In both its inclusions and omissions, the selection policy for Documenta 7 constituted a symptomatic display of repressive tolerance, an intensified form of amnesia with regard to real historical conditions. It is not so much a question of the absence of individual artists (although one can certainly speculate about the omission of political artists such as Victor Burgin, Darcy Lange, and Steve Willats from the otherwise virtually complete repetition of exhibitors that Rudi Fuchs, Documenta’s Artistic Director, had shown at his home base at the Stedelijk van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven). It is, rather, the absence of perspective, methodological or historical—not to mention critical or political—that gave the show its fundamental sense of pompous and pretentious obsolescence. It is what one might have found at a turn-of-the-century salon, when the greedy anxiety of a ruling class to maintain its position dimmed critical perception.

This absence of perspective was, of course, rationalized as liberalism, pretending, as it did, to offer absolute freedom to the work of art understood as an autonomous, ahistorical entity, a product of the artist seen as the “last practitioner of distinct individuality.”1 Thus, a perspective which would attempt to encompass the most productive investigations of the function of visual representation within contemporary culture was replaced by a desperate attempt to reestablish the hegemony of esoteric, elitist modernist high culture. And this occurs just at that moment when the inadequacy of this framework has been made most apparent, having become the central object of contestation in art history, critical theory, semiology, and feminist theory alike.

The fifth and most important in the series of Documenta exhibitions—organized by Harald Szeemann in 1972—had at least begun to question a general focus on high art. Therefore, ten years later, one might have expected from a team of highly qualified curators2 a slightly more complex organizing

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2. The team consisted of an Artistic Director, Rudi Fuchs, Director of the Stedelijk van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven; and an Artistic Committee composed of Coosje van Bruggen, formerly Michael Asher. Proposal for official poster for Documenta 7. 1982.
principle than that of the simple agglomeration of the most recent samples of market-oriented avant-garde products.

Adorno

In 1959, some ten years after his return from exile in America, the philosopher T. W. Adorno encountered for the first time, at the second Documenta, the work of Jackson Pollock. For him, as for so many other visitors to the exhibition, that work became and remained a central point of reference for contemporary visual thinking. More than twenty years later at Documenta 7, American critics have converted the veins of Adorno's aesthetic thought—even while his major work, Aesthetische Theorie, remains untranslated into English—into a mine from which to extract a vocabulary of empty radicalism that is informed by neither the historical specificity nor the political acumen of its model. Rather, Adorno simply provides them with a jargon of justification for the reemergence of irrationalism in contemporary German painting.

Asher

Michael Asher's contribution to Documenta looked as if its censorship had been merely the product of circumstance. His proposal: the reconstruction of the wing walls from the ground floor of Haus Esters in Krefeld, Germany (a private residence designed and constructed by Mies van der Rohe in 1931, recently restored to function as a museum with one of the curators of Documenta 7 as its director). The walls of Asher's reconstruction were intended to be installed according to their original floor plan on the second floor of the Orangerie at Kassel and to function there as regular display surfaces in the context of the exhibition. This proposal was accepted by the curatorial committee several months before the opening of the show, and construction had begun when Asher visited Kassel in May. With the walls nearing completion, however, the curators must finally have understood the implications of the work. Construction of the walls was abandoned before the addition of the dark stained door frames and baseboards that Mies's design had provided for the framing of the stark white walls of the home. The framed objects to be displayed on the walls would have suffered—in the opinion of the curators—from the suggestion of the architectural conditions of the private home. As though Cindy Sherman's fashion plates depicting the cynical recapitulation of the rituals of female submissiveness could be affected by baseboards.

Curator, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Germano Celant, Contributing Editor, Artforum; Johannes Gachnang, formerly Director, Kunsthalle, Bern; and Gerhard Storck, Director, Kaiser Wilhelm Museum, Krefeld.
If only what John Russell wrote in the New York Times had been true: “Documenta 7 could indeed be said to be under the benign and posthumous aegis of Broodthaers.” Marcel Broodthaers’s work was the sole exception to the exhibition’s proviso that nothing be included if it dated from more than two years back. (Presumably this rigorous but pointless imposition was established as a selection criterion by the curators to guarantee the currency of the exhibits.) Broodthaers’s oeuvre is beginning to emerge as one of the most complex aesthetic investigations of the conditions of artistic production and reception within the framework of modernism and its social institution, the museum. As such it embodies the true postmodern practice of the 1970s. In their random juxtaposition of mutually exclusive aesthetic positions, the curators may well have attempted to imitate certain aspects of Broodthaers’s work. But for Broodthaers himself, this notion of aesthetic paradox did not arise from compromised thinking or lack of historical commitment, or from the used art dealer’s attitude that anything goes. On the contrary, when, in 1972, Broodthaers commissioned both Gerhard Richter and Georg Baselitz to paint paintings of eagles for his final museum fiction, the Museum of Eagles, his purpose was not to effect a liberal reconciliation of contradictions in order to affirm the existing power structure, but rather to intensify the dialectical opposition of the two approaches, to sharpen the viewers’ awareness of the framing conditions within which both practices are contained.

Curatorial Creativity

A second work by Asher, one that had been commissioned for Documenta, was dropped without explanation. This was to have been a poster for the exhibition, for which Asher used the figures representing male and female unemployed workers, which had been designed in the early 1930s by the Cologne progressivist artist Gerd Arntz for the Isotype language developed by the Viennese sociologist Otto Neurath. The poster implicitly questioned the historical adequacy of an international art exhibition costing seven million Deutschmarks at a moment of considerable social instability and economic crisis. Paradoxically, Asher’s proposal was replaced by a design that the exhibition’s curators culled from an earlier work by him for the Art Institute of Chicago, in which he had integrated a sculpture by Jean-Antoine Houdon into his installation. Misunderstood, Asher’s idea returned, inverted, in their design for the official poster and postcard for Documenta 7, which used a photograph of Johann August Nahl’s neoclassical portrait of the Landgrave Ludwig II, a reference to the past and its inherent authority.3

3. That Walter Nikkels’s design for Documenta referred specifically to Asher’s Chicago in-
Artists can, in fact, be excellent designers, especially at a historical moment when ornament and decoration are among the only practices they are allowed to reactivate. But the curator as poet and the designer as artist—insofar as the curators and designers of Documenta 7 tried their hands at it—only constituted a leaden addition to the verbal and visual ballast that has accumulated within the ideological space of culture.

_Décor_— _A Conquest_ was the title of Marcel Broodthaers's installation at the ICA in London in 1975. This, his last major installation work, was reconstructed under the supervision of his widow at Documenta 7, where it functioned as an allegorical anchor. The work consisted of two main sections. One was an arrangement of lawn furniture, including a table on which a puzzle of the Battle of Waterloo was scattered, accompanied by a collection of contemporary machine guns. The other was an awe-inspiring arsenal of historical cannons interspersed with eighteenth-century furniture and candelabra, a taxidermist's boa constrictor, palm trees, and red carpets. Broodthaers's _tableaux morts_—they

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stallation is evidenced in the Documenta catalogue, vol. 2, p. VIII, where the design is pictured in conjunction with two photographs of the Art Institute's sculpture of George Washington by Houdon, one in its old location at the museum's entrance, the second showing its relocation by Asher in the eighteenth-century gallery.

4. See, for example, the statement by Walter Nikkels, the designer of the exhibition, in which he states: "The placement of the walls within the classicistic order of the spaces can be seen as a negative sculpture" (Documenta catalogue, vol. 2, p. XXXIX).
function as hybrids of the contemporary *nature morte* and historical *tableau vivant*—were always conceived for and placed within the particular circumstances and specific moments of an exhibition and an institution. *Décor—A Conquest* originally provided the setting for the shooting of Broodthaers's last film, *La Bataille de Waterloo*, which combines shots taken from the window of the ICA of the Trooping of the Colors on Pall Mall, in celebration of the Queen's birthday, with footage of a woman trying to piece together the puzzle of the Battle of Waterloo taken in the installation itself. It is impossible to verify whether the film stemmed from the installation, or the installation served as a pretext for the film, and it was therefore only appropriate that *La Bataille de Waterloo* had its German premiere during the opening of Documenta 7. We can rest assured, however, that Broodthaers would have proposed an entirely different work for the context of this exhibition, which makes it all the more astonishing that *Décor* could unravel the secret fatality of the historical moment within which Documenta 7 seemed to rejoice.

Discoveries

It might be expected that one of the functions of an exhibition of contemporary art on the scale of Documenta (one of its curators compared it, in the catalogue, to the Olympic Games) would be discovery: of new perspectives and unknown artists, of unrecognized contexts and relationships within various disciplines, of new methodological approaches, as well as of rediscoveries of artists whose works deserve reevaluation. In 1972 Documenta 5 disclosed a whole range of such new perspectives, and introduced new work by young artists of considerable consequence for the definition of art practice in the years to come. Moreover, it opened the exhibition to a notion of visual culture that threw into the sharpest possible relief the obsolescent isolation of autonomous high culture. Ten years later Documenta 7 closed down that investigation in favor of a conservative realignment of the Beaux-Arts categories and a methodological agnosticism which undoubtedly sees itself as postmodern. Its reaffirmation not only emphasizes the hegemony of painting and sculpture, but also reestablishes the supremacy of the museum as the social institution within which the discourse of high art originates and must remain. Documenta 7 proclaimed the individuality of the artist and the autonomy of artistic practice. (Fuchs's statement—"Modern art does not have a history—it is an experiment"—is one that we might last have read around 1955 in a commercial gallery's brochure promoting French tachism.) It obviously does not consider the current historical framework and how that might have determined the curators'
present enchantment with conservative clichés. The painted expression, that predictable stereotype that stared out from every second wall surface of the show, promised aesthetic discoveries and adventures of the kind one expects to parade down a fashion-show runway: too shallow and breathless to be said to be bathed in ideology, they can only be said to be soaked in Zeitgeist.

*Fashion Moda*

The Fashion Moda pavilion at Documenta, transplanted from the South Bronx to its temporary high-art setting in the Fridericianum's English garden, was one of the few courageous curatorial choices. Through its petty-commodity program, where artists' tchatchkis and souvenirs were traded over the counter, the hidden order of exchange value underlying Documenta's high-art pretenses was revealed. One would hate to think, however, that this might be Fashion Moda's final destination (even though the name does suggest the ultimate location of the enterprise). Jenny Holzer, who, in collaboration with Stefan Eins, was responsible for bringing the Fashion Moda pavilion to Documenta, excels in both unmasking ideology at work in language and masking art as business to achieve a wide dissemination of her texts—printed on everything from T-shirts to facades. But when the work enters or leaves the gallery in the form of bronze plaques, small change indeed seems to have compromised Holzer's original radicalism.

*Fashion Moda display of T-shirts by, among others, Christie Rupp and John Fekner. (Shown in front of Daniel Buren's work in situ at the Orangerie.)*
Garlands

Daniel Buren’s work, _Les Guirlandes_, introduced sound and motion into Documenta 7, which was given over to painting’s silence and stasis (in spite of its pretense of emotional turbulence). Together with the sound, the sense of historicity and temporal continuity of Buren’s work contradicted the exhibition’s general claim for the universality and timelessness of contemporary aesthetic production. A collection of musical samples—ranging from Lully and Philidon l’Aïné through Bach, Purcell, Mozart, Beethoven, and Verdi, to Offenbach and Scott Joplin—were broadcast over the large field leading the visitors to the Museum Fridericianum. These musical offerings were regularly interrupted by a litany of color names recited in fourteen languages. In the strict chronology of the musical samples, as well as in the abstract administrative listing of color terms, a parodic framework of historicization was proposed as a counterpoint to the exhibition’s—and the curators’—concerted efforts to override the viewers’ discovery of the real historical conditions of aesthetic practice by inspiring awe and dignity. Pennants of Buren’s recognizable colored and white stripes were stretched above the field on the same poles that carried the loudspeakers, complementing the musical sideshow with an ambience of gaudiness appropriate to a fun fair or the grand opening of a gas station. This, in open confrontation to the discretion and rigor of the newly constructed white wall system that had been installed in the eighteenth-century museum for the display of objects. The successful synthesis of all these elements in Buren’s work probably accounts for the attempt by the majority of the show’s curators to prevent its installation (although they finally relented at the last minute) since the majority of viewers might have perceived the work as a decoration installed by the exhibition’s organizers to celebrate the inauguration of their show.

Haacke

Hans Haacke’s two-part installation, _Oelgemaelder — Hommage à Marcel Broodthaers_ (1982), was neither very well placed within the exhibition nor very well received. Benevolent critics deemed it necessary to defend Broodthaers’s work against its genuine historical and political potential as that potential was revealed in Haacke’s timely homage. The juxtaposition of the meticulously painted portrait of Reagan (Haacke’s own accomplishment) with a mural-sized photograph of an antiwar demonstration on the occasion of Reagan’s visit to the German capital, brought too many aspects of the interdependence of aesthetic and political matters into focus to please those conservative critics who would prefer to neutralize Broodthaers’s work within an aesthetic nebulosity. Haacke’s reference was to an installation by Broodthaers at Documenta 5 in which inscriptions contained within a black square were painted on the floor. Such inscriptions as “rêver, peindre” were replaced halfway through the exhibition’s duration by “private property.” The elements of traditional museum exhibi-
tions that demarcate the threshold between life and high art—stanchions, velvet ropes, carpets—frequently used by Broodthaers in his installations, returned in Haacke's work as the means of bracketing the two apparently incompatible elements of his work, the painting of the leader and the photograph of the crowd. But the particular depiction in Haacke's painting and its mock-dignified presentation generated discomfort within the ambience of an exhibition where the dignity of both art and its manner of presentation were declared primary concerns of the curators (Fuchs at one point mentioned that he would install carpets in what had once been a gutted building). If Haacke's work once again broke the unspoken rule that art can be critical as long as it is discreet—a rule that Broodthaers had often emphasized in work that pointed to rituals of discretion—then it responded to a historical situation and a particular instance where Broodthaers's strategies had themselves been acculturated and falsified by the curators. The repeated devaluation of these already devaluated strategies was, then, seen by Haacke as the only means by which to pay homage to the inherent political radicalism of their author.

Kassel

Every four or five years, a small provincial city in West Germany (comparable in size, climate, and location within the country to Akron, Ohio) requests the pleasure of the international art world's company. In the eighteenth century, Kassel was the glamorous residence of the aristocracy of Hesse, patrons of one of the first museum buildings of Europe (1769-79), the Museum Fridericianum. Hesse was, at the time, a feudal state notorious for the rigidity of its army. It was the state where one of the most innovative German playwrights, Georg Büchner, was born, prosecuted, and imprisoned after the failure of the revolution in the early nineteenth century. In the 1930s Kassel served as one of Hitler's most important ammunition depots, a central point connecting Berlin, capital of the Reich, with its western and southern regions. Destroyed by the Allies in the final phase of World War II, Kassel was reconstructed in a rush during the economic miracle to become one of the ugliest cities west of Siberia, a city where Volkswagens are now assembled by Turkish, Spanish, and Italian hands. The blandness of the architecture is only exceeded by the blandness of the inhabitants, who seem to have eaten their way from their Fascist past to their neo-capitalist present. The population of Kassel could not care less about Documenta and international contemporary art, just as the international art world could not care less about the people of the city and state that sponsors the most expensive of art exhibitions. But the 250,000 to 450,000 visitors that the exhibition attracts during the 100 days of its installation come from all over the country as well as from neighboring countries, excluding, of course, those neighbors to the east, the East Germans. Unlike its visits to the Venice or Paris biennals, where the food is good and the monu-
ments are plenty, the international art world dreads going to Kassel, yet is always eager to participate, for Documenta — both the exhibition and its tradition — is an ideological institution where the aesthetic stock of the present day is evaluated and tested.

Mysticism, Postmodern

In one of his many pronouncements on Documenta artists, Rudi Fuchs declared Lawrence Weiner a mystic and paired him with Jannis Kounellis, whom he wished to be seen as Weiner's Greco-Italian counterpart. Six years earlier, Fuchs had described Weiner's work in the catalogue of his exhibition at the Van Abbemuseum:

Is this work then visual art? That depends on use (on what one wants or expects to do with it); also it depends on how a notation can be read. The use of language conforms in no way to the use of language within poetry. Designation of the work as visual art is a question of utility only. (There is no reason to name it differently.)

The work is pure praxis. It is not carried by an aesthetic theory; there is just a sense of utility. Important is that it enters the culture — not as aesthetic satisfaction but as a methodology to deal with material culture.  

If this description does not correspond to our notion of mysticism, it nevertheless helps us understand the recourse to mysticism that pervades the catalogue rhetoric and installation strategies of the present exhibition. In this context mysticism is called up to reconcile the blatant contradictions within current aesthetic practice, and is required to cover over the systematic breakdown of liberal thought and its present conversion to outright reaction. To be committed intellectually to a program of bourgeois enlightenment and rational progress as long as the expanding economy allows for it, but to fall back into a swamp of irrationalism when economic crisis requires a legitimation of hierarchical order and privilege — this is the historical constellation that generates the perverse embrace and willful combination of mutually exclusive aesthetic practices forming the foundation of Fuchs's installation. The postmodern coexistence of aesthetic contradictions pretends to assure and defend the continued existence of a sublime high culture against the vulgar forces of "the media and politics," as Fuchs puts it. (Whose media? Whose politics?)

Certainly in the 1930s one could have combined a painting by Mondrian and a flower still life by Vlaminck (they had once been historically and geo-

graphically close enough to be thought of as artists of the same region who "spoke the same dialect") in the same way that Fuchs combined, for example, the work of Hans Haacke with the paintings of a lost local talent called Jörg Immendorf. But it takes a particular urgency for mystification to claim for such juxtapositions—of eminently relevant artistic practice, on the one hand, and the current revival of trivial picture making, on the other—that they represent the "battle of the century." With this inflated phrase, Fuchs refers to another such combination, that of Andy Warhol and a painter from the rural environment of southern Germany by the name of Anselm Kiefer, who uses straw and tar in his paintings to give tangible form to his desire to return to primary matters.

**Opera and Operator**

Too numerous and too frequently quoted from his notorious letter inviting artists to participate in Documenta 7 are the confessions of the Artistic Director's creative ambitions to make the exhibition into anything other than an exhibition—a poem called *Le Bateau ivre*, a story, a fairy tale, or, ultimately, an opera: "I understand myself to be a composer. I will make an opera out of works of art, paintings, and objects. . . ." Such explicit manipulation stands in overt contradiction to Fuchs's professed concern to present the artworks without an imposition of historical or stylistic categories, as immaculate aesthetic conceptions. This reveals the extent to which the administration and distribution of the individualized products of the contemporary avant-garde partakes of the conditions of the culture industry, which must constantly mythify its activities in order to maintain its credibility. Or—its dialectical complement—the extent to which industry must employ the clichés of individualism and the cult of personality as a means of selling its products at a time when genuine individuality is most threatened. No wonder, then, that the desire for poetry expressed by high culture's top manager (the three-year salary of Documenta's Artistic Director was 365,000.00 DM) and the private confessions of the corporate entrepreneur coincide almost word for word. Thus, Ralph Lauren:

I'm inspired by America. . . . When I do the shows, it's all a dream. . . . There's a vibration I'm expressing, as if I'm a writer. When that model came down the runway in the patchwork skirt and the pictorial sweater with the school and the kids and the trees across the front, and Neil Diamond was singing "Hang onto the Dream"—that was everything I believe in, everything I am.

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7. Fuchs, "I Want to Make an Opera."
Paradoxically Documenta 7, whose declared goal was to restore dignity to the visual arts and to defend high culture against the incursions of the media, opened with the German premiere of Syberberg's *Parsifal*. The film's French producers, with their businessmen's sense of what is proper, had turned down Fuchs's plea for the world premiere, thus frustrating the conservative aesthete's attempt at a media coup for Documenta. Nevertheless, the film director's pathetic desire to be an artist and the exhibition director's ambition to participate in the Zeitgeist on a grand scale did find their meeting ground: in the basement of the Fridericianum. There the monumental kitsch of *Parsifal*’s gigantic plaster props (Wagner's head, Hitler's hand) loomed in the dark (where better might the exhibition's repressed desires be displayed?). In the moviemaker's obsession to be taken seriously as an artist, while also cashing in on the media's current success at toying with fascism under the guise of historical introspection; in the exhibition director's need to show these emblems of the fashionable taste for the prohibited, together with his wish to make the historically unacceptable tasteful—in these the collapse of modernist aesthetic criteria that pervaded the exhibition as a whole revealed its implications for the future: the conflict between the forms of mass culture—which appear as seamless totalities within which the individual subject is constituted—and the aesthetic practices of individual artists—which open up a dimension of critical negativity—cannot be resolved by the social institutions which support and contain aesthetic practice. They lack the critical resistance, let alone the political consciousness, and under the pressure of crisis will yield to whatever system of representation and method of distribution is necessary for the ideologically organized dismantling of modernism.

*Sculture, Outdoors*

With Documenta 7's renewed faith in the institution of the museum—both its mode of display and the ideology it imposes—sculpture appears to have entered a historical cul-de-sac. This is particularly the case for that work which, partially motivated by a critique of the discrete object, extended its investigations to an architectural dimension. Either by excluding certain sculptors or by presenting their work in an incoherent manner (Richard Serra was, for example, represented only by a drawing), the curators made it appear that sculptural activity had withered to utter marginality. One has only to remember the extraordinary sculpture exhibitions organized by Germano Celant—"Ambiente Arte" at the 1976 Venice Biennale—and Kaspar Koenig—"Skulptur" at Muenster in 1977—to realize the drastic change in recent curatorial attitudes. Three works in Documenta 7 did, however, engage in an exemplary way in a reflection upon the transformation of sculpture during the past two decades, including the recent preoccupation with outdoor installation: Claes Oldenburg's
Pick-Axe (1982), Carl Andre's Steel Peneplain (1982), and Dan Graham's Two Adjacent Pavilions (1978–82). Rather than having to face the contradictions of placing contemporary sculpture in the urban environment, these works accepted their confinement in the setting of an eighteenth-century English garden, but at least they did not destroy the garden's historical architecture as did the sculptural installations of past Documenta exhibitions.

Oldenburg's work, placed on the bank of the Fulda River, introduced a giant tool of physical labor into a landscape of leisure. The blue steel axe was tilted at an angle reminiscent of Tatlin's monument and its attempt to replicate the inclination of the globe. Oldenburg’s work escaped questions of the paradoxical nature of iconic representation using large scale steel construction by functioning in relation to Kassel’s Hercules sculpture. Oldenburg confronted that work, “an aristocratic folly on top of a hill,” with a banal contemporary object turned into a sculptural sign of classicist measure. The dimension of collectivity—the essential quality of any public monument—in Oldenburg's work depended upon iconicity and its scale, but it remained external to the

Dan Graham. Two Adjacent Pavilions. 1978–82.
sculpture's structure. In Andre's steel plate sculpture that collective dimension was achieved mechanistically through the sheer expansion of size—to 300 meters in length—and through the implicit use of the work as a walkway in the park.

Graham's work is dependent upon both Oldenburg's ingenious transformation of public signs into monumental sculpture and Andre's materialist definition of perception through the physical involvement of the viewer. But Graham incorporates the dimension of collectivity into the material structure of the work, insofar as the work embodies that dimension in both the perception and the use of the sculpture. Graham's pair of two-way mirrored pavilions differed from each other only in the light conditions resulting from their ceilings, one of which was opaque, the other translucent. This determined whether the viewers inside the pavilion could watch people outside without being observed, and vice versa. Using the most common element of recent international-style corporate architecture, the mirrored glass curtain wall, Graham transformed that architecture into particularized pavilion units of a size—just large enough to feel more spacious than a telephone booth, yet not as large as, say, a bus shelter—which did not impose upon the eighteenth-century garden architecture. The pavilions engaged the visitors to Documenta in a reflection upon the social implications of perceptual activity, ranging from self-reflection, through interactions generated by the two pavilions among groups of spectators, to the inversion of the language of corporate architecture into an analytical model that could be seen as architectural sculpture.

Warhol

As a collector of weathervanes, Andy Warhol apparently knows as much about how oxidation is induced as he does about painting. His Oxidation Paintings at Documenta were among the rare pleasurable exceptions to the generally somber and pompous offerings of the exhibition. From a distance they appeared to be a new version of Art Informel; their glistening metallic surfaces, their emphatic splashes and spots, their undercover preciousness seemed to share the worst aspects of Yves Klein. (These qualities already made viewers aware that they were looking at very contemporary work.) When, however, the authorship and production procedure of the works were revealed—Warhol or an assistant urinated onto canvases prepared with a copper emulsion, causing highly gestural green splotches of oxidation to form on the copper ground—it became clear that their mysterious quality was not only the result of their sheer physical beauty nor even their truth to materials. Indeed, what arrested the viewers in their disenchanted wanderings through the show that had attempted to be a fairy tale was relief from the manufactured angst of the dozens of Dutch, German, and Swiss art-school graduates.
For the past fifteen years or more Lawrence Weiner has consistently used language as a medium to respond to the contemporary desire for aesthetic representations. The success of his linguistic strategies—in his texts, films, and videotapes—is evident in the almost total defeat of the critics' and historians' attempts to impose a secondary discourse on the primary language (the paraphrasing paragraphs which accompany Weiner's statements in Rudi Fuchs's 1976 catalogue form one of the rare exceptions). Weiner's tripartite contribution to Documenta 7 consisted of one inscription on the museum's exterior frieze, three on the museum's interior walls, and one on the paper wrapper that binds together the two volumes of the catalogue. Laconically, in the manner of allegorical inscriptions, these sum up not only the conditions of their own existence; but also, metonymically, the conditions, performance, and mode of representation of adjacent art objects; and finally, by logical extension, those of the exhibition at large. Weiner's statement, "Many colored objects placed side by side to form a row of many colored objects"—painted in upper-case letters in German on the frieze of the Museum Fridericianum beneath allegorical sculptures representing Philosophy, Architecture, Painting, Sculpture, History, and Astronomy—counterposed itself to the Latin inscription on the museum's portico frieze. The latter is incised into the architecture and gilded, while Weiner's inscription consists of bronze-colored letters applied with automobile lacquer sold by Chrysler to BMW. The particular function of this work was the restoration of the real conditions of discourse which underlay the accumulation
of mythical objects on display inside the museum. Its placement in an architectural setting insured a public mode of address, and its particular material pointed to the extension of the conditions of imperialism from economic to aesthetic matters.

Women Artists

Undoubtedly it was Coosje van Bruggen, the curator responsible for the selection of American artists, who was also responsible for the inclusion of a number of women artists whose work continues and develops the radical implications of the major work of the 1960s and '70s, and offers, therefore, the most stringent negation of what is currently presented as the new, predominantly male avant-garde of painting. Adequately presented within the exhibition, the work of Dara Birnbaum, Jenny Holzer, Sherrie Levine, and Martha Rosler would presumably have helped a wider audience to understand that the puerile performances of neoexpressionist artists are, despite their spectacular success, insufficient proposals for a definition of contemporary cultural practice. Prominent display was provided instead for the work of Gilbert and George, who seem to have functioned as spiritual leaders for the male curators in their installation of the masters. Whatever turn one took in the exhibition's labyrinth, one was confronted with another panel depicting Gilbert and George's London lives of petit bourgeois turpitude. And whatever wall space remained on the main floors of the central building had to yield to the German and Italian canvases vying for space, fame, and supremacy. Nevertheless, in spite
of dispersal and displacement (or, in Levine's case, because of the installation in the shadow of an Italian scenario), the women's work managed to function in its subversive contextual strategies.

Dara Birnbaum's work, the only video work admitted to Documenta 7, was one of the most successful in the exhibition, even taking into account its juxtaposition with paintings by Boetti. Its success could be seen in its capacity to attract and hold the attention of large groups of predominantly young viewers, who obviously understood its explicit commitment to contemporaneity, a commitment which denies the false imposition of the new aesthetic sanctity. They presumably understood, as well, the work's critical capacity to interfere with the normal perception of that ideological environment which has become so totalizing in its effect upon everyday life, the hermetic environment of television. Clearly those gazing crowds in front of Birnbaum's three-monitor panel installations were not in awe of the dignity of a high-art discipline. Indeed, they were distracted viewers. But their distraction contained within it the seeds of critical distanciation. Their pleasure in the serially repeated TV imagery, as well as the recycled sounds of '60s rock music, shows the possibility of disrupting television's usual totalizing absorption. With Birnbaum's work, as with the tradition of Brechtian strategies generally, the viewers do not abandon reality through tur-

moil. The potential for critical negation in pleasurable distanciation prevents them from entering a spectacle whose apparent liberation only reinforces the reification of the perceptual process.

The last-minute invitation of Martha Rosler to Documenta resulted in a first-day performance, *Watchwords of the Eighties*, that confronted the attending international art world with a very specific question, that of the possibility of cultural resistance and activist criticism under the political and economic conditions of Reagan’s America. Her performance, with its self-consciously artificial incorporation of rap talk and graffiti writing, was as specific to contemporary New York culture as the “real” graffiti painter Lee Quinones, who had been invited by the curators to paint the walls of a subterranean pedestrian passageway in Kassel (so much for the curators’ commitment to the local dialect of art). As we see Rosler bouncing around stage like a street fighter with a ghetto blaster, it is apparent that her notion of authenticity contradicts the art world’s desire to acculturate instantly any authentic sign of denial and resistance. The authenticity with which Rosler confronts the viewer is that of the apparent impossibility of political commitment and cultural activism within the framework provided by the cultural apparatus and the necessity of a transformation of practice within that framework.

*(Photo: Richard Baron.)*
Two works in the exhibition received little attention due to their success in resisting subjugation to the curators’ declamatory display style. The two artists deliberately situated their works in the stairwells of the Museum Fridericianum, away from the battlefield of prime exposure and enforced comparisons. Both works, that by German artist Lothar Baumgarten and that by West Coast artist John Knight, were written signs that had been integrated into the museum’s architecture. Language was not, however, their primary field of investigation, nor did they subscribe to a reified notion of site specificity that ignores both the linguistic and the ideological dimensions of modernist practice in favor of the perceptual conditions generated by architecture.

John Knight’s six nearly identical relief elements—his initials transformed into a logo design and covered with six different travel posters—were installed on the six landings of the museum’s two lateral staircases. The symmetry of the installation and the repetition of the elements incorporated the strategies of
advertising and commodity display, contradicting the curators’ attempt to camouflage the ways in which such strategies determine contemporary art practice and its exhibition. Through the drastic reduction of the work’s material features and functions to the sign of individualization and authentication, Knight’s installation made still another condition of the contemporary works at Documenta transparent.

The restriction of drawing, or for that matter any other pictorial maneuver, to the design of a logo incorporating the artist’s signature had already been proposed in Broodthaers’s plastic plaques of the early ’70s, as well as by Luciano Fabro’s repeated execution of his signature and address in neon. Using the mode of conceptual tautology then current, these works anticipated in their material structures their inherent function as self-promotion and their ultimate status as commodities. In all of these works contemporary aesthetic practice acknowledges its share in the conditions of the culture industry, especially as it is evidenced in an exhibition like Documenta. Only with the explicit integration of these conditions does it seem that the works can open up a dimension of critical negation and authenticity.

Baumgarten’s inscriptions in dark red classicist letters on the balustrade beneath the rotunda of the central staircase listed the names of Indian tribes from the Amazon region, where Baumgarten had lived and done research from

1979 to 1981. The names of these tribes, many of which are threatened with extinc-
tion, might have appeared to the uninformed viewer like a dada sound poem. In such poems, as Walter Benjamin observed, the rediscovery of the purely phonetic dimension of language liberates the word from its slavery to meaning and simultaneously redeems the historical and material body of lan-
guage. Thus, in Baumgarten’s commemorative inscriptions the historical over-
determination of the current desire for primary expression—the romantic longing for the Ursprache of the noble savage that has haunted art since the nineteenth century—is dialectically related to the actual historical and political existence of those cultures that are still perceived by Western ethnocentrism as exotic and primitive, and that continue to be destroyed in the name of enlighten-
ment.