

Archivists meet Artists: InterPARES Insights into Authenticity

A proposal for Art, Conservation, and Authenticities | Material, Concept, Context

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This paper presents results of the InterPARES (International Research on Permanent Authentic Records in Electronic Systems) project, an interdisciplinary collaboration among archival theorists, artists, scientists, and government agencies. The goal of this research (documented at www.interpares.org) was to develop the theoretical and methodological knowledge essential to the long-term preservation of digital information, including artistic documents. By reviewing the literature of many of the creative and performing arts, and by conducting surveys and intensive case studies, researchers sought to develop an understanding of what authenticity—a crucial but semantically constrained concept in archival science—connotes to the creators of digital art, in order to develop guidelines for preserving it. Such guidelines seem essential, for, according to InterPARES surveys, the works of nearly half of composers and one-quarter of digital photographers have been lost or threatened by technological obsolescence or inadequate preservation strategies.

First, to place the research into perspective, archivists' conceptions of authenticity are reviewed. These were developed for "records", which are documents made or received as an instrument or a by-product of a practical activity, and set aside for action or reference. Verifying the authenticity of a record entails establishing its identity and integrity, including information about the legal and administrative context in which it was created. Archivists distinguish diplomatic authenticity, which obtains when a document exhibits all the formal features designed to ensure its authenticity, from authentication, which involves a one-time declaration by an authority, even when such features are lacking.

To some extent these concepts match art theorists' ideas about the authenticity and authentication of "singular" artworks, that is, objects that exist at only one place at a time: identity and integrity can be established by a reliable record of provenance that links the object to the actions of its creator, and of its context, which recent art theory affirms to be essential to appreciation. But they are difficult to apply to instruments of activities, such as online transactions, that lack the fixity that one expects of records; these are constituted on the fly as ephemeral displays, often dynamically (from changeable external data sources) and interactively (varying with user input). Interestingly, these sorts of displays bear strong resemblance to "multiple" artworks, that can exist at more than one place at a time, like music, some "minimal" sculpture, and installation art. This paper will thus consider how theories of authenticity of multiple artworks, in particular the musical notion of "performance authenticity", help clarify what authenticity means for dynamic and interactive documents more generally, and help inform InterPARES guidelines for creating preservable, record-like digital objects.

This is not to say that all artists succeed—or are even interested—in creating preservable works. Indeed, this paper will also review some of the problems artists have encountered, as exemplified in works that were the focus of InterPARES case studies. The cases range across various categories of art, including instances of interactive gallery installation (Péter Forgács's *Danube Exodus*), a performance artist (Stelarc), animation (produced by the National Film Board of Canada), theater (Québec's Arbo Cyber, théâtre (?)), multimedia (a work involving live dance, music, and custom-engineered infrared video), and music (a composition for bassoon interacting in real time with computer-controlled electronics). The discussion of these case studies will consider how they demonstrate artists' and archivists' conceptions of authenticity. I will also describe what we learned from our attempt to migrate one of the works, which had fallen victim to technological obsolescence.