

Art and Cake, August 25, 2017

Documenta
By Jody Zellen



I arrived at Documenta after visiting the Venice Biennale and Sculpture Project Muenster. These three exhibitions line up every ten years and while it is overwhelming to visit them all, it is also a rare treat. The map for Documenta 14 listed 32 venues. This did not include Athens which for the first time was also a site for the exhibition. Having visited as many of the 209 venues in Venice and most of the 35 plus in Muenster, I was on visual overload when I arrived in Kassel. While Venice is an enchanting city, Kassel was rebuilt after World War II and does not have as much character. It feels like a generic post-war city that happens to house an amazing international art exhibition every five years. It is interesting to notice how the city has changed over time and to think about that in relation to the artworks on view.

In Kassel, Documenta runs from June 6 – September 17, 2017: it is traditionally open for 100 days. The Athens portion was on view from April 8 – July 16. The exhibition, entitled *Learning From Athens*, was organized by Adam Szymczyk. The show is more didactic and pedantic than aesthetic or formal. There are few objects — meaning painting and sculpture— in favor of installations, films and projections. Upon arriving in

Friedrichsplatz (the main plaza in Kassel) Marta Minujin's giant *Parthenon of Books, 2017* beckons. This work, a replica of Greece's Parthenon created from thousands of prohibited books, becomes the symbol of the exhibition, linking both its content and dual locations. It is a beautiful structure to be enjoyed in the day or night. The piece is a work in progress as new books are constantly being added as well as a gathering space where lectures and performances take place.

The curators further link Germany and Athens by hanging works from Greece's National Museum of Contemporary Art in the Fridericianum, one of Documenta's main exhibition halls with a decidedly classical facade. Beginning here in many ways sets the tone for the entire experience— as this historic exhibition presents a wide range of artists from all over the world, many of them of Greek origin. Documenta is known for gathering artists who might not be household names and giving them carte blanche to create new work. Sometimes this works, other times it can be a failed experiment. Be it sculpture, performance, dance, talk, Documenta makes room for it all.

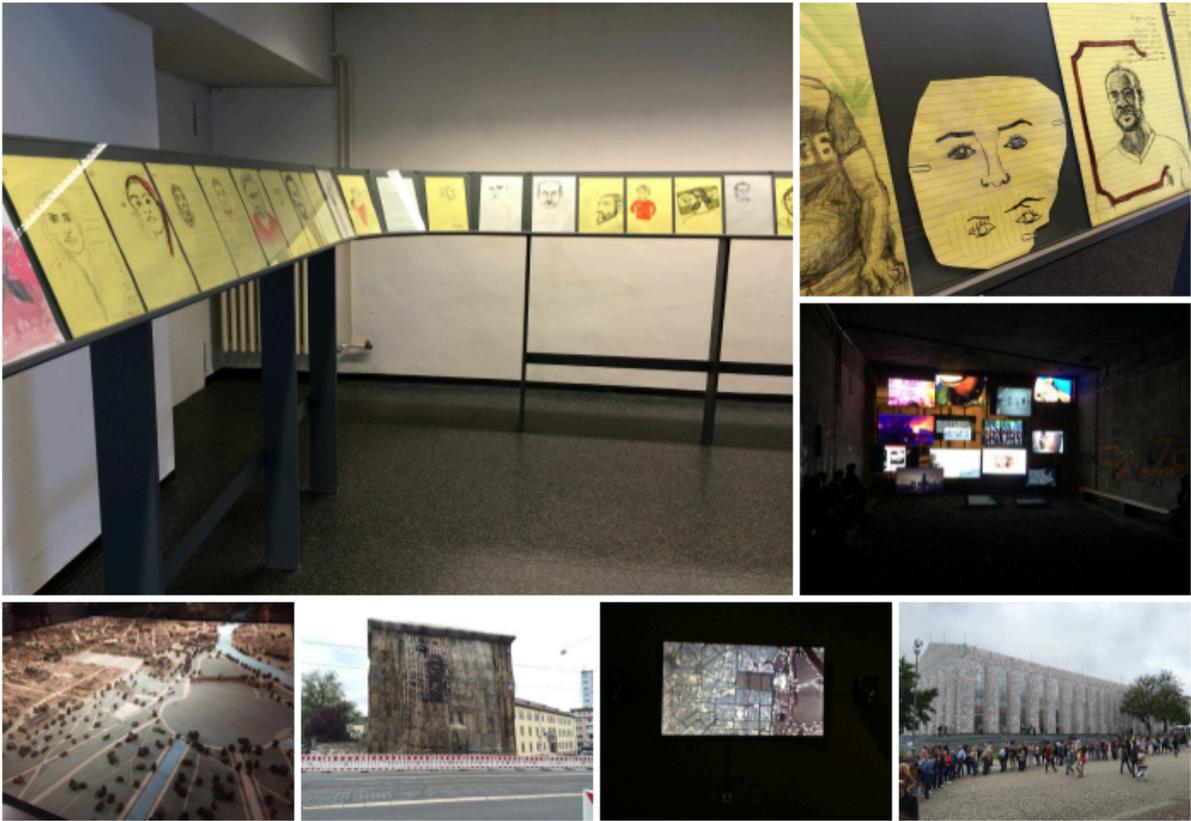
While there are many artists whose work I would like to retain and see again, most of my experience of Documenta was disappointing. I would have liked to sit and watch all the narrative single and multi-channel video works, but with times ranging from thirty minutes to over two hours, that was an impossibility. The only way I could enjoy a film or video in this context was to arrive at a scheduled time to a theatre presentation knowing I was there specifically for that purpose. One of the works I enjoyed the most was Douglas Gordon's film, *I had nowhere to go* about filmmaker Jonas Mekas. In this haunting and compelling film, Mekas talks about his experiences fleeing war torn Lithuania during and after World War II.

As Mekas narrates the film, much of which is a blank screen, the audience can use their imagination to fill in the missing images. This becomes a gratifying experience and one that would have helped in the reception of much of the work presented. Let the viewer use their imagination and fill in the gaps. Another work that succeeds in presenting the underlying concepts of the exhibition with grace was an installation by the Lebanese artist Mounira Al Sohl. Her installation entitled *I Strongly Believe in Our Rights to Be Frivolous, 2012-17* features in part drawings and transcripts of interviews about the Syrian crisis which are housed in a faux bakery based on her parents' business along with text that describes the fate of their endeavor and its eventual demise. Viewers can sit on benches and read about myriad individual struggles, then descend to the lower level of the space and view pen and ink drawings on pages from yellow legal pads that identify these individuals. The work is subtle and powerful and speaks succinctly to the premise of the entire exhibition.

Documenta exhibits are presented in expected and unexpected venues. While Marta Minujin's work occupies the main plaza, Mounira Al Sohl's work is installed in one of five ad hoc spaces entitled Glass Pavilions which in reality are empty window spaces on one of the main traffic corridors in Kassel. A new addition for Documenta 14 was the Neue Neue Gallery (once a post office building) and a former underground train station at the KulturBahnhof where Michel Auder's amazing fourteen channel installation, *The Course of the Empire* was presented. Some artists also engaged with the specificity of

their location as in Ibrahim Mahama’s wrapping of the Torwache buildings in charcoal sacks referencing the history of global trade. Hiwa K’s eleven minute video *View from Above* was presented in the StadtMuseum of local history. For his video, Hiwa K shot details of the museum’s model of Kassel outlining its destruction during World War II (on display in the next room) and juxtaposed these images with a Kafkaesque voice over relating a strategy for a refugee seeking asylum. This piece, like many of the others on display, used the details of Kassel’s history to parallel current events.

The disparate venues and number of artists and artworks are too vast to describe or list and every viewer will have their own favorites. What one takes away from Documenta is the idea of a global politic, of suffering and struggle and survival, and finally in the power of art to communicate these emotional, timely and essential issues.



<https://artandcakela.com/2017/08/25/documenta-14>