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Introduction

Refract's fourth volume explores the entanglements between the document and the documentary as sources of information and forms of visual culture. Derived from the Latin *docere* (to instruct, to teach), the document can be a pedagogical tool, a disciplinary measure, or a literary and legal form that ascribes value to people and property and gives shape to cultural beliefs called laws. And yet, the document defies boundaries—it is at once literary, sociological, scientific, and historical while also being a material object with affective qualities.

By tracing the history of how the term *document*, in the English language, became more and more associated with ideas of truth, evidence, and imperial power, this introduction serves as a cognitive exercise in troubling the ontological barrier between the object (the document, a documentation) and its viewer/audience. Considering the significance (even overdetermination) of the visual in considerations of the “document/ary,” this volume shows how the division between object and subject becomes a fantasy of embodied sensuality. Further, by attending to how the document/ary, as both concept and material object, conditions and is conditioned by social and epistemological needs, this volume considers the role between document/ary’s aesthetic/rhetorical and social/political dimensions.

As a material object, the document/ary has a distinct history. While it is possible to retroactively read many cultural forms as being a “document” or “documentary,” it is important to recognize how the English term itself first manifests as a tool of (colonial) bureaucracy in the Western world. The dividing line between *document* and its suffix *-ary* indicates etymologically a span of some four hundred years: from the point where the former entered the English language in the fifteenth century until it was joined by its adjectival form in the

nineteenth. In its fifteenth-century usage, document has two primary meanings, the first teaching and/or warning, the second a manifestation of evidence or proof.¹ By the eighteenth century, the document had taken on an association with written evidence and other inscribed objects, such as tombstones and coins. The line here between document as a noun and verb is thin—the document as an object itself documents, just as “to document” produces an object that we, in turn, call a document.

Many of the contributors to this volume play with the slippage between the *act* of documenting (preserving, cataloguing) and the object, or more specifically the *archive*, that results. Madison Treece’s interview with Amalia Mesa-Bains explores the Chicana artist, scholar, and educator’s unique relationship to the archive and considers how the practice of documenting and collecting has shaped her artistic practice. This wide-ranging interview covers the importance of documentation in shaping history, determining what is held on to, and how this informs the burgeoning field of Chicana art history (which is also the subject of Catherine S. Ramírez’s special feature; see this volume’s letter from the editor).

Sharing her own practice of collecting, Silvia De Giorgi’s “Memory Matter(s)” is a short essay that engages a multimodal method for documenting, archiving, and memorializing bygone domestic life in her grandparent’s rural home in the Italian province of South Tyrol, initiated by the conditions of social distancing. In “A Catalog of American Things,” Marisa J. Futernick similarly plays with the idea of creating an archive by humorously and horrifyingly cataloging various “things” that might be typified as “American.” Designed as an ever-expanding document of images and exploring the notion of encyclopedic knowledge, the work juxtaposes phrases such as “Manifest Destiny” and “same-day delivery” with photographs that highlight the shallowness of the authoritative words that seek to give meaning to America itself. Elpitha Tsoutsounakis also creates her own archive in “Ground Maps of an Unknown Prospect,” a series of prints depicting topographical maps of a prospective mining site in the Colorado Plateau. Overlapping the maps are large patches of color applied with pigment the artist created from Ochre samples she collected herself at the site. *Unknown Prospect* complicates cartography’s documentary function by materializing the agentic quality of Ochre—deemed “waste” by the US Geological Survey—through the corporeal and relational experience of collecting, cataloging, archiving, and transforming the mineral.

Like Mesa-Bains, De Giorgi, Futernick, and Tsoutsounakis, many other contributors are interested in the active construction of archives (collections of documents in various forms) as a way to preserve and document present and

past experiences. Turning to Enlightenment-era art salons as a kind of archive, Delanie Linden's "Denis Diderot's 'Salons' as Art Conservation in Eighteenth-Century France" explores Diderot's "Salons" as a way to preserve works of art through ekphrasis. By analyzing the reactions to natural disasters in and around Europe in the eighteenth century, Linden considers the role of public anxiety in the preservation of artworks during this period. Stella Gatto's essay "Synthesizing a Dual-Definition of *Façade* in the Western Palaces of Yuanming Yuan: Art, Politics, and Place-Making in the Garden of Perfect Brightness" examines how the documentation of this eighteenth-century garden changes in response to its shifting historical and political contexts. Gatto utilizes the idea of the façade to explore the illusory nature of the Western Palaces, both through the architecture itself and in its representations in print and photography.

The above contributions demonstrate the way document/ary is at once a *thing* and a *practice*. This reflects how scholarship on the historical formation of the document as a concept has identified a purported closing of what we call here the experiential gap—or encountering an object's re-presentation rather than the object itself. What is clear from the term's etymology is that, as both a noun and a verb, the/a *document* aims to instruct and manifest, either by standing in for an absent authority or by otherwise attempting to close an experiential gap by reproducing the phenomenon of observing an object in the world. One of the animating questions of this volume, then, is how this experiential gap is figured historically and in contemporary creative practice, and to what extent do certain aesthetic and discursive practices close, or claim to close, it?

Take, for example, Lisa Gitelman's 2014 *Paper Knowledge*, which maintains that documents are "material objects intended as evidence and processed or framed" such that they are recognizable as a genre of object intended to be taken as such, standing in (if on somewhat shaky ground) for firsthand experience.² This discursive process of framing inaugurates a relationality between object-cum-document and viewer/reader, simultaneously producing both visibility and knowledge. Gitelman writes:

Documents help define and are mutually defined by the know-show function, since documenting is an epistemic practice: the kind of knowing that is all wrapped up with showing, and showing wrapped with knowing.³

In this formulation, the document does more than manifest *content* amenable to epistemological capture. It also inextricably links, on the level of form, visibility and the production of knowledge. Seeing (including reading) is believing, or at least

establishes the conditions for belief in secular, discoverable truths.

Many contributors to this volume grapple with the relationship between the documentary and authoritative truth. Rachel Klipa, for instance, reviews the exhibition *An My-Lê: On Contested Terrain* at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Klipa reflects on the disorientation that resulted from the display of what seemed to be documentary landscape photography in Vietnam and the United States. On closer examination, the images were fictional reenactments that challenge the militarist and nationalist foundations of an American psyche. Sayward Schoonmaker's *Authoritative Forms*, a participatory poem-object, takes seriously the role of materiality—in this case the materiality of paper—in producing the conceptual and physical forms that manifest and convey authority. The piece invites viewers to engage with the poem by manipulating it materially, turning what seems like an exercise in locating authority into an experience of materiality as “pure means,” now cleaved from the authoritative telos of an original or final meaning.

The relation between visibility and knowability that Klipa and Schoonmaker complicate through their work relies on a prior historical shift in Europe, in the latter half of the seventeenth century, in the understanding of where truth (itself a slippery, problematic notion) is located. As the literary critic and historian of science Tita Chico shows in *The Experimental Imagination: Literary Knowledge and Science in the British Enlightenment*, the basis of empiricism and experimental knowledge coincides with a modulation of “truth” away from its aristocratic, religious, and scholastic antecedent, and the concomitant transformation of what constitutes an object of knowledge. Chico writes:

In the Scholastic tradition, *object* and *objective* referred to the presentation of an intelligible entity, universal essence, or “species” to consciousness; the objective state of an entity's essence was the mental mode in which the essence existed in the knowing mind. Understanding the world was a matter of mental labour.⁴

Experiment, which came to mean “discovery” among seventeenth-century European natural philosophers, occasioned an externalization of the object of knowledge and of the processes of knowledge production. “To underscore the transformation,” Chico states, “*object* and *objective*, which earlier understood the knowability of things as a feature of the mind, now indicated an independence from that same mind.”⁵ For “truth” to be disaggregated from status and from intellection, objects in the natural world had to contain or bear observable information. For an object to be the source of truth and for this truth to travel

between persons, especially to those not present at the moment of “discovery,” transmission required forms that purported to document (and thereby reproduce) the experiential relation to the object such that truth’s grounding in the object is preserved while also “protect[ing] the discovered from being disbelieved.”⁶ We consider this an early instantiation of one form and function of the documentary, crucial for the document/ary’s *evidentiary* function and serving as a key conduit for closing the experiential gap between present observer and others.

This epistemological premise—on the one hand, that the truth of an object inheres in that object and, on the other, that visibility and knowability are co-constitutive—is what Gitelman calls the “know-show” function. This requires readers/viewers to buy into the notion that the experiential gap is indeed closed, or sufficiently closed, such that truths “discovered” about and in the world can be accurately and objectively conveyed to those not present. Otherwise, simply conveying those truths would constitute a reversal of the empirical shift privileging discovery over authority. The projects in this volume, such as Schoonmaker’s *Authoritative Forms*, expose this epistemological premise and encourage us to think more critically about the “truth” of documentary evidence.

As Chico, Gitelman, John Guillory, and others have written, the document’s evidentiary function is rhetorical, or rather, the “evidentiary” is itself rhetorical. As Gitelman notes, Guillory’s capacious work in “The Memo and Modernity” holds that the implication of the “self-evidence” of the document is “intrinsically rhetorical.”⁷ Taking a slightly different tack, Chico shows how the rhetorical, or literary, figuration of both the “observer” and the “observed particular” precedes any textual relationship through which instruction can take place. Rather than simply taking for granted the epistemic conceit that suggests documents can manifest particular truths about the world, the generic categories of truth, particularity, and observation have to be recognizable and successfully deployed. Thus the document does more than provide access to information. Instead, it constitutes a key part of the ideological circuit through which information becomes legible and meaningful. This ideological function, then, reveals the way knowledge, sociality, and power collude to meet particular historical needs.

Indeed, many contributions to this volume explore the role of the document/ary in identity formation—especially racial, gender, and national identities. Dark Laboratory’s curatorial essay, “I’m New Here: Black and Indigenous Media Ecologies,” reflects on the born-digital photography exhibition by the same name. Curators Tao Leigh Goffe and Tatiana Esh bring together photographic essays by artists Abigail Hadeed, Nadia Huggins, Kai Minosh Pyle, Allison Arteaga, steve núñez, Melia Delsol, and Dóra Papp that critique racial

capitalism as it intersects with climate crises while also exploring and celebrating Black and Indigenous ecologies beyond replicating the violence of the colonial archive. Margaret Allen Crocker's "Documenting Gender's Signs: Site, Performance, and the US-Mexico Border in Contemporary Art" examines performance and documentation in the work of Ana Teresa Fernández and M. Jenea Sanchez, both women artists whose work critically engages with the US-Mexico border. Crocker argues that gender is a central framework for understanding the intersection between location and identity at the border, while documentation is the form that makes these artists' gendered labor visible. Similarly concerned with gender, Lesdi C. Goussen Robleto's "The Somatic and Textural Language of Patricia Belli: Recrafting Social and Political Bodies in 1990s Nicaragua" examines Belli's tactile textile assemblages as explorations of alternative feminisms and points of resistance to the imbalanced relationship between Nicaragua and the United States in the aftermath of the twentieth-century Central American Crisis. Goussen Robleto contextualizes Belli's works within the *MESOTICA* series of exhibitions, which she reads as creating a liminal and experimental space empowering the female/marginalized body against heteropatriarchal violence and asserting Indigenous modes of cultural transmission.

Other contributions are specifically focused on ideas of nationalism: for instance, "Olympic-Scale Subversion: Poster Art, Architecture, Performance, and the Afterlives of Mexico 1968" by J. Nathan Goldberg discusses how the Mexican state attempted to create a national identity as the host for the upcoming Olympic Games and the backlash of students against the violence of the state that eventually resulted in the Tlatelolco massacre. Goldberg discusses the way the state attempted to co-opt Spanish and Indigenous themes and intersperse them with cosmopolitan imagery to present a modern image to the international stage, even as the government was violently suppressing dissidents and labor unions. Paula Muhr's contribution also looks at the way government power uses certain types of documents and imagery. "Tito/Tata: Fiction and Factuality in Documentary Photographs of the Father Figure in Communist Yugoslavia" is a collection of photographs collected from the artist's family photo album and "Yugonostalgia" websites. Her work juxtaposes imagery of the Communist leader Tito with her father as a commentary on the ways authoritarians attempt to be the "father" of their subjects. This collection demonstrates how a nation can be infantilized and a national myth can be created in the microcosm of the home.

In "The Struggle of Memory against Forgetting: Afterlife and Memorialization of Imagery Surrounding South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission," Madeleine Bazil explores the TRC's multiple proliferating afterlives

as they emerge in the work of four South African visual artists. While official media images from the hearings attempt to solidify one official narrative about the truth of apartheid, Bazil draws out the ways these artists repurpose and reinterpret archival imagery to elicit embodied semiotic responses that deepen conversations about the TRC's contradictions, nuances, and perceived failings. Finding official archives to be lacking, Nastia Volynova's "Thinking of Water as Material Witness: An Attempt to Fill the Voids in the Archive of the Moscow Canal (1932–37)" considers the research challenges posed by Soviet archives and proposes that attention to the material qualities of water may offer an alternative methodology. By analyzing the Moscow Canal's structure and flow, and recognizing its capacity to preserve human and infrastructural remains, Volynova gestures toward a more complete record of the exploitation that characterized the canal's construction in the 1930s.

The contributions by Goldberg, Muhr, Bazil, and Volynova focus on the role of the document/ary in the twentieth century. However, as this introduction outlines, the role of the document in the service of (national, imperial) power is rooted in a much longer history. For example, the eighteenth-century turn to the evidentiary function of the document aligns with the contemporary needs of the British Colonial Empire, which required an instrument to record, convey, administer, and establish hierarchies over lands, peoples, life-forms, and other "discoveries" (scientific and otherwise) outside the metropole. Documents allowed for the possession of lands; even those places that only a few eighteenth-century Europeans would ever see with their own eyes became not only real and mappable but also potential property. For instance, Captain James Cook's charts documented the coastlines of Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia, but as Paul Carter writes, "The chief discovery of the Endeavour was its discovery of nothing or, rather, of the non-existence of a great southern continent."⁸ As such, Cook's documentary practices "preserved the trace of encountering" land, closing the experiential gap between the uncertain space of the imagined "Great Southern Continent" and the actuality of his voyage.

As settler colonialism became more entrenched into the nineteenth century, legal documents alongside the work of surveyors overwrote Indigenous lands into property. At the same time, early photographic technologies were fast advancing, providing another level of authority and assumed truth value to the meaning of "document." As many of the contributions in this volume demonstrate, the camera is a key player in the contemporary usage of "document/ary," in both its photographic and cinematic forms. The first use of the word *documentary* in relation to film is from a review by John Grierson of *Moana* (1926), a film directed by Robert Flaherty about life in a Sāmoan village. Grierson

introduced the term as part of the phrase “documentary value” and provided an oft-cited definition of documentary as the “creative treatment of actuality.”⁹ It is no coincidence that a film about Indigenous peoples of the South Pacific was the first to be labeled a documentary. Just as the document plays a crucial role in colonial practices, the documentary film evolved out of colonial genres of image-making, such as the travelogue and the expedition film, with the resultant magic-lantern lectures. As Michael Chanan notes in *The Politics of Documentary*, “The documentary instinct for the ‘seizure of physical reality’ turns out to carry ideological implications . . . since the leading film-producing countries were nations with colonial empires . . . their films reflected the attitudes that made up the colonial rationale.”¹⁰

There is undoubtedly a deep technological and historical connection between the documentary and the camera, and this volume is an effort to illuminate their (intertwined) roots in colonialism, as “new technologies absorb the political and ideological contexts in which they are developed.”¹¹ Conceptually, the camera’s privileged relationship to the real is founded on two pillars: indexicality, meaning that in a film camera light refracts off an object and exposes the negative, producing a physical trace; and iconicity, in that the image looks like the thing itself. In fact, early photographs were less concerned with the fidelity of representation, as the technology was not yet reliable enough to consistently capture what Joel Snyder and Neil Walsh Allen term an “acceptable” image—well exposed, focused, rich in detail.¹² One early practitioner, Lady Elizabeth Eastlake, for example, writes on the subject in 1857:

Far from holding up the mirror to nature . . . it holds up that which, however beautiful, ingenious and valuable in powers of reflection, is yet subject to certain distortions and deficiencies for which there is no remedy. The science therefore which has developed the resources of photography, has but more glaringly betrayed its defects. For the more perfect you render an imperfect machine the more must its imperfections come to light.¹³

Long exposure times meant that any movement of the camera or subjects within its frame resulted in blurring, even though indexicality was still at play. In fact, the removal of movement—when “photography became associated with the immobilization of movement, the elimination of change from its subject matter”—had to occur before cinema could reintroduce movement and duration through the frame.¹⁴

As the pieces by Klipa, De Giorgi, and others show, many of this volume’s contributions experiment with (documentary) photography, truth, and memory.

Other contributors expand on this by playing with the form of a documentary film. “Neustadt a.d. Aisch,” by Marla Elisabeth Heid, uses three-channel video to document her conversations with her mother and grandmother after learning her grandfather was a member of the SS in Nazi Germany. Devoting a channel each to her mother and her grandmother, and asking the viewer to choose between their audio tracks, Heid seeks ways to come to terms with the past through the documentation of personal and familial expressions of silence, shame, and forgotten memory. *Grandmother’s Garden*, by Amy Reid, uses the materiality of film to examine the production of quilts as they intertwine with the politics and histories of their makers in the United States. Reid layers documentary practices—treating the quilts themselves as documents to be read—in order to question the truth claims of the documentary film. Moving between 16 mm and video, *Grandmother’s Garden* unfolds across multiple archives and geographies, stitching together a picture of women’s labor. And finally, Ncomi Nzimande’s short film *Jozzi Rhapsody* documents contemporary life in Johannesburg through a narrative of personal and spiritual transformation in a city of deep layers and constant movement. Drawing on South African traditions of documentary film and playing with conventions like a black-and-white palette and amateur actors, *Jozzi Rhapsody* argues for the ability of the urban documentary to center and claim the truth of African realities.

The foundational slippage between the indexical and representational qualities of the camera informs what Hito Steyerl calls “documentary uncertainty,” what might otherwise be called an “experiential gap.” Steyerl writes:

We are faced with the first paradox: the documentary form, which is supposed to transmit knowledge in a clear and transparent way, has to be investigated using conceptual tools, which are neither clear nor transparent themselves. The more real documentary seems to get, the more we are at a loss conceptually. The more secured the knowledge that documentary articulations seem to offer, the less can be safely said about them—all terms used to describe them turn out to be dubious, debatable and risky.¹⁵

Steyerl draws on the example of the cell-phone footage broadcast live from the invasion of Iraq in 2003 where, due to the lack of resolution, there was nothing much recognizable as the “world out there.” Yet, as Steyerl concludes, “Those CNN images still vividly and acutely *express* the uncertainty, which governs not only contemporary documentary image production, but also the contemporary world as such. They are perfectly true documents of that general uncertainty, so to speak. They reflect the precarious nature of contemporary lives as well as the

uneasiness of any representation.”¹⁶ In other words, since the advent of the technical image, the document need not be intelligible—indeed, the closer it gets to the “real,” the less intelligible it may appear to the human eye. Just as Lady Eastlake wrote over a hundred years ago, “the more perfect you render an imperfect machine the more must its imperfections come to light.”¹⁷

Not only is the desire for an index that can close the epistemic and experiential gap politically and ethically charged, the need to close this gap is also affectively charged. We might refer to one illumination of this affective relation in W. G. Sebald’s 2001 novel *Austerlitz*. The novel depicts, among other things, Austerlitz’s attempts to verify how his mother manifests in the visual archive of the Holocaust. This attempt to stabilize and verify some aspect of the visual record of the Holocaust is driven by the understandable desire to hold before him some image, and thus be given a chance to experience the presence, of his lost mother and her social world.

I imagined seeing her walking down the street in a summer dress and lightweight gabardine coat, said Austerlitz: among a group of ghetto residents out for a stroll, she alone seemed to make straight for me, coming closer with every step, until at last I thought I could sense her stepping out of the frame and passing over into me.¹⁸

As in other places in the novel, and like its printed images of the film stills and photographs of varying resolutions (some to the point of pixelated abstraction), what is made visible is the problem of indexicality and of proximity. What we see here is the profound affective relation between the documentary and the viewer, and how that affective relation is part of the circuit purporting to close the experiential and epistemological gaps. What begins as a cognitive exercise in imagining the object of an image existing *to be viewed by the viewer* becomes a fantasy of embodied sensuality, not only imagining that the documented scene is there to be viewed but that such viewing might fracture the ontological barrier between viewer/viewed, dissolving the framing division between levels and transporting one to the other such that no experiential gap persists. And though this is partly a function of the way documents produce forms of visibility, it is clear that even the indexical is rhetorical, itself in need of framing and interpretation to produce what we wish it to attest.

Notes

- ¹ Philip Rosen, “Document and Documentary: On the Persistence of Historical Concepts,” in *Theorizing Documentary*, edited by Michael Renoz (New York: Routledge, 1993), 65, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203873083>.
- ² Lisa Gitelman, *Paper Knowledge: Toward a Media History of Documents* (Cambridge, MA: MIT University Press, 2014), 2, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822376767>.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Tita Chico, *The Experimental Imagination: Literary Knowledge and Science in the British Enlightenment* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018), 17, <https://doi.org/10.11126/stanford/9781503605442.001.0001>.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Gitelman, *Paper Knowledge*, 2.
- ⁸ Paul Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay: An Exploration of Landscape and History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 23, <https://doi.org/10.5749/minnesota/9780816669974.001.0001>.
- ⁹ John Grierson, “From ‘First Principles of Documentary’ (UK, 1932),” in *Film Manifestos and Global Cinema Cultures*, edited by Scott MacKenzie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 453–59, <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520957411>.
- ¹⁰ Michael Chanan, *The Politics of Documentary* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 62, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781838711054>.
- ¹¹ Jason Fox, “Introduction: What Do Cameras Do?,” *World Records* 1 (2018), <https://vols.worldrecordsjournal.org/01/01?index=1?index=1>.
- ¹² Joel Snyder and Neil Walsh Allen, “Photography, Vision, and Representation,” *Critical Inquiry* 2, no. 1 (1975): 157, <https://doi.org/10.1086/447832>.
- ¹³ Lady Elizabeth Eastlake, “Photography” (1857), in *Photographic Theory: An Historical Anthology*, edited by Andrew Hershberger (Chichester, West Sussex, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 62.
- ¹⁴ Paul Carter, *Dark Writing: Geography, Performance, Design* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2009), 245, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780824862145>.
- ¹⁵ Hito Steyerl, “Documentary Uncertainty,” *The Long Distance Runner* 72 (2007): 1–2, http://www.kajsadahberg.com/files/No_72_Documentary_Uncertainty_v2.pdf
- ¹⁶ Ibid., 8.
- ¹⁷ Eastlake, “Photography,” 62.
- ¹⁸ W. G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, translated by Anthea Bell (New York: Random House, 2001), 343.