

# Documenting Performance

## *The Context and Processes of Digital Curation and Archiving*

Edited by Toni Sant

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## Documenting Digital Performance Artworks

Adam Nash and Laurene Vaughan

In this chapter we examine the consequences, for the concepts of archiving and documenting performance artworks, brought forth by digital art works that use real time digital data as a constitutive or major part of their construction and execution. We use case studies of the three works that made up the exhibition *Everything is Data* in Singapore in 2015<sup>1</sup>: *The Mood of the Planet* by digital art pioneer Vibeke Sorensen, which mines global social network data in real time to drive multiple LED lights within monumental stacks of crushed glass; *Man A* by Gibson/Martelli, which uses 'augmented reality' to drive motion-captured dance sequences in interaction with a large physical object; and *Out of Space* by Adam Nash and Stefan Greuter, which uses real time motion capture combined with an immersive virtual reality headset to build an immersive abstract audiovisual environment. We interrogate the role and concept of archiving in the light of these works that radically blur the distinction between artwork, archive and documentation. Because such works use real time data sources to build themselves, they therefore might be seen as a kind of 'real time archive' or documentation themselves. Boris Groys (2008) considers such works as primarily performances since they are based on algorithms that must be enacted in real time at the time they are encountered, and can never be said to exist as a single work. Rather, the works can be enacted, or instanced, in widely varied circumstances on different platforms. Using theories from both

performance and practice theory (Auslander 2008; Schatzki 2002; Schechner 2003) and digital game archiving (Swalwell, 2013; deVries et al., 2013; Stuckey et al., 2014; Harvey, 2011), we work through the implications of attempts to both document and archive such real time, data-based artworks. In conclusion, we find that a new understanding of the concepts and methods of archive and documentation are required to appropriately conserve these works for the future, and present examples of such approaches.

### Live performance in the digital era

What does it mean, in the digital era, for a performance to be 'live'? Indeed, how can we define 'performance' in the digital era? The digital represents the apotheosis of Marshall McLuhan's container concept, where every new medium contains all prior media as content. The digital takes this concept to its extreme, subsuming all media into a virtualized process that recreates media in real time (Clemens and Nash 2015). The digital therefore represents some significant problems for our understanding of 'performance' and 'liveness', since it is possible to see the digital itself as a 'live performance' each time a process is enacted. These problems in turn affect our understanding of the documentation of performance.

The version of live performance that the digital inaugurates may, in practical terms, perhaps be treated phenomenologically and accepted for its empirical utility in the case of, say, digital video used to document a live dance performance in the conventional sense of documenting a work. But when considering performances that involve or rely on digital processes to enact the performance work, the digital process becomes the crucial defining factor in the notion of documenting or archiving the work. As we shall see, the digital process also calls into question the status of all previous understandings of document and archive.



## Everything is data

Here, we examine three such works, all presented in an exhibition called *Everything Is Data* at Gallery A of the School of Art, Design and Media at the National Technological University of Singapore in 2015. The works were *The Mood of the Planet* by Danish/American artist Vibeke Sorensen, *Man A* by British artists Gibson/Martelli and *Out of Space* by Australian artist Adam Nash and Australian/German games researcher Stefan Greuter. The exhibition was curated by Australian designer Laurene Vaughan.<sup>2</sup>

Much has been discussed about the implications of so-called mediation for the concepts of 'liveness' and 'performance' (Auslander 2008; Bolter and Grusin 2000), but such discussions rely on an essentially pre-digital acceptance of the concept of 'media'. This attitude often sets the 'screen' in opposition to live performance, conflating different kinds of screen and eliding any considerations of live performance as a technology of reproduction that is already mediated, mediating and mediatizing (Auslander 2008: 2). Such a view traditionally sets the concepts of 'live' and 'recorded' in mutually exclusive opposition, enabling an uncomplicated understanding of what constitutes documenting and archiving. In this understanding, to document is to create an impoverished record of a performance, missing the crucial element of liveness that defines the performance.

Similarly, Auslander describes an attitude that, even while acknowledging both McLuhan's concept of the simulating function of new media and Bolter and Grusin's specifying of that concept in the early twenty-first century, insists that theatre and television compete with each other without really offering any proof and, worse, precludes any possibility of other relationships in which these two forms may participate. Such an enforced dichotomy precludes any considerations that could come to bear on discussions of liveness, such as the audience as performer, the real time transmission of an atmosphere of

liveness and the assemblage of mechanical, electronic and social processes that ultimately comprise any performance experience, whether live in person, transmitted live, asynchronously live or putatively not live at all.

Of ultimate relevance here is the fact that the attitude Auslander describes is unable to conceive of a live performance that is immanently digital. Boris Groys recognizes this when he acknowledges all digital images as performances. What he means by this is that a digital image can not really be said to exist as an image until the time it is called up from data stored on a hard drive and modulated into a display register, i.e., displayed on a screen as a collection of red, green and blue pixels (Groys 2008: 84; Clemens and Nash 2015). For this modulation into the display register to occur, a series of actions are initiated based on an associated algorithm that is used to 'read' the digital file and display it to the screen. This series of actions, implicitly equated with the performance of a musical score, is what Groys considers a performance, performed anew every time the image is displayed on a screen. At this point Groys becomes distracted by considerations of original and copy, showing an inability to think beyond images. At the same time, Groys implicitly acknowledges the fundamental leveling nature of the digital that renders meaningless both any thought of the distinction between images and other sense phenomena and any meaningful distinction between original and copy. The distinction between original and copy is not relevant to those concerned with performance and liveness, since no individual performance can be said to be a copy of another performance. At the same time, on the grounds of geospatial, social or temporal elements, every performance can be said to be original, even though it is the same work being performed. It is this formulation that, as intimated earlier, causes problems for concepts of documenting performance, since every performance is unique in one sense and generic in another, a formulation that is also true of the digital. Some

concrete examples will help to examine further the implications and processes involved.

### *The Mood of the Planet*

Vibeke Sorensen's work *The Mood of the Planet* provides a particularly relevant example of the problems and paradoxes involved in documenting digital works that are presented in physical settings. The core idea that drives the work and its reception also presents the core problem when attempting documentation of the work. Sorensen's idea is to monitor popular web-based social networks such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram for occurrences of words that express emotions. This data is then modulated into a display interface in the form of a large rectangular arch made of clear acrylic plastic filled with thousands of small chunks of crushed glass and coloured LED (light emitting diode) lights. The arch was installed in a darkened, mirrored room so that the visitors had the experience of walking through an infinite periodic tunnel. In the words of the artist herself: 'The "arch" or "doorway" is iconic and references developmental transformation, the metaphoric passing from one state to another, of growth and change that is analogous to the transformative effect that global communications technologies have upon our collective human condition' (Sorensen, 2015).

It is clear from this description that there are two crucial elements that ostensibly render the work, an intrinsically *live* work that is more or less impossible to document usefully or faithfully. The two elements are, first, the emotional keywords being expressed by social network users across the planet at the moment an individual experiences the work and, second, those very individual visitors who experience the work as it is situated in the gallery. It might be said that any artistic experience that involves an individual physically attending



that experience – whether a live performance, a film, a painting or any other kind of artwork – will be unique to that individual. Each individual will experience the work slightly differently from anyone else. Their experience will be informed by their disposition, which in turn is informed by what might be called the emotional timbre of the world. Such unique experience therefore renders relatively useless any attempt to document any artwork or, inversely, renders every individual who experienced the work a living document of that artwork. This might contribute little to our understanding of the documenting of digital work, were it not for the fact that Sorensen's piece is *literally* constituted by the emotional timbre of the world as expressed on global social networks at the moment the individual experiences it, thereby codifying both the momentary uniqueness of any experience of the artwork and the impossibility to adequately document it. This realization radically extends Auslander's assertion that 'the relationship between live and mediatized forms and the meaning of liveness be understood as historical and contingent rather than determined by immutable differences' (2008: 8).

A new approach to documenting and archiving such a work is clearly called for. The consideration of such approaches is concerned with the 'question of the future of the specter or the specter of the future, or the future *as specter*', as Derrida (1995: 84) reminds us; meaning that we really are dealing with a phantom. As we saw earlier, the digital complicates this spectral phantom even further by necessitating a new performance at every access of the archived version. As is often the case with the digital, this realization shines a retroactive light on the nascent qualities of the very idea of documenting and archiving in the pre-digital era, calling on us to acknowledge the performative nature of the archive in its very conception. Acknowledging the spectral nature of the exercise also allows us to understand any document or archive of the work as its own entity, independent of the work it is documenting.



How would a new approach to the concept and practice of documenting and archiving actually work in this context? Clearly, conventional forms of documenting and archiving, such as video, photography and audio recording of the work will be deficient, because the individual experience itself will be lost through lack of peripheral vision, lack of audible stereo positioning, lack of visual resolution due to darkness, etc. At the same time, such attempts at capturing useful documents would be able to capture and preserve certain important aspects of the construction and procedural experience of the work. Depending on the viewpoint of capture, certain aspects of the individual experience of the work may also be recorded. So conventional documenting approaches offer two potential aspects: a somewhat objective view of an individual experiencing the work, and a more subjective view from the individual themselves whilst experiencing the work.

Much of the whole work is lost if only these two aspects are used. This is what Melanie Swalwell and Helen Stuckey try to address with their concept of discursive archiving. Speaking specifically about the archiving of digital computer games, but of enormous relevance to this discussion, they describe Lowood's question of whether digital games are 'artefacts or activity' (Stuckey et al. 2015: 10) and their attempt to reveal the answer as 'both', by proposing and building an archive that can 'support multiple narratives' (ibid.). Crucial to their formulation is the importance of the memories, stories and impressions of the players of the games to the concept of the documenting and archiving of those games. This allows for a more 'open and non-hierarchical' (ibid.) sense of the archive, which enables 'fragmentary and plural interpretations' (ibid.). We can apply the same principle to those who experience Sorensen's work, and this will help provide another dimension to its documenting and archiving.

This gets us so far in terms of documenting and archiving the experience of the work from the point of view of a visitor or

putative objective observer. This might be called external documenting. But what about the experience of performing the work? This might be called internal documenting. Performance theorist Richard Schechner (2003: 300) maintains that there is a 'great big gap between what a performance is to people inside and what it is to people outside [the performance]', but is this a relevant consideration in the case of digital, interactive works? Who or what is the performer in such works, and how might their experience be documented or archived? The next two works in the *Everything Is Data* exhibition help think this through.

### *Man A and Out of Space*

*Man A* by Gibson/Martelli is a work combining an irregularly shaped polygon constructed of cardboard (approximately  $2 \times 2 \times 2$  metres in size) decorated with geometric patterns inspired by World War I era dazzle camouflage and serving as the trigger for augmented reality animations of motion captured dancers similarly geometrically rendered with dazzle-style patterns. The animations are viewed on a smartphone which is pointed at the large cardboard polygon. *Out of Space* by Adam Nash and Stefan Greuter was an abstract audiovisual virtual reality work using a head-mounted Oculus Rift display for visual 'immersion' of the user, and motion capture to track the physical movements of the user, which are mapped in real time into movements in the virtual reality space, allowing the user to use body movements to *play* the virtual reality space as a combination of game and visual/musical instrument.

Both of these performative works call into question the status or identity of the performer, and in doing so, offer potential new approaches to documenting and archiving the work from the point of view of the performer. While *Man A* uses dancers as conventional performers in one sense, theirs is both already a documented



performance, in that it has been motion captured, and also a performance contingent on the specificities of each individual accessing the work in the gallery via their smartphone. Similarly, the visitor in the gallery experiencing the work is a performer of the work in the sense that the experience of the whole work – the interaction of the motion-captured animations with the cardboard sculpture and the user's phone – is entirely dependent on the actions of the visitor and the essential realization of the work. Indeed, the movements of the visitors pointing and moving their phones around the sculpture form an important movement motif of the work.

The visitor to *Out of Space*, on the other hand, becomes the player of the work, quite literally performing it through their physical actions. It is a single-user work because only one person can don the head-mounted display at a time, but other gallery visitors can see the resulting performance displayed on a large two-dimensional screen behind the user. This creates a real time, ephemeral kind of external documenting that also forms an aspect of the experience of the work. Other forms of external documenting, as discussed earlier, can also be applied to these player/performers, and we may adapt some of them for internal documenting too. These would include video, audio and photography from the players' viewpoint, post-facto written or spoken personal impressions of the players, and even such impressions collected whilst playing the work.

Having described a process of assembling a collection of discursive documenting approaches to create an archive that is its own dynamic entity rather than any kind of impoverished copy, there is one more crucial element remaining.

All three of the works discussed rely on digital programs to bring the idea into existence. These programs are created by the artists through programming, also known as coding. As discussed earlier, decoding these programs can be considered performative. Accordingly, digital code occupies a uniquely indeterminate ontological status, in



that it is both specific and generic. It is specific because it is unique to the situation being coded, for example the storage and triggering of the motion-captured dancers in *Man A*, or the modulation of social network emotional keywords into red/green/blue values in *The Mood of the Planet*. It is generic because it is stored as an indeterminate collection of magnetic polarities on a disk and it can be modulated into any display register in an arbitrary number of ways. Similarly, documenting or archiving the programs and the code used to create them involves both internal and external documenting at the same time. As well as the executable program, the code itself needs to be archived, along with descriptions of the equipment used to realize the work. Such descriptions can be written as comments (i.e., non-executable code designed to be read by people rather than computers). Descriptions like these are needed because technical specifications change quickly, and what could once run on common computer equipment may be unusable just a few years later. This is where the generic nature of the digital becomes apparent, allowing the preservation of the code used to construct the program, which can later be used, or referred to, to rebuild the program using appropriate contemporary technology platforms. This is the process that, for example, allows so-called emulation of digital games originally built to run on now-obsolete hardware. It would also be prudent to keep a paper copy of the code to insure against disk degradation or failure (Pogue, 2009).

## Conclusion

To summarize, we have drawn upon the theories and practice of Stuckey and Swallwell, Auslander, Schechner and others to identify the need for discursive documenting and archiving to create archive entities that are dynamically independent of their originating works

rather than an impoverished copy. Such discursiveness requires a more open and less hierarchical approach than has been hitherto conventional in the field of archiving. Discursive documenting means assembling a collection of a range of elements from different sources. External documenting comprises records (video, audio, photography, written, drawn, spoken) of people experiencing the work, taken from outside their point of view or from outside the work, with 'outside' being defined non-precisely and discursively. Internal documenting is comprised of records from the point of view of the experience of performing the work, or from within the work itself. Digital works are defined ontologically as performances that internally document themselves in their very creation. Artworks that use digital media in their execution, such as the three works exhibited in the *Everything is Data* exhibition in 2015, enliven the gallery visitor from being a viewer into a performer and thus every individual experience of the work can be considered as unique performances of the same work and requiring the kind of discursive approach to documenting and archiving that we have described.

In conclusion, three short but important points. First, the purpose of documenting or archiving a work needs to be defined in order to know what elements to include. Second, much of the internal and external documenting of digital works needs to be considered by the artist/s while creating the work. Finally, the role of imagination comes into play as an important post-facto 'voice' in the discursive archive. This is implied by the opening up to a concept of the archive as a dynamic entity, because all people engaging with the archive will need to use imagination to bring the work to life. But we must not consider this as being 'condemned to imagination!', as Augusto Boal (2006: 62) rues of the fragmentary nature of documentary evidence of early Greek theatre. Rather, we should embrace imagination as an important aspect of the discursive, dynamic documenting and archiving of performative digital artworks.

