

The Holobiont Research Project #2



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North//South Convergence Pre-Project Final Report
Web/Digital Version

By **Teemu Takatalo & Niklas Karlsson**

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A Brief Introduction

North//South Convergence is a research project carried out by the Holobiont Project in the Nordic region and with a main focus on Athens, Greece- with an aim of understanding and enabling international interaction and collaboration between artists from the two regions. The project aims to clarify the conditions for Nordic artists, cultural professionals and initiatives in order to actualize production based activities, such as artistic and cultural events, exhibitions, workshops and cross-cultural artist collaborations in Athens and in the Nordic region. The research has investigated possibilities for art and creativity in Athens during the creative period that documenta 14 is expected to bring to the city.

Our main research methodology has been conversational, as we believe that our understanding is enhanced by finding commonalities in meetings with many individuals and groups from a broad range of positions and backgrounds. The understanding of the topics in this research report is based on, but not limited by, conversations with the following individuals, projects and groups:

Ivar Martinsson, Gallery Momangen, Stockholm, Sweden.
JoAnn Kneedler, Kulturhuset Cyklopen, Stockholm, Sweden.
Beate Persdotter Løken, artist and actress, Tromsø, Norway.
Ólafur Páll Sigurdsson, artist and poet, Reykjavik, Iceland
Dean Hewitt, owner, Gallery Sarri 12, Athens, Greece.
Elpida Rikou, anthropologist, TwixtLab, Athens, Greece.
Under Construction, Athens, Greece.
Galleria Alkovi, Helsinki, Finland.
Such Gallery, Helsinki, Finland.
Hirvitalo, Tampere, Finland.
Kalle Hamm & Dzamil Kamanger, Helsinki, Finland.
Tehdas Ry, Pori, Finland.
Gallery NLHspace, Copenhagen, Denmark.
Malina Terkelsen, Copenhagen, Denmark.
YNKB, Copenhagen, Denmark.
Filopappou Group, Athens, Greece.
Dimitris Alexakis & Fotini Banou, TV Control Centre, Athens, Greece.
Antonis Vradis, Junior Research Fellow in the Department of Geography, Durham University, England.
Julia Tulke, Aesthetics of Crisis, Berlin, Germany.
Joe Painter, Professor of Human Geography, Durham University, England.
Julia Heslop, Artist and writer, Newcastle, England.
Mick Wilson, Researcher & Head of Department of Fine, Applied and Performing Arts, Valand Academy, Gothenburg, Sweden.
Martha Frintzila, Baumstrasse, Athens, Greece.
Becky Campbell, Snehta Residency, Athens, Greece.
Marina Fokidis & Quinn Latimer, documenta 14 working group, Athens, Greece.

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Since its founding in 1955, *documenta* has become one of the largest exhibitions of modern and contemporary art in Europe. Next year, in 2017 and for the first time ever, the event is branching out from its home city Kassel, Germany, to the Greek capital Athens. In 2007 the production budget of the event was 19 million euros, half of it covered by the city of Kassel. As many sources note, the exhibition was an attempt to bring Germany up to speed with modern art, both banishing and repressing the cultural darkness of Nazism. The first edition of *documenta* featured many influential modern artists, such as Picasso and Kandinsky, both banned by the Nazi regime. Even though the programme has become more diverse and international with time, it has attracted a common criticism for having a eurocentric approach to art world, as for many years mainly European and American artists were represented. Often occurring at the same time as the the Venice Biennale and Art Basel, it lasts for 100 days and has therefore been called *the museum of 100 days*. In 2017, the 100 days will start in Athens, to then start in Kassel with a certain amount of overlap, ending in Athens first and finishing later in Kassel.

A very brief history of *documenta**

-based on information from www.documenta.de and <http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/bien/documenta/history>

(*please note that *documenta* is purposefully written with a lowercase 'd')

documenta 1, 1955

Parallel to the Federal Horticultural Show in Kassel, the local painter, teacher and curator Arnold Bode (1900-1977) initiated an exhibition of contemporary art. Together with the art historian Werner Haftmann he presented a retrospective of classical Modernism defamed by the Nazis as "degenerate" art as well as newer artworks.

documenta 2, 1959

The great success of the first show, which attracted 130.000 visitors, led Arnold Bode and Werner Haftmann to plan an even more extensive exhibition. The Museum Fridericianum was not sufficient any more but remained the central building as further exhibition places were included.

documenta 3, 1964

This was the last edition fully under the direction of Arnold Bode and Werner Haftmann. In the catalog preface Bode coined the description of documenta as a "Museum of 100 Days". Represented pop art as an up and coming artform. Was delayed by one year and set the new standard of documenta occurring every 5 years as opposed to every 4 years as initially intended.

documenta 4, 1968

Vehement controversies accompany its preparation and themed as 'The Youngest documenta Ever' it lead to the resignation of Werner Haftmann. A committee of 23 members determined the selection of the artists. After the retrospective direction of the first three editions, this *documenta* shifted focus to contemporary art and recreated the organisational processes in order to be more democratic.

documenta 5, 1972

This edition marked the end of the era of Arnold Bode as the Swiss curator Harald Szeemann was appointed as the sole curator. The new theme was "The Questioning of Reality - Image Worlds Today" and contained a programme of increased action based and performance-oriented content.

documenta 6, 1977

The artistic director of this edition was Manfred Schneckenburger who provided a continuation of the themes of the previous 2 *documenta* editions by including film, photography and video amongst the main focuses of his show.

documenta 7, 1982

With the Dutch Rudi Fuchs at the head of this edition, a return to more classical art and artistic values was central, with a special attention to painting, particularly the "Neuen Wilden" from Germany.

documenta 8, 1987

For a second time Manfred Schneckenburger returned as the head of *documenta*, seeking to focus on the "historical and the social dimension of art". The main aspects used to approach this was sound and video installations, performance art as well as architecture and design.

documenta 9, 1992

The 600,000 visitors lead this to be one of the most popular editions, led by the Belgian Jan Hoet. The theme was 'From the body to the body of bodies' and involved current themes and an attempt create an inclusive non-hierarchical approach to the organisational process.

documenta 10, 1997

Catherine David from France was the first woman to head *documenta* in this edition. Her approach was a "critical confrontation with the present" and stressed her ethical and political claim that "the last *documenta* of this century can hardly evade the task of elaborating a historical and critical gaze on its own history, on the recent past of the post-war period, and on everything from this now-vanished age that

remains in ferment within contemporary art and culture..." It received much criticism for being too political and theoretical.

documenta 11, 2002

For the first time a Non-European curator is appointed as the artistic director of documenta, Okwui Enwezor from Nigeria. This edition sought to escape the euro-centric character of previous ones and stated that, "documenta 11 rests on five platforms which aim to describe the present location of culture and its interfaces with other complex, global knowledge systems."

documenta 12, 2007

Organised by the couple Roger M. Buergel and Ruth Noack, this documenta saw the invitation of over 90 publications to participate in what became a central aspect of this edition, the *documenta 12 magazines* which produced a multitude of material reflecting on various aspects of art theory.

documenta 13, 2012

Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev headed this edition and organised it around a central theme and created events outside of Kassel, as far away as Kabul in Afghanistan and Cairo and Alexandria in Egypt. A common critique of *documenta* has been its art market representation and this *documenta* is particularly used as an example of this as more than one third of the participating artists were represented by the Marian Goodman Gallery.

documenta 14, 2017

Themed 'Learning from Athens' by the artistic director Adam Szymczyk, this *documenta* edition is unique because it will take place partly in Athens, where it starts in April 2017, whilst continuing in Kassel from 10th June - 17th September.

documenta

The early *documenta* reflected the ideals of post-war Europe, starting from rebuilding, societal reforms and ideological optimism and then developing towards attempts to stay relevant during the trajectory leading to the seemingly inevitable global neoliberal culture we currently find ourselves in. In this sense a major art exhibition having noble ideas of overcoming something that was severely devastating can be seen as falling into a similar category as the Olympic Games and the Eurovision song contest, as major social unification processes aiming to mould the increasingly fragmented spirit of the enlightened West remain a central aspect. At the same time, it could seek to find new relevance by positioning itself between two European countries that have seen an increased antagonism the last years in relations to austerity measures. The same countries also find themselves at the centre of the current flows of migration which are shaping European politics in various ways. Though these issues have been mentioned in interviews, they have not been provided as strong and central arguments for the current production of the exhibition.

If the last decades have changed the paradigm of human geography in a way that more importance is given to people's social status than country of origin, this same transformation is visible in gigantic art events such as *documenta*. A notion that art is international nowadays means that there are not only artists, curators and audiences coming from all around the world, but what is substantial in arts is defined by socially specific people whose worldview is global. If, during the first *documenta*, the idea of being artistically or culturally meaningful was based on revitalizing repressed modernism, in the 21st century this meaning can be found in examples such as social issues, direct democracy, excluded identities, human and cultural dislocation, political turbulence etc. However, we have to clarify here, that art is selected to be exhibited primarily in order to respond to the desires of privileged social layers - art life and art audiences - who clearly do *not* seek to change their social position.

documenta 14 - *Learning from Athens*

When the artistic director Adam Szymczyk announced that *documenta* 14 will be held in two locations, Kassel and Athens, under a working title "Learning from Athens", a process started that seems to stir up passionate opinions for and against - famously bringing forth negative terminology such as cultural colonialism and poverty tourism - however, based on almost no information at all. *Documenta* is famous for keeping most of the information relating to upcoming exhibitions secret, and this is also the case with *documenta* 14.

Up until now, Szymczyk has only given out the names of members of the working team and participated in few public talks both internationally and locally in Athens. The team has been posting a few video clips on their website about the war in Syria and the first issue of the official *documenta* magazine "*South as a State of Mind*" was published in October 2015. However, none of these really talk directly about the coming exhibition or its relation to the location of Athens.

The speeches given by Szymczyk have been very trivial, mainly describing the history of *documenta*. The "*South as a State of Mind*" magazine contained essays, both literary and visual, dealing with thematics of possession and dispossession, displacement, debt and different *modes of resistance* - aesthetic, political, literary and biological, including texts from living and foregone writers such as Françoise Vergès, Paul B. Preciado, Aristide Antonas, Brandon Shimoda, Stefan Zweig, Hannah Arendt and Bhanu Kapil, to name few.

Regardless of our private communication with the *documenta* team and several artists and art groups in Athens, we have not discovered much more information than what *documenta* has already published. Generally local artists do not have much positive to say about the pre-production of the exhibition. However, the

mayor of Athens, the local municipality, various formal and commercial art institutions and philanthropic funds are either supportive or collaborating with the *documenta* production. Even though much of the information about *documenta* remains secret, one can assume that the infrastructure used by the event will be provided by these exact groups, since they have a multitude of artistic and cultural buildings and spaces. Furthermore, it is certainly possible that the left-over structures of the 2004 Olympics will be provided by the city of Athens.

Several artists and curators who have tried to contact the *documenta* team in order to find ways in which to participate have not received any reply, whilst groups like the Swedish Institute in Athens managed to have a meeting but were not provided with any means by which to attempt to include Swedish artists in the event. Furthermore, the *documenta* curators have not been in contact with artists and art groups in Athens to the extent that we have heard about it through our network of connections there. During 2015 some members of the *documenta* team gave presentations in Athens at alternative art venues such as the cultural squat Green Park, and received a very critical welcoming. The presentation again was very general and challenging questions from the audience were largely ignored by Szymczyk. A similar approach can be seen in recorded talks available online, such as '*What's important: Art & politics with Adam Szymczyk*' that took place in march 2016 in Oxford and is available on YouTube.

From this basis many artists claim that the working title "*Learning from Athens*" is pretentious as it seems that there is no desire to learn anything, at least not in any open collaborative and interactive way that breaks away from the machinery of the art industry. The other criticism is more deeply rooted in social and geopolitical issues that are very much defining Athens at this moment in time and which do not appear to be understood, or at last publicly approached, by the *documenta* team. The tumultuous history of the young Greek state with living memory of forced migrations, dictatorships, occupations and civil war, combined with the current multiple

political, economic and migrational crises provides a massively complex milieu which demands to be addressed. There is a scepticism towards what is perceived as foreign interference due to a multitude of historical elements such as British and American influences on the country in the aftermath of the Second World War, and more recent phenomenon such as the 2004 Olympic Games and the perceived loss of political sovereignty due to imposed austerity measures.

The brief historical overview which we provided in the beginning of this report might very well contain the answer to the question of why Athens is the focus of this current *documenta*. One can see the search for relevance as a common thread of the *documenta* journey and perhaps the turmoil and historical position of Athens in time and space draws the old exhibition there as a way to fit into modern times. Our impression is that the local population, especially within the artistic and cultural spheres, perceives this attention with a series of negative assumptions, predicting exploitation of labour and resources with minimal positive return, if any. These assumption are expressed along with terms such as poverty tourism, colonialism, authoritarianism and exploitation, but in the shadow of this negativity one can also perceive a hint of opportunity.

In our many conversations around the phenomenon of *documenta* we have sensed that though critical thoughts are plentiful, there are also opportunities in the art world's eyes being turned on Athens. Many realise that exhibitions, events, festivals, workshops and other cultural activities that take place during the timeframe of *documenta*, and possibly its aftermath, can have a much broader audience. International opportunities are also possible side effects and there is a sense that more and more international artists are moving to Athens or spending considerable amounts of time there- which is perceived largely positively. Furthermore, criticisms of *documenta* can have their own creative manifestations in fringe or counter events and can lead to a substantial critique and analysis of both Greek and International art.

Conclusions

As our research and investigations obviously lead us to conclude that *documenta* is a very secretive and closed phenomenon, much of what we can learn about it is based on assumptions derived from knowledge and discussions with local and international academics, artists and cultural workers. However, these assumptions are based on a broad and solid understanding of the Athenian, and Greek, reality and an insight which is essential for artistic and cultural work in Athens. The curators of *documenta* seem to be unattainable for artists and initiatives trying to create collaboration, thus Nordic arts can not be promoted in a typical way. However, there is a tendency for *documenta* to utilize some already existing artist activity in Athens and therefore the best way to get Nordic artists involved in *documenta* is to establish Nordic arts in the city by organizing exhibitions before the *documenta* 14 events.

However, from a viewpoint of promoting Nordic arts, the official *documenta* programme is not the only way to reach audiences and other professional target groups. During the year 2017 Athens will see a vast amount of international art professionals and audiences - artists, curators, art journalists, financiers etc. - coming to the city from all around the world. We see this concourse as having the most potential for promotion of Nordic artists and arts. Any art activity happening during *documenta* 14 in any central location of the city, advertised outwardly within the Athenian art scene and for *documenta* visitors will have a high chance to reach professionally important attention. This

position also allows independency that on the one hand allows different curatorial approaches than what *documenta* offers, but on the other hand will be seen to be in dialogue with the *documenta* exhibition and its themes, or perhaps even opposing them.

In a professional sense this can be potentially more interesting than fitting into the curatorial consensus of *documenta* - especially due to the lack of it's local sensitivity, the antagonism from local art life, as well as an interest from visitors and especially international art journals and publications. If Nordic art promotion is done in collaborative and mutually respectful ways with local art life, there is even a chance to succeed there where *documenta* are predicted to fail. An example like this could be very important for Nordic arts - especially for curators and producers - on a professional level.

Strategy

We conclude that the most appropriate strategy in relation to Nordic art and cultural activities during the timeframe around the *documenta* 14 event can be found in the broad criticism towards *documenta* that we have observed continuously during this research. Therefore we suggest a transparent approach which seeks to create Nordic and Greek artistic collaboration and interaction based on an understanding of the different realities involved. From Nordic artists we have very much understood that there is a broad desire to become infused into the Athenian, and Greek, artistic and cultural world so as to understand the milieu and to be able to draw inspiration and participate in meaningful communication. An honest and direct approach which is based on mutually beneficial scenarios has been warmly welcomed by the Greek artistic and cultural groups and individuals which we have been in contact with.

The Holobiont Project already has a broad network in the Nordic region and Greece available for putting such strategies into action. We have also completed a research project based on developing socially (post-)sustainable approaches to Nordic artistic interactions in Greece which is available on our website, and we continue to develop strategies based on that research. We have created relations with various academics and specific research projects in order to further gain insight into the complexities that we face and to develop an understanding from beyond the art world. Amongst those projects are the international cross-disciplinary research project '*Learning from documenta*' as well as the British project '*The Urban Politics and Governance of Social Innovation in Austerity*' carried out by the human geography department at Durham University.

In relation to a Nordic artistic presence in Athens during the upcoming *documenta* period, we will put our approaches into practice by holding a series of exhibitions, workshops and discussions with Nordic artists in Athens as well as sending Greek artist groups to the Valand Academy in Gothenburg as part of their educational presentations in the autumn of 2016. The fine art students of the Valand Academy will then visit Athens for the launch of *documenta* in April 2017 with a diverse understanding of the local reality. The *North//South Convergence* project will seek further funding in order to develop a continuous series of such interactions during 2016 and 2017. Through this project we will put the theoretical approaches that we have found through the commonalities that appeared during this research into action, thereby further learning by doing.