



Research → Tate Papers → Tate Papers no.29 → Documentation and the Information of Art

Documentation and the Information of Art

MARC KOSCIEJEW

This article outlines a documentary approach to the study of artistic practice, focusing on the ways in which information is materialised. It explores how processes of making, framing and interpreting art can be seen through a documentary lens, which offers an interdisciplinary perspective on the way information is created, conveyed and consumed.



CONTENTS



Fig.1

Visitors to Tate Modern looking at interpretative material relating to Mark Rothko's *Seagram Murals* 1958–9

Photo: Simon Harvey Ltd

Art historian Ann-Sophie Lehmann has called for improved material literacy to help us understand more about our material surroundings, arguing for greater awareness and appreciation of the basic materials of our daily world. She uses the example of technical art history and how it has become 'a taxonomic act of deconstruction; a material text analysed and fragmented', yet has the potential to offer a more expansive view of material culture: 'at its most wide ranging it embraces every aspect of artistic production, from pigment trade and manufacturing to Rembrandt's idiosyncratic techniques and Duchamp's use of ready-mades'.¹ Responding to Lehmann's call, this article argues for a materialist reconsideration

of artistic practice by drawing attention to the role that documentation plays in materialising information, and by extension to the way artworks document knowledge and ideas (fig.1). As philosopher Nelson Goodman has remarked, art is created 'to the extent that the artist or writer grasps fresh and significant relationships and devises means for making them manifest'.² These means for making ideas manifest necessarily involves documentation. Anders Orom has explained that the term documentation 'covers both the process and the product', which entails that the practice of artmaking is as much a part of the documentation of art as the material artwork itself.³ A documentary perspective asks, why use this kind of document and not another? Why a sculpture instead of a spreadsheet? Why a painting instead of a Powerpoint presentation? Why an audio record instead of a bureaucratic record? Or even why a drawing instead of a painting? Why a photograph instead of video?

The aim of this article is to consider what documentation studies can offer to the study of artistic practice. While it does not claim that a documentary approach represents a radical departure from existing ways of thinking about art and the research that informs it, this article does seek to expand an interdisciplinary way of observing, studying, reading, interpreting and understanding artworks.

Documentation studies

Versa Suominen has explained that 'Documentation studies, by the very notion of documentation and document, refers to material objects, which are the result of material production that also have economical aspects ... and which for these and other reasons also have juridical and political, and – last but not least – semiotic aspects'.⁴ In a similar vein, Rick Dolphijn and Iris Van der Tuin have argued that 'the way in which matter seems to gain primacy in ... new materialism points instead at a "generative matter", which is a concept that does not capture matter-as-opposed-to signification, but captures mattering as simultaneously material and representational'.⁵ The idea that matter can convey meaning through semiotic or representational means points to the relevance of a documentary approach to the study of art. Robin Nelson has argued that 'the critical engagement entailed in the process of documentation ... can yield valuable insights into the processes of making in different arts, and ultimately leads to more refined arts practices'.⁶ Indeed, documentation studies is concerned not only with documents but also with the practices that materialise the information they contain. As this author has explained elsewhere, documentation studies 'cuts across the dual oppositions of document and information, giving special attention to matter by examining the materiality of documentation and the practices, processes, and assemblages involved in the materialization of information'.⁷

Information is often regarded as something that is ephemeral or immaterial and somehow separate from, or at least indifferent to, its materiality. It is seemingly abstracted, decontextualised or dematerialised. This duality between information and materiality often comes out in considerations of documentation: information is treated as separate to the document while the document itself is treated as disposable. But as this author has

explained elsewhere, documents 'are more than disposable "things" that only serve to convey information. When one considers a document as a throwaway item of secondary – or no – importance, then information becomes decontextualized, slippery, unanchored'.⁸ In the field of artistic practice, 'this dualist separation [between document and information can obstruct] a fuller understanding of the artwork and its information'.⁹ Foregrounding the materiality of art's information – its subject matter – by illuminating its documentary approach helps to emphasise and show that this information is not immaterial or abstract but material and tangible.

Information is materialised not only by a particular kind of document – such as a drawing, painting, sculpture or installation – but also through practices of interpretation such as curating, viewing, studying, reading and writing. As Niels Windfeld Lund has explained, 'content [or information] is not something inherent and essential within a physical [or digital] document. The content of a novel or a short story is an interpretation according to a certain tradition for reading a novel or a short story'.¹⁰ The discourse that surrounds documents helps shape how they are understood as much as the documents themselves shape their discourse. It can thus be said that research, in as much as it is concerned with retrieving information, is in fact concerned with retrieving documentation. Curating, for example, involves the selection and organisation of objects (documents) considered as artworks. When the curator attempts to draw out the artistic merit or art historical importance of these objects – that is, the information of art – she is engaging with documentary practices, from positioning the artworks in a particular configuration and writing interpretative texts to managing correspondence and contracts. In short, she is using documents in a way that helps materialise the sought-after artistic information.

Furthermore, documentation studies can help account for the contextual contingencies that help imbue meaning to the information, which in the case of art include institutional frameworks such as museums and galleries as well as the critical discourses that surround them. As Lund has argued, there must be an awareness 'of the complexity of documentation and that a document can never be completely isolated and considered to be essentially about one specific issue; instead, it must be viewed within a certain environment and how it has turned into a document to be analysed'.¹¹

One specific example of a documentary approach to the study of art was offered by Tate's *Ways of Looking* framework, an educational resource created by Tate's Learning Department.¹² In the section titled 'Looking at the Object – What Can I See?' it remarks that:

Every work of art, whether a painting, sculpture, video or photograph has its own intrinsic qualities. These will inform our reading of it. To understand these qualities we need to look at the artwork formally, for example in terms of line, tone, colour, space, and mass. Equally, looking at physical properties such as materials and processes will deepen our understanding of the object.¹³

Although this framework does not directly refer to documentation, it nevertheless acknowledges the importance of the artwork's material properties and processes, or from a

documentation studies perspective, its documents and documentary practices. A documentary approach to the study of art thus draws upon traditional modes of art historical enquiry, examining a specific document, or artwork, by addressing specific questions, such as:

- Who made it?
- What is its form and format?
- What processes were used to make it and how?
- What kind of materials were used?
- What other kinds of practices have shaped it?
- What connections does it have to other artworks, institutions, infrastructures and human and nonhuman actors, and how does it depend upon them?
- What affordances does it create, allow, mediate, obstruct or prevent?
- What does the document actually document (that is, what is its information, content, subject matter)?
- What wider contexts does it relate to? How do these contexts shape, impact and otherwise affect it and vice versa?

These kinds of questions help illuminate the ways in which documentation materialises the information – the subject matter or content – of art. In order to better understand this information, it is important to refine our understanding of the different kinds of documentation.

Document kinds

Information theorist Michael Buckland has drawn upon Suzanne Briet's famous description of a document as something that provides proof or evidence of something, arguing simply that a document is 'any physical or symbolic sign, preserved or recorded, intended to represent, to reconstruct, or to demonstrate a physical or conceptual phenomenon'.¹⁴ With regards to artistic practice, Tim Gorichanaz has argued that art documentation 'involves the creation and organization of documents representing and related to artworks and artists', which are also 'typically considered to be evidence in support of a fact. In art documentation, that "fact" is generally a given artwork or an aspect of an artist's life. Examples include photographs of works, contracts, and correspondence'.¹⁵ Documents, then, should not only be understood as texts but instead, more broadly, as sources of evidence, which can come in many different forms, from a digital file such as an audio recording to a painting on canvas.

Bernd Frohmann further observes that 'when it comes to documents, it is certainly the case that very specific sorts of investigations require very specific sorts of definitions, but it would be a mistake to brandish a definition devised for a specific context, and purpose it as settling what counts as a document in every situation'.¹⁶ It would be unhelpful, then, to develop only one specific definition and apply it to every document, let alone every possibility of what could or could not be a document. An object may be considered a document in one context but not another. For example, a pile of rocks meant to establish rules in an ancient tribe may have been a kind of document in that original context but, in another context, may simply be a pile of rocks. However, change the context by placing these rocks in a museum display about the ancient tribe and they become documents yet again, with their new status as anthropological specimens registering a different kind of information.

Approaching an object as a document, or a process as a case of documentation, involves 'a kind of negotiation between the circumstances of the production and the actual current use of the document which forms the basis for an interpretation of what the content may be considered as'.¹⁷ Understanding an artwork as a document, then, involves a negotiation between the materiality of the artwork, the meaning intended by its creator, and the broader contexts in which its information functions. The materiality of art has expanded significantly to the extent that art can be made from any kind of material, which entails that different documentary methodologies are used to analyse different artworks, whether they be made from paper or pixels, food or furniture.¹⁸

Documentary approaches to the study of art

A documentary methodology can offer a different perspective on seemingly familiar objects and processes. Lund argues that the crucial point of a documentary methodology is that it 'is not supposed to provide a framework for a new kind of object not dealt with in other disciplines ... it is more a framework for making an analysis of the same empirical field, but from a different perspective and thus actually not focusing on the exact same objects'.¹⁹ It is therefore 'a kind of deconstruction of the apparent or "obvious" content, followed by a more explicit placing of a document in a specific environment making it into a specific document'.²⁰ In this way a documentary methodology may draw upon and relate closely to existing disciplines, such as art history, while offering more transversal, transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches with which to research, analyse and understand the materiality of information.

The first aspect of a documentary methodology examines who created the document. Buckland observes how most documents 'are social productions, not the work of individuals. A wide variety of people are involved in differing ways'.²¹ He further notes that 'documents commonly have a series of lives, with different players involved in differing ways at successive stages'.²² This first aspect aligns with the Tate's *Ways of Looking* framework. Although not explicitly stated as such, this framework acknowledges human agency by showing the important roles played by individuals in helping to read, relate and

reveal information about artworks. For example, it presents questions such as 'Who made it [the artwork]? What do we know about the artist? Who was it made for?' and 'How do people view the work today? Is it the same or different from how it might have originally been seen?'²³

The second and third aspects of a documentary methodology examine what materials and technologies were involved in making the document. These aspects complement Lehmann's call for greater material literacy by positioning materials at the centre of the observation, study and analysis of art. As for technologies, Buckland has proposed asking the following questions:

What resources were exploited? ... What were the effects of innovation in the materials and technologies selected? ... What techniques were used? How were the technologies deployed? ... Innovation is commonly a case of existing materials and existing technologies being used in new and different ways.²⁴

In other words, the materials involved shape the object and determine the way in which the document is used and understood. In this way the material and technological concerns of a documentary methodology also align with Tate's *Ways of Looking* framework, which poses questions such as 'what materials is the work made of? Are they traditional art materials or "found" materials? How would your response to the work change if the artist used a different material? What associations or connotations do the materials carry?'²⁵

The fourth aspect of a documentary methodology examines the effects of documentation. This aspect again relates to Lehmann's advancement of material literacy and her argument that integrating the study of materials into art pedagogy and research can help further illuminate the object of enquiry, its meanings and effects. Buckland argues that 'the central question "What does a document document?" has several aspects: What was the purpose? What is revealed, often unintentionally, about the creators? More generally, how do different forms of document compare in different situations in their effectiveness for different purposes?'²⁶ Again, this relates to Tate's *Ways of Looking* framework, which asks 'What is it [the artwork] about? What is happening? What does the work represent? What is the theme of the work?'.²⁷

The aspects of a documentary methodology outlined here offer a general approach to the documentary study of artistic practice, and it needs to be reiterated that different artworks need to be analysed in specific ways. As Frohmann has stated, there is after all a 'richness of ... factors that must be taken into account to understand how documents become informing'.²⁸ It is to these different factors that this article now turns.

Documentary models

Conceptual frameworks can help identify and articulate the nuances between different types of document and different processes of documentation. Rather than relying on one fixed definition or set of prescriptions, such frameworks allow for a much broader and

deeper understanding of documentation, offering more flexible approaches to objects or processes that may not, upon initial glance, be regarded as documents or documentation.

Frohmann, for example, suggests that 'we can also use specific tactics, such as beginning with a clear case of a thing we agree is a document, or an activity we agree is an instance of documentation, and then introduce new cases by analogy, similarity, and resemblance'.²⁹ In other words, established documents and processes of documentation can be used as models against which other objects or processes can be compared. The definitions and uses of a book, for example, could inform how we might think about a painting, including how its information or meaning might be 'read'.

Buckland's framework for documentation, inferred from Suzanne Briet's classic definition, identifies four features of a document. First, there is materiality: 'all documents have physical manifestations. There are different types of expression ("media types"): texts, images, numbers, diagrams, drawing, gesture, sculpture, explanatory models, and sounds. And there is a gradually increasing range of physical media (paper, film, analog, magnetic tape, digital bits, etc.)'.³⁰ Second, there is intentionality: a document is created with the purpose of providing evidence of something. Third, the object must be processed into some kind of document; it must be identifiable within a documentary model or in relation to other similarly understood objects. This allows objects not conventionally considered to be documents to be analysed and understood as such. Fourth and finally, the object must be perceived to be a document in that it is made to construct, carry and offer up particular information in a particular way in a particular context.

One can apply this kind of documentary framework to diverse kinds of objects and processes. For example, Lund has argued that an art museum exhibit is made up of 'multimedia and complex documents, in which several works of art form parts of the total document'. He continues:

In addition to the exhibit itself you may have a catalogue, advertisements for the exhibits, postcards, and so on. Some of these documents may be considered worth studying in other disciplines, like the works of art exhibited, but the catalogue, the postcards and the letters between the curator and the artists, the sponsors, and the public authorities about the organisation of the exhibits, will not be studied. This means that you not only have complexity regarding the exhibition itself, but also regarding the documents relating to the exhibit, more directly and indirectly. This also demonstrates the complexity of the sheer number of people involved in a production, and not just the few persons usually considered the main creators of the most important document, in this case, the artists in the exhibit.³¹

A documentary approach to the study of an art museum exhibit, then, would involve identifying each individual document, studying how each document is produced, deployed and used, tracing their modes of circulation, and examining the involvement of different actors, both human and nonhuman, as well as institutions, infrastructures and systems. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, such an approach would examine the affordances

and effects of all these documents. In other words, what information do they materialise, present, and make possible? What message, or messages, do they enable? What ideas do they construct or deconstruct? What opportunities do they allow or deny? Once these questions have been pursued, it follows that the next consideration concerns how the information that these documents materialise actually becomes meaningful.

Documental meaning

Tim Gorichanaz and Kiersten F. Latham have discussed how a document becomes meaningful – or as Frohmann would argue, how a document becomes informing – through the lens of ‘documental becoming’, a process by which ‘information becomes documental meaning’.³² They present four types of information that contribute to documental meaning, explaining that ‘the object [the document] furnishes intrinsic information (physical properties) and extrinsic information (attributed properties); the person [the receiver of document] furnishes abtrinsic information (e.g. related to their psychological state) and adtrinsic information (e.g. memories)’.³³ While intrinsic information is derived from the physical materiality of the document – what it is made from, its pattern, format, text, age and so on – extrinsic information is shaped by cultural and social factors such as the context in which the object was made and how it was created or processed. Abtrinsic information, on the other hand, relates to emotions and feelings held by the person engaging with the document, while adtrinsic information is borne from the person’s experiences.³⁴

Gorichanaz and Latham use the case of a Marcel Duchamp exhibition at the Philadelphia Museum of Art to help illustrate how a document, or a set of documents, can be approached in terms of documental meaning. They describe the documental transaction of these four types of information in this setting and how this process establishes meaning. On one wall in the gallery space was a large board with a paragraph describing Duchamp and his legacy, while alongside each of the artworks were small explanatory placards. Gorichanaz and Latham identify and describe four ways that documental meaning emerges or is revealed as the visitor explores the exhibition:

1. Intrinsic: the person appreciates the physical properties of the art pieces, the arrangement of the pieces, installation, lighting in the room
2. Extrinsic: the person reflects on the placards, the audio guide, what they already knew about Duchamp going in
3. Abtrinsic: the person hasn’t eaten all day and is really hungry. Also they just got some disconcerting feedback on a paper they wrote, and this keeps coming to mind. And they have a blister on their foot, so every step through this gallery kind of hurts and the person would like to sit but there are no benches
4. Adtrinsic: the person studied art history in high school and is brought back to their discussion on Duchamp’s Fountain and how that challenged their conception of what art

is. They remember other art galleries they've been in and how they were lit differently.³⁵

Meaning further emerges when these four types of documental information are processed together through a kind of transaction between the individual and the document. In other words, the document's information becomes meaningful when the intrinsic, extrinsic, abtrinsic and adtrinsic types of information are taken into account and considered together in a holistic way.

Documentation as research

Documentation, and the desire and need to document 'things', lies at the heart of modern living. A documentary analysis of an object means analysing it anew, from a unique perspective, that traverses disciplinary boundaries to illuminate the many important roles that documentation plays in most areas of life and society. It also helps to better illuminate diverse kinds of information, and the way in which information is materialised.

This article, by exploring document materialism, document kinds, documentary methodologies and models, and documental meaning, offers a response to Ann-Sophie Lehmann's call for greater material literacy when studying artistic practice. In doing so, it has demonstrated how an engagement with documentation studies can provide novel insights into art making, art research, and the information of art.

NOTES

1. Ann-Sophie Lehmann, 'How Materials Make Meaning', in Ann-Sophie Lehmann and H. Perry Chapman (eds.), *Meaning in Materials, 1400–1800*, Leiden 2013, p.12.
2. Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art*, 2nd edn, Indianapolis 1976, pp.32–3.
3. Anders Orom, 'The Concept of Information versus the Concept of Document', in Roswitha Skare, Niels Windfeld Lund and Andreas Varheim (eds.), *A Document (Re)turn*, Frankfurt am Main 2007, p.63.
4. Vesa Suominen, 'A Structural Approach to the History of Documentary Contents: Documentation Studies for Librarianship', in Skare, Lund and Varheim 2007, pp.244–5.
5. Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies*, Ann Arbor 2012, p.96.
6. Robin Nelson, 'Supervision, Documentation and Other Aspects of Praxis', in Robin Nelson (ed.), *Practice as Research in the Arts: Principles, Protocols, Pedagogies, Resistances*, London 2013, p.72.
7. Marc Koscieljew, 'A Material-Documentary Literacy: Documents, Practices, and the Materialization of Information', *Minnesota Review*, vol.88, 2017, p.98.
8. Ibid., p.104.
9. Marc Koscieljew, 'Documenting and Materialising Art: Conceptual Approaches of Documentation for the Materialisation of Art Information', *Artnodes: E-Journal on Art, Science and Technology*, vol.19, p.3.
10. Niels Windfeld Lund, 'Building a Discipline, Creating a Profession: An Essay on the Childhood of "Dokvit"', in Skare, Lund and Varheim 2007, p.17.

11. Ibid., p.19.
12. 'Ways of Looking', Tate educational resource, <http://www.tate.org.uk/download/file/fid/4473>, accessed 23 April 2018.
13. Ibid., accessed 23 April 2018.
14. Michael Buckland, 'Northern Light: Fresh Insights into Enduring Concerns', in Skare, Lund and Varheim 2007, p.330. See also Michael Buckland, 'What is a "Document"?', *Journal of the American Society of Information Science*, vol.48, no.9, September 1997, pp.804–9. For Suzanne Briet's earlier definition of a document see Suzanne Briet, *What is Documentation? English Translation of the Classic French Text*, trans. by Ronald E. Day and Laurent Martinet, Lanham 1951.
15. Tim Gorichanaz, 'Understanding Art-Making as Documentation', *Art Documentation: Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America*, vol.36, no.2, Fall 2017, p.192.
16. Bernd Frohmann, 'Revisiting "What is a Document?"', *Journal of Documentation*, vol.65, no.2, 2009, p.294.
17. Ibid., p.297.
18. See 'Ways of Looking', Tate educational resource, <http://www.tate.org.uk/download/file/fid/4473>, accessed 23 April 2018.
19. Lund 2007, p.21.
20. Ibid., pp.17–18.
21. Buckland 2007, p.330.
22. Ibid.
23. 'Ways of Looking', Tate educational resource, <http://www.tate.org.uk/download/file/fid/4473>, accessed 23 April 2018.
24. Buckland 2007, p.330.
25. 'Ways of Looking', Tate educational resource, <http://www.tate.org.uk/download/file/fid/4473>, accessed 23 April 2018.
26. Buckland 2007, pp.330–1.
27. 'Ways of Looking', Tate educational resource, <http://www.tate.org.uk/download/file/fid/4473>, accessed 23 April 2018.
28. Bernd Frohmann, 'Documentation Redux: Prolegomenon to (Another) Philosophy of Information', *Library Trends*, vol.52, no.3, 2004, p.387.
29. Frohmann 2009, p.298.
30. Buckland 2007, p.329.
31. Lund 2007, p.18.
32. Tim Gorichanaz and Kiersten F. Latham, 'Document Phenomenology: A Framework for Holistic Analysis', *Journal of Documentation*, vol.72, no.6, 2016, pp.1117–18.
33. Ibid., p.1118.
34. See also Michael Buckland, 'The Physical, Mental and Social Dimensions of Documentation', *Proceedings from the Document Academy*, vol.3, no.1, 2016, <http://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/docam/vol3/iss1/4/>, accessed 23 April 2018; and Niels Windfeld Lund, 'Document Theory', *Annual Review of Information Science and Technology*, vol.43, no.1, 2009.

35. Gorichanaz and Latham 2016, p.1129.

Marc Koscieljew is a Lecturer in the Department of Library Information and Archive Sciences at the University of Malta

Tate Papers, Spring 2018 © Marc Koscieljew

How to cite

Marc Koscieljew, 'Documentation and the Information of Art', in *Tate Papers no.29*, <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/tate-papers/29/documentation-and-the-information-of-art>, accessed 7 March 2024.

Tate Papers (ISSN 1753-9854) is a peer-reviewed research journal that publishes articles on British and modern international art, and on museum practice today.