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SHARED RESPONSIBILITY FOR A COMMON HERITAGE?
NET-BASED ART IN PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

VIDEO ART HAD TO BRANCH OUT INTO INSTALLATION BEFORE IT COULD ESTABLISH ITSELF ON THE ART MARKET. TODAY'S NET-BASED ARTISTS ALSO CREATE SPACE-SPECIFIC PRESENTATIONS TO DISPLAY THEIR WORKS IN GALLERIES AND MUSEUMS. THIS IS NOT ENOUGH, HOWEVER, TO COUNTER THE SCEPTICISM ABOUT ACQUIRING WORKS WHOSE LONG-TERM PRESERVATION DEPENDS ON THE DYNAMICS OF THE INTERNET. IN RECOMMENDING THE CREATION OF A «SWISS PLATFORM FOR NEW MEDIA ART,» **OWNING ONLINE ART** CONCRETISES CONCERNS THAT WERE ALREADY VOICED TEN YEARS AGO.

«Pure webwork/website is still hard to sell... installation could possibly sell better.»¹ – Even if all the criteria for acquisition are met – contemporary relevance, aesthetic quality, place within an artist's oeuvre – net-based art is still minimally represented in public collections. This, in spite of many initiatives and models for its mediation. Building blocks for a «centre of attention on the net» already exist, including **projets internet** at the Centre pour l'image contemporaine in Geneva or the Basel cultural server **Xcult**.² American museums are playing an exemplary role in terms of taking institutional responsibility for the technical updating of the works, thus freeing the artists from unpaid maintenance. The Whitney Museum of Modern Art, the Dia Centre New York and MoMa have committed themselves to the documentation and preservation of web projects.³ The **Variable Media Network** (VMN) brings curators and restorers from different institutions together to work on the permanent integration, restoration and conservation of works in media characterized by mutability.⁴ The VMN has artists fill out a detailed questionnaire in which they are asked about their intentions and for information that can then be used for purposes of documentation and conservation. «Museums have interviewed artists about their work before, but the VMI is radically explicit about the mutability of much contemporary art and attempts to provide a standard framework for both artists and museum personnel to understand what really matters to the artist for any particular work of art.»⁵ The **National Information Standards Organization** has issued recommendations for the creation of high-quality digital collections,⁶ while specialists on both sides of the Atlantic are working on the preservation of and access to digital archives.⁷ Reinhard Storz, co-editor of the present publication, provides an annotated list of museums, private collections and galleries that have distinguished themselves in the mediation of net-based art.⁸

As Peter Schneemann wrote in his article,⁹ if works accessible online are to find their place in the world of the institutional promotion and mediation of visual art, collections will need to redirect the concept of «authorship» away from unique and datable work and toward processes and programming languages. They will also have to abandon the preconceptions against the so-called ephemeral and elaborate suitable procedures for inventory and documentation. The long-established practice of coll-

¹ See Shu Lea Cheang in «Artist's Statements» in the present publication, p. 128.

² See <http://xcult.ch>, <http://www.centreimage.ch/projetsInternet.php> [02.2010]. Barbara Basting, «Bundeskulturserver ja bitte. Knotenpunkt für die Kultur: Wie Internetkunst gefördert werden soll,» in: *Wochenzeitung*, 28.9.2000, p. 19, at: <http://woz.ch/archiv/old/00/39/7629.html> [02.2010].

³ See <http://artport.whitney.org>, <http://www.diacenter.org/webproj/index.html>, <http://moma.org/onlineprojects/index.html>. Barbara Basting outlines the collection strategies of various American institutions in «Netzkunst und die Museen – Aspekte der Institutionalisierung einer neuen Kunstform,» Ms dated 11. 3. 2002, p. 2ff. At: <http://www.xcult.org/texte/basting/02/basting.pdf> [02.2010].

⁴ <http://www.variablemedia.net>: the VMN's latest publication is available for download there. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum / Daniel Langlois Foundation for Art, Science, and Technology (Ed.), **Permanence through Change; The Variable Media Approach**, New York / Montreal, 2003.

⁵ Steve Dietz, «Collecting New-Media Art: Just Like Anything Else, Only Different,» in: Bruce Altshuler (ed.), **Collecting the New**, Princeton University Press, Princeton / Oxford 2005, p. 85 – 101; here p. 98.

⁶ See «A framework of Guidance for Building Good Digital Collections» at: <http://www.niso.org/publications/rp/framework3.pdf> [03.2010].

⁷ Research projects and networks for the protection of digital data address not just net-based art and literature but also the long-term preservation of important cultural data (see e.g. <http://www.langzeitarchivierung.de>). The question as to museums as «senders» raised at the **Museums and the Internet** conference in Hanover (2008) is also applicable to the distribution of net-based works by museums (see <http://www.mai-tagung.de/maitagung+2008/abstracts.htm>). Exhibition projects and conferences of the Karlsruhe Center for Art and Media Technologies (ZKM) approach the Internet as a place for the distribution and dissemination of digital works (see e.g. «From Archive

ecting conceptual art should dissipate scepticism toward the immaterial: «There are plenty of ephemeral, instruction-based works in museum collections, from Jana Sterbak's **Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic** (1987) to LeWitt's **Four Geometric Figures in a Room**. There are plenty of «anti-institutional» artists collected by museums, from Hans Haacke to Andrea Fraser. There are certainly examples of unbounded and open works, from Ray Johnson's correspondence art to Yoko Ono's **Scream** score. Why is there so little new-media art in museum collections?»¹⁰ Steve Dietz, curator of new media at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (1996–2003), speaks of a «collector's crisis» relative to electronic and net-based works. The considerable production of works of digital and interactive art since the 1990s is far from being represented in museum collections. Dietz attributes this only partly to the artistic tendency to turn away from the cultural control of museums and toward a broader audience. More to the point, according to him, is the difference between the open culture of the Internet and the traditional role of museums as «gatekeepers» for the admission of new works into the art-historical and critical canon: «For museums to acquire open-licensed art would require them to transform from collecting institutions to circulating institutions.»¹¹ American collection policy is attempting to deal with the tension between net-based art and the unique, immutable work by opening up a dialogue with the producing artists. What came out of this is that the artists are more interested in the distribution of their works than in earning the distinction of uniqueness: «Artists are more interested in making them accessible than rare.»¹² An e-mail poll conducted by OOA confirmed this provisional conclusion. For artists, the claim for ownership was secondary to a concept of authorship – often hard to make out from the outside – that considered the work and its distribution as interactive: «This interactive communication with the public was the form of my art but at the same time it was the means of distribution» (Martine Neddam, alias Aka Mouchette). Birgit Kempker replied to the question of her place of presentation by pointing out the uncontrollability of data published online: «The net builds its own information tunnel through which I can contact and am sometimes contacted. I notice it when I am recontacted through the net.» The repeated passive linking of her website also guarantees Jodi a wide base of reception. As for Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries, they stated in so many words that they owed her international reputation as an artist to the Internet: «Many blogs and forums link to our work, and we're pleased and fascinated with how the Web has made us who we are.» The global communication system of the Internet relativizes the role of museums as venues for display and mediation.¹³ «Net-artist who have become well-known no longer need to have their works shown in museums; on the contrary, the

to living Database» of April 24, 2009 or «access_unlimited» of Oct. 9, 2009, symposia in conjunction with the Mediaartbase, <http://www.mediaartbase.de>), [03.2010].

⁸ See Reinhard Storz, «Internet-Based Art in Museums, Private Art Collections and Galleries» in the present publication, p. 97–113.

⁹ See Peter Schneemann, «Problems of Compatibility: On the Relationship Between Net-based Art and Market in a Media History Perspective» in the present publication, p. 19–28.

¹⁰ Dietz (op. cit.), p. 93.

¹¹ Ibid. p. 94.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ See «Artist's Statements» in the present publication, p. 125–164.

museum need these artists if they want to show what is happening in today's art world.» In 2000, the net-artist Nathalie Bookchin said: «I see a power shift in that curators and critics should be concerned with net-art, and not the other way around.»¹⁴

The Internet,¹⁵ called an «imaginary museum» from early on and seriously considered as a platform for artistic activity with rules of its own, does not seem to be readily compatible with the concrete business of museums. For artists today, the admission of net-based works into collections often remains an unfulfilled wish (while the first generation of net-artists considered museums as being opponents to their own anarchistic stance). Curators trained to work with traditional media cite computer problems and their own uncertainty as to criteria of quality as obstacles to acquisition. There are further problems involving presentation in actual space. Serious critics complain sometimes about the many monitors to be found at exhibitions of new media art, the lack of sensuous qualities, and being overwhelmed when interactive works require too much time and effort to be viewed. Beatrix Ruf, Director of the Zurich Kunsthalle, is sceptical about the attractiveness of the Internet as a medium for art: «Of course there are people who spend all their time on the net. But for me, going on the net requires above all a different qualitative effort... It is a temporal and experiential space. Until now, I have never been ready to invest three hours of my time for that.»¹⁶ The adherence to net-based art among contemporary art professionals swings between the extremes of a perceived didactic control of the spectator and of a fascination with the game of choosing one's own way through a work. «I am one of those people who prefer seeing a projection than 'tooling around' on a computer. Often I find it lacks sensuousness. Unless the net-art is beamed and enlarged, which is nice.»¹⁷ Christoph Vögele, Director of the Solothurn Kunstmuseum, appreciates presentations that have a sensuous aspect **inside** the museum, not those that reconstruct the aesthetics of an office: «We acquired Monica Studer and Christoph van den Berg's **Wiese** («Lawn», 2005) for our collection. Because the monitor looks good, you don't get the feeling of having a box into which you have to go, but see a picture made of light that reaches out to you.»¹⁸ Many artists work on spatial presentations of their net-based art that make computer screens unnecessary for Internet connections. In this respect, net-based art has learned the lesson of video art: the option of spatial extension with beamer projections made a new experience of video possible, and so it established itself in public and private collections.¹⁹ Stephan Kunz, a curator at the Aargau Kunsthaus, believes that institutions have a duty to engage in the mediation of net-based art. Unlike personal computers, which are usually used for work and research purposes, the museum offers space for more

¹⁴ Nathalie Bookchin, quoted by Barbara Basting in: «Netzkunst und die Museen – Aspekte der Institutionalisierung einer neuen Kunstform» Ms. dated 3.11.2002, p. 4. at: <http://www.xcult.org/texte/basting/02/basting.pdf> [02.2010].

¹⁵ See Tilman Baumgärtel, «Das Internet als imaginäres Museum» Oct. 1998, at: <http://duplox.wzb.eu/texte/tb> [02.2010].

¹⁶ Beatrix Ruf, Director of the Zurich Kunsthalle, in a conversation on July 23, 2008.

¹⁷ Christoph Vögele, Director of the Solothurn Kunstmuseum, in a conversation on June 17, 2009.

¹⁸ Ibid. Vögele and other curators' support for the presence of online-art in their galleries also involves the consideration of attracting the public to their respective institutions.

¹⁹ Diego and Gilli Stampa in conversation on Aug. 5, 2008.

concentrated viewing. Exhibitions are a good means to weigh a long-term commitment to a work: «In exhibitions you can show interesting things, as well as try things out, in a positive sense. Then, in the course of the exhibition, maybe I realize that it interests me more than just for two or three months. I could even imagine having it in our collection.»²⁰ The former curator of the Walker Art Center also had a two-step acquisition strategy. The acquisition for the permanent collection was preceded by a test phase in the so-called **Study Collection**: «This allowed me to collect work that I felt strongly about but that the institution was not necessarily fully equipped to deal with at that point. More important, however, the Study Collection allowed me to preserve work that provided a context for the artwork I was collecting, such as the **Art Dirt** webcasts, which included interviews with many of the artists in the digital art collection.»²¹ It is the mission of up-to-date museums to take both art works and their context under their protective wings: «Museums are moving toward such integration of their collections, archives, and libraries, at least intra-institutionally. It remains a goal to expand accessibility inter-institutionally.»²²

A SWISS PLATFORM FOR NEW MEDIA ART

Felix Stalder first formulated the idea of a «Swiss Platform for New Media Art» in the context of the **OOA** project, but also against the background of the question whether institutional «collecting» necessarily had to be communicated by means of exhibitions, or whether institutions could not also highlight their collections in a virtual space.²³ The public visibility of the individual works, their centralized upkeep entrusted to several public and private collections, as well as the net-specific model of a community based on common interests and efforts probably still goes against the grain of ongoing collection practices. Museums also see their collecting activity as a way to clarify their profile by having their own special areas of interest. At the same time, the idea of a central «pool» holds the promise of being able to deal together with the unpredictable and unknown factors of conservation and restoration.

«Internet-based art has become an established genre of contemporary art and should therefore be admitted into collections devoted to this area. However, net art often overwhelms individual art institutions and collectors because the technical effort for installation and upkeep is considered to be too great. Moreover, there is the fact that the potential collecting institutions do not dispose of enough expertise to determine which works are suitable for a collection and how to deal with the specific curatorial challenge of the individual works.»²⁴

²⁰ The first presentation works of net-based art in Aarau occurred on the occasion of the Annual exhibition for the local-based artists. The catalogue cited only the urls, nothing was shown in the galleries themselves.

²¹ Dietz (op. cit.), p. 96.

²² Ibid.

²³ Felix Stalder, **Schweizer Plattform für Medienkunst**. Unpublished project outline in the context of **Owning Online Art**, Jan. 2008.

²⁴ Ibid. (More quotes follow).

The aim of a «Swiss Platform for New Media Art» would be to constitute, in the medium- and long-term, a collection of net-based works and guarantee their accessibility through a common portal.

«Internet-based projects are characterized by the fact that they can be viewed simultaneously at any number of different places. This creates the possibility of bringing them together on a shared infrastructure and so make them accessible to collectors and the public, whether online or under traditional exhibition conditions. The technical work can be coordinated better in this way and the individual institutions do not have to acquire the necessary know-how, which will be provided by the operators of the «Swiss Platform for New Media Art.»

This platform is organised on a membership basis, with members contributing to the service costs by paying an annual fee (to be determined). The operator of the platform have no budget for new acquisitions themselves, but can submit suggestions based on their knowledge of current production. They are the contact persons for curatorial, technological and conservational questions.²⁵ As intermediaries between the artists and collections, they can draft sales contracts, develop standards for long-term documentation and make estimates for the installation and maintenance of individual works. The owners of the centrally serviced and online viewable works are the individual members, who can develop space-specific installations as needed in conjunction with the platform and the artists. The public benefits by having access to quality work with commentaries and links by means of a single, cooperatively serviced portal.

«The network can be joined by anyone interested in the collection of net art. This includes public and private institutions with a mandate to collect contemporary art, private collectors of contemporary art, private institutions with an interest in making net art accessible in the long term (art schools, art foundations) and individual sponsors.»

Membership is an acknowledgement of the commitment to an artistic production that lies outside of museums, and not just because of its «anti-institutional» roots. For acquisition committees, the annual fees are a regular reminder of net-based art, and the platform provides its members with a showcase of their collecting activity that is accessible on an international scale. Collections that acquire works invest not only in materialisation but also focus on strategies for mediation and distribution. The introduction of a «Swiss Platform for New Media Art» balances out the usual self-profiling and distanced postures of institutional collections with a model of cooperation and mutual communication; in so doing it comes close, structurally speaking, to the successfully estab-

²⁵ Among other things, it was the limitation to the role of service that hampered the realization by the business partners of the *Owning Online Art* project. A high degree of identification with artistic issues and their dissemination was a major factor for Reinhard Storz and Annette Schindler in their original initiative to create a gallery of net-based art and in the present model of a Digital Art Collection with integrated Store. This identification plays only a secondary role for the operators of the platform outlined here.

²⁶ Stephan Kunz in a talk with the author and Markus Schwander on June 13, 2008.

²⁷ Joseph Beuys quoted by Jacqueline Burckhardt, President of the Swiss Society of Graphic Arts (Schweizerische Graphischen Gesellschaft) in the foreword to the exhibition catalogue *Im Auftrag. Druckgraphik 1918 bis 1998*, Graphic Arts Collection of the ETH Zurich, 1998–99, p.1.

²⁸ See Erik Dettwiler in «Artist's Statements» in the present publication, p.130.

lished platforms **Rhizome** and **The Thing** (which also attracted the attention of institutional collections as essential «nodes» for net-based art). Through the collective ownership of data and programs, the association would also be involved in a broader discussion about the rights of authors and copyrights for images. It would have to be taken for granted that the works accessible online would initially be treated as «special cases» (technically) and be integrated into critical discussions only on the occasion of exhibitions and publications.

Stephan Kunz made this clear in his talks with us: the idea of a «Swiss Platform for New Media Art» is not entirely new. «Maybe net-based art should be treated like graphic art, along the lines of the Swiss Society for Graphic Arts, which publishes a special newsletter for 125 subscribers. The work is done for all Swiss museums, and so it would also be in the «pool.» The art is then available to all subscribers who make it available in turn.»²⁶ While the reproducibility of graphic art editions keeps their price relatively low on the market, it can lead to modes of cooperative promotion and distribution. «I am interested in the distribution of physical supports in the form of editions because I am interested in the dissemination of ideas.»²⁷ Modes of propagation should matter to us, especially in the case of a medium in which the work is considered as a mutable process, an individual interaction or a «communicative document».²⁸

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