



BETWEEN AND ACROSS

TEXT / JULIAN MYERS-SZUPINSKA

How is it that the best journal of the 1990s has been more or less forgotten? Maybe trace it to the name, *Documents*, borrowed from the surrealist journal established by Georges Bataille in 1929, a moniker as deadpan and nondescript as could be. Or blame our current regime of digital searchability: enter the title into whichever search engine and find too much or too little. Or accuse the limited imagination of academic distributors and libraries, for whom the editorial remit of the magazine, organized, as the first issue's editorial statement evinces, "between and across" disciplines in the vicinity of art, was simply too curious and capacious to be accommodated easily into one category or another. Or, finally, chalk it up to the 90s themselves, a decade whose recentness and weird sprawl still make it an awkward subject of historical memory.

Never mind: page through its 23 issues, published between 1992 and 2004, and find a version of that decade worth remembering—one adja-

cent to, but distinct from, the histories of the period crystalizing today, of the rise of biennial culture, the articulation of relational aesthetics, of the *informe*, and the YBAs. Many now understand the debates around postmodernism in the 1970s and 80s as a dolorous and hopelessly convoluted dead end, one we'd be better off forgetting; by contrast *Documents* saw them as an essential point of departure, enabling new conversations among disciplines and irreverent new styles of critical writing drawn from previously "marginal domains" like queer activism and punk subculture.¹ In the pages of *Documents* an artist might write about New York, or terrorism, or privacy; an art historian might write about boxing, or rap, or respond to a survey on taste by holding forth on the intimacies of medical exams or the joys of cunnilingus.

I encountered *Documents* first in the form of conversations held in seminar rooms at Cornell University, among a group whose outlines came

into focus only over time: art history graduate students who had, for the most part, passed through the Whitney Independent Study Program in New York City, and who had arrived at the university through the presence of Hal Foster, director of the program's Critical and Curatorial Studies sections from 1987 to 1991. I was an undergraduate student at the time (1992), and had, fortuitously if naïvely, asked Foster to advise an independent major in art theory after taking his lecture on high and low culture—which course, and it can only be said this way, had completely blown my teenage mind. In turn, Foster invited this stammering teenager into graduate seminars whose intensity was both a thrill and a shock. These discussions had premises that I took as nature at the time: that art, critical theory, and psychoanalysis were complementary ways of considering and commenting on life, and that they belonged together in thought and writing; that art's primary task was

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to be critical of itself (aesthetically), and of the world at large (politically); and that art—and by extension, our reasoning out of art’s accomplishments and contradictions—was the most important thing in the world. That artists and exhibitions did not “reflect” theory but *produced* it.

Foster had assembled this cohort, but it was the group itself—which included *Documents* editor Helen Molesworth as well as others (Frazer Ward, Charles Reeve) who would come to contribute to the journal—who carried out these ideas in the texture of their thinking and writing. And so when Molesworth handed me a copy of the magazine’s first double issue (*Documents* 1/2, 1992) I recognized it as an artifact of this social world: Molesworth’s fellow editors, Christopher Hoover, Miwon Kwon, James Marcovitz, and Margaret Sundell, each of whom had passed through the Whitney Program, as had Mark Dion, Claire Pentecost, Pamela Lee, and others. But the roster of contributors, it became clear upon reading, was hardly limited to this New York City milieu or to the context of art: here was a poem by Eileen Myles, and a review of a conference on zines by one J. Church (a pseudonymous Greta Snider, San Francisco filmmaker and the author of the zine *Mudflap*); and then, multiple reviews of Richard and Myriam Weisang Misrach’s project of documenting and photographing the Nevada bombing range *Bravo 20*.² Artists and filmmakers wrote, critically and theoretically, alongside critics and historians, without the grotesqueries of a division of labor or academic legitimation; Pentecost responded to *Bravo 20* not with a review but a piece of fiction.

Free of much (evident) oedipal anxiety or grad-student piety, the editors nevertheless positioned *Documents* self-consciously as a “third term” between *Artforum*’s “hype” and the academic conventions and legitimacy of *October*, joining a counter-history of “little magazines” such as *Wedge* (a journal of art and politics by Brian Wallis and Phil Mariani) and the feminist art journal *Heresies* (founded by a collective that included Harmony Hammond, Lucy Lippard, and May Stevens, among others).³ It wasn’t the easiest territory to hold: *Artforum*, whatever its value, had its base in the art market; *October*’s locus was (at least by the early 1990s) the university. By

contrast *Documents* was grounded in a more purely social and discursive world, without the fuel of commerce or the buttress of institutions—and if this extra-institutional state of being made its editorial format more improvisatory and free, its public, and financial, life was accordingly rather more precarious. Initially imagined as a quarterly, the magazine came out less frequently; and despite all efforts, it could sometimes be difficult to find issues if one was not handed them in person. My own stack of issues misses several of its run—but this might be as much due to distraction and transience in my own life as difficulties with the journal’s distribution.

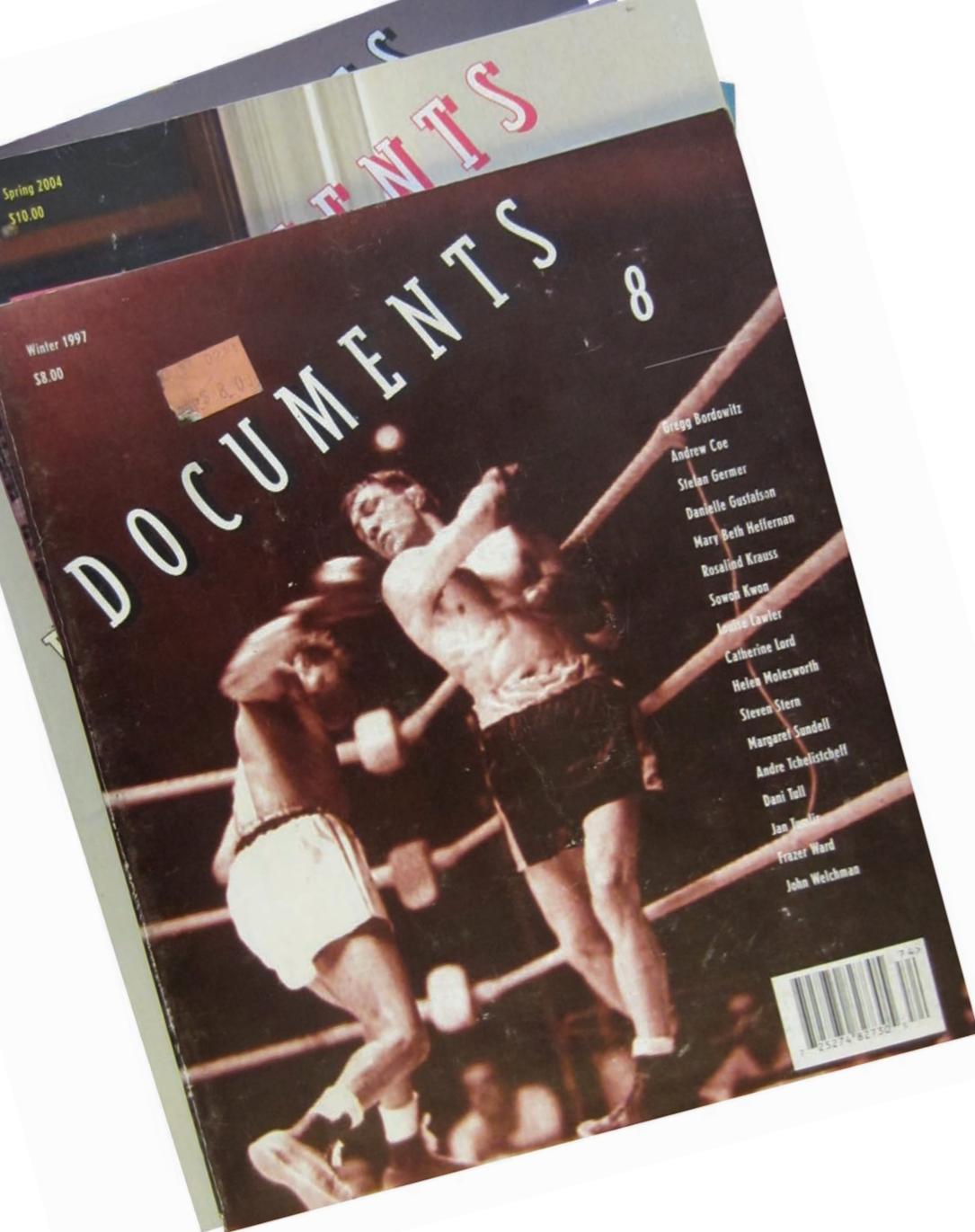
Interdisciplinarity, then and now, has a vaporous currency in professional and academic discourse. It promises the overcoming of hermetic disciplinary expertise and jargon, and, through an abstracted metaphor (cross-pollination?), the production of new ideas; as often, in academia and “creative industries” alike, it results in a cozy, vague eclecticism without rigor or critical traction. Not so with *Documents*, whose interdisciplinarity took a more combative, postmodernist tone, posing “a fundamental threat to the very existence of discrete areas of knowledge” and “an implicit demand for rethinking the very process of producing knowledge.”⁴

What did this principle demand in practice? Though hardly absent of academic-style essays or reviews, the magazine evolved a set of formats proper to the journal’s origins in a social world—the questionnaire, the interview, the roundtable—and populated them on Kwon’s principle of *crossing*.⁵ This crossing might be staged at the level of the interview or discussion—artist Jimmie Durham in conversation with rogue anthropologist Michael Taussig, for example—or in the assembly of respondents—critics, artists, historians—on such subjects as boredom, terrorism, taste, habits, and privacy. Crossing might be staged at the editorial level itself; in the wake of the first Gulf War, the first issue contained a suite of essays (written and imagistic) working through the geographies and technology of warfare; issue six assembled an essay on AIDS education by psychologist Walter Odets, artist projects by Zoe Leonard and Tom Burr, and multiple reviews of Judith Butler’s *Bodies That Matter*.

(Such techniques were hardly foreign to popular culture magazines, and of course *Documents* did not invent any of them as such; *Discussions in Contemporary Culture*, edited by Hal Foster, would have presented the journal with another important model. What was unique about *Documents* was just how central and programmatic such formats were to its activity; one can probably trace a direct line of influence from *Documents*’ example to the increased frequency post-2000 of roundtables and questionnaires in *October* and *Artforum*, among other examples.)

Along similar lines, *Documents* often commissioned multiple reviews of the same book or exhibition, rejecting the idea that there might be any one “correct” position on their subject. Molesworth credits this strategy to the editors’ reading of postmodern criticism (Rosalind Krauss, Homi Bhabha, Roland Barthes) during the rise of queer theory and postcolonial studies, and to Foster, who argued that “any argument with only two sides is not worth having.”⁶ What was most startling about the journal, though, was its *voice*, which emerged equally from other matrices: the negations of American punk culture, the force of queer activism and ACT UP, and the formal and political radicalism of feminist writing. Distinct from other venues, this writing embraced the informal, the fragmentary, the fictional, the negative, and the personal *alongside* more formal or theoretical academic styles—demanding of those forms no less rigor than their legitimated counterparts. Their approach is to be held apart from most contemporary writing in whatever context, in which the informal and virulent are hived into the unincorporated outskirts of the Internet, while “legitimate” discourse tends toward a neutered and often unreadable language of publicity and promotion.

This last point is key. In my teaching I sometimes refer to “language not meant to be read”—which expansive category encompasses everything from *e-flux* press releases to the garbled contents of the contemporary academic and para-academic book markets, organs whose attention to high design over competent editing emphasizes sign-value and point-of-purchase transaction over ideas. I have in mind (to give a few examples) Markus Miessen’s *The Nightmare*



of *Participation* or the English translation of Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics*—these are trophies, not books. Or, to draw an example from *Documents*, the doorstep *S, M, L, XL* by O.M.A., Rem Koolhaas, and Bruce Mau, hilariously assessed in reviews by Denis Hollier, John Lindell, and Marlene McCarty.⁷ *Documents* was meant to be read. For all its emphasis on writerly experimentation and theoretical acuity, *Documents'* primary voice, achieved through close editing, was lucid—a distinctly American voice absent the opacity and theoretical curlicues endemic to other postmodernist prose of its moment. Disciplinary expertise, art historical or otherwise, was to be brought to bear *democratically*.

Some passages from the journal will help give these assertions their necessary weight—though even if I limit myself to the essays, it is difficult to choose. Kwon writing about Mierle Laderman Ukeles, deftly turning the heroic history of institutional critique on its head; Catherine Lord's "Looking Like a Lesbian," on Yvonne Rainer's films; the drifting travelogues of Gregg Bordowitz, whose remarkable column "New York Was Yesterday" introduced most of the magazine's issues; Eileen Myles (or Hal Foster, or Gregg Araki) writing about boredom; Richard Meyer's "At Home in Marginal Domains"? Let my two selections stand in, inadequately, for the rest. Here is Frazer Ward, historian of conceptual and

performance art, working through his experience in the boxing ring:

[L]ike the incomparable Sugar Ray Robinson, "I ain't never liked violence." Boxing may be violent, on some objective plane. For me, though—perhaps because of boxing—violence suggests a loss of control that is at odds with what it feels like to box. From the inside of the ring, boxing is an effort, sometimes a desperate one, to control yourself, and by extension your opponent. It always amused me a little that the great middleweight champion Marvelous Marvin Hagler should have said, "When I see blood, I become a bull." Bulls charge: Hagler, often a more technical fighter than his reputation suggested, picked his shots.⁸

The pleasure is in the way Ward jettisons, without fanfare or self-congratulation, the notion of an art historian's proper territory—as writers in *Documents* did constantly, as a matter of course. He does so with none of the monkey-wearing-pants hubris of the philosopher on safari (Jacques Rancière writing about exhibitions ...), but instead directs his intelligence from one disciplinary field to *something else* he knows well (physically, experientially, intellectually).⁹ I love how he quotes Marvin Hagler, unaffectedly, and the kindness of his insistence on the boxer's intelligence: Bulls charge—not Hagler.

And now, Molesworth: from an essay, "Why Is the Sky Blue," that I have returned to constantly over the last decade. She is weighing the (ongoing) crisis of critical writing in the absence of a viable public sphere. The essay might be understood as statement of intent for *Documents* as a whole:

What is to be done? A lot and not much. I think we live in a period in which the Big Questions are not so productive. I think we live in an era of the small gesture. In the Jewish faith people are supposed to make a mitzvah every day. A mitzvah is a good deed, for in Judaism the task of faith is to make the world we live in a better place, not to put all our effort toward an afterlife. In some senses I feel that criticism, art making, writing, and teaching are like mitzvahs. In a culture that actively promotes stupidity, to express a thought, to contribute to intellectual dialogue, is itself a form of struggle against the status quo. But to allow that we might "contribute to intellectual dialogue" is in some way to posit a public sphere that earlier I said doesn't really exist. Contradiction. The traditional public sphere doesn't exist, neither does the role of

public intellectual. So, we have to recognize, on the one hand, that when we write or make art, we do so in micro-communities, at best. On the other hand, we have to recognize that our little communities are part of the culture, that they overlap with each other, and that our friends sometimes talk to people we don't know.¹⁰

It is a great passage from a great essay. In the folds, drifts, and pivots of her writing, we observe a vulnerable, active process of thought, carefully preserved in the edit. And if Molesworth's "micro-communities" are recognizably of our present, her style is distinct from it. This writing has none of the "word salad" effect that often results from word processing software, whose editorial functions (and multiple editors) carve up this flow.¹¹ Its quality is increasingly rare.

The journal changed over its 12 years. Editors Hoover and Marcovitz (who had not gone to graduate school in art history) moved on to other things after the first several issues; the scale and ambitions of the thematic surveys faded somewhat in the second half of its run. By 2000, *Documents* had become more discernibly a publication dedicated primarily to art criticism and history. And as Kwon, Molesworth, and Sundell finished their doctorates and got professional jobs, the editors were scattered geographically and personally. "Born at a bar from a group of friends," as Molesworth puts it,¹² *Documents* after their dispersal was left without its social basis. In an inexorable way, professional life eroded the time that could be devoted to the journal: "The discussion, exchange and work that had happened just naturally, because of proximity, could not happen anymore."¹³

Desperate for the magazine to sustain itself, Kwon assumed sole editorship around 2001—an alienating move for Molesworth—before finally choosing to end the project in 2004. The contents of the final issue were trenchantly self-critical. The centerpiece of the issue is a wrenching interview with artist Andrea Fraser assessing, among other things, the real peril of maintaining a position outside of institutions: One risks one's life's work being forgotten. "We wanted to end without institutionalization," Kwon later told *Fillip*, "so we are going to end with the potential of being lost."¹⁴

Lost, maybe: One of the strange things about certain corners of 1990s subculture (for me,

hardcore punk and feminism) was their ferocious antipathy toward mediation, and by extension, to becoming an object of history. We grew up bathed in the noxious glow of baby boomer nostalgia, reunion tours, and a warmed-over 1960s: an earlier moment of what music critic Simon Reynolds has diagnosed as "retromania."¹⁵ From this perspective, to become historical was to become reified, removed from the field, drained of venom and life, or, even worse, to be transformed into a sign-value, to be exchanged as capital. One's work leaves one's hands for good and enters into public life on terms one can hardly set for oneself. I've certainly held this view, and I think it may inform a certain queasiness Kwon and Molesworth have both evinced in the project of remembering *Documents*.

Ultimately, though, our misgivings flatten out the project of history, which is only in its worst moments a recuperation or embalming of the past. The project of remembering *Documents* might be instead to address ourselves what was unruly, contentious, and difficult about its moment—to attend to what it said, as well as what it could not say, or imagine. And above all, to think of history not as a registration or interpretation of the past, but, following *Documents'* own precepts, as a social form of production.

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NOTES

1. The phrase is originally from Walter Benjamin's 1933 essay "Rigorous Study of Art," translated by Thomas Levin in *October 47* (Winter 1988), 89: "The hallmark of the new type of researcher is not the eye for the 'all encompassing whole' nor the eye for the 'comprehensive context' (which mediocrity has claimed for itself) but rather the capacity to be at home in marginal domains." Richard Meyer borrowed Benjamin's phrase for the title of his essay "At Home in Marginal Domains," *Documents 18* (2000), 19–32.
2. Richard and Myriam Weisang Misrach, *Bravo 20: The Bombing of the American West* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990).
3. Helen Molesworth and Miwon Kwon, interviewed by Amy Zion, "Documents Magazine, 1992–2004," *Fillip 17* (Fall 2012), 122.
4. *Documents 1*, no. 1/2 (Fall-Winter 1992): 1. Molesworth reflects on this premise in her interview with *Fillip*: "Documents set out to model interdisciplinarity But instead of saying it, we tried to do it. Sometimes I think that is why we 'failed.' Had we stated explicitly that this is what we were doing, instead of just modeling it, perhaps it would have looked less naturalized; it would have registered as a mode of working, as a theoretical paradigm." *Fillip*, 118.
5. Kwon, *Fillip*, 107.
6. *Fillip*, 122.
7. *Documents 7* (Fall 1996), 33–45.
8. Frazer Ward, "The Taste for Blood," *Documents 8* (Winter 1997), 37.
9. I have sometimes named this gesture, of art historians directing their attention elsewhere, as "para-art history," trying to account for my own writing about crowd dynamics at rock concerts, or collaborative projects with artists—each shaped by my own disciplinary knowledge and position. *Documents* needed no such clumsy terminology. It was just what the publication did. Perhaps our moment is more circumscribed, confined, than theirs was.
10. Helen Molesworth, "Why is the Sky Blue and Other Questions Regarding Writing," *Documents 7* (Fall 1996), 19.
11. Perhaps it cropped up again, briefly, in the golden age of blogs, 2000–2003 or so, before the blurts and slogans of Twitter won out.
12. *Fillip*, 119, 111.
13. *Fillip*, 111.
14. *Fillip*, 113.
15. Simon Reynolds, *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past* (Faber & Faber, 2011).