Documenta 13 Director Carolyn Christov-Bagargiev planned to ship a thirty-seven-tonne meteorite, known as El Chaco, from Argentina to Kassel, part of an installation titled A Guide to Campo del Cielo (Field of Sky) by Buenos Aires-based artists Guillermo Faivovich and Nicolás Goldberg. However representatives of the Moqoit first nation peoples, for whom El Chaco (the second-largest meteorite on earth) is a sacred monument, successfully campaigned to stop the shipment.¹

This turn of events, and Christov-Bagargiev’s public reaction to it, tell us a lot about this thirteenth edition of the revered quinquennial. She wondered what the meteorite itself would want: ‘Would it have wished to go on this journey? Does it have any rights? Can it ask to be buried again?’ That inanimate things may have a sense of themselves, and even a kind of agency, was implicit in her remarkable curatorial approach. She steadfastly resisted attempts to define an overarching theme, but throughout her ‘election’ (she prefers this term to ‘selection’) was a strong emphasis away from the primacy of human experience, towards both animals and natural phenomena. Her introduction invoked a ‘non-logocentric vision that is skeptical of the persisting belief in economic growth’, and ‘the shapes and practices of knowing of all the animate and inanimate makers of the world, including people’. Dogs were ‘participants’ in several installations (see below), and there was even a Multispecies dTour, described as ‘a series of walks with experimental dog trainers … to challenge the focus on the human’. Given Christov-Bagargiev’s ever-present Maltese terrier (named Darsi), it wasn’t long before the popular press dubbed the event dogUMENTA.

Such drolleries aside, Christov-Bagargiev rides a serious anti-anthropocentric trend towards ‘objectism’ or ‘thing theory’, which emphasises the life of the non-human and the non-animate, in part arising from growing environmental concerns. Her approach, disruptive and somewhat challenging to an ‘industry’ driven by auteurism and personality fetish, was as much about science, literature, environment, society, war, and the sweep of cosmic time, as it was a survey of contemporary art. She articulated four ‘positions’ (On stage; Under siege; In a state of hope; On retreat) corresponding loosely to the four locations in which this edition was sited: Kassel, Kabul, Alexandria/Cairo, and Banff. The politics were implicit. She describes these places as

**Things made and not made**

**Documenta 13**

David Corbet

Atta Kader, The Repair from Occident to Extra-Occidental Cultures, 2012, ‘The Repair’: slide show projection and genuine artifacts from Africa; ‘Repair as cultural anthropophagy and resistance’: video films, vitrines, artifacts from Africa and Europe, medical and military elements from World War I; ‘Relecture’: life-size sculptures in wood and marble, plinths, dimensions variable; commissioned and produced by Documenta 13 with the support and courtesy of Galleria Continua, San Gimignano/Beijing/Le Moulin; Galerie Christian Nagel Berlin/Cologne/Anwerp; Galerie Krinzinger, Vienna; further support by Fondation nationale des arts graphiques et plastiques, France; Aarc – Algerian Ministry of Culture; photo: Roman März
‘phenomenal spatialities that embody the four conditions, blurring the associations that are typically made with those places and conditions, and which are instead constantly shifting and overlapping’.

This writer spent three days in Kassel, and saw perhaps half the work by 200–plus participants from around the world, spread across a multiplicity of venues, including the expansive Karlsaue Park. Add a colossal publishing effort (100 Books for 100 Days), a three-month program of talks, seminars, screenings and performances, and Documenta might have seemed an exhausting behemoth of unimaginable complexity. This was a big part of its allure – it set out to be sprawling, and signage was minimal – visitors were not spoon-fed information, although you could go on a wide range of themed dTours.

Christov-Bagargiev wanted us to experience difficult and multi-layered works in an unmediated way, and there were a number of times when only in retrospect I realised I had seen a significant piece of art.

The thing that had everyone buzzing from the outset was Ryan Gander’s ‘windwork’ at the flagship Kunsthalle Fredericianum, which was Documenta-central and where most people started their marathon. On the first VIP/Press day, the world’s assembled curatariat queued unhappily for their passes in a light drizzle, so the cold gusts blowing through the Fredericianum’s near-empty ground-floor galleries was far from welcome when they finally gained admittance. ‘Oh, God, this is going to be one of those exhibitions with no art!’, I heard someone remark, understandably – in one half of these large spaces a tiny vitrine on one wall held three small 1930s bronze figures by Julio González, and a small photograph. In the facing gallery was another vitrine with a letter by the artist Kai Althoff, outlining his non-participation. Gander’s work was deliberately-pretentiously named Airflow-velocity study for I Need Some Meaning I Can Memorise (The Invisible Pull) (2012).

I didn’t enquire into the mechanics, but I assume he just clocked clockwise from top left: 1/ Fiona Hall, Fall Prey, 2009–12, mixed media, dimensions variable; commissioned by Documenta 13, and produced with the support of the Australia Council for the Arts, Sydney; Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney; image courtesy the artist and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney; photo: Nils Klinger 2/ Pierre Huyghe, Untitled, 2011–12, alive entities and inanimate things, made and not made, dimensions and duration variable; commissioned and produced by Documenta 13 with the support of Colección CIAC AC, Mexico; Fondation Louis Vuitton pour la création, Paris; Ishikawa Collection, Okayama, Japan; image courtesy the artist; Marian Goodman Gallery, New York; Paris; Esther Schipper, Berlin; photo: Nils Klinger 3/ Gordon Bennett, Home Décor (after Margaret Preston) #1, March 1, 2010, acrylic on linen 182.5 x 152 cm; image courtesy der Künstler; Sutton Gallery, Melbourne; photo: Anders Sune Berg 4/ Giuseppe Penone, Ideas of Stone, bronze and stone, 2004/2010; photo: Roman Mensing.
opened the side windows and let the through-breeze do its work. There was in fact plenty to see here, but Gander’s chilly wind set us up for a sometimes perplexing journey. On other levels were works by Salvador Dali, Fabio Mauri, Mario Garcia Torres, and Michael Rakowitz’s absorbing, museum-like installation about the Bamiyan Buddhas (What Dust Will Rise?, 2012). Nearby, ‘agented’ by Australian curator Hetti Perkins, was an inspiring hang of paintings by Warlimpirrnga Tjapaltjarri and the late Doreen Reid Nakamarra, the latter’s large works displayed flat on a low platform of unvarnished wood. In the central rotunda was Documenta’s glassed-in ‘Brain’ – a busy hang of disparate works that required queuing to view. These ranged from a group of Morandi still lives (and some of the vessels he repeatedly painted), ancient figurines (the Central Asian Bactrian Princesses, 2500-1500 B.C.), photographs taken by Lee Miller in Hitler’s apartment, a bag of marble dust by Sam Durant, and many other objects and images, which according to Christov-Bagargiev ‘indicate not a history, not an archive, but a set of elements that mark contradictory conditions and committed positions of being in and with the world’. Nearby were quantum physicist Anton Zeligier’s experimental machines (Quantum Now, 2012), the late Korbinian Aigner’s 400 postcard-sized paintings of apples, Goshka Macuga’s immense monochrome tapestry, and Kader Attia’s extraordinary ‘ethnographic’ installation, The Repair from Occident to Extra-Occidental Cultures (2012). There was much else besides, and that was just at the Fredericianum.

The adjacent Ottoneum, the city’s natural history museum, contained some strong environmentally-themed installations, and the nearby Orangerie (a baroque science museum) had some hard-to-spot interventions within the permanent displays. The next stop, past Warwick Thornton’s parked Kombi van (with video screen in back), was the modern Documenta Halle, where the art had a more conventional presentation. With its soaring spaces, the Halle was home to giant drawings by Julie Mehretu, steam-punkish machines by Thomas Bayrie, a whirling kinetic light installation by Nalini Malani, and Etel Adnan’s small 1950s abstract paintings, among many other works.

The Neue Galerie, the city’s modest contemporary art museum, featured a substantial selection of artists, including several from Australia: Gordon Bennett and the late Margaret Preston, Sydney-based Hazara Khadim Ali, and Stuart Ringhold’s Anger Workshops, which were ongoing for the duration. Bennett’s geometric paintings are from his Home Décor series, specifically the ones created in response to Preston’s appropriations of Indigenous motifs, some of which hung nearby. The big crowd-pleaser here was American Geoffrey Farmer’s thirty-metre-long ‘sculptural’ paper installation (Leaves of Grass, 2012) cut from old LIFE magazines. I was impressed by South African Zanele Muholi’s uncompromising photographic portraits and documentary video (Difficult Love, 2011). Much admired was Egyptian Wael Shasky’s fifty-eight-minute video installation (Cabaret Crusades: The Path to Cairo, 2012) in which marionette puppets play out a satirical historical narrative.

Next, a brief stop at the Brüder Grimm Museum to see Nedko Solakov’s endearing autobiographical show Knights (and other dreams). Then it was on to the Hugenottobau, a somewhat decrepit (but heritage-protected) terrace house, featuring a whole-building occupation/intervention by ‘hotter-than-hot’ Chicago artist/activist Theaster Gates and his diverse collective of artists and musicians. There was tea, conversation and superb live.
Geoffrey Farmer, *Leaves of Grass*, 2012, *Life* magazines (1935–85), tall grass, wood, glue, dimensions variable; commissioned and produced by *Documenta 13* with the support of the Canada Council for the Arts and the British Columbia Arts Council; image courtesy the artist; commissioned photo: Anders Sune Berg

Tacita Dean, *Fatigues*, 2012, chalk on blackboard, 6 panels; commissioned and co-produced by *Documenta 13*; the artist; Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, Paris; Frith Street Gallery, London, Spohrstr. 7 Ex-Finance Building; image courtesy the artist; Frith Street Gallery, London; Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, Paris; photo: Nils Klinger
jazz. In an adjacent building out back was an outstanding performance work (*This Variation*, 2012) devised by British-born Tino Sehgal. Hailed by some as the best thing at *Documenta*, viewers edged sightless into a pitch-black room, where eighteen *a cappella* performers sang, hummed, clapped and moved in an enthralling sensory experience, as the eyes slowly adjusted to the darkness.

It was a good three-kilometre hike across the baroque Karlsaue Park to another ‘must-see’ work – Pierre Huyghe’s rather depressing ‘swamp’ (*Untitled*, 2012). This large intervention was set in a muddy depression among trees, and at first seemed to be an abandoned building site or quarry, with piles of rubble lying around among weeds, puddles and an uprooted, dying tree. Near the centre of this unlovely scene was an undistinguished stone statue of a reclining woman, whose head is a seething beehive. Two dogs (a white greyhound and a smaller, brown canine of indeterminate breed) with a leg and paw respectively painted bright pink, nosed around the clearing, indifferent to viewers but interacting with visiting dogs, when not asleep in the sun. I later learned that the ‘weeds’ included nightshade, digitalis, opium poppies, cannabis and other psychotropic plants, and that the uprooted oak tree had originally been planted by Joseph Beuys. Huyghe has described his work as ‘Live things and inanimate things, made and not made’.

There were forty installations throughout the park, many housed in small purpose-built cabins, and set among a glade of trees was an utterly entrancing sound work by Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller (*For a thousand years*, 2012). Australian Fiona Hall’s camouflaged ‘hunter’s den’ (*Fall Prey*, 2009-12) was nearby, and along the way you could visit e-flux’s *Time Bank*, have a holistic consultation at Pedro Reyes’s *Sanitorium*, or peer into Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook’s fenced-off cabin, where the Thai artist lived with her dog (named *Ngab*) throughout June, and there were donation boxes to support her work with stray dogs in Bangkok. Prominent outdoor pieces were a massive scaffolding structure by Sam Durant, Anri Sala’s distorted clock, and Giuseppe Penone’s bronze tree with a boulder in its branches.

Cardiff and Bures Miller had an equally beguiling work at Kassel’s large and once-busy central railway station, the Hauptbahnhof. Titled *Alter Bahnhof Video Walk*, you were issued with an iPhone and headset, then embarked on a guided video tour which used GPS technology to show various dreamlike enactments in the very spaces you were looking at, including an account of how platform 13 was once used to load Jews onto concentration-camp bound trains, all quietly narrated by Cardiff: ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=sOkQE7m31Pw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sOkQE7m31Pw)). There was a lot else to experience here, including a single, wall-hung textual work by Australian/Malaysian Simryn Gill (*Where to Draw the Line*, 2012) and a jazzy outdoor sound piece by Susan Philipsz. One unmissable work took some finding, but was worth the effort. Past Michael Portnoy’s looming earth crater (*27 Gnoziv*, 2012) and István Csákány’s wooden sweatshop (*Ghost Keeping*, 2012) lay William Kentridge’s outstanding site-specific installation *The Refusal of Time*. A darkened, shabby warehouse space was transformed into a compelling sensory spectacle using five channels of video, powerfully-present audio, and a so-called ‘elephant-breathing machine’ – a large wooden device which laboured away in the room’s centre like an archaic piece of industrial machinery. The video channels are a *tour-de-force* of many of the artist’s recurrent themes and motifs, and include beautiful monochrome footage of young black actors playing out Chaplin-esque tableaus and slow-motion dance sequences. As a film-maker Kentridge nods to both Georges Meliès and Peter Greenaway, but easily transcends them both to achieve a magically low-tech aesthetic that is unsurpassed. This was the work of a mature artist at the height of his powers, and one of the most impressive single works on show.

Some have hailed *Documenta 13* as the most important contemporary art event (to date) of the 21st century. I wouldn’t go quite that far but as an Australian, coming from a relatively sparse cultural scene, to roam *Documenta 13* was to encounter the full force of European cultural density – the edifice, if you like, of the old North’s depth of thought, its literature, its complex matrix of relationships. You needed wide references and considerable historical knowledge to extract all the resonances from these works, but you could also just encounter them for what they were/are. In Christov-Bagargiev’s words, *Documenta 13* was ‘intentionally uncomfortable, incomplete, nervously lacking – at every step one needs to know that there is something fundamental that is not known, that is invisible and missing – a memory, an unresolved question, a doubt.’

I couldn’t say it better.

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1. *El Chaco* is the biggest surviving fragment of an 840-tonne meteor which exploded in the atmosphere around 4500 years ago, creating a 48,000 square kilometre. Faivovich and Goldberg have been working with meteor fragments from the area since 2006; in 2010, for example, they reunited the two halves of the *El Taco* meteorite, which had previously been held in Argentina and Germany.

*Documenta 15*, curated by Caroline Christov-Bagargiev, was shown at various venues: Kassel (Germany), Kabul (Afghanistan), Alexandria/Cairo (Egypt), and Banff (Canada), 9 June to 16 September 2012. www.d13.documenta.de

David Corbet is a Sydney based writer, curator and artist.