DOCUMENTING DOCUMENTA

Documenta may be the grandest, most important international art exhibition in the world.

Since its first occurrence, in 1955, it has taken place every four or five years in the small German city of Kassel, an old provincial capital that was rebuilt from scratch after World War II and was once home to the Brothers Grimm. The city is also about a twenty-minute drive away from the former East-West border. The exhibition, as you can therefore imagine, carries a large cargo of historical significance. At least at its inception, it was both a symbol of West Germany's cultural resurrection and a banner of artistic freedom that waved the emblems of early and mid-'60s pop, late-'60s radicalism, '70s conceptual and minimalist art, and the materialism of the '80s right in the face of the Eastern bloc.

Kassel now stands smack in the center of a unified Germany, somewhere near the middle of a reconstituted Europe. But Documenta IX, which opens on June 13 for a hundred days in several locations around town (including the neoclassical Freidericeanum and the brand-new, permanent Documenta-Halle), is a lot more than a geopolitical phenomenon. This exhibition is to an uncommon degree self-referential, and the concept of a dialogue through time among various Documentas is embodied in this year's logo: the image of a swan and its reflection. Neither "neutral" nor "representative" in any blandly official sense, it has tended over the years to be a kind of concrete extension of the poetic visions and, indeed, of the personalities of its organizers: a small roster of influential curators (mostly European, and, with rare exception, all men), intellectuals, and critics who often enjoy the kind of personal prestige and power in the media that America usually reserves for its elected officials and movie stars.

Presiding over Documenta IX is Jan Hoet, a Belgian and the director of the Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst, a respected museum in Ghent. Assisting him are Greek art historian Denys Zacharopoulos, the Italian critic Pier Luigi Tazzi, and a young curator from Hoet's museum, Bart De Baere. Hoet is an exceptionally flamboyant and charismatic character. A former boxer prone to vaulting flights of language, Hoet dazzled and bewildered spectators at a New York press conference earlier this year with some wild, bantam moves of his own. Gesticulating like De Niro, he turned questions on their heads. Strutting like Mick Jagger, he spun issues around. And he found his fight in the arena of demographics when he proudly announced that this "nonhierarchical" Documenta, with over 180 artists, would include 18 percent women: "the biggest number ever." While probably true, this did not strike most members of the audience as a triumph over sexism in the art world. When cornered, Hoet just yelled.

But most people I talked to, especially artists, spoke of Hoet with unusual affection. Richard Artschwager, for instance, talked about "the intelligence in his fingertips" and Hoet's knack for delivering the mind-blowing "rabbit punch," curatorially speaking. Documenta IX may indeed deliver quite a few punches. While the exhibition is dedicated to contemporary art and artists, it will also include what Hoet fervently described as a "tower of revolutionaries, martyrs, saints, and heroes in the history of art." Jacques-Louis David's "Death of Marat," the great icon of the French Revolution, will be installed there—in a highly unusual loan from the Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts in Brussels—along with masterworks by Gauguin, Giacometti, Barnett Newman, Joseph Beuys, and James Lee Byars, who, alone among these "saints," is still alive. Other Documents IX constructs include theater, nature, ethics, and, pervasively it seems, sports and games. Some have called Documenta "the Olympics of art." So let's start training. Who knows what can happen in the Belgian boxer's ring?

Interview report by Lisa Liebmann
Art continued

Jonathon Lasker, Participating Artist: I’ve always heard good things about Documents, so I said O.K., sure. I had no objections. I’ll be in any exhibition where I think my work can be seen in a favorable light, by which I mean a good, objective opportunity for the paintings to be seen. Art-culture—4s a process of consensus. No one exhibition can determine everything. Fortunately, art is too intricate for that. I was in Kassel once. I’d been living in Munich for a year. I wanted to get to Hamburg, so I hitched a ride with a truck driver, and we stopped to have dinner in Kassel. I’ve wondered about the location ever since. Dump test little provincial town Imaginable. It was such a small community. The other important, I guess.

Robert Gober, Participating Artist: I feel these big shows are over-like the dinosaurs. I think Documents Is a lavish gesture that’s outdated its purpose. I’m not taking it all that seriously. We’re putting up wallpaper and one sculpture. It’ll be in this weird room. In the new building they’ve built, which is sort of like an ocean liner, with a forty-five-foot-long curved wall. Jan’s wild-sort of a megalomaniac, but kinds great. I have to take as-pirin when I see him ‘cause he’s so Intense. They’re always drinking, always laughing. It’s pitched hysteria. What happens with me when I talk with Jan is I can’t understand what he’s saying. And that doesn’t happen to me very often. He gets so deep and poetic, and I play along, but I’m worried the whole time that he’s going to notice and that I’m going to get caught. Maybe that’s why I get headaches. Sure, I’m happy to be in the show, but I have to say that given the choice of a show with 180 artists in it, or a one-person show, there’s no question where my energies will go.

Mary Boone, New York Art Dealer with Artists Rom Horn, Brice Marden, and Richard Artschwager in D9: I’m excited to go to see what the things look like, but I don’t have the same anticipation that I had in 1982. To put David Salle In an exhibition In 1982, when he was just starting to exhibit his work, Is not the same as putting Roni Horn in one almost ten years Into her exhibiting career. It doesn’t take a Rhodes scholar to put Brice [Marden] and Artschwager In the exhibition, but why isn’t Richard Tuttle in the show? This guy Hoot Is Flemish—that whole Memling cross-culture. Do you understand him? I think he has prejudices that, fortunately, his Instincts override. I’m impressed that he put Roni Horn in An important place. But I think they’ve made a conscious effort...
to be P.C. That’s how they’re thinking: lots of women, lots of outsider types, plus a few people they can’t ignore historically. Same idea as behind the Carnegie—I loved Louise Bourgeois In that, and I’m sure she will do something fabulous In the Carnegle—I loved Louise Bourgeois In that, they can’t ignore historically. Same idea as behind women, lots of outsider types, plus a few people to be P.C. That’s how they’re thinking: lots of beautiful show.

LoUISC BOURGEOIS, Participating Artist: Jan Hoot? That one Is a number. He is a man of words, you know, and I am not so much a person of words. Also, he kind of panicked and invited everybody and their cousin to be In the show at the last minute. He’s like that. The thing was going to be much smaller when he first talked to me. My piece is called Precious Liquids and it occupies a room which is circular all the way to the ceiling. The place is where Beuys used to show his work. Richard Serra also did a piece there. So I liked the implied company through history. That Is one of my foibles. I don’t want to say more about the piece because It is too early. But I will say that things happen In the dark room, because things happen in the dark, no?

Jan Hoot, and to the Brazilian woman I live with. I said no, I don’t wanna. I thought It sounded like “Magicians de la Terra” [a large, pan-cultural exhibition In Paris three years ago]. I finally hated that show. I thought they were going to do a Germanic version of it. Instead, they’re doing a Belgian version! Some of my work had been In a show In Antwerp called “500 Years of Latin America and the Low Countries.” My dealer, Nicole Klagsbrun, Is from Antwerp, and I guess she directed the curators’ attention to my work there. No, I’m not Flemish or Latin American. I grew up on the Cherokee homelands In Oklahoma and Arkansas. The curators? There’s this silly, sweet, klutzv Belgium guy named Bart De Snore, and I fell In love with him. But I didn’t like Jan Hoot at first, because I had heard his name so much. Then when I did meet him I thought maybe Bart was an artist and this was his invention.

Show me what’s available.” They’re very flexible. They wanted to see me where I wanted to be. I have two pieces In Documents. One Is an installation, one is an object. A show like this is purely about visibility—It’s for a cruiser, and my work will tend to suffer drastically In situations like that. I usually stand back and see what actually happens. The thing that surprised me about Jan Is that he had no presumptions. I was very impressed, although I noticed a certain amount of bullshit around-Mike Tyson crap and sports films and stuff, game-playing as part of the scheme of things. It can be embarrassing, the way a lot of heterosexual behavior Is embarrassing.

Ellsworth Kelly, Participating Artist: I’ve been In several Documents*, but I’ve never been there myself. The first time, In the ‘70s, I must not have had enough money to travel. I guess going to Europe wasn’t In my budget. The second time, I think I also had a show In Dusseldorf, and somehow I didn’t bother to go. But I’m excited about being In Documents again. I’ve met Jan Hoot several times and I like his character, his enthusiasm. He reminds me of people I knew In Paris when I was much younger. He also reminds me a little-physically—of that Belgian artist, Broodthaers, whose work I like very much. Plus, he said all the right things: I like your work, I’ve followed It for a long time. You might be surprised, but not very many people say things like that. Nowadays I insist on installing my own shows, so I’ll be In Kassel In early June and I hope to be able to be there for the opening. They gave me my own room: ground floor on the left when you’re facing the building. I carefully designed the space—you know, the door has to be In the right place, and so forth. I’ve sent some plant drawings. They’re an important step In my work and they show how I see nature and work with form. I’m only concerned about producing work that keeps me alive and going.

Richard Artschwager, Participating Artist: I don’t think It’s enough to say that Jan has been a hypocrate or that he is not playing with a full deck. Anyone doing a show of this kind has got to scare together some sort of scaffold-ing, but I think there is a difference between his wild flights of fancy and the sort of pigeonholing that I suppose Is “good scholarship,” on the one hand, or a program of out-and-out trend-seeking, on the other. When he talks about the tower, k sounds like some kind of wild poetry. When he gets on Epic and Dramatic, it’s just barely verbalizing that what might seem like an overpersonal overstatement Is going to work out as a very light touch on the art Itself, and he could end up with one of the best Documentas ever. With a little luck.

Michael Werner, Cologne and New York art dealer with James Lee Byars and Eugene Lengyel, In Di: I suppose you can say that Documents has been a sort of litmus test for the state of art. Szekmann’s was the one that was interesting. He put the painters next to the crazy art; he played dialectically by letting the groups play their games against each other. That’s what a good show Is about. Rudi [Fuchs, who curated 1982’s Documents VII] was still confrontational; he was establishing pluralism for the art world, and that was more than provocative at the time. [Manfred] Schneckenburger [who curated 1987’s Documenta VIII] was al-
ready bullshit-superpluralistic, with no goal. It was like the YMCA. And I can’t see anything that makes sense in what Hoot is doing. It’s super-superpluralistic! With no-ideology ideology. If he’s putting the Marat and all the saints and revolutionaries in the tower, It’s to save him- self-the little Jan Hoot Documents Heaven. Anyway, the Marat is a painting about revolution, not a revolution in painting. If he tells me Byars Is a revolutionary, I believe him—but only for America, because In Europe they already know him very well. I know Jan Hooethe guy [laughs] is crazy.

LISA UEBMANN: I’ve been talking to a lot of people about this Documenta, and many of them seem to think you’re quite mad. Do you think you are?
JH: HOET: CURATOR: Quite mad? Yes, I think so, but I know what I am doing. It’s a question of passion. I have a real passion to come close to the work, to come close to the artist as much as possible. Mad. In our bureaucratic society: it means not following the way you’re used to. I’m dealing with artists and not from my office-4 I’m out in the field. I function like architects In the Middle Ages: I don’t even have an office. My assistants have an office.
JH: One person I talked to said you were like the medieval Flemish folk hero Till Eulenspiegel, the prankster.
JH: Yes, this is true.
JH: How would you describe his character?
JH: Till Eulenspiegel was a man who always tried to discuss the codifications, to judge the establishments. He was always trying to evaluate them in a new way.
JH: What happened to him?
JH: He was always In and out of jail. He was In a very ambiguous position. He represented anarchy and was a little bit the fool of the king. This was during the Burgundians, I think.
JH: Who is your king?
JH: His name Is Baudouin ...
JH: Oh, you mean, literally, the present-day king of Belgium?
JH: Yes, yes. And the queen.
JH: Fabiola.
JH: Yes.
JH: You are their fool?
JH: Yes, I would very much like to be. I met the present king and queen. They’re always laughing a lot, visiting the exhibitions 1 do In Ghent.
LL: Did they laugh understanding or not understanding about what you did?
JH: Understanding, I think. But they are very distant. You have to be very attentive. He always closes his eyes. He’s always questioning In an Interior way. I am more exterior, but also Interior at the same time. But I never show what’s Inside.
JH: That must have been something you found useful In boxing. JH: Yes, but it’s also my character. I didn’t learn that In boxing. I wasn’t a very good boxer? 1N: 1 was an amateur. I don’t even know If I have the talent to be a great boxer. But [Markus] Lupertz did boxing. And Beuys also did the box; In Documents 1968 he did the boxing for the Free Democratic Party. And Warner Hartmann [the art historian, who was involved with the earliest Documentas] was a boxer. So was [museum director] Pontus Hulten. And [museum director and collector] Franz Mayor. [laughs] So, you see, I am not alone.
LL: I do see, and it’s changing my whole view of art! But tell me, exactly how are you including boxing and other sports In this Documenta?
JH: In Documents, since Szememann, there has always been the idea of combining art with something In life. So, for example, related It to the fetishist Issues and kitsch activities-the adoration of the saints In folk art, and so forth. The occult, too. In the Schneekenburger Documenta, 1 was design and architecture. So I shifted this idea to sport. Boxing and baseball. Baseball, you know. Is not very popular In Europe, but I will combine baseball and boxing with jazz. I do this In part because these are three areas where blacks have found the language to become social partners. I’m always concerned with that Issue In boxing. Yes, I was a great Mike Tyson fan. I never saw a boxer with such speed, and such reflexes, and such Insight Into the psychology of the other. Because of Tyson, boxing has not been seen In very good daylight recently. In German, you know, there Is the word gewalt, which means violence, and vergewaltigung, which means rape. In German, these Issues are much closer because of the language. I would like to have this In discussion-the position of the woman, and of blacks, who In our society are as marginal as the women. We have had so many boxers-All, Sugar Ray Leonard, George Foreman-who are very kind people, with great depth of human feel-