

Insa Verbeck

Improving, Representing, and Imagining – documenta’s changing Relation to the World

Right from its beginning documenta was orientated to the world. After the years of cultural isolation under the Nazi-Regime Arnold Bode and Werner Haftmann wanted to acquaint the German public with the development of art that had taken place outside of fascist Germany. But in fact Haftmann’s ambition reached much further: He did not simply want to show foreign art in Germany, but tried to prove his theory of “Abstraktion als Weltsprache” that formed the ideological underpinning of documenta 1 to 3. Haftmann believed that in abstraction he had found a common denominator of the art of all cultures and all times. As a visual equivalent to Esperanto it would allow all nations and cultures to enter into a polylogue, eventually fostering peace and mutual understanding.

What is less known is that for documenta 5 Harald Szeemann and Jean Christophe Ammann initially wanted to propose a similar concept, not conceiving Abstraction but Realism as a universal phenomenon linking the art of the whole world. Although Szeemann and Ammann gave up on this idea, Realism figured prominently in d5 - if not as a common denominator of the world’s art, at least as a key that allowed to systematize and compare major parts of the contemporary art production. This concept – representing the art of the world under a certain viewpoint deemed to be particularly relevant or instructive – is traceable up to documenta 10, where the exhibition as an institution underwent a paradigmatic shift. Instead of representing the world’s art, Catherine David chose to represent the world via art. More than in art itself d10 was interested in rendering visible the political, sociological or anthropological discourses that form our conception and hence our representation of the world.

Okwui Enwezor reacted to this shift by making full use of the possibilities provided by David’s radical gesture. With his five platforms he further extended documenta’s grasp: Physically by holding four of these platforms in other parts of the world, and conceptually insofar as the actual exhibition constituted only one fifth of documenta 11 that otherwise consisted of formats like symposia or talks where matters of postcolonialism and globalization were negotiated. Roger Buergel in turn distanced himself from David’s proposition by ostentatiously denying that art must be understood in relation to the world. Instead he proposed his idea of the Migration of Form – an almost reactionary concept that radically decontextualized artworks in order to recompose them along the principle of formal analogies.

In 2012, under Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, documenta’s relation to the world underwent another radical change. While d10 to d12 analyzed what the world is, d13 speculated on what the world would be, if we rethought the premises and assumptions that are constitutive for our perception and understanding of

Situating Global Art

the world. So instead of representing the world, d13 was interested in imagining or creating other worlds – in the activity of “worlding”, as Christov-Bakargiev called the process of conceiving new worlds by taking radically new viewpoints. Examining the most significant documenta-exhibitions my talk will scrutinize how the conception and representation of “the world” has changed over the last six decades – the very same period in which the medium of the perennial exhibition has itself become a global phenomenon.

Insa Verbeck received her Master’s degree from Freie Universität Berlin for a thesis on the role and effect of size and scale in the work of Claes Oldenburg. In September 2014 she became an assistant to Dr. Dorothea von Hantelmann at the Kunsthochschule Kassel, where she’s currently preparing a dissertation on the normative power of the medium exhibition in general and documenta in particular.

Working as a student assistant at the DFG research group Transcultural Negotiations in the Ambits of Art. Comparative Perspectives on Historical Contexts and Current Constellations from 2011 to 2014 she became acquainted with questions regarding the processes of cultural transformation and interlinking in which artistic objects and practices often take part. Her own studies centered around the art of the 19th century to the present in Europe and North America, as well as the medium of the exhibition. Particularly interested in the work of the Collaborative Research Center Aesthetic Experience and the Dissolution of Artistic Limits her overriding concern in all of this lies in the concept of aesthetic experience and the status of art and the aesthetic in recent past and present.