Les manières de faire vernaculaires / Vernacular Ways (Paris, 23-24 Jan 20)

Université de Paris – Laboratoire de recherche sur les Cultures Anglophones – UMR 8225, Jan 23–24, 2020
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International Conference:
Les manières de faire vernaculaires / Vernacular Ways

The past fifteen years have witnessed a renewed interest and a shift in the notion of the vernacular in the French-speaking world. The notion now applies to more than linguistics and is no longer contained by the opposition between the proximity and localness associated with vernacular languages and, on the other hand, the ideas of circulation and extra-locality that are usually associated with vehicular languages. In its renewed understanding, the term, used also as a noun, can be combined with the adjective contemporary, as in the phrase “the contemporary vernacular.” The new vernacular seems to make up a distinct cultural world, embracing practices that can be linguistic, architectural, landscape-based, pictorial and material—connected to artistic and literary creation but also to the production of objects and of material environments. The vernacular is no longer seen as a popular and informal version of the traditional. In architecture, for instance, it seems to comprise non-standardized, non-academic, non-perennial or non-continuous practices of building that are characterized by their capacity to respond to variations in social conditions and geographical environments.

Over the last decades, a number of authors have reworked the notion in a way suggesting a semantic reversal. They do not look for a vernacular heritage in need of being identified, classified and collected, but instead locate precarious orderings that change in nature when they are stabilized. This version of the vernacular does not survive its preservation as heritage because it is the result of fragmentary and circumstantial actions based on short-term projections.

It seems that this new understanding of the vernacular has been introduced over the past fifteen years in non Anglophone publications especially in French. The translation in 2003 of John Brinckerhoff Jackson's 1984 collection of essays Discovering the Vernacular Landscape (À la recherche du paysage vernaculaire) has certainly contributed to the process. After this publication, the notion appears to have spread towards the fields of landscape studies, urban studies, cultural studies, architecture, and later to the study of photography and design. From Olivier Lugon's book Le style documentaire (2001) to the “Walker Evans” exhibition presented by Clément Chéroux at the Centre Pompidou in Paris in 2017, the growing interest in the work of Walker Evans on the part of researchers, curators, and artists have fueled the reexamination of the notion. Meanwhile, Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour’s 1972 book Learning from Las Vegas has

become the object of many studies. From the fragile domestic worlds photographed by Evans to the accumulations of commercial signs studied in Las Vegas, the contemporary understanding of the vernacular has American roots. According to Jackson, its archetypal form is not the farmhouse, built in stone and conceived as a family property, but rather the mobile home, lacking foundations and provisionally sited. Following John A. Kouwenhoven in The Beer Can by the Highway (1961), jazz can be seen as a musical parable for the vernacular and for the relationship to the world to which it invites its users: “In jazz at its characteristic best, each player seems to be—and has the sense of being—on his own. Each goes his own way, inventing rhythmic and melodic patterns which, superficially, seem to have as little relevance to one another as the United Nations building does to the Empire State. […] As Louis Armstrong once wrote, you would expect that if every man in a band 'had his own way and could play as he wanted, all you would get would be a lot of jumbled-up, crazy noise.'” The notion of the contemporary vernacular would reflect an apparent lack of articulation between individual actions that could, like jazz, produce a form of harmony based on composite interventions.

Beyond transatlantic circulations, the development in studies of the vernacular seems to go hand in hand with recent interest in the “third-landscape” (tiers-paysage), the commons, polyfunctionality, participant architectures, ways of dwelling, amateur practices, the potential of doing, but also ways of using the world that are fundamentally utilitarian and that lead to environmental degradations. In France, Gilles Clément's Le manifeste du Tiers-paysage in 2004 followed the publication in French of Jackson's Discovering the Vernacular Landscape. New attention has been paid to the writings of Ivan Illich, focusing on the vernacular as a field of production that is distant from the hierarchical structures of industrial societies and from any institutionalized form of teaching. While several books on Learning from Las Vegas were being written or issued, Pierre Frey published in 2010 Learning from Vernacular, both a theoretical proposal and a global overview of contemporary vernacular forms. Frey thus joined a British tradition of architectural studies that links encyclopedic approaches, cultural studies, preservation prospects and environmental reflections. Paul Oliver, a key actor and founder of this school, co-directed in 1997 the Encyclopedia of Vernacular Architecture of the World and in 2006 Built to Meet Needs: Cultural Issues in Vernacular Architecture.

Outside the academic world, vernacular forms have been explored in different fields of art and design. Through their focus on the representation of what falls outside the norms of urban, industrial, and political fabrication and of what comes under domestic production, Eugène Atget in France and Walker Evans in the United States seem to have marked out a field of photographic research that is still active today. Likewise, by transposing popular and amateur “ways of doing” in their own disciplines, a number of writers, musicians, visual artists, designers, architects, etc., have turned to the vernacular.

The international conference “Les manières de faire vernaculaires / Vernacular Ways” will interrogate the notion of the vernacular through three main axes:

- its semantic evolution, geographical circulations, and disciplinary variations;

- the cultural productions it designates, both material and immaterial;

- the various modes of documentation, description, and representation that it tends to elicit.

Special attention will be given to proposals focusing on theories of the contemporary vernacular in the anglophone world, on its transposition in continental Europe and the Mediterranean area, and on its proximities to neighboring notions such as the popular, the ordinary, the domestic, the amateur, the utilitarian, but also the spontaneous and the informal. For this multidisciplinary endeavor, we welcome proposals from visual arts, literature, music, architecture, urban and landscape studies.

This conference was originally planned by François Brunet, who passed away in late December 2018. On this occasion, we wish to pay homage to his interest in transfers of technique and subject that overlap and collapse established categories and hierarchies between the major and the minor or between institutionally supported and amateur inquiry and research.

Proposals (in English or French) should include a 300-word abstract and a short biography. They should be sent by May 31, 2019 to the following address: jordi.ballesta@laposte.net and elianedelarminat@posteo.net.

Papers may be given in French, as in English.

A selection of papers will be published in the online journal Interfaces (which will be on OpenEdition in 2019), supported by the CNRS. Texts and images (free of rights) must be submitted to the scientific committee within two months of the colloquium, ie no later than 31 March 2020.

Organizing committee
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Reference:

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