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Day 1, Part III: Alternative Strategies

March 22, 2018

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Part III: Alternative Strategies

Moderated by **Annet Dekker** (Assistant Professor, University of Amsterdam)

Joost Rekveld (Artist), *Interpreting 'Reminiscence'*

Josephine Bosma (Critic & Theorist),*'The World in 24 Hours' Revisited*

Serena Cangiano (SUPSI), *Re-programmed Art: An Open Platform*

Fabian van Sluijs (Creative Coding Utrecht & FIBER), *ReCoding as an Educational Tool and Preservation Strategy*

Reinterpretation as a preservation method

Reinterpretation was regarded as the most radical preservation strategy in the definitions of the Variable Media Network in 2003. Since then, gradually, conservators became a little more relaxed about this preservation strategy, acknowledging, that some works need to be radically reinterpreted in order to keep their meaning. This session, moderated by Annet Dekker, explored different kinds of reinterpretations of artworks.

The session started with Joost Rekveld, an artist who is experimenting with film and analogue and digital machines. LIMA commissioned him to reinterprete a work of its collection, the *Reminiscence* (1974) by Woody Vasulka, which was part of the project *Unfold* **(Link)**. This video piece is not difficult to preserve. Nevertheless, LIMA was interested to see, what the reinterpretation of this piece would look like and what it would trigger.

Joost Rekveld analysed *Reminiscence* thoroughly, in particular the production process of Woody Vasulka. Woody Vasulka made a stroll through his house and recorded it with

a Portapak, an analogue video recorder. He then used an analogue video synthesizer to distort the unedited video. According to Rekveld, the Vasulkas used equipment from surplus stores from (amongst others) Alamos laboratories. So they had very uptodate and good quality equipment at their hands. The analogue video synthesizer is a scan deflection tool designed by Steve Rutt and Bill Etra in 1973 and was used by now well-known video artists, while it was never commerially successful.

Rekveld approached this work in two ways. On the one hand, he rebuilt the Rutt/Etra video synthesizer with modern electronic components, so that it became much smaller and portable. On the other hand, he looked for a new kind of perception. He is interested in electrostatic signals of the everyday environment. Thus, he built a receiver that senses electrostatic frequencies. The use of this idea is an hommage to Christina Kubisch who created electrical walks in cities with special headphones/receivers that made the city audible as a big sound machine. 50Hz is a common frequency as it is emitted by all the power lines. This is why the 50Hz were was also chosen as the video frequency. Thus, Joost Rekveld mapped out the walk from the powerplant in Amsterdam Noord to his studio with his specially designed electromagnetic frequency receiver. He used this signal as an input in the analogue video synthesizer. Like that, interesting interferences between the video frequency and the power frequency emerged. The piece, called *#67*, premiered at Rotterdam Filmfestival in 2017.

Thus, on the one hand, *#67* (2017) by Joost Reekveeld is an hommage or reinterpretation of *Reminiscence* (1974) by Woody Vasulka, on the other hand, it is a new artwork, created by a different artist. Thus, is it still a reinterpretation in the sense of the Viariable Media Nertwork in order to preserve a work? Here, the reinterpretation rather serves the mediation of *Reminiscence*, but not its preservation.

Josephine Bosma, an art ciritic specialised on networked art, was the second speaker. She presented a participative artwork *The World in 24 Hours* initiated by Robert Adrian for Ars Electronica in 1982. This pre-internet artwork created an open network. The headquarters of the network was set up in the ORF Radio studio in Linz. the nodes of communication were created everywhere in the world. Each node was represented by an artist. The 15 geographic locations were chosen so that the particpant artists had a reasonable time slot. The technical components they used to communicate were: an IP Sharp mailbox system (computer terminal and thermal printer connected to phone line), slow scan TV, fax, telephone audio, local media such as radio, and telex. Linz called each location at 12:00 local time - so the project ran from 12:00 followed the midday sun

around the world, ending at 12:00 on the next day. The output was printed out and hung in the foyer of the ORF-Studio.

Josephine Bosma is investigating, whether this art project could be restaged and how. *The World in 24 Hours* is about access and engagement. She quoted Robert Adrian, who said, that "the artists were struggling to get access to the communication media. (...)Thus, the essence was media critique within the media". She believes, that a restaging should not focus on the content of the individual nodes, but do justice to the concept. At the same time, this might be difficult, considering the easy access of media today compared to then. According to Josephine, the idealism of Adrian constitutes another challenge for a restaging. He held everything together and organised the communication space. In contrast, most collaborators and artists followed their own agenda. Finally, although many single devices of the original equipment still function, the use of old equipment could be mistaken as retromania. Thus it is still open, how this piece will be "conserved". If it was restaged, would it be a new artwork, similar to Joost Reekveld's *#67* (2017) and how would it be reinterpreted? Or will the documentation, contextual material and "leftovers" of the performance *The World in 24 Hours* represent this performative artwork in the future?

Serena Cangiano, coordinator of the Master of Advanced Studies in Interaction Design in Lugano (CH), presented a project carried out in 2014 / 2015. A group of design students re-produced conceptual artworks of the artist's group *Gruppo T*. *Groupo T* consisting of five young artists formed in 1959 in Milano. They constituted the term *programmed art*, and started to produce works, both collective and individual, based on the effects of variation in material, surface, colour, etc. These works employing novel methods, techniques, and material, are a sort of fields of happenings, without any personal sign of the artist, and open to the intervention of the audience."[1] They were pioneers of interactive and fragile ephemeral art. They were also politically engaged, as they proposed that their art that cannot be sold. The audience was allowed to touch their artworks. The members of *Gruppo T* were also interested in drawing graphics, diagrams, and schematics to represent the artworks. They intended their art to be easily reproducible and accessible by everybody. Their art was algorithmic, but not software-based. They experimented with the perception and the effect their work produced, as opposed to the physicality of the object, that was not important to them.

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[1] http://www.reprogrammed-art.cc/library/34/Gruppo-T

Inspired by broken, not functioning artworks of *Gruppo T* in museums, Serena Cangiano planned to reenact their artworks and to connect the *Gruppo T* with the current open source and DIY movement. She invited members of *Gruppo T* to join the young interaction designers in the fablab of the university. Serena Cangiano's project team did not intend to reproduce the artworks in a material way, but they tried to reproduce the way gruppo T was working. Hence, they used innovative materials and technology and tried to reproduce the effect of the artworks. The reconstructed artworks were only presented once in an exhibiton together with the works of *Gruppo T*. The reproduced artworks did not enter the art market. Finally, the project team published all the designs with a Creative Commons license[2].

Serena Cangiano's approach has a different angle to the previous ones. On the one hand, the project dealt not with a single artwork and a single artist, but with a group of works and artists. A team of interaction designers reproduced the artworks and discussed the process with the original artists. The interaction designers did not claim authorship of the reproduced artworks. The reproduction process and the creation of updated instructions and designs and their release to the Creative Commons was more important. This different angle is possible due to the intent of *Gruppo T*: Their artworks were meant to be reproduced and accessible.

Fabian van Sluijs ended the session with a talk about recoding as an educational tool and a preservation strategy. Before he presented *The ReCode Project* that he initiated, he described the current creative coding community. He explains, that creative coders are experimenting with graphics and patterns generated by algorithms and like to challenge each other with the most beautiful patterns. However, the downside of this online community is, that code is easily copied and the copyright not always acknowledged. Another critique of Creative Coding is that open source is good for quick prototypes, but not necessarily for crafting elegant code.

In spite of this critique, Fabian Sluijs wanted to make use of this creative coding potential in order to preserve computer generated graphics. The website of this *The ReCode Project*[3] shows more than 160 computer generated graphics that were published in the *Computer Graphics and Art* magazine between 1976 and 1978 by computer graphics pioneers. For many of these grahics, the code is lost. The idea is, that these graphics are recoded in a current programming language by anybody who

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[2] https://github.com/reprogrammed-art and https://github.com/thibalte/bitshift

[3] http://recodeproject.com/

likes the challenge. The language of choice is *processing*, as it is quite common amongst artists who create visuals. The source code produced by such an experiment can be added as *direct translation*. If the source code produces a different interpretation of the artwork, it can be added as an *experimental translation*. The source code can be run within the website and the result be seen immediately.

According to Frieder Nake and Susan Grabowski, both of whom Fabian von Sluijs quotes, the reverse engineering of graphics stimulates the algorithmic thinking and can be part of art education. However, they indicate, that only a certain type of computer graphics can be re-engineerd. Complex computer graphics cannot be recoded without clues from the artist.

Similar to Joost Rekvelds reinterpretation of *Reminiscence* by Woody Vasulka, *The ReCoding Project* stimulates the discussion and increases the knowledge about the production technology of these artworks and is thereful a very valuable contribution to there preservation. This playful, creative approach through an open community without primarily artistic aspirations ressembles the approach taken by Serena Cangiano.

Finally, Annet Dekker asked, how museums can connect with open source communities. Maybe, this is not just a question of how, but of whether they want to. Engaging with communities also means letting loose and giving away control. Questions of responsibility, ownership and selection of artworks suitable for reinterpretation will come up. Exciting times are ahead of us!