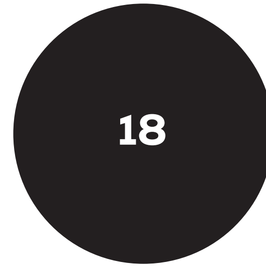

# View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture


**title:**

*Reframing Memory and Knowledge: The Artist as Producer*

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Susan Schuppli in conversation with the Curatorial Collective

**source:**

*View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture* 18 (2017)

**URL:**

http://pismowidok.org/index.php/one/article/view/522/1014

**publisher:**

Institute of Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences
Institute of Polish Culture, University of Warsaw
View. Foundation for Visual Culture

# Reframing Memory and Knowledge: The Artist as Producer

**Susan Schuppli in conversation with the Curatorial Collective**

**Curatorial Collective**: We would like to begin with a concept you introduced: the material witness, an entity – as you write – "whose physical properties or technical configuration records evidence of passing events to which it can bear witness."[1] The emancipatory idea behind it is that whether we like it or not, whether we control it or not, things are registered and can then be decoded, disclosed, and exposed. It seems to be a revolutionary reconceptualization not only of memory but also knowledge. What was the trigger for your thinking in this direction about materiality and environment? Where did it come from?

**Susan Schuppli**: The first, very early trigger was a film that Vladimir Shevchenko shot on site at Chernobyl in April 1986, two days after the explosion.[2] When he processed his rushes he noticed that the film stock was very defective. He was about to throw out the entire material when he realized that what it actually captured was the contaminating presence of radiation itself. An invisible agent had somehow become perceptible, even dangerous. This incident was a very powerful one for me: it signaled a moment when a documentary film, a representation and image of an external event, was transformed into an event itself. In its exposure to airborne radioactive contaminates, the filmic material had archived trace evidence of the radiological event and even became co-extensive with it. For me this was a very important conceptual breakthrough.

*Can the Sun Lie?*[3] was a transition point in my thinking. In it I explored the relationship between 19th-century discussions around photographic evidence and climate change as we experience it today, as well as the interaction between different regimes of witnessing – from scientific expertise to indigenous storytelling traditions. The problems began when photographs arrived in the courtroom as

evidence. My intuition was to look at the snow as a kind of photographic glass plate. As artists, we often have intuition, and it is hard to realize where this actually comes from and what it's connected to. At present, I'm trying to work on the concept of unnatural media – not natural media, but on damaged environments as media systems. For example, in the 19th century there was much interest in environmental phenomena as a form of natural media – lightning preceded the emergence of flash photography.

I have to admit though that I am still struggling with the role of language in my projects: how to narrate these stories best? I still call them stories. I've tended to rely on voiceover in my videos, on people talking – so human agency remains, despite my interest in the expressive qualities of materials themselves. It is still hard for me to concede that working solely through image and sound might be enough to let people know what's actually going on, since the stories I tell are very complex. It is out there on the horizon, but I'm not sure how I'll get there, so for the moment I continue to work with the form of the essay film.

**CC**: The voiceover in your works is an intriguing element as it provokes associations with nature documentaries – works where, rather than letting nature speak for itself by showing it, it is being commented upon. And it is a female voice!

Can the Sun Lie, 2014

**SS**: Yes, I've realized I haven't been able to bring myself to have a male voiceover yet. I have interviewed male scientists so I do include male speech in my videos. I tend to hire friends who sound like me, even though I don't want to narrate myself. But there is of course also a tradition of a female voiceover in nature documentaries, despite the fact that Richard Attenborough is the key figure of the genre. One could say there is a tradition of female voices in documentaries in general. In part, probably because female voices seem more credible, less deceitful.

**CC**: The other problem, which seems very real in the kinds of works you do, is how to get rid of metaphorical readings. Metaphors are signals of our being lost in stories, which do not put humans in the forefront and do not rely on dominant, well-known narratives. The question for us as viewers/readers is how to avoid metaphors and treat the landscape or environment as a medium in and of itself, as a voice.

**SS**: That is a complex issue. I want to work with and understand landscape as a photographic or filmic operation, and not something that merely looks "like" a photograph. This is a crucial difference. I am interested in exploring things as they really are – their technical organization – but not by creating analogies. This also relates to problems that are epistemological or political in nature: how to see an indigenous location in Canada not through a romantic perspective, but rather through the operations of colonial settler violence and capitalism?

**CC**: Would you say that from the very initial stages your projects are collective enterprises, in the sense that there are many people involved: scientists, experts, etc.? All of the works are based on research and seem very elaborate, but also very "professional" in terms of the procedures of knowledge production and the broad knowledge of the mechanisms of the material and intellectual world.

**SS**: I definitely don't have all the knowledge I need to do my work. I do try [laughs]. I work with a lot of archival materials, that's clear. But given the sprawling nature of the projects I work on, there has to be a kind of collective effort and involvement. In that sense, I tend perhaps to function a bit more like a curator: I gather materials, talk to people, organize, etc. So finally, when I sit down to write the script, I realize how much I have taken in. Some people get interviewed because they then appear as a subject in a work. While working on *Trace Evidence*, I talked to scientists in Sweden who work on patterns of radioactive dispersal. Sometimes I talk to people just to get the information I need, and not as potential subjects for a script or as elements of a voiceover. In the Netherlands, I only did audio recording with the scientists working on climate change at the Cabauw Experimental Site for

Atmospheric Research (CESAR). Since 1970, CESAR has been measuring and monitoring the changes taking place in the feedback loops between land surface processes and the airborne dynamics of the Earth. Studying the ways in which the complex behavior of clouds, aerosols, radiation, precipitation, and turbulence interact with terrestrial events.[4] As a general rule, a camera is much more intimidating and intrusive than an audio recorder. It was an interesting process, as I spent several days walking around and watching the scientists' work, and listening to what they were saying, fishing for something really interesting.

**CC**: As an artist, and especially a female artist, have you experienced frustration or intimidation in the face of scientists who "know for real," or whose work is "serious" in contrast to the visual arts, which are usually treated as intellectual or affective experimentation for the sake of art (rather than, say, knowledge)? Many scientists talk about literature or theatre eagerly, even though they are not experts in the fields, while many non-scientists (including scholars in the humanities) feel helpless or are being made helpless by the kind of discourse science produces.

**SS**: Well, no. I would say two things in response to your question. First, I know a lot about legal issues now, although I've never studied law. I don't think I would have any interest in studying it, but I'm interested in the practice of law and the people who practice law. So I actually feel like I have some reasonable insights, and that's basically because of years of working with the material. I even wrote an essay arguing that what lies at the heart of law is a kind of algorithmicity, which can be seen in two institutional mechanisms operating in response to the consequences of state and colonial violence.[5] Second, I have an anecdote: I was at a conference in Toronto presenting my new research, and someone in the audience came up to me afterwards and asked if I was a nuclear scientist. And I said: "No, I am an artist." This means not only that I do have the right to talk about such issues, but also that I have developed a certain language to speak about them. One needs to engage seriously. But on the other hand, scientists – and experts in other fields – also have to take artists seriously. To be honest, I am skeptical about the so-called collaboration or exchange that is sometimes meant to take place at interdisciplinary events and symposia. I've been to lots of humanities events to which scientists were

invited alongside artists. In each case, the "serious" people (meaning the scientists) present their research and findings first, and then artists do their presentations towards the end of the day, but hardly anyone from the scientific community, in my experience, ever sticks around to see and hear the artists present. That happens all too often, I don't know why exactly – perhaps this also happens when they go to science colloquia. Or maybe I do: the artists are not positioned in the same place of expertise because they are commentators on culture and society… observers.

**CC**: That's paradoxical, because the artists are also those who are being commented upon. They do their job, and then someone else comes and says what it means. We are not really used to listening to artists as the ones who use their practice to "talk" about the world. Somehow we need an interpreter, a go-between, a specialist who explains. But the problem with intimidation is related to power: who decides what acceptable knowledge, language, shared concerns, etc. are. As a sovereign act, one has to claim all these realms and feel "professional."

Atmospheric Feedback Loops, 2017

**SS**: Yes. I have another story for you. When I did *Atmospheric Feedback Loops* (2017) – the vertical cinema project – the scientists I worked with came to the premiere and were very impressed but also grateful that I took what they did seriously. Precisely, in their opinion, I did a professional kind of job, not because I was mimicking or illustrating what they did, but because it was my work. It was a substantial work for them. Inviting an artist and sharing with them may not be easy. The risk of exposure and misunderstanding is always there. My biggest concern was that I had to take some creative license with making the atmosphere present. I intervened aesthetically quite a lot to make the environment palpable and sonically rich. They were thrilled with it, and I also agreed to give them all my footage, so that they could use it for their purposes. There was mutual respect as we were like-minded individuals –

easier said than done, I know. But we have to try.

**CC**: There is a certain resistance towards art that is also a kind of criticism towards society, politics, or science. Even if art is not being treated as an equal mode of research, it may pose some danger as an uncontrollable and not fully understandable "whistle-blower." There's still a lot of misunderstanding. Maybe it's a good thing in the end. We mentioned the politics of the visual arts as means of pursuing certain political criticism or social criticism, because we assume you consider your practice critical. We wonder if you have faced any criticism of this, for example in the context of your trilogy *The Trace Evidence* (2016) which "explores the geological, meteorological, and hydrological appearance of nuclear evidence secreted within the molecular arrangement of matter" by referring to three different contexts: the uranium mine site in Oklo, Gabon, the Forsmark power plant in Sweden, and the journey of Caesium-137 from Fukushima Daiichi through the waters of the Pacific Ocean to the west coast of Vancouver Island. Have you been asked: "What do you want us to do? What are you saying? Do you want to close all the power plants?"

**SS:** It's complicated. I have to say, I'm not totally against the use of certain nuclear power. For example, it's crucial in medical diagnosis. This is not the message of my project. Rather, what I was trying to do was to remind us that we are living in a radiological environment – that radioactive contaminates are everywhere we live. I'm much more interested in probing the ways it is regulated, including the systems that produce threshold conditions. Let me give you an example: in Sweden, after Chernobyl, there was a mass culling of a reindeer herd. About 80% of the reindeer herd was killed, because in winter the reindeers' food was partly radioactive contaminated. Following Chernobyl, Sweden changed their acceptable risk level of 300 becquerels, I guess per cubic meter, to 2000 or 3000 – I can't remember precisely. The same has happened in Japan, as the state has completely recalculated acceptable levels of risk of radioactive contamination in food, running water, etc. So, my interest is much more in how materials expose or disclose politics and practices, decision-making, and regulatory frameworks.

I belong to a nuclear culture research network, run by a friend of mine, Ele Carpenter at Goldsmiths, University of London. Weirdly enough, Ele has been invited by the Ministry of Defence to participate in the Submarine Dismantling Project Advisory Group. I think they thought "we'll invite a curator and they will help us with our public image," right? Because the nuclear industry had a bad image. Ele was invited in part because her mother was an original protester and member of the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp, which was a group of women protesting for 19 years against the Americans storing nuclear weapons in Britain. She spent many years of her life living with no electricity in this protest camp, so she comes out of this history. And it was with this background that she started the nuclear cultures research project. Through her I got to meet a lot of nuclear scientists, and we've had really interesting conversations, in part because there is also no consensus amongst them. Some were very antagonistic to artists' responses to nuclear because they say: "the artists are not getting it, they're getting the science wrong, they're making reductive statements." Most people, when you say nuclear, think of an "all or nothing" kind of scenario, not understanding that there's polonium in every cigarette you smoke, there's all kinds of radioactive contaminants everywhere. Flying in a plane is one of the worst things you can do in terms of radiation exposure.

**CC**: Yes, and the extent to which Chernobyl has been demonized as a unique event! People rarely realize that for example in Brazil, in some places on the coast, the radiation is 200 times higher than near Chernobyl.

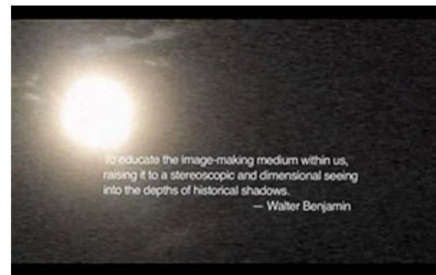
Trace Evidence, 2016

It seems there is lot of confusion at the moment, also in terms of understanding environmental change and global warming. There was this moment when the global public – in general – trusted in scientists' and science's authority, as well as integrity and ethics, in the sense that if they discover something important, dangerous, they will inform us, they will protect us, etc. But this "trust pact" – let's call it like this – is over. Myths get mixed with knowledge, faith with politics, and so on. So it seems that, if not for the artists, we would be totally lost. Their – your – stakes in uncovering how various

phenomena function, how they are valued, and how they are represented (for example things as invisible as radiation) are high.

**SS**: I had an interesting conversation with the human rights lawyer Michael Sfard at HKW in Berlin. He told me that artists are providing lawyers with new legal tools. Well, it's an amazing thing to say. I've got a very complicated attitude towards legal issues. The law is often so abstract and complex that we need new ways to represent and communicate what might be at stake in a given case. The perhaps very inconsequential nature of art actually allows artists to have a lot of access and be able to intervene in ways which are unexpected, and therefore may be productive.

**CC**: In *Material Witness* (2014) you explore the question of political violence – the 1999 Kosovo massacre (a video shot during ethnic conflicts), violence in 2009 in Sri Lanka (an anonymous execution video recorded on a mobile phone), and the conditions of possibility for the material objects (recordings) to become material witnesses. When you look at these contexts and objects, your look has the potential to reorient the narratives or change the order of the story. But these objects have to be looked at differently, outside of the existing frame. When it comes to past crimes or catastrophes, such frames are provided by museums and memorial sites most of all, which are responsible for producing and reproducing a certain "memory effect." Yet, when you actually arrive at places like Auschwitz and you look closely, you realize that life (natural life) did not stop there, that nature might "remember" differently, only it is suppressed by various museological operations in order to fit the image of the "death site." Something we would tend to conceptualize as forgetting (overgrown ruins for example) can be seen as completely the opposite.




Material Witness, 2014-15

**SS**: I keep hearing that people are disappointed when they arrive at Auschwitz, that it is not somber enough. Do you think that people would actually appreciate a more destitute natural environment at the site, one that continued to change over time

rather than was maintained to keep it looking like it did during the time of the war? I know for example that the barbed wire fencing continually needs to be replaced, otherwise its rusts and breaks as part of its natural aging process, but this would also break the hermetic seal of "museification" that operates on the site.

**CC**: It's hard to say. But the expectation is definitely there: when you go to see death, you don't expect to see life, and when you do, you feel puzzled – if not offended – so the memorial sites' administrators take care of our emotions, but also practice a very specific kind of historical politics. I don't know if you are familiar with the unrealized project of a memorial for Auschwitz-Birkenau by Polish architect Oskar Hansen and his team,[6] entitled *The Road* (1957). They wanted to treat the entire site as a monument whose central part would be a black road cutting diagonally across the camp, while everything else – remnants of buildings, barbed wire fences, railway ramps, and tracks – would be left to disintegrate over time. The project won the international competition but has never been realized, as a consequence of the protests coming mostly from former inmates. It was considered disrespectful and too ambiguous to be able to promote the "never again" lesson of Auschwitz. Looking at the project today, and looking at the site of Auschwitz-Birkenau, one realizes the very specific concept of memory, history, knowledge, etc. that is being transmitted, but also how ineffective it is. On the other hand, there are countless geological and biological processes going on which have to be controlled, suppressed, and manipulated in order for us to "remember."

**SS**: That is fascinating! I need to come back to Kraków and take more time looking at the site. I can only relate it to my own visit to the Holocaust Museum in Washington, where I realized why Holocaust narratives are such powerful forms. It is an immense machinery where everything is choreographed so completely that you do not question anything. The first thing you see when you exit the lift that takes you several floors up into the galleries – there is only one route you can take through the exhibits – is a vast photo mural of Americans liberating the camps. So the first impression you get is that this will be an American story in which the US is positioned as *the* heroic actor. It's the story of the Holocaust, but from an entirely American point of view. From there you make several transitions from the spaces of

knowledge into the space of experience, from the objective to the subjective… until you make your way into a room full of old leather shoes. Confronted with the scale of lost bodies, you become emotionally drained, many cry, and then you are led to the "space of hope" where you watch video testimonies of survivors. Everything is choreographed; there is hardly any room to think for yourself or have a different experience than the one that has been pre-scripted for us. I'm not saying the history is wrong, but I was rather taken aback by the degree to which it had been organized around producing intense forms of identification.

**CC**: So there's something which might be of interest in the context of the material witness. After the war, when Holocaust museums were established around the world, all of them wanted to have something to display, and many material objects – shoes, hair, and clothes, but also train carriages and Zyklon B cans – were sent from Poland.

**SS**: I've never thought about that. That from Poland came the distribution of artefacts so that people could see the real thing. It proves strong connections to materiality, to "the actual thing." Is it a better way of telling the story of violence? Teaching about the past? Remembering?

**CC**: Would you say that the relationship is less mediated in these cases? Thinking about it in the context of the visual arts, we are back to the discussion on how to visualize the past and violence, but also how to make visible forms of knowledge/memory production and distribution.

**SS**: For me, to a large extent it is a problem of scale, especially if you want to talk about mass atrocities or environmental destruction. You can't take a climate system into a lab, you can only visualize it. With the scale of "Auschwitz" (as Holocaust), many used the device of the void, which for me personally is not the right way to represent or, perhaps more aptly, "avoid" representing the magnitude of this crime in order to have a discussion about it. I don't know of any scholarship around the Holocaust to understand how scale is crucial in understanding but also remembering the event. Climate change put this problem of scale back in the

center. It's interesting to think about how we actually represent the scale of the event – keeping its affective impact but not rejecting the cognitive part – and what an appropriate device for that is. It is really an interesting discussion, which re-emerges with the so-called "refugee crisis" in Europe. Again, a paradigmatic image is that of a "sea" of migrants trying to reach Lampedusa or Greece. Think about how the scale has been used strategically and politically, with the metaphor of the borders of Europe being "flooded" by the "sea" of refugees. That image and that figure of speech stand for something, which calls for unpacking, problematizing, and getting involved in.

**CC**: The point being not to let the image of the crisis or catastrophe obscure all the intricate connections and interrelations of this "flooding sea" with all sorts of geopolitical problems, including climate change. To make this "out of the blue" experience an element of the narrative of 20th-century colonial history, as traumatic and traumatizing as it may be.

**SS**: Thank you for this fascinating conversation with so many great insights. I like the way we've been connecting things. My interests are moving far and in many directions. Soon the *Material Witness* book will be out, and I hope the conversation continues.

**The conversation took place on April 22nd 2017, in Spółdzielnia Ogniwo in Kraków, on the occasion of the exhibition *Rzeczowy świadek* (artists: Karolina Grzywnowicz, Mateusz Kula, Susan Schuppli, Łukasz Surowiec, Anaïs Tondeur), curated by the Curatorial Collective (Natalia Giemza, Maja Gomulska, Monika Gromala, Katarzyna Grzybowska, Sonia Kądziołka, Daria Kołecka, Karolina Koprowska, Wiktoria Kozioł, Sylwia Papier, Patrycja Przygoda, Roma Sendyka, Gabriela Sułkowska, Maria Świątkowska, Marta Świetlik, Weronika Wawryk), during Krakow Gallery Weekend. Susan Schuppli was an expert in the research project entitled *Uncommemorated Genocide Sites* (National Programme for the Development of Humanities, no. 0121/NPRH4/H2a/83/2016). The *Material Witness* exhibition was part of a discussion on the testimony of objects at the international conference *Traumatic Modernities: From Comparative Literature to Medical Humanities*.**

## Footnotes

1 http://susanschuppli.com/research/materialwitness/, accessed March 1, 2018.

2 Susan Schuppli wrote extensively about the film in her *The Most Dangerous Film in the World*, originally printed in *Tickle Your Catastrophe*, eds. Frederik Le Roy et al. (Ghent: Ghent University, KASK [Ghent Royal Academy of Fine Arts], and Vooruit, 2010), 130-145, http://susanschuppli.com/wp-content/uploads/Schuppli_TYC_Proof.pdf, accessed March 1, 2018.

3 Published in: *Forensis: The Architecture of Public Truth*, ed. Forensic Architecture (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014), 56-64. Polish translation by Katarzyna Bojarska: http://pismowidok.org/index.php/one/article/view/250/450, accessed March 1, 2018.

4 The work *Atmospheric Feedback Loops* was commissioned for Vertical Cinema & Sonic Acts, Amsterdam, and premiered in February 2017.

5 See: "Computing the Law / Searching for Justice," *FORMER WEST: Art and the Contemporary After 1989*, eds. Maria Hlavajova and Simon Sheikh (Utrecht: BAK, basis actuele kunst, 2016), http://susanschuppli.com/wp-content/uploads/Computing-the-Law-Schuppli-Former-West.pdf, accessed March 1, 2018.

6 Jerzy Jarnuszkiewicz, Julian Pałka, Lechosław Rosiński, Edmund Kupiecki, Tadeusz Plasota, Zofia Hansen.