

Taking

a

Stance

FROM A POSITION OF ART

As a highly influential and regularly recurring exhibition series, documenta simultaneously represents an interrogation of the very format of the major exhibition and of the changing concept of art and current artistic practice. It shapes the perception of what it is, precisely, that constitutes art in its encounter and confrontation with its social environment. And it shapes how art is perceived and the way in which it intervenes in social processes or initiates them. This is why, in their approach to the artistic questions of the time, all the curators and artists involved in the various documenta exhibitions continually worked together with other disciplines or spheres of knowledge situated beyond the classic art world. In this way, a transdisciplinary discourse has evolved out of art itself.

Since the dawn of the modern era, long before professional curators undertook to mediate this experience, artists have sought to exhibit their own art and thereby create a zone where the general public might interact with their work. Starting with the first Impressionist show of 1874 in Paris, modern art history has witnessed a string of artistic communities and groups, long since canonized, each of which worked together to create a

collaborative exhibition platform. The same is true of documenta, which was first staged in 1955. It, too, has its roots in the artistic practice of exhibiting works of art, even if the initial inspiration was not to foreground the curator's own works or those of his contemporaries. That said, Arnold Bode, who was a painter and teacher at the Kunsthochschule Kassel (School of Art and Design Kassel), perceived his own curatorship – which would decisively shape the first three documenta exhibitions – as an intuitive and congenial act of artistic assimilation to the demands of the avant-garde artworks of the prewar and the abstract artworks of the postwar period that he put on show. Together with his students at the Kunsthochschule Kassel, he designed and realized the idiosyncratic displays that have since acquired iconic status in the history of documenta. In other words, the history of the establishment of documenta is intimately entwined with that of the Kunsthochschule Kassel. In the course of the 1960s, it became increasingly evident that were an exhibition format such as documenta to continue, it would take the kind of professional approach that a school of art and design could no longer be expected to provide – alongside, and in addition to, its actual teaching responsibilities. To this very day, however, documenta

has preserved an open border between artistic and aesthetic curatorship.

One ought to be able to demand a similar methodology of thought from an institute dedicated to researching the history of documenta. For, as we have all too briefly outlined above, that very methodology underlies the history of documenta itself. Such an institute must be conceived from the position of art. Moreover, it should enter into a relationship with as many other disciplines as possible. And it must continue the very cooperation between academic-theoretical expertise and artistic – creative intervention that has endowed the exhibitions with their specific character. We must therefore ask what form a documenta Institute should take. Is it to stand for bureaucratization and a “quasi-posthumous” historicization of documenta? Or can it indeed live up to the experimental, artistic ambition that has always characterized documenta? Moreover, we should also ask what such an artistic institutionalization might mean. At the very heart of the documenta Institute, there should be a commitment to thinking strongly about art – as an individual aspect of reality but also as a basic stance adopted toward reality as a whole. This entails that the documenta Institute should be just as radical,

just as free, and just as experimental and influential as documenta itself. In other words, if we accept that documenta has decisively shaped what we today conceive of as a major exhibition, then it is clear that we are thinking here of an institution that will decisively shape how, in the future, we will understand the field of exhibition studies and how we will think about exhibitions in general.

It was *Documenta11* (2002) that formulated a “decentering” of the Western viewpoint as the key curatorial task. Since then, at the very latest, there has barely been a major show from within the transnational discourse on exhibitions that has not sought to venture beyond the Western horizon. This “decentering” of Western ways of thinking and acting, which challenges our assumptions, has since become an integral aspect of international exhibition studies. It is our hope that it can now also be harnessed for the purposes of documenta studies and of exhibition studies in general. This will provide the field of documenta research, still largely the province of German scholarship, with a global perspective. The aim here is that a transnationalization of research will stimulate dialog and exchange, help create networks of knowledge production between the academy and art,

and enable a wider access to the archive holdings in Kassel.

We propose thinking – together with documenta but also with a critical eye toward decisions that have been taken in its name – about the real conditions in the world in which we live. This must involve engaging with the history of documenta so as to elaborate questions for the present. This can be based on the art as well as the interventions occasioned by documenta – interventions that were initiated by documenta, those that documenta opposed in solidarity with others, and those that challenged documenta. This species of contextualized and critical research, which places documenta in the intermediary space between event and institution, views itself as being in medias res and working with the history of documenta in order to – in the words of Catherine David apropos of *documentaX* (1997) – “facilitate in different ways an accession to a cognizance of the state of the world.”

In this light, the documenta Institute, as a public research institute, should provide a context in which researching academics and researching artists can together develop new perspectives and produce

knowledge. This should comprise the broadest possible range of disciplinary approaches, aesthetic strategies, and forms of practical knowledge. By “transdisciplinary” documenta and exhibition studies, we mean a critical engagement with exhibitions as media forms, systems of representation, dispositifs, practices, and fields of action. Moreover, this critical engagement must extend beyond disciplinary boundaries and take into account the aesthetic, social, economic, and epistemological conditions under which exhibitions take place. Such research will focus on exhibitions as an action space and place of knowledge production, where curatorial gestures, artistic positions, and visitor perspectives encounter one another.

WHAT SHOULD THE DOCUMENTA INSTITUTE LOOK LIKE IN DETAIL?

The three fields of activity so far proposed – research, the archive, and art education – stand in reciprocal relationship to one another, with the result that various forms of knowledge can arise at the zones between them. This must also be reflected in the planning of space and in the teaching concept for the documenta Institute. Below, we present our vision, elaborated from a position of art, for the topics of research, space, teaching, the archive, and art education at the future documenta Institute.

I. RESEARCH

A key concern of ours is to ensure proper interaction between the academy and art by means of the inclusion of artistic expertise in a field of research that has to date been narrowly defined from merely a traditional, academic perspective.

In terms of exhibition studies, we believe that the history of documenta should also be examined as a history of artistic and curatorial research. This will make an important contribution toward a historical reflection upon, and substantiation of, this still nascent – in institutional terms – field of artistic research. Artistic and curatorial investigations will open up new perspectives on the history, the present moment, and the future of documenta. This will examine the documenta archiv with artistic means and introduce strategies that lead to praxis-based knowledge and an institutional criticism from an artistic and a curatorial point of view. Artistic and curatorial investigations of historical and contemporary material will produce materially based knowledge of an epistemological, discursive, visual, affective, and poetic nature. And they will open up new approaches for documenta research as a critical zone of action.

Artistic professorship

The core requirement of our concept is the establishment of an artistic professorship in addition to the academic professorships. This is still lacking in the current concept for the documenta Institute. If we read documenta itself as a praxis that, on the one hand, participates in the current conventions of exhibitions, yet, on the other, continually advances beyond the normative prescriptions of those conventions, then we can see that it is precisely documenta's artistic and curatorial dimensions that enable it to take such a step beyond the current material situation. At the same time, documenta continues to provide important impetus for the increasingly important – not least on the international level – field of artistic research

Residency program

Artists from around the world come to Kassel to take part in the residency program. In addition to the accommodation and working space that is made available in the documenta Institute, there are also two apartments in Kassel for this purpose

*Senior fellowships for researchers
and artists*

Invitations are extended to established artists and academics to spend a year working in Kassel. This is intended to provide them with an opportunity to produce a “magnus opus” in the form of a project, book, exhibition, etc.

Summer schools

Summer schools are held annually and bring together artistic and academic residents, artistic and academic junior researchers, and scholarship holders. Contributions from visitors from around the world help increase the reach, visibility and outlook of the research conducted in Kassel.

2. SPACE

A “knowledge institution” of the 21st century should provide a platform, a space for thought, and a zone of encounter. It must therefore have areas for retreat and concentration as well as common room facilities to enable dialog, exchange and translocal accessibility. Such an institution requires a public action space

where knowledge is not only put on display but can also be produced by means of a collaborative act. By the same token, it also requires thinking space and ateliers, which not only provide the freedom and isolation that attend artistic and intellectual production but also guarantee the preservation of future archive material.

In addition to the space needed for the archive, the documenta Institute also requires the following:

Thinking space

- ↗ Workspace for the archive
- ↗ Offices and meeting rooms for the archive, for research, and for art education
- ↗ Ateliers for artistic and academic research
- ↗ Residency rooms (workspace as well as accommodation) for artists and researchers
- ↗ Common rooms that can be used by those working at the institute

Public space

- ↗ Reception facilities, jointly used by the archive and art education
- ↗ The archive library
- ↗ Seminar and lecture rooms for public events

- Workshop rooms for art education
- Multipurpose rooms to be used jointly or individually by the archive, research, and art education. These will serve to present installations and assemblages of archive material, objects, and texts. These, however, are not classic exhibits. Rather, they are three-dimensional working hypotheses that are put on public display for the purposes of discussion, interrogation, and even addition. Artistic, academic, and curatorial researchers develop these presentations on the basis of their current avenues of research. Such presentations can also be elaborated and expanded in seminars. In this way, “research” presentations and “art education” presentations exchange places, with the result that the archive is viewed from different angles. This creates a program that grows organically with the work conducted for it
- A café as a place to gather and engage with others (newspapers, journals, and installations with materials for lines of research), curated by art education
- Exhibition of works in the Kunsthochschule Kassel. A space for artistic and curatorial research is to be created in the Kunsthochschule. This forms part of the thinking for archive exhibitions for the documenta Institute. We are thinking here of a small presentation room to be established as a permanent facility within

the Kunsthochschule. This could be used for preparing and reviewing projects for the documenta Institute. This would provide the opportunity to observe research with materials over a longer period. In other words, there will always be at least two perspectives of the documenta Institute to be seen in Kassel. These “exhibitions of works” in the Kunsthochschule will be advertised, together with the exhibitions held in the multipurpose rooms of the documenta Institute, by means of posters and brochures.

3. THE ARCHIVE

The documenta archiv forms the foundation of the documenta Institute. To fulfill this function, it requires resources and conditions that guarantee proper conservation of the material on the history of documenta that is held in the archive. A documenta Institute conceived from an artistic position must avoid any trade-off between conservation and renewal. It is vital that we respect the archive’s intrinsic purpose.

From an artistic point of view, this also opens up new perspectives on the role and purpose of the documenta archiv at the heart of the documenta Institute. The testimonies from documenta history can be understood as “traces” and “specters” that may allude to untold stories or evoke affective memories and can continually create new social networks and relations. This is how the archive should be made to work. For it is only when the documenta archiv is understood as a public, social space and its material as something belonging to the whole community that it then becomes possible to establish links between research, on the one hand, and social praxis, political context, cultural life, and local structures, on the other.

With the aid of the archive, the documenta Institute can become a place that honors the unfulfilled promises of the documenta exhibitions, which fade from sight once the 100-day period has passed. Our proposal is therefore that we should try and learn something from within the midst of the actual material. This will enable us not only to discover more about major exhibitions and hegemonies in the field of art, but also to arrive – with the help of documents, strategies, practices, and events from the history of documenta – at a better

understanding of social relations and to ask, with the aid of this historical material, what this means for the present moment.

For example, a concrete project might be to investigate, on the basis of the documenta archiv, the artistic and curatorial negotiations that took place with various participating institutions and thereby discover the economic and structural determinants – and the conflicts attending these negotiations – that governed each edition of documenta. Because it is here, in the run-up to each documenta, during negotiation of the conditions governing the curatorial process, that each documenta is created and, along with it, the space for possible art practices.

By focusing on the scope of negotiations in the run-up to a documenta exhibition, we broaden our appreciation of what curatorial practice actually means.

4. TEACHING

Postgraduate courses in exhibition studies

A postgraduate study program provides a thematic focus for advanced students (from the third year of study onward) from both academic and design-oriented fields of study. It is here that we witness the encounter between artistic research and curating, on the one hand, and academic research, on the other. The program consists of collaborative, transdisciplinary work that seeks to elaborate the reflexivity of exhibiting as a basic stance adopted toward reality in the past and present, and in theory and practice.

Graduate school in exhibition studies

A graduate school increases networking and support for junior academics across disciplinary boundaries. Typically, a graduate school is an academic institution dedicated to supporting doctoral students. In this case, however, we propose enlarging this narrow profile. Here, too, we are thinking in terms of a hybrid format that would enable artists to become members of the graduate school on the strength of third-party funding. As an alternative to a doctorate, a possible model for a final qualification for artists might be the “artistic

qualification” already awarded to artistic staff members at the Kunsthochschule Kassel.

5. ART EDUCATION

Art education is what turns the documenta Institute into a zone of encounter where knowledge can be produced in the public sphere. It makes it into a place of negotiation and confrontation. In short, it turns it into an institution of the 21st century. It proffers an invitation to publicly negotiate, in medias res, the history of documenta and exhibition discourses as well as the research for, and the present moment of, the coming documenta. This creates a public sphere that provides space for a debate on the history, the present, and the future of documenta and beyond. The experiences gathered throughout the history of art education at documenta – which itself has had a decisive influence on what is today understood around the world as art education – are also a key source of inspiration for the documenta Institute.

In accordance with current debates in this field, art education is what transforms the documenta Institute

into an action space that is oriented toward questions of participation and democratization. In other words, art education – the public program, installations, workshops, performances, and interventions – involves more than just a reproduction of knowledge that has already been established. In addition, art education itself provides a context of collaborative knowledge production – not a space in which merely something is shown, but rather a space in which something can occur. In opening up an intermediary space where a public sphere can emerge and engage in debate, art education takes its responsibility toward the public seriously.

We have already devised the following program:

- A public program of events
- Walks and strolls on the trail of documenta: d-tours on moments and monuments of documenta history
- Affective archives: talks and discussions on the many lives of documenta
- Lived experiences: local documenta stories
- Participative planning: workshops on the future of the documenta Institute (a public advisory board)
- Modular materials: a participative web platform for schools
- Education about art education: the creation of an archive on the history of art education

TEXT

Joel Baumann, Alexis Joachimides, Nora Sternfeld, Dierk Schmidt

MINDMAPS

Hendrik Dorgathen

LECTORATE

Carina Herring

DESIGN

Milena Albiez und Gabriele Franziska Götz

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A Vision
for the
documenta Institute
from the Perspective
of the Kunsthochschule
Kassel

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