

THE EPHEMERAL IN AUDIOVISUAL REALTIME PRACTICES: AN ANALYSIS INTO THE POSSIBILITIES FOR ITS DOCUMENTATION

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Realtime audiovisual performance is an art-moment defined as a unique narrative. By establishing a theoretical structure, grounded on a permanent process of becoming, the subject of documentation will come to the surface. The text aims at presenting references and considerations for the study of documentation of the ephemeral project towards the collective construction of practice's memory.



Systematic Illusion, 2010, Ana Carvalho, Video performance.

Situated between the moment and its memory, a document is evidence of an action. Ephemerality is a key feature of contemporary artistic practices happening at the point of convergence of digital technology and mobile communications through interdisciplinary discourses. The performative moment has a unique narrative that occurs in the present, which is no longer past, neither is future yet. The moment combines all that has preceded and re-arranges elements to constitute possible futures.

The interdisciplinary nature of realtime audiovisual performative practices permits related reflective thinking and theoretical discourse to be diffused and, therefore, associated and located within other disciplines . [1] For this reason, a discourse that is particular to audiovisual performance as a specific field of research is minute. In order to create the necessary theoretical arena to deal with the specificities of the practices in contemporary terms, descriptive documents are necessary to be identified.

In the generic landscape of digital ephemeral practices, the few projects related to documentation usually take empirical approaches, mainly aiming at the recovery and archiving of the past. Current reflection on the possibilities for documentation attempt to deal with the conflict between the temporal, immaterial and interactive essence of work developed within contemporary technological landscape by redefining the fixity that defines a document (with specific features, capable of constituting evidence for preservation). Within realtime audiovisual performance, this same conflict takes specific features as it deals with process, improvisation and identity, and has a unique potential through conversion of the tools of practice into the tools for crafting documentation.

This paper presents a set of references from where to think documentation towards its further empirical application.

Although specific within digital ephemeral practices, realtime audiovisual performance has under its umbrella several expressions differentiated by processes (more or less multidisciplinary, such as VJ/DJing), by context (in closer association with cinema: Live Cinema), by history (establishing a connection with musical composition: Visual Music). Moving away from nuances, differences and divergences, we define realtime audiovisual performance within the combination of two dialogical components: audio and moving image, in a unique, multisensory experience, centered around an audience. We establish a specific interest in the developments made by collectives, with emphasis on process.

We at first established a theoretical structure, through relationships rather than hierarchies, from where to look at realtime audiovisual performance. At its basis, in order for the relationship between process and event to be established, having in mind we are studying a time-based art form, the practice is divided into three moments: creative process, performative moment and community gathering moment.

We propose the performative moment, in itself the art expression, as a stable state within an interconnection of processes that encompass not only its own development but also the performer's body of work, as well as the practice itself as a whole (in its historical and contemporary dimensions). In this interconnection of processes, the time that directly precedes the occurrence of a performative moment will be its process of becoming, what we called the creative process, in terms of Gilbert Simondon's process of individuation . [2] Because there is no process of individuation without the individual, there is no creative process without performative moment. This process occurs in a chronological order. The first event of this order is the principle of individuation itself and the second are it in practice, in a process that results in individuation. At the third and final event is located the individual. Simondon's individuation is "primordial, for it is this process that at once brings the individual into being and determines all the distinguishing characteristics of its development, organization and modalities." [3] By looking at the relationship between the elements (technology, methodologies, knowledge, and other) that constitute the creative process, we establish connections with Simondon's system of historical-cultural evolutionary complexity between humans and technology where man has the role of organizer and interpreter of the ensemble of open machines as expressed in *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*. The audiovisual technical set-up, which allows artists to play live, is an ensemble or a technical object of genetic complexity that establishes a relationship between artist and technology in two ways. Firstly through the capacity to change and make specific, sometimes unique, technical set-ups from a combination of elements. Whether proprietary or customized, mutable technical setups for live performance are developed having in mind a specific performer or performance. Secondly, through the improvisational nature in the relationship between artist and technology, as expressed in a poetical way by Mark Amerika in the description of the persona of the VJ. [4] It is from the point of the performative moment that we propose a look at its process and therefore, to look at the documentation.

To document the process of individuation is to make visible concepts and plans that enable the performative moment with its uniqueness. We propose a look into Process Art to understand ways to deal with documentation of the process as well as to documentation and presentation of Software Art. Possibilities for documents may take the form of technical drawing, scores and registration of dialogues between artists. These will provide ways to describe and understand the performance during its process and its connections with technological developments.

The creative process is what makes each performance unique, even when the elements that constitute it are the same. Returning to Simondon, the process of individuation does not end with the pre-individual but continues within a metastable regime, born and maintained by the individual who carries its inheritance of the pre-individual environment. The same way, the performative moment will give way to another process and another performance. Following this line of comparison, the pre-individual is a source for other metastable states to occur and other individuations to take place. This results in a complex affection between performer, performance and practice as a whole. The process of individuation is here considered being part of an ontogenic process of a larger entity.

The performative moment is constituted by connections between the artists and the projected image, diffused sound, between artists and between artists and audience. If audio and video outcomes and photographic evidence of the environment, resulting from the performance, constitute the most common form of documentation, other aspects are less likely to be looked at. We propose two other elements to be considered of relevance when documenting the performative moment: experience and fruition. Experience is resultant from the relationship established between the performer and work and dialogue with other performers. Fruition is the relationship established by the audience with the work, with each other and the performers. A look into methodos Fluxus artists recurred to in the documentation of their actions, acts, happening and performances, will provide indications of the impact on the ephemeral work that documented descriptions of the audience may have. As an example from the contemporary audiovisual context, the festival Cimatics in its 2007 edition, had a team dedicated to collecting experiences from both spectators and artists. From the edited footage videos were made available online. These videos provide glimpses into the performances and an insight into firsthand experience.

Performance is the moment from where to look into the future. The third moment is the community gathering moment that occurs in physical spaces. Community is a nucleus of those who actively participate in the creation, in critical and theoretical reflection, and experience and fruition of the audiovisual performance. It is composed by individuals from diverse locations and cultural backgrounds. As expressed by Manuel Castells, gatherings allow the community to strengthen the bonds by connecting individuals that come together in a physical location. As nodes of the community, collaborative projects are points of intersection which envisage the network of connections. Collaboration can be identified as the joint effort of two or more people in a dialogical process, grounded on experimenting with concepts, data and technology. To document the community gathering moment is, therefore, of major relevance to understand the practice as a whole as it encompasses all the previously mentioned moments as well as the new one, which is each community gathering moment.

The concept of what is a document has changed, compelled by the shift from art-object to art-moment. Contemporary documentation, moving away from a formula to preserve and exhibit, has a dynamic meaning, which describes a tool to reinstall an installation, or to re-enact a performance. Performances, as well as ephemeral installations, exist only within the context they are presented into the public. In storage (warehouse or database) they are mere materiality. Defined by its uniqueness, the moment is an artistic, ephemeral manifestation that documentation should not replace. From the thirty three case

studies that constitute the research project *Inside Installations* (www.insideinstallations.org) one is relevant to highlight as example. A series of performances with liquid crystals that took place between 1965–66, by the artist Gustav Metzger, were exhibited at the Tate in 2005. For its original format, a team was necessary to manage material and 12 projectors. For the exhibition, the artist, together with the museum's technical team, developed an installation version based on the original concept. A remix of the material was presented recurring to recent technologies. The installation exhibited is also documentation of the performance. The replacement of the realtime and the performative by an object creates a situation that is worth analysing. We take a different and more challenging path with a proposal to approach documentation in a way that not only makes possible to preserve the practice's features but reinforce them.

Which criteria should describe this documentation?

Radical actions, throughout avant-garde movements of the past century, gave way to possibilities of new concepts of making and experiencing art. It is within a conceptual frame that Fluxus can be understood as a community and as a philosophy rather than simply a historical movement [5]. It is through an interest in publication of documents that a concept emerged, but it was through a performance festival that Fluxus started as a network. The emphasis on the playful and ephemeral is visible in published objects related to Fluxus (*Flux Boxes*), but the opposite can be said about the performances, if we refer to their printed scores (*Fluxus Cookbook*). This affection of ephemeral on object and vice-versa is also true for individual artists. Allan Kaprow's writings referenced directly to his work. In fact, they constitute the part that is left of most of his work. Kaprow wrote scores, collected written recollections of himself and of members of the audience of his performances and published about his work under a pseudonym [6]. The intermedia, performative and participatory character of Fluxus took many shapes, for example in events, publications and films. It is the relationship between ephemeral and document in the work of the community as well as of the individuals, that is relevant. Fluxus is a great inspiration for looking at the possible shapes documentation can take in relationship to realtime audiovisual performance from the point of view of the practitioner, from the collective and from the community.

Without defining documenting as a set of rules, but drawing a trajectory for the possibilities of documenting as complementary to practice, an example can be presented. Being interested in the creative process, the collective Aether9 (<http://aether9.org>) explores the possibilities of realtime manipulation and transmission of audio and video. Geographically located in different points of the globe, the collective's members maintain communication and perform exclusively via the Internet. Documentation of their Skype meetings that happen during preparation and during the performance took the shape of (so far) two books published by Greyscale Press (<http://greyscalepress.com>). These books can be purchased through online print-on-demand Lulu (<http://www.lulu.com>). This way, the readers can be located in any place of the globe with Internet and postal access. Through this process of documentation, Aether9 provides non-descriptive layers of the performances which help understand them beyond their results, based on the interaction between artists during the process of development and final presentation.

This example contrast with another one provided by the DVD *Immersive Works* by Granular Synthesis. The DVD presents recordings of performances between 1991 and 2001. A distinctive feature of this work, when compared with general attempts to document audiovisual events, is its descriptive nature (as opposition to the promotional short version very common especially in social networks). It is for this feature that we consider as an example of a document that provide evidence of the group's work. While Aether9's books detach the reader from the actual outcomes and presents creative process and

performative moment as an ongoing process, in the DVD by Granular Synthesis the focus is on the audiovisual experience of the performative moment. Both examples use individual, objectified documents, and none of them can be perceived as replacement of the performative moment.

To establish a theoretic structure, process oriented, from where to construct instruments to analyse and reflect on the contemporary audiovisual performative practice, is a proposal that comprehend both its ephemeral and multidisciplinary nature. Parallel to the institutionalized procedures, documentation of the contemporary practice is a subject of the community's concern. From within, documentation can be considered as registration of a series of relationships and interconnected processes that constitute means to retain and re-experience (individually and collective) the art-moment. This registration can be developed recurring to tools, technologies and knowledge from within the practice. The documents, developed by the community, are a primary source for further study, research and memory construction. In sum, to document is also to contribute actively to the construction of identity and context. In the future, this focus on the community and the possibilities of its actions will likely provoke changes not only in the practice itself but also in the way it is perceived externally.

References and Notes:

1. Dieter Daniels and Sandra Naumann, *See This Sound. Audiovisuology Compendium* (Vienna: Ludwig Boltzmann Institute, 2010), 15.
2. Gilbert Simondon, "The Genesis of the Individual", in *Incorporations*, ed. Jonathan Crary and Sanford Kwinter, 300 (New York: Zone).
3. *Ibidem*, 300.
4. Mark Amerika, *Meta/Data: A Digital Poetics* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2007).
5. Owen Smith, "Fluxus Praxis: An Exploration of Connections, Creativity, and Community," in *At a Distance: Percursors to Art and Activism on the Internet*, ed. Annmarie Chandler and Norie Neumark (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006).
6. Alex Potts, "Writing the Happening: The Aesthetics of Noart" in *Allan Kaprow – Art as Life*, ed. Stephanie Rosenthal et al, 20 – 31 (London: Thames and Hudson, 2008).