Athens before Kassel

A message from Europe’s past that resonates in Europe’s present makes a powerful opening political statement of documenta 14. Christos Paridis visits the world-famous exhibition and finds the decision to open it this year in Athens before Kassel more than just a colonial project of the German art scene.

Critique / Christos Paridis May 19, 2017

Baudet-Etienne-after-Nicolas-Poussin-Landscape-with-Diogenes-1701-etching-engraving-Rijskmuseum.jpg

[1]Étienne Baudet after Nicolas Poussin
Landscape with Diogenes, 1701, etching, engraving

Rijskmuseum, Amsterdam

When you reach the 4th floor of the grand modern-style building that houses the National Museum of Contemporary Art of Greece (EMST), a spectacular panoramic view of Athens unfolds before your eyes. The Acropolis and Lycabetus Hill landmarks anchor the landscape in the middle ground, though your views extend all the way to the Saronic Gulf in the south, and the surrounding highlands. The EMST occupies the building of the old FIX Brewery, which was designed in1961 by acclaimed architect Takis Zennetos. Completely revamped, after lengthy structural work and bureaucratic wrangling, it has not been officially opened yet except on a few special occasions. Thus the majority of Athenians has never visited it before. Its vast, stark façade fronts the multilane Sygrou Avenue, which links the historic center to the sea. Across Sygrou lays the middle-class neighborhood of Koukaki, mostly consisting of mid-century mid-rise condominium buildings that have seen better days. One of them, exactly opposite of FIX/EMST, appears to be totally empty, deserted, and abandoned. In fact, balcony doors are missing on every one of its seven floors. It is more than obvious that it has been like that for many years. In some respect, its downfall resembles Greece’s fall from economic respectability to the miseries of recession. It has, indeed, been a time of

economic and social instability, high poverty, political uncertainty, a refugee crisis, desperate measures, austerity, and a no-way out situation, overall. Still, Greek people manage to survive. Is that what organizers had in mind when they decided that documenta 14 would first open in Athens and not, as it usually happens every 5 years, in Kassel? Is the title of the exhibition, “Learning from Athens,” making that connection? Is Greece’s situation of the past seven years, and the on-going sense of international political upheaval, the ideal context for an international art show? Not surprisingly, this is exactly the case: the current state of affairs in Athens has shaped this enormous, multi-faceted exhibition that has been running since April 8th.

Documenta 14 opened for the first time in its history outside of Germany on that date. The President of the Hellenic Republic, Prokopis Pavlopoulos, headlined the inauguration ceremony. The German President, Frank Walter Steinmeier, attended as guest of honor. The number of invitees to the event was limited, therefore very few could report how Mr. Steinmeier might have reacted to a particularly expressive exhibit, placed a few meters from the main entrance of the EMST: a rectangular metal box filled with olives by artist Marta Minujin. Was it an imagining of a Greek payment (or tribute) that Greeks were paying to cover their debt? What it implies, certainly, is that the visitor has landed in the capital of economic crisis, ergo all art that they would be seeing in the Greek capital would reflect it in every possible way. The inspired choice to open this year’s documenta 14 in Athens before Kassel is credited to its artistic director, Adam Szymczyk.

d14_Marta_Minujin_Performance_©_Mathias_Voelzke-010LOWRES.jpg
[2]

[3]Marta Minujín, Payment of Greek Debt to Germany with Olives and Art, 2017, performance EMST—National Museum of Contemporary Art, Athens, documenta 14

Photo: Mathias Völzke

As soon as one enters the ground-floor gallery of the EMST, one encounters the original copperplate by Étienne Baudet for an engraving of Nicolas Poussin's *Landscape with Diogenes*. Created in 1647, it shows the Greek philosopher Diogenes with the high-Renaissance Roman Palace of Belvedere—the Vatican's treasure house of artworks and antiques - in the background. In the Classical Greek context, it is Pericles' Parthenon treasury, filled with tribute paid to the Delian League, that would be the stand-in for the palace. Diogenes, observing a youth cupping his bare hands to drink water, sets down his only material possession, a humble cup expressing the renunciation of worldly goods. A message from Europe's past that resonates in Europe's present, this image makes a powerful opening political statement in the opening of the important exhibition.

It is not usual for a city like Athens – a major European city, perhaps, and a national capital, but neither a "global city" nor an art mecca – to be hosting such an enormous art show, engaging no fewer than 47 public venues across the city. The Athens art scene has never been involved in an event of this scale and that's something that has, understandably, attracted a massive number of spectators, the majority of who have never been exposed to international contemporary art before. One can say that's a major 'win' for Athens. Mayor Giorgos Kamminis is personally involved in the event, having offered all possible spaces and venues for the benefit of documenta 14. The list is long: city squares, parks, museums, stadiums, hidden or forgotten arcades, theaters, open air cinemas, the Museum of Anti-Dictatorial and Democratic Resistance (where "The Parliament of Bodies," the performance program curated for documenta 14 by the philosopher Paul B. Preciado, opened last October), world-acclaimed ancient monument sites, such as the Ancient Agora and

Aristotle's Lyceum, as well as the First Cemetery of Athens and the School of Agriculture of Athens University, along with the Academy of Fine Arts, the Athens Conservatory, the legendary Benaki Museum, the Byzantine and Christian Museum, the Cinémathèque of Greece, Megaron - the Athens Concert Hall, the Gennadius Library of the American School of Classical Studies, the Archaeological Museum of Piraeus, and many more.

d14_Andreas_Angelidakis_Unauthorized_Athinaiki_Techniki_Polytechnio_8_©_Angelos_GiotopoulosCMYK.jpg **[4]**

[5]Andreas Angelidakis, Unauthorized (Athinaiki Techniki), 2017, installation view Polytechniou 8, Athens, documenta 14

Photo: Angelos Giotopoulos

Most of the 160 international artists participating are not widely recognized. Many come from countries outside the West and the global North. Some are new, others more established. They come from Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Yemen, Pakistan, Mongolia, India, Albania, Serbia, Russia, and from a number of sub-Saharan and West African countries (Mali, Cameroon, Nigeria, Congo, and Senegal). Australian participation includes Aboriginal artists. Seventeen Greek artists, among many westerners, complete the list, like Andreas Angelidakis [6], who is installing *Athinaiki Techniki*, an office investigating the psychotechnical parameters of the construction of Athens, located at the artist's late father's technical office (who built modern Athens back in the '50s and '60s); or

Apostolos Georgiou [7], whose painted figures pay a visit to Megaron, the Music Concert Hall of Athens, the emblematic edifice of political and economic corruption of the past decades.

The dominant concept is most often political and critical in character: a condemnation of colonialism, the ruthless strategies of late-modern capitalism, the elimination of original cultures, immigration, xenophobia, nationalism and Nazism, collective remembrance, violence of the state, and last but not least, ecological destruction. Painting is not a dominant medium; rather, photography, sculpture, and video art and music installations are given emphasis, as well as, performances that take place in spaces that have never been used for such purposes before.

d14_Apostolos_Georgiou_Untitled_2013_Megaron_©_Angelos_GiotopoulosLOWRES.jpg **[8]**

[9]Apostolos Georgiou, Untitled, 2013, acrylic on canvas
Megaron, the Athens Concert Hall, Athens, documenta 14

Photo: Angelos Giotopoulos

The EMST is the largest venue of all, gathering a vast—almost inexhaustible—number of works that, collectively, determines the character of documenta 14. The other three major venues are the

National Conservatory, the Athens School of Fine Arts, and the Benaki Museum, Pireos Annex. Documenta 14's experience, as officially stated, offers the "opportunity to investigate untold, unfinished, or otherwise overshadowed histories and to take inspiration from novel museologies, such as those put forth by artists themselves." Just like in Classical Athens, one has to take long and contemplative walks and undertake a bit of research to start to solve the riddle of documenta 14. There are many dots to connect and many stories to ponder before one starts seeing the whole for its parts.

The building that houses the Athens School of Fine Arts, on Pireos Street, used to be a textile factory, and is now one of the major exhibition spaces. It welcomes visitors with a sign by Australian artist Gordon Hookey [10] above its main entrance that reads "One in MoMA, thousands in the battlefield," parodying the popular Greek slogan "One in the soil, thousands in the battlefield". In the Nikos Kessanlis exhibition hall of the Athens School of Fine Arts there are works that relate mostly to ecology, feminism, and educational experimentation that involves collective and non-conventional forms of teaching. Many of the works displayed are videos, as well as vast installations. Three works follow key schools and sites that dominate the show: *Amereida Phalène Latin South América* (2017) by Ciudad Abierta, part commune, part pedagogical experiment, from Valparaiso, Chile; *Matanzas Sound Map* (2017) by María Magdalena Campos-Pons and Neil Leonard that researches into the sounds of the city of Matanzas in Cuba (the so-called Athens of Cuba); and Rabindranath Tagore's Shantiniketan school of Bengal that appears through the work of the late Benode Behari Mukherjee.

d14_Maria_Magadelena_Campos_Pons_and_Neil_Leonard_Mantanza_Sound_Map_ASFA_©_Angelos_GiotopoulosLOWRES.jpg **[11]**

[12]María Magdalena Campos-Pons and Neil Leonard, Matanzas Sound Map, 2017, sound and sculptural installation
Athens School of Fine Arts (ASFA), documenta 14, Athens

Photo: Angelos Giotopoulos

The Athens Conservatory (Odeion Athinon) is an incomplete edifice by late architect Ioannis Despotopoulos, a project that in the 1960s represented one of the most compelling visions of Greek architecture and was part of a post-WWII vision of a forward-thinking cultural policy. The music academy is located on the first floor, while documenta 14 also uses the underground spaces that were historically occupied by the National Museum of Contemporary Art. Works of Akinbode Akinbiyi, Oscar Masotta, Beatriz Gonzalez, Scratch Orchestra of Cornelius Cardew, Pauline Oliveiros [13], and Jani Christou are either to be seen or heard in special concerts. Mystical, modernist Greek composer Jani Christou [14]'s idea of the "continuum" provided the experimental framework for working sessions between artists, curators, and the documenta 14 team. The vision in this case consists of working through collectively, the practices of such composers as Christou and Oliveiros and Scratch Orchestra, as well as of a new generation of artists. They attempt to reexamine "habits of property, utility for preservation, gratuitous acts of discipline, the enjoyment of consumption". A major project has been the restoration of EMS Synthi 100, a rare analog synthesizer that an Athens music research center purchased in the early 1970s, which has been out of use for more than 20 years. The restoration of the instrument would make it one of a handful of still-functional devices of its kind around the globe. Four commissioned compositions for the instrument will be performed at the Megaron-Concert Hall of Athens, bringing together this important vintage music technology and a new generation of electronic musicians.

d14_Miriam_Cahn_Installationview_Benaki_©_Stathis_MamalakisLOWRES.jpg **[15]**

[16]Miriam Cahn, installation view
Benaki Museum—Pireos Street Annexe, Athens, documenta 14

Photo: Stathis Mamalakis

Collector Antonis Benakis, son of Emmanouil Benakis, a wealthy Alexandria-born merchant and later politician, founded the Benaki Museum, one of the most important museums in Greece. Four of the museum's branches are used by documenta 14: the Islamic Art Collection Gallery at the Kerameikos annex, the Nikos Hadjikiriakos-Ghika Gallery, the Mentis Center for the preservation of traditional textile arts, and the Pireos Street annex, are notable places where the documenta 14 public exhibition is hosted. In the latter, one can find, among others, Miriam Cahn's series of charcoal drawings and Roee Rosen [17]'s impressive installation *Live and Die as Eva Braun* (1995-7). El Hadji Sy's *La nouvelle muséologie* (the New Museology, 2017) juxtaposes butcher tables, bones, crab and mollusk shells, a stone, an axe, roots, leaves, bottles, soil, seeds, ashes, water, and "Le nouveau masque" (oil on Plexiglas and wood, 2016), alongside a work by Tshibumba Kanda Matulu, who in the mid-1970s created a series of 101 paintings that represented the history of his nation, torn by the trauma of colonization and shaped by the forces of militarization and economic neo-imperialism. Greek artist Constantinos Hadzinikolaou's black-and-white silent movie *Anestis* (2017) (digital video transferred from super 8 film) captures melancholy and depression through plain everyday images while the installation is supplemented by a hard-cover red book that had inspired the video.

d14_Roee_Rosen_Live_And_Die_As_Eva_Braun_Installationview__©_Stathis_MamalakisLOWRES.jpg **[18]**

[19]Roee Rosen, Live and Die as Eva Braun, 1995–97, mixed media on paper, installation view Benaki Museum—Pireos Street Annexe, Athens, documenta 14

Photo: Stathis Mamalakis

d14_El_Hadji_Sy_La_Nouvelle_Museologie_Benaki_©_Stathis_MamalakisLOWRES.jpg **[20]**

[21]El Hadji Sy, La nouvelle muséologie (The new museology), 2017, various materials, installation view
Benaki Museum—Pireos Street Annexe, Athens, documenta 14

Photo: Stathis Mamalakis

The Agricultural School of Athens University, which is situated on Iera Odos, the ancient Sacred Way that connected the Sacred Gate in Kerameikos with the Sanctuary of the Goddess Demeter, in the Port of Elefsina (Eleusis), is host to the Malian artist Aboubakar Fofana [22]. He introduces a flock of 54 lambs into an orchard on the east side of the Iera Odos, one for each country in Africa, all dyed indigo.

d14_Aboubakar_Fofana_Ka_Touba_Farafina_ye_Agricultural_University_A

thens_©_Stathis_MamalakisLOWRES.jpg **[23]**

[24]Aboubakar Fofana, Ka touba Farafina yé (Africa blessing), 2017, fifty-four lambs, the African continent, indigo, pasture, and people
Agricultural University of Athens, Athens, documenta 14

Photo: Stathis Mamalakis

Filopappou Hill is named after Gaius Julius Antiochus Epiphanes Philopappos, a Roman consul and administrator appointed by Emperor Hadrian. In the late 1950s, legendary Greek architect Dimitris Pikionis conserved and sensibly redesigned the area, creating a series of paths connecting Filopappou Hill to nearby Acropolis and a pavilion. Alongside other works, a hand-carved marble tent by Rebecca Belmore [25] looks straight at the Acropolis.

d14_Rebecca_Belmore_Biinjiya_iin_Onji_Filopappou_Hill_©_Fanis_VlastarasLOWRES.jpg **[26]**

[27]Rebecca Belmore, Biinjiya'iing Onji (From Inside), 2017, marble
Filopappou Hill, Athens, documenta 14

Photo: Fanis Vlastaras

Film and music are given major emphasis in the exhibition. Legendary filmmaker, poet and writer Jonas Mekas [28] was present at a special honorary screening of his early works at the Greek Film Archives (Tainiothiki), while in the First Cemetery of Athens, under pine and cypress trees, surrounded by neoclassical-style funerary statues, and next to where some of the most prominent Greeks are buried, Pope L. [29] will be presenting his *Whispering Campaign*, an abstraction as well as an atmosphere that seep in and permeate the real space and city infrastructures of Athens and Kassel in 2017. Pope. L has learned about both cities with the help of locals and native speakers, and encoded them into information to be whispered, as a minor history of the two documenta 14 cities.

d14_Pope_L_From_Whispering_Campaign_Cantina_Social_copyright_freddie_faulkenberryLOWRES.jpg **[30]**

[31]Pope.L, Whispering Campaign, 2016–17, various locations, installation view Cantina Social, Athens, documenta 14

Photo: Freddie F.

At Stoa tou Vivliou, the “book arcade” in central Athens, where publishing houses have their flagship stores, one publisher is hosting paper rubbings of marble steles engraved with the incorporation documents of Yugoexport, a “blind, nonaligned oral corporation” created by the artist Irena Haiduk [32] in the U.S. and headquartered in Belgrade. At the same time in Aristotle’s Lyceum, the archaeological site of the school established by the ancient philosopher, Postcommodity is staging a sound installation. It’s a fabulous site, right at the heart of the modern city, close to the Athens Conservatory. Highly precise military-grade speakers are used against their disciplinary purpose, telling-in-music stories of forced displacement and migrations, and of transformation. Some are sung, others spoken or vocalized, still others communicated only by silence.

Until July 16, one can claim that Athens is the European Capital of Art. All do not share this reading, as a cast of Greek politicians sees documenta 14 (which is, frankly, a privilege and a gift to the city) as a colonial project of the German art scene and a modern Nazi invasion of the ancient city. Despite all this, 1,500 international journalists visited Athens on the weekend of the opening, in addition to hundreds of artists, curators, and collectors. All galleries and museums are tuned in to documenta 14. It goes without saying that the weekly program of performances, concerts, and openings in Athens has never been richer, and people of all ages race from one end of the city to the other to experience as much art as they can. How successful documenta 14 is in embodying, expressing, and commenting on the Greek and international political crises (and how catalyzed it is by its Athenian context) is not yet clear. Meanwhile, it is truly a must-see world-class event.

Documenta 14 [33] is on view in different sites in Athens until July 16.

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