

## **dOCUMENTA(13), re-imagining the world through art**

Every five years the city Kassel, in Germany, hosts the most important world event in the field of visual arts: Documenta, an exhibition born in 1955 that in its past edition attracted over 750,000 visitors. The thirteenth edition, held from 9th June to 16th September, presented the works of 193 artists coming from the entire world.

Nico Zardo (text and photos)

The proposal of its art director Carolyn Christov-Bokargiev was to take up the cultural assumptions that concur in the creation of a work of art, making dOCUMENTA(13) not only a moment for "presenting" works by artists retained representative (according to the curator and her collaborators, of course) but also the occasion to re-think the many different personal and social aspects that give rise to this form of visual communication. Besides the presentation of the works in Kassel - in 15 venues all across the city - connected exhibitions were organized in Kabul, Alexandria, Cairo and the University of Alberta in Canada. In the intentions of renewal of the concept of art, the art director has collected the contributions not only of artists but also of people coming from different environments: from science to biological agriculture, from renewable energy to philosophy, from economic and political theories to language, with the aim of using all the forms of knowledge valid and useful in order to re-imagine the world. Seeing everything is impossible both for the great quantity of works on show and their locations. Just to give you an idea, let me tell you about some of the works that have struck me most.

377 MONOCHROME OR SOFT-COLOR PAINTINGS, taken from images chosen on the Internet, were exhibited by Chinese artist Yan Lei by covering all the walls and also hanging some on the ceiling of a 100 m2 hall. The effect is alienating because it reminds us in an amplified way of the bombardments of visual solicitations to which we are subjected daily, and makes us understand that seeing so many images all together is the same as ... seeing none at all!

All very similar and yet different are the 900 postcards depicting apples and pears, painted between 1910 and 1960 by Korbinian Aigner (1885-1966), a country priest from Bavaria who was imprisoned in Dachau for having opposed Nazism and who, in order to survive, began cultivating (and painting) apples, producing several different varieties of them, one of which still bears his name today.

And from WWII (1939-1945) another installation takes its inspiration: The Disobedient by Sanja Ivekovic who, starting from a photograph of a Nazi official guarding a donkey imprisoned inside a barbed wire fence and shown to the prisoners destined for forced labor as an example of disobedience not to be followed, connects this strange fact to some exemplary biographies that resisted the injustice and oppression of tyrannical power (among these, Primo Levi, Jan Palach, Victor Jara). The installation is completed by a collection of stuffed toy donkeys to support the image of the meek animal pointed out as a subversive.

Images and sculptures of faces deformed by war injuries or surgical operations, war objects retrieved from post-colonial Africa, reconstructed and salvaged from public establishments for daily use, are part of an impressive installation by French artist Kader Attia. Here, the intent to illustrate a parallel between Western and African aesthetic conceptions actually turns into a powerful denunciation of the horrors of war.

"TIME" IS PRESENT IN SEVERAL DIFFERENT WORKS: the famous readymade metronome by Man Ray from the 1930s that bears the cut-out of a photograph of the eye of his beloved Lee Miller fixed to the pendulum. From the image of the metronome stems the video installation by South African artist William Kentridge, The refusal of time, which, through a masterly Fellini-style carousel comprised of animated silhouettes, recalls the contradictions between Newton's time - useful for 19th century standardization of labor - and that of Einstein, for whom space and time become closely inter-dependent.

## A CULTURE IN PAPER

A large clock that, although elliptical in shape, marks time with great precision (inspired by a painting by G. Ulbricht of 1825): this is the work of Albanian artist Anri Sala installed in the garden of the Orangerie. Not far away, in a motley colored structure, Mexican artist Julieta Aranda and Russian artist Anton Vidokle present their Time/Bank, an organization that proposes an exchange of art works, based on the model of time banks, hence totally independent from any monetary system.

STILL IN THE GARDENS OF THE ORANGERIE we find Doing nothing garden, the 6-meter tall hill by Song Dong, made using landfill material covered in earth and cultivated with aromatic herbs and wild flowers, which suggests that it would not take much to recycle the waste we produce. And then Weave, a work by Massimo Bartolini: a rectangular tub (about 2 meters x 6) placed at ground level, where the water is moved rhythmically, creating a wave that reminds us of the unstoppable changes taking place in nature.

PAPER IS FULLY PRESENT IN THE WORKS OF DOCUMENTA(13): here are four situations. The first is the imposing collage by Thomas Bayrle, made up of thousands of squares of paper (about 20 cm x 20), on which is printed a texture of small airplanes that create an overall picture of a large airplane (about 15 meters x 8). The second is the surprising work by Geoffrey Farmer, who produced a wall about 40 meters long comprised of silhouettes of images of famous people cut out from issues of Life Magazine spanning from 1935 to 1985. Observing Farmer's work, which can be viewed from two sides, in just a few minutes we can relive fifty years of history through images placed in chronological sequence.

Third. Danish artist Matias Faldbakken must have perturbed the employees of the public library of Kassel's city hall, because this is where he set up his installation. Starting from his research on order and chaos, the artist created a huge mess from the books that were placed on two of the library's shelves by making them fall to the floor in disorderly fashion. The comparison with the Teutonic order reigning all around is blatant. Fourth: Paul Chang, too, has a passion for books, but for him, only the paperboard cover pages that separate from the rest of the book are important: using these as his basis, he paints fields of color and minimalist drawings on them. The rapport between the book's original title and the artists' interventions gives rise to pleasant, unexpected suggestions. For the visitor of dOCUMENTA(13), the great variety of topics, the techniques and situations all so different one from the other, constitute a precious opportunity to reconsider visual arts as a useful instrument for reflection of what takes place all around us and re-confirms the validity of the initial phrase of Farmer's poem, on show in Kassel: "Even when you show so much you also, in the end, show so little". •