</Authenticity in Internet Art>

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1 Introduction

1.1 Project Frame and Relevance

As the age of new media is moving forth in full speed, it has not just instigated the development of new kinds of art like Internet art, it has also influenced the way in which museums deal with these new kinds of art. One of the main problems art museums have to deal with nowadays is interpretation of the term 'authenticity'.

Authenticity of a work of art is crucial to the art museum, since it often determines the emotional, historical, and monetary value that is attached to the work of art (Baugh 1998), and determines the trustworthiness or authority of the museum towards its visitors (Van Mensch, p.46). The increasing use of new media in art, like the Internet in Internet art, calls for a new interpretation of authenticity and thereby causes discussion on the very function and role of the art museum. The value that is attached to the term 'authenticity' also causes a great deal of more practical problems considering the longevity of Internet art. From discussions led by the Instituut Collectie Nederland (ICN) it seems like there is a great deal of confusion among art museums on how to deal with these kinds of 'new heritage' like Internet art. Contemporary art museums (and institutions) have the task of collecting, conserving, archiving and presenting Internet art, but:

> *"All of these tasks bring forth interesting questions of authenticity on how to deal with these new developments (...). Things like software fall on the thin border between material and immaterial heritage. Immaterial heritage is hard to incorporate into the museum, but this does not make it less interesting."* (Wieringa and Wijnia 2007).

In general it seems that the term 'authenticity' is an often used, though much debated term in museums, where it most commonly refers to the *physical* originality of the object. Authenticity then refers to the uniqueness and historical originality of the work of art and thereby to its (monetary) value (Lowenthal 1999). Already with the arrival of photography and its reproducible character, the usage of the term 'authenticity' became controversial. In his work *Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Walter Benjamin took a closer look at what the ability to reproduce a work of art meant for our understanding of the term 'authenticity' and the impact on, as he called it, the 'aura' of the work of art and the museum it is placed in (Benjamin 1968).

In Internet art, the term becomes even more controversial, due to the fact that one often cannot speak of an 'object' anymore, let alone of one, unique copy of the work of art. It seems inescapable that museums look for a different interpretation of the term 'authenticity' and this leads to a multiplicity of discussions and questions concerning the preservation and conservation of Internet artworks in art museums. Once again, scholars look towards Walter Benjamin's texts for aide (Marrinan and Gumbrecht 2003), but we wonder in what sense his text is relevant for the position of the term 'authenticity' in relation to Internet art in the museum.

1.2 Purpose and Research Question

This thesis will strive to provide insight into the definitions and problems of authenticity where it comes to Internet art (sometimes called Net.Art) in the museum and will look at the relevance of the interpretation of the term 'authenticity' as described by Walter Benjamin in his work *Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. The research question of this thesis will be: *"What are the issues with the term 'authenticity' in Internet art in the museum?"* , with an added emphasis on *"to what extent are Benjamin's theories still relevant to these issues?"*

This thesis will not look into broader historical parallels between the arrival of photography and the arrival of new media neither will it attempt to draw grander conclusions on how to deal with digital art or digital heritage. It shall also not go into further discussions of classification and interpretation of Internet art. We shall define Internet art simply as art made for and on the Internet, using the Internet as its primary means and inspiration (Greene, p.7). For more information on this discussion, we recommend Rachel Greene's book 'Internet Art' (2004) and Julian Stallabrass' book 'Internet Art: the online clash of culture and commerce' (2001), as well as the Net.Art archive of the Centre Pompidou (http://www.centrepompidou.fr/Netart/)..

1.3 Methodology

This thesis will provide the reader with an extensive review of literature from the fields of art history, philosophy, art criticism, new media and museum studies. In Chapter 2 we shall discuss the various meanings of authenticity in the visual arts and the traditional problems that go along with these meanings. In Chapter 3 we shall extensively deal with reproductions and Walter Benjamin's theories, so that in Chapter 4 we can look concretely at the issues of localizing and safeguarding authenticity in Internet art in the museum. In Chapter 5 we will describe the consequences of these issues for the preservation and conservation of Internet art in the museum. Chapter 6 is concluding and shall give a brief overview of the issues we encountered and shall add some tentative comments on how to deal with authenticity in Internet art.

The current issues of authenticity in Internet art will be placed into context by means of Walter Benjamin's text from 1936, *Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. The issues with authenticity in this text shall be compared and contrasted to a reproduction of the current discussion on issues with authenticity in the dealing with Internet art by modern and contemporary art museums.

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2 History of Authenticity in the Visual Arts

Introduction

Authenticity in the visual arts has always been a complex and much-debated subject. The meaning of the term 'authenticity' has always been subject to change and shifting public opinions. In order to fully understand Walter Benjamin's opinions and the current discussion concerning authenticity in art museums and internet art, we will need to go into the different connotations of authenticity, the changes in interpretation throughout the ages, and the issues that are traditionally associated with authenticity in the visual arts.

2.1 Nominal Authenticity and Forgeries

2.1.1 History and Common Problems

In general, we discern two types of authenticity, described by *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics* as 'nominal authenticity' and 'expressive authenticity' (Dutton, 2003). We will first discuss nominal authenticity in this paragraph and continue on with expressive authenticity in paragraph 2.2. Of the two kinds, nominal authenticity seems like the more straightforward use of the term, referring to the "correct identification of the origins, authorship, or provenance of an object, ensuring, as the term implies, that an object of aesthetic experience is properly named" (Dutton, p.259). This kind of authenticity refers to the object-ness of the work and is determined by taking the context and history of the work into consideration. Authenticity in the nominal sense refers to the object being what it says it is (for example, a painting by Monet from the year 1873) and to the uniqueness of the object (there is only one *Soleil Levant*). The nominal type of authenticity has, according to many authors, among whom the art historian Jukka Jokilehto (who in the past has worked at ICCROM, ICOMOS and UNESCO) and David Lowenthal (Professor Emiritus in history and geography at University College of London), its roots in the Romantic era. Before this time, the meaning of authenticity depended on the authority of the institution or person claiming it. And as David Lowenthal explains in his article *Authenticity: Rock of Faith of Quicksand Quagmire?* (1999), the concept of an object being 'authentic' in the nominal sense that we speak of today did not matter to people as much as it does these days. In the Middle Ages, the authenticity of relics not so much depended on its traceable history back to the source, but mainly on the Church accepting it as an authentic relic as well as the miraculous function it had. "To authenticate the origins and provenances of relics was pointless when holy relics were by their very nature capable of miraculous removal and replacement. Modern criteria of materials, form, process, provenance, and intentionality scarcely mattered. What made a relic authentic was less what it was than what it did. The miracles that relics engendered proved them authentic" (Lowenthal, p.5). It was not until the Romantic age that the authenticity of an object was researched through historical and scientific research (Lowenthal, p.6) and that the creator became of importance. Nominal authenticity is therefore more broad a term than merely authentic as opposed to a fake, it also means authentic as opposed to the unknown. Knowledge of the context and history of an object, in order to correctly name the object, is a large part of determining a work's authenticity.

Historically, problems with this kind of authenticity lay in the discovery of forgery and plagiarism. One of the most famous cases of misidentification in the visual arts is the oeuvre of Han van Meegeren, who in the years 1937-1943 earned his fortune by creating Vermeer forgeries, selling them as newly discovered works of the master himself. Using authentic seeming materials and techniques, Van Meegeren's works were practically indiscernible from 'the real thing', fooling scientists and connoisseurs alike. However, when finally discovered, the works, once praised as 'masterpieces' were degraded to the basement, rendered instantly invaluable (Coremans, 1949). Today, however, paintings by Van Meegeren are valued as 'authentic' Van Meegeren's and the once-Vermeer *Christ and the Disciples at Emmaus* (1937) now hangs proudly in Boymans Museum in Rotterdam in his own name. Just like passing of a work of art under a false name is morally condemned, working in an 'inauthentic' style is frowned upon as well. Bruce Baugh explains in his article *Authenticiy Revisited* that whereas we call Chartres cathedral an authentic instance of Gothic architecture we call Neuenschwanstein castle pseudo-Gothic kitsch.

> *" [A]n artwork would be authentic, then, when it is a genuine example of a certain class of works and a certain style ("Gothic"), and inauthentic when it is a mere imitation or a forgery. Whereas Chartres both conforms to the Gothic style and historically belongs to the period that produced that style, Neuenschwanstein gives the appearance of belonging to the Middle Ages by aping certain features of Gothic architecture. The authentic work is what it appears to be, while the inauthentic work, whether simply derivative or an outright forgery is not."*
> (Baugh, p.477)

A nominally authentic work of art is 'what it appears to be' and therefore always relative to something else. When trying to define a works authenticity, we should take Dennis Dutton's observation to heart and remember, "whenever the term 'authentic' is used in aesthetics, a good first question is to ask is, authentic as opposed to what?" (Dutton, p.259).

Han van Meegeren, Christ and the Disciples at Emmaus, 1937.
Signed IVERMEER

2.1.2 Innocent Copies and Honest Misidentifications

Besides correctly identified works of art and forgeries there is another category of works that falls between these two extremes. Even though it might seem like a black and white situation, most misidentification of works of art is based on honest misunderstandings. Artists might copy works without actually intending to pass it off as an original (an 'innocent copy') and art historians might due to a lack of knowledge misidentify the origins of a work of art.

The difference between a forgery and an 'innocent copy' is a matter of morals and of intention – what is the artist trying to do? This is what Kennick in his article *Art and Inauthenticity* describes as an 'innocent copy'.

> *"Forgery is something of which a person is guilty, whereas simply copying or painting in the manner of someone is not. (…) A copyist who sells or exhibits his copy of an original as a copy is not guilty of forgery or fraud, and his picture is neither a forged original nor a fraudulent original."*
> (Kennick, p.5-6)

This goes for the works of the Cornish copyist Suzie Ray who, in her studio called 'Suzie Ray Originals, 'produces 'original copies' of Old Master and Impressionist paintings. The works are attributed both to herself as well as to the original artist, looking something like this: 'Paul Gauguin [sic] 1989 / Suzie Ray 1990' (Jones, p.7). Although it might not be the classiest thing to do (see more on this in 2.3), it seems we cannot blame forgery on those who do not pretend their copy is anything more than a copy, and neither can we judge those that honestly misidentify works as something they are not. "There is nothing fraudulent about wrongly guessing the origins of an apparently old New Guinea mask or an apparently eighteenth-century Italian painting", Dennis Dutton explains. However, the line between 'unwarranted optimism' and fraudulent intentions is hazy and many a respected art historian has paid the toll for presenting and optimistic guess as well-established knowledge (Dutton, p.260).

2.2 Expressive Authenticity and the Cult of the Artist

2.2.1 The Dogma of Genius

During the same period that the term 'authenticity' started to become synonymous to 'properly named', the role of the artist also changed. Though we can currently see differences in style in miniatures of the Middle Ages, the artists are hardly ever known by name and are usually referred to as 'the master of the…', based on the little stylistic or biographic information we do have, and the truth is that it mattered less. Art was part of a religious ritual in which not the artist, but the praise of God (or the wealth of the patron) was the more important thing. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the emphasis shifted from the thematic consistency to the authenticity of the thing or person portrayed, usually either the commissioner of the painting or nature scenes. It mattered less who actually did produce the work of art, but more what it depicted (Jones, p.9). Although certain individual masters of course gained personal fame, it was common knowledge that Old Masters like Rembrandt hardly ever produced the entire work without the help of their assistants and students and this was not a threat to the work's authenticity whatsoever. Current problems with the attribution of seventeenth century old master paintings are therefore very much *current* issues and can be seen as a part of the dogma of the genius in our Western society, an idea that gained popularity from the eighteenth and nineteenth century onwards (Pastoureau, p.23-24).

During the Enlightenment, the ideas of philosopher Immanuel Kant were taken to heart, and according to Wim Denslagen (*Romantisch Modernisme)*, it was no longer acceptable for artists to merely follow the example of other artists, it became necessary to be authentic to ones own artistic conscious (Denslagen, p.84). This interpretation of the term 'authenticity' is what we call 'expressive authenticity' (as opposed to nominal authenticity). Expressive authenticity seems more difficult to verify, since it allows much room for interpretation and value judgments. It is a term often used in existential philosophy by philosophers like Heidegger, where it refers to the individual's sovereignty in making choices in life, to one's 'eigentlichkeit' (Dutton, p.267) The term is used similarly in the visual arts, documenting expressive authenticity as being original and truthful to the artist's own self. This means that whereas a work might be authentic in the nominal sense (a Vermeer actually being by the hand of Vermeer), the work might simultaneously be inauthentic in the expressive sense (the hypothetical case of Vermeer copying style-elements of Italian artists). However, the concept of expressive authenticity remains vague, since the borders between authentic and inauthentic are profoundly unclear. Is it 'allowed', for example, to incorporate elements from historical artworks like the *Mona Lisa*? If not, would we call the works of Andy Warhol 'inauthentic'? Probably not, but does this not have more to do with our own value judgments of Andy Warhol's work and his status in history? Another case might be when suddenly an artist decides to completely change his method of working, like Robert Raushenberg switching from 'regular' paintings to flatbed paintings. Does this mean that this new method of working is inauthentic compared to his earlier method of working or do we allow this because of Rauschenberg's success? Is that what we mean by authenticity then simply 'continuity'?

For an answer to these questions, we must look towards the highly influential ideas of Immanuel Kant, as described in his *Analysis of Beauty* (in his *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*). According to Kant, the genius of an artist lies in his or hers natural capacity to judge what is beautiful and aesthetically interesting. This type of genius is different from intellectual genius and it does not rely on (and even rejects) academic rules to produce a 'beautiful' work of art. The genius' capacity to translate beauty in nature into art is then the only thing shaping the work art. Because of this, originality and authenticity is a character of genius, meaning that a work of art made by a genius is never an imitation of previous art, although it may be 'inspired by' or 'follow' previous art (Ginsborg, #2.6). The idea of nominal authenticity heavily relies on the genius of the artists. Unfortunately for us, a genius can only be recognized by the beauty (and originality) of the works he creates, which makes the whole issue extremely subjective. Although we cannot objectify the individual's preferences and judgments of 'authentic' aesthetic expression, Dutton points towards the works of cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1926-2006) in which he says that "to study an art form is to explore a sensibility (and) such a sensibility is essentially a collective formation whose foundations are as wide as social existence and as deep" (Dutton, p.270). What Geertz means by this, is that the expressive authenticity of a work of art lies in the original value it had for the work's original audience (and artist). Expressive authenticity being essentially subjective becomes a part of the nominal authenticity of a work by forming a part of the history of the work of art, telling us something about the society it

Andy Warhol, Mona Lisa, 1963.

resulted from. Tolstoy took this idea even further and in his discussion on *What is Art?* he argues that artistic value is only achieved when the artist expresses his or hers authentic values, especially when those values are shared by the artist's community (Dutton, p.271). This would mean that those works with high expressive authenticity automatically become part of a society's cultural history. English artist and art critic Roger Fry (1866 – 1934) certainly believed this and even maintained the view that the few individual artists that possess the innate capacity to communicate authentic aesthetic expression should be actively stimulated and nurtured by their society and the art market (although he was strongly opposed to public funding due to his mistrust of the governments capacity to pick the 'right ones') (Goodwin, p.45).

The cult of the artist and the claim to originality has extensively been dealt with in Postmodern art theory. Michel Foucault addressed the cult surrounding artists in his work *What is an Author?* and argued that the author's name "points to the existence of certain groups of discourse and refers to the status of this discourse within a society and a culture" (Foucault, p.305). In his famous work *Death of the Author*, Barthes continues Foucault's argument and attacked readers (and art lovers) for considering the author's (or artist's) identity in attributing meaning to his work. An author, according to Barthes, was not able to create original works of art but could only appropriate what had already been done en provide glosses on it. The whole concept of the genius-artist was therefore faulty and deceiving (Sandler, p.338-339). Under the influence of the theories of Foucault, Barthes, and Derrida, deconstructionists separated the work from the (non-existent) artist, defining meaning through the interpretations of the audience, whatever they might be (Sandler, p.339). It thereby went directly against the ideas brought forth by Modernist theorist (most notably Clement Greenberg) who felt that abstract art was the most 'genuine expression' of universal values.

2.2.2 Time and Audience

Although opinions vary on whether true originality exists (and whether the Postmodern era is now over), expressive authenticity has been and still is an important factor in discussing art and art history. Precisely because expressive authenticity is so personal (for both the artist as well as the viewer) it is a debate often loaded with emotion and irrationality. Fact is that in our culture originality is highly appreciated and that in this sense expressive authenticity becomes relevant to nominal authenticity as being part of the historical impact of a work of art. The impact of the work's expressive authenticity and the communication between artist, work, and audience, is only truly authentic when we are dealing with a nominally authentic work of art. Alfred Lessing explains in his article *What is Wrong with a Forgery*:

> *"[A]rt has and must have a history. (…) Artists do not seek merely to produce works of beauty. They seek to produce original works of beauty. (…) It is this search for creative originality which insures the continuation and significance of such a history in the first place. It is for this reason that the concept of originality has become inseparable from that of art. It is for this reason, too, that aesthetics has traditionally concerned itself with topics such as the inspiration of the artist, the mystery of the creative art, the intense and impassioned search of the artist, the artist as the prophet of his times, the artistic struggle after expression, art as a product of its time, and so on."* (Lessing, p.75)

We see that time is an important factor in determining authenticity, or rather, timelessness. The creation of a work of art is a marked moment in time and after this moment the work of art becomes part of the art historical discourse. Rembrandt-expert Ernst van de Wetering explains that the artist's original expression (expressive authenticity) is captured and then moves through time through its own object-ness (nominal authenticity) (Van de Wetering, p.48). According to Jokilehto, the object exercises the 'Kunstwollen' of the artist, creating a bond

between the creative artist and society. This means that everything that happens to the physical work of art, creates a tighter bond between the artist's expressive authenticity and his audience (Jokilehto, p.28).

Conclusion

The meaning of the term authenticity has changed over the ages and it seems that in all cases this meaning is relative. Nominal authenticity refers to the unique and historical object-ness of the work of art as opposed to a forgery or a work that does not belong to the era it pretends to belong to. Mistakes in attribution are made as well as copies that openly say they are copies, but these things usually do not interfere with the authenticity of the one, unique, work of art.

Expressive authenticity refers to the work of art as a medium of true 'authentic' expression for the artist, which of course remains highly subjective. It is referred to as a work resulting from the artist being authentic to his own self as opposed to an artist taking from others or producing without 'soul' or originality. The cult surrounding the artist as a genius is an idea from the Enlightenment and has in some shape or form stuck with us. It is probable that one of the reasons that we value nominal authenticity so much is because for the expression of the artist to be 'authentically' transmitted to the public, the work at least has to be 'real'.

Expressive authenticity is related to nominal authenticity because an authentic work of art brings us into contact with the past and its history, giving us a peek into the artist's intentions. The work of art as an object is a timeless vessel of expressive authenticity, bringing us on the one hand closer to the artist and on the other hand always keeping a distance.

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3 Reproductions and Walter Benjamin

Introduction

In the previous chapter we have seen that the definition of authenticity has different and ever-changing meanings, heavily depending on their context. What most definitions have in common, however, is that they rely on the uniqueness and presence of a single work of art. Until now, we have dealt with copies and forgeries, but we have not yet dealt with reproductions. In this chapter we shall look at the reproducibility of an artwork by analyzing Walter Benjamin's (1892-1940) article *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* from 1934. In this article, that did not become popular until the late 1960s (when it was translated into English), German cultural analyst Walter Benjamin introduces for the first time the concept of the presence of the 'aura' surrounding a work of art. We will look at how he thinks technical reproduction of works of art eradicates this presence and the consequences this has for the art world. Walter Benjamin's observations are especially interesting not only because his views have been highly influential in the past, but mostly because with the more recent technological advances, many writers in the art world deem his ideas once again relevant (Mul, p.5).

3.1 The Aura

3.1.1 The Aura and Authenticity

> *"We define the aura (...) as the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be."* (Benjamin, p.222)

One of the most central ideas in Walter Benjamin's essay is his invention and description of the term 'aura'. This concept of cultural analysis has become key to our understanding of authenticity and issues of reproducibility in the visual arts. Benjamin used the term 'aura' to describe a feeling of distance and closeness at the same time. Confronted with a unique work of art, the viewer felt a sense of awe, relating not directly to the work of art itself, but to the historical life of the work of art, its line of ownership, its historical value, and its uniqueness.

There is a difference between the aura of a work of art and authenticity as we have discussed it in the previous chapter, although the difference is quite subtle and not explicitly defined by Walter Benjamin. The aura of a work of art points towards all the signs of authenticity surrounding the nominally authentic work of art. Where in the previous chapter we have seen that nominal authenticity is defined *through* scholarly investigation into the work's historical value and line of ownership, Benjamin labels these means as a separate force. The sense of awe is invoked by the history and tradition surrounding the work of art, which exists only through the work's nominal authenticity. He thus reverses the importance of authenticity from a goal in itself to a means by which the aura is formed.

Some scholars have argued that Benjamin's appropriation of the term 'aura', which usually means a "curious sensation of a cool or warm breeze, which, starting from one end of the body, passes through the same, and ends in the head or the hollow of the heart" is poorly chosen and he might have been better off choosing the term 'aureole', which refers to "a halo around the entire body, especially that of a saint" (Marinnan, p.83). This seems especially reasonable when we read that Benjamin felt that the importance that we place on the work's aura (and thereby on the work's nominal authenticity), is a continuation of the old ritualistic and religious function the work of art occupied within society.

> *"Originally the contextual integration of art in tradition found its expression in the cult. We know that the earliest art works originated in the service of a ritual – first the magical, then the religious kind. It is significant that the existence of the work of art with reference to its aura is never entirely separated from its ritual function. In other words, the unique value of the "authentic" work of art has its basis in ritual, the location of its original use value. (…) The function of the concept of authenticity remains determinate in the evaluation of art; with the secularization of art, authenticity displaces the cult value of the work."* (p. 244)

Nietsche's account on tragedy (*The Birth of Greek Tragedy*) is widely accepted as proving that the roots of Greek drama lie in religious ritual. Similarly, it is not surprising that Benjamin connects the present-day veneration with which works of art are regarded, to religious practice that is especially visible in societies where art is regarded a secular matter (Sartwell, p.762). In short, the religious-seeming experience people have when confronted with an authentic work of art is what Walter Benjamin calls the aura.

3.1.2 Authenticity and Time

> *"Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be. This unique existence of the work of art determined the history to which it was subject throughout the time of its existence. This includes the changes which it may have suffered in physical condition over the years as well as the various changes in its ownership."*
>
> *"The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from it's beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced. (…)"* (p.221)

If Walter Benjamin's idea of the aura seems familiar to the reader, he would be correct. In the previous chapter we have dealt with authenticity and the notion of time in a very similar fashion. We have seen that authors, among whom Van de Wetering and Lowenthal (1992, 1999), tell us that the historical 'object-ness' of the work of art connects us to the moment of creation and thereby to the expressive authenticity and personal 'touch' of the artist. The bridge between this moment and the present is signified by the historical journey (and nominal authenticity) of the work of art. Although Benjamin does not emphasize the importance of the artist as much, the argument that Van de Wetering and Lowenthal make is clearly influenced by Benjamin's conviction that authenticity relates the object of art to its unique moment and place of origin. Marrinan and Gumbrecht explain in their book *Mapping Benjamin* (2003) that in Benjamin's essay "authenticity shares with the concept of aura th[e] tension between distance and closeness. But [that] we must also understand that aura depends on authenticity" (Marrinan, p. 125). Walter Benjamin's function of authenticity is to connect us to what remains of the cult value of an artwork, the aura. On the other hand, nominal authenticity works closely together with the aura as well, since without the marks of authenticity, which constitutes the aura, the work of art has a hard time proving itself authentic.

3.2 Cultural Crisis

3.2.1 Reproductions

> *"Confronted with its manual reproduction, which was usually branded as a forgery, the original preserved all its authority; not so vis-à-vis technical reproduction."* (p.220)
>
> *"[F]or the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual. To an ever greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility. From a photographic negative for example, one can make any number of prints; to ask for the 'authentic' print makes no sense."* (p.224)
>
> *"[T]hat which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art."* (p.221)

For Benjamin, the traditional value and attraction of a work of art lay in the above-described 'aura'. However, the article aimed to do more than introduce this single term. Benjamin argued that the advent of new technologies like photography and film brought about a change in our experience of the work of art. In a world where suddenly high quality reproductions could be made without much human effort, Benjamin saw a drastic shattering of tradition unfolding.

> *"In one stroke, the single canvas – witness to the vision of a master, to a world frozen in time, remote from the public, priceless – became mass-produced, inexpensive and thus available for everyday domestic consumption."* (Nichols, p.256)

According to Benjamin, technical reproduction of a work of art differed from other, traditional, ways of reproduction not only because it was able to quickly and effortlessly create multiple copies, but mostly because a) these copies could bring out various sides and details of the original simultaneously and independently, and more importantly b) because these copies could be brought to places that the original could never travel to. By taking a photograph one could suddenly carry around a Gothic cathedral in one's pocket. By taking the copy out of its original position, thereby removing it from tradition, Benjamin argued that the aura is destroyed. That which constituted the aura of a work of art – its authenticity, the link to the moment of creation and its creator, the evidence of and connection to all that the physical work of art has endured – was lost in the reproduction. Although many of us feel today that a postcard of the *Mona Lisa* does not damage the authenticity of the real *Mona Lisa*, Benjamin felt that by allowing the reproduction of the work of art to encounter the viewer in their own environment, outside of the traditional scope of the museum, the work is stripped from its traditional value and distance from the viewer and is made current – thereby changing our perspective on that which is reproduced.

3.2.2 Singular and Multiple Works of Art

> *"In principle a work has always been reproducible. Man-made artifacts could always be imitated by men. Replicas were made by pupils in practice of their craft, by master's for diffusing their works, and finally, by third parties in pursuit of gain."* (p.218)

In order to understand what this shift in our perspective meant to Benjamin, it is important to investigate what he means by 'reproduction' in order to understand the change he says is brought about by

technical reproduction. In general we discern two kinds of works of art: singular works of art and multiple works of art (Davies, p.156-163). A typical example of a singular work of art would be Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* or Manet's *Olympia*. Multiple works of art are works of art made in a medium which is reproducible in itself, like cast bronzes, woodblock prints, photographs made from a negative, musical works, books, movies, and operas. Both singular and multiple works of art can be reproduced. However, whereas a reproduction of a singular work of art is called a copy, reproducing a multiple work of art is creating another instance of the work. A distinct, singular, unique work of art can be copied and can be very much 'like' the original, but cannot replace the original. The authenticity of the original work of art remains intact. The situation becomes more complicated when multiple works of art are meant to be reproduced in such a manner that the various instances are interchangeable. All of them are authentic and yet none of them is the one 'authentic' work.

It seems from the text that Benjamin understands the difference between these two types of works. On the one hand he admits that works of art have always been reproducible through manual labor (p.218). This kind of reproduction brings on issues of falsification and honest copies we discussed in paragraph 2.1 of the last chapter. On the other hand, Benjamin observes that increasingly, works of art are designed for reproducibility like photographs (p.224) in which asking for the original print makes no sense. Like most multiple works of art, multiple instances of the work of art are meant to be created out of a photographic negative. There might be a difference in quality between the prints (like in multiple woodblock prints), but all of them are instances of the same work. In this kind of situation, it becomes increasingly difficult to figure out wherein 'authenticity' lies. Not only does it not make sense to ask for the 'authentic' print because any number of prints can be made, as Benjamin says, but also because we know that any one of these prints is as authentic as the other.

When we look at his article, we see that Benjamin was mostly concerned with the reproduction of singular works of art. Although the nominal authenticity of the singular work does not physically change, our *experience* of it changes and is thereby deteriorated by the presence of the technically reproduced. In other words, since the reproduced possesses no authenticity or aura, the original work is removed from the domain of tradition. The resulting loss of the aura changes the function of art and leads to a tremendous shattering of tradition The most powerful representative of this change that art was going through, was, according to Benjamin, visible in the increasing presence of works made specifically for reproduction; multiple works of art, in which the aura was nowhere to be found.

3.3 Discussion

3.3.1 Postmodernism

> *"[T]he instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice – politics."* (p.224)

Just like we have seen earlier in the chapter on authenticity, opinions on the aura have varied throughout time. Benjamin acquired his greatest fame in the 1980s, when in 1985 art critical and Marxist magazine *October* devoted an issue entirely to him. In Postmodern theory, Benjamin was generally admired for his political standpoints. Benjamin argued in his article that where the ritualistic function of art was lost through the destruction of the aura, the social function of art completely changed. No longer could art rely on its claim to autonomy on the basis of its authenticity. Art's function would now become political. Postmodern theorists saw the aura as responsible for creating distance between society (the public) and art, and it was this

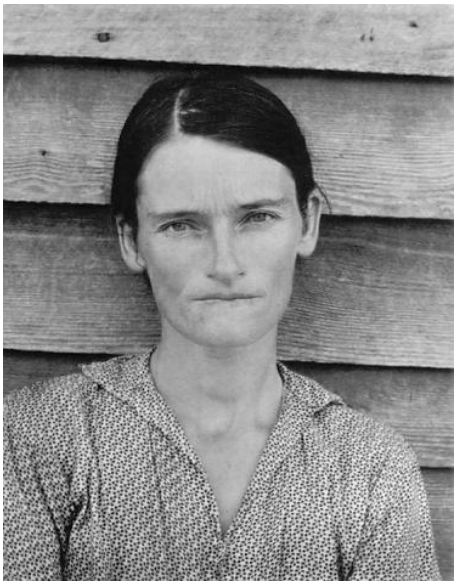
distance that they tried to eliminate (Sandler, p.332). Under the influence of Walter Benjamin's essay, which gained fame in the United States after it was first translated into English in 1967, *October* writers like Rosalind Krauss and Douglas Crimp hailed photography as central to postmodern art and art theory.

The reproducibility of art and the lack of an aura in reproductions also changed the way the artist was viewed and the way in which expressive authenticity was dealt with. Irving Sandler explains about the ideas of that time:

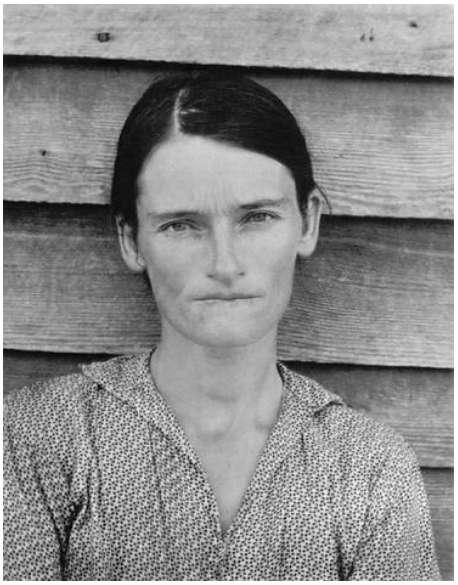
> *"If art could no longer be original, it followed, as Benjamin saw it, that the idea of the artist as an individual genius who makes singular works of art was obsolete. He concluded that such ideas as creativity and genius, eternal value and mystery had become outmoded."* (Sandler, p.346)

Photography being a medium made for technical reproduction would eradicate the cult of the artist and the 'myth' of expressive authenticity. Since there would be no more 'originals', it could no longer be used for the self-involved practices of the art world, they felt. Content would, once again (like in Medieval times), matter more than the artist or the art world. Walter Benjamin had seen photography and film as a good way to harvest a more critical attitude towards political movements like Fascism and Marxism (Benjamin, p.231), and the writers of *October* also felt it would be the ideal manner by which to politicize art and make the world more conscious of the social and monetary processes that went on in the art world. However, not all photography was successful in doing so, argued Krauss. "Notions of value, or presence of aura, of authenticity were revived and readapted for photography" (Krauss in Sandler, p.349).By this she meant photographic works by Andy Warhol (1928-1987) and Robert Raushenberg (1925-2008) that appeared in the New York art galleries in the 1960s. Warhol had reproduced images from pop culture, and had cleverly made sure to make each instance of his work a little different, thereby creating a series of originals, fit for the art market. This new art market exploded and with prices going through the roof, Krauss and other writers of October felt the only reason this 'impure' photography thrived was its commercial appeal.

Almost right from the start, the dialogue between the writers of October and the New York art scene had been intense, and some artists responded in favor of Walter Benjamin's writings as discussed in October. A favorite of Krauss was the work by Sherry Levine (1947-). In 1979 she re-photographed Walker Evans' photographs from a exhibition catalogue and reprinted them as works 'after' Walter Evans. By taking someone else's photographs and appropriating it as her own, she posed serious questions on the monetary value of 'originals' in photography and the status of a copy in a world of reproducibility. Levine tried to consciously 'destruct' the



Walker Evans, Untitled, 1936



Sherrie Levine After Walker Evans, 1981

aura of the works she appropriated, undermining the systems of the art market (Sandler, p.388). Of course, already in 1917 Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) posed questions on expressive and nominal authenticity and the art market by entering a urinary, signed 'R.Mutt' and named *Fountain,* in an art show. The reproductions he ordered and authorized in the 1960s are now shown proudly as 'authentic' Duchamp's in art museums all over the world. Similarly, in the 1980s, artists Mike and Doug Starn (1961-) used art historical masterpieces as readymades. However, unlike Sherrie Levine, the Starn twins altered the photographs of the art historical masterpieces in a nostalgic, aura-like fashion. Through the 'touch' of the artists, these works became one-of-a-kind works, harvesting great prices and denying the absence of the 'aura' in photography.

Benjamin's theories had a great impact on the way artists and critics work, think, and deal with their own work and their reproducibility. Artist like Duchamp have posed serious questions as to what authenticity meant and have consequently fought and embraced the aura. Though authenticity is always relative, artists have shown that, above all, it is an attractive subject for their work.

3.3.2 The Digital Age

> *"Mechanical reproduction of art changes the reaction of the masses toward art. The reactionary attitude toward a Picasso painting changes into the progressive reaction toward a Chaplin movie"* (p.234).

It is clear that Benjamin's ideas did not go over completely unchallenged. Many art critics argued that whereas many copies could now indeed effortlessly be produced, the reproduction was not the original and the original continued to exist. In fact, they argued, photographs of works like the *Mona Lisa* actually just enhance the painting's aura, because it increased the number of people yearning to see 'the real thing' (Hennion and Latour, p.94 and Sandler, p.347). Of course it has slowly become clear that photographs do not necessarily lack aura or authenticity. The art market has been able to reinvent the 'aura' when it comes to photographs by creating only a limited number of prints, authorized by the artist. The touch of the artist, that, according to Benjamin, was lost through technical reproduction, has been brought back into the arts. Recently, however, Benjamin's theory has once again been called upon in the light of a new development: digital media. Books like *Mapping Benjamin* (Marrinan and Gumbrecht, 2003) aim to examine the relevance of Benjamin's text to the recent developments in society and in the visual arts. Lowenthal sees various reasons for this current upsurge of interest in Benjamin:

> *"The skill and ease of replication make authenticity all the more elusive today. As fakes and replicas become harder to tell from originals, other traits – uniqueness, symbolic association, historical credibility – gain canonical authentic status"* (Lowenthal 1992, p.188).

Not only has the quality of reproductions increased, making originals, copies, and fakes harder to discern from one another, but there has been a shift from the way reproductions are produced. Creating new instances of multiple works of art, as is the case in Internet art, has become increasingly dependent on encodings and templates instead of on models like master tapes and negatives. Although we will discuss this shift in means of reproductions further on in this thesis in Chapter 5, it is important to know that the extent to which works have become reproducible has increased dramatically.

Another reason for Walter Benjamin's return into the limelight is the recurring ideal of democratic art – art that is accessible to everyone and, more importantly, that everyone can participate in. Where Benjamin admired film because it could reach the masses and elevate their consciousness, the writers of *October* turned

towards photography, many artist in the seventies turned towards performance art, and now digital art is often championed as the new democratic art (Mul, p.5). Current discussions on authenticity in 'new-heritage' and participation in the arts will extensively be dealt with in Chapter 4.

Conclusion

Walter Benjamin's essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* has had a profound influence on artist and art writers alike. We now think of the aura of a work of art as the 'unique phenomenon of distance, however close it may be', linking us to the moment of creation, following the work of art to the here and now. According to Benjamin, the aura of a work of art is destroyed through technical reproductions, thereby damaging the nominal and the expressive authenticity of the original. This process leads to a shattering of tradition, changing the role of art from ritualistic in function to political. Content would become more important than the persona of the artist or their place in the art world.

Benjamin's ideas especially gained interest among Postmodernist thinkers like the writers of the magazine *October*. Benjamin's emphasis on film and photography as the 'new' art was not only admired by critics, but many artist like Sherrie Levine as well. The cult of the artist and originality was attacked ferociously, while at the same time Walter Benjamin was also criticized. His prediction that nominal authenticity would no longer matter did obviously not come true and painting did not go away, as Krauss and other writers of *October* had expected and hoped. Even though nominal authenticity obviously still matters a great deal, Benjamin is once again called upon in the light of the new developments in the digital age that we live in today. Both his ideas on the aura of the work of art in relation to reproducibility are looked towards as well as his Marxist views on the democratization of art.

In the following chapters we shall see what the main issues with authenticity are today in relation to (new) cultural heritage - the area that according to Benjamin would suffer the most under the reproducibility of art (Chapter 4). We will also take a closer look at Internet art and the specific problems when it comes to preserving and locating authenticity (Chapter 5). The issues presented in these chapters will be looked at in the context of Walter Benjamin's ideas and newly found popularity.

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4 Authenticity and Internet Art in the Museum

Introduction

In the last chapter we have seen how Walter Benjamin's essay had a profound impact on our thinking of the work of art and reproducibility. Although opinions differ on the relevance of Benjamin's theory, we cannot deny that it seems reasonable to once again consider his theories in the light of the recent developments in the arts. In this chapter we shall discuss some issues that play a role in museums and new heritage institutions when dealing with Internet art. Though categorization of art forms is always problematic, we shall define Internet art (often called Net.Art) simply as art made for and on the Internet, using the Internet as its primary means and inspiration (Greene, p.7). The trends we discuss here all touch upon the fact that the immateriality, interconnectedness, and interaction we perceive in Internet art, challenge some of our basic understandings of art and the role of the museum. In this manner, we hope to gain some insight into the relevance of Benjamin's theories.

4.1 The Museum and Internet Art

4.1.1 The Materiality of the Aura

It might not come as a surprise that the traditional role of art museums in the Western world has for a long time been viewed as one of guarding and presenting nominal authenticity. Peter van Mensch argues that the importance of nominal authenticity to museums is directly connected to their authority as an institution. The reliability and prestige of the museum is viewed by him as directly dependent on the trust of the public and their conviction that the objects shown are authentic (Van Mensch, p.46). In fact, when we look at the definition of 'museum' by the International Council of Museums, we see that they specifically note the materiality of the 'evidence' shown in museums;

> *"A museum is a non-profit making, permanent institution in the service of society and of its development, and open to the public which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits, for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of people and their environment."* (ICOM)

Many observed the issue of the trustworthiness of the museum for the public to be the most important reason for the strong classification of the relationship between originals and reproductions in national art museums (Fyfe, p.50-51). Reviewing a recent exhibition in the Royal Museums of Fine Arts in Brussels, we might recognize this tendency. The exhibition *The British Royal Collection* (May 16th – September 21st 2008) shows works by Pieter Brueghel the Elder side by side the museum's own works by Pieter Brueghel the Younger, clearly distinguishing between the original and the copy, pointing out differences and similarities. This distinction is relevant not only for educational purposes, says digital heritage specialist Ross Parry (University

of Leichester), but it is also crucial for the museums' role in society.

As we know, however, paying attention to the differences between an original work and a copy in an exhibition of sixteenth century works, as the Royal Museums of Fine Arts did, is nothing new. When dealing with Internet art, the challenge lies precisely in the difficulties in trying to discern between the original and the copy, because as we have seen in paragraph 3.2.2, there are no differences. Consequently, there may be an unlimited number of equal instances of a multiple work of art. In the case of the original and the copy of the Brueghel paintings on display in Brussels, the aura of both works remains intact, even according to Benjamin (they are handmade copies, not machine-made reproductions). This issue is already controversial in photography, but in Internet art it becomes even more difficult. For Walter Benjamin, the case of the aura photography was clear: he felt there was no aura in photography and it is not hard to imagine how he would have felt about Internet art. After all, entire online galleries of Internet art can be taken and copied to another webserver, as happened with the Documenta X webgallery. When the original gallery was to be ended simultaneously with the physical exposition, Cosic copied the entire gallery onto his own webserver (http://www.ljudmila.org/~vuk/dx/) (Cosic, p.508). Many writers have taken Benjamin's theory to heart and feel that the arrival of new media, especially in the form of reproductions, threatens the existence of the art museum (e.g. Thomas, p.90, Stallabrass, p.129). The arrival of new media in the museum leads to "anxiety (…) surround[ing] the end of the physical visit; a loss of authenticity and authority (…) as well as anxieties over the sustainability of new media initiatives" (Parry, p.344). This particularly resonates in the debate on the digitalization of art museum collections, where a vivid discussion is taking place concerning Benjamin's aura, the role of the museum, and the availability of digital reproductions on the internet (Trant, p.107). More on this discussion can be found in Boekman issue 75 on Art and Digitalization (Amsterdam: Boekman Stichting, 2008). Although the recent developments will most likely not 'destroy' the museum and the fear of the digital age will eventually ebb away (Thomas, p.90), like the anxieties surrounding photography eventually did as well, it does show that there is a certain level of uneasiness surrounding Internet art and other digital arts.

An additional and closely related problem when dealing with the aura in Internet art is the seeming loss of the entire materiality of the work of art, due to which we can no longer speak of an 'object'. As we have seen, the materiality of cultural heritage is what museums are made for and know how to deal with (see ICOM definition above). For Benjamin, the aura was already lost when presented with a photo reproduction of a nominally authentic work of art, since the reproduction lacked the provenance, or place in tradition, of the original. This provenance, the aura, is strongly connected to the physical object-ness of the work (Van de Wetering, p.48), since it is the object itself that bares the physical and historical marks of its journey through time. Today, photographs still possess physical, nominal authenticity (partly through their limited numbers), which is needed for the formation of the aura. In many discussions on the inclusion of Internet art (and other digital art forms) in museum collections, this opposition between the material and the virtual is highlighted:

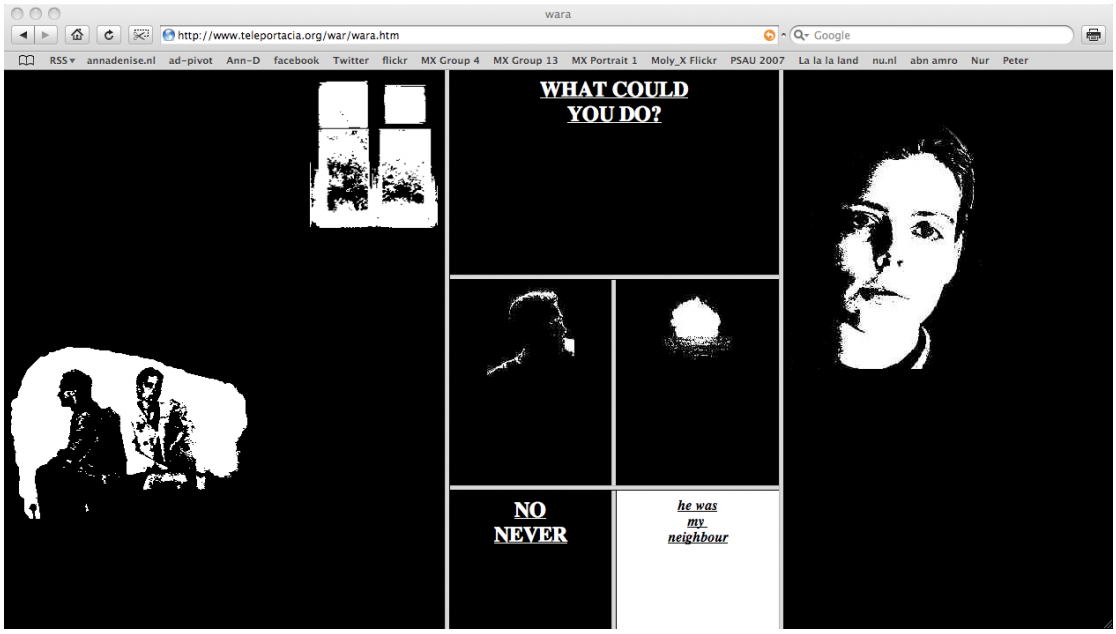
> *"[The] radical difference (…) is conceived in terms of a series of oppositions. The material world carries weight – aura, evidence, the passage of time, the signs of power through accumulation, authority, knowledge, and privilege. Multimedia on the other hand, is perceived as 'the other' of all of these – immediate, surface, temporary, modern, popular, and democratic."* (Witcomb, p.35)

The 'absence' of the material in Internet art, combined with the multiplicity of instances of the work of art, makes the localization of authenticity in Internet art particularly difficult. Even more so, because it seems that, unlike photography and video, Internet art will not allow itself to be 'materialized':

> *"In the past, (…) the art world came to an accommodation with new media, changing itself a little and*

> *the media a great deal. Photography and video, for instance, took on compromised forms, withdrawing their sting of reproducibility with fine prints, limited editions and gallery installation. On the Internet, this will be harder to stage. For photography and video, reproduction was relatively cheap and simple but distribution was often expensive and difficult. With the Internet, the means of cheap distribution are built in. So much of the art work exclusivity clusters around the qualities of rarity, ownership, access and scale, all of which must be artificially imposed on the Internet, or hardly apply."* (Stallabrass, p.137)

It almost seems like Benjamin's aura could, eventually, 'survive' reproducibility, as long as the materiality of the work of art stayed intact. The physical 'object-ness' of the work of art is lost in Internet art, bringing about a whole new set of problems. Wherein lies the authenticity of an artwork, when the object is no longer tangible? Opinions differ on the answer to this question, which is particularly apparent when comparing anglo-American intellectual property law to the continental intellectual law; anglo-American law currently only protects works that are fixed in a physical medium, whereas continental law does not require this (Hesselink, p.30).



Olia Lialina, *My Boyfriend Came Back From the War*, 1996.

4.1.2 Production, Distribution and the Case of Books

A change or difference we observe between many 'traditional artforms' and even most 'new media artforms' is the means of production and distribution. A comparison to books might be appropriate in this context. In many ways the issues literature has gone through after the invention of the printing press are very similar to the issues we dealt and deal with in the visual arts. Museums have always been responsible for the selection and distribution of (nominally and expressive) 'authentic' works of art, just like publishing houses have been responsible for the selection and distributing 'authentic' literary works. In book publishing, means of reproduction have since the invention of the printing press become much cheaper, broadening the audience. Where can one localize authenticity in texts, then? Copyright speaking, the author has the rights to the specific word sequence of the book he wrote and in most cases, this is enough (Lingen, p.51). But 'original' manuscripts are notoriously full of errors that are corrected before publication and even before publishing a new edition, creating differences between the various editions and the 'original' manuscript. Nevertheless, all these editions remain 'authentic', just like quality differences in photographic prints do not render them inauthentic (Stroud, p.565). Why is it then that we deem a text still authentic when it is copied a million times, but we have so much

trouble with allowing a million prints of an artistic photograph (Stroud, p.564)? One could say that it has to do with the amount of 'decoding' one needs to do before grasping the entirety of the work of art. Whereas a photograph is instantly seen and memorized (although perhaps not understood, which is where the value of the museum comes in), most texts need a little more effort. Try 'seeing' and memorizing Homer's Odyssey in an instance; it is a ridiculous challenge.

The relationship between books and Internet art is a sensory one. Most Internet art works make use of images, but are more than that. A good example of this is a work from the early history of Internet art (then called Net.Art) is the work *My Boyfriend Came Back From the War* (1996) by Olia Lialina (the work and a web archive linked to the work can be found on: http://myboyfriendcamebackfromth.ewar.ru/). This work makes extensive use of images as well as text, but the *experience* of the artwork, the interaction with the work is what makes it special. The Internet might look like a medium, but is in fact a 'practice' in which various media (like photography, video, music, etc.) can be employed freely (Stallabrass, p.24, Dietz, p.82 and Cook, p.116). This means that a work of Internet art, like books, cannot instantly be appreciated in its entirety.

Although the case of books is similar, it is also different. There are two components to this difference between a text – even a text on the Internet - and a work of Internet art. The first component is the fact that even though digital or digitalized texts might be available on the Internet, and in that sense can be as 'immaterial' as Internet art, these texts are quite easily translated back into a physical form. If the authenticity of a text is located in the specific word order of the text, it does not make a difference whether we view this word order on our screen, or on a printout version of the online version. How often do we meet someone who actually has done away with paper completely? With Internet art, however, this is quite a different story. Of course screenshots can be produced, but Internet art being inherently interactive, the printouts of these screenshots will not be true to the work of art represented online. Thus, the second component of the difference between texts and Internet art, is that "the Internet is "formally both where and how the work is made and displayed," (Cook, p.117), possessing the qualities of a work of art while simultaneously being a means of distribution. The Internet and therefore Internet art has no physical location, and it only takes presence through its use. The Internet exists only between users, through what can be called "the technological basis for the organizational form of the Information Age: the network" (Castells, p.2). In fact, a work of Internet Art is information made visible by, through, and for the network. Some art critics and thinkers, like Lev Manovich, have therefore (controversially) argued that the materiality of Internet art is made manifest through its networks and one's interaction with and in these networks (Manovich, p.54). In paragraph 4.1.3 we shall read more about the issue of the networked quality of Internet art. In Chapter 5 we shall deal with the difficulties these issues bring about in the preservation and conservation of Internet art.

Books have increasingly come to rely on the Internet for distribution, but unless texts become as dependent on user interaction as Internet art (as is the case in weblogs, perhaps?), this is no threat to their authenticity. Ever since the invention of the printing press, distribution networks (publishing houses) have dominated the market. The biggest challenge coming from the Internet for books is therefore a challenge for the publishing houses, holding onto the rights to distribute (and sell) the authentic work. This challenge is very similar to the problems museums have with Internet art; only in Internet art there is the added challenge of context. Two of the functions of museums are selection and distribution, which legally are reflected in the intellectual property rights museum curators have on the floor plans and selections made for exhibitions (Hesselink, p.66). In this context, we can see the anxieties surrounding new media as being the fear of museums of losing their grip on the distribution of artworks. In this paragraph we have seen that distribution of artworks is one of the main functions of the museum that is threatened by the networked quality of Internet art. In the

next paragraph we shall see that this networked quality also creates problems in trying to give museum visitors an authentic experience of Internet art.

4.1.3 The Authentic Experience and Context

Internet art, being a practice rather than a medium, belongs within the context of the Internet. The important discussion within art museums and cultural heritage institutions is on the authenticity of the experience of the 'objects' presented is also presented with another dimension in Internet art. David Lowenthal describes in his book *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (1998) several ways in which cultural heritage institutions deal with the past. He describes that on the one hand there is 'history', an academic approach towards researching history, and on the other hand there is 'heritage', an effort to connect the past to the present. He warns us for the latter approach, since it often has more to do with current views on society than it does with the actual past (Lowenthal, p.XV). A good example of this discussion is the critical reception of the plans of the new Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, expected to open in 2012, to incorporate art and history into one unified 'atmosphere'. Many art historians were afraid that the paintings would be used only to illustrate a present-day view on Dutch history, thereby disrupting the enjoyment of the paintings' aesthetic value. The director of the Rijksmueum, De Leeuw, assured jokingly that he would not "use Vermeer's *Little Street* (c.1657-1661) to illustrate seventeenth century hygiene," but that he merely felt he was giving the works back their original 'context' (Heermavan Vos).

The problem of the authentic experience in cultural heritage museums is twofold. The first part of the problem is the above-mentioned trust in the museum's *authority by the public*. This means that objects presented in the museum are perceived to be (nominally) authentic. A big part of this perception is the visible wear and tear of the object. A terracotta warrior from the army of Xi'An, for example, does no longer look like it used to when originally created. It is severely fractured and it has lost the bright colors we know it must have had. The museum has to make a choice whether to re-paint the warrior or whether to leave it as it is (be it reassembled). The latter option is usually what happens today and is a recent development in the presentation of cultural heritage. "Up until the early nineteenth century, art works were rarely shown to the public in an obviously damaged or incomplete form," explains Peter Walsch, "Damaged Roman and Geek sculptures were provided with replacement parts (…). Paintings were typically retouched to hide damage or to reflect changing taste, cut down or enlarged to fit new displays" (Walsch, p.27). Current choices in how to present cultural heritage thus reflect current views on history and heritage, which of course aim to be an objective experience of 'authenticity' the public expects from the museum (Cameron, p.56). This 'authentic experience' has a lot to do with the experience of the aura as Benjamin describes it. It has to do with the physical (nominal) condition of the authentic work of art and the museum has to make a choice in how it feels it can connect the past to the present, without losing its objectivity. The other choice a museum needs to make when dealing with an 'authentic experience' is the *context*. A work of Internet art is made for the Internet, just as much as the *Arc de Triomphe* was made for its specific location at the end of the Champs Élysées in Paris. Moving the *Arc de Triomphe* inside would change its function dramatically (this is of course precisely what happened with much of the Egyptian heritage in the British Museum in London). Though the nominal authenticity of the work would remain unchanged (and easily determined), the experience of the work would be altered dramatically.

In Internet art, the discussion on an authentic experience is an important one. Some authors feel that incorporation into a museum or gallery environment would destroy the authenticity of the experience of the work, ripping it from its original environment (Stallabrass, p.128-129). Because Internet art is often considered a practice, the means by which the work is created is also the context. Sarah Cook and Beryl Graham explain:

> *"Many of the once-fixed conditions of exhibition and reception are changed by the characteristics of new media art, and affect the practice of curating. These caracteristics make it very difficult to separate the means of distribution, and content (work) from context (network)."* (Cook 2004, p.85)

When trying to convey an 'authentic experience' when exhibiting Internet art, curators have to make a series of choices. Do you exhibit the work only online or also or exclusively in a physical exhibition? Do you leave the work on the artist's website, or do you place it on the museum's webserver? Do you allow or shield off access to other internet websites (so as to prevent from museum visitors to check their e-mail on the machine exhibiting the work) or do you integrally place it on the museum's intranet, risking links to other works or parts of the project to be 'dead ends'? For example, where would Mark Napier's *Net.Flag* (2002) be without the worldwide access to and interaction with it? An interactive flag for the Internet would mean nothing if not accessible to all users on the Internet. This work in fact has a similar dependent relationship with the Internet users as a website like Wikipedia does. Most museum curators have responded to these challenges on a case-by-case basis (Cook 2004, p.87), but even so, some authors feel the museum cannot guarantee an authentic experience of Internet art. Julian Stallabrass is not just skeptical about the authenticity of the experience, he is even more afraid of what the incorporation of Internet art into the museum will do to the character and development of Internet art in general.

> *"Video art's fate in the museum offers a dire warning to Internet art. The gallery and the museum did come to embrace video, but generally by remaking it as video-installation, displaced from the TV monitor onto large-scale projections, spectacle being purchased at the price of losing mass-production and wide distribution. Video became something that resembled a traditional fine art object. It may be that the embrace of Internet art will be similar, turning this most distributable and immaterial communication into a hybrid techno-craft of making object and environments."* (Stallabrass, p.120)

In other words, museums should leave the Internet the Internet and not try to incorporate it into physical museum environments, forcing physical authenticity onto an immaterial art. One wonders whether Stallabrass feels, like some curators, that the museum website is the only appropriate place for exhibiting Internet art (Cook 2004, p.87).

So far we have seen that authenticity in Internet art is a difficult subject matter. Internet artworks are not just multiple and infinitely reproducible, they are also immaterial, thereby making it even easier to reproduce its instances and almost impossible to find 'the aura' in a physical provenance and connection to the past. Additionally, Internet art is considered not so much a medium, but rather a practice, making it complicated to separate the work from its context, the network, without altering the experience of the work. Art is going through some similar issues as literature, with the difference that Internet art is impossible to re-make into a physical object without completely removing it from its context. We have seen that within the cultural heritage sector, the authentic experience and attention to the work's context is very important as well, and this is even truer for Internet art, which relies heavily on the network structures and interactivity of the environment for which it was made.

4.2 Authorship in Internet Art

4.2.1 Genius and the Internet

Traditionally, the relationship between the artist and their work has been one of 'cause and effect', and, as we have seen in Chapter 2 of this thesis, great importance is attached to the identity of the artist. Some writers argue that one of the main explanations for the *Mona Lisa*'s fame is the cult surrounding her maker: the incredible genius of Leonardo DaVinci (Sassoon, p.9). Perhaps not surprisingly then, in Internet art, the role of the artist has changed with respect to the production of the art work. It is not uncommon for artists that do not possess the technical skills to complete their work as planned, to hire or collaborate with a programmer. Moreover, collaboration between groups of artists on the Internet is even more common. A good example of such collaboration is the website www.jacksonpollock.org (2003) by Miltos Manetas, whose name we find at the top of the website. Miltos is a member and founder of the 'cybercollective' *Neen.* In an interview Manetos confessed that in fact, his role in the production of the piece was minor, since the application the website consists of was developed by fellow *Neen*-member Michal Migurski (www.stamen.com) and finalized through a group effort by all *Neen* members (Witkamp, p.19).

Since the Internet is first and foremost a network, aimed at the exchange of information, collaboration and interconnectivity are at its core. It is only natural that these aspects translate also to the creation of Internet art. Internet artist Mark Napier explains:

> *"Internet art brings the reproducibility to the foreground because reproduction is inherently part of the artwork, rather than something that is done afterwards (as in reproductions of the Mona Lisa). And the idea of art created by group effort is also a natural aspect of internet artwork. Interactivity and networking are an integral part of that medium."* (Napier 2008, Appendix 1)

So, does this mean that the Internet's inherent collaborative nature has done away with our 'yearning', if we may call it that, for geniuses in Internet art? According to Steve Dietz, curator and founding Director of New Media Initiatives at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, it is not the end of our yearning, but Internet art does make things a lot more complicated:

> *´On the net, collaboration is not the exception that proves the rule. Whether it is collectives or role differentiation – concept, programmer, designer, sound mixer, coder, digitizer, writer, fabricator, server administrator – it is even unusual to have a single artist who does everything on a given project. And even not completed without the participation of a… participant. Such a milieu does not lend itself to the notion of genius (…)"* (Dietz, p.80)

Dietz even feels that the lack of a solid identity as a result of collaborations and the anonymity of the Internet is contributing to the fact that Internet art has not acquired the 'high art' status video art has gained in the past decennium. Although collaborations have been more common in the visual arts and art world (think of Rembrandt and his apprentices), these collaborations are often ignored. This is not so easy in Internet art, where collaborations are the rule rather than the exception and this makes it difficult to identify and champion 'great artists'. Part of this is of course also due to the lack of technical knowledge, but partly it is hard to impose the term 'genius' on someone who openly acknowledges or thanks his programmers for their help or perhaps does not claim full authorship of the work at all.

4.2.2 Interactivity and Authorship

We know interactivity is a large part of Internet artworks. Like books are meant to be read, Internet artworks are to be interacted with. A large part of this interactivity comes from the interactive nature and democratic promise of the Internet itself. Some writers, like Andrea Witcomb, even say that the interaction with the user might eventually lead to a more democratic museum (Witcomb, p.46). Many Internet artworks are inspired by this and make use of this quality of the Internet, without this being the ultimate goal of the artwork – as becomes clear from Mark Napier's comment about the core of his work being the underlying algorithms. An additional force in creating the participatory nature of Internet art can be attributed to its activist origins. Many Internet art projects are similar to Fluxus art or performance art, in the sense that they join life and art in a way that sometimes makes it hard to determine what it is we are looking at.

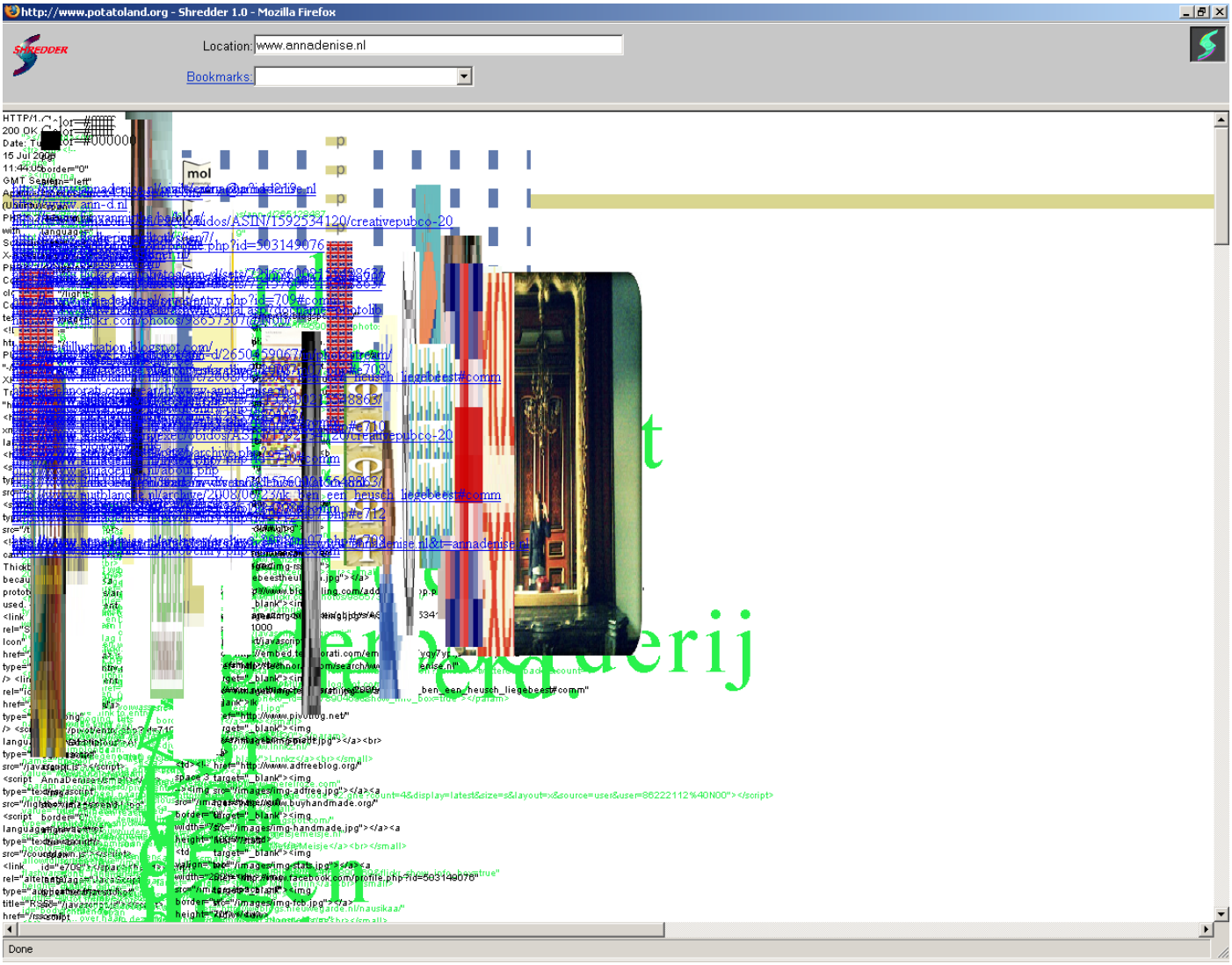
> *"Many of the actual conditions of avant-gardism are present in online art: its anti-art character, its continual probing of the borders of art, and of art's separation from the rest of life, its challenge to the art institutions, genuine group activity, manifestos and collective programs."* (Stallabrass, p.35)

This political dimension (or 'social engagement') is also visible in the extent to which some artworks rely on user input. The confusion on what the meaning of authenticity means in art has been a popular theme in art since Duchamp and continues to be a popular theme in Internet art as well. The large role of the user becomes clear from a work like *Netomat™* (1999-present) by Maciej Wisniewski, which is an Internet browser that creates a dialogue between the user and 'the Internet' by responding to keywords and sentences typed in by the user, thereby generating new Internet content.

> *"The number of Net-based artworks that encourage the visitor's interaction in the completion of the work – through clicking, linking, and entering data – suggest not just the conceptual origins of Net practice, but also its socially engaged or participatory origins."* (Cook 2007, p.118)

Internet art overlaps with the world through its engagement with its users and many Internet artists feel the Internet is therefore a real place (Napier 2008, Appendix 1 and Cook 2007, p.119) with real social impact. The 'succes' of Internet artworks like *Netomat™* is just as dependent on the user generated content as it is on the quality of the programming. When attempting to conserve a work of Internet art, does one also conserve the content generated by the users? Many Internet artists feel a strong connection to the work of Marcel Duchamp and the Dada movement (Cook 2007, p.118), and much of the 'randomness' embraced by the Dada movement can be found in the codes of the algorithms underlying many Internet artworks, like Mark Napier's *Shredder* (1998) which randomly 'shreds' the source code of any website (you can find the work on Napier's website www.potatoland.org. Despite the randomness these codes provide, and the importance of the input and output of the user, true authorship in this case lies not in the outcome of the work, but in the manner in which the input or data are manipulated.

Internet art inherently raises questions on authority, authenticity and ownership. It seems the Internet not just invites the participation of users, but also stimulates the collaboration between artists and exchange of skills and ideas. In fact, the Internet is doing exactly what it was made to do: exchange information. Artists have responded to this not only by exchanging 'data' with fellow artists and other internet users, but also by incorporating it into their works – making their ideas visible through whatever means available through the Internet.



Mark Napier, screenshot of *Shredder*, 1998.

4.3 Conceptual authenticity

> *"There is no original, however there is an author. Five digital copies of an artwork will all be essentially identical, there is no original, but I am the author of all these works, and for a person to own or show the piece they will need either me or my gallery to give them that right. This is a common model in the music industry. Anyone can own a song by say, Madonna, but only Madonna (and/or her publisher) has the right to distribute that song. She is recognized as the author of the song, and controls the rights to how it is used. So you could say that there is no original, but there is an originator."* (Napier 2008, Appendix 1)

4.3.1 Nominal, Expressive and Conceptual Authenticity

Next to the more romantic notions of nominal and expressive authenticity (see Chapter 2 of this thesis), we see that in dealing with modern art, we come across a third category of authenticity: Conceptual authenticity. Starting with the readymade movement initiated by Duchamp, the traditional role of the artist as craftsman was altered. Duchamp's *Fountain* was nothing more than a mass-produced urinary that with little physical intervention of the artist was elevated to the status of a 'work of art'. In her book *Touching Vision* (2004), Hiltrud Schinzel shares her vision that not the object of the *Fountain* itself should be hailed as the work of art, but that it/they should be viewed as evidence of the real work of art: Duchamp's decision to label the

urinary as the work of art (Schinzel, p.40). Similarly, in most conceptual art works, the ideas behind the work are more important than the actual work (hence the category 'conceptual' art). Conceptual artist Diederik Kraaijpoel explains that in conceptual art, the process of thinking the work out is more important than the actual creation of the work. He calls this merely a 'technical affair' that can be dealt with by anyone (Ex, p.106). Jokiletho introduces this third 'kind' of authenticity as the total of ideas that the artist has about his work, or that which he means to convey through his work (Jokiletho, p.19).

Although many people feel that conceptual authenticity and expressive authenticity are one and the same, we can clarify the difference between the different kinds of authenticity by means of Heidegger's ideas. Expressive authenticity can be seen as parallel to his idea of 'eigentlichkeit' – the artist needs to be true to his self in his means of expression. This is often something that is subjectively judged based on style, which is why we have not spoken much of this kind yet. Nominal authenticity can then be seen as parallel to Heidegger's idea of 'erde', the material, whereas conceptual authenticity can be compared to his idea of 'welt', the ideas, the entirety of concepts. So whereas the expressive authenticity has much to do with the artist's being and faithfulness to himself (and although we all think we know what this means, it's still hard to objectify this form of authenticity), conceptual authenticity has to do with the artist's intention. What is the artist trying to convey and how does he do this? An example of this is the work *Reamweaver* (http://reamweaver.com, 2001/2002) by ®™ark (pronounced 'RT-Mark' or 'artmark') and 'the Yes men'; a piece of software that automatically produces a parody of any chosen website. The software was first released in response to the World Trade Organization's attempt to shut down the website www.gatt.org, which parodies the WTO's website. In this case, the software was meant to be freely distributed and used in reaction against the WTO. In other words, the execution of the work was meant to be performed by as many others as possible, while the conceptual authenticity can be attributed completely to The Yes Men and ®™ark.

As we shall see in Chapter 5, in practice, when archiving 'new media art', up until now this conceptual authenticity has been the most important factor in deciding what to keep. Although conceptual authenticity gives us something more practical to work with after all the confusion about nominal and expressive authenticity, it still raises moral questions about what should be preserved and what should and should not be preserved. In an interview on 'new cultural heritage' conducted by the Instituut Collectie Nederland (ICN), a leading Dutch knowledge institute for the "preservation and management of movable cultural heritage", Montevideo Institute of Time Based Art explains that one of the biggest challenges in preserving new media art is coming up with a framework for what to keep. It seems that conceptual authenticity can help us in figuring out how to keep a work of art authentic whilst attempting to preserve it, but has it helped us to figure out what is authentic about the work of Internet art in the first place?

4.3.2 The Aura?

Now that we found a possible new interpretation of authenticity in Internet art, where can we find the aura? The Erasmus University's Professor in philosophy Jos de Mul says in an article in De Volkskrant that he feels that Walter Benjamin's assertion that the 'death' of the aura will lead new media art forms such as photography to turn political, replacing the ritual dimension, is indeed true for most digital art and Internet art (De Mul, p.5). While the artist and his role (albeit a confusing role) still remains highly important, the democratic promise that the Internet has offered since the beginning need not be overlooked. Benjamin saw the potential for revolutionary access for all and a mass participation in the arts. Internet has given anyone with enough money for a computer and an Internet connection the opportunity to create, distribute and participate in Internet art. De Mul therefore concludes that instead of the traditional 'aura' which is found in physical works

of art of nominal (and expressive) authenticity, is indeed lost through the infinitely reproducible character of Internet art, but that this aura is replaced by a veneration for the 'manipulative' and interactive, something which he calls 'dataism'. Other writers have noted as well that people have become to regard the vast pools of manipulative data as something 'of the sublime', reflecting the rhizomorphic makeup of our world (Dietz, p.89).

But is the aura really lost? If we stick to a strict reading of Benjamin's argument, then, yes, the aura has no place in Internet art. Practically speaking, however, the issues of aura and authenticity are intentionally tested to the limit in Internet art, perhaps claiming that they never meant anything at all, or if they did, then why does it matter? As we shall see in Chapter 5, the authenticity of Internet art is mainly tested through its conceptual authenticity, bringing the original ideas to the foreground. In the past, these ideas, these concepts, were always there but were more or less obscured through the visual side of the artwork. The practice of putting together a Vanitas painting, required as much conceptual thinking as the shredding of a website does. Internet, however, is based completely on the exchange of information and thereby brings these qualities more to the foreground, making the ideas more important than the eventual execution of the work.

Conclusion

Several issues contribute to the confusing role of authenticity in Internet art. Whereas museums (and much of the art world) thrive on the materiality and nominal authenticity of their art works, Internet art challenges this by being seemingly 'immaterial' and impossible to separate from its context. Traditionally, works of art are displayed as 'authentically' as possible and for Internet art this means on the Internet, rather than in a gallery or installation-setting. The Internet thereby cancels out the needs of a museum acting as the 'distributor' of the artwork, since the Internet has its cheap means of distribution built right in. This is why the Internet in Internet art is often called a 'practice' rather than a medium. Another problem in the determination of authenticity in Internet art is the absence of a clear 'author'. Collaborations and the exchange of skills between artists on the Internet make it difficult to find true 'genius', even if the true identity of the artist is actually known and his work has not unknowingly been copied onto another website. This issue is only intensified by the fact that the users of Internet art are such a large part of the work. Eventually, it seems like we need a new definition of authenticity and many believe that 'conceptual authenticity' offers a viable solution. This form of authenticity pays attention to whether the shape of the artwork as it will be preserved in fact remains in accordance with the artist's intentions. As we shall see in Chapter 5, this is especially useful when the artist is still alive, like in the case of Mark Napier, who asserts that his algorithms are the 'core' of his work.

If we look at the relevance of Walter Benjamin's ideas, we can say that the issues we deal with in Internet art are similar to the issues he observed after the invention and wide spread use of photography. In fact, whereas Benjamin reacted merely to the reproducibility of works of art through another medium, in Internet art (and other digital arts) the means of reproduction are part of the fabric of the works. Whether this directly leads to the loss of the aura is unclear. The Internet and Internet art are indeed more 'actual' than traditional art forms, because they enter people's lives through their participatory nature. It is therefore not surprising that many Internet artworks take on a 'politicized' form, or a socially conscious and critical role. Since the beginning of the Internet it has contained a promise of democracy that some art historians and curators believe will change the role of the museum from a closed-off, elitist showcase to a dynamic, more democratic and participatory platform. In Chapter 5 we will discuss the practical ways and problems museums have when dealing with the preservation, conservation, and restoration of Internet art and how this forces museums to take on a different approach to the concept of authenticity.

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5 Preservation and Conservation

Introduction

In the last chapter we have discussed various factors that complicate the localization of authenticity in Internet art. We have seen that the networked, immaterial, and collaborative nature of Internet artworks calls for a different definition of authenticity. Even though the role of authenticity in Internet art is still highly confusing, it seems museum professionals are not blessed with sufficient time to carefully consider the implications of these issues before deciding on how to act in preserving and conserving Internet art. In this chapter we shall discuss the ways in which museums try to deal with the ephemeral nature of Internet art in preserving and conserving Internet Art and we look at the way this influences the workings of the museum.

5.1 Preservation and Conservation of Internet Art

5.1.1 The Viewing Problem

> "*While the default for physical artifacts is to persist (or to deteriorate in slow increments), the default for electronic objects is to become inaccessible (…). We can discover and study 3000 year old cave paintings and pottery (…). But we are unable to decipher any of the contents of an electronic file on an 8-inch floppy disk from only 20 years ago.*" (Besser, p.263)

Preservation and conservation are two large aspects of museum practice. In general, physical objects do deteriorate (or are retrieved in a depressing state of decay) and in order to protect the nominal authenticity of the work of art (or historical object), museum professionals spend a lot of time and energy on making sure the climate conditions of the exhibition spaces and/or depots are just right and discuss at length to what extent works should be conserved and/or restored. This is a difficult task when it concerns 'regular' art objects, but for reasons discussed in Chapter 4, Internet art takes these difficulties to a wholly other level. One of the main problems in Internet art (and digital art in general) is what NYU preservation specialist Howard Besser called 'the viewing problem', the problem of files becoming un-viewable due to the changes in hardware and software formats. Many people still remember the rapid switching from 8-inch floppy disks, to 5.25-inch floppy disks, to 3.5-inch diskettes, to CD-ROMS, and now to DVD's and Blueray. Another example is the latest version of Apple's operating system, Mac OS X Leopard (10.5). This version of the famous operating system no longer contains the 'Classic' environment, a hardware and software abstraction layer that allowed applications that were compatible with Mac OS 9 to run on the Mac OS X operating system. This means that various older applications once supported by Mac are no longer viewable on Intel Macs and PowerPC Mac running Leopard, leaving certain files and file extensions for dead. Likewise, works that were created for early Internet browsers are simply no longer be viewable or important parts of works were moved or removed, giving us the most common message on the Internet: '404: Not Found'. This happened to Mark Napier:

> "*Some of my Internet work has become unviewable. I assumed this would happen eventually and actually*

> *am surprised it lasted as long as it did. The work belonged to a specific cultural time and I don't feel that it has to be preserved, or that it even will make sense if it is preserved. Some digital work could be converted to other platforms to preserve or "reenact" the piece. I have converted some pieces myself already and see this as a likely strategy to preserve work."* (Napier, Appendix 1)

This choice between letting things run its course for a while and actively conserving and preserving needs to be made almost instantly in Internet art. Museum professionals and artists now start to realize that by not making a choice, they often make the most devastating choice of all. In an interview with Wired, Richard Rheinhard, director of digital media for the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, explains:

> *"With digital art, there's no room for things to fall between the cracks. If you don't do something to preserve it within a span of five years, it's not going to survive. Some works of digital art are already gone. Our time frame is not decades, it's years, at most."* (Reinhart in Mayfield).

5.1.2 Preservation, Conservation and Restoration

Traditionally, there are a couple of strategies to prevent 'normal' art objects from perishing. First, we discern active and passive conservation. Passive conservation, often called preservation, is aimed at creating the perfect conditions for a work of art to be displayed or stored. This concerns, among other things, climate control and idealized lighting conditions. By active conservation a series of actions is meant by which the current condition of the artwork is stabilized through, for example, reinforcing weakened areas or fixating and impregnating layers of paint. These methods are usually preferred over the more drastic measure of restoring a work to its original condition. Whereas conservation aims to leave the nominal authenticity of the work undisturbed, restoration aims to recuperate the artwork to its original state. This often includes measures like repainting areas of a painting, or replacing missing parts (Ex, p.66, 69). This method was more common up until the nineteenth century, whereas today the less intrusive methods of conservation are preferred (Walsch, p.27). In matters of preservation, conservation, and restoration, the general consensus seems to be (and this is reinforced by the International Council of Museums) that the methods used should aim to be as reversible as possible, maintaining the integrity of the object, or, the nominal authenticity. As one might expect, this is most difficult in restoring a work, since it deeply affects the fabric of works of art like paintings and sculptures.

One might expect these matters to be quite different in Internet art; however, the guidelines are surprisingly similar. Although Internet artworks are not expressed through their object-ness and longstanding traditional techniques developed for physical artifacts are of no use at all, we see a similar preference for preservation and conservation over restoration. For most 'electronic' or digital art 'objects', the method of 'refreshing' is a valid, though time-consuming, option (Besser, p.263-264). It involves periodically moving files from one storage device to another. Though CD-ROM and DVD manufacturers claim the life-span of a disc lies anywhere in between 30 and 100 years, many discs have been tested to last only 2 years, depending on storage and handling conditions (OSTA). This means that data need to be refreshed every couple of years. Apart from that, although some 3-inch diskettes might still be perfectly readable, the right equipment to do so is no longer common. Then, additional to refreshing, Internet artworks can be 'migrated' or 'emulated' to other platforms, as Mark Napier suggests (see above). Migration includes the updating of file extensions to maintain their accessibility. For example, WordPerfect documents can be translated to Word documents without changing the content of the work, and websites may be updated for newer browsers. Emulation includes the actual re-building of the file (sometimes called 're-creation') or the application ('emulation') to 'reenact', as Napier calls it, the original work. Whereas migration can be compared to traditional methods of conservation (and refreshing to preservation); emulation may be compared to restoration. Like restoration, it changes the actual fabric of the work (the code) and is therefore more likely to harm the conceptual authenticity of the work. A less intrusive

option for emulation is therefore to have the emulation take place on the side of the machine that is used to show the work. A new computer could be used to run old software or browsers to show an older piece of art (Carlson, p.35). We see then, that the solutions for safeguarding the nominal authenticity of an Internet artwork seem astonishingly similar to the traditional techniques used for physical artworks: preemptive measures are generally preferred over drastic retrospective actions

5.1.3 What, what, what?

If the methods of preservation are, though inconvenient, somewhat worked out, and the issues of maintaining nominal authenticity are similar to the issues we deal with in physical artworks, what is the problem? Well, the problem is that said preservation strategies are often expensive, sometimes inaccurate, and may conflict with the artist's intentions, posing significant challenges to the work's conceptual and contextual authenticity (Cullen, p.3). Moreover, trying to establish the boundaries of the work is immensely complicated (Besser, p.267). As discussed in Chapter 4, Internet art has no physical body and unfortunately almost never exists out of a single containable file. The interactivity and interconnectivity of the Internet poses serious questions as to what makes up the 'actual work'. Networked works, like Napier's *Shredder*, only work in a networked environment; the Internet is a vital part of the work, so storage is not an option. Howard Besser explains:

> *"Like performance art, Net.art and electronic works are usually difficult to capture and, in many cases it's not even clear what elements need to be captured. The longstanding preservation techniques developed for physical artifacts do not apply to the problem of preserving electronic works. (...) There are significant questions as to what is the boundary of a work. Pieces that link to other parts and may lead the viewer from one website to another, pose problems for anyone trying to capture and preserve a work."* (Besser, 264-267)

We see that the same problems that play a role in deciding how to display a work of Internet art, whilst trying to give the museum visitor as authentic an experience as possible (see Chapter 4), play a role in trying to preserve the work of art as well. How do we keep the work viewable on the one hand, whilst staying as 'true' as possible to the original context? This means that some formal aspects of the work need to be taken into consideration. This is a common problem in digital art in general and when a game called *Moondust* (1982), written by computer scientist and artist Jaron Lanier, became inaccessible after the disappearance of the Commodore 64, a group of kids took it upon themselves to adjust the game so it could be played on present-day computers. Whilst reviewing the re-created game, however, Lanier argued that because of the faster computers the game now ran on, this was no longer 'his' game. In other words, Lanier denied authorship of the game he once built because of the secondary materials involved in his work. This caused severe problems when a museum asked him to display the work and a working 1982 Commodore 64 proved more difficult to acquire than expected. "It turns out," Lanier explains on his own website, "that after my game cartridge was introduced, there was a slight hardware change to the computer (in 1983), which caused the sound to not work. So I had to find a 1982 Commodore 64. There were also compatibility problems with the video interface box and joystick. It took months to find a working set of parts. All this trouble with a machine who's operating system was fixed in ROM and had been available at the time in the millions!" (Lanier). This is no different for Internet artworks, ans as we have seen, Mark Napier also feels that some of his works belonged to a certain time (and thus a certain browser), which is a vital part of the work.

In conserving works of Internet art, museum professionals should take into consideration three things, says Besser: **1)** What is the work? Where do the boundaries lie?; **2)** What aspects of the work need to be saved? What aspects make up the core of the work?; and **3)** What secondary materials have become crucial to our

understanding of the work? (Besser, p.270). This means that museum professionals actively have to deal with questions of authorship, interactivity, and interconnectivity on top of the 'usual' questions that surround the preservation of works of art. In an interview on 'new cultural heritage' conducted by the Instituut Collectie Nederland (ICN), a leading Dutch knowledge institute for the 'preservation and management of movable cultural heritage', Montevideo Institute of Time Based Art explains that one of the biggest challenges in preserving new media art is deciding what to keep (and how to keep it):

> *"The most important guiding principle is to try and preserve what the artist himself sees as the essence of the work. This makes it particularly hard to develop a general value system since it is about the original ideas of the artists, and those can change as well (…). Internet art is not archived. Web applications are not archived, just the audio-visual content. There are some ideas, but it is a matter for the future. Internet connections can also be relevant to a work of art, so you will need to know what the possibilities are concerning preservation of these works. There are just too many developments to fully research before deciding what to keep and how to keep it."* (Annette Dekker and Raymond Coelho in Wieringa and Wijnia, p.10)

Though time seems to come down harder on Internet and other forms of digital art, the task of solving the issues concerning the preservation of the authenticity of these artworks seems more complicated than ever. Longstanding traditions of preservation no longer seem to apply and the available measures do not help us in figuring out where the boundaries of the artwork are. To preserve or not to preserve seems irrelevant when the real question is *what* to preserve.

5.2 Preservation and Conservation of Conceptual Authenticity

5.2.1 Discerning Conceptual Authenticity

As argued in Chapter 4, the solution may lie in accepting a different kind of authenticity, a kind that deals not with the nuts and bolts of the physical work, or lack thereof, but a kind that deals more intensely with the intention of the artist: conceptual authenticity. The problem is that trying to figure out what the original idea behind a work of art is has always been difficult in the visual arts, as is illustrated by the following example of the restoration of Barnett Newman's *Who's afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue III* (1967-68). Soon after the piece was damaged in 1986, a discussion arose on whether the work needed to be restored at all – after all, was the act of violence not a reaction against Barnett Newman's work and therefore 'part' of the work's nominal authenticity? After long deliberation, the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam decided to have the American Daniel Goldreyer restore the piece. Before his death, Newmann had commented on the great skills of this restaurateur, and his impressive resume, ranging from restoring Rembrandts to Rothkos, leading the director of the Stedelijk feel confident about the success of the restoration. However, after the completion of the restoration, voices went up from within and outside of the museum, claiming that Goldreyer went over the entire piece with acrylic paint and a roller, instead of limiting himself to the damaged part with oil paint and a brush. The original work had been made up out of fine red dots, whereas Goldreyer had replaced the entire area with a monochrome red. Goldreyer defended himself saying the intention of the piece had not been damaged, and that the esthetic aspect of the work had been restored. The question here is: what was the intention of the artists and was the original idea reflected in the work's purely esthetic value or on the production of the work or both? In painting, however, general guidelines prescribed by the ICOM indicate what needs to be done to roughly preserve nominal authenticity (and thereby the conceptual and/or expressive authenticity). When Goldreyer did not

stick to these guidelines, the public and experts were infuriated.

In Internet art, so far the art world has dealt with the preservation on a case-by-case basis – or just not at all. Dealing with artworks on a case-by-case basis is not only expensive, it also makes it terribly difficult to come up with general guidelines as to what to preserve, since opinions on what the conceptual authenticity of the work contains may vary. Internet artist Mark Napier revealed in an interview for this thesis that he felt the 'core' of his work are the algorithms underlying the piece:

> *"If you're asking specifically what is preserved, what exactly should be archived to preserve the artwork, I say that the algorithms that make the piece run are the "core" of the work. This is specific to my way of working.(...) Of course the art market loves objects for their investment potential, and typically mistakes the physical object (the projector or computer and monitor) as the art object. In my art the property the collector is investing in is the software, and that must be preserved in order to preserve the work. The computer is disposable and will be obsolete and probably broken in ten years. The software contains the elements of the artwork: what it does, how it does it."* (Napier 2008, Appendix 1)

Mark Napier: ©Bots, 2000. Screenshot of user generated contentcontent

Whereas Barnett Newmann's conceptual authenticity was unclear and enclosed in the physicality of the work (the nominal authenticity), as it is in most paintings, Mark Napier refers only to one part of the totality of the work, namely the code. This might seem straightforward, but many critics and 'users' of his works feel that the user generated content that his work generates is just as important. His work ©*Bots* (2000), for example, allows users to 'mesh up' elements of figures of popular culture (like Warner Brother's *Bugs Bunny*'s ears, or George Lucas' *Darth Vader* mask) and create new images out of them. The gallery of ©bots created by the website's users is just as much a part of the concept of the work as the code is. And as we have seen in Chapter 4, interactivity is inherent to Internet art. As Michael Rush commented, the viewer has become an increasingly important part of works art:

> *"When Duchamp suggested that the work of art depended on the viewer to complete the concept, little did he know that by the end of the century, works of art would literally depend on the viewer, not only to*

> *complete them, but to initiate them and give them content"* (Rush, p.171).

The confusion over where the concept 'ends' and whether reactions on the work or interactions with the work are part of the concept, is the reason why Montevideo currently merely preserves the audio-visual content of Internet art, and not the web pages or applications (Wieringa and Wijnia, p.10). At least these parts can be considered somewhat 'rounded off'. Montevideo should be praised for their attention to Internet art and acknowledging the need for preservation. However, these choices need to be made on a larger scale. They ought to be standardized, not only to cheapen the process, but also to prevent instances of a work becoming multiple works in itself. We can only imagine the complexity of trying to determine which instance of a work of Internet art is the most 'authentic' when preserved in, say, four different ways. In practice, attaching value to conceptual authenticity still involves figuring out where the boundaries of the work lie. However, the boundaries are not determined by looking at the nominal authenticity of the work and by trying to preserve its integrity, but rather by looking at the conceptual authenticity to determine what needs and what needs not to be preserved.

5.2.2 Documentation as Preservation

As described in Chapter 4, when a work of art enters the static surroundings of the museum, it is invariably separated from its authentic context. Museum professionals therefore have to make a choice between trying to simulate the original context of a work of art (as the Rijksmuseum intends to do through its planned style-chambers) or by indicating where the context of the museum differs from the original, through documentation. This is no different in trying to preserve (and exhibit) Internet art. Since opinions may vary about the need of preserving the entire authentic context including everything on the Internet at any given moment (something which might sound exhaustive, but has been a task of the non-profit organization Internet Archive (http://www.archive.org) since 1999), or merely preserving certain aspects of the context of the work relevant to its conceptual background, in both cases, documentation can ease the process of deciding what to keep. According to many museum professionals, this means that preservation and conservation should start during the conception of the work of art (Cullen, p.3 and Wieringa and Wijnia, p.15). Harald Kraemer, director of Artcampus at the University of Bern and creative director at Transfusionen in Zurich, Switzerland, is a great proponent of documentation as a preservation technique:

> *"Documentation has to become a category and a strategy, which must be used in an active way by the researcher, curator, registrar, but also by the artist, and user. In search of the historical truth and the reconstruction of original relationships, documentation in a new sense will be an integral part of the work of art."* (Kraemer, p.195)

This means that the artist needs to start documenting his work as soon as it is created (and if Kraemer got his way, even before creation). This includes documenting both the formal aspects (or ancillary materials) that are vital to our understanding of the work, like Internet browsers and desktop computers, as well as documenting all dimensions of the work, including its interconnectivity and interactivity and the possible collaborations that instigated the work. Although we should doubt whether we want preservation methods to interfere with the actual creation process, like in performance art, documentation can be used to capture those aspects of an Internet artwork that are difficult to preserve otherwise.

One of the most advanced tools in assisting museum professionals in documenting Internet art is the Variable Media Questionnaire. First developed in 2000 by Jon Ippolito, curator at the Guggenheim Museum, this questionnaire consists of an interactive form, linked to a larger database. It is designed to capture behavioral information about Internet art (and other kinds of 'variable media') and is meant to answer the 'what, what,

what?' questions posed earlier in this chapter. It helps to broadly establish the boundaries of the work of art, based on its conceptual origins. The Guggenheim Museum supplements this questionnaire by holding interviews with the artists, concerning questions of preservation and conservation (Besser, p.265). Such artist interviews are increasingly becoming a crucial part of documenting Internet art and other areas of contemporary art. In the publication of 'Modern Art: Who Cares?' Carol Mancusi-Ungaro and Shelley Sturman describe the importance of interviewing artists, in order to preserve the 'original intent' of the work. However, they argue "in the conservation of modern and contemporary art, the artist's opinion should be used as a guide – but in the end it is the custodian of the work who makes the final decision" (Mancusi-Ungaro and Sturman, p.391). This combination of active documentation by researchers, curators, registrars, artists, and users, should ensure that no part of the concept is overlooked. "[I]t should allow," according to Caitlin Jones, working at the Guggenheim Museum, "for their inclusion in the historical record that goes beyond anecdote, photographic representation, screen grab, or the ultimate digital demise, printing to paper" (Jones 2004, p.95). For example, the questionnaire not just asks what the work *Unfolding Object* (2002) by John H. Simon Jr. is (an Internet artwork in the shape of an endless book that keeps rewriting itself based on the input by visitors), but also how (written in Java) and why (was Java just the most common language at that point in time, is it all Simon knew, or does it have special features that are crucial to the work?). The questionnaire provides guidelines for documenting the formal and behavioral aspects of 'variable' works of art like Internet art, and aims through an open discussion to eventually come up with some general standards where it comes to preservation and documentation of conceptual authenticity. Even though solid standards are still in their infancy, the development of this questionnaire offers hope that today's Internet artworks will be preserved for future generations. Whereas documentation has been deployed as part of preserving cultural heritage before, it never has been to serve as vital a purpose as it has in preserving the conceptual authenticity of Internet art (Jones 2004, p.96). Through documentation museum professionals hope to gain insight in the vast amount of problems involved in securing conceptual authenticity.

5.2.3 The Interdepartmental Approach

An interesting aspect of the preservation and the documentation of Internet art in the museum is the interdepartmental approach that is required to deal with these works. Traditionally, preservation was restricted to conservation specialists, since most physical works of art do not require immediate action in order to 'save' the work from complete destruction. Because of the short window of opportunity in Internet art, the documentation of the conceptual authenticity of a work of Internet art (and most digital arts) starts at the moment of conception. This means that curators and artists play a large role in the preservation-process as well. Beryl Graham, Professor of New Media Art at the University of Sunderland (UK), explains:

> *"What is unusual about digital art is the involvement of artists/curators in this work, rather than strictly conservation specialists, which again reflects the collaboration and communication across museum departments."* (Graham, p.105)

It seems that the collaborative nature of Internet art and the interactivity and openness of the Internet have transferred onto museum practices, opening up discussion on what art really is, where authenticity lies, and how to collectively preserve it. This might be a reason why in Internet art, museums increasingly commission works of art as opposed to buying them off the 'free market' (Stallabrass, p.117). It is becoming increasingly common that curators not just provide the content and context for museum exhibitions, but that they find themselves being "a commissioner and a collaborative leader of a teams of artists and technicians" (Cook and Graham, p.86). This is a radical change from the traditional role of the curator of simply collecting and representing existing works and historical research. This is also visible in a Canadian preservation initiative

called 'Documentation et Conservation du Patrimoine des Arts Médiatiques' (DOCAM). This documentation project, initiated by the Daniel Langlois Foundation, researches the perishable nature of new media through interdisciplinary research into methods of documentation of new media art forms. This shows that the dialogue on the preservation of authenticity in new media art reaches beyond the boundaries of the museum and combines scientific with technical knowledge.

Moreover, some curators have argued that this interdepartmental approach needed to preserve and exhibit Internet art and other types of 'new media art' has changed role of the museum as a whole (Cook and Graham, p.86). Curators can be seen as facilitators of Internet art, rather than mere collectors, opening up the museum to contemporary culture (Witcomb, p.35).

> *"As Gerfried Stocker, director of the Ars Electronica festival, has argued, museums need to change focus from being a site for presentation to a platform for production."* (Dietz, p.80)

In becoming a platform, museum curators and conservators take away a large part of the difficulties in ensuring the authentic context (the museum then becomes the context) and can document all the choices made in the development of the work of Internet art. Documentation can be produced in a much wider sense, to convey the conceptual authenticity and the intention of the work of art to those who were not present at its conception or presentation.

Although conceptual authenticity seems a more relevant definition of authenticity when it comes to Internet art, we have seen that it is still difficult to discern where the concept (and thus 'the authentic work') begins and ends. Despite the difficulties of trying to come up with solid standards, museums and artists are working together to preserve the conceptual authenticity of Internet artworks to preserve the original intent and context. Up until now, documentation of all aspects of the work of art has been hailed as the most effective way of thinking about preservation and has according to some transformed the way museums work. Although documentation is of course not the actual preservation of a work of Internet art, it is a first step in determining *what* to preserve and can give clues as to *how* to preserve. Like performance art, some aspects of Internet art might prove impossible to preserve or reenact, but preservation gives us tools to deal with both now and in the future (Graham, p.106).

Conclusion

In this chapter we have seen that thinking about the issues concerning the preservation of the authenticity of Internet artworks seems more complicated than ever, especially because of the short time-frame museum professionals are operating in. Traditional methods of preservation no longer apply because they are aimed at preserving the nominal authenticity of physical works of art. When applied to Internet art, these kinds of techniques seem insufficient and possibly harmful to the conceptual authenticity of works of Internet art. Whereas conceptual authenticity is now generally seen as a more workable definition, we have seen that there are still considerable difficulties in trying to discern conceptual authenticity in Internet art. Museums and artists are working together to preserve the concept of the works through extensive documentation and a useful and promising tool is the Variable Media Questionnaire. This tool encourages museums and artist to document those aspects of Internet artworks (and other kinds of 'variable media') that are subject to change and decay. Some authors believe that the interdepartmental approach required for the preservation and presentation of Internet art and other kinds of new media art will influence the way museums work, eventually

becoming a platform for production rather than a site for presentation. This would take away many of the doubts considering the authentic experience and would allow conservation specialists and curators to prevent works of Internet art from becoming inaccessible for future generations. Perhaps we should ask ourselves the question whether one believes this approach is suitable for a practice as flexible as the Internet and whether we feel Walter Benjamin was right when he proclaimed the end of the museum as we know it.

In the concluding chapter of this thesis we shall discuss the problems with authenticity in Internet art that this thesis has brought forth. We shall look at the developments and offer some tentative insights on the ways in which the theories of Walter Benjamin still relevant to authenticity in Internet art.

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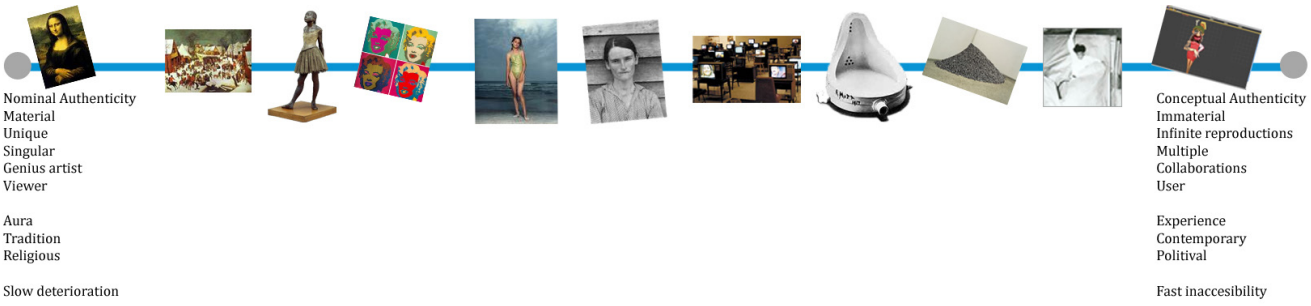
6 Conclusion

Introduction

At the beginning of this thesis we asked ourselves the question what the issues with the term 'authenticity' in Internet art in the museum were and how Benjamin's theories are still relevant for these issues. We have tried to answer these questions by first looking at the historical uses and problems of authenticity in the visual arts (Chapter 2). Secondly, we have tried to fully grasp Benjamin's theories on the aura, authenticity, and reproducibility (Chapter 3). Then we have looked at the current issues of Internet art and authenticity in the museum (Chapter 4). Finally, we have looked at the effect these problems had on thinking about preservation and conservation of Internet art (Chapter 5). In this final, concluding, chapter, we shall give a brief overview of the themes and problems of authenticity in Internet art we picked up on during the course of this thesis and we shall discuss why Benjamin's theory is indeed still relevant to these issues. The final paragraph of this chapter will provide the reader with some further thoughts and recommendations on the subject of authenticity in Internet art.



Appendix 1: Illustration

6.1 The Relative Meaning of Authenticity

6.1.1 Nominal, Expressive, Conceptual

We have seen that the meaning of the term authenticity has changed over the years, and it seems that in all cases this meaning is relative and we have come across several forms of authenticity. In Chapter 2 we discussed the kinds of authenticity traditional in the visual arts: nominal authenticity and expressive authenticity. Nominal authenticity refers to the materiality of the work of art and the authenticity of the label it has been given. This kind of authenticity is usually tested through historical research of the provenance and physical body of the work. Mistakes in attribution are made as well as copies that openly say they are copies, but these things usually do not interfere with the authenticity of the one, unique, work of art. Expressive authenticity, on the other hand, refers to the work of art as a medium of true, 'authentic' expression for the

artist. This, of course, remains highly subjective. It is referred to as a work resulting from the artist being authentic to his 'own self' as opposed to an artist taking from others or producing without 'soul' or originality. This does not necessarily mean artists cannot use images from other artists as long as they add their own, expressive, qualities to them. The cult surrounding the artist as a creator of unique expressive work, as a genius, is a closely related idea stemming from the Enlightenment and has in some shape or form stuck with us. It is probable that one of the reasons we place so much value nominal authenticity is that for the expression of the artist to be 'authentically' transmitted to the public, the work at the very least has to be 'real'. Expressive authenticity is therefore related to nominal authenticity because an authentic work of art brings us into contact with the past and its history, giving us a peek into the artist's personal expression. The work of art as an object is a timeless vessel of expressive authenticity, bringing us on the one hand closer to the artist and on the other hand always keeping a distance. As we have seen in Chapter 3, this phenomenon is what Walter Benjamin has called 'the aura': the feeling of closeness to the moment of creation and the physical work, whilst at the same time experiencing the distance of veneration of the historical life of the work and tradition the work is placed in. According to Benjamin this aura stems from the religious function art has played and plays in society and its places of worship, the museums.

Nominal authenticity has played a large role in understanding the issues of authenticity in Internet art. Whereas nominal authenticity traditionally refers to one, unique, material, historical object, preferably from one (genius) artist, Internet art seems to be the opposite of many of these things. We have therefore come to realize there might be another interpretation of authenticity that seems more appropriate for today's art forms and Internet art in particular: conceptual authenticity. Conceptual authenticity refers to the original idea, the concept, underlying the work of art. Since it deals with original ideas underlying the work rather than with the original or current physical form, it fits the immaterial and fluid form of Internet art. It helps museum specialists determine what to preserve and which aspects are crucial to the work's authenticity. We have also seen, however, that discerning conceptual authenticity is for a large part still relative to the notion of what one believes to be 'part' of the artwork and what is not. The very interactivity of the art form makes it difficult to determine where a work begins and ends.

6.1.2 Material Authenticity and the Aura

We have seen that the authority of the art museum relies in great part on their ability to show 'authentic' works of art and have observed that these works rely heavily on their physicality and 'uniqueness' to guard themselves against forgeries, copies and reproductions. An important observation of this thesis has been that the provenance of a work of art is strongly linked to its 'object-ness'. In effect, Benjamin's aura is also strongly linked to the physicality of the work. We might even see this as a reason why (analog) photography (though in limited editions), 'survived' technical reproducibility – we are still dealing with (material) objects. The absence of this materiality in Internet art is one of the major factors that render it difficult to discern authenticity in Internet art and therefore to determine the presence of an 'aura'.

6.1.3 The Authentic Experience

Finally, we have come across a different kind of authenticity, running parallel to the kinds of authenticity we described earlier: the authentic experience. This kind of authenticity is, and has always been, a particular challenge to museum curators, since it aims for a truthful representation of the work within its context. As soon as an object is moved from its original context to the museum, a contextual authenticity is lost. Whereas some

artworks and forms are especially created for the whitewashed walls of the museums, most artworks were and are not. Internet art adds an additional challenge to the problem, since the authentic context is the Internet itself. Benjamin argued that through reproducibility, art would no longer be confined to the 'religious spaces' of the museum, but would venture out into the world (Benjamin, p.224). It seems that this is true for Internet art – the authentic experience of Internet art lies outside of the museum, on the Internet. As we have seen, it is therefore very difficult to present the museum visitor with an authentic experience of the work of Internet art, without bringing the entire Internet into the museum. The interactive nature and networked qualities of Internet art make it particularly difficult to sever Internet artworks from their original context without drastically altering the functionality of the work, thereby harming the authentic experience of museum visitors.

6.2 The Ephemeral Nature of Internet Art

6.2.1 From Reproducibility to Multiplicity

Internet art is not reproducible. It is multiple. Whereas singular works of art are works of which one unique exemplar exists, multiple works of art are made in a medium, which is reproducible in itself. Reproducing a multiple work of art is called creating another instance of the work, whereas a reproduction of a singular work is called a copy. A distinct, singular, unique work of art can be copied and can be very much 'like' the original, but it cannot *replace* the original. Multiple works of art are, even when they differ in quality, inherently *interchangeable*. As we argued in paragraph 3.2.2, Benjamin seems to have understood this difference as he made a distinction between reproduced works through manual labor (which can either be honest copies or forgeries) and works that can be reproduced through the medium they were made in, like photography. The difference is, however, that Benjamin speaks of reproductions of singular works (paintings) through a multiple medium (photography). These reproductions remove the aura from the original, as they possess no unique aura themselves. Benjamin would therefore have argued that the work of Internet art possesses no aura, simply because not only is it reproducible – it brings its multiplicity explicitly to the foreground.

6.2.2 Networked Art and Authorship

Besides being immaterial and multiple, Internet art is an inherently networked art. In Internet art, the work of art has come to rely completely on the activation, interaction, and completion of the work by the viewer (or user). For this reason, Internet art is often called a practice rather than a medium, because interactivity is what makes it special. This makes it difficult for museums to discern where the boundaries of a work lay, since user participation (or the context) is an important part of the work. Museums are presented with the choice of what parts of the work to display and how, and, more importantly, what to preserve. We have come to understand that though some artists (like Mark Napier), when asked about the conceptual authenticity of their work, deem only the underlying algorithms as important enough to preserve, whilst viewers and critics may feel that the user generated content such algorithms invite, are just as important. This question of authorship raises important questions on the authenticity of what makes up the work and what needs to be preserved.

Additionally, in Internet art the role of the artist has changed with respect to the production of the artwork. It is not uncommon for artists that do not possess the technical skills to hire or collaborate with a programmer. Moreover, collaboration between groups of artists on the Internet is even more common. Of course, artist

collaborations are of all ages, but apart from the fact that it happens on a much larger scale, in Internet art it is no longer visible where the boundaries lie, and we have seen that some authors believe this lack of a solid identity on the Internet is the reason why Internet artists so far have only gotten limited attention (Dietz, p.80-81).

Walter Benjamin predicted that when art would increasingly be made for reproduction, the emphasis would shift from the 'religious' aura to the political. The function of art would no longer be within the confines of the museum, a part of tradition, with its aura on display, but would become a (almost avant-garde like) part of life; a new, democratic kind of art. Although some writers deem the democratic promise of the Internet overrated (Castells, p.63), it definitely seems like the Internet in Internet art has added an interactive and collaborative dimension to art. Because the museum is no longer needed to display (or distribute) it, some people believe that Internet art might mean the end of the museum as we know it. Though it is difficult to believe that a marginal art form like Internet art will single-handedly bring down all art museums, we definitely see a minor case of 'shattering' of traditions.

6.2.3 Longevity

Although localizing authenticity in Internet art is an extremely difficult task, when it comes to preservation and conservation, museums have limited time to come up with a workable definition of authenticity in Internet art. Internet art has an extremely short lifespan and choices of what and how to preserve and conserve need to be made almost instantly. Without a solid definition of authenticity in Internet art, methods of preservation and conservation, and especially methods of restoration, might be irreversible and possibly considered harmful. Conceptual authenticity currently is used most commonly as a guideline for determining what needs to be preserved by looking at the intention of the artist. However, whereas interviews with artists themselves can be extremely helpful in determining where the 'core' of the work lies, the interactive and networked nature of Internet art requires a much broader documentation of all aspects of the work. Not only can artists change their mind about what constitutes the work's authenticity, the rapid technological developments call for answers to questions we cannot foresee today. Documentation and discussion of issues of preservation and conservation need to become part of the conception of the work, especially when a solid definition of authenticity is not available.

6.3 Ideas and Observations

6.3.1 The Museum as a Platform

As argued in Chapter 5, the interdepartmental approach that Internet art requires, may lead to a more open attitude towards the museum as a platform for production of and thinking about Internet art (and other contemporary art forms). This might not just be fruitful from the perspective of fully documenting ephemeral art forms like Internet art, but might also lead to a different kind of museum. Especially when concerned Internet art, collaboration is an inherent part of the art form. In order to give museum visitors an authentic experience, works of Internet art might in the future be produced especially for museum websites or displays inside the museum. The museum can then function on the one hand as a commissioner of new works, while on the other hand having the knowledge and expertise to adequately present the visitors with a valuable selection of Internet artworks. Although Internet art can have multiple instances, this does of course not

mean that everyone knows how to interpret these works. The museum can offer, like it does in its exhibitions, a perspective on the artworks and their meanings. Perhaps then, it is, as John Trant argued, no longer about having the 'real' thing, but about having the 'right' thing (Trant, p.107).

6.3.2 The Unique Experience

Benjamin advocated the demise of traditional art museums through the technical reproduction of works of art. With the availability of cheap reproductions, the museum with her galleries of 'originals' would no longer be of interest to the public. Although we know this was and still is not the case, the problems are exponentially intensified in Internet art. The loss of materiality and the ease by which works can be copied and by definition have become multiple instances of one and the same work, has caused the art world to look towards a different kind of authenticity: the conceptual. The combination of looking at the original intent by the artists and the original context and at the behavior of the work seems to be a plausible solution for thinking about preservation of Internet art. But one could wonder whether works of Internet art needs be preserved at all. This is a difficult question to answer, since the very nature of Internet art is that it is *perishable*. Like performance art, Internet art has a temporal quality to it, and the character of the work is only revealed through interaction. These interactions are unique and difficult to 'copy' or preserve. We might therefore argue that the uniqueness of a work of Internet art seems to lie in the temporary *experience*. Can we then find the 'aura' in the unique experience that Internet art offers? Is it therefore not surprising that museums would want to preserve this shred of uniqueness in a world where the authenticity no longer lies in an artwork's materiality or provenance? If we take the temporary experience of the work itself to be the aura, can this ever be preserved? Like in performance art, the only viable option for impermanent works of Internet art seems documentation, but the documentation can never revive the full 'experience' of the work as it was. Perhaps preservation and conservation should therefore be used primarily from a historical point of view, aiming to convey information about the authentic experience these artworks once provided.

Conclusion

In this thesis we have looked at the various problems with authenticity in Internet art. We have seen that traditional uses of the term authenticity no longer work for Internet art. Internet art has no physical body; it is not singular but multiple; it is interactive; it is highly unclear about its boundaries; it is collaborative; it is user-oriented; it is networked; and transient.

For museums this means that Internet art has no nominal authenticity or historical trace back to the past; it does not have copies but indiscernible multiple instances; it has its own means of distribution; its origins and context lies outside of the museum; there is no standard author and little room for a cult surrounding the artist; and it needs to be preserved almost immediately though it is highly unclear what it is that needs to be preserved.

In terms of Benjamin's theories, his ideas about the aura and reproducibility are still highly relevant to Internet art. The most recognizable feature of Benjamin's theory is that works of art increasingly are made for reproduction. In Internet art, this reproducibility is intrinsic and is explicitly emphasized and practiced. Another interesting point is that the 'aura' Benjamin speaks of seems to be based on the physical object of the work, which is what many museums have built their tasks around. Internet art indeed challenges this definition

of the aura, since it is immaterial and multiple. Additionally, the move towards the 'political' role of art (instead of a religious role), seems to be reflected in the democratic or participatory nature of Internet art and the avant-gardist 'characteristic' of forming a part of our daily lives.

It seems then, that when it concerns Internet art, we need a new definition of 'authenticity'. One of the options we have already described above: conceptual authenticity. It is then also possible that we can look for the aura, or the 'uniqueness', in Internet art in the *experience,* rather than trying to force a kind of materiality onto something so ephemeral.

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Appendix 1: Interview with Mark Napier

This interview with internet artist Mark Napier (napier@potatoland.org) was conducted through e-mail by Anna Denise van der Reijden (anna@annadenise.nl) on Thursday, July 3rd, 2008.

Mark Napier (born 1961) is an American InterneAt artist. He is considered an early pioneer of Net.Art in the United States, responsible for work like *The Distorted Barbie* (1996), *Internet Shredder 1.0* (1998) and more recently *Riot* (2002), *Feed* (2001) and *Black and White* (2003). His work *Net.Flag* (2002), bought by the Guggenheim Museum in 2002 was the first Internet art work to be acquired by a major art museum. Mark Napier lives and works in New York. More information about the artist and his work can be found on www.potatoland.org and on http://www.guggenheimcollection.org/site/ artist_work_md_116A_1.html.

1. Your work often involves input by users. Where do you feel your 'artistry' and 'originality' lies? In the concept, in the actual programming, or in the combination of all this and the outcome? In other words, which parts do you feel authorship over in your work or is this something that does not matter to you?

"Artistry lies in all aspects of the art-producing process, but historically we remember artists by their contribution to the culture. We remember the artist's name and ideas more than anything else, and the specifics of how the artwork is created are less important. Think of "Cremaster". That one word sums up the films, still images, sculpture, performances, museum and gallery shows of Mathew Barney.

In digital art, as in any art form, there is a craft, a process, a final product or products, and there are ideas and the cultural impact of the work. Any artwork can be reproduced and distributed widely (think of how often you see images of the Mona Lisa versus how often you see the original), and many artworks historically have been produced through group effort. This is particularly true of contemporary installations where art is fabricated and assembled by teams. Digital art just brings the reproducibility to the foreground because reproduction is inherently part of the artwork, rather than something that is done afterwards (as in reproductions of the Mona Lisa). And the idea of art created by group effort is also a natural aspect of Internet artwork. Interactivity and networking are an integral part of that medium.

In some ways digital and Internet art are further extensions of a trend that has been going on for hundreds of years, and in some ways these new art forms break that trend because they reveal it so starkly. For example Damien Hirst's shark is in fact a conceptual, algorithmic work that can be reproduced by anyone who has the money to put a six foot long shark in a tank of formaldehyde. The art world treats this work as a permanent unique object that was created by an individual, but of course it isn't permanent (the shark has dissolved), it isn't unique (it can be reproduced by following a set of instructions) and it wasn't made by an individual. Compare that to art made with software and you see that software art isn't all that different. Software is not permanent and it can be reproduced. What's different in software is that it can so easily be reproduced that reproduction becomes an integral part of the work, to the point that there is no distinction between original and reproduction. This is confronting to art collectors, who are still heavily invested in apparently permanent objects, but over time software

will be seen as just another medium and these distinctions will lose importance.

If you're asking specifically what is preserved, what exactly should be archived to preserve the artwork, I say that the algorithms that make the piece run are the "core" of the work. This is specific to my way of working. I create software that can play out on a variety of hardware. My art can be projected, shown on monitors, displayed as prints, and possibly as 3D prototyped objects. In a sense these are different ways to present, or frame the artwork. The art "object" is actually the software that makes all these various manifestations possible.

Of course the art market loves objects for their investment potential, and typically mistakes the physical object (the projector or computer and monitor) as the art object. In my art the property the collector is investing in is the software, and that must be preserved in order to preserve the work. The computer is disposable and will be obsolete and probably broken in ten years. The software contains the elements of the artwork: what it does, how it does it".

2. Some of your works are available online as well. Do you take these 'offline' once a museum or collector buys a work? If so, why, if not, why not?

"My only online work that has been purchased is net.flag, which is owned by the Guggenheim Museum and is part of their permanent collection. The work was purchased with the understanding that it is a publicly available Internet artwork, so it is expected to remain available to the public, and it still is at netflag.guggenheim.org.

The work I sell through galleries is not Internet based. I found that the two environments (internet and gallery space) have profoundly different natures and I prefer to keep them separate."

3. If there are multiple copies of one of your works around, do you feel there is 'one' original 'authentic' work, or does this not matter to you?

"There is no original, however there is an author. Five digital copies of an artwork will all be essentially identical, there is no original, but I am the author of all these works, and for a person to own or show the piece they will need either me or my gallery to give them that right. This is a common model in the music industry. Anyone can own a song by say, Madonna, but only Madonna (and/or her publisher) has the right to distribute that song. She is recognized as the author of the song, and controls the rights to how it is used. So you could say that there is no original, but there is an originator."

4. Some video installations are now no longer viewable because of the technology being outdated. How would you feel if this happened to your work and would you object to your work being converted to other platforms?

"Some of my Internet work has become unviewable. I assumed this would happen eventually and actually am surprised it lasted as long as it did. The work belonged to a specific cultural time and I don't feel that it has to be preserved, or that it even will make sense if it is preserved. Some digital work could be converted to other platforms to preserve or "reenact" the piece. I have converted some pieces myself already and see this as a likely strategy to preserve work."

5. You make a lot of use of pop-culture images. Is this meant as a statement on the abundance of images available through the Internet?

"It's not so much a statement as a response to the medium. There is an abundance of images on the Internet, so much so that it becomes like a terrain, a landscape, an environment composed of images of other disembodied environments. If I search for the word "room" in Google I'll find pages of images of other people's rooms. This deluge of images are part of the terrain of this mediated environment. Impressionist painters painted landscapes because the land was there, and they had a convenient, portable paint form (tubes of oil paint and stretched canvas) that they could take outdoors. Their interest in landscape is not necessarily a statement, but an outgrowth of the medium they were using.

The Internet is a medium that infuses our lives to such an extent that it becomes a space unto itself. The network and computer technology is part of nearly every activity that I engage in. In some ways I live "in" the network and have more engagement with that space than the space in which I'm sitting now, and so I would draw on the images, text and pixels of this digital environment to use as the raw material of my work. As pigment, canvas, marble and bronze are to the physical space, information, text, pixels and energy are to the digital space. This is the material of the digital age."

Appendix 2: Illustration

Nominal Authenticity
Material
Unique
Singular
Genius artist
Viewer

Aura
Tradition
Religious

Slow deterioration

Conceptual Authenticity
Immaterial
Infinite reproductions
Multiple
Collaborations
User

Experience
Contemporary
Politival

Fast inaccesibility

Impression of the gliding scale of authenticity in the visual arts.

‘Authenticity in Internet Art’
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