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Document X — Documenta multidisciplinary

Nancy Princenthal
abounds at the tenth Documenta, particularly if it's got a journalistic inclination. Disqualified are images with aspirations in the direction of painting or advertising; instead, there are lots of small black-and-white prints by world-class street photographers Helen Levitt, Garry Winogrand, and even Walker Evans. The putative candor of this work, mainly haunting images of urban proles caught off-guard, provides for eccentric little sanctuaries from culture theory—quick passages to a not-so-distant era of transparent meaning and meliorative art. In this context, a more skeptical narrative photographer like Jeff Wall, represented primarily by black-and-white prints big enough to walk into (rather than color light boxes), seems particularly provocative, and a perhaps a little callow.

Following current mega-exhibition trends, video and film are thoroughly integrated into this Documenta. Stand-outs include Stan Douglas's *Der Sandmann*, which revolves (literally) around the deceptively simple gesture of one 360-degree pan of a studio dissolving, across a wavery vertical seam, over another circular shot of the same, slightly altered set, to a voice-over text written by E. T. A. Hoffmann. Steve McQueen's jumpy video *Catch* is as keyed-up as Douglas's is anxiously quiet, its big, bold heads of young black adults popping up out of frenzied blurs of color like balls tossed aloft, or targets in a shooting gallery. Winner of the red herring prize is Jordan Crandall, in whose darkened installation viewers are mirrored, or excluded, by a multiplicity of live projections; a sexy little remote-control handset promises control but does, alas, exactly nothing.

Part of the program, too, are no fewer than 100 live events, on as many consecutive days, all video-recorded and simulcast on a web site that also offers dozens of commissioned projects, many of them exploring—what else?—the ready transport and mutation of data; on-line chat about the show tends to speculation about the corporeality of visual culture. In some cases, web projects fill out work that exists on the ground, as with Crandall's lively publication *Blast*. While Martin Kippenberger's electronic *Metro-Net* feels a bit sketchy (the *Metro* project was his last to be completed), it gives some necessary background to the chained, uptilted
In another collaborative undertaking, Rosalyn Troke and artist (on the banks of Kassel's lovely Fulda river) set up camp for two big shows and their pilots: a sculpture of a man's head and a body, an indoor exhibition of photography, and a site-specific installation. The sculptures, which are the main attraction of the show, are accompanied by other works, including paintings, drawings, and photographs. The shows are called "Documenta X" and "Flemish Art in the 20th Century," respectively. "Documenta X," which opened in May, is the largest exhibition of contemporary art in the world, with over 500 artists from 56 countries participating. "Flemish Art in the 20th Century" is a smaller exhibition that focuses on the art of the Netherlands in the 20th century. Both exhibitions are part of the Documenta X festival, which is held every five years in Kassel, Germany. The festival is known for its innovative and experimental approach to art and culture.
interesting point—cataloguing now constitutes an art-making principle in its own right. The work that best supports this view looks like an Enlightenment project blasted sideways, twice, once by conceptualism and a second time by patterns of electronic communication. Information is not now seen sorted and stacked but hopelessly scattered, visual culture as an atlas of world knowledge written in graphic hypertext.

If big names were avoided in the exhibition, they are scattered liberally throughout the book’s 830 pages: Adorno, Beckett, Blanchot, Fanon, Foucault, Habermas. Similarly, there are big years—1945, 1967, 1978—around which are arranged essays and interviews, page-art and reproductions. But the layout and sequencing cause them to jostle each other mercilessly, resulting in texts no more ideologically stable than the publication’s title, which is Politics/ Poetics, the two terms rendered interchangeable by jumpy type. It is a perfect model of the Documenta that X wants to be: heavy ideas suspended in tenuous equilibrium, and art as an open book. Where the exhibition fails its goals, from lack of stamina and staying power, the catalogue compensates with ease.

XLVII Venice Biennale
Norman Bryson
and Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe

When we first arrived in Venice an American explained to us that the Biennale had been arranged hastily, largely and with great efficiency by Germano Celant, because the Italians were afraid that some money that wasn’t really available now might actually not be available were the exhibition to be put off for another year. This had been the original intention and would have allowed the subsequent Biennale to be held in the year 2000. Then, an Italian told us that what was feared was the disappearance of the NEA funds which pay for the U.S. Pavilion. This image of an American attributing the rush to some unfathomable Italian financial manipulation while the Italians think they’re doing it to save Americans from embarrassment by the philistines whom they choose to govern them catches some of the atmosphere and flavor of what goes on at international exhibitions.

An oddity of Venice is the way its grouping of national pavilions in benign competition with one another inevitably recalls some map of rival imperial powers in the late nineteenth century (roughly speaking, when the Biennale started). It was instructive to see how different works responded to this vestigial geopolitical mise-en-scène. In the case of Russia, Maxim Kantor seemed to embrace enthusiastically the idea of turning back the clock, in paintings of urban wastelands populated by hungry-looking figures in head scarves or hobbling on sticks, executed in the bright colors and with the tormented gestures of expressionist painting around 1916. It was as if, with the Soviet experiment obliterated, the landscape now reverted to its condition just prior to the October Revolution.

Meanwhile, over in the various Central European pavilions, the blandness and emphatic non-historicity of many contributions suggested an earnest desire on the part of the commissioners to pretend that recent history had simply passed them by. But elsewhere, artists were trying hard to suggest otherwise: not only through the