Is today's time-based art here to stay? Documentation and digitization meet digital preservation to make time-based art last for posterity.

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The need to preserve the ephemeral (Introduction)

One of the most repeated concerns of art conservators about art historical tradition is that it often assumes artwork as a static entity, not evolving in time. The practice of conservation proves that artworks are nothing but objects in flux: materials change at various speeds, and what is viewed from one perspective as deterioration, from another can be understood as the evolution of the art object. Museums indeed treat artworks as living entities and compile their biographies consisting not only of conservation and treatment history, but also of display/exhibition history, provenance, bibliography, artist biography, and so on.

With art beginning to question the traditional media of painting, sculpture, drawing and architecture and its own substantiation as a material entity, the tradition of art conservation has been challenged from within. Many works employ as their constitutive elements the conceptual, time-based, site-specific, digital and participatory — in one word: the ephemeral.

Recognition of ephemeral works by collectors triggered a paradigm shift in the requirements for care of the art object. The complexity of restoring and displaying these works that now make up substantial portions of collections of modern and contemporary art museums has since the mid-1990s prompted the establishment of specialised positions in museum conservation departments as well as numerous research initiatives, often under the heading of time-based art.

Documentation models

Documentation has come to play a key role in efforts to preserve the ephemeral. Today, museums routinely document art objects on multiple occasions, such as when considering acquisition, data and condition registration in the collection, conservation and treatment, and also those of transport, lending, borrowing, as part of research projects, and so on. Following the need to develop a general workflow, a dozen major models and guidelines for documentation have emerged during past two decades. Their main concerns may be generalised into three modes of inquiry during the documentation process (based esp. on Berndes 1999 and Matters in Media Art 2016). Each of them focuses on different modality of the artwork:

Material object/event. Material aspects of the object/ event still receive large attention in conservation documentation due to the lack of constraints in artists' use of materials as well as their often ambiguous behaviour (notoriously plastics). This mode produces component information, specifications of installation/ execution, textual and visual documentation of conservation history and display history.

Intent/concept. In recent years, the identification of conceptual framework of the piece became regular practice in larger museums during acquisition, gathered particularly through artist interviews. It also collects artist information and clarifies artist intent through study of his/her oeuvre, biographical information, and art-historical literature. By extension, it also involves legal documents.

Experience. Documenting experience is relatively challenging task as its language has traditionally laid in a different field — aesthetics. It is bound to past iterations of the work and realised through artist interviews as well as analyses of photo documentation and reviews of past exhibitions.
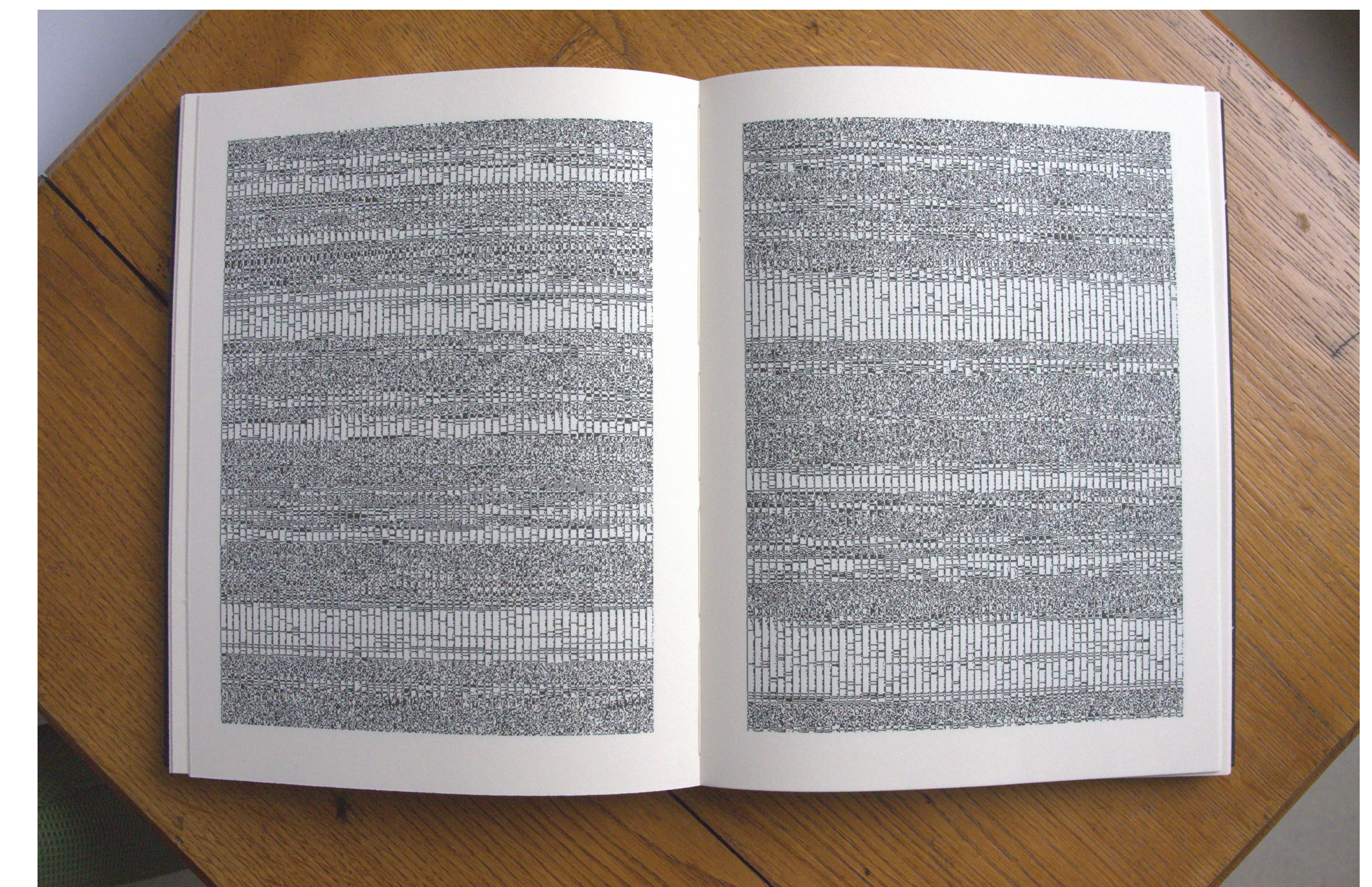
The cold archive (Conclusion)

The work's archive assembled from documents informs decisions in staging its future iterations by the museum. More precisely, the archive determines them (Hölling 2015), in line with the museum's aspiration for material, conceptual and aesthetic authenticity and integrity of the work. The configuration of its constitutive properties, its score (Laurenson 2006), is not allowed to exceed its archive — it is contained within.

With an incentive to optimize workflows, museums are migrating their documentation records from a variety of storage media to the digital. Many components of art objects themselves follow the lead. Since long ago, museums have digitized video components to rescue video works from obsolescence, and they also routinely archive audio components as digital audio, acquire digital-born works, and explore ways to reproduce 35 mm film for display purposes through digital intermediates (Tate 2011). Once the work's components are digitized on a satisfactory level and these files are combined with those produced by comprehensive conservation documentation, the problem of long-term preservation of time-based components of the work is partially transferred to the domain of preserving cold data storage.

In this case, what is frozen down to be preserved is not so much the art object in its materiality as its digital imprint, available for rematerialization in the unspecified future. What follows is that by standardizing their reproducibility, this path affirms artworks as specimens traditionally belonging to science museums, rather than unique objects typical for art museums. Its consequences and alternatives remain to be explored.

Further information

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La Société Anonyme, *The SKOR Codex*, 2012. Artists' book containing a selection from the documentation of artworks commissioned by the Dutch organisation Foundation for Art and Public Domain (SKOR). Digital documents containing text, image, sound and video were transferred to binary form using a single method and printed across 300 pages. The work was the last project commissioned by SKOR. Image courtesy of <http://societeanonyme.la>.
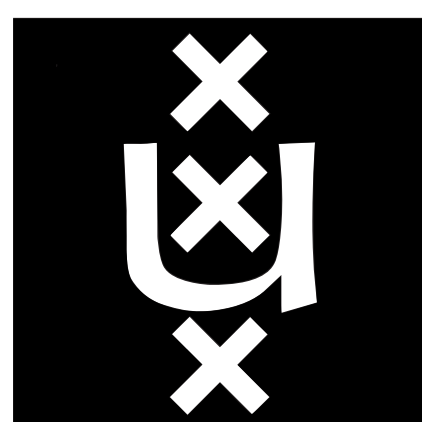
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Acknowledgements