An Interactive Mnemonic Space for Jodi.org:
The Process of Re-exhibiting

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Abstract

How will the artist website jodi.org be remembered? Eventually this artwork could be remembered within an art museum, but there has been a complicated relationship between the museum and Net.Art, in part because of the different memory strategies at play within each. This paper analyses strategies that the artists experiment with to keep jodi.org alive for now and with an eye on the future. This brings into view that it is important to rethink the division between communicative and cultural memory and hybridize memory processes as explained in both fields. How can this new epistemology of memory be applied within museum curatorial practice? This paper proposes the concept of 're-exhibiting': developing various versions for display that strive to incorporate the communication within networks. The exhibition history shows the artwork as a changing entity; it can give insights in the DNA of the artwork and the memory strategies that can be applied to keep it alive.

Introduction

During the Nineties, a new information space known as the World Wide Web (hereafter, the Web) transformed the Internet from a non-public (mostly academic and military) medium into a mass medium accessible to all. Today we may reconsider this pivotal moment in digital culture with the fresh eyes of historical distance. From a contemporary perspective, the Internet can be understood as one of the most important developments in the Twentieth century. To understand our present time, it is essential to have knowledge about the Internet. As such the question arises: *How is it going to be remembered within current and future generations?*

Understanding the rise of the Web also calls for knowledge of the utopian and dystopian pronouncements around that time. Contemporary critical reflections on the emerging medium of the Web can be found within Internet Art. As Aleida Assmann argues that artists are *the* critical observers of the time. [1] The artworks that were created within that time, both on the Internet itself and which capture (critical) reflections on this emerging medium, offer a way to understand the Internet. So if these representations of the time are such an essential contribution to our understanding of the Internet, how can they be saved for future generations?

The responsibility for the memorialization of one of the most well known, avant-garde websites within that

period, jodi.org, is largely in the hands of the artists. The website (origins from 1995) can still be visited online, without any complications in contemporary browsers. Also the work is exhibited regularly within and outside museums and galleries. What will happen when the artists abandon this role? Eventually a memory institution, such as an art museum, could take responsibility, but one problem concerns how to include an online artwork within their memory framework. In the field of memory studies, it has been widely discussed how digital media are influencing memory processes. As a result the gap between memory processes within the art museum and the digital realm still needs to be bridged and it could be argued that many art museums still struggle to include digital heritage in general, but in particular Internet art, within their collections.

Last year I discussed this issue with artist duo JODI (Joan Heemskerk and Dirk Paesmans) and in particular we questioned how their work could be remembered within a museum setting. We decided to rethink the presentation of their early works. The display version they developed gives not only valuable insights in their thoughts about the memorialization of this particular artwork, but also insights into how digital memory processes differ in general.

In this article, jodi.org will be a starting point for analysing memory processes that are crucial for including digital (in particular web-based) heritage within museums. These will be used to create an exhibition model for a web-based artwork. The Internet is a communication medium and the invitation to participate characterizes Net.Art. The exhibition is where interaction with the audience takes place. As such the memorialization of Net.Art is a matter of preservation closely related towards the question how we can display these artworks now and in the future.

Revisiting jodi.org

The website jodi.org was launched in 1995. Since then it has become one of the most well-known avant-garde websites. While letters and symbols are usually displayed on a webpage, the jodi.org website subverts expectations, by displaying the green ASCII text – the program code which is normally invisible to the user - instead. With the undressing of the code, the online

world shows its true face and it totally confuses us, maybe even more now than in 1995. In our post-digital era codes are increasingly hidden and online and offline are tangled and intertwined. We can hardly distinguish what is computational and what is not. Within jodi.org the seemingly nonsensical code obscures a graphical representation of a bomb. The digital disruption makes us wonder what is actually communicated online and what reveals more: the code (for most humans unreadable) or the translated representations (texts and visuals). Even 20 years after its launch, and although computer programming languages have drastically changed, jodi.org still reflects aspects of our contemporary media society. This is not only the case within the history of technology; it is just as much embedded within art historical traditions, with a new generation of artists acknowledging jodi.org as highly relevant for their current artistic practices.

Over the course of time jodi.org has transformed into a dense network of multiple web-based artworks that have been added to the 'mother' website, among others 404.jodi.org, oss.jodi.org and sod.jodi.org. Nowadays jodi.org is not so much a single artwork, but a digital collection, as well as an archive for contextual materials that even includes the email address of the artists, and the network is still growing.

On the one hand the artists try to protect the interactive, evolutionary nature of their artwork and prevent the webpage from being stored offline. On the other hand they do acknowledge the importance of documentation, and see possibilities for offline as well as online collecting and presentation. In other words, they recognize the importance of multiple memory strategies, but emphasize that the Internet is a key aspect within their work, that should be maintained as long as possible.

A new display version for jodi.org

In 2014 I approached JODI with the question if they wanted to rethink how jodi.org could be exhibited within an art museum and present it at 'Projections' (the video art section at the contemporary art fair Art Rotterdam). The artists felt that it could be important for the art museum to present their work with the input devices from that time. As such JODI playfully presented the work with a classic keyboard and mouse. This approach could be seen as ironic, maybe even a form of institutional critique, since they also used a relatively new Mac computer. It was clear that in their opinion the equipment could be replaced. What was more important was the browser, which needed to be visible in all cases (also on the stills within the press release) and for this presentation the original 'Netscape' browser was emulated. As the work was shown on 'Projections' the presentation needed to be more or less adjusted to the format of the limited display possibilities. Although it did illustrate that we should not confuse the computer with the online and offline networks, the connectivity and the web, which are main issues to be taken into account.

The most important question has become, how to maintain the interactivity through the Web. For this, JODI developed an instruction manual (a "screening script"), which needed to be executed by a hired operator. The instructions helped the operator to navigate through their early works (1995-1999). He was asked to continuously execute these instructions, which could be seen as a performance for the viewers. The JODI performances are usually more improvised and although the instruction manual was clear, it also stimulated the operator to make individual detours.

Besides the physical presentation at Art Rotterdam two videos appeared on the website of MAMA (a centre for contemporary art in Rotterdam) in which Rafaël Roozendaal explored JODI's work using their Wikipedia article as the starting point and Constant Dullaart made an appropriation. [2] Jodi.org was brought within a contemporary context by a new generation of artists working with the Internet. Instead of a passive contemplation, the work was displayed as an active platform, which still connected through time (by connecting to a different generation) and space (the connection between geographically remote locations, but also between the online and offline world).

The presentation at Art Rotterdam should not be seen as a final outcome. Rather, it was used as a discursive space for exploring the problem in general. Prior to the exhibition there were conversations with experts, including Sandra Fauconnier (historical context) and Annet Dekker (curatorial and conservation practice). During Art Rotterdam, Witte de With organized a peer-to-peer meeting in which possible futures for online artworks in (museum) collections were examined. Also the presentation at the art fair itself was used as a discursive space with the aim to discuss with museum professionals and collectors possible cultural contexts for jodi.org and the broad range of changing perspectives on display opportunities within a museum gallery.

Art museums reacted positively, but also emphasized their complex relationship with Net.Art. With the advent of digital technology, knowledge is stored in a constant state of flux. It is constantly re-shaped under the changing pressures and perspectives of the present. As also the literature in the field argues, the dynamic mnemonic logic still challenges the museum. When museums collect net-based artworks, they are confronted with the fact that their infrastructure differs and is incompatible with the aims of these artworks. In case of Net.Art this state of flux should be better formulated, as it is not only about how the artworks change continuously, but also how these transformations are caused by communication within a networked community.

Communicative and cultural memory

Remembering the past should not be confused with documentation of the past. Remembering is the result of the decisions made in different places and times; in each specific context we decide what is important to

remember. Because of that history is always more or less distorted: It is a selection, an interpretation and an adjustment towards the schemata's of a particular culture. Our contemporary ideas about the past have been highly influenced by the digital realm. The Internet has given us new mediations of the past, which is challenging our traditional understanding of cultural memory, including the way we think about (stable) historical narratives, the idea of a canon and (single) authorship.

The introduction of the term 'cultural memory' serves to help us understand this shifting perspective. It was Jan Assmann who coined this term, when he examined how cultural identity is developed within a society by creating fixed points that establish the endurance over time and helps sharing the past (for example monuments or artworks). [3] Assmann contrasted this form of memory with Halbwachs's notion of 'social memory', whose focus was on memories that are shared by members of a group through everyday and informal interaction. [4] Oral memories need to be constantly trained and renewed by a selection of individuals that have the responsibility to retell the stories. Assmann adds that the transfer of memory is not only by inter-human interaction, but also by external systems of notation (such as writing or images). [5] As such he distinguishes two theoretical memory concepts: the 'communicative memory' (as articulated by Halbwachs) and 'cultural memory'. The latter takes a distance from the everyday. Certain memories of important, historical events are preserved in time by the construction of so-called 'time islands'. They have a different form of temporality then everyday communication (for example through freezing or repeating certain moments in time). The formation of culture creates a collective experience which meaning can be accessed, millennia after it happened.

Museums are important institutions within the formation of cultural memory and their memory processes still affiliate with how Assmann described it. This also reveals some of the reasons why they have to overcome difficulties when dealing with artworks within the digital realm. Online artworks are nestled within a medium for communication and interactivity is a necessity for their appreciation and understanding. It has been argued that the collaborative authorship can conflict with the functioning of museums as gatekeepers. The fact that these artworks transform over time can be in conflict with the more traditional approach of museums to fix objects. It is impossible to reduce these artworks to the time of realization or an original state. These works ask for a museum that can respond to the present as well as the past, to the individual as well as the collective, to fixed stages as well as the dynamics within the process of time.

The theoretical division that Assmann made between cultural and communicative memory needs a revision. Within the online, social memory space the external memory cannot be separated from the living memory. The living memory directly contributes to the online

memory space (and vice versa). Within the Internet everyone can become a co-author and as a result history is ceaselessly repeated and transformed by the individuals who re-temporalize it. This memory process is fluctuating, never accurate, but related to the social context of the present. Instead of hierarchies or complete systems, we should think in terms of processes. Instead of static objects we should think in terms of events, continuous transformations and a process of forming and re-forming.

The Process of Re-exhibiting

Exhibitions are in particularly interesting as they show a similar process of forming and re-forming the past. They embed artworks within different (art) historical, social and political contexts. Exhibitions often give us a contemporary perspective on the past, but many museums also value to display the 'original' state of the artworks and their audiences are often (passive) observers. Web-based artworks ask for alternative curatorial models, since they are continuously changing entities under influence of interaction with the audience. Net.Art is part of an online communication network (the Web), in which audiences can add their own ideas and memories; easily surf to other parts of the Web; visitors within the gallery can interact with the artwork, but also online visitors who are located at remote locations.

Within the case study jodi.org the exhibition served to create an (inter)active platform. Reesa Greenberg has argued how "remembering exhibitions" (exhibitions that restage historical exhibitions) can be seen as discursive events:

"Remembering exhibitions can be discursive events, dynamic cultural moments of active, widespread exchange and debate that in turn are catalysts for changing perceptions and practices. They have the potential for altering past and future views of the exhibition condition." [6]

In this model the audience is placed within the heart of the exhibition concept. Debate does not only take place afterwards, but also during and prior to the exhibitions. This format breaks with strict curatorial control and prefers a collaborative authorship. Audiences are recognized as active participants. Also this model does not fix the past, but it remains open for translations depending on the context. This paper is not about remembering whole exhibitions; it examines web-based artworks. Though an adaption of this model is still relevant. Key-characteristics of a web-based artwork - like being in continuous flux, interactivity, and connectivity with the world outside the museum - become valuable additions within this model.

Curators of Media Arts propose that the museum can indeed treat artworks as living things that transform under the influence of new contexts. For example Rudolf Frieling argues that the museum functions as a producer that has the responsibility to rethink installations and facilitate appropriations:

"The question will be how a collection can be 'performed' and what specific kinds of experience this might constitute when the museum produces art, the audience participates, and the artist is absent. (...) An installation is thus never a given fact, but the result of many agents in this process. We can summarily say it is produced each time it is installed." [7]

When we re-install a web-based artwork it is in particular important to rethink the networked communication. Can an exhibition become an opportunity for producing a community, a platform that brings people together to debate different perspectives or where collaborations can be formed? Clearly to facilitate involvement we need to situate these artworks within a current context, but with reference to the past and the future. So it is not only the life of the artwork that needs our attention, but also the social life of the artwork. It is not only a case of re-installing an artwork as a technical system, but also rethinking its social context.

Conclusions

Although the contextualization of Net.Art is highly interdisciplinary, art history can greatly contribute to it in analysing both form and content. For the future context of Net.Art it is important that these artworks are (also) included in the collections of art museums. Some art museums have collected web-based artworks and they also contribute to research that can prevent pioneering artworks from falling into oblivion.

In the publication "Re-collection" Richard Rinehart asks a key question: *"Can we imagine museums whose authority is used to facilitate and engage a community rather than treat its members as passive cultural consumers?"* [8] Rinehart mentions the Media Art Notation System (MANS) that represents a "score" for each artwork that contains instructions for recreating that artwork. He also mentions that a Creative Commons License makes it possible for the audience to download the artwork and re-appropriate it. Museums should not only facilitate this, but could also employ their historicising function – they could map and document where (components of) artworks have been re-used.

Within the display version of jodi.org a score was used to keep interactivity alive, not for re-appropriation, but also this less-progressive approach can offer challenges for museums on how to interpret the interactivity with the audience. The museum may or may not include these display configurations, but it is, in any case, important for museums to re-imagine their memory strategies and welcome ideas about interaction, as it can offer opportunities to stay within current social, cultural and cognitive contexts and to maintain a vital relationship with their audiences. Preservation is about respecting the past, but also about serving the needs of the present.

This article shows that analysing the different displays of Internet art can add new insights to the discussion on how to include digital heritage within the art museum. These web-based art practices are also interactive and process-based, but their fluid form develops in social (online and offline) networks. Rethinking curatorial practice is important for remembering these artworks, as it is within exhibitions that the interactivity with audiences takes place. Re-exhibiting Internet art is not only thinking in terms of re-installing a technical system, but also re-creating social contexts of which the form is far from uniform.

Re-exhibiting is not a final outcome, but a continuously process that changes over time. Clearly there is not a single strategy to remember Internet art, but a diversity of possibilities that can be applied according to the specific context. Before the artist is absent it is valuable to rethink various display versions. If we analyse exhibition histories these artworks act like living bodies. It is the archive that shows us the hidden structures and patterns. We need to carefully analyse the lifespan of these artworks within exhibition histories to find its DNA and examine memory strategies, as both are essential to give these artworks a future. [9]

Acknowledgements

References

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8. Richard Rinehart and Jon Ippolito. *Re-Collection: Art, New Media, and Social Memory* (Cambridge and Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2014), 108.
9. The notion of the DNA of the artwork was discussed in the conference "Media in Transition" (Tate Modern, 18-20 November 2015).