

# MORE OF A STATE

Every five years, art enthusiasts from around the world meet in the small town of Kassel in central Germany to celebrate dOCUMENTA. **Dorothea Schoene** looks at the controversy surrounding its latest incarnation and just what makes it so important.

Since its inception in 1955, dOCUMENTA has stood as one of the world's leading presentations of Contemporary art. Yet many doubting voices were to be heard in the run-up to this year's opening, following its curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev's initial statement on her understanding of art and her approach to the project. "dOCUMENTA (13) is for me more than, and not exactly, an exhibition," she announced. "It is a state of mind." Even more perplexity arose when Christov-Bakargiev announced her intention to shift from an anthropocentric world to a more multifaceted, equal rights understanding.

This rather unorthodox declaration, together with her rejection of a preconceived curatorial concept, naturally provoked a degree of profound scepticism before the opening of the exhibition. However, the negative voices began to recede once the first global events and seminars had taken place and when the initial volumes of the 100 notebooks that were published as a prelude to the actual exhibition in Kassel.

## BREAKING BOUNDARIES

More than anything, Christov-Bakargiev wanted to extend the boundaries of disciplines and fields of research. She therefore invited not only artists – about 150 of whom are taking part in this year's dOCUMENTA – but crossed scientific and cultural disciplines to include presentations and interactions within the fields of art, politics, literature,

philosophy and science. Rather than speaking of artists, as previously, the presentations were now introduced as being the work of 'participants'.

The intention was to re-evaluate not only how the art world is constituted but also our entire surroundings. Christov-Bakargiev asked for examinations rather than fixed statements, explaining how, "I believe that procedural questions are as meaningful as the so-called thematic content or subject matter of an art project, if not more so."

The artistic response to her call to arms offers the visitor a spectacular impulse for contemplating some of the most pressing issues of our times. Equally, the variety of topics – as well as the perspective and approach to each – is broad, ranging from socio-political and economic problems to issues of globalisation and internationalism, areas and modes of conflict and suppression, etc. It comes as no surprise then to see the high number of participants from the Middle East and Southeast Asia – more than ever before at a dOCUMENTA.

The core of the exhibition takes place at the Kunsthalle Fridericianum, traditionally the main space of dOCUMENTA. Entering through vast and seemingly empty halls – in which Ryan Gander has installed wind machines as invisible yet highly sensorial art experiences – one quickly encounters the centre of the show in the building's Rotunda. Here, Christov-Bakargiev has arranged a fascinating compilation of objects and artworks, which she considers the "brain" of the exhibition or the "associative space of research". The assem-

blage on display constitutes in its variety a broad understanding of what it means to consider cultural heritage and the documentation of cultural creativity. The objects range from ancient Afghan artefacts (like the Bactrian Princesses, seated small figurines of the late third to early second millennia BC), found objects in Adolf Hitler's apartment and paintings by Giorgio Morandi to Ahmed Basiyoni's video footage from Tahrir Square in Cairo and Mohammad Yusuf Asefi's painted landscapes. On the upper floors are two of the most spectacular installations of dOCUMENTA (13): Kader Attia's *The Repair from Occident to Extra-Occidental Cultures* and Mariam Ghani's two-channel video installation *A Brief History of Collapses*, which takes as its subjects the ruined Darul Aman Palace in Kabul and the restored Museum Fridericianum in Kassel, traversing the buildings in parallel courses to explore both their architectural structures as well as their histories and myths. Both works hint at the strong emphasis put on art coming from the Middle East and Southeast Asia, and in particular from the politically tormented Afghanistan.

From the centre of the exhibition spans a wide and sometimes unconventional range of connections and interactions, presentations of all media (although very few paintings are to be found) and forms of aesthetic discourses. For dOCUMENTA (13), more spaces than ever before have been used to host the artworks and various events. These are taking place in unconventional sites such as department stores, train stations and

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# OF MIND



Above: Etel Adnan. *38 Untitled Paintings*. 1969–2010. Oil on canvas. Variable dimensions.

Centre: Emily Jacir. *Ex Libris*. 2010–2012. Installation with photographs taken with the artist's cell phone. Variable dimensions.

Below: Kader Attia. *The Repair from Occident to Extra-Occidental Cultures*. 2012. Slide show projection and genuine artefacts from Africa. Variable dimensions.

*All images courtesy Matthias Grobe.*

even abandoned buildings. To see and appreciate them all within a day or two is simply impossible.


One would need a day alone to investigate the 50-plus artworks and installations located in the Karlsuae Park adjacent to the main exhibition halls. Yet some of the most astonishing contributions to this exhibition are there: Anri Sala's *Clocked Perspective*, for example, which, like the works of many other artists on display, was developed in response to Kassel's museum holdings. In this case an out-of-perspective clock is used within a painting, rebuilding it in proper perspective. Sam Durant's *Scaffold* – a viewing platform built on a prominent site at the end of a vanishing line within the park, only reveals its brutal reference to the gallows and death penalty at second examination. Meanwhile, at the far end of the park Akram Zaatari's *Time Capsule* contains duplicates of selected images from the Arab Image Foundation, of which he is a co-founder. Buried in a small concrete block, the work raises questions over what should be preserved and archived from our cultural production.



## BRANCHING OUT

In addition to the main venue in Germany, three additional venues will open for a limited period as part of dOCUMENTA (13). Claiming a spatial turn of togetherness – one which we as human beings cannot embody, in that we cannot be everywhere at the same time – Christov-Bakargiev decided to open branches in Kabul (21 June–14 July), in Cairo/Alexandria (1–8 July) and at the Banff Centre in Canada (2–15 August).

The history of Afghanistan, as well as the political uprisings in the Middle East, has moved and inspired a number of contributions – not all originating from within the region and which in some cases are linked to North American or European events. These cross-cultural encounters and linked narratives are presented in the abstract colour landscapes of Lebanese-American artist Etel Adnan, as well as in the large-scale paintings of American Julie Mehretu. While Adnan's pieces document a search for a non-national, worldly pictorial language, Mehretu links recent political events, taking architectural drawings from Tahrir Square as well as Zuccotti Park in Manhattan – where the Occupy-Wall-Street movement camped – and translates them into large-scale drawings on canvas.

The fact that art can initiate discussion and sometimes even profound social change has likely never before been made so clear as in dOCUMENTA (13). Christov-Bakargiev abandoned a curatorial concept in favour of opening a broad platform for discourse. What better approach could there be to acknowledge the prominent role of art in our time? 



dOCUMENTA (13) continues in Kassel until 16 September. For more information visit <http://d13.documenta.de>