

Introduction: *The Documentary Attitude* by Erika Balsom, Hila Peleg
In *Documentary Across Disciplines* Edited by Erika Balsom and Hila Peleg

Hito Steyerl has recently written that “the only thing we can say for sure about the documentary mode in our times is that we always already doubt if it is true.” For her, this uncertainty “is not some shameful lack, which has to be hidden, but instead constitutes the core quality of contemporary documentary modes as such.”¹

[...] In 1998, Lucien Castaing-Taylor wrote of the “fragile future of documentary [...] in this age of spectacle and simulation,” citing the need for a reinvigoration and revitalization of this field of practice.² Documentary was under a double threat: first, from the spurious reality-effects of mass media, which were stronger than ever, and second, from theoretical tendencies that argued for the diminished importance of the referential dimension of the image. The methodological approaches of poststructuralist postmodernism, indebted as they were to Saussurean semiotics, left little space for a consideration of the referent and frequently subjected images to reductive linguistic models of interpretation, understanding them as conventional signs rather than as traces of reality. For Jean Baudrillard in particular, questions of the real and the referent were hopelessly anachronistic in an age of simulated reality-effects. Within such a climate, documentary was something of a bad object, presumed to be inextricable from naïve and ideological notions of immediacy, transparency, and authenticity. One response to the acknowledgement that all images are the product of codes and conventions is to deem the documentary image and the fictional image interchangeable on the grounds that they are equally constructed. While tempting, to take up such a position is to woefully relinquish the unique demands that documentary images place on their viewers. It was against this doxa that Serge Daney argued in his 1992 text “The Tracking Shot in Kapo”:

There always comes a moment when you have to pay your debt to the cash-box of sincere belief and dare to believe in what you see. [...] There has to be some risk and some virtue, that is, some value, in the act of showing something to someone who is capable of seeing it. Learning how to “read” the visual and “decode” messages would be useless if there wasn’t still the minimal, but deep-seated, conviction that seeing is superior to not seeing, and that what isn’t seen “in time” will never really be seen.³

Today, though spectacle and simulation continue unabated, it does seem that Daney’s dare has been taken up: documentary’s future no longer appears fragile at all following a shift in sensibility on the part of those who seek to engage in a sphere of representation beyond – and indeed, in opposition to – mass media. Twenty-first-century art, film, and theory bear witness to a heightened desire to dare to believe in those images that demand it. [...] The new century has seen a concerted move beyond the textualist model of the image and the precession of simulacra, often out of ethical and political motivation. In place of postmodernism’s delight in the rubble of signifiers, today one senses a renewed interest in thinking the relationship between reality and aesthetic form. There is a palpable need to attend to actuality and interrogate the processes by which we transform lived experience into meaning through representational practices while, at the same time, never relinquishing the necessary critique of objectivity and transparency.

In contemporary art and cinema, this interest in documentary came in the wake of trenchant critiques of Eurocentrism and the concomitant embrace of postcolonialist methodologies of

1 Hito Steyerl, “Documentary Uncertainty,” *Re-visiones*, vol.1, (2001), <http://re-visiones.net/spip.php?article37>.

2 Lucien Castaing-Taylor, “Introduction,” David MacDougall, *Transcultural Cinema*, ed. Lucien Castaing-Taylor. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998, p. 3.

3 Serge Daney, “The Tracking Shot in Kapo,” *Postcards from the Cinema*, trans. Paul Grant. Oxford: Berg, 2007, p. 31. Emphasis in original.

recovery and revision. Artists turned away from the materialist interrogation of the medium, away from the “forest of signs,” and toward the world. Working across media, but particularly in photography and the moving image, they began to take up increasingly global perspectives on the precariousness of human and non-human life and to engage in non-traditional forms of historiography. Whereas many artists’ moving image practices of the 1990s were concerned with the image-repertoire of classical Hollywood cinema, this gradually gave way to heightened interest in the invention of hybrid docufiction forms and to the adoption of essayistic, ethnographic, archival, and observational strategies that extend the traditions of documentary cinema in a new institutional context and an expanded field of aesthetic possibilities. Figures long associated with this tradition, such as Harun Farocki and Chris Marker, began to increasingly move into the gallery, while a series of major exhibitions and film festivals brought the spheres of art and documentary into a new coalition.⁴ With careful attention to the specificity of located experience, the fields of film and art have recently been replete with practices that continue and contest cinema’s long documentary tradition in light of today’s social, geopolitical, and technological conditions.

[...] Too often, recent discussions posit a supposed age of “conventional” cinematic documentary – beset by an unreconstructed belief in objectivity – and use it as a straw man against which the creativity and reflexivity of contemporary artistic practices may be favorably compared, thus neglecting to consider the extent to which the documentary tradition has always been one of uncertainty, contamination, and contestation. Documentary didn’t need artists to teach it creativity and reflexivity, yet its predominance in contemporary art is undeniable and demands examination. By revisiting an expansive documentary tradition and serving as a venue for new work, the Berlin Documentary Forum offered a corrective to this historical myopia and diffused the claims of novelty that sometimes accompany documentary in an art context, while also providing an opportunity to illuminate the specificity of the present. This anthology takes up this methodology, with contributions that discuss material spanning from the immediate postwar period to today, some situated very close to the artistic and cinematic contexts and others far outside it.

Rather than taking for granted how one might define “documentary” or attempting to legislate what would constitute correct or incorrect deployments of this slippery term, the program of the Berlin Documentary Forum critically engaged with a diverse array of practices spanning the domains of film, photography, contemporary art, anthropology, performance, architecture, cultural history, and theory. Though these contributions were varied in discipline, strategy, and medium, what united them was a shared investment in orchestrating urgent encounters with actuality and finding in this undertaking a generative and meaningful resource for cultural production. This book follows the Berlin Documentary Forum in this regard as well, as it looks to documentary not as a category or genre – not as a label that one might bestow on one particular practice and refuse another – but as a critical method. Above all, documentary emerges as an attitude – a way of doing, engaging, and creating that accords primacy to the multiple and mutable realities of our world.

4 documenta 10 (1997), curated by Catherine David, might be taken as the inaugurator of a series of interventions that together constitute a “documentary turn” in contemporary art and cinema. A partial listing of key moments in this “turn” includes but is not limited to: documenta 11 (2002), curated by Okwui Enwezor; the cph:dox film festival (2003–) in Copenhagen; the fidmarseille film festival under the direction of Jean-Pierre Rehm (2002–); the True/False Film Festival in Columbus, Missouri (2003–); Experiments with Truth (2004), curated by Mark Nash at Fabric Museum and Workshop, Philadelphia; *The Way of the Termite: The Essay in Cinema, 1909–2004* (2007), programmed by Jean-Pierre Gorin at the Austrian Film Museum, Vienna; *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art* (2008), curated by Okwui Enwezor at the International Center of Photography, New York; *The Greenroom: Reconsidering the Documentary and Contemporary Art*, curated by Maria Lind at the Hessel Museum of Art, Bard College, Annanale-on-Hudson, New York, as well as its accompanying research group (2008); the *Art of the Real* showcase at the Film Society of Lincoln Center, New York (2014–), programmed by Dennis Lim and Rachael Rakes; and of, course, the three editions of Berlin Documentary Forum (2010–14) curated by Hila Peleg at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, out of which this book arises.