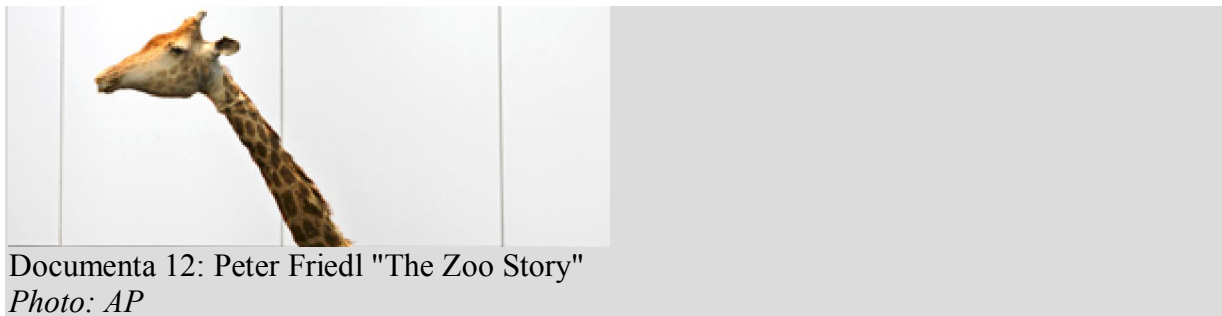


## Art Summer 2007

by **Nina Diezemann**

*Three major contemporary art exhibitions are taking place this summer - Documenta in Kassel, the Venice Biennale and Sculpture Projects in Munster. Hopes that these exhibitions would present a representative overview of contemporary art have not been fulfilled, however, as a glance in European newspaper shows. The question of what constitutes "good" art remains controversial.*

Commenting on the [Documenta 12](http://www.documenta12.de) (<http://www.documenta12.de>) in Kassel, [Richard Dornent](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/arts/main.jhtml?xml=/arts/2007/06/19/badocumenta119.xml) (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/arts/main.jhtml?xml=/arts/2007/06/19/badocumenta119.xml>), art critic for the British Daily Telegraph, called it "the single worst art exhibition I have ever seen anywhere, ever." Meanwhile his German colleague [Thomas Wagner](http://www.faz.net/s/RubEBED639C476B407798B1CE808F1F6632/Doc~E892C01441B794CFA9FCC8C160325C187~ATpl~Ecommon~Spezial.html) (<http://www.faz.net/s/RubEBED639C476B407798B1CE808F1F6632/Doc~E892C01441B794CFA9FCC8C160325C187~ATpl~Ecommon~Spezial.html>) gave the same exhibition an enthusiastic review in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung of 16 June 2007, saying "Documenta is making art accessible again."



Documenta 12: Peter Friedl "The Zoo Story"  
Photo: AP

Seldom has an exhibition divided the opinions of critics worldwide to the extent that this year's Documenta has done. Yet Documenta, which takes place every five years in the German town of Kassel, claims to provide a sort of inventory of contemporary art. For 52 years now it has been one of the most important art exhibitions worldwide. "Where is art today? Where are we today?" the exhibition's founder, Kassel-based art professor Arnold Bode, asked when he inaugurated the first Documenta ten years after the Second World War ended. Finding answers to these questions no longer seems to be possible nowadays; art has become too complex.

The fact that two other major exhibitions opened at virtually the same time as Documenta prompted the British newspaper The Independent to declare this summer "Europe's super summer of art." [Sculpture Projects](http://www.skulptur-projekte.de) (<http://www.skulptur-projekte.de>) opened in Munster, where every ten years since 1977 sculptures have gone on show at different locations in the city, and shortly before that the Venice [Biennale](http://www.labiennale.org/en/) (<http://www.labiennale.org/en/>) opened its doors to the public. This show also aims to provide an overview of international contemporary art. Founded in 1895 and modelled on the Paris World Fair of 1867, it comprises a central

exhibition as well as individual pavilions for participating countries and takes place every two years.

However, the number of people who now ascribe the leading role in defining the artistic canon to the market rather than to the major exhibitions and their curators is growing. Do art fairs like Art Basel, which opened shortly after the Biennale, Documenta and Sculpture Projects, provide a better overview?

### **Basel: commercial value as an art canon indicator**

Commenting on the Art Basel exhibition in the Swiss newspaper *Le Temps* of 18 June 2007, Laurent Wolf noted a major shift: "The Venice Biennale and Documenta in Kassel used to be the only international exhibitions. The galleries operated in the local markets within which the collectors also moved. The artists and the major institutions still had the initiative." He pointed out that things are different nowadays – the art market has gone global.

Beat Wyss, an art history expert, went a step further. On 3 July 2007 in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* he postulated the thesis that the art market is increasingly superseding the major exhibitions and that the latter have lost their canon-defining function: "People still describe Documenta as the major art show, but this is just the wishful thinking of the orthodox art world. With its five exhibition halls and 113 exhibiting artists it pales in comparison with Art Basel, where this year 300 galleries presented the works of 2000 artists – all the crème de la crème... This art fair has risen to become the new art canon indicator."

And on 12 June 2007 [Rose-Marie Gropp](#) (<http://www.faz.net/s/RubEBED639C476B407798B1CE808F1F6632/Doc~EF05B675471A4469396B1ED58C2B4B6E9~ATpl~Ecommon~Spezial.html>) wrote in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* that Art Basel could "simply not afford to display the signs of fatigue that Venice is currently exhibiting; it wants to and must sell. Indeed, this is one of the reasons why it could end up becoming the counterpart to a destitute and decelerating exhibition business; all the exhibitors saved their best pieces to present them in Basel – precisely because of its great appeal. In Gropp's opinion, Art Basel is "the better Biennale."

### **Venice: worn-out artists**

However, other European journalists attribute the "signs of fatigue" at Venice to the negative impact the market is having on the creative process.

After observing the luxury yachts in Venice, British art critic [Charlotte Higgins](#) (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,,2113153,00.html>) noted in *The Guardian* of 28 June 2007: "Events such as the Venice Biennale have less and less to do with art, and more to do with the owners of those yachts." The glamour of the new art scene, she warns, "threatens to eclipse the slow and serious work that art is."

In his report on the Biennale for the French newspaper *Libération*, published on 11 June 2007, [Vincent Noce](#) (<http://www.liberation.fr/culture/260365.FR.php>) comments: "Never before has contemporary art been traded at such huge sums." And in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* of 8 June 2007, [Niklas Maak](#) (<http://www.faz.net/s/RubEBED639C476B407798B1CE808F1F6632/Doc~E18F5273110F849E785C02C69CA85C59B~ATpl~Ecommon~Spezial.html>), who was unimpressed by the

show in Venice, also argues that the booming art market is eating away at art's autonomy: "The problem is not, as it used to be, that there is too little interest, but rather that there is too much. Artists and curators can no longer produce enough works of art to keep up with the demand." The artists, he says, are "worn out from the countless exhibitions and biennials" and as a result are "serving up lukewarm imitations of what they used to produce."

### **Kassel: A counterweight to the market**

Unlike the Biennale, Documenta 12 in Kassel is being touted by its curators, Roger M. Buergel and Ruth Noack, as a counterweight to the art market. This is one of the main reasons they didn't publish a list of artists until the exhibition opened – for participation in the exhibition automatically boosts an artist's commercial value in advance of the event. The European press is divided about whether and how this strategy of keeping the market at arm's length can actually pay off. Many art critics are asking whether Buergel and Noack's approach is in itself a virtue – or whether this is in fact the problem with the exhibition.

[Guy Duyplat](http://www.lalibre.be/article.phtml?id=5&subid=106&art_id=354895) ([http://www.lalibre.be/article.phtml?id=5&subid=106&art\\_id=354895](http://www.lalibre.be/article.phtml?id=5&subid=106&art_id=354895)), for example, noted in the 19 June 2007 edition of the Libre Belgique that Buergel had deliberately adopted an "anti-marketing" approach, but pointed out that after the "sequins of Venice" the exhibition in Kassel resembled an "austere university of contemporary art." He called Documenta 12 "anti-spectacular."

In the French Figaro of 25 June 2007, Béatrice de Rochebouet also described the exhibition as a "summer academy for contemporary art." Yet she noted that the Documenta 12 had at least succeeded in breaking with market-driven expectations. [Holger Liebs](http://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/special/229/119086/index.html/kultur/artikel/937/1187) (<http://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/special/229/119086/index.html/kultur/artikel/937/1187>), on the other hand, described the exhibition as unconvincing in the Süddeutsche Zeitung of 16 June 2007: "All too often the show looks like the treasure chamber of a slightly eccentric private scholar... Disassociation from the art market is not in itself a merit."

### **Munster: the winner of the art summer**

Of the three exhibitions, the Sculpture Projects exhibition in Munster is the one that has been least criticised so far. "This is an exquisite exhibition with carefully tentative, yet precise and clever pieces," [Henrike Thomsen](http://www.taz.de/index.php?id=kuenste&art=791&id=501&cHash=530da50c33) (<http://www.taz.de/index.php?id=kuenste&art=791&id=501&cHash=530da50c33>) concluded in the tageszeitung of 16 June 2007. Writing for the Swiss paper Le Temps on 19 June 2007, Philippe Mathonet also found the sculptures impressive, unlike the Biennale or Documenta where he said the selected works were only aimed at "underpinning a theoretical position."

The clear framework in Munster – it features only sculptures in public places – appears to have achieved what the other exhibitions have failed to provide: a clear overview of today's art.

Here, writes [Niklas Maak](http://www.faz.net/s/RubEBED639C476B407798B1CE808F1F6632/Doc~E9885B4520C2849A495B918FF7AAE2821~ATpl~Ecommon~Spezial.html) (<http://www.faz.net/s/RubEBED639C476B407798B1CE808F1F6632/Doc~E9885B4520C2849A495B918FF7AAE2821~ATpl~Ecommon~Spezial.html>) in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung of 16 June 2007, you can really see how the concept of "public places" as well as the perception of what a sculpture is have changed since the first Sculpture Projects in 1977.

[Nicola Kuhn](http://www.tagesspiegel.de/kultur/Ausstellungen;art2652,2323631) (<http://www.tagesspiegel.de/kultur/Ausstellungen;art2652,2323631>) takes a similar view in the Tagesspiegel of 18 June 2007. In her opinion the clear winners of this year's art summer are the sculpture projects in Munster, which "in their long-term study seek answers to a specific question."

### **Where is art today?**

It seems this kind of overview can only be achieved within a relatively small area of art, and doesn't work for major exhibitions. They lack a central theme and their answers to the question of the purpose and quality of contemporary art remain one-sided. The choice of artists polarises opinion, and at the same time there is a lack of consensus on the quality of the works of art.

[Barbara Bastings](http://www.tagesanzeiger.ch/dyn/news/kultur/771061.html) (<http://www.tagesanzeiger.ch/dyn/news/kultur/771061.html>) even went as far as to suggest in the Swiss Tagesanzeiger of 16 June 2007 that Documenta was a "sham with Dadaistic leanings." Yet with astronomic sums being paid for works of art, the art market can hardly offer more certainty, and there's also the possibility that at some point the current "art frenzy," as [Niklas Maak](http://www.faz.net/s/RubEBED639C476B407798B1CE808F1F6632/Doc~E2BE2C5BBFEB74E21AC83338338CD3EA2~ATpl~Ecommon~Scontent.html) (<http://www.faz.net/s/RubEBED639C476B407798B1CE808F1F6632/Doc~E2BE2C5BBFEB74E21AC83338338CD3EA2~ATpl~Ecommon~Scontent.html>) called it in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung of 14 January 2007, will die down.

### **Nina Diezemann**



Nina Diezemann is an editor of euro|topics. She studied German philology and history, graduated from the Deutsche Journalistenschule in Munich, and then worked as a ...

[» to author index](#)