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Documenting "Documenta": Decoding and Recoding the History of an Exhibition in 1955, 2002, and 2017

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Documenting *documenta*: Decoding and Recoding the History of an Exhibition in 1955, 2002,
and 2017

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

by
Nicola Koepnick

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
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Introduction

The title of the legendary German art quinquennial exhibition, “documenta,” holds a symbolically polarizing meaning. The first artistic director, Arnold Bode, an abstract painter from the hometown of the exhibition, Kassel, fashioned this word for the event with the intent that it represent his curatorial vision of the first exhibit in 1955 and the works it contained. The word “documenta,” is related to the Latin noun “documentum,” which our words “document” and “documentation” also come from. The word “document” as a noun is most commonly used in our time to describe a record, something with a straightforward and impartial sanctity. Documents are objects of verified history, often undebatable and unchangeable, and function as official proof or markers of identifiable truth. In Old French, the word “document” specifically meant “written evidence,” suggesting a power in words written on a page to function as confirmation. This definition in Old French, “something written that provides proof or evidence” emerged in the 18th century and is still regarded as the most common understanding in our modern English.¹ Often, we use the word to describe objects of bureaucracy that need our signatures or pages of text that function as reliable witnesses to historical occurrences whose veracity we do not question. Documents cannot be forged or altered easily and we often think of them as concrete pieces of paper beyond our ability to change them, out of reach behind glass, or tucked away in drawers. The document can be something that proves a crime or testifies to an event in history, and is usually regarded a verification, authentication, or certification. The “documentary” genre also has always had a certain claim to history and authenticity as an archive or reference that has gained an accredited status. At the same time, we know they have authors and are sometimes subject to alteration.

¹ “Document,” Online Etymology Dictionary, accessed April 30, 2018, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/document>.

The Latin origins of our word “document” are more ambiguous in meaning and suggest a tension with the common understanding of the word as consecrated evidence beyond public manipulation. The Latin noun “documentum” is sometimes translated as an “example, proof, lesson” or an “official written instrument.”² The first part of the first definition, “example, proof,” resonates with the widely-accepted understanding of a document as a neutral record yet the words “lesson” and “instrument” hint at an alternate definition. A lesson, though we might sometimes believe our curriculum to be impartial, is often taught from a limited viewpoint. The word “instrument” suggests the document is being used for a particular purpose, as if to sway a cause or measure a result. As *documenta* exhibition historians have commented, the noun “document” can be divided into the verb, “docere,” meaning “to teach,” and the noun “mens,” meaning “intellect.”³⁴ The implication of this reading of the word is different from its function as an empirical record. Rather than a claim to neutrality that the document often bears, something that is “taught” based on “intellect” suddenly obtains a much more biased or opinion-based quality. The teaching of an “intellect” implies that a specific system of knowledge is being passed along. “Indoctrination,” which also contains the same root, is the process in which one learns and adopts the approach of a certain school of thinking. We have now come to recognize that instruction is associated with authority figures who can and maybe should be challenged and undermined; one single person can never tell the whole story. We know “intellect” is not something stable: knowledge and information are often disputable and sometimes alterable based on time and context. “Truth” no longer holds the inviolability that it might once have had. Perhaps this is also an important difference between the two definitions: “the document” could be considered absolute and fixed whereas lesson plans might be subject to change. But maybe

² Ibid.

³ Karin Stengel and Michael Glasmeier, “Introduction,” in *Archive in Motion* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2005).

⁴ Harald Kimpel, *Mythos und Wirklichkeit*, (Cologne: Dumont Verlag, 1997).

what we conceive as a dichotomy between approaching the document as evidential and as completely manipulated is too polarizing and we must understand it more like a prolonged, somewhat malleable index that is unfixd and open to interpretation or reiterated analysis.

In this way, there is a fraught tension between the two meanings that the word “documenta” brings to the table—to record and to teach. Did the organizers of the first exhibition want to leave the art to “speak for itself” or were they actually attempting to impart a political or social message in 1955 and how has this friction changed? If we understand the document as something that undergoes change through history, we might identify common threads through the history of the exhibition’s attempt to record the artistic concerns of its time. This thesis will examine the historical underpinnings of the exhibition’s guiding mission to document its era while simultaneously forging a new identity in three important moments: 1955, 2002, and 2017. These are each important moments in the formation an identity for *documenta* as a flexible arrangement that grapples with and documents the political uncertainties and human quandaries of its time through artistic representation, political concerns, and aesthetic formulations.

As historians of the exhibition have noted, the effort of documentation was of particular significance in post-war Germany when the absence of modernist art created by the Nazi regime in their destruction of thousands of works of art and persecution of abstract artists remained a gaping hole.⁵ In this period, many artists and academics who had been forced out of the art world felt that art had to be documented again to repair the wounds totalitarianism inflicted upon modernist art and culture and to reclaim and record the knowledge that had been stolen and remained missing from public view.⁶ It was important to trace and account for the countless crimes and victims of Nazism because the numbers of victims were still unclear, names missing,

⁵ Walter Grasskamp, “Degenerate Art and Documenta I: Modernism Ostracized and Disarmed,” in *Museum Cultures: Histories, Discourses, Spectacles* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

⁶ Ian Wallace, “The first documenta, 1955,” in *100 Notes – 100 Thoughts* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2011).

and paintings absent or destroyed, many without photographic files. The original *documenta* event can in this light be seen as an attempt to archive the lost and damaged paintings and artists of modernism in a photographic, art historical manner.⁷

In advertising the 1937 “Degenerate Art” show, the Nazis characterized modernist and expressionist works as “Dokumente” or “Kulturdokumente” (documents, cultural documents) that were displayed as evidence of the supposed degradation and defilement of society and the arts.⁸ “Degenerate art” was a term used by the Nazi regime for modern art and the word was utilized to ridicule certain styles and contents based on alleged Jewish, communist, or “degraded” subject matter. Next to these works, slogans and menacing words about the artists, their backgrounds, and the works were written on the walls.⁹ The Nazis were thus presenting and “documenting” the paintings of modernism as objects reflective of a corrupt artistic style. The slogans and offensive remarks about the paintings demonstrate, however, that the Nazis were also imprinting their aesthetic and ideology upon the works and their makers. To the Nazis, these works were records of “degeneracy,” highlighted by their use of the word “Dokumente” in lieu of “Kunst” (art).¹⁰ In 1955, at the time of first *documenta*, the goal to “teach a lesson” by presenting modern art to the public again after the Nazi degradation of these styles, their destruction of the works, and ideology that denigrated it remained unfulfilled and unanswered. The *documenta* organizers’ adoption of the root “document” can thus be seen as a direct appropriation of the Nazis’ use of the word to provide an alternate proof, a different interpretation, and to record their version of history.

⁷ In “An Imaginary Documenta,” in *Archive in Motion*, Annette Tietenberg ruminates on the relationship between the discipline of art history, the photographic perspective, and the *documenta* exhibition.

⁸ Kathryn M. Floyd, “d is for documenta: institutional identity for a periodic exhibition,” *On Curating*, 33 (June 2017): 13. http://www.on-curating.org/files/oc/dateverwaltung/issue-33/pdf/Oncurating_Issue33.pdf.

⁹ Grasskamp, “Degenerate Art and Documenta I.”

¹⁰ Floyd, 13.

The first *documenta* curator and committee's adoption of the word "document" can therefore be seen as a direct response and reaction to the Nazis' enterprise by using the word to re-describe their event and inscribe a new meaning onto it. The same paintings that were documents of "degeneracy" for the Nazis were meant to be documents of progressive artistic merit, the heroism of modernism, and stylistic innovation for *documenta* viewers. The event was as much about recording art history in opposition to the Nazis as it was about the recording itself of specific works and artists. No longer would lingering forms of Nazi aesthetic be prevalent; instead, modernist styles were presented as paths to a revitalization of the nation's artists and citizens, which could allow them to reunite with the international avant-garde and reconnect to "the universal language of abstraction." In the first *documenta*, it was seen as necessary to attempt to reverse and transform the slur of "degeneracy" for artists, the public, and nation.¹¹ Therefore, there was a much-needed moral tone to the exhibition marked by the past in an attempt to reform the minds of the German public and refine their tastes to an updated, abstract palate.

Although the first event of *documenta* might seem historically irrelevant in 2018, some of the curatorial motives and strategies of engaging with the past in order to grapple with current political circumstances remain the same. Of course, much has also changed. In the 2002 *documenta* project, the issue of documentation became a focal point and visual method in the exhibition, both in the works and in the framework and design, but in an entirely new way. Artists and participants in *Documenta 11* collaborated in the process of showing shifting political realities, governmental conflict, and changing subjectivities and identities around the world. In this exhibition, almost 50 years after the first one, the curator and organizers of the *documenta* arrangement were steeped in a project of postcolonialism and decolonization, which might seem

¹¹ Grasskamp, "Degenerate Art and Documenta I."

far from the original intent to re-document what the Nazis regarded as “degenerate.” Yet they both also have something in common: a refusal to forget what powered the structures of the past and a direct attempt to look it in the eye and react to it. By 2002, aesthetic and theoretical trends had changed, as shown by the curator’s rejection of modernist universalism, and various aesthetic and visual formats emerged that practiced politics and social reality in new ways. An effort to document and record instances of these new, shifting methodologies was undertaken in *Documenta 11*, reflecting a repositioning international art world undergoing major fluctuations, altercations, and transformations in geography, artistic practice, and stylistic form. In this exhibition, the curator sought to bring voices from around the world to *documenta* and demonstrate social realities and shifting notions of human subjecthood. This famously “global” exhibition, curated by Okwui Enwezor, marks an important debate and nodal point as to the identity of the exhibition and its precarious role as a documentarian of the conflicts of its time.

In 2017, *documenta* also took on an extensive political project motivated by changes in international political and economic circumstances that sought models for alternative deliberations of the views that divide Europe. This time, the documentation of political turmoil took a pedagogical lens that hoped to foster the creation of an inclusive space of resistance to the exclusionary powers of capitalism, racism, sexism, etc. The 2017 *documenta 14* title clearly suggested a pedagogical intent as opposed to a neutral, detached one: “Learning from Athens” was chosen to represent *documenta*. The curatorial emphasis, according to the title, was on an educational process from city to city. There was to be a learning curve: a pedagogy of and in the process of expanding the geography and timescape of the exhibition to two times and two places rather than a single one in Kassel. The phrase “learning from” indicates an interest in the practices and experience of something posited as having acquired worthwhile data or desirable

intellect. “Learning” is usually what someone does who is unaware or uninformed and the title suggests the exhibition had lessons to learn from Athens.

Yet at the same time, the flow of knowledge evoked in the phrase “Learning from Athens” anticipates an extraction, distillation, or crystallization of the city’s experiences, implying a clear migration of knowledge gained from Athens to Kassel. The title and project thus strike a colonial chord by implying that certain knowledge and resources are to be obtained and removed for better examination and application elsewhere. The title also suggests that something happened to the city that can be “learned from” as to not be repeated; a crisis or traumatic disaster. Along this thinking, the idea that a German art show would be happening in Athens seems like a cultural occupation, which some regarded it as due to its appropriation of venues and neighborhoods.¹² Provocative graffiti in the streets of Athens reacted to *documenta*, reading: “The Crisis of Commodity or Commodity of Crisis.”¹³ A clear trajectory or path of instruction from Athens to Kassel was both supported and challenged by many of the works in the exhibition as well as its texts and statements made in the *documenta* magazine *South as a State of Mind*. The exhibition seemed to be asking the viewer to challenge their own knowledge sets, systems of learning, and signs of value.

The curator of *documenta 14*, Polish art critic and author Adam Szymczyk, stated in an opening press conference: “The great lesson is that there are no lessons,” and that the goal of last year’s exhibition was to enjoy and “immerse ourselves in the darkness of not knowing.”¹⁴ These quotes resonate with existentialism and echo Kierkegaard’s words, “Faith sees best in the dark.”

¹² Alison Hugill, “Courting Crisis: Condescension, Disaster Tourism, and ‘Learning from Athens,’” *Momus*, July 5, 2017, <http://momus.ca/courting-crisis-condescension-disaster-tourism-and-learning-from-athens/>.

¹³ Anne Seidel, “Deutliche Kritik und eine gespalte Kunstszene,” Deutschlandfunk, April 25, 2017, http://www.deutschlandfunk.de/die-documenta-14-in-athen-deutliche-kritik-und-eine.691.de.html?dram:article_id=384577.

¹⁴ Jennifer Higge. “Documenta 14: Benaki Museum,” *Frieze*, April 8, 2017, <https://frieze.com/article/documenta-14-benaki-museum>.

Szymczyk was asking viewers to take a radical leap of faith and enter the exhibit with untrained eyes. His words unsettle the proposition that *documenta 14* was involved in a clear learning process and still leave the question unanswered, if the lesson that there are no lessons is still a lesson that can be learned. His complex, contradictory messages reflect an exhibition and era in Europe split between diverging political parties and divisive cultural attitudes. The choice of hosting the *documenta* exhibition in Athens can be read as the organizers' reaction to the contemporary issues at stake in Europe at this moment. The history of *documenta* is connected to the documentation of political and cultural uncertainty and instability, which was especially visible in the case of *documenta 14* seeing as Szymczyk's choice was largely motivated by current polarizing forces in current European politics.

Retracing the steps of the curating missions and motives of the *documenta* recurring exhibition and how they are positioned toward shifting geographies, political uncertainties, and aesthetic determinations will be helpful to begin to interpret its ramifications in the current iteration. This thesis foregrounds curatorial intent, while understanding that not all works can be subsumed under a single message. In order to think about the larger history of the exhibition and its action in public and political space, the curators' statements and political project must be taken into account. Each exhibition and curator is interpreted in their unique circumstances and context. Of importance will be what is carrying through time from each moment: an agenda that attempts to record contemporary artistic practices and interpret political arguments that manifest themselves aesthetically and culturally, addressing concerns that transform human subjecthood. In the first chapter, this thesis will look at the politics and intent behind the first *documenta* in its combined national and aesthetic revitalization that pursued a reaction to totalitarianism and its aesthetics by recording modernism as the style to carry mankind forward. The second chapter

will mark an important juncture in the history of the geography of the exhibition as a documentarian of political strife and human rights issues in Enwezor's 2002 *documenta*. Finally, the third chapter will interpret the consequences of various shifts, aesthetic, political, and moral, through the lens of *Learning from Athens*. Exhibitions and their works, like poetry, contain signs and rhetoric that help us analyze, evoke, and begin to tackle the deepest moral concerns of our time. These exhibitions, the history of their ideas, their shifts, and the dilemmas they present can be analyzed as methods of engaging in the most urgent ethical and political issues of contemporary life.

Chapter One: Inform/Reform

In Max Beckmann's three-part painting, *Perseus Triptychon* (1941), he portrays the ancient Greek myth in which Perseus rescues Andromeda from the claws of a sea monster in dark, brutal brushstrokes. In the central panel, Perseus holds Andromeda upside-down in a turbulent composition with a slayed, bleeding sea serpent wrapped around them. On the left, the wedding of Perseus and Andromeda is depicted, and on the right, two opposing profiles are caged in black bars and houses burn behind them. Beckmann's painting expressively renders contrasting emotions of captivity, liberation, and sacrifice that some connect to the artist's fear of persecution during exile from Nazi Germany.¹⁵ Beckmann's work, displayed in the first *documenta*, must have evocatively provoked visitors to probe the suffering of imprisonment under totalitarianism for Beckmann, modernist artists, victims of Nazism, and painting itself.

Important for inhabitants of Europe and democratic powers of the 1950s was a pressing need to reconsider the social, cultural, and political history of West Germany and its relationship to democracy and freedom. A question still remained hanging in the air as to what ideas, procedures, and societal values in the previous German system of the Weimar Republic had enabled the nation to create a framework that supported fascism and totalitarian dictatorship. Along with the political and moral confusion of the reconstruction and early Cold War period came a desire to reconsider values of beauty, aesthetics, and art in order to react to and correct those the Nazis claimed as superior.¹⁶ A reevaluation and re-presentation of the art the Nazi's

¹⁵ "Perseus Triptychon," *Museum Folkwang*, accessed April 30, 2018, <http://collection-online.museum-folkwang.de/eMuseumPlus?service=ExternalInterface&siteId=1&module=collection&objectId=3247&viewType=detailView&lang=en>.

¹⁶ Kimpel, 74.

presented as “degenerate” was in many ways considered necessary to West Germany’s cultural resilience after totalitarianism and redefinition as a nation.¹⁷

By 1955, the Allies’ occupation of West Germany had been lifted, rearmament was made possible for the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), and the country entered into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Yet what lingered undocumented officially was a pending acceptance into the international community of artists and avant-garde and what *documenta* historian Harald Kimpel calls “the overcoming of fascism in the cultural sector” after the country had committed unforgiveable and unforgettable crimes against humanity.¹⁸ An “answer” to the fascist defamation of modernism was still required and debated over in the West Germany. In many ways both political and aesthetic, the first *documenta* was an attempt to react to the Nazi vilification and rescue the tradition of the early avant-garde to claim it as a starting point after the war.¹⁹ This story of reaction to the Nazi denigration by reclaiming modernism is often repeated about the beginning of *documenta*, a project born out of an attempt to confront and react to the cultural and societal blemishes of a country ruled by totalitarianism.

West Germany had to be completely rebuilt after National Socialism and World War II left irreparable holes in many institutions, departments, and systems of governance. The holes needed to be re-evaluated and reconstructed in every part of society, conceptually and physically—from the smallest farm to the biggest factory. In Kassel, “destruction was without parallel in local history” due to a bombing by the Allies in October 1943; its military headquarters and factories of the locomotive company Henschel & Sohn facilities, which made

¹⁷ Walter Grasskamp, “To be Continued: Periodic Exhibitions (*documenta*, For Example),” *Tate Papers*, no. 12, (2009), <http://www.tate.org.uk/download/file/fid/7263>.

¹⁸ Kimpel, 74.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 74.

Tiger Tanks during World War II, made it a valuable target and subject to heavy bombing.^{20 21} Other cities in post-war Germany like Nuremberg were reconstructed in the 1950s and 60s with the goal to mimic the older, Medieval buildings. These reconstruction methods, involving the location of old bricks and stones in order to reconstruct monuments and churches, represented an attempt to rebuild a sense of the nation's traditional culture and attest to its prevalence and authority in history and architecture. However, much of the city of Kassel was built in a newer, post-war modernist style.²² The city's urban landscape and patchwork of old and new architectural symbols serve as a visual reminder of the Nazi past, which is embedded in the background of every *documenta* and marks its orientation toward the political. New, post-war buildings remind spectators of those responsible for the destruction of pre-existing architectures and the ideology that supported the devastation. The underlying reminder and resurfacing documents of the bloody and world-destroying consequences of war, totalitarianism, and the Nazi regime manifest in every *documenta*, which has made this moral and ethical reminder and record paradigmatic of visual and conceptual codes used in the exhibition.

The 1955 *documenta* exhibition was intended as a complete break from the Nazi past in an attempt to create something forcefully groundbreaking that could potentially regenerate the war-torn city. First artistic director Bode said, according to Kathryn Floyd, "Kassel lies in a border zone. [It] was totally destroyed and is actively rebuilding. It can be an example thirty kilometers from the border [with the Iron Curtain] ... Kassel is not burdened by artist groups and political-artistic linkages ... Kassel doesn't want to build on old traditions ... but rather wants to

²⁰ Jörg Arnold, *The Allied Air War and Urban Memory: The Legacy of Strategic Bombing in Germany* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 23, Google Books.

²¹ Sandra Camacho, "Resonance and Wonder: Susan Philipsz's 'Study for Strings,'" *International Journal on Stereo & Immersive Media*, 2, vol. 1 (2015), <http://recil.grupolusofona.pt/dspace/bitstream/handle/10437/8718/6286-505-19158-1-10-20180403.pdf?sequence=1>.

²² Jos Bosman, "The Tale of Kassel: From a Unique and Intact 1000 Years of Urban Heritage to a Cityscape Saturated with Modernist Buildings, Crowned by a Copy of Hercules from the Palazzo Farnese in Rome," *Urban Heritage: Research, Interpretation, Education*, (2007), Google.

create ... a new living tradition, whose basic idea is ... expandable.”²³ It was thus Bode’s intention to reject past artistic and political customs and ideologies in creating an exhibition that would reflect changing styles, ideas, and histories. Bode’s focus on the “new” and burgeoning styles can be seen as an important alignment with one of the central foundations of modernism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which emphasized an interest in fleeting and ephemeral transformations present in city society and culture.²⁴ This important quote demonstrates the combined motive to align with the avant-garde and break with the Nazi past in the creation of something entirely new. The word Bode uses in German for “expandable” is “baufähig,” which can also be translated as “buildable,” which further stresses Bode’s conception of the first *documenta* as part of the erection of a new, physical project of building a cultural structure that could house a reformed nation and its people.

Though Kassel is now famous as one of the “artistic centers” of Europe, this was not the case before *documenta*. Often termed “provincial,” Kassel is a small city that came into the national spotlight in the years leading up to 1955 not because of the art exhibit we now know, then titled “Documenta: Art of the Twentieth Century,” but because of a grandiose national garden show. The *Bundesgartenschau* (national garden show) is a federal landscaping and horticulture show in Germany that happens every two years in different cities around the country since 1951.²⁵ In 1955, it took place in Kassel and required the city and citizens to work together in order to groom the city’s parks, gardens, and buildings for visitors. Arnold Bode, who was a local painting professor at the Kassler Werkakademie at the time and a colleague of the landscape architect, Hermann Mattern, who was planning the garden show, had the idea to add

²³ Floyd, 14.

²⁴ Matei Calinescu. *Five Faces of Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995).

²⁵ Hans Eichel, “Wie aus dem künstlerischen Begleitprogramm der Bundesgartenschau 1955 die bedeutendste Weltausstellung der Gegenwartskunst wurde,” in *60 Jahre Documenta* (Berlin/Kassel: B&S Siebenhaar Verlag, 2015), 15-28.

an art exhibition to this garden show.²⁶ In this way, the exhibition in its first incarnation was connected to a national rebuilding mission dedicated to the beautification and revitalization of the city's rubble and wreckage of the second World War.²⁷

* * *

The connection between *documenta* and the mission of reconstruction through the beautification of ruins can be demonstrated in Bode's inspiration from the Milan Picasso show and Triennial that took place just before the first *documenta*. According to Kathryn Floyd, Bode and his conceptual co-organizer, the art historian Werner Haftmann, whom some have called the "European Greenberg," were inspired by the Milan Picasso exhibition displayed in the destroyed Palazzo Reale.²⁸ The first *documenta* can therefore be viewed as inextricably linked to an undertaking of restoration and transformation of ruins as was the national garden show that was to take place in Kassel; both were committed to the effort to reform and reinvent citizens' ruptured psyche through the rebuilding of the city's houses, streets, and parks. At the time, many were considering the mental effects of ruined architecture in European cities and the consequences of ruin aesthetic in popular culture and films shot in these cities, like those of the Trümmerfilme genre and films such as Roberto Rossellini's *Germania Anno Zero* (1948).²⁹ Bode and Haftmann's decision to locate their show within the valorization of beautifying and rectifying a ruined city by associating themselves with the garden show and choosing the Fridericianum as a venue can be interpreted as a simple and direct choice to oppose the "monumental" aesthetic values of the Nazi Regime, Hitler, and his prized architect, Albert Speer.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Klaus Siebenhaar, *A Brief History of an Exhibition and its Contents*, (Berlin: B&S Siebenhaar Verlag, 2017).

²⁸ Floyd, 10.

²⁹ Johannes von Moltke, "Ruin Cinema," in *Ruins of Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 403, Google Books.

Speer is known as the Nazi engineer and designer behind the Nazis' plans to demolish and rebuild major historical cities like Berlin, Nuremberg, and Munich, building projects that were begun during the war and never finished. He is often regarded as responsible for many of the concepts that were instrumental to the Nazis' aesthetic ideology reliant on streamlined neoclassical forms. In his book *Inside the Third Reich*, published after he was released from his 20-year imprisonment, Speer explains how he theorized the idea of "ruin value" and how it came to shape his plans for constructing colossal Nazi buildings that were to be admired for centuries like that of the ancient Greek and Roman civilizations.³⁰ Hitler and Speer conceived of immense monuments that were designed as emblems of domination and authoritative power, projects begun and never finished. The buildings' monumentality was specifically calculated to make spectators feel insignificant and subject to the supremacy of the gargantuan buildings and authorities who created them and used them to exert their rule.³¹ Scholars and investigators after the second World War have studied Speer's writing, plans, and occupations in depth and hold him largely responsible for contributing to the construction of an ideology and based on terrorizing and controlling mass movements and their psychology during the Third Reich.

In his 1996 article, "Monumental Seduction," Andreas Huyssen argues that the overwhelming quality of what society might consider "big and awesome" is subject to change and depends on political structures, time periods, and tastes. He writes that "certain forms of nineteenth monumentality" were "tied to the political needs of the nation state and cultural needs

³⁰ "Albert Speer Dies at 76; Close Associate of Hitler," *The New York Times*, September 2, 1981, <http://www.nytimes.com/1981/09/02/obituaries/albert-speer-dies-at-76-close-associate-of-hitler.html?pagewanted=all>.

³¹ Albert Speer, *Inside the Third Reich: Memoirs by Albert Speer*, translated by Richard and Clara Winston (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1970), https://ia801406.us.archive.org/34/items/Inside_the_Third_Reich_Albert_Speer/Inside_the_Third_Reich_Albert_Speer.pdf.

of the bourgeoisie.”³² He suggests the connection between the late nation state and development of mass ideologies that relied on the valorization of a beauty that claimed “monumentality” in the revitalization and simplification of ancient Greco-Roman forms. These tastes, came to prominence in the 19th century in Europe through the governmental functioning of the nation state, modern middle-class societal wishes, and theories like those established by Wagner, whom Huyssen also regards as a significant influence in Hitler and Speer’s ideology. These influences were then appropriated by the Nazis in order to demonstrate complete power and exert authority over popular masses through the potential future of “ruin value” in their immensity and signification of a dominant and authoritative empire. Our aesthetic desires and political motives are now different than they were in the 19th century and the “seductive” nature of what overwhelms and powers us has changed, yet the desire to claim an aesthetic ideal still exists. Huyssen seems to hint that there is danger in anything people claim as big, supreme, and overriding.

It became an important task of the organizers of the first *documenta* not only to undo and revisit the Nazis’ defamation of modernist, communist, and Jewish works of art but also to fight the political ideologies and artistic tastes that supported this denunciation. Though Bode and Haftmann unmistakably drew inspiration from ruined architecture and the beauty of rubble as part of the effort to regenerate the city and beautify the venue building and city square, it was clear that the Nazi ideology reliant on “monumentality” and dominance was responsible for the rubble and that this aesthetic and philosophy had to be faced and its history re-recorded. The opposition to Nazi ideologies in *documenta* was documented through the choice of style clearly showcasing avant-garde, modernist works as well as other symbolic gestures including the choice of venue, marketing strategies, and the political content of the works. These factors all

³² Andreas Huyssen, “Monumental Seduction,” *New German Critique*, 69 (Autumn 1996): 191, JSTOR.

worked together in an agenda dedicated to reforming and informing visitors and citizens of a potential political and aesthetic alternative to fascism.

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As Harald Kimpel describes it, Arnold Bode was convinced to add an art exhibition to the *Bundesgartenschau* as he was taking his students on a field trip through the ruins of the Fridericianum.³³ In this story of the *documenta* idea, the exhibition emerged out of a group of students engaging with a painting professor and discussing what could be possible after the complete destruction of a war that left the state of modern art in West Germany fatally wounded. In the inception of its idea, *documenta* was a process of learning and materialized out of motivation drawn from the damaged museum, a visual symbol and document of the collective perception of a damaged Europe, and the urge to restore and rebuild it by revisiting the Nazi past and its consequences. Using the ruined building to house the *documenta* show might be uncannily similar to Speer's concept of "ruin value" in the aestheticization of ruin. But the organizers were actually in direct opposition to Nazi ideas of "monumentality" in the use of the Fridericianum as the main venue. Bode's insistence on rebuilding and constructing something anew from the ruins can also be seen as a rejection of an aesthetic that glorifies the past and tributes its domination and supremacy.

The Fridericianum has now become emblematic of *documenta* and its inception. However, the building's history dates back much further. Designed by Huguenot architect Simon Louis du Ry and opened in 1779, the building was one of the first public museums in Europe. It was commissioned by the "enlightened despot" and namesake Landgrave Friedrich II, who decided to construct a museum open to the public rather than a palace full of treasure for personal wealth. Situated in the center of the city, the Fridericianum is connected for many to the

³³ Kimpel, 86.

Enlightenment period and its values and aesthetics seeing as its sponsor wanted to expand the knowledge of those he ruled over. The building's past as a public museum during the Enlightenment signifies the coming together of citizens and visitors of all kinds in a central square where they could view and discuss art, history, and politics. Viewers were imagined as equal citizens where everyone exercises the right to access history and beauty, which was considered important for the *documenta* idea as well. This political concept of equality corresponds to the building's temporary use as a parliamentary house in 1810, a center for legislation and discussion. Later, the Fridericianum was converted into a library and museum for the Brothers Grimm, who worked there, and eventually much of the art and artifacts were transferred to Berlin and the building was used officially as a state library beginning in 1913.³⁴

The Second World War almost completely demolished the Fridericianum and the central square, the Friedrichsplatz, in the 1943 bombing and the city government was still working in the 1950s to rebuild it. When Bode visited with his students, the façade had been rebuilt by the city of Kassel but much of the inside remained skeletal and in pieces. At that time, in its derelict state, it represented the desecration of previously hallowed ideals of reason and virtue from the Enlightenment rather than the ideals of strength and domination of the Nazi period. Rubble lined the indistinguishable streets of Kassel, left in a destroyed disorder reflective of a consciousness of Europeans left without national direction after unconscionable crimes had occurred. In choosing the Fridericianum, the exhibition aligned itself with Enlightenment values in an attempt to react to the Nazi destruction of those values and record and rebuild what was demolished.

³⁴ "Fridericianum," Fridericianum, accessed April 30, 2018, <http://www.fridericianum.org/about/fridericianum/>.

According to critics, the transformation of this desecrated building in the 1955 *documenta* was instrumental for the perception of the exhibition.³⁵ Arnold Bode is usually regarded as responsible for this transformation. He had experience designing exhibitions and spaces and worked with a variety of companies, including Göppinger Plastics, to make sure the space looked exactly the way he wanted, a difficult feat in a place still damaged by war. The walls were painted freshly white and semitransparent plastic curtains installed to filter the natural daylight. Also, Bode used black and white panels made by Heraklith as structural cladding within the building to create false walls. He designed everything down to the chairs visitors sat on, made especially for the first *documenta*.³⁶ Also, metal bars or steles were used to hang some paintings in rooms, a device that was also used in the Milan Picasso exhibition in the year before to display such works as *Guernica*.³⁷ Annette Tietenberg, in “An Imaginary Documenta,” writes, “The ruins of the Fridericianum were interpreted by the critics as symbolic of the postwar ‘period of transition,’ as an aesthetic phenomenon, instrumental in the success of the first *documenta*.”³⁸ For her, the transformation of the building was an important architectural and visual metaphor of the nation’s reconstruction after war and rehabilitation after totalitarianism that continues to remind *documenta* visitors of this history.

The organizers of the 1955 event attempted to redefine a new identity for the city of Kassel and nation of West Germany by informing their viewers aesthetically through modernism and documenting the reentry of the country’s art into the international avant-garde art scene. Kathryn Floyd argues that a key marketing strategy of the first *documenta* was the creation of an

³⁵ Karin Stengel and Friedhelm Scharf, “A History of Documenta Criticism,” *Archive in Motion* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2005) 104-115.

³⁶ “Documenta I Retrospective,” Documenta, accessed April 30, 2018, https://www.documenta.de/en/retrospective/documenta_

³⁷ Floyd, 10.

³⁸ Annette Tietenberg, “An Imaginary Documenta,” in *Archive in Motion* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2005), 38.

abstract original logo, branding, and typography for the exhibition. For Floyd, branding was an important choice that aligned *documenta* with the economic goal to reintegrate artists and modernism into the market. It ultimately also fused an allegiance for *documenta* with the industrial motives of the West German government at the time and was important in defining its identity as an exhibition dedicated to displaying a new aesthetic and political alternative after fascism.³⁹

The lowercase “d” of the title “documenta” was displayed enlarged and alone on posters around the city, on the catalog cover, and publicity materials to reference, represent, and market the exhibition. The font and style of this lowercase “d,” in a version of Azkidenz Grotesk, helped the organizers to trademark their event by targeting a specific audience through styling the letters in a manner according to their tastes and design values. The type used by the organizers of *documenta* to promote the exhibition was similar to the lettering chosen by many commercial organizations and marketing agencies. Rather than choosing a pictorial symbol from the city of Kassel, such as the Fridericianum or city monuments, the organizers chose to design their own element of text that would serve to visually signify *documenta*.⁴⁰ This text-based logo can be seen as linked to modernism’s turn away from the representation of “truth” in painting and in art in the choice to select a textual element rather than a pictorial one, as Kathryn Floyd points out. The “d” for *documenta* signified a choice for “text as image,” or a “word-image” that “cleverly produced an economic, tautological (therefore modernist) visual identity: a text-based logo that signified what is usually textual—a document.”⁴¹ The design choice proved to be functional and efficient, bringing along traditions from Bauhaus, de Stijl, or Swiss graphic design. In the promotional element of the “d,” the *documenta* team was thus able to unify its progressive aims

³⁹ Floyd, 12.

⁴⁰ Floyd, 14.

⁴¹ Ibid., 14.

and signal to viewers that it was claiming a new, esteemed character through an aesthetic linkage with modernism that connected to its mission to record a regeneration of the nation.⁴²

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Bode's personal passion and professional role in the art world gave him a prominent place to announce how "urgently necessary" it was for the avant-garde to return to Kassel, which he could provoke and record through *documenta*.⁴³ Bode and art historian Werner Haftmann worked together in the first *documenta* to create a survey of modern art in the 20th century. As many have commented, it was the combination of their polar focuses and skills that helped to forge the first *documenta* exhibition. Where Bode was an artist and designer, Haftmann was a historian and analyst. As historian Walter Grasskamp has noted, they visited the Milan Triennial and Picasso show in the years leading up to *documenta*, which inspired them both, giving them a place to root their discussions and tastes and supplying them some ideas about what to display and how to display it.

Werner Haftmann was a German intellectual who wrote an influential book on modern art entitled *Painting in the Twentieth Century*. The *documenta* exhibition was in part based on the artists and methods of display in this book, as Tietenberg has demonstrated. Haftmann also wrote the introduction to the catalog of the 1955 *documenta* and the similarities in his writing are also representative of the similarities of the exhibition. Haftmann contributed greatly to the *documenta* concept and was instrumental to building the intellectual framework that was key to the first exhibition.

Though many of the works chosen by Bode and Haftmann were made by artists from Germany and there was a concrete focus on German nationals, exiles, or ex-pats, a certain

⁴² Ibid., 12.

⁴³ Ibid., 11.

international scope was sought after as well in the first *documenta*. The language of abstraction as a “Weltsprache” (world language) was presented as a universal medium to communicate knowledge and understanding through modernism.⁴⁴ Through the works of abstract expressionism and linkage of works from various German artists, it became clear to many that the narrative of the exhibition was meant to convey the triumph of Western democracy emerging out of the chaos of war and destruction to humanity caused by National Socialism. The exhibition was seen as a way to bring back and document the re-integration of the West German art scene into the international one as part of the effort to cohesively re-introduce artists, historians and politicians to the cultural life and civil society of Europe. This effort of recuperation is importantly linked to the political objective of the government in Bonn at time led by Konrad Adenauer and the Christian Democratic Party (CDU), which focused on developing the economy and market-based capitalism and promoted democratic liberties and rights supported by the U.S. and Allies. Redemption was to come through Western democracy and any allegiance, whether through artistic style or identity, that leaned too far toward socialism or communism would be seen as dangerous and unwanted in an exhibition that was attempting to record Germany’s reentry into the international avant-garde.⁴⁵

Haftmann’s introduction to the *documenta* catalog and his book *Painting in the Twentieth Century* contain important information as to the combined motive of national rebuilding and international acceptance behind the first exhibition. The 1954 edition of Haftmann’s book is often thought in tandem with his writing about the first *documenta* and the introduction to the catalog. In “An Imaginary Documenta,” Tietenberg describes the visual similarity of the two texts and connects the “browsing” and reading of the book to the walk-through exhibit and

⁴⁴ Grasskamp, “To Be Continued.”

⁴⁵ Wallace, 5.

structure of the 1955 *documenta*. She writes that flipping through the pages of Haftmann's book might have felt visually similar to walking through the exhibit at the time because many of the photographs of paintings and sculptures in the book were presented in the same order at *documenta*. Ian Wallace describes Haftmann's book as a "ready-made outline for the *documenta* project," which also highlights the resemblance between *Painting in the Twentieth Century* and the event in 1955.⁴⁶ Haftmann's book became key for students of modernism in later years because of its historical survey and accumulation of both international and German artists.

Haftmann's language in the introduction to the catalog clearly shows that the original *documenta* project was dedicated to finding a response to the injury and confusion wrought German culture by Nazism and its consequences in the social fabric of the country. He describes in depth the harsh realities of the plight of exiled and ostracized artists forced underground to "paint in washrooms."⁴⁷ Haftmann emphasizes that the nation was "shut out" from the rest of European countries while under totalitarian rule.⁴⁸ Haftmann's writing shows the horrifying fate of modernist artists under Nazi rule, which he characterizes as reflective of damage done to the nation's culture as a whole. He moves on to say: "One cannot get around touching the painful memories of the recent past in which Germany exited from the unified effort of the modern European spirit, isolated herself, and fell into a very strange and striking attack of iconoclasm that rejected the already achieved goals of this effort to all requirements of the soul."⁴⁹ Here, he references the destruction of paintings and artists under totalitarianism and addresses the cruel infatuation with mass psychologies that influenced aesthetic taste during this period. This quote also indicates Haftmann's sentiment that, in order for Germany to recuperate from totalitarian

⁴⁶ Ibid., 5.

⁴⁷ Werner Haftmann, "Einleitung," *Malerie im 20. Jahrhundert* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 1954), 16.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 15.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 16.

rule, ideology, and devastation, a response must be found. This response, according to his words, cannot get around “touching the painful memories” and engaging with the past.

Haftmann writes that Nazism pushed Germany outside of the collective “European spirit,” and this was ultimately what the *documenta* project was attempting to respond to. Importantly, Haftmann emphasizes that there is a “danger that conformity will choke out freedom,” and that it ultimately the sentiment that must be countered and brought to the attention of the public to reinvigorate “the adventure of art.”⁵⁰ The author of the catalog posits the avant-garde and modernist abstraction as the answer to this danger of conformity, for now. In reading Haftmann’s words in the catalog for *documenta*, it becomes clear that modernism and abstraction were seen as the replacement for totalitarian aesthetics that needed to be countered in *documenta*. Haftmann saw a “new critical relationship to visible reality” in geometric and lyrical abstraction as a better motivation for art rather than a pure realist depiction of objects and scenes. Styles including naturalism, realism, and classicism were not chosen, perhaps because they would be too similar to what totalitarian aesthetics had valued. According to Haftmann, abstraction was a modernist stylistic enterprise that could regenerate German art and could ideally rescue the “spiritual welfare of the nation.”⁵¹

Although Haftmann makes it clear that the particularity of the German situation must be addressed in *documenta*, he also emphasizes the damage done to collective European consciousness and modernist art by Nazism and the necessity of a common effort to reconstitute aesthetic identity in the post-war period. In the introduction to the catalog, Haftmann makes it clear that a specifically “German” show would mean the organizers would have to “sacrifice” the

⁵⁰ Ibid., 23.

⁵¹ Ibid., 18.

“international development” in favor of a “fragmented survey.”⁵² In contrast to his language about the necessary attention the exhibition should give to the particularity of the German nation, Haftmann also emphasizes aspirations toward an international recuperation of modernism that transcends borders. He writes, at the end of the first paragraph in the introduction of the catalog, that “it belongs to the concern of the German spirit to become responsible for wider matters” which point to the “Überationale” or supranational.⁵³ The reach for the supranational in Haftmann’s language stresses a certain degree of universality that was central to the beginning of the *documenta* idea.

Many *documenta* historians and scholars, including Ian Wallace, have critiqued Haftmann’s emphasis on the universal, transcendental element and possibility of modernist abstraction. Wallace delineates how, in “Moderne Kunst und Ihre Politische Idee,” Haftmann explains the political ground of art as a “global federation.” Wallace writes, “But this global federation is ultimately limited to the Western alliance. His support for a “radical” and “critical” outlook is strictly metaphysical and existential, and precludes any actual change to political society.”⁵⁴ In this way, the first *documenta* had a combined national and universalist agenda imagined as an ambiguous philosophical support that artists and intellectuals could appeal to.

* * *

Important in understanding the curatorial decisions and motivations for the show is examining the works that were chosen, the artists, and their placement in the space. Wilhelm Lehmbruck’s bronze sculpture *Kniende* (The Kneeling One, 1911) was a principal work displayed in the first *documenta*. It was given significant attention seeing as it was put in the

⁵² Ibid., 15.

⁵³ Ibid., 15.

⁵⁴ Wallace, 17.

center of the rotunda of the Fridericianum.⁵⁵ Visitors of the exhibition would come across this work multiple times going up and down the stairs and perceive it as important because of its central location, according to Dirk Schwarze.⁵⁶ This work was important to the first *documenta* because it represented the beginnings of the modernist movement to the organizers. As described by *documenta* historian Dirk Schwarze, it was emblematic of the line between tradition and modernism and therefore an essential, ground-breaking sculpture. The figure's down-turned gaze and kneeling stance is reminiscent of the tradition of Christian Annunciation in European painting and sculpture and her elongated limbs resemble Medieval representation of the Virgin Mary. Yet the movement of her pose and posture, in between standing and kneeling as if she were just about to stand or kneel passively, brings her into modernism, as does the stylization of the cloth covering her legs and Lehbruck's rejection of realistic proportions. In this way, the sculpture can be seen as representative of the brink between naturalism and expressionism and therefore a central work in a survey of the foundations of modernism.⁵⁷

Lehbruck's sculpture had been shown previously at the Armory Show in 1913, which situates its position within the avant-garde. Perhaps more significant for *documenta* was the fact that *Kniende* had also been shown in 1937 at the Nazi exhibition of "degenerate art." By exhibiting Lehbruck's sculpture in *documenta I* the directors of the exhibition encouraged a re-interpretation of the work to escape the Nazi defamation under the category of "degenerate." Rather than seeing the sculpture as an example of an immoral and degraded form of art, this time viewers were meant to see the work as an example of a ground-breaking, influential, and dignified form of art. As many scholars have noted, this encounter can be seen as characteristic of the first *documenta*, which was meant as a counter to the National Socialist past. Many other

⁵⁵ Dirk Schwarze, *Meilensteine: Die documenta 1 bis 13* (Berlin: Siebenhaar Verlag, 2012), 13-15.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

works and artists in the first *documenta* were displayed as “degenerate” in 1937 along with hateful messages written next to the works, including Pablo Picasso, Marc Chagall, Henri Matisse, Max Beckmann, Willi Baumeister, Max Ernst, and others. The repeated display of the same works in *documenta* contributes to the idea of the event as a way to physically and conceptually “reposition” and re-document the past.

Notably, Picasso’s famous work *Girl Before a Mirror* (1932) was placed directly across from Fritz Winter’s *Composition for Blue and Yellow* (1955) in the Fridericianum for the first *documenta* in 1955. Dirk Schwarze emphasizes this positioning as an important method of display that represented the confrontation of the Father-teacher generation with the student one. This confrontation transmitted a significant message; the face-to-face can be seen as a documentation of the passing down of knowledge from a master to a student. It was almost as if Fritz Winter, a contemporary German artist at the time who made the work in the same year as *documenta* and perhaps for the event itself, had “learned from” Picasso in this instance and created his own poetic counterpart. By placing the two works in dialogue, the curators were able to reposition German modernists as important symbols of international avant-garde art. This simple gesture of placement became loaded with meaning.

In the entrance of the exhibit, photographic portraits of artists from the history of modernism including Piet Mondrian, Paul Klee, Max Beckmann, and Oskar Kokoschka were displayed on the walls giving homage to the greatness of the individual artistic genius and autonomy of the individual. When walking into the exhibition, viewers would encounter these photographs, which referenced the artists whose work would be displayed and the figures that

were important to the organizers as symbolic of the beginning of avant-garde art and central to the development of styles of modernism.⁵⁸

On the opposite wall of the atrium were photographs of artifacts and religious items from pre-Colombian America, Benin, and Greece which “made the most heterogeneous look similar.”⁵⁹ These were undeniably meant to draw out the universality of humanity in order to show the “origins” of modern art and its shapes around the world to forge a unity in the multiplicity for the path to reconstruction. In displaying these forms that some modernists called their “primitive” inspirations for abstraction in conjunction with the geniuses of modernism, it seems the organizers were attempting to stress what they saw as the similarities of form across nations and cultures though to most contemporary viewers they would seem disparate and distinct. In looking at these two panels, one might think the figures of modernism like Picasso and Mondrian “learned from” the pictures of artifacts from South America and Africa and furthered these universal archetypes and structures.

The link between *documenta*'s modernist works and these pictures might not be clear at first. There was a gap, a physical threshold, between the abstract works in the exhibition and the photographs of artifacts, suggesting an uncomfortable hierarchy. Grasskamp writes, “The National Socialist suggestion of a continuity of classicism was countered with the assertion of a continuity of the archaic.”⁶⁰ This quote suggests that the organizers of the exhibition were attempting to replace the Nazis' glorification and monumentalization of “classic” structures from ancient Greece and Rome with universal abstractions which manifested themselves in “archaic” civilizations across the globe. For Grasskamp, the photo panel represents an attempt to combat the enemies of modernism and avant-garde by asserting that abstract forms have always existed

⁵⁸ Grasskamp, “To be Continued.”

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁶⁰ Grasskamp, “Degenerate Art and Documenta 1,” 171.

everywhere and will continue to be developed through painters and sculptors like the ones shown in the entrance to *documenta*. This universalist, humanist idea is a sweeping one that fails to address differences in cultures and instead, homogenizes them. In addition, it failed to recognize the violent hierarchy asserted between the survey of European paintings and the photographs in the entrance. The idea that the exhibition was continuing ritualistic shapes throughout the against directly opposes Bode's statement that the goal of the exhibit was to create "a new living tradition, whose basic idea is ... expandable."

Documenta historian Harald Kimpel also recognizes the importance of these photographs, which were all copied from art history books in Bode's personal library including Werner Schmalenbach's *Die Kunst Afrikas* and were based off of the ideas in André Malraux's *Imaginary Museum*, which Grasskamp and Kimpel have both documented. For Kimpel, the pictures were displayed so that they could act as an aesthetic preconditioning of viewers tastes before entering the exhibition rather than serve as explicit propaganda for a universalism that was supposed to convey a message about the allegiance of *documenta* with anti-totalitarianism, human rights, and liberal democracy. The entrance photo gallery of portraits and pictures of artifacts can be seen as an attempt at visual and political training using examples from art history to introduce the works of art in the exhibit. Kimpel recognizes that the entrance photo hall "mosaic" was meant to be like a statement that was defining an art term from history to its "goal." He writes that the display, in its aim to "reduce" "many centuries of cultural development" to the "raster image of similar phenomena and exchangeable content" worked in order to reflect Malraux's ideas in *The Imaginary Museum*.⁶¹ In this way, the photo panel offered a visual presentation of the fundamental principle of regeneration behind the exhibit and

⁶¹ Kimpel, 266.

redemption through universalism, internationalism, and reentry into international civil and cultural society that disregarded difference.

The organizers of the first *documenta* and committee member's emphasis on the worldwide shapes and history of modernism as displayed through the photo panel of artifacts matched a political climate in Cold War Germany, Western European countries, and the U.S that sought to present human rights and democracy as the alternative to communism. As a result of the Second World War, fascist and communist nations were perceived as more likely to become international aggressors, which is why countries like France and other democratic members of The Council of Europe sought to ensure that past fascist governments of Italy, Spain, and Germany would remain stable and democratic. Konrad Adenauer of Germany was a central figure in keeping the country aligned with a program dedicated to democratic ideals like free speech and international human rights. In 1949, when Pierre-Henri Teitgen was reporting and negotiating the creation of the European Court of Human Rights, Adenauer allegedly told him that integration for his country would be necessary to prevent further escalation of communism in the Eastern bloc and Soviet Union.⁶²

The *documenta* photo panel of art historical objects and artifacts and portraits of artists promulgated the idea that all of humanity was unified through the “progression” from “primitivism” to modernism and the “universal language of abstraction.” Yet at the same time there was an implicit hierarchy between “archaic” forms and “highly developed” ones allowed entry into the space of *documenta*. This “universal” idea, which disregards the sense of hierarchy and power between the West and “the rest,” was key to both the first and second *documenta*, and seems to parallel the sentiment of another famous exhibition called *The Great Family of Man* at

⁶² Andrew Moravcsik, “The Origins of Human Rights Regimes: Democratic Delegation in Post-War Europe,” *International Organization*, vol. 54, no. 2 (2000): 237, JSTOR.

The Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York. Here, photographs from all around the world that depicted people engaging in various cultural activities were displayed as equals. Roland Barthes famously regarded this exhibition as a proponent of a “progressive humanism” reliant on a nonexistent, mythological man and questioned whether photographs of Emmett Till would be shown.⁶³ In the first *documenta*, these photographs were not even allowed to cross the threshold into the gallery space of the exhibition, but remained outside and alienated from the place of importance and value.

Artist Ian Wallace and historian Walter Grasskamp have both commented on the lack of political artists exhibited in the first *documenta*. Situated in the West German post-war context, the exhibition’s supposed display of the international language of abstraction was limited to German and European artists and the history of modernism displayed was one that did not take “origins” outside of Europe seriously. Only one of the 148 artists, Alexander Calder, who is an American artist, truly represented a country outside of Europe, according to Grasskamp. The other North American artists in the first *documenta*, including Josef Albers, Kurt Roesch, and Lionel Feininger, were first or second generation exiles and German emigrants.⁶⁴ This lack of additional perspectives severely restricted the universal aspirations the curators and directors sought in the exhibition. Anyone coming to the exhibition thinking they would gain perspective about modernism as a whole in a non-transatlantic context would be disappointed; it was fully Eurocentric and focused on reforming German nationality while only alluding to a universalist framework. This limitation underscored their objective to reintegrate German artists into the international art scene and market and emphasized the importance of German artists in the history of modernism and the avant-garde.

⁶³ Roland Barthes, “The Great Family of Man,” in *Mythologies* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2013), 198.

⁶⁴ Grasskamp, “To be Continued,” 6.

Though the geographical limitations of the original show might have become a common critique of *documenta* and the gap between international curatorial aspirations and the reality of the artists displayed, it is an important analysis that came to transform later iterations. The geographical scope of later *documentas* was later widened but artists from Africa, South America, Asia, Australia and other non-North Atlantic backgrounds remained underrepresented for a long time.⁶⁵ There was also a lack of female artists in the first *documenta*; only 8 works displayed by women and no portraits of female “geniuses” of modernism were put up in the entrance hall of the male-dominated show.

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The organizers of the first *documenta* avoided any highly political work with clear targets or statements that might threaten their clean reentry into the political and cultural scene which also contributed to a lack of artists and styles, which Ian Wallace and Annette Tietenberg have both commented on alongside many others. At the beginning of the Cold War, any work that made an overly political statement was seen as threatening to an event that was working toward a smooth restoration of German artists into the international community. Also, because West German leaders at the time were supporting democratic ideals and market capitalism as an answer to the horrors of National Socialism, any work made by communist or radically leftist artists was discouraged or left out of the survey. This move shows that organizers of *documenta* supported the political project of the West German government in the early years of the Cold War with the inclusion of works of a certain aesthetic by artists without dramatic political strategies.

Although creative freedom was granted to the contemporary artists of the *documenta* to contribute works of their choice, the event’s limited political scope made it clear whose politics

⁶⁵ Ibid., 6.

were being represented in the end. *Documenta* exhibited “classical main currents of the avant-garde—Expressionism, Futurism, Constructivism, and Cubism” yet more subversive or defiant movements and groups were not represented.⁶⁶ There was a lack of artists chosen from the Weimar period who made anti-fascist work in the style of Socialist Realism including Käthe Kollwitz and Max Pechstein.⁶⁷ If the *documenta* had exhibited this work in Kassel, it could have been seen as an alliance with the Eastern bloc. Also missing were Berlin Dadaists, German Neue Sachlichkeit artists, and Russian Constructivists, who were all significant influences to modernists of the early 20th century, which the event was surveying.⁶⁸ For Grasskamp, this lack of leftist artists constituted a reduction and “trivialization” of modernism because it refused to include any complexities to the definition and history of modernism and the avant-garde.⁶⁹ At the time of the exhibition, John Anthony Thwaites was the only critic of the first exhibition who wrote about the lack of specific political groups of modernists to take a truly oppositional stance; most other critics were supportive and congratulatory of the exhibition as a whole but his review read this absence as a critical flaw.⁷⁰

Annette Tietenberg sees the curatorial approach of the first *documenta* as one that shied away from institutional influence and political perspective because it embraced the idea of art and artists as autonomous, ideal models of free will. Through inventive creation and freedom of expression, these artists sometimes proclaimed a superior individuality and understanding of the self that marked their work as unique and internal, without outside influence by politics or society. This was also partly what made the *documenta* council and group of modernists proclaim that modern art was universally human because of the independence of the artist and

⁶⁶ “Documenta I Retrospective.”

⁶⁷ Wallace.

⁶⁸ Wallace, 17.

⁶⁹ Grasskamp, “Degenerate Art and Documenta I.”

⁷⁰ Karin Stengel and Friedhelm Scharf, 106.

his claim to subjectivity and personal truth. Tietenberg calls this individual-oriented form a “positivist view” of modernism, which “ensured that its social reformist and anti-institutional stance was overlooked, and that its attitudes to industrial production in the late 1950s and early 1960s were barely reflected.”⁷¹ By focusing on the genius of the individual and his or her interpretation, the organizers of *documenta* failed to completely engage in political conflicts or lingering social issues other than a direct rejection of Nazi “degeneracy.” In this interpretation of the lack of political art, Tietenberg seems to suggest that it was one of the tenets of modernism that prevented the addition of important figures that made political work or institutional critique.

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Werner Haftmann saw his function as an art historian as the threading out of meaningful artistic styles and the documentation of the progress of specific movements and styles of modernism. He wrote, in the catalog for *documenta* that, “The historian constructs ‘history’ out of the complex data he finds in reality; only in this way can he describe the process of temporal growth while dealing with simultaneous phenomena.”⁷² In this quote, Haftmann seems to be describing both the present and the past as equally important elements of the historian’s study: “temporal growth” appears to refer to past developments and “simultaneous phenomena” indicates contemporary events and understandings that parallel “growth.” In this description of historical analysis, Haftmann’s use of the word “constructs” indicates that his method of threading out significant art historical events of the past is the work of an independent individual with personal methods and attitudes. In the *documenta* catalog, Haftmann uses the first person to underscore his point, which also demonstrates his partiality, fusing his role as an impartial historian and subject of history with an opinion and autonomous voice.

⁷¹ Tietenberg, 39.

⁷² Tietenberg, 39.

Many elements of the first *documenta* point to it as an event that was motivated and swayed by a variety of factors, rather than an impartial survey. Haftmann identifies himself as a historian able to dictate what is important in the history of art, the incomplete political aspect of the survey and its corporate, industrial identity show it as sympathetic to the West German government, it was limited in its inclusion of mainly male artists from Europe, and its modernist motive was attached to an aesthetic retraining of citizens in correct visual appreciation. All of these factors point to the way *documenta* organizers were involved in a project with a goal of teaching the German public a lesson. Yet the first *documenta* was an event layered with competing ideas that were in no way fixed. The open, unstable atmosphere of the political and artistic sphere in the Cold War allowed the organizers to form a narrative from the dust of a bruised modernity and select works to reindex and reenvision the past. Though the organizers would soon be viewed as representative of an old, traditional understanding of modernity, their task in 1955 was no small one. It would be reductive to sensationalize the first event in its brave reaction to historical tragedy and loss, as many critics did at the time. On the other hand, a contemporary, in-depth analysis of the event reveals that it would also be simplistic to say that the 1955 *documenta* was solely the replacement of a Nazi ideology with a universal, modernist lesson. In fact, the works displayed from both the traditional avant-garde of the 1890s and early 1900s and the more recent work of the first *documenta* demonstrates that the experience was one riddled with an instability that allowed for it continue and modify based on previous lessons. The organizers' interpretation of the document was one that saw it as simultaneously relegated to objectivity and flowed from their own making. The somewhat conflicting efforts behind the exhibition to put forth something completely new and to reinterpret the past allowed for an event that could shift, change, and ultimately become the institution we witness today.

Chapter Two: Densen/Disperse

In 2002, *documenta* visitors encountered a museum within a museum; four of the twelve rooms that make up Meschac Gaba's *Museum of Contemporary African Art* (1997-2002) occupied the Fridericianum in 2002. In this installation piece, one could find the standard objects of Western museums alongside others that suggested a personal history and desire to represent the artist's home in Benin. In the *Library* room, Gaba displayed books in tall, sleek wooden shelves as well as chandeliers of burnt books.⁷³ Other objects, like T-shirts draping over wooden hangars, might have pointed to the broader project of Gaba's museum, which attempted to critique Western presentation of art in museological institutions that disregard, misrepresent, and profit from African work.⁷⁴ The artist has stated that the *Museum of Contemporary African Art* represented a wish to create a non-existent space where contemporary African work can be shown, a transformation where "my fantasy and it started to be a reality."⁷⁵ New at *documenta* in 2002 was *The Humanist Space* room, where visitors could take golden bicycles onto the streets to bring reality to the life of Kassel.⁷⁶

As is often stated, a crucial project of *Documenta 11* was the "decentralization and deterritorialization" of canonical conversations, languages, forms, and topics to better reflect a modernity marked by movement, transition, and hybrid identities in flux. This effort was one that aimed to disassociate and disentangle the event from its "roots" in Western European and German art and culture. The event has become known for its "platforms," or series of "transdisciplinary" conversations, conferences, and discourses that occurred worldwide,

⁷³ Phyllis Clark Taoua and Taylor Kathryn Miller, "Of Objects, Exhibit Spaces, and Markets: Meschac Gaba's Museum of Contemporary African Art," *Transition*, no. 119 (2016): 188-200, JSTOR.

⁷⁴ "Meschac Gaba," Platform5_Documenta11, accessed April 30, 2018.
<http://www.documenta12.de/archiv/d11/data/english/index.html>.

⁷⁵ "Meschac Gaba: Museum of Contemporary African Art," Tate Modern, accessed April 30, 2018,
<http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/meschac-gaba-museum-contemporary-african-art>.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

eventually coming together in Kassel for an international show of contemporary art in the final, fifth platform. The platforms were each centered around assemblages of conversation and premise: “Democracy Unrealized” in Vienna, “Experiments with Truth: Transitional Justice and the Processes of Truth and Reconciliation” in New Dehli, “Creolite and Creolization” in St. Lucia, and “Under Siege: Four African Cities, Freetown, Johannesburg, Kinshasa, and Lagos” in Lagos. Importantly, these platforms have been interpreted as the transferal and renegotiation of the importance of the artistic “center,” positing cities like Lagos and New Dehli as equally important components rather than subordinate “peripheral” influence. The spatial and temporal rearrangement of the traditional event usually consolidated around the “100-day event” walk-through style standard since Harald Szeemann’s 1972 *documenta* into various platforms allowed for the investigation of a new structure that diverged from previous iterations. At the fifth platform of the 11th *documenta*, viewers were thus interacting with and confronting objects, works, and topics that had become part of a discourse contextualizing the equally important, long-term process of discussions about decolonization and postcolonial culture.

Not only did the 2002 project create new artistic strategies and methodologies for representing and engaging with sociopolitical strife, but it also developed a discursive program to contest normative standards of Western art and *documenta* format. This discursive program, which was extensively influential, was propelled by Catherine David’s *documenta*, which emphasized daily speakers, conversation, and debate to open up the grammar of contemporary art.⁷⁷ In a symbolic gesture of reorganization, curatorial power was distributed to co-curators Mark Nash, Ute Meta Bauer, Susanne Ghez, Sarat Maharaj, and Octavio Zaya, representing a theoretical dispersal of managerial duties and dissemination of the authority of the curator,

⁷⁷ Charles Green and Anthony Gardner, “Post-North? Documenta11 and the Challenges of a Global Exhibition,” *On Curating*, 33 (June 2017): 110, http://www.on-curating.org/files/oc/dateverwaltung/issue-33/pdf/Oncurating_Issue33.pdf.

though much autonomy still remained in the hands of Nigerian-born intellectual and art critic Okwui Enwezor.

Documenta 11 is famously purported as the official “global” *documenta*, having moved the exhibition in a less Eurocentric direction by challenging its formalist aesthetic with the inclusion of numerous documentary works and artists from around the world. Importantly, the “global” connotation is one that might allude to the dissolution of national identities that the first *documenta* exhibition worked to consolidate in displaying formalist and abstract German works to the public. For this reason, the term “global” might tend toward an assumption that all parties involved are equal in comparison to the term “international,” which might be more concerned with specific relations between two designated nation-states. The 2002 *documenta*, though at the time it might have been seen as a successful postcolonial and global response to more discriminatory curatorial exhibitions in the past, was retrospectively seen as controversial. Sylvester Okwunodo Ogbechie, for example, has pointed out that only 20% of all participants were non-Western artists, which might come as a surprise to critics who claimed the show was about privileging “identity-politics” or multiculturalism.⁷⁸ According to Ogbechie, much of the curatorial intent was to find inclusive organizational frameworks for artists of all kinds in all their various relationships to the academy, which is why the selection process was based in points of contention between works, not artists’ backgrounds. In addition, the celebrated “globalism” of *Documenta 11* has come under scrutiny due to what some believe to be its complicity in a trend of “biennialization” that has paralleled an “exponentially increased audience for (and financing of) contemporary art” that profits from exhibitions like *Documenta*

⁷⁸ Sylvester Okwunodo Ogbechie, “Ordering the Universe: Documenta 11 and the Apotheosis of the Occidental Gaze,” *Art Journal*, vol. 64, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 80-89, JSTOR.

11.⁷⁹ In this way, Enwezor's *documenta* was an influential one that elicited a variety of conflicting and heated responses that flowed from the effort to move the exhibition to new territory and document new and combined artistic practices.

In the *Documenta11* final exhibition show in Kassel, the effort to destabilize the display of works was demonstrated by the uses of the spaces and venues in Kassel and variety of media and time-based artistic methods. Works were displayed in more customary *documenta* venues like the Fridericianum but also in new spaces and buildings like the Binding Brauerei. Some of the venues and works of the exhibition were unescapable, yet many performances and installations were displayed not in traditionally "central" locations and were only temporarily situated or even moved around.⁸⁰ Thomas Hirschhorn's *Bataille Monument*, an installation sculpture building constructed with the help of community-members to French philosopher and intellectual George Bataille, was constructed in an urban housing estate in northern Kassel. This controversial work in a working-class Turkish neighborhood was managed by Hirschhorn throughout *documenta*, where he filmed comments and talked to members of the community about the philosopher and structure meant to be a participatory gathering point of conversation and debate, complete with a Turkish coffee stand nearby. Where the piece was an eyesore to some visitors of *documenta*, it represented an escape to others because of its location outside of a compact arena of art.⁸¹ Other public art installations that explored untraditional venues included Renée Green's audio pavilions, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster's park, Ken Lum's mirror maze, and video performances taped by John Bock.⁸² In *Disappearing Element / Disappeared Element*

⁷⁹ Charles Green and Athony Gardner, *Biennials, Triennials, and Documenta* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), 183-206.

⁸⁰ Johanne Lamoureux, "From Form to Platform: The Politics of Representation and the Representation of Politics," *Art Journal*, vol. 64, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 64-73, JSTOR.

⁸¹ Tom Hollert, "Bataille That Binds," *Artforum International* (September 2002): 164, EBSCOhost.

⁸² Eleanor Heartney, "A 600 Hour Documenta," *Art in America* (September 2002), <https://msu.edu/course/ha/491/documentaheartney.pdf>.

(*Imminent Past*), mobile ice-cream vendors sold popsicles of frozen water meant to point out the disparity between the abundance of water in Kassel and communities with a lack of water. These pieces, as well as the selection of the Binding Brauerei as a new venue, can be seen as a physical rearrangement of space that paralleled a project dedicated to taking critical approaches to the dominant organization of art in space that privileges and valorizes some pieces by artists and styles accepted by the academy over others.

Though these works dispersed around Kassel might be seen as an effort to redistribute art in patterns opposed to institutional standards and norms, most of the works were still contained in the four more traditional venues of *documenta*: the Kulturbahnhof, Fridericianum, Binding Brauerei, and Documenta Halle. The effort to highlight new postcolonial identities and subjectivities in exploring the possibilities and downfalls of a globalized economy and system of governance after colonial rule was clear in these venues as well. The exhibition in these venues focused on filmic, photographic, and collage or montage work rather than simply formalist painting and sculpture, as in the first *documenta*, reflecting an effort to document the dislocation and rearrangement of geopolitical forces of power. On the first floor in the left room of the Fridericianum, paintings by Leon Golub involving torture and military figures displayed alongside Doris Salcedo's steel, lead, and wooden chairs that indicated tragic remnants of state violence in Bogotá.⁸³ Filmic works in the Fridericianum signified an important presence, including Zarina Bhimji's *Out of Blue* (2002) on the first floor and works by Anwar Kanwar, Yang Fudong, and many more. In other venues, especially the Binding Brauerei, works that addressed economic and political conflict using film, photography, and video were prevalent as well.

⁸³ José Roca, "Doris Salcedo: Text, Details," *Universes in Universe*, accessed April 30, 2018, <http://universes-in-universe.de/car/documenta/11/frid/e-salcedo-2.htm>.

Zarina Bhimji's 16mm film *Out of Blue* features long shots and pans of empty, abandoned houses, military barracks, prisoner's rooms, and detention cells in Uganda, where the artist and her family were raised and forcibly removed by the authorities under Idi Amin's expulsion of South Asian immigrants. The artist's camera lingers on these spaces, eerily devoid of people and the viewer experiences the melancholy that accompanies the remainders of both violence and beauty in these places. The viewer sees a stack of cups left in a kitchen, intact as if ready to be used again, witnessing the camera's tracing of holes from bullets in a window, and a long shot of sleeping quarters and a sheet that was left to tremble perpetually in the breezy, disjointed shards of sunlight. These scenes in motion that document the places of violence in the artist's past are overlaid with a soundtrack composed of unnerving whispers, wails, and gunshots. Bhimji's slow and methodical camera movements seem to contrast the visceral human soundscape and the violence left in architecture of the stark images.⁸⁴ This approach might seemingly stand as distinct from the more abstracted appeal of another 16mm piece in the exhibition entitled *Western Deep/Carib's Leap* by director Steve McQueen. In his work, the camera descends into the dark mines of TauTona in South Africa, where sporadic beams of light occasionally illuminate faces of miners or the circular spots of flashlights search for doors in the dark. McQueen also focuses on the movements of collective black bodies in scenes where miners are training for physical endurance. What some might perceive as a visual contrast in style between pieces like these demonstrates the complexity and nuance of approaches taken by artists commissioned by Enwezor for *Documenta11*.

The distribution of many works across new venues and the assorted complexity of the works themselves can be seen as part of a marked effort to focus on the contemporary experience of living in a world after colonialism and coming to terms with an increasingly transitory art

⁸⁴ Zarina Bhimji, *Out of Blue* (2002), accessed April 30, 2018, https://www.zarinabhimji.com/video_outofblue.htm.

world in motion, located in between several places rather than firmly designated to commanding centers of control. In his “Black Box” essay that he wrote for the *Documenta 11* catalog, Enwezor wonders what “spectacular difference” his project might make on the history of the exhibition and on the oppressive, Eurocentric system of the art world.⁸⁵ He writes that instead of using “critical spaces” as “places for the normalization or uniformization of all artistic visions on their way to institutional beatification,” he imagines that his project would “through the continuity and circularity of the nodes of discursivity and debate, location and translation, cultural situations and their localities that are transmitted and perceived through the five Platforms, *Documenta 11*’s spaces are to be seen as forums of committed ethical and intellectual reflection on the possibilities of rethinking the historical procedures that are part of its contradictory heritage of grand conclusions.”⁸⁶ Here, the Artistic Director underscores the project’s resistance to singular and sweeping models of understanding and how its venues and discussion are instead imagined as places of “location and translation,” a vision that foregrounds an infinite unravelling dispersal of absolute comprehensions of contemporary subjectivity.

In an essay published four years after the exhibition, Enwezor emphasizes that the undertaking of *Documenta 11* was one engrossed in the rejection of limiting viewpoints because of the cultural dissemination and globalizing politics of contemporary art. He highlights that current aesthetic trends were “unbounded and undisciplined,” or marked by a constant shift in hybridized alternatives and moving between formerly fixed disciplines, practices, and concepts. Importantly, the artistic trends and methods of political commitment of *Documenta 11* paralleled a fluctuating world of governance, capital, and subjecthood in the face of the law. He explains, “This unboundedness, which I have designated elsewhere as the condition of unhomeliness, is

⁸⁵ Okwui Enwezor, “The Black Box,” in *Documenta11_Platform 5: Exhibition Catalog* (Ostfildern: Hatje Kantz, 2002), 43.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 43

partly the result of a widescale global modernity of peoples, goods, and ideas permanently on the move, in constant circulation, reconfiguration, tessellation.”⁸⁷ The dislocated and disseminated nature of the venues, geography, and practices of *Documenta 11* were thus characterized by an insistence on the transmission, flow, and diffusion of working within current political formations. This kind of movement marked the works of *Documenta 11*, which were multi-disciplinary, experimental and geographically various while simultaneously dedicated to a documentation of transitory and transnational streams of interaction.

* * *

In the *documenta* exhibition in 2002, the project put forth by the curatorial and organizing team was seen as an attempt to engage with new strategies of viewing the past and explore artistic methodologies of an archival, documentary, and testimonial sentiment in the post-Cold War, postcolonial world shaken by 9/11. Enwezor has written extensively about contemporary uses of the archive and document as well as the shifts in meaning and associations of works that address social and political issues both inside and outside a realist framework. In “Documentary/Verité: Bio-politics, Human rights, and the Figure of Truth in Contemporary Art,” Enwezor addressed critics of *Documenta 11* in 2002 who bemoaned what they considered an overwhelming focus on documentary work in the final exhibition in Kassel. He argues for a more nuanced consideration of the ambivalences and alliances of politically and socially motivated work to better analyze, view, and reflect on the future possibilities these art pieces might present to us. The author takes issue with the categorization and reduction of these works as simply “documentary,” resisting the negative associations the genre has acquired and contesting the definition of the genre.

⁸⁷ Okwui Enwezor, “Documentary/Verité: Bio-Politics, Human Rights, and the Figure of Truth in Contemporary Art,” in *The Green Room: Reconsidering the Documentary and Contemporary Art* (New York: Sternberg Press, 2008), 99.

Enwezor insists on the multiplicity of forms and methods that the documentary can take, refusing single definitions and limiting narratives. Where the first *documenta* sought to engage its viewers in a poetic dialogue with shadow and light to revitalize modernist abstraction for a new national identity, the 2002 *documenta* ensnared its viewers directly with the ethics and aesthetics of viewing human subjects and their struggles through art. Enwezor's argumentation in the "Documentary/Verité" essay reflects a moment of radical transformation and distribution in contemporary attitudes toward documentation and political art that have pigmented the foundation of the *documenta* exhibition's battle with international political developments and treatment of the human subject, continuing to influence those involved with the event today and its visitors. Inextricably linked with the effort to open up methods and practices of documentation in the 2002 *documenta* was an exploration of a discursive process of destabilization imbued in a project of recording fragmentation, postcoloniality, and globalism in the "terrible nearness of distant places."⁸⁸

In order to defend the variety and multiplicity of the works in the show and argue for a more flexible practice of engaging with sociopolitical commentary through art, Enwezor positions himself against those who would constrict these works to classification through simplification. In the "Documentary/Verité" essay on the 2002 *documenta*, Enwezor writes that *Village Voice* critic Kim Levin declared *Documenta 11* the "CNN Documenta," a branding statement that seems to ridicule the art exhibition by insinuating that it focused too much on reportage and social issues to the extent that it was akin to an American news network and cable channel.⁸⁹ This classification of the exhibition judges *Documenta 11*, implying a sensationalization and misuse of traumatic topics through art and indicates the event was directed

⁸⁸ Okwui Enwezor, "The Black Box," 44.

⁸⁹ The "CNN" reference comes from a piece by Thomas Hirschhorn in the show and the statement was not Levin's own, but rather an overheard remark from a passerby.

by a descriptive, informative news-casting tone, positing it simultaneously as a diluted, watered-down form of journalism and undesirable form of art or misapplication of artistic vision. In her critique, Levin writes that the show “stuns viewers into silence” due to the topics of many of the works, including genocide, mass murder, xenophobia and racism, poverty, etc.⁹⁰

Levin writes that *Documenta11* and the curatorial team chose a string of works that named and pointed to the crises of the world without accurately countering or addressing them. Matthew Higgs in his review, “Same Old Same Old” in *Artforum*, like Levin, complains about the “hectoring tone” of the exhibition while simultaneously claiming many of the works were politically “ineffectual.” It might seem contradictory at first to propose that the same compilation of work represents both an overabundant surplus of political and documentary work to the point that it adopted the monotone droning of a TV and an inadequate interaction and confrontation with sociopolitical realities. For Higgs and Levin, the issue at stake is a perceived majority of documentary works that disregards other forms of art-making and privileges certain critiques over others. Though these authors both agree some of the works in the exhibition were powerful on aesthetic and political registers, they simultaneously agree that too many other works were incompetent in providing a sufficient institutional critique in a captivatingly innovative aesthetic or avant-garde manner.

In the “Documentary/Verité” essay, Enwezor does not refute the fact that many works addressed harrowing topics, using various strategies of social and institutional evaluation to grapple with political and revolutionary histories or current events. He upholds the autonomy and range of the socially and politically driven works in the exhibition in support of the range of complexities they demonstrate in the show. The motivation for much of Enwezor’s project for

⁹⁰ Kim Levin, “The CNN Documenta,” *The Village Voice*, July 2, 2002, <https://www.villagevoice.com/2002/07/02/the-cnn-documenta/>.

documenta, as he writes in the essay, was to showcase artistic work that used past and fluctuating typologies of memory, collection, and recording. He writes that it was “the cornerstone of [the] project” to “demonstrate through a number of complex morphologies the ways through which the logic of the archive and document suffuse and penetrate activities of art and procedures of image production in the last 40 years.”⁹¹ This quote expresses the drive to highlight the document and its various interpretations and variations as pivotal for the exhibition. It was what he calls the “problematic of the documentary” that he wished to put into the spotlight at *Documenta11* in order to embrace the propositions and stratagems that the effort to document brings forth and the difficulties in these processes rather than focusing on an effort to coherently describe the genre in a way that would constrict it.⁹² Enwezor thus resists the structural framework that supports the designation of the documentary, socially critical methodology as distinct from and perhaps insignificant in comparison to the abstract, pieces of “high art” that pay poetic attention to form and composition. This can be thought of as a way to rethink dominant modes of creating and recreating remembrance, memory, and continuing effects of historical occurrences.

The “problematic” of the documentary for Enwezor is entangled in the perceived binary between realism and abstraction, a contested divide that has historically housed many struggles and disputed parties that were at the heart of the ideological project of the first *documenta*. In attempting to document, artists and journalists often find themselves bound to debates that foreground various methods of approaching a subject with a camera, whether that be the artistic, authorial or dedication to the subjects or general experience of an event. In part, the perceived opposition between abstract and realist schools that Enwezor describes has come about from

⁹¹ Okwui Enwezor, “Documentary/Verité,” 84.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 84.

what he describes as the failure of modernist political work to engage the public, offer an institutional critique that probes its own boundaries, or provide enough space for radical political gestures that incite drastic change using artistic exercises. Artists have historically invented numerous ways of using art to fight for freedom, to support movements for rights, to act as a witness, or to hold a perpetrator accountable. Enwezor describes what he sees as two important strains of political art that have engaged with topics in the past concerning human rights, societal issues, and institutional assessment: one a Marxist critique and one a humanist based, like Abstract Expressionism, on the tenet of freedom. The dominant narrative of Abstract Expressionism presents the artist as an individual hero with the power to unify a universal humankind underneath the artistic umbrella of abstraction, modernism, and progress. Both of these “political” methods in the arts were ultimately unsuccessful in Enwezor’s eyes, which is part of the reason we have experienced the polarization between “art” and “politics” in the second half of the 20th century.

The curator of *Documenta 11* in this part of the essay seems to oppose the anti-political nature works that were displayed by the heroes of modernism in the first *documenta* of 1955. Enwezor writes about the artists of the late avant-garde as proprietors of a formalist aestheticism that eventually resulted in “the great emptying out and banishment of the concept of the political in artistic matters.”⁹³ Here, Enwezor reflects the sentiment that artists and paintings of the school of Abstract Expressionism and the line of art championed by Bode in 1955 focused too closely on its shapes, shadows, and figures, which ultimately drained this style of activist potential and left it devoid of political gravitas even if they claimed to be addressing a universality or transcendental human value. Remembering the lack of explicitly political work in the first *documenta*, this statement merits some attention. This formalist aestheticism is one that

⁹³ Ibid., 64.

dominated the first *documenta* of 1955 which renamed the force of “universal humanity” under abstraction as key to the future. By *Documenta 11*, the exhibition was no longer to support this stylistic position, positing it as another failed, exclusionary overarching narrative, or “meta-language” of the 20th century.⁹⁴ In the new *documenta* for the new millennia, Enwezor rejected this version and vision of history, which had undergone several critiques before his project, and proposed the disintegration of this canonical history, in the wake of certain shifts *documenta* had undergone already. By this time, the exhibition had undergone major organizational shifts, adapted to artistic trends that continued to question the boundaries of modernism through Conceptual Art and activism of the 60s and 70s, and transformed due to subsequent artistic directors’ curatorial premises. In 2002, the exhibition was firmly located in so-called postcolonialism and globalism, which were at the heart of the effort to destabilize the exhibition and art world, in an effort to react to the formalist aesthetic that led to the polarization between the abstract and the realist. Enwezor identifies late modernism in Abstract Expressionism and Geometric Abstraction as complicit in the development of an attitude that posited documentary and realist work as distinct or below “fine art” of modernist painters, a sentiment that delegates ethics and aesthetics, moral integrity and beauty as separate.

Of course, this supposed binary between the abstract and realist, “poetic and political,” dates back perhaps to the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century when photography was developing and different trends of modernism were advancing, or even before that, as Mark Nash, a co-curator of *Documenta 11* has pointed out. Important for Nash are two

⁹⁴ In “Modernity and Postcolonial Ambivalence,” Enwezor delineates forms of modernity in the late 20th and early 21st century and refers to the ways the contemporary art world has internalized, transitioned, or reused forms of modernity as it came to prominence in the early 20th century. He writes, “To historicize modernity is not only to ground it within the conditions of social, political, and economic life, it is also to recognize it as a meta- language with which cultural systems become codified and gain modern legitimation.” (597)

trends within documentary work itself; one that prized objectivity as in John Grierson and John Rieth, who founded the charter of the BBC, and another that attempted to ignite radical political change as in Dziga Vertov's work.⁹⁵ The tension he perceives recalls the divide between teaching and informing. However, Enwezor's argument, and the one that is central to the visual grammar of *Documenta 11*, is that the "problematic" of the documentary, political and socially critical approach came to be important for contemporary art in part due to the formation of an international environment centered on human rights. His "Documentary/Verité" essay is devoted to the argument that a political atmosphere that accepts the dignity of the human body is largely responsible for various systems of image-making and methodologies of communicating information, representing struggle, and portraying human strife. Enwezor argues that without the international legal response to the atrocities of the Holocaust in Europe in the Nuremberg trials, the post-war attention given toward victims and accountability, and an effort to account, memorialize, and understand crimes against humanity, the documentary mode would be unrecognizable to us today. A relatively recent focus in participatory democracies on the rights of human beings to the protection and security of their body and being has been central to the understanding of the artistic practice of documentary work and its analysis. The author also seems to identify the increased centrality of human rights and a focus on humanity, subjectivity, and identity as part of the reason so many have developed an ethical skepticism toward the documentary and documentarist.

Enwezor's engages with the history of human rights in order to show how the works of his 2002 *documenta* represented a range of complex works that interpret the ethical and aesthetic stance of the documentary in different ways. Enwezor marks the Universal Declaration of

⁹⁵ Mark Nash, "Reality in the Age of Aesthetics," *Frieze*, April 1, 2008, <https://frieze.com/article/reality-age-aesthetics>.

Human Rights (UDHR) of 1948 as one of the principal indications of a new and enriched international focus on the preservation of the self-worth of human bodies, free from torture and systematic “barbarous acts.” In a broad sense, the human body for Enwezor can act as a “limiting factor” and barrier against the perverse cruelty of modern nation-states, racism, mass murder, torture, etc. He focuses on the negotiation of rights and allowances that dictate presence in the world in a particular state, alluding to strategies and interactions in the social matrix to contest the authority and knowledge of socio-governmental boundaries between life and death. Enwezor mentions numerous and distinct struggles for rights around the world from “liberation and decolonization” movements in former colonial states to the struggles for democracy and new political systems after the fall of Stalinism in the “former second World.”⁹⁶ Whether they imagined themselves as allies or not, these movements led to the development of a supranational human rights guiding principle, or an “ethical compass” to lead a global, international society in the appropriate moral direction and to create a system to support it.⁹⁷ In conjunction with these negotiations, Enwezor highlights the “ethico-juridical sanctity of the human,” suggesting the respect and protection given to the body of a person under legal and ethical systems related to international treaties and declarations like the UDHR. The word “sanctity” implies the human species possesses an elevated sense of veneration and respect in these revised legal and ethical definitions and rights endowed to the human body that arose out of the end of the Second World War and suggests the powerful force these rights have come to embody in international relations. What Enwezor seems to be pointing to by fusing the “ethical” and the “juridical” is the overwhelming shift in attitude, though in different places with different goals, toward the consideration of the respect given to the human as an equal and free individual morally and

⁹⁶ Enwezor, “Documentary/Verité,” 68.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 67.

under the law.

The ethical compass and backbone of human rights in Western democracy could not have become the forceful political order that it is now without the media, in particular photography, television, and other image-making industries. Photographs of numerous starved and tortured victims of concentration camps and countless images of mutilated dead bodies from the death camps still serve, to this day, to prove atrocity and verify crimes against humanity committed by the Nazi regime. In writing about human rights and bio-politics after the Second World War, Enwezor writes about the Nazi crimes against the Jewish population at Auschwitz as the ultimate “image” of the infringement upon human rights. He writes, “Photographs and documentary footage of the liberated camps confronted the world with an ethical question, namely, if the Nazis murdered their victims by first reducing them to the legal category of the non-human, how can the enlightened laws of the post-war international system restore such rights?”⁹⁸ This quote proves to him the complicity between the symbolic, representational element of the image that relies on a visual syntax of seeing and its ethical use as a piece of evidence to reproduce the Nazis murderous crimes. Enwezor also points to the portrayal of the Palestinian struggle for self-determination in the media as reliant on the use of visual representation and pictorial symbols, which fuse the operation of seeing and witnessing with an ethical sympathy for the “helplessness” and “hopeless” of the quest.⁹⁹ These might seem like over-used examples now, but it is important to understand that journalistic media, picture-making, art historical references and human rights were reliant on each other in order for them to come to dominate mainstream perception of international politics and for movements to draw inspiration and draw the attention of the public. These images remain the primary and immediate way of seeing, experiencing, and

⁹⁸ Ibid., 69.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 70.

spreading information about human rights violations.

Though these images have been central to spreading knowledge about violence and suffering, allowing for messages of liberation and voices that cry for rights and protections to be heard, many have come to view these images as dangerous. News imagery, crime photography, and images from war have become more and more important in the every-day interpretation of political events. Many of these typologies are graphic and provoke an ethical or sympathetic response from the viewer. In Susan Sontag's book *Regarding the Pain of Others*, she writes "Wars are now living room sights and sounds," which hyperbolizes the extent to which images of atrocity and conflict have permeated the contemporary experience. These image-making networks and industries that produce and represent atrocity have contributed to the creation of what Enwezor references as "the tabular index of horror" put forth by "contemporary guilt industries (Amnesty International, Doctors Without Borders, etc.)" in their over-proliferation and documentation of violence and death.¹⁰⁰ Because of their perceived exploitation of the subject for personal gain and the overall victimization effect of these media industries, many, including Sontag, have come to regard photojournalism and documentary film as suspect.

Suspensions and reservations that rise out of viewing these distanced images of "the pain of others" parallel uncertainties in contemporary art toward the documentary work that position it as a representational mode that risks the abuse and exploitation of its subjects. Enwezor draws a similarity in sentiment between Susan Sontag's argument that photojournalistic approaches invite the violation and persecution of subjects through media that makes them into spectacles and those that view artworks that attempt to document a social or political subject as potentially immoral. Enwezor writes, "The question of paying attention to the 'pain of others' especially as it is registered and indexed in representation (be it photographic, filmic, or archival) arises purely

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 71.

as a consequence of the development of human rights.”¹⁰¹ In this way, the rise of an international environment that respects personhood and human rights has resulted in the critical view of the documentary approach. This might be paradoxical to some, because some traditional photojournalists and documentarians often saw their work as both aesthetically and ethically distinct from grotesque images of horror and atrocity that proliferated in the news. Yet the project of *Documenta 11* in large part might be seen as an effort to display work that attempts to redefine and develop new schemes for confronting the fraught history of documentation and its limits.

It might come as a surprise that, for a project so devoted to multiplicity and destabilization of the artistic canon, a certain degree of humanism and reliance on human rights methodologies becomes necessary. *Documenta 11* was marked by a radical “tessellation” of subjectivities, practices, and geographies yet human rights and essentialist formatting somehow became unavoidable in order to take on institutionally critical approaches to social realities. In addition, this human element arrives as important to the project in spite of the fact that Enwezor recognizes that human rights has also been complicit in skeptical reactions to viewing images of atrocity. He highlights the activities of *Kein Mensch ist Illegal*, a German group consisting of artists, political advocates, and media companies. In their work, they use a multi-disciplined approach to fight xenophobia and racism, advocating for asylum seekers’ rights and freedom of movement by asserting, simply that “no human is illegal.” Important for their battle, Enwezor argues, is the international nature of their actions and protests and the fact that their concept of the human subject bridges across ethnic and sexual lines. The group’s advocacy for the human is reliant on the fact that representation has the possibility to shed new light on subjecthood and can present “the human” in new ways. The artistic director writes, “Therefore, to make the other or

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 71.

the ‘victim’ the subject of art, as the image of critical recall that stands between the artist and spectator, before the institution and the law brings her contingent status in representation to a level of visibility hitherto unrecognized by the regimes of invisibility that otherwise surround and veil her in public discourse.”¹⁰² Enwezor argues here that artist-activist groups and collectives like *Kein Mensch ist Illegal* necessarily use forms of representation and advocacy that can challenge institutions and legal structures that hide the constitutive force of the asylum seeker’s presence. Thus, representation of the “victim,” in art, for Enwezor retains the potential to fight the “regimes of invisibility,” and can potentially redefine the definition of a subject.

Enwezor terms this kind of approach as the kind of *Kein Mensch ist Illegal* as a “perhaps surprising principle of the universalization of the concept of the human” subject, which he embraces as necessary to effectively target multinational corporations and entities that perpetuate inequality, racism, and exploitation.¹⁰³ This might come as a “surprise” due to the curator’s emphasis in “Black Box” and throughout the project of *Documenta 11* on an investigation of postcolonial subjectivities that are constantly in motion taking new formats across the world, shifting borderlines, and reconstituting designated geographies. This embrace of multiplied subjectivities and identities might seem at first to oppose such universalizations and essentializations such as the “human subject.” Enwezor’s statement also comes as a “surprise” because of the Artistic Director’s adamant rejection of Abstract Expressionism and singular, all-encompassing “meta-narratives,” “totalizing vision,” and the sweeping curatorial motives of the first *documenta*.

Enwezor supports artists’ adoption of a specific element of humanism, as in the case of *Kein Mensch ist Illegal*, in particular instances of archival memory and testimony in his essay on

¹⁰² Ibid., 74-5.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 76.

the *Archive Fever* exhibition as well. The exhibition *Archive Fever* was curated in 2008 after *Documenta 11*. He writes, “On a different level, a noticeable humanist concern drives the analyses found in individual projects. This dialectic structured by humanist and posthumanist traditions casts the whole range of archival production within an epistemological context that far exceeds the issues of taxonomies, typologies, and inventories generated by the artists.”¹⁰⁴ This conceptualization of the human through art demands rethinking due to every shift in international politics and the business of representation. The methods Enwezor defends are those that are both “undisciplined” and “unbounded” to reflect and represent a hyper-actively changing concept of the human through art and relationship between the artist, spectator, and subject.¹⁰⁵

For him, these documentary works were “above all” marked by “the concern for the other, the fidelity to a truth that the documentary ceaselessly constructs and deconstructs.”¹⁰⁶ Specifically, he brings up Alfredo Jaar and Hans Haacke’s work as examples that have approached their subjects in this manner. In Alfredo Jaar’s *Let There Be Light: The Rwanda Project, 1994-1998*, the artists responded to the genocide in Rwanda, photographing its devastating effects on the population beginning in 1994. To Enwezor, “The universal umbrella of human rights offers a peculiar sort of protection to local causes once they are reframed in a global context.”¹⁰⁷ The “peculiar sort of protection” he here identifies exists simultaneously alongside the effort to decentralize the exhibition and dislocate it from Kassel, finding relevance in works from Africa, South America, or Eastern Europe. For Enwezor, the protection secured by human rights does not contradict the effort to take the exhibition in an international or global

¹⁰⁴ Okwui Enwezor, “Archive Fever: Photography between History and the Monument,” in conjunction with *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2008), 46, https://sites.duke.edu/vms565s_01_f2014/files/2014/08/enwezor2008.pdf.

¹⁰⁵ Enwezor paraphrases Irit Rogoff when referencing the unhomely/unbounded

¹⁰⁶ Enwezor, “Documentary/Verité,” 101.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 101.

direction, critical of continuing forms of colonialism, but rather strengthens it.

In this way, he identifies works that might not seem to be supported by universalizations of the human subject as part of a collection dedicated to contemporary artistic practices of diffusion, dispersal, dissemination and postcolonial interrogations of homogeneity and uniformity. Central to this project were particular instances of appealing to a universal, as in the case of *Kein Mensch ist Illegal*, that functioned precisely in order to fight structural and systemic refusals to accept asylum seekers and refugees as legitimate bodies. He identifies various works in *Documenta11* as part of this process including Fared Armaly's collaboration with Rashid Masharawi on an interpretation of the various paths of Palestinian communities in *From/To* and Multiplicity's group work on an immigrant smuggling ship wreck. Many others too, he writes, like Alejandra Riera, the Raqs Media Collective, Black Audio Film Collective, Trinh Minh-ha, Allan Sekou, Craig Horsfield, Meschac Gaba, and Walid Raad/the Atlas Group contributed to exploring new ways of engaging with the political, aesthetic, and sociological.¹⁰⁸ In some instances, therefore, the renegotiation and reshuffling of contemporary political works that grapple with geopolitical forces intentionally adopted a humanist lens to further their cause. These moments were extremely different to the moments in which the organizers of the first *documenta* claimed universalism through abstraction, which for them supposedly bound every work in a narrative from the "primitive" to the abstract expressionist.

Enwezor supports the multi-valenced approaches represented in *Documenta11* in his "Documentary/Verité" essay, especially their ability to capture a dispersed, unshackled, and fluctuating presence in a contemporary experience based in a multiplicity of localities. The state of political affairs and movements within the art world of 2002 was becoming increasingly transitory, operating in multiple locations, moving from place to place, perhaps best represented

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 101.

through hybridized and multi-disciplinary media. Many of the exhibition's works demonstrated the interconnected nature of various struggles against systems of oppression. Using video, photography, and installation, the artists together presented visually compelling representations of global fights against the exploitation of workers, consequences of industrialization, militarism, terrorism, incarceration, etc. In this way, the exhibition marks an important point where conflicting aesthetic tendencies toward documentation, the human subject, and geography played out.

Chapter Three: Exchange/Extract

The platforms so crucial to the project of displacement and rearrangement in Enwezor's *documenta* reappeared in a different form in the 2017 installment of the exhibition *Learning from Athens*. A platform might be thought of as the appearance of a space where points of discussion arise newly, surfacing concretely in a public manner previously obscured. A platform is a place where voices once unheard step up to the podium and experience newfound attention. The five worldwide platforms of Enwezor's *documenta* were imagined as corresponding junctures of discussion topics, including the final fifth platform of the exhibition in Kassel itself and its physical display of art. Each was theoretically considered an equal component of the project in its own right without the arrangement of the fifth. The platforms of Adam Szymczyk's *documenta* in 2017, in comparison, were presented twofold, taking place in Athens and in Kassel. If the platforms of 2002 connected the "global South" with Kassel, then the platforms of 2017 might be seen as an attempt to connect Greece and Germany in the same way presenting them as evenly weighted components. The platforms of work shown in Athens and Kassel in *Learning from Athens* were both conceived as physical exhibitions of artworks, though *documenta 14* also stressed public platforms, performances, lectures, and meetings throughout the event. Szymczyk's adoption and transformation of the platform idea, focusing on two places of interchange, might be interpreted as two material stages upon which ideas, conflicts, and art act out their consequence. We might come to see *Learning from Athens* as "a theater of actions" where tensions of Europe and European identity today were represented, played out, and accentuated.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁹ Quinn Latimer and Adam Szymczyk, "Editor's Letter," *South as a State of Mind*, 6, accessed April 30, 2018, http://www.documenta14.de/en/south/12_editors_letter.

The selection of Athens for the first platform of artistic display in *documenta 14* brings with it a set of allusions to the so-called crises of contemporary Europe. This factor needs to be reconsidered in the context of the institution's history as a process of configuring and reconfiguring public knowledge in times of uncertainty. *Documenta* arose out of an aspiration to reconstitute art in the moral and political disorientation and perplexity of the post-War era when the injuries inflicted on modernism had to be repaired, the nation's politics clarified, and the aesthetic modes reorganized. In 2002, the *documenta* agenda became one that aimed to recompose fragments of post-Cold War identities and aesthetic tendencies in a time of radical post-colonial interrogation and upheaval. At the time of selecting the curator for *documenta 14* and during its planning period, Europe tumbled into a state of confusion marked by investigations of the boundaries and policies associated with national and united characters. Far-right populist parties and xenophobic groups gained traction and continue to do so in parliaments all over the continent—in France, Hungary, Denmark, and Germany. The EU was marred by conflicting policies regarding the influx of migrants at its borders and the economic consequences of the 2008 Eurozone financial emergency that left Greece and other states bankrupt and reliant on bailouts. Consequently, many theorists and artists questioned the efficacy and ethicality of democratic rule, its supporting institutions, and systematic capitalist standards.

Learning from Athens sought a retort to the crises of contemporary Europe, carrying along a tradition of socially oriented work throughout *documenta* history including everything from the urban renewal of the garden show of the first exhibition, *documenta* favorite Joseph Beuys' "social sculptural" work like *7000 Oak Trees* planted all over the city in 1982, and Thomas Hirschhorn's *Bataille Monument*.¹¹⁰ In a time of insecurity and political strife, the actors

¹¹⁰ Dorian Batycka and Vanessa Gravenor, "Awaiting Political Specters: Documenta 14," *Derailed Mag*, May 11, 2017, <https://www.drailedmag.com/2017/05/11/awaiting-political-specters-documenta-14/>.

and agents of the *documenta* institution sought to imagine diverse and complementary spaces of critique that work towards the creation of spaces of inclusivity, resistance, and alternative considerations of citizenship, freedom, and public life. *Documenta 14* favored tangible artistic projects that could potentially address the urgent problems of a divided Europe alongside imaginative and speculative ones as to avoid simply gestural constructions of theoretical utopias, according to the curator. This social and aesthetic radicalism might be what the curator envisioned by the term “theater of actions” –a location inhabited by performative and representational elements that simultaneously sought to actively transform fundamental ideas and knowledge systems of Western thought.¹¹¹

The focus in *Learning from Athens* was one that remained faithful to the idea that learning and “unlearning,” one of the exhibition’s catch-phrases, could incite radical action and change through art. This version of learning is one reliant familiarizing oneself with foundational systems of knowledge and analysis in the West and challenging them. With the inclusion of Tony Bennett’s “The Exhibitionary Complex,” in which he analyzes museums and exhibitions as Foucault analyzed prisons, *documenta* took on a self-critical tone that added to the thematic of learning as a process that the exhibition has to engage in itself. Unlearning took the form of re-imagining previous models of resistance and insurgence to form them anew. In the *Documenta 14 Reader*, Szymczyk writes that “Our hope is that no top-down teaching will be involved and emphasizes Giyatri Spivak’s notion of “learning from below.”¹¹² The pedagogical aspect of the exhibition was emphasized as stemming from the imagined conversation between Athens and Kassel based on a “notion of reciprocity,” a dialectic based on respect and equality.¹¹³ In the

¹¹¹ Quinn Latimer and Adam Szymczyk, “Editor’s Letter,” 6

¹¹² Adam Szymczyk, “Iterability and Otherness: Learning and Working from Athens,” *Documenta 14 Reader* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2017), 36.

¹¹³ “News: Documenta 14,” *Artforum*, May 2012, <https://www.artforum.com/print/201704/documenta-14-67184>.

Documenta 14 Reader, the artistic director writes, “Thus it seemed most pertinent to work and act from Athens, where we might begin to learn to see the world again in an unprejudiced way, unlearning and abandoning the predominant cultural conditioning that, silently or explicitly, presupposes the supremacy of the West, its institutions and culture, over the “barbarian” and supposedly untrustworthy, unable, unenlightened, ever-to-be-subjugated “rest.”¹¹⁴ This logic is one that fundamentally trusts the power of dialogue and performance in overcoming and halting authoritative systems of understanding the world that perpetuate Western institutions (like *documenta*) as superior while disregarding and alienating systems that challenge the ethics that lie behind them. In this statement, Szymczyk demonstrates the intent to connect the importance of learning with a newfound, tolerant perspective based in the conditions and traditions of the city of Athens and the sentiments of its inhabitants.

When presented with the seemingly unexpected bi-locality of *Learning from Athens*, one might conceive of a variety of reactions to an Athens-and-Kassel-based *documenta*. One attitude might evaluate the exhibition’s agenda as an ambitious attempt to mend a crisis in order to alleviate the pain and suffering of the inhabitants of Athens and spark artistic interest in Greek work. This reaction to the exhibition might criticize its motives as a disguised initiative with colonial undertones that exploits the effects of an economic crisis, though it might imagine itself as a compelling and kind benefactor. According to this train of thought, the exhibition might further entrench social binaries and tensions between the countries that rest on conceived inequality between the “Greek mess” stemming from internal ethical deterioration and the “hard-working” Germans who continue to bail countries out of economic crises, attempt to repair European refugee policy through the EU, and extend austerity measures that continue to exacerbate division. In this case, *documenta 14* was seen as a veiled attempt to bring attention

¹¹⁴ Szymczyk, 30.

and revenue to a failing economy in Athens in order to revitalize the institution's own political program and aesthetic ends. *Documenta*'s arrival in Greece along these lines was characterized as part of the institution's valorization of ruin and appropriation of crisis and conflict for artistic attempts to overcome hardship and struggle that benefit the institution, its artists, and visitors rather than the people of Athens. In one of the worst accounts, Yanis Varoufakis, the former Greek minister of finance, famously called *documenta* "offensive" in an interview and said it was "like crisis tourism" and "a gimmick by which to exploit the tragedy in Greece."¹¹⁵

Some Greek institutions and artistic operations, including the National Museum of Contemporary Art, Athens (EMST) welcomed projects set forth by *documenta* initially. In addition, as Elpida Rikou and Elena Yalouri have written, the art scene in Athens was actually flourishing during possibly the worst time of economic hardship. They write, "Remarkably, since the economic repercussions of the Eurozone crisis began to be felt in Greece, the Greek contemporary arts scene has thrived."¹¹⁶ They point to an upsurge in community initiatives and grassroots projects that fostered local art showcased in the *Athens Biennale*, a topic on which Elpida Rikou and Io Chaviara have written more extensively.¹¹⁷ The fact that the art world of Athens was actually flourishing in the "dire times" of economic crisis complicates the idea that *documenta* could be there to instigate change by activating artistic practice in the city.

According to Szymczyk, the intention was never actually to engage with the art scene of Athens, but rather to focus on "the city as a living organism" and involve the city as

¹¹⁵ "'Doing Documenta in Athens is like Rich Americans Taking a Tour in an African Country': An interview with Yanis Varoufakis by Leon Kahane," *Spike Art Magazine*, October 7, 2015, <https://www.spikeartmagazine.com/en/articles/doing-documenta-athens-rich-americans-taking-tour-poor-african-country>.

¹¹⁶ Elpida Rikou and Io Chaviara, "Learning from documenta: A Research Project Between Art and Anthropology," *On Curating*, 33 (June 2017), 132, http://www.on-curating.org/files/oc/dateiverwaltung/issue-33/pdf/Oncurating_Issue33.pdf.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 132.

representative whole experience of presence in contemporary Europe.¹¹⁸ This disregard for Athens as a city was supported by theoretical considerations that regarded it as an equal host city. Szymczyk's statement disregards the change *documenta* could have on the city of Athens and fails to live up to the abstract framework that supported supposed equality between the two places. The curator's quote conveys the feeling that the exhibition was pivoted toward larger, more universal artistic notions rather than simply focusing on the art scene in one city. The lack of practical recognition of the consequences of *documenta* is worsened when considering the change *documenta* had in Greek neighborhoods, bringing an influx of temporary, art-viewing visitors who contributed to pre-gentrification re-investment.¹¹⁹ In addition, the exhibition remained silent in the face of a series of evictions of refugees and migrants from squats in Athens during the time it was supposed to be "learning." In an open letter to the institution, the collective Artists against Evictions wrote to the institution, "Now is a time for carving out a space for all, not a time of culturally archiving crisis."¹²⁰ It is one of the strange ironies of our time that such an exhibition as *Learning from Athens*, which acknowledged the Greek capital as a partner in collaboration whereby to facilitate cooperative exchanges that might contest deep-seated consternation, could also participate in such a vicious form of complacency. This contradiction makes the motive of the exhibition, to learn, listen, and understand the collisions of contemporary Europe all the more important.

In order to emphasize a sense that the two cities were conceptually involved in a complex exchanges and interactions, many of the works of *documenta* were realized halfway between

¹¹⁸ "Reaktion auf Kritik aus Athener Kunstszene," Deutschlandfunkkultur, April 7, 2017. http://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/documenta-chef-adam-szymczyk-reaktion-auf-kritik-aus.1895.de.html?dram:article_id=383349.

¹¹⁹ Hugill.

¹²⁰ "Documenta Under Fire after Artist and Refugee Evictions," *Artforum*, April 10, 2017, <https://www.artforum.com/news/documenta-under-fire-over-artist-and-refugee-evictions-67680>.

Athens and Kassel or used materials, imagery, and joint histories or narratives from both cities and experiences. To a large extent, the artistic director and curators focused on shedding notions of territory, borderlines, and national or international identity in an effort to transcend and combat injustices that these models for political visualization preserve. In the editor's letter in the first edition of the *South as a State of Mind* magazine repurposed for *documenta 14*, Szymczyk and Quinn Latimer write that the participants in the exhibition and contributors to the magazine worked together to explore alternate ways of mapping geographical indicators of meaning.¹²¹ They write, "We feel that, as unstable the local (and global) conditions are at the outset of the project and as uncertain its future, it is worth trying to think in solidarity, with Germany and Greece conceived as simultaneously real and metaphoric sites where such thinking is urgently necessary." Importantly, therefore, a prerequisite for the *documenta 2017* project was the "unstable" conditions of positionality and the "uncertain" future of the project. Szymczyk here emphasizes the necessity to "think in solidarity" for both Greece and Germany, stressing a determination to imagine the actors, activists, and artists of the project as equal agents that must participate in actions in the arenas of both Athens and Kassel. Together material from both vicinities might conceive of new territories, boundaries, and conceptual models.

In this way, it was important to the Artistic Director and many of those involved with the project that works focused on finding "common ground" between Greece and Germany, seeking moments that could allow thinking about these place and concerns of those who inhabit the areas in alternate ways that disregard conventional understandings of these

¹²¹ In the editor's letter of the 9th issue, Quinn Latimer and Adam Szymczyk write, "*South as a State of Mind* is itself a much-discussed title that was never meant to fake any purportedly "Southern" way of thinking and writing—as if those could follow any defined geographical directionals—but rather to open up the possibility of speaking on disparate terms and from a different standpoint than that of the globalized art world as we know it today: that is, a refusal to speak from only the position of power."

countries as designated territory for citizens. Where Enwezor's project helped bring voices from around the world to *documenta*, Szymczyk's agenda was one rooted in understanding the fraught bonds and relations between Germany and Greece. In 2002, the exhibition had learned from the limited, Eurocentric scope of previous iterations that it necessitated a multiplicity of additional artistic practices and experiments from global counterparts in order to conceptualize a world after colonial rule. By 2017, corporate rule and economies of debt came to the center of attention in *documenta* and it recognized its need to learn anew how to navigate the regulation of values and bodies under neoliberalism and the representative democratic values that support these powers. Disoriented and rendered "unstable" by the failings of representation and modes of resistance to domination, what was to come out of the project in the end was imagined as undetermined, open, and unpredictable.

In an effort to stress the exchange and bi-locality and extended temporality of the exhibition, many works from the Greek National Museum of Contemporary Art (EMST) were loaned to display in the Fridericianum in Kassel, which served to detach the notion of Kassel as single "host city" of the exhibition. Szymczyk recognized in *South* that Kassel has, in the past been designated as the central city for the display of work in *documenta* and that his aim was to contest the significance of the German town in the exhibition. The symbolic movement of the artworks from the EMST collection was meant to challenge and expand the infrastructure of the institution of *documenta* as anchored in the city of Kassel. The Greek EMST museum was struggling to open for more than a decade; though it was founded in 1997 by the Greek government and began operating temporarily in 2000, it was not until 2015 that the collection was allowed to move to the permanent venue of the Fix brewery in Athens, which did not open

until October 2016.¹²² Physical works part of the Greek museum's permanent collection including Bia Davou's *Sails* (1981), Nikos Navridis' *Looking for a Place* (1999), and many others including non-Greek artists were presented in Kassel, representing the displacement or transfer of artwork from a "permanent" collection from one place to another.¹²³ Pieces were loaned to display in Kassel in the Fridericianum but also in Athens, in the newly renovated Fix brewery, which added to the mission of detracting attention and consequence from Kassel. This symbolic gesture might seem along the vein of an attempt to disperse works in order to dislocate the centrality of Kassel as the most valuable point of contention and show. Yet the works were not scattered or dispersed across the globe, rather they were displaced, exchanged, and dislocated, which might be more similar to an interaction or trade than a disassociation or distribution.

The director of EMST, Katerina Koskina, facilitated the exchange of the works along with Szymczyk in an emblematic move entitled *Antidoron*, meaning "the return of a gift" or "the return of a loan either linguistic, cultural, or nancial" as in *Antidanion*, according to Koskina. This name further disrupts a preconceived idea of where the works belong, whose land artistic pieces are derived from, and traditional understandings of nationality and belonging. Perplexingly, the Greek works that the EMST loaned to the German museum represented the "return of a gift," suggesting that they were not originally Greek in the first place or that they were borrowed and are now being returned. This definition disrupts the notion that works belong in one place and that the collection is somehow inherently "Greek." This symbolic naming of the

¹²² Fotini Barka, "A tale fit for Homer: the decade-long odyssey of Athens's National Museum of Contemporary Art," *The Art Newspaper*, January 29, 2016, <http://old.theartnewspaper.com/news/museums/a-tale-fit-for-homer-the-decade-long-odyssey-of-athens-s-national-museum-of-contemporary-art/>.
<https://news.artnet.com/art-world/national-museum-athens-opens-736481>.

¹²³ Katerina Koskina, "*Antidoron: The EMST Collection* at Museum Fridericianum," Documenta 14, accessed April 30, 2018, <http://www.documenta14.de/en/notes-and-works/23457/antidoron-the-emst-collection-at-museum-fridericianum>.

exchange also challenges the idea of a “permanent” collection; if the collection of works can move, it is no longer situated or stable in one location and the pieces become more like ideas or people that can travel and are constantly in motion and subject to change. Koskina’s description of the movement of the works as a “nancial return of a loan” also alluded to the debt crisis, perhaps poking fun at *documenta* as a way for Greece to pay off its debt.

Antidoron is a concept commonly used in the context of the Greek Orthodox Church where it designates the bread served “instead of the gifts” during communion. In this double interpretation, then, the *antidoron* is both the return of a loan but also more subversively something returned in lieu of what was initially given.¹²⁴ Koskina, in her description of the temporary transaction, emphasizes the importance of the symbol of the Fridericianum as a valuable place of collective thinking and administrative planning in its history, which is why she included Greek works that reacted to the “troubled, post-war era, the dictatorship in Greece, and years after.”¹²⁵ The symbolic movement of the works of the EMST collection thus mediates the theme of gifting, sharing, and debt that runs through the exhibition and in the publications, like the ruminations on the ceremony of potlatch in *South*.¹²⁶ The *Antidoron* exchange provides a series of complexities of interpretation that demonstrate the variety of intricacies that come along with an attempt to navigate contemporary understandings of movement, transaction, debt, and offering.

In a striking and provocative performance in Athens, Brazilian artist Marta Minujín enacted *Payment of Greek Debt to Germany with Olives and Art* where she presented an Angela Merkel look-alike with olives meant to symbolize Greece’s repayment of funds. The two

¹²⁴ “The Proper Understanding and Use of Antidoron,” Orthodox Christian Information Center, accessed April 30, 2018, <http://orthodoxinfo.com/praxis/antidoron.aspx>.

¹²⁵ Koskina.

¹²⁶ Candice Hopkins, “Outlawed Social Life,” *South as a State of Mind*, 7, accessed April 30, 2018, http://www.documenta14.de/en/south/685_outlawed_social_life.

performers sat down in front of a large audience on the first day of *documenta* in Athens and swiveled in their desk chairs for a few minutes, ambivalently circumnavigating the other person, almost as if they were unsure of how to proceed or were avoiding their duties. The Chancellor's impersonator gave a speech where she accepted a mountain of Greek olives from the artist after they walked around the payment on the first day of the exhibition's opening in Athens.¹²⁷ This controversial piece, based on the artist's 1985 work *El Pago de la Deuda Externa con Choclos* poked fun at the German government and EU's administration of austerity measures in a manner some might perceive as satirical and cynical. Held on the opening day of the exhibition, the event was attended by both German president Frank-Walter Steinmeier and the president of Greece, Prokopis Pavlopoulos. If we consider Minujín's piece as part of the "theater of actions" described by Szymczyk, we might see it as a way for thinking about hyperbolies and exaggerations of the political relationships in the EU and a light-hearted interest in alternate ways of envisioning politics as based on culture, or food, rather than monetary value. Important to the performance piece was the presence of *documenta* visitors and public interpretation of the offering of olives. Without the audience, Minujín's piece would have no political valence and only with a diverse public, which included politicians as well as visitors, could the work provoke questions as to the contested meaning of debt and responsibility in the EU. The performance was centrally located in the newly renovated EMST where visitors were required to pass through to enter the museum. The olives were left in a metal container that visitors to the main venue in Athens encountered on the ground floor near the museum's entrance as a reminder of the performance and its lingering message about debt and the onset of the *documenta* project.

¹²⁷ "When German art meets Greek Austerity," *Politico*, accessed April 30, 2018, <https://www.politico.eu/article/documenta-14-athens-frankwalter-steinmeier-tourism-crisis-when-german-art-meets-greek-austerity/>.

By provoking questions as to both the shared meaning and the difference in definition of debt and payment in Greece and Germany, the exhibition hoped to motivate thoughtful models for practicing alternate visions of collectivity and politics in response to its diagnosis of Europe's debtor and creditor inequality. In providing spaces where provocative contestations such as Minujín's were possible, the exhibition created an arena for attempting to bring the urgency of social issues to its visitors. In large part, the works, performances, and songs of the exhibition were to seek a strategy for communication that might allow for forms of social art that could potentially "heal our traumatized world," in the case of the nuances to be found by the EMST's presence in Kassel.¹²⁸ These words almost recall Haftmann's statement in the first catalog that *documenta* could rescue the "spiritual welfare of the nation," though we now speak of "world" instead of "nation." The methods of communication used in *documenta 14* can be traced back to the idea of the performances as enacted upon a stage where the magnification of societal issues such as debt are transformed and signaled anew. This idea corresponds to Szymczyk's reference to Antonin Artaud's theory of "theater and its double" in "Iterability and Otherness: Learning and Working from Athens."¹²⁹ Artaud rejects the notion of the masterpiece in one of his essays in the collection, instead recognizing the potential political nature of theater to never repeat a gesture. He writes, "I propose a theater in which violent physical images crush and hypnotize the sensibility of the spectator seized by the theater as by a whirlwind of higher forces."¹³⁰ *Documenta 14* certainly was a place set in motion by the hurricanes of contemporary subjectivity in the face of European conflict entrenched in a politics of debt and effort to define an identity with the arrival of hundreds of thousands of immigrants.

¹²⁸ Koskina.

¹²⁹ Szymczyk.

¹³⁰ Antonin Artaud, *Theater and Its Double* (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 82.
http://katarze.mysteria.cz/artaud/theatre_its_double.pdf.

Although debt and transaction were major topics of *Learning from Athens* and were emphasized as starting points for working with the Greek capital, the exhibition highlighted other important sociopolitical conflicts of Europe. Many of the works that were selected from the EMST collection on exhibit in the Fridericianum had to do with designing alternate routes for moving across national, international, and internal and ethical boundaries. Vital to the exploration of new topographies to visualize these boundaries was the creation of multiple connecting membranes and points of contention between the cities of Athens and Kassel, a struggle and interest point brought out in many works in the EMST collection displayed in the Fridericianum. Katerina Koskina writes about some of the works selected to be displayed in Kassel: “The exhibition deals with issues of border crossings, diasporas, cultural exchange, existential quests, and mythologies, as well as personal and collective memories.”¹³¹ In this way, the traded pieces between Germany and Greece represented the use of specific, individual accounts of boundaries whether geographical or categorical to interpret broader transgressions across political thresholds. The topic of “border crossings” mentioned explicitly by Koskina indicates a pointed awareness of work that engaged with contemporary Greek understanding of migrants and refugees in transit.

The public program of *documenta14* took place between the 14th and 24th of September in 2016 in the old headquarters of the dictatorship’s military police in Athens and later in the Fridericianum was curated by Paul B. Preciado. The event consisted of a series of lectures, performances, screenings, and panels, including a variety of thinkers including historians, authors, activists, and academics. These participants and “bodies” can be seen as representative of a plan to expand the community of *documenta* by inviting a wider public to contribute to aesthetic concerns and share artistic strategies of engaging in political projects of resistance and

¹³¹ Koskina.

reimagining democracy, freedom, and economics. Despite critiques that the series of events did not engage with citizens and inhabitants of Athens in a comprehensive or productive manner, the public program was also received with the recognition of its wide support of indigenous and marginalized voices from around the world.¹³² Among these were Naeem Mohaiemen, a Bangladeshi filmmaker and historian, Sámi political rights activist Niilas Somby, Antonio Negri, a political author and worker activist, Carcross/Tagish First Nation writer and curator Candice Hopkins, and many more.¹³³

The Parliament of Bodies was conceived as a reaction to the summer of 2015 during which the European Union received an influx of asylum seekers and migrants on its shores, straining its bureaucracy and challenging the underpinnings of its shared policies and mutual administration of aid. According to the mission statement of the Parliament of Bodies, the experience of the summer of 2015 pointed out and exacerbated a number of administrative shortcomings of the EU: it “revealed the simultaneous failure not only of modern representative democratic institutions but also of ethical practices of hospitality.”¹³⁴ This statement captures the sentiment that the issues that arose out of the failure of various governments to accommodate and account for migrants were common to the public of Europe and its various actors, rather than putting blame on one state or group. This quote locates two conflicts: one underlying the infrastructure of the administrative bodies in charge of regulating asylum seekers and granting refugee status and one that puts pressure on communal understandings of openness and respect for foreigners. The Parliament of Bodies was formed as a part of the public program of

¹³² Maria Nicolacopoulou, “Exercises of Freedom? A review of documenta 14’s Public Program launch in Athens,” *Ocula*, November 11, 2016, <https://ocula.com/magazine/reports/exercises-of-freedom-a-review-of-documenta-14%E2%80%99s-pu/>.

¹³³ “34 Exercises of Freedom, Extended Program, September 14-24, 2016,” Documenta 14, September 12, 2016, <http://www.documenta14.de/en/news/1929/34-exercises-of-freedom-extended-program-september-14-24-2016>

¹³⁴ “Parliament of Bodies,” Documenta 14, accessed April 30, 2018, <http://www.documenta14.de/en/public-programs/927/the-parliament-of-bodies>.

documenta in reaction to the failure of authorities to accommodate its people, maintaining “the real parliament was on the streets.”¹³⁵ In the introduction of the program in Kassel, Preciado explained that the Parliament was meant to reclaim failed institutions in order to reimagine them.¹³⁶

Preciado’s public program as a Parliament of Bodies was dedicated to both the concept of “bodies” as individual agents free from being assembled into a nameless hoard and as isolated, separate, and distinct. The title the “Parliament of Bodies” encapsulates the tension between a collective group of equals and the personal nature of the body. In their description of the agenda of the Parliament, the organizers wrote: “The Parliament of Bodies acts against the individualization of bodies into a mass, against the transformation of the public into a marketing target.”¹³⁷ As the statement shows, the writers emphasize both a shared notion of the body while simultaneously stressing it as unique and free from being appropriated and assimilated into a crowd. In other words, the effort to conceive of radically new strategies of resisting engrained in political policies that reinforce ethical binaries between “visitor” and “host” represented in the Parliament of Bodies located itself in the middle of conceptualizing bodies and subjects both universally and uniquely. A body is something simultaneously singular and plural; it can only function as representative of an individual and their personal, private domain yet the body also represents something in abstract that unifies humankind—the body politic. In his introduction of Preciado and the program in Kassel, Szymczyk relied heavily on the idea of presence as an indicator of shared experience, a concept that also bridges the distinct subjectivity that comes

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ “No Comment-documenta 14-The Parliament of Bodies,” Artort.tv, accessed April 30, 2018 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NUIybEfpR70>

¹³⁷ “Parliament of Bodies.”

from one set of eyes and the broader understanding of existence of a conscience and of personhood.¹³⁸

Works that explicitly answered to and occupied themselves with the experience of the so-called “refugee crisis” were present in the *documenta* exhibition itself both in Kassel and in Athens. Rebecca Belmore’s marble tents entitled *Biinjjiya’iing Onji* (From inside, 2017) stood in Athens on the Filopappou Hill and on the Weinberg-Terrassen in Kassel. In constructing what are usually considered provisional structures out of marble, the artist employed a material generally used in building immense, permanent monuments and long-lasting edifices.¹³⁹ The tents represent a formation that has been used more and more by refugees and migrants as more of an enduring housing unit, seeing as they are often forced to wait a long time for bureaucratic reasons, waiting for interviews, documents, or money to arrive, before continuing on their journey.¹⁴⁰ Belmore’s hand-carved tent is placed such that the Acropolis and ruins of monuments like the Monument of Philopappos are visible in the background when viewing this work. The interchange between these deteriorating ancient structures highlights a desire for permanence in Belmore’s work in Athens. The topics of ruin, deterioration, and durability also reflect on the exhibition as a whole, its transitory time in Athens, and its history as an institution pivoted toward documenting and commenting on that which might perish.

As a structure in between permanence and transience, the tent poses questions as to the assumed duration of migrants’ stays in Athens and Greece and how the government attempts to accommodate them long-term. The gesture of building a “provisional” structure out of marble seems to contest the notion of the migrants as temporary visitors. According to Candice Hopkins,

¹³⁸ “No Comment.”

¹³⁹ Candice Hopkins, “Rebecca Belmore,” excerpt from *documenta 14: Daybook*, accessed April 30, 2018, <http://www.documenta14.de/en/artists/13529/rebecca-belmore>.

¹⁴⁰ Patrick Strickland, “Refugees in Greece Reflect on Another Year of Waiting,” *Aljazeera*, January 2, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/12/refugees-greece-reflect-year-waiting-171226173758364.html>.

Belmore's concept of the tent is also tied to her culture's idea of the wigwam as a temporary structure. In unifying those fleeing violence in the Middle East and Northern Africa and her own Anishinaabewkwe people, the artist seems to parallel the *documenta* call to find resonances and models across cultures.¹⁴¹

Where Belmore's tent imagines an abstract notion of a migrant as a body in transit in need of provisional housing, Angela Melitopoulous' four-channel video installation with sixteen channels of sound *Crossings* (2017) documents the voices and bodies of migrants and refugees in camps in Greece. The piece begins with the sounds of water, insects, and far-off voices emanating from various speakers that are joined by light strumming in the round room of the Gießhaus, a former room of the Henschel factory that made weapons during the World War II.¹⁴² About two minutes into the sounds, an image is screened depicting debris cascading over a hill near Idomeni, Kilkis almost like a waterfall in front of tall hills and gray sky in the background. The debris, full of tents, sleeping mats, blankets, and even shoes and clothing is near a tall metal fence with barbed wire and immediately we understand Melitopolous is not supposed to be there: someone tells her to put the camera away as it starts to rain over the debris and a dog walks around curious about the scene. The camera's eye is a patient one; it lets events unfold in time in the environment and land around it without forcing a narrative upon them. Yet there is also urgency in the work: later we hear voices that describe the fear children feel every day and night in the Moria camp. A young Afghani girl explains that she faced persecution in her country because she wanted to pursue an education and feared she would be stoned or beheaded by Daesh or the Taliban. As she speaks, the camera moves slowly along a rusted wire fence,

¹⁴¹ Candice Hopkins, "Rebecca Belmore."

¹⁴² TJ Demos, "Learning from documenta: Athens, Post-Democracy, and Decolonisation," *Third Text*, accessed April 30, 2018, http://thirdtext.org/demos-documenta_

beginning in a dry, dusty area and eventually moving through an area with provisional housing, plastic roofs, and UN tents.

Melitopoulous' 109-minute film installation required viewers to sit in a location in the round room where they could see all four screens and hear the channels of sounds properly. In this setting, visitors of *documenta* were caught up in the interplay of images and sounds, situated in the center of a set of interactions. The film equally gave attention to the environmental devastation enacted onto the Chalkidiki area near the Skouries mine, stating from the beginning that "Here we are in a land of passages where various wars are crossing. Economic, strategic, racial, and sexual wars. A territory that hosts a double experimentation: the governance by destructive force of debt, and the control of mobility of refugees and migrants. We are not witnessing a clash of civilizations, but a war of subjectivities installed by capitalism." This sentiment is highlighted by a conversation between farmer-activists who describe the deterioration of their water and land as a result of a war waged by the government and the law, who exploit the natural resources of Karatzas.

In the film, the twin operations of debt and control over movement that constrict the inhabitants of Greece are brought together through various sounds and images that parallel one another yet also push against each other in a way that points to important differences. Even though we hear stories from migrants like those in the Moria camp, where a fire started by those on the outside destroyed refugees' homes and interview documents, their energy and experiences are different than those in Lavrion, where we hear the story of a man who teaches Kurdish youth about martyrs who died fighting for the PKK (Kurdistan Worker's Party) cause. Visual topographies also work to parallel and separate in Melitopoulous' work: women beat olive trees with sticks to collect their harvest and men beat plastic police shields in a similar motion in front

of the Ministry of Rural Development and Food in Athens. The artist thus also records sentiments of permanence and impermanence in the stories of migrants while still paying close attention to individual narratives. The subject of Melitopoulous' film carry on the political charge of *Documenta 11* to document and record the nuances, contradictions, and multi-faceted nature of social reality and its conflicts in the present moment. The voices of the migrants and their stories in *Crossings* recalls Enwezor's thoughts on *Kein Mensch ist Illegal* and the humanist drive to listen to these voices and assert their power.

In the editor's letter in the first issue of *South for documenta*, Szymczyk writes that the projects of *Learning from Athens* embrace both unique, local struggles and that they should seek connections between conflicts all around the world. He says, "Trying to think through a world in relation requires a 'worldmentality' (to gloss Manthia Diawara) that allows one to exceed worn ideas of territory, state, and identity as fundamental concepts of our world."¹⁴³ This response demonstrates the curator's emphasis on transcending or "exceeding" ties to nationality, pointing to the need for thinking across urban, national, and continental boundaries. The "worldmentality" Szymczyk emphasizes here correlates to his call to "think in solidarity" with Athens and Kassel; though they are both specific locations with distinct histories of conflict and praxis, he asked the artistic community to find relations that bridge far-off regions. At the same time, the artistic director emphasized the importance of individual suffering and specific, local instances and interpretations of resistance, shown by the variety of inclusions in the reader and magazines. Additions in the reader demonstrated multiple, alternative models for political thinking including everything from Emilie Rākete's ruminations on the Maori principle of Papatūānuku, Silvia Federici's comments on resistance in Latin America, and Antonio Negri's description of his involvement in the worker's rights struggles in German-occupied northern Italy. These

¹⁴³ Quinn Latimer and Adam Szymczyk, "Editor's Letter," 6.

individual accounts of protest highlight the Artistic Director's emphasis that "the place and time matter" "Contrary to the illusions of global access and indistinguishable sameness of being that we are induced to believe by the marketing strategies of global capital and optimistic narrations of failing mainstream politics."¹⁴⁴ This tension between bridging boundaries and emphasizing clear-cut instances of resistance was one spurred by divisions in contemporary politics and reflects the quaking political atmosphere of Europe and unsteady circumstances of global capital.

The tension felt between these versions of the abstract and the site-specific was highlighted further in the display of other works about the so-called "refugee crisis," which ranged from those that focused on migrants in the abstract and those that focused on specific circumstances, individuals, and conflicts. This split in focusing on the experience of transit in general and the specific cases of individuals or specific camps like Moria or Lavrion registered throughout the exhibition, which included both theoretical and practical models of engagement. Belmore's tent, which considered migrants in the abstract, was joined by works like Olu Oguibe's obelisk *Das Fremdlinge und Flüchtlinge Monument* (Monument for strangers and refugees, 2017), which has the phrase "I was a stranger and you took me in" (Matthew 25:35) in four different languages. Similarly, artist Hans Haacke hung five banners in Friedrichsplatz in Kassel that said "We (all) are the people." In a more specific and personal experience, Lebanese-Dutch artist Mounira al Solh recreated her family's bakery in an installation called Nassib's bakery, where she also displayed works from the collection *I Strongly Believe in Our Right to be Frivolous* (2017), an intimate collection of portraits of Middle Eastern and North African migrants who are applying for refugee status. The portraits made on yellow legal paper might be seen as individual representations refugees because they document the real planes of faces of

¹⁴⁴ Szymczyk, 29.

those undergoing the lengthy process of getting papers.¹⁴⁵ The exhibition hosted a variety of work about migrants that ranged from personal portraits to abstract conceptualizations, demonstrating the divide between thinking universally and site-specifically.

Although *Learning from Athens* contained many projects that aimed to explore new, abstract strategies of thinking about geography and cartography, its major critical angle was emphasized as pedagogical, having to do with education and challenging accepted modes of knowledge-access. Many of the strategies, generally theoretical rather than practical, Szymczyk emphasized had to do with the amplification of societal issues in order to examine and analyze the tension they expose further, as if on a stage or in an arena ideally intertwined with the public. The marginalized histories and narratives included in the exhibition, catalog, and magazines served to participate in the process of delineating alternative and radical histories, timescapes, and geographies.

The idea that the documentation of power and knowledge production were at the center of the artistic practice of the institution had begun in 2002 and was adopted again in the 2017 iteration. Yet rather than addressing the modern experience of living in states after colonial rule, *Learning from Athens* was pivoted toward learning from the experience of hybrid subjectivities and positions not accepted by “the neocolonial, patriarchal, heteronormative order of power and discourse” to provoke practices that reside between Germany and Greece—one of the perhaps most symptomatic axes of imbalance in contemporary Europe—that challenge oppressive regimes and the crippling effects of financial capitalism. The split between subjectivities registered on both abstract and individualized levels mediated the unstable political positions of working in a time torn by financial disputes and restrictions of freedom that reveal the deepest fears that contemporary democracies and economic systems in Europe are still steeped in

¹⁴⁵ I saw these works when I visited documenta in Kassel in the summer of 2017.

practices and policies that value certain subjects over others. The institution's failings when it came to the influence of capital in Athens and its silence in the face of evictions make its charge to keep learning and unlearning, becoming self-critical, and studying strategies of resistance all the more important in a contemporary world riveted by contradiction.

Conclusion

What can we learn from looking at these three moments of the *documenta* exhibition? We can see that motives of the exhibition have changed over time and that the conceptual project has learned from itself, modified and changed based both on past histories that resurface in every edition and current trends. Each undertaking of *documenta* represents a halting of time to look around, interpret, and represent the troubled crossroads of contemporary life. This task is one that simultaneously holds up a mirror to modern society and frames that mirror, balancing in that tense space between showing and telling. In each of the *documentas*, an act of recording the moment has relied on looking back, even in the first edition, or a historical concept has resurfaced both expected and unexpected. Each of the curators and artists involved in the institution, by taking up the task of looking around and translating the dilemmas of modern civic and personal life, has also taken up a task of documentation and immersing in an act that contests what it means to see the past, envision the present, and look to the future.

In the beginning, the exhibition took on a nationalist agenda, documenting the reentry of German work back into the grand history of modernism and instilling a reinvigorated drive for formalism in its citizens. In its limited perspective, a result of West German political agendas, the Kassel context, a pervasive Eurocentricism, and stylistic schemas, the first exhibition should be considered a document of the past, relegated to dusty shelves. Paintings, records of their moments, were displayed on walls solely for the eyes of visitors to peruse over and pass by, like the pages in a book or objects of consumption. Works were displayed as documents of their time, necessary to connect West Germany with the early avant-garde and its claim of formalist abstraction as common syntax for all people.

Yet in Bode and the organizers' challenge to establish a "new tradition" through an exploration of what could come out of utmost uncertainty, the idea of the document became something more ambiguous. Rather than something completely resolved, the document was something to be unraveled in modern work. In displaying contemporary works alongside historical ones, the common understanding of the document as neutral and concluded was challenged, the idea of the document becoming one taken up by present-day artists whether to be "carried along" or, later, tampered with and opposed. *Documenta* in its beginning stretched the boundary between neutrality and partiality in alluding to its own aesthetic and political agenda and presenting the possibility of renewal and re-presentation. To document was to demonstrate, show, and display the resuscitation and revival of a disturbed nation.

In 2002, the idea of the document functioned as a point of departure for many of the artistic contributions to *documenta*. In his "Documentary/Verité" essay, Enwezor puts forth the multiplicity of responses and approaches toward documenting social and political issues that the artists of *documenta* took. Here, the potentially infinite meanings of the document were at play in their varied forms of representation of the human subject in the face of violence and oppression, including many variations of abstracted gestures or interactive and participatory models. In *Documenta 11*, a personal concept of the method and mode of the document and its partners was taken by each artist or group included in the show, pointing to the document, archive, and testimony as tools for teaching interpretations of political and aesthetic discord. At the same time, Enwezor notes, a strange, dismantled universalization still lurked behind some activist works that claimed "no human" in order to represent or advocate for "this human." The "surprising" essentialist tone of these pieces in *Documenta 11* is connected to the changing

utilization of documentation in the end of the 20th century and beginning of the 21st century, mutations that are wrapped up in the charged history of human rights and images.

In *Documenta 11*, the particularities of representation in each of the artists' works and their chosen combined frameworks were linked to the partialities of existence in a dislocated, transient art world unhinged by globalized capital. The document here was an effort to hold a moment in place, to witness and reflect on lingering inequalities that are passed by in a multicultural, multilingual art world. The variety of theoretical positions toward documentation in Enwezor's *documenta* was not only a challenge to conventional understandings of the document as neutral, but also disrupted previous idealizations of the artist as a sacred, formalist hero detached from political or practical necessities and realities. Here we see the potential for a document to act in opposition, counter to normalized discourse or the exertion of power. Evidence can also be evidence to the contrary, rather than being a verification, support, or confirmation. This fleshes out the idea of documentation as malleable and open to be used as a medium for understand the complete, disparate nuances of a subject.

In the 2017 *documenta* project, participants were riddled with the question of how to grapple with the consequences of conflicts and crises simultaneously personal and specific yet also enormous. In attempting to react to the last five years since *Documenta (13)*, the organizers had to decode and recode the underlying mechanisms of the power of debt and power of movement that wrought confusion on European subjectivity. Artists and participants focused on the polarizing forces in contemporary Europe, a task not far from the original event's premise. This time, a documentation of the moment involved looking both directly and indirectly at the forces behind polarization, alienation, poverty, and revolt. Szymczyk's project necessitated looking at the entire context of Europe's "crises," which for him required working from Athens

and Greece in conjunction with Kassel. This choice to move to Athens, whether it ended up intensifying the issues at hand or mending them, was a choice shrouded in the history of the exhibition in the motive to reconstitute a ruptured past with an uncertain future. As we have seen, the event has been dedicated to the mission of reconstituting and reimagining history since its inception in 1955. The charge to depict the urgent demands and struggles of contemporary life woven into the political convulsions of our time is one that is continuously defined and redefined in *documenta*.

Of course, each artist and object in the exhibition cannot be thought of as correlating the intent of the curator or the themes designated by theoreticians and organizers of the event. There may be as many versions of documentation as there are documents in the world. What the group exhibitions of *documenta* show is paradoxically all of these individual versions of documenting contemporary political strife and the life stream of the exhibition projects as they bend and tend to dilemmas of contemporary existence, learning from their own interpretations of documentation. This is why the platform of the exhibition is still so important, even with all the lingering inequalities and questions the institution represents, because its funding and almost project of working through the structures of societal predicaments allows for the creation of work that can offer hope if nothing else. In *Archive Fever*, Derrida once wrote that, “the archivization produces as much as it records the event,” which suggests that the act of writing something down, archiving it, and documenting creates “the archival content” itself.¹⁴⁶ Creation and production are also the work of artists and curators part of *documenta* who attempt, in every edition, to reinterpret the past and archive the moment to potentially transform the future. The burning necessity of the documentation of political conflict that has become, perhaps

¹⁴⁶ Jacques Derrida and Eric Prenowitz, “Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression,” in *Diacritics*, vol. 25, no. 3 (Summer 1995), 17, http://artsites.ucsc.edu/sdaniel/230/derrida_archivefever.pdf.

increasingly, central to the exhibition is one that pushes the audience to actively engage in the conceptualization of poetics and politics.

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