

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Hurricane Sandy Highlights the Problems of Digital Archives

by [Kyle Chayka](#) on November 20, 2012



Jonathan Minard's documentary of Eyebeam's recovery efforts (Screen capture by Hyperallergic)

The damage from Sandy's flooding took Chelsea galleries by surprise. The swelling water knocked artworks from walls and poured into basement storage areas, where art spaces and artists alike often store the work that's not on display. Zach Feuer Gallery's sloped space meant that water washed [directly toward fragile work](#). Printed Matter [encountered a similar issue](#), with soaked stock going to waste on the sidewalk. But it wasn't only physical property that was damaged in the hurricane.

[Eyebeam](#), the new media-focused nonprofit that takes its home in a cavernous Chelsea warehouse extremely close to the water, got hit hard by Sandy. The water line on the inside of the building rose to three feet, and portions of the interior walls had to be removed. But the real damage wasn't necessarily to architecture but to the space's archives, which were stored on supposedly stable media formats like DVDs, harddrives, and tapes.

The salt content and the toxicity of the water that came into the building corrupted everything it touched. Years and years of exhibition records, files, and media-driven artist projects were put at risk. Though we think of digital creations as somehow non-physical entities, most of these works were made in the pre-

cloud era, and stored as extremely physical things vulnerable to physical problems. The digital isn't so digital any more when the metal computer tower files reside in is getting eaten away by chemicals. Eyebeam had to go into crisis mode.

Teams of conservators gathered and volunteered to clean, as best they could, the media storage formats that formed Eyebeam's artistic and curatorial heritage. New media documentarian and Eyebeam resident [Jonathan Minard](#) participated in the efforts, and published a short video showing the problems the institution now faces.

Minard also gave Hyperallergic this stirring description of what happened:

Eyebeam Center for Art and Technology resides on the corner of the Westside Highway and 21st street in Chelsea, a neighborhood shared with New York's most prestigious contemporary art galleries that we now know to be a flood zone.

After Sandy, as the floodwaters receded, Eyebeam's staff and residents joined to assess the damage.

A record storm surge had swept through the building, leaving three feet of saltwater mixed with sewage and chemicals, claiming over \$250,000 worth of AV equipment, computers, and books.

Among the wreckage, an archive of analog and digital media chronicling Eyebeam's 15 years of experimental art and technology had been kept in storage on the first floor. As an artist-in-residence working on a documentary about digital archiving, I had recently participated in conversations with the community about how to digitize this collection to preserve Eyebeam's history.

Disaster became the impetus. Our organizations' long-delayed plans to secure a collection stored on unstable formats now had critical urgency.

Kara Van Malssen and Chris Lacinak, media conservation professionals from AudioVisual Media Preservation Solutions, and Eric Piil from Anthology Film Archive, arrived the scene, helping us to implement a system for stabilizing 1,275 items. By promoting our triage effort through social media, we mobilized a volunteer army of archivists including students from NYU's MIAP program, conservators from MoMA, Rhizome and Heritage Preservation.

In less than two weeks, we have inventoried all the submerged DVDs, VHS and Beta cassettes, Mini DVs, and digital storage media in preparation for transfer to servers. We hope to make the entire collection accessible online in the coming years, working with AudioVisual Preservation Solutions to develop a strategy for the long term preservation of our work, ensuring that the best practices of archiving become ingrained in the culture of Eyebeam.

We hope Eyebeam's recovery will offer a lesson for other institutions, to secure their archives before the event of a natural disaster or gradual obsolescence renders their media inaccessible.

This story will become part of Archive: a compendium of short documentaries about archiving culture in the Internet age, and the challenges of massive digital storage.

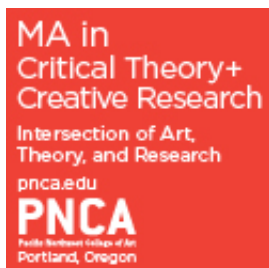
Eyebeam has also opened an [online pledge drive](#) to help fund recovery.

Tagged as: [art conservation](#), [Eyebeam](#), [Hurricane Sandy](#), [Jonathan Minard](#), [New Media](#)

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matthew langley • 13 days ago

I feel for eyebeam's losses as well as the losses incurred by all of the galleries and artspace during the hurricane. But at the same time I'm a bit surprised that people thought that these storage formats are "stable". Hard drives are very fragile, CD-ROM and DVD media (in the R and RW formats) are not stable and are not suitable for long term storage, and let's not get caught thinking that anything on tape is going to last.

Forgive me for coming off like a know it all on this - especially after the fact, but the real tragedy for eyebeam is that proper back up strategies are pretty easy to implement and if done in a controlled fashion over a period of time (say monthly) really do not impede on anyone's bottom line financially.

Often we hear the term "risk management" (often we assume this is about financial management) a digital back up plan is and should be part of that. It can be as simple as keeping copies of your duplicates in tupperware, or having the copies of your back ups at a safe deposit vault or second location. Of course the preferred solution to digital storage is the actively maintained r.a.i.d. array.

This is a hard lesson for everyone, I hope that eyebeam are able to implement a successful back up strategy that is as forward thinking as is their programming.

3 ^ ▾ • Reply • Share ›



Sarah Wingo → matthew langley • 12 days ago

Yep, exactly. Proper preservation methods for digital materials are in some ways even more important than physical materials. Wet books can be dried out, but you corrupt a file and it is gone. Also as you point out calling hard drives and DVDs "supposedly stable" is painfully naive.

2 ^ ▾ • Reply • Share ›



Sarah Wingo • 12 days ago

"Though we think of digital creations as somehow non-physical entities, most of these works were made in the pre-cloud era, and stored as extremely physical things vulnerable to physical problems" It is really important to remember that even "the cloud" exists in an extremely physical state. A cloud is just a big server bay somewhere, that can get destroyed just as easily as anything else.

1 ^ ▾ • Reply • Share ›



punktoad • 9 days ago

The beauty of digital is that copies are just as good as the originals. Most cloud servers

are backed up somewhere else. Even the Internet itself is backed up somewhere in Richmond CA. Analog is much more difficult to back up. Archiving of analog needs to be much more secure, fire proof, waterproof, earthquake proof, etc.

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