

Dieter Lesage
**The Next
Documenta
Shouldn't Be in
Kassel**

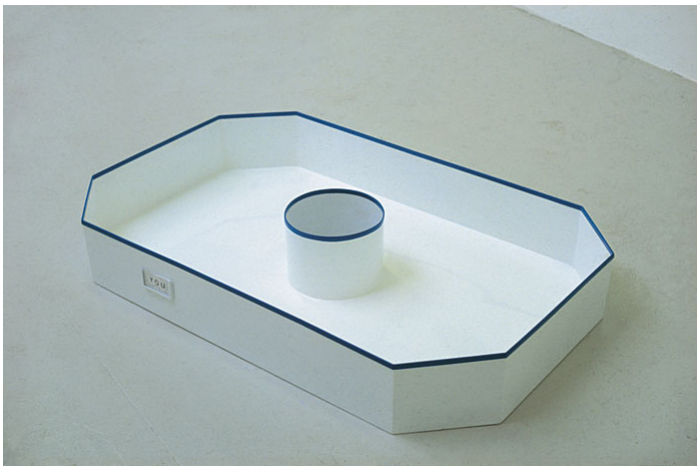
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I. Some Reflections on the Last Documenta

If all goes well, the thirteenth edition of documenta will take place from June 9, 2012, to September 16, 2012.¹ Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, the newly appointed artistic director of documenta 13, might consider reading Oliver Marchart's latest book, which deals extensively with the last three editions of documenta: *Hegemonie im Kunstfeld. Die documenta-Ausstellungen dX, D11, d12 und die Politik der Biennialisierung*.² Marchart's book can be read as a largely convincing critique of documenta 12 (2007), which was directed by the German art critic Roger M. Buergel and co-curated by his wife, the German art historian Ruth Noack.

In his book Marchart describes museums, biennials, and other large-scale art exhibitions such as the documenta as hegemony machines, functioning not unlike the World's Fairs that have contributed significantly to the project of nation-building since the mid-nineteenth century. Following the reflections of Antonio Gramsci in *Quaderni del carcere*, Marchart defines hegemony as a precarious balance between dominant and subaltern forces that, through the networks of society's institutions (museums, biennials, and large-scale exhibitions), establishes a momentary primacy of certain forces. These forces can always be overturned, depending on shifts in an ongoing "war of position." The concept of hegemony can be explained as the way in which consensus is produced as a primordial means of securing the dominance of certain forces. Every institution, which may at some moment seem to consolidate dominant bourgeois culture, may at another point be useful for a counter-hegemonic project – one that could eventually establish another hegemony. Following Laclau and Mouffe's radicalization of Gramsci's theory of hegemony, Marchart points out that subjects and subject positions are only the effects of hegemonic discursive formations.³ The progressive and emancipatory *potentiality* of institutions as discourse producers provides the main reason why they should not be abandoned, as a great many leftists have done out of a belief that institutions *as such* necessarily consolidate petty bourgeois culture. Marchart strongly argues for such a potentiality, citing the hegemonic shifts in discourse that were successfully produced by Catherine David's documenta X (which politicized the field of art) and even more so by Okwui Enwezor's documenta 11 (which de-occidentalized the field of art). Whereas Marchart praises these two editions of documenta, he mercilessly criticizes the last edition for the quadruple shift it tried to operate.



Ricardo Basbaum, *Would you like to participate in an artistic experience?*, work in progress since 1994, painted steel object to be used by participants, 125 x 80 x 18cm. Photo: Ricardo Basbaum

Firstly, according to Marchart, documenta 12 depoliticized whatever political art it showed by taking an aestheticizing approach to art. Secondly, documenta 12 marginalized theoretical contextualization (which was an important characteristic of documenta X, and even more so of documenta 11) by outsourcing the reflection on so-called key questions to a select number of art magazines, whereas the two previous documentas had hosted an extensive discursive program of their own. Thirdly, still according to Marchart, documenta 12 abandoned the de-occidentalization of the documenta, introduced by documenta X and vigorously radicalized by documenta 11, instead withdrawing into Kassel and “re-Kasselizing” and provincializing the exhibition. Fourthly, Marchart claims that the whole mediation program of documenta 11 (to a large extent set up by Marchart himself) had been much more focused on emancipation than the mediation program of documenta 12 could be, given its reactionary character.

When, at the end of 2003, Roger Buerger was designated as the next artistic director of the documenta, he was known as both a critic, writing primarily for the deservedly renowned Austrian art magazine *springerin*, and as a co-curator (with Ruth Noack) of a series of intriguing exhibitions under the overarching title “Die Regierung” (The Government) (which showed at the Kunstraum of the University in Lüneburg, Secession in Vienna, Witte de With in Rotterdam, MACBA in Barcelona, and Miami Art Central).⁴ Given the outspoken political character of Buerger’s previous curatorial work, it remains puzzling how it could have arrived at the depoliticization with which Marchart rightly takes issue in Buerger’s documenta 12. One may recall that the exhibition series “Die Regierung” had a previous life as an exhibition organized by Buerger and Noack to coincide with the Expo

2000 in Hannover and bearing the very uncompromising title “Governmentality. Art in Conflict with the International Hyperbourgeoisie and the National Petty Bourgeoisie.” Re-reading *in extenso* the press release of this little-known exhibition, one wonders even more what may have happened to good old Buerger:

This exhibition looks at contemporary techniques of governing or forms of exercising power that are employed by the “leading” Western societies. What distinguishes these techniques and forms is their reliance on voluntary compliance and the self-regulatory capacities of the individual. But not everyone is willing to go along. For many, the global destruction caused by even the day-to-day functioning of western societies is too great. That is why this exhibition suggests places and forms of possible resistance.

The questions raised by the exhibition have been inspired by the current protest movement against the Austrian government. But the exhibition goes beyond merely mapping Austria’s political terrain to draw out the very principle of “government”: that quantum of actions which structures the space available for other actions.

Power in the modern world rules neither by authoritarian repression nor by welfare-state integration but by assignment of social fate. Such power functions only, however, when these assignments are widely acknowledged. Decisions to accept or reject asylum applications, thus, are formulated not just in governmental committees and civil servant offices but in everyday conversations in the subway or among the family.

The concept of “governmentality,” borrowed from Michel Foucault’s box of tools, refers precisely to this continuum or infinitely subtle merging of national and global regulatory processes with local, apparently naturally arising forms of self-organization. Here is where decisions are made as to who and what gets assigned what meaning – or not; who and what becomes visible or invisible; who is allowed to live in what manner...

At Expo 2000 in Hannover, 180 nations and organizations (from the UN to IBM) demonstrate their firm hold on the future of the planet. Confronted with phantasms of technological omnipotence, but confronted also with the perverse political inability of western democracies to generate social processes that transcend economic criteria of value, certain forces in society – among them, some elements within contemporary art – assume the thankless task of “seeing the world through sober eyes” (Marx).

Again, this is Buerger (and Noack) in 2000, less than four years before his designation as artistic director of documenta 12. If Marchart

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Ricardo Basbaum, *Would you like to participate in an artistic experience?*, Installation view at documenta 12. Photo: Haupt & Binder

had been a member of the finding committee for the artistic director of documenta 12, and if he had found this press release in the portfolio of the candidate, Buergel might immediately have become his favorite candidate for the job. Circa 2000 Buergel is highly aware of the hegemonic impact of world exhibitions, ironically using the opportunity of the Expo in Hannover to articulate concerns about the formalities of migration, rather than about the migration of forms. Many of the artists with whom he worked back then, and who were also present at his documenta 12, felt the same way, and indeed some were totally flabbergasted by the turn that the concept of migration seemed to have taken in the director's mind, feeling very uneasy, if not angry, about the inappropriate recontextualization of their work in documenta 12. Those artists especially whose work dealt explicitly with the politics of migration might have felt that the rhetoric of "migration of form" was taking the political sting out of their interventions.

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over-aestheticized, depoliticized, and re-Kasselized documenta, in order to politicize the art world even more, out of sheer disgust? Sadly enough, Buergel's and Noack's latest comments on their documenta 12 don't allow for this hypothetical attempt at a progressive interpretation of it.⁵ What nevertheless remains is the possibility for a new political turn. The following reflections may serve as a memo for the next documenta artistic director.

II. Some Suggestions for the Next Documenta

Roger Buergel attached great importance to the fact that the first documenta in 1955 coincided with the *Bundesgartenschau*, the Federal Garden Show, which also took place in Kassel. Thus the key publicity images of documenta 12 were distorted pictures of flowers, based on photographs made by Buergel himself with a broken camera. It seems as if one could trace Buergel's intellectual trajectory over the five years leading up to his documenta as a shift from biopower to flower power. The motif of the flower was also present in some of the works in the show, such as Sanja Iveković's *Poppy Field* in front of the Fridericianum, a wonderful work that unfortunately remained unmentioned in many reviews as the poppies began to blossom only a few weeks after the official documenta 12 opening. With *Poppy Field*, Iveković found a brilliant way to upgrade Buergel's strange obsession with flowers with a highly consistent string of revolutionary and emancipatory references.

As Buergel mixed his references to the 1955 *Bundesgartenschau* in Kassel with other events in the history of the city, people less familiar with German history could have been lured into believing that this *Bundesgartenschau* had been an important event for the flower-loving city of Kassel. As a matter of fact, the *Bundesgartenschau*, is a biennial German garden, park, and landscape architecture show that was held for the first time in 1951 in Hannover, and which has since moved every two years to another German city – a traveling biennial indeed. Initially a West German initiative, the *Bundesgartenschau* obviously also travels to former East German cities. In 2009, for instance, it will be hosted by the remarkable city of Schwerin. Moreover, every ten years it is organized as the *Internationale Gartenschau*. Rather than taking the motif of the flower from the historical coincidence of the first documenta with the 1955 *Bundesgartenschau* in Kassel, as Buergel did, I would like to raise the question of whether it would not be conceivable to take the organizational model of the *Bundesgartenschau*



Ricardo Basbaum, *Would you like to participate in an artistic experience?*, work in progress since 1994, painted steel object, 125 x 80 x 18cm. participation Kan-Sy, Dakar, 2007. Photo: Kan-Sy

The question remains, then: what might have happened to Buergel after his designation as artistic director of documenta 12? Could he have been so smart as to deliberately make an

as an inspiration for the organization of the documenta itself. Wouldn't it be an overdue post-Wall renewal of Germany's most well-known art exhibition if one could conceive of the documenta as an exhibition taking place every five years in a different German city? Indeed, the geopolitical meaning of Kassel as a border city between East and West Germany, which figured largely in the rhetoric defending the location of every documenta edition until documenta 8, became totally obsolete in 1989.

As soon as one thinks of a traveling model for the documenta, it also seems that the interval could be... two years, instead of five. Indeed, the simple fact that the burden of financing the event always rests on the same city and the same region is probably the main reason why the time lapse between two editions is longer than that of the Olympics. If the documenta were to travel from one city to another, it would allow for the distribution of financing the event between different *Länder*, supposing that they would be interested. It is my supposition that most of them would be very interested. As for the role of the German Federal Republic (which co-finances the event via its *Bundeskulturstiftung*), it is difficult to imagine why it would oppose such an eminently federating reconceptualization of the documenta. Needless to say, as a Berliner, I would be an ardent supporter of a documenta taking place sometime soon in my own beloved metropolis. But I would also be very curious – as well as very skeptical – about the way Bavaria would deal with its edition of the documenta.

Of course, this bold proposal of a traveling documenta will be opposed by arguments invoking the legacy of the great Arnold Bode, mixed with pious reflections on his deep attachment to his native city of Kassel. But wouldn't it be a marvelous victory, knowing how much the lifelong social democrat Bode, ardent defender of modern art, suffered from the *Berufsverbot* imposed on him by the Nazi regime, if one day his documenta were to reappropriate the Haus der Kunst, among whose tragic layers of historic meaning was the hosting of the infamous 1937 *Entartete Kunst* exhibition? And wouldn't Bode have been proud to see "his" documenta, with all the symbolic power that accompanies it, be successful in preventing the realization of the reactionary Berlin Stadtschloss project, giving way instead to a *Haus der Documenta* in the middle of the German capital, built in the best Bauhaus tradition? Those who believe that the documenta should take place in Kassel in order to honor Bode might be terribly wrong. Maybe Kassel could not bestow a greater honor on its honorable son Bode than by letting his documenta go.

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Of course, once the principle of a traveling documenta is accepted, one has to deal with the question of whether the documenta should be the privilege of German cities alone, or if one should not conceive of a documenta that would travel worldwide. Here, Enwezor's decision to organize the 2002 edition of documenta as a series of five platforms – of which only the fifth and last (the actual exhibition) took place in Kassel, while the other platforms consisted of symposia that were held in Berlin, Vienna, New Delhi, Lagos, and on the Caribbean island of Saint Lucia – may be considered the historical precedent that showed the way. In an essay published in the volume *Cultural Activism Today. The Art of Over-identification*, I severely criticize the fact that these well-intended dislocations, aimed at a de-occidentalization of the documenta, were only to a very limited extent successful. Indeed, I was quite disappointed to learn that the symposium in Saint Lucia was in fact held at a Hyatt Regency Spa and Beach Resort, while the conference in Lagos took place in the equally culturally challenging environment of the local Goethe Institut.⁶ Though I believe that this criticism is still valid, it cannot be invoked as an excuse for the kind of "re-Kasselization" that characterized Roger Buerger's documenta 12 – quite the contrary. After the provincialization that took place with documenta 12 and the renewed perspective that it opened up for a just appreciation of the significance of former documentas, I am very much tempted to review my severe judgment of Documenta 11 and to recall the visionary attempts of Enwezor and his extraordinary team to delocalize the exhibition. Notwithstanding its flaws, documenta 11 seems in retrospect to impose itself decisively as the model to be further developed.

III. A Utopian Postscriptum

In general, one of the more problematic organizational aspects of every documenta that was held in Kassel has been the fact that (however postcolonial two of documenta's editions may have been in inspiration) a visit to the exhibition largely remains the privilege of western art lovers. Along these lines, it comes as no surprise that on November 1, 2008, German enfant terrible Christoph Schlingensiefel, in one of several hilarious interviews with marathon specialist Hans Ulrich Obrist at the Hebbel Am Ufer Theater in Berlin, launched the bold idea of a *Festspielhaus* (Art Festival House) in Africa.⁷ To me, he may just as well have suggested to move the documenta to Dakar. Shouldn't we put some postcolonial pressure on the *documenta und Museum Fridericianum Veranstaltungen GmbH* in

order to seriously consider this suggestion? Considering that they have made very strong decisions in the past, why wouldn't they be able to make even stronger decisions in the future?

Many will argue that, though my proposal may very well be beautifully and naively idealistic, it will never be realized. However, maybe it depends less on the documenta supervisory board (which will most likely and understandably stick to Hessen as the region and Kassel as the city where the documenta should take place) than it does on the new artistic director. After all, maybe the surest and fastest way to have the documenta in Dakar would be to have it curated... by an artist. Or maybe where exactly the next documenta will take place just depends on the artists who are to be invited by the next artistic director. The fact is that the next documenta need not be curated by an artist for any artist to have an incredible influence on the documenta, even with regard to its location. It seems perfectly legitimate to me if an invited artist were to happily accept the invitation to participate in the next documenta under the condition that he or she be free to choose the exact location of his or her artistic intervention. And so it may be that a performance in Dakar becomes part of the next documenta. If enough invited artists accept the invitation while at the same time refusing to interpret it as the obligation to make the pilgrimage to Kassel, then the next documenta will not take place in Kassel. What the next documenta will become, and thus also, where it will take place, depends as much, if not much more so, on the invited artists, as it does on the artistic director or on the supervisory board of the *documenta und Museum Fridericianum Veranstaltungen GmbH*.

Maybe, in the end, it was not so much Okwui Enwezor who showed the way for the next documenta as it was...an artist. As a matter of fact, a little tiny piece of Buerger's supposedly re-Kasselized documenta took place not in a molecular restaurant somewhere near Barcelona, but in a courtyard in the city of... Dakar. One of the artists who participated in Jens Hoffmann's project *The Next Documenta Should Be Curated by an Artist*, which he launched after Enwezor's documenta 11, was the Brazilian artist Ricardo Basbaum. Basbaum was subsequently invited by Buerger to participate in documenta 12, where his project was entitled *Would you like to participate in an artistic experience?* For the documenta 12 version of this project, begun in 1994, twenty painted steel objects were put into circulation.

Ten of them circulate in Brazil and Latin America, nine in Europe, and one in Africa. The project is conducted in four different and

complementary stages: (1) invitation to participate; (2) experiences by the participants; (3) display of the experiences at the website; (4) installation-exhibition. The first three stages are performed since the objects are distributed at the experiences' sites, and start circulating; the fourth stage takes place with the display of the results in an sculptural-architectonic installation developed for the exhibition in Kassel in June 2007.⁸

One of Basbaum's objects was brought to Dakar. The photographs that documented what happened to Basbaum's object in Dakar are a beautiful anticipation of the potentiality of a documenta to be held outside Kassel.

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Dieter Lesage is a Belgian philosopher, writer, and critic. He has been a visiting professor at the Piet Zwart Institute of the Willem De Kooning Academie in Rotterdam (2003-2005) and the Institut für Kulturtheorie of the Leuphana Universität Lüneburg (2007), with a *Eurolecture* grant from the Alfred Toepfer Stiftung F. V. S. He is currently a lecturer and research coordinator at the Department of Audiovisual and Performing Arts, RITS (Erasmushogeschool, Brussels), and a member of the editorial board at *Afterall*. He is a co-editor of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Researcher: The Academy and the Bologna Process* (Antwerp: MuHKA, 2007). With Ina Wudtke, he curated the exhibitions "A Portrait of the Artist as a Researcher" (Freiraum/quartier21, Vienna, 2007) and "A Portrait of the Artist as a Researcher 2.0" (Beursschouwburg, Brussels, 2008). He lives in Berlin.

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The title of this piece is, of course, a reference to the well-known *e-flux* project, curated by Jens Hoffmann, "The Next Documenta Should Be Curated by an Artist." See http://www.e-flux.com/projects/next_doc/index.html.

2

Oliver Marchart, *Hegemonie im Kunstfeld. Die documenta-Ausstellungen dX, D11, d12 und die Politik der Biennalisierung* (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2008).

3

See Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985).

4

For my critique of the Rotterdam exhibition of "Die Regierung," see Dieter Lesage, "How To Become Dutch," *Afterall. A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry* 18 (Summer 2008): 17-26.

5

Ruth Noack and Roger M. Buegel, "Some Afterthoughts on the Migration of Form," *Afterall. A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry* 18 (Summer 2008): 5-15.

6

See Dieter Lesage, "Cultural Resignation Today: On Over-Identification and Overstatement," in *Cultural Activism Today. The Art of Over-Identification*, ed. BAVO (Rotterdam: episode publishers, 2007), 88-98.

7

"Auf Afrika fliegen," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, November 3, 2008. The statement has been picked up by almost all German media.

8

NBP, <http://www.nbp.pro.br>.