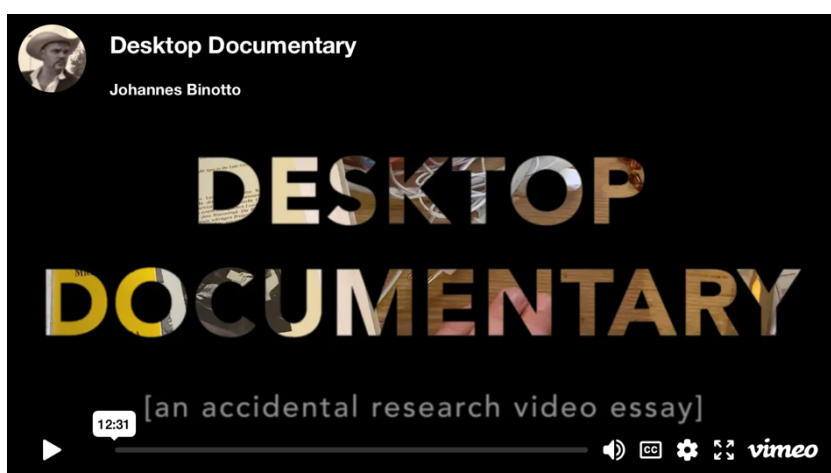


## Desktop Documentary

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URL: <https://necsus-ejms.org/desktop-documentary/>



<https://vimeo.com/723431318>

Desk, this word for a ‘table especially adapted for convenience in reading or writing’, as the dictionary explains, is derived from the medieval Latin ‘desca’ and ultimately from the Greek ‘diskos’, which means quoit, platter, or dish. Thus, a quick look into the etymology of the term infuses it with a mobility we would not normally associate with this piece of furniture of the same name. The desk we usually consider as stable and stationary (sic!) was indeed once nothing more than a disk that could be picked up or thrown (if necessary). In fact, in the Middle Ages desks were still small enough to be carried around and placed on one’s knees, and also had sloped instead of horizontal tops until they were replaced by horizontal desks in the late 18th century.[1] It is thus all the more ironic that in the late 20th and early 21st century the desk would regain its former physical flexibility by morphing into the computer desktop. And with the laptops and tablets of today we see a return of the disk-desks of antiquity.

The moveable computer desktop not only sets the working station into motion (once again) but further destabilises our sense of orientation. As Miriam de Rosa and Wanda Strauven have shown, the 'transformation from the (physical) desk to the (metaphorical) desktop implies a number of reconfigurations concerning, among other things, the axial tension between horizontality and verticality';[2] the documents once lying on my horizontal desk I see now as little icons on my computer screen vertically before me. The movement from physical to digital desktop therefore entails a 'process of reorientation' which not only reshapes our notion of space but also our sense of 'gesturality' and the 'situatedness' of our bodies.[3]

This is also what may have inspired me to redirect my interest back to the physical desk in this video essay. I wanted to have the overlooked physical desk reappear, but to have it reappear – paradoxically – within a digital format which is experienced precisely not on a horizontal desk but on a vertical screen. My video essay is both a desktop documentary and it is not. Digital desktop documentaries such as Kevin B. Lee's seminal *Transformers: The Premake* (2014) or Louis Henderson's *All That Is Solid* (2014) have made us aware of how our computer desktop has become an environment which is preciously intimate and overwhelmingly global at the same time. Similarly, I want to argue how the little ephemera on our physical desks may also be entangled with questions of unimaginable proportions. But while *Transformers: The Premake* and *All That Is Solid* seem to follow the movement of an explosion in which we quickly expand from the confines of our computer screen to eventually all the interconnected and co-dependent corners of the world, the movement in my video essay is rather that of an implosion where I want to move the elements on my desk closer and closer together. Obviously, this also informs the visual design of the video essay and the conscious decision to never cut away from the top of my desk but to have the audience watch its changing surface in one continuous unedited shot with a stationary camera. Instead of an explosive rush of images, an implosive stare.

Finally, by turning my physical desk into the protagonist of my video, I also wanted to pay homage to one of my most beloved, most important collaborators. In fact, my desk does already appear in many other video essays of mine as both canvas and working tool, on which surface I perform my audiovisual investigations. My desk is very literally a foundation for my practice, while in that function also one of those 'actors' which according to Bruno Latour are 'defined above all as obstacles, scandals, as what suspends mastery, as what gets in the way of domination, as what interrupts the closure'.[4] This seems all the more true when considering how my desk bears all the traces of all the other uses this table has found in the past in our family and how those traces interact and counteract with whatever I am doing on and with it.

## DESKTOP DOCUMENTARY

In turning towards our physical desks we may become different, and in becoming different we may find ourselves, as it is so beautifully put into words by Sara Ahmed in her *Queer Phenomenology*:

There, that will be my desk. Or it could just be the writing table. It is here that I will gather my thoughts. It is here that I will write, and even write about writing. This book is written on different writing tables, which orientate me in different ways or which come to 'matter' as effects of different orientations. On the tables, different objects gather. Making a place feel like home, or becoming at home in a space, is for me about being at my table.[5]

## Author

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## Notes

- [1] See Giedion 1948, p. 284.
- [2] See De Rosa & Strauven 2020, p. 232.
- [3] Ibid., p. 235.
- [4] See Latour 2004, p. 81.
- [5] See Ahmed 2006, p. 11.