

Historicization in the Archive: Digital art and originality

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Abstract

In digital art preservation, the seeming un-archivability of artworks remains to be a central issue. The processual dynamic of digital technologies and the ephemerality of installations as anarchival qualia cannot be preserved with traditional archive and conservation strategies. By reading digital artworks as archival artefacts within the process of historicization and its underlying knowledge cognition, this un-archivability is investigated. The problem of originality in regard to digital art's modular and processual characteristics as well as its function as a concept inherent to the archive as structure of power and knowledge becomes palpable. The aim is to question how innovative archive systems can alter these structures to incorporate digital art in its mediality and collective aesthetic.

Keywords

Digital Archiving, Historicization, Artefacts, Originality, knowledge carriers

Digital art as original

The preservation of digital art and the seeming un-archivability of its digital technologies in comparison to object-oriented art remain to be central topics in digital art discourses and theories.¹ The artwork as original, its originality as artistic intention, was expanded in digital art towards a col-

1 See e.g. Giannachi 2016; Kwastek 2013; Bosma 2011; Grau 2007.

laborative and even collective aesthetic which challenges such traditional art historical terms and categories.

The ephemerality of its installations, performances and experiments still separate digital art from the traditional fine arts and the art market in how it is perceived as—and can be sold and collected as—an original work. Archiving digital art thus centers on the act of artefactualizing in several aspects: to memorize it within our historical consciousness, to conceptualize it as an object of study, and/or to sell it as art object by creating a trade value along with the ability to re-exhibit it.

Scholars, technologists and artists have created several methods for preservation. Digital archive projects often focus on documentation strategies such as databases for visual and textual data, software programs such as screen recordings and a historiographical dissemination.² Conservation strategies in museums and other cultural institutions preserve the artwork in a frozen-in status, which is most often decided by the conservator in collaboration with the artist and excludes the artwork from the processualism of digital technologies and the environment of a hyper-linked network.

Although various methods and tools were developed, the main issue remains: In order to be preserved, the artworks have to be altered in their mediality and cannot be persevered in the state-of-being, beholders, conservators and/or archivists have experienced them in, and the artist originally developed them in. Additionally, this processualism of digital technologies, the alterations from one installation to the next (e.g. site-specificity, updates) seem to contradict the idea of an archival document as authorial identity and proof of provenance for one work. Conservation practices in museums and archival strategies in digital databases and platforms have tried to nevertheless preserve digital art within these traditional systems and categories. In this paper, I want to investigate, how we can adopt the (processual) mediality of this art form within archival methods to (1) preserve the knowledge and aesthetic explorations of artworks in their medium qualia and (2) open archival methods towards collective strategies.

This necessitates a re-approach in how to behave towards the concepts of originality and provenance/authenticity inherent to archives as systems of knowledge and power. Originality and authenticity—concepts devel-

² To name a few scientific-driven examples: digitalartarchive.at; medienkunstnetz.de; li-ma.nl. The author of this text worked as co-editor at the Archive of Digital Art at the time of writing.

oped in art history, literature studies and philosophy³—highlight artistic intention in a radical way. They direct the preservation objective towards a *single* entity and idea, which need to be analysed in order to understand the artwork in its conception and expression.

The archived artefact as a source, which allows us to look into the past as a knowledge carrier, accentuates the emphasis of a digital artwork in an original state-of-being as the moment of creation by a single individual and negates the collaborative effort of artistic, scientific and technological team members as well as the idea of interactivity as a collective effort. Not only the processual technicality of the artworks needs to be included into an archiving method, as Wolfgang Ernst has already argued for with his concept of *dynarchive* (Ernst 2011: 82), but also their collective aesthetic as integral qualia, when the artwork is historicized within an archival or museal framework. Due to the transdisciplinarity of this contemporary art form, the preservation-discourse should not be limited to art history and art historical systems of classification, but media archaeology, history of science and technology among others as well. The artwork as source of historical knowledge needs to be able to transfer these elements inherent to digital art.

The problem of preservation in archive theory

The complex challenge of preserving digital art questions historicization in how this process predefines our perception and understanding of art.

The archive as power structure, which seemingly offers a collection of objectively accumulated, factual knowledge, while innately constructing an exclusive, specific and narrative perspective on historical events and artefacts is built upon the idea of (written) historical knowledge as unalterable sources of past events (Taylor 2003: 23). Within the archive's system of classification and verification, these documents become the dominant witnesses of historical knowledge, although they are "only" ever able to mediate a particular point of view.

The archival mediality and its inherent process of historicization predefines our analysis of artworks in their state as preserved documents, their normative, representative function and the logic of reflection we impose on them. The archive's intricacy of its power structures and the exclusivity of its objects instigate our perception of art historical artefacts

3 See Haug 1993; Nelson Goodman's entry „Authenticity“ in the Grove Art Online Database: <https://doi.org/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.article.T005210>.

with an underlying concept of historical knowledge and epistemological ideas. Once a digital artwork is historicized within this system, it represents its original intentionality, form and experience as well as its classifications (e.g. genre, time period). Regarding the processual digital technologies and ephemeral art installations, these *anarchival* qualia (Foster 2004: 5) contrast with the static and semantic premise of archival documents. In order to preserve media artworks, many qualia are lost in the process of historicization, which produces a problematic predefinition of digital artworks within the archive's system. This predefinition is at least insufficient with the construction and execution of digital artworks. While researchers often focus on questioning, how the originality of an artwork can be preserved (Paul 2014: 295), the process of historicization needs to be investigated and altered, too.

This obstacle was answered with different solutions in archive and conservation projects. Digital archives have opened up the process of archiving towards social software technologies that can incorporate user participation in the documentation and dissemination of historicized media artworks, but their database infrastructure often repeat conventional art historical structures of classification and verification. Conservation practices aim at maintaining qualia of interaction in e.g. net.art works, but these are limited to the level of display and interface. Users can operate the work, but this interaction is lost when restarting it. Like other historical artefacts, it is frozen in its state of conservation. Here, the underlying concept of originality comes into play as it is presupposed by the archival system and its underlying concept of historical knowledge in the fixation on a specific object and a single creator, which as mentioned contradicts digital artwork's qualia and mediality.

Once a digital artwork is archived as a representation—be it a visual or written document or be it as conservation—, the archival logic proclaims a normative power to the material, or, in other words, proclaims an authentic value, which can only ever be exemplary for digital art projects. The processual and modular mediality of digital art and its digital technologies challenge this normative power of an archival document.

Rather than declaring digital art as anarchival, and therefore arguing for any preservation method as a failed attempt, it can be regarded as a challenge to question our archival methods (Lozano-Hemmer 2015). This way, the historicization process does not need to be regarded as unavoidable requisite measures, but an opportunity to analyse and understand

media art histories and genealogies in their transdisciplinary and historical developments.

Historicizing digital art

Since the archive is focused on seemingly unalterable documents, digital art is mainly preserved in its written elements (e.g. source code, artist comments, curatorial texts) and visual documentation (e.g. installation photos and videos, screen recordings). As representations, these documents become the dominant source for an artwork, which is as ephemeral, processual and modular as it is semantic and numeric.

As historical artefact and knowledge carrier, the artwork can be examined within an either reflective or explorable method of knowledge cognition for its artistic intention and operability, its genre, or another distinct and categorized field of investigation (Fotiadis 2001: 343): Predefined theories and interpretations can be reflectively authenticated, or new principles can be explored and validated. While we are open in our interpretations, the archive collection and its mediation determine our perspective into the past. In a second analytical step, artefacts suffice for developing explicit, formal laws on the subjects of research. In this representative function, which still relies on the originality of an artwork, we attribute a power of knowledge cognition to these documents.

Historicization theory questions how the perception of historical artefacts changes within the archival system and determines how we perceive documents and artefacts as carriers of knowledge and in the way this knowledge is accessed, organized and distributed. The discourse on the archive as an “idea of what can be said” (Foucault 1981: 186) and the archive as power structure (Derrida 1995: 5) caused a rethinking of the concept of historical facts and the analysis of historical events. Rather than understanding an archival document as a source towards the artwork in its realness—a state-of-being in which the work was meant to be experienced—, the analysis focuses on how these objects are narrated within the archival mediality. In this historicity, they can only ever be re-narrated as representations from a subjective point of view, even though the archive as a power structure assumes an objective perspective. In feminist and queer studies, one consequence of this archival turn was a demand for re-organizing commission and dissemination practices (Squires 2016: 596). Alternative historical analyses are proposed, which focus on marginalized subjects and themes to expand the historical knowledge and create multiple histories and genealogies to be gained from one event, rather than one

single narrative. A concept of messiness was introduced into analytical methods by preserving the tension between artefacts and the conditions in which they are preserved (Fotiadis 2001: 339).

Artworks as historical source usually remain within the art historical discourse, although their content can be relevant for other disciplines, too. As part of a history of technology, digital artworks always relate to several disciplines and can be utilized for a production of historical meaning.

The process of re-evaluation of a digital artwork is not only based on the highly perspectival, perhaps even arbitrary documentation process, but in the accumulation of knowledge, which we want to gain from it once it is historicized within the archival framework. In digital art preservation, the main research focus generally centres on the idea of originality, questioning how close conservation and documentation practices can get to the source. This idea correlates with the general historicization process for artefacts. But although the concept of one idea and one origin has become obsolete in digital art, this does not exclude them from being historicized and archived as sources for present and future analyses. However, new methods of documentation with artworks as new type of historical artefacts can create a different process of knowledge cognition.

Originality: Artistic intention as archival source

If artistic conception is still the most important source of investigation in digital archives and conservation strategies, in which way do we have to acknowledge intentionality as original source and to what extent can we differ from this art historical concept? The artefact as abstract object follows the underlying idea of a work unadulterated from when it was created and from how the artist intended it to function technically as well as appear aesthetically. As an archival paradigm, the aim is to gain access to a historical source unhindered and unmanipulated by subsequent influences. This presupposes an origin, which is self-consistent as an entity. We may have accepted that Homer, Shakespeare and other authors of infamous literary works, which have had a great significance for our cultural understanding and identity, were not one person but several. In the analysis and interpretation of their works though, this caused a rethinking of many well-established theories, if not invalidated them. In the archive's system of classification, too, the concept of more than one author and modular entities of a work is problematic. For metadata infrastructures in databases, the artist's name is as important and essential as its title, while

technologists and scientists usually become collaborators. This distinction very often does not reflect the collaborative working process of a digital art project. The radical highlighting of the artist as single entity is similar to the idea of originality as it was first conceptualized in German romanticism (Carroll 1990: 138). The artist was transfigured as individual genius for the creation of artworks, whose aim was innovation rather than tradition and canon (Jäger 1990: 75). The masculine concept of a single creator and inventor is still dominant in how art historical collections and archives document their works. However, this does not reflect the diverse methods, practices and aims, which were applied in European art history in general, let alone in digital art. Especially in the twentieth century, many artists and artistic movements, which were also predecessors of digital art, e.g. Marcel Duchamp or the conceptual art group *Art&Language* questioned this concept in their works (Harrison 2013).

The artistic intention as creative process is not problematic as such, but the radicalisation of the concept within archival systems, especially since this logic of arranging and hierarchizing knowledge is contradictory to the definition of digital art. As source of knowledge cognition, the problem lies rather in how originality as a concept of artistic creation and innovation is tied to *idea* as epistemological concept.

In general art theory, *idea* is the artistic intention and the artist's creative process in reflecting and representing reality (Panofsky 1989: 4). The artistic intention became the origin of an artwork, and not *idea* as an epistemological concept. When a digital artwork is historicized as archival document, its origin, too, relates to the artistic intention, which is not to say that an artwork cannot be epistemological, but this is separated from the epistemological concept of *idea*.

One could argue that the originality in digital art has shifted from an artistic creation towards a technological one. While artistry, craftsmanship and artistic concept were main criteria in the fine arts, digital art focuses on technological innovations. However, this reduces the outcomes of digital artworks by, once again, neglecting their collaborative and collective *qualia*. Additionally, technologies do not have an agency— at least not yet, and this ultimately only shifts the problem towards the follow-up question: Who created the technology? In order to acknowledge the multiple agencies in digital art projects, the concept of originality needs to shift towards one of collectivity, which can include the technology, collective aesthetic and collaborative interaction.

As artefacts, digital artworks expand the idea as single entity towards a continued development, an always in process-state and inherent “embodied” or “interactive” knowledge. To archive digital art, we cannot rely on the idea of preservation as saving the origin of an artwork but need to integrate the collectivity into archival methodology.

If we accept that an artist’s intention is not an exclusive origin in the collective effort of a digital artwork and in its processual mediality, we are also no longer bound by the archival paradigm of authenticity. As knowledge cognition, the ideal is not to get as close to the idea of origin as possible but understand its processualism as ever-continuing development.

This is a central question in any historical analysis, but especially important in regard to the mediality of digital artworks, since they negate their historicization in their embodied, interactive and technological knowledge, and challenge new methods of storage, access and handling for historical documents.

Alternative methods of storage, access and (re-)usability

As French historian Jacques Le Goff has stated, written documents are what enter our historical consciousness in the present, while oral traditions enter the mythic consciousness and remain elements of the past (Le Goff 1992: 10). The dominance of the archive not only relies on its system of classification and verification but also on the exclusivity of what kind of document is memorable. Since this distinction functions on the idea of inalterability—written documents as seemingly unchangeable containers of factual knowledge—an openness towards other documents questions the archival methodology, too, by necessitating a change of what can be documented and what kind of knowledge is archivable (Taylor 2003: 23-25).

Written documents on digital artworks such as the source code, artwork descriptions, facts on artist name, title, technological data and other information as well as the hardware of an artwork stimulate this dominance, whereas the interactive experience, the software run, or the performance of an experiment are ephemeral and relative qualia, which are subject to change in time, even though these are considered to be intrinsic elements. In order to archive media art as encompassing as possible, other methods of storing and accessing knowledge need to be developed. Instead of the acceptance of an archival document in its state of verification and classification—or in regard to digital art the dissonance of a doc-

ument—, the method of archiving comes into question in order to open it up for non-written and ephemeral elements. The experimental, modular and collective mediality necessitates a new method of archiving as much as it commences it. Digital art archiving and preserving can expand these concepts by incorporating archival theories from other disciplines, e.g. performance art.

In performance studies, the *repertoire* is a concept and system for the documentation of e.g. embodied knowledge that accepts a dynamic quality of historical knowledge (Taylor 2003: 35). Historicized documents on ritual dances or oral storytelling need to be able to incorporate their dependence on communication, presence and exchange with viewers and participants. By accepting and integrating a performative and ephemeral level of the artwork, the written and visual documents are put into perspective as manipulate-able objects rather than static knowledge carriers. As an alternative system of memorizing several kinds of knowledge, the aim is not to proclaim the archive as an overcome method, but still recognize it as an essential access to memorizing knowledge about historical events, artworks and other sources of cultural artefacts while opening it up to different systems of storage and access.

The processual and modular mediality inherent to digital art has been widely accepted when defining it, but the documentation and preservation still highly relies on common art historical methods: (1) descriptive metadata on artist, title, statements and so forth in digital archives, and (2) the conservation of an artwork in a frozen-in status (e.g. sandbox browser systems, emulation). This re-emphasises the common archival methodology and its inherent power structure, when integrated into (digital) archives.

New methods include enabling users to re-arrange and re-categorise documents by e.g. keyword and image tagging, commentary functions and other interactive tools. Additionally, new archival methods question the quality and mediality of the artefact and its values. Rather than as a static and unchangeable object, the documents should incorporate the processual dynamic of digital artworks by making them accessible as re-usable data. A digital art archive in the future could function more like a distributed version control and source code management than a traditional art collection.

In general, the triadic terminology of archive-preservation-conservation is questioned. Conservation as institutional method and archiving as collective method can be considered as two separate terms.

As a general term in digital art publications, digital platforms and institutional practices, archiving describes any kind of process applied to preserve media art—e.g. emulation, video documentation, artwork description and screen recording. The term is not limited to a specific methodology, but applied to theories, practices and projects that document or conserve media art in a short- or long-time preservation.

In a more restricted definition, digital archiving can be described as a method for both documentation and preservation material such as source code, screen recordings, images, videos and other forms of metadata that are saved within a digital platform and database. This data is not considered as original source, but as re-usable and interoperable documents.

Conservation then refers to institutional methods of preserving an artwork in an isolated, stable status, which was approved by the artist and can be re-exhibited any time as long as it and the technologies, which the artists redeem as essential for the artwork, are maintained or can be updated with alternative technologies. Ultimately though, the lifespan of these conserved artworks seems to be more limited since digital technologies have a shorter lifespan than traditional artistic materials such as e.g. oil colour, canvas.

While digital archives are collective projects based on free participation (e.g. the archive of digital art, or platforms such as GitHub), conservation and its manual labour require institutional back-up. This cannot be limited to museums and other cultural institutions but requires support by technology companies and industries.

Conclusion

Digital artists, too, struggle with the idea of preserving their work for future generations and the necessity of accepting technological changes and integrating the processualism into their preservation strategies. Very often, this requires also a stronger cooperation with technologists.

Since digital artworks are not relying on the presence of audience participation like e.g. performance art, but are at the same time numeric and written, we cannot claim that a digital artwork is un-archivable. However, in order to open up the hierarchical structure of archives, which can integrate the diverse, ephemeral, processual and modular criteria of digital art, a concept of collectivity needs to be applied rather than the static concept of originality and authenticity.

To acknowledge the artistic intention—be it one or more artists and technologists involved, we also cannot negate the quality of an artwork in

its original value. In order to allow artists to work freely, they need to be able to sell their works and integrate them into the art market. At the same time, archiving methods need to separate from this idea of originality to incorporate the collective, interactive and ephemeral levels of media artworks as historical artefacts. Therefore, I suggest to separate the methods of archiving digital art as a collective process from the conservation thereof, which is done by the artist(s) and technologist(s) within an institutional framework.

While the problem of historicization with historical documents and artefacts in disciplines like archaeology and history lies in the value we account to them as factual knowledge and how we narrate these seeming facts into statements of historical events, the question of a digital artwork and its preservation needs to reconsider how we document an artwork within an archival system.

Archiving digital art steps away from the idea of written, factual knowledge to an open method of co-creatively recreating the archival material by adding the process of creation, the participants' creative input and reception, as well as the processualism of its digital technologies.

By looking at the archive debate in digital and media art from the process of historicization and knowledge cognition, the idea of dynamic archiving needs to integrate collectivity, too. Not only the media archaeological condition of artworks, but the archival methodology itself can incorporate the interactivity and be open towards associative epistemological processes. By using open licences and sharing material for users to continue working on and alternating archive material, the processual condition of artworks is documented through the use of archival material, rather than the artefactualising thereof.

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