

documentary/
verité.
bio-politics,
human rights
and the
figure of
contemporary art
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"The only relation to art that can be sanctioned in a reality that stands under the constant threat of catastrophe is one that treats works of art with the same deadly seriousness that characterizes the world today." (Theodor W. Adorno)⁰¹

"We shouldn't let ourselves be overly impressed by the false maturity of the moderns who do not see a place for ethics—which they denounce as moralism—in reasonable discourse." (Emmanuel Levinas)⁰²

Prologue

This essay invites two analogous and complementary readings of ethics and aesthetics in contemporary art. The first part seeks to understand the relationship between the ideas of ethics and aesthetics that frame current debates in what is otherwise called political art. The second part is concerned with types of artistic practice that straddle the realm of art and documentary, and the problems they pose to our comprehension of reality in the context of art works, media images, and exhibitions of contemporary art. In the first, I shall analyze reasons for the remarkable transformation of the concept of the political in contemporary art, especially as it concerns both the subject and content of such art, that make secondary the formal means of the work. Secondly, the exhibition *documenta 11* provides the exemplary notice as a specific case study for how to read the disfigured tradition of the documentary as it converges with a surprisingly conservative notion of the disinterestedness of art in its relations with social life.

The Unhomely and the Anxiety of Global Modernity

A distance of nearly fifty years separates us from Adorno's statement, a statement all the more remarkable for its prescience in situating the strange disarticulation of criticality in recent art which

01 Theodor W. Adorno, "Voltaire Proust Museum," in *Adorno*, trans. Samuel and Sherry Weber (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1983), 196.

02 Emmanuel Levinas, "Dialogue on Thinking-of-the-Other," in *Shine Alone: Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 221.

above all else values an over-metabolized formalism by means of a strong return to abstraction in the advanced sectors of the art economy. To the degree that the art economy of the gallery system puts a high premium on commodity objects, the return to formalism and abstraction heralds a return to a kind of conservatism that all but abjures the kind of art which continuously registers a sense of what Sartre would have called *engagement*. What I am calling abstraction here should be understood not just in the sense of metaphysics. Modernist abstraction, especially, unfolds out of mechanistic, formal, and stylistic devices that constitute its representational frame—with a tendency towards the transcendental and the universal, on the part of Abstract Expressionism, and the metaphysical, in the case of geometric abstraction. In contemporary art, however, all these have become sublated, thereby pushing the concept of abstraction more in the direction of the opacity evident in recent abstract art's artful contentlessness. In spite of this deflation, a visible schism exists today between the aesthetes of formalism and those practitioners with political leanings, who—with dim memories of the institutional takeover of historical consciousness hovering over them—nevertheless insist on art's engagement with social life. What should be noticed in the current context, however, is how distanced works of art that evince a political stance are, on the one hand, from the old two-part model of Marxist critique of the commodity form and bourgeois society, and on the other, abstraction's interiorization of artistic vision as a uniquely and internally coherent world in which individual enactment takes precedence over that of the collective or social. The latter view purges the external world from the space of art, wishing for it a state of purity, a state which not only rejects illusionism, but also asserts that the full meaning of any art is to be found in its specific medium. This is the story of a particular view of art overseen by a brand of modernism famously argued for by Clement Greenberg.⁶³

⁶³ See Clement Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocöon," in *Collected Essays and Criticism: Perceptions and Judgments, 1928-1944*, vol. 1, ed. John O'Brien (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 23-38.

Today we are more or less witnessing the complete dissolution and evaporation of a kind of politically-driven art practice based on some notion of the critique of the commodity form and the struggle over the ownership of the means of production, determinations coterminous with a Marxian model of class struggle. If class formations no longer animate the modes of political art today, the other side of this development is the return of formalism as nothing but a great emptying out and banishment of the concept of the political in artistic matters, as if this would provide a cure for the anxiety of modernity. There is a novel idea behind this anxiousness surrounding the modern today, at the root of which is the crisis of the political in current artistic practice. Recent elaborations on modernity hold that within the space of less than two decades we have passed through two endings of modernity: first, with the collapse of communism and the fall of the Berlin Wall, we bore witness to the demise of a Marxist vision of modernity; and secondly, after September 11, 2001, came the dissolution of its liberal counterpoint. It would be tempting indeed to embrace the tenets of these grand conclusions, were it not for the inconclusiveness of history itself. No doubt, the architectural metaphor that accompanied both downfalls of two of the most significant political traditions of the modern era helps frame them both in time and image; modernity as a specter that hangs over the global collective consciousness.

What has emerged, however, is different from this and is not insignificant for cultural politics. The schism masks a deeper anxiety about the period we can call global modernity. This anxiety is manifest in an emerging battle within the critical comprehension, reception, and discussion of contemporary art, namely the opposition between ethics and aesthetics, or the conjunction of both. Recently, discussions of the relation between ethics and aesthetics, or politics and poetics in contemporary art have proliferated. The current upsurge in linking the ethical and the aesthetic—or the more familiar conjunction of art and politics—perhaps, owes something to what Irit Rogoff has described as the nature of "unbounded" or

'undisciplined' work" common to both artistic practice and its multiple locations today.⁶⁴ This unboundedness, which I have designated elsewhere as the condition of unhomeliness, is partly the result of a widescale global modernity of peoples, goods, and ideas permanently on the move, in constant circulation, reconfiguration, tessellation.⁶⁵ The condition of unhomeliness could also be interpreted in another way: in the alienation of our subjective development from the forces of domination and totalization, namely the ideology of unchecked capitalist triumphalism that seeks to sever alternative social models and relations of exchange not already bound exclusively to consumption and consumerism. This alienation, or simply the withdrawal from the homogenizing tyranny of global capitalism, discloses new subjectivities on the verge of transforming what Felix Guattari calls the "mass-media subjectivity" proper to the discourse of totalization.⁶⁶ In contemporary art this is being felt in the rejection of the singularity of the art object, image, or the cultural system that seemingly holds art together in a unified and universalized conception of artistic subjectivity. In Rogoff's idea of unbounded and undisciplined work there arises something no longer notional: artists' withdrawal from the institutionalized (musealized) model of art. Rather, for several decades now we have witnessed the inexorable attempt by artists to break with this totalization. Such attempts reveal a structured and self-conscious "indiscipline" against the conservative institutional idealization of art.⁶⁷

For contemporary art and other cultural practices, indisciplinary and unhomeliness is not just being out of tune with the established order nor the feeling and consciousness of being elsewhere, in exile, dislocated, displaced or rootless, but the contemplation in art that "culture operates metonymically, always simultaneously at

separate but parallel registers."⁶⁸ There is a recognition—by a surprising number of practitioners of contemporary art that assume activist and political modes of position-taking in the critical analysis of culture—that the dispersal of the discourses of art as it was once organized by postmodernism has now reached a watershed moment. The effect of this dispersal is that there is no singular location of culture or contemporary art. While artistic practices of the kind described above often appear in exhibitions and institutions of contemporary art, their destination and target extend well beyond those fora into the larger domain of the global public sphere. In a sense, the global public sphere is both the destination of such art and its target as well, for increasingly the kinds of contemporary art that assume an activist and political position have tended to be transnational in their strategy and tactically concerned with the location of art in the condition of the unhomey, that is, in the present.

The Human as a Limit Case of Modernity: Neo-Political Realism and the Twilight of Class in Artistic Practice

If we are, indeed, witnessing not just a structural antinomy but also a shift in the ideals of modern culture and its images, we do so to the degree that class struggle, which once heralded the promise of a grand social realignment of international civil society in economic and political terms, no longer defines the relationship between different actors in the political and cultural arena. Rather it is "Human Rights" that provides the ethical compass for our interaction with the world and one another. I will argue that the kinds of political realism in artistic practices often associated with social reality, and which to a great extent are also engaged with ethical consideration for human subjects, owe a great deal to the discovery by contemporary art of the importance of the idea of "bio-politics": a politics grounded in explorations of the meaning of life and the ethico-judicial sanctity of the human within current global realignments

64 In: Rogoff, "An/Theory/Elsewhere," "Dossier on documents 11," *Zeitschrift Kunst* (August 2002).
 65 Olufemi Enwezor, "At Home In the World: African Writers and Artists In 'Exile,'" In *Kunst-Welt im Dialog: Von Gruppen zur globalen Gegenwart*, ed. Marc Scheep, Yilmaz Dziewiczy, and Barbara M. Tolson (Cologne: DuMont, 1998), 330-8.
 66 Felix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, trans. Ian Pindar and Paul Simon (London: Athlone Press, 2000), 21.
 67 I borrow the notion of indiscipline from Barbara Vanderlinden and Jens Hoffmann's curatorial project "Indiscipline", where they, along with a multifaceted group of practitioners, explored the nature of creative agency in the face of the breakdown between disciplines and forms of art in Brussels in 2000. See Barbara Vanderlinden and Jens Hoffmann, *Indiscipline* (Brussels: Acomede, 2000), unpaginated brochure.

of political, economic, and cultural formations.^{99,10} In the former third world colonies in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America, liberation and decolonization movements were at the vanguard of this political and cultural reorientation. In the former second world the struggle against communist control of all social and cultural forces gave great impetus to the search for new political alternatives to the socialist utopia disfigured by Stalinism. In the first world of the West, the third and second world positions pointed to above were linked up with struggles occurring in areas such as civil rights, the feminist movement, the gay movement, and anti-racist, anti-war and anti-nuclear movements. The combination of all three interpretations of freedom (what could also be called a politics of rights) is at the heart of a new kind of political order to which contemporary art responds. The organizing instrument is "Human Rights" both in the narrow sense articulated by the Universal Declaration of Rights and in the broad sense of ethical filiation to the very structure of existence. While philosophy has engaged this question for a long time, its encapsulation in cultural and artistic terms is recent. In fact, it is worth emphasizing that the radical codification of bio-politics as the stress in the ethical relationship between a person and the state is specifically the issue taken up by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations General Assembly, on December 10, 1948. Though it does not spell out contemporary artists' concern with the ethical in a specific sense, in a more general sense this text is particularly

99 See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988). Arendt's discussion of *Vita Activa*, in which she identifies three forms of human activity—labor, work, and action—as the fundamental condition of life, as that which invests positive content in all human life, is important to the context of the idea of bio-politics. See also Michel Foucault, "Right of Death and Power over Life," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 267. Foucault comments that in the discourse of bio-politics "what we have seen has been a very real process of struggle: life as a political object was in a sense taken at face value and pitted back against the system that was bent on controlling it. It was life more than the law that became the issue of political struggles, even if the laws were formulated through affirmations concerning rights. The 'right' to life, to one's body, to health, to happiness, to the satisfaction of needs and, beyond all the oppressions or 'alienations,' the 'right'—which the classical juridical system was utterly incapable of comprehending—was the political response to all these new procedures of power which did not derive, either, from the traditional right of sovereignty."

10 In his humanist-oriented essay *The Three Ecologies*, Guzmán spells out an interesting program of thought that reiterates the debate on the human in what he calls *Ecopsychy*. In this philosophy, in which he deals with the disastrous consequences for the present ecological system based on man-made changes, there is a triangulation of what he calls an "ethico-political articulation... between the environment, social relations, and human subjectivity." Guzmán, *The Three Ecologies*, 28. He brings these three intersecting questions to rest on the "ecopsychic problematic... of the production of human existence itself in new historical contexts." *Ibid.*, 34.

illuminating when one attends to contemporary artists' concern with the ethical. Both the preamble and Article 3 of the declaration spell it out. In the first two paragraphs of the preamble the rationale is established:

Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world,

Whereas disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people

Article 3 reiterates the preamble unequivocally: Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person."

Human rights craft thus began with the idea of the human as a limit case under overwhelming coercive force. Therefore, if human rights were constructed for human beings, it would logically follow that human rights as such are regimes crafted to accede to and intercede on behalf of the human. Such rights then, can only be accorded to life and therefore only to the living, hence the importance of bio-politics. We know the immediate historical context that attended and supported this juridical commandment, and it has an image: Auschwitz. Auschwitz was based on the evidence of the overwhelming industrial manufacture of death. Photographs and documentary footage of the liberated camps confronted the world with an ethical question, namely, if the Nazis murdered their victims by first reducing them to the legal category of the non-human, how can the enlightened laws of the post-war international system restore such rights? Thus the Holocaust has come to represent the exemplary test for the question of the human. More than fifty years have not diminished its lesson, if anything it has intensified the questions it raises. Even as Foucault claimed that "what is at stake today is life," it would appear that despite the frequency of wholesale slaughters taking place today, we have become more

11 For the full text of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights see www.un.org/Overview/rights.

injured than ever to what Susan Sontag calls "the pain of others," while human rights discourse has grown even more.^{12,13} The helplessness of the Palestinian struggle and quest for self-determination and a homeland illustrates this. This helplessness is made all the more hopeless when given an image: the Intifada, which has been sometimes described as the struggle between two categories of victims and dispossessed: the Arab and the Jew.¹⁴

Being for the Other and the Ethics of Looking

In this regard, Sontag's analysis and defense of photographic or filmic representations that draw our attention to catastrophes initiated by violence is striking, especially since it goes against the grain of the treatment of images of violation as merely a media window into banal spectacle, as a worrying pornography of victimization and violation.¹⁵ She argues forcefully against such reductive reasoning about the meaning of images in public discourse; instead she made a plea for what could be called an "ethics of looking" in our confrontations with the pain of other people. The eye as an ethical apparatus, more than a prophylactic membrane to ward off the unseemly, the evil eye of death, locates the visual field as the site "for an unfinished work of mourning."¹⁶ For the most part, Sontag's excursus was concerned with documentary photography and photojournalism and their ability to touch a part of the spectator's humane feeling, in short, the concern for another human being.

12. Michel Foucault, quoted in Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 7.
13. Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003). Lucid and mesmerizing, Sontag seeks the pervasive contemporary appropriation of images of violence, the blind stare which detaches itself from the "Pain of Others" through recourse to absurd rationalizations.
14. See Susan Strymlic, *The Object of Memory: Arab and Jew Narrate the Palestinian Struggle* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998) for a scrupulous and moving account of the convergence of two positions of the victim in the historic debate on the politics of displacement.
15. Jean Baudrillard pushed this form of argument to a new level of absurdity in his book *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*. Baudrillard's caveat deploys his familiar theory of the simulacrum in which all representation disappears into the image, with mass media serving as the corpse (both in the literal sense and in the sense of concealment) through which we perceive reality. In order to insist that what the first Gulf War amounted to was nothing more than a media spectacle, a virtualization of the image of war that obviates the actuality of that war. While one can certainly agree that the American prosecution of the war gave the impression of the war as an electronic video screen in the early days of the war, subsequent documentary footage of bombed-out Baghdad and the infamous "highway of death" refutes the assertion of over-theatization provided by his analysis. Sontag's point is that all too often, we shy away from the terrible suffering because we search for an enlightened response that absolves us from seeing what lies immediately before our field of perception.
16. Arlette Abouley, *Deen's Showcase: The Power of Image in Contemporary Democracy*, trans. Ruvik Daniloff (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2001), 4.

Despite her passionate, trenchant argument—persuasive both in its substance and in its analytical insight about photography ballasted by numerous historical examples—suspicions of the ideological machinations that surround the kind of images she offers in her examples remain quite entrenched within visual art. In visual art, a hole in vision, a blindspot, the blank stare, a halating gaze, have been developed as the essential prophylaxis proper to the documentary form. To wit, there is often a moralization in the name of critical questioning of the morality of the documentary that has consistently degraded its efficacy unless it is treated allegorically, à la Warhol. This paradoxical situation corrodes the peculiar position taken by art that stakes a territory within the tension between ethics and aesthetics, or politics and poetics.

The question of paying attention to the "pain of others" especially as it is registered and indexed in representation (be it photographic, filmic, or archival) arises purely as a consequence of the development of human rights. Yet others have argued, precisely, against this identification of the documentary. To purists, documentary's "noble" tradition abjures those kinds of images of the mass anonymous others often caught unawares or dead in the sooty, grainy newsprint of the global news industry. It also refuses the aestheticized horror pictures stylized for quick uncritical consumption as redemptive "truth," as evidence or tokens for which contemporary guilt industries (Amnesty International, Doctors Without Borders, etc.) produce images that court unrestrained witness bearing. Thus the claim of a double kind of violence being visited upon the figures of the violated by the mere repetition of the tabular index of horror.

This begs the question: why have contemporary artists responded to human rights or concern for the other as the ethical limit of any engagement with the world? One suspects that modern traumatography abetted by the machinery of media technologies has much to answer for here. The frequency with which a large group of artists such as Fazel Sheikh, Alfredo Jaar, Kendall Geers,

William Kentridge, amongst others, take up such positions in their work may then lead one to conclude, though not unqualifiedly, that images of the mass phenomenon of displaced people, the carnage of war, genocidal massacres, crimes against humanity, the devastation of famine, manmade ecological disasters, and natural disasters in the media have been contributing factors. Also, radical art, like radical politics, has a natural response to power that gives a certain frisson to the Faustian relationship between ethics and aesthetics, politics and poetics. But if the ethical is a test for our commitment to each other's being, qua existence, how do we square this test with the aesthetic, which in Kantian fashion is concerned with the "lofty" ideal of the sublime, the sensation of the beautiful?¹⁷ When W. B. Yeats writes about a terrible beauty being born, is this not the ground of the ethical and aesthetic (which now is being cheaply merchandised as a special kind of political effect in contemporary art) heaving before us?¹⁸ Are singularized effects of denunciation effective artistic arguments against complex political realities? Or might this concern be more in line with Levinas' moral philosophy of an ethical relationship between two people, grounded in the cognitive embodiment of the other's existence?

Activism and Counter-Power

I will now try to explore the general topography of politically oriented art and its roots in current discussions of power and rights, which elucidates some of the issues I have been tracing. I should also make clear that I am using human rights here in a strictly narrow sense: in its manifestation in politically oriented art, and the putatively ethical weight it gives such art. One of the central principles of contemporary art that unambiguously effects a political stance is

its engagement with bio-politics. The second principle is that its actions seek to mediate the relationship between national and transnational domains of rights. A typical example is the German-based *kein mensch ist illegal*, a collective of activists, artists, and tactical media groups working around issues of immigration, and on behalf of refugees, *sans papiers*, and in raising awareness around the often violent deportation of illegal immigrants from European countries. *Kein mensch ist illegal*, both in its work and its configuration, has moved beyond the traditional framework of being purely an artistic or activist group. It is neither one nor the other. Put another way, it is consciously hybridized, which means it is both an activist and artistic group simultaneously. This allows a degree of flexibility in its tactical formations, along with the tools of its work, which adopt and adapt the instruments of art, propaganda, media, and social protest as make-shift swerving speculums, probing and testing the resilience of the system's attempt to contain disobedience. While its activities are grounded in the struggles for rights of those spectral, shadowy communities comprising immigrants, refugees, and *sans papiers*, *kein mensch ist illegal* disavows any interest in charity or humanitarian work. Rather its principal focus is on the question of rights. This stance is also the source of its name: based on the juridical idea that "no one is illegal." For *kein mensch ist illegal*, to declare a class of people as illegal is to refute the very foundation of human rights; a negation, which it suggests, questions the very category of the human, specifically the non-European other as a foreigner, the unwelcomed stranger.¹⁹

Xenophobia, Xenophilia, Racism, and the Human

As Sarat Maharaj has shown and as can be seen in the work of Ruth Wodak, there is an intense correlation between xenophobia

¹⁷ For Kant's aesthetic theory from which much debate on the question of the aesthetic; in art, draws see NB 1784 essay "The Sense of the Beautiful and of the Sublime" in *The Philosophy of Kant: Immanuel Kant's Moral and Political Writings*, ed. Carl J. Friedrich (New York: The Modern Library, 1949).

¹⁸ W. B. Yeats, "Easter 1916," in *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats*, vol. 1, ed. Richard Rieuwerts (New York: MacMillan, 1963).

¹⁹ For a full account of *kein mensch ist illegal*'s work see Florian Schneider/*kein mensch ist illegal*, "New Rules of the New Anarchy 3.0," in *Democracy Unrealized: Documents 1, Platform 1*, ed. David Enwezor, Carlos Sosaudo, Sarat Maharaj, et al. (Stuttgart: Hugo Cantz, 2002), 179-83; see also <http://www.anarchy.org> for further development of its work.

and xenophilia in the discourse of racism.^{20,21,22} Xenophobia and xenophilia manifest assumptions in their understanding of race in their excessive non-recognition and recognition of the other. The fundamental ethical lapse in both is the manner in which each, in its own way, elides the complex assumptions which undergird the politics of race in contemporary culture. It is not a coincidence that the discourse of multiculturalism and certain digestible acknowledgments of difference have suffered in the context of art and culture due to this ambiguity. Furthermore, xenophobia and xenophilia underline an uneasiness and a false intimacy with the subject of racism. Both can be irrational either in its phobic response to the other or in its obsessive enthusiasm for all things different. In cultural and artistic discourse this schism cannot be emphasized enough. This negation which is both the source of xenophobia and racism is apparent in the recent rise of far right parties which run on anti-immigrant political planks and are often unambiguously racist in their discourse.²³ The late Pim Fortuyn, who made the non-European immigrant the antithesis of a sustainable ideal of multicultural Netherlands, designed his entire party manifesto around what he called *Livable Netherlands*, a quality of life program advocating the expulsion of immigrants from the Netherlands. Racism, as such, is demonstrably an example of the human as a limit case, for it conceives of the other on the basis of a defect, as the pure manifestation of a negation.²⁴ Therefore, to make the other or the "victim" the subject of art, as the image of a critical recall that stands between the artist and the spectator,

before the institution and the law brings her contingent status in representation to a level of visibility hitherto unrecognized by the regimes of invisibility that otherwise surround and veil her in public discourse. Such a human presence disturbs, agitates, and discomfits the visual field in which her presence is both registered and so to speak extirpated. This appearance—which is always anticipated with anxiety, for it is the impossible visibility of an apparition, the immanence of the stranger—has been described by Julia Kristeva in speaking of the stranger amongst us as that which disturbs identity, order, legality.^{25,26} The human as a ghostly presence, as more than a metaphor for illegality, as a shadow before the law, marks the separation between those identified as legal, and therefore properly human (Europeans, white men) and those (Africans, Arabs, Roma, Asians, women, gays, and lesbians, etc.) who must seek the status of normalcy for their inclusion into the human family by first exorcizing their strangeness, foreignness, otherness.

Thus, while it has spotlighted violations by the German government of European Union human rights laws concerning the repatriation and deportation of refugees and asylum seekers, *kein mensch ist illegal* works against the German immigration law in the name of a larger universal ethical principle, one that repudiates the illegalization of desperate immigrants. The given doxa of classical political art is that it intervenes within the means of production and in the cracks between the tectonic plates of class formations.

20 See Sami Mahdavi's essay in *Education, Information, Entertainment: Context Approaches on Higher Artistic Education*, ed. Ute Meta Bauer (Vienna: Edition selene, 2001).

21 Ruth Woods, "Inequality, Democracy and Performative Discourses," in *Democracy Unsettled*, ed. Oliver Elsworth, Carlos Bazalido, Ute Meta Bauer, et al. (Stuttgart: Hatje Cantz, 2002), 151-68.

22 Hans-Joachim Lauth, *The Origins of Racialism* (San Diego and New York: Harcourt, 1998). For a particularly thorough analysis of the development of the concept of race as justification for, and indictment of, dispossession of civil and human rights, see the chapter "Race and Bureaucracy," 186-221.

23 In Europe in the last decade there has been a particularly intense upsurge of racist far right and neo-Nazi political parties such as Jean-Marie Le Pen's Front National in France, Jörg Haider's FPÖ (Freedom Party) in Austria, Filip Dewinter's Vlaams Blok in Belgium, Pim Fortuyn's Lijst Pim Fortuyn in Holland, the election of the nationalist right wing ruling party in Denmark. Amongst others entering into the political mainstream. The spectacular results achieved by Le Pen and Haider in recent elections makes clear that these developments are part of the main stream of racial discourse in the affirmative populist politics and culture, especially in Europe. See for example Etienne Balibar, "Racist and Other," Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* (London: Verso, 1991), 217-27.

24 See W. E. B. Dubois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Bantam, 1989), first published in 1905. Dubois was perhaps the first thinker to draw our attention to the question of race in modernity. In "Of the Dawn of Freedom," the second section of his classic treatment of race and the American experience, he writes: "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line—the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men [sic] in Asia and Africa, in America and islands of the sea." One hundred years after Dubois's treatise, Paul Gilroy in a recent work *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 2000) has taken up and extended this theme in a powerful and clerical critique of the persistence of racial discourses in contemporary culture.

25 More than any other group of thinkers it is revolutionary third-world, anti-colonial intellectuals who foregrounded bio-politics more than class as the founding principle of all political and cultural struggles. See for example Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Mask*, trans. Charles Lam Markham (New York: Grove Press, 1967) particularly the chapter "The Negro and Recognition." The concluding passage of the chapter sketches the degree to which the struggle for the conception of the human has been made the object of all ethical and political considerations of otherness. Fanon writes in this passage: "I said in my Introduction that man is a yes. I will never stop reiterating that. Yes to life. Yes to love. Yes to generosity. But, man is also a no. No to scorn of man. No to degradation of man. No to exploitation of man. No to the butchery of what is most human in man: freedom."

26 For a full treatment of this subject see Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

It was not until the rise of fascism that it became clear that the subject of political art was about to be transformed. It never recognized, however, the importance of otherness and its potent political reality within the visual field. Careful appraisal of artistic formations today makes it clear that they deviate from classical ideas of political art, at least in one respect. The target of this art is not simply systemic, centered on the political entity of the state, its ideology, apparatus, agents. Rather, it involves a perhaps surprising principle of the universalization of the concept of the human evoked by human rights. It is on behalf of such a universal principle that institutions and organs of global multinational and transnational business and policy bodies—such as the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, or Nike, Shell, Exxon—have also become targets of attack. The methods, employed in the name of art, to address some of these issues consequently have had to change, both in their form and orientation. It is in this sense that Rogoff's notion of the unbounded and undisciplined work is a brilliantly novel conceptualization of what many think of as the conjunction between politics and art or ethics and aesthetics.²⁷ Such work, in my view, neither sensationalizes aesthetics nor spectacularizes the ethical.

The Deterritorialized Site of Art and Politics: Contemporary Art in a Time of Crisis

A distinguishing feature of the ethical and aesthetical in current practice is its deterritorialized nature. As I have been arguing, this kind of work is Janus-faced: it is conscious of its form and right as an artistic intervention while imbricating its relation to the conditions and topographies of reception beyond the traditional boundaries of art. It should also be noted that this kind of work is distinctly different from the old political art of the European avant-garde

²⁷ Recent anti-globalization battles in Seattle, Prague, Montreal, Genoa, Guadalupe are instances of the kind "unbounded" and "undisciplined" work is being taken up by certain forms of political art. There is now a recognition, even in such insular clubs as the Davos Economic Summit in Switzerland, of the importance of culture as an instrument of economic policy discussion. The organizers of Davos have since begun inviting "cultural producers" to its discussions on global governance.

which regarded fascism as the enemy and whose politics were based on the solidarity of working class struggles, which it hoped would lead to the relation of the utopia of proletarian rule and culture. The productivist model of the Russian avant-garde in the Soviet Union after 1917 was inspired by this utopianism. The same was the case, for instance, in Mexico where revolutionary artists such as Diego Rivera and other Muralists were concerned with the relation of a worker's rule through the power of a peasant revolution. Or in the *Resistance Art* model in South Africa where art under apartheid harnessed its energy to the overthrow of a totalitarian and racist regime.

Partly because of the revolution in communication technologies, art and politics are now much more broadly concerned with conditions of social life: the environment, human rights, globalization, racism, nationalism, and social justice. In their combination they identify and interact with disciplinary formations that distend the formal boundaries of official artistic discourse. Nevertheless, the surprising, and some would argue troubling, aspect of this kind of work is its tendency to transform ethical concerns into aesthetic devices and vice versa. To the degree that artists editorialize on the nature of social life today, the critical ability of such actions to effect change remains, thus far, in remand. But what interests me in this development is not whether activist or politically invested artists express the "correct position" with the correct forms, instead I am interested in their always-stated interest in an ethics rooted in the conception of bio-politics.²⁸

Thus, when we attempt to grasp the conjunction of ethics and aesthetics, or politics and poetics, we must in effect recognize the importance and global dimension of the discourse of human rights. Consequently, even when what artists spotlight may be local—such as Alfredo Jaar's work on Rwanda and the Union Carbide

²⁸ For a fruitful reading of the task of the artist operating under the understanding of a political commitment, see Walter Benjamin's essay "The Author as Producer," in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Osmund (New York: Schocken, 1978), 220–38; see also (Jean-Paul Sartre, *What is Literature? and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968) for his elaboration of the notion of committed literature.

disaster in Bhopal, India—the tactical public is always global.²⁹ Throughout his career Jaar has made the critique of predatory capitalism and human rights violations signature issues in his work. In *Let There Be Light: The Rwanda Project, 1994–1998* Jaar was one of the first (and remains one of the few) artists to respond to the mass killings that took place over a period of one hundred days in the summer of 1994. Artists like Jaar, (here the art of Hans Haacke is crucial) work at disclosing the complex transnational web that illuminates not only their project but also the interests of multinational formations. Take, for example, Haacke's sculpture *U.S. Isolation Box, Grenada, 1983*, a cube of plywood that evokes the claustrophobia of confinement and imprisonment made in the aftermath of the US invasion of Grenada. Whether in Jaar's or Haacke's work, what we witness is a new kind of thinking that has inverted and transformed the old maxim: "all politics is local" to "all local politics is now global." The universal umbrella of human rights offers a peculiar sort of protection to local causes once they are reframed in a global context. Notice, for instance, that many grassroots social movements and Non-Governmental Organizations may have their specific contexts in local conditions, but often appeal to the global public sphere in order to make effective their individual projects. Sub-commandante Marcos and his Zapatistas in Mexico, the AIDS activists' campaign against pharmaceuticals in South Africa, the late Ken Saro Wiwa's Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) in Nigeria are recent examples of this transformation. Even the most odious of these interests, Al Qaeda, uses the appeal of various local anti-modern Islamic fundamentalisms to export its universalizing ethos of terror and spiritual redemption.

Where political or ethical considerations are specifically foregrounded in an artist's work—for example: in the work of the realist painter Leon Golub; Paul Stopforth's graphite drawings during his years in South Africa; Luis Camnitzer's investigations of torture in

29 Alfredo Jaar, *It is DEMAND: Ten Years and Let There Be Light: The Rwanda Project, 1994–1998* (Barcelona: AOC, 1998).

Uruguay during that country's dictatorship; Willie Doherty's videos and photographs detailing the sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland; Martha Rosler's reworking of images of the Vietnam War as a measured critique of American neo-colonial offensive in Southeast Asia; Chris Burden's Vietnam War counter-memorial; William Kentridge's drawings for projection, which focus on the legacy of apartheid; the solemn performance of the activist group Mothers of Plaza de Mayo's daily vigil in Buenos Aires in behalf of their disappeared children during Argentina's "dirty war"—human rights as such frames the relationship between the producer and receiver. Artists, such as Leon Golub, have made resistance to the constant threat of disappearance of public memory a test for the stress between the ethical and aesthetic. Golub's unrealistically painted realist paintings are conceived specifically as counterpaintings to the opacity of formalist abstraction in which the specificity of the human form had been annulled. For four decades he has demonstrated his commitment to indexing and re-elaborating in his unsettled, agitated paintings, media images that represent in extremis the precariousness of the human body under violent state repression. In such key series of works as *Vietnam (1972–74)*, *Mercenaries (1979–87)*, *Interrogations (1981–86)* and *White Squads (1982–87)*, we are confronted by a panoply of fragmented and isolated images projected against the backdrop of neutral surroundings, all of them specific to and concerned with the deracination of human life. It is as if both naked power and naked life are simultaneously isolated in the ghostly outlines of his sparsely painted, distressed, cleaved canvasses. Likewise, Stopforth's mortuary drawings—a set of reductive drawings of fragments of Steve Biko's mutilated body after his death through torture—play a similarly mnemonic role as Golub's and are no less powerful for their overt political claim to representing violations of the body. Similar concerns are the frame around which Camnitzer's *From the Uruguayan Torture Series* is defined. In each of these artistic positions, what stands out are individual responses to naked power and naked life in representation. The

ethical questions posed by much recent art are never about the question of the aesthetic merit of the work alone. Nor is it just about linking the content of the work to the moral claim of the art. Even if the empirical grounding of such content is never literalized so as to assume unmitigated claims of truth, the appearance of such content in visual representation always represents a risk for both the art and artist, institution and spectator.

Identity Politics and the Rediscovery of the Human in Contemporary Art

I have argued throughout this text that the location of the ethical in contemporary art, or the opposition of the ethical and aesthetic, arises precisely from the legacy of human rights insofar as the category of the human is what is at stake. I want to offer further examples for consideration in this discussion. When we frame certain types of artistic practice around issues of identity—be it cultural, gender-based, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and nationality—we are basically witnessing the serious force given each of these domains by human rights and its evolution in the last fifty years. Each of these domains defines itself around and against principles of power and rights. Consider, for instance, certain activities of artists, such as Group Material, who take up methods of advocacy around political subjectivity, education and health in their work, or activist groups such as ACT UP, who work on the basis of enlightened self-interest in matters concerning the AIDS crisis that ravaged the gay community in the 1980s, or Claude Lanzmann's epic film on the Holocaust, *Shoah*. Even Hollywood films such as *Schindler's List*, which took on the role of bearing witness on behalf of victims of the Holocaust was founded upon identity discourses and the shroud of human rights that envelopes each of them. The destabilizing and subversive rapture often associated with the work of Félix González-Torres (one of the most thorough and complex convergences of the tension surrounding ethics and aesthetics); the ghostly monologues on race and identity in Glen Ligon's coal dust

and stenciled paintings; the ambiguous and lugubrious archives that make up Christian Boltanski's work are caught in this tension. Generalized images that appeal to our sense of "humanity" or categorically reinvest the condition of the human with contingency, works that take up the excursus of trauma: a flash of the tumescent flesh of the wounded body or the wordless scream of the witness before a catastrophe are just as equally implicated in this account. Thus, the more practices and discourses of contemporary art recognize these categories as legitimate artistic strategies, the more human rights will ever remain both the silent narrative and specter that haunts the ethical and aesthetic in contemporary art.

Documenta 11 and the Documentary as a Form of Unraveling Truth

I now wish to consider the effect of these questions as it bears on the reception of documenta 11, for which I served as the artistic director between 1998 and 2002. To many observers, documenta 11 was the culmination of a development in contemporary art in which increasingly the documentary form became the dominant artistic language, particularly in photographic, film, and video work represented in its fifth platform: the exhibition. The surplus of modes of the "documentary," whether materialist or indexical, the "overcompensation" in the exhibition of works with a "political agenda," and the "overwhelming" relationship to social life were read as ethical messages by the exhibition organizers to a jaded global leftist public. Moreover, such messages were held to reveal the ideological proclivities of the organizers rather than their interest in traditional notions of art. In fact, the exhibition was perceived as that moment when the global left's "evangelical" zeal and concern with human rights led to severe reduction in the aesthetic nature of the art and thus promoted a certain political pleading by the many documenta-

80 A particularly disconcerted view of the exhibition could be read in the alarmed review of Blake Gopnik, the art critic of *The Washington Post*, whose article drew out of thin air the obscure notion that the exhibition was anti-American. See Blake Gopnik, "Fully Freighted Art: At Documenta 11, A Bumpy Ride for Art World's Avant-Garde," *Washington Post* (June 16, 2002). Another view of the evangelical, puritanical attitude of the exhibition was offered by Michael Kimmelman, chief art critic of *The New York Times*. In his article, "Global Art Show With an Agenda," *The New York Times*, June 18, 2002.

ries of a view of the world shaped by politics more than art.³⁰ In this account, the documentary not only trumps art, it subordinates it so completely that any relation to art is vitiated by the curatorial agenda. Understood so tendentiously, the bliss of the autonomy of art freed from any socio-political regulation ends precisely at that moment when the opposition between ethics and aesthetics is established, thus forcing viewers to take sides. Of course, this account has little resemblance either to the exhibition that my colleagues and I curated, or to the one I witnessed along with hundreds of thousands of visitors to Kassel.

Some time has passed since the final segment, the fifth platform of documenta 11 opened in Kassel in June, 2002. It now appears possible to revisit some of the points made by its critics. Returning to the idea of the "unbounded" and "undisciplined" work, as a framework around which to articulate the general vicissitude and unhomely condition of contemporary art, the project of documenta 11 was to probe specific instances of this change. Most of you will remember that the fifth platform was designated as the locus of the exhibition, part of the broad visual field of documenta 11's project. You might also remember that the logic of the documenta 11 platforms was partly based on a set of discursive relationships between sites of theoretical practice and those of visual practice, each site elaborating on questions and ideas proper to its own field of discourse, but also interrogating assumptions accruing to the other fields. Another element of the discursive is the pursuit in the exhibition, to present and argue for works with an awareness of their own intelligibility in the social context of today's world. The discursive was however, not based on the relativization of art and politics, the cultural and the social, or even the ethical and the aesthetic. Neither was it based on the usual opposition between the center and margin. The discursive was a term employed to delineate the correspondence between systems of meaning; between locations, publics, audiences, and institutions. It afforded us the ability to be engaged with those disciplinary formations that arise

precisely at the point where visual practice can no longer claim sole legitimacy for the hermeneutic function of art.

I could perhaps say this is where the notion of the ethical may be located in documenta 11, insofar as the ethical is concerned in the agonistic exchange between different interlocutors; the relation with the other, what Foucault calls, in a non-adversarial exchange, "reciprocal elucidations."³¹ This relation to the other has often been explored in connection with the concept of truth. I am thinking of truth here as akin to how Alain Badiou uses it as: "the real process of a fidelity to an event that which this fidelity *produces* [original italics] in the situation."³² The amanuensis of this truth is the other, evoked by Levinasian ethics in our identification with the other, the other as a figure to whom we owe the possibility of this absolute fidelity. The central concern for the other, the being-for-the-other of which Levinas speaks, is the ground for the principle of the intersubjective that governs the communicative principle of an exchange between two people. Therefore, the concept of truth requires first that the other exists in every intersubjective, reciprocal exchange. This is a recognition of the basis of power relations. I do not use the other here in an ethnographical sense. Rather, in the sense of the recognition of one's own limits in relation to another subjectivized position, be it a text, an artwork, a spoken exchange. We initiate each of our interactions in this regard with a fund of trust in the integrity of the subjectivized position. The other, then, exists neither as an aberration nor as an opposition. It exists, always, in dialectical relation to multiple modes of subjectivization.

Let us return to Badiou. According to what he terms the ethic of a truth, the relationship to the other,

is the principle that enables the continuation of a truth-process ... that which lends consistency to the presence of some-one in the composition of the subject induced by the process of this truth.³³

31 Michel Foucault, "Foucault, Politics, and Problematizations" in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth, Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, vol. 1, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: New Press, 1997), 111.

32 Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (London: Verso, 2001), 42.

33 *Ibid.*, 44.

If that be the case, the grounds of the ethical as such in documenta 11 are not in the relativization of ethics and aesthetics, but in a middle course: *the composition of the subject induced by the process of spectator and the work of art.* This means that documenta 11 was, rather, an active, entangled field of procedures for which different practitioners and publics shared responsibility, sometimes in mutual intelligibility and sometimes not. Such a shared zone of responsibility is the zone of subjectivized practices.

Reality Effect and the Representation of Social Life ³⁴

Now that documenta 11 has become historical, in the sense that its evaluation belongs both to the past and the present, we can look back to all its constitutive parts and begin the task of unraveling both its proposals and its public reception. When the exhibition first opened—to almost universal perplexity with regard to its temporal and spatial density—a common idea came to define the nature of the project, the idea that it was invested in what Barthes termed “the reality effect” in its attunement to the representation of social life in multiple works. Kim Levin, the critic of the *New York Village Voice*, proclaimed the exhibition the CNN Documenta.³⁵ Linda Nochlin who offered a careful reading of works in the exhibition, saw images in the exhibition as supported by various and expanded accounts of the documentary. She correctly noted the degree to which many works functioned at the level of the relationship between images and social reality.³⁶ Despite these, the critical misappreciation and misapprehension of the structural and critical intent of the exhibition to elaborate on the reasons why artists and other image-makers had become obsessed with reality as such and the representation of everyday life, along with their effects on contemporary consciousness, was noteworthy in this sense. Not only was the problematic of the documentary elided as more than an account

of the political subjectivity of its makers, the exhibition’s multiple organization of images, forms, practices, and discursive fields was only able to be perceived through the rubric of the documentary mode precisely because it clashed with the traditional understanding of what the work of art is relative to social reality.

A simple tour of the exhibition venues confirms the curatorial cornerstone of our project, namely to generate in a comprehensive, systematic, taxonomic, and typological fashion and to demonstrate through a number of complex morphologies the ways through which the logic of the archive and document suffuse and penetrate activities of art and procedures of image production in the last 40 years. The disparate and oftentimes antagonistic procedures—such as one finds in Allan Sekula’s *Fish Story*; Alfredo Jaar’s *Rwanda Project*; Bernd and Hilla Becher’s *Half-Timbered Houses of the Siegen Industrial Zone*; Jef Geys’s *Day and Night and Day...*; Zarina Bhimji’s *Out of Blue*, Fiona Tan’s *Countenance*; Igloolik Isuma Productions’s *Nunavut (Our Land)*; Black Audio Film Collective’s *Handsworth’s Song*—are not reducible to documentary as such.

A brief excursion into the formal and scopic conception of each of the works cited above provides a fascinating map and disorients the reading of the term “documentary” as a specific mode of photographic or filmic articulation of reality. In fact, there are many more works in the exhibition that even further complicate the documentarist thrust. For example, Isaac Julien’s probing film on paradise and loss in *Paradise Omeros*; Steve McQueen’s double meditation on history, labor, and exile in *Western Deep* and *Carib’s Leap*, Ulrike Ottinger’s *Südostpassage* (South East Passage), a melancholic traversal of the anonymous, abandoned, yet thriving and alive corners of old cities in the second world; Amar Kanwar’s *A Season Outside*, a wrenching cinematic tone poem on partition blues acted out daily at the border crossing that separates India and Pakistan at Wagah, the result of the last colonial act at remapping postcolonial spaces; Eyal Sivan’s *The Specialist*; *Eichmann in Jerusalem and Itsembatsemba*; *Rwanda One Genocide Later*. Might

³⁴ See Boris Groys, “Art in the Age of Biopolitics: From Artwork to An Documentation,” for a highly nuanced discussion of the relationship between reality and representation of life as a social fact within certain forms of artistic practice in *Documenta 11, Problems: Exhibition*, ed. Olvid Eneanya et al. (Stuttgart: Hatje Cantz, 2002), 108–14.
³⁵ See Kim Levin, “The CNN Documenta: Art in an International State of Emergency,” *The Village Voice*, July 2, 2002.
³⁶ See Linda Nochlin, “Documented Success,” *Artforum* (September 2002): 169–82.

one be consoled to learn that all these disparate works—while surely “documentary” in the limited sense applied to them by inattentive critics—do not as a rule share in the devalued image machine we often ascribe when using the epithet “photojournalism,” especially in the predatory form of stalking sensational pictures as a hunter would stalk game?³⁷ In fact, an artist like Touhami Ennadre, who presented in the exhibition a study of the grief and mourning surrounding the destruction of the World Trade Center, vigorously disputes any attempt to associate his work with such an epithet. Even the more benign term “documentary” does not satisfy him in terms of what he believes to be the purpose of his photographic work: to make singular photographic work that speaks to the authenticity of each given situation to the degree that the photograph can no longer be read as just mere information. Yet Chantal Akerman embraces the contradiction with the documentary inherent in film firmly in her cinematic practice in which the image serves both a heuristic purpose and an aesthetic one. She, who is herself the child of Holocaust survivors, makes no secret of her identification with victims, which oftentimes is perceived as part of the ideological baggage much documentary work carries. Her film *D'Est*, which tracks the endlessness of the vast emptiness that attended the dissolution of the Soviet empire, is remarkable not only for its oneiric quality, but also for its gritty realism. Watching the blue haze that coats the mood of the film, one literally has the feeling of watching dusk settling on the after-life of the second world. The film can therefore be read as a kind of *summa* of that after-life.

Vérité, Reality, Affect

So far I have been commenting on one peculiar terminology: the word “documentary” which was recurrent in most commentaries about images in documenta 11. Now what I wish to do is to introduce

37 A more apt term might be the distinction made by Walker Evans between the “documentary style” and the documentary as a form.

a second term: the French word *vérité*. I propose that we explore the questions raised by the term documentary by interpellating it with *vérité*.

The term documentary often refers to a set of techniques and types of images directed at, and drawn from, the “real” world. The general dispensation of such techniques, and the purloined “reality” they embalm as images, are commonly understood to be distinctly organized to interact with and comment directly on that “reality.” This type of work generally is typified by an attitude of commiseration with the subject of the documentary, and where violence or catastrophe is present with the pain of the subject, that is, to the real. Such work as largely found in the media is said to refer to real things or events in the world—that is, as evidence of unvarnished truth of the real. But today, with “reality television” ascendant, the scope of its affective simultaneity makes the documentary mode appear somehow quaint in comparison, in some cases even outmoded due to the delay in its transmission.³⁸

However, what haunts the documentary most is the charge of maudlin moralism directed at its products. Let us dwell a little on this idea of documentary, which despite its susceptibility to moral relativism and appeal to a false consciousness of which its critics accuse it, has a very rich and distinguished tradition. Almost all the important photographers of the modern era—Eugène Atget, Walker Evans, August Sander, Dorothea Lange, Diane Arbus, David Goldblatt, Bernd and Hilla Becher—have worked within the documentary mode, if we understand the nature of the documentary mode as simultaneously analytic and mimetic. As such, the documentary has the unique position of being caught in a tautological game, which is to both document and analyze, to show

38 From its earliest invention television has in one form or other experimented with a visual sensorium directed at the recording and experience of reality in its most direct, unmediated aspect. From early incarnations such as *Cineola Camera* (a not so subtle allusion to the truthfulness of the camera) to the groundbreaking variations on the theme of “Reality Television,” this fascination with “real” life is brought to a new level. What’s impressive about this turn is how “Reality Television” combines techniques of surveillance and spectacle, thereby putting into question the claim of a documented reality. The tradition of the documentary however goes back to the very beginning of cinema in films by the Lumière brothers and Thomas Edison and has remained insistently avowed despite increasing sightings about its accuracy. First in ethnographic films (one thinks of the controversy that continues to plague Robert J. Flaherty’s seminal ethno-documentary film *Nanook of the North*) and today in the news media.

and define and to do so with both aesthetic means and also to be oblivious of aesthetic. For some, it is a matter of taste: the rawer the image the more authentic the structure of feeling it supposedly evokes. For others, the more discreet and anti-spectacular the image, the more correspondingly distanced it is from its subject, the greater its putative objectivity. But even if the most refined aesthetic procedures were employed in a work, because of the tendency to categorize the documentary as a mode of practice consistently prepared to show and ask moral questions around what it documents, it is the documentary as a massive body of evidence we end up most seeing. To certain catholic tastes, the more the ethical confronts the documentary, the more distance from aestheticization it must assume. For such spectators, to aestheticize human suffering is an obscenity. This accusation is often directed against the work of a photographer like Sebastião Salgado; less so for Gilles Peress, and it becomes quite controversial in the case of Susan Meiselas.

Yet when we look at the softcore pictures of distress and poverty by the likes of Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, and other photographers who documented the American depression in the 1930s, there is little moral outrage in the reduction of poverty to certain social types by urbane, middle class photographers roughing it amongst the dejected mass of tenant farmers in drought-blighted tenant farms of the South or the tenements of the large cities. Even Jacob Riis' late nineteenth century moral crusades in his study of the squalor and appalling living conditions in overcrowded tenements of New York's Lower East Side in *How the Other Half Lives* is a product of a different type of moral imperative. Perhaps this is so because these images, which were mostly from before 1940, precede the period of the discourse of victims. The opposition between the ethical and aesthetic or the political and poetic, as I have been attempting to demonstrate, has a long running history. But the vehemence of this opposition today in documentary forms of work is informed mostly by the rise of

discourse of victims scattered all over the global peripheries that saturate the media today. And with this rise of victims a peculiar form of scopophobia, an antiocularcentric vision has settled over the field of the documentary.²⁸ I do not, however, wish to recuperate the documentary form with all its unresolved anomalies within what many would believe to be a more superior aesthetic system. For me, the documentary as such has its own integrity, even if its claims of truth remain dubious.

The documentary is also dominated by a view that it is a kind of testimony which, on the one hand, produces a moral imperative in the telltale details of the real, and on the other, asserts truth in the manner in which it conveys and conducts its judgment of events and depictions of people, things, objects. Even if the documentary is never incontrovertibly called to present a moral judgment but to document, to record, to archive, or simply to present, the overwhelming ethical ground it claims often subtends more nuanced positions.

The documentary admits diverse structures of reference into its methods: for example, evidence, testimony, bearing witness. Above all it is mnemonic. The documentary's relationship to its subject, in spite of its bold assertions of truth claims, is an ambiguous one. One of the most shocking pictures I have ever encountered in the media was reproduced almost a decade ago on the front page of *The New York Times*. The picture, taken by Kevin Carter, a South African photographer, shows a young, exhausted Sudanese refugee child bent over on his hands and knees. The chilling image, which I can only now conjure from memory, is a tightly composed picture, in which the circularity of the camera cuts to a diagonal so as to align the looming frame of the child, with that of a vulture standing behind him, observing, waiting. Two things come back to me from that decade-old experience of the photograph and my feeling as a spectator of the image: the remoteness and ambiguity

²⁸ For a neglectful treatment of anti-ocularcentrism see Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Desecration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

of the photographer from the scene and my own haunted curiosity of the ultimate fate of the child. The latter is what the documentary never discloses: the aftermath. The reception of this picture across the world was spectacular. It raised a range of ethical issues, the most obvious of which was: what, if anything, did the photographer do to save the vulnerable abandoned child. Moral outrage at the picture and at the photographer was mingled with dumb admiration of the photographer's courage in recording such a harrowing scene, for rescuing the child, if only as image, from the anonymity of his fate. Of course, the photographer won all kinds of awards for his effort. Carter was overwhelmed by the attention and the debate surrounding the picture. He committed suicide shortly thereafter.⁴⁰

Memento Mori: The Archive as a Site of Mourning

I have used this example to raise the unanswerable question of the documentary's ambiguity to its subject and to pose the question whether it makes any sense to collapse ethics and aesthetics in a single discussion of art's relationship to its subject. Here, I want to call attention to Christian Boltanski's blurry pictures of "Holocaust" children and parts of Gerhard Richter's exhaustive archive *Atlas*.⁴¹ Boltanski's massive reorganization of photographs of anonymous children, which blurs and exposes the faces of innocence, comes closest to the use of the documentary as a method of bearing witness and a tool of memorialization: the archive as mnemonic machine. Richter's *Atlas* evinces a different relationship to this machine in that he deliberately collapses the borders between the private and public, the personal and political, the quotidian and banal with the profound. His is an atlas of "perpetual commentary" on the subject of looking and the function of images in constituting social memory in the aftermath of Nazism and within modern culture. *Atlas* is an inventory of massive, inexhaustible potential that

either forecloses meaning due to its unwieldy heterogeneity or manipulates the scales and legibility of what is represented, thereby actively reading them, *a priori*, as nothing but an arbitrary juxtaposition of meaningless images. But is *Atlas*, in its obsessive documentary attempt at collectivization of personal and public memory, truly arbitrary? Or does its effect of distance not assume a critical attempt to bring to bear a great degree of complexity in the secondary career images, outside of their context as reference, as memento mori? Such memento mori is registered in the early beginning of this ambitious historical project. In panels 16, 17, and 18, Richter shows us newspaper images of Nazi soldiers publically humiliating their victims and of the liberated Nazi camps, which depict emaciated survivors amid jumbled piles of bleached corpses of those who did not survive. And years later in panels 470, 471, 472, and 473, images of the Baader-Meinhof gang join the roll-call of the memorialized. Panel 471 is in fact a reproduction of Richter's painting from a newspaper reproduction of Ulrike Meinhof's suicide. The temporal lag between the Nazi camp images and that of the terrorist gang does nothing to alleviate the context of the historical space from which this comparatively benign investigation is being conducted. As if to foreground what Hannah Arendt identified as the banality of evil, Richter intersperses throughout the breadth of his magnum opus images of domestic tranquility, his studio, holiday pictures, pictures of his own work, etc.⁴²

Blindspot, Blank Stare, Scopophobia, and the Hole in Vision

How are we to read the images and historical accounts both Boltanski and Richter seek to reindex? Surely, to see Richter's Herculean effort at structural collectivization of private and public, personal and political histories as disinterested and merely ambiguous is to be blind to it. Such a reaction exemplifies a consistent *aporia* in contemporary art's approach to the documentary. A remarkable body of literature has been developed around

40 The circumstance of suicide has not been fully clarified. It is unclear insofar as whether the suicide was a result of the commotion caused by this particular picture or due to other problems. Any inference of a connection to the publicity surrounding this image and his death is not intended here.

41 See Benjamin H. D. Bushloh, "Gerhard Richter's *Atlas*: The Anomic Archive," *October* 88 (Spring 1993): 107-45.

42 See Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, rev. ed. (New York: Penguin, 1964).

this question. The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben makes a crucial point about Auschwitz in this context. He writes that "[t]he aporia of Auschwitz is, indeed, the very aporia of historical knowledge; a non-coincidence between fact and truth, between verification and comprehension."⁴³

Perhaps, then, this crisis, this confusion between fact and truth, verification and comprehension linked to the documentary may have its source at the level in which the documentary confronts the monstrous, the absolute, indissoluble reduction of human suffering to abject status and spectacle. It was Foucault who wrote vociferously about the indignity of speaking for others. This poses the following question to Sontag's fascinating and coruscating self-reflexive analysis of documentary pictures in her recent book *Regarding the Pain of Others*: whence does one open oneself up to another's pain, a process which again recalls Levinas' ethics of being-for-the-other? If the documentary is a testimony, as Sontag argues, to a calamity, a record of an event, a representation of an actuality, it is exegetic and seemingly eidetic. Yet it is neither mastery nor totality. As such, it can only communicate as a fragment. How do we trust or question that which the documentary presents beyond blind acceptance of its ethical correctness or obdurate distrust of its politics? The neutralizing assumption of a spectatorship, which averts its gaze and turns askance from the documentary because it deeply distrusts it as a moral accusation, cannot at the same time judge it. To avert one's eyes, to look askance, is equally an ethical stance; it is to ask not to be accused; not to be contaminated, not to exist purely for the other, to be cleansed from the guilt of looking at human misery, relieved from the burden of being-for-the-other. Yet there is a level at which this disavowal, when excessively interpreted in the direction of the non-western other (as a critic, like Matthew Higgs did in relation to images in

documenta 11) registers at a deeper level two kinds of disavowal: a scopophobic inattention to the specificity of the image and a reflexive xenophobia unable to imagine the other as properly human.⁴⁴ This turning away, this hole in vision, as I have argued earlier in this text, perhaps has its basis not in any superior moral vision, but is precisely a prophylactic to the obscenity of the human ruin.

Let us return to conventional documentary images, more specifically photographic and cinematic (as well as video) images that capture slices of what some call "the real world." The root of the term "documentary" is the document. In its literal term it is a record or evidence of something that proves the existence or the occurrence of that which the document records, hence the claim of "truth" often imputed to the documentary. But to document is never to make immanent a singular overwhelming truth. It is simply to collect in different forms a series of statements (what Foucault calls "statement events" as the enunciative function of the archive) leading to the interpretation of historical events or facts.⁴⁵ The documentary as such is never outrightly a claim of truth, namely, that this happened; therefore, it is true. In its relentless singularization, in the guise of bearing witness to that which is part of our reality, even if it may be outside our immediate experience, the documentary claims for itself the burden of truth in that it directs itself to what it sees as recordable reality.

To document is to offer statements that stand for evidence of something: a truth, a testimony to some truth. It is impossible for any image to fully disclose the reality that hangs like a pall over the extended field in which all images exist irrespective of Guy Debord's claim that we all now live in a world of appearances where all social relationships have disappeared into the screen of mediation.⁴⁶ Let's take any "documentary" image, say a war scene in Afghanistan and, as a rule of thumb, test its veracity. On the one hand, one can

43 Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone, 1998), 12.

44 See Matthew Higgs, "Same Old Same Old," *Artforum* (September 2002): 160-7.

45 See Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A. H. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 126-31.

46 Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone, 1994).

look at scenes of the war's carnage: ruined streets, piled-up corpses, disconsolate populace and come away with the reasonable belief that what the scenes show is the misery of war. At the same time, the same image can never fully support whatever the rationale that supports the war, such as the moral correctness of rooting out terrorists. What do we see when we behold the prone, dead corpse of a Taliban soldier: evidence of "here is a dead terrorist" or "here is an Islamic martyr"? The abeyance into which such an image is cast is no longer merely semantic or simply ideological.⁴⁷ The photograph is not at any rate a codeless message or a messageless code.⁴⁸ In a sort of contradiction, despite the persistence of the eye to see into and through such a scene, no reading of it would ever prove adequate nor summarize the import of its message. Literally, such scenes induce a kind of blindness, excavate a hole in vision. Because of the vast extended visual field in which such images exist, it appears quite the case that a documentary can record something that is true but fail to reveal the truth of that something, in the sense that it may actually misrepresent the subject in question. This is the given paradox of the documentary, namely its lack of self-evidence. This was, I suspect, part of the antipathy towards the documentary mode critics associated with documenta 11.

The Documentary and the Scriptible

It is already difficult enough that professional documentarists continuously work a thin line between compromise and heroism, that to add to the cache of images produced by them, the vast quantity of amateur images frays the truthfulness and the facticity of the documentary. The advent of technological ability has meant the wide availability of cameras to casual users. As such, the documentary, as Barthes says of certain forms of writing, is "scriptible," because it turns the reader into a kind of writer, that is it

47. Sontag makes this point in *Regarding the Pain of Others*.

48. See Roland Barthes, "The Photographic Message," *A Barthes Reader*, ed. Susan Sontag (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 194-210.

makes the reader wish to carry further the act of writing, encouraging the imitation of the act of writing.⁴⁹ The documentary could also be perceived as scriptible in that it increasingly turns the casual spectator into an expert witness. It encourages all kinds of acts of wanting to further the work of documenting, creating new narratives of the real world, adding, as it were, to the vast body of evidence. In a sense, everyone who possesses a camera could, by definition function as a documentarist. A famous example of some such transformation of the documentary genre by whoever possesses a camera is George Holliday's video record of Rodney King being beaten by a group of Los Angeles police officers. But does the mere possession of a camera and shooting the real world imbue us immediately with authority as modern day truth tellers?

This was the dilemma of Holliday as a witness, with his mechanical eye. He was too busy filming the scene of the assault to bother seeing it with his own eyes. Instead the camera came to replace his vision, literally his capacity to see. To move then from the passive position of the one who watches, who gazes at such a scene, or as the receiver of its images on screen to a producer of those images is to shift into a remarkable position of responsibility. Such responsibility is what made Holliday not just a proper witness but also a double witness whose two sets of vision must be corroborated according to the mysterious workings of the law.

The position of the double witness, I believe, is what sets up the opposition between art and documentary heard quite frequently during the days of the opening of documenta 11; and afterwards, the idea that the collection of images, which critics had organized under the rubric of documentary are essentially two things: (1) they are "scriptible," meaning that anyone with a camera can also record images of atrocities or poverty, but not everyone can be an artist in a convincing way. In a sense this is a denigration of the technical facility which mechanical reproduction promotes; (2) this scriptibility

49. See Roland Barthes, *SSZ*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1974).

of the documentary, especially its mimetic proclivities, removes it from the realm of art. But for some critics what actually grates is not simply the provincial art versus documentary argument, but the audacity of any image to designate a reality to which viewers have limited and oftentimes no experience of at all. The documentary for such people relates only to a shallow kind of truth, due to its dependence on causality. Art, so the argument goes, evidences a deeper kind of truth, for it is not dependent on any external determinant other than its own internal reality. This kind of argument is familiar to many of us who at one time or another have been confronted with the opposition between art as something specific and unique and documentary as something that manifests only a kind of social concern with limited creative purchase.

I cannot wholly dismiss the argument that many works in documenta 11 can be confused with the documentary mode. Some of the works can be thought as such insofar as the devices, the stringing and sequencing of images or the narrative procedures of certain analytical or conceptual frames of certain works, use material drawn directly from the social world at large. Herein lies my own distinction: rather than accepting exclusively the term "documentary" as a way to understand the manner in which the exhibition purportedly privileged the documentation of the real world or the analysis of social reality, I wish to address the documentary versus art issue by inserting into the field of documenta 11's vision the concept of *vérité*.

Vérité has been defined as truth. But also it refers to lifelikeness, a trueness to life. In the latter definition, it is predisposed towards mimeticism. For example, in French, *vérité* also means to strive to be true to life in art: *s'efforcer à la vérité en art*. Similarly *vérité* refers to realism, to real life, naturalism, authenticity, pragmatism, verisimilitude. In the documentary mode we are presently reviewing, *vérité* involves also the kind of documentary practice born in France in 1960s known as *cinéma vérité*, which blurs the line between reality and simulated reality.

The meaning of the term "documentary" that was of philosophical interest to our main purpose—and I believe this was demonstrated throughout the entire length and breadth of the project, in all the platforms, publications, symposia, workshops, etc.—refers to Agamben's idea of bare life or naked life. Bare life or naked life, as such, is connected to that dimension of experience, which he defines as a form-of-life, "a life that can never be separated from its form, a life in which it is never possible to isolate something such as naked life."⁵⁰

Bio-politics, then, is both the conceptual envelope and the philosophical determinant for how the loose term "documentary" came to inhabit such a palpable space in the galleries of the exhibition. The hinge for the examination of naked or bare life is the *vérité/documentary* space. So, on the one hand, in the idea of *vérité* we confront the conditionalities of "truth" as a process of unraveling, exploring, questioning, probing, analyzing, diagnosing, a search for truth or, shall we say, veracity. For the documentary mode, on the other hand, there is a purposive, forensic inclination concerned essentially with the recording of dry facts to be submitted to the *vérité* committee. It is here that the pure relationship between documentary and *vérité* become clearer, for they each define the relationship between the spectator and the image—what in *Camera Lucida* Barthes defined as the *studium*—the interplay between fact and truth. Comprehension and verification is the agitated field of the *studium*, for "to recognise the *studium* is inevitably to encounter the photographer's intentions, to enter into harmony with them, to approve or disapprove of them, but always to understand them, to argue with them within myself, for culture (from which the *studium* derives) is a contract arrived at between creators and consumers."⁵¹ This is what governs the relationship between the documentary and *vérité*, since there is nothing inherently true or

50 Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 2-3.

51 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 27-28.

factual in the documented image if the purpose of such a documentation does not further ask the viewer to approach such documentation as not only just a fact of something real in the world, but also something true in the social condition of that world which is difficult to support in a single film frame or photographic image.

If this holds true, perhaps then the response to the documentary made in documenta 11 may lead us to assume that the recursive persistence of what many came to see as documentary in the exhibition already points to an exhaustion of the mode, an exhaustion that not only complicates the viewer's relationship to the particular social world being examined, but in fact explodes that social world as nothing but a body of excess. Thus to recoil from the documentary is to return to doubts we each harbor about the nature of its representations of events or the world as real and therefore true. This apprehension is even more acute in the context of the general control and regulation of the media by powerful interests. To disbelieve what is presented as the truth about the world may in fact lend itself to distrust of the messenger rather than the message. The less that documentary exposes truth about the world in favor of an excess of reality over which we have little control and even less of a choice of full comprehension, the more it seems that spectators turn from it.

Epilogue

In conclusion, it might be important to restate the view that the role often assigned to documentary forms exists in the tension between their aesthetic intention and ethical position vis-à-vis the subject of the documentary. The second point about the documentary form concerns its mnemonic function in relation to the archive that brings into visibility the relationship between images, documents, and systems of meaning. But it also involves a struggle between two irresolvable positions in our news-saturated, mediated world. W. J. T. Mitchell in his essay, *The Photographic Essay: Four Case*

Studies, began his searching assessment of the photographic medium and language by positing the idea that "[t]he relation of photography and language is a principal site of struggle for value and power in contemporary representations of reality; it is the place where images and words find and lose their conscience, their aesthetic and ethical identity." The question could be asked: when do images lose their "conscience, their aesthetic and ethical identity?"⁵² This is a question that does not have any answers that are not unhelpfully speculative. In spite of attempts to discredit the place of the documentary image in exhibitions of contemporary art (in my view a highly dubious denial in an already prolix world of images and usage), the broad category of images in documenta 11 nevertheless surpass the documentary reflex. The complex variety of approaches to be found in the genre in itself points to the importance of adjusting the reductive prejudices that strip images down to only their functionalist format.

This was precisely what we found in the lengthy research and communications with artists, theorists, activists, architects, institutions—across cultures and continents, disciplines and communities, institutions and networks (formal and informal): There are no fixed messages that attach to the designation documentary. We worked with artists and thinkers producing ideas and images on an understanding of their practice within the broader parameters of the changing relationship between artist and audience, discourse and language, addressing questions that were far less predicated on predetermined meanings, but open to interpellation to other activities, actions, events, and discourses. When an artist group like *Huit Facettes* emerges in Senegal to question the efficacy of the individual artist's relation to his context of production and public, what does their alliance with the rural community of Hamdallaye in Senegal mean, and how does it show these complex relations of power? And by what means does *Le Groupe Amos* in the

52 W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 281.

Democratic Republic of Congo communicate to their audience the work it produces in the name of acting on behalf of Congolese civil society: organizing public manifestations; producing documentary films on gender and sexual relationship, economic production, and flows of labor and capital; conducting clinics on democracy and development; teaching workshops on gender equality; leading workshops on tolerance as the first condition of a democratic society; or participating as observers in the peace negotiations between the different factions of rebel movements that have made the Democratic Republic of Congo ungovernable? How do we apprehend the important proposals of Park Fiction working in the suburbs of Hamburg in a long-running project to mobilize the marginalized community of St. Pauli against the gentrification of their neighborhood by speculative real estate ventures, proposing instead a park rather than another bland modernist architecture that weakens the link between social relationships and community identity? In the same affiliative spirit of urban and territorial analysis, we find the important project of Faeed Armaly: *From/To*, working in collaboration with the filmmaker Rashid Masharawi on a reading of the scattered trajectories of Palestinian dispersion and fragmentation into multiple communities of exile and diaspora. Or the Italian group Multiplicity in a provocative attempt to retrace and reconstruct the tragedy and lives of migrants and refugees whose illegal smuggling ship sank and disappeared during one night of tempest in the Clandestini basin of the Mediterranean sea in *Solid Sea*. From Alejandra Riera and Doina Petrescu's *L'Association (des pas)* which concerns the political and cultural subjectivity of the Kurdish community in Turkey, rendered as a poetics of social and political analysis of representation to Raqs Media Collective's installation on the Coordinates of Everyday Life in Delhi, which abjures the ideological territorialization of marginality imposed by the state on urban forms; to Black Audio Film Collective's probing documentary film, which investigates the causes of black urban riots during Margaret Thatcher's rule in *Handsworth Songs*; to Trinh T. Minh-ha's

film, a meditation on slow time and cultural spaces thriving outside the totalizing gaze of globalization in *Naked Spaces: Living Is Round*; to Allan Sekula in *Fish Story*, tracing the containerized motor of global labor flows; to sonic and visual fields which act as mnemonic triggers in Craigie Horsfield's *El Hierro* project; Thomas Hirschhorn in *Bataille Monument*, a materialized documentary dedicated to the life and work of the French philosopher; or the discourse of an African claim to modernity enacted in the *Library and Museum Shop* sections of Meschac Gaba's *Museum for Contemporary African Art*; or Walid Raad/Atlas Group's documentary fictions in *Missing Lebanese Wars* which preys on the manipulation between the warring factions of Lebanon, and the struggle for control of the archival memory of the civil war in order to penetrate the larger "truth" of that civil conflict. These are just some of many examples. Each of these artists in documents 11 employs the tools of the documentary and the function of the archive as procedures for inducing new flows and transactions between images, texts, narratives, documents, statements, events, communities, institutions, audiences. And each confounds the role of the documentary in establishing a hierarchy between images and artistic forms, between ethics and aesthetics, politics and poetics, truth and fiction. In fact, in each of the individual positions and works mentioned throughout this text, what stands out the most is the remarkable consistency of concern with social life that is a mixture of political interest (Armaly, Sekula, Jaar); sociological (Raqs Media Collective, Multiplicity, Black Audio Film Collective, Ottinger, Igloodik Isuma Productions); aesthetic (McQueen, Julien); and archival (Jef Geys). Above all, it is the concern with the other, the fidelity to a truth that the documentary ceaselessly constructs and deconstructs. Let me end with Martin Jay's eloquent and succinct remark in which he cautions that "[t]here is 'no view from nowhere' for even the most scrupulously 'detached' observer."⁵² And so it is with all of us who at one time or another survey the ruin of modernity: There is

52 Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, 18.

no here from which to view disinterestedly that elsewhere that purportedly is the province of the documentary. Vision, whether blind or seeing is always invested with a function of apprehending the visual in a manner far more extensive and complex than what the eye ultimately sees. And what truths can images tell us when they are drowning in the continental drift set up by modern media industries?

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