

Press Release

16 June 2021

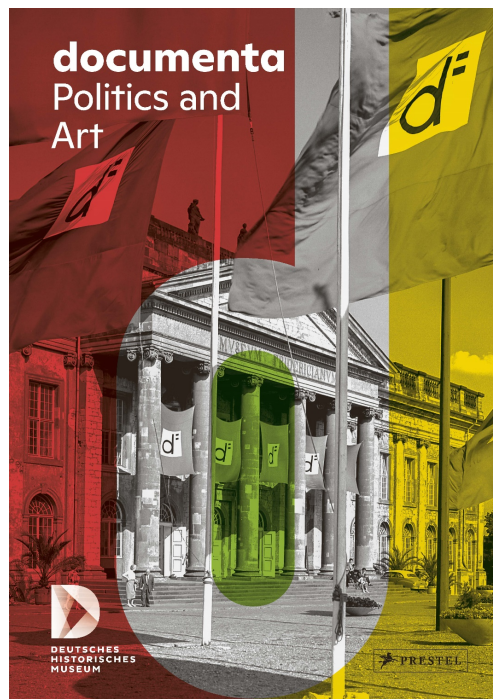


DEUTSCHES
HISTORISCHES
MUSEUM

How the Federal Republic of Germany shaped its image anew at documenta

'documenta. Politics and Art', opens on 18 June 2021 at the Deutsches Historisches Museum

Documenta's rise to become Germany's most successful art exhibition was due not least to its political dimension, in particular the need to draw a line under National Socialism, followed by the formation of the Eastern and Western blocs in the Cold War. Although the exhibition claimed to distance itself from Nazi cultural policy, it failed to engage openly with the National Socialist past. At the same time, its politically motivated orientation towards the West led it to reject the socialist concept of art in the Eastern bloc.



Deutsches Historisches Museum

Department of Communications
Director
Dr. Stephan Adam
Unter den Linden 2
10117 Berlin

Press and Public Relations
Daniela Lange
T +49 30 20304-410
presse@dhm.de

www.dhm.de

With 'documenta. Politics and Art' (18 June 2021–9 January 2022), the Deutsches Historisches Museum (German Historical Museum) is presenting the first exhibition to focus on documenta as a means of investigating the many-layered interplay of politics and art in German society after 1945.

Prof. Dr. Raphael Gross, President of the Stiftung Deutsches Historisches Museum: 'Documenta has always been much more than a prestigious art exhibition. With it, modernism – after having been vilified until 1945 – rose to become the favoured style of the young Federal Republic. The early makers of documenta welcomed modern art as a means of breaking with the Nazi past. Yet there were also continuities. For example, the historian Carlo Gentile has revealed that Werner Haftmann, one of the key figures of the early documenta exhibitions, was involved in war crimes in the summer of 1944. It was no coincidence that works by murdered Jewish artists had no place in the image of modernism as Haftmann chose to stage it. With our exhibition, we are systematically retracing, for the first time, how politics was made with art at documenta. In pursuing this goal, I hope we will open up a new perspective on the history of the Federal Republic.'

Prof. Monika Grütters, Minister of State for Culture and Media Affairs: 'In the case of documenta, this major exhibition highlights the persistence of social networks from the National Socialist era and the associated continuity in individual careers in the Federal Republic of Germany after 1945. This look behind the scenes shows that it is still a crucial task, in the politics of remembrance, to investigate possible participation in Nazi crimes by leading figures at German cultural institutions. To this end, I have initiated a comprehensive review of the reassessment of the Nazi past and its aftermath, with regard to the cultural institutions permanently funded by the Federal Ministry of Culture (BKM). The process has been set in motion by the DHM under the academic supervision of Prof. Dr. Michael Wildt.'

Hortensia Völckers, Artistic Director of the Federal Cultural Foundation: 'As long-standing supporters of documenta in Kassel, we welcome the work done by the Deutsches Historisches Museum on the political history of the most important art exhibition in Germany. This exhibition project finally sheds light on previously unknown connections with Nazism in the early years and shows that the 'documenta myth' was constantly being shaped, from the first to the tenth edition, by the geopolitical interests of the various players in post-war German history.'

The curators Dr Lars Bang Larsen, Prof. Dr Julia Voss and Prof. Dr Dorothee Wierling: 'Each documenta was accompanied by promises that were not kept. Yet all the greater were the demands made of the next documenta. Driven by this dynamic, documenta never ceased to be a political arena that owed its exciting atmosphere in part to the competition between different forces.'

Ever since it was founded in 1955, documenta, as a major international exhibition, has been a place where West Germans negotiated their country's image. Henceforth, every four years, later every five, the makers of each documenta sought to provide insights into current artistic trends. For the first time, the Deutsches Historisches Museum is exploring the history of the first documenta to the tenth in the context of political, cultural and socio-historical developments in the Federal Republic of Germany between 1955 and 1997. Covering two floors of the building, the exhibition presents works of art, films, documents, posters, oral history interviews and other original cultural and historical testimonies that illustrate how documenta – as an art event and as a historical location – commented on, demanded and reflected social and political change. Museum visitors will (re)encounter famous documenta exhibits from fifteen countries – including works by Joseph Beuys, the Guerrilla Girls, Hans Haacke, Beryl Korot, Séraphine Louis, Wolfgang Mattheuer, Jackson Pollock, Emy Roeder, Klaus Staeck, Komar & Melamid, Andy Warhol and Fritz Winter.

How the organisers of the early documentas rewrote art history

From 1955 onwards, documenta sought to reacquaint its audience with the art of modernism, an era that had been termed 'degenerate' in Germany between 1933 and 1945. The Federal Republic of Germany commended itself to its Western partners with a programme that ostensibly turned its back on the recent past, but in certain ways perpetuated it. This is less surprising when one considers that almost half of the team that organised the first documenta had formerly been members of the Nazi party, the SA or the SS. Among them was Werner Haftmann, art historian, expert advisor and curator. As the historian Carlo Gentile made public just recently, Haftmann was awarded the Iron Cross 2nd Class for his service in a unit that hunted down partisans in Italy in 1944; he was also wanted as a war criminal by the Italian authorities in 1946. Haftmann, one of the leading minds behind the concept for documentas 1 to 4, kept this part of his biography a secret for his entire life, together with his NSDAP membership.

Artists who were Jewish or communists, who had been murdered or had had to emigrate were not represented by their works in Kassel. Instead, Haftmann white-washed the antisemitic artist Emil Nolde as seeking refuge in 'inner emigration'. Apparently, there was no room for the victims of persecution, war and mass murder in the narrative of a new beginning in the seemingly depoliticised art of the young Federal Republic. In the exhibition at the Deutsches Historisches Museum, works by the Jewish artist Rudolf Levy draw attention to the absence of this group of 'forgotten' artists in the early years of documenta, a gap that bespoke the prevailing politics of memory.

Documenta as a political stage in the East-West conflict

Documenta was closely linked to the political programme of the Federal Republic of Germany in the 1950s and 1960s, reflecting the tensions of the Cold War. Modern art, which had formerly been defamed and censored, was elevated to the status of official state art – through public funding and political support – and served as a means of connecting with the Western world. Kassel, where documenta was held, lay near the border with the Eastern 'zone'. As a large-scale event, it targeted an East German audience, yet had no place for East German art. Beginning with documenta 2 in 1959, abstraction was elevated to the supreme style of contemporary art and the epitome of universal artistic freedom, while socialist realism was relegated the status of 'non-art', a product of conformity to the party line in the East. It was not until the 1970s, in the wake of détente and Willy Brandt's new *Ostpolitik*, that East German and Eastern European artists and art attracted interest in the West.

Over the years, documenta honed its profile as a major international event with festival appeal, especially attracting young people, who were invited to discuss art with some of the artists. The education boom of the 1960s contributed significantly to the success of the exhibition. However, middle-class traditionalists often felt provoked by the event and sometimes even protested against it. In the following decades, the 'documenta' brand established itself as the model for popular, commercially oriented art events in a globalised (art) world. Time and again, it became a platform for political activism, as the feminist artists' group Guerrilla Girls demonstrated at documenta 8 in 1987.

The last chapter of the exhibition comprises three new works by Loretta Fahrenholz, which she has created especially for the Deutsches Historisches Museum. Each is informed by her artistic research on documenta: the silkscreen series 'We-Wolf', the film 'documenta Dream' and the performance 'A Way of Turning'. By giving the last word to an artist, the curators sought to keep the writing of documenta's ongoing history open to new perspectives.

The exhibition 'documenta. Politics and Art' is to a large extent equally accessible for disabled visitors. A tactile floor guidance system, sign language videos, exhibition texts in Braille, high-contrast large print and Easy Language (German only) are all integrated in the exhibition design. Also included are 'communication stations', each addressing at least two sensory faculties and offering interactive access to a particular subject area.

Prestel Verlag has published an exhibition catalogue in separate German and English editions (328 pages, 200 colour illustrations, €36).

The **new digital format MORE STORY** introduces the exhibition's main topics in German and English and offers additional content.

The exhibition is funded by

