documenta Modernism (June–October 1964)

Abstract

At *documenta* III in 1964, artists from across the globe displayed their innovative creations, affirming the Western belief that abstraction and experimentation were the appropriate forms of democratic art.

Source

***documenta* III**
28 June – 6 October 1964
International Exhibition

Artistic Director
Arnold Bode

Venues
Museum Fridericianum, Orangerie, Alte Galerie, Staatliche Werkkunstschule

Artists
353

Visitors
200,000

Budget
1,860,000 DM

Due to in-house problems, the third *documenta* did not take place as planned four years after the second, but instead five years later – an interval that would become the standard from 1972 onward. Arnold Bode served as art director for the third time in succession and, once again, Werner Haftmann was his adviser on theoretical matters on the multimember committees for painting and sculpture and for drawing. With its focus on the traditional genres of painting, sculpture, and graphic art and its emphasis on abstract art, *documenta* 3 was – again – further removed from its time than the previous exhibition. In 1964, Pop art was the up-and-coming movement in the U.S., Nouveau Réalisme was in vogue in France, and a new avant-garde led by Fluxus and Capitalist Realism was on the march in Germany. Action art, happenings, concerts, and process art were the new, in some cases radically innovative, categories. The guiding principle of the "Museum of 100 Days," as it was now described by Bode for the first time, was that "art is what famous artists make" – a concept presumably intended to underscore the autonomy of art. Thus, fewer specific currents and trends in contemporary art were explored, while considerable attention was placed on specific artists. Although the Nouveaux Réalistes were represented in the exhibition – by Arman, César, Yves Klein, and Jean Tinguely, for example – they were not presented as a group, but rather in different individual contexts. Joseph Beuys was also represented at *documenta* for the first time – not as a Fluxus artist, of course, but instead in the sections devoted to drawings and "Aspects 64," which featured more recent art – and such artists as Ellsworth Kelly and Morris Louis (as exponents of Color Field painting), as well as Robert Rauschenberg as an early representative of American Pop art (which was totally misunderstood by Haftmann at the time).

Documenta 3 was divided into five sections. Older modernists were presented in individual exhibits on

the upper floor of the Alte Galerie (formerly the Gallery of Paintings, later the Neue Galerie). The "Drawings" section occupied a special place on the lower level, as was emphasized repeatedly. The extremely elaborate presentation in showcases featuring multiple passepartouts was a source of irritation in some cases. The "generation of forty- to sixty-year-olds" (as Werner Haftmann described this group in volume one of the catalogue, Painting and Sculpture) was presented on the ground floor of the Fridericianum, the younger generation under "Aspects" on the second floor. This section also included an exhibit entitled "Light and Motion" on the third floor, for which Bode was solely responsible. Presented here were such artists as Harry Kramer, Otto Piene, Heinz Mack, Jean Tinguely, Günther Uecker, and the Zero group, which, although not mentioned by Haftmann in his introduction, was definitely one of the most innovative and experimental presentations at this *documenta*.

The "Painting and Sculpture in Space" section was shown as part of a thematic exhibition in rooms at the Fridericianum and in the ruins of the Orangerie, which, as in previous exhibitions, was reserved for sculptures. Particularly evident in this section was Bode's love of unconventional presentations, which imbued individual works with a striking aura. "Thus, we are striving to create spaces and spatial relationships in which paintings and sculptures can express themselves to the fullest, in which their colors and forms, their moods and radiance, can be intensified and flow outward." Among the most spectacular examples were the Three Wall Paintings for the Staircase at the Kunsthalle Basel (1956/57) by Sam Francis (presented in an elevated hexagonal wall construction) and Ernst Wilhelm Nay's monumental Three Paintings in Space (1963), works created specifically for the exhibition, which were hung in a rhythmic, staggered arrangement at an oblique angle under the corner and thus lent the space an almost religious aura as a "ceiling painting." The presentation of Emilio Vedova's installation, composed of paintings hung at differing angles to one another in a black-painted room, was probably most closely associated with the new category of environmental art. Sculptures were exhibited in and especially outside the ruins of the Orangerie in an architecture consisting of white walls and translucent ceiling constructions – a modern extension of the remaining architectural ruins that established a unique link between indoor and outdoor space. According to Bode, a "setting consisting of walls, niches, recesses, and elevated elements with structured views and water basins" was needed for a presentation of modern sculpture, whose sensibility might otherwise be lost in "the confrontation with plants, trees, grass, and sky." Attracting some 200,000 visitors and generally positive international coverage in the press, *documenta* 3 succeeded in spite of its "outdated artistic concept" (Justin Hoffmann in his essay on *documenta* 3) in asserting and institutionalizing its leading role in the presentation, documentation, and reception of contemporary art.

Source: *documenta* Retrospective for 1964. Available online at: https://www.documenta.de/en/retrospective/documenta_iii#

Recommended Citation: documenta Modernism (June–October 1964), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/two-germanies-1961-1989/ghdi:document-5034> [October 12, 2024].