
Rethinking first-person testimony through a vitalist account of documentary participation

By Kim Munro

Much documentary making which follows in the Griersonian tradition is still predicated on the ongoing binary axis of the testimony of victim¹ and filmmaker as voice-giver.² In the production of documentary projects about social issues, an unspoken contract between maker and participant is established, where in return for the participation, the filmmakers make an artefact which will bear witness to their stories, experiences and trauma. However, often the pressure to provide convincing evidence through affective and persuasive means from testimony can burden the participant and the participatory relationship. The reliance on first-person accounts of people in crisis also presents the problem of sustained listening in both the filmmaking process as well as the finished film. New ecologies of documentary making have seen shifts in this traditional paradigm with movements towards participatory and collaborative filmmaking practices that include processes that diverge from producing conventional artefacts through heritage processes. This has been an attempt to recast power differentials, and allow for more open-ended and multivalent conceptions of knowledge, non-didactic meanings and multiple voices to be included. Often these projects exist in forms that include not only the linear but also the non or multi-linear, web-based, interactive or mobile. These forms allow for a more rhizomatic³ spread through documentary spaces and destabilise traditional binary relationships more prevalent in documentary industries.

According to Paula Rabinowitz, documentary's "purpose is to speak and confer value on the objects it speaks about"⁴. This observation acknowledges Nichols's concept of "documentary voice"⁵ and how it frames the world and speaks through the text in its address to the audience. In addition to the stylistic elements and aspects of authorship, documentary voice is also composed of the verbal participation, often through interviews. And through these interviews, value is conferred on the world through articulated experience. This foregrounds the linguistic as the dominant mode of constructing knowledge. This article proposes a lateral shift in participatory documentary practice and theory that allows for a vital-materialist focus on the ecology of place, material and other non-linguistic modes of participation. I will discuss my documentary work- in-progress, *The Park*, which focuses on the sudden eviction of long-term residents at an outer suburban caravan park in Melbourne. These residents are predominantly elderly, disabled or unemployed and many have been living in the park for up to thirty years. The eviction of these residents has caused much trauma through displacement, significant loss of finances and illness and death. Drawing on Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter* (2010), I claim that decentralising the role of first person accounts and situating the human voice among a range of other conceptualisations of participation through training the camera and microphone towards the other evidence of the documentary world can ease the burden of the affective labour of first-person accounts of trauma. This shift towards the material landscape and environment as participatory pro-filmic elements, which convey

experience and tell stories, can create resonant documentary material that allows for a re-invigorated method of listening to social issues beyond the linguistic.

The Park: some background

At the beginning of 2017, the one hundred and eighty permanent residents at the Wantirna Residential Park were given a letter saying they would need to vacate by January 2018. The land on which they have been living had been sold to a developer who has three hundred townhouses planned. Some of these residents have been there for nearly thirty years. They had retired there and had been planning to live out their time in the leafy streets of this caravan park which provided a low-cost, safe and convenient alternative to owning a more conventional house. For these residents, many elderly, disabled and/or on low incomes, there are few viable options of where to go next. *The Park* traces the final eight months of this place and the eviction of the residents. This project is a collection of short films which focus on the people as both individuals and part of a community, the place and the environment, and the objects and structures. *The Park* touches on social issues such as grass-roots activism, land ownership, politics, housing affordability as well the degradation of the built environment through abandonment and the natural environment that has grown around this space.

I began *The Park* project after reading a newspaper article in *The Guardian Australia*. The Wantirna Residential Park had been owned by four people who then sold it to a developer to build three hundred town houses. While the residents don't own the land, they do own their houses which largely consist of portable cabins which have had extensions such as structures and decks built on. They also have well-developed gardens; evidence of years of work and money. These have become permanent fixtures in the park and are either costly to relocate or cannot be moved. In May 2017, after getting in contact with one of the organisers of the Wantirna Residents' Action Group (W.R.A.G.), I was invited out to a meeting the following day. There were about sixty people there, all of whom had grievances and concerns about how they had been treated, what their legal rights were and what would happen to them next. I felt like this was the edge of a movement of resistance. Peter Gray, one of the organisers, outlined his idea that they should fight for compensation since there was no chance of them being able to continue living there. I made a plan to return to do some interviews. Over the past few months, I have been out to the caravan park about twenty times. A small group of residents, sometimes three or four, sometimes ten and sometimes only Peter, are standing on the roadside with signs and petitions. Each time, there are more and more houses for sale or demolished. I encounter the same core group of residents each time. While they are trying to escalate the action, life is moving on for many of them as the number of residents remaining dwindle. I am acutely aware that my actions as a documentary maker cannot effect change, just as Peter knows that his binders of documents, collection of handwritten letters by the residents, radio appearances, newspaper articles and current affairs interviews will also not effect change. By Christmas 2017, most residents will have moved. Watching this process begs the question faced by many documentary makers; what happens to the documentary process when so much of it feels futile? One of the enduring questions in this project is how to continually document a situation which is traumatic for most the participants to speak of. And subsequently, how can I create works around these issues that will engage an audience in hearing these stories. *The Park* is an ongoing project of a collection of short films around this

event. Rather than a textual analysis of documentary artefacts, this article discusses my documentary practice underpinned by theoretical concepts.

Documentary participation as affective labour

Documentary filmmaking can request much of its participants with the trade-off that the stories and experiences are made visible, issues and events are brought to light and some knowledge or change might be made. While not all documentaries involve participation, much work that is of a social or political nature rely on first-person accounts, testimony and interviews. This form of participation has the underlying intention of the veracity of lived experience. The spoken word gives the sense of what it is like to be that person in that place at that time. While a wide variety of participatory approaches are available to the documentary maker, the interview endures as the primary evidence of lived experience, constructed and conveyed or performed through the speaking subject. Often the interview is taken as evidence and the use of interviews to elicit and translate experience continue to be problematised through their equation with facts. Trinh T Minh-ha argues that if documentary is to ask questions and present multiple ways of knowing, it must resist its “totalizing quest” in favour of more open texts which defy singular didactic knowledge despite their finite and closed form.⁶ Rather, Trinh claims, documentary should create a “space in which meaning remains fascinated by what escapes it and what exceeds it... displacing and emptying out the totality of establishment”.⁷ The representational problem of the interview is its perceived indexicality which Trinh claims is predicated on “authenticity”.⁸ While we often believe what documentary presents to us, this testimony is often part of a complex performance of self and expectations which rely heavily on being able to convincingly articulate what is felt and often beyond linguistic conceptualisation.

Documentary traditionally places the speaking subject at the centre of the film in telling the story and constructing the reality. According to Rabinowitz, “Testimony is always a partial truth, so when film-makers authorise their subjects to speak and thus provoke their audiences to act, it can only be a supplementary gesture towards truth. Yet the ‘political’ documentary often fails to register this, presenting, like the ethnographer, the appearance of ‘wholeness’.” What to do with the voices? Isaac Julien also claims that the problem of featuring testimony from people who have been previously denied a voice in documentary is one of representation. How do you present these voices without it becoming the totalising “authentic” voice?⁹ Both of these present challenges to questions of representation; of creating a context which has an internal critique. The representation of reality is always fraught, especially when relying solely on the speaking subject.

Although testimony still has the power to produce affects, these are increasingly manipulated and rendered ineffectual with audiences often numbed to the spectacle of difference, novelty and a media-rich environment. In documentary films, strategies are used to appeal to emotions as an end unto itself; intensified for entertainment. Rabinowitz asks how can documentary’s call to action be activated without relying on melodrama to create this desire. It is through a process of making the audience feel uncomfortable enough to take action that she claims has more potential power than just through the creation of affects.¹⁰ The desire provoked in the spectator is one of intersubjective identification is not enough to create a

response.

The request of the participant in documentary can be considered one of labour. Regarding human action as labour frames our endeavours within a neo-liberal context where everything is considered an exchange of value and of potential return. Labour is a contractual arrangement usually quantified through the exchange of time for financial remuneration. However, while participatory practices in documentary involve some kind of action and therefore labour, there is rarely any payment involved. While documentary has been traditionally thought of as indicative of power differentials between the filmmaker who is seen to have control and power in the final artefact that is produced, the reality is often more complex. This easy binary is often predicated on model which, with continually shrinking documentary budgets and products commissioned, is increasingly rare. Much documentary production now exists outside of funding with people pursuing projects for various reasons, impelled by their own desires and motivations. Especially in socially oriented documentary, a lot of the work is done without payment or funding. Rather, the filmmakers often make significant financial contributions in addition to the hours of unpaid labour. Silke Panse raises the point that documentary production has largely moved into the field of leisure with much of the work done being immaterial labour.¹¹ Hardt and Negri describe immaterial labour as “labor that produces an immaterial good, such as a service, a cultural product, knowledge, or communication”.¹² With the shift away from labour being equated with the production of material artefacts, immaterial labour composes much of the work that is done for financial remuneration. Hardt and Negri describe three components of this immaterial labour with *affective labor* as “human contact and interaction... This labor is immaterial, even if it is corporeal and affective involves the production and manipulation of affect and requires (virtual and actual) human contact, labor in the bodily mode”.¹³

Every one of the residents that I meet wants to talk. They are concerned both for themselves as well as for others less visible: the sick, the elderly, those with mental health issues, those that do not leave their houses. This is a complex mix of people and are warm and friendly and it is easy to empathise with their situation. Every time I encounter Con, he tells me about his three sons that he raised here and his dad living nearby who has cancer. He speaks down the barrel of the camera, addressing the imagined politicians and the audience, making visible his despair.

Panse claims that documentary making is prescriptive in the moment of filming and “can add to the affective manual labour of the worker”.¹⁴ While Panse’s observations relate to documenting workers who are burdened with additional pressure of having to appear productive or happy or with whatever expression is required in the moment of filming to demonstrate their workerness, similar affective behaviour is required when conducting filmed interviews of people affected by a traumatic experience. Not only do the participants live their experience in the present, they are subject to a double-act of re-living it over and over again for the purpose of being recorded. Affect is the currency of the documentary protagonist that catalyses identification with the documentary viewer. Additionally, through the interview, the probing and direction of the participant can exacerbate this.

Each time I visit Charlie’s home, the Australia flag on the pole outside is a bit more tattered.

And each time I film Charlie, he seems more resigned to the fact that he has to move. In our first afternoon on a rainy Tuesday afternoon in June, he talks about having a barbecue to roast the developer. He tells me he has nowhere to go and that they'll have to bulldoze him out of there. In the second interview, he briefly acknowledges his imminent move. He's not sure where it will be to but is on a waiting-list on public housing. He has started packing away his Elvis CDs and Clive Cussler books. I see him over the next few months and ask him to film him some more. He tells me that he's done enough, the anger that was so surface in the past has given way to resignation. One day I find his place empty. His cabin is half gone and I find the palimpsest of living among the detritus that remains.

Sometimes I forget. I forget that I am not only trying to make a film, but that I am also engaging and interacting with people who are experiencing difficulty. That I am there to listen and bear witness, however effective or not this is, even if I am not always filming. But the film is also the evidence of their struggle and their involvement in the filming and the thing that is produced from the affective labour. Sometimes I forget that I need a certain cushion of time between arriving at the park and beginning filming. I need this time to reconnect, to rediscover the rapport, to catch up on what has been happening, to look at documents and evidence that has been collected. This place has a different sense of time and the usual drop by for a quick chat and interview doesn't work. Sometimes it becomes difficult to even pick up the camera and start filming as though it breaks the connection we are having.

What did they say? Yeah it's sad but what can we do?

In August, at one of the roadside protests, I meet some the residents I have interviewed and tell them that I have just been to a documentary conference. I tell them that I presented some of the material I have been filming at the park. I almost tell them that I "I talked about this project" as though their lives and experiences and filmic representations have become my 'project'. One of them said, "What did they say? Yeah it's sad but what can we do?". And then she asked about the film and said she'd buy a DVD. I feel the burden and responsibility that the labour they have provided has not been reciprocated with a film yet. I also feel that I cannot make something that will change the situation. We all know this is true. When one of the residents, Diana, tells me that she has attempted suicide and no-one can do anything to help, I agree and acknowledge that my being here and filming will also not do anything.

In new ecologies of documentary practice which has seen an expansion into processes and forms beyond the traditional linear and which often rely more heavily on participatory acts that involve the subjects taking on some of the labour of the documentary maker, John Dovey makes a case for the potential for exploitation.¹⁵ In these practices, participants might produce their own material which then becomes part of the larger documentary project. The question of the affective labour from the participant is rarely discussed in practice as it is often conceived that they take part in the documentary for reasons of their own. But what is required of a participant can be quite demanding. They might be directed to redo an action in multiple takes, with different framing so that there is enough material for the edit. The time commitment can also be much more involved than predicted by both subject and filmmaker. Reality, as it appears for documentary film, is directed with a request made on the participant.

The issue of payment is also problematic and is rarely an aspect of the exchange of labour in documentary production. This is premised on the idea that once the transaction involves financial remuneration, a certain level of authenticity can be compromised where people may choose to participate for material gain rather than other reasons. In his handbook on documentary techniques and strategies, Michael Rabiger claims that, “To pay people would mean purchasing the truth, truth you want to hear, which destroys your film’s credibility”.¹⁶ Rabiger acknowledges there are some exceptions, one including where there is an obvious imbalance in economics, that it is ethical to contribute either through money or in-kind gifts or payment of services.

Expansion of documentary participation beyond the human

Participation in documentary films has traditionally been conceptualised through the linguistic contributions through either interviews or onscreen interactions between participants as central to the narrative of the film. Elizabeth Cowrie asks, “How then, does documentary participate in the construction of discourses of knowledge and reality as not only the “said” but also the “shown”?¹⁷ Whenever I turn the camera on, the residents of the caravan park relive their experiences. My initial appearance on the scene presents an opportunity for these accounts to be recorded. And despite my awareness that I am not the “voice-giver” it’s also easy to slip into a role that feels desired by the participants. My camera bears witness to the effects of this situation but while I listen through the camera, I also struggle with the limits of the spoken word. Rabinowitz claims, “As ‘star’ of the documentary, the presence of the body, especially the body in pain, signifies truth and readiness which seem to defy contextualisation”.¹⁸ Although she goes on to say that without the presence of the filmmaker in the frame, the camera is disembodied and “the filmed bodies are over-invested with meaning yet deprived of agency”.¹⁹ The over-dependence on the speaking subject creates a dissonance with the notion of agency because it is if the more they speak, the less ability they have to effect change through the filming process. And with an excess of speaking and accounts of their personal situations, another challenge I face as a documentary filmmaker, is how to constantly be receptive to the event that I am filming and how to keep listening.

Some days when I go out to the park, I just spend time walking around the streets with my camera noticing what is changing. On a particularly windy day, I film the wind and its effect on the flags, the trees, the wind chimes, the interior of a demolished cabin. I want to give more presence to what is here. I move in close to the piles of insulation that are disintegrating into the earth. A snail crosses the path and disappears under a sheet of metal. I film the insides of a cabin that are now external as half the house has been taken. After the people leave, what material remains?

Drawing on theories of a material account of political action, Jane Bennett presents another paradigm which can be extrapolated to documentary filmmaking. In her book, *Vibrant Matter*, Bennett asks, “What if we loosened the tie between participation and human language use, encountering the world as a swarm of vibrant materials entering and leaving agential assemblages?”²⁰ She asks what effects material conditions and nonhuman forces might end up exerting on greater events that directly affect humans and vice-versa implicating an extended an ecology of effects.²¹ In her examples, she cites how everything, either animate or

inanimate is composed of matter that is in constant movement and vibration. This active or vibrant matter comes together to enact agency in the world to create an event. So although often this matter does not have enough agency independently, together it forms more than the sum of its parts thereby creating an event.²² A theory of vibrant matter destabilises the human with linguistic competence as the sole actant in events.

Thinking of the material that occupies the documentary world as vibrant matter, and as extended elements of participation in the story of the film, opens up a space for a greater contribution towards the concept of documentary participation when looking at a situation or a crisis. This accounts for another sense of the world where the documentary takes place; providing additional evidence to what traditionally has been presented through the spoken word. The filming process foregrounds this vibrant matter within the pro-filmic space as a participant in the construction of the project. This also expands the concept of voice beyond the linguistic towards a material conception. This requires thinking through Bennett's concept of "vibrant matter" in two parts. To consider the caravan park as a site of swarming vibrant matter and how this might be translated as documentary participation would involve thinking of a documentary site as an ecology containing the elements found in this space; the land in which it occupies; wedged between the freeway and the highway. And also the plants and trees; a combination of native gum trees with English style gardens, the materials of the buildings and the disintegration that becomes part of the land underneath; the bees, the flies and other insects buzzing around; the leaking tap slowly wearing a hole where the incessant drops land; the flags in a various array of disintegration. Noting these observed materials in the park is not a reductivist reading of the vitality of matter but rather an acknowledgement of one aspect of this theory. It is a Latourian description.

The second account and application of Bennett's "vibrant matter" concerns how the non-human materials of this place might be translated as documentary participation and evidence of experience, beyond the linguistic. This enacts part of a broader ecology for the audience to enter into the world that this event is occurring in. This presents a more subtle way that allows for a rendering of the situation. This is not to diminish the impact of the human cost at the heart of what is happening in the caravan park and this project. The expansion of participation to the material elements through the lens of a vitalist account of the site does not negate the effect that this is having on the residents. It is not a flat ontology where all matter is created equal. And I am not equating a pane of glass covered in cobwebs with a person displaced from their home of twenty-two years. Rather, I am proposing a documentary approach that might allow the audience to access this world with a renewed approach to listening to this event through the material in addition to the human testimony. This approach enacts a practice of documentary-making that requires ever-shifting means of production and strategies of seeing and hearing in order to re-present narratives that have been commodified and normalised. These socially-situated events, despite the specificity of each of these situations, also represent yet another case of the effects of human-centred greed and late capitalism.

In positioning vibrant matter as a social and political methodology, Bennett draws on Rancière's "partition of the sensible"²³ as a way to destabilise the human-centric position of agency and power. Rancière presents this partition as an arbitrary line between political

agents and those without power. This is a division between “what is visible and what is not, of what can be heard from the inaudible”.²⁴ Rancière locates power within the use of language and claims this partition is disrupted through an equality of speaking beings. Applying Rancière’s theory with Bennett’s reimagining of this divide between those with power and those without, in a how we represent a documentary world such as the caravan park, we can broaden participation through giving agency to those elements not usually assigned power as speaking beings. While Rancière might base his emancipation on the speaking subject, not all subjects are equal in their ability to speak or to be subsequently heard. This calls forth the necessity to enable other ways of speaking that might dislodge the conventional structures of documentary discourse. This is where Bennett draws analogies between Rancière and vibrant matter; in their shared ability to disrupt binaries and afford agency where previously it may have been perceived as mute.²⁵ With an excess of affective stimulus, how else can documentary speak, and through what processes can it make itself heard? Through a vital materialist theory, the traditional binary between the speaking subject and objects are rethought as co-existing in a shared ecology of constantly shifting relations. As a documentary practice, foregrounding the materiality of the effects on the caravan park as evidence allows a shift from the over-reliance on the speaking documentary subject.

Enabling listening in documentary

The last time I went out to the park, I hardly saw anyone. It was early on a warm Friday morning and I wanted to catch the light as it arrived before the heat of the sun. Summer is approaching and there’s a dryness to the air. Last Sunday they held their final roadside protest as there are too few people to attend anymore. After collecting thousands of signatures, all the petitions have been submitted to the state government. The presence of the stencilled spray-painted For Sale signs is overwhelming. Piles of the insulation, pine wood, old televisions, sheet metal and green waste accumulate on the edges of the streets. Small clumps waiting for something. I look through windows into houses where I have filmed and out the other side into thirsty gardens. The Australia flags that remain are almost completely faded or disintegrated. There is no one left here to speak, nothing else left to say. I film the presence and the absence while I listen the quiet buzz of distant traffic, bees and crickets.

To rethink documentary participation manifested as vital materialism can allow us to approach the idea of listening as a philosophical concept.²⁶ This expands beyond the linguistic and the human-centred so as to hear what might be said in other ways through presencing evidence and knowledge. This alleviates the affective demand on the documentary participant. Here, I take Gemma Fiumara’s approach to listening as a philosophical concept:

In a culture determined by the technology of information the human condition is ever more scrutinized and exposed, as if the dominant tendency were to seek out ever more ‘interesting’ material, with the result that we are increasingly immunised through exposure to human suffering as it is passed to us by the media. This humans seem to reconcile themselves to indifference while they are induced to say: ‘We know everything and we can’t do anything about it.’²⁷

A vital materialist account of the documentary space allows for an approach that adds

richness to the documentary material and supports the human participants. While these stories that very much represent the present climate of late-capitalism, disenfranchisement, destruction of communities and issues around home are essential to be heard, we also need alternative approaches to the documentary representations of such events. And while much documentary relies on finding the ‘new’ or what Fiumara calls the ‘interesting’ subject matter, this should also not mean that those stories and events that appear to be so common in contemporary times are not heard. We just need a rethinking of the documentary space and approaches that enable listening. Additionally, also a continual reliance on first-person testimony as the truth conveying vehicle of the personal, economic, environmental cost of such situations can also be burdensome for the participant living the trauma that they speak of. This is not an anti-humanist position to negate the human subject position, rather that the materiality of evidence or the evidence of materiality can work in support of the human. When the affective demand of the human experience might create a burden, or with a lack of listening might not be heard, then the other images that are silent or at least present alternative perspectives can support a broader approach to participation.

I started filming *The Park* as a project that would be largely “character-driven” and would follow the participants as they fought to either save their caravan park from destruction or won financial compensation. There was also the possibility that they would all just move off in their disparate directions at the end of the year. *The Park* was largely about the people who occupied this land and their stories of being victims of a developer. But over time, I realised that to focus solely on the residents through how they were able to tell their stories and narrate their experience was only one form of knowing, one aspect of truth. I also witnessed that while words might constitute a direct way of conveying experience, they can also be rendered ineffective. This can be through the repetition of the speech act as well as the lack of ability to listen to these stories. Evidence of how the caravan park was changing was also essential in supporting the residents. Through also incorporating filming strategies that focused on how this space was taking over allowed the creation of more open documentary images that support the more affective onslaught of human suffering. Focusing on the role of vibrant matter as it engages in its own representation of this event allows it have agency in participating in the story-telling world of *The Park*.

Notes

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² Trinh, T Minh-ha. “The Totalizing Quest for Meaning.” *Theorizing*

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[5](#) Nichols, Bill. "What gives documentary a voice of their own?" *Film Quarterly* 36.3 1983: 17-30.

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