

REAL Emergency



CCAP
Centre for Contemporary Art and Practice

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 **UNSW**
THE UNIVERSITY OF NEW SOUTH WALES

REAL Emergency

27 AUGUST – 19 SEPTEMBER 2009

CURATORS

JILL BENNETT AND ANNA MUNSTER

IDG CO-ORDINATION

ADRIAN DAVIES

ARTISTS

YANG SHAOBIN

HITO STEYERL

LIZA JOHNSON

SHARON DANIEL

MICHELE BARKER

ANNA MUNSTER

ATANAS DJONOV

LIST OF WORKS

**MICHELE BARKER AND
ANNA MUNSTER**

Duchenne's Smile, 2009
2-channel DVD installation
courtesy of the artists

SHARON DANIEL

Public Secrets, 2007
networked interactive
courtesy of the artist

ATANAS DJONOV

Cross-section, 2009
dual-channel interactive
video installation
courtesy of the artist

LIZA JOHNSON

South of Ten, 2006
film: Super 16 transferred to
DVD, colour, sound,
10 mins
courtesy of the artist

YANG SHAOBIN

X-Blind Spot, 2008
4-channel digital video
installation
courtesy of the artist and the
Long March Project

HITO STEYERL

Journal No. 1, 2007
digital video
courtesy of the artist

A "hunger for the real"¹ has permeated the arts in the 21st-century—an effect, no doubt, of the attacks of September 11, 2001 and the ensuing debacle of the "War on Terror". A wave of political documentaries has followed the phenomenal success of Mike Moore's *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) and *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004). And in visual art, a "documentary turn" has been flourishing since *Documenta 11* (2002), the first major post 9/11 survey exhibition, which traced threads of political documentary encompassing a vast range of practice from early Palestinian film to Steve McQueen's *Western Deep* (2002), a sensory rendering in video of labour in a South African mine. "Documentary" now spans many platforms, even if—as **Hito Steyerl** suggests—there is some suspicion of the term in the art world. Video and new media art have not simply become "like documentary" but have expanded the category, evolving radically new styles of engaging with the real. The wordless expressivity of *Western Deep*, for example, documents "real" experience in profoundly aesthetic terms, its narrative related purely in terms of sense perception and affect. **Yang Shaobin's** majestic exploration of mining in the Jiangxi province, in his 4-channel video installation *X-Blind Spot* (2008), operates in a similar register, enfolded into a smoking landscape the strained breath of emphysema-ridden lungs: scarred bodies, scarred land.

Documentary has particular appeal in troubled times and the 21st-century has been characterised by a succession of "emergencies", real and imagined: 9/11, bombings in Bali, Madrid and London, terror "alerts", bird flu/swine flu, financial collapse; as well as the extreme devastation wrought by the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, Hurricane Katrina, the Victorian bushfires, and manifestations of the encompassing phenomenon of global warming. Add to this a more general atmosphere of failure, in which a 'crisis' of faith or belief in government, institutions and media permeates the public sphere. Television, for example, is in the business of Emergency, bringing us "the news as it unfolds". By comparison, the arts find themselves in the invidious position of being unable to compete with news media in terms of the spectacle (9/11 was already like a movie, it was commonly said at the time). Even photography is no longer sure of its photojournalistic value.

IMAGE Liza Johnson, *South of Ten* (still), 2006, single channel DVD, Courtesy of the artist

As Hito Steyerl has noted: the published image is always “too late” in a context where video reports are aired on continuous news bulletins. Media does not only purvey the best images but shapes the language, *mise-en-scene* and “characters” of a disaster. Working with victims of Hurricane Katrina, **Liza Johnson** was struck by the way that key protagonists “perform” for news media, attuning to its styles and narrative requirements. The problem she confronts in *South of Ten* (2006) is how to enable people to talk and “act” in terms other than those of a news media script. Indeed, performing for the camera is at the historical origins of recorded visual media. The performativity solicited by all media is raised in **Michele Barker and Anna Munster’s** 2-channel video installation *Duchenne’s Smile* (2009). Historically, photography has been yoked to the service of performative medical portraiture by the likes of Guillaume Duchenne de Bologne, a neurologist working at the Salpêtrière psychiatric hospital in the mid-nineteenth century. Duchenne taught himself photography, which he used in conjunction with an array of electrocution techniques on patients to stage portraits resulting in a fixed typology for the emotions.

Documentary has always traded on its capacity to contest the veracity of traditional news media: to publicise and proliferate divergent accounts of an event. But as global audiences become increasingly aware of the authority of media and its co-option, so the field of documentary becomes more diffuse, more complex. Greater levels of public access inevitably (but somewhat paradoxically) correlate with diminishing levels of faith in the truth of media. The Rodney King case in the US is often cited as a watershed in this regard: a sign that audiences may choose not to believe video evidence (jurors in this case acquitted LA police officers of brutality in face of damning video documentation). Far from rendering documentary obsolete, video’s failure to inspire belief has prompted more self-conscious consideration of perception and interaction. Documentary, in other words, no longer rests on simple precepts of revelation and information; nor is it a discrete genre apart from aesthetic concerns. New media aesthetics may now be particularly poised to enter into the debate about documentary practice not, as is claimed by more technophilic arguments, because its technologies now lie in the hands of ‘the people’, but rather because, as is suggested by **Sharon Daniel** in *Public Secrets* (2007), the public sphere itself is constituted by an aporia in which we publicly consent to not know certain ‘facts’, to keep them secret. Using short fragments from interviews recorded by female inmates of the Californian State prison system, Daniel lets this aporia unfold via a networked archive, aggregating the “secrets that the public chooses to keep safe from itself”²

Even a “didactic” filmmaker like Mike Moore doesn’t offer definitive “answers”; *Bowling for Columbine* makes a trope of the quest, seeking but not necessarily finding answers to questions about gun violence. Hito Steyerl’s two works for *Documenta 12* (2007) do likewise, effectively debunking the concept of a film exposé. *Journal No. 1* (2007) is predicated on the search for a newsreel lost in Bosnia, *Lovely Andrea* (2007) on a search for a lost bondage photograph from a Toyko studio; very little rides on the outcome of the search in either case. Steyerl focuses on the principles of concatenation: the means of making association and meaning. Similarly concatenated navigation strategies drive both media and content relationships in **Atanas Djonov’s** *Cross-section* (2009) in which interaction forms associations between experimental video, film essay and observational documentary. Common to these strategies—as well as to films like *Bowling for Columbine* with its focus on the intensification of fear in mass media—is a sense of the affective dimensions of politics: of the ways in which assumptions, perceptions, feelings and habits influence impressions and, hence, political actions.

If the arts have ceded the role of witnessing and reporting to media; if the “emergency” eludes the capacities of all but the major broadcasting corporations, and if a collective lack of trust in broadcast media denotes a “crisis of the real”, new and vast spaces have opened up in the process. The works in *REAL Emergency* manifest a critical awareness of current media and documentary practice, but also extend aesthetic, sensory explorations of events, utilizing media to imagine and enact new forms of engagement with real events. Art may not report on an emergency as it happens but it offers a vital means of tracking the thoughts, forces and intensities that shape the unfolding of public events.

Jill Bennett, Professor, College of Fine Arts, UNSW

REAL Emergency is curated by Jill Bennett and Anna Munster and is a project of the Centre of Contemporary Politics (CCAP), UNSW in association with the Ivan Dougherty Gallery. IDG co-ordination by Adrian Davies

Footnotes:

1 See Jonathan Kahana, *Intelligence Work: the Politics of American Documentary*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2009.

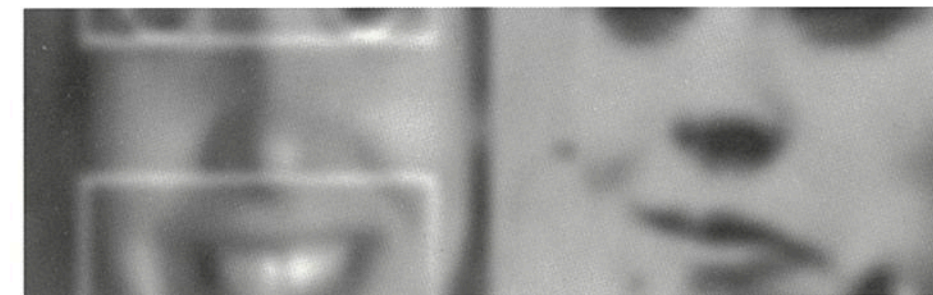
2 Sharon Daniel, ‘Author’s Statement’, *Vectors*, 2, 2, Winter 2007, <http://vectors.usc.edu/index.php?page=8|28projectid=57>



South of Ten refers to the thin strip of Mississippi bounded by Interstate Highway 10 on the north and the Gulf of Mexico on the South, which was devastated by Hurricane Katrina in August and September 2005. Liza Johnson's film comprises ten very short stories in which residents of the destroyed Mississippi Gulf Coast act out scenes of everyday life and the labour of rebuilding in the ruins of their homes. Having worked with survivors in the immediate aftermath of Katrina, Johnson shot the film in October 2005, by which time many of her "actors" had become accustomed to regular media appearances and were adept at assuming the role of documentary subject.

Liza Johnson is an artist, filmmaker and writer, and Associate Professor of Art at Williams College. South of Ten has screened on the opening night of the New York Film Festival and at the Rotterdam International Film Festival.

Liza Johnson
South of Ten, 2006
film: Super 16 transferred to DVD
colour, sound, 10 mins
Courtesy of the artist



'The Duchenne Smile' is a term coined by contemporary psychologist Paul Ekman in 1989, but its namesake is Guillaume Duchenne de Bologne, a neurologist hired by Charcot to work at the Salpêtrière in the mid-nineteenth century. While working there, he taught himself photography, which he used in conjunction with electrocution techniques on patients to stage portraits of types of facial emotions. In this two-channel installation, Barker and Munster explore the heritage of Duchenne's smile from the performance of 'genuine' expression in the development of early neurological science through to attempts to capture expression via contemporary face recognition software.

Michele Barker and Anna Munster are media artists who have worked collaboratively for over 10 years and have exhibited at the AGNSW, ISEA and Eyebeam Gallery, New York, among other galleries. Barker is a senior lecturer and Munster an associate professor at the College of Fine Arts, UNSW.

Michele Barker and Anna Munster
Duchenne's Smile, 2009
2-channel DVD installation
Courtesy the artists



In 1993, the California Department of Corrections imposed a media ban on all of its facilities. This ongoing ban prohibits journalists from face-to-face interviews, eliminates the prisoners' right to confidential correspondence with media representatives, and bars the use of cameras, recording devices, and writing instruments in interviews with media representatives. Daniel visited the Central California Women's Facility as a legal advocate (legal advocates have the right to record conversations with inmates). She worked with a non-profit, human rights organization, Justice Now. Together they documented conversations with women prisoners in an effort to unmask the well known, yet still secret injustices that result from our society's reliance on prisons to solve social problems.

Sharon Daniel is an artist whose work provides online contexts for social inclusion and justice for communities, and a professor of film and media at the University of Santa Cruz, California USA.

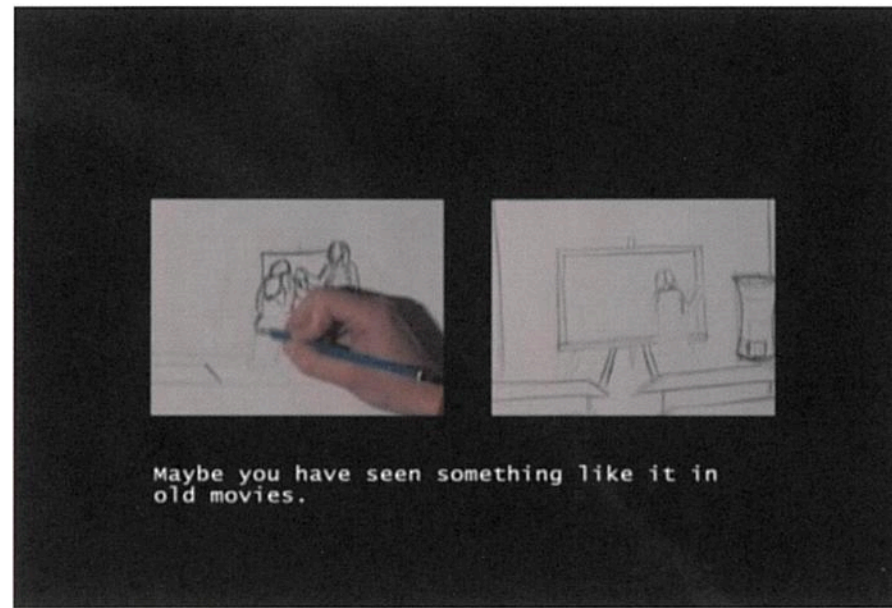
Sharon Daniel
Public Secrets, 2007
 networked interactive
 Courtesy the artist



Cross-section (2009) consists of: a marine compass, positioned on a plinth between two white linen screens that represent the geographical directions East and West; a soundtrack of revolutionary workers' songs; and a computer driven interface that controls a pool of audio-visual sequences. Made from fabric and a rectangular wooden frame, backlit and free standing in the space, the screens resemble propaganda posters (agit-plakat) and display audio-visual material selected by the viewers turning the compass in the middle. As the viewer moves from crowd scenes in urban Sydney to the post-industrial landscape of Bulgaria, the songs, triumphantly espousing faith in a socialist reality, are modulated by the contemporary realities of both capitalist and post-socialist societies.

Atanas Djonov is a Sydney-based emerging media artist, born in Plovdiv, Bulgaria in 1972. His art practice incorporates video installation, sound, animation and photography.

Atanas Djonov
Cross-section, 2009
 dual-channel interactive video installation
 Courtesy the artist



Journal No. 1—An artist's impression (2007) concerns the search for a lost newsreel—the first ever Bosnian Film Journal, produced two years after the end of the Second World War, in Sarajevo. This newsreel, which survived on nitrate film, was hidden and subsequently lost in the confusion of the conflict in Yugoslavia. Steyerl's "artist's" documentary affects, in part, the style of investigative journalism, moving from site to site in search of the lost reel from the destroyed Sutjeska studio.

Hito Steyerl works as filmmaker and author in the area of essayist documentary film/video, media art and video installation. She teaches extensively, with guest professorships at UdK Berlin and as a visiting lecturer at Bard College, New York, USA.

Hito Steyerl
Journal No. 1, 2007
 digital video
 Courtesy the artist



Yang Shaobin and the Long March Project have worked together since 2004, documenting and generating images, paintings and sculptures about the coalmining communities of rural China. *X-Blind Spot* is a body of work about the harsh realities of coalmining in Hebei and Jiangxi provinces, China. In travelling to these regions, Yang and the Long March lived with, worked on and documented coalmining as an everyday reality for workers, becoming particularly aware of the often cruel physical effects on workers' bodies of the sudden Chinese macro-economic transition from agriculture to industrialisation.

Yang Shaobin is an artist who works across painting, sculpture and media arts. He is based in Beijing and has exhibited at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Modern Art Centre in Milan among many international galleries.

Yang Shaobin
X-Blind Spot, 2008
 4-channel digital video installation
 Courtesy the artist and the Long March Project