

# Sustainable digital preservation of new media art

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## Abstract

This paper is about two pilot studies conducted in 2022 that aimed to develop a model for preserving and archiving new media art work in the context of a research project on the sustainable digital preservation of new media art that is being co-hosted by the Museum of Modern Art in Ljubljana. As the works of art selected for the study by Slovenian new media art pioneers Vuk Ćosić (2000) and Srečo Dragan (2005) were technically obsolete or non-functional by the time of the study, the question of how to bring the artworks back into existence and what components of each artwork to include in the collection and preservation process constituted one aspect of our research. But this process of reconstruction also raised questions about how the preservation of media art is reshaping the practice of archiving within an institution whose holdings were, until recently, largely in traditional mediums. An interdisciplinary approach addressed the problem from different points of view, involving the practitioners, experts from art-history, museology, computer science, media theory and intellectual property rights.

## Keywords

new media art preservation, digital cultural heritage, reconstruction, new media art archives, media art documentation, inter-media translation, new media art pioneers

## Archiving the Unarchiveable: Institutionalizing Media Art History in Slovenia

Slovenia has seen the rise of artists working in new, emerging and augmented media who regularly exhibit their work at international art festivals and exhibitions since the 1980s. Much of this media art has been produced by independent and grassroots communities that lack the material backing for archiving, placing this history at risk. The museum has been co-hosting this project in order to address this lack through state-funded and institutional resources. But in undertaking the re-exhibition of two works of new media art in the museum's holdings, the project has treated these restoration projects as opportunities to identify the necessary infrastructural investments that would enable longterm institutional support of this relatively recent development in Slovenian art history. The need to rethink the processes and practices associated with archiving art objects at the time of acquisition has been one of the pressing preliminary conclusions of the research project. Had the artists not been available to describe the conceptual motivations driving their projects, the curators would have had to work from

exclusively photographic documentation, one of the main archival methods used by the museum so far, but also one that associates the specificities of the new media art object with its appearance rather than its operations and internal technical affordances. In order to view these artifacts as social, cultural, and discursive interventions rather than inanimate and inert objects, new methods will have to be developed to document the relations between the artwork and its original media context and environment. [1] Examples of such documentation, including interviews, questionnaires, exhibition history and technical specifications, will need to be conceptualized and adopted as a means of ensuring the accessibility of new media art history and its integration within narratives of modern and contemporary Slovenian art. An important feature of both projects is the fact that the artists are still active and chose to reconstruct their older work in the contemporary socio-historical and technological context.



Figure 1. *Matrix Coincidence Dating Club* (2005, 2023) by Srečo Dragan at the Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova, 19 Jan. 2023. Photo: Dejan Habicht.

## Reconstructing a techno performance: *Matrix – Coincidence – Dating Club 2005* by Srečo Dragan

New media artworks by the Slovenian artist Srečo Dragan were originally developed in collaboration with research laboratories and used cutting edge programs. [2] Fifteen years later, these technologies have become obsolete, i. e. they were never implemented outside the research labs. A digital communities installation that used text messages on mobile phones and included a techno performance based on gait recognition from 2006 was recreated using contemporary computer vision algorithms based in neural networks. [3] Since this was the core of the artwork, our group also documented the artistic concept behind all the elements of the project.

For instance, a digital animation was produced as an informative visualization of the project in addition to the written text, photo and video documentation of the original techno performance.



Figure 2. *Nation – Culture* (2000, 2022) exhibition by Vuk Ćosić at the Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova, 13 Oct. 2022 - 8 Feb. 2023. Photo: Dejan Habicht.

### Reconstructing a web-based textual generator/visualizer after 22 years: the *Nation – Culture* by Vuk Ćosić

The *Nation – Culture* project that net.art pioneer Vuk Ćosić created in 2000 was based on a then-widely used

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## Authors Biographies

Narvika Bovcon is professor of video and new media art. She is member of the Computer Vision Laboratory at the Faculty of Computer and Information Science University of Ljubljana. She has been developing prototypes for the translation of exhibitions from the real gallery space onto interactive online platforms and virtual worlds. She has authored several new media art projects, scientific papers and exhibitions.

internet portal in Slovenia, the “Mat’Kurja” directory, and it used a Macromedia Flash platform. [4] Twenty-two years later, there are several dilemmas about how to address the project that sourced its textual stream from a now long-gone search engine (in fact a Yahoo-type directory), but more importantly how to substitute it without losing the layers of cultural meaning that originally related the internet context to the artistic context and to the technologically generated text. The process was documented and archived on the conceptual and technical level with the author being asked to advise on the process of reinterpreting the original artwork. [5] But his idea of bridging 22 years of technological development by migrating a work originally conceived for a digital-born Slovenian text generator to Twitter suggests the extent that the creative act needs to be repeated with restoration, and hence how challenging such work is to archive. [6] Also, this particular project points to the implied necessity for this project to include cutting-edge technological development that in both cases is tied to the Slovenian-language context.

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Eszter Polonyi is an Assistant Professor in Cultural History at the University of Nova Gorica in Slovenia and an ACROSS Visiting Lecturer in Media Archaeology at the University of Udine. Her research focuses on operational images emerging at the intersection of twentieth-century film, photography, art and science from regions that are geopolitically peripheral to Europe and North America. She is also working on a book manuscript entitled *An Archaeology of Recognition Media* and is PI of a research project on Identity Photography that is also funded by the Slovenian National Research Agency.

Aleš Vaupotič is a new media artist and theorist. Since 2021 he is the director of the Museum of Modern Art in Ljubljana (Moderna galerija), before he was the dean of the School of Humanities of the University of Nova Gorica. In 2022 he was the commissioner for the Slovenian Pavilion at La biennale di Venezia. He is the project leader in a nationally funded interdisciplinary project, Sustainable Digital Preservation of the Slovenian New Media Art. Among his research focusses are the theory of discourse, semiotics, comparative art studies, methodology of digital humanities.

Jaka Železnikar works in the Museum of Modern Art (Moderna galerija) as an expert in the field of digitalisation, sustainable archiving, safeguarding, displaying and restoration of digital art works. He is also an independent author in the field of net.art and electronic literature, since 1996. Many of his works are now technically obsolete for a number of reasons. His experience with restoration of digital art works ranges from his own work to contributions in restoration of works by other authors.