

Adam Szymczyk & Quinn Latimer



Adam Szymczyk is a curator. This year he was the artistic director of documenta 14, which was split between Athens and Kassel. Quinn Latimer is a poet, critic and editor-in-chief of documenta's publications. Since 1955, documenta has taken place every five years, each edition limited to 100 days. documenta opened in April in Athens, and will open in Kassel this June.

Interview: [Thomas Roueché](#)
Portrait: [Aristide Antonas](#)

Thomas Roueché You've spoken about the importance of text for documenta. What was the role of *South* magazine?
Adam Szymczyk It was a way to think about what is expected and what else we can do for this large exhibition. The exhibition was, from the very beginning, meant to take place in both Athens and Kassel, so it needed a different treatment.

Something that would not only connect with a specific place, but open up a larger view on things. documenta's *South* magazine is very much located in this case, in Athens. It had been established there as *South as a State of Mind* by Marina Fokidis in 2012, and Quinn and I continued making it from Athens. On the one hand, it's very much from here,

but on the other, our issues did not address the exhibition in Athens or Kassel in a specific way. It was floating. **Quinn Latimer** The magazine was emblematic of a larger idea about the project; it was made here, but it wasn't about the Athens or Kassel art scenes. It was made from a certain place, engaged with these two cities, but it brought in voices from all over the world – ideas, conversations and movements that were geographically pertinent, but also emblematic of a larger global consciousness. There was always a tug between the local and global points of view.

TR You've spoken about "building knowledge and buildings of knowledge".
QL At the launch of *South*, held in the National Library of Greece, in Athens, we spoke specifically about the case of Fridericianum [a museum in Kassel, bombed in 1941 and its collection of 350,000 books destroyed]; *The Parthenon of Books* [Marta Minujín's work at documenta 14, composed of 100,000 banned books]; the history and material fact of temples and libraries; and the fact that the Fridericianum was the first European public museum, but it was initially a library. The building became a starting ground for documenta when it was still a ruin after the Second World War. We were interested in mirroring this, but also talking about the Marta Minujín Parthenon project, which will be in the Kassel iteration of the show on Friedrichplatz. The project will mirror the Fridericianum and be built from the books that were censored all over the world by authoritarian regimes.
AS Through the magazine, we were able to thematise or point to certain institutions, like the National Library, here in Athens, where we launched *South* as the documenta 14 journal. And now the whole collection of books from the National Library, which is a neoclassical building in the very centre of the city – part of a suite of buildings from the 19th century built in order to anchor the new Greek state in the institutional framework, designed as imagined by the Bavarian monarchy – is moving to a new location, close to the sea and far from the city and most of its inhabitants.

TR One of the things I read by Quinn was about how you were interested in the way that words can become codes for other things.
QL I'm often interested in when words become specifically fashionable and how they become code words for other things. What is sitting behind the words, is unsaid? As words become clichés, become abstractions, what concrete ideas

are they being abstracted from? There's also the enigmatic word, where words function as suggestions for things less easily articulated. I've been thinking back to an interview with an Indian graphic novelist, Sarnath Banerjee. He said that truth seekers or non-fiction readers, as he calls them, are charlatans, and fiction readers aren't. Fiction readers are trying to approach something that feels like the truth, but is not actual fact, is not the truth itself. That's where he thinks the truth lies. Even though much of the work that we've published is non-fiction, I think I've been trying to approach it in a fictional way, so that it's suggesting truth, pointing at it, trying to approximate the tone of it, without attempting to be instructional. The works aren't trying to say that this is exactly how the world is and this is how you can fix it; they're operating in the modes of fiction, storytelling and the parable. You often feel truth but you can't exactly locate it in the actual world, but in a kind of fictional world that sometimes has more truth than the one with which you are engaging.
AS This is a very good way to describe the oft-asked question about the extent to which art should be political, or whether art is dealing with reality and real issues. How much reality does there have to be in an artwork in order for it to retain some sort of rapport with lived reality? It's specific to art that it addresses reality through its own means that are proper to it. There is no need to ask art to become something else because there is something else already, and there is a sort of shifting border between the two – this is where interesting art operates. But it is not about saying that since this a fiction, this can have no aspiration to say something politically important, or to say something important about the things that surround and affect us. That something is fiction, doesn't mean that it's mere decoration or a pastime.
QL We get this critique a lot – that if you're doing a political project, then the work has to have political ends. In a weird way, people treat us as if we're supposed to be an NGO or that we're supposed to do the work of an human-rights organisation. I think that you can make political work that has political consequences, totally within the realm of art. We don't expect to feed people with the work that we do; that doesn't mean that we can't talk about hunger in all of its meanings – as famine or as metaphor for writing or art-making or knowledge. All of these things are important and they have a place in political discourse, as art. People become

quite reactionary. In the US right now, there's a proposal from the regime in power to get rid of the National Endowment for the Arts, which is about 0.003% of the national budget, so as to spend more on defence. Some critiques of d14 have amounted to the same thing: "the documenta money should be used for an environmental service or given to a refugee organisation" – as if, in a place of economic and humanitarian crises, there's no place for art in both aesthetic and political discourses, which I simply don't believe.

TR How do you navigate the categories of anthropology and ethnography, which can be so problematic?
AS I think what we are trying to do is to ask artists who we think are capable and knowledgeable to guide us through these practices, rather than just import the material expressions of such practices. So all the people who produced and used objects that are either art or objects used in rituals and ceremonies, or rites, came to install the work, and we learned from them how the objects were used. There are always more questions than answers. We did not attempt to elevate these objects to the status of artworks because they speak for themselves, they are activated when the people who come with them teach us how to use and understand them. I think this aspect of bringing the makers and those in the know into the project through public programmes is important. They make the exhibitions a little different than a collection of ethnographic items. I know that for me, emotionally and intellectually, this was a very important encounter with certain practises that were pretty inaccessible, before meeting these people. For example, an artist like [the Kwakwaka'wakw] Beau Dick, whose installation was not completed before his death became meaningful because we could not think about it without thinking about his death, and the ways in which his death might have been honoured in the place where he lived. So, with each artwork that could be described as a "stranger" we tried to create a respectful context, one that would enable people who are completely profane to understand something of it.
TR Is it similar when one approaches the military dictatorship in Greece?
QL documenta 14's public programme this year focused, in part, on the military dictatorship in Greece, and it got criticism from local newspapers who argued that this was not the best way to approach it, or it wasn't the right sort of history to engage with. I think the same could be said about indigenous objects,

or any contested history or material which is not one's own heritage.
AS The same criticism could be made about anything in the world! Some of our artists trained as anthropologists, and have betrayed their profession – perhaps for a reason. We also had photographs by [the anthropologist] Franz Boas, who was a prominent figure within the anthropology department at Columbia, and Naem Mohaiemen, one of our artists, was interested to see these. This is one thing that some artists question; they question the metier of the discipline to which they supposedly belong. Naem's ideas about this became really relevant when were confronted with calls to "fix our vision of history", in this case the episode of the Greek military dictatorship. We were summoned to tell a certain version, or we were told that this version has been repeated too many times, that we were foreigners who didn't understand anything, and that we were being unkind to peoples' feelings!

Naem has this little book called *Prisoners of Sbotbik Itibash*. When you don't know Bengali, the title sounds almost as if it were about prisoners of a penal colony. What it really means is "correct history", so the full title is "Prisoners of Correct History", history told in a correct way. The title is a quote from an older professor of history, who during a discussion in which Naem's work was presented, said "You have to tell correct history." As if there were one version of history to tell. And we were also confronted while working, with these normative versions of history and archaeology. For example, [in relation to Ross Birrell's work *The Athens-Kassel Ride*, the horses of which caused controversy] the definition of a horse in Greece is "an animal that looks like a horse, which is not smaller than 158cm". And where does this come from? The archaeological council of Greece! I'll leave you with this enigma...
QL To further that parable, in the first issue of *South*, Naem made a piece on this idea of correct history, about his great uncle, a famous Bengali writer who was a Nazi sympathiser. It's a fascinating piece because he is struggling with the fact that he knows that he is going against his family and his field to enter into this, that it would be better for him not to open the volume of essays by his great uncle, in which he professes his sympathy to Hitler. And yet, he can't stop himself. Much of this critique of engagement believes that it is better to stay away. Nevertheless, Naem would rather take the risk of engaging incorrectly, than not engage at all. §