

# THE ACTION OF SEEING



The question of the nature of the documentary invites us to scrutinize the border between artwork and evidence, stressing the instability of the documentary's truth claim and the guilty accomplice of the camera.

words by TINA DICARLO & KHADIJA CARROLL LA

Renzo Martens, *Episode 3*, video still, 2008  
Courtesy: the artist; Galerie Fons Welters, Amsterdam;  
Wilkinson Gallery, London  
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Six years ago, curator Jeff Kipnis observed that the documentary was a missed opportunity that garnered little attention within the art world. Today discussions and presentations of the documentary, either taken up directly or comprising a dominant genre within an exhibition, are everywhere: the "Berlin Documentary Forum 1: New Practices across Disciplines" opened in early June, to be quickly followed by the Berlin and Bucharest Biennales, respectively "what is waiting out there" and "Handlung. On Producing Possibilities." At the same time, Allan Sekula is exhibiting *Polonia and Other Fables* in Budapest until this September, and "The Storyteller," an exhibition curated by Claire Gilman and Margaret Sundell, will open this fall at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, after having toured to Salinas, Kansas, New York and Toronto. The exhibition features, among others, Jeremy Deller, Emanuel Licha, Omer Fast and Hito Stereyl (who in 2008 co-published, together with Maria Lind, the prescient *The Greenroom*, an anthology of essays that considers how the documentary has evolved over the past two decades). This fall, Allan Sekula will exhibit *Polonia and Other Fables* in Budapest and Hito Steyerl's *The Green Room*, which documents how the documentary has evolved over the past two decades, will be published by Sternberg Press. What these exhibitions and projects evidence, and what the publications no doubt argue, is that the documentary's proclivity to be perceived as classic reportage—an immediate and accurate view in the heat of battle—and the myths embedded therein have been rigorously re-thought and re-framed over the past twenty years.



Marie Voignier  
*Hearing the Shape of a Drum*, video still, 2010  
Courtesy: the artist and Gallerie Marcelle Alix, Paris  
© Marie Voignier

Despite such cogent rethinking, the documentary's proliferation comes with a certain looseness of tongue, and even looser, more complex affiliations: as a recording, it is (mis)taken as witness and testimony, assumed to act as evidence. Such terms, generally attached to legal and scientific discourses, conflate the documentary with the document and documenting, confounding the artwork, which records and reveals, with evidence. But are they the same? Is the documentary, as an artistic form, evidence? If such connotations were perhaps implied at the Documentary Forum, they were pervasive and overt in the recent Berlin Biennale.

The Documentary Forum, an initiative of artistic director Hila Peleg, explored the documentary's historical and contemporary form, while re-thinking the documentary format of the exhibition itself. A six-day program at Berlin's Haus der Kulturen der Welt presented a curated program of talks, discussions, screenings, performances and installations grouped into six different themes: Rules of Evidence; Missing Image; Catastrophe; Authorship, Authority, and Authenticity; Documentary Moments; and Blind Spots. The program featured a wish list of contemporary practitioners, scholars, cultural theorists and historians: Catherine





This page:  
Allan Sekula  
"Kiss me I'm Polish", September 2007

Next page:  
Ladies Auxillary Polish Army Veterans of  
World War II, Polish Constitution Day parade,  
Chicago, 3 May 2008

All the images from the series  
"Polonia and other Fables," 2007-09  
All the images courtesy:  
the artist and Galerie Michel Rein, Paris

David, who gave the keynote address, Eyal Sivan, Ariella Azoulay, Okwui Enwezor, Tony Cokes, Walid Sadek, Thomas Keenan, Chris Marker, Steyerl, and Fast, to name but a few.

The forum was impressively comprehensive in its exploration—de-bunking, parodying, involuting, re-framing and self-consciously exposing the complex facets of documentary practice, the instability of the truth claim, the guilty accomplice of the camera and the missing frame, and the image as a co-constituted construction, both produced and productive of certain truths. Of particular note was the "Rules of Evidence" section, an installation of works and a panel discussion of artists organized by Enwezor, the objective of which was to put routines of the visual in remand in exchange for other strategies.

Alternatively, "what is waiting out there," the 6th Berlin Biennale thrust the extreme realism of the external world to the fore, relying on the documentary form to reinforce its thesis. Documentary video and photography occupied a large percentage of the Biennale, and included works by Mark Boulos, Renzo Martens, Armando Lulaj, Minerva Cuevas, Olga Chernysheva, Mohamed Bourouissa, Michael Schmidt, Nir Evron, Ferhat Özgür, Phil Collins, George Kuchar, Margaret Salmon, John Smith, Marie Voignier, Anna Witt, Bernard Bazile, Avi Mograbi and Ruti Sela & Maayan Amir, which represented abuses of power and violence everywhere from Africa to Gaza, and Mexico to Albania. Documentary reportage was mistrusted and parodied by artists such as Marie Voignier, whose video of the media frenzy around Josef Fritzl's trial—which was closed to the cameras—shows how the news constructs a report of the story.

As a whole, the array of documents stands as evidence of the artists as non-complicit witnesses to inhumane treatment, however this position of resistance acted out for the camera is not transferred to the art audience. Rather, in a case like Voignier's contribution, the documentary becomes a self-referential meta-medium for the artist's practice. It is thus perhaps pertinent that in conversation, the documentarian Mark Boulos complained about what he perceives to be an a-historical and naïve appropriation of his medium by the contemporary art scene. We watch, for example, children suffering from malnutrition in the making of world-vision-style television campaigns in Renzo Martens's 88-minute *Episode 3: Enjoy Poverty* (2009) as inept, almost complicit bystanders.

Under these auspices, even within such responsible and artistically strong programs as Enwezor's, agency is thought to be implicit in the documentary's ability to reveal and make known. Although the artist may expose, even undermine the medium itself to reveal the documentary's limitations, implicit in these works is what Thomas Keenan calls the "Mobilization of Shame": the assumption that to see is to witness, and if one witnesses, then the documentary—given its ability to make known, expose and to appeal to one's reason—will shame one into acting. Keenan's point is a strong one, compelling us to examine what is generally conflated, collapsed and perhaps lazily rolled into the term "documentary": that to evidence, to witness, to document, to testify—what Renzo Martens calls an "Action Art Project" or perhaps what Felix Vogel terms "Producing Possibilities"—all allude to different nuances of the medium and different levels of agency, and are therefore engaged in some-



what different projects. Indeed, one may need to document evidence, evidence may appear in the form of a document, or the document might record information that is evidentiary—but the three possibilities are not necessarily equivalent, nor do they possess the same forms of agency. Possibility isn't necessarily productive. Activism isn't necessarily agent, nor is the artwork. And perhaps the artwork, eager as they are to be agent or politically engaged, are still and rightly so, relics of a Kantian discourse in which action lies in knowledge and reason.

Evidence, as Keenan argues, "is what we see, what is exposed or obvious to the eye... It exists against the backdrop of a contagion and proliferation in the field of the visible and evidential and takes us on toward the techniques and regimes of vision."<sup>1</sup> Contrary to what was implied in Enzewor's panel, evidence is engaged in rulings—as opposed to rules of the game, those applicable and capable of being suspended in the playing field. It makes legible and is legislatively inscribed, actively involved in the production of space through a forum



outside of art's own autonomous one, be it the legal court or an impromptu gathering on the banks of the Amazon.

Recently, Eyal Weizman, along with several peers at Goldsmiths, including Lawrence Abu Hamdan, Aysha Hameed, Charles Heller, Emanuel Licha and Paulo Tavares, has been exploring what he terms "forensics architecture." Forensics, from the Latin source meaning "before the forum," refers to the practice and skill of presenting evidence before a gathering of citizens in a forum such as a court. As Weizman writes in a recent studio brief, "[F]orensics assumes that events, as complex and multivalent as they might be, are registered within the material properties of objects-bodies-spaces. On the basis of artifacts, bodies, traces, medical samples, foot-finger printings, DNA samples or spatial products—and to the extent that they have been accepted as evidence—conclusions are made and decisions, taken." Things—or in this case, documents—become the embodiment of events, and experts—in space, science, law and medicine—are assigned the task of harvesting from them

evidence, which is considered more objective than the testimony of the witness or living subject. In this way, Weizman argues, "Forensics implies a complex process of translation in which objects/things become the agents of controversy in dispute. Its 'material rhetoric' presents the substratum around which a public forum is formed, but also creates a forum itself, for what counts as the genuine evidence of an event is, in fact, the product of conflicts and negotiations over the very possibility of determining whether an object is what it purports to be, and what can thus be claimed in its name."

Weizman's interest in evidence is engaged in the very "agency of things": the rubble in Gaza that attests to human rights violation; the model of the wall between Israel and the Palestinian West Bank that, documented as a spatial apparatus, can be "tried" in a court of law. No doubt Weizman considers the court a sort of laboratory; nevertheless, he and his crew recently presented their evidence within the forum of the United Nations itself, a body by-and-large dedicated to recording and registering—i.e., documenting—to which, paradoxically, often no one is listening.

In his "Fake as Evidence," an 8-minute presentation delivered within the 14th session of the United Nations Council on Human Rights in Geneva on 11 June 2010, Emanuel Licha proposed that "the work of journalist is often associated with a work of investigating, and what is being brought back from those investigations presented as evidences." He questioned "the viewer's resulting assumption to be in an immediate relation to reality," through historical examples of various forms of fabrication of evidence: Prince Potemkin's hollow facades to impress Empress Catherine II in 1787; the Theresienstadt concentration camp, installed by the Nazis in then Czechoslovakia, for the visit of the International Red Cross in June 1944; Colin Powell's infamous speech to the UN Security Council in February 2003 in which "fabricated" evidence of voice recordings, and satellite and computer images were used to initiate the war on Iraq; and the Fort Irwin National Training Center in Northern California, where mock Iraqi villages are built for the purposes of training US soldiers, a situation Licha invokes in his most recent work *Mirages* (2010). Recently on view at the Montreal SBC Gallery of Contemporary Art, Licha's two-channel video installation re-stages Fort Irwin as a rehearsal space, as much for soldiers as it is for journalists. The installation re-creates Fort Irwin's theater of operations via a viewing platform that contains a window of 16:9 cinematic proportions, which overlooks the camp, and a curtain-less "hotel room" window with the 3:4 aspect ratio of a television screen, overlooking what is the most picturesque element on site: the Mosque. At Fort Irwin, everything is organized, meant to be watched, documented, evidenced.

Indeed Licha has a point here, and it goes beyond his art installation, beyond the documentary forum, to the forum of the UN. His point is not only to reveal embedded journalism but to expose the very actions and implications of some of its most illegal aspects and the spatial paradoxes thereof, paradoxes implicit in zones of conflict that someone like Weizman—who by presenting the rubble of buildings itself as evidence—work to expose in court. As evidence, these documents can be contested; they have two faces. Within the true can lie the lie; within the legal, the illegal; within evidence, the fake. Weizman and his colleagues take this notion further, from an art that reveals to an architecture that has agency, from the artistic forum to the forum of the international court, in the hopes that there, evidence will do more than make known and appeal to reason. Rather, it will become disputed, capable of producing different spaces of conflict and negotiations. ♦



FOOTNOTES

1. Tom Keenan, as quoted in Eyal Weizman, John Palmesino, and Paulo Tavares, "Forensics Architecture," Centre for Research Architecture, Goldsmiths, London, Studio Seminar Brief, 2009-10.

AUTHORS

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This page:  
Mark Boulos  
*All That Is Solid Melts into Air*,  
video stills, 2008  
Courtesy: the artist © the artist

Next page, from top:  
Eyal Sivan  
*Jaffa, The Orange's Clockwork*,  
archival material, 2009  
Emanuel Licha  
*Mirages*, video still, 2010  
Courtesy: the artist