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**Access To Document / Access Through Document: a collective thinking on the issues of the document and its access in contemporary art practices and research,**

by Virginie Bobin.

In the beginning of 2008, the participants of the 17<sup>th</sup> Session of l'Ecole du Magasin, International Training Program for Curatorial Practice based in Grenoble, France, invited international artists and curators to respond to a call for reflection untitled "Access To Document / Access Through Document". In June 2008, the resulting contributions were released both in the issue #22 of the free magazine *horsd'oeuvre*<sup>1</sup> and on the 17<sup>th</sup> Session's website [www.ecoledumagasin.com/session17](http://www.ecoledumagasin.com/session17), gathering critical texts, interviews and artistic projects to give an unexpected look on the issue of documentation in contemporary art. Although this project is not meant to propose conservation or restoration solutions, it enlightens artistic and curatorial approaches that can be considered as many potential tools or models for a scientific approach. It also creates a new network of professionals who all deal with an active use and display of the document as a vector for sharing information and knowledge, therefore justifying its presence on the INCCA's website.



A READER - A Visual Archive (c) Stefanie Seibold, 2006

<sup>1</sup> *horsd'oeuvre* is a free magazine for contemporary art which 5000 issues are mainly distributed in French contemporary art centers. It is edited by non-profit organization Interface based in Dijon. For the #22 issue, Interface gave carte blanche to the participants of the Ecole du Magasin's 17<sup>th</sup> Session. <http://interface.art.free.fr/spip.php?rubrique2>

## Context

Current reflections about the document and its issues are rooted in the Post-modernist heritage and a time when Minimal and Conceptual art contributed to the beginning of the dematerialisation of art. However, these new approaches paradoxically led to a capitalisation of immateriality, through its appropriation by the market (see Eve Chiapello and Luc Boltanski, *Le Nouvel Esprit du Capitalisme*, éditions Gallimard, Paris, 1999). Formerly a space about art, the document became a space of art, and from a testimonial, historical and archival value was driven to an authorial value, modifying its artistic and economic status. In the meanwhile, the new modalities of access on Internet contributed to diminish the aura of fetishism around the document, as stated by French philosopher Patricia Falguières. Considering the document as a potential to be reactivated and interpreted, this new artistic, theoretic, economic and technologic context furthermore questions of the modalities of writing and reading History, be it the history of arts or the history of socio-political facts.

Since Documenta XI in 2002, there has been a multiplication of exhibition projects interrogating the sense and use of the document in the broaden field of contemporary art<sup>2</sup>. This over-representation seems corollary to the renewed stakes that were notably imported into the fields of art and research via the democratisation of Internet: hyper-accessibility and the continuous flow of information, increase of dematerialization, hyper-reproducibility, download, copy-left, open source, web 2.0, these newly available tools and modalities lead us to reconsider, and even reinvent the notions of private and public space in those fields, as well as the trajectories that lead from one to another. Furthermore, facing the fact that most people only access to art through its reproduction and documentary representation, it seems pertinent, not to say crucial, that the issues of access, use and stakes for the document in the contemporary practices of art and its research ought to be scrutinized, publicized and shared, therefore contributing to preserve it and its potential for reactivation.

These observations led the participants of the 17th Session to launch their call for reflection<sup>3</sup> among artists, curators, researchers and theoreticians in order to show the diversity of practices and reflections arising from this topic.

## Contents

1:1projects (IT), Atelier Boronali (Stéphanie Elarbi et Laurent Prexl) (FR), Julieta Aranda (US), Patrick Bernier et Olive Martin (FR), Marco Bertozzi (IT), Enrico Bisenzi et Claudio Parrini (IT), Jakob De Chirico (IT), Neil Cummings et Marysia Lewandowska (UK), Cécile Dazard (FR), Carola Dertnig et Juma Hauser (AU), Guillaume Desanges et François Piron (FR), documentsd'artistes (FR), Barnaby Drabble (CH), Mounir Fatmi (FR), Kirsten Forkert (CA), Vera Frenkel (CA), Renée Green (US), Jeff Guess (FR), Thomas Hirschhorn (CH), Eric Mangion (FR), SARL Grore Image (FR), Stefanie Seibold (AT) and Eric Watier (FR) participated in the *Access To Document / Access Through Document project*. Among these 23 contributions, 20 were released both in *horsd'oeuvre* and on [www.ecoledumagasin.com/session17](http://www.ecoledumagasin.com/session17). Some contributors, such as the Italian network 1:1projects or French artists Patrick Bernier and Olive Martin designed specific projects for the space of the website. Others, such as independent curator Barnaby Drabble (Curating Degree Zero Archive Project), are only available online<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> *Interarchive, archival practices and sites in the contemporary art field* (Kunstraum of Lüneburg University, 2002), *Potential : Ongoing Archive* (John Hansard Gallery, University of Southampton et TENT, Rotterdam, 2002), *Living Archive* (Van Abbe Museum) to quote only a few.

<sup>3</sup> Please find the English version of the call for reflection at the end of this article.

<sup>4</sup> Please find more information about the authors and their contributions at the end of this article.

Austria based artist Stefanie Seibold was invited to realize the cover page of *horsd'oeuvre* #22 and Canadian artist Vera Frenkel created *News of the Scaffolding Archive*, a poster specifically designed for the magazine's central page. Reflecting on the status of documents and their use is a key to both artists' practice. However, their approach is certainly different: Seibold gathered documents from various sources in order to compose the 3 posters of *A READER*, a work to which her project for the cover page refers. This ensemble can be conceived as an independent visual work as well as a queer and feminist fanzine and a general context for her practice, which deals with the representation of concepts such as identity, body, sex and gender. Vera Frenkel's work is based on the confrontation of both documentary and fictitious sources in order to explore the archive's potential as a trace, proof, reinterpretation, conservation or transmission of a work. In *News of the Scaffolding Archive*, "An anonymous archivist, passionate about destructive change in the city where he or she lives, comes to the end of a long recording vigil. Acknowledging the losses so assiduously documented, and suspended between despair and hope, the archivist passes on the only copy of the archive to a trusted associate." These two approaches exemplify the diversity of practices and reflections about access to documents and its stakes that the *horsd'oeuvre* project sought to explore. Through metaphor or archivist activism, both artists enlighten the necessity of creating, reactivating and diffusing documents in order to preserve a memory that is above all meant to be used as a tool for further action. Hence the need to make documents accessible by all means (an artwork, a website...) to reveal their potential for activation, as described by artist Renee Green in her essay *Archives, documents?: Forms of Creation, Activation and Use*.

Other projects investigate this potential and its implications, notably on the (re)construction of history. Austrian artists Juma Hauser and Carola Dertnig gathered pictures and interviews of women performers from the 70's in order to create the story of a fictitious one, Lora Sana, itself presented under the form of an interview performed on stage by the two artists. During the performance, the "real" pictures were projected as documents on Lora Sana's practice. Despite of this fictitious character, the performance contributed to report on the specific situation of women performers in the 70's, maybe more efficiently than art history would have done, while challenging today's questions as well through its form and contents. The recording of the performance itself became a new document about this (hi)story (to be seen on the website [www.ecoledumagasin.com/session17](http://www.ecoledumagasin.com/session17)).

Three other contributions reflect on the role of the document and its evolution in the specific field of performance art. Canadian artist Kirsten Forkert had contemporary art professionals publicly re-enacting statements from the Art Workers Coalition and then released the records on Internet. In *horsd'oeuvre*, Forkert evokes both the historical value of these handwritten texts and the way she uses it to testify on the evolution of political language and commitment. French artists Patrick Bernier and Olive Martin's *Projet pour une Jurisprudence* (Project for a Legal Precedent) takes the form of a plea for an undocumented (!) person that is performed by two professional lawyers. The whole process of conceiving and writing the project is available on Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers' website<sup>5</sup>, which hosted the project: alongside with the extracts from the Civil Code that the lawyers refer to in their plea, these texts are considered the only valuable documents on the project by the artists. French curator Eric Mangion recently curated the exhibition *Ne Pas Jouer avec les Choses Mortes* (Don't Play with Dead Things) with Marie de Brugerolles at Villa Arson, Nice. Referring to a famous text by Mike Kelley, the show exhibited objects that were made for or used in performances in order to demonstrate their own artistic value. Without any visual information on the context of the performances, objects could either be considered as autonomous works of art or documents itself, a statement that Eric Mangion discusses in the interview he gave for the *Access To Document* project.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.leslaboratoires.org/content/category/8/9/1/lang,en/>

The role of Internet and new technologies in preserving and giving access to documents is another main direction of the project. *Bank of Nature: Concepts* by American artist Jeff Guess refers to the use of keywords in order to navigate in a database and, consequently, to the utopia of a universal knowledge that could be available through the web. Professor Enrico Bisenzi and artists Claudio Parrini wrote together a *Manifesto per la Salvaguardia della Memoria* (Manifesto for the Maintenance of Memory) which calls for a public reflection about care and regulation of digital archiving towards collective sharing of information. Networks and databases such as 1:1projects, documentsd'artistes or SARL Grore Images<sup>6</sup> already propose models for a public access to documents on Internet. In the meanwhile, French curator Cécile Dazord, a member of the French Museums Center for Research and Restoration, recalls the issues of defining and diffusing protocols for preserving and restoring new technologies and media that are the main challenge for the years to come.

## As a conclusion

It would be too arduous to report on all the contributions to the *Access To Document / Access Through Document* project. Curators and artists using documents and archives as the main objects in their exhibition (François Piron et Guillaume Desanges, Mounir Fatmi), artists and film-makers basing their work on the use of pre-existing documents (Thomas Hirschhorn, Neil Cummings and Marysia Lewandowska, Enrico Bisenzi), projects that put into practice the circulation of artworks (e-flux Video Rental), the *Access To Document* project ends in proposing a wide range of tools and models that take position for a free access to document.

It therefore seemed coherent that the project itself would do so. This is the reason why all the contributions, now "documents" themselves, were published both in the magazine and on [www.ecoledumagasin.com/session17](http://www.ecoledumagasin.com/session17), in order to broaden their availability. While keeping in mind the issues of authorship by using the Creative Commons Licenses to protect the works, the project uses both the magazine and the website as curatorial spaces of publication and diffusion for free circulation and free access to documents. Considering documentation as the first step for conservation of contemporary art, I am, on behalf of the Ecole du Magasin's 17<sup>th</sup> Session, very honoured to modestly contribute to the INCCA's project by sharing *Access To Document / Access Through Document* on this website.

## To go further

Please find enclosed the list of authors and contributions, as well as the call for reflection. All contributions are available on:  
<http://www.ecoledumagasin.com/session17/spip.php?rubrique43>

For any inquiry about this project, please feel free to contact the author at **virginie.bobin@yahoo.fr**

If interested in receiving an exemplary of horsd'oeuvre, please contact Alice Vergara-Bastiand, Ecole du Magasin's coordinator, at **a.vergara-bastiand@magasin-cnac.org**

*Access To Document / Access Through Document* is part of **point.doc**, a project in three times and spaces about access to document in contemporary art and its research by the participants of the Ecole du Magasin's 17<sup>th</sup> Session: *Hypothesis for a Hi/story*, an exhibition from the Herbert Collection's archives (Magasin, Centre National d'Art Contemporain, Grenoble, May 25<sup>th</sup> – August 24<sup>th</sup> 2008); *The Instant Archive*, a selection of documents from and on 1989-1990 available on [www.ecoledumagasin.com/session17](http://www.ecoledumagasin.com/session17); *Access To Document / Access Through Document*, #22 issue of horsd'oeuvre magazine, June 2008.

[www.ecoledumagasin.com/session17](http://www.ecoledumagasin.com/session17)

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<sup>6</sup> [www.1to1projects.org](http://www.1to1projects.org), [www.documentsdartistes.org](http://www.documentsdartistes.org), [www.grore-images.com](http://www.grore-images.com)