Transcript

Publishing as Commons Practice, Interview with Alessandro Ludovico

http://creatingcommons.zhdk.ch/publishing-as-commons-practice/

AL:	00:28	Neural is a magazine, a quite classic magazine and it started in November 19th, almost exactly 25 years ago. It started in a completely different media landscape and it started with the basic need to talk about the relationship between technology and culture reflecting the practices of that time. The time was particularly exciting because there was the internet that was finally arriving to average people. And so also to the artistic community and to the musicians and music scene in general, but also quite a few different technologies like the first wave of virtual reality. The specific angle we wanted to find was to see how technology's enabled the different types of processes in our minds. That's why we call it the neural and there are a couple of things which are worth to mention. One is that it was not the only magazine, of course we did a new about that in advance.
AL:	02:05	But the first issue or white magazine was out just six months before the first issue of Mute magazine came out just six months later. There was no communication among all these different worlds. And only in Italy there were these five to six publications, from zines to commercial magazines talking out technologies and different type of creative practices. That's also why the main concept for me has always been not to do something which would be exclusive or the possible best example or in simple words, the best possible magazine about the topics. But to be a node in a network. That concept that always fascinated me, still does. And I think it's still valid. The network paradigm for me was extremely important. It does change a lot of course over 25 years. There's plenty of things that we can mention, but let's say that mainly the magazine has to evolve after each issue reflecting what's going on, what is going on both, let's say, technical, culturally and strategically. It has been evolved from being a classic magazine in a most, classic media environment. So TV, radio, magazines, music, mainly to digital permeate daily life. And I still think it's interesting to run a print magazine because of that, because it's continuously changing environment and the challenges to still making it sustainable and interesting. Possibly.

AL: 04:14   Yeah, it is a research idea funnded by libraries and supported indeed I have to mention that by, the Winchester school art at the University of Southampton where I work. It's both practice and theory combined, but is quite performed around to practice-based. The start of the concept is to bring the books were, or the publications bring the publications when they are needed. So even a, finding the library as one of the most important in strategical cultural asset in contemporary society. I find the classic library concept too limiting in terms of space and time because you have to go to a library, there are wonderfull libraries, but they're only accessibility is to physically go there.

AL: 05:32   The idea is to metaphorically break these boundaries, the physical boundaries, the walls. So the temporary library is conducted in this way. It needs an event, a public event to start, then to this event is proposed to create a very small public library, publicly accessible within the event. It's usually a themeatized, usually geographically thematized and curated. This is also an important, and I'm never doing it alone. I'm co-cuturating it with somebody who is a more specific, are involved either in the territory, in the topic. We curate list of books and publications in general, books, magazines, zines and catalogues. We ask for donations to publishers, institutions, artists,, cultural practioners and we organize library for the event.

AL: 06:45   Then the library hopefully is enjoyed. We also produce a very small material list of all the publications included, which you can take away with all the donors as well. So there's a bridge, there's a contact, if you want find the book that you are interested in and you want to, have a copy. You can contact the donor of course and find your way to get a copy personal one. And very importantly, when the event's is finished, this resource, which I would like to call a common and which is the developed with minimal or even zero budget, is then donated to another institution. Usually we have an agreement in advance with an offshore library, usually an academic library, and we donate the whole collection, under two conditions. One is that this collection should be cataloged as a special collection so that it can easily be put together at will.

AL: 07:59   And the other condition, which is straight, strictly related, that is that in case there's another event that asks for this collection temporary for the event, the library has to be open to enter a discussion. Our problems will be solved. Of course, shipping costs, insurance eventually had to get all the materials back. But in this way, there are a few processes that are generated. One is the creation of a free resource, the second is that the resource is stable. The third is that the space of the library becomes a

social space. It's not just exhibiting the books, but the books can be experienced. And even more there's an opportunity to exchange opinions, discuss them, discover, point other people to publications that are not so well known. So it becomes a social space and this is quite enriching.

AL: 09:09   And the last consequence is that it becomes a stable and properly preserved but at the same time not stuck potentially. It can also travel and go back. And I find it quite relevant. And this whole model, it's not a very specific for media art of course it can be applied to any other cultural sector and particularly sympathetic with underrepresented fields of culture. So especially in this whole underground culture or less represented culture, especially in libraries. They are both important because the first is he's a quite dynamic moment and it's a moment of both exposure and an excuse to gather around a specific collection of culture. Because the idea is to create, is to exploit the exposure in order to create a social moment. And I notice that it works.

AL: 10:37   The point is that there is a very dynamic moment, obviously comes to an end, which is also In the nature of the event, it's temporary. But then the effort should be preserved, not in the classic terms of preservation, but should turn into something that maintains its nature. But at the same time, it's not technically, it shouldn't be technically archived. I mean, when we talk about archives, something that is meant to preserve and maintain more than travel. And I was struck by this characteristic. So trying to translate the dynamicness of the social momentum into something that in a way maybe only metaphorically keeps the energy, in a library as preserved ,maintained, but at the same time keeps these energy in the potential for moving again and create a new dynamic, a new social moment. I think that both express the importance of a producing, let's say conglomerate, curated selections of culture and having them exposed in the people till moment and events like festival very important, but they have this emphemeral nature of producing a lot in a short amount of time. So reconcile these two moments was important. in order to produce something that resonates. But at the same time can continue to express its role afterwards. And the idea, I mean, the effort to produce more in different contexts also creates another kind of network. I mean, this concept of networks resonate again because these are specific collections. They actually don't juxtapose. They almost never juxtapose. So we can start to think about this resoource. Different resources spread geographically as nodes of specific parts of the whole culture.

AL: 13:20   Going back to the trajectory over 25 years, the filter has become more and more important and now I think it's quite essential because the exposure to interesting cultural material that one had 25 years ago was a ridiculously low compared to to what one has now. Now the problem is really about even forcing yourself to filter information as much as possible. Especially intellectually curious people are attracted by a lot of different things and that takes time. And then you end up not dedicating time to the things you care more or care more even to explore, to research. So the filter is a key concept in this and so is the curation. And so it's important, it's extremely important to filter, which doesn't mean at all that that filter, it should be a universal one, usually is quite subjective, but it's valuable. If it comes from some experience, then there is, an accumulation of criteria behind that filter.

AL: 14:40   So it of course it's usually applied in every single archive. It's applied in libraries. And there's this, a parallel between the role of librarian and the role of an editor, which I found quite interesting, because the librarian is also guide, he has to select and put together consistently to serve a purpose. And it's a before magazines who are not, devoted to a commercial logic. It's exactly the same, make a selection to serve a public in the best possible way. I have to say that one of the highest joy about the temporary library development, because every single library takes some elements from the previous one and change them. And it's, I mean, til now it has been quite an evolutionary thing. It's evolving, one after the other.

AL: 15:58   And in the second one, which was a quite challenging, trying to cover Latin America and so different, very different, countries' histories of media, art production, something really enlightening happens, which was that some of the people asked to provide material spontaneously,, suggest other material which we didn't know about. And even if the still was a curatorial guideline, we were able to include publications that we never knew about. So this started to be a more sharing club as a practice, for actually two reasons. One is the complexity we deal with a and the other is a fragmentation of sources which has been augmented over the years. The collaborative dimension is a more and more necessity. The concept of network is resonating once more because it just means to let some nodes be aware of other nodes and bridge them and show them the path to connect.

AL: 17:18   I mean personally it has been something I've done all my, let's say, professional cultural life to connect people to bridge situations that they think could have benefited from just from knowing each other, not

necessarily to plan some shared project immediately or to reach some goal, but to be aware of respective practices, of respective activities. So publishing is a strategy more than as a product. Of course there's a product, it's very important, but the progress has to embed for me the potential of connections.

AL: 18:26   To make it very brief. Of course we have digital publications, we have different formats and there are two perspectives. One is an industrial perspective, which is focused on production and on revenues. And it's usually coming with a, let's say a subtle propaganda about which format is best at the moment and that serves these interests.

AL: 19:10   Then there's a different perspective, which is what kind of role in society, different formats might have. Obviously I'm on the second perspective, I'm trying to analyze the second perspective. And so I still think that the print object has so many specificities that it can't be just replaced by the digital one in any possible format, for a decently long lists of reasons, there's a sensorial reasons or how you experience it. There are economical reasons, there are privacy reasons. So there are shareable reasons. There are reasons connected to preservation of these objects, there are plenty but I don't think they are alternative. Obviously, digital publications development strongly influence the print one.Neural has been heavily influenced by the whole digital publications development. But I do think that in contemporaneity they are complementary. They compliment each other, they serve different purposes.

AL: 20:42   Why the printed one is central. I think that it's central because maintains a role of physical connection between the producers and the persons using them. And then the possible sharing of this resource, which is a physical one and did implies a different relationship because obviously there's a much more, let's say organic media involved than the digital, it's just that the manifestation of the collection of printed materials produced by others, which as a magazine we have received it in 25 years. It's the manifestation in terms that to this collection as every magazine is still lying in our spaces. So it's a secluded, I started to think that the first is a relevant collection because it's s few thousand publications and the specially, most of them are not so, known and acknowledged and present in bibliographies, in libraries as I was mentioning before and so on.

AL: 22:22   So I thought it's a relevant collection, but it's secluded and it has been also on from an ethical point of view donated, therefore the largest part by the community of this scene. I started to think it's a huge gift, but at

the same time it, I felt the urge of doing something, returning this gift to the community.

AL: 22:52   The methodology I try to establish, to overcome this limitation is to at least manifesting it, so making it public and making it public in as much detail as possible. So what we did was to create an online database about these publications. It's an ongoing process. We reached 1,500 and more, at the moment, and it's going on every day. I think there are a couple new titles are that we just include the color and all the bibliographical details, including the content index, which is probably the most strategic part of the majority of them. And it's searchable. It's important because, spreads the word about these publications. We specifically, for example, spread the word about each new title in included on social media.And this generates interest in these specific publications, but it's not meant to stop there.

AL: 24:14   It's meant to develop more, I'm sorry, once more as a node in a network. In terms that, one of the most paradoxical things about, especially the new media arts scene has been for me that it has not been properly historicized in terms of preserved good archives and publications and there are quite a few small institutions. They'd have their own archives, their own collections of publications, a very specific and they are not accessible. A metaphor for me is the archipelagos. I mean all these collections are small islands but there are submerged. So making them public means to let them emerge. At least they acknowledge the existence of all these publications. And then the idea is that this database that we did could be also done by other institutions. At the moment we are discussing it with another archive in Peru, a similar one providing the infrastructure or at least making our compatible with their's.

AL: 25:37   For this purpose the database has been devolved to in free software with the most basic standards. And it's not specific, I mean the infrastructure is not specific for new media art because potentially it can be applied to any other misrepresented cultural scene. I think that an important aspect to it, probably one of the most important aspect is this manifestation because going public with what own implicitly means that you are taking responsibility for it. That you are committed to preserve it.

AL: 26:22   And when this starts to become not anymore is single effort but you are connected with other archives, then it's a collective responsibility. Actually if you look at these different libraries, however want to call them, online archive, sometimes shadow libraries, they have different

criteria in the selection and what they offer somehow as a service. And I am personally very sympathetic with the UbuWeb one, because their criteria, yeah, I think it still is that day digitize the something if it's rare or very expensive, if it's a relatively cheap or affordable to buy, they don't, and this is a quite healthy criteria in order to cope with work of small publishers as all these publications have work behind and have their own small scale economy behind them. So it's an open question of how to make your selection.

AL: 27:49   We choose to, not providing a pdf or original files unless the publisher authorizes us to do so. We discussed it and we personally agreed, we agreed all together with the person involved with the archive. There's as specifically one person, a Christina Pical (?) is our digital archivist and we agreed with the fact that it should be a dialogue with the publishers. On a pure technical site, it doesn't make sense because technically it takes a very short amount of time to digitize anything and put it online. But I think that the criteria are important. And for me it's important that this dialogue goes on. This whole thing is not just about demonstrating how a technology, what the technology can do on the other side the curator aspect and the filter aspect especially comes back in terms of what can be provided it, what you choose to provide.

AL: 29:13   And I strongly think that the more focused the archive you assemble, the better in terms that the huge numbers are counterproductive to the knowledge of that field. In my ideal world, it should be a galaxy of small archives and those who are maintaining them are aware of what they have and can also find guides for other people approaching that specific knowledge and they can connect among each other. So more than the myth of having all the knowledge publicly available, I think that the dream should be to have an infrastructure of people guiding you through what you want to know more and having the possibility of doing it also through this social exchange.

AL: 30:17   Of course there are plenty of constraints to act on a relatively small scale. And I'm a big fan of scalable efforts , in this models of a galaxy or smaller efforts, I think that maintaining a small scale that can escalate thanks to others. It's also important this fragmentation of infrastructure that I was mentioning before. It does become quite hard to cope with so many different sources of information to involve people that have the same problem. So the fragmentation of time and labor and also the speed of change in, in the processes that you enact. Even the ones, I mean, even producing magazine 25 years, it's changed a lot even technically. And there are things which are changing one day to another, involving the

economy on the whole thing. But it's not only that, it also, I mean you have to communicate, for example, lots of people and you have to adopt, you have to embrace a few different standards.

AL: 31:56   There's people who respond to only on Messenger as people respond to only when you massage them on Whatsapp or only by email. So this combination of complexity because they have to learn continuously how to, let's say, update your own micro universe in order to continue and evolve and the fragmentation of how it evolves. It's one of the most limiting things at the moment. But on the other side, I have to say that my impression is that it also enables more original processes then in the past. It does. That's a good side. The only thing is that the only thing that I think it should be really scaled down is complexity. Generally speaking. That is inevitably harming the potential of what you do.