

# Straining for Wisdom, documenta 14 Implodes Under the Weight of European Guilt

Curator Adam Szymczyk's vision is pulling in two different ways at once.

**Ben Davis**, June 20, 2017



Zafos Xagoraris, *The Welcoming Gate* (2017). Image: Ben Davis.

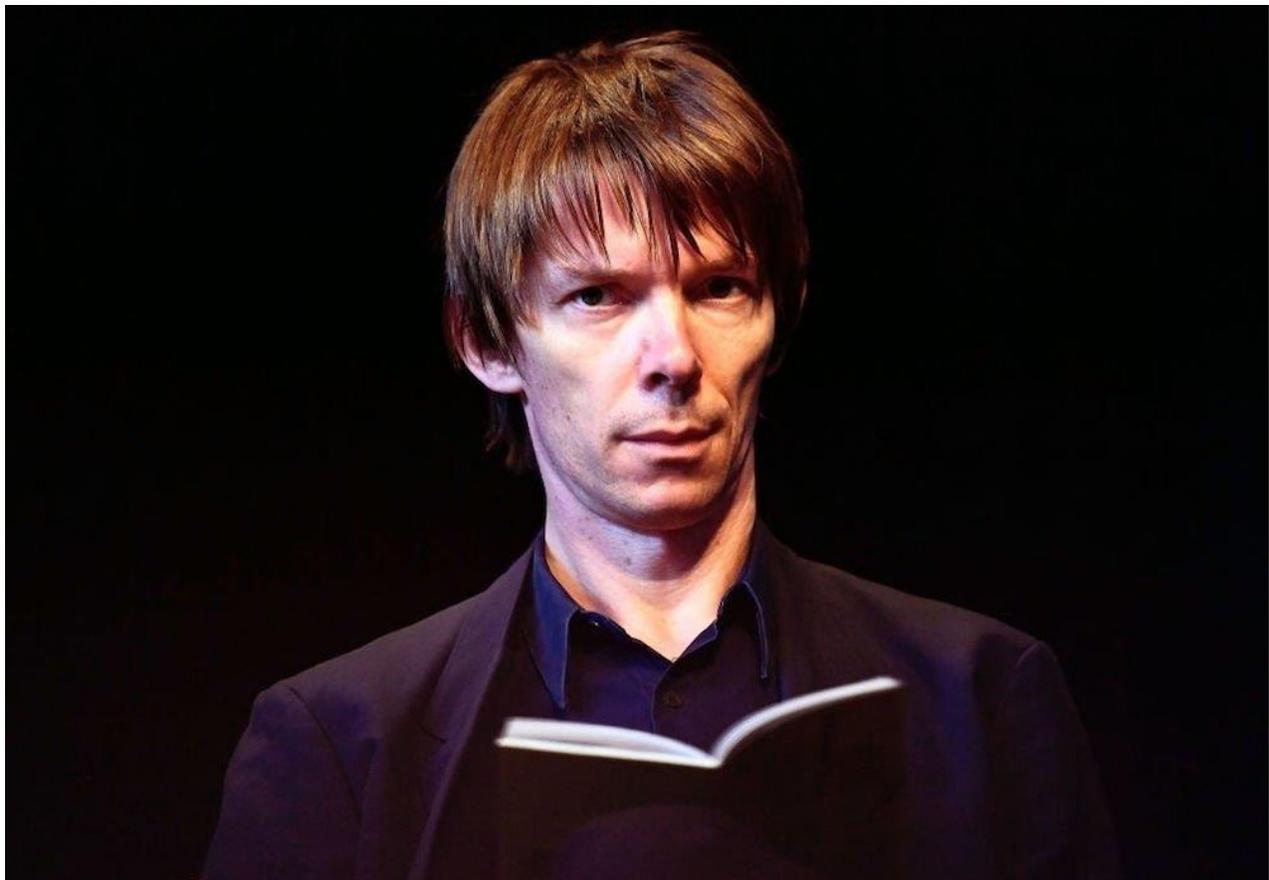
documenta is one of world's most closely watched art events, a quinquennial referendum on what art is and can be in the present. And what does Polish curator Adam Szymczyk's big show say about the state of art in 2017, now that it is finally fully open?

It says that art is... very confused.

It's hard to put into words how perplexing the experience of documenta 14 in Kassel is. People who like their art to be entertaining are going to hate it, because it is a strikingly alienating show.

This is deliberate. At the Kassel press launch for documenta 14, Szymczyk was asked if he thought that art needs to “look good.” His characteristically otherworldly answer: “If you think of aesthetics as more akin to cosmetics, as a pretty thing, I suppose this can be useful sometimes, but we’re more interested in the texture and the structure.”

A simple “no” would have sufficed.



documenta 14 artistic director Adam Szymczyk, during the opening press conference at Kongress Palais on June 7, 2017 in Kassel, Germany. Photo by Thomas Lohnes/Getty Images.

The more didactic temperament is fine—except that people who think art should say something urgent about the political moment are also going to hate this show. As self-serious and overburdened with political themes as it is—it’s called

“Learning From Athens,” for crying out loud!—nothing is really clear (a few moments of public art aside, which feel almost like overcompensation).

This lack of a clear message is also very deliberate. As Szymczyk has explained (sort of), “the process of becoming a political subject is a process of unlearning.”

The only thing I’ll say to counter the rain of vitriol that is no doubt going to greet documenta 14 is that there is a method to its messiness. If it feels like it represents art imploding under its own contradictions, it is also true that it appears to be a controlled demolition on Szymczyk’s part.



Olu Oguibe’s *Monument for Strangers and Refugees*, featuring the Bible verse “I Was a Stranger and You Took Me In” in four languages. Image: Ben Davis.

It may be interesting to compare “Learning From Athens” to the recent Venice Biennale, which starting with its hokey name, “Arte Viva Arte,” was all about redemption and healing, and ended up being pleasant enough—but probably not something people will be thinking about for very long.

documenta 14, on the other hand, is much more deliberately irredeemable, and probably much more something to brood over.

## Documents of Barbarism

The distinction between a show that is alienating on purpose and a show that just doesn't come off is a pretty fine one, so let's retrace the ideas that went into this documenta.

Faced with the headline-consuming crisis of the Eurozone, Szymczyk's main curatorial decision, of course, was to call the show "Learning From Athens" and fragment it between its traditional home in provincial Germany and crisis-ravaged Greece, in a gesture of North/South solidarity. (My colleague Hili Perlson has already reviewed the Athens section.)



Hans Haacke, *Wir (alle) sind das Volk—We (all) are the people* (2003/2017). © Hans Haacke/VG Bild-Kunst. Courtesy documenta 14, Photo: Roman März .

Yet the most important curatorial gambit when it comes to understanding Szymczyk's intentions for Kassel might be one that didn't actually happen: His attempt to host the Gurlitt Collection of art, whole, during documenta 14.

The Gurlitt Collection, of course, would be the staggering trove of 1,500 works of Modern art, which was found in the Munich apartment of one Cornelius Gurlitt in 2012. His father, Hildebrand, had been art dealer to the Nazis, and the hoard has been the subject of multiple restitution claims by Jewish families that were dispossessed of their art during the war.

The gesture didn't come together because of unspecified "legal and political restrictions," but the proposition lays bare more than anything else documenta 14's presiding sensibility: It would have confronted you with a massive, impressive collection of treasures—but the point would be how its pleasures were compromised, tangled in circuits of power that you cannot see.



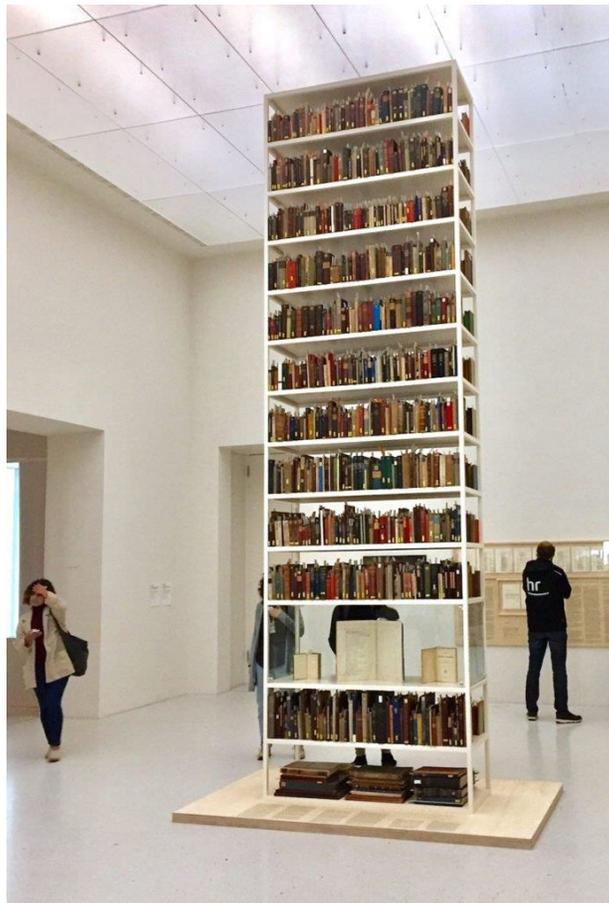
Banu Cennetoğlu's *BEINGSAFEISSCARY*, (2017) on the exterior of the Fridericianum. Image: Ben Davis.

The Gurlitt hoard would have borne curatorial testimony to the fact that there “is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism,” as Walter Benjamin wrote in the shadow of Nazism, some 77 years ago. And that very much is the larger idea that haunts everything here.

### **A Bookish documenta**

What results in Kassel is a show that feels like an airing of evidence, not of artworks, a fact that accounts for both its lack of aesthetic appeal and its cryptic feeling.

The most direct echo of the aborted Gurlitt initiative comes at the Neue Galerie venue, where the centerpiece is Maria Eichhorn’s formidable series of displays relating to the Nazi seizure of Jewish property. Dubbed the “Rose Valland Institute” and taking over multiple galleries as a museum-within-a-museum, it includes a literal tower of books that the Nazis had confiscated, plus yards of historical documentation, inventories, and letters relating to the vast and systemic campaign of plunder.



Tower of books from Maria Eichhorn’s Rose Valland Institute (2017). Image: Ben Davis.

Eichhorn's piece is nothing if not specific. But this type of aesthetics of evidence becomes the free-floating leitmotif of "Learning From Athens," reappearing elsewhere in very different forms.

Take, for instance, Argentine artist Marta Minujín's *Parthenon of Books*, located in the symbolic heart of the show, the Friedrichsplatz.



Marta Minujín, *The Parthenon of Books* (2017). Photo by Thomas Lohnes/Getty Images.

A massive recreation of the Parthenon covered top to bottom in banned texts, Minujín's architectural showstopper makes a perfect centerpiece for a show called "Learning From Athens." What the big installation illustrates, however, is that even at its most spectacular and photo-ready, art here remains primarily a vehicle to remind you of political nightmares unseen.

Truth be told, Minujín's idea was probably more resonant when it was originally staged, in 1983 in Buenos Aires, as a showcase for the books specifically banned by the then-just-ended Argentine junta. In Kassel, it is built around a rather vaguer idea—just taking a stand against the banning of any books, anywhere.

It has also attracted rather less enthusiasm: At the opening of documenta 14, the *Parthenon of Books* had only received enough donated texts to be half finished.

At another of the show's 30-plus venues, the Torwache, the exact same bookish motifs are dispersed into unintended comedy. There, choreographers Annie Vigier and Franck Apertet's *Library* consists of shelves of academic tomes about performance and dance that, we are told, have been curated to include only texts that *do not* reference their own work, a bit of omphalocentric commentary on the biases that structure art history.



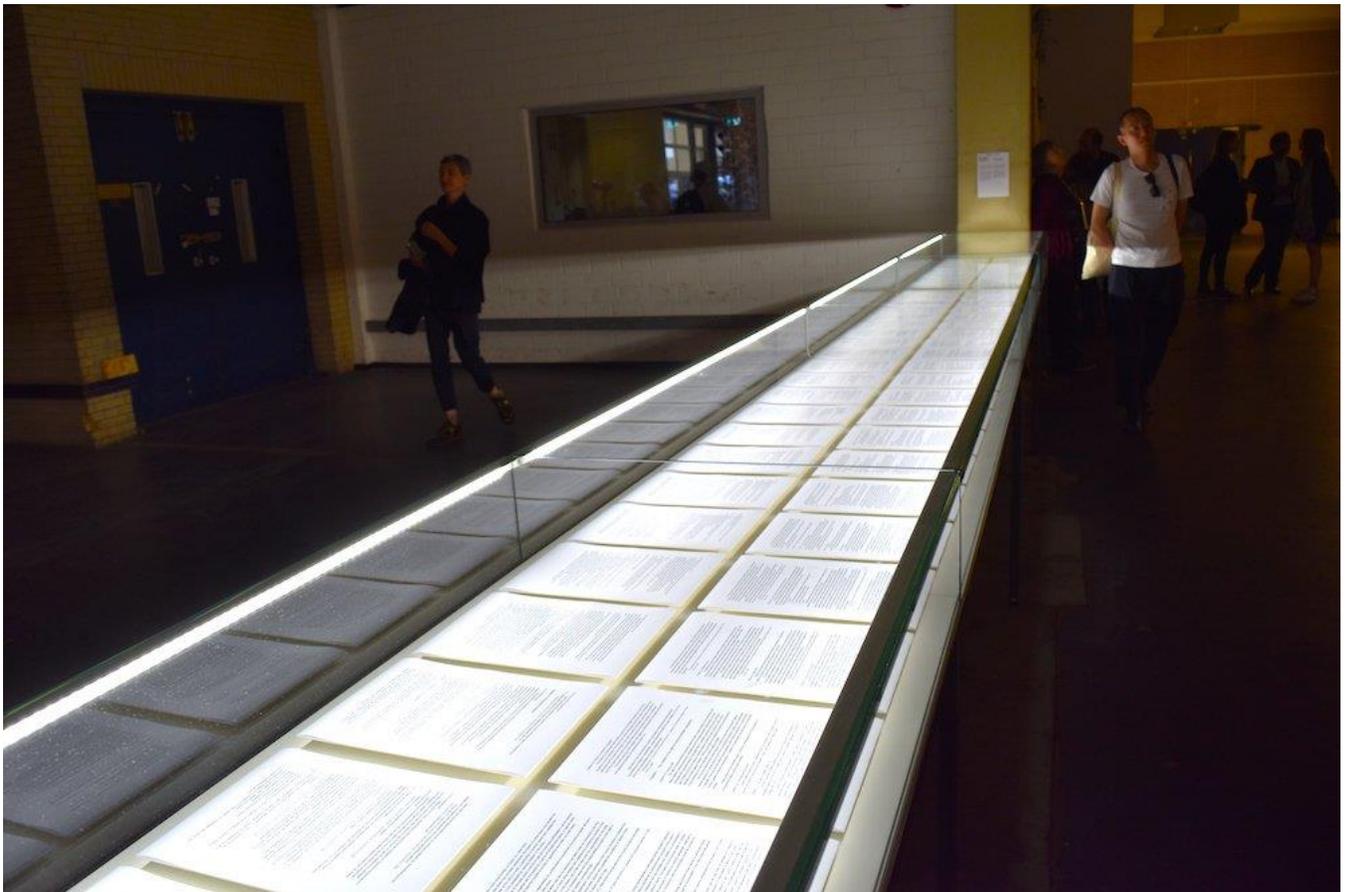
Annie Vigier and Franck Apertet's *Library* (2017) in documenta 14. Image: Ben Davis.

At once obvious and labored, this could easily be a parody of contemporary art.

Except, *Library* is shown right next to Oskar Hansen's 1957 proposal for a *Monument to the Victims of Fascism in Auschwitz-Birkenau*, so I guess you are meant to take Vigier and Apertet's career woes very seriously indeed....

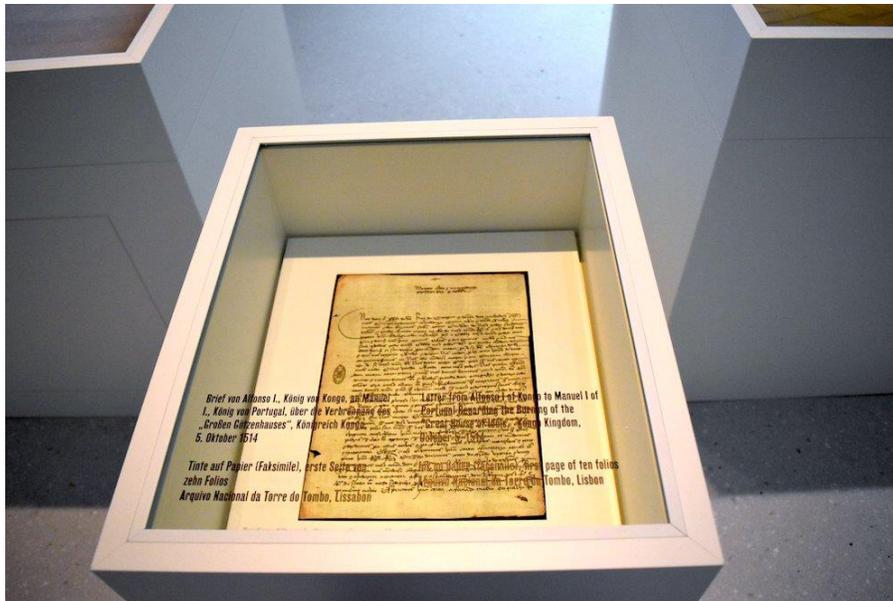
Everywhere you look, this is a very document-focused documenta, its works tending to come with paperwork attached.

There's Máret Anne Sara's display of the transcripts of two trials concerning the indigenous Sami people's right to stop Norway's forced reindeer cull.



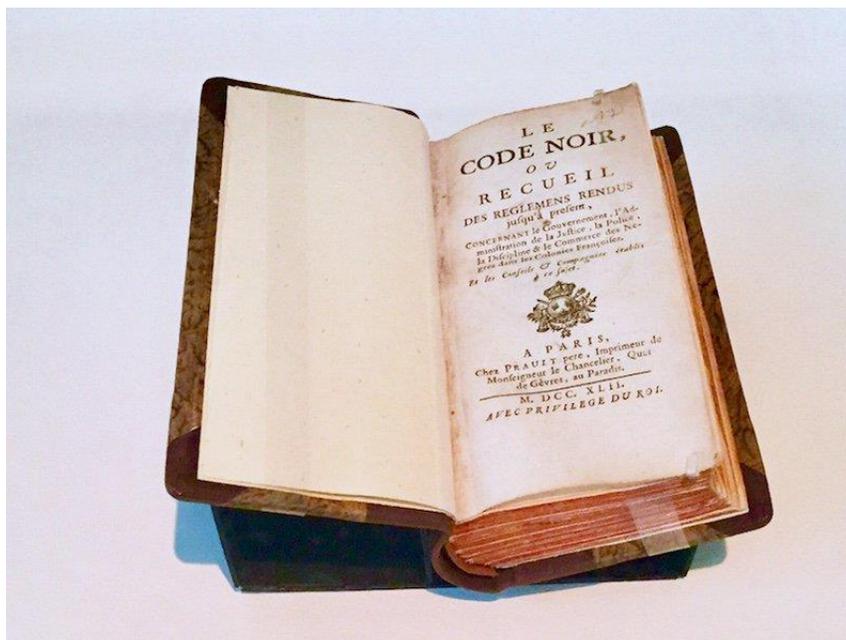
Máret Anne Sara's *Pile o' Sapmi* (2017), a display containing excerpts and conclusions of the first and second trial of Jovsset Ante Iverse Sara versus the Norwegian Ministry of Agriculture and Food. Image: Ben Davis.

There's Congolese artist Sammy Baloji's installation *Fragments of Interlaced Dialogues*, which includes, under glass, a 1514 letter from King Afonso I of the Kongo to the king of Portugal, boasting that he had burned the local idols.



A historical letter, displayed as part of Sammy Baloji's installation *Fragments of Interlaced Dialogues* (2017). Image: Ben Davis.

At one point, at the Neue Galerie, you simply see the small tome—the so-called “Code Noir,” or Black Code, of 1742—that systematized the French Empire’s racist laws towards its possessions.



*The Black Code or collection of rules that have been passed so far: regarding government, administration of justice, police, and discipline & trade of Negros in the French colonies and the councils and companies established for these matters (1742), as displayed in documenta 14.*

Image: Ben Davis.

You can't read it, you can only read about it in a wall text. There's no artist; it is just Szymczyk entering another exhibit into the evidence file.

### **Europe Under Glass**

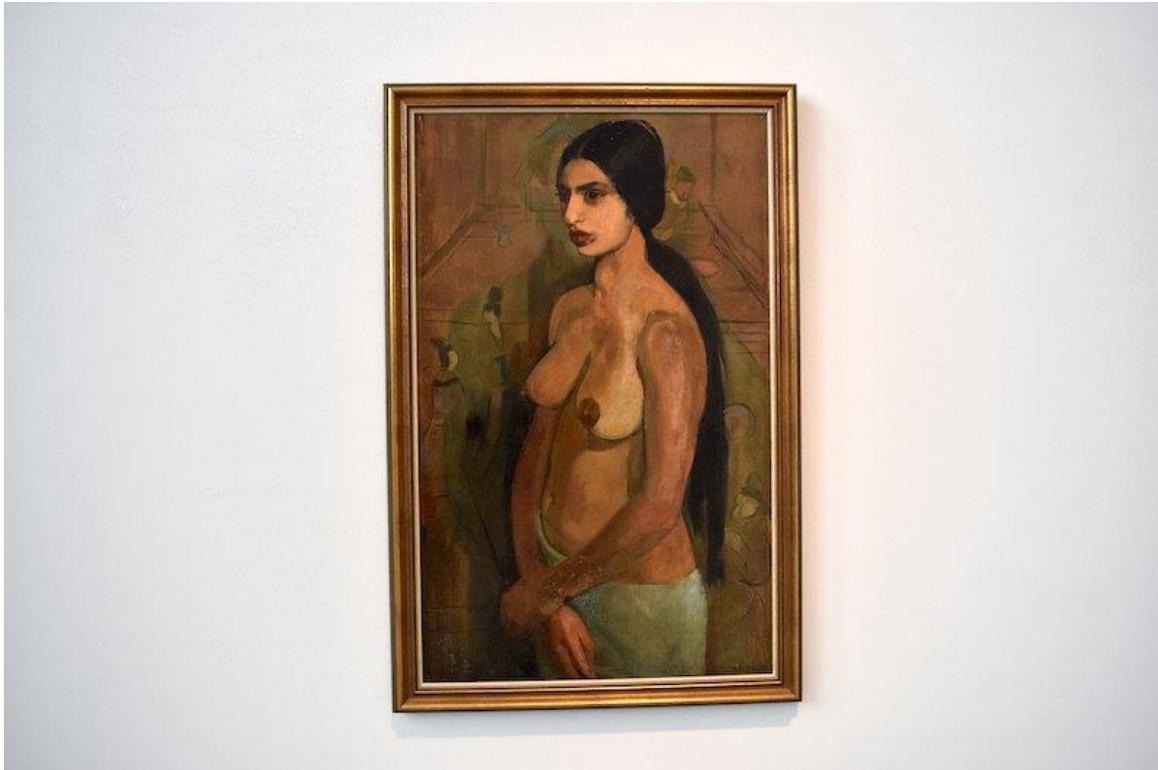
At the press conference, the eminent philosopher, curator, and transgender activist Paul B. Preciado, who has organized the public programs of documenta 14 for Szymczyk, gave probably the most rousing and convincing statement of purpose for the event.

Preciado was reflecting on the history of the Kassel venues, the Natural History Museum. “Many of the artists of this exhibition—themselves, their bodies, their languages, their tradition, their art practices—could have been the subject of vitrines,” he declared. “We have been given agency to destroy the vitrines where those considered less than human were exhibited... and become artists and curators. The colonial, the white supremacist, and the heteronormative—they created the modern museum.”



The Naturkundemuseum in Kassel. Image by Mathias Völzke. Courtesy documenta 14.

This is an exciting mission, and reflects the fact that one of the ambitions behind documenta 14's twists and turns is to be a decentered, post-colonial event. Far more than actually being about Greece, the title "Learning From Athens" means "learning to see the historically dominated," and the attention Szymczyk pays to voices that don't normally get heard is absolutely worth celebrating.



Amrita Sher-Gil, *Self-Portrait as a Tahitian* (1934). Image: Ben Davis.

Some of the show's most memorable points are the ones that organically articulate these themes: the wonderful paintings of the Indian-Hungarian Amrita Sher-Gil (1913-1941), including the startling *Self-Portrait as a Tahitian* (1934); the New York-based Naeem Mohaiemen's *Two Meetings and a Funeral* (2017), a lucid, intellectually rich three-channel video essay about the failures of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), the Cold War attempt of Third World countries to carve out a space between the spheres of influence of the USSR and the US; the astonishingly powerful masks of the late Kwakwaka'wakw carver Beau Dick (though a few of the excellent texts produced by curator Candice Hopkins about Dick are worth seeking out for context).



Works by Beau Dick, at documenta Halle. Image: Ben Davis.

And yet, the strange fact about the experience in Kassel is that, overwhelmingly the effect is the *exact converse* of the one Preciado gave: not to smash the Natural History Museum, but to turn its ethnographic techniques back around on documenta itself, to en-vitrine Europe.

Thus, at the Neue Galerie, for one long passage, you are hit with the most concentrated dose of traditional European painting. And yet none of what you see makes any sense if read just as an art object.

There are drawings on Greek themes by documenta's founding director Arnold Bode (1900-1977); images of Greek ruins by Hitler's favorite painter, Alexander Kalderach (1880-1965); drawings of the Parthenon by Theodor Heuss (1884-1963), the first president of the Republic of Germany... and much more art in this vein.



Alexander Kalderach, *The Parthenon* (1939). Image: Ben Davis.

You need to understand who made them, and where they fit into the particular point Szymczyk is making about the sins of German culture and its infatuation with Greek culture.

And speaking of Greek culture, the same ethnographic effect holds true, in a different way, of “Antidoron,” the dense display that occupies the Fridericianum. It packs a vast chunk of the collection of Greece’s Museum of Contemporary Art (a venue in the Athens installment) across three giant floors, a missive from the margins in what is normally central venue of documenta.

What you encounter are mostly names that you don’t know, though often palpably reflecting recent international art trends through a Greek filter. The status of “Antidoron” within documenta 14 is somewhat undetermined, its artists technically in the show but not listed among the participants.



Installation view of “Antidoron” in documenta 14, with Nausika Pastra’s *Synectron—Square—Circle* (1968-76) in the foreground, and Yiannis Bouteas’s *Untitled* (1974-80). Image: Ben Davis.

Aesthetically, the effect is uneven—but that doesn’t really matter because the net outcome of displaying this collection comes off as sociological, not artistic: “Greek contemporary art” held up to scrutiny as an object of curiosity.

### **Lessons Unlearned**

In Athens itself, “Learning From Athens” has received some stern reviews. Former Greek finance minister Yanis Varoufakis has compared Szymczyk’s gesture to “crisis tourism,” and worse.

That shows you that the conversation about decentering art can have very different connotations depending on which end you come at it from, the center or the margins—particularly when you are touching on raw political matters.

All the fragmentations and deflections that make Szymczyk’s show feel particularly in-its-head link back to his theme of the historic guilt of the German or Western center as the underlying through-line, as indicated by the importance of the (absent) Gurlitt hoard as a symbol.

Yet this is slightly different conversation than the one that Preciado was touting, of letting the formerly marginal speak fully as “artists and curators.” The latter would first and foremost be about letting those subjects tell their stories clearly, in a way not weighed down with someone else’s guilt and hang-ups; about supplying a missing context rather than denaturalizing a context taken-for-granted.



The documenta Halle venue of documenta 14 during the opening week. Image: Ben Davis.

Consider one of the oddest moments in Szymczyk’s show, the first thing when you enter the space at the documenta Halle.

There, you are presented what amounts to an accumulation of music memorabilia relating to the life and music of Malian singer Ali Ibrahim “Ali Farka” Touré (1939-2006), courtesy curator Igo Diarra.



A 1994 Grammy for Best World Music Album, from a collection of objects and archival materials related to Malian musician Ali Farka Touré. Image: Ben Davis.

What to make of this hoard, which includes a wall of LPs, a display of the musician's personal IDs, a tableful of Grammys and other awards, and a spotlit guitar laid against the wall? What function does it serve?



Wall of LPs representing Ali Ibrahim "Ali Farka" Touré. Image: Ben Davis.

Maybe, given the ambient themes of geopolitical disintegration and free speech in documenta 14, you are meant to somehow make the connection to the recent Islamist music ban that afflicted the north of Mali, causing Ali Farka Touré's music to be forbidden. I say maybe, because nothing tells you that.



ID cards of Ali Ibrahim "Ali Farka" Touré, as displayed in documenta 14. Image: Ben Davis.

Or perhaps making the presiding figure at the documenta Halle a musician rather than an artist points to how the whole show invests in living culture as the opposite of dead museum culture. Indeed, a whole other essay could be written about how much of the fragmentary feeling within Szymczyk's galleries is explained by the fact that they center mainly on the remainders of political rites of atonement or exorcisms of various kinds. Live art is where documenta 14 invests the possibility of redemption.



A guitar in the display dedicated to Ali Ibrahim “Ali Farka” Touré, at documenta 14. Image: Ben Davis.

The label for the installation, however, suggests that you are meant to take away a very specific cultural lesson. It highlights a quote by Touré about his music, from the liner notes to his album *Niafunké*:

*This record [Niafunké] is more real, more authentic. It was recorded in the place where the music belongs—deep Mali. We were in the middle of the landscape which inspired the music and that in turn inspired myself and the musicians. My music is about where I come from and our way of life and it is full of important messages for Africans. In the West perhaps this music is just entertainment and I don’t expect people to understand. But I hope some might take the time to listen and learn.*

The implicit German or international art viewer is told that what they are seeing is evidence of the richness of a cultural production that belongs elsewhere.

But what about the fragile potential that Touré describes for Westerners to “listen and learn?” You don’t get much help. Szymczyk, of course, is more interested in forcing his audience to “unlearn.”

Perhaps the Touré epigraph suggests that the viewer needs to be disabused of any idea of easy “entertainment” before they can arrive at that hard-won deeper cultural understanding, to commit to cultural communion as work rather than something pleasant. “Learning From Athens” definitely feels like work.

In the end, documenta 14 makes me think about an argument you sometimes hear about the oft-invoked “death of painting,” that it only really happened at the exact historical point when women and minorities began asserting themselves as painters.

A similar thought occurs here, on the expanded level of the big international art show: It would be a pity if the post-colonial subject gets to speak in art only at the moment when speaking ceases to be empowering, and starts to be a burden.

*documenta 14, “Learning From Athens,” is on view in Kassel, Germany through September 17, 2017.*