

DOCKET

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Summary of Project Option in Lieu of Thesis
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DOCKET

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My project-in-lieu-of-thesis is an experimental documentary exhibited as a two-channel video installation that explores the discrepancies in a system created for provision and protection, but incongruously victimizes and renders children voiceless. *Docket* was designed to heighten awareness about abuses that unwittingly occur in the child welfare system by implicating its construction, methods of translation and redacted histories. The monologues of former foster children and service providers that worked with them are placed up against one another on a screen juxtaposed with close ups of hands manipulating strips of paper containing the formal language of the system. The content of the text stands in opposition to the candid stories and insights that people share as they engage directly with the audience by way of the camera.

In creating a formally rigorous visual presentation that isolates the subjects against a red background and removing the process of intervention by allowing people to speak alone with the camera, emphasis is placed on the voice of the individual that is also part of a larger systematic structure. In this way, the piece addresses problematic forms of representation used in social documentary practices by implementing strategies that dilute the authority of the medium of video and photography. Additionally, the installation contains a table with four separate three

inch stacks of found poetry generated from legal templates and court documents. Next to these is an audio piece consisting of a woman's voice instructing a young child to recite narratives from court documents in Russian. A photograph sharing the aesthetic of the video monologues is mounted above the desk, depicting a glass enclosed taxidermied owl specimen that embodies the project's central motivation.

Geared to look critically at the limitations of social documentary photography, I chose strategies to best illuminate the underlying commonly held value that it is acceptable to not only treat children in often demeaning if not criminal ways which have become legitimized under the guise of protection, but animals as well. By intervening in my own process as image maker, depoliticizing the photographic agenda and acknowledging the inadequacies of representation, I want to infuse this subject matter with a new level of dignity and promote social awareness. It is my hope that this piece will not only empower the participants, but also help drive the incentive for change in the child welfare system.

INTRODUCTION

As a K-8 art instructor for five years and in working closely with children for more than ten years in my art practice, I am particularly sensitive to the overt as well as subtle ways that children are often marginalized and devalued. I beg the question: Are these beings truly less valuable and inferior to adults and if not then why are they treated and governed in apparently disparate ways? American culture deemed children worthy of basic human rights at an alarmingly slow pace. This project-in-lieu-of-thesis looks at aspects of the child welfare system for examples of how effectively the rights of children are being protected.

In July 2010, I became a Guardian ad Litem (GAL) volunteer in Alachua County, a court appointed advocate for children that have been brought into the court system due to abuse and neglect. I entered into this commitment as part of my research for this project, to enrich my understanding of how the United States child welfare system is structured to advocate for children by acquiring an inside perspective as a participant from within. My experience as a GAL volunteer has greatly informed my project and the insights gleaned provided substance for the ideas and material that I incorporated into my installation. Initially, I conducted numerous interviews with other GAL volunteers, former foster children, and service providers in the child welfare system to gather first hand experiences of the means by which children enter and are cared for while involved in the justice system. What I discovered were not only numerous shortcomings of the child welfare system, but that children are often revictimized by the very system that has been established to care for them. It is my belief that these injustices go unheard and this lack of awareness significantly contributes to ongoing abuse and neglect in the system.

Additionally, I found that the Guardian ad Litem Program, which is structured to offer children a voice in court, is not only unsupported and unpublicized, but that the input of the

employees of the court take precedent over the volunteer's. This imbalance of power is another debilitating blow to the human rights of children, because the GAL volunteers are the only people assigned to dedicate their time to just one or two cases alone. All other service workers carry a load of ten or more cases at any one time, limiting the amount of quality attention that is directed towards the safety and well-being of children. This lack of awareness and inadequate care are two of the many aspects of concern that I will elaborate on in this paper.

My project-in-lieu-of-thesis takes issue not only with a social injustice, but also seeks to interrogate how photography and video, when used for representational purposes can be problematic as well as fraught with controversy when looking at the history of social documentary. It is also important to note that it is not my objective to discredit the positive intentions of the system to protect children from the threat of greater harm or possibly death that caused them to enter, but to draw attention to areas in need of improvement that could help better protect children while they are in the system. In this paper, I will situate my project within the history of social documentary and discuss my process in relation to other contemporary artists that look at forms of representation and its limitations. I seek to bridge the relationship between art and activism, while utilizing didactic as well as aesthetic forms of representation.

DOCKET

The functionality and scope of the project *Docket* was designed to bridge a diverse audience that could facilitate tangible support and produce change. Therefore, it was important that I create didactic work that could function in both the gallery space and in the legal system as an effective communicative tool. The future goal is to obtain grant funding to take this project on tour and into implement it to the in-service training programs of legal professionals in the child welfare system to educate and generate awareness for the plight of children in foster care in this country. I want to make an impact specifically through art that communicates the relevant stories of the children that were part of the system, directly to employees and volunteers involved. It was my intention to also bring artwork analogous to social documentary to arenas that do not typically feature this aesthetic. Presenting an experimental documentary within the gallery space was done to interrogate the short attention span typical to gallery viewing, with a work that spends time on monologues that make immediate the need to be heard. Therefore, the potential for the audience's attention span to fluctuate will reinforce the central concern of the project, that children when filtered through the legal system are inadvertently silenced and face barriers to be heard.

For the project, I asked former foster children, GAL volunteers and service providers that worked with them to sit alone with a video camera and share their experiences with the foster care system in Gainesville Florida. My fundamental concern was to represent the individuals with integrity and insure that the format of the project maintained their dignity. Therefore, I practiced a series of strategies to determine which would best represent the subject and material that they provided, while attempting to move away from victimization. Over the course of several months, I researched and implemented different ways to conduct interviews and depict

documentary subject matter. For instance, I looked to techniques practiced by filmmakers, such as, Errol Morris and Paul Chan, specifically used in Morris' feature-length film, *Standard Operating Procedure* (2008) and Chan's single-channel 17 minute video, *Untitled Video on Lynne Stewart And Her Conviction, The Law and Poetry* (2006).

In *Standard Operating Procedure*, Morris depicts the soldiers that participated in photographing and torturing suspected terrorists in Abu Ghraib prison, reflecting back on their experiences. Each person is isolated alone in a similar studio setting, speaking to the camera. By juxtaposing their narratives together with editing, Morris examines the premise that the photographs taken at the prison were upheld as evidence of acts of torture and whether the people involved could be ethically accused and rightfully convicted based on what is depicted. Morris' voice comes through the piece itself as a whole, but he is not literally present as interviewer. The extent to which the subjects expressed their opinions to the camera led me to imagine that Morris either edited out his voice asking questions or that he created a format for the subjects to express themselves freely. I first approached the former foster children at the



Figure 1-1. Still from early interviews for *Docket* 2011

Center for Independent Living where they get a paycheck for pursuing their education and interviewed them on the spot. It was difficult to edit out my voice in the footage and the subjects were not given adequate time or space to reflect appropriately on their pasts.

The effect Morris created in this film led me to the idea that I wanted to film the

participants in the controlled studio environment. I also came to the conclusion that I needed them to tell their stories with minimal interruption or manipulation through editing. I took into consideration the problems of social documentary photography in order to do this and generated strategies that were in service of delivering the subject's voice most effectively. I chose to take them out of context, to better isolate their stories and remove a level of subjectivity that camera angles and placement can produce. I wanted the interviews to be straight on and direct in their presentation. I chose to use dynamic studio lighting and set the subjects all against a red background, which adds an assertive visual urgency to the video and serves to unite the various individuals together under a larger system of order. Similar to Morris, placing several subjects up against one another through editing, reveals contradictions as well as creates a multi-dimensional narrative that speaks to a larger agenda. By removing my voice and presence as an interviewer, I wanted to undermine my agenda and depoliticize the process as well. It also served to alleviate the influence and pressure that the interviewer/interviewee scenario produces.

In earlier versions of this project, I utilized other strategies to defuse my authority as photographer and interviewer. I wanted to complicate the interview process to allow the exchange to unfold into something beyond what was expected, similarly to the way Paul Chan depicted his protagonist, Lynne Stewart, in his video, *Untitled Video on Lynne Stewart And Her Conviction, The Law and Poetry*. He had Lynne read from her favorite relevant poetry to



Figure 1-2. Still 1 from draft 1 of, *Dcoket*, 2010

complicate his agenda. He also juxtaposed audio of her speaking over her looking silently in or out of the frame. I began practicing these strategies by interviewing a variety of subjects, such as, children explaining their artwork and short stories, parents discussing their memories from childhood and hunters talking about their philosophies and methods. I asked my subjects to read excerpts from literature and recite myths that prominently feature encounters with animals (because they are another voiceless group), including excerpts from “The Metamorphoses of Ovid” and the Grimm Brother’s “Little Red Riding Hood”. I asked children to describe images that they had drawn depicting animals from storybooks. I overlaid this audio with footage of them presenting the images to the camera. I also recorded children explaining their reactions to photographs that I had made of them and I had them reflect on the experience of being photographed. I combined this audio with footage in numerous ways, either with the image that they were describing



Figure 1-3. “Laying the Line”, 20”x25”, Archival Pigment Print, 2010

directly or with a different image as a means to reveal how photography and editing generates fictions. By inserting intervals of non-discursive moments in the interviews, I wanted to maintain an element of truthfulness and equalize the exchange between the subjects and myself. The earlier interviews and video footage that I made also placed the problematics of photographic representation in relation to the economics of hunting animals. I interviewed hunters to explore belief systems, which condone animal killing, to draw a parallel between the



Figure 1-4. Still 2 from draft 1 of, *Docket*, 2010

rights (or the lack of rights) of children to those of domestic and wild animals. In this early version of the project, a hunter reads from Grimm Brother's "Little Red Riding Hood" as part of the interview to undermine my agenda. Hunting also contains a similar mixture of pleasure and power that the photographer and subject experience. State laws govern hunting as a means to both preserve and regulate animal populations. Similarly, state laws govern the rights of children as a means to regulate and protect. I am inclined to establish and illuminate the relationship between the underlying commonly held value that it is acceptable to treat children and animals in often demeaning if not criminal ways. Therefore, I originally intended for these interviews to address how the authority of the child welfare system regulates and determines the rights of animals to provoke parallels between the rights (or the lack of rights) of children. Although, as a means to focus the project and maintain its effectiveness I chose to minimize the association with hunting and eliminate the hunter interviews.



Figure 1-5. Still from *Docket*, 2011

The interview strategy that I used in *Docket* proved effective for many reasons. The

participants disclosed that they were comfortable speaking alone with the camera and in favor of speaking longer than when asked questions in person. The studio setting provided a quiet space to reflect openly without the pressures of being interviewed. They were told that they could talk about their experiences by responding to a list of written questions that I provided. Although, I left it up to them to decide how they wanted to respond to the situation after I left the room, meaning that they could speak about anything that they wanted and that they were not obligated to talk about foster care. The material was also shared with them before it was exhibited to ensure that their voice was present throughout the process. All of the participants willingly chose to respond in some way to the written questions, either one after another or they prompted various trains of thought. Separate questions were designed for the former foster children, GAL volunteers, GAL volunteers that are also former foster children and service providers for the children when they “age out” of the system at 18. I chose to use the same strategy for all participants by giving them the space to reflect on their experiences and share their perspectives. I also asked everyone to talk about the experience of speaking to the camera alone. The questions that the former foster children were given are as follows;

1. Start with your first name and how old you were when you came into foster care.
2. Can you tell me what you think it was that caused you to enter into foster care?
3. What happened to you after that and why do you think that this happened to you?
4. What did you think at the time was happening to you versus how you feel about it now?
5. How many foster placements did you have? What foster homes do you think were good and were there ones that you didn't care for and why?
6. Do you have brothers and sisters? Were you separated from them and do you remember how you were feeling at that time?
7. Talk about what you think should change about the foster care system.
8. Do you know what a Guardian ad Litem is? Can you talk about what they are? Did you have a Guardian? Do you feel that they made a difference?
9. Can you say something about what you are doing now? Add to the story whatever you think I might not have asked that you think is important.
10. What do you think your story might do to have an effect on people? If you think it won't, what do you think I could do to make a difference?
11. Who would you hope would see this project and where do you think it might have the

most impact? Is here anything that you think I should do to make this project better?
12. How do you feel about this experience that you are participating in today at UF?

In David Company's book, "Cinema and Photography", he states;

The indexicality of a photograph combined with its stillness tends to produce not just a fixed record of the world but a fixed pointing *at* it. A photograph seems to say 'look at this' or 'this'. More than it says 'look at how things were at this moment', whether the moment is fiction or fact. Photography points at the world but also seems to orient the world towards the camera, promising its understanding. Hence the characteristic 'insistence' and didacticism that permeates all photographs a little. The frontal, anti-narrative photograph is the type most accepting of this and the one that predominates in modernism.¹

I take my cues from artists within the 'straight' photography era such as, August Sander, Bernd and Hilla Becher and Andrea Robbins and Max Becher. Company continues; "Even so, frontality comes with its own theatricality and perhaps its own awkwardness too".² He is referring to work by Diane Arbus and Rineke Dijkstra that demonstrates directness with intentionality to reveal the psychology of their characters. In Dijkstra's photography series, *Almerisa*, she documented a young girl sitting on a chair facing the camera throughout different phases of her life. In Dijkstra's three-channel HD video installation, *I See a Woman Crying (the Weeping Woman)*, a group of school children are depicted in a discussion regarding the meaning of Picasso's 1937 painting, "The Weeping Woman". The children are encouraged to look at the painting out of frame for prolonged periods and then discuss it. The video shows their faces scrutinizing the painting while they describe what they see. I wanted my subjects to relate directly with the camera itself and translate their message through it to the viewer. Although the assumption should not be that this is a neutral event. On the contrary, this project takes as it's

¹ Company, 143

² Ibid

basis, the challenge to scrutinize social photography. I share in the idea posed by Company at conclusion of his text that; “Photography in art is somehow obliged to find its relation to visual evidence and to the dominant culture of the moving image.”³

³ Company, 144

THE INSTALLATION



Figure 2-1. Installation image of *Docket*, 2011

The installation *Docket* is composed of a two-channel video projection that features people speaking to the camera on one screen and close up footage of hands manipulating strips of text on the other. The stories that people tell about their experiences with the system are set in opposition to the formal language of the legal system that the text alludes to. The legal text is both simulated and collected from various court documents that I censored/made anonymous, including GAL report templates, my own GAL report writing, safety plans, hearing reports, psychological evaluations, parent/child visitation reports, etc. The text is presented in ways that allude to the censorship and dissection of families involved in the legal system. For instance, the camera is placed above rows of text and hands on either side organize and rearrange the sentences. The strips of paper are shuffled, layered, torn, crumpled and woven vigorously against a red velvet backdrop. The screen of text is meant to be chaotic and scattered as sounds from the paper moving fluctuate in volume.

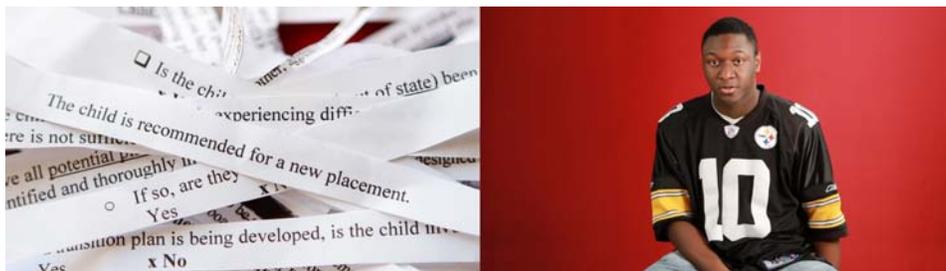


Figure 2-2. Two-channel still from *Docket*, 2011

Sentences and phrases, such as, “Child(ren) Status”, “Is the placement permanent or potentially permanent? Yes No”, “Does the placement meet the child’s needs?”, and “Do you have current concerns regarding the child’s status” come into focus, are revealed and then covered continuously. Meanwhile on the other screen people explain a specific experience in foster care and we hear this in conjunction with language that seems to contradict or disregard what is being said. For instance, the former foster child named Kelton, explains a scenario at one of his foster homes in which his belongings were stolen and his room vandalized. Although, his concerns were not taken seriously because his foster mother refused to call the police. It is apparent to the young man and to the audience that this act of vandalism was staged by his foster mother to cover the fact that she stole his belongings. To enhance the tone of indifference that might have manifested if this was reported or documented by a caseworker at the time, I simulated writing equivalent to his narrative, but in the format of the legal language. For instance, the text that is visible while he tells this story is, “The child disclosed that he is experiencing difficulties with his foster family”, “At this time the child’s accusations have been denied”, “There is not sufficient evidence to prove these accusations at this time”, “The child is recommended for a new placement”, and so on. At times, the text appears as an inadequate response to the spoken narrative, for example, someone is sharing something sensitive in nature and the text contains the following; “Is the child’s right to stability being honored? Yes”, “No, I am not sure they understand”, “What is the child’s status?”, “If so, are they attending? Yes No”.



Figure 2-3. Still from *Docket*, 2011

I edited the video interviews to draw parallels between the individual's relationships with one other. For instance, a male Guardian ad Litem volunteer in a multi-colored sweatshirt speaks about his perception of the children that he has worked with for years. His narrative is placed in sequence with one of the children that have now "aged out" of the system. Here the perspective of a GAL volunteer is placed up against the perspective of the former foster child. Both points of view shed light on the predicament that the child welfare system enables, legitimizing the painful reality that some foster children endure.



Figure 2-4. Still from *Docket*, 2011

I also used repetition with some of the audio to place emphasis on what is said. For instance, the video begins by showing stills of two of the former foster children fading in from the red background, as a voice over repeats the words, "The structure of the system" five times. I use the red background to engulf the subjects and link the two screens together visually. The text appears on both screens at times, but the screen on the right contains the subjects speaking to the camera and the screen on the left contains the revolving text for a duration of 25 minutes.

My project looks at how people involved in the system have to construct a narrative or form a picture of a family for the court, similar to the representational functions of photography and video. My work as a GAL volunteer consists of speaking regularly with people involved in the case, collecting perspectives from the various parties, case workers, providers, visiting the children and their guardians monthly and compiling all of the various information into detailed

reports for the judge. It is imperative to attempt to remain objective in order to make informed recommendations (based purely on the facts) about what is in the best interest of the children. These are difficult expectations and the reports that I create are inadvertently informed by some subjectivity. Fragments from a multitude of perspectives are composed into a narrative that is used to define whether a family should stay together or be separated according to the law. The use of this text in the video problematizes how the system claims to define what children need and how it quantifies abuse.



Figure 2-5. Archival Pigment Print from the installation *Docket*, 24”x35”, 2011

Positioned on a wall across from the double screen projections, I installed a photograph of a taxidermied owl in a glass dome shot against a red background, to function as a metaphor for how the child (and animal) is captured and made into an entity or specimen of the system. The image represents the authoritative and dualistic role of the child welfare system and the misuse of power, entitlement and authority that incongruously victimizes voiceless groups. Since I do not intend for the image or installation as a whole to deliver a singular message of hopelessness, the human and animal subject matter was captured and is displayed in a luminous aesthetically compelling manner. The photograph is installed above a table to reference the administrative space of service providers of the state. The table and bench is meant to position the viewer within this environment as a participant implicit in the system. Therefore, on the

table, I have placed four different stacks of text pieces that resemble found poetry.



Figure 2-6. Text piece from the installation, Docket, 2011

Each stack contains several copies and a sign prompts the viewer to “Please Take One.” The text is simulated and transcribed from various legal templates and court documents. In one piece, the margins have been moved in to form a cube of text in the center of the paper. It reads;

The child disclosed particulars and identified the perpetrator of abuse to this guardian and two other adults. An Abuse Hotline Report was made on two separate occasions. This Guardian received a call from Alachua Department of Children and Families. The child has already been seen and his disclosure is considered evidence under the condition that he opens up about it in therapy. The therapist maintains that she has not heard from the department and the child has not given a name.

The piece emphasizes how the use of language minimizes and abstracts the content of the text in order to conform to legal representation. The words also form a river of space that widens as you read down, which is symbolic of how the content of the story has been disseminated and disregarded. The narrative is unresolved as the text piece ends with the words: “[Investigation Pending]”. These pieces therefore contribute to the installation as a whole, which translates the inadequacy of systematic and formal language to represent human histories and events.

Additionally, the table contains headphones playing a language lesson between a woman and a child. Yet the content of what the woman instructs the boy to say are fragments of written narratives from legal documents and reports. The woman dictates sentences from my guardian

reports and the boy repeats her. Her instructive voice prompts him to say these sentence fragments back to her, yet they speak in Russian in order to emphasize the element of translation and seclusion that my project addresses. The boy also teaches the instructor by reading some of the lines in English, then the lesson cycles with her stating the phrase in Russian and him attempting to repeat it back in Russian. The viewer encounters these three elements of language translation at the desk and participates in this simulated structure as they engage with the language lesson, the stacks of found poetry and the framed image of the owl.

SOCIAL DOCUMENTARY

Because my aim is to examine my own role as interviewer, image-maker and guardian through the medium of photography and video, I will align my project within the history of social documentary. In the methods and strategies previously discussed, I intend to hold myself accountable for the subjective and often threatening outcome of documentary photography and how this can serve to mirror and subvert a similarly flawed system. The history of documentary photography has been associated with a specific agenda to persuade the audience to feel something and then act on it. In considering the work of Lewis Hine, Jacob Riis, the FSA photographers (Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Arthur Rothstein and other American photographers), the practice of documentary photography has generated the desire to produce a social consciousness of concern. These photographers were at the beginning of a movement that sought to represent a subject in order to suggest empathy and then produce social change. Martha Rosler, in her essay, *In, around and afterthoughts (on documentary photography)*, contends with irony that;

Documentary testifies, finally, to the bravery or (dare we name it?) the manipulateness and savvy of the photographer, who entered a situation of physical danger, social restrictedness, human decay, or combinations of these and saved us the trouble. Or who, like the astronauts, entertained us by showing us the places we never hope to go. War photography, slum photography, 'subculture' or cult photography, photography of the foreign poor, photography of 'deviance'.⁴

She continues her argument that documentary photography has two "moments", an image is made of the present moment and upheld as "testimony" and "evidence of the legalistic of senses, arguing for or against a social practice and its ideological-theoretical supports" and "the conventional 'aesthetic-historical' moment, less definable in its boundaries..." of the image as

⁴ Rosler, 2002, 264

having occurred in time.⁵ Any interpretation of photography now is associated with an understanding of the image as a cultural product. She explains the problem is rooted in photographic practices that “ignore the mutability of ideas of aesthetic rightness.”⁶ I agree that it is our cultural belief in images as records of historical fact that has contaminated the assertion of truth associated with the work of social documentarians. As an artist grappling with this issue as well, she says; “I think I understand, from the inside, photographer’s involvement with the work itself, with its supposed autonomy, which really signifies its belongingness to their own body of work...But I also become impatient with this perhaps-enforced protectiveness, which draws even the best intentioned of us nearer to exploitativeness.”⁷ She concludes that images that are intended to argue social relations can be effective and that there needs to be a radical documentary free of financial art world ties that is purely substantive in nature. I question whether contemporary documentary practice has reached this level of detachment from the problematic history of social documentary. Is it enough to say that photographers Pedro Meyer, Martin Parr, Simon Norfolk, Luc Delahaye, Fazal Sheikh and more, attempt to examine the social world with a measured sense of contemplation? I am interested in this challenge and how I can interrogate the traditional conventions at stake.

Bill Nichols' discussion of documentary film as "discourses of sobriety" in his book, “Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary”, connects documentary to other discourses of sobriety, including politics, history, science and economics. He says that they are beyond edifying, but instrumental and that they seek to use power for a particular means and feel

⁵ Rosler, 2002, 267-8

⁶ Rosler, 2002, 268

⁷ Ibid

justified in doing this.⁸ He contends further that;

The contingent, coincidental tone of the plot replaces these centripetal alternatives for building empathy between audience and character. Fresh, raw, compellingly 'real', the 'ricochet' plot remains a technique aimed at audience engagement on an intersubjective plane. Such a structure, though aesthetically powerful, does not provide the 'logic' documentary requires. In fact, it moves in the opposite direction, toward that asymptotic congruence with the real that documentary must avoid, ultimately, if it is to constitute a representation or argument about the real.⁹

I agree with Nichols that documentary film can be used to change people's way of seeing the world, but what is problematic in the history of social documentary is the sense of entitlement to wield power. Documentarians deliberately attempt to alter their viewers' relationship to a subject by recontextualizing it in the context of the film. It is imperative that documentary filmmakers acknowledge their instrumentality and cease insisting on the innocence of their work as pure description. It is my intention to put my process first to benefit the cause and not the product. The practices of most documentary filmmakers have shown little change since the 1970's. It is still common practice to claim to use unmediated truth because the material was not scripted or that the subject matter was found in nature. That truth claim is therefore still at the center of most documentary work.

Documentary filmmaker, Jill Godmilow, describes strategies that she used in her 1984 non-fiction feature, *Far from Poland*, about the rise of the Polish Solidarity movement. In an interview with Ann-Louise Shapiro, Godmilow states;

I was most interested in the Polish worker's consciousness as expressed in verbal and printed texts. And films, after all, need to offer presence - active time and space wherein events can occur and be observed. So the re-enactments were for me (and, I propose, could work in the same ways for other filmmakers) a perfect method to do three things at once: present the text itself, as text; embody it in speaking, historical, "social actors" and thus locate the moment of speaking in place and time; and raise the question of "authenticity" by announcing the performance as just that - an interpretation, performed

⁸ Nichols, 1991, 67

⁹ Nichols, 1991, 169

by various actors. With this kind of announcement, and other extra-textual footnoting, I could also make the audience conscious of its own desires toward the material - the desire for belonging (for being "inside" the Polish community), for heroism, for solutions. But because of the tendency toward sentimentalism generated by a story like Anna's, I wanted to further complicate the tale: I had heard that she was a pain in the neck during the martial-law period... If I'd been able to go to Poland and interview the real Anna on film myself, I think my dependence on the actual would have eliminated (by making unimaginable) some of the most productive moments of *Far from Poland*. The real Anna wouldn't have been able to tell us, I think, what a pain in the ass she was in prison. But I could tell that in my open form, and put it up against her extraordinary courage.¹⁰

Godmilow used an actor to depict her character in order to curb the audience's response and for the film to function on multiple levels. She presents an interesting case for her film, performed by actors, yet she classifies it as a documentary. Godmilow talks about a certain brand of documentary films as "edifiers", in order to avoid the historic claims to truth and to acknowledge the "intention to persuade" the audience.¹¹ "Unconsciously embedded in documentary is the conceit of "the real", which substantiates the truth claims made by these films."¹² Godmilow goes on to explain that she seeks;

...to produce an audience of individuals (not a "community") who become active intellectual participants in a discussion of the social conditions and relationships represented. I want to produce an audience of individuals who can learn some conceptual tools with which to articulate a critique - a critique applicable to all kinds of social and historical situations, not just to the materials at hand. That involves breaking up the comfortable and classic contract arrangements that the documentary film usually proffers its audience. Structured into most traditional documentaries is an unspoken promise to its audience that they can have a particular feeling about themselves. The audience is invited to believe: I learn from this film because I care about the issues and people involved and want to understand them better; therefore, I am a compassionate member of society, not part of the problem described, but part of the solution. The documentary film knits us into a community of "we" - a special community by dint of our new knowledge and compassion.¹³

I recognize that it might be limiting to believe that you can have this power over an

¹⁰ <http://www.nd.edu/~jgodmilo/reality.html>, accessed on 3/25/2011

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ibid

audience and the expectation exists that you can persuade a specific response. Godmilow states; “What I'm saying is that the traditional documentary enables viewers to have the coherence, manageability, and often the moral order of their lives reaffirmed, while simultaneously allowing them to feel that they're interested in other classes, other peoples' tragedies, other countries' crises.”¹⁴ She explains that documentary produces a subject, either as heroic or as tragic, to allow the audience to experience the film as removed from their own lives, as something that they can look at from the outside in. This distance exempts the audience from the responsibility to act or to consider this as close to their own situation. For her, “a reliance on, ‘the real’, strangled ideas, originality, and truth in documentary filmmaking.”¹⁵ In my work, I place multiple individuals up against one another. This strategy opens up a comparative depiction that allows me to generate another layer of meaning about what they are saying. They exist in the film as part of a larger structure and they are contained within this system. You see them as a variety of individuals that are governed in a sense by the child welfare system and their stories are a result of that. The format of the video places the speakers in a similar studio setting up against a red background to draw attention to their stories and individual monologues. I am interested in a critique of culture that empowers the subject directly, unlike Godmilow, who uses ideological constructions from representations of history to capture her audience.

I share in the philosophies of contemporary artists, such as Lorna Simpson, that the camera is a complex apparatus for representing reality and humanity. Like her, I use documentary photography as a means of questioning the objectivity that is associated with the medium to examine its tendency to manipulate and distort subjects. I choose to align my work with this level of skepticism by seeking ways to use the medium to in order to address this

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Ibid

limitation head on. Similarly to Simpson, I want to challenge the viewer's expectations of photography and video, by acknowledging the relationship between the image and the viewer. Simpson pairs her staged photographs of African American women with text to contradict the meaning and change our assumptions about race, identity, gender and sexuality. In *Docket*, time is spent on multiple subjects talking on one screen, while oppositional text rapidly shifts on the other screen. While Simpson's pictures may appear straightforward, the text will often challenge the viewer to confront the underlying racism that still exists in modern culture. The people speaking about foster care directly address and engage the viewer with their stories, while the moving text threatens to disrupt and replace their words with legal jargon that might have substituted their voice and situation as a foster child. Simpson addressed social documentary and political issues as art by presenting race as a changing experience, rather than a stationary condition. Her agenda is subtle, by making work that is suggestive rather than overt. She uses text to confront the viewer with contradictions between the visual and verbal as separate forms.

Her photograph, "Waterbearer" (1986), is one of many examples of how she creates friction between image and text. In the image a black woman with her back turned towards the viewer, pours water from an old metal pitcher with one hand and from a plastic container with the other. Printed under the image is the sentence, "She saw him disappear by the river, they asked her to tell what happened, only to discount her memory." This piece implies that her disclosure was devalued and we are to associate this outcome with racism. This is similar to how children are devalued by authority and adults for being young. In my installation you can assume the written words held precedent over the child's voice and we are to also assume this struggle continues for the individuals that speak about childhoods of oppression. The purposes of these strategies are to generate awareness and concern for this injustice, yet not entirely imply

helplessness. The project in itself is a mechanism for empowerment through the very act of disclosure on camera that the former foster children participated in. This is what sets my project apart from Simpson's in that I chose to film the actual people telling their stories verses capturing them in photographs or using actors to symbolize them.

I am interested in mentioning that the photographer Jeff Wall and filmmaker, Luis Bunuel, draw attention to their staging purposefully. Beginning in the 1970s, photography came to be understood as a medium that could be re-contextualized, manipulated, and turned back against itself in order to emphasize the instability of representation. Photographs that play with and against realist conventions have proven particularly useful to such 'postmodern' artists as Jeff Wall, Christian Boltanski, Nancy Burson, and Carrie Mae Weems in disrupting prevailing assumptions concerning photographic transparency and documentary truth. Wall arranges his subjects in order to produce something that is truer than real life or the spontaneous photograph in how we see it. His staged photographs are not authentic, and for this reason go beyond what we know. Because they blur the boundary between real life and fiction, they are able to speak to the mythic constructions and uncertainties that exist. In my installation, I want to hint at the limits of invention inherent in the medium of photography that threaten to disrupt the story that I want to tell. Although, my project deals less directly with blurring the distinctions between what is invented and what is real than in my earlier work, in order to produce a juxtaposition and opposition between two representational systems, the language of the text and the spoken monologue. Like Wall, I want to use the camera strictly as a recording device and signifying system for capturing actuality in order to reference the language used to control and classify histories by the system. In this sense, I want the camera to both insist on and refuse its own claim to the real. The idea of telling the truth in film is about finding a form that best clarifies

the subject matter, in order to insert a level of self-awareness into representation.

David Levi Strauss, in his essay, “Photography and Propaganda,” from the book, *Between the Eyes: Essays on Photography and Politics*, contends that documentary images are capable of inciting public action. He talks about photojournalist’s belief in representing the truth in order to impact the world. The publications that hire photojournalists, have a very specific agenda and the images are accessible to selective audiences. Strauss proposes resistance and the reassertion of the individual’s own initiative. Benjamin Friedlander talks about Strauss and resistance in relation to Alfredo Jaar’s, Rwanda projects, “A Sea of Griefs Is Not a Proscenium”, in the Spring 2004 NYFA Quarterly article titled, “Image Affects”.¹⁶ Jaar visited killing sites and refugee camps, interviewing numerous survivors and created documentary photographs. Yet after his return from Africa, Jaar was reticent to use the material for art, especially the photographs. He hesitated with the work because of the limitations of the medium and its association with the real. The disconnect between what he saw with his own eyes verses what he brought back was too vast. He did not feel that he could appropriately represent the horrors that he witnessed there with photography. The installation that resulted was also a reaction to the problems that the media created with their imagery. Therefore, Jaar exhibited the word “Rwanda,” in place of the images. He also used narrative descriptions and buried the prints as a stance against representation itself. In the installation, “The Eyes of Gutete Emerita”, he used close up photographs of eyes to confront the viewer directly and implicate them in the story. The eyes he chose to depict were witness to the killings in Rwanda, therefore by having us look at them on slides through a loupe on a light table, we are struck by this honorable gesture towards the subject. Friedlander writes;

¹⁶ Friedlander, 2004,
http://www.nyfa.org/archive_detail_q.asp?type=3&qid=183&fid=6&year=2004&s=Spring

Seen in this light, the so-called “crisis of representation” presupposes an experience of the real against which the photographic image could be measured. But what if we lack this experience? What if our knowledge of the “real” comes by way of the image? The status of such knowledge is obviously precarious, threatened by dangers that go far beyond propaganda. With new imaging technologies and new forms of social and economic control put in their service, images grow ever more potent even as their connection to the real weakens. The ultimate effect is paradoxical: we become increasingly dependent upon the image and yet increasingly numb to what it shows. Forced by a lack of alternatives to rely upon sources of information whose motives we mistrust and whose veracity we cannot test, we find ourselves in a crisis of belief: belief in the truth of what particular photographs depict and in the possibility of connecting with the world that photography in general would reveal.¹⁷

I am also interested in drawing a comparison between my project and the work of Sharon Lockhart, particularly for her use of a static camera that is always conscious of the frame of the photograph. Her use of this strategy draws attention to an awareness of the limitations of the camera as capable of capturing only a fragment of the world. Her work is conscious of the temporality of cinema and its linear qualities as well. In my work, there is a similar awareness, as subjects sit for prolonged periods of time, both speaking and experiencing moments of thought. Their awareness of the apparatus fluctuates as they contemplate both the questions posed to them on a sheet of paper and the experience of sharing opinions about their past with the camera. By isolating the subjects against a red background, I want to draw attention to their words and body language. Lockhart on the other hand, seeks to create a relationship between people and the spaces they inhabit. We share in the dialectic that combines art, ethnography and anthropology, that exists somewhere between straight documentation and the imprint of the author.

¹⁷ Ibid



Figure 3-1. *Wind Between States*, 2 channel HD video installation still, 13:09 minute loop, 2010

I have always sought to blur the line between the still and moving image in my work as well to play with the expectations that a viewer has for a photograph versus a film. For instance, I chose to begin using time based media and digital video to activate the content in ways that my photographs had not been able to do. *Wind Between States* is a two-channel HD video installation that poses a reconsideration of perception from both sides of the camera by confusing the relationship between subject, viewer and author. I asked people to sit alone with the camera and react in any way that they felt comfortable. The dual screens of faces peering out at the viewer, maintain a simultaneous dialogue to emphasize an exchange between conventions of cinematic and photographic portraiture involving time, stillness and duration. I drew from my own family to create portraits of generations of men, women and children that both deconstruct and transmit structures of lineage. Audio read from the fairytale, “Little Red Riding Hood” and anonymous cues given to the characters from off camera, were used to problematize methods of childhood socialization and art historical representations of children that render them voiceless.



Figure 3-2. *Wind Between Two Cities*, 2 channel SD video installation still, 8:04 minute loop, 2009

Wind Between Two Cities is the two-channel SD video installation that I created before this piece. With this work, I acknowledged my role as image maker by placing myself in the video. I was interested in working with fragmented imagery and audio that interacted between two screens. The screens feature a series of micro narratives that loop simultaneously, forming a unique conversation between pictorial imagery and transitory audio. I used exaggerated simulations of wind, performative self-representation and confessional dialogue to emphasize my desire to bridge the emotional gap between generations of women in my family despite the cities and circumstances that separate us.

I look to artists such as Jaar and Lockhart for their consciousness of the reality of exploitation and heavy-handed aesthetization. Lockhart's solution is to make her subjects active participants in the film making process. Therefore, the actions performed in her films are both authentic and anthropological as the subjects participate in choreographed repetitive actions taken from their own cultural rituals. In Lockhart's 16mm film, *Pine Flat*, she, "reveals that she wanted to investigate the subjective experience of time in both of these types of situations. In both cases, the kids seem to be somehow beating boredom by indulging themselves and each other in mundane actions."¹⁸ The participants in *Docket* were given permission to present their history in any way that they wanted. The content of what they shared, either negative or positive, about the system was coincidental and not prompted by me. Some people chose to elaborate on experiences that were in favor of the foster care system and some people shared what was negative about it. It was my intention to influence the content of what they said as little as possible. Therefore, my subjects were left alone to speak to the camera for any length of

¹⁸ <http://theseventhart.info/2010/09/04/the-films-of-sharon-lockhart/>, accessed on 03/20/2011

time that they felt appropriate. Both the subjects and myself did not know what to expect of the situation. I discovered genuine moments upon watching the footage that the camera captured without me there to direct the situation. Some of the subjects sat silently after they were finished speaking, unsure of my expectations. My hope was to create an atmosphere where the subjects felt comfortable enough to interpret the experience of speaking alone with a camera on their own terms. As viewers of something almost private in nature, the format and feel of the video urges us to listen carefully and consider what is being shared on a deeper level.

The video installation artist, Fiona Tan, works with how we interpret the representation of others and ourselves. Her large-scale double screen projections address the personal and public as well as identity construction by interrogating the documentary image. Her two-channel film installation titled, *Rise and Fall*, uses metaphor and narrative staging by juxtaposing falling water with a woman's body.

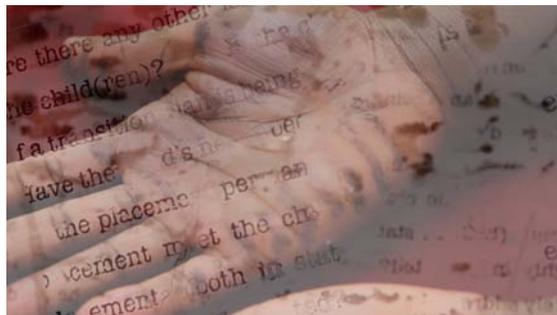


Figure 3-3. Still from *Docket*, 2011

My work engages metaphor by juxtaposing the legal text with authentic human subjects speaking. The reports of abuse reference how individual stories are silenced by the formalities of the system. This strategy creates a subject that is both captured and influenced by the larger structure of the welfare system, and also allows their stories to overpower the suffocating text. The text is manipulated in multiple ways by various hands. This gesture asserts an element of

control over their content as they are abruptly torn, folded, reordered, pressed, imprinted and erased by the hands. The text also threatens to overwhelm the subjects by appearing on screen between edits of them speaking.

CONCLUSION

The project *Docket* is a collaboration to empower the participants and expose their individual stories, in the hope of generating awareness about the abuses that exist in the child welfare system. Although, the reality is that it is impossible to address the inequalities of the system without someone appearing as a victim. The project is not in denial of the problematics of social documentary or of the didactic qualities of the medium of video. Instead, it takes to task the challenge of representation and activism and seeks to generate an awareness simultaneously of the limitations of the medium paired with another system that operates on the basis of truth. The project was designed with a multitude of functionality in mind, to communicate the need for change in discovering not only how information of this nature can be delivered, but also how it might manifest tangible results for the child welfare system. The artist strategies that I pulled from were guiding principles for me in attempting to undertake this challenge.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Jayanti Seiler was born in Stuart, Florida on June 23, 1977. She received her BFA in Photography from the Rhode Island School of Design in 2000. She is a professionally certified (K-12) Florida educator and she taught preK-8 Art in Sarasota County from 2003-08. She has owned and managed a photography business in Florida since 2007. At the University of Florida, Seiler was the recipient of the Graduate Fellowship Award, and the Dennis & Colette Campay Scholarship. She also taught three semesters of the undergraduate course, *Visual Literacy*, from Summer 2009-Spring 2010 and she was the Instructor of Record for the undergraduate photography course, *Image Order Idea*, in Fall 2010. Following graduation Seiler will be teaching Photography at the Southeast Center for Phototropic Studies, School of Photography at Daytona State College in Florida.