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DEAR TRUTH: DOCUMENTARY STRATEGIES IN CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY



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Dear Truth Exhibition Framework

Dear Truth in Times of Post-Truth

In 1989, a year characterized by political uproar and revolution in Europe, artist Martha Rosler remarked, “Without some reference to the real, there’s no place of departure”.¹ Her statement was formulated at the end of a decade that had seen the art world deeply affected by postmodernist critique. The idea of universal truth was rigorously questioned and, within photography, the documentary genre was particularly criticized. The reasons for this criticism were many, but one of particular interest to this exhibition, *Dear Truth: Documentary Strategies in Contemporary Photography*, relates to documentary’s connections with truth and objectivity. This bond simultaneously carries the promise and the perils of documentary photography, touching upon fundamental questions concerning the photograph’s relation with reality.

In 2016 Oxford Dictionaries announced “*post-truth*” as its international Word of the Year. The concept refers to a condition in which emotions and personal beliefs are more influential in shaping public opinion than scientifically based facts. In art, the rejection of objective facts is commonplace and the audience is often put in a state of uncertainty in relation to truth. Despite the substantial differences between, on the one hand, falsehoods offered by politicians and, on the other, the blurred distinction between fact and fiction in artworks, there are similarities.

The “dear” in the exhibition title makes use of a word with many meanings. It signals an affection for truth, but also designates truth as something that is valuable and comes at a high cost. It has been stated that “in a time of universal deceit, telling the truth is a revolutionary act.”—a quote often attributed to George Orwell but, ironically, its authorship is disputed. In the present, this statement is topical.

Dear Truth is an exploration of artists whose works deal with urgent socio-political realities. A vast and complex question has grounded the development of the exhibition: Does the current post-truth political condition influence how contemporary artists relate to the ideas of truth, facts, and objectivity?

Scratching the post-truth surface reveals ideological and geopolitical aspects: post-truth to whom, and where? There is an Anglo-centric bias to the conception of post-truth, and, as some of the artists in the exhibition suggest, the undermining of certain truths is not a new strategy. There is, however, an intensity with which post-truth and “alternative facts” have surfaced as notions to be reckoned with. Today, global emergencies—notably the climate crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic—are embedded in the absurdity of alternative facts voiced unscrupulously by “anti-establishment” politicians.

The Hesitant Resurgence of Documentary Photography

Since the turn of the millennium, the documentary has been designated as “back” in the contemporary-art context, a return which is marked by the influential 2002 exhibition

¹ Martha Rosler interviewed in *Interventions and Provocations: Conversations on Art, Culture, and Resistance*, edited by Glenn Harper (1998).

Documenta 11, led by artistic director Okwui Enwezor. This return, however, does not necessarily prevent artists from kindly but firmly rejecting association with the field. When artist Paul Graham—often linked to documentary photography—refers to the documentary as a “semi-derogatory tag,”² a nod of recognition is close at hand.

My own stake in the questions and themes that underpin *Dear Truth* derives from my long-standing relationship with photography: first as a photography student, then as a teacher and artist, and most recently while undertaking a practice-based artistic PhD. For the last seven years the setting for my artistic practice has been connected to the natural sciences, primarily through collaborations within the field of nanotechnology, but the origin of my research project can be traced back to the harsh critique of documentary photography that emerged four decades ago and profoundly challenged the documentary framework.³

While this criticism was important, rightful, and cutting-edge, photographic technology, circulation, and thinking have since evolved. Today, many artistic and theoretical works resourcefully identify and make use of the reformed and innovative possibilities of the photographic medium. However, alongside these developments, anxieties from the last decades of the twentieth century linger. Photography-based artists are now, alongside photography critics, often the sharpest interrogators of the material-specific attributes of their medium.

The ability to be critical, to reflect upon one’s own position in relation to the medium is important, especially given the genealogy of photography, which reveals a field that comprises of misrepresentation, pseudo-scientific claims, and capitalization on the misfortune of others. But, excessive self-reflection may also generate self-doubt and lead to a halt; making work that risks being perceived as naively putting faith in the image to represent reality or change the world for the better, is a documentary minefield. *Dear Truth* considers ways to move beyond the more incapacitating aspects of “representational critique” by combining interviews with artists conducted for this catalogue with theoretical considerations.

What Dear Truth Does

My aforementioned connection to the natural sciences encourages the use of a well-worn analogy when deliberating about the role of the exhibition within a research project: like a scientist enters her laboratory to examine if an idea holds, I enter the gallery space to gain insights and make discoveries that support or alter my theories. But instead of clear-cut theories or a hypothesis, a set of questions and intentions have emerged: How can artists address urgent matters in society? How can we speak, act, and photograph from ethically thoughtful positions? How do we stay close to social realities and insist that

² Paul Graham, “The Unreasonable Apple” (presentation at the first MoMA Photography Forum in February 2010).

³ Notably Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (1977); Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (1980); John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (1972); Allan Sekula, “Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary” (Notes on the Politics of Representation)” (1978); Martha Rosler, “In, around, and afterthoughts (on documentary photography)” (1981).

facts matter? This exhibition brings together artists whose practices address these questions in different ways.

Within a research project, the mapping of the field is typically a written analysis. *Dear Truth*, in contrast, encourages us to look, listen, and acquire new understandings by spatially and affectively engaging with concerns of relevance to the research. Different projects require different working methods and, in this case, exhibition-making presented itself as a dynamic and generative part of my research undertaking. In the process of shaping the exhibition, the idea of “experimental documentary photography” pointed the way. Photography, in this context indicates an expanded field of lens-based media that includes film, montage, and installation.

The exhibition and catalogue operate in multiple ways. First, they provide the opportunity to enter into dialogue with significant artists and their practice. Reflections voiced by the artists in their interviews have challenged and invigorated the research project. Through this dialogical process, important considerations have emerged with regard to the artists’ ways of working and ways of thinking about their work. Second, the dissemination of a research project is tricky and doctoral dissertations tend to be read by few. The exhibition offers the opportunity to introduce ongoing research into a space in which a broader range of people enter. Third, *Dear Truth* has given room for considerable engagement with the theoretical framework of the research project. This process is to a certain extent disclosed in the exhibition and catalogue. However, in order to refrain from an exhibition that is loaded with theoretical concerns, much of the analysis is kept for the dissertation.

Conceptual Considerations

Around the same time as the postmodern critique of the concepts of truth and objectivity in the 1980s, equally severe but markedly different assessments of objectivity emerged within feminist science theory. Philosophers Sandra Harding and Donna Haraway and, later, theoretical physicist Karen Barad presented analyses in which objectivity is seen as imperfect but not to be discarded. Those ideas are explored within the research project that underpins the *Dear Truth* exhibition.

Moving back and forth between scientific theory and documentary photography offers possibilities. Whereas the analysis of documentary photography can be a marathon of skepticism and mistrust, the theoretical perspectives introduced in *Dear Truth* endorse optimistic criticality, productive reflexivity, and ethical involvement with facts.

“How can the notion of objectivity be updated and made useful for contemporary knowledge-seeking projects?” asks Harding, promoting the idea of a researcher who is reflexive and self-conscious.⁴ Haraway, inspired by Harding, criticized objectivity as a disembodied “god trick,” but rather than stopping there, she formulated potentials. She sought to “reclaim vision” by encouraging embodied feminist perspectives that do not shy away from objectivity. This objectivity “means, quite simply, situated knowledges.”⁵

⁴ Harding, Sandra, “Strong Objectivity: A Response to the New Objectivity Question” (1995).

⁵ Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective” (1988).

Haraway articulated these thoughts around the same time that Martha Rosler made her statement [“Without some reference to the real, there’s no place of departure.”] cited in the introduction. Thirty years later these statements can be brought together productively. Rosler formulates the problems from documentary photography’s point of view and Haraway articulates “keys” from the scientific horizon. While they were both skeptical of predominant understandings of objectivity, they insisted upon the importance of finding ways to negotiate reality.

In *Dear Truth* “objectivity” is paired with the prefix “situated.” In a historical moment when the destabilizing of scientific facts makes it difficult to confront public, political falsehoods, “situated objectivity” is offered as a renewed version of objectivity. Situated objectivity implies engagement with the world, which can lead to new truths about reality—truths that are always affected by the networks that they are embedded within.

Objectivity, according to Barad, entails responsibilities and accountability. Applied to the documentary framework, Barad’s position suggests that we can speak of a partial, non-neutral objectivity in which factual matters decisively matter and ethics are a central concern.⁶

Artists and Artworks in Dear Truth

By documenting, speculating, assembling, and constructing, the artists in this exhibition face the world. Alternately intersecting and diverging, the artists and artworks have in common that they eloquently navigate complex social issues. The images, videos, and installations are related, in different ways, to a tradition of socially engaged, lens-based art that is rooted in discernible realities: the subjects have a basis in reality, they locate something that is not entirely fiction, and point to matters that are somewhat outside of subjectivity.

The interviews that are the core of this catalogue also expose an extensive suspicion about photography’s authority—a caution that is productively channeled into multi-layered, thoughtful, and urgent works. By stepping into the world, turning to archives, pointing to facts, and formulating counter-narratives, the artists expose structures and oppressions that are strategically hidden or overlooked and insist upon the importance of seeing, knowing, and reacting to the complexities and disorders of our time.

MATHIEU ASSELIN: A Photographic Investigation: Motivation Outrage

Monsanto Exposed

A small, black-and-white, wire-haired dog and a young child on a sun-drenched grass lawn appear comfortable. Their noses almost touch. Above them, a headline in bold letters states, **Without chemicals, life itself would be impossible.** The image is an advertisement from 1977 promoting the view that nature is chemical.

⁶ Karen Barad, “Meeting the Universe Halfway: Realism and Social Constructivism Without Contradiction” (1996).

In a more recent portrait, a woman curled up in bed looks straight into the camera. The photograph is composed to include a considerable number of small orange plastic containers identifiable as pill bottles. The accompanying text gives us the woman's name, Kelly L. Derricks, and relates a brief story of her life, which has been ruthlessly marked by proximity to chemicals produced by the company in the 1977 advertisement.

Both images are from Mathieu Asselin's photo-based investigation of the multinational biotechnology company Monsanto, one of the world's most powerful agrochemical giants. Monsanto was founded in the United States in 1901 and has manufactured products such as the herbicide Agent Orange, the insecticide DDT, and an assortment of genetically modified organisms (GMOs). Countless narratives like Derrick's fill the company's century-long history.

It was quickly clear to Asselin that he should focus upon the devastating effect of the toxins Monsanto introduced into the landscape. He describes his motivation as outrage: "When I see what Monsanto has done, I ask myself: what are the mechanisms that allow this to happen? I really feel this need to scream, but of course screaming for the sake of screaming is not very effective." Instead Asselin's articulated scream is conveyed through one of the more acclaimed artist books to have emerged in recent years, *Monsanto®: A Photographic Investigation*.

Describing his practice as socially and politically engaged, Asselin stresses that he aspires to raise questions with the help of photography: "People see the Monsanto work and ask: why, where, to whom did this happen, and who is responsible? And, from there, maybe if I am lucky enough and do my work right, they ask, how can we change things?" He continues, "For me as a photographer, the artistic tools are important in the articulation of questions that maybe would not be asked otherwise. The important thing with art is the potential it gives you to tell stories—complicated stories."

The ambitious, five-year undertaking that Asselin commenced in 2011 gave rise to images that serve as reminders of personal suffering and environmental destruction in the wake of one company's pursuit of profit. He photographs scenes in the present and adds depth by digging into Monsanto's advertising history. Archival images that communicate idealized Monsanto visions make up a substantial part of Asselin's work, entangling the fictitious, dreamy corporate scenarios of the past with new photographs that testify to real traumas in the present.

Asselin's rich and striking work does not allow the reader to forget that his primary motivation is to spread the word about a corporation's wrongdoings, and to challenge their carefully shaped image. The book *Monsanto®: A Photographic Investigation* can be streamed for free on Asselin's website and this accessibility is an indication of Asselin's priorities. His gesture makes possible widespread dissemination—which is common within scientific research—and speaks of a desire for viewers to spend time with the work. Pedagogical ambition pervades Asselin's art: "I have a message; a story to tell."

Whereas the ethical framework of photojournalism calls for journalistic honesty, Asselin embraces the creative freedom that artistic approaches allow. He is reluctant to speak of his work as truth and says the truth will always reflect the perspective of the

speaker: “Everybody has their own truths, depending on their moral grounds. The full story is that Monsanto did good things, too. I am telling *part* of the truth about Monsanto. I am choosing to tell only one side of the story because I believe nothing that Monsanto have done good can make up for all the bad things that they have done. Is it true? I don’t think that the word is *true*, but I think it is fact-based.”

Facts, Truths, and Documentary Photography

Truth—as something other than facts—is not a distinction that is set in stone. Asselin’s analysis is worth expounding, given the *Dear Truth* framework. In line with Asselin’s reasoning, truth can be seen to signal the personal understanding of events: truth is created, articulated by the speaker, and individually experienced rather than simply “out there” to be discovered. Facts, on the other hand, point precisely to that which is out there and, according to this position, facts are part of reality—proven to be unquestionably true and not dependent on individual perspectives. For instance, people have suffered health issues as a consequence of Monsanto’s chemical contamination. That is a fact.

Asselin refers to the idea of “speculative documentary,” a term introduced by photographers Max Pinckers and Michiel De Cleene: “I think that speculation and its relation with historic facts is interesting. It is a tricky relationship when working with the type of subjects that I do.”

In certain fields of photography, sticking to reality has been seen as important. This is primarily the case in photojournalism, where impartiality is a precondition, but it is also a factor within traditional documentary photography. Asselin draws attention to the burden that weighs down the documentary—whether rightfully or unjustly. He elaborates, “We need to think about what our position is and how this will be reflected in our work—it is not only about documenting. This inevitably includes having a point of view—we cannot be neutral. I choose to work on Monsanto because I have something to say.”

Attentive to his own role in the artistic process, Asselin states, “I am putting things together to make you understand that I don’t like Monsanto! I could have put myself in a more comfortable position by letting the public decide, but no, this is a protest work. It is fact-based and *against* Monsanto, and the message needs to be clear.”

Asselin is part of a generation of artists who work with documentary strategies and question their situated position. Their doubts generate self-awareness and reflexivity. Asselin reflects, “It’s important to question why, for whom and with what intentions I am doing this? What is the end goal? I believe that by answering these questions in a sincere and direct way, it allows me to understand better where I place myself in relation to the subject.”

Apart from serving to illustrate reflexive awareness, Asselin’s statements regarding truth carry particular significance in the context of this exhibition: “You have this ‘post-truth’ era with alternative facts—this is very dangerous. As the saying goes: you can have your own opinions but you cannot have your own facts.” He stresses the importance of ascertaining facts by way of comprehensive investigation and points to research as an important part of his practice: “You need to back what you say. Photography needs to be

embedded within a bigger movement of scientists, journalists, activists, et cetera. For the type of work I do, working as the lonely documentary photographer, trying to fight the world, it's romantic but not very effective. My work is a small contribution to the bigger fight against Monsanto.” ¶

Situated Objectivity

Asselin's perspective traverses generations: in the 1970s, documentary photographers partnered with sociologists, writers, and political activists. For Mathieu Asselin, an important collaborator is fellow artist and curator Sergio Valenzuela Escobedo, with whom he designed all the exhibitions of the Monsanto project, as well as developed numerous workshops and pedagogical programs.

Today, in-depth collaborations often play a role in artworks. My own artistic practice has gone from the solitary assumption of every role, to one in which collaborations with people from other fields are central. For me, working with “insiders” and drawing boundaries for myself is an ethical decision that prevents me from aspiring to know-it-all; active delimitation necessitates attention to the knowledge that one holds and does not hold.

“Critical reflexivity” is about distinguishing the place from which one speaks, as well as recognizing that one's presence impacts a situation. Social scientist Malcolm Williams argues that whereas value-neutrality is not possible, a form of objectivity which is clearly situated in a social context is thinkable.⁷ While he diagnoses objectivity as a socially constructed value driven by purpose, he stresses that it can nevertheless lead us to new truths and novel facts about the world.

To be situated means to be located, to have a position, a place from where one speaks. The notion of situated objectivity paves the way for ethical negotiations with factual matters.⁸ It challenges authoritarian knowledge claims. Following Karen Barad and Donna Haraway, it sanctions a focus on real events, marking a shift from constructivist approaches in which language, culture, and the failure of representation were key concerns. Applied to the documentary framework and the work of artists such as Asselin, these perspectives suggest that we can speak of a partial objectivity that demands an ethical responsibility in relation to the images we make.

The majority of the works in *Dear Truth* are informative and rooted in matters of fact. The information is creatively handled, and the artworks do not necessarily transmit an air of traditional objectivity, but they convey knowledge that is likely to leave the audience knowing more than they did when entering the exhibition.

⁷ Malcolm Williams “Situated Objectivity” (2005) and “Situated objectivity, values and realism” (2014).

⁸ A term which relates to situated objectivity is “engaged objectivity”, introduced by Eyal Weizman, the founder of The Forensic Architecture research agency at Goldsmiths University of London. Weizman argues that the truth will always be produced and staged, and stresses “the necessity of taking sides, of fighting for and defending claims.” (In *Forensic Architecture: Violence at the Threshold of Detectability*, 2017)

Setting the Scene: The Seen and the Unseen

Aside from investigating by way of the curatorial, three individual but interlinked artworks form the foundation of my research project: the film *Zero Point Energy* (2016), the photography based series *A World Made by Science* (2018) and the montage work *The Science Question in Feminism* (2018). They address questions linked to documentary photography and scientific knowledge production, with special attention to nanotechnology.

Nanotechnology is a branch of research carried out on a billionth of a millimeter scale. It is about the control of nanoparticles, and the ability to manipulate on atomic and molecular scale. The capacity to “see” the molecular particles is dependent on visualizations and technical equipment. In many respects, nanotechnology and photography have in common an investment into the apparatus and the accuracy of images, sharing a preoccupation with matters of truth and reality.

Dear Truth shows parts of *A World Made by Science* and *The Science Question in Feminism*. The latter borrows its title from one of Sandra Harding’s books and places focus on women in the history of science. It highlights scientists who spent their working lives in patriarchal environments and addresses the discrimination that continuously impacts what and who is prioritized in scientific communities. The images are obvious constructions—they don’t mirror reality. Gender discrimination is a subject that is visually difficult to capture in a ‘straight’ photograph. Making montages was a way of availing myself of the limited existing photographic material of these twentieth-century scientists, none of whom are still alive. The technique also made it possible to introduce visual indications of the researchers’ scientific achievements, placing the portraits in a context.

A World Made by Science provides connections between the science of nanoparticles and social concerns beyond the laboratory. In this work, inspired by the aesthetics of posters, my photographs are combined with images from archives at Chalmers University of Technology, Gothenburg, Sweden. Both works in *Dear Truth* are based in found imagery, factual information and photographs from site-visits in scientific settings. In line with a documentary tradition, they take reality as a starting point and negotiate facts by way of a creative treatment.

FRIDA ORUPABO: Montage: A Politics of Positioning Introducing Diffraction

Whereas the idea of situated objectivity carries potential, it is important to underscore the legitimate and rightful critique of the concept of objectivity itself. Frida Orupabo gives voice to an aversion to the ways in which objective claims have developed within hegemonies: “The word objectivity always gives me goose bumps because it makes me think of whiteness, power, neutrality, and knowledge-production.”

Orupabo refers to artist and psychologist Grada Kilomba, who has stated, “When they speak it is scientific, when we speak it is unscientific; universal/specific; objective/subjective; neutral/personal; rational/emotional; impartial/partial; they have

facts, we have opinions; they have knowledge, we have experiences.”⁹ The dualistic model of organizing knowledge that Kilomba refers to, also draws Karen Barad and Donna Haraway’s skepticism. The significance of situated objectivity is its embrace of objective knowledge while at the same time remaining critical of it. It is, in the words of Haraway, about a more subtle vision that demands responsibility and respectful relations.

The concept of “diffraction” has via Haraway and Barad found use outside the natural sciences from which it originates. They suggest that diffraction—a term that in physics refers to a wave’s behavior when it encounters an obstacle —can profitably challenge the common optical metaphor of “reflection.”

An example of diffraction: when an ocean wave hits a rock and diffracts around it, a new pattern is created out of the interference. Embedded in the idea of diffraction, as Barad and Haraway use it, is a critique of representation, since *representation* suggests a mirror-like image—a reflection—of the world. Diffraction emphasizes “active interference,” drawing attention to the constant interactions at work in the formation of any knowledge.

Intervention / Disturbance / Construction

To acknowledge that the image is not a reflection of the world does not negate the idea that photographs have a profound attachment to that which was in front of the lens at a certain time. This visual and material bond should—and often does—incite the artist to reflect upon how their presence and predispositions impact the resulting image.

Barad and Haraway draw attention to the role not only of the researcher or artist, but also to the instruments: “Vision requires instruments of vision; an optics is a politics of positioning.”¹⁰

Orupabo does not necessarily navigate the optical instrument herself. Rather than using a camera, her images are firmly rooted in a montage tradition. The montage-work accentuates the performative act of making, revealing a high level of active interference that can be referred to as a non-representational diffractive methodology. Describing her process of making, Orupabo says, “Except for two collages (that were improvised), all have been made digitally (in Photoshop) first. The next step is to enlarge the collages and print them out, usually at A4 paper scale. Lastly, I cut out the shapes and fasten each layer by using tape and pins.”

Orupabo’s description of her workflow unveils a practice that moves across time, scales, and material. The original photograph morphs and the montage is a testimony not only of the historical moment that formed the original context of the image but also of the artist’s situatedness in the present. The criticality inherent to this process is significant: it indicates intervention, disturbance, construction, and the unsettling of time and space.

⁹ Grada Kilomba quoted in “To decolonize is to perform: The Theory-in-Praxis of Grada Kilomba” by Inês Bezeza Barreiros and Joacine Katar Moreira in *Challenging Memories and Rebuilding Identities: Literary and Artistic Voices*, edited by Margarida Rendeiro and Federica Lupati (2019).

¹⁰ Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective” (1988).

As mentioned previously, critical reflexivity is a matter of ethics. The materiality of montage-work implies an inescapable position of reflexivity through the very technique of cutting and pasting, through tangibly disrupting the photograph. Orupabo's work refuses to be mistaken for direct representation, and displays the complexity and heterogeneity that is embedded in the expanded theory of diffraction.

With a master's degree in sociology and a background as a social worker, Orupabo reflects, "Sociology, very simply put, looks at how we impact and create society, but also how social systems shape and impact us. I believe this informs all my work." Orupabo is attuned to what Barad refers to as performativity: a relational approach that draws attention to actions rather than descriptions.

Barad's definition of performativity assumes that we can never be entirely outside of the thing that we engage with. This entanglement is palpable in photography—a process through which the apparatus and the light-sensitive material in the camera record the light that is reflected off the subject. Barad's "ethics of knowing" fittingly evokes the perspective that the camera and photographer inescapably interfere, disrupt, and cause disturbance, stressing the act of making and the construction of meaning. To speak of diffraction rather than reflection is a way to escape mirror analogies. This is evident in Orupabo's practice: "I've always been interested in concepts and the *shaping* [emphasis added] of reality."

Cut—Ethics

Barad also elaborates on the familiar word *cut* in ways that stimulate thoughts of the montage technique as a practice of making cuts on a philosophical as well as a material level. A cut offers a brief moment of stabilization. This temporary pause makes room for some things to enter into the frame and allows us to gain knowledge—albeit limited knowledge—about certain aspects of the world.

The knowledge that is assembled needs to be actively delimited: our formulations have consequences and we are ethically responsible in relation to the knowledge that we construct, Barad contends. Orupabo defines her ground: "I am interrogating myself, my perceptions and ideas about race, gender, sexuality, class, and culture." She places her work in the realm of personal familiarity. But the personal is profoundly and purposefully entangled with collective experience. She states, "A main focus is on how black women are portrayed and perceived (for instance in the mainstream media) and, further, the consequence of these ways of seeing."

The archival photographs that Orupabo's images derive from are testimonies of lived experiences. Her intervention points to the ethical difficulty of working with archival material. Who are the anonymous people in the images? How would they perceive their inclusion in a twenty-first-century montage? Is it (symbolically) violent to cut someone's photographed body into pieces? Should somebody—perhaps an unknown photographer—be credited for the original photograph? For Orupabo, ethical considerations are interconnected with aesthetic choices: "One collage usually consists of five to six images," she says. When making the montages, she consequently modifies the

original images to a great extent. The fragmentary nature of montaged images can disclose original identities, but when including people in montage work there is always a possibility that the person in the image, or someone related, will take offense.

Here, it is pertinent to think of what the montage can *do*. To reproduce or physically interfere with an existing image may violate, but it also facilitates engagement with important aspects of issues such as discrimination by drawing attention to real-life physical and psychological violence. Orupabo's work discloses an artistic ethos fueled by the urgency of using art to highlight personal and collective histories of race and gender, and to confront portrayals of black women.

Orupabo makes montages because they enable her "to explore gender—what is understood as masculine and feminine, [and what is] beautiful (what is a desirable body), by mixing up body parts from both women and men, twisting limbs, and so on. I am interested in the body—specifically the black female body; how it is interpreted, talked and written about, and how that affects me/us."

The montage technique is historically fertile soil for politically powerful work; through its very materiality it relates to political art movements such as Dada and Constructivism. Orupabo reflects on why she avails herself of this technique: "Collages allow me to explore [questions of belonging] in a good way by bringing something together that was not originally meant to stand together. It allows you to create new narratives or counter-narratives and meaning." ¶

LARA BALADI: Acts of Resistance Propaganda Reconsidered

Similarly to the work of Frida Orupabo, Lara Baladi also operates in the realm of counter-narration. She describes her poetic and pressing *ABC: A Lesson in History* as "inspired by 1950s propagandist educational books." The work is composed of a "book" cover, a title page, twenty-eight plates (for the twenty-eight letters of the Arabic alphabet), and an index. The plates are vividly blue in color: "Each plate is printed on watercolor paper using a 19th century analogue process: cyanotype." Baladi's utilization of an archaic process serves as a reminder of early photographs and films of protests since the 1800s. The connection between the protests and the analogue photographic process matters to Baladi, who adds: "These cyanotype prints, reminiscent of the blueprints of engineering drawings, inscribe the ABC as the core language—and structure—to engineer a revolution."

In *ABC: A Lesson in History*, key historical moments are illustrated through the use of iconic images. "I have selected the images for each letter based on the archive I gathered from Egypt's 2011 revolutions and other global social movements," Baladi says. For instance, "The image of the globe with the girl standing on it is borrowed from the cover of an Egyptian magazine published during the period which followed the 1952 revolutions that toppled the monarchy."

The images that Baladi uses originally surfaced in contexts ranging from the early days of queer activism and the 1969 Stonewall protests in New York City to the recent Egyptian and Iraqi uprisings. Each plate includes one letter, one iconic image, and one word, mimicking the structure of children's ABC booklets in use from the 1940s until today. The images that emerge are intended to "illustrate the core notion implied in each word" and speak to each word's actual or imagined function in the revolutionary process.

Baladi's work is the culmination of several years of research into the iconography of protests. Interrelated artworks have emerged from her ongoing process of collecting the *Tahrir Archives*. Baladi says; "*ABC: A Lesson in History* is an ABC Primer, the first of a new series which revolves around a web based abecedary titled *Anatomy of a Revolution*."

The artworks highlight the resonance between historical events across time and space: “Learning history ‘from a bird’s eye view,’ allows us to move forward with greater awareness and to raise our consciousness.” She continues, “The objective is to offer an artistic perspective on the ‘symptoms’ of revolution and to suggest that the historical cycle we are caught up in can shift, from revolution to hopefully evolution.”

Resistance by Recording

In January 2011, Baladi was one of the hundreds of thousands of people across Egypt who took to the streets in protest against President Hosni Mubarak. “In 2011, I started an ongoing process of collecting data—especially photos and videos—related to Egypt’s and other Arab uprisings. I titled the archive *Vox Populi, Tahrir Archives* as a reference to the main focus of my research: media produced by citizens.¹¹ Dissecting this vernacular visual material, i.e. the popular language, which has emerged and continues to emerge in times of revolution and protest, has been at the core of my work since.”

Baladi is interested in the role of images at a moment when neither photographs nor political falsehoods travel only, or primarily, with the help of *mass* media, but rather with *social* media. This shift from printed to social media is significant to Baladi’s practice. Having lived in Cairo since 1997, Baladi in 2013 wrote a compelling article on the changing conditions of photography in which she argues that how the world is informed about contemporary events has fundamentally changed. She calls this, “A new trend of online political activism.”¹² Writing from the context of Tahrir Square—a public square in Cairo that served as an epicenter of the protests—Baladi states, “In the midst of the emergency, all theories on the subjectivity of photography suddenly became irrelevant.”¹³

When asked today to elaborate on her statements written in 2013, Baladi comments, “In the context of Tahrir Square, in a country where photography had been banned in most public spaces until 2011; where if you were photographing you were assumed to be an Israeli spy; where (anti-camera) propaganda helped generate paranoia, fear, and mistrust between people ... literally overnight, the camera became one of the most efficient ways to counter the state and its security apparatus.”

To discuss the camera as a tool to attack the dominant regime is in line with what media-studies professor Kari Andén-Papadopoulos refers to as “resistance by recording.”¹⁴ This reveals a twenty-first-century phenomenon of photographs that originate from the perspectives of those embedded in a conflict. The political promise of photography is performative—encompassing viewing, making, and mobilizing with and through photography. In the digital era, the archiving and the sharing of an incident often takes place minutes or even seconds later, when the footage is uploaded online and distributed globally.

Baladi has referred to “archiving as an act of resistance” and considers photography as a participatory practice.¹⁵ Andén-Papadopoulos, in a related vein, contends that with the expansion of digital media, those who were previously “looked at” are able now to actively image the situations they are embedded in through the use of mobile phones. The act of photographing is an act of participation.

The Urgent Necessity to Trust

Baladi’s statement that all theories on the subjectivity of photography suddenly became irrelevant is progressive and paves the way for further focal points: “What prevailed was the urgent necessity to trust each other and to trust that photography in fact still could, in the digital age, ‘reproduce nature’ and represent visual evidence. Photography became instinctively a ‘shared’ tool, not to say a weapon, against the state. Protestors in this short-lived moment of solidarity, in fact, had to believe that what was being photographed was the ‘truth,’ the protestors’ truth.”

Her words signal that particular moments in time demand shifted attention: “During those eighteen days [of revolution in Tahrir Square], people in the square took photos because they felt the social responsibility

¹¹ “Vox Populi” is the Latin phrase for “voice of the people”.

¹² Lara Baladi, “When Seeing Is Belonging: The Photography of Tahrir Square” (2013).

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Kari Andén-Papadopoulos, “Imaging human rights: On the ethical and political implications of picturing pain” in *The Routledge Companion to Media and Human Rights*, edited by Howard Tumber and Silvio Waisbord (2017).

¹⁵ Lara Baladi, “Archiving a Revolution in the Digital Age, Archiving as an Act of Resistance” (2016).

to do so. Photography became objective; photography showed the truth—yes, a truth made of as many truths as there were protesters in the square, but nonetheless one that urgently had to be revealed at this turning point in history.”¹⁶

Baladi’s article was written seven years ago in and about a specific context. It is, however, tempting to think that “in the midst of the emergency” could connote a broader range of ongoing emergencies that have materialized and escalated in recent years: zooming out, an image that is saturated with global challenges appears.

Conditions for Transformation

The photographs that originate from the epicenter of the emergency, from the protesters point of view, have the traits of a new form of first-hand documentary photography. However, Baladi does not see her own work as documentary: “I started my career as a documentary photographer, but I quickly shifted to making art when I realized art was a field I could work in freely, without apparent constraints. My approach to making art has evolved over time but also radically when the 2011 uprisings in Egypt began. Art has always had the ability to impact and change society, however, *how* art changes society depends on the place and the socio-political context it is made in.”

When asked if the recently surfaced post-truth agendas in media and politics influence how she thinks about truth and facts in her work, Baladi responds, “Not necessarily.” She draws attention to the geopolitical dimension of the concept: “In societies of control, the term ‘post-truth’ does not apply. The status quo is that ‘truth’ is that of the state.” She is also skeptical of the notion of objectivity: “If I cared to focus on a certain form of objectivity in my work, I would probably have chosen to be a journalist or a scientist, both fields in which the term objectivity is defined within the limitations of the rules and ethics of reporting or science.” Objectivity and truth are challenging concepts. By naming something, there is the risk that this something will come across as both tamed and conclusive. This is not the intention in *Dear Truth*. Nevertheless, established terms are revisited in this exhibition—including the notion of documentary photography—instead of opting to start afresh with new concepts. The concepts are included for pragmatic reasons; partly to designate where the research operates and partly to tackle existing blockages in documentary thought and practice. ¶

LAIA ABRIL: The Self, the Story, the Audience Experiences Across Time

Laia Abril and I connect via the internet for an interview in September 2020, when online meetings have become part of the new normal. Like so many events, the *Dear Truth* exhibition had been postponed due to the rapid spread of COVID-19. Abril was in Spain and under heavy lockdown restrictions throughout the spring and summer. In our conversation, she underscores an identifiable sentiment: “So much has changed in the last six months.” Of course, publications and exhibitions have been delayed or cancelled, but Abril’s comment also refers to the intangible changes in attitudes, perspectives, and in how—and about what—we speak.

“What triggers my interest is to understand how the world works or why something happens.” This wide-ranging curiosity has led Abril to subjects that are rooted in the gruesome, often invisible experiences of women such as rape, eating disorders, and unsafe abortions. *Dear Truth* includes selected parts of *On Abortion*, the first chapter of the long-term and ongoing series *A History of Misogyny* (2016–).

¹⁶ Lara Baladi, “When Seeing Is Belonging: The Photography of Tahrir Square” (2013).

Every year, unsafe abortions lead to the death of tens of thousands of women around the world. The women who undergo hazardous abortions do so not because of insufficient medical and technological knowledge, but as a consequence of society's religious and political motivations.

Documentary Against the Grain

"I was trained as a writer and a researcher," Abril says. After completing a degree in journalism, she moved in the direction of documentary photography. She valued the absence of journalistic briefs, but her initial appreciation of the documentary—a field that appeared to embrace subjectivity—came to a halt: "I started to break the rules by working with appropriation and reconstruction."

The situations where one's view of what documentary photography is – and is not – impact which formal and informal guidelines one adheres to: "At the end of the day, it [the documentary] is a label." Abril's experience of the documentary revealed to her a field that came across as restrictive, patriarchal, and reductionist: "The rules and guidelines made it impossible to visualize the women's stories that I wanted to tell in the way that I think they should be told."

She found that the documentary and journalism have in common the expectation that photographers are to remove themselves from the story: "I tried to do that for a long time because that was what I had been told to do for many years, but I am slowly accepting that I was always part of the equation." For Abril, the subjective position is at the center: "Who are you? Why are you the person to tell this story? How do you influence it?" In art, she found the freedom of not "just representing facts."

The Artist as a Filter

The pervasive misogynistic culture in which Abril grew up as a young woman in southern Europe is the starting point of *A History of Misogyny*. Women's mental and physical health is continuously jeopardized, which Abril puts in context by juxtaposing historical conditions, material equipment, ideological incitements, and personal testimonies. Her research involves confronting atrocious experiences: "I can only spend the time and energy if something really, really motivates me in my guts. Otherwise, there is no way that I would put myself through it." She continues, "Sometimes it gets too much, too dark."

Her projects are time-consuming; she deliberately opposes the short-lived reports in newspapers: "In the newspaper, you are told that something happened and then you turn the page." The journalistic article, Abril contends, does not necessarily create discussion or emotional involvement; it does not give the audience the space and time to engage.

Abril always attends to the audience, but "I don't 'cuddle' them." She emphasizes that her position is not paternalistic or overprotective, but empathic and ethical with the subjects. She looks for tools and novel ways to engross an audience despite such grim stories: "For a long time, I thought of myself as a filter. Things that were very hard to

look at ... I would put myself in that situation and create something for the audience, bearable to look at.”

Abril describes her artistic process as made up of “three parts”: herself, the story, and the audience. The story involves responsibility toward the people whose experiences are being recounted: “It is a stressful situation as an artist and a great responsibility. You are always faced with the possibility of making a mistake when you are working with other people’s lives.” Trust and responsibility are crucial, especially when following people in precarious situations as in *On Abortion*.

Her previous projects have started with individual perspectives: “I would tell the micro stories in order to understand the macro.” With *A History of Misogyny*, she decided to “create a conceptual map to make connections and try to comprehend why things were happening—the causes and the consequences of the individual experiences.” Her process involves an initial investigation that is followed by reacting to the material. Then, she creates “an emotional response to something that actually happened.”

Abril’s art-making procedure comes across as an open-ended progression rather than a predetermined narrative. It is clear that neither statements, methods, nor methodologies are set in stone. Her frankness discloses an acute attention to deliberation and analysis. She describes the research process as “a journey through which I become (politically) educated. In this process of learning, things change—it is a progress.” She challenges her own preconceptions through reading and reflecting and by going to places, speaking to people, and exploring materials. The stakes are high: she is trying to figure out “how to represent the pain of others”.

Questions of Trust

While not aspiring to represent or document reality as such, Abril does not regard any part of her work as fiction. Instead, she speaks of “visual metaphors” that rest in real events: “I am so interested in what is *actually* happening that I don’t need the made-up stories.” Her works are based on real experiences but she is clear: “I am not obsessed with convincing anyone that this is the truth.”

To ensure that what she states in her works is correct she fact-checks her assertions, but she does not account for her source material: “The audience has to trust that I am being honest. I am not going to spend time convincing them that what I am telling them is true. I guess that is the difference between a journalist and an artist. You either trust me or you don’t.”

Abril’s reflections on her relationship with truth and fiction uncover a deep commitment to the stories she aims to tell. She adds that she understands that people are seeking confirmation: “I often confirm that I work with facts so that people know that it is true. I understand that they want to know, and I say, ‘Yes, it did take place.’ But I also say: let us focus on what it *means* that it happened and why it still happens.”

When speaking with Abril, the issue of trust is persistent and multifaceted. Her work relies on conversations with people who trust her with their stories. There is also the trust between her and the audience. A third aspect of trust, important in the context of *Dear*

Truth, is how women have been disbelieved and silenced throughout history. She refers particularly to her latest work, *On Rape*, which is the second chapter of *A History of Misogyny*: “It’s complicated. The latest peak of post-truth—from 2016 until now—is when I have been working with rape and the lack of trust in rape testimonies.”

From this vantage point Abril contemplates that post-truth is not a novelty: “The topics I am working on have always been affected by people not believing.” Just like Lara Baladi, Abril challenges the idea of post-truth, stating that, from the outset, an important aspect of her work has been “the politics of the undermining of trust.” In concert with recent post-truth developments, the #MeToo movement grew in strength and Abril contends that, to her, the force and effects of this movement against sexual abuse overshadowed the unfolding post-truth situation. ¶

KARLSSON RIXON with MIKELA LUNDAHL HERO: Nearby and Across

Research(ing) Perspectives

Research plays an important role for many of the artists in *Dear Truth*. For Axel A Karlsson Rixon, a PhD in artistic research within the field of photography entailed researching with and through art. Their practice-based PhD project, which is made up by a set of interconnected artistic projects, was published in the dissertation *Queer Community through Photographic Acts: Three Entrances to an Artistic Research Project Approaching LGBTQIA Russia*.¹⁷

The research explores how queer community can emerge through photography. Karlsson Rixon’s sincerity in relation to ethical considerations is especially striking. Their position is critically engaged and rests upon a genuine concern about how the photographic portrait touches, disturbs, and harms: “I have had a critical approach towards documentary photography since I went to Nordens Fotoskola (Nordic School of Photography) in the mid 1980’s, which led me to undertake my MFA at CalArts (California Institute of the Arts) and study for, among others, Allan Sekula.”

Karlsson Rixon later returned to California to study with Trinh T. Minh-Ha, Professor of Gender & Women’s Studies and Rhetoric. This contact turned out to be significant: “When studying and attending Trinh’s seminars, I felt that I achieved a set of theoretical tools that are still useful for my photographic practice in relation to the documentary.”

From her position of filmmaker and theorist, Trinh’s approach to filmmaking involved shifting attention from speaking “about” to speaking “nearby”; a shift which acknowledges the inescapable gap between an artist and the subjects of the work. This attitude together with other thoughts presented in Karlsson Rixon’s dissertation are relevant to their work in *Dear Truth*, which is the result of a collaboration with historian of ideas Mikela Lundahl Hero.

¹⁷ Annica Karlsson Rixon, *Queer Community through Photographic Acts: Three Entrances to an Artistic Research Project Approaching LGBTQIA Russia* (2016).

Geographic and Personal Positions

The setting has moved from the LGBTQIA scene in Russia to a refugee camp in Greece. Lundahl Hero explains, “We tried to make sense of the so-called migration crisis, what it did to places, how it affected people already there and those who arrived there.”

Karlsson Rixon describes that the collaborative project started “as a reaction to how people in the margins today are gathered in camps. So far, I have made a couple of works on these situations, and in all of them I try to reflect my own position as a photographer—for example white, queer and Western—and what it means to work photographically based on these positions.” Karlsson Rixon draws upon Trinh’s notion of “in-between,” which acknowledges the multiplicity of positions that one person embodies simultaneously and stresses the tensions and potentials that arise.

While opposing simple categorizations, Karlsson Rixon sees the value in having distinct areas of accountability in a collaborative project: “With ownership comes responsibility.” This responsibility is perhaps easier to accomplish when recognizing various individuals’ situated knowledge. Defining their position, Karlsson Rixon says: “I have an interest in how photography acts in the world: the acts of transmission that begin with the moment photographs are taken, how this is reflected when they are exhibited, and the relationship between these events.”

Depending on the nature of the artistic project, working with people with different competencies can be invaluable in avoiding excessively speculative claims. Karlsson Rixon reflects on the collaborative preconditions of their work: “It is based on common interests informed by the different knowledge we bring into the work. For me, it would be hard to make this project without having an interlocutor.” Lundahl Hero says that she is drawn to the process of thinking together with other people and welcomes “both the recognition and the friction that it causes.” Collaboration is important for the thought process as well as for the companionship: “In this specific case it was helpful to share the experience and then reflect upon it together, and in solitude, back and forth, which made the unbearable a little less painful.”

Ethics Considered

Dear Truth includes artworks that approach notoriously difficult questions: how to represent the experience of a refugee or a person in exile; violation of the bodily integrity; environmental damage; human suffering, and structural discrimination. The works in the exhibition are marked by a desire to show without harming. Lundahl Hero points out that this can be a difficult balancing act: “In the end, I am just one privileged first-world person reporting from the fringes with a vain hope of producing a critical narrative that will be a part of a change. But am I? Will it? And can it justify using their stories, their lives, their voices? Will it do more harm than good? I can never rest in one of the two [answers to these questions].”

When asked about the role ethical considerations play, she responds, “Oh, they are everything. I think it is so difficult to publish or show anything that includes other people that I rather would not, since I cannot be sure that it will actually do anything for them—

or, rather, since I can be sure that it will do nothing for them.” Lundahl Hero’s statements, from her position as a historian of ideas, highlight a challenge shared by many photographers: the privilege of photographing certain situations and locations often means that you are an outsider. Her reflection is identifiable: I would rather not.

Why, then, persist? The artists in *Dear Truth* come across as driven by deep engagement with society. They are motivated by curiosity, anger and frustration with the human inclination to discriminate, violate, and control. The tool at hand is art, and to not use the potential of art to reveal the upsetting and threatening aspects of society perhaps does not seem like a viable option.

With Close Distance

Central to the ethically reflective documentary approach that Karlsson Rixon puts forward in their dissertation is a profound understanding of the problems of photographing “others.” *At the Time of the Third Reading*, one of the dissertation artworks, shows a lesbian summer camp in Russia. To be able to photograph the camp, Karlsson Rixon photographed from a distance in order to protect the identities of the people in the images. A similarly distant position characterizes Karlsson Rixon’s photographs in *Dear Truth*.

For a few weeks, Karlsson Rixon and Lundahl Hero are on the inside. Their visit does not make them insiders, but presence was a necessary component of being able to acquire a sense of the everyday life there. The work that grew out of their stay in the refugee camp in Greece consists of photographs and textual deliberations on their experiences. Lundahl Hero says about the texts, “The vignettes that I wrote were produced in situ as a direct reflection of what we saw, the meetings we had with the migrants and volunteers, and the place itself. At the same time, they reflect years of thinking, reading, and talking about the current political situation, the border regime of Fortress Europe, and the white supremacy that continuously produces grievable and non-grievable bodies.”

The “vignettes” have a diary-like quality and speak of emotional responses and personal thoughts. This is different from how Lundahl Hero commonly approaches a text: “I usually write in a more academic or essayistic tone, where there is a narrative and an effort to get somewhere. Here I couldn’t get anywhere. There is nowhere to go. The migration politics is a trap with no closure.”

The photographs were originally published in a magazine where some of them were cropped into circles that claustrophobically mimicked a peephole.¹⁸ The view is masked and the people—predominantly children—are often facing away from the camera. The images make no attempt to offer comprehensive insight; they don’t bring us close or pretend familiarity with the situation that they depict. But they are intimate and touching in a subtle and unassuming way, facilitating gentle observations rather than sanctioning objectifying voyeurism. The frustration of being allowed to see so little is overshadowed by the appreciation of being shown anything at all.

¹⁸ *Ord & Bild* no 2/2019.

The “insiders” on the site have fled war, violence, and persecution. It is questionable whether this experience—or any person’s experience—can be conveyed by anyone else. Karlsson Rixon’s photographs are, however, not attempts to *represent* the people that they met. In their dissertation, we find a clue about their approach: “To take a step back does not necessarily always mean to distance oneself from the subject. A photographic position of stepping back can also mean an ethical response to what matters, a way of finding other methods to still be able to approach that which is engaging one.” ¶

BOUCHRA KHALILI: Situated Storytelling

Staging Performances

Mother Tongue is the first chapter of Bouchra Khalili’s video trilogy *The Speeches Series*. Each chapter follows a different format, respectively articulating one of three concepts: language, citizenship, and labor.

The chapter presented in *Dear Truth* attends to language and is narrated by five migrants who live in Paris and have been invited by the artist to recite literary and political texts. Khalili explains, “Each of them chose the piece she/he is performing. They translated and memorized those fragments. So what the viewer is watching, is literally a performance.”

The opening speech, which tells of the savagery and hypocrisy of colonialism, is introduced in white letters on a black backdrop and identified as being written by the Martinican poet and politician Aimé Césaire. The name is followed by a cut to a tightly framed still image of a patio leading up to a house: “The film articulates private and public spaces. The participants selected the location of their performances.”

Two doors break up the façade, indicating that we will soon be invited inside. Cut. The camera adopts a closer focal length. A woman has appeared in the main door’s window. Her name is Naoual and when she speaks, she does so in her mother tongue, Moroccan Arabic, reciting the opening lines of Césaire’s *Discourse on Colonialism*: “A civilization that proves incapable of solving the problems it creates is a decadent civilization. A civilization that chooses to close its eyes to its most crucial problems is a stricken civilization. A civilization that uses its principles for trickery and deceit is a dying civilization.”¹⁹

Naoual’s performance of Césaire’s words is minimalist, staged by Khalili in a way that demands attention to speech, language, storytelling and the person who speaks. Khalili works from the idea of “civil poetry,” in which the civil poet takes ownership of speech: “The film also includes Naoual’s name, which creates a sense of equality between Naoual and Césaire.” The “civic poet” is a concept that is borrowed from Italian film maker and writer Pier Paolo Pasolini. Referring to Pasolini, Khalili speaks to the idea of enabling the emergence of new interactions and collectivities through the cinematic language. The subjective, singular voice is an articulation that forms a part of a collective narration:

¹⁹ Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (1955).

history is subjective, made up of fragments to be assembled. What is more: “History is often the narrative as imposed by power. The point is rather what happens when the ‘subalterns’ speak”.

An Alternative History Book

In order to comprehend Khalili’s attention to language and the power of speech, her relationship with storytelling is illuminating. She describes storytelling as a sort of alternative history book: “The history of the people told by the people to other people.”²⁰ Born in Morocco, where the official history was in the hands of colonizers and the political regime, Khalili stresses the importance of private, intimate storytelling—what she refers to as “living archives”—to expand official histories. The histories that formed the living archives that Khalili listened to as a child were about death, politics and love and they differed from the official narratives both in form and contents.

Khalili’s works can be seen to facilitate a re-claiming of history from the dominant voice: “A narrative is never raw. It is always produced from a clearly situated position.”²¹ In *Dear Truth* this basic yet important consideration of the situated position of the narrator is fundamental. The recognition that a narrative undeniably comes from an embodied somewhere paves the way for ethical articulations. In *Mother Tongue*, the articulations are interlaced, encompassing the voice of the author who wrote the text, the person who recites it, and the artist who sets up the encounter.

Image as Proposition

Khalili regards the image as “a sort of space where a proposition is made and received.”²² To speak of propositions is reminiscent of philosopher Isabelle Stengers, who has asked, “How can I present a proposal intended not to say what is, or what ought to be, but to provoke thought?”²³ Stengers and Khalili’s uses of the terms *proposal* and *proposition* denote (art)works as fluid suggestions rather than as confirmations. Stengers encourages the slowing down of thinking, since it may stimulate other responses and understanding of the troubles that we face. In 2016, she posed an open question to an audience: “How can [our research] matter? We have to take it seriously. Trying to think to the future. What can we compose to the next generation? The kind of imaginations that are necessary, that make a difference.”²⁴

Stengers’s statement is charged with aspiration and appeals to the audience to not waste the opportunity to make something that matters. A similar desire is revealed when Khalili speaks of art as being not only about personal experience and affect: “I wish I could

²⁰ Bouchra Khalili in conversation with artist Doris Salcedo, moderated by Natalie Bell as part of the New Museum’s “Who’s Afraid of the New Now?” (2017).

²¹ Interview with Bouchra Khalili at Jeu de Paume, Concorde-Paris (2018).

²² Ibid.

²³ Isabelle Stengers, “The Cosmopolitical Proposal” (2005).

²⁴ Keynote presentation by Isabelle Stengers at the 2016 Annual Meeting of the Society for the Social Study of Science (4S) in Barcelona (private notes).

believe that [art] can change the world. But if it doesn't change the world, at least it can help us to think about how we can make it better."²⁵

Khalili describes the propositions she puts forward as neither documentary nor fiction but rather as a hypothesis: "They all start with *what if*."²⁶ Emphasizing the speculative nature of her works, Khalili states: "I don't personally consider that I work with documentary. I would rather say that I work with what can seem to be documentary strategies, but it is not about documenting something."²⁷ She contends that documentary as a Western canon fails, as the voices of the people that the work concerns are systematically excluded.

Khalili's projects involve long conversations with the participants: they talk and she listens. In this process, the participants claim their voice and their stories. Her role as an artist then is to "show something to someone", a statement that refers to French film critic Serge Daney and his ethics of filmmaking. In this process, the audiences' reactions are important. The artworks are considered as neither completed nor final; they need to be complemented by the multitude of perspectives offered by the audience. In the act of looking and listening, the audience becomes part of the story.

As with many of the artists in *Dear Truth*, Khalili is committed to thinking. Rather than accepting the documentary label, she comes up with alternative descriptions when speaking about her practice, pointing us in new directions. The artistic practice does not stop when an image is framed or when the film is edited. The transformative process continues and the meta-perspectives the artists in this exhibition voice cultivate the progression of the photographic discourse. ¶

TARYN SIMON: Showing the Impossible

Backdrop

When presented in full, Taryn Simon's work *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters I–XVIII* consists of eighteen chapters where "external forces" such as territory and religion collide with the "internal forces" of psychological and physical inheritance. The monumental installation includes two-meter-high panels that are structured methodically. Each chapter contains three segments: to the left are portraits; in the center a text panel which communicates narratives and lists names, professions, date of birth and place of residence; on the right, "footnote images" provide photographic evidence and fragmented material that speaks with the overall story.

The individuals in the photographs are related to one another by blood. This is the common denominator and rationale that courses through the project. The rows of portraits have the quality of a grand catalogue and in line with a long portrait tradition, the individuals are photographed straight-on as they look into the lens. Simon's recording of bloodlines and their related stories denotes endless cycles of people being born and

²⁵ "Questionnaire: Bouchra Khalili" in Frieze (2018).

²⁶ Bouchra Khalili in conversation with artist Doris Salcedo, moderated by Natalie Bell as part of the New Museum's "Who's Afraid of the New Now?" (2017).

²⁷ Ibid.

dying, implying that, as she puts it: “we are all ghosts from the past and the future.” The work comes across as an attempt to organize the unorganizable; elements of chance, fate and evolution are important components in her pursuit of “repetition, patterns and codes.”

The process of making *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters I–XVIII* involved substantial research to unveil stories related to for instance colonial conquest and persecution, political power disputes, religious rituals, and the wild rabbit population in Australia. Tracing Simon’s process, photo historian Geoffrey Batchen discloses a procedure which considerably supersedes the photographic moment:²⁸ if the scale of the presentation of this work is captivating, the magnitude of the artist’s process is equally staggering. Over the course of four years, Simon spent a vast amount of time travelling to a significant number of geographic locations with seven cases of photographic equipment. The trips required her and her team to go through an extensive process of research, obtaining permissions, interviewing participants, and recording histories. In each of the eighteen locations, which included India, Brazil, Ukraine and Tanzania, a plain background was used to create a “non-place”, effectively neutralizing time, context, and environmental dissimilarities.

Critical theorist Homi K. Bhabha stresses the significance of Simon’s use of the neutral and unchanging backdrop, suggesting that the artist’s setup may “serve as an antidote to the voyeurism/fetishism paradigm.”²⁹ In *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters I–XVIII* the people participate in “the ambiguity of their photographic representations”. Bhabha’s reading of Simon’s work is attentive to the complexity of what the photographic portrait *is* and what it *does*: a photograph neither completely captures a situation, nor altogether fails to capture something. Commenting on this Simon says, “I’ve always felt that the photographs insist on a state of not knowing, through a distance that implicates both myself and the viewer.”

Unlike a broad history of photo journalism, which pretends to be familiar with, or have intimate access to, a subject’s or moment’s experience, Simon’s unusual and sometimes uncomfortable distance insists that the photograph’s gaze can never capture or represent a life or story: “Through the accumulation of so many photographs, something unknowable and unspeakable can be found in the gaps.”

Installation, Camera, Text

Martha Rosler has suggested: “I think the documentary makes some effort to locate something outside of subjectivity, even if it doesn’t ever quite reach that point.”³⁰ Simon in a similar line of thought has stated that the camera provides “what appears to be evidence of a truth. But there are multiple truths attached to every image depending on the creator’s intention, the viewer, and the context in which it is presented.”³¹

²⁸ Geoffrey Batchen, “Revenant” in *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters I - XVIII* (2011).

²⁹ Homi K. Bhabha, “Beyond Photography” in *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters I - XVIII* (2011).

³⁰ Martha Rosler interviewed in *Interventions and Provocations: Conversations on Art, Culture, and Resistance*, edited by Glenn Harper (1998).

³¹ TEDGlobal 2009, “Photographs of secret lies” (2009).

As with Rosler's definition, Simon's work locates something outside of subjectivity. But it is both conceptually and visually distant from the twentieth-century social-documentary photographic tradition. When *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters I–XVIII* was first exhibited in 2011, it marked a new route for socially engaged photography. The artwork is vast in terms of scale, subject matter, and research, and its physical and conceptual magnitude is intensely ambitious.

Where predecessors such as Allan Sekula often chose modest forms of presentation, Simon's installations are deliberately alluring and spectacular. The photographs, meanwhile, are small and intimate when considered individually, but overwhelming when experienced in their vast gridded aggregate.

Simon developed a precise procedure for *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters I–XVIII* when she introduced what was to become one of the most groundbreaking photographic projects since the turn of the 21st century. Alongside its comprehensive content, the project presented an unprecedented form with frames that were part of the work itself, scroll-like text, and multiple component parts intended to be read in a non-linear manner.

Precursors of the formal repetition that structures *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters I–XVIII* can be found among works by Bernd and Hilla Becher and August Sander, but Simon's installation is more intricate than those of her photographic predecessors. In addition to photographs, narratives are relayed through carefully considered texts, anchoring the portraits. Simon refers to the texts as "locked in time." She elaborates: "A photograph is more fluid with time; it doesn't have fixed definitions." Data and language are less malleable which "creates a purposeful tension over time", when new stories occur and unravel.

Simon's camera of choice has often been emblematic of how she prioritizes attention to details. When working on *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters I–XVIII*, she used the cumbersome large format film camera as well as a modified version which allowed for digital images: "The photographic technologies were radically shifting at the time of the project. While tracing the bloodlines in the narratives it constructs, it is simultaneously capturing machine evolution."

Interruptions

Dear Truth includes Chapter V and Chapter VII. The presentation of Chapter V alludes to how it was installed at the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing, China, 2013–14, where the chapter—which tells the story of the South Korean citizen Choe Janggeun who reportedly was abducted by North Korean agents in 1977—was not allowed to be shown. Simon made the decision to paint black fields on the wall in place of the photographs and texts, creating a haunting commentary on censorship.

Chapter VII documents a bloodline interrupted by genocide. The Srebrenica massacre took place during five days in July 1995 in the city of Srebrenica, Bosnia and Herzegovina. The killings, which targeted men and boys, were ordered by military commander Ratko Mladić and carried out by units of the Bosnian Serb Army of

Republika Srpska. This war crime, the deadliest in Europe since the Second World War, killed more than eight thousand people.

The footnote panel includes still images from a video. One of the images shows an Orthodox priest blessing a member of the Scorpions, a Serbian paramilitary unit. Another shows the Scorpions lining up six Bosnian Muslim young men for execution. Following the Srebrenica massacre, human remains were scattered in secondary grave sites in an attempt to conceal the killings. The video, which confirmed the Scorpions' involvement in the massacre and was shown at the trial of former Serbian president Slobodan Milošević, "points to the importance of record, and the invisible violence in its gaps," Simon says.

In *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters I–XVIII*, empty portraits stand in for individual members of a bloodline who were unable to be photographed: for example, individuals in prison and women not allowed in front of the camera for religious reasons. In Chapter VII, however, absence is represented differently. Here, mothers are pictured alongside the mortal remains of their children, which the International Commission on Missing Persons identified by matching DNA with blood samples from family members. Photographs of tooth and bone samples recovered from mass graves mark the voids left by the victims.

The stories remain fragmented, suspended in the archive that is the artwork. Viewers scan for pattern and order within disorderly, chaotic webs of relations and coincidences. Connecting the past with the present, the future is evoked: empty portraits are painful reminders of people who have lost their lives or are denied autonomy—but they are also blank spaces waiting to be occupied by the unborn, the newly born, or the dispossessed who have (re)gained their independence. ¶

TREVOR PAGLEN: All That is Solid

Material Traces

Whereas Taryn Simon's photographs in *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters I–XVIII* are frequently populated and intimate, Trevor Paglen's images are typically photographed from a distance and unoccupied by human bodies. The human presence is instead evoked in the material traces of technology.

Paglen's focus on materials relates a prominent shift in critical thinking in recent years. With object-oriented ontology (OOO), new materialism, and post-humanist theory, attention is placed on matter and the repositioning of the human subject: "Materials themselves have stories embedded in them." Paglen elaborates, "Typically, we think about a photograph as an image, but we don't have to look at it that way: we can think about it as gelatin and silver nitrate that have been activated in certain kinds of ways or as paper that has been made out of trees. There is a whole different way that we can approach the question of what a photograph is."

The attentiveness to materials, the stuff that makes up the world, effectively moves focus away from the self: Paglen's work, although infused with criticality and a reflection

upon both his own position and the shortcomings of photography, does not contain overtly self-referential traces.

Digging Deep to Surface Information

In several ways, Paglen has moved photography beyond the ordinary photograph, pushing the medium into the twenty-first century. His refusal to settle for quick and easy solutions has led him to challenge the technological properties of the camera, to experiment across disciplines, and to enter into pioneering collaborations. In laborious projects, he demonstrates that photography is often more complicated than the click of a button.

His works are striking and political, visually direct and conceptually complex. Paglen photographically uncovers material manifestations linked to geopolitics, infrastructure, and mass surveillance and unveils worlds of technology and power that have deliberately been concealed. Rather than opting for meta-documentaries or quasi-historical accounts, he stresses the importance of research and collaboration, investigating with the help of natural scientists and human-rights activists: “Part of your job and responsibility as a professional artist is to be a part of the society and engage with society and take on the responsibilities that have been conferred to you as a result of the enormous amount of freedom that you are granted in being an artist.”

In the work, of which a part is shown in *Dear Truth*, the internet is in focus. On a mission to see and to show the ever-changing world, Paglen develops methods to unveil the classified, applying unconventional procedures and techniques informed by a range of scientific fields. His investigation into the material aspects of something as seemingly abstract as the internet and mass surveillance required him to learn how to scuba dive. On the seabed rest cables that transport ninety-eight percent of the world’s data across the globe. Paglen traced the locations of the underwater cables, and the photographs give us a glimpse of a sphere that is normally hidden. Above water, an image of a cliff in Cornwall, United Kingdom, shows the coastlines where the cables emerge; another depicts a group of islands outside Marseille, France. The views seem ordinary enough but are charged with unseen information.

Paglen’s photographs, that visually connect with landscape painting, expose the scenic landscapes in front of him, or indeed above or below him: he lures the viewer into seeing and reflecting upon the overlooked. In one part of the work on view, maritime maps provide the visual backdrop for additional layers of information. The juxtaposition of different materials facilitates the transmission of part of the broad research that underpins Paglen’s vast projects.

Contesting Authoritarian Truths

“I don’t really overuse the word documentary,” Paglen says. “There is still an idea within photography that photographs represent something about the world,” an idea which has given rise to some of the harshest criticism toward documentary photography. He continues, “Particularly within photography there is a long tradition of people wanting to

believe that photographs can tell the truth. I understand why people want that, but I don't think that it is true."

Despite insisting that "images are always inadequate,"³² Paglen's work transmits a belief in the photograph. Not a blind trust in the photograph as a representation of the world, but an encouraging expectation of the photograph's ability to show something important. Such a "distrustful trust" in photography is central to *Dear Truth*. It is about—albeit hesitantly—valuing photography as a medium capable of effectively drawing attention to urgent matters.

"I am not questioning truth in some kind of vulgar, postmodern, nothing-matters kind of way, but I am questioning the relationship between truth and authority. What sort of truths are claimed, and how, and who do those truths benefit at whose expense?" This line of enquiry is important to Paglen. When asked if there are any specific events in his past that are important to the work he does today, he does not, as one may expect, single out his PhD in Geography but instead points to a fundamental, innate questioning of authority. He states, "I am curious and I want to learn how to see the world around us. It's an endlessly interesting question: what is seen?"

The camera is a tool in this quest. In Paglen's photographs the unseen is made available for the audience to examine: "You're making art in response to the world, and I think that art is one of many means by which we can tell ourselves stories about who we are and about what the world looks like."

Paglen reflects upon the impression that an artwork may leave: "For me, it's just the way that I understand what the world looks like at different moments in history; how one makes sense of it is very much through art. When we make images, we create a kind of common sense—we change the common sense, in a way." ¶

Connecting the dots

Dear Truth forms a map of passageways. At the heart of the experimental documentary³³ trajectory that unfolds is ethics. Ethical considerations are evident in the artists' attention to the photographic medium's legacy and in their encounters with people in precarious situations—as well as in remaining aware of their own position in the process. Critical reflexivity emerges as an omnipresent guideline that signals attentiveness to how one's situated position impacts a situation. The ability to critically engage with and acknowledge personal influences on thoughts, actions, and material outcomes is a basis for these artists.

Rigorous research processes are in many cases undertaken for a specific project; in other instances the research entails years of study across different academic disciplines that inform the artistic practice. Engaging in collaborations yields new understanding that feeds into the works, but also serves to facilitate conversations and companionship. The complex artworks are underpinned with layers of information—facts that are not always

³² Trevor Paglen interviewed for the Deutsche Börse Photography Foundation Prize (2016).

³³ The notion of 'experimental documentary' was first introduced by filmmaker John Grierson in 1926 to map out an attitude towards the documentary where experimentality, theory and "a creative treatment of actuality" are central.

disclosed but are important for the accuracy of the work. The research foundation contributes to artistic works that are characterized by consideration and urgency.

Extensive procedures often precede the materialization of the artworks. There are, however, significant differences in the artistic processes depending on the material-specific qualities of the work. Whereas some artworks require the time-consuming method of going to places to encounter people and materials, the montage technique enables a more immediate engagement that traverses time and collapses geographic locations.

The artists attend to the presentation of their art-works with a carefulness that reveals a consideration of the audience: How to enable visitors to comprehend and engage with the works' subject matter is a recurring question.

The themes that the artists in *Dear Truth* work with are of public concern. Rather than primarily illuminating individual feelings—and instead of predominantly placing emphasis on philosophical questions or material-specific deliberations—their works address questions that are anchored in social realities. In some of the artworks, the intent and position of the artist is clear; in others the artist's motivation is more obscure. It may be based in curiosity, dismay, anger, or the desire to highlight a pressing issue; no matter the thematic content, active delimitation and a systematic approach are recurring traits.

None of the artists in the exhibition aim to represent reality; they all acknowledge that the idea of truth is contested. But the artworks advance matters of concern in contemporary society with an urgency that originates in facts and in real bodily and structural exploitation and violence. In a political moment in which prominent world leaders' disinclination to be truthful repeatedly catches attention, telling the truth is heralded as precious by those who put trust in scientific facts. Artworks are not analogous to scientific facts, but in *Dear Truth: Documentary Strategies in Contemporary Photography*, truth plays a leading part. Not as an absolute and unquestionable endpoint, but as an open-ended beginning and a possibility for social commitment.