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 curating is significant because museums are where art conservation begins and where its practices have developed. However, this position may change as specialized 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 institutions 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 no unlikely to happen.

Keywords
conservation; museums; networks; art

Mouchette.Org
To describe 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

organized. After many years of well-kept secrecy in 2010 Martin Boulard 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 15 years old, an artist, and living in Amsterdam.

The name Mouchette derives from the novel Nouvelle histoire de Mouchette (1957) by French author Georges Simenon, and the movie Mouchette (1957) by Robert Bresson, a free adaptation of the novel. In both accounts Mouchette is a girl between childhood and adolescence. She leads a hard life – rejected by society (family, school and friends). She is raised 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-purposes 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. Mouchette uses some web characteristics to comments on to emphasize the drama and enigma of the story. For example, hyperlinks create connecting connection, 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 aspects, 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 it or re-use it in their own space. The latter bore witness to the project’s success, as several Mondherbes have been created over the years. It could be argued that these profits are not unique to Mondherbes.org, nor are they limited to the Internet. The combination is surely found in other entities, albeit in different modalities and to different extents. In any case, the experience tells us that the website’s potential and value of a knowledge field that is often neglected when discussing conservation strategies, the central theme of this essay.

A communication tool

For Naidni, Mondherbes.org is foremost a tool for communication, a social platform that branches into several directions. First of all, Mondherbes.org is a playful interface as Naidni explains, to express herself about issues that she as a non-native English-speaking person would find difficult to articulate [7]. Her online (anonymous) character also enables her to express intellectual authority while maintaining contact with visitors [2]. Similarly, in an attempt to provoke art discourse, Naidni uses ‘pink aesthetics’ to create institutional art worlds, which are enhanced by a didactic component and an apparently well-educated thirteen-year-old. Second, Mondherbes.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 it or re-use it in their own space. At a certain place in the website, visitors are invited to enter Mondherbes network. They can obtain a password that enables them to act like Mondherbes. With this password, texts and photographs can be uploaded to Mondherbes.org. E-mails sent to Mondherbes may also be answered by the new entity. This community-assisted terminology to the project’s success, as several Mondherbes have been created over the years. Moreover, the website’s potential and value of a knowledge field that is often neglected when discussing conservation strategies, the central theme of this essay.

Networks of care

The term ‘network’ is used in different ways to characterize current social formations (especially within technological culture). It is not my intention to focus on a theory of networks, but to outline the potential of networks as collaborative practices that work towards the realization of projects. As such, the networks I am referring to are closest to what media researchers Gert Løvheim and Nad Rosselin have termed ‘networks’ ([10]; pp. 239-30). Networks are organized networks that should be seen in opposition to commercial social networking websites. These networks are based on people who come together for a common purpose by building strong ties among dispersed individuals, thereby bringing geographically dispersed organization to the Internet. The emphasis is placed on collective intelligence ([9]), 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 Yoh Hui and Harry Fylde ([6]), who focus on philosopher Gilbert Simondon’s ‘collective individuation’ ([14], I want to stress collective in networks. Such a point of departure helps to analyze the underlying structures of networks, by naming the individual and the group not as opposing but as entities that influence each other and, together, constitute a common process of individuation. As stressed by Hui and Fylde, the individuals in Simondon’s ‘collective individuation’ is more a simple individuation, which is also the condition of individuation, while collective individuation 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 medium ([4], pp. 119).

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 work demonstrating that a community-driven conservation strategy is not futile. For instance, a situation presented itself on 23 July 2002. A few months after Naidni launched a quiz comparing characters from the film Moulin Rouge! with the website, Naidni received a summons from Besson’s widow to take down any reference to the film. Shortly afterwards, Naidni posted the letter on her website and let her readers help. In response, several independent organizations took it upon themselves to restore the project on other websites.

Similar initiatives are becoming more common, and traditional institutions, a collection of individuals, and small organizations 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 institutions or private collectors, either to protect the work, from amortization (as was the case with Mondherbes.org), or to safeguard and protect it, often after an artist’s death. With different stakeholders and curators who do not have a centralized body or an organization to manage archival information, the relationship between conservation and documentation practices and knowledge transfer becomes inherently political. In her article, ‘The Ethics and Politics
of Documentation” [19]. Vivian von Suare 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. An additional factor for documentation is 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 revision (in 2011) was completed as a result of individual and collective efforts by a network of caretakers. Von Suare concludes that in the absence of a customary framework, the decision to keep the artwork for the future cannot be made at one single moment in time; the history of the work shows that its proclamation had to be negotiated again and again [15, p. 82].

The distributed network of caretakers functioned through a combination of expertise and non-specialists who brought in knowledge from different fields and backgrounds. As acknowledged by von Suare, 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 into the art world at the time. Moreover, I would add that such an analysis may reveal that structures could show how sustainable such a network can ever be.

Similarly, with regard to monochette.org, users not only influence and assume ownership of the work, but they also take care of it—a 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 monochette.org. Besides valuing its own artificial conditions, it uses these conditions to set unraveled, emergent and distributed events in motion. These conditions add to the work’s original ambition.

Although important questions remain—for example, how shifting conditions and power relations will affect future proliferation efforts of the network, or who will be leading or even responsible for stewarding and funding the documentation that is distributed across several caretakers—it is clear that these networks can operate without the structures of centralised archives and authorised curators, 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 should have to consist of several characteristics. These can be bred by looking at how a network gives agency to individuals, instead of answering the questions of how individual 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 user-friendly, 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 results 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 and flexible so that individuals can easily move between networks and projects can be merged or split into separate small or more specialised groups. Similarly, new user contributions Böhm has also created several objects, performances and presentations that she considers part of monochette.org [2].

When I asked her about the “collection” of monochette.org, she replied:

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

Although Böhm’s taste of memory could be questioned, it highlights that, for her, the concept of the work is the most important asset of monochette.org. Knowledge about Böhm’s project is distributed across different groups of people, within each person knowing something, but not everything. In other words, no single element contains the “whole story.” Böhm uses relationships and situations as means to produce and distribute monochette.org, as well as to illustrate her messages.

This “social side” of the project is important for conservators. It is something that they will have to take into account and can benefit from. As Kathleen Fryarick 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. (Contact) is equally important and equally volatile in shaping our understanding of the production, circulation, and preservation of digital texts [1, p. 126].

A dispersed network of knowledge with a non-hierarchical structure places importance on localized knowledge, avoiding standardisation and assuming variability rather than creating a freeze state. Whereas several networks
around artworks or between organisations and museums already exist, and some of them such as힌다 foundational
Matter in Media Art, Visible Media Network and ISCCA site, or have been, very successful, some of these have
explicitly recognized or framed their work as using the potential of ‘collective individualisation’. To briefly return
to Smelser’s [34], in collective individualisations, relations
to others, to self, and to technical ensembles, are layered
together through processes of individuation. In other words, something becomes in relation, it emerges from
processes of becoming that are mediated by differences. This also
means that something, a technology for example, is never
ﬁxed or complete— it is contingent, depending on variables
such as personal backgrounds, interests, competencies, or
other contextual restrictions

Conclusion
As for mondadori.org, I have not been able to trace all
the diﬀerent elements that are part of it, or will be
a future accessorize, but as the above shows this might
not be necessary. Some parts can be physically individuated
or digitally stored in archives and museum, others will later
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 mondadori.org
and continues its operation in diﬀerent versions. Stories will
continue to be told through various authors and curators
and because Mondadori does not want to control its growth
mondadori.org keeps generating more objects, events, and
communities. Together with evolving communities that are
growing around the website mondadori.org is a circulation
of traces, experiences, and sharing that started at some point
and progresses without a deﬁnite plan

References
2. A. Dijkstra, “how to look real, and conceptual at the

To see how it works, instructions are found at:
http://www.adm mondadori.org

Benson's wife did not see the work as an adaptation, but
as a contribution to the film's narrative. More surprisingly,
the letter was addressed directly to Mondadori, believing
she was a real person. By replacing the quiz (in its French version) with the latter, Hains’s wife became part of the experience and the narrative of Moulinette, bringing it to life. For more information see Paul Macklin [11] and http://www.moulinette.org/film/

See, for example, the Nan Haverstock 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.nanhaverstockfoundation.com

By using the term ‘care’, or ‘catalysts’, I am referring to care as described by Annemarie Mol [12] as 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 attain knowledge and technologies to demised bodies and complex lives. Mol makes explicit what it is that matters: care, an ungrounded combination of adaptability and perseverance.

Such distributions and dispersal of events is uncommon in art and is often what it strives on. Similar examples are Ola Lundin’s My (formerly) Camp (Back From The War) (1996) and Missoula (Family by) Evey (thoroughly analyzed by Josephine Bosma [1], pp. 173-85). They demonstrate a more nuanced way of dealing with memo and valors, in which the distributive effects are intentional if not foreseeable.

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

Personal conversation with Martin Nijland, August 2011 Amsterdam.

I borrow the term ‘social I/II’ from John Smith Brown and Paul Dugiu 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, Matthias Kirschnadermann advocates the importance of social dimensions in preservation of digital media, which is ‘at least as important as purely technical considerations’ [6, pp. 280-1]. Conservator Glen Warrant [16] examines professional authority and community involvement with a civic monument, which shows the benefits of involving public participation in conservation. Similarly, Pep Llomenn and Vincent van Sasse [17] conclude with reference to the collection and preservation of performance art that the likeness or non-likeness of performance art is not the main challenge, rather what those works demand to maintain their memory, i.e. the maintenance of the networks which support the work [5, p. 59].
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