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Jean-Luc Moulène's Dialectical Documents

Sophie Berrebi



Fig. 1 : Jean-Luc Moulène, *Untitled. Saint Sebastian/Donostia* (11 January 2000), Courtesy Jean-Luc Moulène and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris.

Consider this image by the French artist Jean-Luc Moulène: *Untitled. Saint Sebastian/Donostia* (11 January 2000) [fig 1]. It shows a white plastic tub containing partially wrapped meat that is being dragged with a butcher's hook by a figure in white trousers, on the sidewalk of an almost empty street. The image might easily be described as documentary, taking into account its focused clarity and apparent absence of aesthetic effects. Further, the strict framing of the picture isolates anything that is not essential to the subject - the tub of meat being dragged on the sidewalk - and the neutral caption gives a sense of time and space. These traits have been the traditional measures for what constitutes a documentary image rather than an aesthetic one. Jean-Luc Moulène's own name for images such as this one is, however, different. *Untitled. Saint Sebastian / Donostia* (11 January 2000), is part of an ongoing series of images entitled *Documents* that he began producing in the late 1990s. While the term 'documentary,' which changed from being only an adjective to becoming a substantive, refers to a genre (mainly film and photography) that uses documents, a



'document' is more broadly an object such as a text or an image, either found or constructed, that is used for purposes of identification, education, evidence, or archival record.

In the recent trend for documentary in the art context, the meaning of the two terms document and documentary is often conflated. As a consequence, documents are invested with the same characteristics of truthfulness, transparency, necessity and realism that have informed the documentary tradition. In exhibitions such as *Documenta 11* (Kassel, 2003), *Cruel and Tender* (London and Cologne, 2003), and *The Need to Document* (Basel and Lüneburg, 2005), a certain logic of the document as an index of the real, as a truthful and transparent object, prevails.

It is not certain, however, that Moulène's photograph subscribes to such an idea of the document. A closer look shows other things at work in the image. The framing allows for little contextualisation, silencing the figures in the foreground by cutting off their heads and creating a strange 'disjunction' – to borrow the title of another series of photographs by Moulène - whereby the missing heads are reclaimed in the form of the severed animal heads in the white tub. If the image tells us something, it is less about something out there in the real world than about something at work in the image. But, if it is, as the artist contends, a document, one may ask: of what kind?

To answer this question and explore a conception of the document that diverges from the one commonly adopted in the language of documentary, the notion of a *dialectical document* might be of use. What I am calling a dialectical document – after Walter Benjamin's notion of the dialectical image – would be a work of art that adopts the form of the document and the strategies of the documentary, but that in so doing, would simultaneously – and self-consciously - question their codes and conventions. A dialectical document then, is an equivocal object that endorses the intrinsic paradox of the document: it is both an object of interest in itself, and at the same time only there to attest to the existence of something else. This paradox, it can be argued, further opens up a range of productive oppositions that the dialectical document employs: neutrality and engagement, transparency and opacity, art and non-art.

What I call the dialectical document is not an entirely new phenomenon, of course. The images of Jacques-André Boiffard and Eli Lotar included in the pages of the journal *Documents* and then, today, on the walls of an exhibition, might be defined as such. Or, one may think of works such as Robert Smithson's essay *A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey* (published in *Artforum* in December 1967), which explored the suburban wasteland of Passaic, describing abandoned construction materials and industrial waste as monuments of a past industrial era. Together with its photographic illustrations, Smithson's text plays out a subtle indeterminacy between factual observation and fantasy-like interpretation, challenging the alleged objective nature of the documentary format and of the document as a faithful recording of fact. The essay, both a work of art and a document, played out the discrepancy between text and image, and their basic inability to convey experience in a truthful way. These strong precedents suggest that this phenomenon is not



new, and show the need to identify what may be called the dialectical document in contemporary art, in a context marked by an increased presence of documentary practices in art exhibitions, practices that are usually accompanied by a very straightforward, realist discourse.

The rhetoric of documentary

An exhibition such as *Cruel and Tender* exemplifies this belief in the document as an index of the real. In the catalogue essay, its co-curator Emma Dexter described the way in which the show aimed at presenting an undisturbed narrative stretching from Walker Evans and August Sander to the present, including artists such as Rineke Dijkstra and Philip Lorca di Corcia, claiming that this tradition had continued in parallel with 'critical practices and theories.'¹ The rhetoric of the exhibition emphasised the anti-aesthetic quality of the work presented, underscoring the 'straightforwardness' of the images and the realist use of the medium – it avoided thereby addressing issues that would complicate the picture, such as the ambivalent formula coined by Walker Evans in speaking of a 'documentary style.' Instead of this, and looking back to the 1930s, Dexter argued that the 'child-like simplicity or truth to the medium was not readily associated with the dynamics of a European avant-garde.'² Furthermore, she also stressed the modesty of these photographs that do 'not draw attention to themselves, 'allowing the medium to concentrate on depicting the subject.' This unobtrusiveness contrasted with what she called the "'isms" of modern art that range from surrealism to conceptualism.' In the former, 'the photograph is stretched and twisted and [...] the technical invention of the photographer is to be marvelled at,' while conceptual art was dismissed for its 'solipsistic position.'³ In this simplistic analysis, Dexter emphasised the antagonism between the work of art and the document, the former seen as critical and self-reflexive, the latter as realistic, and following an independent, parallel tradition.

Dexter's straightforward appraisal of documentary photography reflects the dominant literature on the subject. The studies of Jean-Francois Chevrier and Olivier Lugon, among others, privilege the German and American traditions of 'straight' documentary photography to the detriment of alternative currents and in particular surrealism, rarely examined in relation to documentary, aside from Ian Walker's *City Gorged with Dreams: Surrealism and Documentary Photography in Interwar Paris*.⁴ While Walker often shies away from defining the particularities of the surrealist document and its relation to documentary, for authors such as Lugon, it is a relationship that simply never developed. In his key study of documentary photography, *Le Style Documentaire*, Lugon foregrounds the interest of the surrealists and of Salvador Dalí in the document and recalls their discovery, via Man Ray, of the work of Eugène Atget. Yet he argues that a real surrealist documentary tradition did not come into being, mainly as the artists concerned never followed up these early interests, and pointing too to the domination of literature over the visual arts in surrealism.⁵

Document and work of art



At stake in the idea of the dialectical document is the ambivalence of status between document and work of art. The distinction between the two is the subject of a short text by Walter Benjamin, 'Thirteen Theses against Snobs,' which appeared in 1928 in the volume of 'aphorisms, jokes and dreams' published under the title *One Way Street*.⁶ Benjamin's text stages an opposition between the two elaborated through thirteen theses prefaced by a short statement that sets the scene:

Snob in the private office for art criticism. On the left a child's drawing, on the right a fetish.

Snob: 'Doesn't this make Picasso seem such a waste of time?'

Following this *entrée en matière*, two columns divide the page, each one claiming the respective qualities of the work of art and of the document and bringing them into comparison with one another. A sample of these gives a sense of their tone:

Thesis 3: The art-work is a masterpiece/the document serves to instruct.

Thesis 9: In the art-work the formal law is central/in the document forms are merely dispersed.

Thesis 10: The artwork is synthetic: an energy-centre/the fertility of the document demands: analysis.

Pointing out the naiveté of the snob who is touched by the spontaneity and directness of the child's drawing, Benjamin seems at first to aim at putting concepts into place. Hence he stresses the 'one dimensionality' of the document; its poverty when compared to the work of art, which he instead praises for its quality of synthesis. While, as he states in thesis 6, the work of art brings content and form into one to produce meaning, the document's strength comes only through a 'wholly dominant' subject matter. In this perspective, the work of art is granted qualities of synthesis, of uniqueness, remoteness and durability, that the document's plainness – a point echoed by Dexter's remark on the 'childlike simplicity of documentary photography'⁷ - clearly cannot match.

Walter Benjamin's condemnation of the document should not be taken, however, entirely at face value. The solemnity of his tone is enough to suggest that there is a great deal of irony behind these words, and one needs only to look at other statements and think of the art that Benjamin was interested in at the time to give the text another reading; one that may be suggested for instance, by thesis 11: 'The virility of works of art lies in assault,/the document's innocence gives it cover.' Could it be then that the document's innocence is but a strategy that the snob mistakes as child-like simplicity? Around the time that he wrote and published *One-Way Street*, Benjamin displayed a strong interest in avant-garde art, in photography, dada and surrealism, and these avant-gardes, as Benjamin often repeats, produced documents. The original cover of *One-Way Street* testifies to this interest, featuring



a montage of visual and written documents by photographer Sasha Stone, who was also a friend of Benjamin's. In his article, 'Surrealism, or the Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia,' published a year later, in 1929, Benjamin in fact described the productions of the surrealists as, among other things, documents rather than works of art.⁸ In 1931, in an essay on the 'crisis of the novel,' he likened the practice of the novelist Alfred Döblin in *Berlin-Alexanderplatz* to montage and compared it to dadaism: 'Authentic montage is based on the document. In its fanatical struggle with the work of art, Dadaism used montage to turn daily life into its ally. It was the first to proclaim, somewhat uncertainly, the autocracy of the authentic.'⁹ Thus the document, while it cannot measure up to the great classical works of art in a conventional sense, may nonetheless, notably in a practice of montage, display a greater power of subversion.

Beyond Benjamin's direct references to surrealism and dadaism, it is worth noting that his text appeared at a time in which the issue of the document and of documentary was, often in the context of modernisation and the development of new technologies, a recurrent theme. This was of course, the same period that saw the publication of André Breton's *Nadja* (1928) and of Georges Bataille's *Documents*. Benjamin's 'Thirteen Theses against Snobs' also preceded by a couple of years his major essay on photography, 'A Small History of Photography.' This essay, incidentally, was the occasion for Benjamin to discuss a number of recent photographic publications and to praise photographers such as such as Karl Blossfeldt – whose images appeared in the pages of *Documents*.

These examples suggest that the 'Thirteen Theses' sought, more than anything, to reflect upon the equivocal nature of the document. The acknowledged simplicity of the document appears, then, to be the result of a deliberate strategy, a *cover* to make a work of art that challenges the classical definition given in the text. This does not seem so far removed from what Denis Hollier calls, in the preface to the facsimile re-edition of *Documents*, Bataille's deliberate 'anti-aesthetic' position, signalled, among other things, by the choice of 'documents' as the title of the journal.¹⁰ The ambivalent document shares with Benjamin's notion of the dialectical image an instability that is moreover a temporal instability. In the dialectical image, 'all temporalities meet' ('tous les temps se rencontrent'), notes Georges Didi-Huberman.¹¹ This temporal instability is, further, what allows the image to escape from being, in Didi-Huberman's reading, either a simple 'document of history' or a 'work of art idealized as a monument of the absolute.'¹² Benjamin's reflections on the document, notably in the 'Thirteen Theses,' and the qualities the document shares with the dialectical image, suggest that the antagonism between work of art and document posited by Dexter, while following a broad historical tradition, only gives a partial view of a richer history in which document and work of art can be two interrelated aspects of the same object.

Moulène's dialectical documents

To account for this history of what we can call the dialectical document, it may be worth examining the works of artists who have integrated this concept of the equivocal document in



later twentieth-century art practice, in opposition to the historians who have neglected it. An early model of this dialectical document in the context of conceptual art is no doubt the project *Evidence* developed by artists Mike Mandel and Larry Sultan in the late 1970s, and which took the form of an exhibition and a book. This book was re-issued in 2003, and the photographs were the subject of the exhibition *Evidence Revisited* at the Photographer's Gallery in London in 2005.¹³ They were shown again in the 2006 Berlin Biennial entitled *Of Mice and Men*. The two artists collected documentary photographs from archives of over one hundred American government agencies and educational institutions, and assembled a sequence of 59 pictures, which they presented in an exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Modern art in 1977. Stripped of captions or any kind of description or indication of origin, these images, made according to the pure conventions of photographic documentary, and made specifically as objective records of activities and situations, test results, crime scenes and so forth, became absurd, and gained a life of their own by virtue of their selection and arrangement.

Evidence presented documentary photography in its most elementary form and showed how the conventions of clarity, frontality and black and white could fail to convey any information whatsoever once the captions had been removed and the context had changed. The effect was accentuated by the contrast between such highly demonstrative images, originally staged and framed solely with the purpose of pinpointing a certain reality, and the total obtuseness that resulted from their reconfiguration in the exhibition and book project. But further, *Evidence* demonstrated the shakiness of the document as a stable record. As the photographer and theorist Joan Fontcuberta recently put it:

Evidence pulverized the very notion that photography was the proof of something, the support of some evidence. Because we should have asked ourselves: Evidence of what? Perhaps evidence only of its own ambiguity. What remains, then, of the document?¹⁴

What remains then, is that the ambivalence of the document is exposed. These works adopt the forms and conventions of documents - here as found objects - and disrupt their codes and conventions. Dialectical documents are unstable objects that do not completely relinquish their status as documents even when becoming an art project. This instability and reliance upon presentation and contextualisation means that photography can never just be 'itself' as Dexter claims at the end of her essay in the *Cruel and Tender* catalogue, when she writes that 'photography has finally become itself.'¹⁵ Instead, photography exists in relation to specific conditions of production, circulation and interpretation.

Jean-Luc Moulène's photographic practice has since the early 1990s shown a particular awareness of this characteristic of photography. Emerging from the realm of performance and body art, rather than photography, Moulène was notably close to the French artist Michel Journiac who relied on photography for what he called 'constats d'actions' -



literally, photographic certificates, or reports of actions - objects which sit indeterminably between art object and documents.¹⁶ In Moulène's work, the reflection on the dialectical quality of the document moves from exploring its instability within a body of work and artistic production, to examining the condition of a work's reception. A case in point would be one of his best-known projects, the *Objets de Grève*, a series of photographs and of manufactured objects produced by workers on strike and collected by the artist [fig. 2]. The *Objets de Grève* (strike objects) 'presented by Jean-Luc Moulène,' to cite the full title of the work, trace episodes of workers' movements and form part of a social history. Moulène has collected and photographed them, making something akin to identity photographs of each individual piece. The images, presented in exhibition and museum spaces, closely frame the objects, enlarging them. The unframed pictures have an object-like quality, but at the same time, printed on glossy paper, they surreptitiously evoke advertising posters. The result is an ongoing project that is both a document of social history and an art project, with the stress on either aspect depending upon the context of reception. The ambivalence of the project as at once conceptual, documentary and celebratory is echoed further by the ambivalence within the images: as both iconic and documentary.



Fig. 2: Jean-Luc Moulène, *Objets de Grève*, Courtesy Jean-Luc Moulène and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris.

In one of his most recent projects, *Le Louvre*, Moulène can be seen methodically deconstructing the codes of photographic documentation made for the purpose of archive and conservation. For this project, which was presented in the Louvre museum in November 2005, Moulène photographed a series of 24 small sculptures from the museum's collection,



mostly of religious or sacred figures of all beliefs. Removing them from the vitrines in which they were usually displayed, and transporting them into the artist's studio, he made what can best be called portraits of these small sculptures, using only natural light, and framing them so that they made eye contact with the viewer.



Fig. 3: Jean-Luc Moulène, *Crise d'hystérie ou de tétanos*. Courtesy Jean-Luc Moulène and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris.

The images of this deceptively simple project are reminiscent of the displacements that *Documents* created with its methods of framing, arranging and ordering images in an issue. In Moulène's images, the photographic process, instead of being an unquestioned realist medium, is addressed as a coded representational system. This becomes clear if we juxtapose the images made by the artist with the photographs that the museum keeps in its archives and which are available on the online database of its collections. Moulène's images underscore the tradition at work in these apparently objective documentary images. The figurine from Smyrna entitled *Crise d'hystérie ou de tétanos* is a case in point. Moulène's



image of it is taken in natural light and the photographer is, as it were, face to face with the sculpture [fig. 3]. By contrast, in the photograph that is kept in the collections of the Louvre - and available online in the Atlas database - shows the figurine photographed from below and with a strong lighting scheme that emphasises the smile and the distortion of the figure. As such, the Louvre image becomes as convincing a representation of a hysteria figure as those staged by Jean-Martin Charcot in his time. That these 'objective,' documentary images in the Louvre archives also adopt a conventional framing that the photographer thought best in relation to the subject matter is evidenced further in the photograph of a terracotta model of Bernini's sculpture *Truth* [fig. 4]. The image in the Louvre database stresses by anticipation the monumentality of the sculpture for which this is a model. By contrast, Moulène, aiming at the figure's gaze, reveals the way in which the pleats of her gown obscure rather than illuminate the truth she is supposed to represent.



Fig. 4: Jean-Luc Moulène, *Bernini's Truth*. Courtesy Jean-Luc Moulène and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris.

It might be possible to see this project as a follow up and extension to what is at work in *Documents*. While Georges Bataille assigned his dictionary the job of defining 'the tasks rather than the meaning of words,' Moulène's images suggest that his dialectical documents are about the task of photography, rather than about its meaning.¹⁷ This task might be defined as re-orienting vision, making the viewer aware of visual conventions and usually unquestioned modes of presentation. At this point, it is time to return to the first image discussed, *Untitled. Saint Sebastian/Donostia (11 January 2000)*. If it is a document, then, it is clear that this document presents not objective fact, but a document destined to join the artist's own archive, part of what he calls an 'impersonal diary,' consisting of raw material that is destined to be collected in order to later re-emerge, in a publication or an exhibition (such as the one on show in London in summer 2006 at Thomas Dane). In this most recent case, works from different series - various kinds of documents - come together in a montage that takes place in the exhibition space.



Fig. 5: Jean-Luc Moulène, *Les Ongles, Paris, novembre 1999*. Courtesy Jean-Luc Moulène and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris.



Although Moulène possesses an extended knowledge of the history of surrealist and related photography – he cites notably the journal *Le Grand Jeu* and what he sees as the performative photographic self-portraits of its protagonists - his work does not directly cite or re-enact historical existing images. He claims instead an interest in the mechanisms at work in the compositions.¹⁸ Yet an image such as *Les Ongles, Paris, novembre 1999* [fig. 5], provides a good starting point to investigate the relation between his work and the images in *Documents*. It may help, for instance to understand the artist's rather mysterious phrase explaining that he 'organises unconscious projections' ('j'organise les projections inconscientes') in his images. Indeed, while there is no direct association between *Les Ongles* and Boiffard's *Gros Orteil*, or between Moulène's photograph of packed meat and Eli Lotar's images of La Villette, the eeriness of these images nevertheless similarly relates to issues of anthropomorphism - big toe as face, toe nail as thorax - and make you sense at once the bloodiness of the meat and its inclusion in a rationalised circuit of production and distribution. Moulène's images, produced in a context that is unambiguously an artistic one, discreetly bring out the dialectical document aspect of the images of *Documents*. In so doing, they suggest the possibility of a tradition of documentary photography that would include the images from *Documents* and those of Moulène, those of *Le Grand Jeu* and the photographic reports of body art. These dialectical documents have been sidelined in the histories of documentary art constructed around the father figures of Walker Evans and August Sander and their legacy. Moulène's images show how practice can raise historiographic issues and help critically revise historical traditions.

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¹ Emma Dexter, 'Photography Itself,' *Cruel and Tender*, Tate Modern, London, 2003, 16.

² Dexter, 'Photography Itself,' 16.

³ Dexter, 'Photography Itself,' 16.

⁴ Ian Walker, *City Gorged with Dreams: Surrealism and Documentary Photography in Interwar Paris*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2002.



⁵ 'Tout étrange que cela paraisse, nous sommes strictement dans la logique d'un surréalisme domine par les écrivains. Malgré, ou à cause de cette mythologie, la photographie se situera les plus souvent qu'en deça ou au delà d'un art documentaire.' Olivier Lugon, *Le Style Documentaire. D'August Sander à Walker Evans, 1920-1945*, Macula, Paris, 2004, 27-28.

⁶ Walter Benjamin, letter to Letter to Gershom Sholem, 22 December 1924, cited by Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1991, 16. David Company is one of the very few authors to discuss this text by Benjamin, see *Art and Photography*, Phaidon, London, 2003.

⁷ Dexter, 'Photography Itself,' 16.

⁸ Walter Benjamin, 'Surrealism or the Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia' (1929), *One Way Street and Other Writings*, Verso, London and New York, 1979, 225-239.

⁹ Walter Benjamin, 'The Crisis of the Novel' (1931) reprinted in Michael W. Jennings (ed.), *Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings*, Belknap Press, Cambridge and London, 1999, 299-304.

¹⁰ Denis Hollier, 'La valeur d'usage de l'impossible,' *Documents* (1920-30), Jean Michel Place, Paris, 1991, viii.

¹¹ Georges Didi-Huberman, *Devant le temps, Histoire de l'art et anachronisme des images*, Editions de Minuit, Paris, 2000, 43.

¹² Didi-Huberman, *Devant le temps*, 91.

¹³ The original exhibition *Evidence* was presented at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1977.

¹⁴ Joan Fontcuberta, 'Evidence of what?,' *Harvard Journal of Photography*, vol. 9, *Fantastic*, 2007, <http://www.hcs.harvard.edu/hpj/>.

¹⁵ Emma Dexter, 'Photography Itself,' 21.

¹⁶ Interview with the artist, 24 March 2006, Paris.

¹⁷ Georges Bataille, 'Informe,' *Documents*, no. 7, 1929, 382.

¹⁸ Interview with the artist, 24 March 2006, Paris.

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