

Networks of care, or how in the future museums will no longer be the sole caretakers of art

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Abstract

To depart from a museum's perspective when talking about caretaking is significant because museums are where art conservation began and where its practices have developed. However, this position may change as specialised organisations, artists and the public begin documenting or conserving artworks. As I will show, at times a network of different people gather around an initiative and start working together. It is not uncommon for such networks to form around artworks that are not collected by museums, large institutes or private collectors: either to protect the work from censorship, or to safeguard and protect it, often after an artist dies. I argue that such a network could evolve into a 'network of care' that maintains or conserves parts of an artwork. In what follows I will describe the value of these networks and demonstrate that a community-driven conservation strategy is not unlikely to happen.

Keywords

conservation; museums; networks; net art

Mouchette.Org

To describe how a 'network of care' could take effect I will focus on the artwork *mouchette.org*. Created in 1996, *mouchette.org* is an interactive website by a pseudonymous character who calls herself 'Mouchette'. Over the years the project developed and evolved – additional pages were added and other physical offline projects and events were

organised. After many years of well-kept secrecy in 2010 Martine Neddham decided to reveal herself as the author behind the work. Today as in 1997, on the home page the visitor is welcomed by a large bright flower and a small stamp-sized photo in the upper left-hand corner showing a young girl looking down – presumably a picture of Mouchette. Mouchette claims to be almost 13 years old, an artist, and living in Amsterdam.

The name Mouchette derives from the novel *Nouvelle histoire de Mouchette* (1937) by French author Georges Bermanos, and the movie *Mouchette* (1967) by Robert Bresson, a free adaptation of the novel. In both accounts, Mouchette is a girl between childhood and adolescence. She leads a harsh life – rejected by society (family, school and friends). She is raped by a trusted older man, and also experiences the death of her mother. These events leave her disheartened, and although never made explicit, the story ends with her suicide. *mouchette.org* takes many of the themes that play out in the book and film and re-performs them in a contemporary setting, namely as an online diary with several project pages. And what initially appears to be the personal website of a female teenager evolves into darker themes on subsequent pages. Neddham uses some web characteristics in intricate ways to emphasise the drama and enigma of the story. For example, hyperlinks create confusing circulation; interactive possibilities produce several layers of information; and, identity play is performed in various ways.

The artwork poses several challenges for conservation. For instance, it consists of some old-fashioned technical aesthetics; some of the outdated code and software can be difficult to read; maintenance can be

very time consuming; participating users might change the work; and the website also evolves into other projects. Finally, it allowed visitors to use the website for their own projects, to build on or re-use in their own space. The latter testifies to the project's success, as several Mouchettes have been created over the years. It could be argued that these problems are not unique to mouchette.org, or net art for that matter, however the combination is rarely found in other artforms. Moreover, the speed of developments, and consequently the depth and breadth of different knowledge fields, are major concerns. For now I will concentrate on the potential and value of a knowledge field that is often neglected when discussing conservation strategies: the caretakers of mouchette.org

A communication tool

For Neddham, mouchette.org is foremost a tool for communication: a social platform that branches into several directions. First of all, mouchette.org is a playful interface as Neddham explains, to express herself about issues that she as a non-native English-speaking person would find difficult to articulate [2]. Her online (anonymous) character also enables her to abandon intellectual authority while maintaining contact with visitors [2]. Similarly, in an attempt to provoke art discourses, Neddham uses 'pink aesthetics' to criticise institutional art worlds, which are enhanced by cheeky comments from an apparently well-educated thirteen-year old. Secondly, mouchette.org as a social platform is a space where people can communicate with or help each other. And thirdly, it allows visitors to use the website for their own projects, or to build on or re-use in their own spaces. At a certain place in the website visitors are invited to enter Mouchette's network. They can obtain a password that enables them to act like Mouchette. With this password, texts and photographs can be uploaded to mouchette.org. E-mails sent to Mouchette may also be answered by the new inlogee. This community investment testifies to the project's success, as several Mouchettes have been created over the years. Moreover, the work was promoted by a close but dispersed community of followers (a fan club and simultaneously a hate club formed around the website). This could be one of the solutions for its future conservation.

Networks of care

The term 'network' is used in different ways to characterise current social formations (especially within technological cultures). It is not my intention to focus on a theory of networks, but to indicate the potential of networks as collaborative practices that work towards the realisation of projects. As such, the networks I am referring to are

closest to what media researchers Geert Lovink and Ned Rossiter have termed 'orgnets' [10; 9, pp. 239-55]. Orgnets are organised networks that should be seen in opposition to commercial social networking websites. These network formations are based on people who come together for a common purpose by building strong ties among dispersed individuals, thereby bringing goal-driven organisation to the Internet. The emphasis is placed on collective intelligence [8], or the idea of a knowledge community [5], in which everyone knows something, but no one knows everything. However, I do not want to confine my use of the term networks to technology. And following researchers Yuk Hui and Harry Halpin [4], who lean on philosopher Gilbert Simondon's collective individuation [14], I want to stress collectivity in networks. Such a point of departure helps to analyse the underlying structures of networks, by seeing the individual and the group not as opposing but as entities that influence each other and together constitute a constant process of individuation. As stressed by Hui and Halpin Psychic individuation to Simondon is more a simple individualization, which is also the condition of individuation, while collective individualisation is the process that brings the individual into a state of constant transformation (...), each individual is at the same time both an agent and a milieu [4, p.111].

It goes beyond the aims of this paper to elaborate on Simondon's theories and their potential use to conservation. It is simply worth explicating the value of these networks and worth demonstrating that a community-driven conservation strategy is not unlikely. For instance, a situation presented itself on 23 July 2002. A few months after Neddham launched a quiz comparing characters from the film Mouchette with the website, Neddham received a summons from Bresson's widow to take down any reference to the film. Shortly afterwards, Neddham posted the letter on her website and through her e-mail lists. In response, several independent organisations took it upon themselves to mirror the project on other websites.

Similar initiatives are becoming more common. Instead of traditional institutions, a collection of individuals and small organisations gather to form foundations that look after an artist's legacy. In such examples, a network of different people gather around an initiative and start working together. It is not uncommon for such networks to form around artworks that are not collected by museums, large institutes or private collectors: either to protect the work from censorship (as was the case with mouchette.org), or to safeguard and protect it, often after an artist dies. With different stakeholders and caretakers who do not have a centralised system or organisation to manage archival information, the relationship between conservation or documentation practices and knowledge transfer becomes inherently political. In her article, 'The Ethics and Politics

of Documentation' [15], Vivian van Saaze examines how collaborative knowledge production takes shape in discussions about the continued existence of an artwork, and what role documentation plays in such a process. Analysing the documentation of Robert Smithson's land art project Spiral Hill/Broken Circle (1971–present) shows that several stakeholders became involved in the discussions around the project's preservation, but that reaching a solution was difficult 'partly due to the fact that the relevant information was distributed over a wide range of archives' [15, p. 81], complicating the decision-making process. Nevertheless, the most recent restoration (in 2012) was completed as a result of individual and collective efforts by a network of caretakers. Van Saaze concludes that in the absence of a common heritage framework, the decision to keep this work for the future cannot be traced to one single moment in time; the history of the work shows that its prolongation had to be negotiated again and again [15, p. 82].

The distributed network of caretakers functioned through a combination of experts and non-specialists who brought in knowledge from different fields and backgrounds. As acknowledged by Van Saaze, a thorough investigation of the different roles of the stakeholders, or more precisely caretakers, might provide a lot of insight into the political dimensions around the artwork, as well as in the art world at the time; moreover, I would add that analysing the underlying structures could show how sustainable such a network can be over time.

Similarly, with regard to *mouchette.org* users not only influence and assume ownership of the work, but they also take care of it – at least to a certain extent. The extent to which this happens will most likely shift in time and through different networks, because the process is ever evolving, like the work itself. Nevertheless, the formation of what I call 'networks of care' also adds to the importance of *mouchette.org*. Besides reflecting on its own artificial conditions, it uses these conditions to set unintended, emergent and distributed events in motion. These conditions add to the work's original ambition.

Although important questions remain – for example, how shifting constellations and power relations will affect future prolongation efforts of the artwork, or who will be leading or even responsible for safekeeping and tracking the documentation that is distributed across several caretakers – it is clear that these networks can operate without the structures of centralised archives and authorised custodians, which are present in most museums. For a 'network of care' to succeed outside of an institutional framework, or to become effective as a tool for transformation, it ideally has to consist of several characteristics. These can be traced by looking at how a network gives agency to individuals, instead of answering the question of how individuals create networks. A 'network of care' is based on a transdisciplinary

attitude and a combination of professionals and non-experts who manage or work on a shared project. To enable the creation and administration of a project, the transmission of information is helped by a common mode of sharing where everyone in the group has access to all the documents or archives. Ideally, it would be an open system, or a dynamic set of tools that is used and cared for, where people could add, edit and manage information and track changes that are made. Such a system indicates and can also be monitored by the network. An added bonus is that if someone leaves, the project can continue because the content and information is always accessible and part of a larger network. Such a structure allows people to take control of a shared project, thus obtaining meaning from their 'investments'. To be able to share information and benefit from experience and insight gained elsewhere, for example, in other networks dealing with similar issues, a network should be dynamic such that individuals can easily move between networks and projects can be merged or split into separate smaller or more specialised groups. Similarly, next to user contributions Neddham has also created several objects, performances and presentations that she considers part of *mouchette.org* [2]. When I asked her about the 'collection' of *mouchette.org*, she replied

It's hard to say what constitutes *mouchette.org*. Over the years I have lost track of all the performances, projects and objects that I made. But for sure, *mouchette.org* is more than just a website.

Although Neddham's lapse of memory could be questioned, it highlights that, for her, the concept of the work is the most important aspect of *mouchette.org*. Knowledge about Neddham's project is distributed across different (groups of) people, where each person knows something, but not everything. In other words, no single element contains the 'whole' story. Neddham uses relationships and situations as means to produce and distribute *mouchette.org*, as well as to illustrate her message.

This 'social life' of the project is important for conservators. It is something that they will have to take into account and can benefit from. As Kathleen Fitzpatrick argues, a future preservation of digital objects may be less about

new tools than new socially-organized systems, systems that take advantage of the number of individuals and institutions facing the same challenges and seeking the same goals (...) Context is equally important, and equally volatile, in shaping our understanding of the production, circulation, and preservation of digital texts [3, p. 126].

A dispersed network of knowledge with a non-hierarchical structure places importance on localised knowledge, avoiding standardisation and ensuring variability rather than creating a freeze state. Whereas several networks

around artworks or between organisations and museums already exist, and some of them such as Inside Installations, Matters in Media Art, Variable Media Network and INCCA are, or have been, very successful, none of them have explicitly recognised or framed their work as ‘using’ the potential of ‘collective individuation’. To briefly return to Simondon [14], in collective individuation, relations to others, to self, and to technical ensembles, are knotted together through processes of individuation. In other words, something becomes in relation; it ‘emerges’ from processes of becoming that are instantiated by differences. This also means that something, a technology for example, is never final or complete – it is contingent, depending on variables such as personal backgrounds, intentions, competencies, or other contextual restrictions

Conclusion

As for mouchette.org, I have not been able to trace all the different elements that are part of it, nor will a future conservator, but as the above shows this might not be necessary. Some parts can be physically archived or digitally stored in archives and museums, others will linger and evolve between various networks, and some of it will be automatically cached through crawlers. Another scenario could be that a community takes control of mouchette.org and ensures its continuation in different versions. Stories will continue to be told through multiple authors and caretakers and because Neddham does not want to control its growth mouchette.org keeps generating more objects, events, and comments. Together with evolving communities that are growing around the website mouchette.org is a circulation of traces, experiences, and sharing that started at some point and progresses without a definite plan.

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To see how it works, instructions are found at:
<http://www.edit.mouchette.org>.

Bresson's wife did not see the work as an adaptation, but as a contradiction to the film's narrative. More surprising, the letter was addressed directly to Mouchette, believing

she was a real person. By replacing the quiz (in its French version) with the letter, Bresson's wife became part of the experience and the narrative of Mouchette, bringing it to life. For more information see Paule Mackrous [11] and <http://www.mouchette.org/film/>.

See, for example, the Nan Hoover Foundation, which was set up a few months after her death and is now dedicated to preserving her work as well as making it accessible to the public. See:

<http://www.nanhooverfoundation.com>.

By using the term 'care', or 'caretakers', I am referring to care as described by Annemarie Mol [12] in her ethnography of health care. In this sense care as a practice involves political, economic and institutional power relations, but more importantly care is not a matter of making well-argued individual choices, it is something that grows out of collaborative and continuing attempts to attune knowledge and technologies to diseased bodies and complex lives. Mol makes explicit what it is that motivates care: an intriguing combination of adaptability and perseverance.

Such distribution and dispersion of events is not uncommon in net art and is often what it thrives on. Similar examples are Olia Lialina's *My Boyfriend Came Back From the War* (1996) and *Mission Eternity* by Etoy (thoroughly analysed by Josephine Bosma [1, pp. 173-83]). They demonstrate a more recent way of dealing with memes and virals, in which the distributive effects are intentional if not foreseeable.

I am following the method proposed by Hui and Halpin [4] who analysed online collective social networks like Facebook and made suggestions for alternatives that would allow people to work together towards common goals.

Personal conversation with Martine Neddham, August 2011
Amsterdam.

I borrow the term 'social lLife' from John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid. In *The Social Life of Information* [13], they argue for a stronger emphasis on the context of social networks around information. Information, they argue, only acquires meaning through social context. Similarly, Matthew Kirschenbaum advocates the importance of social dimensions in preservation of digital media, which is 'at least as important as purely technical considerations' [6, pp. 240-1]. Conservator Glen Wharton [16] examines professional authority and community involvement with a civic monument, which shows the benefits of involving public participation in conservation. Similarly, Pip Laurenson and Vivian van Saaze [7] conclude with reference to the collection and conservation of performance art that the liveness or non-materiality of performance art is not the main challenge, rather what these works demand to maintain their memory; i.e. the maintenance of the networks which support the work [5, p. 39].

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