

Documents of Engagement: The five works of digging till the sun goes down

Text by Charlotte Poos

Digging for common ground

At the time of writing, the artworks presented here were still works-in-progress. In my role as a postgraduate student of Media & Performance Studies, I got the chance to engage with these young artists while they were in the process of working through the material and experimenting with forms. At first sight, the works are very diverse and different from each other. On a second glance, what becomes visible is that these artists share a critical engagement with their subjects, their methods and the cultural reality. For me these works expose a quest—through the documentary process—for a position from which to tell, wonder and enquire about (aspects of) that shared reality, a searching that I as fellow young thinker identify with. In the following essay I explore how this critical engagement of these young artists is visible in their self-reflexive usage of media, and the way in which the document itself becomes an object of reflection within these artworks.

Staging the document

A document can take many forms. And even though the concept of the document is so broad that it cannot properly be defined, we still somewhat know when something is a document. This happens when we recognize, through conventions, certain forms and certain uses of media as documentary. Moreover, it could be said that in shaping these conventions of the perception of what counts as document or documentary, developments in media and its technology play a significant role.

Many have emphasized the impact of mass media on the way we think about the document. As a response to this development, artists had to renew their thinking about the status of the document and their role as artists in creating it. Others emphasize the developments towards digital photographic media in the second half of the nineteen nineties. According to J. Ellis, digital technology has led to an increased awareness of the possibility of manipulating the truthfulness of the digital photographic media image, therefore undermining the idea that events or situations are presented to the viewer “objectively”. This in turn has led to a more ethically critical stance on the part of the spectator towards the documentary maker. (2012, 33)

We can expand this observation and explore how these changed attitudes towards the document not only influence the perception of the audience, but also influence documentary makers and the way they position themselves towards the spectator within the work. Through self-reflexive procedures these artists engage with the general acknowledgement of this new status of the document, as what I call a manipulated disclosure of reality.

In the work *Do you think I'm normal?* by Bernice Siewe, it is the personal presence of the artist that colors our perception of the document. Through the form of the interview she takes a very personal and social approach, investigating the relationship between herself and her social prejudices, symbolized by her relationship to her mother and her mother's orchids. The video still you see here illustrates her presence within the work, responding to comments made by her interviewees and asking herself more questions.

As stated above, we recognize the document through our conventions of perception. Even though the interview seems to be about the interviewees, Siewe simultaneously creates an awareness of her presence by constantly commenting and incorporating her personal view as maker into the video. The work becomes self-reflexive not only on the level of the format used, but also on another level of organization: that of editing. Through the edit, the form of the documents shifts from interview to a personal, self-reflexive autobiographical exploration. Siewe can therefore not only stage her position towards the interviewee, she can also stage it

towards the spectator.

The work *Do you think I'm normal?* points our attention to the "fact" that what is shown is dependent on the medium that is used and on the one who is filming and selecting. Through this altered notion of what it means to document, the space of the document moves from what happens before the camera to what happens behind it. What is explored in this work is a changed attitude towards the material in the maker herself.

Staging media

In the following works, which explore how culture performs through the document, the focus shifts from the personal to the cultural. These works examine the audience's attitude towards the document by focusing on the process of representing as such. By staging and exposing the frame of representation that is inherent to the process of documenting, they examine in what ways photographic media can create (a) reality for us.

In the photo series *Myopia* by Hillie de Rooij we recognize the document through another form that it can take: the photographic media image. De Rooij uses the characteristics of press, advertisement and anthropological photographs in order to research our collective visual representation, as it is visible in these photographic media.

The work of De Rooij is interesting in the context of this writing as it complexifies notions of realism in documentary photographic media. It functions around the spectator not noticing the staged nature of the images, therefore exposing how certain kinds of images distributed in the press are unconsciously recognized, through cultural conventions, as "realistic" representations. De Rooij shows the multiple ways in which the image of Africa is constructed, thereby acknowledging the multiple positions that Africa can take up. At the same time she points to conventions concerning what is objective and realistic, what is inherent to the western gaze. What becomes recognized as realistic is that which is not recognized as staged, therefore maintaining what can be called a myth of objectivity. Seen this way, the work shows how in (press) media, objectivity is presented through the "so-called" absence of the maker. Just as in technologies of visual representations in science, it is the covering up of the influence of the subjective, of the personal [and the cultural], which creates the ideal of objectivity. (Gallison 2010,7)

In *Leap in the dark*, Annabel Hesselink also focuses on the process of representation as such and exposes the influence that media representations have on the way we imagine the reality of events.

In this image we can see how Hesselink places multiple interpretations and imaginings of the moon next to each other, representing the heterogeneity of our collective knowledge. Her work also has some likeness to the notion of scientific tests and explorations. By positioning the images next to each other, Hesselink leaves it up to the viewer to connect them. She shows how it is impossible for all the tests and observations to become an accurate accumulation and single visual representation of the same object. From this perspective, it seems she celebrates the gaps in knowledge that have to be filled by the imagination of the spectator. The position that is staged here is not only the one of the rational scientific observer who analyses reality for the audience, the self of the filmer is also the poetic viewer, aware of the role that imagination plays in staging events in our collective memory.

By placing focus on the process of representing as such, these works investigate the influence of the documentary media image on our collective knowledge. They do so not only by showing the close link between the maker and the process of documenting, as is the case in the work of Sieve, but also by undermining the idea that reality can be presented "as it is", independent of the observant.

Staging Positions

Through staging their positions, these makers shape and communicate their visions of reality to the spectator, while at the same time remaining aware of their own influence, of the relationship between filmer and filmed, on what is seen and shown. It is this relationship between the camera, what is filmed and the self of the artist that is scrutinized in these works.

In *I named my pig Genius* by Sjaan Klijnee the positioning of the Self within the work is taken further by radicalizing the participation of the maker within what is shown. By taking in a pig in her living environment, Klijnee researches our cultural relationship with animals and animality. In this work she is looking for a way of embracing this animal/ animality, turning it into an object that can be loved. Here, again a different image of Self is presented. Klijnee stages what Silverman has described as 'an identification with the other as other'. (1996,73) Klijnee explores this other not only through the camera, but also through touch and affect. Furthermore, by bringing the object of meat consumption close and at the same time distancing herself from it, she shows an involved artist that is not only observing, but also experiencing. She creates multiple positions towards the animal, the other that we are as well.

Like the others, Klijnee's work shows that the position taken up in these works is staged as part of and operating within a shared cultural reality. The maker, the observing Self, is not only a witness of this reality, but also a participant in it. Furthermore, this process of witnessing and participation is represented to the spectator.

It is this awareness of the position of the artist as both witness and participant in cultural reality that is also visible in *In gold we trust* by Aline Baggio. Baggio explores the mechanisms and ideology embedded in the practices of the financial world and neoliberal system. She is looking for an engaged position towards the omnipotence of the capitalist market. By mixing various media that show different facets of this exploration, Baggio's work emphasizes the process-orientated character of documentary art. As she guides the viewer through her search, she invites him or her to become aware of the arrangements of power that she seeks to challenge. This process shows again the involvement of the documentary artist as participant in the observed reality. Moreover, even though she explores critical strategies, she is also aware of how in our culture, these strategies are taken up by the market itself, and as such are "necessarily inscribed within the very forces of power whose arrangements of presence and absence it seeks to challenge. (Mc Kenzie 2001, 43) Her extensive experiments with formats and modes of presentation show her perseverance in finding the right position from where to tell and show. As artist she is also challenged by the changed notion of the document, as it is not only the audience, but also the artist herself who demands an ethical and critical stance towards her own position as documentary artist.

Documenting engagement

In conclusion, the reality explored in these artworks concerns our social and cultural conventions, our strata of knowledge production and our distribution of love and capital. Even though the works differ greatly in the way they approach these subjects, they all play with a changed understanding of the document and emphasize the engaged position that the maker can take up within the documentary process. In these works, this position becomes part of the communication with the spectator, thematizing the mutual influence of disclosed cultural reality and created image of Self within the document.

To close, I would like to say that while these artists have worked through forms and experimented with their material, it seems that they ask questions that concern me as spectator as well. They ask questions about our shared responsibility for the meaning and value of the document in culture today. And they ask questions about the "we" that is included in the making of that meaning.

Works Referenced

- Ellis, J. 2012. *Documentary: Witness and Self-revelation*. London/ New York: Routledge.
- Galison, P. 2010. "The Objective Image". Faculty speech at the inauguration as Treaty of Utrecht Professor (University Utrecht) Pdf:
<http://www.uu.nl/faculty/humanities/EN/research/publications/Pages/facultaireredes.aspx>,
retrieved 27 may 2013.
- Silverman, K. 1996. *The Threshold of the Visible World*. London/ New York: Routledge.
- Mc Kenzie, J. 2001. *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance*. London/ New York: Routledge.