

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Diedrich Diederichsen, "Summer of the Shamans," *ARTFORUM*, September, 2017

ARTFORUM



Perhaps most compelling of all, however, is the video in the Polish pavilion featuring five young women with whom Sharon Lockhart worked for several years in a youth-education center in the Polish countryside. Three sequences thematize exceptional distortions of time and duration as allegories of adolescent experience: an energetic movement in extreme slow motion, a repetitive performance of slowed-down, minimal gestures, and a hyperaestheticized exploration of a piano solo—not as music, non-music, or anti-music, but as something else entirely.

Lockhart associates her works with the theory and practice of Polish educator Janusz Korczak, an orphanage director in Warsaw who died in the Treblinka concentration camp. He could easily take his place among the many great pedagogues of the early and mid-twentieth century who play a role at Documenta, including Oskar Hansen, Asja Lācis, and Anna Halprin.

THE GRAND TOUR

SUMMER OF THE SHAMANS

DIEDRICH DIEDERICHSEN ON DOCUMENTA 14 AND THE 57TH VENICE BIENNALE

CONSTRUCTED FROM SCAFFOLDING on the Friedrichsplatz in Kassel, Martha Minujin's *Parthenon of Books*, 2017, is unfortunately just more of the usual nonsense displayed at that location at almost every Documenta. The gigantic structure's columns are wrapped in plastic cladding containing vast quantities of books that are or were forbidden somewhere in the world, many of which are among the staples of German households, including works by Goethe and Brecht, and the diary of Anne Frank. It turns out the last of these was banned not by a rogue state but by some American school districts (on account of its sexual content), but it really doesn't matter. The same is true of other works dotted around the Friedrichsplatz, among them Banu Cennetoğlu's *BEINGSAFEISSCARY*, 2017, in which the artist replaced the Fridericianum's name with the ultra-profound motto *BEING SAFE IS SCARY*, or Daniel Knorr's *Expiration Movement*, 2017, in which smoke rises from the Zwehrenturm—no matter whether this is a critique of the art market (which is like a factory, according to the artist on Documenta's website), a wave to Athens (artistic director Adam Szymczyk, quoted in *Der Spiegel*), or a reminder of Auschwitz (the artist again, quoted in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*). It is high time we put behind us the unspeakable Kassel tradition of making grandiose gestures on the Friedrichsplatz, a practice notoriously beloved by charismatic populists like Ai Weiwei and Joseph Beuys. And as impressive as it is that this Documenta was actually mounted on the same scale in two locations, the innumerable projects that offered nothing

besides a link between Athens and Kassel (riders riding from Athens to Kassel, a tree in Athens grafted with an oak from Kassel, famous buildings from Athens cited in Kassel) not only quickly grew tiresome but continue to clog the columns of press on the exhibition with meaningless anecdotes—when this Documenta has goals that are so much more important than that.

Given the spate of major art events happening this year, it is not surprising that the curators of the largest exhibitions are jostling to outdo one another with their claims for art's importance. "Art is the ultimate ground for reflection, individual expression, freedom, and for fundamental questions," explains Christine Macel, curator of the Venice Biennale: "The role, the voice and the responsibility of the artist are more crucial than ever. [T]he world of tomorrow is often best intuited by artists than others [*sic*]." And Katerina Koskina, director of the EMST | National Museum of Contemporary Art in Athens, one of Documenta 14's primary partner institutions, adds that art's mission is "to denounce, to transform, and also to heal our traumatized world." Gone are the days, then, when art was free to be reckless, unfriendly, antisocial, aloof, aggressive, critical, intellectual, overblown—in a word, interesting. But it's easy to make fun of pious sermonizing and highfalutin pontification; more important is to consider which words are deemed suitable for sermons at a particular historical moment and why.

This pathos of healing, the alarmism of the last bastion! Why should art in particular be able to help in a situation where a host of devastating global develop-

ments has led to the rise of authoritarian politics and para-fascist rule? After all, this has happened during a time when art massively expanded its reach, productivity, and economic power. Rather than slowing down these shifts, it may have exacerbated them. How, then, can art justify such megalomaniacal claims about what it is able to accomplish? Who can direct its course, and in whose name? For Szymczyk, the goal of Documenta 14 is "to question this very supremacist, white and male, nationalist, colonialist way of being and thinking" by attempting to carry "Indigenous practices and techniques of knowledge from all over the world, via Athens, to Kassel and elsewhere." And who is the enemy to be vanquished? "A complex entanglement of political and military powers that globally uphold the exploits of financial capitalism while keeping intact the old and untenable concept of a world comprised of sovereign nation-states." There are thus two adversaries: de- and reterritorializing capitalism. Szymczyk aspires to "radical subjectiv[ity]"—is that one of the indigenous knowledge practices, or are they something else?—and he would like to close or reduce the chasm between "the rich and poor, the educated and uneducated, the citizen and the stateless, whites and people of color, men and women, the heteronormative and the LGBTQ communities." That's an awfully packed to-do list, especially when you're also trying to put on a giant art show in two parallel locations with very different infrastructural capacities.

Those who come second on this list, on the right-hand side of these chasms, have something in common,

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Daniel Knorr, *Exploration Movement*,
2017, smoke, text, installation
view, Zehrfeld, Kassel.
From Documenta 14. Photo:
Bernd Borchardt.

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Hans Eijkelboom, *Photo Notes 1992-2017* (details), 270 inkjet prints, each 23 1/2 x 19 1/2". Stadtmuseum Kassel. From Documenta 14.



Works from Beau Dick's series "Undersea Kingdom," 2016-17. Twenty-one masks with acrylic paint, red cedar, cedar bark, rubber, wool, faux fur, horsehair, faux feathers, wire, copper, cloth, pigment, quartz crystal, abalone shell, leather, mica. Installation view, Documenta Halle, Kassel, 2017. From Documenta 14. Photo: Roman März.

but it is seldom if ever political. While they all experience oppression or systemic disadvantage, they do not even share similar forms of disadvantage, only the abstract principle of it. The everyday work of the politics of intersectionality involves hashing out, again and again, that a shared politics and practice, or what Jean-François Lyotard calls a "patchwork of minorities," cannot be brought about by simply enforcing an idealistic voluntarism—especially not within the infrastructure of the visual arts in the First World, where such politics automatically become moralistic, an appeal to conscience. Such a moral stand has something in common with the protection historically afforded to bourgeois Western art, namely, that it is to some extent above the fray. But when art seeks to give a voice to those who cannot afford to be above the fray, who are pursuing identity politics on the other side of the chasm, art kitschifies these others into political subjects without the politics to match. They simply represent being disadvantaged in the abstract and are thus pressed into an empty universal but nonuniversalist function—which is problematic both because it makes their concrete grievances irrelevant and because any new, post-Western universalism is unfortunately still a work in progress. An abstract idea of disadvantage also, of course, sits uncomfortably with the tendency of identity politics to focus on its single, concrete forms. Indeed, a group in Athens that criticizes Documenta on its platform

"Documenta" has extracted the political subject of choice from Documenta's rhetoric, the "queer indigenous" person, and carried out various actions in which its members perform as queer indigenous Greeks—with the charge that Documenta is projecting the sentimental idea of the noble resisting subject not only onto non-Western cultures but onto Greece as well: "We're not saying that's colonial," Fil Ieropoulos, one of their representatives, explained to me in conversation. "That's such a bad word, full of blood. We say *Orientalist*. That's not quite as bad; that's only the second worst."

Like Szymczyk's Documenta, Macel's Biennale tries to redefine art as a transformative discipline, in fields ranging from political intervention to magic. Documenta takes a significantly more complex approach to this cause than does the Biennale, however: The latter sorts topics into individual "transpavilions," grouping works together within thematic arrangements that are more or less transformative, from "shamanisms" (more) to "traditions" (less). At Documenta, certain subjects have also been curated together, but in less obvious ways so as to draw out the latent connections between them. On entering the Stadtmuseum Kassel, for example, one encounters the nearly two-hour-long video *Thirty-Three Situations*, 2015, by Anna/Anča Daučíková (who was for me one of the great discoveries of this Documenta). Cameras glide low across surfaces, scanning the world around

them before pulling into focus printed forms that categorize thirty-three social situations connected with female and lesbian sexuality in the former Soviet Union. In a different part of the same building, one encounters Hans Eijkelboom's *Photo Notes 1992-2017*, which also involves a classification system, but one based on the everyday performance of the clothing choices of several hundred city-dwellers all over the world. One catches oneself smiling unawares at the charm of artistic classifications in and of themselves: the sarcastic triumph of form over randomness and obliviousness.

The works on view in one of the largest galleries at the EMST in Athens, meanwhile, offered a case study of two types of transformativity. Delicate masks by the late Kwakwaka'wakw First Nations chief Beau Dick were arranged in two circles, only one of which—containing ritual objects to be used and later burned, rather than artworks as such—the viewer was allowed to enter. Installed across from it was a binder filled with documentation of Christopher D'Arcangelo's anarchist actions against New York's museums from 1965 to 1979: the sole object in the room that one was forbidden to photograph. The message was clear: Art cannot transform; preservation through photography has a reifying effect; the only thing that works is direct (political or ritual) action. In other cases, it was harder to see the point of the implied connections: How was the viewer to link Olu Oguibe's sober and elegant associative archival installation addressing the Biafra

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Above: Ayrson Heráclito, *O sacudimento da casa da torre* (The Shaking of the Tower House), 2015. HD video, color, sound, 8 minutes 44 seconds. Arsenale, Venice. From the 57th Venice Biennale.

Right: View of Olafur Eliasson's *Green light*—an artistic workshop, 2016—, Central Pavilion, Venice, 2017. From the 57th Venice Biennale. Photo: Chandra Glick.



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conflict in late-1960s Nigeria, *Biafra Time Capsule*, 2017, with the ritually connoted masks of the Cambodian artist Khvay Samnang in *Preah Kunlong* (The Way of the Spirit), 2017? Moreover, Samnang, who has been exhibiting all over the world for a number of years and works in many genres, is hardly the native witness of a religious practice, as the context of other para-magical objects displayed near his work might suggest: Cecilia Vicuña's *Quipu Womb* (*The Story of the Red Thread, Athens*), 2017, for example, which is meant to evoke, simultaneously, indigenous Latin American knotted-string writing, Andean mother goddesses, Greek maritime mythology, and menstrual blood. From here, the exhibition took off on a wild ride through a constellation of historical ethnographic material of all kinds, both as source and as subject, ultimately leading to an installation by McDermott & McGough and Piotr Ukleński (*The Greek Way*, 2017) that simplistically and problematically addresses German fascism, its philhellenism, and the implicit reaction formation behind the homophobia of the Nazis. What, if any, is the connection to Western ethnography here?

In Venice, by contrast, topics and techniques of the transformative are not even placed in tension with each other; associated concepts simply replace the good, the true, and the beautiful in the artistic piety of the kindergarten slogan "Viva Arte Viva." But here, too, there are also a number of good artworks, includ-

ing Ayrson Heráclito's videos *O sacudimento da casa da torre* (The Shaking of the Tower House) and *O sacudimento da maison des esclaves em Gorée* (The Shaking of the Slave House in Gorée), both 2015, which were projected across from each other. In them, we see how a group of protagonists dressed in white uses leaves and twigs as broom-like instruments to "cleanse"—translated in the English rendering of their titles as "shaking"—two of the most horrific places of the transatlantic slave trade, one in Bahia, Brazil, and the other on Gorée Island, off the coast of Senegal. Rather than simply being an abstract non-Western practice, "magic" is here historically specific.

These two exhibitions suggested a growing consensus about art being a transformative discipline, and the undialectical negation of autonomy it is often presumed to entail. Whether practiced in the name of authenticity, incursion, intervention, biographism, or—as particularly evident in the exhibitions on view this summer—non-Western cultures, this approach tends to overlook the fact that any non- or anti-institutional, supposedly transgressive action that takes place within art institutions (or indeed anywhere that is acclimated to the language-game of art or accustomed to hosting artistic "statements") operates in a much more devastating way to stabilize the conventions of an accepted status quo. If something is exhibited under the pretense (or in the sincere belief) that the act of exhibition is no different from direct

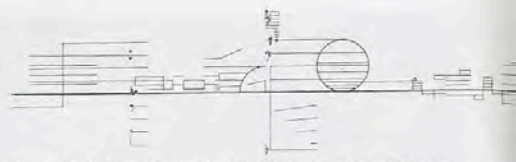
forms of action or interaction, this does violence to what is put on view—by, for example, Orientalizing it or exposing it to voyeurism. Hence what transgressive, interventionist art needs, much more urgently than high-modernist art did, is a critical reflection on its mediation, *as art*, that goes beyond the mediation of the projects and works themselves, encompassing a concept of the medium specificity of performances, interventions, and actions that are thought to take place outside any medium.

In this regard, bringing Documenta to Athens had the effect of turning the city into a stage or backdrop that we know all too well from biennials and Manifestas. No matter how well intentioned such endeavors are, they somehow refuse to understand that exhibiting a city itself—its daily routines, its historical architecture, but above all its contemporary life—means reifying and commodifying it into a movie set. The invisible demarcation line between artwork and spectator implicit in any art exhibition is nothing to be trifled with; it does not disappear when one leaves the white cube. In this sense, Kassel and Venice have long since become city-size white cubes. Repeated attempts to tease a degree of political or historical concreteness out of Venetian opulence or the dreariness of Kassel have all failed; today both cities are, if in dissimilar ways, something like universal convention centers. In Athens, on the other hand, Documenta continued the established practice of using urban contingencies and

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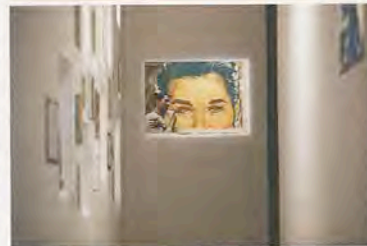
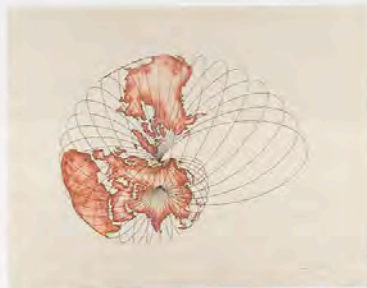
Clockwise, from left: Works by Raymond Hains, 1964–2001, mixed media, installation view, Central Pavilion, Venice, 2017. From the 57th Venice Biennale. Photo: Francesco Galli. Detail of Cornelius Cardew's *Treatise* score, 1967. Neue Galerie, Kassel. From Documenta 14. Agnes Denes, *Isometric Systems in Isotropic Space—Map Projections: The Snail*, 1978, ink on paper and Mylar, 20 x 30". Nikos Kessamitis Exhibition Hall, Athens School of Fine Arts. From Documenta 14. Kader Attia, *Narrative Vibrations*, 2017, mixed media, installation view, Arsenale, Venice. From the 57th Venice Biennale. Photo: Italo Rondinella. Anne Imhot, *Feust*, 2017. Performance view, German pavilion, Venice, May 11, 2017. From the 57th Venice Biennale. Photo: Nadine Fraczkowski.

coincidences for temporary exhibitions and interventions, which has been a popular curatorial move for twenty years now. While it always looks interesting, it, too, turns the city into a showroom or a stage set, albeit of a slightly different kind.

But what is worse than exhibiting cities is exhibiting people who are not performers, or doing so without reflecting on the medium in which one is causing them to appear. The worst offender in this regard is Olafur Eliasson's installation in one of the first galleries of the Central Pavilion in Venice, where actual refugees work on actual design objects—a kind of post-racist ethnological exposition or human zoo of civil society. After moving through Philippe Parreno's eerie installation of pure light and electromagnetism, which is overwhelming in its asceticism, and an impressive show of Raymond Hains's little-known post-*décollage* work, one gets a particularly appalling second look at the laboring refugees from an elevated vantage point. This workplace was undoubtedly created with the best intentions, but it is completely lacking in any feeling for the real effect of the act of exhibition and how putting people on display turns their absorption in their work, and their liveness itself, into an object of voyeurism. This problem does not go away if you believe that you are not exhibiting them because you are employing them—at least not if this act of employment is attributed to the artist Olafur Eliasson.

On this very point, assistance may be forthcoming from Documenta. Another of its themes, again emerging through sometimes latent, sometimes explicit, connections between various objects and events, is a curatorial attempt to formulate an inventory of precisely such urgently necessary media theories of the

unmediated and make them productive. After all, direct and interventionist art, art in search of immediacy, is nothing new. One of Documenta's most important insights is that it could use the knowledge that has long since been gained in this area. There is a lot to be learned from the model of the score in the legacies of Fluxus and experimental music, for example, as represented here by composers such as Cornelius Cardew and those who worked with him on the social and musical experiment of the Scratch Orchestra. Cardew's graphic scores are among many examples of the culture of instructions and notation in experimental music in the exhibition, which also includes material by and about Pauline Oliveros, Jani Christou, Alvin Lucier, and others—in addition to "event scores" devised in 1968 by Anna and Lawrence Halprin, as well as documentation of various projects along related lines by the Chilean art/architecture group Ciudad Abierta. Agnes Denes's conceptual prints and drawings and Katalin Ladik's circuits also offer ways of examining the relationship between drawing, recording, and score. Sculptures by Nevin Aladağ and Guillermo Galindo that function like musical instruments are relevant to these ideas too, as are the fantastic percussive drawings of the late Lahore, Pakistan-based artist Lala Rukh, which seem to denote tabla patterns. This rich, predominantly historical, and meticulously reconstructed storehouse of material for a practical media theory of unmediated performance- and time-based, "direct" and interventionist arts could help repudiate the ideology whereby so many interventionisms and activism situate their practices outside the use of media. But it has not yet found application in contemporary art.



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Left: Sharon Lockhart, *Little Review*, 2017, HD video, color, sound, 27 minutes 17 seconds. Polish pavilion, Venice. From the 57th Venice Biennale.

Right: Kader Attia, *Narrative Vibrations*, 2017, mixed media. Installation view, Arsenale, Venice. From the 57th Venice Biennale. Photo: Italo Rondinella.



One only learns from an exhibition in a transformative sense if one also lets oneself be exhibited by it.

Or perhaps it has. For even in Venice, where these ideas seem to be present more by accident, there are some wonderful works on the notation, anticipation, and reconstruction of practices that are both time-based and transgressive. Chief among them is Kader Attia's *Narrative Vibrations*, 2017, a complex and inspiring installation on the relationship between voice, gender, and gender attribution, which repeatedly moves from sober, scientific disquisition to high drama. On screens set among album-cover decorations, primarily from Turkish and Egyptian records, musicologists and ethnomusicologists offer an introduction to the subject. Then, in the theatrical darkness of the work's central room, couscous grains vibrate to the voices of great cis- or transgender female Arabic singers, arranging themselves into seemingly neutral, objective patterns. In a work by Anri Sala, *All of a Tremble (Encounter I)*, 2016, two stamps for printing wallpaper, one geometric and the other chaotic, double up as a music box: They are mounted on a wooden cylinder and plucked by a steel comb. And in Marcos Ávila Forero's video *Atrato*, 2014, we watch a group of Afro-Colombian percussionists reconstruct the traditional artistic and ritual skill of water percussion, learning from Congolese musicians since the practice has largely been lost in Colombia. Here, movement, sound, collaboration, and coordination turn into both material and medium.

How nonprofessional performers can be included in exhibitions without being simply put on display is also demonstrated in many other works at the Biennale. At the South African pavilion, Candice Breitz's collection of self-representations by refugees in videos benefits enormously from the fact that its authenticity is undercut by an interposed layer in

which Julianne Moore and Alec Baldwin perform statements from the videos. Anne Imhof's work at the German pavilion includes the brilliant intervention of a glass floor roughly three feet high that divides the space into aboveground and underground areas. These, in turn, become the stage set for a performance by an ensemble of professional young posers of dark moods and elegant (auto-)aggressiveness. Perhaps most compelling of all, however, is the video in the Polish pavilion featuring five young women with whom Sharon Lockhart worked for several years in a youth-education center in the Polish countryside. Three sequences thematize exceptional distortions of time and duration as allegories of adolescent experience: an energetic movement in extreme slow motion, a repetitive performance of slowed-down, minimal gestures, and a hyperaestheticized exploration of a piano solo—not as music, non-music, or anti-music, but as something else entirely.

Lockhart associates her works with the theory and practice of Polish educator Janusz Korczak, an orphanage director in Warsaw who died in the Treblinka concentration camp. He could easily take his place among the many great pedagogues of the early and mid-twentieth century who play a role at Documenta, including Oskar Hansen, Asja Lăcis, and Anna Halprin. With all these interesting teachers, however, one wonders what the point was of the fashionable watchword *unlearning*, which also came up at Documenta—as if there were something to be said against learning, simply because there is almost always something to be said against what is taught. At the same time, the idea of "Learning from Athens," which Documenta also proclaimed as a slogan, overlooks the fact that

one only learns from an exhibition in a transformative sense if one also lets oneself be exhibited by it. As far as I can see, that rarely happened. Or if it did, then in a rather convoluted fashion: Documenta's traditional center, the Fridericianum, has been given over to the collection of the EMST. The experience of a national collection that is largely unknown in Germany but that reproduces every known phase of postwar Western art draws attention to the learned contexts that Western art viewers carry around with them when they look at contemporary art ("Is this the Greek Twombly? Is that the Greek Tâpies?"). This is how unlearning can take place in the good sense. There is no room for exoticism; instead, the visitor's own Western gaze becomes evident, as they are shown things they know and yet don't know.

Otherwise, however, with marble as the omnipresent decorative element, the relationship to Athens is dominated by the familiar German philhellenism, which stretches from Hölderlin through Heidegger to the German hippies—and which, of course, very much included the Nazis. It doesn't help that there are no Germans at all among the exhibition's curators. In the work on view in Kassel, this problematic philhellenism is well documented, albeit as a historical phenomenon. Unfortunately, in the art world's enthusiasm for a somehow revolutionary, queer, "universally indigent" person as a new political subject, something of its exoticizing returns. □

Documenta 14 is on view in Kassel through September 17; the 57th Venice Biennale is on view through November 26.

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