



ART REVIEW

Documenta 14, a German Art Show's Greek Revival



A piece by the Mexican artist Guillermo Galindo at Documenta 14 in Athens.
EIRINI VOURLIOMIS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

By JASON FARAGO

APRIL 9, 2017

ATHENS — Even today, in a supersaturated calendar of worldwide art events, no show matters more than [Documenta](#), a colossal German exhibition of contemporary art, reinvented every five or so years as a “museum of 100 days.”

Of 13 editions so far, two have become touchstones in recent art history: [the freewheeling fifth edition](#), curated by the Swiss Harald Szeemann in 1972, which equalized painting and sculpture with conceptual art and happenings; and [the erudite 11th edition](#), organized by the Nigerian Okwui Enwezor in 2002, which propounded a global art ecosystem with Europe no longer at the center. But every Documenta, since the first in 1955, has served as a manifesto about art's current

relevance and direction, and every one has taken place in Kassel, an unlovely town north of Frankfurt destroyed by Allied bombs in [World War II](#).



Naeem Mohaiemen's "Tripoli Cancelled" installation.
MATHIAS VÖLZKE

Until this year. The 14th edition of Documenta, led by the 46-year-old Polish curator [Adam Szymczyk](#), is being shared by Kassel and Athens, a city with intertwined crises of finance and migration, and the capital of a country whose recent relations with Germany have been anything but collaborative. Mr. Szymczyk and the bulk of his curatorial team have been living in Greece for years, and the Athenian half of this two-city show opened on Saturday, in the presence of the presidents of both countries. [The local welcome has been skeptical](#). The German news media, too, has looked askance at Documenta's expansion into the capital of what some still offensively call a schuldenland, or debtor country.

A full reckoning will have to wait until June, when the show's second half opens in Kassel. This much I can say now: If the exhibition falls short (far short, in places) of the great editions of 1972 and 2002, Mr. Szymczyk's decision to uproot Documenta was the right one. This Hellenized Documenta is sometimes forceful, often obscure, and in places exhaustingly proud of itself. Parts reminded me of the apartment rental app [Airbnb](#), which allows young cosmopolitans to "go local" on the cheap. And yet the show's most important themes — migration, debt, fraying European unity and the historical antecedents of today's populism and intolerance — are ones Athenians have reckoned with for years. Now that those troubles span the world, Greece may be the best place to come to grips with them.



“Music Room” by Nevin Aladag.
EIRINI VOURLUMIS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

There’s art by nearly [160 participants](#), almost all of whom will also show work in Kassel. For every familiar name, such as the American painters Vija Celmins, R. H. Quaytman and Stanley Whitney, there are 10 you’ve never heard of, often for good reason. (Albanian socialist realism, weirdly, gets a major day in the sun.) It sprawls across 40 sites, as far afield as the port of Piraeus, though its most important is probably the new [National Museum of Contemporary Art](#), or EMST, in an elegantly converted former brewery [vacant for years](#). The accompanying bureaucratic and financial headaches are not incidental for Mr. Szymczyk, who opted to work with public institutions rather than Athens’s cash-flush private museums. A fair chunk of Documenta’s 37 million euro budget (about \$40 million) has gone into nearly bankrupt Greek art organizations, which you can think of as an artsy stand-in for the [eurozone transfer payments](#) that Germany continues to resist.

ADVERTISEMENT



The image is a blue rectangular advertisement for LATAM Airlines. In the top right corner, there is the LATAM AIRLINES logo and a small information icon. The main text is in white and yellow. It reads: "Viaj  al mismo precio del 2015." followed by "Viaj  en avi n." in yellow. Below that, "Mendoza" is written in large white letters, with "Ida y vuelta" underneath. The price "\$2.097" is displayed in very large white font. At the bottom, it says "Precios 100% finales." and a red button with white text that says "Compr  aqu ".

Standout works at EMST include “Tripoli Canceled,” a polished film by the New York-based artist [Naeem Mohaiemen](#), set on an old 747 parked at the [crumbling Hellenikon Airport](#) in Athens. The pilot goes through the motions of announcing flight time, but never takes off; like the myriad migrants here whose movements are blocked by European Union regulations, this plane is stuck in Greece. A languorous video, by the British artists [Rosalind Nashashibi and Lucy Skaer](#), revisits sites painted by Paul Gauguin in Tahiti, but the women they film rarely return their gaze. This honest, knowingly partial film is a model of how to depict other cultures ethically, and how not to shy away from the risks entailed.

A large gallery at EMST showcases music by the Soviet composer Arseny Avraamov, whose “[Symphony of Sirens](#),” backed by gun blasts and metallic droning, is a classic case of an artwork for a future that never came. Music and sound are major concerns of this Documenta, especially in the section housed at the Athens Conservatoire, Greece’s oldest music school. Graphical scores by Greek composers such as Jani Christou and Bia Davou are juxtaposed with nifty diagrams of a rare synthesizer, the EMS Synthi 100, which the Documenta team has been restoring for Greek electronic musicians.



The Argentine artist Marta Minujín, left, and an Angela Merkel impersonator at Documenta.
EIRINI VOURLUMIS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Greece's troubled relationship with Germany finds kitschy form in the EMST lobby. A large box there is filled with thousands of olives; the Argentine artist Marta Minujín, rather daftly, proposes Greeks could win debt cancellation with stone fruit. (At a performance on Saturday, which I missed, Ms. Minujín passed handfuls of the olives to a performer dressed in a red blazer and a frowzy wig, more than passable as German Chancellor Angela Merkel.) David Lamelas, another veteran Argentine, has rigged up a live feed at the entrance to the Conservatoire, showing debates in the Bundestag and the Hellenic Parliament — and a video of the Parthenon, looming as ever over this city.



David Lamelas's "Time as Activity."
MATHIAS VÖLZKE

That third feed from the Acropolis is a reminder that the ties between this country and Germany are far older than the eurozone. A Bavarian was Greece's first king, after the country won independence from the Ottomans two centuries ago. Art history itself, in fact, is a Greek-German invention; it was 18th-century Prussian aesthetes, most prominently Johann Joachim Winckelmann, who first systematized the art of the past, and placed Greece at the summit.



Masks by the Canadian artist Beau Dick, part of Documenta 14 at the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Athens.

EIRINI VOURLIOMIS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

The use and abuse of Classical antiquity, born in Greece and routed through Germany, therefore hums through Documenta 14. Campy hoplites and temple maidens appear in dramatic photographs from 1970 by Pierre Zucca, whose collaborations with the great artist and writer Pierre Klossowski mashed up sex and economics. Flatter are the Polish artist Piotr Uklanski's reproduced stills from "[Olympia](#)," [Leni Riefenstahl's](#) notorious Nazi propaganda film. They hang alongside dire older paintings of Hitler by the American duo [McDermott and McGough](#), each meant to memorialize a gay victim of the Holocaust but undone by their cheapness. (The legacy of the Holocaust may be even more present in Documenta's Kassel half. Several artists are apparently working on projects related to [the art collection of Cornelius Gurlitt](#), much of it believed to have been looted from Jewish families.)

Works by Piotr Uklanski, part of an installation called "The Greek Way."
MATHIAS VÖLZKE

A much more thoughtful analyst of Classicism is [Daniel García Andújar](#), of Spain, who has filled an EMST gallery with 3-D-printed statues of the "[Farnese Hercules](#)," the "[Boxer at Rest](#)" and more deformed riffs on Greek art, plus banks of images that place Greek art within a dizzying network of nationalist imagery and racial classification.

Patrons take in Daniel García Andújar's "Disasters of War" at the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Athens.
EIRINI VOURLOUMIS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

And everywhere, everywhere, bodies are in motion. The ongoing refugee crisis — a hopeless euphemism to describe the greatest moral failure of our time, which has left [65.3 million people displaced](#) and pushed Greek social services to the breaking point — is inescapable in Documenta 14. Some artists here have responded poetically, including Peter Friedl, who films a stage adaptation of Kafka's "Report to an Academy" in which the ape narrator is played by actors and nonactors of various races, languages and ages. Other times it leads to self-righteousness or glibness, as with the wonky musical instruments made by [Guillermo Galindo](#), a Mexican composer, incorporating tubes salvaged from a refugee camp near Kassel.

ADVERTISEMENT

And what are we to make of "Glimpse," a 20-minute silent film by [the Polish provocateur Artur Zmijewski](#) that is this show's most important work, as well as its most disturbing? It's at the Athens School of Fine Arts, and was shot largely in [the Jungle of Calais, France](#), the recently destroyed camp home to 6,000 migrants. The film's initial, documentary sequences of plywood shacks and pitiful tents, hopeless against the rain, are searingly accusatory. Some refugees stare down the camera; a young girl smiles, while her father looks down, abashed. But then the film's tone changes: The artist enters the frame, offers a new coat to a refugee and then paints its back with a dripping white X. Later, in Paris, he shoots African migrants in close-up, turning their heads slowly to get just the pose the artist wants. His film is brave and urgent; it's also shockingly discomfiting, and stamps on our

expectations of objectivity and respect in depicting the least fortunate.

While much of the rhetoric of Documenta 14 invokes a common humanity, “Glimpse” proposes that even the do-gooders have motives of their own. That is a sentiment many Athenians, skeptical of the intentions of this German-born megashow, will find easy to understand. All the same, one of the central aims of modern art has been to break through society’s assumptions, to imagine living as equals *even if* we never get there. It takes courage to get your hands dirty, even if you wash them clean later in your Airbnb.

Correction: April 9, 2017

A picture caption with an earlier version of this review misspelled the surname of the artist whose work was featured. She is Nevin Aladag, not Adalag.

Correction: April 11, 2017

A picture caption with an earlier version of this review, using information provided by Documenta 14, misidentified the artist responsible for a group of paintings in the installation “The Greek Way.” The works are by Piotr Uklanski alone; they are not by Mr. Uklanski and the American duo McDermott and McGough. Those artists contributed other works to that installation, which are not pictured.

Documenta 14

Through July 16 in Athens, and from June 10 to Sept. 17 in Kassel, Germany.

RELATED COVERAGE



[German Art Exhibition Documenta Expands Into Athens](#) APR 5, 2017



[Art Review: Art Show as Unruly Organism](#) JUN 14, 2012



[Special Report: Contemporary Art: Superstar Among Curators](#) JUN 13, 2011



[Art Review | 'Documenta 12': Asking Serious Questions in a Very Quiet Voice](#)
JUN 22, 2007

Most Popular on NYTimes.com