

Spaces of engagement – critical aesthetic practice, audience experience and the documentary-like work

From early poetic and expository forms through to current television and online formats, we can see that experiential strategies have always been part of what documentary does. Aesthetic choices are fundamental to how factual content establishes its credentials and addresses its audience.

This paper focuses on the overlap between documentary and video art practice to explore the rhetorical possibilities of aesthetic experience. Applying the malleability of approach witnessed within artistic contexts to documentary practice holds the promise of encouraging greater diversity in the stories that are told, how they are told and how they might be heard. Through examination of the two-channel video installation, *Disorient* by Fiona Tan, the paper analyses how aesthetic choices operate as elements of a rhetorical strategy where the work is realised as an experience in itself, existing in the space of encounter between art object and spectator.

I argue that the critical aesthetic practice evident in *Disorient* produces a circumstance where the audience encounters the rhetorical movements as much through the direct experience of the work as they do through puzzling over the indexical references that Tan raises and combines. As a two channel video projection that is at a one step remove from the form of cinematic documentary, *Disorient* is instructive in what may be possible when these strategies are applied to an artistically inclined expanded documentary practice.

Keywords: documentary; critical aesthetic practice; audience; experience; art; Fiona Tan; moving image art; video art

Introduction

In 2014, director of the Sundance Documentary Film Program (SDFP), Tabitha Jackson, summed up the key motivation underlying the work of the SDFP as the belief that ‘art changes the way we reach people’ (2014). Jackson was advocating for documentary makers to have the opportunity to deeply consider not just what they say but how they say it as part of a strategy to build on the SDFP’s foundations of human rights advocacy and social justice. It is a strategy that encourages experimentation during the creative process where discovery is valued over predetermined outcomes. The intention is to support and promote ‘the intrinsic value of documentary as much as its instrumental value’ (Jackson 2014). In this conceptualising of documentary practice, artfulness is tied to the diversity and distinctiveness of stories that can be told, the kinds of telling that can occur and the spaces of engagement that might be created. This focus enables makers to embrace the particularities and affordances of mediums and exhibition modes with a goal to expand conversations and thinking around a range of key documentary issues.

In this paper I explore how art practices and contexts can change the way documentary reaches people. This exploration is done from a practice-based perspective, analysing the effect of creative decisions and investigating how the example documentary-like artwork, *Disorient* by Fiona Tan, engages the viewer through content, aesthetic approach and aesthetic experience. Using a concept of critical aesthetic practice, this paper examines how the logics, techniques and creative processes applied to gallery-based artist moving image are mobilised in a rhetorical strategy that conceives of documentary-like artworks as aesthetic experiences. By framing this as a critical aesthetic practice, the intention is to consider how the qualities of the aesthetic experience can work with the overall aims of a documentary argument.

I use the concept of the documentary-like work to refer to artistic practice situated in the intersections between art and documentary, taking advantage of a broadened aesthetic palette which encompasses exhibition circumstances as well content and formal choices. It is this quality of being documentary-like that makes the example work, *Disorient*, relevant to understanding how art can change the way audiences are engaged through documentary. Through thick description (Ponterotto 2006) and close analysis of *Disorient*, I investigate the range of aesthetic, experiential and rhetorical strategies that operate within the work and how these strategies impact the spectator. I argue that the mode of exhibition and speculative, open tone are key points of differentiation enabled by the artistic framing and represent ways to encourage greater diversity in stories, modes of telling and audience engagement.

Aesthetics of creation and perception

A critical aesthetic practice takes a whole of concept approach to the decisions involved in the production of a work so that the aesthetic experience is an integrated part of the communication strategy. The parameters that impact on the aesthetic experience range from the choice of subject, the materials used to explore it, the way the materials are combined, the way the work is presented, the context in which it is presented and the conditions for engagement between work and audience that are facilitated. Critical aesthetic practice is a maker-focused idea that considers intention and the alignments or frictions that might be set in motion by the total suite of decisions that impact the experience of the work. A critical aesthetic practice uses aesthetic variables (such as form, materials and exhibition circumstances) to interrogate assumptions around truth, authenticity and authority that underlie documentary re-presentations of the real and that may otherwise be embedded in a realist aesthetic.

In this analysis, the word *aesthetic* refers both, to the particular combination of variables brought into contact through the work an artist creates and to the spectator's perceptual experience.

Within the concept of a critical aesthetic practice, I am using the term *aesthetic* to refer to the formal choices and judgements made by the maker and how they are combined in the process of producing a work. These choices extend to all aspects that can shape or influence the perception of a work and the way a spectator engages with a work.

Secondly, I am using the term aesthetic to describe the combined sensory and intellectual provocations and evocations that a spectator experiences and combines with their own memories, emotions, values and preconceptions when engaging with a work. For this usage, I am drawing on the work in sensory ethnography by C. Nadia Seremetakis. Her work offers precedents for reconnection, between what may be perceived as two polarities (mind and body, rhetoric and aesthetic) through the etymology of the Greek word *aesthitiki*. As Seremetakis states:

The word for senses is *aesthisis*, emotion-feeling and aesthetics are respectively *aésthima* and *aesthitiki*. They all derive from the verb *aesthánome* or *aesthísome* meaning I feel or sense, I understand, grasp learn or receive news or information, and I have an accurate sense of good and evil, that is I judge correctly. *Aesthisis* is defined as action or power through the medium of the senses, and the media or the *semía* (points, tracks, marks) by which one senses.

(1996, 4-5 [original emphasis])

Through this line of derivation, coming to know or understand, which is often conceived of as an intellectual process, is folded back into a sensory methodology so that judgement and understanding require sense-ability. It is this process, where

knowledge is gained through the interactions between senses and intellect, with which a critical aesthetic practice engages.

At the same time, I am using an expanded concept of rhetoric that incorporates acts of communication (including non-verbal means) aimed at persuading, provoking consideration of a particular perspective or opening up speculative lines of contemplation. Drawing the threads together, it is possible to see how a critical aesthetic practice can incorporate consideration of the aesthetic experience being created as well as the alignments between creative choices and rhetorical intentions. In the context of a documentary-like work, a critical aesthetic practice may additionally involve disrupting or departing from invisible, realist approaches in order to draw attention to underlying assumptions or habitual patterns.

The documentary-like work

There are multiple ways in which documentary and artist moving image practice overlap, from the choice of topics and materials through to techniques of sequencing and combining documents, evidence, and artefacts of the real to reveal something new. In addition, intentions more closely align at different points in the chronology of the practices depending on the social, cultural and political contexts. However, overlap does not necessarily equate with agreement and as disciplines with their own, well-formed bodies of knowledge and practice, they each prioritise certain essential constructions differently. The way each conceives of the work as a cultural object, the management of the exhibition circumstances and the modes of audience address that shape the outputs are points of disparity that can be instructive and prompt reconsideration of certain givens within each area of practice. Elizabeth Cowie notes, '[d]ocumentary as installation in the gallery disturbs the categories of both "art" and "documentary"'

(2009, 126). I will discuss the effects of such disturbances in the second half of the paper through the example, *Disorient*, situated as it is in an intersection between documentary and art and engaging in a critical aesthetic practice.

There is growing scholarship around these overlaps between art and documentary. Dara Waldron queries if there could be ‘a “new nonfiction film” that aspired to the category of art, taking issue with strategies of documentary?’ (2018, 6) but cautions that ‘the body of film that is explored under the umbrella of new nonfiction film is best understood...as a cluster of films as opposed to a specific genre’ (2018, 8). This caution identifies a key problem for categorising these intersectional works, notably that they cannot be grouped by adherence to generic convention. Following a similar thread, Daniel Jewesbury refers to the ‘fine art documentary’, or his preferred term, ‘the experimental documentary’, noting that ‘[t]here is no pre-existing form for experimental documentary; each subject brings with it its own requirements, its own demands, and the filmmaker has to approach the production and especially the editing of the film with an idea of how the form that they are building can bring the viewer into the complexities of the subject matter, as an active, critical reader’ (2013, 68-9). This statement speaks to the value of keeping issues of form *live* in these intersectional works and how the desired relationship to audience can impact on key creative decisions. Form then is a key aspect where the different priorities of an artistically focused practice can change the way an audience is engaged.

However, not all artists working with aspects of the real wish to have their work considered as documentary and frequently have a less deferential attitude towards notions of truth than practitioners who call themselves documentary makers. Erika Balsom notes that there is an extensive body of artist moving image work, post-1990, that interrogates ‘a tension central to the cinema: the tension between referentiality and

representation, between a fidelity to the world and a fictionalization of it' (2013, 152). She goes on to observe how some artists 'turn to hybrid formations of documentary and fiction not to assert their interchangeability, but in order to explore the multiplicity of relations that mediate between the real and the image' (Balsom 2013, 154). That there is important meaning making and engagement happening as the audience grapples and connects with a network of relations between the real and the image, referentiality and representation, is key to the operation of rhetorical strategies in these works at the intersection of art and documentary.

In a conversation with curator, Saskia Bos, before the exhibition of *Disorient* at the Venice Biennale, Fiona Tan described her creative development as 'a steady progression, in formal terms from initially a documentary mode of working towards an increasingly controlled and staged representation' (Bos and Tan 2009, 23). *Disorient* is the outcome of a hybrid practice that embraces both archival material and original footage produced by Tan for the project. The work is documentary-like and has sympathies with cinematic and televisual manifestations of documentary but takes the screen-based form in a different direction through installation.

For the purposes of this article, the idea of the documentary-like work encompasses installation practices more usually associated with gallery exhibition, such as looped, multichannel projections. The term, documentary-like, also references the idea of 'near documentary', used to describe certain photographic works by Jeff Wall that 'occupy a middle ground between fiction and documentary' (Tate Gallery 2005). Documentary-like is not a term intended to enforce hard boundaries but alludes to works in the uncertain territories of overlap and intermingling between fiction, art practice and documentary where delineations between fiction and non-fiction, representation and referentiality, narrative and artifact are blurred. As it is noted in *The*

Act of Documenting, '[n]arrative is not a synonym for fiction and non-fiction is not a synonym for documentary' (Winston, Vanstone, and Wang 2017, 218). The documentary-like work includes materials that convey the real but the material is combined and presented to the viewer in ways that problematise, disrupt and trouble the sense of direct representation. As a consequence, clear distinctions between fiction and non-fiction are difficult to apply to a documentary-like work such as *Disorient*.

Aesthetic, experiential and rhetorical strategies

The malleability of form that is observable in documentary-like artists' moving image fits with a critical aesthetic approach that looks at the particularities of materials, ideas, audiences, exhibition circumstances and the relations between each of these as part of the process of determining an overall aesthetic strategy. There is a sense of the artist responding to the constituent elements with a contextual awareness of both an artistic community of practice and an understanding of how the materials (or similar kinds of material) circulate in broader cultural and social networks. This contextual awareness is key to recognising the viewer's context for understanding. Importantly, in analysing the film *Bernadette* by Duncan Campbell, Jewesbury points out that the creative process can include 'finding a form through which the contradictions within and between sources can be performed' (2013, 70). This idea of finding a form that can perform contradictions is something that has been powerfully realised within the example work, *Disorient*, where not just oppositions but also nuances, complexities and insights are explored. The potential to both critically examine content and craft experiences to convey ideas through aesthetic choices means that different kinds of knowledge can be explored that might be generated affectively, viscerally, aesthetically and perceptually as well as via the traditional intellectual and rhetorical means associated with what

Adrian Miles refers to as 'legacy nonfiction forms and practices' (2018, 4).

In activating such diverse means of knowledge generation, a critical aesthetic practice may realise the promise identified by Jackson (2014) for an artistic practice to change the way people are engaged. As a broad ranging aesthetic strategy encompassing content, materials, exhibition circumstances and modes of reception there is potential to promote diversity in the stories that are told, the topics that are explored, the form of the telling, who is doing the telling, who is addressed and who is paying attention.

With an emphasis on experiential knowing, *Disorient* goes beyond the traditional factual terrain associated with documentary practice and privileges the experience of the encounter. As Tan notes, '[b]etween two apparent opposites a gap comes into view and the piece extends beyond a simple dialectical opposition of rich and poor, positive and negative' (Bos and Tan 2009, 27). Conceiving of the work as an experience expands the aesthetic palette to consider not just the content and physical properties of the installation but also the aesthetics of the argument and the spaces for engagement that emerge in the encounter between viewer and exhibition.

At some level, all documentary works engage with aesthetic practice as the primary way of connecting or engaging. Echoing an earlier statement by Trinh T. Minh-Ha (1993), Belinda Smaill points out that '[t]he perceived authenticity of any performance or event in documentary is reliant, in part, on the aesthetic conventions of documentary. Realist documentary conventions signify authenticity' (2010, 69).

Documentary works frequently use aesthetic treatments associated with realism to add credibility and claim authority. This can be through elements such as overall structure, image composition and sound design. By working counter to such generic expectations, the artist disrupts aesthetic conventions that reinforce documentary as unmediated representations and draws attention to the form of the work. The rhetorical strategies are

interrelated with the perceptual experience of the work, with both combining to establish the terms of exchange between creative work and spectator.

The work is experienced more clearly as a construction, the product of an artist's thinking, feeling and engaging with the material, a chance to encounter someone else's truth through the way they have responded to the material. Defamiliarisation is a critical aesthetic practice that fits with this idea and can be observed operating across many documentary-like works. As explored by Viktor Shklovsky in his 1917 essay, *Art as Technique*, defamiliarisation sets out 'to make objects "unfamiliar," to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged' (1998, 18). Through the denial of immediately apparent meaning and an emphasis on the experience and perception, defamiliarisation arrests habitual patterns of knowing and holds the encounter at a point of near stasis. Indeed Winston et al have more recently proposed defamiliarisation (*ostranenie*) as an alternative strategy to sensationalism for compelling audience attention. They point out, that if over-familiar images are drained 'of all power to move us, then forcing (in Shklovsky's term) "de-automatized perception" through *ostranenie* becomes a crucial process for the communicator. It is as relevant for the documentarist as for the artist' (Winston, Vanstone, and Wang 2017, 188).

As Jewesbury highlights, art making tends to arise from an ongoing process of innovation in representation in order to resist becoming automatic (and consequently invisible) (2013). Art engages with the aesthetics of defamiliarisation as a means to transform perception so that it 'is less involved in making sense of the world and more involved in exploring the possibilities of being, of becoming, in the world' (O'Sullivan 2001, 130). It is a technique that seeks to provoke new ways of seeing and understanding, potentially keeping the process of audience engagement *live* for longer.

On a purely physical level, the art gallery or exhibition space is usually a context that is at a remove from commonplace sites and as a result comes loaded with differing sets of expectations. This is not the everyday; this is a space for considering things in new ways. The documentary-like work becomes an experience in itself and the aesthetic encounter, the feeling of being in the space of the work, is an important means of expression. The intention of the piece moves beyond re-presentation of a direct facsimile into territories of evocation and experiential knowing. Importantly, as Cowie highlights, the introduction of artist moving image into the space of art raises questions regarding ‘the extent to which the experience of art arises not only in relation to the specificity of the medium of representation but also in relation to the site, the space and the duration of its presentation and viewing’ (2009, 124). It is an effect that needs to be considered as another aspect of a critical aesthetic practice.

Ella Barclay and Alex Munt make productive use of the Bellourian concept of the *dispositif* (Bellour 2012) to account for the impact of the gallery space upon artist moving image practice. Building on Erika Balsom’s (2013) and Adrian Martin’s (2014) interpretation of the term, Barclay and Munt note that ‘the *dispositif* may refer to the historical passage of the moving image across eras or in relation to the distinct properties of a particular artwork or exhibition’ (2019, 365). There is scope to similarly apply the idea of the *dispositif* when considering documentary-like work in artistic contexts. It permits consideration of the documentary-like work as an expanded practice that takes into account the physical staging and broader framing that facilitates the exhibition.

For example, as Cowie observes of the work *Kuba* by Kutlug Ataman, ‘[t]he use of multiple screens produces a work which is inherently unstable, unavailable as identically repeatable, as each spectator engages uniquely in ordering her attention and

gaze between the screens and sounds' (2009, 127). The introduction of greater variability through the more diverse approaches to exhibition found in the gallery only adds to the already subjective process of spectatorship, increasing the degree of uniqueness in how a spectator engages with and experiences the work.

The spaces for engagement that exist in relation to the documentary-like work in the gallery are a product of the parts that make up the total experience of the work, including the work itself, the circumstances of exhibition, and the work of perceiving carried out by the gallery visitor. In addition the aesthetic palette is here understood as including the style and quality of the argument being put by the work and how that shapes the audience's engagement and understanding of the content. The question of how the gallery visitor exists in relation to the work and the quality of the space of engagement are central to the considerations that follow.

The experience of *Disorient*

The two screen HD video installation work, *Disorient* by Fiona Tan was initially devised for exhibition in the Dutch Pavilion at the 53rd Venice Biennale¹. It was restaged in Sydney at the Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation² (Tan 2010). More recently *Disorient* has been exhibited at the Museum Voor Moderne Kunst, Arnhem (27 March 2010 – 20 June 2010), Glasgow Gallery of Modern Art (19 July 2012 – 15 October 2012), the Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore (18 January 2014 – 30 March 2014), the Guggenheim Bilbao (December 22, 2016 - March 19, 2017) and as part of the 2018 Kuandu Biennale (October 5, 2018–January 6, 2019). Originally

¹ See the artist's website <https://fionatan.nl/project/disorient/> for documentation images of the work.

² It is this iteration of the work upon which the analysis for this paper is based.

intended as a location and time specific artwork, the piece is ‘inspired by the geo-strategic position Venice once had through its connections to the Middle East and Asia’ (Bos and Tan 2009, 23).

In Sydney, it was exhibited in a darkened gallery space that felt detached from the streetscape outside the door. There are three media elements to the work – one channel of projected video that shows a gliding passage through rows of museum cases and storage shelves in an archive of assembled objects; a second channel of video, projected slightly smaller on the opposite wall showing contemporary archival footage drawn from news and current affairs television of people and places throughout the Middle East and Asia; and a voiceover reading excerpts from *The Travels*, the 700 year old book by Marco Polo describing his journeys between East and West. In between the two screens were large beanbags where viewers could recline and watch the work.

The first projection (screen A) traces movement through an excess of gathered items – dolls, tomatoes, television monitors, taxidermied animals, chillies, tea, star anise, peanuts, incense, furniture, carpets, books, scrolls, lanterns, figurines, butterflies – all piled in an eclectic display of memory objects. For all the profusion, this is a quiet place. It is a calm gallery of relics with bizarre juxtapositions demonstrating an almost impenetrable system (or absence) of cataloguing. Everything is in stasis, extracted from any original context. Low-key lighting indicates this is a secluded place. It is a cocooned accumulation of eccentric treasures. The colour palette emphasises lush tones of red, gold and brown. We see a person dressed in saffron robes (who may be a part, or keeper, of the collection) asleep on a couch. There are television monitors that at first seem out of place but then, they too are of a style that is from another time and place. The camera moves through the space at a slow pace with gentle shifts in focus directing

our attention to different objects. The transitions between shots are through cross dissolves so that a constant flowing movement is maintained.

The contemporary images on the other screen (screen B) are of Eastern Europe, the Middle, Central and Far East, often viewed through the lens of hardship. We see workers engaged in difficult, manual labour under conditions that frequently seem deleterious to their health. There are rubbish pickers and people recycling a range of discarded post-consumer waste. The implication is that their labour goes to support the lifestyles of privileged others. There are images of war and troops dealing roughly with civilians, tanks rolling through city streets. We see explosions in a city night sky that bring to mind footage of air strikes and bombing raids during the Gulf War. Hands score the swollen seed pods of poppies, presumably as part of the opium harvesting process. People carry heavy loads, some push carts; others haul with the help of beasts of burden. In one instance a man walks with an enormous flat screen television strapped to his back. It is one of the only times that we see evidence of modern technology in this version of the world. There is a realist rawness to the images that speaks of utilitarian motivations of newsgathering and recording evidence of military operations. These are not romanticised images of exotic locations. The footage is often quite confronting and depicts a world where life is a struggle. These are loaded images that call up a range of cultural references as the viewer goes through the process of decoding the montage. This channel of video also shows reflexive images of the Dutch Biennale Pavilion (site of the initial installation of the work) being set up as the location for the shoot of the video content that we now see on screen A.

The voiceover performance is unemotional and somewhat hushed implying an intimacy or interiority. The tone is methodical. It settles in the space and in the images, providing a point of linkage between the two video screens that can only be viewed

alternately, not both at the same time. The passages chosen for the voiceover are not the well-known tales of Marco Polo's encounters such as those with Kublai Khan in Xanadu. The spoken words comprise a methodical listing of places along the way. The list expresses a gathering impulse that matches the surplus of objects shown on the first screen. Seeming like a business traveller's guide from the Middle Ages, it is a fairly confronting text that sums up whole civilisations as idolaters and robbers, Christians or Saracens. There are elements of location audio that draw on iconic sounds such as a call to prayer, noises of the street and chickens. These sounds direct attention from screen to screen as the spectator searches for possible points of synchronisation. There are long pauses between sections that allow for some processing of the text that otherwise seems to come in a constant flow of new places and judgements.

The three elements (screen A, screen B and the soundtrack) do not form up into a traditional narrative but the voiceover imposes the chronology of a journey and the footage has been chosen for the stories that it contributes. The sound-image relationship appears to be structured according to an associational approach with space for the viewer to find connections and make sense of the material. There is a poetic approach evident in the tone and possibilities for new meanings to emerge through the various combinations of elements. The voiceover track is synchronised to the video for screen B but the two video streams are of differing durations (screen A: 17 minutes, screen B: 21 minutes). Consequently there is a time slippage between the two screens and a repeated viewing is not quite the same as the previous one.

Between the screen A footage and the voiceover, a sense of the returned traveller recounting their experience in relation to souvenirs being unpacked is evoked. In this relationship, the voiceover feels more like a fixed text moving through rehearsed anecdotes. A place is named, described and then the text moves on. Terms of

description are repeated in reference to people and places so a strangely homogenous portrayal of locations emerges from the point of view of an outsider merchant. It is a list of observations and judgements. The story of a journey is deemphasised – no glimmers of personal growth or insight emerge. Assessments of people, places and the opportunities to be had from them come to the foreground.

The screen B news footage is clearly drawn from a range of contemporary archival sources and is presented in a sequence that can be connected to the places being mentioned in the voiceover but one is never sure of direct correlation. A challenge to the reliability of the voiceover pronouncements emerges through the returned gaze of some of the people shown, the contemporary nature of the screen B footage and resulting disruption of the judgements voiced in the Polan text. This opens a fissure that problematizes easy readings of the combined materials. *Disorient* may be showing us life (as Vertov implored), but it is not trying to replicate the world as we routinely perceive it and does ‘far more than merely copy the eye’ (Renov 2007). At times there are unsettling alignments, sometimes disruptions, and at yet other points the effect is indeterminate. The overall result prompts the viewer to insert themselves into the conversation with the constituent elements so that they engage with the work as an experience that depends upon their subjective response in order to be actualised.

The agency of the audience in shaping the experience of *Disorient* is extended slightly from the interior-to-the viewer, intertextual and subjective responses possible with single channel works. With the installation layout of *Disorient*, the audience has to choose to which screen they will pay attention at each moment of the work as both screens of the work cannot be seen at the same time (because they are projected on walls that are at either end of the room). This spatial separation means that the decision

of where to look becomes deliberate and active, the viewer responding to uncertainty and searching for meaning.

The work as an aesthetic experience in itself

For Dewey (2005), an aesthetic experience is a product of the connections between elements that result in a sense of unity emerging from the encounter. In the context of an artwork an aesthetic experience is a process whereby the viewer is exposed to or ‘undergoes’ (Dewey 2005) the components of the work, which prompts an adjustment in thinking or affective responses from the viewer. The to and fro of the encounter continues on, creating ‘an experience’ as an emergent kind of story built ‘from the dialogue of a person with her or his world through action’ (Hassenzahl 2010, 8).

However as Whitelaw highlights, it is important to note that ‘as Merleau-Ponty, Dewey, and others have argued, art enables aesthetic experience, it does not provide it’ (2012, 175).

Understanding the work as an aesthetic experience in itself, rather than as an attempt to replicate the world, enables us to deeply engage with the ‘bundle of affects’ that is art ‘waiting to be reactivated by a spectator or participant’ (O’Sullivan 2001, 126). As a ‘bundle of affects’, drawn together by the artist, the aesthetic experience emerges as the spectator engages with the unified elements. In attempting to grasp the knowledge that is embedded in the experience (that may be incomplete, opaque, lateral or intertextual) the viewer has a personal encounter with the work that activates multiple modes of perceiving. Speaking of her own approach to curation, founder of the Menil Collection, Dominique de Menil makes plain, the triggering of a personal encounter is a strategy where ‘the work of art “invades” one’s territory so strongly that it “demands a response”’(quoted in Smart 2010, 170). In these circumstances an embodied

spectatorship is activated where sensations of linkage and affectedness between audience and content are prompted so that knowing is experienced on multiple levels.

In the shift to conceiving of the work as an aesthetic experience rather than as an autonomous piece with fixed meaning separate to the audience encounter, the experience of the work becomes a way of knowing and thinking, with attendant forms of truth and authenticity. As Hans Georg Gadamer explains:

[i]n the experience of art we see a genuine experience induced by the work, which does not leave him who has it unchanged, and we enquire into the mode of being of that which is experienced in this way. So we hope to understand better what kind of truth it is that encounters us there.

(2014)

The idea that the experience of the work prompts audiences to seek to ‘understand better what kind of truth it is that encounters us there’ is highly significant for *Disorient*. It not only accounts for the possibility of multiple truths depending on individual perspective but also allows that truth can be experienced in ways other than the purely intellectual, with possibilities for emotional, sensory, embodied and other truths to be considered.

The title of the work is helpful in analysing the experience of *Disorient* as it provides a key to the artist’s intentions. As a transitive verb, disorient is defined as ‘[t]o turn from the east; to cause to “lose one's bearings”; to put out, disconcert, embarrass’ (“disorient, v.” 2000). The use of the prefix *dis* has a reversing force so that, in the context of the artwork, ‘disorient’ could also be understood as the opposite of ‘orient’. As a noun, orient refers to the countries of the East, especially East Asia. In this form, the word recalls Edward Said’s concept of Orientalism, ‘a systematic process through which the East is studied, researched, administered and “pronounced upon”’ (Nayar 2015, 119), and how the Orient is frequently set up in opposition to the Occident or the

West. As a verb, orient means ‘to position or align (a structure, etc.) with, or in a particular way relative to, the points of the compass, or other specified points’ and also ‘to bring into a defined relationship with known facts, circumstances, etc.’ (“orient, v.” 2000). As a start then, the title raises ideas of being moved to feel uncertain of our position, interrogations of the oppositions set up between East and West and the destabilisation of fixed, perhaps even forced alignments, with particular ‘known facts, circumstances, etc.’. It is also worth acknowledging alignments between the verb form of disorient and Shklovsky’s idea of defamiliarisation. As the work disorients the viewer, habitual ways of perceiving and understanding, to which the viewer might otherwise resort, are unsettled. It is in this space of disconcert and disorientation where the potential for novel understandings and new connections emerges.

For Tan, Marco Polo both offered intrigue and irritation. Describing him as ‘the ideal traveller – neither colonialist, warrior nor politician, he has no goal, no final destination’ (2009, n.p.), Tan uses his writings as a structuring element within the work, providing navigation points but not expert testimony. That the text is presented through audio means that the words are present but ephemeral, no matter at which screen the viewer is looking. Notions of a true centre or fixed referentiality existing within the work are in this way upset by the slipperiness of synchronisation between sound and image.

The opposition between the moving image materials on screen A and screen B presented through *Disorient* is part of a strategy to explore complex understandings and problematise underlying assumptions as Tan describes herself as ‘straining to see and imagine a future beyond the restrictive dichotomy of East and West’ (2009). Exhibited within a contained and quiet space where perception can be concentrated, the content, style and circumstances of the work promote a focused quality of attention so that, the

aesthetic experience makes connections that can be felt deeply. In the space of the work, outside distractions are minimised, defamiliarisation strategies make the material seem strange and the viewer is powerfully drawn into the realisation of the work through their physical positioning between the two screens.

The aesthetic difference and the yawning gap that opens up between the different conceptions of the world presented on the two screens in *Disorient* is important to the rhetorical strategy and affective impact of the work. The choice of which screen to look at becomes a choice between a version of contemporary life on screen B and a timeless storehouse on screen A, between an impression of immediacy (screen B) and an etherised warehouse of possessions (screen A). Both screens show the contents of archives, but one shows us somewhere else through images of people and places shot on location (screen B); the other through images of a *Wunderkammer* of assembled souvenir objects (screen A). We might read the news and current affairs screen as more real (particularly as it informs on the opposing screen through its showing of reflexive, behind-the-scenes-footage of the production of the screen A video), but it too is just as much an assemblage of material gathered together and compiled for the purpose of this work.

The footage on screen A is perhaps easier to watch. The tone of the space that is featured in the footage matches that of the gallery space within which *Disorient* is screened. Added to this is the sense that the voiceover reading the words of Marco Polo sits slightly more at ease when the viewer is looking at the content of screen A. The categorising impulse underlying the text seems to sit better with the images of the storehouse of collected goods. The location sounds on the soundtrack make the visual space of the screen A footage feel like a storehouse situated somewhere within the territories where the collected goods have been sourced. But as we are shown via the

reflexive footage on screen B, this is a constructed world, built from materials and objects specifically set up in the Dutch Pavilion for the filming and then removed before the Venice Biennale exhibition of *Disorient* commenced. The screens share a soundtrack but there are complications to any sense of geographical contiguity of the places depicted on each screen.

The effect of the voiceover is far more disturbing when contextualised by the footage of screen B. While being told of the city Balkh that ‘used to be much greater and more splendid; but the Tartars and other invaders have sacked and ravaged it’ (Polo 2009, 13), we watch children crying as male family members, their heads covered by sacks or boxes, are taken away by what appear to be Western soldiers. We know the video footage of screen B is referencing complex stories but in this combination, the violence of the pronouncements of the voiceover, declaring people to be idolaters and savages, is even more stark.

As a work that deploys an expanded aesthetic palette that includes the content, tone, staging, exhibition content and relation to audience, *Disorient* can be seen to set up the circumstances for a subjective aesthetic experience. The openness of the work allows for *Disorient* to be thought of as an event, in so far as it comes into being as a consequence of being experienced by the gallery visitor³. However, this openness also means that, in my experience of the work at least, the to and fro of the encounter with the artwork continues long after the visit to the exhibition has concluded. Drawing on Stuart Hall’s audience reception studies to consider the agency of the audience in relation to moving image works, Catherine Elwes asks, ‘[i]f mainstream fare is as malleable as Hall suggests then how much more open to interpretation is the ambiguous

³ See (Arsenault et al. 2016) where Frankham discusses the proposition of the documentary as an event in relation to interactive documentary.

terrain of artists' moving image installation?' (2015, 152). This malleability is then taken further when we think that *Disorient* was initially intended to be a site specific piece, that drew on 'the strategic geopolitical position held by Venice in the distant past' (Tan 2009). Each subsequent staging, in different cities with varying relations to 'critical questions about contemporary globalism and its origins' (Tan 2009) opens up new possibilities for additional site specific resonances.

Discussing a list of artists that includes Fiona Tan, Balsom notes how they 'use the moving image to turn outwards and open artistic production to an encounter with subjective and/or historical experience' (2013, 158). This turning out is significant in how *Disorient* disturbs the categories of both art and documentary, juxtaposing as it does 'time and place, fiction and reality' (Tan 2009).

The status of *Disorient* as art is far more certain due to institutional endorsements. Tan was trained in the fine arts before establishing a now extensive lens and time based artistic practice. *Disorient* was selected to represent The Netherlands at the 53rd Venice Biennale. Beyond that, the work has continued to be exhibited in gallery spaces in multiple countries. *Disorient* also fits with the documentary turn in art practice as described by curators Okwui Enwezor (2004) and Mark Nash (2008). It is in the way that *Disorient* 'signifies – culturally and politically – independently of the aesthetic form' (Cowie 2009)⁴, through the archival material on screen B and the commentary it seems to offer on the other the elements, that the category of art is disturbed.

Conceiving of *Disorient* as a documentary is more contentious, hence the relevance of considering it a documentary-like work. There is little doubt that the work engages with aspects of documentary practice. Indeed, in conversation with Bos, Tan

⁴ Here Cowie is discussing the effects of documentary as works of art installation more broadly.

notes her interest in the Dutch documentary film tradition and describes Joris Ivens, Bert Haanstra, Johan van der Keuken as her teachers (Bos and Tan 2009). However she goes on to clarify that she does ‘not think that documentary, archival footage is “true life”. It is, as any image is, a “take” on life, a subjective view, a limited and manipulating viewpoint’ (Bos and Tan 2009, 25). The intention of *Disorient* can be understood then as provoking viewers to explore the gap between the materials presented on each of the two screens and in the soundtrack. It is a rhetorical strategy to prompt viewer engagement by placing them between archival footage and footage of an archive, accompanied by the account of Polo, an unreliable but compelling witness.

Spaces of engagement and forms of truth

In describing the making of *Disorient* as ‘straining to see’ (2009) Tan appears to be indicating a speculative approach where ways of thinking through and beyond ‘the restrictive dichotomy of East and West’ (Tan 2009) could emerge through the aesthetic experience of the work as well as through the making. The uncertainty of ‘straining to see’ implies an open work that offers glimpses that may coalesce into something more through spectator experiences. We can examine how Tan disturbs expectations that the documentary material is the source of the real by shifting the analysis of the terrain of truth into the experience of the viewer.

The material of the work, the footage and sound, becomes a provocation to find a subjective truth even if that remains at the level of the truth experienced in being disoriented by the work. Speaking of Kutlug Ataman, Balsom notes, ‘[t]hrough the exploration of multichannel installations and experiments with the temporality of reception that would be impossible in a standard theatrical exhibition, he recontextualizes that [cinematic documentary] tradition in a dynamic way that introduces new aesthetic and epistemological possibilities’ (2013, 161). Significantly

then, in the case of *Disorient* it is not just the aesthetics of Tan's lens based art practice or the combination of her own staged video with aesthetically contrasting archival footage that enables a change in 'the way we reach people' (Jackson 2014). Also important is the mode of exhibition that enables spaces of engagement where different forms of truth (such as embodied, sensory or affective) may be accessed.

We can understand that the material presented on the two screens and in the sound track are intended to communicate certain ideas: that international relations are complex; that the origins of current social, economic and political circumstances lie in trajectories set in motion by events from long ago; that accounts of events are contradictory and unreliable; that there are human (and other) costs incurred from our impulses to collect and consume; that in looking we can also be looked at. However the key truths of *Disorient* are conceptual and subjective rather than objective and immutable. The experience of the work conveys truths about the structures of thought and how we can hold space for complexity. That these truths emerge is a consequence of the kind of telling that occurs in *Disorient*. The clash between the visual material of *Disorient* accompanied by the cataloguing voiceover, that only partially explains what we see, provokes a searching response in the audience as they must strive to make their own sense of the materials, potentially uncovering further subjective connections. In the confronting language of the voiceover, the privileged position of western outsider is challenged and the model of travel-as-consumption is brought into consciousness.

The layout of the video installation means that the truths encountered there arise from the combination of Tan's montage of images presented on the two screens and in the soundtrack, which is then re-montaged by the viewer as they look from screen to screen. Occurring in between the screens, the viewer's experience is the conduit through which truths are generated. There is little doubt that it is within the viewer where truths

from media encounters more generally arise, as the viewer processes and comes to their own understanding, their own truths and relationship to the material they are encountering. However, in the staging of *Disorient*, Tan makes the truth of this experience apparent, no longer abstract but a physical manifestation of the process that is occurring. As much as Balsom notes that artists such as Tan use projection to place primary emphasis ‘on a represented scene or event rather than on the apparatus itself’ (2013, 157), she does qualify this by adding how sharply these artists are ‘attuned to the material specificities of the media in which they work’ (2013, 158). In the case of *Disorient*, it is the specificity not just of the video media but also of the installation layout that enables the work to do double duty. The video is used for its narrative potential (the stories it can tell) but also as a component in a sculptural, physical manifestation that positions the viewer in the middle of two screens they must look between to find points of provocation and resonance. By physically situating the viewer in the gap ‘[b]etween two apparent opposites’ (Bos and Tan 2009, 127) Tan activates the possibility for an experience that can hold complex, situated and subjective truths, enhanced by strategies of defamiliarisation.

As with all authored works, there is an intricate dynamic between the individual will of the artist and ‘the point of both reception and resistance that constitutes the spectator’ (Elwes 2015, 270). Resistant readings and disengagement are always possible outcomes. There are also limits to audience agency within the space of *Disorient* relating to their inability to make changes to the fixed content and staging of the work and the one-direction transmission nature of the communication. However, as with any work, the viewer is free to bring ‘her individual life history, her belief systems, political affiliations and her aspirations for the future, not to mention, as Viola reminded us, the kaleidoscope of memories of all the films, videos, television shows and installations she

has ever seen' (Elwes 2015, 153). The openness of the rhetorical form and argument aesthetic in *Disorient* meant it enables a space where intertextual and internal combinations could occur.

Disorient, staged as a one off installation work at the Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation gallery in Sydney, was more likely to attract visitors able to spend time with the work and commit to staying for multiple repetitions. It became a singular event that was akin to the movie-going experience. Even though effort was required of the viewer to process the experience of the work, needs were being met through the encounter that kept the viewer engaged while they were expending that effort. Needs such as being challenged to: understand; seek a more complex understanding; see a different point of view that is literally between the cataloguing, acquisitive impulses of the merchant traveller and the contemporary outcomes of such travels and trade routes. There are audiences who delight in such challenges and will seek out the intellectual, emotional and perceptual expansion that works of this kind enable. Perhaps then, some combination of the exhibition strategies for cinema and artworks aligned with an awareness of the viewing conditions and level of audience engagement can aid us in producing affecting, impacting works that can achieve the goals of crafting 'ethical citizenship while also making the ineffable present' (Smart 2010, pp.222-23).

It is not the intention of this paper to make claims that *Disorient* is necessarily novel or unique in its exhibition strategy. I acknowledge that other video artists use the physical placement of screens and other medium specific elements particular to the architectural staging of art installation in order to realise a critical aesthetic practice. However, through an in depth consideration and analysis of *Disorient*, it has been possible to identify strategies that might be applied to documentary, particularly if we conceive of documentary in the expanded form of an experience. This might mean

developing flexible exhibition spaces that can accommodate diverse configurations of screens, seating and spectatorship. In using insights from art to change the way we reach people, there is particular promise if this extends to the circumstances of exhibition. Installation practice offers one such model for how change might manifest.

Conclusion

Situated in the intersections of art and documentary practice, a documentary-like work that applies a critical aesthetic practice has the potential to create spaces of engagement where viewers are prompted to explore gaps and tensions within the material presented. The dual-channel video installation, *Disorient* by Fiona Tan, was used to explore the specificities of how a critical aesthetic practice could be applied to realise the work as an experience in itself where form combines strongly with content to activate complex, situated and subjective truths. As a documentary-like work by an artist who describes her practice as evolving from a documentary mode, analysis of the experience of *Disorient* has revealed key strategies relevant to an expanded documentary practice. When the work is conceived as an experience rather than a representation, the spectator is directly implicated as the locus of meaning making as they process a range of aesthetic, experiential and rhetorical approaches that stretch beyond the material on screen.

I started this paper with reference to statements by head of the Sundance Institute Documentary Film Program, Tabitha Jackson, in which she set out the terms for why documentary is more than the provision of evidence and why the Sundance Institute values an artful approach to documentary. Key to the argument of this paper is that artfulness is crucial if we are to ensure the diversity and distinctiveness of stories that can be told, the ways in which they are told and how they might be heard. To work

toward greater diversity in the kinds of documentary telling we experience means that the form needs to accommodate the incomplete, tentative, embodied, disruptive, playful, changeful and complex explorations of lived experience and abstract ideas that perhaps do not always fully comply with expectations for legacy, single-channel forms of documentary. Breaking with these expectations and embracing the emergent form of the documentary experience can additionally serve to reinvigorate audience engagement with documentary content. While there are limitations around infrastructure for the expanded exhibition of documentary work, this re-consideration of the experience of documentary through the lens of critical aesthetic practice offers alternative strategies that may more closely align the creative approach with the underlying conceptual premise.

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