



OPINION - 12 JUN 2017

documenta 14 Kassel: Highlights from the Off-Site Venues

The third of our editors' impressions from Kassel, Amy Sherlock on the works housed in the exhibition's 'off-sites'

BY AMY SHERLOCK

Large-scale exhibitions are fatiguing. Even in cases – and documenta 14 is not one – where visitors are helped by legible maps and well-informed invigilators, and in which we are spared the extensive prerequisite reading required by oblique curatorial theses. Beyond the three main venues in Kassel this year – the Neue and Neue Neue galleries, and documenta Halle – there are artworks in around 30 further locations across the city, ranging from a former tofu factory in the north of the city to a new museum dedicated to the Brothers Grimm at the top of the landscaped Weinberg-Terrassen overlooking the Südstadt. This year, these 'off-sites' include the Fridericianum, which has been the historical centrepiece of the quinquennial exhibition since its first iteration in 1955. As part of documenta 14's 'Learning from Athens' exchange, the museum is hosting an interesting but tangential overview of the collection of the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Athens

(EMST) – currently one of the principal venues of the Greek leg of documenta 14 – curated by the EMST’s director, Katerina Koskina.



Michel Auder, *The Course of Empire*, 2017, fourteen-channel digital video installation, Former Underground Train Station (KulturBahnhof), Kassel, documenta 14, photograph: Jasper Kettne

Over two days, I made it to 22 of the off-site venues. Do not feel you need do the same. As with every exhibition on this scale, the strength of works varies enormously between spaces, as does their resonance with director Adam Szymczyk’s general theme of the crisis of the Global North. There are circumstantial reasons for my general antipathy towards the programme: an unfortunate drenching in a June downpour while searching, fruitlessly, for unmapped artworks in Karlsaue park; and beginning my exhibition visit, as per the curators’ bidding, at the KulturBahnhof – a disused underground stop below the central train station – where only one work, by Michel Auder, was labelled and none of the guards could help with identifying the others. (Was the decision not to tell the invigilators anything about the works they were standing near a curatorial conceit? If so, it is a vexing and somewhat unproductive one. Discussing the artworks and the ideas behind them with invigilators, who must number in the hundreds here, must be one of the most direct means of that ever-important ‘engagement’ with a community beyond the international biennale circuit that is available to an exhibition on this scale.) This backdrop of frustration and fatigue, then, might also go some way to explaining why my highlights are mostly filmic – screened in black-box spaces, with cinema-style fold-down seating, and projected large scale. Another reason might be: in a show that, for the most part, seems deeply skeptical – perhaps even afraid – of spectacle, this gravitation towards the cinematic speaks of an elsewhere-frustrated desire to be acted upon sensorially as well as intellectually: to be absorbed, arrested and moved by images and sound.



Nairy Baghramian, *The Iron Table (Homage to Jane Bowles)*, 2002, various materials, installation view, Hessisches Landesmuseum, Kassel, documenta 14, photograph: Michael Nast

If you only have time to visit one off-site location in Kassel, I would advise making it the Hessisches Landesmuseum (Hessian State Museum), an imposing neoclassical building in the southwest of the city inaugurated in 1913. In addition to clean, colourful and large sculptural installations by Nevin Aladağ, Nairy Baghramian and Mata Aho Collective, the museum's third floor hosts a new, three-screen projection by Naeem Mohaiemen (co-commissioned by documenta, the Sharjah Art Foundation and the Ford Foundation's JustFilms). In contrast to the lyrical, humour-tinged melancholy of the artist's first fiction film, *Tripoli Cancelled* (2017), which is a highlight of the show currently at the EMST in Athens, *Two Meetings and a Funeral* (2017) is a didactic, more-or-less chronological account of the ill-fated Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). Born out of the 1956 Declaration of Brijuni signed by Egypt, India and Yugoslavia, NAM proposed a 'Third World' of nations of the Global South that could act independently of, and free of intervention from, the Cold War superpowers. Founded along the principles of mutual non-aggression, respect for territorial sovereignty and non-interference in domestic affairs, NAM was a secular coalition, many of whose member-states were, at the time, organized or organizing along socialist lines. Since the 1990s, NAM has faded into insignificance, split by conflict, ideological divisions and the shift of the global political spectrum to the right, and the rise of blocs including the Organization of Islamic Co-operation (OIC), which has come to supersede NAM in many of its former heartlands in the Middle East and North Africa. (Just eight heads of state attended the most recent NAM summit, in 2016, on Venezuela's Margarita Island.)



Naeem Mohaiemen, *Two Meetings and a Funeral*, 2017, three-channel digital video installation, Hessisches Landesmuseum, Kassel, documenta 14, photograph: Michael Nast

Interweaving archival footage from early NAM conferences and interviews with historians, scholars and activists, including Amirul Islam, Vijay Prashad, Zonayed Saki and the artist Atef Berredjem, *Two Meetings* charts the history of NAM by way of Mohaiemen's native Bangladesh, whose development offers a parallel cautionary tale. The 1973 NAM conference in Algiers was the first time that the newly formed Bangladeshi state was recognized on the international stage by leaders from countries including Libya and Iran. (It had seceded, after the brutal repression of the Bengali nationalist movement by the Pakistani military, in 1971; Pakistan would not recognize Bangladesh as an independent nation until the second summit of OIC, in Lahore, the following year.) In the event, the NAM was to have taken place in Dhaka in 2001 stands as a symbol of the movement's demise. With infrastructure projects in the Bangladeshi capital incomplete, the conference was relocated; the Dhaka venue was completed with the help of Chinese investment in 2002 and inaugurated as the China Friendship Conference Centre – a stark indication of the shifting balance of geo-political power since the Cold War days and the outmoded nomenclature of 'first' and 'third' worlds. Cutting cleanly between dated intertitles, text and talking-head footage – and propelled by the compulsive beats of an original soundtrack by musician Qasim Ali Naqvi – if the film's structure is straightforwardly didactic, the political and economic relations that it narrates are complex and tangled. They are also bloody: the roll call at the end of the film, which includes a statement by and brief biography of each of its protagonists, includes such figures as Muammar Gaddafi, who appears, young and handsome, in an archival clip from the early 1970s, and Yasser Arafat ('Palestine is the cement that holds the Arab world together, or it is the explosive that blow it apart') in his trademark dark glasses. Deftly avoiding the twin traps of moralizing and nostalgia, *Two Meetings'* critical assessment of NAM and its failure is prescient in its analysis of how international relations fall apart. More optimistically, as part of the public programme curated by Paul B. Preciado, a three-day conference on the

topic of 'Reviving the Idea of a Global Left' (August 1-4), will use NAM's lessons to ask what kind of successor organization might be possible today.



Véréna Paravel and Lucien Castaing-Taylor, *Commensal*, 2017, installation view, Tofufabrik, Kassel, documenta 14

Shifting to the micro, biographical level, Véréna Paravel and Lucien Castaing-Taylor's haunting, unsettling film *Commensal* (2017) also has to do with whether we ever do, can, or even want to, learn from our mistakes. Screened in a former tofu factory in the post-industrial hinterlands that surround the Neue Neue Galerie, the venue is off the beaten track but well worth the journey. Paravel and Castaing-Taylor, who set up the Sensory Ethnography Lab at Harvard University, have established a distinctive mode of quasi- (or queasy-) documentary filmmaking that combines narrative obliqueness with an overwhelming proximity to the camera's objects, blurring the lines between seeing, feeling and understanding. In the case of *Commensal*, the duo's camera is mostly trained on the aged visage of Issei Sagawa, a Japanese man who became a macabre celebrity in the 1980s after murdering and partially eating a 25-year-old Dutch woman while a graduate student in Paris. Sagawa was declared unfit to stand trial on grounds of insanity and committed to an institution in France but, after only a couple years, he was extradited to Japan where doctors found him to be sane. By some extraordinary quirk of international justice, he was released. Now 68 – and having suffered a cerebral hemorrhage a few years ago – he lives alone in a small apartment where he is cared for by his younger brother. Not that the film tells you any of this – which is its compelling and uneasy beauty. Instead, we see extreme close-ups of Sagawa's face, blurring in and out of focus – his pockmarked skin, the droop of his right eye – and his illustrations for a darkly erotic manga book, which tells the story of the Paris crime. ('This is too

much [...] it's making me sick,' the brother says as they flick through pages depicting Sagawa as a scorched-red sex demon, his erection throbbing, and the gaping incisions into his victim's flesh.)

<https://www.frieze.com/event/art-architecture-conference>

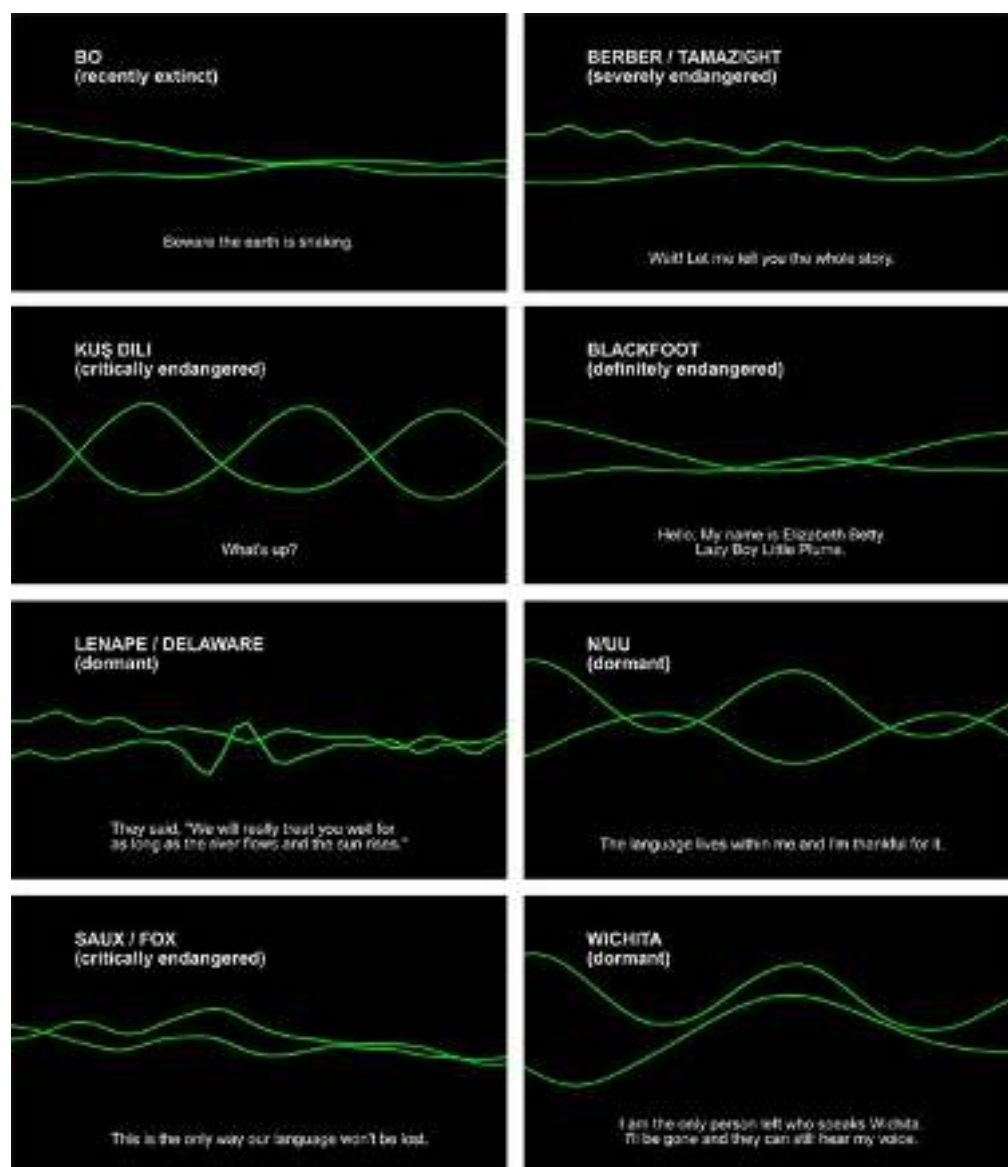
The brothers speak candidly about the murder – at points, almost jokingly. The film offers neither incrimination nor remorse nor absolution – nor is it a simple portrayal of the banality of the monstrous or of the levelling fragility of the human body: it something both more tender and more terrible. In a fundamental way, it's also a work about the power of images to act on us – from pornography to the stomach-turning manga to Sagawa's comment that his first fantasies about Western women came from seeing Grace Kelly on screen. Which is perhaps precisely why this whole exhibition seems suspicious of them, of what they might be responsible for – so keen to keep their seductive power at a distance, under glass or at an archeological remove.



Douglas Gordon, *I Had Nowhere to Go*, 2016, film still, screened at Cinestar movie theatre, Kassel, for documenta 14, 2017

Screening four times daily at the Cinestar movie theatre, Douglas Gordon's portrait of Jonas Mekas begins with the legendary 'filmer' recounting an anecdote about his first photographic image. He is a boy standing on a farm at the edge of his village, watching Soviet tanks roll through. From the edge of the road, he snaps a picture; a Soviet officer runs over, grabs the camera, pulls out the film and stamps it into the dust under his heavy boots. The image is gone but, the suggestion is, the artefact may still be there, buried under decades of Lithuanian dust. Then the on-screen image disappears and, for most of the 90-odd minutes that follow, we are left in darkness with Mekas's heavily-accented English narrating snapshots of his youth in war-ravaged Eastern Europe: forced labour, Displaced Persons camps, the long journey to America and what he found there. When *I Had Nowhere to Go* had its US premiere at New York Film Festival last year, the film drew criticism for being

overwrought: paradoxically bombastic in its attempts to strip away; pathos laden; simplistic in its emphasis on the poverty of the image in relation to experience (specifically trauma). I stayed for 30 minutes, and what I saw I found beautiful. But, then, I have always liked being read stories. ('You are welcome to read this as a fiction,' Mekas's voice says, in the darkness, at a certain point.) In quite different but equally effective ways, both Gordon's and Paravel and Castaing-Taylor's films are making a very simple point about the impossibility of seeing the world through another person's eyes. In the case of Mekas, who has spent a career documenting the day-to-day of the world around him, we need his familiar images – of New York, for instance – to disappear in order to begin to understand what they represent for him; with Sagawa's comic book, on the other hand, the pictures force us to go where our imaginations might prefer not to.



Susan Hiller, *Lost and Found*, 2016, video installation, Grimmwelt, Kassel, documenta 14. Courtesy: Susan Hiller and Lisson Gallery, London, New York, Milan © Susan Hiller/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2017

Finally: blindness – or lacunae – draw together a tight, sombre, presentation at the Grimmwelt museum, where Roe Rosen's update on *The Merchant of Venice* (*The Blind Merchant*, 1989–91) presents Shylock, at the outset of the drama, as having been blinded in punishment for a prior misdemeanor. Correspondingly, the artist's illustrations of all pages in which the character appears were drawn blindfolded. Archival materials relating to the fascinating, overlooked historical figures Asja Lācis (an experimental Latvian theatre director, the lover of Walter Benjamin in the 1920s) and Tom Seidmann-Freud (illustrator, children's book author, niece of Sigmund) are unfortunately unimaginative in their presentation, while Susan Hiller's *Lost and Found* (2016), which burbles from a side room, documents disappearing and disappeared global languages.

In the centre of the room, five plaster panels lie flat on plinths under glass cases: a huddled old crone, a tree, a prince on horseback. They were painted by the Polish-Jewish author Bruno Schulz, just before his remarkable career was cut short by a bullet from a Nazi pistol in the Drohobych ghetto, in the home of an a senior SS officer named Felix Landau. More precisely, they decorated the walls in the nursery of Landau's young son. After the war, Villa Landau was nationalized and Schulz's murals painted over; they were only rediscovered in 2001. There are obvious and heartbreaking points to be made here about the dangers of nationalism and myth-making, the relativity of innocence and hopelessness of fantasy in a place from which there was to be no escape. However, these faded, fragile pieces also encapsulate an idea that – for better or for worse – underpins this edition of documenta: the image as evidence, image as account. Look behind it, look through it, look beyond it: no picture is ever innocent.

Main image: Naeem Mohaiemen, Two Meetings and a Funeral, 2017, three-channel digital video installation, Hessisches Landesmuseum, Kassel, documenta 14, photograph: Michael Nast

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