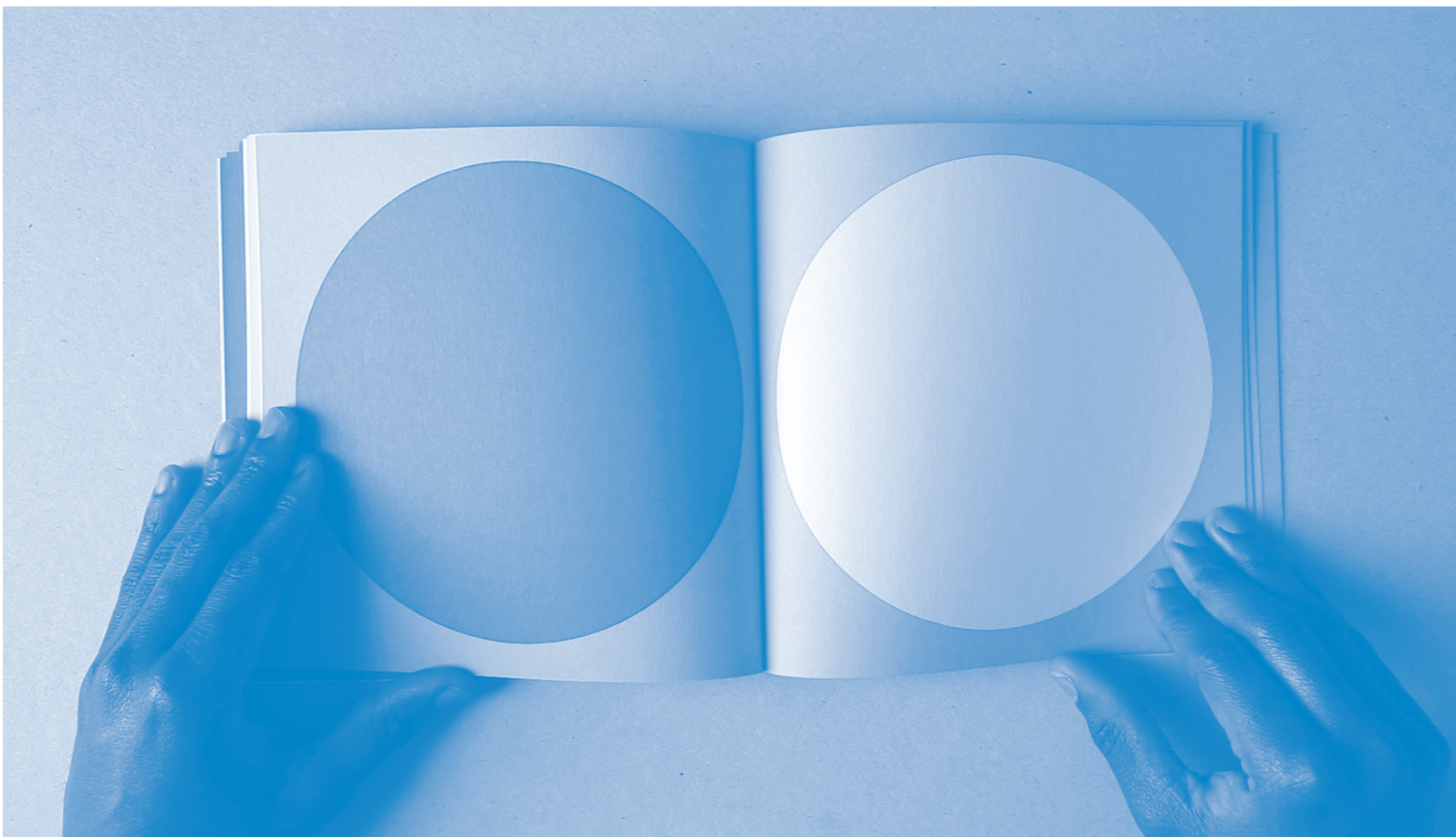


# Nelson Henricks

## DOCUMENT XXL

Program duration : 57 min



# X

*DOCUMENT*. Etymologically speaking, the word *document* is rooted in the Latin words *docere* (to teach) and *documentum* (example, lesson, proof). It was first used by the French in the 13th century, and was picked up by the English 200 hundred years later. The *-ment* of document – from the Latin *-mentum* – refers to the result or product of an action. A document is the result of explaining, teaching, or proving. Somewhere along the line, *document* became a verb. Artists are always documenting their work. Some of this documentation is pedagogical in nature. It teaches arts funding juries what art looks like. It ends up on web sites, in slide shows and PowerPoint presentations, in catalogues and history books. Artexte is a documentation centre. It is full of art documents and artists' documentation.

*XXL* of course, stands for *extra extra large*. I initiated my research in Artexte's oversized document collection. This was the main repository for 12" vinyl records when I began working (this has since changed). It is also, curiously, where many rare or valuable items are stored. *XXL* is oversized and over-priced. It is double oversized. But more on that elsewhere. Rather than strictly referring to size or volume, I chose to interpret X, X, and L as philosophical instruments: quasi-mathematical figures that allow me to play with documents, and with ideas. To X is to multiply, to combine one thing with another, i.e.,  $10 \times 10 = 100$ . The power of L allows us to open a hinge dimension, a vertical axis on a horizontal plane, i.e.,  $A \times B = L$ , like opening a spatial axis on a linear time continuum. This is L. It allows ideas and phenomena to be folded and unfolded, to be open or closed like books.

# X

As I mentioned somewhere else, though widely known as a resource centre for print documentation on contemporary art, Artexte also possesses a significant collection of audio-visual materials: films, videotapes, DVDs, vinyl records, audiocassettes and CDs. The status of these objects varies: some are actual artworks; others are documentary evidence.

Occasionally, while digging for documents, it occurred to me that Artexte is like a fossil of life before the internet: the world-wide web before the web. It reflects a time when data was not so easily accessible. Photocopied documents in files seem precious, perhaps even a bit outmoded or dated, more so an era when seemingly all information is digitized and accessible on the web. The bounty and inclusivity of the web is, of course, an illusion, and Artexte's strength is that it offers an alternative to the post-truth virtual. It is real, tactile and tangible. Its existence in physical space allows one to make weird or unexpected connections.

Unlike the web, Artexte is finite. The physical limitation of what is contained in the Artexte database, and what is recoverable from it, became one of my primary curatorial limitations. I didn't feel I could, or should, work outside of this structure. I decided not to bring anything in from outside (though I did cheat in one or two instances.) This led me to question whether what I was doing was real curating or not. I wasn't free to follow a research question and respond to it by looking for things in the vast expansiveness of the world. Instead, I responded to what I found within the boundaries of the database: a kind of top-down curating that emerged from a pre-existing, finite body of documents, rather than one unbounded by contextual constraints.

# L

A widely circulated cliché about artist-curators is that they only pick work made by their friends. Fair enough. I have been guilty of this type of curating at certain points in my career, but I believe it's a vice I have overcome. In any case, even curator-curators – real curators – can be just as prone to this type of nepotism, so perhaps this isn't a meaningful way to distinguish between artist-curators and other kinds people who engage in this activity. For my part, I believe that an artist-curator works differently from what we might call a vocational curator: a person who isn't engaged in the process of making art, and who I assume has some specialized training other than picking nice wall colours. I envy vocational curators because they can look at and think about art, without all the problems of having to actually make the stuff. Their minds must be less cluttered.

When the artist Steve Reinke was curating an exhibition of my work in 2010, I let him take liberties – play and improvise with my artworks – in ways I wouldn't have allowed a regular curator to do. This was in part due to my long friendship with Steve, my admiration of his output, and my trust that the risks he took were in some ways calculated ones, founded in his rigorous and skilled practice as an artist. When I told Steve and a curator about my distinction between artist-curators and curator-curators, they both laughed. They insisted that there was no difference between the two. So perhaps the claim I am trying to make is a false one, dated or unfashionable. After all, curators like Hou Hanru think of themselves as artists, combining works in risky ways that favour cross-contamination. Curated exhibitions in the hands of these individuals become meta-artworks, pluri-vocal constructs that outstrip the reach of any individual.

In her excellent article on the exhibition curated by the artist Danh Vo for Punta della Dogana in Venice (Artforum, September 2015), Claire Bishop describes the show negatively, as an extension of Vo's own interests and art practice. Curating by artist-curators is a means for artists to build their own *family tree*: they bolster their own authority via a kind of genealogy-by-association. Certainly this is a risk with *DOCUMENT XXL* as well. That aside, what struck me about Vo's exhibition was the extent to which the artists and works he selected unpacked or unfolded Vo's own practice. This was something of which Bishop was also critical. But if artist-curators are engaged in the process of making stuff as a kind of research, shouldn't the work of an artist-curator also extend from, or reflect research already conducted?

My curatorial method was this: I picked stuff that I liked, that I was attracted to. This, somewhat problematically, led me to the questions: *Why do I like this? Why do I gravitate towards these materials, these forms, these ideas?* The curatorial choices I made did seem to extend from, or were informed by, choices I make as an artist. Trying to get to the bottom of the question of *what I like* seemed to overthink the problem. It was as tiresome as trying to explain a joke, or analyze why you find someone sexy. It robbed the activity of all pleasure. Words failed. And anyway, what artist's practice is unbiased by preferences for certain materials, methods, or themes? What curator has ever picked out art they didn't like by artists they didn't care about? Is there a way we can talk about these attractions and affinities, without resorting to *taste*?

On one hand, one could say that the work of saying the unsayable, the inarticulable, is the real labour we are all engaged in, both curators and artists. It's the heavy lifting we need to do, and we shouldn't shy away from it. Fearing accusations of intellectual laziness or a lack of rigour, I would counter by saying that this kind of pleasure – the pleasure of attraction – operates before or after language. This is the hinge dimension *L* of *XXL*: the kind of thinking outside of words that artists do through making. This is the realm of affect.



# X

# L

# X

# L

A few years ago, I was talking with a curator about the 2013 Venice Biennale. He said that Massimiliano Gioni curated like a DJ. I found this proposition exciting. I assume that the person in question was implying there was a kind of playful looseness to Gioni's curatorial approach: like someone flipping through a record bin, picking out songs they feel will work well together, building up rhythms and intensities, and then providing pauses for the dancers to catch their breath. What would it mean to curate like a DJ? It's more about building up attractions and affinities. Using this as a model, I began to think about mixing, about mixtapes, about sampling and mashups, about hip-hop and rap and guest rapping on tracks. I began combing through the oversized documents, looking for 12" vinyl records. These became the first building blocks of DOCUMENT XXL.

Much of what attracted me to the records I selected was their packaging and their physical presence as objects: white vinyl, yellow vinyl, transparent vinyl, flexi-discs... I felt like a vinyl junkie. Basically I picked out stuff I was attracted to. I don't think curating should be just another manifestation of commodity fetishism or taste, yet this thinking shadowed a lot of my decisions. I selected things that I wanted to own. So on its dumbest level, XXL DOCUMENT is about celebrating all the really cool stuff I found while digging through Artexte's oversize document collection. *We all own this!*

DOCUMENT XXL stands halfway between being a curated exhibition and an original artwork. From the start, I was aware of the ethical problems in doing this. Even if curators such as Hou Hanru see themselves as artists and feel free to combine the works of artists together to create meta-artworks, this method could be seen as disrespectful of the artist's original intentions. On the other hand, as an artist who has presented my work group shows, I am well-aware of the need to be flexible when it comes to pollution from other artworks. I have even built works with long passages of silence to accommodate sounds coming from other works the gallery, or the gallery itself. Some curators have even used this notion of cross-contamination as curatorial criteria. Art seldom exists in a vacuum.

The two lines of X cross one thing with another: the two lines of L unfold one thing from another.

X is a doubling.

L is an opening or unfolding.

DOCUMENT XXL.

# X

DOCUMENT XXL is about artist's talks and artist's speech. This was a preoccupation shared by my 2015 video installation *A Lecture on Art*, a work that saw me reconstituting the voice of Oscar Wilde from an annotated text. To some extent, what artists are speaking about determined some of the sub-themes of the exhibition: I let their words guide my selection. I found myself gravitating towards text-based art, conceptual or post-conceptual practices, and to generative procedures and processes. But more on this elsewhere. In a broader sense however, the exhibition became about time, about the problems of presenting time-based work in gallery contexts, and the paradoxical condition of an object that is both seen and heard.

This type of thinking was paralleled by reflections on another question, the problem of presenting time-based art in gallery settings.<sup>1</sup> For me, this frustration is illustrated by the paradox of, for example, presenting Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Commerce Quay, 080 Brussels* on a plinth monitor equipped with headphones with no bench or seat in sight. Here, the curator is not inviting you to experience the work in any meaningful way: you can't watch a three-hour and forty-five minute film standing in a gallery. Clearly this sculptural presentation of time is meant to act as a signpost: it points to somewhere outside the gallery. It might be referring you to your own memory of seeing the film previously, or perhaps it is asking you to rent or buy the film, and watch it when you get home. So this *pointing function* of the artwork – the film standing as a marker or indicator for itself somewhere outside the gallery – intrigued me.

This taken into consideration, my approach was to try to find two things that could live together in harmonious proximity, without one obviously overpowering the other. In the case of videos or films, for example, I judged it best not to provide silent works with a soundtrack. I occasionally let some things stand on their own, establish themselves, before combining them with something else. Ultimately, my goal was to orchestrate a conversation between the artists. If I came close to deforming or ridiculing something, I pulled back. If I have appeared to do this in any way, my apologies. It was not my objective.

### Essay by Nelson Henricks

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In any case, the ethical considerations of this practice were mitigated somewhat by the documentary status of the ephemera collected here. Only a few of the objects bear the status of being artworks. Most of material presented is excerpted, and not presented in their entirety, thus another reason to seek out the originals in the documentation centre.

# X

Did I mention that the time-based holdings at Artexte, though finite, are incredibly vast? I allotted myself 20 hours of research time. But even excluding things I had already seen, there were still hours and hours more material to go through. I burned through my initial paid research time quickly, and soon lost track of how many listening, viewing, and reading hours I sunk into research. Without a fulltime job at Artexte, I could only hope to skim the surface, to take a scoop from this vast reservoir of time. Choosing the lure of the physical object as a parameter was one way, among others, to limit my search time. But this preoccupation quickly shifted to the question of how to showcase the hours of material I had collected. Clearly what I began to refer to as *The Jeanne Dielman Method* was not adequate. Presenting hours and hours of material in the gallery wasn't going to hold anyone's attention, and was making an unfair demand on the audience. Here is where the model provided by Djing became useful. By playing two documents against one another, by allowing them to mix, one could experience double the material in half the time. Editing or excerpting works, like sampling or mashups, became a means of condensing the contents. The structure of the exhibition folds time (L) onto itself.

As I mention somewhere else, artists' talks and artists' speech, became a kind of central thread for DOCUMENT XXL. As such, it was necessary to respond to what they were talking about. There are a number of chapters in DOCUMENT XXL. Some sections are concerned with the notion of documentation – audio-visual recording – and a kind of tipping point where documentation becomes art, and vice versa. Others are about travel, politics and movement(s). Others are about flames and fires (burning documents). And then there is the silence of the artist – which can be as powerful as their speech – and the place of the audience. Actually, I am not going to write more about this. I don't want to spell these things out too much, or even mention individual authors in relation to specific themes. This would shut down the whole project. Instead, I hope spectators will forge these connections on their own. DOCUMENT XXL makes space for readers.

Viewer will notice the exhibition tends to focus on conceptual or neo-conceptual practices. This is perhaps a byproduct of conceptual art's investment in language, but it also reflects my attraction to certain artists and practices. To be frank, I often gravitated towards minimal works because they seemed to mix better: more complex articulations were difficult to put into counterpoint one another. Works that engaged notions of music, sampling or appropriation resonated well with the criteria of Djing, mixing or mashups. Documents that employed doubling, layering, or folding – compression of information – rhymed well with the overall objectives of the project. Colour and monochrome opened the whole project onto the L-dimension, the realm of affect and sensation: a place where linguistic signification breaks down and is replaced by something more intuitive, more bodily, more colourful.

That said, the pointing function of *The Jeanne Dielman Method* was intriguing. Ultimately, DOCUMENT XXL is meant to point back to the database, to the documentation centre. I see this as a way of activating the archive. Viewers are encouraged to consult these documents directly in the documentation centre, to see, touch and hear them, and experience their physical presences as objects first hand.

<sup>1</sup> This is an issue that Jason Simon also addressed in his essay for the exhibition *Changeover*, presented at Artexte from December 2014 to February 2015.

