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Jeffery Warda and Briana Feston-Brunet, Managing Editors

Edited by Helen Bailey, Briana Feston-Brunet, Karen Pavelka, and Jeffrey Warda

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American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works
727 15th Street NW, Ste. 500
Washington, DC 20005
info@conservation-us.org
<http://www.conservation-us.org>

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FUTURE, OR HOW TO SURVIVE FOREVER

ANNET DEKKER

ABSTRACT

This extended abstract is part of an ongoing study of the documentation of net art. The research project focuses on conservation strategies and comparing methods that are developed in museums to document artists' practices. For this presentation at the 2013 Annual Meeting of the American Institute for the Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works, I concentrated on a case study of *Naked on Pluto* (2010), a Facebook game that was created by Dave Griffiths, Aymeric Mansoux, and Marloes de Valk. I will explore whether a project that is dependent on a commercial platform can be documented, and if so, how to approach documentation.

INTRODUCTION

Net artist Igor Štromajer started to delete all of his net artworks in 2010. Over a period of 37 days, he deleted one of his artworks each day, based on the conviction that “if one can create art, one can also delete it. Memory is there to deceive” (Dekker 2013). Other artists like Constant Dullaart and Robert Sakrowski are currently giving people guidelines on how best to document their, or other people's, net artworks. Their approach of subjective documenting, and straightforward collecting of meta data is aimed at the participation and exchange of the collected documentation by all parties interested in preservation of Internet based artworks. At the same time more and more net artists are translating their online artwork into

objects, sculptures, and installations, and experimenting with ways to present and document their work for future generations.

The way artists make, use, and present their documentation, from the work in progress to the final presentation, can give a lot of information about the work. This is of vital importance for the preservation or re-creation of a work. Analyzing artists' documentation methods and comparing these to the information that is asked for in museum documentation models showed that specific and inherent qualities of the artworks have previously not been taken into account. For example, closer analysis of the English performance group Blast Theory's creative processes indicated that integral information might get lost when using standard questionnaires or applying emulation methods that transfer the game-play to new platforms (Dekker 2012). For this presentation I analysed the multiplayer game *Naked on Pluto* (2010), a work that is based on process and relies on the commercial and restricted online platform Facebook, and identified and mapped out the implications of its conservation.

Although there is still little analytical reflection on artworks that proliferate on commercial social media platforms, or interest in the presentation or acquisition of these works by museums, through this—rather extreme—case study, I will show that this practice is gaining attention with artists and thus can be regarded as paradigmatic for contemporary artworks.

NAKED ON PLUTO

Naked on Pluto (2010) is a multiplayer text adventure on Facebook, conceptualized and developed by Dave Griffiths, Aymeric Mansoux, and Marloes de Valk. *Naked on Pluto* was launched in 2010 and is still active at the time of writing: <http://naked-on-pluto.net/>. When entering the game, the player finds him or herself on planet Pluto, in a city under the rule of *Elastic Versailles revision 14* (EVr14), an artificial intelligence functioning as an entertainment colony. It is the Las Vegas of the solar

system, a true paradise for consumers and corporations alike. The game starts with a prolific textual exchange between the player and the computer, during which bots mix and muddle up data, faces, and profiles to generate a framework of strangely familiar relationships. The complexity of the exchange increases as the game progresses. Players can only free themselves from harassment by the bots by resisting and waiting until their resources run out, or the logic of the plot loses all sense. *Naked on Pluto* explores the limits and nature of social networks from within, slowly pushing the boundaries of what is tolerated by the companies that own them, while carefully documenting this process as it unfolds. Story and play are combined with an investigation into the degree to which people are exposed on social networks, and how their data is being used.

PATHS TO EXPLORE

In talks I've had with the artists, a few points came up and, looking back, I think are interesting to explore in a wider context.

First, *Naked on Pluto* is a complex network of distributed parts in which individual parts function separately in different domains. For example, the game-engine is freely distributed and built upon by various users. Besides the present technical difficulty of conservation, this dispersion makes it even more difficult for a conservator to decide what is important to preserve. However, when acknowledging that multiple versions—or even parts of a work—exist and are scattered around different platforms, re-installation may become less of an obstacle. Within certain restrictions, freedom to choose will be possible, and will likely lead to interesting results. Such a process already exists in the practice of curating, where variability is especially visible in the presentation of installations (Ippolito 2008; Noël de Tilly 2009). Although curators recognize this more and more, conservators may be more hesitant in choosing the method of reinterpretation. A shift in thinking will be necessary for this change to come about.

Second, besides challenging general concepts and strategies in presentation and conservation, these artworks also show that conventional roles are shifting. Artists are not necessarily the main actors anymore. For example the public can take over parts of the work; the work itself is distributed in various versions, forms, and platforms, so that a broad range of knowledge and a variety of perspectives are needed to present and conserve the work. Vivian van Saaze (2009) concluded that due to the nature of such works—her example is the project *No Ghost Just a Shell* (1999–2002), an extended exhibition process based on a computer file, by Phillip Parreno and Pierre Huyghe—there are multiple actors who are involved and co-determine the process. Thinking about conservation, Van Saaze argues that “knowledge and existing practices in different areas (vocabularies, the work itself, the artist’s intent, professional roles, economic models) needed to be revised” (2013, 179). She continues by stating that “the notion of ownership as defined as freezing the art object in a singular state is in need of a revision; one that acknowledges a more tactile, practice-based, and interventive kind of engagement of the museum professional” (2013, 179).

My analysis supports this conclusion. Furthermore, I would like to suggest that this engagement should focus on bringing several types of professionals together, likely including people from outside of the museum. In other words, the goal should be, to use a phrase by Jill Sterrett, “advancing collaboration in museums”.¹ Or, as Pip Laurenson suggested in the opening talk she gave at the AIC Annual Meeting in 2013, adopting the notion of “interactional expertise and acknowledging and using contributory expertise” (2013). To add to this, it would be relatively easy to say that net artworks, or as outlined by Laurenson, performance artworks when acquired by the museum, will change the museum structure. Although this may come true, it is perhaps more fruitful to see how such a new *modus operandi* will affect other more traditional works of art. I believe that a change could generate interesting new knowledge within traditional approaches and methods.

This brings me to the third point I’d like to make. With documentation being part of the artwork, replacing the artwork, or even being regarded as the artwork, what does this shift mean for documentation? In other words, what happens when the context, for example a distributed network, is also the work? Can something immaterial, such as a process, or a virtual network, be documented? If not, what does that say about a work, or a document? Lev Manovich argues that software culture is moving beyond the 20th century terminology of document, work, message, or recording, and “instead of fixed documents whose contents and meaning could be determined by examining their structure and content...we now interact with dynamic ‘software performances’” (2013, 33).

Manovich uses the term performance, because what we are experiencing is built by software in real time. Whether we are surfing on a website, using email, playing a video game, or using a GPS phone to friends or a particular spot in the surrounding area, we are always working on dynamic and real time interactions and no longer with static documents. He continues:

Computer programs can use a variety of components to create these performances: design templates, files stored on a local machine, media from the databases on the network server, the real-time input from a mouse, touch screen, joystick, our moving bodies, or another interface, etc. Therefore, although some static documents may be involved, the final media experience constructed by software usually does not correspond to any single static document stored in some media. In other words, in contrast to paintings, literary works, music scores, films, industrial designs, or buildings, a critic can’t simply consult a single “file” containing all of work’s content. (2013, 34)

Could it be possible for a conservator to work with algorithmic processes, or other software performances, instead of objects and documents? Some, including Deena Engel and Glen Wharton (2013) point to the importance of reading code I also believe that such methods of analysis are crucial to acquiring a good understanding of the work, because they give a lot of information about how and why decisions were made. Others have taken this point onward, comparing the execution of code with music notation, but while musicians play notes from paper, software is based on interactions. So while the idea of notation or scores is promising, it is dealing with just one function of software-driven media and neglects another important dimension, namely, interactivity. Also, reading code is possible in a closed project, but will be much more difficult when it comes to real-time interaction that involves networked processes and other external dependencies. When dealing with web applications or a dynamic website, where multiple software architectures are used and individual software modules work together (e.g., a web client, application server, and a database), it is impossible to read all the code. For example, in the case of large-scale commercial dynamic websites, such as Facebook or Amazon, user experience in a single Web page involves different interactions that can amount to sixty separate software processes (Manovich 2012). Even if a software program is relatively small and a reader understands exactly what the program should do by examining the code, then the concept of the structure still says little about the actual user experience. The content of a document (the code) is obviously a part of this experience, but it is also formed by the interface and the various software tools. In this respect, it is important to distinguish between code and software. Moreover, it demonstrates the relationship with performance art, as well as the importance of collaborative and networked strategies that are developed in gaming, theatre, and contemporary dance where also a number of actions (in most cases intentionally) lead to ambiguous experiences.

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NOTES

1. An initial attempt to see what this would mean and how this change could be effected was done in a workshop organised by Jill Sterrett and Layna White of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA), Chris Jones and Kelly Meanley of Hot Studio, San Francisco, and Annet Dekker at the Museums and the Web conference in April 2012. Available at www.museumsandtheweb.com/mw2012/programs/advancing_collaboration_in_museums (accessed 05/01/12). The idea for the workshop came from the concept of a “framework” that was developed by SFMOMA in collaboration with Hot Studio as a result of their successful Team Media meetings.

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Annet Dekker
Curator and Researcher
Amsterdam
The Netherlands
annet@aaaan.net