Re-collection: Art, New Media and Social Memory

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Dedicated 'To everyone who's dead', the volume concerns art made with digital media over the last 50 years or so which will not exist for others to experience, indeed some has become extinct already. The galleries, libraries, archives and museums (GLAM), implicated so centrally in the priming and maintenance of our social and cultural memory, have been tardy in responding to the outputs from artists' desktops, working with applications sitting on various OS platforms.

In a series of well constructed chapters, alternately written by each of the authors (with occasional questions of each other's work, boxed within the text), the traditional methods and methodologies of the GLAM are surveyed. The solemnity of objects marooned in a space or on a wall, subject to the presentational whims of their custodians, are examined in relation to digital art and media artists. In the main the authors' exploration is of archival strategies more suited to cultural artefacts made by this group which share participation, interaction and direct experience, 'a series of events'.

Referencing artists from the late 20th Century, methods of storage, emulation, migration and reinterpretation employed are

assessed in relation to particular artworks that have suffered from obsolescence, within analogue structures (from Flavin to Nam June Paik), and digital systems, (Silicon Graphics-based works by for instance Char Davies). The test for suitability of these methods is whether one or a combination will maintain the fundamental quality of the aesthetic experience as defined by the artist, with little or no concession made to the shortcomings of the tools employed to recreate that experience.

The institutional approach to the problems is described on several levels throughout the book – both authors operate in these domains – but quickly home in on the core of the book: '...new media art operates like an algorithm that relies on dynamic external variables, taking it even further away from a definition as an eternal fixed object and towards performativity, relativity and variability." The term 'variable media', (unlike the familiar term variable dimensions), seems to confound the issue but in developing the principle the authors reassure that "...we can embrace change and turn it from preservation's deadliest enemy into our greatest ally."

The key to the approach is metadata. Not just the integers hidden in the folds of file structure but human stuff to do with actions, lists, plans, intentions, reflections, along with names, even the names of those who experience a work for the first time and have something to say about it. Handling such a cornucopia of data, as Rhizome Artbase found, where folksonomy rubs alongside taxonomy, helped like clarifying butter, useful terminology to emerge. Collaborating with some of the world's larger collecting institutions, researchers developed the Variable Media Questionnaire and the Media Arts Notation System (MANS) employing <XML> based indexing able to be extensible and interoperable across systems.

Less well covered in this proposed approach is where the skills and finance involved emerges; to set aside the time for a lengthy 'debrief' at the completion of each project; and later, the decoding of the score of the defunct system. This assumes, further down the track that a new form of institution will have the infrastructure in place to fund the team of ethnomediologists and futurist technologists able to interpret 'the score'.

The concept of a 'franchised' Open (Meta) Museum and Interarchive is floated, an idealised notion responding to the difficulty of getting artists to agree to almost anything, and begging the question as to exactly who approves the franchise. The kind of network employed for years by hacker culture is envisaged, and the countless volunteers building emulators for obsolete 'video' games receives praise for their cascading approach to quality control and code advancement. These 'unreliable archivists' and the tendency of media culture to proliferate are held out as examples of the kinds of imagination applicable to the problem.

For instance by employing DNA, a fascinating chapter - steel, polymer and silicon are replaced with carbon and the genetic replication and mutation generating code that responds to the operating environment (place and time), the artwork being conceived by the artist as a kind of family of possibilities or affordances, in the knowledge of an existence as long-lived as say a dynasty of forest giants... (Has anyone yet detected the DNA of *previous* cultural forms in trees?)

The final chapter sets out to 'future-proof contemporary culture' with a set of twelve 'recommendations.' There's something here for every stakeholder, even down to a table (or 'weather forecast') comparing the longevity of various file formats, for

those contemplating pathways to immortality.

The focus throughout is on North American artists with asides to Europe, and even one to Australia, (though not to the Scanlines database, which might itself be described as an Open Museum). This is an engaging read in conversational style with plentiful headings to make retrieval of sections easier; there are copious footnotes that include the references and an index, and the book is produced by MIT Press to the usual high standard of design and production.

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