

Pierre-Yves Desaiwe

Abstract

Recently, Belgian federal museums were asked to determinate their needs in terms of “numerising” (numériser) their collections. The term – or its substitute: digitizing – is now widely used in the french speaking museum community in place of “informatiser” (to computerize). The later usually refers to managing a museum collection. There are consequences to this semantic shift, as “digitizing” means to transpose a work of art from one state into another, while the prefix of the french word for “computerizing” underlines the idea of *adding* information. The first conceivers of databases for art museums wanted to take advantage of query languages to make existing or potential links between objects visible. Metadata and thesauri were to play a leading role in doing so.

Today, the predominance of “numerising” underlines the importance of the image in the process. Looking at the online catalogues of some of the leading art museums, there is some frustration in finding that the available data is usually reduced to its very core compared to printed matter. Even hypertextuality is underused. Is this really worth long term, expensive digitizing plans? There is the argument of preservation, but little is known of the longevity of digital supports. As early as 1998, the Getty Institute started to study “the long term implications of relying on current digital technology to preserve our cultural memory”. Referring to what he has defined as the “viewing problem”, Howard Besser states that “the default for electronic objects is to become inaccessible unless someone takes an immediate pro-active role to save them”. Refreshing, migrating, emulating, ... are some of the possibilities to cope with changing file formats and the evolution of supports.

As video art has nowadays entered the collection of most museums with a contemporary art department, new questions arise, from a museological point of view: restoring, or digitizing analog tapes? Not to mention the evolution of video formats and projectors. These institutions, based on 19th-century models, face all these questions and more from the very beginning when they deal with digital art – a situation that is far from unusual. Art museums may agree with Besser that “from conservation perspective, electronic works have more characteristics in common with performance art, conceptual art, site-specific installations, and experimental art”, these “distant cousins” to digital works (Jon Ippolito) they have learned to deal with. But while it is sometimes unclear “what is the work”, the problems to ensure its longevity ironically meet the ones to preserve digital copies of ancient works of art. Fine Arts museums need to adjust to digital art, interact with the new generation of institutions dedicated to new media, but keep on playing their role of laboratories in terms of preservation, exhibition and comprehension. As Jon Ippolito stated: “the most extreme departures from the material object, digital or otherwise, are ultimately the ones whose future depends on the very institution they were designed to render obsolete.”