

Documenta 14: Unlearned Predictability

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Emeka Ogboh, *The Way Earthly Things Are Going*, 2017. Installation view, Multichannel sound installation and real-time LED display of world stock indexes, Athens Conservatoire (Odeion), documenta 14, Photo: Mathias Völzke.

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Anaïs Castro

LEARNING FROM ATHENS

ATHENS

8 APRIL –

16 JULY, 2017

KASSEL

8 JUNE –

17 SEPTEMBER, 2017

In October 2014, when Adam Szymczyk, documenta 14's Artistic Director, announced that the world-renowned symposium would be shared between two cities, Kassel and Athens, his bold move generated intrigue. His explanation for this decision laid out his concern for a didactic consideration of the divisions and tensions between northern and southern Europe. The title *Learning from Athens* promised to address some of the current social and political issues facing Europe today, questioning its foundations such as colonialism, patriarchy, gender-normativity and capitalism amongst others. The title raised suspicion. Who is invited to learn from Athens? Many feared that the exhibition would try to glamorize the 'Greek crisis' and capitalize on what is a very complex and difficult social and economic situation. What's in it for Athens?

These concerns were raised again at the opening press conference in Athens in April. Szymczyk discussed 'unlearning' as a means to abandon preconceptions in order to become a worthy political subject and to defy power relations. Associate Curator Marina Fokidis explained that the exhibition's aim is to pose questions, not present answers and to offer a platform for discussion. Curator Monika Szewczyk suggested challenging traditional tourism as consumption and called for the active participation of the visitors as an alternative. In short, documenta 14 was presented as a social experiment.

However, the open-endedness that seems to have guided the curatorial construction of the project is not without problems. The project poses too many questions, tries to break down too much hegemony, goes in too many directions and is likely to leave one feeling baffled and exhausted. Moreover, there is potential for tragic irony in a project such as documenta 14, wherein contemporary art extracts from real world injustices in order to take centre stage, legitimizing a sort of exploitation through the prism of relational aesthetics and the tyranny of indeterminacy. While the claims of the curatorial team might appear on the surface as subversive and progressive, they are underlying technocratic affirmations with a deliberate agenda, one that has come prevail in our cultural institutions. Esteemed minds such as Suhail Malik and Tirdad Zolghadr have heavily critiqued indeterminacy and the assumption that through alleged socially engaged praxis one somehow exists on the other side of power. documenta continues to be one of the most influential events in contemporary art and its impact permeates the rest of the system. It has repercussions on the art market and will have an effect on what museums across the world show. If anything, documenta is very much a power structure on its own.

Upon first glance, the list of participating artists included few celebrity names. Moreover, the number of artists from Islamic countries, indigenous artists, LGBTQ artists and artists belonging to other minority groups suggests a conscious decision to emphasize voices from marginalized communities—a decision for which the curatorial team should be applauded.

Although visitors to Athens were faced with the hardship of navigating the city under the scathing sun in order to visit spread-out venues, they encountered few spectacular sights. But this is precisely the strength of Athens's selection: it was not a give away. Bouchra Khalili's *The Tempest Society*, presented at Athens School of Fine Arts, is a poignant hour-long video that positions Athenians and Syrian migrants on a theatre stage,

enabling them to tell their stories and making a call for equality and solidarity. At Athens Conservatoire, Susan Hiller's *The Last Silent Movie* is a patchwork of found sound material that presents 25 disappearing or extinguished languages. Next door, the sorrowful vocals in Emeka Ogboh's multi-channel sound installation *The Way Earthly Things Are Going* resonated in the unfinished concrete amphitheatre dimly lit with a LED-thread, displaying real-time Stock Exchange Indexes. On another floor, Hiwa K's video piece *Preimage (Blind as The Mother Tongue)* recounts the artist's journey by foot in 1996, when he fled to Europe from Iraq where he was persecuted as a Kurdish Iraqi. At one point, he balances a sculpture made of mirrors on his nose as he retraces his steps some twenty years later. His story is one of persecution, darkness, disorientation and fear, and of the human need to belong. In the Kassel iteration, Hiwa K's work stands out as well. William L. Pope's *Whispering Campaign*, amplified throughout the city, is composed of many soundworks dispersed in multiple locations. They are a delight to come across.

While Athens succeeded in avoiding the display of Instagrammable-art, the approach that was taken for the Kassel iteration was obviously different. Among the most photographed pieces of documenta 14 is Argentinian artist Marta Minujín's *The Parthenon of Books*, a life-size reproduction of Athens's famous site made up of some 100,000 Nazis-censored books, which stands on the very site where books were burned during the Second World War. At Königsplatz, Olu Oguibe's 52-foot-high concrete obelisk displayed a message in four languages Arabic, English, German and Turkish: "I was a stranger and you took me in," and above the entrance of the Fridericianum, Banu Cennetoğlu's message stated: "Being Safe is Scary." Ibrahim Mahama wrapped Kassel's historical Torwache in jute rags, a textile associated with trade with developing countries. These are monumental works that make political statements but they are like bumper stickers: they have no real political traction.

Guillermo Galindo's *Fluchtzieleuropahavarieschallkörper* encapsulates everything that is wrong with documenta. Seeing biennial-goers circling around the remains of ships from the most militarized zone between the United States and Mexico is a cultural extraction veiled as epistemic guerrilla action. It is another example of a politically charged artwork that presents a situation of oppression through artefact. The public encounters the work, experiences it, digests what it means to them, and swiftly moves on to the next instance of cosmopolitan provocation. Certainly, the juxtaposition of Galindo's work with Cecilia Vicuña's *Quipo Poncho* enriches it. Nevertheless, it is a curatorial decision that resigns both works to their own singularity, continuing the failure of Biennial culture to convey art in a way that does something more than validating the viewers' own meaning of it.

While documenta is presented as something that engages with what is at stake in trying to help Greece, it does so under the aegis of Biennial culture. Adam Szymczyk and his team's ambitious claims are arduous in their scope, not because the claims staked are not worthy of consideration and in need of desperate and drastic action, but because they are presented with the bricks and mortar to build a construct without any substantial framework. Despite this, documenta 14 includes a significant number of standout works that achieve a high level of political engagement with potential for real change.

Such is the case of Maria Eichhorn's *Rose Valland Institut*, an installation in which she presents books borrowed from the Berlin Library that had been confiscated from Jewish people during the Second World War and whose rightful owners have not yet been identified. Parallel with the display of this illegitimate collection of books she instigated the project *Open Call: Unlawful Ownership in Germany*, which aims to identify other objects stolen by the Nazis. Further along in the hall, Mattin's performance work is set apart in its stark rejection of medium specificity. *Social Dissonance* is art that requires participation but rejects the relationship between the object and the observer. The infrastructure that brings viewers to this place and creates their relationships with other participants is the fabric of the work. Terre Thaemlitz's *Lovebomb/Ai No Bakudan* is another example of how documenta is at its strongest when it does not attempt to engage with an entire nation's struggles. In general, Thaemlitz's work can be understood as an analysis of gender-politics in a way that disavows binaries. Upon entering the soundproofed room in the Museum Für Sepulkultur, the viewer is enveloped in a swell of spectral noise and low frequencies set to a collage of glitched cartoons, amateur animation and hauntological webpages, all narrated by pop-up warnings from an operating system. Calls to war in the face of apartheid meet chicks with dicks in *Lovebomb/Ai No Bakudan*, a stream-of-consciousness interrogation of the loaded concept of love as a weapon. It truly is a euphoric piece of art and one that succeeds in presenting love as an ideological expression of a culture's material processes.

Véréna Paravel and Lucien Castaing-Taylor's *Commensal* finalizes the brutality of the means by which you consume art at documenta. Off the beaten track, on a street lined with working prostitutes, a chilling tale of cannibalism is conveyed in a manner that echoes the egotistical penance Kassel takes on every five years in the name of culture: Kunst ist Kapital. Ultimately, the same questions of power dynamics resurface and what results is a closed circuit of criticism rather than the transgressing social experiment that the curators aimed to exert.

Anais Castro is an art critic and curator based in Montreal and Berlin. She holds a BFA from Concordia University and a Masters in Art History, Curating and Criticism from the University of Edinburgh. She has curated a number of projects in past years, including *Monochrome*³, *Porcelain: Breaking Tradition*, *Moving Still | Still Moving*, *#self* and more recently *Self-Abstractions* and *The Tip of the Iceberg*. She was a Critic in Residence at Burlington City Arts in 2015 and a Curator in Residence at Titanik in Turku, Finland. She has published critical essays and reviews in many art magazines, such as *thisistomorrow*, *esse arts + opinions*, *ESPACE art actuel*, *Vie des arts* and *Line Magazine*. She is the Executive Director of Art Mûr Berlin.

Ibrahim Mahama, Check Point, Profiyigika, 1934–2034, 2016–2017, 2017. Performance with charcoal sacks on Syntagma Square, Athens, documenta 14, photo: Mathias Völzke
Hiwa K, When We Were Exhaling Images, 2017. Installation View, Various materials, in Zusammenarbeit mit PDO22, dem Diplomstudiengang Produktdesign, Prof. Jakob Gebert, Kunsthochschule Kassel, Friedriehsplatz, Kassel, documenta 14, Photo: Mathias Völzke.

