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Ecological Functions of the Document in Art and Design: Diplomatic Documents in Artistic Inquiries

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Ecological Functions of the Document in Art and Design: Diplomatic Documents in Artistic Inquiries

Cover Page Footnote

Thanks to : Stéphane Darricau

Social | Democracy | Territories | Art | Ecology

Abstract

A certain ecologist art form has been on the rise for the past twenty years. Those artworks include documents. The analysis will take two examples : *Tale as Tool*, and *Chroniques de l'accueil*. The use of documents doesn't deal with representation, as it used to be in art, but with inquiries. The ecological art tries to trigger testimonies and transformations of the common representation of nature. They don't use documents as a trace but for their diplomatic capabilities. The document doesn't record events or facts but it changes the situation. The ecological artists come with this paradoxical art stance : recording the existing state of social relation to transform it.

Ecological functions of the document in art and design: diplomatic-documents in *artistics inquiries*

A certain ecologist art form has been on the rise for the past twenty years (Agnès Vilette, Mathieu Duperrex, Aurélien Gamboni, Atelier Raffard-Roussel, etc.), on the fringe of an older art movement (Kagan, 2013, p. 269-344) that deals with environmental concerns. This new movement talks about ecology, in the reality of the practice this is the process which makes a difference. Those artworks include documents. Far from developing the modernist aesthetic of disinterested contemplation as (Kant), these artworks are documenting and representing activities which are the real core of the art production. Artists and designers become curators and editors who make selections into documents produced along the project. In fact, the artwork is mostly made with negotiations and inquiries with stakeholders: the exhibition or book made is but one moment in the process. The artist or the designer is no longer a subject who expresses their point of view; instead, they act as a mediator who translates human experiences as much as they draw attention to the situations of non-humans.

I will take a non-common definition of the word “ecology”, from Félix Guattari's vision, in *The Three Ecologies* (1989). He outlines three ecological registers, which are not defined only by natural issues: mental/symbolic, social/economic and natural/environmental. I will also draw upon Sacha Kagan (2013) work. To begin the analysis I'm going to take two examples of ecological works of art.

Rendition artwork made with documents

Tale as Tool is presented as an exhibition of photographs and texts. It was curated and organised by Sandrine Teixido and Aurélien Gamboni. The items are

placed on a sort of shelf, halfway up the wall. Documents and writings are displayed side-by-side. The exhibition has an associated website, *ataleasatool.com* which also presents documents, including excerpts from interviews formatted according to academic standards, photographs, and maps. The artistic project is based on an investigation in Norway's Lofoten Islands. Its subject is the famous Moskstraumen maelstrom described by Edgar Allan Poe in the short story *A Descent Into the Maelstrom* (1841). Poe's tale is a tool that leads to the launch of an investigation which sheds light on local ecological issues. The work therefore proposes a social, symbolic and natural ecology.

Chroniques de l'accueil is an exhibition produced and curated by Fabrication-Maison and the Kolone association. The first part of the project consisted of producing a visual identity for the Maison des Réfugiés in Paris. The graphic style of this safe place for migrants was created and designed with the refugees themselves. The front of the building is painted with the word "welcome" in languages spoken by the refugees.

The second part was shown at the Signe in Chaumont (France) in 2022. It presents timelines and maps of the migratory journeys made by 4 asylum seekers from the CADA de Chaumont (a shelter for asylum seekers); testimonies given by asylum seekers and French social workers; and a poster production workshop. The documents presented were produced by the graphic designers of Fabrication-Maison and made up of the images created by asylum seekers. The essence of the project lies in the dialogue with the asylum seekers, therein offering them the opportunity to bear witness to their experiences. So, it is a work of both social and symbolic ecology. Into this process the graphic designers work with *intermediary-documents* (Zacklad, 2020 ; Aucompte, 2021): *documents for analysis* (pictures, paintings, texts, etc.), *records-documents for testimony* (timeline, picture, quote, etc.) and *tools-documents for conception* (like grids, instructions manuals, pieces of images, etc.).

We could observe in these two examples that the pieces of art produced could not summarize the process. Documents aren't manipulated for "a second use" (Pouillaude, 2020, p. 105), or even for a third use which would focus on the document's aesthetic properties instead of its function: that we could summarize as "being a trace or a "squared representation" (Pouillaude, 2020, p. 107)". The art of late 60's and early 90's used documents for those non-aesthetics forms qualities. Those productions used documents as mediums. Sometimes, artists don't take care of the authors, but try to make statements on society or culture (from Josef Kosuth to Edward Prince). In the exemples described below the document is a real testimony of events or collective production. The work consists of a collective process of documentation. It also uses documents as a trigger and records the production of even more documents.

**Works using an inquiry process: from the document as recording (« *document-trace* »)
to the document as transforming tool (« *document-diplomate* »)**

Documents are traces, but they involve new work processes and new representations. They do not objectively testify to what was said and done, but transform the actual interactions

(Couturier, 2021). Producing a document also changes the situation of what is being documented: the document becomes *diplomatic* within the production process (Verjat, 2021).

The diplomatic character of the document isn't a given, but asks to be enacted in a situated way. It is one of his *dispositions* to become diplomatic¹ in certain kinds of situations. The document is diplomatic from an ontological point of view. In Bruno Latour's work human organizations are based on *schemes of enunciation* (Latour, 2006) which structure various *modes of existence* (Latour, 2012). In Western cultures, which Latour calls "modern" (1991), the schemes of enunciation possessed an institutionalized manner of speaking whose power of true meaning depended on where they were used. The power of a sentence varies according to the establishments politics where it is pronounced. In order to be perceived as "saying the truth", we have to get involved in a certain way of describing reality. This way generally conforms to only one kind of ideal institutionalize category (Weber's *ideal-typic-establishment*) of western humanism : justice, fiction, science, techniques, politics². For example, truth within science is not the same as within the technical-engineering process. Reality can be described in a plurality of ways, which are all true depending on the way audiences have been prepared to hear them (*Felicity's Condition*, Goffman, 1986 ; Latour, 2012). Yet Latour doesn't mean something along the lines of "to each one his own truth": he rather describes the establishment of truth from an ontological point of view. Human interaction cannot be summarized in some nihilistic way by considering the "language game" only as child's play. It is no longer about finding transcendence in Greek *lógos*, or magic power to *speech acts* (yet the languages and inscriptions had a certain potential magic power). To exercise its power to tell the truth, a scheme of enunciation has to establish itself: in other words – to ensure that its speech and inscriptions have visible social effects (Latour, 2011). Those establishments arose through a long historical process and many disruptions (revolution, systemic shock, riot, invention, discovery, etc.) which have deeply ingrained the schemes of enunciation into our *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1980).

Speaking about *modes of existence* means that many people are enrolled to make the word real within everyone's social experience (Latour, 2011).

For example: when the French President signs a decree, a top-down chain of command is put in motion in order to circulate it. Established and confirmed agents organize and set up the dissemination of the of the written order (the *inscriptions*) because they were trained to do their work in a certain way. In this apparatus, the stakeholders are promoted for their capacity to conform to the rules or to make the order real within a restrictive system. But they could be punished for their lack of respect for the rules, as could be the citizens – including through the apparatus calls for the use of legitimate state violence (police). Agents obtain their social position

¹ Here we don't use the word "diplomatic" in reference to the scholarly historical discipline of that name.

² This analyzing method has many similarities with Manuel Zacklad's approach of intervention logic (Zacklad, 2007, p. 289).

through a **education** and within a specific social network. Everybody as become accustomed to acknowledging their authority, their quality and their obligations.

For Bruno Latour, the issue comes with the tendency of the established groups to close themselves on their own *schemes of enunciation* and *modes of existence*. There is a danger of an hegemonic situation: the schemes are always in a competition to replace each other. An *ontological diplomacy* indeed tries to encourage a plurality of discourses and lifestyles. Latour draws on the critical philosophy of Ellul, Horkheimer, Guattari or Illich, who described the alliance between science, politics and technology as a dictatorial *triumvirat*. This statement means that we have to take care of the emergent schemes which are trying to produce new establishments.

A diplomat-document is at a crossroads of modes of existence. It reveals an ontological and enunciation hybridity. Its means or function are not to communicate a message or to archive an event but to change the relationships between the stakeholders. The act of recording transform the situation recorded. **Here**, the act of registration triggers the social shifting.

The non-functional means of the document make it strange to our eyes : this is the phenomenon that John Dewey (2010) describes as an « experience ». The stakeholders cannot give any automatic social response. The members of the social group hence constituted have to work on a common definition of the events they live together. They have to debate on sign, inscription and speech : what does it require us to do? do we have to believe in it? do we have to evaluate it? with which kind of scheme?

The document is then a prototype which can steer the stakeholders towards a dialogue. Within the social realm, we can then speak of a « restitution of activities ». For instance, social designers always maintain a photographic logbook of their own activities. This recording then seems to be both a means of inquiry and the response to a new production context.

New production context

Very often, these works draw on new economic and organizational methods. From a sociological point of view, these practices cannot be compared to the practices inherited from Romantic or Impressionist art. Ecological documentary productions are not works that go from the studio to the gallery (White Cube, O'Doherty), rather they are periods of residency or investigation, which are funded from different sources. The artists previously mentioned were subsidized publicly or from a private foundation as part of an artistic, social or academic research project. To be financed, a project must be outlined and planned. It needs to obey scientific, administrative, or institutional protocols and must be justified by evaluation documents at the end of the funding period.

Moreover, these two milieus (democratic institutions and the scientific field) are not simply fortuitous partners with exogenous requirements to the art world – but real actors in these new project dynamics: they are democratic and scientific at the same time because they are entirely involved in the ecological transformations of our lifestyles.

Most recent ecological works (Duperrex, Sarraceno, Villette, etc.) use this combination of scientific, documentary and co-creation discourse.

They seem to follow the same principles that Guattari described in the 1980s (Guattari, 1989, 2013). The work of art is only ecological if it exists outside of the art world, records existing practices, and reveals the multiplicities of representations of the world. They do not produce art for the establishment, but they go through social struggle to transform it into artistic performances : they try to make new institutions.

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