Experience & Exchange: Documentary as the Art of Collaboration
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Kent State University School of Art Gallery
Kent, Ohio
October 2–21, 2003
Foreword:

*Experience and Exchange: Documentary as the Art of Collaboration* is the fourth photography exhibition organized by the Gallery since 1985. The current exhibit is most appropriate for the School of Art Gallery since it is innovative in its focus on the active collaboration between the subject-participant and the artist. Issues of ethnicity, gender and class are also raised by the works in the show. The concentration on photography and video and on interdisciplinary works that integrate verbal, visual and audio materials creates important teaching opportunity for the School of Art. In this regard, the Gallery as a learning center has a long-standing commitment to organizing events which present new and original material.

Scott A. Sherer, Assistant Professor of Art History, served as guest curator for the exhibition. As curator, he established the focus for the exhibit, selected the art works, wrote the catalogue essay and supervised all aspects of production. Professor Sherer's dedication and hard work deserve special recognition. As with any exhibition, many individuals and organizations were involved. I acknowledge the dedication and support of the gallery staff, especially our graduate assistants, Leann Kucharski, Tony Morris, Rebecca Norris, and Michelle Wardle. I would also like to thank Ken Hejduk for his excellent design of both the announcement and catalogue. Finally, I must express my gratitude to the Ohio Arts Council for making this project possible.

Fred T Smith, Director
School of Art Galleries
Experience and Exchange: 
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Evidence and Memory

Having to stand next to my brothers in the long-sleeved shirts we would never grow into and sweating and squinting into the South Texas sun, my father would focus and re-focus his camera, a bumbling Mr. Magoo-become-war-correspondent in the half-dead weed jungle of our front yard. No sniper ever appeared to release us early from our torment, but if our adolescent thoughts could kill, they surely would have—first our father and then each other. In other photographs taken during the same period, we stand again awkward and uncomfortable in a summer evening’s humidity but smiling proudly at the fish hanging from a stringer. Each of us would insist on posing only with “my fish.” Recognizing whose was whose, we would string and re-string each specimen to be shown at its fattest and most colorful. I get a little queasy when I look at these pictures, but I remedy the general unease of my adolescence by turning my thoughts to the enduring pleasure of teasing my little brother.

Further, these images inspire me to pause and wonder about the conversations I'll never have with my...
older brother and father, both having died too young. When I last came across these photographs, I thought for a few minutes of calling my mom to talk to her about them, but I changed my mind when I realized that now I’m as old as she was then.

Many of us carry along or pull out cameras at special events because we are wanting to make history. In the photographic act, history’s nuances become clear. Into frames, we develop a new history and fix it, and from those frames, in a new present, we develop another new history and fix that, too. At some point in the future, maybe moments from now with a Polaroid or a digital camera at a party, or years from now when we dig photographs out of an old cardboard box, we’ll see a record of a past event and interpret it anew.

Not only does photography have the magical character of existing simultaneously in multiple coordinates of time and space, but photography makes us aware of what we normally cannot see: all four horse’s hooves galloping in mid-air, microscopic creatures, or the temples of a faraway culture. Simultaneously, photography provides information and imagination. We can imagine being in a time and place before we were born and with people who would be impossible to meet. Photographs demonstrate the dependence of both information and imagination on the context of viewing. Indeed, most of us would agree that family photographs most often have meaning for only a small group of people, and that group will shrink over time.

**Description and Interpretation**

At its birth in the 1820s-1830s, photography entered into the enduring tension between fact and fiction that animates many visual representations of objects and events. From dramatically different contexts, both Plato and Picasso recognized the uneasy character of reference in visual discourse. Plato criticized the shadows of a fire dancing on a cave’s wall as a third order of reality, removed from the second order reality of the event of fire, which is further removed from the first order of reality of the fire’s metaphysical essence. Picasso, who is certainly not alone in his thinking, tells us frankly that all art is a lie, and that the artist’s job is to convince others of the truth of those lies.

Fundamentally, all observation and resemblance becomes an exercise of interpretation, and the gods—whether watching us, laughing at us, or dead—have doomed us to communicate “truth” in terms of the
success of our arguments. Photographic media produce both convincing resemblance of the physical world as well as convincing meaning of the conceptual world. Sometimes we want our photographs to be factual records, while at other times we want them to be fiction. Our driver's license photographs prove this point: sometimes they're not so embarrassing, sometimes they're laughable reminders of an unfortunate hairstyle, and sometimes they're inexplicable, horrifying results of camera malfunction.

**Documentary**

Like all forms of communication, visual art engages in conversation and argument. On the trajectory between fact and fiction, documentary occupies a compelling location. As first used in 1926 by the film critic John Grierson, documentary describes representations with privileged access to “truth.” Recorded on paper, film, or in digital memory, documentary provides access and encourages awareness of historic events and objects, but in so doing, documentary also creates opportunity for new interpretation. Documentary photography and video, as the works
On the 300 acre farmland near where I live, 1165 townhouses, apartments, and homes would be built. And I didn't know how to stop it.

in this show demonstrate, may be comprised of diverse elements and may suggest diverse themes. In the most generic “definition,” documentary seems to represent an “historical real.” Centuries of experimentation in the science of optics have enabled the capture of light’s reflections from one surface onto another. This technology still fascinates us, and its mechanics still suggest objective distance between artists and objects and between viewers and photographic images that is inherently much greater than what can be achieved in more subjective media such as, for example, painting. Indeed, photo (light) graph (writing) is a scientific miracle: when light enters the box, an image appears! Photography’s objectivity is only possible if we forget the manufacture of the camera-machine and the prejudiced selection of the image’s referent.

As a specialized discourse, documentary requires tacit agreement between the maker and the viewer regarding the context of viewing. As all mimetic representations retain an inherently complex integration of the objective and the subjective, documentary's relationship to “truth” and the “real” is fundamentally a question not of transparent relationships to

Above Left: Untitled #1 from Contested Territory, 2003

Above: Aerial of West Windsor, digital video still from Contested Territory, 2003

Opposite Page Top Left: Untitled #3, from Contested Territory, 2003

Opposite Page Top Right: Untitled #4, from Contested Territory, 2003

Opposite Page Bottom Left: Untitled #5, from Contested Territory, 2003

Opposite Page Bottom Right: Untitled #8, from Contested Territory, 2003
referents but to questions of rhetorical argument. All visual images are inspired, developed, and circulate within social and cultural frameworks. Documentary discourse, like all forms of discourse, develops from and contributes to constructed meaning. Surely documentary provides factual information, but it is interpretation that inspires our understanding and action.

**Phenomenological engagement**

Viewing is an embodied experience. As I write these words, I am in a world of sensory experience. I see the black color of letters altering the white of the computer screen, I feel the heat of the laptop sitting on my lap, I hear coffee shop noise, and I taste chocolate and smell coffee. Ideas enter into the possibility of sensory exchange only as they become transformed into recognizable language and take on a material—or digital—existence. The relationships between the texts I produce and my readers are phenomenal experiences. At this very moment, the meaning of these words depends in part upon your physical being, of perceptual organs in a specific environment. The study of embodied perception, or phenomenology, emphasizes that our consciousness develops in particular and situated relationships. Meaning develops not simply as an arrangement of terms within the possibilities—or even against or outside of the possibilities—of cultural systems of meaning. We create meaning by exchanging vocabulary within the structures of verbal and visual languages that are specific to our interpretive experiences.

When we experience visual images in a gallery, we enter into a possibility of communication that depends on complex relations. We recognize the space of the gallery as a particular kind of space that is distinguished from others by its physical character and through cultural interpretation. Engaged with images on the walls, if we do pause in front of them, we engage with them because of their presence as objects in a world of phenomena. The images have value as materials that generate common frames of reference. The subject matter within a photograph is subject matter that maintains relations to other similar objects that exist or have existed in the world. Abstract works that do not correspond to actual elements of the world enter
our consciousness through their very distance from actuality and in relation to other experiences that have also challenged the real.

In the opening sequences of Dziga Vertov's famous film, *The Man with a Movie Camera* 1929 we are exposed to the mechanical instrument the camera and the discourse of viewing as the images the camera makes are presented in a series of quick cuts. The film brings us into an opulent auditorium. We see velvet curtains and glittering chandeliers. We also see people massing in doorways, descending down aisles, and taking their seats. We see rows with seats magically lowered by unseen hands. The masses take their places, and in one frame, a single seat lowers in invitation to you or me to become one with others. Without sound, the original silent film shows us the band playing their instruments, and we might imagine being enveloped by the unique environment created by a live orchestra. The ambience of the darkened theater, the particular smells and temperature of the building and its inhabitants are instructive. These elements work toward bringing the individual into the social and cultural experience of film and are as important as any filmic element such as narrative. The opening
sequences of *The Man with a Movie Camera* demonstrate how we learn to experience the world. Even our sensory experiences are influenced by social and cultural structures. The apparatus of the camera and of the theater setting contribute to bringing the individual into collective experience. We maneuver through crowded streets and a crowded lobby to find "our" seats, we settle in for the spectacle, and we become part of that spectacle.

**Subjectivity**

In contemporary critical theory, the concept/figure of the individual has been replaced by the concept/figure of the subject. This shift stresses that social processes and demands influence fundamental considerations of identity and desire. We are not born into the neutral world of a *tabula rasa*. Quickly, others influence all but our most basic instincts, and we come to view the world—and live in that world—through the complex interrelations of cultural discourses. As much critical theory in aesthetic, social, psychoanalytic, and phenomenological traditions argues, discourses of vision are central to the twin processes of identification and disidentification. For example, theories of the gaze describe the direct and
indirect ways that individual and social subjectivity develop. We see and are seen to a variety of ends in a variety of different contexts. We learn and learn to respond to the names we are given and to the discourses that give character to our embodied experience.

Portraits gain our attention, like all representations, because of their aesthetic and cultural value. While nowadays few of us may allow ourselves to be lost in thorough contemplation as to what activates Mona Lisa’s smile, a momentary glance into another’s face may linger in conscious and subconscious thoughts. We may want to ask, “Who is this person? What is her or his name? What is she or he thinking?” And then we may begin to wonder, “What is the chain of events that led to this photograph being made and what is the chain of events that has led me to being here looking at this image?” In our fast-paced world, where we may see anywhere from zero to thousands of faces and images a day, portraits hung on a gallery’s walls, printed, or digitized, may encourage us to think about another, to think about ourselves, and to think about the relationships among ourselves and others that develop in imagination and lived experience.

Experience and Exchange

While successful art (whether “good” or “bad”) provokes beyond the boundaries of its edges, pedestals, and gallery settings, artistic presentations are fundamentally bracketed experiences. In photography, viewers see only what the frame contains—through the eye of the artist and the lens of both the camera and the conventions of photographic discourse. Traditionally the viewer follows the authority of the one who possesses the camera and surveys the world, collects and presents images, and interprets and judges them. Viewers are rewarded with a certain kind of knowledge and the safety of that knowledge when we do little more than read captions and dutifully record lecture notes without absorbing their meaning. Yet, sometimes, we open ourselves to or are challenged by others and are transformed by an intersubjective exchange.

The artists in this exhibition use their cameras not as windows where thin panes of glass seal one world off from another. These artists create with the active collaboration of their subjects-
participants. These collaborative documentaries blur the uneven assumptions of typical structures of inquiry and response. Marking the intersections of seeing and being seen, these portraits are complex statements of the intersubjective character of human experience. Because all representations are influenced by the discourses that construct them, the works collected here use both words and images to demonstrate the conceptual and lived relationships among experiences and their representations and among individuals and their worlds. The images here seduce us with their beauty and provoke us with their uncanny oscillation between the unfamiliar and the familiar. If we’re lucky, we too become collaborators with the images and all those behind them.

Scott A. Sherer, Ph.D
Assistant Professor of Art History
Vincent Cianni
Vincent Cianni’s *We Skate Hardcore* is the culmination of a six-year documentary project, which was begun in 1994, of the Southside, a rough but proud neighborhood, in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. In 1997 Cianni first began photographing a group of young in-line skaters who constructed transient “skate parks” from scrap material. Cianni’s photographs of the context of both their skating and their relationships also create opportunity for the skaters’ own thoughts. These images and writings document the complex lives of young people and their changing community.

Annu Palakunnathu Matthew
Annu Palakunnathu Matthew’s *The Backlash in the Wake of 9/11* documents discrimination and hate against immigrants. Initially, Matthew decided to photograph people who live in fear of racial and ethnocentric violence after 9/11 but many in New York’s South Asian community were reluctant to show their faces in connection with their stories. Matthew, herself an immigrant from India, respects and accommodates this fear by using iconic images of fingerprints and eyes to represent individuals. These body parts are unique signifiers that correspond to specific individuals in a physiological sense, but also, in cultural discourse (the eye as a “window into the soul”) in institutional frameworks, and in law enforcement. Matthew shows us the prejudice enduring within American experience.

Carolyn McGrath
Carolyn McGrath’s *Contested Territory* digital video, 51 min., 2003 tells the story of West Windsor, New Jersey, as the last tracts of farmland become suburban community. McGrath weaves together interviews with farmers, developers, environmentalists, and politicians with her own reflections. Her relationship to the land on the road on which she lives begins an exploration into how American towns develop their identities amid the late modern challenges of class and racial and cultural difference. *Contested Territory* demonstrates the tense negotiations among our demands for preserving natural environments and rural culture and for housing and community development for those living across a broad range of social statuses.

Tone Stockenström
Tone Stockenström’s collaborations are journeys into the complexity of individual and social experience. An immigrant from Sweden, Stockenström has collaborated with the Castañeda-Torres family, Chicago, since 1999. *Just Because I Live in America* is an intimate journal of a family’s experience living between two cultures and the changing dynamics of childhood, family, and home. Also in 1999, Stockenström began *The Picolino Circus Project* in Salvador, Bahia, Brazil. This project unites the voices and photographs of fifteen at-risk former street kids with Stockenström’s commitment to improving the lives of others through documentary. For the past three years, youth with Chicago’s Logan Square Neighborhood Association have been conducting a letter-writing and video dialogue with the children of the circus. In the summer of 2003, eight Mexican-American and Puerto Rican youth from Chicago traveled to Brazil to begin a photograph and video documentary exchange project with their peers. The hope is that this exchange will continue with a circus performance in Chicago and with a continuation of their collaboration to promote awareness about the social and economic conditions disadvantaged people face world-over.

David Waldorf
David Waldorf has been taking and giving photographs in residential hotels in the Tenderloin, San Francisco, since 2001 Renting a room and putting up a sign announcing “Free Photos,” Waldorf extends the discourse of portraiture to those who normally cannot afford its benefits. Residents take advantage of the opportunity to have free portraits to keep for themselves, to give to lovers, and to send to family. In this on-going project, digital audio records conversation about the photographs, daily life, and Waldorf’s presence. Photography brings Waldorf, the hotels’ residents, and gallery viewers into improbable but compelling conversation.
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