



Left: Visitor interacting with Ryan Gander's *I Need Some Meaning I Can Memorize (The Invisible Pull)*, 2012, Kunsthalle Fridericianum, Kassel. Photo: Nils Klinger. Below: Willie Doherty, *Secretion*, 2012, HD video, color, sound, 20 minutes. Nachrichtenmeisterei, Hauptbahnhof, Kassel. Right, from top: Goshka Macuga, *Of what is, that it is; of what is not, that it is not 1*, 2012, tapestry. Installation view, Kunsthalle Fridericianum, Kassel. Photo: Roman März. Hannah Ryggen, *Drømmedød (Death of Dreams/Tod der Träume)*, 1936, tapestries. Installation view, Kunsthalle Fridericianum, Kassel. Photo: Roman März.



Documenta 13

VARIOUS VENUES,
KASSEL, BANFF, CAIRO, AND KABUL
Dieter Roelstraete

A REALLY IN-DEPTH REVIEW of Documenta 13 is probably an impossible task—a task made *intentionally* impossible?—considering the outlandish size of this show, and considering how many events took place long after the opening, some of them even on other continents. My first and most general criticism, then, is that the project's gargantuan scale at times struck me as redolent less of generosity than of gluttony—not exactly a curatorial virtue in our age of austerity. With offshoots in Cairo, Kabul, and Banff, Canada, and with a sprawling cast of participants including but not limited to artists, curators, poets, and scientists, the exhibition felt positively cosmic in ambition. The show was dedicated, in curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev's words, "to artistic research and forms of imagination that explore commitment, matter, things, embodiment, and active living in connection with, yet not subordinated to, theory," and the reigning logic was one of juxtaposing, associating, and amassing: a festival of inclusion, with its self-described "Brain," in the rotunda of the Fridericianum, especially devoted to bringing

together "a number of artworks, objects, and documents . . . in lieu of a concept." This was not the only aspect of the show that brought Roger Buerger and Ruth Noack's Documenta 12 to mind, and it may prove productive to consider both projects in dialogue. The primary commonalities concern the elastic notion of artistic research and its relationship to the notion of a curatorial master plan or überthema—or, more precisely, perhaps, to the absence thereof. However, it may be more enlightening to consider the considerable differences—telling disparities in temperament that surfaced during the events' respective opening weekends. During the gray, damp first days of the 2007 edition, the mood of the audience was one of charnined befuddlement and outright irritation, and the critical response was correspondingly cool. By contrast, although the weather was only marginally more benevolent during the opening of Documenta 13, the general atmosphere (though not necessarily the mood of the art on display) was one of carefree relaxation and good humor, with no discernible rumors of mass cancellation on the part of the collector-and-dealer community. Whereas Buerger and Noack's Documenta did not care to hide its disdain for the power of commerce, and whereas theirs was very much an exhibition trying to make sense of art's role in a world in thrall to the hysterical rhetoric of boundless economic growth, i.e., the world as we knew it *before* the global financial crisis, Documenta 13's relationship to the art market, like most of its relations, has been more ambivalent.

In any case, engineering an ambience as pleasant as Kassel's this past June was undoubtedly quite a feat, especially considering the proposed conceptual centrality of war, trauma, and loss to the whole curatorial endeavor. But then again, loss does entail the possibility of renewal, a blank slate wiped pristinely clean—it creates *light*. The inherent duality of such lightness (lucidity versus vacuity, luminescence or triviality, lightness of touch and slightness of build) was certainly rendered with conviction and to

enchanting effect on the mostly empty ground floor of a very well-curated Fridericianum, where Ryan Gander's invisibly generated breeze (*I Need Some Meaning I Can Memorize [The Invisible Pull]*, 2012) literally blew a breath of fresh air through one of the oldest museums in the world. Along with a handful of other leitmotifs, air—the ambient, the atmospheric, the ethereal, and figures of some invisibly felt presence—proved to be something of a recurring theme in a seemingly themeless exhibition. It returned, for instance, in Geoffrey Farmer's astounding *Leaves of Grass*, 2012, a 130-foot-long collage installation inside the Neue Galerie made up of thousands of paper cuttings from half a century's worth of *Life* magazine—the autumnal foliage of half an American century

Something we presume to constitute the very core of Documenta as a grand curatorial enterprise—something related to the aging virtues of antinomy and irony—seemed mysteriously absent from its thirteenth installment.

fluttering softly in the winds of time. It made itself felt in the whispers of Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller's disorienting audio guide to the Hauptbahnhof (*Alter Bahnhof Video Walk*, 2012) and in the immersive new age-style sound tracks that could be heard around Kassel's converted railway station—accompanying Tejal Shah's and Jessica Warboys's multimedia musings on the magic of unicorns and megaliths, for example. Farther down the tracks, Susan Philipsz's *Study for Strings*, 2012, a sound installation based on Pavel Haas's 1943 composition of the same title, could be heard circling above a deserted platform. *The End of Summer*, 2012, a large-scale, multi-room installation by Haris Epaminonda and Daniel Gustav Cramer inside a building adjacent to the Hauptbahnhof,



From left: Theaster Gates, *Black Monks of Mississippi at Huguenot House*, 2012. Performance view, Huguenot House, Kassel, June 10, 2012. Photo: Rasa Maria Rühling. Pierre Huyghe, *Untitled (detail)*, 2012, gardener/beekeeper, plants, animals, minerals. Installation view, Karlsau Park, Kassel. Photo: Nils Klingner. Matias Faldbakken, *Untitled (Book Sculpture)*, 2008–12, books. Installation view, Youth Library, Kassel. Photo: Henrik Stromberg.



was especially emblematic in this regard, its wondrous ambience of innocuous uncanniness convincingly demonstrating that atmospherics (“air”) counted for much more in this year’s Documenta than anything as retrograde, linear, and doctrinaire as “theme,” let alone theorems. The installation’s overall effect was one of dazed though not unpleasant confusion—a vibe of spacious scatter that only the taut focus of an insulated viewing environment could dispel, which is perhaps why both the Otolith Group’s *The Radiant*, 2012, a Markeresque, peerlessly scored film essay “about” the aftermath of the Fukushima nuclear disaster, and Willie Doherty’s brooding, visceral *Secretion*, 2012, stood out with such singular conviction.

But let us return to the Fridericianum’s ground floor. In many ways, the charming inaugural gesture of a ritual airing and emptying of the hallowed, history-laden spaces of art remained just that—air, an ultimately vapid introduction to more art, *lots* of art, made by artists living and dead, talented and less so, known and unknown. In the latter category, the Cambodian artists Sopheap Pich and Vann Nath and the Australian painters Doreen Reid Nakamarra and Warlimpirrnga Tjapaltjarri were especially memorable. Some work was installed in truly inspired ways (Goshka Macuga’s large-scale tapestry, at the Fridericianum, one floor above Hannah Ryggen’s smaller textile works from the ’30s and ’50s; Mark Lombardi’s collection of index cards shown inside a room decked out with hundreds of tiny paintings of apples by the late Bavarian pastor Korbinian Aigner). Most of the choices hardly qualified as curatorial experimentation, however, and the project’s vaunted associative logic occasionally lapsed into inane redundancies (e.g., lumping “ecological” or environmentally themed work together in the local natural-history museum, or situating Emily Jacir’s and Michael Rakowitz’s installations consecutively simply because both deal with the burning and destruction of books).

A number of the most rewarding individual projects were dispersed throughout the city. I am thinking here of

works by Gerard Byrne, Tino Sehgal, and particularly Theaster Gates, whose wide-ranging communal project inside a dilapidated house functioned as an engaging mirror image of a superficially comparable work by Canadian lone wolf Gareth Moore, presiding over his own community of one at the far end of the Karlsau Park. For whatever reason, it was in this park, by far the most expansive site, that the benign buzz of “anything goes” gave way to a rather less committal “whatever,” and any sense of urgency, of there being anything at stake at all in this extravaganza, was hard to recoup from even the best-aimed works on display—e.g., Sam Durant’s gallows-cum-playground *Scaffold*, 2012. Of course, much to my subsequent annoyance, this is also where the critic was reminded of the obsolescence of his trade’s standard demands. If the absence of anything resembling a critical “edge” in this particular assembly of works was quick to emerge as the most profound symptom of Christov-Bakargiev’s Documenta as a whole, it was all too easy to imagine being told that the very concept of “edge” is *s-o-o-o* twentieth-century—an antiquated remnant of Cartesian rationalism or the dialectical imagination.

Opting for various types of safety (safety in numbers and safety in ambiguity being just two of them) did pay off in the short term, judging from the gushing reviews that followed the show’s opening, with some critics even calling it the “most important exhibition of the twenty-first century,” unironically. Oh, irony. Where didst thou flee, along with the pleasures of the flesh, including the visceral pleasure of absolute antinomy? Every Documenta produces its share of masterpieces, though significantly, they are not necessarily the key works singled out by the curator for the rhetorical power with which they embody certain of the exhibition’s central ideas. Rather, they may be those aesthetic experiences that anchor themselves in our memory precisely because they anomalously fail to serve those ideas, and because they do so in a way that brings to mind the good old-fashioned tradition of antagonism.

Ideally such works are directed *against*, or somehow subtly subvert, the presiding curator’s master narrative. In Documenta 13, this role was performed by Pierre Huyghe’s nihilistic antigarden *Untitled*, 2012, and to a lesser (i.e., less spectacular) extent by Matias Faldbakken’s ultraefficient *Untitled (Book Sculpture)*, 2008–12. The guide to the exhibition described Faldbakken’s piece in typically overwrought fashion as “putting into spatial disarray the components of a categorized library,” but what you really got, thankfully, were the contents of a bookshelf—the economy and law section of a local public library—thrown to the ground, nothing more, but certainly also nothing less. Precisely because of its blunt, deflationary quality, this work now haunts me as one of the most powerful in the entire exhibition, on par with the abject figure with a beehive for a head reclining in Huyghe’s dystopian torture garden, tucked away amid heaps of upturned earth covered in nettles and thistles—a precious, lonely moment when the sheer idea of “edge” was made palpably present again.

Reviewing Catherine David’s Documenta 10 in the pages of this magazine way back in September 1997, Daniel Birnbaum noted how, “like the Whitney Biennial, Documenta is a show many writers love to hate.” It is hard to imagine this being the case with this year’s installment of what has indeed become the single most hyped exhibition on the art-world calendar. Yet something that we presume to constitute the very core of Documenta as a grand curatorial enterprise—something related to the aging virtues of antinomy and irony—seemed mysteriously, but no less conspicuously, absent from its thirteenth installment. For a fortifying little while, this absence made for a welcome breath of fresh air, to be sure: the pleasurable buzz of lightness. But, in the end, it amounted to a disappointing dearth of strong, polemical positions and truly creative tension, let alone *dialectics*. Yes, I can hear your sighs: that old twentieth-century stuff. □

DIETER ROELSTRAETE IS MANILOW SENIOR CURATOR AT THE MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, CHICAGO.