Contentious Relations: Art and Documentary

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If, fifteen years ago, you had predicted that documentary work would come to make up a large and influential strand of contemporary art, the idea would have seemed absurd. It would have been said that documentary had surely had its day, perishing with the liberal politics that had nourished it; and along with it, naïve ideas about humanitarian reform and the ability of visual representation to capture reality. Yet, now the art world is increasingly fractured between a commercial world of investment and spectacular display, catering to the global elite, and the circulation of art on the biennial scene, which is dominated by documentary work, particularly in photography and video. This work is documentary in form and political in content, though both exhibit a fair bit of variety. There are three linked reasons behind this striking change: economic, technological and political. Economically, the growth of the biennial scene is part of the general globalisation of contemporary art. As artists from many nations outside of the US and Western Europe came to prominence, they often brought with them distinct political positions and perspectives that were quite alien from those of the old art world centres. They were also often obliged to perform their nationality through reference to politics (so Chinese artists regularly refer to censorship, Indian artists to sectarian violence, and Russian artists to the communist past). Technologically, it has become much easier and cheaper to make high-quality photography and video, and the media landscape has been changed beyond recognition by mass participation through social media. Politically, given the events of September 11, 2001 and the conflicts that followed, politics and its representation were pushed violently to the fore.

From the moment when 'documentary' was formulated as a category in the 1930s, its relations with the art world were troubled and contentious. In film, it was John Grierson who tried systematically to lay out the character of the new mode, claiming that there need be no tension between documentary and art, and that the 'fact of the matter' could be a path to modern beauty. Relations between art and documentary were tied to documentary's role in industry—with photography, in the illustrated magazines, which were immensely powerful and popular from the 1930s through to the 1960s; and in film through reflections on social relations, often state-sponsored, which provided ways of having a nation see and think about itself. As Grierson points out, documentary was also needed by the state as a tool of social knowledge—and, by implication, control. As a servant of commerce and government, documentary was unsurprisingly looked on with scepticism and mistrust by many in the art world.

If the relations between art and documentary have been highly variable since the 1930s, this is because both realms changed hugely, sometimes in response to one another. The expressive mutations of documentary photography made by Diane Arbus, Robert Frank, Lee Friedlander and Garry Winogrand were promoted by the New York Museum of Modern Art as an antidote

to the humanist photojournalism of *Life* and *Look*.[1] The decline of the illustrated magazines in the face of competition from television brought forth the most systematic art-world critique of their operations—from Martha Rosler and Allan Sekula, among others.

The basis of the tension with art came about to the extent that documentary was thought of as transparent reflection of the world, in which subjectivity, creativity and expression were necessarily suppressed. This idea was linked to a general association of documentary with 'lower' classes of producers—with 'primitives', workers, women and socialists. Elizabeth McCauseland, who was prominent in the US Photo League, committed to putting documentary to the service of radical politics, makes this explicit: documentary will be made by workers, not artists, and they will not try to prettify life but will present it 'unretouched', arriving at unadorned truth. It was a minority position, and we shall see that many early documentarians made artistic claims for their work. Yet, if such a view now seems strange, it was partly because the Photo League was effectively suppressed in the Cold War era by FBI harassment and media blackout, along with an entire leftist culture.[2]

Over eighty years ago, Walter Benjamin—a constructor of elaborate collages of textual documents—wrote of the prejudices against the document, picking them out with extreme clarity so as to delineate their absurdity. His list of ideological prejudices has proved remarkably persistent, and is still heard among art world snobs today. In the face of them, and from the beginning, artists' documentary had to elaborate a meta-critique of the category of documentary, which sometimes took on what now seems a remarkably postmodern hue. James Agee, for instance, made a book in collaboration with Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, about the living conditions of tenant farmers in the 1930s. In Agee's long and involuted text for the book, writer and photographer are often highlighted as actors on (as well as mere recorders of) a scene, readers' and viewers' expectations about how tenant farmers should be depicted are held up for examination, and their motives for wanting to be exposed to such a subject are sceptically judged. Evans' photographs were equally self-conscious exemplars of 'documentary style' carried to a formal extreme. Despite the vicissitudes of documentary in the art world, such traits have remained remarkably constant—especially an emphasis on artifice, which appears to owe a lot to Brecht, an education in political ideology through images.

But, in any case, what is documentary? This turns out to be a very difficult question, and its difficulty persists across a number of ways of arriving at an answer. From the tradition of analytical philosophy, Carl Plantinga reviews two models of definition (one based on a relation to a real subject, the other on the maker merely saying that what they have made is 'documentary'), and settles on a definition that is close to documentary by fiat: its status is largely asserted by the maker, and that the conventions by which documentary asserts its character as documentary are highly variable historically. For film-maker, Trinh T. Min-ha, the category is a fiction. For documentary to function traditionally, its conventions have to remain invisible to the viewer, so that they remain in the accepted realm of framing or common sense, letting the subject seem to speak directly to the viewer. By making these conventions visible in her own films, documentary is demolished. Jacques Rancière makes a distinction between 'ostensive', naked images—mere

[1] See, for example, Museum of Modern Art, New York, *New Documents*, 1967, curated by John Szarkowski.
[2] See Anne Tucker, 'The Photo League', in Liz Heron/ Val Williams, eds., *Illuminations: Women Writing on Photography from the 1850s to the Present*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC 1996, pp. 165-9.

documents—and the 'metaphoric' ones that artists use to destabilize and critique images. The implications of his schema for documentary is that it may dissolve in a wider image culture in which some form of 'document', linked to presence and testimony, is dominant—from artistic engagements with documentary to advertisements and, we may add, reality TV. Rancière draws on Serge Daney's writings about TV, which were influential on the conception of Documenta X, curated by Catherine David in 1997, one of the first prominent reassertions of the documentary tradition in contemporary art.

So, if it is very difficult to come up with satisfactory definitions, viewers fall back on documentary conventions to assure themselves that what they are seeing has a basis in reality and is not complete fiction. Of these, for a long time, one of the most prominent in photography and film was the use of black and white. In photojournalism, it ran into conflict with industry as advertisers and proprietors increasingly wanted colour stories to run in magazines alongside colour adverts. Philip Jones Griffiths worked in Vietnam during the American War, making many images in colour in the hope of selling them to magazines but printing them in black and white when they appeared in his signal photographic analysis of the war, *Vietnam Inc.*[3] Griffiths writes of the 'curse' of colour in its disruption of documentary meaning, and of the particular technical problems posed for a documentary photographer by colour film, recommending the artifice of black and white as an expressive medium. An-My Lê, from the very different perspective of an artist examining the military, and in her return to Vietnam after many years' absence, also reflects on the choice of black and white in going beyond mere documentary fact to suggest broader schema by making large-scale museum photographs that dwell on a landscape formed by war, and a military sublime. David Goldblatt, who first became known for very fine black-and-white work about social issues in apartheid South Africa argues that monochrome suited that situation; but he has also made accomplished colour work for the gallery, documenting a rapidly changing social and urban landscape in which the colour of things is often important.

So conventions assure the viewer of documentary status, but this opens the question of what exposure to those conventions does to the viewer. Views of this were long dominated by Susan Sontag's rhetorically brilliant writing in *On Photography*: she argued that the photographic industry and its consumers demanded novelty, so that for example even the most accomplished pictures of famine (by Don McCullin) would dull the viewer by repetition, and corrupt the conscience; and further, that documentary photography yields no knowledge, merely sentimental feeling, and that it is part of an image culture that makes of its habitual users 'image junkies'. For decades, Sontag was ritually invoked on such matters as an ineluctable authority. Some of her arguments were reinforced and developed by Martha Rosler in her striking and influential critique of documentary as a creature of liberal politics. It may show poverty and oppression but cannot account for them other than as natural features of the social landscape, to which the only response is charity. Even on occasions when documentary does establish blame (and here Rosler refers to W. Eugene Smith's celebrated work on the Minamata poisoning), its reception in bourgeois society elevates the messenger above the message.[4] In a clear and conscious case of the owl of Minerva flying at dusk, Rosler encapsulates this system at the moment of its eclipse, at

[3] Philip Jones Griffiths, *Vietnam Inc.*, Collier Books, New York 1971.
[4] W. Eugene Smith/ Aileen M. Smith, *Minamata*, Center for Creative Photography, Tucson 1981.

the beginning of the neoliberal moment of Reagan, Thatcher and Pinochet, and at the point when Rupert Murdoch was expelling McCullin and serious photojournalism from the *Sunday Times*, demanding that photographs of starving babies be replaced by those of successful businessmen around their weekend barbecues.[5] At the same time, Allan Sekula holds up documentary photography to severe examination, particularly in an analysis of the famous *Family of Man* exhibition, staged by the Museum of Modern Art in 1955, which he sees as propagandising for a universal language of sentiment bent to Cold War purposes. Rosler and Sekula may be contrasted with Jean-Paul Sartre's writing about Henri Cartier-Bresson's photographs of China at the moment of the revolution's success: Sartre, writing from war-devastated Europe in which the memory of starvation was still fresh, sketches out the power of humanist photography at the moment at which he hopes that History will end the 'universal' conditions of oppression on which it feeds.

The reawakening of documentary has been a product of the over-reach of neoliberal power, particularly in the revival of imperialism in the long and continuing 'war on terror'. In launching controversial wars, starkly dividing the globe into allies and enemies, and violating democratic principles, photojournalism and documentary were thrust into renewed prominence in the news media and beyond. This produced, of necessity, a substantial wave of theoretical re-evaluation of documentary for its new roles and its new social and political situation—by Azoulay, Butler, Demos, Linfield, Rancière and many others.[6] Ariella Azoulay made the most specific frontal assault on Sontag's views. In her analysis of the citizenship of photography, she writes of the willingness of people to become photographs. While (as Rosler notes) Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother* wanted direct help for her plight, and Evans' subjects felt shame at the depiction of their poverty, now photography is seen as an instrument of considerable power. Photography may be used by people to claim rights denied by states—to be considered a citizen, in particular. If Azoulay's arguments seem plausible, it is because the media landscape has changed so much. Azoulay's subjects, unlike Evans' or Lange's, know what it is to be photographed and filmed, see the results soon afterwards, and adjust their behaviour accordingly. Artist and theorist Hito Steyerl also engages with this new scene. She begins her account of documentary with a scenario close to that of Sekula: it is an engine for eliciting standard emotions, especially fear, among an artificially united public. Yet she also points to an emergent sphere that breaks with the broadcast model of documentary, as more people have the means to represent themselves and show their work to others. This development has the potential to produce a documentary 'commons' in which the boundary between makers and subjects is eroded.

For Judith Butler, while the state retains much power over the image, and over influencing whose death is thought worth consideration and mourning, photography has a greater independent power, as the effect of the Abu Ghraib images clearly shows. The prison pictures make the act of taking photographs apparent, and in doing so reveal 'the entire social scene' of

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[5] See Don McCullin with Lewis Chester, *Unreasonable Behaviour: An Autobiography*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York 1992, pp. 269-70.

[6] Aside from the texts included in this collection, see Ariella Azoulay, *Death's Showcase – The Power of Image in Contemporary Democracy*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. 2001; Robert Hariman/ John Louis Lucaites, *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2007; Susie Linfield, *The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2010; Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott, Verso, London 2009.

production and reception. If in Azoulay our shared condition is one of citizenship, for Butler it is the darker sharing of the perpetrator's burden; and if in Rosler, sentiment tends to be reduced to useless wallowing in pity, for Butler it may yield legitimate grieving. Butler also says that Sontag's later writing, exposed to the 9/11 wars, granted documentary greater power than previously, and she echoes Sontag's exhortation: 'let the atrocious images haunt us'.[7]

The reassessment of documentary was accompanied by a revival of interest in photojournalism, for long dismissed, at least in the art world, as a hopelessly simplistic, naïve and compromised practice. This shift may allow us to read the older texts of photojournalism in the light of our new present, and to recognise that few of its major practitioners were quite as simple as they had been made out. W. Eugene Smith, one of the most celebrated documentarians of the illustrated magazines, writes against the idea of objective recording, and celebrates a personal, interpretative expression of a subject, in which the stage management of people and scenes is permitted. Similarly, Daido Moriyama writes of a notorious incident in which Horst Faas and Michel Laurent photographed the torture and murder of men thought to have collaborated with the Pakistani Army at the time of the war in which Bangladesh was created: the controversy centred on how much the presence of their cameras had caused the killings. Moriyama, like Smith, thinks that the photographer's role is to interpret, and not merely to lose oneself in subject matter. Smith's views were partly formed by photographing the US war against Japan in terrible and perilous circumstances; Moriyama's by the long effective occupation of his country by the US following the war, and the slow strangling of its ancient culture—hence his ambition to grasp an outline of the totality of social relations, no matter how ugly.

An indication of the controversy that photojournalism still produces in the art world may be seen in the opposing views offered by David Levi-Strauss and the photographic artists Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin. In his essay on Sebastião Salgado, Levi-Strauss challenges the widespread assumption that beauty and documentary cannot mix, and that beauty cannot be put into the service to social advancement. This is a defence of a singular figure who has evolved his own distinctive and elegiac style, drawing much from W. Eugene Smith in his celebration of workers, peasants and tribal peoples. In judging the World Press Photo awards, Broomberg and Chanarin were exposed to the regular fare of the industry, and they expose its clichés, its hunt for suffering, doubtful ideologies, and complicity with the war machine which takes its creepiest form in nostalgia for the Vietnam War. Alfredo Jaar, much of whose work has reflected critically on the making and circulation of news photographs, is interviewed about his remarkable installation piece on the life and death of Kevin Carter, who made an infamous Pulitzer Prize-winning picture of a starving Sudanese child stalked by a vulture. Jaar admires photojournalists because through his own practice, which includes work about the Rwandan genocide, he recognises the insurmountable contradictions which torture them as they depict famine, war and other man-made disasters.

One of the most common critiques of visual documentary has been to do with all that it excludes from view. Jaar made a work about this by displaying every *Life* magazine cover that depicted African over sixty years (there are not many and they mostly feature animals). There may be

[7] The '9/11 wars' is the useful shorthand coined by Jason Burke, *The 9/11 Wars*, Allen Lane, London 2011; Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Hamish Hamilton, London 2003.

many reasons for such exclusions—pragmatic, commercial, political and ideological. In analysing four of the very few pictures to have emerged from inside Holocaust camps, Georges Didi-Huberman takes the most extreme case: in which the forgetting of the extermination—the attempt to destroy all that documented it—is a part of the extermination. Here, as in Rwanda, we may ask whether the poor and scant images made in the face of that repression of imagery betray their subjects or contribute to understanding. Didi-Huberman's work on the subject caused much controversy in France in a debate with those who believe the Holocaust to be unrepresentable. Haroun Farocki examines the partial revelation of the same crime through aerial photography, taken for military purposes and much later re-read as documents of the Holocaust; they are inadequate on their own, Farocki argues, but can be put to work in alliance with other documents and witness statements.

Some wars—especially those conducted by the US and its allies—are staged for the media, and are designed to show off the power of the state to its enemies and its home population. More often, where mass slaughter takes place, cameras are forbidden. Lisa Jackson, who made a film about rape as an act of war in the lengthy, little-reported conflict in the Congo, talks of the difficulties in getting such a subject to public attention. She also talks about the problems of engaging in dialogue with the perpetrators as well as the victims. Struggling against corporate secrecy, another major foe of documentary, Ursula Bieman makes notes on the Black Sea oil industry; here, at least, images can be snatched and access occasionally negotiated. Marta Zarzycka, in paying attention to documentary photography's silence and implied sound, which is now sometimes supplied in multi-media work, explores its use in bringing to life violence against women, in looking at a linked war to Jackson's: rape victims in neighbouring Rwanda.

One logical response to the lack of documents is to invent them. This is a regular tactic in the face of dictatorship and censorship: Joan Fontcuberta, the creator of many fictional photographic 'documents', writes that his suspicion of received information was formed in Spain in the Franco years. Similarly, Kutlug Ataman who makes work in a comparatively young state, Turkey, which still faces fundamental challenges to its foundation, finds the lies that people tell his camera more interesting (and socially motivated) than mere truth. Another clear case here is Walid Ra'ad and his work with the Atlas Group, who confect both plausible and surreal 'documents' of the Civil War in the Lebanon, and comment on the documentary and archival urges, the paucity of actual documents, and the general inadequacies of visual documents.

The making of such documentary fictions has become one of the most common art-world responses to the rise of documentary, and it is also used by Omer Fast, Sean Snyder and many others. When the fiction is manifest to viewers, the conceit may function like Brecht's use of the chorus to break the narrative flow of theatre, and remind the audience where they are and what they are looking at. Fiction has many advantages in art-world settings: there is no suspicion that the artist has engaged in some naïve reflection of social reality; their handiwork is evident, and with it artistic expression; there is also a built-in commentary on the conventions and rhetoric of the documentary tradition. The price may be paid, of course, in political effect: as with Rosler's account of the treatment of W. Eugene Smith, the focus may switch from subject matter to maker, and if doubt is cast upon the veracity of one element, disbelief may extend to all. Subjects become actors, either formally paid to perform a role, or (as with Ataman) in displaying the

persona that 'real' people adopt. Bieman, in a short text, invents a dialogue between artist and actor, each disputing the rights of the other to the work.

Commitment to the subject takes many forms, and may lead documentarians and artists into hardship and danger. In these circumstances, the exposure to risk necessarily becomes a part of the work, as the limits of what may be recorded become apparent, as does the vulnerability of the maker. The exposure to risk is performed, and the action of the maker is clearly seen as an intervention in the scene: in this way, and in tension with the opposition between story-telling and political effect touched on before, it is linked to fiction.

Craigie Horsfield, who is best known for his black-and-white portraits and scenes made in Poland in the 1970s, willingly submitted himself to live under actually existing socialism, and writes here of a faithfulness to radical contingency, to the alien character of a world that exceeds human concerns, and is recorded through an intense engagement with the surface, and a rejection of all pre-existing categories. Boris Mikhailov, who was stuck with the same system, writes of how he made work in the teeth of its many restrictions, including the ban on nakedness in photography. The fall of communism led to the evaporation of the community that had resisted and endured it, and in dramatically changed circumstances, Mikhailov made work that demonstrated the new power relations forged by money.

In the extremely dangerous environment of urban Guatemala, Regina José Galindo makes performances that produce documents of neglected issues, especially about the subjection of women to exploitation and violence. She has lived and had herself photographed as a maid, in a uniform that marks out her lowly status, and makes her subject to abuse. In a resonant condemnation of her nation's amnesia of its atrocious past, she walked from the Constitutional Court to the National Palace of Guatemala, leaving a trail of bloody footsteps. The performance and resulting video was a conductor for discussion about the presidential candidacy of Efraín Ríos Montt, since arrested for genocide and other crimes against humanity.

While Jackson and Jaar made work in central Africa to highlight issues that barely registered in the Western mass media, Renzo Martens went to the Congo to play an eccentric role as a provocateur, encouraging locals to document (and thus profit) from their own poverty, cutting out Western professionals. In a social scene in which charity is part of the problem and political change apparently remote, Martens' film provides a bleak vision of Western exploitation—in which every consumer is complicit—that refuses any comfort to the viewer. There is an alignment with Rosler here, as documentary is forced painfully to perform its own powerlessness.

Under the US National Defense Authorization Act, 'citizens' (following Azoulay, we may use the term with caution) may be seized and held indefinitely without charge or any right to see the evidence held against them. Artist and academic, Hasan Elahi, finding himself on the terrorist watch list and subject to secret surveillance, responded by constantly documenting his actions and whereabouts. His work dramatises the surveillance to which we are all subject by state and commercial agencies, and also bears upon the extent to which many people document themselves, and offer themselves up for surveillance through social networking. In what has become another front in the 'war on terror', the artist Emily Jacir and her sister, the filmmaker

Annemarie Jacir, are exposed to extreme danger. Both have made work that documents the plight of Palestinians living under Israeli occupation, and here they pay the commonplace price for their presence there in coming under fire from IDF forces.

The book, unlike the database form, imposes a single form of organisation on its contents. I have tried to give substantial extracts of longer texts, and the complete texts of some shorter ones to allow each element to breathe freely within that constraint. Many texts do more than one thing, and could serve in more than one section: Trinh in conventions, for example, or Sekula in spectators, or Jaar and Goldblatt in commitment. Readers can, of course, make their own combinations. Referring to the database is a way to point to the remarkable mutual transformation of documentary and art: documentary film and the documentary photograph or photographic sequence were once more like books and pages: singular items forced to unfurl in a particular and fixed sequence. Now, usually in digital form, laden with metadata, subject to multiple searches and forms of indexing, and copied with abandon, they become part of a remarkable digital environment—and perhaps, at least ideally, a commons—of which art is increasingly a part. This may, as Rancière suggests, mean an end to documentary as a distinct entity and tradition, but it is also an end to its long marginalisation and condemnation as a simplistic and lower mode of representation.