

# Approaching an Art-Conservation Framework for Digital-Art Installations: The Case of “Arabesque” by P.J. Holden

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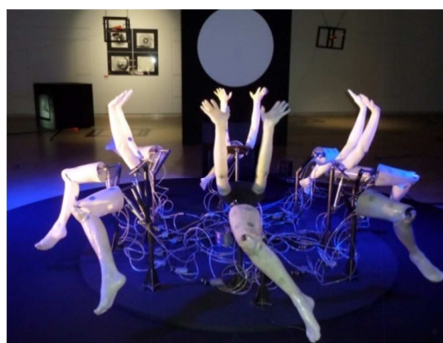
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**Abstract:** The “Arabesque” installation by P. J. Holden was presented as a contemporary artwork at the Digital Arts Festival in Athens at “Megaron” Hall in 2018 and ever since has had a major artistic and social impact all over the world. For its exhibition needs, it was necessary that a series of decisions be made, all of which were relative to the factor of “functionality”. For the work is not a simple sculpture but a moving artwork, with an environmental, aesthetic and also aural impact on the viewer. Corresponding to the principles of acoustic ecology and urban sounds, the work does not only explore the relationship between man and his environment (and consequently nature and urban culture) through its sound, but also directly or indirectly influences the consciousness and the way the visitors think, see, hear and interpret. In particular, the installation is made up of multi-part replicas of the artist's body. Those are robotically dancing through air-pressure systems in the rhythm of Johann Strauss's “Blue Danube”. Preventive conservation does not seem to have the greatest meaning in the case of preservation, as sound, motion and light are digitally controlled. The same applies for the acoustic climate (db) of noise produced by the project's operating equipment (levers, compressed air tubes, loudspeakers) the optical climate, the hydraulic system, etc. Unlike recordings and video recordings (of Echo/lightscapes), Arabesque is not just a computer projection to be installed. It raises multiple issues regarding the authenticity of the artwork, the multiple versions of artworks, the deterioration and restoration of matter, and the competence of the group of scientists that care on behalf of the artist so as to install it.

**Keywords:** Lightscapes, Soundscapes, Contemporary Art Conservation, Restoration, Ethics, Digital Art, Decision-making

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## 1. Introduction



**Figure 1.** View of the Arabesque digital and robotic installation by J.P. Holden in the ADAF, 2018. In the background, the display screen is visible. (Origin of photograph: Stoupathis Konstantinos).

The “Arabesque” installation by J.P. Holden (Figure 1) occurred as an installation in the Athens Digital Arts Festival that took place at the “Megaron” Concert Hall of Athens in May 2018. This is an “artificial” Ballet responding concertedly under the Blue Danube music” [1]. At the same time, it produces in the nave an “arabesque” that the spectator sees in the depth of the installation in view.

For the purposes of this research, the author interviewed the artist so as to provide an important documentation tool about the conservation, restoration and also the modern art exhibition practices.

Skype interviewing with J.P. Holden was based on a structured questionnaire in order to gather all the information of the artist's intent, concerning conservation of the sculpture and contemporary art challenges due to the digital nature of his installation. The interview was conducted in terms of free discussion and development of the topic as well as through

asking him open-ended questions.

At the same time, it was associated with making a series of decisions on the "functionality" of the installation's digital equipment and the recovery potential of the sculptures or other items in case of damage to similar installations.

## 2. Contemplation over "Functionality"

According to C. Brandi the assessment of differentiating works of art from other products produced by man is due to a process of recognizing their value, linked to the consciousness of the individual and his subjective criterion [2]. For this reason he connects the term of conservation with the concept of recognizing the object as a "work of Art" without special reference to its specific functional requirements.

In relation to Brandi's Conservation Theory there are two aspects of conservation that have to be adopted, accepted as an action with impact on the object. In the case of "Arabesque", conservation has to be severely taken into consideration:

a) as an intervention aimed at restoring the function of industrial products to their original state, or

b) as an intervention for the preservation of art-objects of aesthetics. Besides that, all fine art that may have special needs for care and affection (beyond the functional character of artifacts and artworks, utility or expediency of their creation). These aforementioned factors cannot be neglected due to the technical and aesthetic value of Holden's installation. For a prerequisite for conservation is the creation of an artwork where conservation occurs temporally and sometimes subjectively, at the level of the individual's consciousness. With strong social impact when it comes to cultural heritage.

Another condition contained in Brandi's theory concerns the critical contemplation that the conservator conducts in the work of art, in order to estimate and conceive it knowing how it shall be perceived by the viewer: a) at the level of identifying the materials or techniques used, b) at the level of purpose of it, by creating or documenting its state of preservation. Through the restoration of any deterioration, decay or later intervention, all that indicates the impact of time on the artwork [3].

The aforementioned approaches to the ethical concerns of Brandi for the introduction of a code of Ethics that accepts functionality, history and value in 1963 seem to be applauded today by Verbeeck when she states that the theory of the conservation of monuments and art-collections is flexible, so that it can be applied even to the care of contemporary art. She attributes the power of Theory to the possibility of flexibility and adaptation of the values of historicity or aesthetics to contemporary works of art [4].

The project is not a mere sculpture but an animated project with environmental status. Its originality lies in its unique and authentic character.

The principle of "functionality" does not only refer to art but is also a feature of motor games, tools or even musical

instruments in museums, as objects subject to engineering principles and as exhibits that have a certain visual, audible and interpretive impact on the surroundings and on the visitor who views and listens these artifacts in a museum environment. As a landscape of sound and light.

What is common between motor installations of contemporary art and children's games (either as soundscapes if they produce sound or as lightscapes if they have bright elements) is identified here with the meaning of "invention" or even as a morphological component: as a visual or audio natural or artificial result causing emotions and recalling experiences (for example, the principles of "aural identity" as described by the Greek Company of Acoustic Ecology about the relationship of sound and remembrance, [5]).

The process of construction of Holden's Arabesque is equally a complicated process, as a Robotics installation: Holden studied human movement to emulate through the motor systems the naturalness of the human body (Figure 2).

Through a series of coordinated movement commands of hands and legs with mechanical sounds-with digital technology- a harmonious sound-lightscape is produced. It is no coincidence that the French toy manufacturer Martin Farnard produced the first mechanical games, in 1876, out of love for engineering. The manufacturing companies recycled metal cans into games, in the late 19th century [6].

Merging two pieces in one to create models of cars, dolls, etc is a practice for creating multiple copies but also an artistic endeavor. Holden's installation has specific exposing requirements since it is about copies of his body which shake rhythmically. Like doctor Schmeltz [4], an expert in anatomy, who, in the 19th century, constructed a game, "the Swimmer" which was renowned for the naturalness of movement, and became a high-profile project.



**Figure 2.** Detail of the moving installation, created as sculptured copies of the body of the visual artist: parallel illumination through blue light in the installation aims at the production of a photo-landscape as a simulation of the "Blue Danube" (Origin of photograph: Stoupathis Konstantinos' archive).

## 3. Light, Urban Sounds and Interaction

The moral dilemmas for the conservator, seem to involve a decision-making framework so as to prevent material deterioration and safeguard interaction when exhibited.

Entails all the conservation stages that are scientifically and socially accredited and will result beneficially to the “experience” of it. To solve the theoretical and practical issues with conservation principles and objective criterias, to assess what should be the representative image of the installation after its conservation: the kinetic sculpture, the “essence” of it as a meaningful performance and mechanical exhibit.

Especially there is a close link -if the aesthetic value be cut off from its mechanical properties, there is a discrepancy from transmission of its meaning to mass perception (by the viewer). This, according to Munoz-Vinas is the concept of a contemporary theory of conservation [7]. It is obvious that the conservator should not act only based on his own desires or vision but listen to what is ultimately possible from the work of art. To provoke human senses and emotions (before this takes place in the exhibition as a biological reaction of the viewer of art).

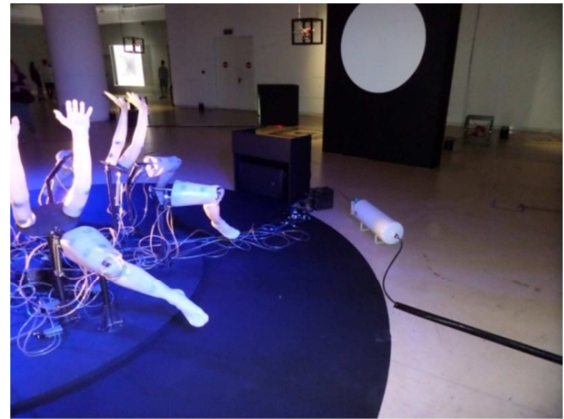
Although the viewer is not directly involved in the “Arabesque” case-study, Holden considers this to be an installation that “in terms of the audio system and the light spectra environment embraces both the interaction and the spectator's reaction.” It is clear that the digital era bequeathed the suggestions of M. Duchamp and other artists, to make their artworks engage with the viewer, regardless the impact: by moving levers, pushing buttons and providing energy for movement as to produce Art.

Similarly, Lias-Pacheco points out the artist's contribution to the preservation and ability to evaluate the dynamics of contemporary artwork as a multisensory experience in the present [8]. The points of view presented by the work of art are based on different perspectives of perception of time in the work predetermined by its creator through personal beliefs about its duration.

As T. Duckrey mentions “if images become ever more experimental, then a theory of representation must be developed as it takes into account the transaction “caused by the viewer's participation in the work” [9, 10].

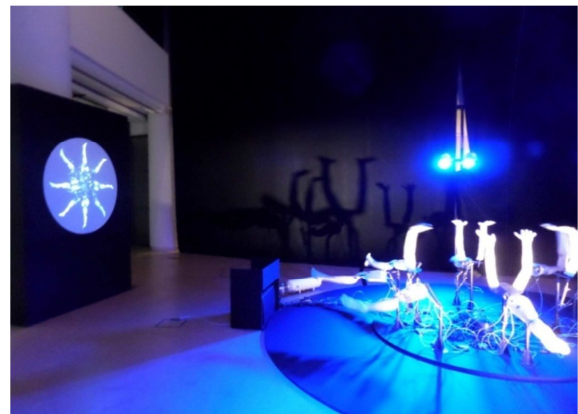
For the viewer to understand the content of Arabesque, it is necessary to carry out the musical composition along with the «choreography», the movement of artificial limbs, hands and feet: so that there is a performance where the soundscape will be accompanied by a robotic choreography- “Ballet”, according to the artist. In this sense, it belongs to the category of soundscapes since it is shaping the right conditions to produce a landscape of artificial sounds, mechanical sounds together with sounds of classical music, bathed in blue light (Figure 3).

This type of contemporary art cannot refer to sound art or audio art movements. The fact that a number of air compressors in the hands are powering the movement of a series of mechanical circuits, rollers and levers is leading not only in the sense of motion but also in the production of an “air pressure” sound.



**Figure 3.** View of the hydraulic system of the installation with the metal arms and the air feeding bottle, right on the floor (Origin of photograph: Stoupathis Konstantinos' archive).

The sound that is heard as “pressure” and “decompression” from the tubes “accompanies” the orchestra playing the Blue Danube of J. Strauss, with accurate sequence of sound and pace (Figure 4).



**Figure 4.** Criterion for choosing this music performance by the artist was the speed of play by the orchestra as it served correctly the response of the pressure levers to the rhythm of classical music to produce the “Arabesque” (Origin of photograph: Stoupathis Konstantinos).

The soundscape that we hear is a recorded combination of a concert and industrial sound. Therefore, the robotic sets accompany recorded music. In this way, it is identified as a group of “the art of noise”, similar to that of the Italian Futurists. The sounds are created in situ and sound natural, as part of the installation. The recorded part which coordinates with the Arabesque comes from the soundtrack of the film “Space Odyssey”<sup>1</sup>.

Because of the aforementioned reasons, the artist said that “it is the particular performance, conducted by V. Karagian and recorded in 1950, that is consistent with the proper function and speed of the project-recording. It is an audio and visual artistic effect, like the paintings that provoke visitors’ reactions in museums”<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup>According to the artist, it is the following recorded concert: Strauss, Johann, “The Blue Danube” Waltz op. 314 (Herbert Von Karajan & The Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra).

<sup>2</sup>“In my recent work I have been concerned not only with the three-dimensional



#### 4. The Study of the Conceptual Content of Arabesque in Relation to Its Exhibition Requirements

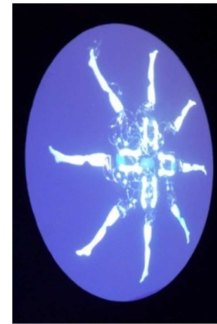
Regarding the issue of the goal of preservation of contemporary art, Holden focuses on a transition from the traditional methodology of aesthetic restoration to a scientific approach, that of the professional conservator. What is interesting is the humanistic dimension of conservation, its value not only for culture and exhibiting but also for the people themselves who construct meanings and values through objects, important to communities. With conservation being an event in the linear flow of project life. For conservation is not only the artwork but the content as well [11].

Regarding Holden's anthropomorphic robotic creations as central protagonists of his installation, we should try to imagine what differentiates them from human existence, as concrete and sound elements of the installation. The superior in terms of technology and science dummies tend to become the ultimate anthropomorphic entities that survive in space, where it is impossible for man to do so. Holden uses multiple real-size copies of his body as environment features to give his work ironic and tragic style-as consistent in the novel *Frankenstein* in relation to ordinary mortals. The installation has diameter width of four (4) metres. The translucent anthropomorphic entities expose their internal (robotic) mechanisms to the public. Wiring and intubation is a conscious aesthetic judgment, which is incorporated into the project to highlight the chaotic lines, unlike the well-organized symmetry of human limbs. When it is moving, the "Arabesque" turns into a floating soundscape with work items, mechanical noise.

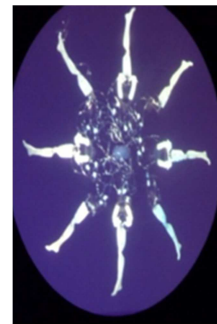
The installation's top view in motion is displayed digitally on a screen in the background. This way an arabesque is created (figures 5, 6) as the product of a musical Kaleidoscope. Sound and light are the dominant features so as to encourage interpretation by the viewer. Blue light intensely glows from two headlights and represents "Blue Danube" praised with dance by the semi-transparent anthropomorphic limbs, the blue reflections on transparent tubing, forming a sound-photo scape.

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sculpture but also with the fourth dimension: time. "Arabesque" is a real-time animation. With its roots in Mary Shelly's "Frankenstein" novel (1818) and the alchemist lab, the installation resembles a mechanical flower: a simulacrum of nature. The wiring network itself is an aesthetic expression. The warmth of this robotic equipment is the air that moves the human parts with steel levers. The presence of air is betrayed only when it exits strongly from the valves connected to the central tube. This is combined with the ringing of the relay and torsion of the pistons that accompany Strauss's music. In part as a cinematic act, as a theater performance, the installation "Arabesque" can be viewed from many points of view. By revealing a multitude of different forms, different motifs and different experiences. A kaleidoscope-paradoxically- of beautiful shapes and motifs created by a grotesque installation".



**Figure 5.** Vertical view of the Arabesque installation where the robotic parts seem to form a Medieval cross (Origin of photograph: Stoupathis Konstantinos' archive).



**Figure 6.** Another view of the installation and the design created by the moving parts. The sound is combined with the waltz rhythm, under conditions of absolute resonance and "reflections" of blue light. (Origin of photograph: Stoupathis Konstantinos' archive).

A symbolic value for Holden's installation is that "no matter how perfect the dance is, the dummies never cease to be perfect as humans or the artist himself: as copies of his body, they remain fragile and weak. All these in contemporary art or "artificial-kinetic forms" have life only when supported by levers [12].

The artist's reference to his digital work as a work of a variety of techniques (installation, sculpture) through dance moves and motion, suggest his symbolism: "we are led to the conclusion that beauty is not standardized because art can't be defined by cliché terms and stereotypes to be reproduced or preserved".

In order to understand the interpretation scheme of Holden's installation, it would be advisable to look at the alternative version of artist D. Miliotis' "Echotopia" soundscapes. (Figures 7, 8). In "Art Athina 2019 Greekfair" the artist presented a multipath of nine engravings under this title. For Soundscape remains an experience provided through depictions that provide impression and does not concern digital/ kinetic art [13].

Miliotis engravings required plexi-glas and simple wall hanging. He used multiple, mixed engraving print techniques to visualize a soundscape. His compositions were based on a series of sound recordings, coming from natural landscapes of his choice in Corfu Island, which he later featured through printing.

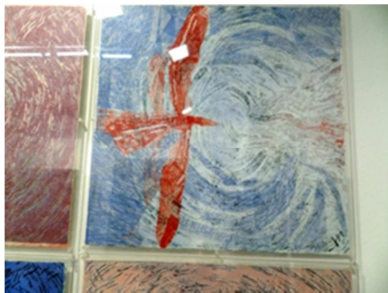
His soundscapes are characterized by two main features: a) rendering natural sounds in the form of voids, developed in a circle rather than waveforms and acoustic spectra, b) the

representation of insects (like the "dragonfly") in order to imitate the concept of movement into the natural environment and the reaction of a living organism to the atmospheric landscape. The sounds of the landscape he depicts are not periodic waveforms with a certain frequency of oscillations but the propagation of sound in the form of echo in the acoustic universe. The practice followed by Miliotis as compared to Holden's tactics seems to follow the principles of an atmospheric representation, involving linear shapes which indicate sound propagation, circularly, sideways, upwards or downwards. A soundscape that we do not hear, but activates our senses dreamily with the use of light, shadows, and bright colors.

The presence of living creatures helps as they respond to the sounds as elements of a (nighttime) soundscape. Although no viewer listens to flying insects or frogs, they can certainly recall sounds that have been recorded in his memory. Besides, the engraver was inspired by the loud sounds of the soundtrack he heard, recorded and performed afterwards in his workshop.



**Figure 7.** Engravings by D. Miliotis, entitled "Echo-topia" (soundscapes), 2018. (Origin of photograph: Stoupathis Konstantinos' archive).



**Figure 8.** Detail of an "Echo-topia" engraving where circular beams of light indicate an upward flight path (Origin of photograph: Stoupathis Konstantinos' archive).

## 5. The Moral Dilemmas of the "Sculptural Installation" Conservation

The most important parameter related to the exhibition requirements is the simulation of the physical movement of the human body through digital tools: can we restore or replace the deteriorated sculptural parts or are we committed to conserving the original and prototype version? May this light/soundscape be reproduced in many museum exhibitions

at the same time? How can we restore both values of authenticity and functionality? Can we replace the damaged polyester material with a new one? The artist himself points out that the coordination and "grace" of human movement when we dance is due to specific brain commands and movement coordination of the human body:

a) observing a dancing sequence (see example [14]),

b) simulating a choreography by robotic parts. This suggests the artist's "intention" to create an impression on the audience through specific sound and visual stimuli (eg. fog from blue lights). At the same time, it indicates the objective of the "conservation" process followed by professional maintainers in order to reproduce the specific light-soundscape impressions without problems of equipment malfunction or matter deterioration during its exhibition (Figure 9).

In accordance with a common code of conduct and ethics for conservation it is essential to face the following dilemmas: a) to what extent we interfere with this kind of installation through conservation and b) what the permissible interventions are. Taking all these into consideration, it seems that we may draw the same conclusion: a compromise between functionality and authenticity so that the visual artwork remains functional and authentic in terms of originality and historical accuracy, serving the mission that the art restorer means to.



**Figure 9.** View of the installation with the artist on the job (Origin: P. J. Holden).

Considering the three main authorities of restorers, such as the "conservation of the historical, artistic and aesthetic values of the art work, any modification will produce a different impact of the light/soundscape. More specifically-as it turned out through the structured interview with P.J. Holden –replication and reproduction can't be the solution to any deterioration. Furthermore, even the request of the art collector to produce several copies of the same work is not ethical: "Arabesque with different sculptural body parts will not be the same installation. Each separate display requires different compromise on setting-up». It is certain that the plastic tubes are being polymerized, losing their transparency under uncontrollable microclimate (relative humidity/RH %, temperature, etc.). Holden considers 3D printers the future in repairing and replacing damaged parts in view of the obsolescence of old digital equipment [15].

In accordance with the preventive conservation standards, Holden selected LED headlamps to provoke light intensity (>200 lux) and an appropriate blue hue filter but without thermal energy emitting from lights that would darken or polymerize the plastic-polymer materials or polyester ones with fiberglass fibers of his sculptures.

Although the modern tendency in preservation and exhibition of contemporary art is to expose the original artwork (authentic), the alternative of replica prevails among the curators as an easy solution in contrast to conservation [16]. At the same time, through replication conservators are ethically relieved of problems of interference and legal issues related to their assignment. In cases where the artist himself undertakes the restoration of the damaged installation, things are mainly better. There is also the artist's responsibility to direct the conservator on what to do during the installation of his artwork: when a camera cannot be installed on the ceiling of the gallery to provide projection, a digital media player synchronization is used to show the "Arabesque" formation and excite the visitor once again (Figure 10).

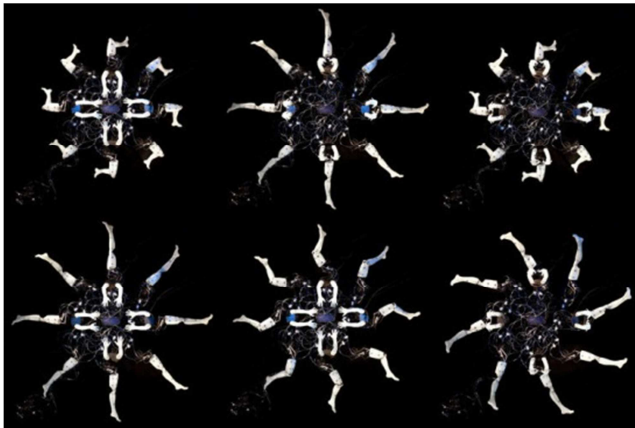


Figure 10. Screen views of the ground plan of "Arabesque" (Origin: P. J. Holden).

## 6. Conclusions

In a word of challenges and fears for the conservation of contemporary art, there are many decisions to be made, always with the artists consent [17]. The dramatic, poetic orchestration of the "Blue Danube" in relation to the performance of the moving installation leads to the corresponding sound-lightscape of P.J. Holden. The solution to Arabesque's exhibition practice is the right decision, a compromise of 'intention and exposure possibilities'. It involves the production of an artificial landscape by both the visual artist and the conservators. The blue light, the supposed "Blue Danube", is a scenic means of creating an animated scene with intense sounds and shadows, in conjunction with classical music and artificial sounds. Holden himself said during the interview that he did not care about the technique of lighting as the "ideal element" but the quality of lighting as the "intention" that would produce the corresponding result. There will always be challenges in the field of installing, researching, conserving and planning the

"ideal" exposure scheme of this installation. However, Holden's artwork will always be a matter of concern to the conservators and curators so as to display the installation in the best possible way, even in the long run.

## Acknowledgements

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- [6] Hillier M., (Ed.).(1976) *Automata and Mechanical Toys, an Illustrated History*. Jupiter, ISBN-10: 0904041328, London. On pages 162-175 the author refers to the history of the "automatic" toy making techniques and the melting of the old tin cans. Also to the folding of metal sheets for re-use and their conversion into two-sided metal toys. Toys made of cast iron, namely sheet metal layers containing zinc or zinc coated with alloys.
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- [14] Stoupathis K., *A first Approach to conservation of light installations*. To be published in: Annual Conservation Conference Proceedings of the Panhellenic Union of Greek Conservators/ΠΙΕΣΑ, 4 December, 2017. Poster announcement of a typical example of a visual installation, resulting from the digital recording of a dancer's movements is P. Korbicka's installation "Dance Calligraphy". After recording her dancing movements, digital forms of three (3) dimensional images created a triptych of argon lamps. His artwork is best known as "sculpture, environment" and "installation". The rationale of replacing broken argon light tubes is a feasible solution if they wear out: as long as the glassmaker is consistent in reconstruction. The challenge is to match the installation's "compatible materials" with the digitally recorded movements of the dancer so that the contemporary artwork will never get lost.
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