Exhibiting Poetry in Public Places
Using a Network of Scattered QR Codes

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Abstract. Our goal was to remove poetry from its usual setting, exhibit it in public places and let the unsuspecting citizen engage with it in a way that he is unaccustomed to. We thus came up with codepoetry, a poetry game in the city. A large number of QR barcodes, spray painted on walls around central Athens using a large metallic stencil, tempt passers-by into scanning them using a smartphone in order to reveal a random poem from a curated online collection to which participating modern Greek writers and members of the public have contributed. The experience is further enhanced by allowing visitors to leave comments underneath the verses. The public context in combination with the use of smartphones and the feeling of playful discovery, helps familiarize the audience with poetry and demystifies this form of expression.

Keywords: Quick Response code, QR, poetry, street game, smartphone, mobile, scanner.

1 Introduction

Even though there is a number of people that read and write poetry in Greece, the vast majority are left with a distorted impression of this literary medium emanating from their school days. Poets are commonly beatified and poetry is often associated with beauty, rhyme, wordplay or esotericism rather than a wide range of emotions, imagery and style in tune with the times. The academic experience of many and the prevalence of prosaic approaches to reality leaves most with little appetite or aptitude to experience a poem, let alone create one.

Our primary goal was to reconcile the public with poetry by raising its awareness and to promote a reflective dialogue with space. To achieve that, we decided to showcase verses in an original way on public surfaces. In other words, we wanted to take poetry out of its traditional setting and into places where people don’t expect it to exist. To achieve that on a relatively big scale we combined smartphones, Quick Response (QR) codes and the internet to create a distributed game of poetry in the city. Scattered QR codes invite you to discover the poetry hidden in unexpected places and with the help of a smartphone the scanned QR leads you straight to a random poem from the constantly updated,
curated, online collection. To further enhance the experience we allowed visitors to leave comments underneath each poem or to send a message directly to its author, even anonymously.

Realizing that the QR code contains a poem, before its actual content is read, is enough to change, even temporarily, the lay impression about poetry. Combining the elements of discovery and decryption along with two seemingly incompatible concepts such as poetry and technology, takes members of the public by surprise and positively predisposes them to the random poem that they are served, making its reading more likely. From web page analytics and various forms of feedback from the public one can conclude with some certainty that our effort has somewhat reconciled the unsuspecting receiver with this form of expression.

2 Poetry in Public Spaces

In antiquity, when oral traditions were strong, poetry was used to strengthen communal ties, teach moral values, relieve people from sufferings and even combat oppression. At that time poetry was at the center of public life. With the advent of written tradition, poetry was gradually displaced to a more private sphere. There have been few attempts to place poetry again more prominently in the public realm. Some of these are examined below.

2.1 Poetry on Public Transport

Starting in 1986 some of the advertising space on carriages of the London Underground was reclaimed and short poems fitting in small carriage panels have been displayed. Judith Chernaik first came up with the idea and along with her small team continues to choose the verses that will go up. They make their choices for a wide range of passengers, selecting poems from antiquity, new voices from English-speaking countries around the world, as well as translations. The endeavour has been praised extensively and has been extended to London buses. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it has been adopted by cities around the world such as Dublin, Paris, New York, Vienna, Stockholm, Helsinki, Barcelona, Moscow, St. Petersburg and, most recently, Shanghai and Warsaw [1]. As the creators themselves have noted “Poetry thrives on paradox, and the poems seemed to take a new life when they were removed from books and set among the adverts” [2].

The best poems have been printed on paperback (now in its 11th edition) with the ninth edition of the collection selling an impressive 250,000 copies [3]. On some occasions, such as in Paris, open competitions were held offering to display the winning poems on public transport panels.

In our native Athens, in 2011 and for a whole month, the National Book Centre of Greece (under the auspices of the Ministry of Education) decorated the insides of trains, buses and other means of transport with verses of Odysseas Elytis, Greece’s Nobel prize laureate, in order to celebrate the 100th anniversary since his birth as part of world poetry day.