

The sublime whiff of criticality

Radical Culture Research Collective

Documenta has always had a political agenda. The first Documenta, organized by Arnold Bode in 1955, was intended to signal to the international art world that the dark days of Nazi philistinism were definitively over: Germany's demonstrative openness to 'avant-garde' art could be taken as a clear confirmation to its Cold War-Western Allies of the Bonn republic's reliability as a partner. The democratic constitution imposed on West Germany did not necessarily produce the reflection needed on the fascist past. In many ways, the new democracy continued the imperative of anti-communism by other means. The first Documenta made the rehabilitation of *entartete Kunst* ('degenerate art') its main concern. But this was accomplished selectively: politically committed artists of the Left were overlooked in favour of those using the language of abstraction. In the German national context, support for non-figurative art was a way of demonstrating a link back to the 'degenerate' culture condemned by the Nazis – but without endorsing the anti-fascist avant-garde of Grosz and Heartfield. Internationally, meanwhile, alignment with New York-centred abstraction served the Cold War cultural strategy of opposing the alleged universality and vitality of capitalist art to Eastern Bloc social realism. With only mild exceptions, this politically strategic cultural model was fostered by the Documentas through the following decades. Over the years, this implicit logic of national restoration attracted increasing official and corporate sponsorship.

The first real disturbance to this pattern was Catherine David's Documenta 10 (1997), which imposed an unprecedented self-reflection upon the institution. Deliberately going beyond the bounds of the art system, David involved legions of critical theorists, in effect transforming the exhibition into an impressive and sustained event for reflection on the relations between politics and poetics after 1945. Five years later, Okwui Enwezor 'globalized' Documenta to an unprecedented degree, while also giving more focus to the critical-theoretical frame: the exhibition was wrapped by four discursive 'platforms' that grappled with the problems of unrealized democracy, truth and reconciliation processes, and sprawling mega-cities

beyond the capitalist core. We are not claiming that these two Documentas were beyond criticism; only that they broke with the prevailing logic of the Kassel exhibition in significant ways. However, neither scared away the official or corporate sponsors. Rather, they established the critical exhibition as a legitimate and acceptable form of cultural critique.

New institutionalism

While David and Enwezor tried to reject the politics of earlier Documentas by insisting on what had been deliberately omitted, Documenta 12 Artistic Director Roger Buerger called for a return to a more traditional focus on aesthetic values. Back, then, to the bourgeois aesthetics that underwrote the Documentas up to David's. Buerger announced the change in the *International Herald Tribune*: 'For this year's documenta, you don't need a sociology degree to understand the art.' While this shift seems at first to be a rejection of the transformations in the logic of Documenta attempted by David and Enwezor, it actually announced that these transformations – basically, the valorization of criticality – have been successfully integrated into a new, neoliberal cultural strategy. With the Documenta Magazines Project, criticality is retained and exhibited, but now in a merely token form. The critique of the institution and its logic has been converted into an asset of the very same institution. The practical result is that critique is in large part pre-empted: since the institution itself is already critical, it can be entrusted with the task of (self-)criticism.

In this, Documenta is hardly unique. It merely exemplifies what has been called the New Institutionalism. Currently a buzzword in discussions of curatorial practice, New Institutionalism is alleged to be a pathway for institutional transformation based on principles of participation. In 'The Institution is Dead! Long Live the Institution!' Claire Doherty defines it as a curatorial tendency that

responds to (some might even say assimilates) the working methods of artistic practice and, furthermore, artist-run initiatives, whilst maintaining a belief in the gallery, museum or arts centre, and by

association their buildings, as a necessary locus of, or platform for, art.

What are the ideologies that comprise New Institutionalism? And how are they at work in Documenta?

The first is professionalism – that is, the idea that institutions serve as better safeguards against the influences of the market than smaller, less established organizations, which are perceived to be unpredictable, amateurish and at times too dangerously subcultural and entrepreneurial. Larger institutions are seen as more professional, and are thus thought to be better suited to upholding standards for critical art practice and publishing. Second is the belief that larger, state-funded institutions (art or otherwise) are in a better position to defend the gains of women, minorities and other marginalized groups than are smaller or more ad hoc organizations or social movements, which lack institutional clout, respectability, skills or resources. Any conflict or dialectic between smaller and larger art institutions – and in the parallel terms of social movements, between grassroots activism and structures such as NGOs, political parties or the state – is sidestepped as unproductive and unnecessary. Under the regime of New Institutionalism, self-organized initiatives become invisible, redundant and undesirable.

Institutions like Documenta thus tend to become hegemonic, incorporating the efforts of smaller organizations and individuals. Since Documenta incorporates everything, it can simultaneously claim the institutional authority of the museum and also the (formerly external) critical and oppositional position of smaller groups and organizations. Here we recognize the neoliberal strategy of co-opting conflict and incorporating it into carefully controlled internal management – Tony Blair’s ‘One Big Tent’ beneath which CEOs and people on welfare happily coexist. In this schema, conflict is simply counterproductive and inefficient. Its irruptions may be described as fits of immature and irrational pique, and eventually associated with ‘terrorism’.

Documenta exemplifies the ambiguous status of prestigious, non-market events and with this the limits of non-economic capital. This can be seen clearly in the Magazines Project, in which the ninety independent art and theory magazines taking part were invited to participate without economic remuneration. Instead of cheques that pay the rent, the magazines had to settle for forms of recognition and other benefits that are generally characterized as non-economic forms of capital: symbolic, social and cultural. As developed by Bourdieu, the notion of non-monetary capital was a conceptual tool designed to unmask class domination.

The degradation of this analytical concept by Richard Florida and others has turned it into class-neutral shorthand for the non-profit sector. Today, Bourdieu’s terms are most often used to euphemize or normalize exploitative relations – and are conducive to making these relations acceptable even within critical contexts, such as Documenta.

Most of the journals and magazines involved in the magazine project are small, relatively marginal, non-profit or otherwise financially precarious organizations. But they are also potentially ‘the next big thing’, hot, radical, and so on. Most have little choice but to accept opportunities offering visibility. This is particularly true of invitations to participate in Documenta, which enjoys the reputation of being the most critical and serious of all the international art events – a kind of global standard for criticality. This inherited reputation – accumulated non-economic capital – is a primary element in the swirling mix of expectation and desire that makes Documenta such an appealing artworld brand.

Small, precarious critical publications obviously find it difficult to be indifferent to Documenta’s offer; agreeing to work for free, producing content for Documenta and thus confirming its critical reputation, in return for the *possibility* that they may be able to convert their participation into money or other opportunities in the future. Directly or indirectly, the effect of these forms of exchange is that contestational forms of criticality – especially those from radical or anti-institutional orientations – tend to be self-censored. One must ‘play nice’, or at least ‘not make a stink’, in order to garner social capital (connections, opportunities), or so as not to endanger one’s place in a community. Artists from Vienna, the epicentre of this Documenta’s organization, in particular experienced this dynamic, which is typical of local art scenes. In any case, the tokenism of the criticality generated by the Magazines Project was clear from the mode in which it was presented in Kassel: all the journals and magazines are *exhibited* as immobile objects, in a way that strongly discourages actually reading them.

Outsourcing risk

In emergent forms of capitalist business management, the integration of enterprises is achieved by concentrating control within administrative centres while simultaneously dispersing or outsourcing ‘creative labour’ to individuals or smaller enterprises with a higher tolerance for risk and casualized, project-based working environments. As a result, major consortia are buffered from market risk, which is borne by the individuals and

small groups of project-based labourers. The dynamic is the same when work formerly done by trained employees is outsourced to large, generally unpaid groups of people through open calls, competitions and other 'reality TV'-like scenarios. The result is a wholesale outsourcing of risk. What holds for business holds true for other institutions as well.

Today, large art institutions such as Documenta, Tate Modern, the VanAbbe Museum or the Museu D'art Contemporani de Barcelona can lay claim to both consecrated and risky forms of cultural production. In this model, independent forms of cultural production are 'networked' into larger institutions, instead of posing a challenge or presenting an alternative. As the Euromayday Hamburg activists observed, the institution now 'takes up crucial mechanisms of self-organized projects' through incorporating their efforts. In this way, remote, marginal or emergent activities can be exploited, or, better, conditions for self-exploitation can be created.

Why were the participating magazines and journals unable to generate a collective reflection and response to the exploitative outsourcing of research through this scheme? In an increasingly competitive and precarious

environment, there is a sense that any exposure, any reputation-building, may lead to some financial stability. According to this logic, turning down any offer becomes a suicidal gesture.

The prevalence of exploitation and self-exploitation within the art field points to the necessity of a systemic analysis that can grasp these processes of neutralizing incorporation and their functions within contemporary global capitalism. And because our participation in these structures is due to the underlying feeling that we have no choice, the need for alternatives also becomes urgent. This means both articulating and enacting alternative values: values that lead some people to decline participation, to put their investment in 'symbolic capital' at risk by being critical and making trouble; to express the desire for recognition in new non-competitive terms.

How can the desire for recognition be reconfigured in terms of solidarity, rather than as a competition for the crumbs? How do we organize collectively so that those who refuse to 'play nice' do not do so alone? What can be learned from social movements, in order that critique resist abstraction into a curatorial theme or seminar topic that leads to no actual change?

The Radical Culture Research Collective (RCRC) is a group of activists, artists, researchers and writers in Berlin, Hamburg, London (UK), Montreal, London (Canada), New York, San Francisco, Tampa, Weimar and Vienna that aims to build structures and processes for criticizing the capitalist art system, reflect on politicized artistic practices, and develop modes of militant praxis within and without the field of art. Our recent discussions have revolved around the ways in which criticality is recuperated through neo-liberal managerialism. One of the members of our collective, an editor of MALMOE, co-authored a critical response to the Documenta 12 Magazines Project, which we have drawn upon here.



The documenta team is also driving Saab BioPower cars, with four exclusive and prestigious 9-5 SportCombi 2.0t BioPower models. The artistic director of this year's documenta, Roger M. Buergel, received a white **Saab 9-3 Cabrio**.



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Magazines field, or, the next Documenta should be curated by magazines

Patricia Canetti with Leandro de Paula

Canal Contemporâneo

I attended Documenta 12 on two different occasions: in June, for the show's opening, and in July, in order to participate with *Canal Contemporâneo* in the Magazines Project's Lunch Lectures. Each visit was marked by an image of Friedrich Platz, Kassel's main square, around which Documenta takes place. In June, the square was empty, its flower beds full of dry earth, scorched by the then-intense heat, a soil in which it was difficult to picture Croatian artist Sanja Iveković's installation, 'Poppy Field'.¹ On the second visit, I stepped out of the tram into the square and, when I lifted my head, found a sea of red poppies radiating in the late afternoon sun. Simply glorious.

This contrast between the June and the July images of Friedrich Platz is something of an allegory for the contradictory feelings aroused by Documenta 12 and its Magazines Project. The promise of a network of publications from diverse countries, brought together to discuss the most relevant themes of the planet's most important art exhibition, certainly amounted to an interesting invitation.² More than that, it was a brilliant idea: a vision of authors and editors meeting on an online platform specially conceived for the discussion, lasting for ten long months, demanded daring, breadth and enthusiasm. At the end of such an adventure, we would have seen all content published online, open to the public, so as to feed both the participant magazines and the three printed *Magazine* editions – one for each theme – linking up multiple collaborations from all over the world to the ideas of curators and artists present in the show.³ And that was not all. We could imagine the sequel to this meeting that we might elaborate together: an international theoretical-artistic web, biased towards permanent exchange. For me, a digital community activist artist, a real radiant poppy garden.

However, what we lived with for more than a year of the project's cycle up to the opening of Documenta 12 was a dry earth flower bed. The online tool promised

for May 2006 was made available only in February 2007. Devoid of the digital environment where the nature of the initiative could be understood from its own development, the diverse group of participants became an unfocused and ossified collective, snarled in Documenta's bureaucratic dynamics.

The three printed editions – *Modernity?*, *Life!* and *Education* – were not the fruit of a publications network, because such a network simply never came to exist. What promised to be a daring collaboration became a tool of institutional visibility. This kidnapping was clear at the show's opening, from the small space allotted to the Magazines Project in the Documenta Halle, the omission of the names of publications from the exhibition's catalogue, and the way that participating magazines were classified on their passes as 'Press'. Nothing against the press, but such a detail announced the new function that had been delegated to us, so different from the original idea that had seduced us all.

At the opening, despite there being few participating magazines, and despite the atmosphere of frustration that engulfed us at that moment, we managed to experience a spark of such network. There we were sat around a table, *Brumaria*, *Canal Contemporâneo*, *Chto delat'?*, *Empyre*, *Pages* and *Radical Philosophy*, discussing, finally. At the same time as each of us shared our disappointment, we tried to discover possible paths to be taken and to analyse their difficulties. The blind spot in the project, regarding the exchange of contributions between the participating publications, was that a waiving of copyright was not sufficient, because of the language barrier, and with it the financial hindrance of translation costs.

With the mutilation of the project and the language problem disrupting its development, all that was left was the meeting. This spontaneous gathering, originating in the exchange of emails, informally anticipated what had been designed for the participation of the



Magazines during the exhibition itself: meetings and chats among a group of participating magazines, mixing with invited artists, critics, curators and educators, in the course of Documenta 12's hundred days. This final stage became the project's last opportunity to realize its essential idea: the establishment of a publications network.

Back in Kassel the following month, to take part in the *Paper and Pixel* week, which brought together the publications *Canal Contemporâneo*, *Concrete Reflection*, *Empyre*, *Esfera Pública*, *Neural*, *Sab0t* and *Zehar*, we tried to extract from this last phase new exchanges that would allow us a glimpse of a future. Again, after sharing and clearing our sense of frustration, common interests and important revelations emerged. We enjoyed the surprise of learning the story of *mag.net*,⁴ its attempt to create a network of publications, and their contribution to the origin and development of the Magazines Project.

Different moments, diverse interests, paper or pixel, with more or fewer collaborators, the story has shown the difficulties that independent publications face in carrying out their work anywhere on the planet. It would not be different with the building of this network. It is necessary to develop tools that can widen contact and our collaborative potency, without, however, losing our individual features and the critical stance common to our independent practices. All this becomes even more complex with the present configuration linked to a big institution such as Documenta. Sometimes I think

that the name Magazines has confused the institution's focus. It considered it sufficient to amass publications in great numbers, failing to understand that the force of the project would not rest on the number of cells in this organism, but instead on the quality of the synapses produced. The experience of this project swings like a pendulum between real expectations and digital frustrations, a handful of potencies and ossifications typical of such big institutions.

The poppy field shows that even in dry soil it is nonetheless possible to move ahead, provided one can gather the necessary elements and wait for the right time for their development. In his text 'The Beauty of Printing and the Glory of Networking', published in *mag.net*, Andreas Broeckmann defines the paradox of networking as being that 'those who most need the help from others are usually those who most invest in the strengthening of networks.'⁵ The challenge is to orchestrate focus and the premisses of particular works with contemporary art's global context and to understand the real role played by independent media in a cyber-connected scenario.

Perhaps the best way is to stimulate the flourishing of this field grounded on the slow but concrete force of small exchanges. The debate about the value of the Magazines Project, taking in the worst sense of the adjective 'virtual', seems a tangible beginning. The next Documenta should be curated by magazines.⁶

Translated by Gavin Adams

Notes

1. www.documenta12.de/index.php?id=1049&L=1.
2. www.canalcontemporaneo.art.br/documenta12magazines/_v2/sections.php?id=6&page=2#presentation.
3. <http://magazines.documenta.de>.
4. <http://magnet-ecp.org>.
5. <http://magnet-ecp.org/The-Beauty-of-Printing-and-the-Glory-of-Networking>.
6. Cf. 'The Next Documenta Should Be Curated by an Artist': www.e-flux.com/projects/next_doc/index.html

Canal Contemporâneo (www.canalcontemporaneo.art.br) holds and spreads information, knowledge and debate about Brazilian contemporary art in its different online modules. Basing itself on the concepts of Virtual Community (Rheingold), Radical Media (Downing) and Tactical Media (Garcia/Lovink), it has been effective in rousing communication and interaction, connecting people and institutions around the twenty-seven Brazilian states and over eighty countries. Its activism guides frequent journal articles and has encouraged political mobilization, for example, for the inclusion of the Digital Art in the scope of the Brazilian Cultural Funding laws (2004). Canal Contemporâneo took part in exhibitions such as *hiPer> relações eletro//digitais* (*hiPer>electro//digital relations*), curated by Daniela Bousso (Santander Cultural, Porto Alegre, Brazil), *Tudo aquilo que escapa* (*Everything that escapes*), curated by Cristiana Tejo (Museu do Estado, Recife, Brazil), *Ocupação*, (*Paço das Artes, São Paulo*).

The big lie

Dario Corbeira and Irene Montero, *Brumaria*

When *Brumaria* was invited to take part in the Documenta 12 Magazines Project, in February 2006, we were filled with enthusiasm. We drew up an ambitious project, 'Art: The Radical Political Imagination', which, based on post-1968 experiences and recent experiments in counter-hegemonic practices, tried to set up some critical-theoretical points of departure through a congress, two seminars, an online discussion and three issues of the printed publication.¹ However, the invitation had some special conditions: we had to respond to the three questions/leitmotivs that were to articulate the exhibition — 'Is modernity our antiquity?', 'Bare life?' and 'What is to be done?' From the outset, we found these questions ambiguous, shallow and excessively abstract, but at the same time, this ambiguity allowed us to tackle other subjects we were more interested in.

We thought it excessive that Documenta was asking us to contribute without giving us 'anything' in return, other than its image and its success in the media. Nevertheless, the Magazines Project appeared to be an interesting venture that would make it possible for us to establish relations with other editorial teams across the world and have different kinds and formats of exchange. From our perspective, it is important to open a global discussion about the social, political and cultural characteristics of the present and their reflection in, and contradictions and similarities with, the proposals, images and power-platforms that contemporary art is running; questions about forms of

government, global war, political artistic and editorial practice.

Finally, at the opening of the exhibition itself, we realized what Documenta 12 consisted in. The contributions of the ninety-five editorial teams, the transregional meetings (about which we have received no information), the materials contributed by the magazines, and the relations that had been established between magazines had not been useful. Documenta 12 looked just like the big five-year event that triumphant neoliberalism needs these days. One could feel the terrible 'richness' that the old and new Right are putting into the political playground, in contrast to a diminished and weak Left incapable of producing any changes, no matter how tiny.

In this context, art institutions, located within the culture industry inside an ideologically fragile cultural capitalism, are going through a moment we could describe as delicate and dubious, which places the market on top of all other discursive considerations. The 'Grand Tour' of Venice–Basel–Kassel–Münster, which Documenta should never have entered, became a planetary tribute to Art Basel, the market in its purest form, while the rest of the events have been criticized from all imaginable points of view. The art market has never had either so much power or so many consensuses around it. Documenta could have offered an analysis of the situation, making clear that there are more options when building a 'great exhibition' than the univocal market. But its view that simply by

avoiding the 'Top 100' artists it could keep away from the market just reinforced it.

In our opinion, there were two negative vectors in the Magazines Project. On the one hand, the time was insufficient to prepare such an ambitious project of exchanges. On the other hand, there was the enormous discrepancy between the director's and curator's (Buerger's and Noack's) exhibition and the theoretical approaches and texts provided by the more than ninety magazines. The three volumes edited by Documenta 12 Magazines, *Modernity*, *Life!* and *Education* (supposedly, a selection from the contributing magazines), reflect the interests of the curatorial team rather than the concerns of the editorial teams involved in the project; mirroring the weak conceptual and textual content of Documenta's catalogue. This catalogue, together with the exhibition's 'image book' and the three volumes, are an archive unconnected to the concerns, projects, ideological substratum and militant positions of the magazines. We could say the same about the 'transregional meetings' and the 'lunch lectures' scheduled in Documenta Halle during the '100 days'. These meetings and seminars continue the keynotes of the project: lack of propositional and ideological clarity, confusion about time and content, and a general lack of structure. The Magazines Project was the big lie of Documenta 12.

It was a huge discourtesy that Documenta and its director were not capable of inviting and assembling the magazines involved in Kassel and that Roger Buerger had no contact with them. The art market and the art bourgeoisie take artists' and theoreticians' 'immaterial production' more seriously than this. Documenta, which might have been expected to take its own intellectual, moral and political heritage more

seriously, seems to have been playing another game, in another discipline, and in a very strange place.

However, more positively, in spite of the problems, the brief and messy past, contacts between a significant number of editorial teams involved in art and cultural criticism have begun, the benefits of which we hope we shall see in the future. We have proposed continuing Documenta 12 Magazines beyond autumn 2007, expanding the project in time and possibilities, since from the beginning we believed in the necessity of this kind of association. We still think the Magazines Project has to constitute itself as an association of global counter-hegemony making possible the circulation of plural proposals and discourses. We live in a world that is politically unidirectional, economically anarchical and socially unfair, where the international Art Institution has become a big circus that takes place at art fairs and biennial exhibitions. In this circus the hegemonic magazines (*Artforum*, *Parkett*, *Flash Art*, *Frieze*, *October*) play a role that hardly questions the classist and perverse nature of this institution. Documenta 12 Magazines is already, in its own definition, a platform that can and should break the comfortable situation in which the Art Institution finds itself nowadays.

Notes

1. In the end, the project was reduced to a congress on Art and Revolution, a seminar with some of the staff from the Magazines Project and other editors taking part, and the publication of two Brumaria issues – *Brumaria 7: Art, Machines, Immaterial Work*, and *Brumaria 8: Art and Revolution*. Right now (August 2007), we are preparing a seminar, 'Money, Lies and Contemporary Art Centers', to take place in Kassel in September, along with a new issue devoted to Documenta 12 Magazines, *Brumaria 9*, consisting of a compilation of contributions from Documenta 12 Magazines' online platform.



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Brumaria 8 **Art and Revolution** " Spanish & English version "

Alexander Alberro
Jane Crawford
Alice Creischer &
Andreas Siekmann
Brian Holmes
Ana Longoni
Gerardo Mosquera
Suely Rolnik
Gregory Sholette
Eduardo Subirats
Feng Yuan

Brumaria 9 **Modernity? Life!** " Spanish & English version "

Roger M. Buergel
Art & Language
Marius Babias
Leo Bersani
Judith Butler
Andreas Huyssen
Maurizio Lazzarato
Pamela M. Lee
Mark Lewis
Jacques Rancière
Slavoj Žižek
Roger M. Buergel
Keti Chukhrov
Dario Corbeira
Carlos Jiménez
Oliver Marchart

