

## Experiments with Truth: The Documentary Turn

“Your Satyagraha doctrine, Mr Gandhi, as far as I understand it, involves the pursuit of truth and in that pursuit you invite suffering on yourself and do not cause violence to anybody else?”

“Yes, sir.”

“But however honestly a man may strive in his search for truth, his notions of truth may be different from the notions of others. Who then is to determine the truth?”

“The individual himself will determine that, sir. Different individuals will have different views as to the truth.”

“Would that not lead to confusion?”

“I do not think so, sir. But honestly striving after truth will differ in every case. That is why, sir, the non-violence path was a necessary corollary. Without that there would be confusion and much worse”.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> From *Report of the committee appointed by the Government of India to investigate the disturbances in the Punjab, etc* (London: HMSO, 1920); quoted in Amar Kanwar’s film *A Season Outside* (1998). The president of the inquiry, Lord Hunter, is interrogating Mr Gandhi.

<sup>2</sup> M.K.Gandhi, *An Autobiography: or The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Press, 1927 - 1929; English translation Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1982).

<sup>3</sup> Enwezor et al, eds., *Experiments with Truth: Transitional Justice and the Processes of Truth and Reconciliation* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Kantz, 2002).

*Experiments with Truth* takes its title from the autobiography of Mahatma Gandhi.<sup>2</sup> It also references the Documenta11\_Platform2 conference: *Experiments with Truth: Transitional Justice and the Processes of Truth and Reconciliation*, held in New Delhi, India, in 2002,<sup>3</sup> followed by the related exhibition curated by me in Philadelphia in 2004-5. In this *Experiments with Truth*, however, I am interested in exploring a range of approaches to notions of the documentary and of the indexical in the practice of contemporary moving image art. The issue of transitional justice, which the 2002 conference addressed, emerges clearly in this exhibition only in the contribution of British artists Langlands and Bell, although it can be traced as an undercurrent in several other works.

Documenta11\_Platform5, the exhibition portion of the 2002 exhibition conference that took place in Kassel, Germany, was noteworthy for its wide-ranging presentation of works using film and video, confronting viewers with a wide range of documentary strategies that posed aesthetic and political challenges. *Experiments with Truth* is clearly indebted to Documenta11 and the work of my fellow co-curators, and attempts to develop one element of that project by following some of the artists involved into newer (or in some cases, older) works that raise a host of issues that this essay will attempt in part to unpack.

Documentary, however loosely we understand the word, has become almost a privileged form of communication in recent years, providing a meta-discourse that questions or guarantees the truth of our political, social,

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and cultural life. This is not the place for a film history lesson, although it is worth pointing out two formative but politically opposed notions that have informed key debates and practices since the 1930s. On the one hand is the use of film to educate and inform a mass audience on the duties, responsibilities, and occasional pleasures of citizenship. This model was developed by John Grierson and embodied in John Reith's founding charter for the BBC. On the other hand it is the model, inspired by the political avant-garde in Soviet Russia, that sought to use images as a vehicle for social and political change – e.g., the imagistic factography of a Dziga Vertov or the more traditional humanist challenge of a Joris Ivens. In the post-WW2 period, British television developed a pre-eminent position in the production of television documentary, one that is all but eclipsed at the present time. Indeed, one might speculate that the interest in documentary in an art context sprung in part from the failures of broadcast media over the last decade, and that artists took up the challenge of earlier generations of video makers to make alternatives to television.

However, there is a paradoxical underside to this 21st century return to documentary, if such it is, namely that of the evacuation of signification from the signifieds of documentary practice so that it becomes, in the words of more than one artist practitioner, 'simply' art.<sup>4</sup> Whereas in earlier political modernism there was an argument that the activity of art was engaged in ideological critique, with understanding and in some way changing reality, now it can be argued the pendulum has swung to the opposite extreme, in what Hal Foster, drawing on the work of Peter Sloterdijk, has termed "the art of cynical reason":

The aesthetic of cynical reason emerged not only as a reaction against the presumptive truth claims of ideology critique but also as an exaggeration of the epistemological scepticism of deconstruction.<sup>5</sup>

This approach, as it were, literally drains the social and political connotations away in an action of which the term 'vampiric' might be appropriate.<sup>6</sup> In this perspective it is no longer possible to distinguish between 'reality' and "its" representation:

Reality itself founders in hyperrealism, the meticulous reduplication of the real, preferably through another, reproductive medium, such as photography. From medium to medium, the real is volatilized, becoming an allegory of death. But it is also, in a sense, reinforced through its own destruction. It becomes *reality for its own sake*, the fetishism of the lost object: no longer the object of representation, but the ecstasy of denial and of its own ritual extermination: the hyperreal.<sup>7</sup>

Much writing on film and video and on moving image media – my own included<sup>8</sup> – has focussed on issues of duration and mobility, on the

<sup>4</sup> While many observers commented on the dominance of the documentary mode in Documenta11, less attention has been given to its subsequent adoption by biennials and commercial galleries. It could be argued that the post-minimal return to figuration has only now reached its apotheosis with the reintroduction of a (quasi-) realist documentary image.

<sup>5</sup> Hal Foster, "The Art of Cynical Reason", *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge, Mass., London, England: MIT Press, 1996), 119.

<sup>6</sup> Indeed, first nations groups confronted with photography for the first time presciently thought as much.

<sup>7</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (Sage: London, 1993), 70-71.

<sup>8</sup> Mark Nash, "Art and Cinema: Some Critical Reflection", in *Documenta11\_Platform5: Exhibition Catalogue* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Kantz, 2002), 128-136.

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<sup>9</sup> This is indeed the focus of an impeccably installed exhibition *Time Zones* at the Tate Modern, London.

Though conceived completely independently from that at the Tate, I see our exhibition as having a dialogue with it; although they proceed from radically different critical and philosophical perspectives, both exhibitions achieve a quality of installation which hopefully will set standards for future exhibitions.

<sup>10</sup> Mark Nash, "Short Cuts", *3'* (Frankfurt: Schirn Kunsthalle, 2004), 207-208.

<sup>11</sup> Irit Rogoff, "The Where of Now", in Jessica Morgan and Gregor Muir, eds., *Time Zones* (London: Tate Modern, 2004), 84-97.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 84. Rogoff's nuanced account is more generous than mine toward this tendency of artists to de-locate their work and attempts to mediate between positions that I would argue need to be clearly opposed.

<sup>13</sup> Andre Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image", *What is Cinema?*, ed. and trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967).

<sup>14</sup> Avant-garde cinema, however, is not a document in this sense. See Mark Nash, "Art and Cinema", 129.

<sup>15</sup> As part of an argument that the apparently anti-realist work of Jean-Luc Godard has a foundation in

challenge to spectators posed by the presence of moving images in a gallery context.<sup>9</sup> While it is increasingly argued that contemporary audiences for art exhibitions (in the over-developed world, at least) are time poor and that artists and curators need to accommodate this audience, in a recent essay I argue that we should resist such an easy accommodation:

Duration is an essential part of contemporary cinematic if not fine art moving image practices. This is partially because many of the most interesting developments in cinema continue to use a combination of duration and theatrical minimalism or naturalism e.g. Iranian art house cinema. Often these films come from time-rich but resource-poor countries and one has to make a deliberate decision to adapt to the demands of the work in question or risk being cut off from important developments in contemporary artistic production.<sup>10</sup>

If issues of time and duration constitute a formal challenge to the spectator's position, documentary cuts through this by combining duration with narration, thereby forcing the viewer to engage with a range of contents which appear to be located in the real world, rather than that of fiction or fantasy. I say 'appear', because in recent years I believe we have been witnessing a break in the indexical bond between image and referent.

This is also the topic of an important essay by Irit Rogoff.<sup>11</sup> "When", Rogoff asks, "did we begin to assume a fluidity of circulating meanings in which not only is the signifier detached from the signified, but in which the *enunciative* had also taken over from the *interpretative*?"<sup>12</sup> My concern in *Experiments with Truth* is exactly this: to explore work where the enunciative has not (yet) taken over from the interpretative and where the artists struggle against immersion in the Baudrillardian hyper-real.

Andre Bazin's 1946 essay "The Ontology of the Photographic Image" also locates the desire for realism in the struggle against death.<sup>13</sup> The image, for Bazin, becomes a death mask for a reality that, because of the passage of time, is always in the process of being superseded by its photographic image. This applies to both fiction and documentary images – both register a pro-filmic reality, whether a staged fictional narrative or a 'documentary' recording.<sup>14</sup> Both are documents in Bazin's sense.<sup>15</sup> The development of digital effects technology creates a problem for this model: in particular, it poses the question of how does virtual reality impact on one's notion of the indexical. At first sight, at least, *Experiments with Truth* is firmly located in the indexical not least because all of the works involved have some political, social, cultural, or historical referent.

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This goes against the thrust of much contemporary artists' work that attempts to avoid or at least minimise narrative expectations of the viewer. Some artists wish to avoid any connotations of the 'documentary' as they have experienced it, most likely on television, and are not particularly informed as to the cinematic history of experimental and poetic use of this form. They are doubtlessly trying to avoid the excesses of the meta-discursive documentary using voice-over that presents a perspective for the viewer to identify with, "finding something that is not related to answers you have already given yourself".

Those who subscribed to notions of documentary as a mode of education, information, and possible agent of social change have to accept that while this still represents a critical historical legacy it is nevertheless now regarded as outmoded by many contemporary artists. There are many artists working today with and against documentary genres, making an intervention in its various forms and with audiences' expectations. Much of this work however gets trapped in a binary opposition to or slavish imitation of what it perceives as the dominant ideological mass media form.

The artists presented in *Experiments with Truth* however address these questions with considerable sophistication and by and large do not participate in the solipsistic approach to documentary that I refer to above. Rather, almost all the works participate in an ethics of engagement and presentation, whether it is Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi meditating on the social and political reality of images from post-war Italy or French colonial Vietnam or New Caledonia, or Isaac Julien rearticulating the elegance of the prose through which Frantz Fanon's explored his revolutionary ideas as also involving an aesthetic re-articulation.

There is no single set of aesthetic preoccupations that connect the works in the exhibition. Take the three works we are showing off-site in a cinema context: Pere Portabella's lyrical structuralism through which he filters Spain's transition to democracy, Igloolik Isuma's embrace of historical realist narrative in the name of Inuit cultural autonomy, and Liisa Roberts's play with vérité documentary and notions of Finnish, Soviet, and Russian identity are all radically different from each other. Issues of desire and sexual difference, and questions of subjective truth and the truth of the subject hover around a number of works, particularly the cinephilic palimpsest of Francesco Vezzoli's *The End of the Human Voice* and Glenn Ligon's more conceptual investigation. Kanwar and Bhimji explore political violence through absence and silence. Langlands and Bell and Ottinger in different ways explore a lexicon of approaches to documentary and documentation: Ottinger deftly interweaves documents from her narrative fictional and documentary journeys, while Langlands & Bell present a range of documentary modalities – apparently vérité documentary, via

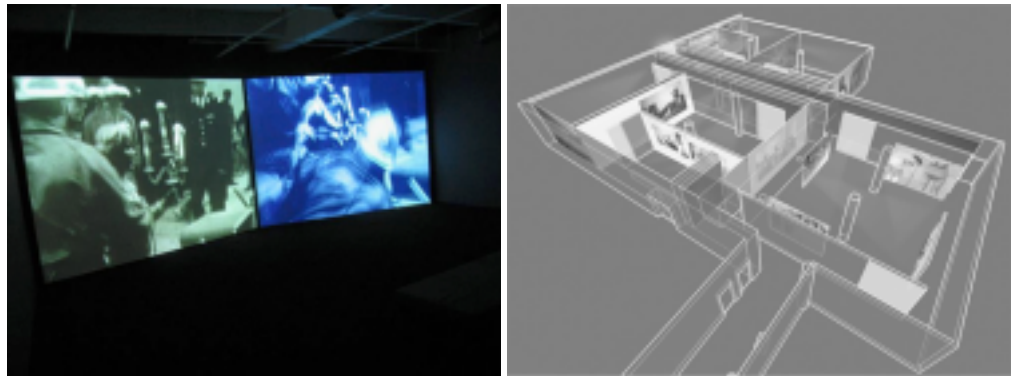
Bazinian realism, Colin MacCabe puts this issue succinctly: "This is not an argument about whether Laurence Olivier's Henry V is realistic, rather it is an argument that cinema inevitably presents the reality of Laurence Olivier playing Henry V before the camera." Colin MacCabe, *Godard: A Portrait of the Artist at 70* (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), 63.

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photographic documentation to fictional recreation. The Multiplicity group conducts a simple sociological observation, comparing itineraries open to Israeli and Palestinian travellers in the same territories.

These artists are involved in negotiating and indeed constructing the perception of otherness both in and about their work. As a Cuban artist, Ezequiel Suarez is a member of a community of artists that is relatively isolated from the international art world and its market. But he chooses to make a document about another Cuban minority – a black engineer, who might have been a popular singer in another place and time. Tempting though it might be for some, the works in this exhibition cannot be incorporated into arguments for an accented, exilic, or migratory aesthetics.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> e.g., Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).



Isaac Julien, *Experiments with Truth*. Courtesy of M. Nash.

*Architectural renderings of FWM Sixth Floor galleries, Experiments with Truth, 2004.* Courtesy Lyn Rice of OpenOffice.

Indeed the artists presented in *Documenta 11* have been chosen to make such a reading difficult if not impossible. The works presented there deal with issues of context, location, and displacement worked through artistic, social, and political filters and are presented in an international art arena. It is not useful to talk about the nationality or ethnic origin of individual artists as providing any necessary truths about their work. In an important sense the work of art operates to complicate such designations. While Zarina Bhimji, for instance, was born in Uganda, the location and to some extent the subject of her work in *Experiments with Truth*, her art practice has been developed in the United Kingdom with an aesthetic that draws as much from the language of contemporary art, film, and photography as any other. Langlands and Bell hail from a former colonial power in Afghanistan (Great Britain) from where their current project draws its imagery, but its staging and articulation is equally addressed to an international art audience and in a formal language that they have successfully made their own.

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These issues are perhaps more usefully glossed in terms of re<local>isation,<sup>17</sup> a rearticulation of the local, of the artist returning to the specificities of place, culture, context, and history not necessarily their own. As Geeta Kapur puts it in her essay in this catalogue:

As art gains ever-higher visibility through the economy and ideology of globalization, the politics of place – community, country, region, nation, even the margin or exile – tends to lose the privilege of direct address. I want to suggest that we investigate the interstices of urban archipelagos to obtain . . . suppressed, subversive, punctual signs of place and belonging in and through the practice of art.<sup>18</sup>

Indeed signs of place and belonging are key to many of the works in this exhibition. In Kapur's version, the role of the artist is to reclaim memory and history – the memories of/from exile (e.g., Bhimji); memories and histories un- or underwritten (e.g., Roberts).

In his contribution to the catalogue Okwui Enwezor explores the rich semantic ground which notions of documentary provide, and teases out both aesthetic and ethical issues that urgently need addressing. In his provocative analysis he proposes that the term(s) if not the practices may already be in the process of becoming redundant, and that in our 'news-saturated, mediatized world' it is all too easy for images to lose their 'conscience, their aesthetic and ethical identity'. The work of the best contemporary artists 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. What truths, Enwezor asks, can images tell us when they are drowning in the continental drift set up by modern media industries?

<sup>17</sup> See Lars Henrik Gass, Bady Minck, and Katrin Mundt, "re<local>ization", in *49 International Kutzfilmtage Oberhausen, Festival Katalog 2003* (Oberhausen Film Festival: Oberhausen, 2003), 77–78; and my contribution to the catalogue, Mark Nash, *Experiments with Truth*, 100–101.

<sup>18</sup> Greta Kapur, "Tracking", in *Experiments with Truth*, 105.



Ezequiel Suarez, *Experiments with Truth*. Courtesy of M. Nash

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His list of Documenta11 artists – and I would add those of *Experiments with Truth* – makes clear that the role of this revitalized engagement with the documentary form is indeed an attempt to explore the possibility of regimes of truth which bypass the modern media industries. If the answer is no, it is because I find these arguments easily drift into an essentialism, often an essentialism of the underdeveloped world as victim. In fact the artists have been chosen to make such a reading difficult if not impossible. The range of work exceeds such paradigms. As a curator my concern is to allow work to be shown in the specified medium, hence film works are shown as film in a cinema with the difference of location, audience, and address that this implies and, through collaboration with community partners, that engages in a social practice of cinema.

Film is characterized by a means of production that necessitates forms of cooperation and collaboration. A sharing of these means characterises many of the works in *Experiments with Truth*: ‘Multiplicity’ is a loosely knit group of architects and urban planners making an intervention in spaces of art exhibition; Langlands and Bell, and Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi are both artist duos who produce work collaboratively, and so on.

Equally, the work of individual artists such as Bhimji or Ligon necessitates collaboration and participation in the production of their projects. I would not want to be seen as privileging one over the other. The development of single-camera video production and computer editing has radically changed the economy of moving image production. The author can still be a producer, to paraphrase Walter Benjamin, but advances in technology mean that the productive and progressive tendencies, which he and Bertolt Brecht thought inherent in the medium, are clearly no longer there (and they were probably never there in the simplistic way that I am articulating it here). More than ever, in other words, it is important to insist on a plurality of ways in which moving image work can be and is being produced.

<sup>19</sup> *Whitney Biennial 2004* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2004), 16.

The introduction to the Whitney Biennial 2004 Catalogue proposes that “today’s artists relate to recent history through a kind of self-aware nostalgia”.<sup>19</sup> *Experiments with Truth* quite deliberately brackets off this relativism and insists, on the contrary, on continuing possibilities for artistic practices of engagement even if the notion of the political might be understood differently in 2004 than in 1968. Such ‘self-aware nostalgia’ could instead be regarded if not as a symptom of the decadence of contemporary American art then as a sign of its failure to come to terms with the political defeat which that moment in fact represents, rather than a golden age of self-organised political activism as it is too often remembered (i.e. nostalgia).

<sup>20</sup> This analysis also forms the basis of Hardt and Negri’s recent publications, *Empire* and *Multitudes*, but with very different conclusions.

In a recent book Paolo Virno analyses the experience of the Autonomista movements in Italy as a prelude to this defeat:<sup>20</sup> “During the 1960s and

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1970s there was, in the West, a defeated revolution – the first revolution aimed not against poverty and backwardness, but specifically against the means of capitalist production, thus, against wage labor”. Post-Fordism, Virno argues, did lead to a revolution, but not one that the left was arguing for but rather one of capital. As he provocatively puts it, “Post-Fordism is the communism of capital”.<sup>21</sup>

It is surprising, so many years after Adorno and Horkheimer wrote their indictment of certain forms of popular culture,<sup>22</sup> and indeed after the theoretical and cultural revolution spearheaded by the Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies, to find oneself questioning the role and value of popular cultural forms as mediated by the cultural industries in 2005. The arguments of that time – deciphering modes of resistance through popular cultural forms – were in tune with, indeed influenced by waves of Italian Marxism, the latter with their insistence on what was later to be called biopolitical resistance. If we are to revisit these discussions today (and which I hope to do on another occasion) we could argue the case for art rather than popular culture as a form of general intellect, “as the communication, abstraction [and] self-reflection of living subjects”;<sup>23</sup> for art as embodying modes of cognition and indeed of potential empowerment, articulating, as it can do, the dilemmas of subordination to post-Fordist, imperial capital.

At a time when some countries in the West are involved in a crusade to establish their notions of independence, liberty, and democracy while at the same time advancing their global economic and political interests, it is perhaps timely to insist on Gandhi’s belief in the power of reason, non-violence, and respect for political and cultural difference and the possible contributions art and artists can make to that.

<sup>21</sup> Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude* (New York: Semiotexte, 2004), 111.

<sup>22</sup> Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum, 1993). Originally published as *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, 1944.

<sup>23</sup> Virno, *A Grammar*, 65.



Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi, *Experiments with Truth*. Courtesy of M. Nash.