

Imaginaries in Becoming The Dynamic Archive

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Abstract

Departing from one of the topics previously discussed in ISEA symposiums, this paper introduces an artistic research project, The Dynamic Archive (thedynamicarchive.net). As an open source, collaborative platform that collects processes and methods, it represents another direction in archival strategies in the age of computation. [1] The paper will also further explore the term “symbioses” by describing relations that occur within the project, such as the relations between curator and contributor, component and version, and its digital and physical presence. Since it could be regarded as a symbiotic organization that aims at creating symbiotic imaginaries, the paper will work through how these notions relate to The Dynamic Archive and possible alternative terms to consider. Taking the book *Symbiotic Planet* by Lynn Margulis as a starting point, the paper will look into notions such as Karan Barad’s “becoming” (focusing on process), and “virtual” (or “non-local,” as Denise Ferreira da Silva calls it). These positions question Western knowledge production and problematize what its systems imply. Our research project reflects on these terms, not only in trying to position itself among them, but in the very attempt to question them.

Key Words

Archive, symbiotic, processes, scores, sharing, becoming, non-locality, performativity.

Introduction New Directions in Online Archiving: The Dynamic Archive

The Dynamic Archive 01 (thedynamicarchive.net) has been an online platform since 2018. The platform compiles artistic and artistic-scientific principles, tools, methods, scores, and notes by artists and scientists, who make them publicly available to other artists, scientists, and cultural institutions for use, to copy, and to expand upon in different versions. New versions created through this type of usage are also uploaded onto the platform and can also initiate new versions or changes in previous components. Here, we can see

a feedback loop whose theme is nothing less than a circulatory dispositif.¹

As both a tool for collaboration and a practice, an archive consolidates a constructed knowledge system while also apparently doing nothing more than simply affirming it. Ultimately, though, an archive also puts the process of organizing knowledge up for negotiation. To put it bluntly, transformational processes seem to be an inherent element of the archive and therefore not only map constantly changing practices, infrastructures, and heterogenous spaces but also perform them, as well. In other words, the archive is continually creating and performing itself.

Building upon the paper from the second summit, The Dynamic Archive, as an online platform, considers archiving artistic strategies and methods in the age of computation. [1] Both Video-Policy media library (from now on MeViPol) and The Dynamic Archive are collecting Media Art and Data Art in a multidisciplinary field and are looking to find a way for the collecting process in connection to rapid technological development and changes. As with MeViPol, the intent is to collect documentation of media art and data art with the aim of protecting the art works as well as the audio-visual memory, The Dynamic Archive works more as an artistic research project, where the processes, methods, tools and scores are collected and offered always as possible starting points for further thought and change. As the text states: “MeViPol proposes a virtual space in which both the programming code with which the works are developed and the records generated for their development, both technical and conceptual is collected.” (Alonso-Calero, Vertedor-Romero, Robles-Florida, 2022, p. 1) Where MeViPol collects recording and programming codes, the components of The Dynamic Archive consist of various parts (which we call ‘nodes’) that are represented by text (descriptions, instruction, poems, algorithms, manifests), video, GIFs, diagrams, images, audio. With their digital versions, The Dynamic Archive performs a collaborative knowledge production in the Arts and as such focuses on the process rather than the preservation of finished works. The Dynamic Archive, thus, questions the very notion of preservation in archiving in the digital age. In this

¹ Michel Foucault defines *dispositif* (apparatus) in the interview “The Confession of the Flesh” (1977) as “a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions—in short, the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of the apparatus. The apparatus itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements.”

context, questions about performativity and the dynamics of an artistic-scientific archive in today's knowledge culture have been exemplified and researched in The Dynamic Archive project.

Collaborative work in general, and the sharing, copying and further use of modules developed by other members of a network in particular have become practices in communities in the arts, design, and academia in recent years. Open source strategies, cultivated in software development, have served as a model for these efforts. MeViPol is following this model in terms of the more technical approach to the documentation of the programming code, offering free access. Applying the methodology more often found in platforms that focus on processes related to software development, such as forking and branching, The Dynamic Archive began by considering what these methods of sharing can bring in the context of art, design, and media theory. At the same time, issues such as goals and motivations among practitioners, as well as questions concerning authorship, patents, and trade secrets concerning skills and processes have arisen. The Dynamic Archive sets out to discuss, probe, and develop these questions with a focus on theatre and performance, media arts and design, as well as software design. In this sense media art and performance art are in our focus, as these fields often imply collaborative and cross-disciplinary working approaches. Besides these fields, The DynamicArchive works with others as well (painting, drawing, music, fashion etc) and encourages the possibility of the methods from one field being developed by a practitioner of another, looking for potential in otherwise unrelated disciplines.

In terms of curatorial practise, both ViMiPol and The Dynamic Archive consider the coexistence in relation to multidisciplinary approaches. MiVePol focuses on otherness and territorialization: "at a time when the figure of the other, the body, the subject, the territory and, in short, coexistence are inevitably crossed by these digital technologies." (Alonso-Calero, Vertedor-Romero, Robles-Florida, 2022, p. 2) With The Dynamic Archive the 'otherness' in terms of individual authors and identities is less relevant, as the focus is on process and collaborative practise.

Once the components and version are presented, beyond their digital environment, in the physical space of the program Version room, this multidisciplinary principles are contextualised within each different Version Room and become situated knowledge. As the digital platform moves and performs, its physical manifestations become pockets of stillness where one can linger in the process and knowledge that has been created at that specific point in time and space. In this situation, the collaborators who, most probably have not met beyond the digital platform, get to connect and collaborate together in the space of the gallery.

As the starting point of the collaboration, artists and designers provide The Dynamic Archive with their working methods and processes (as notations, software, technical specifications, patterns, scores, tools, rules, texts, principles), in order to make these resources available to others

for use and further development. In the context of The Dynamic Archive these working methods and processes are referred to as "components." The main part of this research project is the iterative implementation of the digital archive itself in the form of the web application thedynamicarchive.net, and the continuous addition of components to the archive. The archive allows for the copying and modification of already archived components. In the context of The Dynamic Archive, these modified copies are referred to as "versions." The new "version" of a component preserves the connection to its source component.

In this respect, the curated platform is as much a tool as it is a collection. The components of the archive are by no means static and might well permanently undergo changes and developments. Components are only categorized in a vague fashion but can be searched by these categorizations as well as through full-text searches. The archive is open to the public, and thus such inquiries can be initiated by anyone visiting the archive.

The Dynamic Archive—an unstable archive, constantly evolving and shifting—offers a possible avenue to an exploration of opacity, challenging conventional Western epistemologies—fugitive shadows that stubbornly refuse to make themselves fully transparent." (Definition by Luiza Prado). [2]

In reflecting upon the function and location of the archive and the production of knowledge, one focus is always on the status of the archive as both a public entity and an effective organ of knowledge. The categorical turning point in the process of increasing digitalization already noted in the nineteen-nineties (along with the accompanying paradigm shift from systems of written records to structures for linking and networking, all the way to concepts of collective intelligence) have had significant influence upon the techniques, methodology, and technological realization of archives. This turning point also directly impacted the components of the archive itself (objects, events, notes, data), which depend upon their location in the archive as well as upon researchers and infrastructure. In their book *An den Grenzen der Archive* (At the Borders of Archives), which refers to the archives as systems of knowledge production in the digital age, the editors write: "Today, archives appear less as stable places for custody and more as flexible knowledge networks. They have moved at their limits and at the same time become more concrete and abstract." (Bexte, Bühler, Lauke, 2016, p. 7) When discussing the decisive role the relationship between materiality and digitality play in twenty-first-century art archiving, they write that by thinking of the archival within the Internet, the archival becomes more abstract while at the same time becoming closer or more available. When thinking of archival processes in the arts and design, The Dynamic Archive can be seen, as they put it: "as artistic investigations at the boundaries of the archives" and as such, it questions the standard that an archive implies.

Reexamining Standards

The Boundaries of Symbioses, Towards Becoming Imaginaries

In her well known book *Symbiotic Planet*, Lin Maruilis refers to the term “symbioses,” first defined in 1873, as the co-existence of very different kind of organisms. In some cases, symbioses, she writes, would result in symbiogenesis, which implies the appearance of new organs, bodies, or species. (Maruilis, 1998, p. 33) Furthermore, she writes, what becomes apparent in these new organisms that are created through symbiotic mergers is that many of them lose what is, in retrospect, seen as “their former individuality.” What these terms imply is that organisms as such exist as separate entities and that, through time and physical contact, they not only influence each other but are dependent on one another. In some cases, they create new, separate entities via their mergers. Symbioses implies physical contact between individuals that are regarded as separate organisms. In the context of knowledge production, the concept of symbiosis could be seen as a metaphor for the way in which different fields of knowledge or ways of thinking can interact and influence each other. At the same time, the term can be reconsidered with a reflection on the Cartesian divide or the separation of mind and body.² This separation has had significant implications for how we understand the relationship between the physical world and the mental or subjective experience of it. The problematics of the Cartesian divide might be relevant when considering how we understand and integrate different forms of knowledge, such as scientific and artistic knowledge, or knowledge that is based on objective observation and knowledge that is more subjective or interpretive.

In some ways, The Dynamic Archive could be seen as a symbiotic organization. Let’s look into some of the relational processes with which it operates: curator-contributor, component-version, and physical-virtual. To begin with, it collects processes from different contributors through an initial interview process. After a first contact, an interview or conversation with the artist or designer is conducted by a member of The Dynamic Archive team. This step serves as a way to discuss and reflect upon the contributor’s work methods and processes and how they can be represented as a component in the archive. In this conversation, both sides try to explore the idea and the method together, with one coming from the position of the platform (The Dynamic Archive’s structure and intent) and the other from their own practice, resulting in a new organism known as a “component.” Through their subsequent versions, new processes and collaborations are created. As the components and versions start building on each other, in some cases a loop is created where it cannot be known which one was created

first. The authors’ names can be seen, but it is not always evident who is attached to which content. The question here is how individually or separately these processes can be perceived, or, how separate do we want them to appear? In promoting the components, rather than their authors, what becomes more present in the archive is the method as the process of creating knowledge rather than the person who created it. Each component and version appear as expressions that are not isolated or disconnected from the other things that exist in the archive; rather, they are connected or intertwined with them in some way. In her text “On Difference Without Separability,” Ferreira Da Silva questions the notion of “the other.” “The other,” she writes, can be understood as something that is different or distinct from oneself or one’s own group. She suggests thinking of these expressions or entities, not as separate from one another or from the larger system in which they exist, but as being inextricably connected to each other and to the whole. (De Silva, p. 59) This idea challenges the traditional notion of the other as something that is fundamentally distinct or separate from oneself; therefore, we suggest that it challenges the very principles of symbioses.

Dynamic changes produce traces, and traces entangle history. Within a dynamic archive, stories shape-shift from enclosure to enclosure, wrappings to wrappings, casings to casings, contexts to contexts, all the while documenting change. Dynamic change is the matter of any archive, and any archive is subject to change. The archive is not the sum of what is read in it, nor the sum of what is written on it: Hybrid, diverse, unbounded, the archive is the ephemeral stage upon which change happens and is stratified into history. (Definition by Luiz Zanotello.)[3]

Perhaps an example of a component-version relation might help demonstrate these ideas. One contributor, coming from the fine arts, decided to share her illustrations of silhouettes, eyes, and adjectives. Another contributor, from digital media, took these elements and created a software based on an ancient Chinese divination tool, the I Ching. He programmed different characters that emerge through diverse combinations of the elements from the previous contributor (eyes, silhouettes). Finally, a text from the I Ching is attached as their description. On the other hand, another contributor decided to create their own characters and animations, new creatures named “quadrupods” inspired by the initial offerings of eyes and silhouettes. One can tell only through the chronology of their contribution which one came first, but they do not really have any hierarchy embedded in them. Kati, who made the initial contribution, was unsure why anyone might be interested in these elements, but through the interview process still decided to contribute (see fig. 1). What has been important here is how different knowledge systems connect and create

² The problematics of the Cartesian divide refer to the separation of mind and body that was proposed by philosopher René Descartes in the 17th century.

around the same idea viewed from different perspectives in a way we as curators could not foresee.

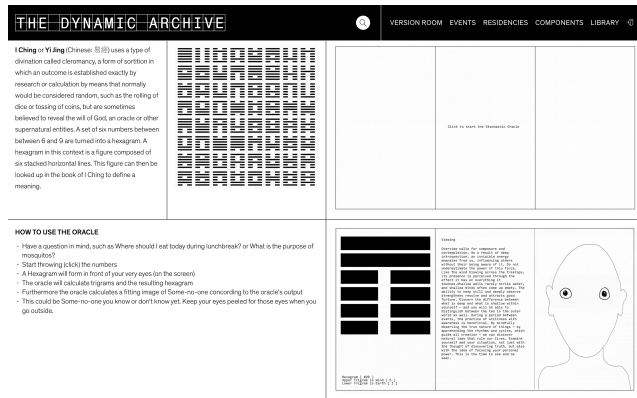


Figure 1. The Dynamic Archive Platform. Example of component-version. Screenshot.

These continuous contributions to The Dynamic Archive are what make the project a complex system that is difficult to disentangle, or to understand solely through its separate expressions. They have as much to tell about the project as the project does about positioning them.

When seen in their entanglement, the processes or the way they e(merged) contain the possibility of collaborative process where the focus is uncovering the previously unknown or not-thought-of. As different disciplines relate to each other and create new components, one can think of the knowledge created in the archive rather as knowing, as entangled, as becoming, as performing, and never really finished.³ Knowledge that is created in the archive is not simply something that is thought or studied; it is also actively expressed or performed in some way. This idea of knowledge as a continuous notion suggests that it is not something that can be fully understood or grasped at any one moment but is always in a state of development or growth.

From Physical (Separate) to Virtual (Non-local)

Symbioses, by definition, considers physical contact and the changes that emerge through this contact. When we then think of digital processes—on one hand, the complexity of the code defining them and on the other, the overwhelming presence of vast data—is it even possible to think of separate entities and their merging behaviors in

³ Relying on particle physics, author Karen Barad, argues that agency is not given or attached to any one entity, but that it rather appears through the process of entanglement. Therefore we can think of knowledge always in becoming (dynamic, changing, related to the known and to the unknown) rather than a fixed knowledge system.

⁴ As Karan Barad and Ferreira da Silva as well looks into particle physics, among other arguments, in order to make explicit the fragility of western systems of knowledge production.

⁵ The principle of nonlocality, also known as quantum nonlocality, is a concept in quantum physics that refers to the idea that certain physical phenomena cannot be explained by classical physics and cannot be localised in time and space.

any controlled way? The immateriality or virtuality can make it difficult to understand and analyze the relationships and systems that make up the internet, because these relationships are not always visible or tangible. In the context of digital archives and media art in general, this relation of physical (separate) and virtual (non-local) has to be considered.

In reexamining the archive as a standard for collecting and preserving knowledge, The Dynamic Archive examines the principles from which knowledge production stems, and which are used to create knowledge. Ferreira da Silva addresses the difficulty in perceiving the world as separate entities that influence each other, simply because the power that arises in such a hierarchy always determines the knowledge that is produced and how it is produced.⁴ She calls for a radical shift in how we approach matter and form. From the physical, as a way of Cartesian, deterministic understanding of the human condition, toward the virtual, since Ferreira Da Silva considers the virtual as the no local.⁵

It reveals that there is more than one way to do anything, and that projects include plural horizons that turn into complex maps rather than straight lines. It is a glimpse into personal and intuitive experiences, abstract thoughts, associations, metaphors, modes, codes, and ways of seeing that are usually and too often excluded from representation. (Definition by Johanna Mehl.)[4]

If we think of The Dynamic Archive as an apparatus for knowledge production, the project always reflects on itself and the structures it works within. Apart from the web application and the components, this research project is also concerned with the caveats, risks, and dangers that can potentially arise from such a process. What sorts of commercial structures that unfold beyond copyrights, licensing, and patent disputes (while tending to privilege growth and profits) must and should be anticipated? How can The Dynamic Archive avoid repeating and reinforcing such structures and tendencies? A critical perspective on archives and collection such as The Dynamic Archive is needed, and the research project aims to develop such a perspective in parallel with the archive itself. Next to the web application hosted on the platform thedynamicarchive.net, a series of other activities pertaining to the research project—such as discussion processes, conferences and workshops, exhibitions and performances, publications and the artist in resi-

gency programs—can be found there. These formats aim to contribute to the development of an open and collaborative platform with regional and international dimensions to examine and experiment with the structures of The Dynamic Archive.

The archive also can serve to discover processes of accommodation, while also advancing critical positions. Here, transcultural questions and issues come into play in significant ways. They are expressed in the actual work of translations that show “situated knowledge” in use at the archive as it operates.



Figure 2. Version-room at gallery Circa106. In the middle of May 2022, during their Version Room residency at Circa 106, Heike Kati Barath, Lui Kohlmann and Julian Hesperheide transformed the gallery space into an open invitation to encounter chance and choice from three different perspectives. Between the three different components, a Projection-Animation, a Software Oracle and anthropomorphic life forms, common themes of repetition, randomness and selection were shared. © Jimmy Dao Sheng Liu.

Summary

As a structure in constant motion that considers itself a starting point for further development, The Dynamic Archive works as an online platform and a physical space (versionroom) in a gallery (Circa106) hosted by the University of Arts Bremen, where it shows mainly its components and versions (see fig. 2). Within this complex reality of physical and virtual, it rehearses the possibility of unknown, accepting the experiment as its intent. To imagine the archive as something different from an orderly whole consisting of separate components that relate through some sort of measurement, we must accept the uncertainty of its results and stay focused in rehearsing this uncertainty. In this sense, this paper positions the project The Dynamic Archive in the context of the new directions in online archiving, considering the text itself as preparation for further thought. In embracing the nature of uncertain process lies perhaps the only fixed position of this dynamic project.

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Author Biographies

Irena Kukrić's (1983) practice and research are related to the absence of the human body in time-based installation performance. Her performances focus on the balance between digital or mechanical dimensions of the works and on the poetics of human experience through non-human actors.

Irena studied scenography at the Faculty of Applied Arts at the University of Arts in Belgrade, Serbia, and Digital Media at the University of Arts in Bremen, Germany. She is currently a PhD candidate at the PhDArts Leiden (in collaboration with the University of the Arts Bremen). In 2012 she interned in the installation department at MoMA PS1, New York. Irena lectures at the University of Arts Bremen and is a coordinator and researcher in the research project The Dynamic Archive at the University of Arts Bremen. She was born in Belgrade and divides her time between Bremen and Berlin.

Marcela Antipán Olate is a designer and artist interested in technology as expressive media. In her practice, she combines concepts that are indistinguishable from the arts, sciences, or other fields. Within that framework, one of her main interests is the critical reflection on technological objects of daily use and their symbolic and technical connections in relation to politics, economics, ecologies, and cultures. With a background in graphic design, functionality, and speculative narratives intertwined with her processes, Marcela's work translates into physical objects, software, research, visual pieces, and program-driven poetry.

In the past she has worked on developing ideas and concepts for research institutions, as well as teaching at the School of Design at the University of Chile. Currently, she is working as an assistant in the research project The Dynamic Archive at the University of the Arts Bremen, while finishing her master's degree at the same institution.

Andrea Sick has been a professor of Media and Cultural History and Theory at the University of the Arts Bremen (HfK Bremen) since 2009. She heads the Binational Artistic PhD Program at HfK Bremen, working in cooperation with international partners. Her main work and research interests cover the relationship between technological media and cultural (artistic) production; the transitions between art, biology, and information technology discourses; the interfaces of scientific and cultural activities; practices of archiving (collaborative knowledge [production] and scores in artistic context); and queer studies.

Sick studied German language and literature, politics, cultural sciences, and the history of art at the universities of Heidelberg, Bremen, and Hamburg. In 2001 she obtained a doctoral degree at Hamburg University in Media Studies with a dissertation on the interactions between knowledge (production) and cartography. One of Sick's main research projects is The Dynamic Archive. Together with Ralf Baecker and Dennis Paul, she has been curating the Salon Digital: Reenactments in Art, Science and Technology (salon-digital.com) since 2016. She is also the editor of the *Manifestos Publication* (manifesto.de).