



## Hidden Agendas

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The combined effect of Venice/Basel/documenta/Muenster made the early summer an Olympiad of opinion-making. Every discussion was of what one 'thought about' an artist's work or a curator's venture. By the time I hit Kassel I felt punch-drunk with opinions. Learning of the four venues containing over 150 artists organized by the curatorial duo of Roger M. Buergel (listed in all the official materials as the 'Artistic Director') and Ruth Noack ('Curator') provoked equal measures of anticipation and fatigue. On procuring my catalogue I finally encountered the list of artists in the exhibition and found that, for better or worse, I had not heard of at least half of them. If nothing else, I thought, I might 'learn something'. Walking in the Fridericianum – the flagship venue of documenta – I almost felt relieved; how could I be expected to form opinions about work I didn't know?

Of course, the province of the reviewer is ultimately to generate opinions. And so I feel compelled to say that there is some very interesting work in documenta 12, and, with all due equivocation, there is some quite mediocre work as well. I could (and should?) offer lists of names and descriptions

of works, adding my tally to the emerging consensus, the budding file and folders in curatorial and collector's offices on both sides of the Atlantic. But as I started to write this review on 21 June, the first day of summer, from my desk in Cambridge, Massachusetts, my days in Kassel on 14 and 15 June were already fading from view. This in itself feels like an indictment (for instance, I have quite vivid memories of the work in documenta 11). In the end the art did not carry the day; it did not commit itself to memory; it failed to spark the fundamental engine of aesthetic experience – curiosity. If this feels harsh, it is – but it was not all the art's fault. Louise Lawler, whose works are included in the exhibition, taught us long ago that context is all, that the meaning of art is dependent on the strategies of display and distribution within which it finds itself. The legacy of institutional critique is such that none of us takes for granted any more the where and how of what we see. The museum, the gallery, the auction house, the living-rooms of the wealthy have all been parsed and appraised by Lawler's pictures in ways that show us the unconscious aims at work in each instance – desires and ideologies that both shape and produce the ever more contingent meanings we glean from art objects.

The largest context for documenta is its own history. Hence it was impossible for me not to compare this edition with the only other one I have seen: documenta 11. The

differences between the two are striking. Documenta 12 is organized by a husband-and-wife team, whose veiled division of labour produced an exhibition shrouded in secrecy, as they refused to reveal the names of the artists in their exhibition until the opening day. Despite my initial sense of interest about a list of names I did not recognize, I was soon troubled by what it meant not to let people know who would be in the show. Its most pronounced effect, for me, was that I was not prepared to see it. In the introduction to the catalogue the curators write that their ambition was to create an exhibition 'where art communicates itself and on its own terms. This is aesthetic experience in its true sense.' This is a High-Modernist, Kantian-derived understanding of the nature of art worthy of Clement Greenberg. Is this why the seemingly noble gesture of including so many under-represented artists ultimately fell flat, undermined by the complete lack of explanatory labels in the galleries? Indeed, not even the artists' countries of origin were included on the basic wall label. Are we really to believe – in the age of Lawler (not to mention Wikipedia) – that to have absolutely no context, other than the 'compare and contrast' exercise offered by the curators, is 'aesthetic experience in the true sense'?

And what of this curatorial 'compare and contrast'? True to a basic Wölfflinian art history lecture, viewers were treated to an exhibition, half of whose works were largely

Courtesy: Metro Pictures, New York, and the artist