

EXHIBITING RESEARCH

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View of Room A. *Documentary Protocols II*, Leonard & Bina Ellen Gallery, Concordia University.
Photo Paul Litherland

Documentary Protocols (1967-1975) is the third part of a major project that took place over a three-year period, and that also included two exhibitions (*Documentary Protocols I* and *Documentary Protocols II*) presented at the Gallery in 2007 and 2008. This ambitious historical undertaking, conceived and

developed by Vincent Bonin in response to an invitation from the Gallery, operates on many levels. It is an attempt to grasp and describe the interweaving of a *context* and *transition*, specifically with regard to the paradigm of self-determination in Canadian art that emerged in the mid-1960s; the transformation of artists into managers in their relationships with governmental structures and social programs developed at the same time; and the rupture that occurred in the mid-1970s between certain aesthetic positions and political objectives. Furthermore, the project draws on various archival holdings in a parallel attempt to construct a narrative out of documents attesting to the events and actions that shaped this context and transition. Finally, through the various stages of production, it reveals the archival document's role and function in its transitions, more or less difficult, from one resting place to another.

The publication *Documentary Protocols (1967-1975)*, and indeed the entire project associated with it, constitutes an exercise in the critical examination of the nature of curatorial work and research at the Gallery, as well as of their dissemination within the framework of the exhibition and the printed work. By questioning existing forms and contexts and examining the objects that give rise to this process, it has prompted, at various stages of the project's development, an enquiry into their meaning and modes of operation.

In this short introduction, one cannot delve sufficiently into the issues raised by this enterprise, which have particular relevance to the Gallery's intellectual objectives, specifically those questionin what, for the Gallery, constitutes a research project and its materialization. We hope to have the opportunity to address such questions in depth at a later date. At this point, we can, however, indicate possible avenues for discussion along two axes of investigation: research and its public display.

It is important to point out that this publication and the exhibitions that make up *Documentary Protocols* were developed in the wake of a recent

widespread interest in documents and archival holdings and, one might say, a certain co-opting of these by the institutional apparatus of contemporary art. The issues associated with this fascination are discussed among others, in Vincent Bonin's essay, in relation to a series of major exhibitions focusing on archival documents that have taken place over the past 10 years. One can undoubtedly add to his analysis the incessant process of commodification and the continual production of capital that is in operation here, but the phenomenon is complex. It combines an intense need to historicize with increased accessibility as a result of the speed with which information is being processed into databases. The status that the archival document now holds within the context of contemporary art is the subject of much debate, particularly in relation to the "shift" that its new status as an art object, among other things, brings about in the information it contains, the knowledge base to which it contributes, and its affiliation with the various contexts to which it belongs and with which it has been associated.

This project is different in that it does not address the document from the perspective of contemporary practices in art but uses it, rather, as material to make a narrative of a cultural, indeed political, moment in Canada by revealing a cultural transformation, a certain way of being and doing things. Moreover, through an almost excessive – but never random – accumulation of material within a given space, that of the exhibition and the book, the complexity of this state of affairs is allowed free rein and, through the juxtaposition of its various permutations, achieves a level of intelligibility. Another singular aspect of this project rests in the careful construction of a historical juncture through a meticulous and transversal reading of administrative documents that exist on the margins of artistic work; in short, of a body of neglected data. Although these documents have been reproduced in this book and placed in display cases in the exhibitions, these modes of graphic presentation and of display work against their commodification as art objects.

This is a paradoxical situation, however, since *Documentary Protocols* was made possible by the collaboration of an institution devoted to the study and exhibition of contemporary art. And it is precisely through this productive contradiction that a critical consideration of curating, research and exhibition practices proves fruitful for a gallery that is situated within a university-based framework of knowledge production and investigation. Let us now look at the directions that have been opened to examination by means of the axes mentioned above.

Documentary Protocols is the result of a process of intense and laborious research that began more than two years ago. Ten archival collections from various Canadian institutions were consulted. Because this research was based on administrative documents from these holdings, it posed the question of what constitutes material for exhibition at the Gallery—and what are the parameters of a contemporary art exhibition? This research *became* an exhibition and, subsequently, a book. If artistic creation is often synonymous with research today, then what does the act of researching signify as it manifests itself in *Documentary Protocols*? How can it be defined in relation to the type of research that now seems to be an integral part of all present-day art practice? Moreover, giving the material obtained through this research a public form—as in the two exhibitions and the publication—proved complex, since the use of photocopies in the exhibition, for example, and of simple digital images in the publication, forced the lending institutions to address unconventional requests for the use of their holdings. In short, the process of consultation was open, but that of presentation was difficult. What is the status of a contemporary art establishment in relation to the institutional caretakers of archives? What role do archives play in research and its dissemination as they are critically debated in contemporary art, which questions, in turn, the whole of the archival apparatus?

In its public form of two exhibitions and a publication, this project, the outgrowth of in-depth research, has always remained research. In other words,

within the transition to a public mode of display, every possible means was used to prevent the documentary evidence from functioning as illustration, and analysis into exegesis. In mounting the exhibitions and producing this book, the issue of how to exhibit research continuously arose, and it remained an open question. How can a visitor or a reader be drawn into a project whose organizing principle is that of research? Certain strategies were adopted, including the presentation of a critical mass of documents (excess as a form of equilibrium) in display cases and binders on shelves along the wall, in order to convey the rise of this administrative structure of influence that emerged, along with its by-products. But this approach serves also to involve visitors in the sustained and repeated activity of consulting archives (re-search: to search anew and again). In addition, there is the question of how to avoid the nostalgic reconstruction of an era, the anachronism that is the prerogative of historical exhibitions. Could this be accomplished by privileging the document as a vehicle of information and requiring visitors to be, first and foremost, readers of content? In this work of over four hundred pages, a similar critical mass is present, : the book's six case studies engage us in thorough investigations—information processing—that form irregular constellations to which others can be added. *Documentary Protocols* opens up innumerable pathways for analysis, and any exhibition program that wishes to be critical has this end in sight. In the end, what of the document and its status in its “exhibited” form? A vehicle of information, surely; but is it not also an object of surplus value? And is it possible for an institution to avoid endowing an exhibited archival document with such value?

The desire of the project's initiator that it take the shape of a “contemporary” exhibition and that it extend to a publication has also led us to consider curatorial work as a framework for new research strategies and ways of valorizing such activities. What does a mode of thinking that is “document-based” stand to gain from a deployment in the exhibition space, and what does the sphere of contemporary art gain by lending itself to such an exercise? One hopes

that the knowledge that circulates from one place to another in this form will initiate a debate on the deployment of knowledge in a society where it has become a commodity.