

## Documenta 14: What can we still learn from art?

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**Abstract:** Under praise and many controversies, documenta 14, with Polish Adam Szymczyk as its art director, was marked by a strong curatorial discourse. Divided between its usual location in the German city of Kassel and the capital of Greece, the great show used the motto “Learning from Athens” to present a political approach that debated complex discussions of contemporaneity while questioning historical narratives on art.

**Keywords:** Documenta 14. Contemporary art. Athens. Historical narratives. Political art.

Divided between the cities of Athens, Greece, from April 8 to July 16, and Kassel, Germany, from June 10 to September 17, 2017, the 14<sup>th</sup> edition of documenta escaped what is usually expected from that great art show. This can be understood under a variety of positive or negative perspectives. This text is a contribution to understanding them by debating some of the issues that emerged when the author visited the show.

### UNLEARNING IN ORDER TO LEARN

“Learning from Athens” was the slogan of documenta 14, led by the Polish curator Adam Szymczyk. The title created controversy since it came out, especially because of the exhibition's division between the traditional German city of Kassel and the Greek capital. Such displacement was criticized by part of the German press and institutions and by the Greek art community. It resulted in international debates on the complex political and economic relationship between the two countries and extended to discussions on post-colonialism and neocolonialism in the already strained North-South relationship. While Greece is currently facing deep economic recession and strong austerity measures are demanded as a condition for its permanence in the European Union, Germany – as the bloc's main political power – represents the enforcement of such measures. Many Greeks hold Germany responsible for the high debt

assumed by their country and the resulting economic crisis that plagues its population.



**Figure 1.** Marta Minujin, *The Parthenon of Books*, 2017. Steel, books and plastic sheets, Friedrichsplatz, Kassel. Photo by Roman März.<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, documenta 14's proposal was seen by many actors in the art world as an attempt at repairing the imposed austerity measures, through culture. Others, who considered documenta's strength as an important institution in contemporary art scene, accused it of neocolonialism since it literally occupied Greek institutions, incorporating nothing or very little of their particular questions and perspectives into the project. There were also those who saw documenta's displacement to Athens as underscoring the differences between the global north and south and the focus on the Greek city as an attempt to learn how to live in/out of the crisis.

Beyond these issues and the undeniable immediate tension, the curatorial team stated that their intention was to overcome the dichotomy between the two countries, understanding the title as a motto based on which the exhibition would unfold. They also emphasized the idea of *aneducation*, that is, the idea that the exercise of alterity embedded in “learning from” demanded renouncing its own truths and certainties in a process of unlearning. That very idea included a permanent challenge to official narratives of Western Art History and its contexts and criteria of legitimation. This can be seen in the curatorial discourse and the selection of works that dismantled the Eurocentric historical perspective – not by openly criticizing it, but by being the very alternative to such a view.

1. All images selected to accompany this text were taken from the official documenta 14 website and are subtitled as they appear there: <http://www.documenta14.de/en/>.

## GERMANY AND GREECE: HISTORICAL CONFRONTATIONS

Iconic images of Athens such as those of the Parthenon were often present at document 14. In the monumental work *Parthenon of Books* (2017), by Argentine artist Marta Minujin (Figure 1), produced on a 1:1 scale in the center of Friedrichsplatz; in Cornelia Gurlitt's academic paintings from the early twentieth century; in Greek architect Christos Papoulias's drawings and studies for project "The Erichthonean Museum of the Acropolis" (1991); or in evoking German historian and archaeologist J. J. Winckelmann as the founder of Art History as a discipline in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century. His book "The History of Ancient Art" (1764), as well as the first edition of "Athenaeum" (1798-1800), founded by brothers August and Friedrich Schlegel and considered one of the leading magazines in German Romanticism, are highlighted in *Neue Galerie* and inform the public about how Greek art was raised to the status of cradle of Western art and its main features such as harmony, symmetry and attention to proportions were seen as the ideal of beauty for centuries.



Figure 2. Piotr Uklanski and McDermott & McGough. *The Greek Way*, 2017; view of the installation, EMST – National Museum of Contemporary Art, Athens. Photo by Mathias Völzke.

Documenta also emphasized the historical ties between the two countries in World War II. Spanish artist Daniel García Andújar's work "The Disasters of War/Trojan Horse" (2017) used photographs of senior Nazi leaders in front of the Parthenon and other Greek archeological sites as symbols of the city's occupation and submission. Hitler's figure also appeared at the exhibition in the highly ironic

installation made by Piotr Uklanski and the duo McDermott & McGough (Figure 2), in which portraits of the leader of the III Reich are face to face with a series of images taken from Leni Riefenstahl's 1938 film *Olympia*. Here the praise to the classical Greek ideal with its perfect proportions is evidenced as Hitler's obsession, justifying his predilection for neoclassical artistic and architectural production over the art of the vanguards of that time. The history of documenta with its origins in a movement to rebuild the city of Kassel after World War II, aiming at bringing Germany back to relevant discussions on international contemporary art, is directly or indirectly present in the exhibition and its publications.

The Gurlitt case is an example of how historical debts remaining from the war period were crucial to the construction of curatorial thinking. In February 2012, over 1,400 works of art were found at the German collector Cornelius Gurlitt's Munich apartment. Some of them have already been proven to have belonged to Jews who had their property expropriated in World War II. Cornelius' father was one of the few dealers authorized by Nazi authorities to market the so-called degenerate art. This news resulted in remembrance of war violence and abuses and generated claims by heirs for return and repatriation of that property. Taking the Gurlitt case as a reference, Maria Eichhorn (Figure 3) presented a large shelf full of books confiscated or stolen from Jewish families and the corresponding document research proving their ownership.



Figure 3. Mary Eichhorn. *Illegally acquired books pertaining to Jews*, 2016-17. View of the installation, Neue Galerie, Kassel. Photo by Mathias Völzke.

Repatriation, understood more broadly, was a constant element in documenta 14. This can be seen in the relationship established with Greece, which has been trying for decades to retrieve objects, sculptures, reliefs and columns from museums such as the Louvre in Paris, the British Museum in London, the Pergamon Museum in Berlin and the Metropolitan in New York. But also in its more contemporary character, by paying attention to migratory and refugee flows arriving in Europe in large numbers, fleeing the war in Syria and other situations of persecution and violence. The theme is addressed in the work of Pakistani-British artist Rasheed Araeen (Figure 4), "Shamiyaana – Food for Thought: Thought for Change" (2016-17), in which the artist built a restaurant in central Athens's Kotzia Square. The restaurant was intended to be a meeting point for differences, welcoming refugees, unemployed people, local residents and visitors to documenta. Mediterranean dishes prepared using only local ingredients were served around community tables. The artist's intention to share food and personal stories was to create processes of empathy and integration between people who might not meet in other circumstances.



**Figure 4.** Rasheed Araeen, Shamiyaana. *Food for Thought: Thought for Change*, 2016-17. Tents with geometric patchwork, cooking and eating. Kotzia Square, Athens. Photo by Yiannis Hadjiaslanis.

## CURATORIAL STATEMENTS

In proposing a myriad of political debates, the event created expectations that provoked quite different reactions regarding the exhibition project. While a set of publications, debates, meetings and workshops as well as radio and television programs were part of its public programming and educational project, many works were obliterated by the strong curatorial discourse, which superimposed its agenda – however necessary and urgent it might be – to that of the artists.

Therefore, documenta 14 as an art show suffered the setbacks of choices made by its curatorial team. Although it addressed subjects dear in contemporary world, it found it difficult to capture the public's attention and arouse their sensitivities. Characterizing itself as a predominantly discursive exhibition, it dispensed with the visual element at several moments, making abundant use of documentation, testimonies, records and varied files. At the opposite end, it presented works that merely illustrated concepts of the curatorial statements.

While the show did not present significant innovations in terms of artistic languages, it also did not invest on the impact of the visual experience on its visitors. Documenta 14 summoned viewers to constant reflection on their own actions in the world, placing the as historical agents. Such an operation, however, demands time, availability, awareness and public involvement – an objective hardly reached by large-scale exhibitions.

Without questioning its own dimension, the event at least questioned its exhibition policies. Starting from the traditional duration of 100 days<sup>2</sup> in each city, the edition totaled 163 days and exhibited works by more than 160 artists. It had the largest number of Asian, African and Eastern European artists, in addition to presenting a large contingent of artists who were little known in the international circuit (aiming to escape market pressure).

The whole negotiation with institutions and German and Greek authorities was also very complex and with strong political connotation. Perhaps the most significant example of this was the "replacement" of the space at the EMST – The National Museum of Contemporary Art in Athens – with Kassel's Friedricianum. In practice that meant that in order for documenta to use the space of the Greek museum as one of its main exhibition locations – a key issue for the Athens exhibition – the institution had to give up the more traditional exhibition space in Kassel to shelter the EMST collection – predominantly Greek contemporary art – under curatorship proposed by the museum's management.

By imposing its will and occupy the Friedricianum on documenta, the Greek institution broke, even if discreetly and temporarily, with the traditional hierarchical structures of the art system. And even if such a bargain was not part of their original project, the curatorial team accepted such a reversal of values: it occupied and was occupied by Athens, doing politics both in its theme and in its operation.

2. The duration of documenta or the museum of the 100 days as it is also called is a reference to Hitler's degenerate art show, which extended for the same period.

## WHAT DOES ART HAVE TO TEACH?

While starting from a canonical institution and then questioning the creation and perpetuation of historical canons may be seen as one of the major contradictions of documenta 14, embracing such contradictions and living with them may have been its most courageous act.

Among the curatorial team's right and wrong actions, one of their greatest merits was encouraging and facing complex and difficult discussions – many of which without answers of any nature, whether aesthetic and/or ideological. Adam Szymczyk and his team did not fall back on the avant-garde fetish still in place to respond to the constant demand for language renewal. They faced bitter issues which could have been better enjoyed in their poetic potential and sensibility if it were not for the scale of the project and its constant appeal to intellectualization of what was exhibited.

Questioning past versions to build the possibility of more inclusive and less universalizing historical revisions led to the emergence of dissent that was not quickly erased by the exhibition's trajectory. Therefore, documenta 14 showed that many repressed stories are to be expurgated and it reaffirmed the fundamental role of art in a time when, according to the work of the Turkish artist Banu Cennetoğlu (Figure 5), "being safe is scary".<sup>3</sup>



Figure 5. Banu Cennetoğlu, *BEINGSAFEISSCARY* (2014); various materials, Friedrichsplatz, Kassel, photo: Roman März.

## INFORMATION

Learning from Athens

Art director: Adam Szymczyk

### Athens

April 8 through July 16, 2017

47 locations

### Kassel

June 10 through September 17, 2017

35 locations

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(\*)This text was submitted in November 2017.

3. The sentence "being safe is scary" was taken by the artist on April 6, 2017 from a graffiti on the wall at Athens's National Technical University and exposed on the facade of the Friedrichsplatz in Kassel, replacing the letters of the name of the museum.