

Art Show as Unruly Organism

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Art Review



Documenta 13 This sprawling exhibition in Kassel, Germany, includes “Doing Nothing Garden,” a composted landscape by the Chinese artist Song Dong. Andreas Meichsner for The New York Times

KASSEL, Germany — The longtime curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev has a lot on her mind, and she has managed to wedge a remarkable amount of it into [Documenta 13](#).

As artistic director of the latest version of this always overbearing international exhibition of mostly contemporary art, which is staged every four or five years in this drab industrial city in central Germany, Ms. Christov-Bakargiev has assembled an immense, unruly organism of a show. It is alternately inspiring — almost visionary — and insufferable,

innovative and predictable, meticulous and sentimentally precious. I would not have missed this seething, shape-shifting extravaganza for the world, and I'd rather not see its like again, at least not on this dwarfing, imperious, self-canceling scale.

By now, it is almost tradition for Documenta to present more art than is possible to track down, much less absorb. The current effort spreads the work of some 200 artists and artists' collectives from some 50 countries all over Kassel, starting at the Fridericianum, the regal Neo-Classical museum that has been the show's heart since its inception in 1955. Ardently feminist, global and multimedia in approach and including works by dead artists and selected bits of ancient art, it provides visitors with paintings, sculptures, drawings, videos and, most of all, quite a number of impressive installation and performance pieces. Works involving sound or music of some kind are often especially outstanding.

Many efforts push, sometimes to a sophomoric degree, against the boundaries separating art and life while straining the limits of the exhibition format. Also on display are scientific projects by a quantum physicist and a geneticist, and an anger-management workshop, courtesy of an Australian artist, that you can sign up for. It is not clear how many more times we need to be reminded that anything can be considered art, but there you are. The larger point seems to be that Ms. Christov-Bakargiev is more interested in creativity in general than in art in particular.

This year the impossibility of seeing everything has been made official: The show has a distant outpost, with works by roughly 30 of its artists, in Kabul, Afghanistan. The country where much of the West has been at war for a decade is a recurring leitmotif in Kassel, as are the two world wars, the Vietnam War and other 20th-century conflicts.



A small painting by Etel Adnan. Andreas Meichsner for The New York Times

The emphasis on the trauma of war is consistent with Ms. Christov-Bakargiev's view of Documenta as a show born of trauma, expressed in an essay in one of the show's three catalogs. It grew, after all, out of the ruins of World War II — Kassel was heavily bombed by the Allies — and was an attempt to bring Germany up to speed with modern art, both banishing and repressing the cultural darkness of Nazism.

Ms. Christov-Bakargiev seems more determined than even some of her predecessors to counter any notion of this show as a mere art update; she wants to reveal how art reflects and interacts with the world. Her effort is haunted by the violence of history mitigated by the solace of art and its creative processes and by the solidarity and sometimes bravery of artists.

She signals her intention to make a different kind of Documenta in the ground-floor galleries at the Fridericianum, which usually feature some

sort of opening-act visual spectacle. This time they have been left nearly empty, devoted to "I Need Some Meaning I Can Memorise (The Invisible Pull)," an installation piece by the British artist Ryan Gander. Nothing more than an overhead ventilation system that blows a stiff, cooling breeze through the galleries, the piece is a very nervy, even arrogant opener, but the refreshing air and elegant spaces are hard to resist.

Soon enough, though, emptiness is superseded — in the rotunda space that is portentously called "The Brain" — by a dense array of art, artifacts, photographs and ephemera that highlight some of the themes and artworks to come, and is among the show's best moments. Dachau, Hitler's bathtub, the 1968 Soviet crackdown in Czechoslovakia, the crowds of the Arab Spring in Tahrir Square are alluded to.

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Against these, [Giorgio Morandi](#)'s still life paintings are glimpsed, along with examples of the objects depicted in them. We see a lone puppet, one of scores used by the Egyptian artist Wael Shawky in his "Crusades Cabaret," a brilliant two-video marionette-musical consideration of early contact between the Arab and European cultures. (It is on view in the Neue Galerie, a short walk from the Fridericianum.)

In the rotunda, as throughout the exhibition, attention to the fine print is de rigueur. If you are wondering, for example, about a pleasantly derivative van Gogh-ish landscape from 2011, the label will tell you that it was made by Mohammad Yusuf Asefi, an Afghan artist who saved some 80 paintings in the National Museum in Kabul that were threatened by the Taliban prohibition of art depicting animals or humans. (He painted over these motifs with water-soluble paint.)



One of the so-called Bactrian Princesses from Central Asia (2500-1500 B.C.). Andreas Meichsner for The New York Times

There are also actual examples of work that evaded destruction. One of the show's most magnificent inclusions is a group of eight small, rare composite figurines, the so-called [Bactrian Princesses](#) from the Central Asian region around northern Afghanistan (2500-1500 B.C.). Roughly contemporary with Cycladic and Egyptian art, they are distinguished by delicate limestone faces and bulky, polychrome stone bodies cloaked with incised patterns that conjure rivers, plant life and intricately woven silks. They attest to art's implacable ability to survive on sheer visual power (though portability helps too).

From here, the exhibition unspools through the Fridericianum, revising and resurrecting as it goes. Directly upstairs you'll find the relatively unknown figurative tapestries from the late 1930s by [Hannah Ryggen](#) (1894-1970), a self-taught Swedish weaver, that vigorously protest, with color and verve, the rise of Fascism. Nearby, two walls are covered with small, winsome postcard-size paintings of apples or pears, one or two at a time, made between 1912 and the '60s by Korbinian Aigner (1885-1966), a Bavarian village priest and botanist who, the label informs us, was sent to Dachau for speaking out against the Nazis.

Elsewhere in the building, the pulsating abstractions of Warlimpirrnga Tjapaltjarri, an Aboriginal artist in Australia born in 1959, are riveting, as are the packed expressionist drawings of the Egyptian artist Anna Boghiguan and the obsessively worked postapocalyptic paintings of the American artist Llyn Foulkes, who also exhibits — and over the next week or so sometimes plays — "The Machine," a homemade drum kit festooned with old automobile horns.

Also not to be missed is Kader Attia's "Repair From Occident to Extra-Occidental Cultures," a daunting installation that reflects on art, colonialism and body scarification in Africa but draws its main force from

a set of large carved-wood busts depicting the horrific face wounds suffered by European soldiers in World War I. Gripping yet also illustrational, the piece exemplifies several archivelike works here. It also reflects the continuing hegemony of late-late Conceptualism — now extravagantly materialized and labor-intensive — over the international exhibition circuit.

Beyond the polemical intensity of the Fridericianum, the show loses coherence and often subsides into dross. There are terrible low points, like “Limited Art Project,” by the Chinese artist Yan Lei, a bit of endgame cynicism involving 360 fuzzily dead-in-the-water Photo Realist canvases that will be gradually converted to monochromes: Each day a few are spray-painted at a car factory near Kassel. They fill a looming space in the Documenta Halle, where their dreariness is somewhat ameliorated by a nearby gallery devoted to the small, stubbornly radiant abstractions that the Lebanese-American poet and writer Etel Adnan has made since the late 1950s.

There are efforts that muster relatively stark presentations of facts, for which you are grateful, like the timeline explaining the plight of Western Saharan refugees in Algeria that the New York artist Robin Kahn has assembled with help from the heroic National Union of Women From Western Sahara, and is presenting along with a Bedouin-style tent in Karlsaue Park, which is dotted with installations and works displayed in small cottages.

[Documenta 13](#)

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Andreas Meichsner for The New York Times

Similarly, at the nearby Neue Galerie, the South African artist Zanele Muholi presents "Difficult Love," a documentary video (made with Peter Goldsmid) that harrowingly illuminates the prejudice and frequent sexual violence endured by lesbians in her country. The life force evoked in these works becomes transcendent art in a dance-performance piece by the French choreographer Jérôme Bel, enacted by learning-disabled adults in a theater on the slightly seedy Königsplatz.

Several usual suspects do what they usually do in shows of this kind, only better. "Study for Strings," a sound piece by the Scottish artist Susan Philipsz, unleashes a plaintive call-and-response of cellos at Kassel's intercity railroad station, where William Kentridge, collaborating with Peter L. Galison, revives a style that had gone stale with "The Refusal of Time," an engulfing fusion of video animation, sculpture and music.

Several less usual suspects, too, rise to the occasion. Also at the railroad

station, the Indian artist Tejal Shah presents "Between the Waves," a pair of mock-serious pseudo-mythological videos involving two women wearing unicorn horns and not much else. Among the show's several Afghan artists, whose work is somewhat ghettoized in a former hospital behind the Fridericianum, a standout is Jeanno Gaussi, who was born in Kabul in 1973, left in 1978 and is based in Berlin; she presents an installation piece that centers on old family snapshots that she commissioned Ustad Sharif Amin, a Kabul artist, to render as vivid, folkish paintings.

On the manicured lawn at the mouth of the Karlsaue, "Doing Nothing Garden," an undulant compost-heap hillock fuzzy with new weeds, by the Chinese artist Song Dong, erupts like a comic mirage. And the American artist Theaster Gates has converted a large old house near the Fridericianum into a resonant walk-in collage of recycled building materials punctuated with videos and occasional performances — the first of his efforts truly to justify the considerable buzz around his work.

Adjacent to Mr. Gates's work, the British-born artist Tino Sehgal has orchestrated what is really the show's beating heart, an immersive environmental-performance piece that places viewers in a nearly dark gallery among some 20 performers who sing, dance, clap, hum and talk, creating an electrifying aural-spatial experience of pure, unencumbered imagination in action.

Not unlike this piece, Documenta 13 is perhaps most effective as a disembodied state of mind. Ms. Christov-Bakargiev seems to have intended it to be the first of its kind in terms of its sheer porosity, the way it blends with the world. But its incomprehensible, viewer-defying vastness perpetuates an old model, the curator as all-seeing-god, on a disheartening scale. In this way, it seems as much a dying breed as a new start.

Documenta 13 is on view in Kassel, Germany, through Sept. 16;

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