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NEWS

### Politics and performance take centre stage at Documenta 14 in Athens

Quinquennial contemporary art exhibition opens in a different city to Kassel for the first time

by JULIA MICHALSKA | 6 April 2017



Rasheed Araeen's Shamiyaana—Food for Thought: Thought for Change (Image: © Yiannis Hadjiaslanis)

If you want to be surprised by art, go to Athens. Documenta 14, which opened to invited guests in the Greek capital today (6 April), puts lesser-known artists from far-flung countries at the forefront; big names are few and far between. The idea is to shake preconceptions amid the “current sad and threatening state of official politics”, the artistic director Adam Szymczyk said at today’s press conference.

For the first time, the prestigious contemporary art exhibition opens in a city other than Kassel, Germany, where it has been held every five years since 1955. The two locations of Documenta are at the heart of Szymczyk’s concept. Both exhibitions—the Kassel iteration will open to the public on 10 June (until 17 September)—stand on equal footing, Szymczyk has been keen to reiterate. Previous artistic directors have attempted a move away from Kassel—with parallel events taking place in Kabul, Banff and Alexandria—but the scope of this year’s programme is unprecedented.

From the moment Szymczyk was appointed artistic director of Documenta 14 in 2013, he has

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been insistent on inviting the 160 participating artists to visit and create works for both cities.

Titled *Learning from Athens*, the exhibition wants viewers to in fact “unlearn what we know” and to “immerse ourselves in the darkness of not knowing instead of pretending to know enough in advance,” Szymczyk said.

Politics takes centre stage. Set against the backdrop of Greece’s social and economic woes, displacement, colonialism, violence and protest are among Documenta 14’s central themes. Szymczyk said: “The great lesson is that there isn’t one lesson; no school that can dispense it and that no masters that can tell us how to live and what to do. We must assume responsibility and act as political subjects instead of simply leaving it to elected representatives.”

Invited to speak at the press conference besides Documenta’s curatorial team were the Society of Friends of Halit Yozgat, a Turkish man who was murdered in Kassel 11 years ago today, as well as Charif Kiwan, a member of the Abounaddara collective, a group of film-makers producing an alternative image of Syrian life to that broadcast by international media.



Pope.L, *Whispering Campaign* (2016-17)  
(Image: Freddie Faulkenberry)

In Athens, the Documenta team is collaborating with around 40 local institutions, including the Benaki Museum, the Archaeological Museum of Piraeus, the Numismatic Museum and as the First Cemetery of Athens where, from 8 April, the American artist Pope.L will be performing his *Whispering Campaign* (2016-17) in which five performers will roam the city whispering their observations to the public.

The Athens Contemporary Art Museum (EMST), which was established in 1997 but was only partially opened late last year, is the main Athens venue of Documenta 14. In exchange, EMST will send part of its permanent collection to Kassel, where it will be on show at the Fridericianum over the course of the exhibition.

Visitors to Documenta 14 at EMST are greeted by a large container of olives titled *Payment of Greek Debt to Germany with Olives and Art* by Marta Minujin, an explicit reference to the Greek financial crisis. In Kassel, the Argentinian artist will also be restaging her 1983 work *The Parthenon of Books*, a huge replica of the Acropolis made from 100,000 banned books. Much space is also devoted to the colourful masks of the Kwakwaka'wakw artist Beau Dick, who died only a few days ago on 27 March.

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Performances are in abundance. They range from the Haitian choreographer Kettly Noël's zombie ballet, *Zombification*, to Regina José Galindo's *Presencia* (Presence), in which the Guatemalan artist wears the dress of a murdered woman, and Rasheed Araeen's certain crowd pleaser *Shamiyaana*—*Food for Thought: Thought for Change* in which the public will be invited to eat a meal under a traditional Pakistani wedding tent.

Concerts and sound works are a mainstay of Documenta 14's radio programme, which is broadcasting on Greek radio stations. And off the radio, the many music events include Polish composer Henryk Górecki's harrowing *Symphony of Sorrowful Songs*, which will be performed on 8 April by the Athens State Orchestra and the Syrian Expat Philharmonic Orchestra in collaboration with the artist Ross Birrell and David Harding.

Glasgow-based Birrell is involved in another major event, the *Athens-Kassel Ride* (2017), which, on 9 April, will see 12 horses and riders travel the streets of Athens from the Acropolis to the Parliament. For the riders, however, the trip will be far from over as they will then set off on a 100-day horseback ride to Kassel, for the second leg of what is sure to be an equally memorable display.