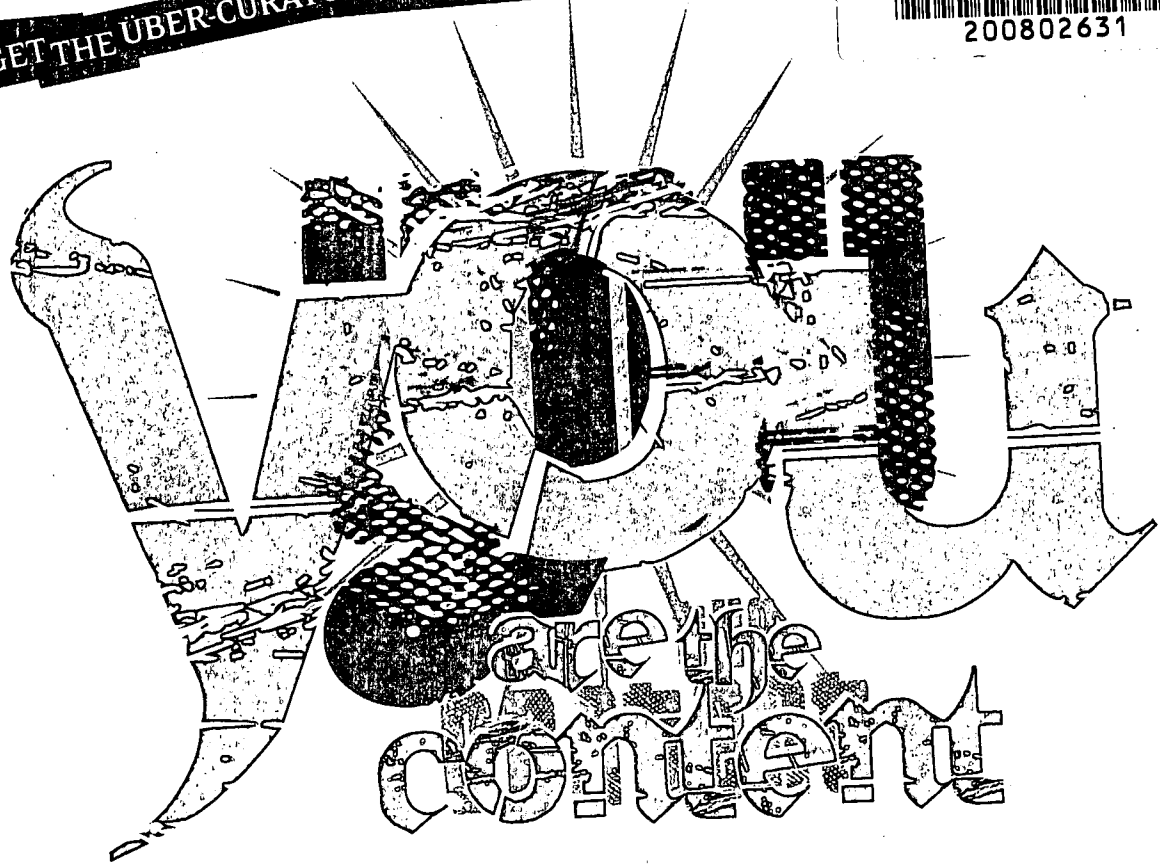


FORGET THE UBER-CURATORS



SCOTT REDFORD

Promises, promises. The Grand Tour the promoters dubbed it: Venice, Kassel, Münster. In reality it was anything but grand! Were expectations so high that we *had* to fall so low? These are supposed to be the 'biggest of the really big' contemporary art shows - so were we so wrong to expect the best in recent art or, if not the best, then at least a good attempt?

First up and looking tired and safe was Robert Storr's Venice but as it transpired tired and safe seemed good after viewing the disaster of Roger M Buerger and Ruth Noack's Documenta 12. And Münster? Pretty forgettable. What can you say about an exhibition whose highlight was the realisation of a work unable to be made 30 years ago for the first Münster? I was so upset about what was beginning to look like Venice, Kassel and Münster's purposeful betrayal that, standing all alone on a wet cold day in Bruce Nauman's *Square Depression*, I hit rock bottom. Well, I thought it was rock bottom. I was yet to read the advance brochure for Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev's forthcoming Biennale of Sydney...

So what was wrong with Venice 2007 and Documenta 12? The broad objective of these major shows was an attempt to deal with the current problems of the world. The Arsenale section of Storr's Venice Biennale seemed desperate to convince us that art could be everywhere at once in the world's trouble hotspots. Like the SBS news we got images of detention centres, guard towers, bombed-out houses, a kid kicking a skull around somewhere. Obviously we were meant to feel concerned but what exactly, after an initial flush of anxiety, did these works add to our understanding of the world? Are Third World people forever to be depicted as passive victims toiling in mud? Let's remember that the so-called Third World is where most people live - in reality it's the Majority World. Is it their lot in life simply to be the objects of Western documentary pity? Storr's Venice, like Charles Merewether's 2006 Biennale of Sydney, seemed oblivious to the possibility that these peoples may actually resent being forever cast as the locus of all the world's problems.

Things got worse in the big old Italian pavilion in the Venice Giardini, which is now given over to the biennale's central showcase. Here Storr was only too happy to re-present all the artists he had worked with when he was curator at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. You could sense the stunned disbelief of fellow viewers as room of Gerhard Richter followed room of Sigma Polke and then room of Elsworth Kelly and room of Robert Ryman. All great stuff but surely these are accepted canonical classics and not exactly contemporary cutting-edge art! While there was some new or previously underexposed work from Africa and elsewhere the overwhelming impression remained one of a breathtakingly safe backward gaze. Smug even.

Same at Documenta 12. As Christopher Miles pointed out in *The Los Angeles Times*, nearly one third of the 500 works on view had not been produced in the last 25 years. Many more works weren't made within the last ten! Yet the overwhelming majority of works were made during the lifetimes of the event's curators. There was a real emphasis on work from the sixties and seventies - even the work by newer artists was, for the most part, inspired by, or worse derivative of, that of artists of those decades'. So much for having faith in the concept of the contemporary in art!

The overwhelming sense of Documenta 12 was that the present is simply too tainted by capitalist consumerism and consequently worthy soft-Left artists such as Martha Rosler, Mary Kelly and Zoe Leonard needed to be brought back to centre stage. One of Documenta's three stated themes was education. But reading their curatorial rationale for education one soon realises what Buerger and Noack really meant by this was that we all need *re-educating back* into true resistance. "Lack of education is a real problem that must be countered on a long-term basis, balancing the responsibilities of the State with an ethics of self-care," they state. "Thus, the experience of one's own lack of knowledge might be seen as a productive step towards a politicised spectatorship."<sup>2</sup>

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I, too, once believed much of the Leftist political consciousness-raising agenda. I was, after all, a nineties Queer artist and I learnt the hard way that momentary successes, while certainly worthwhile, need continual re-evaluation, fresh strategies and a sort of permanent revisionism. I just get frustrated by what I see as the conservatism of the Left. So much concerned political art never has any real effect (and I would have to include some of my own work here).

Our current über-curators seem desperate to find artists who are ready-sanctioned. For that, of course, they have to go back in time - wearing their 20-20 hindsight goggles. But surely one of the points of staging big cultural flagships like biennales is that, unlike museums, they can take a punt on grappling with what is happening now - when we have no historical perspective to rely upon - and actually revel in it. These big shows promise the high-wire thrill of trying to understand the present but in reality cling to the safety harness of history and the soft pillow of the universally authorised. To be really interesting there has to be a chance they'll crash and burn - otherwise where is the risk? When presented with a sort of illustrated historical thesis like Documenta 12 is anything really at stake?

Judging from its advance publicity, another upcoming exhibition that looks set to go backwards is the 2008 Biennale of Sydney. Here we have, yet again, a line up of canonical Moderns re-enlisted: Duchamp and Tatlin, Calder and Tinguely, Kounellis, Penone and Weiner, to name but a few. In her preview brochure curator Christov-Bakargiev also gets stuck into postmodernism. "Postmodern cultural practices," she states, "have rarely advocated radical change and revolution in the forms and language of art, instead promoting notions of pastiche, repetition and inter-textuality that, in retrospect, have encouraged the loss of agency and singularity."<sup>3</sup>

Postmodernism, in my view, *did* attempt to take some responsibility and grapple with the complexity of our consumerist lives. For the generation that came of age during the final quarter of the 20th century it was empowering and did offer independent agency and, by coopting and using the forms and images of day-to-day media, made a real and concerted (and successful) attempt to re-engage a mainstream audience. (Eighties post-Pop art aimed to be popular.) But that is my own generation's experience. What concerns me most is

that a new generation much younger than me is not being allowed to speak; is being spoon fed old revolutions just as new revolutions are forcing themselves front and centre. We have had far too many Biennales of Sydney addicted to a soft-Left concern for the world. Is it too much to ask for just one Sydney Biennale that looks at the sheer hedonism and consumerism of its host city? Perhaps a biennale that revels in contemporary visuality, superficiality and pop culture instead of a po-faced and ultimately elitist re-education lesson? A biennale that acknowledges that art history throws up many competing stories and that many a good artist has mined other seams than the soft-Left agenda with no less revolutionary intent?

But no, all these baby-boomer curators are obsessed with finding radical meaning in yesterday's art, especially that from the years just prior to their birth. It's golden-age-ism by the bucket load.

As soon as the world turns bad (or worse than usual) it seems all we need to do is wheel out our guise of concern and go into activist mode, emboldened with a sense of our own high-mindedness. We are happy in the knowledge that art is returning to one of its proper social functions, returning

## THE FACT IS WE MAY JUST BE NAMING WRONG PEOPLE 'CONTEMPORARY ARTIST'

to its humanist roots and throwing off its dangerous flirtation with capital via pop culture and new media. It's a theme beloved of the Left and the Right both.

Wearing its concerned heart on its sleeve art can get back to 'normal'; occupying the moral 'high ground'. The (bad) world outside is to be critiqued by an (always good) art elite. The binary of Us vs Them is reinstated. Never are the limits of art tested. Never is it considered that art itself may be somehow culpable. This is the failure of these soft-Left-curated exhibitions. A harder Left thinking from, say, Theodore Adorno or Herbert Marcuse would question art itself. These exhibitions and curators fail to explore the complicity of art (the art world: artists, curators, museums, the art market) in the problems of the world, or at least address those problems honestly.

Reading Christov-Bakargiev's liturgy of famous artists, the nagging question arises: if they were so great why is the world still as bad now as it was when they were around? Does anyone wonder if these artists actually failed? We risk turning concern for human rights into another discrete genre like landscape painting or abstraction - nothing more complex than laying a wreath at an ANZAC memorial on Remembrance Day. Surely human rights deserve more than that! And surely being involved with the contemporary in art means more than valorising old art revolutionaries already safely authorised by history.

There seems to be no recognition of the very real danger of art aestheticising the things it sets out to critique and to change. Indeed in Robert Storr's Arsenal show we come face to face with the problem that just repeating images of suffering may do little more than formalise (and canonise) that suffering until we simply just accept that the majority 'Third' World will never get better because 'powerful' art images tell us so. Where is the accountability in yet more rollcalls of revolutionary fine-art heroism when art paradoxically is seen as both as *in* the world and *above* the world? And where is the accountability when artistic careers (those of both curators and artists) can rise meteorically or crash and burn not on their own merits but by in their synchrony with fashionable reflexive 'concern' or academic pseudo-revolution? It's not that art or artists are faking concern, it's that their concern may have no real effect beyond the

palliative (it makes *us* feel better). Artists should be concerned, but we should be wary of how much this 're-privileging' of concern is blinding us to other real changes in art and culture; changes that in turn actually *are* revolutionising the cultural terrain. To act in a truly contemporary way one must engage with that new terrain. I really believe this is a great time for thinking, and for making images and objects. My consternation stems from the way that this is not being harnessed by the powers that be in the art world.

This desire to return to a canonical socialistic revolutionary politics of the Left is itself a form of conservatism in the face of new modes of communication and expression in the public realm that are developing from the ground up rather than the top down. These curators fail to understand culture holistically as the field of both high-art and popular culture: itself a division that is becoming so porous as to be impossible to clearly delineate. Is this backward gaze a desire to return to a time when those delineations did seem clear? The fact is we may just be naming the wrong people 'contemporary artist'.

Early last century many dreamed that Modernism would become a universal language for art. A universal language has indeed come to pass but not as those founding Modernists imagined. Popular culture's ascendancy over the course of the 20th century has meant that more and more people now have an active stake in their culture. We are no longer just spoken to by high culture: we are now beginning to *act out* our cultural engagement and we are posting it on YouTube, immersing ourselves in Facebook and MySpace and living it in Second Life. Entertainment, art and culture continue to merge, and the old forms of criticality have been dislodged. If this has meant a rise also in forms of consumerism, then so be it. Consumerism, like art and taste, are just forms of human behaviour.

It is all very well for curators to latch onto one aspect of revolutionary avant-garde thought, cherry picking supposedly anti-consumer stances, dubious as some may be (Duchamp as anti-consumerist ... really?!). What angers me about so many of these recent curatorial forays is that nostalgia has replaced any understanding that advances in technology and modes of mass intercommunication clearly inspired the early modernists just as much as a desire for social change: the Russian Constructivists rated advertising as equal to art.

But this situation is too open for many on the Left *and* the Right: it's just *too* democratic. It truly is disheartening just how much they seem to need art to remain 'unsullied' by the masses. As our museums increasingly co-opt aspects of popular culture and the mass media in a bid to build audiences, it seems that those audiences are still not allowed to actually form their own tastes. Just remember the episode following the death of the popular (and populist) artist Pro Hart when the director of the National Gallery of Australia, in refusing to present the artist's work, basically said "Go jump, plebs!" to a large section of the Australian population. It seems that taste is a form of power that must stay in the hands of an elite few otherwise the ceiling of civilisation will fall in. This is the true revolution of our times. As Michael Coveney wrote recently in the UK *Observer*: "People's cultural tastes are now accepted as a democratic given, and the idea that a cultural elite could impose 'higher' tastes is no longer accepted, as it was 30 years ago."<sup>4</sup>

Nonetheless, recent overseas blockbuster events (and the forthcoming 2008 Biennale of Sydney) seem intent on re-introducing the well-worn, anti-consumer-culture line so familiar from the sixties and seventies. Where is the recognition that the internet, YouTube, MySpace, Web 2.0 and the rise and rise of popular culture are

advances to rival anything from the last century and a half and, more importantly, are happening *now*? Certainly not in these über-exhibitions. But elsewhere art is understood to be evolving with the times. In a recent statement issued by the Deutsche Guggenheim, Berlin, the museum acknowledged that: "Nowadays, art is leaving its traditional protective housing and has begun permeating all spheres of social life. It serves increasingly less as the cultural heritage of a bourgeois elite and is instead conquering more and more social classes as a lifestyle element. There is no doubt that art has democratized itself..."<sup>5</sup>

Pop culture and mass media are not the enemy – they are entities in a changing world. If this resurrection of 'concern' is nostalgic it's because no-one is clear who the enemy is. Political correctness and Western vulnerability have created a state of impotent confusion. In the recent Venice Biennale and Documenta the shadow of the 2006 furore over cartoons about the Islamic Prophet Muhammad published in a Danish newspaper was still evident in their hesitancy and lack of real political punch.

While the art world appears happy to subscribe to Duchamp's notion that "In the future, artists will just point" they do so with the caveat "we like the truth when it reveals others, not when it reveals ourselves".<sup>6</sup> By these lights art appears to be aesthetically unbounded while in actuality it (and its supposed audience) remains within safe, well-established confines. I am amazed that an art world that has canonised Dadaists abusing clergy in the street (*Our Collaborator*, Benjamin Peret *Insulting a Priest*, 1926<sup>7</sup>) or advocating the burning down of libraries and the flooding of museums (The Futurist Manifesto, 1909) is shit-scared of developments such as YouTube, MySpace and the burgeoning of popular culture.

There is a real political dimension to the whole YouTube/MySpace phenomenon. Since the Enlightenment we have seen the evolving concept of the sovereign self whereby, broadly speaking, the power over the individual that was once vested in the monarch (the sovereign), or perhaps in the Church, now resides with the individual themselves. We live in a time of capitalism but we also live in a time of democracy. Individual freedoms and the right to choose have become paramount. They form the basis of our engagement with human rights and with ethics. The 'acting out' we witness on YouTube can be seen as a natural extension of the sovereign self. But the democratising attitudes of these new 'actors', these creators of a new social sculpture, seem antithetic to those of the gatekeepers of the 'old' authorised culture who prefer things the way they remember them.

As I write this the ZKM Centre for Art and Media in Karlsruhe has opened an exhibition that could have made an interesting proposal for a Biennale of Sydney. It is worth quoting from their curatorial statement at length:

*In the Internet, portals such as [www.flickr.com](http://www.flickr.com), [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com), [www.myspace.com](http://www.myspace.com); and virtual worlds, such as [www.secondlife.com](http://www.secondlife.com) or blogs now offer a newly structured space for the creative statements of millions of people. The artist no longer has a monopoly on creativity. Users deliver or generate the content or put it together. They become producers and program designers and thereby, competitors to television, radio, and newspapers, the historical media monopoly. Audience participation reshapes itself as consumers' emancipation.*<sup>8</sup>

It was inevitable that this exhibition would happen. It just wasn't going to happen in one of those art circuses of the Golden Age we've seen recently in Europe and which the Sydney Biennale seems so desperate to emulate. Back in the real world things are moving very

quickly. While the baby-boomer über-curators attempt to reinstate the old Left/Right binary that characterised the 20th century others with more open minds and eyes have quickly divined that the new century would bring new problems and new solutions. The ZKM statement continues:

*The new installations ... allow the visitors to emancipate themselves. They can act as artists, curators and producers. The exhibition visitors, as users, as emancipated consumers, are at the center of focus. YOU are the content of the exhibition!*<sup>9</sup>

And the public has indeed emancipated itself with a vengeance! Two hundred million MySpace pages. Six million citizens of the online Second Life and counting. Four and a half million videos uploaded to YouTube every week. It's been an avalanche of self expression and self possession. Even the 2007 Australian election campaign is now in on it and, what's more, that recently derided and supposedly discarded category of postmodernism has resurfaced to describe the situation of one politician watching another politician watching and then turning off the first politician's ad and then...well you know the story. It's like a hall of mirrors. Contrast this with the increasingly paranoid tone adopted in recent cultural commentary against all manner of new language communication in the established press from both the Left and Right.

Also, as I write, Documenta 12 are spruiking an increase in attendances over Doc11 as evidence of the success of their "non-art-market driven" exhibition. Really? I would say that what the extra attendances show is that the lure of the Grand Tour worked but it doesn't necessarily mean that those audiences liked what they saw. What the increase means is that many more Asian and Eastern European people are attending art events. Australia was even singled out by Documenta12 as one of the new audience regions. But a question emerges from all this: what does the avant-garde do now that its old foe the bourgeoisie (then the petit-bourgeoisie) have morphed into nothing more 'evil' than you or me?

As the events in Venice, Kassel, Munster and Sydney make evident, a great many of the art world's most prestigious curators seem destined to repeat the mistakes of preceding generations by bundling up the art they knew when they were young and were still truly open to innovation into cosy cocoons, wrapping themselves in the comforting blanket of the familiar while they dream of a revolution safely beyond reach. If one were to name one, just one, goal of all of us interested in vanguard art it would be to have been involved an event that was truly groundbreaking, truly revolutionary. The sad thing is that so many (but thankfully not all) 'official' and institutional art decision makers seem blind to the real Zeitgeist that is actually going on all around them. They just can't or won't see it.

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<Notes>

- 1 Christopher Miles 'Despite Some Gems, Germany's Documenta Lacks a Theme' *Los Angeles Times* 27 June 2007
- 2 Documenta 12 press kit brochure June 2007
- 3 Sydney Biennale 2008 advance brochure distributed at Venice Biennale June 2007
- 4 Michael Coveney 'Voices Off' *The Observer* 30 October 2005
- 5 Deutsche Guggenheim, Berlin press release for *Art Spaces For Tomorrow* (panel discussion) 3 November 2007
- 6 With apologies to Saint Augustine
- 7 Anonymous photographer, published in *La Revolution Surrealiste* Set 2, No8, 1 December 1926 p13 reproduced in *Surrealism: Revolution by Night* catalogue National Gallery of Australia 1993 p128
- 8 *You, Aer: The Century of The Consumer* (curatorial advance statement) ZKM Karlsruhe 2007
- 9 Ibid