The Problem of Nostalgia: Learning from Athens in documenta 14

A depressing human condition resolved with grand gestures of politics, sentimentality, fashion, and merchandise. Michal B. Ron writes about documenta 14 in Kassel.

Critique / Michal B. Ron August 29, 2017

It seems only appropriate, too appropriate, that a true scale Parthenon, covered with books, dominates Kassel's Friedrichsplatz, right at documenta's heart. "Learning from Athens" is the working title that became official for this year's documenta, first initiated by people of the German art world in 1955. Since 1957, every five years, documenta occupies the city of Kassel for one hundred days. Therefore, it was under heavy controversy and high expectations that Adam Szymczyk, the artistic director of its 14th edition, inaugurated it in Athens before Kassel.1

For the first time in its sixty-three years of existence, documenta is equally split between two locations: Kassel and Athens. The important art event is stretched over one-hundred-sixty-three days in two cities, a three-hour flight away from one another.2

d14_Marta_Minujin_The_Parthenon_of_Books_Friedrichsplatz_©_Roman_Maerz2lowres.jpg



[1]Marta Minujín, The Parthenon of Books, 2017
Steel books, and plastic sheeting, Friedrichsplatz, Kassel, documenta 14

Photo: Roman März

Marta Minujín's (b. 1943, Buenos Aires) *The Parthenon of Books* shows that also in 1983, "Athens" seemed as a symbol to learn from. The artist addressed it in the time of a falling tyranny in Argentina, when she constructed a Parthenon in true scale in Buenos Aires, covered with books that the military junta had confiscated, as a monument for democracy and intellectual progress. In Kassel, *The Parthenon of Books* that occupies Friedrichsplatz, befittingly mirrors the nearby neo classicist Fridericianum, which now bares the inscription *BEINGSAFEISSCARY* (2017) by Banu Cennetoğlu (b. 1970 in Ankara). Against eighteenth-century architecture that mimicked ancient Greek aesthetics out of a taste for that paragon of an enlightened culture, Minujín's simplified Parthenon, aglitter with its colourful book covers, exhibits the sensibility of Camp.3 Considering its history, the gesture of repositioning the work seems sentimental. But toward what is this sentimentality directed? Dictatorships, and their falling? Athens, Socrates's democratic polis, considering, or not, Socrates's contempt for the written word?4 The matter of books being banned? Or maybe artists making grand political gestures?

d14_Banu_Cennetoglu_BEINGSAFEISSCARY_Fridericianum_©_Roman_M

aerz.jpg **[2]**



[3]Banu Cennetoğlu, BEINGSAFEISSCARY, 2017
various materials, Friedrichsplatz, Kassel, documenta 14

Photo: Roman März

Now in Kassel, the public is invited to donate books that were once banned and participate in the collective act. As a way to make room on your shelves in the digital age, perhaps? One could clean the closet of unwanted inherited old copies of *Mein Kampf* too.5 However, I am much more convinced by the suggestion by Paul B. Preciado, another collaborator of documenta 14, to collectively practice the knowledge in books that may be banned, as he writes: "... in the context of global war, this collection of scholarship could be destroyed also, as fast as a microchip melting under intense heat. Before all the existing fragile archives about feminism and black, queer, and trans culture have been reduced to a state of radioactive shades, it is indispensable to transform such minority knowledge into collective experimentation, into physical practice, into ways of life and forms of cohabitations."6

Preciado defines the principle of "Auto-Guinea Pig": the using of one's body as the field of exploration - as Sigmund Freud had done with psychoanalysis and cocaine, Walter Benjamin with hashish, and of course Preciado himself with testosterone - instead of the outsourcing of bodies for

experimentation of other people and animals. Whereas Preciado's approach addresses a transformation and a future, the slogan "Learning from Athens" that hovers over Kassel seems to be repetitive and to address a past, again outsourcing a field of study. It could have meant learning from a state struggling with debt and depression, or from Europe's front gate for refugees crossing the Mediterranean. But instead, "Athens" seems to symbolize a glorified and mythical past, an empty common ground unto which to project fantasies of identities. In eighteenth-century Kassel, in 1983 Buenos Aires, and once again in 2017 Kassel. The Parthenon casts a nostalgic shadow all over documenta 14.

A core gestures of this large-scale art event is the swapping of spaces: whereas the rooms of the newly opened National Museum of Contemporary Art of Greece (EMST [4]) in Athens were made available as an acting arena for documenta, its collection occupies the Fridericianum in return. It thereby enjoys an exposure and publicity institutions from all around the global art periphery could only dream of. Works of Greek artists from the 1960s onwards are exhibited next to occasional works of artists who are better known internationally. The juxtaposition shows how certain practices have been spread worldwide: there are abstract paintings and sculptures with a strong material presence, like the works by Costas Tsoclis (b. 1930 in Athens) from 1960; readymade-based objects, such as *Suitcase with Rubbish from a Beach* (1972) by Alexis Akrithakis (1939-1994, Athens); and highly conceptualized installations - for example a work by George Hadjimichalis [5] (b. 1954 in Athens) that concerns the crossroad where Oedipus killed Laius (1990-95/1997), which also brings to mind earlier American Land Art. Artists in Israel have shared such tendencies too. They are less present in this collection, though, which is otherwise committed to Mediterranean political positions, including works by Mona Hatoum (b. 1952 in Beirut), Gülsün Karamustafa [6] (b. 1946 in Ankara) and Walid Raad (b. 1967 in Chbanieh, Lebanon). Emily Jacir [7]'s (b. 1972 in Bethlehem) *Memorial to 418 Palestinian Villages which were Destroyed, Deported, and Occupied by Israel in 1948* (2001), a tent on which names of destroyed Palestinian villages are embroidered, gains a special attention, as it echoes the Parthenon outside.

The presentation of the museum's collection is not necessarily committed to a political narrative or an argumentative curatorial statement. It shows highlights from the past, "the best of." Yet the retroactive presence of the past is maintained in other documenta venues as well, which show many paintings, some new, others originating in older avant-gardes. Regrettably, the specific and singular positions of painters, such as Edi Hila [8]'s (b. 1944 in Shkoder, Albania), whose paintings hang in dispersed venues, get swallowed up by the sum of everything. Perhaps these were positions one would wish to return to, to be "learning from," but here painting seems as a futile solitary struggle that can change nothing, no matter how heroic the effort.

d14_Edi_Hila_Comers_ODEION_©_Mathias_Voelzkelowres.jpg **[9]**



[10]Edi Hila, Boulevard 1-6, 2015
Oil on canvas, installation view (detail), Torwache, Kassel, documenta 14

Photo: Michael Nast

Other contemporary positions are sometimes blunt. A sense of déjà-vu is evoked by Daniel Knorr's (b. 1967 in Bucharest) *Expiration Movement* (2017) that blows smoke out of the Zwehrenturm. Five years ago, in Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev's dOCUMENTA 13, smoke escaped the Fridericianum into the backyard, as a concealed side effect of Ryan Gander's (b. 1976, Chester) *I Need Some Meaning I Can Memorise (The Invisible Pull)* (2012), when the artist produced a light breeze in the Fridericianum's empty halls. But against the glitches of the otherwise subtle and suggestive gestures of the previous documenta, in 2017 flagrancy rules the game. In Pope.L's (b. 1955 in Newark, New Jersey) *Whispering Campaign* (2016-2017), a seductive voice whispers "ignorance is a blessing" from speakers spread all over Kassel, in English or in German, provoking us didactically. I would rather take the Delphian aporia: "know thyself."

d14_Daniel_Knorr_Expiration_Movement_Fridericianum_©_VG-Bildkunst_Bonn_2017_©_Bernd_Borchardt.jpg **[11]**



[12]Daniel Knorr, Expiration Movement, 2017
Smoke and manifesto, Zwehrenturm, Kassel, documenta 14

© Daniel Knorr/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, 2017, photo: Bernd Borchardt

The visibility of books is repeated in another grand gesture, in the Neue Galerie. There, Maria Eichhorn [13] (b. 1962 in Bamberg) presents some findings of the *Rose Valland Institute* (2017), which she initiated to locate property that the Nazis had confiscated from Jewish owners. Such are the *Unlawfully acquired books from Jewish ownership* in the State Library of Berlin, which the artist shows in an impressive display of a tall library, whose shelves rise up to the ceiling. The restitution of books was crucial immediately after the catastrophe of the Holocaust. Hannah Arendt and Gershom Scholem obtained such books and distributed them wherever they were needed, in Jewish communities, educational and religious institutions, in the young Israel, and around the world.7 But now, the books that Eichhorn puts on display had gotten old. It is no longer a question of the value of content, but of property and ownership, it is not about use value but about private financial value. Too late to matter, this gesture of righting wrongs is repeated for its visibility only. It suggests an aesthetics of restitution, disguising itself as the restitution of aesthetics.

d14_Maria_Eichhorn_Unrechtmaessige_Buecher_Neue_Galerie_©_VG-Bildkunst_Bonn_2017_©_Mathias_Voelzke.jpg **[14]**



[15]Maria Eichhorn, Unlawfully acquired books from Jewish ownership
Installation view, Neue Galerie, Kassel, documenta 14

Photo: Mathias Völzke

Adding to the sentimental atmosphere is *I had nowhere to go* (2016), the film Douglas Gordon (b. 1966 in Glasgow) made after Jonas Mekas [16]'s (b. 1922, Semeniškiai, Lithuania) memories of his experience during the Second World War and his first steps in America. The younger film artist follows "the godfather of American avant-garde cinema." Yet Gordon cleverly juxtaposes Mekas's voice, as an old man narrating his stories, with explosion sounds of war films special effects, allowing the viewer-listener who experiences the film that is mostly composed of an audio track devoid of picture, some reflective critical distance. Another highlight is the digital video, *The Dust Channel* (2016) by Roee Rosen (b. 1963 in Rehovot), a witty operetta for a vacuum cleaner that ends with clips about the Holot detention center for refuge seekers in Israel, mixed with expressions of xenophobia by Sir James Dyson, the inventor of the bag-less vacuum cleaner that stars in Rosen's work. Finally, a work that faces current reality and uses humor and absurd as powerful weapons.

d14_Gordon_Hookey_MURRILAND_Neue_Neue_Galerie_©_VG-Bildkunst_Bonn_2017_©_Michael_Nast.jpg **[17]**

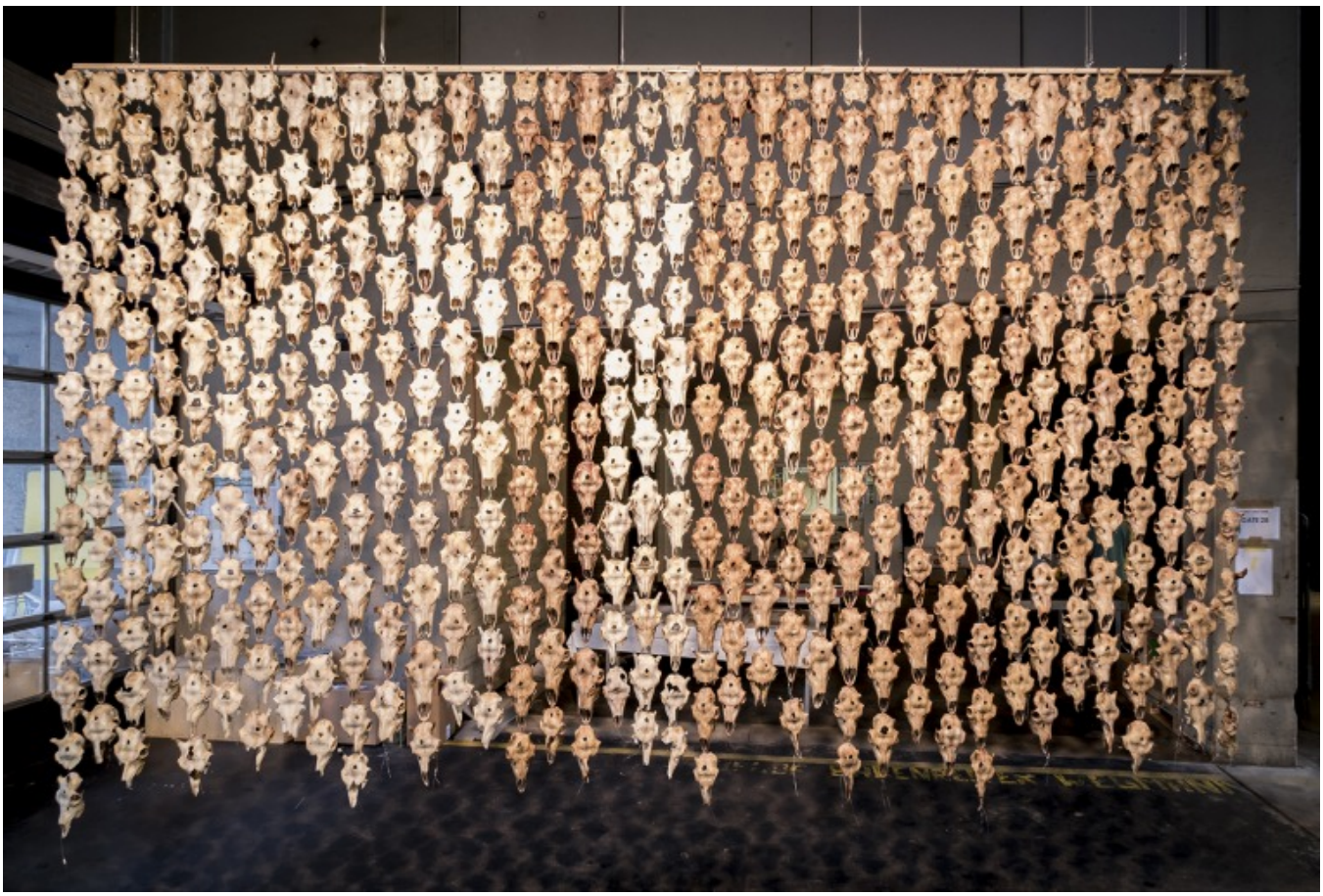


[18]Gordon Hookey, MURRILAND!, 2017
Oil on linen and mural, Neue Neue Galerie (Neue Hauptpost), Kassel

© Gordon Hookey/ VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2017, documenta 14, photo: Michael Nast

The public faces further horrible outcomes of our global history in the hangars of the so called Neue Neue Galerie (Neue Hauptpost). In *MURRILAND!* (2017), Gordon Hookey (b. 1961 in Cloncurry, Australia) shocks us with a huge and colourful mural painting that tells the awful story of colonialism and oppression in Australia. Máret Ánne Sara [19] (b. 1983 in Hammerfest, Norway) completes the morbid impression with skulls of reindeer in *Pile o' Sámpi* (2017), demonstrating how the Norwegian state defies the rights of the native Sámi community to practice their tradition as reindeer herders.

d14_Maret_Anne_Sara_Pile_o_Sapmi_Neue_Neue_Galerie_©_Mathias_Voelzkelowres.jpg **[20]**



[21]Máret Ánne Sara, Pile o’ Sámpi, 2017
Various materials, installation view, Neue Neue Galerie (Neue Hauptpost), Kassel, documenta 14

Photo: Mathias Völzke

Theo Eshetu, Atlas Fractured, 2017, digital video projected on banner, Neue Neue Galerie (Neue Hauptpost), Kassel, documenta 14, photo Mathias Völzke.jpg **[22]**



[23]Theo Eshetu, Atlas Fractured, 2017
Digital video projected on banner, Neue Neue Galerie (Neue Hauptpost), Kassel, documenta 14

Photo: Mathias Völzke

Theo Eshetu (b. 1958 in London) attacks the posters of the Ethnological Museum of Berlin, which feature masks to represent America, Asia, Africa etc. In *Atlas Fractured* (2017) the artist projects filmed faces on those masks, to a soundtrack that includes historical voices of struggle for human rights and universalistic speeches such as Charlie Chaplin's in the *Great Dictator* (1940). It seems that the solution to the world's horrors is an updated and global *Family of Man* (1955).

d14_Maria_Hassabi_Staging_quartet_©_Fred_Dott_041lowres.jpg **[24]**



[25]Maria Hassabi, STAGING, 2017
Live installation, installation view, Neue Neue Galerie (Neue Hauptpost), Kassel, documenta 14

Photo: Fred Dott

Maria Hassabi [26] (b. 1973 in Nicosia) suggests another solution to the miserable human condition in the live installation *STAGING* (2017). Human essence is here reduced to the bodies of young performers, who move extremely slow and very close to the floor, their faces expressionless, but their clothes are colourful and their pointed silver shoes shiny. Fashion is what Irena Haiduk (b. 1982 in Belgrad) proposes too, in a much more humorous manner, in *SER (Seductive Exacting Realism)* (2015-), with an “Army of Beautiful Women” modelling Yugoform. Balancing a book on the head, allegedly the twelfth volume of Marcel Proust’s *In Search of the Lost Time*, and wearing dresses and shoes intended for female factory workers, young women perform on the catwalk. The shoes and dresses could be purchased in the exhibition, under the title Yugoexport [27].

Finally, the depressing human condition is resolved with fashion and merchandise. We can now join the attractive musicians singing the libretto in Rosen’s work that glorifies commodities: “suck, Dyson DC07, suck suck suck …” Suck all the dust away from the Parthenon.

d14_Roee_Rosen_The_Dust_Channel_Palais_Bellevue_©_Daniel_Wimme

rlowres.jpg **[28]**



[29]Roee Rosen, The Dust Channel, 2016
Digital video, installation view, Palais Bellevue, Kassel, documenta 14

Photo: Daniel Wimmer

- 1. The art world cooperated, but to voices of criticism: whereas privileged people of the art world could tour all over Athens for free, locals could barely afford the visit to the exhibition due to the land's heavy financial crisis. Art classes from all over Germany flew into Athens for the lesson, taking advantage of academic funding. Would classes from Greece now do the same and fly to Kassel, or are they not the addressees of "learning from Athens"? I, who visited only Kassel, represent a realistic, art-broke approach: my current resources don't allow me to fly from Berlin to Athens, so I took a train to Kassel to learn from Athens there.
- 2. In 2002, Okwui Enwezor's documenta 11 had satellites in Lima and Vienna, and in 2013, Carolyn Christof-Bakargiev's documenta 13 operated in Kabul too. Yet documenta 14 is the first to extend the traditional one-hundred-days event, and to split the budget between both locations.
- 3. See Susan Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp'," 1964. For example: "10. Camp sees everything in

quotations marks. […] To perceive Camp in object or person is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theatre." It is relevant to our case that Sontag finds the origins of Camp taste in the eighteenth century.

- 4. See Jacques Derrida on Plato's Phaedrus, "Plato's Pharmacy," *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (The University of Chicago Press, 1983), 61-171.
- 5. A detailed list of books once banned appears in a call for books here: http://blogs.ubc.ca/documenta/files/2017/05/List-of-Banned-Books-2017-05-04.pdf [30]
- 6. Paul B. Preciado, *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era*, trans. Bruce Benderson (New York: The Feminist Press, 2013), 349-50. Preciado is responsible for the public program of documenta 14, called "The Parliament of Bodies."
- 7. The matter of redistributing books plays a large part in the correspondence between Arendt and Scholem. See *The Correspondence of Hannah Arednt and Gershom Scholem*, ed. Marie Luise Knott, trans. Anthony David (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017).

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