

“The Greenroom”

CCS GALLERIES AND HESSEL MUSEUM OF ART,
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THAT DOCUMENTARY is a kind of fiction is a truism today. But an aura of truth still hovers around the genre, despite its unavoidable manipulation. The artist Hito Steyerl has developed the term *documentality* to describe the kinds of truth—whether evidentiary, scientific, or journalistic—typically used to establish a shared reality, thereby lending authority to particular worldviews. In her own work, Steyerl aims to understand why some forms of documentary appear “truer” than others: She accords a special position to self-reflexive documentary films that, rather than asking viewers to take their veracity for granted, set out to traverse the slippery slope between fact and fiction.

This traversal is the theme of “The Greenroom: Reconsidering the Documentary and Contemporary Art,” recently launched at Bard College’s Center for Curatorial Studies and Art in Contemporary Culture. Organized by CCS director Maria Lind with Steyerl as her key consultant, “The Greenroom” is appropriately sprawling, given the breadth of its topic. It comprises two exhibitions; film and video screenings in various venues (and on local cable television); lectures; symposia; two publications (one forthcoming); and a behind-the-scenes “reference group”—a think tank, really—of artists whose work addresses issues of documentary truth. The two exhibitions are the major public face of the larger research project and will bookend its approximately three-year span.

The first exhibition (in the center’s galleries and the Hessel Museum of Art) was a hodgepodge affair that tossed almost every contemporary documentary strategy into the pot without differentiation. This was to the show’s benefit as well as to its detriment: It threw the

problem of documentary wide open, but without distinguishing between various practices. A central salon-style hanging of some one hundred photographic works, drawn from Bard’s permanent collection, epitomized this situation. The photographs included documents of performances by Ana Mendieta and Joseph Beuys, the straight photography of Larry Clark and Boris Mikhailov, and a wide array of more recent work by Vanessa Beecroft, An-My Lê, and even Jack Pierson. These wildly diverse practices raised the fundamental question: Can anything made with a camera be called documentary? This is a conundrum that, since the advent of photography, has been given very specific answers by figures ranging from Fox Talbot to Martha Rosler. Recognition of this historical context, in which the camera-based arts became rhetorically aligned with various notions of truth, would have been helpful to the viewer. Surely Pierson’s work, with its misty-eyed poetics, is substantially different from Rosler’s semiological dissection of documentary conventions? The danger here is that if everything becomes documentary, then nothing is.

Beyond the salon, the exhibition began to address this dilemma as it highlighted works that overtly acknowledge the specific conditions of contemporary documentality. Despite a curatorial reluctance to typologize, themes still emerged; the memoir and the tension between personal memory and public history were especially prominent. In *Inbox*, 2004–2005, Emily Jacir transcribed messages selected from her e-mail in-box into small, hand-lettered paintings. Documentary truth is here colored by personal affect, as Jacir and her correspondents attempt to come to terms with the events of the day—from 9/11 to the death of Edward Said—alongside private matters. The memoir also structures works like Steyerl’s *November*, 2004, in which the artist recounts the story of her friend’s transformation from militant manqué to bona fide rebel fighter and mythical media icon; or in Stephen Shore’s books of diaristic snapshots taken in one day, triggered by headlines from the *New York Times*. For the sound track of his short film *The Role of a Lifetime*, 2003, Deimantas Narkevicius interviewed Peter Watkins, one of the father figures of self-reflexive documentary, while strolling through a garden in Lithuania. We hear Watkins remark upon the surrounding decor—decommissioned monuments from the Stalinist era—while musing on the foibles

of Western history, its ruined claims to certainty and authority, as well as his own attempts to grapple with political truth in documentary form. He admits, “This thing called documentary is a creation, is a fake.” Watkins’s statement neatly summarizes the way in which contemporary documentary troubles the truth, compulsively musing on the making of history and grounding itself in the personal and the subjective. What is more, his comment indicates the shift that has occurred since John Grierson’s original coinage of the term *documentary* in the 1930s. Grierson had positioned documentary as Hollywood’s other, the ascetic opposite of lavish studio production, but like Watkins’s own practice, much of the work in “The Greenroom” is not opposed to artifice, Hollywood or otherwise. Rather, it takes artifice as a condition of any document, recognizing fiction as the basis of history by engaging head-on with fakery. The exhibition turns on this reversal. Take Petra Bauer’s *Der*

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Fall Joseph (The Case of Joseph), 2003, a purposefully inconclusive meditation on false testimony and the murder of a young Iraqi immigrant in Germany. Or Gitte Villesen’s *Authentic. Objective. Subjective. Or Which Rules Does One Follow?*, 2004, which considers the difficulties of transcribing recordings from Holocaust war crimes trials and the inaccuracies of media translation. Or Omer Fast’s *Spielberg’s List*, 2003, an account of extras who worked on *Schindler’s List* and the confusion between real events and their simulation for the purposes of big-budget movie-making. In an age when claims of “evidence” can provoke dire consequences, the reversal in documentary’s foundations—from fact to fiction—is all too timely. The first “Greenroom” exhibition began the necessary process of addressing this shift. Hopefully the closing exhibition will do so more systematically, by specifically attending to histories of documentary as well as the divergent strands of various contemporary practices. □

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Left: Martha Rosler, *The Past May Be Inevitable, But the Future Is Not*, 1999, color photograph, 17 1/2 x 22 1/2". Right: Jack Pierson, *Parents 50th Anniversary Flowers*, 1995, color photograph, 38 x 30".

