

Between Decay and Preservation: A Personal Approach to Media Art Archiving

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Abstract

Now that more than 40 years of electronic art history have passed, it is generally agreed that museums and art institutions are facing a serious problem in respect to the preservation of works of media art. A large number of historical media art works are currently disappearing due to the technical as well as organizational difficulties that their maintenance entails. While this might seem to be a problem that is only of concern for art historians and archiving specialists, artists and creative practitioners will also have to play a role in the development of practical solutions and innovative concepts to deal with the issue of decay and conservation.

Background

Dr. Oliver Grau, one of the leading figures in the field of media art history and the founder of an international conference on this topic [1], writes that many key media art works of the past 50 years are currently being lost. He states that a large part of our cultural heritage is in danger of disappearing because it is not being collected or preserved [2]. Grau argues that there is still too little awareness of the negligence of the public museums toward this art form. According to him, media art has played a key role in addressing the dominant problems of our times, but it has never managed to gain access to the art market or be properly preserved by art museums. There are some laudable initiatives such as the ZMK Digital Art Conservation conferences and the publications of that institution [3]. All and all, however, we must become more aware of the fact that our cultural heritage is being lost.

To deal with the issue of decay, impermanence and archiving we created a series of artworks called "Portrait on the Fly". In the current paper we will describe this project in detail and also look at the context of art, decay and conservation by describing various artistic strategies related to our own art practice.

Art, Decay and Melancholia

Sean Cubitt addresses the ethical component that is linked to every archiving strategy. He writes "archival encounters bring us face to face with fragile but living entities [that] carry freights both of intentions from their makers and of the accidents that have occurred to them through their lives." [4] He therefore sees the archival object as a form of confrontation with our ancestral artefacts. Pointing towards the archivist's melancholic understanding that not everything

can be saved, Cubitt recalls Walter Benjamin's suggestion that "we are the posterity to whom past generations looked to be the ones who judged." [4] This permanent state of melancholia, as described by Cubitt, is a topic that artists have also addressed.

The Dadaists, for example, reacted to the horrors of the First World War by dealing with issues of decay, loss and destruction in their works of art. In the Dada Manifesto of 1918 Tristan Tzara writes: "abolition of memory: Dada; abolition of archaeology: Dada; abolition of prophets: Dada; abolition of the future: Dada." [5]

Another reaction to the political horrors of the times can be found in the Japanese Gutai movement. In the Gutai Manifesto of 1956 Jiro Yoshihara writes "Lock up these corpses in the graveyard. Gutai art does not alter the material. Gutai art imparts life to the material." [6] Florence de Mèredieu states that after the defeat of Japan in the Second World War, when the emperor ceased to be regarded as sacred, Japan went into a profound state of trauma. Artists in Post-War Japan reverted to a latent nihilism that exalted the beauty of destruction. While Gutai to some degree celebrated destruction, Mèredieu also detects a playful and festive attitude in this art movement: "it is because chaos heralds new beginnings and creates the conditions that make new experiments possible. Beauty is simpler and more fragile there. Ephemeral, like the actions of the group." [7]

Chaos and destruction were also described as sources of new energy by the German artist Joseph Beuys, who had been a soldier in World War II and had suffered serious depression: "Chaos may have a healing aspect; in its link with the idea of an open movement it channels the energy heat of chaos, [thereby transforming it] into something ordered and put into form." [8]

Kristine Stiles suggests that the body of the artist holds aesthetic and social signs that also commute political power. "In this sense, destruction art is a warning system, an aesthetic response to human emergency that occurs in the lapse between theory and practice in terminal culture." She suggests that the artist, when faced with extinction, must, if s/he takes responsibility for his/her trust, put art in the service of survival, as "the body conveys the interdependent, interconnected and contingent state of the individual and the collective in survival" [9]. This personal connection between the artist's body and general states of destruction, decay and disappearance can be found in many other examples of art history. The Viennese Actionists in Post-War Austria often performed painful rituals, ceremonies and self-mutilations on their own bodies or those of dead animals [10]. Artists around the Italian Arte Povera movement also introduced elements of decay, for example by utilizing natural materials

that decompose or age. A famous example is Piero Manzoni *Artist's Shit* from 1961. [11] This proponent of the Italian Arte Povera movement produced ninety 30 gram tins of his own excrement and sold them for the value of their weight in gold. While this is clearly a parody of his own status as an artist, it can also be seen as an interesting strategy for archiving himself and conserving a product of his body as an artwork.

Gustav Metzger's manifestos of Auto-Destructive Art include many interesting points that show some relation to today's media art. In his manifesto of 1959 he writes: "Auto-destructive art can be created with natural forces, traditional art techniques and technological techniques... The artist may collaborate with scientists, engineers. Self-destructive art can be machine produced and factory assembled. Auto-destructive paintings sculptures and constructions have lifetimes [that vary] from a few moments to twenty years. When the disintegrative process is complete, [they should be] be removed from the site and scrapped." [12] Two years later he included the term auto-created art and proclaimed: "Auto-created art is art of change, growth, movement. Auto-destructive art and auto-created art aim at the integration of art with the advances of science and technology. The immediate object is the creation, with the aid of computers, of works of art whose movement are programmed and include 'self-regulation'". Electronic devices enable the spectator to "have a direct bearing on the action of these works. Auto-destructive art is the attack on the capitalist values and the drive to nuclear annihilation." [13]

A good example of this type of auto-destructive art is Jean Tinguely's *Homage to New York*, which he realized for the sculpture garden of the Museum of Modern Art. The plan was to create a self-destroying machine that was composed of a meteorological balloon, breakable bottles, a piano, hammers, saws, bicycle wheels and other items he had found. Unfortunately the machine refused to destroy itself and Tinguely wrote: "It wasn't the idea of a machine committing suicide that fascinated me primarily, it was the freedom that belonged to its ephemeral aspect- ephemeral like life, you understand. It was the opposite of the cathedrals, the opposite of the skyscrapers around us. The opposite of the museum idea, the opposite of the petrification in a fixed work of art." [14]

Another radical proclamation of destructivism in art was made by Rafael Montanez Ortiz, who became famous for his participative piano destruction performances. In the Destructivism Manifesto of 1962 he wrote: "The artist must give warning, his struggle must make a noise, it must be a signal. Our screams of anguish and anger will contort our faces and bodies, our shouts will be 'to hell with death,' our actions will make a noise that will shake the heavens and hell. Of this stuff our art will be, that which is made will be unmade, that which is assembled will be disassembled, that which is constructed will be destructed. ...The art that utilizes the destructive processes will purge, for it gives death, so it will give life." [15]

It is interesting to see that even in the manifestos of Dada, Gutai, Actionism and Destructivism there is always a component of creation that is linked to destruction and decay. Perhaps this is because the artist has a melancholic longing to transform destruction and decay into a creative process, even after the artefacts have disappeared.

Decay and Conservation in Media Art

Of course artists have been dealing with archiving and conservation strategies for a long time. They have always

been interested in strategies to keep their artefacts and create long-term value, for example by having their works included in important museums, collections and foundations.

The situation in media art is, however, more complicated due to the fragility of digital technologies. The Variable Media Network (1999-2005) coordinated by the Daniel Langlois Foundation in Montreal and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation in New York, claimed that media art is innately ephemeral and that reinterpretation would be the best way to conserve it [16]. However, there is now more understanding that institutions must shift their focus and assume more responsibility for communicating the historicity of historic works of media art. In a recent exhibition called *Digital Artworks. The Challenges of Conservation* the ZKM Media Museum in Karlsruhe showed that the strategy of storage and hardware preservation has its place in the conservation of digital art and that several different strategies must be simultaneously employed if digital artworks and their contexts are to be conserved [17].

An interesting point concerning media art preservation is also made by Spanish media artist Antoni Muntadas, who states that both the artists and the museum are responsible for employing preservation procedures. He however suggests that "museums and artists need to accept [the fact] that there is a need to destroy more [artworks]. Artists should destroy more works, and keep works that are most relevant. Why keep all the work? In scientific research, for example, only data which is relevant is kept. In artworks, we could keep what we think is the synthesis of the work. Everything that surrounds the works, those things that become the objects of fetishistic admiration or market interests, should not be preserved. We need to destroy more. We need to make decisions." [18]

This connection between artworks that survive and ones that are lost is also pointed out by media art pioneer Jeffrey Shaw. He states: "This is also interesting, because [in some cases] ...technological obsolescence ...does impact the viability and integrity of the work, but in other cases the aesthetic and functional properties of the work can transcend that." He says that the longevity of an artwork gives him a certain pleasure as this piece of art "starts to go beyond the time of its immediate concerns. Because then it becomes a historic object, and it becomes a reference in terms of art history and you can see it in a different light." [18]

Referring to media art, Jussi Parikka writes that today "the big challenge is to think through what to do with decay and processes, and how to tap into cultural heritage, and hence also [what to do about the] conservation of digital art that is about electromagnetic fields, number crunching, network pings, and screens that are only stable when they refresh." [19]

Portrait on the Fly- An Artistic Approach to Media Art Archiving

For 25 years we have been creating interactive artworks that deal with artificial life processes and evolution and are linked to user participation. Many of these creations only appear when the user interacts with them, so their essence is ephemeral. However, conservation has always been an important focus for us and we keep updating, upgrading and porting the hardware and software whenever it is possible to do so. But, as pointed out earlier, digital obsolescence is becoming more and more of an issue, especially at times when hardware and software are being replaced at an ever increasing rate.

It is of course unfortunate that many important artefacts of media art are currently disappearing because they are not being properly collected and preserved. When talking to our artist friends we often heard that their early media artworks have vanished because nobody had the time and money to preserve them. However it is also clear that Antoni Muntadas is right when he claims that artists need to become more proactive and make decisions about what to keep and what to discard. We therefore decided to create an artwork that deals proactively with the issue of impermanence in a pragmatic manner. Similar to the Destructivists, we use the issue of decay as a motif for a series of art works.

They are called *Portrait on the Fly* and consist of a series of interactive portraits, plotter drawings and video portraits. Their main motif is a swarm of digital flies that can compose faces and outlines of people. An inspiration for this series was derived from the fantastic portraits that Guiseppe Arcimboldo made from parts of plants and animals in middle of the 15th century. Roland Barthes ascribes a certain scientific method to Arcimboldo's research into botanical as well as zoological details. At the same time, he remarks that artistic freedom and monstrosity are celebrated in these paintings [20]. While Arcimboldo's portraits are composed of many different animals, for *Portrait on the Fly* we only utilize one insect, a simple fly. In many cultures the image of the fly is associated with death and decay. In forensic entomology, for example, the fly is used to determine the exact time of death, as it is the earliest insect to infest a corpse and it plays an important role in the decomposition of bodies. [21] We are aware that using the symbolism of the fly in our artwork is rather morbid, it signifies a certain fragility of media art per se.

Portrait on the Fly – interactive version

Portrait on the Fly (Interactive Version) is composed of an interactive monitor that shows a swarm of ten thousand flies [22]. The algorithms for their movements were programmed by us; they were inspired by the behavior of real flies and simulate the motions these insects make when they are flying.

When a person positions him or herself in front of the monitor, the camera detects his or her outline and communicates it to the artificial insects. They then begin to arrange themselves so as to reproduce his or her facial features, thereby creating a recognizable likeness. As soon as anybody poses in front of the monitor, the flies are attracted to the image of his or her face. Within seconds they invade it, but even the slightest movement of the head or facial features drives them off. The portraits are thus in constant flux; they construct and deconstruct. *Portrait on the Fly* is a commentary on the extent to which we love to make pictures of ourselves (Selfie-Culture); it has to do with change, transience and impermanence. It celebrates the ephemeral moment of self-portraiture; each image only exists for one brief instant.



Fig 1. *Portrait on the Fly*, 2015, Laurent Mignonneau and Christa Sommerer, interactive installation.



Fig 2. *Portrait on the Fly*, 2015, Laurent Mignonneau and Christa Sommerer, interactive installation.

Portrait on the Fly – Plotter Drawings

Portrait on the Fly (Plotter Drawings) also exists in the form of a series of plotter drawings. Snapshots of digital fly portraits are printed out in plotter-style drawings of the 1960s. Ephemeral moments of interaction are thereby immortalized in the form of graphical drawings.

The first of these artworks is an auto portrait. The series includes likenesses of important media art experts, theorists and artists, such as Jeffrey Shaw, Frieder Nake, Mark

Wilson, Hans Dehlinger, Edmond Couchot, Hannes Leopoldseder, Christine Schöpf, Peter Weibel, Lynn Hershman, and many others. Its aim is to conserve valuable original images of the historic figures who are involved in media art. The idea of going back to a unique original image after having explored process-based and ephemeral art also relates to a fundamental problem of media art - the need to create artefacts which remain unaltered.

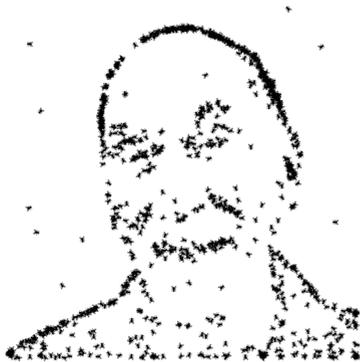


Fig 3. *Portrait on the Fly (Frieder Nake)*, 2015, Laurent Mignonneau and Christa Sommerer, plotter drawing, original, signed.



Fig 4. *Portrait on the Fly (Jeffrey Shaw)*, 2015, Laurent Mignonneau and Christa Sommerer, plotter drawing, original, signed.

Portrait on the Fly – Video Portraits

This is an ongoing digital archive which consists of short video sequences where the moving portraits of well-known media art pioneers, scholars, artists, theorist, gallerist and organizers are turned into swarms of flies. They include so portraits of Marie Hélène Tramus, Christiane Paul, Sarah Diamond, Peter d'Agostino, Gerfried Stocker, Oliver Grau, Maurice Benayoun, Paul Thomas, Jill Scott, Paul Sermon, Simon Biggs, Greg Garvey, Thecla Schiphorst, Jean-Luc

Soret, Chu-Yin Chen, Dominique Moulon, Nina Czeglédy, Ellen Pau, Wolf Lieser, Anita Beckers, Tomoe Moriyama, Erkki Huhtamo, Machiko Kusahara, Hiroshi Ishii, Ryszard Kluszczyński, Annick Bureaud, Derrick de Kerckhove, Jean-Louis Boissier, Anne-Marie Duguet, Sabine Himmelsbach, Karin Ohlenschläger, Maria Grazia Mattei, Victoria Vesna, Sean Cubitt, Minoru Hatanaka, Masahiro Miwa, Joachim Sauter, and many others.

It is a personal collection of fly portraits of our peers who shape and have shaped the field of media art. It is our personal homage to our friends and colleagues and a celebration of the archivist's melancholic understanding that not everything can be saved. Torn between knowing that media art is a form of art that is linked to decay and destruction, this work also envisions a format that can survive longer. Or as Jeffrey Shaw expressed it, "your biggest problem, your biggest challenge is the mortality of the artists who made these works. Because once they are gone, you're lost." [23]



Fig 4. *Portrait on the Fly (Anne-Marie Duguet)*, 2015, Laurent Mignonneau and Christa Sommerer, screen shot from video portrait.

Conclusion

In this paper we have shown that decay is a topos that we encounter throughout many decades of art history. From the Dadaist, to Gutai, the Viennese Actionists to the manifestos of Arte Povera and Destructivism, impermanence has been a topic that inspired many artists. Media art is an especially ephemeral form of art, since its components are particularly prone to obsolescence. A recent surge of media art archiving strategies shows that there is a longing for more permanence and for the conservation of artefacts of art history. We have taken a proactive approach towards media art archiving by proposing a personal artistic strategy that involves the collection and preservation of portraits of important media art protagonist. At the same time we highlight the problematic and melancholic component that is related to such an undertaking. We are aware that celebrating decay is always linked to new possibilities of creation. Or, as Ortiz said, "the art that utilizes the destructive processes will purge; it gives death, so it will give life." [15]

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