

'Art Understanding, Economics, and Business Acumen': Documenta and the Art Market

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Independence and self-determination are widely accepted as central to the success of documenta as a world-renowned series of exhibitions. Besides autonomy from political and institutional authorities, this naturally means freedom from commercial constraints. But was documenta independent of the market in its early days?

In 1955, changes were afoot in the art trade: the era of the art dealer – charismatic individuals fostering strong personal relationships with the artists they represented – was waning, while the professional art gallery, poised for exponential growth, was on the rise. Moreover, the line between non-profit and for-profit was not clear: the sale of exhibits was not uncommon in art institutions, in particular in the citizen-supported *Kunstvereine*. Werner Schmalenbach recalled how he had wiped out the deficit in the Kestner-Gesellschaft's balance sheets thanks to a 15% commission on the sale of Kurt Schwitters' collages during an exhibition in 1956.¹ The same commission was applied to sales made throughout the early documentas and, raised to 20% in 1968, would remain in place until as late as 1987.²

In this context, it was probably natural that Arnold Bode and the experts assisting him for documenta 2, faced with a financial shortfall left by the first exhibition, resorted to raising funds from sales and set up a specific area where visitors could buy prints, strategically placed next to the graphic art exhibition. Sales were managed by Hein and Eva Stünke, founding owners of Galerie Der Spiegel in Cologne. This too must have seemed logical, since Hein Stünke was one of the experts advising the documenta team – in fact, the only gallerist involved at the time – and his gallery's support of artist editions, prints and multiples, with market opportunities still uncertain, was well known.³

The decision to sell prints at documenta 2 was a success in several ways. It helped turn the tour of the exhibition into a 'popular experience, where modern art could be enjoyed in a

¹ Eduard Beaucamp, *Werner Schmalenbach* (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2011), 33.

² Exhibition regulations for documenta, 1955. documenta Archive, d1, folder 13, n.p.

³ Heinrich (Hein) Stünke (1913) had been deputy head of the cultural department of the Reich Youth Leadership based in Braunschweig, but he embarked on a new career after the war by founding, together with his wife, Der Spiegel art gallery in December 1945.

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spectacular setting accompanied by contemporary design interiors, cafés, bars, and other facilities'.⁴ Besides, since the prices of prints were more affordable than those of original artworks, it was an explicit move towards democratising access to art – although seen by older art dealers as a desecration of the intimate relationship between artwork and collector. Finally, sales generated a significant amount of money, which helped the documenta account balance and moreover brought economic stability to Stünke's gallery, which had been keeping afloat largely thanks to the gallery's secondary businesses: a printing press, a bindery, and framing services.

In 1964, further steps were taken towards consolidating documenta fundraising through the sale of multiples and graphic works. At Arnold Bode's initiative, the porcelain brand Rosenthal undertook the production of the *Rosenthal Relief Series*, a limited edition of porcelain reliefs by internationally renowned artists such as Henry Moore, Lucio Fontana, and Victor Vasarely, among others. Furthermore, the documenta Foundation was set up: an association with the primary aim of becoming the publisher of the editions sold during the exhibition – instead of trading with other publishers' prints – and, on a broader level, raising funds for the successive documentas (a goal which was rather vaguely described in the statutes).

Soon, Stünke became an active member of the Foundation board while he and his wife continued to manage their gallery. In 1966, along with Rudolf Zwirner, he unveiled a new project that was to have a crucial impact on the development of the art market: the Association of Progressive German Art Dealers, which would establish the first contemporary art fair, launched in 1967 and later known as Art Cologne.

However, such an increasing concentration of power and intersection between exhibition and trade soon began to attract negative attention. Complaints started to be publicly voiced. In February 1968, the director of the Frankfurter Kunstverein, Ewald Rathke, bitterly criticised the incestuous nature of connections among members of the documenta council, focusing in particular on Hein Stünke.⁵ In April, the Association of Progressive German Art Dealers complained of being disadvantaged by the Foundation's exclusive dealings with

⁴ Kristian Handbergj, 'The Shock of the Contemporary: documenta II and the Louisiana Museum', *On Curating* 33; The documenta issue (2017).

⁵ Ewald Rathke, 'Ring frei in Kassel: documenta 1968', *Artis* 2 (1968): 10–13.

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Galerie Der Spiegel. In June, a leaflet was circulated which read: 'The entire American contribution...is selected by a Cologne gallery owner who, as an official documenta council member, is in the unique situation of being able to invite artists to participate and at the same time to acquire works for his gallery'. Its authors went on to say that 'the "Stünke model" is an example of a concentration of power and a monopoly in the art world that must be countered'.⁶

'The real reason for this crisis', as art critic Georg Jappe had accurately stated in May, 'is the fact that the documenta acts as an inviolable institution at a time when institutions are being dismantled'.⁷ Indeed, these complaints were just one of the signs suggesting that by 1968 documenta had reached a turning point, and that changes should be made. One of the changes concerned the Foundation, which covered the costs of the *Ambiente* programme for documenta 4 and still helped finance documenta 5, but stopped issuing new editions after 1968 and gradually decreased its activity until it was eventually dissolved in 1997.

The documenta Foundation experiment was two-sided. While its editions genuinely aimed to open up the market to a new artistic genre and to facilitate wider access to art, in its actual dealings it ran into conflicts of interests that, from the 1960s onwards, neither the professional art world nor the public were willing to accept. In 1970, Hein Stünke declared that 'a feeling for art, economic understanding, and business acumen' were all prerequisites for a good art dealer.⁸ The documenta Foundation enterprise demonstrated that a keen ability to draw the limits between these fields was also essential in order to ensure that the exhibition organisation remain independent of the market.

⁶ 'An Alle', leaflet with typed text dated 25 June 1968 and signed by students and professors of the Hochschule für Bildende Kunst in Hamburg.

⁷ Georg Jappe, 'Im Hintergrund der documenta: Gericht der Künstler und Boykott der Kunsthändler', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (13 May 1968).

⁸ Hein Stünke, interview by Eberhard Garnatz, 15 September 1970. ZADIK Zentralarchiv für deutsche und internationale Kunstmarktforschung, Fonds Galerie Der Spiegel, A1, VI, 2, p. 3.