



# The show that maps out art's future

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## At the huge four-yearly Documenta exhibition in Germany, Richard Dorment finds artists turning their attention to the outside world

Documenta is the largest and the most important exhibition of contemporary art in the world. Every four years since 1955 it has been staged in Kassel, a small and nondescript town in the middle of Germany that would not otherwise rate as a major tourist destination.



**Documenta 11: Louise Bourgeois' Cell XXII (Portrait), 2000 and Cell XII (Portrait), 2000. The exhibition is strong, distinctive, surprising, and often visually exciting**

By summarising current trends in the visual arts over the past four years, what is shown at Documenta inevitably influences the art we will all be seeing in the future. Its importance for artists, curators and critics is therefore hard to overestimate. This year, the artistic director of the 11th Documenta is Okwui Enwezor, a Nigerian-born independent curator who lives in New York.

Assisted by a highly experienced curatorial team from America, Germany, South Africa, Spain and Britain, he has come up with a strong, distinctive, surprising, and often visually exciting exhibition that encompasses works of art in every conceivable medium by more than 100 artists from every corner of the world.

The show as a whole is focused, and tightly curated. Although there is a noticeable emphasis on film, and although most of the artists are relatively young, that does not mean that painting, installation and sculpture were neglected, nor that artists of an older generation were excluded.

In fact, it's the work of the long-established artists that, like the hub of a great wheel, establish the themes explored in this year's Documenta. A series of deadpan black and white images by [the influential German photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher](#) record the façades of dozens of half-timbered houses, which they travelled through Europe to photograph between 1971 and 1973. Leaving aside the austere beauty of the work, the Bechers, more than almost any other figures of their generation, have engaged with the external world as it really is, not as we imagine it or wish it be.

advertisement Another venerable master is the great Japanese conceptual artist On Kawara, a part of whose epic project, One Million Years (Past and Future) is being shown (and heard) at Documenta.

Since the early Seventies, Kawara has dealt with the most fundamental reality of all, the passing of time. At Documenta, two of his assistants were slowly intoning every day of every month of every year for a million years, like the solemn tolling of a bell. In the presence of Kawara's work we must become still and centred, at which point we may become conscious - if only for an instant - of the brevity of our existence in the infinite, invisible, and inexorable ocean of time.

Elsewhere in the show, the veteran American painter and draughtsman Leon Golub shows big unstretched canvases covered with scrawled words and brutal images of politically-generated violence. [The ancient and ubiquitous Louise Bourgeois](#) exhibits a series of abject figures imprisoned in cages. Her strange, sickly and self-pitying art could be said to embody another kind of reality, one that engages with interior or psychological truth.

What all these figures have in common is their engagement with the world around them, an approach to art that is the opposite of art for art's sake and has very little to do with minimalism,

Pop, or pure abstraction. In retrospect, it is clear that no other kind of art would have been possible for this year's Documenta. It is exactly right that the Iranian film-maker Seifollah Samadian shows a work about women in Islamic society or that an Israeli, Eyal Sivan, presents a documentary about the massacres in Rwanda (including the chilling radio broadcasts inciting Hutus to kill their Tutsi neighbours in the name of Jesus).

Among the many artists whose work was new to me, I'd single out the Turkish artist Kutlug Ataman's wonderful multi-screen video projection *The Four Seasons of Veronica Read*. Though jazzily presented, basically the piece consists of an interview with an eccentric English woman whose hobby is growing that most phallic of flowers, the amaryllis.

At first, you assume that the artist's interest is in horticulture. Then you realise that his real focus is on the delightfully obsessive horticulturalist. As she describes her bulbs and plants to him, she charmingly and unconsciously uses language most of us would reserve for our sexual partners. The whole thing is touching and hilarious.

The photo series *Suburbia* by the South African-born Kendell Geers (who I'd characterise as a distant descendant of Leon Golub) simply documents the frightening array of security fences, barbed wire and armed response burglar alarms behind which the white middle class barricades itself in his native country.

Some artists pulled out all the stops to create some of the best work of their careers. [The South African William Kentridge](#) showed an animated film in which he uses shadow puppets to create phantasmagoric images that were weirder and wittier than any I've seen in his work so far.

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