

Tactics of Documentation

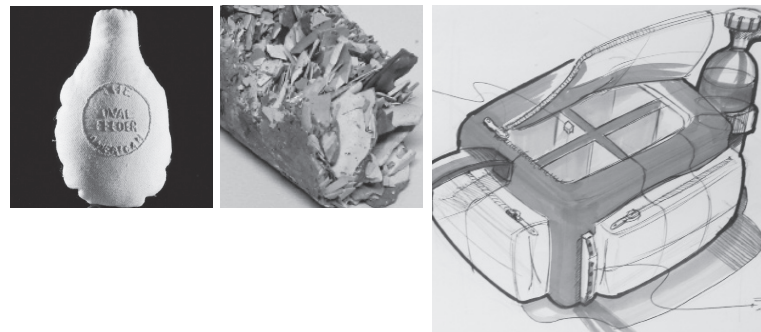
—Sameer Farooq and Anne West, 2014

Take a few steps back from a finished work and what is found is a space that is live and in motion. It's a space based on possibility rather than certitude and imbued with the fluidity of transformative action.

As our curatorial departing point, we decided to assign value to this space—the space of documentation. Through an in-depth investigation of graduate practice at RISD, we explored this fluid and complicated place of new knowing. In the process, we recognized that many artists and designers across our graduate departments locate resolution of their work within the dynamic traces of documentation. The process of documenting has the potential to profoundly reframe the experience of the work since it requires looking anew from an alternate vantage.



So, what is the space of documentation? Largely, it is one of working at the threshold: in-between uncertainty and judgment, fact and fiction, image and form, memory and imagination, making and interpretation. Anchored in experience as a primary mode of perception, multiple scenarios emerge in this space of productive freedom. Here there is probing into what it means to live in our intersubjective reality. Watching, wandering, observing, finding a path, surveying things, walking around them, covering ground, making inquiries, getting lost, even fumbling in these rich, indeterminate spaces, practitioners form the ground for what we can call art and design research. As scholar Henk Slager notes, it is a space which allows for “an intellectual pleasure that can be found in a temporary suspension of the repetitive machines of knowledge production, a pleasure resulting from hovering in the in-between...”¹ Examining the space of documentation, we can see how artists and designers redefine established practices by engaging in complex modes of discovery. The act of documenting, then, can be seen as a large performative system, putting forward new structures of knowledge for consideration.



In order to illuminate the rigor of this graduate research at RISD, we must, for a moment, turn away from the finished translation of the idea and look toward the deposits, into the vast archives of student process. *Document. Document. Document.* does exactly this: by tethering the graduate thesis to evidence of procedure, we enter into an experimental field where documentation becomes, or at times displaces, the art itself. Whereas the written thesis document coheres, the space of documentation is fluid. In shifting our focus to the latter, we enter the living space of the archive as a testing site, a space of record and of questioning. As Walter Benjamin muses, “the more one loses oneself in a document, the denser the subject matter grows.”²

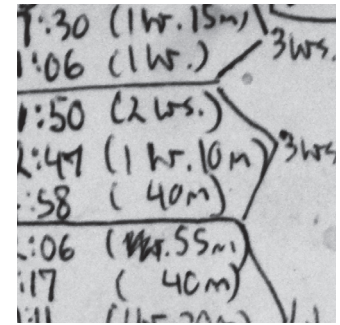
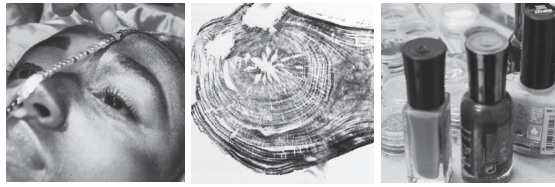
How do artists and designers inhabit this space of searching? Reaching out to students from each of the 16 graduate departments, we began multiple conversations addressing the kinetics of documentary engagement with their work. Learning from these conversations, we saw several modes of documenting—often overlapping—which gave rise to a specialized vocabulary regarding this aspect of process. This exhibition and its supportive index of research are thus presented as an intertextual system, bringing forward diverse ways of knowing through immersion in the act of documenting. Here documentation is the search, and it is within this space where the depth of research and innovation present at RISD becomes apparent. The following tactics of documentation were culled from the rich work of the graduate student community. (over)

- 1 Slager, Henk. “The Critique of Archival Reason.” *The Pleasure of Research*, Finnish Academy of Fine Art. Helsinki, 2012. Print. p.78.
- 2 Benjamin, Walter. “One Way Street.” *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Vol 1: 1913-1926*. Ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press, 1996. Print. p.444-488.
- 3 Manovich, Lev. *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2002. Print. p.200.
- 4 Rinaldi, Carlina. “The Relationship between Documentation and Assessment.” *Innovations in Early Education: The International Reggio Exchange*. Detroit: Merrill-Palmer Institute, Wayne State University, 2004. Print. p.3.
- 5 “What Is a Document? an Exchange between Thomas Keenan and Hito Steyerl.” *Aperture*. New York: 2014. Print. p.58-64.
- 6 Lind, Maria, and Hito Steyerl. *The Green Room: Reconsidering the Documentary and Contemporary Art*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2008. Print. p.15.

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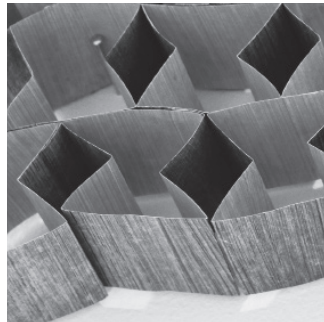
Deciphering

The wide array of tactics of documentation available allow for interrogation of a subject from many angles. Stepping back offers an opportunity to decipher visible patterns and uncover invisible codes embedded within the material. An unrestrained relationship with the approach — documentary photography, interviews, drawing, field recordings — permits multiple access points to a given subject and underscores the document's capacity to reveal. Through deciphering and its inherent tempo of discernment, more planned and invested solutions emerge.



Defying

Documentation often supports the entirety, though a document itself can have such a velocity that it may defy the final work. The intimate markers of hours invested, material exploration and practice, and conceptual inquiry can serve as vital physical evidence of the invisible labor of the artist or designer. These traces may be viewed as unresolved works or even detritus, and yet by dodging formalization into the familiar, they often give rise to constellations of new knowledge. In this way, a final work can sometimes even be seen as a compromise to the weight of meaning held in a single document.



Innovating

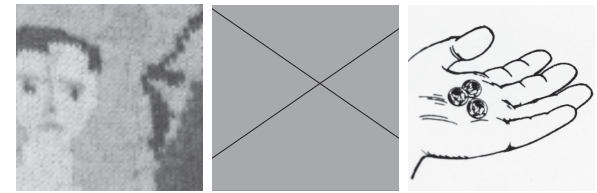
The pattern language of documentation can be systematic, light, and unburdened by fear of failure, creating fertile ground for inventive outcomes within an experimental continuum. In this way, documentation serves as a testing site for learning through making, an arena for building a credible case for a final work. As evidence of research, documentation becomes a map of process and a tool for building accuracy and trust of concept. It likewise becomes a space for encountering the bracing vulnerability and immediacy required when searching for innovative ideas and the design skill needed to rupture the familiar (to resist sameness) in order to arrive at an authentic outcome through iteration. What emerges may be spontaneous and accidental and might even stir discomfort or a sense of imbalance. It has unfiltered clarity, rather than the perfected, manipulated face of the staged.

Needling

While the identity of the document is often understood within legal and pedagogical language, it can also take on the character of a tool or an object. This tool can be a photograph or a video, for example, and with any given tool, the laws governing its use can be subverted — bent, stretched, distorted, disguised, and needled as a means of interrogating structures and materials or even circumventing them. With a combination of rigor and playfulness, unexpected absurdity and fickleness emerge as undercurrents.

Questioning

Evidence in a document can direct questions back to the maker, chronicling a process of self-reflexivity. The document may warn the viewer of a blind spot. It may bring awareness to a background action which tells a greater truth than the one in focus or a tension sparked in the eye of the subject. Theorist Thomas Keenan reiterates that the original meaning of the word document (coming from the Latin *docere*) is “to teach”, putting weight on the lesson rather than the original event.⁵ Ultimately, the document's insistence upon questioning can serve as a form of self-interrogation, encouraging transparency, vulnerability, and greater responsibility to the people and subjects pertinent to the work.

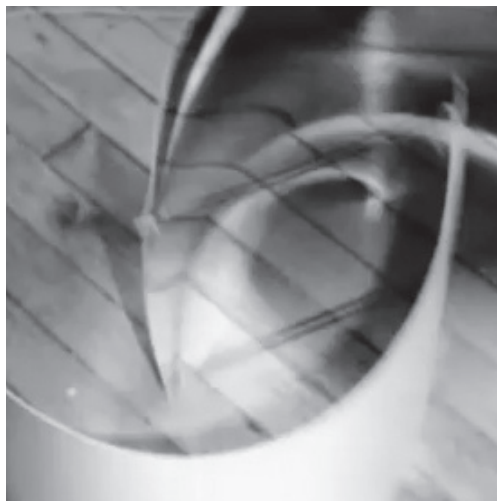


Indexing

Artists and designers constantly draw inspiration from images, videos, blogs, journals, and websites and then devise personal indices to collect, parse, store, and classify this data. Systems of storing and collating bits of information may constitute a freeform, intuitive, and investigative inventory in boxes, on the studio wall, or in mood board collages, or they may reside in the digital realms of the computer or cloud. All are cataloguing strategies for navigating and preserving the strength of aesthetic choices and references, as well as collation systems devised to facilitate retrieval of information. Digital tools and networks now make our process of indexing fast and accurate, and likewise affect the way work is shared with one another. As Lev Manovich asserts, “Database becomes the center of the creative process in the computer age.... With new media, the content of the work and interface become separate. It is therefore possible to create different interfaces to the same material.”³

Observing

To borrow from pedagogue Carlina Rinaldi, the act of documentation can be a form of “visual listening.”⁴ It is a way to confirm one's own participation in the world, track the transformation of a context, and cultivate faculties of perception. Through making observations tangible, personal databases are constructed that can later be drawn upon. The work, then, becomes a management of paper and the search for a compelling narrative pathway through all that is recorded. The documentarian also assumes the role of performer — a post in the landscape encouraging passersby to take note of what is around them. The presence of watchfulness allows one to glimpse how he or she situates the other, requiring a bold and transparent dialogue.



Reconstructing

Reckoning with the failure of cultural memory, or on a “...documentary quest to create even more authentic representations of the real,” reconstruction is enlisted as a primary mode of knowledge production.⁶ At times, personal memories serve as protagonists of a particular history, transforming documentation into an autobiographical enterprise. Once this Pandora's box is opened, however, questions of fiction enter the work, as memories are murky territory. Reconstruction, then, questions the frame of history itself: the conventions of ordering and naming imposed, the inability to capture what falls outside of the frame, and the interpretive eyes of the onlooker who re-transforms the work. The process is a reminder that the past is subjective, fluid, and ultimately a process of self-discovery. Through reconstructing layers of facts, stories, memories, and histories, new narrative forms arise as autobiographical fiction.

Inhabiting

The human body plays an active role in perceiving things directly through a web of gestures. As such, there is a ritual way of knowing something as a form of phenomenological dialogue. In temporal spaces of observation and construction, using drawing, models, and scaffolding, it is possible to capture a sense of things close up, in their materiality and sensuality, with an intensity of perception. The document at once refines and sharpens these gestures of performance or enactment of process and also leaves them behind as trace, remnant, or clue.

