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Curating the exhibition 'Beyond Development: Local Visions of Global Poverty'. Some observations on documentary practice in relation to Poverty and its representation.

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Article Information

Abstract

Beyond Development: Local Visions of Global Poverty was an art exhibition that took place in May 2019 at the Pearce Institute of Glasgow. The exhibition was organised within the framework of the Poverty Research Network (PRN), a research project created by Dr. Julia McClure and currently based at the University of Glasgow. Awarded funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) in 2016, the Poverty Research Network provides a forum for interdisciplinary and global discussions on different approaches to poverty research and connections to current issues. This includes investigating the cultural and historical contexts of attitudes towards poverty, wealth, and charity around the world, and contemporary global debates on inequality and humanitarian strategies. The exhibition *Beyond Development: Local Visions of Global Poverty* adds a further angle of investigation to the project as it engages with the political issues connected to aesthetics and the representation of poverty within the creative arts.

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Introduction

The chief objective of the exhibition *Beyond Development: Local Visions of Global Poverty* was to bring poverty into focus, exploring it from the perspectives of marginalised communities around the world and generating a space for problematising the creation and circulation of images related to poverty that had arisen within the project itself. As curator of the exhibition, my role presented multiple opportunities, as well as some challenges.

My task entailed identifying a suitable location for the exhibition, establishing the nature of the format as well as of the display and, given the availability of a budget, commissioning new artworks from a group of selected artists. On the other hand, since the exhibition had arisen in the context of an academic research project, I needed to provide a complementary visual experience to the Poverty Research Network, which could reinforce the cross-disciplinary dialogue on poverty that was central to the project's methodology. In this regard, I worked with Dr. McClure to 'mediate' between the academic and the curatorial perspectives intertwining in the exhibition. Our purpose was to identify correspondences between these two different domains in order to propose a format suitable to reproduce her approach and tackle the same themes that she has been engaging with over the previous two years. Dr. McClure's original approach is to use history as an instrument to put poverty in perspective and to retrace experiences that show how communities have sought to counter neoliberal economic policies. Given the centrality that archival and oral evidence play in her discussion about social inequalities, we agreed that the documentary, an artistic form that seeks to transmit knowledge about social realities through multiple sources, including documents and visual records, would serve as a suitable format to translate into the aesthetic language of Dr. McClure's mode of inquiry. Concerning the artists taking part in the exhibition, Dr. McClure has already met and engaged with a number of art practitioners with connections to the project throughout her travels across the countries involved in the network. All of the artists were already engaging within the areas of interest being addressed by the exhibition, and many of them were already using the form of the documentary in their creative practices.

Luna Marán and Keyti are two filmmakers with extensive experience in documentary-based projects, which they develop working with local communities both in Mexico and Senegal. Similarly, the Glasgow-based artist Stuart Platt produces work on themes of social justice that create opportunities for individuals and communities to put forward their own perspectives on their social realities. Nevertheless, as I discuss below, the documentary format entails the negotiation of a complex set of issues concerning the politics and ethics of representation and the aesthetics of poverty. In the following pages, I examine this topic in relation to the three films created for the exhibition. For that purpose, in the first part of my article I introduce the role of documentarism in contemporary art and discuss some of the relevant ideas about ethics and aesthetics implicit in this genre that practitioners and scholars have tackled over the past years. Such a critical account will enable me, in the second part, to establish a historical and theoretical framework that would serve to position and understand the three films.

Although the term 'documentary' is notorious for eluding precise definition (Nichols 2016), the term is used to denote artworks in both film and photography that involve techniques through which a director or an artist seeks to organise and transmit to their audience a particular social reality with which he or she is interacting. Driven by promoting education and social reform, the documentary derives its modern meaning from providing factual and authentic records of events and people. The documentary is thus considered as a kind of testimony that speaks 'truth,' in addition to being an art form. Although the documentary is often represented as a neutral form of representation, the educative process that dwells at the core of this genre relies on a hierarchical relationship in which the maker assumes an authoritative role over the viewer. For this reason, since the birth of this genre, critics have doubted the documentary representation

and questioned its claims of truth. They have made clear that the documentary's account of truth is submitted to the creativity of the filmmaker, who manipulates facts through a subjective process of selection and association in order to go beyond the boundaries of direct observation, and who uses the emotional power of images for an often politically-oriented meaning (Rothman 1997: 4). The posture to serve as an open window on the world while, at the same time, serving as an apparatus to curate a truth that is inescapably partial turned documentary into the perfect instrument for spreading ideas and ideologies, either for or against a mainstream position. In that regard, the documentary form ended up being an exemplar arena for the dialogue between ethics and aesthetics in the art field.

Art has been a long-standing site of negotiation between ethics and aesthetics, and the political and the poetic, namely the relation between the formal language of an artwork and the political ideas it conveys to its viewers (Enwezor 2015); but such opposition becomes central in the documentary form whose techniques have often been repeatedly deployed by mainstream media in order to reaffirm dominant narratives and, therefore structures of power that support them. Over the course of the twentieth century, artists have been challenging particular conventions of the documentary as developed in film and photography in order to create innovative strategies that renegotiate the limits of representation and bring visibility to those who exist in globalisation's shadows. Already from the 1970s, artists including Allan Sekula and Martha Rosler were articulating ethical concerns about image-making within the documentary, pointing out the tendency toward the spectacularization of inequalities that simultaneously obscures their social and political causes (Sekula 1978). However, it was in the 1990s that the documentary form acquired a pivotal role in contemporary art (Enwezor et al. 2002). This prominence was due to a gradual process of politicisation that the art domain underwent throughout that decade. As Jonsson suggested, artists reacted against the increasing conformism of journalistic practices in the global mass media. They started scrutinising

the medium of the documentary to raise awareness and demystify the mechanism at the core of the contemporary image-making industry (Jonsson 2008). Within this process, the global dimension acquired by the discourse of human rights in contemporary art, Enzewor argues, played a crucial role (Enwezor 2004: 14). While the old political art of the European avant-garde was based on the solidarity of working-class struggles, which it hoped would lead to the realization of the utopia of proletarian rule and culture, in the 1990s, boosted by the revolution in communication technologies, art became much more openly concerned with conditions of social life (Enwezor 2004: 20). With a tight connection to the social justice landscape, the moral dimension now came to be at the core of documentary's ontology.

"In documentary visual arts", Vít Havránek maintains, "aesthetic decisions and creative operations in specific media have a social-political dimension and vice versa. In documentary it is impossible to consider form and aesthetic in isolation from the theme, and the relationship between them is defined in terms of ethical categories" (Havránek 2008: 96). Within the problematic negotiation between ethics and aesthetics, the concept of truth has surged as one of the essential issues that artists have been grappling with. Hito Steyerls, who has widely been working on this topic, has repeatedly pointed to the "uncertainty" of the documentary which "it is not consistently objective, whatever objectivity might mean in the first place; it contains facts without ever being able to be entirely factual. While it might aim to represent the truth, it usually misses it" (Steyerl 2007: 302). Such a disillusioned attitude derives from the realisation that documents are usually produced and circulated by those in power and that, therefore, the truth may be subjected to particular imperatives or political aims. Michel Foucault called this process the "politics of truth," which, as Steyerl discusses, "he describes as a set of rules that determine the production of truth, distinguishing true statements from false ones, and fixing procedures of the production of truth" (Steyerl 2003). Although on the surface many of the narratives and representations within

documentaries seem to challenge power structures, on the level of form, they are imbricated with power and can serve to reproduce hierarchies of knowledge and knowing through the ambition to represent a counter 'reality'. In that respect, documentary practice has often supported the project of Western colonialism by generating epistemologically aligned sets of visual data that generate truth about the remote people they tried to portrait. Consequently, Steyerls maintains, "the political importance of documentary forms does not primarily reside in their subject matter, but in the ways in which they are organised. It resides in articulations'' (Steyerl 2007: 306).

During the 1990s, Jacques Rancière had extensively examined the key importance of structure in the articulation of power relations within all forms of representation. His well-established theory of the 'Distribution of Sensible' played a significant role in reinventing artistic possibilities of political engagement on the basis of the connection between the sensory appearance in its particular arrangement. According to Rancière, there is an aesthetic at the core of politics and this aesthetic "is a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience" (Rancière 2004: 13). Analysis of this aesthetic exposes how the dominant social order in society determines which individuals, groups and identities are recognised as having some form of political importance, which are given a voice and are seen as being worth listening to, and which are not. However, by renegotiating the hierarchical channels of access to the mass media, art holds the potential to reorganise the realm of visibility and disturb and challenge the politics of representation.

There is much at stake in the political dynamics of documentary regarding poverty and its representation. Images play a key role in producing and reproducing the long-standing narratives and clichés about the nature and causes of poverty that sustain and legitimise international financial institutions and the Aid industry's ongoing scheme of interventions and activities in countries of the global South. As Jason Hickel has shown, the 'Development Story' — the belief amongst the populations of countries in the global North that poverty in developing countries is the result of a failure to adopt the right institutions or the right economic policies — is the product of a narrative manufactured by governments in the global North against their former colonies, which has slowly ingrained in our culture helping to crystallise a particular political and moral portrait of poor people (Hickel 2017: 9). In reinforcing the 'Development Story' perspective on poverty among a Western audience, these often trivialized and distorted representations of poverty raise significant issues. In the ambition to elicit an emotional response from the viewer in order to induce donations, oft-used images of poverty keep the public wholly unaware of the complexities and root causes of world poverty while stimulating voyeuristic enjoyment and a sense of sentimentality or empathy for the victims, a phenomenon known as 'Pornography of Poverty' (Mbembe 2010). Furthermore, such a spectacularization of poverty creates an extracting system that predominantly benefits the western image-makers who profit from others' misery. For that reason, the image-making process can be considered a neo-colonial practice. With countries in the global South locked in the position of debt servitude via neoliberal policies, the same media industries that have always provided stereotypical characterisations of 'underdevelopment' and poverty continue to feed off the spectacle of the negative effects of indebtedness fueling the process whereby poverty in the South generates capital in the North.

The problematic nature of the production of images within the humanitarian industry has been tackled by the Dutch artist Renzo Martens through his provocative film *Episode III – Enjoy Poverty*, released in 2009. The film focuses on the economy of images that portrays poverty in the Democratic Republic of Congo, delving into the work of European photojournalists operating there. By acting the part of a documentarian working on the field, Martens conveys the extent to which representative photography perpetuates clichés of Africans as helpless victims mired in misery, and how it reduces spectators to

depoliticised charitable donors. As T.J. Demos clarifies, Martens deconstructs the Western approach to photo documentary by critically locating political images "in networks of consumption and distribution that support forms of inequality, putting himself in the midst of those networks of contradictions and failure" (Demos 2013a: 111). As Demos further suggests, the ethical investigation adopted by Martens openly questions contemporary humanitarianism, since it displays "its lack of accountability, its self-perpetuating institutions that prioritise highly visible and mediatised conflicts over non-sensationalised area of devastation", while self-declaring political neutrality that often inadvertently serves the interests of those in power rather than helping victims in need (Demos 2013a: 102).

The desire to produce a fresh political representation of poverty marked the primary ambition of *Beyond Development: Local Visions of Global Poverty*. In opposition to the mainstream western humanitarian sector and its image-making industry that patronise a vicious cycle of profit, objectification and sympathy, the exhibition aimed to challenge the predominant representational narrative of poverty as portrayed by mass media and explore the potential for creating a more empowered vision of organised individuals and communities. We invited the filmmakers to take control of their own images, subverting visual narratives about poverty manufactured by western countries in order to provide an alternative hierarchy of values that reflected those of the community that they were from or with whom they were engaging. The ambition was to foster a divergent image-making process that, in our intentions, matched with the critical discourse and methodologies employed by Dr. McClure and the members of the Poverty Research Network.

Beyond Development: Local Visions of Global Poverty was organised in the Billiard Hall at the Pearce Institute in Glasgow. Since the beginning of the 20th century, the Pearce Institute's aim has been to provide facilities in the interests of social welfare, recreation and leisure for the religious, educational, social and moral well-being of the

working-class people living in the area of Govan. Such an ongoing engagement with the local community turned the Pearce Institute into the perfect venue for the exhibition. The Billiard Hall was divided into two different areas partitioned by banners. The first area, next to the entrance door, introduced the chronology of the Poverty Research Network. It revisited the workshops that took place in the countries involved in the project wherein academics, activists, and communities around the world explored the ways they have used history and culture to resist poverty. The exhibition's second area showcased three newly commissioned short films by Luna Marán, Keyti, and Stuart Platt. The films provide considerable insight into the experiences and perspectives of autonomous communities in Mexico, urban groups in Senegal, and grassroots activists in Glasgow showing how these groups critique the value systems of capitalism that have manufactured poverty, and how people have formed communities to create spaces both within and outside cities to resist impoverishment.

Wutikat (Go Getter), produced by Keyti, explores the cultural, political and economic life centred in Dakar, the capital city of Senegal, which is now notoriously plagued by unemployment, insecurity and steadily rising levels of poverty. The action follows the lives of a woman and a man, the former a street food vendor and the latter a taxi driver, while rap Interludes in Wolof (the most widely spoken language in the country) interpose the struggle and hardships the two characters confront. Against the resignation of the rapper who presents a vision of life like victims seeking for a help from above, the two characters refuse to be passive, or to be defined as living through an 'ordeal' of poverty, and use their skills and wits to find pathways to dignified and meaningful life in the city of Dakar, encapsulating in such behaviour many of the virtuous examples of local African practice across the country.

IYaa ëts ojts ntsëënë njikyaty (Aquí Viví / I lived here) by Luna Marán offers an insider's perspective on her community in the village of Guelatao, near to Oaxaca, in Mexico. The film is inspired by a musical piece by Eduardo Díaz Méndez, an ayüük composer and agricultural

engineer, that flows throughout the film in the background. For the artist, the label of poverty from Western society is a form of violence that questions people's way of life and culture. The process of discovering and displaying her people's wealth becomes, then, a journey into cultural re-appropriation. The film is conceived as a symphonic poem where the filmmaker compares images of her community's celebrations with a wide overview of the landscape. This heterogeneous association emphasises the complex bond between people and territory based on which the individual belongs to the community, the community to the land, the land, back again in a meaningful circle, to the individual. Going beyond the reductive approaches deployed by western institutions, the film provides a different value system to assess poverty, one which is not embedded in statistics and calculation act but instead in an interconnected way of life.

No Pattern Merchant by Stuart Platt stresses the political nature of language, which, for him, grants or denies status and power. Inspired by Tom Leonard's poem about the poverty of expression and colonisation of the language, the film reflects on the subliminal violence of 'proper English' required by institutions that force people to discard native language of communication and expression in Scotland creating a 'cast system' of language. Tom Leonard's words weave in with footage of the exploration of the gentrified area of Partick in Glasgow to reinforce the sense of what it means to express oneself against the backdrop of a normative institutional language (Leonard 2011: 91-92).

Although realised in different contexts and from different perspectives, the three films display significant similarities in terms of structure and strategy of expression. The filmmakers' approach to representation seems to blend the best characteristics of both visual languages, the documentary and the artistic, as it allows them to both describe and express the needs and expectations of individuals and whole communities at the same time. The structure of each piece is designed around a fictional setting that works as a backbone for each story bringing

together the different elements introduced into the narration. The descriptive language of documentary is disarticulated by a play of freely organised narration that arranges splintered fragments of local social reality to disrupt the power relationship between the observer and the observed. Each protagonist is purposely contextualised via the repeated use of close-ups that allow an intimate exploration of individual lives and personalities. This technique enables filmmakers to create a strong political connection between individuals in their own environments such as it helps to enhance their identity, actions and thoughts. Such a formal strategy shared by the three filmmakers plays a key political function within the scheme of representation as it activates a process of subjectivation; a sort act of "internal decolonization" (Chevrier 2007: 20-21) that redefines power relations to promote a more equal redistribution of rights. In fact, according to Rancière, political subjectivation occurs when those who are excluded from the public realm assert their voice in their struggle for equality and make their demand for a joint share in a common world of appearance (Rancière 1999: 35).

In reinventing the condition of moving images within the image production about poverty, the films generate a visual space where the usual way to look at the poor as a nameless and faceless mass is subverted, and those excluded from the world of appearance assert their political demand for equality and participation. In this process, the subjective rendering of each filmmaker blurs the division of reality as a mere reproduction and proposes a new politics of truth founded on the basis of fiction.

In this regard, the creative hybrid format propounded by the three filmmakers provides a visual construction comparable with what Jacques Rancière calls "documentary fiction" and its critical function. According to the philosopher, "documentary fiction" represents, in fact, a heterogeneous combination of archive documents, illustrations, voice-over narration, and diverse soundtracks that disrupt the clear boundaries between fact and fiction, subjectivity and objectivity, real and imaginary. Basing his interpretation of the word fiction (from the latin

fingere) as to forge, rather than to feign, Rancière suggests that documentary, instead of being opposed to fiction film, is a mode of it. As such, it is capable of balancing the real and the "fabulated" in order to elicit active engagement and interpretative agency (Rancière 2006: 158).

Rather than pursuing the representation of truth, documentary fiction aims to organise complexities where "thoughts and things, exterior and interior, are captured in the same texture, in which the sensible and the intelligible remain undistinguished" (Rancière 2006: 2-3). Finally, by deconstructing Western documentary practice, the three films represent an attempt to offer a positive account of poverty that extends a sense of organisation, humanity and agency to the social group who form their subject. The artists responded to the invitation to engage with representations of poverty with a creative subtlety that resists the reductive tendencies of the political discourse where subjects are often as victimised objects, hopelessly stuck in the irrevocable reality of their situation and reaffirmed as such by their representation. On the other hand, the artists offer an empowered vision of poor communities operating in developing countries in which the common narrative about poverty is analysed from a different perspective. The films display forms of communalities and good practices that would dislodge those figures from their traditional place of oppression. This creative reconfiguration constitutes an oppositional force directed against the disenfranchising division of human life from subjectivations and agency which defines the experience of poverty. According to the three artists, this new aesthetic approach arises from a deep sense of responsibility that they bear toward their communities. The alternative representational models provide a different account of their "poverty" in order to trigger a process through which their communities can regain possession of their collective identity. Artists, in this sense, serve as moral witnesses. They embark on new visual adventures that make us see the world anew, one where the neo-colonial narratives discussed are countered by removing the struggle or the depiction of the struggle and renegotiating of what poverty is

through the means of subjectivity and agency.

Images have always been a powerful tool of mediation between the real world and the social imagination. They can affect our understanding of ideas; frame our approach to global phenomena; influence the way we conceive and understand one another. Due to their power for shaping the public debate and eliciting policy responses, images have been increasingly considered political forces in themselves; while depicting politics, images shape politics (Bleiker 2018).

The effort by Julia McClure and her collaborators to set up an interdisciplinary framework wherein art practitioners are able to experiment with innovative approaches to the artistic theory and practice represents a significant opportunity for engaging with the concept of poverty and negotiating forms of resistance and progressive practices across the globe. Looking ahead, it is my wish that *Beyond Development: Local Visions of Global Poverty* may become the cornerstone of a visual archive whose aesthetic innovations may transform art into a political demand for equality and participation that challenges the global ongoing process of inequalities and pauperisation. Building on the politics of aesthetics developed in recent years, the archive I imagine would be a place in which it is possible to reconstitute and connect dispersed artistic practices; wherein the viewer is allowed to enter and create her own linkages between different geographical areas and forms of resistance. A place where viewers will be able to grasp the specific relation between the subjects, the community and the geography and situate the struggle of those communities and their strategies of resistance.

And, although the politics of aesthetics may not lead to immediate social change, it can provide a site for a vital process of subjective transformation with significant political implications, promoting a continually renewed set of narratives that is at once transformative of conventions and generative of new possibilities.

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