

Curatorial Network visit to Documenta 12, Kassel and Munster Sculpture Project  
June 2007

Christine Jowett

I had a hectic week in Germany visiting two of the most prestigious international exhibitions in this year's calendar: Documenta 12, held every 5 years in the town of Kassel, and the Munster Sculpture Project showcased every 10 years. The visit was funded by ACE SW, organised by Ann Jones from Arts Projects and Solutions, and all participants were curators from the SW, selected through a submission process.

The event was well organised thanks to Ann who had organised meetings with curators and art educators from Germany, and introduced us to other contacts from home and abroad. All I had to do was turn up at Heathrow. Some people already knew each other but for most of us, there were several new faces for us to get to know over the next 6 days.

We arrived in Kassel late on Thursday evening. Our hotel was several kilometres outside of the town itself, situated on a peaceful river – but with a plethora of wildlife, including midges, spiders and other creepy crawlies inhabiting our rooms. The 'natural environment' according to our hoteliers. Thankfully we moved to a more central hotel 2 days later.

Artworks were sited over 5 different locations in and around Kassel. My first stop was the Aue Pavilion, a large marquee situated in a park.

African artist Romuald Hazoume added some fun to the show with his African mask pieces fashioned from discarded plastic watering cans, providing some humour to the show whilst also addressing the unwanted westernisation of Africa. I also enjoyed the work of textile painter Lu Hao, *recording 2006 chang'an street*, which was a beautifully executed painting documenting the buildings on Chang'an Avenue, the street which bisects Beijing. Sculpture by John McCracken lifted things a bit, but although there was some interesting work, none of it had the 'wow' factor I was expecting. Paintings by Xie Nanxing (already dark in colour) were hung in a dingy corner which did nothing much for the

paintings, or the work of other artists. I was disappointed by the layout and hanging generally.

After celebrating Ann's birthday at lunchtime we went to the Schloss Wilhelmsöhe, museum and park. I braved the long trek up to a large folly to see Allan Sekula's *Shipwreck and Workers*, a series of photographs rethinking the artistic tradition of monumental public sculpture. I'm not too sure that he pulls this off, but the long haul was worth the fabulous views.

Back at the museum, I particularly enjoyed the video installation *Funk Staden* by Dias and Riedweg. Set in Rio de Janeiro, the video is a contemporary reworking of the accounts of the German Hans Staden who was shipwrecked in Brazil and taken prisoner in the 16<sup>th</sup>C. Dias and Reidwed capture a real sense of menacing ritual and dance which I found strange and unsettling.

Moving hotel meant we could walk to most places. I spent the morning back at the Aue Pavilion and had a quick bratwurst for lunch before heading to the Museum Fridericianum. Amongst others, I found several pieces by both Kerry James Marshall and John Mc Cracken - a theme running throughout the exhibition. The whole group met for a fantastic meal, which we ate outside at 10pm on soft cushions with cosy blankets thanks to the restaurant.

On my last day in Kassel I went to the Neue Galerie - the final, and from what I had been told, best part of Documenta 12.

The whole building was geared for contemporary art, staging a cohesive exhibition. I enjoyed the intensity of the very delicate and beautiful work of Sheela Gowda, particularly *Collateral*, intricately moulded incense that was burnt in situ. The smell of burnt incense was really evocative. Yet again both John Mc Cracken and Kerry James Marshall were strongly represented. By this time I was starting to enjoy the Mc Cracken work, but one more piece by Marshall and I might have lost the will to live. The 'wow' factor still eluded me.

I most enjoyed the work of Bulgarian artist Nedko Solakoz. In *Fears*, Solakov writes about 100 embarrassing moments, awkward incidents and experiences of physical panic. Presented on A4 paper, his text is accompanied by small, hand drawn cartoons. The work

was simple, fun, sad and beautiful; it may not have had the 'w' factor I was looking for, but it is my pick of Documenta 12.

In our final 2 days we visited Dortmund on our way to Munster. Despite a 6am wake up call, I was looking forward to *History Will Repeat Itself* at Hartware MedienKunstVerein Dortmund. I was not disappointed. The standard of work and the building in which it was housed, were exceptional; I heartily recommend a trip to this gallery. The following were highlights:

*Third Memory* by Pierre Huyghe is a video installation based on a legendary bank robbery. In 1972 John Woytowicz robbed a branch of Chase Manhattan Bank, taking several hostages; everything was caught on CCTV and Woytowicz was eventually jailed for his crime. For Huyghe's *The Third Memory*, Woytowicz re-enacts the events of the day and this film is shown alongside the original CCTV footage. Woytowicz is excellent, he makes the video extremely watchable and almost made me wish he'd got away with it.

I was also impressed with *Unexpected Rules* by Frederic Moser and Philippe Schwinger, originally commissioned for the 26<sup>th</sup> International Biennial of Sao Paula; this was the first time the work had been shown in Europe. *Unexpected Rules* is a play which takes place on an empty set, illuminated by ever changing naked light bulbs. In the video, seven actors document the Clinton-Lewinsky affair between 1995 and 1996 in just 16 minutes. The re-enactment is well executed and the whole piece is installed inside what appears to be the original multicoloured, illuminated set; I loved it. In fact I found the entire show inspiring and thoroughly enjoyable.

Munster is an affluent town with a lot of clothes shops catering for ladies who lunch, interspersed with posh deli's and chocolate shops. The best way to see all the sculptures in the Project is to hire a bike. This is not as scary as it seems because there are cycle lanes on the roads and even better, there are cycle lanes on the pavement. Munster is also flat as a pancake which is a blessing for those of us who don't normally ride.

Five of us set out to look round this year's show whilst taking in as much of the work from the four previous projects as we could. We were lucky with the weather, it was perfect summer's day. But I was again disappointed with a lot of the work, although two pieces stood out amongst the mediocrity: Bruce Nauman *Square Depression* and Martin Boyce *We are still reflective*. Jeremy Deller had some work in a group of allotments

although for me the work was definitely not Deller at his best. But the allotments where his work was sited were amazing - pristine and manicured with almost military precision; well worth the long cycle ride to the edge of town.

We left for home the next morning. Going with a group of like minded people is a great thing to do - next time could it be New York?