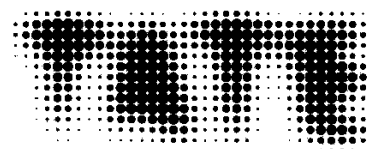# Net Art at Tate: 'Always Under Review'

An edited transcript of Sarah Cook's concluding paper delivered at Net Art at Tate: Learning from the Reshaping the Collectible research project, the final project seminar held online. With an introduction by Pip Laurenson and followed by a roundtable discussion.

31 October 2023

Pip Laurenson   Hello everyone. Thank you so much for joining us today to celebrate the publication of a substantial body of writing focused on a group of net artworks that were commissioned by Tate between 2000 and 2011. 'The Lives of Net Art' is one of the six case studies undertaken as part of the Mellon-funded research project Reshaping the Collectible: When Artworks Live in the Museum. My name, as Martha explained, is Pip Laurenson. And last year, after a wonderful 30-year career at Tate, I moved to UCL to direct the new MSC in the Conservation of Contemporary Art and Media at UCL East.

Reshaping the Collectible was really my dream project, and I was lucky enough to lead this extraordinary research project from 2018 until 2022. And please do visit the website, which hosts a range of resources, including recordings from the final conference and a number of research papers, which all really bear testimony to the depth of thinking and research delivered by staff at Tate, the interdisciplinary dedicated research team, and the research fellows and doctoral students, all of whom contributed to their creativity, brilliance and commitment to make the project so rich. And it's lovely to see some of you here today.

Rooted in the Collection Care division, this project was structured around individual works or groups of works, nominated by staff, that challenged established practises. They were works which unfolded over time, that had complex social or technological dependencies and that questioned the boundaries between the archive, the record and the artwork. These were works that required the time and resources of a major research project to address and move forward with, often bringing with them a significant development in practice. And I want to particularly thank the Time-based Media Conservators and technicians for their commitment, hard work and expertise that they brought to the project, consistently going above and beyond to develop, consolidate and generously share the knowledge generated by their research and practice. And although it wasn't all the work of the Time-based Media team, a lot of these works did fall within their remit.

I also want to acknowledge and thank the leadership of the Collection Care division for their vision and generous support of the research. So right at the start of the project it was really clear that these 15 net artworks were at the top of the list for many of those who were nominating case studies. The works could still be accessed, although for some works what was found were fragments and remains and,

at times, the process was not unlike an archaeological dig into the very recent past. The site is still accessible thanks to the work of the Digital team. And personally, if you want to explore it, I find it easiest just to enter the words 'net art', 'Tate' and 'intermedia' into a web browser.

Already published on the project's website are a number of important papers. The records for these commissions were slim and under the direction of Sarah Haylett, who's also here today, and was the project researcher embedded within archives and records at Tate, the team set about reconstituting the record of these commissions and this moment in Tate's history. As part of the case study, the art historian Dr Lucy Bayley, who's also here, produced a history of this moment of commissioning, looking at them in the context of wider art policy in the UK at the time and the institutional history of Tate. Sarah Haylett also used the latest web recording tools to create a record of the site for Tate's archive and developed groundbreaking practice in the reconstitution of records. Stephen Huyton, the project researcher embedded in Collection Management, examined the use of licences within commissioning and managing net artworks within systems developed for really different types of artwork. The team also hosted a public event in Tate Exchange, which was a wonderful kind of reunion for many of the artists involved – and I see Susan Collins is on the call – and a series of workshops at Tate Modern with artists, curators, conservators, archivists, collection managers and scholars.

So today we're here to celebrate the publication of the final body of texts that have come out of this research. These include a set of co-authored essays providing new insights, both art historical and technical, into each of these works. And I'd really like to thank Patricia Falcão, Chris King, Lucy Bayley and Sarah Cook for their amazing work in the creation of these texts, and to the artists for their commitment and engagement with this research. Obviously, we couldn't do it without them. We also have an important essay by Patricia Falcão from Time-based Media Conservation, who is one of the pioneering research practitioners at the forefront of the conservation of net art and software-based art. And finally, we have a new and substantial introduction by Professor Sarah Cook that contextualises these essays and the works that they describe, and who I have the honour of introducing as our speaker today.

However, before I introduce Sarah, I also just want to extend my thanks and the thanks of all the authors to the research publishing

team at Tate for their tireless work and dedication seeing these texts, and all of the texts coming from the project, published. Huge thanks are due to Christopher Griffin, Arthur Goodwin, Celia White, Susannah Worth and Martha Barratt. They have worked closely with all of our authors, some of whom were writing for publication for the first time, to bring this research to you. They've done an extraordinary job in ensuring that there is a deep and lasting legacy from the project for the field.

And now to Sarah. Professor Sarah Cook has spent her career immersed in media art as an exceptional curator and scholar, and it's been such a privilege to work with her closely during her stint as one of the three senior academic research fellows who so generously supported Reshaping the Collectible. Sarah has worked directly with many of the artists who are represented in this case study for a number of years and is not only part of the ecosystem that supports artists working with digital technologies but is also central to the writing of this history as she lives reflectively with it. Sarah is at the cutting edge of both commissioning and curating digital work, and through this work and her writing, she has shown us how artists can help us understand and navigate the impact of digital technologies on our lives. Sarah's talk today serves as a conclusion to this case study, and we're really honoured to hand her the microphone to provide the capstone to this project. Thank you.

Sarah Cook   Thank you, Pip. That's wonderful. It's a pleasure to be here. I'm starting with the words of an artist. 'What role do you think the artist will perform in this event? Pulled out of the archives and examined... old dinosaur relics and display cases that you can talk about and maybe prod into life occasionally.' Those are the words of Heath Bunting in an interview with the Reshaping the Collectible project team.

Fig.1
Self-portrait taken by Heath Bunting using his watch to check orientation
Photograph courtesy Heith Bunting

The aim of this talk is to discuss the outcomes about the case study, about net art as part of this larger project. And as Pip says, I was the late arriving post-pandemic final academic research fellow. And 20 years earlier I had written my PhD in part on Tate's first net art commissions, looking at the relationship between curators, the museum and the challenges of new media art from my position as a curator outside the museum. And Tate of course continued to commission that art until 2011 – 15 works in total. So, in this talk I want to try – and to use a phrase I heard often at Tate during my fellowship – I want to try and 'surface' how artists in the institution think about the shared legacy and the future of these and other net artworks.

And the difficulty with this, of course, is that outwith the museum and outwith the Tate, the field is divided in terms of whether or not net art has a legacy, or is it an ongoing concern, and whether it deserves to have a legacy in the museum or could it have a life in the museum in the first place. And the museum choosing to create a new legacy for a work of art commissioned decades ago, which may have languished on a server since, or maybe indeed been lost, is arguably an odd thing to do now. And on the one hand, we have

museums questioning the sustainability of collection care processes and data storage, and on the other, we have an increased hype and attention to new forms of digital art. So, before we get too far ahead of ourselves, let's stick with what we know so far.
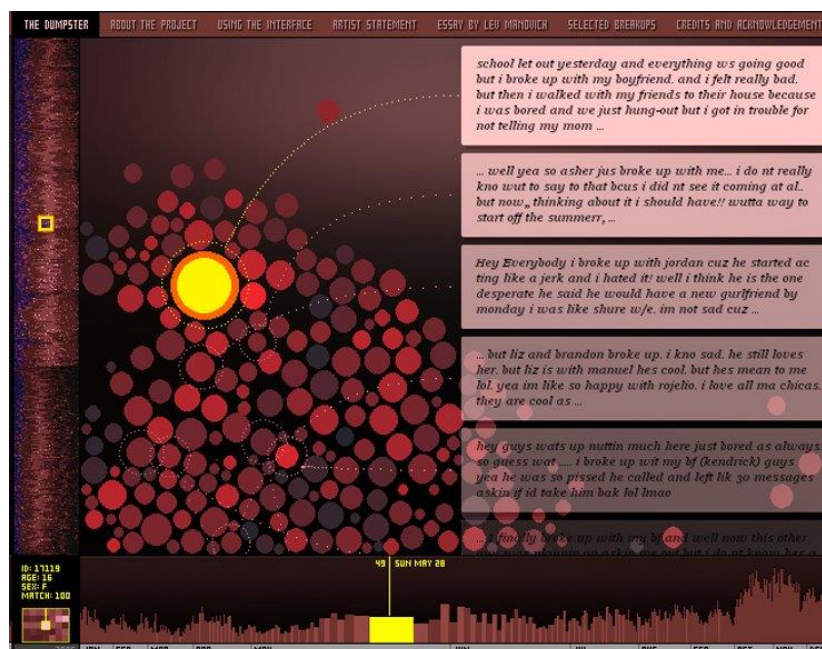

Fig.2
Golan Levin
The Dumpster 2006 (screenshot)
© Golan Levin

The Reshaping the Collectible net art case study has resulted in three main outcomes, each of which I hope to discuss in the time that we have. First was an archival commitment to net art in terms of the role of Gallery Records, which is a department within Tate. And their being convinced of the value of Tate's own Intermedia Art web pages, which is where the works of net art were linked from alongside documentation of other related programming. Second is the conservation and curatorial commitment to some of the commissioned net artworks, resulting in work to assess the current technical condition of all of the works and, for some, their migration into the main art collection. Now these are two different outcomes with different values at play. One reaffirms the institutions obligations to proper record-keeping. The other points towards a greater understanding that the potential value of Tate's net artworks is in them as individual and functional works of art and not as a group of works pertaining to the history of the institution, as a commissioning strand or as a collection. Therefore, these two first outcomes are already at odds. An archival or records management

approach to Tate's role in commissioning that artworks would focus on keeping them together. A curatorial approach separates them as individual artistic endeavours, as they were at the point of their commissioning. And so, in fact, what's resulted is the risk that they fall between those cracks and the net art case study in Reshaping the Collectible has at least pointed out this crack and this risk. The third outcome is the unintended one, and that is the outward facing from the museum and the recognition that the public reception or understanding of net art and its history and relevance today is an ongoing task, and moreover that there is an appetite for this activity.

Despite the works themselves being at risk of loss, if not lost already, there is an appetite for the historicisation of them. And through undertaking public conversations, private interviews, producing videos for releasing online, the detailed texts that were written, and displaying some of the works in the gallery and collection displays, it's clear that the Reshaping the Collectible project has done much to increase awareness of and legacies for net art. So in this talk, let's try and elaborate on some of these outcomes, each in turn, to contextualise the work that's been done through this project and to point out maybe the work that is still to do.
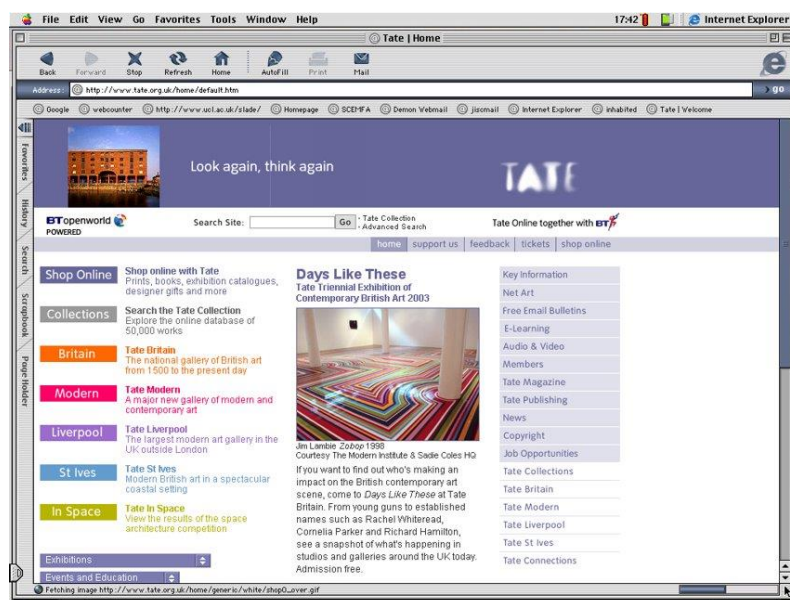

Fig.3
Susan Collins
Tate in Space 2002–3 (screenshot)
© Susan Collins

The archival and institutional legacy. Before considering the legacy of a work of art that it holds, a museum has to first know whether

or not that work of art can sustain attention over time. This is a curatorial as well as a conservation question. The trick, of course, with preserving net art is how to determine what it is and where it begins and ends. And as net art is part of the web, it's connected to a distributed network, and any one node is but one entry point to a potentially diverging path that the artwork may take its visitors down. So the museum is just one node in a network in which net art lives.
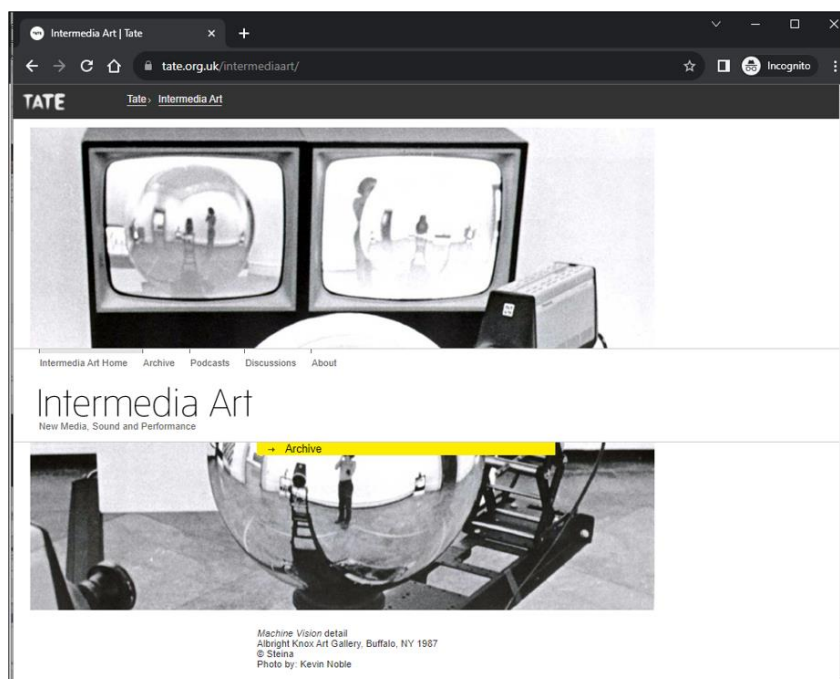

Fig.4
Screenshot of the Tate Intermedia Art website October 2023
https://www.tate.org.uk/intermediaart/

Therefore, the first outcome of the Tate's net art case study is the decision to preserve and maintain access online to the Tate's own Intermediate Art web pages, and this is a significant result of the research. The Gallery Records department recognised the scope of their responsibility, which includes digital preservation, that institutionally created documentation of public facing museum activity should be maintained so that viewers might remember earlier versions of the museum's take on or framing of an art topic or an art movement. So it's not just important that we remember net art, it's also important that we remember what Tate thought net art was and why they thought it was important at that time.

Maybe you recall going to an exhibition and then years later looking for a review of that exhibition or looking for the museum's own web

page of that exhibition to remind yourself of the experience that you had encountering new art forms at a particular moment in time. And this is kind of the digital equivalent of that: the enframing of net art within web pages, linking the artworks to a broader take on digital culture alongside audio works or streams of discussion and different commissioned texts and reports. This was a curatorial decision by staff at Tate and as such it is a significant moment in Tate's history and in the history of net art as represented by a national institution.
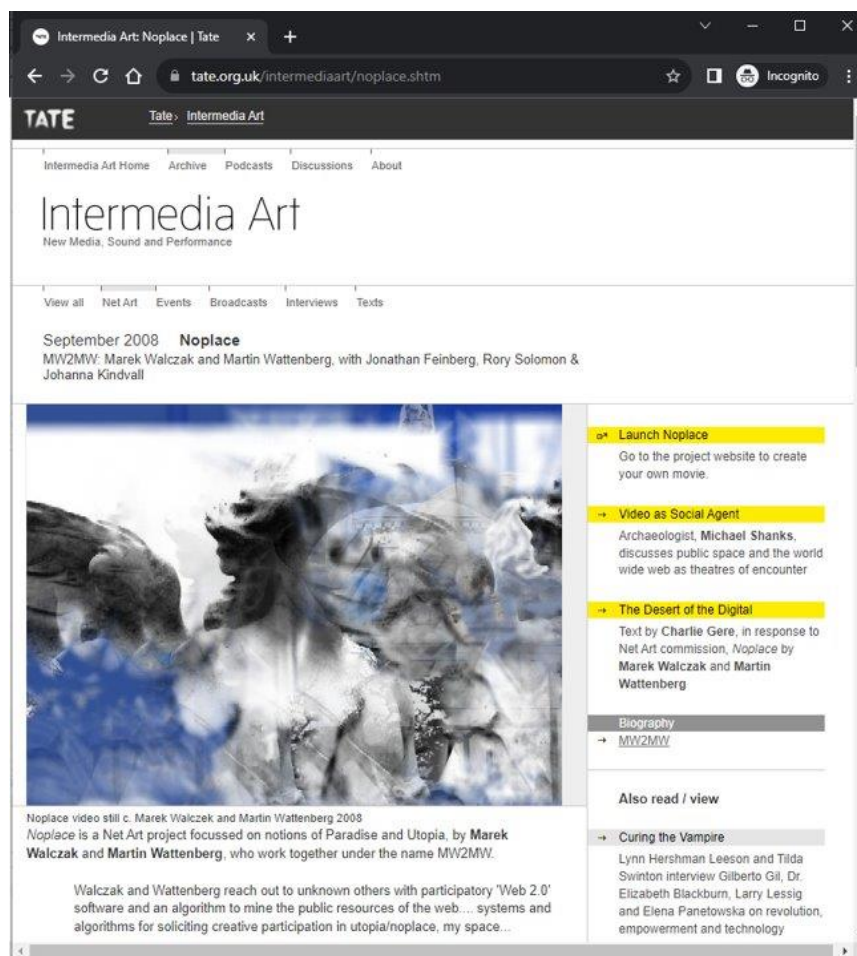

Fig.5
Screenshot of the artwork page on Tate's Intermedia Art microsite for *Noplace* 2008 by MW2MW (Marek Walczak and Martin Wattenberg). The artwork could be launched from this page, which also links to essays, artists' biographies and events pages.

The decision to preserve these records – these web pages as records – also sits within the broader context of Tate being a national institution and therefore a repository of records for the nation. You know, as with the British Library, which also collects web pages. Keeping the Intermedia Art pages not only keeps a record of what

kind of artworks were considered significant in the ongoing history of digital art, but also keeps the design of the page itself – a container with its own aesthetic merits. And so this outcome actually has had implications for how the museum works. There is now a different approach proposed for record preservation at Tate compared to, for example, a standard web archiving or capturing approach as will be taken by the British Library.

In the course of the research into net art, it was discovered that the institutional records pertaining to the commissioning and display of the net artworks had been lost. This may sound more dramatic than it is if you know anything about how museums' own institutional records work. Do curators have to lodge copies of all their e-mail correspondence with artists in the institution's own archive and record system? Yes. Do education staff have to keep copies of all contracts with external designers or copy editors? Also yes. Is it possible that e-mail accounts are migrated, staff leave, and such institutional records get lost? Unfortunately, also yes.

As embedded researcher and archivist Sarah Haylett pointed out in her essay,

'Reconstituting lost or missing records is a process of repopulating information from a central system or a distributed network, or trying to rebuild it completely.'[1]

Now Sarah also pointed out at the beginning of the research project how some digital forms of art through their being displayed in the museum generate more records and documents about themselves also in digital form. And so drawing lines around what the work of art is and what the correspondence about the work of art is or what the documentation of the work's display is, is all very difficult with born-digital art and with net art in particular. And I refer you to Annet Decker's book on documentation as art for more on that.
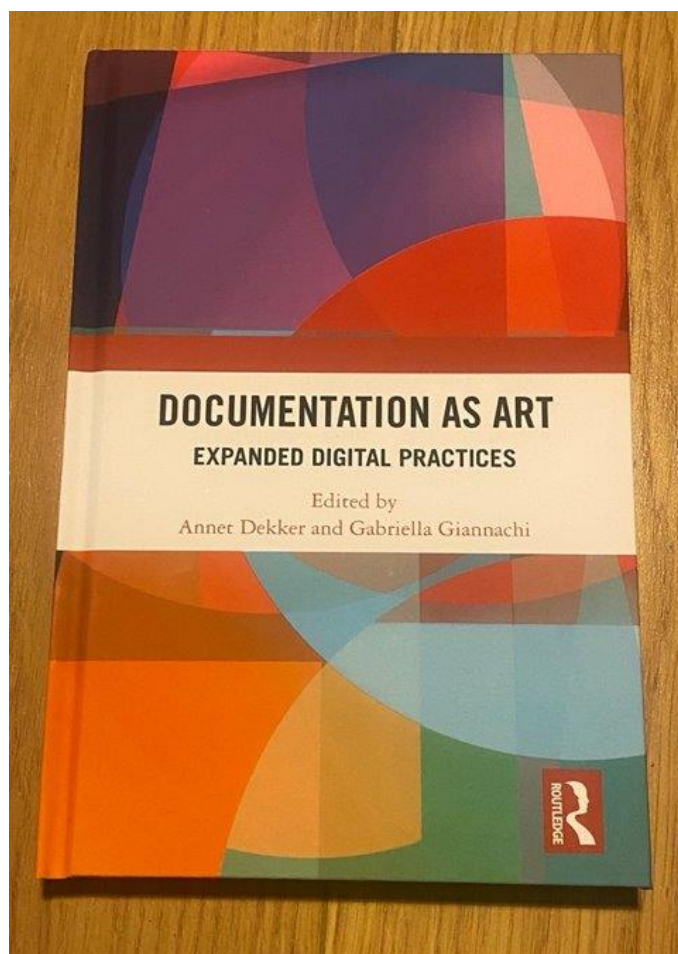
Fig.6
Annet Dekker, *Documentation As Art: Expanded Digital Practices,* Abingdon 2022

Let's say the designer sends a copy of the web page to the artist and the artist sends corrections to the text of that copy back. In a case of the work of Susan Collins's *Tate in Space*, for example, the files attached to that e-mail are themselves copies of the work. They may be exactly the same. They may be indistinguishable to a viewing public from the HTML files which are uploaded to the server and constitute the published version of the work. In the Reshaping the Collectible research project, the team were able to interview artists and technicians and ask them for copies of their files pertaining to the commissions, arguably amassing a larger body of records with more value to the institution across a broader network of people than those that had been lost.

The second part, artistic legacy:

'Is it about the work? Is it about the curatorial process of commissioning and collecting? Is it about people like yourselves and

the Tate? Is it artist focused? Is it work focused? Or is it collection focused?'

Again, Heath Bunting. This leads to the second outcome of the research, which is the reconsideration of the individual works, their current technical condition and the individuals or the collectives who created them. And there are maybe three ways to dissect this outcome.
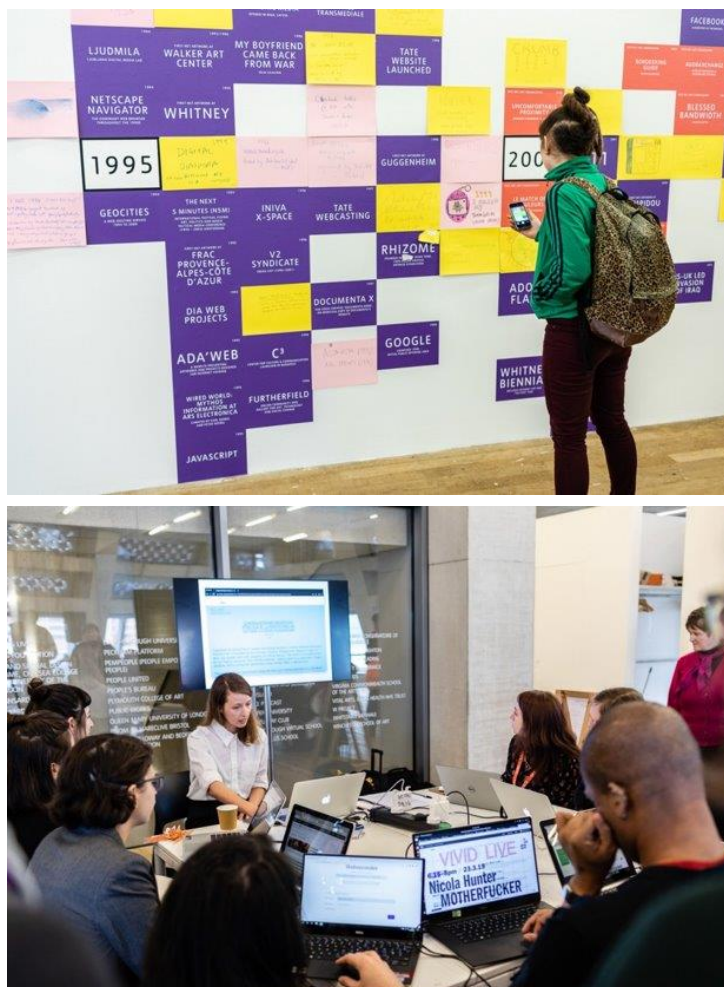

Fig.7
'Lives of Net Art' event, Tate Exchange, Tate Modern, 19 April 2019
Photographs courtesy Hydar Dewachi

Firstly is, whether they're all dinosaurs or not, all of the artists involved in the original commissions are still living. And so interviews with the artists and participation by some, albeit not all of them, in the 'Lives of Net Art' event, which was a public event in Tate Exchange, started to allow the museum to have a historical look back and reconsideration of the value of the works individually on their

own merit. And until this point, the works had mostly been considered by staff at Tate in relation to the institution or to the history of its website. Talking to the artists about how they remembered that work and what it means to them now allowed for conversations about current work and future work and a re-evaluation of the significance of that particular piece of net art to the rest of their careers which may or may not have continued to include net art practise.
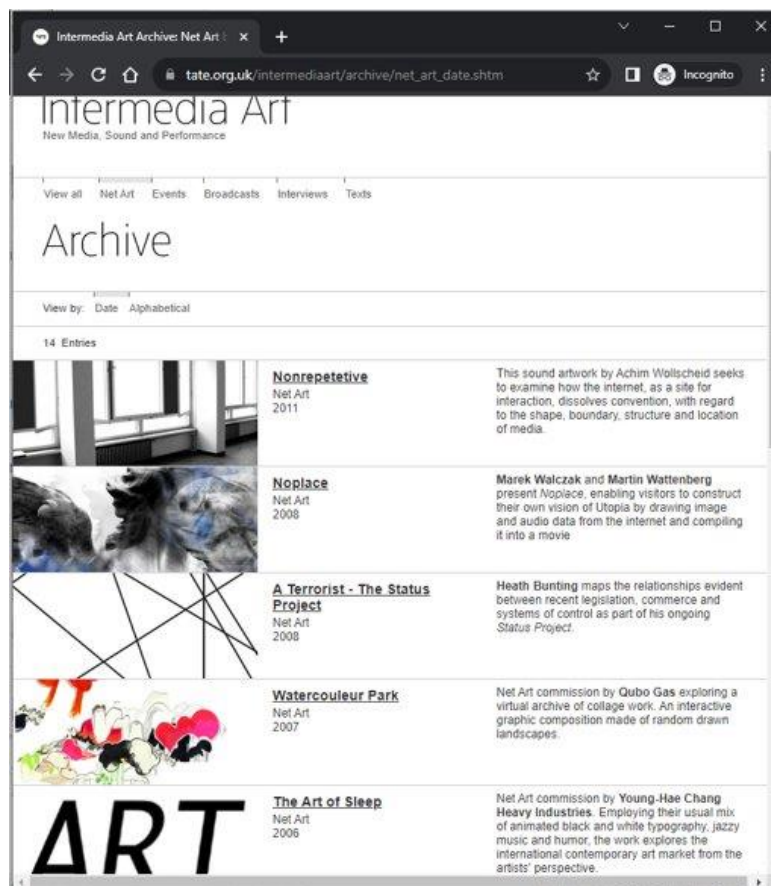

Fig.8
Screenshot of the Tate Intermedia Art website October 2023
https://www.tate.org.uk/intermediaart/

Secondly, it transpired that through attention to the institution's own history of commissioning net art, the idea of 15 works as a collection or even as a kind of ongoing non-time-bound exhibition was in fact an archival concept. What I mean is that this had mostly been influenced by the attention paid to Tate's Intermedia website as a container which needed to be preserved as a record of a curatorial programme. This is an archivist's way of seeing things, not a curator's one. It turns out it's more helpful for curators to understand the

commissioning of net art as something which the Tate once did. In its examination of the digital landscape in which art was beginning to circulate, it linked what Tate once did to similar efforts at other museums, such as the Whitney's Artport or adaweb acquired by the Walker Art Center. However, keeping these 15 works together is not an idea that makes much curatorial sense once the materiality and conceptual framework and artistic intent of each of the works is considered anew, as the curators did in their meetings with the Reshaping the Collectible project team.
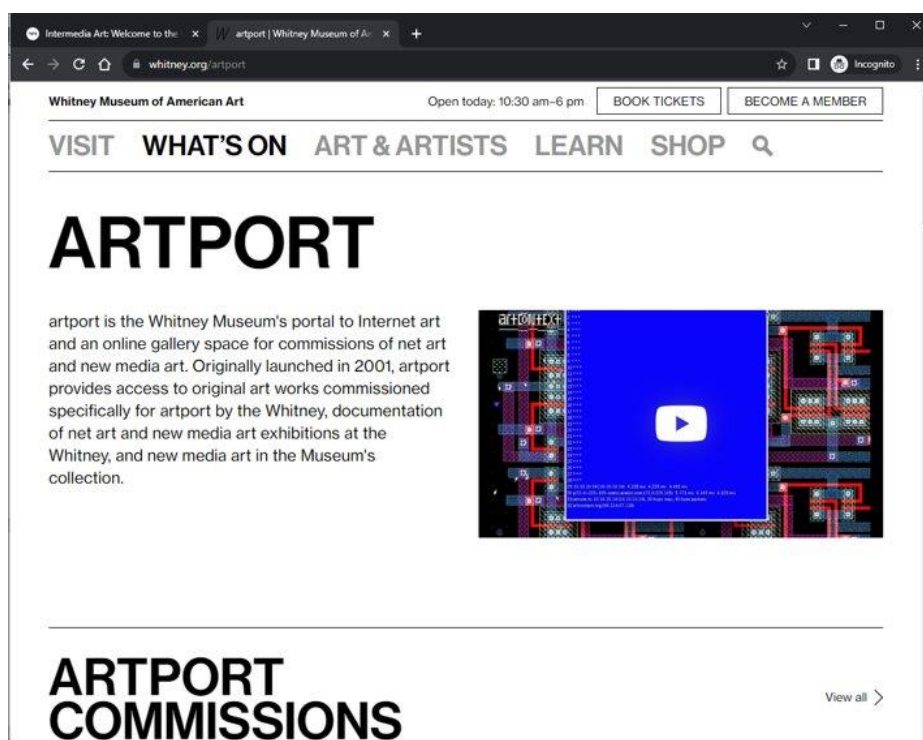

Fig.9
Screenshot of Artport, the platform for web-based art by the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

The wider practices of the artists considered comes immediately into view. After all, they were commissioned by different curators as part of different programmes. So should Tate launch a new digital art commissioning strand for online dissemination or cyberspace or the metaverse or whatever it's called now. It may or may not reference these prior art commissions.

So thirdly, and this is a longer bit here, this provoked reflection on how ways of working in a digital age might alter the long-held curatorial imperatives of the museum to populate a canon from disparate works by diverse artists on divergent themes. And this

curatorial imperative prioritises the separation of artworks and their reassembly or juxtaposition into new authored narrative roots and the filling of gaps which are impossible to fill. Curating asks for new connections to be made between artworks from different spaces and times in new places for new audiences. Even monographic exhibitions, a significant aspect of the museum's programming, assemble a number of works by a single artist or collective together, which these net art commissions do not.

In conversations between myself, curators, the Reshaping the Collectible project lead and Head of Collection Care Research, Pip Laurenson, it became apparent that the idea of works of net art, many of which exist now more as records than anything else, didn't necessarily or intrinsically have curatorial traction, if they were to be considered for the collection of the museum. They might fill a gap in the art-historical canon, but were they the right works by those artists, or even the right artists for the narratives the museum is currently telling? Of greater interest to a few of the curators we spoke to was understanding how the net artworks related to that artist's wider body of practice, and whether the net art commission could initiate or restart a continuation of the institution's relationship with the artist. Could preserving and restaging the net art commission be, for the artist, a means of production or a way of working relevant to art now? Could its restaging and display or acquisition be relevant to other art in the collection? Could it function as a representative or a stand-in for other things not in the collection? In this, through informal conversations with curators, it became apparent that the idea of re-exhibiting the documentation and records of the net artworks, making public their recreation, through display in the gallery spaces or touring exhibitions for even the video we produced, was also potentially a more favoured approach than simply retrospectively restoring, preserving or acquiring one-off works as they were at the time of their commissioning.

ASK SØME GUY IN THE STREET IF ART IS WØRTH A DAMN, HE'LL SMACK YØU UPSIDE THE HEAD JUST FØR ASKING.

A DØG. ART IS A DØG AND ITS DØGGIE DEEDS.

Fig.10
THE ART OF SILENCE 2006 (video stills)
Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries (Young-Hae Chang and Marc Voge)
© YOUNG-HAE CHANG HEAVY INDUSTRIES

The attention to where each of the net artworks could go kind of raises this question of, like, then what? Could it be imagined that they would be placed in the museum as representative of that individual artist's practice or the medium of net art, even British net art, or in the practice of artists working with networked technologies and software? Which gap in the collection could they fill? Discussions with the curators concerned the range of international artists and British artists in the 15 works – Tate Britain was planning its rehang and Tate Modern refreshing its view from collection displays, all with the mission of Tate to diversify its collection in mind. Does the sought after diversity apply to the geographic location of the artist or the place the work was made – arguably both largely irrelevant to the network spaces of net art, maybe. Or diversity in terms of style or aesthetic considerations, the range of media beyond film and video,

for example. Should they be placed in the canon of art history, thematically or chronologically, or repositioned in the public imagination, or restored into the records of institutional history? Or all three.

Fig.11
Installation view of Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries (Young-Hae Chang and Marc Voge) THE ART OF SILENCE 2006 © YOUNG-HAE CHANG HEAVY INDUSTRIES

Artist Simon Patterson, in his interview with the Reshaping the Collectible team, commented on the possibility of reassembling his work for display, but acknowledged the question as to whether that would be a valuable process compared to other activities.

'We can look at how we can restore it, but if you think it's just too problematic, then it could just be archived to some other form. Just have a digital version of the DVD, which is pretty much the same thing. It doesn't have to be exactly the same way. Because I think money could be spent on other things, commissioning some new piece by someone.'

This sentiment was shared by a number of artists when asked to consider their works individually in relation to the institution rather than in relation to other of the net art commissions. Heath Bunting put it finally, reiterating the importance of putting the relationship with the artist at the forefront, saying,

'your relationship with even purchasing work or acquiring work you've commissioned, that relationship should be with the artist, should be really troubled and always under review.'

These philosophical questions, or even thought experiments, about the legacy of net art for artists and audiences, remind us that a long-standing consideration concerning the museum's relationship to net art was its role as a location for access to the work. And at Tate this is the case in two senses. One is that the web page of the museum was the primary topic of discussion about both the initial commissioning of the works, and for Graham Harwood and Susan Collins the Tate's website was also the subject of their works. And, two, that keeping the web page container on which the works later resided – the Intermediate Art web pages – was an important task for the institution. Curatorially today, however, the conversation revolves around audience access to the museum and the museum's contents in a physically engaged sense, and how digital experiences fit with that.
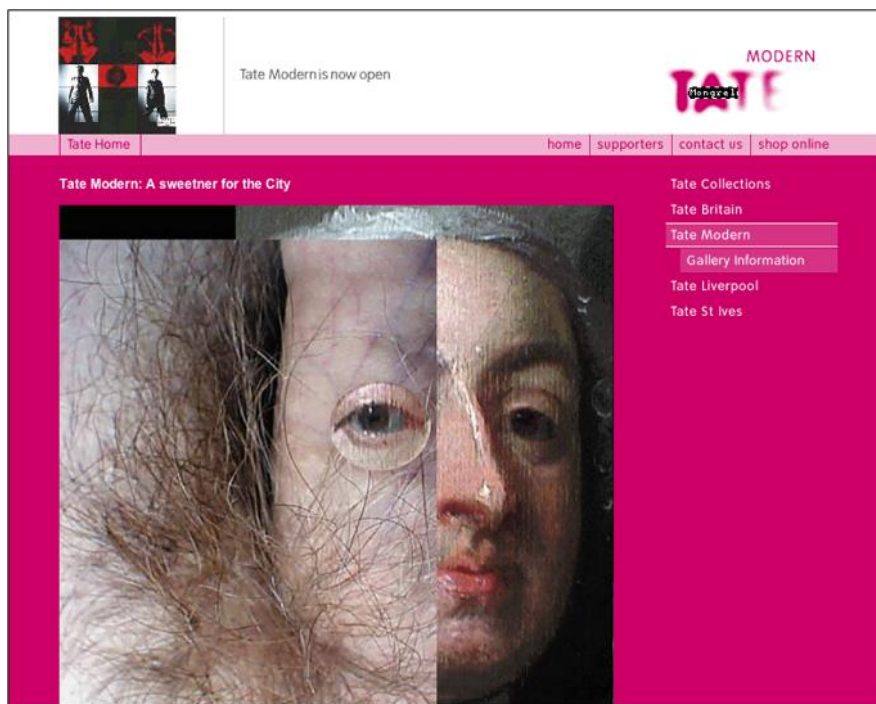
Fig.12
Graham Harwood
Uncomfortable Proximity 2002 (screenshots)
© Graham Harwood

This is most evident in the display of the works by Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries, which during the lifetime of the Reshaping the Collectible research project, these works were installed on display in the collection galleries in Tate Modern, allowing the museum to again be a location for accessing work. This display coincided with the slow release of restrictions around social distancing and the one-way system through the galleries, and with the rapid adoption of the use of QR codes across all sectors of society. As such, the transference of the works to the collection which predated their display and predated the research project, was curatorially compounded by the possibility to display them to have a label with a QR code on the wall and a location from which they could be accessed in the context of other works by the same artists.
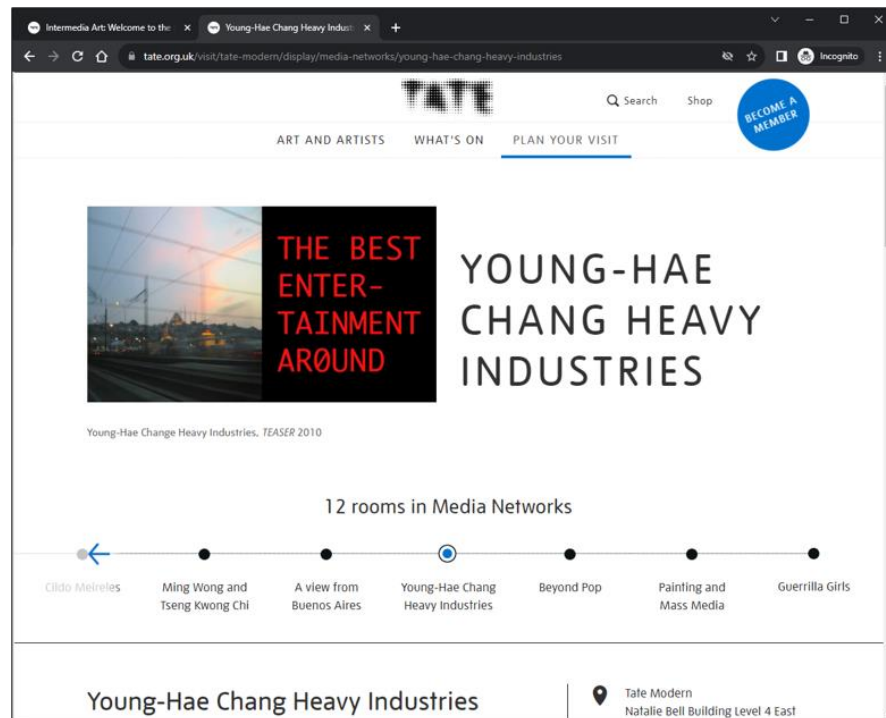
Fig.13
Screenshot of the Tate website, October 2023

Histories of net art have often cited the fact that works of net art are parasitic on the institution in the way that they occupy server space and consume the institution's resources in order to survive. And in an earlier Tate-hosted conversation, which was also linked to the Intermediate Art pages, art historian and technology theorist Charlie Gere talked about the museum as 'the host of a ghost of the avant-garde', insofar as that once an innovative or provocative artwork comes to the museum, it dies. It might be nice for the institution to think of itself as a gracious and welcoming host, but a ghost might not be a very well behaved guest, might make the museum seem more like a cemetery, as the Futurists had it, and bring with it all kinds of memories the host might not want to have to deal with, such as the institution's own hand in the death of the work. Ghosts also have the possibility to transcend physical boundaries of location and time frames, and to use Heath Bunting's words, they 'trouble' the security of the homes they visit.

In this a ghost is maybe a good analogy for net art, revealing through its time- and space-transgressing behaviours the tensions between it and the museum. And a time- and space- travelling ghost is a perfect way to highlight the museum's contingent desire to locate and secure artworks in fixed places: in the store, in the crate in transit, in the gallery, on view, on the server. Susan Collins, in her

interview with curator Jemima Rellie at the time of the launch of her online work *Tate in Space*, in which she pretended to be the director of Tate's space satellite venue for art, speculated about other possible pasts and futures of the work and its location in relation to the institution. Saying:

'a project like this could in some respects have existed as an offline project in an earlier age, through leafletting or posters or something. That certainly would not have been nearly as plausible or economically possible or worked in such a seamless, integrated way as it was possible now in the Tate.'

The lessons of the effects of the last 20-plus years on net art has shown us that the museum has to responsibly defer to the artist's own authority on the work: what it means now, what it could have been and how it could be represented if we can't see it anymore. So perhaps it makes sense to think of the museum not as the location or space for net art, but as the steward of time for encountering net art. Or, in Susan Collins's case: time and space travel.
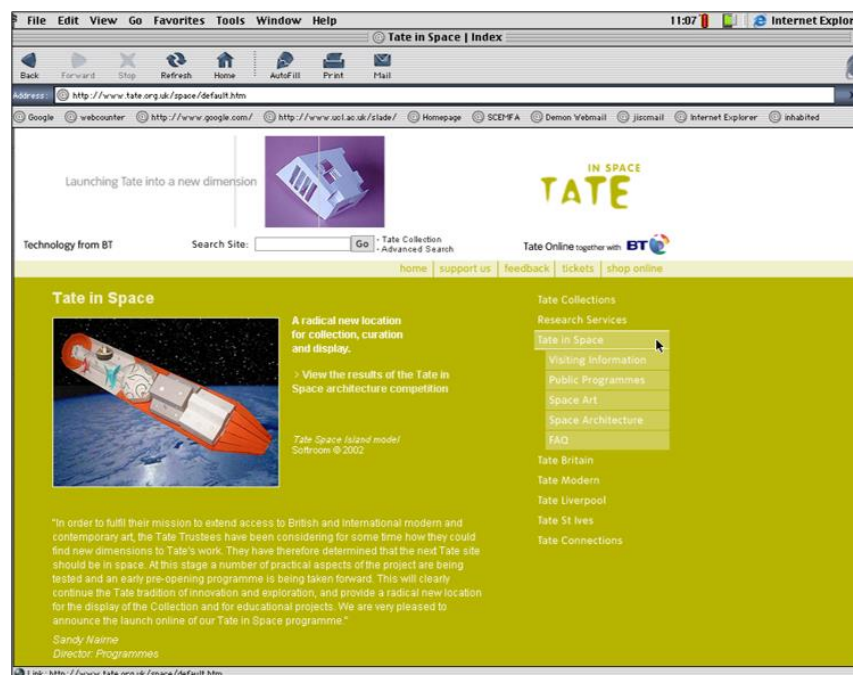

Fig.14
Susan Collins
Tate in Space 2002–3
© Susan Collins

Reshaping the Collectible challenged the traditional conservation thinking of the museum as a force which arrests degradation, stopping time for works of art and maintaining them as static objects

to be encountered repeatedly. It's simply not possible for the museum to stop time for works of art which continue to live on, sometimes in ghostly form, in more complicated networks of obsolescence, such as net art. But it is possible for the museum to give those works longer time frames to live in, or longer time frames for audiences to encounter them in. And if the museum allows the work to live and change, then it also has to continue to share that life-giving responsibility with the artist. As Andy Deck commented in his interview:

'I'm still a net artist and I still want to maintain it. There is a certain perilousness to it, insofar as I'm one fire away from having it all disappear, but I want to maintain my own stewardship of the projects. You can maintain it or fix it up, but it's going to have the same problem again in 10 or 15 years. It's like a constant restoration problem. There may be some way in which I could make an alternative or slightly alternative version of it that would help the artwork to not end up in a failed condition where people are linking off to something else.'

Linking off to something else or rethinking the museum as the fixed location for art, is both a positive and negative possibility for the future of net art living in the network. Clicking on the Tate's link to the work *agoraXchange* takes you to the original URL, which now has a text on it which reads:

'"agoraXchange" went online on March 15th 2004 as a commission from the Tate museum for a repository of ideas for a global politics game with four basic decrees that upend current institutions sustaining nationalism and inequality. Please visit the archived website using the Wayback Machine for more information.'

Here the artist makes visible the process of curatorial attention or neglect, and conservation care, upgrading, migrating, stabilising. Artists, where willing and enabled, have been the stewards of their work in the absence of the museum's conservation efforts. And what has changed with Reshaping the Collectible is recognition by the museum of the network of care surrounding works of art. Referring to the net artworks as commissions doesn't ascribe blame to the museum for not maintaining the works. After all, they were only licenced for display and not acquired.
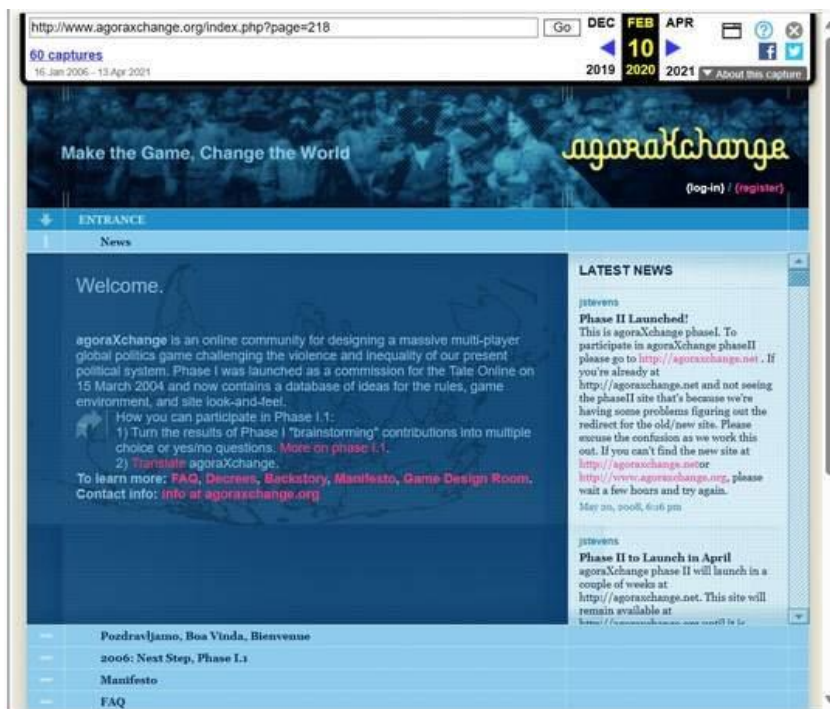
Fig.15
Screenshot of Natalie Bookchin and Jacqueline Stevens's *agoraXchange*, phase 1, via the Wayback Machine, 10 February 2020
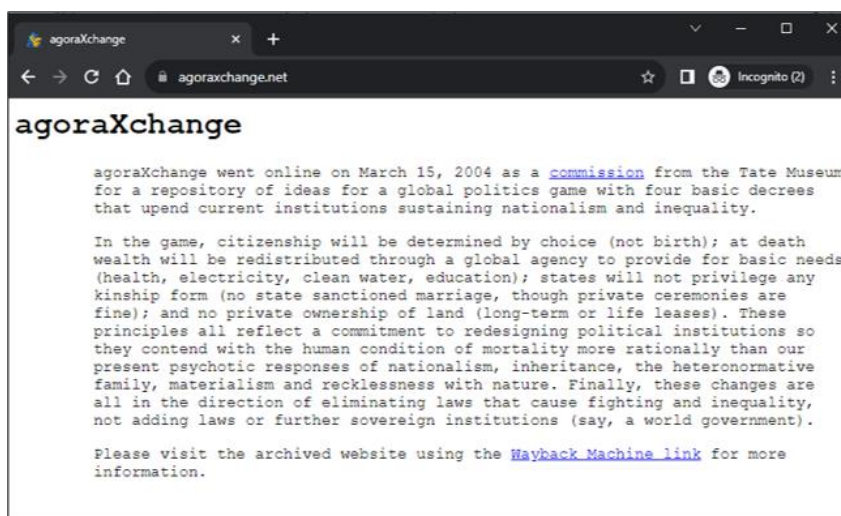
Fig.16
Screenshot of current webpage for *agoraxchange*, directing visitors the archived version of the work, October 2023

Most other museums who trucked in net art in the early 2000s were in the same situation of hosting works they didn't have title ownership of. Instead, this a note on the *agoraXchange* website and Andy Deck's words, and Susan Collins's doubts about restaging the work and whether it might have worked better in a more distributed form: this all points to the strength of the internet itself and its many

players as a potentially more secure distributed network to maintain the work or the records of it as it was back when. The Reshaping the Collectible project asked every artist who created a net artwork for Tate what their own ambitions were as to the future of their works. And a handful of their responses are here, which I will read for you as well. Heith [Bunting] says:

'You may not be able to solve this problem. If you're looking back at this old server that's still running, it may just be futile. It may just have to be left there to run and die at some point. It might just be better to move forward with the relationships that have been initiated.'

And Andy Deck says:

'I just wonder, where's the institutional energy to do that kind of work? There's a lot of code out there that's just going to wither on the vine and not work anymore. I'm making an effort to keep a lot of my work online, but not all of it.'

Simon Patterson says:

'What was interesting about the whole conference, the Lives of Net Art in Tate Exchange, was the amount of work that's out there that's languishing, that has probably died a death for now and for similar reasons of broken links or whatever.'

'I do feel that we live in a very, very different time', says Shilpa Gupta.

'People are spending five hours or six hours on the internet. So the way you experience something now is completely different to the way you would experience something in 2001. There it was more slow-paced. There was more patience and more time. You walked slowly into a space. Now, very, very fast-paced. So do I imagine if 'Blessed Bandwidth' could go up on the internet and exist? Yes, sure, it's something to try out, see how people experience and imagine it now. I also think it maybe has the potential to maybe live another life. I'm totally flexible. Whatever. Whether you want to show it as documentation, you want to put it in your archive, you're free to have the files and do what you want.'

Or Graham Harwood:

'I think we work a lot with process and we work a lot for the people that are involved in a project primarily and that is their goal. If the methodologies produced in that or the kind of residues of that process can be usefully placed in another context, then that's also a useful thing, but it's not the primary aim of the work.'
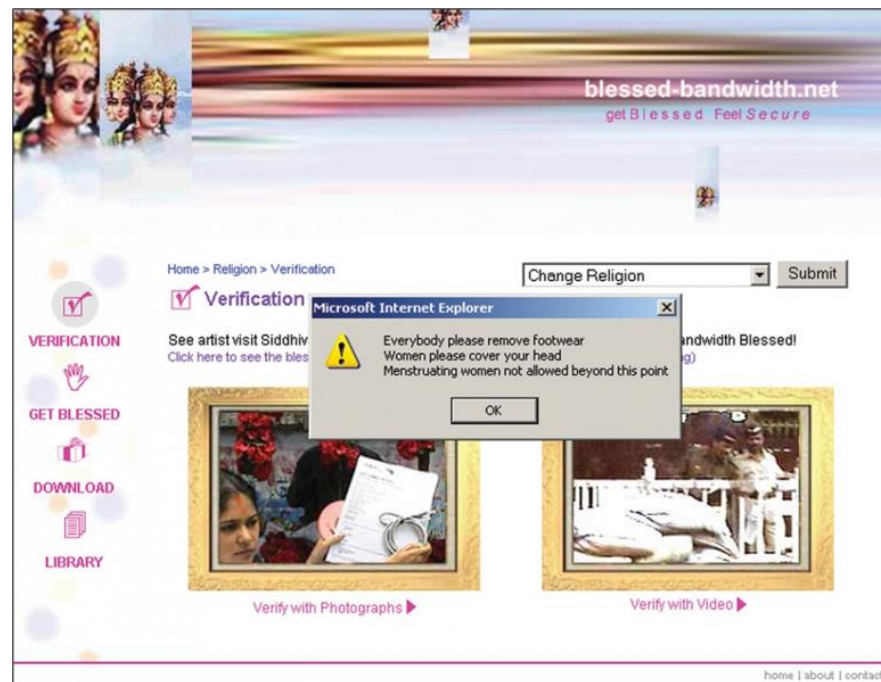

Fig.17
Shilpa Gupta
Blessed Bandwidth 2003 (screenshot)
© Shilpa Gupta

In works which are multiple and live in the network, even if the museum does take responsibility for their accessibility, that doesn't mean the artist relinquishes theirs to the work's maintenance. So this brings us to audience legacy. And these comments from artists as to the future of their net artworks and the legacy of net art for audiences shows the museum's responsibility beyond conservation responsibility to records or curatorial responsibility to artists. So arguably the themes and the topics present in the 15 works – space travel, historical witnessing, inequality, nationalism, the migrant experience, structural bias and digital systems – this makes these works even more relevant in the present day than they were in the moment of their commissioning. Truly avant-garde. But the artists' own responses to being questioned about the future of their works strongly suggested the need for relationships and a participative engagement with the works in order for them to live on. As Shilpa

Gupta stated, people should be able to choose whether or not to have the work, and Graham Harwood also reiterated that the projects were for the people involved in them, and their residue may be useful, but as an afterthought.

In 2018 the Thoma Foundation asked 10 curators, artists, critics to talk about the future of digital art. And they all commented about the need for greater engagement, education and awareness of the aesthetics of the work, the workings of the systems behind them, and about inclusion. How audiences can access the tools necessary to not just view the works but potentially make and distribute such art themselves. A repeated concern was about who gets to be an artist today, within digital networks, which are locked down by corporate interests. As artist Taeyoon Choi in particular asked: 'How can art exist outside the given network or the internet as we know it today? What is the internet that we could create, as artists?' And critic Nora Khan commented that: 'Art needs people who are radical and willing to work outside of institutional spaces, and I think digital art offers that.'

Fig.18
'What are internet artworks and why do we care for them?', YouTube,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R2eVaR4kPRQ

Fig.19
'Lives of Net Art' event, Tate Exchange, Tate Modern, 19 April 2019
Photographs courtesy Hydar Dewachi

The legacy of this research into net art includes, admittedly belatedly, the museum's acknowledgement of their responsibility to the public reception or understanding of net art, which is important in order to help artists and audiences imagine other futures for digital art and other futures for our entanglement with digital spaces such as the internet beyond this corporate pull of social media. So those of us who have followed net art since its inception have always felt this responsibility – that we should keep writing and talking about and saving net art because it might just remain as one of the best ways for understanding what the internet itself was like at different points in its development. But those who are new to digital and media art, and who felt that very keenly when forced to close museum doors during a global pandemic in 2020 and turn their audiences attention to online space; now how do they think about this work? So through producing the 'Lives of the Net Art' video, which I encourage you to

go watch, and discussing with artists and curators about these works and public events and the display of work such as those by Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries in the galleries, there is a greater public awareness of net art.

And with some sustained effort around its use of digital systems, Tate is able to transport viewers back into the past to understand what net art was, as well as into the future to imagine what net art could be. Just as museums are able, through their programming, whether that's online or face to face, to allow audiences to decide how much time they want to spend alone or together, looking at any kind of art in the first place. Digital art and net art are part of an ongoing revolution within digital culture, within broader culture, which is itself hard to have a perspective on when you're living through it. As Heath Bunting again pointed out to in his interview, he says:

'It's a total paradigm shift. You ask me why I did a certain thing in the '90s. I can't tell you. I went through a radical transformation, and so did the economy, the politics and the culture.'

So arguably, such radical transformations are continuing today, certainly in the economy and the politics, and in online space and in culture, and in how we relate to art and how we relate to one another and how we use our digital tools. It would be fitting to finish this overview of the results of the net art case study, not with a sad emoji about the loss of institutional records or the server on which commissioned works resided, but instead with a spirited argument about the new systems for digital art, which museums are currently considering. But the problem with that is that the NFT or cryptocurrency initiatives or AI stuff today is potentially about producing wealth for an elite. As Harwood has noted, they're not about the stewardship of art or enabling access to art for audiences, including future artists. And of course, you may disagree. And Harwood says:

'The work is about critically engaging with the living. We're not worried about legacy within collections. If people involved in the process can think or imagine differently for a period of time, that's enough. Whether we're forgotten, it doesn't really matter. It's about a living culture rather than a dead one, really. I can see where public collections can be important and useful, but not when they're just used to produce some kind of symbolic value for some wealthy or powerful elite. That's just not interesting.'
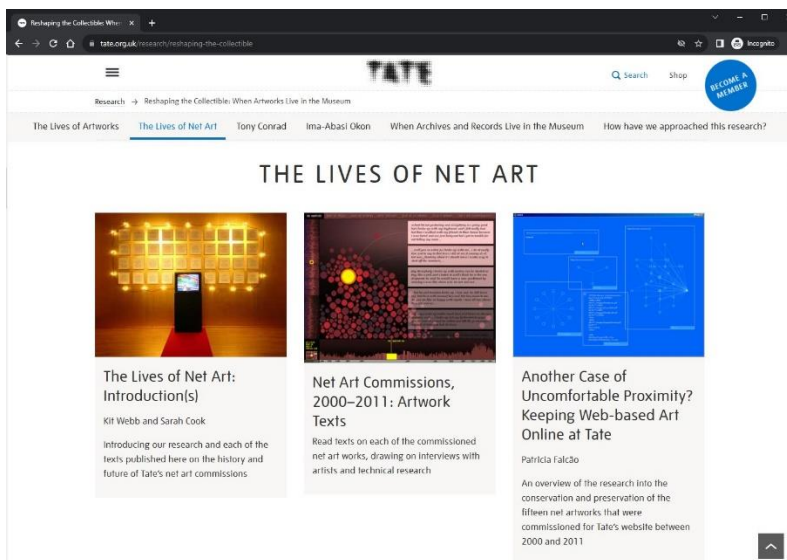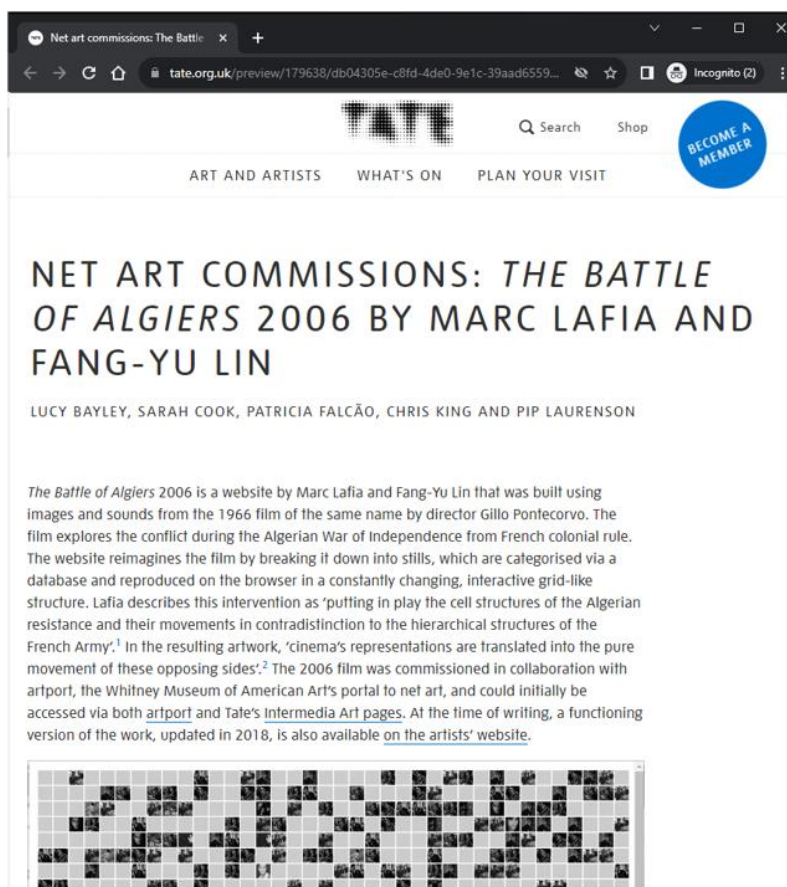
Fig.20
Screenshots from the Tate website, October 2023

The museum has developed new ways of accommodating and caring for digital works in static or non-fixed forms. There are collection categories for licenced works such as films or videos. There is, in the

archive, what's called the single item collection for things which don't quite fit any other category yet. And at other museums than Tate, net art often sits in relation to so-called 'study collections', which might not be of unique objects or multiples or reference items, which the museum maintains access to but does not own. And relevant to net art, there's also, of course, the collections in the library, including artists' books and CD-roms, which occasionally looks after things, until such times it makes sense to transfer them into the main collection, as in the case of works by other artists here. So the Reshaping the Collectible project has brought net art into conversation with performance, with socially engaged art, with work made by collectives, which is activated by participants. And there is so much that all these kinds of art can gain from being in dialogue with one another, and that the museum can take from curating them together.

A museum's responsibility to a work of art is to learn it, to know its strengths and weaknesses, to understand what the artist intended in making it and why audiences care about it and care about seeing it and spending time with it. Museums have a responsibility to learn about net art because it is part of the development of art and digital culture, a part of the idea of art and life being intertwined. Yes, there are technical questions to investigate further about how these works operated, so that we can understand about how to keep them working if we decide to do so. And yes, there are social questions to answer about how accessibility to art is made equitable, and whether technology introduces obstacles to that fair openness. And one of the briefs of the research was to find out how the museum imagines the future for net artworks conceptually, technically and curatorially. But in fact, it's not up to the museum solely to imagine that future. It's up to all of us. So, as filmmaker Stan Brakhage observed,

'one of the problems with institutions preserving things is that too much is bureaucratised and things revolve around committee meetings. And what really works is when someone loves something so much that they preserve it in any form they can.'

Thank you.

Pip Laurenson   Thank you so much, Sarah. That was a wonderful, really wonderful talk and a fantastic end – always good to end with love, I think. Does anybody want to start our discussion or questions? Have we got any questions from the floor? You could put your physical hand up, or your kind of electronic one. If not, I just wanted to – what really struck

me, actually, in terms of what you were talking about, which I think we did learn through the project, not only through the net artworks, but also actually thinking about the conservation of Tony Conrad's *Ten Years Alive on the Infinite Plane,* and that was really about, I think for both of these case studies, shifting our focus away from what the museum could do and actually acknowledge what the communities, what the artists, what the kind of ecosystems around these works were doing themselves to actually keep these works present and remembered and loved, I guess, as well. And I wondered, Sarah, if you can speak to that ecosystem and how much of the history you think is being recorded. Because, you know, I was really conscious going to Iniva the other week for an event they had around X-Space, which was their commissioning programme at a very similar time. And it seems to me that we're just at that moment where these communities are still around and, but it feels very precarious. But maybe it always feels precarious. I'd love to hear your thoughts.

Sarah Cook

Yeah, I think I hinted at it a little bit about how the networks that produced and sustained these works were so artist-driven. And, as artists, careers move on and their interests move on, their responsibility to maintaining not just the works but the networks in which those works were produced also potentially moves on. And I think for 15 years, if not 20 years, people have been saying to me, will you write down, will you please write down what happened and what you remember. And, and I've always said, I'm a bit nervous about it being my patchy memory, anecdotal history of a moment in time as a curator, not even as an artist making work. So I recognise that there is an appetite now and I think that's what I was trying to get to also in this talk was there isn't – one of the comments on the video we produced was in relation to Patricia's work, preserving the work, and a comment from a member of the public was: I want to hear so much more from that person at the end. There is this appetite to understand what net art was, how it came into being, who supported it, what the communities were like to work in and be part of. To see if there's parallels to the way art's made today in the communities that are making art today.

Pip Laurenson

Thank you. And I would love to hear from other kind of members of the team who worked on this project. I don't know – Patricia or Lucy or Sarah, if – given there's been a kind of, a period of time, I think, which you've been working for a number of years now thinking about these works. And I wonder if you see things shifting either in terms of development of new tools or different kind of perspectives on the value of these histories. And this kind of particular moment of time,

actually, in which these were commissioned. I don't know if any of you want to hop in on that topic. Lucy, great.

Lucy Bayley

Hello. It's lovely to see you all. And thank you so much, Sarah. I found that really brilliant, you were summarising all the work that had gone on and thinking about the potential life within the collection. And it's been a few years. It's been such a long time, starting to meet all of the artists and programmers and thinking about the history of the works. So I feel a bit detached from it because it's been a couple, like a year or two since I've been so connected to it. But I want – one thing that struck me when you were bringing up the quotes about what should happen to those works in the future. I think when we were working on the project, I remember doing a session of Tate creators and talking about how these works might be acquired, and grouping thematically and thinking about how they might sit within the collection. And it's just interesting to notice where that desire comes from, to place them in the collection. And whether we were actually seeing the desire coming from the artists in the interviews or whether it was being interpreted that way. And actually, when you showed those quotations, I thought perhaps that desire wasn't necessarily from the artists. And I think, for me, it was about, it came from a curatorial and historical interest in showing the value of these works in their histories and placing them alongside broader art historical narratives, like socially engaged practice to activism. Examples of a version of institutional critique, examples of performance and seeing how they could sit alongside. And I think having those texts available with amazing contributions around the preservation conservation and that context, history, conservation, having it all there, I think helps. But I wonder as well how they could form part of a programme or connect to the collection in some way. Not necessarily as part of the collection – not in a way that they would be acquired. But how do they sit alongside works and have a life beyond still- trying to keep them alive still.

Sarah Cook

Yeah, I think that's a really important conversation to continue to have. And I'm a curator who just wants the works to be known about so that they can be considered, I suppose. And I often think about exhibitions, as you say, that are thematic, thematic group shows. But why were net artworks that were commissioned by Tate not considered for inclusion in a thematic group show if there was an overlap? And that was because they perhaps just weren't well known about. And I think that this Reshaping the Collectible net art case study is going to do a huge amount for making sure these works are understood in a context of other works produced at the time and in

relationship to the key ideas within arts and technology. So, thank you Lucy for your hard work and doing all the interviews and capturing all those moments and those, those voices.

Pip Laurenson

I mean the other thing that is interesting in this context which is, is the way in which all of the works when they were commissioned had a specially commissioned essay that sat alongside it. Which I remember, I think either you, Sarah or Lucy, saying it's really interesting strategy. It's almost like a gallerist's strategy to kind of raise the profile of these works, almost like lobbying internally for these works. And I don't know if you've got any thoughts on that, their original presentation?

Sarah Cook

I mean, I suppose I thought of them also, those essays, as recognition that the way in which net art circulated at that time was prominently on mailing lists. You know, an artist would post their work onto a mailing list and people would immediately pile in and discuss it and talk about it. And so it was almost fruitless to actually have a display or an exhibition of a net artwork that wasn't already in a discursive context. And works were circulating within festivals. All the festivals had conferences alongside, you know they were – it was just, we talked about net culture all the time. So I think in many ways, commissioning a writer to put some words alongside the works was a way of ensuring that those works remained attached to the culture in which they had emerged into. More in keeping with what net art was. So it's not a gallery label, it's not just tombstone information on the wall, it's as it would have been experienced.

Pip Laurenson

Patricia, do you feel that in the kind of focused time, well, I guess over the time that you've been working on these, do you feel that there's greater kind of provision within conservation, different tools that are kind of supporting your work in this area?

Patricia Falcão

Yeah, I mean, so I'm really interested in these works from a technological perspective. That's how we looked at them. And that was a really interesting learning process for myself and Chris, just going deep in the code and get completely nerdy about all of that. And the project gave us – the project and actually, something that looked catastrophic as the loss of Flash, which was a core piece of all – most of the works have been at least a few elements of Flash – was seeing the reaction of the community or those networks of care around it that meant, you know from 2019 where it's like it's gonna end and it's the end to now where it's like, oh, OK, it's the end, but actually it's still available in multiple ways because people developed

emulators, the Internet Archive allows you to play it directly now if you have a page that still has the Flash file on it, that is something that I – [laughs] So, in the end it was really hopeful and being able to see this development of, of this community, community efforts to maintain these works. Well, not these works specifically, but this technology online. And I, but I also feel that it's really relevant right now to see this – It's a very, or it can be a very simple technology that you produce these pages and you have a bunch of HTML files and you keep them on your server and they're running to compare to the systems that we are looking at now it's, you know even just Facebook or social media or not to speak of AI and and, well, NFTs and blockchain, they are just so simple and so easy to start with. And so yeah, I think it's a good time to look back at it because we can still do that. And it really struck me how most artists still had even the works that weren't online, they still had something on their server or hard drives.

Pip Laurenson
Yes, some of them were amazingly robust, actually. The simple, you know, yeah, the simplicity of some of the construction had really stood the test of time. Can I invite anybody else who'd like to make a comment or has a question for anybody? Do you have any thoughts on what you've heard? Any curators planning a new round of net art commissions? Not leaping forward? OK, I guess one thing that I would like to ask is, Patricia, do you have any future plans within Time-based Media Conservation for kind of carrying on this, this really important work that you've been doing around the preservation of net art?

Patricia Falcão
Yeah. I mean, having fallen in love with this medium a little bit, I feel that my role is to make it as easy as possible for it to be acquired and cared for within the collection. And so that's what we've been working on, also with Chris, in terms and in collaboration with Rhizome – the institution that is doing a brilliant job of developing tools for preservation and collecting – to think through what would be a sensible way of doing that. Because it's really unique in the way that it requires the involvement of technology that is responsible for all the servers that you – well, you don't need a lot of them, but – the technology that you need to care for the servers, you need Digital to think through, OK, how are these pages set up? How do they come together with the website? So you really need an integrated workflow with all of these teams beyond the ones that you need, you know – curatorial and registrars. And so it's an even broader field. And being able to think that through, make it as simple as possible to bring something in. Now this was something that we could start with

Reshaping the Collectible, and I worried a little bit when the project ended because there was also a massive shift of staff and now all of a sudden there's new staff and they're really enthusiastic, so I'm quite happy with that! So I think that – I'm hoping in the, you know, in the – We do have a plan, and we'll see how it comes to fruition.

Pip Laurenson   And new works coming in, that's exciting.

Patricia Falcão   That would be very helpful.

Pip Laurenson   Yeah, that's the way to keep the work happening, isn't it. Helen, you've got a question.

Helen O'Malley   Not a new artwork, but we have I think like 150 hours of video footage from Richard Bell's *Embassy* that's currently living in a Dropbox. There's no access. So if people were eager to kind of put all of this to practice in a new project, there's massive scope there and I'll probably be in touch with everyone after this meeting. But I guess just to thank you because it's been so helpful to think through the possibilities. And again, that's a collection artwork that didn't necessarily come in as a piece of net art, but it's become that over the course of the past couple of years. So excited to follow up with people.

Pip Laurenson   Yeah, no, definitely. I think the, the artworks that have a kind of net component that isn't perhaps fully appreciated when it's acquired is quite an interesting small group of works in the collection. Valentina, you've got your hand up. Thank you, Helen.

Valentina Ravaglia   Thank you, Helen. And you've reminded me about the British Library, the website for the British Library, as well as another repository of information that is a net art project from certain angles. And I don't know what the current plans are for what to do with it in the long-term. Patricia, do you know, per chance?

Patricia Falcão   Yes, it's a collection work so we have backups of the site. We have an agreement with Digital and Technology to maintain those servers and the page as it is. We just changed it when the – a little bit after the exhibition ended because the artist has this requirement that you swap to a sort of – you're not allowed – you don't make – you don't have the option to do – to input your stories. But it's part of the collection so that's really easy. If it's shown again, we'll need to change the way the page is displayed again to allow the histories to be added. But that's easy. We are also working with Digital on that.

So they work with an external company that have taken the maintenance of the site over while we keep sort of a frozen version as well, so we can update it from that if we need to.

Pip Laurenson   And that collaboration, I think is extraordinary, isn't it, between Digital and Conservation and Curatorial. Sorry, Valentina, I interrupted you.

Valentina Ravaglia   So just follow-up question that if a researcher wants to access that content right now, would they be able to?

Patricia Falcão   For the database? Yes, they should. I mean they would need to request permission. Um, not sure actually that's a good question. I don't know who would – Because we have access to that, but I think someone in Curatorial would also have access to the back-end because there was someone in your team that was doing the checking. So maybe too much detail at this point but it's there.

Pip Laurenson   Maybe you could request a viewing in the same way as you do other works in the store and come and sit at Patricia's terminal. Sounds like one possibility. I mean another work that was really interesting was Sandra Gamarra's *LiMac Shop*, which for years we talked about that coming in, not just as the sculptural element, which was the shop, but also the website which kind of parodied the, you know, this imagined museum of contemporary art for Lima. And I kind of like the fact that actually it never got institutionalised and it remains as this sort of artist-controlled element of the project and it kind of has this sort of dual identity. And I think, I think again just kind of looking at things like that which might feel like a failure, but actually are quite telling in terms of how we might live as part of a broader ecosystem in the museum being part of these networks – but only part – that keep these works going and alive. Do we have any other comments?

Sarah Cook   I mean I might just jump in and just – even the works that are in the collection that have web-based elements that are now understood as ways to preserve the web-based elements as part of the works is super interesting. But they owe a debt to the net artworks. Now these are web-based elements of physical installations that have come into the collection through other justifications, and they owe a debt to net artworks that existed often without any physical installation version and have different materiality questions. And it's, it's a wonderful, not side effect, but it's like a happy accident, in a funny kind of a way, that the ability to preserve web-based elements of

larger complex installations is possible now, in a way. And that allows us to then look back and go, OK, what about the net art as well? And I just, I guess I want to think about how we reverse those conversations.

Pip Laurenson Thank you. Yeah, the value of those earlier histories. Patricia,

Patricia Falcão I must say, I feel that it's almost the other way around because *LiMac Shop* was the first work that came in and I think the website came sort of under the radar and there wasn't an obvious conscious decision, OK, we are going to collect net art, right? But that meant we had to develop those processes and it was the first time we'd looked into that. And I mean, Pip started it and then I picked it up a couple of years later, I think. And, but it did help, it just sort of the first time we thought, OK, what's a website and what does this mean and what can we do? So I feel that there's some value to this underhanded – well, no sorry, underhanded is negative. I mean, sort of surreptitious way of bringing net art into the museum.

Sarah Cook It's always been surreptitious. It's a ghost. It's always... through a crack in the door.

Patricia Falcão I love that we've talked so much about ghosts on Halloween. And I'm conscious that people have probably got to hop off and be in meetings in 5 minutes. And I just want to really thank everybody for coming, thank Sarah for her wonderful paper, and Martha for organising this event. I think Jess was involved in organising it as well, and all the folk at Tate Research and it's so great to see you here and let's hope the conversation continues and I'm sure the work will continue. So thank you so much everybody.

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[1] Sarah Haylett, 'Contextualising the Intermedia Art Microsite 2008–12', in *Reshaping the Collectible: When Artworks Live in the Museum*, Tate Research Publication, 2021, https://www.tate.org.uk/research/reshaping-the-collectible/net-art-contextualising-intermedia-art-microsite, accessed 30 January 2024.