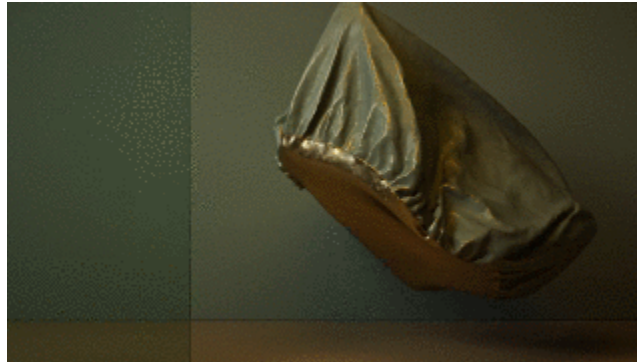


To fold and unfold a data closet.

A Reflection on Transformation Digital Art Symposium 2022

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Reflection by Patricia Black



Documentation, restoration and acquisition are still a museum's key functions in maintaining the authenticity and care of its collections. Yet, the traditional concept of minimal intervention when maintaining artworks to their original forms, is constantly challenged by software based art giving its stakeholders a constant role of decision making.

Finding strategies for preserving those artworks means not only artistic, political and curatorial decisions, but also a strategy to manage data distribution in what we document, share and reflect on their preservation strategies. **But, as data becomes more vulnerable to the fast pace of technology, how can those agents deal with the constant anxiety of losing them? Is there a way to work towards a harmony flux between the appearance and disappearance of these digital art objects? And if we can't save data, what can we save?**

This year's LIMA Transformation Digital Art symposium was focused on the theme of collaborative knowledge building and sharing, leading to a particular emphasis on the topic of agency as a way towards that discussion. For the last 20 years collaboration has been one of the key components for preserving digital art and has happened in different forms: collaboration inside a project team, within institutions, between colleagues, between artists and even between users.

As stated by LIMA, the more knowledge is gathered and presented online, the more urgent it becomes to develop sustainable networks for new and existing practices as well as its responsibilities. Discussions like this help us to understand collaborative stewardship forms as ways to address the unsustainability of caring for such complex objects. Yet, challenges remain in how much can be expected in terms of commitment, time and resources from each community.

As a common reflection for born-digital objects, its conservation processes open up for many questions. What exactly is this work composed of? What are its fundamental elements? What is the best way to document such elements to the future? And how do we keep its intention alive in the long term?

As an artist and media aesthetic researcher, my point of view is often drawn to the last one. Enthusiastic of the artistic practice, I'll always try to get a hint of what is really moving us as users, how this is enabling us to participate in a dialog and what we should maintain to allow what is, essentially, an experience of transformation.

TDA's panels raised questions on how initiatives can look for those answers, how they are being organized and what are their challenges, such as decision making and politics. Some focused on artist's collaboration, like LIMA's Digital Canon project with the video art artist Bas van Koolwijk and the series *TST & audiovisual works* (2000-); other on the institutional level with preservation projects in the Netherlands, Central Europe and Taiwan; last one focused on decentralized tools of responsibility such as open source databases (WikiData) for media documentation, taking the spotlight to the general public and practices across multiple institutions.

Conducted by Gabriella Arrigoni, Victoria and Albert Museum presented a case study moderated by Gabriella Giannacci, about [geist.xyz](#) (2016), a multi part design project that explores software's capabilities to simulate life-like materials. Created by the studio ZEITGUISSED, the artwork is a recent acquisition to the museum's digital collection and since then faces challenges to its preservation.

As I saw generative fabrics moving like ghosts by the force of an algorithmic wind, an imaginative idea has urged in my mind: **how would it be to fold and unfold hundreds of virtual multicolored textiles into a digital closet for the future?** Imaginations apart, the abstract closet almost seems to fit the vision given the object's reality in which the studio seduces users to explore. We are most certainly not folding fabrics to the future anymore. We are folding data. And in that digital closet, I wonder what data looks like and whose drawer should we keep it?

Even though we all agree this isn't necessarily the role of an artist - as well spoken by Koolwijk, "I prefer making things, instead of keeping (them)" - author's interviews seem to be a positive path to minimize the anxiety of the gaps created by technical obsolescence. Such reports can encourage both artist and institution to look back to the work's estructural genesis and many of the times to make updated reconfiguration of those - reaffirming or even putting in a new context their intention. Surely not an easy reality, given the amount of time and investment such a strategy would have on a large scale, but beneficial for both sides.

Case "Planting trees in desert: how we build preservation networks from zero to point one in Taiwan" by Yu-Hsien Chen (Save Media Art), was brought to my attention as a reminder of how much we still need the endorsement of big institutions and governmental funds - probably the

biggest drawer's owners in that closet. If for some there's a well wired network linking artists, exhibition spaces and institutions, for others collaboration is like stepping into a desert.

Since 2017, Chen's Save Media Art project addresses digital media art conservation with anything able "to make a change" - writing, lectures, translation, curation, educational workshops and more, with less than 12.000 euro p/year budget - meeting a historical national demand not only toward a specific collection or artwork, but in the creation of an art culture, art education and even art professionalization.

Interesting to mention, despite the longer tradition of the field in Europe, that it's not uncommon for institutions to feel every new software based artwork acquired is like the first one - remembered moderator Kati Kivinen (Kiasma). Tech aspects are often too variable, complex and specifics, making them just like that one tree in the desert: "it's always case by case".

This issue made a bridge to the second day's workshop - "Wikidata: how to insert media artworks and collections?" - touching the same theme of specificity, this time inside decentralized databases such as the WikiData system. The workshop looked at how this collaborative platform for media art documentation is working, but also practical difficulties of institutions to deal with multiple formats, taxonomies, definition of versions and linking structures.

The fact is, when institutions use WikiData they give away their control over their collection's information to the general public, leading to pros and cons. Negative aspects mostly pointed out to skewed data and contested information, which can be a particular problem if some museums work by commission and want to avoid certain types of opinion. Together with harmful information, this all could mean extra, if not double work for the institutions in the long term to organize. Positive results highlighted the increased visibility and awareness that collections could gain; to get a cross-institution overview of artworks collected and artists represented; and keeping artists bios and exhibition's history more often updated.

As expressed by LIMA, all these solutions continue to animate artistic and cultural initiatives, as well as the corporate and governmental agendas they unfold among. As a focal point of these efforts, knowledge production evolves into ever-new sociotechnical forms, constituted by different communities and the digital structures that mediate their collaboration and archive its results.

This might be the strongest quality of such plurality: various perspectives are allowed to live and be remembered next to each other. For Giselle Beiguelman (Artist and Professor), this is more than a diversity matter, it is a way to reopen and recreate old political archives. To archive "what is missing". Digital literacy could then be a way for the common public not exclusively passively consume data, but actively learn how to construct them towards a world, some world, the world we decide to create and later, to remember.

But Beiguelman goes further when reflecting on the theme of memory in the contemporary age and wonders how post digital culture could be hindering us to the simple act of remembrance. At the last day panel “Distributed knowledge” moderated by Geert Lovink, she described a society driving towards a “botox era”, one where media content is being constantly retouched to fake news, modified faces, images with no traceable source or background.

In fact, the more the Internet invests in the creation of data with no attachment to space, territory or time, the more our old concept of archives, closets and drawers start to get meaningless. **After all, what will be our idea of the past, when all we have is timeless data to preserve? What will be our global heritage when data has no longer attachment to truth or reality?**

For Beiguelman, erasing the experience of time could eliminate the very own sense of history, till the act of preservation starts to be questioned itself. For media art this means the recognition of a new era of memory - bringing constant discussion on what we want to remember of collections and the bend of the traditional conservation methods till it makes sense to it.

It also means, as well stated by Lozanna Rossenova (Digital Designer and researcher), an institutional point of view that embraces more messiness and relinquishes purity in their data. One that recognizes that in data modeling it is impossible to keep your data to one single isolated community. For in the contemporary closet, institutions should best accept that having a perfect folding will never exist and agree that a well-filled but messy drawer might profit everyone.



*GIFs produced by ZEITGUISED and taken from geist.xyz, 2016.