

Caitlin Jones and Lizzie Muller

The Giver of Names: Documentary Collection

Introduction to the Collection

Background

Documentation serves a multitude of functions. Art historians look for contextual information to enrich their understanding of their subjects, and art conservators have long documented the inevitable natural and man-made changes that occur in works of art over time. Whether it is a time-based digital media work or an oil painting these changes can often tell us much about the material nature of the work as well as something of the artist's intent. With media art there is not one, static, unique object, but often a collection of components, hardware and software which together create a time and process based experience. With works changing at a rate much faster than traditional media due to technological obsolescence, the need for comprehensive documentation becomes of utmost importance. As such, historical research documentation serves an increasingly vital function.

Unfortunately, a lack of documentation has led to a situation in which we know far too little about many of the landmark works of new media art. Traditional models of documentation have left some gaps in the record, the largest of which is the documentation of the audience, both their views and impressions about a work within a specific context and also, when applicable, how they interacted with it. This collection of documentation on the artwork *The Giver of Names*, by David Rokeby, is a case-study which demonstrates how such gaps in the documentary record may be filled. In late 2007 the authors were awarded research residencies at the Daniel Langlois Foundation Centre for Research and Documentation (CR+D) to explore ways of documenting digital media artworks. Our research projects focused on the exhibition *e-art, New Technologies and Contemporary Art* curated by Jean Gagnon at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. Caitlin Jones' research objective was to examine a number of existing models of documentation with an emphasis on artist's intent. Lizzie Muller's original research objective was to find ways to document and archive the audience's descriptions of their experiences. We chose to conduct a joint documentary case-study to develop and demonstrate the integration of our two objectives, and this collection is the result.

We were delighted to have the opportunity to create a collection for *The Giver of Names*. Rokeby is an artist who has reflected and written extensively about his work, including his iterative production methods and the role of audience experience. He is highly articulate and reflective about his process and intent. *The Giver of Names* is an interactive piece which requires considerable participation from the audience in order to be activated. It has a long, illustrious exhibition history and has evolved over many versions. Significantly, however, Rokeby suggests that the work has reached its 'sweet spot,' where few changes are envisaged in the future. This creates an excellent opportunity to review the work's history and create a full record of the installation at this moment in time.

Creating a documentary collection

The term 'archive' has come to hold a variety of meanings, but it often implies a totality of documentation, in some state of completion. The term 'documentation' has a much

looser connotation and it is with this in mind that we want to take care to properly define our terms in this case study. To do this we decided to look to traditional archival principles. In the field of archival science (within Canada) the *fonds* is the highest level of archival description, which according to the Canadian Council of Archives, is "the whole of the documents, regardless of form or medium, automatically and organically created and/or accumulated and used by a particular individual, family, or corporate body in the course of that creator's activities or functions" (from the Canadian Council of Archives' "Rules for Archival Description"). Distinguishable from this, a *collection* is described as "an artificial accumulation of documents of any provenance brought together on the basis of some common characteristic, e.g., way of acquisition, subject, language, medium, type of document, name of collector, which may be treated for descriptive purposes as a unit under a common title." The key difference, as it relates to our research, is the notion of 'automatically and organically created' vis a vis 'artificial accumulation.' Our case study, which we would perhaps hesitate to refer to as 'artificial,' is most certainly a collection of information entirely solicited by us as researchers, based on our particular research goals. In this sense we have actively amassed a 'collection' of carefully curated documentation. In our view this active role is necessary, but also requires a degree of self-reflexivity and openness in terms of how the collection was formed. As such, for this Documentary Collection we describe the materials we have collected and also the rationale and motivations behind our decisions of what to include.

Between real and ideal

At the beginning of this collaborative project we reflected on the relationship between our two different research perspectives. Caitlin's approach, based on the tools of the Variable Media Network, focused on locating the artist's intent as a means to aid future conservation considerations. The key principle of this approach is to record information about the essence (or "kernel") of an artwork, independent of the media in which it manifests. It privileges the relationship between the conceptual aspects of the work (the philosophical ideas behind the artists intentions) and technical aspects of the work (encompassing the decisions the artist has made in regards to the physical components, software, installation and environmental factors of the work). Lizzie's approach focused on the experiential aspects of the work – how the artwork "occurs" for audience members in the real world - and emphasized the argument that artworks (particularly interactive installations) exist primarily in human experience, rather than as discreet objects. The strategy of this approach is to create a lively portrait of the work as it actually occurs through in-depth interviews with real audience members. The background, rationales and methodologies of these two approaches are detailed in these two publications.

As we began to gather documentation we were faced with an apparent conflict between our perspectives; whilst Caitlin's approach sought to identify an "ideal" form for the work through an exploration of a work's 'medium independent' qualities, Lizzie's approach emphasized the "real" experiences, which were often very far from the expected or desired description given by the artist. The gap between artists' intentions and audience experience is not a new realisation in terms of art theory. The poststructuralist critical revolution of the last century has established the authorial position as only one privileged but not definitive perspective on the interpretation of an artwork. However this gap remains a problem for documentary and preservation strategies in ephemeral art where, in the absence of a clear, discrete and material art-object, the artists intentions have, in many cases, provided the touchstone for how a work will be preserved, restaged and

described in the future.

We recognized a productive tension forming between our approaches, and between the "real" and "ideal" versions of the artwork that motivated them. Both approaches challenge the authority of the other in a useful way, and each offers the other complementary information – creating a richer, deeper and more complex overall picture. The Variable Media Network approach is designed to capture detailed information about the artist's intentions and the degree of variability of technical components of the work. This notion of the ideal version of the work usually grows from the artists experience through numerous installations or 'versions' of a work. By looking for consistencies and difference in these versions, this approach gives conservators a clearer picture of what elements of a work are important, in the eyes of the artist, to preserve over time. It therefore constructs an idea of the work that has often never existed in the real world. The experiential approach, on the other hand captures real world experiences that provide a rich and detailed picture of the reality of the work as it existed, but does not provide essential technical information about how and why it was achieved.

While our approaches were never mutually exclusive of each other, explicitly recognizing the tension between real and ideal provided us with a strategy to solve problems within our individual approaches and develop what we believe to be a useful holistic approach to the documentation of variable media artworks. In our combined approach we have sought to draw together both ideal and real accounts of the work – without erasing or smoothing over their differences. Rather, in this collection we have tried to preserve and exploit the tension in several ways; Firstly in our methods of creating documentation including our interview with the artist and our interviews with the audience, secondly in our approach to structuring and ordering data within the repository, and thirdly in the creation of "signposts," which link together information describing aspects of the ideal version of the work with records of its actual manifestation.

Our process:

Artist interview

We developed a combined method for conducting an artist interview that drew together our two research perspectives. The medium independent questions of the Variable Media Questionnaire identified the conceptual and technical aspects of the work which were placed, by Lizzie, within an experiential context. This created a valuable dialogue between "real and ideal." Framing the discussion in experiential terms enhanced our understanding of why, in certain circumstances, Rokeby had made particular decisions and this frame allowed us to create links between different versions of the work and account for changes that have occurred over time. Additionally, by approaching Rokeby during an installation period, we were able to probe his choices about the technical aspects of the work at the precise moment when variable decisions were being made. This timing further elicited rich and specific details about his experiential goals and assumptions. Our hybrid method allowed us to generate an interview that has clear links to both the audience interviews and the conceptual and technical background information that we have gathered. As such it can act as a lynch-pin for the documentary collection, without claiming to provide a definitive account of the work.

Audience interviews

Using techniques adapted from human-centered design, ethnography and oral history, Lizzie Muller recorded interviews with audience members and museum attendants. The methods and processes used are explained in more detail alongside the records in the archive and in ["Towards an oral history of new media art"](#). Each of the audience interviews presents a unique experience of the work, and together they represent a cross section of ages, occupations and self-defined levels of experience with art.

Data structure

Traditional arrangement in archival studies follows a principle of "*respect des fonds*" meaning that the "original order" in which the records were kept is a key element in maintaining the integrity of a collection of documents. In the case of a 'created collection' however, rules of arrangement of documentation and standardization are less prescribed. Caitlin Jones in ["Surveying the state of the art \(of documentation\)"](#) outlines a number of current data structures proposed by numerous people and organizations working in the field of media art preservation and documentation. The aim of our structure is not to create a hierarchy of information, but to allow for a 'drilling down' of information from the general, to the specific and back, reflecting a more traditional archival arrangement and in keeping with some of the other standards for media art documentation, such as Richard Reinhart's Media Art Notation System (MANS) and V2's Capturing Unstable Media Conceptual Model.

Access points

While it is not our intent to provide an analysis of the data we hope the arrangement and description of the elements will articulate the relationship between audience experience and the conceptual and technical/installed aspects of the work (and vice versa). To achieve this, in the future we hope to provide multiple access points into the information through a series of tags and keywords that will help people make connections within the documentation (between technical details and artist intention, or articulated goals with audience responses).

Conclusion

Maintaining the tension between the ideal notion and the real manifestation of *The Giver of Names* in this documentary collection has produced a productive way to reconcile the way in which ephemeral artworks exist in the world and the way they are represented in archival contexts. The result is a collection that provides multiple perspectives of the work, as well as multiple layers of information, held together with - but not sublimated to - the idea of a unified ideal. As such we hope the collection will provide future researchers with an array of tools and perspectives through which they can understand the actuality of the work as richly as possible. Rather than creating an authoritative documentary account, which establishes a single ideal identity of the work, we have sought to capture its mutability and contingency through the dialogue between its experiential, conceptual and technical aspects. Through this strategy we believe we have created a more, not less, "complete" account of the artwork. By allowing future researchers to understand more deeply the occurrence of the work in this particular place and time we believe that our collection offers them a field of possibilities relating to the work, enabling them to act confidently, in their own time and place, in respect to their own conservation work, research, re-staging or exhibition projects.