

Relocations: The Idiot as a Figure of Miscommunication

ABSTRACT

I investigate a productive sense of repetition by looking at miscommunications emerging through relocations. Departing from the field of communication design, I engage with Isabelle Stengers' conceptual framework of the idiot to explore how miscommunication produces modes of indeterminacy that generate new readings of the designer, contexts and publics of communication.

In the first part of the text, I note how communication design is largely shaped by practices aiming to "faithfully communicate". In observing work by artist Dina Danish I explore how miscommunication raises performative and material dimensions, which disturb the idea of faithfulness in communication. In deepening the political potential of miscommunication, I propose to explore through the conceptual character of the idiot how modes of indeterminacy may impact communication design.

In the second part, I analyse the participatory process of relocating a village in Alentejo, Portugal, due to the construction of a dam. I explore a sense of repetition around equivalents between the old and new village during the process of relocation. Relocating sets out unaccounted connections that produce modes of indeterminacy. These allow modes of encounter surrounding the miscommunications emerging between the early projection phase to be traced, and the reality of relocation and its impact on the local community and its ecosystem. This political dimension to miscommunication calls on an eco-political positioning of communication design that may allow new publics to emerge.

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And it happens in the mode of indeterminacy, that is, of the event from which nothing follows, no “and so...” but that confronts everyone with the question of how they will inherit from it.

Isabelle Stengers¹

Introduction: Exploring Miscommunication

In *Introductory Notes on an Ecology of Practices*,² Belgian philosopher Isabelle Stengers presents the term “faithful communication” as a counter to “affirming misunderstanding”.³ Affirming misunderstandings within a practice questions the value of “good communication” in creating a “good definition” of a common world.⁴ In this sense, it challenges modalities of the political, construed upon establishing a common ground and based on an agreement around an equality of terms. In political terms, faithful communication implies communication design is working upon consensual⁵ framings of the public, and reinforcing and reproducing these consensual understandings of the public, by, predominantly, framing communication as a space of rational, discursive, dialogical interchange. This communicational space of exchange resting upon common terms, is the foundation

of models of communication accounting for our democratic lives.⁶

What I am looking to explore in this paper are practical possibilities for the design of communication to remain not solely a practice shaping consensus, but rather entertain the possibility of assuming modes of being public and political that are not known in advance, where communication moves from a normative exercise aiming at consensus, to trouble assumptions regarding faithful communication with different propositions of what a communicative arena might be.

In *Molloy Re-translated to French*,⁷ Egyptian artist Dina Danish presents a re-translation of *Molloy* “in collaboration with its author Samuel Beckett.”⁸ *Molloy* was written and published in French in 1951 and translated to English in 1955. The fact that Danish attempts to re-translate the English version back to its original French version points to a non-



Molloy Re-translated to French, 2008. Photo by Dina Danish.

sensical repetition, which Danish stresses further by working with the materiality of *Molloy* as book. Danish evidences the acts of replacement and transport inherent to word translation, with Danish collecting each of the single letters in the English original needed to assemble words in the French re-translation. “To re-translate the first page in French, 124 pages of the English version were needed.”⁹ In this way, the French version is, materially, the English version, allowing through translation a return to its original. Danish establishes a physical connection between signs and object, but an open one regarding referents.

The performativity of re-translating *Molloy* produces a suspension of the text’s meanings, disclosing language’s material and iconic dimensions. In this way, miscommunication is potentially happening in-between other layers of meaning, and not only on the layer of language. In *Molloy*, it seems the nonsense of a translation travelling back to an absent original form, amplifies both Beckett’s words, the performativity of translation, and the role of representation in communication, adding layers to the book as a communicational object. In the act of repeating, different layers intertwine, which may potentially reshuffle the grounds of established interpretative frames.

In *The Sis, These S*¹⁰ Danish explores translation by reflecting on the process of learning a foreign language, considering her position in-between languages. Danish playfully engages with grammar, interpretations and translations in an attempt to connect her Arabic, Spanish and German. She invites us to account for words in different modalities, by emptying them, de-contextualising them, by breaking the rules that bond them together and searching for reasoning beyond grammar or meaning. The repetitions, translations, hesitations Danish creates become nonsensical in proposing “foreigner” not only as language but as *her* language. “Foreigner” resists the limits of “correct” translations, becoming a language of permanent interference to the formalities of language. In this sense, it is a language of miscommunication, as Danish makes tacit a performative dimension of language, affecting us as readers to play with our own use of language in the nonsensical process of learning “foreigner”.

The repetitions in the work of Danish show the potential in exploring communication design beyond faithful communication. Her use of repetition raises questions, such as, what is

1. Stengers, Isabelle. The Cosmopolitical Proposal. In *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (eds.). Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005. p. 996.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 189.

3. “And the practical certainty of misunderstanding is something an ecology of practice has to affirm without nostalgia for what would be faithful communication”. *Ibid.*, p. 189. Stengers. p. 995.

4. Stengers. p. 995.

5. A prevailing metaphor for this consensual view of the public within representative democracy is of an image of a body constituted of many bodies, an illustration of a public equally represented within modes of government. However, as Jacques Rancière points out, this notion of a public rendered equally participant before the idea of a general law blurs what is private and what is public. But then, the private sphere is determined by the same political structure that recognises the public. The association of the private sphere with the individual, the body, is used as an abstraction to legitimate—by opposition to—that which is universal. And, as the universal is considered the realm of citizenship, what is private becomes excluded from the sphere of citizenship. See Jacques Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy* [La Haine de la démocratie]. Translated by Steve Corcoran. London. New York, NY: Verso. 2009.

6. A notion of the bourgeois public sphere is proposed by Habermas as a “society engaged in critical public debate” in which “the sphere of private people come together as a public; they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor.” See Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society (Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought)* [Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit]. Translated by Thomas Burger with assistance of Frederik Lawrence. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press. 1991. p. 52 and p. 27.

7. Danish, Dina. *Molloy Re-Translated to French*. <http://dinadanish.com/translation.html> (Accessed 2016-04-08).

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*

10. Danish, Dina. *The Sis, These S*. San Francisco, CA: The Walgreen’s Eye Press. 2008.

the point of undoing translation? Or, of making translation confusing and paradoxical? The dissolution of sense leads to an impasse that dislocates our attention towards the performativity and materiality of the acts of replacement, of erasing, of transport, as unforeseen practices of translation. This nonsensical aspects of Danish's work seem to invoke Stengers' idea of the idiot as a producer of impasses to "good communication" that interrupt the general understandings of a situation or problem as framed by faithful communication.

The Idiot as Figure of Miscommunication

In the examples above Danish explores repetition through translating, de-contextualising, and moving, to paralyse what would be expected correspondences and shape the possibility of other connections, which allow for different inhabitations of communication. The act of repeating creates a productive sense of interference, which allows other dimensions of communication to emerge.

In "A Cosmopolitical Proposal",¹¹ Isabelle Stengers proposes the figure of the Idiot as a conceptual character capable of creating a state of suspension, of indeterminacy, by interrupting general understandings of a situation or problem. Stengers¹² proposes Bartleby, a character developed by Herman Melville, as an example of the possibilities that the figure of "the Idiot" can offer in a sort of ecological questioning of an environment, forging new political questions. In Melville's short story, Bartleby is a clerk who embodies the ultimate form of resistance because he lives his environment in a way that defies being understood by all those surrounding him. As his superior continually tries to approach him to negotiate a working relationship, Bartleby offers nothing other than a "I would prefer not to"—in a sense a soft answer, but one that resists faithful communication and seems to paralyse any "normal" relationship of address, opening an empty space

around him. This is the space that Stengers proposes as a state of indeterminacy. Bartleby's state of refusal is not exactly a negation—that would be a claim—and the indeterminacy is not exactly a neutral state—that would not be a force. The refusal is a resistance. Like in a process of casting, a negative is taken from a positive, as the first step is to adhere to the surface of what exists and alternate it.

Danish's work points to a space of potential idiocy within communication design, where communication oriented towards achieving agreement and consensus is interrupted with impasses to what should be "good communication", emerging from the nonsensical aspect of her projects.

Deleuze's definition of nonsense in *The Logic of Sense*¹³ is affirmed through contrast: rather than a name whose sense is described by other names—that is, by synonyms—nonsense is when a name says its own sense. According to Helen Palmer in *Deleuze and Futurism: A Manifesto for Nonsense*,¹⁴ given "Deleuze's theory of univocity, the formula does not differ from its permutations."¹⁵ Accordingly, only nonsense itself can be named as an example of nonsense. The simultaneous openness and entropy of the concept makes nonsense produce a paradoxical indeterminacy: "the removal of the delineation between sense and nonsense means that [...] there is absolute openness, but there is also nowhere left to go."¹⁶

Stengers is drawn to the character of the idiot, from the ancient Greek and borrowing from Deleuze's idea of "conceptual characters". For the ancient Greeks, the idiot was someone estranged from Greek language, a relation made apparent in the etymology of Idiom, a "semi-private language".¹⁷ Deleuze indicates the idiot's effect of "slowing down", "that we don't consider ourselves authorized to believe we possess the meaning of what we know".¹⁸ Following Stenger's appropriation of Deleuze's "idiot", one could further argue that Deleuze's definition of "nonsense" indicates a para-

doxical state, which provokes an indeterminacy of senses.

The openness of indeterminacy is significant in looking at miscommunication within design processes. Firstly, because it draws in matters of positioning and affect, which contemplate an ecological understanding of a design process,¹⁹ that considers our attachment²⁰ within this positioning and involves a “thinking with”, a being implicated with what will happen within the realm of a practice. This bond is important because it takes a personal commitment to allow indeterminacy to provoke political questions. Choosing to think and act from indeterminacy means allowing the nonsense brought by the idiot to resonate within a design process. Secondly, indeterminacy calls on a performative quality, which enables miscommunication to become a link to the assembling of diverse perspectives, even if incapable of interlocution. In this sense, miscommunication surpasses the level of what might be or not be equally understood, and moves an understanding of communication to the level of materialities, and affect. Finally, within this affective experiencing of indeterminacy, of an impasse, of what is provoking the “slowing down” Stengers refers to, there is an inhabiting of a situation, while lacking keys to interpret, or unlock it, and this demands a remapping, that is, a political transformation.

The idiot for Stengers is potentially more generative of indeterminacy than a Deleuzian register and gives rise to plurality, and to a multivocal set of registers that complicate encounters, because the Stengerian idiot nuances

the idea of the political not only as a site of challenge per se, but rather created through mutual, but different forms of incomprehension, that might even consider those deliberately or accidentally confusing a situation.

The idiot as a figure of miscommunication is shaping connections, which suspend what would be assumed as logical correspondences, and allow other layers, other connections, to surface. In this sense, indeterminacy renders miscommunication visible, suspending faithful communication and transporting exchanges from the domain of the representative to a concrete practical dimension, constituted by materialities and affecting other modes of participation that are not shaped around representation, but rather a “lived” dimension of communication.

In this sense, Danish’s threading of nonsensical connections remains far from the political potential of the idiot as figure of miscommunication, due to its circumscribing to a literary universe, which remains thoroughly authorial and unchallenged in terms of how the idiot might resound within the setting of her work. I consider Danish a good example of nonsense, and there is a part of the idiot that concerns producing nonsense, but what interests me is the political sense of the idiot in producing what Stengers proposes as modes of indeterminacy. This is what I wish to analyse further in looking at communication within the participated process of relocating Luz, a village in the south of Portugal, due to the construction of a dam. Communication here is part of an ongoing effort in arriving at agreements

11. Stengers.

12. Ibid. p. 996.

13. Deleuze, Gilles. *The Logic of Sense* [Logique du sens]. New York, NY: Columbia University Press. 1990.

14. Palmer, Helen. *Deleuze and Futurism: A Manifesto for Nonsense*. London, New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic. 2014.

15. Ibid. p. 11.

16. Ibid. p. 11.

17. Stengers. p. 994.

18. Ibid. pp. 994-995.

19. Introductory Notes on an Ecology of Practices.

20. de la Bellacasa, Maria Puig. Matters of Care in Technoscience: Assembling Neglected Things. *Social Studies of Science* 41. no. 1. 2011.

regarding the plan of relocating a village, as a participatory process shaped the relocation. In-between the imagined, the projected, the discussed and the “reality” of a new village materialising, communication goes through diverse stages and moves from abstract notions of that what might be affected by a relocation, to the conversations surrounding the concrete questions and problems emerging from the actual relocating.

A Practice in Indeterminacy: Relocating Luz

a legend tells that the holy virgin appeared to a shepherd at the top of an oak tree asking the people to build a temple in her honour at the same place of her apparition. However, the people decided to save the tree and build the temple elsewhere. During its construction, what was built one day appeared destroyed on the other, with all the construction tools reappearing under the oak tree. After several attempts, the temple was built in the place of the apparition—the oak tree—and the saints’ will was satisfied.

—Carlos Dias²¹

The legend above is at the origin of a small village named Luz (Light) in the Alentejo region, in the south of Portugal. The village was named after Our Lady of Light, the saint appearing above the oak tree determining its location. In a twist of fate, after such importance was invested in its location, Luz was relocated in 2003, due to the construction of the Alqueva dam.²² Here I will look into how this process of relocation was projected, planned and implemented, considering the participation process involving different layers of political players affected by this relocation, as well as how the design of communication changed during the various planning phases, as the relationship between the local community and the project of relocation modified.

After the decision to construct the dam and the

flooding of Luz, the question of how to relocate its residents²³ resulted in the decision to re-build another village two kilometres along, which added to its original name—Luz—the word Nova (new): *Nova Luz*. In attempting to replicate the original village, but also to improve it, the processes of replicating and improving triggered a permanent dispute and debate with efforts in negotiating representations of Luz by the diverse actors involved in the relocation. In this way, the process of relocating Luz opened a space of miscommunication in negotiating the in-betweens to multiple referents and expectations. As a sort of translation of Luz, *Nova Luz* is a village in which “every facet is the result of a design decision,” which in itself comes out of a participatory process, drawing in the ambivalence of multiple perspectives: “a discussion with people living inside it”.²⁴

The project of the Alqueva dam assumed the status of a myth in the region, as it was first discussed in the late 1950s and left in “still waters” by several governments since then. There was distrust in the project being implemented up to the final stages of construction—“[...] you’d better finish it yourself! Because they will do it in a month of Sundays!”²⁵ The gigantic scale of the project, its high cost and the numerous stakeholders involved provoked disruptions within all phases of the project, from planning to implementation, with the inhabitants of Luz accustomed to interpreting these disturbances as a sign the project would remain unimplemented. Thus, inhabitants of Luz were committing to participating in a process that would irreversibly change their lives, while remaining in the expectation that the project would actually never go ahead.

When, finally, a whole ecosystem was transported—the dead included—the replicated village became haunted by the original; a museum was created to preserve the memory of the submerged village and generate a sense of continuity; and, as a village was submerged and a new one born, tourism was fostered in the shadow of the ghost of the invisible village. If one considers not only

the human actors involved in the re-location, but also the impact on the non-human—the irreversible transformation of the landscape, the wildlife, the immaterial flow of economic activity, and how a local culture is affected by its living “*muse-alisation*”—it becomes apparent how the process of relocation is a valuable example through which to analyse miscommunication, particularly considering that during the years the process of relocation took place there was a constant concern with the consultation and participation of the inhabitants of Luz. As the process unfolded, communication unravelled the complexity of relocating with many miscommunications emerging around the impasses created between a general understanding of what the project would be, and the specificities of the territory and its modes of life. Between different modalities of communication, implying distinct representative universes, but also different layers of materialities and affects to the landscape, to the social and economical structures in the process of being relocated. I analyse these in more detail, working mainly from a set of documentaries registering the process, as well as drawing from a set of papers, of which I would like to underline the contribution of ethnographer Clara Saraiva, who followed the process of relocation integrating a team responsible for creating a museum dedicated to Luz.

The Story of Luz: Inhabiting a Participatory Process

In an early phase of planning, one of the initial hypotheses offered to the inhabitants of Luz, was of keeping the village in place by constructing dykes. However, in the driest region of Portugal people were afraid of being surrounded by such a large amount of water. The inhabitants of Luz were then offered a choice between receiving a financial compensation and relocating the village. They opted to relocate the village, agreeing that the compensation would follow a juridical figure known as “like for like”.²⁶ This decision was first made by a group of men of Luz in 1981, and later by the whole village in 1996: “we always wanted house for house and land for land”.²⁷

The relocation of the village under this system of equivalence set out the expectation that the process of relocation would constitute a process of repetition, in the sense that the set of conditions and relations existing in Luz would be translated to

21. Legend of the foundation of Village of Luz. In Carlos Dias. *Demolição Da Aldeia Da Luz Começou Ontem. Público*. 2003. (Translation/adaptation from Portuguese by the author.)

22. The Alqueva Dam is the biggest in Europe with an area of 250 km² at its maximum quota of 152m. The general objectives of this gigantic structure were altered through successive readjustments: the construction of a water reservoir important in fighting the severe draught and secure the provision of water to populations; a progressive alteration of the specialisation of agriculture in the south of the country, which gains 110,000 hectares of water for irrigation; the production of hydroelectric energy; the fight against physical and populational desertification through an increment on the regional job market and stimulation of agriculture, industry and tourism. In Clara Saraiva. *Aldeia Da Luz: Entre Dois Solstícios, a Etnografia Das Continuidades E Mudanças [The Dam of Alqueva and the Village of Luz: Between Two Solstices—The Ethnography of its Continuities and Changes]* *Etnográfica VII*, no. 1. 2003. pp. 105-106.

23. Luz in 2001 had 363 residents in 185 plots with homes, outbuildings and gardens. *Ibid.* p. 106. (Translated from Portuguese by author.)

24. Mário Moura to The Ressabiator. 2013-08-26. <http://ressabiator.wordpress.com/2013/08/26/uma-discussao-com-gente-a-viver-la-dentro/#more-11652>.

25. One man addressing another man who is going to visit the construction place of Nova Luz. In Muriel Jacquerod and Eduardo Saraiva Pereira. *Between Two Villages (Entre Deux Villages / Entre Duas Terras)*. Switzerland / Portugal. 2003.

26. Saraiva. *Aldeia Da Luz*. p. 107.

27. Wateau, Fabienne. *Barragem E Participação Pública Em Alqueva. Um Exemplo Português De Concertação?* In *Auga E Sustentabilidade. Enfoques Para Unha Nova Política De Augas*. T.S. Cuesta and X.X. Neira (eds.) Santiago de Compostela: Universidade de Santiago de Compostela, 2008.

Village of Nova Luz in Alentejo, Portugal. Photograph by Miguel Manso for Jornal Público. © Jornal Público.



another location. In this sense, the term of equivalence marks a defining moment in which miscommunication became inscribed in the whole participation process.

In resuming the Alqueva project after the end of dictatorship, the choice was to include the inhabitants of Luz in the decision-making process.²⁸ However, the shaping of this process of participation went through different stages and many transformations. The project set out by creating a committee of residents, which met regularly with architects. But, at a certain point, this dialogue became impossible, and, from there on the company EDIA,²⁹ responsible for the Alqueva Dam project, became responsible for discussing matters with the population, such as the area of houses, annexes and gardens, materials for floors and walls and the possibility of adding modifications to projects.³⁰

Since 1995, meetings were set up with EDIA at the village centre with the intent of explaining the process to the inhabitants of Luz. The decision was made to call residents to these meetings according to identical social conditions, asking them to choose the floor of their future house, the colour of doors and windows, the general configuration of the house. Residents participated in these meetings trying to understand the plans of the architects and the arguments of the people of EDIA, in order to approve their new houses. The technicians of EDIA tried to explain to these groups of residents what would become an equivalent to each house, as well as why residents were part of a particular group. Questions of value surfaced during these meetings, but also of what must be identical in old and new houses for them to be considered equivalent to “home”. For many, the discussion centred upon the expectations of an equivalent house being a unique and individual one, assuming similar characteristics to the ones they called home.

The idea of equivalence was nuanced within the actual planning of the new village. The project

team devised an initial set of 25 typologies of houses, projected as an equivalent to the range of houses existing in Luz; each with a different set of materials and finishes. In the outlines of these typologies, in making them public and discussing these in detail, inhabitants of Luz were confronted with the replications of economical and social differences. Inequalities were highlighted within the project through details such as the size of windows or the quality of floors. As inequality became tacit, it affected social relations, creating envy and unrest; even people who considered themselves happy with their new house, noted “they were left off worse than their neighbours”.³¹ The very idea of groups of houses being merged into one typology was difficult to accept when many houses were constructed with money saved from years of migration, precisely looking to differentiate them from others.

Conflicts emerging from these meetings led to limiting contact to two intermediaries as representatives of the village: the current and the former village council presidents.³² Finally, EDIA chose to select a small group of technicians as contact with the population. Several documentaries register moments of tension in the contrast between different discourses, for example, with inhabitants signing the approval to the construction of their houses without a full understanding of the architectural plans or mock-ups constructed.³³ Many miscommunications only became manifest over time, as people, in visiting the construction site, came to terms with what they had signed off to during the planning phase of the project. Often discussions were layered with feelings of resentment, of injustice, of resignation.

The participatory processes of consulting with the inhabitants of Luz took place over several years, without the population believing the project would come to a conclusion. It was only with the relocation of the cemetery that inhabitants faced the reality of relocating.³⁴ The inhabitants of Luz were assertive in that they “would not abandon their little souls” and “the dead should move before the living.”³⁵ Care

was put in planning the relocation of the cemetery, trying to articulate the will of residents with the practicalities of such transition; every household was individually consulted and residents accepted to name a representative to be present at each exhumation. The relocation of the cemetery is considered by ethnographer Clara Saraiva, who followed the process of relocating Luz closely, “the most difficult moment in terms of the violence of privacy which touched the heart of the sacred relation of people with the dead”,³⁶ a process where, again, meaningful miscommunications surfaced.

The decision was made to create an exact replica of the old cemetery, but different understandings of what a replica entails became apparent. Maria Chilrito, an inhabitant of Luz, in a talk with EDIA technicians expressed her discomfort with the exhumation of the body of her daughter: “because you know that ground is the sacred ground that destroyed her little body”³⁷—for Chilrito moving the cemetery involved moving the ground itself. It was not a matter of exhuming bodies, but of the holiness of the location (the sacred grounds of the Saint of Luz) and of the holy earth of which the body of her child had become part. In order to facilitate the process of reburial, inhabitants of Luz were asked to light candles in the old cemetery as a gesture of farewell and again in the new so souls could find their way.³⁸ Saraiva notes that the sense of continuity in the repetition of these gestures helped mitigate the pain.³⁹

Finally, inhabitants moved into their new houses in several phases. The process of moving was based on a swapping of keys, in order to assure people did not return. This was a moment of great sadness as residents left houses, spaces, plants, trees, that had been in their families for generations; the houses were left clean and tidy—cared for.

After moving to Nova Luz, residents returned to the old of village on a daily basis: “we are going to have coffee at the village.”⁴⁰ Over time shops, cafés, the post office, and school were relocated to the new village and people came to terms with the move. In several documentaries one sees the population observing the rising of the waters of the dam, as the landscape of their whole life changes, the river of their picnics and festivities disappears, the trees and pastures make place for a large lake: “cognitive maps and memories of landscape completely changed: ‘now I don’t know how to orient myself; I search for things that

28. This resolution was based on learning from the process of submerging the village of Vilarinho das Furnas in the north of Portugal, in 1972.

29. “Empresa de Desenvolvimento e Infraestruturas do Alqueva, S.A. was set up in 1995. It is a public limited company with an exclusively public share capital and belongs to the state corporate sector. Its mission is to design, execute, build and operate the Alqueva Multi-purpose Undertaking (EFMA), thereby contributing to the economic and social development of its area of intervention [...]” In S.A. EDIA Empresa de Desenvolvimento e Infra-estrutura do Alqueva. About Us—Edia. <http://www.edia.pt/en/about-us/edia/146>. (Accessed 2016-04-08).

30. Saraiva. p. 121.

31. *Ibid.* p. 118.

32. Wateau.

33. This became apparent when the village was constructed and inhabitants started to visualise their new houses, as for example when a group of inhabitants visit the construction site as one of them vents: “I gave permission to build exactly the same house. When we saw the plan we couldn’t tell it was going to be like this!” In Jacquerod and Pereira.

34. Saraiva. p. 110.

35. *Ibid.*

36. *Ibid.*

37. Jacquerod and Pereira.

38. Saraiva. p. 110.

39. *Ibid.* pp. 110-111.

40. *Ibid.* p. 120.

are already under water and that before we knew so well!”⁴¹ But, in moving to their new houses there was also a sense of renovation in buying new furniture and lamps, and elderly couples enjoyed making jokes: “now, with the move these are all bridal houses.”⁴²

During the participation process, from the period of planning, to construction and finally relocation, communication with the population created numerous miscommunications that surfaced between those planning Nova Luz, and those affected by it. For those living in Luz, the relocation touched upon the sacred grounds of their loved ones; on decorative tiles that were proud representatives to years of migration; toilets and sanitation constructed with sacrifice; houses that were built by ancestors and shaped during generations, by marriage, death, births; the envy of observing a neighbour with bigger windows; the sadness of abandoning vegetable gardens cultivated for over 40 years. Again, people were caught between a sense of pride of the sacrifice⁴³ they were making for their country, and a lack of privacy in being on display, under the attention of the media and a rising amount of tourists.

Miscommunication becomes tangible at moments in which relocating suspends the language of project and planning. In looking at communication, one perceives moments of impasse in which the idea of an agreement is only reached because one side is capitulating, sulking, lamenting, or withdrawing. With impasses in communication, tensions, perceived in silences, in gestures, disrupt faithful communication.

Miscommunication and Modes of Indeterminacy: Between Life and Project

Architects, urban planners and designers set themselves the task of not only attempting to preserve an original, but also to improve it. This task was shared between the expectations of a

variety of stakeholders, including the inhabitants of Luz, but also several instances of central and local government, EDIA, the semi-private company responsible for the project with financial support from the EU. As discussed above, many miscommunications permeated the participation process of projecting Nova Luz, and as the village materialised and people relocated different senses of relocating came forward; I transcribe different vocalisations collected from several documentaries:

This is not a replica

An EDIA Technician speaks with new inhabitants about their pantry space: “Because these [houses] aren’t replicas. It was decided to compensate in kind. The house is to compensate for the one you lost. Regardless of whether this or that wall is in the same place [...] If we did that, we’d have to tear down the things that are here but aren’t the same as in your old homes. These aren’t replicas.”⁴⁴

An equivalent

In *Duas Terras* we follow the explanation of a technician to inhabitants of Luz gathered to select the floors of their future houses: “as you must understand when we are going to build a house that is equivalent to the ones you have here we are going to attribute better materials but compatible with the level of the house relatively to others that already have better finishes. So it is natural that you say ‘we like this one better’ [...] but, all has to be a little balanced, you see? So, in the same way, that, for example, instead of we building the houses, we paid for you to build them, there are houses that are worth more and others less, right?”⁴⁵

It can’t be a copy

In *Luz Submersa*⁴⁶ we watch an inhabitant of Luz visiting the construction site of his new house, pointing to structural details that differ from the initial project. He complains he will not be able to inhabit the house in the same way.

But then he stops to remark that, in fact, the house could never be the same, because even if it was a copy, it wouldn't be identical: his house in Luz was built by his grandfather and maintained with his own hands.

In another example an elderly couple, in attempting to explain their feelings regarding the new house, describe their old house as an extension of their marriage:⁴⁷ “my husband built up the walls to our marriage”,⁴⁸ starting only with outer walls and soil floor, to over decades build necessary inner walls as the family grew.

In the first part of this paper I presented the concept of nonsense, to substantiate the paradoxical quality of indeterminacy. There is no possibility of agreement around the value of a concept, no possibility of equivalence. The signification of relocating holds similar modes of entropy and openness. In this case, what is significant is that the indeterminacy surrounding the meaning of relocating and the values of equivalence, copy, house, home, landscape—to name a few—is emerging in the inhabiting of Nova Luz. The practical grounds of the concrete materialisation of the new village make tacit impasses already felt during the participated process manifest.

Between projection and practice, different modes of locating communication within a political discussion emerged. During the projected phase, in designing participation around representations of what could become the new village; during the implementation of the project, in communication moving to the dimension of the practical,

surrounding the concrete rather than the represented and allowing another affective dimension to emerge in communication. In the new village becoming concrete the most significant dispute seems to have arisen between the rural modes of living existing at Luz and the urban conception of living guiding the architects projecting the village: “the problem is that the village was projected by architects who think more the urban world.”⁴⁹ This is well illustrated in documentaries showing the reaction of the inhabitants to Nova Luz, with recurrent complaints regarding the larger scale of the village and its windy central square without shadow, no land allocated for vegetable gardens and pastures, the lack of conditions to slaughter a pig, small chimneys without space to smoke meat, or—an important detail in a village where sitting on a doorstep is significant to social life—the lack of doorsteps.

There is a sequence in *Duas Terras*, which is illustrative of how conversations seemed to occur within two different worlds, remaining invisible to each other: as an old man, in search of a doorstep, enquires with the constructor “no doorstep made of stone?” and receives a perplexed reply: “Doorstep? Stone? Your door is v-424 and it's not supposed to have one... [moving to the kitchen] here you have a g-70, a canopy and sink.”⁵⁰ We observe an impasse in communication arising from distinct modes of being affected by the absence of a doorstep. The old man cannot understand that a house does not have a doorstep; the contractor is reading a plan that clearly does not include a doorstep. In the documentary, the old man turns his back and resigns himself to the impossibility of communicating.

41. Ibid. p. 125.

42. Ibid. p. 117.

43. In the documentary *My Village Doesn't Live Here Anymore* we hear the priest during a procession in the village: “know like Christ how to accept our own suffering. He accepted suffering for our sake, that through his sacrifice we could be happier. And likewise our suffering must be borne for the sake of our fellow brothers and sisters in Portugal, through a dam that might bring them more happiness. That this sacrifice might be accepted in this hour of goodbye.”

44. Technician talking to new inhabitants about their pantry space. In Catarina Mourão. *My Village Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (a Minha Aldeia Já Não Mora Aqui). 2006.

45. Jacquerod and Pereira.

46. Matos Silva, Fernando. *Luz Submersa*. 2001.

47. In Portuguese, the verb “to marry” (casar) is closely affiliated with the act of occupying a “house” (casa).

48. Jacquerod and Pereira.

49. Salema, Aldeia Da Luz Já Tem Museu. *Público* 2003.

50. Ibid.

51. Saraiva. Aldeia Da Luz. p. 121.

52. Mourão.

53. Saraiva. Aldeia Da Luz. p.122.

54. Representative of EDIA. In Ramon Rodriguez. *Aldeia Da Luz, Uma Terra Submersa Pelas Águas*. 2003.

55. de Azevedo Antunes, Manuel, Coutinho Duarte, Lucinda, and Reino, João Pedro. Barragens Em Portugal: De Vilarinho Da Furna À Aldeia Da Luz, Com Passagem Pelo Douro Internacional (paper presented at the Comunicação ao IV Congresso Ibérico sobre Gestão e Planificação da Água. Tortosa. 8-12 December 2004. p. 17.

56. Mourão.

57. Clara Saraiva, the ethnographer involved in the creation of the museum in Salema.

58. Saraiva, Clara. Um Museu Debaixo De Água: O Caso Da Luz [A museum under water: the case of the village of Luz]. *etnográfica* 11, no. 2. 2007. p. 445.

59. Ibid. p. 457.

60. Ibid. p. 459.

61. Ibid. p. 460.

62. Salema.

Like in the example given by Stengers of Bartleby, the idiocy of this moment suspends “good communication”, creating an impasse materialised in silence. A silence loaded with a sense of miscommunication between two different views on the doorstep. These different senses do not allow for an exchange, because they refer to two different worlds existing around relocation: between a way of living that includes sitting on the sidewalk as part of a social dynamics of Luz, and, the contractor following a plan to finish a construction site. These are two modes of being part of a situation that defy the terms of faithful communication and present a challenge in terms of how communication design devises participation.

Miscommunication between life and project is evidenced as each designed element is disputed by its inhabitation:

It is a rural mode of living where people are deeply connected with the rituals of the pig slaughter, smoke-houses, making wine, preparing olives which make up a great part of peoples' modes of living and that the architect team neglected. Not even one shed remained the same less than a year after moving and decorative elements such as tiles, columns and arches were added to houses, reflecting a need to appropriate a space and personalise it, a space that you want different than your neighbours.⁵¹

Or, in an attempt to recover social ties between neighbours, another recurrent change observed is shortening, or altering the white walls limiting each property, in order to gain a view of the

surrounding landscape,⁵² but also to be able to chat with neighbours,⁵³ as it used to be in the old village.

It becomes clear that the participatory process failed to account for the project from different perspectives. The dominant view was that of the architects, planners and technicians, ignoring miscommunications, which were not discursive, but manifest as modes of indeterminacy, which mobilise other dimensions to communication.

Miscommunication and Modes of Indeterminacy: Between Original and Copy

From the start the idea was to demolish the old village of Luz before submerging it, in order to protect the quality of the water, but also so there would be “no affective relation with the past or disgust for the situation of today[...].”⁵⁴ This stressing of disappearance seems perceptive of the potential of miscommunication. The interest in erasing traces beyond a practical need reveals a desire to flatten the timeline of events, eliminating what could constitute an obstacle to an evaluation of the process as effective.

The images of a bulldozer destroying the church constructed in honour of Nossa Senhora da Luz (Our Lady of Light) are powerful and moving. They feel, at least to me, as another layer of invasion that somehow makes explicit, underlines, what Antunes, Duarte and Reino conclude in “Barragens in Portugal”:

“in terms of memories there will be a permanent recurring to another space that is a non-place as a primordial reference, thus there will always be a place for comparison ‘what we had there and don’t here, what we saw there and here don’t.’”⁵⁵ It seems the attempt was that in demolishing, in destroying the original Luz, this non-place would cease to exist. This feeling resonates within the initial sentences of the documentary *My Village Doesn’t Live Here Anymore* in which the voice of a child speaks, while “we drive through” the old village “[...] Everything changed all at once, so it would seem as if nothing changed at all.”⁵⁶

EDIA’s decision to eliminate the physical existence of Luz contrasts with the planning of a museum of the original village, the Museu da Luz. During the years of planning and implementation of the dam, a team was working on documenting the process and collecting material for the museum. The museum was projected as a memory deposit and catalyser to help the population adapt to the new village: “This museum is an exorcism.”⁵⁷ In terms of its architecture, it was projected to disappear into the landscape between the new church and cemetery: “Thought as an element of the landscape and not as construction [...] perpetuating a relation with two fundamental elements: the original earth, and water, agent of transformation.”⁵⁸

Luz’s live musealisation entailed observing ethnographers “looking for old things for the museum”,⁵⁹ and changed people’s sense of value and heritage. The affective ties to the past changed, reshaping a sense of identity. Objects that were symbols of the hardships of the region’s rural life—and that people looked to forget—suddenly became valuable: “if they want them for the museum they must be valuable.”⁶⁰ Progressively, as Saraiva observes, these objects became a symbol of social and cultural status and ornament houses and gardens in Nova Luz,⁶¹ extending the act of memorialising beyond the symbolical borders of the Museum and affecting Nova Luz with cultural changes resulting from

the process of preserving the memory of Luz. This aspect is important because the museum became an amplifier of relocation: in preserving the memory of the submerged village it also initiates a process of “mise en abyme” of documenting, in which everything holds the memory of the relocation, generating in itself a profound impact on Luz.

Georgina Sardinha, an inhabitant of Luz seems to defy the place of the museum as capturing the old village, by denying its sense of heritage: there is nothing there that does not exist in the village. Almost denying the changes taking place. The ongoing process of inhabiting Nova Luz, with Luz as reference, is a process of living values of heritage, of documentation and identity where potentially many productive forms of miscommunication may generate modes of indeterminacy between the original and its new equivalent.

*Georgina Sardinha lives in the central square, she says she is not going to the museum inauguration: “I am a friend of seeing things, but all there is in the village passes through here.” She is sitting in the sun working on her “crochet”, which she undoes at night to save thread, “my children like everything bought”.*⁶²

Final Remarks

In this paper I explored the idea of repetition as a way of creating moments where processes of communication accommodate a more idiotic and nonsensical approach to what it means to believe in faithful communication. While in Dina Danish’s *Molloy* repetition opened up a nonsensical process of miscommunicating translation and language, the relocation of Luz was layered by a texture of miscommunications underlying an apparently functional process. The potential of miscommunication was augmented by the assumption that the original village would be replicated. In this way, the relocation process produced numerous para-

doxical encounters, which I found to be evocative of Stengers' figure of the Idiot, a figure interrupting the ideas of good communication surrounding the participatory process of planning, by drawing on affected and practical modes of experiencing relocation. If Danish's *Molloy* invoked a nonsensical side of the Idiot, relocating Luz shows the political potential of indeterminacy in opening communication to different senses, emerging issues and new publics. Here, moments of impasse demand an engagement with a situation, that moves communication to not only contemplate the discursive, but also its material and performative qualities that raise questions about participatory processes.

Many of the miscommunicating instances in Luz happened because of how each party involved was understanding the process of relocation as repetition and replica: in the earth that enveloped the bodies in the cemetery, in the immaterial routes gradually submerged leaving people disoriented, in dislocating objects from homes into the museum. But also in spaces of meaning, such as in the idea of equivalence as a cornerstone to the process of relocation; in the contrast between the language spoken at the meetings between technicians and residents; or in architects designing with an urban view that overlooked aspects of rural life. And many miscommunications not mentioned here, such as, for example, ecologists for whom relocating implied moving thousands of trees that were to be cut down.

The exercise of relocating—moving senses, people, artifacts—revealed miscommunications that raise important questions to designing communication. Questions arising from not ignoring what is intuited as a fissure within the development of projects, acknowledging the silence, the hesitations, the awkward moments, which communication designers tend to dismiss, or equalise, to accomplish faithful communication. These questions entail dealing with idiocy in communication and imply a multitude of exchanges, agendas, affects and materialisations that should not be flattened and equalised to an abstract

level of rational, consensual modes of exchange.

In this sense, the publics envisioned in processes of faithful communication are in fact layered, personal and complex rather than uniform and anonymous. Transporting into communication the demand for a positioning challenges representativity and opens new dimensions to “making sense”. Thus, instead of assuming, as designers, there is a perfect version of “good communication” we may rely on modes of indeterminacy and demand a positioned and affective involvement that allows for a political redrawing of the publics of communication.

For communication design to work with these productive forms of miscommunication it must be open to a sense of discovery, of trial and error, of learning by doing, through the very inhabitation of a practice that is not always formulated in discursive terms and that, as the Idiot shows, can involve moments of impasse and indeterminacy. Miscommunications challenge the idea of faithfulness, to become polyphonic and no longer concerning solely a reciprocity of consensual exchanges.

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