

Susan Paul Firestone on documenta 14: Kassel, Germany June 11-15, 2017

Power/Over Power/N Power/M Power

Are we *looking* at history?

Are we open to images and stories in art that are unfamiliar and foreign?
Can we learn from history that is outside of the Western art history narrative?

Those are questions posed by the Polish Artistic Director of documenta 14, Adam Szymczyk. If you are an art enthusiast, you are by now fully aware of the Director's *double vision* of extending this traditional German exhibition held in Kassel every five years since 1955, to include Athens, Greece. A first.

Imagine Szymczyk's curatorial team seeking artists beyond Western Europe, the Mediterranean, and a dedicated international scope to include Asia, Africa and the Middle East. He sought and found 160 artists, mostly unknown outside their home countries, who through their art offer a glimpse into the human experience of distant world situations. As we know, artists usually find a way to image, speak, and perform their experiences. Some occasionally present distinct urgent messages from their environments. As an artist-documentarian, here are my takes on some artists that stood out to me.

Selected artists portrayed work that may not have "the look" from a western art world perspective, but their art rings true of beliefs, traditions, and mythologies that carry a particular story of change, injustice, or disruption. Much of their art is made of humble materials and called for traditional hand skills, not finely fabricated works for the wealthy of the moment to collect. After the opening days, the audience in Kassel appeared focused and willing to dig for the messages. Is the exhibition, "Learning from Athens", intended to activate us if we see images, hear the voices and witness the visual practices, rituals, and evidences of those who have withstood the threats of the oppressors and speak for those of the past?

The impressive monumental *Parthenon of Books* (1983) reconstructed by Marta Minujin announced the connection between the two cities and commanded the outdoor space before the Friedricianum in Kassel. Bringing the soaring, scale model structure of Athens's past glory to Kassel, via Buenos Aires, Minujin symbolically linked historical political repressive regimes. The

25,000 books, sealed tightly in heavy clear plastic, revealed covers only, of literature forbidden during the past military rule in Argentina. Books, holding their words, ideas and stories, were untouchable here as well as they were imbedded in columns and pediments of see-through heavy material, which brought to mind the personified mythology of the majestic acropolis friezes. Those scattered sculptural pieces of past Greek gods, goddesses and glorious conquests are now preserved centuries later in museums.



Marta Minujin, Kassel, documenta 14, 2017, Photo: ©Susan Firestone

Moments of social and political change, past and present, brought on by the crisis of war and circumstance were told by documenta 14 artists in art, music, dance, and performance that often embodied not only grief, but story, ritual and song. We sense that works of art are valuable, not only as a record of a time, but for their particular aesthetic, insight and essence.

In the spirit of collaboration, impressive works from the Athens Contemporary Museum's (EMST) collection were transported to Kassel and exhibited in the Friedricianum in exchange for space for documenta 14 artists to show work in Athens as well as Kassel. Entering the historic site of the former palace, the visually exciting digital animation, *The End* (2007) of Nikos Alexiou projected intensely colored patterns onto the floor which invited one to walk onto and through the veils of light. The reimagined facsimile of moving marble tiles was inspired by designs of the 11c. Byzantine monastery at Mt. Athos.



Nikos Alexiou, *The End* (2007), Kassel, documenta 14, 2017 Photo:
©Nils Klinger

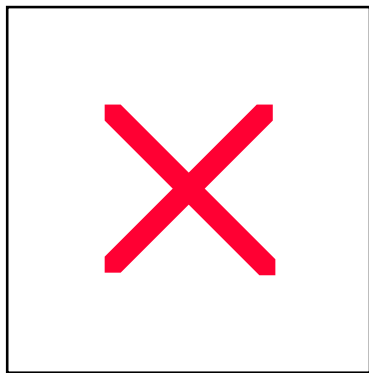
The Athenian EMST collection, begun in the 1960s, presented in Kassel monumental works by known artists such as American: Linda Bengalis with a sensual gold wall sculpture and Bill Viola's video, *Raft* (2004) with surging water impeding human progression. Diaspora Greek artists Janis Kounellis (1936-2017) with his steel square sticking upright into bags of coal and Stephen Antonakos's (1926-2013) *Remembrance* (1987-89), with his brilliant neon lights that escaped their geometry, represented artists of great stature who are newly mourned. Significant works by Bahamian/American artist Janine Antoni (*Slumber* (1993), an installation in which she slept in the museum or gallery and upon waking spun strips of her nightgown on a giant loom and stitched her blanket according to the recorded EKG patterns of her REM brainwaves; and Palestinian/UK artist Mona Hatoum's installation *Fix It* (2004), of noise-making electrified metal parts from an old brewery that is now the site of the museum in Athens, attest to the scope of the collection. Many surprises were the Greek artists: Takis's looming steel curved panel which when struck by a swinging device shattered the calm of Chryssa's (1933-2013) series of Cycladic plaster book objects displayed in the glow of her neon wall construction. Pantelis Xagorris's (1929-2000) delicate and beautiful green and magenta drawings (1988) linked the artist's hand with science and technology. Quite timely in political impact were Caniaris's (1928-2011) headless figures with suitcases, *Hopscotch* (1974) which referenced immigrants and their displacement and ambiguous presence as did, *Guest Workers- Foreign Workers*. Logothetis (1925-1997) works also of the 70s abstractly presented acts of violence in mutilated canvases painted in red skin tones that had been torn and stitched roughly together with crude tools.

Documenta 14 artists, not well known in the Western world, drew on personal experience and story from their unique histories. Some were activists like Máret Anna Sara of Sámpí in Northern Norway who came from an indigenous family of reindeer herders and exhibited a hanging of animal skulls with bullet holes centered in their skeletal heads to protest Norwegian culling laws.



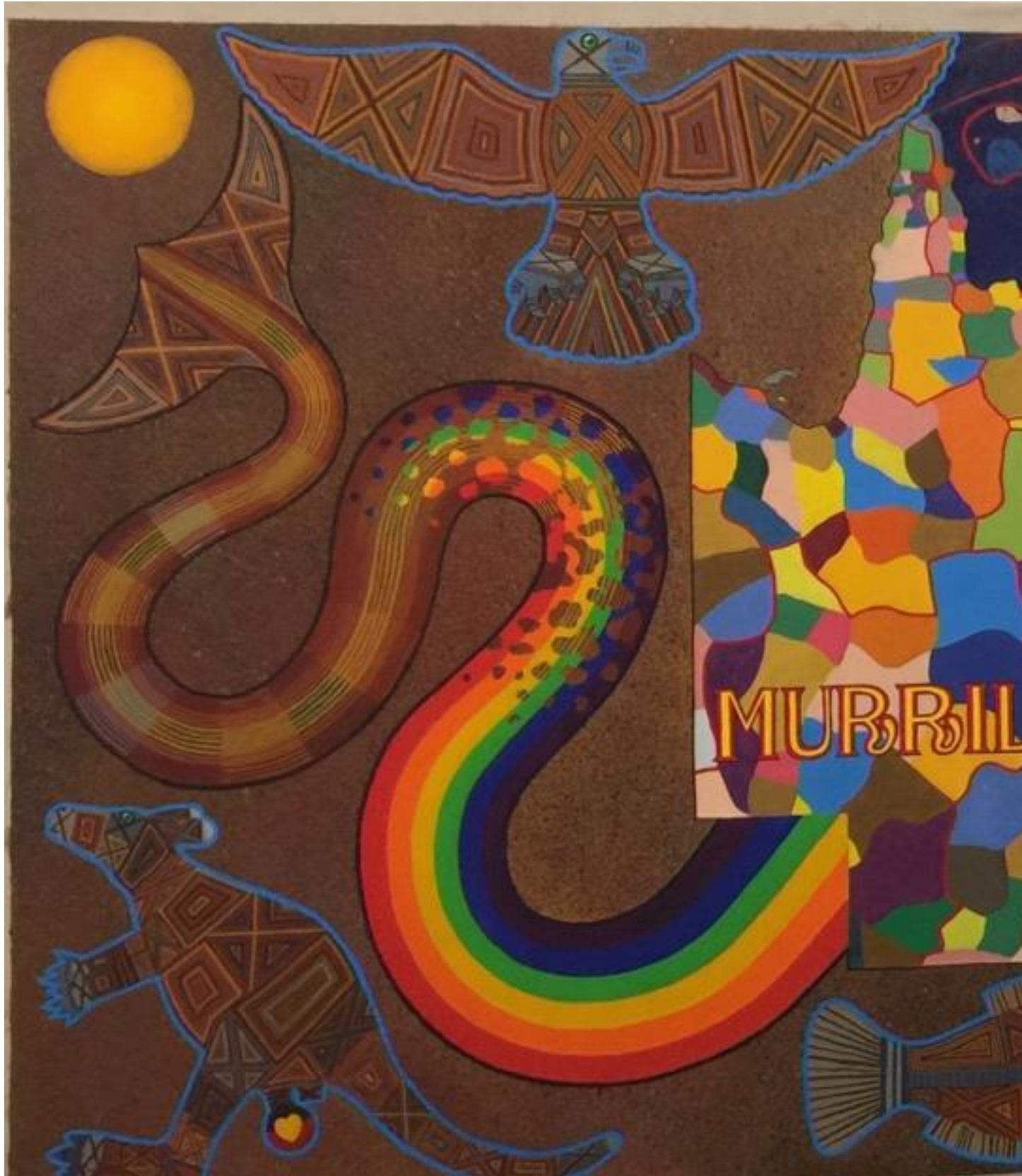
Máret Ánna Sara, Raindeer Skulls, Kassel documenta 14, 2017 Photo:© Susan Firestone

Britta Marakait-Labba of northern Sweden brought her Sápmi story of reindeer herding into visual terms in elegantly stitched embroidery of tiny images of her Sami people and their intermingled life with the reindeer. Beau Dick (1955-2017), “maker of monsters” and a hereditary chief of the Canadian Kwakwaka’wakw who sadly died before this event, carved 22 elaborate masks in the series “Atlakim (1990-2012) of supernatural spirits that were believed to have actual roles and functions in their Indigenous community.



Beau Dick, installation view, documenta halle, Kassel, documenta 14, photo: Susan Firestone

Rebecca Belmore, also Canadian, symbolically shouted Indigenous voices in efforts to save burial grounds in Oka with her large wooden megaphone, “Speaking to Their Mother” (1991) and in Athens constructed a marble tent shaped like a wigwam to silently stand for refugees having to remake their homes. Australian Gordon Hookey’s stretched out wall-covering mural, *Murriland!* (2016) painted from his Aboriginal perspective, created a history of colonial oppression through provocative narrative comments and heightened colored images drawn from mythological stories of their origins mixed with present day news.



Gordon Hookey 2016, *Murriland*, mural painted on the wall, Neue Neue Galerie

(Neue Hauptpost, Kassel,
documenta 14, photo: documenta images

These artists, and others included here, galvanized their people to protest not only human rights affronts to their way of life and traditional customs, but also commodification and appropriation of their culture and valued objects.

Aboubakar Fofana's installation of hanging garments of natural fibers, textiles colored with indigo dye, *Fundi (Uprising, 2017)* are statements of his revived practice of growing indigo plants for their richness of blue and associated meaning. He found that releasing the indigotin pigment in live bacteria, that was formally done by slaves in Africa and transported later to the colony in South Carolina, was fostered to satisfy trade demands in 17th through 19th century Europe. His research into the lost production of the deep blue dye took him from Paris back to his native Mali on a spiritual quest that affirmed his belief in the divinity of nature over chemical substitute.



Aboubakar Fofana, *Fundi (Uprising)*, 2017, various materials, installation view, documenta Halle, Kassel, documenta 14, photo: Roman März