

Kunsthaus Baselland, Switzerland and
Halle für Kunst Lüneburg, Germany

The word 'need' in an otherwise deadpan exhibition title might signal a deep human urge underpinning the exhibition's content, or a definitive statement about the important social and emotional function of documentation and recording. Luckily 'The Need to Document' interprets its theme less literally than its title implies. With two different incarnations, in the Kunsthaus Baselland and the Halle für Kunst Lüneburg, the exhibition eschews nostalgic autobiographies or pieces of official evidence and focuses on a possibility with more obscure objectives – the artist's document. Rather than rehashing the interrogation of the documentary or questioning the existence of objective truth, the show asks how (or whether) artistic methods of documentation function inside and outside the gallery. Can a work of art be a valid document and vice versa?

Nothing here could be mistaken for straight documentation or tries to fool us into thinking it is – there are no press photos or BBC-style exposés. From the beginning it is clear that 'need' does not necessarily have to be a life-threatening risk or social obligation. In fact, it may have no specific end other than its own existence. In the video *Everything Has Been Done* (2003) the Polish art collective Azorro reflect on the artistic process as they ponder potential art works. Each of their

offerings, ranging from 'a triangle inside a square' to 'something with fat, sweating people', is just as soon dismissed by another member of the group with a simple 'No, that's been done'. Although the work is staged for an audience, we don't doubt its status as a veritable document, because finally their failed inspiration is both work of art and document.

In many works the artist plays the traditional role of a documentarian bearing witness to events in remote places that might not otherwise see a camera lens. Artists' individual voices often fall silent in favour of the voices of their subjects. In *Re:route* (2000–5), for instance, Big Hope remap Turin through the photographs and statements of local immigrants. The photographs are banal, but the captions evoke the alienation of the immigrants' experience. Robdu from Ethiopia, for instance, photographs a pharmacy because it is adjacent to the place from where he wires money home to his family. While the testimonies seem genuine, they still beg the question: does a multiplicity of viewpoints provide a more authentic view?

Jens Haaning's *Obne Titel* (Untitled, 2000) also focuses on immigrants, but without any claim to the absolute authenticity of their experience. Instead Haaning seems to encourage us to take part in racial stereotyping. In the tradition of photographer as social archivist he presents 12 photographs of immigrants outside Dutch foreigners' clubs, supplemented by the



Big Hope
(Miklós Erhardt and
Dominic Hislop)
Re:route
(detail)
2000–5
Mixed media
Dimensions variable

description, price and origin of each of their garments, including details such as 'Underwear 30 DKK at Fotex'. Haaning co-opts the style of the heedless fashion photographer, moulding his subjects into conspirators in his game. Is he monumentalizing immigrants by treating them as fashion models or satirizing them by documenting their uniformity and machismo?

Many of the works employ a deliberate disjunction between text and image, in which artists' texts function as misleading or ambiguous captions. In Klub Zwei's *Schwarz auf Weiss* (Black on White, 2003), a video consisting only of black words on a white background, the narration practices a technique of suppression – we hear excerpts of someone describing a photographic archive from World War II, but the voice-over is edited to discuss the photographs' physical condition rather than their content. The piece encourages us to conjure our own mental image of the Holocaust and then turn the photograph over in our minds, so that we are faced with the other side – a blank, decaying piece of paper that tells us little about the original event it recorded. This is a somewhat cumbersome, though eventually effective, metaphor for the inadequacy of historicizing the Holocaust. Visual documentation (or its lack) is the ostensible subject, but our own mental imagery completes the work.

Unlike other shows which suggest that our faith in documentary strategies may be limited, only a few works in 'The Need to Document' adopt this cynical stance; most earnestly employ these documentary methodologies. The real question is whether these approaches are viable alternatives to journalism, academic research, traditional documentaries or any of the forms they co-opt, or whether they simply strip away our faith in those methods.

Christy Lange



That's been done.

Azorro
*Everything Has Been
Done*
2003
Video still

The Need to Document