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History Lessons

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Abstract (Summary)

With the glitzy yachts moored in the Grand Canal's shallow waters and the parties hosted by galleries in charmingly forlorn palazzi-not to speak of the Netjets phenomenon-all pretensions that contemporary art remains a site for the articulation of new positions and for new kinds of encounters between curators and artists, critics and historians, art and audiences, were all but drowned in the algae-ridden canals. (Thinking closer to our own time, one sees Francesco Bonami's Venice Biennale in 2003, for which he enlisted a group of collaborators who, like him, had mostly established their credentials in the '90s, as a kind of coda to that period.) You will no doubt notice the omission from the preceding list of Art Basel, which a decade ago was a respectable affair, an important conclave for contemporary and modern art.

Full Text (4180 words)

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ONCE EVERY DECADE SINCE 1977, a unique summertime convergence of large-scale European exhibitions-the Venice Biennale, Documenta, and Skulptur Projekte Münster-transforms the ecology of contemporary art into a spectacular field of display, production, multiple curatorial conceits, gossip, and ennui. In previous years when these shows' cycles have become synchronized, the entire art world has seemed to follow the same route, making the long, exhausting trip from one old European city to another like a caravan trailing a summer carnival. Inevitably, this endeavor was attended by the strange experience of encountering the same people-artists, curators, writers, collectors, and assorted groupies-all over, in different cities, and seeing their enthusiasm in bright, sunny Italy gently turn to jaded fatigue as their travels continued through gloomy, soggy Germany. But this year seemed different.

Even before the gates of the Giardini opened to the public at the Venice Biennale, a striking, unspoken sense of doom and boredom seemed to have set in among the art-world pilgrims starting their journey across the continent-an expedition that would this summer mix together the serious and the curious, the outlandish and the bombastic, to an alarming degree. And attending this atmosphere was an extravagant spirit that seemed the rule, one conjured in no small part by petit local collections inflating their cultural value by way of supersize surplus value (here, François Pinault's Palazzo Grassi has no competition). With the glitzy yachts moored in the Grand Canal's shallow waters and the parties hosted by galleries in charmingly forlorn palazzi-not to speak of the Netjets phenomenon-all pretensions that contemporary art remains a site for the articulation of new positions and for new kinds of encounters between curators and artists, critics and historians, art and audiences, were all but drowned in the algae-ridden canals.

To say this much about the state of contemporary art is not to lapse into nostalgia for a supposedly more genteel, serious time, for art always follows the money (even if today it can hardly run fast enough to keep pace). That said, one does wonder whether something has changed fundamentally. Something about this year's group of exhibitions, with their funereal pallor, prompts one to ask, Does the money-drenched condition of contemporary art spell the end for the kind of curatorial irreverence and ingenuity that transformed the art world in the '90s into a truly global affair? Do the mordant and even hostile responses to this year's Venice Biennale, Documenta, and Skulptur Projekte Munster on the part of professionals and general audiences alike signal that the paradigm of the large-scale show-which once represented a unique grammar of exhibition practice-has hit an iceberg and is about to sink? In the prolix environment of art fairs and endless institutional group shows that make no attempt to hide their pilfering of ideas from previous biennials and Documentas, have these grand exhibitions become victims of their own radical difference?

In order to consider these questions as they arise from any experience of the so-called Grand Tour-an anachronistic label for this year's trio of shows that, in truth, only hints at the level of dehistoricization at which the contemporary art field is currently operating-it is important to remind ourselves of the curatorial developments that took place in the '90s, for there was during that decade a significant shift within the arena of contemporary art. The end of the cold war, the collapse of totalitarian regimes in Eastern Europe, and the fall of apartheid in South Africa spurred a critical reappraisal of the conditions of artistic production and of the systems by which such production was legitimated and admitted into the broader field of cultural production, to use Pierre Bourdieu's terminology. It was within this field that

one began to experience the critical artistic changes that were then occurring, along with curatorial responses of a kind that had been largely absent in the exhibitions of the '80s, a period uncannily analogous to the present in terms of the authority, power, and irrational exuberance of the art market. At that earlier historical moment, important questions around identity, difference, and multiculturalism were often debated by curators taking into account only the crudest oppositions in artists' work. In the '90s, however, contemporary art took an entirely new direction, as a coalescing of postcolonialism and globalization changed the principles under which curatorial practice advanced artistic and critical analyses of aesthetic and cultural canons. There was a shift in curatorial language from one whose reference systems belonged to an early twentieth-century modernity to one more attuned to the tendencies of the twenty-first century. (The common practice of excluding non-Western artists from the discursive forums of international exhibition halls here became untenable.) But it was only in the summer of 1997 that a critical mass of such curatorial ambition was finally perceptible, crystallized as it was in this trio of shows' once-a-decade synchronicity. I remember very well the striking atmosphere of that moment: The exhibitions—from Germano Celant's expansive Venice Biennale and Catherine David's intellectually rich Documenta 10 to Kasper König's scintillating and celebratory Skulptur Projekte Münster—were a powerful series of thought experiments as different from each other as they were opposed to the market. (Thinking closer to our own time, one sees Francesco Bonami's Venice Biennale in 2003, for which he enlisted a group of collaborators who, like him, had mostly established their credentials in the '90s, as a kind of coda to that period.)

You will no doubt notice the omission from the preceding list of Art Basel, which a decade ago was a respectable affair, an important conclave for contemporary and modern art. Everyone understood Basel's limits: It was a marketplace of objects, not of ideas; and it did not feature a program that anyone would ever consider a counterpart of intellectually and critically inflected exhibitions like Venice et al. To my mind, the distinction is important and served everyone's interests—or at least served them much better than does the circus that has since erupted across the entire circuit. Art Basel, like many other art fairs, is no longer content to play the role of a commercial enterprise. Rather, it seeks to bill itself as an intellectual leader and, to that end, convenes panels, symposia, film screenings, and a variety of commissioned projects. Its most vital coup to date is the grossly obese Art Unlimited, the so-called curated section of the fair, which showcases contemporary art in a cavernous exhibition hall that seems to have been designed to house a lot of spectacularly large, loud, bright art. Even respected curators and artists have come to ply their trades here, lending a certain gravitas to the proceedings. One could say that Art Unlimited, when it debuted in 2000, was the very first intimation of the impending obsolescence of large-scale exhibitions, for it not only mimics biennials but also thoroughly literalizes the notion of the "large"-being, as it is, the depository of mammoth artistic concoctions that won't fit into the modestly scaled booths in which gallerists set up shop. One could also say that Art Basel as a whole has, in turn, evolved into a parody of large-scale exhibitions. The event aims not so much to blend the crass with the serious as to exist in the gap between the two modes—arguing, in a strange way, for its own cultural relevance in direct competition with Venice, Kassel, and Münster.

This argument for the art fair as a new arbiter of curatorial judgment has been, if not entirely accepted, quite successful. Indeed, based on my own informal survey during and after this summer's events, many people spent more time in Basel than they did in Kassel. However, the curatorial assertiveness of art fairs—and the increasing gravitation toward them by curators and even philosophers, as evidenced by Jacques Rancière's participation in the Frieze Art Fair's lecture program—intimate not so much an expansion of possibilities in curatorial practice as a crisis in non-market-based exhibition making as it slowly approaches a kind of tertiary stage. Art Basel's success is such that it infects the very air in which contemporary art functions, lives, and breathes; and it produces atmospheric effects that absolutely must be taken into account when seeking to articulate any critical appraisal of this summer's large-scale exhibitions. Regarding Art Basel, one was bound to read in a breathy, gossipy special insert of the Financial Times that more art had been sold than ever, more money generated, more records broken, more parallel art fairs established; artists were designing exhibition booths, instant collections were established, everyone's appetites were sated. Experienced against the foil of the roaring Art Basel, the deflationary tenor of the Grand Tour was all the more apparent.

In Venice, this was to some extent due to a decisive return to an '80s sensibility in Robert Storr's "Think with the Senses, Feel with the Mind: Art in the Present Tense," where the Italian pavilion has become, either by design or by default, a cemetery for abstract, expensive, blue-chip paintings by Ellsworth Kelly, Gerhard Richter, Susan Rothenberg, and Robert Ryman, with Sigmar Polke's gigantic, oddly vacuous panels setting the stage for what becomes a punishing exercise in revanchist melancholia. The Arsenale fares no better. True, the exhibition is immaculately presented—and why should it be otherwise?—but it's also antiseptic, the setting more suited to a highbrow retrospective than to a committed attempt to present a truly compelling aesthetic view of what it means to live and make art in this most unruly time of ours. The so-called authority of art that was supposed to be the *cri de coeur* of Storr's Biennale feels largely absent from "Think with the Senses, Feel with the Mind," although there was some outstanding work: Steve McQueen's film on the Congo, *Gravesend*, 2007, by far the most absorbing and disturbing work by a contemporary artist I have seen this year; Francis Alys's installation in the Arsenale, a layered take on experience and perception; Emily Jacir's iconological excavation of murdered Palestinian insurgent, intellectual, and romantic Wael Zuaiter; El Anatsui's handmade, tinkered swaths of metal drapery hung in cascades of shimmering splendor; and Philippe Parreno's sound and sculptural installation.

A few of the national pavilions are noteworthy as well. For her installation *Oil*, 2007, Isa Genzken rigged the exterior of

the German pavilion to resemble that of a building undergoing renovation; the mirrored interior served as a setting for a revisitation of America's '60s space-program propaganda, the goal of transcendental democratization symbolized by the Apollo program here embodied by dummy astronauts, some supine on the floor, some floating overhead. There are stunning exhibitions by Gerard Byrne, in the Irish pavilion, and Willie Doherty, in the pavilion for Northern Ireland. And in the Uruguayan pavilion, Ernesto Vila's installation *imágenes (des) imágenes*, 2006-2007, is simple, poetic, and powerful, devoid of spectacular effects and grandiosity yet alive in its sharpness. It is also well worth traveling beyond the Giardini to see Angela Ferreira's Portuguese pavilion; Ferreira engages in an archaeology of modernism, tropical architecture, and colonialism via Jean Prouvé's *Maison Tropicale*, a 1951 housing prototype for colonial French Africa. Finally, there is the off-site Lebanese pavilion, where Walid Sadek's succinct presentation on civil war-in which a short essay titled "Mourning in the Presence of the Corpse" was mounted on the wall and available as a take-away printout-is a thorough encapsulation of the potential of contemporary art by other means.

That said, Australia shows what can happen when countries ratchet up their competitive spirit: Galium Morton's *Valhalla*, 2007, a giant architectural construction, is simply overproduced, expensive, and empty, though Susan Norrie's videos manage to be engaging despite their all-too-earnest environmentalism. Sophie Calle's *Take Care of Yourself*, 2007, in the French pavilion, is a hysterically funny soap opera-a perfect parody of the battle of the sexes-but ultimately a cliché example of a peculiar Calle obsession with staging herself as the victim in a failed love affair (recall her earlier piece *Douleur Exquise [Exquisite Pain]*, 1984-2003); while Tracey Emin's British pavilion is, alas, just desperate.

If the Venice Biennale therefore seemed like a strange complement to Basel-blue-chip paintings and artistic brand names were accorded prominence in each-Documenta 12, seeking to abrogate any relationship to art fairs, cosmopolitanism, or the allegedly decadent white cube, took a radically revisionist stance. Prior to my arrival, the rumor mill was abuzz with reports that a disaster had occurred in Kassel. The emotional refrain was on the order of consternation, confusion, incredulity, and opprobrium. In fact, arriving a few days after the preview, I soon learned that some German critics of a leftist, quasi-Frankfurt-school persuasion had even set up a kind of euratorium-in-exile, where artistic director Roger M. Buergel and his partner and cocurator Ruth Noack were on trial in absentia for curatorial crimes. Here it should be said that, because I was artistic director of Documenta 11, I approach Documenta 12 from a vantage of intimate proximity to the institution. Knowing too well the feeling of beleagueredness induced by know-it-all sidewalk critics, I found that my immediate sympathies were with the curators-even as it was overwhelmingly obvious to me that my curatorial stance and that of Buergel and Noack are radically opposed.

It was immediately clear, I thought, that the primary item on Documenta 12's agenda was the creation of a self-contained aesthetic and intellectual universe - and therein lies the confounding importance of Documenta 12. Due to the relative isolation of Kassel from the rest of the contemporary art scene, Documenta is one of the rare institutions capable of marching to the beat of its own drum. If it does not quite invent its own reality, it may nevertheless set the terms for its own critical reception. The project's potential detachment is, in other words, its strength. And in the case of Documenta 12, there is an abundance of detachment. In fact, sometimes this willful remove leads the project into unproductive *culs-de-sac*. In the attempt to see their goal of resistance through to the bitter end, Buergel and Noack arrive at a series of curatorial mannerisms: no white cube, therefore candy-colored walls; no whitewash lighting, therefore dim spotlights; no heavy walls, therefore flimsy partitions; no artistic hagiographies, therefore a catalogue with no information whatsoever about the artists or their work. Buergel and Noack's unrelenting attempt to prove themselves contrary here becomes a trap; their effort devolves into a highly sensitive self-consciousness that may be interpreted as a lack of confidence in their quietly interesting take on the dichotomous relationship of major exhibition and minor art. (The selection is notable for the underknown, the peripheral, and the modest.)

Indeed, by following their own gambit to the letter, as one visiting artist from India pointed out to me, the pair risks focusing on objects and form such that they neglect the nuances of individual practices and the social contexts in which works were produced. Subtending the entire exhibition is the curators' notion of "migration of form"-a term designating the way in which particular formal styles and strategies may traverse territories and eras. And so works are installed so as to highlight formal correspondences, and a number of artists-Kerry James Marshall, John McCracken, Charlotte Posenenske, Martha Rosier - "migrate" through the show, constantly popping up across the different venues. These recurrences are an impediment to thoroughly understanding the roles to which the artists have been assigned. In the case of McCracken, his ubiquity and the shocking emptiness of his adamantine slabs, wedges, and columns led me to suspect that the curators mean to wholly reinvent him, for the purposes of the exhibition, as a goofy character at whom we can all laugh, his ham-fisted early psychotropic paintings heightening our amusement. For me, he became less and less an artist; his polished sculptures became the ultimate image of banality, doorstops to prop open the portals through which other forms may migrate in a series of color-coded juxtapositions. Meanwhile, Marshall's stupendously complex psychological allegories of the American experience and the racial self are thoroughly neutered, particularly in an unfortunate and offensive juxtaposition in the Museum Schloss Wilhelmshöhe-a neoclassical castle that houses an exquisite collection of Rembrandt, Rubens, Hals, and Cranach and which resides in a sprawling park dotted, like a late-Enlightenment amusement park, with classical ruins. In this hilltop redoubt, Marshall's portraits of the Ellisonian invisibility of black men are installed right under a seventeenth-century painting of caricatured black figures. It was here that my residue of sympathy for the migration of form evaporated. The installation seemed to betray a complete misunderstanding of the historical questions Marshall has engaged

throughout his career. To wit: Racial iconography may seem a mild joke in Vienna, but it is certainly not a joke in the complicated moral geography of the United States. That Buerger and Noack have so little understanding of this is stunning.

But despite the condemnations, and however contradictory it may appear to say so after having aired such reservations, the curators to my thinking are at the height of their powers in Documenta 12. If intellectual snobbery is what is necessary to focus attention on the crisis of legitimation that now besets both artistic and curatorial practice as a form of cultural analysis, then so be it. Buerger and Noack appear to have grasped this going in, and to have known that in order to set themselves apart, they would have to invent a rather strange grammar. With their laconic attitude, they seem to be taking a piss, and a bit of bitter revenge, on the "bourgeois" art world that trades in commodity objects.

I believe Documenta 12 is the first exhibition in a long time to successfully articulate a contrarian position regarding the question of the display of contemporary art. That it ultimately proves unsuccessful is beside the point, because it is a spirited response to the takeover of artistic subjectivity by agents of the market. Of all the exhibitions this summer, Documenta 12 is the only one that invites us to take a shot at it—impelling us to reject it, to quarrel with it, to debate the purpose of an exhibition as an aesthetic and intellectual experience. It reorganizes the conflation of the anthropological gaze and the aesthetic recognition of quotidian objects like Persian carpets, bridal veils, etc. It also asks why Documenta should not content itself with curatorial and artistic eclecticism, with mixing genres, forms, periods, visual aperçus, retinal puns. For all of these things, the curators should be thoroughly commended.

And there are other successful aspects of the exhibition, some quite brilliant. To my mind, the two most striking works in Documenta 12 are not works of art at all, at least in the conventional aesthetic sense. They are direct curatorial interventions into the exhibition fabric. Documenta 12 is rife with meta-artistic statements: the colored walls; the magazine project; the remote participation of chef Ferran Adria, listed on the artist roster but present only by way of invitations, extended to select visitors, to dine at his restaurant FJ Bulli, in Roses, Spain. Likely the first such statement that viewers encounter is located in the entryway of the Museum Fridericianum, traditionally Documenta's fulcrum: Walking into the museum, one finds oneself in an entry hall lined with mirror panels. The confrontation with this profusion of reflections is a shock that, I suppose, is meant to prompt visitors to adjust their aesthetic expectations. One is being introduced to the first of many *mise-en-scènes*; the stage is set for a series of theatrical gestures. In this literal hall of mirrors, viewers perceive themselves-surrounded by their own images, which recede in diminishing iterations toward a distant vanishing point—as actors in a theater of displacements. The first artwork, a mirrored bronze column by the soon-to-be-ubiquitous McCracken, is transformed into a ghost object, having been absorbed, dissolved, dematerialized by the surroundings.

After the entry hall comes the staircase—a careful reproduction of the one that was installed on the occasion of the first Documenta in 1955. (The 1955 staircase, torn out in an '80s renovation, itself replaced the original steps, which were destroyed, along with most of the rest of the museum, by Allied bombing during World War II.) This new staircase has a strange aura. It is like a kind of architectural prosthesis, an attachment meant to remind us of a lost extremity, to conjure the memory of some unacknowledged past. The rationale for this reconstruction, which the curators undertook for this exhibition, is still not clear to me, though its hint at historicizing the building may also be interpreted as a form of dehistoricization—that is, if it leads us to read the current state of the building out of sequence with Germany's twentieth-century past. This almost-revisionist attempt to restore the architectural history of Documenta is perhaps employed either to obliterate the legacy of other Documentas or to invest the current one with a new mandate. However, we must remember that the Museum Fridericianum's loss of its original staircase is owed to more than mere architectural vandalism: It is the result of a historical event, one that serves to link the building's past with the present. While the rebuilt staircase refers to the architecture's past, it is also an acknowledgment that the past can never be repaired. One can subsequently question the precise meaning of the reconstructed staircase as a symbol or sign.

As one proceeds from the Fridericianum to Documenta Halle (which was built in 1992 for Documenta 9 and has a vaguely bureaucratic ambience), to the Neue Galerie (where the color scheme reaches its apotheosis in a suite of Pepto-Bismol-pink spaces), to the Alie (a newly built venue that is like a greenhouse, or perhaps the trial equivalent of a Schrebergarten), to the 1 one goes from one decontextualization to the next. The curators—so establishing a migration of form under their sovereign authority—ardently refuse to play second fiddle to the artists or to eschew their own subjectivity. Regarding the latter dimension of their project, however: If we take full measure of the proposals of Documenta 12, we find that they share many affinities with certain curatorial predecessors. The eclecticism and regionalism here seem a nod to some of the most convincing aspects of Jean-Hubert Martin's 2000 Lyon Biennial, "Partage d'Exotisme," which was installed with theatrical casualness: billowing curtains as partitions; colored temporary walls. Documenta 12 could also be read as referencing Martin's seminal 1989 exhibition "Magiciens de la terre," which intermixed works by well-known Western artists and lesser-knowns from the supposedly geographic periphery.

In fact, despite my earlier assertions to the contrary, there might be a paradoxical contiguity here with Documenta 10 and 11, as Buerger and Noack's exhibition does not depart from curatorial trajectories charted in the '90s so much as recontextualize them. If their show was, for me, all too ordinary for its operating in many localized idioms, it

nevertheless obtained its own unique voice and character, assuming its own view of historicity. In this regard, and in the best tradition of past Documentas, it was a singularity: a reminder that one sometimes must take a road less traveled, even if that occasions mistaken detours onto other, well-trodden paths. As I consider the current crisis of large-scale exhibitions, the utter absence of passion in Venice, the mildness and all-too-pleasant nature of Münster (which might be on the way to becoming obsolete, like its predecessor, Sonsbeek), and the parody that is Art Basel, I cannot help but think, despite the hostility of the art world, that there is something in their project worth retaining. Buerger and Noack may have written a polemic, even though they wanted to write a manifesto. They threw a grenade into the arena. Though it did not explode and shatter the white cube as they intended, we must all remember James Baldwin's warning: The fire next time.

[Sidebar]

Do the mordant and even hostile responses to this year's Venice Biennale, Documenta, and Skulptur Projekte Münster on the part of professionals and general audiences alike signal that the large-scale show-which once represented a unique grammar of exhibition practice-has hit an iceberg and is about to sink?

Of all the exhibitions this summer, Documenta 12 is the only one that invites us to take a shot at it-impelling us to reject it, to quarrel with it, to debate the purpose of an exhibition as an aesthetic and intellectual experience.

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