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Content production and selection. What to conserve?

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Abstract

The concept of the archive is in transformation, which confronts us with questions like how do we, as cultural institutions, see the role of our archive, what should it represent and how should they accordingly be structured. Our understanding of past, present and future is also closely linked to the way we organize and process information with electronic media and how we retrieve knowledge and meaning out of these processes. Archives are becoming complex interconnected databases and no longer just contain our past for inspection by historians and other researchers. Archives have become crucial in how the past and present are created and reflected upon. What does all this mean for our institutional archives, what could be the function and meaning of contemporary archives and what is our vision on archives in relation to our institutions and what we practice in them?

Keywords

archive, preservation, audience participation, museum

Producción y selección de contenidos. ¿Qué conservar?
Resumen

El concepto de archivo se está transformando, lo cual nos hace plantear, en calidad de instituciones culturales, la función de nuestro archivo, de lo que debería representar y de cómo deberían estructurarse las instituciones en consonancia. Nuestra comprensión del pasado, del presente y del futuro también se encuentra estrechamente vinculada al modo en que organizamos y procesamos información con medios electrónicos y a cómo obtenemos conocimientos y sentido de estos procesos. Los archivos se están convirtiendo en complejas bases interconectadas y ya no se limitan a contener nuestro pasado para que los historiadores y otros investigadores lo examinen. Los archivos se han vuelto esenciales en la creación y en la reflexión del pasado y del presente. ¿Qué significan todas estas afirmaciones para

nuestros archivos institucionales, cuál podría ser la función y el sentido de los archivos contemporáneos y qué pensamos de los archivos en relación a nuestras instituciones y a lo que hacemos en ellas?

Palabras clave

archivo, conservación, participación del público, museo

Our understanding of past, present and future is closely linked to the way we organize and process information with electronic media and how we retrieve knowledge and meaning out of these processes.

In contemporary archival practices it is not just the individual data that are being stored in databases. The relationships and correlations between the various data are now also being stored, by using metadata that offer us different context for individual data.

Archives are becoming complex interconnected databases and no longer just contain our past for inspection by historians and other researchers. Behind almost every activity in the hard, material world nowadays hides an immaterial archive. We are living in the world's online archive, or more to the point, we are living in the world-as-archive, as a constellation of databases all connected with each other by a global network of computers, the internet.

Because archives are continuously available and accessible, they have become an essential factor in acting in the present. One could say that archives have become crucial in how the past and present are created and reflected upon.

What does all this mean for our institutional archives, what could the function and meaning of contemporary archives be and what is our vision of archives in relation to our institutions and what we practice in them? This question relates to the way we structure our archives, make them accessible for different users and what kind information we want in our archives. Or better said: what is an archive nowadays and what do we want it to be (looking at our practice and our institutions).

To not drift into a futuristic vision of the archive, even though we need new models for our archives, it is important to reflect the archive in relation to the main functions of our institutions, which are:

- presentation and audience participation;
- research and production, and related to this, the dissemination of knowledge and experience (education);
- preservation (which only few of us do and it would be good to hear why we think this is) and conservation as part of an archival practice (our archival practice is divers and often less related to preservation and conservation as is the case in regular museums).

Archives, history, time

The experience and perception of time is not an objective phenomenon, even though we might think it is when looking at how we nowadays live under the regime of the rational clock time. This also becomes obvious when we look at the fundamental distinction between natural time, where time is internalized, and rational time (the clock):

I know what time is as long as nobody asks me about it.

(Aurelius Augustinus, 4th century)

The abstraction and rationalization of time in hours, minutes and seconds, as performed by the clock, had far reaching consequences in the 19th century when it became the model for the rationalization of production (labour) during the Industrial Revolution. The introduction of the Greenwich time standard (1884) was a clear expression of this tendency to submit social, economic and political life to the rhythm of rational time and to establish a global time standard, or better said, an economy of time. The bomb attack on the Royal Observatory in 1894, by a young French anarchist who accidentally blew himself up in Greenwich Park before reaching his target – as it seems that the clock he used for the bomb wasn't properly set – shows how the standardization of time was experienced as submitting man and labour to the regime of the clock.

As mentioned, the personal experience and perception of time is not an objective phenomenon following a logical and causal historical time line, specifically not in our media technology saturated societies. Timothy Druckrey, a media art critic and writer, stated in this context:

In media art we are confronted by an array of temporalities engaged with the temporalities of the systems that deny the normative flows of representability. Here we are urged not merely to experience banal phenomenal time, but rather to engage in behaviours, assess momentary conditions, interfere with stasis, investigate the instantaneous states of information, probe transitory visibilities, consider indeterminate identities, examine the decay of memory, inspect the "flow" of the event, and survey the cumulative and relative structures of the archive.

In our media determined realities we experience time as being malleable. In technical media (cinema, video, radio, the internet, etc.),

we can detach time and space, and stretch and compress time. Media reinforce our notion of time, which is related to how media are linked to our historical sense of time; they are time machines producing machine time.

As cognitive research into the phenomenon of time progresses, it is becoming more and more obvious that time is not an objective quality which can be measured by chronometers and divided up into seconds and everything beyond. Time very much is a personal and therefore emotional experience, controlled by social rhythms – a process that starts in the womb –. Time is never only natural or only historical, only subjective or only objective: it is always both at the same time. But how can this be embedded in the way we structure our media art archives?

For the past 10 years we have seen approaches in archival thinking that touch on this topic of what is represented in archives and how this relates to the different temporalities that so strongly determine our personal experiences. In contemporary digital archives we store data objects as autonomous data that have metadata connected to them, thus being able to offer a more dynamic and personal user related set of data to the user. These archives present us with ever changing relations between these single data-objects and thus move away from a more historical approach of the content, since they try to contextualise data-objects in the now and less in the past.

The concept of the archive is in transformation which confronts us with questions like how do we as institutions see the role of our archive, what should it represent, and how should they accordingly be structured.

Our understanding of past, present and future is closely linked to the way we organize and process information with electronic media and how we create meaning out of the data clusters or clouds that are offered by digital archives.

Interesting models and methodologies of collecting, storing and processing information, and the creation of meaning can be traced back from the *wunderkammer* or curiosity cabinets from the 16th century to contemporary practices regarding digital archives.

As mentioned, in contemporary archival practices it is not just the individual data that are being stored in databases. The relationships and correlations between the various data are now also being stored, by using metadata. Metadata (also known as tags) are data that describe and categorize other data. Metadata as means for ordering, hierarchizing, streamlining and evaluating have become increasingly important as social, political and economical instruments in an informational sphere that for a long time was considered as being value-free.

In various contemporary views the archive has proved to be a strong metaphor. The human body has become a genetic archive, now that it has been digitally opened up in the *Human Genome*

Project. Our language is an archive of meanings that can be unlocked by philological methods. It teaches us who we are and where we come from. The unconscious is an archive of all the traumatic and deep experiences that define our identity. Even history has become a database from which facts can be arbitrarily retrieved and now lacks one big unifying story.

Archives no longer just contain our past for inspection by historians and other researchers. We are permanently living in archives: All the sites we visit on the internet are logged by our search engines and are monitored by mostly illegal spy bots that are installed in our machines by companies and who knows who else. All our shopping is registered by our supermarkets. On the basis of such archives the policies for the future are being planned. Behind almost every activity in the hard, material world nowadays hides an immaterial archive. We are living in the world's online archive, or more to the point, we are living in the world-as-archive, as a constellation of databases all connected with each other by a global network of computers, the internet.

Because archives are continuously available and accessible, they have become an essential factor for acting in the present. One could even say that archives have become crucial in how the present is created and reflected upon by its users. Archives have become more user oriented, offering to users contextualization of the content of the archive according their personal interest or by adding personal information to existing archives. Moreover, for some years now we have been seeing the rise of the semantic web, where the traditional archivist and curator will be pushed to the background while personal *smart agents* will do the search for you and create meaning out of the unstructured data they find on the web themselves.

So, having a conference on future archival practices and asking ourselves what we should archive and how we want to structure it, offering interfaces for easy retrieval, and user participation (or not), is addressing fundamental questions about the role of institutional archives in a rapidly transforming informational sphere where the role of the archivist, the user and even the institutions themselves are questioned.

This presentation is merely trying to create a context and some reference points for the good practices being presented by the different speakers that represent art organisations of varying size and different backgrounds, but who can all be related to the role of contemporary art in our technological culture, and who are positioning their practice within this broader context.

The archive always had a central place in art institutions. The main functions of art institutions, being presentation, preservation and education have always been strongly related to the archive as being an endless resource for research, interpretation and education.

Since the role, function and structure of institutions and their classical functions are also reshaped and re-thought in relation to

the impact of an ever-growing networked information society, it is important to position the role of archival practices clearly within these developments.

Furthermore, it is these dynamic and often interactive media practices themselves that we shape and reflect in our daily practices

already facing us with tough questions like what should we archive, how should we archive, and how can we unite our forces and share the accumulated experience and knowledge and make our archives more compatible with each other.

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CV



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