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**Between Real and Ideal:
Documenting Media Art**

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Abstract

This paper describes a new approach to documenting media art which seeks to place in dialogue the artist's intentions and the audience's experience. It explicitly highlights the productive tension between the ideal, conceptual existence of the work, and its actual manifestation through different iterations and exhibitions in the real world. The paper describes how the approach was developed collaboratively during the production of a documentary collection for the artwork *Giver of Names*, by David Rokeby. It outlines the key features of the approach including artist's interview, audience interviews and data structure.

Introduction

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. Documentation is, therefore, increasingly important in media art, as it provides a continuing source of knowledge as to how a particular work manifests over time.

Traditional models of documentation are not well adapted to such works. Recent attempts to develop new models for documenting media art offer flexible paradigms which focus on the processes of creation and exhibition, rather than on static objects [1, 2]. However, there is still an important gap around the documentation of the audience's experience of the work, and ways to integrate experiential documentation with other information [2].

In late 2007 we were awarded research residencies at the Daniel Langlois Foundation Centre for Research & Documentation to explore ways of documenting media art. The result was a case-study documentary collection for the artwork *Giver of Names* (1991–2004), by David Rokeby. Through the creation of this case-study we have developed a promising new approach which draws together 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.

David Rokeby's *Giver of Names*

David Rokeby is an artist who has written extensively about his work, particularly on his iterative production methods and the importance of audience experience. He is highly reflective and articulate about his process and intent. *Giver of Names* is an interactive piece which requires considerable participation from the audience in order to be activated. It has a long exhibition history and has evolved through many iterations. Significantly, however, Rokeby suggests that the work has reached its "sweet spot," [3] where few changes are envisaged in the future. This creates an excellent opportunity to review the work's history and create a record of its existence at this moment in time. The documentary collection for *Giver of Names*, which is the basis of this article, can be accessed on the website of the Daniel Langlois Foundation [3].

Between Real and Ideal

At the beginning of this collaborative project we reflected on the relationship between our two different research perspectives. Jones' approach, based on the tools of the Variable Media Network, focused on the artist's intentions as a means to illuminate conservation considerations. The key principle of this approach is to record information about the essence (or "kernel") of an artwork, independent of the media in which it manifests. It privileges the relationship between the conceptual aspects of the work (the ideas behind the artist's intentions) and technical aspects of the work (encompassing the decisions the artist has made in regards to the physical components, software, installation and environmental factors of the work). Muller's approach focused on the experiential aspects of the work, based on how the artwork "occurs" for audience members in the real world. Her research emphasizes the argument that media artworks (particularly interactive installations) exist primarily in human experience, rather than as discrete objects. The strategy of this approach is to create a lively portrait of the art work as it actually occurs through in-depth interviews with real audience members. The background, rationales and methodologies of these two approaches are detailed in [4] and [5].

As we began to gather documentation we were faced with an apparent conflict between our perspectives; whilst Jones' approach sought to identify an "ideal" form for the work through an exploration of a work's medium-independent qualities, Muller's approach emphasized the "real" experiences, which were often very far from the expected or desired description given by the artist. The gap between artist's intentions and audience experience is not a new realization in terms of art theory. The poststructuralist critical revolution of the last century has established the authorial position as only one privileged, but not definitive, perspective on the interpretation of an artwork. However, this gap remains a problem for documentary and preservation strategies in ephemeral art where, in the absence of a clear, discrete and material art-object, the artist's intentions have, in many cases, provided the touchstone for how a work will be preserved, restaged and described in the future.

We recognized a productive tension forming between our approaches and between the "real" and "ideal" versions of the artwork that motivated them. 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 picture. The Variable Media Network approach is designed to capture detailed information about the artist's intentions and the degree of variability of technical components of the work. This notion of the ideal version of the work usually grows from the artist's experience through numerous installations or 'versions' of a work. By looking for consistencies and difference in these versions, this approach gives conservators a clearer picture of what elements of a work are important, in the eyes of the artist, to preserve over time. It therefore constructs an idea of the work that may not have ever existed in an exhibition context. The experiential approach, on the other hand, captures real world experiences that provide a rich and detailed picture of the work as it existed, but does not provide essential technical information about how and why it was achieved.

While our approaches were never mutually exclusive of each other, explicitly recognizing the tension between real and **[End Page 418]** ideal provided us with a strategy to solve problems within our individual approaches and develop what we believe to be a useful holistic approach to the documentation of media artworks. In our combined approach we have sought to draw together both ideal and real accounts of the work—without erasing or smoothing over their differences. Rather, in this collection we have tried to preserve and exploit the tension in several ways: first in our methods of creating documentation, including our interview with the artist and our interviews with the audience; second in our approach to structuring and ordering data within the repository; and third in the creation of "access points," which link together information describing aspects of the ideal version of the work with records of its actual manifestation.

Our Process

1. Artist Interview

We developed a combined method for conducting an artist interview that drew together our two research perspectives. The medium-independent questions of the Variable Media Questionnaire framed the conceptual and technical aspects of the work. These were placed, by Muller, within an experiential context using tools from human-centred interaction, including "Personas and Scenarios," a technique which involves telling the "story" of an artwork from the perspective of an imaginary audience member [6]. This created a valuable dialogue between "real and ideal." Framing the discussion in experiential terms enhanced our understanding of why, in certain circumstances, Rokeby had made particular decisions, and this frame allowed us to create links between different versions of the work and to account for changes that have occurred over time. Additionally, by interviewing Rokeby during an installation period, we were able to probe his choices about the technical aspects of the work at the precise moment when variable decisions

were being made. This timing further elicited rich and specific details about his experiential goals and assumptions. Our hybrid method allowed us to generate an interview that has clear links to both the audience interviews and the conceptual and technical background information that we have gathered. As such, the artist's interview can act as a lynchpin for the collection without claiming to provide a definitive account of the work.

2. Audience Interviews

Using techniques adapted from human-centered design, ethnography and oral history, Muller interviewed a total of 28 people, including general visitors, invited participants and museum guards [3, 5]. Each of the interviews presents a unique experience of the work, and together they represent a cross section of ages, occupations and self-identified levels of experience with art. The interviews were based on two methods: semi-structured interview and video-cued recall (in which the participant simultaneously describes their experience of an artwork, whilst watching a video of their encounter). Both methods aim to record rich descriptions of the way in which each experience unfolds through time, as well as capturing information about the participants' motivation, thoughts and opinions about the work [5].

3. Data Structure

Traditional arrangement in archival studies follows a principle of “respect des fonds” meaning that the original order in which the records were kept is a key element in maintaining the integrity of a collection of documents. In the case of a created collection, however, rules of arrangement of documentation and standardization are less prescribed. Jones has outlined a number of current data structures proposed in the field of media art preservation and documentation [4]. The aim of our structure is not to create a hierarchy of information, but to allow for a drilling down of information from the general to the specific and back. This reflects traditional archival arrangement and is in keeping with standards for media art documentation, such as Richard Rinehart's Media Art Notation System [7] and V2's Capturing Unstable Media Conceptual Model [1].

4. Access Points

While it is not our intent to provide an analysis of the material in the collection, we hope the arrangement and description of the elements articulates the relationship between audience experience, artists' intentions, the conceptual and technical/installed aspects of the work and other contextual factors. We have provided multiple access points into the information through a series of access points that will help users of the collection make connections between different forms of material within the documentation.

Conclusion and Significance

Maintaining the tension between the ideal notion and the real manifestation of *Giver of Names* in the case study produced a productive way to reconcile the way in which ephemeral artworks exist in the world and the way they are represented in archival contexts. The result is a collection of documentation that provides multiple perspectives of the work, as well as multiple layers of information, held together with—but not superseded by—the idea of a unified ideal. Rather than creating an authoritative collection of documentation, which establishes a fixed identity for the work, our approach seeks to capture its mutability and contingency through the dialogue between its experiential, conceptual and technical aspects. This strategy, we believe, enables us to create a more, not less, “complete” account of the work. By allowing future researchers to understand more deeply the occurrence of the work in a particular place and time, we believe that our 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.

References and Notes

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