ARTIST’S ARTICLE

The Virtual Artist’s Book as a Space for Curatorial Experiments

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The author presents postdoctoral research on the concept of art exhibitions presented as virtual artist's books. The author's intent was to conduct theoretical research on emerging trends in art curation and virtual artists' books, in addition to creating a digital art exhibition to be displayed in museums and other cultural venues. The research resulted in the creation of a hybrid augmented reality book titled “Acropolis Remix,” which can be exhibited in galleries, museums, libraries, gardens, private homes, etc.

During the first two decades of the 21st century, art exhibitions using new media often restricted themselves to virtually reproducing the physical space of the exhibition or to employing digital devices for supporting educational mediation (as in the case of the Modigliani exhibition at Tate Modern in 2017) instead of presenting works constructed with these technologies [1]. New media (including “art and technology,” “computer art,” “systems art,” and other previous rubrics) is being increasingly used by artists at present. However, Lev Manovich has observed a preference for using established formats, such as the virtual tour of the exhibition, over formats involving laboratory processes and systematic investigation [2]. According to Manovich, few artists are dedicated to investigating equivalent new media forms and procedures. He mentions as examples without equivalents the forms of “a shot, sentence, word, or even letter” [3].

In an attempt to investigate equivalent forms of curatorial art using new media, I proposed researching the digital exhibition of artist's books. I planned the research at the postdoctoral level in the graduate program Art, Virtual Reality & Multi-User systems of Artistic Expression of the Athens [Greece] School of Fine Arts under the supervision of Manthos Santorineos. I intended this research to focus theoretically on new trends in contemporary art curation and virtual artist's books, in addition to creating an art exhibition in digital format designed to be displayed in museums and other cultural venues, titled Acropolis Remix. The proposed research was intended to be positioned at the triangular intersection of the worlds of the arts, namely those of academia, new media and the gallery. The latter is understood here as traditional institutional exhibition spaces of the arts, such as galleries and museums [4]. An investigation into the possibilities of expanding art curation practice to the artist's book on new media (360° panorama and augmented reality) was also part of the intended goals.

As Santorineos states, “With regard to art, various fields have played a significant role in the development, promotion and exchange of ideas, such as specialized festivals, research centers, university faculties with the new post-graduate departments, and the Internet” [5]. On the other hand, Shanken states that “yet rarely does the mainstream artworld converge with the new media artworld. As a result, their discourses have become increasingly divergent” [6]. My intention was precisely to explore the new possibilities that emerge at the intersection of the fields referred to by Santorineos and Shanken, by proposing a digitally curated exhibition that would span the territories of academic research, the new postgraduate programs, the Internet and museums, in order to promote collaboration, increasing creation and distribution of content.

The choice of the digital artist's book as an exhibition space was an offshoot of collaborative academic research [7] that generated my coauthorship of curatorial experiments in photo books in PDF format [8,9]. These experiments led to the need for further investigation into the potential of artists' books in the context of cyberculture. The intention was to expand the limits of the PDF, through reflection and experimentation of innovative contemporary practices in the field of art curation and book design.

Regarding the possibilities of exploring artists’ books as an exhibition space, I rely on Panek's assertion that "the gallery’s exhibition space is transferred to the space of the book and has to provide a differentiated attitude as it relates the exhibition and distribution of artwork” [10]. The expansion of
curated art exhibition to the space of the book, whether real or virtual, allows art to be accessible to a diverse audience, expanding its possibilities of reception. The digital book has a portability even broader than that of the paper book, as it can be simultaneously accessed by users in different parts of the world, over the Internet or through other means. Thus, traditional book forms are re-created virtually, and in every re-creation new spaces are opened. According to Bodman,

The conceptual development of the page in computer media can also be read in a different way—not as a further development of a codex form, but as a return to earlier forms such as the papyrus roll of ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome. Scrolling through the contents of a computer window or a World Wide Web page has more in common with unrolling than it does with turning the pages of a modern book [11].

From its inception in ancient times, the book has proven to be a revolutionary object. Taking many different forms, from papyrus rolls through the parchment codex and the printed paper book to the electronic and virtual book, it has been characterized as a vehicle of transmission of knowledge and creativity, symbolically marking the history of ideas and the arts. Numerous thinkers and renowned artists have made use of this medium, promoting and extending the reach of their creations, due to its characteristics of portability and longevity (ars longa).

In order to better understand the nature of the artist's book, I first researched what a book is. According to Carrión's definition, "a book is a space-time sequence," a sequence of spaces that are perceived at different times. The sequence of the book is made up not necessarily of linguistic signs, but any other system of signs. Carrión says that "a book can also exist as an autonomous and self-sufficient form." He postulates a new art of making books where the content plays a secondary role and where investigation into the shape and structure of the book itself becomes emphasized. According to him, "to make a book is to actualize its ideal space-time sequence by means of the creation of a parallel sequence of signs, be it linguistic or other" [12]. Such statements led me to question what the ideal exhibition space in virtual environment would be, in order to perform the creation of a sequence of space/time with artistic works reflecting curatorial trends and contemporary forms.

Because the initial intention was to experiment with a form that could be exhibited in museums and other unconventional spaces, I researched the available technologies. Among these technologies, those that caught my attention were augmented reality, where I saw the possibility of producing an art exhibition in the form of an augmented book, and the equirectangular 360° panorama, with which I could create a virtual cube.

One of the concerns I had in executing the project was not to simply reproduce the patterns of books and exhibitions already established, only transporting them to the virtual environment, but to think and design an innovative piloting process of art curation, which could be shared as a model for developing virtual exhibitions by art curators. For the Internet environment, the use of 360° panorama was the best alternative found at first, with a view not only to display of the works but also to the possibility of interactivity, sharing and engagement by users. Formatting the equirectangular 360° panorama proved feasible and simple, meeting the project objectives. Despite its cubic structure, the form of navigation is circular, and the camera (the user's point of view) is in the center. Thus, an international call for artists was held in this format, made available on the project website www.acropolisremix.eu.org and also published on the social network Facebook (on this last platform, the call reached over 10,000 views in the first week).

The cube contains concepts and a link to the call for artists, working both as a marketing piece and as a curatorial statement. The concepts presented in the statement were: "new media, panorama, digital art, hybridism, transdisciplinarity, immersive storytelling, exhibition art, net art, art, algorithms, artist's book, virtual exhibition, contemporary art, research, alternative, space" (Fig. 1), concepts that I wished to explore during the development of the project, still embryonic at that moment. Therefore I intended this object containing the curatorial statement to be one of the forms of the

![Fig. 1. Curatorial statement in the equirectangular 360° panorama format.](© Celina Lage)
transmedia exhibition. According to my view, the curatorial concepts would be a way to intersemiotically translate the virtual artist’s book into an interactive 3D cube, which could be considered an art exhibit in itself, a kind of visual poem. The attitude of considering the curatorial statement as a work of art and part of the art exhibition is in line with the current trend in the arts to consider the curator an exhibition’s author and, ultimately, an artist [13]. Thus the curatorial statement would gain a new status, positioning itself as a work of art.

The curatorial statement was conceived in two formats: an equirectangular 360° panorama format, containing concepts related to the theoretical research of the project and the call for artists; and a narrative curatorial statement, explaining the exhibition theme in narrative form to artists and the public. Both statements were included in the project website. The narrative statement presents the theme of the Acropolis Remix exhibition, the proposal for deconstruction and virtual reconstruction of the monument, its historical contexts and variable meanings. As I see it, the Acropolis is a work in progress, which continues to be transformed according to the historical context and artistic rereadings. I gave the first exhibition the subtitle Disruptive Monumentality, opening the possibility of creating new exhibitions with different subtitles within the same Acropolis Remix project.

We received works by artists from many countries, which were selected by a curatorial team composed of me (Universidade do Estado de Minas Gerais [UEMG], Brazil), Gabriela Carvalho (Casa Camelo, Brazil), Patricia Marques (UEMG, Brazil) and Anna Meli (Athens School of Fine Arts, ASFA, Greece). The selected works, according to the call, were either digital or digitized, static or moving images (GIF art, video art, animation). Musical pieces were also selected, composed with physical and/or electronic instruments. The digital works are related to the exhibition theme and respond directly or indirectly to at least one of the following questions: How might we best deconstruct and reconstruct or update the Acropolis? How do we deal with the monuments of the past? How do we disrupt the Acropolis’s monumentality? What would an Acropolis that we built today be like? How do we create original artworks from existing ideas and forms, establishing a critical perspective? How can the idea and ideals of ancient Greece be recycled in contemporary images? How can the complexity of our time be addressed through a new reading of the Acropolis? The curatorial team selected artworks that are intellectually provocative, combine complex meanings, state a point of view and/or are an exercise of the creative imagination. The selected works are: Placed and Lost:012MMX by Fernando Hermógenes Aguiar da Silva (Brazil), 163 and 163d and g0n3 by Sierra Ortega (U.S.A.), Khôra by Czar ML (Mexico), Loop through me by Konstantin Elfmov (Russia), Birth by Jeannine Vökel (Germany), Journey to the Olympus by Olga Guse (Russia), Artaeology by Paul Matosic (U.K.), Woven In Time by Susan Plover (U.K.), Untitled by Peter Devenyi (Canada), Pollution by Sevgi Tan (Turkey), Night echoes of a reconstructed plagiaulos of Koile in the surroundings of the Acropolis by George Bar (Greece), Fragments Imprints by Anna Meli (Greece), R-evo and Organica by Antonio D’Amato (Italy) and Apparition by William Lindley (U.K.).

For the physical exhibition, I created a hybrid book format (phigital) in augmented reality [14]. After several experiments with the technologies available, I decided to use augmented reality with the open-source program ARToolKit in conjunction with the game development platform Unity 3D. For the exhibition design, I adapted the logo and the letters contained in the project title Acropolis Remix (Fig. 2) plus a hash symbol (#) as markers/anchors to the exhibition objects. Thus, using the markers as references, the digital objects were anchored in the real world.

I created a total of 16 markers, and there were one to three digital objects anchored in each of them. The user must therefore use a tablet or smartphone interface (Android system) to access the works anchored (Fig. 3) in each marker through scanning. Still images and moving images were applied to plans as textures, which were anchored in the markers mentioned above and located in different positions, always above them. Musical works were not associated with any other type of digital image in addition to the markers, being accessed simply by the visualization of those, retaining an immaterial, invisible character.

In the first test the markers were printed on 300gsm (grams per square meter) paper, 33 × 33 cm with matte lamination,
so that they could keep a solid shape. They were arranged as loose pages, not attached to one another, and placed in a hard, white plastic envelope (Fig. 4). Also inside the envelope is a page with a QR code, which directs to an explanatory page of the project on the website. The information on artists, titles of works, curators, etc., can be found in this way; the workflow and the application can also be downloaded.

In *Acropolis Remix*, the envelope with loose markers/pages is the artist’s book, whose pages the user spreads around as they wish to access the exhibition, displaying the markers with the use of the application, using the tablet and smartphone (Android system) interface (Fig. 5), as in the experiment conducted in the Multimedia Hypermedia & Video Art Laboratory [15]. If the user does not want to print the markers/pages, there is also a second choice, which is to access them only through their digital display (in this case one sees the interface through another interface with the markers, for example, a smartphone displaying the screen of a PC). A third possibility would be printing and later viewing the markers through the computer interface, with live footage and projection on a screen or wall, while the public handles the markers. Because the pages are loose, there are numerous possibilities of combination and interaction among the works, from the visual and musical points of view. An example of that are the soundtracks of videos and musical pieces, which can be played all at once or in varying combinations, creating a disruptive soundscape. When users access the works by scanning the markers, they have the option to access one by one or several at once, which causes a constant remix on display assembly, reinforcing the concept proposed by the curatorial statement.

I must mention here two references that were used from the past to design the display format: the series *Boîte en valise* by Marcel Duchamp (1935–1940) and the publication *4,492,040* by Lucy Lippard (1969–1974). Both works consisted of a portable exhibition—the first with reproductions of the artist’s own works and the second with reproductions of works by various artists. Both used the logic of loose pages, each in its own way, allowing users to manipulate and arrange the pages in the way they wanted. The logic of loose pages adopted by me reinforces the concept of the disruption of monumentality, present in the exhibition’s subtitile, as it is a deconstruction of the traditional codex form.

Unlike other forms of the augmented reality book, in which the book pages contain anchors
along with other elements (images or texts), the format I created, which I call the “augmented artist’s anchorbook,” presumes the anchors themselves as the book’s pages. It has great portability, as it can be digitally shared along with printing and workflow instructions or be exhibited in galleries, museums, libraries, gardens, private homes, etc., its sole limitation being the need for access and use of compatible technology. It should be noted that the same markers/book anchors could easily be used to host many exhibitions with different applications, i.e. each book could anchor multiple exhibitions and become an infinite book. The infinitude of the book and its exhibition possibilities is still being tested, as it is conceived to be a work in progress.

In conclusion, in the Acropolis Remix project the artist’s book acquires a new potency, favoring the dissemination and creation of original works and establishing new forms of relationship with the public. As stated by Cook and Barkley, “Continual reinvention is the key challenge for curators in adapting their understanding of where, when, and how new media and digital arts are best received by audiences” [16]. The artist’s book has proven to be a means that is conducive to experimentation and can be used in digital or hybrid (phigital) format as a way to rethink the art space in an innovative way. It works as a virtual space for alternative, autonomous and independent exhibition, which goes beyond the art world and reaches a much wider audience.

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References and Notes


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