AN INTRODUCTION

Jan Hoet

To write a text about an exhibition, after living with it through a gestation period of nearly three years, now seems to me like a contradiction in terms. At this moment the exhibition is becoming visible, tangible, real. Everything is in motion, though very little is finalized. Writing, for me, is always a definitive process: it establishes, freezes, creams off a concrete reality. The energy that propels me at the moment is one of movement, impetus, constant new involvements: an energy from without, not from within.

What can I write about, when so much remains to be said? Some things I would prefer to shout about; for such things, print seems altogether too quiet. I shall be expected to produce explanations, declarations of principle. But there are no true explanations or declarations, only letters and words: explanations, if you like, but not reality. Nothing but marginal notes, anecdotes, proposals.

My exhibition is an offer and a challenge; it is an invitation and an argument that can be experienced through the individual encounter with art. If a text that accompanies an exhibition is to be anything beyond self-justification - defending the work for which one has assumed such total and minute responsibility - then the only statements that count are those that direct the eye straight back to the exhibition itself.

So what should an introduction contain?

I might, for example, write about beauty: the physical experience of the secret of art.

Artists do not investigate the aesthetics of things: they reveal the hidden beauty, the essence, the ecstasy. Material takes on a new intensity that frees it from its physical trammels, transcends it, dissolves it into a new sensory field of reference. It is only by entering a work of art, becoming physically involved with it, that you can find the all-embracing experience that it demands. You have to be in the work, inside a wide open space created by the artist.

Art demands the eyes, the intellect, the body, the desires. It always relates to the body.

Just as the artist creates his work against the background of his own thoughts, his own experiences, his own intuition, and his own feeling for the body, the viewer, too, creates every work of art anew. The encounter with art begins at the point where the eyes reconstruct the artwork.

Experience is not a formal thing; it is not an image. Experience is always relative. It establishes associations with areas of life that we know already. This is not confined to experience in and with art; it equally applies to life experience. What counts is not what you expect but what you discover.

Great discoveries lie in store, not in this text but in the exhibition.

A story might be told, a long tale about the people and situations that I have encountered here. A story of all those little emperors who patrol the frontiers of their empires, day in, day out; kings in the tiny realms of their own responsibilities.

It would be a good, long story, with plenty of surprises.

Much might be said about the antagonism between a provincial environment and a world exhibition; the clash between a petit-bourgeois craving for security and an internationally respected arena for free artistic interchange. An undertaking as hopeless as it is vital. A city gives birth to an idea, cherishes a tradition, and then is
appalled all over again, every time, by the stunning force and the creative potential
that are released when that idea becomes a reality.
It would be the tale of the Sorcerer’s Apprentice, and also that of Pitch Mary and
Gold Mary—the folk story about the Unlucky Girl and the Lucky Girl. Somehow,
one has to give all necessary support to those who are prepared to face up to the
challenge of change, without at the same time totally overwhelming the
unprepared. Conflict as open dialogue...
How better to conduct that dialogue than with, and in the presence of, art?

4
There is so much to be said about seeing, about how we have learned to perceive,
about our experience of the world. This world has grown smaller: the ‘global
village’ that was outlined by McLuhan now forms the horizon of our everyday lives.
Almost everything is available; we have access in seconds to information,
impresions and experiences of every kind. The world is atomized; the holistic
vision is increasingly disappearing from our lives. Everything has become an image,
mediatized. Our contacts with the world outside ourselves are concentrated in
the eyes and in the immaterial experiences that they convey. No longer does the
world seem alien: it has become a kind of object, a thing we think we can be sure
of. Images allow parallels to appear where there was no comparability before; we
feel secure because we have risk-free visual access to all phenomena, however
distant. Any attacks of insecurity, anxiety and disorientation that we may suffer
have been safely categorized, docketed with psychoanalytic, psychiatric and
sociological names, and embedded in a system of social and psychic care. There
are enough supervised free areas and domestication devices to keep every
possible aberration safely within the system.
But the hold that civilization maintains on the widening cracks and fissures in our
well-ordered life is becoming less and less effective. The threats and assaults of the
Unknown (within and without) have become more diffuse, harder to localize, and
accordingly more urgent and more absolute. In a world in which almost anything
can be digitally objectivized, there is a patent need for a mediating language.
Total availability also means total inconsequence. Models with a strict inner logic,
systems on the basis of a limited number of axioms, provide only a very
temporary security. The compelling rationalism of the categories makes possible
any coherent combination of the components. If everything can be logically
connected with everything else, then truth becomes interchangeable and there-
fore unimportant. At a time when experiences are becoming less and less
concrete—more virtual, in fact—only total intersubjectivity, only the awareness of
specific concreteness and physicality, can provide a new impetus.
What is called for is no longer the invocation of grand abstract and transcendental
visions, but an acute eye for the physical components of the world around us: a
new, objective relation to the world of objects (with an over-attachment to detail
as its inherent negative aspect).
Reassembly of atomized experiences; reorganization beyond all scientific systems;
reconstruction of an existential sensory network: this must be among the aims of
art. The body must be talked about once more: not physically but emotionally; not
superficially but mentally; not as an ideal but in all its vulnerability. In this respect
Beuys opened a door. His work constantly demands of us that we take
responsibility for our own actions.
But what is the point of writing about visions and experiences instead of having
them? All the potential is there, in documenta.

5
Whatever I write, I know many people are going to read it not as what it is—a
reflection—but as what it never intends to be: a conception. A concept, in the
sense of standing at the beginning, framing the point of departure and setting the
course of further reflection. But for me there has only ever been one starting-
point, and that is art, artists and their works: things created by inner necessity, 
which have sought and made a place for themselves.

Does documenta have a place of its own? In the eventful history of this exhibition, 
the Museum Fridericianum has been central from the start. But what was it then, 
and what is it now? All that was standing in 1955 was the remnants of some 
eighteenth-century stonework, protected by a flimsy, temporary roof. Inside, the 
whitewash on the exposed masonry barely covered the soot left behind by the 
incinerated knowledge of a once magnificent, bombed library. The thick, black 
plastic sheeting used in the first documenta, which formed bold accents as part of 
the exhibition hanging, looked like an abstract reminder of that great annihilation. 
The Museum Fridericianum was not a museum: it was a ruin brought to life by a 
grand gesture. From the ashes of the Second World War, classic modernism arose 
to meet the 1950s.

With more than thirty-five years of tradition behind it, this ninth documenta takes 
possession of a relatively well-established location. In 1987 the Museum 
Fridericianum was restored in accordance with building regulations and divided 
into fire zones; it is now on the verge of collapse from the sheer weight of concrete 
that has been pumped into it. Then there are the newly built documenta-Halle; the 
Neue Galerie, somewhat dusty but interesting; a slowly crumbling museum of 
natural history, with many undiscovered treasures in it; and the stoutly built 
temporary exhibition pavilions on the Aue.

In the beginning was non-location. More an idea than an institution, for documenta 
arises out of virtually nothing every time. Its premises are not really its own: they 
are permanent installations on temporary secondment. The logistics, the person-
nel, the organization, the exhibition sites, everything has to be found from scratch. 
All that is permanent is the basic idea, a tradition that has acquired an economic 
momentum of its own, together with the history of its past realizations. It is an idea 
in search of a place in which to be manifested; and initially it finds this, as it always 
has done, at the Museum Fridericianum. From there, the threads spin out further; 
new buildings and spaces are discovered and insert themselves into a living 
topographical web of relationships. And then the spatial structure of the exhibition 
is suddenly there in the mind’s eye, and becomes both the point of departure and 
the decisive, leading goal.

The ninth documenta is a documenta of places; its topography is the framework 
that supports it all. But it is also a documenta of artists; for they alone create the 
spaces within the framework. An exhibition must always take its own material 
circumstances as its point of departure; buildings, light, paths. It must always see 
and experience that, rather than look for theoretical concepts.

Or should I write about the artists? The many fascinating, disconcerting, powerful 
encounters and experiences? The artist stands at the centre: the making of the 
exhibition derives from an intensive engagement with his or her work. My 
documenta takes the artist and the artist’s work as its sole point of departure. 
Organizing an exhibition, for me, is always a battle, a struggle for every work, an 
engagement to the point of physical exhaustion.

The artist has this extraordinary energy; this great expressive power; a potential 
that a maker of exhibitions never has. An exhibition can only profit by this energy, 
draw it out, make it visible, channel it and make it available to outsiders. The 
strength of an exhibition lies in revealing energies that are the motive forces of the 
world, energies that maintain life in motion, that manifest - for a single instant - 
beauty in its pure state.

Artists are the motors of the world; but they need the rest of the vehicle if their 
power is to become a propulsive force and not merely run to waste. This 
exhibition is intended to be a drive-belt.
And then someone sends in a text:'... The earth does not seem to be the quarry of matter, to be shamelessly exploited by enlightened human reason. The earth is the origin of life, a metaphysical event like no other, to which man, even modern man, owes his origin and his continuous existence. This is proved by his own earthly body. He wears the image of life par excellence, the earthily sign that constantly reminds him of the maternal umbilical cord. Plato and his followers detected a metaphysical image only in the geometrically defined male body: a microcosmic mirror of the macrocosmic, rational order. They saw only the head, the seat of the rational soul, the part that moves along furthest from the earth. With eyes wide open, they remained blind to the signs of their own original ties... Art, through its metaphysical fidelity of the miracle of life, becomes what it always wanted to be, namely a maternal art...

(Sylvain De Bleeckere).

Is this a possible way to write? Can anyone - and a man, to boot-write a thing like this? And what does it mean when more and more artists seek to locate themselves where they can deal with the things of everyday life; when many works seek to locate themselves somewhere between the creation of new, mystically charged spaces and a conceptual enquiry into the fundamental, organic, 'dirty' side of life; when excrement, consumer culture, the vagina, phallic symbols, death and sweaty sex are dragged into the white purity of the classic exhibition space? Shifting things out of their accustomed contexts, references back to Duchamp, 'displacement', the destabilization of one's own standpoint, are important modes of access to an everyday world that is all too readily dismissed as low and banal. But does that make it a female or - better - a maternal art?

Once again, things themselves have got to matter more than what we say about them. We live in an age of social, individual and cultural indeterminacy, in which the horizon is no longer a straight line. It manifests itself as a vague tension between heaven and earth, an indeterminate zone in which we can no longer achieve a sharp visual focus. Good and evil, above and below, true and false, blur into each other in a transitional zone that generates a bewildering state of relativity Experience means the world. Art that speaks on this level is always an instrument of access to an everyday world that is all too readily dismissed as low and banal. But does that make it a female or - better - a maternal art?

Why am I always being asked about criteria, abstract yardsticks, good and bad taste? Art is not a matter of taste, but of choice. Choice takes courage, decisiveness. Taste remains indefinite and undecided; it always leaves a back door open. You have to be able to say Yes or No, give your reasons and examine them - and be able to make mistakes. To make a good exhibition, it is not enough to assemble a hit-list of celebrated names; there would be no coherence in that. An exhibition has a specific aim in view; it is carried along by one controlling idea. That in itself shows where the selection process must start, how successive decisions affect each other and have the power to create an inner structure. Such a structure cannot be described; you can only see it, empathize with it, experience it, reconstruct it and reinvent it in the course of the direct confrontation with the real experience.

8

Why am I always being asked about criteria, abstract yardsticks, good and bad taste? Art is not a matter of taste, but of choice. Choice takes courage, decisiveness. Taste remains indefinite and undecided; it always leaves a back door open. You have to be able to say Yes or No, give your reasons and examine them - and be able to make mistakes. To make a good exhibition, it is not enough to assemble a hit-list of celebrated names; there would be no coherence in that. An exhibition has a specific aim in view; it is carried along by one controlling idea. That in itself shows where the selection process must start, how successive decisions affect each other and have the power to create an inner structure. Such a structure cannot be described; you can only see it, empathize with it, experience it, reconstruct it and reinvent it in the course of the direct confrontation with the real experience.