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## ARTICLE

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# Archiving and preserving media art. Best practices in Spain: the case of Espacio P and MediaLab Madrid archive

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## Abstract

Archiving and preserving media art practises are among the contemporary challenges of digitization, preservation and dissemination of cultural heritage.

On the one hand, it is necessary to propose solutions for preserving the digital in our contemporary world. This issue involves two problems of enormous complexity. One involves analogue documents that are digitized, and the other involves documents of digital origin. This circumstance entails developing specific preservation strategies that also allow for a possible need for recovery, which often involves software or hardware issues.

On the other hand, archiving implies generating internationally shared practices, languages, and procedures to guarantee interoperability, the sharing of documents, their optimal location, and, therefore, to ensure their accessibility.

In this study, we present and analyse the creation of the archives of two of the most pioneering and emblematic projects in the Spanish context of new media art, Espacio P and MediaLab Madrid. Two archives, which, on the other hand, are the first and forerunners in the scientific application of archival practices for the creation of media art archives, as will be shown throughout the study presented here.

In the case of Espacio P, as well as being one of the first artist-run spaces in Spain, they also developed artistic practices that involved the use of technologies, such as video art. In relation to MediaLab Madrid, it was a genuine, disruptive, and innovative space in the practices of the first interactive technologies in the digital context of the early 21st century in Spain.

This work aims to expose the work processes carried out for the creation of both archives, their protocols and documentary languages, as well as the challenge of the media art thesaurus.

### Keywords

archiving; preserving; media art; Espacio P; MediaLab Madrid

### *Archivar y preservar el arte de los medios. Mejores prácticas en España: el caso de Espacio P y el archivo MediaLab Madrid*

### Resumen

*Archivar y preservar el arte de los medios es uno de los desafíos contemporáneos de la digitalización, la conservación y la difusión del patrimonio cultural.*

*Por un lado, es necesario proponer soluciones para preservar lo digital en nuestro mundo contemporáneo. Este problema implica dos problemas de enorme complejidad. Uno son los documentos analógicos digitalizados y el otro los documentos de origen digital. Esta circunstancia conlleva desarrollar estrategias de conservación específicas que también permitan la posible necesidad de recuperación, que a menudo implica problemas de software o hardware.*

*Por otro lado, el archivar implica generar prácticas, idiomas y procedimientos compartidos internacionalmente para garantizar la interoperabilidad, el intercambio de documentos, su ubicación óptima y, por lo tanto, garantizar su accesibilidad. En este estudio, presentamos y analizamos la creación de los archivos de dos de los proyectos más pioneros y emblemáticos en el contexto español del nuevo arte de los medios, Espacio P y MediaLab Madrid. Dos archivos, que, por otro lado, son los primeros y pioneros en la aplicación científica de prácticas de archivo para la creación de archivos de arte de los medios, como se mostrará a lo largo del estudio presentado aquí.*

*En el caso del Espacio P, además de ser uno de los primeros espacios dirigidos por artistas en España, también desarrollaron prácticas artísticas que implicaban el uso de tecnologías, como el videoarte. En cuanto a MediaLab Madrid, fue un espacio genuino, disruptivo e innovador en las prácticas de las primeras tecnologías interactivas en el contexto digital de principios del siglo XXI en España.*

*Este trabajo tiene como objetivo exponer los procesos de trabajo llevados a cabo para la creación de archivos, sus protocolos y lenguajes documentales, así como el desafío del tesoro del arte de los medios.*

### Palabras clave

archivo; conservación; arte de los medios; Espacio P; MediaLab Madrid

## Introduction

The development of new technologies in recent decades has given rise to a new paradigm, with a profoundly transformative impact on all areas of knowledge.

One of the first challenges that has been present from the beginning is the preservation of this intangible asset, this set of zeros and ones, both in terms of storage and the search for solutions to the obsolescence of both software and hardware. In relation to the creation of new media art, this question directly concerns it, as the nature of its creations is purely digital.

Therefore, it is no coincidence that the most relevant research forums and congresses in the field of new media art have begun to create sections to reflect on, share practices and propose solutions to the subject. It must be said that we are late, as either materials and documentation have already been lost, and it may be very difficult or impossible to recover them. Although the initiative of the first meeting on archives in art and new media in 2021, in the context of ISEA (International Symposium on Electronic Art), is very commendable and noteworthy, the truth is that until now, there have been no specific spaces for debate to tackle the challenges of preservation and recovery.

The concern is now notable and widely shared, which is why many initiatives are being developed. In 2016, the Spanish Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Enterprise (MINECO) funded the project “[Archivo Español de Media Art](#)”, directed by researcher Ana Navarrete, to compile, safeguard, preserve and document the collections and archives of new media art in the Spanish context. In the process, just over 50 collections and archives were located. Two of them are the case study of the present work, as specific archives have been created for each of them, based on archival processes, which makes them unique cases in the Spanish context and very relevant in the international context, as we could only compare their practices with the case of Ars Electronica, which has worked in the same direction.

These two cases, Espacio P and MediaLab Madrid Archive, have also been studied as good practices in the latest edition of the *Libro Blanco de la interrelación entre Arte, Ciencia, Tecnología y Sociedad en España, 2023*, in which for the first time a chapter is dedicated to “Archives and Preservation” of new media art. This initiative helps to highlight the concern raised, which we will discuss in this paper.

## 1. Archiving and preserving: case study of the 33 so-called media art “archives”

Archiving and preserving new media artistic practises are among the contemporary challenges of digitization, preservation and dissemination of cultural heritage.

On the one hand, archival science implies the commitment of all institutions and individuals owning an archive to apply archival practices as a specific science of knowledge, i. e., to make use of internationally shared practices, languages and procedures to ensure interoperability.

This enables the sharing of documents and ensures optimal findability and accessibility, a central function of any archive.

On the other hand, preservation means, firstly, continuing to seek strategies for the storage of all types of documents (cloud storage and its sustainability). And secondly, generating solutions to address the obsolescence of software and hardware that affects all researchers, studios, experts and artists in new media art.

As noted above, in June 2023, the Spanish Foundation for Science and Technology (FECYT), under the Ministry of Science and Innovation, published the second edition of the *Libro Blanco de la interrelación entre Arte, Ciencia, Tecnología y Sociedad en España, 2023*. This book included, for the first time, a chapter titled “Archives and Preservation”.

This study analysed 37 cases of so-called “archives” presented at the [27th International Symposium on Electronic Art Summit](#), held in Barcelona in June 2022.

Most of the proposed case studies, with some exceptions, show significant shortcomings in the creation of so-called “archives”.

As a primary problem, it was observed that most teams creating the so-called “archives” did not have an archival professional, archivist, or documentalist on their team.

This has several negative consequences. Firstly, there is considerable confusion between the concepts of archive and repository. It is essential to know that an archive is not the same as a repository. From an archival point of view, an archive is defined by two principles (Macedo, Jaime Sánchez 2021):

- Principle of provenance. We can only call an archive a set of documents that is the product or result of the activity of an institution – for example, Ars Electronica – or of a person – for instance, the archive of artist Concha Jérez.
- Natural order. That is, they should be documented in the natural order in which the documents were produced, due to the activity carried out.

In this sense, taking into account the principle of provenance, that is, the origin of the information, we can state that, of the 37 cases analysed, only 19 can be called archives as such:

1. [Documenta Media Archive](#)
2. [ZKM](#)
3. [Museum Computer Network](#), since 1967 (Annual Conference)
4. [V2\\_](#)
5. [Düsseldorf Inter Media Art Institute \(IMAI\)](#) (1,000 video works that can be viewed in full-length) (Distribuidora multimedia 235)
6. [Transmediale](#)
7. [Ars Electronica](#)
8. [SIGGRAPH Digital Art Show archive](#)
9. [Computer Arts Society](#) (founded 1 in 1968)
10. [Archive of published things by Neural.it](#)
11. FILE. [Electronic Language International Festival](#)
12. [Imagina](#) (France, 1981-2000)
13. [The Foundation for Art and Creative Technology \(FACT\)](#)
14. [Los Angeles County Museum of Art](#)
15. [Spanish Archive of Media Art \(AEMA\)](#)
16. The EVA (Electronic Visualisation and the Arts) [Conferences Archive](#)
17. [Vector Hack](#) (experimental analogue vector graphics)
18. [Espacio P](#)
19. [MediaLab Madrid Archive](#)

In the specific case of the Spanish Media Art Archive, if it were to have a physical space, we could say that it would be an archive of art and new media, as the main bulk of its collection is made up of archives that, in relation to the origin of its information, are the result of a specific activity of each of the projects or spaces that would make up this archive, being within what in relation to archival science is referred to as a principle of origin. As all these archives and collections are housed on a website, as a compilation, and many of these archives have not yet been inventoried, described and catalogued, we should consider it a repository.

Furthermore, most of the archives in the list, out of these 19 archives, do not use interoperable languages, which does not allow the documents to be shared. Only some do, exceptionally, such as the Ars Electronica archive, or in the Spanish case Espacio P and MediaLab Madrid Archive.

All these latter cases utilize the Dublin Core metadata model, as does Europeana, which enables their archives to be integrated into the Europeana network. Nor have they developed thesauri specific to new media art; they just use lists of keywords. We can certainly point to a first initiative in the context of ADA (Archive Digital Art): which, although it uses Getty Art & Architecture Thesaurus, Iconclass, or the Warburg Index as references to provide a transhistorical account, is essentially based on a set of keywords, but in order to consider the result as a thesaurus as such, the whole list of words that compose it should be subjected to a process of terminological purification and other documentation techniques. In other words, there are different types of document languages: keyword languages, free descriptor languages, authority languages, term languages, but for a set of words to be called a thesaurus, a precise systematization process must be carried out, the fundamental basis of which is the descriptor, as a key part of any thesaurus that involves semantic purification and, therefore, guarantees the unambiguous representation of a notion contained in a document.

This is the case of the **VOREMETUR Project** (Vocabularies for a Network of Media Art Archives and Collections), in which a group of documentalists have created what we could call the first thesaurus of art and new media, applying a process of semantic purification to guarantee a quality vocabulary and the use of innovative techniques and software for the creation of the thesaurus. This is the thesaurus that has been applied to our two case studies: Espacio P and Archivo MediaLab Madrid.

### 1.1. Espacio P

Espacio P was one of the first artist-run spaces in Spain, founded in 1981 by artist Pedro Garhel. Cultural manager Karin Ohlenschläger, together with a team of documentalists, played a crucial role in creating this archive, alongside researcher and artistic manager Yanira Quintero, who conducted her doctoral thesis on Pedro Garhel.

The Espacio P Archive was born in the context of the research project “Archivo Espacio P (AEP): a methodological proposal for its digital continuity 2014-2017” (MINECO Ref. HAR2013-44726), directed by Federico Castro Morales and Francisco Hernández Mateo from the Agustín Millares Carlo Research Institute of Carlos III University of Madrid, alongside an interdisciplinary group of researchers from the same institution, in collaboration with the universities of La Laguna, Granada and Vigo.

Within the framework of this project, a web page has been created where part of the material constituting the Espacio P Archive can be consulted. Each of these documents includes identifiers for locating the material.

At present, the archive is physically located in the Provincial Archive of Tenerife, Pedro Garhel’s hometown. However, although its documentary collections cannot be accessed digitally from the Provincial Archive of Tenerife, thanks to the archival and documentation work carried out in the aforementioned project, which digitized part of the material, we

can consult a significant part of its collections through its website (specifically those materials to which the thesaurus developed by Miguel Ángel Marzal and his team has been applied). In this process, they have also developed the concept of web museography as a strategy to disseminate their collections (Vocabularies for a Network of Media Art Archives and Collections).



Figure 1. Espacio P archive website

Source: <https://vorematur.uc3m.es/redmediaart/s/pedro-garhel-fondo/page/inicio>

Thanks to this project, we now have an archive in the strict sense of the word, the Archive of Espacio P, whose collections can be accessed through the aforementioned website, with descriptive files, interoperable languages, such as the Dublin Core metadata model, and with the Vorematur thesaurus applied, which has been developed using scientific documentary language techniques, as mentioned above.



Figure 2. Espacio P logo. Source: Espacio P

### 1.2. MediaLab Madrid Archive

The MediaLab Madrid project, in its concept, was truly pioneering and innovative, precisely because it was the first centre, we could say, in the Spanish context for the creation and generation of knowledge in the interrelations between art, science, technology and society.

As a result of the intense activity that took place during its five-year duration, **MediaLab Madrid** (2002-2006) generated a substantial amount of valuable documentation, serving as a testament to its intense activity. This activity can be found in the dossier of activities

on the CEIARTE (Centro de Experimentación e Investigación en Artes Electrónicas) [website](#).

The legacy of MediaLab Madrid that we have today was passed down to us thanks to Karin Ohlenschläger, the cultural manager and co-founder of MediaLab Madrid, who kept the documentation generated by the MediaLab Madrid project for 19 years – until it was donated – and took it with her wherever she relocated.



Figure 3. Logo MediaLab Madrid Archive. Source: MediaLab Madrid

At the end of 2019, the MediaLab Madrid project secured funding from the Community of Madrid's call for research projects to establish the MediaLab Madrid Archive. Within the framework of this project titled "MediaLab Madrid as a transversal laboratory model: art, science, technology, society + sustainability for the digital agenda", ref. H2019/HUM-5740 (MediaLab-CM), the MediaLab Madrid Archive was developed and created.

Ohlenschläger was willing to donate all the documentation to the Universidad Complutense de Madrid, provided the project could secure funding to create the archive, which it did.

The importance of the incorporation of the MediaLab Madrid Archive into the holdings of a historical archive such as the UCM Archive is a truly relevant contribution to the practises of new media art, more specifically, to the processes of artistic creation and innovation of knowledge centred on the interrelations between art, science, technology + society, as it is the first time that a public institution in the Spanish context has accepted a collection of new media art. Safeguarding this documentation as a historical archive that houses the documentation of an institution with more than 500 years of history such as the Complutense University of Madrid, means contributing to the first foundations of its institutionalization, the legitimization of the artistic practices of new media art, and the fact that it is now part of the Cultural Heritage.

Now, how was the MediaLab Madrid Archive generated? The aforementioned research project for the creation of the Archive created its own database, but in addition to the database, the institutional repository of the UCM Archive applies the archival description standard. The documents housed in the UCM Archive are described in accordance with international standards and utilize Dublin Core for their virtual exhibitions and the interoperability of their documents. However, it should be noted that at the time the project was being developed, the UCM Archive's database organized the documents in a flat, linear and

non-relational way, although it is currently in the process of transforming them responding to the semantic and relational narratives of the web space.

In this sense, the project for creating the MediaLab Madrid Archive aimed to generate a relational database, which is one of the main contributions and key aspects that differentiate it from traditional archival practices.

This database was developed using FileMaker software, which is characterised by its flexibility, enabling the creation of a relational database and responding to the concept of transdisciplinarity in new media artistic practices. This concept precisely defined the methodology of the MediaLab Madrid project.

The database was structured into three sections: "Documents", "People", and "Projects and Activities", all of which allowed for relating and cross-referencing data during the search.



Figure 4. Medialab Madrid Archive database home screen. Source: website screenshot

So, in the "People" tab, there are two more search paths: "Archival documents related to this person" and "Activities", i. e., the activities to which the person in question is linked.

And in the "Projects and Activities" tab: "Archival documents related to this activity", "People", which refers to individuals involved in this activity, and "Digital documents". Here, archival documents that have been digitized and can be accessed via the web are displayed and can be consulted.

The visualization for the public, as we have pointed out, is done through the web, in relation to the concept of web museography, starting from the database, which is what feeds the documentary contents of the archive to the web page.

It also has a classification table (it structures the documentation according to the activities carried out). The classification table was designed by Ohlenschläger herself, which was the central task in creating the archive, as it is the main intellectual and conceptual task in the creation of an archive. The metadata model, as mentioned above, is Dublin Core and the thesaurus.

Voremetur is already incorporated into the database and will be implemented in different phases of the work. The website has been designed based on the concept of web museography, allowing all the

archive's digitized material to be consulted through its portal: documents, catalogues and, especially, videos.



Figure 5. MediaLab Madrid Archive website. Source: website screenshot

Furthermore, all the audiovisual materials are hosted on the **UCM Archive's YouTube portal**, which can be accessed through the MediaLab Madrid Archive website or the **UCM Archive's institutional repository**. This repository has been developed by a company specializing in digital archives, ensuring a comprehensive description of the materials and utilizing the Dublin Core metadata model to promote interoperability among documents.

All this work guarantees preservation, localization, accessibility and open access for dissemination and use by the entire university community, researchers, artists and society in general.

## Conclusion

The aim of this study was to focus on what ISEA (International Symposium on Electronic Art) considered the main “archives” of new media art, as presented at the event held on archives.

In a first study, focusing on the ISEA cases mentioned above, it was found that, of the 37 “archives” analysed, only 19 can be called archives, while the rest are merely repositories or documentation spaces for new media art. Of the first, we have focused our attention on two archives in the Spanish context, as we consider them to be examples of good practice: the archive of Espacio P and the MediaLab Madrid Archive.

In both cases, we have been able to verify that archival and documentation professionals have worked on their development, that they use international description standards, make use of the Dublin Core metadata model and, therefore, are interoperable and can, for example, incorporate their archives into Europeana, and make use of what we can call the first and only media art thesaurus, created by documentalists.

In conclusion, we must acknowledge and emphasise the need to establish common practices that enable us to build a solid narrative

for new media. In Spain, we have started the journey. Still, for all this to have continuity, solid multidisciplinary teams and institutional support must be formed, as is the case in the Archive of the Complutense University of Madrid.

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## CV

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