

# An indeterminate archive for David Rokeby's "The Giver of Names"

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"I'm an interactive artist: I construct experiences"

David Rokeby, The Construction of Experience: Interface as Content, 1998, p27

In the quote above David Rokeby acknowledges that, as an artist working with computers, his role is not to create objects but rather to create experiences. Rokeby's works, like other new media artworks have a liminal existence on the threshold between material and immaterial things; they are things in potential. New media artworks cannot be considered or treated simply as objects. Their full existence occurs when they are used. Such experiential works present a paradoxical challenge to art historical research. Without a central unchanging object upon which to focus historical investigation, documentation about the work becomes increasingly crucial, but also increasingly contested.

This paper reports on a documentation case-study of David Rokeby's Giver of Names (1991-2004), undertaken in Montreal in 2007 (<http://www.fondation-langlois.org/html/e/page.php?NumPage=2130>). Through the process of creating this case-study, what we have come to call an 'indeterminate archive,' we have developed an approach to documentation which draws together both the artist's intentions for the work and the audience's experience. The approach creates a dialogue between the ideal, conceptual existence of the work, and its actual manifestation through different iterations and exhibitions in the real world.

## The state of the art of media art documentation

Art historians, conservators and curators all look to documentation to support their research and their ability to preserve artworks, maintain collections, and mount exhibitions. Media artworks rarely exist as static, discrete and unique objects, but rather as collections of components, hardware and software which together create time and process based experiences. Such works may change radically depending on the contextual conditions of their staging. Even the material components of such works are subject to rapid change due to technological obsolescence. Thorough documentation is consistently noted by artists, conservators and curators as essential to provide a continuing source of knowledge as to how a particular work manifests over time.

In the absence of a clear, discrete and material art-object, more traditional models of documentation and conservation have adapted in order to offer more flexible paradigms that focus on the processes of creation and exhibition, rather than on static objects. Currently there is a range of preservation and documentation initiatives in practice around the world that vary in their perspectives and approaches to the issues. As part of the case study this field of media art documentation and preservation was studied so as to draw upon existing expertise in the field (Jones, 2007). Missing from many of these models however was a means through which to document user experience. In most instances artists intentions continues to provide the touchstone for how a work will be preserved, restaged and described in the future. And while conservation practice may privilege the artist, the broader context of art history demands an account of the user's experience. While some articulated this as a significant gap in the record, there had not been many systematic proposals to change it.

## The strategy of indeterminacy

In our case-study we combined two different approaches. The first, based on the Variable Media paradigm focused on the artist's intentions as a means to record information about the essence (or "kernel") of an artwork, independent of the media in which it manifests (Depocas, Ippolito and Jones, 2004). The second, focused on the experiential aspects of the work, based on how the artwork "occurs" for audience members in the real world. A productive tension forming between these two approaches, and between the "real" and "ideal" versions of the artwork. Both approaches challenge the authority of the other in a useful way, and each offers the other complimentary information - creating a richer, deeper and more complex overall

picture (Jones and Muller, 2007). The gap between artists' intentions and audience experience is not a new realisation in terms of art theory. The poststructuralist critical revolution of the last century has established the authorial position as only one privileged but not definitive perspective on the interpretation of an artwork.

The term 'indeterminate archive' thus reflects the multiplicity of perspectives we have endeavored to include, and also the indeterminacy of the term 'archive' itself. "Archive" as both a noun and a verb, has taken on an array of meanings. From the traditional conception of the archive as both a collection of records and the location in which they are kept, to a less definable and more insidious locale of political and cultural hegemony. The archive is often viewed as the neutral building blocks of history, but through the work of many philosophers, Heidegger, Foucault and Derrida among them, this neutrality is shattered. This term, and the power to construct and sustain cultural memory, has become highly contested. As related specifically to our research question, the idea of privileging neither artistic intent, nor user experience as the primary authority on a work allows for a more dynamic perspective.

### **Our methods**

The basis of our archive is the artist interview, for which we developed a combined interview method that drew together the two research perspectives described above. The medium-independent questions of the Variable Media Questionnaire framed the conceptual and technical aspects of the work. These were placed within an experiential context using tools from human-centered interaction, including "Personas and Scenarios", a technique that involves telling the "story" of an artwork from the perspective of an imaginary audience (Bodker, 2000). Our hybrid method allowed us to generate an interview that has clear links to both the audience interviews and the conceptual and technical information (such as hardware, installation diagrams, etc) that we have gathered. As such the artist's interview can act as a lynchpin for the collection without claiming to provide a definitive account of the work.

User experience is documented using techniques adapted from human-centered design and oral history we interviewed a total of 28 people, including general visitors, invited participants and museum guards. Each of the interviews presents a unique experience of the work, and together they represent a cross section of ages, occupations and self-identified levels of experience with art. The interviews were based on two methods: semi-structured interview and video-cued recall (in which the participant simultaneously describes their experience of an artwork, whilst watching a video of their encounter). Both methods aim to record rich descriptions of the way in which each experience unfolds through time, as well as capturing information about the participants' motivation, thoughts and opinions about the work.

### **David Rokeby and the Giver of Names**

Canadian artist David Rokeby began working with interactive computer-technologies in 1982, and has produced numerous award winning interactive audio-visual installations His work explores the differences and similarities between humans and computers, in particular examining issues of perception, artificial intelligence and surveillance. Rokeby places human experience, and particularly the transformation of human experience through technology, at the heart of his own aesthetic approach to interaction.

This combination of elements makes Rokeby a particularly interesting focus for our approach to documentation. On the one hand Rokeby is a highly articulate artist who is deeply reflective about his process and intent. He has written and published widely about his artworks, and his own "authorised version" of their nature and meaning is widely known – perhaps even more widely known in some cases than the works themselves. On the other hand he is an artist who values, above all else, the audience's actual experience of his works. This provides a rich context in which to investigate the relationship between "real" and "ideal" in a documentary setting. How do Rokeby's experiential intentions relate to the audience's experiential realities?

The Giver of Names is a computer system programmed to see, analyse and describe objects offered to it by participants. In its "ideal" use scenario a participant chooses objects from a pile on the floor and places them on a plinth to be analysed and described by the computer. The computer speaks the description aloud, and it appears as text on a screen showing an image of the object, suspended directly above the plinth. The

computer's descriptions, pulled from its language database, respond to parameters such as colour, form and position, producing phrases that may seem poetic, whimsical or foolish to the human observer, but importantly should not seem completely random.

The work has a long, illustrious exhibition history and has evolved over many versions. Significantly, however, Rokeby suggests in our interview with him that the work has reached its 'sweet spot,' where few changes are envisaged in the future. This creates an excellent opportunity to create a documentary collection that considers the nature of this final iteration of the work.

### **Working with the Indeterminate Archive – Modes of engagement in the Giver of Names**

In the interview with Rokeby within documentary collection he describes his intention to create, in The Giver of Names, an artwork that would exist uniquely for each individual that used it:

The real intention of this piece...was to create an interface that had as wide a reach as I could possibly imagine... where there was so little pre-constrained that the experience for each person would be absolutely unique and very fundamentally determined by their contribution.

The value of the indeterminate archive is in its ability to hold within it these different versions, views and realities, which, taken together offer a lively and dynamic picture of the work.

In the following example we have particularly focused on the different ways in which the audience members engage with the work. This focus reveals some particular agreements and tensions between real and ideal in the Giver of Names—future users of the archive, we hope, will discover many more. All the quotes by Rokeby, below, are taken from the interview that appears in the archive, as are the audience's quotes, which are identified in the text by the actual first names of the participants.

In the final section of our interview with him Rokeby explains that the most essential aspect of the installation, in his view, is the participant's realisation that the descriptions of objects given by the system are not random. Rokeby explains how the work is carefully orchestrated to create a kind of "stereoscopy" through which the audience is "led to compare the way they see the object and the way the computer sees the object." To achieve this Rokeby has specifically constructed the plinth, screen and projector to create a mirror like relationship between the real object and the image of the object that is presented on the screen.

In Rokeby's view, this realisation need not be immediate. His aim in creating Giver of Names was to "stretch out the feedback loop to allow the participant more time for reflection". He designed the work specifically to lead people to question how it works:

In this piece you are invited to think as much as you want about how it's happening. And I try in both screens to give as many useful hints as I can about what's going on. You invited to think about what's going on conceptually and technically.

For Rokeby the ideal experience of the work is a "systematic scientific approach", which slowly reveals the nature and operation of the system. He contrasts this with a kind of behaviour which he describes as "object play", in which the participant becomes involved with the objects themselves, rather than with the system as a whole, where participants:

...seem to be drawn to put as many objects on [the plinth] as possible, and just accumulate and accumulate. They are not really seeing through the system I think if they do that. It's a very common response, but they are getting involved in object play...Whereas the person who is engaged on the sort of scientific method process is more looking and seeing through the system, which is more the operative mode of the piece

The audience experiences recorded in the archive reveal examples of both approaches, but also show how complex and entwined these different behaviours are. At one extreme a participant called Alan describes a highly systematic and thorough approach to the work. After a long time interacting carefully with it he concluded that:

It's an interesting systematic text generator operating at a completely different register than any human signifying activity. It produces something tangibly outside the field of my experience but yet that is nonetheless inextricable from it.

Others deduced how the system worked not by interacting with it themselves, but by watching others. For example John and Diana, who are both older audience members, observe others interacting with the work for a long while and grasp its operation in great detail, "it excited my curiosity" Diana explains "and I wanted to see a little more of how it worked, the connection between the objects and images". However neither of them felt a need to interact with it themselves. As John points out: "I didn't see any real point in doing it for myself... I don't need to play with it – I've seen how it works." Diana explains their reluctance to interact further by talking about their age and attitude towards museums and other people:

[T]here were other people there, and I'm disinclined to barge in and push other people out of the way... I'm 61 and Jim is 60 we've been raised in a culture where you didn't touch things in museum and I think that's very strong with me.

John and Diana's ability to understand the work and get any experience from it at all relied on others who were more willing to interact with the objects.

Some of those others were involved in what Rokeye describes as "object play", but the depth and emotion of their experiences suggest that there might be more to this kind of approach to the work than Rokeye has envisaged. The intensity of playing with the toys prompts memories and playful behaviour that often provokes an emotional reaction that the more scientific or systematic approach does not.

Mary-Beth for example never worked out how the piece functions, but had an intense reaction to the toys themselves. As she continues to select and display objects on the plinth, she clearly becomes engaged in another, and perhaps equally compelling, series of reflections about the different "meanings" of the objects:

I was walking my friend's dog this morning and he likes to take these little animals and shake them as if he had gotten a squirrel in his mouth... [my selection of this toy] was completely motivated by that. I also have a son who's seventeen years old and he still has all of these kind of kids toys, and I was picking through things in the pile I was thinking to myself "I wonder when Duncan is going to get his act together to have a garage sale or something so that we can get rid of some of this stuff that's in our attic

Eric also engages in intense "object play", even though he has a fairly good understanding of the way the system works, because he is trying to communicate something through the objects to other people in the space:

I wanted to come up with interesting combinations of objects. I invested time in trying to find certain combinations that I thought would be interesting that I thought could give meaning or sense, or a tongue in cheek reference that other people might read. I'm doing what I think is cool, what could be interesting to look at for a few minutes.

Eric's experience, as well as Diana and John's show how important the social relations in the space are to the experience of the participant. By setting up a form of experimental communication and engagement with (in his words) a "quasi-subjective entity", Rokeye has also created a space for observation and experimentation between human beings.

Like Eric, Vincent, spends a great deal of time arranging objects. His aim is to try and challenge the computer, but also he clearly enjoys the arrangement of the objects themselves, which he spends a great deal of time perfecting:

I was trying to pick objects that were similar – to create a collection – so to see if the device would react by finding similar elements in the objects so all the objects were blue – that was the common denominator, I wasn't believing that it would really find that common denominator. But it did - And 'turquoise' did come twice.

For Rokeye attempting to communicate with the system, as Vincent does, through the arrangement of the objects represents an ideal mode of interaction in which the participant has understood the operation of the work and is going beyond experimentation to use the piece as a tool. This kind of behaviour Rokeye

suggests:

[Maps] on to what my experience was in developing the piece. Finding out the limits of what the system can do and reflecting back on “gee I wonder what my limits are what I don’t see because I have these human eyes.

By enticing the participant into a dialogue with an artificial agent, Rokeby intends to provoke reflection on the profound achievement of the everyday human task of making sense of the world.

In other experiences that were recorded the younger participants swiftly understood how the system works and went one step further, by putting their own heads or hands onto the plinth. Whilst the set-up of the installation clearly offers this possibility it is not something that Rokeby talks of in his interview. This creative misuse of the work is an interesting extension of Rokeby’s ‘ideal’, for the participants who try to reproduce their own image in the work are not only asking what does the computer make of these objects but also asking “what does the computer make of me?”

## Conclusion

While the artist’s own perspective still holds a central position in the indeterminate archive, it becomes one voice of many, part of the dialogue between real and ideal. Each audience interview can only ever be a partial view, but the documentation of these multiple perspectives opens the record of The Giver of Names to a wide field of possibilities.

Rather than creating an authoritative collection of documentation, which establishes a fixed identity for the work, our approach seeks to capture its mutability. By allowing future researchers to understand more deeply the occurrence of the work in a particular place and time we believe that the ‘indeterminate’ approach offers them a field of possibilities relating to the work, enabling them to act confidently, in their own time and place, in respect to their own conservation work, research, restaging or exhibition projects.

## Endnotes

1. C. Jones, Surveying the State of the Art (of Documentation), (Montreal: Daniel Langlois Foundation, 2008). <http://www.fondation-langlois.org/html/e/page.php?NumPage=2125>
2. A. Depocas, J. Ippolito and C. Jones, eds Permanence Through Change: the Variable Media Approach (Montreal: Daniel Langlois Foundation, New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 2003)
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4. S. Bodker, “Scenarios in User-Centered Design - Setting the Stage for Reflection and Action,” *Interacting With Computers* 13 (2000) pp. 61-75