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Reconsidering the Shape of Evidence

Visual Documents in and Beyond Contemporary Art

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Publication date

2017

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Das Wissen der Kunst

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Berrebi, S. (2017). Reconsidering the Shape of Evidence: Visual Documents in and Beyond Contemporary Art . *Das Wissen der Kunst*, 7. <https://wissenderkuenste.de/texte/ausgabe-7/07-11-2016-reconsidering-the-shape-of-evidence-visual-documents-in-and-beyond-contemporary-art/>

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Sophie Berrebi

Ausgabe #7
November 2017

Sophie Berrebi discusses in her lecture the use of documents in the visual arts in the first decade of the 21st century. She focusses on artists, who shed light on the potentials, mechanisms and traditions of analogue forms of documentary practices in contrast to the contemporary emphasis on the usage of digital media. In doing so they question the status of art works as well as of documents and the relationship of museums and archives. We present here the presentation manuscript of the lecture and add the notes taken by two members of the research training group. This most common kind of documentation of lectures in most scientific disciplines points out the processes of selection and accentuation in listening and recording.

Reconsidering the Shape of Evidence: Visual Documents in and Beyond
Contemporary Art.

Lecture by Dr. Sophie Berrebi

University of the Arts, Berlin, 7 November 2016

Presentation Manuscript

Thank you for inviting me to speak at the University of the Arts in this series of talks on the document in the arts and science. And thank you, Renate Woehrer, in particular, for discussing the content of this talk in which I will focus on a book I published in January 2015 under the title *The Shape of Evidence*. Two years later, it is a good moment to reflect on the argument it develops because, since the book appeared I started to work on several different research projects which all take my investigation on the document further: They include a book entitled *Entrée en Matière, Hubert Damisch and Jean Dubuffet*, a book that contains critical texts by Damisch as well as the correspondence he exchanged with Jean Dubuffet. Another project is a research I am busy with at the moment is called *Elements of Fashion: Icons, Details, Gestures*. In it, I research specific clothing icons (such as the white shirt, jumpsuit, stripy naval shirt), details (such as ties and pockets) and gestures (such as wrapping or wearing black), through visual documentation. And a third one is research project called *Platform Body/space*. All of these projects involve thinking and using documents, either as a means or as an ends. So it is useful here for me to retrace the steps I took in *The Shape of Evidence* and where it has taken me.

In this book, I tried to make close readings of a number of key artistic practices in order to share my belief that artists can provide, through their work, manuals, or maps to help us explore the life of things and objects from everyday life. I was also interested in looking at what happens to documents and archives when we move from analogue to digital age. Therefore, in the next forty minutes or so, I would like to explain the context in which I developed the argument of my book and elaborate on some of its conclusions.

Upon starting the research that led to writing *The Shape of Evidence*, I realised immediately that my interest was in the work of artists who use film, photography or written sources, and who adopted formats derived from specific professional, industrial, scientific or commercial

contexts. And I proposed that in their work, we focus on this reference to utilitarian forms of photography and film and argue that what these artists do is propose that the document is a critical form, that is, a form that makes it possible to develop in a critical reflection around issues of representation, knowledge production, art and its history. By using the document as a critical form, these artists could be seen to address what I felt were key issues both in art and in general culture today, issues that include, for instance, the fraught relationship between the museum and the archive, the trust that is placed in documents today, the way in which visual documents circulate, and finally, the historical genealogies that can be perceived in visual documents within art and beyond art.

Before continuing to where questioning these issues led me, I would like to back track a little and say a few words about the context in which I developed this research: In the mid 2000s the contemporary art context in which I was active, saw the gradual appearance of documentary forms as one of the key artistic forms and their establishment as a dominant medium or discipline in the art world. *Documenta X* (1997) directed by Catherine David, played an early role in this. She included within the exhibition, which was very much about history and politics, documentary films and photography as well as feature films - objects that until then had a marginal presence in art if at all. That exhibition also rendered visible a generation of artists including Jean-Luc Moulène and Johan Grimoprez whose work developed a critical reflection about the media. Moreover, the agenda of that show, to examine 20th century history, the cold war, decolonisation, globalisation and so on, meant that to a certain extent, the idea of art as information was foregrounded. The eleventh edition of Documenta directed by Okwui Enwezor, in 2002 very much followed a similar impulse, but extended it to a more global perspective. It was nicknamed by some media the '400 hours Documenta', in reference to the time that would be needed to view all the films (many of them documentary) that were presented in the exhibition, a telling joke that pointed to the way the exhibition moved towards the format of a film festival. Many exhibitions in the years that followed *Documenta 11* also focused on documentary practices. To name just a few: *Cruel and Tender*, London, 2003; *[Based Upon] True Stories*, Rotterdam, 2003; *Experiments with Truth*, Philadelphia, 2004; *The Need to Document*, Basel and Luneburg, 2005; *Making History: Art and Documentary In Britain 1929 to Now*, Liverpool, 2008.

Several of these had one thing in common: the idea that the purpose of art was to testify about and show things going on in the world. And the curatorial discourse that came with these shows often argued that the artwork had an ethical role and that the artist was at her or his best, a journalist showing and denouncing injustices in neglected parts of the world. There was comparatively little questioning and discussion about how this was done, about the processes of reflection by which artists would question the format of documentaries and framed photographs that were adopted by artists. Only a few voices, like for example Hito Steyerl in an essay where she questioned the authoritativeness of the language of documentary film, addressed these issues.

It seemed to me that there were many artists who were not discussed within the context of documentary and art, whose work was less visible as a result, because their work appeared to be too removed from immediate reality, or too hermetic. But it is precisely those artists whom I felt were the most interesting to look at. I wrote about a number of them Sven Augustijnen, Jean Luc Moulène and Zoe Leonard, I curated exhibitions presenting the work of others: Alexandra Leykauf, Cary Young, and Christopher Williams, and also began teaching about these generations of artists in the context of the history of photography and the history of contemporary art. I felt a contradiction at the time that I began as a lecturer in photography at the university of Amsterdam between the fact that I felt no general interest in photography, while at the same time, all the living artists I found the most interesting were working with photography. This peculiar paradox became a kind of motor: I was not interested in photography as a discipline but rather as a medium with a

rich interdisciplinary history and a complex relationship to structures of power and knowledge, be it political, scientific or judiciary.

The articles, exhibitions and lectures grew into the book, which I called an art historical book even though people I spoke to constantly seem to disapprove of the choice of artists: most of the academics had never heard those names and most of the art critics thought they were not new or young enough. They were all on the threshold between the contemporary and the historical both in terms of age and positioning and also, as I gradually discovered, in relation to photography and film as mediums.

But for me, at that point, what was the most interesting was that instead of reacting immediately to current events, their work often looked at more historical events and their resonance in the present, while also reflecting on the medium they were using and therefore on the way information is constructed and circulated.

A case in point would be the work of Fiona Tan, Wendelien van Oldenborgh and Sven Augustijnen, which I eventually discussed in the fourth chapter of the *Shape of Evidence* book, that some of you here may have read. I looked in particular at the way in which Fiona Tan [whose work is currently the subject of a large exhibition in Frankfurt] used found footage from tourists, colonial authorities and ethnographers from the early 20th century, at a video installation by Wendelien van Oldenborgh [who will represent the Netherlands at the next Venice Biennale] entitled *Maurits Script* (2006), in which she talked about the 17th century Dutch colonial venture in Brazil. Her film is carefully scripted, very formal, and shows the apparatus of recording, of staging the performance she filmed. This staging shows that, contrary to certain beliefs, there is no need to be realistic in order to let truth appear. In his film *Spectres* (2011) Sven Augustijnen used an opposite strategy. He made a film that has all the appearances of realism in order to show the lies of its protagonist. *Spectres* investigated the murder of the independence leader of Congo Patrice Lumumba in newly independent Congo in 1961 and the role assumed by Belgian authorities in this murder. It distorts and confuses the rules of documentary because it seemed to agree and disagree at the same time with the main protagonist who is a Belgian witness of those events. It is telling that some documentary film festivals refused to show it while others awarded him prizes: the apparent ambivalence was complicated to understand for some viewers and programmers.

Aside from works that played with – and subverted traditions of – documentary film, I also looked at the work of artists who manipulated, restaged, remade, or deconstructed a wide spectrum of ‘professional’ photographic documents: archive images, documentation of artworks, scientific representations, product photographs that you could encounter in a sales catalogue, street photography, and so on.

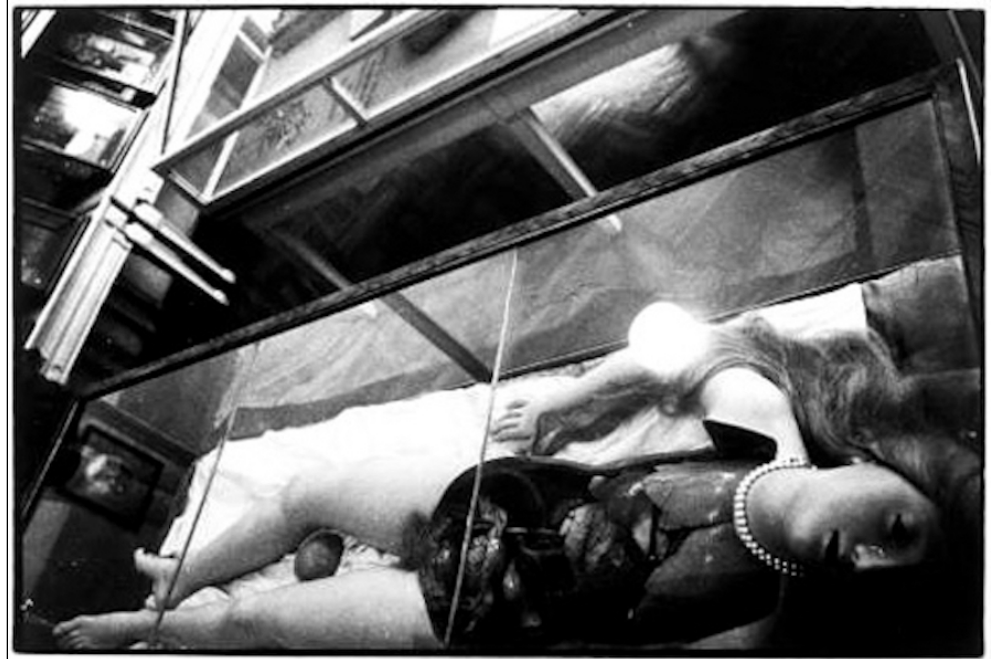
This was the case of Christopher Williams, who questions product and fashion photography, by either making 'wrong' images, images that did not match the exacting criteria, the idealised reality of advertising, or by saturating his images with references. In this image, titled *Untitled (Study in Yellow/Berlin) Dirk Schaper Studio, Berlin, June 21, 2007 (No.1)*, (Fig. 1) and drawn from the series entitled *For example: 18 lecons sur la societe industrielle...* Williams depicts what appears to be a lingerie model in white bra and knickers, but she is unexpectedly shown from the back. What interests me in this image is the way in which it is a fashion photograph, but turned back to front and 'gone wrong' in terms of professional photography (if you look closely at the picture you see she has dirty feet, moles on her back, yellow clips holding the bra tight). This turning the model around can be interpreted in several ways: it turns the image into an art work (it quotes several images from Francis Picabia's nudes from the 1930s, and it suggests the 'undersides of capitalism' the ideal image is replaced by one showing the labour involved (through the dirty feet) and the imperfection of the industrial product (that needs clips to hold it in place). Moreover, read in relation to the rise of realism in painting in the 1850s, the dirty feet evoke the nudes of Courbet and Manet, who depicted un-idealised bodies that were dubbed 'dirty' by some critics.



Christopher Williams
Untitled (Study in Yellow/Berlin)
Dirk Schaper Studio, Berlin
June 21, 2007 (No. 1)
2008
Chromogenic print
paper: 50,8×40,6 cm
framed: 87,6×75,6 cm
Courtesy Galerie Gisela Capitan, Cologne and David Zwirner, New York/London

Photographs such as those of Williams but also by Moulène and Leonard questioned institutionalised terms like 'objectivity' something that has, in terms of visual representations, a long history, and a set of rules, involving for instance a frontal framing, and even light that give a sense of neutrality. These works show that objectivity is only a construction. Another interesting example to look at in this context is a photograph by Zoe Leonard, entitled *Wax Anatomical Model Shot Crooked From Above*, (1990). It shows a wax figure kept at the Josephinum Museum in Vienna, and part of a collection of figures that was originally bought by Emperor Joseph II in Florence in 1786 to be used for medical training in Vienna, and was thus meant, when it was made, to be an objective rendering of human anatomy (Fig. 2) In this picture, the wax model has been photographed sideways, as if the artist was refusing to comply to the realistic model of wax rendering, by placing onto it the

objectifying device of photography. She photographs it 'wrong' like a clumsy tourist, and captures the light reflecting on the glass case, the museum display and the entire institutional set up along with the hyperrealist figure.



Zoe Leonard
Wax Anatomical Model Shot Crooked From Above, 1990
Silbergelatine-Abzug
77,8 x 116,8 cm
© the artist, courtesy Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne

Works of art such as these, seemingly straightforward, but actually complex and multi-layered question powerfully the way we read images, but also inform the way in which we define works of art. For instance, they show that a work of art is above all what art historian Hubert Damisch calls a 'theoretical object': in other words, they provoke the viewer to produce theory, and they give the viewer tools to think.

Moreover, as I suggested in the book, they show that some art works, reject being autonomous and complete, and instead, look towards the document as an almost ontological model: They start to share with the document its characteristics, such as fragmentation and possibility of being instrumentalised. This phenomenon is broader than what was meant with the so-called 'documentary turn' of the late 1990s and early 2000s, which I evoked earlier. The idea of an artwork-document suggests an older logic at work in the field of art, one that includes early twentieth-century traditions of collage and montage, but also conceptual artistic practices and documentary traditions in film and photography. It is about art claiming openly its inability to be complete, to have authority, to have the final word on a topic. Thinking of a precedent to recent work, we might remember that Marcel Duchamp left his 'Large Glass' unfinished, and published a set of 'documents' packed in a 'green box' that has resulted in the work's interpretation remaining forever open. The permanent deferral in the use Christopher Williams makes of the phrase 'for example', at the beginning of the titles of several of his works, and the system of 'revisions' he has adopted for exhibitions, but also the speculative gaze of Zoe Leonard that I just showed an example from, and the multi-voiced narrative in Van Oldenborgh's film *Maurits Script*: all these elements contribute to a notion of the artwork as a self-reflective process and a document of its own making. The idea of artwork-document affirms the unsolvable dichotomy between the autonomy of art and its entry into discourse and institutional practice: The more it enters sociological, political, and historical discourse, the more it needs to reaffirm its distance from these fields.

The development of the 'artwork-document' was one of the conclusions I reached at the end of the *The Shape of Evidence*. And this notion in turn, highlighted some changes at work within the field of museums, something that I called the 'museum-archive complex'. My central idea, in what was the second conclusion of the book is that the artwork-document muddles the traditional organisation of the museum and its distinct identity from the archive: Traditionally the museum display draws up a script that visitors duly follow, while archives, on the contrary, call for individual users and researchers who construct their own script. The museum categorises, establishes hierarchies and forestalls utility, whereas an archive is taxonomic rather than pyramidal and derives its value from the usefulness of the information it contains. When they adopt the formats and protocols belonging to documents in order to make works of art, works like Leonard's *Wax Anatomical Model* transform or displace documents from archives to museum spaces. They turn obscure, invisible sources, into covetable, individual objects worthy of lengthy observation. They blur the roles of the archive and the museum and thereby question notions of representation, visibility and knowledge production in exhibition display and historiography. We can speak of a museum-archive complex in the two meanings of the word complex: an obsession - as the museum is truly haunted by the archive - and in the sense of a network of relations that the museum and the archive must jointly reinvent. Thus it is no coincidence that museums and archives are cited in these works: the Louvre, the Josephinum, the National Dutch film archives, the Mauritshuis, the J.F. Kennedy Library and the Getty Museum are questioned, represented, probed and investigated by the artists discussed in the book. At times the institutions themselves take the initiative for such probing, inviting artists to work with their archive. And when they do this they reveal a wider process of self-reflection that is at work in the museum world today.

The problems are urgent: how do art museums face the pressures of continuous education and the neo-liberal idea of knowledge as a commodity? How do they achieve global reach as markers of cultural identity? Such questions also provoke a re-thinking of the status of the object in the museum: is it a unique treasure or an immaterial image destined to be circulated? To give just one example: with its abundance of large glass vitrines that flatten the space of its galleries and turn objects and paintings into two-dimensional images, the renovated Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam has all but become a walk-in database, thus epitomising the archive-museum complex.

The third conclusion I came to at the end of the book is something I experienced in the process of considering the format and the writing process of this book. The intellectual legitimacy of projects such as Sven Augustijnen's film *Spectres* made it impossible for me not to question, in turn, formats of scientific research emanating from scholars in the academic field. Recent publications such as Ivan Jablonka's manifesto *L'Histoire est une littérature contemporaine* show how some historians are trying to re-invent academic discourse by the introduction of the self, family histories and shifts of viewpoint; they highlight the ways in which evidence is constructed in historical discourse. What I call the Shape of thinking is an invitation to drop the pseudo-objectivity of scholarly research and to develop forms of academic writing that acknowledge the vagaries and undecided self-positioning of the author.

The fourth and final point I made at the end of the book was the issue of amnesic recording, an expression I used in order to identify the major paradox of the digital age: while all information and communication is preserved and recorded on servers and hard drives, at the same time, by its transformation into data, everything somehow seems to vanish: I mentioned this already at the beginning. Looking back, I could see that all the artists that I discussed in the book worked with analogue and hinted at its disappearance. For instance, the images of Christopher Williams show defects that digital alterations would remove. Zoe Leonard, in her project entitled *Analogue* made an archive of photographs of windows of small neighbourhood shops that are disappearing in New York,

using analogue photography, a medium that is itself disappearing. These works, among others provide clues about this apparent paradox that accompanies the move into a digital world. The evanescent images of the Snapchat mobile phone application (introduced in 2011) are typical of amnesic recording. The fragility of evidence that the artists discussed in this book highlight, redefining the distinction between analogue and digital forms of registration and representation, exposes some of the dilemmas we face in the digital era between surveillance and total archiving and dispossession of our visual memories.

The practices of the artists I discussed in the book are located at the intersection of the four issues I have just identified: the artwork-document, the museum-archive complex, the shape of thinking and amnesic recording. Taken together, they comprise a pressing transformation in the field of culture, knowledge production and art. They spell out dialectical changes at work in art production, shifting back and forth between a disappearance of contemporary art as a whole and its reinvention in other sectors of culture and knowledge production. This is something of a give and take in which all parties are required to self-analyse and re-think their motivations, aims and forms.

Mitschrift Berrebi, 7.11.2016

- geht um die Kunst, kommt zurück zu Dokumenten

↳ Bild + neue Projekte
↳ The shape of evidence

1) 1) - "archival modes"

2) - 1) Elements of Testimony → Louis, Doreen, Gerry
↳ left & right side appear
↳ in photographs and in documentary in photographs
↳ Representations are strange.

3) - Postface Body Space → means in my presence
↳ 1) → conclusion of the book
↳ side as side scene

I. → Idee: Artists, Class - Buildings in mixed Document it has also
↳ + Bilder
↳ Document as a central focus
↳ Bilder, Objekte, Dokumente
↳ Re-read the history of 20th century art

↳ Context - Embedded in Documentary history
↳ Rainer Schickel's Document, 1977
↳ Interviews
↳ Kunstgeschichte, Cool & Tender (Fotografie)
↳ Based upon these stories
↳ Phil, Photographs
↳ The need to document, Making History

↳ Jean-Luc Heilbrunn, Peiré-dochères - Bastille → fotografieren
↳ too slow, low resolution, poor shot
↳ created great photo, 1970
↳ each - Feb = Bastillefest
↳ also support site, but it's not a site
↳ Bastillefest ist ein Fest

↳ "historical objects" - poses questions but gives answers
↳ not "rich" → sketchy

↳ the channel - archive - complex
↳ also, man's machine records images, but it's not a site
↳ Fotos in Museum → also complex

↳ Re-Thinking of the Object
↳ - Subjectivity tells it all → Document
↳ - The shape of Reality
↳ - digital recording → permanence in disappearance
↳ Objektivität des Seins

↳ Transformation
↳ stuff, material de base, but it's all in a different context
↳ aufzuarbeiten

↳ The shape of Body Technology & the Postface
↳ (re)write the story of the body
↳ digital - in the archive & present
↳ in the archive & present

↳ Photographic Museum, 1954
↳ "Hand"
↳ Beliefs etc.
↳ Beach Section → organic space

↳ die etw. Rolle der Künstlerin
↳ Folge sind die HPLI in einer einheitl. Form

↳ 1970 steps

↳ kritische der Rolle der Künstlerin
↳ sein, unter, Intervall - nicht
↳ Buch

↳ der Dokument, wird der Dokumentarische
↳ Prozess
↳ the role of the document
↳ the role of the document
↳ the role of the document

↳ Social Science
↳ create the document, not just a document
↳ the document, not just a document
↳ the document, not just a document

↳ "Photographic Museum"
↳ "Hand" und "Beach Section"
↳ "You were there" document
↳ object → Document
↳ Producing a document
↳ foreground → the gift; the document

↳ historical connections
↳ historical context
↳ historical context
↳ historical context

↳ "The" → historical context
↳ historical context
↳ historical context
↳ historical context

↳ "The" → historical context
↳ historical context
↳ historical context
↳ historical context

↳ How images create a practice?
↳ Collecting, Material Culture / Materialized objects
↳ of Body Technology → the - since then
↳ from - archival

↳ Lindegarde kein das Konzept der
↳ Bilder sind extra werden?

1) images as 40% are 30
2) pictorial practice

↳ 40% der 30er → more visual as all
↳ 1970er 40% - Technik der 30er?

↳ Po. in the Body, Miraflores and the 30er
↳ digital copy available?

↳ alle werden werden? Dokument zu sein?
↳ bei der 30er und Dokument zu sein?

↳ Documentary Evidence,
↳ - the missing images

Abb. 4
Constance Krüger: Mitschriften zum Vortrag von Sophie Berrebi, 2016.
Digitaler Scan.