Dejan Grba

Forensics of a Molten Crystal

Challenges of Archiving and Representing Generative Art

Abstract

This lecture discusses the conceptual, material and logistic aspects of archiving, preserving, and controlled representation of generative digital art projects at the beginning of the 21st century.

Creative approaches in contemporary digital art are often based upon the complex relations between multiple interdependent software and hardware platforms. These platforms are considered as guaranteed layers of cultural and technical infrastructure, but they are highly unstable because they evolve according to the unpredictable changes in economy, technology and politics. Functionality of these platforms is primarily focused on satisfying current demands, with relatively narrow margins for backward and forward compatibility.

Technical solutions in the first wave of institutional curation, archiving, preserving and representing digital art, with Paola Antonelli, Christiane Paul, Charlie Gere, Wolf Lieser and Oliver Grau among its most notable proponents, have been dealing with the less demanding software/hardware dynamics of the 20th century. Contemporary generative projects, however, often employ multilayered interconnections between software libraries, platforms and APIs running on the networked hardware, with much higher degree of entanglement. One response to these technological challenges is to maintain and update the relevant libraries, platforms and other software components, and to continuously develop the software emulators which can reconstruct the formal and operational qualities of the archived artworks on modern hardware.

Directly thematizing their software/hardware reliance, many generative projects, especially those in post-digital, post-media and post-Internet art, imply or engage the social and political consequences of the temporariness and fragility of information technologies. Some of these projects can be emulated, and some were already anticipated and realized as both the event and its own documentation which

relevantly represents all the poetic elements of the original event. However, the projects whose generativeness emerges from the frequent network transactions between many users can only be archived as documentation while their generative functionality cannot be emulated but only simulated. The absence of technical solutions for their proper archival and representation confronts us with ultimate impossibility of the unconditional preservation of the artistic and cultural products, but it also reminds us on the values of transience and forgetting in this context.