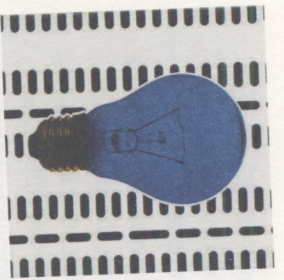


Mission and Commission

documenta
and the Art Market
1955-1968

Mela Dávila Freire



Projekt Geldmacher Mariotti [brochure].
Kassel: self-published, 1968.

²⁰ Paz Guevara, op. cit., p. 298-299.

²¹ *Das Ursprüngliche und die Moderne*, exhibition organised by Berliner Festwochen and the Akademie der Künste, August 23 to September 27, 1964.

²² *Afrika: 100 Stämme, 100 Meisterwerke*, School of Fine Arts, Charlottenburg (Berlin), September 12 to October 4, 1964.

²³ Rudolf Zwirner with Nicola Kuhn, *Ich wolle immer Gegenwort. Autobiographie*, Cologne: Wienand Verlag, 2019, p. 120.

¹⁷ Paz Guevara, 'Exhibition as a Medium for Geopolitical Operations: Digging Up the Exhibitions of the Congress for Cultural Freedom', in Anselm Franke, Nida Ghousse, Paz Guevara, and Antonia Majaca (eds.), *Parapolitics: Cultural Freedom and the Cold War*, Berlin: Haus der Kulturen der Welt and Sternberg Press, 2021, p. 298.

¹⁸ Werner Schmalenbach, Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2011, p. 45. (Werner Schmalenbach interviewed by Eduard Beaucamp.)

¹⁹ Since at least 1954, Barr had been a member of the American Committee for Cultural Freedom (ACCF) section of Congress.

established the value of "cultural freedom" in opposition to what they called the "directed culture" of the Soviet bloc, of which socialist realism and political muralism were examples.¹⁷

Clearly, the historical-political perspectives of documenta's organisers dovetailed neatly with this ideological scenario and collaborations were soon formalised. In 1959, when documenta exhibited in Europe for the first time a selection of American Abstract Expressionist paintings chosen personally by the 'curator-cum-secret agent'¹⁸ Porter McCray, part of the expense of shipping the works to Kassel was borne by MoMA's International Exhibitions Program, whose director, Alfred H. Barr, was a member of the US branch of the Congress for Cultural Freedom.¹⁹ Indeed, a number of other personal connections were established between Congress members and the organisers of the first editions of documenta: Will Grohmann, who was part of the Kassel organising team until the third edition, participated in a symposium organised by the Congress in 1960 in West Berlin, as did Werner Hatfmann.²⁰ Likewise, in 1964, as part of the cultural festival mounted in Berlin by Nicolas Navokov, Secretary General of the Congress, Grohmann helped with the exhibition *The Original and the Moderns*²¹ on display at the Berlin Academy of Arts, while Arnold Bode was commissioned to design the exhibition *Africa: 100 Tribes, 100 Masterpieces*²² for the Berlin School of Fine Arts.

In addition to these connections, funds from the Congress for Cultural Freedom found their way into the documenta's coffers on at least one occasion. In 1964, shortly before opening, documenta III was happily announcing the Amsterdam-based Fondation Européenne de la Culture (FEC)'s release of DM 80,000 to cover the entire cost of the exhibition's drawing section, brokered by German businessman Gustav Stein, one of the first private collectors to make a firm commitment to contemporary art in West Germany.²³ At the time, Stein was both vice-chairman of the FEC and a member of the documenta Board, a supervisory body in place since the second edition. Not long after, in 1967, the instrumental role of the FEC – which turned out to be one of the Congress for Cultural Freedom's main channels of allocation of CIA funds to different European cultural projects – was laid bare when the press revealed the close ties between the CIA and the Congress for Cultural Freedom.

This scoop has gone down in the annals of documenta's history as scarcely more than an anecdote – and the same goes for other circumstances or incidents relating to the financial side of things. Even though documenta's financial antics and status have often been the subject of commentary, intense debate and even angry polemic in German

media, especially when airing the deficits that the project has regularly incurred throughout its existence, the exhibition's financial strengths and weaknesses have rarely been discussed or studied, with historians preferring to focus on art proposals, currents and trends, curatorial styles and their aesthetic and political contexts. Indeed, attempts to reflect on the connection between money and artistic production around documenta have tended to come from artists, who have addressed this issue through their artistic work. One early example of this critical attitude to documenta's funding strategy is the large-scale installation *Projekt Geldmacher Mariotti*, presented in 1968 in the Orangerie park, which highlighted the relevance that 'contributions in kind' from business had reached at the time, while seeking to ignite a discussion around these issues in the public domain.

In the spring of 1968, artists Klaus Geldmacher and Francesco Mariotti, both recent graduates of the Hamburg School of Fine Arts (whose director was Herbert von Buttlar, a member of the documenta organising team) were invited to create a project for the *Ambiente* section of documenta IV.²⁴ Entitled simply *Projekt Geldmacher Mariotti*, their proposal consisted of a gigantic wooden and metal cube in the open air fitted with a propeller, a wiring system and some 10,000 different coloured light bulbs. 'This object could be presented – just as it is now – as a charming work of art with sounds and music and fascinating light effects, and it would probably be quite well received,'²⁵ the artists stated in the small publication that was brought out to accompany the work. But, as they went on to say, their intention was not aesthetic, but political. With their large mechanical sculpture in the Orangerie they sought to open up a space for dialogue through a 'photoacoustic experience': 'We have been given a forum which allows us to start a discussion' and which should fulfil a 'function as a medium for communication and a space to discuss future definitions of art.'²⁶

As would often be the case in the early editions of documenta, the production schedule for *Projekt Geldmacher Mariotti* was so tight that

finalising the installation in time for the opening of the exhibition was nothing short of miraculous. The budget had not been approved until May, and then, as work began, the two artists quickly realised that their estimated costs of around DM 17,000 were far from realistic. A new calculation showed that the final cost would be more than double. To solve the problem, they immediately contacted some 150 industrial suppliers, whom they had selected after a quick visit to the Hanover Industrial Fair which had just taken place, and asked if they would be so kind as to provide the materials they needed to make their gigantic light cube a reality.

They did not have to wait long for the responses. In the end, of the thirty companies expressing a willingness to collaborate, only about fifteen came forward with the materials, most of which were loaned. 'Bayer Farbenfabriken donated 105 Makrolon plastic sheets at the value of DM 10,000. Bettermann-Electro CHG lent 952 metres of track cable, and Fr. Jorns Kupferwerk lent a large axial fan worth DM 8,000. The companies Pioneer C. Melchers & Co (an amplification system) and Klöckner-Moeller-Werke (distributors and circuits) also lent material. Discounts of 50% were given by Lindner GmbH for 9,000 incandescent lamps and Sylvania GmbH for 100 fluorescent lamps.'²⁷

The 20-page brochure accompanying *Projekt Geldmacher Mariotti* shared not only details of this sort, but also a detailed breakdown of the costs and an account of the various obstacles the funding had encountered along the way. It also reserved plenty of space for the sponsoring companies to sport their logos alongside photographs taken of the piece as it was assembled. Furthermore, it included a text by the artists in which they asked Bode to explain his understanding of the concept of 'artistic freedom' which, after all, had been one of the main motivations for setting up documenta. Geldmacher and Mariotti expressed their view that with this, the fourth edition of the exhibition, such a concept might now be considered amortised and questioned what the essence of artistic freedom might be now, given the public administration's role in ensuring the economic viability of documenta: 'We need to investigate how the State guarantees artistic freedom in this context, what motivates it, whether liberal insecurities, tolerant negligence, respect for a minority, a deliberate desire to deceive the public or a vision anchored in certain political-cultural contexts...'²⁸

In line with the protests calling for a total shake-up of institutional authority of all kinds – let's not forget this was 1968 – Geldmacher and Mariotti's piece served to spotlight what the impact and the consequences of institutional funding might be on an event like documenta. Merely attempting to address this issue so explicitly was in itself a bold and

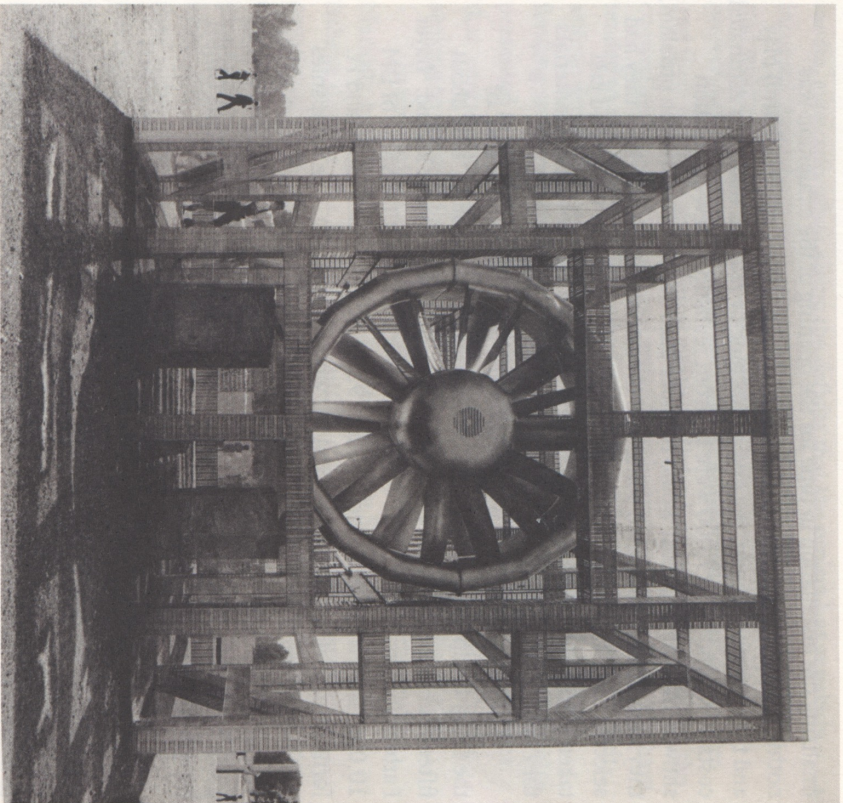
²⁴ The *Ambiente* section was financed by the documenta foundation, whose history is described in the following chapters of this book.

²⁵ Klaus Geldmacher and Francesco Mariotti, *Projekt Geldmacher Mariotti – 4, Documenta [brochure]*, Kassel: self-published, 1968.

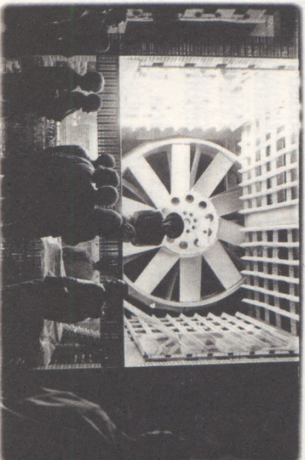
²⁶ Klaus Geldmacher and Francesco Mariotti, *Ibid.*

²⁷ Willi Bongard, 'Markt für 100 Tage', in *Die Zeit* no. 29, July 19, 1968, p. 27 [monthly section 'Art Market']. In addition to editing this section and contributing regularly to *Die Zeit*, Willi Bongard was one of the three curators invited to select projects for *Ambiente* at documenta IV.

²⁸ Klaus Geldmacher and Francesco Mariotti, *op. cit.*



Klaus Geldmacher and Francesco Mariotti: *Projekt Geldmacher Mariotti*, documenta IV, Kassel, 1968.
Photo: documenta archiv.



provocative act, although from today's perspective, it may seem almost ironic that the artists were questioning public financial support while the private sponsoring for their piece failed to arouse any suspicion. The problem that *Projekt Geldmacher Mariotti* essentially addresses, however, is not institutional support per se, but more generally the inevitable economic dependence implicit in artistic production.

Apart from probing Bode about the symbolic price of institutional support from the pages of a brochure displaying corporate logos of sponsoring companies so big they could be mistaken for illustrations, Geldmacher and Mariotti also set out to examine other practices that were characteristic of mercantile and commercial relations generally. They devised two new tactics intended to help cover the costs of their ambitious project: on the one hand, a complex system of allocation of 'shares' that would hypothetically yield 'investors' a profit of DM 500 each if, after documenta, they succeeded in finding a buyer for their outdoor piece; and on the other, in the manner of a duchampian *Boîte en valise* edition, the commercialisation of a limited run of 'scale reproductions' (30 x 30 x 20 cm approx.) of their great cube of lights.

No evidence has been found suggesting that *Projekt Geldmacher Mariotti* was sold after documenta closed,²⁹ and so one can assume that the shares system the pair devised did not work as expected in terms of profits. As for the limited edition, by commercialising it, Geldmacher and Mariotti were in fact resorting to the classic fundraising method used in art: the sale of works. The formula was by no means exceptional. The documenta organisers had employed it themselves to raise funds via an entity specifically created for the purpose – the documenta foundation – which, thanks to revenue from previous editions, had, by 1968, enough money to pay not only for half of the cost of *Projekt Geldmacher Mariotti*, but for the entire *Ambiente* section.

²⁹ As the surviving correspondence from the documenta foundation shows, after the end of documenta IV, rather than profit, the gigantic piece had generated a whole new financial

problem due to its elevated storage costs, even though it had been partially dismantled so that the technical equipment loaned by the various private sponsors could be returned.