



## CASE STUDY

### **dOCUMENTA(13), Kassel, Germany, June-September, 2012**

In the majority of our case studies we chose to visit higher arts education institutions in order to examine the development of the doctoral level in these and to get a picture of how the third cycle level was unfolding in each site. For this case study we had a different object to explore, and this was the interaction between doctoral programmes in the arts, and a premier international arts festival, the quintennial Documenta in Kassel, Germany. The significance of this case study was that it enabled us to look closely at the dialogue between higher education and a major world leading cultural provider and the role of the third cycle in this space.

The project began with a day long meeting between representative form the European Artistic Research Network (one of the small networks that constituted a part of the larger network of SHARE). Representatives from art academies in London, Utrecht, Helsinki, London, Gothenburg, Venice, Vienna, Malmo, Leeds and Dublin met with the dOCUMENTA(13) team on Saturday December 17<sup>th</sup> 2011. The meeting entailed a detailed presentation by the Documenta team of their agenda with respect to: **(i)** the wish to directly engage students from art academies in work on “activated projects” – a series of artworks within the frame of dOCUMENTA(13) that specifically required activation by presence of people/participants /collaborators/co-authors; **(ii)** a wish to examine the question of artistic research; and **(iii) the wish to open** a dialogue with art academies. Part of the offer that was contained within this proposal was that the students would be given access to and membership of dOCUMENTA(13) as a kind of temporary academy (an idea at the heart of the historical mission of Documenta). In the dialogue that followed there was one overarching issue that kept returning, and this was the question of whether the students were being mobilized as a form of unpaid labour or whether there was a “real” engagement being proposed here whereby the art students would have agency and presence within the Documenta construct as something more than unpaid interns. There was a frank discussion of concerns by all present, and acknowledgement of the reputational stakes in framing a collaboration between EARN and dOCUMENTA(13) in the public domain. It was also noted that this was consistent with the trajectory of EARN since 2005 to work in conjunction with mainstream art world events (Venice Biennale, Manifesta etc.) as a means to foster a dialogue on artistic research across the academies and the worlds of practice beyond the academies. It was resolved to proceed with the project, and to attach each institution to one or more of the activated projects that were described by the dOCUMENTA(13) team. In the discussion it was also noted that some of the activities required by the students were much more suited to the level of bachelor or masters students than doctorands.

These projects ranged from co-construction activities such as the building and programming of Theater Gates' "12 Ballads for Huguenot House" to the simple practice of maintaining a space and serving tea and food with Robin Kahn and her collaboration with *La Cooperativa Unidad Nacional Mujeres Saharauis* on "The Art of Sahrawi Cooking"; and from the simple parading of placards and signs for the artist Ida Applebroog's work "I see by your fingernails that you are my brother" to more active co-production in performative works such as Paul Ryan's "Threeing". Some of the projects were activated by bachelor and masters students, and a few were activated by doctoral students. One such project was the engagement by researchers from the Graduate School of Creative Arts and Media, Dublin (GradCAM) with Robin Kahn's project. This project collaboration was conceived in such a way as to foreground the research potential of the situation, and to try to foster an interaction between the research interests of specific participants and the orientation of Robin Kahn's project itself. The process was documented through a blog entitled "In The Tent".

The bog provides a description of the rationale and modus operandi of the doctoral researchers interacting with the project.

We have adopted the strategy of using this blog as a means to pursue and document an enquiry conducted within the terms set by Robin Kahn's artwork. ... to investigate three basic themes. These themes have been adopted based on a preliminary exploration of the materials available in the global public sphere that provide some modest account of the Sahrawi people; their cultural traditions and exchanges; the relatively under-reported history and complex legacy of the Spanish colony of Western Sahara; the geopolitics of resource exploitation and international law violations in the region; political violence; and the complexities of the struggle for civil society, statehood and self-government. Our approach as researchers working in this complex context is firmly rooted within the ethos and practice of hospitality. We understand our action here as that of guests learning to inhabit the places of our hosts and in the process learning new ways to provide a little hospitality also. The framework of 'guest', 'host' and 'hospitality' is an operational schema that allows us to explore ideas and experiences without claiming expertise nor the uninterrogated right to speak on behalf of others. In our circular schema: dOCUMENTA(13) hosts Robin Kahn and the Women of Western Sahara and their tent construction; the Women of Western Sahara and Robin Kahn host GradCAM researchers and other visitors in their tent; the GradCAM researchers host other visitors and the guests of dOCUMENTA(13) on behalf of Robin Kahn and the Women of Western Sahara; the tent in turn proposes to transport all participants in some way into the contexts of the Sahrawi people; and in this way all of us – imaginatively – take up tricky and unstable 'occupations' of each others' places. This of course requires careful thinking about presentation and representation, about power and responsibility, about forms of visibility and concealment, and about the will to visibility and public appearing. The theme of 'occupation' is of course key – as at the heart of the contemporary Sahrawi political struggle is a question of territorial occupation and displacement and one of the longest standing refugee situations in the world. In order to structure and coordinate our dialogues and explorations "in the tent" we have adopted three over-arching questions:

1. How may we speak of Western Sahara? This is the core task of finding out about the state of affairs in respect of Western Sahara and includes issues of politics, local organisation, cultural practices, and geopolitics of the region etc. But this question also implies a self-consciousness about the act of speaking in the place of another, and a need to consider the histories of display of the 'other' as spectacle and exotica.

2. What is it to occupy? This question pertains to many senses of occupy – We are occupying a space in Kassel, that is in relation to a space occupied and inhabited by others elsewhere ... There is the question of occupation both as the colonisation of territory and as the taking on of a task, role or job. There is a way in which this theme also connects with questions of hospitality – guest host relations when one occupies a stranger’s place etc.

3. What is a state? This is a broader question of how states are formed, the international law context for inter-state relations, the strange history of the state form (including such state formations as the nation-state, the divided/re-united state etc.). This also links to questions of sovereignty, jurisdiction, globalisation, capital and the territorialisation of the state etc. This also brings us to questions of personhood, citizenship, representational structures, and the questions of biopolitic so prevalent in contemporary theory and practice etc.<sup>1</sup>

This indicates that there was a desire to make this interaction an enquiry-based, dialogical and explorative process, while working within the defined parameters of the specific art work. Interestingly the blog also became a site within which the process of all the activated projects at dOCUMENTA(13) became subject to discussion and debate by the student participants. Thus in an entry to the bog entitled “Activated Projects and Labour Issues# (August 6<sup>th</sup> 2012) Rana Oztrurk, a doctoral researcher from GradCAM, described the situation as follows:

all these students are funded by their schools to be in Kassel (covering accommodation and travel costs), with no contribution from d(13), and students have to cover the daily cost of living in Kassel themselves. One would expect this whole network program to be quite rewarding for the students to take on this position at a certain cost. However, this program was a cause of great frustration and disappointment among students due to the nature of works they had to fulfill as well as the questions about the alternativeness of the study program organized for the students. It was very quickly apparent that the roles expected from the students were mostly repetitive and based on physical labour rather than any other artistic or intellectual contribution. Rightly so, this was a cause of complaints in the meetings with the organizing team, where the potential contribution of the students was only discussed at the level of the number of hours each student worked for their project. As one of the participants of the program, my understanding of the problem is the lack of clarity of the d(13) team in the ways in which they explained the actual work to the participant schools. The communication of the project to the artists and the schools seems to be different and misleading. The artists were offered student helpers, while the schools were offered an opportunity for education, research, and collaboration... This created different expectations in different parties involved.<sup>2</sup>

Clearly there was a tension created because of the way in which the relationships were brokered between the different agents in play: dOCUMENTA(13), EARN, the individual academies, the individual artists, and the individual students. A key tension that emerged in tandem with the question of unpaid labour, was that of peer esteem. It is clear that in a world class festival event such as Documenta, there is a very strong reputational economy in play. Within this economy of status and professional standing, there is on the one hand the desire to participate in the reputational frame of Documenta, and on the other hand there is also the desire to police or maintain the exclusivity of the brand. We must assume that all players are attuned to a greater or lesser degree by this reputational economy dynamic, as it is intrinsic to the operation of both the art system and the art education system. For the dOCUMENTA(13) team this inevitably also created a need to prioritise the demands of different players at different

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.inthetent.org/research/?page\\_id=2](http://www.inthetent.org/research/?page_id=2)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.inthetent.org/research/?p=338>

times, and this was further intensified by the scale of the event programme relative to the size of the core team. The extraction of unpaid labour in this kind of context is structural (rather than just based on the bad intention of one or other individual decision-maker, although this is a factor too) and very difficult to challenge. It appears as an intrinsic requirement of the large cultural festival that it draws upon unpaid labour by those willing to work for an accumulation of symbolic capital. These issues about relative esteem, and relative levels of resourcing, also became activated in the workshop and conference event developed between the art academies and Documenta.

The conference event was announced via the dOCUMENTA(13) website as follows:

In December 2011, dOCUMENTA (13) and EARN (European Artistic Research Network) started to develop a collaborative project. The discussions showed that the way the notion of research is used today might also cause a confusion of concepts. Is research merely conducted within institutional environments or does it have a broader - connotative - scope? What does it mean for the self-awareness (consciousness?) of artists to understand and present their practice as research-based? And last but not least, does the concept of research lead to an expansion of artistic practices or does it limit them? (The other way round?) To evaluate the concept of research, we thus chose two perspectives: the perspective of artists who contributed "activated" projects to dOCUMENTA (13) and the perspective of artists who are engaged in a PhD in Fine Art within the various academic environments of the art school - specifically at institutes of the EARN network.

The conference was staged with a lead-in event consisting of presentation by doctoral researchers from the EARN academies. These presentations took place in the main accommodation site for the student participants in the activated projects, with a basic screen and data projector set up and informal seating arrangement. On seeing these arrangements some participants were disappointed, and withdrew from presenting because they did not see the presentation set-up as one that allowed them to present their work properly. The physical location and the resourcing seemed to clearly signal a low standing in the reputational economy of the larger dOCUMENTA(13) and this was found unacceptable by some. Interestingly, there was no string commitment on the part of the presenters to be present for their peers' presentations. Later at a social event concluding the doctoral presentations, these issues surfaced again in a discussion about the quality of accommodations etc. These details are mentioned here by way of indicating how the interaction between a pedagogical setting and a highly charged public art world setting can create special challenges for research educators.

In the main programme of the conference there were two elements: a series of presentations and roundtables and the dissemination of a small book published by the Finnish Academy of Fine Art under the title "Doing Research" that featured contributions by the artists responsible for the activated projects within dOCUMENTA(13) and representatives from the academies' doctoral programmes. The questions that framed these discussions were:

Understandings of artistic research

1. What is your definition of doing (artistic) research? Does artistic research need an institutional framework or could it be legitimized differently? Does the institutionalization of research imply an instrumental control and a reduced conception of art? Or does it also create room for matters such as unexpected and independent artistic forms, and openness to conflict and difference?

2. Do current research-notations and protocols limit the domain of artistic imagination? Or could research-based art lead to novel forms of (critical) consciousness? What could be the implications of the research discourse for aesthetic qualities such as the non-discursive, the not-knowing, and the intuitive, and what does this mean for your practice?

Artist and researcher

3. Do you see your own work as research-based? How does research affect your practice and your position as an artist? Or do you consider the topic of research obsolete in the realm of art? What, then, is a current topic or emergent theme in visual art that might be an alternative to the focus on research?

4. What does thinking in terms of research mean for your self understanding as an artist? Can you, as an “artist”, identify with the role and identity of a “researcher”? Or do you expect that the practice of artistic research will contribute to re-thinking and re-assessing the established concept of researcher?

Related concepts and terminologies

5. Do you consider your practice with reference to ideas of political economy? How could an artistic (research) practice relate to current conditions of “capital” and to what are seen as the ubiquitous forms of “cognitive capitalism”? Do you see possibilities for the production of alternative social and economic strategies in your work? How could artists currently demand attention for emancipatory forms of knowledge and experience that enable the world to be thought differently?

6. To what extent do you think and work in terms of “knowledge production”? Is the current “biopolitical” expansion of the notion of production a theme in your work? Are these terms familiar and/or relevant for you in thinking about your practice?<sup>3</sup>

In terms of the ways in which the responses to these questions unfolded, there appeared to be a partial disconnect between the content of the responses to these questions and the actual conditions under which the event itself unfolded. The issues that surfaced in the blog discussion and informal debates of the researchers did not manifest so clearly in the discussions on the day, even though there was a question of political economy foreground in these questions. Again this may be a reflection of the relative hierarchy of speakers and the ability to set discursive agendas in these contexts. It is too early to discern what the consequences of this exchange will be both for the individual artist-researchers who participated and for the wider debate within the contemporary art field on artistic research. However, it clearly demonstrates the potential for interaction across education and cultural providers with respect to building a research platform, but it also points to the challenge of creating a research culture within the conjunction of both a highly charged reputational economy and a highly de-stabilized public funding economy of the arts sector post-2008.

There was an important opportunity opened up here in DOCUMENTA(13), but it remains to be seen how this opportunity might be fully actualised within the subsequent unfolding of research by the various protagonists in the artworks and the debates. This case does however indicate that there is a need for a more sustained consideration of this interaction between the education and the culture sectors with respect to sharing of agendas, resources and publics.

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<sup>3</sup> Jan Kaila and Henk SLager (eds.) (2012) *Doing Research, Writings from the finnish academy of fine arts*. N<sup>o</sup>3.