Reviews

Gilles Clément

Breve trattato sull'arte involontaria. Testi, disegni e fotografie

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The book published by Quodlibet in the series *In Ottavo* in 2019–original edition of 1997–is the outcome of a collection of glances by the author of the *Third Landscape Manifesto*, collected in the years previous its publication, in the form of images, drawings and short notes. The slight format of the Italian edition–about 100 pages in 14.5 x 21 cm format–makes it partly similar to the romantic image of the *flâneur's* notebook, in the meaning given at the word by Walter Benjamin in his *passages* [Benjamin 2002]. And as in Benjamin, it is not a book of idle thoughts, melancholy memories or simple highlights of journey: as the title of the work states, the literary form is the treatise, in which the introduction to the subject is followed by a taxonomic exposition and concluded by very brief synoptic considerations.

The book declares its intent from the beginning, in which Clément seems to write a text poised between the *manifesto* and the *dedicatory*: *manifesto* because its language is allusive, poetic, visionary, and defines a field of observation of the world, *dedicatory* because it appears as an epistolary writing between an observer–the author–and any other latent observer–the readers: *"For those who can observe, everything is art. Nature, the city, man, the landscape, the atmosphere, what we call 'mood', and, finally and above all, the light"* [p. 13].

The combination of a holistic vision, the look at the landscape and the style of writing, are certainly not new in the French landscaping, and bring to mind another *incipit*: "everything is landscape […] and every landscape is a form of civilization, a union of natural and cultural, at the same time voluntary and spontaneous, orderly and chaotic, hot and cold, wise and trivial" [Kroll 1999, p. 3].

This correspondence, among many others possible, seems to suggest that the extension of the gaze presented in this brief treatise can be considered a natural extension of the concept of landscape that the author–and a large part of the landscape movement–has developed in recent decades: with the fortunate neologism of the third landscape Clément does not aim to re-evaluate the aesthetic qualities, sometimes romantic, of abandoned places–what architect who formed in recent decades has not been fascinated by the photographs by Luigi Ghirri, Gabriele Basilico or Francesco Jodice?–but to investigate how these places seeming as 'residues' of man's passage can become a resource for the planet's biological system. "If you stop looking at the landscape as the object of a human activity you immediately discover […] a quantity of undecided spaces, devoid of function on which it is difficult to put a name. This ensemble belongs neither to the territory of shadow nor to that of light. It is located on the margins" [Clément 2005, p.10].

A further step back to trace the roots of Clément's work leads us to the *Mission Photographique de la DATAR* promoted

in 1984 by the *Délégation à l'aménagement du territoire et à l'action régionale* [DATAR 1984]–a systematic landscape photography campaign animated by a narrative and non-documentary aim– which facilitated, probably sanctioned, the collective awareness of the aesthetic qualities of marginal spaces.

The eye placed on the marginality of such spaces, it is not surprising that it then produced the recognition of the aesthetic qualities even of sets of elements configured–sometimes apparently, sometimes literally–in an accidental way. Clément describes as involuntary art "the happy result of an unforeseen combination of situations or objects organized according to the rules of harmony of the case" [p. 13], and in this definition he encloses his entire program: Clément's involuntary art is a combination of situations or organized objects, not a pure result of chaos. There is no intention, but there is an organization that, regardless of its *raison d'être*, produces a configuration that in the eyes of a predisposed observer acquires an aesthetic value.

Although apparently distant, another parallel could assist us in focusing the substance of Clément's book: in the development of the child's sign an essential step is the *fortuitous realism* phase, that is the stage when the child begins to a posteriori identify shapes and objects from his own scribbles, marked without representative aim. It is possible to imagine that the child's surprise at identifying a ball in one of his doodles–traced without the intention of reproducing a ball–is similar to the surprise of the landscaper–or the careful observer–who comes across an installation of involuntary art, which no one had thought of as such, and which also fears in his eyes with unexpected vigour.

The author provide us an ample example of his approach, and tries to classify it by proposing a taxonomy of eight distinct categories of involuntary art: *Flights, Accumulations, Islands, Constructions, Erosions, Installations, Traces* and *Apparitions,* outlining the categories: *Flights* and *Accumulations* have to do with the wind, *Islands* with the relationship between solid and fluid, *Constructions* and *Erosions* with the work of man, *Traces* tells of uncertainties, *Apparitions* of animated beings and, finally, *Installations* collects configurations similar to art installations [pp. 15, 16].

The eight classes in which Clément organises his examples of involuntary art have the character of an accidental landscape grammar. A grammar symmetrical to the founding grammar of architectural thinking, as, by way of example only, in the series of drawings *Come si agisce / Dentro l'architettura* by Franco Purini exhibited at the Brera Academy in 1994, in which the graphic sign stands as a demonstration of a conceptual theorem on the categories of architectural thinking, untranslatable – in the author's opinion–in a praxis [Purini 1996]: *Bending, Overlapping, Thinning, Measuring, Wrapping* and many others are the components of an analogical and structural design thinking that seem to suggest a parallel with *Flying, Accumulating, Isolating, Building, Eroding, Installing, Tracing* and *Appearing,* involuntary actions that precede the taxonomy proposed by Clément. But the symmetry and, therefore, the distinction between these grammars is all too clear: while the Purinian grammar underlies a poietic event, Clément's grammar accentuates the self-poietic value of the residual landscape narrated in the book.

The tools used by Clément in his narration are verbal, graphical and visual, in a happy coexistence that demonstrates further the mutual distinction between them: sketches and photographs are at the heart of the book, described and commented on in the brief texts accompanying it, and in this balance between three languages–verbal, graphical and visual–the book acquires a specific value for scholars of representation. In the first instance for the distinction between sign and image, between graphical and visual domain, which although strongly correlated refer to symmetrical processes, a distinction that justifies the alternative use of drawing and photography: there seems to be a distinction between the involuntary works of art represented with a proximity gaze, and therefore perspective and visual–through photography–and those represented according to parallel projection models and the graphic medium–through drawing. The latter, in fact, are perhaps more effective in identifying that *organization that conforms to the rules of harmony* of the case by accompanying the observer's gaze into otherwise inaccessible points of view. This is the case for the rice fields of *Kerobokan*, in Indonesia, whose system of bamboo xylophones animated by the wind to dissuade birds, ends up producing a visual landscape despite their essentially sound function, or for the *fencing of the golf course of Mauille-Point*, a district of Cape Town in South Africa, where the author probably felt the need to isolate some elements with the drawing, from others that would have entered the photographic frame, documenting their value as a morphological rather than visual system.

But the key reason for this book's interest is that the role of drawing in Clément's work seems to adhere to that "paradoxical archaeological point of view" which "should be addressed to concrete objects in order to grasp […] the *drawing*", and which Fabrizio Gay

points out as the second of three instances of a correct eidetic theory [Gay 2014, p. 166]. "This is an ideal anthropological point of view–as Gay wrote– that should be addressed archaeologically to objects, that is without knowing in advance 'what they are', ignoring the mutual functional, commodity and literary gender boundaries between the arts and the techniques that produced them. Only through this effort of categorical extraneousness, of 'learned ignorance' of the current artistic and technical categories, is the image of objects reconstructed (archaeologically) *a posteriori*" [Gay 2014, p. 167].

From this point of view Clément seems to realize precisely that archaeological look that a posteriori acknowledges the image, and therefore, the drawing. That is, the project, but in an eidetic backwards path.

And yet, in conclusion, it would seem to lack that original impulse of intentionality that would be necessary for the recognition of the artifact as a work of art, but in Clément's work, like *ready-mades*, it is precisely the recognition by the author of the aesthetic value of that *organization that conforms to the rules of harmony* of chance that makes plastic bags dispersed in the environment and carried by the wind on the *fence of the golf course in Mauille-Point* an artwork. Involuntary in its realization, of course, but intentional in its acknowledgement.

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