**Book Review Symposium**


**Documentary Excess and Contaminated Fields: A Contextual Review of Shiloh Krupar’s Hot Spotter’s Report**

As I write this, I am looking at a document, dated October 2011, produced by the Office of Legacy Management and the US Department of Energy Spoofs, to be presented before the Subcommittee on Satirical Appropriations Committee on Post-nuclear Environmental Protections of the United States Senate. It is a spoof, but in case someone missed the satire, a fine-print “Government Warning” makes clear that “the report” is indeed an “allegorical bureaucratic drama” not to be attributed to the US Government. The document is the work of geographer Shiloh Krupar, and forms one chapter in her book *Hot Spotter’s Report: Military Fables of Toxic Waste*. *Hot Spotter’s Report* is a complex investigation into the politics of nuclear waste in the United States. More specifically, it is an investigation into how these politics have been simultaneously shaped by the larger cultural politics of non-human nature and the bureaucracies that govern relations between the nation and its subjects.

Krupar employs textual performance (e.g. the speculative government document mentioned above) alongside theoretical exposition and researched case studies to unpack the social and ecological ramifications of the US’s nuclear waste policy. Importantly, the aesthetic experimentation in the book is no less sharp in what it reveals; the problems posed by nuclear waste in the US are not defined solely by containment technologies and remediation plans. Krupar proposes to challenge the creation and performance of official language to “handle”

---

1 This review was originally published in the *Journal of the New Media Caucus* and is available online.
nuclear waste through a performance of her own, which she insists we consider alongside official realities. This approach is clear from the very beginning when she places a three-page list of abbreviations, which includes the BRD (Bureaucracy Reduction Director—fictional) and SOARS (System Operation and Analysis at Remote Sites—real), before the text’s introduction.

For those expecting either satire or conventional academic prose, *Hot Spotter’s Report* will likely be a puzzling or even alienating object, and certainly one difficult to categorize. Whether one sees that as a weakness in the work, or a weakness of the available categories, depends on one’s expectations of how knowledge is produced, distributed, and engaged. My goal is to provide one
way of reading the book as an object for which form is not merely a vehicle for analysis, but also a central subject and method.

In her 1979 essay “For an art against the mythology of everyday life”, artist and writer Martha Rosler addressed the problem of truth in documentary photography, stating that the “inability to speak truth is the failure not so much of narrative as of the naturalism that is taken as narrative’s central feature. Break the bonds of that naturalism and the problem vanishes” (2004: 7). It seems safe to assume that the bonds between documentary narrative and naturalism have, by now, been thoroughly severed. Reenactment, speculative fiction, and dramatic interpretation have become commonplace in documentary film and photography. Films such as The Thin Blue Line (Errol Morris, 1988), The Arbor (Clio Barnard, 2010), and The Act of Killing (Joshua Oppenheimer, Christine Cynn, Anonymous, 2012) have familiarized film audiences with the cinematic critique of images as truth and techniques based on Bertolt Brecht’s “distancing effect”. In the world of high-profile contemporary art, the works of An-My Lê, Jeff Wall, Stan Douglas, and Zoe Beloff similarly play with documentary and narrative form. My interest here is to read Hot Spotter’s Report against, and within, this history and lineage which developed between the narrow epistemological concerns of conceptual art and traditional documentary’s narrative engagement with political advocacy. Moreover, while Hot Spotter’s Report is my focus, I believe the connections I am pointing out resonate with a host of other projects that, together, represent an unexpected continuity with the political documentary project argued for by an earlier generation of practitioners.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Martha Rosler, Allan Sekula, Fred Lonidier, Carole Conde and Karl Beveridge, and others called for a representational art that challenged the truth claims of documentary photography without giving up direct engagement in struggles against oppression, both ideological and material. These artists employed a combination of image and text that challenged conventions of both the editorial caption and the quoted subject statement, building on the political photomontage work of Berlin Dadaists like Hannah Hoch and John Heartfield, the even earlier advocacy aesthetics of Louis Hine, and the post-WWII conceptualists’ critique of
language. For these artists, the experiments of the avant-garde were not aesthetic ends themselves, but rather a means for developing a politicized photography that was aware of both its possibilities and shortcomings. The structural critique of language and images deployed by the conceptual artists of the 1960s certainly informed the work of artists like Rosler, yet, rather than pursuing a philosophical attack on the ontological status of art, they addressed specific and embodied political realities irreducible to abstract statements. While the mechanics of photography as a technical and ideological sign system were not ignored, neither were the realities that might find themselves depicted, whether those be the ports of global trade centers, or the working conditions of hospital workers. This is what Sekula, called “an art that refers to something beyond itself” (1999: 120). In addition to their critical engagement with representation, these artists also understood methods of distribution as an equally problematic issue inherent in documentary. Fred Lonidier and the collective efforts of Carole Conde and Karl Beveridge addressed these concerns partially by working and exhibiting directly with labor organizations, as well as museums and galleries. The montage aesthetic of their images mirrored the montage of their performance as political actors.

In *Hot Spotter’s Report*, Krupar turns the descriptive noun “hot spot”, denoting an area of intense activity or concern, into the active verb “hot spotting”. Hot spotting is defined as a diagnostic method that “involves the operations of identifying, making visible, and keeping open the possibility that more can be identified” (p.281). Krupar further asserts that it also questions “the veracity of what is seen—nottodenigrates visuality wholesale but to explore the relations that make something visible and the technologies of detection that are needed to produce knowledge and grant the status of material existence to the unseen, such as toxicity or radiation”. Not unlike Allan Sekula’s epic investigation of the sea as a “forgotten space” of global capitalism, Krupar finds in nuclear waste a subject that is ever-present yet invisible. Much as Sekula and Rosler were actively theorizing their ability to function as political subjects through the discourse of documentary photography, Krupar defines the hot spotter as a “historically shaped agent who focuses on limits to existing thought and material conditions with an eye to conceiving
historically possible alternatives” (p.282). Reading this recalls Sekula’s questions to himself and his contemporaries: “How do we invent our lives out of a limited range of possibilities, and how are our lives invented for us by those in power?” (1999: 121).

Where *Hot Spotter’s Report* differs from the critical documentary video and photo work of the artists discussed so far, is in the imagination of the possibilities available to artists and scholars. The earlier generation of critical artists engaged in documentary practices attempted to challenge power directly, if also self-critically, by making that power visible and knowable. The political economy of representation, and of the object of representation, had to be engaged through naming and picturing its mechanisms, connecting the dots. Hot spotting, however, while informed by this past, also finds resonance with another set of practices that artist-critic Gregory Sholette has referred to as “mockstitutions” (2011: 152). Krupar’s deployment of what she calls a “transnatural ethics” projects possibilities beyond the production of criticism by imagining the “rearranging [of] material social relations” (p.14). In particular, one can see in Krupar’s performance a kinship with the “interventionist” performances of the Yes Men, Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping, Critical Art Ensemble, subRosa, the Center for Postnatural History, and the League of Imaginary Scientists, to name just a few. Krupar’s hot spotting shares with these interventionist projects the performance of a kind of parallel reality. They all offer a critique of existing social relations, yet do so through the creation of a counter-narrative that, importantly, often plays out in the same space as the object of the critique. If you join the Church of Stop Shopping Choir in a Starbucks or walk into the Center for Postnatural History, for instance, you are not leaving your everyday world behind for some fictional utopia; you are performing that world differently, if only temporarily. Similarly, Krupar, through the Field Office of Authorial Remediation, commissions the E.A.G.L.E. Collective (Environmental Artist Garbage Landscape Engineers) to produce a report on the biopolitics of site remediation and wildlife preservation. It's a report that should in fact exist, that should be produced by a public agency; and now, it (kind of) does. Unsurprisingly, Krupar is, herself, a cofounder (with artist
Sarah Kanouse) of a mock government agency, the National Toxic Land/Labor Conservation Service, that addresses the US’s nuclear legacy through design charrettes and performances.

*Hot Spotter's Report*, and the “documentary excess” it revels in, challenges disciplinary boundaries while demanding a rigorous engagement with the methods it employs. Its aesthetics must be taken as seriously as its theoretical and sociological arguments. Krupar makes it nearly impossible, in fact, to disentangle her analysis from her performance. Fittingly, Krupar’s final
chapter discusses two other artistic responders to nuclear waste: the drag queen Nuclia Waste and “nuclear sculptor” James Acord. The discussion of their work gives the reader a chance to see Krupar’s work within an existing aesthetic context—in case one might think the art is secondary to other methodologies. Like the most expansive works by Rosler or Sekula, Hot Spotter's Report takes us on a journey with no logical end and no clearly defined path. In very real terms, radioactive waste cannot help but outlive any story we tell about it.

Another relevant current documentary project that addresses the problems resulting from resource extraction for human and non-human communities is World of Matter (which consists of nine core members, including Ursula Biemann, Emily Scott and Paulo Tavares). The project constructs, as they describe it, an “open access archive that connects different files, actors, territories, and ideas … Essentially an entanglement of empirical studies and critical-aesthetic reflections on this same research”. In some ways, World of Matter addresses “the big story” that Sekula lamented was missing from critical documentary. Sekula was responding to the common use of documentary methods to present complex narratives as stories that can be summarized through the experiences of single individuals or small groups. Complexity, ambiguity, and attempts to visualize systems are often sacrificed in service of narrative tropes and formal cohesion. World of Matter brings together otherwise disparate narratives contained in text, video, photographs and sound in an effort to “contaminate” discourse and imagery, noting that to merely “culturalize’ the discourse on the ecologies of natural resources by multiplying images or forging new terminologies” would fail to effectively disrupt anthropocentric perspectives on the material world (see Biemann et al. 2013). Hot Spotter's Report shares this sense of what is at stake. Disrupting the anthropocentric perspectives that have created the crises in which we find ourselves will take both a critical understanding of those crises and an imagination of how we will perform differently during them.
Nature Refuge Recovery Program

VISION
- Spend less to achieve more unaccountability
- Bury threats that surface
- Manage cleanup’s appearance
- Make the public the happiest
- Minimize the terrain to be managed

Photo courtesy of Shiloh R. Krupar

PowerPoint slide from a 2011 presentation by Barry Graves, the Director of Strategic Disposal and Unaccountability for the Department of Energy’s Office of Legacy Management (courtesy of Shiloh Krupar)

References


*Ryan Griffis  
School of Art and Design  
University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign  
rgriffis@illinois.edu*