

THE MIGRANT IMAGE



The Art and Politics of
Documentary during Global Crisis

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TRANSIT

GOING OFFSHORE

The art of Yto Barrada, Ahlam Shibli, Emily Jacir, and the Otolith Group variously contributes to recent aesthetic innovations around documentary practice, mobilized in part to show the circumstances of those caught up in oppressive border regimes or expanding states of exception. These artists variously portray “life full of holes,” drawing on mobile identifications, showing the limits of representation, and investing potentiality in the image. By recognizing the unrecognized, their work extends visibility to those outside mainstream forms of appearance, capturing the human costs of global crisis and its political, economic, and religious exclusions, even while they resist objectifying the oppressed, thereby challenging social documentary’s long-standing project of producing ethnographic knowledge and affirming humanitarianism’s compassionate beholder. Forming an aesthetics of opacity—according to Édouard Glissant’s poetic, post-identitarian conceptualization—their photography and films reject the conventional knowledge systems that might otherwise neutralize their political opposition and creative offering.

But what happens when corporate power draws on the aesthetics of opacity as a resource to disguise its own dealings, cloak its identities, and increase forms of inequality by absenting itself from regulatory mechanisms, taxation, and the spotlight of legal and financial scrutiny? Areas of exception have also proliferated in the geography of global capital, allowing financial bodies to operate outside the state’s borders, and such a situation enables the further accumulation of wealth by those intent on voluntarily exiting from the distribution of appearance—especially when it comes to economic accountability. The recourse to “capital flight,” the often sudden transnational movement of capital, corresponds, however, to the destruction of national economies, debt crises, and skyrocketing inflation,

as if the country losing money were somehow responsible. Such is the privilege and practice of financial organizations—offshore banks, hedge funds, and shell companies—that exist beyond the visible fiscal network, overseeing massive flows of capital. According to the investigative journalist Nicholas Shaxson, “There are anywhere between \$10 and \$20 trillion sitting offshore at the moment,” constituting “the secret underpinning for the political and financial power of Wall Street today.”¹ Linking together Libreville and Paris, Luanda and Moscow, Cyprus and London, Wall Street, Mexico City, and the Cayman Islands, Washington and Riyadh, this network connects the criminal underworld with financial elites, the diplomatic and intelligence establishments with multinational companies, and, Shaxson contends, it continues the prerogatives of neocolonialism even as it motors financial globalization.

It is the shady epistemology of the offshore, and perhaps unexpectedly its aesthetic and political potentiality, that provides the source for Goldin + Senneby’s *Looking for Headless*, a project included in *Uneven Geographies: Art and Globalization*, an exhibition I co-curated with Alex Farquharson in 2010 at Nottingham Contemporary in the U.K. The show assembled artistic practices that critically and creatively investigate the uneven developments of globalization, what Marxist critic Fredric Jameson, as early as the mid-1990s, termed “a system so vast that it cannot be encompassed by the natural and historically developed categories of perception with which human beings normally orient themselves.”² Indeed, as Nina Power and Michael Sayeau suggested more recently, the current economic crisis of 2008 has its “origin in financial instruments of such complicated construction that even their users are said not to have understood exactly what they were and how they worked. How does one illustrate a credit-default swap?”³ Taking up such representational challenges and the political difficulties they imply, the exhibition looked to artists, including Yto Barrada, Steve McQueen, Ursula Biemann, the French collective Bureau d’études, and the Swedish duo Goldin + Senneby, among others, for recent proposals to creatively map and critically examine the conditions of the uneven geographies of contemporary globalization.⁴

The unevenness of modern geographies, of course, is well established in the scholarship, and the exhibition’s premise took account of the work of scholars such as David Harvey and the late Neil Smith to gain historical perspective on the present. It was Smith’s text *Uneven Development*, pub-

lished in 1984, that first systematically analyzed the concept in relation to the economic geography of neoliberal capitalism. As elaborated in Milton Friedman's Chicago school of economics, the policies of deregulated markets, privatization, and curtailed social spending—the key tenets of neoliberalism—were advanced with devastating results by Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan, Augusto Pinochet, and Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s and 1980s.⁵ Yet despite the ruinous consequences, measured in social and political injustice, a hobbled social security system, lowered standards of living for the working and middle classes, and growing economic disparity, uneven development has continued unabated, as neoliberalism has been consolidated and expanded worldwide in the 1990s and 2000s, with the consequent spread of economic and political inequality across the globe. The relevance and accuracy of uneven geographies as an optic of analysis has only increased ever since.⁶

For Smith, uneven development issues from the dual and contradictory tendencies of capital to simultaneously promote “equalization” (the harmonization of levels and conditions of production in geographically dispersed areas) and “differentiation” (the accumulation and centralization of wealth).⁷ As Smith acknowledges, this analysis builds on earlier insights of economists and political theorists; indeed, uneven development was first observed in the nineteenth century by Karl Marx, who wrote presciently of capitalism’s “new and international division of labour” that “converts one part of the globe into a chiefly agricultural field of production, for supplying the other part which remains a chiefly industrial field,” even while capital “extracts in every sphere of production equality in the conditions of the exploitation of labour.”⁸ Marx saw that expanding and internationalizing the division of labor would also mean introducing the rule of exploitation worldwide, an outcome clearly visible in the most recent guise of capitalism’s growing divisions between the developed world’s economy of postindustrial services and consumption, and the underdeveloped world’s foundering in cheap precarious labor, environmental devastation, and resource expropriation.⁹ We now face the “equalization” of economic and cultural homogenization, in terms of the global monoculture of the same few global corporations, fast-food restaurants, hotels, clothing chains, cars, films, music, and television shows, and the simultaneous “differentiation” between skyrocketing CEO salaries and multinational wealth based in the global north on the one hand and, on the other, the global south’s (and in-

creasingly segments of the north's) wallowing in underdevelopment and debt. The result is what some have called "global economic apartheid," supported ultimately by the neoliberal policies of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization.¹⁰

While the circumstances of global economic development are no doubt more complex than this brief account allows, it is clear that "accumulation by dispossession" (to use Harvey's favored term, which emphasizes the causal and often brutal relations between systems of wealth and poverty) has only intensified of late.¹¹ Indeed, one sees its violent manifestations in the military, financial, social, and environmental crises that have become the perverse mechanism of what Naomi Klein calls "disaster capitalism," when profiteers and governments exploit catastrophes as pretexts for emergency measures, making politically viable the introduction of free-market economic reforms without democratic accountability and enforced by military domination.¹² As Klein writes, the world is in the grips of a "fundamentalist form of capitalism," which has "consistently been midwifed by the most brutal forms of coercion, inflicted on the collective body politic as well as on countless individual bodies."¹³ A related cause and consequence of neoliberalism is the construction of the financial offshore, according to which multinationals are able to make enormous profits by circulating their capital through complex networks of financial exchange via semilegal and ethically dubious mechanisms; as a result, they are able to pay virtually no taxes to the nations and states where they operate, defining further heights of wealth differentiation and an emerging model of accumulation by dispossession, where the dispossessed is now the general public deprived of its welfare and social security, education and health care.¹⁴

It is at this point that Simon Goldin and Jakob Senneby intervene with *Headless*, a project begun in 2007. Excavating the long and sometimes bizarre history of secretive tax havens, their work has brought out surprising parallels between recent banking practice and transgressive avant-garde activities, as when they ask: could the shadowy world of offshore banking somehow harbor an incarnation of Georges Bataille's mid-twentieth-century secret society Acéphale? Following through with this unlikely—but because of it all-the-more provocative—proposition, their project's symbol, a headless man, pays homage to Acéphale's adoption of André Masson's notorious drawing of a gruesome decapitated figure, a



FIGURE 55.

Goldin + Senneby, "Headless. From the Public Record," Installation view:
Index, Stockholm, 2009–10. Courtesy of the artists.

perverse inversion of Leonardo's enlightened Vitruvian Man, with a skull in place of his groin (see figure 55). The Swedish artists' examination of how financial systems relate to forms of invisibility focuses on Headless Ltd., an offshore company recently registered in the Bahamas, and has yielded an array of collaborative and aesthetically unpredictable outputs, including a quasinovel, a feature-length documentary, secretive presentations in the financial districts of European cities, and lectures in various venues on economic geography and Bataille's esoteric club, which are performed in minimal, corporate-style installations (sometimes in actual corporate office buildings) with projections that evoke the popular associations of the offshore with Caribbean islands (see plate 11). Spokespersons, emissaries, and ghost-writers stand in for the artists at these events, while the artists themselves seemingly pull the strings from an undisclosed location, enhancing the project's cloak-and-dagger murkiness. If *Headless* mines the opaque epistemology of the offshore as a source of artistic inspiration, its provocative results could not be more economically timely or politically explosive.

As such, the project participates in the recent postconceptual artistic

trend of adopting the aesthetics of corporate administration and putting them to critical ends. Consider, for instance, the Yes Men's subversive deployment of the language of media publicity in 2004, when they publicly impersonated representatives of Dow Chemical, live on the BBC, and apologized for the company's responsibility for the deadly chemical spill in Bhopal, India; Melanie Gilligan's display of the fraught psychology of financial calamity in her four-part video drama *Crisis in the Credit System* (2008); Carey Young's performance of the collapse of neo-avant-garde into service industry in *I Am a Revolutionary* (2001), for which the artist hired a personal trainer to help her convincingly say the words in the video's title; and Maria Eichhorn's construction of an artwork as a shareholder-owned business in *Aktiengesellschaft* (Public limited company) (2002). Sharing in this detouring of the corporate environment for artistic material—increasingly tempting in this age of obscene levels of corporate power—Goldin + Senneby's distinct approach involves investigating the clandestine zones of global finance and creatively appropriating those mysterious spaces of withdrawal.

Within the expansive scope of *Headless's* many iterations, they investigate the juridical anomalies of offshore financial centers. The project's cast of characters includes the freelance writer John Barlow, sent by the artists (whom he had never met) to the Bahamas to investigate Headless Ltd. and write a travel blog based on his investigations (itself becoming the Goldin + Senneby work *Gone Offshore* [2008]). Barlow's activities are also selectively narrated in *Looking for Headless*, a novel by a fictional author known only as K. D., who recounts how she became suspicious of the artists while working for Sovereign Trust (Headless's management company, which apparently threatened the artists with legal action to have their employee's name—shared, coincidentally, by the work's purported writer—removed from public communications) (see figure 56). The novel has been published gradually in chapters, just as the project has grown incrementally with each new show. Goldin + Senneby's exhibition openings and associated readings and screenings serve as fodder for the developing plot, which is captivating less for its literary qualities than for its cannibalistic fictionalization of the realities it both describes and steadily produces. The documentary *Looking for Headless* (2010), by Kate Cooper and Richard John Jones, provides a useful overview of the project. They interview experts and the investigative journalist Gavin MacFadyen about Headless

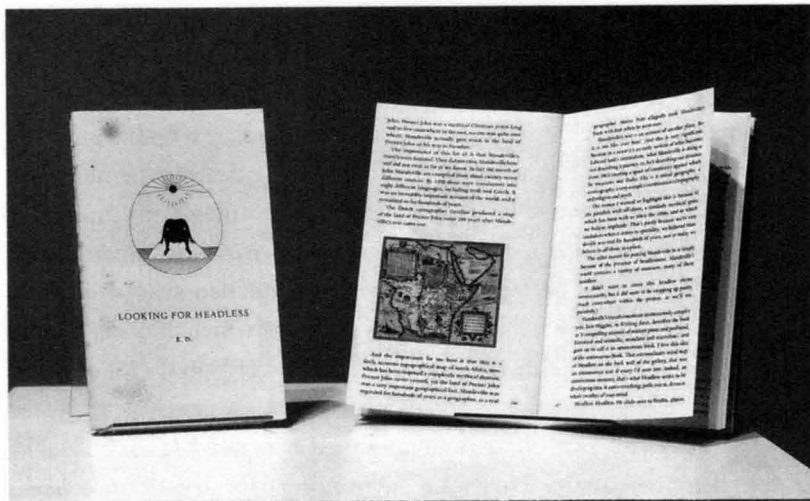


FIGURE 56.

Goldin + Senneby, “Headless. From the Public Record,” Installation view: Index, Stockholm, 2009–10. Courtesy of the artists.

Ltd., and themselves visit Sovereign Trust offices in Gibraltar and London; the work also includes footage of a São Paulo Bienal panel discussion led in 2008 by an actor impersonating K. D. The proliferating interconnections and multiplying levels of documentary and fiction make it easy to lose one’s bearings, which is part of the point.

In terms of such zones of lawlessness, one thinks of Agamben’s analysis of the state of exception as a paradigm for current geopolitical developments, one that refers to new formations of executive sovereignty that manifest themselves by creating areas of legal exclusion, such as the prison at Guantánamo Bay.¹⁵ By referencing Agamben’s notion in “their” novel, Goldin + Senneby imply that what falls out of his analysis is the simultaneous construction of financial zones of exception that have accelerated the accumulation of wealth by multinationals and rich individuals outside of public accountability and national regulation.¹⁶ It is this field of invisibility that Goldin and Senneby track and turn into a source of intrigue in their commissioned texts and lectures by their representatives, the indeterminate status of which—is it fiction or real?—mirrors the uncertain knowledge economy of the offshore. By mimicking the world of shell companies, economic evasion, and unaccountable institutions in their semi-

fictional accounts, the artists blur the boundaries between the real and the imaginary, thereby reappropriating the category of the offshore from the financial elite and redirecting it for shared creative and collaborative artistic purposes.

The seriousness of the project, however, is undeniable. The academic Angus Cameron, coauthor of *The Imagined Economies of Globalization* (2004), appears in the project's book and videos and frequently gives lectures as the artists' "emissary."¹⁷ His creative role reached its apogee on the occasion of "The Decapitation of Money," the artists' exhibition at the Kadist Art Foundation, in Paris, for which Cameron led an expedition to the Marly Forest, where the Acéphale group met during the late 1930s to carry out secret rites and celebrate the beheading of Louis XVI.¹⁸ While walking his audience through the woods, he lectured on select moments in the history of the offshore industry, including its first appearance, when England detached its currency from silver during the war with revolutionary France in 1793. He also discussed the Cold War-era monetary uprooting when Soviet and Chinese banks, intent on escaping American control of their foreign assets, created the Eurodollar market by depositing their dollar-denominated reserves in European banks (a reconstruction of the somewhat psychedelic interior design of one of these institutions was created within the exhibition). Finally, he reviewed the explosion of offshore markets in the contemporary global economy, where trillions circulate beyond national regulatory oversight in an increasingly fictitious—but financially very real—realm.¹⁹

For Cameron, that murky area beyond national sovereignty echoes the acephalous, as corporate bodies detach themselves from nation-state heads, even though, he confesses, Bataille would not have found in their examples the rebellious headless transgression he desired. While the economy has recently convulsed in fits of consumption and destruction—resonating with Bataille's writings on the "general economy" in *The Accursed Share*—secretive financial bodies have only grown more powerful, leading to a neoaristocratic age of wealth-based privilege, disguised by fictitious offshore companies. Such could not be further from Acéphale's passionate devotion to collective union before death (as on one occasion, when its members infamously wished to consummate their bonds through a real human sacrifice but could only find volunteers for the role of the executed).

One might conclude that Goldin + Senneby's project demonstrates that economic fictions cannot be exposed in reality today—in contrast with, for instance, Hans Haacke's ambitions to catalogue Harry Shapolsky's Manhattan real estate holdings in the 1970s, or the more recent mappings of geoeconomic governmentality in projects by Bureau d'études and Mark Lombardi (both included in *Uneven Geographies*).²⁰ The reason being, financial reality has become the very site of fiction, hence Goldin + Senneby's recourse to creative mimicry. But this need not, in my view, entail accepting the hermetic core of multinational capitalism, and with it the proliferating, uneven geographies of today's corporate globalization. More in the Bataillean spirit, *Headless* amasses the potential for a collective imagination that would reinvent a politics of regulatory justice (drawing out Bataille's Marxist roots), as Cameron intimated in the Marly Forest. Such a call indeed resonates with the aims of anticorporate tax-dodging groups like U.K. Uncut.²¹ Indeed, reality volunteered a ready-made plot development during recent demonstrations in London against the conservative government's proposed cuts to education funding (while corporations such as Vodafone and Topshop continue to find ways to avoid U.K. taxes), when protesters encountered Prince Charles's and Camilla's limo and, in an unsettlingly close-to-the-bone joke, began to chant, "Off with their heads!"