Annette Kulenkampff

*dOCUMENTA (13)—Behind the scenes:*
Art journalists Nicole Büsing & Heiko Klaas interview Annette Kulenkampff, head of Hatje Cantz Publishers. The conversation took place in a hotel in Kassel on June 8, 2012, during the previews of the dOCUMENTA (13).

Ms. Kulenkampff, you grew up in Hanover, not too far from Kassel, home of the documenta. What was your first experience with the documenta? What’s the first show you can remember?

The 1972 show. That’s basically the first documenta that I was really aware of. I had attended previous documenta shows, but I was still very young then. I just don’t remember them well. From then on, I went to every documenta, not just with my parents, but later, too. I was always excited about it in one way or another, except for the last documenta. It was the least interesting to me. But up until then, each one was fascinating, despite, or even because of, all of the fragmentation.

By that, you surely mean the very different curatorial styles . . .

There was a very decisive break: Jan Hoet was the last narrative, poetic curator of the documenta. That’s a tendency that I’m discovering again in the current documenta. Catherine David brought about a turning point with the documenta X that was crucial to the way that contemporary exhibitions have been produced since then. I thought that was also a really great, important documenta. It was not until later that people recognized how important it was. Okwui Enwezor’s exhibition fell somewhere in between. But I still liked it very much. Now, once again, we have the narrative, the poetic, and the sensual. That was missing a little bit, in the last one. This time, the experience is once again very sensual. One is caught up, from head to toe.
You’ve now spent two days touring the dOCUMENTA (13). What are your first impressions?
I’m very excited about the dOCUMENTA (13). My general impression is that there is very obviously a common theme running through it. The world as a whole, so to speak. Maybe that seems a little naïve sometimes, but in any case, you can see that everything going on in the world is being taken seriously: from plants, landscapes, and animals, to people and their objects. That is, of course, highly ambitious, but you notice that here, it’s all about everything, as it were. And I think that is basically the golden thread running through this exhibition.

Do you have any personal favorites?
I think the Huguenot House is absolutely top-notch. Theaster Gates is an artist from Chicago. He rented a house with some unemployed people, and people who have no education. It’s called the Huguenot House. He designed wild furniture for it. He made paintings out of garbage. The people working with him live in the house, and they make music there. A kind of poetry music, jazz poetry. Quite wonderful. And the house is full of this stuff—this furniture and these homemade things. Even some of the wallpaper, some of the things that were either there before, or made a reappearance—they also play a role. So that’s one of the works I think is very successful.

Do you plan to return to the documenta? Will you attend regularly during the one hundred days?
I don’t know if I’ll come regularly. But I’d like to come back at least once or twice. There’s so much to see. In addition to the art, there’s a very diverse, comprehensive program of events. I envy the people who live in Kassel.

Hatje Cantz and the documenta seem almost inseparable. Since when has that been the case?
As far as the publishing company founded by Mr. Cantz goes, this is the fourth documenta that we’re doing. Before that, the documenta always went to a printer close to Kassel. Although, I think, the first or second catalogue was by Prestel. But after that, no other publishers were involved. It didn’t really start until Jan Hoet’s DOCUMENTA IX. That was twenty years ago. Then we did the documenta with Catherine David, number ten, and then number eleven, with Okwui Enwezor. Twelve was done with Taschen, and now the documenta is working with us again.

How did this new collaboration come about?
When I found out that Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev was going to be the artistic director, I simply contacted Bernd Leifeld, the executive director of the documenta, whom I of course know. I told him it would be nice if we could be considered. And then we quickly started talks.

What is needed, in order to collaborate with the documenta?
You need a team that specializes in this kind of production. It doesn’t work any other way. You just can’t manage it any other way. And so we said, okay, we’ll help with everything. From the
start, beginning with the Notebooks. The dimensions kept on growing. It was impossible to predict at first. But we agreed upon everything right after Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev invited us to Turin. That was in autumn 2010.

And afterward? Was there a complicated agreement process?
Not much after that. We used the designers suggested by Carolyn Cristov-Bakargiev, Leftloft, who did a great job. They’re in Milan and New York. We put together an editorial team. Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev brought in Bettina Funcke, who lives in New York. It’s extremely important that the inner circle of editors consists of people who speak the same language. Working with her was very productive. She came from Karlsruhe, was with the DIA Art Foundation, and did publications there, too. And I suggested Katrin Sauerländer, who was with the Kunst-Werke in Berlin. I’ve known her since forever, and I thought it would all work out well together. And that turned out to be true. In conjunction with our in-house production department, it was an optimal structure.

Did you have many meetings afterward with Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev?
We had about five meetings, to work things out in general. Then there were a few Skype conferences. A lot happened while we were in the production process. Then you don’t meet as much anymore, because the participants are so scattered. Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev was actually always traveling. In that respect, communication was limited to e-mail and telephone.

What was special about the exchanges with Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev?
Like Catherine David und Okwui Enwezor, the publications are very important to her. That is a very important part of her approach. Because she loves books, she wanted to see and supervise everything, which is a little difficult when someone is constantly on the road and under a lot of time constraints. In that respect, she was heavily involved. But always in a positive sense. Sometimes she had some ideas that were very difficult to realize, but that is not unusual.

Can you name some examples?
First of all, the Book of Books was supposed to have 1400 pages. We had to tell her that that’s just not technically feasible. We’re now at a thickness of 7.5 centimeters. Eight centimeters is the absolute maximum, otherwise the book can’t go through the production line at the bindery. We used very thin paper and exhausted all of the tricks of the trade, but we always had to confront the dreams and wishes of the other side with the technical and pragmatic obstacles on our side. And in the end, if we’re lucky, that will produce something very good.

You just mentioned the special quality of the paper. Could you tell us something more specific . . . ?
Here’s something very important: it’s munken paper, which has a kind of open, uncoated quality. It’s actually not suited for pictures, but I still think that it was the right decision. Because it gives the publications—the Notebooks, the guide, the Book of Books, and the Logbook—a
great sense of homogeneity. It simply makes you realize that this series belongs together. With munken paper, you don’t expect every color to be correct. If you use a very smooth, coated kind of fine art paper, the pictures have to be brilliant and have color fidelity. Pictures on munken paper don’t look as brilliant, but it creates a beautiful, homogenous, overall impression that works very well.

Are there any other things worth noting about the technical approach and the design of the books?

The guide contains a lot of visual material of very diverse quality by the artists. Pictures might be of a drawing, a photo, or just a photocopy. The paper homogenizes the different criteria of the source materials. That makes the guide as a whole very consistent, harmonious. Nothing looks odd or sticks out. We used 80-gram paper for the guide, which was also a little risky, completely out of the ordinary. 135- or 150-gram paper is normal. But we used 80; otherwise, you couldn’t carry the guide book around with you. So it’s very practical, because even though it’s thick, it’s not heavy. Visitors can carry it with them as they tour the exhibition, and that’s what it’s meant for. You can’t produce heavy tomes for that.

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