

Recode, Name and Displace

Arnaud Hendrickx
Sint Lucas School of Architecture Brussels, Belgium

Abstract: This paper sketches three mechanisms for dealing with poetic knowledge in art and architecture. These are identified in the reflection on transdisciplinary action in the context of the ongoing research by design project “Art as Vacancy” which looks at the question: “Can expressive mechanisms from the art practice enrich the architectural practice (and vice versa)?”. These mechanisms, tentatively called ‘recode chunks’, ‘name things’ and ‘displacement and proximity’, are discussed as instruments to capture or change the poetic potential of designerly action. This is mainly done by transposing known linguistic mechanisms to the field of non-verbal communication.

Keywords: poetic knowledge, metaphor, architecture, art, research by design

1 Personal Background of the Author

I am a practitioner whose practice is mainly situated on four levels: architecture, art, education and research. All these levels are interconnected. These connections are the topic of my research.

From 1998 to 2007, the majority of my energy was directed toward my architectural office RAUW¹. In 2007, due to a full time enrollment in the Sint-Lucas School of Architecture, my professional activities shifted from a professional to an academic context. Education and research became the main focus. From that point on I have continuously been challenged to define a new practice within this context.

This new practice should not start from scratch but build on the experience gained in preceding works. The relatively new academic framework offered by research by/through design offers this opportunity to implement designerly skills and knowledge in an academic frame.

By making instrumental (ab)use of academic means, designerly ways of thinking and acting can be put to use in a redefined practice. Academic papers,

articles, presentations, conferences, research projects and a PhD, become instruments to create new work and a platform to, by means of this new work, continue and explore elements from my earlier practice. This motivates my choice for a research by/through design. As a result of this choice I am currently working on a research by design project ‘Art as Vacancy’.

2 Short Description of the Research by Design Project ‘Art as Vacancy’

During the last two centuries art and architecture have developed their own platforms, resulting in a greater autonomy of both disciplines. Practitioners found space to explore the limits of their respective media and developed a singular, or at least personal, relation to the means of expression embodied in them. As a result, both disciplines developed their proper, independent discourse more clearly than before.

It is clear that, despite their autonomy, both disciplines share fields of interest and often deal with similar means of expression. In this context the research project “Art as Vacancy” looks at the question: “Can expressive mechanisms from the art practice enrich the architectural practice (and vice versa)?”

The aim of the project is to confront my architectural practice with that of four exemplary artists chosen for their specific approaches towards architectural topics and space in general: Michaël Van den Abeele, Freek Wambcq, Harald Thys and Richard Venlet.

The core of this project is mode-2 knowledge production in the form of *transdisciplinary*² (or ‘at

¹ Please visit www.RAUW.org for more information.

² Transdisciplinary is used here as the form of collaboration where people originating from different disciplines work together towards a common goal and where all participants address the full spectrum of the tasks that achieving this goal implies, even if some of these

least' interdisciplinary) collaborations between each of these artists and myself. Each collaboration aims at the production of an autonomous work in the field of art and architecture.

Besides this action, on a more conceptual level, reflection on this action, is stimulated by a method of identifying, naming, exploring and contextualizing mechanisms that came forward in the collaborative process. The generative potential of these mechanisms is optimized and explored by new action. This can be through reflective action which is specifically performed for this purpose, or, through new autonomous action in which the implementation of this mechanism is identified afterwards.

3 The Method Defines the Subject

As the short description above suggests, the research project 'Art as Vacancy' has an explicitly designed method: the participants, their collaboration, the registration of and the reflection on this collaboration are all specified. In contrast to the specificity in the method, the subject itself is left very open. The broad and fuzzy field of subjects belonging to the two disciplines art and architecture and their possible overlaps is only delimited by the specificities implied in the method, or otherwise put, the method defines the subject. This intentional openness creates space for surprise and unanticipated subjects.

This openness is also the reason why findings can have very different natures. Sometimes they are identified in different moments of the creative process, deal with different aspects or differ in performative potential.

In a previous presentation I discussed some formal or plastic mechanisms that capture a clear performative strategy. For example 'Negotiating space' describes a specific mechanism to deal with the dynamics contained in the classical solid-void dialog in spatial experience. Another example, 'Because it's there' describes how a spatial configuration can provoke the observer to interact with the space.

In this paper I want to reflect on less instrumental mechanisms, mechanisms that don't seem to have a

direct performative implementation in a new work and deal with more ephemeral aspects of poetical communication. The mechanisms discussed are all identified in the communication during and around the design process and in the discussion of the possible interpretations of the works created. They are situated on a level above the singular work, at the meta-level of designing and the meaning or interoperation of its outcome in general.

4 Aim and Structure of the Text

4.1 Aim

First of all it should be clarified that this project is still ongoing. Therefore, the topics that are put forward here have not yet reached a conclusion. This text should be interpreted as an attempt to provoke critical feed-back from more academically trained peers than myself who could help me steer the fuzzy cloud of ideas toward a better defined field and more focussed subject.

Secondly, this is an attempt to talk about poetic knowledge and find a way to deal with it. Bearing radical constructivist Ernst von Glaserfeld's warning about *incommensurability of Scientific and Poetic Knowledge* (Von Glaserfeld, 1994) in mind, this text is not aiming at formulating a scientific explanation for poetic knowledge or to make a universal conclusion, but at generating instruments in the form of performative mechanisms. These mechanisms should respect the fact that poetic knowledge can be, tacit, wicked, ineffable, hermeneutical...

4.2 Structure

The reflection that follows is presented in a fixed structure. Firstly, a specific experience, drawn from one of the collaborative projects conducted in the context of 'Art as Vacancy' is described. Secondly, a more general reflection on and around this experience is made and some strongly resonating references are mentioned. Lastly, a summary of the first two points is formulated and the mechanism is named to capture the generalised concept, turning it into a manipulatable model, transposable to other contexts.

tasks are not traditionally considered to be a part of the discipline someone belongs to. Often a new common language is developed in these type of collaborations. In an interdisciplinary collaboration people originating from different disciplines also work together towards a common goal but here every participant stays in his own domain, addressing only (or mainly) the tasks traditionally belonging to his discipline.

5 CHIPKA

5.1 Action

In November 2009 the exhibition, *Bonus Malus*³ by Michaël Van den Abeele (Artist) and Arnaud Hendrickx (Architect) opened. This exhibition showed paintings and sculptures by Van den Abeele in a spatial scenography conceived together by the artist and the architect. The main element of this scenography consisted of a brick pavilion (fig 1).



Fig. 1. Van den Abeele M., Hendrickx A. (2009). Installation view of 'Bonus Malus'.

In the more recent exhibition *CHIPKA*⁴, the brick 'neolithic pavilion' from Bonus Malus would get a second life, a new interpretation. This thematic group exhibition set forth themes of industrialisation, innovation, utopia and architecture and is indirectly embedded in the local context of the city Aalst.

While in Bonus Malus the structure was a way to define a specific scenography shaping the existing exhibition space into a new context, a sequence of different spaces working together with Van den Abeele's paintings and sculptures, it now became itself an existing context to respond to, in an exhibition with a different, imposed theme. The structure had also become a part of the curator's interpretation of the exhibition themes because he had strategically chosen artists and works that worked well in combination with the pavilion.

At first, because of this huge contextual shift, a very fundamental intervention on the pavilion seemed necessary. Turning it into a ruin by partly demolishing

it or refinishing its surface by plastering the walls are just two examples of this initial reaction. Some other experiments and sketches showed that maybe only repopulating the pavilion with a few well chosen artworks and finding a suitable title for the new constellation could shift the original field of possible interpretations to respond to a field that fitted this new context.

In the process of concerting the new content for the pavilion, the possible meanings and interpretations of the pavilion changed by virtually placing artifacts in it or confronting it with specific references to movies, places, books and so on. In some combinations, new experiences or interpretations that were not present before became visible in combination with these references or artifacts. It seemed that for example the book *God Jr* (Cooper, 2005) by Dennis Cooper strongly resonated with the structure. But at the same time it did it in a different way and highlighted different aspects than other references we found interesting like for example: the visual and atmospheric memories the artist and architect both shared from Flemish cultural centers built in the eighties, the connotations which a cellar of a man with a strange hobby of collecting beer bottles evoked, the possible atmosphere of a future abandoned virgin galactic office or the claustrophobic space of a loud chicken fight den.

The same shift in meaning seemed to happen for the objects placed in the pavilion and when different combinations of other works were made. Some combinations worked, other did not. Out of this blurry, associative cloud the combination of four works in completely different media (video, models, music and a pavilion) was selected because the elements in this combination reinforced each other in a coherent way:

- A video 'Friends for Eternity' (2005) by Michaël Van den Abeele. (fig. 3)
- A series of five plaster models representing detailed slices of medieval keeps 'Magna Turris' (2010) by Arnaud Hendrickx. (fig. 4)
- A soundscape made on the first light-synthesiser or photoelectronic instrument 'ANS' (2004) by Coil.
- The 'Neolithic pavilion' (2009).

5.2 Recoding Chunks

5.2.1 Chunking

In the communication described above between the artist and the architect, the reference to a pavilion in Coopers' book *God Jr* or to the levitation scene in Andrei Tarkovski's movie *Solaris* (1972), seems to work as single package of multidimensional sensorial

³ Van den Abeele M. & Hendrickx A. (2009) Bonus Malus, <http://www.netwerk-art.be/en/activities/exhibitions/429>.

⁴ Thematic group exhibition (2010) CHIPKA, <http://www.netwerk-art.be/en/activities/exhibitions/433>.

information that embodies poetic knowledge like personal, emotional or atmospheric experiences. When both parties share the experience, in this case this would mean that they would have both read the book or seen the movie, a complex series of associations are triggered in the brain just by referencing a simple book or movie title.

In his paper *The Magical Number Seven, Plus or Minus Two* (Miller, 1956) George A. Miller describes how recoding basic units of information into larger chunks enables us to process larger quantities of information. Simply put when, for example, a subject is able to instantly recognize decimal numbers in a string of binary numbers we can replace the string of binary digits by one decimal number representing a chunk of information. If the complexity of the chunks raises, the number of chunks one can process at once diminishes, but the total amount of information one can process raises significantly.

Because Miller considers information not only as explicit data, but also incorporates multidimensional sensorial experiences and the personal knowledge frame of the observer, his concept of recoding information and chunking can also be linked to communication of non-verbal knowledge.

How one experiences a space is a complex set sensorial of experiences based on the temporal and spatial conditions and the personal knowledge frame of the observer. To capture and communicate this complex set of non-verbal knowledge, a large quantity of information has to be processed. It seems that to complete this task, we often rely on a vehicle that shows many similarities to what Miller describes as chunking.

This raises the questions whether there exists a similar recoding and recognition process in dealing with poetic knowledge than in, for example, the process of recoding single morse points and dots to immediately recognizable patterns representing letters and even words? Whether ability is similarly enhanced by training and building up experience? If there is a specific catalyst that help us reaching this experience in dealing with poetic knowledge? Whether designers are trained to develop this ability? Whether artist are better trained at this than for example architects?

5.2.. Analogy and logical form.

In the design process of CHIPKA, described above, a scene in the movie *Solaris*, physically not more than some coloured light projected on a screen combined with some sound waves, shares similarities with a pavilion, a heavy and immobile stack of bricks.

We seem to have a natural intuition for looking and recognizing recurring patterns or similarities between seemingly random objects. We have no problem in

recognizing that seven apples and seven letters share the number seven.

As described by Susanne Langer in *An introduction to symbolic logic* (Langer, 1967), analogy is considered the mechanism to see logical form in things which may be entirely discrepant to content. The power of recognizing similar forms in widely various exemplifications, i.e. the power of discovering analogies, is logical intuition. For example, to understand language is to appreciate the analogy between the syntactical construct and the complex of ideas, letting the former function as a representative, or “logical picture” of the latter.

In his *A Provisional Theory of Non-Sites* (Smithson, 1968), Robert Smithson shows how this theory of analogy and logical form is literally used as an instrument to generate a series of very influential works called Non-sites:

‘By drawing a diagram, a ground plan of a house, a street plan to the location of a site, or a topographic map, one draws a "logical two dimensional picture." A "logical picture" differs from a natural or realistic picture in that it rarely looks like the thing it stands for. It is a two dimensional analogy or metaphor - A is Z. The Non-Site ... is a three dimensional logical picture that is abstract, yet it represents an actual site ... It is by this dimensional metaphor that one site can represent another site which does not resemble it - this The Non-Site.’

Another, maybe more direct example of analogy as an instrument to generate poetics, is a recent work of the Belgian artist Freek Wambacq (fig.2). This work shows a custom casing for a basic cellular phone, next to a picture of the rudimentary front door of a house. Various similarities are discovered and/or generated on very different levels. Both objects share formal (rectangles, color, ...) as well as more conceptual (customization, identity, ...) elements.



Fig. 2. Wambacq Freek., Untitled (2010).

5.2.3 Poetic Analogy

Combining the two previous points on chunking and analogy in a more generalized way we could state that when designers attempt to communicate the poetic potential of a proposition they often rely on poetic analogy. Poetic analogies intend to transmit or communicate poetic information and/or knowledge by combining the ability to recode multidimensional experiential information into manageable chunks with the logical intuition to recognize analogies.

When a poetic analogy is created with the purpose of revealing a property of something else, it has a dominant direction and we could call it a poetic metaphor. The only difference with the traditional concept of metaphors, as an analogy conveyed by the use of a metaphorical word replacing some other word, is that poetical metaphors are not necessarily verbally referenced. A picture, sound, object or any other sensory reference can do the job.

In the communication described above between the artist and the architect described above the poetical metaphor "...this pavilion is so Solaris...", a statement where a movie becomes a reference for a hard to express, poetic potential of a built structure, is verbally expressed. In the example of Freek Wambacq the analogy is left verbally unarticulated but is intrinsically implied in the juxtaposition of the objects.

In this last example, none of the two constituents of the analogy are created - or selected in this specific work using found objects or 'readymades' - to reveal something specific about the other one. There is no hierarchy or dominant direction. We could say that the analogy is bidirectional and that both constituents are equally affected by the juxtaposition. In this case this poetic analogy could be called a poetic juxtaposition.

5.2.4 Mechanism

In the example of CHIPKA, by recombining four autonomous works into one new autonomous installation, the chunk of tacit communication each individual work transmitted, its possible original meanings or possible interpretations became recoded. By intuitively implementing poetic analogy between concepts, references and artifacts, complex chunks of tacit and/or poetic information were processed and exchanged.

The mechanism of trying to grasp, influence or create the poetic potential of an object or a constellation of objects by making use of poetic analogy is a very fundamental performative strategy in the conception and functioning of poetic works. As an observer we also make use of this mechanism for interpretation of a work.

To be able to explore this mechanism more and to transpose it to other situation naming it seems relevant.

At this time '*recoding chunks*' seems a performant name to enable this.

5.3 Name things

5.3.1 *de Kring (the Circle)*

Finding a suitable name for this new constellation of works, as shown in the exhibition CHIPKA, showed a lot of similarities to the process of using poetic analogy as described above. The whole constellation was somehow differently perceived when a different name was given. The name seemed to be an important part of the installation, a key to capture and understand the relations between the constituents of the work.

The final title "de Kring" (dutch for "the Circle") seemed to glue the works together. In dutch this is a word with many connotations that could refer to a circle of people, a stone circle, a circle of regional geography and history, a geometrical shape, a sphincter,...

5.3.2 *Instrumental Naming*

We could consider the title with its semantics, including all its possible associations and connotations, as one chunk of information, the constellation of four works as another. When combined, some of the elements of both chunks get highlighted, start resonating and get recoded by poetic analogy. So we could say that this is not different from the mechanism described above.

On the other hand, due to its different status and its historical connotations, it seems relevant to discuss naming a little more.

It is clear that naming things can serve many purposes, from merely making it possible to identify something, over influencing how thing that is given a name is perceived, to redefining it completely.

In his article *The Art of Naming Operations* (Sieminski, 1995), Sieminski gives a inspiring overview of the history of the US military tradition to name war operations. He explains how a well chosen name, like for example 'desert storm', can influence how the perception of a complete war operation is influenced, merely by giving it a well balanced name. The name becomes a reference for the whole and it can be a motivation for the own army, a deterrent for the enemy, a conceptual frame through which the media and the home front looks at the operation and so on.

In the world of art, the history of considering the title as a part of the artwork is recent. In his book *De Titel Uit De Doeken Gedaan* (Hoek, 1997) Hoek describes how a title evolved from being one a simple description based on the depicted, that could sometimes change in time without the author having any control on this, towards an integrated part of the

artwork where the author consciously plays with it to frame a certain approach toward the work.

In short, we could say that when used correctly, naming things is not a static description or categorization but plays a much more active role in the interaction between the name and the named.

5.3.3 *Metaphor as a probe*

In his book *Displacement of Concepts* (Schön, 2001) Donald Schön describes how the use of metaphor can generate new knowledge. He finds in metaphor a powerful vehicle to transport associative knowledge from one context to another. Applying a metaphor to a new context and checking which associations apply or not, tells us things about the source and the destination.

In the same way, the mechanisms of poetic metaphor and of instrumental naming can be implemented as probes to explore the poetic potential of something. We can compare the metaphor to what it tries to capture, revealing information about both elements of the comparison, we can place it in combination with other objects or concepts and so on.

5.3.4 *Mechanism*

In the example of CHIPKA, giving a name to something intangible, like possible interpretations of the relations between different artefacts, associates the conceptual artefact or phenomenological experience that is given a name to this name and the intangible receives some properties in a sense comparable to physical objects: you get a handle to manipulate, compare and displace them.

In this way, the more generalized mechanism of **'naming things'** can be a performant research instrument to probe into the functioning of the poetic potential of an idea or the poetic functioning of a work.

6 Displacement and Proximity

6.1 Action

In 2009 the exhibition *By Design for Design 2* (BDFD2 in short) was organised at Sint Lucas School of architecture. The participants were all offered a table clad with mirrors. The table called 'displacement and proximity' by Arnaud Hendrickx consisted of a collection of models from recent installations and interventions, booklets on these and other works and an autonomous work placed on this reflecting table. This table simultaneously was an autonomous image and a research tool. To perform as a research tool the different objects laying on the table could literally be displaced and placed in proximity of each other to

explore possible resonating links or reveal possible poetic analogies between different objects.

6.2 Displacement and Proximity

6.2.1 *La Boite-en-Valise*

Marcel Duchamps might be considered the first artist who is consciously creating a mental space between his different works. Iterative optimisation of recurrent themes in different media or recombining elements of different works in new works, are just some of the conceptual games he intensionally plays to create an additional layer of communication in his works. At a certain point these relations become a crucial key for understanding his individual works. By doing this he draws attention to what these days has become almost self-evident, the importance of knowledge of the artistic 'oeuvre' of an artist as a key to understand individual works by this artist.

A portable miniature of his oeuvre in a suitcase, "la Boite-en-Valise" brought his works in proximity of each other so that they could resonate and reveal intended and even unintended relations to the observer. Different arrangements of the miniature paintings and other models could be made, each containing a different potential for interpretation, each revealing different (possible) relations.

It was also Duchamps who used displacement as a method to let us perceive things differently by placing them in a different context. Even though there are a lot of different interpretations of his 'objets trouvés' or readymades, they all agree on the fact that the perception of the readymade changes when the context in which we encounter the object changes its meaning. The displacement of an urinal in a museum uncovers new insights, offers new possible interpretation, assigns new meaning to this mundane object.

6.2.2 *Mnemosyne Atlas*

In the late twenties of the previous century, in his controversial *Mnemosyne Atlas* (Warburg, 2008), Aby Warburg taunted colleague scientists, who were used to explore and communicate ideas in explicit semantics, by implementing the power of the tacit communication and/or poetic analogy between specific images to generate, explore and demonstrate new insights.

In his Atlas, Warburg places images of physical artifacts, in proximity with other images of similar or very different objects. By grouping these photographs with 'affinity for one another' or in 'good company' (Bruhn, 2006) on a wooden panel, relations and possible interpretations of these relations come forward. By displacing this image in another configuration, in

combination with other images on another panel, the image can obtain another meaning and other relations can become visible.

Eventhough ‘BilderAtlas’ was criticized for its ambiguity and the impossibility to explicitly formulate its meaning and functionality, embracing the hermeneutical character of tacit communication opened doors to mediate between problems on different levels and make invisible things visible.

Mnemosyne Atlas considers images to have the same potential and generates new knowledge about artifacts by displacing images of them in different combinations and contexts.

There have been other inspiring projects that focus on relationships and associations by bringing artifacts into proximity and/or displacing them: Buckminster Fuller’s ‘Chronofile’ and Andy Warhol’s ‘Time Capsule project’ to name a few.

6.2.3 ‘1+1 = 3’

A scientific text is often constructed in a recurring pattern:

- First, the author starts by isolating and (re)defining a handful of crucial terms. While the reader advances in the text these terms become gradually charged with a more defined (and more complex) meaning.
- Secondly, when the author has helped you in placing the right associations with these terms, he can start to play around with them. By combining (placing terms in proximity of each other) and/or displacing (using terms in an unusual context) a new insight is generated and a new conceptual artefact is created.
- This concept often encompasses a higher degree of complexity as the terms used to construct it.

This frequently used way to guide a reader in finding access to nontrivial matters, is also applied in other media. When we talk, we frequently and almost spontaneously make use of the the second step, the combination and displacement of concepts, by using a metaphor. The first step, controlling the associations we make with certain terms, is replaced by the assumption that the associations are shared as general knowledge.

When dealing with hybrid artefacts (simultaneously conceptual and material artefacts) like art and architecture, this approach seems relevant too. Placing objects or representations of them in proximity of each other may induce the mind to see relations between the complex associated properties these objects provoke. Displacing the same object in the proximity of another

object can highlight other relationships. Of course these interpretations will also change if a different representation of an object is made.

By displacing the object into another (or unusual) context we might discover an unanticipated potential it possesses.

6.2.4 Mechanism

In a way, the reflecting table of reflection presented in BDFD2 is a physical way to enable poetic analogies to arise. By juxtaposition of two or more objects links can begin to resonate and by using an instrumental name these links are captured for later exploration.

I call this mechanism of capturing the probing possibilities of poetic juxtaposition **‘displacement and proximity’**.

7 Map

“Maps, graphs, books, formulae, etc., offer wonderful opportunities for reorganizing our knowledge from ever new points of view. And this reorganization is itself, as a rule, a tacit performance, similar to that by which we gain intellectual control over our surroundings at the pre-verbal level, and akin therefore also to the process of creative reorganization by which new discoveries are made.” (Polanyi, 1959)

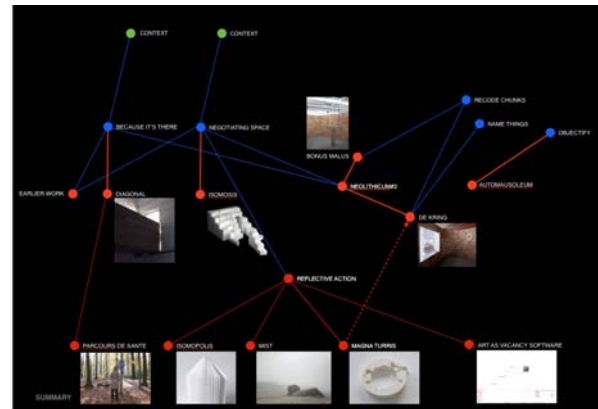


Fig. 3. Art as Vacancy software, Screenshot showing the mapping.

In an attempt to combine the mechanisms of recoding chunks, name things and displacement and proximity described above, a software is under development to facilitate this the process of relating specific physical and conceptual artefacts to more general models, revealing how mechanisms can be a source of inspiration and knowledge for the generation of new specific physical and conceptual artefacts.

Mapping this process (fig 3.) illustrates how these different layers of action, reflective action and reflection on action interact.

In essence the software is just simple a portfolio catalogue. Every time some form of action or reflection is completed, it is added to the list. Also references, action and reflection by others can be placed in the list. By adding search functionality and a filter based on different properties to this list, the portfolio can also function as a “catalogue raisonnée”.

The main difference with a traditional portfolio lies in the ability to drag and drop the elements from this list into a network graph that helps to visualize relations and links. Elements in the list can be compared and analogies on different levels can be identified. If different items share a common analogy, the group of links corresponding to this analogy is given a name and can become a more general mechanism.

This software wants to facilitate:

- the importance of giving names to intangible things and processes to make them visible,
- the multi-interpretational quality of tacit communication expressive means of different media embody.
- the generative potential of displacing concepts (or metaphors) in a new context.

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