



Heather Mathews. *dOCUMENTA (13)*. Museum Fridericianum and other venues, Kassel: 9 June 2012 – 16 Sept. 2012. Brief description.

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Published on H-German (September, 2012)

Commissioned by Shannon Nagy

dOCUMENTA (13) both maintains and breaks from the conventions that have characterized the show in the past and manages, despite a typically vast scope, to evoke a cohesive sentiment across its exhibition spaces.

Every *documenta* comes with a little historical baggage. The first, in 1955, sought to record current art practice while reclaiming modernism from its condemnation by the Nazis; since the second show in 1958, *documenta* has focused on the present and the future, with occasional nods to historical influences. In recent years, there has been an emphasis on the theoretical and the political; this was true of Catherine David's work at *documenta X* in 1997 and Okwui Enwezor's at *documenta 11* in 2002. Perhaps in response to these approaches, the eleventh show, in 2007, curated by Roger Buergel and Ruth Noack, did not; in the press it was widely regarded as something of a non-event. Against this immediate backdrop, then, there was a subtle pressure on Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev to produce a more substantive show in 2012. She did so, in part, by delegating some of her authority to a curatorial board, "Agents," who helped to refine the concept and identify artists. This collaborative approach seems to have succeeded.

Like *documenta 11*, this year's exhibition diffuses the blockbuster effect somewhat by includ-

ing several remote events, held in Kabul/Bamiyan, Cairo/Alexandria, and Banff. This decentralized approach does not detract from the importance of Kassel as a central location; rather, it emphasizes the global nature of the issues and aesthetics addressed by its artists.

While it is difficult to discern a single theme from the enormous inventory of objects, installations, performances, and interventions, there are hints throughout. In the introduction to the *Guidebook*, Christov-Bakargiev writes, "Whatever is, is somewhere and somewhen."^[1] The artists, scientists, and theorists drawn together at *dOCUMENTA (13)* attempt to understand that *where* and *when*, often walking the line between history and memory, between personal and collective experience, in the process. In many cases, there is a distinct suggestion that these acts of locating and fixing what is, by nature, a multivalent thing or an ongoing occurrence, are counterintuitive, although not counterproductive.

On the first floor of the Fridericianum, the starting point of the exhibition, an glass-walled interior room functions as a museum within a museum. This so-called Brain of *dOCUMENTA (13)* contains artifacts and artworks that formed a basis for the thematic tendencies that underpin the show. It cycles between the ancient and the modern, even futuristic, from the theoretical to the

very material. It includes a selection of "Bactrian Princesses" of the late third and early second millennia BCE; still lifes by Giorgio Morandi and the objects on which they're based; Giuseppe Penone's river stone, twinned in a marble copy, or Sam Durant's hyper-realistically carved bag of marble powder. These and other works in the "Brain" address past and present, the experience of memory and its expression, but also materiality and iteration.

Time is also addressed from the standpoint of physics, as in the Feininger-like paintings of the physicist Konrad Zuse or in an installation of computers illustrating the quantum mechanics studied by the present-day physicist Anton Zeilinger. In a video about the birth of the universe, created for the planetarium in the Orangerie, Jeronimo Voss touches on quantum theory and the idea of the multiverse through the example of the Paris Commune, an event which, he suggests, is not singular, but infinite, and which has differing outcomes in each version. (The utopian aims of the Commune are addressed elsewhere in a video and installation by e-flux about the nature of money and barter economics). William Kentridge's animation/installation *The Refusal of Time* starts with a metronome, a discourse about early attempts to measure of the speed of light, coupled with imagery which suggests revolutions in both science and in society.

Afghanistan, host to one of dOCUMENTA (13)'s three outlying sites, is another subject common to a number of works in the exhibition. In diverse ways, they frame the impact of the war and call attention to the rebuilding Afghanistan's cultural life: in wartime and in the post-conflict future. Worldwide awareness of the Afghan situation—or lack of awareness, a looking without seeing—is addressed directly and with some humor in an enormous tapestry by Goshka Macuga, *Of what is, that it is; of what is not, that is not*. Hung against a curved wall in the Fridericianum, it depicts a group of artists and supporters in Kabul,

who stare out at the viewers gazing at them. In Kabul, in a similarly curved space in the Queen's Palace, the artist has installed another tapestry, this one with a crowd of onlookers gathered at the Fridericianum and gazing, in turn, at their Afghan audience. In each work, the signature building, the Fridericianum and the Queen's Palace, are transposed into the opposite scene, so that space and time bleed together across the two pieces. Kassel, shaped so deeply by war and by rebuilding sixty years ago, might see itself in the processes taking place in Kabul. The past of Kassel, and of Germany, is also expressly invoked by a number of dOCUMENTA (13)'s artists. Documentary notes and sketches from Horst Hoheisel's inverted fountain, a countermonument recalling the presence of National Socialism in Kassel, are included in the "Brain" in the Fridericianum. Gunnar Richter's slide- and document show on the Karlsau illustrates the changing role of the Cloister at Breitenau, long used as a prison and, by the Nazis, as a concentration camp. Susan Philipsz's haunting composition for strings, installed on the edge of the Hauptbahnhof, hangs in the air just adjacent to the platforms from which trains once rolled from Kassel to more distant camps. Finally, Dora García's ongoing performance piece, *Die Klau Mich Show*, has devoted at least one episode to *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, featuring a discussion between the historian Norbert Frei and the author Rudolf Kreis. These works—as well as the very thorough integration of the exhibition throughout the city of Kassel, weave the history of the place—Kassel, Germany, the world—into the larger narrative of time, history, and presence.

While works like these might be of most interest for Germanists, I want to close by mentioning a few works that I found particularly captivating for other reasons. Some are by more familiar names. Julie Mehretu's *Mogamma* (*A Painting in Four Parts*) in the documenta Halle is a series of enormous white fields covered with a dense web of linear structures and shapes, like a scrambled archaeological record of a city. Tacita Dean's in-

stallation of chalk drawings of the mountains and rivers outside Kabul, filling the foyer of a small nineteenth-century financial building, have a specificity of place but also a poetic, imprecise, quality, as if drawn from fading memories. Ken-tridge's enchanting video, with its silent film and stop animation, is absolutely engrossing in its illustration of the passage of time in personal, scientific, and possibly political metaphors. And then, finally, there were two site-specific works that made a particular, and oddly complementary, impression on me. First, the crumbling Huguenot House occupied by Theaster Gates and a team of young volunteers; second, the spic-and-span early twentieth-century office building transformed by Daniel Gustav Cramer and Haris Epaminonda. Gates links the Huguenot House with another building he's occupied in Chicago, moving found materials from each to the other. With old magazines, record album sleeves, and audio/video installations, he brings an echo of past and present African American culture into the nineteenth-century space, linking the two places and times. The jazz improvisations in the videos lend a living presence to the house, which has been stripped to the studs and is slowly taking on new form. It speaks of a past, but also about a cooperative present and future.

At the office building behind the Hauptbahnhof, on the other hand, process is completely hidden from sight. Every surface is smooth and perfect, every object, including Epaminonda's collages, pristine and placed just so. But in spite of the precision there are no conclusions to be drawn from the building's three stories of objects and images. It has the feel of a box of postcards and souvenirs retrieved from an aged relative's home, examined by the viewer closely but with no way to free the memories encased inside. With their use of the structures of the past--historic buildings within a city known for its distinct lack of prewar buildings--these two pieces encapsulate the overall spirit of the exhibition for me. Past and present, a suggestion of future, no definitive

meaning or lesson to be derived from either but an admonishment to look more closely at all of it. To avoid encountering potential copyright issues, I would like to include a single link to Universes in Universe's coverage of dOCUMENTA (13).[2]

Notes

[1]. Eva Scharrer, *dOCUMENTA (13) Katalog 3/3--Das Begleitbuch* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2012), 7.

[2]. Universes in Universe's coverage of dOCUMENTA (13) can be found here: http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/bien/documenta/2012/photo_tour.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
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Citation: Heather Mathews. Review of Heather Mathews. *dOCUMENTA (13)*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. September, 2012.

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