

AtWork: Scattered Notes on Art Notebooks

Katia Anguelova

1. The production of meaning

Much has been written about the importance of beginnings in writing. In an interesting essay written in 1975, Edward Said defined the *incipit* (of novels) as the first step in the production of meaning (within the text): “A beginning is not only an action, it is also a frame of mind, a kind of work, an attitude, a consciousness... beginning is making or producing difference... difference which is the result of combining the already-familiar with the novelty of human work in language... this interplay between the new and the customary without which (*ex nihilo nihil fit*) a beginning cannot really take place... beginnings confirm, rather than discourage, a radical severity and verify evidence of at least some innovation – of *having begun*.”¹

The *incipit* of AtWork is the expression of a willingness to create a project about Africa, which comes from *lettera27*, a non-profit foundation created in 2006 to support the right to literacy, education, and the access to knowledge and information: a project able to reflect our relationship with the territory and with the Other, and to open up new spaces for thinking that may contribute to evoking a different imagery of Africa. Since there is no centralised logic in Africa, but only a series of micro-logics that together constitute the social fabric of the country, the activities promoted by AtWork follow a similar trajectory.

2. The collection of “art notebooks”

AtWork is a project starting with a collection of “art notebooks”: unique works of art created in Moleskine notebooks by different artists. The collection reflects the variety, richness and complexity of contemporary art. Starting with an online exhibition (www.atwork27.org), it becomes a vehicle for the circulation of knowledge.

2.1. Gift and relationship

All the notebooks included in the AtWork collection have been donated by the artists. A gift is the evidence of an act, a symbolic gesture, which is at once free and obligatory. The concept of gift has evolved over the years: from a “total social phenomenon” (Mauss) to an invisible, unexpected and not repayable act (Derrida). Thinking of the work of art in terms of a *give-and-take* relationship allows us to wonder whether it can be regarded as a gift or as a *representation* of a gift, and to consider art “as a place made up of symbolic forms of relationship and reciprocity, which may suggest invitation or provocation, homage or hazard, dedication or outrage; forms where the practices of *giving* and *receiving* keep all their richness and fascination, in a world where the rules of interpersonal relations are instead becoming more and more predictable and explicit”². In this sense, a gift is more than just an object: it is a relationship with its recipient. The artists featured in the collection have not only donated their works to support the projects

¹ Edward Said, *Beginnings. Intention and Method*, London: Granta Publications, 1984, p. xxi.

² Antonio Somaini, “Visibilità e invisibilità del dono”, in *Il Dono. Offerta, ospitalità, insidia*, Edizioni Charta, Milano 2001

promoted by *lettera27* in Africa, but have also looked at the digital diffusion of their works and at their compatibility with the Internet as an opportunity to reach a wider audience.

2.2. CC_BY_SA

AtWork makes the works of art available under a “free” and shared license (CC_BY_SA), which authorises the use of all pictures on two conditions: the source must be acknowledged and all derivative works must be released under the same license.

Regarded as an alternative to *copyright*, the Creative Commons license adopted by the AtWork collection becomes a breeding ground for experimentation and innovation, involving new forms of knowledge and new modes of artistic production (and property). The adoption of this license is related to a willingness to change and to the need to actively promote a wider sharing of ideas. The Creative Commons license (and the use of the Internet) becomes for AtWork a “knowledge platform” inspired by a “share, remix, reuse legally” logic, where visitors are simultaneously users, contributors and stakeholders.

The digital world and the new possibilities for recording and organising knowledge associated with it open up new perspectives for creating and accessing knowledge, replacing vertical relationships with horizontal modes of participation. Conceived this way, the collection also becomes a way to access the present and to think of learning and knowledge as “eventualities”, which take shape in situations that are not necessarily prescribed, but are part of the process by which a work of art comes to life.

2.3. Inside track: between fiction and documentation

Some of the notebooks in the collection contain stories, others are turned into sculptures, but all of them have something in common: they reveal the creative process leading to a finished work of art, exploring the documentary power of “notes” and their endless possibilities of interpretation for reflecting on the different modes of representation. Made of paper, the notebook is a technologically simple but conceptually rich object, able to absorb and preserve the (physical and material) sign. It therefore becomes a space “in between”, able to convey fragility and strength, as well as an artefact involving a very personal act, while also implying relationship and mutual exchange.

AtWork’s notebooks share a radical dynamism, both in the images and in the experiences they convey. In the notebooks, form and content are closely related: starting from a travel culture seen as disorientation and discovery of new worlds, the notebook form makes it possible to keep track of “those spontaneous phrases that cannot be repeated, too vague for anything but one’s notebook”.³ Some take the form of notes and personal reflections, as if they were workshops of ideas to be developed (as in the case of Hervé Yamguen, Alioum Moussa, Ruth Sacks, Camerun Platter); others promote an understanding of diversity as a way to make life experience more significant (Audry Liseron-Monfils, Frédéric Keiff, Roberto Paci Dalò). “Pre-works” in the process of becoming something else (Enzo Umbaca), the notebooks help recount and revisit history (Ozmo, Luigi Presicce, Michelangelo Consani, James Webb, Slimane Rais, Ethel Kabwato) and give us an opportunity to take a journey from Italy to the Horn of Africa (Marco Colombaioni). An intertwining of reality and fiction (Iman Issa) as well as a reflection on the movement of

³ Michael Taussig, *N:001: Michael Tausig Fieldwork / Notebooks*, Published by Erschieren im Hatje Caatz Verlag, p. 8

the individual in the world (Pascale-Marthine Tayou), the notebooks become a pretext for translating the problem of the contemporary geopolitical map into images (Mohsin Harraki). In other cases, they explore the issue of self-sustainability (Polonca Lovsin), or consist in an articulation of different visual, social and historical elements (Seamus Farrell), or turn the drawing into a form of graphic erosion able to undo our sense of identity-territory and its potential borders (MAP office).

2.4. Around the notebooks: notes and reflections

AtWork aims to promote and contribute to the circulation of knowledge, acting in different African environments and following different strategies and formats, with the aim of creating an autonomous space for reflection and research.

Using an online platform, AtWork contains, along with the works of art, a series of texts written by different authors, such as Ivan Bargna, who starts with a reflection on the Internet and Africa and tries to understand the sense of an online exhibition to be further developed in Africa; or Clare Butcher, who highlights the role of the often peripheral and marginal support structures in the processes of archive-building. Cécile Bourne-Farrell instead considers the notebooks as unclassifiable works, which blur the boundaries between fiction and work of art, establishing a complex relationship between the idea and its impossible expression. For Sue Williamson, the contents of the notebooks are half-formed ideas, phrases that might (or might not) develop into larger ideas. Iolanda Pensa finally reflects on the sense of Creative Commons, while Antonio Somaini focuses on the relationship between gift and contemporary art. Simon Njami draws on his personal life story to define the collection of notebooks (each with its own character and identity) as the reflection of an African thought in action. The mixture is not attempting to be an analysis, but an instrument for future exploration.

3. Spectrum of possibilities

With its first initiative, AtWork intends to make use of the Internet to free art (and its circulation) from the tyranny of space and material objects. AtWork starts with an online exhibition, but develops into a process that follows different strategies and multiple formats (workshops, exhibitions, meetings), in an attempt to create a “contact zone”, a meeting place.

AtWork aims to develop into different chapters written in the African continent, following an *in vivo* experience that evolves according to the narrator and that, at every step, builds on what has been accomplished before. It is an ever-changing process shaped by the experiences of the people who “write” it, and resulting in an instrument that does not intend to define a story, but to propose dynamic systems of interaction with the public.

We expect that the *incipit* of this story will lead to totally unexpected developments. After all, as Simon Njami reminds us, quoting Stevenson, “adventure is the very pulse of tales”.

Following a multifaceted development, AtWork uses the notebooks as a metaphorical tool, which, even before becoming a form of knowledge, may provide some clues as to the meaning of artistic practices in the knowledge society.