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## **World Art, Framed Walls**

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**T**HIS PAPER DEALS WITH AN EXHIBITION OF CONTEMPORARY ART from Africa, Asia and Latin America. The exhibition took place in summer 1992 in Kassel and the small neighboring town of Hannoversch Mnden. Its title, "Encountering the Others," contained an unspoken "we." My paper explores the implications of the temporal and spatial context constituting the relationship addressed in the title of the exhibition. Who are the "others?" What does their otherness consist in? What type of encounter is it, and who participates?

Thus I consider my paper not merely a review of an exhibition from an ethnological perspective, but an exploration of a visual arrangement and public event. This event took place at a site that does not normally see changing art exhibits; other exhibitions do not constantly take place in the surrounding area. But an event that took place in the neighborhood at the same time, the Documenta 9, must be considered in the analysis.

Art exhibitions mobilize masses of people. In recent years, new audiences have been attracted to such exhibits. More and more temporary exhibitions are held; the activity of exhibiting itself, hardly examined until well into the eighties, is receiving greater attention. "Exhibition-makers" have professionalized what used to be an incidental activity. While in the seventies, it was the artists who expanded the concept of art and became involved in the process of exhibiting, in the eighties curators began to influence artistic production, attracting attention with exhibits staged as "works."

Exhibitions are points of concentration in the process of creating political symbols. They take up formulations from other contexts and

construct their own meanings. This paper will describe the patterns and strategies utilized by the exhibition "Encountering the Others." The focus of this exploration is the relevance of context in creating the meaning of an exhibition.

I. My discussion begins with the context in which the exhibition placed itself. In an interview, the curator, Hamdi el Attar, explained the intentions of the exhibition:

"I am interested in the art of non-European countries. For example Africa, what happened after colonialism, after the Second World War; how did culture, identity, develop? All we know about African art are its ethnological and folklorist aspects. Avant-garde art in these countries is not taken seriously; it is not shown in modern museums like Cologne or Stuttgart."

The exhibition's declared aim was to show non-European art in the context of art, rather than considering the "ethnological aspects" of the art.

In recent years – in 1991 in Frankfurt, for example – several German museums of ethnology have begun collecting contemporary non-European art. However, like more traditional works, they are collected and exhibited as specimens of foreign cultures. Thus the works of non-European artists interested in the art market, art criticism and artistic promotion end up in ethnological exhibitions, where they experience a new form of tribalization.

The exhibition "Encountering the Others" showed contemporary art from Africa, Asia and South America outside this institutional context. As an exhibition introducing non-Western art, "Encountering the Others" was the latest in a series of exhibitions dealing with art seen as "other" art from the European or Western perspective. Thus in a detailed review in the Documenta volume of *Kunstforum*, Paolo Bianchi links the exhibition with the Paris exhibition *magiciens de la terre*. That exhibition in 1989 formulated a post-modern concept of the coexistence, overlapping and fusion of symbolic forms. A hundred artists of the first, second, third and fourth worlds were included. Each received his or her own space and, in alphabetical order, a double page in the catalogue. In the right margin was a map of the world, in each case printed so that the artist's place of residence appeared as the center. The exhibition was intended as an attempt to overcome the Eurocentrism that prevails in thinking

about art. Like the 1984 New York exhibition "Primitivism in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art," which could be seen as an homage to modernism, magicians de la terre also thematized a relationship between one's own and foreign art, though in a different way. Both exhibitions presented not only works of art, but also a view of art.

"LOTTE OR THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE OBJECT," an anthropologically-annotated exhibition appearing in 1990 and 1991 in Graz and Vienna, went a step further: it brought together West African objects and contemporary "Western" art objects, with the declared aim of posing questions of authenticity, authorship, and acceptance. Clementine Deliss, the curator of this exhibition, transferred a theoretical discourse to an exhibition arrangement. She thus tied it into the discourse on "Poetics and Politics of Representation."

In contrast to the discussion on "contextualization" vs. "aesthetization" as alternatives in exhibiting that has taken place in recent years within German ethnology, utilizing arguments from various positions involving pedagogic intention and the nature of foreign art, this discourse reflects what actually happens in exhibiting: What dynamic can each individual element of a display develop? How do contexts change the significance of an object? What are the connotations of presentation forms and media that play a roll in exhibiting? How are the constructions that produce or are shown in exhibitions used or changed politically?

These questions presented themselves when I visited the exhibition "Encountering the Others," for I discovered something surprising in Hannoversch Mnden: it was not the art, but its frame, that drew attention. The exhibition of art from around the world was the background to a celebration of local originality. The exhibition neither formulated an artistic concept nor questioned attitudes towards art. Its real interest, for me, lay in its significance for the process of formation of political symbols, and the way in which formulations were found.

II. The first point in the following description of the exhibition concerns the construction of the category "the others." The exhibition included installations, objects, pictures, sculptures and a video sculpture; art created in studios and ending up in galleries; art that – like the skin and wall paintings from West Africa presented in photos – is not treated as such; recycled products functioning as utensils, whose artistic side is

produced by the Western eye, accustomed as it is to pop art; paintings in the manner of Van Gogh or using techniques reminiscent of Jackson Pollock's action paintings; art oriented towards Western art that remains unacknowledged.

The objects, which had already moved from one significance – and value-changing context to another, were exposed to yet another transformation as displays in this exhibition. But this was neither addressed in the text nor thematized in the presentation itself. Not until a second edition of the catalogue appeared at the end of the exhibition was any information or commentary provided, at least for some of the works. In the exhibition itself, there were only four text boards with contradictory explanations. For example, sculptures by Tanzanian artist Nwjudi Dastani, who was mentioned by name, were explained under the heading "Makonde Art."

The works were organized neither by genre nor by theme, nor by regional origin, the organizing principle behind the catalogue. In many cases, works by the same artist were distributed among various rooms of the exhibition.

Each display was labelled with the title of the work, the name of the artist and his or her country of origin. The category "country of origin" became particularly important; the tension between viewing, categorizing and checking was related to the regional categorization. Because most of the artists were not familiar from earlier exhibits in Europe, the viewer sought what was typical or exceptional in subject, technique or style in the origins of the artist.

In one place, I found an instructive supplement: next to one of the signs hung a small gray piece of cardboard with a handwritten completion of the information provided. This most likely occurred at the initiative of the artist, Yoshio Kitayami, who had come himself to build his three-part object. The improvised label listed not only the title, whose full length did not fit the standard label, but also the materials used and the year the object was produced. Information on material creates a connection with a topos of Western contemporary art. Thematizing materiality – a bridge of international artistic communication – was thus prevented categorically. Dating is part of a concept of individual artistic development. It is an argument in issues involving avantgardism. This aspect was kept out by dating all the works in a diffuse present.

The criteria used to select the exhibits were unclear. Only one criterion was apparent: the works of African, Asian and Latin American artists who do not live in their overseas homelands were excluded. Thus location in the country of origin was made into a quality, and connected with originality. The global networking of the American-European art scene with artistic circles in the countries selected was negated, and "otherness" guaranteed.

In short, the emphasis on origin, without making the art of a region an object, the exclusion of information taken for granted in Western cultural presentations, and the mixture of objects from different spheres of art and culture led to a paradoxical type of levelling; the works of art ensured difference and were interchangeable at will. The one clear criterion of selection turned the otherness into untouchedness. This is how the exhibit managed to construct the category "the others."

III. To describe more precisely the way in which "Encountering the Others" functioned, we must consider the fact that this exhibition took place at the same time as the Documenta 9. The Documenta is a magnet for the public. For a short time, it turns the provinces into an arts metropolis. For its audience, "Encountering the Others" turned its position in the shadow of the Documenta into a "counter- Documenta." The following remarks concern the conscious or unconscious strategies utilized to achieve this.

Personalization was an implicit strategy that allowed the visitor to "Encountering the Others" to take sides and identify. On one side was the Documenta team, on the other the project group "Stoffwechsel." But we connected one person with each exhibition; Jan Hoet and Hamdi el Attar, the two curators, embodied their projects. Selection of displays was their subjective decision.

Jan Hoet made explicitly intuitive choices:

"This intuition aimed at something corporeal, something physical, and thus something a-conceptual – not anti-conceptual; that is, 'without,' not 'against.'"

"I'm trying to get away from categories. Many people just have to create categories to safeguard themselves. But when you create categories, it always diminishes the artist."

Both curators operated with programmatic lack of concept.

"I want to make room for other points of view, to show art in its respective context, in order to break down prejudices. It's not a question of a fantastic exhibition; we collect unknown information. That is the basis of our project,"

Said Hamdi el Attar, who explained later in the same interview:

". . . We don't need an explanation of each picture. We don't need guides to explain the meaning of the pictures to people. Let people grasp art according to their own imaginations, not based on some academic significance. That's what kills creativity."

Hamdi el Attar's statement itself helps develop an analysis of the exhibition. Here, however, I am interested only in the similarity of these two statements at first glance.

This personalization brings together temporal and spatial implications. Jan Hoet, manager and author of Documenta 9, came from outside, from the Museum of Contemporary Art in Ghent. In this constellation of two competitors, he represented Western art. Hamdi el Attar of Egypt stood for non-European art. As a professor at Kassel Polytechnic, he was "from here." This intersection of immediate proximity and spatially localizable foreignness was reflected in the concept of otherness that did not emphasize the conceptually "foreign" or "other," but fixed upon distances and the immediacy of "encounters."

As in many other cases (we may recall the conference of non-governmental organizations that took place parallel to the environmental summit in Rio), the legitimacy of small alternative events consists in their ability to avoid state censorship and economic pressure. In the case of the Documenta, these became the authority of art criticism and the power of the art market—from which "Encountering the Others" declared its independence. To climb from the second tier to an alternative exhibition, it employed the strategy of parallelization. Here we might point to the preparatory period of five years each. Size is also important — the works of 110 artists on 6,000 square meters of exhibition space, versus the works of 190 artists on 10,000 square meters at the Documenta. In contrast, the budgets were very different: the Documenta cost 16.5 million, "Encountering the Others" only three million. However, this fact entirely suits the image of an alternative enterprise. "Encountering the Others" showed that an exhibition of almost the same size could be presented for far less taxpayers' money. In this way, "Encountering the Others" ensured itself a moral bonus.

Both exhibitions presented their displays in several buildings of very different character, in terms of both architectural style and normal or original function. As in the past, the Documenta utilized the Fredericianum, the Ottoneum, and the Kunsthalle, to name only three buildings. In 1992, temporary structures and the Documenta hall were added. The Stoffwechsel group used Hall K18 in Kassel, which had also been used before. But in Hannoversch Mnden, the castle, the city hall, the rotunda, and especially the Packhof, a former warehouse accessible for the first time, were new sites. The attraction of uniqueness or first use thus made "Encountering the Others" a special event in the five-year exhibition cycle. In a five-year rhythm, the Documenta transforms the periphery of German and European arts' activity into a center of the Western art world. "Encountering the Others" took this to extremes: Hannoversch Mnden, a town on the edge of this periphery, exhibited "world art." The small competitor became a challenger.

IV. My exploration now turns from consideration of the confrontation sought with these "others" to the encounter with the other "others."

The objects, which commented upon one another, were distributed among a total of eleven locations – three sites in Kassel and eight in Hannoversch Mnden. In their respective spatial contexts, they found themselves in a further dimension of meaning-creating dynamics: the relationship between displays and space was the level at which the exhibit construed "encounters."

I will refer here to three examples: Hall K 18, a former factory hall in Kassel, the Knights' Hall of Welfen Castle, and the Packhof in Hannoversch Mnden. The wall across from the old factory floor of the Henschel works was included in the presentation through a painted sign some twenty meters long; like the wall painting, the banner and the flag were reminiscent of the squatters' movement: the factory was in "other" hands. The visitor entered a hall lighted naturally from above. The room could be observed in its entirety. Iron constructions structured the space. The space had purposely not been subdivided to add to the effect. This decision had its price—smaller works tended to get lost in the space, and larger ones got in each other's way. For example, four Senegalese verre glomis paintings seemed merely nice and trivial, especially as the hangings were clumsy and the passepartouts unsuited to the pictures.



The large three-part filigree object by Yoshio Kitayami, which could only unfold its effects in the play of light and shadow on the floor and walls, clashed optically with other works. The part of the object that jutted farthest into the hall became a motley, confused mass, produced with laborious effort.

In many cases, it was apparent that hanging, presentation and labelling had been careless. A 136 X 180 large object on paper, the work of Myung-Sook Kim, was simply pinned to the wall with thumb-tacks. A whole piece of an installation by Sheng-Zhong Lu was missing when the exhibition ended. Neither in terms of personnel nor in technical terms were the works taken care of in the manner that is customary when high insurance premiums must be paid. The works came from countries where art is cheap. The impression of a "third world Documenta," the subtitle of Paolo Bianchi's review of the exhibition in *Kunstforum*, was raised by such details, which do not necessarily attract the viewer's conscious attention. Such careless handling of the displays gave the impression of art "from below."

Art brought life to the shut-down factory halls. The displays, in turn, gained authenticity from the space. The factory hall gave the presentation a workshop character. The workshop, the studio, is a place where the work of art is still untouched by gallery owners, juries, curators and art educators.

Here we see how "Encountering the Others" resolved the contradiction between its declared renunciation of explanations, and its promise to show the art works in "their context": the atmosphere of the space was the "context."

In the forecourt of the Welfen Castle, the visitor was met by sculptures designed especially for the courtyard by Shigeru Nishina and Atsuo Okamoto. Oil paintings by Vasim R. Kapoor were displayed in the Knights' Hall. Here, works by two Indian artists, Sarol Pal Gogi and Nayar Ved, were juxtaposed. Nayar Ved's symmetrically – designed object "Humanity 2192 – Despair and Hope of Kalpavriksha" was reminiscent of an altar. Saro Pal Gogi's work is the artistic design of furnishings or recalls home furnishings. At the end of the room stood a paravent by Kyung-Yeun Chung, and in front of it, on a flat, moveable table, a metal sculpture by Marcos Coelho Benjamin; these artists' other pieces were shown elsewhere. Table, paravent, carpet, chimney piece, potted palm, panels–art furnishes the space; pictures display the frame.

This was especially true of the Packhof. It is thanks to art that this building became accessible to the public in the first place. Since the war, all sorts of items owned by the community had been stored on the two top floors; the ground floor had been used by the Mnden vehicle fleet. With the murmur of the Werra in her ears, the visitor entered the Packhof and faced a work created by Morihiro Wada for this entranceway. Her eyes gradually became accustomed to the room's dim light. With the cobblestones on the ground floor under her feet, she discovered on her left installations by Marcos Lora-Read. One was an ensemble with a sword and an outsize rose of metal; another was formed of boats made of packaging materials, bearing the word "Colon" and a sailboat emblem, fastened to the ceiling beams. The right side was dominated by an installation by Jose Bedia, who had sprayed colours directly on the wall. A narrow wooden staircase led to the two upper floors, where the visitor continued through hallways lit dimly by narrow, unglazed window openings in the brick walls. The Packhof was a comforting place; here the art was integrated entirely into familiar natural materials. The works were gently highlighted by spotlights. Paintings and objects from the three continents again shared the space; the visitor's attention was drawn especially by installations by Angela Riesca and Palolo. Like the works on the ground floor, these large object works from Latin America were readable signs; they dealt with colonization, slavery, underdevelopment and religiosity. The displays attained a sphere of familiarity and became somehow comprehensible. El Attar's intention of breaking down prejudices was fulfilled in the sense of an encounter thus engendered.

V. "Art with a great deal of soul, with messages, with sensuality – and presented so wonderfully. Thank you. Marie Luise Lange." That was one entry in the guest book. Others read:

"Finally art that's also for the heart – for the stomach, not for the intellect . . . Andrea" "Actually, I'm a 'philistine,' but this exhibition captivated me. C.G." "Documenta – too much aesthetic; here – we live in a living world, a lot of pain (the political here), but at least life. Thomas Schpel, Bielefeld" "We would like to support this exhibition so it can be repeated in this form, because the voice of the 'Third World' must be heard. We could learn so much from each other, because only

if I know something about 'the others' can I learn to understand. Out of that could come understanding of one another, and violence against 'foreignness' and foreigners could cease to exist. Carl Duisberg Society, Kassel International Circle." "I want to always be one of the others, in order not to lose our common, critical, positive view together. Thank you! W. Seegers." "I've come for the second time, because the exhibits—all of them – moved me – quite unlike JAN HOET's self-promotion at the 'official' Documenta. Thank you to the artists and the initiators and assistants. Most sincerely, Nate Schfer, Lippstadt." "This exhibition documents the superfluous media circus surrounding the Documenta. I'm satisfied with having sought the encounter with the others. Gregor Dnwald, 5 K 1"

As the title of the exhibition suggested in advance, the encounter took place in one direction; the "we" took on an active role, while the artworks became the raw material for "our own imaginations." This is where Hamdi el Attar's conceptual restraint differed from Jan Hoet's; the latter attempted to strengthen the "activity" of the artworks by renouncing categories of art criticism. In contrast to the programmatic insecurity of the Documenta, "Encountering the Others" offered certainty. The stories of life, art, the search for their own forms and the clash with concepts formulated in Western art centers became invisible, boiled down to a stew of exotic cuisines. Here and there it became apparent – as in the improvised labelling of the three-part object by Yoshio Kitayama discussed above – that the artists did not see themselves as "ethnic artists." However one may judge their selection, in many of the African, Asian and Latin American artworks, transformations from one context to another, a crossing of borders, and manifold connections were obvious in ways that played no part in the exhibition's concept of encounters.

In the thirty-six pages of visitors' comments selected for publication, there is not a single one – except for a child's entry that "the turtle artwork is the prettiest" – that refers to a specific work of art. The art did not provoke. The focus was not a dialogue with or about art; instead, art became a mediating institution. It was given the task of representing "the others." The status of the "others" as natives living at the edge of cultural and economic centers whose cultural production therefore retains its "naturalness," makes them similar to the Mndeners

and the entire population on the former border with East Germany. The periphery supports the periphery in the struggle for centrality and identity.

In relation to the Documenta art, the art of "the others" is found at the margins. In comparison with the Documenta city, Kassel, Hannoversch Mnden is the "backwoods." Working on the principle of the world-turned-upside-down, the exhibition and the town of Hannoversch Mnden temporarily turned this marginal situation into a festival of the exotic among half-timbered houses.

A visit to the exhibition in Hannoversch Mnden became a stroll through a preserved old city center, passing houses with framed walls dating as far back as the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries – from the Rotunda, a massive round tower from the medieval city fortifications, and the late Gothic Welfen Castle, to the city hall in the style of the "Weser Renaissance," the oven-fired ceramic sculpture by Akiko Fujita on the Tanzwerder, where the Werra flows into the Fulda, and finally, the Packhof. In the course of the exhibition, performances took place at these sites: the Bagamoyo Players, a Tanzanian dance group, the Brazilian percussion group Uakti, the Indian musician Shivkumar Sharma, and the dance group Kanazawa Butch-Kan from Japan. "World Art in a Half-Timbered Idyll" was the headline of an article in Mnden's Hessische Allgemeine newspaper. Art exhibits its frame – this relationship also applied to the larger spatial context. The exhibition catalogue stated, "... the whole city and its existing conditions are integrated into the cultural event. Art, nature and environment form a unit, a total work of art." The cover of the catalogue was a panorama of Hannoversch Mnden, presented like a piece of contemporary art itself – as a media mix of photographie and painting.

A map emerged out of the choice of displays and exhibition sites, the presentation and its spaces. There were "the others," covered by a sweeping wave of the hand: Central and South America, sub-Saharan Africa, the Indian subcontinent, Southeast Asia. And the dot on the map, made larger by many pointing fingers, was Hannoversch Mnden and, as a sort of suburb, Kassel.

VI. The local significance of the exhibition was based on the fact that the city did not take center stage directly, but provided the

framework for the presentation of foreign art. A campaign for increased tourism based on the attractions of the picturesque old city might quickly have faced the familiar barriers faced by direct demands for support of city interests in regional struggles. But as host to art from Japan, Mexico, India . . . the city gained new respect. The implicit self-reference gave the city's image new accents, promoted business, and strengthened local identity beyond the city limits. "If we can't say who we are, let's say who we aren't!" Hannoversch Mnden succeeded by using this form of self-portrayal.

In the everyday life of Hannoversch Mnden, the Woolworth branch and the video store in a half-timbered house drew people from the area. Visitors came from far away on excursions to view the intact old buildings. "Encountering the Others" made world art consummable in Hannoversch Mnden; the city attracted a new class of visitors.

They were interested in another version of implied self-thematizing. The exhibition offered an identity to all those not attracted by mainstream art or opposed to the market, power and its centers. Showing concern for others, using foreign cultures as a model for personal attempts at self-realization, is a familiar practice among this class of visitors. Visiting an exhibition as an act of giving suppressed art a chance provides a "we" feeling that completes the encounter construct. Non-European art stands for a search for identity; it guarantees originality and can be located in a "one world" concept. This art does not reek of German *Gemlichkeit*. A visit to a small German town can be enjoyed through the mediation of art classified as "other." The unspoken "we" in the title can only be experienced positively because it remains implicit in the program itself.

"Encountering the Others" follows a common German practice of placing art exhibitions in a politically integrationist or multicultural context, (on the distinction between integrationist and multiculturalist oriented art and arts' policy measures see Wolbert (expected 1994)) or of creating political symbols using art subsidies. A series of exhibitions taking place in spaces lent by local government, with subsidized catalogues and an "alternative" audience, operated with the discovery of "other" art; they also placed the artists in a position in which they were to represent others, who were seen as "the others;" and thirdly, they made it possible, by offering a chance to identify or define self

through difference, to find an open as well as an implicit formulation of the standard-setting "we." This was an exhibition like "Ich lebe in Deutschland" – "I live in Germany. Seven Turkish artists in Berlin," a 1984 exhibition shown in Bonn, Brussels, and Berlin, or the 1987 "berall Bahnhof" – Railroad station everywhere. Painting and sculpture by Turkish artists in Berlin," collected for Berlin's 750<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations, which showed the works of artists from countries in which immigrant workers had been recruited. (The title "berall Bahnhof" referred to the railroad station as one of the first places where guestworkers gathered. It was also a reference to the German expression "ich verstehe nur Bahnhof" – "I don't understand anything but Bahnhof", meaning "I hardly understand a word".) "Das andere Land" – "The other country. Foreign artists in the Federal Republic," an exhibition held in 1986 and 1987 in a number of West German cities, displayed the works of forty- seven artists, heterogeneous in genre, technique and subject. The link between these works was that they were created by artists living in Germany without a German passport. (See "Ich lebe in Deutschland" 1984, "berall BAhnhof" 1987 and "Das andere Land" 1986) To make the art manageable, it was made foreign, or identified as really "other."

What is shown here in the context of an art exhibit and art consumption can be described as a tourist relationship. What is ours is not questioned. What is foreign is not demystified. It may not become mundane or familiar. The feeling is conveyed over and over that thresholds are being crossed and new territories discovered. This was accomplished by the record-breaking exhibition in Kassel and Hannoversch Münden, with its selection criteria for the artists and its concept of "encounter." Not only was "Encountering the Others" a tourist event; tourism also provides a model to describe the relationship between visitor and art that gave the exhibition its title.

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