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**EVERYTHING STARTED WITH THE IDEA THAT TECHNOLOGY  
COULD BE A SOLUTION  
(CASE STUDY – DIGITALISATION OF CONCEPTUAL ART ARCHIVES)**

*But solution for what?*

*We know that we are losing something and that something has to be saved, but what is this  
History, art, museum, time?*

The autonomisation of art which manifested itself most evidently in the establishment of a traditional museum of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century indicated also a strict separation, even alienation of art from technology. Just a glance into the etymology of the word technology indicates a more complex relationship between these very distinct fields in the modernist era. The word technology comes from the Greek *techne* (art, skill or craft) and *-ology* (as the study of) pointing out that technology and art were once inseparably intertwined. This separation of fields (which happened on a general level) produced severe consequences concerning the field of art as well as concerning the technology and each field was underlying its specific logic concerning the formation of time and space.

The traditional museum was so bound to history and represented - if not even symbolized - the linearity of time processing. Once the artworks entered the museum they became stripped of their context, they became *timeless*, and becoming timeless meant that they can be subordinated to the logic of the museum; they became a part of linear history. Further, this means that with depicting the linearity of time, time became static, its course was always the same: from the past to the future. This alienation of artworks from time and space becomes a preface of experience in modernity. In order to experience artworks one has to alienate them from the space and time, which resulted also in the concept of the modernistic white cube [1]. White cube was thought as a “neutral” space existing outside cultural, economic and political context, shielding the artworks from the “outside” world and with this allowing the art history to establish its own linear narrative.

Opposite to the museum which has everything to do with time, technology primarily has nothing to do with time. There is no continuity in the functioning of digital technology, but there are intervals. Paradoxically the sequences of intervals introduce processuality and imitate time. To go even further, we can state that digital technology can even “reappropriate time” [2]. As much as the principle of the museum, which stretches the time endlessly and the technology which breaks up the time are different as well as the museum as also technology have in common the manipulation of time.

*Is it possible for technology to be co- shaping a new museum, revising the relationship to history and consequently time and space, helping to enable new understanding of art - art of the past and art of the present?*

A contemporary museum has undergone severe changes as well as concerning the methodology of work as also its subject – the art object. The later became unfixed and dynamic, not anymore bound solely to its own materiality, but to its context, to its outside. But one of the most important tasks of all the museums - still today - is to preserve artworks - preserve them “forever”. But considering the

expansions of collections and more and more fragile and sensitive materials used in artworks, this task gets harder and harder to fulfil. A contemporary museum is marked by a deep cleavage, on one hand it is dealing with the fragility and temporality of contemporary artworks and on the other hand with the illusion of timelessness and stability. Breakell describes the mass digitalization as *»as democratized solution to the issues raised by the role of the host institution and its selection processes, and by the paradox of wanting to keep everything yet the impracticality of doing so.«* [3]

This cleavage that marks a contemporary museum is at the same time a source of tension and potential, as well as it hides the emptiness from which the absolute museum could rise again, a museum which sterilizes its objects and puts them in a database where "the authority of the museum as author remains intact through prescribed subjects, anonymous narratives and singular interpretations consistent with the empirical/modernist paradigm of collection organisation and interpretation." [4] Though within contemporary, digital societies' absolute concepts, whether of knowledge or authority seem obsolete, this is not true; in fact the authority and positions of power and control still exist, they have only been modified and their position became dynamic.

Nevertheless, technology has finally become a topic in contemporary artworks and even museums; it is still often perceived as means to an end and not as something that co-shapes contents and concepts. In order to develop the potential of digital media within the contemporary museum and to develop the potential of contemporary museum, one has to abandon the perception of digital media as a tool for digital reproduction of images, or paradoxically even for preservation of artworks. Digital images are visual representations of computer code, and for that reason a fully new entity. So we are not dealing anymore with the objects, but with information about the object, which is not given, but generated and processed. Lev Manovich states, that "Modern media is the new battlefield for the competition between database and narrative." [5] If we pursue this statement we could say that the point in which the database and narrative meet within the museum is the concept of a **digital archive**. Digital archive as such is also one of the most paradoxical concepts, an intersection between digital, the archive and the museum. Unfortunately, the concept of digital archive is often simplified and interpreted as a database. This reduction of a digital archive onto a mere database eliminates the potential of merging of an archive and technology, and also the merger of two principles of time.

An Archive conquers a special place within society especially because of the relationship between the archive and history and the archive and political power<sup>1</sup>, it is often paradoxically interpreted as an objective speaker of the past, paradoxically because it is full of rifts, empty spaces and mistakes<sup>2</sup>. This incompleteness of the archive enables manipulation and constant reinterpretation, and these characteristics are the ones that make the archive so dangerous, and at the same time so interesting. To return back to the notion of a digital archive, we can even state that digital archive is a space where the logic of a museum - where time should stop - and the logic of technology, actually collide. The consequences of this collision are most severe, but also bear a great potential.

In a traditional museum time was abolished, this loss was compensated by introducing a historical timeline to artificially introduce dead time. Space was alienated by the white cube<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> »There is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory. Effective democratization can always be measured by its essential criterion: the participation in and the access to the archive, its constitution and its interpretation.« [6].

<sup>2</sup> »The archive cannot be described in its totality; and in its presence it is unavoidable. It emerges in fragments, regions, and levels, more fully, no doubt, and with greater sharpness, the greater the time that separates us from it: at most, where it not for the rarity of the documents, the greater chronological distance would be necessary to analyse it.« [7]

<sup>3</sup> The explosive proliferation of optical, illusionist toys, exhibitions and settings (e.g. the panoramas and dioramas of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) was also a kind of surrogate for the reduced role of direct sensation for the individual in contact with space.« [8]

In digital media the space was introduced as one of the core concepts though the concept of digital space is completely virtual. The time, not anymore as linear artificial sequence of events, but as the concept of accelerated “real”<sup>4</sup> time emerged.

*What happens when the terminated space and static time of the museum meet with the accelerated “real” time and virtual space of digital media?*

An archive becomes an artefact speaking about the time and even enables the construction of new timelines, alternative readings; and a digital archive becomes a space for the realisation and actualisation of these possibilities.

The case study that I would like to present which led to these considerations, and the awareness of the limitations we are dealing with while thinking about the digital archive, is the project of digitalisation of the of conceptual art archives – practically the OHO archive (project in the frame of the Museum of Contemporary Art Slovenia). The archive we were dealing with consists mostly of artworks, videos, documents, images, reproductions, texts etc. Already the materiality of the archive speaks about its above mentioned fragility and incompleteness. Our goal was to translate the structure of an archive into digital media while organizing the metadata in a way to enable this structuring. We have tried to distance ourselves from the objects, meaning that we perceived the digital images which are the result of the process of digitalisation as information, as nodes of information within the network<sup>5</sup> having in mind a basic principle of a network - that there connections are more numerous than the nodes. If we translate the principle of a network on a digital archive we can notice that the connections are actually constructing the context of the nodes (which can represent digitalized documents, artworks, events...). In this way, the focus from the digital appearance shifts to the contextual information – from the artwork to its position and connections within the structure of the archive. Another important thing is that such a digital network is in constant flux - it changes each time information is added. This way, networks bear a great potential, and the networked structures of data and consequently information can help us to create new knowledge structures based on deeper understanding of connections between events, objects and processes. This is necessary today, because “Our culture on the whole thus evolves to be increasingly hybrid, in order to master the challenge of complexity it has itself created...Imagination and representation are becoming more hybrid than ever.” [9].

The knowledge that present systems of indexing are artificial and far from the associative principles which are closer to the way we think is not new. Already in 1945, Vannevar Bush developed the idea about the MEMEX machine, a machine, which would not think instead of a man, but help him think. If we project this idea into a digital archive/s then it becomes clear that digital archive/s should not be a mere set of digital images, but there should also be a severe consideration about its structure, about the software, about the interface and its representation. So the idea would be, not to connect the information in the digital archive based only on known systems of indexing, but to develop tools and systems which would be closer to the associative logic of human brain<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> This acceleration of time has reduced the perception of time and the passing of time to »now«. Paul Virilio speaks about the victory of the real time over the time interval. The concepts of »real time« is manifesting actually the reappropriation of time – artificial time.

<sup>5</sup> “...the network model is one of the most promising concepts when discussing the complex and fluid relationship between culture and technology, permitting to seamlessly move from one level to the other.” [9].

<sup>6</sup> Semantic web was the promise for a long time, but the enthusiasm has vanished in the last five years since we became aware also of its limitations within the sciences where concepts and definitions are not fixed.

If we are thinking about the digital archive in a form of a network, a hybrid network, rather than tree structure, we face many new possibilities. In our case of the digital archive, OHO archive, we started to complement the archive also with oral histories and other references.

In order to conclude and try to answer the questions posed here, we have to return back to the museum and question the white cube today in relation to the digital archive, but bearing in mind that digital archive is not isolated from the material archive but it exists in relation with it. If in modernism the white cube was shielding the artwork from the outside, later with postmodernism the museum space changes and the wall of a white cube “becomes a membrane through which aesthetic and commercial values osmotically exchange. As this molecular shudder in the white walls becomes perceptible, there is a further invention of context.” [1] But today we need to go even further from this. A great change happened in relation to the previously described modernistic experience of artwork. Today we need a context to understand, read and experience art, we do not strive anymore for alienation in order to have experience, but for interaction. *In order to understand and experience we interact.* The postmodernistic osmotic wall described by Brian O’Doherty is not isolating the work anymore - it is a space of projections and exchange, but it is still passive and incapable of interaction. For this reason, there is a necessity that the digital enters the museum, and the computer interface becomes the membrane which enables interaction. This way digital is not only entering the representational function of a museum, but it is also co-shaping the museum and influencing its restructuring of time.

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