

FUTURE PROOF!? Transformation Digital Art 2017
February 8 and 9 at the Stedelijk Museum Schiedam.
Report by George Barker

Gaby Wijers (LIMA) introduced Future Proof!? Transformation Digital Art 2017 by reflecting on the current influx of born digital art exhibitions taking place in the Netherlands, referring to Jan Robert Leegte's solo exhibition at Upstream Gallery, Rafaël Rozendaal's solo exhibition at HNI, and the As If exhibition at Framer Framed. This year's Future Proof!? offered further national and international case studies from which to build upon the discussions of the 2016 Transformation Digital Art Symposium. The symposium was held at the Stedelijk museum in Schiedam in light of the collaboration between Geert Mul and LIMA in the research and preparation of his artworks for the solo retrospective exhibition at the museum entitled 'Match Maker, 25 Years of Media Art'.

Sabine Himmelsbach, artistic director of HeK (House of Electronic Arts Basel), started the symposium with the presentation 'Museums and the Future of Media Art. Building up a Collection of Media Art at HeK', entailing the procedures of collection acquisition and care for her growing institute. Stating that a focus on preservation of the processual and performative behaviours of an artwork as opposed to its artifactual components is key for HeK. Himmelsbach outlaid the conservation strategies for TV Bot 1.0 / 2.0 / 3.0 by Marc Lee and Olia Lialina's 'My Boyfriend came back from the War'. She chose to present these cases because they both epitomised HeK's overarching consideration of artworks as documents of cultural changes in the history of the net and net technology. After explicating the complexities of conserving, emulating and exhibiting historic digital artworks, Himmelsbach suggested that a further form of preservation may exist in the preservation of social information and relations, stressing the importance of inter-institutional cooperation and the spread of expertise within the specialist field of digital art conservation.

Jon Ippolito, Professor of New Media, University of Maine, opened his presentation 'Does Time Fold or Unfold?' with the provocation that, at the moment, by museums, digital art is somewhat lumped into the time-based category. Ippolito did so in order to question whether they should be considered as such, or rather, he suggested, instead as instruction based. Drawing from research conducted for Re-collection, Art, New Media and Social Memory, and the LIMA Unfold research project in 2016, Ippolito went on to state that both instructional and time-based media are alike in that they are synonymous regarding processes of modification and unfolding which should in turn influence their models of conservation. In light of the unfolding nature of such works, Ippolito suggested the practical implementation that the variable media endowment should always be calculated and integrated into a budget at the moment of the acquisition of a digital artwork by a museum. He also argued that wall labels in the museum should credit the re-interpreter of a work, bringing further attention to the role of the conservator as an actor in the representation of modified digital art works.

Ward Janssen, curator at MOTI/Stedelijk Museum Breda, talked about the benefits and difficulties in collaborative projects between smaller and larger institutions regarding the acquisition of digital-born works. Subsequent to MOTI having closed their acquisition of digital-born artworks from 2008-2016, Janssen spoke about the processes of an evenly split acquisition collaboration between the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam and MOTI. At first he stated that bigger institutions come with slower processes of working, continuing on to say that the larger budget and team afforded by collaboration can allow for a perhaps more 'futureproof' workflow which dedicates more energy towards preservation at the point of acquisition. Alongside stressing that museums should embrace versions of an artwork, Janssen pointed out the importance of continual contact with the artists as well as yearly check-ups as modes of ensuring digital artworks acquired in a collection are still operational and not outdated.

Tom Ensom, PhD researcher from King's College London, presented on the documentation of software based artworks, particularly in relation to John Gerrard's Sow Farm, a work in real time 3D. Although the simplicity of the 3D rendering in the work is dated, Gerrard conceived it as being emblematic of its time, and so Ensom's work was to subsequently analyse the process and rebuild the software environment of Sow Farm. In regards to making digital art futureproof, Ensom stressed that documentation should be flexible enough so that it could be recognised and perhaps even written by non-programmers, speaking from experiences of when software programming did not operate - as anticipated - in rigid structures but was also richly descriptive.

Josef Grundler, FH Joanneum, Graz, then gave a presentation on his artistic reinterpretation of four historic electronic artworks in miniature form. As an example of rudimentary documentation practices through the lens of an artist, he showed images captured on a 2004 cellphone as the only examples of the documentation of his re-interpretation of Nam June Paik's TV Buddha. Offering the perspective of an artist as re-interpreter, Grundler argued that the will to recreate the original experience of an artwork can only be conceived as a process of illusion, wherein faking the past in its inaugural form is ultimately an unachievable goal. Instead, he stated that all digital and tech-based art has intrinsic processual value which somewhat devalues traditional processes of artifactual conservation and opens up potential spaces for playful reinterpretation.

Rachel Somers Miles, researcher at LIMA, gave further explanation towards the approaches of LIMA in regards to the documentation and presentation of the Geert Mul solo exhibition. As an example of how institutions can react to complex software-based and interactive media, Miles spoke about the artwork documentation tool developed by LIMA and its specific application to works such as *God's Browser* and *Match of the Day*. She stressed the importance of institutional documentation at the moment of installation or deinstallation. Also, she touched upon the current imbalance of funding designated towards projects of exhibition as opposed to projects of conservation within the realm of digital art, ultimately suggesting that both should be integrated in the workflows of museums and art institutes.

The afternoon panel discussion, entitled 'How to become and stay a professional in digital art conservation?' brought together Annet Dekker, Patrícia Falcão, Tjarda de Haan and Eef

Masson in a conversation stressing the exchange of knowledge amongst different spheres and institutions of research in digital art curation and conservation. Dekker, curator and Assistant Professor Media Studies: Archival Science at the University of Amsterdam, commented that her curatorial work has always been deeply invested in collaborative processes and pointed towards online networks as the most effective resources from which to collate and share institutional perspectives. Masson, the programme co-ordinator for the Preservation and Presentation of the Moving Image Master's Degree at the University of Amsterdam, stated that the sharing of knowledge in the context of film, broadcast and media art preservation is vital to her academic position and the educational interests of the programme. Falcão, time-based media conservator at Tate, spoke more specifically about the need for the development of shared information in the realm of software emulation. Tjarda de Haan, web-archaeologist and guest e-curator at the Amsterdam Museum, introduced the Digital City project as a collaborative process that has sourced expertise from students as well as seeking former system administrators from around Amsterdam and reviving their interest in the project.

Florian Cramer, applied research professor at Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences, In the presentation entitled 'Low-Tech Approaches to Preserving Digital Electronic Art' spoke about the pitfalls of preservation that exists in increasingly complex technical, complex and time-consuming forms. Using the fruitful paradox of electronic literature which is now more accessible in print form, as well as the example of the survival of agnosticism through quotations in printed Christian literature, Cramer suggested low-tech strategies and non-institutional archival methods may be best practices for digital preservation. Citing open file format sources such as Ubuweb and textfiles.com which are written in static HTML, Cramer suggested that the easiest route to preservation is through replicable and robust formats that can run alongside complex emulations in order to ensure a version of a work is accessible for audiences wider than institutions.

Lara Garcia Diaz, PhD student at Antwerp Research Institute for the Arts and researcher at LIMA, gave a presentation on the value of re-interpretation as a creative act in order to contradiction suppositions that re-interpretation may be considered as a radical or dangerous technique in conservation practices. Referencing research performed in relation to Joost Rekveld's work, Diaz questioned whether preservation itself could be understood as a creative act and therefore re-interpretation could be understood as one of its viable strategies. In the realm of digital art, Diaz suggested that artworks are dependant on conflicts and compromises enacted by their institutional caretakers, making them embedded in complex processes of creativity. In short, she summarised by stating that media variability brings forth a change of canonised institutional preservation practices and opens up re-interpretation as a reliable and viable strategy of representing artworks in the future.

Martine Neddham, artist and author of Mouchette.org, presented the final presentation of the day. Neddham immediately reflected upon the presentation of Diaz by agreeing that re-interpretation is a viable form of preservation. However, she displaced the term re-interpretation with that of generative preservation instead. Speaking about generative

preservation, Neddham also brought forth the concept of mutation by suggesting the inevitability of the creative act of the conservator. She said that as long as the essence and form of an artwork is preserved, such creative mutations can be deemed acceptable. Neddham also reflected on the importance of the Future Proof!?! conference itself as a form of preservation, wherein the social act of discussion enacted through such an event provides a form of conservation as conversation.

Day 2

Claudia Röck, PhD student of the University of Amsterdam (NACCA) situated at LIMA, opened the second day of the symposium with a discussion that outlined the integral yet variable qualities central to the preservation of Shan Shui, an interactive installation by Geert Mul which was on exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum Schiedam. This acute case-study was then discussed within the larger framework of Röck's PhD research into the conservation of software-based artworks. In discussion with her supervisors Julia Noordegraaf and Klaus Rechert, Röck spoke about the usefulness and implications of virtualization as a strategy for the conservation of works in Dutch museum collections.

Jesse de Vos, from the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision, gave a presentation titled 'Let's Play the Archive: On Documentation Strategies for Computer Games'. He introduced his presentation with the acknowledgement of his simultaneous detachment and engagement with topics previously discussed in the symposium, based upon his position as a conservator invested in the documentation and public presentation of video games. Discussing Game On!, which was developed in collaboration with Utrecht University, de Vos broached the possibility of video recording participant interaction as was done here - for historic games - as an alternate mode of documenting and collecting new layers of information about an artwork. Although not always necessary, in the case of interactive installations de Vos argued how the benefits of this form of documentation may allow for a work to become more thickly specified in the future.

Sandra Fauconnier, an independent Art Historian, followed de Vos with another alternate mode of documentation not often considered in the context of media and digital art preservation: Wikipedia. In certain aspects Fauconnier's central argument aligned with Florian Cramer's from the previous day as both were arguing for a simplified and non-institutional form of preservation where the benefits lay in quantitative and accessible information about art works. However Fauconnier also had another purpose, providing a brief best practice training session in how to contribute to Wikipedia/Wikimedia with the aims of boosting contribution from those in the audience best equipped to write texts about artists and artworks likely to be the focal point of their interests and research. As the initial point of entry for many early researchers and otherwise inclined or interested web-browsers, Fauconnier showed the poor representation of digital art currently on Wikipedia, using this lack of information as a further example of the marginalisation of digital artworks within media art and contemporary art histories in a broader sense.

In the final session of the symposium, participants and visitors fractioned into two groups both led by LIMA researchers; Rachel Somers Miles lead a workshop covering documentation strategies geared towards artists, whilst Nina van Doren's workshop was focused again on the documentation of digital artworks through the perspective of institutional conservation. Attending van Doren's workshop, after initial introductions and a round of open questions, van Doren alongside Alex Michaan brought into discussion previous LIMA projects concerning the software-based works of Peter Struycken and practices of CD-ROM archiving. Thereafter, Arthur Van Mourik from the Centraal Museum Utrecht spoke extensively and showed footage of the documentation of the reinstallation of Pipilotti Rist's work as it moved from cathedral to museum, and in the future, to a manor.

As the symposium closed for drinks, there was the sense that whilst there may be no overarching method or model which can take into account the variable forms of software based and digital art that are placed in the hands of its makers, conservators and curators, the production of shared knowledge is - as was discussed during this symposium - a vital strategy through which to overcome certain challenges facing its artists and museum professionals.