Imagining the future of a complex mixed media work: The case of Lynn Hershman Leeson's *The Floating Museum*

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Over the last twenty years museums have systematically digitized the contents of their archives and, increasingly, the data and documents produced through these processes are used, alongside historic documents, to engage audiences on- and offline (see, for example, Tate's Archives and Access project, 2012–2017).[1] For art museums, this has increasingly involved the digitization of materials related to performance and new media. When this has occurred, it has been found that museums often only have partial data pertaining to these kinds of works. This has to do with questions related to how museums originally documented performance and new media, as well as with the inherent complexity of capturing information about these specific genres.[2]

Artists, too, nowadays often digitize historic documentations of their work, frequently submitting existing documentations of their artworks that do not yet form part of museum collections to universities or national libraries and archives for preservation purposes. However, simply digitizing existing data pertaining to these works is often not sufficient to generate high-quality, future-facing documentations that could communicate the complexity of a work to generations to come. This is because, as Renée van de Vall, Anna Hölling, Tatja Scholte, and Sannike Stigter suggested, "The meaning of an object and the effects it has on people and events may change during its existence," which means that we should construct the "lives" of these objects "as individual trajectories."[3] Digitization projects, however, rarely cross-reference contextual documentation collected before, during, or after a given live event, which means that the relation between different versions of a work or different works that may form part of a wider body of work are often lost.

Here, I suggest that digitization projects should not only digitize existing documents and records but also attempt to capture their context, and, during this process, generate new documentations and maybe even commission new artworks that do not merely treat past performance and new media documents as historical products, but rather as complex live assemblages tracing the evolving life of a work. By assemblage, I mean not so much the readymade or the found object, as is the common use of the term in art history, but I refer rather to an adaptation to the field of performance and new media studies of the philosophical

term used by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980).[4] The original French term *agencement* refers to the idea of an arrangement as a trope for the analysis of fluidity, exchangeability, and the multiple functionality of entities. This includes their relationality or connectivity to other entities. The notion of assemblage, and so, more specifically, that of arrangement, thus indicates the possibility that it is the assemblage rather than the entity of a work that provides its meaning and value.

Documentations, documents, records, photographs, videos, tweets, annotations, etc., are not only performance remains, to use Rebecca Schneider's term (2001),[5] they are interrelated (Jones 1997,[6] Clausen 2005[7]), and although it is obvious that none of these terms are synonymous with performance, or indeed with each other, as they may originate from different points in time, they form part of a wider rhizomatic structure to which I will refer here as an assemblage. Important studies have outlined the history and evolution of this term. Before analyzing precisely how assemblages operate and what the value of this term is in relation to the fields of performance and new media art documentation, I will describe in more detail what I mean by documentation, documents, and records in this context. Here, following Annet Dekker, I tend to refer to documentation as the paperwork that is usually produced by museums at the point of purchase or exhibition, as well as what is created by artists for a range of motivations, sometimes to do with value accrual.[8] Other researchers have used this term in a range of ways, and of course this term has a long and complex history which originates in Suzanne Briet's seminal work, *What is documentation* (1951),[9] and led in recent years to important studies in new media documentation, which are well summarized in Dekker[10] and Cailin Jones's (2008) analyses of the field.[11] For the purpose of this paper, it is worthwhile also recalling Toni Slant's definition of documentation as "the process of storing documents and preserving them in a systematic way for long-term access through an archive,"[12] which means that, for him, the process of documentation is indiscernible from what I have called elsewhere the apparatus of the archive.[13] Here, I suggest that documentations should be constructed as assemblages. To understand the value of this suggestion, further distinctions need to be made between the terms document and record. Arguably, documents, as the etymology of the term suggests, tend to teach and often entail instructions, while records are generated as the result of an action.[14] So, documents emerge as a consequence of planning or thinking about the future, while records are created as a consequence of something that happened in the past. A documentation, which often entails both documents and records, is therefore both past- and future-facing. Photographs, videos, tweets, annotations, etc., are records, but they may also be documents, form part of documentations, or indeed be part of an artwork.

The term "assemblage," as has been pointed out,[15] does not refer to a theory, though other interpreters have come to see it as such,[16] and neither does the English term reflect the fact that the original French term, *agencement*, "to arrange, to lay out, to piece together," refers less to a grouping or gathering than an arrangement or layout.[17] In fact, the term implies "a multiplicity" that must be considered "neither a part nor a whole,"[18] where what lies "in between" the elements is just as crucial as the assemblage itself.[19] Manuel DeLanda suggests that a defining characteristic of assemblages are their "emergent properties," or "properties of a whole caused by the interactions between its parts."[20] For him, the elements of these wholes maintain their autonomy so that they can "be detached from one whole and plugged into another one, entering into new interactions."[21] While the whole and the parts are on the same ontological plane,[22] each assemblage is an *individual entity*[23] which is formed of "heterogeneous components" (i.e., its materials and symbolic artifacts) and can be part of larger assemblages.[24] This characteristic of the assemblage, entailing parts which are on different spatiotemporal planes but belong to the same ontological plane, is significant when considering the relationship between documents, records, and documentation with performance and new media works.

The case study discussed here, *The Floating Museum*, illustrates the complexity of documenting mixed media works. *The Floating Museum* could be described, in its current state, as an assemblage of both documents and records, of which only some are digitized, that is now preserved alongside documentations of the rest of Lynn Hershman Leeson's opus at the Department of Special Collections at Stanford University Libraries. *The Floating Museum* (1974–1978) was a temporary museum comprising a set of commissioned artworks by over 300 artists whose visions did not fit the boundaries of traditional museum and gallery spaces. Membership fees ranged from $10 (Active) to $500 (Patron). Participants included Eleanor Antin, Bonnie Sherk, Darryl Sapien, Michael Asher, Newton and Helen Harrison, Terry Fox, Douglas Davis, Paul Cotton, Peter D'Agostino, Hilaire Dufresne, Robert Janz, Peter Wiehl, Robert Harris, and Richard Lowenberg, as well as Leeson herself.

The Floating Museum consisted of two phases which were curated by Leeson, a renowned San Francisco artist, for public spaces in San Francisco (in phase I) and in other cities in the United States, Italy, and France (in phase II). The first phase was inaugurated on November 6, 1975, by two performance pieces by the Southern Californian artist Eleanor Antin: *King's Meditation*, at the Palace of Fine Arts in San Francisco, and *Ballerina*, the following day, in the eighteenth-century galleries of the California Palace of the Legion of Honor. In 1978 the activities of the second phase culminated in an exhibition produced in collaboration with the

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art titled *Global Space Invasion (phase II)*, which featured the work of over one hundred artists at public spaces throughout the city, such as the Bay Area Rapid Transit, a courtyard on Sacramento Street, and the landscapes of Fort Point. Throughout both phases, artists were encouraged to use a number of media, including video and performance, soundscapes, and installation.[25]

Leeson's intention, captured in an interview with Moira Roth, was "to help artists to work outside of museum structures"; she noted thus, "I wanted to set an example of a method that would enable artists to do their own work easily in such sites. I wanted to recycle space that already existed, using what was already there, the environment, and promoting that idea. And also, I wanted to develop the idea of paying artists for that work, something that hadn't been done much before." Except for the San Quentin Mural, *The Floating Museum* only entailed temporary projects and was "in itself only temporary."[26]

Fig. 1. Robert Janz, *Chalk Waves*, 1976, *The Floating Museum.* Courtesy of Lynn Hershman Leeson.

The Floating Museum was meant to be "integrated into everyday life,"[27] aiming to develop "temporary projects" while being "in itself only temporary,"[28] so as to create work that was "either situational or environmental"; in other words, "work made for the specific place in it, shown with the political, social and psychological positions incorporated into its construct."[29] *The Floating Museum*'s fundamental concept was therefore to *transform* the city, "to recycle existing spaces and resources as well as to transform local areas into temporary exhibition sites."[30] Thus, for example, Robert Janz's *Chalk Waves* (1976, fig. 1) was literally drawn around the streets of San Francisco with chalk. The piece, which "registered the changes that occurred in a drawing" as it was walked over or rained upon, addressed the themes of "rearrangement and change," both implicit in *The Floating Museum*'s curatorial vision of transience, ephemerality, and transformation.[31]
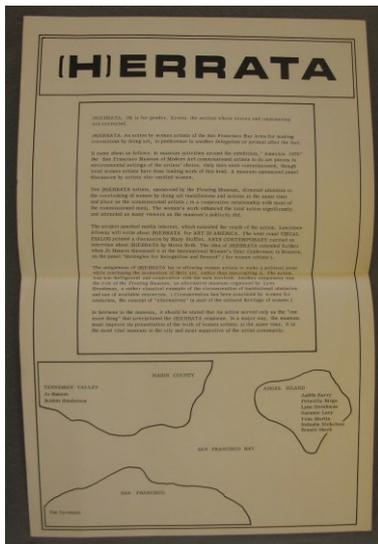
Figure 2. Lynn Hershman Leeson, Jo Hanson, and Pat Tavernier, *(H)errata*, 1977, *The Floating Museum.* Courtesy of Lynn Hershman Leeson.

Another example of a temporary event that formed part of *The Floating Museum* was *(H)errata* (1977, fig. 2), a collaborative exhibition design developed by Leeson with Jo Hanson and Pat Tavernier, which aimed at correcting the errors and omissions regarding women's work in local museum exhibitions. *(H)errata* consisted of a temporary exhibition at Angel Island, the Pacific Ocean, and Tennessee Valley. Participating artists included Fran Martin, Robbin Henderson, Judith Barry, Bonnie Sherk, Natasha Nicholson, Suzanne Lacy, and Priscilla Birge.[32]
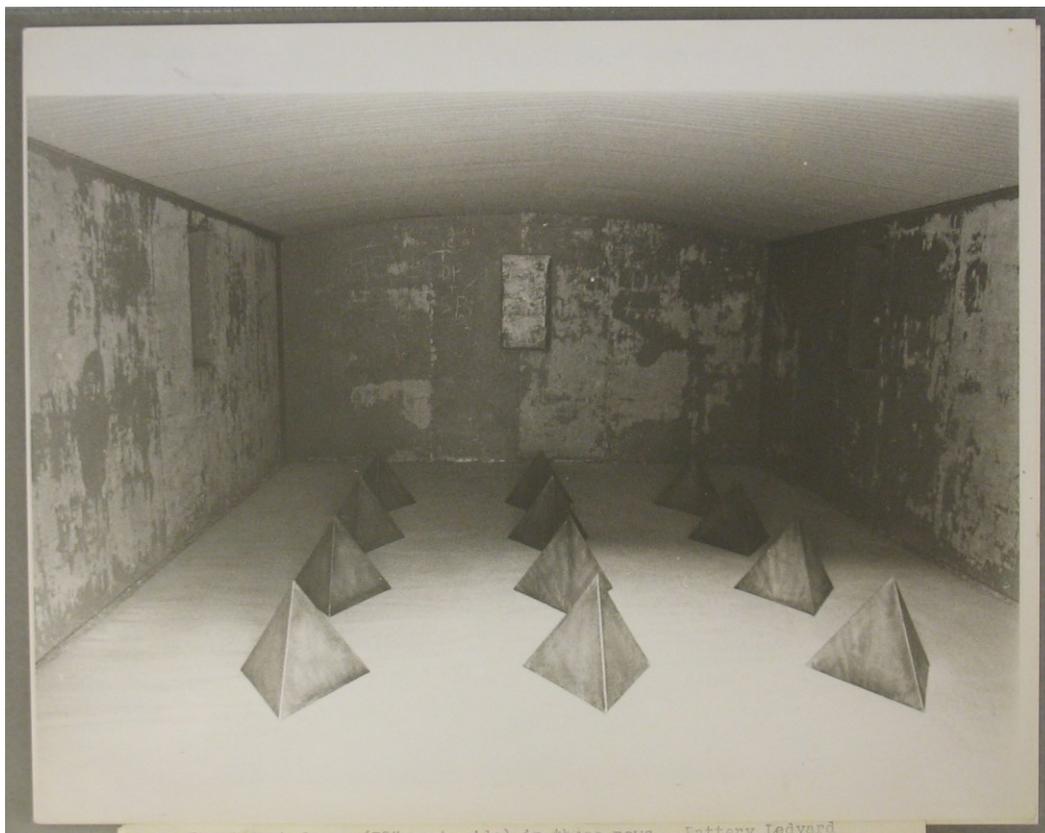
Fran Martin's *Battery Ledyard* installation on Angel Island, which formed part of *(H)errata* (fig. 3), was described by the artist as an exercise in articulation. The work consisted of a "procession from San Francisco to Angel Island," "a movement in space from the general to the particular—from the cacophony of forms in the City to the serenity of the battery structure and finally to the elementary forms within."[33] *Battery Ledyard* is, in fact, one of three gun batteries built on Angel Island around 1900. Named after August C. Ledyard, 6th United States Infantry, who was killed in action in the Philippine Islands, the battery was declared obsolete in 1909 and deactivated in 1915, when the guns and carriages were removed. Located in a quiet setting on the side of a cliff overlooking San Francisco, the Golden Gate Bridge, and Marin County, it is "an austere geometric structure which evokes thoughts of even older ruins such as Palatine Hill and Delphi."[34] At the time, the battery contained four rooms separated by mounds of earth. There were no windows and the only light source was from the doorways. Martin chose three rooms within the battery and placed "modular tetrahedron pieces made of wood and metal covered with cloth varnished in such a way that it looks like parchment."[35] The shape of the pieces was reminiscent of the shape of the pyramids, and its texture of parchment—commonly used for writing, except that here the monument was dwarfed by the site that hosted it—and the writing was assumed by viewers as they moved through the disused spaces of the battery.

Another work that formed part of *The Floating Museum* was Richard Kamler's *An environmental installation for the transformation of the old Sutro Bath House ruins* (1978). The Sutro Bath House was opened to the public in 1806 as the world's largest indoor set of swimming pools, but it was destroyed by a fire in 1966 and never restored to its former glory. The ruins are still open to visitors, and form part of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area. As Kamler points out:

> Sitting regally next to the Pacific Ocean, the Sutro Bath House once held a unique place in the collective experiences of San Franciscans and visitors to San Francisco as well: recollections of cascading down the Big Slide and tumbling into the long pool, leaping from the hot pool to the warm pool to the cool pool to the cold pool, gazing up and around in awe at the crystal palace effect of the structure itself, skating on the ice rink above and wandering around the museum above that all came together to produce that specialness that was the Sutro Bath House.[36]

For Kamler, the mark of time that was noticeable in the installation was in itself also significant:

> The patina of antiquity is already visible: partially submerged walls looming through green slime coated waters, barnacles clinging to worn concrete surfaces, the ocean constantly attacking and threatening to reclaim it all, the dunes and walls of sand shifting and sliding in response to some timeless rhythm from the past.[37]

This vision motivated Kamler to give his audiences a shared task. The work thus used a number of bales of straw that had been purchased from farms in Sonoma, Mendocino, and Marin counties, which were loaded onto a series of flatbed trucks with side racks and stacked in pyramidal shapes. These were then loaded on barges, I assume at the site of the Sutro Bath House, which were from there towed under the Golden Gate Bridge and into San Francisco Bay, where they were anchored for a period of time to become "a momentary part of the bay seascape."[38] The barges then moved to the Embarcadero, where "the bales were donated and removed by community groups who expressed a need for it."[39]
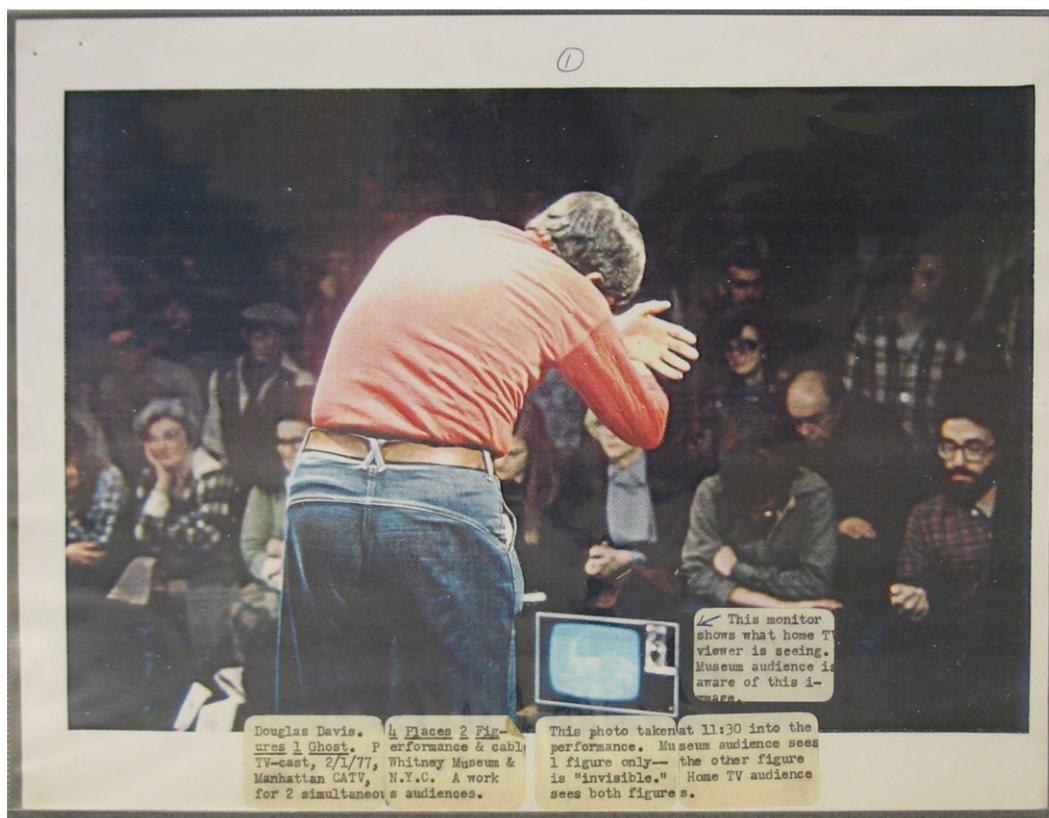
Douglas Davis's *Two Cities, a Text, Flesh, and the Devil* (1977), which was also part of *The Floating Museum,* uses the body of the performer as the *locus* through which distinct locations are mediated. The video work was a California Cable Television event performed and cablecast live simultaneously in Santa Monica and San Francisco, creating "a futuristic scenario of real-time connectivity."[40] The goal of the work was for Davis to "join a performing partner by appearing to travel through the airwaves."[41] *The Floating Museum*'s aim of developing transient work is here epitomized by the fact that in this early experiment with liveness and mediation, the viewer who is co-located with Davis experiences the work only partially, whereas the viewer who is not co-located with Davis experiences the work as an early form of telepresence (i.e., in this case, a synthesis of two presences which are not co-located in a physical site) (fig. 4). With the advent of the technological revolution that marked the end of the twentieth century, site here comes to coincide with the medium.

Helen and Newton Harrison's *Meditations on the Condition of the Sacramento River, its Delta and the Bays at San Francisco* (1975–1978) was another complex, time-based work divided in three parts, five media, and three time frames. The work consisted of a number of exhibits around the city, involving also the San Francisco Art Institute and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. The work was presented in an unprecedented city-wide exposition that would include the *Meditations*, as well as earlier works, billboards, posters, a graffiti campaign, and video and radio pieces. The Harrisons describe their position as "post-conceptual."[42] The *Meditations* argued with many practices and policies of water management, specifically suggesting that removal of waters from the Sacramento River and California Delta for irrigation purposes or development and the return of these waters, untreated, to the delta was "ecologically immoral," and suggests "modifications and alternatives to current modes and practices and presents a proposal for an exemplar system of water re-use as a public work of art."[43]

The Floating Museum also involved the creation of a mural at San Quentin State Prison (1974), which was conceived as part of the "first prison art program in the United States."[44] Inmates at the prison, led by master muralist Hilarie Dufresne, painted a 45-by-28-foot mural of the scenic landscape beyond the prison wall, outlining "the confinement of eight hundred inmates."[45] The location for the mural was an area just inside the courtyard, considered a "charged" space because it was the murder site of the legendary Black Panther Party member George Jackson in 1971 (fig. 5). The image was selected through a design contest, which was won by an inmate named Midget Rodriguez. Rodriguez's submission was of the prison wall covered by a painting of the landscape that was actually behind it.[46] The mural remained on the prison wall for twenty years.

These works, while employing different media and aesthetics, shared *The Floating Museum*'s central vision of creating ephemeral transformations of found spaces, usually, but not exclusively, in the city of San Francisco. Most works are locative and participatory, in that they place narratives in existing locations, engaging audiences in particular times and places, often by exposing the sites' capacity to act as palimpsests environmentally, in terms of their ecological histories, and archaeologically, in terms of their architectural, historical, and social uses. Places, and the histories evoked, were not only used as locales but also as lenses able to conjure other times and spaces.
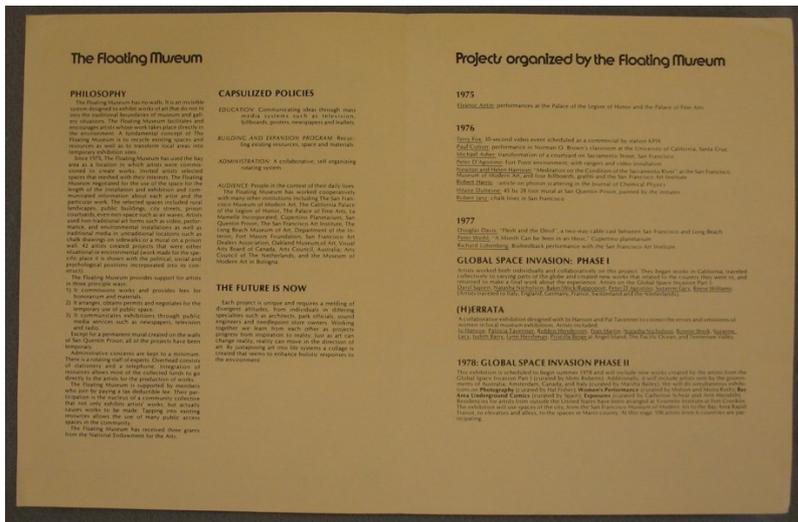
The Floating Museum documentation at Stanford University libraries includes some of Leeson's original press records, photographic documentations, and reviews. The original documents and records show that the museum had a number of concurrent aims, including an education mission (i.e., communicating ideas through mass media systems such as television, billboards, posters, newspapers, and leaflets), a building and expansion program (i.e., recycling existing resources, space, and materials), an administrative strategy (i.e., a collaborative, self-organizing, rotating system), and a vision of an audience (i.e., people in the context of their daily lives) (fig. 6), which can be traced through the various records, documents, and documentations.[47]

The documentation includes catalogued items, but no additional retrospective data capture has occurred. The work itself has not often been shown, though elements from the Stanford collection were exhibited at New Langton Arts in 2008, as part of a wider retrospective organized by Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, the De Young Museum, the Hess Collection, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and the 01SJ Global Festival of Art on the Edge at the San Jose Museum of Art. This means that this seminal and pioneering work still largely exists as a raw, historic, undigitized documentation. While it is crucial that the documentation is preserved, the fact that no subsequent study has been conducted that captures the voices of participants (by which I mean artists and their publics in this context) or relates the historic work to other iterations of the artworks first exhibited in *The Floating Museum*, analyzing its possible influence on subsequent and future museum practice, places the historic documentation at risk because, without these voices, it is impossible to understand the original experience of the work.

This documentation shows that, when looking at a work diachronically, terms like process and participant, documentation, record, and archive become as significant as terms like art and artist, creativity, and performance. The assemblage of these factors offers a more complex understanding of the artwork than its isolated elements. If I were to imagine the future of this complex and groundbreaking work, made of other works and often developed collaboratively, I would suggest that the individual trajectories that have traversed these works during their original curation and subsequent evolution should now be captured. Not only was *The Floating Museum* an *ante-litteram* "participatory museum,"[48] it was conceived of as a space, using Richard Sandell's term, for social change.[49] To find out more about the experience of participation and the impacts of social change of the original work would add a rich contextual layer that would enable us to better understand not only this work but also how artists can transform urban space. While *The Floating Museum* is of clear importance in the histories of both performance and new media, the curatorial vision for the museum itself remains under-researched, and while Leeson herself reworked some of these documents into her landmark film about feminist art, *!Women Art Revolution* (2010), most materials from *The Floating Museum* are literally waiting to be rediscovered.[50]

I hope to have shown how the prospect of digitizing a collection such as that of *The Floating Museum* brings about new challenges to do with how we currently produce and disseminate knowledge. These require new competencies and new forms of collaboration. It is not, in this case, only a matter of using known strategies for the documentation of performance and new media, or even crowdsourcing the documentation of the work retrospectively as a form of participatory practice.[51] Instead, it would be interesting to devise novel digital methods to past and current contextual knowledge about each of the works hosted by the *Floating Museum*, as well as about the curatorial vision for this and similar archival or museological frameworks. Platforms such as Accurator,[52] for example, would allow internet users to retrace knowledge specific to the original records and documents that is currently not available in the archive, while the use of platforms such as CREATE[53] or Time Machine[54] could make it possible to use machine learning to connect the documentation to other documents and records that may not have been captured in the original documentation, in relation to more recent exhibitions of the work. This kind of platform, or an equivalent, able to link open data, would allow us to relate *The Floating Museum* to other initiatives, though it is crucial that in the formation of these new types of assemblages, contextual information would not be lost. Of course, crowdsourcing such documents may raise concerns to do with authority, accuracy, and ethics, and the use of digital platforms may raise questions to do with maintenance costs,

accessibility, agency, and ownership. However, simply to leave rich and inspiring documentations untouched might result in important information being lost over time.

A contextual investigation of *The Floating Museum* is likely not only to provide a rewrite of a number of art historical and museological practices but also help us all to revisit how art can and should create social change. The documentation will show that the work is not only formed by a series of artworks and practices but also by their curatorial strategy, which put transformation and social change at the very heart of *The Floating Museum*. Moreover, a contextual investigation of such a complex work is likely to evidence the claim that cultural products are "embedded in an interactional logic according to which the active users' involvement and a process of museum adjustment lead to co-create value through an ongoing experience-for-experience exchange."[55] This suggests that the value of documentations not only lies currently in their ability to generate less hierarchical forms of dynamic archival engagements, which are potentially constructed as experiences, but also that their assemblage allows us to continuously revisit the liveness of the work. The future of *The Floating Museum* may then be that the documentation not only brings us back to Leeson's original work and its experience by its participants but also again operates as a live and dynamic space for practicing urban transformation.

Acknowledgements

Bio

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