



Research Group

# Art Production and Art Theory in the Age of Global Migration

of the Ulmer Verein  
für Kunst- und Kulturwissenschaften

[www.ag-kunst-migration.de](http://www.ag-kunst-migration.de)

## Statement to the documenta14 (2017)

**From the point of view of the Research Group ART PRODUCTION AND ART THEORY IN THE AGE OF GLOBAL MIGRATION, the documenta14 has:**

\_ through their theoretical subsidence,  
\_ through the diversity of chosen locations, exhibition formats and presentation forms as well as  
\_ by initiating public debates in various media formats  
enabled heterogeneous, particularistic perspectives on art. The exhibition has established "other" narratives of art history – i.a. from the view of exiles, refugees, displaced persons – and thus from the perspective of those who are in the (western) art system generally not perceived or consciously marginalized.

With this concept and the choice of the two equal locations Athens and Kassel, the international curatorial team led by Adam Szymczyk deepened the critical approaches of earlier documenta editions as well as it expanded the narrowed view of the art production and art theory in the wake of global migration by a non-Eurocentric perspective.

**The following aspects of the d14 should be emphasized as being particularly innovative and trailblazing:**

1. The **presentation of artistic positions** of marginalized or forgotten artists, i.a. of the former Eastern Bloc, South America, Asia and Africa, allowed the opening of hermetic art spaces and the questioning of nationally determined concepts of art. Thus, the diversity and transcultural interconnections of artistic perspectives became visible as they constitute global cultures, which have always been determined by migration and transfer processes in history. In the Kassel Fridericianum, the exhibition of selected Greek and international artists from 1960 to the present from the collection of the Athens National Museum of Contemporary Art (*EMST*), which has never before been exhibited, indicated another important shift in focus.
2. **The main topics of flight, causes of flight, migration, xenophobia and racism** were not only addressed in the film program of the documenta14, by events of the "Parliament of the body" and at various exhibition venues with works (f.e. by Hiwa K, Jonas Mekas, Mounira al Solh, Olu Oguibe, Ahlam Shibli et al.), but were also underlined by the decision for a route between Athens and Kassel as a symbol and icon as well as the framing of the exhibition period by the memorial days for the two victims of racist murders, the

Kassel Internet cafe operator Halit Yozgat (6.4.2006) and the Athenian singer Pavlos Fyssas (night from 17./18.9.2013).

3. The **initiation and networking of local, national and international long-term projects, research proposals and cooperation with social initiatives, artists and academics** (ia *Gesamthochschule Kassel, Rose Valland Institute, Friends of Halit Yozgat, Forensic Architecture, EMST, magazine "South"*) has systematically expanded the scope of perception and impact of the documenta14 in terms of time, space and into different social spheres, and will unfold sustainable effects in the foreseeable future.
4. Szymczyk's **concept of the two corresponding exhibition venues** and the numerous artistic works related to **Athens and Kassel** have shed new light on the historical connections on the current relationships between the places, demythologizing current clichés with regard to both Greece and the city Athens as well as it made visible recent global cultural negotiations (north-south debate). This applies both to the historical strategies of Greek swarming, antiquity idealization and the nationally adopted Greek image in German history since the 19th century, as well as for the recent past as the German occupation during National Socialism (f.e. in the works by Maria Karavelas and Mary Zygouri) or the phenomenon of “labor migration” and the situation of the so-called “guest workers” in the 20th century.

### **On the critique of the documenta 14**

Particularly the thematic focus of the documenta14 on migration and flight, as well as the decisions of the curatorial team far from the art market, have led to violent, often disproportionate and unspecific critique while and after the exhibition – of the entire structure of the d14, and finally of the freedom of its artistic director (incl. the supervisory board, selection committee and rules of procedure).

For example, the German newspaper *Die Zeit* opposed against the installation of the Arnold Bode Prize winner 2017 Olu Oguibe on the Kassel Königsplatz and the new exhibition sites in the Kassel Nordstadt: "The Documenta offers platitudes [...] in excess [...]. A concrete obelisk quotes the Bible: 'I was a stranger and you hosted me'." And the critique finally led to the statement "[...] that Documenta14 had crashed so badly at the end that she abuses the art and does not even shrink from making Kassel's migrant Nordstadt the backdrop for her repentance and lamentations [...]." (*Die ZEIT*, 15.6.2017).

Daily newspapers such as *Die Welt* called for the "absolute freedom" of the Documenta curators to be restricted, to control the supervisory board and, if necessary, to depose him, as well as to replace the artistic director if he turns out to be as "negligent and incompetent as Adam Szymczyk" (*Die Welt*, 28.7.2017); and the *Neue Züricher Zeitung* pleaded for the "disempowerment of the airy-fairy and intellectually outraged curatorial caste" and questioned the selection committee and the rules of procedure fundamentally (*NZZ*, 2.8.2017).

When, after many protests, the performance *Auschwitz on the Beach* was cancelled by the documenta management in Kassel and replaced by a conference – in which the Italian philosopher and activist Franco "Bifo" Berardi brought up and explained his (regretted) comparison of the European migration policy with the Holocaust – the predominantly negative judgment in the press was sealed. There were only a few voices left, who supported the documenta team's response on this issue, as Philipp Ruch, the spokesman for the "Center for Political Beauty" in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, (SZ, 27.8.2017) or the editor the magazine *Monopol* Elke Buhr, who was committed to the "great-like setting" of the show.

But there were also distinctly different voices, so by the German party "Alternative für Deutschland" (AfD), which called Olu Ogiube's obelisk on the Königsplatz as "ideologizing and disfiguring art" and furthermore connected this statement with the announcement, to call for demonstrations in front of the Obelisk in "every attempt by refugees".

After the end of documenta14 and the news of the budget overrun, the exhibition motto "Learning from Athens" became the vehicle for the renewed stereotypical devaluation of Greece, as it had already emerged in the wake of the former financial crisis: The press response ranged from rather ironic headlines in the German television news *Tagesthemen* ("Learning from Athens – the failure documenta14", 14.9.2017) or on *Deutschlandfunk* ("To learn from Athens – does that mean debts?", 23.8.2017), up to more accusingly statements on a populist website close to the AfD ("Learned from Athens: The bankruptcy of documenta", achgut.com, 13.9.2017). This was followed by a complaint filed by the AfD at the Kassel prosecutor's office against the documenta management "for embezzlement" and to proceed "all other crimes coming into consideration". Here the overlapping of the (cultural) political dimension of the criticism of the documenta14 by particularly right-wing party-political objectives became particularly clear.

The prevailing image of the "failure" of the documenta has been increasingly relativized in recent months – through comments by the participating artists and associates, through analyzes in the press (including *Deutschlandfunk*, 17.9.2017, *Der Spiegel*, 3.12.2017), in art-historical journals (*Kunstchronik*, 12/2017), and an open letter from more than 130 museum directors, artists and other experts from 16.1.2018.

**With our statement we want to support the previous comments and demands, as well as continue the debate.**

**The Research Group ART PRODUCTION AND ART THEORY IN THE AGE OF GLOBAL MIGRATION vehemently takes a stand:**

**\_against** the exclusive, hasty and populist focus on the budget overrun of the d14, which was not singular in the history of the exhibition, and which is attributed to the longer duration and the exhibition in two places in the current case;

**\_against** the political absorption of exhibitions and exhibition critique, which is guided by migrant / xenophobic interests and contradicts the specialized requirements of global exhibition projects;

**\_against** the public distribution and media dissemination of marginalizing and segregating political content and political insistence in the context of the documenta14, which stand in stark contrast to the requirements for a balanced and competent press work as well as the cultural-political tasks in Germany, and which in the sense of a competent, free and open cultural promotion are not acceptable.

**Looking to the future, the Research Group ART PRODUCTION AND ART THEORY IN THE AGE OF GLOBAL MIGRATION shares the view of the documenta14 team:**

*"that it is time to put the system of added value to such mega exhibitions as the documenta to the test. [...]. The expectations of ever-growing success and economic growth not only lead directly to exploitative working conditions, but also jeopardize the possibility that the exhibition will remain a place of critical action as well as an artistic field of experimentation."*

However, this will only succeed,

\_if the policy-makers in Germany bethink of their duty of cultural promotion and educational mandate, fundamentally reflect the framework and budgeting of exhibition projects as the documenta, and if they expressly speak up for the continuity of one of the most important exhibitions for contemporary art under artistic and curatorial acceptable economic and socio-political conditions.

\_if curatorial independence and adequate artistic-curatorial working conditions are ensured before, on and after documenta (e.g. 5-year contracts, etc.);

\_if, as an exposed international exhibition, documenta remains fundamentally committed to its history and the diversity of artistic positions and modes of work, as well as to the recent global conditions of contemporary art production beyond conditions of the art market.

On the subject of documenta14, *Monopol* aptly states: "Adam Szymczyk's documenta14 captures the best of documenta's history: Arnold Bode's insistence on democracy, Harald Szeemann's radical questioning of the concept of art and the courage to chaos, and from Catherine David and especially from Okwui Enwezor the insight that the Western art system is a west-centred, colonial organization that desperately needs a more global perspective." (*Monopol*, July 15, 2017).

**For the research group ART PRODUCTION AND ART THEORIE IN THE AGE OF GLOBAL MIGRATION and its members, the documenta14 has provided new impulses for the further examination of the manifestations, cultural practices and subject-specific dimensions of migration and flight. The documenta14 has made it clear that artistic theory and practice in its history up to the present is generally not conceivable without a continuous, open and lively**

**cultural exchange – and that the migration of actors, ideas, insights and things is the actual general case of plural cultural expression.**

**We hope from the next documenta that their artistic direction with an international team of curators will continue to develop different perspectives on the role of art and the conditions of global art production and present it to an international audience – free from market interests and without unprofessional, petty-bourgeois or right-wing populist motivated permanent criticism.**

The statement will be published in *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* in June 2018.

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