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Preserving the Ephemeral

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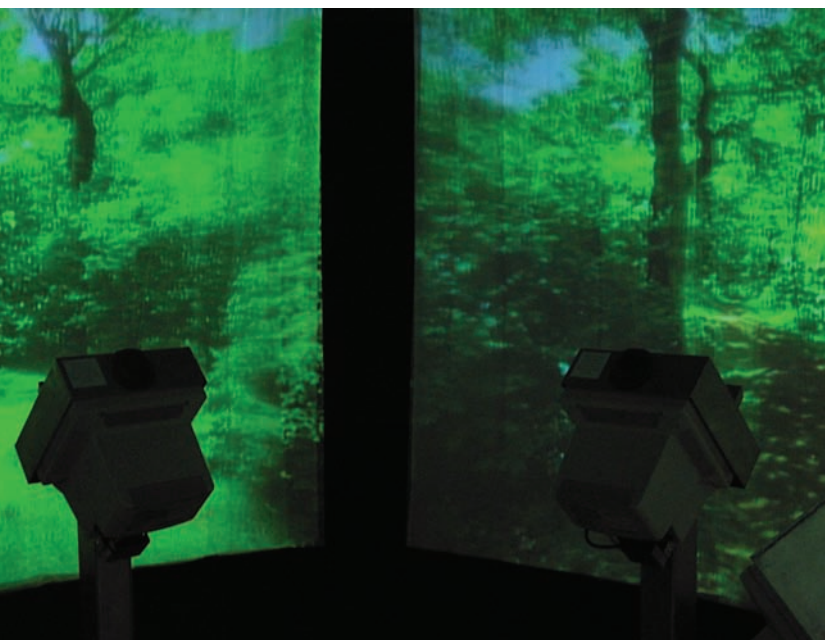
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PRESERVING THE EPHEMERAL



Luc Courchesne, *Landscape One*, 1991.
Exhibition *Digital Avantgarde/Prix Selection*. Lentos Kunstmuseum Linz, 2004.
Photo: Pau Waelder.



Christa Sommerer and Laurent Mignonneau, *Interactive Plant Growing*, 1993.
Exhibition *Digital Avantgarde/Prix Selection*. Lentos Kunstmuseum Linz, 2004. Photo: Pau Waelder.

Media art being so frequently labeled as ‘the art of tomorrow’, it has been seldom considered that the artworks we see today in exhibitions at festivals and galleries will one day be the art of the past. Moreover, as media art is always looking at recent and future developments, the past does not seem to matter—except in the case of pioneers like Nam June Paik or ancestors like Marcel Duchamp, who are evoked in order to place media art in the mainstream of the history of art. Works from a few years ago may seem *passé* to many, in the same way that an old game console, cell phone or operating system becomes obsolete. Stewart Brand has pointed out that new media art is caught up in a process of constant novelty and accelerated obsolescence which endangers, not only the artist’s career but also the art itself: “How does a culture get any aesthetics, grounding or continuity from art forms with the longevity of mayflies? Does anything lasting escape from the black hole of accelerating technology?”¹ [1]. Brand concludes that artists working in new media may finally be creating new forms of artistic creation, so that the medium becomes more important than the individual artworks. This is, to a certain extent, promoted by media art festivals and the concept behind many group exhibitions, in which artworks appear merely as an illustration of an overall concept. In the context of festivals, although the awards do highlight the work of artists, the focus tends to be put on the most recent and cutting-edge projects, which are presented in the frame of an event that lasts only a few days. Artworks thus tend to be confused with merely another form of digital commodity, that can be replaced by any other which performs in a similar way and can be discarded for a newer model with more exciting features. In terms of preservation of media art, as well as its own history, this tendency may well become a problem in the future, as the artworks tend to be forgotten and their influence on posterior works is overlooked. But even when there is the will to exhibit «old» artworks again, a bigger problem arises: the technology on which they are based has become obsolete. Benjamin Weil, Carl Goodman and Gerfried Stocker had to face this problem when they curated the exhibition *Digital Avantgarde/Prix Selection*² [in 2004, which showcased a number of interactive installations created between 1990 and 2002. In some projects, the original software had to be reconstructed in order to ensure that the piece would be functional. In others, this process of updating the software entailed the dilemma of whether to preserve the original conditions of the artwork (including the loading time, much slower in older systems) or to present an upgraded version. The preservation of a process-based form of artistic creation, which is dependent on unstable technology, is thus complicated. In 2005, Jon Ippolito warned about the “Three Threats to the Survival of New Media”³, and suggested that, in order to preserve media artworks, it must be ensured that they remain adaptable and mutable (as the example of the *Digital Avantgarde* exhibition shows), as well as accessible, in every sense. Preservation is preceded in every case by documentation: to understand how the artwork must be installed and to which extent it can be updated, it is necessary to know the intentions of the artist and the context in which the work was originally presented. Initiatives such as the *Variable Media Network*⁴ and *DOCAM (Documentation and Conservation of Media Arts Heritage)*⁵ have developed strategies and tools to properly document and preserve media art, but to this date the process of emulation or reinterpretation of old artworks has proven costly and time-consuming. In a recent summit of the DOCAM, Ippolito indicated that crowdsourcing can be a valid method of preservation⁶, building on the example of computer game culture and how old gaming platforms have been successfully emulated by the combined efforts of a small community of unpaid, volunteer programmers. The same applies to documentation, as more and more visitors to exhibitions, as well as the artists themselves, publish videos and photos of the artworks in popular websites such as YouTube and Flickr. It is difficult to foresee how much of the media art we see today will be preserved in the next decades, let alone centuries. In any case, it seems clear that this particular form of artistic creation is a part of contemporary art whose importance will keep growing in the future, and that it is necessary

to preserve it in order to be able to understand the culture and society in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. This task will not be limited to the work of archivists and museum curators, but will be shared by every agent in the art world and ultimately will necessarily incorporate the contributions of the public. The preservation of our culture will therefore be a communal effort, whilst the concept of preservation itself is transformed, not merely maintaining the original conditions of an object, but facilitating a continuous transformation. As Alain Depocas states: "Both instability and variability, being intrinsic to new media art, are incontrovertible. They cannot be ignored any more than they can be contained; doing so would betray the integrity of the artwork. In fact, the opposite must be done"⁷.

Pau Waelder

Pau Waelder is an art critic, curator and researcher in digital art and culture. Among his latest projects are the conferences *En_lloc* (Now_here), Digital Culture (Fundació Pilar i Joan Miró a Mallorca) and the exhibitions *Metalandscapes* (Deichtorcenter Hamburg) and *FLOW* (CCA Andratx). As reviewer and editor, he has collaborated with *Rhizome*, *Artnodes*, *Vernissage TV* and *Furtherfield*. His articles have appeared in magazines such as *minima*, *Magazine du CIAC* and *Leonardo*. New Media Editor at *art.es* magazine.

Notes

- 1 Stewart Brand, "Creating Creating". *Ars Electronica. Timeshift-The World in Twenty-Five Years*. <http://90.146.8.18/en/archives/festival_archive/festival_catalogs/festival_artikel.asp?iProjectID=12939>
- 2 "Digital Avantgarde/Prix Selection". *Lentos Kunstmuseum Linz*. <http://www.lentos.at/en/2178_507.asp>
- 3 Jon Ippolito, "Three Threats to the Survival of New Media". <http://newmedia.umaine.edu/interarchive/three_threats.html>
- 4 *Variable Media Network*. <<http://www.variablemedia.net/>>
- 5 *DOCAM*. <<http://www.docam.ca/>>
- 6 "Crowdsourcing Preservation: The Variable Media Questionnaire 3.0". *DOCAM*. <<http://www.docam.ca/en/annual-summits/2010-summit/425-crowdsourcing-preservation.html>>
- 7 Alain Depocas, "Foreword". *DOCAM*. <<http://www.docam.ca/en/foreword.html>>



Jeffrey Shaw, *The Legible City*, 1990.
Exhibition *Digital Avantgarde/Prix Selection*.
Lentos Kunstmuseum Linz, 2004. Photo: Pau Waelder.