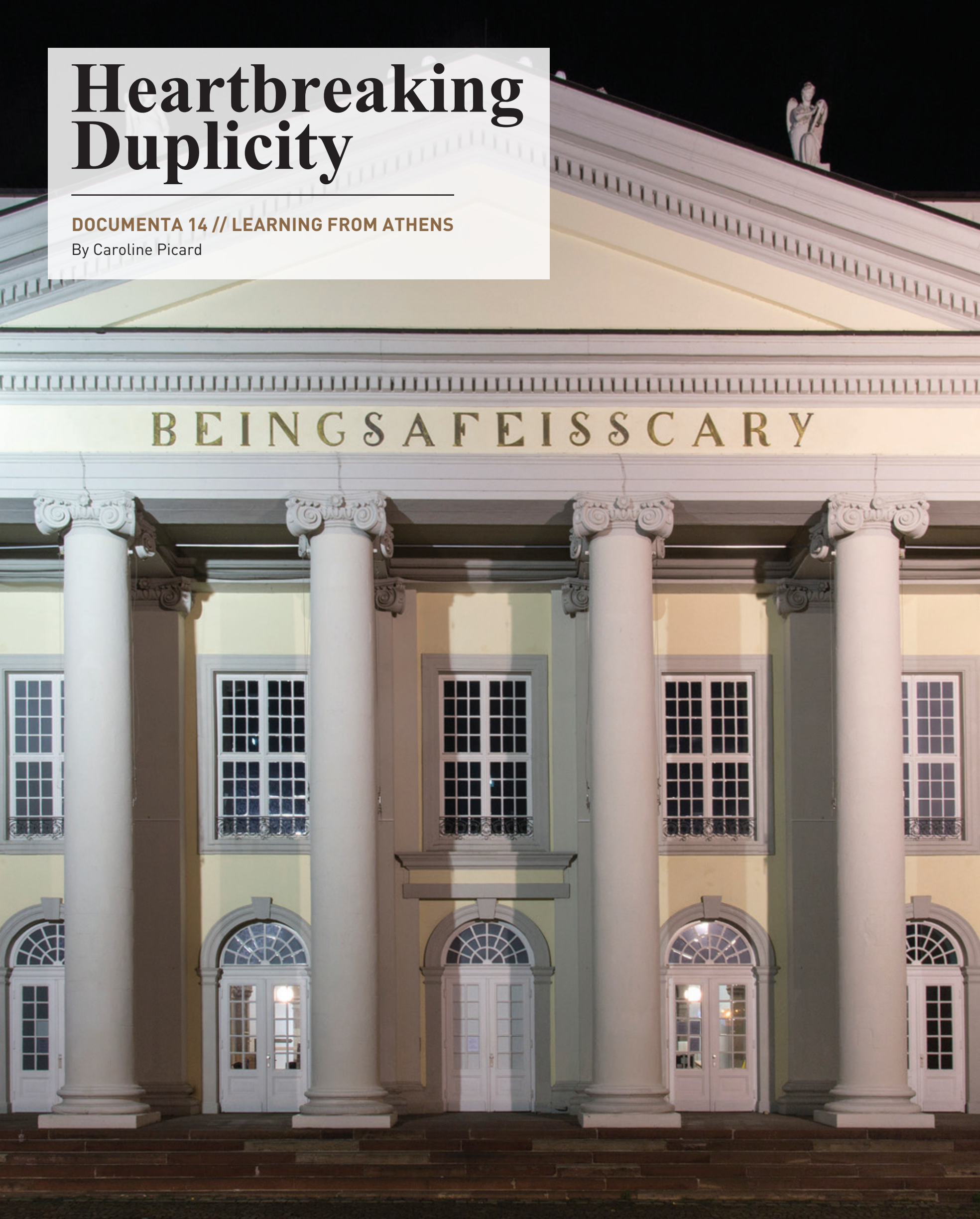


Heartbreaking Duplicity

DOCUMENTA 14 // LEARNING FROM ATHENS

By Caroline Picard

BEINGS AFEISSCARY



In a sense, the Western World presumes to be (always) learning from Athens, espousing Ancient Greece as its point of origin and thereafter presuming a complex blend of familiarity, ownership, and admiration. The inscribed plaques on the gates at the foot of the Acropolis reinforce this lineage, reminding attending tourists that its ground marks the birthplace of Western Civilization. As a further reminder, the Acropolis is visible throughout the city: a distant hill with a brilliant stone beacon, signifying democracy, philosophy, freedom, and social cooperation; values endemic to Western identity, even if they remain elusive and difficult to implement. So, the

private German company. “The deal is the first in a wave of privatizations the government had until recently opposed, but must make to qualify for bailout loans.”² The dizzy reverberation between world events, economic policy, and cultural diplomacy therefore comprise an odd maze, riddling the 2017 edition of documenta with hierarchical challenges. These challenges so dominate the national and international dialogue as to make the artworks accountable to their setting. Within a climate, for example, where some 20,000 Athenians visit soup kitchens every day, what is the significance of Rasheed Araeen’s tented dining room in Athens’ Kotzia Square—a

and transform circumstance. “Our hope is that rather than being a mere reproduction of existing social relationships, art can produce and inhabit space, enable discourses beyond what is known to all, and act to challenge the predictable, gloomy course of current political and social global events that keep us sleepless and suspended.”⁵ In his curatorial essay, Szymczyk acknowledges Greece’s current socioeconomic climate alongside documenta’s connection to the German government, suggesting that despite these two poles, artists might yet have the power to infiltrate hierarchal patterns with their own independent and possibly world-changing agency. “We can see

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—CAROLINE PICARD

West has always studied Athens, though the method of ‘learning’ proposed by documenta 14—the historically Kassel-based quinquennial exhibition, entitled *Learning From Athens*—is of a different kind; one that demands bifurcation to decenter and experience the world simultaneously from Greek and German coordinates: to look up at the Acropolis from elsewhere, while seeing elsewhere from the Acropolis.

_____ To recognize the radical nature of this project, one need only observe the conditions by which the exhibition proposal for documenta 14 has been contextualized since it was accepted in 2012. The event comes at a time of economic strife in which many Greeks are convinced that “Germany is on a mission to throw the country out of the euro, however hard it tries to implement tough reforms demanded by creditors”¹—reforms such as the sale of fourteen regional Greek airports to a

project intended to serve art enthusiasts and local people a free meal without requirements save that they converse?³ _____

_____ Is art useful in this context? Or does it merely exploit a landscape of inequality? _____

_____ From the vantage of Kassel, one might suggest that the selected works on view should be held accountable to these same concerns, pointing out that there is no safe distance from which global inequality can be examined through art. And yet the proximity of Athens’ economic trials, combined with its particularly troubled relationship to Germany, make the Athenian chapter of documenta especially strained. On one side, Greece’s resigned Finance Minister, Yanis Varoufakis, calls the entire effort “disaster tourism.”⁴ On the other, Artistic Director, Adam Szymczyk remains optimistic about the project’s ability to overcome

documenta 14, therefore, as exactly the acts that can be carried out by anyone and everyone as a diverse, ever-changing, trans-national, and anti-identitarian parliament of bodies—of all bodies coming together in documenta 14, to then disperse and form other parliaments, other instances of destituent power, elsewhere and in another time.”⁶ _____

_____ Select internal decisions of the curatorial team cause the perception of documenta’s position to appear additionally ambiguous. After announcing an intended partnership with the Athens Biennial, documenta 14 withdrew from the relationship for allegedly poaching the biennial staff;⁷ this was further complicated when new hires understood they would be paid at one rate (9 euros an hour) only to find their wages had been halved a few weeks later.⁸ These misunderstandings were additionally paired with the deliberate yet controversial debut of Athens’



Contemporary Art Museum (EMST) collection, in Kassel—not Greece, where the collection had previously remained in storage for years. As such, the “divided self” of documenta manifests in the dual location of Kassel and Athens, and is further mirrored in the organization’s two-facedness: desiring on the one hand to build a cultural bridge between Germany and Greece, while inadvertently reproducing some of the same power dynamics it aims to assuage. What is perhaps most curious about this arrangement is how documenta 14 begins to absorb some of Greece’s difficulties as its own, “Foremost among the catastrophes that we have encountered as we have worked on documenta 14 has been the economic violence enacted, as it seems, almost experimentally upon the population of Greece.”⁹

— Whether in appreciation for the intellect, energy, and vision required to navigate these complicated waters, or simply to get on and explore the artworks documenta presents, let’s say the forty million dollar curatorial project glitters with strange ambivalence, boasting a radical internal optimism that is nevertheless intersected and refracted by a shifting quagmire of economic inequality, practical compromise, politics, hierarchical patterns, and mass migration: themes around which documenta’s core program is built. As such, and maybe because doubling one’s consciousness is exceptionally difficult, reflection upon the project is disorienting. It is almost impossible to determine inside from outside, to

delineate documenta’s setting from documenta’s internal curatorial agenda, or even map the movement from one place to another. This disorientation might well encapsulate the crouched and restricted feeling of our times as vital entanglements bubble around every one of us, refusing despite best efforts to provide anyone a sense of agency.

— As though to mirror this ambivalence, New Zealand-based artist Nathan Pohio presents two large scale black and white photographs in Athens and Kassel, *Raise the anchor, unfurl the sails, set course to the centre of an ever setting sun!* (2017) and *Raise the anchor, unfurl the sails, set course to the centre of an ever setting sun!* (2015). Reproducing two 1905 archival prints, each scene depicts the British Governor and his wife, Lord and Lady Plunket, meeting the Ngāi Tahu tribe from South New Zealand for the first time. The 2017 image hangs like a banner in Athens’ EMST’s lobby, as though welcoming visitors to the complexities of the 100-day museum. Men on horseback in ceremonial gear stand ad hoc around the western couple in their car. “In a Māori tradition, objects and bodies would be prepared to travel through a folding of space and time. Rather than considering movement as a passage from a point of departure to a point of arrival, the destination is brought to the traveler.”¹⁰ This reiteration of space, time, and travel could “enable discourses beyond what is known to all”¹¹ while lending insight to Athens’ and Kassel’s simultaneity.

— If space cannot be crossed, but instead is folded, an alternate world view breaches the surface of the Western mind: it is the world that comes and goes, not the individual.

— Perhaps then, describing documenta 14 as a bifurcation is a misnomer. Perhaps instead we should think of the show as a type of fold in and of itself, which allows objects and visitors to pass between its two cities. The weekly airplane commissioned to connect Kassel and Athens for the duration of documenta would reinforce this idea, for it further merges these sites through the appearance of convenience. Additionally, each of the artists included in the two-site exhibition present work in both locations, such that the installations echo back and forth with an almost vertiginous, or amnesiac quality. Pohio presents a better-known photograph from the same series in Kassel on the Weinberg-Terrassen; this second image (2015) features the same figures, this time formally posed in a line to produce the shot. The photograph is the same as its Athenian cousin, except for the arrangement of figures. Had I not taken a photograph of the first image, I would not have remembered the difference, save for a queasy feeling of invalidated doubt. Here, in Kassel’s photograph, the figures have prepared themselves to meet the camera and, strangely enough, future viewers in different locations, like myself standing on a hill overlooking the Kassel’s Orangery.

— “For Māori, the relationship between past, present, and future is neither teleological nor linear—the present is molded by the past being before us, and the future is a present continuous.”¹² Both images capture an encounter between strangers and customs during a pivotal moment in respective histories. The 1905 photographs were taken during a land dispute between the British Government and the Ngāi Tūāhuriri, underscoring the question for its 2017 audience: can documenta 14 revise the power dynamics it uncovers?

— Canadian artist Rebecca Belmore creates a similarly uncanny juxtaposition with *Biinjiya’iing Onji (From inside)* (2017) a hand-carved, life-sized marble tent. Installed first on Filopappou Hill, overlooking the Acropolis, the tent was later relocated to Kassel to stand alongside Pohio’s photograph on the Weinberg-Terrassen. The marble form is inscribed with folds of fabric. The ground of its marble bed is also made to look worn-in at the center, as though having born the

weight of regular use. The tent's door remains open, an invitation almost, and a small hole in the ceiling is at once reminiscent of smoke chimney and a view finder for stars. The work brings the Syrian refugee crisis to mind—a situation that once again amplifies the troubled relationship between Greece and the European Union. Since 2015, more than one million refugees from primarily Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan have traveled to Greece in search of safety.¹³ From January and March of 2017, roughly one in four of 29,758 refugees were children.¹⁴ “Upwards of eight thousand asylum seekers remain in limbo on the Greek islands. So far, the European Union has only opened seven percent of its possible relocation sites, despite the goal of opening one-third of all relocation sites by the end of 2016.”¹⁵ Belmore's tent is modeled after provisional architecture, a structure designed specifically for its portability. Fashioned from stone, the tent suggests transience as a permanent state, highlighting a Western contradiction: while international law entitles people the right to protection if they face persecution at home, national fears block many humanitarian efforts. “For other European allies, the continued flow of refugees also poses significant concerns, such as the growing fear of a terrorist attack, or riots between refugees, host communities, and the police.”¹⁶ *Biinjiya'iing Onji (From inside)* reminds viewers of the tepid and static welcome so many asylum seekers find in lieu of the Western promise they might otherwise seek.

— “The world as we know it today remains a place (and time) of mostly fear, not hope,”¹⁷ Szymczyk states in the central documenta 14 catalogue text. Describing how these fears baffle progressive political parties, while simultaneously goading neoliberal policies and defensive national reflexes, this fright is a force that stiffens rather than accommodates our shifting global landscape. This sense is further articulated by artist Banu Cennetoğlu's site-specific text work, *Being Safe is Scary* (2017), which appears on the frontispiece of the Fridericianum in Kassel, or William Pope L's *Whisper Campaign* (2017) where plain clothed performers and small hidden speakers inside and outside museums emit phrases that elicit doubt and suspicion. Or the filmmaker Naeem Mohaiemen who shows two films in each location, *Tripoli Cancelled* (2017) about a man stuck in an abandoned airport, and *Two Meetings and a Funeral* (2017) that looks at the historic but unsuccessful Non-Aligned Movement, an

initiative started in 1956 by countries that aimed to unify and empower the Global South, despite the landscape of Cold War politics. This latter film seems to highlight the tremendous odds self-determination faces when attempting to tackle dominant political forces. It's not clear that any of these artists feel solutions are in reach, but perhaps demonstrating strategies for collectivism, or simply amplifying the predominance of fear and disenfranchisement might yet yield positive actions. These art works reflect the same ambivalence that documenta itself performs, furthering a pervasive sense of mistrust and disillusion—perhaps with a dash of uncertain hope.

— In Kassel, a former Tofu factory (Tofufabrik) screens two films that reiterate humanity's heartbreaking duplicity. Inside, one super-eight projection features a young boy playing in a yard. As visitors pass through a slatted plastic screen to the left, a second full-color film projects *Commensal* (2017) by Véréna Paravel and Lucien Castaing-Taylor of the Sensory Ethnography Lab. Playing with the slip between fiction and fact, the face of an aging Issei Sagawa—the infamous criminal who in 1981 murdered and cannibalized a twenty-five-year-old exchange student—often fills the entire screen, whether because he is speaking, or because he appears to be lying down, chewing. In this sequence, Sagawa references the act that made him famous in the eighties, but for which he was exonerated due to strange circumstances. The closeness of the camera undermines what distance

a viewer might otherwise presume, imposing an effective and uncomfortable intimacy. One cannot help but recoil at the cannibalistic narrative. You want to ask: *how could this happen?* Where does such desire come from? In the context of this transient museum, and perhaps because Sagawa is old, waxen, and frail—having recently suffered a cerebral hemorrhage—it is not so easy to distance oneself. I am reminded of the incriminating mesh of global capital.

— How is it that the structures we have built and continue to uphold so willingly abandon refugees to circumstance, or even more generally exploit workers to produce everyday devices—for instance, the suicides that have dogged Apple's main production factory in China such that the factory installed suicide nets around the perimeter of its buildings in 2010.¹⁸ Is this system not another form of cannibalism that implicates everyone? And perhaps worse, the sacrifice of human life and well-being that drives our appetite is not even one of erotic pleasure, but instead a compulsory desire for the newest technological objects that are doomed to expire without a conscience.

— As if to demonstrate how recompense might be made in the face of historic exploitation, Rosalind Nashashibi and Lucy Skaer return to sites painted by Paul Gauguin in Tahiti in their film *Why Are You Angry?* (2017) focusing primarily on female subjects as they eat sandwiches, sit still before modern homes, dance together, or recline in outdoor couches like models to be painted. There







is a feeling that the artists are returning to Gauguin's view, attempting to recreate it, by means of demonstrating the limitation of his non-Western fantasy—i.e. the figure wears a tank top rather than being shirtless, and the way the subjects enjoy companionship in contrast to the solitude of Gauguin's women seems enshrined within. The work appears as a hopeful and defiant gesture, perhaps especially for its modest eighteen minutes.

— Another exhibition site, The Athens Conservatoire (Odeion), is significant both for its architecture and the themes embedded within the works it contains. This place was, for me, a kind of Rosetta Stone of documenta 14, amplifying the idea of migration, political strife, learning, and the effort to translate movement into sound into image. Established in 1871, the Odeion is the first performing arts school in Modern Greece. It is further situated a stone's throw away from Aristotle's Lyceum, the original peripatetic university, designed by the philosopher to pair movement (or walking) with learning. Proposed by Ioannis Despotopoulos in 1959, the Odeion was rebuilt as part of a larger urban plan that, like documenta in 1955, meant to architecturally embody "Central European Rationalism and postwar attempts at broad-minded cultural policy."

— The building was never completed to fit its intended purpose due to financial troubles, until NEON, a roving non-profit cultural organization founded in 2013 by collector and entrepreneur Dimitris Daskalopoulos, recently completed the building as an exhibition space.²⁰ The overall architecture feels deliberately incomplete as a result. Columns are only halfway clad in marble. Other walls have been finished with cinder blocks, or remain brutalist with exposed concrete—as with a large auditorium on the second floor. Here, in the dark, Emeka Ogboh's *The Way Earthly Things Are Going* (2017) combines a streaming ticker tape of the stock market—the only light source in the whole room—while Epirotic Song plays ambient in the background. Paired in this way, the stock market reads like a score, illustrating how readers translate information into movement, or in this case turns in the global economy.

— Ogboh's installation resonates with Lala Rukh's *Hieroglyphics* (1995) one story below. Featured in another dark room, Rukh's large suite of drawings depict an original tablature that the artist developed based on Islamic writing. A large



digital animation demonstrates the relationship between sound and notation, as though to teach the audience that movement is contained in the works on paper as well, even if a reader is required to produce results. Here again, Szymczyk's challenge comes to mind: is this how art transforms? The concept of movement throughout documenta 14 invariably has political implications, such as in Beatriz González large-scale *Interior Decoration* (1981). Using a historic newspaper photograph as source material, the unstretched painting features Julio César Turbay Ayala, a corrupt dictator, singing with women. Reminiscent of a large curtain, *Interior Decoration* emphasizes the power of provisional architecture to inscribe boundaries and filter world-views. It is worth noting that González's installation in Kassel consists of a similarly large hanging curtain, wherein the artist instead repainted Manet's *Luncheon on the Grass*. In this way, González makes a correlation between political propaganda and the canon of Western art history that has, for so long, excluded so many cultures from its discourse.

— Similarly, Hiwa K's film, *Preimage (Blind as The Mother Tongue)* (2017), describes the artist's experience in 1996 when he fled Iraq for Europe. A voice carries on throughout the film with poetic remembrances about his experience—what it was like, for instance, to ride in a cargo crate, sitting in the dark indefinitely for some future arrival. The

screen is similarly dark for the duration of this sequence, until upon arrival, a landscape emerges and the artist retraces steps taken twenty years before while balancing a tower of mirrors on his face. To keep the structure balanced, he can only look up at the sky and thus cannot see the ground, only how it is reflected in the mirrors he carries.

— Premiering at documenta in Athens was *An Opera of the World* (2017), a documentary by the Mali-born, New York-based filmmaker and writer, Manthia Diawara. The film focuses primarily on *Bintou Were, a Sahel Opera* (2007), an opera that took place in Bamako in Mali. Bintou Were is the opera's protagonist, and the opening scenes depict her struggles with the local patriarchy, members of whom have raped her, left her pregnant, and try to further take advantage of the situation by claiming fatherhood. Rather than remain in this social structure, Were purchases the assistance of a smuggler who will bring her to Europe for a better future. The opera uses a libretto by the Chadian poet and playwright Koulsy Lamko, and was originally commissioned by Prince Claus of the Netherlands through his trust. As such the opera is a complicated format to work from, steeped in colonial history, and the documentary combines footage from rehearsals of the 2007 production, with archival footage of migrants and refugees, European arias, and commentary from critics Fatou Diome, Alexander Kluge, Nicole Lapierre, Richard Sennett and

Diawara himself. These conversations try to unpack the politics of opera, while still meditating on the real condition that so many migrants face upon leaving one land for another. “If opera is often understood as an über-European art form—the *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total work of art) invoked by composer Richard Wagner, one of the form’s most controversial proponents—Diawara chooses to meditate on its movement or migration as opposed to its expansion or totality. What happens when opera moves south, from Europe to Africa, just as so many people from that continent are moving north, in search of better lives?”²¹ —

In this way, Diawara’s film explores similar questions that documenta 14 is embroiled in: can a large Western gesture still be useful in relation to the historic socioeconomic strife and exploitation it has caused? While Diawara seems to suggest yes, the work emphasizes an accompanying puzzle for all to consider: why do we not recognize migration as an opportunity to expand and open, a moment in which to meet new potential optimistically? While Documenta remains uncomfortably two-faced, presenting compelling works in a context chosen for its economic strife, we would do well to take this scenario as an opportunity to examine duplicities riddling the most banal habits of contemporary life—the purchase of pumpkins harvested by migrant workers, for instance, or the collective reliance on fossil fuels despite the danger of a warming climate. How might documenta’s audience absorb this criticism to break the borders of inherited assumption, prioritizing instead a collective and inclusive future?

TITLE PAGE:

Banu Cennetoğlu, *BEINGSAFE/ISSCARY*, 2017, various materials, Friedrichsplatz, Kassel, documenta 14. Photo: Roman März.

PAGE 58:

Nathan Pohio, *Raise the anchor, unfurl the sails, set course to the centre of an ever setting sun!*, 2015. Various materials, installation view, Weinberg-Terrassen, Kassel, documenta 14. Photo: Liz Eve.

PAGE 59:

Véréna Paravel and Lucien Castaing-Taylor, *Commensal*, 2017. Video and film installation, installation view, Tofufabrik, Kassel, documenta 14. Photo: Mathias Völzke.

PREVIOUS SPREAD:

Rebecca Belmore, *Biinjya'iing Onji (From inside)*, 2017. Marble, Filopappou Hill, Athens, documenta 14. Photo: Fanis Vlastaras.

OPPOSITE PAGE:

Manthia Diawara, *An Opera of the World*, 2017. Digital video, screening at BALi-Kinos, Kassel, documenta 14. Photo: Fred Dott.

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- 3 “Connoisseurs or colonists? Documenta’s controversial stay in Athens,” *The Economist*.
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- 5 Adam Szyzyk, “Iterability and Otherness—Learning and Working form Athens,” *The documenta 14 Reader*, documenta and Museum Friericianum gGmbH, Kassel, (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2017) p. 52.
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- 10 Hendrik Folkerts, “Nathan Pohio” Posted in public exhibitions and xcerpted from *documenta 14: Daybook*, 2017. Accessed July 10, 2017.
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