
The Global Archive and the Future of Poetics

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Abstract: In defining “the global archive,” this essay refers, first of all, to the historical development of exhibitions in Germany that address a global horizon, a distinct cultural project since at least the Enlightenment. After 1945, modern art, which had been removed from public view by the Nazi state, was reintroduced as a project of reeducation as much as aesthetics. Documenta, beginning in 1955, exhibited modern and later artists in the destroyed buildings of the city of Kassel, and expanded its formal and cultural address to a global scale over its fifty-year history. Documenta itself became a kind of continuous archive of its own exhibition history, a mode of formal presentation that increasingly relied on the works it presented. Here I read in detail the archival strategies and form of dOCUMENTA 13, arguably a highpoint of this effort to archive globality as it emerges. Theorists from Michel Foucault, Fredric Jameson, and Arjun Appadurai to the “critical regionalism” of Cheryl Herr and the “negative globality” of Alberto Moreiras assist in the project of comprehending the “archive as form,” seen in a series of artists working on a global scale.

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The “global archive” is an ordered series of documents, works of art, or more generally what Michel Foucault termed “statements” that interprets as it constructs the culture, history, or lifeworld of one “region” of the emerging global order to another.¹ In bringing my work on exhibitions to our recent colloquy on “The Avant-Garde @ Zero Hour,” I start by identifying a series of global exhibitions as statements occurring across time and space, in Germany after 1945, that led to the concept of the global archive. If the prospect of globalization is perpetually open and never completely totalized, an unclosed dialectic of locality, region, and universality, such a thing as a global archive might be an impossibility, as a “global order” is never complete.² An art exhibition that presents the work of artists addressing a global scale, however, provides a model for such an archive, and by that one can posit other examples not restricted to exhibitions. A 20th-century example of a global archive in the strict sense of such an ordered series of texts would be the records of the Nuremberg Trials, whose purposes transgress the boundaries of the nation state they interpret as they evaluate the crimes of the Nazi era in terms of an emerging universal judicial standard. Many of the global archives and exhibitions I describe here make their project, analogously, the interrogation of aesthetic or ethical

universals within a horizon of constantly emerging and not yet determined globality. I have been following the construction of the global archives through the history of conceptual art, from its global formative moment in the 60s to a series of recent documenta exhibitions in Germany. In this essay, I focus on how archives and archiving have become a structural and interpretive constant in such exhibitions. In so doing, archiving as a theme and mode of presentation makes the exhibition itself a reflexive cultural document of a global scale, in common cause with the avant-garde and its “systemic detotalization” of the whole.³

As a prime example of the global archive, dOCUMENTA 13 (2012), curated by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, consciously refers to the history of politicized exhibitions in Germany, as a site of historical comprehension of post-1945 art and culture on a global scale. Using cross-aesthetic, site-specific, historicist, and critical regionalist strategies, dOCUMENTA 13 takes the form of an “imaginary museum” of a vast range of conceptual, site-specific, multimedia, performance, and documentary art, along with painting, sculpture, music, and cinema, at four global sites—constructing a cosmopolitan, transnational, but partial global frame for the show’s emphasis on the conceptual, material, contingent, historical, local, and regional dimensions of art practice. In this essay, I connect documenta as a self-constituting archive of German exhibition history; the structure of dOCUMENTA 13 as a global archive; and the construction of the “statements” of that archive in individual works, each differing in their genre and material form. In dOCUMENTA 13’s exhibition strategies, the global archive emerges as a present-based but future-oriented (material or virtual) organization of documents, images, and objects that reinterprets specific zones of history and region toward emerging global horizons. As an example of global visual archive, the exhibition could be placed alongside a range of verbal or media works and archives that serve similar functions. Many examples of the modern epic poem—from Ezra Pound’s *Cantos* to the long poems of Language writing such as Ron Silliman’s *The Alphabet*, Lyn Hejinian’s *A Border Comedy*, and others of that ilk—are global archives in this sense. Fictional works from Arno Schmidt’s experimental novellas to Roberto Bolaño’s *romans fleuves* such as *2666* work as well. Other genres also serve, for example the postwar U.S. TV series using military file footage *Victory at Sea* (1952–1953); or French director Jean-Luc Godard’s 266-minute video compilation, *Histoire du cinema* (1998). Each of these works offers a powerful series of values and interpretations that show the political possibility of a global archive that plays across regions. In my conclusion to this essay, I reflect on the poetics of the archive—the “archive as form”—as site for global comprehension across boundaries of regional conditions and politics.

Exhibition History

My essay draws from several earlier works on the history of global exhibitions that focus on the aesthetic uses of documents and archives. In the first, “Global Conceptualism: Conceptual Art, Universals, and the Avant-Garde” (2004), I asked: “How can the question asked by Conceptual Art, of the nature of art, provide a framework for an even larger issue, the nature of the global?” I took as my primary example the emergence of conceptual strategies in a global framework at Documenta11 (2002; curated by Okwui Enwezor), which with documenta X (1998; curated by Catherine David) established the use of conceptual art to access global politics in the international art exhibition.⁴ Held every five years in Kassel, Germany, documenta has consistently featured avant-garde, conceptual, site-specific,

ephemeral, performative strategies in its gradual evolution away from the modernist assumptions of its first installment in 1955.⁵ I connect the use of these strategies, and conceptual art in general, to the transnational perspectives of the prescient *Information* show at the Museum of Modern Art (1970), and to the retrospective *Global Conceptualism* at the Queens Museum (1999), both of which reveal not only the international character but the global criticality of radical time-based, site-specific art.⁶ Also significant are the proto-conceptualist, materialist strategies of *When Attitudes Become Form* (1968), the subject of a recent scholarship and a reconstructed exhibition.⁷ As a species of the genus *avant-garde*, Conceptual Art enacts a systemic detotalization of the whole, in which the work of art becomes a negative moment of the total system in which it is produced. In zeroing in on this moment to define the nature of art, Conceptual Art undertakes a critique of universals, beginning with the category of the aesthetic but extending to numerous nonaesthetic universals like time, space, number, logic, causality, materiality, and so on. Global conceptualism at the same time has been linked, from its origins, with political horizons of popular democratic and/or anti-imperialist politics: its critique of universals thus aligns with the open antagonisms and liberationist horizons of the Vietnam Era and labor struggles, the oppression of women, racism, authoritarianism, and so on.⁸ Conceptualism's critique of universals is at once aesthetic and political; a reading of conceptual art (and writing) that preserves their global horizons thus counters art historical narratives organized in terms of formal strategies.⁹

In "Global Exhibitions/Berlin: Destruction and Community in *Tod—Kein Tod* (Palast der Republik, 2005)" (2010), I extended the part/whole dynamic of the critique of universals with a "critical regionalism," the differential relationship between regions within a global horizon—here, the spatial politics of the divided/unified Berlin as exhibition site.¹⁰ The independent curatorial group *Fraktale's* decision to mount an exhibition thematizing the "death" of the Palast der Republik, the quasi-modernist former seat of government of the German Democratic Republic (DDR), followed a long tradition of exhibitions that both created and destroyed political consensus on the nature of art, from *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate Art) and *Great German Art Exhibition* of the Nazi period up through exhibitions after 1945 that promoted democratization and denazification in the name of modernism and the avant-garde. Berlin itself was an initial site for such politically deployed uses of modernism and the avant-garde, from the early postwar period to the eruption of the avant-garde after 1989. *Tod—Kein Tod*, which presented numerous conceptual and "post-genre" meditations on death and destruction within the empty shell of the former government edifice, was also an opportunity to mobilize against the destruction of the building and its reconstruction as a simulacral version of what preceded it—the former Hohenzollern Palast, 80 percent damaged in the war and subsequently demolished by the DDR, now rebuilt as the awkward and expensive Humboldt Forum.¹¹ The exhibition presented itself as an archive of the negative history it succeeded and predicted, in both individual art works and as an exhibition, a strategy aligning with my present site of inquiry into documenta. The deathward "statements" of the works selected for this exhibition joined with the form of the exhibition itself as an encounter with history and politics—both past and present in terms of the building's fate.

The tradition of exhibiting art in damaged buildings such the Palast der Republik stems not only from the history of art exhibitions in post-1945 Berlin, where forbidden art was exhibited in the destroyed city after Zero Hour, but also from the initial series of documenta 1 and II. documenta (1955, 1959), held in the bombed-out and partly reconstructed shells of the Fredricianum, Orangerie, Bellevue Schloss, and other sites in Kassel.¹² These exhibitions are themselves historical interpretants,

even allegories, of postwar recovery and democratization, as well as sites for critical engagements with denazification and Americanization. The explicit aims of documenta 1, curated by Arnold Bode, were to renew traditions of European modernism that had been denigrated and suppressed during the Nazi period; to juxtapose works of modernism with the historical destruction from which Germany was just emerging; and to extend the work of modernism—albeit in traditional genres such as painting and sculpture that were clearly separated—as a democratic politics (an intention confirmed by the critical success of the exhibition and its 130,000 visitors). While focusing on the dynamic relationship between artworks and their sites (through the use of often jarring juxtapositions and innovative framing materials), documenta 1 made a statement through the form of the exhibition itself. This can be seen in the cosmopolitan frame of a series of anthropological photographs at the entrance (akin to the better-known *Family of Man* exhibition; 1955), quickly followed by a wall installation of artist photos, creating an individual/collective dialectic of spectatorship. Sculpture was particularly important at documenta 1, especially Wilhelm Lehmbruck's *Die Kniende*, shown at the Armory Show (1913) but specifically targeted by the *Entartete Kunst* exhibition as an excrescence. This nonrealistic depiction of the human figure was mirrored by antirealist premises of most of the painting displayed—key works of European modernism by Klee, Chagall, Picasso, Beckmann, and so on, forming a stable canon of *Die Moderne* that would be displayed, for instance, in Munich's Pinakothek der Moderne, but excluding more realist figures like Karl Hofer, whose anti-Nazi credentials were impeccable and who complained loudly from a distance at his exclusion. The exhibition strategy of documenta 1 intended anything but a monumental frame for the works it displayed, as it pursued the work of democratization in its aesthetic decisions.

II.documenta extended the political charge of presenting modernism as a democratic politics by focusing on art of the post-1945 period, not only European but American. The pedagogical moment of the exhibition was central: the modernist tradition was being represented not only as a basis for continuing practice, but as a demonstration of the fundamental autonomy of the aesthetic. Framing the exhibition, curator Werner Haftmann's catalogue essay made as strong a case for abstraction as an aesthetic and political imperative as would Clement Greenberg's writings on Abstract Expressionism. The presence of American abstract painters was key to this synthesis of art and politics, their presence in part a consequence of the Cold War effort to export American cultural politics (backed by USIA and even CIA funding, as subsequent research revealed). In this synthesis, democratization and Americanization were linked through abstract art, providing a presentist rather than historicist framework, even as the politics of the exhibition itself could not be anything *but* historicist. The focus on abstraction, and perhaps the American examples that were used to make the case, made the II.documenta the site of more controversy than the first. This productive antagonism between modernism and Americanism is suggested by the site of Theodor W. Adorno's lecture on new music, held not as a part of the exhibition but at Kassel's Amerikahaus. Finally, the construction of new forms of spectatorship, in relation to documenta's privileging of abstract art, was at the center of its political argument. In a well-known photographic series documenting the show by Hans Haacke, then a museum staff, New Germans are seen to be constructed in an encounter with an art that was meant to democratize them as a politics. The interpellation of the individual by abstraction performed an educational task, one that would be reflected on, attacked, and modified through documenta's development.

DOCUMENTA 13

Achieving a high point in the series, DOCUMENTA 13 consciously continues the history of politicized exhibitions in Germany as a site of historical comprehension of post-1945 art and global culture.¹³ Emphasizing cross-aesthetic, site-specific, historicist, and critical regionalist aesthetic strategies, DOCUMENTA 13 constructs an “imaginary museum” of a vast range of conceptual, site-specific, multimedia, and performance art along with developing genres of painting, sculpture, and cinema: some 200 artists, at four global exhibition sites (Kassel, Kabul, Alexandria/Cairo, Banff), supported by state and corporate funders and attracting 830,000 visitors over 100 days. Using the “documenta city” Kassel as site, the exhibition was staged at five permanent exhibition venues and numerous nonexhibition sites, particularly the city park, which was dotted with projects. I visited DOCUMENTA 13 twice, for the preview and for the closing week, which included Carla Harryman’s staging of her refunctioning of Adorno’s lecture as a musical performance.¹⁴ Over the six days I visited I still managed not to see, or even to find, many of the most notable works on view—not to mention most of the ongoing performance, film, and lecture series and “Maybe Education” program. DOCUMENTA’s vastness, decenteredness, and fragmentedness appear both as the legacy of its German heritage as a synthesis of all genres of art toward a unifying horizon (the Jena romantics would have approved) and as testimony to its global horizons—both abstractly and in specific terms. The parallel venues at Kabul and Alexandria/Cairo—in displaying what we in the West call “art” but which may have other cultural meanings in non-Western contexts—in particular situated Conceptual Art’s global critique as a politics. I take this horizon of global critique as necessary, in turn, for work in other genres; in what follows, I begin with a selective reading of strategies from the exhibition and then seek its implications for a poetics and politics of the archive—the “archive as form”—more generally.

DOCUMENTA 13’s paratactic and palimpsestic archive, from its orienting frameworks to its global displacements, consciously re-presents its own history as an exhibition, seen in turn as a historical register of art in the post-1945 period. This self-reflectiveness has been cumulative, an object of historical and theoretical inquiry at least since documenta X and Documenta11 (1998; 2002), and even institutional: documenta maintains an ongoing archive to promote its work in off years and to provide background information for conceptualizing its next installments. In 2005, the documenta archive even staged its own retrospective; “50 Jahre/Years documenta 1955-2005” explored numerous historical contexts for the exhibition: surveying post-1945 and Cold War debates over aesthetics, in the movement from modernist formalism—the legacy of European modernism and the emergence of postwar abstraction—to later radical avant-garde strategies about 1968 (associated with curator Harald Szeeman and the multi-media interventions of Joseph Beuys) to its current interdisciplinary assumptions. Documenta’s contributions to design, typography, architecture, catalogue publication, performance, film, and theory are themselves accounted for in meticulous detail. Interpreting her role as keeper of the documenta flame, Christov-Bakargiev documented and archived the four sites and 100 days of her exhibition in lavish style: four catalogues (exhibition and program guides for individual artists and events, along with 100 commissioned artists’ statements or theoretical perspectives, published separately and bound together in *Book of Books*).¹⁵ The “archive” in all its theoretical and historical complexity thus was a major platform and strategy for DOCUMENTA’s multiple venues, framing the exhibition and becoming a cross-aesthetic formal “dominant” for many of the works on

display. The opening and ending re-presentations of Adorno's "Music and New Music" essay were some of many archival moments, transvaluing the archive by rethinking its form.

Given that a detailed description of dOCUMENTA 13 is simply not possible (indeed, only the curator herself may have comprehended its full extent), the exhibition itself was charged to provide a structure for interpreting its manifold complexity. In Kassel, the major site, dOCUMENTA's exhibition framework separated into roughly four areas: an orienting and thematized exhibition at the major venue (the Fridericianum), supporting exhibitions at secondary sites (documenta-Halle, Neue Galerie); site-specific works in exhibition venues that interact with their permanent exhibitions (Ottoneum, Orangerie, the Grimm Museum); installations in nonexhibition sites (the Bahnhof; the parking garage; a department store; and so on); and finally site-specific work outside in the city park. Exhibition contexts ranged from the didactic and framed to the contextual and generic to the random and dispersed. This was evident in the use of the two exhibition halls flanking the entrance on the ground floor of the Fridericianum, which in past exhibitions had been premier sites for presentation. Taking her prerogative as "curator-artist," Christov-Bakargiev chose to empty both halls of all but the most minimal content: to the right, on entry, a didactic display of three small modernist sculptures by Julio Gonzalez, originally shown at II.documenta (as wall copy explained); on the left, a vitrine displaying a painful correspondence between the curator and an artist who chose to withdraw from the show. Archival, documentary, conceptual, and institutional frameworks having been activated, in a differential play of presence and absence, one moves on to the main event in the rotunda, a series of installations assembled as "The Brain," a kind of conceptual paradigm for the entire show. As viewing "The Brain" was crucial for interpreting dOCUMENTA 13, or at least was inferred to be so, one had no choice but to queue up, often for more than an hour—the crowds had become truly excessive. One was then able to visually and verbally download a series of conceptual and archival art works as didactic paradigms that served as kind of conceptual toolkit for the show.

The Brain

The overall poetics of this pedagogical ensemble, given the opening device of two largely empty rooms, was to create a play of the present and absent, aesthetic and historical, object-oriented and nonobjective through a disjunct series of works—ranging from framed and intentional works of art (the still lifes of Giorgio Morandi); to objects nominated as works of art but not originally conceived as such (the actual bottles Morandi used as models); to conceptual strategies operating between aesthetic and non-aesthetic (two stones, one of which was real and the other a plaster simulation); to historical documents now considered as art (the war photographs of Lee Miller); to works of art presented as historical remainders (the porcelain nude found in Hitler's apartment; destroyed museum pieces from Beirut). One overarching theme, evident from the curatorial copy, positioned the work in terms of historical trauma, destruction, and preservation: the eight "Bactrian princesses" on display (originating in Bactria, part of present-day Afghanistan, about 2500-1500 B.C.) represent the care in their presentation, through tradition; while the shards of art objects from Beirut are witness to the destructiveness of modern war. A kind of poetic "step rhyme" or "knight's move" (after Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky) was readable in a number of sequences—especially the war photos by Lee Miller, which culminated in the famous shot of her bathing in Hitler's apartment the same day that

she visited Dachau; objects from Hitler's apartment that Miller purloined and that are now part of her archive, including a nude statue reminiscent of her 1930s poses for Man Ray, Eva Braun's perfume bottle, a portrait of Hitler, and Hitler's initialed bath towels (the latter of which, in Germany, are themselves historically difficult to view, if not prohibited); and a series of surrealist works titled *Objects to Be Destroyed* by Man Ray, several of which feature a cut-out image of Lee Miller's eye, referring to the end of their relationship as well as to the psychodynamics of destruction in erotic life (see Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Das "Brain"/The Brain, the Rotunda, Fridericianum, dOCUMENTA 13, 2012. Installation views. Left: objects from the Lee Miller archive; the "Bactrian Princesses"; bottles used as models by Giorgio Morandi. Right: Giuseppe Penone, river stone and fabricated copy; paintings by Morandi; and other works. *Das Logbook/The Logbook* (Hatje Cantz, 2012).

The multiple overlaps and negations of this series, provocative as they are, precisely calibrate the historicist and archival argument being explored by "The Brain." After this syntax (a partial not a total one), the viewer is charged to construct further schema for what counts as art at the present moment of dOCUMENTA—so that "counting as art" in itself becomes historical. It is in this mix of historical and conceptual strategies—both working to equate art with documentation, so that the work and the document are readable at a secondary, meta-level—that dOCUMENTA pursues a poetics of the archive as an extensive catalogue where like and unlike, object and interpretation, representation and concept mutually inform each other. At the representational end of the spectrum, for example, we encounter a painting by Mohammad Yusef Asefi, who as a curator altered paintings at the National Gallery of Kabul by watercoloring out any figuration, thus saving them from destruction by the Taliban, or where Cambodian photographer Vandy Rattana presents documentary images of "bomb ponds" from the Vietnam War—both requiring interpretive framing to be legible. Conceptual strategies, on the other hand, are equally historical, as when Tomas St. Turba made "Czechoslovak radios" out of bricks (by naming them radios) during the Warsaw Pact invasion of 1968, which were then confiscated as prohibited radios by Soviet forces and archived as such, later to be recovered and displayed as works of art. Likewise, Gustav Metzger's refusal to make art as a rejection of Cold War politics, and his "Manifesto of Auto-Destructive Art" (1959)—is documented by the manifesto itself alongside a fragment of a work made previous to it, which the artist stored in a suitcase until 2010 and is now willing to exhibit. Throughout "The Brain," conceptual strategies of simulation, citation, and copying are deployed as a *lingua franca* at dOCUMENTA: Konrad Zuse's technological component that must be part of an early computer that he is credited as having invented, but is otherwise mutely

illegible; Giuseppe Penone's display of a river stone along with an identical plaster cast; Sam Durant's bag of marble dust fabricated out of solid marble, a comment on the current state of marble quarrying, and so on. This admixture of conceptual and historical indexing thus creates an archive of discrepant conceptual paradigms, a repository of interpretants.

The Archive as Form

DOCUMENTA 13's reflexive relations between work and document, object and interpretation, may be termed a "poetics"—a discourse of the making of the work, in its manifold aesthetic, historical, and conceptual contexts, at once producing and interpreting it, as well as a discourse on the *possibility* of the work, through its interpretation. At the center of these relationships, as a larger strategy for their presentation, is the *archive as form*—deliberately constructed as a model for interpretation in "The Brain" and formally demonstrated in a good percentage of works on display at dOCUMENTA, as well as in the form of the exhibition and its autopoietic historical preservation project. Nothing less than a theory and demonstration of postmodern knowledge production is the result, visible in an aesthetic "redistribution of the sensible" (after Jacques Rancière) among multiple strategies on display.¹⁶ In referring to Rancière's adaptable descriptor for the aesthetic, it is important to note that he takes up the form of the exhibition itself, rather than the individual artwork, as the privileged means by which such a redistribution may be achieved—between and among works, in their differential (both positive and negative) relations. The archive, after Foucault but reinterpreted by Rancière, becomes not merely an indexical, documentary, historical project but an aesthetic one—a privileged form at the intersection of conceptual, installation, performance, and site-specific art—as the best account of how the sensible may indeed be "redistributed."

Kadar Attia

To conclude my account of dOCUMENTA, I will focus briefly on a several installations, outside the initial framework of "The Brain," that mine the gold of the archive in its many veins. The most of notable of these—and popular, given the long queues lined up to see it—was Kadar Attia's pseudo-archival installation, *The Repair from Occident to Extra-Occidental Cultures* (2012; see Fig. 2). Attia organizes a critique of Western imperial culture from the time of colonialism and World War I by juxtaposing two series of documents: an archive of so-called primitive art and modernist anthropology from the end of the colonial period, and images and texts addressing the repair of facial disfigurements resulting from the Great War. Strategies of contextual reframing and the "stepwise" construction of relations between the two series create an affect that is readable as much in what the archive does not present (literal human damage) as what it does (inadequate attempts to represent it). As an introduction to the archive itself, Attia presents museum shelves full of artworks, toys, and tools made from shell casings, bayonets, and other military hardware from the Great War; these are shown along with objects that would be encountered in an ethnographic museum like Berlin's Staatliche Museum. What Attia accomplishes is no less than a decentering and primitivizing of the West as a consequence of its own discourses, taking the form of an archive of absent and potential meanings. Here the archive is an evacuation of meaning as much as a positive form.



Fig. 2. Kadar Attia, detail from *The Repair from Occident to Extra-Occidental Cultures*, dOCUMENTA 13, 2012. Installation view, with carved wood sculptures of World War I facial wounds and ethnographic literature from the early 20th century. Photo: author.



Fig. 3. Yan Lei. Detail from *Limited Art Project*, dOCUMENTA 13, 2011–2012. Installation view, showing original fabricated images installed at the beginning of the exhibition and overpainted canvases substituted over its 100 days. Photo: author.

Yan Lei

Opposing presentism to Attia's historicism, but working a similar ground of the negative, Beijing artist Yan Lei's *Limited Art Project* (2011–2012) makes a work that is only readable in a present from which it disappears (see Fig. 3). Lei fabricated 360 accessible and likeable images from the image bank of art history and popular culture, employing digital painting techniques. Of the 360 images, one was selected for destruction by overpainting at an auto body shop for each of the 100 days of the exhibition. What appeared as an overwhelmingly content-based and accessible archive at the opening thus ended up in a production-based death drive that substituted a high proportion of blank, monochrome canvases at the end. The crowd for Lei's work at the conclusion of the show was again so numerous and agitated that it was impossible to get into the gallery; the photo through the door frame only partially indicates the affect resulting from Lei's archive of the entropic mode of production. Here, the contemporary is ironically reversed as a form of self-destructive practice that seems to proceed without human mediation. Since at least documenta X, the work of the Chinese avant-garde has been foregrounded as an example of and index to the new global order. Where the adoption of conceptual strategies, to begin with, tied these artists to the Western art-historical tradition documenta represents, Lei's total dismantling of the Eurocentric image archive and its rendering as global simulacra repositions China as an example of "one country, two systems," in terms of politics and economics. As Marx wrote of modernity, "All that is solid melts into air," visualized here in a work of art on a global scale.

Michael Rakowitz

Rhyming with documenta's long history of showing presentist and conceptual art in destroyed buildings as a historicist politics was Michael Rakowitz's *What Dust Will Rise?* (2012; see Fig. 4), based on collaborative work with Afghan artists at the site of the destroyed statuary at Bamiyan. Rakowitz, who worked on a substitute archive of looted antiquities from the National Museum of Baghdad, did not choose to represent directly the annihilated Buddhas. Rather, he engaged a master Afghan ceramicist to fabricate reproductions of books from the Kassel Library that were lost in Allied air raids in World War II—in his archive, objects that are lost are as substantial as those which are preserved. The specific religious content of the destroyed volumes, many from the Middle Ages, also commented on the reduction of systems of belief to material artifacts. An ironic sidebar consisted of the display of rubble from British cities that were dropped by the RAF over Germany as an act of revenge prior to the actual bombing. The lack of distinction between British rubble and the rubble that would result forms an apt comment on the interpretability of the material, a legacy of documenta's development from abstract modernism through materialist and conceptual strategies seen as archival form itself. These first three pieces stand for any number of other installations that deployed the archive as form for the redistribution of the sensible, the reorganization of aesthetic categories. Installation art—which in the 70s challenged traditional genres as a part of a cultural politics—has evolved in exhibitions like documenta to become the "archive as form," accessing in turn aesthetic and political horizons of hitherto unimagined scale.

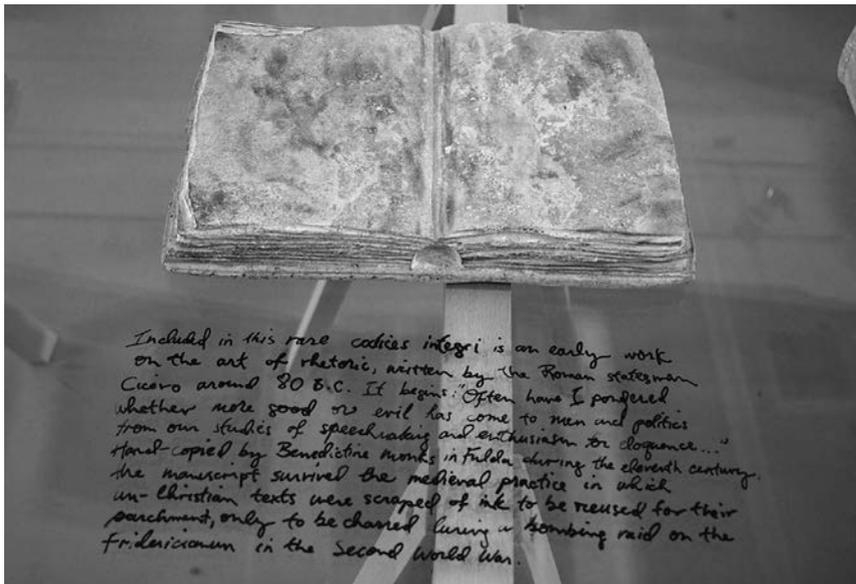


Fig. 4. Michael Rakowitz. Detail from *What Dust Will Rise?*, dOCUMENTA 13, 2012. Installation view, showing fabricated destroyed volume and handwritten copy: “Included in this rare codex integri is an early work on the art of rhetoric, written by the Roman statesman Cicero around 80 B.C. It begins: ‘Often have I pondered whether more good or evil has come to men and politics from our studies of speechmaking and enthusiasm for eloquence . . .’ Hand copied by Benedictine monks in Fulda during the eleventh century, the manuscript survived the medieval practice in which un-Christian texts were scraped of ink to be reused for their parchment, only to be charred during a bombing raid on the Fridericianum in the Second World War.” Photo: author.



Fig. 5. Etel Adnan, untitled landscape, oil on canvas, n.d. Installation view, dOCUMENTA 13, 2012. Photo: author.

Etel Adnan

Perhaps the best example of a “statement” at DOCUMENTA 13 was the curatorially astute reframing of the paintings of Lebanese-American artist and writer Etel Adnan in a stand-alone gallery at the documenta-Halle. Where the entire tendency of documenta has been toward an embrace a critical conceptualism and existential materialism, Adnan’s series of oil paintings were intensely aesthetic—in other words, unapologetically gorgeous—minimalist quasi-abstract landscapes evoking a lifetime of sensed experience in Northern California and the Levant. The cultural heterogeneity of Adnan’s multiple residences and languages might be readable purely in the intensification of color, shape, and outline in these works, which bear no obvious relation to traumatic displacement as a primary register for the work (unlike her poetry, which as a poetry of exile works through questions of affect, desire, and politics in relation to the global uncertainty of diasporic personhood). While her work is narratively framed by displacement, its formal values work on a much different register: “These abstracted landscapes in lush colors—some tone-on-tone in light pastel palettes, others in bright contrasting primary colors—are painted with bold, straightforward brushstrokes. Her latest series, executed in Beirut in 2010 and 2011, are even more formally reduced, pared down to squares and circles and suggesting seascapes with horizon and sun.”¹⁷ Where the global “archive as form” tends toward an amassing of complexity and detail, in Adnan’s work sensory immediacy becomes the site of an immanent critique of location. The result is a series of works, under the sign of the archive as form, that truly “redistributes the sensible” of the exhibition (see Fig. 5).

Poetics of the Archive

Not long ago, I was visited by one of our university administrators, who wanted to know if I wanted to be put up for one of our awards for creative writing. “But,” they said, “it needs to be for a creative work, not this archive stuff you have been doing.” Evidently, when my seminar on the archive was approved for the schedule that year, it was not readable as a creative project (nor likely even a theoretical one). It turns out, however, that I have spent no small amount of time over two decades working on archival projects as creative, from *The Grand Piano* (2006–2010), with its online listserv and its multiple chronologies, to *A Guide to Poetics Journal* and *Poetics Journal Digital Archive* (2013, 2015), published in the hybrid form of a print anthology and digital archive as a way of both re-presenting its content, unlinking it from its historical series, making it accessible in print and digital form, and encouraging reading as form of linking between a wide range of writing in poetics. There is something globally utopian in these projects, rendering all information available all the time, but there is also a quotidian rhyme with the internet. In the U.S., there has been a considerable amount of digital archiving in poetics and the avant-garde, from UbuWeb to PennSound to Eclipse, and these projects are hardly unique. Likewise, print archives for poetics are thriving and the site of a renewed interest on hand’s-on research.¹⁸ What would the poetics of the “archive as form” at exhibitions like DOCUMENTA mean for this ongoing activity, for the larger question of the nature of poetics, and finally for poetry, as engaging theoretical and historical concerns?

If what we term *poetics* is a discourse on the making and possibility of the work, in its manifold aesthetic, historical, and theoretical contexts, at once producing and interpreting it, what would the

work presented at dOCUMENTA add as a perspective? If one imagines that poetics was first of all a preface to or defense of poetry—not so much theory anticipating practice as theory explaining it to unsympathetic audiences (and often in the context of an aesthetic or cultural paradigm shift)—what is most notable is its occasion. Poetics is always contextual in that it is a discourse of the making the work that negotiates its immediate historical reception—this was certainly true of Language writing in its development. What, then, when that context changes? Is poetics to be relegated to the scrap heap of history, the defense of a mere period style, superseded by new conventions?¹⁹ This was an issue we faced in archiving *Poetics Journal*, whose positions were advanced prospectively and, over decades, led to results—a change in the literary paradigm, but once realized, then what? The intense documentary practices of documenta, on the other hand, are unfazed by questions of poetic obsolescence. There is something in the materiality of an unfinished or prospective proposal that is worth exhibiting in itself; hence, the proliferation of chalkboard schemas for utopian projects, from Joseph Beuys to Mark Lombardi to Anton Zelliger, at documenta. There is something, as well, to be seen in the value of prospective but not yet realized horizon of the work itself that may be transferable between discourses. What could also be learned from the content of the archive as form at documenta is that a discourse of the making of the work—as is evident in the 100 individual projects assembled in *The Book of Books*—conveys a timely effervescence, even as there is a downside to the artists' statement as theoretical cameo. It is the form of the archive itself that is productive for poetics, to the point that it might prime them for action. Walter Benjamin's Arcades Project, in its ungainly endlessness of material textuality, points the way to the horizon of poetics—a site for possible readings and acts.

One of the problems with poetics is that it has too often been understood as merely a preface (to be overcome once the work is accomplished) or a defense (which bears with it all the hidden injuries of the lack of comprehension), ending up producing nothing new and thus defenseless. This is the problem, I think, that Adorno mulled over in his dialectic of New Music and contemporary music—if New Music was promoted and defended by values that historically depended on its New-ness, what of its positive value as music when other music is new? If we think of poetics as a series of proscriptions that must be followed, the limit of a period aesthetic that cannot think beyond the next historical turn in the road, we may end up with poetics as a period style, overwritten by historical generalizations. This is precisely what Carla Harryman's reinterpretation of Adorno's lecture on new music accomplished—a re-enactment of its essay as form in other terms. If dOCUMENTA's use of the archive as form is initially informed by the reciprocal relationship of the discourse on the making of a work with the work itself, it unveils a capacious scale of historical and global comprehension (and difficulty). This is a horizon I would like to see taken up in poetics.²⁰

Notes

1. “The statement is not therefore a structure [...]; it is a function of existence that properly belongs to signs and on the basis of which one may then decide, through analysis or intuition, whether or not they ‘make sense’”; it is “a function that cuts across a domain of structures and possible unities, and which reveals them, with concrete contents, in time and space”; Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, pp. 86-87.
2. On lack of closure in globalization, see Cheryl Herr's *Critical Regionalism* and Alberto Moreiras's concept of “negative globality” in *Exhaustion of Difference*; on theorizing the global, see Jameson, *Geopolitical Aesthetic*, and Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*.

3. In theorizing the avant-garde I see its negative formal strategies as working to disclose an unsublatable whole: “The question of the avant-garde concerns the constructedness and historical specificity of the negative—not simply an oppositional moment but a destructive/renewing one of *systemic detotalization*”; Watten, *Constructivist Moment*, p. 290.
4. On documenta X, see Barth, *Politics-Poetics*; on Documenta 11, see Fietzek, *Documenta 11*.
5. On the history of documenta (which often changes its spelling for each exhibition), see Siebenhaar, *Documenta*; and Glasmeier and Stengel, *50 Jahre/Years documenta*.
6. McShine, *Information*; and the catalogue for *Global Conceptualism*.
7. Rattemeyer, *Exhibiting the New Art*; Hoffman, *When Attitudes Became Form Become Attitudes*, which restaged the form of the exhibition using work by later artists inspired by it.
8. For example, Weiss, *Making Art Global: Third Havana Biennial 1989*; and Steeds, *Making Art Global: “Magiciens De La Terre” 1989*.
9. On radical particularity and universals in Language writing and Conceptual Art, see *Questions of Poetics*, chaps. 2 and 4.
10. On critical regionalism, art in the divided Germany, and the spatial politics of Berlin exhibitions, see *Questions of Poetics*, chap. 5, pp. 188–198, discussing Bernd and Hilla Becher, Neo Rauch, *Tod/Kein Tod*, and Berlin Biennales 4 and 5.
11. On the exhibition: *Fraktale IV: Tod/Kein Tod*; on the site: Holfelder, *Palast Der Republik*.
12. Kimpel and Stengel, *Documenta 1955 and II.Documenta ’59*.
13. From that time forward, documenta 14 (2017) continued the global project, with exhibition sites in Athens and Kassel, while Documenta 15 opens in 2022, curated by a ten-person curatorial group from Indonesia, ruangrupa, organizing a global network of art collectives.
14. Carla Harryman, “Occupying Theodor W. Adorno’s Music and New Music: A Re-Performance,” performed 12 September 2012 with Magda Mayas, prepared piano. A new version composed by Harryman and Jon Raskin (2020) was presented at the “Avant-Gardes @ Zero Hour” colloquy on 6 April 2021; featuring Harryman, voice; Raskin, voice and saxophone; Gino Robair, prepared piano, voice, and mix; Florian Werner and Adorno, recorded voices.
15. Three catalogues were produced for the exhibition: *Das Begleitbuch/The Guidebook*; *Das Logbook/The Logbook*; and *The Book of Books*, as well as a guide to live events.
16. Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*: “This distribution and redistribution of places and identities, the apportioning and reapportioning of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, and of noise and speech constitutes what I call the distribution of the sensible” (24–25). In an earlier passage that maps well onto global exhibitions, he writes: “Aesthetics is the thought of the new disorder. This disorder does not only imply that the hierarchy of subjects and of publics becomes blurred. [. . .] Artworks henceforth relate to the ‘genius’ of peoples and present themselves, at least in principle, to the gaze of anyone at all.” See also Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, which aligns artistic form and exhibition strategies with Rancière’s concept.
17. “Etel Adnan,” in *Das Begleitbuch/The Guidebook*, p. 180.
18. For example, Seita, *Provisional Avant-Gardes*.
19. I debated this issue throughout *Questions of Poetics*; for a summary, see “Document 73: Period Style,” barrettwatten.net, accessible at bit.ly/2HW6KJq.
20. The concept of the global archive is connected to the current call for a politics of translation by Pierre Joris, Johannes Göransson, Rachel Galvin, Jen Scappettone, Urayoán Noel, Oana Avasilichioae, Lucas Klein, and other poet/translators. But not all translations are global archives; an example of being both would be Aimé Césaire’s *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* as a globally transformative work along with the history of its translations and influence as an archive.

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