

documenta Kassel ... Contemporary Art since 1955

Philipp Grieb

The *documenta* exhibition, one of the world's largest events for contemporary art, has started a new edition in Kassel/Germany this June. Every five years, the organising company elects a curator who presents his perspective on contemporary art. The history of the *documenta* is therefore always full of contrasts and ruptures, reflecting different views of art, content, social and political trends. It is a history of setbacks and successes, of doubts and insights, of scandals and triumphs, in its continuity and its growth from 130,000 to, most recently, over 900,000 visitors; a great success too. Only the Venice Biennale is considered an institution of comparable importance.

The first *documenta* was held in 1955, ten years after the end of the Second World War, and was initiated by the artist, art professor and curator Arnold Bode (1900-1977). His aim was to bring the avant-garde, which had been persecuted by the National Socialists, back to Germany and to introduce it to a broad public with a cultural backlog. It was to be the first exhibition of modern art after the Nazis' *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerated Art) exhibition in Munich in 1937.

The occasion and the choice of Kassel as the location was prompted by a Federal Garden Show planned for Kassel in 1955. The city expected increased interest for both events, which promised to complement each other well. Moreover, with the Museum Fridericianum - one of the oldest art museums on the European continent - the city offered a prominent venue for the project. Built in 1779, the museum had been completely burnt out in the Second World War and had just been provisionally repaired, a perfect symbol of the revival of art and culture ten years after the great catastrophe.

Indeed, 130,000 visitors came to the first *documenta*. Its initial focus was less on contemporary art of the years after 1945; Bode's main aim was to introduce visitors to the works of artists who had been banned in Germany during the Nazi era under the



Fridericianum-Kassel 2007 (Foto Carroy)

designation *degenerated art*. Therefore, abstract art, especially abstract painting of the 1920s and 1930s, was the focus of the first exhibition. The list of participants read like a Who's Who of early 20th century European modern art: Barlach, Braque, Chagall, Chirico, Delaunay, Gris, Heckel, Kandinsky, Klee, Léger, Lehmbrock, Matisse, Miró, Modigliani, Moore, Nolde, Picasso, Vlaminck, to name just a few of the 148 artists.

Only in the following events did the focus shift to contemporary art with increasing contributions from artists from America, Asia and Africa. The growing number of participants demanded the expansion to other exhibition venues in Kassel.

For the 4th *documenta* in 1968, a 23-member committee selected the artists for the first time after preparatory consultations in working committees. Pop Art and Op Art dominated this exhibition, popularising it and increasing the number of visitors to over 200,000. Because of the strong presence of American artists, it went down in history as the *documenta americana*. The organisers' available budget had increased tenfold in the meantime. Its focus was on works from the youngest art avant-garde and less on the masters of the middle and older generations. Rauschenberg, Christo and Beuys were present, some important names were missing. *documenta 5* in 1972 was directed by the Swiss museum director and curator Harald Szeemann. In contrast to the earlier *documenta* exhibitions, which were largely committed to

abstraction, with him "reality" made a comeback in various forms. Concept art and happenings also left their mark on this event. Five years later, *documenta 6* expanded the artistic fields: Historical photography, auteur cinema, utopian design and GDR artists made their debut. With the project *Stadtverwaltung statt Stadtverwaltung* (urban forestation instead of city administration) and the planting of 7,000 oak trees, Joseph Beuys secured a lasting memory for himself during *documenta 7* in 1982.

The concepts of the changing *documenta* curators varied greatly and surprisingly. The last *documenta* of the 20th century, *documenta 10* in 1997, was for the first time directed by a lady, the Frenchwoman Catherine David. She designed an intellectual exhibition that challenged the audience with subtle questions. With retrospectives, she exposed important tendencies of the post-war past and took up the founding idea of the *documenta*.

In 2002, the Nigerian-born Owui Enwezor was the first non-European *documenta* director. In accordance with his premise that art is knowledge production, many of his projects had a documentary character. The achievement of (his) *documenta 11* was that it questioned the *unspoken attention hierarchies of the Western exhibition system* (W. Lenk).



man_walking_to_th_sky documenta 9 (1992)

The 2012 event (*documenta 13*) was no longer satisfied with outposts in the Kassel city area. It set up international outposts in Afghanistan, Egypt and Canada. This idea was taken up by the Polish-born director for *documenta 14* (2017), Adam Szymczyk. His concept envisaged a transformation of the exhibition through a change of perspective and establishing a second location for the exhibition in Athens (8 April - 16 July, 2017), alongside Kassel (10 June - 17 September, 2017). Participating artists were invited to present at both locations. The number of visitors exceeding 900,000 confirmed his attempt.

The curatorship of the current 15th edition, *documenta 15*, was entrusted to the collective ruangrupa from Indonesia. After the opening of the exhibition, controversy arose over a large mural



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by the group Taring Padi, which occupied the media and politics. The intention to focus on the global South and dare a change of perspective with ruangrupa - including misunderstandings, controversies and discussions - is nevertheless to be welcomed. The *documenta 15* will end on 25 Sept. 2022.



Claes Oldenburg Spitzhacke, documenta 7_1982

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