

The Ephemerality of Digital Monuments: Swedish Public Art at the Turn of the Millennium, the case of *Tidsdokumentet*

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Introduction

On the 20th of December 1999, the Swedish national memorial, celebrating the turn of the millennium, was inaugurated. The monument was erected on behalf of the Millennium Committee, set up by the Swedish government. The commission to realize the monument was given to Chalmers University of Technology in Gothenburg, and along with a request to create something “permanent with an everlasting value.”¹ The committee’s attention was particularly drawn to the outstanding research conducted within the university in the area of digital technology, and during one year, artists, scientists, architects and engineers collaborated while constructing the monument. The vice-chancellor at Chalmers University of Technology implied that the working process represented an ideal example of how to conduct research in the future, whereas he particularly emphasized the importance of interdisciplinary art–science collaborations, conducted in close cooperation with local authorities and the industry.²

¹ Peter Ullmark, “Tidsdokumentet,” in *2000: Kring det svenska millenniemnesmärket*, ed. Johan Linton (Göteborg: Chalmers, 2000), 10.

² Jan-Eric Sundgren, “Chalmers i det nya millenniet,” *Chalmers årsredovisning 1999*, 2–5. The Millennium Committee emphasises the importance of interdisciplinary research in general, and between art, science and technology in particular. SOU 2000:49. *Samtal inför ett nytt årtusende: Slutbetänkande från Millenniekommittén*.

The commission was characterized by a ubiquitous belief to create a new public place, “for ever” associated with the commemoration of the turn of the millennium.³ The final result of this prestigious project became *Tidsdokumentet*, an interactive monument downtown Gothenburg. However, despite the intention to last forever, the use of cutting edge digital technology, investments by the municipality of Gothenburg and Chalmers University of Technology, more than 5 SEK million in external funding, as well as an inauguration ceremony hosted by His Majesty King Carl XVI, the memorial did not become enduring. Due to unclear organizational responsibilities concerning the maintenance of the technology, the monument was eventually shut down. In 2005, *Tidsdokumentet* was re-inaugurated and, once again, shut down shortly afterwards, and in 2011 the final decision was reached to dismantle the memorial.⁴ Thus, within a few years the monument that was supposed to epitomize visions of technological progress actually had turned into a ruin of technology.

Digital monuments

Tidsdokumentet represents a new kind of public art that emerged during the mid 1990’s and in this paper I introduce the concept *digital monuments* to characterize it. By digital monuments I mean, to put it briefly, monuments that consist of digital technology, are located in public places and are intended to be enduring.

Digital monuments emerged during the rise of the so-called information society and during this era the political climate in Sweden was permeated by the visions of turning the country into a leading IT-nation. In Sweden, 1994 has been pointed out as the year when a discursive shift took place that resulted in the information society.⁵ During the years to come

³ Jan-Eric Sundgren, “Millenniemarket,” in *2000: Kring det svenska millenniemärket*, ed. Johan Linton (Göteborg: Chalmers, 2000), 9.

⁴ “Återinvigning av Tidsdokumentet,” press release, Chalmers University of Technology, 8 December 2005, retrieved from <https://www.chalmers.se/sv/nyheter/Sidor/aterinvigning-av-tidsdokumentet.aspx>, accessed February 12, 2018.

⁵ Per Lundin, “Computers and Welfare: The Swedish Debate on the Politics of Computerization in the 1970s and

these visions have also come to include a political focus on innovation and digitalisation and thus the ventures on digital monuments are well aligned with these visions. Digital monuments are huge, lavish ventures engaging the industry, the state as well as local authorities. And my preliminary results show that digital monuments are often erected in places relating to “entrepreneurship”, “innovation”, “creativity” or “technological and scientific excellence”.⁶ They consist of materials that tend to rapidly exceed their “best before” date, such as fibre optics, sensors and software systems, and moreover they are created by sound and light and they tend, by and large, to be interactive. However, despite the intention to become enduring, digital monuments are surprisingly transitory and thus could be characterised as ephemeral. Nevertheless, the venture on digital monuments seems to continue.⁷ This makes them particularly apt to study.

Art historians as well as media scholars have paid attention to the ephemerality of digital art as a crucial issue concerning preservation indeed.⁸ Two factors are particular salient, more precisely technological and organizational. Whereas the first one has to do with the rapid technological development, that risk to make the technology by which digital art is

the 1980s”, in *History of Nordic Computing 4, 4th IFIP WG 9.7 Conference, HiNC 4, Copenhagen, Denmark, August 13-15, 2014, Revised Selected Papers*, Christian Gram, Per Rasmussen, Søren Duus Østergaard, eds, (Heidelberg: Springer Verlag, 2015), 9.

⁶ Anna Orrghen, “Digitala monument – offentlig konst i framtiden?” unpublished paper presented at the course on master level “Public Art – Cultural Heritage of Tomorrow,” Department of Art History, Uppsala University, March 16, 2016 and March 15, 2017. Anna Orrghen, “Digitala bevarandemetoder,” unpublished paper presented at the division of Cultural Heritage, Department of Art History, Uppsala University, Campus Visby, February 6, 2017.

⁷ Other examples of digital monuments in Sweden are *Miljömonumentet* (1994), *For Karlstad* (2004), *Spår av pågående minnen* (2006) and *The Mirror* (2015). All in all, these examples cover the time period from the introduction of the information society until the present days, and they represent different examples of ephemerality of digital monuments. *Miljömonumentet* is one of the first examples of digital monuments in Sweden and was moved from its original setting to make room for a new monument. Petra Adolfsson, “The Obelisks of Stockholm,” in *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, ed. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (Cambridge, Mass.: ZKM/The MIT Press, 2005), 396–397. *For Karlstad* was partly dismantled. Joa Ljungberg, “Jenny Holzer: For Karlstad,” *Statens Konstråd* catalogue 35 (2006), 96–105 and Anna Svensson, *Uptäck konsten i Karlstad: Guide till konsten på gator och torg* (Karlstad: Kultur- och fritidsnämnden, 2011), 24–25. *Spår av pågående minnen*, on the other hand, never became realised, Mikael Lundberg, interview by Anna Orrghen September 16, 2011, whereas the most recent example, *The Mirror*, is still intact.

⁸ C.f. Bernhard Serexhe, ed., *Preservation of Digital Art: Theory and Practice: The Project Digital Art Conservation* (Wien: Ambra V, 2013); Fiona Cameron and Sarah Kenderdine, Eds, *Theorizing Digital Cultural Heritage: A Critical Discourse* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, [2007] 2010).

created and used obsolete, the latter one concerns the lack of institutional support.⁹ Hence, they argue, unless questions concerning preservation are prioritised not only digital art but the entire digital culture, risks to vanish.¹⁰ Digital monuments are thus an illustrative example of the fundamental issues concerning preservation of digital art in general and digital art in public places in particular.¹¹

Digital monuments seem to be permeated by visions of technological and scientific progress and thus point towards the future. On the other hand, technology is constantly changing at a very high rate – especially digital technology – meaning that the technology becomes out-of-date with an accelerated speed. In this paper, I argue that digital monuments encompass this paradox. Thus, although digital monuments are intended to be part of the future, they literally turn into a part of the passed. By examining the rhetoric of *Tidsdokumentet*, its sociocultural, economic and material conditions as well as its role – before as well as after the inauguration – this paper aims at raising questions concerning preservation of digital art in public spaces.

Tidsdokumentet

On the 6th of April 1998 the Swedish government made a public decision to set up a committee to organize activities in regard to the approaching turn of the millennium.¹² The Millennium Committee consisted of fifteen prominent persons from diverse areas in the Swedish society, e.g., the archbishop, an established professor in history of science and ideas,

⁹ Oliver Grau, “The Complex and Multifarious Expressions of Digital Art and its Impact on Archives and Humanities,” in *A Companion to Digital Art*, ed. Christiane Paul (Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), 23-45; Perla Innocenti, “Keeping the Bits Alive: Authenticity and Longevity for Digital Art,” in *Preservation of Digital Art: Theory and Practice: The Project Digital Art Conservation*, ed. Bernhard Serexhe (Wien: Ambra V, 2013), 217-230.

¹⁰ Richard Rinehart and Jon Ippolito, *Re-collection: Art, New Media, and Social Memory* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2014).

¹¹ On digital art in public places facing similar difficulties, see, Steve Dietz, “Interactive publics,” *Public Art Review* 15:1 (2003), 23-29.

¹² Johan Linton, “Med och mot tiden,” in *2000: Kring det svenska millennieminnesmärket*, ed. Johan Linton, (Göteborg: Chalmers, 2000), 12.

an internationally renowned writer, a person in charge of global strategies at Mc Donald's, and a filmmaker. The Minister of Social Affairs, Lars Engqvist, was appointed chairman of the committee. Although the committee initially had made a clear stance towards not creating a monument as part of their activities, this, however, changed in the autumn of 1998 as Engqvist was invited to the Swedish Royal Court. During Engqvist's account of the undertakings of the committee, His Majesty King Carl XVI made a proposition of a national memorial, celebrating the turn of the millennium. In January 1999 the commission to realise the monument was given to Chalmers University of Technology in Gothenburg. By the 18 February 1999, the committee had secured substantial funding as well as established contact with the municipality of Gothenburg. And by 29 March 1999 a thorough, albeit not exhaustive, project plan was accepted.¹³

The monument was planned to be erected downtown Gothenburg. Except from the memorial, the project did also entail thorough construction work of the place itself including the design of the environment as well as the construction of engine rooms underground. Hence, a number of municipal committees and departments as well as other instances were soon to be approached, e.g. The Urban Planning Department, the Traffic Committee, the Water and Sewage Treatment Plan, the Energy Office, the Phone Company, Gothenburg City Museum, the county administrative board and the Police. At a meeting at the Urban Planning Department by the 1 July 1999 it was decided to carry through the project and construction work started in September 1999.¹⁴ On 20 December 1999, the memorial was inaugurated in the presence of His Majesty King Carl XVI. During 2000 further adjustments were made and in January 2001 the project was finalised.¹⁵

Tidsdokumentet was carried out at the newly started interdisciplinary strategic research program Innovative Design at Chalmers University of Technology where architects,

¹³ Ibid., 12f.

¹⁴ Ibid., 13f.

¹⁵ Ibid., 14.

artists, technicians, engineers, senior researchers as well as PhD students collaborated while creating the monument.¹⁶ The architect and professor in workspace design Peter Ullmark was appointed project manager, theoretical physician Mats Nordahl chief technical and Hans Bjur, dean of the school of Architecture, was chief project leader. Furthermore, a project group, consisting of approximately forty persons was affiliated with the project.¹⁷

The artistic work was lead by the artist Graham Stacy in close cooperation with the architect Stefan Alenius. Together, they carried out an extensive work that also involved several experts.¹⁸ Palle Dahlstedt and Mikael Lundberg were among the contributing artists, and the result became three interactive objects containing light, sound and moving images: *The Cone*, *The Cube* and *The Mast*.¹⁹ The project was financed by investments by the municipality of Gothenburg and Chalmers University of Technology and received more than 5 SEK million in external funding.²⁰

By the time the project was finalised in 2001 there was no clear agreement between Chalmers University of Technology and the municipality of Gothenburg on how to maintain the memorial.²¹ Thus, due to unclear organizational responsibilities concerning the maintenance of the technology,²² the monument was shut down after some time. In 2005, *Tidsdokumentet* was re-inaugurated and, once again, shut down shortly afterwards, and in 2011 the final decision was reached to dismantle the memorial.

Conclusion: The Ephemerality of Digital Monuments

¹⁶ Ullmark, "Tidsdokumentet," 10f.

¹⁷ Johan Linton, ed., *2000: Kring det svenska millennieminnesmärket*, (Göteborg: Chalmers, 2000), 110.

¹⁸ For a thorough account of the creation of *Tidsdokumentet*, see Graham Stacy, "Platsens form – Tidens väv," in *2000: Kring det svenska millennieminnesmärket*, ed. Johan Linton, (Göteborg: Chalmers, 2000), 16-55.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Linton, "Med och mot tiden," 15.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 14.

²² See for instance, Elisabeth Klingberg, "Oklart vem som ska sköta Tidsdokumentet vid Storan," *Vårt Göteborg* November 12, 2004.

This paper has introduced digital monuments as a concept for a new kind of public art that emerged during the mid 1990's. *Tidsdokumentet* has served as an example to characterise digital monuments in general, and to emphasize their ephemerality in particular. By way of introducing *Tidsdokumentet*, the aim of this paper has been to shed light upon questions concerning preservation of digital art in public places. The account of the creation of *Tidsdokumentet* reveals a lavish venture, carried out during a short time frame by a considerable amount of actors from different areas in the Swedish society. It was made by digital technology, located in a public place and was intended to be enduring. Furthermore, it also bears witness to great personal commitment as well as disappointment.²³ *Tidsdokumentet* was erected during the “dotcom bubble”, and akin to the art historian Oliver Grau’s understanding of digital art as crucial expressions of the society,²⁴ the monument could be said to symbolize the political visions related to information technology imbued in the Swedish society at the turn of the millennium. However, as political scientists have paid attention to, these visions were not necessarily part of the reality.²⁵ Hence, *Tidsdokumentet* further excavates a clash between political visions of information technology and the reality.

Thus, although digital monuments are intended to represent one thing, they actually turn out to be a monument of something else. An illustrative example is found in the official decision to deconstruct *Tidsdokumentet*. Roughly ten years after the inauguration ceremony, the municipality of Gothenburg described the monument as “a particularly good idea when it was created, but that unfortunately has become a part of the passed”.²⁶

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²³ See for instance, Mikael Lundberg, interview by Anna Orrghen September 16, 2011; Palle Dahlstedt, interview by Anna Orrghen October 13, 2011; Peter Ullmark, interview by Anna Orrghen October 11, 2011.

²⁴ Grau, “The Complex and Multifarious Expressions of Digital Art and its Impact on Archives and Humanities,” 24.

²⁵ Patrik Hall and Karl Löfgren, “The Rise and Decline of a Visionary Policy: Swedish ICT-policy in Retrospect,” *Information Polity* 9 (2004), 149-165.

²⁶ Göteborgs Stad, Stadskansliet, “Tjänsteutlåtande: Enheten för stadsutveckling och samhällsanalys”, March 29, 2011, dnr 0944/10.

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