

A Tale of Two Cities

On documenta 14 in Athens and Kassel

BY JÖRG HEISER



The jury of eight international museum directors that, in 2013, selected Adam Szymczyk as documenta 14's artistic director arguably chose him over his five competitors because he proposed that the quinquennial should take place in Athens as well as Kassel. In the wake of the Greek economic crisis, the pitch was bold and promising. Its ambition to expand to another country spoke to the documenta institution – a limited liability company funded by the city of Kassel and the state of Hesse, as well as the German Federal Cultural Foundation – and its image of itself as the world's leading exhibition of contemporary art. The pitch also warded off any anxieties the institution may have had about being provincial and reflected its desire to demonstrate a sense of having confronted Germany's past by reaching out to the world. This was not a new idea: Okwui Enwezor – director of documenta 11 in 2002 – held collateral events in numerous places, including St Lucia and Lagos, while Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, director of DOCUMENTA (13) in 2012, did the same in Kabul and Cairo.

All of these desires and anxieties dramatically culminated this April in Athens with the opening of documenta 14. At the press conference, Szymczyk spoke about the show's title 'Learning from Athens': 'The great lesson is that there are no lessons,' he reasoned, and went on to say that 'unlearning everything we believe to know is the best beginning'. Citing Gayatri Chakravorty

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Spivak as a reference in his essay for the documenta 14 reader, Szymczyk made it clear that he knows where the notion stems from. However, in her ground-breaking essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' (1985), Spivak's concept of 'unlearning' isn't a woolly one – it's very specifically about post-colonial intellectuals understanding 'their privilege as their loss'. The theorist believes that you have to learn to see your entitled position not as an advantage but as a hindrance if you want to speak to – rather than about – the people whose marginalization you seek to critique. In documenta's case, its privileged position allowed a €38-million German mega-art-show to descend upon a Greek city in such deep financial crisis that – until the exhibition arrived – it couldn't afford to open its recently built National Museum of Contemporary Art (EMST).

Although EMST was one of the main documenta venues, in the press conference, Szymczyk advised the audience not to 'go to the four main venues and make your judgment on the show' but to see the exhibition 'as a geography, by areas'. With 47 venues and a fairly useless guide, this was easier said than done. I inadvertently arrived two hours early for a performance at the small Archaeological Museum of Piraeus, but happily spent the time looking at their collection of breathtakingly intricate ancient bronze sculptures. Then, the performance began: *Collective Exhibition for a Single Body* (all works 2017 unless otherwise stated) was conceived by documenta 14's co-curator Pierre Bal-Blanc and choreographer Kostas Tsioukas. It involved inviting a dozen artists from the show to each suggest a small movement for one part of the body that was then performed by three dancers. With a kind of detached pathos, the performers made slow, exaggerated movements amidst the venerable statues – and, I'm sorry to say, it felt like a lazy Tino Sehgal rip-off.



Khvay Samnang, *Preah Kunlong (The Way of the Spirit)*, 2017, installation view at EMST, Athens, with live performance and choreographer Nget Rady. Courtesy and photograph: the artist

But at least I actually witnessed the performance: other sites and events were harder to find. The plea not to judge the show on its main venues turned out to be an excuse for the inexplicable slackness of a multimillion-euro institution, its artistic director and his international team of a dozen curators and curatorial advisers. Often, not even the most basic directions and information – such as the artist’s name or the title and date of the work – were supplied. With over 160 contemporary artists from around the globe showing both in Athens and Kassel, plus historic work by about another 100 artists, it was a lot to organize – but there were years to prepare for it. It might have been easier to accept such unprofessionalism if it had been the result of the documenta team’s energy being absorbed by creating experimental and lively collaborations with Athenians and their city. Instead, there seemed to be a real estrangement from the local art and intellectual scene. In a conversation published by *art-agenda* in June, the former Greek finance minister Yanis Varoufakis put it bluntly: ‘documenta supposedly came to Greece to spend, but

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instead they sucked up every single resource available for the local art scene. The few resources that Greece's private and public sectors make available to Greek artists, like the Aegean Airways sponsorship, went to documenta. The Athens municipality gave documenta a building for free. Many hotels donated rooms for free. Buildings at the Athens School of Fine Arts were made available for free.'

The Spanish philosopher and transgender activist Paul B. Preciado organized the extensive public programme. Entitled 'The Parliament of Bodies', it brought together hundreds of speakers, including great thinkers such as Jack Halberstam and Antonio Negri addressing anti-fascist and trans-feminist issues. From September 2016, talks took place at Parko Eleftherias (Freedom Park), in a small building which, between 1967 and 1974, under the far-right Greek junta, was the military police headquarters. In a second building behind it (which today houses the Museum of Anti-dictatorial and Democratic Resistance), countless people were detained and tortured. On the documenta website, there is some acknowledgement of this history, along with a statement explaining that the Greek architect and artist Andreas Angelidakis's *Demos* (2016) for the former military police headquarters was a response to it. While it remains unclear how 74 blocks of foam seating addresses a history of tyranny and torture, the title 'The Parliament of Bodies' raises further questions. As Preciado has explained on numerous occasions, it refers to the people who gathered on the streets of Athens in July 2015 to protest the Greek parliament's acceptance of an EU bailout, despite the results of a referendum rejecting it. Preciado's reference strikes me as politically naive. As the recent rise of nationalist-populist movements has proven, elected parliaments are exactly what are under attack from the far right and 'bodies' on the street are not automatically emancipative – what about far-right mobs? In her recent book *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015), Judith Butler explores the implications of street protest in the wake of the 2011–13 uprisings in the Middle East and Turkey: she discusses an 'assembly of bodies' and how their 'acting in concert' can call into question the powers that be. But what does it mean to adopt this kind of terminology for a space associated with state-sanctioned torture?

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Michel Auder, *The Course of Empire*, 2017, installation view at KulturBahnhof, Kassel; photograph: Jasper Kettner

Having been asked not to judge documenta 14 by the four main venues, it's ironic that the best works were displayed in them. In the Athens Conservatoire (Odeion), amongst the works of 49 artists shown, Hiwa K's video *Pre-Image (Blind as the Mother Tongue)* was a highlight: the artist retraced parts of the route of his flight from Syria to Europe via Greece while balancing a pole on his head, attached to which were downward-facing rear-view-mirrors: a simple, effective sculptural device allowing him to see himself in fragments. For her video *Manuscript* – which was screened in a narrow recess – the artist Eva Stefani paired historic film footage with a soundtrack that was often hilariously at odds with what was visible. For example, a silent film sequence of leap-frogging men is set to an eerie electronic soundtrack: it's an unexpected clash of elements that stimulates your mind and emotions. This was the opposite effect of trying to grasp the sheer volume of framed documents and vitrines on display: a seemingly endless array of photographs and musical and choreographic scores from the 1960s and '70s turned the very real liberations of bodies and eyes and ears, by figures such as composers Jani Christou and Iannis Xenakis, into muted examples of vintage expression.

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The exhibition at the Athens School of Fine Art – which included the work of 29 artists – raised questions about how the curatorial team actually worked together. Artur Żmijewski's intentionally offensive, silent, black and white film *Glimpse* (2016–17) involves the artist interacting with undocumented immigrants and asylum seekers in Calais and Berlin's Tempelhof airport. The artist finger-paints one migrant's black skin with white pigment and presents another with a new pair of shoes. As in many of his works, Żmijewski sadistically performs insulting acts in order to trigger the viewer's sense of guilt: it's a tired trick. In adjacent rooms were Olaf Holzapfel's blandly decorative straw and hay reliefs *Zaun* (Fence) and Bonita Ely's mildly entertaining fantasy objects from an ecologically dystopian techno-trash future (*Plastikus Progressus: Memento Mori*). If there was any method to this mess, it escaped me. It seemed as if the curators were less intent on creating meaningful narrative arcs or formal constellations than in fighting over which of 'their' artists might be shown in the best location. The result was a thick cloud of diffusion. What was sold as a clear intention – unlearning – simply came across as a lack of even the most basic grasp of good curation.

At the Benaki Museum – Pireos Street Annexe, the most arresting work of the 18 artists shown was the 70-minute documentary *Somniloquies* by Véréna Paravel and Lucien Castaing-Taylor. Blurry, slow, close-up shots of sleeping, naked bodies are set to original audio footage of the aspiring songwriter Dion McGregor, who found fame in the 1960s as a sleepwalker when he was recorded by a room-mate: in clear and witty queer argot, he recounts the kind of perverse scenarios that would make a Lacanian blush. The film struck a chord because here was desire itself, talking candidly and humorously, not (yet) corralled into exemplary representation and stratagems of self-positioning. A highlight amongst the works by 82 artists on display at EMST was Hans Eijkelboom's video *The Street & Modern Life, Birmingham, UK* (2014). As still images slowly move across the screen, it becomes apparent that Eijkelboom grouped his anonymous protagonists by their clothes and accessories: checked jumpers, animal motifs, holding a plastic cup, hijabs, etc. As each picture gives way to the next, this droll vision of street fashion thwarts the traditional categories of class, gender, race and age.

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Marta Minujín, *El Partenón de libros (The Parthenon of Books)*, 1983, documentation of construction, Buenos Aires.
Photograph: Marta Minujín Archive

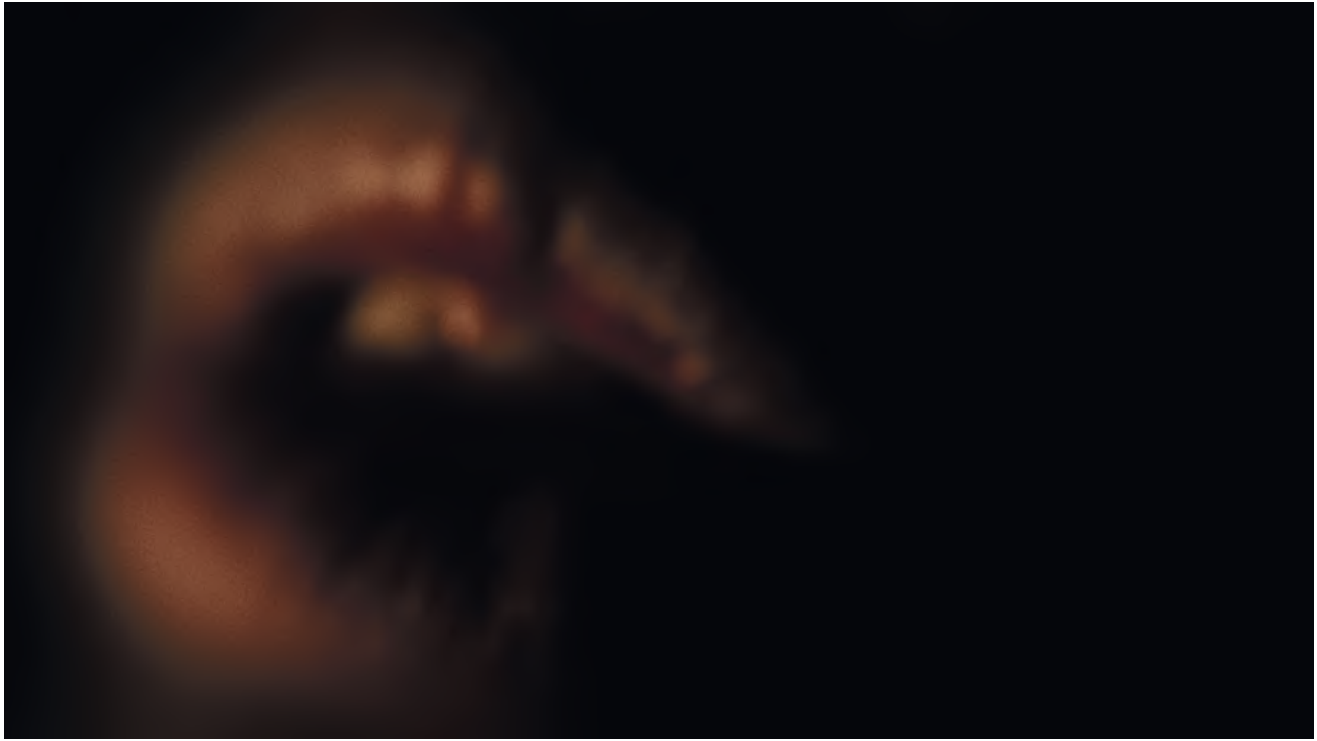
In the audio-video installation *Interstices* (2001–03), by the great electronic musician and transgender activist Terre Thaemlitz, majestic waves of digital glitches fill the space. These sounds function like metaphors for the power of real ‘interstitial’ lives being lived between the dominant either/ors of identity. Queer identities are too frequently represented in the mainstream world of cable channels as a form of freak show dressed up as family therapy. But in Thaemlitz’s take, one moment you hear the voice of a patronizing TV doctor, the next you see a blowjob silhouetted against a bright pink glow. I imagine the late French philosopher and artist Pierre Klossowski would have liked this work, so presenting his 1970 collaboration with filmmaker Pierre Zucca nearby made sense. The latter’s black and white photographs of bourgeois sexual decadence are apt illustrations of Klossowski’s book *La Monnaie vivante* (Living Currency, 1970), in which he analyzes capitalism as a realm where fantasy and desire circulate.

But this fiery constellation of Thaemlitz and Klossowski fizzled in the next galleries. Cecilia

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Vicuña's giant unspooled beads of red wool hanging from the ceiling (*Quipu Womb, The Story of the Red Thread, Athens*) bore no meaningful relation to the works it was grouped with: namely Khvay Samnang's *Preah Kunlong* (The Way of the Spirit) – 11 masks made of woven vines pinned on stands – and Olu Oguibe's *Biafra Time Capsule*, a freestanding walls-cum-vitrines display of book and magazine covers documenting the devastating effects of the Nigerian Civil War, which raged from 1967–70. To see *no* connection between these works was more bearable than having to assume some kind of ethno-representational simplification was at play, pairing ham-fisted symbolism (red wool as streams of blood?) with 'natural' masks and an unrelated war.

Sometimes, it was hard not to see connections. Rosalind Nashashibi and Lucy Skaer's 16mm film *Why Are You Angry?* – a reference to Paul Gauguin's painting *No te aha oe riri* (Why Are You Angry?, 1896) – is a modern-day portrait of the Tahitian women who Gauguin painted as inhabitants of an erotic Eden. Posing naked, just hanging around or smoking a cigarette with amused ennui, they remain silent objects for the camera. In the corridor, vintage photographs (1900–44) by Lionel Wendt portrayed daily life in what was then Ceylon, including boys and young men in different poses and states of undress. Wendt also narrated Basil Wright's documentary *The Song of Ceylon* (1934), which was shown on a monitor. The film and the photographs together intimated a traditional national heritage almost unbridled by the forces of technology and colonization (Ceylon remained a British colony until 1948), something which speaks to Western longings for the 'untouched'. It was odd to see this pattern of (re-)exoticization perpetuated by pairing Wendt with Nashashibi/Skaer, flattening any ambivalence between celebration and implicit critique into ethnographic kitsch.



Véréna Paravel and Lucien Castaing-Taylor, *Somniloquies*, 2017, film still.
Courtesy: Norte Productions

After the Athens debacle, I had hoped that the 35 venues in Kassel would be an improvement. A life-size Parthenon – built from scaffolding and clad in books banned at some point in some part of the world – was built in the central Friedrichsplatz. Marta Minujin's *El Partenón de libros* (Parthenon of Books, 1983) was originally erected as a bold statement in the centre of Buenos Aires after the collapse of Argentina's military junta. In Kassel, this historic context has been replaced by a blunt symbolism evoking Athens in the idiom of tourist-board marketing. In a similar spirit, the Fridericianum – a museum that has been the beating heart of previous instalments of documenta – hosted the EMST's art collection. Quid pro quo: it is rumoured that the Athens museum was made available on the condition that it would get the Fridericianum in return. But the collection (of mostly Greek artists, with a number of international names thrown in) is frankly mediocre and came across as lazy resell museum programming.

After this anti-climax, the Neue Galerie – which included hundreds of artefacts and the work of more than 90 artists – felt dense: it was the one venue in this entire documenta that actually seemed thoroughly considered. Here, the task was spelled out clearly: let's look again at Western art history from the perspective of colonialism and slavery. The stone-cold heart of this

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endeavour was a 1724 copy of the *Code Noir*, the cruel document legally defining the conditions of slavery in the French colonial empire. It has to be said, though, that the argument – what kinds of symptoms of colonial othering, repression and violence can we (still) detect? – was weakened by the extended wall labels (which is ironic considering the Athens experience of little or no contextualization). For example, one text explained that André Breton compared French painter Yves Laloy's geometrical abstractions to the sand painting of the Navajo, quoting Breton's expressed interest in understanding the ceremonial meaning of these works beyond their visual qualities – but then declared Laloy's works 'indicative' of ignorant appropriation.

Serious claims were often made with surprising casualness. For example, first editions of books by the 18th-century pioneer of archaeology and art history Johann Joachim Winckelmann were accompanied by a text stating that: 'Winckelmann's interpretation of Greek antique sculpture as the ideal form, embodying Beauty and Truth, was underpinned by a cultural desire that was made even more phantasmatic by the fact that Winckelmann never actually set foot in Athens or Greece.' Wow! Yes, Winckelmann, son of a poor shoemaker, never set foot in Athens. Perhaps this was because travelling to Greece three centuries ago was a long and dangerous journey through countries devastated by war and occupation. Also, Winckelmann worked for many years in Italy, areas of which were, of course, once part of Ancient Greece. The historian's notion of beauty and truth as residing in fragments was not simply the outcome of some vague 'cultural' (i.e. colonial) longing but, much more specifically, an expression of homoerotic desire – he was openly gay, a fact commented on by both Casanova and Goethe. In other words: to construct Winckelmann as the original sinner of colonial ignorance is flawed, to put it mildly. This kind of absence of scholarly rigour does a disservice to important studies into how colonialism is inscribed in Western art history.



Lionel Wendt, *Portrait of Kandyan Dancer*, c.1935, gelatin silver print, 22 × 17 cm. Courtesy: Jhaveri Contemporary, Mumbai

The punch line of the argument, so to speak, was that philo-Hellenism – the idealization of ancient Greece – somehow led to Adolf Hitler's Germany. Evidence is given, for example, in the form of a kitsch painting by Alexander Kalderach, *The Parthenon* (1939). Indeed, the Nazis celebrated elements of Greek antiquity – but only as one ingredient amongst many of their bogus mythological mix. In any case, that line of argument more or less fell apart when the exhibition focused on the issue of looted and stolen Jewish property during the Third Reich. Maria Eichhorn's *Rose Valland Institute* (named after the Parisian art historian who secretly listed works looted during Nazi occupation), was set up to research 'orphaned property in Europe', i.e. Jewish wealth stolen not only by the German state, but also by private individuals.

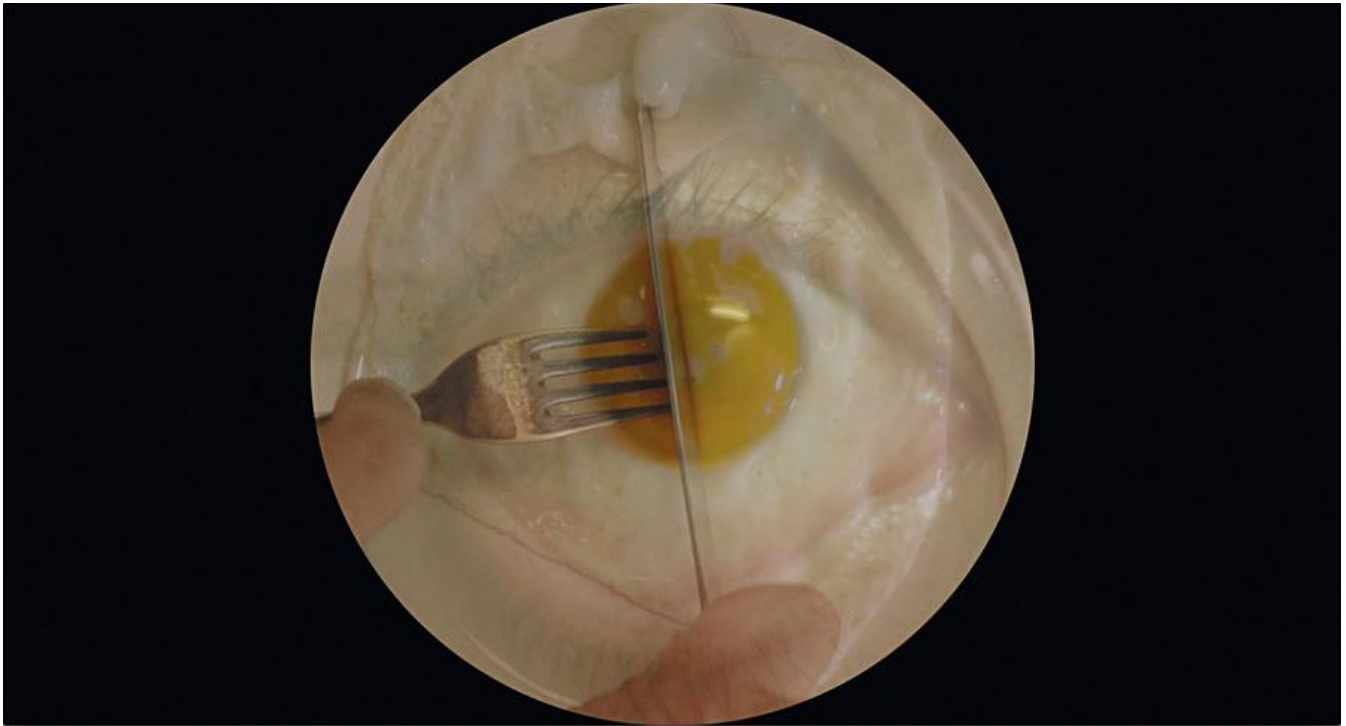
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Her research was manifested in a detailed display of documents, including a towering bookcase filled with volumes looted by Nazis and purchased in 1943 by Berlin's municipal library.

Restitution and provenance research is time-consuming and costly; numerous institutes, such as the German Lost Art Foundation in Magdeburg, are dedicated to the cause. It remains unclear how Eichhorn's institute, post-documenta, will continue its investigation. But perhaps the hope is that artworks create the kind of public awareness a scholarly foundation isn't able to generate.

It remains to be seen what Piotr Uklański's 'Real Nazis' is supposed to make us aware of. The series of framed photos includes – you guessed it! – real Nazis, such as Hitler and Hans Frank, but also alleged Nazis, such as the young Joseph Beuys in a Luftwaffe uniform. Which is, of course, no coincidence, since Uklański's work is hung next to Beuys's installation *The Pack (das Rudel)* (1969), which is permanently housed at the Neue Galerie. What 'Real Nazis' really made me aware of is that the only two living Polish artists included in documenta 14 are Uklanski and Źmijewski, both of who respond to evocations of historical guilt and contemporary failure with the sensibility of online trolls.

Being controversial doesn't, of course, disqualify an artwork's seriousness: Roe Rosen's video *The Dust Channel* (2016) at Palais Bellevue (where works by 18 artists were on show) is a case in point. It spins a crazy and hilarious tale about the connection between Dyson vacuum cleaners, cable TV, the restrictive immigration policy of Benjamin Netanyahu's government in Israel, singing and armpit hair. Less hilarious are the underlying ideological connections between xenophobic fantasies of purification and the sexual desire for the impure. Rosen's work made me realize that the tough truths about xenophobia and capitalism this documenta seeks to explore are best conveyed by works that are allowed the space and time to develop their own imaginative realm, rather than the ones used merely as forensic evidence.



Roe Rosen, *The Dust Channel*, 2016, film still. Courtesy: the artist

That said, one of the absolute highlights of documenta 14 is a piece that provides exactly that: forensic evidence. A Kassel-based NGO, The Society of Friends of Halit, is investigating the murder of Halit Yozgat by the NSU – the German neo-Nazi terrorist group uncovered in 2011 – in an internet café in Kassel in 2006. The initiative argues that the case is not an isolated incident but an indicator of widespread institutionalized racism. The group approached Eyal Weizman's London-based Forensic Architecture, which specializes in investigating events via 3D reconstruction. *77sqm_9:26min – Report*, shown at the Neue Neue Galerie (one of the main venues; a former post office in which the work of 25 artists is shown), unfolds like a complex mathematical equation and with the visual clarity of a good educational children's programme. It is a powerful, convincing takedown of the testimony of one Andreas Temme, an agent of Verfassungsschutz, Germany's domestic secret service, who claimed in court to have been at the scene of the crime by coincidence only, and that he did not hear or smell the shots that killed Yozgat from where he sat in the next room.

Strangely, this important piece of investigative work into a crime that took place in Kassel itself was not awarded a central position in the exhibition. Instead, it is projected in a small space hidden behind a huge curtain by the Colombian artist Beatriz González. *Telón de la móvil y*

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cambiante naturaleza (Drop Curtain of Mobile and Changing Nature, 1978) is emblazoned with a pop-style rendition of Edouard Manet's painting *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (Luncheon on the Grass, 1863).

By contrast, Michel Auder's 14 flat-screen video installation is well sited in a former underground train station. It could be said that *The Course of Empire* sums up this documenta's probing of the current global hell and its historic resonances – minus its curatorial pretensions. It includes fast-paced video cut-ups of old master paintings of decapitations, contemporary media footage from war zones, Facebook threads of people exchanging views about genocides, images of softcore nakedness and excerpts from the German explorer Alexander von Humboldt's *Travels to the Equinoctial Regions of America* (1799–1804), in which he serenely describes encounters with snakes and sea turtles and comments on the cruel treatment of slaves. What makes Auder's work so strong is that the onslaught of imagery and words is silent – as if it was directly extracted from his cerebral cortex.



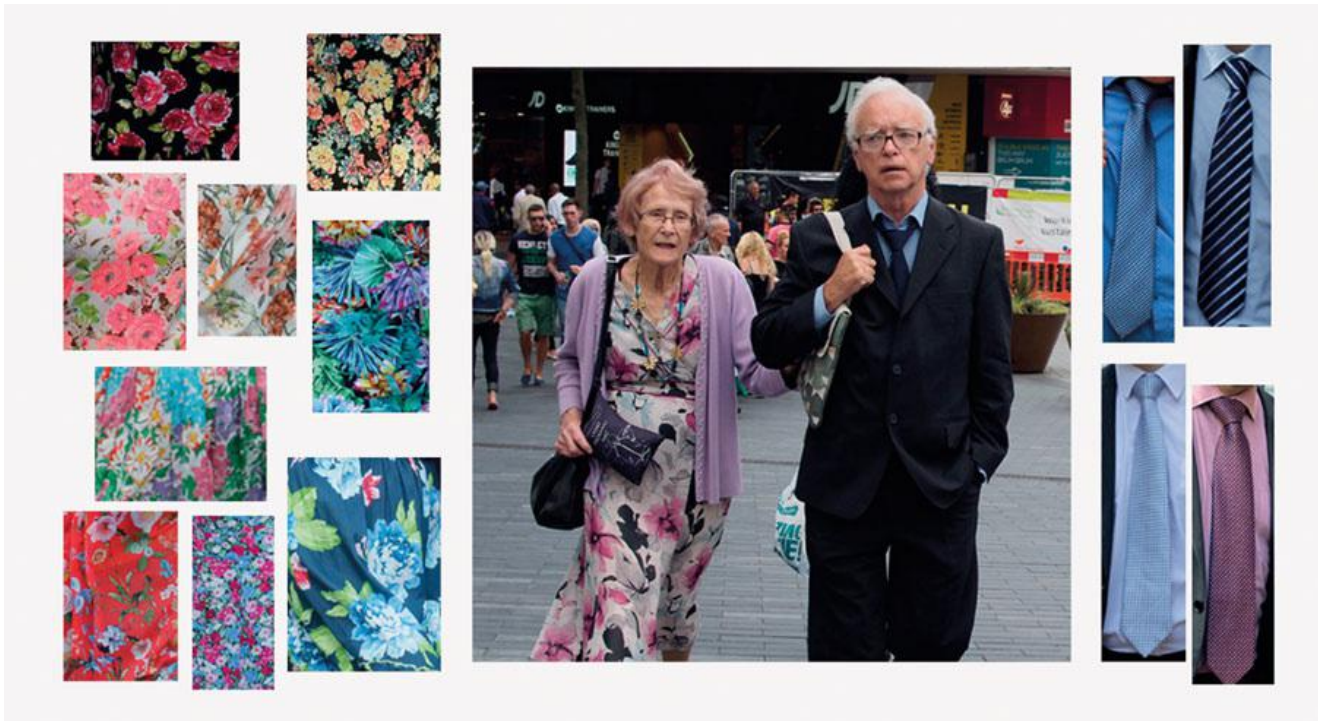
Olu Oguibe, *Biafra Time Capsule*, 2017, installation view at EMST, Athens.
Courtesy: the artist

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If Auder's work has a messy but precise structure, the presentation at Ottoneum – Kassel's small natural history museum – has a highly questionable one. Here, a monumental video projection by Samnang features more masks made of vines, this time worn in a Cambodian forest (*Preah Kunlong*), outlines of boomerangs sprayed onto freestanding white walls by Brisbane-based artist Dale Harding (*Composite Wall Panel, Reckitt's Blue*), a video of Mongolian artist Ariuntugs Tserenpil eating moss (*Act*, 2013) and Nashashibi's *Vivian's Garden*. The latter is an intimate, 30-minute film portrait of the Swiss painter Vivian Suter and her 95-year-old mother, the artist Elisabeth Wild (who both have work in documenta). The camera gently observes them in their shared home – a former coffee plantation in Guatemala – as they chat and have meals, while their Mayan servants silently work around them. At one point, Suter recalls how, as a child, she was saved from a bee attack by one of the servants, who still works for her – the camera focuses on her elderly face. I appreciate the portrait of a mother and daughter, but I'm stunned that Nashashibi seems to take for granted that, as a filmmaker, she can perpetuate the silence traditionally reserved for Indigenous servants attending to white masters. It makes *Downton Abbey* look progressive by comparison.

Even more surprising is how a documenta team seriously engaged with decolonization could have allowed the Ottoneum presentation: it aggressively reduces artists in a natural history museum to being geographically defined representatives of an ethnographic world map – and a film romanticizing 'gentle' colonialism is simply the cherry on the cake. I had to stop and check: is this really the 21st century?

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Hans Eijkelboom, photographs from *The Street & Modern Life*, 2014.
Courtesy: © Hans Eijkelboom and Dewi Lewis Publishing

Documenta 14 is the tale of two cities, Athens and Kassel: its earnest attempt to uncover how the cruelty of colonialism transmuted into the cruelty of contemporary globalized capitalism has produced the strangest lapses in rigorous thinking along the way. Its failures call into question the entire documenta institutional complex, which evinces an obsession with having *more* each time: more money, more visitors, more venues, more sites around the globe and more moral authority. I don't think the cure for this obsession is that the next documenta should be curated by an artist or by the people. I think it's enough to give the next team of curators the licence to work on the principle that, sometimes, less is definitely more.

Main image: Marta Minujín, El Partenón de libros (The Parthenon of Books), 2017, under construction in Kassel as part of documenta 14. Photograph:

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