Documenta 14, Kassel: 30 recommendations from 10 artists

After launching for the first time in Athens in April, the quinquennial art exhibition Documenta 14 has just opened across 35 venues and numerous outdoor sites in its home city of Kassel, Germany. Ten a-n artist members, who visited Kassel with the support of an a-n Travel bursary, pick their top three works from the vast city-wide programme.

This year’s Documenta 14 (http://www.documenta14.de/en/) in Kassel, Germany follows on from the Athens leg which opened in April and continues until 16 July. That first iteration of the 2017 edition of the quinquennial art exhibition marks a major new departure for Documenta, acting as a kind of counterpoint to Kassel and establishing a dialogue around the historical relationship between Greece and Germany – and of course the more recent EU edicts around Greece’s national debt and enforced austerity.

It has also had a very obvious and visible impact on the Kassel event, with the vast Fridericianum – usually the main exhibition venue – given over to the collection of Greek and international art from the National Museum of Contemporary Arts, Athens (http://www.emst.gr/en/) (EMST).

In a move that chimes with its ‘Learning from Athens’ title, the only Documenta 14 artist exhibited in the Fridericianum is Ben Russell who presents the video installation, *Good Luck*. Outside, the museum’s name has been replaced with the words, ‘Being Safe is Scary’, by the artist Banu Cennetoglu.

Curated by artistic director Adam Szymczyk, Documenta 14 is a vast exhibition of works that sprawls across 35 venues; during its three months (10 June – 17 September 2017) it dominates this small city in the Hesse region of Germany.
As well as museums and permanent art spaces, Documenta 14 also presents works outside and in numerous temporary sites.

Supported by a-n Travel bursaries (https://www.a-n.co.uk/news/a-n-bursaries-23-artists-receive-awards-to-attend-venice-biennale-and-documenta), a number of a-n artist members attended the Documenta 14 preview in Kassel. Here, 10 of them select three works each that have left a lasting impression on them.

Documenta 14 recommendations

Pope.L,


A recurring pattern across this Documenta is artists’ use of various documentary forms, employed to explore and explain complex histories and relationships. Pope.L’s pieces also tell of interwoven narratives but instead of giving us the whole story he simply nods to the direction he wants us to look. He is one of the few artists in the exhibition who appreciates that humour has a way of cutting to a political point. His small-scale text paintings are a good example of this – White People Are God’s Way of Saying I’m Sorry; Green People Are a Recent Invention.

Likewise, his Whispering Campaign (listed materials: Nation, people, sentiment, language, time. 9,438 hours) forgoes physical space to occupy the exhibition ‘ether’. Whispered vocals carry across the open space of Friedrichplatz (http://www.documenta14.de/en/venues/21714/friedrichsplatz) or sound suddenly from behind anonymous doors in exhibition spaces and from within parked cars on the street. The vocals, described as ‘secrets, speculations, half-truths and post-truths’, have been recorded from the voices of ‘local residents and natives’ of both Kassel and Athens.
Marie Cool Fabio Balducci, *Untitled*, Documenta Halle

In a Documenta that is packed with artists and artworks with something to tell you, it is the understated works which carry a particular kind of quiet power. This piece, constructed of upturned office tables connected with lines of Scotch tape, passed me by as I was pacing through the Documenta Halle at the end of my first day. It wasn’t until I happened upon the artist performing it later that its perfectly simple magic spoke to me. We’ve all done that thing where we rub our finger along the sticky end of a piece of sellotape and feel its vibrations in our fingers. This is exactly what the artist did, slowly strolling back and forth running a single finger along the tape. It was nothing and everything at the same time, transporting me to a time of blissful childhood boredom.

Otobong Nkanga, *Carved to Flow*, Neue Galerie

Like many of the pieces in the show, this work by Nigerian artist Otobong Nkanga comes to life when performed. The work is shown across the Documenta venues in various guises, from performance through to the exhibition of the performance props and materials. The piece is centred around the development of a ‘circular production’ enterprise producing a soap called ‘08 Black Stone’ for sale across the Documenta venues. The soap recipe, conceived by the artist, fuses eight oils and butters from across the Mediterranean, Middle East, North and West Africa. Otobong describes how the piece is about exploring the ‘networked geographies, traditions, histories and people’ that go into the making of a product.

Selected by Maurice Carlin

Roee Rosen, *The Dust Channel*, Palais Bellevue

Roee Rosen’s *The Dust Channel* (2016) combines the sex rituals of a fictional privileged couple and the fetishisation of a Dyson Series 7 hoover in a biting satire of xenophobia, all performed in-camera as a libretto opera by an ensemble of classical musicians and with found footage sections that incorporate James Dyson and the works of Harun Farocki. Think Pasolini’s *Theorem* as a musical – this is one of the rare and essential works at Documenta 14 that directly communicates complexities effectively through humour.

Rosalind Nashashibi, *Vivian’s Garden*, Naturkundemuseum im Ottoneum

Turner Prize 2017 nominee Rosalind Nashashibi’s *Vivian’s Garden* (2017) is an evocative observational film, following the relationship between artist mother and daughter, Elisabeth Wild and Vivian Suter. Filmed in their domestic space, the rich saturated 16mm cinematography is composed to be as painterly as the subject matter, and the interior and exterior spaces are revealed in order to relish the present and its vulnerability.

Amar Kanwar, *Such a Morning*, Neue Galerie

While it may be tempting to skip this 2017 feature-length work by Amar Kanwar, this mesmerising, slow-paced film features stunning cinematography and immersive sound design. Like its protagonists, you’ll need to sit patiently to be immersed in the poetic interplay between semi-deserted architectures, landscape, and contemplations on history, waiting and possession. A separate installation by Kanwar of six mini-projections on to handmade paper leads you into this world.

Selected by Chris Paul Daniels
Bonita Ely, *Sewing Machine Gun; Watchtower; Trench; Call of Duty*, Palais Bellevue

Australian artist Bonita Ely has created a child-size trench system made out of old wooden furniture she inherited. The complicated knee-high structure is overlooked by a furniture watchtower and a machine gun made from a Singer sewing machine. Around the walls are photos and a list of names from commemorative events with war veterans and their families. An evocative piece about how post-traumatic stress disorder can seep into family life, down through generations and across continents.

Khvay Samnang, *Preah Kunlong*, Naturkundemuseum im Ottoneum

An immersive video projection across two walls showing a mix of panoramic and intimate junglescapes inhabited by a figure wearing wicker animal headdresses. With each different head covering we see him take on the spirits of, amongst other animals, an elephant, crocodile and bird. The powerful scale of image and sound moves between the figure as a tiny element in the land and the close-up detail of beads of sweat on his skin.

iQiya, *Monday*, Kulturbahnhof

Entering through a shipping container into this disused train station, the first artwork you come to is iQiya’s concentration of menace and explosive violence in a dark corner of the corridor. The short video shows a classroom of young students who very quickly move from their silent listening rows to standing, shouting and attacking their teacher. A frightening portrayal of the eruption of violence on the turn of a single word – a small but powerful echo of violent confrontation.

Britta Marakatt-Labba, *Historja*, Documenta Halle

Measuring 39 cm in height and over 23 metres wide, the embroidered tapestry on linen, *Historja* (2003-07), spans almost an entire wall of the gallery. It is only when approached up close that the work begins to reveal itself aesthetically and politically. A non-linear timeline of indigenous Sami life and historical events are depicted – reindeer herders pulled along on sleighs by reindeers, wolves emerging from the forest, mobs engaging in church burning and beheading. Its detail is exquisite, and its scenes continuously surprising.

Olu Oguibe, *Das Fremdlinge und Flüchtlinge Monument (Monument for strangers and refugees)*, Königsplatz

Ancient Egyptian obelisks were relocated as symbols of power by conquering nations. This contemporary concrete monument located in Kassel’s circular public square inverts this traditional symbolism. With the Biblical verse quote ‘I was a stranger and you took me in’ inscribed on each side in German, Turkish, Arabic, and English, it bears symbolic testimony to our current times as thousands of refugees and migrants continue to die as they flee across the Mediterranean Sea.

Daniel Knorr, *Expiration Movement*, Zwehrenturm

The first thought when watching the white smoke billowing out from the top of the tower next to Friedrichsplatz is ‘Habemus Papam’ – that moment when white smoke emerges from the chimney of the Sistine Chapel to announce the election of a new pope. In this instance the smoke announced the inauguration of Documenta 14 in Athens in April and will continue throughout the run of the exhibition in Kassel. Disturbingly however it also pays reference to the burning of banned books that took place on this site.

Selected by Elizabeth Turner

Selected by Pat Naldi
Amar Kanwar, Such a Morning, Neue Galerie (http://www.documenta14.de/en/venues/21726/neue-galerie)
Such a Morning attracted many audience members who remained for the 85-minute duration of this depiction of a professor’s sudden withdrawal from society. The story is played out through light and dark; jarring cuts from the darkened cabin are a visceral shock having become accustomed to the murky half-blind world of the protagonist. The slow pacing and gradual immersion in this character’s fate allows for an articulate examination of violence in many forms.

The low-key staging of this piece by Marie Cool Fabio Balducci (http://www.documenta14.de/en/artists/13710/marie-cool-fabio-balducci), with its upturned office furniture connected via a single line of clear tape, allows it to work within the busy thoroughfare of the hall, functioning as a moment of specific and still intent. The performer slowly moves via the adhesive of the tape, her arm outstretched vibrating against the pull of Scotch tape on her skin. Finally, invisibly, it has worn away and she leaves the space.

This performance installation sits within the display of the National Museum of Contemporary Arts, Athens, aiming to document five decades of social and political life in Greece. The archival furniture of the space is restrained and functional, with viewers invited to look through images and papers, prompted to respond by the performers, or read aloud to from government statements. Phrases and actions are repeated as we are shown history inevitably looping.

Selected by Hannah Elizabeth Allan (https://hannahelizabethallan.info)

Romuald Karmakar, Byzantion; Agni Parthene (Greek version); Agni Parthene (Church Slavonic version), Westpavillon (Orangerie)
The voices from Romuald Karmakar (http://www.documenta14.de/en/artists/13706/romuald-karmakar)'s video works, singing an orthodox hymn, spill out of the open windows of this 18th century building them. It's a rewarding time spent with this piece both inside and out, considering the multitude of references and their connotations.

Britta Marakatt-Labba with Simon Issát Marainen and Axel Andersson, Yoik and History, Documenta Halle
The exhibition in Documenta Halle comes to the fore through this performance (http://www.documenta14.de/en/calendar/22538/yoik-and-history). With the audience reclining on a sloping stage, a performance of traditional yoik singing and guitar uses Britta Marakatt-Labba’s vast stretch of embroidered history as a score.

Using stage scenes, improvisation and reenactment, Narimane Mari (http://www.documenta14.de/en/artists/8124/narimane-mari)'s film installation follows a nomadic community as they explore a utopian society in response to colonisation. Immersed in the opulent setting of the Ballhaus, it is well worth the trip to this out of the way venue and you will want to spend the time length of the film demands. The sound is truly special.

Selected by Hannah Rose Whittle (http://hannahrosewhittle.co.uk)

Although initially unsure about what this space was – a working cafe or artspace – I later became very struck by this installation. Beirut-born, Lebanese-Dutch artist Mounira Al Solh (http://www.documenta14.de/en/artists/13500/mounira-al-solh) has created a stark depiction of ‘Nassib’s Bakery’ a means for survival during civil war with her description of the physicality of making bread, of sourcing flour, to the bakery’s eventual bombing and burning down. Handwritten directly onto the wall, she conveys so vividly and personally the knife-edge of existence in such a beautifully poetic yet raw way that it’s difficult to not be transfixed.


I was immediately drawn to this work from Hiwa K (http://www.documenta14.de/en/artists/13528/hiwa-k), an Iraq-born artist living in Berlin. A series of clay pipes sit housed in front of Documenta Halle, with various furniture, books and plants contained within – each pipe a different home, a home that one tries to make wherever one goes.


This welcome gate and sound installation draws upon a moment in Greece’s history in 1916 when 7,000 Greek soldiers surrendered to German forces and, because Greece remained neutral in the first world war, became both guests and prisoners in Gorlitz, Germany for three years. Installed in the disused underground station of KulturBahnhof it serves as a welcome arrival to a city, as well as resonating with a common and important strand of Documenta 14 around the idea of the ‘guest’ and of a human instinct to welcome.

Selected by Rosy Naylor (http://www.artwalkprojects.co.uk)


Khvay Samnang’s film work explores notions of borders and embodied knowledge by working with native people from the Areng Valley in Cambodia. The film documents the process by which the Cho people mark the edges of their land by enacting the movements of animals which inhabit the landscape. The project is the result of a collaborative process working with the Chong people alongside a dancer and choreographer to capture this way of knowing the landscape which is increasingly under environmental threat.


I might easily have missed Gauri Gill (http://www.documenta14.de/en/artists/13545/gauri-gill)'s two bodies of work which are exhibited on the top floor of the Hessisches Landesmuseum. Gill works with marginalised communities in India; I was impressed by both the visual strength of her work and the creativity and collaborative nature of her practice which seems to avoid the imbalance of power often set up between photographers and disempowered communities.


Installed in a long, light corridor down one side of the museum, Katalin Ladik (http://www.documenta14.de/en/artists/13488/katalin-ladik)'s sound installation and improvised musical scores form a fascinating dialogue with a series of allegorical sculptures from the late 1800s representing idealised visions of European nations. This combination of elements seems to tap into the critique of enlightenment values, the reshaping of language and questioning of nationhood, which are recurrent themes throughout Documenta.

Selected by Michele Allen (https://www.michele-allen.co.uk)
Set within an old factory, Angela Melitopoulos’ *Crossings* is a thoughtful 4 channel film and sound installation weaving together multi-layered narratives and images. Shots and interviews from metallurgy plants and refugee camps in the artist’s native Greece are combined with wider narratives on the ‘greedy monster’ that is capitalism and the people who find themselves powerless in its grasp. The discordant and compelling soundtrack subtly created a disconcerting atmosphere within the space.

This compelling, unsettling four-screen installation can be found in the basement of the Fridericianum, the dark cavernous spaces and sense of disorientation while navigating between screens creating an atmospheric backdrop for Ben Russell (http://www.documenta14.de/en/artists/8548/ben-russell)’s haunting imagery. Long takes descending with Serbian workers down a copper mine, saturated 16mm imagery of workers sifting for gold in Suriname, jarring industrial sounds, combined with interviews and black and white head shots, took me closer to the visceral experience of working in a mine than I’ve ever been, while still reflexively acknowledging the camera’s subjective gaze.

Douglas Gordon’s portrayal of Jonas Mekas and his story of displacement demands patience – it’s 97 minutes long – but rewards with an evocative piece which breaks from cinematic conventions to favour auditory over visual experience. Presenting a black screen for most of the duration of the work, this darkness allows for an intimate encounter with Mekas’ voice, its rich textures, the compelling memories he recounts, and the melancholy and humour contained within. The few images that appear on screen left me with some questions about their content, but it is the sound that makes this experience worthwhile and distinct.

Selected by Rosalind Fowler (http://rosalindfowler.co.uk)

This monumental video installation mixes archival sound and video recordings projected onto an original banner from the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin-Dahlem, which has been cut up and rearranged. The projection maps onto the actors’ faces as well as the banner, creating stunning layers. There is a phrase in the work that has stayed with me, and I hope to find the source: ‘Giving is not an investment’.


This 58 minute piece by Terre Thaemlitz (http://www.documenta14.de/en/artists/1944/terre-thaemlitz) is a collection of 13 audiovisual works from the album Lovebomb. Playful reworking of archival footage, along with Thaemlitz’s music production, attempt to work through the multifaceted notions of love. The fifth track, a personal account of transphobia, brought tears to my eyes: ‘They loved what they did with me, what being with someone like me allowed them to do…’ This work is not to be missed, and should be experienced in its entirety.

Prinz Gholam, *Speaking of Pictures*, Performance, Lutherplatz

Their work can be found in multiple venues, including the Documenta Halle and Museum für Sepulkralkultur, but I was absolutely entranced by Prinz Gholam (http://www.documenta14.de/en/artists/13707/prinz-gholam)’s gentle performance in the church graveyard in Lutherplatz. The pair’s reenactment of classic poses found in archival photographs creates a meditative space for the audience, a welcome pause amongst the frenetic pace of Documenta. Seeing the live performance also gave me a deeper appreciation of their other work on display.

Selected by Philip Cornett (http://www.philipcornett.com)

Images:
3. Pope.L, White People Are God's Way of Saying I'm Sorry. Photo: Maurice Carlin
5. Roei Rosen, The Dust Channel, 2016, Documenta 14. Photo: Chris Paul Daniels
8. Amar Kanwar, Such a Morning, 2017, Documenta 14. Photo: Chris Paul Daniels
9. Romuald Karmakar, Byzantion; Agni Parthene (Greek version); Agni Parthene (Church Slavonic version), installation view, Documenta 14. Photo: Hannah Rose Whittle
14. Marie Cool Fabio Balducci, Untitled, Performance, Documenta 14, Kassel. Photo: Chris Paul Daniels
15. Daniel Kortt, Expiration Movement, Zwehrenturm, Documenta 14, Kassel. Photo: Pat Naldi
16. Olu Oguibe, Das Fremdlinge und Flüchtlinge Monument (Monument for strangers and refugees), Königsplatz. Photo: Pat Naldi

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