

In the provinces of the international art scene

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1**

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IN THE PROVINCES OF THE INTERNATIONAL ART SCENE

48

Rein Wolfs Can art be shown anywhere or has it been definitively banished to the big city enclaves ever since art became contemporary? Numerous examples of current art are shown in smaller cities as well, with Switzerland as a preeminent example in this regard. In the German-speaking part of the country, from Glarus to Amden and from Rapperswil to Ittingen – in municipalities that are indeed rather modest – exhibitions of contemporary art are shown on a more or less continual basis, sometimes even at an international level. In Germany too, important exhibitions are frequently presented in the geographic provinces. The premiere example is the documenta, held for over a half-century in the isolated north Hessian metropolis of Kassel.

Metropolis? With nearly 200,000 inhabitants, the former prince electorship of Kassel officially ranks as a big city for Germany, although its relatively peripheral position makes it more of a provincial big city. It came close to being picked as the capital due to its location in the exact geographic center of Germany. Things turned out differently, however, and it ended up a battered, war-damaged, inadequately rebuilt city on the economic and geopolitical outskirts just twenty-five kilometers from the eastern boundary wall of the new Federal Republic.

Despite the defining effect of these dramatic developments, the city has managed to hold its own as the site of the "world exhibition of art", even in face of increased competition from all manner of biennale events that take place all over the world. Might the (supposed) provinciality of this city even be a factor in cultivating the success of the documenta legend? Is there a certain charm, perhaps even a cult status involved in

driving back there every five years? The landscape of postwar Germany was put together from an over-proportionate number of pedestrian zones and is marked by countless architectural eyesores. Moreover, it long lacked a major center and instead was more decentralized, or, if you will, pluricentric. In the field of art, the nation's multiple centers consisted of Cologne, Munich, Hamburg and Frankfurt. All the other places were relegated to the provincial backwater. The artistic backwater, at least. It's only been in recent years that everything has seemed to focus on Berlin. Everyone wants to go there, everyone wants to be a part of it. A true center seems to have finally emerged.

Let's operate under the assumption that Kassel really is a provincial city, despite having museum structures that few German cities can rival in terms of scale and significance. Now I would like to sketch out three aspects of this provinciality a little more closely. My examination is based on three theses, sorted into three simple questions: What are the provinces? What good are the provinces? What do provinces need?

Provinces are everywhere. In towns but also in big cities. In rural areas as well as in urban agglomerations. Provinciality is also related to social structures, to demographic, ethnic, educational, cultural and other factors. In terms of numbers, so-called artistic provinciality can be measured according to the number of art institutions and the number of inhabitants of a place, but it can also be assessed by looking at the number of practicing artists. From a qualitative perspective, additional factors include the existence of interesting educational institutions and the concrete engagement with art and the presence of a flourishing artistic discourse.

In my years at the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam, it became apparent that even the second-largest city in the Netherlands – promoted as a global city by the city's marketing engines – is much more provincial than might appear at first glance, when it comes to art. Rotterdam can boast a higher than average number of art institutions, multiple educational institutions and a considerable art scene, though one that keeps a very low profile and reluctantly draws attention to itself on the city stage. Exhibition openings usually do not attract much of an art scene presence and podium discussions or other discursive events are often sparsely attended. The art scene seems to go back and forth between dormant and active and to generally be rather incompatible with the rest of the population in this harbor-dominated metropolis. In a city with the country's lowest average income and educational level, with the highest number of non-western immigrants and a barely present white middle and upper class cultural elite, the traditional counterpart of the artists is in short supply. In such a city, art leads a geographically provincial existence: It lacks a "natural" audience, it lacks the necessary discourse.

Provincialism is the reason to move away – which naturally includes the flip side of coming back. I have never come across a city that can compare to Rotterdam in the number of artists wishing to break away from the city only to keep coming back again. It is a natural part of provinciality that inhabitants have to regularly seek the active discourse elsewhere but then come back to the provinces to work, if for no other reason than the low rents and limited number of competing distractions. Provinciality allows excellent work concentration, yet has to be countered and nurtured by educa-

tional trips, residencies, external investigations and other creative opportunities. In the comfort and convenience of the big city with the wide range of temptations and contacts, there is much less need to go out and bring back new discoveries, influences and desires. In the supposed paradise, artists are happy and content but not always productive.

Let's ignore the issue of quality for a moment and assume it is sufficient. The chief problems that remain are the absence of artistic discourse and the lack of a broader public; an art scene is clearly lacking. In recent years, the effort has been to counter these "competitive disadvantages" with the two magic words of promotion and communication. And this is the role of the more provincial art institution, one where the art scene's in-crowd does not come beating down the door and the accustomed calm and quiet of the security guards remains intact. Clearly communicating what you stand for, dispelling fears, offering entry-level opportunities, cultivating engagement through participation, importing something from the big world into the smaller world.

With Kunsthalle Fridericianum, we want to tackle and test these goals and more. So that the big-world documenta can be supplanted by a big-world permanence of contemporary art in the intervening years too. Provincial or not.