

introduction
reconsidering
the
documentary
and
contemporary
art
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The double bind is strong: on the one hand documentary images are more powerful than ever. On the other hand, we have less and less trust in documentary representations. This is the case at a time when documentary visual material is a part of contemporary affective economies, supporting everything from humanitarian aid to a sustained politics of fear.⁰¹ Without it something like globalized media would look entirely different, and the course of events in, for example, world politics would be completely different. Documentary media images also pervade the most intimate of spheres through mobile phones, youtube, and other interfaces; they have not only entered collective imagination but have also profoundly transformed it.

In this light, it should come as no surprise that documentary practices have made up one of the most significant tendencies within art during the last two decades. Traditional documentary photography and film have been reinvented and reinvigorated by merging with traditions such as video, performance, and conceptual art. Recent documentary works attest to a new diversity and complexity of forms, ranging from conceptual mockumentaries to reflexive photo essays via split-screen slide shows, found footage video reportages, reenacted printed matter, and archaeological collages. Its field of reference ranges from traditional documentary art forms and conventional reportage to Third Cinema, essay and avant-garde film, and from reality TV to performance and interventionist art. Although such innovative documentary art forms abound, and a large number of exhibitions and other projects dealing with documentary practices and contemporary art have been organized in various parts of the world, the discussion of the phenomenon is

01 See Hito Steyerl, "Die dokumentarische Unschärferelation," in *Die Farbe der Wahrheit* (Vienna: Turia und Kant, 2008), 13.
02 A few selected examples include: "Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art," International Center of Photography, New York 2008; "No More Reality," BELEF, Belgrade 2006; "Slowly Learning to Survive the Desire to Simplify: A Symposium on Critical Documents," Iaspis, Stockholm 2006; "The Need to Document," various locations, 2005; "After the Fact," Martin-Gropius Bau, Berlin 2005; "Experiments with Truth," The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia 2004-05; "True Stories," Witte de With, Rotterdam, January-March 2003; "Ficcions documentales," Fundació "la Caixa", Barcelona 2003; "It's Hard to Touch the Real," Kunstverein München 2002-04; After the News-Post-Media Documentary Practices at the CCCB in Barcelona, 2003. This list represents merely a sample from a much larger pool of shows, which have addressed documentary modes in art since 2000.

still mostly confined to scattered texts in various catalogues and journals.⁰² This anthology seeks to overcome this dispersion and offer new perspectives on this crucial theme.

Document vs. Art?

Historically, the documentary is a form that emerges in a state of crisis: it is no coincidence that many documentary art works remind us of quests for suitable forms and provide methods for the discussion of social content. They often aim to mirror the effects of past or recent political and economic upheaval. Their inclusion into the art field historically marks a moment of social and political crisis, as was the case with the early years of Soviet communism with its debates about productivism and factography, the Great Depression of the 1930s in the US and reformist documentary photography, anti-colonial movements and the birth of the film essay, the counter-hegemonial movements of the 1960s and '70s, and nouvelle vague documentary as well as conceptualist documentation.

Yet the inclusion of documentary modes in the art field has also always been strongly contested. In the wake of modernist art history, documentary practices have traditionally been understood as the opposite of art, its alter ego.⁰³ This reading also affects contemporary articulations of the documentary, where its status as art remains as disputed as ever.

An unlikely precursor of modernist art historian Clement Greenberg's well-known contempt for the documentary is Walter Benjamin, who in a little noted passage of "Einbahnstraße" (One-way street), juxtaposes art and document as two oppositions.⁰⁴ Benjamin, for all his usual sophistication, goes so far as to describe the document as the preoccupation of "primitive man." He probably wrote this in ignorance of the Soviet discussions about documentary practices, which around 1925—the year Benjamin wrote these

03 One of these recent debates around the inclusion of documentary into documenta 11 is traced in detail in Okwui Enwezor's text.

04 Walter Benjamin: "13 Theses against Snobs," in *Selected Writings, Vol. 1* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 459. This hint is owed to Sophie Hamacher, who analyzed Benjamin's text in detail in an unpublished masters thesis at the Whitney Independent Study Program: "Art, Document, Witness," 2004.

aphorisms—displayed a fascinating degree of sophistication. Throughout the 1920s, heated debates about the documentary and its transformation of art and reality occurred in the circles of the Soviet avant-garde, whose members discussed the construction of facticity and the politics of perception with a depth of insight that contemporary debates are struggling to achieve.⁰⁵ Benjamin's text "The Author as Producer,"⁰⁶ written in 1934, captures some of these debates and presents a much more articulate view of the documentary and its relations of production. It also conveys a glimpse of the documentary's fraught relationship with the state apparatus. Only in the period between both world wars does the notion of documentary transcend local contexts; it coalesces into a set of practices and develops a certain self-awareness.⁰⁷

Since then, the repeated appearance of documentary forms within the art field (as well as its subsequent marginalization in times of conservative rollback) is accompanied by disagreements about its status as art. Its alleged non-artistic nature was even strategically exploited by some early conceptualists in order to distance themselves from worn-out aesthetic standards.⁰⁸ In this era, documentary practices have become an updated example of various primitivisms constructed from within the art field which serve to renew it, by tapping into its self-imagined "Other."⁰⁹ From the late 1960s until today, the incursion of documentary modes into performance and conceptual art has also marked the period during which we have witnessed the impact of mass media and the information age on the art field, and documentary practices negotiate an unstable relationship between the two. Information has become an important concern of critical art practices: it is understood as a form of critique and a site of intervention.¹⁰ Artists

05 For an overview of some of these debates see *October* 118, "Soviet Factography—A Special Issue" (Fall 2006).

06 Walter Benjamin: "The Author as Producer," in *New Left Review* 1/62 (July/August 1970).

07 See Olivier Lugon, pages 28–37 in this volume.

08 See Lucy Soutter, "The Photographic Idea: Reconsidering Conceptual Photography," in *Afterimage* (March–April 1999).

09 See John Roberts, "Photography, Iconophobia and the Ruins of Conceptual Art," in *The Impossible Document: Photography and Conceptual Art in Britain 1966–1976*, ed. John Roberts (London: Camerawork, 1997), 7–46.

10 See Sabeth Buchmann, "Under the Sign of Labor," in *Art after Conceptual Art*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Sabeth Buchmann (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006), 179–196.

working in the wake of representational critique, feminist theory, and psychoanalytic film theory later challenged the idea of information as critique: starting in the 1970s and especially from the 1990s onwards, postconceptualist and essayistic documentary art practices tended to instead emphasize the critique of information and offer skeptical and subversive readings of documentary jargons of authenticity.

The era of neoliberal globalization after 1989 with its enormous upheavals has spawned its own range of documentary modes, which despite their huge formal differences attest to a shared desire to “touch the real”¹¹ and to create arenas of debate within an increasingly privatized and fragmented global environment.¹²

The recent fragmentation of the social also impacts the site of documentary production itself. The massive transformations within the multiple modes of the documentary are intrinsically connected to the ambivalent transitions of globalization.¹³ Due to the increasing privatization of media and cuts in public funding, experimental documentary production has again been increasingly pushed into the art field.¹⁴ The art field has become a laboratory for the development of new documentary expressions. According to Bill Nichols, this is a function it has held since the inception of documentary film: the formal experiments of the artistic avant-gardes set the standards for representation of reality by mass media.¹⁵

Historically, the overlap between documentary practices and the art field has produced heated debate. As Olivier Lugon cogently remarks in his introductory text “‘Documentary’: Authority and Ambiguities,”¹⁶ historical documentary modes were primarily forged within the art field, but repeatedly denied any part in it. They were perceived as being “beyond art, yet very much a part of it.”¹⁷

11 “It’s hard to touch the real” is a quote by documentary filmmaker Johan van der Keuken. It was also used by the Kunstverein München for a two year-long screening series, two festivals and an archive which traveled to a number of venues in Europe, including Kunstverein Graz, 2006.

12 See Jan Erik Lundström, “After the Fact,” in *After the Fact*, catalogue, 1st Berlin Photography Festival, 2005, 11.

13 See Okwui Enwezor, pages 62–102 in this volume.

14 See Hito Steyerl, pages 224–231 in this volume.

15 See Stefan Jonsson, pages 166–186 in this volume.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

This paradox leads to the successive inclusion and exclusion of documentary forms from the field of art and opens up a zone of conflict in which different ideas of art (and its relation to life) clash and transform each other. This conflict reflects the tension between the two different tendencies inherent in documentary creation: the desire to both let the subject express itself without much interference and yet on the aesthetic level to turn it into something unique. But this tension also creates the drive of a documentary quest for ever more authentic representations of the real.

True Life

Notions of the real or true life have haunted documentary expression since its early days. In the early 1920s, Dziga Vertov triumphantly exclaimed: “Long live life, as it is!”¹⁸ While this slogan seems to be underlining the importance of the real and authentic life, it also paradoxically introduces doubts about its nature. Why does Vertov have to reassure us this life is really “as it is”? Vertov’s exclamation, as assertive as it sounds, also informs us about the suspicion that haunts the notion of real life. Could there be another life as well, one which is essentially alienated, corrupted, and treacherous? Or does Vertov’s slogan rather embody what Alain Badiou called the “passion of the real”¹⁹ during the 20th century: a violent desire to unmask the truth and to cleanse reality from all appearances? As Badiou has shown, this desire is intrinsically paranoid: it realizes itself as a politics of suspicion. The passion for the real calls for a renewed purge of reality from all things deemed inauthentic, a desire which spills over into reality and catalyses purges and a politics of “cleansing.” The myth of documentary authenticity is thus ambivalent; while, on the one hand, it testifies to a certain fidelity to the material world, it also projects profound anxieties about its own status onto the Other. Modernity, whose offspring is documentary expression, appears Janus-faced in the prism of its

18 For an extended discussion about Vertov and the documentary’s relation to life, see Hito Steyerl “Kunst oder Leben,” in *Die Farbe der Wahrheit* (Vienna: Turia und Kant, 2008), 93–100.

19 Alain Badiou, *The Century* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007).

documentary reflection: if documentary works are historically imbued with the spirit of progress, enlightenment, and education, they not only record but sometimes also actively contribute to the catastrophic failure in realizing those ideals.

The crisis of modernity also impacts on the documentary's traditional truth claims. While the notion of a document is historically tied to ideas of certitude and confirmation and is primarily used in the legal realm, this certitude has all but vanished from contemporary consciousness. The experiences of the 20th century, its large-scale enterprises of propaganda and disinformation, have created an attitude, which could be called habitual distrust as well as advanced media literacy. Documentary modes still appeal to institutional modes of power/knowledge and cite their authority, but the effect is rather a perpetual doubt; a blurred and agitated documentary uncertainty, which paradoxically is extremely pertinent as an image of our times.²⁰ It is precisely the failure of the documentary to fulfill its pretense to certainty, which ultimately does justice to an intransparent and dubious contemporary reality.²¹ The same lack of certainty applies to theoretical definitions of the "documentary."²² At the same time, this vagueness has actually contributed to the success and to the dissemination of documentary practices. Instead of denying this uncertainty, one should instead acknowledge its productive effects.²³ Perhaps this uncertainty has also made documentary practices one of the most innovative forms of contemporary art. The documentary's ambivalent nature, hovering between art and non-art, has contributed to creating new zones of entanglement between the aesthetic and the ethic, between artifice and authenticity, between fiction and fact, between documentary power and documentary potential, and between art and its social, political, and economic conditions.²⁴

20 See Hito Steyerl, "Die dokumentarische Unschärferelation," in *Die Farbe der Wahrheit* (Vienna: Turia und Kant, 2008), 15.

21 Ibid.

22 See Lugon, page 29 in this volume.

23 Ibid.

24 See Okwui Enwezor, pages 62-102 in this volume.

Communicating Vessels

This publication, containing eleven essays written between 2003 and 2008, engages with the contested field of desires and anxieties to touch the real; it sits in the middle of needs to investigate the documentary's role in the construction of our present. Having been published in such diverse contexts as an art magazine from Holland, an online periodical and a scholarly journal from New Zealand among other places, this collection of texts forms the most extensive anthology on contemporary art and documentary practices to date. The authors are equally diverse in their professional backgrounds, which include writing and art production, curating, art history teaching, literary critique, editing daily newspapers and mainstream art magazines, or running a well-known documentary film festival. This is yet another sign of how concerns about documentary practices not only permeate the world of contemporary art but are also intrinsically interdisciplinary.

The first three texts explore the various impasse of documentary representation and its conflictual relation to various definitions of art. In the first text of this volume, Olivier Lugon gives us a historical perspective on the connection between documentary practices and theories and the art field. While the meaning of "documentary" has shifted historically, the art field's reaction has also turned out to be unstable, torn as it was between rejection and embrace. But documentary practices are also filled with internal contradictions. The basic tension within documentary forms is the conflict between artifice and authenticity. On the one hand, documentary practices express the desire to get rid of the author or creator. On the other, this desire can create—as in the work of Walker Evans—an even stronger aesthetic impact, because the resulting images seem stripped from any formal affectation. This paradox cannot be reconciled; it defines the dynamic nature of documentary representation.

In Jean-Pierre Rehm's text, "The Plays of the Witnesses,"²⁵ the paradoxes of documentary representation are further explored.

25 See Jean-Pierre Rehm, pages 38-47 in this volume.

At its core are a bundle of permanent discrepancies: although the documentary often parades as a mere reflection of reality, it obeys and carefully executes coded narrative systems.²⁶ To simply view documentary forms as transparent rip-offs of reality means denying that they “only contain opacity and thickness and that they are in themselves objects of study, document among documents, link in a process of interpretation offered to the political freedom of the spectator.”²⁷ Quoting Michel Foucault, Rehm elucidates the function of documentary information: to identify, to report what is known and convenient, to report the past and the future in a desired present without consequence or consistency, in order to obtain a confirmation of all initial hypotheses. Conventional information is thus a process of subjection and coerced obedience. A documentary critique of this information could consist in the documentary production of reality rather than its mimetic or naturalistic reproduction: an entirely manufactured process, which blends fiction and documentary. Thus, documentary practices are characterized by risk, the risk of moving in-between and beyond the sterile opposition of simultaneously recording and making up reality.

A completely different approach is taken by Jörg Heiser, who explores the link between fact, truth, and fiction. His close reading of the work *Mandarin Ducks* by artists Jeroen de Rijke/Willem de Rooij poses the question of the documentary from the perspective of its supposed Other: fiction. According to Heiser, this piece points to the core of the documentary problem precisely because it is entirely fictional: it begs the question of truth. Heiser expresses his dissatisfaction with constructivist models of documentary truth. He grounds his debate in the ethic necessity to distinguish facts from fiction or to disentangle historical events from their revisionist distortion and describes Foucault’s often-cited model of a politics of truth as a tautology in which power and truth are simply equated with each other. By contrasting this model with Jürgen Habermas’

²⁶ See page 40 of the text.

²⁷ See pages 40-41 of the text.

pragmatic theory of truth reached by communication and consensus, he argues for a dialectical movement between both. By analyzing the different logics of enunciation in *Mandarin Ducks*, Heiser highlights each model’s failures but emphasizes that moments of truth still emerge between both. More generally, he explores the question of truth in the realm of art. Could we call it beauty, a quality produced by a sustained contradiction?

Global Documentary

The next section locates concerns about the documentary and art in the contemporary political and social context: the massive political and economic upheavals caused by the contradictory drifts of globalization. In his essay “Documentary/Vérité: Bio-Politics, Human Rights, and the Figure of ‘Truth’ in Contemporary Art,” Okwui Enwezor firmly anchors most of the traditional concerns about the relation of art and documentary in the present; he analyzes the contemporary condition of documentary forms within the aporias of globalization. Crafted as a response to the criticism of the documentary character of documenta 11, his text is a reflection on the general dimension of the documentary in a world characterized by two alternate endings of modernism: 1989 and 9/11.

According to Enwezor, documentary art works condense a contemporary political and social constellation characterized by the “unhomeliness” of globalization, migration, and mobility, as well as by the catastrophic consequences of these processes. This configuration gives rise to a new relation of ethics and aesthetics mediated by a specific articulation of the documentary, which Enwezor calls *vérité* (in contrast to the more conventional mode of “documentary”). The mode of *vérité* doesn’t confront the spectator with non-negotiable facts, as more conventional documentary does. Instead, it creates a possible space for an ethical encounter between the spectator and the other, a space in which truth is not an abstracted *mot d’ordre*, but instead, as Alain Badiou proposes, a truth process. As *vérité*, the documentary is not only mimetic but

also analytic. It is not truth, but the fidelity to truth, that the documentary ceaselessly constructs and deconstructs. This version of documentary, embodied by works from authors like Allan Sekula, Chantal Akerman, Walid Raad, or the Black Audio Film Collective, combines reflexivity with an ethical stance. It is also firmly located within the ethical necessities of the present: How do we look at the pain of the other without lapsing into voyeurism? Why do we still have to answer to his or her gaze? How do we imagine a global public sphere when there are no democratic institutions to back it? Enwezor insists on the importance of the term “human rights” to enable such communication and create a common ground within an unevenly globalizing world. However, as he notes, this term is also fraught with ambivalence.

This ambivalence is further explored in T. J. Demos’ essay “Life Full of Holes.” The failure of the promises of human rights necessitates a fundamental revision of the relation between politics and representation. It is no coincidence that the bearer of “human rights,” the refugee deprived of any political representation, came to metaphorically embody the vicissitudes of globalization. He or she is the one who inhabits the fissures and gaps between states and corporations, and is left to the precariousness of a deregulated global sphere unbound by any rule of law. But if this subject is not representable in terms of classical political representation, how does it figure in artistic representation?

Demos argues that the structural absence of bare life from official representation can nevertheless be captured by documentary expression. The uncertain status of its subject troubles the image and creates holes, blurs, and lacunae within the visual field. Documentary forms are thus suspended between being an instrument of power and surveillance—not only representing but even constituting bare life such as in the pictures from Abu Ghraib—and on the other hand undermining the same structures it serves to uphold. Taking Yto Barrada’s and Emily Jacir’s work as examples, Demos shows how the representation of bare life proceeds within the

ruptures, holes, and fissures within documentary representation. Absence is the only way to depict the realities of fragmented global spaces and to portray the fates of people who end up being swallowed by the chasms in between them. But paradoxically, dispersion and disfiguration can also free the subject from the confines of documentary representation, as in *Pursuit* by Steve McQueen, which challenges notions of the spectators’ bodily integrity and creates a space of uncertainty and indeterminacy open to experiment and becoming.

Vít Havránek points out a different consequence of the most recent effects of capitalist globalization on documentary preoccupations. For Havránek, recent documentary art practices in Eastern European countries during so-called “transition” represent a reaction to the total reorganization of reality after 1989. The ethical vacuum produced in this period bears the visual stamp of advertising. In contrast to this economically very potent yet vacuous form of the public, the documentary is always grounded in the social positions of its subject matter. Form and content cannot be separated from each other—an ethical relation between both is established. This relation is often probed in relation to the social and economic context of documentary production itself—the art field. In Hans Haacke’s or Andrea Fraser’s work, documents map out the relations of production within the art field or its institutions. The same can be said about works by Roman Ondák, Deimantas Narkevičius, and Pawel Althamer. At the same time, the historical space in some transitional countries has to be reappropriated because it has fallen prey to a widespread amnesia (or one might add, to privatization and new national imaginaries). Works such as IRWIN’s *East Art Map* reappropriate the space of writing art history, while others focus on the subjective aspect of writing history. The necessity to develop a documentary methodology, which more often than not incorporates other research methods, enables documentary forms to trespass not only into other disciplines but also to transcend a local perspective and to open up a space characterized by mobility and nomadism.

In Carles Guerra's essay "Negatives of Europe," questions of mobility are explored further. Using the example of media reports focusing on the cut-off of the old oil pipeline from Russia to Belarus in 2007, he encourages us to ask what happens behind the "trompe l'oeil" information that the media offers us. In order to examine this he argues that a "collective pedagogy" is necessary, a pedagogy in which information and opinion intermingle. The essayist works by Ursula Biemann and Angela Melitopoulos are quoted as prime examples of how artists might successfully deal with current conditions of globalization. In *The Black Sea Files* and *Corridor X* the artists investigate transport and communication infrastructure—both the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline and the highway route stretching from Greece through ex-Yugoslavia to Germany—through an intricate play of the visible and the invisible, the total and the partial. Not unlike montage in film, they are not documenting reality but rather organising complexity. According to Guerra, this approach can be seen in light of a general revival of interest in educational models in contemporary art, with work that moves comfortably between the academic department and the exhibition space. At the same time he understands it as a critique of photojournalism and its preference for single images and iconic power. Instead, this type of work allows for new cognitive possibilities and ways of managing radical plurality. And more importantly, these practices produce their own events—they do not have to wait for them to happen.

Media and the Archive

The relation between media and documentary art is the focus of the following section. The literary critic Stefan Jonsson discusses the glaring conformism of global mass media in contrast to the simultaneous politicization of contemporary art (including literature, film, and music) of the last decade and a half. He sees the two as communicating vessels. Art compensates for the blind spots of journalism, similar to the claims in the theoretical work of late

19th-century Marxists Karl Kautsky and Franz Mehring. They showed how the arts, during certain historical periods, channel information and experiences, which have no other place in the public debate. In contemporary society, globalized media is the main public arena, and we have to ask what is allowed there. What is considered newsworthy? According to Jonsson, parochial news is coded as universally applicable to humankind but only as long as they follow "a universal equivalent." This universal equivalent, or leveler, is a well-known figure: it is based on experiences of Western men, of the owning classes, and it excludes other local characteristics. The universal equivalent is furthermore the key component of cultural globalization.

Today both art and journalism are part of the historical process called "globalization of culture," in which Jonsson identifies three tendencies: the triumph of American mass culture, the integration of Western high culture in lifestyles beyond the West, and the resistance of certain local traditions. Politics, in the sense of mirroring opinions and following the rituals of day-to-day political affairs, is nowadays catered to by journalism. At the same time "the political," meaning the underlying principles and consequences of political and economic policies—and the ways people can represent themselves and their interest in a public sphere—are explored by art. This leads to a situation where pluritopic interpretations can now be found almost exclusively in the "public sphere of inbetweenness" produced by aesthetics and cultural theory rather than in journalism. This public sphere of inbetweenness is, in Jonsson's understanding, a fourth tendency, which deals with the conflictual relationships between the commercialized mass culture, standardized elite culture, and local resistance. At the core of its pluritopic interpretations lies a much-needed ambition to challenge worn-out representational modes.

In his essay Jan Verwoert takes a closer look at the logic of the archive, particularly within the context of art. Moving from the "sublime archive" in the work of Christian Boltanski and Hanne Darboven,

in which history is encountered in its totality, to the de-institutionalized and subjective archive in the work of Renée Green, he asks how a record becomes a document. The “respectless” contact, which is fostered between the work and the viewer in Green’s *Import/Export Funk Office*, for example, is according to Verwoert also present in the essayistic installations of Dorit Margreiter. As with Adorno’s definition of the literary essay, the essayist installation privileges associatively arranged statements, filtering them through subjective experience rather than promoting linear progress and rational arguments. This spatio-temporal experience can also take place in a video such as Gitte Villesen’s *Willy as DJ*, where the artist and her collaborator perform in front of the camera in relation to available material. Using the filmic work of Deimantas Narkevičius as an example, he suggests that cinematic montage can create gaps in the archive, which allow for refined attempts at making research available. Verwoert concludes by arguing, as is the case with a number of the other authors here, that documentary practices in contemporary art are neither tied to a genre nor to a medium. They are both expanding and diversifying. And yet, there is a common denominator to the multiplicity of practices: a critical sensibility, which acknowledges the urgency to represent specific realities at the same time as it confesses to an awareness of the ideologies and apparatuses governing them.

Documentary Power and Potential

How does documentary theory align itself with contemporary theories of information capitalism and the cultural industries? How is the documentary embedded in its social conditions, and how can it work on transforming them? The last two texts address urgent questions concerning the material conditions of the documentary. In his analysis of the expression of contemporary protest movements, Maurizio Lazzarato breaks with the age-old paradigm of representation—whether in politics or artistic modes of expression. Referring to a cultural condition in which corporations and their advertisements

produce a world in which objects and subjects exist, where consumption means belonging to a world, he claims that the way signs, images, and statements function in contemporary economies instead contribute to the emergence of the possible as well as to its realization. A documentary image therefore becomes a catalyst for a different reality instead of being its representation. He is inspired by events in Seattle and collective demonstrations elsewhere, and to him the slogan of the protesters—“a different world is possible”—signifies entry to a different intellectual atmosphere, with different conceptual constellations. To replace the outdated subject-work relationship, which is the basis of a representational paradigm, he proposes the event-multiplicity bind. One advantage is that the event is an encounter with two aspects: soul and body. It is both intellectual-emotional and performed, literally. As opposed to the classical representational paradigm this does not reflect backwards but projects ahead and creates “possible worlds.”

By addressing the contemporary conditions of production within documentary practice, Hito Steyerl seeks to establish a political perspective on the documentary that is not only constituted by concerns with representation but also by addressing shared practice. In her view, experimental contemporary documentary practice not only serves to create works, but also links and connections between dispersed digital workers. The space of contemporary experimental documentary production is peopled by freelancers and embedded into global databases, p2p networks, and other file sharing platforms. This opens up reflections on the conditions of digital production as well as on the question of copyright and intellectual property. But the volatile networks of experimental documentary producers could also become new nodes of a public sphere, which has emancipated itself from the control of both nation and capital.

In the environment of digital capitalism (and very often also national fragmentation and “ethnic” strife), the documentary relation to reality shifts as well. As archives becomes fluid and more and

more information is available online, conflicts about the intellectual property of documentary images and sounds increase. The documentary becomes further implicated in processes of Othering and social disintegration. But contemporary documentary production has to face these conditions. They do not represent reality. They are the reality.

The Greenroom Project

This publication is part of “The Greenroom: Reconsidering the Documentary and Contemporary Art,” a long-term research project on “the documentary.” The aim of the research project is to investigate and contextualise these contemporary documentary practices within current cultural production and to explore their role within mainstream media and activism. It also aims at situating documentary practices in contemporary art, in relation to the history of film, documentary photography and television as well as to video art. The research project is a collaboration between the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, and Hito Steyerl. A reference group, consisting of Petra Bauer, Matthew Buckingham, Carles Guerra, Walid Raad, and Hito Steyerl has been invited to contribute to the research project in various ways. The research project will run for approximately three years, having started in March 2008. Its first public event, the exhibition “The Greenroom: Reconsidering the Documentary and Contemporary Art (Part I),” will take place from September 27, 2008–February 1, 2009 at the Hessel Museum at CCS Bard. With all its components the research project is meant to be a “greenroom for documentary practices,” comparable to greenrooms at television stations. There, staff and guests meet before and after broadcasting and engage in discussions, which tend to be different from those on stage. Greenrooms are made to relax protocols and give space to unexpected exchanges, and yet their proximity to the limelight provides a sense of concentration and rigour. “The Greenroom: Reconsidering the Documentary and Contemporary Art (Part II)” is scheduled for Fall 2010.