

scurvy tunes

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greening documenta?



Kristina Buch, *The Lover*, 2012

Radical Camouflage at Documenta 13

by Julian Stallabrass

Documenta, held every five years in the central German city of Kassel, is the art world's equivalent of the Olympics. While its scale may be rivalled by Venice, its five-yearly timetable and large budget allow curators time to develop an elaborate vision, and it has often been used to test the temperature of contemporary art production. Some previous editions have been very influential in changing the direction of the art world—for instance, Catherine David's Documenta X and Okwui Ozenor's Documenta XII did much to push it towards documentary and a greater engagement with politics.

The unusual situation and history of Documenta has haunted many of its editions, including the one currently on show. Kassel is a smallish industrial city set in hilly and forested countryside. In the Second World War, it produced planes and tanks, and it is still a production centre for Germany's main battle tank, a fact that has not escaped Kassel's Occupy protestors. The city was repeatedly bombed by the RAF, and extensively destroyed, with thousands killed and many more made homeless. As with so many German cities, its modern centre is the product of that destruction, and its few older buildings were those considered worth restoring from ruin. Documenta, founded in 1955, was from the beginning seen as a restoration of Nazi cultural wrecking, and its first edition showed works of classical modernism which had, of course, been condemned by the Nazis as 'degenerate'. They were shown in what remains the main venue of Documenta, the Fridericianum, which then still bore some of the marks of war damage.

The current Documenta—or DOCUMENTA (13) if you follow the rubric of its branding—is a

vastly ambitious attempt to influence the course of art and culture as a whole. Its curator, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, using a frame of reference that takes in phenomenology, quantum theory, feminist thinking and psychoanalysis, wants to push the centre of human cultural concerns away from simple subject-object oppositions towards a perspective that would take in the viewpoints of all entities, living and inorganic. If matter has an intricate connection with information, at least at the quantum level, then all entities may be said to communicate and even to have will. In recounting a failed attempt to have the world's heaviest meteorite shipped across the world for display at Documenta, Christov-Bakargiev is led to ask, not just what she wanted or what the rock's custodians (the indigenous Moqoit people in Argentina) wanted, but what it wanted:

'It had traveled through vertiginous space before landing on Earth and settling. Would it have wished to go on this further journey? Does it have any rights, and if so, how can they be exercised? Can it ask to be buried again, as some of the Moqoit argue, or would it have enjoyed a short trip to an art exhibition, rather than a science or world's fair?'

This thinking is used to prop up a series of gestures towards radical positions: environmental, activist, participatory, anti-war, and in the defence of various minorities. In all this, it is paramount that there must be no 'closure', no settling and no agreement: rather a dissonant dance of beings and objects in which all perspectives are acknowledged in an 'anti-logocentric' frame.

Documenta's five-year gestation period has often involved highly complex intellectual engagements. Ewenzor's edition, for example, had seminars dotting the globe and involving hundreds of peripatetic and local participants. These discussions produced five volumes of essays on subjects such as truth and reconciliation, the current state of democracy and the African city. Christov-Bakargiev's Documenta has produced no less than 100 mini-books that have been collected into a gargantuan volume for the main event—The Book of Books—and has had events taking place in various venues: Kabul, Banff, Cairo and Alexandria as well as at Kassel. As with previous Documentas, only those invited to participate in those events can judge the process by which the Documenta was brought about. This account will be concerned only with the final product as seen at Kassel by a regular viewer.



Rabih Mroué, *The Pixelated Revolution*, 2012

I will look at a series of works that give some idea of the range of offerings at

Documenta, and some of its common concerns, starting with an accomplished and typical piece of 'biennial art'. The subject matter of the installation and video by Rabih Mroué is contemporary and newsworthy: the relation of cameras and guns in the Syrian uprising. Why, Mroué asks in his compelling video-lecture, do people risk their lives to make photos and videos, even to the point of continuing to film while being shot at? He shows a few instances when it is clear that the person behind the camera sees the gunman turn towards them, raise his weapon and take deliberate aim. Still they keep filming as the gun is fired. Mroué makes the point the videos are also weapons, when distributed in Syria and beyond, and are essential to feeding the resistance; also that the phone camera is not used like film cameras of old but becomes a prosthesis, an extension of the eye which is continually active, even when the images produced, for instance in scanning the urban landscape for danger, are to the outside viewer a jumble of meaningless frames, piled jerkily one on another.

In a large room next to the video-screening, Mroué displays various items that, again in typical biennial fashion, estrange the viewer from the conventions of the media and ingrained habits of looking. Some films are rendered as flip-books, and the viewer is supposed to time their flipping of the pages with pressing a button to play the accompanying soundtrack. This is hard to get right, so there is a disjunction experienced between sound and image, and also between the gravity of the footage and the flippancy of the format. In a very common tension in the way political issues are handled in contemporary art within a documentary frame, there is a confrontation between the partisan presentation of content and the urge to deconstruct the media on which it was recorded.

Mroué's work is shown at the Hauptbahnhof, once the city's main station. It was used during the war to transport arms, forced labour and the city's Jews. Various artists are set the task of awakening its ghosts. So there is a loose connection between conflict in Syria and the history of the place, yet this could be said of many places, especially in Germany and across a vast swathe of Eastern Europe where the war was mainly fought. Since the artist seals his work off from the station environment through the use of projections and spotlighted objects in darkened spaces, the station provides a general and evocative frame for this piece, and no more.



Kristina Buch, *The Lover*, 2012

In complete contrast, and in a work that could not be more open to its environment and the elements, in her project, *The Lover*, Kristina Buch has created a live butterfly installation in front of the State Theater. On a raised platform, Buch has planted ideal plants for indigenous butterfly species, with protective nettles and thistles on the edges and a flowering center. Researching the habitats of butterflies, Buch

installed the pupae of 37 species on the plantation, to hatch out and populate the flower island. She has tended the garden and the butterflies since March, and will continue to do so throughout the 100 days of the exhibition, so this is a long, careful piece of artistic labour in which the results are cast into the air without any guaranteed result.

Before the land was flattened by industrial farming into a patchwork of monocultures, and the countryside fell eerily silent, one of the most sublime spectacles of living abundance was the swarms of butterflies that filled the air in their millions. To net one or two specimens from such profusion, kill them and pin them to a board was a respectable and even worthy pursuit, combining scientific curiosity and aesthetic appreciation.

Buch, who trained as a biologist, and whose scientifically inflected work is well-attuned to the ethos of this Documenta, reverses the action of those collectors. Her work is a token act of restoration, bringing back to the land an absurdly tiny fragment of the biological riches that it once held. The viewer has no way of knowing what effect this work has had on the environment. There do seem to be a lot of butterflies about, not so much around the flowering platform, but in the nearby herb gardens of the Karlsaue Park, and among the tea-making plants established by anti-capitalist activists, AND AND AND. But, of course, they could have been there anyway.



Song Dong, *Doing Nothing Garden*, 2012

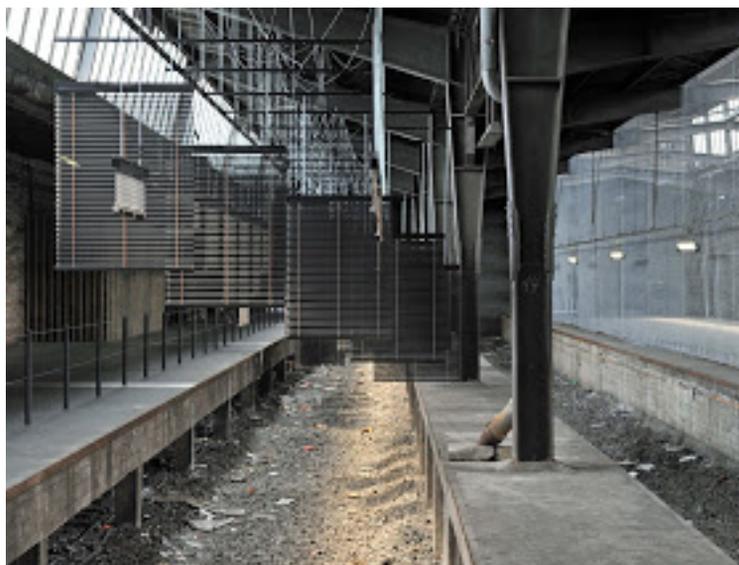
Buch's piece is one of a number that engage in various kinds of gardening, and this Documenta makes extensive use of the extraordinary Karlsaue park, which was laid out in the eighteenth century as a formal garden, and in postwar reconstruction with more informal planting. Song Dong has set up a work that has a formal resemblance to Buch's, being another island of vegetation from which viewers are forbidden. His *Doing Nothing Garden* has been set up on pile of building and biological waste. A frequent recourse to dealing with the rubble produced by war was to heap it up, spread soil over it and hope that something will grow. As a result, strange artificial hillocks dot the parks of the war zones. As Song Dong doubtless knows, in the year of the first Documenta, a flower festival was held in Kassel in which the extensive rubble from the city's bombing, which had been dumped in the Karlsaue, was planted over with roses. While Buch's work highlights an intensive, daily labour of care, undertaken for non-instrumental purposes for its own sake, Song Dong, having once set up his garden, does nothing more and lets nature take its course within the well-marked artistic frame. Behind both works lies the idea of a futile activity which is nonetheless necessary;

and despite the sunlit appearance of each garden, a darker undercurrent of each work relates to the futility of token action in the face of global environmental degradation.



Lara Favaretto, *Momentary Monument IV*, 2012 (Photo: JS)

In a different register, but still concerned with waste, Lara Favaretto has arranged a massive parade of metal junk in one of the marshalling yards of the railway station. She is known for making sculptural objects with a range of sophisticated art-historical references, often leavened with humour. The 400-ton pile of industrial scrap includes parts from trucks, trains and various containers. The obvious point made here is about the colossal waste of consumerism and capitalism's 'creative destruction', which is much on people's minds in the midst of the economic crisis: objects (and employees) are junked, not because they are obsolescent, but because the economic climate of supply and demand has shifted. Once again (and as with many works shown in the Hauptbahnhof) the war is evoked. In this setting, it is easy to read Favaretto's vast pile of scrap, less as a knowing nod to Pop, Arte Povera, to César and John Chamberlain, and more as an evocation of the vast wastage of war—the ultimate act of creative destruction. This is all the more so because Favaretto has chosen to remove certain elements of particular sculptural merit, replacing them with concrete equivalents. These heavy, pale forms may refer to Doris Salcedo or Rachel Whiteread's memorial ghosts. Yet they also serve to evoke a parade of war memories, remote and recent, from the burning armour of the battle of Kursk, in which the tank army of the Wehrmacht was broken, to the unequal annihilation by high-tech weaponry of the half-century-old armour of the Iraqi Army in 2003.



Haegue Yang, *Approaching*, 2012 (Photo: JS)

Also in the Hauptbahnhof, in an large shed space, hangs Haegue Yang's installation, *Approaching: Choreography Engineered in Never-Past Tense*, composed of motorised Venetian blinds that rise and fall. Christov-Bakargiev has written of her Documenta as an 'un-harmonic and frenetic' dance, but the choreography here is measured and tasteful. The reflective black of the shades is finely judged to complement the greys of the train shed while the roof admits light that falls variably on the work, depending on cloud cover and time of day. The result is a contemplative episode in a space that acts as a long corridor-like transition between dark inner spaces and the outdoors.

Yang has become very well-known for elaborate sculptural pieces which draw on a set of abstruse and eccentric intellectual concerns to produce works that look formalist but also refer to narrative. In her gallery works, her personal concerns—themselves an exploration of complex interactions between light and shadow, materiality and insubstantial elements, abstraction and story-telling—are given full rein. In her site-specific installations, they are pitched into a relationship with particular spaces and histories.

Venetian blinds in Yang's work are meant to act as a partial barrier, screening and revealing viewers from each other, in a metaphor of personal relations affected by miscommunication and the demands of practical life. In the Hauptbahnhof, viewers are held at a distance from the blinds, and see them from only two of their four sides, so the effect is reduced. What is hidden and revealed is instead the fabric and light of the shed itself. The 'Never-Past' of the title may refer to the traditions of past generations and their weight on the brains of the living, since Yang's work is subject to a melancholic Benjaminian engagement with history and memory. Like the Lavaretto, the Yang plays with the past, but does so in a way that is less prescriptive and specific. Instead, the material of the station building is set up against a modulated version of something that the artist has often made before, and the qualified victor in this clash is her personal, artistic autonomy.



Pierre Huyghe, *Untilled*, 2012 (Photo: JS)

Another signal—and highly popular—display of artistic eccentricity may be found deep in the Karlsaue. A map is essential to find the many works scattered through the gardens, and certainly for this piece, *Untilled*, by Pierre Huyghe, in an area that you would be unlikely to find by wandering. Over a portion of the gardens, the regulated woods, bounded areas of meadow and planned vistas are replaced by a dumping ground for

concrete slabs and other building materials. In the midst of a series of artificial hillocks lies a sculpture of a reclining woman, her head being represented by a live bees' nest. Viewers are ordered not to approach too closely. They are also asked to keep their dogs on a lead. With luck, the reason soon becomes apparent, as dogs run in and around the installation, recognisable as the artists' creatures by their brightly coloured legs in fluorescent pink and blue.

On one level, and as with many of the works at Documenta, this is a piece of 'relational aesthetics', a piece that puts people in a highly unusual situation (quite unlike the regulated spaces of work and organised leisure) to see how they will react to it and each other. On another level, and in this way it is very much like the Yang, Untilled is a response to a place, yet one that remains very much part of the artist's signature style: here of intelligent, amusing, cool and peculiar pieces of work, entertaining but also puzzling. Viewers are plunged into Huyghe-world, a quasi-surreal environment in which the borders of chance and artistic calculation are hard to gauge.

If Huyghe gives a wilfully eccentric, attention-seeking and media-friendly performance for the Documenta, the same may be said of the curator herself. Hers is the über-art-work choreography of myriad pieces and events, and in this the figure of the curator and creator, as the subjective heart of Documenta, stands to the fore. In some previous biennials (including the last Documenta, curated by Roger Buergel and Ruth Noack), a strong tension was felt between political exigencies and the usual Kantian display of aesthetic temperament expected at such events. 'Beautiful' works clashed incoherently with pieces about the war on terror and other urgent, desperate political situations, leaving even expert viewers bewildered by the combination.

Here, in an ambitious and overbearing theoretical frame, coherence is loudly renounced yet at the same time all must serve the demands of the rejection of hierarchies, resistance to 'closure', scepticism about economic growth, and the granting of all non-human beings and objects their due as agents. If the biennial can no longer be coherent, it should embrace dissonance as its aesthetic, and the boundaries of art are dissolved. So, in some particularly silly displays, science is roped into the corral of art. One distinguished innovator in quantum information, Anton Zeilinger, shows pieces of scientific equipment on old worktops, and the traditional blackboard scribbled with equations. A notice reads:

Do Not Touch. No Presentation Until To [sic] 8th of August.

(I saw this on the 3rd.) The oddities of quantum theory are gestured towards using apparatus, the use of which (lacking either demonstration or explanation) must remain mysterious to the vast majority of viewers. Much the same can be said of a display of various artefacts used in the study of epigenetics. Both fields have deep consequences for human culture: quantum theory because of its truly alien epistemological implications (which have been puzzled over for eighty years); and epigenetics as a fundamental revision of Darwinism in which the environment produces heritable effects on the expression of genes. The best that can be said of the Documenta displays is that they may encourage further reading.



Anton Zeilinger, *Quanta Now*, 2012

Christov-Bakargiev's extravagant self-aggrandising was highlighted by one artist-blogger who noted that in the first Documenta press release, images of the curator outnumbered those of art works! In essays and wall texts, themes are deeply personalised as subjective performances. This, for instance, is how the various Documenta venues are presented:

- On *stage*. I am playing a role, I am a subject in the act of re-performing.
- Under *siege*. I am encircled by the other, besieged by others.
- In a state of *hope*, or optimism. I dream, I am the dreaming subject of anticipation.
- On *retreat*. I am withdrawn, I choose to leave the others, I sleep.

These four conditions relate to the four locations in which DOCUMENTA (13) is physically and conceptually sited – *Kassel, Kabul, Alexandria/Cairo, and Banff*.

This quasi-theoretical bluster seeks to conceal a number of serious contradictions at the heart of the Documenta enterprise, which cannot be much-eased by the sticky oil of diversity and anti-logocentrism. One of the most obvious for the ordinary visitor is the business of the Documenta. The spirit of openness, sharing and digital gift-giving evoked in Documenta literature comes up against the high ticket prices and the stern guarding of the great majority of venues, even those in the gardens. Tickets cost 20€ for a 1-day ticket, and 35€ for a two-day one. A season ticket, of most use to locals, is a massive 100€. The concessionary prices for students, the unemployed and those on benefits are not far below these prices, excluding large numbers of viewers altogether.

The Documenta is a large business enterprise: it is closely connected to the commercial art world, and many of its artists are bankable stars. As critic Jerry Saltz pointed out, referring to one of the most prominent New York galleries, a third of Marion Goodman's stable are exhibited there. What is more, scepticism of economic growth does not extend to the Documenta itself. The budgets of the various Documentas have shown sustained growth, with two very large leaps, one in 1992 for Documenta 9 and another in 2007 for Documenta 12, when the budget almost tripled. While substantial funding comes from federal and Hesse state sources, the Documenta is also has the sponsorship of major corporations including Deutsche Bank, Finanzgruppe and

Volkswagen. As with many such events, it is easiest to exhibit the work of successful commercial artists since their wealthy galleries subsidise their showing. The marketing of Documenta-branded consumer items, and the high ticket prices are consequences of the competition between art events and the vaunting ambitions of curators.



This contradiction is further exacerbated by the environmental aspects of the Documenta. The strapline, 'A Sustainable Exhibition', the use of the Karlsaeue, and the inclusion of gardening pieces may lead the casual viewer to think of this a 'green' event. Yet, of course, the increasingly event-driven character of the art world contributes to environmental despoliation. Artists, curators, critics, gallerists and buyers have been flown to venues across four continents. Objects are shipped by air (and massively heavy piles of scrap metal are displaced). VIPs travel to Kassel by helicopter and private jet. Ordinary viewers travel long distances for the latest unique but also standard art-world mega-event. There is nothing green about any of this, and the curatorial moves to evoke environmental issues, like the green hue of the BP logo, are an insulting camouflage.

Similarly, and in line with other recent art-world events, the look of political activism is drawn upon. At the AND AND AND display there can be seen familiar utopian slogans chalked on blackboards, flow charts showing the process of collaborative political thinking, along with the detritus of collective living. Participation is invited but within the frame of an event at which the default mode is the passive consumption of displays made by individuals who are held up as exceptional. An island of political radicalism and participation is set within an ocean of broadcast culture.



Photo: JS

In a qualified sense, an alternative model was offered by the modest scale of this

year's Berlin Biennial, curated by Joanna Warsza and Artur Zmijewski, which was, not coincidentally, free to view. The basic setup was similar in that viewers were still encouraged to travel to see the site-specific works, unique, unrepeatable and largely unreproducible: you see them in Berlin (or Kassel, or Venice or at Gwangju...) or not at all. Yet Occupy was invited to inhabit the most prominent space of the Biennial, which is quite a different move from Christov-Bakargiev's retrospective welcoming of a small Occupy group that chose to camp outside the Fridericianum. Occupy, being multiple and local, can set up cheaply anywhere: what they offer may be locally distinct, but it makes no sense to travel far to participate. Its interventions, many of which draw on the techniques and tactics of contemporary art, offer a practice of culture which is environmentally light, inclusive, participatory and anti-elitist.

There are strains within the art world engagement with politics which echo these ideals. As military imperialism continues to be exercised, and as the myths of neoliberalism are dented by the prolonged economic crisis, the art world does respond—and it must do so, since the populous lower ranks from which its few stars are drawn are notably impoverished and insecure. At Documenta, the aesthetic performance of a curator armoured with an elaborate theoretical mysticism is supposed to allow viewers to glide over the deep contradictions between art's ethos and its business model. Yet it may occur to the viewer, confronted with such incoherent diversity, that effective actions against inequality, environmental devastation, political oppression and the failures of democracy, while they may emerge from innovative means for mass political participation, may also and urgently, involve logic and closure.



[Many thanks to Julian for the repost from the Retort list, and for sharing his images. A version of this text is forthcoming in New Left Review. - GR]

jehan alonzo at 1:10 PM

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