Documentary Now!
Contemporary Strategies in Photography, Film and the Visual Arts

Sophie Berrebi

Review – May 1, 2006

Frits Gierstberg a.o. (eds.), ***Documentary Now! Contemporary Strategies in Photography, Film and the Visual Arts*** **(Reflect #04), NAi Publishers, Rotterdam, 2005, ISBN 9056624555**

Losing Sight of the Broader Issues at Stake

Documentary Now!, the latest volume to appear in NAi Publishers' *Reflect* series, begins in the way Lars von Trier's *Dogville* and *Manderley* end: with a montage of documentary photographs. Similar to a credit sequence, the inspiring beginning of this generally thoughtfully designed book sets the tone for what follows, featuring images discussed elsewhere in the book or made by artists who also contribute statements in the volume. The programmatic quality of the book's opening sequence is further made clear by the inclusion of two black and white exhibition views of Documenta 11, showing people looking at tv screens. These images underline, three years on, the significant role of Documenta 11 – the so-called '600-hour Documenta' because of its inclusion of a large number of full-length films – in revealing an artistic and curatorial interest in documentary practice and formats. This interest serves as a point of departure for the editors of *Documentary Now!*, while the visual montage raises questions pertaining to the nature of the documentary image, its place within visual culture and how it may be discussed in terms of style, aesthetics and ethics. All these issues and more are addressed in the six essays written by Frits Gierstberg, Maartje van den Heuvel, (Frits Gierstberg and Maartje van den Heuvel also edited the book along with Hans Scholten and Martijn Verhoeven), Ine Gevers, Jean-François Chevrier, Olivier Lugon and Tom Holert. Alongside shorter contributions by visual artists, these constitute the bulk of the volume.

The essays are of differing quality and the last three authors undoubtedly contri-bute the most rewarding texts. Olivier Lugon, who has made a name for himself with a very thorough and extensively documented study of 'documentary style' as an aesthetic and social project in the works of August Sander and Walker Evans, provides a solid and historically grounded reflection on the multiple definitions of documentary since the origins of the term and the beginnings of photography. Jean-François Chevrier anchors the discussion about documentary in a historical framework. Using such terms as 'picturesque' and 'description' he makes a strong case for the continued prevalence of the finalities of nineteenth-century photography in present day documentary practice, evoking a genealogy of photographers and artists around the paradigmatic figure of Walker Evans whose invention of 'documentary style' enabled him to distance himself both from the pictorialist and modernist fashions of the time and from a certain demonstrative rhetoric of reportage. Rather than postulating that documentary has been contaminated by media society and thus requires greater visual literacy in order to be grasped and produced, or

that it has been reconfigured by the art context – as other authors in the book argue – Chevrier shows himself to be very critical about the legacy of the term in contemporary practices, stating that the careful balance achieved by Evans is difficult to reach: 'many photographers refer to Evans but few of them understand him or can afford the same economy' (p. 53).

Taking up the issue of the increased presence of documentaries in art exhibitions and museum spaces, Tom Holert's essay on the artistic appropriation of the documentary (previously published in *De Witte Raaf*) makes several strong points. He discusses the unresolved ambivalences of curatorial practice in relation to documentary films and emphasizes the carelessness with which these films are installed in museum contexts and the effect of the spatial reconfiguration upon the intelligibility of these works.

Most of the other essays in the book pale by comparison with these well-argued and rigorous pieces. Maartje van den Heuvel's essay is replete with cliché statements such as 'the mass media increasingly dominate our perception of reality' (p. 105), as she laboriously sets out to remind us of the necessity of a greater visual literacy to face the world we live in, and discusses the artistic responses to this situation. Embarking upon a false dichotomy between aesthetics and ethics, Ine Gevers throws in a few jargon terms such as post-media age (a misreading of Rosalind Krauss' 'post-medium age'?) and post-documentary that she does not bother to define while charting an overview of the term aesthetics that falls short of mentioning actual dates and periods (save for Antiquity) or indeed philosophers. Several of these articles also repeat information already exposed elsewhere and in better terms (Van den Heuvel's historical account of the origins of documentary for instance overlaps with Lugon and Chevrier).

The great difference in quality among the texts suggests problems in commissioning – Chevrier's text, for instance, could have gained from being longer – but also reveals ambivalence as to the book's precise aims. The preface emphasizes the popularity of documentary in film festivals and television programmes but simultaneously states that the 'traditional platforms of documentary' are losing terrain in favour of the museum. A comparable dichotomy exists between the book's subtitle *Contemporary Strategies in Photography, Film and the Visual Arts* and its content: the essays rarely venture beyond the narrow perspective of an art world responding to the outburst of documentary formats and genres. This may explain why, all too often, the articles feel like their authors are moving in circles, losing sight of the broader issues at stake in discussing documentary today. Precisely for this reason, it would have been desirable to include contributions from the world of press photography and documentary film, where issues of distribution – through agencies, galleries and cinemas – of exhibition, publication and festival screenings are topical and also trigger a reflection on the forms and subjects of documentaries made by artists and by filmmakers.

Alternatively, a book focussing exclusively on the intrusion of the documentary in art would have required a more distant and analytical approach of its subject, deconstructing for instance the rhetoric of contemporary art discourse, and investigating what lies beneath the 'boom' of documentary in the art world, in relation to the phenomenon of globalization and ethnic representation, and to the tradition of modernism and postmodernism. While the articles by Holert and Chevrier begin to provide answers to these complex questions, the bulk of the volume seems to carefully avoid them. In this context, the artists' contributions, candidly stating their positions, offer a welcome respite from the over-laboured and often vague essays.

Sophie Berrebi is an art historian and curator and lecturer in the History and Theory of Photography at the University of Amsterdam. Her current research considers the issue of the document in contemporary art.

Tags

Aesthetics, Art Discourse, Image

This text was downloaded on September 11, 2026 from
Open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain
www.onlineopen.org/documentary-now