

Mogens Jacobsen & Morten Søndergaard (eds.):
RE_ACTION: The digital archive experience.
Renegotiating the Competences of the Archive
and the (Art) Museum in the 21st Century.
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A circular bar and 260 colourful liquor bottles on transparent acrylic shelves on the wall sounds like a vivid scene from Sunny Beach, but is in fact from the Museum of Contemporary Art in Roskilde. *Audiobar* is the title of media artist Mogens Jacobsen's work that was produced for the museum in 2007. This futuristic looking bar is a tangible interface, where museum guests can choose a bottle from the shelf and place it onto the bar. Each bottle is labelled with a scale indicating its virtual content, which might be "70% Rhythmic", "60% Ethereal", or "30% Noise". When placed on the table, a small RFID chip in the bottom of the bottle activates a number of possible works from the museum's collection of audio artworks. Placing several bottles on the bar narrows down the list of possible works.

Next to the bar is a study lounge with two monitors, mice and headphones. The monitors display the ten recently played tracks from the bar, and the guest can read facts about the particular audio work and further explore other works by the same artist in the collection.

Audiobar was developed as part of the research project *MAP / Media Art Platform* – a project at the Museum of Contemporary Art, which lasted from 2006-2008. The museum contains a large collection of audio art dating from as early as the 1890s, and according to the introduction in the anthology the aim of *MAP* was to create "a public platform where different concepts of media art could be combined with media-based artistic expressions into a 'digital archive experience'" (p. 12). *MAP* was developed in collaboration with artists, programmers, designers, art historians and institutions. Through the design of a number of

new media art experiments, *MAP* explored how the art collection of The Museum of Contemporary Art (of which none of the works are digital) could be transformed and re-presented into a digitally preserved, accessible and tangible environment. The outcome of the project was presented at the exhibition *TOTAL_ACTION – Art in the New Media Landscape*, which was shown at the Museum of Contemporary Art from October to November 2008.

In the book *RE_ACTION: The digital archive experience. Renegotiating the Competences of the Archive and the (Art) Museum in the 21st Century* (2009), the *MAP* project is the starting point for further discussions about the role of the archive and the (art) museum in the age of digital media. The book is an anthology and contains a diverse and interesting mix of theoretical, practical and historical articles about the museum institution and its archive from a new media perspective.

The central question in the book is the following: In a radically altered world, how do museums activate their archive in an open, intelligent and exciting manner? In his essay “The Digital Archive Experience”, the editor-in-chief of the anthology and project leader of *MAP*, Morten Søndergaard, argues that the museum of today and the future should institute innovative practices in the form of new structures and relations. To “institutionalize culture-as-identity into collected ‘canons’” is not a valid solution for the future, he argues (p. 28). In short, Morten Søndergaard suggests the answer to the question is *the digital archive experience*.

And *Audiobar* is a good example of how an artist today can use technology to create such a digital archive experience. In his article “Audiobar: Creating the “Hørbar/Audiobar””, Mogens Jacobsen explains:

When I visit a museum, I don't plan which art works to see. (...) Not all pieces will be hits, but I am always quite sure I will find some unknown “hits” during my visit. (...) the *Audiobar* tries to introduce this “stumble upon” experience into the field of audio-based art. (...) Visitors explore the bottles on the shelves, looking for specific combinations. Guests discuss music and negotiate with strangers for the real estate on the table top. And some even begin to discuss the concept of describing audio in words (p. 217).

In addition to *Audiobar* by Mogens Jacobsen, the anthology contains articles about the other works produced for *MAP*: *Metasyn* by media artist and designer Carl Emil Carlsen, *Social Souvenir* by media artist and designer Sebastian Campion, *Shift* by media and sound artist hc gilje, *Unsound* by sound artist Lars L. Hansen, *Mirror-Zone-Site* and *Zen-Sofa-Arrangement* by media artists Kjell Yngve Petersen and Karin Søndergaard, and *The Discovery of Sound* by sound artist Astrid Lomholt. These works elegantly show the possibilities and strengths of the *digital archive experience*; when the tangible virtuality of the invisible computer is combined with an archival information space, a new situation, a digital archive experience, emerges that might very well prove to be fruitful for the museum.

The digital culture, which museums are a part of today, is described by the American writer Clay Shirky. In his contribution “Ontology Is Overrated: Categories, links and tags”,

he describes a remarkable change in how we organise data and knowledge in the digital age and identifies a transition from the conventional hierarchical ways of categorising things to what he calls “organic ways of organizing information”. Shirky argues convincingly that today’s world uses “linking” and “tagging” as classification strategies, of which Google is a striking example. Translated to a museum context, this would parallel the traditional static museum, where art works are grouped in fixed categories decided by art historians, versus a museum that experiments with “organic ways of organizing” art works, where the visitor plays an active role in deciding which art works to approach and activate.

For the German media theorist, curator and artist Peter Weibel, the information society has given the artist a new role. In his article “New Protagonists and Alliances in 21st Century Art” he states that the artist of today does not just produce works of art, but also provides services – an argument that is put into practice by the art works in *MAP*, which are not only works of art in themselves, but also meta works that provide interfaces/services through which the visitors can engage with the museum space and archive.

In that sense, the artist is not just an artist but also a mediator between the visitor and the archive. For some museums this is considered a problematic approach, since it becomes increasingly difficult to differentiate between the artwork and the art communication. But the blurring of borders is exactly why some find the digital archive experience appealing. In his text “Metadata, mon amour”, the Russian media theorist Lev Manovich points out that since meta data is not only an innocent tool to structure data, but also a cultural form which shapes the ways we experience the world, working with this particular issue becomes an important task for media artists. However, according to Manovich, “surprisingly little energy has been spent so far thinking about how we can interface image and other media collections in new ways” (p. 114).

Thus, *RE_ACTION: The digital archive experience. Renegotiating the Competencies of the Archive and the (Art) Museum in the 21st Century* enters into the current debates about how museum practices might be reorganised in response to the digital media era in which we live. Questions about audience reception, the role of the curator, access to collections, education versus experience economy, preservation, copy rights etc. are all central to these discussions. But whereas the discussions often have evolved around on-line digital mediation and web 2.0 (at least until recently), *RE_ACTION* propose a different strategy: here the focus is on the archive as the very centre of the museum and on the development of new “innovative” cultural institutions, as editor-in-chief Morten Søndergaard points out in his article (p. 32). The book argues convincingly for the museum institution as an information space, which can facilitate social communication and networking. But instead of discussing the net as a platform for art communication and either the curator or the user as the producer of this communication, the anthology shifts the focus to the physical museum space and to different forms of tangible, ubiquitous art installations produced by artists.

This approach is quite refreshing and has a lot to offer future museum practices that want to revitalise old archives and museum structures. However, it also raises a couple of

questions. One of the most obvious is the relationship between the “old” art works in the collection and the “new” art work that functions as the collection’s interface. What happens to the “old” work when it is recontextualised within the frame of a new art work? Do meta installations revitalise the “dead” collections and help visitors become aware of the old art works? Or do they, with their tangible and often attractive interface, demand so much attention that the collection becomes a mere footnote to the new artwork? It seems plausible that this new form of work most likely cannot stand alone – but combined with other ways of communicating, the digital archive experience can call attention to artworks that might otherwise be forgotten in the archive.

The anthology presents an excellent collection of articles – many of them “classics” within their fields – each with interesting points about the potential of new media. But as is often the case with anthologies, the overall impression is at times a bit diffuse and incoherent. These objections set aside, the anthology is an important contribution to the ongoing debate, with many interesting examples of new media art works and a refreshing, thought-provoking view on the museum and the archive in our digital times.

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