

**Anne Bénichou (editor), *Ouvrir le document : Enjeux et pratiques de la documentation dans les arts visuels contemporains*, Dijon : Les Presses du réel, 2010**

Felicity Tayler

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## Anne Bénichou (editor)

### Ouvrir le document : Enjeux et pratiques de la documentation dans les arts visuels contemporains

Dijon : Les Presses du réel, 2010

The title of this volume, which translates as “Open the document,” is an imperative: it urges you to unfold the cover, printed in solid gold ink, of a perfect-bound paperback. This materiality suggests that the contents are both precious and brilliant, and that there is urgency in its message. In large part an anthology of papers presented at a university conference on cultural heritage, the book exerts a pressure that arises from anxieties in the museological world around the preservation and display of time-based artistic practices of the late twentieth century. The book also makes a deft analogy between the ephemerality of live events and the variable media of computational arts.

Volume editor Anne Bénichou has written extensively on the intersection among artists, documentary traces, and collecting institutions. The texts that she has gathered here are an insightful mix of essays and interviews with artists by scholars, curators, conservators, and other professionals in the field of contemporary art in Canada, the United States, and France. These voices are divided thematically into four sections, each with a clear editorial introduction. Roughly translated, the section titles are “Between Documentation and Creation,” “Mediations,” “Recounting Art Histories,” and “Scripts For the Work.”

In her general introduction, Bénichou argues that as artists moved away from the production of art objects into a conceptual realm, the ephemeral nature of practices such as land art, happenings, and performance caused artists and institutions to systematically document their work. This documentation (textual or photographic) acts as a trace and assures the process of historicization. To avoid the effects of teleology, it is helpful to remember that these essays are written from the point of

view of those devoted to long-term public access to cultural heritage. The analysis is concerned with how the artist’s act of self-archiving affects access to artistic practices as shared history. From this perspective, the pragmatism of methodological rigour is coupled with an affectionate suspicion of the artist as unreliable narrator.

In the first section, “Between Documentation and Creation,” Anne Moeglin-Delcroix captures this paradox in her discussion of artists’ books that have a hybrid function as work of art and record of an event. She gives as one example Ed Ruscha’s *Royal Road Test* (1967), a book that is both primary information as an autonomous work of art and secondary information as the photographic record of the act of throwing a typewriter from a rapidly moving car. Are these images a constructed fiction or photographic evidence? This slipperiness is compounded when Moeglin-Delcroix suggests that it could be a parody of Allan Kaprow’s photographic documentation of happenings. In an essay in the same section, Judith Rodenbeck presents the contradictory nature of Kaprow’s photographs, which, due to the impossibility of capturing multidimensional choreography in the camera frame, became an aesthetic act in themselves. The camera became an actor in the happening as participants changed their behaviour, self-conscious of their mediation. The subject of the photographs was no longer the happening, but became an allegory calling into question the conditions of photographic reproduction in the late 1960s. In these and other examples, we are shown how an apparently trustworthy source of information undermines itself.

“Recounting Art Histories” goes beyond the ambiguity of the photographic image to ask what happens when artists produce their own critical and historical discourses.

Bertrand Clavez presents an engaging bibliographic history of Fluxus, a loosely affiliated group of artists notoriously difficult to classify or represent. Clavez discusses publishing as a strategy used by George Maciunas, Dick Higgins, and others, such as George Brecht, Emmett Williams, and Wolf Vostell. Maciunas’s inscription of Fluxus into art history and Higgins’s project of theoretical elaboration on *Intermedia* reveal a source of concern for the historian who wishes to “pierce the defences” of this network. Vincent Bonin presents Andy Warhol’s *Time Capsules*, to show how the 600 boxes of detritus removed daily from the artist’s desk now serve as cipher to archivists and curators. Grafted onto the artist’s personal archives, the capsules are used as adjuncts to biographical or thematic narratives of museum display. Bonin argues that they have an aesthetic value as part of Warhol’s art practice. Like the challenge that Warhol threw at most high principles of modernism, the *Time Capsules* transform conceits of administrative order through a propositional logic that captures the random activity of the everyday.

“Mediations” addresses the presence and absence of documents in the history of exhibition practices of the modernist “white cube.” It is also in this section of the book that the analogy between the ephemerality of time-based practices of the 1960s and variable media of the 1990s is drawn. Marie-Josée Jean presents the integral nature of textual and photographic documentation to the practice of the artists of N.E. Thing Co. The document as “information” made visible otherwise imperceptible actions or ideas. This strategy established the value of their judgment as artists, but also their legitimacy as a small business. In 1969, these functions were combined at the National Gallery of Canada, when their exhibition design (in the form of company divisions) was itself a process of documentation that revealed the inner workings of the company-as-aesthetic-service-provider. Following the theories of Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, Jean presents N.E. Thing Co. as prescient of neo-liberal entrepreneurial business models in the knowledge economy. In his essay, Bertrand Gauguet picks up the preoccupation with conditions of the knowledge economy in relation to the net.art of the 1990s. “Information” as representation in the 1960s (language captured in the physical form of photograph or textual record) can be likened to “information” as data processed or stored in the computational networks of the 1990s. In Gauguet’s view, all information published online becomes a “document.” This unit

becomes the pivotal object of value in a virtual economy based on service provision, with complex ties to questions of intellectual property, access, and technical obsolescence, especially in the case of cultural heritage. *Rhisome.org* is an example given of a service created by artists in the late 1990s to preserve net.art at a moment when the art market and institutions such as museums took an interest in these practices.

“Scripts For the Work” addresses museum documentation practices for preservation and presentation of works that have variable forms; thinking back to the book’s title, we are reminded that the phrase “Open the document” is a metaphor that we use to describe the action of creating a new record in software applications. Texts by Francine Couture and Richard Gagnier, Alain Depocas, and Nathalie Leleu consider the supplementary file of notations that accompany the work in museum collections, assuring provenance and fidelity to the artists’ aesthetic intentions. This reflection on museological practices could be read alongside the correlative terminology between new media and art history proposed by Steve Dietz and Sarah Cook in *Rethinking Curating: Art After New Media*.

*Ouvrir le document* is appropriately text-heavy. The serif typography is classic and easy on the eyes, and colour illustrations are included with each essay. The book also includes a substantial bibliography and an index. Other contributions include Suzanne Paquet on Robert Smithson, Anne-Marie St-Jean Aubre interviews Tomas Corriveau, Anne Bénichou interviews Ming Tiampo about the Japanese magazine *Gutai*, and Véronique Rodriguez on Steina Vasulka. The release of *Ouvrir le document*, in 2010, preceded the mediatized spectacle of Marina Abramovic’s retrospective at the MoMA. Nonetheless, the essays are timely and provide useful models for the study of what Amelia Jones describes as a paradox of “proving our own inexorable mortality: the fact that we are always reaching to secure time, and always failing.”

In her research, writing, and art practice, **Felicity Tayler** explores visual art as a means of information exchange and the function of artist-initiated publishing as a communications circuit. Recent projects include an exhibition for the National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives. [www.atthetime.ca](http://www.atthetime.ca)