

Summary workshop Documenting Digital Art : Documenting Net Art 16.06.2020, summary by Manique Hendricks

The workshop Documenting net art : untitledinternet.com (2012) by Constant Dullaart & Documenting Mouchette (1996 - now) by Martine Neddham by Mila van der Weide (Assistant Conservation and Documentation, LIMA) & Patricia Black (Research Intern, LIMA). Moderated by Gaby Wijers (Director, LIMA).

In June 2020, LIMA prepares to continue its Conversation on Preservation programme online, recognizing the need for connections and exchanges. Documentation — a work's physical remnant or trace — is created and used in different ways, depending on its use, perspective and timing. In performance and digital art, documentation has become the focus of conservation and presentation strategies. What can be learned from other practices within and outside of the scope of the museum? This series of workshops is part of the collaborative project [Documenting Digital Art](#), initiated and coordinated by the University of Exeter.

Mila van der Weide, untitledinternet.com (2012) by Constant Dullaart

untitledinternet.com is a net art piece by Constant Dullaart which the artist describes as a 'performative collage'. The website displays a Google startpage with a particular look, as it is overlaid by a filter that partly obscures the web page. The search function is thereby fully maintained, allowing the user to browse the internet through this customized search engine. Each time the user reloads the page, a new filter appears, and retrieved information is partly erased by distinct brushstrokes, pen scratches or airbrush doodles, reminiscent of the tools in MS Paint. As such, the artist provides the tools or context, and the user - as well as the server - creates collages with this context through the act of browsing. By obscuring the search giant's web page, while simultaneously turning the entire internet into a painted collage, untitledinternet.com is a comment on the neutrality of Google and its hidden algorithms that structure information. The work depends heavily on Google and its censoring power, both technically as well as conceptually. Considering the rapid changes in (internet) technologies, as well as Google's safety measurements, adapting the work is inevitable to keep it online functioning. The domain name, artwork files and the source code that together make up the work (server side) are stored at LIMA, in a system of virtual servers called ArtHost <https://www.li-ma.nl/lima/article/arhost>. For the browserside we aim collaborate with Rhizome.

For untitledinternet.com, as well as for other web-based works that are preserved in ArtHost, we create a video documentation in which the work itself, the interactivity as well as the artist reflecting on (the functionality of) his work were captured. This approach was inspired by the Dullaart-Sakrowski method, a documentation method for net art in which the use of split screen video image is used as a way to move beyond documenting merely technical specifications and interactivity but also emphasizes the 'reception situation'.

In LIMA's video documentation the idea of the splitscreen was adopted, and the artist is filmed while interacting with the work, reflecting on its future, on its concept, as well as on the creation process. The viewer can follow the artist's browsing and the work's behaviour by means of a screen recording. In preparation, a list of questions was sent to the artist. As

opposed to a classical interview with an interviewer and interviewee, we chose to have the artist tell us about the artwork in his own way.

Has the work been shown in an exhibition context, and has information on the exhibition been added to the documentation?

The exhibition history of the work is part of the case study report. This work was shown as screen shots. For me I find it very interesting that the way that it is exhibited in a gallery context is quite different from when you would see the work online, as the whole interactivity is not necessarily there. So Dullaart might do a search in advance for the exhibition display, that image would be put on display. The performance is there but it has been done in advance. The server is always live performing.

What kind of documentation do we need now and in the future to understand the work, how the work functions or functioned?

In what ways is the way in which the work remains important to the artist?

Dullaart is quite flexible in that. It's important for him but he points out that it could be a screen recording of a browsing session through this work. Or it could be those screenshots. We also have a whole mind map, when a work is seen as the work, or when it will be seen as documentation, when the artist has to be contacted, when things are possible to fix etc. But it's very complex and open for multiple interpretations. Also Dullaart is very involved, we can always consult him now in this moment. We have been working with him together. I'm also wondering if there will be a moment.

How can we improve on common practice?

Was the project ArtHost by LIMA considered as documentation or the contrary of documentation: live and working?

The project is not finished. What was referred to was the first steps of the projects, and testing with different websites. We thought the websites were rather simple, but then there were some on the Google blacklist. Complexity wise these were not the most complex works. The next step that we started with the development of Arthost is more participatory works and I think Patricia can continue from here.

ArtHost was not originally/intentionally made for documentation but for hosting the artwork. So all the backup of all the files, source codes, documentation, domain names are backed up and monitored. If we want to exhibit this work in the future we need to have the documentation and the parameters to do so. Documentation was not the first aim, but keeping the work alive is the first aim, facilitating the backup and storing of the work.

What is missing in our documentation?

The mapping is not done yet. Also the screen recording of a browsing session that could function as documentation, could replace the work when the work is not accessible for instance. We didn't do that yet. For some of the other Google works Dullaart has already sent a screen recording. Dullaart made a very useful timeline that you can find on his website, from his first google works until now. He lists all the developments there. You can see the links between the works, there so dependent on Google.

What do we need to know about the experience of this work by different audiences?

We didn't focus too much on this aspect. The audience participation has a different role I would say in Mouchette I would say, for Dullaarts work it's basically a tool that the user can work with. What I think is important there is that maybe the work is conceptual, like the experience user would figure out quite easily what to do with it, for someone with no experience the work needs context. In that sense the video shows its functionality.

What should we remember about the work? How can we take the work into the future through documentation?

In the case of Dullaart's work: it's the concept that should be remembered about it, that he attempted to comment or reflect on a sort of global power player of our time in a playful way and giving the user in a way information back. This customized lens, I think that this is also what he talks about in the video that we made. For this work the artist intentions are documented in the video.

Documenting Mouchette (1996 - now) by Martine Neddum by Patricia Black (Research Intern, LIMA)

"Mouchette" (1996) is a collaborative net art performance from the Amsterdam based artist Martine Neddum. Presented as an interactive website, the ongoing platform evokes the online presence and rather subversive diary of a young character named Mouchette, a 13 year old girl who likes to express herself around themes like death, desire and suicide. Online for more than 20 years, *mouchette.org* disclosed a very private and playful universe, mainly consisting of image/text compositions that leads the user to multiple narratives. Entering the first page, visitors have many paths of interaction, which includes puzzled clicks, flash image animations, check in boxes, answering web questionnaires or listening to odd and quite humorous sounds.

The website presents a lot of documentation and preservation challenges, since it contains a combination of different elements and it's highly participatory. During its existence, it incorporated several side projects, as live performances and installations. The artist sees it as a performative brand, which means that rather than the main web artwork, her character also expands itself through other projects and media. This makes its documentation not only more complex, but also more sensible if we really want to understand its essence and reflections on time in a more profound and integrated way. "Mouchette" is then provided by a documentation based on memory, events and places, rather than just one static artwork. Also, the website has a quite complex structure, containing several interactive pages, more than 3.000 active links and an ever growing text database. Technically, the work grew in a very free, flexible and organic system during the years. Because of that, it's very hard to map it in an objective way, as also to document it in a static point of view.

The old programming and aesthetics it's also one of its conceptual essence, which makes technical updates not so simple as a choice. To clean it, or organize too much, could also be a way of killing what makes Mouchette what she is. Since the main maintenance it's being done by the artist, all the knowledge of how to preserve the website has a very personal approach. During the years, this process had to be part of the artist's routine and life. Flexibility, re-creation, interaction and collaboration are the main factors for this artwork.

Therefore documentation should always care for its mutable ecology.

What are the problems in documenting digital art?

How you can maintain and express / show / present the aesthetically importance of the code in the documentation?

There's actually a every interesting site that I brought from an article of Katja Kwastek in which she talks about developing a better vocabulary for interactive works, and I think this is interesting in light of the aesthetical importance of Mouchette. The aesthetic of the identity of Mouchette that communicates the narrative, everything that composes Mouchette (imagery, interactivity) is important. Not cleaning the back end to much. Coming back to the article of Kwastek; maybe it's interesting to have this aesthetical thinking, also for this very objective vocabulary of how to describe the work.

How does audience-generated documentation become part of the documentation of the work?

There's different ways of dealing with audience participation for Mouchette. In a way Mouchette is already documenting and archiving its audience participation, but it's also interesting to think if this is considered a document or not. In a more neutral, outside perspective we didn't work on audience documentation so far.

What can we learn from the documentation and preservation of performance?

We used a text by Gabriella Giannachi. Documentation of performance tends to think in a way that is not so much focused on a static object, but more a relation between the different systems, artist, viewer, space, time etc. This makes a lot of sense for Mouchette since the work is very performative in a way. What are the levels of representation? It's not only about a strict point of view, what are the different representations of different realities? This makes sense for Mouchette, it's a kaleidoscope of representation, sometimes its virtual, sometimes its physical, sometimes it's real sometimes its fiction. Performance documentation can kind of remind that a work can be reinterpreted over time, it's not something objective. Mouchette is always changing and can always be changing, depending on the relationship with the audience. Maybe we can think of different versions of documentation over time.

What are the different monitoring parameters of ArtHost for these two web-based works are they the same or do they differ?

There are many different manners to document change over time. The most annoying thing is that you have to interpret changes, what kind of actions should be taken. For Mouchette we used mapping, putting a system in place that we on a regular base would use new mapping and would see how things evolve. Also working on a warning system, that if links are broken immediately a message comes to LIMA to work on it.

What is missing in our documentation?

The artist is gathering a lot of information about the work. What is always missing is about the more exhibition details. We have performance, live events, the work as net art, sometimes it was just a screen, a projection of one of the pages. This is something that is missing for Mouchette to better understand the way in which the work has been exhibited. Mouchette is not only the website, it's more. What is this trajectory?

We had originally planned an interview with Martine with video documentation where the artist herself is browsing and explaining the work and we would record it. But until now we didn't manage to do it. An essay about the research by Patricia will be published by LIMA.

What is meant by 'old versions' of mouchette.org? When does something become 'old'?

It is more about development how to document previous and next versions

In the case of Mouchette, at least in a conceptual way, there's not really old versions, it's continuous since the work is always changing and evolving into something new. Maybe more in a technical way? So for example the website started with another domain, maybe it's interesting to preserve old code/php programming? Technical parameters could be interesting to preserve and document.

Has LIMA ever considered a more narrative or written approaches taken to document Mouchette's identity? What would this be like?

It works a lot with the idea of a documentation being something that is not static, it's an interpretation of the work, maybe? So I think in this way it makes sense that maybe this is also including some narrative and aesthetical thinking. How someone, a curator or a researcher is interpreting that work at the moment makes a lot of sense for Mouchette. It really is about that.

With the acquisition of the work into a collection, will there be a "handover" of roles, for example who will be doing maintenance in the future? Are there changes being done to the code as well, and if so, are they logged in some kind of version control? Gaby Wijers: Does the museum maintain the work? Or are you, Martine, as an artist, still keeping the role in maintaining the work?

What they have acquired is a version, they haven't acquired mouchette.org. They acquired mouchette.org/version01, all the data until a certain date with a timestamp. All they have is data, it's not on a server. Since that time the data has stopped. Since that time i have upgraded to a new version of php, i have been cleaning etc. If you put online that version many things wouldn't work anymore. So you would have to revive the whole environment (php or server software). They also have acquired the right to present it, which means that they are dependent on my online version. We're considering possibilities of a proposal to exhibit the work, everything is possible. You can call it an old version, I would call it a time stamped version. The work is very dependent on the time when it is made. It's not possible to acquire Mouchette as such, because nobody knows how to maintain it yet, I am the only one who knows how to maintain it and it changes all the time.

To what extent can documentation really "replace" the work if it doesn't function as anticipated anymore?

Sometimes, maybe often, documentation is what remains, and in that way takes over the visuals of the work. Think of performance documentation for example, where maybe originally it was seen as documentation, over time evolved into the work. Also there is a time again that this documentation to reinterpret, or reinstall the works. To make new versions of the work. This is always a super interesting question.

It's quite characteristic how things went in performance studies. We have noticed that as a

phenomenon this started to become more manifest in the late 80s and 90s while the reenactment started to become a genre that started to be popular

In the book that Jonah and I edited we found that that included a wide range of documents, original journal magazine publications to ephemera from works like wall paper or objects that were used in the work. The question within this context would be; what could then be the documents that could become the artwork in the future? If so? What can we do to look after those documents that we will call the work? In performance studies the line between documentation and artwork became very thin.

We had conversations with Dullaart if emulation could become the work? What is the stadium that the work should be replaced? When it's not the work anymore? What's the line? What kind of documentation would we need for that? That's ongoing part of our research.

How do you see the value of documentation, for instance in the case of the Stedelijk whose version doesn't really work anymore but they still have the documentation, would this be enough for a replacement - and if so, what does this say about the value (art historical and financial) of the work? How do you see the difference coming up all of a sudden between what is left as documentation and what is left of the work (that is not the work anymore). What is the value then of the work and of the documentation?

The acquiring of the work raised a lot of questions. At some point I didn't want to go through it, but what pulled me over was the open endedness of the situation. There will be questions, and we will find answers. If not me, someone else will and this is what I like. Naming things documentation or the work; generative preservation/conservation, I wouldn't be bothered to make the distinction. LIMA has another position of someone external, because they don't position themselves as the author. As the author I say: it's all the same, I don't want to make the difference. Also hoping that a lot of this agency could be taken in the future, if things have to be redone in a certain way, to be more truthful to the spirit rather than to preserve the actual material/code/things in a hard way. And change it to fit the spirit of the work, rather than the code, or hard material. In that sense, everything could become the work of art itself.

Then, would you perhaps consider that more of a curatorial decision and not as a conservational decision? It's about the intentions of the work and the context.

I think conservation is curation. Even for the fact that the Stedelijk owns something that is not in state of showing it means that every decision of presentation is curation, whether it's made by me, by them or by whoever. The curation part and even the artistic/recreation part is meant to be preservation.

What should we remember about the work? How can we take the work into the future through documentation?

It was very interesting what Martine said because that's how I feel the work, during the time I was researching it, it's really about the intention, it's not if you use everything, you lose most of it. I think Mouchette is about this intention, this identity, this communication, this transformative work. In a specific way that is mouchette.

How did we document this intention?

In a way what we are doing it is already a way of documenting, discussing it, it's really good. There is a lot of discussion about what is the intention, what mouchette means, what it is in a

social perspective. This is already being done in a way. Martine herself is always speaking a lot about the work. This is really good for maintaining this intention and always new and discuss.