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Exhibiting Exhibiting documenta 12 as a Meta-Exhibition

Introduction

Since the so-called 'curatorial turn' in the 1990s, curators are considered as new paradigmatic authors in the art field. Discussions about curatorial authorship first gained momentum in the late 1960s, when curating was no longer merely regarded as a museological backstage profession but increasingly also meant organizing exhibitions and conceiving of other art events on a freelance basis. The topos of the curator as a meta-artist was popularized by Daniel Buren in his critique of Harald Szeemann's auctorial stance at *documenta 5*. As part of his contribution *Exposition d'une Exposition*, for which Buren covered the walls of some rooms with striped wallpaper to frame the other artists' works installed there, he also issued a statement that was included in the show's catalogue. In it, he complained that individual artworks were reduced to the status of mere dots of color in a curatorial *Gesamtkunstwerk*.¹

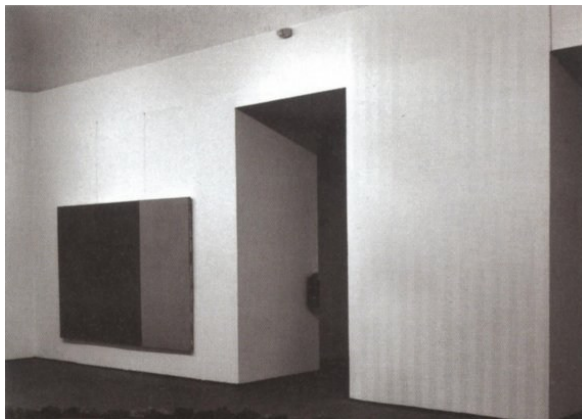


Fig. 1: Daniel Buren: *Exposition d'une Exposition* (1972), exhibition view at *documenta 5* (1972)

Similar allegations have since been used time and again by critics who felt that curators were willfully misusing exhibitions as their own works of art, thereby illegitimately interfering with artists' intentions. It should be noted, however, that as a practice that implies selecting and commissioning artworks to put them in relation not only with one another but also with the surrounding material and social contexts, curating always necessarily implies creating complex multidimensional constellations, even if this meta-me-

diality is repressed in the so-called White Cube.

Against this backdrop, my contribution considers *documenta 12* (2007) as a critical intervention into the ways in which authorship is generally constructed as individual agency.² Resembling the move from 'Work to Frame'³ that has been performed by various waves of institutional critique, artistic director Roger M. Buergel and chief curator Ruth Noack produced a show which shifted the focus away from artists and curators as sole authors and instead exhibited the exhibition as a medium in which different agencies contribute to decentered processes of meaning-making.⁴ In order to demonstrate how *documenta 12* called attention to the ways in which exhibitions shape perception and produce narratives, this text provides a close reading of the show's design, architecture, labeling, publications and public programming. I will discuss how by radically breaking with the convention of the White Cube, *documenta 12* (re)appropriated a variety of methodologies and strategies that have formerly been used by artists such as Daniel Buren, Dan Graham, Gerwald Rockenschau, and Louise Lawler in their exposures of the 'powers of display'.⁵ As an exhibition of the exhibition, *documenta 12* has to be considered in terms that go beyond the notion of the 'hyperimage' because it not only took into account the intentional combination of images by collectors, art historians and artists that Felix Thürlemann addresses in his book but also provided meta-medial reflections of exhibitions as complex infrastructural constellations and social spaces. Thereby, *documenta 12* called into question the very notion of individual authorship that is a focal point of Thürlemann's discussion of the 'hyperimage'.⁶

Nevertheless, Roger M. Buergel and Ruth Noack's deconstructive approach to relativizing the exclusive author-ity attributed to curators and artists by exposing how exhibitions are co-authored by a multiplicity of decentered agencies, was largely misinterpreted by critics as just another attempt to assert curatorial power at the cost of artistic autonomy. Confronted with candy-colored walls, thick carpets, spectacular lighting and opulent curtains as well as with eccentric plinths and vitrines, many critics of *documenta 12*

echoed the criticism brought forward against earlier documentas, accusing Buerger and Noack of curatorial whimsy, too much subjectivity, autocratic egotism and meta-artistic transgressions.⁷ In fact, such rather formulaic patterns of curator bashing have a long tradition in the media reception of documenta.⁸ While Arnold Bode was already criticized for 'overstaging' the first documenta, the discourse over the legitimacy of curatorial meta-artistry gained momentum with Szeemann's *documenta 5* (1972) and critiques of curatorial power by artists like Buren. Enriched with sexist overtones, it also hit Catherine David's *documenta X* (1997) and proves so persistent that it was still observable with regard to Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev's *dOCUMENTA (13)* (2012).⁹ The topos of the curator as a meta-artist, the register of ruling and willful domination as well as complaints about infringement of artist's rights often seem to be employed automatically and regardless of the particularities of an exhibition's set-up. Therefore, it is crucial to scrutinize the specific ways in which exhibitions are curated and how authorship is negotiated in each individual case.

The following close reading of *documenta 12* aims to demonstrate how the exhibition exposed the mediality of exhibitions as relational and procedural rather than monologic and static. Concentrating on matters of display, I argue that by shifting the attention from the contexts of production to those of reception, *documenta 12* was set up as a space where the exhibition could be experienced as a complex constellation of different interacting agencies. In other words, various elements of the setting called attention to the fact that an exhibition is not a prefabricated intentionally controlled hyperimage, but rather a social sphere where meaning is constantly negotiated through shifting relationships between material, verbal, intellectual, and physical acts.¹⁰ Theatrical installation design, reflexive handling of display rhetorics and a site specific approach to the venues highlighted contextual effects and the situated agency of audiences thereby deconstructing notions of singular authorship, neutral installation, the autonomy of artworks or the sovereignty of reception.¹¹ This was achieved, for instance, by restaging the historically specific ways of addressing spectators that are inscribed into the respective architectures of venues from in different time periods. Furthermore, a differentiated system of crediting in the publications, wall texts and audio guides helped to undermine notions of institutional neutrality or objec-

tivity and ideas of individual authorship by calling attention to the importance of contributions by visitors as well as staff (such as construction crew, guards or art educators). Finally, numerous specific curatorial interventions akin to neo-avantgardist practices exposed the contingency of curatorial decision making while simultaneously calling attention to the historicity of the ways in which objects are displayed and spectators situated.

Displaying the Display

The exhibition design at *documenta 12* was unusually flamboyant. Multicolored walls, carpets and curtains made from different fabrics as well as dramatic lighting radically diverged from the White Cube-model. This ostentatious style of curating was provocative to those who prefer modest display rhetorics because instead of suggesting neutrality, artworks were subjected to spectacular staging. In fact, the theatrical mise-en-scène not only served to exhibit the exhibits but also explicitly displayed the display and staged the spectators as constitutive components of the exhibition constellation. Therefore - I would argue - the deliberate prominence of curatorial devices was less an attempt to pose as almighty meta-artists but rather served to deconstruct the neutrality of the exhibition space by raising consciousness for the curatorial powers to select, to frame, to highlight, in short: to make meaning.

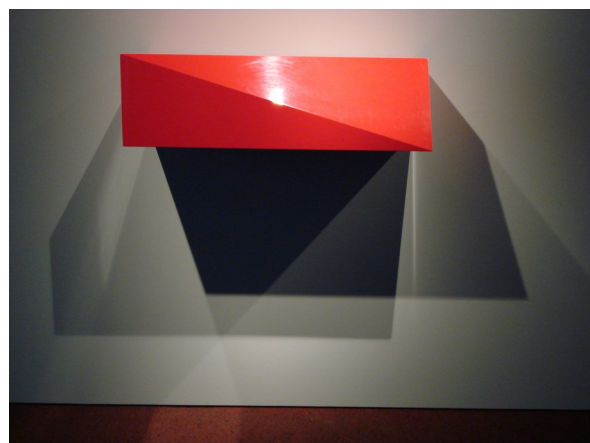


Fig. 2: Spotlights on sculpture: *Orchid* (1991) by John McCracken

By breaking with the convention of discrete ceiling lights or dispersed daylight commonly employed to illuminate the White Cube, for instance, sources of light drew attention to themselves in the many scarcely lit rooms of *documenta 12*. Spotlights, screened win-

dows and translucent or opaque curtains became visible as means to direct attention. The curators' response to the seamless polished surfaces of John McCracken's *Orchid* (1991), for instance, was to stage an erotic dance of light and dark that highlights the preciousness of the object in an almost fetishistic manner. Moreover, lamps casting complex shadows on objects and spotlights set off focus - illuminating the wall beside a picture instead of the artwork - added to this 'enlightening' effect. These hyperbolic dramatizations of conventional presentation technology may therefore be interpreted as reminders of the fact that highlighting always implies leaving other aspects in the dark.



Fig. 3: Curtains and red walls in the Fridericianum

Furthermore, the ubiquity of curtains, whose general function besides shading the sun is to veil and unveil, carried a similar message. The theatrical act of presenting was disclosed as a visual regime that directs the viewers' gaze. Accordingly, nothing appeared neutral or natural. Instead, the artificiality of the spectacle and the historical contingency of display rhetorics were revealed by the variation of installation styles, which - beyond this - were rich in references to historical exhibition conventions. Curtains, for instance, have a long tradition in exhibition-making which can be traced back to the academic salons, many of the legendary Impressionists' shows, and the first Secessions.¹² Experimental exhibition designers of the first half of the 20th century - such as Lilly Reich or René d'Harnoncourt - used them as well.¹³ Therefore, it is certainly no coincidence that some curtains at *documenta 12* resemble those plastic draperies Arnold Bode used in the first *documenta*-edition. Likewise, the design of the walls alluded to art-historical museums and galleries of painting,

where traditionally walls were - and often still are - covered with colored fabrics.



Fig. 4: Green wall in the Fridericianum with *4 Reliefs, Elements of Series B* (1967) by Charlotte Posenenske

The curators also experimented with historical traditions of installation by changing placement patterns during the hundred days of the exhibition. The skied installation of *4 Reliefs, Elements of Series B* (1967) by Charlotte Posenenske, for instance, evoked salon-style hanging as practiced in the French Academy's exhibitions and in art-historical museums. During the first days of the exhibition, however, the elements of Posenenske's work had been placed in a row citing modernist exhibition paradigms. Such a hanging at eye level with images facing the beholder one by one had started to become common practice with the Vienna Secessions at the beginning 20th century to suggest the autonomy of individual works.¹⁴ *documenta 12*'s playful deviations denaturalized this style of hanging which has become one of the dominant conventions and default solutions for the display of modern and contemporary art in the White Cube.

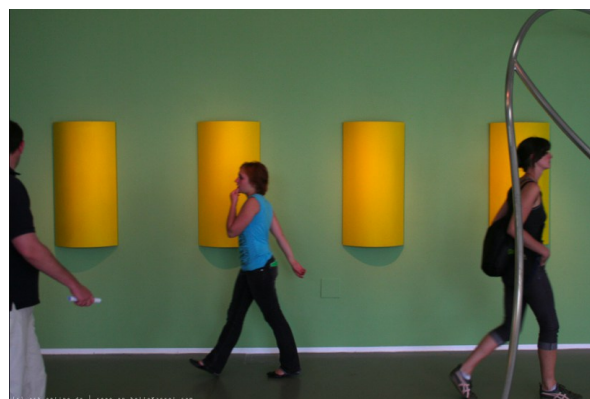


Fig. 5: Green wall in the Fridericianum with *4 Reliefs, Elements of Series B* (1967) by Charlotte Posenenske

Finally, the auratic presentation of exhibits in luminous vitrines or on unusually colorful display tables in darkened rooms may be associated with treasure chambers such as that of the *Vienna Hofburg*, where objects were traditionally presented in velvet clothed show cases and subjected to dramatic illumination in order to highlight their preciousness. Perhaps it is no coincidence that the color used to tease out the voluptuousness of Mária Bartuszová's untitled plaster sculptures (1970-1987) matches that of the linings in showcases of Vienna's treasure chamber. Overemphasizing curatorial tools in an almost ironic manner, dragging authorship if you will, the display of display exposed the means of influencing audiences, which in more subtle realizations might have escaped viewers.



Fig. 6: Violet display table in the Aue-Pavilion with spotlitged untitled sculptures (1970-87) by Mária Bartuszová

By laying bare contextual effects, the supposed autonomy of artworks and the fetishization of intentional independency of singular artists were called into question in favor of pointing to the ways in which the constellation of artworks, architectures and display elements influence perception and interpretation. Moreover, sampling display conventions from different time periods exposed installation policies and framing effects as historically specific.

Flexing their curatorial muscles and showing off the powers of display that usually go unnoticed, the exhibitionist drag show therefore did not strip the artists of their author-ity in order to claim a position of meta-authority for themselves - as some critics would have it.¹⁵ On the contrary, mimicking the institutionally critical reflections of display architecture by participating artists like Louise Lawler, Charlotte Posenenske, or Gerwald Rockenschaub - to name just some of the artists whose work was not only a model for *documenta 12*'s reflexive approach but also included into

the show - the theatrical installation design rather exposed all curatorial decisions as conditioned and subjected to historical trends and tastes, and hence liable to critique. In other words, such a curatorial striptease implies a certain vulnerability because - in contrast to universalizing suggestions of objectivity - it reveals all its charms, undressing the exhibition until it is naked.



Fig. 7: Louise Lawler: *Does it Matter Who Owns It?* (1990), framed photography on pink wall at *documenta 12* (2007)

All of the above mentioned artists were represented with several works that had not only been distributed over different locations, and thus subjected to varying conditions of presentation, but also often mirrored curatorial gestures. Lawler's pictures of sometimes quite idiosyncratic display situations in private collections and museums were displayed on the pink walls in the Neue Galerie almost as if inviting her to take another picture of this situation, which would potentially result in the reciprocal appropriation of framings *mise en abyme*¹⁶. She already alludes to this in her photograph *Does it Matter Who Owns it?* (1990), a picture of a picture that frames the framing.



Fig. 8: Louise Lawler: *HVAC* (1996) installed in the Aue-Pavilion

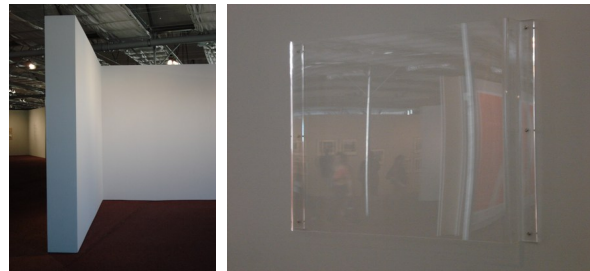
Another of Lawler's photographs, *HVAC* (1996), depicting a construction site with ventilation pipes waiting for their installation, could be encountered in the Aue-Pavilion. Here, the picture was hung unusually low, almost sitting on the floor like the pipes that were depicted in it. Moreover, it was juxtaposed with elements from Posenenske's *Vierkantrohre, Serie B* (1967) that not only resemble the pipes in Lawler's photo in color, material and shape but were also positioned on the floor in a similar way as on the image. Posenenske's objects, which she had intended to be combined by users as they please, were installed differently in different *documenta 12* venues. In contrast to their position on the ground in the Aue that suggested a hands-on approach, elements from her related *DW series* (1967) were hung up in the air under the ceiling in the Fridericianum, where they were generally overlooked - perhaps because they mimicked their function as ventilation pipe so well.



Fig. 9: Charlotte Posenenske: *Vierkantrohre Serie D* (1967) installed in the Aue-Pavilion

Rockenschaub's untitled transparent plastic screens made to be screwed to the wall, likewise unsettled the clear division of *ergon* and *parergon*.¹⁷ They could be encountered mainly on free-standing walls in the Aue-Pavilion that resembled minimalist sculptures, so that it remained unclear whether the object-like wall displayed Rockenschaub's work or whether it was displayed by his work. This was taken to an extreme with his *untitled plexiglas, 10mm (transparent, colorless), six industrial screws, six industrial washers* (2002), which functioned like a microscopic lense that magnified the significance of the wall as its carrier. Thus, insisting on the dependency of meaning making on its contexts and the infinite ways intentional constellations can be appropriated and reappropriated with changing meanings, the notion of a single central au-

thor-ity - be it that of artists or curators - was relativized.¹⁸



Figs. 10 +11: Freestanding Wall in the Aue-Pavilion and *Untitled plexiglas* (2002) by Gerwald Rockenschaub

Staging the Spectators

Authorship was also decentered from singular authorial figures by exhibiting the author-ity of others. Spectators, for instance, were author-ized not only by addressing them as active participants who contribute to the event with their bodies and minds but also by exposing them as subjects of seeing and being seen and by restaging specific modes of address inscribed into the exhibition venues' historical architectures. The intimate mood and domestic atmosphere created by colorful curtains, soft carpets and dimmed lights, therefore may be read as a welcoming gesture towards visitors in contrast to the widespread habit of positioning them as intruders who pollute the clinical atmosphere of white cubish exhibition design. Manifold seating opportunities furthermore acknowledged the spectators' bodily needs and helped to decelerate perception. Carpets and seats invited visitors to make themselves at home in the exhibition. Sometimes, empty chairs even served as representatives for potential visitors, particularly in spaces where no art was shown and the seating took center stage.¹⁹ Homely interior design is nothing new in exhibition history. Especially in the 19th century exhibitions had often been quite cozy. Since the 1880s, for instance, the Impressionists' exhibitions organized by their dealer Durand-Ruel simulated living room interiors using sofas, indoor plants, and draperies as a marketing strategy, so that interested buyers could gain an impression of what the works would look like in their homes.²⁰ Likewise, Wilhelm von Bode's turn of the century stagings in the *Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum* in Berlin (today's Bode Museum) were influenced by collectors' apartments.²¹



Fig. 12: Ambient atmosphere in the Neue Galerie

Apart from prompting them to reflect on their corporeal occupation of the space, *documenta 12*'s ambient settings allowed visitors to experience how immersion into different - often contrasting - atmospheres influences perception and triggers psychological reactions. Such an affective inclusion of spectators has been criticized by cultural theorists in the Brechtian tradition for turning the audience into passive consumers where critical distancing would be desirable.²² Yet, at *documenta 12* this implication of spectators as sensual beings, importantly, was neither a suggestion that visitors are merely reactive victims of overwhelming environments nor a call to action as in some participatory or interactional art.²³ Quite on the contrary, visitors were not considered as passive and in need of activation. Instead, they were - on the one hand - addressed as inherently active participants in accordance with Ranci re's theory of the 'emancipated spectator'²⁴. On the other hand, their aesthetic involvement simultaneously demonstrated that absolute spectatorial sovereignty within an exhibition is impossible and that everybody is always already implicated into dispositives of seeing and being seen.²⁵



Fig. 13: Mirrored Entrance Hall of the Fridericianum with *Untitled* (2007) by John McCracken

Thus, visitors were anticipated in their twofold performativity that is: in their intellectual contribution to the making of meaning as well as in their physical presence in the theatrical event of the exhibition.²⁶

Accordingly, the strategy of highlighting the bodily, intellectual and emotional inclusion of spectators through immersive atmospheres was complemented by several curatorial interventions to expose them as subjects of aesthetic experiences and objects of other visitors' gaze. The most spectacular gesture was the decision to cover the walls of the entrance hall of the *Museum Fridericianum* with mirrors. This space - which traditionally serves as a kind of prologue to each individual *documenta* edition - thus not only alluded to 18th century Baroque mirror halls (as the one in Versailles) but also mimicked artistic uses of mirrors to reflect on the institutional conditions of showing art. As Benjamin Buchloh noted with regard to the latter, "Morris' *Mirrored Cubes*, for example [...], situate the spectator in the *suture* of the mirror reflection: that interface between sculptural object and architectural container where neither element can acquire a position of priority or dominance in the triad between spectator, sculptured object, and architectural space."²⁷ Reflecting the building's architecture, an artwork by John McCracken - notably, a minimalist mirrored column - as well as security staff and the visitors, the mirror hall at *documenta 12* programmatically exposed the expository constellation of the exhibition as a relational ensemble of different entangled agencies, reminding the visitors of their double role of viewers and viewed, while McCracken's *Untitled* (2007) dissolved itself in the myriad reciprocal reflections that blurred the boundary between the artwork and its surrounding.



Fig. 14: Visitors posing behind the Panorama window at the end of the Aue-Pavilion

Similarly, the glass front at the end of the Aue-Pavilion close to the exit transformed the space behind it into a huge showcase. As a large-scale display, it staged the audience as agents and patients of looking. Such a pairing of spectacle and surveillance in the dispositive of exhibitions has been theorized by Tony Bennett with regard to *Crystal Palace* (1851).²⁸ Hence, it is no coincidence, that besides the window's reference to many examples of artistic stagings of spectators - such as Dan Graham's *Public Space/Two Audiences* (1975) or Graciela Carnevale's enclosure piece (1968) - the Aue-Pavilion as a whole pays tribute to Paxton's building as a landmark of exhibition architecture. Like *Crystal Palace*, the pavilion was conceived as a temporary exhibition venue with modular elements used in commercial green-houses and thus refers to the *London Great Exhibition* (1851) as an important watershed in exhibition history. The disciplinary functions of exhibitions, where - according to Bennett - the awareness of being looked at by other spectators educates people into self-control is also a central theme of Carnevale's performance of locking her audience into an empty gallery to provoke them to take action and free themselves. An almost life-size documentary photo of this event was shown at *documenta 12* in the Fridericianum.²⁹



Figs. 15+16: So-called 'palmetto groves' in the Aue-Pavilion with antique Chinese chairs from Ai Weiwei's *Fairy Tale Project* (2007) and lines around sculpture *Minnesota* (1989) by John McCracken

Another instance of the coupling of panorama and panopticon was realized in the so called 'palmetto groves'. Originally they had been intended as areas for contemplation and conversation, but they also functioned as frames, plinths, or stages for spectators. These ambiguous square-lines on the floor were often misunderstood by visitors as banning marks prohibiting them to touch or sit on the antique Chinese chairs that were part of Ai Weiwei's *Fairy Tale Project* (and indeed intended for use). The prohibitive reading was reinforced by the fact that similar marks

with exactly this distancing function could also be found in the exhibition around sculptures by John McCracken. As a result, visitors had to decide for themselves if it would be adequate behaviour to cross those lines.³⁰ Considering the risk of being disciplined by the guards, this confrontation with putative sanctions may have provoked reflections on 'civilizing rituals'³¹ in museums similar to those contemplations on the internalization of rules and regulations in educational constellations that Gerwald Rockenschau's neo-minimalist interpretation of a classroom setting (blackboard in the front, rigid parallel rows of benches facing towards it) installed in the same building sought to trigger.



Fig. 17: *Untitled school setting* (2007) by Gerwald Rockenschau

Finally, a site-specific approach to the exhibition venues accommodating *documenta 12* pointed to how exhibitions and museums always project their audiences in specific ways. The curators used this strategy to highlight the ways in which historically distinct norms of behaviour are prescribed through architecture. Exposing the spectatorial implications of buildings such as the Fridericianum, the Neue Galerie and the Documenta Halle, *documenta 12* provided a genealogy of exhibition dispositives from the 18th century until today. Each of the buildings positioned visitors differently: In the *Fridericianum* (1776) a dismantling of fake walls and an opening of blocked windows resulted in a symmetrical order of spaces which addressed viewers in an enlightenment spirit as sovereign subjects who can move freely and always keep an overview. Conversely, in the *Neue Galerie* (1877) visitors were addressed as bourgeois connoisseurs through stressing the intimate character of the space. Here, visitors were forced to follow a linear route through narrow cabinets *enfilade*, thus recapitulating

the chronological progression as a dominant organizing principle of 19th century art museums. By filling the huge open space of the *documenta Halle* (1993) with works of art that look like blown up toys, it was furnished like a playground for adults - a conception that is typical for many 20th century exhibition spaces. The large scale of both - building and artworks - shrank visitors in a 'Gulliver's Travels' - manner, echoing the ludic promises of entertainment culture and amusement parks. Rather than reconstructing historical spaces true to the original, the curators stressed that it was their intention to evoke the specificity of the ways these buildings had originally addressed their public.³²



Fig. 18: Panorama window at the end of the Aue-Pavilion with reflection of the baroque Orangery en face

This free interpretation of historical spatio-temporal exhibition politics may be linked to Wilhelm von Bode's concept of period rooms for the *Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum* (1880-1904). "Period rooms are historical inventions based on one or several typical historical models. These were often planned as part of chronological sequences of differently styled spaces."³³ Bode's aim was to replace the coherent monotonous structuring of cabinets by a multiplicity of room-types in different sizes, wall colors, and layouts. His renunciation of the *enfilade* principle and the gallery red dominating 19th century galleries of painting was - in a way - paralleled by *documenta 12*'s turning away from the monolithic White Cube as prototypical 20th century exhibition-space. The experimental setting allowed visitors to become aware of how experiences of similar works by the same artists differ severely depending on the surrounding environment into which they are planted. The *Aue-Pavilion*, constructed specifically for *documenta 12* to repre-

sent the 21st century within the overarching chronology of architectures, quotes three common contemporary display strategies: Following an open arrangement typical of public art, visitors had to find their way through a labyrinth-like entangled booth-architecture, often found in art fairs, before finally reaching a White Cube-like space at the end of the pavilion. The necessity to find one's own path through the rather complex setting alluded to the overwhelming condition of contemporary visual culture, which people have to navigate based on their own priorities. Last but not least, the pavilion's greenhouse architecture, which corresponded to the baroque *Orangery* (1703-1711) it was facing, can be regarded as a large-scale showcase to exhibit the history of exhibiting. As a *pars pro toto* for *documenta 12*'s overall matryoshka principle, it reflects the self-reflexive character of *documenta 12* as a meta-exhibition.

Crediting the Crew

After these examples of how curatorial manipulations of display and architecture provided visitors with opportunities to notice how meaning changes depending on varying contextual conditions, I will now finally discuss how a crediting of the crew in publications and public programme contributed to an authorization of other actors. Like the pseudo-neutral White Cube, conventional anonymous para-textual devices in exhibitions have also been problematized for their pretence of objectivity. As Stefan Nowotny notes, they tend to assert the exceptional autonomy of artworks, thus attributing authorial status exclusively to artists while ignoring the manifold factors that contribute to the production of meaning in exhibitions.³⁴ At *documenta 12*, conversely, explanatory information on the art and the artists was hard to obtain: Labels only listed name, title and year of production, but deliberately omitted the artist's country of origin to avoid reducing them to representatives of national cultures. Correspondingly, longer wall texts only appeared sparingly after complaints about a lack of contextualization. Moreover, the catalogue frustrated many of its users because it was organized in chronological order rather than by venues, rooms or artists' names.³⁵ Hence, the entire textual politics of *documenta 12* may be interpreted as an endeavor to escape a hagiography of artists, alternatively crediting other actors and agencies as co-authorities. Besides exposing the authorial powers of curators and the visitors'

performative contributions to the exhibition, this also involved calling attention to the importance of other institutional employees.

The texts in the *Catalogue*, for example, are authored not only by curators and art experts alone but also by such unlikely contributors as a pop star, artists on other artists, staff members or even a thirteen-year-old teenager. In other words, people who are not necessarily known as experts on the exhibits they are writing about have a say. For some of the works, entries are missing completely. This plurality of idiosyncratic texts in different styles provides no sanctioned or objective reading. Instead, by assembling heterogeneous voices, the catalogue calls into question the necessity for legitimate speech to be authorized by professional expertise, thus encouraging everybody to produce their own reading. Furthermore, the polyphony of the catalogue is taken up in the so-called *Picture Book*.³⁶ This Coffee-Table-volume features pictures taken by fourteen photographers who had been invited to submit their personal perspective on the exhibition, only some of them officially participating artists of *documenta 12*. Like a miniature of the show, the book consists primarily of these images, largely uncommented by any text. Even the photographers' names only appear in the back of the book where they are matched with page numbers. Some photographs focus on details of artworks, others on architectural details or the installation of the show before the opening. Some show the construction crew at work, others art educators preparing for their tours. Thus, the book diverts from the widespread convention to show high quality reproductions of single artworks or installation shots of perfectly arranged rooms void of visitors.³⁷ Instead, it presents a social space under construction, a making of the exhibition in which exhibits, installation, installers, mediators, cleaners and gardeners are pictured as interacting agencies. The book - like the pictures that were published on the official website of *d12* - offers multiple perspectives on the exhibition. Both - book and website - provided a visual crediting of mundane behind-the-scenes activities, thus co-authorizing the crew and exposing the relational setup of the exhibition.

Wall texts worked by a similar principle. They were introduced only after many complaints about a lack of information - one after another suddenly appearing during the exhibition. In terms of content, they did not focus on single pieces but rather talked about con-

stellations of artworks, the relationship of exhibits and architectures as well as the temporality of experiencing the exhibition by moving through the show. Notably, biographical information on artists or art-historical categorization was missing. Instead, the attention was shifted from the contexts of production to the conditions of reception. Stylistically, these anonymous texts were written in a highly subjective voice enriched by figurative speech. A first person narrator asks him or herself questions, inviting readers to join these deliberations addressing them either as 'you' or using an inclusive 'we'. As in the *audio guides*, the tone is not assertive and neutral but poetic and speculative, thus suspending any definite interpretation of artworks. This delegation of the responsibility to make sense of things frustrated many visitors who were looking for definite meanings or concise information on the art and the artists. Even though their authors were not identified by signature³⁸, the texts clearly repudiated a monolithic conception of institutional authority by merely suggesting one of many possible interpretations.

Finally, art educators - who usually function as an institution's mouthpiece - had only been provided with relatively little information on the artworks and artists themselves. In this way, they were challenged to produce their own narratives instead of reproducing centrally authorized texts. They thus personified the show's polyvocality by articulating multiple, even dissonant perspectives and positions. This shift away from service orientation in museum education was generally not easy to explain to visitors, who were paying for their tours and consequently often expected unambiguous information and privileged insights into curatorial or artistic intentions.³⁹ But even if it was at times difficult for the educators to legitimize themselves as authors in their own right⁴⁰, this paradoxical experiment of forced emancipation at least irritated traditional hierarchies of who is authorized to define meaning.⁴¹ Although *documenta 12* was not able to undo differences in the social status of artists, curators and educators, its emphasis on educational issues and its strong department of art education have contributed to an empowerment of museum education in Germany.⁴² By favoring subjective narratives over authoritative explanations, publication policy and public programme summoned visitors and educators alike to rely on their own judgment, to produce their own readings and consider the material and mental conditions of their experience in the exhi-

bition. Simultaneously, authorship was decentered by verbally and visually crediting members of the crew in the publications, thus highlighting seemingly peripheral processes as constitutive contributions to the making of exhibitions.

Conclusion

As a self-reflexive exhibition *documenta 12* highlighted the relations of exhibits, wall texts, architecture as well as display features, such as plinths, curtains, and lighting, to expose their effects on the overall setting. Different historical exhibition conventions were quoted, enabling visitors to experience how exhibits and viewers are positioned and addressed differently in varying aesthetic and social regimes. Furthermore, visitors were not only exposed as a constitutive part of the exhibition by means of glass walls, mirrored halls, and framed seats, they were also addressed as co-authors by purposely withholding information on artists' intentions or curatorial conceptions. Consequently, wall texts, catalogues and audio guides alike were opaquely poetic, explicitly subjective and obviously did not provide trustworthy objective information. Moreover, in the catalogue, the picture book and the art mediation programme people who usually do not have author-ity were given a voice and credited for their contributions. By thus exhibiting the exhibition not only as a showroom for displaying art but also as a social setting to reflect and contest authorial powers, *documenta 12* went beyond the notion of the hyperimage. Because on top of connecting different images and artworks to compose an expository 'meta-work', it exposed the impossibility of authorial control and the manifold ways meaning is shifting in expository constellations, the notion of the meta-medium seems to be more adequate to capture the specificities of this show. As a meta-exhibition, *documenta 12* thus made clear that art exhibitions do not function as media to express individual authors' intentions, but have to be considered as historically contingent spaces where meaning is constantly negotiated.

Notes

1. Daniel Buren, *Exposition d'une Exposition*, in: *documenta 5. Befragung der Realität. Bildwelten heute*, Kassel 1972, dossier 17: p.19. For reciprocal appropriations of curatorial responsibilities amongst Buren and Szeemann see *Den Kurator Kuratieren*, in: Beatrice von Bismarck, *Auftritt als Künstler*, Köln 2010, pp. 167-177.
2. This article is based on my unpublished M.A. thesis *Ausstellen ausstellen. Ausstellungsautorschaft auf der documenta 12* (2009) and two talks that I gave in 2011 & 2012. Even though my research has moved on since, I kept the original arguments because I believe they

shed an interesting light on current discussions of hyperimages.

3. Craig Owens, *From Work to Frame, or, Is There Life After 'The Death of the Author'?* (1985) in: *Beyond Recognition. Presentation, Power, and Culture*, Berkeley/Los Angeles/London 1997, pp.122-139. "Rather, postmodernism approaches the empty space left by the author's disappearance from a different perspective, one which brings to light a number of questions that modernism, with its exclusive focus on the work of art and its 'creator' either ignored or repressed: Where do exchanges between readers and viewers take place? Who is free to define, manipulate and, ultimately, to benefit from the codes and conventions of cultural production? These questions shift attention away from the work and its producer and onto its *frame* – the first, by focusing on the *location* in which the work of art is encountered; the second, by insisting on the *social* nature of artistic production and reception. [...] More often than not, however, the 'frame' is treated as that network of institutional practices (Foucault would have called them 'discourses') that define, circumscribe and contain both artistic production and reception." Ibid. p.126.
4. As Benjamin H. D. Buchloh remarked with regard to the development of the neo-avantgarde practices in the 1960s, "[...] a work is conceived as programmatically shifting the reading of it from a centered, unified, pictorial object to an experience of architectural contingency, and as thereby incorporating the supplementary and overdetermining strategies of curatorial placement and conventions of installation [...] into the *conception* of the work itself." Idem., *Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions*, in: *October*, Vol. 55. (Winter, 1990), pp. 105-143 (p. 132).
5. Mary Anne Staniszewski, *The Power of Display. A History of Exhibition Installation at the Museum of Modern Art*, Cambridge/London 1998.
6. Felix Thürlemann, *Mehr als ein Bild. Für eine Kunstgeschichte des 'hyperimage'*, München 2013. Even though he hints at the possibilities that hyperimages challenge conventional notions of authorship, his monograph is structured by a perspective on specific collectors, art historians and artists as producers of hyperimages with their authors' names figuring prominently as chapter headings. There are references to curators in general but no individual curators are identified as authors of hyperimages.
7. In *Artforum International* Birnbaum, for example, speaks of the curators as "artists of higher order" because "The show is conceived as a kind of *gesamtkunstwerk*, there's no question about that, and the curators respect their own institutions and sensibilities in a manner befitting an artist". See Daniel Birnbaum, *String Theory*, in: *Artforum International: The Grand Tour*, September 2007, pp. 407-414 (p. 413). Many more examples from German newspapers and journals could be cited here.
8. See Dirk Schwarze, *Die Expansion der documenta-Kritik. Eine Ausstellung im Spiegel der Presse*, ed. by Walter Vitt, Nordlingen 2006.
9. For academic discussions of curatorial authorship at *documenta*, which sometimes share the polemics with the mainstream media, see Walter Grasskamp, *Modell documenta oder wie wird Kunstgeschichte gemacht?*, in: *Kunstforum International*, 49, *Mythos Documenta* (1982), pp.15-22, republished in: *Thinking about Exhibitions*, ed. by Reesa Greenberg/Bruce W. Ferguson/Sandy Nairne, London/New York 2006, pp. 67-78; Stefan Germer, *Documenta als anachronistisches Ritual*, in: *Texte zur Kunst*, 6, (1992), pp. 49-63; John Miller, *The Show You Love to Hate. Eine Psychologie der Mega-Ausstellung*, *ibid.* pp.4-7; Oliver Marchart, *The Curatorial Subject. The figure of the curator between individuality and collectivity*, in: *Texte zur*

- Kunst*, 86, (2012), pp. 28-40; Beatrice von Bismarck, *Curating Curators*, *ibid.* pp. 43-60.
10. See, for instance, Beatrice von Bismarck, *Making Exhibitions - Processing Relations*, in: *Analog*, catalogue for Dorit Margreiter exhibition in the GfzK, ed. by Julia Schäfer, Leipzig/Berlin 2006.
 11. See Wolfgang Kemp, *Kunstwissenschaft und Rezeptions-ästhetik*, in: *idem.* (ed.), *Der Betrachter ist im Bild. Kunstwissenschaft und Rezeptionsästhetik*, Berlin 1992, pp. 7-27.
 12. See Alexis Joachimides, *Die Museumsreformbewegung in Deutschland und die Entstehung des modernen Museums 1880-1940*, Dresden 2001.
 13. See Chapter 1 and 2 in Staniszewski 1998, *The Power of Display*.
 14. See Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube. The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, Santa Monica/San Francisco 1986), pp. 65-86.
 15. "In the Neuen Galerie, the installation scheme just didn't work. Poor Louise Lawler! For decades she has wittily and witheringly critiqued the contexts in which artworks are displayed, making it a cruel irony – and perhaps a karmic inevitability – that her own work should be hung next to Juan Davila's. Very few artists seem to have demanded control over the conditions of their work's exhibition [...]." See Birnbaum 2007, *String Theory*, p. 413.
 16. In the context of so-called 'new institutionalism', controversial debates regarding this institutionalization of institutional critique have emerged about whether the curatorial (re)appropriation of methods employed by artist in their critique of institutions is a legitimate continuation of the critical project or a recuperation of critique. See, for example Julia Bryan-Wilson, *A Curriculum for Institutional Critique, or the Professionalization of Conceptual Art*, in: *Verksted*, Nr. 1, ed. by Jonas Ekeberg (Office for Contemporary Art Norway, 2003) pp. 89-107 or *Institutional Critique and After*. Volume 2 of the SoCCAS Symposia, ed. by John C. Welchman, Zürich 2006.
 17. Drawing on Jacques Derrida's essay on the *Parergon*, Juliane Rebenitsch speaks about a 'parergonal logic' with regard to the blurring of boundaries between artworks and space. See Juliane Rebenitsch, *Ästhetik der Installation*, Frankfurt am Main 2003, p. 254.
 18. Historically, artworks and exhibits have more often than not been taken from their original contexts and displayed in ways that were not intended by their makers. Think of the transplantation of altarpieces from churches to museums or colonialist depropriations as the foundation for ethnographic museums. *documenta 12* also hinted at these histories, for instance, by showing the *Berlin Saray Album* of Persian, Chinese, Ottoman, and European drawings from the 14-16th century that were assembled by Heinrich Friedrich von Diez in the 18th century. Modern artists, such as Gustave Courbet or the Impressionists, eventually sought to take control over the exhibition of their art by taking the organization of exhibitions into their own hands.
 19. For the effects of seating in exhibitions see, for instance, Reesa Greenberg, *The Exhibition Redistributed. A case for reassessing space*, in: Greenberg/Ferguson/Naime 2006, *Thinking about Exhibitions*, pp. 349-367 (p. 351).
 20. See Joachimides 2001, *Museumsreformbewegung*, p. 116.
 21. *Ibid.*, p. 67.
 22. E.g. Stefan Römer, *Eine Kartographie. Vom White Cube zum Ambient*, in: *Das Museum als Arena. Institutionskritische Texte von KünstlerInnen*, ed. by Christian Kravagna, Köln 2001, pp. 243-273.
 23. The varying modes of activation and the problems this concept entails have caused extensive controversies well summarized in Claire Bishop, *Participation. Documents of Contemporary Art*, Cambridge 2006.
 24. Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator. Ein Vortrag zur Zuschauerperspektive*, in: *Texte zur Kunst*, 58 (2005) pp. 35-51.
 25. See Martin Beck, *Sovereignty and Control*, in: *About the Relative Size of Things in the Universe*, ed. by Martin Beck, Utrecht/London 2007, pp. 44-59.
 26. Rebenitsch, for instance, describes the mental performativity of aesthetic experience as a self-reflexive process. See Rebenitsch 2003, *Ästhetik der Installation*. Erika Fischer-Lichte stresses that due to the corporal co-presence of actors and audiences in the theatre, meaning cannot be controlled by central authorities such as the director of a play. According to her, a performative interplay of what happens on stage and in the auditorium defines performances. See *idem.*, *Theatralität als kulturelles Modell*, in: *Theatralität als Modell in den Kulturwissenschaften*, ed. by Christine Horn/Sandra Umatham/Matthias Warstat, Tübingen/Basel 2004), pp. 7-26 (pp. 10-15).
 27. See Buchloh 1990, *Conceptual Art 1962-1969* p. 134.
 28. Tony Bennett, *The Exhibitionary Complex* [1988], in: Greenberg/Ferguson/Naime 2006, *Thinking about Exhibitions*, pp. 81-112 (pp. 83-91). For his argument, he draws on Foucault's and Althusser's theoretizations of disciplinary institutions.
 29. The photo by Carlos Militello shows a woman stepping outside through the splintered glass the moment after the crowd decided to break the huge window to free themselves.
 30. See Alexander Henschel, *Vermittlung als Konstitution von Öffentlichkeit. Palmenhaine auf der documenta 12*, in: *KUNSTVERMITTLUNG 2. Zwischen kritischer Praxis und Dienstleistung auf der documenta 12. Ergebnisse eines Forschungsprojekts*, ed. by Carmen Mörsch et al., Berlin 2009, pp. 47-58 (pp. 51-52).
 31. Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals Inside Public Art Museums*, London 1995.
 32. Buergel/Noack, *Räume für die Kunst*, in: *Press Kit Architecture*, ed. by documenta und Museum Fridericianum Veranstaltungs-GmbH/Catrin Seefranz, Kassel 2007.
 33. Joachimides 2001, *Museumsreformbewegung*, p. 62 (translation N.B.).
 34. Stefan Nowotny, *Polizierte Betrachtung. Zur Funktion und Funktionsgeschichte von Ausstellungstexten*, in: *Wer spricht? Autorität und Autorschaft in Ausstellungen*, ed. by Beatrice Jaschke, Chalotte Martinz-Turek, Nora Sternfeld, Wien 2005, pp.72-92 (pp.73-77). See also Jaschke, Martinz-Turek, Sternfeld, *Vorwort*, in: *idem.* 2005, *Wer spricht?*, pp. 9-14 (p.10).
 35. In their 'Preface' to the catalogue Buergel/Noack write: "But how does one keep the balance between identification and fixation? Art can teach us this discipline. It was not our aim either to highlight artists' names (...) nor did we want to favour geopolitical identity (à la 'art from India')." See *Katalog*, ed. by documenta und Museum Fridericianum Veranstaltungs-GmbH/Catrin Seefranz, Kassel 2007, pp.11-13 (p.11).
 36. *Bilderbuch*, ed. by documenta und Museum Fridericianum Veranstaltungs-GmbH, Köln 2007.
 37. For reflections on the modernist convention of viewers' absence in installation shots see O'Doherty, 1986, *Inside the White Cube*, p. 42 and Staniszewski 1998, *Power of Display* (Introduction).
 38. This has been suggested as a method to ensure an awareness of the position from which an institutional speech act is uttered. See Nowotny, 2005, *Polizierte Betrachtung*, p. 89. See also Irene Calderoni, *Creating Shows. Some Notes on Exhibition Aesthetics at the End of the Sixties*, in: *Curating Subjects*, ed. by Paul O'Neill, London 2006 (p. 76).
 39. This is first hand experience, as I was a member of the education team.
 40. The authorial status of art educators is often precarious as they are conventionally expected to reproduce real

authors' (i. e. the curators' and the artists') messages. In this context, a gendering of authorship and the feminization of the educational sector also plays a significant role. See Nora Landkammer, *Rollen Fallen. Für Kunstvermittlerinnen vorgesehene Rollen, ihre Gender-Codierung und die Frage, welcher taktische Umgang möglich ist*, in: *KUNSTVERMITTLUNG* 2, 2009, pp. 147-158. Nora Sternfeld, *Unglamorous Tasks. What Can Education Learn From its Political Traditions*, in: *e-flux*, 14 (2010), p. 8.

41. Sternfeld problematizes the conventional gendered division of labour where the 'production' of meaning is the curators' privilege whereas educators are expected to 'reproduce' already authored texts. See Sternfeld 2010, *Unglamorous Tasks*, p. 8.
42. *The Documenta Magazine Education*, ed. by documenta und Museum Fridericianum VeranstaltungsgmbH/Georg Schöllhammer, Köln 2007, as well as the so called 'palmetto groves' as islands for mediation are evidence for the centrality attributed to educational issues at *documenta 12*. The new self-esteem of art education manifests itself in the already mentioned seminal two volume publication *KUNSTVERMITTLUNG* (2009) that was published independently from the documenta und Museum Fridericianum VeranstaltungsgmbH two years after the show.

Figures

- Fig. 1: Daniel Buren: *Exposition d'une Exposition* (1972), Exhibition View, *documenta V* (1972)
From: Beatrice von Bismarck, *Der Meister der Werke. Daniel Burens Beitrag zur 'documenta 5' in Kassel 1972*, in: *Jenseits der Grenzen*, ed. by Uwe Fleckner, Martin Schieder u. Michael F. Zimmermann, DuMont 2000, 115-129, p. 217.
- Fig. 2: Spotlights on sculpture *Orchid* (1991) by John McCracken
- Fig. 3: Curtains and red walls in the Fridericianum
- Figs. 4+5: Green wall in the Fridericianum with 4 *Reliefs, Elements of Series B* (1967) by Charlotte Posenenske
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- Fig. 6: Violet display table in the Aue-Pavilion with spotlighted untitled sculptures (1970-87) by Mária Bartuszová
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- Fig. 7: Louise Lawler: *Does it Matter Who Owns It?* (1990), photography on pink wall at *documenta 12* (2007)
- Fig. 8: Installation of photography *HVAC* (1996) by Louise Lawler in the in Aue-Pavilion
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- Fig. 10: Freestanding Wall in the Aue-Pavilion
- Fig. 11: *Untitled* (2002), Plexiglas 10mm (transparent, colourless), 6 industrial screws, 6 industrial washers, 110x156x8 cm by Gerwald Rockenschaub
- Fig. 12: Ambient atmosphere in the Neue Galerie
Photo: Michael Katzer
- Fig. 13: Mirrored Entrance Hall of the Fridericianum with *Untitled* (2007) by John McCracken
Photo: Dieter Schwerdtle, in: *Kunstforum International*, No. 187, August-September 2007, p. 89.

Fig. 14: Visitors posing behind the Panorama window at the end of the Aue-Pavilion

Fig. 15: So-called 'palmetto groves' in the Aue-Pavilion with antique Chinese chairs from Ai WeiWei's *Fairytales Project* (2007)

Fig. 16: Lines around sculpture *Minnesota* (1989) by John McCracken

Fig. 17: *Untitled* (2007), wood, acrylic lacquer, 300x400x535 cm by Gerwald Rockenschaub
Photo: Stefan Hurtig

Fig. 18: Panorama window at the end of the Aue-Pavilion with reflection of the baroque Orangery en face

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Abstract

Since the so-called 'curatorial turn' in the 1990s, curators are discussed as new paradigmatic authors in the art field. Discussions about curatorial authorship first gained momentum in the late 1960s, when curating was no longer merely regarded as a museological backstage profession but increasingly also meant organizing exhibitions and conceiving of other art events on a freelance basis. The topos of the curator as a meta-artist was popularized by Daniel Buren in his critique of Harald Szeemann's auctorial stance at *documenta 5*, in which he complained that individual artworks were reduced to the status of mere dots of color in a curatorial *Gesamtkunstwerk*. It has since been used time and again by critics who felt that curators were willfully misusing exhibitions as their own works of art, thereby illegitimately interfering with artists' intentions. As a practice that implies selecting and commissioning artworks to put them in relation with one another and with the surrounding material and social contexts, curating, however, always necessarily implies creating complex multidimensional constellations - even if this meta-mediality is repressed in the 'White Cube' (Brian O'Doherty).

My contribution considers *documenta 12* (2007) as a critical intervention into the ways in which authorship is generally constructed as an individual agency. Reassembling the move from 'Work to Frame' (Craig Owens) that has been performed by various waves of artistic institutional critique, artistic director Roger M. Buegel and chief curator Ruth Noack produced a show which shifted the focus away from artists and curators as sole authors and instead exhibited the exhibition as a medium in which different agencies contribute to decentered processes of meaning-making. To demonstrate how *documenta 12* called attention to the ways in which exhibitions shape perception and produce narratives, this text provides a close reading of the exhibition's design, architecture, labeling, publications and public programming. It discusses how by radically breaking with the convention of the White Cube, *documenta 12* (re)appropriated a variety of methodologies and strategies that have formerly been

used by artists such as Daniel Buren, Dan Graham, Gerwald Rockenschaub, and Louise Lawler in their exposure of the 'powers of display' (Mary Anne Staniszewski). As an exhibition of the exhibition, *documenta 12* has to be considered in terms that go beyond the notion of the 'hyperimage' in so far as it took into account not only the intentional combination of images by collectors, art historians and artists that Felix Thürlemann addresses in his book but also provided meta-medial reflections of exhibitions as complex infrastructural constellations and social spaces. Thus, *documenta 12* called into question the very notion of individual authorship that is a focal point of Thürlemann's discussion of the hyperimage.

Author

Nanne Buurman is an art educator, curator, and scholar based in Leipzig. She holds an M.A. in Cultural Studies/American Studies and a State Certificate (M.A. equivalent) in Art Education/English Teaching from Leipzig University, where she has also taught as an adjunct lecturer in the Department of Cultural Studies. Since October 2012, Buurman has been working on her PhD in art history at the Freie Universität Berlin, where she was a DFG (German Research Foundation) funded member of the International Research Training Group *InterArt Studies* (2012-2015). Her main research areas are museum- and exhibition studies with a focus on curatorial authorship and gender. Besides being involved with different projects of cultural production, Buurman has worked for a number of art institutions, including *documenta 11* and *documenta 12*. Publications include *Angels in the White Cube? Rhetoriken kuratorischer Unschuld bei der dOCUMENTA (13)*, in: *FKW/Zeitschrift für Geschlechterforschung und visuelle Kultur*, Nr. 58, April 2015, *CCB with...: Displaying Curatorial Relationality in dOCUMENTA (13)'s Catalogue*, in: *Journal of Curatorial Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 1, June 2016; *Hosting Significant Others. Autobiographies as Exhibitions of Co-Authority*, in: *Hospitality. Hosting Relations in Exhibitions*, ed. by Beatrice von Bismarck, Benjamin Meyer-Krahmer, Berlin 2016, forthcoming 2016.

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