

Digital Art – what *is* (or was) it?

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The overall experience of losing an archive of digital work has made me question what it really 'is' or 'was' that was lost.

The initial effect of finding that my computer and the work it contained had been stolen was a sense of devastation. How much of it was an emotional attachment to the machine itself? Having learned and worked on it for 2 years, I felt an intimacy to it, I understood its quirks and problems and knew how to tend it when it was not performing at its best. So it felt a bit like losing a much-loved friend. This attachment to technology is interesting - like anthropomorphism (an interpretation of what is not human or personal in terms of human or personal), the process becomes a form of 'technomorphism', whereby we humanize the machine. What computer-user has not whispered to their console, begged it not to crash, felt aggressive toward it when it does? We even introduce a sense of reasoning and feel concerned when it shows evidence of problems. A 'virus' may infect it, the 'motherboard' may be faulty, and we may ask it for 'help'. No wonder we feel an emotional attachment with all these human/organic terms applied to the use of a computer.

So what exactly *have* I lost? As Baudrillard proposes, digital material is a 'simulacra' – a simulation of something that does not exist as an original. Sherry Turkle discusses this theory in her book 'Life on the Screen'. In an attempt to illustrate this concept she states the following:

"The documents that scroll before my eyes as I compose this book on a computer screen function as real enough. They are my access to the thing itself, but there is no other thing itself."

So it is not the 'thing itself' that I have lost, but the access to it –as 'it' no longer exists (and never did, in any true sense). So, when digital files are lost, as in the crashing of a hard disk or theft of a machine, there is no master copy, no 'thing' to mourn the loss of. Difficult to understand how one can lose something that never existed – to lose the signifier but not the signified, as there was no signified in the first place. The whole problem begins to sound like an Alice in Wonderland conundrum.

Hence the obsession one gets with 'backing up' data. Simple to do when the files are small text files, but when the files are video files and are 2 gigs or more, other more sophisticated backups are required. Too big to put on storage disks, they have to be a) returned to a mini DV or other video format (DV is the only high-quality option) or b) stored on a 20gig+ spare drive. Expensive. Fortunately, most recent digital video cameras and software can transfer back to camera at the touch of the button. But as artists are not renowned for having high incomes and are often working with old equipment, unless they have access to such they are stuck.

Artists tend to find it preferable to work in a designated studio, where they can experiment freely. Unless the artist owns the appropriate equipment, they have to pay for a 'session' at a media centre. This means that not only are they paying for the

production method, but also the creative time it takes to evolve an idea. Digital work is very process-led, being dependant on a machine for production can be frustrating - imagine a writer having to hire a typewriter on a regular basis to write a novel. An impossible scenario, yet one many digital artists have to work around.

All this begs the question 'why do we do it?' Historically, artists have taken technological advancements and used them in their practise. In doing so, they exploit the process in new and innovative ways, which often informs how others use them. One doesn't need to be a programmer to create digital work - modern software allows artists to experiment with ideas and to combine media that no other processes offer e.g. text, image, video and sound. Words need no longer be fixed to a page – writing for the web becomes a form of 'concrete poetry, released from the concrete'. Work can be easily created on a computer, but just as easily lost. When I worked with printmaking, proof prints and prints at different stages of production were stored on paper. Over a period of time these built up to an insurmountable stack of work, which takes space for storage. Digital work takes less physical space to store and is probably no more vulnerable than a plan-drawer full of paper, which might be burnt out, stolen or defiled.

Most interestingly, when I lost my digital files, the concept of memory returned to its original meaning. Much of the lost work remains only in my memory, as opposed to the computers memory, with no material evidence of its prior existence. Unfortunately, it is not as easy to bring these memories back to a conscious level as it is to open a file on a computer, resulting in much of it being left dormant until something evokes it again. So starting from scratch has been productive in that only the key ideas have remained as starting points. The hard disk of my brain has locked some of the files and left others open to work with. Memory cannot be erased, unless by some illness, so the experience of creating the lost works exists in the back of my mind and informs any new work I make. And of course my replacement equipment is far faster and much more efficient, which has smoothed over the sense of loss. Every cloud has a silver lining.