

THE SCHOOL OF
SPECULATIVE
DOCUMENTARY

A Manifesto
An Invitation

October 2018

Dear Gentleperson,

It is our great pleasure to extend to you an invitation to join us as a visiting artist, researcher, scholar, dramaturge, critic, etc. at the School of Speculative Documentary.

The School of Speculative Documentary is a meeting place dedicated to critically questioning the documentary gesture, cutting across the boundaries that traditionally pigeonhole the documentary into rigid genres. As theatre and film makers, installation artists and photographers, we wonder which strategies we can develop to subvert and unravel the market-driven taxidermic and forensic formats of a mainstream documentary industry. We worry that, despite the socially committed attitude of many artists, documentaries often end up underpinning a large-scale epistemological enterprise that is closely linked to such projects as colonialism, global capitalism and anthropocentrism. How can we rethink the documentary attitude conceptually, formally and methodologically? How can we make decentralized, deformatted and polycentric documentaries, even if we assume that we will never fully succeed?

Rather than via this invitation, we had initially planned to address you in the form of a manifesto. But the genre's modernist speed, loudness, determination and clarity proved to be at odds with the essence of our approach. The documentary that we practice is based on conjecture rather than knowledge. It is unfinished business. We openly embrace perpetual uncertainty, contamination, contestation, befoggedness and messiness in our engagement with, and our creation of, multiple and mutable realities. In doing so, we hail the paradox at the heart of documentary practices: from the very moment we attempt to capture reality, it escapes, mutates and vanishes into thin air.

The School of Speculative Documentary welcomes a myriad of views in which there seems to be no clear distinction between fact and fiction, artifice and realism, imagination and observation, representation and experience. We notice a volatility between those categories and – through a layered approach in which multiple realisms are poetically intertwined – we attempt to navigate around the subjective and fabricated nature of their boundaries.

Through our work, we hope to undermine documentary's authoritative stance and its claim to knowledge and truth. But even though our practice is not based on some presumed omniscience, at times we do employ the same codes and conventions that historically have come to imply this very omniscience. Scrutinizing the power-structures inherent in documentary making, we keep searching for ways to deal with our own blind spots and power positions, as we ourselves manoeuvre within and around institutional boundaries. How can we shoulder the responsibility for the selection mechanisms that define what can and should be perceived, seen, heard, said, thought, made or done?

Sometimes we wonder about the fine line between self-reflexivity and self-referentiality. Sometimes we wonder when speculation slips into arbitrariness. Sometimes we wonder whether we actually make documentaries at all. Sometimes we are aware of the paradoxical nature of all of the above. Sometimes we quarrel over all of the above. At all times we warmly welcome the awkwardness of our attempting to define the documentary gesture, along with the clumsiness of our practicing of it. And we would be delighted if you were willing to share this awkwardness and clumsiness with us.

Please let us know if you wish to learn more about the School of Speculative Documentary and join the conversation. Submit your letter of interest to admin@schoolofspeculativedocumentary.org. We will get in touch with you as soon as possible in order to inform you about our activities and explore possible ways to collaborate. Please accept our apologies for the somewhat administrative tone, which should not disguise our genuine enthusiasm and appreciation for your interest in the School of Speculative Documentary. To conclude, allow us to express our gratitude to Erika Balsom, Hila Peleg, Hito Steyerl and all those whose work has helped us articulate what it is we are undertaking.

On behalf of the School of Speculative Documentary, we look forward to hearing from you.

Yours faithfully,

An van. Dienderen
Max Pinckers
Michiel De Cleene
Thomas Bellinck

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