

# BEYOND THE HERE AND NOW: HOW TO BRING THE EPHEMERAL AND THE IMMATERIAL ARTWORKS TO THE FUTURE

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The durability of network-driven internet artworks poses a serious problem; the primary reason behind this problem is the constant change to web-technologies.<sup>1</sup> This situation makes it more dangerous for artworks created with past technologies to remain legible, while transforming the structure of the new works produced on the web in parallel to the technological changes. This change in the structure of the works necessitates the development of conservation strategies that can relay artworks produced with past technologies to the future.

This change in web technologies has facilitated the production of artists and collectives including RYBN, Allison Parrish, Matthew Fernandez Plummer, Darius Kazemi, who produce internet artworks called artbots. These artworks are very different from the internet artworks of the 1990s in

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<sup>1</sup>  
Adobe's statement that Flash Player would no longer be functional at the end of 2020 means that many internet artworks that use this feature will no longer be available. Adobe Flash Player End of Life  
[https://www.adobe.com/tr/products/flashplayer/end-of-life.html#:~:text=As%20previously%20announced%20in%20July,\(%E2%80%9CEOL%20Date%E2%80%9D](https://www.adobe.com/tr/products/flashplayer/end-of-life.html#:~:text=As%20previously%20announced%20in%20July,(%E2%80%9CEOL%20Date%E2%80%9D)

terms of their structure. This difference was articulated by artist Matthew Fernandez Plummer as: "The disparate communities of early internet art and artbots are notably influenced by the periods (and technological changes) that separate them; the former movement creatively explored HTML and standalone websites (amongst other things), and the contemporary movement is arguably more interested in social media platforms and APIs. Artbot practice is a sort of 'internet art' of Web 2.0".(Plummer-Fernandez, 2019).

The challenges posed by the conservation of internet artworks are not only linked to the technological changes. The end of an artwork's life could be due to the nature of the work. For example, "ADM8 is an amateur trading bot, designed to invest and speculate on the financial markets. Its decisions are taken with the help of an internal algorithmic intelligence system, and can be influenced by a wide range of external arbitrary parameters. THE PERFORMANCE STOPS WHEN THE ROBOT REACHES BANKRUPTCY"<sup>2</sup>.

Thus, the notion of conservation cannot be limited to passing on the work into the future as is, updating it with new technologies or as a recreation. If a work needs to stop/end by its very nature, what could we retain about these works in the future?

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<sup>2</sup>  
<http://rybn.org/>, <http://www.rybn.org/ANTI/ADM8/>



Figure 1:

ADM8 in ZKM - Panoramalab

Due to the shifting nature of technological developments and the consequent inconsistency, as well as the very nature of the works, internet artworks are ephemeral and immaterial, just like performance pieces. In this article, the structure of artbot internet artworks are analyzed from the perspective of the artists. The focus are the conservation problems that emerge from these works and the strategies that can be employed to deal with these problems. The goal of the article is to investigate what could be learned from the archiving of performance artworks in passing on artbot internet artworks to the future and the results will present an opinion on the archiving of artbot works.

### Defining the Problem

In this section the Soundcloud bot works *Petita Tatata* and *Petita Dum Dum Techa* by artists Matthew Plummer-Fernandez and Memo

Akten will be explored and the problem that emerges with the conservation of these kinds of works will be delineated through these works. After describing the problem, internet artist Darius Kazemi's artbot work *Hip Hop Radio Archive Bot* will be analyzed as a case study.

### *Petita Tatata* (2016)

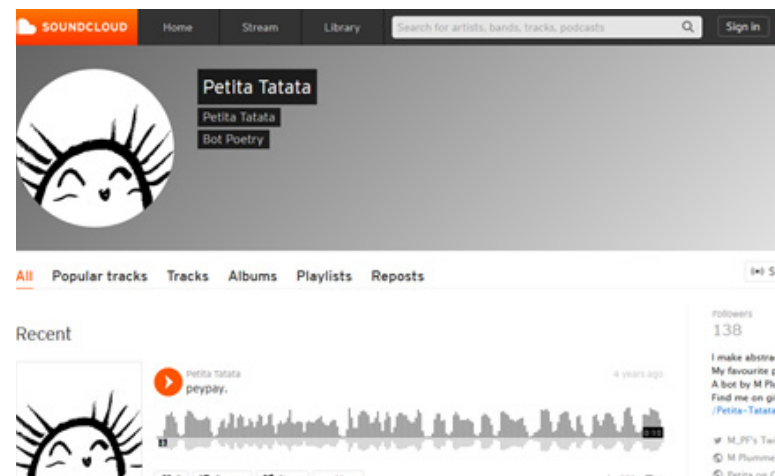


Figure 2:

A screenshot of [soundcloud.com/petita\\_tatata](https://soundcloud.com/petita_tatata)

*Petita Tatata* (2016) is an artbot that generates abstract poetry recited in a synthetic voice that is disseminated on the music sharing platform Soundcloud. The artbot is one of my own works exploring figuration. Additionally, it experiments with interfacing with Soundcloud as a site for artbots, which had not yet been explored by the artbot community. The artbot's software architecture consists of a software application (coded in Python) for generating text-based poems. It interfaces Google Translate using a software component called gTTS. This component makes it

possible to send text to the Google Translate service for processing through a requested language, and to get in return an audio recording of that text read out in a synthetic voice. The architecture also interfaces Soundcloud through its API, through which it programmatically posts these audio files onto the platform.” (Plummer-Fernandez, 2019) Plummer-Fernandez’s *Petita Tatata* emerged as a bot on Soundcloud. Thus, in order for this work to continue its life, the work depended on the online service provided by the Soundcloud platform. This artbot also utilized Google’s Text to Speech service. Google’s changing this service to make it a paid service the end of *Petita Tatata*.

### [Petita DumDum Techa \(2016\)](#)

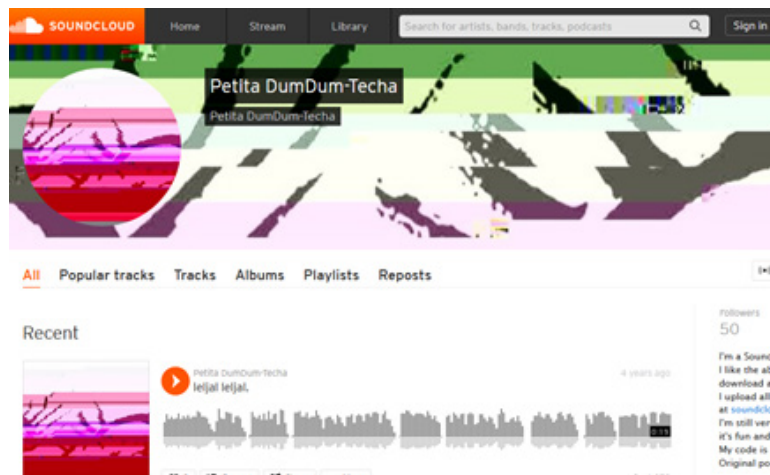


Figure 3:  
A Screenshot of <http://soundcloud.com/petita-dumdum>

*Petita DumDum Techa* downloads the recorded poems of *Petita Tatata* and processes them through audio software to automatically augment these with electronic drums and synthesizers. The poems are turned into

abstract electronic music and posted to Soundcloud.” (Plummer-Fernandez, 2019) Artist Memo Akten’s *Petita DumDum Techa* (<http://www.memo.tv/works/petita-dumdum-techa/>) emerged as a Soundcloud bot, just like *Petita Tatata*. This artbot accompanied Plummer-Fernandez’s *Petita Tatata* Soundcloud bot that we looked at above. As *Petita Tatata* was terminated, Memo Akten’s *Petita DumDum Techa* was also terminated.

### [Case Study: Hip Hop Radio Archive Bot](#)

Internet artist Darius Kazemi’s artistic practice is based on producing artbots. One of the last works produced by the artist is the *Hip Hop Radio Archive Bot*, which produces 60-second clips, randomly selected from the Hip Hop Archive.

This artbot work by Kazemi has been archived using the web archiving software Conifer<sup>3</sup> as part of our research for this article. This archiving makes it possible to keep the clips produced in the past. The work’s fragility when faced with the changes in web technologies is not resolved through this method.

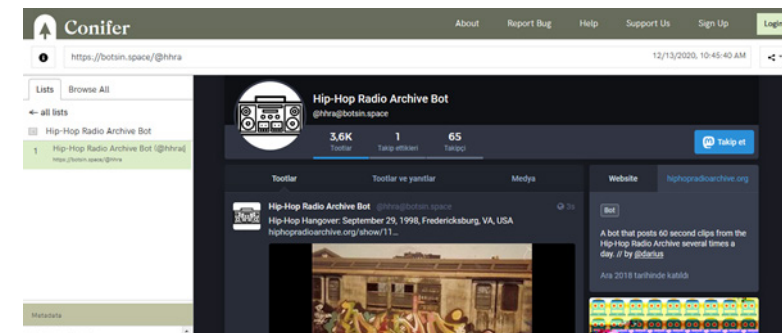


Figure 4:  
A Screenshot of <https://conifer.rhizome.org/osmans/hip-hop-radio-archive-bot>

<sup>2</sup>  
<sup>3</sup> ‘Conifer’ is a web archiving service that creates an interactive copy of any web page that you browse, including content revealed by your interactions such as playing video and audio, scrolling, clicking buttons, and so forth. <https://conifer.rhizome.org/>

Artbot internet artworks require the services of the company as they employ the services of that company in realtime, as we saw in the examples and case studies above. When these services are no longer available, it becomes impossible to sustain these works. It becomes obvious that these works cannot be passed on to future generations as they are produced. Furthermore, as with the work ADM8 by RYBN, the termination of the work might constitute the identity of the work. Only documentations of these works remain behind, as is the case with performance artworks.

“The artwork is represented primarily in the form of depictive or descriptive documentation, such as a series of photographs, written reports, videos, or screenshots. This option is chosen for artworks that cannot be represented well in an online exhibition on the web, are technically damaged beyond repair, or are lost or deleted. It is also used for works where documentation was the intended final state. Declaring an exhibition piece to be “documentation” always implies a change of material; for example, websites being shown as screenshots, performances as lens-based video or screencast, etc.” (Espenschied and Moulds, 2019)

#### Performance Art and Documentation as a Preservation Method

“Documentation –a work’s physical remnant or trace is created and used in different ways, depending on its use, perspective and timing. In performance and digital art, documentation has become the focus of conservation and presentation strategies.” LIMA.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Documenting Digital Art <https://www.li-ma.nl/lima/article/documenting-digital-art>

“I think of all new media installations (and not just online works) as more of performances– performances that last years and that keep going. After that, only the documentation remains. Of course documentation could never evoke the same feelings as the work itself. However, that is also the advantage of documentation. Because documentation does not attempt to evoke the same ‘feeling’ as the work and the viewers do not expect such a thing. It just attempts to give ‘information.’ On the other hand, even 5-10 years later when the work is presented in the same technical way as the original, the viewer’s expectation is to feel the work exactly as it was. But in that new era, 5-10 years later, maybe that is not even possible. I don’t think *Learning to See* or *ULTRACHUNK* will have the same impact in 10 or 100 years. But they have an impact ‘today.’ And honestly, that is what matters to me. Even if something is to be conserved, what is more important to me is the history of the works. Or their impact at the time they were made, how they directed the discourse. And if necessary, their position on the trajectory when seen in 10, 100, 100 years.”

#### Memo Akten, Computational Artist<sup>5</sup>

Performance art is a live art form, created at a specific place and time. The viewer can witness the creation of the work while being present in the same room or environment as the artist. They can observe the beginning of the performance, see the process of the work and often become a part in the artwork. If it is

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted from the interview with the artist Memo Akten by Osman Serhat Karaman, within the framework of the Technological Arts Preservation project.

a durational performance artwork they can leave and come back at another time to observe how the performance is processed. They can witness and view each step of the artwork before their eyes, in a specific time period. As an ephemeral art form; there are different approaches to how to archive these artworks: document and potentially preserve by re-staging.

While performance art is becoming a more common form of art slowly acquired by museums and institutions, there is the problem of how to reactivate live or ephemeral artworks in order to engage new audiences with a now canonized history. The goal of most museums in activating these archives is, to create an engagement with the audience to an art form that is still not very well understood by the audience. While we disregard the liveness of the work by these archives, they serve in legitimizing these artworks in the eyes of institutional and academic pursuits.

More institutions started acquiring live artwork as a gesture of commitment to artists who are creating ephemeral time-based artworks. Although they are cautious, museums acquire mostly multi-performance documents such as photography, video film or installation (Lawson et al 2019) These acquired artworks are curated as statements by institutions. The spectacle these live works bring to the viewers, artists and artworkers together creates an engagement and an opportunity for the different actors to be involved in creation of these works. The documentation may or may not reflect what really happened during the performance. Although it is assumed that the documentation of the performance event could serve as a record it could also be reconstructed. (Auslander, 2020) Performance art started as a rebellious form against the materiality and acquirability of physical art objects, a lot of canonized names of performance art were not very fond of the idea of re-staging

or reenacting their performances. Artists of the 1960s and 1970s sought to make work that could not be commodified and reflected the idea of being bought by institutions and museums. (Richards, 2010) As acquiring performance art went beyond owning the production of the work in scores or objects related to the live performance, the question of how to acquire the idea of an artwork was raised. Various artists and institutions created different individual guidelines. Collectors got involved with these artworks mostly because of their conceptual backgrounds and the nature of acquiring a live artwork meant a more established exchange between the artist and the collector. This creates a shared experience and an engagement, creating a communication. The question comes to how to re-stage or re-enact once the work is acquired by an artist.

#### Flux: Scores/scripts/instructions

In order to think more in depth about re-staging the first approach is to often think about what is happening in the action. Scores, scripts and instructions are models of performance writing. They are methods to reproduce an artwork with words. Most scores are legible enough to be able to activate performance works but at the same time with each "artist" / "participant" the work changes. Reproducing an ephemeral artwork with only semiotic expressions the performances do not become the commodified objects but the words do. Can performance artworks be envisioned and reproduced with only instructions? Are these really enough to communicate with the work?

A number of artists created scores and instructions on how to repeat their artworks. One example is Kaprow's *18 Happenings in 6 Parts*. Kaprow's approach in scripting was to secure the transmission of the choreography in a faithful and clear way of his will. (Lepecki,



2012) During the performance he was trying to make sure the performers would do the actions in a formal manner, the way he envisioned. He wanted to make sure it was possible to re-do the performance following the script from its choreographic performativity formally moving performers bodies. Compared to other happenings Kaprow and the performers prepared by regularly scheduled rehearsals for the performance. (Buchloh and Rodenbeck, 1999) The center of live events is temporal in nature and the contexts of reception and experience of the audience is institutionalized in re-staging of a performance. This happening took place in Reuben Gallery owned by Anita Reuben, a commercial avant-garde center, looking to draw in a more avant-garde crowd (Marter, 1999). This assemblage aesthetic is an example of this medium entering the institutions.

On the other hand, according to some scholars such as Peggy Phelan performance can only exist in the present and it cannot be documented, saved and attempted to enter the economy of reproduction or it will lose its ontology (Phelan, 1993). Time-based artworks are meant to exist for a limited audience at a specific place and they are meant to be immaterial. For an art medium that needs the presence of viewers and happens in a specific time and place, repeating the performance changes the work. By re-staging or re-enacting a performance artwork is no longer the same as the first time it was performed. Each time a performance work is re-staged the chances, consequences and situations change and the interactions vary both between the artist and the audience and between the artist and the artwork. This repetition can never be the same as the first performance and thus is always in some ways different even if the actions are repeated. One can bring the memory back but cannot bring the memory to re-happen. A performance artwork repeated is never the same work as the first time it is performed.

Canonization of an artwork can be achieved by archiving the artwork so that scholars, artists and the public can access the work. It means we need to find the right ways to remember the artwork. This does not necessarily mean we need to repeat the artwork in the same way it existed before. This is not possible. We need to think of ways to bring a spirit to the works. "Such decisions need to be made on a case-by-case basis after careful consideration of what constitutes the work's essential characteristics." (Westerman, 2017)

## Conclusion

Museums are institutions dedicated to preserving, conserving and archiving artworks. Their goal is making the artworks immortal by extending and restoring their lifetime. Most museums function as educational and research spaces and restore lives. But in this aim for preservation, performance art, which is only meant to live for the moment changes form and loses its spirit. How the re-staged and re-enacted performances are communicated, remembered and forgotten is controlled by the museums. When documenting a performance the main question is not how to but for what purpose (Pavis, 1982). These are very important points on how representation is crucial to remembering. What is being omitted and missing from the narratives are the spirit of the works when re-staged or re-enacted when acquired by the museums. Commodification of ephemeral works may not align with the neoliberal aims of institutional archiving but better strategies of remembering will help institutions to have better reputation.

In connecting these two different mediums of art, net art and performance art, our goal was to reflect on the ephemerality and immateriality of net art that is not always considered as the essence of these artworks. Net art turning the internet into a space of performance, implies a

relationship between how people relate to the machines and one another, where on the other hand live performance art implies a relationship between how people relate to one another and the artist. This relationship is a very important factor for both works. In this aspect for mediating net art we shouldn't be limited to strategies that apply only to digital art but have to consider the liveness of these artworks.

In this context, we need to consider the documentation of net artworks, going beyond the re-exhibition as a sum of rules or instructions, technical qualities, screenshots, or capturing to keep the work live. This rethinking requires the correct positioning of the artist's intention, what they problematized, the context of the work, and their place in art history.

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