



OPINION - 08 APR 2017

documenta 14: Benaki Museum

The third in a series of our editors' initial impressions from documenta 14 Athens, Jennifer Higgle on the Benaki Museum

BY JENNIFER HIGGLE

During the press conference on 6 April that launched documenta 14 in Athens, the artistic director, Adam Szymczyk, made an impassioned plea: he asked us to 'unlearn what we know' and 'immerse ourselves in the darkness of not knowing'. He also declared: 'We must assume responsibility and act as political subjects instead of simply leaving it to elected representatives.' Now that's what I call a mixed message. Surely, to become a 'political subject' means discovering how to instigate change, which would, I'd assume, involve a great deal of learning – not its opposite. And as for 'unlearning': while I'm the first to admit my ignorance of many things, I also like to think that some of the stuff I know isn't so bad. Although Szymczyk's request obviously stems from a desire to prise open closed minds, the reverse also holds true: the darkness of 'not knowing' is what got much of the world into the mess it's in today and I, for one, don't particularly want to immerse myself in it. It begs the question: was Documenta's director being ironic when he titled the show 'Learning from Athens'? I assume not, as many of the themes that have dominated Greece over the past decade – economic instability, the refugee crisis, political extremism – are the ones that shape this enormous,

multi-faceted exhibition. The strength of 'Learning from Athens' lies in its recognition of the world's – and by association art's – complexity. It's a genuinely international show of work by around 160 artists, many of whom aren't well known and, despite its loose thematic connections, is not dominated by a single style, medium or approach. All of these are good things. As an exhibition, its ambition is staggering: in Athens alone, 47 venues are listed. My brief here is to cover just one: The Benaki Museum – Pireos Street Annexe.

Established in 1930, the Benaki Museum was founded by the collector Antonis Benakis, whose father, Emmanouil Benakis, emigrated to Alexandria and made his money in cotton. On his return to Greece in 1914, Emmanouil was elected mayor of Athens, financially helped resettle Greek refugees after the Greco-Turkish war and was a great supporter of the Red Cross. His son donated his entire collection to the state. Today, the Benaki Museum has six branches, four archives, an enormous library and a collection of more than 500,000 objects including ancient Greek, Islamic, pre-Colombian, African and Chinese art. The Pireos Street Annexe is the museum's newest branch, and the work of the 16 artists (living and dead) on show here – from Armenia, Germany, Greece, Haiti, India, Iraq, Israel, Italy, Kosovo, Lithuania, Peru, Senegal, Sweden, Switzerland, Thailand, UK and Zaire (now Democratic Republic of Congo) – reflects the geographical reach of the museum's collection.



Nilima Sheikh, 'Each night put Kashmir in your dreams', 2003-14, installation view, Benaki Museum—Pireos Street Annexe, Athens, documenta 14.

According to a statement on the documenta 14 website, the site of the Benaki Museum affords an 'opportunity to investigate untold, unfinished, or otherwise overshadowed histories and to take inspiration from novel museologies, such as those put forth by artists themselves.' In this, the show succeeds. By the time I emerged from it, my mind was reeling from the sheer volume of words, objects and images that represent, from myriad angles, the various stories that make up a life, or lives, across this complicated planet we call home.

The show declares its hand with the grim, provocative brilliance of Israeli artist Roe Roseen's *Live and Die as Eva Braun* (1995-97), which, via a short story printed on ten black banners and 66 black-framed works on paper, imagines Eva Braun's life with Adolf Hitler, her death by his hand and her descent into hell – and back again. It turns conventional history on its head, telling Braun's story as a complicit victim of a madman's obsessions in often wildly unstable language. It's compelling, horrifying and ludicrous: Roe is a master at employing humour in order to seriously reflect on something monstrous.



Roe Rosen, *Live and Die as Eva Braun, 1995-97*, mixed media on paper, installation view, Benaki Museum—Pireos Street Annexe, Athens, documenta 14. Photograph: Stathis Mamalakis

The work in the following room – Indian artist Nilima Sheikh’s series of paintings ‘Each night put Kashmir in your dreams’ (2003-14) – also employs banners, but to a very different end. At first glance, these are ravishing images: richly-coloured scenes of bucolic joy are interspersed with visual quotes from ancient miniatures and Kashmiri folktales. Yet, stay with them and something more troubling emerges. The title of the series is a line borrowed from the poem, *I See Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight* (1997) by the late Kashmiri American poet Agha Shahid Ali. Sheikh has long been involved with the social and political issues that affect Kashmir and the combination of beauty and anxiety in the paintings reflects her mix of love and concern for the region. The verso of the banners are covered in texts: quotes from Ali’s poems, medieval poetry and Salman Rushdie’s novels are interspersed with reports of environmental and social crisis or concern.

The intertwining of image and text are like the veins and heart of this exhibition. In Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi’s devastating film *Return to Khodorciur–Armenian Diary* (1986), Gianikian’s elderly father – a survivor of the 1915 massacre of Armenians in eastern Turkey – reads from his diary, recalling the terrible events of his youth. As the filmmaker observed in one interview: ‘The real material here is the archive of my father’s memory.’

Coming at politics from a more oblique angle is a major installation of over 60 extraordinary small paintings from the 1970s by the late Tshibumba Kanda Matulu – known as TKM – that explore scenes from Congolese history and its recent past. Images of everyday scenes – people in fields or factories – are interspersed with more violent scenarios of torture, executions and political corruption. The images are inscribed with aphorisms,

personal reveries, funny asides, political cartoons and barbed comments about the abuse of power and workers' rights. TKM was born in 1947 and disappeared in 1981; it is believed that he was killed during riots.

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Miriam Cahn, installation view, Benaki Museum—Pireos Street Annexe, Athens, documenta 14. Photograph: Stathis Mamalakis

Swiss artist Miriam Cahn's room is filled with smudged charcoal drawings of simplified heads (described as 'unclear beings') from the early 1980s and more recent diaristic texts that would take hours to read. As they are arranged on A4 paper in small print on the floor, I have to say, I skipped over them as, bar kneeling, it was physically difficult to read them. I turned to the documenta website to assist me: 'The works' titles contain no, or only, capital letters: to suspend the specific is to generalize. sarajevo, beirut, hände hoch!, MARE NOSTRUM could be anytime, anywhere; they can be/are everywhere, at all times.[*]'. I'm still pondering what this means.

One of the strangest works on offer is Verena Paravel and Lucien Castaing-Taylor's surreal 70-minute documentary *somniloquies* (2017): shots of blurred, sleeping bodies are accompanied by a recording made

over seven years in the 1960s of Dion McGregor – an American musician – sleep-talking. His unconscious ramblings veer wildly: one moment he'll be describing a 'midget city' and the next, the 'platinum bush' of a woman; at another, he runs through his weekly diary of sexual escapades ('suck Monday', for example). Considered by scientists to be the world's most prolific sleep-talker, his often salacious, funny, cruel soliloquys are compelling and weirdly sobering: a reminder of the fact that we spend a third of our life asleep – and this is what happens to our brains when we turn out the lights.



Tshibumba Kanda Matulu, '101 Works' (detail), 1973-74, installation view, Benaki Museum—Pireos Street Annexe, Athens, documenta 14

Words and images fuse and dissolve in Greek artist Constantinos Hadzinikolaou's mesmerizing three-minute silent film *Anestis* (2017): a word – IETO? TETO?, faintly inscribed in chalk on what could be a pavement disappears in a blaze of light to be replaced by another image and a shift in mood. It's a brief, poignant reminder of how we move through the world: seeing, reading, mis-reading and then forgetting.

If I have one criticism of this rich and challenging show, it's the lack of contextualizing information: no birth or death dates or country of origin are included in the otherwise charming labels, which are arranged on the floor and held in place with a small marble block, inscribed with the artist's name. I'm the first person to criticize

tedious wall texts but given the often very specific geo-political motivation of much of the work on show here, it would have been good not to have to depend on Google to discover, say, that Tshibumba Kanda Matulu made these works in what was then Zaire, and died in 1981. It's the kind of information that makes understanding the paintings a much deeper experience than a more superficial reading of them offers. During the press conference, Szymczyk declared that 'the great lesson is that there are no lessons.' I beg to differ. There's a lot to learn here.

This is the third in a series of frieze magazine editors' first impressions from documenta 14 Athens. Check back for reviews of the other four main venues.

Main image: Roe Rosen, Live and Die as Eva Braun, 1995–97, mixed media on paper, installation view, Benaki Museum—Pireos Street Annexe, Athens, documenta 14. Photograph: Stathis Mamalakis

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