Day 1, Part II: Artistic and Institutional Approaches

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Part II: Artistic and Institutional Approaches

Moderated by **Paulien 't Hoen** (SBMK)

Conversation on Conservation: **Jeanette Bisschops** (Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam) in conversation with **Martine Neddam** (Artist) on sustaining the artwork *'Mouchette.org'*

Constant Dullaart (Artist), *Commodifying Ephemeral Context*

Louise Cone (Statens Museum for Kunst), *Museums and Art in the Information Age: How Can the Present Be Preserved and (Re)presented in the Future?*

The second session of the first day constituted a series of discussions and talks about processes of art preservation as experienced from opposite ends of the artist/institutional spectrum. Making specific reference to immaterial, time-based media, these presentations served to highlight both the similarities and the differences across a range of practices, a range of times, and a range of interest groups. Central to all of the discussions was the importance of collaborative preservation, and the need for strong mutual understandings and the shared duty of care held by all associated parties. In this regard, a number of primarily theoretical debates were discussed in a wholly practical and human context, with a number of commonalities identifiable across a range of apparently disparate practices (i.e. that of the artist vs. that of the curator, that of the software-based artworks vs. more material works, the technician vs. the theoretician, and the real vs. the ideal). Subsequent to the initial session, focused as it was on how LIMA's activities have progressed since the previous year's symposium, this session served to illuminate in broad terms the very human processes of preservation, and set the ground for the ongoing Arthost project as a potential resource of great value for the responsible and sustainable caretaking of online digital art works.

Conversation on Conservation: Martine Neddam (artist) & Janet Bischop (Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam)

The session began with a discussion between artist Martine Neddam, and Janet Bischop, of the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam's time-based media working group, to discuss the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam and Museum of the Image Breda (now Stedelijk Breda)'s shared acquisition of Martine Neddam's work *Mouchette.* Having existed, grown, and mutated over twenty years as the result of user interactions and submissions, *Mouchette* serves as an exemplar of the challenges faced in attempting to conserve an artwork that is defined in many ways by the diffusive fluidity of its content, and the specific ways in which it was intended to be experienced by the audience.

The involvement of the Stedelijk in both this discussion and the purchase of *Mouchette* is timely, given their recent heightened sensitivity to the conservation needs of time-based works. While these have long been a staple of their collection and afforded due attention in their acquisition policies, it is only since November 2017 that a working group has been convened to assess the preservation needs specific to such works, under the guidance of curator Karen Archey. As with much of the field, this is being undertaken in the spirit of having recognized a need to develop best practices in an area where such might not be readily apparent.

With this in mind, the question of *Mouchette* entails a number of issues central to the conservator's task. How is a long-term, highly complex, and sprawling, diffuse work to be taken into a museum's collection? What are the repercussions of encapsulating one instance of the requisite data and declaiming that a version?

In discussing informally the sale of the work, a number of interesting threads were unpicked that speak to the importance of collaboration between artists and those bestowed with the responsibility for caring for their works. It is worthy of note that the version (as termed by both artist and institution) of the work sold to the Stedelijk represents only one such snapshot of the database behind *Mouchette*, a solitary image of the complex thing freeze-dried for eternity. However, further possibilities were brought into the light: the potential for selling the work in parts, or perhaps licensing the use of the artwork were both taken under discussion as potential future avenues in approaching such works. Most pertinently was the discussion of the work as it relates

to Martine Neddam's life and broader works, and her conception that *Mouchette*, with its 20-year archive of user interactions, could be considered a museum in its own right. In this regard, it seems a fruitful notion to think in terms or Martine Neddam's conception of "generative preservation", the notion that a work such as *Mouchette* could be considered as preserved when it exists in a state wherein it is capable of generating more work.

Commodifying Ephemeral Context: Constant Dullaart (Artist)

As an artist with an extensive body of work investigating the (social) media landscape and communication technologies, and a history of working to both highlight and remedy the ephemerality of so much work undertaken in the digital realm, Constant Dullaart's talk served to provide a lucid and engaging account of the ways in which artists have attempted to encapsulate the immaterial, and attempt to win for it some of the status and attention awarded to the traditional art "commodity", both in terms of their value and their considered status as objects.

Starting from a discussion of a series of works hosted on Youtube, playing with the standard appearance of the Youtube play button, attention was drawn to the temporality of over-dependence on online platforms, particularly large corporate platforms subject to capricious change deleterious to the wellbeing of artworks hosted thereupon. Subsequent to this, the artist's series of works using the Google API (*The Disagreeing Internet*, *The Revolving Internet*, *The Doubting Internet* et al.) were discussed in the context of their inherent fragility. Firstly, in very concrete terms, the need for a proxy server to mediate requests between the artwork and Google's servers was highlighted as an example whereupon dependence on external services complicates the work, and any subsequent attempts to delineate it within a given packaging. And from here, the structure of said sites, predicated as they are on a relatively minimal Javascript coding wrapped around the ubiquitous Google front-end, served to manoeuvre the discussion towards the specificities of web-hosting for digital artworks, and the preservation requirements thereof.

The jumping off point between the sites mentioned and this subsequent discussion came centred around the notion of the domain name as a form of packaging in itself, serving as a form of symbolic ring-fencing for a piece, regardless of any tendrils it may have reaching out to other corners of the internet. Hence the case was made that the upkeep of such websites requires very specific processes of maintenance on the part

of their caretaker, be they artist, curator, collector, conservator, or whomever else. Again, as per the prior discussion with Martine Neddam, this was discussed in the context of the mutually-supportive relationship between these caretakers and the artist responsible.

The proposed avenues by which this relationship can be mediated were manifold. Most simply was the urgent recommendation of greater attention being paid to issues of ongoing maintenance being written into contracts of sale between artists and buyers. This would serve, for example, to ensure that hosting fees remain up-to-date, maintenance schedules are created and given due attention to fend off the risks of obsolescence, or that plans are put in place for preservation works are put in place ahead of time, rather than reactively. Building on this, the development of escrow services was proposed, allowing for nominally neutral third parties between artists and caretakers, ensuring that any breakdown of the aforementioned agreements would not cause unnecessary risk to the well-being of the artworks themselves. It is in such a spirit that the Arthost project can be understood – the provision of a service that can be relied on to handle the intricacies of web-hosting specific to the artistic context.

Museums and Art in the Information Age: How Can the Present be Preserved and (Re)presented in the Future? - Louise Cone (Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen)
Closing the session, Louise Cone spoke of her work as part of a collaboration between Statens Museum for Kunst [SMK], Museet for Samtidskunst (Roskilde), and two Danish universities, in a research project seeking to develop interdisciplinary strategies for the preservation of ephemeral and immaterial art. Central to this project is the question of activating archived materials, bringing them back into the light and allowing new audiences to experience them (what, after all, is the point of musea archiving artworks which cannot be seen?)

Contrastingly to the other discussions in this session, this talk was given very much from an institutional and art historical perspective, and the works under scrutiny were somewhat divergent from the purely digital works of Neddam and Dullaart. The starting point of the discussion, and indeed the aforementioned research project, was the Fluxus collection of Knud Pedersen, which SMK had had in storage since 1990. With the provision of funding for the digitization and preservation of this collection, the question was opened up as to how best to organize a collection representing a truly

diverse mass of objects: papers, written documents, games, clothing, mail art, media artworks and so on. And then when bringing these works out of the archive and into the exhibition space, how can the act of curation be undertaken in such a way as to preserve the life and the sense of the originals?

Louise Cone argued passionately and well for the role of the conservator as an active participant in the revivification of artworks previously lost to the world in the dormancy of archival storage. The specific example of Bjørn Nørgaard's *Sammenhobninger* was given to highlight the essential agency of the conservator. With the artist refusing to allow for the exhibition of the work in its present state, blessing was given to Louise to construct a recreation within the boundaries of the essential characteristics, as understood through discussion with the artist. The subsequent retelling of the SMK's experience with the works of Goodiepal gave an institutional perspective on the difficulties of defining the form of an artwork within a collection when faced by the somewhat mischievous obstinacy of an artist who reserves the right to amend his artworks *in situ*. Are these works ever finished?

On reflection, an interesting series of commonalities and disjunctures can be identified across and between the various speakers during this session. With Louise Cone's talk touching upon a great deal of themes identifiable within discussions of digital preservation, it was brought to our attention that questions of ephemerality, obsolescence, decay, and diffusivity are not the sole preserve of those working with complex digital art, and that there are indeed a number of practices and perspectives that are apposite to all fields of practice. Whilst some of the terminology may differ – one person's reiteration is another's version is yet another's recreation – the underlying questions of how to identify or assign permanence, and fend off the dangers of decrepitude are shared ones.

In drawing these discussions away from the theoretical context in which they are most often encountered by the majority of people, the vital need to consider the human aspects of preservation were brought to the fore. The vital understanding that each person at every step of the process from atelier to acquisition to archival storage have both an important role to play and a great degree of agency in how they complete their work. Central to this theme, and present throughout all of the discussions during the session, was the repeated emphasis on collaboration and clear communication. As noted in the title of Martine Neddam and Janet Bischop's session, and indeed

commented on by Martine herself, the conversation is central. The conversation here can broader: the conversation here serves as a useful metaphor for the position of trust and the duty of care endowed upon those with the responsibility for caring for artworks. It is through these processes of collaboration that the transformative and indeed creative processes of preservation can best be undertaken in a mutually satisfactory way.