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In Conversation with Alan Gilbert

By Andrew McNeely

Haunt—I'd like to start our conversation with a discussion of your 2006 book, *Another Future: Poetry and Art in a Postmodern Twilight*, which is a collection of critical essays and reviews you published between 1999 and 2003. Not only are the book's many reflections on the legacy of 9/11 topical, but one of the text's underlying themes, namely, poetry and art's unique documentary potential to critique or resist everyday forms of oppression, is entirely germane to *Haunt's* overarching concerns. In this regard, I am specifically referring to the relationship between cultural production and cultural difference, and how other forms of knowing can be approached in arts education. Here, I should note that you use the term "documentary" in the book to think through many of the well-rehearsed conflicts between competing disciplinary traditions.

The most important of these conflicts being theoretical models of social formations and culture where art's supposed critical import is often mobilized to marginalize, if not directly suppress, cultural difference. As a countermeasure to the centralizing and leveling impulse underpinning appeals to avant-garde aesthetic programs, you champion poets and artists who playfully confront their own specific complicity in hegemony while isolating or "documenting" the specific conditions of their geographic, cultural, and historical positions. Two such examples, whose respective work particularly resonates with me, given my personal intellectual interests and my location in southern California, are the artist Keith Piper and the poet Andrew Schelling. Would you start by clarifying your use of the term "documentary" in the context of their work and the term's broader political stakes?

Alan—Thank you for such an incisive reading of that book! Its interest in documentary arose from a dissatisfaction with the way in which so much emphasis in the eighties and into the nineties had been put on a poem's or work of art's formal techniques, whether mainstream or avant-garde (back when these distinctions were a bit more meaningful than they are now). Of course this wasn't universal (or international), but it was occurring against the larger backdrop of postmodernism and its turn to language and discourse and away from an analysis of material conditions. That book was my own attempt to articulate what comes after postmodernism and its specific manifestations in very contemporary poetry and visual art. My proposal

involved concerns such as local versus global, hybridity, the micro-historical, along with identity and race, economics, and cross-cultural migrations, all of which had been percolating beneath postmodernism's increasing presentism. Schelling's poetry on the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas and Piper's digital-installational investigations of the Black Atlantic fit within these concerns.

Documentary-based work became my focus for examining these larger issues, specifically a mode of socially engaged poetry and visual art I termed "conceptual documentary"—defined as strategies that build on documentary traditions while self-reflexively calling into question documentary's traditional truth-telling and witnessing roles. Among many inspirations for this approach to documentary (including Gayl Jones's stunning novel *Mosquito*, about a female African American truck driver who helps ferry undocumented immigrants across the U.S.-Mexico border, and Chuck D's statement that rap music is "CNN for black people") were Martha Rosler and Walid Raad—Rosler for a rigorous critique of conventional, humanist documentary in her conceptual photo work *The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems* (1974–75) and her essay "In, Around, and Afterthoughts (on documentary photography)" (1981); and Raad for his ingenious imaginary archive—The Atlas Group—of fictional documentary materials pertaining to the Lebanese Civil Wars. There are certainly others as well, but those two are artists and thinkers I greatly admire whom I've also been honored to know as friends.

Haunt—Are there artists or poets you feel are activating the term documentary in interesting ways in recent years?

Alan—Absolutely. The funny thing is that when I was writing that book and for a few years after, there wasn't much documentary poetry being written, but the past few years have seen an explosion of different forms of it, including Claudia Rankine's *Citizen*, which at this point must be the best-selling book of poems (although it's not *exactly* poetry) in years. Decades? Rankine's ability to implicate the reader in her descriptions of racist encounters and situations, mostly through her sophisticated use of the second-person pronoun "you," gives her book an immediacy and physicality that a more conventional documentary approach might not achieve. But she's also not performing documentary per se with its pseudo-objectivism; it's more that she collects silenced stories (so much of *Citizen* is about the difficulty in speaking) as part of a poetic investigation. That's certainly something that continues to interest me. Overall, documentary modes have seen a real resurgence in poetry over the past five years. One very recent example is Solmaz Sharif's *Look*, which reproduces language from the *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* and was published a few months ago and even more recently shortlisted for a National Book Award.

As far as artists activating documentary, there are so many, and your readers will be able to name as many as I can, but I would single out Hito Steyerl, who like Rosler is both a brilliant theorist and practitioner of both documentary and visual culture at large. She updates these images for our pixelated era. Again, I'm a bit hesitant to single out just a few artists (or poets) as "representative" for me or anyone else, because the art we encounter is determined by so many factors, including class, cultural milieu, age, and location, and since there are very few things I loathe more than lists with their implicit exclusions, but since you asked, Sondra Perry and Sophia Al-Maria, both of whose work I've only seen a few examples of, are exciting to me. But is this documentary or something closer to a poetic ethnography? If you read cultural products materially, dialectically, then anything can be "documentary," while at the same time, maybe in the end documentary is too specifically a formal technique, a somewhat rigid frame. Of artists working within this frame, Trevor Paglen's work is important in documenting the infrastructure of our digital domain. His work beautifully captures the ghost in the machine of the security apparatus.

Haunt—As concepts such as local versus global, hybridity, micro-historical, etc., are absorbed by dominant critical discussions, would you also speak to emerging, or perhaps remaining issues you feel are poorly addressed since the publication of *Another Future*?

Alan—The strange thing is that as documentary has come back into fashion, in poetry in particular, I've somewhat drifted away from certain aspects of it. For one thing, I think the internet has rendered a fair amount of documentary work a bit redundant. Anyone with a degree of curiosity and basic research skills can discover a tremendous amount of documentary material on the internet, which collects information in the same fragmented and at times blurry modes that seem inherent to documentary in an art-world context, and in poetry as well.

Instead, I've become much more interested in the way that dominant, ruling-class ideologies embed themselves as common sense, and the strategies poets and artists might use to resist them: absurdity, false logic (which poetry, with its associational techniques, excels at; and visual art, with its increasing engagement with the internet's links and leaps, echoes), the grotesque, abjection. William Pope.L's work has become a touchstone in this regard, and Paul Chan's multi-component project a few years back that engaged with the works of the Marquis de Sade in the context of the war on terror, Abu Ghraib, and black-site detention and torture facilities was important in helping me make this transition from documentary to disfigurement.

What Occupy Wall Street did was insert a new story into the landscape, and I think that tactic still needs to be reckoned with. Black Lives Matter

seems to be the most important representative of this approach right now. I would also like to see a form of institutional critique that institutions would be unable to appropriate and absorb. Less some kind of impossible stridency, this work would more take a form that institutions might not immediately recognize as art or politics or both. Since you asked, I'll list another concern, which is cultural and political tactics of invisibility. In order to be recognized as a viable subject on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc., which, let's admit it, is increasingly to be recognized as a viable subject at all, we are expected to participate daily, which in turn involves being constantly datamined, located, tracked, and surveilled. So that when I talk about invisibility, I imagine a self not constantly interpellated by capitalism's hailing. Resistant and elusive.

But above all else, I'm most interested in how to speak across differences. *Another Future* was very much about cultural hybridity and syncretism—finding what is shared among people and cultures. Post-9/11, my focus has been more on ways of speaking across profound differences and what can't be translated between cultures and communities, because despite globalization and an increasingly interconnected world, it's this untranslatable remainder that to me feels like the central issue of our particular historical moment.

Maybe this is related to a question I'd like to ask you, specifically *Haunt's* concern with “the relationship between cultural production and cultural difference, and how other forms of knowing can be approached in arts education.” How do you grapple with these issues? How have you succeeded and not succeeded?

Haunt—To answer that question, albeit in a roundabout way, I think it's important to touch upon some of the motivations that drive *Haunt* (at least as I have come to understand them). In our inaugural issue's “Editor's Note,” written by *Haunt's* founder, Amanda McGough, she states that one of the difficulties of developing a journal that calls for “speculative and innovative art writing practices” is that true innovation tends to fly right past our conscious recognition of it. Following from this, she writes that volume one focused on work that “forced us to reverse our touch, lending to textured ways of feeling and perceiving,” and it's this metaphoric description of perception—as if feeling can have a grain—that I see as the main open-ended question that we strive to take up anew with every issue. In this way, our editorial concerns are less driven by an aim to push a particular investigation forward and more towards establishing a space where our contributors can take up the journal format in a performative vein.

To put it another way, *Haunt* is undergirded by a playful ambivalence around the very idea of what a “journal of art” ought to be or accomplish. In this way, I would argue that the journal, especially as an extension of an

art school, offers students a place to grapple with difference with an earnestness that routinized critiques/seminars rarely allow for. Time will tell how successful this idea may be. But, here is a point of possible intersection between *Haunt* as a space for dialog that performatively adopts the journal form and reflections you've already touched upon earlier about poetry's political import, particularly with regards to things that are not conventionally understood as poetry.

A consistent theme that I've noticed throughout your criticism is a preference for artists that openly construct complex fictions—most notably, Walid Raad's Atlas Group, about which you've written extensively—as a means to reconfigure what is imaginable in the real. Moreover, something I find interesting about your work is how you grapple with the critical import of spontaneous imagination within the structure of public assembly. In “Allegories of Art, Politics, and Poetry,” for instance, you write that one of the things that Occupy Wall Street instigated was a form of public assembly that, by not constraining itself to any particular polemical position, introduced a “self-deflating authority into its own ideology and organizational modes” and thus a new rhetorical structure into the language of resistance. You go on to write that Occupy's legacy is thus linguistic as much as it is historical. Therefore the movement—as both real event and cultural memory—can be thought of as a kind of poetry. I am curious if you would briefly return to what you feel remains to be reckoned with about Occupy and how the allegorical dimension of it in our lived present may or may not relate to Black Lives Matter?

Alan—I am constitutionally anti-authoritarian, my own first and foremost. And I wonder if we're starting to head toward the end of the age of experts, which is welcome to me, although some of what's replacing it right now is who can shout the loudest—usually via social media. Donald Trump is an obvious example of this in that he has zero expertise when it comes to national politics, and yet that's part of what separated him from the other Republican candidates (and from Hillary Clinton). It's not that he will “shake up politics” or is from “outside the Beltway” when he is so completely a product of the status quo: whether of capitalism, white privilege, or heteronormativity. It's his lack of political expertise that makes him an “outsider,” which isn't quite the same as what has made him appealing to voters. The latter is because of the profound and systemic racism and misogyny he taps into in U.S. society. Take that away and he's just a guy who sells neckties made in China.

The model for me still remains Paulo Freire's de-hierarchized and dialogic classroom. Occupy Wall Street, and specifically its encampment in Zuccotti Park, made an effort to realize this. Decision-making was supposed to be public, transparent, and based on a consensus model. Its daily group assemblies with their people's mic format that sometimes stretched on

for hours just to address a few points were substantive, inspiring, and are a model that activists have modified and taken into other contexts. Just as importantly, Occupy Wall Street reinvigorated the discussion of class. Were there failings? Definitely. Anyone who spent time at Zuccotti Park could see that in fact there was a bit of a hierarchy between the top half of the park (near Broadway, where the people’s library and media center were located and the general assemblies met) and the lower half with its drum circles and more cramped layout. And people have debated exactly what the Occupy movement did or did not accomplish. Black Lives Matter didn’t directly “result” from Occupy, but it’s certainly related, especially as Black Lives Matter develops political and economic policies alongside the necessary immediacy of getting demonstrators into the street (and hashtags into social media) to protest police brutality toward people of color.

Haunt—In your two books of poetry, *Late in the Antenna Fields* and *The Treatment of Monuments* you depict everyday consumerism from a seemingly neutral and even whimsical voice, oscillating between journalistic observation and diaristic monologue, abrasive rhythms and disjointed associations. How does your understanding of the work of cultural practice and allegory inform your approach within these texts?

Alan—Allegories give a little stretch to the present, right? So much of our experience—information, thought, emotion—has become a kind of instant delivery system, and I’m interested in scrambling this situation a bit via some of the techniques and tactics you describe, not as a purely anarchic and resistant gesture (although I think that’s a worthy act as well: Bartleby’s “I would prefer not to”), but to create a site for intersectionalities between different voices, locations, cultures, subjectivities, and knowledges. And while I definitely think it’s important to experience history and temporality as more than simply the immediate present, I don’t think or talk about allegory too much anymore: the word and concept feel fussy. Is allegory actually a meaningful notion to anyone under 30?

As I get older, and I dearly hope this isn’t the sign of a creeping conservatism, what I increasingly value in art—and by this I mean the process of creating it—is its ability to open a space of freedom for the imagination. I’m heartened in this when you include a reference to the imagination in the description of *Haunt* on your website: “We believe speculative and innovative art writing practices are paramount to the development of radical thinking and imagination.” The poet Diane di Prima wrote, “The only war that matters is the war against the imagination.” And while there’s something Romantically-politically oblivious about this (di Prima’s quote won’t be of much solace to the current residents of Aleppo), there’s also something deeply insightful and foundational about it. We have just about destroyed this world; we need to start imagining new ones. There are enough rules and responsibilities and debts and internalized authorities in our

lives that art could be approached as a place of maximum freedom, which entails a degree of amoralism, while at the same time remaining aware that no one is ever truly free. To return to a point you made at the start of this conversation, it's my belief that we should begin with our complicities with systems of oppression and then go from there. In my experience, socially engaged art can be a little too self-congratulatory at times. I'm glad you're trying to keep *Haunt* playful and open-ended.

† Alan Gilbert is the author of two books of poetry, *The Treatment of Monuments* and *Late in the Antenna Fields*, as well as a collection of essays, articles, and reviews entitled *Another Future: Poetry and Art in a Postmodern Twilight*. He lives in New York.

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