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Sweeping Herculean Shows

Are They Still Potent?



Yacht moored at Waterfront of Venice, Italy. Photo credit: Guillem Lopez/Alamy Stock Photo

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In 1982 I went to Documenta for the first time. This legendary contemporary art exhibition, which takes place every five years in Kassel, Germany, is widely regarded as the most prominent of all the -ennials in the world. It did not disappoint.

Curated by Rudi Fuchs, [Documenta 7](#) was the first time that American visitors had our nationalist blinkers peeled away and saw great contemporary art from Europe and the United States integrated into a single exhibition. It was a revelation.

Andy Warhol's piss paintings were installed next to Anselm Kiefer's paintings of the scorched earth of Polish towns that had lost their names to Germany. We saw the first of Gerhard Richter's mature abstractions and grand paintings by artists as diverse as Baselitz and Toroni.

Lawrence Weiner's work *Many Colored Objects Placed Side by Side To Form A Row of Many Colored Objects* (1979) was written in German across the architrave of the main museum building and Joseph Beuys's massive mound of basalt columns spilled into the green square in the center of the exhibition just as thousands of oak trees were planted in the drab city of Kassel. Ulay and Marina Abramović performed their magnetic sculptural presence, *Nightsea Crossing* (1981-87).

The exhibition defined the first half of the 1980s, identifying virtually all the key artists practicing at that time—in many cases represented by some of their most pivotal works. There were artists from generations mature and new: Keith Haring's first tarp paintings were shown there while the graffiti artist Lee Quinones painted a mural in a pedestrian tunnel and Jenny Holzer created a store of inexpensive art multiples.

The 1982 Documenta gave coherence to an artistic population that went on to form the foundation of the art market—which has largely been built on the clarity of that momentous curatorial achievement.

Documenta 7 was followed by many international exhibitions that defined the art of an otherwise multivalent moment. Throughout the 1980s and well into the 1990s, there were numerous biennials, triennials and sweeping thematic exhibitions that introduced artists of great importance with whom we were not familiar. There were exhibitions that captured recent moments with crystal clear precision; others that presented platforms for artists from cultures that had not previously had a seat at the table of Western art history; yet more that challenged our notions of taste, content, asking who has the right to speak and for whom.

But, over time, with a few notable exceptions, those sweeping herculean shows started to lose their prescience, their clarity and deep insight. At a certain point, it began to seem as though curators of biennials and triennials had circled the globe so thoroughly that, after having delivered so many new voices of vision and identity, they returned from lands as far as one could fly or drive to with just different versions of the same stories and viewpoints that had already been told, styles that were known and perspectives that lacked originality.

Maybe it had to do with the global access of the internet, with the efficiency of the curators that preceded them or with the commercialization of art. Or perhaps we were witnessing the redundancy, repetition, saturation of art, of quieter and duller moments in the universe of imagination.



55th Venice Biennale, "The Encyclopedic Palace", curated by Massimiliano Gioni (2013). Installation view, with works by: Ron Nagle (foreground) and anonymous Tantric paintings (background). Photo credit: Roberto Marossi

Is it possible these -ennials have lost their spark—their relevance as essential meeting points of artists, curators, thinkers and opinion makers? Has the number of museums and art viewers grown to such magnitude that these sweeping shows have lost their meaning? Might the vast sums it takes to stage a biennial be better spent in more inventive ways? Surely more imagination about these exhibition formats could only benefit their well-travelled audiences.

Then again, when an exhibition is so visually and intellectually transporting, as was, for example, Massimiliano Gioni's

Venice Biennale in 2013, we are aware that the form can still be potent—even when otherwise tired and over-trodden.