

## 2.3 Curating Biennales

This section will examine the emergence of the professional profile of the biennale curator as they exist today. The goal will be to highlight several seminal moments in its development, in order to show the challenges and debates that define it. The focus in this section is on Documenta in Kassel, because it has been a site for many important developments in biennale curating, but also because it illustrates how many different factors—geopolitics, art history, global vs local—are brought together and negotiated through curatorial practice. The section will focus on three particularly important editions of documenta, each significant for its own reasons. The first section will examine the inaugural Documenta in 1955, and the debates around Harald Szeemann's Documenta in 1972, and the second section will examine Enwezor's Documenta 11 in 2002. Each will focus on different parts of what make up biennale curatorship, though of course it being the same festival, there are certain threads that flow through all of the editions.

### 2.3.1 Documenta V

Documenta was originally established in 1955 by professor and exhibition-designer Arnold Bode. The exhibition was put on with the intention of repudiating the Nazi-era branding of modernism as degenerate art (*Entartete Kunst*), and reintegrating Germany with avant-garde artistic movements, in an attempt to modernize and move forward after the trauma of war. Bode's inspiration came from his visit to the Venice Biennale of 1954, demonstrating the importance of Venice as a site for the dissemination of the biennale model (Wallace 2011, 5). (documenta n.d.-a)

Its first edition took place in the Fridericianum, still in ruins after the Allied bombing campaigns of WWII. It is significantly is the oldest public museum in Europe, having been built in 1779 on the Enlightenment principals of making the art collection of the state visible to the public. This effort by the state to promote the consumption of culture by the masses as a form of education is an early instance of the emerging intellectual culture of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which has already been addressed in examining the universal expositions. (Wallace 2011)

Documenta II took place four years later in 1959, but as of Documenta V moved to a 5-year rhythm which it has kept up since. The exhibition has also expanded into a host of additional sites, including ones outside of Germany, which will be addressed later. The first exhibition having lasted around 2 months, by Documenta 3 it had become deemed by Bode the "Museum of 100 Days," a length that it has mostly kept since then (documenta n.d.-b).

Documenta V, perhaps its most famous edition, took place in 1972 under the direction of Swiss curator Harald Szeemann. Before this though, it is important to

take a brief detour and examine the growth of Szeemann's curatorial practice also before that landmark event.

By the time Szeemann had received the commission for Documenta 5, he had made a name for himself already as an important and influential curator in the art world. Before documenta, he became famous for "When Attitudes become Form" (1969) at the Kunsthalle Bern. The show highlighted artists working in then-emerging genres that rejected the creation of the art object in favour of situations and processes. The exhibition also featured artists whose work could not be "displayed" in the museum in the traditional sense, such as conceptual art and land art, about which can only be informed or referenced through documentation (Szeemann 1981, 47). The show was not well received by the Swiss public; the resulting outcry led eventually to Szeemann's firing.

Szeemann, newly-unemployed, would subsequently go on to found his now-famous *Agentur für Geistige Gastarbeit*, his own for-hire independent curatorial organization. This "agency," consisting only Szeemann himself as a private person, was an early instance of a curator breaking away from a large institution and offering their freelance services for hire on a project-by-project basis to arts institutions.

Szeemann's agency is usually interpreted as a symptom of the fact that the curator's role had, by the 1960s, largely shifted away from the care of collections and towards the staging of exhibitions, a change whose implications would prove significant in the further development of the term until the present. Curating, as one is endlessly reminded, comes etymologically from *cura*, meaning to take care of something. The term *curating* stems from the curator's former professional role taking care of the museum's collections, meaning the storage and preservation of works, but also their hanging and transportation. As many contemporary works became more immaterial, referential (e.g. documentation of land art or conceptual art, as with the exhibition in Bern), or performative, the role of the curator shifted to this second role of exhibition design.

Szeemann's agency reflects this, no longer tied down to museums and their collections, as an independent curator he can focus on the design of exhibition experiences, working in many different kinds of spaces and with a large range of artists. Curating becomes then a situated practice, it becomes performative, focused on the event of the concentration and coming together of works and performances for a short time for an exhibition. This stands in contrast to the museum logic of collecting, preserving, acting as a mausoleum. Artistic and curatorial practice were developing together, away from an emphasis on the narrative of art history, and towards emphasizing art as an event that either happened in the exhibition in the moment of experiencing it, or in the moment of their performance (usually then exhibited as traces, such as video or documentation).

Harald Szeemann's Documenta V in 1972 is regarded as an example of curatorial authorship revolving around the singular subjective authorship of the mystified

curator/genius. Szeemann was given the title of “General Secretary,” and made it known that his final authority over the exhibition would not easily be able to be questioned by the 5–7 person working group who helped realize the exhibition. Documenta V was significant in that it was the first Documenta that did not take place under the leadership of Bode, instead being run by Szeemann, with Bode serving only in an advisory role. Szeemann’s Documenta 5 was given the name “Questioning Reality—Pictorial Worlds Today.” The exhibition that until then had understood itself as an “100 days’ exhibition,” was profiled by Szeemann as a “100-day event,” showing the influence that Fluxus and happenings, as well as the student protests of 1968 some years earlier, had had on Szeemann.

The exhibition was thematic and subjective in its choice of artists and works, in contrast to Bode’s attempt at creating a survey of contemporary art trends at the time. Szeemann’s curatorial concept was to show a juxtaposition of both so-called artistic and non-artistic images with the intention of having viewers decide for themselves just how art should be defined, and to create what he called new forms of seeing (Szeemann 1981, 74). To achieve this, the exhibition was divided into three main sections, “Individual Mythologies,” a presentation of 70 artists mainly in the areas of performance, installation, and process-based art. “Parallel visual worlds,” made up mostly of design, and things not normally considered as art (poster design, propaganda, etc.), and lastly “Artists’ Museums,” where artists curated their own exhibitions. These included Claus Oldenburg’s *Mouse Museum*, Duchamp’s *La Boîte en Valise* (1941), and Broodthaers *Musée d’Art Moderne, Département des Aigles, Section d’Art Moderne*, among other works (Szeemann 1972, 9).

It was also the first time that installations made up a large amount of the works on display, meaning that many rooms were filled and conceived of entirely by one artist. It should be pointed out that as here the experientiality and festivity of the experience of the work of art is being discussed, that the installation is part of a logical continuation of this trend within the visual arts: As Fried, and later O’Doherty, have argued, the installation can be seen as the transformation of the entire room into the work of art. These kinds of works, which melt out of their frames and share the space with the viewer mean that the experience becomes one “of an object in a *situation*—one that, virtually by definition, *includes the beholder*” (Fried [1967] 1998, 153; see also O’Doherty [1976] 1999, 29). They become theatrical, experiential, and begins to approach the performativity of theatre and music, interesting also for our purposes later.

Szeemann intended for Documenta 5 to be a “schooling of the eye” (*Seherschule*). As has been argued to be the case among the universal expositions and their inculcation of a specific scopic regime, a schooling of the eye is a common refrain among arts festivals as well. Unique to Szeemann’s approach was that it was informed and influenced by the 1968 revolution, and as a result it did not intend to prescribe new values, but rather to enrich and foster the experience of seeing in

itself, in a kind of rekindling of the Enlightenment spirit. Szeemann would then in theory function as a kind of “ignorant schoolmaster” in the Rancièrian sense of providing the audience with a *will* and motivation to learn, through the staging of objects on display, but not an *intellect* to be learnt, which elsewhere has been called a specific political ideology or modernist narrative. He let rather artists and non-art objects to provide this intellect, and ultimately leaving it up to the audience themselves, at least in theory. (Rancièrè 1991, 14)

Szeemann’s approach was intended to be an attack on prescribed readings and didacticism in the museum. His argument was that once we have cleaned it of being a mausoleum—a place of worship of the arts—the museum can once again be rendered useful to contemporary artists. During this time, much artistic practice was performative, happening in the street, and in spaces not traditionally associated with art: Much artistic production post-1968 sought to reject the bourgeois institutions of artistic practice associated with the hidden dissemination of their hegemonic ideologies. Szeemann however made a point of utilizing the Neue Galerie and the Fridericianum, the two old museums in Kassel. He tried to bring art *back* into the museum by ridding the museum of its former position of status, and attempting to align it with this anti-bourgeois, emancipatory spirit.

With Documenta 5, Szeemann’s interest was in moving away from grand exhibitions extolling the singular and authoritative course of art history, once again attempting to disavow a core function of the museum institution. He wanted instead to move towards a much broader, more subjective understanding of art history that was made up of “individual mythologies” that gave the audience their own authority to decide how to construct their own proper art historical narratives. He understood his role as differentiating the audiences’ gaze, rather than creating simple and dogmatic yes or no structures of acceptance or denial to the status of art (Szeemann 1972, 74–75).

This emphasis on a lack of art historical theme counterintuitively made this the first Documenta to have a specific programmatic focus set by its curator, “Questioning Reality” (Richter 2008, 110). This is an important distinction that must be made: Bode’s motivation for presenting modernist and abstract art in West Germany was the reinstating of an oppressed history, though one that was perhaps less inevitable than large-scale post-war exhibitions made it seem. Bode, in contrast to Szeemann, worked more as an instrument of a grand, modern narrative of inevitable aesthetic progress, a change in content but not underlying approach from Nazi art policy. Szeemann, in his post-modern, post-1968 style, rejected these grand narratives in favour of smaller, individual ones, “individual mythologies” of the artists, but also, at least in theory, of visitors as well.

## The Independent Curator

Documenta 5 was an early example of a festival that experimented with the conditions for knowledge-creation using its organizational framework. Szeemann's approach can be attributed to a form of curatorial practice that had been emerging, since the late 1960s, which saw curators begin to assert authorship over the exhibition as itself a kind of statement. Szeemann coined the term for this professional profile the *Ausstellungsmacher*, the exhibition maker. Curators such as Szeemann could be "independent" because these figures normally possessed a high enough level of influence in the art world that allowed them to break away from large institutions and work on a project basis on specific exhibitions as they came up.<sup>18</sup>

Although there exists a history of experimentation with the exhibition setting by curators and artists alike well before the focus here on the 1960s, what is significant is that this period marked an increase in the treatment of the exhibition as its own particular medium, as well as in the number of large international group exhibitions organized by these independent curators.<sup>19</sup> Group exhibitions allowed for comparisons and contrasts between works from various artists and styles, orchestrated by the curator through their modelling of the exhibition experience (O'Neil 2012, 16). Exhibitions became thematic rather than linear or retrospective.

Artists were often also asked to make works uniquely for specific shows, creating situations where curators and artists would have to collaborate and establish some kind of working relationship specific to the exhibition being put on. This was a particular relationship to many of the early independent curators, as their curatorial practices were often inextricably linked to the forms of artistic practice of the artists that they represented. The relationships between independent curators like Szeemann and artists such as Buren or Beuys was often symbiotic; e.g. artists often using a curator's stiff frame and concept as a springboard and set of enabling constraints.

The role of the independent curator as the author of the exhibition becomes more complex when we continue to further examine the similarities between their practices and the many forms of experimental art, installation art, and conceptual art that had been emerging since the 1940s.

Because artists' works increasingly depended on specific sites of production and display, it was in their interest to have as much control over these as possible. The issue was that these mediating factors such as hanging plans or choice of site were the traditional domain of institutions or curators. Added to this was, as seen with Szeemann, that curators' roles were shifting to assume authorship over the

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18 Other significant early independent curators were Konrad Fischer, Walter Hopps, and Seth Siegelau, to name just a few.

19 A further exploration of experimental forms of display goes beyond the scope of this volume. See however O'Neil 2012, 9–13.

exhibition and its display, we can begin to see a battle for control over the exhibition and its interpretation emerge.

This new overlap in the responsibilities of artists and curators set up a situation of tension and negotiation between them. Some of the controversies around Documenta 5 are good examples of this, and will be explored below. This situation of the “battle” for the exhibition between the artist and the curator was far from unproductive. On the contrary, it would prove to be a crisis of definition and sharpening of profiles that was highly productive and interesting for the visual arts. The exhibition became the creative nexus of the art world, the standard unit of knowledge production, created as intense moments of negotiation between curators and artists, and of course a host of other stakeholders.

Having now surveyed some of the key aspects of Szeemann’s work, it is now possible to examine the relationship between Szeemann’s persona, his curatorial approach, and the criticism of the exhibition by artists, which will in turn allow for a survey of some of the key debates that underpin the field of curating.

### Criticism by Documenta Artists

Two significant critiques by Documenta 5 artists will be focused on here, Daniel Buren and Marcel Broodthaers.

Buren used his space in the exhibition’s catalogue to write a text entitled “Ausstellung einer Ausstellung,” or exhibition of an exhibition. Buren argued that there was a tendency in exhibitions of the day to *themselves* be portrayed as works of art, rather than allowing works of art to speak on their own. In his analogy, artists’ works function only as “pigments” for the larger “painting” created by the curator—Szeemann. Works exist in a degraded position, as the curator selects them according to their suitability for the larger exhibition work and its central thesis (Buren 1972, 29).

Buren’s argument is that works are both acknowledged as art through their selection and inclusion in the exhibition, but simultaneously destroyed through their valorization solely within the curatorial thesis or narrative, which illuminates only a specific reading of the work. Though part of Szeemann’s concept was ostensibly the emancipation of the exhibition-goer, encouraging them to make their own decisions as to the definition of art, his ascription of artists’ positions into the three main categories of his exhibition were for Buren merely a replacement of one form of control over his works to another.

Szeemann’s position against the traditional museum’s authority over the definition of artistic work can be read as a post-modernist displacement of the role of the museum, and a new form of the same appropriation of the autonomy of the artwork that the museum itself practiced. The modern museum of fine art at the time typically hung its collections chronologically, implying in this pattern a progres-

sion of the universalist narrative of art history. This narrative was rejected by post-modernism, and the authority of the museum in defining art history was taken away by the 1968 generation's rejection of forms of state authority. The exhibition of works by the independent curator acknowledges the failure of the modernist project in the post-modern sense, but, as per Buren's argument, replaces a universalist narrative with a subjective one of the curator's own telling, their "individual mythology."

Thinking again about the system of display of the universal expositions and the beginning of the modernist gallery, the same way of functioning remains. Just like in the universal exposition, artworks are subjected to a dual operation of being taken out of their original contexts and inserted into a new one, making them illustrations of a larger narrative. The shift from a modernist to post-modernist paradigm in the use of the museum then still meant artworks were subservient to the conditions of their display (Groys 2008b, 50–51). Interestingly though, when power then becomes manifest in an "authorizing" subject, the independent curator Szeemann, the criticism of this system by artists seems to be more successful, or are more apparent in the exhibition's presentation. Artists were given a clear sparring partner, and as is clear with Documenta 5, they fought back.

Buren's position of resistance against the domination of Szeemann's approach extended also to his works in the exhibition. He covered seven walls in six sections of Documenta with wallpaper consisting of stripes of two shades of white. Some surrounded works, others were used as normal exhibition walls with works placed on top of them. Buren's interventions were an invitation to viewers to become aware of the walls in the exhibition space: a mild disruption was introduced into the anonymity of the white cube. Buren's intent was to show that

be it the stretcher, the venue, or the social context—the frame in which an artwork is presented is always involved in the production of meaning and itself undergoes changes in function depending on the definition of art brought to bear in any given case. (von Bismarck 2017)

Whether into a universal modernist narrative, or a subjective post-modern position of Szeemann attempting to integrate artists' works into his own meta-artwork, Buren's stripes were an intervention against the subjugation of art to the interests of the exhibition. Buren was not arguing for the destruction of this institution, but rather for its functioning in a way that left artists control over the contextualization of their own works.

A second position within Szeemann's Documenta was the final two installments of Marcel Broodthaers' *Musée d'Art Moderne*, the *Département des Aigles*, *Section Publicité* and *Section d'Art Moderne* (1972). It gives a slightly different perspective on this same issue of the relationship between curator and artist. It differs however from the critique by Buren in its form; resistance is practiced through the consummate

construction of an exhibition within an exhibition, a parody of Szeemann's concept.

The *Departement des Aigles, Section Publicité* consisted of an exhibition showing the use of the eagle in advertising. Significantly, this artist-as-curator's exhibition in the exhibition was reminiscent of 19<sup>th</sup> century exhibitions and ethnological display cabinets. This meant creating a rigorous reference system consisting of an alphabetical annotated index, and labels placed next to each eagle object inscribed with a reference number and the phrase "This is not a work of art" (Snauwaert [1972] 2017, 130).

The throwback to the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a thematization of the same ambiguous issues that have been presented in the section on universal expositions. This is namely a highlighting of the exhibition display as a rationalizing force, able to produce its own narrative out of the de- and re-contextualized exhibited cultural artefacts. Broodthaers in reconstructing this system was enacting an "empirical verification" of its workings (Snauwaert [1972] 2017, 131). By imitating as an artist the rituals and practices of the rationalist-modernist museum, he sought to question its power and authority over the works themselves (ibid.). In doing so in his capacity as artist, Broodthaers sought to reclaim territory in the struggle for authority over meaning to artists and their works themselves, rather than the curator.

Second, in the *Section d'Art Moderne*, a plaque on the floor was inscribed with the phrase "Private Property" in three languages. Halfway through the exhibition, Broodthaers changed the plaque to a longer inscription whose final phrase read "faire informer pouvoir" (do, inform power) (Bishop 2007, 17). On this occasion, he gave insight into his reasoning for both the first inscription and the change, which shows us how Broodthaers understood the criticality of this exhibition microcosm: He claims that the inscription "private property" was to emphasize his artistic power replacing that of the organizer Szeemann within his small corner of the larger exhibition, something which he felt he did not achieve with his exhibition-within-an-exhibition. This caused him to change it to the second inscription, meant to "subvert the organizational scheme of the exhibition" (ibid.). What is clear here is the struggle for the artistic work to be able to define its own manner of contextualization, rather than being de- and re-contextualized to suit the "meta-painting" of the curator—here Szeemann, but previously also the modernist museum that functioned in the same way.

The importance in separating out the role of the artist from that of the curator is in order to highlight the autonomy of Broodthaers' position within Documenta 5. There must be space for the artist to be able to subvert the exhibition with its interest in subsuming the artistic position within a preconceived framework. Without this, artists run the danger of falling back into the problematic situation of the exhibition practices of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, namely the loss of the artists' authorial

autonomy, they exist then only through their representation by a curator to their audience.

His observation halfway through Documenta 5 that his exhibition was failing to establish such an autonomous space for itself, prompting the changing of the inscription plaque, speaks to this as well. Though ostensibly Documenta 5 was focused on empowering artists, Szeemann was skewing towards attempting to compose his own “meta”-artistic position out of artists’ works: the resistance to this act revealed that the role of curator could not be viewed as analogous to the status of the commissioned artists. The system that had worked more or less for exhibitions at Kunsthalle Bern did not scale to the size of documenta.

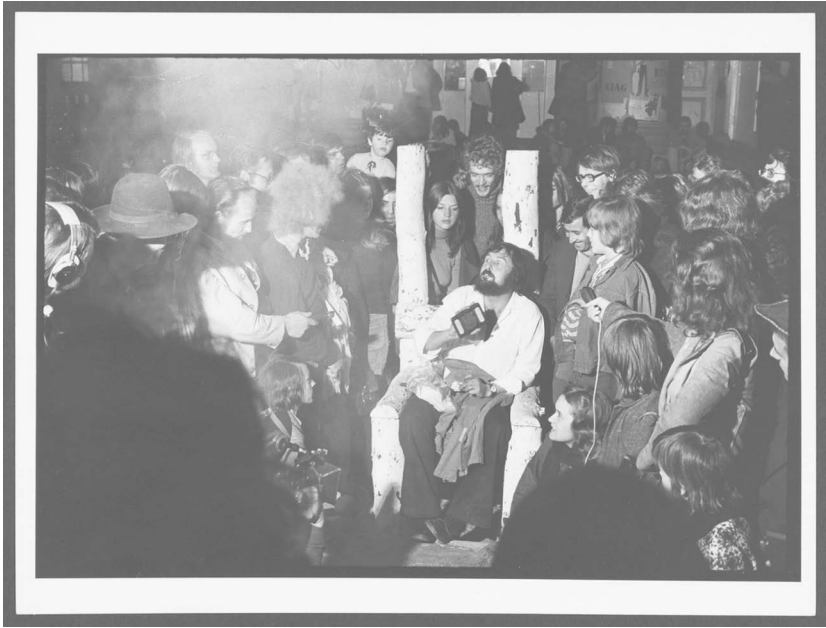
Curators during this time were undergoing transformations in their professional profile as a result of the rapid expansion of the art world. Along with their function as *auteur* of the exhibition, they were taking on also an expanded administrative role, representing artists and their wishes, but also the market, and the financial/logistical considerations of large-scale exhibitions (Bishop 2007, 18). Curators thus differed from artists in that they are reliant on hegemonic powers and their interest in narrative-making. As will be shown with later editions of documenta, part of the curatorial task becomes creatively working-with these constellations of powers.

### Harald Szeemann the Figure

The opening photo series of Szeemann’s book *Museum of Obsessions* from 1981 shows Szeemann at document 5 lounging on a throne, surrounded by a throng of artists. Dorothee Richter shows in her art-historical analysis of these photos that this iconic image has a long history meant to evoke the relation between Christ as god in human form in the middle of the image, and the those who surround him in a clear hierarchy of relations (Richter 2008, 110–111). The curator positions himself as a god, at least in his own domain of the exhibition, a genius, surrounded by his disciples. Documenta 5 was a comprehensive attempt by Szeemann to subsume a multitude of artistic works under one umbrella, thus positioning his practice in a way analogous to his self-portrayal in photos (Richter 2008, 114–115).

Though it has been discussed that Szeemann’s approach could be understood in terms of a shift from modern to post-modern knowledge-production, his self-understanding as singular *auteur* of the exhibition brings up a different problem. Szeemann was not just acting as the “will” of the exhibition, occupying himself with the logistical concerns while letting artists express themselves and their “intellect” as they wished (to invoke again Rancière’s concept of the ignorant schoolmaster), he was becoming as von Bismarck describes it a “first among equals,” rather than a co-collaborator with the artists (von Bismarck 2017). The criticism of Szeemann becomes that he used this plaidoyer for freedom and emancipation as a way of jockey-

*Image 2: Photograph of Harald Szeemann with artists on the last day of Documenta 5, Oct. 8, 1972. Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (2011.M.30).*



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ing for influence and gaining power for himself. As Richter's analysis of Szeemann and his photos with Documenta artists concludes, what is visible is how Szeemann used the iconography of a seemingly anarchistic and emancipated concept of artistic production to establish himself at the top of a hierarchical system of meaning-production (Richter 2008, 121).<sup>20</sup>

This criticism of Szeemann and his character points to a further important point in the development of curatorial practice. It matters a great deal not just what the curatorial concept is on paper or what artists are presented, but also how

20 Richter's analysis contrasts Szeemann with the quasi-curatorial work of Maciunas and the Fluxus group. Maciunas, despite half-hearted attempts at becoming the central node in the Fluxus network, was rather more a facilitator. Richter argues, through the analysis of archival photos, that any such self-definition of Maciunas as in the centre of the network is non-existent; rather what is seen are the anarchistic and non-hierarchical moments that were a foil to Szeemann's centrality at Documenta (2008, 115–121). This can be connected to the case study analysis of Berno Odo Polzer's leadership of Maerzmusik, which is concluded to exhibit a similar contradiction in values, see the conclusion of that chapter in section 5.9.

the internal working conditions of the curatorial practice exist in relationship to the stated curatorial strategy. Curating is an act of mediation between all manner of stakeholders that come together to produce the event of exhibition, the stated intention of the curatorial strategy is only one small part of this larger network; the direct actions and choices of the curator, whether intentional or not, are just as important as any discrete statements they should make.

Szeemann's practice shows that curating cannot be simply about hanging and conceiving the exhibition itself, but rather must encompass also the working relationships with these stakeholders, navigating these various social contexts successfully. His earlier projects, such as at the Kunsthalle Bern, were also similar kinds of battles for authorship over the exhibition, battles that Szeemann enjoyed having, and which defined his career. What seems to be the case though with Documenta is that these working relationships began to sour in the leadup to the exhibition itself, with artists feeling that they were losing the ability to negotiate with the curator.

When we look at these criticisms by Buren, Broodthaers, or Robert Morris (whose equally-important criticism of Documenta 5 will not be examined here), the common thread seems to be a sentiment of a loss of control over the struggle.<sup>21</sup> No longer was a shared symbolic space for intense debate over the status of the exhibition possible, it was replaced by Szeemann's singular vision: the curator became too influenced by his own need for self-promotion. This within a changing arts institutional landscape that increasingly centred on the figure of the curator as the hypervisible nexus of power in the art world.

Despite these fundamental and cutting criticisms of Szeemann, scholars Martini and Martini argue that despite his authoritarian structure marking the beginning of a period of hyper-visibility for the solitary curator-figure running through the 1970s and 1980s, his Documenta 5 working method, working together with a curatorial team, would anticipate the trend towards the schema of central curator and network of collaborators that would become common among later biennales (2010, 265).

Remaining within the specific framework of documenta, the network model with a number of collaborators working together with the artistic director would take another generation to establish itself structurally in the institution of documenta. It was perhaps only rhetorically the case with Jan Hoet's Documenta 9 in 1992 that such a system was established, but a collective, network model was strongly reflected in the structural set-up of Documenta exhibitions beginning with Catherine David's Documenta 10 (1997) and Enwezor's Documenta 11 (2002) (Martini and Martini 2010, 268).

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21 On Robert Morris' letter of withdrawal from Documenta 5, see Bishop 2007, 14–15.

Szeemann's first great experiment with the Documenta format thus seemed to fall back into the same kinds of criticisms of an overdetermination of artistic works by its framing and contextualization by the festival that have been seen before. Significantly though, the event should not be solely seen in this light. The exhibition was also an early attempt at experimentation with the structures of knowledge-creation of a large-scale arts festival, and were part of an era that would mark a turning point in approaches to arts festival leadership in this regard.

The struggles with artists like Buren and Broodthaers are also very significant developments, as they represent a growing trend in visual art towards artists using contextualization of works as part of their expressive medium, and taking a position towards the curator's concept for the exhibition explicitly in their works and writings. Buren's striped walls encouraged visitors to acknowledge the specificity of site, working against the manufactured illusion of the white cube. Broodthaers' museum-in-a-museum allowed him to call into question the infrastructure that manufactures perception of works on display.

More important than tying these various struggles into a neat package, what the case of Documenta 5 shows is the transformation of the exhibition by the mid-century into a contested site of various mediations on multiple levels by artists and curators alike. It also shows that mediation of the artistic work is not the sole responsibility of the exhibition curator, but is rather something much less centralized, an action that can be done by curators and artists alike.

### 2.3.2 Documenta 11

Documenta 11 was curated by artistic director Okwui Enwezor, and took place in 2002. This section will explore the particular and landmark ways in which the exhibition succeeded in addressing the issue of representation of artistic production from non-Western regions and artists. This was achieved through a particularly innovative structural setup of the exhibition, dividing it into a series of five platforms, the last of which was the exhibition in Kassel. Also notable was Enwezor's insistence on working as a "manager" rather than curator-as-author of documenta, allowing a diversity of knowledges to flow into the creation of the event.

#### Magiciens de la Terre

Before exploring Documenta 11 itself, an important precursor in the treatment of non-Western contemporary art production in the West must be examined, as its approach (and mistakes) would come to inform the structures of Documenta 11. The exhibition in question is "Magiciens de la Terre," curated by Marc Francis and Jean-Hubert Martin in 1989, which itself was inspired by "'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern" at the MoMA NYC in 1984–5.

“Magiciens” is notable because it is “widely acknowledged as the first large-scale international group exhibition to have raised the issue of inclusion of contemporary art and artists from non-Western centres of production” (O’Neil 2012, 56). It took place in Paris at the Centre Georges Pompidou and the Grande Halle de la Villette, and was organized as the replacement to the Paris Biennial. It united work from Asia, Africa, and Latin America, exhibiting it alongside works from the established art centres of Europe and North America.

By examining the criticism of this earlier approach to the inclusion of non-Western art and contrasting it with the structure employed for the presentation of the same at Documenta 11, it will be possible to highlight two sides of a divide in the curatorial approach to large-scale arts festivals. This in turn will help set the stage for understanding the globalized situation of art as it exists today, and will also be important for contextualizing and adding depth of perspective particularly to the conception of the platform format used during the Munich Biennale for New Music Theater, the case study at the centre of Chapter 4.

It will be shown that while “Magiciens” treatment of non-Western art epitomizes the ideological paradigm of post-modernist diversity, Documenta 11 is part of a shift to post-colonial discourse as of around the turn of the century. The year of Magiciens’ exhibition in 1989 is significant here: it marked not only the fall of the Berlin Wall and the eventual dissolution of the Soviet Union, but also the universalization of Western liberal democracy. This period also saw the rapid expansion in the number and size of biennales around the globe. The art market spread along with it, truly becoming the art *world*, all-encompassing in its narrative and scope. “Magiciens” was part of a growing awareness in the West that artistic production from outside it would need to be more fundamentally addressed in this new global situation.

In section 2.1 on the universal exposition, the argument was that the festival has historically acted as a site for the dissemination of a way of seeing through the eyes of hegemonic power. In section 2.3.1 on Documenta V, this modernist innovation was shown to be able also transition into a post-modern one, becoming subjective rather than universal without giving up its insistence on a singular reading or interpretation. “Magiciens” operated with a similar pretext, as it was heavily criticized for the way it attempted to subsume its diversity within one text, that of the curator. Differences between artistic works were presented in a kind of pluralism that celebrated these differences at the same time as reifying them.

In his preface to the exhibition, Martin spends a lot of time addressing the question of how to receive these works from “other cultures” different to the West, pointing out the challenges in reconstructing the contexts in which the works were made. His solution is first to say that the same criteria of art were applied to both Western and non-Western artists, the latter’s art though needing to be seen in the context of its creation. Throughout the preface, it becomes clear that the goal is one

of cultural dialogue and exchange between the art of the West and that of those on the peripheries of civilization. Though perhaps well-intentioned, it produced forms of otherness that are essentialized and therefore incommensurable with Western subjectivities (Martin 1989, 9). Though arguably creating visibility for non-Western works, Martin was solidifying difference, and further alienating the other from access to power through a strategy of ghetto-izing them (O'Neil 2012, 57–58).

This is a kind of tepid pluralism, a multiculturalism on the established aesthetic terms of the West. What Martin does not do is question the constitution of the fundamental categories with which he worked. His position in collecting and displaying works was one of the curator-as-anthropologist, shifting the focus from the works themselves to the act of gathering them, and ultimately to the gatherer himself, once again mirroring the Szeemann-esque position of a final central arbiter and authority. Martin thus assumes an untenable position at the centre, with the viewer is pushed into a specific and subjective narrative of the collected works (O'Neil 2012, 55).

## Documenta 11

When Okwui Enwezor was chosen by the Documenta committee, he would be the first non-European artistic director in its history, following Catherine David, who in 1997 became the first woman nominated to the position. The festival took as its starting point its particular geopolitical situation: at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, processes of globalization were happening with increasing rapidity, and with it came issues of post-colonialism and the need to address issues of the shifting status of the global south. Documenta 11 also came in the wake of, and was influenced by, the explosion of biennales in the global south that had begun to flourish in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. One of these, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Johannesburg biennale in 1997 (entitled *Trade Routes: History and Geography*), would be Enwezor's only significant experience with large-scale exhibition-making before documenta.

In an interview with Paul O'Neil, Enwezor positions his curatorial concept for Documenta as fundamentally different from the concept behind "Magiciens," arguing that it has "nothing to do with what I do or the way I think about the transnational sphere." (2007, 112). His main point of differentiation is that Martin possessed what he calls a "new colonist's eye," meaning that in his presentation of art from outside the West, he would seek out positions of "extreme otherness" to the western positions (Enwezor 2007, 113). Seeking to portray works from outside the West that exhibited the maximal amount of difference produces a manufactured contrast that overemphasizes difference, and is ultimately the result of Martin's own taste, not an accurate representation of important artistic practice from the places he sought to represent.

The issue with this kind of approach is that it does not look at how artistic practices can be considered radical or critical within the specific contexts and communities in which they have been made. Rather, a Western art history is imposed onto them instead, with the West coming out as “more advanced” in its development because of the inherent design of the value system being employed. Enwezor’s criticism turns into an argument for once again understanding works in their contexts, rather than against one’s own value system. As will be discussed later, this becomes important also for navigating interdisciplinary arts, as it turns out there that one’s personal temperament and dispositions end up influencing the perception of the artistic work, and the extent to which it can be considered critical or innovative, rather than e.g. reinventing the wheel (see here section 3.2.1).

Just as Bode in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had used Documenta reconnect connect post-war West Germany to modernist and abstract art, so too did Enwezor use Documenta as a site for reinvestigating the relationship between the artistic practices of Europe and North America to the rest of the world. He views the post-colonial constellation in which Germany and the West still play a central, problematic role as having coopted the critical project of the 20<sup>th</sup> century avant-gardes, and attempted with his globalized Documenta to locate the new sites where resistance to colonialist-capitalist society is manifesting itself (Enwezor 2002, 45). He argues that this has the possibility to form a new kind of avant-gardism challenging Western values through the presentation of these nascent new models and the new forms of subjectivity that they produce, all of which are occurring outside of the established framing procedures of the West, which by (or through) definition ignore these true threats to its legitimacy (ibid.).

Importantly, this avant-garde is one that has formed in all those places affected by the expansion of global capitalism and neo-colonialism, implying a worldview of fundamental *entanglement* between places all over the globe brought together by the flows of globalization.<sup>22</sup> Decolonization for Enwezor should thus mean putting forward a new way of reading the world that puts into perspective the way in which global phenomena are interconnected, and therefore not reducible to schemas of West and East, or other easy dualisms.

From an artistic perspective, rather than promote the further propagation of the orientalist gaze on non-Western work, it was intended to challenge the hegemony of the West over its ability to define the practices and discourses of contemporary art (Gardner and Green 2017, 111). The previous generation of curators’

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22 See also the research of Shalini Randeria, which deals explicitly with the topic of entanglement as a way of framing global phenomena beyond West-East dualisms, e.g. in *Jenseits des Eurozentrismus: Postkoloniale Perspektiven in den Geschichts- und Kulturwissenschaften* [Beyond eurocentrism: postcolonial perspectives in the historical and cultural sciences] (with Sebastian Conrad, 2002).

networks were ones based mainly in the West, meaning that these developments outside of that narrow scope were not being addressed in a serious way. Enwezor argues that what was understood to be “international” was really just a focus on the “milieu of the artistic industry clustered in a limited art market in the Western Europe [sic] and North America” (Enwezor 2007, 111).

Though there was a pronounced focus in Kassel on contemporary artistic practice from the global south, and in particular from Africa, Enwezor’s goal was not to bring one to the other, but rather to establish Kassel as a place where what he calls a “deterritorialization” could take place. This deterritorialization was about moving away from an emphasis on clearly-delineated borders or categories of West and East, North and South, replacing them instead with a post-colonial vision of Kassel as a place where many networks of intertwined knowledges would intersect over the 100 days of documenta. Rather than trying to point out and therefore manufacture differences, Enwezor’s concept tried to show how artistic practices around the globe have *always been* intertwined with each other. This is how Enwezor tried to move away from the post-modernist framework deployed in “Magiciens,” where differences were only reproduced and entrenched through exhibition, and towards his vision of a post-colonial one. This goal was pursued through a series of structural and curatorial concepts for running and presenting documenta.

The first structural change by Enwezor was that he wanted to move away from the association between large-scale biennales and the *auteur* position of the artistic director, seen best in Szeemann’s Documenta V. Enwezor thus invited a team of co-curators to work with him, an approach that he had already successfully implemented in a similar way his earlier Johannesburg Biennale. Unlike Szeemann, Enwezor’s team became a group of collaborators, and Enwezor more of a team leader or manager rather than the final authority over the exhibition. The team consisted of academics with backgrounds in the curation of exhibitions: Carlos Basualdo, Ute Meta Bauer, Susanne Ghez, Sarat Maharaj, Mark Nash, and Octavio Zaya. His intention was to have a mix of different backgrounds, not just curators, but different kinds of intelligence, and to discuss together with them some of the challenges that faced Documenta (Enwezor 2007, 117). The group was unconventional for the time, having backgrounds in both academia and curating exhibitions, which allowed them to balance both art academic interests with the more speculative and open work of the curator, bridging a chasm between these two sides that had gradually established itself since the rise of the exhibition *auteur* curators of the 1960s (Gardner and Green 2017, 111).

This situation allowed for different knowledges to complement each other, rather than the entirety of a mega-exhibition like Kassel be the product of a singular vision. This willingness to be open and share the position of power were signals that Enwezor was attempting to depart from the homogeneity of the singular authorial position, which has its strong associations to both the

singular narrative of sovereign power, and the subjective truth of the post-modern exhibition-as-story, represented by Szeemann and Martin.

Enwezor also broke up Documenta 11 into a series of 5 platforms beginning a year before the biennale, four of which took place in various locations worldwide—and outside of Kassel itself. The first four platforms (in Vienna/Berlin, New Delhi, St. Lucia, and Lagos respectively) consisted of debates, panel discussions, and lectures. The preliminary platforms took place in the lead-up to the fifth and final platform in Kassel itself, the 100-day exhibition in the small German town.

The discursive program of festivals is often used to catalyze discussion and discourse, but also as a way to constitute it in the first place (Elfert 2009, 136). This community is normally constituted through their spatio-temporal co-presence, in part via the discursive program as communal activity, during the concentrated time of the festival. This system is interrupted here; the community is distributed among the far-flung sites all over the globe during different time periods.

This disruption meant that experts from many different fields all over the world would gradually accumulate the public sphere of Documenta 11. Over the course of the platforms in different cities, they would become part of an imagined community all discussing and debating the Documenta and its challenges. Enwezor's Documenta took on a format that was not just meant as a framework for artists, but also attempted to call itself into question not just from a singular art historical angle, but from many different kinds of practitioners. This opening of the festival to different forms of knowledge was part of a larger shift in the visual arts world of festivals moving away from relying on experts only in visual arts, and towards them being hotbeds of different kinds of knowledges.

The first four platforms were a thorough exercise in the mapping of the particular set of political urgencies that would define the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, issues such as democracy, reconciliation, cultural hybridity, and urbanization, in a host of local contexts. The platforms functioned first as a kind of “manifesto,” meaning that they were an attempt at sketching an aspirational plan for the future, for what Documenta could be, in this sense also closely related to the concept of heterotopia as it has been related to festivals in section 2.2.1.

They also, to take their name literally, were a kind of vantage point, a way of looking into the distance both forward and backward, as well as geographically surveying from four different vantage points, before finally finding their way to Kassel (Gardner and Green 2017, 113–114). Rather than looking out and attempting to plot the map of contemporary art from the perspective only of Kassel, this mapping process took place from a variety of perspectives, in order to study how their vectors crossed both in Kassel and elsewhere (Enwezor 2007, 118). This kind of geographical taking-stock was a key part of the de-centring of the narrative from the North Atlantic towards one that included also the goings-on in the global South. Unlike in *Magiciens*, where differences were essentialized, and forms of orientalism

reproduced, Documenta 11 strove to define a new narrative of mutual dependence and connectivity.

A result of this platform system was that because the four platforms in advance of the Documenta took place outside of Kassel, it meant that “talk was happening elsewhere” and was therefore not accessible in an unmediated form to the biennale-going public who attended the main event in Kassel. This is a disruption of the normal situation of the bodily co-presence of the festival community and the immediate accessibility of their knowledge, something that has been identified as a key component of the festival format. In the context of a Documenta that seeks to thematize exactly the illumination of the infrastructure that makes these flows of knowledge possible, it seems fitting that it itself be also always-incomplete. This is a good example of what is meant by experimenting with the format of the festival itself. Its spatio-temporal concentration is intentionally disrupted by the platform structure as a way of exposing the underlying mechanisms of this system, which in turn was part of the subject of the festival.

In section 2.2.2, the chief difference between music festivals and biennales historically was argued to be that the latter actively experiment with their infrastructure, and with their fundamental constitutional parameters as an important element of their conception. Enwezor here is changing, via the platform format, the constitution of documenta’s festival community, as part of a disruption of the relationship between the arts festival and hegemonic power. This is another instance of visual arts curating focusing directly and explicitly on experimentation with the underlying infrastructure and framework constitutive of the festival, a key component of what makes up the particularity of curating in the visual arts context.

### Documenta 11 as a Turning Point

Taking the experiences of “Magiciens” and Documenta 11 together, they lie on either side of a shift in the conception of large-scale exhibitions. “Magiciens” was still the product of a post-modernist interest in an ultimately still Western-centric narrative of pluralism, of West and an abundance of Rest with fixed identities, subjected to a still-Orientalized gaze also reproduced through display. On the other hand, distancing itself also rhetorically from “Magiciens,” Enwezor’s Documenta 11 was an attempt to give the institution a new project for the new millennium. This was the introduction of a post-colonial approach to the curation of documenta, i.e. one that attempted to create a curatorial framework or infrastructure that would lead to an exhibition highlighting the inextricable entanglement between the “West” and the regions and people of the world it had formerly branded as “Other.”

Enwezor’s Documenta 11 was about sketching a “deterritorialization” of both the format itself, but also more generally as a project going forward for artistic practice globally. Deterritorialization as a concept is obviously taken from the works of

Deleuze and Guattari, but the question often in the arts is what exactly is meant with the term. Deterritorialization here is both a move away from the historic focus on the “territory” of Germany as a state and German issues, towards a wider focus on the relationship between Germany as embedded within Europe, and its relationship to other countries around the globe. Second, related to this, it is a move towards a thematic opening of Documenta away from a specifically art-history-related concern, and towards an expansion of the number of different disciplinary models that the festival worked with (Enwezor 2002, 42).

Documenta could then no longer be judged on the basis of one frame of reference, that of its German critics, but rather would be pushed into a “deterritorialized” zone that was covered by no one field of knowledge. This non-territory was not arbitrary or any-which-thing, as post-modernism is accused of being, but rather an attempt to capture the inherent complexity and density of global art as it exists. As O’Neil states, this approach positions Documenta 11 as “a starting point rather than an end point from which to consider our current global condition” (O’Neil 2012, 59).

Enwezor’s Documenta serves as a framework for understanding the current form of biennales around the world. It exhibits the characteristics and challenges of the festival as it has existed in modernity, but takes also the step, explicitly but also relatively successfully, of intervening in the organizational concept of the festival in order to counteract its instrumentalization by Western hegemonic power.

His implicit understanding of curating is as a practice focused on manipulating the acts of mediation and contextualization of the festival institution. The specific focus on the institutional context is important because of how it determines the *episteme*, the scope of the knowable and sayable in the Foucauldian sense, within a given situation. Attempting to move into a “deterritorialized” zone where by definition no expert could exist, was a way of shifting this contextualizing practice away from the prescriptive functioning of the modern festival.

The lack of the possibility of a priori experts in this kind of festival set-up makes the act of organizing and staging the festival itself into an experiment with unknown outcome. Curators, like Enwezor, if they are trying to create a festival concept that looks to shift contemporary episteme, can themselves only improvise a situated solution in this great field of uncertainty. They can draw on previous experience, but ultimately because of the nature of a practice involved in the creation of new relations in networks, must always start again anew.

This curatorial practice can then perhaps be called *contemporary*, in the sense put forward by Agamben in *What Is the Contemporary?*. He proposes that the contemporary is “he who firmly holds his gaze on his own time so as to perceive not its light, but rather its darkness” (Agamben 2009, 44). Being contemporary to one’s era is to constantly be engaged in a looking for that which has been cast into shadow, and not allow oneself to be “blinded by the lights of the century” (Agamben 2009,

45). What is furthermore significant is that Agamben ascribes the power to do this to the poet, and thus to an artistic sensibility. The act of designing and adequately executing a curatorial concept, like Documenta 11, one that is able to point a gaze at that which lies in darkness, arguably through this definition becomes an artistic practice in itself, but more importantly is a practice of designing the parameters for specific kinds of knowledge creation. The particularities of this case, the establishment of a curatorial team, the platform system, they are all means to an end, which is a curatorial concept that “stares back” at the colonizer, and attempts to shine a new light on the arts festival as a means for the solidification of a Western identity, and the manufacture of an exoticized other.

Documenta 11 has been presented here because it is a good example, but not at all because it is the only example, of a curatorial concept as a quasi-artistic practice. The festival can be seen within a tendency to so-called “discursive exhibitions” that emerged within large-scale exhibitions in the 1990s, as the profile of the curator was transforming from someone with know-how on how to successfully mount and stage an exhibition to a figure more focused on reflecting upon and experimenting with parameters for knowledge production. Situating and understanding this turn towards more theory-based and experimental curatorial practice will be the central concern of the next section.

## 2.4 Curatorial Discourse

The case of Documenta 5 demonstrates the battles for authority and control of the exhibition format. On the one hand, Szeemann as curator made the exhibition into his own Gesamtkunstwerk, attempting to subsume the positions of the participating artists into his own vision for the exhibition, using them as “pigments for his painting,” as Buren put it. On the other, artists such as Buren and Broodthaers dedicated their artistic practices to exploring and manipulating the conditions of display. Buren’s stripe paintings encouraged visitors to think of the white cube spaces of the museum as only being an illusion of neutrality. Broodthaers’ artist museum imitated the protocols of a “real” museum, and in doing so explored how this seemingly-invisible infrastructure is constitutive to the exhibited objects.

With Documenta 11, Enwezor’s approach was to work more as a facilitator. He worked together with a team of academic curators who designed the program as a group. Documenta was split into five platforms around the world, giving a series of perspectives on Documenta and its relationship to the global art world. In terms of presentation and contextualization of works in Kassel itself, Enwezor left this mostly up to artists. Rather than composed group exhibitions as a form of curatorial meta-composition—a favorite form of Szeemann—artists and collectives