

Net Art and Preservation. For Museums and Artists

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Artists have appropriated the Internet as soon as it became public to experiment new artistic, social and technical practices that have been gathered under the term net art. The museums and cultural institutions that are interested by those works have to reconsider the way they commission, exhibit, collect and preserve artworks, as they already did with other forms of ephemeral or process-based art. They have to construct new approaches to preservation that would also make them rethink how to conserve and display their entire collections, not just digital works. Very few museums have actually acquired online artworks, despite the interest that many showed towards these practices, especially in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Paradoxically, museums have never been so ready to do so as many studies and research programs, often collaborations between institutions, have been dedicated to the preservation of new media art (mostly video artworks and rarely digital art pieces).

Net art works, along with other forms of art, whether digital or not, are challenging some of the elements that are central to artworks within a museum collection. They are inherently variable and in a state of programmed obsolescence. Nevertheless, new or updated preservation models within museums can be explored in order to preserve the net art pieces, that is to preserve its accessibility. I use accessibility as a notion that includes both access and exhibition: the artwork is online and ready to be activated by an Internet user, and there are elements of context and documentation. Accessibility guides preservation strategies, even if it's independent from them.

Which elements of net art works should be emphasized, described, documented and kept? What makes up the artwork: the experience of the piece for the visitor, what can be seen on the screen, its apparatus, its source code, etc.? Preservation strategies and subsequent collections will vary, depending on the way institutions answer that question. Within the museum context has emerged the Variable Media Initiative which perceives the artwork outside of its medium, so that it can evolve, be re-created, for instance when its original medium becomes obsolete. Every art work is considered

individually, more as a score than a finite, unchanging object. This model is highly influential within the scope of new media and process-based artworks, even if it has been implemented by only a few institutions.

I would like to suggest another way to look at the preservation of net art with an intuition and potential solution: the archeological museum model. An archeological museum preserves broken pieces, equivalent of works that don't function anymore as they should, accumulates objects in various states which allow for a mental reconstruction of the original ones. The status of what is shown is significantly different in such a museum: visitors are aware that what they are seeing and experiencing is reconstructed, they do not expect to see an object that is identical to what it was when it was made. The status of the artwork recreated is challenged and interrogated.

By combining museum and archival approaches, it is possible to keep traces of the net-based artworks' context by taking into account interrelations within a dynamic environment. Net archiving tools allow to follow very closely how an art work evolves, but that doesn't necessarily mean that the capture of works are functioning similarly to the works themselves.

By emphasizing the dialog between net art works and their environment, the institution would become a living archive, with fragments of artworks which could be updated and re-activated in multiple ways in such a "data museum".

The challenges the museum faces with preservation of net art works are also shared by artists, albeit in different ways. The difficulty to assess the lifetime of online artworks change the ways artists think about their own works. One option could be for artists to document their artworks while they are creating and showing them, as a rich documentation (both artistic and technical) could also have a career beside the artwork, especially as in some cases it's the only way to have access to the work. One other possibility, compatible with the first option, is the use of free software, open formats and copyleft licenses as they allow artists to make the life duration of their works potentially longer, whatever the way their works is distributed. Beside the advantages of free software for the creation of artworks (such as the freedom to experiment, the independence from companies and sharing of code and knowledge, etc), the use of open standards and formats for once give artists a little more time to show, share and sell their works than if they would use proprietary formats, as open standards make interoperability possible between software. Copyleft licences also permits, and encourages, duplication, which ensures its access, which is a main factor of its longevity. The care of the work could be potentially distributed outside of a single artist or institution. Nevertheless, digital artworks, whether made with proprietary or free softwares suffer from the same issues with storage and software decay.