

Can “Mouchette” be preserved as an identity?

By Patricia Black (research intern LIMA 2020)

1.



Home page and menu browser of www.mouchette.org

I was only 6 when a 13 year old girl called Mouchette first appeared on the Internet back in the 90's. We both grew up together, although very much apart - me in São Paulo (Brazil), she in a so-called “Amsterdam”- knowing nothing about each other's existence yet on the edge of the same digital revolution. Little did we know we would both meet inside and outside of her trapped screen: me in my 30's, she still 13's.

In 2020, three decades after our first encounter, I started a collaboration with LIMA to study this girl and what happened to be a pioneer net art work of the Dutch based artist, Martine Neddam. Constructed under the form of an interactive website (first www.xs4all.nl/~mouche, currently www.mouchette.org), “Mouchette” resembles the beginnings of webdiary and evokes the online presence of a young girl who likes to express herself around themes like death, desire and suicide triggers.

Online since 1996, “Mouchette” is one of the most popular and acknowledged works of the artist and a reference inside the history of net art. The research was part of LIMA's “ArtHost: dynamic archiving” project, which investigates how to deal with contemporary artworks that depend on dynamic digital technology, in particular web-based artworks. Key to this research was the reflection on how such works can be stored, documented and kept permanently accessible for the longer term.

LIMA wanted to raise ArtHost investigation to the next level of complexity by analyzing artworks with highly interactive environments and the mutable ecology of “Mouchette” represented a great choice with an extended timeline of existence. Along with Gaby Wijers, LIMA’s director, and Wiel Seuskens, LIMA’s technical manager, I was responsible for composing a study case report analysing both our main conceptual and technical challenges.

Coming from a media art studies and cinema/aesthetics background, and in addition to the report, my goal was to follow Mouchettes’s essence and the experience she’s involving us in, in a wider aesthetical reflection that questions how preservation could influence the expression of this virtual identity and its impacts in the future. Central to this investigation was the participation of Martine Neddham herself, who exchanged with the team through the whole period personally and by mail correspondence.

2.



“Flesh&Blood” section in www.mouchette.org

The investigation started each day when I opened my browser and looked for the secret corners of what feels to be a virtual teenager’s room filled with hidden drawers, suggestive notes, restive paths: anything close to feeling trapped while obsessively wanting to be pierced. Indirectly based on Robert Bresson’s movie character (“Mouchette”, 1967), and following backwards to George Bernamos’s novel book (“Mouchette”, 1937), the net art of Martin Neddham re-performs its own personal version of the naive adolescent yet dark storyteller.

The website mainly consists of image/text compositions which lead the user to multiple narratives. When on the front page, a menu bar introduces one of the main tools for navigation

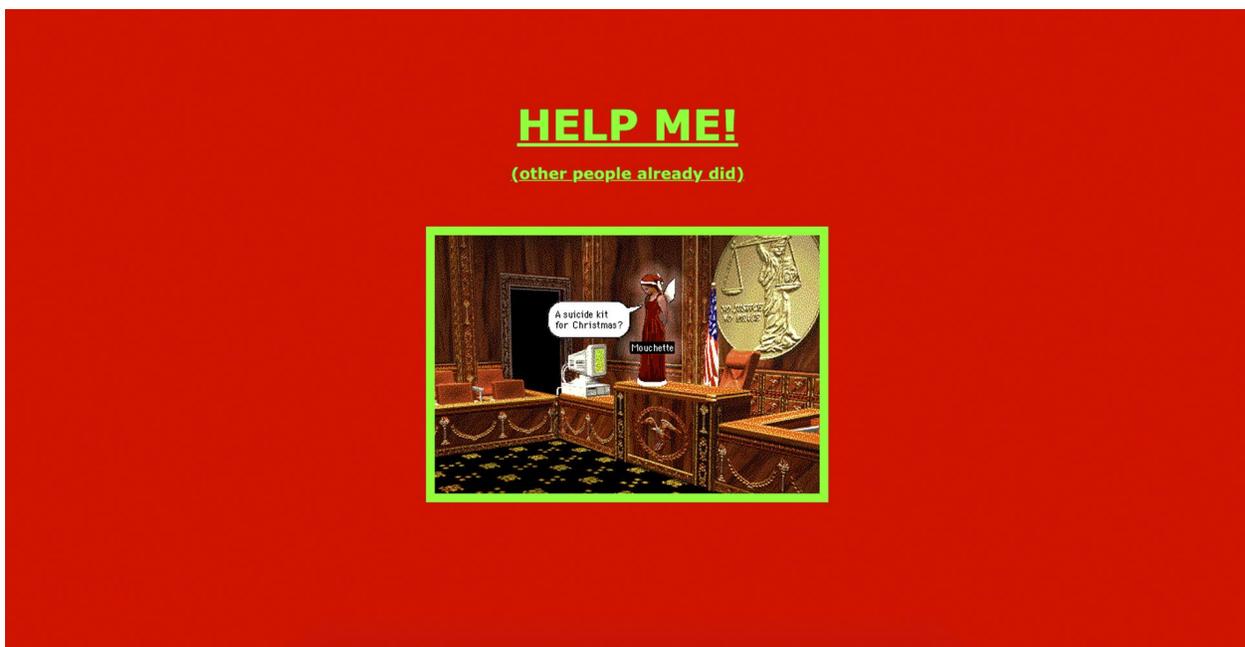
and interaction is constantly encouraged through several actions and hidden links. Each of these paths guides the user to a big chain of developments or a simple action with a short end of the line. Most of all, actions include interacting and doing what Mouchette tells you to: “Kill that cat”, “Put your cheek on the monitor”, “Help me”, “Answer me”, “Browse me”.

I suddenly get in touch with a universe of trapped ghosts, a device where I’m reminded things cannot die yet are never completely alive. I click and kill an opportunist fly because she asks me to and the result is one of many haunting codes still to come: “Hey, what happened? I think I’m dead. Why do you have to click on buttons before you know what’s behind?”. The fly asks me how it can write to me if it’s dead. In the course of 2021’s technology, I don’t find that question so odd.

Web box questionnaires are continuously asking for dialogue and producing a strange sense of intimacy. “Finally, I can come that close to you. Do you also want to come that close to me?”, asks the girl while we see a picture of her tongue pressed against a flat monitor - here an endless oppressing barricade. From these activities, users can have different kinds of content feedback, such as “private” automatic email responses or have their answers later published in communicating boards for visitor’s interaction.

On such boards I read the replies of people who, like me, could not avoid making direct contact. At some point Mouchette asks for my suggestion to build a suicide kit for children: “It’s something that allows children of all ages to play suicide. It’s a new toy. It’s my own invention!”, she writes. “What is the best way to kill yourself when you’re under 13?” she dares to ask.

3.



Mouchette invite the user to build a “Suicide Kit” in www.mouchtte.org

It all started in 1995 and the initial possibilities of programming, when Neddham addressed her artistic creation to the digital sphere and first engaged with PMC-MOO virtual reality ambients. Privately domestic Internet was the new big deal and ambients such as PMC-MOO were for the first time allowing amateur programmers to learn and collectively collaborate with each other in the creation of their own codes.

For Neddham, this was a start of a still undisclosed storytelling mechanism, something much beyond the linear structure of directories often experienced at that moment on the Internet. It was also a witty hint at the impact the Internet would have in the formation of oneself through an exchange with others (De Wild, 2018). MOO ambients triggered important features that, one year later, would help to originate “Mouchette”. Having to express only by text and very simple iconic imagery, the character’s identity has grown around a very personal visuality and multi-linear narrative.

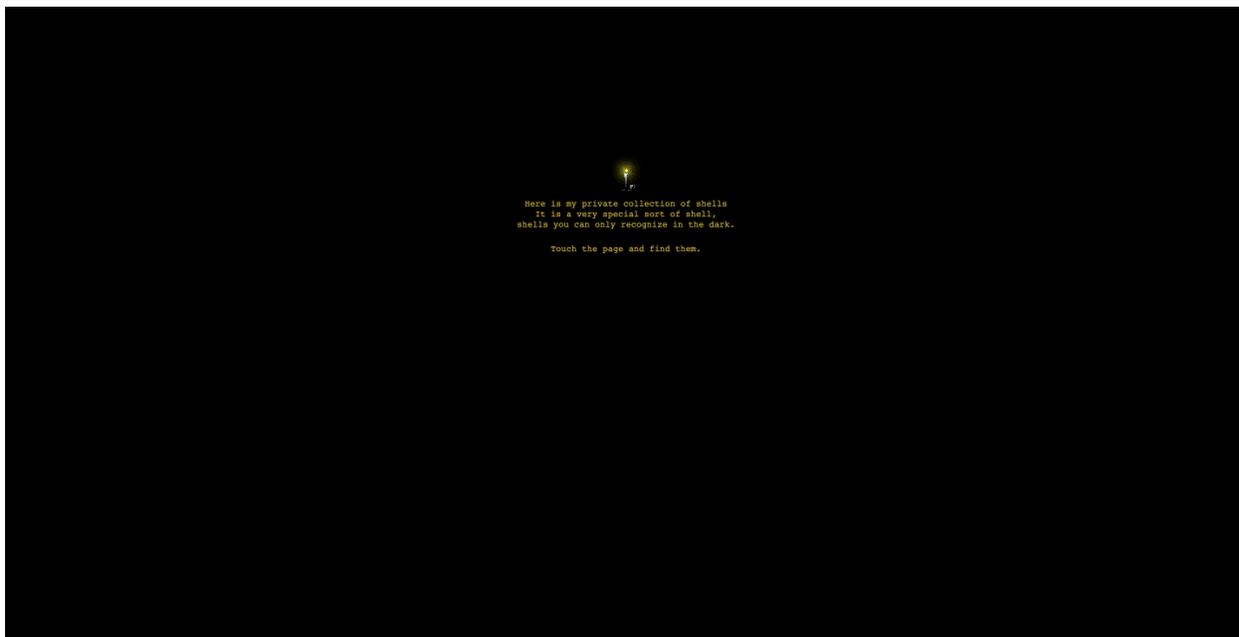
From 1996 till 1998, “Mouchette” was like most independent artistic projects circulating inside closed academic fields and digital art discussions. When browsers started to better develop their searching methods - aka the emergence of Google and a huge change of content search by relevance - the artwork began to gain greater popularity and visibility. The website started to have a considerable number of daily accessors and became a reference platform where people would meet to talk about suicide.

“Mouchette” impresses for being so contemporary. Long before the boom of social media, this net art was a pioneer in converging users around one single platform filled with personality. Even after 30 years, the device is still there and still engages people to the core - the latest replies have already mentioned how to die of boredom after a world pandemic crisis. Quoting the artist: “these virtual characters have always functioned more as communication tools than as mere portraits. They engage in dialogue with the public, trigger their reactions, stimulate exchange between the visitors, archive these exchanges to recycle them into new works of art”¹.

The mystery behind the character's real existence provoked visitor’s curiosity and engagement, especially as Neddham’s authorship was a secret from 1996 till 2010. Because of it, it’s surprising how Martine Neddham lighted up very prematurely topics such as fake web personas, social identity compositions and collective authorship inside digital art.

4.

¹ Source: <https://www.neddham.info/about/> (access in february 2020)



Mouchette request the user to touch the page and look for her collection of blind shells in www.mouchette.org

It was at an early stage that LIMA started an open discussion with Martine Neddham in order to better understand and provide solutions for Mouchette's preservation. The relationship dates back to 2017, when the work was acquired by the Stedelijk Museum of Amsterdam and counted with LIMA's consultancy on how the website could be bought and maintained in the long term. At that time, the solution was to buy a time stamped version of *mouchette.org*, named as "Mouchette Version 01", a non-interactive version which included all data of the website until the date of acquisition. Although analysing this acquisition process is not our focus here, it certainly helps us understand some of the challenges the artist still faces when it comes to defining the limits of her work as a selling piece as also its maintenance structure, now a shared responsibility with the owner institution.

It was long before the negotiation with Stedelick that the technical maintenance challenges started to emerge. As a born-digital artwork, "Mouchette" groups several interactive pages, more than 3000 active links and an ever growing text database. The ever changing Internet's linguistics are not necessarily combining with the artistic choices and, overall, the whole website requires a lot of time to just keep going.

The problem was that, until very recently, Neddham was the only one responsible for this process, working along with programmers she hired to collaborate in technical aspects that were beyond her expertise (like updating codes and programming). Moderation, for example, was - and still is - done by the artist and plays an essential narrative factor in the website, as determining what comes in and out of those communicating boards such as the sections "Suicide Kit for Cristmas" and "Lullaby for a Dead Fly". With no moderator the website could have remained 30 years online, still nothing inside of it would have changed. Until today,

Neddham is the only one responsible for registering domains, managing emails, re-posting user's answers - all sorts of details that push the artist to be its own "help desk" center.

Nevertheless, as said by Neddham, "most changes are changes to remain the same"². That's because, with so many technical updates since 1996, the old programming also holds a conceptual importance. For instance, the artist prefers to keep the old codes as long as possible, instead of just migrating to something new. To clean it or organize too much could also kill the character's "charisma". Broken links could be then fixed as bugs or kept as vestiges of the past, as she often does.

Reflecting on this issue, even technical aspects such as those of simple maintenance are a matter of artistic choice, and should always be considered case by case. Acceptable changes could actually be those focused on keeping the relation machine/user alive, anything that updates in order to maintain the curiosity, the surprise, the unexpectedness, without transforming it into a "push-button situation", the artist explains. For her, if things have to be redone in a certain way, changes have always to "fit the spirit, rather than the code".

In a mail correspondence with our team of LIMA, Neddham expressed that she finds any kind of translation preferable to the disappearance of the work. For her, the right attitude is to have the work remain accessible as much as possible, observe the conditions in which the work is being accessed, fix whatever can be fixed, and for the rest: "enjoy the mess!"

5.



"Kill that cat" section in www.mouchette.org

² Source: Martine Neddham's mail correspondence with LIMA, 2020.

As a motto suggested by the artist, “everything that mentions Mouchette is Mouchette”³. And here is where Martine Neddham breaks with what was already complex, and takes it to the next level.

It was not long after the creation of the website that Neddham started to expand Mouchette to other media using the character as a connector key to multiple artworks. As she called, “Mouchette” is by essence this “brand” through which several actions take place. For example, in 1997 a public appearance of Mouchette was announced at the Triple X Festival Amsterdam, a performance that tricked the audience by sending an old man, René Paul Vallentgoed, her agent, in her place. After this, another fake promise announced Mouchette to reveal herself during a Postmasters Gallery New York’s installation set in collaboration with the American artist Anakin Koenig.

In 2001, *rhizome.org* used the page “Kill that cat” from *mouchette.org* as a mandatory splash page of its website. Even though this wasn’t a new creation, it was digitally reallocated of place, context and audience. Visitors had to interact with it in order to access Rhizome, making Mouchette acquire a lot of publicity. In 2011, “Guerrilla FanShop” converted Mouchette into physical souvenirs that could be bought as a cult figure, like t-shirts and buttons.

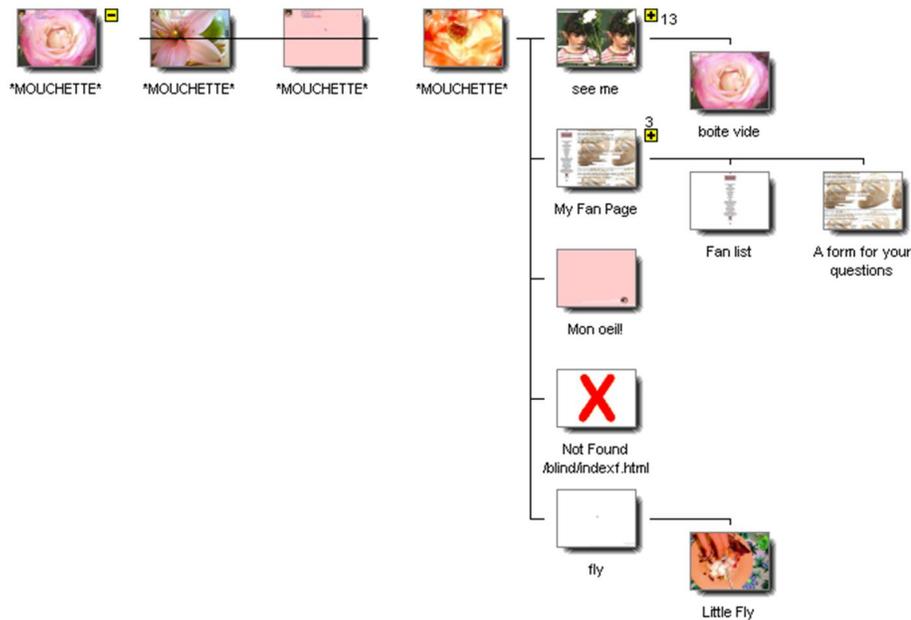
During 2003, Neddham expanded the artwork by launching *mouchette.net*, an open platform that allowed visitors to become Mouchette themselves by using her identity to send emails, changing her profile picture or other contributions to the main website. Very importantly, Neddham expressed that everytime that the audience develops their own versions of the website - such as fan’s parodies or the use of the girls identity to create a virtual action - this can be considered a valuable version of “Mouchette”.

These examples make it very clear how Mouchette can inhabit multiple universes at once, such as the physical and the virtual, the fiction and the real and that its preservation strategy should be much beyond the “original” as a central concept. Neddham calls this a “generative conservation”, something able to fracture with what is considered old or new by reinforcing the “origin” instead of the original. For her, if we stop preserving “Mouchette” as an original object, we can start endowing it in relation to a movement or direction. Something with a starting point, yes, but where the focus becomes the relation of this point to a multi versioning path - something *per se* very contemporary if we think about what we now understand with Internet culture.

The main challenge for our analyses was therefore that “Mouchette” is not only gathering several kinds of agents but that these agents are actually growing, modifying and constantly disappearing in relation to each other. Over time, the relationship between agents changes as well as the action between them, making it hard to map and document it in a static point of view. Vital to this performative net art is to be comprehended less as a fixed object and more as relation between its elements, such as its authors, dispositives and exhibitions spaces.

³ Source: Martine Neddham’s mail correspondence with LIMA, 2020.

6.



One of the images generated by PoweMapper for a string of links in *mouchette.org*.

At the end of this investigation, some results were formulated. Wiel Seuskens, technical manager at LIMA, brought PowerMapper (www.powermapper.com/) as a possible solution to scan the website and provide a fast visual picture of its structure. The mapping wouldn't only be useful as a warning system for regular broken links, but when structural aspects such as major programming updates are done as well. The scan would function as a guarantee that errors did not occur during such impactful processes, as well as a regular parameter able to provide a more amplified view of changes in the long term.

Taking into consideration the speed *mouchette.org* changes as well as its huge database, another priority of LIMA was a more consistent backup system to be found. By 2020, Neddham didn't have a complete local version of her website, the last one being the dump made for "Mouchette Version 01" to Stedelijk around 2015. In January of 2021, Seuskens was able to develop a remote script on LIMA's server that approaches all domains considered by the artist as central to the current preservation of "Mouchette", providing copies of its files and respective database. The result was a backup system that now copies the main domain files weekly, monthly and annually; or daily when it comes to the databases.

Even though we can't ignore such foundation needs of technical support, it is interesting to point out that "Mouchette" has a very peculiar system that somehow encourages its own preservation. For example, Neddham created a sort of documentation system by publishing and archiving all kinds of material related to the work in a secondary blog (<http://about.mouchette.org>). By copying entire articles, press releases, making snapshots of old parts of the website and posting

broken links, the artist is actually working on her own preservation strategy. Even a maintenance manual for how the moderation tools work and PowerPoint files with original images of the website are currently being archived there.

Reflecting on this quality, previous studies on Martine Neddams oeuvre were central to my analyses. The concept of “network of care” brought by the dutch researcher Annet Dekker (2018), used “Mouchette” as an main object to describe the possibility of an altered conservation strategy, one able to embrace different stakeholders in a decentralized approach. By that, it aims to bring together traditional institutions like museums, small organizations, but also individuals - from experts, to fans, to non-specialists - towards a collaborative and diverse network of preservation. By partitioning the responsibility not in one but several care holders, works like Mouchette can have more chances to remain, and perhaps align even more with its artistic concept in the long term.

As an example for this collaborative care system, in 2001, Robert Bresson's widow acted with a lawsuit and made offline one of Mouchette’s pages that related a quiz with his movie character. The incident called attention to other artists and small institutions that decided to host the forbidden page on their websites in protest against abusive copyright laws and by that, shared the actions for its maintenance and preservation. Even though the page was restored online on her website, Neddams maintains the historical information written as a text and a documentation of the incident.

7.



“Lullaby for Dead Fly” creates a virtual burial and ghost communication device for the dead fly.

In March of 2020, during LIMA's "Transformation Digital Art (TDA)" symposium, while I was presenting part of the results of this study case, one of my listeners was none less than Martine Neddham herself. For me this is an assurance of how much her presence and collaboration have created a great impact in the livelihood of her work. "Mouchette" is not only three decades online, but participates actively in years of offline discussion. There's no doubt that this affects in many positive ways how the artists intentions are preserved and re contextualized for the ever changing net art scenarios. "There will be questions, and we will find answers. If not me, someone else will and this is what I like"⁴, said the artist.

As a digital born artwork extending itself for so much time, lies on "Mouchette" this permanent necessity of analysis. One of the results of my research was the emergence of the term "identity" as a concept able to glue fractured parts of this necessity. After all, what do we keep from "Mouchette" after leaving her digital presence? Certainly not just what's inside the monitor. What Mouchette inserts on the screen is the moment of an experience itself, a way in which her code decides to attract, spread and transform the user: an encounter.

This is the experience that by essence Mouchette reminds us and that's the "origin point" we want to preserve. When the term "identity" emerges as a notion for a preservation strategy, it aims underlining "Mouchette" as a amplified tool able to accumulate a story, build an expression, transform and be transformed by it. It also aims to discard the artwork as a fixed object and reinforce its movement. Mouchette is a persona. By determining what unables this persona to exist, grow, change and interact would then become a central feature for its future comprehension and preservation in the long term.

Even though there's no objective here to firm up the lines of a new investigation, it's interesting to point out how contemporary gender studies philosophers, such as Judith Butler (2003), could add to this reflection. For her, identity isn't an established parameter behind someone's expressions. Identity is something performatively constituted "by" the expressions themselves taken as its results. In this sense, Mouchette is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuous constituted in time - an identity created through a stylized "repetition of acts".

And what acts are those? Would our focus be therefore to find a coherence for those repetitive acts and preserve it? For Butler, the "coherence" or the "continuity" of the "person" are not logical or analytical characteristics of any condition, but on the contrary, socially instituted and maintained by norms of intelligibility. Here, identity is understood as a "compelling illusion", an object of belief.

Preserving "Mouchette" as an identity is preserving my right for a belief, and in its performative aspect the forever possibility of cotesting its reified status. Its purpose goes beyond a one-way flow of codes, it presents itself as a round-trip bridge, capable of transiting, displacing times, duplicating realities and most important: she lets me play with them. As the artwork throws itself

⁴ Source: Summary from Workshop "Documenting net art : untitledinternet.com (2012) by Constant Dullaart & Documenting Mouchette (1996 - now) by Martine Neddham" (2020).

into this transference, often by a multi language and interactive aspect, it is not just traversing a story for simulation, but enabling transport and identification.

After a pandemic crisis forcing us into a brand new social temporality and stigma, Mouchette is no longer the only girl trapped in her screen and asking to be touched: we all are. She reminds us of the two sides of a coding barricade, a space where I'm always on the edge of my own appearance and disappearance. Inside these virtual territories resides a powerful everyday haunting force, where we exist all the time as ourselves and as ghosts of ourselves and others. I cope with that and I ask myself: to be or not to be Mouchette⁵?

⁵ Here I play with Martine Neddam's own work by the same name ("To be or not to be Mouchette?", 2007), a video installation re-staging texts from the website database where the artist echoes Hamlet's famous soliloquy to reflect on death, suicide and identity conflicts powered by the Internet.