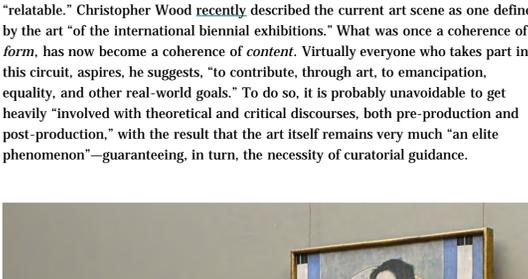


C. G. BOERNER

DEALERS IN FINE ART SINCE 1826

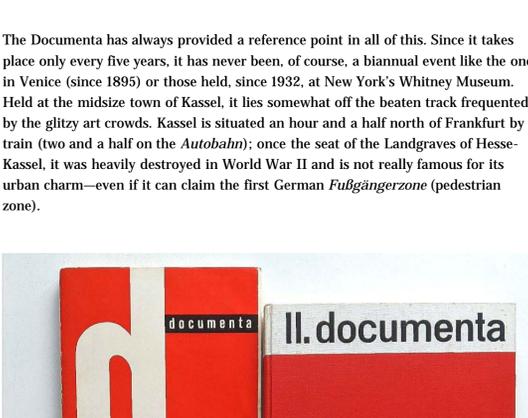
Distraction / Abwechslung
26 July 2022

The days when certain artistic styles defined an epoch, a century, a decade or, more recently, any brief moment in the ongoing search for the next new thing, seem to be well and truly over. The transition between styles—from Abstract Expressionism to Pop to Conceptualism to Minimalism to New Figuration to Post-Minimalism, and so on—is a thing of the past. If everything new has already been tried and is ultimately accepted and subsumed by the powers of the market, we just have to assume that anything goes.



view of the fifth floor in New York's Whitney Museum, showing a section of *Quiet as It's Kept*, the 2022 edition of the Whitney Biennial

Yet even in the midst of our present aesthetic free-for-all, there still exists a common denominator that enables curators around the globe to arrange exhibitions wherever they are invited, and collectors, jetting between fairs, to buy work they find "relatable." Christopher Wood recently described the current art scene as one defined by the art "of the international biennial exhibitions." What was once a coherence of *form*, has now become a coherence of *content*. Virtually everyone who takes part in this circuit, aspires, he suggests, "to contribute, through art, to emancipation, equality, and other real-world goals." To do so, it is probably unavoidable to get heavily "involved with theoretical and critical discourses, both pre-production and post-production," with the result that the art itself remains very much "an elite phenomenon"—guaranteeing, in turn, the necessity of curatorial guidance.



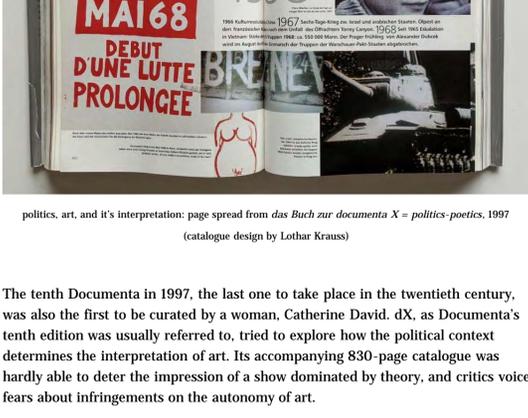
sometimes, older art might also need explanation: a visitor with an audio guide in front of Gustav Klimt, *Margarethe Stenborough-Wittgenstein*, 1905, as seen during a recent trip to the Alte Pinakothek, Munich

The Documenta has always provided a reference point in all of this. Since it takes place only every five years, it has never been, of course, a biennial event like the ones in Venice (since 1895) or those held, since 1932, at New York's Whitney Museum. Held at the midsize town of Kassel, it lies somewhat off the beaten track frequented by the glitzy art crowds. Kassel is situated an hour and a half north of Frankfurt by train (two and a half on the *Autobahn*); once the seat of the Landgraves of Hesse-Kassel, it was heavily destroyed in World War II and is not really famous for its urban charm—even if it can claim the first German *Fußgängerzone* (pedestrian zone).



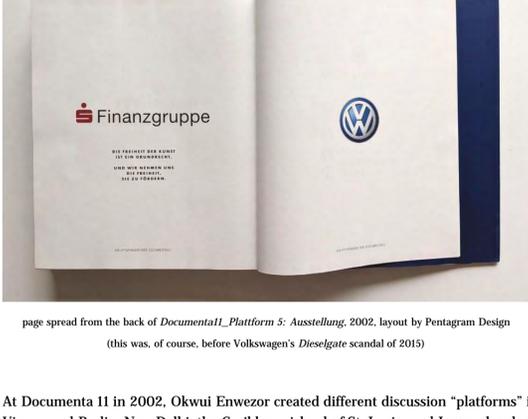
instagrammable from the very beginning: the catalogues for Documenta 1 through 4, 1955–68 (could it also be that Arnould Bode, chief curator of the show's first three iterations and responsible for all design-related aspects, including the layout of the catalogues, had a color preference?)

From the time the exhibition premiered in 1955 through its first eight iterations, the only significant "location" close to Kassel was the inner-German border, which was, in fact, one of the reasons for the first organizers to choose Kassel to begin with. Documenta was meant to demonstrate to the East-German regime beyond the Iron Curtain that culture in the West was not only going to make up for the "lost years" of Nazism, but also to open up and welcome the influences coming from the *Schutzmacht* (protective power) across the Atlantic. Accordingly, Pop art affirmed its new dominance at the fourth Documenta in 1968.



cover of the binder-format catalogue for *documenta 5*, 1969, designed by Ed Ruscha

Generous public funding also provided ample room for experimentation. Harald Szeemann was able to display his astute aesthetic sensibilities, first presented in modest form in his now-mythical exhibition *When Attitudes Become Form* at the Kunsthalle Bern in 1969, on a much grander scale three years later at *documenta 5*.

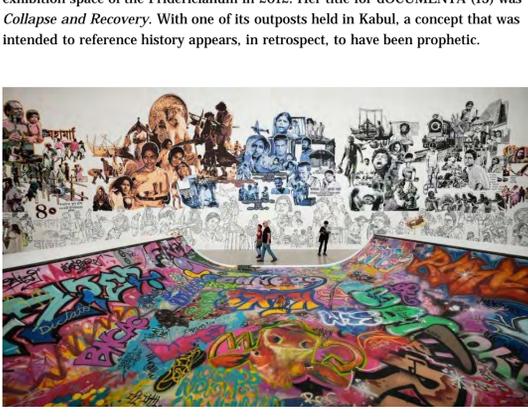


politics, art, and it's interpretation: page spread from *das Buch zur documenta X = politics-poetics*, 1997 (catalogue design by Lothar Krauss)

The tenth Documenta in 1997, the last one to take place in the twentieth century, was also the first to be curated by a woman, Catherine David. *documenta X*'s tenth edition was usually referred to, tried to explore how the political context determines the interpretation of art. Its accompanying 830-page catalogue was hardly able to deter the impression of a show dominated by theory, and critics voiced fear about infringements on the autonomy of art.

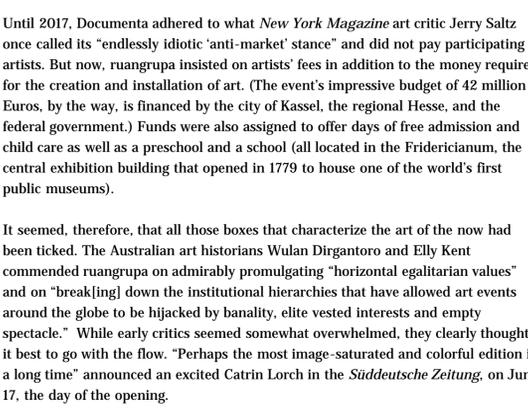


page spread from the front of *Documenta 11, Plattform 5: Ausstellung*, 2002, layout by Pentagram Design



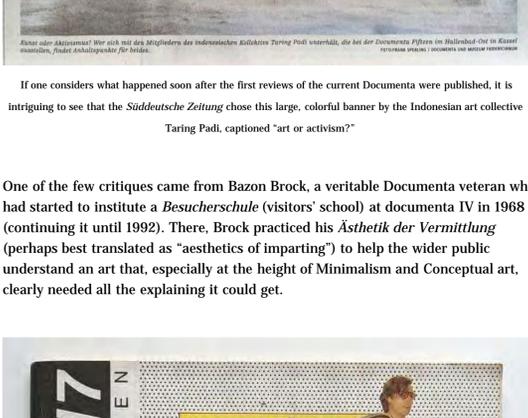
page spread from the back of *Documenta 11, Plattform 5: Ausstellung*, 2002, layout by Pentagram Design (this was, of course, before Volkswagen's *Dieselgate* scandal of 2015)

At Documenta 11 in 2002, Okwui Enwezor created different discussion "platforms" in Vienna and Berlin, New Delhi, the Caribbean island of St. Lucia, and Lagos ahead of the main event. This ultimately broke open the self-referential limitations of what curators Laszlo Gloyer and Kasper König had somewhat ironically labeled *Westkunst* in their influential 1981 Cologne exhibition: an art that projects itself as being of universal value but is, in reality, representative merely of a strictly confined region of the world that for decades had been preoccupied with its own Cold War polarities.



Bactrian princess figures, Central Asia, ca. 2,500 to 1,500 BCE (the accompanying text in the catalogue describes their distinct "objecthood" and points out that their size equals that of our smartphones)

Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev discovered the power of the past by installing mysterious, four-thousand-year old Bactrian princess figures from Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Northern Afghanistan as energy batteries and the conceptual heart of the central exhibition space of the Fridericianum in 2012. Her title for DOCUMENTA (13) was *Collapse and Recovery*. With one of its outposts held in Kabul, a concept that was intended to reference history appears, in retrospect, to have been prophetic.

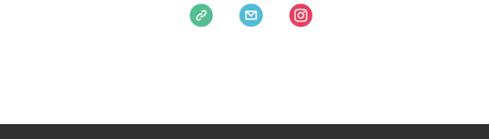


a half-pipe for skateboarders created by Baan Noong Collaborative Arts and Culture from Thailand, together with a wall installation by Britto Arts Trust from Dhaka, Bangladesh, at documenta Halle, Kassel, 2022

DoCUMENtA FiFTEEN was clearly meant to follow these recent trajectories and, possibly, to represent the ultimate triumph of the emancipated art of the global present. Even if one acknowledges that the "finding committee" tasked with determining the event's next director consisted of consummate art-world insiders hailing from Berlin, Eindhoven, Frankfurt, London, New Dheli, São Paulo, and Singapore, it was, nonetheless, a daring move on their behalf to hand this year's baton over to *ruangrupa*, an Indonesian artists' collective. The words *ruang* and *rupa* mean "room" and "form" in Indonesian, hinting at the "process-orientated" aspects of artmaking favored by the group. *Lumbung*, the motto chosen by the group for DoCUMENtA FiFTEEN, encapsulated the show's central concern: equality. The word describes the barn or shed Indonesian farmers use as common storage for rice, with those enjoying richer harvests sharing the surplus with those who have harvested less. Consequentially, the group reached out to other collectives, ultimately counting 14 from such far-flung places as Bangladesh, Denmark, Cuba, and New Zealand. Each of these invited other artists and, in the end, no one was really sure how many artists ultimately participated; the final counts reported by the press ranged between 1,500 and 1,700.

Until 2017, Documenta adhered to what *New York Magazine* art critic Jerry Saltz once called its "endlessly idiotic 'anti-market' stance" and did not pay participating artists. But now, *ruangrupa* insisted on artists' fees in addition to the money required for the creation and installation of art. (The event's impressive budget of 42 million Euros, by the way, is financed by the city of Kassel, the regional Hesse, and the federal government.) Funds were also assigned to offer days of free admission and child care as well as a preschool and a school (all located in the Fridericianum, the central exhibition building that opened in 1779 to house one of the world's first public museums).

It seemed, therefore, that all those boxes that characterize the art of the now had been ticked. The Australian art historians Wulan Dirgantoro and Ely Kent commended *ruangrupa* on admirably promulgating "horizontal egalitarian values" and on "break[ing] down the institutional hierarchies that have allowed art events around the globe to be hijacked by banality, elite vested interests and empty spectacle." While early critics seemed somewhat overwhelmed, they clearly thought it best to go with the flow. "Perhaps the most image-saturated and colorful edition in a long time" announced an excited Catrin Lorch in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, on June 17, the day of the opening.



If one considers what happened soon after the first reviews of the current Documenta were published, it is intriguing to see that the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* chose this large, colorful banner by the Indonesian art collective Taring Padi, captioned "art or activism?"

One of the few critiques came from Bazon Brock, a veritable Documenta veteran who had started to institute a *Besucherschule* (visitors' school) at *documenta IV* in 1968 (continuing it until 1992). There, Brock practiced his *Ästhetik der Vermittlung* (perhaps best translated as "aesthetics of imparting") to help the wider public understand an art that, especially at the height of Minimalism and Conceptual art, clearly needed all the explaining it could get.

brochure of Bazon Brock's *Besucherschule d7: The Ugliness of the Beautiful*, 1982 (makes one miss the clothes, hair, and glasses of the eighties!)

Brock is not only a dapper dresser, he is also, while being an attentive observer of all things contemporary, an unapologetic Romantic (with a capital "R"). He maintains a belief in the power of the individual author/artist. He sees art's autonomy, which manages to assert itself without recourse to church, state, capital, or any other form of authority, as the greatest cultural achievement of the last five centuries. As he explained in an interview with the German public radio station *Deutschlandfunk*, this tradition has been—finally—put to an end by DoCUMENtA FiFTEEN, a process that he provocatively describes as "the liquidation of the freedom of art in the name of artistic freedom." Therefore, if art is meant to represent the current state of the world, then the current show, with its culturalistic group-rule, accomplishes this aim unreservedly and deserves to be called "the best Documenta of all times."

Inherent in all this, however, was an enormous risk, since the one thing *ruangrupa*'s "lumbung framework" was not able to provide was an adequate mechanism to distribute risk and responsibility. If one acknowledges that all cultural institutions, especially a publicly funded one like Documenta, "are notoriously risk-averse, with the primary motivation being to avoid reputational damage" (Dirgantoro and Kelly), what happened next might perhaps best be described with the resonant German word *Super-GAU*, a term dating from the early years of nuclear power plants, with "GAU" standing for *Grösster Anzunehmender Unfall* (largest presumable accident). It describes nothing less but the terminal meltdown of a nuclear reactor. The day after its opening, DoCUMENtA FiFTEEN experienced its very own art-world version of Chernobyl or Fukushima.

... to be continued ...

