

6 Challenges in the creation, perception and distribution of documentation

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Individual cultural institutions and initiatives publish their collections and archives online in very diverse ways. Sometimes as part of their own websites, but increasingly, initiatives have emerged to aggregate such efforts, on both national and international levels, making digitised heritage discoverable across individual and siloed collections. Such aggregation efforts take many forms: thematic, but also – usually with political and economic motives – with a nation-wide or even continent-wide focus. This chapter assesses this emergent digital ecosystem by analysing some of the most widely used online platforms for digital heritage in the field of (performative) new media art – platforms that reach large audiences, that exceed institutional borders, and/or have nation-wide or international remits. First, this chapter looks into which considerations have influenced their *creation*, analysing the socio-political considerations underpinning their foundation and management. Second, this chapter looks into whether the resulting digital ecosystem of platforms encourages a holistic and equitable perception of (performative) new media art, analysing whether the landscape of digital heritage platforms serves the needs of diverse audiences, including those who are less privileged. Third, this chapter looks into the status of the *distribution* of documentation of performative new media art from a long-term perspective.

Method

To practically investigate these fields, this chapter analyses various categories of online heritage platforms through the lens of a small sample of representative international artists active in the field of new media art, exploring where, how and why their work is documented there, and investigating the quality, thoroughness and usefulness of this documentation. The selected artists are at various stages in their careers, but all have produced artworks that are considered iconic and/or that have been widely presented, researched and discussed; none of them are collected by museums. Mimicking the search behaviour of an uninformed user who is interested in a general overview, each artist's name and sometimes the title of a significant artwork was used in the search functions of the platforms, and when relevant in the artist/artwork's native language. The outcomes were analysed to see if, and how, information and documentation about these artists and their work,

is represented in the various online platforms. Whereas these search results (or lack thereof) provide information about each platform's purpose, scope, reach and resilience, the type of governance and management of the platforms (government-led, peer to peer, volunteer-based, maintained by individuals or for-profit entities) and their funding sources (corporate and for profit versus donation-based, funded through (inter)national public and private funding schemes, or low-cost and paid out of pocket by founders) are also important signifiers.

The type of data, information and documentation about artists and their works disseminated through such platforms is extremely diverse. To be able to compare various areas of coverage and to discover patterns, the data, information and documentation have been roughly classified. If artists and/or their artwork seemed to have a dedicated page or database entry, this has been recorded as a data item. Short textual descriptions of works, and biographies (usually published online with an educational purpose) were registered separately. Most platforms provided links to and/or downloads of publications (books and articles) by and about the artists and their artworks. Finally, multimedia-based documentation (usually images and video, sometimes software and other digital resources) were categorised as image/video documentation.

Europe's international digital heritage platform Europeana started as a prototype in 2008¹ and it is considered to be an explicit European, government-led and non-profit response to Google Books, Google's own strongly contested digitisation initiative.² Over the course of more than a decade, a slew of similar (inter)national digital culture aggregator websites were officially launched, including DigitalNZ for New Zealand in 2008, Trove for Australia in 2009, the portal canadiana.ca for Canada in 2011, the Digital Public Library of America (DPLA) in 2013, the National Digital Library of India (NDLI) in 2016 and Japan Search in 2020. These aggregators have become a very prominent public part of the (inter)national, cross-domain digital infrastructure that established itself over the past decades. While they are similar in purpose, each platform aggregates slightly different types of content, applies different selection criteria, and collects content from different types of institutions and initiatives.

Some basic patterns in relation to the occurrences of digital art/artists emerged: information and documentation about a specific artist's artwork is likely to be best represented in the aggregator from the region in which the artist is or was most active: for instance, Trove (Australia) emphasises Linda Dement, Japan Search highlights Seiko Mikami, and the Digital Public Library of America presents Coco Fusco. Remarkably, Europeana and DPLA provide few resources on digital art. Their policies favour larger funded institutions that have access to solid technical infrastructure, such as organisations and festivals like Ars Electronica (Linz, Austria) and Transmediale (Berlin, Germany). In both cases, there is a strong bias towards 'established' cultural expressions.³ The Australian cultural aggregator Trove provides the richest offerings in the field of performative and new media arts, probably as its aggregation policy is more inclusive and accommodates smaller and more 'fringe' institutional collections as well. Trove not only contains pointers to very diverse resources related to Australia-based artist Linda Dement

Table 6.1 General overview table of inventoried online platforms and artists. The detailed dataset that was collected can be downloaded from <https://osf.io/gm3a6/> (DOI 10.17605/OSF.IO/GM3A6)

	<i>Petra Cortright</i>	<i>Linda Dement</i>	<i>Coco Fusco</i>	<i>Olia Lialina</i>	<i>Seiko Mikami</i>	<i>Martine Neddham (Mouchette)</i>	<i>Mendi + Keith Obadike</i>	<i>Rags Media Collective</i>
data item								
biography or work description								
publication by/about								
image/video documentation								
Europeana								
Trove (AU)		 					 	
DPLA (US)			 					
NDLI (IN)								
Japan Search								
UbuWeb								
Monoskop	 	 		 				
Internet Archive		 	 	 			 	
Wikimedia	 	 	 	 	 	 	 	
Google Arts & Culture	 		 	 				
Rhizome ArtBase	 			 		 	 	
Flickr								
YouTube								
Vimeo								

General overview table of inventoried online platforms and artists. Digital art in (inter)national cultural aggregators.

but is also the only aggregator that provides links to information related to all the other (international) artists in this sample. Artists with a longer international career, like Coco Fusco, will produce the most ‘hits’, but even a younger artist like Petra Cortright is covered. Internationally, based on this sample, while Trove provides a rich starting point for researchers by linking to a variety of research papers, popular media articles, books and multimedia resources, the information in Trove also merely provides a first ‘jumping board’ and a general introduction, instead of a repository with comprehensive overviews. In summary, the documentation that the aggregators point to is mostly general and educational in nature and examples of more specialised digital art documentation for presentation and preservation purposes are rare.

There are several reasons for this lack of attention to digital art. Most of the public aggregators are the product of early digital library and book digitisation efforts and they tend to be research- and publication-focused. Therefore, they offer more links to (digitised) publications by and about artists than to images, videos and other documentation. They also need to comply with (inter)national copyright legislation, and since digital art is, at most, only several decades old, most of it is copyrighted. Similarly, academic and educational materials about digital art (for instance in the form of digitised books and articles) is often behind paywalls. Finally, there is limited space for end users to assist in filling the content gaps. Even though Europeana engages in crowdsourcing and participatory projects, this is limited to specific topics. The rich resources shared by artists, institutions and audiences elsewhere (for instance on commercial social platforms like Flickr and Vimeo, described later) generally don’t flow back to cultural aggregators. As a result, end users of such aggregators need the privilege of academic affiliations or other types of library subscriptions, and/or physical access to specialised libraries, to be able to access the resources they are interested in.

Shadow libraries

Only few Internet users around the world possess such academic privileges, the time and resources to visit a specialised library, and/or the financial possibilities to purchase sometimes quite expensive articles and books. Open access to scholarly literature is still too much of a marginal phenomenon to offer a satisfactory answer to this problem,⁴ especially in regions and situations where ‘proper knowledge absorption infrastructures’ are also lagging behind.⁵ In an attempt to provide access to paywalled content, various groups have founded so-called shadow libraries: web portals that aggregate downloadable and readable resources. Shadow libraries collect and share content in a legal grey zone. Their activities are generally regarded as piracy, but they may rely on the fair use copyright doctrine, employ takedown procedures, or operate (partly) with implicit or even explicit permission from the creators whose works they share.⁶ That said, such platforms regularly face copyright-related lawsuits, including the smaller and more specialised ones.⁷ While several of the more well-known shadow libraries such as Library Genesis and Sci-Hub cater to general academic audiences, a variety of thematic

initiatives also exist that cover (part of) the field of digital art and performance art. Two notable ones are Monoskop and UbuWeb. Both repositories publish specific multimedia-rich documentation. Additionally, thematic portals like Memory of the World, AAAAARG and textz.com serve as aggregators that can be considered more classical ‘digital libraries’, emphasising downloadable print resources, texts and books. All these resources operate in a broader ecosystem in which they frequently link to each other, partly republish each other’s content, refer to each other in scholarly literature, and sometimes publish texts and manifestos together.⁸

Of all the websites and platforms described in this overview, UbuWeb is one of the oldest; it has been actively maintained throughout its existence.⁹ Founded in 1996 by poet Kenneth Goldsmith, UbuWeb aggregates multimedia materials and documentation related to avant-garde poetry, experimental film, video art, new media art, sound art and many ephemera related to, and in between, these genres. Reflecting the diverging interests of its founder, UbuWeb features many thousands of video, audio and text resources that are collected from diverse sources around the world. Similarly to UbuWeb, Monoskop (since 2004) is managed mainly by an individual, Dušan Barok, with little financial and institutional support.¹⁰ Monoskop serves partly as a wiki (in fact a mini-Wikipedia) with selected and summarised information about digital art and culture, but it also has a weblog (Monoskop Log) which regularly publishes and links to downloadable digitised publications in this field.

Looking at the sample of artists studied in this chapter, UbuWeb provides access to materials related to those artists whose field of work fits with UbuWeb’s avant-garde focus: for instance, Raqs Media Collective, and Mendi + Keith Obadike, who besides producing Internet art, are also active in the field of experimental poetry. Internet-based and interactive digital art is (currently) outside of UbuWeb’s scope and is more extensively covered by Monoskop, which also includes short Wikipedia-style biographies and work descriptions for, among many others, Petra Cortright, Linda Dement, Olia Lialina and Raqs Media Collective. Most of the content shared by UbuWeb and Monoskop either is educational in nature or can be considered a ‘digital surrogate’ of an artwork. There are few examples of presentation- or preservation-focused documentation. One notable exception is the preservation of the Facebook game and research project *Naked on Pluto* (2010–2013) by Dave Griffiths, Aymeric Mansoux and Marloes de Valk. For this project, Monoskop serves as an experimental documentation platform for preservation purposes.¹¹

Shadow libraries and archives tend to have strong topical scopes, informed by the interest of their founder(s) and/or curator(s). In terms of coverage of under-represented topics, a paradox emerges: existing thematic shadow libraries can unearth and highlight fringe materials in a crucial way, but this will only happen for those topics for which a passionate curator is willing and able to dedicate time and resources. Many marginalised topics outside of the interests of such existing platforms remain undescribed and risk disappearing from view and memory. In this sense, shadow libraries only partially bridge the content gaps that are left by the initiatives described earlier, which are driven by major institutional and

political interests. Governance and curatorship by an individual or a small group of founders is both a strength and a weakness: continued engagement of a curator can energise a large and diverse community over a long period of time and may bring many otherwise hidden materials to life, but there is also a strong ‘bus factor’. If a project loses its stewardship, unique resources are likely to disappear from circulation.

The Internet Archive and Wikimedia

While it has characteristics of a shadow library, the Internet Archive has evolved to become a prominent part of the world’s digital heritage infrastructure, ranking as approximately the 200th most visited website around the world in April 2021.¹² Like UbuWeb, the Internet Archive is a non-profit resource that was founded in 1996. While it is well known for its Wayback Machine that archives websites, the Internet Archive also provides upload and storage of heritage resources, encompassing over 50 million files: consisting of scanned texts and books, audio files, moving image and software. Anyone can create an account on the website and upload material. Even though the Internet Archive emphasises the public domain nature and the preservation purpose of its infrastructure, issues around copyright infringement have regularly taken place. In some cases, the Internet Archive serves as an official digital asset management system for major cultural institutions that otherwise don’t have the means to deploy an advanced digital infrastructure of their own, such as the National Library of Aruba.¹³

As part of the Open Library project, there is a strong focus of the Internet Archive on scanned out-of-print books, but it also gives special attention to software history, and it provides facilities for proactive web archiving. In this context, the Internet Archive has the potential to be a relevant resource for persistent storage and online distribution of documentation of digital art. Notable examples from the artists selection for this research, are the downloadable disk image of the classical CD-ROM artwork *Cyberflesh Girlmonster* (1995) by Linda Dement,¹⁴ and the web archive of Petra Cortright’s website. Both are specific (but rare) examples of documentation of digital artworks stored at the Internet Archive for preservation purposes. Although most heritage institutions will store documentation of digital artworks on their own servers, external and resilient non-profit platforms like the Internet Archive may be good places for back-ups of specific documentation, especially considering the vulnerability of some heritage institutions.

Since much of the content on Internet Archive is amassed by different volunteers, the site can – at least partly – be considered to be part of the ecosystem of so-called ‘commons-based peer production’.¹⁵ This term describes a specific type of knowledge production, in which large groups of peers collaborate to create a shared resource or commons. Also, the free encyclopaedia Wikipedia, and its sister projects in the broader Wikimedia ecosystem fall under this definition. Wikipedia was founded in 2001 and all the content on the Wikimedia sites has been created, collected and curated by a worldwide community of tens of thousands of (mainly) volunteer editors around the world. In press and scholarly literature,

‘Wikipedia’ is often referred to as a monolithic entity, similar to major Internet brands like ‘Google’ and ‘Facebook’. The Wikimedia ecosystem, however, consists of hundreds of smaller wikis in over 300 languages, each with their own distinct community and culture, and with a complex governance structure.¹⁶ Despite its diversity, the Wikimedia community has formulated one shared vision: ‘Imagine a world in which every single human being can freely share in the sum of all knowledge’.¹⁷ Yet, it struggles to live up to this idealistic goal. Wikimedia wikis still strongly reflect existing knowledge gaps and biases, the Wikimedia community is predominantly white and male and does not reflect the world’s population’s diversity, and Wikipedia’s encyclopaedic emphasis on ‘reliable sources’ excludes large amounts of fringe and unpublished information.¹⁸ Bias and imbalance are not endemic to the Wikimedia ecosystem only; they are equally present in each of the platforms mentioned in this chapter. However, unlike most of the others, the Wikimedia movement has been prominently and publicly acting upon these issues for more than a decade through a variety of initiatives, most notably through many projects around the world addressing Wikimedia’s gender gap,¹⁹ and by giving knowledge equity a central place in Wikimedia’s strategy for 2030.²⁰ Partly thanks to these efforts, the artists’ selection for this research are described in at least one – and often multiple – Wikipedia articles, which means that there is always an artist biography in at least one language, but for some artists there are also Wikipedia articles about individual artworks. However, audio-visual material is lagging behind. Wikimedia Commons, the media repository of the Wikimedia ecosystem, contains only a few images and in most cases these images are usually portrait photos of artists to illustrate their Wikipedia biographies. Wikimedia Commons’ focuses on educational media content,²¹ which means that it is not an optimal place to host (back-ups of) very specialised, professional documentation about digital art (e.g., produced specifically for preservation purposes).

Similarly, Wikimedia projects only collect and distribute materials (texts, multimedia and data) that fall under the Definition of Free Cultural Works:²² resources with the Creative Commons licence clauses ‘attribution’ and ‘share alike’, and other free resources, are allowed. Free licence-filtered searches for documentation related to digital art, and contemporary art in general, demonstrate that even after 20 years (Creative Commons licences were first launched in 2001), free content licences are not widely adopted by artists. This is also the case for digital artists who may be considered digitally literate, and most up to date with such copyright systems and developments. When digital artists align with open source and open content practices, it is often in a critical way by creating and adopting their own licences. Consequently, both Wikimedia and (inter)national cultural aggregators are characterised by the phenomenon of the so-called 20th-century copyright gap or hole.²³ Due to these platforms’ strict compliance with copyright law – and, in Wikimedia’s case, restriction to free licences for mission-aligned reasons – visual materials about 20th-century and early-21st-century art are still missing.

The Wikimedia community has actively worked with cultural institutions in so-called GLAM-Wiki projects over more than 10 years now,²⁴ but in general these collaborations have mainly focused on larger, well-resourced institutions that are

maintaining traditional heritage collections. In this sense, (the lack of) representation of digital art documentation related to digital art on Wikimedia wikis shows parallels with a similar general underrepresentation of this type of material in (inter)national cultural aggregators. GLAM-Wiki partnerships with digital arts organisations, if initiated in the future, will have the potential to increase the availability, use and visibility of educational documentation – not just on Wikimedia projects but through reuse via free licences, on the whole Internet.

Google Arts & Culture

In a reflection on the future of the open movement, Paul Keller and Alek Tarkowski²⁵ describe two conditions in which open approaches have flourished: projects where many people contribute to the creation of a common resource – this is the story of Wikipedia, OpenStreetMap, Blender.org, and the countless free software projects that provide much of the Internet’s infrastructure; and, circumstances were opening up happens as the result of external incentives or requirements, rather than voluntary actions – this is the story of publicly funded knowledge production like Open Access academic publications, cultural heritage collections in the Public Domain, Open Educational Resources (OER) and Open Government data.²⁶ The authors mention how the open movement has failed to prevent the concentration of digital power in the hands of a few platform intermediaries, which develop closed models of sharing. As stated earlier, (inter)national cultural aggregators were founded partly as a public and regional alternative to Google Books. Yet, Google’s influence as a provider of digital infrastructure in the cultural sector has certainly not dwindled. In 2011, several years after the launch of Europeana, Google rolled out its own art aggregator, Google Art Project (later renamed to Google Arts & Culture). Partner institutions in this platform have the opportunity to have their galleries recorded via a camera that is derived from Google Street View and can have their artworks scanned and digitised in high resolution by Google Arts & Culture staff. These are prestigious and attractive offers in a sector and in regions where public funding for such endeavours is scarce. Unlike many other platforms described in this chapter, Google Arts & Culture provides an attractive and user-friendly experience, despite it being heavily curated and controlled, without user participation or contribution. Unlike the large public aggregators, Google Arts & Culture offers worldwide coverage of cultural heritage, but even after an extensive broadening of its scope, the platform remains biased towards Western, canonical and conventional art.²⁷

Digital art is rare on Google Arts & Culture. For a while, the discipline seemed to be restricted and reduced to interactive online games or ‘Arts & Culture Experiments’,²⁸ but as the aggregator became larger, digital art found a place in organisations such as the Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie (ZKM) and Rhizome,²⁹ who both became Google Arts & Culture partners.³⁰ The partnership with Rhizome is particularly interesting because it introduces and explains specialised and preservation-focused digital art documentation in the context of a heavily curated, corporate and educational platform that is mainly intended for general audiences.

Sector-specific institutional platforms

Today, Rhizome's ArtBase functions as the institution's own archive of digital art, with descriptions and documentation of projects that were commissioned and preserved by the organisation. Until 2008, however, the ArtBase had a broader scope: with an open submission policy, it functioned as a general crowdsourced database of Internet art around the world. Around that time, several other sector-wide digital art online databases emerged as well, including *netzspannung.org*, *mediaartnet.org* and the Archive of Digital Art. Several digital art organisations also invested in their own online archives, such as V2_ Institute for the Unstable Media, Ars Electronica, and the Daniel Langlois Foundation.³¹ In general, many institutions have continued their archival efforts, with a few notable exceptions, like the Daniel Langlois Foundation, whose collection was transferred to the Cinémathèque québécoise in 2011, and which changed focus in 2015. In general, sector-wide databases have become less popular and have seen less maintenance and longevity. Although collaboration in the cultural sector is strongly encouraged by funding bodies, it is not obvious to secure long-term funding for initiatives that surpass a single institution's remit and to keep all partners equally engaged.³² A more solid base and future can be created when institutions are embedded within established, traditional arts institutions or university departments. Unsurprisingly, institutional and sector-specific databases of digital art are generally the richest source of detailed and specialised documentation, including documentation produced as part of research projects, for presentation and preservation purposes. However, as mentioned earlier, the lack of sustained funding especially for small organisations is a major obstacle to create sustainable and resilient platforms and resources.³³

Corporate sharing platforms

Outside of their own websites, many initiatives, artists and organisations disseminate the documentation they produce through a variety of external, commercial and cloud-based online platforms; for instance, the photo and video sharing website Flickr (launched in 2004), and the video sharing websites Vimeo (2004) and YouTube (2005, owned by Google since 2006). An abundance of digital art documentation (videos and photographs) is available on these platforms. In fact, the amount of material about a single artist on Flickr, Vimeo and YouTube vastly exceeds their presence on the other platforms described earlier; often by a tenfold or more.

On these corporate sharing platforms, cultural institutions are the main publishers of documentation about artists. The majority of photographs and videos document events (lectures and exhibitions), sometimes as rough registrations, other times as edited videos. A large number of artists maintain their own accounts and/or channels, and in some cases, exhibition visitors and art fans publish registrations of exhibitions and performative works. Vimeo, while less popular in general, is more actively used than YouTube by artists and cultural institutions. One of the reasons could be that Vimeo explicitly markets its platform to creators and offers a more 'archive-like' experience, while YouTube's interface and functionalities

focus more on casual viewing and social sharing. All the platforms are designed to allow and encourage embedding content in other contexts, and this is also generally what happens, which triggers views and circulation of the material.

Unlike many of the other websites described earlier, these types of platforms are generally well known among general Internet audiences, and they provide a high degree of convenience, circulation and reach. This explains why artists, institutions and end users/audiences will often pick them as a first choice for storage and dissemination. Only a few of these resources will be republished on or trickle down to platforms with a more open source and public service ethos. It would be interesting to investigate more deeply which types of resources turn out to be most valuable over the longer term, which have the strongest trickledown effect, and how these factors influence each other. This question goes hand in hand with broader ethical and socio-political considerations and tensions. Commercial platforms (some of them ethically dubious) seem to offer the broadest reach and more resilience for online documentation than many platforms managed by vulnerable, small-scale publicly funded initiatives. At the same time, participation in commons-based initiatives may not be legally sustainable or desirable due to divergent community values between the artists' production and the broader commons-based communities that will host and care for the documentation. So, while the landscape of platforms is extremely diverse, a general overview or entry point barely exists. In many cases the widely known corporate sharing platforms and Wikipedia will serve as a first point of entry, but especially for newcomers in the field, it will be difficult to learn about and discover the wide variety of platforms through which documentation is distributed.

The culture and heritage-focused publication and aggregation platforms described in this chapter are in many cases founded and maintained because of strong pragmatic motives from funders' and publishers' point of view: cultural mediators and institutions promote and spark dialogue around their interests, collections and activities; creators provide insight in their practice; art audiences record and share experiences and governance bodies encourage and promote certain cultural policies and viewpoints.

In general, the recent and in many cases still 'living' documentation of recent artworks thrives foremostly in the context of participatory, commercial and 'shadow' initiatives. The official public aggregation platforms, influenced by copyright regimes, generally tend to favour older, more traditional, canonical and established cultural materials. Finally, the more specialised institutions that produce and host the most rich and diverse ranges of presentation- and preservation-related documentation are the most vulnerable, putting the future of such documentation at risk.

Notes

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- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Inna Kizhner, Melissa Terras, Maxim Romyantsev, Valentina Khokhlova, Elisaveta Demeshkova, Ivan Rudov, Julia Afanasieva, “Digital Cultural Colonialism: Measuring Bias in Aggregated Digitized Content Held in Google Arts and Culture,” *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities* (2020) <https://doi.org/10.1093/lc/fqaa055>.
- 28 “Arts & Culture Experiments,” *Experiments with Google*, <https://experiments.with-google.com/collection/arts-culture>.
- 29 In the context of this book, Rhizome’s partnership is especially interesting, as it places the preservation aspects of internet art in the spotlight, through various case studies, including documentation of the work *VVEBCAM* (2007) by Petra Cortright and a feature about Olia Lialina’s and Dragan Espenschied’s GeoCities preservation project *One Terabyte of Kilobyte Age*, for more information, see, Zachary Kaplan, “Announcing a New Collaboration Between Rhizome + Google Arts & Culture,” *Rhizome* (30 May 2017), <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2017/may/30/rhizome-google-partnership/>.
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Documentation as Art

Expanded Digital Practices

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