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Preface

When I came to the Deutsches Historisches Museum (DHM) in 2017, I was thinking about creating a show to examine the relationship between art and historical exhibitions. It struck me that a large and important part of the DHM collection consists of works of art. They were mostly added to the collection because they testify to historical events, changing attitudes, or the everyday realities of former times. But what does it mean when a work of art is displayed in a historical museum? What changes about the way we look at it and interpret it? Is it reduced to the level of a source? Do artworks enrich what we call history by giving us something to look at? What is the relationship between aesthetic and historical judgement?

Documenta is probably the most famous international art exhibition that has ever been held in Germany. To do justice to its historical significance in our own exhibition, I looked for a team that was capable of exploring and presenting the relationships between art, politics and history. It quickly became apparent that only an interdisciplinary team would be appropriate, and I was pleased to be able to bring curator and art historian Lars Bang Larsen and contemporary historian Dorothee Wierling on board to begin with, followed by the science and art historian Julia Voss. Dorlis Blume has overseen the exhibition as project manager, and Alexia Pooth served as research associate.

With the support of Christiane and Nicolaus Weickart, the DHM held an all-day symposium called 'documenta. History/Art/Politics' on 15 October 2019. The participants also discussed the exhibition "'Divinely Gifted': National Socialism's Favoured Artists in the Federal Republic', which is being curated by Wolfgang Brauneis and will be held in parallel with the exhibition about documenta. As a result of this discussion, it became, for the first time, quite clear to me that these projects were not antithetical to one another: on the one hand, the modern, pro-Western, formalist, democratic documenta; on the other hand, the continuing influence of Nazi-infused, reactionary, anti-modernist art. Julia Friedrich gave a talk in which she clearly brought out the continuities with the Nazi period that can be seen in documenta. On the one hand, the modern arts, revived and set against the backdrop of the ruined Fridericianum, were supposed to tie in with the pre-war avant-garde and, in so doing, bridge the rupture that separated the young Federal Republic from that era. On the other hand, they offered viewers an all-too-easy reconciliation, identifying the curators and their modern audience with the opponents and even the victims of the Nazis.

Another result of the symposium was that the artistic director of the Kulturstiftung des Bundes (German Federal Cultural Foundation), Hortensia Völckers,

who had also attended the event, encouraged me to apply to the Kulturstiftung and request support for the two projects. Furthermore, the results of the symposium also persuaded Minister of State Monika Grütters that a closer examination would be made of the continuity of National Socialism with the cultural institutions of the Federal Republic, which was mostly unknown to the public at that point.

In 2021, a coincidence then led me to an even more disconcerting connection between the early days of documenta and Nazism: I was talking to historian Carlo Gentile about a new centre planned to deal with the subject of German war crimes in the years 1939–45 under the initial direction of the German Historical Museum, and he mentioned that Italian archives contained direct links to a central figure of documenta – Werner Haftmann. One of the most important sources of intellectual inspiration for documenta 1 to 3 had apparently committed serious war crimes in Italy during the Nazi regime. We cite the source for this information in the present catalogue.

During the first deliberations over the dual exhibition beginning in 2017, the two shows at first appeared to be simply polar opposites: at one end, the lingering echo of Nazi aesthetics in the public works of Hitler's and Goebbels' favourite artists, named on the list of the 'divinely gifted', who had been allowed to continue styling key areas of the Federal Republic after 1945. At the other end, the three vectors of the history of documenta: the fight against the Nazis' anti-modernist conceptions of art; against the GDR and the East bloc; and the orientation toward the 'West' in its sense as the political, moral and aesthetic counterpoint to the 'East'. This polarity became blurred, however, the more research we did, the closer we looked, and the more we discussed matters with colleagues – and not just at the symposium in 2019.

So this project has most definitely not resolved the question of the relationship between works of art and a historical museum. On the contrary, the issue has become even more differentiated. Our research and our experience with the history of documenta have shown the extent to which aesthetic judgements are in part determined by historical knowledge.

Raphael Gross

President of the Deutsches Historisches Museum

Foreword by the Kulturstiftung des Bundes

'I see haunting as a back-and-forth movement' between past and present, says artist Loretta Fahrenholz in the interview at the end of this book, '[as] the presence of all the things that are there, even if they are denied'. In a series of portraits of documenta created especially for this exhibition, Fahrenholz carried out her exploration with the help of a computer program. And the results are jarring. Instead of endowing the history of documenta with a clear and prominent visage, the algorithms have produced distorted features and images. As a representation of the history of the exhibition, they raise one question in particular: in what guise does documenta present itself when, in a forty-year artistic retrospective, countless images are set off against one another in a seemingly random fashion?

In seeking the answer to this question, this project combines contemporary art with historical research. The digital compositions by Loretta Fahrenholz lead to a rejection of retrospective idealizations, as do the historical studies that form the heart of the exhibition. Rather than invite us to celebrate a flagship cultural institution, they offer us excursions with many different voices and perspectives. In this forum, an interdisciplinary team of researchers, with the aid of many contemporary witnesses, highlights half a century of documenta and, in particular, four areas of modern German history that are replete with contradiction: National Socialism, the alignment with the West, the modern art of East Germany, and the Federal Republic's funding of cultural activity.

'Politics and Art' is the subtitle of this exhibition: different areas of human endeavour, but deeply interwoven. The macro-political parameters of international geopolitics and of foreign, cultural and educational policy for both parts of Germany find expression at this interface, as do the private politics of memory – and of repression. One of the difficult realizations that emerged during the critical reassessment of the early history of documenta – a re-evaluation that began in the run-up to the project – was that the careers of several early 'founders' of documenta were fatally intertwined with the tyrannical Nazi regime. The exhibition devotes a section to the Nazi past of art historian Werner Haftmann, who was the intellectual guiding light of the early editions of documenta.

The research produced further results. Records that as yet remain unpublished indicate a previously little-noticed practice of unequal commemoration at documenta – an especially perfidious 'dialectic of memory loss and remembrance', as Benjamin Buchloh puts it. The first exhibition was dominated by the rhetoric

of making amends to the modern art proscribed by the Nazis; this was in keeping with the spirit of the times and was, moreover, desired by the West German government. At the same time, however, the names of two Jewish avant-garde artists who had been prosecuted by the Nazis were dropped from internal content lists in the course of planning the first documenta. These two artists were Otto Freundlich and Rudolf Levy, and the persecution of the latter is dealt with in the exhibition. A few rare original paintings by him are shown as well.

This exhibition encompasses ten different editions of documenta. These were ten reinventions of the event, ranging from the middle to the end of the twentieth century, each of which put its own stamp on the relationship between 'politics and art'. In 1997, for example, the literary theorist Edward Said remarked that in the tenth documenta, 'it is less clear where the dividing lines are' between what is art and what is not art, between art and politics, and – in light of the findings of this project – we may add: between peripheral event and international sensation, between awakening and remembrance, healing and 'affliction', between market autonomy and brand strategy, between incorporation into cultural policy for agendas of 'political modernisation' (Walter Grasskamp) and the radical subjectivity of curatorial control.

Documenta has kept its readiness to chart new directions. Every five years, it opens up a new chapter in contemporary art. As the 'politics and art' of documenta are deliberated from a historical perspective at the DHM in Berlin, preparations are under way in Kassel, Jakarta and other international locations for edition number fifteen. This is being directed by the Indonesian team from *ruangrupa*, which marks the first time that a non-European art collective is taking the reins of documenta, with the aim of offering the world a 'proposal for the future'. It tackles questions such as how to distribute ideas, resources, time, energy, knowledge and financial means for the benefit of everyone as a community. By the organisers' own admission, this new course is being charted for documenta with a view to its history: 'If documenta set out in 1955 to heal the wounds of war', writes *ruangrupa* in its programme statement, 'why shouldn't we try to focus attention on today's injuries with documenta 15?'

The Kulturstiftung des Bundes would like to thank the Deutsches Historisches Museum, under the direction of Raphael Gross, and Dorlis Blume as project leader with curators Lars Bang Larsen, Julia Voss and Dorothee Wierling, and research associate Alexia Pooth; in addition the artist Loretta Fahrenholz, the exhibition designers chezweitz and the entire DHM team for creating an exhibition that presents the history of documenta to us in a completely new light: as a culturally complex and historically contradictory undertaking, as a political and artistic event of international standing and, above all, as an unfinished process.

Hortensia Völckers

Executive Board | Artistic Director

Kirsten Haß

Executive Board | Administrative Director

Introduction

Several months before *documenta. Politics and Art* was due to open, we were sitting together in the Deutsches Historisches Museum to consider which of our research findings was the most significant. Various suggestions had been put forward and there was a pause in the conversation. Then Dorothee Wierling, one of the curators of the exhibition, said 'In any case, we have to make clear what a big, wild thing *documenta* was'. The rest of the team had to agree that she was right. Those three words perfectly sum up the dazzling, contradictory nature of the event that took over Kassel every few years. *Documenta* was always more than just a brilliantly staged art exhibition. From the beginning, it was a stage on which Federal Presidents or Chancellors appeared. It was an international showcase where the fledgling Federal Republic sought to present itself in a good light to its Western allies. It was a transatlantic bridge that spanned the ocean from Kassel to New York. It was the place where modernism, proscribed by the Nazis, rose to the status of state-approved art. It was also a Cold War *tour de force*, intended to demonstrate the unfettered potential of an idealised West – and the aesthetic inferiority of the East.

At the same time, it was all kinds of other things: an attempt to introduce the young generation to new values after 1945; a playground on which to practice democratic behaviour in the field of art; a public nuisance for some and a consuming passion for others; a platform for protests and pushback; a launching pad for the meteoric rise of a number of artists, most of them men, and a crowd-puller for adults and children. Moreover, behind the scenes, people with a leading role in *documenta* developed models of the politics of remembrance that were based, to a not inconsiderable extent, on lies. Nevertheless – or perhaps precisely because of that – they help shape the image that West Germans had of their country.

In short, *documenta* sent ambivalent signals. The Kassel show found lasting success as one of the most innovative West German exhibition formats and as an international art event with the character of a festival, populated by young people who talked, argued, laughed and pondered things with the artists. At the same time, despite all the jaunty exuberance, *documenta* was much more closely tied to the Federal Republic's political agenda than it might seem at first glance. Describing this contradiction seems to us to be one of the main challenges in making a historical assessment of *documenta*. The other, more obviously, is the question of how to exhibit an exhibition – even more, in fact: how to bring ten exhibitions spanning more than four decades into one museum. We ruled out a purely chronological sequence at a very early stage. We were more interested in tracing recurrent themes and lines of continuity.

In order to get to grips with the extensive and varied material, we followed several parallel approaches. In October 2019, a symposium on 'documenta. History/Art/Politics' was held in the Deutsches Historisches Museum and the contributions were published in the museum's magazine *Historische Urteilskraft*. After that, we broadened the discussion, arranging interviews with a large number of people who had a particular connection to documenta, namely Bazon Brock, Catherine David, Lorenz Dombois, Hans Eichel, Heiner Georgsdorf, Ingeborg Lüscher, Judy Lybke, Chris Reinecke, Gerhard Richter and Rudolf Zwirner. At the same time, we scoured the specialist literature and explored the archives from Kassel to Berlin, Leipzig and Dresden, and further afield to Copenhagen, Florence and Los Angeles.

We gratefully made use of the advice and knowledge offered us by specialists who have concerned themselves with documenta for a long time. Also instructive were our conversations with researchers whose voices had seldom been heard before, or not at all. As for the question of how an exhibition about exhibitions might look, we found that out in our dialogue with the chezweitz design team.

Prologue: Documenta in its Times

How did an art exhibition in the medium-sized city of Kassel, located on what was then the 'zone periphery', manage to become so large, influential and internationally significant? This is the question that we faced at the start of our research. The answer that we found has many facets, but one common denominator: documenta owes its rise and its status as Germany's most successful art exhibition to its political dimension. Without considering the amalgamation of politics and art, in particular the extraordinary promotion and enlistment of the fine arts by political interests, it is not possible to understand documenta and the enormous importance that it achieved.

In the prologue, Dorothee Wierling traces the parallels between documenta on a small scale and politics on a large scale. At first, this relationship was by no means self-evident. Julia Voss follows the ups and downs of the quest to establish an exhibition of European twentieth century art, which led to the first documenta in 1955. Julia Friedrich analyses the design of the first exhibition and examines how German guilt was magicked away in the transformed ruin of the Fridericianum in Kassel.

We are aware of how much documenta has changed in the course of its history, over and over again. It took surprising turns on more than one occasion. Despite these caesuras, we consider it useful to look at a continuous period of time. The exhibition and catalogue deal with the period from 1955 to 1997, in which the first ten editions of documenta took place. What these shows have in common is that they were shaped by the Cold War and its eventful course. It was Catherine David, the director of documenta 10, who gave a new twist to

this political legacy in 1997. Firstly, because David gave artists space, for the first time in the history of documenta, to reflect on their origins in Eastern Germany or Eastern Europe, and on the end of communist rule. Secondly, because she recognized the urgency of analysing another political gradient: the one from north to south. It is at this turning point that our investigation of documenta concludes.

Documenta and National Socialism

Shortly before the catalogue went to press, we received the latest findings by Carlo Gentile at the Martin Buber Institute of Jewish Studies of Cologne University. In the course of archival research into the German occupation of northern Italy, he had come across the name of Werner Haftmann, who, alongside Arnold Bode, was the most important founding figure of documenta. Gentile found out that in the summer of 1944, Haftmann was given the command of an anti-espionage and 'band intelligence' group tasked with combating partisans in central and northern Italy. For his service in a 'band hunt company', he was awarded the Iron Cross 2nd Class by the National Socialist authorities. In 1946, Haftmann was wanted as a war criminal by the Italian authorities | → **Cat. no. 72, p. 97** |. The art historian kept silent about this part of his life, as well as his membership in the SA and NSDAP (Nazi Party).

Haftmann's silence had consequences for his model of art history and his reconstruction of modernism, as well as for documenta itself and the politics of memory. Julia Voss investigates this topic in the catalogue and the exhibition. One of the aspects on which she focuses is the work of the Jewish painter Rudolf Levy, whose name was added to a draft list of artists for documenta in 1955, although he was subsequently omitted. We see it as one of the tasks of our project to point such gaps out without reproducing them.

The exclusion of artists who had been murdered by the German Wehrmacht as Jews or 'Bolsheviks' was not the only aspect of Haftmann's incomplete reconstruction of modernism. Emil Nolde, whose art was rejected by the National Socialists despite his support of the party, was reinvented by Haftmann as a 'born anti-fascist' – in this process, too, documenta played a decisive role. Nolde's transfiguration, with Kassel as the springboard, ultimately led to his paintings being hung in the Federal Chancellery in Bonn. Haftmann was not the only one, however, who had been much closer to National Socialism than he cared to admit after 1945. In the catalogue, Mirl Redmann takes a closer look at the founding generation of documenta, from 1955 to 1968, in particular with regard to membership in the NSDAP, SA, or SS.

The Cultural and Political Programme of 'the West'

This exhibition also offers a good opportunity to take a closer look at the role of the fine arts in the Cold War. From the very beginning, some of the financing came from the government department responsible for combating communism. The Federal Ministry for All-German Affairs, as it was then called, agreed to support the exhibition partly because Kassel was near the inner-German border, between the former 'zones' of Germany. The funds were granted 'in appreciation of the likely impact of your exhibition project on the Soviet occupation zone', according to the ministry.

Lars Bang Larsen describes documenta's claim to the prerogative of interpretation and what it entailed. National Socialism and communism were equated with one another as 'totalitarian' and erased from the history of art. West Germany sought to close ranks with the United States not only in the military and economic spheres, but also in the arts. Abstract art was elevated to the status of a purported 'world language' – an assertion that illustrates the hegemonic ambition of its advocates. This claim had the simultaneous effect of putting art in a gilded cage: when documenta 2 devoted itself almost exclusively to abstract art in 1959, declaring it to be a universal standard, painting and sculpture were placed off-limits for any serious expression of political content. Consumer culture, on the other hand, moved in all the faster, with documenta 4 in 1968 dedicating a lot of space to pop art and minimal art. This led it to be called the 'documenta americana'. In her essay for the catalogue, Birgit Jooss explores the event's early – and close – ties to the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

The exchange of ideas was not, however, a one-way street: in 1973, exploratory talks were held with the City of Philadelphia. It was proposed that documenta 6 should be the Federal Republic's official contribution to the celebrations of the bicentenary of the United States Declaration of Independence. In the end, this plan did not come to fruition.

All these shows of consensus among the Western allies ultimately provoked a backlash: in 1972, Swiss curator Harald Szeemann turned his back on the unspoken agreement that had governed all previous documenta editions. At documenta 5, the public was no longer invited to identify with a certain direction in art, be it modernism, abstraction, or pop art. Instead, Szeemann laid out a multiplicity of 'pictorial worlds', ranging from kitsch to propaganda. This break with convention marked the beginning of a new era in Kassel. Yet Szeemann, too, was accused of a normative treatment of art: why, for example, was the art world not taking a stand in Kassel on the Vietnam War? Why did it include so few works by women artists? The Guerrilla Girls group of artists got to the heart of this particular blind spot of the supposedly liberal West in 1987. With regard to d8, they asked the public the question: 'Why in 1987 is documenta 95% white and 83% male?'

