



**MARKUS SCHWANDER
PACKAGE DEAL – ON THE MATERIALITY OF NET-BASED ART**

THE MARKETABILITY OF WORKS OF ART DEPENDS TO A LARGE EXTENT ON THEIR «MATERIALITY» AND PERMANENCE. MARKUS SCHWANDER COMPARES THE 60S' CONCEPTUAL ART IDEA OF IMPERMANENCE WITH THE EXPERIENCES OF TODAY'S ARTISTS, WHOSE NET-BASED WORKS ARE OFTEN LIMITED AS TO VISIBILITY AND FUNCTION DUE TO TECHNICAL DEVELOPMENTS ON THE INTERNET. SCHWANDER MAKES A CASE FOR THE COORDINATED CONSERVATION OF THESE WORKS BY THE ARTISTS AND INSTITUTIONS RESPONSIBLE FOR THEIR COLLECTION AND TRANSMISSION. HE GIVES CONCRETE EXAMPLES OF HOW THE THINKING ABOUT MATERIALISATION FOR THE SAKE OF SELLING ARTWORKS CAN CHANGE WORKS FOR THE BETTER.

The research project **Owning Online Art** studied the relationship between net-based art and the art market, addressing and answering some basic economic, technical and historical questions. It also examined several net-based artworks. To evaluate the conditions of sale and possession we had to check their «materiality.» What did the collector acquire when he bought this kind of work? Will the url be assigned to a new owner? Should the work's programming on the artist's server be deleted and transferred to that of the new owner? How can the programming volume be determined? What should be kept when the work is restored?

All the digital artworks examined for the project are based on a program. This program is a text that describes computing processes that involve operating systems and their applications - i.e. other programs. Such a program can be considered an active structure and they are associated with different components. Their combined interaction makes the work visible and enables the desired operations to be performed. Since these relationships involve mutual interdependence, any changes in the relevant software - be it a browser or a player - can disrupt what is seen on the screen. Repairing these disruptions often means altering what can be considered as the work's structure. Accordingly, there is a major difference between the materiality of digital and non-digital art. Tabea Lurk discusses further issues from the point of view of conservation in her article.¹

1. MATERIALITY

The idea of «materiality» is part of a discussion about the immateriality of works of art that began in the early 1960s. This idea is fundamental to the marketing of net-based art inasmuch as net-based art originally oriented itself essentially on the conceptual art tradition and the discussion involved the issue of the art market from the very beginning. In the words of Lucy Lippard writing in 1972: «The people who buy a work of art they cannot hang up or have in their garden are less interested in possession. They are patrons rather than collectors.»² She also pointed out that magazines and newspapers were ideal supports for conceptual art, because this form of «materialisation» corresponded to the spirit of the works: «Kosuth, Piper and Ian Wilson published works as <ads> in newspapers at the time.»³ In 1969, Joseph Kosuth himself expressed the hope that immaterial art would find a potentially wider audience thanks to the mass media than traditional art forms like painting and sculpture.⁴

In **How to do Things with Art** (2007), Dorothea von Hantelmann criticized the idea that works of visual art could be immaterial at all: «An art form that offers no possibility of transmission will either be made transmissible or ultimately disap-

¹ Tabea Lurk, «On the aging of net-based artworks» in the present publication, p. 51-65.

² Lucy Lippard, **Six Years: The Dematerialisation of the Art Object 1966 to 1972**, University of California Press, Berkley and Los Angeles, 1973, p. xiv.

³ Ibid. p. xviii.

⁴ Ibid. p. 73.

pear from the visual arts canon.»⁵ She adds: «There is no way for art to exist outside of the context of material objects, things or products. Materiality is the precondition for a work of art, since each one materialises something. This implies, however, that it exists structurally as a thing and product.»⁶ According to Adorno, the thingness of an artwork and the basic tendency to negate its own thingness is precisely the dialectic that founds the visual arts.⁷ While conceptual artists like Jan Dibbets consider immateriality to be the resolution of this dialectical conflict and believe that artworks are all the more market-proof as they are «artless»⁸, it seems more interesting today to look at what contents come into being through materialisation and how they reflect the issue of collectibility. The artists approached in our study generally expressed a pragmatic attitude to the marketability of their work. Martine Neddham (a.k.a. Mouchette) wrote: «Any work of art, no matter how immaterial it is, becomes a marketable commodity when it enters the art market. I wish my art would enter the art market one day so as to benefit from that kind of circulation. I'm glad it was never made as a marketable commodity and I don't think entering the art market would alter its nature.»⁹ Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries took a more assertive stance: «We tell institutional collectors that they can present our work like a painting or a sculpture. We tell potential private collectors that they can hang our work over their sofas at home and in their office.»¹⁰ The materiality of digital art productions comprises the data that permit it to be manifested. It is reasonable, and even essential, to consider this data volume as material when it changes hands by means of a sale. Logically, this also permits the recording of the events involved in the interaction to be considered as data, and so as material (as we will see in the case of the **Sphinx**).

2. PACKAGE DEAL

The thoughts mentioned at the beginning about the special materiality of net-based artworks make it necessary to define what exactly belongs to an artwork and how its individual components are to be dealt with. In our study we called these definitions «packages.» We originally wanted to use the expression «Package Deal» as the name for an art gallery that would make sure that the sale included all the components of a digital artwork.¹¹ Although the gallery idea fell by the wayside, it seems advisable to retain the idea of «package.» A package is a negotiable unit and the «package deal» includes all the measures necessary to make a work usable by its owner. Thus it seemed worthwhile to talk with the artists about the materiality of their work and evaluate their viability on the art market. The question of the materiality of a work also

⁵ Dorothea von Hantelmann, **How to do Things with Art**, Zürich/Berlin: Diaphanes, 2007, p. 14.

⁶ Ibid. p. 160.

⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, **Aesthetische Theorie**, Gesammelte Schriften, vol. 7, Rolf Tiedemann (ed.), Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1970, p. 262.

⁸ Cf. Lucy Lippard (op. cit.), p. xiv: Jan Dibbets: «To sell my work? To sell isn't part of the art. Maybe there will be people idiotic enough to buy what they could make themselves...»

⁹ Martine Neddham in «Artist's Statements» in the present publication, p. 150.

¹⁰ Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries in «Artist's Statements» in the present publication, p. 163.

¹¹ In his article «Economies of Art» in the present publication, Simon Grand discusses the conditions for creating a gallery for net-based art.

involves determining the size of its content. Since this cannot be established in terms of spatial extension, we can resort to comparisons with time-based media. We can, for example, quantify the length of time needed to view a film or the number of clicks needed to explore an interactive work. Since there are no guidelines for prices in this area, the artists and gallerists have to elaborate their own criteria, while also taking the expectations and ideas of their clients into account. Monica Studer and Christoph van den Berg, who are represented by the Nicolas Krupp Gallery in Basle, state in this connection that the clients «appreciate a certain measure of stability through the establishment of clear rules,» since these gave them «standards and a basis for comparison.»¹²

In the course of our study the Ricola Collection acquired a net-based work by Esther Hunziker titled **un_focus**.¹³ This work consists of ten animated films, some of which are interactive. It was sold as an original and is considered a sizeable work, especially since the individual elements are not variations on an idea, but independent audiovisual creations. **un_focus** is the artist's first net-based artwork and was created in 2000. To make sure that her work would be viewable in the near future, Hunziker had to reprogram it in flash format. Flash has established itself as a web standard and often comes pre-installed on new computers. Similar applications have lost ground because they were not used as often. Art projects that call on data from the Internet are dependent on search engines and so demand a certain amount of technical maintenance. Thus the description of their materiality must also take this interactive factor into consideration.

Although an artist like Hamish Fulton - whose work since the 1960s consists mostly of walking tours - markets documentary photos as full-fledged representations of his activity, this kind of strategy is no longer satisfactory for interactive art.¹⁴ The impermanence of the intervention was part of Fulton's intention, but the artists who participated in our study considered the technically-conditioned disappearance of their work as a loss. The preservation of their work is a basic concern for them, not least as supporting evidence for their identity as artists. In this connection Shu Lea Cheang wrote: «Yes, I can only restate again, how important it is to preserve online work. In my case, my major commission **BRANDON**¹⁵ at the Guggenheim Museum was once lost (removed from the sponsored server) and kept offline for a few years. It was finally resurrected by the museum with a digital art preservation grant... until now, I don't see the site getting fully recovered in its full length presentation as it was in 1998-1999.»¹⁶ As we will see below, thinking about the components that make up the «package» of a work can also lead to a new way of looking at the works via a broader concept of materiality.

¹² Monica Studer and Christoph van den Berg in «Artist's Statements» in the present publication, p. 159.

¹³ <http://www.ref17.net/unfocus> [03.2010]. Cf. Roman Kurzmeyer's article in the present publication, p. 115-120.

¹⁴ Patrick Werkner, *Land Art USA*, Munich: Prestel, 1992, p. 134. Dr. Peter Schneemann deals exhaustively with issues of documentation as art in his article «Problems in Compatibility» in the present publication p. 19-28.

¹⁵ <http://brandon.guggenheim.org> [03.2010].

¹⁶ Shu Lea Cheang in «Artist's Statements» in the present publication, p. 128.

3. NEGOTIATING RELATIONSHIPS: SPHINX SPECIALS

Visitors of the **Sphinx**¹⁷ website can type in questions and receive an answer after a certain interval of time. In her text on strategies for potentially saleable products, «Sphinx Specials,» Birgit Kempker treats the relationship between artist and buyer in terms of a marketable object. The very first contact with the Sphinx already raises the question of the type of personal relationship to be contracted. The home page displays a regularly pierced light-blue surface through which an unidentifiable person is looking. A ticker tape at the top of the page asks «sphinx or machine?» There are two options: «ask» or «read.» «Ask» leads to a blank input field and «read» opens a list of all the questions asked so far and their answers. By choosing, the users also decide on the role they wish to play: acting either as passive observers or active participants in a communicative transaction.

After the first choice comes another game with closeness and distance. The question can be answered either by the sphinx or by the machine. Because of its stated identity, its digitally-generated voice and the sextain structure of its sentences, the machine creates an impression of impersonality and distance. The **Sphinx**, on the other hand, seems to be animated by a living person. The interplay between the two «persons» intensifies the relationship between the user and the Sphinx/machine. Participation is free in every sense of the word. The option «Eigene Fragen» («My Questions») and the resulting answers, however, can be purchased for CHF 350 in the form of a CD that includes the record of the preceding questions and answers. These are combined by the **Sphinx** in such a way that a thread is generated in which it becomes clear in which mental context the answer to the question was elaborated. Thus what the buyer acquires is not just a document of his or her personal exchange with the **Sphinx** but also a reconstitution of the **Sphinx's** treatment of the topic in question.¹⁸

The relationship between the **Sphinx** and collector can be deepened even further. Birgit Kempker writes in «Sphinx Specials»: «The book object composed in connection with a special question by the collector or art buyer (<book objects> because they are pasted, sewn and cut-out, and so three-dimensional objects) associates images and texts with the question (pasting, cutting, copying, photographing, microphoning). These specials are added as a copy (book) to the [Sphinx] archive and so probably appear again in the next links as selected material.»¹⁹ In this way, the art buyer becomes directly involved in the art process, just as the initial questions led to all the subsequent interactions. The **Sphinx** also assigns tasks to the collector: «She has to copy one of the works she purchased and transport it, etc. This makes each special very different; allowing for different co-operations, different actions and effects on the **Sphinx** in the net.»²⁰

¹⁷ <http://www.xcult.org/sphinx/index.html> [03.2010].

¹⁸ Examples of these threads can be seen at <http://www.xcult.org/sphinx/index.html> under «collectors2 [03.2010].

¹⁹ From Kempker's description of the DA Store (unpublished manuscript). More information: <http://www.xcult.org/kempker/mat/sphinx-buch.html> [03.2010].

²⁰ Ibid.

4. UNCHOSEN ACCESSES. 1 YEAR OF ONEWORDMOVIE



Beat Brogle, onewordmovie,
Harddisk with the data of a year's
download

At the other end of the scale, Beat Brogle's **onewordmovie**²¹ asks visitors only to type in one word. The **onewordmovie** program then searches the Internet for images involving this word and makes a flash movie out of them. Unlike Birgit Kempker's **Sphinx**, no one is looking at the user. A single word typed into the search engine, as with Google, sets the film in operation. The typing-in of search words has become an everyday action, and it does not require the user to engage in any personal communication.

The interaction becomes binding only when it comes to a sale. The object sold is a DVD containing the film made for the word in question. The choice of words will be correspondingly more discriminating. Will the word chosen generate only nice pictures or will it express the client's originality? Could, for example, the «Michael Jackson DVD» someday become a valuable collector's item? Each specific word is sold only once a year. Buyers receive a DVD with the images found for the word on the Internet and a player that generates the film. Thus the random image archives of the Internet can be used to create original, and potentially valuable, collectibles by the mere copying of data on a storage medium.

In 2007 Brogle began to download all the images that were culled by **onewordmovie** each year. This downloading does not just modify the location and accessibility of the data; Brogle realized that the content of the work also changed in the process. For each yearly download Brogle used all the words that were entered into **onewordmovie**. The words - about 100'000 - crystallized an unexpected area of interest among the users: over 90% of the words involved pornographic material. One of the things that characterizes the Internet is that each user sees only what he or she is looking for: the other information does not exist. The fact that the image selection procedure was performed impersonally, independently of the user, changes his or her way of looking at the work. This project might seem at first sight to be a trivial pursuit, but the recording of the chosen words creates an archive of unsettling collective predilections.

When a selection of images from the Internet at a certain moment in time is recorded, the question of historicity immediately comes to the fore, since the data will not be preserved on the Internet forever. Each annual download permits the creation of a work that not only acts as an offline image-bank for **onewordmovie** but also contains very complex information about the Internet.

²¹ <http://www.onewordmovie.ch>
[03.2010].

5. THE FRAMING OF THE EVENT: 1 HOUR OF TV-BOT

Marc Lee works with the news that is reported on the Internet. Random queries combine the news into serendipitous new broadcasts. As soon as you choose the **TV-Bot**²² website, the program starts searching the Internet for news reports less than an hour old. The news constantly changes and appears in ever-newer combinations. This process is not recorded, and so the news of the moment disappears into the past as new items keep pouring in. The news-stream seems always to have existed and to flow on forever. What of this stream could be bought and sold? The artist's offer is an hour's worth of **TV-Bot** starting at a time of one's choice. Since there is no automatic recording of the news (this would fundamentally alter the nature of the work), the artist has to record the selected hour himself. However, the moment for beginning the recording will always lie in the future, and so how is the buyer to choose this moment? A birthday? A national holiday? At random? The invitation to choose a date in the future seems somewhat unusual in the case of news reports, since news events are usually dated only in retrospect, in the past tense. The definition of a materialised «work» for the sake of marketability in this case forcibly raises questions about the public's expectations. It upsets our usual ideas about current events that are worth being reported and goads the spectator into wishing for pleasant, humorous, violent or sensational events in the future. The fixing of the data flow here also raises new questions and expands the scope of the work.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Unfortunately, like many other net-based artworks, **TV-Bot** suffered from the loss in popularity of the Real Player. Most of the TV stations that provide news pictures and text have stopped using this program, which means that a reprogramming of the work was in order.²³ Again, like other net-based artworks, **TV-Bot** has to survive in a context dominated by IT companies. Constantly changing applications means constant adaptation. It also means that net-based art has a limited transmissibility, since technical conditions – browser, programs and hardware – stop supporting the work and let it lapse into invisibility. These changes occur so fast and can be so radical that digital culture may seem to be ephemeral by its very nature. Since net-based art is so strongly influenced by conceptual art, there are some voices that say that the immateriality and impermanence of net-based art is part of its basic condition. Yet if the visibility and function of an artwork is too restricted or becomes obsolete, then the work exists only as an anecdote and its impact as a work of visual art can no longer be felt. Since a good deal of net-based art works interactively, which means that the work

²² <http://www.igoi.net/index.php/Main/TV-BOT?> [03.2010].

²³ TV-Bot 2.0 exists since January 2010: <http://www.igoi.net/56ktv> [03.2010].

²⁴ Monica Studer and Christoph van den Berg in «Artist's Statements» in the present publication, p. 159.

is produced to a large degree by the actions of the users, it is much more difficult to evoke the experience of the work through a documentary image or description, as with traditional media. Monica Studer and Christoph v d Berg describe the situation in these terms: «We believe that it is important that the history and chronology of net-based artworks can be consulted in the net itself. Today, in 2009, technological developments and faster data-transfer make it possible to create different works of art than ten years ago. However, this will be evident only when the fossils of net-based art can still be viewed online... In works that do not require interaction between the public and artist, the source code should always be updated to the newest technical standard. But who has time for that kind of maintenance? The updating could be done by specially trained personnel. In our case, we prefer to invest our time and money in new work than in restoring our old work, and so we accept the fact that earlier works are no longer completely functional.»²⁴

The need to preserve net-based artworks menaced with oblivion due to new modes of access and altered compatibility points to a general problem that plagues net-based art. Where will the website of important designers be preserved? Will we be able to view the visual culture of today's Internet twenty years from now? Art collections could make an important contribution in this respect, since it has always been one of their tasks to preserve works of art and make them accessible to the public. Each picture displayed in a museum involves expenditures in terms of space, maintenance and insurance. Although the net-based art described here can be preserved only by investing in technical upkeep, net-based art accessible on a server and kept online can very easily be made permanently visible. While the disappearance of the object seemed a radical artistic solution from the 1960s onward, we have to do some rethinking at a time and in a medium in which everything is vanishing very rapidly anyway. The preservation of net-based artworks can be seen as an act of resistance against the powerful IT companies, as well as an example of the conservation of new technology to protect cultural heritage.

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This text is part of the publication **Owning Online Art - On the Sale and Ownership of Web-based Works of Art**, edited by Markus Schwander and Reinhard Storz. UAS Northwestern Switzerland, Academy of Art and Design. Basel, 2010