

# AGAINST\DOCUMENTATION<sup>1</sup>

International Conference

November 8–10, 2018

Ruhr University Bochum, Germany



The counter-documentary (*das Gegendokumentarische*) is a response to the provocation inherent in the notion of the documentary (*das Dokumentarische*). The provocation we are addressing lies in the claim or desire to capture, represent, and control 'reality'. Ever since documentary practices are used, there have also been interventions against them. For us, the notion of the counter-documentary delineates a deliberately strategic attempt to antithetically sharpen and politicize the understanding of documentary media, operations, institutions, poetics, aesthetics, ways of writing, and modes of representation. We want to discuss what the counter-documentary *can* be or *should* be in different contexts by proceeding from both academic and artistic stances. The authority of the documentary intervenes in areas of conflict like identity, politics and history by constituting realities. Therefore, it also touches upon questions of gender, nationality, racism and propaganda. Every act of documentation produces an outside or other. The notion of the counter-documentary is instrumental to address and describe different aspects of this antagonistic moment.

## 1. The counter-documentary includes attempts to document *otherwise*.

The counter-documentary comprises practices that see or frame themselves as alternatives to established forms of capturing reality. At its core, this involves the (re)appropriation, modification, and revaluation of documentary practices (counter-surveillance, veillance, hacking, montage, assemblage) and includes speculative and/or fictionalizing methods that expand the scope of the documentary (reenactment, mockumentary, performing documentaries).

## 2. The counter-documentary includes attempts to document *others*.

It takes into account groups, subjects, and perspectives which are neglected and excluded by hegemonic institutions. Often the authority of the documentary is drawn upon in order to oppose another truth to the official version. Antagonistic social forces resemble each other in

---

<sup>1</sup> It is difficult to come up with a satisfying translation of the German conference title *GEGEN\DOKUMENTATION* because it deliberately does not differentiate between documentary and documentation. In addition, the preposition 'gegen' is far from unambiguous. Consequently, the title could be rendered as **counter-documentary**, **contra-documentary**, **veillance**, or even as **anti-documentary**. We opted for *AGAINST\DOCUMENTATION* because it invokes the resistant spirit and manifesto character of Susan Sontag's *Against Interpretation*. What is more, **counter-documentary**, which has a progressive ring to it in German, seems to be a term appropriated by right-wing media in English-speaking countries which is why we chose to avoid it in the title. Nonetheless, we deem this term effective in addressing the critical potential of certain documentary practices and processes.

---

the way they are resorting to counter-documentary strategies as a means of media politics. Both terminology and operations are appropriated and repurposed in conflicts. In some cases, this puts into question the emancipatory potential of counter-documentation. Concepts like truth, enlightenment, authenticity are increasingly dogged by controversy and currently being discussed under headings like *fake news*, *alternative facts*, or *counter-documentary*.

### 3. The counter-documentary indicates *another* frame of documentation.

The attempts to document *others*, and to do so *otherwise*, require an analysis of and a confrontation with the conditions imposed by institutions and media, i.e. the frame(s) of documentation. There are different options to redraw the boundaries of the documentary, e.g. the occupation of new spaces that compete with existing institution (e.g. amateur practices), the repurposing/altering of existing institutions (e.g. the research agency *Forensic Architecture*) or the creation of completely new institutions (e.g. Milo Rau's *General Assembly*, *The Parliament of Bodies* at documenta 14).

### 4. The counter-documentary invokes *the other* of the documentary.

The notion of the counter-documentary also allows for a perspective informed by media philosophy. It can be understood as an invitation to work on and think through the question what constitutes the other of documentary, what is genuinely non-documentary or anti-documentary, as well as problems related to what is not or can never be documented, what is not communicated/mediated, and what is non-communicable/cannot be mediated.

The notion of the counter-documentary is brought into play as a means to readdress documentary practices from a critical distance and bring into focus artistic, journalistic, forensic, judicial and counter-cultural practices that position themselves as alternatives to established documentary practices and institutions. It prompts us to challenge the claim to truth inherent in the documentary and explore and reevaluate the limits of its proper domain. Counter-documentary practices must be held at least to the same standard as the practices they intend to criticize because the difference between documentary and counter-documentary practices is an ever-shifting hinge that necessitates a permanent *reflection of* and *struggle with* the claims implicit in different acts of documentation at the core of the counter-documentary.

*For the joint discussion of these approaches we welcome contributions from the fields of media studies, language and literature, film, art and pictorial studies, theater and performance studies, cultural studies, sociology and political science, as well as praxeological investigations and forms of artistic research. Papers and other contributions should not exceed 20 minutes. Abstracts of not more than 3000 characters can be sent to [gegendokumentation@rub.de](mailto:gegendokumentation@rub.de) until March 31, 2018.*