

Documentation as a Political Act

by

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ABSTRACT

This text examines the potential of the documentation of socially engaged art to affect change. It looks at how it can extend the goal of political action inherent in much socially engaged artwork, particularly with reference to Corrie Peters thesis exhibition: *All the rooming houses on my street have had their front door removed.*

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The font *Arial Narrow* is used in the text to refer to the artist's exhibited thesis work.

“Worldview is connected to language translation, and context is an essential element to translation” (Absalon 93).

INTRODUCING

“Critical consciousness is a process of recognizing both limitations and possibilities” (Lippard 127).

I make relational art.¹

I make dialogical art.²

I am a social practice artist.³

I am an artist making new genre public art.⁴

I make socially engaged work.⁵

¹ “Art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context” (Bourriaud 14).

² “While it is common for a work of art to provoke dialogue among viewers, this typically occurs in response to a finished object. In [dialogical] projects...[conversation] is reframed as an active, generative process that can help us speak and imagine beyond the limits of fixed identities, official discourse, and the perceived inevitability of partisan political conflict.”(Kester 80).

³ “...a social practice artist is a documentarian with agency. Instead of recording what is happening in the world, the social practice artist is also affecting what is happening in the world, setting things in motion, fostering connections between people, and organizing everyday life so it can be seen as engaging and meaningful” (Fletcher and Delos Reyes 34).

⁴ - “new genre public art – visual art that uses both traditional and nontraditional media to communicate and interact with a broad and diversified audience about issues directly relevant to their lives – is based on engagement” (Lacy 19). “An alternative history of today's public art could be read through the development of various vanguard groups, such as feminist, ethnic, Marxist, and media artists and other activists. They have a common interest in leftist politics, social activism, redefined audiences, relevance for communities (particularly marginalized ones), and collaborative methodology. By re-visioning history through the lens of these interests, rather than artistic media-specific concerns, we understand the present moment, new genre public art, and its implications for art making in a way that focuses our critical investigation” (Lacy 25).

⁵ “Socially engaged art functions by attaching itself to subjects and problems that normally belong to other disciplines, moving them temporarily into a space of ambiguity. It is this temporary snatching away of subjects into the realm of art-making that brings new insights to a particular problem or condition and in turn makes it visible to other disciplines” (Helguara 5).

I make participatory art.⁶ I make art about how I am learning about others and myself within the world.⁷ My art is how I am learning about others and myself within the world.⁸

With each naming I hear a theorist, artist, curator, academic, activist, etcetera, grappling with how to define something as complicated as human interaction; grappling with the complication of calling that a medium. At times I have settled on Bourriaud's often quoted definition – "art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context" (14), yet, it aligns my work with a theoretical framing that often only lightly touches on the current conversations, the ongoing concerns, in the circles that continue to grapple with defining This art. His definition feels like a starting point. So, in categorizing my work, I slide between these terms because "I want my words to reflect my way of thinking, being and doing,

⁶ Although Claire Bishop uses this term to trace a history for socially engaged work through the history of theatre and performance art I am more interested in Erin Manning's expansion of it: "The art of participation takes the notion of modes of existence as its starting point, asking how the conditions that orient it toward its more-than modify or modulate how art can make a difference, opening up the existing fields of relation toward new forms of perception, accountability, experience and collectivity. This aspect of the art of participation cannot be thought separately from the political, despite the fact that the work's political force is not necessarily in its content. This is not about making the form of art political. It is about asking how the field of relation activated by art can affect the complex ecologies of which it is part." (16)

⁷ Anne Carson has written that "One thing that strikes [her] about Hölderlin as a translator, and about Francis Bacon as a painter, and for that matter about Joan of Arc as a soldier of God, is the high degree of self-consciousness that is present in their respective manipulations of catastrophe."

⁸ Kester summarizes connected knowing as "a form of knowledge based, not on counterpoised arguments, but on a conversational mode in which each interlocutor works to identify with the perspective of others... concerned with recognizing the social context from which the others speak, judge, act... This involves a recognition of the speaker's history... and his or her position relative to modes of social, political, and cultural power both within the discursive situation and outside it... [It involves] a redefinition of discursive interaction in terms of empathetic identification... It is through empathy that we can learn not simply to suppress self-interest through identification with some putatively universal perspective, or through the irresistible compulsion of logical argument, but literally to redefine self: to both know and feel our connectedness to others" (summarized from Mary Field Belenky's *Women's Ways of Knowing* 113-114).

and it's difficult at times to balance what I think I'm supposed to write with my sense of self" (Absalon 15).

The current conversations⁹ are acknowledging reoccurring motivations¹⁰ that drive many artists in the definitions outside of relational art, or perhaps, more accurately, surrounding relational art. One of these motivations is to "have an effect on the established social order" (Terwilliger). This is a political act. We¹¹ are committing political acts individually, collectively, alongside and on behalf of. We are questioning how to do that best, and recognizing, creating, developing and breaking systems to do so. We are learning from those who already do this.¹² We are searching.¹³

And, we are documenting that process; we are collecting "material that provides official information or evidence or that serves as a record" (documentation).

⁹ An example can be found at: <http://openengagement.info/categories/100-questions/>

¹⁰ "While many artworks made over the last four decades have encouraged the participation of the viewer...this participation mostly involves the execution of an idea or the free partaking of the work in an open-ended social environment...SEA [socially engaged art], as it is manifested today, continues in the spirit of these practices but often expands the depth of the social relationship, at times promoting ideas such as empowerment, criticality, and sustainability among the participants. Like the political and activist art inspired by 1970s feminism and identity politics, SEA usually has an overt agenda, but its emphasis is less on the act of protest than on becoming a platform or a network for the participation of others, so that the effects of the project might outlast its ephemeral presentation" (Helguara 11).

¹¹ Is *we* the other artists making the same type of art as myself? Is it the collective group of *us* who bond at openings? Is it the community that has welcomed me, and allows me to collaborate with them at times? Is *we* those with similar ideas about how the world could be better? Is it you and I?

¹² "We typically viewer the artist as a heroic figure, actualizing his or her will through the transformation of nature or alchemically elevating the primitive, the degraded, and the vernacular into great art. Throughout, the locus of expressive meaning remains the radically autonomous figure of the individual artist. A dialogical aesthetic suggest a very different image of the artist, one defined in terms of openness, of listening... and of a willingness to a accept a position of dependence and intersubjective vulnerability relative to the viewer or collaborator" (Kester 110).

¹³ "I also know I am not a novice to searching and learning. All my life I have been searching: for those cultural mirrors, for like-minded Spirits, for kindness in the world, for a sense of belonging, for acceptance and knowledge" (Absolon 17).

Is our documenting having an effect on the established social order?

Is it able to?

I believe it can.¹⁴

This essay will be an effort at naming our current documentation, its limitations and possibilities, within the field of socially engaged art. It will look at what is involved in acting politically and imagine how to use one area of the work – the documentation – towards fulfillment of a larger goal.¹⁵

¹⁴ "To search for the good and make it matter: this is the real challenge for the artist. Not simply to transform ideas of revelations into matter, but to make those revelations actually matter" (Conwill Májozo 88).

¹⁵ "Conscious searchers are searching topics essential to their own wellness, the goal of living a good life or making the world better for generations to come" (Absolon 71). I set out to name a process that I can only hope will be able to do this in a small way.

DOCUMENTING

What is the “material that provides official information or evidence or that serves as a record (documentation)”? What is its potential?

“As art becomes the complex interventions and the creation of living circumstance” (Groys 54) Boris Groys names documentation as “the only possible form to reference an artistic activity that cannot be represented in another way” (54). I would like to suggest that documentation in socially engaged art has three categories: *The Contribution*, *The Collection* and *The Afterlife*.¹⁶

The Contribution. Socially engaged practices are about the interactions between people and common titles ascribed to those involved are artist and participants.¹⁷ This category is the documentation of the contributors: a term I believe is a more accurate description of the role of those involved. It is the information that individuals and communities collect to remember and develop meaning among themselves. At its best, it is an ongoing action of meaning-making stemming from people expressing their own agency.¹⁸

¹⁶ Naming can allow for understanding to develop. On March 28, 2015 I watched my daughter understand and practice “Papa”, calling out again and again, developing her understanding of the relationship between this word and the response it brings. This understanding will develop throughout her entire life, built through their relationship and the ways she sees others understand it in the world.

¹⁷ “Within a listener-centered paradigm, the old specializations of artist and audience, creative and uncreative, professional and unprofessional – distinctions between who is and who is not an artist – begin to blur” (Conwill Majojo 88).

¹⁸ When Kester says that in dialogical projects, “the work of art can enact community here and now through the process of physical and dialogical interaction” (58) we perhaps are unable to draw a clear line between the artwork and the documentation of the contributors.

At its best, perhaps we could (should?) often stop here.¹⁹

Please fill this box with an example of this first category of documentation.

The Collection. The second category is the stuff the artists, the organizers, the cultural workers, the facilitators collect.

Agency is an important word here again both because the artist is enacting their agency through their choice of document to serve as record, and they also can be acting as “a business or organization established to provide a particular service, a thing or person that acts to produce a particular result” (agency). As the artist makes choices before, during and after, they are deciding

¹⁹ Even understanding documentation as a passive object, separated from the initial meaning making in *the contribution*, allows the possibility of leaving it behind: “the idea of galleries and museums is that they are the textbook to what has already happened. They are an afterthought for a work of art that has already been a part of our lives, has had its life cycle, and now the museum is documenting its rest” (Swoon qtd. by Rutz 165).

The form of relational art allows for this potential as well. It rejects the modernist understanding of “the work of art simultaneously speak[ing] to, and “through” the actual viewer to an ideal viewer yet to be” (Kester 31) by the active understanding of the artwork as there “for an audience summoned by an artist” (Bourriaud 29).

Helguara's instruction gets the closest to the idea of that stopping the documentation at *the contribution* might be necessary to represent the politics inherent in relationship as medium. “In contemporary art and in art history in general, the voice of the public is generally missing; it is the voice of the artists, the curators, and the critics that seem to matter... If [the participants] were the primary recipients of a transformative experience, it should reside with them to describe it, not the artist, curator or critic” (74).

who to consult and what needs to meet through these choices. At its best, they are hoping to represent²⁰ and remember the meaning-making through the document.

At its best, what is the work involved to achieve this?

Please fill this box with an example of this second category of documentation

The What. What makes up *the collection*?²¹

In an exhaustive catalogue of the documentation of socially engaged artists it is hard to spot the deviations from photos, stories and descriptions.

Photos.

Stories.

(Descriptions).

There are few projects I have been introduced to outside of this. (The description is usually the starting point for the story, or the caption to a photo. Delivery of the description in as neutral of manner as possible is a strategy artists use to excuse

²⁰ "To represent is to aestheticize; that is, to transform. It presents a vast field of choices but it does not include the choice not to transform, not to change or alter whatever is being represented. It cannot be a pure process, in practice" (Strauss 107).

²¹ Again Groys has provided us an opportunity to identify the inherent political act of the document : "art documentation] can also take the form of paintings, drawings, photographs, videos, texts, and installations - that is to say, all the same forms and media in which art is traditionally presented - but in the case of art documentation these media do not present art but merely refer to it... Art documentation is by definition *not* art; it merely refers to art, and in precisely this way it makes it clear that art, in this case, is no longer present and immediately visible but rather absent and hidden" (53).

themselves from representation, performing western scientific research methodology in this action. The description is in parenthesis to highlight the fact that we often don't think of it as documentation that is a representation.)

Grappling with the relationship between agency and *the what*²² is part of the searching that is taking place for socially engaged artists. "In some productions where you are going for the power of the image, you can get a large amount of input from the community before the actual making of the image, then you take control of the aesthetic. That's one model. Another is a fully collaborative process in which you give the voice to the community and they make the image." (Judith Baca qtd by Lacy 44) Hegulara offers an answer to this searching with his writing that:

Documentation should be regarded as an inextricable component of an action, one which, ideally becomes a quotidian and evolving component of the event, not an element of postproduction but a coproduction of viewers, interpreters and narrators. Multiple witness accounts, different modes of documentation, and, most importantly, a public record of the evolution of the project in real time are ways to present an event in its multiple angles and allow for multiple interpretations. (76)²³

Archives of socially engaged practices offer examples²⁴ from many fields on a daily basis. When I pause to look at why so much of my time is occupied with wondering how I am going to continue, at the expense of concentrating on the stories of the person in front of me, I realize that all the information available is really noisy.

²² What is '*forming*' when the agency is almost completely repressed?

²³ Bishop echoes part of this belief with her assertion that a successful participatory art is one which presents multiple views (30-37).

²⁴ One example is: <http://www.scoop.it/t/social-art-practices>

And, not only do I have trouble listening, but my voice feels insignificant.²⁵ Noise instinctually creates the sense that I need to listen to the loudest person, and that I have to be loud. In an art form that has to do with contributors it is easy to adopt the capitalist understanding of the word over a collective one; I can easily slip into collecting more voices and collecting the most convincing voices.²⁶

Relationship as form, in its naming, makes political claims about the artwork as something not easily absorbed into the capitalist market, often referring to time span (Bourriaud) and process (Kester) as the actual art.²⁷ If *the collection* claims to be only the documentation we see an expansion of the hope to be other than the capitalist system – not only is the artwork no longer the object, the object is also no longer the artwork. The distance between the object and

²⁵ When I think about how I - a middle class white woman participating in a master's programs in a western country - can feel insignificant, it can help me remember how the noise might make others feel like their voice does not even register.

²⁶ "...a speaker with a mastery of grammar, vocabulary, and rhetoric enhanced by privileged education would communicate very differently from a speaker without such advantages. This does not mean that the insights of the less educated are any less valid, only that they may require a different form of listening" (Kester 114).

Knitting can be the comfort of synchronized movement in silence together.

²⁷ This is continuing the utopian possibilities inherent in many emerging art forms. "To change the power relations inherent in the way art is now made and distributed, we need to continue to seek out new forms buried in social energies not yet recognized as art. Some of the most interesting attempts are those that reframe not-necessarily-art practices or places by seeing them through the eyes of art. This, too, is an idea that originated in the mid-sixties. At that time such "looking around" was the product of a rejection of art as "precious objects," as more stuff filling up the world. The idea was to look at what was already in the world and transform it into art by the process of seeing – naming and pointing out – rather than producing" (Lippard126).

artwork has grown. Groys claims “art documentation is thus the art of making living things out of artificial ones” (57).²⁸ This expands the inherent political qualities of naming *the collection* documentation.

The Afterlife. This third category is taking *the collection* and presenting it. The choices here, some that can seem to happen outside one’s agency, can be done in a number of ways from a passing reference in conversation to, at the other end of the spectrum, the mass exposure a viral social media post can have. This is the process of understanding *the collection* by the individuals that come in contact with it: their process of meaning-making.

Please fill this box an example of this third category of documentation.

The Why. Documentation meets some very real needs as well as some ideological ones. Our motivations for using them move between the reasons. Perhaps a categorization of the reasons can help us imagine other ways to meet these needs.

²⁸ Groys claims are tied to the belief that we are in a biopolitical age: one in which we are unable to distinguish between the real and the artificial, in Walter Benjamin’s terms: the original and the copy. It is a time in which art demonstrates how the living can be replaced by the artificial. It is then only narration that makes something “real”. Documentation then becomes narration applied to something (54-58). If I understand my social practice as interwoven with the real-ness of life then, to document it in a way that assumes I am giving life to the artificial demotes the initial experience.

We document to continue. We want to keep doing the work and need a way to support this. We prove our legitimacy by showing what we've done. We prove our legitimacy by outlining an effect that we've had, by offering our record. This legitimacy is about our value in the art market – the market of granting, teaching, exhibiting, recognizing, etcetera. It is about why it is important that I be the artist chosen for the opportunity to continue.²⁹

We document to convince: convince the institutions, convince the communities we consider ourselves a part of, convince the communities we would love to be welcomed into, convince others and to convince ourselves.³⁰ As I work to convince, I often find myself making noise.

We document to share. One only needs to listen in for a little while to a social practice artist to hear the excitement in their voice about their interactions with another. At its best, they are telling of how they were transformed through the invitation to participate in a moment with someone in a way that also transforms the listener. At its best, is this result enough?

We document to change. If we were able to see something differently through our experience with the project, and the first category of documentation seems to support this as well, why would we not want to extend this audience? If we now see

²⁹ We cannot understand continuing without competing within our current system.

³⁰ Art and the social sciences have legacies of language to do this. Dominant culture has helped form these legacies and has its own legacies. We have our own histories that are telling us what needs to be there to legitimize ourselves. These are all tied together.

injustice built into the very fabric of our society why would we not want to convince others to join the fight to change this?³¹

³¹ "The secondary audience is ineliminable, but also essential, since it keeps open the possibility that everyone can learn something from these projects: it allows specific instances to become generalisable, establishing a relationship between particular and universal that is far more generative than the model of exemplary ethical gesture" (Bishop 272).
Does it then matter that the rooming houses with their front doors removed are on **my** street?

A NOTE ABOUT CHANGE

I change when I am forced to by something that affects me intimately. Like many, I am often preoccupied with things I should change, things I could change, and things I am working to change.³² When I evaluate honestly, this takes up a lot of time and energy but often does not result in change. I am forced to change by something big happening. I am forced when something becomes so uncomfortable that it can no longer work for me, often despite my best efforts to make it work. I am left with no choice but to change.

I grew up being taught that when someone is having a hard time, you help them. As I am learning how to help I make the convenient mistake of seeing the help people need rather than them as a whole person. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie sums it up so well in a TED talk when she describes visiting the family of the houseboy her family employed. She was surprised at the beautiful basket his brother made: “All I had heard about them was how poor they were, so it had become impossible for me to see them as anything else but poor.”

It can feel complicated to expand the story of those needing help.³³ The “single story” (Adichie)³⁴ is so convenient. It is connected to power.³⁵

³²Listening to people talking about the problems in 'these people's lives' and the solutions they have for them, I've realized that when people don't have safe housing or food they don't have the privilege of hiding the things going wrong from other people's, my, judging eyes. I get to hide these things because I have all sorts of supports, including the support of safe housing and a full stomach. From a safe place, it is just so easy to come up with the step-by-step program to help solve someone else's life.

³³ Knitting as a process involves time, repetition and correction. One dropped stitch can destroy the structure. Knitting with sewing thread involves observation and perseverance.

³⁴ “So that is how to create a single story, show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become” (Adichie).

³⁵ “How [the stories] are told, who tells them, when they are told, how many stories are told, are really dependent on power. Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person” (Adichie).

I have been employed and involved in what is literally called 'the helping professions' for a long time now. I have met a lot of people in need of help through this time, and the categorization of 'them' has gotten more and more uncomfortable. 'Them' allows me to exclude any reflection on myself. I need help a lot in my life. There are so many little things that people help me with, and so many little conversations I get to have all the time that help me process things. I have been born with a certain amount of power that makes accessing that help so simple that I can ignore that it is actually help. I am one of 'them'.³⁶ We probably all are.³⁷

The other thing 'them' allows is for me to categorize what change needs to take place and how it should happen. This allows me to enact my power³⁸ on people who live in systems that require someone not to have power. I am helping write the story that our dominant systems need to be told so that I am kept comfortable.³⁹

Adichie quoted the Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti: "If you want to dispossess a people the simplest way to do it is to tell their story and to start with secondly." So, from my

³⁶ I am Vulnerable. I am Fragile.

³⁷ "To know the true nature of a society, its not enough to point to its achievements, as leaders like to do. We also need to look at its shortcomings. What do we see, then, when we look at the drug ghetto of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside and similar enclaves in other urban centres? We see the dirty underside of our economic and social culture, the reverse of the image we would like to cherish of a humane, prosperous and egalitarian society. We see our failure to honor family and community life or to protect children; we see our refusal to grant justice to Native peoples; and we see vindictiveness toward those who have already suffered more than most of us can imagine. Rather than lifting our eyes to the dark mirror held in front of us, we shut them to avoid the unsavory image we see reflected there" (Mate 279).

³⁸ "Much as I want to accept them, at least in principle, some days I find myself full of disapproval and judgment, rejecting them and wanting them to be other than who they are. That contradiction originates with me, not with my patients. It's my problem – except that, given the obvious power imbalance between us, it's all too easy for me to make it their problem" (Mate 14).

³⁹ "The drug addict is today's scapegoat. Viewed honestly, much of our culture is geared toward enticing us away from ourselves, into externally directed activity, into diverting the mind from ennui and distress. The hard-core addict surrenders her pretense about that. Her life is all about escape. The rest of us can, with varying success, maintain our charade, but to do so, we banish her to the margins of society" (Mate 279).

discomfort I have had to ask, what is the first part of the story? What are the systems that have resulted, that require, some to be disposed of power, of privilege?⁴⁰

I still believe that when someone needs helping, you help. I especially believe that I should be offering that help to those that our current system requires to be in need; but, the formula of helping that can be convenient for my way of being does not allow me to know the many stories that make up each person.⁴¹ It does not expect me to learn from 'them'.⁴²

I learn in relationship. If I am not allowing myself to learn then the relationship is artificial.⁴³

So, as art involves itself in change – in having an effect to the established social order – how can documentation show these realities?

⁴⁰ What are the systems that profit from the idea that we can all be Trailblazers, Rebels, Defenders? How does this idea of individual strength being achievable for all operate as the backbone of capitalism?

⁴¹ I know that in an ideal world I would not be building doors to reduce exposure and vulnerability, in an ideal world we would all be removing our doors.

⁴² "While the theorist helps the agent to get a clearer understanding of how power works... the agents helps the theorist to recognize which structural constraints count as power" (Kester summarizing Hans Herbert Kogler 95).

⁴³ Knitting is social. Knitting can provide a non-hierarchical place of encounter.

UNDERSTANDING PROBLEMS:

That which can be “regarded as unwelcome or harmful and needing to be dealt with and overcome” (problem).⁴⁴

The problems can also be categorized into three areas: *Misuse*, *Misrepresentation* and *Co-option*, although the categories slide into one another.

Misuse. This first category is about separation from of *the what* from context: using *the collection* to further a need by decontextualizing it. It is not a coincidence that the evaluation of an art form about people cannot seem to avoid ethics. The photos and stories are parts of peoples’ lives, and, as such, are part of the representation of them. They are part of how the world will understand them. In the world we have lived in so far, that implies responsibility⁴⁵, regardless of whether it is acted upon or rejected. This category includes those examples that may be easy to classify: using a photo or a story for a different purpose than it was intended. Needs can be prioritized by those enacting their agency, often in a moment, and it is not hard for stories being presented to be convincing and satisfying.⁴⁶

The label 'Misuse' holds power, and this power can be accessed with the use of the word. It is tied up with the idea that there is a truth about each situation that can be presented. Misuse holds power to defeat the single story, yet the reaction often offers another single story in its place.

⁴⁴ Photos? Stories? (Descriptions?)

⁴⁵ This can be seen to varying degrees throughout history. The question of how much, and, to whom, are the very questions artists involved in this line of work are often involved with.

⁴⁶ "I believe cliché is a question. We resort to cliché because it's easier than trying to make up something new. Implicit in it is the question, Don't we already know what we think about this? Don't we have a formula we use for this? Can't I just send a standard greeting card or paste in a snapshot of what it was like rather than trying to come up with an original drawing" (Carson)?

Misrepresent. "To represent is to aestheticize; that is, to transform. It presents a vast field of choices but it does not include the choice not to transform, not to change or alter whatever is being represented. It cannot be a pure process, in practice" (Strauss 107).

We know that representation is not pure.⁴⁷ This is why we carefully plan the stories we will share and leave out those ones that could be used to further clichés. In practice, many socially engaged artists realize that most audiences will not invest the time that hearing the multiple stories of a person or place takes; they will not invest in building a relationship through documentation. And, they know that presenting multiple views is not a box that can simply be checked off. They are engaged in the process of being conscious searchers and, as such, are constantly asking questions of the representations they are setting out.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ We can look at the history of photography and the conversations there to understand this.

⁴⁸ "We are constantly framing our systems of experience of the world through representational systems... These systems are necessary but also dangerous. They lead us to believe that the world is a fixed and orderly place and that we occupy a privileged position of stability and coherence within it" (Kester 20).

What gives someone the right to share a story? Is my participation and transformation enough to grant me permission to tell the story?⁴⁹ Is there a need that can grant permission? Does authenticity absolve the questions cliché poses?⁵⁰

I have a lot of interesting stories. I even have great stories. I have stories that can guarantee to inform, teach, and perhaps even move someone towards change. I am moved and inspired by stories, they are how I connect with another. Stories do something. But, in art documentation, we have yet to separate them from being a pure process, from the belief that they are not a representation.

Stories are representations of someone else, and, even at their most authentic, I am unsure I can protect them from cliché.⁵¹ I am unsure that I can create a single story to fill the place of multiples.

It is impossible to talk about the single story without talking about power... How they are told, who tells them, when they are told, how many stories are told, are

⁴⁹ “Habermas would argue that, as someone who was embedded in the action, an artist - even if acting in good faith and making efforts to be objective in representing what happened - is a subject of the action, and as such we can't rely on his or her descriptions: they may be delusional about the artist, the project, and its relationship with the world" (Helguera 75).

⁵⁰ For the form of the documentary Kester has claimed that: "authenticity rests in its ability to act not only as art, but also in the kind of concrete social struggles that give it its original character" (qtd. by Struass 107).

⁵¹ "For community artists the aesthetic plays the same role that science does for reformers or religion for evangelicals, allowing them to transcend the specificity of their own social and cultural position and sanctioning their intervention in a given community" (Kester 137). As those engaged in writing about socially engaged art realize that "visual analyses fall short when confronted with the documentary material through which we are given to understand many of these practices" (Bishop 5) value and analysis has now ascribed 'Authenticity' with power. It is easy to understand authenticity as displaying The truth about the event. That is a convenient definition of the word, in the same way that to use misuse to end one single story and replace it with another is convenient. If we know that representation is not pure, if we believe that truth is often understood through context, and if we believe truth can be used as a way of creating an illusion of stability in the world so that power can continue its path, then, to equate authenticity with truth is to undervalue its potential.

really dependent on power. Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person. (Adichie)

What would a document that cannot be co-opted to the power of the single story look like? Can documentation provide the time and space necessary to engage with all of the stories?⁵²

Öfters hab'ich die Sprache, öfters hab'ich Gesang versucht, aber sie hörten dich nicht.

Often enough I tried language, often enough I tried song, but they didn't hear you.⁵³

Co-option. My social practice, and the majority of those I am familiar with, exist within the capitalist system. The political potential of this work, embedded in its defining, has dealt directly with the dictionary definition of capitalism.⁵⁴ But, what capitalism does best is hijack motivation and intentions (Steiner). It is sneaky. I am always playing catch up to what it is doing. And, I'm a part of it.

⁵² Can documentation weave time itself in to the process of viewing it?

⁵³ To introduce this Carson wrote: "On the right-hand margin of a page on which he had already drafted a poem, Hölderlin at a later date began to write an essay. It contains this strange remark:"

⁵⁴ "Economic and political system... in which trade and industry are controlled by private sectors for profit, rather than by the state" (capitalism).

We can trace its sneakiness.⁵⁵ I can trace the pull in myself to take my careful, long and ongoing process of developing ethics around this work and share it in the form of a list of what makes a project ethical. Yet, the very act of checking off boxes denies the work of dialogue.⁵⁶ It becomes a process that is finished. It denies the fact that it is ongoing and involves constant transformation of myself through getting to know the stories of another.

The process of development is something unable to be captured.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ "Inevitably, art outside the mainstream is initially met with criticism and suspicion; then some stars are identified and propelled to demonstrate the incorporation of yet another area, such as a new style, into the art scene" (Jacob 55).

"Through the discourse of creativity, the elitist activity of art is democratized, although today this leads to business rather than to Beuys. The dehierarchising rhetoric of artists whose projects seek to facilitate creativity ends up sounding identical to government cultural policy geared towards the twin mantras of social inclusion and creative cities" (Bishop 16).

"Today we are living not in a society of similarity, but rather in a society of difference. And the society of difference is not a polieia but a market economy. If I live in a society in which everyone is specialized, and has his or her specific cultural identity, then I offer to others what I have and can do – and receive from them what they have or can do. These networks of exchange also function as networks of communication, as a rhizome. Freedom of communication is only a special case for the free market. Now, theory and art that performs theory, produce similarity beyond the differences that are induced by the market economy – and, therefore, theory and art compensate for the absence of traditional commonalities. It is not accidental that the call to human solidarity is almost always accompanied in our time not by an appeal to common origins, common sense and reason, or the commonality of human nature, but to the danger of common death through nuclear war or global warming, for example. We are different in our modes of existence – but similar due to our morality"(Groys "Under the Gaze" 11)"

⁵⁶ "Dialogue is the encounter between men [and women], mediated by the world, in order to name the world. Hence, dialogue cannot occur between those who want to name the world and those who do not wish this naming - between those who deny others the right to speak their word and those whose right to speak has been denied them" (Freire 88).

⁵⁷ Spivak, in her book *Harlem*, talks about how the process of defining stops something (in her example she is using our understanding of culture to explain this) and how, when we categorize in our work, we are actually stopping the process of understanding. Similar to Freire and Adichie, she asks questions about who is doing the categorizing, and then expands this to ask who is doing the receiving. "Who sends, and who receives, when messages assuming collectivities are inscribed" (7)? I can understand who as artist and audience, but to stop at that understanding defines the interconnection of audience with the dominant system around them, so it cannot be caught there. She suggests that these moments where we could define must rather be moments to imagine if we want them to not be co-opted.

Any documentation is vulnerable to co-option. Capitalism, we, I, all are trained to co-opt the fragile moments that bring about change. We are trained that this is the language necessary to meet our needs. To do otherwise is difficult to live out. If we choose to document, it requires that the document remain "a living thing" (Groys 57).⁵⁸ It requires that the document is unable to be captured.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ When I read the artificial, as presented by Groys, not as the acceptance that all is artificial but as the complex realization of capitalism's co-option and the potential to understand everything as under its power, I can then accept his understanding of the living act of the document. (See footnote 28).

⁵⁹ There is a necessity for capture that influences our current analysis of art. It is also sneaky. Kant's belief that "When we are no longer required to perform the onerous labour of testing each perception against an existing conceptual repertoire, we experience a unique liberatory pleasure. ..in the very act of enjoying the unconstrained and harmonious operation of our mental facilities we recognize their implicit universality; we realize that everyone must experience the world through the same basic cognitive process....foundation of aesthetic "common sense, literally a sense of the commonness of cognition itself. This knowledge is produced at two sites: the viewer and the object... [this] contains a radical promise: the calculating and defensive individual has the capacity to become more open and receptive, to view the world not as a resource to be exploited but as an opportunity for experimentation and self-transformation. But this promise can be fulfilled only by robbing the object of aesthetic contemplation of its specificity and its ability to speak to us in turn" (Kester 108). This robbing of the specificity means that "As long as art remain[s] within the sphere of Art, it [is] possible to hold utopian expectations for its transformative power" (Weiss 143). Can the utopian and the specific exist together in the representation, is that what it is to be unable to be captured? Can building doors also be fighting for a world in which there are none?

IMAGINING DEFEAT: TO "WIN A VICTORY OVER" (defeat), TO
"PREVENT (AN AIM) FROM BEING ACHIEVED" (defeat), TO "REJECT OR
BLOCK" (defeat), TO "BE IMPOSSIBLE... TO UNDERSTAND" (defeat).

BEING OTHER

“As researchers we have an obligation to rework methodologies with various world views and unequal power structures in mind” (Absalon, 99).

How we are documenting becomes a system of representation⁶⁰ of ourselves, of the art form(s), of the contributors. Like most systems developing themselves, we have a choice of the language of representation we will use. This, despite the fact that the dominant system operates in such a way that we can feel convinced that we do not have this choice.⁶¹

In acknowledging the rise of socially engaged art and the individual and collective work that has brought this about, maybe the moment has arrived; the moment when funders, audiences and fans can help fulfill the needs to continue, to convince and to share without requiring methods of documentation geared towards capitalist-driven representations. Maybe the moment

⁶⁰ “[Representation] can be used, on the one hand, simply as another way of talking about how one images a reality that exists ‘outside’ the means by which things are represented: a conception grounded in a mimetic theory of representation. On the other hand the term can also stand for a very radical displacement of that unproblematic notion of the concept of representation. My own view is that events, relations, structures do have conditions of existence and real effects, outside the sphere of the discursive; but that it is only within the discursive, and subject to its specific conditions, limits and modalities, do they have or can they be constructed within meaning. Thus, while not wanting to expand the territorial claims of the discursive infinitely, how things are represented and the ‘machineries’ and regimes of representation in a culture do play a constitutive, and merely a reflective, after-the-event role. This gives questions of culture and ideology, and the scenarios of representation - subjectivity, identity, politics - a formative, not merely an expressive, place in the constitution of social and political life” (Hall, 443).

⁶¹ The gallery has power and, even in the effort to minimize that, it still can appear to position a work as the centre around which the rest operates.

has arrived when we can look at how our own desire to claim power has operated within hegemonic structures.⁶²

Maybe these are our opportunities to be other:

“The imagination is our inbuilt instrument of othering, of thinking of things that are not in the here and now, of wanting to become others” (Spivak 15).⁶³ The very use of the word *document* rather than *artwork* to refer to what we are putting in the gallery is an imagining, hoping to continue the process of othering the artwork – of understanding other.⁶⁴

In the discipline of seeking out the development⁶⁵ of capitalism in how we document, we perhaps stand a chance to demonstrate something other through our process. “When we reject the single story, when we realize there is never a single story about any place, we regain a kind of paradise” (Adichie).

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⁶² “If you want your knowledge to be legitimate in this society, you have to prove it is legitimate on western terms, using the western knowledge system. This is not only epistemologically unsound, it is also racist” (Leanne qtd. by Absalon 98).

⁶³ This follows: “To lexicalize is to separate a linguistic item from its appropriate grammatical system into the conventions of another grammar. Thus, a new economic and cultural lexicalization... demands a delexicalization as well” (15).

⁶⁴ “To look for the outlines of a subject that is not a mirror image of the dominant, we have to acknowledge... that any object of investigation... is other than the investigator” (Spivak 16).

⁶⁵ Development is used throughout *Harlem* to refer to the global hegemonic structures spread throughout the world and also our own experience of that in our lives. The word development represents the co-option of even our understanding of personal growth. It represents the entanglement of the global capitalist system all around us and within ourselves.

⁶⁶ Spivak wrote that finding ideas within the dominant ideology that do not support capitalism will never work, we have to go at it from the sides (15).

It requires risk. My privilege allows me the opportunity to take a bit more risk. The power socially engaged art now has allows us to take a bit more risk – risk to imagine how the utopian and the specific can be brought together.

TRANSLATING

What if it will never be as important for those listening as it was for those who were there? Can we let the secondary documentation go? Or can we make it other?

I have become convinced that it is in the work of imagining the collection that the afterlife of relational artwork is held.⁶⁷ This is an act of translation:⁶⁸ the moving of something from artwork to documentation.⁶⁹

Translation holds responsibility.

I hold the responsibility for a representation. I hold the responsibility for what is contained and what is excluded. If the artwork of socially engaged art is not an object to stand in front of then the document must not be captured by this understanding of art. If the artwork has ethics woven directly into it so much the documentation. I must bring my ways of knowing, developed through searching, to this process.

Carson has written that the resistance to answer the question of cliché is to catastrophize. In representation, to resist cliché, I must be willing to represent the violence involved in the movement from artwork to document; I must be willing to be responsible for all that is problematic.

⁶⁷ Rather than a record claiming Truth that can fill our needs.

⁶⁸ As I struggled for the right words in conversation with a friend, Sigrid Dahle, she was able to bring the word translation. The language has fit so comfortably that I cannot remember how I managed to describe my practice without it.

In the words of others I often find '*defining*'.

⁶⁹ "If we make our way to the artwork, then it is an original. If we force the artwork to come to us, then it is a copy. For that reason, the distinction between original and copy has, in Benjamin's work, a dimension of violence" (Groys 63). If we understand the documentation as a copy then bringing it to others is not a peaceful process. When we make the decision that the work needs to go beyond the contributors, it is here that a different type of work begins. We are giving it an afterlife, and thus exposing it to the problems that can contain.

Translation is a tool of power.

Naming is establishing authority. We are "imbued with a logocentric culture in which the bearers of the word are predominately involved in speaking, molding, informing... we have little familiarity with what it means to listen" (Fiumara summarized by Kester 107). Under the guise of our development, under the rights we assume come with our own transformation, under a system that needs the story of the individual transformation to maintain belief that we all hold equal potential to succeed (and by extension are each responsible for our own failure), it becomes easy to believe we are right to tell the story as we understand it; easy to believe our context is enough. "Because dialogue is an encounter among women and men who name the world, it must not be a situation where some name on behalf of others. It is an act of creation; it must not serve as a crafty instrument for the domination of one person by another" (Freire 89).⁷⁰

Translation is a posture of understanding.

As such, it assumes work/time is involved and that the convenient answers may have sneaky motivations. It is a way of knowing that understands there is the first part of a story, and recognizes the distance involved to move a single 'word' from one language to another. It is the understanding that this process is ongoing – a process of both deepening our understanding of

⁷⁰ "Those who steal the words of others develop a deep doubt in the abilities of the others and consider them incompetent. Each time they say their word without hearing the word of those whom they have forbidden to speak, they grow more accustomed to power and acquire a taste for guiding, ordering, and commanding. They can no longer live without someone to give orders to" (Freire 134).

the previously unnamable in the relationship⁷¹ and of understanding the specificity of the person in front of us. It knows that a single story is never enough.

Translation has the ability to be reinterpreted.

The creation of documentation has to do with it being deterritorialized (Groys 63). If the work of translation, moving through deterritorialization, delexicalization, decontextualization – through catastrophe⁷² – results in an answer outside of cliché, then it holds the potential to be capable of ongoing meaning-making that remembers the original. Perhaps the translation can hold the violence, the absence, the utopian and the specific with a representation that allows a new group of contributors to remember and develop meaning among themselves. “When art is ‘life’ ... art documentation is neither the making present of a past event nor the promise of a coming artwork” (Groys 53-54): the space for translation.

⁷¹ As Erin Manning has attempted to do with her defining of “artfulness: the way the art of time makes itself felt, how it lands, and how it always exceeds its landing” (26).

⁷² To move from the conviction that the only answer is in an empty gallery space to:

"All the rooming houses on my street have had their front door removed.

This is the opening sentence to the story of situating my socially engaged art practice as rebuilding doors. The seven sites of this exhibition hope to document the time of learning, questioning and reflecting through relationship: knitting together the threads of connection and complicity that become part of the thin line working to maneuver through the systems of power we exist within." (the promotional statement I've written to describe this thesis exhibition.)

Translation can be SILENCE

“Silence is as important as words in the practice and study of translation” (Carson).

I began this journey with an understanding of silence as an act, perhaps, of humility. In refusing to narrate, in refusing to name, I was placing the representation of someone else above my own. But, even in silence I am not letting the documentation go. Therefore I am required to translate.

Carson talks about three types of silence in translation: physical silence through the loss of part of a text, metaphysical silence that occurs within a word whose intentions are difficult to understand and then, “a deeper one – a word that does not *intend* to be translatable.” Silence that represents the holes that will always be present for those not part of the artwork, silence whose complexity demands time, and then, silence that is resistance.

The lesson that I have learned over the last decades is that, unless there is infinite patience, not just in one of us but in all of us, to learn from below, we cannot stand for their collectivity, if anyone ever can, when freedom from oppression, from not having rights, turns round, one hopes, to the freedom to be responsible. (Spivak 43)⁷³

⁷³ I have written this quote out over and over. At moments I have grasped it. And yet, in each attempt to summarize or expand upon it the meaning has slipped away.

And, for the hold out, for even one who cannot be brought around: "being silent together" (44). The resistance is something we can do, together.⁷⁴ "Here are four letters of the alphabet, you can pronounce them but you cannot define, possess, or make use of them" (Carson).

When I arrive at a place where I cannot capture the multiple stories I have become part of through time engaging in dialogue, when I recognize that I have not found the way for representation to be liberation, when I see the development of capitalism co-opting all that I offer, when I see how each cliché is an answer: I offer silence.

⁷⁴ With our power we can resist. No – in spite of my power – I can learn from those for whom silence is often the only resistance. I can act from the welcome I have received into that action with them.

"In that silence, one has the feeling that something has passed us and kept going, that some possibility has got free" (Carson).

Viewing my acts of documentation from this level of possibility I can see how they hold the potential of being political acts in the most radical understanding of the definition.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ I do not believe I have arrived. I have yet to fully capture how.

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