




Curating *documenta*: The Spectacle of Modernism

“Just as the artist endeavours to improve his interpretation and conception through innovation, the commercial entity strives to improve its end product or service through experimentation with new methods and materials. (...) As businessmen in tune with our times, we at Philip Morris are committed to support the experimental. (...) These [sponsorship] arrangements are not adjuncts to our commercial function, but rather an integral part.”

–John A. Murphy, president of the tobacco conglomerate Philip Morris Europe in the catalogue to *When Attitudes Become Form* (1969)

1 MEMORY AND SPECTACLE

 One of the biggest and most important exhibitions of the past several decades, *documenta* in Kassel, Germany, was initiated in 1955 by professor Arnold Bode with a two-fold function: partly as a “regeneration initiative for a small town that had suffered extensive damage during World War II and partly as an attempt to counter the attack on modern art by the Nazis” (Angela Dimitrakaki, 2003:153).²⁵ What was planned

²⁵ “Devastating bombing raids during WWII, due among other things to Kassels’ munitions factories, destroyed roughly 80% of the city” (Buergel 2005:173).

as a one-time event in a provincial town in the framework of a bigger national garden festival turned into a large success: the event grew and inspired its initiators to repeat it every four years up to the present day.²⁶ This has resulted in thirteen editions by

²⁶ “The garden festival with its three million visitors was not just a show to enhance the city’s image. Of course, its primary aim was to boost domestic tourism and investments in local infrastructure, since the division of Germany had suddenly left Kassel on the edge of the western world” (Buergel 174). Until 1972, *documenta* exhibition was held every four years. After 1972, this was changed to every five years and the possible reason for this was not have it in the same year as the world football championships. For more on this see: Luchezar Boyadjiev: 2003/2004.

now, and a rich archive of a complex history, which undoubtedly confronts one with the question of how to approach it or, in other words, how to open its content to critical analysis.

The name *documenta* was chosen by following two main principles: the semantic translation of its envisioned function, and new ways of naming successful products in advertising:

The chief aim of venture [documenta] was to instruct people’s minds [docere mentis],” in the words of Ernst Schuh, Arnold Bode’s assistant to the first *documenta*. (...)

The choice of name was a spin-off of the “1950s advertising neologisms,” such as “Constructa” (Lange 2005: 14) or “Nivea, (...) Schauma, Fanta. It was especially popular to tack on an a, which according to psychologists of language makes a word sound more optimistic to German ears” (Jahre 2005: 46).

Its conceptual origins are to be found in the “hope of human renewal, of a revolutionary, or evolutionary, transformation of mankind to a better life – in this case the conversion of the German population, led astray by National Socialism, to modernist art, seen as an international phenomenon, and to freedom” (Lange 14-15). In his lecture at *documenta III*, Ernst Bloch spoke about a “not-yet” man, of “redemption of self through the spirit of art, liberation of self to a utopian glory in the age-old Neoplatonic, esoteric tradition of aesthetics” (20). This way, the envisioned function of *documenta* was to become a guide to the people and lead them back to the path they had lost or, in other words, to curate their minds by exposing them to a new sensory discipline. Germany in the 1950s introduced the rules for polite behavior: “By means of which a nation that had turned barbaric in the crimes of the war and the Holocaust was again to find a way back to civilization. By being nice and being polite, it was possible to make the economic miracle all the better, whereas the “things we don’t understand” are simply “Picasso”” (Glasmeier 2005: 193). Formulated the best in a rather problematic statement by Roger M. Buergel, the curator of its twelfth edition in 2007, the hidden function of *documenta* was to serve as an instrument of rebuilding the community of a fragmented post-war society:

Not only does the “damaged or endangered community” make a recovery through the task; it is through the exhibition medium that this community actually learns to see, understand, and develop itself as a community. In spite of

its exclusions, *documenta* was (and is) a laboratory – an ontological laboratory in which to create, display, and emphasize an ethics of coexistence (2005: 176).

On the level of aesthetics, Walter Grasskamp underlines the fact that the first editions of *documenta* should be “understood as an answer to the trauma that resulted from that original antimodernist smear campaign” of National Socialism (1994: 165). Further on, this will allow us to interpret this “One Hundred Day museum” as an event created on a particularly traumatic spot of recent German history, or as a part of post-war cultural memorization. Nevertheless, the official narrative of *documenta* becomes destabilized if we read its repetitive form as a continuous restaging of the traumatic past in the particular form: in the form of spectacle. According to Guy Debord, the function of spectacle is “to use culture to bury all historical memory” (2002: #192). On the other hand, spectacle complicates one of the main functions of this exhibition, since its dream of collectivity will never be reached:

The spectacle was born from the world’s loss of the unity, and the immense expansion of the modern spectacle reveals the enormity of this loss. (...) Spectators are linked solely by their one-way relationship to the very center that keeps them isolated from each other. The spectacle thus reunites the separated, but it reunites them only *in their separateness* (emphasis in the original 2002: #29).

Taking a step further, this makes curators, the main agents of *documenta*, the ones who function not only as the “masters” of the spectacle, but also as the “masters” of the traumatic past; their duty is to construct a synthetic narrative in the form of an exhibition, to shape this “not-yet” man, and to make sure he rejoins the collective of other civilized men.

The following investigation aims at detecting the traces that contradict the master narratives of *documenta*, the evidence that had managed to escape the control, and to speak about the processes and procedures obscured by the spectacle. We will be interested in the examination of a spectacle as a repression mechanism, as an attempt to escape the disturbing narrativization of a traumatic past. We will look for the “hidden” narratives of exclusion in order to acquire a glimpse of alternative histories of *documenta*, “for one thing is certain: within the exhibition industry, the institution *documenta* is the most potent generator of memories” (Glasmeier and Heinrich 2005: 7).

2 ACCIDENTAL IMAGES

During the course of my research into the history of *documenta*, two particular photographs caught my attention in the book dedicated to work and life of its founder, professor Arnold Bode, in the chapter featuring the interview with his widow, Mrs. Bode (Orzechowski: 1986). On the right-hand side of page 24 and parallel to the interview, two black-and-white photographs have been placed, one below the other. The caption under the first reads “Protest action during the press conference at *documenta* 4, 1968”²⁷ and shows a large crowd of young

27 “Protestaktion anlässlich der Presskonferenz zur *documenta* 4, 1968” in Arnold Bode: *Documenta Kassel: Essays*; (translated from German by the author).

people standing around the table with, presumably, journalists, and holding up a large hand-written poster with the message “Prof. Bode! We, the blind, thank you for this beautiful exhibition.”²⁸ The second photograph shows five men in their

28 “PROF. BODE! WIR BLINDEN DANKEN IHNEN FÜR DIESE SCHÖNE AUSSTELLUNG.”

mid-thirties surrounding an older man who is giving or taking a book from one of them; the caption reads “*documenta* 5, 1972. From the left: Peter Iden, Prof. Arnold Bode, Harald Szeemann, Prof. Bazon Brock, Dr. Jean Christophe Armmann, Dr. Ingolf Bauer”.

What initially caught my attention were not the particular elements of those photographs separately; the “disturbance” stemmed from their juxtaposition. What triggered my attention was the construction of the shift that was achieved by editing in the framework of the book, the construction of the change that apparently happened between those two (cinematic) moments in history. I became interested in the space in-between, in the particular cut that shows things shifting from a highly dramatic,



Protestaktion anlässlich der Pressekonferenz zur documenta 4, 1968



documenta 5, 1972. Von links: Peter Iden, Prof. Arnold Bode, Harald Szeemann, Prof. Bazon Brock, Dr. Jean Christophe Armmann, Dr. Ingolf Bauer

“explosive” and “noisy” image of an undifferentiated group of men and women in the first photograph to a calm, “monumentalized” group of five men on the second. Selected from a vast body of archival photographs as most representative of the “historical reality”, they are here exhibited as “natural” sequences of events following each other with no apparent contradiction or clash.

At first glance, the first photograph seems to show a crowded press conference where the present group of people is expressing their gratitude to professor Bode. Nevertheless, the caption informs us that what we are seeing is the “protest action,” which further complicates the story and opens up the space to doubt the truthfulness of the written statement, turning the message into a possibly ironic one. If there was some disturbance in the photograph of 1968, in the one from 1972 everything seems to have been resolved. There are no students, there seems to be no protest, and there are no ironic messages. What remains unanswered is the key to how to read the message in the first photo, as well as what happened in between. At this point, I became interested in what in Barthesian terms could be called the subversion of these photographs, or the possibility of releasing the “pressure of the unspeakable which wants to be spoken” (Barthes, 1980: 19).

Since the text of the interview that frames the photographs did not give me any further keys to my initial questions, the next place to look for clues was in the official visual and textual material left behind by those two exhibitions in the art library – the examination of their catalogues. The analysis of the catalogues becomes even more intriguing since, as already noticed, “the book metaphor runs like a thread through documenta’s history,” where “the catalogue becomes a kind of lasting monument to the exhibition and one of its most important authentic traces” (Jahre 2005 46-47).

I immediately became aware of the difference between the two catalogues that showcased a radical shift that happened in the period between 1968 and 1972. The catalogue from the 1968 was something that we could characterize today as “old fashioned” – it had the same format as the catalogues of two previous editions of *documenta*, in hard cover, divided into two books, with introductory texts by the mayor of Kassel, professor Arnold Bode, and several other art history experts. The texts were followed by a large section of black-and-white images of artworks and the artists, all precisely divided into segments based on the medium that the works were made in. Nevertheless, the catalog from 1972 looks like something that, at least conceptually, any exhibition-maker of today could be proud of: its loose black-and-white pages in A4 format were compiled into a big orange plastic office folder, the artworks were presented in more than twenty categories and sub-categories with images, accompanying texts and, in the case of some conceptual works, the artworks themselves were included in the catalogue. What was also a novelty was the appearance of advertisements placed by commercial art galleries and art magazines in the last part of the catalogue.²⁹

²⁹ Noticing the similarity between the catalogue from 1972 and the ones we encounter today might lead us to conclude that aesthetic innovations and promotion of the commercial sector set by its secretary general Harald Szeemann might be still in operation today.

Going through those catalogues, I was vaguely introduced to the group of men from the second picture and concluded that they were in one way or another related to *documenta 5*, mostly being responsible for the execution of its particular segments. Nevertheless, the first catalogue did not reveal anything that could help me understand the first photo. What was even more striking was the contradiction between the images and catalogues from particular times: the vibrant and messy image from 1968 in comparison to the rigid and disciplined catalogue from the same year, and the stiffness of the men in the

second picture juxtaposed with the “alive” and loose catalogue from 1972.

Not able to find any satisfying answers to my initial questions about the changes between these two moments, nor about the identity of the people from the first picture or the meaning of their message written to professor Bode, I decided to continue my search in other available archives. Among the rare visual documents of exhibitions from the past, the work that truly stands out are the documentaries made by the Belgium filmmaker, Jef Cornelis. At this point, we will take a closer look into the ideas and questions posed by his movies about *documenta 4* and *5*.

3 FILMING THE SHIFT: JEF CORNELIS' DOCUMENTARIES OF *DOCUMENTA*

The rich and impressive body of work of Jef Cornelis has yet to be evaluated and analyzed.³⁰ In the period between

³⁰ These documentaries are only available in the video archives of *Argus*, Brussels and at the Jan van Eyck Academy, Maastricht, whose director Koen Brams has initiated a long-term in-depth research project into the opus of Jef Cornelis. I am deeply grateful to Mr. Brams for the availability of the materials.

1963 and 1998, he was primarily active as a director and script-writer for the Flemish broadcasting company (VRT) in Belgium. Besides providing valuable content on various subjects and people, his work is indispensable in the discussion on the medium of TV and documentary-making. One of the most important aspects of Cornelis' work is that he did not hide himself behind the camera, or present his films as objective and essentially "true" to reality. Instead, inspired by certain developments in the filmmaking of the 1960s, he treated the camera as his pen, or *camera stylo*, as a way to express his opinions on the events that he filmed (Brams, Pultau 2003 (1)). Apart from being a television maker, he was also involved in various art initiatives, and was an active participant in the international art scene, which gave him a unique access to this field. He has left behind several documentaries in which the art world is constructed and presented in a particular way, reflecting his deep dissatisfaction with certain manifestations of power.³¹ Nevertheless, after filming *documenta 5*, Cornelis decided to

³¹ About his first encounter with the Venice Biennial in 1966 he said: "I thought I had landed in parish hall. I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw the Cardinal of Venice handing out the awards. (...) I think my vision of the art world was already clearly expressed in that film. It is obvious how I feel about the art world - remote, critical, ambiguous - to put it mildly" (Brams, Pultau 2003 (2)).

stop filming the "art world".³²

³² "I dropped out in 1972. That was pretty radical. I still went to exhibi-

tions and stayed in touch with a number of people, but I wasn't involved anymore. Documenta 5 - 1972 - was in my opinion the beginning of the commercialization and the breakthrough of the mentality of 'every man for himself.' Nevertheless, his attempt at a "comeback" was reflected a decade later in the documentary on the Paris biennial in 1985 (*Het gerucht: Biennale van Parijs*) but after this, he made no more record of the exhibitions or exhibition-making (Brams, Pultau 2003 (2)).

DOCUMENTA 4

For the second broadcast of both documentaries in the 1990s, Jef Cornelis added short introductory notes that open the films. These further reveal his position on the filmed material, and offer a framework in which to watch and interpret it. The opening line for *documenta 4* introduces us to the clashes and problems that were occurring in the international art scene at that moment:

When prof. A. Bode initiated "Documenta 1" in 1955 in Kassel, his first task was to bring West Germany back to the international scene. When "Documenta 4" took place in 1968, the international art world was in the crisis of authorities. Kassel of that time did not understand this.

Being aware of his position as a filmmaker who not only represents events but also *gives a voice to conflicting positions*, Cornelis opens the film with a scene in which the French artists express their protest against the exhibition-makers, and explain the withdrawal of their works from the show as a political act. This black-and-white, thirty-minute film is fast and dynamic, and we see and hear a multitude of voices: those of the artists, the organizers, the critics, the dealers and gallerists, and the interviewer. We also see the artworks, the public, and the camera(man). Very soon, we become aware of at least four levels on which conflicts and tensions are taking place, and the film leaves us with open questions rather than clearly formulated answers.

On the first level, the conflict was between the rebellious artists and the organizers, usually seen as the part of the 1960s student protests and demands for institutional change. In this particular case, the *primus inter pares* of the organizers, the Dutch Jean Leering, reduces the political dimension of this protest to a mere technical problem. We hear him explaining that

the artists were not satisfied with the room in which they were supposed to exhibit their works. Having two exhibition spaces at their disposal, of which one was extremely big and the other quite small, the organizers had decided to distribute the artworks according to their size. Nevertheless, the rebellious artists explained their withdrawal as a way of openly disagreeing with the selection process of the exhibition which, according to them, did not represent a true and objective overview of the art scene of that moment. Being the first edition of *documenta* to be focused on the contemporary art production, this fact has a specific significance.³³

³³ As a consequence of this “modernization”, the numeration of *documenta* was changed from the Roman numbers to Arabic ones.

Although being unsatisfied with the organization and the overloaded nature of the spaces, the American artists decided to participate, and to avoid the politicization of the act of withdrawal. This point introduces us to a new level of the conflict: US artists versus European artists. The decision to exhibit, for the first time in Europe, the new developments in American art (minimalism, conceptualism, pop art) turned this edition of *documenta* into a historical moment in which the repositioning of the center of artistic production officially shifted to the other side of the Atlantic. According to the voices of the critics heard in the film, the exhibition shows the strength of the young American scene and the “sicknesses” of the old European one. Nevertheless, for their part, the rebellious French artists express their opinion about the disproportions in the exhibition, which offered an overview of mostly American art.

As a consequence, the occurrence of the new forms of art had initiated several shifts on the third level on which this confrontation took place – between the new art production and the rigid museum structures. Art dealers informed us about the necessary shifts that would have to happen in the galleries, and the necessity

of collectors to change their attitude towards what is considered art. We hear that New York-based PS gallery had sold several works by old masters in order to finance the new artistic production and the ambitious works exhibited in Kassel. At this edition of *documenta*, the debate was still ongoing about what is to be considered art, and what the criteria should be by which this is to be judged. Since the main title of the show was “Art is what artists make,” this was the criteria followed in the selection process.

The last level of confrontation seems to have been taking place between the potential of art as a tool of political change and the threat of its commodification. At that point in history, new genres of American art were considered to be critical of the market system and, in the case of minimalism, as a way of escaping its grasp. Nevertheless, several decades later it became clear that this was not the case, and Cornelis gives us his lucid insights via the soundtrack, following particular artworks: twice we see Robert Indiana’s artwork, during the first few minutes of the film and again at the end. The image is followed by a particular noise: initially it is a sound similar to a typewriter, and at the end it becomes clear that what we are hearing is a money cash register.³⁴ The final sequence of the film provides us with Cornelis’

³⁴ For more on the contradictions of minimalism, its commodification and the consequent change of the size of exhibition spaces see: Rosalind Krauss: 1990.

ironic conclusion, through Louis Armstrong’s version of *What A Wonderful World*: a song made as an antidote to the more and more racially and politically charged climate in the US, which the American art completely fails to portray.

DOCUMENTA 5

Four years later, Jef Cornelis filmed the next edition of *documenta*, which now opens with the following introductory text:

In Kassel, Germany, "Documenta 9" will begin on June 13, 1992. The artistic director of this manifestation, the Flemish Jan Hoet will take out the Pharisees from the temple. "Documenta 5" in 1972 is known in the history as a first example of an exhibition as a spectacle. Under the leadership of a Swiss Harald Szeemann, the art is brought back to the museum. The main point of this event in Kassel became the economical, political and media importance. The avant-garde was definitely buried. The new hero is the exhibition maker Szeemann. Will Jan Hoet bring back the art to Kassel?

The first impression of this 55-minute, mainly black-and-white film is one of order and the immaculate organization of the exhibition. Artworks are organized under bigger themes and categories, there is no sign of chaos, and everything seems under control.³⁵ Following the didactic character of the exhibition, the

³⁵ Szeemann entitled his *documenta 5* "Questioning reality – pictorial worlds today," further divided into several smaller sections of which "Individual Mythologies" was the most important one.

film imitates this and presents itself as an educational piece with voice-over narration. In comparison to the previous film, with its multiple actors and voices, in the film about *documenta 5* we are left only with three of them: we see and hear the artists, curators, and gallerists.

The main organizer of the exhibition, the secretary general of *documenta 5* Harald Szeemann, talks about the importance of the audience attendance, his acceptance of power and responsibility, and his view that subversive artists can only work in the context of a museum.³⁶ Daniel Buren, one of the participating artists, openly

36 We also hear Szeemann justifying his decision to divide the show into thematic parts based on the need to make artworks more interesting to the public. For more on this “discovery” of the audience and the shift of the visitor from the periphery to the center of museal practice in the post-industrial leisure society, see: Karsten Schubert: 2002.

reflects on the new position of Szeemann and calls it “the exhibition of the exhibition,” or the construction of the show as curator’s artwork. Alongside the works usually considered to be art, Szeemann had included numerous objects of mass culture usually referred to as “kitsch.” There is also no longer any doubt about what should be considered art: from this moment, art is not what artists make, but rather what the curator defines as art.

When it comes to questions about the commercialization of art, the artist Lawrence Weiner still believes in the possibility of conceptual art to escape the market. Nevertheless, Cornelis allows us to hear the position of one of the art dealers, Leo Castelli, who erases all possible illusions and says that even the conceptualists have to live from something. There are no contradictory voices from the artists who had previously opposed this “invasion” of American art, which was fully institutionalized within the art system during this short four-year span.

According to Cornelis, this edition of *documenta* was an important historical moment, after which the things developed in a particular direction: “For me, the fifth *documenta* was the decisive moment. The marketing and the spectacle of art hit its first peak there” (Brams, Pultau 2003 (2)). From today’s perspective, his conclusion seems understandable, but at the moment when this event was filmed, this was a unique, solitary voice that probably not too many people were aware of. One of the main contributions of *documenta 5* in the development within the art system is usually ascribed to the institutionalization of one person responsible for the conceptual and organizational aspects of an exhibition. Harald Szeemann introduced the new type of curatorship: *documenta 5*

marked his institutionalization as an exhibition maker. Before this event, “the exhibitions were simply “hung” or “mounted.” Much was spontaneous or born of necessity” (Nachtigaller 2005: 26). This would not be the case any more. The centralization of power was presented as a progressive development in the situation following incidents at *documenta 4*, where the show was endangered by major conflicts in the discussion of what was to be regarded as (modern) art, and was officially run by 23 members of “comprehensive council”:³⁷

³⁷ See more in: Grasskamp, 1994:164.

Szeemann was appointed “Secretary General” (reference to the political role of the UN Sec.Gen.) Szeemann didn’t aim to “democratize” the making of the *documenta*, however; he made this clear when describing himself as “a Secretary General with the widest range of authority and a team of 5-7 executors in a *documenta 5* working group” (Martini and Martini 265).

In his analysis of one earlier moment of the “death of avant-garde,” Konstantin Akinsha reminds us of the rise of the Marxist curators between the years 1927-1932 in Russia. According to him, this was the period when critics became curators. Their main invention was “visual installations”: “The curators did not try to implant new art into the dusty museum halls but sought instead to transform the museum into a kind of contemporary art form” (2000:160). At this point, photo-collages and various “non-museum” objects penetrated the exhibitions, and “in the hands of Marxist curators, artworks became no more than illustrations for their ideologies” (161).

The complete analysis and evaluation of Szeemann’s controversial curatorial practice is yet to be completed, but even the greatest supporters of his work agree with the critics who noticed the contradiction inherent to the curating as he practiced it:

And because the blizzard of ideas stirred up by Szeemann's shows had a way of obscuring the art in favor of the *modus operandi* of the artists, the curator who courageously provided artists as much freedom as he could squeeze from the institutions that hired him, and who thought of himself as a servant of art rather than a pompous expert picking over studio productions like a persnickety wine-sniffer, paradoxically ended up driving many lovers of contemporary art to the conclusion that, in the end, it's all about the curator, baby (Plagens, 2007:45).

In comparison to the Marxist curators whose exhibitions became artworks and therefore illustrations of Marxist ideology, Szeemann's shows became illustrations of his positions, and of his personal obsessions. What differs here is the changed status of the addressee; in other words, *documenta 5* "gave birth to a new model of mediating art: the mediator as hero, sender, and addressee of inspiration at the same time" (Grasskamp: 164).

Following this, the spectacle of the exhibition as (re)invented by Szeemann as his medium can be read as his solitary narrativization of modern art, which seems to hide another moment of German history when the avant-garde was buried for the first time: the traumatic moment of "degenerate art" when the exhibition was used as a spectacular medium by the "artists" of the Nazi party. As noticed by Gerd Gemunden, embracing Westernization in the 1960s, and specifically US popular culture, were offered as an alternative to the Nazi past, or as a way of erasing one's own past through this "remembering" of other people's memories (1999: 120-133). This is precisely what appears to have happened between those two editions of *documenta*: all contradictions were resolved and pacified through the construction of one master narrative that embraced the spectacularization of art as a way of avoiding confrontation with one's own fractured identity.

4 BACK TO THE PHOTOGRAPHS: *WHERE IS THE PUNCTUM?*

After this endeavor of researching the official and alternative visual material on *documenta 4* and *5*, I am back to the photographs in order to summarize the conclusions that I have obtained in the meantime. Indeed, I was offered some additional understanding of the shift that happened between those two editions, and definitely confirmed that the message addressed to professor Bode was an ironic one. Nevertheless, following Roland Barthes' advices on how to gain access to pictures, we should look for the counternarrative, defined by Rosalind Krauss as "a seemingly aimless set of details that throws the forward drive of diegesis into reverse" (1990: 298). Looking back at the photographs, I asked myself if there was something that still escaped the narrativization, something that still strikes me, or in Barthesian terms, what was the *punctum* that "rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow" and "breaks my *studium*" (Barthes 1980:26)?



In the first photograph, amidst the noisy scene and the students, I spotted one detail on the table, an object without an owner, without a *master*, and seemingly out of context: a female purse.

In the second photo, my attention was caught by an object of exchange, of communication, that seemingly initiated the movement between the two men on the picture: a book for which we cannot define who the sender is and who the receiver is.



What both of those details, or *punctums*, open up are two different cracks, two different “black holes” in the *documenta* history. The female purse undoubtedly brings us up to someone who is missing, who is absent from this perfect picture – a woman. It opens up the questions of the total absence or invisibility of women from the narrative of *documenta*. From the other side, the book opens up the questions about tradition and continuity, or the means by which the same things are transferred from one generation to the next, while presented as novel. The answers or further complications of those questions, I propose, might be better formulated if we pose them in the framework of one of the recent editions of this manifestation, *documenta 12*, that took place in 2007.

5 THE WOMAN WITHOUT A SHADOW

The question of the obscured history of women in the *documenta* past is one that demands its own space for analysis, and at this point I would like to focus only on the editions that are significant for this discussion – *documenta 4, 5, and 12*.³⁸ In Jef Cornelis' documentaries, there is only one short

³⁸ Only twice has a woman been appointed as a main curator – Catharine David at *documenta X* in 1997, and Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev at *documenta 13* in 2012. As a process of possible inclusion of female artists in Szeemann's shows, I encountered only one mention of an 'incident' when he received a public letter from Lucy Lippard entitled "Who the hell are you calling a whore?".

moment when we encounter a female face, that of the art dealer Rene Denise in *documenta 4*. The absence of women in the documentaries can be seen as a consequence of their absence from the exhibitions, their organization, and the public discussion on art. This becomes even more tragic seen in the perspective of the surrounding rise of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s, which had yet not been allowed to penetrate *documenta's* rigid system of male dominance.

Nevertheless, in the recent documentary made by the TV station ARTE about *documenta 12*, we are confronted with an abundance of female characters. Most of the artists whom the director Julia Benkert focuses on are women. We are informed that, contrary to all public announcements, this particular edition of *documenta* was the "child" of a curatorial couple – Roger M. Buergel and his wife, Ruth Noack. In the period preceding the exhibition, it was publicly stated that the exhibition would take place under the artistic leadership of Mr. Breugel alone, and this documentary explains that the statute of *documenta* "technically" does not allow the appointment of two persons as its leaders. Therefore, Mrs. Noack had to be presented in the position of a curator.³⁹

39 This “technical” problem seems one that did not exist in 1968, when it was possible to have 23 (or 26, according to some sources) members on the comprehensive council as its leadership.

One of the first differences one can notice when comparing this documentary to the ones made by Jef Cornelis is an incredible focus on curators. Nevertheless, we are not presented with their conceptual framework or aesthetic or political questions; rather, the camera has a sensationalistic approach, and is used as a way to intrude into their private lives “behind the scenes.” We hear that Mrs. Noack does not particularly like to spend time with her two little children, and sees them as a burden to her busy schedule. She discusses their decision to wear red clothes at the opening as a way to “rebel” against the dominance of black at the usual art gatherings.⁴⁰ They show us small wooden

40 For more on the importance of the image of *documenta* and the status of the suits as a way to forget the history of military uniforms from the previous times see in: Grasskamp, 1994: 174

models of exhibition spaces, around which they spend most of their time arranging artworks, resembling children playing with a doll-house. We see Mr. Breugel driving a luxurious cabriolet through the city, in a hurry to meet possible sponsors, etc.

One of the most striking facts is that Mrs. Noack declares herself a feminist, but her decision to comply with the ruling statute that renounces her official power brings up questions about the current state of the post-feminist struggle. This generation seems to be satisfied with whatever they are given, and nobody questions the fact of less value hence less pay given to female workers in comparison to their male colleagues. Nevertheless, a look at the list of people employed in various positions in the *documenta 12* machinery (listed in the colophon) reveals that it was mostly run on the power of women. At this point, I became interested in the possibility of “locating” those numerous women in the official material created by the authors of the exhibition.

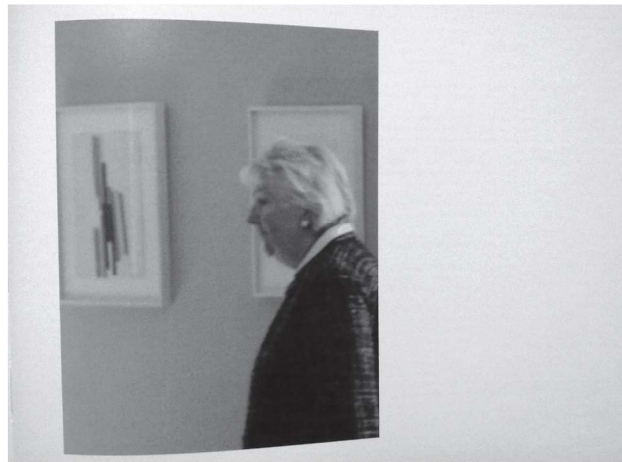
In addition to the catalogue of artworks and the separate reader of theoretical texts, the curators have decided to offer us another source through which to “remember” this show – a luxurious photo book, *Bilderbuch*. Although mostly overcrowded by thousands of visitors every day, this photo book shows untitled images of exhibition spaces populated mainly by the works of art. In several of them that include people, we see mostly women: they pose in front of the artworks with solemn expressions on their faces, and their attached identification badges allow for the conclusion that they must have been part of the “army” of teenagers employed by Mr. Breugel as exhibition guides. On page 201, we even see two cleaning ladies vacuuming and washing the gigantic floor of a new “crystal” building of *documenta*.

Nevertheless, what caught my attention was the very last photograph. After the whole series of very professional and high-quality photographs, this last one is blurred, possibly taken secretly, and we see an elegantly dressed elderly woman strolling among the artworks. Not being a technically perfect photograph made me wonder why it was included in the collection. The only answer I could come up with was that it must have been based on the identity of the person “caught” in the picture.

In one of the documents published on the official *documenta 12* website, I discovered an interview with a woman who physically seemed almost identical to the woman in the blurry photograph that triggered my attention: a 77-year-old inhabitant of Kassel, Mrs. Gerda Lippitz. This rather long and elaborate interview presents her as an art enthusiast and a genuine *documenta* expert, who has followed its every edition since 1968. According to her, she has never “experienced such a relaxing exhibition as *documenta 12*” (*documenta 12* official website). What became interesting here are the particular positions and

behavior promoted by *documenta* officials through the publicity of this interview.

We read about the enjoyment Mrs. Lippitz has every four years when *documenta* comes to her town, and she obtains a pass in order to be able to go there every day and fully enjoy the artworks. For her, this “is not an exhibition but an encounter with the world!” What stands out is the conclusion that the subject’s position promoted here is one of reverse cultural tourism – instead of traveling far to get experiences of other places, Mrs. Lippitz is offered a substitute in the exhibition where she can enjoy the rest of the world gathered under one roof. Or, as Donald Preziosi put it in his analysis of the construction of (national) subjects, starting with the Great Exhibition of 1851, we encounter here “imaginary geography of all peoples and products with the modern citizen – consumer, the ‘orthopsychic subject’ at and as its (imaginary) center” (2003:111). The only demand on the consumer constructed through *documenta* is one of the excessive leisure time necessary to fully grasp the numerous artworks.



Being able to visit the exhibition every day, Mrs. Lippitz also controls the other visitors and reacts whenever some of them

express doubts about whether an object in the exhibition is really a work of art: "Then I reply: 'Well just come with me and I'll show you the five things I've understood and enjoyed.'" This policing of possible contradictory voices seems to completely shut out any possibility of discussion on the status of art today. Rather, this solitary experience is presented as the only valid perspective through which other subjects are supposed to see the exhibited objects. In a way, this recalls the description of the gaze of Queen Victoria, who visited the Great Exhibition every second day: "In seeing Victoria seeing, a whole world learned what and how to see. Victoria, in short, ostensified the spectator as consumer" (Preziosi 2003: 98). Instead of a gaze of the Queen, we are introduced here with its seemingly "democratic" transformation, the gaze of a satisfied (female) consumer. What did not change is this belief that the whole world is present under one roof, "the ideal horizon and the blueprint of patriarchal colonialism; the epistemological technology of Orientalism as such. It was the laboratory table on which all things and peoples could be objectively and poignantly compared and contrasted in a uniform and perfect light, and phylogenetically and ontogenetically ranked" (98). In this imaginary world where all the differences are rendered and domesticated, every citizen believes to be its master.

If we remember the discussion from the documentaries analyzed when the status and function of art was still debatable, Mrs. Lippitz informs us that the art of today is that which makes one feel comfortable. She believes that 1001 antique chairs imported from China as part of an artist's concept is not a luxury extravaganza, but rather a beautiful concept that allows one to fully appreciate art. For the artists in the 1960s, art was significant for not being susceptible to instrumentalization and commodification, as other objects are. As it seems, this position has completely evaporated in the course of history. Ironically, the imported chairs fit in perfectly with Buerger's idea, inspired by "palm groves" in

India: as places where people can sit and reflect on art. It is worth pointing out that this has not been interpreted as form of exoticism, but rather as a valid curatorial concept.⁴¹

41 The elitist concept hit its peak with the introduction of the chef Fergan Adria in the framework of the exhibition: "The star chef will participate from afar, by keeping a table for two open to the exhibition visitors at his restaurant "El Bulli" on the Costa Brava, outside Barcelona, every night of the show. The lucky two will be chosen randomly by Buerger in Kassel and offered airfare, along with a meal at "El Bulli." Artforum official website, accessed 23 October 2007.

The strategy Mrs. Lippitz used in order to fully understand Mr. Breugel's view on art was to read all of the articles and listen numerous times to his recorded radio interviews. Drawn from this, the satisfied subject seems to be the one who listens to the voice of the curator and repeats it until his positions become internalized, until they become hers. The perfect consumerist subject is presented here as a (feminine) one who asks no questions, makes no friction, and shows no doubt about the picture of the world presented.

Going back to the photograph from 1968, it seems possible that the female purse on the table might have its master after all – it might have been Mrs. Lippitz's, who has formed her worldviews through *documenta* exhibitions ever since. This question of continuity brings us further to the "other" black hole opened by the *punctum* on the second photograph. Hence, in the next section, we will examine the (re)interpretation and legacy of modernism as presented in the concept of the first and twelfth *documenta*, and as presented in its *Bilderbuch*.

6 BACK TO THE SHIFT: GENERATION CHANGE AT *DOCUMENTA 5*

The discussion about *documenta 5* seems to summarize the conclusion that Hans Belting offered regarding the history of art and modernism, underlining two major events that we should bear in mind when examining modernism in the present:

Two events, however, separate early modernism from the present, and they permanently affected both the fate of art and the image of written art history. (...) The cultural policies of National Socialism represented the first event, and the new cultural hegemony of the United States in or over Europe was the second event to be discussed in any retrospective on XX century art. (...) The debate that raged about “degenerate art” was only the high point of an already long-simmering controversy on modern art. (...) Modern art, in Germany the victim of politics, became the hero of international culture. (...) Modern art occupied a sacred space in which only veneration was possible and where critical analysis was out of place (2003: 37).

In that sense, the first edition of *documenta* was created as a “retrospective of modern art as it had survived the period of persecution and destruction and that was now celebrated as a new classicism” (37). Nevertheless, the main problem with this representation of modernism was its selective nature and interpretation that was made “safe” for the German audience, in whose eyes this type of art had been demonized just several years before:

“Safe” meant that art had not known any element of doubt, and “unequivocal,” that it had materialized in the classic art genres. For this reason, technical media (photography) and

dada, with their social satire, remained largely in the background, while painting and sculpture were to represent a humanism that appeared undamaged by any kind of collective slogan or any declared belief in the machine (39).

There were no German-Jewish artists, and almost no politically engaged art from the Weimar Republic:

It is striking that (...) the first *documenta* [did not] give attention to the strong veristic position of George Grosz's or John Heartfield's art of political opposition. They, of all artists, should have been guaranteed a place in the first *documenta*, because they constituted a front of resistance to Nazi ideology in the clearest and most aggressive possible form (Gutbrod 2005: 193).

After twelve years and three editions of *documenta*, whose task was the revival of modernist art and a remodeling of German citizens, a moment came when the old paradigms were to be questioned. The time has come to take this manifestation to a new era. Hence, we should not be surprised by the "chaos" displayed at *documenta 4*, when the politics of exhibiting shifted from the overview of the old to showing the new, or the most recent art production:

documenta 4 opened on the eve of the student revolts and in the thick of the Cold War. Calls for more democracy, waves of protest, and the ongoing Americanization of the Western world did not stop at the doors of the by now well-established exhibition series. Visitors on the opening day had to brave chanting demonstrators and a red flag, or they got embroiled in discussions on the portico steps. (...) The will to change, to embark on new paths, was everywhere in evidence at *documenta 4*: virtually nothing was the same.

And yet Arnold Bode as director of the show seemed a bit lost amid all the color and diversity. Colorfully elegant and full of provocation, art was no longer at home in his rooms, but was straining to break out of the museum into social space, to where Fluxus, happening and actionism were already forming up – young, rebellious art whose proponents once again were waiting outside the doors (Nachtigaller 2005: 29-30).

At that time, the generational change was also manifested in the resignation of Werner Haftmann, the spiritual father of *documenta*, as well as of two important council members, Fritz Winter and Werner Schmalenbach, who believed *documenta* would “degenerate into a trendy show of novelties” (Stengel and Scharf 2005: 104). In the organizational structure, this was reflected in the replacement of Arnold Bode’s “circle of friends (...)” by a council of twenty-six with democratic powers to decide who to admit to the illustrious ranks of *documenta* exhibitors” (Engler 2005: 234).

As we have seen, the process of democratization was not perceived as the right model to make an exhibition, which is why four years later, in 1972, everything was very different: “Swiss exhibition maker Harald Szeemann led the corporate venture out of the chaos of its pseudo-democratized selection procedure to a curatorial model” (Nachtigaller 30). What is even more striking, if we place this event in a historical context, is the fact that those were the days of the Baader-Meinhof-Gruppe, Vietnam, napalm bombs, and the attack at the Olympic village in Munich; the world was on fire, but this was nowhere to be seen in Szeemann’s calm and reflective new child:

In the context of the social transformations after 1968, the institution of the exhibition was also called into question. In

the late 1960s, art institutions were being occupied everywhere. Alternatives to the art market were created, and collective campaigns were undertaken. Not only society was to be conceived anew – art too once again turned to Utopias (Mackert 2005: 254).

As we remember, the reaction by Robert Smithson was one of the first statements related to the changes of power structures in the museums, but it was not the only one. In his letter sent to Szeemann, Robert Morris withdrew all his works, and forbid any to be shown, as he was not interested in illustrating “misguided sociological principles or outmoded art historical categories.” He also refused to participate in an exhibition which did not consult with him about what work to show, “but instead dictate to me what will be shown” (Scharf and Schirmer 2001: 99). On May 12th, 1972, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* published a letter signed by Carl Andre, Hans Haacke, Donald Judd, Barry Le Va, Sol Le Witt, Robert Morris, Dorothea Rockburne, Fred Sandback, Richard Serra, and Robert Smithson. In this letter, they requested that the artist should be the one with the right to chose the way his/her work is exhibited in a space, the right to agree on or reject the proposed thematic classification, and the right to decide what will be written in the catalogue, while the transportation costs should be paid by the inviting institution (99).

Harald Szeemann’s beginnings were in the theater, hence we should not be surprised to notice that his curatorial practice reflects the method of stressing the theatricality of exhibitions. Nevertheless, it is important to notice that this approach was already anticipated and integrated in previous *documenta* editions. The decision to have the first edition held in the bombed-out museum created a particular kind of a stage for the art to be exhibited, bringing in the particular atmosphere as well: “The experience of displacement and rootlessness in the transitional

postwar period was accommodated within the 'leprous walls' of the former museum. The derelict building proved itself capable of providing adequate living space for 'wounded humankind in a wounded world'" (Kuby and Haftmann in Kimpel 2005: 68). In this particular stage, Arnold Bode "deployed compelling spatial situations to elicit an emotional response from the audience – a method popularly applied in Baroque theater" (Prus 2005: 78). Therefore we can even conclude that the novelty of *documenta* as a spectacle was not instituted by Szeemann. Nevertheless, the shift did happen on another level: from 1972 onwards, the spectacle of modernism was replaced by the spectacle of capitalism.

At the time, this shift was perceived as the "Americanization" of the arts and culture in Europe. In today's globally "Americanized" world, it becomes almost impossible to imagine a different kind of a society. Nevertheless, the late 1960s and early 1970s mark a period in which resistance was felt not only in the socialist countries. The struggle for the public domain in West Germany becomes even more significant when one bears in mind the opposition to its Eastern, communist section. In the context of *documenta*, 1977 was the "first and only occasion that East Germany was represented" (Scharf and Schirmer 119). Harald Szeemann did invite artists from the East to participate, but this was rejected due to his approach of exhibiting "social realism as part of a cabinet of curiosities" (123). Additionally, the two countries "not only assigned conflicting functions to art – in the West the expression of freedom, in the East social responsibility – but also developed different habits of seeing it" (123). The selectors of *documenta* did not consider that the official painting from the East had any artistic quality whatsoever, while "in the West, individualism was celebrated; in the East, it was condemned as "bourgeois and decadent": "If, in the East, art was required to legitimate itself by its social mission, in the West the development of modern art was seen to reside precisely in liberation from missions of any kind"

(Gutbrod 196). Nevertheless, after certain documents became available to the public in 2000, it was revealed that the CIA was behind the instrumentalization of American culture in the fight against communism.⁴² Since then, the discussion on abstract art

⁴² For more, see Frances Stonor Saunders' study *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (2001).

in Europe was critically reexamined, revealing that the West was no different in using art for political and ideological purposes. The only difference is that this was hidden behind a powerful rhetoric about individual freedoms and autonomous artists.

What came as a result was that the "liberal" in liberal arts began to mean the liberal market, and exactly this shift was staged at *documenta 5*. Having no problem with the corporate influence and funding, Harald Szeemann simply applied the same logic to all future exhibition works he produced. If the *documenta* of 1968 "highlighted New York as the new art metropolis" (Engler 235), its next edition confirmed a new canon, "indisputably a canon oriented toward America, one fixated on the media and compatible with discourses" (Glasmeier 181).

7 DOCUMENTA 12: THE PHOTO BOOK OF MODERNISM

In his analysis of the representation of modernism in *documenta 1*, Walter Grasskamp concludes that it was “mutilated, as if someone wanted to make a children’s book out of a pornographic novel” (1994:181), which for him was not enough to fully defeat the Nazi antimodernist propaganda. According to him, this same practice continued with every following exhibition, hidden behind the flashy glance of a spectacle.⁴³ One of

⁴³ “Documenta had never succeeded in becoming the recuperative forum for all of modernism, which had been arrested early, destroyed, them only appreciated in highly fragmented form, and therefore really continued to serve as only a prospectus to itself” (187).

the strategies professor Bode used at *documenta 1* to rehabilitate modernism was in the use of particular photo collages. In them, the artworks of modernism were accompanied by different archeological, ethnological, and anthropological photographs of objects and people taken all over the world. The “One Hundred Day Museum,” based on the concept of an imaginary museum, suppressed the difference between image and reality and “exaggerated the similar” (189). Beside this, the modern art of the twentieth century was shown in a historical perspective, but without the accompanying history: “They relied on the autonomy of the works of art, as if these could assert and legitimate themselves on their own” (170).

This same technique of collage seems to be used by the curators of *documenta 12* as well: the main contingent of contemporary works is juxtaposed with 1960s and 1970s formalism and conceptualism and a selection of Eastern carpets and miniatures going back to the fourteenth century. In the space of the existing museum in Schloss Wilhelmshuhe, several contemporary artists were asked to insert new works into the historical collection. According to one of the critics,

The threads suggested between periods and cultures are decorative rather than serendipitous, and this can have the effect of condescending to the true complexity of context, as though fragments from provenances remote from each other were forced to mimic each other without understanding (Prince, 2007:21).

In the space of the *Bilderbuch*, we are presented with images of artworks, people and landscapes without names, where every item there is supposed to *speak on its own*. The photographs are divided into sections named after the centuries in which the exhibition spaces were built. Through this, the differences between the centuries are also erased, and there seem to be no breaks in this perfect continuity from the eighteenth century.⁴⁴

44 The continuity with the previous editions of *documenta* can perhaps be noticed in the changes in the logo for the twelfth edition. The title *documenta 12* is accompanied with 12 tally marks. This ancient system of counting was used to add another cut without changing the previous ones. In this way, *documenta 12* makes all the other editions visible, but claims to be only one in the line.

In the recent analysis of the conservative intellectual narratives in the literature of the united Germany, Mariatte C. Denman brought about their active promotions of “art as an experience that creates a presence unobstructed by ideological interpretations and social paradigms” (2004: 284). This reveals an attempt to recover a sense of belonging to the “German cultural community liberated from the burden of both the memory and discourse of the Holocaust” (286). Hence, poetic works fail to represent social reality or engage in political circumstances. Instead, they serve to provide a ground on which Germany’s sense of its united self will be rebuilt without the intrusion of historical flaws. According to those tendencies, this can be only achieved if a continuity with the times prior to the Nazi past is established,

and the twelfth edition of *documenta* seems to have had exactly this as its ultimate aim.

Valuable insight on the relationship between modernism and nationalism is given by Preziosi:

Modernism is the paradoxical status quo of nationalism, existing as a virtual site constituting the edge between the material residues and relics of the past and the adjacent empty space that the future is imagined to be, demanding to be filled. That which is perpetually in between two fictions: its origins in an immemorial past and the destiny of its fulfilled future (2003:40).

In the construction of national identity, the exclusion of Others plays a crucial role. Using similar tactics, the depolitization of early *documentas* happened through the exclusion of all elements that might disturb the fairy tale of modernism. According to Grasskamp, "National Socialism had forced the art it protected as well as that it discredited into a political context. The countermeasure of the *documenta* consisted in relieving art of any political context and then understanding this as liberation" (1994:178).

The process of the depolitization of *documenta 12* happened on another level as well – through the particular choice of the curators. After being informed of the appointment of Mr. Buerger, a critic from the distinguished newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung* openly hoped that Buerger "will not follow too closely in the footsteps of former *documenta* organizers Catherine David and Okwui Enwezor, whose approach was too political. (...) Kassel thus dared to make a cautious correction of the path that *documenta* has taken since 1997" (Artforum official website). Therefore, the recuperation after the disturbance of

the editions headed by a woman and by a non-European curator seems to be one of the imperatives of the selection process of the Austrian couple. From their side, the curators proclaimed “the possibility of failure” of the exhibition as their main *modus operandi*, using the same tactics employed by Harald Szeemann to relativize the responsibility over their actions. As it seems, they are ready to capitulate to the new rules of the game, turning their enterprise into the mere service industry of globalized capital: their chief architectural contribution was the building of a glass structure usually used in (art) fairs.

This development is not an isolated example of cultural politics in post-1989 Germany. According to many, this phase is marked by the intrusion of private industry and moneyed patrons that resemble American strategies to fund art and culture. They support “city institutions with an eye towards safer, prestige-oriented culture” (Salter 2004:5); art has a “new ‘sacrificial lamb’ status in a political and economic climate where pressure exists not only to reduce budgets but also to curb cultural practices that challenge the rubric and practices of Empire” (6).

What is missing in the latest staging of modernism in Kassel is the reflection on the colonial conditions of modernity. Instead, this manifestation seems to have taken the course of behaving like a “multinational corporation,” and the dangers of this are yet to be seen.⁴⁵ According to some, this redefining of Europe as

⁴⁵ On the new development of museums that have appropriated the practice from multi-national corporations and its dangers see more in Sloni Mathur: 2005.

the primary *habitus* of the modern can only be deconstructed through its disturbance as a center, through new critical biennials and art production in the so-called margins. The valuable lesson on the role of museums and the practice of modernism is given by Preziosi: “The modernist conflation of aesthetics and ethics

has historically entailed the kind of social dream work that has resulted in not a few holocausts, and by no means only in Europe” (2003:141) and this is not to be forgotten. The task of critical analysis is to reveal the existing practice of exclusions on different levels that are still taking place as part of the exhibition-making of *documenta*. From their side, the ghosts in the pictures are there to remind us of the constant presence of death, but also to question whose deaths are we trying to forget. As we have seen, the traces are there to disturb dominant (masculine) narratives, and to reveal the continuous practice of exclusionary politics, something we will pay a closer attention to in the next chapter.