

Documenta 14

ATHENS CONSERVATOIRE / ATHENS SCHOOL OF FINE ART / BENAKI MUSEUM / MUSEUM OF ANTI-DICTATORSHIP / NATIONAL MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART / PARKO ELEFThERIAS, Athens

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The fourteenth edition of Documenta takes place, for the first time in the institution's history, across two locations. By staging it in Germany and Greece, and expressing the hope that an exhibition bankrolled by the former might effectively critique the infrastructures of power that have immiserated the latter, curator Adam Szymczyk signalled that this would be a Documenta defined by its internal contradictions. The embrace of paradox continued in the press conference for the Athens opening, during which Szymczyk spoke about the possibility of "learning from Athens" through a process of "unlearning what we know."

That revealing "we" encapsulates some of the concerns surrounding the decision to splay Documenta 14 across a fragmenting Europe. Not the least of these is that the southern city might be expected to play the role of exotic other to the visiting northern institution, with whose western European sensibilities the visitor is assumed to identify. These and other conflicts between the manifest aims of Documenta 14 and its underlying structures are never entirely resolved, but the same might be said of any exhibition of contemporary art on a comparable scale. Indeed, Szymczyk's statement to the press suggested a strategy predicated on acknowledging and then exploring the productive tensions between contradictory positions. In order to know yourself, he proposes, you must first become a stranger to yourself. A further Socratic injunction, that the greatest part of wisdom consists in the admission of ignorance, might reassure visitors to this sprawling citywide presentation of some 160 artists, many of whose names will be foreign to even the most diligent art world insider. Estrangement is both the enduring effect and founding principle of an exhibition divided against itself.

An intelligently curated section at the Pireos annexe of the Benaki Museum introduces the movement between different states—of consciousness, being, knowledge, citizenship, identity—as one method through which to undermine established logics. This Documenta is played by an ensemble cast, but among the works which might serve to illuminate broader themes is Véréna Paravel and Lucien Castaing-Taylor's mesmerizing film *somniloquies* (2017), narrated by a prolific sleep-talker. Set to ghostlike moving images of sleeping bodies suspended in space, these direct dispatches from the unconscious—occasionally explicit, always surreal, frequently discomfiting—suggest that it might be possible to "learn" about one's self by first moving outside it.

At the same venue, Roe Rosen's installation *Live and Die as Eva Braun* (1995–97), a plot for an immersive virtual reality experience printed onto ten black banners and accompanied by framed illustrations, also articulates what is typically left unspoken. By encouraging the viewer to identify with Hitler's pitiable mistress, the work challenges conventions of remembrance and identity while forcing home the point that the lines separating credulous stupidity from the commission of evil are more easily crossed than it is comfortable to acknowledge. *Färden* (*The Journey/Mátki*) (1986), an embroidered linen by Britta Marakatt-Labba, the most accomplished of a contingent of Sami artists represented in the show, depicts the lowering of a casket by a congregation of mourners, above whom soar the souls of the recently departed. That the living and dead might be more intimately connected than is dreamt of by science is reiterated by the dismembered bones depicted in the same artist's *Skallarna* (*The Skulls/Oaiveskálžžut*) (2017). The embroidery on linen presents a delicately morbid, uncannily homely protest against western anthropologists' disinterment of skeletons on the grounds that this disturbs the souls to whom they continue to belong.

In Marakatt-Labba's work, as elsewhere in the exhibition, critique is directed against zealots of any stripe who claim to have identified a system of knowledge that is true to the exclusion of all others, whether scientific materialism, patriarchal government, or neoliberal economics. The determination to represent as many structures of thought as possible lends this exhibition a dizzying variety of styles and attitudes. My personal highlights were as varied as Mounira Al Solh's decorated shelter at the Museum of Islamic Art, which houses the embroidered testimonies of Middle Eastern migrants (*Sperveri*, 2017), Pope L's citywide *Whispering Campaign* (2016–17), and Benjamin Patterson's open air sound installation *When Elephants Fight, It Is the Frogs that Suffer* (2016), set beside a running stream at the Byzantine Gardens and comprising a croaking frog chorus intermittently interrupted by such appropriately Heraclitean pronouncements as "All is Flux." In different circumstances such a rounding-up



1 Gordon Hookey, *Solidarity*, 2017.



2 Véréna Paravel and Lucien Castaing-Taylor, *somniloquies*, 2017.



3 Roe Rosen, *Live and Die as Eva Braun*, 1995–97.



4 Britta Marakatt-Labba, [left] *Färden (The Journey/Mátki)*, 1986. Embroidery and print on linen, 46 x 70 cm; [right] *Skallarna (The Skulls/Oaiveskálžžut)*, 2017.



5 Mounira Al Solh, *Sperveri*, 2017.

of approaches and epistemologies might feel like a purely intellectual exercise; in the context of the accelerating collapse of the institutions and principles that have shaped western society since the Enlightenment, however, the search for new ways of structuring the future feels like a matter of more than academic interest.

The persistent and pointed juxtaposition of historical with contemporary work makes clear that the re-imagination of our future entails the open-minded reappraisal of our past. While Szymczyk's principle of "unlearning" might at first glance seem worryingly close to the postmodern relativism recently hijacked by the far right, works such as Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi's film *Return to Khodorciur—Armenian Diary* (1986)—which records Gianikian's father reading from the harrowing journal he kept during the Armenian genocide of 1915—illustrate the false equivalence between post-truth and non-canonical accounts of history. As in Tshibumba Kanda Matulu's cycle of paintings recounting the fraught past of the Democratic Republic of Congo ("101 Works," 1973-74), the visitor is urged to be receptive to different accounts of the world. The practice of history is presented as an ongoing activity, requiring the visitor to step outside authorized accounts of the past and exercise judgment.

The medium most closely associated with moving outside oneself—*ekstasis*—is music, which might explain why this edition of Documenta is at its strongest when exploring the revelatory and ecstatic potential of sound. At Odeion, the Athens Conservatoire, Ben Russell's 35mm film *Black and White Trypps Number Three* (2007) documents how noise music can induce altered states. This portrait of a crowd of bodies transformed into a single rapturous mass suggests that sound can stimulate the kind of communal experience that is increasingly denied to western societies disfigured by capitalist individualism. That sound can dissolve the boundaries between self and other was demonstrated during the opening days by Alvin Lucier's live performance of *I am sitting in a room* (1969/2017) at the same venue.

Sitting on a wooden chair, the octogenarian Lucier described the sound piece in a few, halting sentences. These amplified words were picked up by microphones placed in the packed auditorium and played repeatedly back through the speakers, each time picking up a layer of distortion until, in the artist's own words, "the resonant frequencies of the room reinforce themselves so that any semblance of my speech, with perhaps the exception of rhythm, is destroyed." As his words dissolved gradually into shimmering metallic sheets of sound, pulsing through an audience whose physical occupation of the space played a part in determining their frequency, I was moved.

At the Athens School of Fine Art, one of the young activists portrayed in Bouchra Khalili's defiant digital video documentary *The Tempest Society* (2017) describes the emerging coalition between oppressed communities around the world as a "new music" to which they have "already begun to listen," suggesting that polyphony is not only a useful curatorial tool but a principle of resistance. Installed just a few meters away, however, Artur Żmijewski's unnerving *Glimpse* (2016-17) interrogates the ethics of art's engagement with social issues. The black-and-white, meaningfully silent 16mm film depicts a series of "gifts" presented by the artist to refugees in the cramped, numbered shacks that made up the migrant camp at Calais. The viewer is left to consider, as the artist proceeds roughly to pose his subjects and then to cover with white zinc paint the face of a black man to whom he has given a new item of clothing, what precisely he—and his audience—receives in exchange.

The instrumentalization of silent witnesses to history finds another, more literal, expression at the National Museum of Contemporary Art. A gallery is devoted to the avant-garde experiments of Russian composer Arseny Avraamov (1886-1944), whose invention of graphical sound made it possible to transcribe objects as musical notation and thereby to "play them" using a sound system. He chose for his first subjects classical vases, an attempt to recover a forgotten past through sound that resonates in this context. For his performance on the opening day of his *Border Cantos* (2012–ongoing), Guillermo Galindo made a tin can symphony out of makeshift instruments constructed from detritus collected from migrants in Kassel and Athens. Nevin Aladağ's gently surrealist *Music Room (Athens)* (2017) also coaxes sound from dumb objects, in her case by stringing a high backed, narrow chair or stretching a drum skin over the seat of a stool.

In common with many of the works across 40 venues in Athens, Aladağ's evocative installation is only fully activated by its performance. This is analogous of the relationship between Documenta's physical exhibitions and the broader conceptual framework of which they are only one part, and without reference to which they can feel obscure. These curricular activities include the publication of four issues of Documenta's "takeover" of the Greek magazine *South as a State of Mind* under the editorship of Quinn Latimer(1), an experiment in radical pedagogy entitled "aneducation," and an extensive public program curated by Paul B. Preciado and hosted by the Municipal Gallery in Parko Eleftherias. These were the spaces in which Documenta 14's principles were refined and articulated. That the findings of these assemblies—on such diverse themes as masks, language, gift economies, gender fluidity, antiquity, and hunger—are not more easily available to the visitor is to be regretted.



6 Pope.L, *Whispering Campaign*, 2016–17.



7 Ben Russell, *Black and White Trypps Number Three*, 2007.



8 Benjamin Patterson, *When Elephants Fight, It Is the Frogs that Suffer*, 2016–17.



9 Bouchra Khalili, *The Tempest Society*, 2017.



10 Nevin Aladağ, *Music Room (Athens)*, 2017.

Inevitably for an exhibition which attempts to orchestrate so many marginalized and dissident voices, Documenta 14 oscillates between the musical and psychological applications of the word “fugue”: a delicate polyphonic arrangement and state of momentary confusion. Yet in a broader sociopolitical context characterized by aggressive essentialism and wilful oversimplifications, this faith in the visitor’s willingness to embrace complexity constitutes a political position. Indeed, by recognizing and undermining binaries—between implication and critique, north and south, male and female, citizenship and statelessness, sound and silence, freedom and constraint, individual and collective—the exhibition reclaims instability, uncertainty, and ambiguity as productive states and progressive principles. To move forward, it proposes, it is necessary to live in-between.

(1) On which, full disclosure, I worked as associate editor.

Ben Eastham is assistant editor at art-agenda and co-founder of *The White Review*. He is the co-author with Katya Tylevich of *My Life as a Work of Art* (Laurence King, 2016).



11 Beau Dick, twenty-two masks from the series “Atlakim,” 1990–2012.



12 Hans Haacke, *Wir (alle) sind das Volk—We (all) are the people*, 2003/2017.

1 Gordon Hookey, *Solidarity*, 2017. Acrylic paint on concrete wall at Athens School of Fine Arts. © Gordon Hookey/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2017, documenta 14. Photo by Stathis Mamalakis.

2 Véréna Paravel and Lucien Castaing-Taylor, *somniloquies*, 2017. Digital video, installation view, Benaki Museum—Pireos Street Annexe, Athens, documenta 14. Photo by Yiannis Hadjiaslanis.

3 Roe Rosen, *Live and Die as Eva Braun*, 1995–97. Mixed media on paper, dimensions variable. Installed at Benaki Museum—Pireos Street Annexe, Athens, documenta 14. Photo by Stathis Mamalakis.

4 Britta Marakatt-Labba, [left] *Färden (The Journey/Mätki)*, 1986. Embroidery and print on linen, 46 × 70 cm; [right] *Skallarna (The Skulls/Oaiveskálzžut)*, 2017. Embroidered linen, 23 × 23 cm. Installed at the Benaki Museum—Pireos Street Annexe, © Britta Marakatt-Labba/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2017, documenta 14. Photo by Stathis Mamalakis.

5 Mounira Al Solh, *Sperveri*, 2017. Installed at the Museum of Islamic Art, Benaki Museum, Athens, documenta 14. Photo by Yiannis Hadjiaslanis.

6 Pope L., *Whispering Campaign*, 2016–17. Sound installation at various locations, Athens, documenta 14. Photo by Freddie F.

7 Ben Russell, *Black and White Trypps Number Three*, 2007. Digital video transferred from 35 mm film, Conservatoire (Odeion), Athens, documenta 14. Photo by Mathias Völzke.

8 Benjamin Patterson, *When Elephants Fight, It Is the Frogs that Suffer*, 2016–17. Sonic graffiti, twenty-four-channel sound installation at the Byzantine and Christian Museum (Gardens), Athens, documenta 14. Photo by Freddie F.

9 Bouchra Khalili, *The Tempest Society*, 2017. Digital video, installation view, Athens School of Fine Arts, documenta 14. © Bouchra Khalili/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2017. Photo by Angelos Giotopoulos.

10 Nevin Aladağ, *Music Room (Athens)*, 2017. Installation with furniture, housewares, musical-instrument components, and performances, Conservatoire (Odeion), Athens, documenta 14. Image courtesy of documenta 14. Photo by Mathias Völzke.

11 Beau Dick, twenty-two masks from the series “Atlakim,” 1990–2012. Mixed media, dimensions variable. Installed at EMST—National Museum of Contemporary Art, Athens, documenta 14. Image courtesy of documenta 14. Photo by Mathias Völzke.

12 Hans Haacke, *Wir (alle) sind das Volk—We (all) are the people*, 2003/2017. Banner, EMST—National Museum of Contemporary Art, Athens, documenta 14. © Hans Haacke/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2017. Photo by Mathias Völzke.

“The Boat is Leaking. The Captain Lied.”

FONDAZIONE PRADA, Venice

Spaces—Containers

Martino Gamper's "Middle Chair"

POLLOK HOUSE, Glasgow

Nick Bastis's "Sentries"

ERMES-ERMES, Rome