Cultural Authorship: The Palimpsest Case

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Abstract. The paper presents the concerns that arise regarding authorship, but also authority, when cultural assets are digitized, reproduced and even reinterpreted and when participatory collective processes coexist with traditional artistic creation. It does so in reference to a specific project, PALIMPSEST: Post-Alphabetic, Interactive Museum using Participatory, Space-Embedded Story-Telling project, funded by the *GRIT*–Interreg EU program. The project attempts to discuss the urban palimpsest as it is constructed by oral history and revived by art and culture as an open and progressive process, which involves many actors and takes place at the urban public space, configuring a new collective and participatory way to address culture and incite artistic creation.

Keywords: Authorship, Cultural, Collective, Digital, Art

Short description

SindeFin is a research group interested in how contemporary technologies affect the subject's relation to its surroundings. Rethinking this relation, which in the past was primarily mediated by architecture, is the main purpose of this architecturally oriented research group. SindeFin is largely concerned about the way media constitute an autonomous, expansive and intrusive third nature, one that overlaps our natural nature and our human-made nature and develops new ways of being in and relating to the world. In this circumstance, design is challenged in both ends; neither reality can be assumed as a pinpointed, objectified experience, nor the subject can be positioned firmly in this evanescent and flowing but still decisive, condition. Design, as a relational process, is shifting, as what it connects seems to be less stable.

SindeFin is an open-structured group; its members are primarily academics from different disciplines and countries and also postdoctoral researchers and PhD candidates and it is linked to the Laboratory of Fine Arts, Audiovisual and Electronic Applications at the Democritus University of Thrace.

SindeFin's activity includes research programs, architectural competitions, publications, exhibitions and organization of multidisciplinary seminars, workshops and various events.

Lately, SindeFin is involved in the implementation of PALIMPSEST, a GRIT INTERREG project, funded under Priority Axis 2 – Integrated Environmental Management. The project focuses on how cultural heritage assets can be reinserted in the city through digital technologies, storytelling and artistic interpretation, in Epirus-Greece and Puglia-Italy regions. For this purpose the SindeFin team has sought collaborations in disciplines that were not previously participating immediately at the group, such as educators, theatre directors, storytellers and creative writing experts among others, in order to facilitate, enhance and deepen the understanding and the implementation of certain actions necessary for the project.

PALIMPSEST addresses the common challenge of promoting tourism in less-developed areas, by animating the urban public space and recuperating cultural heritage assets through bottom-up, participatory procedures and artistic interventions that as a result create new cultural assets. It does so by developing an in-situ, localized archive of story-telling assets, which leads to an interactive, immaterial, open-air Museum experience in the urban space of the city, with the involvement of artists selected through an art competition.

The project now in an intermediate phase, where cultural heritage assets regarding the city's stories and legends have been gathered by elementary school pupils with transgenerational participation, as they sought vanishing information from elder family memebers. The phase that is now ongoing is about the creation of a MAP in an APP format, which pinpoints the previously collected data and supports the collection of more by online participation. The elaboration of the collected material will then lead to art installations that will be implemented in the city and will be activated by visitors creating a dreamlike atmosphere.

PALIMSPEST aims to transform the urban public space's experience to a museistic, story-telling, interactive, thematic condition, which will revive the city and attract high quality tourism and at the same time it aspires to test in practice the way digital technologies affect and distort typical dipoles such as the author-audience, but also categories and typologies such as the museum and invite us to rethink their structure and characteristics.

Overview

The Museum that the PALIMPSEST aspires to create is a different and singular museum, since its location, access, content, structure, are all reconsidered and influenced by the post-alphabetic condition.

The post-alphabetic as a principal characteristic of PALIMPSEST is an immediate reference to Marshall McLuhan, who coined it in order to describe the era of the electronic media. McLuhan's frontward reading of the impact that digital technologies would have in our stance and our ways of interaction with our surroundings, is based upon the assertion that the dominance of the alphabetic thinking will succumb to the groundbreaking and novel interfaces that digital technologies offer and that bring along a revolutionary but still subtle change in our condition. [1]

McLuhan's understanding of the post-alphabetic and its characteristics seems to be concomitant to his descriptions of the pre-alphabetic; still, as the post-alphabetic configures our reality it becomes obvious that the post- is about mixing and intermingling, about combining and augmenting; therefore, the alphabetic doesn't succumb or vanish but rather it coexists with the retrieved pre-alphabetic in a new, far more interesting condition than the one McLuhan described. [2]

The post-alphabetic museum is a museum where numerous possible combinations and augmentations are realized and where common classifications and taxonomies become irrelevant. PALiMPSEST proposes an open-air, constantly changing, evanescent and dreamlike, but also personalized, museistic experience that questions and defies traditional organizations of Museums.

Content for the PALIMPSEST museum is co-created by the public involved in the collection of narratives from the city's past and artists responsible for the *mise en scène* of the narratives in the public urban space. This interrelation of experts and public, of traditional emitters and receivers, of authors and audience for the co-creation and the common authorship of the content is an issue of great significance.

The prevalent and more equally distributed possibility to receive and emit information is an important factor of change in the post-alphabetic era. In the alphabetic condition information and knowledge was produced by certain centers and was distributed to the public that was, in most cases, a passive receiver. Authority and authorship was defined and indisputable. History in the alphabetic world was difficult to perceive as an interpretative and biased understanding of the past, as it claimed the right to be the objective, unique and uncontestable knowledge of the past.

As the information begun to flow rapidly and the channels that distribute it started to multiply, there was less time to check it and assimilate it and the reception became more passive. Classifying and creating categories was a thing of the past and soon we became accustomed to sometimes absurd, vivid collages and medleys with no hierarchical or taxonomical organization. Television ages gave the first stroke to the alphabetic hierarchical organization of facts that the printed book and also the press had established. [3] In a later moment, the post-alphabetic media offer the widespread possibility to each receiver to be also a transmitter; information is now produced and transmitted by all. This democratization process with its subsequent results regarding the elimination of any truth-factor, which was previously idealized by the alphabetic condition but still always remained questionable, is a deal-breaker for every authoritative and top-down construction. Instituted knowledge becomes disputed; sources are overwhelmingly multiplied and mostly uncontrollable; authorship is no longer a privileged condition of the few; selection, categorization, ordering and hierarchies appear in multiple versions, subjective and subjected to their transmitters.

In this circumstance the museum as an authoritative and trustworthy institution for the objective and established representation of the world; a structure that separates authors and public, enters in a crisis. [4] This is the theoretical context upon which PALISMPSEST aims to work. One of its main objectives is to re-engage the habitants of the city, who are asked to collect, organize and associate, and therefore interpret, information and narratives about the city's past. It is centered in the non-institutional history of the city, which is gathered through individual implication in the form of particular descriptions and subjective storytelling. The representation of the city in the MAP and APP format recreates the layered representation of the actual palimpsest,

which every city has as a base, although it is often ignored and forgotten. Consequently the reactivation of the palimpsest in the MAP and APP changes the habitants' mental representation of the urban public space. Collected stories are elaborated and a number of them is selected in order to be given to artists as a basis for the construction of art installations in the city. The art installations take one-step further the interpretation of the collected stories. Their apparently random activation by visitors and the personalized perception of the museum that this creates is an additional filter that distorts any possibility of an objective and hierarchical reading of the museum's content.

PALIMPSEST rethinks the traditional classifications of authors and public without dissolving them. Oral history and collective cultural production which comes from our distant pre-alphabetic past doesn't annul the necessity of the artist as a distinct and established figure but rather it allows both ends to explore and exploit the possibilities that arise from their interconnection.

Open challenges

Digital media because of their "digital nature" are open to and, moreover, are enticing constant manipulations, transformations and alterations. Documentation, digitization but also mashups, samplings, remixes, appropriations and distorted reproductions make authorship difficult to trace and sometimes impossible to render. Still, the notion of cultural authorship is *per se* contradictory as culture is habitually used to describe a collective and long-term condition that progresses and evolves in a communal and cooperative way. Authorship instead, is a term that emerges late on and is associated to the personalization and even privatization and exploitation and finally commodification of cultural products.

PALIMPSEST focuses on how cultural heritage assets can be reinserted in the city through digital technologies, storytelling and artistic interpretation. Its main goal is to recuperate cultural heritage assets through bottom-up, participatory procedures and artistic interventions and thus animate public space and promote tourism in in less-developed areas. The process of collecting the stories is based on crowdsourcing and participation of the local community. For this purpose various workshops in schools were organized in order to achieve the collaboration and also the mediation of a younger audience, which sought stories about the city from the older members of their family. This transgenerational crowdsourcing placed issues about accuracy and authority but also about authorship as many of these stories can be found elsewhere and sometimes in more formal and authorized sources, books, blogs, etc, with variations and even divergences.

The upcoming phase of PALIMPSEST includes the elaboration of the collected material and its insertion to the app that will allow others to upload new material but also comment upon uploaded material. More discussion about authorship and

authority is expected to occur when the presented cultural assets are reestablished in the public, although digital, space of the MAP and APP.

At the same time the preparation of the final phase where artist will reinterpret the stories and insert them as installations in the urban web, also places similar questions as the artistic creation is copyrighted but in this case its references and background material can also be traced back to the student and its source. Accuracy and authority issues are even more present in this phase because the stories that will be reinserted in the public urban space are personal reinterpretations, filtered by different actors, i.e. the storyteller's point of view, the schoolchild that transcribes it and the artist that reinterprets it.

The challenges faced are the result of the post-alphabetic character of the project. On one hand it is easily understood that crowdsourced, oral, unverified and subjective material cannot be considered de facto accurate and truthful. On another hand artistic creation is copyrighted and preserves its authorship even if it is created on demand as part of a collective project and it is based upon material that is crowdsourced and could be potentially traced back to its contributors.

The construction of a post-alphabetic museum engages a different approach for all parties involved. Traditional museums select, classify associate and finally, unavoidably also manipulate content, following dominative and established models of representing the world. In the traditional museum visitors are placed in front of this objectified representation of the world as passive receivers. Nowadays, this alphabetic arrangement seems problematic and visitors often express uneasiness and restlessness with this obsolete division between spectacle and spectators. Museums often allow certain liberties and employ strategies of gamification or social media in order to address the demands of their public. Nevertheless, the overall approach remains intact.

If the museum is to become post-alphabetic and hybrid, allow the dilution of categories and taxonomies, question the architectural typologies and even its need to establish a concentrated typology instead of being a dispersed, distributed structure, it is imperative to understand how certain alphabetic characteristics can co-exist and be integrated with pre-alphabetic ones.

Cultural authorship is a main challenge for our circumstance as the proper term includes an important contradiction. Authorship in its original assumption, as it is etymologically understood, that is from the Latin verb *augere*, (and through the Latin *auctor* and the French *autor*) is better combined to culture than the contemporary understanding of authorship as ownership and as right to privatize, exploit and commodify the cultural assets. [5] Still, the notion of author is an important one for the preservation of the unique, distinctive and irreplaceable subject, an important and valuable achievement of the alphabetic world that gave artists an exceptional and exclusive role in the alphabetic world.

Interestingly enough this open challenge was spotted by the schoolchildren of the elementary schools who responded with great enthusiasm in their partaking in the project and who suggested that this is going to be their own museum. Nevertheless, they affirmed that the PALIMPSEST team but also the artists involved through the art competition are necessary in order to facilitate the implementation of the museum.

The PALIMPSEST team faces this challenge as an opportunity to rethink how collectivities, public engagement, crowdsourcing and co-creation can be combined

respectfully with artistic creation as a differentiated, exclusive and highly important process for the creation of new cultural assets. It becomes obvious that the challenge we affront is not only to preserve cultural assets of the past but also stimulate the proper cycle of culture, as new creation is also an important undertaking for our cultural future.

Work in Progress

The PALIMPSEST team is already working upon collected stories in a preparatory and introductory way. Stories are transcribed, image and sound are added and short videos with still images are published in the social media pages of PALIMPSEST in order to test acceptance from the contributors of the stories and also of the general public. This process was not originally included in the work-plan of the project but it was considered a valuable testbed for the more complicated art interpretations that will take place in the city and has so far given very positive results.

  https://www.facebook.com/gritpalimpsest/videos/vb.686148385112833/398938790891326/?type=2&theater

Xenofon Bitsikas, L 2005_b_165X115cm (detail)

Xenofon Bitsikas, C 2005, 165X115cm (detail)

Xenofon Bitsikas, 70X100cm x 5 transparent layers , 1998   (Glium detail)

https://www.facebook.com/gritpalimpsest/videos/vb.686148385112833/36215493
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Xenofon Bitsikas, emigrant, 2002 [B 4a (detail 20x30cm

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