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IN THE SHADOW OF THE PUBLIC LIBRARY. Artistic takes on the Digital Commons.

monoskop.org, Memory of the World, aaaaarg.fail and Ubu.com are projects that make cultural products available online for free: texts/books, historical documents, video and sound works. What is special about these projects is that they have all been initiated and are run by small groups of artists or individual artists. They can be described as collections, as libraries or digital archives. In that sense, the artists behind these projects provide the infrastructure as well as the contents being made available, and they do so without a budget or any sort of official mandate. Rather, the artists are passionate either about the specific content provided, and/or about an individually created technical constellation for the provision of the material. All the projects were initiated as self-directed, experimental and open-ended, and they own their existence greatly to the personal interest of their creators as well as a very generous interpretation of copyright law – which is why I will discuss them in the context of 'shadow libraries.'

Shadow Libraries

While a library, in general, is an institution that collects, orders and makes available published information under aspects of archival, economic and synoptic aspects, a shadow library has an unofficial status. Usually, the infrastructure of shadow libraries is being conceived, built and run by individuals or small groups of people who prefer to stay anonymous for obvious reasons. With regards to the media content provided, most shadow libraries are peer-produced in the sense that they are based on the contribution of a community of supporters. What is specific about shadow

libraries, however, is the fact that they make available anything their contributors consider to be relevant – irrespective of its legal status. That is to say, shadow libraries also provide unauthorized access to copyrighted publications, and they make the material available for download without charge and without any other restrictions.

The notion of the shadow library started to enjoy popularity in the early 2000s when the wide availability of digital networked media contributed to the emergence of large-scale repositories of scientific materials, the most famous one having been Gigapedia, which later transformed into library.nu. This project was famous for hosting approximately 400,000 (scientific) books and journal articles, but had to be shut down in 2012 as a consequence of a series of injunctions from powerful publishing houses. The now leading shadow library in the field – Library Genesis (LibGen) – can be considered as its even more influential successor. As of November 2016, the database contained 25 million documents (42 terabytes), of which 2.1 million were books, with digital copies of scientific articles published in 27,134 journals by 1342 publishers.[1] The large majority of the digital material is of scientific and educational nature (95%), while only 5% serves recreational purposes.[2] The repository is based on various ways of crowd-sourcing, i.e., social and technical forms of accessing and sharing academic publications. Despite a number of legal cases and court orders, the site is still available under various and changing domain names.[3]

The related project Sci-Hub is an online service that processes requests for pay-walled articles by providing systematic, automated, but unauthorized backdoor access to proprietary scholarly journal databases. Users requesting papers not present in LibGen are advised to download them through Sci-Hub; the respective PDF files are served to users and automatically added to LibGen (if not already present). According to *Nature* magazine, Sci-Hub hosts around 60 million academic papers and was able to serve 75 million downloads in 2016. On a daily basis 70,000 users access approximately 200,000 articles.

 The founder of the meta library Sci-Hub is Kazakh programmer Alexandra Elbakyan, who has been sued by large publishing houses and was convicted twice to pay almost 20 million US$ in compensation for the losses her activities allegedly have caused, which is why she had to go underground in Russia. For illegally leaking millions of documents the *New York Times* compared

[1] Cabanac, Guillaume, "Bibliogifts in LibGen? A study of a text-sharing platform driven by biblioleaks and crowdsourcing," in: *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology*, 67, (4) (2016): 874–884, 2016.
[2] Ibid.
[3] The current address is: http://libgen.is (accessed on Dec. 11, 2019).

her to Edward Snowden in 2016: "While she didn't reveal state secrets, she took a stand for the public's right to know by providing free online access to just about every scientific paper ever published, ranging from acoustics to zymology."[4] In the same year the prestigious *Nature* magazine elected her as one of the ten most influential people in science.[5] Unlike other persecuted people, Elbakyan went on the offensive and started to explain her actions and motives in court documents and blog posts. Sci-Hub's intention is to encourage new ways of distributing knowledge, beyond any commercial interests. It provides a radically open infrastructure thus creating an inviting atmosphere.

As the Amsterdam–based media scholar Bodó Balázs indicated, these sorts of libraries and collections could be considered to be the practical manifestation of Aaron Swartz' *Guerilla Open Access Manifesto* (2008). In this manifesto, the American hacker and activist pointed out the flaws of open access politics and aimed at recruiting supporters for the idea of radical open access. Radical in this context means to completely ignore copyright and simply make as much information available as possible. "Information is power," is how the manifesto begins. Basically, it addresses the – what he calls – privileged, in the sense that they do have access to information as academic staff or librarians, and he calls on their support for building a system of freely available information by using their privilege, downloading and making available information.

> "We need to take information, wherever it is stored, make our copies and share them with the world. We need to take stuff that's out of copyright and add it to the archive. We need to buy secret databases and put them on the Web. We need to download scientific journals and upload them to file sharing networks. We need to fight for Guerilla Open Access. With enough of us, around the world, we'll not just send a strong message opposing the privatization of knowledge — we'll make it a thing of the past. Will you join us?"[6]

Swartz, who had been a politically minded hacker all his life, was sued in 2013 by US state prosecutors for downloading 4.8 million scientific articles, and, very sadly, committed suicide

[4] Murphy, Kate, 'Should All Research Papers Be Free?"', *New York Times Sunday Review*, Mar. 12, 2016. Online available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/13/opinion/sunday/should-all-research-papers-be-free.html (accessed on Dec. 11, 2019).
[5] Richard Van Noorden, "Nature's 10," *Nature*, Dec. 19, 2016, https://www.nature.com/news/nature-s-10-1.21157 (accessed on Dec. 11, 2019).
[6] Available at: https://gist.github.com/usmanity/4522840

before the trail began. His ideas, however, stayed alive, and many contemporary projects can be considered to operate in his spirit.

Artistic Shadow Libraries

The idea of radical open access has been practiced in the art context for more than twenty years where the materials provided refer to specific, often niche interests. These artistic shadow libraries often make use of resources from the art world to keep the projects alive while, at the same time, their (contested) status as art projects helps to disseminate the underlying issues such as the growing enclosure of informational and cultural goods. Nevertheless, they provide a fully functional "service" that is totally independent from the art world context.

Monoskop

The first example to mention is Monoskop, a wiki and a wordpress blog, founded in 2004. It is a repository aggregating, documenting and mapping works, artists and initiatives related to the avant-gardes, media arts, theory and activism. It provides both an exhaustive, indexical overview of those fields and also digital access to rare historic finds. Initially it focused on Eastern and Central Europe. That is also where it originated, in Bratislava, Slovakia. Its spiritus rector and movens is artist Dušan Barok who has built the wiki and maintains the site while it is easy to get editor rights and contribute, most of the editorial and publishing contributions come from Dušan. The site contains around 6,500 pages and 11,900 uploaded files. Currently, it has 4,200 registered users from all over the world. The related blog repository features daily releases of books, journals or other printed archival material, some freshly digitized by Monoskop and some contributed by the users, authors and publishers.[7]

Memory of the World

By contrast, Memory of the World is a network of interconnected shadow libraries, each maintained locally and independently from the others. The idea is that people have their private library of ebooks and pdfs organized through Calibre, an open source software for managing digital

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[7] Source: https://www.memoryoftheworld.org/blog/2014/10/28/monoskop/

books. These individual libraries sit on people's private computers, but they are connected through a plug-in with the server of the project. The workflow includes that the catalogues and meta data are uploaded, and the server functions as a kind relay between peers. This plug-in is called "let's share books" and it has been developed conceptually and technically by Marcell Mars, who, together with Tomislav Medak and a few other collaborators runs and represents the project. A special feature of the project is a number of permanently available sub-libraries, for each of which there is a small group of amateur librarians who are taking care of it. The project has started in 2011, and also emerged in Eastern Europe in the context of the independent media center MaMa in Zagreb. Conceptually, MotW pays tribute to the idea of the public library expanding its traditional notion into an even more ubiquitous access to information – based on the Internet and the contributions of the many who have become librarians in their own right.

AAARG

According to its self-definition, AAAARG was created with the intention of developing critical discourse outside of an institutional framework. It describes itself as a "conversation platform – performing, at different times, as a school, or a reading group, or a journal." In fact, the project evolved in the context of the informal educational project The Public School in Los Angeles in 2004, and meanwhile has become a comprehensive content management platform referred to as "the missing university library on a global scale." It is specialized in texts/books in the fields of architecture, art, philosophy, and media theory, and unlike other projects in this ecosystem, AAARG is very much user-driven and peer-based when it comes to its contents. Its more than 100,000 active users keep the repository up to date and make it into a resource put together by its users. This is certainly due to its origin in the context of self-organized learning, and it is also reflected, to a certain degree, in its set-up that provides various formats for collaboration.

UbuWeb

Ubu is also a large web repository, focussing on "avant-garde art," according to its founder Kenneth Goldsmith. It was founded in 1997 as a site of visual and concrete poetry, later also including sound poetry, art videos and documentaries. Today, the archive contains thousands of art works. Ubu contextualizes them within curated sections and also provides framing academic essays. Although it is a private project, run by Goldsmith along, his writing practice, without a budget, Ubu has become a major point of reference for anyone interested in exploring 20th century avant-garde art, and it has built a reputation of making all the things available one would not find

elsewhere. At the same time, it is a highly controversial project, not the least because of its generous interpretation of copyright law. Ubu provides cultural resources, which are out of print, or "absurdly priced or insanely hard to procure," thus functioning as a distribution center for hard-to-find, out-of-print and obscure materials, transferred digitally to the web." The content is not presented in a consistent taxonomy model, but is mainly collected and organized along the interests of its operator. While it is an easy to access archive, Ubu is exclusively based on the curatorial concept of its founder. In this sense, it could almost be considered a private collection being made public. And like none of the other projects, Ubu is actively promoted by Goldsmiths strong performance as genius artist. This contradiction between embodying the 19th century genius and promoting the "uncreative genius" while serving the public good by providing the services related to Ubu, is one of the aspects that makes the project particularly exciting.

Conclusion

Given the fact that these projects all operate on no or little money, it is all the more stunning how they were able to survive and even expand to such an extent. The cultural resources being taken care of, the artefacts are numbered in the hundreds of thousands just as their users. Although located in a special interest sector of cultural goods, due to their radical open access, practiced in the art context they unfold an enormous symbolic value, parallel to their practical value. The fact that they have to move beyond the restrictions of current copyright law in order to practice their philosophy demonstrates the urgency of the matter, the matter of accessibility to knowledge and distribution of knowledge. In this sense, they are manifestations of current political problems rather than solutions, and their relevance lies in the complexity of the questions they are asking.

Remarks:

1) The research underlying this text has been conducted as part of the SNF-funded research project on art and digital commons *Creating Commons*, hosted by the Zürcher Hochschule der Künste: creatingcommons.zhdk.ch
2) Parts of this text have already been included in: "The Surplus of Copying—How Shadow Libraries and Pirate Archives Contribute to the Creation of Cultural Memory and the Commons," published in: Michael Kargl and Franz Thalmair (Eds.), *originalcopy. Post-digital Strategies of Appropriati*on, edition: angewandte, Vienna/ de Gruyter, Berlin/Boston, 2019.

Video interviews with the artists introduced above are to be found here:

- *From Notepad to Cultural Resource. The Aesthetics of Crosslinking at Monoskop*, Interview with Dušan Barok:
  http://creatingcommons.zhdk.ch/from-notepad-to-cultural-resource/
- *Caring for the Public Library*, Interview with Marcell Mars & Tomislav Medak:
  http://creatingcommons.zhdk.ch/caring-for-the-public-library/
- *The Practice of Sharing Knowledge*:
  http://creatingcommons.zhdk.ch/the-practice-of-sharing-knowledge/
- *The Poetry of Archiving*, Interview with Kenneth Goldsmith:
  http://creatingcommons.zhdk.ch/the-poetry-of-archiving-kenneth-goldsmith/