Six years ago, curator Jeff Kipnis observed that the documentary was a missed opportunity that garnered little attention within the art world. Today discussions and presentations of the documentary, either taken up directly or comprising a dominant genre within an exhibition, are everywhere: the "Berlin Documentary Forum I: New Practices across Disciplines" opened in early June, to be quickly followed by the Berlin and Bucharest Biennales, respectively “what is waiting out there” and "Handltag: On Producing Possibilities.” At the same time, Allan Sekula is exhibiting Polonia and Other Fables in Budapest until this September, and "The Storyteller," an exhibition curated by Claire Gilman and Margaret Sundell, will open this fall at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, after having toured to Salinas, Kansas, New York and Toronto. The exhibition features, among others, Jeremy Deller, Emanuel Licha, Omer Fast and Hito Steyerl (who in 2008 co-published, together with Maria Lind, the prescient The Greenroom, an anthology of essays that considers how the documentary has evolved over the past two decades). This fall, Allan Sekula will exhibit Polonia and Other Fables in Budapest and Hito Steyerl’s The Green Room, which documents how the documentary has evolved over the past two decades, will be published by Sternberg Press.

What these exhibitions and projects evidence, and what the publications no doubt argue, is that the documentary’s proclivity to be perceived as classic reportage—an immediate and accurate view in the heat of battle—and the myths embedded therein have been rigorously re-thought and re-framed over the past twenty years.

Despite such cogent rethinking, the documentary’s proliferation comes with a certain looseness of tongue, and even looser, more complex affiliations: as a recording, it is (mis)taken as witness and testimony, assumed to act as evidence. Such terms, generally attached to legal and scientific discourses, conflate the documentary with the document and documenting, confounding the artwork, which records and reveals, with evidence. But are they the same? Is the documentary, as an artistic form, evidence? If such conflations were perhaps implied at the Documentary Forum, they were pervasive and overt in the recent Berlin Biennale.

The Documentary Forum, an initiative of artistic director Hila Peleg, explored the documentary’s historical and contemporary form, while re-thinking the documentary format of the exhibition itself. A six-day program at Berlin’s Haus der Kulturen der Welt presented a curated program of talks, discussions, screenings, performances and installations grouped into six different themes: Rules of Evidence; Missing Image; Catastrophe; Authorship, Authority, and Authenticity; Documentary Moments; and Blind Spots. The program featured a wish list of contemporary practitioners, scholars, cultural theorists and historians: Catherine

words by TINA DICARLO & KHADIJA CARROLL LA

Despite such cogent rethinking, the documentary’s proliferation comes with a certain looseness of tongue, and even looser, more complex affiliations: as a recording, it is (mis)taken as witness and testimony, assumed to act as evidence. Such terms, generally attached to legal and scientific discourses, conflate the documentary with the document and documenting, confounding the artwork, which records and reveals, with evidence. But are they the same? Is the documentary, as an artistic form, evidence? If such conflations were perhaps implied at the Documentary Forum, they were pervasive and overt in the recent Berlin Biennale.

The Documentary Forum, an initiative of artistic director Hila Peleg, explored the documentary’s historical and contemporary form, while re-thinking the documentary format of the exhibition itself. A six-day program at Berlin’s Haus der Kulturen der Welt presented a curated program of talks, discussions, screenings, performances and installations grouped into six different themes: Rules of Evidence; Missing Image; Catastrophe; Authorship, Authority, and Authenticity; Documentary Moments; and Blind Spots. The program featured a wish list of contemporary practitioners, scholars, cultural theorists and historians: Catherine
David, who gave the keynote address, Eyal Sivan, Ariella Azoulay, Okwui Enwezor, Tony Cokes, Wael Sadek, Thomas Keenan, Chris Marker, Steyerl, and Fast, to name but a few. The forum was impressively comprehensive in its exploration—de-bunking, parodying, re-framing and self-consciously exposing the complex facets of documentary practice, the instability of the truth claim, the guilty accomplice of the camera and the missing frame, and the image as a co-constituted construction, both produced and productive of certain truths. Of particular note was the “Rules of Evidence” section, an installation of works and a panel discussion of artists organized by Enwezor, the objective of which was to put routines of the visual in remand in exchange for other strategies.

Alternatively, “what is waiting out there,” the 6th Berlin Biennale thrust the extreme realism of the external world to the fore, relying on the documentary form to reinforce its thesis. Documentary video and photography occupied a large percentage of the Biennale, and included works by Mark Boulos, Renzo Martens, Armando Lulaj, Minerva Cuevas, Olga Chernysheva, Mohamed Bourouissa, Michael Schmidt, Nir Evron, Ferhat Örgü, Phil Collins, George Kuchar, Margaret Salmon, John Smith, Marie Voignier, Anna Witt, Bernard Bazile, Ari M Nagar and Ratu Sela & Mayyan Amir, which represented abuses of power and violence everywhere from Africa to Gaza, and Mexico to Albania. Documentary reportage was mistrusted and parodied by artists such as Marie Voignier, whose video of the media frenzy around Josef Fritzl’s trial—which was closed to the cameras—shows how the news constructs a report of the story.

As a whole, the array of documents stands as evidence of the artists as non-complicit witnesses to inhumane treatment, however this position of resistance acted out for the camera is not transferred to the art audience. Rather, in a case like Voignier’s contribution, the documentary becomes a self-referential meta-medium for the artist’s practice. It is thus perhaps pertinent that in conversation, the documentarian Mark Boulos complained about what he perceives to be an a-historical and naïve appropriation of his medium by the contemporary art scene. We watch, for example, children suffering from malnutrition in the making of world-vision-style television campaigns in Renzo Martens’s 88-minute Episode 3: Enjoy Poverty (2009) as inept, almost complicit bystanders.

Under these auspices, even within such responsible and artistically strong programs as Enwezor’s, agency is thought to be implicit in the documentary’s ability to reveal and make known. Although the artist may expose, even undermine the medium itself to reveal the documentary’s limitations, implicit in these works is what Thomas Keenan calls the “Mobilization of Shame”: the assumption that to see is to witness, and if one witnesses, then the documentary—given its ability to make known, expose and to appeal to one’s reason—will shame one into acting. Keenan’s point is a strong one, compelling us to examine what is generally conflated, collapsed and perhaps lazily rolled into the term “documentary”: that to evidence, to witness, to document, to testify—what Renzo Martens calls an “Action Art Project” or perhaps what Felix Vogel terms “Producing Possibilities”—all allude to different nuances of the medium and different levels of agency, and are therefore engaged in some-
what different projects. Indeed, one may need to document evidence; evidence may appear in the form of a document, or the document might record information that is evidentiary—but the three possibilities are not necessarily equivalent, nor do they possess the same forms of agency. Possibility isn’t necessarily agent, nor is the artwork. And perhaps the artwork, eager as they are to be agent or politically engaged, are still and rightly so, relics of a Kantian discourse in which action lies in knowledge and reason.

Evidence, as Kressen argues, “is what we see, what is exposed or obvious to the eye... It exists against the backdrop of a contagion and proliferation in the field of the visible and evidential and takes us toward the techniques and regimes of vision.” Contrary to what was implied in Einstein’s panel, evidence is engaged in rulings—as opposed to rules of the game, those applicable and capable of being suspended in the playing field. It makes legible and legislatively inscribed, actively involved in the production of space through a forum outside of art’s own autonomous one, be it the legal court or an impromptu gathering on the banks of the Amazon.

Recently, Eyal Weizman, along with several peers at Goldsmiths, including Lawrence Abu Hamdan, Ayeshah Hamed, Charles Heller, Emanuel Licha and Paulo Tavares, has been exploring what he terms “forensics architecture.” Forensics, from the Latin source meaning “the science, art, or practice of investigating, and is legislatively inscribed, actively involved in the production of space through a forum

Footnotes

Authors
Tina DiCarlo is a writer and curator living in London and Berlin. From 2004-07 she was a curator of contemporary architecture and design at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. In addition to curating exhibitions, she is a contributing editor of LOG: Observations on Contemporary Architecture and the City. Tina DiCarlo holds a master’s degree in architecture from Harvard Graduate School of Design, as well as advanced degrees in philosophy and art history from the Courtauld Institute, London. She is currently a Ph.D candidate at Goldsmiths, University of London.

Krisna CABRILLI is an Australian-American writer based in Berlin. She makes books of poetry, photo-essays, art history, theory, and fiction. The author of Orphic’s Contemporary Art from Colonial History, she also works as a consultant and is the co-founder of the design studio 109 www.109designstudio.com. Krisna earned a B.A. from Harvard University and a master’s in architecture at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, artist in residence at Fondation Berlin, and recipient of the 2010 ViaWeste Vereinigungsstiftung a der posen exhibition museum.