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# The New Diversity and the New Public: Impressions of *dOCUMENTA (13)*<sup>1</sup>

Barbara Wolbert



Figure 1: Waiting in line to see *dOCUMENTA (13)*, Photo: Christos-Nikolas Vittoratos.

When *dOCUMENTA (13)* closed on September 16, 2012, the German evening news show *Tagesthemen* reported that the exhibition had attracted around 860,000 visitors, a record for this Kassel-based quinquennial series. Among the visitors were 12,500 journalists whose reviews of the exhibition spurred even more visits both on-site and online. *dOCUMENTA (13)* also had a record number of first-time attendees, with almost one-third of the total visitors being under the age of thirty, another all-time high. The exhibition could also boast of 188 participating artists and art collectives, and—in addition to venues in Kabul and Bamiyan, in Alexandria and Cairo, and at The Banff Center in Alberta, Canada—of 36 sites in Kassel.

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<sup>1</sup> The formatting of official titles for the documenta series varies from event to event. In this article, simplified titles have been used for most of the previous documenta shows (e.g., *Documenta 2*, *Documenta 3*, *Documenta 12*), and the official titles, according to the original posters of the respective shows, have been listed in an appendix. There are two exceptions to this practice of simplifying titles: the thirteenth documenta is referred to by its official title “*dOCUMENTA (13)*,” since it is the focus of this article; and the first documenta is referred to as “*documenta*,” since its title was originally unnumbered.—Ed.

Despite its unprecedented size and popularity, the show in Kassel nonetheless struck me as remarkably unspectacular. This ambiguity nagged at me and would become crucial for my understanding not only of this most recent documenta and of its audiences, but also of new art audiences in general. It made me focus on how contemporary art exhibitions are coming to terms with a changing notion of what is public, and on how they define the public sphere. Moreover, it made me ruminate on re-mediations of cultural, racial, ethnic, and national categories as markers for artistic and aesthetic concepts.

The first artwork mentioned in the *Tagesthemen* broadcast and the exhibit to which it devoted most of its *dOCUMENTA (13)* coverage was Yan Lei's installation *Limited Art Project, 2010–2011* (see figure 2).



Figure 2: Yan Lei's *Limited Art Project, 2010–2011*, Photo: Hartwig Bambeby.

Introduced as a main attraction of *dOCUMENTA (13)*, this installation will also serve as a point of departure for my discussion and will be revisited in my concluding remarks. Yan Lei's installation consisted of 360 oil and acrylic paintings on different sized canvases that were displayed on the walls and hung from the ceiling. All of these works—which his team had painted, one a day, over the course of a year—were copies of images that Yan Lei had found on the Internet, including some famous artworks. By bringing these images back from the virtual realms of electronic space onto canvases and into a physical gallery space, the *Limited Art Project, 2010–2011* re-mediates photographs, paintings, and photographs of paintings. In doing so, Yan Lei invited *dOCUMENTA (13)* visitors, who had been touring all kinds of sites, had seen all kinds of objects and performances, and had even experienced artworks that were only audible, into a painting gallery proper. Banking on this difference between virtual and physical exhibition spaces, Yan Lei raises his audiences' awareness of the

re-mediations enacted by new media that seem to render ‘old media’ obsolete. At the same time, the installation plays with those mediations and puts them to new use (see Bolter and Grusin).

The presentation of *Limited Art Project 2010–2011* in the *Tagesthemen* show on the final day of *dOCUMENTA (13)* also deserves special attention in the context of contemporary re-mediations of race and ethnicity in German visual culture, as the reception of Yan Lei’s installation arguably reframes the questionable publicity given to this Beijing artist during his participation in previous documentas. Yan Lei had attended *Documenta 12* as part of a contingent of seven artists from the People’s Republic of China, who the curators’ dramaturgy and journalists’ reviews had singled out on account of their nationality. By contrast, the *Tagesthemen* show, like other press and publicity on *dOCUMENTA (13)*, referred to Yan Lei without particular reference to his country of origin. Whether or not this omission was intentional, I shall argue that this ‘noiselessness’ about the artist’s nationality was paradigmatic of *dOCUMENTA (13)* and of its reception as a whole.

Three years prior to the opening of *dOCUMENTA (13)*, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, appointed as its director, announced that ‘her documenta’ would stay clear of what she called the “biennial syndrome” (Lecture at the California College of the Arts in San Francisco). The very notion of a recurring art event had already discomfited Christov-Bakargiev when she served as the director of the 2008 *Biennial of Sydney*. As she suggested, the increase of biennials might have “decentralized art and created multiple art systems,” but it also appears to have “invented ‘new possibilities of disempowerment’” (Bywater 154). Christov-Bakargiev’s skepticism about the biennial format raises several key questions about the history and future of the documenta: To what extent are documentas following a “biennial trajectory” in becoming more and more spectacular, and how might they still differ from other recurring exhibition series? Historically, if the inception of the documenta belied a nation state’s latent bid for international recognition, then did it not also produce some kind of decentralizing effect by shifting the artworld’s attention away from Paris and New York to an emerging West-German system of art? Today, moreover, what role can the documenta play in a global landscape filled with biennial spectacles, and which symptoms and signs would indicate a biennialization of the documenta, which Christov-Bakargiev strove to avoid so passionately?

The Venice Biennial dates back to 1895, when the “International Art Exhibition of the City of Venice” was first staged as a public event (see *La Biennale*). After this inaugural opening, the exposition resumed on a biennial schedule to become a major international cultural event. The exhibition palace and the national pavilions subsequently built surrounding it were originally conceived as a competitively arranged and staged representation of visual artists’ works categorized by national origin, and, as such, represented the nation state through visual arts. Prior to World War I and II the exhibition was executed as a national(ist) spectacle. We may assume that Christov-Bakargiev intended to distance herself from the legacy of such spectacles, which made the nation a primary category of interest. Christov-Bakargiev’s remarks indicate that she sought to dissociate *dOCUMENTA (13)* from these kinds of international art spectacles or world fairs of art. Furthermore, as the designated director, she was compelled to distinguish this documenta from other recurring events on the already packed timetable of worldwide biennials, which on average records a new showing every ten days (see Haupt and Binder). It seems that Christov-Bakargiev wanted to give a wide berth to *dOCUMENTA (13)* so that it would not be variously celebrated as spectacular or criticized as merely a spectacle.

But are art shows not always spectacles and is the documenta not inescapably a type of spectacle? Guy Debord once asserted that in “societies, where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation” (§1). While Debord did not explicitly address art events, these productions are certainly a part of the mediated reality discussed in *The Society of the Spectacle*, and it is difficult to imagine that an international art show of the size and prestige of the documenta can be anything but spectacular. The documenta is a product of modern cultural politics, one of the arenas that brings about and affects social relations through images. As Debord asserts, “The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images” (§4).

In addition to considering the documenta as a spectacle, we also need to question the significance of racial, ethnic, and national categories in both visual representations and their reception. We need to ask whether these categories have explicitly shaped the terms of previous documentas, influencing and framing curatorial decisions, or whether the disregard for these categories has disadvantaged documenta artists. With a focus on spectacularization and on the mediation of nationality, race or ethnicity—two notions implicit in Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev’s rejection of a further biennialization of the documenta—I hope to better understand the agendas that are intertwined in her pledge to create a documenta free of the “biennial syndrome” (Christov-Bakargiev, Lecture). In an overview of the first twelve documentas, I will follow those two lines of thought. I will focus on processes of festivalization and on those features of *dOCUMENTA (13)* associated with spectacle, and I will keep an eye towards mediations and re-mediations of national, racial, and ethnic identifications in specific exhibits. To that end, I will begin with a short history of the documenta, and trace how the remote town of Kassel was transformed into a temporary art center with major exhibitions taking place initially once every four years, and later, every fifth summer. I will also frame this history of the documenta in relation to repercussions from three eras of national history: Nazi-Germany’s art politics, West Germany’s interest in internationalization, and a united Germany’s cultural acclimatization to globalization.

## Documenta and the Emergence of the “Biennial-Syndrome”

In 1955, an exhibition entitled “documenta” took place at one of Europe’s oldest museum buildings, the Fridericianum in Kassel, then empty, bomb-damaged, and structurally secured but not yet renovated. Arnold Bode, a professor at the local art school, spontaneously launched this project with great confidence, and after only one year of advance preparation, realized his vision with modest means and a newfangled interior design.<sup>2</sup>

This show, *documenta*, was one of the first international art exhibitions—and the one with the most longevity—after the foundation of the two German states in 1949. Prior to *documenta*, there had only been a Hamburg show of works by Henry Moore, set up by the British Council and the *Dritte Deutsche Kunstausstellung* (Third

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<sup>2</sup> Bode converted inexpensive materials and techniques used in industrial and construction contexts—such as white paint on the floor and (mended) walls, thin iron bars, straight and bent, and nine meter high plastic curtains, donated by the Göppinger Kaliko- and Kunstlederwerke—into a cutting-edge exhibition design. See Harald Kimpel and Karin Stengel, *documenta 1955*, pp. 28 and 32.

German Art Exhibition) which presented Socialist Realist art from East and West Germany. Before 1949 an international show of Christian art was on display in Cologne in 1948, and an exhibit of French painting put together by the French Military Authorities had toured the Western zones in 1946 and attracted more visitors than the *documenta* seven years later. Remarkable, furthermore, was the First German Art Exhibition in Dresden, which during the same year, presented works by artists of all the military zones and critically addressed the *Degenerate 'Art'* show of 1937 (see Stonard).

*Documenta* reveals two uncanny connections to the past that I regard as relevant to its subsequent institutionalization as a periodically reoccurring art event: first, the synergy established between this exhibition and a concurrently running garden festival that had been tainted by Nazi exhibition politics; second, *documenta*'s connection to two earlier art exhibitions of the Nazi era. Many visitors to *documenta* had actually come to Kassel to attend the Bundesgartenschau (Federal Garden Exhibition) taking place that same summer. This federal parks-and-recreation festival dating back to earlier garden shows organized in and by German cities was re-launched during the 1930s on the national level, as the *Reichs-gartenschau* (Garden Show of the Third Reich), transforming the opening of a public part into a festival. In addition to dealing with this legacy of Nazi exhibition practices, the better part of *documenta* consisted of modern artworks from the first half of the twentieth century, including paintings by Beckmann, Chagall, Kirchner, Kokoschka and Picasso that had been taken down from museum walls and banned by the Nazis. Some of these artworks, such as Wilhelm Lehmbruck's statue *Kneeling Woman* (1911), which was placed prominently in the rotunda of the Fridericianum for *documenta*, had been included in the 1937 Degenerate Art Exhibition in Munich (see Barron). This derogatory exhibition, which was toured other parts of Germany as well or was replicated in other places, had three million visitors altogether. It demanded its audiences support, approval or, at least, silence regarding the Nazi regime's program of ethnic cleansing and its practice of humiliating and fetal selection. Its opening in Munich coincided by no means as a matter of chance with the pompous inauguration of Hitler's House of German Art, which was yet another signature spectacle of the Nazi regime's exhibition politics.

At *documenta*, photographs of artworks—contemporary and historical, European and non-European—covered the walls of the foyer at the Fridericianum in order to convey West Germany's aspirations of openness and inclusiveness. Enlarged photographic portraits of artists who had been persecuted and whose works had been censored or destroyed by the Nazis were displayed on both sides of the entrance to the actual exhibition space. Thus *documenta* called to mind Germany's inglorious past and indicated the nation's desire for redemption. Although this engagement with the Nazi past had not been made explicit, *documenta* was thus intended to remediate issues of race and ethnicity, thereby enacting postwar reconciliation. However, the exhibition offered only partial rehabilitation: it did not include all of the banned and ridiculed works from the Degenerate Art Exhibition, omitting the socially engaged, anti-militaristic, figurative works of realist art; and it failed to remedy early misrepresentations of works by artists who had been designated as mentally ill by the Nazi regime (see Grasskamp). Nonetheless, such acts of rehabilitation, though incomplete and hardly explicit, granted the exhibit its political weight.

The powerful coalescence of the installation's political importance—in particular with regard to the historical burden of guilt implicitly associated with the show—and its innocent appearance, that is, the apparent spontaneity of its production and its



unassuming design, made this singular art exhibition of 1955 ‘the *first* documenta’: This exhibition showed the potential to become a recurring spectacle in West Germany. Since then, the Fridericianum has continually served as a central documenta venue. *Documenta 2* moved beyond the confines of the museum structure and its representational style, transforming the ruins of the Orangerie into an open-air exhibition site for introducing works by Henry Moore and other sculptors to a wider German audience. This marked the beginning of documentas’ characteristic use of multiple exhibition sites, which have since expanded across and beyond several designated buildings and open-air places. By 1964, Arnold Bode’s already unconventional exhibition design became even more extraordinary. At *Documenta 3*, for example, he mounted three of Ernst Wilhelm Nay’s large inclined canvas paintings to the ceiling of an exhibition room, thus forcing audiences to crane their necks in order to view them. Noteworthy for our purposes is the fact that the art displayed at the documenta came to be restricted to the realm of modernist abstraction.

The participating artists came exclusively from countries of the political West, thereby rendering the documenta a Cold War art event par excellence. On the other side of this cultural war of position, the *Fünfte Deutsche Kunstausstellung* (Fifth German Art Exhibition) of 1962–63 and the *Sechste Deutsche Kunstausstellung* (Sixth German Art Exhibition) of 1967–68, showed mostly figurative and socialist realist works of GDR artists.

Although not inaccessible to the wider public, the early documenta shows addressed a rather homogenous audience of artworld professionals and art connoisseurs, the total number of visitors amounting to less than a quarter of recent documentas. In the eyes of some of these engaged audience members who had monitored the exhibition’s politics, Arnold Bode’s leadership became a matter of controversy in 1968, since he had participated in negotiations permitting the Museum of Modern Art in New York to select two-thirds of the artworks from its collection to be featured in *Documenta 4*. In dissent, a group of artists spearheaded by Wolf Vostell and Jörg Immendorf, whose provocatively figurative works did not follow the dictum of abstraction but dealt critically with the Vietnam War and the silence about Germany’s Nazi past, secretly plotted to create a subversive spectacle. They wore blind persons’ armbands at the first official press conference of Documenta 4 at Kassel’s town hall. As part of this “disturbance action” the artists performed the famous “Honey-Blind Action” (“Honig-Aktion”) (Allen 207.). Honey, sugar, kisses and coins signified the adhesive and lucrative relationship of the members of the city council to Arnold Bode. They unfurled a huge banner whose acrimonious text read, “PROF. BODE! WE, THE BLIND ONES, THANK YOU FOR THIS NICE EXHIBITION” (“PROF. BODE! WIR DIE BLINDEN DANKEN IHNEN FÜR DIESE SCHÖNE AUSSTELLUNG.”) (see Kimpel). Transforming the conference into a ‘happening’—a new art form not even considered for *Documenta 4*—the artists also protested against the restriction of art production to painting and sculpture and the conflation of aesthetic abstraction with political freedom in a Cold War country shaped by American culture and politics. Their protest relied on both the transformative potential of performances and the power of mass media. This spectacular fight against the establishment enacted a process of what Bourdieu calls “position-taking” in the field of cultural production (30–34): a new generation of artists would succeed in getting Harald Szeeman installed as the general secretary for *Documenta 5*. Szeeman’s appointment as a curator for the next documenta was also

the beginning of a new institutional model, still in place today. It includes a five years interim period between the shows and a board that appoints the next director.

With Szeeman as the director, *Documenta 5* and *Documenta 6* became more inclusive. Exhibitions included paintings by mentally ill artists that had been ridiculed in the Degenerate Art Exhibition. In contrast to *Documenta 4*, realist works from North America were also on display in *Documenta 5*, and, at *Documenta 6*, for the first time, works were shown by artists labeled as representatives of “socialist realism,” including four of the most famous GDR painters whose works had previously been deemed to be off limits in the FRG—Bernhard Heisig, Wolfgang Mattheuer, Willy Sitte, and Werner Tübke—as well as the sculptors Jo Jastram and Fritz Cremer. To summarize: *Documentas 5–6* instantiated re-mediations of art that had been excluded from the first four documentas due to residual traces of Nazi ideology and Cold War taboos.

Beginning with *Documenta 5* of 1972—which, in light of the *Honig Aktion* protests, we may regard as a delayed 1968 documenta—the public square in front of the Fridericianum was turned into an art space. Continuing the trend of challenging the traditional limits of the museum space and its division of rarified art from everyday life, a work by the architectural collective Haus-Rucker-Co was installed at the Fridericianum that seemed to burst out of the second floor of the museum building. It consisted of a huge transparent bubble, furnished with a kind of gangway holding two small artificial palm trees. The lawn of the Friedrich-platz was also populated by artworks and visitors, self-reflexively implementing Guy Debord’s notion of the “spectacle” right in front of the Fridericianum. From now on artworks would appear in this public space for the duration of the festival, including Richard Serra’s *Terminal*, an iron sculpture placed on Friedrichplatz for *Documenta 6*; the basalt stones set next to each one of the 7000 oaks that Joseph Beuys had planted in Kassel for *Documenta 7*; and Javier Mariscals cashiers’ booths for *Documenta 8*.

*Documenta*’s popularity increased with more playful installations staged as public exhibits. In 1992, Mo Edoga’s *Turm der Hoffnung*, a “tower of hope” built from drift wood found along the banks of Kassel’s Fulda river, became a work in progress for the duration of *Documenta 9*. At the same show, Jonathan Borofsky’s *Man Walking to the Sky*, a life-size fiberglass figure in marching position mounted on an eighty-foot steel pole rising at a sixty-degree angle, fascinated the public to such an extent that Borofsky’s sculpture, which became known as the “Himmelsstürmer” among residents of Kassel, was subsequently purchased by the city and relocated to the train station, to become the town’s landmark. These installations became iconic for the highly popular *Documenta 9* and for the public perception of a “new” documenta. These works were not politically provocative but rather provided an all-inclusive “enchantment of technology” (see Gell). *Documenta 9* attracted 129,040 new visitors, the largest increase in visitors from one documenta to the next. Vendors sold arts and crafts at stands erected along the pathway from the Documenta Hall to the Orangerie and, for the first time, temporary galleries were also set up in the park by the river. Art was everywhere. Kassel was no longer merely the host of a renowned art exhibition; the city itself had become the venue for an art spectacle.

During *Documenta 9*, a second multi-sited exhibit called “*Begegnung mit den Anderen/Encountering the Others*” was also installed in several venues in Kassel as well as in the neighboring towns of Göttingen and Hannoversch-Münden. While documenta director Jan Hoet mainly invited artists from North America and Western Europe to *Documenta 9*, *Encountering the Others* relied exclusively on artists living and working in Australia, Africa, Asia, and South America. *Encountering the Others*



was a low-budget project initiated by “Group Stoffwechsel,” a collaborative group from the local university. An illustrated and rather comprehensive article in *Kunstforum International* called *Encountering the Others* a “Third World Documenta” (Bianchi 526–41). *Encountering the Others* was widely publicized by an enormous press echo (see Projektgruppe Stoffwechsel), and inspired broader public discussion about the role of nationally-defined concepts of representation, ethnocentrism, and cultural diversity among artists, as well as about the divide between non-Western and Western art (see Wolbert). “Artists from all countries should be equally represented at a documenta” seemed to be a widespread sentiment among audiences (see Projektgruppe Stoffwechsel). We may interpret this clash of exhibitions as a kind of “biennial moment” in Kassel. Both *Encountering the Others* and *Documenta 9* were popular events: No connoisseurship was required for either the “patronizing” show, as *Documenta 9* director Jan Hoet called the *Encountering the Others* project, or *Documenta 9*, which Hoet proudly introduced as originating from an intuition “that aimed at something corporeal, something physical and thus something a-conceptual” but “not anti-conceptual, that is ‘without’ not ‘against.’” (Wolbert 67)

Part of *Documenta 9*’s popularity was the result of its appeal to the senses. Visitors could, for example, wander past Belu-Simion Fainaru’s wall-installation, a tiny unstable construction involving a small drinking glass filled with water and a chicken egg resting on two match-sized nails, pinned onto the plaster of a narrow corridor. Visitors could also step on scary materials when entering a room completely lined with lead, installed by Pier Paolo Calzolari; pass by a sculpture made from the hair of the artist David Hammons; walk through a labyrinth set up by Royden Rabinovic; and bump against hanging objects like the punching balls installed by Flatz. Visitors to *Documenta 9* might also find themselves alternately shocked or amused when stumbling into a room occupied by seven life-sized 3D self-portraits of and by the artist Ray Charles, which depict him in the nude, engaged in various homoerotic sexual activities.

*Documenta 9* was not only anti-conceptual but also apolitical, and it was sensational. I regard it as the first documenta spectacle to conform to the terms of what Levent Sosyal has termed “public intimacy” (389), which I will introduce in detail when I consider *dOCUMENTA (13)*. Interestingly, neither the non-Eurocentric alternative exhibition *Encountering the Others* nor the Western-biased *Documenta 9*, the first documenta following German reunification, reflected on current political changes and the accelerated process of globalization (see Wolbert). Such a dialogue would not take place until five years later at *Documenta 10*.

Each of Jan Hoet’s four successors made decisive choices against allowing the documenta to become more of a spectacle or a biennial, but their efforts did not effectively reverse this trend. Catherine David’s restrictive “*parcours*” for *Documenta 10* suggested an itinerary that discouraged visitors from freely roaming various sites, instead giving specific directions for a walking-tour from the “Kulturbahnhof,” a wing of the central railway station, to the Fridericianum and the Documenta Hall (see *Shortguide* 10). David’s program of daily lectures and discussions, “100 days, 100 guests” was intended to encourage reflection from various perspectives, including a post-colonial perspective. This program seemed to signal a shift toward cross-disciplinary approaches and, at least from a conventional academic perspective, a step beyond the boundaries of the traditional art world (See Becker). This change was, however, just another turn toward the festivalization of documenta.

*Documenta 11* director Okwui Enwezor attempted to contain any festival excitement with a clear design, fewer but larger buildings, and thus well-defined exhibition spaces. He also allotted an unprecedented area of the available exhibition space to time-based media. Focused on globalization and mobility, Enwezor turned the Kassel exhibits and events into the last in a series of five platforms that were set up on four continents—in Vienna, Berlin, New Delhi, St. Lucia, and Lagos—thereby decentralizing Kassel and globalizing documenta.

While Roger M. Buergel, and Ruth Noack, director of *Documenta 12* and his partner and co-curator, cut back on media art, leading reviewers to celebrate the “return of the fine arts” (Rückkehr der ‘Schönen Künste’, Wiegand), they annexed new territory for the documenta in Kassel from the Fulda River to the hills of Wilhelmshöhe. The two *Documenta 12* curators ventured to display monumental and centrally positioned land-art experiments, such as Sakarin Krue-On’s rice terrace at Wilhelmshöhe castle and Sanja Ivekovic’s poppy field in front of the Fridericianum. Buergel and Noack also invited ‘creatives’ from all over the world, including many lesser-known artists. A widely publicized photo, placed prominently in the middle of the volume of *Kunstforum International* dedicated to *Documenta 12*, shows artists dressed in their national attire and posing with Buergel and Noack in front of the Fridericianum, giving the impression that the event celebrated ethnic, cultural, and national diversity (See “D12 Künstler”). Among the participants of *Documenta 12* were Xie Nanxing, Lu Hao, Hu Xiaoyuan, Zheng Guogu and the Yangjian Calligraphy Group, whose art relied in part on traditional Chinese techniques, subjects, or materials. German newspapers and magazines, including *Stern*, *Der Spiegel*, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, and the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, made these Chinese artists a center of attention (see Lösel; “Documenta 12;” Maak; “Welche Motive”), and art critics extolled them as new discoveries. The media presence surrounding Ai Weiwei intensified when his work *Template*, an outdoor structure of wooden doors and windows from historic Chinese houses that had been recently torn down, collapsed in a storm on the sixth day of the one hundred day-long show. As part of another *Documenta 12* project, entitled *Fairytale*, Ai Weiwei invited 1001 visitors from China. This project blurred the boundaries between art, artist, and audiences by making visitors a part of the artwork. However, the fact that these audiences were exclusively Chinese, and that they were all equipped with black and white suitcases and striped bed sheets, causing the participants to appear uniform, made the actual materialization of this conceptual work appear not unlike some “Völkerschau” highlights of the past (see Thode-Arora). Admittedly, this artistic project did shed some light on the asymmetry of German and Chinese visa policies, which needed to be repealed for the Chinese visitors, who had responded to Ai Weiwei’s documenta invitation as a means to gain a trip to Europe. However, rather than functioning as an act of empowerment or as a critical re-mediation of colonial exhibitions of Germany’s past, *Fairytale* turned out to be a paternalistic endeavor and thus a repetition of those earlier voyeuristic spectacles.

As outlined above, documenta’s festivalization had already come to a high point by 1992, posing new challenges for *Documenta 10* director Catherine David and *Documenta 11* director Okwui Enwezor, both of whom defied documenta’s tendency to become an expanded art fairground in the town of Kassel and avoided patriarchal celebrations of multiculturalism. By contrast, *Documenta 12* co-directors Roger M. Buergel and Ruth Noack let the documenta exhibits—and their audiences—again disperse all over Kassel and were not particularly attentive to exoticisms. Not surprisingly, then, after the controversial *Documenta 4*, featuring American Pop Art,

and *Documenta 9*, challenged by *Encountering the Others*, *Documenta 12* became the third event to evoke discussions of artists' nationality beyond the usual comparisons of national artistic trends that had always accompanied the event.

### ***dOCUMENTA (13)***

In conceptualizing *dOCUMENTA (13)*, Christov-Bakargiev chose to distance herself from this kind of mediation and re-mediation of nationality, and refrained from the inclination to “festivalize” the event. To analyze how this was possible, I will draw on Bruno Latour’s approach to representation in “From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik” and Levent Soysal’s concept of “public intimacy.” Critical of epistemological limitations of the anthropocentrism that shapes contemporary politics, Latour’s approach to representation suggests the heuristic adoption of non-human perspectives. Whereas Latour deals with politics, public issues, and new representational necessities, Soysal focuses on contemporary audience practices of viewing and engaging with art events. Soysal coined the term “public intimacy” (373) to identify a phenomenon that has become prevalent in a globalized world, exemplified by popular reality shows and the use of Facebook (376). This form of intimacy that does not entail the social consequences one would face under the traditional rules of what Michael Herzfeld has called “cultural intimacy.” Instead, public intimacy, which can be organized, and is both repeatable and communicable, does not evoke the same kind of sanctions or obligations. Soysal assesses public events that define spaces of “the increasingly amplifying, increasingly exogenous contours of sociality today” (388). The arenas and occasions for public intimacy—biennials and other periodic art shows, fairs, carnivals, and special openings of governmental or other offices or museum—become difficult to distinguish from one another and, “[c]ities become unthinkable without their festivals” (ibid.).

Christov-Bakargiev’s remarks on avoiding the “biennial syndrome” arguably signaled her intention to spare *dOCUMENTA (13)* from being sucked into the perpetual cycle of increasingly indistinguishable urban festivals that Soysal describes. A tour of *dOCUMENTA (13)*, starting at the Fridericianum and the Friedrichplatz and returning to them in the end, should help us assess the implications of Christov-Bakargiev’s attempt to avoid the “biennial syndrome.”

## *dOCUMENTA (13)*: The End of a Spectacle?



Figure 3: The Fridericianum in Kassel in June 2012, Photo: Nils Klinger.

During my research for this essay, I glimpsed a photo documenting the opening of *dOCUMENTA (13)* with yellow banners between the pillars of the Fridericianum (see figure 3). Yet when I attended the show a few days later, these banners had been removed.<sup>3</sup> Even though there were huge billboards advertising the event in Berlin and a yellow engine moving on the tracks of the Deutsche Bahn, one of *dOCUMENTA (13)*'s sponsors, within the town of Kassel promotional signifiers were at a minimum with small yellow signs only being used where guidance or reference was absolutely necessary. This abstinence may be read as a first sign of director Christov-Bakargiev's intent to make the event less of a spectacle.

Starting with the Friedrichsplatz, I need to mention two pieces, an object and an installation, which tell us stories about place, space, and time.

One of them is an outdoor habitat for butterflies by Kristina Buch (see figure 4). An exhibition label in the Documenta Hall, where Buch's *The Lover*—consisting of a row of empty chrysalises—was on display, made me aware of this related piece, commissioned and produced by *dOCUMENTA (13)*, co-funded by the North Rhine Westphalian Ministry of Family, Children, Youth, Culture, and Sport, by Düsseldorf's Municipal Office of Culture, and by a number of companies, including construction and gardening firms, located in Kassel and elsewhere. These details pointed to some kind of raised bed, a biotope for butterflies, also entitled *The Lover*, on the lawn of the Friedrichsplatz, right across the street from the Documenta Hall. This enigmatically titled project give us a first impression of this documenta's wide range of interdisciplinary collaborations, which go well beyond the field of cultural production (Bourdieu 29–73).

<sup>3</sup> The *dOCUMENTA (13)* web archive documents these banners only on a tiny inserted screenshot of a n app under "dMAPS." See: <http://www3.documenta.de/de/?m=n&L=1-de/dmaps/>



Figure 4: Kristina Buch's *The Lover*, Photo: Kristina Buch, Source: News archive of the Heinrich-Heine Universität Düsseldorf (<http://www.uni-duesseldorf.de/home/en/hhu-duesseldorf-information-centre/news/news-archive-in-german/archiv/>)

The other piece was a rusty 38-ton iron block right in front of the Fridericianum intended to stand in for an absent meteorite of the same weight, since the meteorite itself could not be on display (see figure 5). In response to protests by residents of the sparsely populated area called *Campo del Cielo* in Northern Argentina, where the meteorite was found and venerated, it had not been shipped from Argentina as originally planned by site-researchers Guillermo Faivovich and Nicolas Goldberg. In the *dOCUMENTA (13)* guidebook, the meteorite block was described as a thing “already-made” to connote the idea of an object found on earth that is actually older than the earth (Christov-Bakargiev *Das Begleitbuch* 60). In spite of these intricate stories, neither this rather small object nor the inconspicuous installation of plants on the lawn caught my attention.



Figure 5: Guillermo Faivovich and Nicolas Goldberg, *The Weight of Uncertainty*, Photo commissioned and produced by *dOCUMENTA (13)*, Courtesy of the artists, in Brigitte Werneburg, *dOCUMENTA (13): SECHS*, in Andy Warhol's Interview <http://archiv.interview.de/Documenta-13-Sechs>.





Figure 6: Restaurant in front of the Fridericianum, Photo: Barbara Wolbert.

Instead, what caught my eye were the white umbrellas advertising the beer Raderberger Pils in front of the local restaurant that obviously had been granted permission to serve visitors right in front of the Fridericianum (figure 6), only meters away from the tents of members of the occupy movement, which the director also gladly tolerated, as I remembered reading online or in a newspaper (see Geoffroy). A ‘sacred’ documenta site carelessly treated?



Figure 7: Tents of the Occupy Movement in front of the Fridericianum in Summer 2012, Photo: Doris Koch.

To the surprise of the local press, Christov-Bakargiev had protested against the ostentatious display of Stephan Balkenhol's painted aluminum sculpture consisting of a rotating life-size figure of a man with outstretched arms on a small golden globe that had been mounted on the tower of the Catholic church on the other side of the Friedrichsplatz shortly before the opening of *dOCUMENTA (13)*. The local representatives were shocked by the documenta director's protest of Balkenhol's sculpture, and argued that this demand would contradict the spirit of the documenta as an event characterized by tolerance and freedom of artistic expression. (See "Bildhauer-Balkenhol" and "Stephan Balkenhol in Sankt Elisabeth"). Ironically, this impression of 'her documenta' as open to anything is precisely what Christov-Bakargiev was trying to avoid: Christov-Bakargiev's seemingly paradoxical attitude—tolerant of mundane gastronomy and occupy protesters a right in front of the Fridericianum, yet outraged over a sculpture—actually revealed that she did take control and that her carelessness or even sloppiness was carefully calculated and cultivated. Christov-Bakargiev's attitude was a crucial feature of *dOCUMENTA (13)*, preventing any impression of 'staginess' and suggesting that, rather than curatorial vanity, an actual interest in the artists' work would prevail.

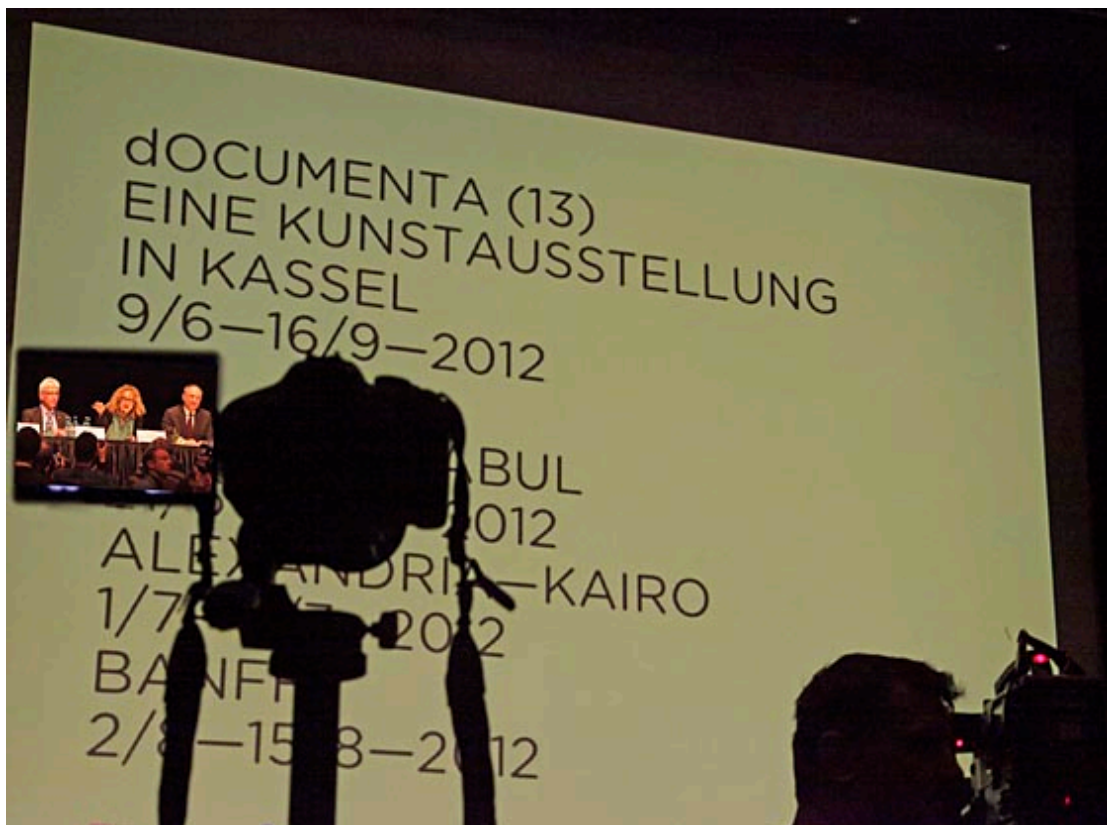


Figure 8: "dOCUMENTA (13) - Eine Kunstausstellung in Kassel." A projection at the press conference in the Kassel Townhall, June 6, 2010, Photo: Hartwig Bambej.

The official subtitle of the 2012 documenta, eccentrically spelled as "*dOCUMENTA (13)*" was "*An Art Exhibition in Kassel*" (see figure 8). This subtitle may have suited the very first documenta, which was indeed still *an* art exhibition in Kassel, but it could not capture the elevated sense of the 13<sup>th</sup> documenta, since the documenta shows had long since become *the* art exhibition in Kassel. This understatement is a further indication that *dOCUMENTA (13)*, though spectacularly unusual, kept a decisively low profile.



Before we enter the Fridericianum, I would like to take you around providing several more examples of the laconic casualness characteristic of this documenta's curatorial practices. In front of the Ottoneum, neighboring the Fridericianum and the Documenta Hall, visitors could see wooden pallets and plastic boxes. This *Tea Garden* was part of the project "Commoning in Kassel," an initiative of students at Kassel University's Landscaping and Agriculture Departments and the artist group AND...AND...AND... (see figure 9). Intended simply as a place for social encounters among visitors, *The Tea Garden* was not made with any considerable technical or aesthetic considerations, and it resembled any other urban horticulture project of container farming (See Ristau).



Figure 9: Artist Collective AND...AND...AND...’s *The Tea Garden* in front of the Ottoneum, Photo: Haupt & Binder. Source: [http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/bien/documenta/2012/photo\\_tour/ottoneum/02/](http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/bien/documenta/2012/photo_tour/ottoneum/02/).

In the Southern wing of the *Hauptbahnhof*, the train station in the center of the town, which hosted documenta exhibits, Seth Price’s artwork materialized ideas about clothes as a form of human packaging. Price’s *Spring/Summer Collection*, created in collaboration with fashion designer Tim Hamilton, was for sale at SinnLeffers, the department store neighboring the Fridericianum (figure 10). I had read about Price’s collection and sought it out, eventually finding it equipped with price tags amid the rest of the store’s merchandise. After leaving the store again, I sat on the stairs of the south entrance and listened to music from invisible loudspeakers while waiting for the students with whom I had come to Kassel. Only later did I discover a small makeshift sign that informed me that it was Gabriel Lester’s soundtrack “Kaufhaus Incidentals – Music for Department Stores,” an artist whose sculpture *Transition 2012*, a curved tunnel positioned at the far end of the Karlsaue park, I had seen earlier.



Figure 10: Seth Price and Tim Hamilton's *Spring/Summer Collection* on sale in the department store Kaufhaus Leffers, Photo: Barbara Wolbert.

### ***DOCUMENTA (13)* and the (Re-)Mediation of Diversity**

With its interior and exterior displays focused on both man-made and found objects, as well as plants and animals, this documenta made the conventional boundaries between an art world and a social world beyond it apparent, and called them into question. In the Karlsaue, for example, Brian Jungen's dog park only granted access to visitors accompanied by dogs. When I later glimpsed dogs in the narrow staircase of the Fridericianum, I understood that dogs were, by turn, only allowed to tour the exhibits in this traditional documenta building when joined by their owners. The presence of animals in an exhibition seemed to be nothing remarkable here. I had not immediately noticed Kristina Buch's biotope for butterflies, the garden patch on the Friedrichsplatz. But I was prepared to find the bees in a hive placed (as a head) on the shoulders of a reclining woman, a sculpture positioned near the compost area on the Karlsaue, and I had expected to encounter a slim, white dog, one leg dyed pink and roaming freely—both part of Pierre Huyghe's larger ensemble *Untilled*.





Figures 11-13: Pierre Huyghe's *Untitled*, Photos: Daniel Dean (bees' head sculpture) and Fabian Fröhlich (close-ups: bees' head sculpture and roaming pink-legged dog).

These elements of Huyghe's hidden and ever changing scenario had been featured in art journals, newspapers, and blogs. In fact, photos of the bee's head sculpture and the marked Spanish Podenco, the white dog with one pink leg, were among the most often published photographs of *DOCUMENTA (13)*, accompanying Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev's frequently quoted statements about political rights for strawberries and dogs (see Deutsche-Press Agentur; Vahland). In these statements, Christov-Bakargiev alluded to Bruno Lautor's suggestion to move "from Realpolitik to Dingpolitik" and thus to a new concept of diversity. From this perspective, any conventional identity markers (e.g., nationality, ethnicity, territory, citizenship, culture) were insignificant or irrelevant. (In this light, Balkenhol's *Man in the Tower*, appears, furthermore, as an obsolete anthropocentric statement.) As far as art as a representation of the nation goes, *DOCUMENTA (13)* thus stayed clear of developing any hint of "biennial syndrome."

## *DOCUMENTA (13)*'s New Audiences

Let us, finally, enter the Fridericianum: I found the two major first floor galleries of this eighteenth-century museum building almost completely empty. In one of them, the only object on display was a letter from an artist, Kai Althoff, who had declined his invitation to the show.



**Figure 14:** The vitrine with the letter from Kai Althoff to Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev of May 24, 2011, on display with the permission of the artist. 2012 in the space Ryan Gander used for his work *I Need Some Meaning I Can Memorize (The Invisible Pull)*, Photo: Barbara Wolbert.

Walking around as a returning documenta visitor, I saw the rooms as if I had come for the first time, and after a while I realized that the chill that had overcome me at the entrance had not left me. It was not coming from the open doors as I had previously assumed; it was not that cold outside and all the windows were closed. What I felt was in fact an artificial breeze—a work by Ryan Gander—that was constantly blowing through the first floor.





Figure 15: Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev's *The Brain*, Photo: Fabian Fröhlich.

The famous rotunda, however, was entirely protected by glass walls and doors. I had to wait in line to get into this shrine-like space, filled with small objects, where the visitors spoke in subdued voices. I had to read the labels to make sense of the displays. It seemed as though Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev was whispering stories about her amazing collection of objects of high and low monetary value and about art and non-art into my ear. Later I read on the *dOCUMENTA (13)* website that this effect had indeed been intended, not in this particular space but in the event as a whole: the *100 Notes Program* was said to “produce a contingent murmuring within the body of *dOCUMENTA (13)*” (Christoph-Bakargiev, “Readers’ Circle”).



Figure 16: Yan Lei's *Limited Art Project*, 2010–2011, Photo: Susanne Schumacher.

Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev’s interest in these ambiguities between public spectacle and intimate conversation helps us to better understand Yan Lei’s *Limited Art Project, 2011-2012* (figure 16). Over the course of *dOCUMENTA (13)*, Yan Lei took the works down from the walls piece by piece in order to have them painted over at a near-by Volkswagen factory and returned to the Documenta Hall as monochrome paintings. What was significant, then, was not so much his journey from Beijing to Kassel, or from China to Europe, but his movement along and across the border between art and non-art—one of the territories Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev encouraged *dOCUMENTA (13)* viewers to explore.

*dOCUMENTA (13)* allowed for intimate intellectual discoveries of traces, growth, affinity, tone, and other hints of an untold story, an unbelievable past, an unconsidered option. Philosopher Sjoerd Van Tuinen could have been describing *dOCUMENTA (13)* when he wrote in a 2008 article on “public intimacy:” “art is not made for an audience, but creates an audience” (9). Similarly, Christov-Bakargiev had called the viewers the true “instigators of the art work” (Lecture). Only if such installations as those on the Friedrichsplatz or in the Karlsau succeed in escaping attention or notice, can they, in turn, be discovered. Only if we start to ask questions about a gallery filled with paintings from the floor to the ceiling, about a collection of pupae, or about an iron block, will we see what is art and what is life. Immediate experience and representation no longer form a dichotomy. Debord’s assertion that immediate experience has given way to representation seems to have been reversed. As Christov-Bakargiev observed, “Not everything in this show is art.” Nor are all the contributors artists.



Figures 17-23: Documenta visitors viewing Yan Lei’s *Limited Art Project, 2010-2011*, Photos: Fabian Fröhlich.

It is precisely this blend of subjects and disciplines, of opinion, ostentatious inconclusiveness, and strategically practiced carelessness that most effectively resonates with Soysal’s notion of the “new individual” (394). For Soysal, the new individual is “a member of cultured collectivities that are differentiated by gender,

sexual preference, ethnicity, religion, spirituality, or lifestyle. And culture surrounds her in abundance as commodity (and project) [...] [S]he lives her sociality and establishes her intimate relations primarily on public stages” (394). A visit to *dOCUMENTA (13)* can thus be understood as a form of homecoming to the individual’s very own personal thoughts, which have been laid out in a public space. When we walk through the Karlsaue, we take photos that we then send to a couple of friends or plan to upload online. Texting other visitors at the documenta, we may arrange a meeting for dinner, post a comment, or let everyone know our locations. While waiting in line to enter the Fridericianum or *The Brain*, we type, chat, and feel connected to others. We spend a day or two in Kassel. We are at the documenta. We are alive!

*dOCUMENTA (13)* was not less spectacular than any other documentas of the last decade, or even the past two decades. What has changed, first and foremost, are the audiences. The “new demography” of the documenta refers to visitors who have been assimilated to the culture of the spectacle and accustomed to “intimate engagements of the public kind” (Soysal 373). For them, the documenta is not an art show in a public space—the documenta itself is the public space.

It is this newly emerging relationship between a spectacle and its audience that Christov-Bakargiev took into account in the attempt to make *dOCUMENTA (13)* stand out from other now-ubiquitous biennials and festivals displaying artists’ positions and representing public issues. Although this may seem to be a radical change, returning to Guy Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle* makes it appear to be merely one more rotation of a spiral: “The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images” (4). Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev was aware of the social practice of the “new individual” and of the art of re-mediation and was thus able to arrange the spectacle of *dOCUMENTA (13)* as an anti-spectacle. The necessity for a continued political fight for equality and participation has not become obsolete, but this documenta seemed to allow for a temporary, perhaps heuristic, leave. Ultimately, *dOCUMENTA (13)* was a staged vision heralding the end of diversity politics and the beginning of diversity.



Figure 24: Waiting in line to see *dOCUMENTA (13)*, Photo: Christos-Nikolas Vittoratos.



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**Appendix: Documenta Titles  
(according to the official documenta posters)**

<b>Title used in Article</b>	<b>Official Title(s)</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Director(s)</b>
<i>documenta</i>	documenta	1955	Arnold Bode
<i>Documenta 2</i>	II. documenta	1959	Arnold Bode, Werner Haftmann
<i>Documenta 3</i>	documenta III	1964	Arnold Bode, Werner Haftmann
<i>Documenta 4</i>	4. documenta	1968	24-member documenta council
<i>Documenta 5</i>	docuMenta 5	1972	Harald Szeemann
<i>Documenta 6</i>	documenta 6	1977	Manfred Schneckenburger
<i>Documenta 7</i>	documenta 7	1982	Rudi Fuchs
<i>Documenta 8</i>	documenta 8	1987	Manfred Schneckenburger
<i>Documenta 9</i>	<del>DOCUMENTA IX</del>	1992	Jan Hoet
<i>Documenta 10</i>	documenta X	1997	Catherine David
<i>Documenta 11</i>	Documenta11	2002	Okwui Enwezor
<i>Documenta 12</i>	DOCUMENTA KASSEL 16/06- 23/09 2007	2007	Roger M. Buergel
<i>dOCUMENTA (13)</i>	dOCUMENTA (13)	2012	Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev

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- Fainaru, Belu-Simion. *Tzarih tamid Lehatil mehadash! Il faut toujours commencer a nouveau*, 1991. Glass, water, egg, wax, paper, copper, Kassel, Germany, *DOCUMENTA IX*.
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