for their continuing support for art and research, 15. Juni Fonden, Danish Arts Foundation, Malmö Konstmuseum, Malmö Stad, Region Skåne, Lilith Performance Studio, Institut Funder Bakke, Simian, Aarhus University, Art Hub Copenhagen for their invested time and support.

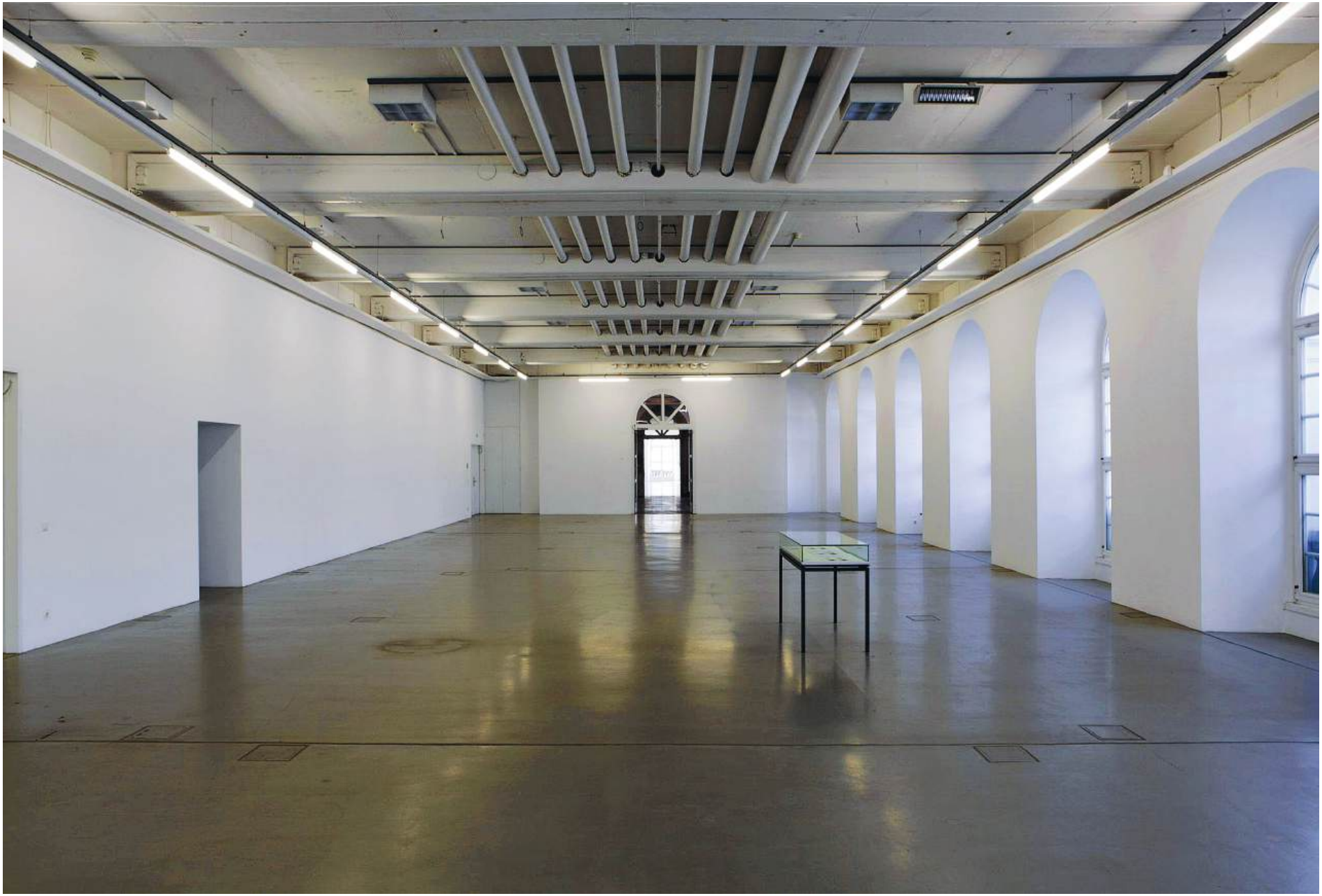
This book is published on the occasion of a series of exhibitions presenting one or more possible opening spaces. The exhibition *Setting the Tone of the Exhibition – The Anatomy of Exhibition Openings* at Malmö Konstmuseum (Malmö, Sweden), *iwillmedievalfutureyou2* at Lilith Performance Studio (Malmö, Sweden), *We haven't open yet, but we are working on it and doing our best to meet your expectations...* at Institut Funder Bakke (Funder, Denmark), and *A room of one's own?* at Simian (Copenhagen, Denmark), are all echoes and part of the overall project *Setting the Tone of the Exhibition – The Anatomy of Exhibition Openings*.

I would like to thank Agnes Ada Kjær and Seolhui Lee for their important editorial contributions and graphic designer Dokho Shin, who made the dots connect visually. A heartfelt thank you goes to all the people involved in this book and project.

Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev

Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev (b. 1957, USA. Based in New York, Torino, and Velletri), Artistic Director of *dOCUMENTA (13)*, Kassel (2012) and Director of Castello di Rivoli Museum of Contemporary Art, Turin (2009 / 2016–2023).

During the opening week of the Venice Biennale 2022, I reached out to Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev to arrange an interview. Our conversation was recorded on 19 April 2022 in a quiet spot between the Venezuelan pavilion and the boarded-up Russian pavilion inside Giardini della Biennale, Venice. I wanted to talk to Christov-Bakargiev about her approach to and role as the artistic director of dOCUMENTA (13), particularly her idea behind 'The Brain' and the subtle opening space with works by Ryan Gander, Ceal Floyer and the delusive letter from Kai Althoff. The exhibition embraced a sense of poetic urgency that elegantly merged both space and art, and art and politics. Our conversation ended up spiraling around physical experiences of getting-to-places, linguistics, emptiness as a strategy, colonial borders, humble consummation, and the appeal and potential shortcomings of lengthy titles—engaging yet prone to being forgotten.



Ryan Gander, *I Need Some Meaning I Can Memorize*, 2012, installation view,
dOCUMENTA (13), Kassel, 2012, Photo: Ryszard Kasiewicz, Courtesy documenta archive.

JACOB FABRICIUS What interests me is the whole idea of curating shows. How curators and artists open exhibitions. In books and films you usually have the opening scene; the intro. This hasn't been discussed so much within curatorial work, how much the entrance of an exhibition can influence a show and the understanding of the audience.

CAROLYN CHRISTOV-BAKARGIEV It's true, and I've never thought about it, but I've always cared for it.

JF The most obvious example I can think of, where it seems you've clearly cared for the initial impressions when entering, is the empty space of your exhibition in Kassel, *dOCUMENTA (13)*.

CC-B It was on the ground floor of the Fridericianum.

JF Yes, that's it. Of course, it wasn't exactly empty...?

CC-B Well, I never thought of the entry of the Fridericianum as the beginning of the *dOCUMENTA*. Rather, I always saw it in contrast with Aue Park. Two beginnings or two ends – we don't know. Where the usually empty one was suddenly full and vice versa; we filled the otherwise empty gardens surrounding the museum with little houses inspired by the Monte Verita commune of the early 20th century near Ascona in Switzerland. On the other hand, the ground floor of the Fridericianum, which is usually the main entrance of the exhibition and is full of texts and works, I left empty, except for four artworks which were not immediately visible.

JF The initial space appeared unexpectedly vacant to the observer. At first glance, there was only a modest photograph and a vitrine within an otherwise empty space. Then, a recurring sound piece with the phrases 'I'll just keep on' and 'till I get it right,' accompanied by a subtle breeze, contributed to the ambiance, but the viewer only became aware of these elements upon consulting the wall label or exhibition map. Can you elaborate on these four components and their play on bareness and immateriality?

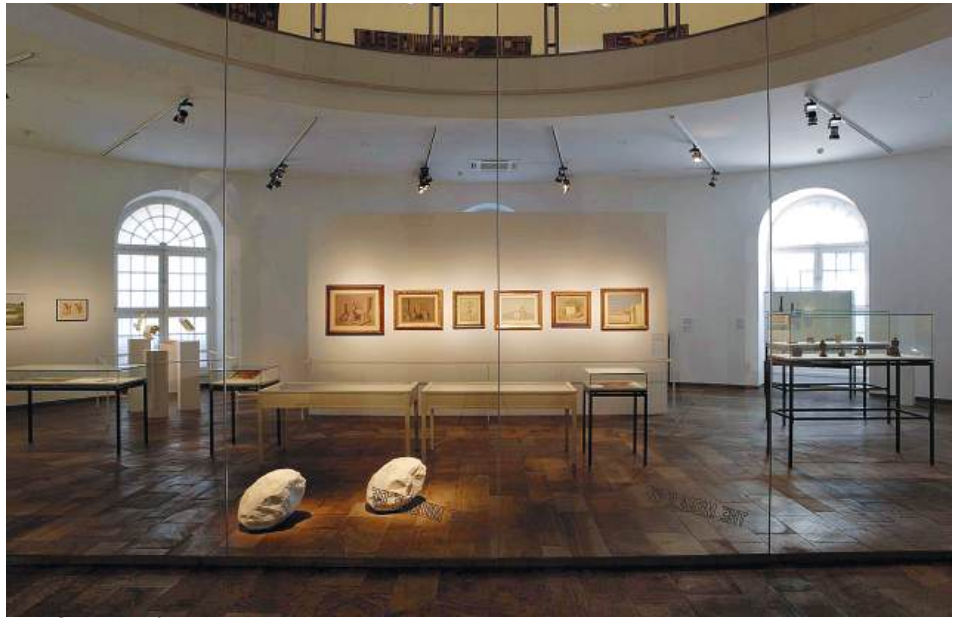
CC-B Yes... so, firstly, the wind created by the artist Ryan Gander. And then the singing of Ceal Floyer, turning those phrases into a loop. And there was the letter of refusal from Kai Althoff in the vitrine, where he refuses my invitation to take part in the exhibition. Plus my conversation with Kai, because then I asked him if I could exhibit his letter. But actually, he did have a piece in 'The Brain' of *dOCUMENTA (13)*; it was an untitled painting of a cat. So, the whole refusal letter pointing to Kai not being in the exhibition was actually a bit of a lie, because in reality he was.

Then on the right side of the Fridericianum, there was a photograph from the archives of the *documenta* of 1959, where you saw this woman barefoot, and a man with shoes. He wore winter clothes while she wore summer clothes, and they were walking in opposite directions in the Fridericianum, in that same room, in 1959. He was looking at her, and she was avoiding his gaze, looking at a sculpture by Julio González. You could only see a little bit of the sculpture in the photograph, because it was hidden by him. It took me about six months of research to find out what it was, in Julio González' oeuvre, and it was actually in the archives of the *documenta*. So somehow it created this triangle between two visitors: the space of the exhibition was a

space, let's say, of desire and of the impossibility of a connection. He wanted to connect with her, while she wanted to connect with the sculpture. The artwork served to create this triangle. And she was barefoot, but nobody would be barefoot in 2012, so in a way it was also about how society had gone backwards.

JF So, the visitors saw the photograph, and then you borrowed the actual sculptures from the very photograph, and installed them exactly where they were in 1959?

CC-B Yes, which created a sort of doubled time. Like, the time of the beginning of documenta, and the time where we were in the *dOCUMENTA (13)*. And then hidden at the back of the ground floor, in the rotunda, was 'The Brain.' It was the theoretical core of the exhibition with many different things, including destroyed objects and artifacts from wars. Because that question of the destruction of objects was very, very important to me in *dOCUMENTA (13)*.

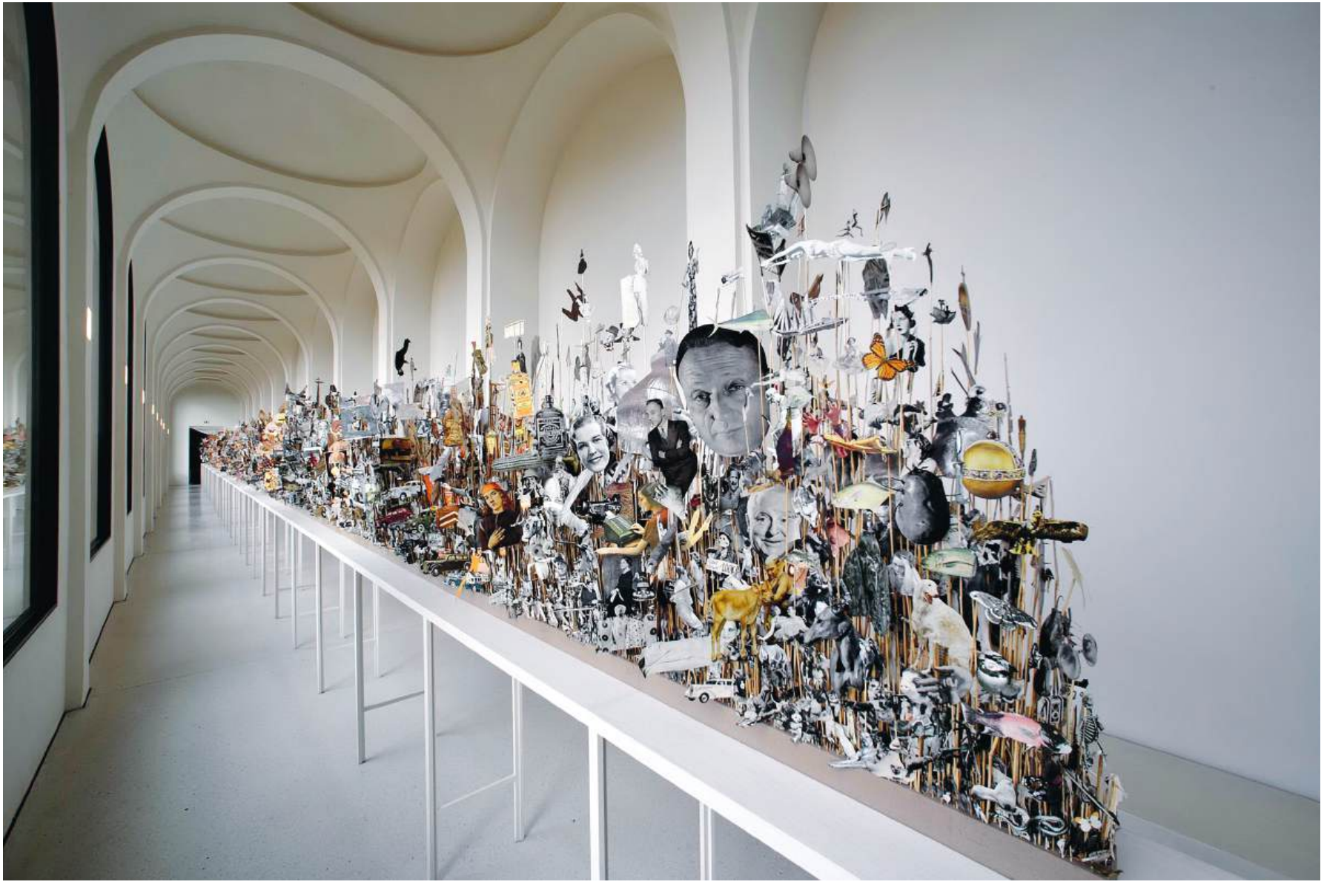


Various artists, *The Brain*, 2012, installation view, *dOCUMENTA (13)*, Kassel, 2012, Photo: Ryszard Kasiewicz, Courtesy documenta archive.

Two things were especially important: the de-anthropocentrization of culture, to take away the centrality of the Enlightenment subject, which is, in fact, identified with male patriarchal thinking, and so, to de-anthropocentricize meant to also go to Pre-Socratic Greece, and also Latin thinking like that of the epic poem *De Rerum Natura* by Lucretius. To see the human as only a small part of a larger entity or cosmos of non-humans. That was the most important concept, and that concept was expressed through putting Donna Haraway on my team of advisors, and dedicating the Worldly House in the Gardens to her.

I think it really changed the way that art exhibitions worked after that, because a year later there was the *Anthropocene Exhibition* at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, and that profoundly changed the paradigm. And we can see that even now we're still within that paradigm of Post-anthropocentrism or Post-humanism.

Still for me, this topic was never separate from what the damages were that the humans were causing to their own cultural artifacts. These damages encompass not only environmental consequences in the context of Anthropocene, in other words, but also the destruction of cultural artifacts. I never isolated these two aspects; they always coexisted. But I did not focus only on the destruction. It was always about how things survive through care. So, whether we're discussing the Bactrian princesses that survived through so many years or the question of the ecological issue, I've always been an optimist. I never make sad exhibitions.



Geoffrey Farmer, *Leaves of Grass*, 2012, installation view, *dOCUMENTA (13)*, Kassel, 2012, Photo: Ryszard Kasiewicz, Courtesy documenta archive.

And I always believed that we can save both our planet and our cultural heritage. In my essay for *dOCUMENTA (13)*, I aimed to convey this idea, and perhaps it's worth revisiting. I've always seen these two pursuits as parallel. To become more human, you must also become less human, and conversely, to become less human, you must become more human. This involves cultivating and expanding our capacity for empathy.

I'm a pretty good friend of Vittorio Gallese, who is part of Rizzolatti e Gallese's team in Parma. They identified the mirror neurons which set off the whole empathy studies. That was very much part of my later exhibitions, yet it was already part of my culture in 2012, speaking with these people from Parma about their discoveries within the field of mirror neurons. I've consistently believed that to become more human, you need to shed some aspects of your humanity, and vice versa. This connection between the destruction of the environment and climate, along with the relationship between climate justice and social justice as expressed through the artifacts we create, has always been at the core of my work.

The integration of these elements, or what one might call 'agencement' in a Deleuzian sense, was crucial. However, for whatever reason, I didn't effectively bridge this connection in a explicit way in *dOCUMENTA (13)*. So two things happened in the art world afterwards: on one hand, there was a surge in works and exhibitions related to the Anthropocene, and on the other, there was a growing focus on the destruction of cultural artifacts. Object-based ontologies

turned into a focus on the destruction of cultural artifacts. But no one kept these two aspects together, which was what I always thought, and still think, should happen; it's the only way to actually move on in a positive way. And I think that's what indigenous cultures teach us, as well as what many ancient cultures teach us.

I'm the daughter of an archaeologist, and in archaeology you can see the connection between these things, you know?

JF That's right.

CC-B Otherwise, there would be no Pompeii and so on... So, that's the primary point here. This is essentially what you're referring to when you mention the entrance to the exhibition. I think it did come as quite a shock for visitors entering the Fridericianum to find only an absence, with an opposite full world in the park.

I aimed to place the audience as the central figures, if you will, as I wanted people to feel like they were actively shaping the exhibition. This idea of engaging visitors to make them feel like co-creators isn't fundamentally different from thinking in terms of a theatrical production. I mean, in a theater, if there's no audience watching a play, then essentially there's no play. It's normal in my perspective because my academic background involves semiotics and linguistics, and I was trained at the university, almost like the intellectual heir of Umberto Eco, if you will. We knew each other. I miss him dearly since he passed.

In Eco's work *Opera Aperta*, *The Open Work*, which was written, I think, in 1962, he makes exactly this point. It becomes clear then that he's a semiologist

coming from structuralism. I was trained in structuralist discourse, so I know very well that you cannot define a phoneme by itself. You can only define it by contrasting in relation with something else. So, relational studies of structures was my basis. And then layered on that, semiology, looking at all systems of signs, meaning that to say there is no play without the audience is, like, obvious.

JF So, if I understand you correctly, you always see a cultural work or piece of art as a relational matter? What other relations or contrasts did you set in position at *dOCUMENTA (13)*?

CC-B Within this framework of the relation, there's another perspective worth considering.

Typically, what's positioned in front of the Fridericianum is a substantial, attention-grabbing visual artwork. However, in this particular instance we featured a small, highly compact piece of iron crafted by Faivovich and Goldberg, two Argentinian artists. It weighed the same as an iron meteorite found in Chaco, located in the northern region of Argentina. This meteor serves as a symbolic representation of colonialism, as the Chaco fields held significant religious importance for pre-Columbian civilizations. It was the largest meteorite field in the world, in terms of the surface of the meteorite field. And this object, the biggest meteorite, I wanted to bring to *dOCUMENTA (13)* as the heaviest object ever moved on the planet. Single object, heaviest. Kind of an antithesis to the emergent digital world.

This allowed us to delve into discussions about the significance of weight and the idea of a world's center,

commonly referred to as the omphalos. It also provided a platform for addressing the colonial period's role in extracting metals from various countries, including the appropriation of meteorites from the Chaco field.

JF But you didn't get to borrow that meteorite, did you?

CC-B No. Finally the Chaco Indians, the different Indigenous Peoples there with whom we met, decided not to lend us the meteor. The Argentinian government was in favour, but they had several meetings and finally decided not to. And I respected that decision. So, instead we put an iron piece by the two Argentinian artists, which had the same weight as the meteorite but was rather small, one square cube. So, that was again an anti-visual thing. Just like inside the Fridericianum.

And instead I gave electricity to the tents of the people who were protesting the banks. Remember there were these protests?

JF Yeah.

CC-B There were a series of tents set up where, at times, people could charge their laptops and cellphones using power from inside the Fridericianum. It wasn't considered an artwork; it was merely a means of providing electricity to the protesters.

JF Another crucial element in *dOCUMENTA (13)* was how visitors were received by non-specialized tour guides. Could you tell me about your thoughts behind the *Worldly Companions*?

CC-B They were in the space to welcome people instead of tour guides. I didn't want these top-down tour guides, and I didn't even want a hypocritical version of not-top-down tour guides, so instead I created this

programme called the *Worldly Companions* run by art historian Jakob Schillinger. Essentially, we established a university to prepare anyone from the local Kassel population who wished to become a guide for the exhibition. I felt it was essential that they learned about the art. This was about hybridizing non-artistic knowledges with art.

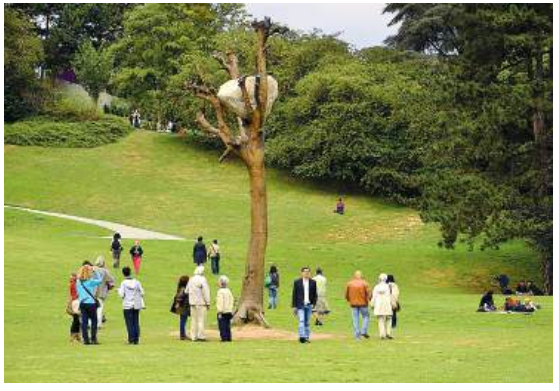
For about six months, we hosted sessions with artists like Pierre Huyghe, who delivered lectures, and all the artists explained their work to prepare the companions. Their role was to guide visitors to their favourite artworks and merge their own knowledge with that of the art. Their individual expertise was diverse; for instance, a gardener might lead people around Aue Park, offering insights into the plants and connecting it to the art, which I found so much more intriguing than regular tour guides. You could learn about the flora while also understanding the work of artists like Dinh Q. Lê.

This approach was crucial in introducing an innovative way to dispel the fear that many people have about art being exclusive. We live in a world where there's a widespread perception that art is reserved for the elite. So I thought that if non-specialized people became the guides and combined their own knowledge with what they had learned, they could offer unique and approachable ways of engaging with art.

In terms of welcoming, I think that was important. It is also about signage. For me, signage is very important. I had the little yellow signs, remember?

JF Yeah.

CC-B The signs were all over the place in Kassel. Equally significant to me was what you couldn't access, however. I aimed to counteract hybris and the prevailing consumer culture, and thus there were certain locations that you couldn't physically reach, or that were hard to reach for people from the centers of the art world. Banff, Alexandria, Cairo, Kabul and Bamiyan were intentionally off-limits for the touristic biennale globe-trotters. This restriction served as a reminder of the importance of humility for visitors, encouraging them to reflect on their own limitations. To deeply understand that you can't just consume because you buy a ticket. You can't do that in life. You take planes, you consume, then you damage the atmosphere. You can't always just 'buy' experience. At least sometimes you can't... Even the richest visitors with private planes could not fly to Kabul. There were no tourist visas at all then. That was one of the reasons I chose Afghanistan. It was a place where nobody in the art world, not even the wealthiest people, could go. And it would balance the fact that many Afghans, or people from many, many postcolonial places, could not go to Kassel. They could not get the tourist visas easily as they would be suspected of wanting to illegally immigrate to Germany.



Giuseppe Penone, *Idee di Pietra (Ideas of Stone)*, 2012, installation view, *dOCUMENTA (13)*, Kassel, 2012. Photo: Ryszard Kasiewicz, Courtesy documenta archive.

So the only people who could go to Kabul and Bamiyan were the artists and people who were participating in the project, and the visitors were therefore local.

And it was a totally local audience. You know, 40,000 people saw that show in Kabul. That's a lot. Once, a curator whom I otherwise really respect said in a talk, with me present, that since the art world couldn't go to Kabul, it was like the exhibition there didn't actually exist. And I said, What? What are you talking about? Forty thousand people saw that show. You could not go, because I wanted you to feel just like somebody who didn't get the visa, but that doesn't mean it didn't exist. That's a colonial attitude. That's like saying terra nullius in Australia. There's nobody there, because you don't see the Indigenous Peoples. They don't exist, and therefore nobody's there.

JF Do you remember Santiago Sierra's Spanish Pavilion in Venice in 2003? You had to show a Spanish passport to get in.

CC-B Oh, yes exactly! That's something. There's this idea that because the art world couldn't go to Kabul, then Kabul as a venue did not exist. As the daughter of an archaeologist, I know when everybody who was alive and actually visited the *dOCUMENTA (13)* exhibition is dead, in the future people will study it, and feel and find that the section in Kassel and the one in Kabul were very much the same, because you have newspaper articles and catalog entries and photographs on both. You have visitors in both places. You have lists of works, lists of works. Venues, venues. So, it was only

a temporary feeling that it was invisible.

JF Is it revealed what was in Kabul, actually?

CC-B I published everything. The whole last part of the guidebook was in Farsi, and in English, too. If you take the guidebook and you turn it upside down, the front cover is Kabul. There's, like, a hundred pages on Kabul. Every single artwork is listed: international and Afghan artists. All the Afghan artists who were in Kassel were also in Kabul.

JF I'm interested in whether you've employed similar approaches in other exhibitions. Have there been instances where you considered factors like the accessibility of the exhibition to various audiences, and strategies to dislocate it from the typical viewer experience?

CC-B Yes, *Saltwater*, the 14th Istanbul Biennial in 2015, where I also thought so much about how long it takes to visit it, and how you can dislocate it over many venues and over two or three days. I wanted it to be like the Bosphorus. So, it went from the islands, the Princes' Islands, to the place where the Russian satellite plates are rusted, opposite the Rumeli Feneri, I think it's called, lighthouse, which is where the Bosphorus opens onto the Black Sea.

Basically, the exhibitions went from the Mediterranean Sea to the Black Sea, following the whole Bosphorus. And there were shows on both sides of the Bosphorus. Usually, the Biennale is only on the European side, but this time there were lots of shows on the Asian side and also on the islands, so it was key to figure out where and how people would go. Not just in terms of what art places they'd visit, but very

specifically what routes they would follow to get there.

Theaster Gates created a pottery shop in a very special neighborhood in Istanbul where he learned to make pottery from Iznik. And so, basically, I used a lot of signage again, and I was thinking that I wanted people on the water. So, to have people on the water, they had to take the ferries. I wanted it to be a physical experience of the saltwater, not just a concept of the exhibition.

And again, there was a dialogue with technology in the sense that I was saying that saltwater can destroy your cell phone. So, basically the reasoning was that you can then destroy the entire technology of the world with just plain salt. What was important to me was to speak about that relationship with growing technology. Saltwater, on one hand, is incredibly beneficial for our bodies, but on the other hand, it can wreak havoc on your cellphone. This was a simple way of highlighting that we are fundamentally distinct from our cellphones. They are vulnerable to saltwater, while it is beneficial to us.

I aimed to offer an experiential sense of well-being, particularly through the inhalation of iodine present in the saltwater. To reach the Biennale, visitors had to embark on boat rides that took several hours. That was the most invisible but omnipresent element welcoming the audience, I think. Saltwater.

JF Really interesting, this shifted perception of place and opening space – from the exhibition venue itself to the journey there. Another way to broaden the perception of an introduction or opening, I think, could involve

lectures and engaging the public. Could you share insights into the role this has played in your practice?

CC-B Yes, it was actually both the case with *dOCUMENTA (13)* and the Biennale in Istanbul. I like the idea that you can stay for a hundred days in Kassel and every day do something different. It builds communities between the artists. And I think those are the most important. What happens kind of in between. It's not about the visitors, but what happens in between the artists after the exhibition day is over, after hours, is even another whole programme.

For example, I had a quantum physics course by Anton Zeilinger in the Fridericianum every night, when the museum closed. So, the visitors would leave, and the artists would come, and Anton would come into his room.

JF Is that why there was always writing on the blackboards? It was from Zeilinger's lectures?

CC-B Exactly. At around nine o'clock every evening, there was a class on quantum physics. For everybody. Rabih Mroué came. Lots of artists came. Michael Rakowitz. There were always, like, 30 artists there studying quantum physics with Anton. Not for the whole summer, but for a long time. So, that would be another layer. I like this movie called *The Others*. Have you ever seen it?

JF No.

CC-B It's about a haunted house, and the people who buy the house are living in it and they're afraid of the ghosts. Then, at the end of the movie, you find out that they're the actual ghosts, the people who died, and the actual

living people are the ones they thought were ghosts. It's unclear who the ghosts are, you know? In a way, these two layers, the hundred artists at night and the hundred or thousand visitors each day, they don't quite mix.

Yet since the beginning, I've had a very strong bond with artists – I've even married one, as you know. I think that they're very particular people that are full of hybris and also very fragile, and I generally help, in a secret way, in their making of works.

So, I'm like the first audience in a way. Maybe I'm in between those people that I talked about: the ones who come to the exhibitions, and the artists, and I'm sort of in between, navigating. I'm the ghost for both of them.

JF [Chuckles].

CC-B And I think that sums it up. I genuinely care about all these diverse groups of people. When it comes to an art exhibition, it's not just one single audience; there are countless different audiences to consider. There are children, adults, seniors, local community members, international visitors, the artists themselves, and even the artists' families.

For instance, during the Biennale of Sydney, in 2008, I placed an emphasis on creating an immersive experience for viewers while also considering the unique context of Sydney Harbor. Given Australia's history with prisons, as it was once a British penal colony, I wanted people to grasp the historical significance. To achieve this, I used Cockatoo Island, a former prison that later served as a factory – essentially a prison in another form. It provided an opportunity for visitors

to feel what it was like to be in a remote and controlled environment, evoking the prison experience.

In Australia, we also organized a special event involving the artists' parents. We invited them to a large congress or conference, and many of them attended. I had the opportunity to meet and engage with these parents, and as happy as that could be, it also sometimes felt like a scene from a Freudian setting.

The interesting thing was experiencing the parental relations. Many artists were genuinely proud to have their parents present for this event. However, organizing it was quite an expensive endeavour. We extended invitations to around 40 parents from various parts of the world, which translated to roughly 80 plane tickets. This was an idea of the artist Darius Mikšys.

JF That's a lot. Was there any curational or artistic purpose attached to you inviting them to the shows?

CC-B First of all, it means a lot to come and see their children's show. So it has to do with elaboration of trauma, but also it was like fundamental research. Like, from what families do these artists come from? Still, I think that art objects are extremely important, so I also disagree with purely relational projects because I think that it's all holistically related.

You know, the artists as audience, the viewers as audience, the parents as audience, the signage, the events.

JF One last thing. I'd like to explore another method of initiating a conversation when commencing an exhibition: the use of a title. A title can in some senses hold transformative potential. You mentioned Umberto Eco and the themes of translation, transmutation and

openness. How has the choice of titles influenced your approach to exhibitions?

CC-B Well, I think I'm really good at it [laughing].

JF [Laughing]. Great.

CC-B But I really do think so. My next show, opening next week, is called *Espressioni con Frazioni*, which means 'fractional expressions.' I don't translate it into fractional expressions, but you know, like one on three, one on four.

The exhibition delves into the fragmented nature of our current world, which is marked by its numerous extremes. It features a diverse range of artists and works, such as the Ukrainian Nikita Kadan and his *Letter from the Front*, the digital art of Beeple, the indigenous activist artist Richard Bell, and the expressionist painter Julie Mehretu, amongst others.

In essence, it resembles shards rather than a pristine diamond with many facets. It's more like a fractured diamond. I believed this title would resonate effectively. However, in mathematical terms, 'fractional expressions' are referred to as *Espressioni con Frazioni*, but this doesn't quite capture the intended meaning in English for several reasons. The point is: no English translation. It's just *Espressioni con Frazioni*, which you could translate as fractured expressions.

And actually, the etymology of fraction and fractured is the same. Like, fractured bone and the fraction of a sum of numbers. So I think it's quite a good title!

For *dOCUMENTA (13)*, I intentionally chose a title that would be hard to forget, or perhaps more accurately, hard to remember. It became something along the lines of *The dance was very frenetic, lively, rattling, clanging, rolling, contorted, and lasted for a long time*. This title was a quote from Ulrike Meinhof's *Bambule*, a production that took place near Kassel in Breitenau. It revolved around a sort of ailment known as shingles. It resulted in the longest title I've ever used.

However, there was another one, even lengthier, from a show in Antwerp back in 1993, during Antwerp's Cultural Capital of Europe programme. The title was *On Taking a Normal Situation and Retranslating it into Overlapping and Multiple Readings of Conditions Past and Present*. It was so extensive, and the only reason I remember it is because I was much younger and forced myself to commit it to memory. This particular title, *On Taking a Normal Situation (...)*, was inspired by Gordon Matta-Clark's work, particularly his final cutting piece in Antwerp. It had to do with the emerging fascination with archives, which soon translated into the concept of the Internet. This was around 1992, well before the Internet became widely recognized in 1994, 1995, and later in the late 1990s with the advent of YouTube and the discussions about archive fever and similar topics.

In 1991, the idea that there are multiple layers existing simultaneously was still quite new and fresh. Titles are of the utmost importance to me. Sometimes they're incredibly long, and I do it deliberately to make them hard for people to memorize. Other times, I keep them short and to the point. *Saltwater* was one such succinct title. It encapsulated the essence of what I mentioned earlier. In general, I like to choose strong words that hold hidden meanings...