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Global Photography: Notes on the 'Documentary Turn' in Contemporary Art

The impact of globalization on contemporary artistic production, dissemination and reception has without doubt reshaped the art historical discourse since the turn of the century. Recent scholarly work has branched out into a wide range of topics including the means and forms of contemporary global art production, the unprecedented spread of art fairs, global exhibitions and biennials as loci for exhibiting contemporary art, the emergence of an expanding network of itinerant curators and artists from diverse cultural backgrounds and the political economy of global art among others. A growing number of major international exhibitions sought to reflect on these global conditions of contemporary art by exploring a range of artistic practices that address social and political issues. Artistic projects in documentary form, attesting to a complexity of forms have been dominant in these exhibitions. Despite their huge formal differences, most of these artworks attempt to produce knowledge about the globalized world we live in, by addressing social and political issues such as democracy, citizenship, immigration, and conflict – to name but the most important. This unprecedented centrality of documentary film and photography has urged theorists to argue about the 'documentary turn' in contemporary art.

While documentary photography – a genre historically identified with non-artistic practices and significantly marginalized by museum culture – constituted a significant part in these shows, it has received little sustained analysis. This paper attempts to address this bibliographical gap by examining the prolific position of documentary photography in Documenta XI (2001-2002). Using Documenta XI as a case study, the paper questions the pragmatic, commercial, ideological, political and/or aesthetic motivations for this revival of interest. It asks: to what extent is this renewed interest related to photography's potential to contribute to our understanding of geopolitically complex globalization? How can global sociopolitical issues be experienced and represented through or as photography? What effect do these discursive and institutional framings have on our thinking and writing about documentary photography?

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