

Evidentiary Realism

Paolo Cirio writes on the impulse and tendency of forensic, documentary, and investigative aesthetics. He discusses the term *Evidentiary Realism*, the context from which it emerges, and the tension between the social and the subjective in modern art history, which now can be identified with the decline of poststructuralist aesthetics and the return of realism.

“Naturally, in the struggle with falsehood we must write the truth, and this truth must not be a lofty and ambiguous generality [but] something practical, factual, undeniable, something to the point [...] taking away from these words their rotten, mystical implications”. Bertolt Brecht, *Writing the Truth, Five Difficulties*, 1935.

Realism is out of sight

The real is present and concrete, yet complexity, scale, speed, and opacity hide it from sight. The contemporary features of the social landscape are unintelligible at first glance. Although we see the shocking results of our social reality, we are nonetheless often unable to see the systems and processes that generate such conditions. Realism in art returns through intersecting documentary, forensic, and investigative practices that contemporary realist artists utilize to bring to light the unseeable beneath the formation of our society.

Realism traditionally portrays social oppression, visually illustrating people and situations truthfully and accurately. In the visual arts, it has primarily been expressed through figurative painting, photography, and film. Thus, realism today can be conceptualized as an expansion of ways of seeing and portraying contemporary social complexities, while maintaining the concern of presenting subject matter factually within the aesthetics of visual language. However, this particular realism looks beyond visible social conditions. *Evidentiary Realism* examines the underpinning economic, political, legal, linguistic, and cultural structures that impact society at large. These evolving social fields are highly interconnected and often too complex and high-speed to grasp—if not secret, imperceptible, opaque, or manipulated by advanced rhetorical devices. Reality today can only be fully apprehended by pointing at evidence from the language, programs, infrastructures, relations, data, and technology that power structures control, manipulate, and hide. This contemporary postvisual condition is introduced by Trevor Paglen, commenting on the work of Harun Farocki, “wars are being waged through systems that are simply postvisual, or more accurately, systems whose imaging capacities exceed those of human eyes to the point of being invisible to them.”¹

Since the late sixties, artists have responded to increasingly tangled socio-political and technological developments. Representations of the modern reality of systemic complexity were initially questioned by Jack Burnham and Hans Haacke, who argued, “easel art can no longer convey the subtleties and complexities of the international business world...If you make protest paintings you are likely to stay below the sophistication of the apparatus.”²

¹ Trevor Paglen, “Trevor Paglen on Harun Farocki,” *Artforum*, Feb 2015.
<https://www.artforum.com/passages/id=50135>

² Jack Burnham, *Recent Works: Hans Haacke*, exhibition catalog (Chicago: The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, 1979).
<http://www.renaissancesociety.org/exhibitions/296/hans-haacke-recent-works/>

Inherent limitations of objectivity and the representation of complex social issues were addressed by Martha Rosler as “inadequate descriptive systems”³ for addressing evidence of intentions and contexts of reception as disguising devices, which Roland Barthes initially discussed as the “overconstruction”⁴ of photography. These reflections brought to maturity the documentary category and, as Hal Foster noted recently, “this critique of the document is largely assimilated, and many artists have passed from a posture of deconstruction to one of reconstruction.”⁵ The tendency of evidentiary realist artists to show evidence is in effect about the impulse and urgency of reassembling fragments from our entangled and opaque reality and in doing so it reconciles with the original legacy of realism and documentary practices. As Rosalyn Deutsche noted, “today critical practices claiming the legacy of realism [...] explore the mediation of consciousness by representation and investigate the conditions of possibility of what is perceived to be ‘real’ at a given historical moment.”⁶

In turn, the epistemological critique of the document is integrated with an investigation of the factual aspects of the subject matter. *Evidentiary Realism* considers the contexts of the sociopolitical, technical, and cultural infrastructures of complex systems that influence the perception and validation of truth and reality in an explicit empiricism of epistemic inquiry. The real can be seen only by simultaneously accounting for the multiple infrastructural signals, referents, relations, and processes of the various parameters that produce reality. It’s with *Evidentiary Realism* that artistic research into systemic and structural apparatuses pushes the boundaries of what can be seen beyond sight.

Realism is enhanced

Beside the assimilation of epistemological examination, today realism in art is also enhanced by advancing technological and cognitive capability, which allows artists to capture, access, and process reality as never before. The technologies of detection and presentation provide easier, faster, and cheaper means to render, represent, and share relevant information. The relentless “technological turning point”⁷ in media and science introduces novel forms of evidence to be used and discussed, while “the current wave of interactive and telematic technologies [...] enables users to access previously inaccessible data about complex (and often hidden) social relationships.”⁸ Artists can investigate and decode complexity through a wide range of material and techniques, ranging from high-resolution photo cameras, scanners, and satellite images to data-mining, hacking, leaks, social media content, open source intelligence, and archival or instant news items. These materials can now be computed

³ Martha Rosler, *The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems*, 1974-1979.

⁴ Roland Barthes, “Shock-Photos,” 1969.

⁵ Hal Foster, “Real Fictions: Alternatives to Alternative Facts,” *Artforum*, April 2017. <https://www.artforum.com/inprint/issue=201704&id=67192>

⁶ Rosalyn Deutsche, *Hans Haacke*, October Files 18, MIT Press, 2015.

⁷ Thomas Keenan, Eyal Weizman; *Mengele's Skull: The Advent of a Forensic Aesthetics* (Berlin: Sternberg, 2012).

⁸ Edward A. Shanken, “Investigatory art: Real-time systems and network culture”; November 22, 2012.

on relational timelines and in databases correlated with geographic, architectural, biological, and financial data. Even the most complex black boxes are interrogated by counter black boxes programmed to illuminate the obscure artificial intelligence, high-frequency trading, and big data of our computational society. The asymmetry of the power of vision and knowledge is bound to be a pursuit of the technological field that will keep leveling itself.

The forums of presentation and legitimization have also expanded. Both evidence and artworks are shared over networks, and, in turn, are collectively discussed and verified. Citizen journalism, research, and criticism complement institutional and mainstream outlets in validating evidence-based work, while a broad audience acknowledges such evidence through a variety of distribution networks. As Eyal Weizman noted, “the protocols and languages of the forum will be reorganized around new aesthetic, material, and systemic demands. Forums are immanent, contingent, diffused, and networked; they appear, they expand and contract.”⁹

Quantifiable, computable, and shareable documentary forms provide a sense of amplified realism. An unseeable reality appears to us as sharper evidence once it is intercepted and decoded in all its complexity. Enhanced realism in documentary art can be conceptualized as “forensic information,” which here is broadly interpreted as in-depth analysis of media and content gathered from a variety of sources and techniques and combined with “forensics linguistics” to analyze modes of rhetoric, representation, and reception. Yet, the enhancement of realism in art goes beyond the use of tools, material, and knowledge available today. Realism can be archived only with independent studies and critiques of the social, economic, legal, and political contexts of institutional power. As Weizman stated, “forensics is forensics where there is no law, beyond State law.”¹⁰ The autonomy of the research is also inflected on the results of the works; “The outcomes of ‘investigatory art,’ like those of investigative journalism, have no legal authority but can act as an agent for change by creating public awareness that instigates action.”¹¹

Such politics of representation and presentation of evidence come into relation with the field of aesthetics. Giving significant artistic form to evidence is about articulating the intentions, outcomes, and contexts of the artworks; this is how evidentiary realist artists address the circumstances that produce their artworks—and truly enhance realism.

Realism of evidentiary aesthetics

Evidentiary works explore the aesthetics of secrecy, complexity, rhetoric, and the control of social, economic, and technological systems. The evidence is presented through a variety of artistic strategies: juxtapositions, ready-mades, reconstructions, abstractions, and compositions that reveal networks of relations, languages, operations, and infrastructures. Beyond the visual presentation, evidence is articulated with dialectical reflection and discourse

⁹ Eyal Weizman, *Forensic Architecture: Notes from Fields and Forums*, (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2012).

¹⁰ Eyal Weizman, “Forensics Is Forensics Where There Is No Law,” *MetaMute*, Dec 16, 2014. <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/forensics-forensics-where-there-no-law>

¹¹ Edward A. Shanken, op cit.

on the subject matter and its representation. Yet evidentiary artworks do not make use of slogans or refer to the artist's subjectivity—the evidence presented is meant to speak for itself.

The aesthetics of *Evidentiary Realism* is often “post-spectacular,” defined as “imagery characterized by its forensic look at the evidence of violence, which comes to stand in for what we don't see.”¹² The process of investigation, the nature of the material, and the sensibility of the artists eventually transform the evidence into highly aesthetic visual works. However, this aesthetization of evidence differs from traditional documentary art. It can instead synthesize complex systems and make them accessible, catalyzing responses from the audience, who otherwise would not sense the evidence emotionally and visually—similar to how Laura Poitras describes her projects which, “both create an aesthetic experience and reveal information that evokes an emotional response.”¹³ Composing aesthetic and stylistic forms from evidence prompts the viewer to intimately sense the emotive elements invoked by the artists.

With formal visual language and mediums, evidentiary realists intelligently engage with the formal qualities of the documentary tradition. As such, the artists are invested in how to convey evidence through abstraction, figuration, or commentary. Unseeable, fabricated, or bare evidence is portrayed within specific aesthetics, forms, and conceptual frameworks of visual art. For instance, “visual perspective and the spatial representation of complex systems”¹⁴ were implemented in diagrammatic drawings by Mark Lombardi as a rigorous aspect and technique of visual art. The formal mediums of photography, film, drawing, painting, and sculpture used in evidentiary artworks provide a captivating means to transform the material of the investigation into evidence. The materialization of the intellectual, emotive, and intuitive artistic process creates physical evidence akin to the notion of “real evidence” in the legal field. Such “material evidence” are objects brought to court to perform proof and where the aesthetics for sensing, mediating, narrating, and presenting evidence play a judicial role. Similarly, physical artifacts, compositions, and installations assembled by evidentiary realist artists are objects articulating proof in the form of artworks.

Investigative aesthetics is an interdisciplinary artistic practice characterized by research and field work in human rights, war crimes, ecocide, political collusions, legal, and financial inequalities. Artistic research looks at the fabric of associations and chains of actions between people, environments, events, and things. Interrogating, seeking, finding, connecting, and inquiring into leaked and discovered evidence fuels the artistic process of making evidentiary artworks, which are created from the artist's sensibility, curiosity, and intuition. The artists often unveil realities already fully present in the world, as open secrets, or “leaks” from systems that are too complex and large to be completely hidden and undecodable. However, the detectable evidence might be still at threshold of visibility or disguised by secrecy and complexity. In all these cases, evidentiary works present the unintelligibility of evidence, or the connections among decoded hints, or refined details available to expose their meaning. Evidentiary realists purposefully challenge the detectability of complex systems to illuminate and enhance what can't be seen at plain sight and qualify as evidence.

¹² Christy Lange, “The Limitations of Photojournalism and the Ethics of Artistic Representation,” *Frieze*, June 2010. <https://frieze.com/article/shooting-gallery>

¹³ Laura Poitras, *Laura Poitras: Astro Noise*, (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2016).

¹⁴ Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, *Mark Lombardi*, (dOCUMENTA (13) (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2013).

Despite its agenda to expose the concealed real, *Evidentiary Realism* is not necessarily political art in classical terms. Its social function is inscribed in its own right. It questions the fundamental politics of representation itself with profound philosophical questions on art-making and its audience, role, and use in society. *Evidentiary Realism* enhances the tradition of the historical realisms in art, with artworks becoming advanced learning tools to build in-depth social knowledge and inquiry.

Realism returns

The return of reality prevails in an advanced capitalist society that increasingly pushes the planet to extreme social crises. The shift in the perception of the real-world and impulse toward realism in art can be exemplified at a time when nobody dares to openly deny climate change philosophically and scientifically. This return of reality has already been marked in several social crises, provoking the popular demand for truth and social justice. The opposition to the Iraq War, Occupy Wall Street, Wikileaks, Edward Snowden, the Panama Papers, Climate March, Black Lives Matter, and the recent resistance to Donald J. Trump and Brexit are among only the most evident signs of an intensification in acknowledging critical social issues and in valuing the exposure of the truth.

In art, this time of crisis is reflected through the expansion of the aesthetics of social engagement, socio-critical and protest art, interventionism, institutional critique, and *Evidentiary Realism* outlined here. Through a historical perspective, we can notice that the return of realist aesthetics naturally reflects times of social and economic crises. In fact, realism in art can be traced back to France in the aftermath of the nineteenth century revolutions, which compelled artists to reject Romanticism for realist depictions of famine, labor, and political turmoil. After this initial wave of realism, Impressionism emerged and elevated the personal over the social. This pattern of waves of aesthetics oscillating between prioritizing social or subjective reality emerged and it cycled again during the economic recession of 1930s, the post-war period, and the social unrest of the sixties and the seventies. We can infer that we are now moving through a new wave of realism in art after the last decades of the twentieth century, which were characterized by pop art, nihilism, and postmodernism. It is with the beginning of the twenty-first century that the social sphere and its representations are again pushed to the forefront of social inquiry.

Rooted in the critique of globalization, neoliberalism, and ecological destruction, the return of reality and the impulse towards realism in art can be traced to the aftermath of September 11, 2001. As Julian Stallabrass also noted, “the reawakening of documentary has been a product of the over-reach of neoliberal power, particularly [...] the launching of controversial wars, starkly dividing the globe into allies and enemies, and the violating democratic principles, thrust documentary in a renewed prominence.”¹⁵ The collapse of the Twin Towers signalled the decline of subjectivism in postmodernist and poststructuralist philosophies that prevailed from the late seventies to the nineties. The duplicity of reality, which Jean Baudrillard

¹⁵ Julian Stallabrass, *Documentary*, Whitechapel: Documents of Contemporary Art, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013).

coincidentally identified in the Twin Towers,¹⁶ turned into a monolithic reality as a harsh response to the attacks. In this time of history, the postmodern relativity of the real is gradually losing discursive influence, while the urgency of economic, social, and ecological crises has become dramatically concrete. Even in the so-called post-factual era, truth seems to be manufactured in unsophisticated modes: blatant falsehoods seem to be lauded as power of denial of evident facts. In post-truth, reality is denied by opposing it with authoritarian voices, which ultimately responds to the popular fear of the return of reality.

While the manifestation and mystification of political rhetoric has renewed its violence in different forms over the centuries, it is the popular peril of false information propagating online that makes fact-checking a common activity for most people. Nevertheless, humanity is approaching a critical stage of global crisis with climate change, neglected war crimes, mass surveillance, civil rights, and the freedom of speech, bringing a new theoretical reevaluation of documentary art and the roles it plays within this social and political context. Similar to how the French Realists moved away from Romanticism, we now see the exhaustion of postmodernist relativism and its paradigm losing its representational relevance. At its apex, realist aesthetics may want to refuse subjectivity, ambiguity, allegory, and spectacle. Susan Sontag reminded us in 2002, "real wars are not metaphors."¹⁷ As such, *Evidentiary Realism* reckons with a framework for a profound portrayal of contemporary times.

¹⁶ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, (Los Angeles: Semiotext[e], 1983).

¹⁷ Susan Sontag, "Real Battles and Empty Metaphors," *New York Times*, September 10, 2002.