

'Mirror of visual culture'

Discussing documentary

A great deal of thought and discussion is nowadays being devoted to the advance of documentary photographs and film images in art. With documentas X and 11 as indicators of these developments, the question is being raised as to whether documentary is taking a new path and attempting to renew the way it functions in the space of the museum. There are discussions about the legitimacy and effectiveness of documentary practices within the art circuit, about whether documentary can indeed still perform its time-honoured communicative role of militant eye-witness in the museum room, and whether documentary images themselves can anyway still refer to a degree of reality or whether the boundary with fiction has definitively been abolished.

What is surprising in this exchange of views is that the appearance of documentary images in an art context is seen as an isolated phenomenon. Developments in documentary photography and film and the advance of the documentary image in art should, however, be understood in a much wider context. They are signs of an increased role of the media in how reality is experienced in our western society. They indicate an increased 'visual literacy' on the part of image makers – artists, photographers and filmmakers – as well as viewers.

The mass media dominate more and more our perception of reality, and these are being dominated in their turn by still and moving lens-based images: in magazines, advertising in public spaces, television, the cinema and the Internet. The prominent presence of visual media, long regarded in Europe as typically American, has become a fact in more and more countries, which means that the current generations are growing up with a constantly increasing stream of photographic and film images. Our world view is no longer solely determined by experiences that we ourselves have directly and personally undergone; our experience of the world increasingly takes place via the media. It is where we inform, amaze and entertain ourselves, conduct trade, seduce and allow ourselves to be seduced.

As a result of the visual character and the continuous stream of media reporting, the visual language used by the media is becoming more and more complex and viewers are becoming more and more trained in developing insight into the visual means and rhetoric employed. More and more artists are reflecting upon this in their work. They are no longer trying to create an image of reality, the physical world surrounding us, but of the way that images are dealt with in the media.

The term 'visual literacy' refers generally to one's ability to adequately distinguish and interpret visible actions, objects and symbols in one's surroundings. Someone who is visually literate is then able, in his or her turn, to apply these to communication.¹ In the context of media, visual literacy refers to the competence of image-makers in employing a more and more complex visual language and of viewers in being able to understand, fathom and interpret this. Visually literate people are able to critically distinguish the codes and mechanisms that the media uses in photography, film and video and to fathom their meaning.

Visual literacy exists alongside verbal literacy, which refers to the ability to deal critically and knowledgeably with written and spoken texts. The field of knowledge associated with verbal literacy is much more a collective body of thought, which research and criticism builds on. As self-evident as close reading is in secondary schools, so attention to analysing media images is notably all the more limited.

Image-makers as well as viewers are able to deal intuitively with highly complex codes and mechanisms. Until today, competences in this area are not developed by reading about it or by being taught orally, as with verbal literacy. Instead, visual literacy develops almost exclusively through looking a lot at mass media. It is mainly photographers, filmmakers and (video) artists who have actively reflected upon the use of images in the media in recent decades. They do this not textually, but through making their own images.

In any case, the documentary image is not the only image that is reflected upon in art. Other types of media images, such as journalism, advertising, games, pop culture and various film genres, are also dealt with in the work of

contemporary artists. In this sense, reflection upon documentary images is part of a wider development, namely one in which art is beginning to function more and more as a mirror of visual culture.²

In this essay, however, I limit myself to work that reflects upon documentary photography and film and the way that these function in the media. In particular, I wish to focus attention on how much such work testifies to increased visual literacy. To this end, in 'Documentary: the militant eye-witness', I briefly review the visual tradition that comprises the notion of 'documentary'. I then indicate in 'Documentary remix' how very different artists, the one more explicitly or more intentionally than the other, free themselves from the classical documentary tradition and establish a contrary image. After dissecting it into elements such as subject, style and distance from the subject, they then get down to work. I distinguish ten trends in total, each based on a few examples. With this my aim is to instigate a more structural consideration of documentary images in art from the viewpoint of visual literacy.

Documentary: the militant eye-witness

Which documentary image tradition are we talking about? This question is not so easy to answer, since in theory the term 'documentary' applies to every image made with a camera. From the Dutch perspective, however, we can point to roughly two historical visual traditions that have determined the interpretation of the notion of documentary. Coming from the West there was an Anglo-Saxon line of 'human interest' photography and film.³ In addition there was an influential tradition in the East, that of Communist and Socialist Russian (later Soviet) and German photography and film from the beginning of the twentieth century until the interbellum. As a result of these traditions, the word 'documentary' came to acquire a meaning that referred to the *function* of certain images – that of militant eye-witness. Without going at too great a length into it, I will just mention a few key figures and periods from the history of photography and film that have contributed to this type of engaged documentary.

We can locate the origin of the tradition around 1900, with American photographers such as Jacob Riis (1849–

1914) and Lewis Hine (1874–1940). Their photographic work emerged from a strong compassion for the immigrants, workers and farmers who, at that time, were often living in wretched conditions. Their subjects and the way they were depicted were influenced by the reformist aspirations of these photographers.

The term 'documentary' as indicating a genre appeared for the first time in connection with film. John Grierson, a British film producer, uses it in 1926 to designate non-fiction film.⁴ A documentary was meant to describe things from actual life objectively and realistically – as opposed to the subjectivity of films that represent a fictitious reality. The same role of providing a 'realistic' counterpart to the glamour of the fiction film was fulfilled by the now famous FSA project.⁵ Photographers such as Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange were commissioned by the American government to record the wretched conditions in the American countryside and in the poor neighbourhoods of the cities. The pictures served to provide visual arguments for President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal politics established to combat poverty in America.

The tradition outlined here was continued in the Fifties and Sixties in the photographs published in illustrated magazines such as *Life* and *Look* (USA), *Picture Post* (England), *Vu* (France), *Heute* and *Der Spiegel* (Germany) and *De Spiegel* and *Katholieke Illustratie* (the Netherlands), which gave the Western reader a 'window on the world'. In particular, the photographers belonging to the Magnum agency achieved international fame with their critical, investigatory and independent documentary photographs.

During the first decades of the Twentieth century up until the Second World War there was also a picture tradition in Russia (later the Soviet Union) and Germany that had an influence on how the notion of documentary was formed. Socialism and Communism embraced photography and film as a new, pure form of imagery that was suited to the times and positioned itself against the tradition of painting, which was rejected as a stuffy, bourgeois medium contaminated with decoration and mannerism.

Organised workers' movements in the early Soviet Union and Germany deliberately deployed the photo and film camera in support of the revolutionary Socialist and

Communist struggle of the working class. The Vereinigung der Arbeiter-Fotografen was created in Germany in 1927, allying itself strongly with the Soviet Union and the use of photography and film there. An important channel of publication was the *Arbeiter-Illustrierte-Zeitung*. The norm in workers' photography was to focus on man, depicting him at work in 'genre' pictures of everyday life. Photography was supposed to serve Leftist causes, which meant portraying the under-privileged, the working class and ordinary people either in harrowing conditions of poverty or heroically taking up the revolutionary struggle. The camera was intended to offer support to Socialists among themselves in this struggle and to expose abuses.

The German workers' photography movement came to an abrupt end when Hitler dissolved the Vereinigung der Arbeiter-Fotografen when he came to power in 1933. In the Netherlands, the activist use of photography was continued in the work of photographers resisting the German occupation and who also ended up playing a leading role in postwar documentary photography.⁶

In the Sixties and Seventies, partly under the influence of the omnipresent revolutionary mood, a good documentary photographer was a left-wing activist, an eye-witness of abuses and of attempts to set them right and of alternative, exemplary lifestyles. In the meantime the form of documentary photography had developed into coarse-grained photographs made with a 35mm camera and with high contrasts of black and white. The customary narrative structure of the documentary had become that of reportage: a picture story with an accompanying text like a voice-over directing how the images were to be interpreted.

At that time the documentary photographer was diametrically opposed to the advertising photographer. Whereas the latter was associated with colour, technical perfection, artificiality, idealisation and staging, the rougher, black and white style of the documentary photographer was associated with 'authenticity', realism, everyday rawness – images 'seized from life'.

The documentary image depended for its functioning on the viewer's belief in its transparency and objectivity. From the 1970s onwards, however, this belief has been increasingly undermined.⁷ We're talking here about the period when television made its entry into the living room,

with the rapid growth in the number of TV channels and broadcasts and the huge rise in the amount of visual material in public space in the form of advertising and billboards. It was also an age in which knowledge about visual literacy became widespread,⁸ with attempts being made to reveal the manipulative effect of media images.

Initially there was talk of documentary undergoing a crisis – it was seen to have lost its authoritative status as an objective genre of imagery, while television had taken over the role of window on the world. In retrospect, however, it could be argued that awareness of the documentary image's subjectivity has opened up new paths for it. It began to appear in advertising and fiction, together with the emergence of inbetween genres like the docudrama and Reality TV. Furthermore, documentary images were catching on in art. To start with, documentary images that had generally been made for a completely different context were treated as art by galleries and purchased by museums.⁹ Photographers, filmmakers, and video artists subsequently began focussing more and more directly on the art circuit.

Documentary remix

In the museum environment in particular, a sort of laboratory has been created in which the documentary image is analysed, commented upon and deployed in new ways. This is being done by photographers and filmmakers seeking out the space of the museum are doing this, as well as by artists working with photography and film.¹⁰ A range of variations and experiments are being created that focus in a variety of ways on different aspects of the traditional documentary image by establishing contrasts to it.

The notion of visual literacy that arose in the Seventies is becoming relevant again. The various new directions in and experiments with the documentary image are evidence of a visual inquiry into the effect of documentary photography and film in our society's mass media. They testify to the increased set of competences required of makers and viewers in dealing with lens-based images.

First of all, these are artists looking for technical, stylistic or narrative alternatives to the classic documentary. Against the coarse-grained black and white quality of human interest photography, students of the so-called

Becher School at the Düsseldorf Art Academy, including Thomas Struth, Andreas Gursky and Thomas Ruff, proposed the alternative of sharpness of detail and colour. This represented a break with the past in which these aspects belonged not to the domain of documentary photography but to advertising photography or to more functional directions such as topographical or architectural photography. Compared to classic documentary photography, their work also employs a different narrative structure, one that is more akin to a typological series. Completely fitting within a museum presentation and the way that images are dealt with in the art market, these documentary images can also stand as autonomous works of art and are much less connected to each other as a picture story.

Besides alternatives in the *form* of the documentary, there have also emerged more and more alternatives in the choice of *subject*. It is no longer just the under-privileged and victims who are the subjects of documentary photography. The middle class has also become a common subject, as in *The Cost of Living* in which the British photographer Martin Parr portrays his own social background. Another British photographer, Karen Knorr, also depicts her own origins, notably the customs and codes of the wealthy, in the series *Marks of Distinction*. Subjects that were previously not associated with the engagement of documentary photography or film are depicted too, such as the Californian porno industry in the work of Larry Sultan (ill. p. 31).

Other artists broach the issue of the distance that traditionally exists in the documentary between the image-maker on the one hand and the subject photographed or filmed on the other. The American photographer Nan Goldin and the Dutch photographer Bertien van Manen, for example, expressly strive not to construe a story about the 'other', in a context that is supposed to be outside their own. Goldin's photographs in *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* and *I'll Be Your Mirror* were made in her own personal surroundings. Bertien van Manen likewise took photographs in her own surroundings, as in her series *Mannen* about her partner, son and father. When she points her camera at people outside her own life, as in her work about Russia and China, she aims in no way for a picture story that talks objectively and from a detached point of view *about* the

people she photographs (ill. p. 15). In both cases her photographs are infused with a subjectivity, friendliness and familiarity that the photographer has managed to achieve with the people she photographs and from which the photographs emerge. A snapshot-like style that we know from family photos and home videos, emphasises the intimacy in the work of both Goldin and Van Manen.

The speed and routine-like superficiality with which many documentary makers over the course of the years assembled their picture stories is also an aspect of the documentary that artists are reacting to critically. A number of artists are countering this with a far-reaching depth. Allan Sekula, for example, is conducting a long-running project about economic structures and trading routes, showing the consequences of economic globalisation. With considerable dedication and patience he photographs the effect of this globalisation on the lives of people in all sorts of locations. He combines his photographs with extensive, self-penned texts, that explain, analyse and criticise the situations he encounters.

A similar patience is displayed by Fazal Sheikh in the way he goes in depth into the situation of the people he photographs. He presents not only his own descriptive story about the situation encountered. In *Ramadan Moon*, he achieves a more complete and empathetic picture of the situation of a Somali refugee in the Netherlands by combining respectful portraits of her with her own story, as well as texts from the Koran and historical and statistical information about Somali refugees in the Netherlands.

Gilles Peress also tries to reach the viewer in a fresh way and to get through to the viewer's feelings. He does this, however, in a totally different way, namely by seeking out the limits of the ethical norms that are employed – mainly implicitly – in documentary photography. In *The Silence* he provides a more explicit and less censored picture of the terrible genocide in Rwanda than usual. Whereas in the media it was considered unseemly to depict dead people in detail, Peress' pictures show decomposing corpses lying neglected on the street, so as to convey the extent and horror of the genocide.

Another development sees documentary image-makers focussing on the publicity and distribution channels of

documentary photography. They study and comment on the way that the media shape history and the political and commercial interests that influence this. Stories that do not fit into the collective image of the world or are regarded as undesirable by those concerned can be ignored by society or even deliberately suppressed. Susan Meiselas, for example, comments on this in her project Kurdistan: *In the Shadow of History*. By approaching Kurds in many places in the world who have fled their homeland she collects their personal histories, records them and makes them public on the Internet.¹¹ Walid Raad and his Atlas Group are also working on an alternative Internet-based history writing, in this case in connection with the history of his native country of Lebanon.¹²

A number of artists are of the opinion that certain (parts of) stories can better be told on the basis of authentic images by those originally involved than by the documentary photographer or filmmaker who remains an outsider. In making their documentary work such artists resort to quoting or reusing historical images. The British photographer Julian Germain does this in an interesting way. In *Steelworks*, about the disappearance of the steel industry in Northern England, he combines his own documentary images with an existing reportage by the photographer Don McCullin and photographs by a local press photographer and amateur photographers from the region.

Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y by the Belgian artist Johan Grimonprez is a collage that consists of the artist's own films combined with historical media imagery about airplane hijackings (ill. p. 20). The Dutch photographer Andrea Stultiens's *Kerkdorp – Polderdorp* juxtaposes portraits of a centuries-old Catholic village in the south of Holland and a new polder village from the 1950s that is still in the process of constructing its cultural and religious history. Like Germain and Grimonprez, she too conveys her story by combining her own photographs with existing ones, in her case family photos and pictures from archives in the villages themselves.

In the work of the artists that I am about to discuss it is more and more the documentary image itself that is questioned, but what they have in common with the artists I have been dealing with so far is the fact that they display

a visual literacy and insight into the way that classical documentary functions. Yet they do not simply give us to it in the way they represent their themes and involve more explicitly the means whereby classical documentary images themselves are compiled and appear.

The Japanese photographer Hiroshi Sugimoto concentrates on how the suggestion of reality is constructed. He simulates documentary photographs in completely artificial surroundings, such as the American Museum of Natural History in New York, The Movieland Wax Museum in Los Angeles and Madame Tussauds in London.¹³ He points to the artificiality with which classic documentary images conjure the suggestion of reality.

Jeff Wall investigates the language of documentary by means of staging. Since the late Seventies, Wall has been making documentary-looking photographs that are, however, carefully staged. His work references the use of images in mass media and subtly shows us how clichéd they can be. Rather than quote documentary images themselves he imitates them by using their codes, gestures and compositions. Besides documentary images, Wall also refers to other things associated with mass media, such as war reporting in *Dead Troops Talk*, and to advertising photography by presenting his pictures in the form of light boxes.

The Dutch artist Juul Hondius also imitates documentary and journalistic images.¹⁴ His pictures of people sleeping in a car or behind a rain-streaked bus window, for example, evoke associations with refugees and war situations (ill. 29). Yet they are nothing more than suggestions of documentary images, since he stages the scenes completely artificially in his studio, thereby revealing the stereotypical codes and clichés employed by the media. Both Wall and Hondius dwell upon the construction of documentary images and expose their manipulative effect.¹⁵

The method known as 're-enacting' is also important here.¹⁶ This is the re-staging for the purposes of making a photograph or a film of an event that has already been previously shown as 'real' in documentary images. Pierre Huyghe's *The Third Memory* is a sophisticated example of this: a complex and multi-layered piece, with documentary and other images, about a bank robbery in Brooklyn, New York, in 1972.¹⁷ Designed as a museum installation it

combines three layers of time and imagery: first of all the original journalistic and documentary media images that were disseminated in newspapers and on television at the time of the bank robbery itself. The robbery, which took place in broad daylight and involved a hijack lasting several hours, was a major media event in the United States. Television stations not only set aside their normal programmes for a live report, but newspapers and magazines also discussed every possible aspect of the bank robber's background. The second layer in *The Third Memory* is Sidney Lumet's 1975 film of the event, *Dog Day Afternoon*, starring Al Pacino. Lastly, Huyghe added his own images, in which he had the actual bank robber re-enact the robbery on a simulated set. After so many years the robber was given the possibility to tell the story at first hand and to correct the distortions in the media version.

The Swiss artist Christoph Draeger also uses re-enactment, enlarging to bizarre proportions documentary's propensity to focus on victims of wretched situations. He is interested in the way that events like accidents, natural disasters and hijackings are presented to us by the media. In his photo series *Catastrophes* he imitates media images by photographing scale models of disaster scenes (ill. p. 19).¹⁸ In the museum installation *Black September* he concentrates on the terrorist hijacking and murder of Israeli athletes during the 1972 Olympic Games in Munich, combining the original reporting with his own filmed reconstruction of the events in the room where the athletes were kidnapped.¹⁹ These images can be seen in the museum installation on television screens standing in a reconstruction of the scene of the crime, complete with furniture and objects such as ashtrays and bloodied clothes. Re-enactment is a way of penetrating to the essence of documentary images in order to comprehend them – providing insight, as it were, through re-experience.

Towards more visual literacy

The artists mentioned here differ in the degree to which reflection upon the documentary tradition is the main aim in their artistic work. Artists like Juul Hondius and Christoph Draeger refer much more explicitly to the effect of documentary images in mass media than for example

Martin Parr or Nan Goldin. Other artists may have different intentions when they make their work. Nevertheless, what the works have in common is that they analyse and comment on the structure and effect of documentary images in the mass media. This testifies to an increased visual literacy among artists and also makes an appeal for it among the viewers of the images. It is precisely this element that largely determines the meaning of these works and makes their relevance clear. The debate about the documentary in an art context should also take visual literacy as its starting point to a greater degree, thereby enabling the significance and value of documentary photography and film in art to be better assessed.

- 1 This description is based on a definition from 1969 by John Debes, one of the founders of the International Visual Literacy Association (www.ivla.org). Set up in the late Sixties in Rochester (New York), the Association unites scholars and professionals from such diverse backgrounds as photography, film, graphic design, art history, psychology and anthropology. 'Visual literacy' became a topic of discussion again in the Nineties in connection with developments in art education and museums. See, for example, *The Active Eye: an international symposium on art education and visual literacy*, Rotterdam (Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen/Nederlands Foto Instituut) 1997.
- 2 Andy Warhol and other Pop Art artists can be seen as early predecessors of this.
- 3 Olivier Lugon calls this the social-political function of documentary in his essay elsewhere in this collection (and further refers to a patrimonial and encyclopaedic function which goes beyond the scope of my essay, however). Abigail Solomon-Godeau calls this tradition 'reformist'. See 'Who is Speaking Thus?', in: Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Photography at the Dock*, (Media and Society 4), Minneapolis, 1991, pp. 169-183.
- 4 Grierson is writing with reference to Robert Flaherty's film *Moana*, in: *The New York Sun*, 1926. W. Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, New York, 1973, p. 9.
- 5 FSA stands for Farm Security Administration. Roy Stryker was head of the photography section of this department of the American Ministry of Agriculture and directed the extensive photography commissions carried out between 1935 and 1943.
- 6 After the war, a number of photographers active in the Dutch Resistance established the influential association of photographers GKF. Taco Anema et al. (eds), *GKF 50. Fotografie 1945-1995*, Amsterdam, 1995.

- 7 See the essays by Martha Rosler, Rosalind Krauss en Abigail Solomon-Godeau, for example. The exhibition 'Repositioning Documentary' took place in Amsterdam and Rotterdam (Galerie Perspectief/KunstRAI) in 1991.
- 8 This occurred on an international scale under the names 'visual literacy' and 'visuelle Kommunikation'.
- 9 Interestingly, museums during this period moved photography and film/video from the documentary department to the art depots and also started dealing with it as art.
- 10 In what follows I mean both groups when I speak of 'artists'.
- 11 www.akaKurdistan.com.
- 12 www.theatlasgroup.org.
- 13 Hiroshi Sugimoto, *Time Exposed*, Kyoto, 1991.
- 14 Juul Hondius, *A Complex Newspaper*, Amsterdam, 2002.
- 15 Sven Lütticken, on the exhibition 'Faction' by Juul Hondius in Galerie Akinci, Amsterdam, *ArtForum*, September 2003.
- 16 For more examples of re-enactment, other than those mentioned here, see Sven Lütticken's exhibition and publication *Life, Once, More*, Witte de With, Rotterdam, 2005.
- 17 Pierre Huyghe, *The Third Memory*, museum installation, 1999. See also: Pierre Huyghe, *The Third Memory*, Chicago/Paris (Renaissance Society/Centre Georges Pompidou) 2000.
- 18 Christoph Draeger, *Catastrophe* series, mid-Nineties. Draeger printed the photographs in a very large format, which amplified the spectacular effect of the disaster images even more.
- 19 Christoph Draeger, *Black September 2002*, synchronised two-channel video installation.