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art doc archive
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About the project
Art Doc Archive develops a prototype of centralized archiving of the self-documentation of Berlin based artists on websites and social media.

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Digital preservation of (art) archives - a commoning practice?

Claartje Rasterhoff

In the last few years, Casco Art Institute: Working for the Commons (Utrecht, the Netherlands) has been developing the project commons.art (https://www.commons.art). Commons.art is envisioned as a platform that facilitates and supports the creative and social caretaking of art as a way of generating new commons. The platform aims to offer artworks or art projects with a set of toolkits and support mechanisms for their use and maintenance by sharing authorship. Artists can document works of art, together with texts, images, translations and sounds, for reuse. Such an infrastructure is in itself not new, but the project introduces a novel element by combining an infrastructure for care and maintenance of works of art with commoning practices. In this blogpost, I’ll explore what the notion of commons brings us when it comes to issues around digital art and heritage.

So, what are these issues? While there is a widespread call for sustainable preservation of heritage, (digital) art or artistic projects, the focus is often still on the objects, and on registering in databases for documentation and public consultation. This often happens through institutionalized collections, such as those with museums or archives, with only limited space for users to engage more actively. This has received ample interest from researchers, especially when it comes to documenting complex art, including time-based art, performance art and digital art/net art. Recent work by Annet Dekker and Gabriella Giannachi on digital art and heritage, for instance, underscores the importance of art documentation, with emphasis on the ‘genuine creation’ that can take place in the practice of the documentalist as well as how documentation generates meaning and value through “the juxtaposition, selection, and the comparison of documents, and the production of auxiliary documents” (Dekker & Giannachi 2023). In their view, documentation can also be performative, and networks of care become part of the work of art.

Tasks and responsibilities for maintenance are distributed and shared in these networks of care (Dekker, 2015; Dekker & Giannachi 2023). This shifts the focus from preserving the object and from the technologies that support preservation to the maintenance of a network that supports the art project (Laurenson and Van Saaze 2014). This brings back to mind Kathleen Fitzpatrick’s suggestion that the preservation of digital objects may become less about new tools than “new socially-organized systems, systems that take advantage of the number of individuals and institutions facing the same challenges and seeking the same goals”. A sociotechnical infrastructure, then, in which archiving becomes part of the work, also through its use by people other than the original creator of the work, and by a documentation that expands understanding of the work. In a way, existing preservation services such as Arthost or Artbase are part of such networks of care, but, importantly, the practice of care does not start or end with the act of archiving or entering a work in a database.

The common.art project, while not explicitly focusing on digital art, builds on such dynamic notions of care in relation to documentation, preservation and maintenance, but explicitly adds the element of commons. Commons refers to the natural and cultural resources that are held in
common, such as water, air, land, but also art and cultural heritage (cf. Bollier n.d.). Preserving, maintaining and using them may involve the creation of rules and norms, the establishment of formal institutions to manage the resources, or the formation of informal networks and collaborations. Commons scholars have explored the conditions under which common resources can be effectively managed and sustained, and have pointed to the importance of collective action and cooperation in achieving these goals. All resources that are to some degree self-organized or collectively managed. Commons have a long history, throughout which the historian Tine De Moor distinguishes three waves: rural commons and guilds (Middle Ages until 1800); cooperatives, mutual insurances and labour unions (1800-2000), and new cooperative arrangements in the areas of care/health, culture, food, energy and housing (since the turn of the 21st century) (De Moor 2019).

With this third wave, the term has also come to be used in a slightly different way, through the concept and practice of commoning. Commoning presents ‘commons’ as a set of ongoing practices that is all about creating and maintaining relationships among people, between humans and the nonhuman world, and between our and future generations (Fournier 2013). Many artists, designers and cultural organisations identify with notions and practices of self-organisation, collectivity, and reciprocity. Sometimes they explicitly work with the term commons or commoning, as in the cases of Casco, Howlround, Pro Arts Commons, and Furtherfield. These initiatives draw on a longer tradition of participatory and public art/design projects towards social change, and so-called ‘commoning artists’ are working more and more to an increasingly activist and political agenda. The activist understanding holds that the act of ‘commoning’ offers an alternative to capitalist extractive ideology by creating value networks of (re)generation and reciprocity (cf. Nightingale 2019 for a feminist perspective).

What would it mean if we introduced this more active notion of commoning to redress the aforementioned issues in arts and heritage preservation? First, already existing efforts by sites such as Wikipedia and the Internet Archive can – at least partly – be considered to be part of the ecosystem of so-called ‘commons-based peer production’. This describes a specific type of knowledge production, in which large groups of peers collaborate to create a shared resource or commons. More specifically related to (internet) art, netzspannung.org, mediaartnet.org and the Archive of Digital Art, and Rhizome’s ArtBase, provide online databases. Artbase, for example, now provides documentation of projects that were commissioned and preserved by the organisation, but until 2008 it functioned as a general crowdsourced database of Internet art around the world (cf. Dekker 2018). Compared to such platforms, Commons.art extends the notion of a database designed for registration and documentation to specifically include socio-cultural practices on maintenance and care.

What do (or might) these practices look like? The artist can upload their work of art in the form of a recipe that allows for different uses by other actors and, through licenses, the boundaries of how their projects are maintained and used are set. The artist and caretaker’s unique contributions to initiate, use and maintain an artwork is registered on eco-friendly non-fungible tokens (NFTs), that “recognize each unique contribution made in a specific moment of a project’s lifetime”. This means that the work of art develops into a project (or a network of care) that comprises multiple NFTs. When an artwork or art project grows beyond an individual’s endeavour into a social life, decision-making and funding distributions are organised through Decentralized Autonomous Organization (DAO), a blockchain-based computer program that executes collective decisions without a central figure’s approval (commons.art). Such a DAO comprises both the code and the community of users, as well as the protocols, rules, and values
that the community has agreed upon to manage the DAO. This, then, can be seen as a socio-technological example of the commons.

While it remains to be seen how commons.art will work in practice, for now it explicates the question of what kind of infrastructures can facilitate dynamic and resilient processes of preservation of works of art and heritage. Its platform design points to two important developments. First, it is run by commons-oriented principles, and this helps make explicit how the development and use of technologies are always socially organized. Second, it extends the use of new technologies (such as NFTs) beyond the marketplace and commercialized exchange, towards shared authorship. By doing so, the development of the commons.art platform caters to the various issues around preservation of art mentioned above: it refocuses the work of art beyond objects to include change over time and networks of care; it pushes beyond registering works of art in databases for preservation and consultation by enabling reuse by others in different contexts; and, through its focus on reuse, it enables valuation of art in and by communities, not just institutionalized collections.

The aims of commons.art can, in fact, be seen to extend beyond preservation, as it aims to imagine and contribute to a fairer art market and art world. And of course, it is easy to fall in with the promise of democratization associated with both the notion of commons and with distributed technologies such as NFT and DAO. They remind us of earlier meetings between art and web technology, most notably with net art, that prompted a vision for the internet as an autonomous and egalitarian space, and artistic practice that emphasized non-commercial exchange as well as collaborative and cooperative work (Dekker 2018; Corby 2006). Still, critical awareness of dominant promises and expectations around commons and commons-inspired technologies in the fields of art and heritage does not preclude development. In fact, it should invite experiments that allow artists and other practitioners to explore and learn alternative preservation and use practices together, and that allow researchers to critically examine conditions, for example, for the resilience of such commons-inspired preservation of (digital) art and heritage.

**Literature**


Fournier, Valerie (2013): Commoning: on the social organisation of the commons. *M@n@gement*, 16, 433-453. https://doi.org/10.3917/mana.164.0433
