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The Documentary between Art and Activism. Angela Melitopoulos

According to Hila Peleg's apt formulation the documentary "is characterized – and differentiated from other forms of artistic and intellectual practice such as the writing of fiction – by a commitment to actual events",[1] a formula that seems able to cover the growing diversity of the genre's manifestations and strategies across the disciplines. On second thought, it sounds more like the pronouncement of an ethics than a definition, especially when we think of the forms in which *the documentary* appears in the structures of contemporary visual art. Art practices have a way of twisting given visual practices that may or may not meet with the acceptance of their 'regular' practitioners, and Angela Melitopoulos certainly does precisely that.

Fig. 114–117

The curator of the 56th Venice Biennale, Okwui Enwezor, inserted artistic positions of the already historic 1960s and 1970s into the show. With Chris Marker's *L'ambassade* (1973) he included the work of a film-maker mostly known for his documentaries. Not knowing the film I fell straight into Marker's trap and took at face value the written announcement at the beginning: "film Super 8 trouvé dans une ambassade". The film appears to be a technically and rhetorically very low-key documentary of an event in

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1 Hila Peleg, "Documentary Practices across Disciplines", in: Hila Peleg and Bert Rebhandl (eds.), *Berlin Documentary Forum 1,* Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin 2010, pp. 6–7, here p. 6.

Fig. 114–117 Chris Marker, screenshots from the film *L'ambassade*, 1973.

Chile in 1973, with political activists from all factions of the left finding refuge in an embassy as General Pinochet's coup d'état unfolds. Shaky Super 8 shots in casual light and framing create an impression of intimate spontaneous glimpses of details like hands, knees, profiles, groups cooking, singing, eating, sleeping, comforting children, discussing, while a voice-over commentary lends a consistent narrative frame to the camera's soundless fragmented observations. In the end, as an observant eye might discern, it turns out that the embassy is located in Paris (a police van outside looks decidedly French, while the final view over the city's roofs shows a very distant Eiffel Tower). Does the spectator feel betrayed, manipulated? As connoisseurs know this is one of Marker's few *fictional films*, but in the end the question arises: Does it matter? Is there a medium or format that does not 'manipulate' its eager viewers? Is the documentary a question of format or ethics? Or perhaps neither? Is the documentary a category that still serves to define boundaries that are useful for anything? And is this film – in whatever genre we decide to place it – not very much committed to an actual event? What does this commitment mean? The embedded presence of the filmic eye at the actual event? 'Real' archival material? Political engagement on the 'right' side? Commitment to non-commercial visuality? Neutralisation of authorship?

These questions are interconnected and have to be discussed accordingly. All have consequences for the choices of format, technology, circulation (both aesthetic and political). Perhaps art is a field that might help in mapping these questions. Art comprises as many conventions of format, practice and technology as it continuously breaks, swaps, shifts, mixes and invents new ones. Art was once sharply and insistently differentiated from its documentary other (see for example photography during its foundational decades in the 1840s). Those debates are around, now seeking to define or blur differences between art and non-art in the fields of function, media specificity, economy, circulation and ideology. With the boundaries between art and documentary being crossed – mostly by artists and curators, less by the practitioners of documentary as genre – it might be worth looking at developments in this sphere, and the work of Angela Melitopoulos certainly offers a good occasion to do so.

Let us begin with circulation: As far as I am aware, Melitopoulos's video installations rarely appear in the 'classical' exhibitions of institutions for modern and contemporary art. They can be seen and heard in innovative art spaces like Kunstwerke in Berlin, in interdisciplinary venues like Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin,

and in seminars and workshops run by art academies and activist platforms. As for the ubiquitous biennials, we find her work at Manifesta 7, Documenta 14, the Biennials of São Paulo, Istanbul, and Taipeh – but not at the Venice Biennale. Okwui Enwezor did however include her programmatic teaching in the lateral events of the 2015 Venice Biennale, as part of the three-day summer school 'The School of Kapital'. It is certainly interesting to speculate on the reasons for the very peculiar (non-)visibility her work is given in the context of this exhibition; in my view the Biennale di Venezia is still struggling in various respects with its heritage of artistic conservatism. To me it seems that the art institutions where Melitopoulos's work can be seen, and the curators who work with her, typically have a programmatic interest in postcolonial politics and participatory art; they function as bridges between the art scene and various activist forms and scenes.

Other observations on circulation shed light on the artist's choices concerning her position in the art market: unusually for an artist these days it seems she has neither a personal website nor a gallery with a website. Because of her particular practice linking art and global activism I had expected prolific Internet circulation. Most of her videos can be viewed on Vimeo, but some are 'private' and password-protected. These choices show that the artist is very conscious of the difficult position she holds, with an oeuvre that transgresses the rules of the art world but does not give itself over completely to activism *tout court*. But again, these rules are being transformed by new forms of art production, introduced by the meanwhile established practice of "artistic research" which integrates art into the economy of the knowledge society. Art production now is often "project-based" and artistic research is accepted as a "new habitat for art",[2] which also means its integration into capitalist knowledge production and circulation – a situation full of ambiguities causing problems for artists trying to define their role, all the more so in the case of research done within a context of political activism, as is the case with most of Melitopoulos's work. Angela Melitopoulos is trained as an artist and regarded as such by the art scene. Talking to colleagues I noticed that the work most widely associated with her name is her early video *Passing Drama* (1999) and not the later works that were produced to a certain extent within collective and/or activist contexts. The reason I suppose is that *Passing Drama* looks more like 'art' than the later works: single-channel, a highly sophisticated and abstract-

2   See Tom Holert, "Artistic Research. Anatomy of an Ascent", in: Texte zur Kunst 82, 2011, pp. 38–63, here p. 48.

ing montage of image and sound, a high degree of aesthetic transformation of the documentary material, transformation being a key element of art in confronting and working with elements of reality. That is one of two possible reasons I can think of, the other being the changing channels and places of circulation and presentation, moving away from the classical art exhibition.

Remembering earlier video art works with documentary material that appeared in various Documentas, it occured to me they were often single-channel: Amar Kanwar's *A Season Outside* (1998, Documenta 11, 2002), or Zarina Bhimji's *Out of Blue* (2002, Documenta 11, 2002). As far as I can recall Kanwar's film was shown in a small room on a small monitor positioned on the floor, a setting inconceivable for today's aesthetic and curatorial standards of immersive big-screen/multichannel/all-surround video installations. Kanwar's images were not manipulated in terms of abstraction or alienation. On the contrary, they were disturbingly straightforward in the sober way they recorded intimately gruesome moments. Sound and voice-over were independent from the image, there was no linear narration; the format was that of a video essay. Today Kanwar's film might be seen as a precursor of artistic research: he literally researched situations of conflict, but he presented the results more in terms of poetic-philosophical reflection than in terms of knowledge or activism.

Since then the conditions for the documentary within art (and not only there) have changed greatly, in a way that can also be traced in the work of Melitopoulos. *Passing Drama* is single-channel like *A Season Outside*, but it works with digital split-screen manipulation of material from different sources – from 1970s family holiday Super 8 and family photos to new video material, from the stylistics of the road movie to fragments of houses, faces, landscapes, interviews, all interwoven in a work of montage Melitopoulos posits as analogon to the workings of memory. Melitopoulos has much more confidence in the potentials of technology than Kanwar in searching for effects on the viewer's emotions, or, nearer to her theoretical background, the viewer's affects. And the difference between emotion and affect may be important.

Passing Drama is, as Melitopoulos puts it, the "acoustic image of my family history",[3] her German version, *Hörbild*, is more fitting, because it posits sound and image in a relationship of equivalence. Following the routes from Greece to Germany taken by

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3 Angela Melitopoulos, "'Passing Drama'. The Materialization of Race", in: Darkmatter, 23 February 2008, http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2008/02/23/passing-drama-the-materialization-of-race/ (last accessed 26 October 2015).

her father during the Nazi occupation and later her family as migrants, she filmed her own material and combined it with images and films from the family archive, with interviews with relatives and neighbours in the Greek village her family left, and glimpses from her own journeys to Greece. The montage and manipulation of this material followed a concept based on the time strata of memory involved in the construction of a family history of migration covering three generations: "From one image generation to the next, I constructed different levels and degrees of abstraction through the image manipulation, which were attributed to the 'generation' of the story accordingly."[4] But it is not only these abstractions that raise the question whether and how the documentary is involved in this work. Melitopoulos herself declares: "There is no objective/documentary image."[5] Which does not really help with our questions since equating the documentary with objectivity is generally recognised to be fallacious. The images Melitopoulos has combined could all be called documentary. It is in post-production that they are manipulated, abstracted, montaged. The element of transformation (of the documentary) inherent to artistic work takes effect. Image and sound manipulation come together with montage in the sense of editing to form a complex texture, which turns out to be a multiple metaphor: for the structures of individual and collective memory, and, perhaps even more importantly, for the analogy of video montage with the dynamics of interwoven narrative levels. Melitopoulos and the philosopher Maurizio Lazzarato have collaborated in creating a kind of video ontology around the metaphors of weaving and the body:

> "Video images have a pre-representative life: a molecular life of (tape) speed, (light) intensities, (camera) movements, and (video) streams of light, which are determined by the smallest forces of desire and affects. Electronic images, sounds and the smallest pixels are understood here as bodies, which affect our bodies."[6]

In *Passing Drama* "you can 'see' this ontology instead of laboriously reading about it here".[7] This video ontology is seen as analogon for the politics of deterritorialisation:

> "The difficulty of 'politically' representing minorities and the difficulty of using video as a means of 'aesthetic' representation have the same origin: the deterritorialization of flows. If real politics are to be searched for in ontology, as the classical

4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.

7 Maurizio Lazzarato, *Videophilosophy. The Perception of Time in Post-Fordism*, New York 2019, p. 81.

period teaches us, then the politics of the video are also to be looked for in ontology. Weaving, dissolving and re-weaving flows – instead of representing them as the migrants as in Passing Drama – is radical constructivism in politics as well as in the video image."[8]

In *Passing Drama* memory is activated through image types that are known to audiences from filmic and other images. Fiction and the documentary share this reservoir, feeding into as well as taking from it. The image structure in *Passing Drama* is highly codified, making this video essay as much a text as a suggestive combination of road movie, travel record, and migrational, three-generational family memory. The fragmentary, strongly rhythmicised montage gives the single images the character of textual or musical notations. In Melitopoulos's own words:

> "In 'Passing Drama' the viewer is compelled into other dimensions. We are transported to another dimension, which psychologists refer to with the lovely expression 'a-modal perception': as in the pre-verbal life of the newborn, here we still have the freedom of not fixing what touches us in categories of image, sound or the designation of the object, but rather of gliding from one emotion into the next. […] With the compression and extension of movement, with the weaving and interweaving of the flows of images and sounds, new experiences of perceptions and logics arise, which are for the viewer vectors of dehumanized subjectivity at the same time."[9]

The documentary becomes but one of several threads in the conceptually tightly woven texture of an art work that can also be seen as an allegory: material, technology and editing together form an allegory for the artist's theory and political agenda. Melitopoulos's work is embedded in a discursive scenery that places its lineage with Guattari and Deleuze. To be quite clear: I do not share this lineage; her theoretical foil interests me solely in relation to its formal, aesthetic and practical implications for her work. One argument of relevance to Melitopoulos's choices in terms of production and aesthetics is what I consider an attempt to bypass representation with Deleuzian concepts of pre-representation, separating representation and language from affect as something *before* representation,[10] a separation in terms of consecutiveness: there is something before language,

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8   Ibid., p. 82.
9   Melitopoulos, *Passing Drama*, 2008.
10   See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus,* Minneapolis 1987, with an introduction by Brian Massumi, "Notes on the Translation and Acknowledgements". The French original is *Capitalisme et schizophrénie 2: Mille Plateaux*, Paris 1980.

and in psychoanalytic terms this would be early childhood before entering language. On the other hand memory, individual as well as collective, plays a strong role in her theoretical setting. And this in turn is linked to images rooted in the commons. But this means that memory, be it individual or collective, and images cannot be seen as separate from representation. Seen from my field, which is the history of art, placing the visual in a space of affect (as opposed to language/representation) is an act of belief: the belief in the visual – and its media – as a means of resistance, for example. The Jacobin ideologues of the French Revolution, most of them trained priests, knew otherwise when in the years after 1789 they installed an elaborate visual code of social control.

Passing Drama was followed in 2002 by a very ambitious collaborative project involving several video authors from different countries: *Timescapes*, initiated by Melitopoulos, Ursula Biemann, and Lisa Parks. As the title of the project's website indicates, its theoretical approach draws strongly on Maurizio Lazzarato's "videophilosophy".[11] The project posited "non-linear editing" as political strategy. In practical terms non-linear meant collaborative editing and non-linear narrative structures: "Timescapes investigates non-linear editing as a constituent force of what is held in common against the power politics of segmenting memory, communication and the spaces of imagining."[12] The participants were Melitopoulos, Hito Steyerl, VideA Media Collective (Ankara), Dragana Zarevac, and Freddy Viannelis.[13] The group installed a complicated production structure to make artistic practice correspond to the theoretical propositions of videophilosophy:

> "Timescapes investigates non-linear editing as a constituent force of what is held in common against the power politics of segmenting memory, communication and the spaces of imagining; video production is understood here as memory work, which develops the potential of mnemonic narrative and assesses geography not through the representation of a filmed object, but rather through narrative structures and editing strategies arising through the emotions of the image streams."[14]

11 See Lazzarato, *Videophilosophy*.
12 Angela Melitopoulos, "Timescapes. The Logic of the Sentence", in: transversal, January 2007, https://transversal.at/transversal/0107/melitopoulos/en (last accessed 1 February 2020).
13 For more information on the project see its website http://www.videophilosophy.de/ (last accessed 2 February 2020).

Under http://www.videophilosophy.de/tc-geographies.net/projects/melitopoulos/CORRX_story.html Melitopoulos gives more information on the contributions of individual members (Angela Melitopoulos, "Story Corridor X", in: *Videophilosophy*, without date, last accessed 2 February 2020).
14 Melitopoulos, *Timescapes. The Logic of the Sentence,* 2007.

Here is Basra.

Fig. 118

The participating artists built a database of images, sound, and text which was then used for collective editing.[15] Brian Holmes gives a description of the complicated procedures:

"The participants, who filmed along the routes of Corridor X and beyond, accept to place their results on common, consti-tuting a stock of video images which each then receives back as a collective memory bank (around 25 hours of rushes). Each video-maker then works in an isolated studio; but a spe-cially conceived Internet platform allows the editors to share the timecodes with all the others, and to relay any additional material such as subtitles, image overlays, supplementary scenes, etc."[16]

In 2005 a new format emerged to experiment within the field of video/film: collective editing on stage, as live performance at Transmediale05 in Berlin, using the database of material. By 2007 the project had finished five interconnected installations and two single-screen videos, all done with the material from the collectively built database.

From this archive Melitopoulos produced *Corridor X*, a two-chan-nel video of 130 minutes. Again all the material used could be considered documentary. Editing is less densely rhythmicised than in *Passing Drama*, post-production in terms of the aesthetic digital manipulation of the images themselves is much reduced. Notwithstanding Melitopoulos's statements about deconstruct-ing this format, *Corridor X* looks much more like a straightfor-ward documentary than *Passing Drama*. It combines multiple images, voices, memories, testimonies, and written as well as spoken commentary about the route travelled by Melitopoulos's family from Germany to Greece, now in a broader historical and

economical context of the trans-European corridors of transport and commerce between Germany and Turkey, from the times of the late-nineteenth-century German-Turkish alliance to today's huge infrastructure project, the Trans-European Transport Network. The work combined a great deal of informational input with a layering of contrasting sequences on parallel screens that opened a field of loose associations and self-explanatory contrasts, showing for example shots from the media centre of the European Summit in Thessaloniki 2003 next to furious demonstrations against the European Union, the Iraq war and capitalism in general. *Corridor X* looked much more like the result of research than *Passing Drama* with its poetic condensation and transformation of the audiovisual material, and hence more like a documentary in a classical sense. Melitopoulos views her use of the video differently: "The video image does not document the real, but acts as a mnemonic agent or a visual memory."[17] But it is certainly possible to let the concept of the documentary embrace this notion; as with photography, it is, as mentioned above, consensus that the documentary is not identical with passive or pure recording of the 'real'. Melitopoulos locates the difference of her practice in the non-linear editing process. Fragmentation and letting the detail speak is essential:

"In the editing process, one starts by perusing images and comparing them, where relevant, with experiences of the location. Usually new, unforeseen events occur in this perusal: single shots become key images and significant for the construction of the narrative. They indicate something beyond the space where they were shot, detach themselves from it, suggest other spaces, contexts, times and potentials. They contain a surplus of reality that invokes other realities, a potential of linkage that is found in the microscopic material of the image and is perceived as an intensity that mobilizes our memory."[18]

This microscopicity[19] of the video image, in videophilosophy, stands for video's potential to relate directly, without any detour through reflection, to the spectator's affects. These affects in turn are located in a time-space before representation and, surpassing single subjectivities, encompass shifting collective subjectivities. And these subjectivities are the new political horizon, posited against the individual subject of modern enlightenment

17 Angela Melitopoulos, "Timescapes", in: Anselm Franke (ed.), *B-Zone. Becoming Europe and Beyond*, Barcelona 2006, here p. 140.
18 Melitopoulos, *Timescapes. The Logic of the Sentence*, 2007.

19 My neologism originates in the German way abstracting from a noun or a verb. If the format had permitted I would have inserted a smiley here.

tradition. What is not taken into account in this transfer of theory into artistic practice is a very practical part of filming: the handling of the camera. Melitopoulos grounds the specific kind of narrativity she aims at in editing, not in the camera movements. Non-linear editing produces a kind of narration that corresponds to the migrant's way of moving, thinking, and acting:

> "As a migrant, in a sense one is compelled daily to practice a kind of 'non-linear editing', which means linking heterogeneous elements in one's thinking and actions, which would normally be regarded as contradictory. The kind of action that results is a 'micropolitical' behavior, which is denied and ignored by the macropolitical dimension."[20]

But what the camera does remains in a way the subconscious of this approach. Farocki and Ehmann talk of the camerawork in documentary films as the documentary gesture: specific, codified forms of camerawork. The opposite is the camerawork in feature films, one being contingent, the other controlled: "The camera chases after events in documentary films, whereas in feature films it anticipates the events."[21] The main characteristics of the documentary gesture include an observational stance, panning for a widened perspective on the context, wobbly, out-of-focus camera and other signs of filming in uncontrollable situations – in other words, chasing the event. In recent decades a crossover has occurred between the two camera styles – with the gestures of documentary contingency appearing in feature films and the controlled feature style in the documentary. In *Corridor X* the camerawork shows the complete repertoire of the documentary gesture. This is even more the case in *The Art of Being Many*, a four-part project circulating in the Internet under Melitopoulos's name[22] focusing on some of the most incisive political protests of recent years: Turkey (Gezi Park), Egypt (Tahrir), Spain (protests against evictions), and Greece (Skouries, protest against a gold mine project). The videos are accessible on the Internet. We find the panning, the wobbly and out-of-focus camera, in general the signs of a camera chasing the events, but now these gestures become part of the rhetoric of activism, transferred to film, its editing dramatised by the events themselves. *Gezi* begins with very short cuts taken in the midst

20 Melitopoulos, *Timescapes. The Logic of the Sentence*, 2007.
21 Antje Ehmann, Harun Farocki and Volker Pantenburg, "Control and Contingency. Excerpt from a Conversation between Antje Ehmann, Harun Farocki and Volker Pantenburg", in: *Berlin Documentary Forum 2*, 31 May – 3 June 2012, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin 2012, pp. 14–19, here p. 14.

22 See: https://vimeo.com/melitopoulos. The films are registered here under her name. The other participants who did the filming in the four locations are not named. In this form of circulation the ideal of collective authorship ends up with the individual authorship of Melitopoulos.

Fig. 119

of the events, shown on one screen in rapid succession, with the date and time indicated on the other. Only after the first two minutes does this driven rhythm slow, alleviating the pressure on the viewer. The film meticulously follows the many collective choreographies producing rhythmic noise and the improvised collective organisation. *Tahrir* has a slower rhythm, with female activists narrating and commentating what was happening and views of the square from a rooftop during the confrontations with the police and army. The video ends on a slower melancholy note, showing a person with a gas mask meandering through the streets amidst the debris of the upheaval, with a voice-over reciting what sounds like a poem. A dramaturgical structure seems to be in effect here, arching from the hopes of the beginning to the desperation of revolutionary failure in the face of violent repression. Of the four parts *Tahrir* shows most clearly that the documentary *follows* the event – and takes this into account. In this film nothing is left to chance – and since this cannot be achieved while filming in an uncontrollable situation it is achieved through editing. Behind *Tahrir* there is a visible auctorial mind – but the editing of *Gezi* with its aesthetic of spontaneity is also the result of editorial choices. Seeing all the parts of *The Art of Being Many* creates a sense of redundancy: The acts of activism recur repeatedly and reveal their global codification: *The Art of Being Many*. Perhaps that is why the statement of one female Egyptian activist remained so strongly in my memory (in emotional as well as cognitive terms, which I maintain are strongly connected). Rasha Azab[23] analyses the situation with great clarity, quiet wrath and soberness, making it very clear that what the global media searched for and showed (foreign activists included) was not what had made the Tahrir protests happen. One had suspected

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23   Looking through the films on Vimeo six months later I realised that *Tahrir* can be seen under two signatures, once as part of *The Art of Being Many*, as a collective work under the name of Angela Melitopoulos, once under Leil-Zahra Mortada who is the author of this part of *The Art of Being Many*. Leil-Zahra Mortada also published a series of videos with women activists testifying their experiences and analyses under the title *Words of Women from the Egyptian Revolution* (available on YouTube). He also used parts of this material for *Tahrir*. Rasha Azab's statement is taken from episode one of this series, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NamUZHWJem0 (last accessed 31 July 2016).

Fig. 119–120   Angela Melitopoulos, screenshots from the film *The Art of Being Many – 02. Tahrir*, double projections, 2014.

TEARGAS (smell)   TEARGAS (taste)

Fig. 120

as much, and it is a good thing her statement is featured so prominently in the film. Her statement throws a particular light on the phenomenon of video artists wanting to be part of social movements. A quote from the announcement for a workshop on "post-production of images of a revolution" at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen gives an impression of what I mean:

"What affected the video image production and archiving during the political movement of the Gezi Park movement in Istanbul in 2013 and 2014? We discuss strategies of performance and image production that drive and re-script the social movements as a real-time experiment."[24]

Image politics, which includes the counter-politics of video collectives, had concentrated on Tahrir. But the activist from Tahrir saw this taking agency away from the movement as she lived it – coming from the neighbourhoods, fighting in the streets for days before Tahrir became the symbol of the revolution, and going on fighting after the cameras had left. Another such example is the announcement of a meeting entitled 'The Art of Being Many' at Kampnagel Internationale Kulturfabrik in 2014:

"In autumn 2014 about 400 artists, activists, researchers and participants from all around the planet will gather […]. Sharing experiences from real-democracy-movements and artistic experimentation we want to explore new ways of coming together […]. In an arena especially built for the occasion the assembly will become a laboratory of itself."[25]

Activism as Art or Art as Activism – to my ear both formulae sound strangely parasitical in the face of those "real-democracy-movements". It certainly cannot be the artist's role to teach

24 See Cargo Collective, "Post-production of Images of a Revolution – Workshop with Alper Sen and Octay Ince", 14–17 October 2010, http://cargocollective.com/Media-School/Post-production-of-Images-of-a-Revolution-Workshop-with-Alper-Sen-and (last accessed 26 February 2020).
25 http://www.geheimagentur.net/the-art-of-being-many-2/ (last accessed 16 November 2015).

the 'real' activists in Cairo and Istanbul the art of being many, while the other way around – artists searching for the 'real' experience in Tahrir or Gezi – certainly makes for a form of profiteering that we know well from the history of left-wing activism. In the 1960s and 1970s young people from the wealthy West were looking for the 'real' thing in Cuba or Nicaragua, now the web generation looks for contact with 'real', grassroots street fighting, giving themselves the role of counter-documentarists, image politicians, and archivists. So the old question arises: Cui bono?

This question turns up again when thinking about the relationship between affect and video in relation to videophilosophy. It returns as a question about power. Thinking about video as directly touching on or causing affect and consequently trying to eliminate authorship by eliminating representation, and by the same token trying to substitute the individual for the collective has a bitter consequence: it does not eliminate the question of power, it ignores it. The affect that is supposed to be evoked is located in the viewer. It is the editing artist who determines through her editing how and why these affects shall be effected (i.e. in the viewer). Editing cannot be an affective action as the act of viewing is supposed to be. It is an auctorial activity, whether individual or collective. It implies responsibility. Showing the Egyptian activist teaching the international video activists a lesson is an act of responsibility, and it provokes not affects but emotion and reflection.

At this point the question of whether Melitopoulos's *The Art of Being Many* should or should not be defined as art or documentary loses its relevance. It is significant, though, that the repertoire of documentary gestures is so prominent in this video. I should think that this work is documentary, in the terms of Peleg's definition cited at the beginning: it is committed to an actual event. Compared to Ehmann and Farocki's list of documentary gestures there may be a difference in style: while they speak of the observing distance of the documentary camera, the material that Melitopoulos uses was often taken in the centre of events and looked like it, satisfying the viewer's presumed desire to feel in the midst of the event and heightening the sense of drama and urgency.

1973–2019: some afterthoughts

While Chris Marker remains as much as possible under the radar of iconicity in *L'ambassade* ("Ceci n'est pas un film ...", the voice-over remarks at the beginning, making me think of Magritte's and

Foucault's shared *Pipe*), Melitopoulos tries to evade represen-
tation – in which, fortunately, she does not succeed. Marker en-
acts a mimicry of authenticity whereas Melitopoulos produces a
kind of meta-authenticity from a huge pool of documentary
images. Marker starts from an operative setting (Super 8, no
direct sound) while Melitopoulos starts from the image pool.
Marker finds his form by defining his mode of operation,
Melitopoulos emulates analogies with video theory and the pol-
itics of migration in her mode of operation and technology.
Marker's mimicry of authenticity looks simple in production but
was complicated to fabricate, whereas Melitopoulos's films show
how much time, travel, technology, editing, and infrastructure
went into the production. *L'ambassade* lasts 22 minutes, *Corridor
X* runs for 120 minutes; *The Art of Being Many* is even longer.
These differences are symptomatic for the changes in the artis-
tic and documentary production of film and video in the last 40
years. Nonetheless Marker's *L'ambassade* was included in the
2015 Venice Biennale as an important historical point of refer-
ence for artists, whereas Melitopoulos's work was not shown.
Apart from the Biennale's aforementioned inherent conservatism,
I suppose there are other reasons of a more practical kind for
this. *Corridor X* and *The Art of Being Many* may not take as long
as the reading of Marx's *Das Kapital*,[26] but they are too long to
be fitted into the time management of visitors to the Biennale
– or any exhibition. The ideal format for a video work at an art
exhibition is the loop, based on a short film. It does not matter if
the visitor misses the beginning or end. Another predilection of
artists and curators these days is the monumental installation of
multichannel works trying to capture the viewer's field of vision
completely, flooding her audiovisual senses. Melitopoulos's work
does not fit into either category. Her attempt to access to the
viewer's affects is not grounded in this strategy of immersion.
With *The Art of Being Many* her desire to express the urgency of
political opposition gives way to certain means of visual rhetoric
which I have tried to describe, but her work does not overwhelm
the viewer through all-surround monumentality. Melitopoulos's
work does indeed cross the lines between art and the documen-
tary; and there is a price to pay for that: the place of her work in
the art system's circulation is not (yet) defined. The art institu-
tions will have to change again if they are to accommodate this
kind of go-between.

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26   Which lasted the entire duration of the
2015 Biennale.