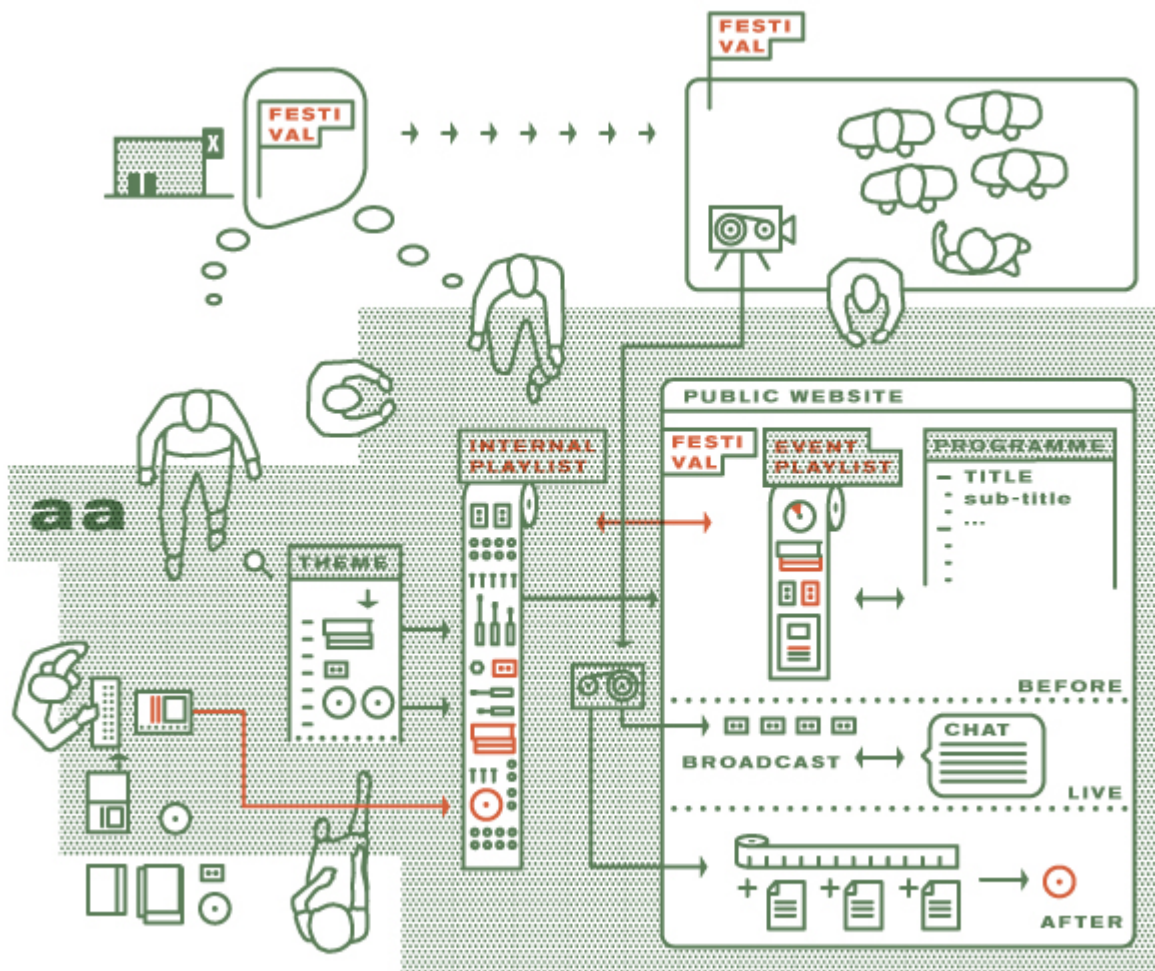


Manifesto for an Active Archive

From ActiveArchives

This Manifesto is a work in progress. The text introduces the ideas and motivations behind the Active Archive project lead by Constant in collaboration with Arteleku, and was initiated in 2006. This project aims at creating a free software platform to connect practices of library, media library, publications on paper (as magazines, books, catalogues), productions of audio-visual objects, events, workshops, discursive productions, etc. Practices which can take place on line or in various geographical places, and which can be at various stages of visibility for reasons of rights of access or for reasons of research and privacy conditions. The development will take place during 2008-2009 and regular workshops will be organised to stimulate dialog between future users, developers and cultural workers and researchers.



Creating web pages and displaying information on-line has become easier and easier for non-expert users. The Active Archives project starts from the observation that most of the interesting cultural archives that have been developed over the last few years have taken advantage of those new facilities for instant publishing, but mostly in the form of websites that mirror regular information brochures, announcements and text-publishing. Often, they are conceived as "We" give information to "You". Within Active Archives, we aim to set up multi-directional communication channels, and are interested in making information circulate back and forth. We would like to give material away and receive it transformed: enriched by different connections, contexts and contradictions.

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Decentralizing the archive

When we want to share with other cultural associations and groups/institutions, the challenge is as follows: how do "We" share information "Together", how do we channel information through each others' network, under which conditions? How do we produce digital content together? To develop common infrastructures, we will need to discuss what kind of licensing we prefer, and work on norms and a common agreement on formats. We also need to find a shared understanding of classifications or maybe first question existing ones.

Digital cultural archives today fall into two categories: fragmented archives and over-centralized archives. Fragmented archives look like isolated islands. Every institution sits on top of its treasure and tries to regulate and control the way it is used with at most offering a timid RSS feed. Centralized archives gather collections and resources from different origins but disconnect the material from its original context. Accessibility and searchability come at the cost of legitimisation.

An active archive is a decentralized archive which is not only open for reading but also for re-appropriation, comment, divergences, transformations. This manifesto is a plea for such a decentralized archive: an archive constituted from many sites and voices that keep their own contexts without fear of sharing, mirroring, connecting and using common protocols.

Owning our infrastructure

If public television channels decide to publish their archives on YouTube, libraries work in partnership with Google etc., why does the Active Archive not make use of the existing web 2.0 infrastructure? Flickr + MySpace + FaceBook with a bit of Delicious to glue it all together... who needs more? But to upload digital culture on the servers of dotcom billionaires might not be such a good idea after all.

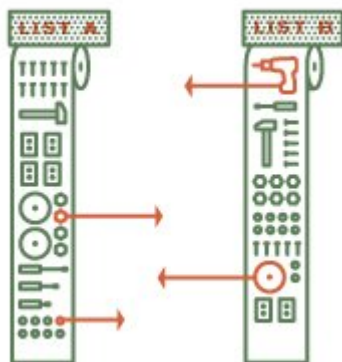
However much influence the functionalities of Web 2.0 had in popularising the digital archive, we need to be aware of their terms of use. We would like to prevent that cultural archives serve as footage for ad-placement or as honey pot for market profilers and for this reason we need to make the effort to build our own infrastructure.

An active archive should provide to its contributors a clean and clear contract where the terms of the participation are fair and legible for everyone. The goal of an active archive is to produce more interesting content in the first place. Not to make profit in monitoring the users and selling their behavioural patterns. Only when the different parties involved own their own infrastructure and accept to share it, they can ensure the conditions for access without strings attached. This means open content licenses for all material stored, so that the conditions for use are clear for everyone. An infrastructure built with free software so that everybody can co-own the source code.

Distributing more than text

An active archive needs to go beyond mere text-publishing. Artists, cultural groups and institutions regularly produce video and audio images for various communication or creative purposes. It is necessary to take into account that media content requires different material configurations: they need more disk space and more bandwidth, therefore they require clever strategies of distribution. Peer-to-peer networks have pioneered large scale experiments with the distribution of audiovisual media, and it is time to learn from them.

Integrating audiovisual media is not just adding another type of file. It requires a new approach to navigation, searching, linking, subtitling and translation so that audio and video content can connect to text-based content because otherwise those files remain black holes in the archives.



Promoting re-use

The material that is made available through the Active Archive is thought of as source material for other works. This means, systems need to be put in to place to make referencing and re-use of the material easy, but also make sure that versions of the material can filter back to the place it original came from. These systems are partially technical, and partially cultural: a series of commissions, workshops, exhibitions and publications will inspire creative use.

Between tags and ontologies

To improve the search facilities, to group elements, to link them and to create new meaning and new experiences, an archive needs a system of classification. Librarians and archivists are used to work with fixed standards but the work produced and discussed within contemporary culture tends to escape these classification schemes.

An Active Archive requires the creation and discussion of vocabularies and taxonomies that can evolve, diverge or merge. These vocabularies and taxonomies should neither be brutally top-down or completely flat. The system should stimulate the sharing of common classifications, allow for divergence and promote the convergence of knowledge trees. Active Archive needs a classification system with a difference.

Moving through new gestures

Sharing is the principal motivation to create an Active Archive. This means that we need to update our assumptions about the users of such an archive, the sources that are used and the circulation of its content. An Active Archive is not a black box with a Download button, it is information reconfigured. And it has to start now.



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- Kitchen table workshop
- Archive in motion workshop

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