

## image/con/text.

# Documentary Practices Between Journalism, Art and Activism

How to make images matter? The search for new narrative forms in the field of photojournalism and documentary photography – stretching perspectives beyond the conventional understanding of the documentary form – is the topic of numerous contemporary debates,<sup>1</sup> and was a central motivation behind the publication *Images in Conflict/Bilder im Konflikt*<sup>2</sup>. In the present volume we delve further into the possibilities of the documentary and the development of visual narrations that subvert the traditional viewing habits, expectations and stereotyping of classical documentary photographic narrative forms. The contributions in *image/con/text. Documentary Practices Between Journalism, Art and Activism* focus specifically on the textuality and contextuality of documentary practices and on explorations of their bounds, in particular the relationships between art, documentation and journalism.<sup>3</sup>

It is conspicuous that current approaches often understand the continuous interaction of construction and deconstruction of documentary assertions of reality as a precondition for their own practice, thus arriving at the intersection between documentary and power. Projects today frequently express the resulting understanding of the documentary as a context-determined and *mobile* concept – specifically characterised by the need to continuously question and confirm – by integrating different materials and sources.<sup>4</sup> Unlike the coupling of visual and verbal in journalistic publications, which are interested primarily in the

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1 See for example the objectives of the C/O Berlin Talent Award 2020 *New Documentary Strategies* and the exhibition *New Perspectives on Documentary Practices* planned for the LUMIX Festival for Young Visual Journalism. For a deeper discussion see also the publications of Fred Ritchin, including *Bending the Frame. Photojournalism, Documentary, and the Citizen*, New York 2013.

2 See the previous [IMAGE MATTERS] publication: Karen Fromm, Sophia Greiff and Anna Stemmler (eds.), *Images in Conflict / Bilder im Konflikt*, Kromsdorf/Weimar 2018.

3 Some of the following contributions are

based on papers given at the *image/con/text. Complementary Testimonies in Documentary Discourse* symposium on 29 and 30 October 2019 at Faculty III: Media, Information and Design at Hochschule Hannover – University of Applied Sciences and Arts.

4 On the documentary as a mobile concept see also Karen Fromm, *Das Bild als Zeuge. Inszenierungen des Dokumentarischen in der künstlerischen Fotografie seit 1980*, Berlin 2014, <https://edoc.hu-berlin.de/bitstream/handle/18452/17620/fromm.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y> (last accessed 16 February 2020).

objective of legibility, these works seek to evade explicit clarification of the semantic levels. While the relationship between image and caption in the press generally implies a clearly functional relationship – and seeks the unity of word and image – more recent developments emphasise the polysemy and contextuality of images rather than describing images with text.

## Between Image and Text

Works like those by Eva Leitolf, with which the present publication begins, establish a relationship between visual and verbal medialities that understands these as part of a heterogeneous field of practices of representation, rather than as opposed. This is clearly seen in works like *Deutsche Bilder II* and *Postcards from Europe*, as Leitolf confirms in her interview with Florian Sturm: “For me image and text are absolute equals, what I am interested in is the relations – and tensions – between these media.” By combining and confronting visibility and textuality, Leitolf specifically emphasises the space between and puts her finger on the incoherence and incommensurability of the different levels of representation. Leitolf herself names Martha Rosler and Allan Sekula, under whom she studied at the California Institute of the Arts, as points of reference for her interest in the context-dependency of images: Rosler and Sekula were both interested in the problems and limits of purely visual forms of representation. As Karen Fromm shows in „*Context matters*“. *Bild und Text bei Allan Sekula und Martha Rosler*, Rosler and Sekula were already in the early 1970s – both in their artistic practice and in theoretical texts – pioneers of a repoliticisation and realignment of the institutional and discursive strategies of the documentary, understanding contextuality as a precondition for any form of significance and efficacy. In the examples Fromm presents, *The Bowery* by Martha Rosler and *Aerospace Folktales* by Allan Sekula, both operate with image/text combinations. They open up fields of mutually complementary and reciprocally relativising claims in order to specifically negate the perfect correspondence between object of representation and excerpt of reality in favour of a diversity of perspectives. In this they are working against the desire, engraved deep into the history of visual representations, to dissolve the difference between the representation and the presence of the represented.

## Layered Contexts

In his film-making Jean-Luc Godard, too, is guided by a mistrust of contextless images, strives for a new form and privileges text at times, ultimately seeking, like Rosler and Sekula, the relationship between aesthetic and ideology. In the film *The Image Book* of 2018, Godard shows no doubt that the act of representing is almost always associated with violence against the represented subject, in stark contradiction to the calm that may be inherent to the representation itself. The concordance of image and language that normally characterises film as an audiovisual medium is challenged in Godard's increasingly essayistic films. Unity of image and text can collapse potential meanings in such a way as to obscure complexities that should in fact be preserved in the interests of critiquing power. In his contribution Thomas Helbig traces the development of the interplay of image, sound and text in the work of this political film author from different historical phases. As well as cinema films he includes *Photo et Cie* (1976), which was created for the very different media environment of television. This meta-reflection on mass media analyses their use of image and language through advertising images and a press photograph, peeling away layer after layer. There is an additive aspect too: text is laid over the film image, the story of the origin of this one conflict photography is told in voice-over. Here Godard is philosophising through film, with overwriting and inscriptions, shifts on the sound track, jumps in the images, text frames, quotes and commentaries.

Alisha Sett's contribution shows, initially in the family context, how deeply inadequate the memory associated with a photographic past can be. A single family photo may tell more than one story. So when the Kashmir Photo Collective (KPC) was founded Sett decided not only to scan and save the photographs, some of them very old, but also to record their contexts. When photos are added to the archive, the associated facts and fictions are recorded in handwriting in dialogue with the illustrated families. Commentaries and corrections to the narrative reports are included directly in the documentation. As well as the individual family stories, this automatically also expresses the broader collective identity and history of Kashmir. Connections with other families are revealed, one story leads to the next – and to another archival transaction. For this process of emergence of an “archival forest of memories” Sett finds the poetic and very pertinent image of the banyan tree. From a single seed this species of fig can proliferate to cover an area of hundreds of square metres with its spreading branches, aerial roots and trunk-like supports.

The collected Kashmiri photographs with their surrounding materials produce a collaborative complementary archive, which fills a gap where state archives deny access, lose documents or claim sole authority over the regional conflict history. Here the practice of documenting becomes an inherently political one. Sett sees the KPC pursuing the objective of calling into question and reversing the traditionally alienating role played by archives. As Ariella Azoulay writes:

“The archive fever responsible for creating other archive models exposes the fact that the distancing by law of citizens from documents regarding their lives [...] is a violation of the basic right to share the archive, a right that is embodied in the [...] fact that the documents it holds regard those striving to actualize this right. Thus, instead of regarding the archive as an institution that preserves the past [...], I propose to see the archive as [...] a place that enables one [...] to preserve what Walter Benjamin referred to as the ‘incompleteness of the past’.”<sup>5</sup>

In order to be found in an archive, a photograph must have concepts and names attributed to it. Yet every encounter between viewer and photograph subverts such attempts to define a stable reference.<sup>6</sup> Creating an accessible ‘civil’ archive that enables such encounters works against the violence of representation inflicted on citizens by state instances. Film-maker Godard and archivist Sett both resist a hermetic closing of the levels of meaning and reveal the complexities and ramifications of a divided reality.

## Weaving Hidden Stories: Visual Investigations

One subject area of the present volume is dedicated to the upcoming subgenre of research-based photobooks, which collate image and text fragments into a narrative structure that reveals complex and hidden issues with an archiving and frequently activist gesture comparable to the work of the Kashmir Photo Collective.<sup>7</sup> Here again word and image meet not in a relationship of reciprocal control or coping with contingency but as equal

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<sup>5</sup> Ariella Azoulay, “Archive”, in: *Political Concepts: A Critical Lexicon*, <http://www.politicalconcepts.org/issue1/archive/> (last accessed 23 February 2020).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> See for example the award-winning photobook by Mathieu Asselin, *Monsanto®: A Photographic Investigation*, Dortmund 2017, which is based on extensive research on the widely criticised chemicals manufacturer.

modes of representation of reality. In these works very diverse materials are combined to form a new unity, leaving their original contexts, transgressing genre boundaries and being integrated into other formats, opening up new and innovative domains beyond and outside the specialist discourses and filter bubbles. In the collaborative photobook *Negative Publicity: Artefacts of Extraordinary Rendition*, documents researched by the journalist Crofton Black (to date used in particular in human rights court cases) interact with photographs by Edmund Clark. In their reciprocal referencing they address the process of discovery concerning the extraordinary rendition of prisoners between secret CIA prisons and retrace the bureaucratic web of contracts, authorisations and invoices through which they were able to expose the existence of this programme and its logistics. Both the sometimes heavily censored documents and the photographs of apparently mundane places that reveal little more than the blandness of their own façades visualise in their *not-showing* aspects of secrecy, concealment and misinformation. With its complex referencing and index structure, the form of the book reflects its content and challenges readers/viewers to investigate actively, to connect and interpret the presented fragments. In conversation with Sophia Greiff, Edmund Clark also stresses the potential of making it difficult to read and deconstruct familiar patterns, rather than offering easily consumable fixed meanings. He warns against the flood of simplified messages and information that reach us today via multiple channels: “Our screens are targeting us with messages of advertising, propaganda, potential news ... this is a kind of battlefield of imagery and text and quite often the messages are incredibly simplistic.” Clark sees a way out in creative approaches that unlock some kind of dissonance, wonder or unease in their recipients, approaches that undermine repetitive forms of representation to foster criticism, reconsideration and reflection.

As Laia Abril confirms in dialogue with Sophia Greiff, the art (or book and exhibition) context in particular appears to offer corresponding scope and possibilities to experiment in this respect. Abril affirms moral and ethical standards internalised in her journalistic training, but does not want her message limited by narrow rules: “I’m not a photojournalist, I don’t reveal my sources; I have a different way of presenting my material. I’m more interested in showing emotions, ideas and concepts that arise and challenge me during my research.” Thus her work also harnesses the polysemy of the images and creates very disparate image/text relations in order to grant multifaceted insights into difficult topics. In her photobook *On Abortion. And the Repercussions of Lack of Access*, which originated in an exhibition, she explores the complex and controversial issue of abortion in a kind of

visual investigation. This combines her own photographs and documentations with found and manipulated materials and with staged images of intense symbolism. Alongside a visual rhythm she also creates an emotional rhythm and works with the aspects of image, text, design and production that define a photobook. Regine Petersen's *Find a Fallen Star* can also be categorised as a visual investigation. Meteorite impacts in Alabama (United States), Ramsdorf (Germany) and Kanwarpura (India) serve as her starting point to explore questions of place, time, history and memory using photographs, interviews and documents. In three volumes presented in a slipcase, Petersen weaves together documentary, associative and poetic elements into a narration that is both factual and mythical.

Anja Schürmann's contribution, finally, explores the epistemological structure of the research-based photobook. In her analysis of the books *Redheaded Peckerwood* (Christian Patterson, 2010–2013), *The Epilogue* (Laia Abril, 2014) and *Find a Fallen Star* (Regine Petersen, 2015), she finds connections to crime novels, appropriation art and conceptual art and concludes – with reference to Lesley A. Martin – that they all function like puzzles that “alternate between factual and fictional narrative”.

## Found in Translation

As we have seen, certain forms of documentary production shift and blur not only the limits of the media but also those of the discourses of documentarism, art and activism. The process of relativising narrow definitions of objectivity, the documentary in general and photojournalistic practice specifically increasingly also grants the fictional a role in relating the real. Chris Marker's *The Embassy* in 1973 already subverted the grammar of the documentary by suggesting that it used found Super-8 material showing events occurring inside an otherwise unidentified embassy building – only to reveal its fictionality in the final shot.<sup>8</sup> Susanne von Falkenhausen takes this as the starting point of her essay about the localisation of the documentary in form, content and dissemination and the term's usefulness as category. Her investigation concerns the video works of Angela Melitopoulos, who works with shared memories and experiences of history and protest. As has been shown in the example of Rosler and Sekula, Falkenhausen, too, notes that artists often appear as the driving force behind expansions of documentary practices: “With the

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<sup>8</sup> Although the actual site of the film's diegesis is never stated explicitly, the timing

would suggest that it represents Marker's response to events in Chile in 1973.

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.” Yet in the case of several positions presented in this volume, we observe this boundary also and increasingly being transgressed by practitioners whose roots are not in art but in applied photography. More than just seeking an escape from the *crisis-stricken* system of photojournalism, the drive is often to instrumentalise the resulting shift in the discourse space to the benefit of the efficacy of the images. This is a question that Falkenhausen takes up in relation to Melitopoulos, where she shows how images of political activism are differentiated from the activism itself.

Like Melitopoulos, Hungarian artist Peter Puklus also references a reservoir of individual and collective memory spaces in *The Epic Love Story of a Warrior*, to tell a fact-based and nevertheless fictional history of the 20th and 21st centuries. In the case of Puklus, as Malte Radtke demonstrates, it is especially the broad renunciation of text-based contextualisation that reveals a fundamental interaction of image and language in which it can be shown – to cite W. J. T Mitchell – that even if the “verbal discourse may only be figuratively or indirectly evoked in a picture [this] does not mean that the evocation is impotent, that the viewer ‘hears’ or ‘reads’ nothing in the image”.<sup>9</sup> Puklus’ photo-book *The Epic Love Story of a Warrior* exemplifies a tendency in photographic works that handle historical, societal and social questions to involve the readers and viewers actively in the constitution of meaning (to the point of leaving this largely to them) rather than striving for unambiguous legibility.

In an essay about his *Googlegrams* Joan Fontcuberta draws an arc from the earliest known evidence of human activity through Edwin Aldrin’s photograph of a footprint on the moon to the algorithms used by Google’s image search, where – defying all efforts at clarification – polysemy of images and incommensurability of image and text remain prevalent. A Google search for Aldrin’s iconic image using the supposedly unique archive number #AS11-40-5878 turns up not only the original but also its restaging. This transpires to be part of a series of *double takes* by the Swiss duo Cortis & Sonderegger and underlines Fontcuberta’s argument: search term and searched object, word and image are never completely congruent but generate interference in the archive. Fontcuberta makes use of this interference in his *Googlegrams*, where he recomposes iconic images as mosaics. The elements of which the mosaics are composed are

9 W. J. T. Mitchell, “Beyond Comparison: Picture, Text, and Method”, in W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal*

*and Visual Representation*, Chicago 2007, pp. 83–107, here p. 96.

the results of an image search for related terms. A torture image from the US military prison in Abu Ghraib is made up of images found on the Internet using the names of all responsible individuals named in the *Final Report of the Independent Panel to Review DoD Detention Operations*. Here Fontcuberta chooses not image or text, but places his argument in the space between the media.

The artist Max Pinckers also uses an image from Abu Ghraib in the last chapter of his photobook *Margins of Excess*. The story behind the photo of the so-called *hooded man* is part of Pinckers's exploration of the limits of the documentary and the problems of journalistic conventions, when confronted with life stories that break with conventional understandings of reality and truth. As a real victim of torture, Ali Alqaisi acted in the belief that he was the person shown in the infamous photo. Although he had been neither aware of a camera nor able to return the gaze of the perpetrator in the moment the photograph might have been taken, he ended up being accused of lying on the basis of the difference between story and image.

As Anna Stemmler shows in her analysis of *Margins of Excess*, Pinckers opens up "a complex space of possibilities for blending factual and imaginary, but also for the question of the background to the untruth". Especially in the translation work of restagings and interviews, in found material and excerpts from journalistic reporting – setting aside promises of objectivity and truth – the way fiction can contribute to bringing together the complexity and ambiguity of reality becomes visible and legible.

## Context Creates Meaning

Images can lend context to images as well as texts. In his contribution about three photo comics, Friedrich Weltzien describes both variants: contextualisation of images through text (including paratexts that establish a kind of agreement to read the given as documentary) and reciprocal contextualisation through images from different media. The reciprocal framings confirm, define and amplify the expression and credibility of the images. The more diverse the techniques, styles, reality levels and references of the mutually complementary visual materials, the stronger the effect becomes. In particular photography and drawing can authenticate each other when brought together. Weltzien regards context as indispensable for constituting meaning, which is an approach that Fred Ritchin shares. Ritchin, a former picture editor of the *New York Times Magazine*, sees the technical possibilities of multimedia and the Internet as an



opportunity both for a freer relationship between photographs and the texts accompanying them and also for involving viewers. Playful experiments in hypermedia, abandoning linear storytelling, do more justice to the ambiguities of the images and thus ultimately the reality. Enrichment with additional information is time-consuming but would offer unprecedented insights. Yet Ritchin finds that many strategies for linking very different levels of information, which have been available since the emergence of hypertext, have still not taken hold in the everyday work of journalism. Parallel to this, mechanisms of information distortion and omission become established very much more efficiently. At the same time, the rise of social media and the digital means that viewers and readers have both more and fewer possibilities to participate in the creation of meaning. In relation to his project with the photojournalist Gilles Peress from 1996, *Bosnia. Uncertain Paths to Peace*, Ritchin reports how the associated discussion groups generated a lively (and sometimes venomous) conversation that was started by the contribution of one photographer (and his embedding in a news organisation) but very quickly proliferated outside the self-imposed rules of established journalism. In this connection it is worth seizing on Christina Thürmer-Rohr's bringing together of two quotes from the philosopher Hannah Arendt: Arendt, she writes, values human conversation "for its inexhaustible richness and for the 'pleasure in the other and what he has to say'. This exchange would 'inevitably come to a standstill if there was one truth that resolved all disagreement for all time'."<sup>10</sup> Hostile and reductionistic commentaries are hard to bear, and violate the conventions of human conversation by denying the counterpart the fundamental recognition required for the dialogue, yet the idea of tolerating competing truths is central to maintaining exchange. Over and above descriptive systems that are in themselves inadequate, complementarity of testimonies in documentary discourse must comprise the complementarity of very different voices.

<sup>10</sup> Translated from Christina Thürmer-Rohr: "Zum ‚dialogischen Prinzip‘ im politischen Denken von Hannah Arendt", in: *Zeitschrift für politisches Denken/Journal for Political Thinking* 5, no. 1 (2009): Human Rights and Responsibility,

<http://www.hannaharendt.net/index.php/han/article/view/151/267> (last accessed 23 February 2020). Her quotes from Hannah Arendt are from *Gedanken zu Lessing* (Thoughts on Lessing) and *Wahrheit und Politik* (Truth and Politics).