

Documenting Digital Art: Insights for Artists, Audiences, Cultural Organisations, and Policymakers, including A Step-By-Step Guide for Organisations Doing Documentation

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Summary

Digital art is notoriously difficult to preserve. Over time, its documentation, which may include photographs, videos, interviews, instructions, maps, records, reports, among others, constitutes one of its few remains that can be exhibited and circulated. Much has been written about the value of documentation in this respect, from the perspective of performance, new media, and digital art practice and scholarship.^[2] Frameworks, reports, studies and papers have led to significant advances in the practices of conservation as well as, through re-enactments and re-interpretation, in the practices of curation, archiving, and collection research.^[3] Many findings/insights have been generated in the sector, including work by conservators and curators, as well as artists, researchers in archival studies, performance, new media, photography, and digital art, often looking at documentation from different perspectives and for a variety of reasons.^[4]

This guide, one of the outcomes of a three-year Arts and Humanities Research Council funded research project, 'Documenting Digital Art' (2019-23), is aimed at stakeholders working in a range of cognate fields, including artists, audiences, policy makers, and cultural organisations of different sizes and varying characteristics. The guide introduces a framework which includes a short statement about the value, context, and power of documentation and a series of recommendations to support sustainable practices for the conservation of digital art. Bringing together advice about different phases in the life of an artwork (production, circulation, and preservation) this framework makes a significant step forward in acknowledging the key role audiences could play in all these fields.

Documentation has many stakeholders, including conservators and curators, as well as artists, researchers in archival studies, performance, new media, photography, and digital art. Each of these stakeholders approach documentation in different ways to meet diverse institutional and cultural objectives: as marketing, education and outreach, for institutional memory and archiving, to ensure the accessible afterlife of an artwork. Here we suggest that audiences ought to be included in processes of documentation to offer further understanding of how they experience digital art. The inclusion of audiences will foster inclusivity by making it possible to represent a wider range of voices and perspectives which might otherwise be occluded by canonic institutional norms of documentation and its circulation. Using this framework is likely to make digital art more accessible, shareable, and secure that more stakeholders are invested in its afterlife.

Value of Documentation

For the purposes of this report, documentation is the practice of making sense of and remembering process-driven, interactive, performative, ephemeral and non-object based artworks, including digital artworks. It is both what may remain of an artwork and what is said about it for perception, preservation, and re-activation. In this sense, documentation is both past and future facing. It produces a snapshot

of a moment in the life cycle of an artwork that enables it to be revisited, reactivated, regenerated, reused in subsequent years.

Documentation has the capacity to describe or visualise how digital art can change over time. Thus, documentation can add new forms of value and widen the breadth of approaches that can be used to interpret digital art, thereby expanding the possibility of their survival over time. In this sense, documentation is the industry that defines the aesthetic, market, and interpretative value of digital art. Hence, documentation is key to the conservation, presentation, and dissemination of digital art. Yet the value of documentation is still under-rated: its context is rarely made explicit, and the role of the audience in creating and disseminating documentation is rarely acknowledged or analysed. However, without documentation strategies, there is a risk that digital art (and its reception and context) will be rendered inaccessible or incomprehensible in the future, threatening its long term social and cultural impact. Without a clear focus on the context of documentation, gaps in knowledge are likely to emerge that may not be surmountable. Thus, without devoting due attention to the documentation, including context and audience, our understanding of digital art will be lost.

Recommendations

- For artists, documentation constitutes a major parameter in how a work is activated and remembered, and so to maintain control over its values, aesthetics and functioning, it is crucial that they continue to document their work over time.
- For audiences, documentation constitutes a social communication tool and when uploading and sharing their documentation online, audiences should try to maintain control and access over what and how their reception of a work is communicated or used.
- Within cultural organisations, documentation is used to re-interpret an artwork, so they need to offer flexible documentation strategies to accommodate different kinds of works and ensure stakeholders' inputs into these works are included in the process.
- Policy makers will benefit from looking into documentation as a discipline that needs specific skills development and investment for teaching, research, preservation, presentation, and communication.

Context of Documentation

When the context of a documentation is lost, by which we mean its rationale and situatedness, both historically and by locality, organisations and researchers will struggle to make sense of an artwork. In the past cultural organisations were single-handedly responsible for generating the documentation of materials in their collection. Now, the introduction of standardised documentation efforts in museums, has removed the embodied knowledge of the relation between the documenter and the artwork as the camera represents a cartographic, often purely panoramic view which is folded into a standard method of representation. Under the guise of documentation standardisation, meta-collections are created that bring about symbolic capital. A shift towards a new collaborative networked modes of governance needs to occur to protect the values of digital artworks through their documentation. To this extent, it is important to favour temporality and locality over framing standards. It is also important to move away from notions of originality and copy, and instead consider documentation as the key through which to read artworks as multiple, with their own life biographies, which express how to relate to the various iterations a work may adapt to in different ways.

Recommendations

- For artists, documentation usually presents a static moment in time in the life of an artwork. To secure an artwork's future accessibility and interpretation, it is necessary to provide insights into the context and rationale for its creation, as well as its subsequent reiterations.
- With respect to audiences, they should remember their snapshots may become key to interpret the work depicted in them; organisations should ensure that the audience reception is documented and safeguarded to make sense of how works are experienced by visitors.
- Cultural organisations need to contextualise documentation (including audience-generated documentation) for it to be meaningful; its perspective must be made transparent, accessible, and revisited over time. This requires the identification of criteria for appraisal; shared responsibility; participation and accessibility.
- Policy makers should think of documentation as an investment in the future of art. Documentation is future facing so it needs to continue to be developed through an iterative meta-model. Time and resources need to be factored in budget lines. Only in this way will past investments still make sense in the future.

The Power of Documentation

Different types of documentation, spanning from wild productions (poor image) to high-end ecosystems of all kinds of reproductions systems (think of Google Arts and Culture), provide important information for the presentation and conservation of digital art. This is because documentation can change what we make of an artwork. Documentation can also provide knowledge about how digital artworks can be preserved and/or how they can be used to generate new versions of it. Currently, it is primarily artists, organisations and visitors who document art, but the creation of intelligent objects that use AI and are part of the internet of things also means that in the future artworks may document themselves, as well as their audiences and even cultural organisations in whose collections they are located. 'Casual' documentation, carried out by stakeholders and visitors or even passers-by, will continue to affect power relations. This has repercussions about the value of documentation as an asset, which reinforces its ownership and control or power over it.

Recommendations

- Artists need to ensure that their work is documented.
- Audiences need to be aware that cultural organisations may preserve documentation generated by them.
- Cultural organisations need to preserve digital artworks and ensure future curators, audiences and stakeholders will have sufficient information about them. For this, they need to generate 'thick descriptions,' based on multivocal approaches that empower artists, as well as visitors, and make it possible for them to maintain an overview of the field.
- Policy makers should invest in the fact that documentation can foster inclusivity, making it possible for different kinds of cultural organisations to widen access and participation to digital art.

A Step-By-Step Guide for Organisations Doing Documentation

- 1 Identify short and long-term goals and responsibilities.
- 2 Liaise with artists and other stakeholders (including audiences) and choose your methods based on these conversations.
- 3 Make sure that open systems are used; try to use ones that may be adapted and/or

acknowledge their possible shortcomings.

- 4 Ensure that the context of the documentation is explained and be transparent about the gaps, blind spots or lack of information/knowledge.
- 5 Find parallel and multiple ways of documenting and interconnect existing documentation from different departments sustainably.
- 6 Conduct risk assessments and be explicit about the vulnerabilities of the documentation.
- 7 Explain how and why priorities are made and how this may affect the practice and knowledge building.
- 8 Find parallel ways to document, rather than relying on one or the other system, method, or one person, while ensuring information is linked or connected.
- 9 Create open structures that allow for participation and inclusivity in documentation.
- 10 Start from the 'traces' left behind, catalogue them, digitise them, and think of dissemination pathways (artist statement, stakeholder statements, context of the 'original' work, exhibition or presentation history, examples of audience reception, possible impacts, index).
- 11 Adopt the notion of temporary rather than permanent documentation, to emphasise what may be decentralised and avoid a 'corrective' of the past.

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