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About knowledge on History of Art on the internet : profane, specialized and documental writings

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Abstract

To approach the present state of affairs concerning the mediation of knowledges on History of Art on the internet, this paper proposes to observe, by means of case analysis, the characteristics of three writings: profane, specialized and documental writings. This approach considers the characters and enunciative contexts of each one in a socio- semiotic perspective, which makes it possible to cross knowledge and informational and communicational practices, so as to study how the interdependence between support and medium is built.

Keywords

History of Art ; internet ; mediation of knowledge ; writing ; enunciation ; popular culture ; blog ; folksonomy ; artistic culture ; édition ; art documentation ; art journals ; typology, taxinomy

In the text on "the networks reasons ignore", Bruno Latour concludes: "Because labs, libraries and collections are connected in a world which without them becomes incomprehensible, it is necessary to support them, wher- ever there is interest in reason" (LATOUR, 1996, p.44). By observing the current information and communica- tion technology, it is possible to resume this conclusion, defining that the tools for comprehension mentioned are connected in a world in which internet is, at the same time, an object of the world and a tool of "connection", understood in the world and understanding the world, and add that understanding can also mean learning and conceiving. Internet has become, therefore - as a network and an interface of knowledge - support, media and mediator of writings, images and sounds, an important research object for information and communication sci-

ences. This is not unheard of, in the sense that we would have for the first time a factor to organize knowledge rationally, since scientific writing, classification, books and restricted academic literature, objects or, generally speaking, supports and traditional means of information and communication could perform this function, how- ever, it is new in how it was produced, at the same time temporally and spatially, a "superior crystallization" (if this may be said) of networks and practices and in which access to information and even to knowledge implies the operation, in additional degrees, of facilitation and penalization factors.

How to approach these new degrees, these specific and present aspects of a state of writing and reading of knowledges, is one of the questions this debate induces. Not intending to bring a proposal, even if partial, we will recover, however, a field we have already dealt with in human sciences (RÉGIMBEAU, 2006), referring to certain publishing or documental "formalizations" re- lated to plastic arts and their history, to gather certain observations. The issue is, first of all, to make sense of an informational reality with the assistance of descriptive criteria taken from the analysis of enunciation, from the analysis of content and socio-semiotics, to attempt to find the dominant and maybe even revealing traces of certain logics of publication and edition, in the external expression of certain digital qualities.

Among the writings we will deal with are 1) those whose status fluctuates from testimonial, reaction to the exchange with readers or public trust: The "profane writings"; 2) then, those that were developed in an old format and in permanent reconstruction of the periodic press through newspapers and magazines: The "special- ized writings"; 3) and, finally, those that intend to place, work out and communicate references: "documental writings". These three fields are far from indenting the changing and extensive matter of writings on art, but they offer boundaries where knowledge, informational and communicational practices cross each other so as to study how the interdependence of support and medium is built (SOUCHIER, 2004; ORRIGI, 2004).

"Profane" writings on art

Along with the historical, scientific, critical and esthetic genders related to artists, university students and professional authors, other writings on art are ex- pressed and put into circulation on the internet. They feed blogs, forums, websites, personal webpages and other spaces

devoted to them. The interest they arouse is indisputable for those wishing to interrogate certain forms of knowledge on art history and recover its con- tents. They could be called "common writings", "amateur writings" or "restricted writings" as well - not intending a connotation whatsoever - since their authors come from an amateur or non-specialized group (in several degrees). The term "profane", taken from the sociologi- cal vocabulary, attempts to translate the idea of a text from non-proficient individuals, idea that Hervé Moëlo (2004)1 promoted as "laical" in an article in which he clearly states the difficulty of referring to the so-called "common" writings without questioning the ideological basis of the notion itself.

"Blog" writings and forum words

Generally short and reactive shared comments and articles referring to exhibitions, they remind us of the reasons why a certain work should cause interest or they deal with interests related to movements and artists; these texts, previously part of personal diaries, letters or reader's mail, now consist accessible sources for the study of these writings (considering them "files" could be premature because of the ephemeral character of the personal websites). This kind of investigation is obviously the interest of a reception sociology which considers popular expressions of culture - popular culture itself - as well as a certain popular relation with other cultures, especially with the erudite culture – immediately defining that the matter, in these statements, refer to fragments mixed with the most varied cultural horizons, where curious beginners, versatile individuals, eager amateurs and also learned individuals wandering outside their specialty, gather together. However, this study cannot remain unknown for or independent from information and communication sciences, which, in this field, have a typical example of the textual and cultural confronta- tions on the enunciation modalities connected to the communication means and conditions.

In some cases, among others, these enunciations determine the tone of what could be the topic of a more systematic prospection.

- For example, a web user who writes ironically about a certain car introduced by Citroën: "It's a shame its design is so clumsy... To be clear, using the name of a genius like Picasso for a machine that looks like a compact Caesar formation is amazing..."2 He humorously witnesses a certain familiarity with the "standards" of contemporary art.
- Another one declares lyrically his interest in Chagall: "I love Chagall's painting, it's as if a thousand pages of one's childhood memories are turned, as if a child had never stopped dreaming with a paintbrush right before his eyes."3 We are reminded that the emotions

brought about by paintings can be united with the emotions of short stories (Ut picture poesis).

- Another one - in a comment on a video that shows an "action" by Sophie Calle interpreting a love message, censoring her frequent request from institutions: "Sophie Calle, stereotype of the French institutional artist. What she represents is simply the contemporary institutional art in France (generously subventioned)."4 - reinstates a usual criticism, especially about the creation of re- gional subsidies for contemporary arts (FRAC), moving from a debate on esthetics to a social debate related to public consumption.

Certainly, these taking of stands, these opinions with no real editorial commitment, these glances, have existed for a long time, but with the internet they have surfaced to the public level and brought about a horizon of reception, opening up the "golden book" of arts, usually restricted to the place where the exhibition took place.

"Tagged" texts

Another expression of the profane writings on art is the phenomena, now generalized, of the folksonomy that consists – in a kind of spontaneous creation of an index – in any author or web user creating "tags" (labels or keywords) for texts and images without mentioning (or at least without any explicit reference) to the lists of topics and references or documental languages.

The Flickr5 photo sharing website invites us to use a tag with the following statement as an encouragement: "What are tags? You can give your photos and videos a "tag", which is like a keyword or category label. Tags help you find photos and videos which have something in common. It is pos- sible to label up to 75 tags for each photo or video." However, there is a distance between what is announced and what is feasible. For example, the tags attached to Brian Eno's6 work "Quiet Club" for the Lyon Biennial of 2005 are only five: "Lyon; Contemporary Art Biennial, Dalbera (who took the photos); France; Eno". The same happens with other works exhibited on the site, which really limits the pos- sibilities to find images. Maybe it can be inferred that folksonomy is incapable of deep or pertinent indexation because it is not possible to improvise as an index maker out of nowhere, especially when the motivation of the "publication" does not distinguish itself by the interest in spreading certain specialized information, rather it is interested in the transposition of personal picture albums.

It is possible, however, to bring together amateur practices and principles inherited from

museology, dedicated to the popularization and facilitated access to culture. This is what happens with the experiment called "Steve" in which some American museums collaborated: "We are a group of volunteers, primarily from art museums, who share a common interest in improving access to our collections. We are concerned about barriers to public access to online museum information [...] who believe that social tagging may provide profound new ways to describe and access museum collections and encourage visitor engagement with museum objects."7 - - - This project started a few years ago is supposed to generate reports on the efficiency of the opening to active consultation by visitors from all fields: "[...] Participation in steve is open to anyone with a contribution to make to developing our collective knowledge, whether they formally represent a museum or not"8. This kind of experience internet makes possible, more than any other communication system, is carefully followed by some professionals, who consider folksonomy a way to enrich the indexation of the works - "...since the tags added to the works are a lot richer, simply because of the multicultural- ity folksonomy engenders"9 - as well as a way get the visitor more involved by means of using one's own comments or simplifying access to the works through the use of a less specialized vocabulary: "This vocabulary understood by anyone evidently makes searches easier, since tags are also metadata."10 Seth Van Hooland insisted on the need to count on these new practices: "The comments from users may be greatly useful, for example, in databases of historical images to increase the quality of metadata available" (VAN HOLLAND, 2006, p.46).

These aspects – only half-shown here according to spaces or places of expressions – concern this research and do hold a growing place in the study of mediatic (as medium and media) specificities of the internet (Cf. EUTIC, 2007)11. Soon comparative synthesis will become possible, both from a historical point of view (social, economic and cultural) of the personal and shared websites or typologies and from the concrete demonstration (themes, forms, contents...) of these expressions, "leading to analyses that avoid the banalization of the quotidian and resist the reflex of heroification through text", as Hervé Moëlo affirms.12

Specialized writings: art magazines and journals

With the internet we are facing an enunciation system that places or intertwines private and public registers, close and far, internal and external, native and exogenous - a fact which leads us to finding every level of publication. The journalistic world is certainly one of the most

represented, be it professionally or "amateur- ishly" (with blogs, websites for sharing purposes and forums), recovering certain semiotic and rhetoric aspects of the journalistic signatures and tone. The professional mode is characterized by print, among which we can find exclusively digital titles and "bi-media" titles (paper and digital) in the category of newspapers as well as magazines. What was observed in other studies (RÉGIMBEAU, 1999; 2001; COURBIÈRES et al., 2007) has continued, taking diverse new faces, of which we will portray a few aspects, using as examples, the website of an old print newspaper (Connaissance des arts [Art knowledge] created in 1952) and the typical model of a digital magazine that exceeds digital (Synesthésie [Synaesthesia] created in 1995).

From printed paper to computer media

An important title in the field, easily found in newsstands, bookstores and libraries, Connaissance des arts (http://www.connaissancedesarts.com/) is publicized and introduced as an information media: "Every month, Connaissance des Arts keeps its readers updated with international news." Thus the topics intend to cover all events in an encyclopedic fashion: "To better understand the art of all times, from archeology to contemporary creation, from garden art to design and architecture". However, this copy of the print version becomes an online media, associating information to contents closer to a collec- tion of works, such as "Chronicles of a life, Art and society, Analysis of style, Study of a work, Library" as well as to functionalities involving files and the dissemination of topics such as "Videos, Portfolio, Listen, Introduction to Art" through which one can have access to documental films and interviews. The total, in the periphery and in hypertextual links with expected titles in the editorial center mobilized by covers and summaries of the print edition. Emphasis is placed on the abundance of topics on a dense homepage – "home" (overloaded, which is quite common on sites meant for large screens) on which headlines, titles and subtitles, links and advertisements squeeze in, which relate this kind of online publication to a multimedia newspaper.

Among the art press sites, this kind sums up a ten- dency that aims at opening in the web, not only a website to go with the paper version, but also to develop a portal that may encourage the visitor to use all the areas of the website, reminding us, as a promise, of the remarkable information content of the newspaper. This reader, who is also a spectator and an auditor, may have permanent access to information stocked according to a dosage of proportions finely weighed compared to the print ver- sion. The portal performs the function of promotional

argumentation for the newspaper, publicizing its quality by means of the simple reduction of topics: Quantitative, in this case is under signs, subject to the questioning of its meanings when the print media, especially everyday media, reduces at the same time its texts and surfaces.

From the digital magazine to the center of artistic initiatives

After the implementation phase, magazines had to find out how to survive. Generally, this was what happened to the online edition, whose first steps on the Internet were supported by public, private or association structures. Synesthésie is among the titles that survived due to several actions in the publishing, social and finan- cial fields. The formula used by the magazine in its initial phase is characteristic of its position in between an art magazine, a forum, an editor and an association. If on one hand it claims precocity and its significant experi- ence, suggesting that it "was the first art magazine on the in- ternet in France", on the other hand it also establishes that its activities are both publicizing and editing: "In 2002 we created, the CAV (Virtual Art Center) on the site, a space to access works especially created for the internet and for Synesthésie." This Virtual Art Center with the Synesthésie badge was possible thanks to several regular contributions from the cities, departments, regions and the Ministry of Culture and the Regional Culture Man- agement. This action was carried out, among others, in 2006, through the virtual participation - and also physi- cal - in a Biennial called "Urban Mutations" in Seine- Saint-Denis (Parisian region), which was extended by means of an informative presence of the Biennial on the Synesthésie website, continuing the publicization of the works by invited artists in this space accessed through the CAV13, also showing expository texts by the curators14. The functions normally acquired in posterior phases and different supports, up to the most consequent, that is, naturally, the conservation of the works created for the event, are thus gathered and – for a certain amount of time, maybe, still to be observed – accessible.

The filing of old numbers, virtual works, studies, projects, which is a constant concern from the begin- ning of the magazine, created dense assets, which places it in a new enunciative configuration: As a portal or a platform to organize open files. In the subject of Art His- tory - in which another vector is also active concurring and complementing the article published in a scientific magazine: The exhibition's catalog - the importance placed on the arguments of the exhibition, the historical texts and the comments on works is marked by this will to preserve characteristics.

Documental writings

The grouping, as well as the crossing and "accumulation" of data on the internet, so diverse and numerous, favored studies that sought to understand and clarify the landscape of information.

Typology and organization of knowledge

Regarding art, the studies were carried out aiming at new possibilities created by computer techniques. During the 1990's, for example, several works came about strug- gling to circumscribe the characteristics of the websites and generating forms of typological categorization: An important example was the classification of digital works, performed by Annick Bureaud so as to "display the great categories of works online" (BUREAUD, 1998).
This category approach also came from the docu- menting services and libraries in the organization of topics and the architecture of its websites. Having the objective of selecting and relating, as well as creating a scope of understanding for the field, these tools have become themselves typological documents. Claiming the theorization of documental pragmatics, we established a first synthesis of the reference potential of the notions and points of view from the selection of meaningful web- sites in the delimitation of "classifications" or relation with the subject15: Artists; 2) subjects and techniques; 3) works (collection, exhibitions, conservation); 4) research on art; 5) geography; 6) cultural mediation of art; 7) edition, mediatization and criticism; 8) documental re- sources; 9) formation of artists; 10) markets and galleries; 11) law and professional and social statute; 12) cultural policy; institutions and support; 13) activities and actors associated, among which art education; 14) news.

The analysis of the inputs in complex information is not only of practical interest; it is an important clas- sifier which can be a complementary theoretic tool to analytically define a field of study. These documental text principles can be used, for example, in the methodic exploration of the web to define the theme of an aca- demic dissertation.

Taxonomy and indexation

Other documental tools come about on the net and may aid comprehension or, more

specifically, add to the pedagogic instruments necessary to understand the works. Francis Parent16, art critic and historian, worked to define taxonomy for a database, articulated around a few main required criteria for the reception and critical appreciation of the works. The four criteria chosen for the base called Artrinet17, which actually determine the indexation classification, are A) Formalism (most abstract, most figurative, most..., etc., classified from the most "immaterial" to the most "realistic"?); B) Materiality (pure concept, group of materials, transversal object, etc., classified as the most "immaterial" to the most "real"?); C) The body-mind investment (which is the Body/Mind ratio by which the artist expresses oneself in the work? Classified from the most "intellectual", for example, "Conceptual Art", ... to the most "physical", for example, "Body Art",...). D) Communication (The artist deliberately intends to communicate some kind of message through his/her work? (classified from most "spiritualist" to most "mundane").

This principle of plastical and esthetical definition of an important corpus is interesting in more than one instance: Be it for a contextual observation that may consider it an additional moment of critical methodology, be it for an observation strictly guided by and for the art market, be it as a witness of the esthetic commitments of the Artension magazine which supports this project18. All these approaches are possible, but the one we support here is the formalization of documental criteria whose list and organization are worth a pre-figuration of a compen- dium which is applicable to contemporary works, usually hard to synthesize (condense) documentally by keywords or descriptions, such as thematic dimensions.

Conclusion

Our contribution proposed to deal with the specific field of internet writings, inferring that these examples, interesting in themselves, could also be used to approach other cases to study the mediation of knowledge and the information on art.

The new modes of writing or reading authorized by the Internet where the network, the sites, the exchanges and the hypertextuality are coordinated resort to three essential types of new: The new signs at play, engendered by technique and esthetics; the one arising from the new conditions of text and image (both referring to innova- tion) enunciation; and the one referring to updating or original generation of contents (this type referring to, above all, innovation).

Varying, the text receives differ- ent shapes as to linguistic and editorial unity, not only according to the context of its production, as well as its availability. These two moments can also be conceived as united or even mixed, when a concept of text updating is referred to only in its reception. The text is not what is read once by a receiver, cultivated or not. Turning our observation to the kind and the context of the enuncia- tion, we try to make sense of the dynamics that sow the communication intention.

As new writings, these enunciations created by different social actors who invest contents, motivations and several obligations, presuppose an observation and analysis of the modes of expression and inscription in a mediatic and informational window crossed by ideologi- cal and economical (paid websites, commercial, free, etc.) and cultural (art, science, education) challenges which cannot be dissociated from political and social chal- lenges. Since these writings result in the organization of a discourse, this would be one of the issues to resume in a socio-semiotic perspective that is concerned with the relation between the sign and the meaning.

Notes

1. This is how he summarizes the publication phenomena in his article: “In literature or science, the edition space gene- rates the normative conditions of its cultural productions.”

2. The auto.Citroën blog celebrates Picasso [accessed in Sep 9, 2008]: http://www.leblogauto.com/2006/09/ citroen-celebre-picasso.html

3. Fórum sobe Psychonet.fr [consultado em 9-09-2008] : http://www.psychonet.fr/forums_psychonet/viewtopic. php?t=2062

4. Sophie Calle makes us talk about love. [accessed in Sep 9, 2008] http://latelelibre.fr/index.php/2008/04/ sophie-calle-nous-fait-parler-damour/

5. Flickr. Home [website accessed on Sep 25, 2008]. URL: <http://www.flickr.com/>

6. Flickr [website accessed on Sep 25, 2008]. URL: <http://www.flickr.com/search/?ss=2&ct=6&q=Brian +eno+biennale&m=text>

7. Steve: The Museum Social Tagging Project [on-line]. Home. Welcome to the Steve Project. 2005-2008. [ac- cessed on Oct 10, 2008] URL: <http://tagger.steve. museum/steve.php?task=helpController_help>

8. Steve: The Museum Social Tagging Project [on- line]. Links & Resources. 2005-2008 [accessed on Oct 10, 2008]. URL: <http://steve.museum/index.

php?option=com_content&task=blogsection&id=5& Itemid=14>

9. Museu real de Mariemont (Bélgica) [on-line]. Scien- tific establishment of the French community in Belgium. Blog Mariemont 2.0. Folksonomy: When a visitor can tag a work... Posted by Alexis Sonet, Monday, May 19, 2008 [accessed on Sep 10, 2008]. URL: <http://www. musee-mariemont.be/blog2/index.php?m=05&y=08& d=30&entr y=entr y080530-151920>

10. Ibid.

11. Witness: Several communication topics in the EU- TIC debates aimed at information and communication technologies and (TIC) in Athens, 2007, dealt with blogs, forums, amateurish participation, wiki, etc.

12. Indicates in a footnote that "This kind of procedure reminds us of several authors such as Gaston BACHELARD, Michel FOUCAULT, Norbert ELIAS, Michel DE CERTEAU, Roger CHARTIER, Pierre BOURDIEU, Richard HOG- GART..." (MOËLO, 2004). Among other authors that helped us understand the fertile openings of information and communication sciences.

13. Art Grandeur Nature. Shared Urban Zones. [ac- cessed on Sep 15, 2008]. URL: <http://www.art-gran- deur-nature.com>

14. Mutações urbanas. Arte grandeza natureza 06. Home [accessed on Sep 15, 2008]. URL : <http://synesthesie. free.fr/agn2006/index2.html>

15. Retomamos aqui uma das listas apresentadas em nosso estudo sobre a tipologia da informação de arte contemporânea (Régimbeau, 2006).

16. PARENT, F. Approche de classification pour une taxinomia visuelle générale de la création Artistique. Artrinet [online]. [accessed on Sep 28, 2008]. URL: http://www.artrinet. fr/classification.php.

17. Artrinet. Home [online]. [accessed on Sep 25, 2008]. URL: <http://www.artrinet.fr/>

18. Artension [on-line]. [accessed on Sep 20, 2008]. URL: <http://www.artension.fr/>

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