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The hyper-animated city: visions of Valencia Street Art in the short film Urban Sphinx

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Abstract

Urban Sphinx (2020) is an animated short film produced to document creatively the presence of Street Art at the diverse neighbourhoods of Valencia, Spain, between 2018 and 2019. Conceived as a tribute to all the urban artists of Valencia, highlighting the quantity and variety of these ephemeral pieces and paintings, Urban Sphinx has a special relationship with memory, which comes to life when these images take on motion like film frames. Taking from Alan Cholodenko the idea of the animatic, the animation of Urban Sphinx proves the idea of hyperanimated hyperreality, as animation seduces Street Art and both melt in a realm of metamorphosis. In this essay, the director of the film describes the production process, highlighting the personalities of Street Artists, the development of animation and editing, and the importance of music and sound in the project.

Keywords

Urban Sphinx, Street Art, Valencia, Animatic, GIF, Hand Pan, Rhythm.

1. Introduction

Urban Sphinx (Esfinge urbana, María Lorenzo, 2020) is an animated short film made from several thousands of photos taken in Valencia during the years 2018 and 2019. The film pays tribute to the place where I have lived for the last 25 years — but also as a homage to the Valencian Street Artists, whose creations have a very strong presence in the city, sometimes helping to outline the personality of each different district.

Artistic intervention in the public environment may be illegal or performed with permission; but what is undoubted, as Diego López Giménez states in his book *Valencia en grafitis*, “Graffiti and Street art are unstoppable, and they are part of the history of each city” [1]. Throughout the Valencian Community are held public events that welcome graffiti as an artistic manifestation — like the ConFusión Festival in Benimaclet neighbourhood (Valencia), or the graffiti event Poliniza, at Universitat Politècnica de Valencia, which invites urban artists from around the world to paint at the Campus. As well, in recent years the Valencian City Hall has invited renowned graffiti artists, such as Okuda, Escif and Pichiavo, to create another kind of ephemeral monuments: las Fallas — a celebration considered from 2016 by Unesco as Intangible Heritage of Humanity.

As a result, some Street Artists enjoy institutional recognition, while most urban artists frequently pay fines for their interventions. As well,

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the consideration of Street Art in Valencia is also ambiguous: it can be regarded as an artistic manifestation or as a vandalization of the environment. For me, *Urban Sphinx* was made to give visibility and recognition to the second group. Our photographic archive of urban art was especially focused on little pieces, stickers and small graffiti by the following artists who have been identified by their pseudonyms: Atila The One, Barbiturikills, Bea Rodríguez Art, Bowy Face, Chikitín, Cofla, Creative Close, David de Limón, Deih, Disneylexia, Erb Mon, Espectro Lobo, Hope, Julieta XLF, la Nena Wapa Wapa, PichiAvo, Robin Kowalewsky, The Photographer, Victin, Vinz, Will Coles, Xolaca — among others.

Urban Sphinx highlights the quantity and variety of their pieces, which are of ephemeral nature. For this reason, the film has a special relationship with memory, which comes to life when the photographs acquire movement like the frames of a film. The film, which is five minutes long and took approximately one year to be completed, was made with the support of the producer Enrique Millán and IVC – CulturArts —the Valencian Cultural Institute. A trailer of the film can be watched following this link: <https://vimeo.com/373224985>

The sections of this essay will subsequently explore the research and exploration process to find the Street Art pieces, identifying and describing the most relevant artists for the making of this film; the organization of this material as an animated form; and some final considerations, results and conclusions about this piece of experimental animation.

2. Wandering by the city: metaphysics of the gaze

Differently to great Madrid or Barcelona, Valencia is a city big and small at the same time, that can be explored on foot — this is especially true for me, since I don't have a car, nor even a driving license. Street Art pieces can be found everywhere in Valencia, but they appear more frequently and last longer at the Old City — the Gothic and Modernistic centre — and at various districts that experience gentrification — like Russafa, El Carmen, San Vicente Street, Patraix, etc. The presence of Street Art also provides an idea of the economical effects of the “housing bubble”, becoming massive in some half abandoned places.

Moreover, people are usually too busy or too distracted by the shops windows to pay attention to Street Art. As well, many of these pieces are very small and can be found only in places like the rear part of traffic lights, electricity boxes, or in the facades of abandoned houses. When I started to take these photographs, people passing looked at me strangely and only then they realized that there were faces painted or glued on the walls.

Significantly, very often I found exactly the same kind of image or design, just like glued photocopies, stickers or stenciled paintings. Such repetition of the same image obeys a will of the artist to be seen, and using the terminology of the world of graffiti, this type of action is called “bombing” [2]. But, for me, the insistent multiplicity of these images, scattered throughout the city suggest what Alan Cholodenko calls “hyperanimation” [3].

These identical pictures that could be found at different corners made me think of the possibility to create an animation similar to Paul

Bush's stop-motion works such as *Furniture Poetry* (2000), *While Darwin Sleeps* (2004) or *The Five Minutes Museum* (2015), whose game between the still, the inanimate and motion, animating the changing forms at hyper speed, establishes a privileged relation between animation and the world of objects—like that of pioneering stop-motion animation at the turn of the 20th century. For me, another important reference is Gil Alkabetz's *The Da Vinci Time Code* (2009), a film made only from one painting, Da Vinci's *The Last Supper*: Alkabetz is able to create an animated film from its fragments, finding secret movements from the combination in time of similar forms contained in this one picture; thus, the people in the film (in the picture) eat, run and argue, until finally they are silenced.

In the following paragraphs I will describe the work of some of the most relevant artists, whose creations have been photographed and included in *Urban Sphinx*.

2.1. Chikitin and his posmodern *Giocondas*



Fig. 1. A series of Street Art pieces which reproduce Chikitin's oil paintings.

In the beginning of 2018 in Valencia started to mushroom a series of painted faces showing several pairs of eyes. All these portraits, actually photocopies glued on the walls, where due to the same artista: Chikitín (born 1984).

Chikitín is an artist who produces paintings in the traditional way, with oil on canvas. He is specialized in portraits that remain the Classic masters of painting — like for instance Ingres or David —, and, at the same time, the Surrealism of Chirico, Max Ernst or Dalí, suggesting an intense metaphysical experience through his portraits of women with numerous eyes on the forehead. The copies of these paintings can be purchased in certain stores, and their copies have literally overflowed the streets. For more than two years, these pieces have renovated the experience of walking around the city: with their many eyes, these true postmodern effigies seem to ask questions as fundamental as, who we are, where we are going, why we walk in a hurry, or, how long we will last.

Chikitín portrays decomposing figures, broken inside, isolated in a desert landscape. We believe that these sensations are amplified in the urban manifestation of his art, where the climatology and human action corrode these images of classic beauty, which are radically transformed when put into motion thanks to animation. As Chikitín states, his paintings



Fig. 2. One of the iconic tiles by The Photographer (beside a reproduction of a painting by Chikitín).

keep a secret parallelism with the illusion of animated images: “they are a seed that is uncomfortable, because they unveil an forgotten truth in our subconscious: that what we believe is not true.” [4]

2.2. The Photographer

Another relevant symbol in the center of Valencia is The Photographer. This image, created by Mrbt62 — also known as The Photographer (born 1953) — appears in stickers of different sizes, vinyl silhouettes, stenciled paintings, also printed on tiles. The variety of materials showing the same iconic figure was also very suggesting in terms of being animated. The Photographer is a figure and the sign of the artist, at the same time. And it is transgressive since it is disseminated in total anonymity, often accompanying the image with the following text: “If not illegal, not graffiti” (sic).

The Photographer, as many other icons, was discovered when I started to look for Chikitín images. Usually Street artists visit the same places and corners to place their works.

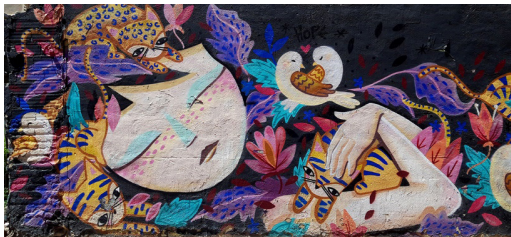
2.3. Bowy Face

This is both the name and the work of another anonymous artist, who just wants that his dog, Bowy, becomes a recognizable citizen in Valencia: like The Photographer, he disseminates stickers, stenciled paintings and tiles always with the same image, the face of his dog — though sometimes transformed into a zoomorphic guy. Sometimes his paintings are as extensive like a big window and generally they adapt onto every surface.

2.4. La Nena Wapa Wapa

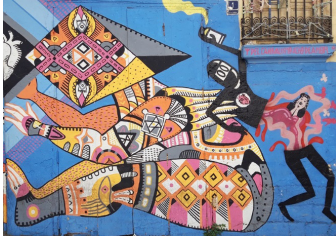
All we know from this artist is that she finished her studies in Fine Arts in 2004. Her works are varied and usually cover entire doors or murals — very often they are commissioned works. They are identifiable because of the protagonism of women of different ages, and the recurrent use of templates to create these paintings with sprays and acrylics. Although her characters are different — with the only exception of a pin-up girl, which she has painted many times and, like Bowy Face, is a familiar face in the city —, it was possible to find raccord relations between her painted women to create very accurate animations that suggest a single moving portrait.

Fig. 3. A large mural painting by Julieta XLF in Valencia.



2.5. Julieta XLF

Born in 1982, she paints murals in Valencia and many other cities in the world. She doesn't use templates or repeat images, but her visual style, akin to illustration for children books, is very recognizable and frequently paints girls with closed eyes and long hair. The reco-



pilation of these images also provide the opportunity to suggest a single character in motion.

2.6. Other artists

Valencia is also the showcase for artists who create iconic characters like David De Limón (Graduated 1997), Disneylexia (born 1979), Deih (born 1978), etc. All of them appear in the film showing their murals, or suggesting motion from their repeated figures. One of the most interesting artists was Erb Mon (working since 1998), whose geometrical patterns, including big colour circles, facilitated some abstract animations.

The experience of searching for the graffitis wandering by the city, capturing the images with our mobile phones, resembled sometimes the idea of playing a game of augmented reality — although only in postproduction this reality, the graffitis, would be augmented through the illusion of motion.

With this starting material, and as the collection of photographs progressed, in October 2018 I began to edit different groups of images to achieve motion effects. The production finished in September 2019, and its phases will be explained in the following section.

3. Urban Sphinx: production notes

The film wasn't made under the usual process of writing a script or drawing a storyboard, since it was experimental and totally linked to the discovery of new possibilities in the streets.

While we collected photos, the physical integrity of these Street Art pieces was always respected, avoiding to intervene their current state: the images were photographed just as they were found, frequently showing the traces of the passage of time, such as successive rips of paper or chipping of the paintings, which gave these images a poetic nuance. Needless to say, the production of Urban Sphinx has not encouraged illegal activities or activities that harm public or private assets.

When the animation process started, I just had two ideas: that Chikitin's paintings would play a central role in the animation beside the other painted characters; and that we needed a very rhythmic music score to pace with the waterfall of animated images. Both processes are explained below.

3.1. Animating the real

Although I initially had planned to take some time-lapse scenes showing changes of light onto the paintings, at the end the film just included still photos of large graffitis, and motion scenes animated from small segments and pieces.

The animated GIF technique helped to bring these works to life, combining a succession of photographs, each of them taking 2 or 3 frames of duration. To produce Urban Sphinx, it was necessary to create more than 200 GIFS with different approaches to the graffiti themes, such as painted faces, animals, lettering — the prohibition to glue public-

Fig. 4. Mural painted by Disneylexia, David del Limón and La Nena Wapa Wapa.

ity — among other geometric and iconic elements, giving prominence to the eye and the gaze as symbols.

Although we took more than 3.000 photos, less than 1.200 are included in the film, organized in animated GIFs that we edited in the timeline alongside the music theme. Naturally, to benefit the whole, it is necessary to renounce those scenes which do not fit in the whole or seem too



Fig. 5. Mural painting by Deih (Valencia) showing an animation.

repetitive. In this sense, the amount of photos recording stenciled works and the black and white pieces copies of Chikitin paintings was massive, and it was necessary to find some balance searching for more colourful motifs, especially paintings that gave the film more visual variety.

When it comes to animate these figures, if we are combining photos of the same visual theme — for instance, the same face —, it has to be adjusted very carefully onto a photo that serves as a template for the others. This means that it is necessary to work with Photoshop many hours before having scenes to edit in the timeline. Photos had to be high quality (4K) to prevent a loss of quality if they had to be resized or transformed. As well, since these pieces are frequently found very near of the ground, or very high, it is vital to correct the distortion created by perspective.

Working from Street Art — and not from one one's drawings —, it is important to figure out different ways to suggest movement or changes that can be animated. Sometimes animation can be used to suggest the idea of removing or degrading the effigie, depending of the preservation state of each separated image, arranging the order of frames to find a logical sequence of change, like a loop. For this reason, it was particularly fond of finding images that were not perfect; instead, I liked finding degraded paintings on shelled walls, or half-torn stickers; sometimes, people re-paint onto them or vandalize these images: a combination that gives more variety and motion to each scene.

The result of combining together photos showing the same motif is normally that of a boiling image, with fast changes in the surroundings — creating a sort of visual noise. In this sense, it is important to remember that backgrounds play an important role — for instance, if the pieces are glued onto a series of lampposts, it is possible to animate the environment, suggesting a sort of camera movement around the image on the lamppost as a central axis.

Other times the artists paint the same characters in different positions, so this makes possible to animate them very lively — like the painted duck jumping, or the masked head turning 360°, that we

found in a graffiti by Deih. In this sense, it is important to be opened to different combinations and dare to see “raccord” relations between unrelated pictures. If, in animation, time is an illusion [5], space and identity are also illusory ideas, since it can be created the idea of continuity between different designs, evoking the motion of a single head turning the neck or nodding.



Fig. 6. Female faces from different mural paintings by La Nena Wapa Wapa (Valencia).

3.2. Giving final form: editing and sound

Although *Urban Sphinx* is almost abstract film, the most challenging thing was the need to give some structure to the whole, creating different visual rhythms according to the music theme, and finding some kind of progression, starting with big murals, then approaching to the details and finally animating them 12 frames per second. To give some counterbalance to graffiti, for me it was important to show in the beginning of the film other urban elements that can be animated, like for instance plaster ornaments representing realistic faces — that can be found in Modernist buildings — or certain traffic signs sculpted directly onto the facades. And, from these legal Street art, then the film centers on the “illegal”: the graffiti, the stenciled paintings and the stickers.



With this concept in mind, and having collected a reasonable number of photos, I started a preliminary montage to combine the images with sound: a piece of hand pan music, “Maktub”, performed by Gabriel de Paco, a musician that I found playing in the streets of Valencia in 2016.

Fig. 7. Gabriel de Paco playing the Hand Pan during the ConFusión Festival (Benimaclet, Valencia).

By then I bought the musician a CD and time later, when I started *Urban Sphinx*, I decided that it was the mesmerizing and rhythmical sound that the project needed.

Gabriel de Paco started to play drums in the early 2000s. He played bass and guitar with various groups, and participated in recordings and concerts between 2006 and 2012. His solo career began when he travelled abroad and discovered the Hand Pan, a percussion instrument which emits an aerial sound that invites to dream.

The song “Maktub” is an improvised composition that arises from a series of melodic and rhythmic patterns created by the artist during the recording of a video in the middle of the street. Gabriel de Paco describes his own creative and improvisation process as follows:

Like any other musician playing the piano or other instrument, I already had some music patterns in mind, and this helped to improvise the music theme, performed in the Street to be recorded in video. When you improvise you incorporate the things you're thinking at that moment, so it is impossible to reproduce it later. And that's why the title of the theme is "Maktub", which means in Arab: "It was written". When you improvise, the music comes naturally, without filters. [6]

Gabriel de Paco's original performance can be watched here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V6N-j9j5vz4>

As this recording was taken in the Street and it captured some ambient sounds — like, for instance, the bells from a church or some chirping birds —, it was necessary to introduce more ambient sounds, to create a sort of urban soundscape that would eventually counterpoint what the image shows. After editing a preliminary test with different ambient sound added to the music, the sound technician Pedro Aviñó designed the definitive Foley and score for the film.

4. Results and conclusions

Since its premiere at the Mostra Animac de Catalunya 2020 (Lleida), Urban Sphinx has been selected at numerous international animation festivals; due to the CoVid-19 crisis, some of them have been cancelled — like Roanne (France) — or postponed, like Anifilm (Czech Republic), AnimaDoc (Poland) or La Truca (Colombia). However, the film has been internationally premiered at the Annecy 2020 Festival —which had to run online— and it is also scheduled in Grenoble (Festival du Film Court in Plen Air), Berlin Animation Festival, FlipBook (Macedonia), Ottawa (Canada) and Hiroshima (program Best of the World), among others.

However, being the first time that I complete a whole short film without making a single drawing, normally I meet people who ask: but, is this animation?

Although animation festivals schedule all kind of abstract, non-narrative and mixed media films, for a significant part of the audience, experimental animation happens to be still the "blind spot" — using Alan Cholodenko's term when he refers to animation as the "blind spot" of art historians and film critics [7]. Nevertheless, Urban Sphinx provides an illustration for Norman McLaren's definition of animation, not as "the art of drawings-that-move, but rather the art of movements that are drawn", since the the animation of this Street Art paintings and objects poses a double illusion: that of motion from static images, and that of continuity between disparate pictures, suggesting the spectral, the uncanny or, to return to Cholodenko's clarifying terms, "the animatic" [8].

Urban Sphinx provides the hyper-experience of wandering by Valencia, using sound and images like a mix of memories that acquire movement in the imagination of the viewer. The film is often perceived as an hypnotic journey, subtly conducted by the dreamlike sound of Hand Pan. The film works both as an archive of an ephemeral form of art, the Street Art, and as a creative film that privileges the relation be-

tween artistic interventions in the streets, improvised music, and experimental animation, merging into a form that multiplies the possibilities of documentary films: it could be said, after Cholodenko, that animation re-animates Street Art in “the way the object, after Baudrillard, seduces the subject, animating and reanimating it, making the subject enter its realm of metamorphosis, even despite itself.” [9]

What the moving images seem to tell us is that we exist, but we might not exist — and the world would keep spinning without us; a thought akin to following paradox by Antonio Machado, which leads the film:

The eye you see is not an eye because you see it; it is an eye because it sees you. [10]

To exist, in our time, is to be seen; therefore, the eye is the most powerful symbol. The gaze and the eye are the most distinctive subject in many of these graffitis: eyes that see you, eyes that see without seeing, mystical eyes in the sky... The eyes of a sphinx, the guards of the lonely streets.

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