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[DOCUMENTA \(13\), Manifesta 9, and the 7th Berlin Biennale](#)

by [John Zarobell](#)

Image: Jonas Staal. *New World Summit*, 2012; installation view, 7th Berlin Biennale. Courtesy Sophiensäle, Berlin. Photo: © Lidia Rossner

Just as history in Europe is told through its existing art and architecture (as well as through that which is missing because it has been bombed to bits), contemporary art questions our conceptions of the present and engages the problem of how we will remember it. In this review, I consider three concurrent exhibitions in Europe—Documenta (13), Manifesta 9, and the 7th Berlin Biennale. Each has a different history while sharing similar concerns and offering illuminating explorations of our collective present.

Documenta(13)

The idea of a biennale, and particularly of Documenta (which occurs every five years), is a snapshot of the present, but this sprawling, almost endless version of the exhibition is far from that. It is absolutely a subjective interpretation of emerging movements in art and history, crafted over the past five years by the curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev. Her primary interest lies in artistic research, but more than anything she is driven by history: both representing it and marking it. The guidebook states: “Whatever is, is somewhere and somewhen.”¹ Christov-Bakargiev’s iteration of Documenta is directed towards an institutional, artistic, and intellectual exchange with Kabul Afghanistan. Other manifestations (called *platforms*) are presented in Kabul, Alexandria, and, of all places, Banff, and there have been a series of seminars in Kabul from February to July of this year with artists, scholars, and curators contributing to both exhibitions and discussions. Extending the exhibition in this way is generous, but these carefully selected sites make one consider their significance beyond the context of an art venue, particularly in light of the recent political upheavals across the Middle East and NATO’s ten-year occupation of Afghanistan.

But in Kassel, there is a festival atmosphere. There were lots of tourists on a Monday in July—about a month after the exhibition opened—and the venues were pretty crowded despite being distributed across town. Catering stations had been set up. Without doubt, Documenta (13) is a kind of vortex, and most of the art one sees was produced as commissions for the exhibition, making much of the enterprise’s relevance event-based. It is designed to inspire artistic innovation and to generate novel experiences for viewers. Even for the initiated, there is a real sense of discovery here—the end result is tremendous. I have the impression that the curatorial team traveled the world looking not for important artists but for really interesting ideas and projects to introduce, and a very international crowd is represented. Perhaps this has become de rigueur for an international exhibition, but I honestly find the artist selection expansive. Particularly noteworthy is the large number of artists from Muslim countries, doubtless a nod to the Arab Spring.

Juxtaposing a range of artists, cultures, and forms of inquiry is one main point of this show. It is not the idea of particularity that reigns (the labels do not mention artist birth dates or home countries) but a sense of shared purposes, investigations, and discoveries. There is much intervention into the urban fabric of Kassel itself. Some artists, such as Amar Kanwar and Maria Thereza Alves, engage ideas of nature and science at the Museum of Natural History in the Ottoneum while others, such as Jeronimo Voss and Mika Taanila, explore science and technology at the Orangerie Museum of Astronomy and Technology. There are countless pavilions sprinkled throughout Karlsaue, formerly a royal garden, and other projects and performances have taken over museums and even train stations throughout the city. Theaster Gates’s transformation of the historic but decrepit Huguenot House, *Twelve Ballads for the Huguenot House*, is a particular standout. Gates created a temporary living community for young artists from Chicago and Kassel, made with scrap housing materials collected in those two cities. With this group, he reconstituted the building’s interior spaces as a rambling large-scale installation filled with spaces for live music performances and videos of primarily gospel singers from Chicago. The sense of cultural contact across time (suggested by the history of the site) and space (by geography and architecture) is exemplary.



Theaster Gates. *12 Ballads for the Huguenot House*, 2012; installation view; deconstructed timbers and other construction materials from 6901 South Dorchester, Chicago, video, sound 9.14 x 18.29 x 36.56 m. Rebuild Foundation Construction Team, John Preus (lead). Courtesy the artist; Kavi Gupta, Chicago and White Cube, London. Commissioned by Documenta (13) in collaboration with MCA, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, with the support of Phillip Keir and Sarah Benjamin, London; Kavi Gupta, Chicago; and the Huguenot House. Photo: Nils Klinger.

Christov-Bakargiev has extended her hand towards science, presenting the experiments of scientists such as Anton Zelliger and Alexander Tarakhovsky, translated into visual form. The early computers of Konrad Zuse, who invented the first programmable machine with a binary switching mechanism in 1938, are paired with his watercolors inspired by Lionel Feininger. Bringing in a non-professional artist because he was a significant inventor is an interesting curatorial move, one that forces viewers to reconsider the relationship between art and technology. But I do not think these presentations mix well into the overall exhibition; it seems as if certain projects were shoehorned into a context more proper to installation art. Still, the intersection of art, technology, and the history of energy are themes that overlap with another European biennale, Manifesta, which takes place every two years in a new location.

Manifesta 9

In many ways, Manifesta 9 is a comparison to Documenta (13), telescoping and consolidating many of its interests in a smaller show. Also organized by a curator of international prestige, Cuahtémoc Medina, Manifesta 9 is presented in a former mine building on the outskirts of the Belgian town of Genk, a post-industrial site far removed from any city. This site was chosen both to draw people to an underexplored region in the heart of northern Europe and as a reflection of the show’s theme, “The Deep of the Modern.” Both exhibitions bring together historical and contemporary global cultural production and both engage the local context, but the slickness of Documenta (13)’s interiors contrasts with the uneven concrete floors and peeling paint of Manifesta 9’s venue.

Another major difference is that Manifesta 9 devotes a whole floor of its three-floor presentation to a “Heritage” section about the history of mining in the region, with artifacts that range from prayer rugs brought by Muslim emigrant laborers, to folk art made by miners, to a devastating section of work logbooks that reveal that many miners before 1914 were in fact minors. It is hard to imagine, but in 1889, the mine employed ten thousand children under fourteen (some even younger than eight) down in the

hole. While many of the artists in Documenta (13) engage the historical context of Kassel, and even the Fridericianum itself—Michael Rakowitz and Mariam Ghani stand out in this regard—their contributions are particular while the investigation of location that takes place at Manifesta 9 is the focus of the entire project.

Manifesta 9 also took the step of bringing in a separate curator, Dawn Ades, to work on a modern section called “Historical”; it is something of a stand-alone exhibition that presents a sweep of history. Following the topic of coal and locality across art from the nineteenth century to the present, Ades’s most recent selections are contemporary (featured artists such as Jeremy Deller and David Hammons are still active). Thus, while the “Historical” section at Manifesta thematically overlaps neatly with the selections in the “Contemporary” section, the two periods are still presented separately, unlike at Documenta (13), where works of modern and contemporary art are integrated. The Rotunda at Documenta (13), for example, brings together modern art with craft and small-scale recent works in a contemporary cabinet of wonders that can only hold forty visitors at once.

Manifesta 9 can be characterized as unblinkingly sincere, its air of seriousness supplemented by the postindustrial context of the venue. There is hardly a trace of irony and barely any playfulness (the tongue-in-cheek installation, *Trading Post*, by Visible Solutions, LLC, is the exception here). This is not because Medina has an axe to grind. In fact, his approach seems rather thoughtful, resulting in the inclusion of artists who employ a variety of approaches. For example, a magical sound-and-scent work, *Martinete*, by the Brazilian artist Oswaldo Maciá is placed in a long light-filled hallway replete with peeling paint and rusty window casings. Upon entering the space, a visitor detects a scent emanating from a device hung above and hears a recording of industrial hammering, which the artwork label explains was the source of salsa’s rhythmic signature. Examining women’s role in industrial production and labor organization, Marge Menko presents a slideshow of historical Estonian factory photos paired with a recording of a scene of a drama by Elfriede Jelinek about female labor organizers. Tomaz Furlan’s prosthetic machines, *Wear Series*, execute simple tasks like crushing cans and sweeping, parodying the repetitive activities of everyday life outside the factory and demonstrating how the rationality of industrialization is not confined to the workplace.

Another theme at Manifesta 9 is globalization. Making visible new industrial partnerships between China and various African nations, the photographs of Paolo Woods update the documentary photographic tradition represented by another

participant, [Edward Burtynsky](#). The expansive, multipart installation by Jota Izquierdo, *Capitalismo Amarillo: Special Economic Zone* is composed of a painted floor, curved tables on which Chinese products are arrayed, and a series of suspended video monitors. The documentary videos shown on these monitors include interviews with merchants and producers that explore the new distribution channels in Mexico and Spain for cheap plastic objects and counterfeit designer goods exported from China. The masterpiece on the topic of how the geographical distribution of labor has gone mad is undoubtedly Katleen Vermeir and Ronny Heiremans’s video installation about the globalization of the art world, *The Residence (A Wager for the Afterlife)*, in which a Chinese artist is commissioned by a wealthy Euro-American benefactor to produce an unlocatable house for the afterlife.

These issues are also inextricably connected to politics, most clearly seen in the work of Jeremy Deller and Mike Figgis in the “Historical” section. Deller and Figgis recreated the [1984 Battle at Orgreave](#), a definitive victory for Margaret Thatcher’s Neoliberal government policies over organized labor in Britain. In a less sympathetic vein, Nemanja Cvijanovic stages protests with Croatians—providing signs, cheers, and the rest of it—and then films herself paying the demonstrators. Her work presents a profound piece of postcommunist bad faith that nevertheless makes for some very compelling art. One wonders how many protests around the world are organized in just this way.

In numerous videos and installations on view at Manifesta 9, the ideas of creation, invention, and transformation are shunned in favor of commentaries on political commitment and neoliberal economics. Questions of accessing truth about the outside world are filtered through the syntax of documentary. But there is an overall degree of remove, underlined by the placement of the show in a postindustrial provincial Belgian province, that suggests that art and politics perhaps only meet in the imagination. The work in Manifesta 9 is relevant to the world; it exposes its processes and inequalities. Such work makes us think and may compel us to act, but it does not necessarily encourage participation.



Mariam Ghani. *A Brief History of Collapses*, 2011–2012; installation view; 2-channel HD video installation, color, 6.1-channel sound; 22:00. Dimensions variable, Courtesy Mariam Ghani. Commissioned and produced by Documenta (13), with additional support provided by the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts. Photo: Roman März.

7th Berlin Biennale

However, activism is a current throughout Documenta (13), with projects by artist-activists such as Claire Pentecost, Amy Balkin, and the artist-run initiative AND AND AND, among others. Occupy protesters had also set up just outside the Fridericianum in Kassel. This was an interesting echo of the then-concurrent 7th Berlin Biennale, which was focused upon the Occupy movement. Organized by Arthur Zmijewski, the 7th Berlin Biennale was presented primarily at the Kunstwerke Institute for Contemporary Art (KW) and at the Deutschlandhaus, along with two other venues. There were philosophical and political discussions shared by both biennales, which so clearly aimed to open themselves up beyond the art world (a trend presaged by many similar art events, particularly the 2002 Okwui Enwezor-curated Documenta 11). But the 7th Berlin Biennale was in a sense a call to action, which invited political activists as well as artists to participate. To quote the official handbook:

*In the last year people of the worldwide social movements 15m/ Indigenados/ Occupy/ Real Democracy Now/ Arabian Spring were invited by the curators of this year's Berlin Biennale...This cooperation is no museum, but a workshop and experimental space for global change and opposition!*²

Most of the works in the project, and the various events that were organized within it, seriously sought to change not just the conversation around politics and art but also the way art viewers engaged in politics in the world.

It is fair to ask, then: Should this be the role of art? Or the artist? Or even the biennale? Is not a little distance the essence of the artistic project? The questions sparked by the 7th Berlin Biennale’s ambitious agenda seemed more generative of palpable unease than measured consideration. Berliners involved in the art world with whom I discussed the biennale before arriving at the KW Institute, were somewhat dismissive: no one had gone, nor were they interested. When I arrived and saw the encampment inside the expansive gallery space, I could see the reason for their reserve. The project could have been titled “Occupy the White Cube.” These folks had moved in, made art and food, and invited others to join in their discussions, their lives, and their utopian project. They were squatters at the core of the market-exhibition system, invading the art world with their unreconstructed idealism. They wanted to change larger systems, beginning with the art world. I am sure this looked familiar to those who have been around for forty years, but today, what Berlin gallerist would want to see that?

Arriving on the last weekend of the biennale, I had missed one of its major events, the “New World Summit” organized by the Dutch artist Jonas Staal, which took place on May 4 and 5. During that weekend, the artist and his collaborators brought together as many representatives of organizations placed on terrorist watch lists as possible. At the summit, these representatives were given free reign to speak, in a specially built circular structure designed to create an open, democratic forum, in the vein of the United Nations building. The video recording of the proceedings was a little dull, I’ll admit, but you have to respect Staal’s ambition. Having the United States government declare that a political organization contributes to terrorism effectively pushes its voice outside of political discourse. To make a space for those excluded voices was an attempt by an artist to intervene directly in global politics.

I did attend some of the conference organized by Zmijewski that explored in an open-ended way the intersection between art, film, and the politics of the Occupy movement. I arrived just in time for a Q & A where I saw a professor, Salvatore Lacagnina, questioned for his specialized academic reading of the etymology of *occupy*. A student-age woman directly asked whether his approach wasn’t counter-revolutionary. This does not happen at most conferences I attend, and I found the exchange refreshing. Upstairs, I saw *Breaking the News*, a panorama of continually updated videos made by a range of artists in the past year of political protests and conflicts with police around the world. Cushions were placed on the floor so you could recline and watch—which was far preferable to the unforgiving benches in the other expos for watching the countless hours of videos on offer. There were no videos from Oakland, but the display of solidarity was a form of validation for a protester like myself. For others, I imagine it provided a window onto the many forms resistance can take, at times fought for with placards or theatrics and, at other times, with lobbed stones. The police, when one could see their faces, did not look like they were having fun, but they did not come off as compassionate either.



Katleen Vermeir and Ronny Heiremans. *The Residence (A Wager for the Afterlife)*, 2012; Single-screen video installation; 35:00. Photo: Kristien Daem.

Another work, *State of Palestine* by Khaled Jarrar, involved the production of two kinds of stamps celebrating the Palestinian nation (which, of course, does not yet exist). One could get a stamp in a passport, but Jarrar's team also had managed to produce an actual German postage stamp, allowing visitors to become participants by mailing letters around the world. (Apparently there is a liberal German law that allows citizens to design their own stamps for approval by the national post office). Support for a Palestinian state seems to be the victim of a stalled Middle East peace process, and though the politics is complicated, the ideal of the two-state solution has apparently been thrown out by the current Israeli administration. So Jarrar's intervention aims to redress this stalemate by compelling action outside of official channels. On the top floor of the KW Institute was a seedling project, *Guerilla Gardening*, which involved the occupying collective (in this case, a collective of collectives) producing a large quantity of seedlings that local residents could take if they gave their names and addresses. The idea seemed hardly radical to a Bay Area denizen, but it made clear that art and politics had a local as well as a global dimension and that the curators were willing to make room for the activists' projects in the context of the biennale.

At first glance, it is hard not to think of the 7th Berlin Biennale as giving the lie to the spectacle, the flocking visitors, and the opportunism of the bigger art events such as Documenta (13). But that would be entirely too reductive. The Berlin show provided a sense of a project on the edge, not one that is well funded or that has a particular reputation to uphold. There are many levels from which to consider the significance of contemporary art and to argue for its relevance. The different strategies demonstrated by these three European exhibitions all have the same essential aim: to use cultural production as an agent to engage the present historical moment and to open this production up for viewers to reflect on it more deeply. Each exhibition has a distinct position, but their goals are very much aligned. At a basic level, each satisfied this viewer's desire to be stimulated and involved. The crucial question is: How does art contribute to our understanding of politics and history, and how can it provide a medium that allows us to take possession of these concepts, right now?

NOTES:

1. Documenta 13, *The Guidebook*, catalog 3 (Kassel: Hatje Catz, 2012), 6.
2. "The worldwide movements network on the 7th Berlin Biennale," *Occupy Biennale, 7th Berlin Biennale for contemporary art* (Berlin: Berlin Biennale, 2012), unpaginated.

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Bio

John Zarobell is Assistant Professor of International Studies and Program Chair of European Studies at the University of San Francisco. Formerly, he held the positions of assistant curator at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and associate curator at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Curating exhibitions has allowed him to engage with artists as diverse as Frida Kahlo, Edvard Munch, Edouard Manet, and Kerry James Marshall. He is a regular contributor to the web-based journal *Art Practical* and he has contributed to numerous exhibition catalogues and has published in *Art History*, *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide*, and the *Berkeley Review of Latin-American Studies*. His book, *Empire of Landscape*, was published in 2010. It concerns the intersection of colonial politics and landscape art in nineteenth-century France.

Zarobell holds a BA in Studio Art from Hampshire College and earned his MA and PhD in History of Art from the University of California at Berkeley. He has taught at California College of the Arts, Berkeley, Stanford University, Tulane University, and the University of San Francisco.