An indeterminate archive for David Rokeby's "The Giver of Names"

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"I'm an interactive artist: I construct experiences"

David Rokeby, The Construction of Experience: Interface as Content, 1998, p27

In the quote above David Rokeby acknowledges that, as an artist working with computers, his role is not to create objects but rather to create experiences. Rokeby's works, like other new media artworks have a liminal existence on the threshold between material and immaterial things; they are things in potential. New media artworks cannot be considered or treated simply as objects. Their full existence occurs when they are used. Such experiential works present a paradoxical challenge to art historical research. Without a central unchanging object upon which to focus historical investigation, documentation about the work becomes increasingly crucial, but also increasingly contested.

This paper reports on a documentation case-study of David Rokeby's Giver of Names (1991-2004), undertaken in Montreal in 2007 (http://www.fondation-langlois.org/html/e/page.php?NumPage=2130). Through the process of creating this case-study, what we have come to call an 'indeterminate archive,' we have developed an approach to documentation which draws together both the artist's intentions for the work and the audience's experience. The approach creates a dialogue between the ideal, conceptual existence of the work, and its actual manifestation through different iterations and exhibitions in the real world.

The state of the art of media art documentation

Art historians, conservators and curators all look to documentation to support their research and their ability to preserve artworks, maintain collections, and mount exhibitions. Media artworks rarely exist as static, discrete and unique objects, but rather as collections of components, hardware and software which together create time and process based experiences. Such works may change radically depending on the contextual conditions of their staging. Even the material components of such works are subject to rapid change due to technological obsolescence. Thorough documentation is consistently noted by artists, conservators and curators as essential to provide a continuing source of knowledge as to how a particular work manifests over time.

In the absence of a clear, discrete and material art-object, more traditional models of documentation and conservation have adapted in order to offer more flexible paradigms that focus on the processes of creation and exhibition, rather than on static objects. Currently there is a range of preservation and documentation initiatives in practice around the world that vary in their perspectives and approaches to the issues. As part of the case study this field of media art documentation and preservation was studied so as to draw upon existing expertise in the field (Jones, 2007). Missing from many of these models however was a means through which to document user experience. In most instances artists intentions continues to provide the touchstone for how a work will be preserved, restaged and described in the future. And while conservation practice may privilege the artist, the broader context of art history demands an account of the user's experience. While some articulated this as a significant gap in the record, there had not been many systematic proposals to change it.

The strategy of indeterminacy

In our case-study we combined two different approaches. The first, based on the Variable Media paradigm focused on the artist's intentions as a means to record information about the essence (or "kernel") of an artwork, independent of the media in which it manifests (Depocas, Ippolito and Jones, 2004). The second, focused on the experiential aspects of the work, based on how the artwork "occurs" for audience members in the real world. A productive tension forming between these two approaches, and between the "real" and "ideal" versions of the artwork. Both approaches challenge the authority of the other in a useful way, and each offers the other complimentary information - creating a richer, deeper and more complex overall

computer's descriptions, pulled from its language database, respond to parameters such as colour, form and position, producing phrases that may seem poetic, whimsical or foolish to the human observer, but importantly should not seem completely random.

The work has a long, illustrious exhibition history and has evolved over many versions. Significantly, however, Rokeby suggests in our interview with him that the work has reached its 'sweet spot,' where few changes are envisaged in the future. This creates an excellent opportunity to create a documentary collection that considers the nature of this final iteration of the work.

Working with the Indeterminate Archive – Modes of engagement in the Giver of Names

In the interview with Rokeby within documentary collection he describes his intention to create, in The Giver of Names, an artwork that would exist uniquely for each individual that used it:

> The real intention of this piece...was to create an interface that had as wide a reach as I could possibly imagine… where there was so little pre-constrained that the experience for each person would be absolutely unique and very fundamentally determined by their contribution.

The value of the indeterminate archive is in its ability to hold within it these different versions, views and realities, which, taken together offer a lively and dynamic picture of the work.

In the following example we have particularly focused on the different ways in which the audience members engage with the work. This focus reveals some particular agreements and tensions between real and ideal in the Giver of Names–future users of the archive, we hope, will discover many more. All the quotes by Rokeby, below, are taken from the interview that appears in the archive, as are the audience's quotes, which are identified in the text by the actual first names of the participants.

In the final section of our interview with him Rokeby explains that the most essential aspect of the installation, in his view, is the participant's realisation that the descriptions of objects given by the system are not random. Rokeby explains how the work is carefully orchestrated to create a kind of "stereoscopy" through which the audience is "led to compare the way they see the object and the way the computer sees the object." To achieve this Rokeby has specifically constructed the plinth, screen and projector to create a mirror like relationship between the real object and the image of the object that is presented on the screen.

In Rokeby's view, this realisation need not be immediate. His aim in creating Giver of Names was to "stretch out the feedback loop to allow the participant more time for reflection". He designed the work specifically to lead people to question how it works:

> In this piece you are invited to think as much as you want about how it's happening. And I try in both screens to give as many useful hints as I can about what's going on. You invited to think about what's going on conceptually and technically.

For Rokeby the ideal experience of the work is a "systematic scientific approach", which slowly reveals the nature and operation of the system. He contrasts this with a kind of behaviour which he describes as "object play", in which the participant becomes involved with the objects themselves, rather than with the system as a whole, where participants:

> …seem to be drawn to put as many objects on [the plinth] as possible, and just accumulate and accumulate. They are not really seeing through the system I think if they do that. It's a very common response, but they are getting involved in object play…Whereas the person who is engaged on the sort of scientific method process is more looking and seeing through the system, which is more the operative mode of the piece

The audience experiences recorded in the archive reveal examples of both approaches, but also show how complex and entwined these different behaviours are. At one extreme a participant called Alan describes a highly systematic and thorough approach to the work. After a long time interacting carefully with it he concluded that:

suggests:

> [Maps] on to what my experience was in developing the piece. Finding out the limits of what the system can do and reflecting back on "gee I wonder what my limits are what I don't see because I have these human eyes.

By enticing the participant into a dialogue with an artificial agent, Rokeby intends to provoke reflection on the profound achievement of the everyday human task of making sense of the world.

In other experiences that were recorded the younger participants swiftly understood how the system works and went one step further, by putting their own heads or hands onto the plinth. Whilst the set-up of the installation clearly offers this possibility it is not something that Rokeby talks of in his interview. This creative misuse of the work is an interesting extension of Rokeby's 'ideal', for the participants who try to reproduce their own image in the work are not only asking what does the computer make of these objects but also asking "what does the computer make of me?"

Conclusion

While the artist's own perspective still holds a central position in the indeterminate archive, it becomes one voice of many, part of the dialogue between real and ideal. Each audience interview can only ever be a partial view, but the documentation of these multiple perspectives opens the record of The Giver of Names to a wide field of possibilities.

Rather than creating an authoritative collection of documentation, which establishes a fixed identity for the work, our approach seeks to capture its mutability. By allowing future researchers to understand more deeply the occurrence of the work in a particular place and time we believe that the 'indeterminate' approach offers them a field of possibilities relating to the work, enabling them to act confidently, in their own time and place, in respect to their own conservation work, research, restaging or exhibition projects.

Endnotes

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