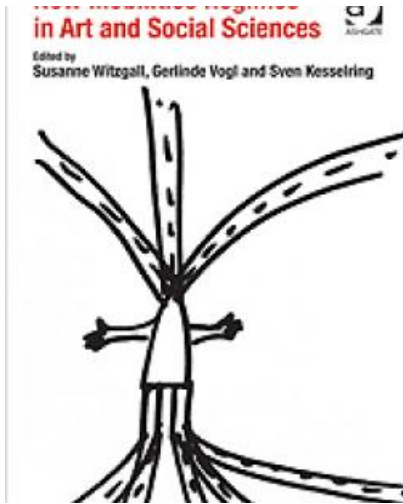


ESSENTIAL READING

11/25/2015



New Mobilities Regimes in Art and Social Sciences - by Susanne Witzgall, Gerlinde Vogl and Sven Kesslerling

By **Guillaume Logé** 25 November 2015
(Researcher in Art History and The book *New Environmental Sciences*) *Mobilities Regimes in Art and Social Sciences* (Ashgate Publishing, 2013), developed under the direction of Susanne Witzgall, Gerlinde Vogl and Sven Kesslerling, follows the conference-exhibition entitled *Tracing the New Mobilities Regimes* that took place at the Akademie Bildenden Künste in Munich in 2008.

A collaboration between Art and the Social Sciences to be defined

Part of the book's appeal lies in the presentation of the collaboration between art and social science, and the exploration of how they can enhance working methods and knowledge. The body of work consists of videos, photograms, photos, drawings, cartoons, diagrams, installations and a fictional enterprise (artist Res Ingold's airline company).

The book raises critical questions for anyone interested in the meeting of art and sciences, especially social sciences. Is it art itself or certain means that art uses that can be drawn upon? Does an investigation method specific to art exist (to be stowed away neatly alongside scientific methods - sociological or ethnological, for example)? Or rather, does art act as a complement, or solely and strictly as additional raw material on which science can build?

The book is based on the assumption that the language of images and written language create a dialogue that surpasses the respective means of each. This preconception goes

beyond the book and touches more widely on the question of the possible links between academic analysis and esthetic/artistic approaches and their implementation. The authors clearly assume that some of the interactions between art and social science have yet to be identified and verbalized: it is a work in progress that the authors expect will lead to new perspectives in the discovery of both new topics and new methods.

Implicitly, the book is a call for a reformulation of the reader's behavior. It is up to him to explore the active connections at work in the different articles with his own sensitivity, intuition and knowledge, and his own work as a viewer-reader. Approaching this book (like any other) likewise means missing its very substance. The invention of a new stance is required here. The book does not conclude with the end of a sentence or discovery of an image; it is a new and demanding type of object that requires cross-referencing between image and text. The reader must also use of two sets of eyes: an analytical eye, to consider the statements, and an esthetic/artistic eye, one could say, to consider the works of art.

The ethnographic and iconic turn

As Susanne Witzgall recalls in the introduction to the book, starting in the 1970s, science came to be regarded as being subject to historical, social, economic, discursive and political factors. She refers to the work of reputed researchers, such as philosopher/anthropologist Bruno Latour, sociologist Karin Knorr-Cetina, and philosopher of science and technologies Donna Haraway. In other words, science has become a form of cultural expression like any other. It does not intrinsically have a closer link with "reality" than other forms of knowledge, nor can its representations of reality be considered superior to the narrative and symbolic practices of art. Art and science thus are on equal footing in attempting to describe reality or exploring, for instance, determinism and **mobility** practices. Language as the sole vector of knowledge is questioned given that it always seems contingent on an era.

In those same years, many artists borrowed from the sciences - especially sociology and ethnography - without necessarily abiding by all of their binding rules. We talk about the "ethnographic turn" in art. Meanwhile, more and more researchers became interested in the visual and formal representations of artists, with the idea of revisiting their practices. The idea of artistic research emerged twenty years ago, at a time - retrospectively referred to as the "iconic turn" - where the absolute sagacity of science was being called into question. This turning point should be seen relative to the place that pictures began to take in society. The creative power of pictures, their power to generate in the literal sense of the term and the epistemological issues they raise were the topics of discussion.

The idea of images speaking for themselves, which would be more "accurate," or more precisely the idea that, through images, it is possible to allow an object to speak for itself, is discussed. Somehow images provide access to the material itself, without filters. This notion of the neutrality of images has, of course, been largely invalidated from an art history standpoint. Implicitly, through analysis, it is also present in the work of Christoph Keller, who questions how a camera documents **movement**, and what the notion of time and esthetics says about this harnessing. Despite this shortfall, inherent in any approach which, by definition, is limited, the image as a tool seems full of promise, both for exploring (research development based on the image) and expressing thoughts and knowledge.

The interaction between Art and the Social Sciences and mobilities studies

Susanne Witzgall believes that, in the field of mobility, the artistic process is a research avenue in itself, to be placed alongside traditional scientific approaches. Artists' work can deepen aspects that are often neglected or forgotten by science, providing access to the senses and to the individual involved in mobility processes with a relevance that statistics cannot. However, she qualifies this position by adding that artistic approaches inspired by anthropologists and sociologists, in their realization process, are not in themselves a sufficient basis for scientific analysis and assessment. Rather, they are to be put on par with images and other sources of information available to scientists.

In other words, an artistic approach is recognized and validated by the author; it can function independently but should not be placed at the same level as scientific approaches. Rather, it should be understood as enriching the scientific approach.

The author seems to be more reserved than philosopher Jacques Rancière, whose work, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (2004), she cites: "Politics and art, as forms of knowledge, build fictions, that is to say practical rearrangements of signs and images, relationships between what is seen and what is said, what is done and what can be done." For Rancière, science and art are simply different forms of distribution with equal value of the sensible that comprise reality. Art and science are both dependent on systems of perception. Thus should we consider them as complementary, even though are contradictory.

The example of the car as object and the sensitive research method

It is more in the dynamic described by Jacques Rancière that Amtoft Andrew and Bettina Vestergaard, co-authors of one of the book's chapters, fit. Based on the idea that changes in behavior and modes of perception lead to a reconfiguration of knowledge, they created the Campervan Residency Program - CVRP. For them, the production of knowledge and artistic creativity converge through perpetual exchange. The two authors explore how such a program provides artists and researchers even greater immersion in the flow of contemporary mobilities, at the heart of the social interactions that take place inside of cars.

CVRP is a nomadic living and working space. The authors used this approach for *Free Speech on Wheels, Let Your Opinion Roll - FSOW* (2006-2007) work-study (video, photograms and text). The pair roamed Los Angeles - a city where the car's place is very cultural - in a 1973 VW Beetle, to meet inhabitants in order to gauge diversity and develop more complete reflection on what constitutes public space. Conducting the interviews in a mobile space (their car) helped highlight that which, using a conventional protocol, would have remained invisible. The study showed that the only place where real mixing of the population takes place is on the roads. Therefore, FSOW is a performative and participatory method that aims to bring together the diverse profiles of those traveling inside a vehicle to gauge L.A. residents' relationship to the public space and to vehicles. It is a new kind of interventionist survey method where the researchers used the object of study (the car) as the study method itself.

The main advantage of positioning oneself inside of the field being studied is the ability to interact and elicit responses from our surroundings, the environment itself participating in the study. The authors propose the concept of "perceptual mobility" as a meeting point for exchanges between visual art and the sciences. This concept sheds light on how sensory perception helps both artists and social scientists to better understand and discover the uniqueness of contemporary modes of social organization. It

suggests that, when the object of our knowledge was formed through what we see or do, the reconfiguration of how we see or do things is also a reconfiguration of our knowledge of that object.

Towards hybrid approaches?

The article-drawing by artist Jorinde Voigt entitled "Airport-Studies, Intercontinental, Territorium" at first glance seems to fit into the category defined by Susanne Witzgall: art as a complementary approach to science and the purveyor of additional usable raw materials. We find here the artist's easily recognizable style - a combination of diagrams, lines, curves and readings in which she interweaves positions, journeys, speeds, times and geographic coordinates. Her drawings seem to wrest from mobility some of its distinguishing features, as though she were dissecting the mysterious algorithm that governs them. The splintered graphic representation often tends towards saturation, or perhaps is itself movement, a ceaseless palimpsest whose rendering would only capture a given state at a given moment. Fundamentally, the article remains obscure, thus demonstrating the very difficulty of introducing art, and more specifically of non-documentary, non-illustrative art, particularly into the social sciences. However, the real purpose of this work seems to emerge once we recognize the prospects it opens up in terms of synchronizing multiple parameters: distance, speed, direction, frequency and dynamic graphics. In a way, it should be regarded as basic research, as it can be practiced in the sciences. Ultimately, Jorinde Voigt's work goes less in sense of complementarity - as described by Susanne Witzgall - than the fusion of artistic and scientific approaches in a kind of hybrid, third approach.

It is in this perspective that the work of Pia Lanzinger might fit. The latter analyzes the telework phenomenon that has been made possible by the development of information and communications technology. Telework (usually work of a less qualified nature) is mainly done by women, sending them back to the traditional status long conferred on them. The artist met with teleworking women in Germany and Sweden and created film portraits. Lanzinger's approach (video and installation) helps us grasp the problem of isolation for teleworkers and the blurring of lines between the private sphere and professional activities, without the use of text. These issues become clear through the images and esthetics; the viewer is immersed in these women's environments, which are recreated simultaneously in the installations, voices and filmed portraits. This approach goes beyond traditional scientific approaches, which would not have used such tools, but without limiting itself to an artistic approach. In fact it seems to perfectly exemplify the hybrid, third research method mentioned above.

In a similar vein, in 2005, Gülsün Karamustafa combined video and text to capture the situation of women from a Moldovan minority, close to Turkey, who go to work illegally in Istanbul as servants for rich Turkish women. The video asks them about their past, their lives upon returning home and their working conditions.

Alissa Tolstokorova's working process is similar. She is interested in Ukrainian women who have been driven to geographic and economic mobility by the post-Communist context and poverty. Some have left to live or work outside their country. The author interviewed 23 women in this situation. She studies the restrictions imposed on them by their employers, how they are housed, fed, the integrity of their family life, and how they forge their careers in an attempt to reclaim their futures. The article concludes that, despite increasingly global mobility, these women have virtually no chance of returning home.

Art as a tool for transmitting knowledge

In addition to approaches combining art and science targeting a hybrid survey and restitution method, the position of artist Ursula Bienmann is interesting. With her work, the scale tips a bit more toward the art side, taking clear advantage of the assumption that a work of art by itself is capable of providing knowledge, without additional intervention. Between 2006 and 2009 Bienmann produced a video anthology entitled Sahara Chronicle, which focuses on migration in the Sahara toward Europe. The video documents certain pivotal points on the migration routes (the Agadez and Arlit transit areas in Niger, Tuareg guides on the border in the Libyan Desert, military patrols along the Algerian-Moroccan border in Oujda, the Laayoune prison, and boat crossings from Senegal to the Canary Islands). She simply reports, without commentary, on the system that the spectator himself must attempt to reconstruct. In the video X-Mission (2008), Bienmann focuses on the idea of "camps" (using the example of a refugee camp in Palestine) as extra-territorial zones. These areas, usually created on a temporary basis, tend to perpetuate, forcing their "inhabitants" to settle there and create a life in a context linked to global issues, the management of supranational bodies (UN and NGOs) and links between people and their communities of origin.

Researcher Mehdi Alioua and artist Charles Heller teamed up to explore the phenomenon of migration in Africa, and trans-Moroccan migration in particular. The article explains how individual stories quickly become collective, and how communities form, organize, create their own rules, communicate and develop an imaginary. The artistic status of the Crossroads at the Edge of Worlds video is not apparent, and is neither used nor questioned with respect to the research; it is simply used here as a tool to illustrate. This collaborative work does not reveal any interaction between the art and science fields. One might rightly wonder here about whether or not "art" indeed came into play here. Rather, it appears as though a medium that art sometimes uses – video – was employed here. One of the pitfalls of the art-science combo lies precisely here: in believing that art merges with the tool we are using.

Mobility

Broadly, the word mobility can be defined as the intention to move and the realization of this movement in geographical space, implying a social change.

[More](#)

Movement

Movement is the crossing of space by people, objects, capital, ideas and other information. It is either oriented, and therefore occurs between an origin and one or more destinations, or it is more akin to the idea of simply wandering, with no real origin or destination.

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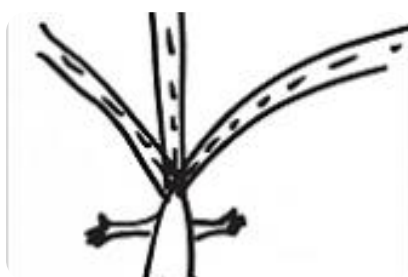


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¹² <http://en.forumviesmobiles.org/publication/livres-clefs/2015/11/25/new-mobilities-regimes-art-and-social-sciences-suzanne-witzgall-gerlinde-vogl-and-sven-kesserlig-2985>