

Docu-mentality

.....
 Dario Cecchi

Università "La Sapienza" di Roma
 (Italia)

1. Introductory Remarks

Maurizio Ferraris first proposed to reconsider documentality as a philosophical matter, grounding it on Searle's social ontology.¹ Considering art as a form of communication and documentality is more interesting for the *pragmatics* of documentality, rather than for its *ontology*. I propose, therefore, to speak of *docu-mentality*, rather than of *document-ality*, as far as art is concerned, since art does not imply a direct reference to the ontology of documentality (to its 'alities'), but to the *mentality*² we display as we document something. Art is then, as I will try to show in the last paragraph of my paper, *a way to explore the pragmatics of documentality*.

¹ John Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York, Free Press 1995).

² See Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader. Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press 1979). Pragmatics can be applied also to visual arts: see Louis Marin, *On Representation* (Stanford University Press 2002).

2. Documentality: Ontology or Philosophy of Experience?

According to Maurizio Ferraris' recent account,³ documentality surveys every social object capable of recording a fact or an event, according to an intersubjective understanding of its characteristic features. The characteristic features of documents could be, therefore, reduced to the ontological status of *recorded* things. Recording allows a thing to become a document, and has formal rather than material effects: recording is an activity that gives things their *shape*. Avoiding any metaphysical discussion about the relation between "form" and "matter" of documents, we could refer the fact that a document has a shape to the *intersubjective conditions* of recognition of its shape. Those conditions can be summed up in the idea of a *common sense* (*Gemeinsinn*), of which Immanuel Kant speaks in the Third Critique:⁴ it is the *a priori* condition for understanding beauty. It is an exemplary condition: aesthetic judgement is based on no logical ground. The aesthetic judgement implies the existence of an ideal "community of taste" where we discuss

³ Maurizio Ferraris, *Documentality. Why It Is Necessary to Leave Traces* (Fordham University Press 2012).

⁴ See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. by P. Guyer (Cambridge University Press 2001). For the relation between aesthetics and communication in the Third Critique, see Emilio Garroni, *Ricognizione della semiotica* (Roma, Officine 1977).

about our standards of beauty. Artworks are then, among other beautiful things, *social objects*.

By referring to Searle, Ferraris' social ontology is more linguistic than aesthetic. Like speech, documentality implies some "games", in Wittgenstein's sense. But games imply no universally pre-established grammar. A theory of documentality grounded only on an ontological investigation might lead to an objective and logical universalism of the kind of pre-established grammars: documents are those objects, and only those objects, which share the following n properties, etc. On the contrary, a theory that leaves more room for investigating the pragmatics of documentality seeks the exemplary standards of documentality in *practices* rather than in *objects*. Unlike documentality, documentality should investigate the *dynamics* of documentality as *communication*.

We need not establish whether documentality is a sub-ontology of language, or an ontology *per se*, sharing with language some common features. Investigating the ontological status of documentality could actually meet an aporia: is there a distinction between the physical ground of documents and their social recognition? Evolutionary and cultural anthropologists introduce some distinctions between human and non-human communication, or between art and other communitarian activities. Michael Tomasello argues that humans develop communication together with a collective

representation of the world around them.⁵ Ellen Dissanayake argues that art is a way humans have of "making special" specific cultural and social objects.⁶ The turning point in the evolution of human communication is when humans become able to refer their mental representation to a *We-intention* rather than to an *I-intention*.

Tomasello describes communication as a ritual among individuals of the same species. Human and non-human communication are both rituals. Let us take two apes of the same species. One of them wants to involve the other in its hunting activity. It creates, then, a more or less complicated gesture in order to catch the attention of its fellow, and bring it to join the hunt. The second ape is able to answer that gesture by other gesticulations. Their communication becomes a ritual whose primary function is not inviting to hunting, but creating and preserving the relation between them. The ritual can be used, then, to go hunting, but also to start playing and so on. According to Tomasello, the real difference running between human and animal communication must be found in the capability humans have, and animals have not, to reshape and anticipate their fellows' mental representations. By understanding the gesture displayed by their fellows during rituals, animals are able to *reconstruct* the

⁵ See Michael Tomasello, *The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press 2001); *Origins of Human Communication* (Cambridge, MIT Press 2008).

⁶ See Ellen Dissanayake, *What Is Art For?* (Seattle, University of Washington Press 1988).

content of their fellows' mental representations: intentions, desires and so on. Since the early stages of their lives, instead, humans develop the capability of *anticipating* and thus *creatively reshaping* their fellows' representations. It is the case of children's games based on "pretending", where a child knows that the adult is aware that she (or he) is only pretending to do something, and not actually doing it. This fact shows the complexity of human mental structures, and their relation to creativity. It also shows why human language is much more developed than animal communication. This creative quality of the human mental activity is, as we shall see, what the Italian philosopher Emilio Garroni calls "metaoperativity".⁷ Metaoperativity is the *species-specific feature* of human animals: in other words, it introduces a distinction between humans and other animals.

It is important to bear in mind that the passage from I-intention to We-intention must not be understood only as an evolution of mental structures. The mind surveys external prostheses as well as mental structures, since the mind exists as far as communication exists. To understand the interaction between inner structures and external prostheses of mind, we need therefore to refer to *experience*. My account of experience is Kantian: experience is not barely composed by sense data, but by sense data *as they are reorganized by imagination during a reflective activity*. Imagination is not fantasy, but the

⁷ Garroni, *Ricognizione della semiotica*; Emilio Garroni, *Creatività* (Quodlibet, Macerata 2010).

faculty of schematism,⁸ and is strongly related to language.⁹

As a result of Tomasello's investigations we can understand that there is no difference among humans and the other apes if we consider the possible biological reasons for gesture and mimic, and their primary function. The difference is rather *cultural*. Like other apes, humans are able to organize complex communication rituals with other fellow people. However, unlike the other apes, they are also able not to direct rituals to an immediate matter of state: an order, or an invitation, to be executed (or rejected). For humans, gesture and mimic become the practical referents of We-intentionality, rather than I-intentionality.

The reflective power of the mind and gestural, as well as mimic, practices are convergent conditions for the existence of the human language. Those two kinds of conditions remain relatively independent from one another: there is no determinism, neither in a mentalist nor in a material sense. Once gesture and mimic converge towards the emergence of an intersubjective representation of the world, human language and communication become possible. It is interesting to note that the difference between mind and communication has important cultural effects, namely, in the emergence of *art*. Some visual theorists argue that, in the

⁸ See Maurizio Ferraris, *L'immaginazione* (Bologna, il Mulino 1996).

⁹ See Garroni, *Ricognizione della semiotica*; Wolfram Högbe, *Kant und das Problem einer transzendentalen Semantik* (Freiburg-München, Alber 1974).

artistic practice, the relation between mind and communication is translated into that between *images* and *pictures*, or between mental representations of reality and concrete artworks.¹⁰ The relation between mental representations and artworks has the power to refresh the relation between the mind, on one side, and communication and language, on the other.¹¹

According to Emilio Garroni, *art* is precisely the activity through which humans exert the relation between reflective powers and representational practices, independently from any content art could convey: art is, so to speak, *communication for communication's sake*. Creativity is fundamental for art. Every human activity is concerned with creative skills. Art, however, is the *exhibition of sheer creativity*, free from any purpose of the action or thing realized. Art conveys, then, no information in the proper sense: art is concerned with the forms and media of communication as such, as well as with the ways creativity finds to invent new forms of connecting and interpreting data taken from experience. Communication is one fundamental aspect of the creative process, because, as we saw, mental activities are strongly related to the exchange of information through communication. In that sense,

¹⁰ See Hans Belting, *An Anthropology of Images* (Princeton-Oxford, Princeton University Press 2011); W.J.T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago-London, Chicago University Press 2005).

¹¹ See Garroni, *Creatività*; Emilio Garroni, *Immagine, linguaggio, figura* (Roma-Bari, Laterza 2005).

we can say that art has a special place in documentality: it is, among other things, a special form of documentality, much more tied to its social and pragmatic conditions.

Let us restart from the definition Ferraris gives of documents: a document is every form of recording. That makes documentality not only a peculiar class of objects, but also a *technology*.¹² And it is not simply a technology: documentality is the most general definition of technology we might give. There is, then, a partial superposition between documentality and technicity. Documentality is concerned with the ways humans develop social practices, in order to transmit their beliefs. The practice of documentality requires a *technology*, to which establishing some *standards* is, therefore, necessary. Unlike linguistic pragmatics, which can be related to a pre-established grammar, the pragmatics of documentality is dynamic, and establishes its own standards in the course of its practice. The kind of pragmatics implied in documentality is different from linguistic, and especially textual, pragmatics: it is a *technological pragmatics*. It follows that its reference to general pre-established frameworks of rules is less strong than in the case of the pragmatics based on language and writing. A technological pragmatics tries to describe the *dynamic emergence* of the standards through which something is to be recognized as a document. Before the archaeologists decided that

¹² See Maurizio Ferraris, *Anima e iPad* (Parma, Guanda 2011).

ancient temples or ordinary pottery had to be considered as relevant for the reconstruction of a past age, nobody would have been authorized to consider them as documents. In my opinion, one task of art is to *explore how ordinary objects might become documents*. The transformation of an ordinary thing into a document is also relevant to understand how our mental representation and interpretation of the world evolve: it is *culture*, rather than ontology alone. For those reasons, I propose to consider documentality as the pragmatic counterpart of a more general ontology of document-ality.

3. Is Art a Document?

Art is concerned with documentality as an *experience* rather than a bare *fact*. This means that we cannot follow Arthur C. Danto when he argues that we should philosophically consider artworks as ontological facts, and not consider their aesthetic properties.¹³ The aesthetic properties actually define artworks as *experiences*, namely, as *aesthetic experiences*. There has been much criticism against the analytical philosophy of art, especially that inspired by Danto, for its refusal to consider art as an aesthetic experience.¹⁴ In this paragraph I will follow Hans Robert Jauss' hypothesis that art is a very specific form of aesthetic

experience: artworks are *self-reflexive social performances*. Art shows us the value of sociality, and gives our social world a shape. Art is a way of collecting and elaborating shared cultural or social identities. Artworks are documents in that sense: they bear no specific information or content, but show us how we can use the media networks in order to produce communication and documents.

Jauss argues that aesthetic pleasure (*Genuss*) is "the use, or usefulness, of something".¹⁵ The aesthetic pleasure must be distinguished from bare sense pleasure: "How do we distinguish aesthetic pleasure from sense pleasure in general?" wonders Jauss.¹⁶ The intersubjective character of aesthetic pleasure distinguishes it from other kinds of pleasure, since the "use" (*Gebrauch*) Jauss has in mind is no private use of things, but a way of sharing things by using them. It is *frui* rather than *uti*: it is a use that makes the most peculiar characters of an object evident to all, and then available to all. Speaking of art as an aesthetic experience means, then, that the *pleasure* we take in it is one of its most characteristic features. Art, among other aesthetic experiences, has a specific role in emphasizing aesthetic pleasure: "*the attitude toward pleasure, which art engenders and makes available, is the aesthetic original experience: we cannot abstract from it.*"¹⁷ If we translate the aesthetic discourse made by Jauss into the "language" of documentality,

¹³ Arthur Coleman Danto, *What Art Is* (New Haven-London, Yale University Press 2013).

¹⁴ Paolo D'Angelo, *Estetica* (Roma-Bari, Laterza 2011).

¹⁵ Hans Robert Jauss, *Kleine Apologie der ästhetischen Erfahrung* (Konstanz, Universitätsverlag 1972), p. 8.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

we can say that everything is, in principle, fit to become a document, because everything might become the artistic vehicle of something else. Or it might become a good medium of an artistic content, if we look at it from the point of view of communication. As “aesthetic” living creatures, argues Jauss, we must pay “*attention to general communication*”. For Jauss, who is Kantian in his aesthetic perspective, that means to recover the category of *Gemeinsinn* developed by Kant in the Third Critique, though in its empirical rather than in its transcendental formulation: aesthetic judgement is, therefore, the “*faculty of evaluating anything through which everyone is able to communicate her/his feeling to someone else*” as if a “universal compact” comprehending all humankind asked us to judge in that way aesthetic objects.¹⁸

Jauss’ theory of art as aesthetic experience is a theory of experience in the narrow sense of the term: artworks are not considered as objects barely available to the audience’s experience. The act of creating artworks is part of the overall process of the aesthetic experience: it is produced by the artist as she (or he) properly creates the artworks, and is reproduced by the audience, as they recreate an image of it in their mind, thus also recreating themselves by enjoying the experience they are doing. Beside *Katharsis*, the communicative function of art, Jauss considers, then, also *Poiesis* and *Aisthesis* – aesthetic creation and perception – as fundamental elements of aesthetic experience as such.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

Without going into the depths of the theory, it is interesting to observe that Jauss is interested in artworks as processes, rather than as objects: they are works in the most active sense of the term.

As far as documentality is concerned, artworks are not the most refined documents we could find: tickets, or cards, are better ways of documenting reality, since they clearly indicate some data. Artworks, on the contrary, are interesting because they teach us *how* we should interpret the data contained in a document. The ambiguity of art is its very richness, if we consider it as a form of documentality to be experienced and investigated in its pragmatic, rather than ontological status. As Danto taught us,¹⁹ it is very difficult to define the ontological status of artworks, because, as far as we consider them as a class of objects, they appear subject to historical changes: what an age considered as art is often not considered as art by the following ages, and vice versa. The class of artistic objects is weird. However, as long as we consider artworks as a way humans have to *leave a trace in the world*, their pragmatic status of documents can be better understood. Its dynamics also appears more clearly: although our way of understanding the documentality of art changes with time, its reference to the evolution of our communication is a guarantee of continuity. As Jauss argues: “humans are able to satisfy their general need to be familiar and at home

¹⁹ Arthur Coleman Danto, *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York, Columbia University Press 1986); Danto, *What Art Is*.

in the world through the creation of art, as far as they remove *the reluctant extraneousness from the external world*".²⁰ This last sentence is literally a quotation from Hegel's aesthetics. The reference to Hegel and his aesthetics opens, however, a problem which is far from being solved in our theory of art as pragmatic documentality.

4. Interpreting Artworks

I would like to conclude my paper with some short remarks about a difficulty emerged when I proposed to consider art as a practice of documentality. The difficulty does not contradict the theory under every aspect: it requires, however, further explanations and investigations.

Interpreting artistic documents is subject to time and historical change: we interpret artworks differently from age to age. Homer was considered by the early-18th century Classicism as a too primitive a poet, if compared to Hellenistic authors. Once the taste changed, between the 18th and the 19th century, and a Pre-Romantic mood emerged in art and culture, the prominence of Homer as the original poet of his homeland was rediscovered. His "primitiveness" was now considered as the expression of the naïve originality of the first Greek poet, who still spoke a language near to the mother-tongue of his people. Art changes also because artists cre-

²⁰ Jauss, *Kleine Apologie der ästhetischen Erfahrung*, p. 14.

ate different kinds of artworks according to their age: Duchamp's ready-mades would have been senseless only fifty years before, and paintings like Ingres' century were considered simply kitsch at the beginning of the 20th.

Hegel spoke of modern art – he actually spoke of "Romantic" or "Christian" art – as an art that lost its power of interpreting and expressing the *Zeitgeist* of its age.²¹ There is no more beauty capable of expressing the *ethos* of an age through the fusion of the sensible with the ideal element. As Hegel argues, we, the moderns, live in the age of the "past character of art" (*Vergangenheitscharakter der Kunst*): art took with no remedy the character of something past. On one side, this fact provides a good element for our theory that art is an experience of documentality: something is a document when, by happening, it leaves a trace. On the other side, a question is still open: have we, properly speaking, criteria for establishing the *truthfulness* of artworks as documents? Or, to put it in more modern terms: where are we to find the link between our *pragmatics* of artistic documentality and its *semantics*?

²¹ The above mentioned works by Arthur C. Danto contributed to the renewal of the studies which see Hegel as an interpreter of modernist art: see Robert Pippin, *After the Beautiful. Hegel and the Philosophy of Pictorial Modernism* (Chicago-London, Chicago University Press 2014).