



## Journal *Hybrid*, n° 1 “Ephemeral Heritages”

### Introduction

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### Full text (PDF file)

“Ephemeral Heritages” —the association of these two terms may seem paradoxical at first. Whether we talk about a monument, a literary work, a painting, a film or a ritual raised to tradition, isn't heritage first defined in terms of permanence?

However, to regard heritage as something immutable would amount to overlooking the extent to which the selection, promotion, mediation and exposure processes are determined by cultural

policies, value systems, changing trends and *habitus*. This issue of the *Hybrid* journal not only questions the decision-making bodies and socio-cultural contexts in which objects are integrated into heritage, but also the means implemented to preserve heritages, from the preservation of original works to remediatisation, including total reconstruction. A first series of articles, written for the special report of the *Hybrid* journal, will focus on these issues, tackling both the selection of heritage objects and museum mediation approaches in a context of unstable reception. The obviousness of “permanent heritages” is therefore put into perspective, so much so that the ephemeral now appears to be one of the *essences* of heritage.

What is true for every heritage when put in the context of its selection and mediation processes holds true for artworks that originally fall within the “aesthetics of the ephemeral”: every performing art, street performance, land art, most installations, ice sculptures, flower-petal mandalas, all last but a short moment and therefore constitute a challenge in terms of their integration into “heritage.” Does the preservation of something ephemeral even make sense? If such is the case, what are the potential preservation methods and media?

In the past few years, digital technologies have been regarded as a solution for the recording and storing of a large amount of data on sustainable media. However, the attempts to record the whole content of the web have shown that it is impossible to preserve an ever-changing set of data in detail, because of the lack of two components that are essential to any integration into heritage: a well thought-out mediation allowing readers to make their way through this set of data and a reliable storage format. The designers and producers of digital contents, just like the institutions in charge of their preservation, have indeed had to acknowledge that preservation was not limited to storage and that the digital apparatus itself was ephemeral. The processing speed of computers keeps on improving, the software designers keep on developing their products, new creation and search media are created, while other software-tools get “stale,” servers and formats wear out...

The inherently ephemeral nature of certain digital art and literary works questions the characteristics of the digital apparatus, sometimes exacerbating them to the point where lability, instability, the procedural and performative nature of the work are raised as fundamental aesthetic principles. A second series of texts presents works, approaches to creation and “aesthetics of the ephemeral,” both from the pre-digital and digital eras. Moreover, it proposes solutions to reach forms of collection, preservation, exhibition, or in short integration of these works into heritage, despite all challenges.

The articles in this issue resort to approaches taken from the fields of art history, information and communication sciences,

aesthetics, philosophy, fine arts and literary studies, involving the reader in mixed perspectives, which not only induces a re-reading of the concept of heritage from the perspective of the ephemeral, but also provides proposals and new solutions to create, archive and exhibit while raising awareness on the status of the digital work.

## Heritage through the perspective of the ephemeral

Is the ephemeral the soul of heritage? Could the short lifespan and inevitable oblivion of digital works be a constituent of heritage, as paradoxical as it may seem?<sup>1</sup> Some heritages have become obsolete, like those churches whose upkeep is considered too expensive, these numerous examples of knocked down statues recent History has given us, these creations destined to disappear with or without the artists' consent. On the contrary, other heritages are re-discovered through the establishment of new communities in research networks or on content-sharing platforms such as YouTube, away from the common preconception according which heritage objects would be ascribed with immutable durability. Could the ephemeral define the conditions of heritage then?

As demonstrated,<sup>2</sup> heritage consists of past objects that are selected at present in order to be passed on, or in other words, while looking to the future. Multi-temporality is therefore inherent to the very concept of heritage. Besides, the pragmatic approach to heritage —the fact that it falls within the logic of action and measures— has us question the duration or rather the sustainability of heritage. In this perspective, the first issue to tackle is less concerned with the identification of an “ephemeral heritage” category than with raising the more general issue of heritage through the perspective of the ephemeral, and first and foremost at the level of the heritage “filter.”

### Heritage, a present interpretation

We call “heritage filter” the operations —collection, selection and documentation— through which an object is granted a heritage status, or in other words how it is deemed worthy of being protected and preserved. In this sense, heritage is radically different from creation, in that it manifests itself in a variety of forms, only partly integrated into heritage. There is indeed no heritage without filter or intentionality. Above all, heritage is a stance taken on an object possessing its own materiality, which Gérard Genette refers to as

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1 On these issues, see Bernadette Dufrene (ed.), *Numérisation du patrimoine. Quels accès? Quelles médiations? Quelles cultures?*, Paris, Hermann, 2013 and Ead., *Patrimoines et humanités numériques*, Berlin, Lit Verlag, 2014.

2 Jean Davallon, *Le Don du patrimoine*, Paris, Hermès, 2007.

the “immanence of works.”<sup>3</sup> Even the “intangible” heritage, such as music, dance, know-how of arts professionals or even digital files, possesses some kind of materiality and has heritage properties derived from the history of its production and reception that are common to other forms of heritage.

Now, the heritage dimension is a consequence of reception. Unquestionably, what will be granted a heritage status indeed exists in the form of an immanent presence, be it physical or ideal, but it is for its symbolic or “sign” value that it becomes projected into the future. Krystof Pomian has come up with the term *semiophore* to define this aspect of the heritage object.<sup>4</sup> In this way, heritage becomes established in the present, in the event of its reception, in the taking of a stance on that object. Then, it is indivisible from the communities that pick an object out as a heritage object, whether it is the authorized stance of the representatives of “legitimate culture,” as defined by Bourdieu —*i.e.* the vertical stance of heritage institutions and the academic world—, or that of the communities of amateurs that have appeared on the web. Benjamin Barbier’s article on the amateur preservation of video games provides us with a good example, recounting the process through which a usual object is granted a heritage status as a “social construct.” The collection of amateur criticism websites is another good example evoked by Iris Berbain and Cécile Obligi, who have worked on the Bibliothèque nationale de France collection of performance arts’ ephemerals.

If we have indeed thought that heritage constituted some kind of eternal present, it is because the institutions in charge of its preservation, through storage and study, have been developing since the 18th century. However, this is but an illusion. The continuity of heritage through museums, libraries or archives must not overshadow another aspect of remembrance, which consists in updates, re-updates and re-assessments. This ability to update memory is evidenced by the establishment of new departments, unlocking of new funds and development of new acquisition policies, as well as the emergence of new websites and new forms of information processing in the field of heritage. Marc Kaiser demonstrates this evolution through the example of vinyl records. The history of the preservation of vinyl records shows how they have gradually acquired a heritage value: first as a trace revealing the prevailing cultural trends and production and reception conditions throughout the ages, and then through certain agents’

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3 Gérard Genette, *L’Œuvre de l’art*, t. 1 : *Immanence et transcendance*, Paris, Seuil, 1994.

4 Louis Quéré, “L’espace public comme forme et comme événement,” in *Prendre place. Espace public et culture dramatique*, Cerisy, Éditions Recherches, 1995, p. 98.

struggle for the recognition of the vinyl record as an artistic and cultural work, as a “heritage content in its own right.” Iris Berbain and Cécile Obligi introduce a similar case: show programs, posters and now websites constitute heritages that are but hardly researched, although they are evidence of the work’s “field of production.”

These updates of the memory work are quite similar to Francis Haskell’s *ephemeral museums*, or in other words to the phenomenon of temporary exhibitions, which keep on changing the sense of a collection. They constitute one aspect of the digital collection: the latter can indeed be re-organized through several lines of reading, as demonstrated by the Centre Pompidou virtuel, the musée du Quai Branly website or the *Immaterial Art Stock* project which is dealt with in Aurélie Herbet’s article. As Gaëlle Périot-Bled explains, some of these initiatives consider digital heritage as a procedural reenactment of the work, rather than a means of preservation that fails to prevent the disappearance of works.

Michel Melot quotes Germaine Krull’s beautiful sentence on photography, which could also apply to heritage through the perspective of the ephemeral: “Every new perspective multiplies the world by itself.”<sup>5</sup> This continuous and multiform revival of meaning makes heritage fall within the sphere of the ephemeral. This is what Benjamin Barbier shows in his article: the process of integration into heritage no longer results in the almost systematic rise of the object given a heritage status to the status of legitimate cultural object.

### The variability of heritage: extension of the heritage field and diffraction of perspective

The emergence of new heritage communities also contributes to the entrenchment of the heritage concept into the ephemeral. The *semiophore* value is volatile as it is subjected to the changes in perspectives, but also because the heritage field, up until Unesco’s recent recognition of the digital heritage, has been constantly expanding.

If the categorization of an object according to its value ascribes it with a heritage status, its own value is determined only within communities, whether scientific, cultural or simply amateur ones. This diffraction of heritage into heritages shows the relative indeterminacy of the values determining the categorization and more generally of the process of integration into heritage — problems that Fred Forest acutely points out in his contribution to

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<sup>5</sup> Michel Melot, *Mirabilia. Essai sur l'Inventaire général du patrimoine culturel*, Paris, Gallimard, 2012, p. 141.

this issue. Although the inventory programs are initiated in France by the government, the only limits set being the territorial and chronological ones, the issue of value still remains unclear.

The variability of heritage is a true challenge for any preservation policy. Shall we preserve everything, as suggested by Henri Langlois in the case of the Film Museum? On the contrary, as a “reverse filiation” (to quote Jean Davallon’s term<sup>6</sup>), does heritage induce the right to oblivion? While the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF) is trying to archive all websites on the model of legal deposit and digital libraries such as Europeana or the World Digital Library are collecting works at a transnational level, should the storage and accumulation logic —on which heritage institutions have based their policies— prevail over that of the community’s appropriation of objects selected for their symbolic properties, to the detriment of others that are relegated to oblivion?

In other words, shall we consider the digital space first and foremost as a storage space, or shall we also take into account the “publication space” dimension of the web? In the former perspective, the digital would induce a disruption in the relation to time and space, “the impossible oblivion” as Milad Doueïhi would put it, a telltale sign of a “new era,” a time when History suffers no gap, of a comprehensive and universal library, of some sort of human collective memory, accompanied by the circulation of individuals’ memories on the web.<sup>7</sup> Doesn’t the phenomenological approach to the public space —according to which it is apparent insofar as it “sets out a context of action and relation,” where “it gives information on the ways one should behave, the relations one should have with others, as well as on places and their content, while being produced and made perceptible through these ways”<sup>8</sup>— allows for a better understanding of how heritage, in its diversity and variability, still constitutes a particular form of space built on values negotiated by multiple communities? Different time forms are associated with this variability, from the “lengthy” or “extended” time of institutions to the “short” time of heritage projects.

## Ephemeral heritages in the digital era

Research has been focusing on the issue of the ephemeral as its relevance has kept on increasing since the 1990s. The very characteristics of the digital have induced this thought of the ephemeral and raised concrete concerns.

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6 Jean Davallon, *Le Don du patrimoine*, Paris, Hermès, 2007.

7 Milad Doueïhi, *Pour un humanisme numérique*, Paris, Seuil, 2011, p. 153.

8 Louis Quéré, “L’espace public comme forme et comme événement,” in *Prendre place. Espace public et culture dramatique*, Cerisy, Éditions Recherches, 1995, p. 98.

In fact, far from homogenizing the writing of heritage, the digital has led to a multiplicity of coding forms. To fully understand this phenomenon, it should be remembered that the digital consists of two distinct levels, as described by Bruno Bachimont: “the computational ideality” on the one hand and the “digital effectiveness”<sup>9</sup> on the other hand. The computational ideality is based on the independence from the material substrate (the binary file remains unchanged, whatever the hardware) and what is called formality (the binary contents are signs which can be used only through external reading conventions, *i.e.* formats). The actual implementation of this “ideality,” inherent to calculation and formalism, is hampered by the architecture of the machines and diversity of formats (“the digital effectiveness”). Besides, this diversity of coding forms results in an unstable design of the interfaces through which heritage is shown and apprehended. Consequently, the feeling of the ephemeral is based on the observation that digital media are obsolescent (the BnF has tackled this issue by developing a content migration policy, as demonstrated in the article written by Iris Berbain and Cécile Obligi), but also on the issue of format compatibility (although a strong effort is now put into the interoperability of information systems). Unindexed, undescribed so as to allow for tracking — hence devoid of metadata—, there would be no digital heritage. Therefore, the diversity and accelerated renewal of encoding forms have strengthened the feeling of an ephemeral heritage, owing both to its reception and production history.

By making a formerly sacralized object a “commonplace” one in today’s society, in Yves Jeanneret’s sense of the term —true to its etymology— of an object that circulates and therefore cannot be recovered,<sup>10</sup> the digital does not deprive it of its essential characteristic, that of *semiophore*. Its use in expographic, scientific and documentary contexts also ascribes it a document value. Provided that we take into account the creation of that open heritage archive, this diffuse effort to make what counts public, we may wonder whether we are not currently witnessing the paradoxical re-sacralization of heritage, through its multiple shifts and transformations on the web.

## The artwork facing the ephemeral

Consequently, it should be no surprise that artists and authors have been experiencing the inherently ephemeral nature of the

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9 Bruno Bachimont, “Pour une critique phénoménologique de la raison computationnelle,” in *E-dossier de l’audiovisuel : l’éducation aux cultures de l’information*, 2012.

10 Yves Jeanneret, *Penser la trivialité*, vol. I: *La vie triviale des êtres culturels*, Paris, Hermès, 2008.

digital artwork and wondering what, despite the obsolescence of machines, architectures and formats, could be preserved as traces of life? The digital artwork is a catalyst for issues already raised by other works characterized by an unstable materiality and short duration —theater arts, biodegradable installations, performances—, while its media and apparatus were first endowed with the imaginary dimension of permanence, with a hope of durability. Certain digital works invite us to take a reflexive stance on these imaginary worlds, by crushing these hopes of permanence before our eyes. Because they fall within the aptly changing web data flows,<sup>11</sup> they raise the issue of shared reception and interpretation. Above all, their preservation takes us back to what could still constitute the work and its context, its immanence, substance and essence.

Instead of regarding the inexorable lability of the digital apparatus as a threat for its reception and integration into heritage, shouldn't we rather redefine the "work" and "*parergon*" categories<sup>12</sup> and consider instability as a fundamental feature of creation? As Jean-Paul Fourmentraux states it, the work would no longer exist merely through what it shows, but also in the framework-apparatus through which it exists.<sup>13</sup>

## The surface esthetics

Throughout the 90s, many artists from the digital field have simply ignored the instability of the apparatus, creating in the present time and place as if the production and reception context of the digital work was immutable. This esthetics, which we shall call "surface esthetics,"<sup>14</sup> focuses on the texts, videos and animations that are displayed on the surface of the screen and treats them as fixed "models," in Christine Buci-Glucksmann's words, rather than unstable flows. Nowadays, we still find many artistic projects for tablets and e-readers that adopt this approach, although it soon demonstrated its limitations.

Brian Kim Stefans's project *The Dreamlife of Letters*,<sup>15</sup> one of the most renowned and discussed animated poems in digital poetry, features subtle text animations that are updated differently from one

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11 On the esthetics of the flow, see Alexandra Saemmer and Bertrand Gervais (eds.), *Protée*, no. 39, 1: "Esthétiques numériques," 2011.

12 Cf. Jacques Derrida, *La Vérité en peinture*. Paris, Flammarion, 1978.

13 Jean-Paul Fourmentraux, *Art et Internet. Les nouvelles figures de la création*, Paris, CNRS Éditions, 2005, p. 76.

14 Cf. Alexandra Saemmer, "Face aux disparitions aléatoires de l'œuvre numérique. Réponses esthétiques et conséquences pour la préservation," *TLE*, no. 27, 2010, p. 135-159.

15 Brian Kim Stefans, *The Dreamlife of Letters*, 2000. [Online] [http://collection.eliterature.org/1/works/stefans\\_the\\_dreamlife\\_of\\_letters.html](http://collection.eliterature.org/1/works/stefans_the_dreamlife_of_letters.html) [accessed December 25th 2013].

computer to another. The analysis of the source file<sup>16</sup> reveals the extent to which the progress and temporality of the animations have been planned by the author. However, this file is unavailable to the public. On a ten-year old laptop, all of these animations are clearly perceptible. On a 2008 MacBook, the animations are running a bit faster and seem a tad less clear. On a recent desktop, some of these animations even become imperceptible. In the latter running context, it is impossible for recipients of the work to access the animation as designed by the author. They cannot even suspect it, because the source file containing the computer program of the work is usually unattainable. The transformations of this work are the ultimate example of the need for a distinction between computational ideality and digital effectiveness, as suggested by Bruno Bachimont.

What is a digital work then? The effects of media on the screen surface? The program, the software-tool? The operating system, the machine? What part of it should be preserved as it is integrated into heritage? In the case of works like *The Dreamlife of letters*, two options stand out: either the work “unintendedly” fits into its impermanent context and what would be preserved would consist of several update states, a “power to act” (cf. Philippe Bootz’s article), infinitely a-present, located in a “uchronic time” (Edmond Couchot); or else the work is captured on video, ideally on the machine the artist created his/her work with, which would better match the mimetic esthetics of this non-interactive and non-generative work, although it would undermine its programmed nature. Faced with this capture, readers could then feel the uneasiness they would experience by visiting the second floor of the Museum der Modernen Kunst in Vienna, which is dedicated to Viennese actionism: the documentary films separating the performance from its initial *parergon* look a shadow of the works’ essence. Their power to act seems “sanitized.”

## The mimetic esthetics

Some artists, fully aware of the lability of the digital apparatus, refuse the documentary approach and demand the “right” reception context, meaning the original machine, to perform all re-updates of the work. Of course, as time goes by, this demand will be harder to meet, as it will be impossible to preserve already obsolete machines, software and operating systems. This demand is reminiscent of the concept of “author-machine” discussed by Philippe Bootz, which focuses on the redevelopment of the ideal context for the update of the author-project, either by means of

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<sup>16</sup> Brian Kim Stefans gave Alexandra Saemmer this source file during a private interview.

programming approaches such as emulation, or else by using the machine on which the work has been created.

This esthetics can be called “mimetic.” Many heritage preservation projects discussed in this issue resort to this esthetics, even if it is hardly regarded as an ideal, but rather as a temporary solution, for want of a better alternative, as a clear-sightedly accepted palliative: as demonstrated by Benjamin Barbier, the emulation of historic video games is carried out by amateur communities, so that creations that are deemed worthy to be passed on are made available to the public, despite the changes induced by emulation. In the field of artistic creations within shared 3D spaces (such as *Second Life*), the preservation initiative introduced by Aurélie Herbet also aims at making sometimes obsolete works available to the public, through migration or even through re-mediatization, despite the potential consequences of this approach. When it comes to exhibiting a digital work, to make it accessible, it is quite relevant to wonder what part of the lost work can be *reconstituted*.

Saving is not the same as integrating into heritage, passing on is not limited to preserving, states Nicole Denoit in her article. We cannot but agree with Christine Buci-Glucksmann when she claims that the performance-work, especially the digital work, should now be regarded as a process. As well, one can only approve the idea according to which the computer code constitutes some kind of *abstract* of the work, a computational ideality, the only perennial element that is independent of the machine’s architecture and obsolescence (Edmond Couchot). Yet, we have to ask ourselves whether this abstract could be considered as the “original,” the state of reference for the integration into heritage. Is it possible to compare the program of the digital work with the score of a musical work and implement preservation (or restoration) measures drawing on performing arts? Would these measures be enough? Nothing is less certain.

Together with Philippe Bootz, let us emphasize the importance of the collection of documents —screenshots and update statuses, notes of intent and reception traces—, which complements the preservation of the program itself and would constitute this “live archive” mentioned by Aurélie Herbet. However, the integration of the digital work into heritage also raises the issue of what can be shown to the public: some documentation, state of the work, abstract of the program? or re-mediatization that would be as “truthful” as possible?

Shall we dismantle the materiality of the work to reach degrees of perception that are unattainable through current reading apparatus? Shall we preserve the work’s “power to act” rather than its materiality? Then, what would be the “preservation duty” of the authorities in charge of the artistic heritage preservation? As

conceptualized by Fred Forest and Edmond Couchot in their articles, the integration of digital arts into heritage raises concerns as to their public promotion and potential entry into the art market.

## The esthetics of re-enchantment

Confronted with the instability of the digital reading context, the third approach consists in “re-enchanting” it, by ascribing it with “technological sublime.” This approach constitutes the esthetic principle of certain digital works, such as Gregory Chatonsky and Reynald Drouhin’s *Revenances*,<sup>17</sup> a 3D browsable work that theologizes and mystifies the relationships between materialities and the potential meanings induced by motion, the contents of the words and images, sounds and interactive gestures, so as to hint at the existence of something unspeakable, something that cannot be shown and that is perceptible only through the participative and community exploration of the work.

On the surface of the screen, the unspeakable could be shown through intermediality. Texts, images and sounds can be endlessly combined in no particular order: what matters is no longer the production of a fixed “model-image,” but the experience of the work in the present, composed of a sublime magma of sounds, images and words free from any obligation to make sense.

At the level of the relations between the work and unstable digital apparatus, what cannot be shown would be expressed in the very flaws and interferences resulting from this instability. Shrouded in mystery, instability is not only integrated into this approach—it is supposed to provide access to a “technological sublime,” through which the machine itself would bring novelty. This instability is then literally seized, giving way to trans-humanist or post-humanist utopias. According to Edmond Couchot, the preservation of the digital work could very well draw on the functioning of organic memory as a live re-creation.

## The esthetics of the ephemeral

The most radical approach to the instability of the digital reading context consists in letting the work slowly collapse over time, change shapes and updates, thus fully recognizing the fact that incidents and unpredictability are interpretable. This esthetics of the ephemeral originally falls within various artistic forms that may inspire reflections on the integration into heritage of: theater arts, land art, installations, Claire Kueny’s shadow sculptures that are part ephemeral and part monuments, part appearance and part disappearance, “implicit” evocations, digital performances, and many other forms which, according to Nicole Denoit, are as many

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17 Gregory Chatonsky and Reynald Drouhin, *Revenances*, 2000. [Online] <http://chatonsky.net/works/revenances/> [accessed December 25th 2013].

artistic domestications of an inevitable and necessary destruction... As demonstrated by Gaëlle Périot-Bled, the emergence of actions and performances as a means of expression does not mean that there is no longer any wish for permanence, but rather that the way it is considered changes: it is not regarded as an immutable form but as an endless development of processes triggered by human activity.

The work as a reflection of the world, where nothing stays forever, where the here and now are never coming back, does not necessarily convey a disenchanted vision. When the lability of the apparatus has an impact on the surface events planned by the author of a digital work, the first thing that is disrupted is the potentially meaningful relation between the media, texts, images, sounds, motion and interface gestures. According to Edmond Couchot, this shift from factual to potential is already noticeable in the very first hypertexts and hypermedia, which create events and series of events as they are stated—they do not represent, they present for the very first time. Although this particular situation of utterance seems indeed valid in the case of a hypertext's reception process (following the principle that everyone may shape History as they please), some hyperfiction authors are still able to anticipate meaningful relations between linked texts and images: the hypertext always heralds series of readings by linking texts and images, although these series may be triggered by the reader in various orders. This is why the "aesthetics of the ephemeral," supported by some artists and authors of the digital field, seems to naturally tend towards the a-media object, for which the interaction between media, words and sounds is operated by random processes—and no longer by the author's intention only, which is thwarted by the instability of the apparatus anyway.

The artist greets the labile nature of the digital work with melancholy, as demonstrated by Christine Buci-Glucksmann in *Esthétique de l'éphémère*, deploring the interruption of time and decay of memory, or on the contrary welcomes it as a delicate vibration, a positive void, a weaving with modulations.<sup>18</sup> Authors such as Philippe Bootz play with the unstable nature of the apparatus in their projects while ensuring a satisfying result, through adaptive programming procedures: "La Série des U", available for consultation in this issue, is a convincing example of this approach.

In the interview featured in this issue, Christine Buci-Glucksmann calls for a kind of positive promotion of impermanence: "Hasn't every ephemeral art always strived to preserve its memory, layout or maps?" In fact, it is undoubtedly difficult to accept impermanence and its utter radicalism. Isn't

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<sup>18</sup> Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *Esthétique de l'éphémère*, Paris, Galilée, 2003.

denying the work a prolonged lifetime amounts, for their creator, to refusing the author's mythical aura and the compensation —be it symbolic or material— for the creative effort? What about the “pleasure of reception” one feels when faced with works originally designed like performing arts, perceptible performances and communicative experiences, as they become maps, scores and abstracts, documentary materials, museum pieces? More generally, can the work retain a “power to act” when integrated into heritage?

In the light of those highly contemporary paradoxes, questioning the update of every creation's essence as it is granted a heritage status, we invite the reader to discover this first issue of the *Hybrid* journal.

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