

SCENE & HERD

LEARNING CURVES

April 12, 2017 • Athens • Kaelen Wilson-Goldie at the opening of Documenta 14 in Athens



Documenta 14 artistic director Adam Szymczyk surrounded by his team. (All photos: Kaelen Wilson-Goldie)

LET'S SAY YOU LIVE IN TWO DIFFERENT PLACES. Maybe you were born in one city and live in another. One is cold, orderly, efficient, and peaceful; the other is hot, chaotic, wildly corrupt, and untenable. You endlessly set them in dialogue, sure that something meaningful will be made from the echo back and forth, the jagged path, and the way you move between them.

If you're lucky, your exile is of your own choosing. You haven't been forced out by war, disaster, or economic collapse. But in that case, you have temptations to avoid (exoticism, exploitation) and tricky questions to answer. Who are you to live here, to make this place your own and create your work from it? And who are you to say that you do so from a place of love, not ambition or pity or arrogance, not from some misplaced need to affirm your position or legitimize your politics?

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Thirty-six hours after arriving in Athens on Thursday morning for the opening days of Documenta 14, I lost my train of thought.

I was squeezed in by a majestic view of the Acropolis lit up against the nighttime sky on one side and a roomful of loud people on the other, shouting above the din, all of us brought together, in theory, by the quieter act of looking, by the promise to listen and learn. We were expending nervous energy everywhere.

The night before, I'd found myself at a calmer table, listening to the artist Amar Kanwar as he told five of us about living in one city, one neighborhood even, and barely ever leaving. It was a wonder to us all, that willful stillness, which also permeates Kanwar's astonishing new film, *Such a Morning*, commissioned for Documenta 14, that tells the story of a man losing his sight and retreating from the world. None of us had a clue how to live this way. Writer and novelist Shumon Basar and curator Natasha Ginwala, one of five curatorial advisors on the Documenta team, joked about who was more perfectly opposite. Both are nominally based in Berlin, but neither of them can sit still.



Left: Documenta 14 curator of public programs Paul B. Preciado. Right: Artists Naeem Mohaiemen and Amar Kanwar.

Now it was Friday night, at a dinner on Avissinia’s Square hosted by the Breeder, one of the powerhouse galleries on the Athenian art scene, celebrating three of its artists in Documenta (Andreas Angelidakis, Maria Hassabi, and Angelo Plessas) as well as the opening of a new show at the gallery curated by Milovan Farronato. I was having the same conversation on repeat, meeting a Greek DJ just returned from Detroit, an Iranian artist raised in Switzerland, an Egyptian from Assiut who had lived in Athens for twenty years, an architect from Thessaloniki who lived all over Europe before returning somewhat reluctantly to practice in Athens, myriad South Asians in Dubai, New Yorkers in Istanbul, countless Athenians in London, artists from everywhere now in Berlin, and curators who think nothing of flying from London to Mumbai for lunch with an artist who is eccentric, and demanding.

Sitting across from me was an affable Greek hotelier who divides his time between Athens and Crete (loves one, hates the other). He looked at me with a gap-toothed grin and laughed. “Yeah, you’re fucked,” he said, sliding his hand through the air. “Whichever city you choose,” he stopped and shook his head vigorously. “You’re fucked either way.”

And so it is, perhaps more delicately, with Documenta 14. Kassel feels betrayed, Athens invaded. Artistic director Adam Szymczyk has described his edition as a divided self, a theater and its double, an apparition, a phantom, an exhibition intent on unsettling its

own format, emphasizing repetition and the retake. What is poetic in these formulations has been largely overlooked. Szymczyk must have some personal stake in this—his wife, the choreographer Alexandra Bachzetsis, is Greek (also Swiss), and Athens isn't exactly new to him. And a divided Documenta stands repeatedly and in so many ways not for the crisis of Europe but for the body that is both, the identity that is mixed, the history that is messed up and complicated by too many things tangled together.



Left: Artist Aoubakar Fofana with Documenta 14 curatorial advisor Marina Fokidis, founder of Kunsthalle Athena and South as a State of Mind. Right: Locus Athens cofounder Maria-Thalia Carras with artist Cevdet Erek.

At an earlier dinner, thrown by Hans Ulrich Obrist to mark the opening of his Maria Lassnig show at the Municipal Gallery of Athens, I had a chance to catch up with Sylvia Kouvali—and to meet one of her artists, the very funny painter Apostolos Georgiou. Born in Athens, Kouvali opened her Rodeo Gallery in Istanbul a decade ago. For a time, it was split between there and London. I hadn't seen her since she closed the space in Istanbul. I asked Kouvali if she missed it. "The things I miss aren't there," she told me. "The things I miss aren't anywhere."

The great Alexandrian writer André Aciman, an expert in melancholic exile, calls those absences shadow cities. And to extend his logic, the current edition of Documenta isn't only about Athens and Kassel but about everything Athens has been, including, currently, a shadow of itself, and the burden of all the past Documentas in Kassel—including the

prior one, which featured programming if not the full-blown exhibition in foreign cities such as Cairo and Kabul. Perhaps what's at stake isn't one city or the other but us, spectators and participants, and what we might constitute together.

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By staging Documenta in exile, and promising to return it home later, Szymczyk has walked into a familiar set of roles: dodgy foreigner, eccentric expat, probable spy. It doesn't help that he is impossibly tall but impish, a waif of a man with funny hair. Local critics have jumped all over his air of suspicion. Their responses to the arrival of the Documenta enterprise range from the humorous (scratching out the first letter of the title so it reads "Earning from Athens" instead of "Learning from Athens") to the hyperbolic and insane ("FUCK DOCUMENTA. FUCK ADAM SZYMCZYK AND ANYONE WHO SUPPORTS THIS BULLSHIT IN A LAND WHERE UNFOLDS A GENOCIDE. DOCUMENTA IS A FORM OF COLONIALISM AND ANYONE WHO SUPPORTS IT MAKES MONEY FROM NAZISM. END OF STORY.") Szymczyk's intentions may be forever misrepresented. But he and Team Documenta have also produced so much verbiage about what they're doing that it's no wonder so much of it ends up sounding tone-deaf to local history or insensitive to local politics, those of a highly factional Athenian art scene included.



Left: Documenta 14 curator at large Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung with artist and radio journalist Tito Valery. Right: Artists Nikolas Ventourakis and Panos Tsagaris.

Witness the press conference, which opened at noon on Thursday in the white gleaming concert hall that many regard as a neoliberal dream palace, an emblem of all that has been stolen from the common Greek people to enrich the elite. The curtain was raised to reveal a crowd mirroring the crowd. The team of artists and curators and staff is huge. About a dozen of them speechified for a full two hours before opening to questions from the audience.

That's when I scootched in. A reporter from the *Wall Street Journal* wanted to know: Isn't the agreement among finance ministers nearly signed? Hasn't the crisis that brought you here ended? Don't you risk calcifying it in place? Aren't you, in essence, already passé? Journalists from South America and West Africa wanted to understand how their regions were being represented and what Documenta could do for them. The artist Thierry Geoffroy, who might be the first proper gadfly of the biennial era—he always wears a blue UN helmet because, as he explains, arms manufacturing is big business in Kassel and he is afraid—said that Szymczyk had become a phenomenon like Mother Theresa. Then Geoffroy asked Team Documenta, pretty directly, if they had developed a mechanism for internal critique, to question whether or not what they were doing was actually working.

Dieter Roelstraete, one of Documenta 14's seven curators, cracked a few jokes. Hendrik Folkerts, another curator, insisted over and over: "We don't have fixed opinions. We don't speak with one voice." Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, a curator at large who worked on an extensive radio project, picked up that idea and ran with it: "What we are really trying to do is figure out a way to live together." Rhetorical yes, but true as well.



Left: Artist Bouchra Khalili. Right: Artist Nevin Aladag with graphic designer Ludovic Balland and Portikus curator Fabian Schöneich.

After the press conference, I was swept by hunger to a garden restaurant next door to the concert hall, crammed with the Documenta melee. It was my good fortune to find a seat under the not-too-blazing sun next to the artists Lala Rukh and Gauri Gill, who are showing two of the exhibition's most striking projects. Lala Rukh's installation, on a lower floor of the architectural marvel that is the Athens Conservatoire, moves from older calligraphic drawings to a beautiful, moody animation based on subtle changes to fixed musical patterns that have no notational system.

Four of Gill's mesmerizing series of black-and-white photographs are installed in the incredible Epigraphic Museum, the oldest (and perhaps only) museum of writing in the world. Also at our table was Naeem Mohaiemen, who is showing a gorgeous feature-length film, *Tripoli Cancelled*, about a man stranded in the Athens airport, specifically the Ellinikon terminal designed by Eero Saarinen, which closed in 2001, was later used for refugee housing, and has since been sold off for real-estate development. The artist Nikhil Chopra arrived and split off with Mohaiemen for the kind of intense talk among artists for which Documenta might best be known, and loved.

Then the dealer Umer Butt arrived complaining bitterly about the lack of wall texts, or any explanatory texts at all. (He represents Lala Rukh at his gallery, Grey Noise, in Dubai.) I thought he was being a drama queen, but I later realized he was right. For all the

talk of the press conference, for all the published material, and despite a great little booklet offering concise histories of the venues, there really is nothing that does the same for the artists and their works. (Communication about the event to the city is so bad that the director of a prominent Athens gallery whispered to me one morning: “Even the local hipsters aren’t going to see Documenta for themselves.”)



Left: Documenta 14 curator Candice Hopkins with poet Quinn Latimer, editor-in-chief of publications. Right: Artists Lala Rukh and Gauri Gill.

Naturally, Shumon Basar was restless, so we set off to make sense of it all. As we were leaving, who should roll up in a van with a driver but Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, curator of the previous Documenta. She humored me with an air kiss. Then she turned on us.

“Where is it?” she asked sharply.

“I beg your pardon?”

“The work!”

“Oh, Carolyn, this is a restaurant, lunch, sociability!” I chirped.

“No! There is work here! You missed it!”

I blinked. Thirty seconds of small talk and she was scolding us.

“We’ll come back.”

“Oh, yeah, you’ll come back.”

I realized that Christov-Bakargiev reminds me of my mother. I also realized that this was going to be yet another exhibition in the treasure-hunt style, with more than 160 artists scattered across more than forty venues, and all of us, insufferable, crumpled, and occasionally rude, guided by spare maps and limited time.

A few days later, I did, in fact, come back to see how Abounaddara’s videos were placed in the nearby Museum of Anti-Dictatorial and Democratic Resistance. They weren’t there, or they had been moved somewhere else, but given that anyone with a decent internet connection can watch any of the work made by the anonymous collective of Syrian filmmakers at any time, the point seemed more about getting *us* there.



Left: Marfa’ Projects founder Joumana Asseily with Protocinema founder Mari Spirito. Right: Documenta 14 curator Dieter Roelstraete.

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Before traveling to Athens, I had spoken with a curator I admire who also divides her time between cities: one in the Middle East, the other in Europe. She wasn’t sure she

would make the trip. Honestly, the heyday of Documenta was during our parents' generation. We grew up with the mythology, possibly false, that Documenta was where artists would do their best work, where they'd push themselves and use the time—five years!—to take risks. She worried that this edition would be too much like a kunsthalle show.

In a way, she was right. Szymczyk's show is definitely too big. There is too much packed in. There are loads of archival presentations, so many books in glass boxes—useless. There's a thread of works approaching Hitler with loud, brassy humor, which seemed in poor taste. (Do I really need to imagine myself in the position of Eva Braun being fucked in pornographic detail by Hitler? I do not.)

But I came away with a surprisingly long list of artists who I think have done some of the best work of their lives for this Documenta, including Kanwar and Mohaiemen, as well as Banu Cennetoğlu, Bouchra Khalili, Mounira al-Solh, and Angelo Plessas. The Nigerian artist Emeka Ogboh's installation in the amphitheater of the conservatory, matching the ticker tape of a stock exchange to hauntingly funereal vocals, is something I won't soon forget. The room of more than one hundred folk-history paintings by Tshibumba Kanda-Matulu is a wonder. I'm dying to know more about the painters Ganesh Haloi and Sedje Hémon and the wild embroideries of Britta Marakatt-Labba.

Of course, whether the show or the works are any good is almost beside the point. The split between Athens and Kassel will remain the most distinctive thing about this edition. Maybe the question to ask is whether Documenta-in-exile does any harm. For sure it isn't going to solve Greece's unsustainable economic settlement. "People who are totally honest go off the books because the tax situation is impossible," a photographer from a family of Athenian architects told me one day. "Let's say a freelance designer makes 6,000 euros a year. Then he'll have to pay 7,500 euros in taxes? It makes no sense." Ask anyone and they will tell you the refugee crisis is nothing new. It's now a deluge but it's been a flood for years, even decades. The presence in Greek politics of ultranationalist, fascist, even explicitly neo-Nazi parties like Golden Dawn is also nothing new, just emboldened by the current climate.



Left: Artist Yiannis Papadopoulos with Yuli Karatsiki of the Kalfayan Galleries. Right: Curator Tarek Abou El-Fetouh.

Athens is a city blasted by graffiti, some of it exuberant, much of it angry. It felt more explosive to me than anywhere I've been in the Middle East. "Suicide rates among men are through the roof," I was told, repeatedly. Was any of that destructive energy channeled by Documenta? Perhaps as critique. But it's hard to say what an anarchist response would really look like. If Documenta's harshest critics were to make an exhibition of their own, or propose a different model of politically useful artmaking altogether, what would it include that Documenta has missed, or refused? Maybe the most damning thing that can be said is that Documenta risks replacing tough, real politics on the ground with the fake politics that inform the global art world.

But I don't really buy it, just as I don't buy the statement made by Abounaddara's spokesperson, Charif Kiwan, at the end of the press conference about how artists are artisans and how artists have failed. At that dinner on Thursday night, Amar Kanwar told a story about being a young man hired to film a charismatic politician and community leader who was sure he was going to be killed. He was, more quickly than he thought. Kanwar recalled his slogan. Your struggle alone is not enough. You have to construct and create something new from your struggle.

Such a Morning does that, as do several of this Documenta's best works. The one that does it most fully, in my mind, is Bouchra Khalili's *The Tempest Society*. A sixty-minute

film in Arabic and Greek, it tells a meticulously composed, uncompromising, and highly emotional story about the struggle for equality, linking Al-Assifa, a Parisian theater troupe that lasted for just six years in the 1970s, to a hunger strike among North African factory workers in Thessaloniki, the referendum protests on Athens’s Syntagma Square, and a group of Syrian children who formed another theater troupe, mirroring Al-Assifa, while waiting to find out if they could go to school in Greece. “We were not interested in art,” says Malek, one of Khalili’s characters. “We just wanted to turn sadness into beauty.”

This Documenta might do that, as a gift, which is not an unproblematic gesture. But if the goal is indeed justice, then participants and spectators might start, in the spirit of Khalili’s film, by viewing each other, and the exhibitions in Athens and Kassel, as equals.

— Kaelen Wilson-Goldie



Left: Natasha Hoare and Samuel Saelemakers of the Witte de With. Right: Documenta 14 curatorial advisor Natasha Ginwala with writer and novelist Shumon Basar.



Left: Rodeo Gallery's Sylvia Kouvali with artist Apostolos Georgeiou. Right: Hans Ulrich Obrist of the Serpentine Galleries.



Left: Artist Thierry Geoffroy. Right: Artists Hristina Ivanoska and Yane Calovski.

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