

## Press Information

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# How the documenta invented the “Zero Hour” in art after 1945

“documenta. Politics and Art” from 18 June 2021 to 9 January 2022 in the Deutsches Historisches Museum



Federal President Theodor Heuss at documenta, 1955 © documenta archiv / Photo: Erich Müller

The documenta owes its rise to the most successful German art exhibition not least to its political dimension: its disassociation from National Socialism and the bloc building of the Cold War. It was informed on the one hand by the supposed attempt to distance itself radically from Nazi cultural politics while at the same time refusing to deal openly with the Nazi past. On the other hand, its politically motivated orientation on the West included a decided aloofness toward and denigration of the socialist art of the “Eastern bloc”.

With “documenta. Politics and Art” (18.6.21 – 9.1.22) the Deutsches Historisches Museum takes up the example of the famous exhibition in Kassel to shed light on the manifold interactions between politics and art in the society of the Federal Republic after 1945. Parallel to this, the exhibition “‘Divinely Gifted’. National Socialism’s favoured artists in the Federal Republic” (27.8.21 – 6.2.22) presents for the first time an examination of the post-war careers of so-called “divinely gifted” visual artists whom the Nazi authorities, from 1944 on, had deemed to be “indispensable” and were therefore exempt from front-line military service or other work for the war effort.

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**Prof. Dr Raphael Gross, President of the Stiftung Deutsches Historisches Museum:** "With these exhibitions we want to bring to light a new perspective on the history of the Federal Republic in its international context. Both of them correct the notion of a radical aesthetic new beginning, which has often been attributed to the documenta and of which the early documenta framers made extensive use. There were, in fact, unbroken lines leading back to National Socialism. Works by murdered Jewish artists found no room in the early editions of the documenta. And in our exhibition on the previously almost unresearched 'Divinely Gifted', we are showing, conversely, the degree to which this group of visual artists who had been active in the Nazi cultural sector dominated the public space after 1945 and continue to dominate it to this day."

### **documenta reflects the history of the Federal Republic**

From its founding in 1955, this major, internationally oriented exhibition acted as a place where West German self-understanding was debated. From that time on, the organisers have felt empowered every four, later every five, years to represent current artistic tendencies. For the first time, the Deutsches Historisches Museum places the history of the first ten documenta exhibitions in the context of the political, cultural- and social-historical development of the Federal Republic of Germany between 1955 and 1997. Artworks, films, documents, posters, oral history interviews and other original cultural-historical exponents will illustrate on two floors of the DHM how the documenta as a cultural event and at the same time as a historical location commented on, called for, and reflected on socio-political changes. Our guests will have the opportunity to see or revisit famous documenta works by such artists as Joseph Beuys, the Guerrilla Girls, Hans Haacke, Séraphine Louis, Wolfgang Mattheuer, Jackson Pollock, Emy Roeder and Fritz Winter.

Beginning in 1955, the documenta audience was confronted with "Modern art", artistic styles which until 1945 had been considered "degenerate" in Germany. The programme with which the Federal Republic commended itself in Kassel to its Western partners lived off a past it purported to want to overcome. And yet almost half of those who participated in the organisation of the first documenta had been members of the NSDAP, the SA, or the SS. Among them was the art historian, academic consultant and curator Werner Haftmann, whose membership in the NSDAP was discussed in October 2019 at the DHM symposium "*documenta. HISTORY/ART/POLITICS*". By contrast, works by Jewish, emigrated or communist artists were not represented at the documenta. There was apparently no room for the victims of persecution, war and mass murder in the narrative of

the supposed “fresh start” in the seemingly depoliticised art of the young Federal Republic.

The documenta was closely connected with the political agenda of the Federal Republic of the 1950s and 1960s. It mirrored the stress and strain of the Cold War. The formerly defamed modern art advanced, thanks to considerable financial support and commissioning by the political entities, to the status of official state art and thus a means of bonding with the “West”. Located on the periphery of the Eastern zone, it also addressed itself to an East German audience, but East German art was not welcome. From documenta 2 in 1959, Abstraction was considered the kingpin of contemporary art and embodiment of artistic freedom, while Socialist Realism was declared the non-art of the “East” that was merely loyal to the party line. It was not until the 1970s, in the wake of Willy Brandt’s “Ostpolitik”, that the documenta showed awareness of East German and Eastern European artists.

Over the years, the documenta forged its career as a festive, international, major event, thronged with young people who came there to discuss art with the artists. The education boom of the 1960s played a decisive role in its success. However, the traditional educated middle-class milieu reacted to the event with irritation, sometimes even holding counterdemonstrations. But in the following decades, the brand name “documenta” established itself once and for all as the model of a popular and commercially oriented art event in a globalised (art) world. Time and again it became a platform for political activism, as the feminist artists’ group Guerrilla Girls impressively demonstrated at documenta 8 in 1987.

Both exhibitions are supported by

