

Scoring the Work: Documenting Practice and Performance in Variable Media Art

Corina MacDonald

Those concerned with the preservation of variable media artworks have looked first and foremost to documentation as a means of enabling the future instantiation of these works. In the museum context, existing descriptive and cataloguing methodologies are leveraged and adapted to this end, with varied success. It has become apparent that the documentation of these works must evolve to take into account their unique characteristics. Both the mutable nature of the works and the technological environment in which they operate are problematic for traditional museological documentation [1]. These documentary practices must adapt in order to reflect the contextual and recombinatory relationships between variable media artworks and documents. In this paper, I will revisit the writing of Suzanne Briet, whose 1951 work *What Is Documentation?* tackled the concepts of document and documentation in a radical way, one that continues to elicit discussion within the field of information science today. I apply Briet's ideas about the nature of the document to current concerns regarding the documentation of variable media art. Janet Cardiff's *40 Part Motet* (2001) will provide case material pertinent to this discussion. I believe the perspective of information science will be an informative one for a discussion of these issues and will help to identify the parameters of a new paradigm for the documentation of these works, one that incorporates content, context and practice [2].

WHAT IS DOCUMENTATION?

Suzanne Briet (1894–1989) was a pioneer of the European documentation movement, a precursor to the field now known as information science. She was among the first women to be appointed as a professional librarian at the Bibliothèque Nationale in France, in 1924. During her 30-year tenure there, she gained the nickname “Madame Documentation” for her active role in advancing documentation as a practice distinct from librarianship. *What Is Documentation?* pushes the boundaries of the field and of the profession and is strangely prescient of current dilemmas faced by librarians, archivists and curators despite the technological advances of intervening decades.

What Is Documentation? is a short work of 48 pages. Often

referred to as a “manifesto,” it puts forth some of Briet's ideas about the nature of the document, the practice of documentation and the relationship between users and documents. Her treatise begins by building on the traditionally espoused notions of the document as an embodiment of proof, expanding this idea to define a document as “all concrete or symbolic indexical signs [*indices*], preserved or recorded toward the ends of representing, of reconstituting, or of proving a physical or intellectual phenomenon” [3]. Several of her key ideas constitute a significant break from previous thought within the field of European documentation. Her analysis of the document as a sign subverts the positivist view of evidence as proof of a “fact” and situates the practice of documentation within a network of social and cultural production, something not previously acknowledged by documentalists [4]. The production of knowledge and its documentation proceed simultaneously, and often the two may become conflated, as documents are rearranged in new contexts to create new meanings. The fluid, discursive and contextual nature of the use and creation of documents is emphasized here, as “the forms that documentary work assumes are as numerous as the needs from which they are born” [5]. The content of documentation is in fact “inter-documentary,” comprising a complex array of relationships between indexical signs. Briet predicted that evolving technologies would only further the trend of selection and recombination of information in new formats to meet diverse needs. In her lifetime, this trend was effected by the use of the Dictaphone, microfilm and Teletype.

Briet explodes the idea of paper as the primary documentary form, literally referring to the book as bursting from its seams due to the need for “mobility” [6]. So what forms then can a document take? Briet asks:

Is a star a document? Is a pebble rolled by a torrent a document? Is a living animal a document? No. But some documents are: the photographs and the catalogs of stars, stones in a museum of mineralogy, and animals that are cataloged and shown in a zoo [7].

Briet is renowned for using the unorthodox example of an antelope as a document to illustrate this statement: A new species of antelope is discovered in Africa and a specimen is brought back to the Jardin des Plantes in Paris. Briet considers this antelope to be a document, because it is framed as such within a community of scholarship, that of zoology. Unlike its cousins in the wild, this particular beast has become the focal

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the issues inherent to documenting integral characteristics of variable media artworks. The author begins by revisiting Suzanne Briet's vision of documentation as a socially constructed practice central to the creation and dissemination of knowledge. This perspective lends insight into the nature of the document in the digital age and suggests a new cultural technique for working with variable media art as both document and documented. Janet Cardiff's *40 Part Motet* (2001) provides case material for this discussion, and Richard Rinehart's proposal of the score as a documentary medium is suggested as a means of capturing the elements of practice and performance associated with variable media.

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point of a specialized discourse and its attendant social interactions. For Briet, this antelope is a primary or initial document—the object of the documentary act. She identifies the “documentary fertility” of this primary document; its potentially limitless manifestation in multiple forms, from the press release announcing its display at the zoo to a recording of its voice, from drawings and monographs to its ultimate taxidermy and display in a museum. The forms that are created from the initial document are defined as secondary documents, the means and networks in which the phenomenon manifests itself outside its original frame of context.

The idea of the document as socially constructed was a new one in the library world of 1951. Briet’s thinking led her to propose a new approach to the management of information, departing from the centralized control and access model of the library to a contextual model of selection and recombination based upon the needs of specific communities. She proposed a new role for the documentalist: working side by side with researchers, “prospecting” along the frontiers of a given domain of knowledge and participating in the construction of new knowledge. In fact, she viewed documentation as a new cultural technique spanning documentary forms, social networks and cultural means of expression [8].

THE DIGITAL DOCUMENT: CONTAINER, CONTENT AND CONTEXT

The nature of the document remains a subject of discussion and debate in the field of information science. The proliferation of heterogeneous digital and networked resources in today’s information landscape raises many questions about what forms a document may take and in what ways we may interact with them. Briet’s work positions the document within a social and technological framework, existing in multiple forms to meet multiple needs. Her division of content from form prefigures the popular metaphor in information science of container, content and context, a multifaceted perspective that has become instrumental for the description and preservation of digital resources [9]. Many of the current technological implementations aimed at managing digital documents have treated these three facets independently and have favored the preservation of content and context over the container. Often the container is considered a secondary property of

the document, only concerned with the transmission of content; however, the importance of the container’s influence should not be overlooked in the quest for mobile and contextual content [10]. These three elements are inseparable: containers are integral to the properties of content and context.

Digital resources perhaps illustrate Briet’s concept of the document more persuasively than the antelope in the zoo. If we revisit her definition of the document as a “concrete or symbolic indexical sign,” we see that materiality is not a prerequisite characteristic. Rather, it is the notion of the pointer that is emphasized, a notion that certainly applies well to digital entities, which could be said to exist materially as electrical signals but whose meaning depends upon the interplay of external agents that can read and reconstruct them when required. The container in this case provides the

environment of “ambient intelligence” that is context-aware and able to recombine information in real time based upon geographical or other environmental data and user preferences [11]. How can the perspectives of information scientists concerned with the nature of digital objects provide insight into the documentation and preservation of variable media art? Variable media artworks have much in common with digital documents, existing as distributed and interdependent networks of components. They are complex configurations of the digital and analog, physical and ephemeral, that depend upon a variety of human and nonhuman agents for instantiation. They are interactive, mutable, fleeting and fragmentary. As Richard Rinehart has pointed out, they are as much performative as they are object based [12].

An artwork is framed within a given dis-

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pointer: the file format and its associated operations within a specific cultural and technological framework. This container enables the reconstruction of the content and context of the document, an iterative process dependent upon environmental variables. The process of reconstruction echoes another aspect of Briet’s definition of the document; its goal of reconstituting or representing a phenomenon. The digital document or object is a fragmentary entity, by nature both intangible and interactive. In many cases there may be more than one technological configuration or container that will provide access, leading to variability in the final presentation of content and context. These three distributed yet interdependent facets are all required in order to convey meaning.

VARIABLE MEDIA ART: THE WORK AS DOCUMENT

Briet spoke of the atomization of the book into its constituent leaves and the recombination of these leaves in new forms (such as the binder) that were context specific. Today in information science literature, context is everything as researchers seek to create a digital en-

vironment in much the same way as is Briet’s primary document. There is a comparison to be made between the exposition of the antelope in the zoo and the work in the museum. Both act as pointers within social and cultural networks and rely upon the interoperability of multiple agents within them. They generate webs of secondary documentary forms, all of which serve to reconstitute, represent or prove the original phenomenon. The artwork as a primary document can provide a means of understanding the interdependencies between the many components of a work within multiple networks of production. Like the digital document, the variable media artwork can be said to exist in the assemblage of container, content and context. The relationship between the content and form of the work becomes an important consideration in its preservation. Understanding the artwork as a constructed phenomenon situated within networks of secondary documentation will point toward a preservation strategy based on a new understanding of the practice of documentation. To illustrate the documentary characteristics of variable media art, we will discuss the case of Janet Cardiff’s *40 Part Motet*.

40 PART MOTET

40 Part Motet is an audiovisual installation work that investigates the intersections of perception, sound and space. Like much of Cardiff's work, the *Motet* is concerned with the ephemeral nature of sound as a medium and the ways in which it influences both memory and our perception of time. Sound is a physical phenomenon yet it evokes an ephemeral presence. With *40 Part Motet*, Cardiff utilizes a gallery space to re-enact a performance of an extremely complex polyphonic choral work of the 16th century, Thomas Tallis's *Spem in Alium*. Forty recorded choir members are channeled through dedicated speakers, arranged in a circular configuration originally conceived by Tallis. The installation deconstructs conventional spectatorship, allowing the listener to "climb inside the music" by moving throughout the space and listening to different configurations of voices [13]. The trajectory taken by the listener is an integral part of the experience of the work. The principle of spatialization is explored, whereby perceptions of both aural and physical space are affected. The installation is highly interactive, requiring the participation of an audience to complete the work and carry out the artist's intent.

Simulation also plays a key role in the work in the implied presence of the performers indicated by the anthropomorphic presentation and arrangement of the 40 speakers. Channeling as a metaphor describes both the physical conduits through which the recordings are connected to the speakers as well as the spectral effect of the voices they emit. Tallis himself could be said to be channeled across time in this work, which Cardiff describes as a collaboration rather than a reinterpretation [14]. The overlay of recorded sound and ambient sound within a space creates the impression of layered realities, an infiltration of the past into the present, the virtual into the real. The work juxtaposes both physicality and ephemerality, psychological and technological aspects of perception.

Like the primary document, particularly the digital document, this artwork relies upon a complex interoperability of components, from the digital audio recordings of the performers to the reverberation of the presentation space and the presence of people within it. The infrastructure of interactions between physical constituents, technological elements and participatory activity corresponds to Briet's notion of a document in that it points to external agents that act to

reconstitute or re-perform the phenomenon of the work. This "infrastructure" is a kind of interoperable architecture crucial to what is perceived as "the work," namely the phenomenological dimension that reflects the artistic intent. Briet claimed that a document could act as a substitute for a lived experience, and it is in this sense that we can understand how the infrastructure provides the documentary structure for the experience of the artwork [15]. To revisit the tripartite metaphor of the document as container, content and context, the container could be equated to this infrastructure, which in turn allows the content and context of the work to take form. In *40 Part Motet* the container includes the operation of components such as hard disk recorders, amplifiers, cabling and speakers, the interaction between space and sound, as well as the movement of listeners through the space. The content of the work is embodied in the experience. Context exists in the cultural and social constructions brought to the work by all participants, as well as the roles and practices involved in instantiating the work.

TACIT KNOWLEDGE AND THE DOCUMENTATION OF PRACTICE

Context is the most difficult aspect of the work to document for posterity. It consists in large part of what could be called tacit knowledge. The concept of tacit knowing was developed by Michael Po-

that are required to re-present the work. Tacit knowledge in the museum setting is essential for the preservation of variable media art yet remains as ephemeral as many of the works. Hummelen and Scholte review some of the methodologies that have been devised to capture the practices associated with these artworks [18]. Interviews with artists are one way of gathering this knowledge directly from the source, and the use of multimedia interview formats permits nonverbal communication through example or demonstration. Interview material can be incorporated into artist's archives, which should ideally be shared among institutions [19]. Besides the interview, they review the Variable Media Questionnaire [20], a tool that has the potential to document intangible features of a work by incorporating varying perspectives alongside information about the artistic intent and the effects and behaviors of the work [21].

Cardiff's *Motet* has generated an abundance of secondary documentation. Exhibition catalogs and reviews, press interviews, photographs and detailed technical specifications are all collected by the institutional proprietor. While this is an informative network of documentation, it does not encompass all of the contextual knowledge required for preservation. Some of the collected documents, such as records of conversations archived as e-mail correspondence, do provide some context. The museum has also undertaken to film short interview

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lanyi and refers to the range of conceptual and sensory information that cannot be expressed in words but that provides the backdrop to our understanding of a thing [16]. It is best described by Polanyi's aphorism: "We can know more than we can tell" [17]. For documentalists this kind of knowledge by its very nature poses a problem. For variable media artworks, the tacit knowledge necessary for preservation consists of the artistic intent, the social and cultural contexts that impart meaning and the practices

segments with the artist discussing the work. However, all the documentation thus far acquired and produced lacks a record of the tacit knowledge that is embodied in the practice of reinstalling and re-presenting the work. By nature, this knowledge cannot be easily expressed using words, but there are some techniques for eliciting it that may be appropriate for this case.

With *40 Part Motet*, tacit knowledge resides primarily with the artist and her collaborators. The artist, however, is not

a source continually available to the museum, and so responsibility for “knowing” the practices associated with the work has been delegated to one person who can oversee successive installations at various locations [22]. The frequent reinstallation of this work in different spaces presents unique problems, because the experience of the work is so closely tied to its physical location. The importance of sound spatialization requires that some parameters be established to determine which physical spaces are most suitable. These parameters exist as specifications about room dimensions, decor and reverberation. If certain fundamental criteria can be met, then the installation can proceed. Once a decision has been made to install the work within a given space, the tacit knowledge of the technician comes into play. This individual’s “sound memory” [23] of the original instantiation of the work serves as a guide and is a highly subjective awareness residing only in the practice of this single person.

The experiential nature of the work is mirrored by the subjective practice of its installation, and to date no systematic methods have been defined to transmit these processes to others [24]. Potential means of capturing this knowledge and context could be borrowed from the management techniques of gathering “lessons learned” and “best practices” [25]. For example, an installation log would be a simple method of recording practice by documenting the context-specific installation issues that may provide insight in the future. These lessons learned borrow from the practice of storytelling and are often conceived as narrative structures, from annotated databases to notebooks, detailing circumstances and decisions taken. In capturing context through narrative, it is informative to share accounts of both failure and success [26]. Best practices are developed over time from the results of extensive experience and lessons learned. In the museum setting, it would be beneficial to produce a set of best practices for the documentation of variable media artworks in general, but perhaps a more informal guide could be developed for individual works such as the *40 Part Motel*. Developing methods for documenting practice is one way to preserve tacit knowledge. The preservation of knowledge is as essential to the future of the variable media artwork as the maintenance of its physical and technological constituents. Tools developed to perpetuate this knowledge would enhance the network of documentation surrounding the work.

TOWARD A NEW PARADIGM OF DOCUMENTATION: SCORING THE WORK

Suzanne Briet envisaged documentation as a new cultural technique, with practitioners actively occupied alongside the producers of knowledge. She predicted that knowledge creation and documentation would increasingly become parallel and even convergent enterprises. This idea is illustrated in the museum environment by the changing relationships between the key players concerned with the

of the document as a constructed entity is quite applicable today to both digital documents and variable media artworks. The move away from an emphasis on form toward the primacy of use and context is a key attribute of the new paradigm of documentation envisaged by Briet. While documentary practice is shifting to accommodate the nature of contemporary art forms, there is a need for a structured model that will address some of the issues particular to variable media artworks. Documentation of variable media art must comprehensively consider

The overlay of recorded sound and ambient sound within a space creates the impression of layered realities, an infiltration of the past into the present, the virtual into the real.

preservation of variable media art. Traditional approaches to documentation are no longer appropriate for these works. The distributed and interdependent nature of the works calls for a similarly diverse yet interconnected network of professionals. The division between institutional roles and practices is decreasing as museums today frequently function as production spaces for the development of a work [27]. The museum has become the site of complementary activities associated with creation, documentation and preservation. Curators, artists, conservators and technicians work collaboratively to support future instantiations of a work. The practice of documenting variable media artworks is closely tied to other arenas of production and research within the museum setting. The artwork is no longer framed as the focal point of a particular discourse but serves as the meeting place of multiple frames of reference. This shift away from a traditional static documentary model reflects what Briet considered the essential quality of the new paradigm of documentation, what she referred to as “the dynamism of living documentation” [28].

The document is no longer a stable concept, and documentation has in turn become a fluid and agile intellectual activity. Documentary practice intersects social, cultural and technological frameworks, reflecting the interactions that occur between them. Briet’s positioning

the facets of container (infrastructure), content (experience) and context (tacit knowledge). It must be responsive to the evolution of a work and its networks of production. The document must reflect the form of the work itself [29].

In *What Is Documentation?* Briet identified two emergent documentary techniques: that of an “increasingly abstract and algebraic schematization of documentary elements” and a simultaneous extension of “substitutes for lived experiences” such as photography, radio and television [30]. The differentiation between the experience and the structure of a work foreshadows today’s digital environment, which is home to a multiplicity of media formats designed to share lived experience. At the same time there remains a need for adequate descriptive structures to locate and retrieve these heterogeneous resources. These trends underlie much of the work done in information science, which seeks to develop and maintain interoperable descriptive standards to enable access to the evolving incarnations of digital documents. The balance between experience and structure is always shifting.

The relation between experience and structure is also crucial for variable media artworks. There is a need to transmit the experience of the work and to document it in a way that facilitates the capture of tacit knowledge for future reuse. A documentation model is required that

can convey structure, experience and movement. All the unique documentary concerns and demands in the preservation of variable media art point us toward a new model of documentation similar to the medium of the score as proposed by Richard Rinehart [31]. His proposed formal notation system has a flexible yet robust structure and incorporates the passage of time and the possibility of change. It can act as both a documentary and compositional tool, affirming the correspondence between knowledge production and documentation. Rinehart states that the score constitutes the “clearest type of description that compiles formalized (systematic) discrete elements into documents that aid in the re-performance or re-creation of works of art” [32]. Through the process of compilation, it permits varying levels of granularity [33] appropriate to the context of use. Thus, the model of the score offers a balance between experience and structure, infrastructure (container) and the phenomenon (content and context), creation and recording.

Rinehart recognizes the link between digital informatics and variable media artworks and proposes the use of a markup language to express the notation system. This is reminiscent of Briet’s idea of an abstract and algebraic schematization of documentary elements. A markup language provides a schema to delineate the components, context and practice of a work. It acts as a script for the re-performance of the work at a future time, incorporating the spectrum of participation and decision making, of roles and interactions. The document, the score and the markup language all imply movement and navigation. The document as an indexical sign positions itself within a web of connections, easily visualized using the associative properties of a hypertextual markup language. Rinehart’s formal notation system for variable media art presents a documentary model that is able to encompass many of the complexities inherent in the nature of the artwork and its relationships with its documentation. This model embodies the notion of “recording” as a dynamic documentary process [34].

CONCLUSION

Questions about the nature of the document as expressed within the field of information science provide us with some interesting revelations about the docu-

mentary practices surrounding variable media art. Suzanne Briet’s definition of the document as a sign recorded in order to reconstruct a phenomenon brings to the foreground of this investigation the interdependent and recombinatory relationships that exist between a work and its documentation. The work as document and documented helps us to understand variable media art in multiple dimensions as pointer, narrative and network.

Briet saw in the emerging role of the documentalist a new rhythm of intellectual work, one fostered by the technological developments of her time. Today documentation is still a rhythmic force, buffeted by new technologies and demanding new models. The issues raised in the documentation of variable media art call for a new methodology that can embody these fluctuating rhythms of production and practice. Rinehart’s formal notation system leverages the synergy between current technological standards and the concept of the musical score to enable the documentation of both experience and structure. The re-performance of a work through the score will provide an interesting departure point for future investigation of the interdisciplinary cultural technique that is documentation.

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