

The Wall Street Journal, "A Party, Every Five Years, for 750,000 Guests", Text/Kelly Crow, June 10, 2012

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## A Party, Every Five Years, for 750,000 Guests

By KELLY CROW



Documenta

Gabriel Lester's 'Transition 2012,' one of the artworks in the Documenta show in Kassel, Germany.

If ever an art exhibition felt like a scavenger hunt, it's Documenta—a freewheeling display of contemporary art that draws hundreds of thousands to the northern German city of Kassel every five years.

Chinese sculptor Ai Weiwei became an international hit after Documenta unveiled his 2007 work, "Fairytale." (The title partly nods to the fact that the Brothers Grimm grew up in Kassel.) Before that, the art show was among the first to champion conceptual artists like Lawrence Weiner, a New Yorker who's known for covering entire floors or walls with cryptic sayings.

## Photos: Documenta



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Documenta

Documenta—a twice-a-decade exhibition of contemporary art in Kassel, Germany—is a quirky favorite among international art lovers looking for the next breakout hit. Documenta opened Saturday and runs through Sept. 16. A few highlights.

The latest edition, which opens this weekend and runs through Sept. 16, includes new art tucked into former bank vaults, Huguenot-era houses and factories where the Nazis once built tanks.

An art teacher in Kassel created Documenta in 1955 with the aim of unearthing artworks deemed degenerate by the Nazis. After the success of the first event, the organizers took four years to produce a sequel, and it then took on its two-a-decade form—a quirky calendar configuration that's helped make it a must-see for the art-world elite.

At least 750,000 people are expected to turn up in Kassel for a closer look. That

beats the famed Venice Biennale, which attracted 440,000 visitors in 2011.

Documenta's crowds dwarf the year-round population of Kassel—which rarely tops 200,000—but locals don't seem to mind the extra attention. Kassel, 120 miles northeast of Frankfurt, is more than a millennium old, but most of its medieval, historic center was destroyed during World War II. Aside from Documenta, the city's biggest claim to fame is Bergpark Wilhelmshöhe, which features a giant statue of Hercules.

Documenta typically gives its artists at least two years to conceive and produce their projects, so the works are often elaborate and intellectually complex. That doesn't mean they're easy to spot, though: Chinese conceptualist Song Dong's contribution to Documenta is "The Doing Nothing Garden," a 160-foot-long grassy knoll in Karlsau Park whose innards are a mound of trash. British artist Ryan Gander has also burrowed into the park, creating an inaccessible tunnel with a trap door called "Escape Hatch to Culturefield." Passersby who peer in can see a blue light at its end. (Bonus points go to those who recognize Mr. Gander's other park project, "Had a Message from the Curator," in which an actor plays a playwright working on a screenplay about a Hollywood star who plays himself resurrected from the dead.)

In the park are 24 cottage-like pavilions filled with art, including Tokyo-born artist Shinro Ohtake's "Mon Cheri: A Self-Portrait as a Scrapped Shed." It's brimming with ambient sound recordings and discarded objects like neon signs, posters and news clippings he gathered from around the world and assembled here like a one-stop travelogue.



## LEO XU PROJECTS

Documenta often plays up its cerebral side, and its latest crop of 180 participants includes philosophers and quantum physicists as well as artists. In a new twist, about a fifth of the works are being unveiled in places like Kabul, Afghanistan, and Banff, Canada, said artistic director Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev.

At Documenta, the main draw is seeing art in unlikely local spaces, though. South African artist William Kentridge has set up "The Refusal of Time," a series of video screens in Kassel's former train station near Track 13, where Jews were once sent to Auschwitz. The screens show his drawings and images exploring time and memory. At a former hotel ballroom, Irish video artist Gerard Byrne is showing short films that will be occasionally obscured by shutters.

British artist Tacita Dean may take home the prize for best-hidden art: Her project, "Fatigues," is a series of mountain scenes she drew on blackboard-covered walls rimming the basement of a bank that was bombed during World War II and later built over—except for its overlooked, lower floors. "Tacita has used white chalk to create these melting views of the Hindu Kush," Ms. Christov-Bakargiev said. "It feels like looking at a storyboard for a film that can never be made."

### Corrections & Amplifications

Chinese sculptor Ai Weiwei became an international hit after Documenta unveiled his 2007 work, "Fairytale." An earlier version of this story incorrectly said the date was 1997.

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