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## Not-so-Transparent Things



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Transparent things, through which the past shines! Man-made objects, or natural ones, inert in themselves but much used in careless life (you are thinking quite rightly so of a hillside stone over which a multitude of small animals have scurried in the course of incalculable seasons) are particularly difficult to keep in surface focus: novices fall through the surface, humming happily to themselves, and are soon reveling with childish abandon in the story of this stone, of that heath.

—Vladimir Nabokov, *Transparent Things* (1972)

In his account of a visit to Passaic published in *Artforum* in 1967, Robert Smithson portrayed the suburban New Jersey town where he was born as a postindustrial

wasteland. He singled out a bridge over the Passaic River, a pumping derrick, water pipes sprouting out of a hillside, and a sand box in a playground as documents exposing the anarchic, industrial development of the area and its present state of desolation and supported his description with black-and-white snapshots. Yet, surprisingly, the generic term he used to describe the constructions he stumbled upon seemingly haphazardly was not document but instead monument. If documents refer to accidentally formed or deliberately constructed material traces of different sorts that are used for purpose of proof, education, or legal record, monuments, by contrast, are traditionally understood as intentional sites through which the past is memorialized. There is little doubt that a historian attempting to describe the process and elucidate the causes of the dilapidation of the Passaic landscape would define these constructions as involuntary documents rather than intentionally created monuments. Yet although Smithson uses the term consistently throughout his essay, his notion of monument is rather idiosyncratic, as is clear from a description of the fragmented landscape and scattered urbanism of Passaic, which, he writes, create “monumental vacancies that define, without trying, the memory-traces of an abandoned set of futures.” Smithson’s purpose in calling those accidental documents “monuments” of an already dilapidated future is to illustrate the notion of entropy, a discussion of which concludes his essay. Yet Smithson’s deliberately awkward choice of words inevitably brings to mind Michel Foucault’s coupling of document and monument in a passage of *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969). Discussing the current stakes faced by French historians, Foucault somewhat elliptically concludes: “In our time, history is that which transforms documents into monuments.” In this passage, Foucault summarized the implications of the critique of the document led by historians grouped around the legacy of the *Annales* journal, founded in 1929 by Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, for the redefinition of the methods, aims, and objects of the investigation of history.

Smithson and Foucault are writing, of course, from different positions and with different purposes; nonetheless this coincidence of terminology offers an opportunity to consider to what extent the critique of the document developed in the context of the *Annales* and by its heirs, the historians of the *nouvelle histoire*, might offer useful critical tools to look back at those artistic practices from the 1960s until the present in which visual and textual documents, related or not to an interest in history, are prominently used.

In contrast with the shock value and temporal-spatial disorientation that resulted from the inclusion of daily life documents (scraps of paper, photographs and objects) in early twentieth-century avant-garde practices—including Dada montage, cubist collage, and surrealist literature and art—conceptual art, performance, land art, and other process-oriented practices introduced, in the 1960s, a more reflexive use of documentation. Artists orchestrated, more or less carefully, the production and circulation of documentation of their work. They put into question the validity of documents and how they should be interpreted, as authorized or accidental sources, as traces that could prolong the life of their works or make them visible or that could entirely replace and stand for an original artwork. When examining the more recent incursions by artists into the field of history, an interest that has become ubiquitous since the 1990s, the historiographical “critique of the document” might offer useful suggestions to assess works by artists that, as Vladimir Nabokov puts it, “revel with childish abandon” in the microhistories they excavate, or on the contrary, to interpret works by artists that appropriate forms of document production

and presentation to unsettle historical narratives, as Jean-Luc Moulène does in his 2005 photo series and newspaper project *Le Monde, Le Louvre*.

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However complex Foucault's relations with historians were in the 1960s and 1970s, the introduction of *The Archaeology of Knowledge* offers a seemingly effortless description of the contemporary challenges faced by historians. These may be, writes Foucault: summed up in a word: the questioning of the document. . . . History has altered its position in relation to the document: it has taken as its primary task, not the interpretation of the document, nor the attempt to decide whether it is telling the truth or what is its expressive value, but to work on it from within and to develop it: history now the document, divides it up, distributes it, orders it, arranges it in levels, establishes series . . . the document, then, is no longer for history an inert material.

While Foucault might be excessive in erasing the quest of truth from the horizon of the historian, this passage mentions some key changes in the approach to the document on the part of the *nouvelle histoire* that I want to briefly review. The first change in this approach is the broadening of the definition of what constitutes a document. The sharpest description of this process is given by March Bloch in his posthumously published *The Historian's Craft*. In this seminal historiographic book Bloch argues that equal weight should be given to the written records (such as memoirs, minutes of official meetings, and so on) willingly transmitted from the past into the present and to those involuntary material traces (such as archaeological findings of everyday life) left by the past. Beyond the simple search for truthfulness versus falseness historians must examine both types of documents with renewed skepticism. It is necessary to read between the lines of the voluntary traces and deconstruct their discourse but also to be aware that involuntary traces can function as proof only if one knows what one is looking for; they speak only "when they are properly questioned."

This widening of the idea of the document and the acknowledgment that what was traditionally thought to be an objective source is in reality fraught with ideological undertones imply that it be rethought in relation to monuments, which are understood as compilations of official sources destined to be passed on to future generations as the official story. Several years after Foucault's swift formula, medievalist historians Jacques Le Goff and Pierre Toubert contracted the two terms to create something more of a working concept:

The document is a monument. It is the result of the effort made by historical societies to impose, voluntarily or involuntarily—a certain image of themselves into the future. There is no truthful document. Every document is a lie. It is the task of the historian to deconstruct, to demolish this montage, to de-structure this construction, and to analyze the conditions of production of these documents-monuments.

Bloch as well as Le Goff and Toubert are similarly concerned with defining what constitutes their research material, but they write as if there existed "immense dormant sectors of documentation" waiting to be "brought to life," in the words of another *Annales*

heir, Francois Furet. It is against this perception of the “inertia” of documents—to reprise the term used by Foucault—that Michel de Certeau, at times associated to the *nouvelle histoire*, develops his argument in *The Writing of History*:

In history everything begins with the gesture of setting aside, of putting together, of transforming certain classified objects into “documents.” This new cultural distribution is the first task. In reality it consists in producing such documents by dint of copying, transcribing, or photographing these objects, simultaneously changing their locus and their status.

Certeau here shifts the attention from the materials of historians to the historians themselves, reminding them that the practice of history is an institutionalized discipline by which no “document” is accidentally found but is instead always willingly constructed as such by the historian through her/his practice.

The call to scrutinize critically the content, modes of appearance, and manipulation of documents provides a useful corrective to interpret artworks that celebrate the document as treasure, that savor accidental findings, or even those works that discover alternative narratives to supposedly “official” ones and all too easily trade an older certainty for a newly acquired one. Yet, in no way should these historiographical reflections provide a blueprint for artistic practices or for assessing them. Certeau’s underlining of the institutionalized aspect of history as a discipline is a reminder that artists are not historians and that not only their methods of gathering and interpreting documents do not subscribe to its rules, but their objectives might also widely differ. If the historian’s aim in collecting and questioning documents is to uncover the truths they conceal, then artists can take a reverse position. They may create works that masquerade as documents and in so doing emphasize the extent to which documents are the products of sited conventions of knowledge production rather than vehicles for evidence. Their interest, in this case, lies less in uncovering than in unsettling historical truths and narratives.

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This unsettling is what Jean-Luc Moulène strives to create in his 2006 work *Le Monde Le Louvre*, where he reframes, with the use of photography, a group of twenty-four sculptures drawn from the collections of the Louvre in three different contexts. The first context is the museum. The artist selected from the various departments of the museum, statuettes of divinities from different periods and places around the world. Temporarily awakening them from slumber in the museum’s storage or removing them from the glass display cases in which they habitually rest, he photographed them individually, following a similar protocol: he resorts exclusively to natural light and places them against bare, neutral-colored backgrounds ranging from greyish–blue to light ochre. As a result of these compositional choices and of the particular selection of objects he has made, the artist challenges the order of the museum (its authority and its organisation) in two ways: First, his arbitrary selection undermines the museum’s rigid divisions into departments and periods. The series of images propose an alternative narrative of the collections that ignores the authoritative discourse of the curator and the historian. I can walk from a dancing Greek youth to a medieval Christ, compare a carved alabaster

Babylonian goddess with a predynastic Egyptian woman made out of crocodile bone. Second, the photographs, in singling them out from the museum display allow me to pause at length in front of each object and examine it in detail capturing the expressions in the sculpted faces and noting the textural details of their surfaces. The effect is troubling, for these smaller works—usually overshadowed in museum displays by larger masterpieces and juxtaposed to others in vitrines—suddenly take center stage. Or do they? For this new visibility is paradoxically the result of their reproduction. If the photographic document is traditionally confined to the archive and the object to the gallery, by reversing this process and displaying the usually concealed visual documents, the artist upsets the museum's organization and questions its way of disseminating and mediating works of art beyond its walls as a collection of images and cultural icons rather than as a physical home for objects.

Moulène's second framework is the archive, and more specifically, the publicly accessible digital database on which all the objects exhibited in the Louvre are catalogued and, for many of them reproduced. All the sculptures photographed by the artist are available on this so-called Base Atlas along with basic information of provenance, period, and subject matter. A comparison between photographs on the Base Atlas and Moulène's own images shows the way in which the order of the archive is not only one of classification but also one of interpretation through visual documentation. Hence, the photographic reproduction of *Sainte Madeleine en extase* (glazed pottery, France, Avon School, early seventeenth century) in the Base Atlas shows how the archival image matches closely the sculpture's title. It presents the statuette from the side, highlighting the tension of her body directed towards the sky. Similarly, a figurine from Smyrna (*Grotesque: Crise d'hystérie ou de tetanos?* terracotta, Roman imperial era), which represents, according to the online catalogue, hysteria or a tetanus attack, is tilted upward and shot in a low-angled light that accentuates its distorted smirk and torso. As for Bernini's model for an allegorical monument to Truth, (*Bernini, La Vérité*, terracotta, c. 1645, Italy) it is shot from below, to accentuate its main sculptural lines, and against a background of white veined marble in anticipation of the planned monumental version (that was in effect never completed). Moulène responds to these images by creating his own conceptual reverse shots photographs respond to these images and propose a visual and conceptual reverse shot Aiming his camera at their eyes as if to capture their gaze, his photographs show another side of these statuettes. Instead of staring adoringly towards the heavens, *Sainte Madeleine* looks back toward the viewers, as does the *Smyrna* figurine now beaming against a luminous blue ground. Bernini's bozzetto of *La Vérité* is no longer majestic but discloses a voluptuous figure whose radiant face emerges from the ample pleats of a gown that seems destined to hide truths rather than reveal them. Whereas the pictures produced for the Base Atlas accentuate the outlines of the sculptures, often opting for profile or three-quarters views that avert their "faces," Moulène's reverse shots deeply alter these representations. Once oriented to face the artist, their outlines appear more compact, and less legible and identifiable in terms of period or style. The contrast between the two sets of images reveals how the archival photographs from the Base Atlas closely match the interpretation of the works provided in the curatorial information given in the titles on the database; this is invariably true whatever the period in which the photographs were taken.

By making these sculptures confront the viewer in the eye, Moulène lays bare the visual

conventions of art documentation but in so doing, he also questions the finality of these conventions. He suggests that the purpose of the photographic documentation of the object is to make it yield information, to assign it a particular place within the museum's order, like the historian's writing, as Certeau argues, sets aside an object to produce it as a document, thereby affecting its meaning and status. The direct gaze of the statuettes in Moulène's photographs directly echoes the unwavering look of African sculptures captured by Chris Marker and Alain Resnais in their short film *Les Statues meurent aussi* (1953). Produced by the Paris-based Pan-African publishing house and gallery *Présence Africaine*, and recognized by French censors as virulently anticolonial as soon as it was released, the film contains a sequence in which a series of African sculpture heads and masks successively emerge and disappear from a dark background. Dramatically lit and accompanied by a solemn drum roll, the sculptures appear to confront the viewer with an indomitable gaze. In contrast to these conquering expressions, an off-screen voice-over comments on the masks' lost histories and on colonialism's relentless pursuit of knowledge and domination "Colonizers of the world, we want everything to speak to us: the animals, the dead, the statues. But these statues are mute." Like Moulène's statuettes, the African masks and sculptures filmed by Marker and Resnais will not speak; they refuse the probing of the colonizer, the historian, and the curator. They refuse, in other terms, to be turned into documents. While filmmakers can use montage, sound effects, and voice-over commentary to put into evidence the process of cultural appropriation and resistance to it, photographers must resort to other devices. In *Le Monde Le Louvre*, Moulène exposes the metal screws protruding from the inside of statuettes along with the inventory numbers painted directly onto their surfaces. These marks, which are usually concealed in archival and documentary reproductions that show sculptures on their plinths, indicate more glaringly than the missing limbs that have disappeared over time, the way the museum absorbs objects.

The third context in which Moulène places the sculptures from the Louvre is that of the newspaper, a setting that enables him to develop his questioning of both the museum and the archive. The artist inserted the same series of photographs in what he considers to be the original format of his work: a supplement from the French newspaper *Le Monde*. The format brings to light the geopolitical background of his selection of objects. The juxtaposed names of two French institutions indicated on the cover of the supplement present side-by-side two conceptions of the world. The world according to the Louvre is one that begins with France in its middle and radiates outward, expanding historically through cultural affinities, colonial histories, and war. The world according to *Le Monde* analyzes and informs about the contemporary from a center-left perspective. Moving across these geopolitical mappings, Moulène's tour of the world in twenty-four images brings together different cults and civilizations from France to Greece and from Egypt to Syria, and juxtaposes contrasting perspectives of ancient history and current affairs. In distributing widely his newspaper work, the artist moreover reminds us of the extradiegetic (beyond the narrative space beyond the museum, an institution in which each object has a particular place and role within an organized narrative).

Moulène's preference to present his images in a newspaper, a medium that he frequently resorts to, recalls Robert Smithson's fondness for essays published, like "The Monuments of Passaic," in magazines. In both cases, the artists opt for formats associated with reporting, narrating, and circulating information only to render these habitual vehicles of

transparent certainties unstable, muddled. Unlike Nabokov's novice falling through the surface of transparent things, Smithson and Moulène keep them in check, and only adopt their formats for purposes of estrangement.



Jean-Luc Moulène,  
Pazuzu, Le Monde,  
Le Louvre, 2005.