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Memory_Archive_Database v 3.0: Database culture is only partly a reflection of the rise of the Internet.

Steve Dietz

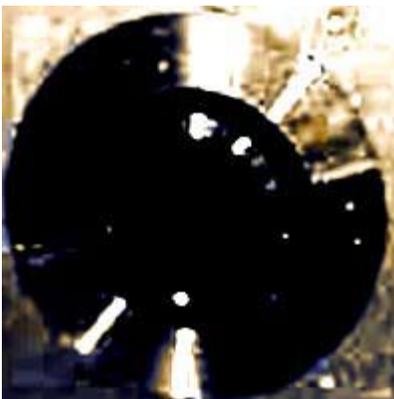Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/switch

Archived from http://switch.sjsu.edu/archive/nextswitch/switch_engine/front/front.php%3Fartc=31.html. Documentation of the preservation processes used for this collection is available at https://github.com/NickSzydlowski/switch.

DATABASE

Memory_Archive_Database v 3.0

Database culture is only partly a reflection of the rise of the Internet.

Steve Dietz on Jan 21 2000   **issue 13**

For the past 25+ years, museums and other cultural institutions have been trying to figure out, first how to automate their information systems--create computer-based databases--and, more recently, how to provide the public access to this "automated information." Original Article

In 1968, in a report to the Rockefeller Foundation during a residency at SUNY Stony Brook, Nam June Paik argued that 97% of all electronic music was not recorded and that "a simple measure would solve the whole problem. An information center for unpublished electronic media should be created."(2) Of course, at the time, this meant such a center would "provide a xerox copy and a tape copy of musical pieces, at the request of performers, students, and organizers from all over the world." Still, convert analog to digital, and the dream lives on, perhaps more vibrant than ever, of a universal archive, with access to everything by anyone anywhere at anytime.

For the past 25+ years, museums and other cultural institutions have been trying to figure out, first how to automate their information systems--create computer-based databases--and, more recently, how to provide the public access to this "automated information."(3)

Now that we institutions have begun to implement, with the advent of the World Wide Web, the public access side of things, one of the dirty secrets we are hiding is that many people don't care that much about the information museums have so assiduously gathered--dimensions, medium, provenance and much of the other important but less-than-fascinating minutiae of museum information systems.

Artist:	Bacher, Lutz
Title:	In Memory of My Feelings
Date:	1990
Medium:	zinc coated steel, screenprinted T-shirts
Dimensions:	overall 54-5/8 x 11-1/2 x 11-7/16"
Credit Line:	Partial gift of Eileen and Michael Cohen, 1997

Information such as this is sometimes referred to as "tombstone" information by museum professionals. From the Walker Art Center's online database http://www.walkerart.org/resources/

As Hal Foster put it,

>   *"Is there a new dialectics of seeing allowed by electronic information? . . . Art as image-text, as info-pixel? An archive without museums? If so, will this database be more than a base of data, a repository of the*

given?"(4)

To the extent that "museumification" is a kind of classification, it is no wonder that many artists are skeptical, at best, of the mausoleumizing of the vibrant net culture they have been creating and participating in. To a large extent, "new media" is an activity, not always a product, and, to paraphrase Barnett Newman, databases are for art what ornithology is for birds.

Database Culture + Datapoesis

In *Interface Culture*, Steven Johnson argued, in essence, that the interface is omnipresent, a defining aspect of contemporary culture.(5) Almost unbelievably **Merriam-Webster®** suggests that database first came into use around 1962. I would argue that the database has become the backend, so to speak, of interface culture. Even when there does not exist, technically speaking, a "collection of data, or information, that is specially organized for rapid search and retrieval," the potential of getting-retrieving-finding what you want is omnipresent, just on the other side of the interface.

Database culture is only partly a reflection of the rise of the Internet and Microsoft sloganeering about "Where do you want to go today?™" It is mirrored more generally in what Simon Nora and Alain Minc described in a 1978 report to the French government as the "computerization of society."6 Even in the art world, this transformation was presciently alluded to by Leo Steinberg in his classic "**Other Criteria**" (1968, 1972).

> *"The **flatbed picture** plane makes its symbolic allusion to hard surfaces such as tabletops, studio floors, charts, bulletin boards--any receptor surface on which objects are scattered, on which data is entered, on which information may be received, printed, impressed-- whether coherently or in confusion. The pictures of the last fifteen to twenty years insist on a radically new orientation, in which the painted surface is no longer the analogue of a visual experience of nature but of operational processes.*
>
> *"Yet [the flatbed] is no more than a symptom of changes which go far beyond questions of picture planes, or of painting as such. It is part of a shakeup which contaminates all purified categories. The deepening inroads of art into non-art continue to alienate the connoisseur as art defects and departs into strange territories leaving the old stand-by criteria to rule an eroding plain."(7)*

Even as art and artists abandon a purified aesthetics and question the value of museological classification schema, within the context of the computerization of society in general, many artists are working to destabilize these activities by a methodology that might be described as "datapoesis," freeing data for a different trajectory, as Manuel Delanda put it in an interview with Switch staff members in **Switch v3n3:**

> *"Strata may be geological, biological or social, but in all cases they represent a way of constraining the spontaneous creativity of matter-energy, of linking it to stable, durable, stratified forms. (rocks, plant or animal bodies, social institutions). In nature there are also, destratifying processes, which detach a particular structure from it fixed function, and open it up to a new one, like the mouth of a bird which is detached from a flow of food, a purely digestive function, to become linked to a flow of song, a more expressive function, used to mark a territory and seduce mates. The artist is that agent (human or not) that takes stratified matter-energy or sedimented cultural materials, and makes them follow a line of flight, or a line of song, or of color. (emphasis added)"(8)*

Institutions cannot afford not to try and understand, present, collect, and preserve contemporary artistic activities. We would do well, however, to explore artists' process as well as their "product," fine tuning the signal-to-noise ratio–the surprise--of what we want to deliver.

The Artist as Unreliable Archivist

The Unreliable Archivist by Janet Cohen, Keith Frank, and Jon Ippolito was commissioned by the Walker as both a parasitic archive of äda'web and a meta-commentary on the act of the Walker archiving such a remarkable and vibrant collective project.
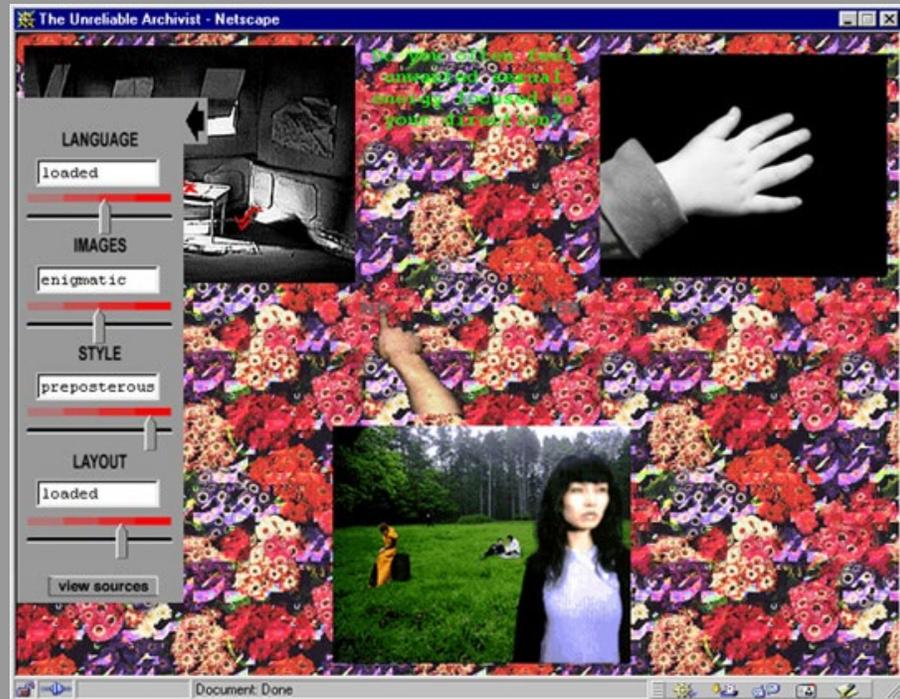
The Unreliable Archivist, like any good archivist, creates metadata about äda'web. In this case it just happens to be a little, shall we say, idiosyncratic. . . . The value of a standard like the Categories for the Description of Works of Art is its precision--at least for experts. It allows one to make minute differentiations between objects. It allows for the discovery of specific known objects from vast databases. What it is not so good at is making connections or finding things one doesn't know about. Think of the difference between searching for a 20th-century portrait made of wood and searching for something that has ambiguous language, enigmatic images, and preposterous style.

When I first saw *The Unreliable Archivist*, I took it to be an homage to the wonderful, breathtaking excesses of äda'web and those who created it. I also took it to be a parody, a tongue-in-cheek commentary on the butchery that archiving--mothballing--such a dynamic institution as the Walker could entail. I still think these conclusions are true, but my concern has changed. Rather than worrying about how unreliable the archivist is, perhaps we should map the whole Walker collection according to these categories and values. What would happen?

It is possible to imagine a future in which everything is archived--from our credit data to our memories, from world events to passionate encounters. How then do we create systems that allow each of us to be an unreliable archivist? To create the preposterous, the enigmatic? No matter how intelligent archiving agents are in 2020, they will be poor substitutes if they can't represent an individual point of view.

Technologies to the People®

> *"It is good for the artist to insinuate himself into the open mesh of any system–not in a provocative and visible way, but mimetically, using their same mediums."*
>
> *--Maurizio Cattelan*

Technologies To The People Video Collection

the use of video and television as a media of artistic expression.

Tittle	Year	Autor	Tech.
Against Video	1973	Douglas Davis	6:30 min. Col. Video
And Now This	1983	Jorge Lozano/Christa Schadt	8 min. Col. Video
Animation	1975	Stuart Marshall	4 min. Col. Video
Art and Technology	1975	Chris Burden	15 min. Col. Video

Daniel Garcia Andujar's "**Video Collection**" is what I would call a typical net.art gesture. It appropriates the developing practices of the Internet--in this case database-like streaming content as well as its series of unhelpful **help desk messages**--and yokes them to cultural and societal desires--in this case database-access to significant but not always easy-to-find cultural resources. While there is a clear element of épater le bourgeois with this work, one less predictable outcome is the economic issues that get raised. Andujar was written to by at least two artist and/or cultural institution representatives with questions that started out along the lines of "how did you do this" (technically) and ended, more or less," how dare you do this." The issue is only partly an economic one, really. By being so opaque about his project, Andujar also highlights the tension between the ideal of transparency in net culture–and in archiving–and the fact that information is knowledge–and power–whether it is about the arcana of technological capabilities such as streaming media or the arcana of classification schema.

The Social Filter: The File Room

The notions of openness and non-exclusivity can be problematic enough for institutions, but one of the cornerstones of museum culture is authoritativeness and selectivity. The pioneering example of Antonio Muntadas's **File Room**, however, points to a very different model--of bi-directional information flows, multi-nodal information sources, collaborative filtering, multiple points of view, the transgression of geographic and discipline boundaries, and the comingling of specialist and non-specialist.

The File Room is a particularly interesting example because it is about censorship. Explicitly, it is about specific instances of censorship that have occurred anywhere in the world. Implicitly, however, it is about the fact that there has been no easily and publicly accessible source for this information; that subjects of censorship have often been beholden to traditional news sources to tell their stories, and if they are told at all, they are not always the story the subject would tell.

This kind of "filter," where the only filter is really that people have to know about the resource and be willing to take the time to upload to it, has been called a "social filter,"

and is present in other "open archives" such as the network group **ORANG**, which allows anyone who wishes to
"collaborate" to have an account to upload files or **An Experience Base, A Boolean Typhoon**, which also relies on the public at large to collaboratively create an SGML-based classification scheme for a database of experiences.

To reinforce this issue of bypassing traditional institutional resources, The File Room was originally mounted as an effort of the alternative artist space, the Randolph Street Gallery in Chicago, along with technical help from the Electronic Visualization Lab at the University of Illinois at Chicago. It is now hosted by another non-profit, alternative virtual organization. What makes museums think they are necessary for the propagation of net culture? At any rate, I would submit that it is impossible to adequately represent net culture without the integral involvement of the net community.

The Counter-Anatomical Database: ftp_formless_anatomy:

Alan Sekula in an important essay "The Body and the Archive" has pointed out the early role of photographic archives in the normalization of the criminal surveillance system, not to mention the rise of eugenics. In terms of the origins of the photographic archive, which gave rise, in many ways, to our present-day surveillance society, there were two important poles:

> *"[t]he Paris police official Alphonse Bertillon invented the first effective modern system of criminal identification. His was a bipartite system, positioning a 'microscopic' individual record within a 'macroscopic' aggregate."*
>
> *"The English statistician and founder of eugenics, Francis Galton, invented a method of composite portraiture. . . . Through one of his several applications of composite portraiture, Galton attempted to construct a purely optical apparition of the criminal type."(9)*

And Catherine Richard at a recent ISEA Cartographies symposium spoke of surveillance as one of the three primary manifestations of what she described as the contemporary "collapse of the visual."10 Of course, for those of us with popular culture tendencies, **Enemy of the State** confirms that the U.S. government can spy on anyone anywhere. Gene Hackman, nevertheless, provides the practical advice that if Denzel Washington doesn't look up, he will remain safe, somewhat reminiscent of the "duck and cover" teachings of an earlier era. Inevitably, one must speculate that in the near future fashionable hats on the Paris runways will be designed for the pleasurable viewing of satellite surveillance–and subsequent downloading from the Web, as a kind of tele-fashion mirror. Think about it.


```
Index of /~ftp_formless_anatomy/

   name              last modified  size   description
**********************************************************************

   ../formless/

   digital_anatomy   05-Apr-99      8529K  VHP cross-
                                           sectional
   realvideo_surgery 24-Apr-99      2074K  webcast surgery
   virtual_body      05-Apr-99      1606K  3-D body
                                           modeling
                                           online
   bioinformatics    21-Apr-99      N/A    biological
                                           databases
```

In a much more rigorous way, Eugene Thacker's **ftp_formless_anatomy: counter-anatomical database** is precisely about how the databasing of the human body through the Visible Human project transforms it from subject to object; something entirely suitable for surveillance--not just of one dead convict, but of anyone, whether webcasting surgery or giving birth. He writes in "**Bioinformatics**":

> *"This decoding [of biomedical technologies such as MRI] works*

doubly, since, on the one hand, it is an approach to the body completely mediated through its production in imaging technologies, and, on the other, it is an assumption of the anatomical body inherited from modern anatomy as a corporeal, organized, mechanistic integral unit. The tensions of a technoculture can be found here, between the body of modern anatomy and the body of postmodern 'infomedicine,' and the body of the modern anatomy text book and the body displayed on multiple scanning monitors are their technological correlatives."(11)

Data Body: Time Capsule

"In an age in which we are increasingly aware of ourselves as databases, identified by social security numbers and genetic structures, it is imperative that artists actively participate in how data is shaped, organised and disseminated."

--Victoria Vesna12

In **Time Capsule**, Eduardo Kac has taken Vesna's observation to a kind of logical extreme, self-implanting a bio-panoptic surveillance device–a microchip that contains a programmed identification number and that is integrated with a coil and a capacitor, all hermetically sealed in biocompatible glass. Scanning the implant generates a low energy radio signal that energizes the microchip to transmit its unique and inalterable numerical code. As part of the procedure Kac registered himself in a database set up to aid in finding lost animals, classifying himself as both animal and owner.

For Kac, the kind of literal construction of the dead, anatomical body that Thacker points to, is manifest on a daily, ongoing basis as humans adapt to become extensions of the computer–of the database/interface.

"As we experience it today, the passage into a digital culture--with standard interfaces that require us to pound a keyboard and sit behind a desk staring at a screen--creates a physical trauma that amplifies the psychological shock generated by ever-faster cycles of technological invention, development, and obsolescence. In its most obvious manifestation, this physical trauma takes the shape of carpal-tunnel syndrome and backaches. In its less evident form, current interface standardization has led to an overall containment of the human body, which is then forced to conform to the boxy shape of the computer setup (monitor and CPU). It is almost as if the body

*has become an extension of the computer, and not the other way
around. The need for alternative ways of experience in the digital
culture is evident."(13)*

Datamining: C5

If the database, with its multiple fields for searching, is a direct descendent of the
Bertillon cabinet, which managed to classify hundreds of thousands of subjects
according to 12 measurements so that the smallest category in the system had no
more than a dozen records, a descendent of Galton's composite photograph is the
composite data profile.
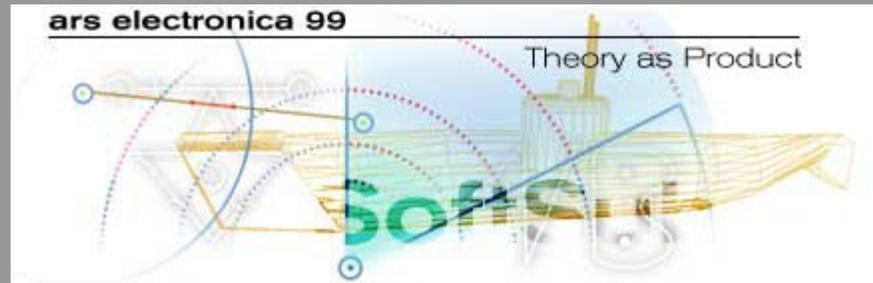
Beginning with **Lisa Jevbratt's Stillman Projects**, one of which was commissioned by
the Walker Art Center, and continuing with the projects **16 Sessions**, **1:1**, and, most
recently, **SoftSub**, the artist group C5 has created a number of fascinating
collaborative filtering projects that make manifest the vast and subterranean data
mining efforts that big and small businesses alike are mounting to make a buck off
your information–your body of data/databody.

The important thing about Galton's composite photograph was **not** whether someone
did or did not look like it. No one did, by design. The intent was in the mean
differentiation. Individuals that approached the composite profile to a certain degree
were suspect. In a similar way, composite data profiles of likely buyers and likely
offenders are being created and as your data profile approaches it, you will be acted on
accordingly, whether it is with spam or a visit from a government authority.

SoftSub is an opt in program. It is a screensaver that collects information about the file
structure of a user's computer. Data is collected only if a user downloads the software
and only if she decides to upload her personal data. Here, an opposite approach to
Andujar has a similar result. By foregrounding the practice of conscientious opt-in, the
standard practice of hidden or murky data gathering procedures is highlighted. Also, it
is important to point out that *SoftSub* is collecting essentially benign information. Even
with blatant misuse, what is C5 going to do? Post on the net the 100 messiest
desktops? C5's real interest is in trying to understand how to approach data sets
without a particular target in mind, because as with Galton, the understanding and use
of supposedly objective measurements can be grossly subverted by a particular intent.

Data Stories: DissemiNET

DissemiNET by Beth Stryker and Sawad Brooks, is a database-driven compilation of
user-defined stories that is searched with a kind of fuzzy "curatorial"--as they put it--
selectivity that complements a dynamic visual display to create a compelling portrait of
"The Disappeared" in Guatemala.

DissemiNET also has parallels to open archives such as The File Room, as anyone can–at least during its initial installation–upload their stories related to the topic. More than being an open resource, however, it also attempts to represent and deal with notions of memory and loss and dispersion in a manner that is particularly appropriate to a computerized society.

> *"Creating a repository for personal and social memory, DissemiNET uses web technologies to give visual form to the transactions (deposits, retrievals, and loss) through which we experience memory. The DissemiNET reelaborates terms such as "origin", "home(site)", "diaspora", and "search", in terms of and through the mechanisms of the web. Drawing parallels between diasporas and the dispersal of meaning over the web, DissemiNET in response provide spaces (lacunae) for people to recall and recollect, gathering there to re-tell stories about their own experiences with displacement and dispersal. Over time, DissemiNET will become a collection of such stories of errancy."(14)*

DissemiNET lies somewhere between the particular instance and a composite whole, but it is particularly interesting for the way, not unlike The Unreliable Archivist, the fuzzy algorithm creates relationships between stories–data--as a way to investigate semi-automated storytelling, with a bit of a point of view, in relation to very large data sets.

Searching for the Story: Anna Karenin Goes to Paradise

There will always be a tension between complete description of a specific individual and a generalized description of a group. Neither tells the whole story. One way to get beyond just the facts, of course, is to actually tell a story. While storytelling may seem inimical to databases, the linguistic researcher Walter Ong has determined that one of the great Western storytellers, Homer, substituted a stock set of phrases according to identifiable regular occurrences. This is not exactly the same as saying that the Iliad is a database-driven hypertext, but it does hint that the storytelling and information systems are not inherently incompatible.
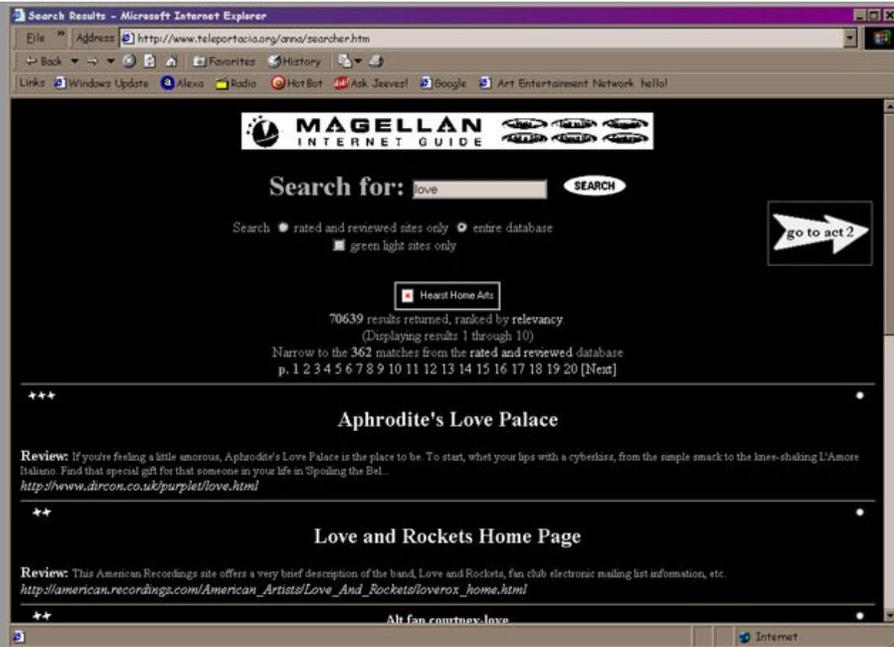
In a slyly funny piece, **Anna Karenin Goes to Paradise**, Olia Lialina tells the story of Anna Karenin as a comedy in three acts (and an epilog): Anna looking for love; Anna looking for train; Anna looking for paradise. The way Anna looks, of course, is through Web searches for the words love, train, and paradise. Lialina culls the results from the search engines Magellan, Yahoo! and Alta Vista into 3 pages of pre-selections, and the "reader," is invited to get lost on her own train of data thoughts, before proceeding to the next act.

An interesting and somewhat disturbing aspect of the piece is that upwards of 90% of the links in the story now return "page not found" errors, emphasizing, perhaps, not only the ineffability of love but also the ephemerality of the Web.

Databasing Forgetting: The Impermanence Agent

Plato is said to have complained about the invention of writing and how it would compromise the art of remembering–not to mention the art of conversation. Do we need to archive everything? You do not have to be Monica Lewinsky to suspect that it is not necessarily a good thing to have a permanent record of every email dispatched into the cybervoid.
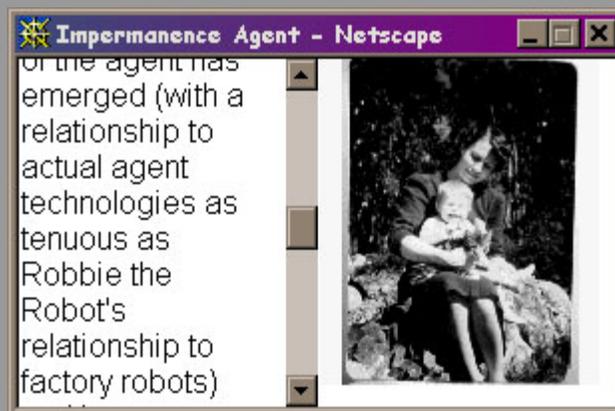
Loss is an important aspect of memory, and impermanence may be the natural state of things. Noah Waldrop-Fruin's **The Impermanence Agent** is a remarkable project that starts out as the story of the death of his grandmother. But it is designed to disappear. As the you browse the Web, the impermanence agent replaces Noah's story with snippets of text and images from your browsing, until, finally, the story is completely retold in the words of what you have been reading and looking at, with only the

structure of the original story left behind.

The Artist as Reliable Archivist: Road to Victory

Museums have always told stories, but there has not always been the opportunity to counter or play with them. For his recent project for the Museum of Modern Art, **Road to Victory**, Fred Wilson researched the MOMA's archives for several years and then used the Web to juxtapose different stories the museum has told over the years.

In the first frame of the project, Wilson quotes A. Conger Goodyear from 1932:

For Wilson, over time , MOMA had lost a certain social agenda, which it had originally intended. He wrote about the project:

> "These archival photographs expose the museum's use of didactic material to persuade the public of its liberal point of view as well as its aesthetic ideas."

Interestingly, in the very same press release that quotes Wilson, the pr speak about the project demonstrates it exactly and, presumably, unwittingly.

> "Fred Wilson's online project, Road to Victory (1999)--titled after the Museum's 1942 exhibition that included photographs of the United States at war--explores The Museum of Modern Art's memory of itself: namely, the institution's photographic archive. Constructing narratives through juxtapositions and connections between documentary images and text borrowed from the archive, Wilson reveals much of what, though visible, is not on display: the Museum's visitors, staff, exhibition graphics, and wall texts."(15)

Dump Your Trash_Shred the Web!

And then there is the trash heap. Sometimes you just need to get rid of something, to forget about it once and for all. Both Joachim Blank's **Dump Your Trash** and Mark Napier's **Digital Landfill** provide at least a psychic outlet for this human need.

+++
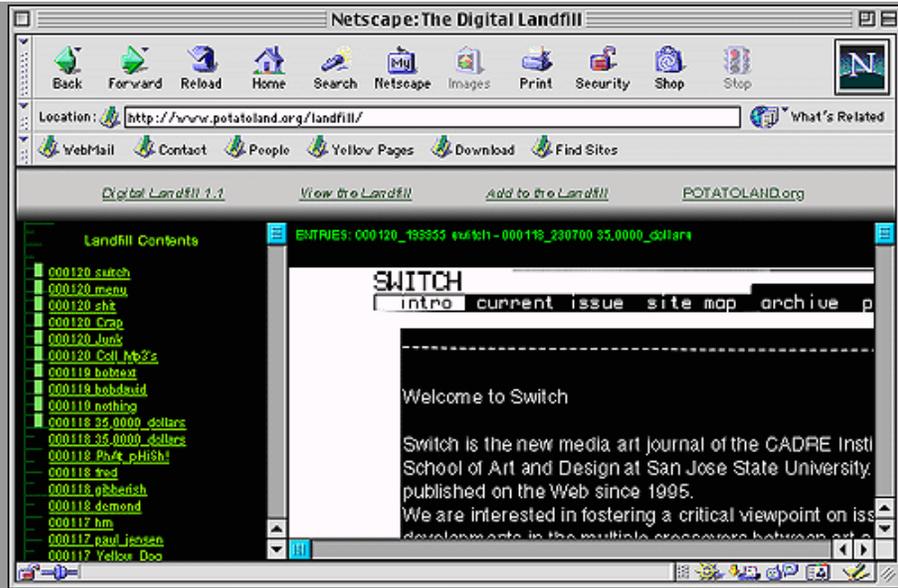
1 Earlier versions of this paper were given at the ISEA-sponsored Cartographies conference in a session "Conserving and Archiving Digital Work," as well as at the Montreal Festival of New Cinema and New Media, 1999. It is version 3.0 of an ongoing investigation. See http://www.walkerart.org/gallery9/dietz/memory_archive_database/

2 Nam June Paik, "Expanded Education for the Paper-Less Society" (Feb. 1968), in Judson Rosebush, ed., Nam June Paik: Videa 'n' Videology, 1959-1973. Syracuse, New York: Everson Museum of Art, 1974.

3 Arguably, the "pigeon-holes" for manuscripts at the Library of Alexandria were the forerunners of todayÕs automated information systems (see Canfora), but the first systematic attempts at computerized museum information automation were only in the 1970s.

4 Hal Foster, "The Archive Without Museums," October 77 (Summer 1996)

5 Steven Johnson, Interface Culture: How New Technology Transforms the Way We Create and Communicate (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 1997).

6 Simon Nora and Alain Minc, The Computerization of Society: A Report to the President of France (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1979).

7 Leo Steinberg. Other Criteria : Confrontations With Twentieth-Century Art. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972.

8 Brett Stalbaum (et al), Interview with Manuel Delanda, Switch (3:3). http://switch.sjsu.edu:/web/v3n3/DeLanda/delanda.html

9 Alan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," October 39

10 "Cartographies," symposium sponsored by ISEA, Montreal, October 14, 1999

11 Eugene Thacker, "Bioinformatics," Ctheory 63 (28 October 98)

12 Victoria Vesna, "AI & Society Database Aesthetics," http://time.arts.ucla.edu/AI_Society/vesnaintro.html

13 Eduardo Kac, "Time Capsule." http://www.ekac.org/timec.html

14 Sawad Brooks and Beth Stryker, "DissemiNET." http://disseminet.walkerart.org/html/gallerycredits.html

15 "WEB SITE FEATURING TWO ONLINE PROJECTS ACCOMPANIES THE MUSEUM AS MUSE: ARTISTS REFLECT AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART" http://www.moma.org/docs/press/1999/fF_PO02,c8161,.htm

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