Reflection of Day 2 of Transformation Digital Art Symposium 2022

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Transformation Digital Art Symposium, 2022

15.00 - 15:50 CET Who cares (— if public memory institutions don't?) by Cornelia Sollfrank (Artist, Researcher, Artistic Archivist)

Sanneke Huisman, programmer and writer at LIMA, started the second session of the day with an introduction of the speakers Geert Lovink and Cornelia Sollfrank. Lovink, co-founder of the Institute of Network Cultures, moderated Sollfrank's lecture in which she presented a critical reflection on networked collaborative practices through the presentation of her own work as an artist-researcher in the field of net.art.

During her lecture, Sollfrank elaborated on three of her projects. The first one is the openly accessible ebook Fix My Code, a critical dialogue on the net.art generator with artist-researcher Winnie Soon. The net.art generator is an iconic computer program made by Sollfrank in 1998, which automatically recombines images on the net into "fancy-looking" collages. The tool and the online archive in which the resulting images are stored, are openly accessible to anyone with an internet connection.

In Fix My Code, Sollfrank and Soon demonstrate that the net.art generator evokes multiple discussions on issues of authorship, copyrights, originality and open source. Indeed, by randomly copy-pasting images that circulate on the web, the net.art generator reveals how the Internet distorted concepts of originality and unicity on another level than (video)camera's had done the previous century.

Issues of copyright were also prominent in the research project *Creating Commons*, run by Felix Stalder, Shusha Niederberger, and Cornelia Sollfrank from 2017 until 2020. The researchers studied and focused on fifteen specific projects based on open source software. Many of these projects, such as MONOSKOP, a digital archive run by Dusan Barok; aaaaaarg. fail, a collection of academic texts; MemoryoftheWorld; and Ubuweb can be understood as "pirate collections." These are all illegal platforms for which the leaders – often artists – take risks in terms of copyright and engage themselves to keep the platform up. Another common characteristic is the double identity of the platforms, both artistic projects and functional tools, constructed to share knowledge democratically and practice the commons.

"The mode is the message, the code is the collective" (Motto of the Old Boys Network)

Sollfrank's interest in feminism, is apparent in the last project she presented: the archive of the OBN, an international collective of cyberfeminists. The group, that was active from 1997 until 2001, provided spaces – like temporary meetings, conferences, and workshops – in which techno feminists could act. For example, during its five years of existence, the OBN organized Cyberfeminist International thrice, the first in 1997 at the Documenta X in Kassel following an invitation by Geert Lovink.

Sollfrank did not realize an archive of the OBN was needed until she received the question to write a report on the activities of the collective. She noticed that the absence of an OBN archive generated various misinterpretations concerning the collective, and decided to collect the archival material connected to the collective in a public and interactive digital archive.

Who cares if public institutions don't? The title of Sollfrank's lecture emphasizes the central aim of the three projects she presented. Through these projects the involved artists and researchers explored democratic ways to distribute knowledge, thereby altering established ideas of authorship, copyrights, and originality, and countering the closedness of our mainstream memory institutions.

16:00 - 17:00 CET Presentation on Distributed knowledge
The following part of the symposium consisted of three presentations from Elizabeth Stainforth, Lozana Rossenova and Giselle Beiguelman. Their varying practices reflected on overall questions of accessibility and sharing of digital knowledge in several projects/archives.

Elizabeth Stainforth, a lecturer in Heritage Studies at the University of Leeds, presented on the politics of digital heritage aggregation at scale. She defines these 'aggregators' as platforms that collect metadata from multiple providers and transform it into widely accessible forms, e.g. blogs as used by TROVE Australia or online exhibitions as done in the Digital Public Library of America (DPLA) . A European example of portals with a similar aim and values is Europeana, a political project to unite Europe by culture. Unlike traditional archives, initiatives like these switch the focus from access to knowledge to active contribution to the platform and engagement with communities. Accordingly, they are located at the intersection of politics and data management. As further elaborated in the following discussion, there is affiliated criticism that comes with accessibility to such systems.

Lozana Rossenova, a digital Designer and researcher based in Berlin spoke about her interest in the relationship between cultural heritage and open source. She presented on the concept of rethinking user agency in the context of digital cultural archives. The accessibility of digital archives provides for the ability to share knowledge within online communities. Rossenova used *Rhizome.org* as an example of an art organization that deals with such concepts of archive accessibility. She explained that decisions concerning archive policies and database infrastructures should account for user access and interactions. Rossenova further elaborated on the Digital Archive of Artists' Publishing, a user-driven initiative that allows for the search of printed resources. The creation of an open community for all members (from users to institutions) allows for the preservation of "digital cultural memory".

Giselle Beiguelman, an artist and professor at the School of Architecture and Urbanism at the University of São Paulo, discussed how to decolonize the distributed archive. She explained that archives themselves exist within coloniality, and in order to decolonize them, the problematization of the past must be acknowledged. Beiguelman described two challenges in these distributed archives. The first being obsolescence and storage of physical archives, which raises the question of how intangible storage exists in social media today. Beiguelman's second point, known as the "botox memory age", deals with the question of how memories are built on networks. Particularly how these concepts exist in relation to social media and artificial intelligence editing abilities. These memories become timeless and therefore hold no past, present or future. Beiguelman criticized the emptiness of social media posts, explaining that these messages only exist temporarily, yet remain unforgettable on the Internet.

17:00 - 18:00 Discussion

The presentations were followed up with a vivid discussion. It was opened with the question of whether internet knowledge, such as the one provided by Wikipedia, is really that democratic as it seems to be. In the age of recommendations and algorithms, there is arguably no search available: "new generations never search, because the algorithms do this for them." With the information provided by the algorithms, the search tends to be biased but it can still be influenced by individuals and institutions through online archival platforms. Wikidata is an example of such a platform that serves the general public alongside an organization, and where the so-called low culture can confront the high one.

According to Giselle Beiguelman, the open sources of the Internet are not so much about confrontation between the low and high cultures, but rather about inclusion of all existing people's experiences and memories. What will happen when Google or YouTube crash? How will this affect our memory of the pandemic? The memory of the Internet itself is zero, since it is under the agency of people and institutions which generate and share their recollections. This is why we should encourage institutions to promote the visions of Indigineous communities and other minorities by including them on their social media and other forms of archives. Besides, people themselves now have more tools to become visible by contributing to such global archives as Wikimedia, and this appears to be one of the ways to decolonise the archives.

To decolonise, first of all means, to open the archive for what is missing and undocumented. This does not lie in the creation of new documents and knowledge, but in the recognition of the value of what has been excluded and of memories that come from different and not traditional (i.e colonial) sources. Thus, the archive should be open to new modalities and new sources of knowledge.

Lozana Rossenova added that even though internet systems are widely distributed, problems of data discrimination and digital illiteracy still prevail. This is one of the multiple reasons why designers should be involved in developing more inclusive and interactive platforms. Online interfaces of the archival initiatives should be open and accessible to all, and this is partially designers' responsibility to educate the users, who should be able to easily think through the interfaces. Giselle Beiguelman mentioned VFRAME.io (Visual Forensics and Metadata Extraction) as an example of the websites that make data generally accessible. VFRAME is a visual toolkit, supported by the Syrian Archive in Berlin, that aims at bridging "the gap between state-of-the-art artificial intelligence used in the commercial sector and making it accessible and tailored to the needs of human rights researchers." In relation to the Syrian war crimes, which are the focus of the VFRAME archive, Lozana Rossenova also mentioned another initiative —SUCHO (Saving Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Online)— that is active now in Ukraine. This online archive attempts to decolonise the platform starting with the inner structure of it: having created the Slack chat with a thousand of volunteers, together they have discussed the ways data should be curated and what information needs to be preserved there.

The second day of LIMA's symposium provided the public with numerous insights into existing projects that build and share knowledge online. The increasing quantity of networked archives and databases generates a continuous demand for access to such platforms by all kinds of users. As the last discussion proved, the question of how these networks can be decolonised and democratized, is prominent and will indisputably be elaborated in the future.