

Researching Notions on the Physical and the Mental Space at **dOCUMENTA (13)**, in the Presence of Artistic Research

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This past summer as I drove through Germany and swiftly entered the grounds of Kassel descending through the mountains, my expectation grew with excitement, as this was my first Documenta ever. Being that the case, I decided to not sink myself into any sort of literature before hand and build prejudice (not necessarily negatively), but rather decided that I wanted to experience the event with not many preconceptions, perhaps freer, lighter, curious, and I thought it was also better that later I would get reflexive about it, that it was gonna be in the future that I would revise the archives of my memory as the experience had been digested and settled in. Indeed, a few months later I was into it, I got to read some of the literature made for the event, and I caught myself reading the introduction and having a lot of 'aha! moments', this occurred of course because the text was somehow making complete sense to what I had experienced, it almost felt that the introduction was some sort of conceptual map on how to deal with the event, ambiguously enough it also gave me the impression to be a guide for the exhibition, or maybe not, but somehow it did.

"documenta is a state of mind"

Although one liners and catchy phrases might not seem the best way to start writing a statement on a respectable and well debated topic like the 'Documenta event', although in this case it appears to be no way around it when we consider the array of proposals presented in an exhibition of such magnitude, and where new and conflictive terms like 'artistic research' become heavily introduced into the public. Even though I will like to specify more on this topic now, I first would like to set up a contextual space to discuss the matter further. When Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev declares "documenta is a state of mind" on her introduction in "The Book of Books", the catalog for dOCUMENTA (13), here, in that space (the book), something is being said, it does not appear to be words for words sake. The conceptualization and the machinery behind the materialization of a Documenta event is something quite extraordinary, nothing can be taken for granted when so many things have to be justified. Matters are placed under inquiry, not only to the money bearers and the bureaucratic entities, but to a staggering 887,000 (according to the official website) visitors/spectators interested in contemporary art. Maybe if we can start to consider that if this introductory statement by Christov-Bakargiev can trigger our imagination into a realm of thoughts and interpretations of what these event might seek, we cannot turn a blind eye to it and simply let it flow unattended.

To start pondering or maybe to set in motion and widen our perception on the matter 'documenta is a state of mind', we might want to begin by understanding and adopting this 'readymade' phrase as a conceptual device or somehow a mental tool, an aid, that we might want to plug-in into our perception as we reflect upon the presence of certain powerful statements laid forth at dOCUMENTA (13). So, let's think of 'documenta is a state of mind' as a space, and attitude which we might adopt in order to build our reflexive opinions and thoughts of what could have been expected from spectators, or better said, suggested to be experienced at the exhibition. Of course we might read further into her introductory text, perhaps being careless and aloof, losing ourselves into the organic approach that her finely articulated words propose there, say, in a purely poetic manner. For example this passage comes to mind: "The dance was very frenetic, lively, rattling, clanging, rolling, contorted, and lasted for a long time". We cannot but feel somehow liberated by this, but maybe we should consider with care that words can have double meaning, and that as Christov-Bakargiev is the Artistic Director of the event, her actions and statements on this curatorial project can also be seen in another angle, let's say, in terms of authorship, say, as her, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev building one massive art piece of its own, and not as art for art's sake, but somehow further, it is a grand political statement, not particularly and necessarily for the art-world, but for an inquisitive and participatory global society hungry for culture. Although drawing conclusions to fast and looking at things in broader way it can be said that the whole of dOCUMENTA (13) is one enormous Artistic Research project, specially when we consider the amount of specific and schematized research that is produced in order to make this event happen and the data that is gathered and organized after that. Besides, when we look at the works presented at the exhibition and the sort of reaction that is produced in us as spectators, we cannot but feel overwhelmed at the amount of information and formats of knowledge that are laid before us, feeling somehow imprecise and short of words to describe the totality of the dOCUMENTA (13) experience.¹

One of the aspects that caught my attention on the text, was that Christov-Bakargiev gave, such an importance to contextualize the event in 'space' and 'perception', 'temporality' didn't seem to be of such a crucial importance, although she establishes it and makes clear references to today's busy lifestyles and its devices as a frame of reference for us as audience to draw a general perception and location of tempo in the contemporary world. As we continue to read further in the following statement we cannot but feel somehow drawn to the previously stated idea, 'documenta is a state of mind' in which temporality is forgotten as we enter a certain territory, a delineated area (concrete and abstract) where

¹ [...]with its scope and careful execution, documenta is still a very exceptional experience. Since the organizers have an extensive time period to put the exhibition together, from its research to its commissioned projects, it provides a vigorous snapshot of the current state of contemporary art. Because of its scholarly yet experimental approach and keen emphasis on new works, it has become the most anticipated art event in the world. This years iteration, dOCUMENTA (13), proves to be worth the anticipation. In addition to the exhibition, an intense schedule of public programs, including lectures, film screenings, and performances are spread over its 100 days duration leading to rich encounters no matter when you visit the city of Kassel. Ibid.

we surrender our mind. “The choreography of dOCUMENTA (13) is instead un-harmonic and frenetic, while also producing some shared understanding of this condition through alternative alliances and bonds. The appearance of movements and positions in different places does not suggest that we dance together in utopia; rather, this choreography relies on a spatial turn of dis-placedness, on a contorted interplay of movements in several places that cannot ever be really synced, that cannot ever be “global”; and the participants in and visitors to dOCUMENTA (13) are not encouraged to feel that they are everywhere at the same time, simultaneously experiencing life together in a synchronized manner”. Her rhetoric on the statements are unarguable, but it is precisely the smoothness of its form that makes it somehow deceiving to swallow all at once.

Although I find myself with mixed feelings after reading this statement, especially because of its contrary posture towards the ‘entertainment event’ or the event as a schematized entertaining ‘set-up’, “the participants in and visitors to dOCUMENTA (13) are not encouraged to feel”. I couldn’t help myself to consider this in another way, and felt drawn to somehow caricaturize a binary opposition for the sake of building an example, say, when we read the introductory page for the Epcot Park in Disneyworld, it reads “Discover a place where "out of this world" is well within reach...where flying high isn't that tall of an order...and where you can travel the world just as easily as walking a city block. You'll discover all this—and so much more—at Epcot park. Here, creativity is encouraged, imagination is celebrated and countries are united. Be amazed, inspired, enlightened and entertained!” It is there in that sort of ‘this is something else’, where I find myself with a feeling of suspicion, that it is of crucial importance to have a sort of ‘documenta is a state of mind’ preset to really experience the totality of Christov-Bakargiev event. Of course anyone can experience ‘it’ in any way they want, but it is clear, that a whole set of intentions have been preset for us to have a certain kind of experience, a certain kind of understanding, in a certain kind of space. But still, as we dwell and absorb the grounds of dOCUMENTA (13) in search of art, creativity and knowledge we set our ‘documenta is a state of mind’ in the appropriate ‘channel’ to perceive and de-codify the artworks one by one, to later unite them into one single thought: dOCUMENTA (13).

It is important for the sake of the argument to set the matter ‘documenta is a state of mind’ as a preliminary notion, or as a context or a sort of filter, to explore the memory and the documents, which are the only remanences left from the event, in order to view and scrutinize the variety of displays and proposals presented by artists that refer to their works as those engaged with ‘artistic research’, primarily with those grouped at Ottoneum, and others scattered around the map of dOCUMENTA (13), like Rabih Mroue highly debated piece at the Kassel Hauptbahnhof. The notion ‘documenta is a state of mind’ implies that everything encapsulated within that space could be territorialized within the umbrella of that concept, and that that ‘documenta is a state of mind’ notion, might be the key, the translators device that the spectator could need in order to grasp the light in which everything is being articulated at dOCUMENTA (13). In that order, when exploring terms or more specifically the term ‘artistic research’ we also have to contemplate that this concept

has been nourished within that frame. The following statements that Christov-Bakargiev proposes on her introductory text comes to mind as she defines ‘the artwork’s role’ within the event, “The artwork, an ambiguous entity, a quasi-object whose attributes are to provide both grounding and relation, performs the task of the transitional object, a prop for an exercise, a gymnastics of being-without, without another, but also becoming with, unwired, in one place and not in another place, in one time and not in another time, just here, in this place, with this food, these animals, these people, poorer, and richer too.” We can also read on this statement the clear notion to contextualize spectatorship while defining the purpose of the artwork, on this criteria we can reflect as we seek to contemplate and debate, and possibly understand or somehow build a definition on the topic ‘artistic research’ in the dOCUMENTA (13) frame.

The works at Ottoneum call special attention since they seem to possess the quality of scientific research in their appearance immediately linking us to a relation to ‘artistic research’, because they show a quality of museum displays, careful categorization and profound archival strategies, all, while being presented inside the Museum of Natural Sciences, and the fact that some of them are actual scientific research, makes matters more complex when figuring what is the presence of ‘artistic research’ at the event. To survey, departing from the stand point ‘documenta is a state of mind’ that Christov-Bakargiev suggests, we can divide our attention in an (a)-(b) scheme, (a) where the notions of universality, utopia and the global become quite intense in their presence as ‘places-spaces’ and (b) her stance towards the posture of the spectator at the dOCUMENTA (13) on maintaining a singular but at the same time a holistic approach to the one place, “in one place and not in another place, in one time and not in another time”, to the space where things are taking place.

To finish rounding the over present concept ‘documenta is a state of mind’, it would be a good idea to also review a powerful conception set upon the framework of development and assimilation of dOCUMENTA (13). The sense of ‘situating’ the artists and the producers, but also the spectators in specific roles or as Christov-Bakargiev calls it, ‘the positions’ taken by artists and thinkers, also seem to blend, to morph one against each other.² It becomes of quite some importance then, that in order to reflect upon the production of knowledge and the links that this might have to the use of the term ‘artistic

² dOCUMENTA (13) is located in an apparent simultaneity of places and times, and it is articulated through four main positions corresponding to conditions in which people, in particular artists and thinkers, find themselves acting in the present. Far from being exhaustive of all the positions that a subject can take, they acquire their significance in their interrelation. The four conditions that are put into play within the mental and the real spaces of the project are the following:

- On stage. I am playing a role, I am a subject in the act of re-performing.
- Under siege. I am encircled by the other, besieged by others.
- In a state of hope, or optimism. I dream, I am the dreaming subject of anticipation. — On retreat. I am withdrawn, I choose to leave the others, I sleep.

These four conditions relate to the four locations in which dOCUMENTA (13) is physically and conceptually sited—Kassel, Kabul, Alexandria/Cairo, and Banff. These places are phenomenal spatialities that embody the four conditions, blurring the associations that are typically made with those places and conditions, and which are instead constantly shifting and overlapping. Ibid.

research' that took place before and during dOCUMENTA (13) one has to enter in the 'documenta is a state of mind' that Christov-Bakargiev suggests, not necessarily or entirely in a rigorous philosophical manner, although possible, but perhaps to look at it more plainly, to understand the action of entering of a defined space with a certain attitude towards it, and obtaining something in exchange, whatever that product might be. In the case of the general event(s) Documenta(s), we might consider more carefully what is being discussed there, as they are events known to be trendsetters in the global artistic production. Although the sense of 'globalness' is presented in an ambiguous manner as Christov-Bakargiev states "a spatial turn of dis-placedness, on a contorted interplay of movements in several places that cannot ever be really synced, that cannot ever be 'global' ". But paradoxically enough at the same time we find that other outposts of dOCUMENTA (13) through out the world: Canada, Kabul and Kairo are setting themselves in a sense of wholeness and totality. To mention this is not in order to contradict matters, but to actually understand the sense of 'space' and 'mind' that we are being placed at, and how through the process of conceptual contradiction we become reflexive and suspicious gaining new notions and developing alternative ways of looking at things differently, in the words of Christov-Bakargiev referring to the controversial Kabul project "By acting as if there is no conflict—no incredible security systems, no occupation—you can actually interfere, interrupt, and change reality through acts of imagination.³

Somehow I intuit that by surveying the concept 'artistic research' in the 'documenta is a state of mind' mode, within the frame of the event, some undetermined conflicting ideas related to the matter of 'artistic research'⁴ come to light. At the dOCUMENTA (13), where we as spectators face new formats of art production, and where we are confronted or somehow invited to understand that things (material or immaterial) that for example look like science or are supposed to look like it, could be art while at the same time they are left openly undefined raising interesting points of discord. It also for example puts clearly in the open the fragility of defining 'artistic research' today, or figuring out what 'artistic research' engages on, or more likely it puts focus on those claiming practicing it, artists and curators alike professing to do 'artistic research'. Could it be a quest for new 'aesthetical form' or style? Could it become a sort of artistic gesture that is capable of touching anything it wants and say, make look like science things into artworks? Or by a simple 'transformative' gesture could it immediately convert any factual research into art, or worse, mediocre research in to artworks? Is it looking to give science an 'artistic touch'? Is artistic research reflecting into science, imitating science, making a prank on science, recycling science? Is it possible that those engaged with 'artistic research' might have to keep a certain ethical

³ AFGHAN SCENE EDITIONS, Issue 95 June 2012, <http://www.afghanscene.com/june-issue-june-issue/10157-documenta-13>

⁴ When we use the terms research and artistic in conjunction, it immediately creates a difficulty as it refers to a systematic and somewhat verifiable approach mixed with personal expression. Notes on dOCUMENTA (13): Artistic Research. By [Hakan Topal](#), August 17th, 2012, <http://www.deliberatelyconsidered.com/2012/08/notes-on-documenta-13-artistic-research/>

posture in order to keep matters defined in that field? Could a sort of agreement/manifesto be made at all?

It seems to me more questions could rise, and that there might not be an answer at hand, and that there should not be one either, that it is of vital importance to keep the debate open and moving, if there is any real desire for 'artistic research' to keep fluid and interesting, to keep this notion active and challenging, and if it is that 'it' seeks to produce knowledge and touch us emotionally, and more daringly, if it is that 'it' wants to be called upon, but not named. For researchers and artists alike, there should be a concern to create areas of antagonism and disputation in order to keep it fluid and borderless, and the focus might become less interesting if we focus on the obvious: 'its form' (or formal qualities), rather than in its content or its conceptual possibilities. To borrow from Bachelard, "the created object is highly intelligible; and it is the *formation*, not the form, that remains mysterious."