Theory in Studio: The Art of the Document

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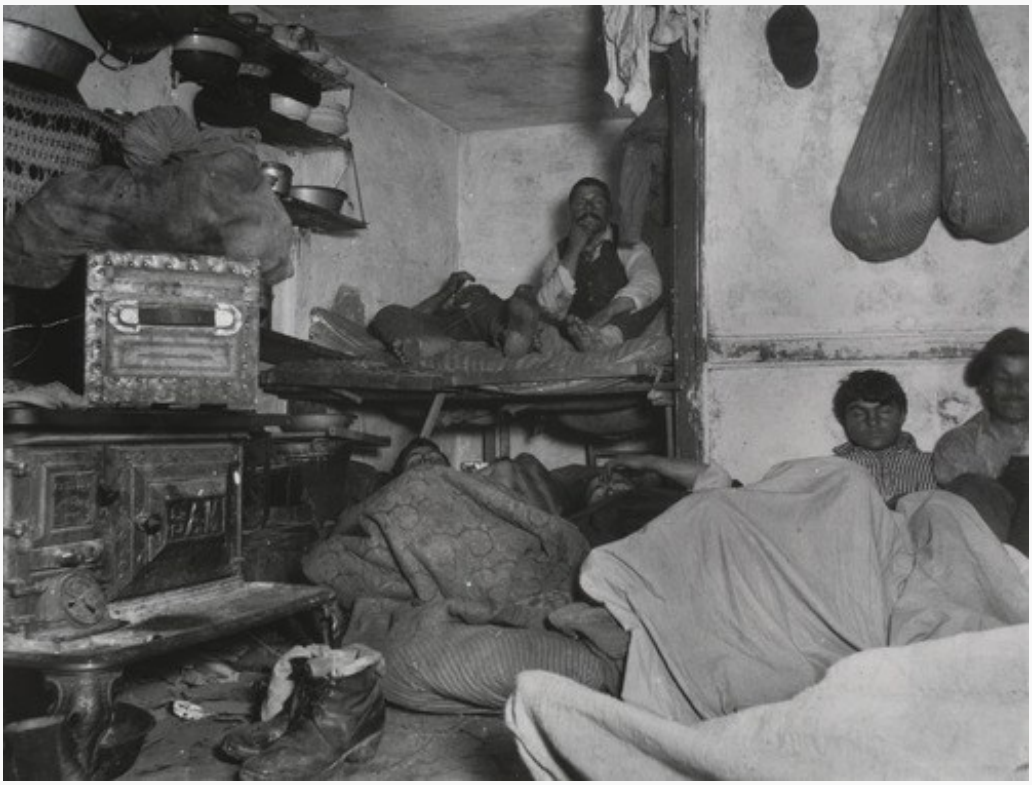
The Atlas Group, *My Neck is Thinner than a Hair: Engines*, 2000-03, one of 100 wall-mounted images. Tate, London. ©The Atlas Group and Walid Raad.

Writing about photography, more than perhaps any other medium, tends to be stained with sourness, skepticism, and disillusionment. Theorists of photography obsessively dwell on its faults but are manifestly still captivated by it, like people who can't tear themselves away from unfaithful lovers.

If proof is needed, Susie Linfield assembles a damning catalogue of these poison-pen letters in her 2010 book *The Cruel Radiance*, including some justly famous invective from Susan Sontag (photography is "treacherous," "reductive," "a sublimated murder") and Allan Sekula (it is "primitive, infantile, aggressive"). Even Barthes, that most romantic of admirers, admits that photography is "platitudinous," a "catastrophe," and "an Agent of Death." Not surprisingly, documentary photography comes in for the some of the harshest lashing. See, for example, Martha Rosler's charge that documentary "can hardly escape the inclination towards some form of dramatization," and that it is "a polarizing practice that must inevitably provoke opposition, perpetually teetering on the brink of demise" (*Decoys and Disruptions*, 2004).

These criticisms of documentary photography provided the fodder for the emergence of artworks centered on photographic documents themselves as the theoretical construct of "the document" came to take center stage in contemporary artistic practices. Stories that once might have been told through straight documentary are now often told through document-based works or other forms that might be considered fragments and mutations of documentary.

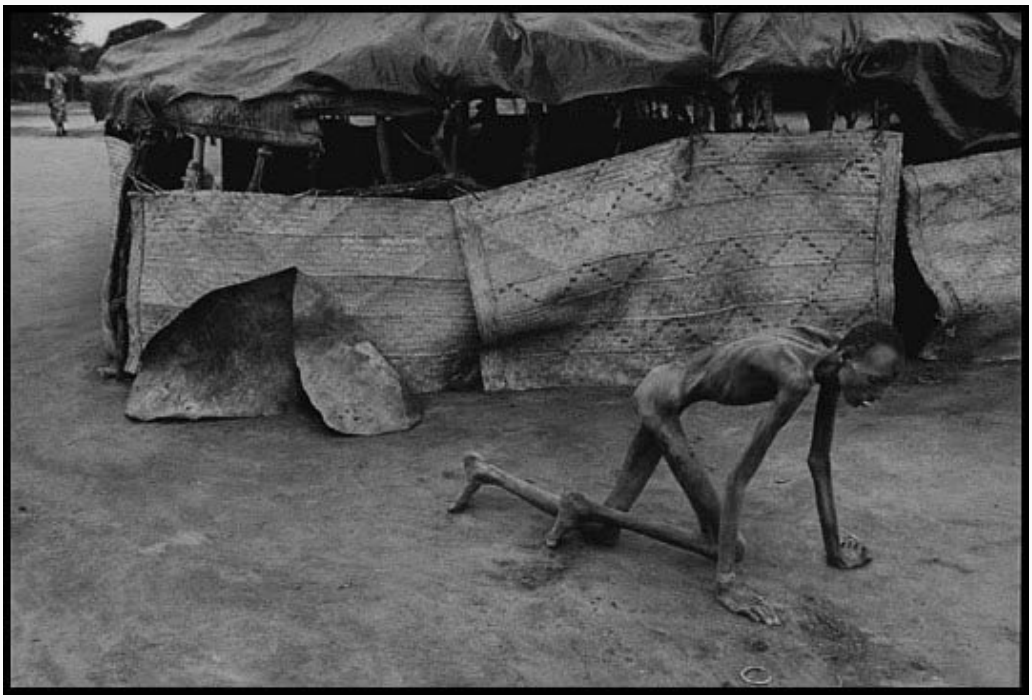


Jacob Riis, *Lodgers in Bayard Street Tenement, Five Cents a Spot*, 1889, printed 1957. Museum of Modern Art.

Documentary, especially in its socially conscious forms, has always embodied a tense, possibly unsatisfiable set of ideals, and this inner tension gives rise to two main lines of criticism. First, critics charge that documentary invariably aestheticizes its subjects, distorting them to satisfy an artistic ideal or personal vision. Think of Jacob Riis's preference for depicting his tenement dwellers with their eyes averted, looking bleached and dazed; James Nachtwey's formally impeccable but almost unviewable pictures of the desiccated bodies of starving Sudanese men and women (*Inferno*, 1999); or Sebastião Salgado's richly textured, improbably sculptural photographs of manual laborers (*Workers* 2005). These works aim to be artful depictions of humanity and suffering but are all too easily dragged toward depersonalization.

Second, documentary images purportedly rely for their effectiveness on a gut-level appeal to emotion, especially shock and pity. These affective responses move viewers to sympathy with the photographer's larger social concerns, but this effect is achieved only by short-circuiting critical thought and blinding viewers to the larger narrative and factual context. This capacity of photographs to annihilate rational thought was posited by Frankfurt School theorist Siegfried Kracauer: "The 'image-idea' drives away the idea. The blizzard of photographs betrays an indifference towards what the things mean." And it is a favorite theme of Sontag, who even in her late writings maintains that "the image as shock and the image as cliché are two aspects of the same presence" (*Regarding the Pain of Others*, 2003).

These tensions arise because of documentary photography's supposed conveyance of unposed veridicality. It aspires to the status of truthful evidence, manifesting proof of human endurance in the face of injustice. But this purpose is hopelessly entangled with its affective and aesthetic qualities. Despite its stated commitment to truth, at its heart documentary is manipulative: It manipulates the viewer by playing on his emotional responses; and it manipulates its subjects, either by presenting them in an aestheticized light or, more directly, by the photographer actually intervening and posing or arranging a scene.



James Nachtwey, Sudan, 1993, famine victim in a feeding center.

Of course, these criticisms are in a way purely academic, since documentary and related practices such as photojournalism roll on like juggernauts. Their progress is ably surveyed by Linfield and Fred Ritchin (*Bending the Frame: Photojournalism, Documentary, and the Citizen*, 2013), among others. But many artists have absorbed and metabolized these critical barbs, turning them into new kinds of practice.

The criticisms fundamentally hinge on photography's alleged inability to adhere to notions of what evidence or truthful representation should look like. This raises, but leaves unexplored, the issue of what photographic practice might be if it were grounded in the idea that image-making is a method of producing these kinds of records, namely objects that are meant to be seen first and foremost in terms of their value as records. Pursuing this question gives rise to practices that use the photographic medium itself to investigate the network of relationships between images and the circumstances of their production.

Traditional documentary adheres to the conventions of photographic transparency, which is to say that the photographs themselves are meant to be looked *through*, like mere windows in space and time. Usually we are conscious only of what they depict, falling into the scene beyond and letting their role as possibly unreliable mediating objects fade into the background.

Document-based works, on the other hand, make use of various strategies for drawing attention to their own objecthood. Strictly speaking, every photograph is a document of something. However, some photographs want not to be merely seen through, but rather to be seen *as* documents. The awareness that the image you are staring at is a kind of record—a tangible thing made of paper and dye—can coexist with an awareness of what it depicts, but it importantly involves the feeling that the image is pushing back slightly against your gaze, reminding you of its presence. This sense of mediatedness, or resistance to transparency, is a signature of document-based works.

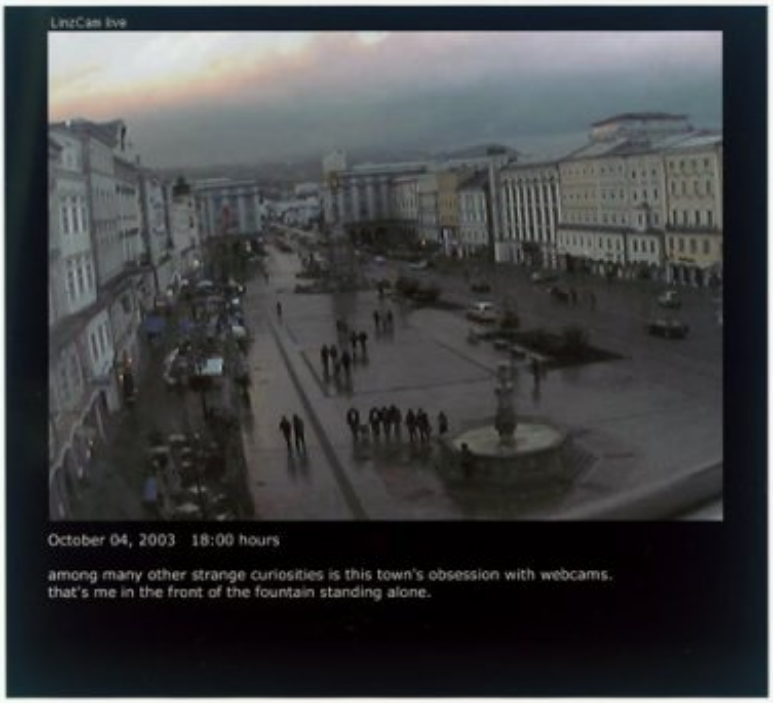
Zoe Leonard, *The Fae Richards Photo Archive*, 1993–96, partial installation view. Whitney Museum of American Art.

Focusing on the objecthood of an image reminds us of the conditions of the image's production, something that straight documentary works leave unexplored or take for granted. The document-as-artwork becomes possible, then, when the work itself raises questions concerning the material production of images and their putative evidential value, highlighting the fact that they are objects with their own history and presence. The crucial terminological change from "documentary" to "the document" is a way of signifying that the stage has shifted to bring questions about the status of images as records out of the critical shadows and into the light.

Some document-centered works make use of strategies of replication and mimicry, subtly playing with the conventions of transparency. Consider Sherrie Levine's *After Walker Evans* (1981), a series that deals explicitly with issues about authorship and authenticity. These reduplicative works interpose themselves between us and their originals. They are reminders of the mediatedness inherent in even the most transparent-seeming photographs, and they function both to make visible the hand of Evans himself in creating the original images and to question his creative authority. This effect is one that the original images themselves would not have produced.

Zoe Leonard's *The Fae Richards Photo Archive* (1993–96) falls into this class as well. Mimicking the precise physical appearance of old snapshots, film stills, and promotional photographs, these works present a convincing simulacrum of real documentation, down to the yellowing and creasing of the prints. The fact that the actress who is their subject was entirely fictional is beside the point. Real documents of an unreal person serve to remind us that many real people have led undocumented lives, highlighting the fragility of our connection with the past.

Other works, such as Emily Jacir's *linz diary* (2003), replicate the look of automated surveillance footage. In this series, the Palestinian artist allowed herself to be photographed by a public webcam as she walked through a square in Linz, Austria, at the same time over several days. The images are "bad" in a way that has become familiar: slightly grainy, with a gaze that is discomfiting because it seems mechanically uninterested in any of the humanly significant objects displayed in the frame. Within that optical deadness, nothing is more worthy of attention than anything else, and this gives surveillance systems their rapacious ability to take in everything with pure indifference.



Emily Jacir, *linz diary*, 2003; one of 26 chromogenic prints. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

But this dehumanizing potential of surveillance, which now occurs without human intervention in almost every public space, is in a way inherent to the medium, as John Stezaker's *Third Person Archive* (2009) illustrates. Stezaker went through early 20th-century photographs of cities and carefully cropped and extracted particular individuals who were captured, purely by chance, in some unremarkable portion of the scene. These portraits, tiny as Walserian microscript when isolated against a vast white backdrop, are reminders of how easily we shed photographic traces in our wake, and at the same time how easily those traces can be lost in the surrounding sea of uninterpretable visual noise.

Finally, the characteristic affective and aesthetic qualities of evidence are explored in numerous works by Walid Raad and in Félix Gonzáles-Torres' *Untitled* (*Death by Gun)*, 1990. Raad, who often presents his works as products of the "imaginary foundation" the Atlas Group, creates authoritative-seeming documentary images, texts, and supporting scholarly apparatus relating to the history of the Lebanese Civil War. Mounted and fixed in place by a web of discourse, the images themselves are objects of scrutiny for both the viewer and for the work, which may contain written comments and notes assessing what is depicted. These works can be seen as performing forensic acts of scrutiny on the allegedly documentary images, co-opting the critical gaze itself.

Félix Gonzáles-Torres, *Untitled (Death by Gun)*, poster displayed in stacks, 1990. Museum of Modern Art, New York. © Félix Gonzáles-Torres Foundation.

Untitled (Death by Gun), in contrast, operates much more directly. The work is a massive stack of printed pages, each of which contains the name, age, and geographic location of 460 people killed by gunshots during a single week, along with a picture of each victim. The effect of staring into this grid of faces—a collective representation of individual lives, each punctuated with a final captioned photograph—is akin to being struck by the literal weight of the evidence. Like carbon atoms organized into diamond, the document fuses a mass of facts into hard, crystalline emotion. There could be no sharper rebuke to Kracauer than to show that the visible truth has its own potent affective register.

This catalogue could be extended further—for more, see Hito Steyerl's incisive discussion of other document-based works by Sanja Ivekovic and Klub Zwei. Grown from the soil of skepticism, the art of the document embodies a distinct set of expressive, aesthetic, and affective possibilities that transcend those of its pure documentary roots. Photography's most bitter critics have helped to produce some of its richest blooms.