

## How to Make Documents into Art

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‘Take a Reality Check’ [*Witness: Contemporary Artists Document Our Time*, Barbican], *Evening Standard*, 4 March 2003, p. 41.

It is often said that recent art has generally tired of thinking about itself and has switched its attention to the outside world. Rather than muse about languages, visual or otherwise, and representation, it turns its wearied eye on some portion of reality. Yet to count as art, these documents must firmly distinguish themselves from the ever-present documentary outpourings of newspapers, magazines and television. If that work in the mass media tends to be up-to-the-minute, slickly turned out, technically accomplished, full of incident, and fitting comfortably into resolved, settled narratives, art must be otherwise, not only because it must clearly declare itself art but also because much of it honourably sets out to resist mass-media cliché.

All the photographic and video work gathered together in the Barbican’s show, *Witness: Contemporary Artists Document Our Time*, appears to record something, whether it is souvenir-shopping at the site of the World Trade Center, the conversation of a Turkish transsexual, or semi-naked ladies being sprayed with foam in a church. What follows are some brief pointers to the tactics and techniques commonly used:

Unnerve the viewer with odd juxtapositions. In *Hero*, Phil Collins (playing on his famous namesake) has a very intelligent media commentator give an hour-long analysis of press reaction to the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>. His discourse is affecting, thought-provoking and often funny—recounting for instance how journalists in New York for the city’s fashion week were suddenly co-opted into disaster and political reportage. Yet the commentator chain-smokes throughout, and is urged by someone off-camera to keep drinking liquor from a mug, and gradually loses his considerable articulacy. Meanwhile a speaker above the viewer’s head continuously plays one of those simultaneously highly emotional and highly

anodyne US songs about heroes. So, who is the hero here? The one sung about, the commentator who, against the tide of convention (and alcohol), keeps an independent mind or no one at all?

Fake it. The Atlas Group were set up to document the history of conflict in the Lebanon, focusing on the long civil war. They show scraps of found video grabbed from surveillance cameras, or record a moving interview with the longest-held hostage of the war. Or they would do, if the group existed and the footage was not mocked-up. The 'Group' was set up in 1999 by media artist and academic Walid Raad, and is meant to get viewers to think about documentary conventions and, more specifically, the way they tend to get applied to the Arab world.

Size and placement matter. A sure-fire way to mark off artistic production from television is to inflate it to the size of a wall, use multiple projections, or by the placing of screens or projections in unusual configurations and settings. Santiago Sierra's potentially salacious footage of foam-covered women is undercut by the oversized display of his bleached-out, low-resolution video, so that the gaze that would dwell on flesh is snagged on blurry pixellation.



Make it look old. Boris Mikhailov makes photographs that evoke the style and technique of the beginning of the twentieth century rather than this one. When applied to the impoverished inhabitants of the Ukraine, the point was to indicate the feeling that progress

had been thrown sharply into reverse in much of the former Soviet Union, as life-expectancy dropped and destitution and hunger rose, in an unprecedented economic and social catastrophe. The effect in *Witness* of the same technique applied to the way holidaymakers dispose their bodies before the camera in a Crimean seaside resort is less certain.

Never tell a straightforward story. Kutlug Ataman, who has emerged from documentary film-making to achieve considerable success in the art world in the last few years, shows a video, *Never My Soul*, that meanders over several hours in the company of a pre-operative Turkish transsexual living in exile. While her exaggerated self-presentation and love of the camera would be well-suited to television, that medium could never allow itself the licence that Ataman grants himself and his subject in this work, with its fragmented story slowly assembled in the viewer's mind, rather than carved into concise, pre-existing shape by professional editing.



Focus on the marginalized. In *Under the Flag*, Artūras Raila gives voice to a group of Lithuanian fascists in a two-screen video installation in which they comment on what occurs

on the other screen, footage from the Austrian city of Linz at the time of the general election in 1999. Haider and beer halls meet approval but unsurprisingly non-whites and a man they take to be a Jew do not. As with Ataman, it is the uncensored character of the work that gives it interest.

Make it boring; if it's really slow and static and doesn't seem to do much, it won't be mistaken for TV. Combined with inflated size, it may even come across as portentous. This is by now a venerable and standard technique.

Many of these techniques, indeed, risk becoming exhausted through familiarity. Particularly when they are used in combination, a media mannerism results, which also opens up the likelihood that a segment of the mass media will borrow them for a time, undercutting their already weakened power. It is those artists who deploy fewer of them and skate closest to straight documentary that make the most interesting work. Allan Sekula, both a photographer and one of the foremost theorists of photography, is a case in point with his fine slide series, *Waiting for Tear Gas*, about the anti-World Trade Organisation demonstrators in Seattle in 1999. It is true that these images also react against a type of mass-media representation, sensation-hungry photojournalism, for they do not seek out the violent moment of drama that conventionally seems to encapsulate the whole story. Instead, in their recording of ordinary demonstrators, many of them women, anticipating police assault or in its aftermath, they come close to an older tradition of engaged documentary photography. In these images, many of which taken singly are quite unexceptional but which build in significance as the sequence unfolds, Sekula shows how the act of resistance lights up minds and thus faces recorded by the lens. As Sekula admits, the alliances forged on the streets at that extraordinary time surprised him as much as anybody, and led him to produce an unaffected representation of (and here the meaning is clear enough) heroism.

*Witness: Contemporary Artists Document Our Time* is at the Curve, Barbican until 27 April.