

EPHEMERON - SCULPTING A COLLECTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS AND MAPPING A COLLABORATIVE PROCESS

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Abstract

Ephemeron is an interactive installation resulting from the collaboration of artists during the e-MobilArt project. *Ephemeron*, a responsive sculpture, attempts to express the eternal ephemeral human epic: the daily song of pain and struggle, love and loss, lived by beings full of "mud and dreams". The installation comprises an audio soundscape, projected video and a large fabric form under high tension and with a floor of sand. Visitors may enter the form, where the projected video and soundscape become sensitive to their presence. Keywords: collaboration, interaction, visual arts, sound, music, video.

Ephemeron is an audio-visual, biomorphic sculpture collaboratively created by four participants in the e-MobilArt project for interactive artists: Barry L. Roshto (DE/USA), Eleni Panouklia (GR), John Holder (UK) and Sally Pryor (AU). The artwork premiered, alongside other e-MobilArt artworks, at the Greek State Museum of Contemporary Art in Thessaloniki, a parallel event to the 2nd Thessaloniki Biennale.

The name *Ephemeron* is derived from the Greek word *ephemeris*, meaning, "daily; lasting or living only a day". *Ephemeron*, the artwork, invites an emotional engagement with the eternal, ephemeral human epic, the daily song of pain and struggle, love and loss, the in-

volvement of the past (both tragic and glorious) and the future (both hopeful or possibly cataclysmic). A source of inspiration came from the statement by Nikos Kazantzakis: "I am an ... ephemeral being, frail and weak; full of mud and dreams [1].

Ephemeron has an outer skin of stretched fabric enclosing an inner skin containing a floor of sand (Fig. 1). Peering through an opening in these membranes, visitors can see a video projection of cascading water down the inside of the form and onto the sand. When visitors enter the sculpture, they encounter a dynamic, yet subtle, multi-channel soundscape consisting of fragments of traditional folk songs that become increasingly coherent the longer the visitor remains. Similarly, the flowing "river" of video projection is also transformed by the visitors' presence.

Ephemeron's biomorphic shape is itself a mirror of the process of living: the uncertainties, emotional inconsistencies, hooks, weights and encumbrances of the physical body, family and cultural ties. The audiovisuals also mirror those processes. Together, the three elements of form, moving light and sound attempt to express tensions between physical limitations and spiritual/emotional aspirations. The water is genesis, both evolutionary and biological; the songs, a record of shared experiences, a collective attempt at transcending physical reality, and most especially an absolute, direct method of emotional communication. On the one hand, nature, on the other, nurture.

The initial impression of *Ephemeron*

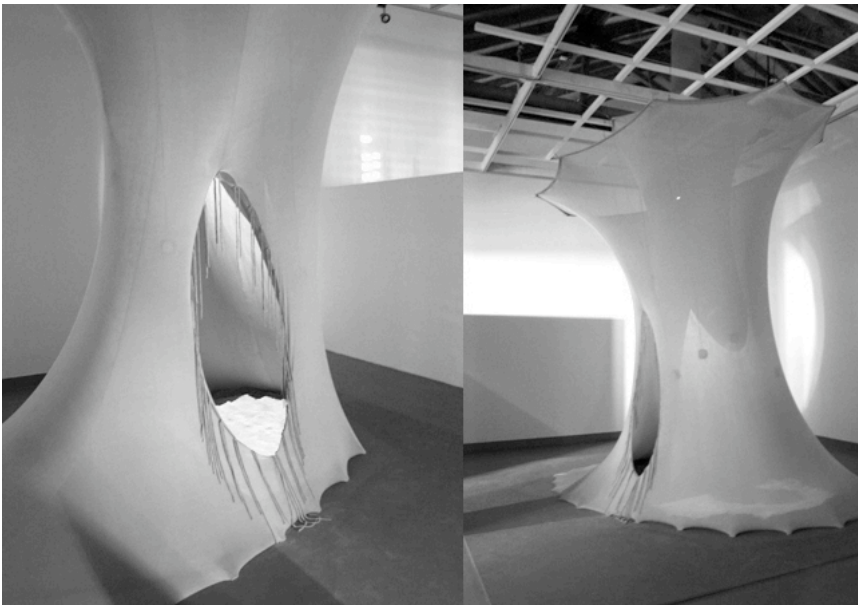
as an installation is the imposing sculptural form made of grey fabric. This is under extreme tension, stretched in the direction of what might seem like random points in space. The guide wires attached to the fishing hooks are the only straight lines in the space and are seemingly invisible, having no apparent correlation to each other. This is an interesting result considering that Eleni Panouklia, the artist who created this flexible amorphous form, had previously worked almost exclusively with cubes and grids.

Panouklia originally designed the form of *Ephemeron* as a glass cube (Fig. 2) and this met the structural requirements for the phase-canceling speakers intended for the audio stream (see below). However, as the audio element evolved, the collaborative dialog continued and, perhaps also influenced by the turbulent conditions in Athens, Panouklia realized that she must abandon the safety of the box. The development processes of the form and of the audio had a particularly intimate, reflexive relationship: one leading the other, then reversing; one trying to "get into" another, then reversing, and so on. The river at Rovaniemi, one of e-MobiLArt's key locations, was also a strong influence. *Ephemeron's* final form thus became kinetic, adaptive (site specific) to the exhibition space, a product of many forces pulling from various points and the result of the myriad of tensions we encounter in our work and in our ephemeral lives.

The audio concept of the installation began as a literal sonification of the notion of our initial proposition to "make the invisible visible". Speakers suspended opposite each other emanating out of phase sine waves would produce no audible sound. Only when actions in the space (such as visitor presence) caused deviations in the interval between the speakers would the hidden, ubiquitous soundtrack be revealed. After numerous experimentations, this plan was abandoned because there were no results that could be reproduced within the projected conditions. Exactly at this moment of frustration, when we were pondering how to resolve this sonic problem, we discovered that there was some common sonic ground within the group. There were similar transcultural family traditions, involving the singing of traditional folk songs.

After experiencing and reflecting upon the power of the traditional sung word (even in a language that one didn't comprehend), it became apparent that this

Fig. 1. *Ephemeron* installed at the Greek State Museum of Contemporary Art, 2009. Photos © Barry Roshto



might offer a method of unlocking hitherto invisible spaces of the human mind. The traditional folk song is a collection and expression of the human condition within a cultural context that is trans-generational, ranging often over many centuries. Interestingly enough, in spite of, or maybe even particularly because of its universality, it is also a method of experiencing cherished memories long forgotten. It could even be considered as the most widespread synaesthetic phenomena. A certain popular song can bring back images and smells long forgotten. So we set to work individually recording our songs. The intention remained the same, but the method had changed dramatically. Now we would attempt to conjure memories in individual visitors by means of “word-tone” fragments randomly extracted from traditional songs embedded in their specific cultures. We included a love song and a lullaby each from the English, Greek and Polish traditions due to the constitution of the group and the exhibition localities.

With the video projections, the first ideas involved capturing shadows of visitors for computer manipulation. Actions inside the space would be tracked and used to manipulate the images, which would then be distorted, morphed or even granulated into clouds of smoke. The question of how and where the video should be positioned within the space was particularly difficult. When it became clear that the structure would have a floor of sand and that the form would not provide any flat surfaces, the prospect of using recognizable images was revisited. The sand was considered an extremely interesting anomalous pro-

jection plane, with the prospect for producing unique shadows. As a result of this change and in empathy with the sand, the video became more abstract. A relationship between form, sand and video was sought. Rippling watery reflections were created from three-dimensional algorithms. We intended to project them low down across the sandy base, creating long shadows that the viewer could affect. The equivalence to a flowing river was inevitable, and seemed to fit the concept of *Ephemeron*, mirroring the continuum of passing time.

A camera tracking system was developed at the same time in order to enable participants to interact with the sculpture. The system involved observation of participants and projected shadows from above, with this data driving the manipulation of the audio in order to slowly reveal or conceal more coherent fragments. The changing level of sound within the installation was to be monitored by a microphone, in turn causing the video’s fractal peaks to expand upward and subsequently fade quickly back into the continuum.

During the actual gallery hanging of the form, it became difficult to project and observe at the intended positions. An alternative solution was for the projection to be placed above the participant at an angle, in order to enable the video to flow as sheets of fluid greenish fractals down the inner membrane, resembling a cascading waterfall. Upon reaching the sandy floor the fractals rippled, shimmering perhaps as if caught by sunlight. The similarity to a shallow sandy cove or gently flowing river evolved, and seemed to fit the concept of *Ephemeron*

and mirror the continuum of passing time. The microphone was hidden between the two membranes and monitored the ambient sound being produced by the installation and the participant(s). This data-stream was used to affect the turbulence of the fluid video projections and hence to subtly affect the audio output via the influence of the camera tracking system.

As an installation, *Ephemeron* is a “mapping” of real and virtual spaces: the actual physical space in which the object is installed, as well as the more interesting, invisible spaces produced by the interplay of form, light and sound. However, the piece also functions on a meta-level. A map can be understood as an abstraction of something that we have perceived, perhaps in order to obtain an overview or analysis, or maybe, as an attempt at bringing observed objects under control. Although the value of a map increases with its precision, it remains a subjective interpretation and is, often enough, a projection of subjectivities, and even personal agendas. However, if the observed object is itself in flux and/or invisible, as in the case of an evolving collaborative creative process, the map also becomes an object of observation. Without the possibility of referencing and comparing the original to the abstraction, one often (out of necessity or convenience) makes a map of the map.

Throughout the research and construction process involved in creating this artwork, the development of each of its three individual elements created force fields and momenta that influenced each other and created tensions that are evident in the finished installation. This process led each individual artist to solutions that s/he most certainly would not have considered or needed if working alone. Thus, the artwork can also be viewed as a “mapping” of the collaborative process itself.

References and Notes

1. Nikos Kazantzakis, *The Saviors of God* (1923). Published in English as *The Saviors of God: Spiritual Exercise*. Kimon Friar trans. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960)

Fig. 2. Original Plan for *Ephemeron*. Image © Eleni Panouklia

