What Are the Lessons of documenta 12?

Reflections from the Viewpoint of a Postmodern Artist

"You arrive in the heart of Germany, just to read the word „art“ under your own shadow. „Du kommst zum Herzen Deutschlands, nur um das Wort Kunst unter deinem eigenen Schatten zu lesen.“ These German letters shine – with a knowing wink – at the visitor, who may well have made a long journey to come here, when he places himself in the cone of light of a stripped-down installation in the Neue Galerie, one of five exhibition locations. Even though this work by the Chilean artist Gonzalo Díaz is one of the few humorous and self-ironic contributions to the 100-Day Museum, this spectacle that takes place every five years in Kassel, Germany, presents itself nonetheless in a mostly light-hearted vein.

The exhibition program displayed in five main locations by the director, Roger M. Buergel and Ruth Noack, the exhibition’s curator and Buergel’s wife in one, is exceedingly complex. The two exhibition organizers present a reduced selection of 117 artistic positions from around the world with less than 500 works that are by no means limited to contemporary artists as far as historical depth is concerned, and that subtly seeks to direct the visitor’s gaze away from the established and rising stars of the international art scene. The show presents a wide spectrum of media, extending from a spatially integrated sculpture by Iole de Freitas to dance performances by Trisha Brown and Harun Farocki’s computer-based work that explores and interprets the 2006 Soccer World Championship Final in various modes of rendition. This show, the world’s largest exhibition of contemporary art, was elucidated with a few descriptive catch-words whose adequacy will be analysed in what follows.

Conflict Number One

The conflict in the Near East, „Conflict Number One“ in Roger M. Buergel’s view, turns up a number of times in the exhibition. Thus, the Palestinian artist Ahlam Shibli documents the fate of the Beduins living in the Israeli Negev Desert, after having been „transferred,“ i.e. forced, from their lands, in her subtle photo cycle, „Goter.“ The Austrian artist Peter Friedl makes his commentary on the conflict with a stuffed giraffe that died in 2002 in the Palestinian zoo of Qalqilyah of a panic attack it suffered when skirmishes erupted during the invasion of the Israeli Army. In his wall tapestry compositions of 2006, Abdoulaye Konaté combines the Israeli flag with the checked Palestinian headcloth and surrounds them with hundreds of so-called „gris-gris,“ stitched leather amulets for protection and good luck from Mali.
The Migration of Form

To be sure, the necessary background information for understanding the works is not accessible through the mere displaying of the works themselves. Quite the contrary, the 400-page catalog is indispensable. The catalog’s explanatory texts clarify the meaning of the term, „migration of form,”- elevated by Buergel has to the level of a programmatic statement – with respect to parts of the exhibition up to a point. Thus, the oldest work shown in Schloss Wilhelmshöhe, a Persian miniature painting dating from the 14th – 16th centuries, reveals Chinese styles of representation – an indication of cultural exchange during that period. But it is by no means clear how a “migration of form” is supposed to have taken place between the Persian forest landscape with a river flowing through it and the representations in its vicinity, such as a Hokusai wood-cut from 1835 consisting of a completely abstract, vertical pattern of stripes. However ambitious the curator team’s contraposition of works from different epochs and contexts may be, many of the intended connections between the mostly heterogenic works are neither formally nor conceptually evident. This holds for the exhibits in Schloss Wilhelmshöhe that are integrated into the existing collection of classical works, but also for presentations in the documenta hall, in which an approx. 200 year-old Persian carpet with a slightly abstract garden motif cannot be intelligibly placed even in a complementary relationship with Friedel’s giraffe or with a current sculpture installation by Cosima von Bonin.

A Major Exhibition With No Form

By no means can one agree with Roger M. Buergel when he coyly maintains that „this major exhibition has no form.“ The exhibition spaces in the Fridericianum, in the documenta hall, the Neue Galerie and Schloss Wilhelmshöhe do indeed have a form, that of the impressive design of the exhibit rooms. These present themselves either as bright and colorful, or dark and cave-like, sometimes with or without a garish carpet, and thus depart from the classical presentation in the White Cube. But an implicit question imposes itself on one in connection with this presentation and its subtle correspondences as to whether the curator is in fact acting as a facilitator here, or is celebrating his own entrée as an artist, or rather as an art-space designer. The fifth exhibition location, the temporary pavilion in the idyllic Auepark, demonstrates a complete failure of design intuition combined with a lapse into formal contingency. Instead of responding to the migration of form evident in the park itself – after all, the grove is an indecisive hybrid between a French park and an English garden – an ugly hall construction has been planted in front of the baroque Orangerie, as if its purpose was to block the feudal palace’s absolutistic view over the expanse of the park for the 100 days. Originally conceived as halls flooded with light, the transparent sides had to be covered on the side facing the sun, and huge air conditioning units – no trace of green sustainability-awareness here - were needed to rescue the complex from heat collapse. How paradoxical: To make the critical artistic confrontation with the excesses of modernity at least barely endurable as far as indoor climate is concerned, the documenta makes its “contribution” to global warming with a senseless waste of energy – and that with the support of the Swedish auto maker, Saab.

Not a Cabinet of Curiosities, but Creation of Public Space
What strikes one most is the overwhelmingly museum-like appearance of this important exhibition. The few works in the outdoors area are more like settings and only rarely invite the visitor to real interaction and communication with public space. One significant exception may well be the 1001 Chinese from different milieux whom Ai Weiwei invited to Kassel in five stages, in which each group was to summarize their impressions of the temporary “world art city” in northern Hessen for a week.

Documenta Magazines

The documenta magazines offer a much more open and pluralized perspective. With them, a publication project was created that includes a kaleidoscope of about 90 print and online magazines from the entire world, with different approaches to the developing discussion of the three leitmotifs. Akhbar Al-Adab (Cairo, starting in 1993), Amkenah (Alexandria, starting in 1999), Masharef founded in 1995 by Emile Habiby in Haifa) and Naqd (Algiers, starting in 1991) represent the Arab-speaking world. The Israeli magazine Studio, that has appeared in Tel Aviv since 1987, and New York’s English-language quarterly Bidoun, a platform and forum for discussions on art and culture from the Middle East, as well as the architecture forum ArchNet (http://archnet.org), founded by the Agha Khan and administered in cooperation with MIT and Harvard University deserve mention here. Together with the other magazines, discussions were held on the three leitmotivs; „is modernity our antiquity?“, „what is mere life?“ and the question aimed at the subject of education, „what is to be done?“ Fouad Asfour, the editor in charge of the Arabic magazines, points out that global exchange and interconnectedness was nothing new for most of the magazines. A case in point; Daho Djerbal (Naqd) and Desiderio Navarro from the Cuban magazine Criterios had already exchanged contributions with each other prior to the magazine platform. Now and then members of the editorial boards question the supposed topicality of the issue. Thus, the magazine Al-Adab, that has appeared in Beirut since 1952, had already published an attractive issue focusing on the theme of modernity. The level of discussion of the publication network is reflected in the three magazines with their titles, Modernity?, Life! and Education that were published in advance. Historical retrospectives are present in the Arabic contributions. For example, one article traces the development of the Moroccan magazine Souffles, that had become an important intellectual organ between 1966 and 1971 and had helped Moroccan poets find their own voices after the country’s emergence into independence. But the primary focus of its articles is on current societal issues. Adania Shibli makes use of her stopped watch as a metaphor for her desire to forget a harassing border check at the Lydd airport. Toni Chakar presents his depressing impressions of the most recent war in Lebanon. For him, both the Israeli army and the Hisbollah fighters have become victims of modernity – not least through the cold geometrization of space resulting from the use of maps. Hassan Khan takes a disillusioning look at Egypt’s revolutionary currents, taking the book of Arwa Saleh, an activist of the student movement of the early 1970’ who took her own life in 1997, as his point of departure. According to Saleh, the revolution is sinking into a kitschy sentimentality and the revolutionaries are declining into „egocentric romantics in love with nothing but ideas.“ Fortunately, the magazines’ creators do not always restrict themselves to the somewhat obsolete topics and sometimes break through the corset of leitmotifs in a self-critical fashion. If one takes a closer, more precise look and investigates Mark Lewis’ concept of modernity as the result of a „pure
contingency” and a “complete secularization brought about by capital,” more exactly, the question arises as to whether one can speak about a completely secularized society anywhere today. East Germany belongs to the very few empty spaces in the global patchwork of religious denominations, an area that has perhaps not only lost religion to a great extent, but also the spirituality bound up with it after having endured two dictatorships. But it is this very metaphysical homelessness that allows Giorgio Agamben’s figure of the disfranchised homo sacer to become thinkable at all. But it fails to function in many places for the very reason that, in spite of all earthly misery, human beings still have their heavenly escape route to paradise.

The anti-capitalist focus of the leitmotifs, however legitimate it may be, thus distorts one’s view of current developments that have recently fundamentally altered the aesthetic fabric through its lack of conceptual clarity and its claim to sovereign authority of interpretation. Thus, Ines Doujak legitimately refers to the neocolonial practices of biopiracy. But here, one all too easily loses view of the fact that it was scientific disciplines such as molecular biology that were decisively involved in the final downfall of the positivistic paradigm in the first place. Cellular processes, but also communication in networks such as the Internet can no longer be dealt with monocausally. It is much rather the case that these developments have contributed to a new relational understanding of the world as a complex interweaving of relationships. If there is to be a new edition of the magazine project for the next documenta – and this would be most desirable – then the issue can be discussed further. For starters, though, we may anticipate the web journal announced at the start of the documenta that is to contain about 300 contributions from the magazines, available online and free of charge around the world.

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