Peternák Miklós - 404 Object Not Found (2003)
Introduction: The medium of preservation

The medium of preservationThe appearance of technical media in the arts and in cultural communications brought with it a new phenomenon. As new media were continuously being introduced the audience had to confront both the unfamiliar features of these media as well as the new content that a given work brought into being in these media. By the 1960's the series of novelties induced such popular-but at the same time extreme - interpretations as the medium itself is the message.Obviously the new possibilities created by the new tools, as well as the functioning of these never-before-seen techniques, are part of the overall effect, yet it is this that will disappear the most quickly due to the medium of habitor the sensation aroused by that which is even newer. When technology involved in the creation of a new work of art goes beyond the technology employed in the creation of an older work, the older work will be seen in a distorting mirror, i.e. in a familiar context created by other older, even antique works. This viewpoint, a mix of empathy and sympathy, will compensate for the quality of novelty that the work once possessed, but has since lost, because it has become dated. The artistic - additional - quality is therefore in the first place what we must store. In other words, we must know what is new artistically, something which can be seen beyond the two aforementioned viewpoints. But the nature of works of art also changes with time, not just their meanings and their interpretations. Let's take for example not the dagerrotype or the super eight film, but the fate of Greek sculpture: when archeologists excavated these sculptures as aesthetic-historical objects the sculptors of that time admired and copied them. Yet the original glaze and color of these works had been worn down and onlythe 'clean' form remained. This became the model for young sculptors and a standard of aesthetic taste: colorful sculpture is still regarded as kitsch and as something that does not belong to the world of high art. The history of changes in media can be instructive for the first aspect, while changes in the techniques of preservation related to these can be relevant for the second aspect. Recalling the time when verbalism dominated, communication was based on individualism and memory. What we heard or thought could only be preserved through memory. Later, when writing took over the task of preserving ideas from the memory of the individual, many regarded this as an unfortunate development that would lead to a loss of aptitude (Plato discusses this, for example). The earliest manner of communicating and preserving writing was through copying, but this undoubtedly led to debased and varied texts. In other words the 'preservation' of a message resulted in damage to the original meaning. Printing techniques, which replaced hand-copying, allowed for the production of texts of similar quality and content. It was also considerably faster than copying, if perhaps less personal or individual, since in each copy one finds the same typography, whereas in the manuscripts there is a variety of handwritings, each peculiar to the time the copy was transcribed. Every copy of a given book is printed from the same plates, much like the plates used to create prints which, much more precisely, carry sufficient information to allow for reconstruction. Yet these plates are not usually kept. It is the print that the artist sees and decides to show to the public, just like the photographer presents the photo rather than the negative. It is the fate of completed works of art to be taken from the hand of their creator and have their future lives dictated by individual or institutional decisions and competence. Societal acceptance, just like an individual, personal act, happens with a kind of registration (receipt, contract, inventory, thank you note, or a mixture of these). A specific profession can develop out of this, the connaisseur or the conservateur, the caste comprising those people who are aware of what these registers entail, who guard this knowledge, and who know both how to undo it and how to keep it part of the public domain.

Most works of art stand before us uncoded and easily accessible to our senses and emotions. It is a peculiarty of media art that one needs an apparatus and sometimes even a code system in order for it to be accessible. By apparatus we refer - using Flusser's concept – to the tools and the knowledge concerning their use.By code we should understand special individual systems of notation (for example a particular filter system or a chemical combination, specific software, or directions concerning presentation that are not obvious, but nevertheless essential). In this case the preconditions of presenting and preserving a work of art are firstly the apparatus and secondly the knowledge and functional presence of the code system.There are points of intersection between the different apparatuses: a reproduction is more often close to identical with the original than before the emergence of technical mediums.The disappearing elements of one apparatus can be replaced by a new apparatus. In other words, it is often a change of medium which offers the only possibility for the preservation of certain works of art.What are the new artistic possibilities for works made for internet consumption? How can net.art, the product of the latest change in communication, survive the attacks of constant upgrades?In the case of Alexei Shulgin's Form(created in the C3), which is based on the graphic operating surface of the browsers, we would obviously see an authentic visualization of the work if we were to use Netscape 3.0. At the same time, since it can be found on the internet, the work is always adjusted to the programs found on the specific computer through which it is being viewed.Form therefore takes on slightly a different appearence, depending on whether the viewer is using Explorer or Netscape 6.0. It is questionable whether in such cases the host of the work and its "content" can impose the usage of a certain browser, thus delaying accessibility in order to ensure that the original image be seen exactly as it was designed by its creator. Perhaps this is simply the format preferred for museum presentations, while on the net what is currently being seen is to be considered authentic since - as one can easily imagine – in the creation of his/her work the author no doubt used what was then the most up-to -date browser. We will not ask how a new browser might have inspired the artist, since it is obvious that this would have led to different pages and different proportions. The author did not chose the internet by accident: to understand the work's essential newness we must take this choice into account. Sitting in front of the computer, on-line users (i.e. potential viewers) are engaged in several parallel activities. In other words their attention is divided. When a user views individual works of art, for example Form, his/her attention may occasionally wander. This dissipated attention is typical of internet users, something which is also represented by the structure and environment of the work. A sterile presentation, where the work is divorced from its medium, leads to greater misinterpretations than a presentation based on an acceptance of the fact that the medium of the work constantly and automatically transforms the work itself. It creates new mutations, even as old versions disappear. To show this work on the original browser is therefore bad dogmatism, since it is of primary importance that the work be quickly and widely accessible. Yet at the same time we are aware of many examples from the past where works of art were taken from their original context and placed into a new environment. The obvious example is the museum collections consisting of objects which once adorned churches. These removals were made with the intention of preserving the work of art, creating the conditions under which (it was at least believed) the work would be both more accessible and more secure. The peculiarity of internet art – that it can be both viewed and copied from anywhere in the world and that there is a great variety of possible versions – raises the question, which version should be considered authentic, or, to think back to the age of manuscripts, which is the `autograph,` the authoritative version. There is only one clear way to resolve this question – one must ask the artist, or, rather, one must place alongside the work documentation concerning authorship.

http://www.c3.hu/c3/eu_projects/hartware/index.html