Saved by Copying: Web Collecting And the Preservation of Digital Artworks

DOMENICO QUARANTA

Notes on Collecting

> In a way, all collecting can be seen as an ongoing attempt to cope with the fact that time goes by. (Winzen 1988, 22)

Any attempt to save something for the future starts with an act of collecting. Of course, collecting itself can't be reduced to just a means of preservation. As individuals and institutions, we collect for many different reasons: because we like or need to accumulate; because we are unable to choose what to keep and what to discard; because we want to show off our power; because we want to carve out our place in history; because we don't have anything else to do; and sometimes, because we love what we collect.

Whatever our primary reason for collecting may be, when we collect we usually select, buy, archive, index, store and prepare the items of our collection to last for a long time, and sometimes to outlive us. In order to do so, we often have to engage strategies of restoration or documentation. When a collection, an archive

or a library starts to be considered of public interest, it can be either turned into a public institution or acquired by a public institution. Of course, public institutions themselves engage in collecting as a strategy of preservation of valuable cultural items and as an attempt to build public memory. This has been happening since the beginning of history, but during the 20th century the socio-cultural status of archives and museums became so important that collecting is today largely perceived as an institutional activity, and as an effort to preserve the past (and, increasingly often, the present). This "institutional takeover" however must not allow us to forget that collecting is primarily an individual activity, done in different ways, for different reasons and with different levels of consciousness. Mathias Winzen writes:

> Everybody collects. Something. Anything. Again and again. Sometimes consciously and with a long term strategy, other times without thinking much. Take trash, for instance. Before the trash is carried outside, it is collected and perhaps even sorted. […] Then there are shoes. Most people I know own more pairs of show than they regularly wear or at least have use for. Those appear to be collections with no conscious intention behind them. They just have somehow accumulated. Shelves with music CDs, books or photo albums reveal a somewhat more conscious organization. Hobby collectors turn their attention to vases, stamps, minerals, old postcards, pressed flowers, porcelain, or used telephone cards. Rare or strange pieces seem to hold a special attention for them. (Winzen 1988, 22, unnoficial translation)

This obsession with rarity is something shared by any keen collector. From stamps to works of art, the act of collecting is perpetrated in a scarcity-based economy. Even when we collect ephemera and commercial items reproduced in millions of copies for personal interest, this act of collecting becomes socially relevant when it deals with scarcity. The rarer an item is, the more it is valued, sought after and desired. Scarcity is so important for collecting that, when it is not a given, it is artificially produced. This, again, happens in all fields, but it becomes particularly relevant when we consider contemporary art. In the second half of the 20th century, the burgeoning contemporary art market had to find ways to

respond to the massive adoption of new, mechanically reproducible media by artists in order to artificially produce scarcity and thus keep working as it always worked: a small market of unique or rare objects with a high cultural and economic value, produced for and sold to a tiny elite who is interested in these artifacts for different reasons that range from true love to cultural interest or social ambition. As a consequence of the restricted potential of a given medium (traditional printing techniques such as lithography allow for a small number of good quality copies from a single matrix), limited editions became a convention with readymades, photography and video – a convention that has been fairly accepted by artists and collectors for a long time, but that with the advent of the digital is increasingly perceived as odd and artificial. Julian Stallabrass writes:

> [...] artists can cheaply produce photographs, CDs or videos in large numbers, and try to achieve wide ownership of their work. Yet the great majority of them produce tiny editions, each piece being accompanied by a certificate of authentication, for very high prices. Ownership of such a piece grants status to the collector, and reciprocally the price paid grants status to the work. This is the defining characteristic of art against other areas of high culture [...] Only in high art is the core business the production of rare and unique objects that can only be owned by the very wealthy, whether they are states, businesses or individuals. (Stallabrass 2004, 101-102, unnoficial translation)

However problematic this model may be, we may claim that it is – at least – quite functional in terms of collecting and preservation. Again: the rarer (and more expensive) an artwork is, the more valuable and important it is for a (public or private) collection and the more resources will be invested to preserve it for the future in its original conditions.

Notes on Museums

This is what museums usually do in our society, in a way that becoming part of a museum collection is usually perceived as a first step into History, and as a promise that your society, from now on, will do its best to save your art for future generations. In an increasingly secularized society, museums are not only entertaining and educational centers, or a good public facade for whoever funds them – be it the state, a corporation or a private foundation; they are not just places of celebration and preservation of our culture, something in between a sanctuary and a cemetery; they are not just a repository for an incalculable cultural and economic value, that can be run as banks (Werner 2005); they are also the contemporary equivalent of a cathedral, and as such they are perceived as a meta-historical entity, that has always been there and always will be.

Of course, this is far from being true. The idea of the "public museum" was pioneered in the Enlightenment, and found one of its first embodiments in the Louvre Museum in Paris, opened in 1793, which enabled for the first time free access to the former French royal collections for people of all status. The Museum Age started in the 19th Century and probably isn't yet over, with museums being founded all over the world, and often becoming the core element of a new urban planning and the visual demonstration that a former rogue state is now entering the wonderful world of capitalist democracy. Yet, museums today – like everything else – are confronting the challenges of the Digital Age. Nobody can say if museums will survive these challenges, and how much their traditional model will be reviewed to better fit in the new world order[1].

That said, what's more important in the scope of this paper is to note that museums and "institutional collecting" have not always been the main way in which art has been saved for the future.

---

1. For an in-depth analysis of the impact of new technologies on museums, and a positive prediction on the future role of the "recoded" museum, cf. Parry 2007.

Saved by...

Throughout history, art has been saved in many different ways, sometimes willingly, often accidentally. Even when preservation is the consequence of a conscious act of collecting, only in a very few cases have artworks been collected because they were artworks. Art for art's sake is a pretty recent notion, which became commom and broadcasted only in the early 19th century. Before that time, artworks had a very specific function. Take, for example, graves. From the Egyptian pyramids to Mycenaean and Etruscan tombs, art was often buried with the dearly departed, not in order to preserve it for the future, but to go with him/her to the world beyond the grave. Funeral masks such as the famous Mask of Agamemnon were made to preserve the dead man's features; jewelry was a gift for the divinities welcoming him/her in their new life after death; vases were meant to carry essential oils and food.

If they had not been buried in graves for centuries, all these things would probably have been destroyed by people who didn't care about them, or just reused until they were rendered useless. Until the rise of Archeology, reuse has been a powerful destructive force: Romans destroyed Greek bronze statues to turn them into raw material; Christians did the same for a very long time, converting Roman temples into Christian churches, works of art into weapons, and building upon the ruins of the Roman Empire. In order to build his monumental baldachin for the Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome (1623–1634), Gian Lorenzo Bernini infamously used the bronze taken from the portico ceiling of the ancient Roman Pantheon. Other accounts say that the Pantheon's bronze was used for a cannon, but whatever actually happened, Pasquino was right: *"Quod non fecerunt barbari, fecerunt Barberini"* [What the Barbarians did not do, the Barberini did]. Yet reuse has also been, throughout history, a powerful means of preservation. The main square in my Italian hometown, Brescia, was built in the Renaissance. The facade of one of the buildings around the square has been decorated with stones coming from some Roman ruins, carrying inscriptions and reliefs. Today, that building is considered one of the best places in Italy to study Roman inscriptions. Similarly, when the Reformation fell like a storm on Northern Europe, artworks decorating religious

buildings were destroyed or defaced for iconoclastic reasons. The ones that survived are still among us thanks to the clever decision of some art lovers, who converted them from religious images into secularized symbols.

This list of artworks saved by other means than museumification could grow *ad libitum*. Pompeii and Herculaneum were saved by a natural disaster (and their recent museumification is actually doing more damage than centuries of silent life underground). The Riace Warriors survived thanks to a shipwreck, and were preserved for centuries underwater. Many frescoes survived because the artists invited to replace them when they became *démodé* decided to paint over them, instead of destroying them completely. The same often happens with paintings.

Saved by Copying

What didn't survive by accident has sometimes been saved by copying. When people didn't care too much about originals, copying proved to be an extraordinary means of preservation. Without Roman marble copies of original Greek masterpieces, we would know most of Greek art only from descriptions. Before discovering, in March 2012, that part of the painting still exists under Vasari's frescoes, Leonardo da Vinci's *The Battle of Anghiari,* one of the masterpieces of Italian Renaissance, survived only thanks to Leonardo's preparatory studies and to a big drawing by Pieter Paul Rubens (1603), based on a engraving by Lorenzo Zacchia (1553), based on the painting or possibly derived from a cartoon by Leonardo. Hundreds of paintings from the history of art are only available to us through engravings, drawings or painted copies. Needless to say, most of our culture survived thanks to the patient work of copying carried by monks in monasteries in the Middle Ages.

Copies don't usually have the same status as the original work, even if sometimes they are themselves valuable works of art. In the age of mechanical reproduction, copies of lost original artworks were only legitimized in the form of "limited editions" produced under some kind of control by the artist himself, his heirs, collaborators or gallery. Reprints – under strict control – of original

photographs produced when there wasn't any "art market" for photography are quite common practice today. In the 1960s, Marcel Duchamp made limited editions from his original readymades – some of them lost.

With the digital medium and the online distribution of content, however, this distinction is becoming, as Stallabrass suggested, increasingly artificial. Let's take, for example, digital images and videos. For some time, and still now in some cases, resolution – together with the absence of an authenticity certificate – was the main difference between a content distributed online and the same content licensed as a high quality print, or an edited DVD. Today, the broadband allows us to increasingly publish materials online at their native resolution. If I download that content, am I the owner of a copy or of an original? Of course it's a copy. But when there isn't any material difference between the copy and the original, does this distinction make any sense anymore? And should we care about it, when the issue at stake is the survival of a given artwork?

What if I care for my appropriated artwork more than the collector who bought it for some bucks, more than the gallery who sold it, and more than the artist itself? What if, in thirty years, my downloaded file will be the only remains of an artwork that nobody else cared about for decades, but that is now being considered relevant? Shall we say that this artwork has been saved by copying?

The Web Collector

> With more and more media readily available through this unruly archive, the task becomes one of packaging, producing, reframing, and distributing; a mode of production analogous not to the creation of material goods, but to the production of social contexts, using existing material. What a time you chose to be born! (Price 2002).

I first started thinking about these issues while working on an exhibition, Collect the WWWorld: The Artist as Archivist in the Internet Age[2]. The starting point

2.   Collect the WWWorld: The Artist as Archivist in the Internet Age. Brescia, Spazio Contemporanea,

was very simple: I was interested in exploring how practices such as "collection as artwork", appropriation and remix, first explored in the 1960s and the 1980s by artists as Hans-Peter Feldmann, John Baldessari, Richard Prince and many, many others, were evolving in the age of social networking, the rise of the amateur and the prosumer (cf. Keen 2007) and universal access to the means of production and dissemination. In the context of this paper, I can't but point to the exhibition catalogue[3] and to the exhibition research blog[4] – itself an ongoing collection on its own – for a better analysis of the issues at stake in the show. Here I would like to underline a couple of concepts I became aware of while working on Collect the WW-World, and that can be very useful for the discourse I'm weaving here.

The first is that, surprisingly enough, scarcity – embedded in any act of collecting, as mentioned above – is still an issue in the digital realm. How can this happen in a context where a file can be copied *ad libitum* without loss of quality, and where there's no difference between copy and original? In fact, the impossibility of artificially imposing scarcity onto a digital artifact circulated online is one of the main reasons it so difficult for the art market to fully accept and integrate online digital art. How can you effectively persuade public and private collectors to buy and preserve a website that is actually copied by anybody by simply visiting it? Or a video, a sound or software piece, a static or animated image that can be easily downloaded by anybody?[5]

Digital files may be easily copied without any loss of quality; they may be replicated, linked, tagged, reblogged by anybody on the internet. At the same time, however, they are extremely ephemeral. The specter of total disappearance is always waiting behind the door. Changes in software, firmware and network structures may turn a piece of code into a useless portion of occupied disk space.

September 24 – October 15, 2011; Basel, House for Electronic Arts Basel, March 9 – May 20, 2012; New York, 319 Scholes, October 18 – November 4, 2012.

3. Domenico Quaranta, *Collect the WWWorld: The Artist as Archivist in the Internet Age* (Brescia: LINK Editions, 2011).

4. Cf. "Collect the WWWorld: The Artist as Archivist in the Internet Age", accessed July 21, 2014. http://collectheworld.linkartcenter.eu/.

5. For an analysis of the conditions for the introduction of net-based art into the art market, cf. Schuwander and Storz 2010.

Successful online services may become obsolete in a very short time and be removed without complaint after a while, as happened to Geocities some years ago. Storing devices may get lost or burnt. The absence of an economy for their art or any other reason may bring an interesting artist to stop any activity in the field and remove his/her online archive – and the same happens all the time to any active prosumer of course. What's out there today may turn into a broken link or a 404 error page tomorrow. And what is still out there may simply become impossible to retrieve, buried under terabytes of irrelevant digital data. That's one of the reasons why artists active online are collecting, archiving, storing and reusing anything from Flickr sets to YouTube videos, from Google Street View screenshots to machinima, from midi files to mp3 collections to old cliparts to business portraits to animated gifs to blog entries. As Joanne McNeil wrote in the catalogue of Collect the WWWorld:

> Fragmentary orphan online images make up the paint box of a contemporary artist – to infuse with purpose and meaning, to recombine and root to a specific place and time. There is documentation of anything waiting to be found. An endless archive of images awaits the artist. To create from it is to remember, not just to recall. (McNeil 2011)

The second concept is that artists familiar with the internet as a distribution system and with the digital medium, usually have a clear understanding of what we discussed so far, and even if, on the one side, they try to adapt to the requirements and conventions of the art world and its peculiar economy, at the same time they challenge these very conventions, in ways that may be, from time to time, more discursive or more radical. As Seth Price wrote in *Dispersion*:

> Suppose an artist were to release the work directly into a system that depends on reproduction and distribution for its sustenance, a model that encourages contamination, borrowing, stealing, and horizontal blur. The art system usually corrals errant works, but how could it recoup thousands of freely circulating paperbacks? (Price 2002)

With his discourse about the equivalence between direct and mediated experience, Price himself is a good example of what I'm saying:

> Does one have an obligation to view the work first-hand? What happens when a more intimate, thoughtful, and enduring understanding comes from mediated discussions of an exhibition, rather than from a direct experience of the work? Is it incumbent upon the consumer to bear witness, or can one's art experience derive from magazines, the internet, books, and conversation? (Price 2002)

Other artists are even more radical, claiming that their original artwork is the one available online, and refusing to turn these originals into physical objects (DVDs, prints, etc.) or downgrading the latter to commercial byproducts of their main activity, which happens online.

Copying as a Strategy of Preservation for Digital Artworks

In these conditions, copying and sharing reveal an extraordinary potential, in terms of memory and preservation of art. What artists are doing with amateur and commercial content available online, curators and "amateur collectors" can effectively do with art. In the Digital Age, archiving and collecting are no more just an act connected with power, institutions and authority: people can be involved in it with what they choose to save on their hard disk, and to share again online; they can, if not compete, at least cooperate with institutions in the effort of preserving ephemeral artworks that have been distributed online at some point in their existence, but that are not online anymore. Your hard disk, for the future archivist or art historian, may be a resource as valuable as a museum's digital collection.

Of course, this is not enough. Institutions such as Rhizome are doing extraordinary work not just in terms of archiving artworks, but also in terms of researching and developing new strategies to archive them and make them available to

future audiences[6]. Furthermore, the preservation of the actual digital artifact may bring to a dead end if we don't find ways to preserve the topicality of a specific artwork in the contemporary environment: digital artworks may look obsolete and hard to understand only five years after they were first released. In order to do this, strategies such as documentation proved to be more effective than the preservation and accessibility of the actual work[7].

That said, institutional archives can't preserve everything. Good documentation usually emerges later, when the importance of a given artwork has been recognized. Some examples may clarify this concept. Netochka Nezvanova[8] was an influential figure online at the turn of the millennium. Besides producing software artworks and music, Netochka Nezvanova became infamous online for her complex, usually aggressive online behavior, her multiple identities, the opacity of the human(s) behind the online persona, and for her language that mixed online jargon, code and language. She first appeared online in 1995, and gradually disappeared after 2002. In her heyday, she was called "the most feared woman on the internet" (Mieszkowski 2002). The last screenshots of her main website (http://m9ndfukc.com/) were grabbed by the Internet Archive in 2006. Today, what's available online regarding Netochka Nezvanova is mainly documentation and the remains of her spamming activity in mailing list archives. Her softwares are not available online anymore. There are no traces of her in the Rhizome Artbase. Some smaller institutional archives or collections may have stored her software and audio CDs, but the information about these collections is not publicly available yet. The artist herself, at the moment, seems little interested in saving her work for the future and keeping it publicly available.

6.   For an overview of the preservation strategies employed by Rhizome, check out the ebooks on the subject published by Rhizome itself, and available online at "Rhizome | About the Rhizome Artbase", accessed May 17, 2014, http://rhizome.org/artbase/about/.

7.   An interesting project on documentation of online artworks has been launched by artist Constant Dullaart, and includes not only the documentation of the piece and its user experience, but also the documentation of the act of browsing itself – an act that would presumably become a thing of the past very soon. Cf. "net.artdatabase", accessed May 17, 2014, http://net.artdatabase.org/.

8.   "Netochka Nezvanova (author)", *Wikipedia*, the Free Encyclopedia, accessed May 17, 2014, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Netochka_Nezvanova_(author).

That said, her most famous software, nato.0+55+3d, has been used for years by other artists to work on video and multimedia installations. Fellow artists, critics and curators may have saved other pieces of software, webpages, email propaganda. Being able to collect all this material may be a first step into an on-going process of preservation of an identity and activity that is now considered seminal for the early history of net art.

The same experience can be made with a lot of software art from the late 1990s and the beginning of the new millennium. Since February 2010, the visitor of the Signwave's website would jump into this announcement:

> Dear visitor,
>
> Thank you for visiting Signwave's web site. Since 1999 we have been developing innovative software for interesting people – artists, architects, dancers, musicians, designers and anyone that might be interested in alternative uses of software. [...]
>
> We've been honoured with awards from the likes of Transmediale and Ars Electronica, and had some great opportunities to take our work to exciting places around the world. We've had support from large institutions and private individuals alike […] However, times change. Signwave no longer exists as a business, and its legacy remains as a collection of various different pieces of software scattered around the world on people's computers. As you can imagine, we are unable to support this legacy any longer, and so regretfully we must inform you that we no longer distribute or support software products[9].

Signwave was the brand name of British artist and software developer Adrian Ward, the creator, among other things, of Auto-Shop and Auto-Illustrator, two successful softwares that parodied Adobe's products, showing, according to the online encyclopedia Media Art Net, "how the tools that are employed control the appearance of any possible image that can be constructed" (Weiss 2004). Two seminal pieces of software art, these works aren't available online anymore. And yet, as Ward puts it, they remain "as a collection of various different pieces of software scattered around the world on people's computers."

9. Cf. "Signwave UK", accessed May 17, 2014, http://www.signwave.co.uk/.

Another artist that consciously decided to remove all his artistic production from the internet is US based artist, actor and musician Kevin Bewersdorf. As an artist, Bewersdorf was very active on the net between 2007 and 2009, before stopping completely and attempting to cancel all traces of his presence online. First, he emptied his personal archive (maximumsorrow.com), replacing it with a new homepage, (purekev.com): a site/performance that features a white flame against a blue background ("my light on the web"), destined to shrink a little smaller every day. Today, the site is just a blank web page. Then, he deleted his other domains (like that of the GEARt.e.k corporation, a company he was founder and CEO of) and his accounts on online platforms such as YouTube.

However dramatic, this act of disappearance is coherent with what Bewersdorf says in a number of essays and interviews and with his faith in the internet as a publishing platform able to preserve what's valuable. In 2007 he wrote:

> The object I care for most is my laptop, whom I travel the world with in a romantic fashion. My laptop is expendable and I would drop it off a cliff without hesitation (a computer is just one of many portals to the INFOspirit). The seeds of my data are already safely spread across the web, and this data is what concerns me. (Bewersdorf 2011, 101-105)

Even if he made some physical artworks, Bewersdorf didn't feel comfortable in the gallery context, and always refused to print his photos. In another essay, he explains this choice with the story of a mother forcing him to delete some photos he took of her children; and goes on saying:

> A digital photo is not an artwork in the minds of mothers. A digital photo is a dangerously instantaneous and innately dispersible document that requires little skill to manually execute. A digital photo is difficult to regulate and understand as a commodity. In its purest form, a digital photo is not even visible. That terrifies mothers. It is the threat of invincibility that is so terrifying. A non-physical thing has so much more power than a physical thing now – enough power to enrage a mother to the point of spitting all over her lipstick – and for this reason I will always take digital photos and never object photos. (Bewersdorf 2011, 101-105)

In the frame of our discourse, this also means something else. It means that the low resolution version of his photos that he put on his website, and circulated online on various blogs, are the only legitimate version of that given artwork. They are originals. They do not exist outside of the net. Collecting and sharing them is the best we can do, if we want to preserve them according to their author's intentions.

That's why, some months ago, I started an online curatorial project called *Share Your Sorrow*[10]. The project – a Tumblr blog – collects all the remains of Kevin Bewersdorf's work still available online, and puts them in circulation again. Also, I am inviting people – friends and pals of the artist, people who were visiting his website when he was still active – to post things that they may have collected on their hard disk. So far, I got three applications – three tiny images, all sent by artist Eilis McDonald, who deserves all my gratitude and respect. I never owned something more precious.

References

Altshuler, Bruce. *Collecting the New: Museums and Contemporary Art*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005.

Bewersdorf, Kevin. "Spirit Surfing". In *Collect the WWWorld: The Artist as Archivist in the Internet Age*, edited by Quaranta Domenico. Brescia, Italy: LINK Editions, 2011.

Fino-Radin, Ben. "Digital Preservation Practices and the Rhizome ArtBase". Accessed July 21, 2014. http://http://media.rhizome.org/artbase/documents/Digital-Preservation-Practices-and-the-Rhizome-ArtBase.pdf.

Keen, Andrew. *The Cult of the Amateur: How Today's Internet is Killing our Culture*. New York: Doubleday/Currency, 2007.

McNeil, Joanne. "Endless Archive". In *Collect the WWWorld: The Artist as Archivist in the Internet Age*, edited by Quaranta Domenico, 38-47. Brescia, Italy: LINK Editions, 2011.

Mieszkowski, Katharine. "The Most Feared Woman on the Internet". *Salon*. Last modified March 1, 2002. Accessed July 21, 2014. http://www.salon.com/2002/03/01/netochka/.

Parry, Ross. *Recoding the Museum: Digital Heritage and the Technologies of Change*. London: Routledge, 2007.

Price, Seth. *Dispersion*. Distributed History, 2002. http://www.distributedhistory.com/Dispersion08.pdf.

10. Cf. "Share Your Sorrow", accessed May 17, 2014, http://shareyoursorrow.linkartcenter.eu/.

Rinehart, Richard. *Preserving the Rhizome ArtBase*. Accessed February 24, 2013. http://media.rhizome.org/art-base/documents/Preserving-the-Rhizome-ArtBase.pdf.

Schwander, Marcus, and Reinhart Storz, ed. *Owning Online Art. Selling and Collecting Netbased Artworks*. Accessed February 24, 2013. www.ooart.ch/publikation/index.html.

Smith, Ward. "Research Issue: Challenges for Cataloguing New Media Art". *Rhizome*. Accessed July 21, 2014. http://media.rhizome.org/artbase/documents/Cataloging-New-Media-Art.pdf

Stallabrass, Julian. *Art Incorporated: The Story of Contemporary Art*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Weiss, Matthias. "What is Computer Art? An attempt towards an answer and examples of interpretation". *Media Art Net.* Accessed July 21, 2014. www.medienkunstnetz.de/themes/generative-tools/computer_art/16/.

Werner, Paul. *Museum, Inc.: Inside the Global Art World*. Chicago, Ill: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2005.

Winzen, Mathias. "Collecting: So Normal, So Paradoxical". In *Deep Storage: Collecting, Storing and Archiving in Art*, edited by Ingrid Schaffner, Matthias Winzen, Geoffrey Batchen, and Hubertus Gassner, 22-31. Exhb. Cat., PS1 Contemporary Art Center, New York; Henry Art Gallery, Seattle. Munich: Prestel, 1998.