

# A Comparative Study of Kassel Documenta and the National Art Exhibition in an Interwoven Context

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## ABSTRACT

Comparing the National Art Exhibition in China with the Kassel Documenta in Germany can reflect the similarities and differences in the development of Chinese and Western art due to various factors. By compiling the similarities, differences and value presentation of the two exhibitions, combining the political, economic and cultural backgrounds of the corresponding Chinese and Western eras, and taking curatorial concept and artistic thinking as the entry point, this paper conducts a comparative analysis and research, so as to propose a path and directional thinking for the planning and development of contemporary art design exhibitions.

**Keywords:** National Art Exhibition; Kassel Documenta; similarities; differences; value

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Second World War ended in 1945. In decades after the war, the world has gradually entered an era of relative peace, and Earth-shaking changes have taken place in the world pattern. At the same time, the revolution of art also happened quietly. Art has gained more voice, and all kinds of art exhibitions have sprung up. Germany, the host country of Kassel Documenta, was once known as the "country of culture", while China, the host country of the National Fine Arts Exhibition, was once one of the four ancient civilizations in the world. As the leading art exhibition in China, China's National Art Exhibition and Germany's Kassel Documenta have always been at the forefront of art and have become the vane of art exhibitions.

## 2. SIMILARITIES BETWEEN KASSEL DOCUMENTA AND THE NATIONAL ART EXHIBITION

Germany was once a place of pilgrimage for many artists. And Chinese art, with its 5,000-year history, has also had its moments of splendor and glory. Post-war Germany and China at the beginning of liberation share certain similarities in their situations. The decades of development of both Kassel Documenta of Germany and the National Art Exhibition of China are the process of art from fragmentation to reorganization, from weakening to revival. The two straddle the distance of

time and space, creating a subtle common ground when the national institutions and artistic cultures of the host countries are far apart.

### 2.1. Thinking and rebuilding

The Second World War established the world landscape in the second half of the 20th century, and the division of the world between the United States and the Soviet Union led to the intervention of related interest groups in the political, economic and even military spheres. And the war brought not only political and economic effects, but also a long-lasting suppression of people's lives as well as the cultural and artistic fields. At that time, Germany had not yet recovered from the trauma of the war, the long-imprisoned culture and art needed to be revived, and the people's spiritual world needed new pillars. Many artists who chose to go into "innere Emigration" also intended to show that the development of modern art in Germany had not been interrupted by the first Kassel Documenta in 1955. From the 1st to 4th editions of Kassel Documenta, there were both retrospectives on modern art and reflections on postmodern art. It is as if the creation of art at this time became a narrative action in the making, not only bringing living water to the lives of the German people, but also bring new vitality and economic benefits to the development of German art.

Back in China, in 1949, as the war of liberation was coming to an end, Guo Moruo elaborated on "the issue of

literature and art serving the workers, peasants and soldiers" and "the issue of building a united front for literature and art" at the first congress of the Chinese National Literature and Art Workers. Since then, a literary and artistic policy with Chinese characteristics has been gradually established, with "fine arts serving politics" as the core, and the development of China's literary and artistic undertakings has ushered in a brand new starting point [1]. The 1st to the 4th National Art Exhibition carried out the literary policy of "a hundred flowers bloom and a hundred schools of thought contend", and the works were mostly in the form of oil paintings, prints, New Year paintings, comic strips, watercolors, drawings and other categories, reflecting the correct guidance of Mao Zedong's thought on literature and art for the new China's literary career, and promoting the main theme of literature and art "serving the workers, peasants and soldiers, serving the socialist construction" with a realistic approach. It also proclaimed the dedication of the general public under the leadership of the Party and in spite of the hardships[2].

Looking at the 1st to 4th Kassel Documenta and the National Art Exhibition, they both have similar backgrounds of origin. On the one hand, they both originated from "change", and they are both exhibitions that emerged at a new stage of social development and led society to change; on the other hand, both Kassel Documenta and National Art Exhibition are exhibitions with social and political significance. In terms of artistic expression, the works of this period were also created in a single art language, both of which attempted to construct a new image of the nation from both historical and realistic dimensions. Through these works, it is easy for the viewer to see the strong national will shown in the artistic creation of the second half of the 20th century.

## ***2.2. Transformation and Expansion***

Beginning in the 1960s, as emerging art forms began to emerge on a global scale, Kassel Documenta underwent a shift in exhibition format and style of work. The 5th edition of Documenta Kassel in 1972 is regarded as a turning point in the history, as a new approach to the exhibition began to emerge, not only breaking the historical and geographical limitations, but also expanding the range of artistic expressions, abandoning the focus on traditional aesthetic concepts and starting to focus on the expression of artists' personal views and thoughts. The curators also added a large number of elements related to everyday life to the exhibition, photography, installation, video became new forms of artistic expression. Since then, easel painting no longer dominates Kassel Documenta, traditional art forms are further reduced, and the curatorial concept gradually begins to combine artistic diversity with the times[3]. With the development of technology and media, many of the works show the expansion of the concept of

"art" during the evolution of Kassel Documenta in a new, unique and even somewhat absurd form, reflecting the strong will of the contemporary artists.

The transformation of the 5th to 10th National Art Exhibition was mainly reflected in the themes of the exhibited works, which were inseparable from the social background of China at that time. The Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the CPC brought an end to the wandering of the transitional period of the Post-Cultural Revolution, and began to move towards a new stage of reform and opening up. In 1979, Deng Xiaoping made adjustments to artistic creation in terms of expressing the diversity of life at the Fourth Congress of Chinese Literature and Art Workers. He pointed out that artistic creation should insist on "pushing out new ideas" on the basis of the coexistence of different artistic styles, thus leading to a change in the theme and content of the 5th National Art Exhibition [4]. "With the easing of political pressure from top to bottom during this period, the suppressed voices and imprisoned ideas from all sides gradually broke free from their fetters, and the nation's mind began to leap again. A profound reflection on human nature, an eager longing for modernization and a strong thirst for Western scholarship characterized the entire era"[5]. Since then, from the 5th National Art Exhibition, "pursuing the truth" has become the primary goal in both the creation of subjects and the language of expression. Culture and art have been freed from previous constraints, expressing true emotions and shaping true artistic images in the form of art works[6]. With the continuous development of the cause of reform and opening up, the social economy has become more prosperous, and the National Art Exhibition presents the real living condition of the people to the audience in the form of art works, with more diversified art forms and more diverse artistic expressions.

By comparing the two exhibitions at this stage, we find that both have entered a new stage of transition in terms of exhibition mode and content, not only breaking away from the form of narrating history and politics through art, but also departing to a certain extent from previous traditions, and beginning to accept new art and new ideas, laying the foundation for their own innovations in curatorial system and content selection.

## ***2.3. Diversification Exploration***

The exhibition works of the 10-14 Kassel Documenta and 11-13 National Art Exhibition are more diversified and more combined with science and technology. Since from the 10th Kassel Documenta, cross-disciplinary ideas and diverse works have emerged in endlessly. Artists have begun to focus on the boundaries between art and science, non-art and art practice, as well as reflecting on issues such as aesthetics and politics. At this time, Documenta is no longer just a stage for the presentation of artworks, but a space for social activities that combines

aesthetic, cultural and media experiences, It has become a space for the exchange of academic ideas and discourse from all walks of life [7]. For example, the 13th Kassel Documenta continues the focus on science and technology from the 10th, with a number of experts from other fields discussing the boundaries of art. Some works in the exhibition also reflect the development achievements of science and technology, such as the machine model made by Thomas bayrle (1937 -), and the influence of quantum theory on today's scientific development displayed by doctoral students of the University of Vienna in the exhibition hall, Artists "present the keen observation, political attitude and participation theory of contemporary art proposed by the complex world pattern and social changes" through cross domain combination [8].

Similarly, in such a worldwide diversified and complex cultural pattern, the cultural undertakings of the Chinese nation have been further prospered and deepened. The combination of the National Art Exhibition and science and technology is mainly reflected in the presentation form of art works. In the past 20 years since the 20th century, with the development of science and technology, new forms of artistic expression such as computer-based animation have gradually appeared in the public eye. At this time, artistic creation should not only conform to the development trend of global culture, but also expand the influence of its own culture in the process of digging deeper into national cultural traditions, keeping up with the times and being inclusive. The 11th-13th National Art Exhibition applied science and technology to art creation, making "animation", a new art category, among the national art exhibitions[9].The exhibiting artists in this stage strive to "adhere to the direction of 'two for' and the 'double hundred' policy, and adhere to the combination of promoting the 'main theme ' and advocate the 'diversity' combination"[10]. In the era of opportunities and challenges, participating in the world art and cultural exchanges with a confident, open and inclusive attitude. Promoting the prosperity and development of national fine arts vision on the basis of adhering to the national cultural characteristics.

At this time, Kassel Documenta and the National Art Exhibition are more responsive to the development of the times than ever before, testing the existing art and exploring new art in the midst of the continuous progress of science and technology. While extending the scope of art and bringing a better viewing experience to the audience, they also began to look at the whole world, trying to break through the limitations of geography and form, striving to be in line with international standards.

### **3. DIFFERENCES BETWEEN KASSEL DOCUMENTA AND THE NATIONAL ART EXHIBITION**

#### *3.1. Differences in Curatorial Idea*

As mentioned above, the National Art Exhibition, as an important venue for art creation to respond to the national guidelines of literature and art, will make corresponding regulations and adjustments to the theme of the exhibition according to the national guidelines, and this thematic requirement also determines the selection and awarding of works, which will inevitably affect the artists' artistic creation, i.e. the overall style of the exhibition. The first National Art Exhibition faced a great change that turned the whole country upside down. Literary works were mainly retrospective and realistic during this period, giving full play to the social attributes and edifying functions of art , sharing the important task of uniting the people of all ethnic groups and strengthening the leadership of the Party[11]. In other words, the works of the National Art Exhibition have not only been highly compatible with the mainstream ideology of the country since the beginning of the founding of New China, but even in the context of contemporary literary and artistic creation, where most of society's literary and artistic creations try to keep a certain distance from the mainstream, the works of the National Art Exhibition still answer the proposition of the relationship between artistic aesthetics and ideology with their unique perspectives. On the one hand, it shows the rapid development of our country to the world, exports our national culture and builds the country's own image; on the other hand, through the exhibited works, the domestic public can improve their knowledge of the international situation and understand the current technological innovations obtained through the efforts of workers in new fields.

While Kassel Documenta had political ambitions in the 1950s to help Germany return to its modern society in the name of modern art. However, as it grew in size, Kassel gradually became a symbol of economic and public relations which indirectly linked European culture as a unified whole, becoming a space for expanding criticism and discussion of contemporary art. The idea of using the exhibition as a forum for rethinking serious and complex issues from different regions, capturing the possibility of engaging in micro-politics, and in doing so presenting as much visual impact as possible, is of particular concern to Documenta. The theme of the first Documenta was "Western Art in the 20th Century", and in its infancy Kassel Documenta had a tendency to break through geographical limitations. Although artists from Eastern Europe, Asia and Third World countries were not invited to participate in the first few editions of Documenta, as globalization accelerated, artists from countries other than Europe and the United States were

able to exchange their art with the original Western art on Documenta. With the steady decline of easel paintings and the consequent creation of new art forms, Kassel Documenta has expanded the scope of art by incorporating science and technology into art, showcasing the fruits of global technological developments[12]. In addition, Kassel Documenta also gives artists a respectful and comprehensive space to think about their works from multiple serious angles, and "connect them with important ideological achievements in other disciplines and fields, so that all parts can produce value together when summarizing. The exhibition is an important tool for innovative thinking about art practice"[13].

### **3.2. Differences in Expression**

Both Kassel Documenta and the National Art Exhibition are art exhibitions that include political and social aspects in their contents, but the status of "art" is different between them, and the language of formal expression is also different.

In Kassel Documenta, "art" has always dominated the exhibition. During the Nazi era, when many art schools and artists were persecuted, Kassel Documenta reaffirmed European modern art, which the Nazi regime had denigrated as "degenerate art". Despite the political nature of this reason, the first Kassel Documenta did not feature a large number of works with political themes, but rather gave the utmost respect to those artists and their works who chose to go into exile due to persecution, showing such works together with a large number of artworks of modern art schools from other European countries, expressing to a certain extent the resistance to the oppression of the times, and showing more the development of "art" itself. Although Kassel Documenta has continued to "go political," the primacy of art has not been replaced, and Documenta can establish a connection between art and politics - while thinking about the relationship between politics, society and art, curators are constantly looking for innovation in art, expanding the scope of art, and integrating art with other fields[14]. The representation of other fields in Kassel Documenta's exhibition works as an adjunct to art provides new ideas for the development of art and the expansion of the subject matter of artworks.

From the study of the works of the previous National Art Exhibition, it is found that the works of the National Art Exhibition show a diversity of traditional-oriented and folk-oriented characteristics. Especially in terms of formal expression, more and more artists have begun to think about the ethnicity of China's local art creation. Almost every National Art Exhibition is held in accordance with a conference. Some of the suggestions and advocacies for literary artists made at the conference are reflected in the works of the National Art Exhibition and have a direct impact on the development of changes

in the exhibition. Art plays a role more as a kind of carrier shown to the public in the National Art Exhibition. The significance of art in the National Art Exhibition is not only limited to the exploration of art language and forms, but also lies in the artists' integration of their inner spirit and national identity into their own art creation. The artists of the National Art Exhibition have always persistently paid attention to social, political and traditional cultural resources, selected and used national cultural resources in their artistic creation from the perspective of modern people, reflected reality through their works so as to achieve rational reflection on reality and positive intervention in their national sentiments, taking the realism genre as the main form of artistic expression and giving it a new spirit of the times.

## **4. THE VALUE OF THE NATIONAL ART EXHIBITION AND KASSEL DOCUMENTA**

### **4.1. Social Value**

An art exhibition is not only an activity concerning the subjective intention of artists, but its essence also contains the social function that the curator or curatorial institution wants to achieve. In the context of different art forms, the intrinsic pursuits presented in art works will also differ, ultimately forming aesthetic products in a unique ideological context. The Kassel Documenta and the National Art Exhibition, both of which have an important place in Chinese and Western art, also undoubtedly reflect the state of practice of this law.

In the context of two different regional cultures, Kassel Documenta and the National Art Exhibition, one is a large-scale art exhibition with great international influence, and the other is the most influential large-scale art exhibition in China, and the art concepts and art forms followed by both have become the trendsetters of many art exhibitions. Excluding the conceptual differences between the two due to regional differences, their horizontal development in different periods has formed a relationship that echoes the spirit of contemporary society and the demands of the times at all times. The expression of the spirit of the times, or the attempt to construct social reality, is in fact a breakthrough in the construction of social discourse. The works in the National Art Exhibition review the glorious history and promote the spirit of the times. When viewing the works, viewers are able to feel the development and transformation of China's social landscape presented by the works, indirectly promoting people's trust and expectation of Chinese society under the leadership of the Party, thus becoming an attempt to elevate art creation to the height of social ideological achievements. Kassel Documenta's political nature allows it to have not only a sensory impact on the viewer, but also a strong political and social effect on a certain scale, inspiring some social behaviors. For example, the political movement "Kein

mensch ist illegal", which emerged from the 10th Kassel Documenta, aims to reflect on the basic survival of refugees. At the same time, Kassel Documenta encourages artists to create more social art, as in the case of "7000 Oaks," a "social sculpture" by artist Joseph Beuys (1921-1986) and citizens, which illustrates the meaning of "everyone can participate in social activities and contribute to society," which is also one of the ways for social groups to recognize and approach the social reality of today.

#### **4.2. Aesthetic value**

Kassel Documenta and the National Art Exhibition not only have great social value, but also, from the perspective of art language, they reflect an aesthetic phenomenon in which multiple languages communicate with each other. During the long development process, the mutual collision of multiple cultures has brought new opportunities and challenges to the development of art. The two exhibitions have gradually departed from the traditional meaning of art, and have made in-depth thoughts on the integration of art with other fields and the regional nature of art.

National Art Exhibition and Kassel Documenta never stop exploring the meaning of art—On the one hand, in some of the works, multiple art languages show a dialogue, thus constructing a multi-language system within the specific works; on the other hand, the cross-cultural art languages also show a multi-faceted interaction, thus realizing that the art languages are refined in different contexts. With the gradual expansion of the scope of art, works such as performance art, installation art, mixed media and animation are gradually added to the exhibits, giving the participating artists and curators more room to play on the basis of obeying the exhibition theme. Presenting the artists' personal views in the exhibition and incorporating other fields into the art, mobilizing the viewers' senses in all aspects, forming a colorful art effect, bringing the audience a more diversified aesthetic experience and giving them the right guidance.

At the same time, the accelerating process of "globalization" has had a major impact on the development of art at Kassel Documenta and the National Art Exhibition. In recent years, artworks that combine the aesthetics of different regions and the artistic concepts of different countries have been appearing in the exhibitions. This shows that both exhibitions have begun to follow the process of "globalization" and make new attempts in the aesthetics of art. Chinese art is beginning to consider the contradictions between Chinese and Western art, and European art is gradually breaking through regional restrictions, experimenting with "de-regionalized" and universal experiences and models, which is the inherent aesthetic value of both exhibitions.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

Also emerging from a period of social change, the National Art Exhibition and the Kassel Documenta share similar artistic qualities, but differ in terms of their geographical and cultural differences. Both the most influential National Art Exhibition in China and the world-renowned Kassel Documenta have contributed to the evolution of Chinese and Western art in many ways, and have suggested paths and directions for the planning and development of exhibitions in the field of contemporary art and design.

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