

Ghostly Women, Faithful Sons

by Vesna Madžoski

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.”¹ 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.”² 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.”³

Formulated 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.⁴

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.⁵ 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 a particular form: in the form of spectacle. According to Guy Debord, the function of spectacle is “to use culture to bury all historical memory.”⁶ 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 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.⁷

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.

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.⁸ 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,”⁹ and shows a large crowd of young 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."¹⁰ The second photograph shows five men in suits in their 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."



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

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, "explosive" and "noisy" image of an undifferentiated group of men and women in the first photograph to a calm, "monumentalized" group of five men in 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 group of people present 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."¹¹

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 noted, "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."¹²

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 in which the works were made. Nevertheless, the catalogue from 1972 looks like something of which, at least conceptually, any exhibition-maker of today could be proud: 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. 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 works that truly stand 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* (1968) and *documenta 5* (1972).

Filming the Shift: Jef Cornelis' Documentaries

The rich and impressive body of work of Jef Cornelis has yet to be evaluated and analyzed. In the period between 1963 and 1998, he was primarily active as a director and scriptwriter 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 filmmaking in 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.¹³ 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.¹⁴ Nevertheless, after filming *documenta 5*, Cornelis decided to stop filming the “art world.”¹⁵

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, fifty-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 that, 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 contemporary art production, this fact has a specific significance.¹⁶

Although being dissatisfied 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 appearance of the new forms of art 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 inform us about the necessary shifts that would have to happen in the galleries, and the need for collectors to change their attitude towards what is considered art. We hear that New York-based Pace 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 was to be considered art, and what the criteria should be by which this was 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 cash register. The final sequence of the film provides us with Cornelis' 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:

..."Documenta 5" in 1972 is known in 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...

The first impression of this fifty-five-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.¹⁷ Following the didactic character of the exhibition, the film imitates this and presents itself as an educational piece with voiceover narration. In comparison to the previous film, with its multiple actors and voices, in the film about *documenta 5* we are left with only three of them: we see and hear the artists, curators, and gallerists.

The main organizer of *documenta 5*, the Secretary General Harald Szeemann, talks about the importance of audience attendance, his acceptance of power and responsibility, and his view that subversive artists can only work in the context of a museum.¹⁸ Daniel Buren, one of the participating artists, openly reflects on the new position of Szeemann and calls it "the exhibition of the exhibition," or the construction of the show as a 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. There are no contradictory

voices from the artists who had previously opposed the “invasion” of American art, which was fully institutionalized within the contemporary art system during this short four-year span.

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. According to Cornelis himself, 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.”¹⁹ One of the main contributions of *documenta 5* in developments within the international 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.”²⁰ This would not be the case anymore. 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 a “comprehensive council.”²¹

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 echo 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 noted by Gerd Gemunden, embracing Westernization in the 1960s, and specifically US popular culture, was 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.²² 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. Nevertheless, the exhibition as a spectacle seems to have been there from the first

edition of *documenta*; hence the remaining question will be for us to try to define what the real novelty was at *documenta 5*.

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 return to the photographs in order to summarize the conclusions that I have reached in the meantime. Indeed, I developed a further understanding of the shift that happened between those two editions, and definitively confirmed that the message addressed to Professor Bode was an ironic one. Nevertheless, following Roland Barthes’ advice on how to gain access to pictures, we should look for the counter-narrative, defined by Rosalind Krauss as “a seemingly aimless set of details that throws the forward drive of diegesis into reverse.”²³ Looking back at the photographs, I asked myself if there was something that still escaped the narrativization, something that still struck 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*”?²⁴

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 in 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 history of *documenta*. The female purse undoubtedly brings us to someone who is missing, who is absent from this perfect picture—a woman. It opens up questions of the total absence or invisibility of women from the narrative of *documenta*. From the other side, the book opens up 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 posed them in the framework of one of the recent editions of this manifestation, *documenta 12*, which took place in 2007. As the discussion has already brought us to the question of what the real changes were at *documenta 5*, I suggest here that we take a look at the *punctum* in the second photograph.

Generation Change at *documenta 5*

The discussion about *documenta 5* seems to encapsulate the conclusion that Hans Belting offered regarding the history of art and modernism, underlining two major events 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 twentieth-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.²⁵

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."²⁶ 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 a few years earlier: "Technical media (photography) and *dada*, with their social satire, remained largely in the background,"²⁷ and there were neither German-Jewish artists nor politically engaged art from the Weimar Republic.²⁸

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 had come to take this manifestation into a new era. Hence, we should not be surprised by the "chaos" displayed at *documenta 4*, when the politics of exhibiting shifted from an overview of the old to showing the new, or the most recent art production, as it opened amid the student revolts and political turmoil of the Cold War:

Visitors on the opening day had to brave chanting demonstrators and a red flag, or they got embroiled in discussions on the portico steps. [...] And yet Arnold Bode as director of the show

seemed a bit lost amid all the color and diversity. [...] 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.²⁹

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."³⁰ 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.³¹

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."³² 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.³³

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 that did not consult with him about what work to show, "but instead dictate to me what will be shown."³⁴ On May 12, 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 choose the way his/her work is exhibited in a space, the right to agree on or to 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.³⁵

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 a particular atmosphere as well. On this particular stage, Arnold Bode "deployed compelling spatial situations to elicit an emotional response from the audience—a method popularly applied in Baroque theater."³⁶ 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 (liberal) capitalism.

At the time, this shift was perceived as the "Americanization" of 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."³⁷ 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."³⁸ 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."³⁹ 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."⁴⁰ In the meantime, the "liberal" in liberal arts began to mean the liberal market, and it was precisely this shift that was staged at *documenta* 5. Having no problem with the corporate influence and funding, Harald Szeemann simply applied the same logic to all future exhibitions he produced. If the *documenta* of 1968 "highlighted New York as the new art metropolis,"⁴¹ its next edition confirmed a new canon, "indisputably a canon oriented toward America, one fixated on the media and compatible with discourses."⁴² As it seems, the faithful sons had learned their lesson.

The Woman Without a Shadow

The question of the obscured history of women in *documenta*'s 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 12.⁴³ In Jef Cornelis' *documentaries*, there is only one short moment when we encounter a female face, that of the art dealer Denise René 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 from 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.⁴⁴ 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. Buergel 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.⁴⁵

One of the first differences one can notice when comparing this documentary to the ones made by Jef Cornelis is the 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 on 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. They show us small wooden models of exhibition spaces, around which they spend most of their time arranging artworks, resembling children playing with a doll-house. We see Mr. Buerger 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 lesser value and hence less pay given to female workers as compared 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 decided to offer us another source through which to "remember" this show—a luxurious photo book, *Bilderbuch*. Although the show itself was for the most part overcrowded with 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. Buerger as exhibition guides. On page 201, we even see two cleaning ladies vacuuming and washing the gigantic floor of *documenta's* new "crystal" building.

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, it 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 publicly available 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 every edition since 1968. According to her, she has never "experienced such a relaxing exhibition as *documenta 12*."⁴⁶ What became interesting here were the particular positions and behavior promoted by *documenta* officials through the publicity of this interview.

We read about the enjoyment Mrs. Lippitz has every five 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."⁴⁷ The only demand on the consumer constructed through *documenta* is one of

the extensive 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."⁴⁸ 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."⁴⁹ In this imaginary world where all the differences were rendered and domesticated, every citizen believed to be its master.

If we recall 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 1,001 antique chairs imported from China as part of an artist's concept is not an extravagance of luxury, 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 were. 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 was not interpreted as a form of exoticism, but rather as a valid curatorial concept.⁵⁰ The strategy Mrs. Lippitz used in order to fully understand Mr. Buerger's view on art was to read all of the articles and to 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, causes 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.

* In a slightly modified form, this analysis was originally published as a chapter entitled: "Curating *documenta*: The Spectacle of Capitalism" in Vesna Madžoski, *DE CVRATORIBVS. The Dialectics of Care and Confinement*, Atropos Press, New York, Dresden, 2013.

Notes

1 Angela Dimitrakaki, "Art and Politics Continued: Avant-garde, Resistance and the Multitude in Documenta 11," *Historical Materialism* 11.3, 2003, pp. 153.

2 Christoph Lange, "The Spirit of Documenta. Art-Philosophical Reflections," in *50 Jahre / Years Documenta, 1955-2005*, vol. 2: *Archive in Motion, documenta manual*, Steidl Verlag, Göttingen, 2005, pp. 14-15.

3 Michael Glasmeier, "Paths to Discretion," in *50 Jahre / Years Documenta, 1955-2005*, vol. 1: *Discrete Energies*, Steidl Verlag, Göttingen, 2005, p. 193.

4 Roger M. Buerger, "The Origins," in *50 Jahre / Years Documenta, 1955-2005*, vol. 2: *Archive in Motion, documenta Manual*, Steidl Verlag, Göttingen, 2005, p. 176. The quote within the quote is by Federal President Theodor Heuss here.

5 Walter Grasskamp, "Degenerate Art and Documenta I: Modernism Ostracized and Disarmed," in *Museum Culture: Histories, Discourses, Spectacles*, Routledge, London, 1994, pp. 165.

6 Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Hobgoblin Press, Canberra, 2002, p. 192.

7 Emphasis in the original, *Ibid.*, p. 29.

8 Lothar Orzechowski, *Arnold Bode: Documenta Kassel: Essays*, Stadtsparkasse, Kassel, 1986.

9 "Protestaktion anlässlich der Presskonferenz zur documenta 4, 1968" in *Ibid.*, p. 24.

10 "PROF. BODE! WIR BLINDEN DANKEN IHNEN FÜR DIESE SCHÖNE AUSSTELLUNG" in *Ibid.*, p. 24.

11 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Vintage Classics, London, 2000, p. 19.

12 Lutz Jahre, "Curators and Catalogues in the Documenta Reading Room," in *50 Jahre / Years Documenta, 1955-2005*, vol. 2: *Archive in Motion, documenta Manual*, pp. 46-47.

13 Koen Brams and Dirk Pültau. 2003. "Television makes things disappear. They slip from memory. Interview with Jef Cornelis about his early films for television." Jan van Eyck Academy Website. Accessed 17.11.2007. http://www.janvaneyck.nl/0_3_3_research_info/cornelis_interview1.html

14 About his first encounter with the Venice Biennale 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." In Koen Brams and Dirk Pültau. 2003. "Le spectacle, mon dieu. Interview with Jef Cornelis on his return to the visual arts and *Little Sparta, et in arcadia ego*." Jan van Eyck Academy Website. Accessed 17.11.2007. http://www.janvaneyck.nl/0_3_3_research_info/cornelis_interview2.html

15 "I dropped out in 1972. That was pretty radical. I still went to exhibitions 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. *Ibid.*

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

17 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.

18 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, *The Curators Egg: The Evolution of the Museum Concept from the French Revolution to the Present Day*, One-Off Press, London, 2000.

19 Koen Brams and Dirk Pültau. 2003. "Le spectacle, mon dieu. Interview with Jef Cornelis on his return to the visual arts and *Little Sparta*, et in *arcadia ego*."

20 Ronald Nachtigäller, "Performing the Zeitgeist. A Roundup of Fifty Years of Staged Art," in *50 Jahre / Years Documenta, 1955-2005*, vol. 2: *Archive in Motion, documenta manual*, p. 26.

21 Szeemann was appointed "Secretary General" (a 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" in Federica Martini and Vittoria Martini, "Questions of Authorship in Biennial Curating," Marieke van Hal, Solveig Ovstebo, Elena Filipovic eds., *The Biennial Reader*, Hatje Cantz Verlag, Berlin, 2010, p. 265.

22 Gerd Gemunden, "Nostalgia for the Nation: Intellectuals and National Identity in Unified Germany," *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, Dartmouth College, Hanover and London, 1999, pp. 120-133.

23 Rosalind Krauss, "Reinventing the Medium," *Critical Inquiry* 25.2, 1990, p. 298.

24 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, p.26.

25 Hans Belting, *Art History after Modernism*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2003, p. 37.

26 *Ibid.*

27 *Ibid.* p. 39.

28 For more on this, see: Philipp Gutbrod, "Werner Haftmann's Introduction to the D2 Catalogue," in *50 Jahre / Years Documenta, 1955-2005*, vol. 2: *Archive in Motion, documenta manual*, p. 193.

29 Ronald Nachtigäller, "Performing the Zeitgeist. A Roundup of Fifty Years of Staged Art," in *50 Jahre / Years Documenta, 1955-2005*, vol. 2: *Archive in Motion, documenta manual*, p. 29-30.

30 Friedhelm Scharf and Gisela Schirmer, "Off the Wall: Artists' Refusal and Rejections: A History of Conflict," *50 Jahre / Years Documenta, 1955-2005*, vol.2: *Archive in Motion, documenta manual*, p. 104.

31 Martin Engler, "Twilight of the Gods: Documenta in Times of Change," in *50 Jahre / Years Documenta, 1955-2005*, vol. 2: *Archive in Motion, documenta manual*, p. 234.

32 Ronald Nachtigäller, "Performing the Zeitgeist. A Roundup of Fifty Years of Staged Art," p. 30.

33 Gabriele Mackert, "At Home in Contradictions: Harald Szeemann's Documenta," in *50 Jahre / Years Documenta, 1955-2005*, vol. 2: *Archive in Motion, documenta manual*, p. 254.

34 Friedhelm Scharf and Gisela Schirmer, "Off the Wall: Artists' Refusal and Rejections: A History of Conflict," p. 99.

35 *Ibid.*

36 Agnes Prus, "Theater and the Documenta," in *50 Jahre / Years Documenta, 1955-2005*, vol. 2: *Archive in Motion, documenta manual*, p. 78.

37 *Ibid.* p. 119.

38 *Ibid.* p. 123.

39 *Ibid.*

40 Philipp Gutbrod, "Werner Haftmann's Introduction to the D2 Catalogue," p. 196.

41 Martin Engler, "Twilight of the Gods: Documenta in Times of Change," in *50 Jahre / Years Documenta, 1955-2005*, vol. 2: *Archive in Motion, documenta Manual*, p. 235.

42 Michael Glasmeier "Paths to Discretion," p. 181.

43 Only twice has a woman been appointed as the main curator—Catherine David for *documenta X* in 1997, and Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev for *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?"

44 Julia Benkert, *Das Wunder von Kassel*, 2007.

45 This "technical" problem seems to be 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.

46 *documenta 12 Official Website*, <http://www.documenta12.de>, for the original German version of the interview see: <http://www.documenta12.de/index.php?id=1214>.

47 Donald Preziosi, *The Brain of the Earth's Body: Art, Museums, and the Phantasms of Modernity*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2003, p. 111.

48 *Ibid.*, p. 98.

49 *Ibid.*

50 The elitist concept hit its peak with the introduction of the chef Ferran Adrià into 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 Buergel in Kassel and offered airfare, along with a meal at El Bulli." "Critics Weigh In on Documenta 12 and Art Basel; Ferran Adrià's Role in Documenta 12." *Artforum Official Website*. June 18, 2007. International News Digest. Accessed 23.10.2007. <http://artforum.com/news/id=15482>

Captions

1 Scan of page 24 from Lothar Orzechowski, Arnold Bode: *Documenta Kassel: Essays*, 1986, *documenta 4*, 1968, Photograph by Heinz Pauly © documenta Archiv, *documenta 5*, 1972, Bode Nachlaß © documenta Archiv

2 Scan of page 221 from *d12 Bilderbuch*, Kassel 2007, Photograph by Geneviève Frisson, © Geneviève Frisson

Vesna Madžoski is a professor of critical theory at the Master Artistic Research program of the Royal Academy of Art in The Hague, The Netherlands. Based in Amsterdam since 2003, she has initiated and organized various contemporary art events. Since 2006, she has been a member of the Amsterdam-based artists' initiative Public Space With A Roof, with which she has produced numerous exhibitions and projects in Amsterdam and internationally. As a lecturer, she has given talks on various topics related to contemporary art in different venues and occasions and has published numerous texts and essays in various international publications. She was one of the editors of the Belgrade magazine *Prelom – Journal for Images and Politics*. In the last ten years, her research has focused on the analysis of the global art system, while her PhD dissertation *DE CVRATORIBVS. The Dialectics of Care and Confinement* (2013, Atropos Press) traced the changes in the practice of curatorship in post-war Europe and the consequences this had on both an aesthetic and political level.