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# THE GIFT, THE NETWORK, AND RECIPROCITY IN ARTIST’S BOOKS

Leszek Brogowski

The arrival of the photocopier (Xerox) in western markets in the late 1950s, and its steady rise as a household name did, certainly, create the *material* conditions which prompted the setting up of a vast network for the exchange of ideas and information between artists all over the world; an exhibition organized at the Cabinet du livre d’artiste in 2011, “The Photocopy”, brought together documents reminding us that, from now on, works produced by artists can themselves take the form of a modest photocopy. However, when Lucy R. Lippard placed so much hope in an alternative network for ideas and information in 1973, she rightly insisted on including this new phenomenon emerging from much older foundations, such as books or the post office, “much art now is transported by the artist or in the artist himself,” she said, “rather than by [...] existing information networks such as mail, books, telex, video, radio etc.”.<sup>1</sup> This was a time – now long gone – of pride in a post office which would take to the addressee, on the same day, any object which was properly stamped and legibly addressed: a pebble, a piece of fruit, a sheet of paper. It should not be forgotten that the typewriter, aided and abetted by carbon paper, had – since the 19th century – permitted large numbers of copies of written documents to be made at little cost, which is how the editors of the magazine *Potlatch* worked in Paris in the 1950s. We should not forget, either, that cheap offset printing was available to everyone at small ‘cornershop’ printers, whose specialty was calling cards and wedding invitations; which is how the publisher of the *Daily Bûl* at La Louvière in Belgium proceeded.<sup>2</sup>

So, the material conditions of this network had existed for a while, but it seems that it is the profound questioning of the foundations of Western society after the carnage of the Second World War, as well as the criticism of art as its symbolic legitimization, in short, a definitive loss of illusions, which gave the impulse to reflection not about one more revolutionary strategy, or even about massive social change, but of the creation of refuges and oases where art can hide away at the heart of that real society, or to build shelters for art, or open umbrellas to protect it. “I guess”, wrote Lucy R. Lippard, “that’s where the other culture, or alternative information network, comes in – so we can have a choice of ways to live without dropping out.”<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, Guy Debord, one of the editors of the review *Potlatch*, brought to light the ability of the “*société du spectacle*”<sup>4</sup> to co-opt critical inventions of the avant-garde, ‘recognized as an officially positive value’, in order to put them to work for the capitalist project of ‘spectacular consumption’ and a ‘restructuring without community’; yet the inventions of contemporary art aimed at the cathartic destruction of the language of an art which symbolized, precisely, bourgeois society. “The critical truth of such attacks”, wrote Debord, “as utterances of the real life of modern poetry and art is concealed”, as the spectacle, “whose function it is to *bury history in culture*, presses the pseudo-originality of its modernist means into the service of a strategy of which defines it in the most profound sense”.<sup>5</sup>

Informal networks of artistic exchange were thus set up from the 1950s onward: their esthetic and political involvement often went unnoticed, as did the role played in these exchanges by various forms of printed matter, which are their *practical* conditions of possibility. Yet this forgotten text from 1971, typewritten by two Polish artists, Jarosław Kozłowski and Andrzej Kostołowski, ‘NET’<sup>6</sup>, lucidly enumerates several of these principles:

## NET

- ▶ a NET is open and uncommercial
- ▶ points of the NET are: private homes, studios and any other places, where art propositions are articulated
- ▶ these propositions are presented to persons interested in them
- ▶ propositions may be accompanied by editions in form of prints, tapes, slides, photographs, catalogues, books, films, letters, manuscripts etc.
- ▶ NET has no central point and any coordination
- ▶ points of NET can be anywhere
- ▶ all points of NET are in contact among themselves and exchange concepts, propositions, projects and other forms of articulation
- ▶ the idea of NET is not new and in this moment it stops to be an authorized<sup>7</sup> idea
- ▶ NET can be arbitrarily developed and copied

In the spirit of the times, this manifesto insisted on the alternative nature of the institution which made up the network, which – unlike the internet – did not aim for an infinite propagation of information, because it brought together people engaged in exchanges. The informal network as a new type of artistic institution (an institution in the sense Michel Foucault would understand, rather than a public or private organism, with its own legal and administrative structures) permits a modification of the idea of utopia, closely linked to thinking about art and its critical function: not only could ‘private apartments, artists’ workshops and other places where artistic propositions are articulated’ now be considered as sites where utopia is *realized* (which is in line with a liberal society’s philosophy, anyway), but moreover, the *here and now* of utopia is emphasized by using the existing means of communication, like the post office, faxes, telexes, or the radio. As Krzysztof Wodiczko once said, for Polish artists, the point was to consciously “infiltrate and manipulate the system while also recognizing the extent to which they are being manipulated by the system”.<sup>8</sup> That seemed possible in so far as – a major political engagement – the network had no centre, found itself free of all coordination, and in consequence constituted an alternative to the concentration of power, therefore hardly being vulnerable to manipulation at all. The *NET* manifesto finally affirms that art propositions are carried by all kinds of printed matter: handouts, tracts, photos, etc.

It is precisely these esthetic and political consequences of the circulation of printed matter – reproducible objects – across informal networks, which I intend to discuss here, more precisely, about the reciprocity of exchange within these networks.

In *La Société du Spectacle* (1967), following on from Karl Marx and Walter Benjamin, Guy Debord talked about the abandonment of two fundamental suppositions of *esthetic* theory: the separation of individuals into two categories, artists and spectators (§186); and the isolation, among the totality of objects, of those objects having the esthetic qualities of works of art (§187). An analysis of these informal networks allows us to sharpen the theorization on both these points. On the one hand, art is no longer seen as a collection of works, but as a process which includes, apart from “art propositions”, many kinds of documents, namely “publications”, with the border between them now becoming problematic and permeable. Not only can these works include documents, as was already true in the time of Cubism and Dadaism, but the art propositions themselves could be in the form of documents, either as printed matter, or as

documentation of ephemeral or inaccessible works, or finally when the status of the document is not determinable, apart from its taking part in the artistic process. Put another way, this kind of artistic exchange makes us realize that the large-scale arrival of the document as artistic material is the other face of the de-estheticization of art. On the other hand, we can be more precise about the modification of the respective status of the artist and the spectator. In fact, it does not seem that the difference between the artist and the spectator has been erased, despite the ever-widening opening offered to each and every person who wishes to become a self-taught artist. Against that, they both become *active participants* in art; without being artists themselves, editors, curators, librarians, collectors, bookstores, or mere spectators, have become fully-fledged *actors*.<sup>9</sup> The artist retains the specificity of his or her position, but no longer has the absolute prerogative of (creative) action. The roles of the various participants in the artistic process thus remain distinct, but the functioning of this process through a network, where propositions about art “are presented to people interested in them”, removes the distinction between sender and receiver, between actor and public, between active “points” and passive “points” of the network.

These informal networks are also interesting to study from a political point of view, in particular through the economics of art, that is from the point of view of the type of exchanges implied, as they do favor a reciprocal participation in art, and steer clear of a logic of escalation, not without similarities to a pathological version of potlatch. The gift, which was the object of anthropological study at both the beginning and the end of the 20th century, and phenomenological study at the same century’s end, has become one of the main preoccupations of artists at the beginning of the 21st century.<sup>10</sup> However, work dealing with the artistic gift are stuck strangely in the conception of the unique work, a sacred value, born with the Renaissance, while all the technical evolution since the 15th century – such as Gutenberg! – was headed in precisely the opposite direction: reproduction. So, we have to reflect upon what mechanical replicability can change, not in the economics of the art market, but in the possibility of another economic sphere, that of the Gift.<sup>11</sup>

The accessibility of the means of production described here, and the appropriation of the means of (re)production by anyone and everyone<sup>12</sup> (the revolutionary moment in Marx’s sense), as well as the artist’s loss of his or her exclusive prerogative of gifting, in so far as ‘creation’ is the act of giving, leads to a reciprocity of exchanges. Artists and *other active participants* in art, givers and receivers, are now on equal footing, which fits better with respect to everyone’s dignity, and perhaps heralds a better vision of humanity than that – overvalued? – put forward by the Renaissance, with its rather fanatical conception of the genius as an inspired and superior being. The gift of this type – artistic – then begins to be a little better shared (one receives; but one gives, too), so that you can glimpse the model of a new kind of gift economy: in order that there be an economy, there have to be exchanges. That is the idea which runs through a whole line of anthropologists from Malinowski to Godelier, passing through Mauss and Lévi-Strauss on the way.

In his *Enigma of the Gift*,<sup>13</sup> Maurice Godelier demystified the potlatch which had so entranced artists as an alternative to the capitalist economy, and he considered the two types of economies – the one for profit; the other of the gift – had coexisted in societies for a long time, and that they still coexist in our own. As for potlatch,

Marcel Mauss “had given pride of place to a historically belated and pathological form of this institution [i.e. potlatch]”<sup>14</sup> a form overly antagonistic and dangerous to the gift economy, in the extreme case which Mauss called “total prestation”; according to Franz Boas, potlatch ‘went mad’ during the 19th century, following the disruption brought about by the colonization of the Kwakiutl tribes.<sup>15</sup> As to the coexistence of both types of economy in contemporary societies, we can but note the disturbing facts: certain choices of a political nature are overturned before our eyes in the domain of charity; the market economy seizes the Christmas period and other holidays to produce gifts, without speaking of innumerable works *donated* by artists which end up becoming merchandise. These are reasons enough today to try to rethink alternative models for the gift economy. The informal networks of art which have huge recourse to printed matter, are an example of a system of exchange where the ‘artistic gift’ is no longer exorbitant and can easily become reciprocal, sidestepping the escalation typical of the art market. Indeed, the esthetic chain, as conceived by the Renaissance, that is, leading from a ‘higher reality’ to the sacred work, disappears in favor of a more balanced exchange, at least potentially. In these networks, unlike the commercial economy, exchanges are direct, and intermediaries play a secondary role.

When in 2008, along with Anne Mœglin-Delcroix, I presented the second issue of *Nouvelle revue d’esthétique*: “Livres d’artistes. L’esprit du réseau”,<sup>16</sup> we emphasized the emergence of the idea of the network – collaborations or artworks made through a network – in the 1960s:

“It’s in this context that the Artist’s Book appears, at the same time as many other kinds of printed productions, from the review to the postcard, thought up as so many solutions to create and distribute works on the edge of the dominant institutional circuits. Thus, the title of this issue underlines the links between the artist’s book and the idea of the network, to show that the network cannot be reduced to a technical infrastructure, but comes down to a spirit: a state of mind which cements a community which is geographically without frontiers, numerically limited, made up of artists, publishers, readers, librarians, critics and collectors, *who are often the same people*. Through this collection of contributions, we try to bring out the components of this spirit, made from a pronounced taste for freedom, a definite talent to do good work with small means, and above all a complicity based on the desire to make art differently.”<sup>17</sup>

This other way of doing things demands a change in methodology: art can no longer be considered as a discourse (structuralism), but as a conversation. This is a good place to bring up the work of Ian Wilson, made entirely of conversations where the reciprocity between giving and receiving is so much respected that the artist announces the date and location of the meetings without ever being able to advertize the subjects of the coming exchanges. The relationship with art can not therefore be reduced to the exploration of the play of signifier / signified, as it must take into account exchanges: their status, their origins and cause, their effects on reality, their sociology, and so on. And in order for this type of conversation to succeed, it’s necessary for the veneration of the artwork to give way to a more equitable exchange, to an engagement in the process of giving and receiving, and that the rivalry between artists should give way to work on oneself: to a rivalry with oneself. It is not enough to receive, as you must also have something to give, it being understood that the things being given come from within



oneself, and are within everyone’s reach. In this way, the artist can be a publisher; the critic, an artist; the collector, a critic; the librarian, a collector; and the publisher, a scholar.

But accuracy is required. As Godelier remarked, it is not because “relationships between individuals and groups are person to person” which is also the case in informal networks, that they are necessarily “less mystified and ‘transparent’”.<sup>18</sup> If one can think that the exchange networks around the use of printed materials in art are indeed less ‘mystified’ and more ‘transparent’, it is because this kind of network already embodies a conscious choice made by the various participants in art. Which is how they try to work to open up or create, in the heart of a society, a space free from the mystifications maintained by the dominant artistic institutions. The place of man, remarked Godelier, “is not only that of a being who lives in a society, but a being who produces society in order to live”.<sup>19</sup> This comment sits alongside the quote from Lucy R. Lippard, cited below.

The artist’s book can be seen as an attempt to shift the practice of art toward the culture of the book, protected up to a certain point from economic pressure (the legally controlled prices of books, loans in libraries), in France and other countries. Far from the commercial practices of the art world, the artists themselves have set up another economy. They have understood that the book (though not deluxe or bibliophile editions) and its cultural setting (publishers, libraries, bookstores, etc., but also all of the everyday uses of books), frees them from numerous constraints linked to institutions, to the dominant esthetic ideology, and to market forces, and so on. The more lucid individuals among them, like Lawrence Weiner, have in fact adopted positions similar to the one quoted above, in regard to utopian thinking, namely to consider that this other culture, coming from the economy of the gift, cannot be an exclusive alternative to the market economy, but should rather accept coexistence alongside it. “I wasn’t particularly against the dominant cultural structure – because it allowed me to see a Barnett Newman – allowed me to see many other things. So I wasn’t against it. I just tried to build another structure that carried with it less authority of those people.”<sup>20</sup>

Starting in 1954, the editors of *Potlatch* sent through the post, free of charge, to fifty people who had not requested subscriptions, examples of their modest review: a single page in A4 format, with a typewritten text, copied with sheets of carbon paper, that was all. The operation may appear derisory and doomed to failure: yet that review has mythical status nowadays. The idea it had was to follow the logic implied in its title: give, receive, and give back. But giving back the same value, in this case, meant that those who received the review became in turn editors themselves. *Potlatch* proposed a system where the reader would be dragged into a dynamic of creative activity, which is also that of political autonomy, that is to say, to broaden the sphere of the things we give, to elicit counter-gifts, therefore to create a network of exchanges between artists, political activists and publishers, each of them taking on the three roles at the same time. Which has nothing to do with the deformed conception of potlatch and its excessiveness.

1. Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years: The dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972...* London, Studio Vista, 1973, p. 8.
2. *Sans niveau ni mètre* n° 16/2010, p. 2. Today, new technologies have completely rendered such old offset presses obsolete.
3. Lippard, *Six Years*, op. cit. p. 9.
4. Debord’s work is well enough known, and the strict English title ‘The Society of the Spectacle’ does not carry the economy of thought or resonance of the French version, where ‘spectacle’ and ‘spectacular’ really mean ‘false show with intent to deceive; hollow; grossly superficial’. *Trans.*
5. *La Soci  t   du Spectacle*. in *Œuvres*, Paris, Gallimard, 2006, § 192, p. 848. For the English translation, see: Zone Books, New York, 9th Edition, 1995, pp. 136-7.
6. Here left in its original form, (with its minor errors of English uncorrected: sic) as published in Poznań as a tract of just 360 copies. *Trans.*
7. ‘*Not authorized*’ here has the sense of ‘*having no authors*’; not the more common meaning of ‘not permitted by the Authorities’, which was paradoxically also true at that time, in fact.
8. “A Conversation with October”, in *Critical Vehicles. Writings, Projects, Interviews*. MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England, 1999, p. 154.
9. ‘*Actor*’ in this section means ‘active participant in the process of art’. The French carries no confusion with a theater actor. *Trans.*
10. Cf. the catalog “Il Dono / The Gift,” Milano, Charta, 2001, which accompanied the exhibition at the Palazzo delle Papesse.
11. Cf. upper the article of Aur  lie Noury about the *Collection of the Cabinet du livre d’artiste*, p. #.
12. Walter Benjamin, “Petite histoire de la photographie”, (A Short History of Photography) in *Œuvres II*, Paris, Gallimard, coll. « Folio essais », 2000, p. 295.
13. *L’  nigme du don*, Paris, Flammarion, 2002.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 108.
15. *Id.*
16. ‘Artist’s Books. The spirit of the network’
17. *Nouvelle Revue d’esth  tique*, n° 2/2008, dossier « Livres d’artistes : l’esprit de r  seau », p. 7, I underline.
18. *L’  nigme du don*, op. cit., p. 100.
19. *Ibidem*, p. 276.
20. “Lawrence Weiner, ‘Conversation with Judith Hoffberg on Books’”, *Umbrella*, vol. 26, no. 1 - May 2003, [http://colophon.com/umbrella/LAWRENCE\\_WEINER.pdf](http://colophon.com/umbrella/LAWRENCE_WEINER.pdf) [6.02.2013].

# DOCUMENTING DOCUMENTING

Woody Leslie



DOC/UNDOC *Documentado/Undocumented Ars Sham  nica Perform  tica*. Moving Parts Press.

Guillermo G  mez-Pe  a / Felicia Rice / Gustavo Vazquez / Jennifer Gonz  lez / Zachary Watkins

A multi-artist collaboration, DOC/UNDOC is a neatly packed explosion. Not so much an artist’s book as a readymade installation in a box, it contains many parts: a Fluxkit-like multiple, an artist’s book, a performance script, video art, sound art, and a self-analytic critical essay. As a cohesive unit, it begs the question, “What is it?” which in turn might be its very own answer.

Made in an edition of 65, fifteen of them are a deluxe edition, housed in an aluminum case filled with colorful objects, toys, and props, very akin to a 1960’s Fluxkit. Upon opening the box, lights flick on, and Zachary Watkins’ sound art begins to play. The viewer can navigate through different sound pieces via little buttons in the case. The regular edition—a large clamshell box paneled with flashy red plastic and black vinyl lettering—is contained within the deluxe edition’s aluminum case. Inset in the inside cover of the red case are two discs, one containing all of Watkins’ sounds, and the other a selection of short video performance art collaborations between Guillermo G  mez-Pe  a and Gustavo Vazquez. The case holds two books. One book is Felicia Rice’s hulking letterpress-printed faux-fur covered 30+ accordion. The other is a large offset-printed pamphlet (with letterpress cover), containing a critical essay about the project by Jennifer Gonz  lez, G  mez-Pe  a’s writing, a short essay by Rice, and project credits which read more like a press release.

In short, there’s a lot going on.

The crux of the work is G  mez-Pe  a’s writing. Unadulterated in the accompanying pamphlet, there are fifteen short chapters (one page each), alternating between narrative anecdotes and more lyrical musings. Each takes the form of a monologue G  mez-Pe  a might give in a performance, replete with occasional stage directions. The subjects range from the personal to the political—all centered around Mexican-American identity, racism, and issues of immigration and documentation. G  mez-Pe  a’s writing is at once insightful, humorous, poignant, clever, and full of character. It could stand alone as a work in itself.

Rice’s book uses G  mez-Pe  a’s writing as its foundation. Each spread of the accordion illustrates one of G  mez-Pe  a’s chapters in

heavily layered images. The text itself becomes another layer, overprinted on top of the images such that it is only partially readable. The legible parts lend fleeting wisps of semantic meaning, flavoring the visual stew of subsumed words and images. An excised selection of the text is clearly printed in red on the bottom right of each image, forming a caption of sorts. The countless times Rice ran each spread through her Vandercook gives it an attractive glossy sheen, and it’s an impressively constructed tomb of an accordion (bound by Craig Jensen of BookLab II). The book is striking for sure, especially stretched out to its full thirty feet of glory.

The rest of the work exists in various degrees of separation from the writing, or relies on G  mez-Pe  a as the linking thread. The video contains some of G  mez-Pe  a’s text as voice-over, though most of it consists of other short performances involving G  mez-Pe  a subjecting himself to a variety of types of physical harm (including one particularly painful one involving his bare chest and a hot iron).

Watkin’s sound pieces feature G  mez-Pe  a’s voice alternately acting to guide the viewer through the experience, and actively questioning what the whole thing is. The sounds perhaps makes sense paired with the cabinet of curiosities contained in the deluxe edition, but in the CD’s decontextualized linear fashion, they feel homeless.

The essays by Gonz  lez and Rice, though included in the artwork, step outside of it for a self-analytic perspective. Rice’s essay sets up some backstory for the project, and explains her artistic approach to her book. Gonz  lez’s critical commentary sets out a ready interpretation for the reader. The artwork becomes cognizant of its own existence.

There’s a lot going on.

All in all, the work is begging to be be an installation. Let the aluminum box become a room, and all its contents spread throughout—on the wall, on tables, video screens, speakers. Give all the parts the space they deserve. And indeed, it has been an installation. The Sesnon Gallery at UC Santa Cruz showcased DOC/UNDOC from October to December 2014, and it appears other exhibitions are slated for the future.

With that in mind, the work has come full circle. DOC/UNDOC is a documentation of itself. The object documents itself as an installation presupposed by itself as an object. All of the work’s components—book, video, sound recording, essay, gallery show—are types of documentation in and of themselves. Forced together, they question what it means to document. It may be overstuffed, but the very mess of it, intentionally or not, reflects the very mess of trying to document anything, be it art, ideas or immigrants.

DOC/UNDOC continually asks itself “What is it?” and unanswerable as it is, it turns to question documentation itself. What is it? Can documentation document anything other than documenting?