

### What Is the MoMA Media Lounge?

By Sabine Breitwieser, Chief Curator, Department of Media and Performance Art

The art museum is a repository for artifacts based on the idea that these objects are somehow unique, have a certain value, and tell an important story about our culture that should be preserved and mediated for contemporary and future generations. Hardly any museum can display its entire collection, simply because the galleries cannot physically accommodate them. Some objects might be delicate and can only be shown under very restricted conditions and only over a limited time period, such as works on paper or photographs. The Museum of Modern Art typically shows 2% of its vast holdings of about 150,000 artworks in its own galleries or in touring exhibitions. In other words, about 147,000 artworks are usually in storage at a given time. In addition, MoMA has about the same amount of films in its collection, which are viewed in exhibitions programmed for our theaters. The traditional art museum provides an encounter with artworks animated by its presentation through highlighting or juxtaposing selected works. In fact, that's one of the tasks of a curator, to create a meaningful environment and inspiring intellectual context for artworks.

Artists have always challenged the institution of art and the art museum by exploring boundaries and experimenting with new media and technology—new ways of making but also new ways of presenting art. Today, in addition to such traditional art forms as painting and sculpture, the art museum has to accommodate artworks employing video or other technologies, and even live events, in order to present a collection that represents the diverse and innovative character of contemporary art practice. In the 1960s and 1970s, when these artworks were being pioneered<sup>1</sup>, artists were driven by an expansion of media and crossover of disciplines. The term “intermedia,” which came out of Fluxus, was used to describe the overlap of fields including performance art and theater, or science and technology. In addition, when video technology became accessible in the late 1960s, it was considered by women artists to be less dominated by their male peers, and opened up new possibilities.

Considering how we should represent artworks using media and performance at the museum (the latter often survives as a cinematic document), it is important to keep in mind the original utopian impulse of these art forms. Both emerged as a reaction and in opposition to the ideology of modernism, the so-called disinterested pleasure of the experience of autonomous art objects. Featuring works based on process and time, artists also used technological media and the body to experiment with collaboration and participation. Artists were challenging the artwork as a product distributed through the art market. In fact, media and performance art provoked a paradigm shift of what constitutes the author as well as the relationship between work and spectator, or creator and audience. Thus, the use of electronic mass media and the body in the visual arts are in fact emancipatory movements in which artists have negotiated the physical and social spaces of art. How should the contemporary art museum present these types of artworks? Do they deserve the same presentation formats as traditional media now that they have finally been acknowledged and incorporated by the museum? Or can we find new, meaningful ways for museum visitors to encounter the history and contemporary practice of media and performance art, given their legacy and the state of the art museum itself?

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<sup>1</sup> One can even look back to the 1910/20s to movements like the Russian Avant-garde and Dada.

The Department of Media and Performance Art at MoMA holds a collection of over 2,400 works. Over 900 titles are unique or limited-edition works of rather complex installations with films, videos, or props that are conceived to be installed in a gallery space. Sixty-one percent, or nearly 1,500 titles, can be described as single-channel videos (mostly unlimited editions meant to be shown on monitors), constituting a vast collection that covers the history of video art and, to some extent, the history of performance art (if documented as video). Until recently these works were shown only if included in gallery rotations, and single-channel videos could be accessed in the Department of Media and Performance Art Study Center upon request.

Upon arriving as MoMA's Chief Curator of Media and Performance Art about two years ago, I was determined to focus on the acquisition of unique installations and draw a more complete narrative of media and performance art through its representation in videos and photographs in MoMA's collection and exhibitions. On the other hand my goal was to make such art forms as present in the collection galleries as, for instance, painting and sculpture, to represent the state and diversity of contemporary art practice adequately in the Museum. In addition, my goal was to make the single-channel video collection accessible in an interactive way to a broad audience on a daily basis. In collaboration with assistant curators Cara Starke and Erica Papernik, along with other members of the department—and other departments at MoMA—we have developed a specific interactive display that provides a completely new encounter with artworks at the Museum.

The MoMA Media Lounge hands the curatorial power over to the audience, who can select artworks through a specially developed iPad interface with common search criteria including artist, date, title, etc., plus curatorial topics to spark inspiration. The interactive system pays tribute to the original intention of artists who use video to challenge the limits of art museums and provide easy access. In order to get there we had (and continue) to digitize the entire collection, which existed in all kinds of video formats from the past 50 years. We reached out to the artists to complete the cataloging and obtain requested rights for the project. This comprehensive assessment of the holdings and the state of the collection turned out to be extremely stimulating in determining new acquisitions that could fill gaps in the collection—probably an ongoing project by its nature.

The vision for the design of this platform, conceived as an environment that offers a radically different encounter with art than the usual gallery setting, was a series of modular and flexible architectural units that can “travel” within the Museum or to other venues. While people are not expected to have a lively debate on artworks in the galleries, in contrast I was interested in providing a space for social interaction—a dynamic environment stimulating both collective and individual experience. The lounge should also be a place for educational events such as artists' or scholars' talks, readings, discussions, or book presentations relating to the works offered for viewing. The MoMA Media Lounge should also allow us to host and organize temporary exhibitions by simply highlighting one of the monitors or screens with specific works or topics curated by the department or in collaboration with other departments at MoMA—or guest-curators and external organizations. In short, the MoMA Media Lounge requires active engagement from both the viewer and the curatorial team.

Artist Renée Green (b. 1959, Cleveland, OH) was commissioned to conceive the design of the MoMA Media Lounge. Green creates multimedia installations and immersive environments that invite visitors to interact and participate. While her vibrant and engaging displays emphasize color and a diversity of

textures as a way of enlivening spaces, we also realized during our collaboration her sensitivity to the role of the museum in relation to its public, and the interactions between the two. Green's *Media Bicho*—as she calls the display she has conceived for MoMA—provides an intermediary modular system and space-altering device that can be expanded and contracted into a variety of forms. Her display refers to the work of Brazilian artist Lygia Clark, who in the 1960s applied the word *bicho*, the Portuguese or Spanish word for “creature” or “bug,” to her geometric metal sculptures with which viewers can interact to create multiple forms. In Green's *Media Bichos*, multicolored, textured screens are arranged to offer a partial enclosure in which to experience videos and, hopefully soon, audio works.

The MoMA Media Lounge is a new platform for collaboration between the Museum's visitors and the curatorial staff in the construction of knowledge, the actual *raison d'être* of the art museum today. It is an environment where people are actively involved in the selection, presentation, and contextualization of artworks, where they get a voice and where the museum, as an archive and educational institution, is highlighted.