

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Daniel Birnbaum, "Thinking Twice," *ARTFORUM*, September, 2017

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Above: R. H. Quaytman, *Chapter 29*, 2015, oil, silk-screen ink, and gesso on wood, 24 1/2 x 40 1/2". Neue Galerie, Kassel.

Another engaging repetition was that of R. H. Quaytman's elusive yet mesmeric works, although the grouping of her paintings in Kassel's Neue Galerie makes quite an impression in its own right. They are part of a series dealing with the discovery of the fact that the titular figure in Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*, 1920, famously immortalized as the angel of history by Walter Benjamin, was mounted on top of a portrait of Martin Luther. Quaytman's forensic explorations contribute to a German Jewish theme that unfolds across the exhibition and that, especially at the Neue Galerie, evolves into an account of German guilt that seems to offer no possibility of reparation, let alone any glimpse of redemption. No reason for optimism or enthusiasm here.

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Opposite page: Pavel Filonov,  
*Formula of Spring, 1922–23*,  
oil on canvas, 39 3/4 × 39 3/4".  
Neue Galerie, Kassel.

Right: Fridericianum, Kassel,  
Germany, May 2017. Photo:  
Mathias Völzke.



THE GRAND TOUR

## THINKING TWICE

DANIEL BIRNBAUM ON DOCUMENTA 14

HELL IS FULL OF GOOD INTENTIONS, but heaven is full of good works: This maxim, attributed to a medieval French abbot, is one that contemporary curators should bear in mind. The team behind Documenta 14, earnestly dubbed "Learning from Athens," has issued so many well-intended progressive statements and condemnations of the neocolonial, patriarchal, heteronormative world order that it's hardly surprising the exhibition occasionally feels like a trip to quinquennial perdition. The good news: This Documenta is not a monolithically pious exercise, but a multiplicity of proposals. It involves radio and television programming, publications, performances, and educational seminars, as well as individual and collective works of art installed in a vast variety of spaces scattered across its two locations, Kassel and Athens. Think of it as a two-headed octopus with some arms unfurling in distasteful directions, others pointing toward places

of beauty and wonder. However, only viewers willing to work hard and wear comfortable shoes will be fully rewarded. This show is not for the lethargic.

Say you arrive in Kassel by train and then do the obvious and easy thing: take a taxi to the Fridericianum, where in previous years you encountered some quite extraordinary works that perhaps even altered your understanding of what contemporary art can be. You will be severely punished for this laziness. What you encounter in these august halls is hard to interpret as anything but a parody of that dreaded genre, the dutiful collection show. On display are works from the unremarkable holdings of Greece's dysfunctional EMST | National Museum of Contemporary Art: mildly interesting Greek Conceptualism and works by such international household names as Gary Hill, Joseph Kosuth, and Bill Viola. These are perfect examples of zombie art, work that no one seems to

care about, not even the curators who put it on view—not a word from the verbose Documenta team about what poor Bill Viola is doing here!—and they are installed in the most standardized, institutional way. If there's a point, beyond the symbolic gesture of filling the space of Germany's oldest public museum with Greek property, it is one the organizers have made by accident: Things that seem exciting when you first glimpse them often appear less so just a decade or two later. Is that what one can learn from Athens?

Actually, says artistic director Adam Szymczyk, the lesson is that there are no lessons. With this helpful piece of guidance, one can leave the Fridericianum and go astray along other paths. There are some great surprises out there, like a glass pavilion I came upon while looking for another address. Semitransparent canvases hung from its ceiling, their curvilinear red and pale-blue patterns suffused by the sun. These

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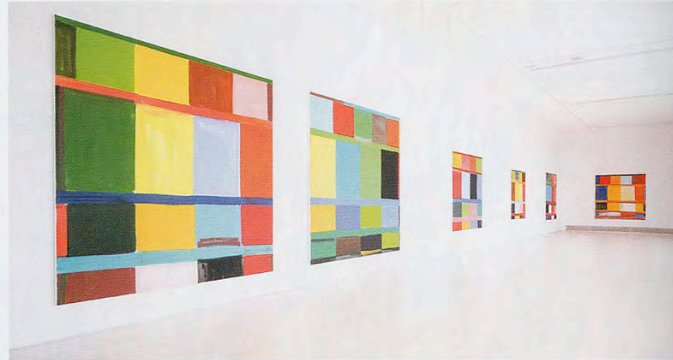
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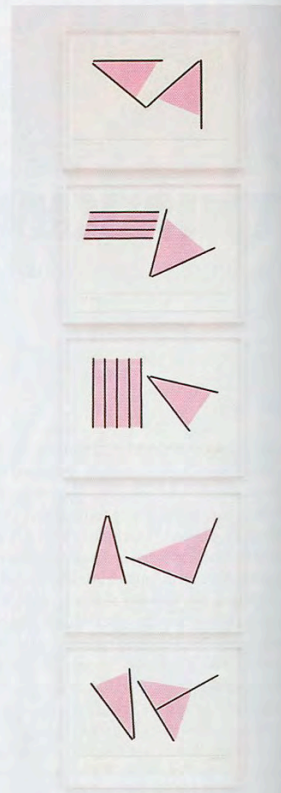


Above, left: Cecilia Vicuña, *Quipu Womb (The Story of the Red Thread, Athens)*, 2017, dyed wool. Installation view, EMST | National Museum of Contemporary Art, Athens. Photo: Mathias Völzke.

Above, right: Works by Stanley Whitney, 2008–16, oil on linen. Installation view, EMST | National Museum of Contemporary Art, Athens. Photo: Mathias Völzke.

Left: Works from Synnøve Persen's series "Sámi Flag Project," 1977–, acrylic on canvas, screen print, textile. Installation view, EMST | National Museum of Contemporary Art, Athens. Photo: Mathias Völzke.

Right: Geta Brătescu, *Linea (The Line)*, 2012, ink and collage on five sheets of paper, each 11 1/4 x 15 1/2". EMST | National Museum of Contemporary Art, Athens.



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Right: Vivian Suter, *Nisyros (Vivian's Bed)*, 2016–17, mixed media. Installation view, Kurt-Schumacher-Strasse, Kassel. Photo: Fred Dott.



organic shapes, created with volcanic materials, earth, and pigment, seemed to radiate life. I realized they must have been made by the same artist, previously unknown to me, who had installed equally dazzling canvases in a humble wooden structure in an Athens park, where they were suspended in open air. The grandiose colorist, Guatemala-based Vivian Suter (who is also portrayed, along with her mother, painter Elisabeth Wild, in Rosalind Nashashibi's intimate and profoundly empathetic film *Vivian's Garden*, 2017, at Kassel's natural-history museum), really is a discovery, and her work, I think, embodies what this exhibition is striving for in its most sympathetic moments. Unassuming yet jubilant, Suter's paintings are said to deal with the extreme meteorological conditions on the former coffee plantation where she and her mother live and work, and at their best seem to channel not only their maker's psychological energies but also the cosmic powers of the weather. Or am I projecting too much? All I can say with certainty is that these canvases, installed in sites of modest everyday splendor, weave themselves

into an experiential mesh in which works of art and viewers' subjectivity intertwine organically with each other and with the rich textures of daily life. That, I believe, is a realization of the exhibition's utopian aspirations, sponsored by Volkswagen.

Occasionally, one can detect traces of another exhibition behind the politically persuasive but sometimes aesthetically underwhelming explorations of migration, colonialism, and economic inequality. This semi-hidden show-within-a-show is fruitfully preoccupied with artworks that explore a certain diagrammatic aesthetic in textiles, sound experiments, and notational systems, works that strive to capture the elusive synesthetic mechanisms of processes we might call visionary. At the Neue Galerie, there is a rewarding passage from Russian philosopher and painter Pavel Filonov's extraordinary canvases *Cosmos (Formula of the Cosmos)*, 1918–19, and *Formula of Spring*, 1922–23, to fragments of microtonal composer Mikhail Matyushin's score for the Futurist opera *Victory over the Sun*, 1913, via a long corridor where classical marble figures keep company with

Hungarian shaman-poet Katalin Ladik's collages and vocal compositions from the late 1960s and '70s. All of these works map inner or imaginative worlds and must be situated within an ecstatic rather than a rationalist paradigm. Unfortunately, many of these spiritual diagrams are in vitrines, a traditional curatorial device for the display of archival materials that, in this case, domesticates the artists' wayward energies. It is a missed opportunity that left me wishing the curators had been as experimental with the presentation of objects as in their programming and overall exhibition structure.

The most radical decision—to situate the show in two countries—does produce plenty of peculiar moments of déjà vu, and these echo and doppelgänger effects are among the more intriguing aspects of the entire project. The frisson of stumbling on Suter's work in Kassel, for instance, was amplified by the pleasant sense of recognition engendered by having seen her work in Athens a few days earlier. I was also happy to encounter Chilean Cecilia Vicuña's art twice. Her massive knotted strings of

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Above: R. H. Quaytman, #77, Chapter 29, 2015, oil, silk-screen ink, and gesso on wood, 24 1/4 x 40 1/4". Neue Galerie, Kassel.

Below: Artist unknown, Johann Joachim Winckelmann Shown against an Italian Landscape, ca. early nineteenth century, oil on canvas, 28 x 33 1/2". Neue Galerie, Kassel.



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crimson wool, hanging from the ceilings of EMST in Athens and Documenta Halle in Kassel, represent *quipus*, pre-Columbian string objects that may be the traces of a knot-based writing system. Blown up to monumental proportions, they are among the few visually spectacular works in an otherwise archival and document-heavy show. The reiterated appearances of such arresting works as Vija Celmins's subtle depictions of the night sky; Geta Brătescu's intriguing drawings, videos, and collages; and Stanley Whitney's intensely colorful paintings were vaguely but somehow beguilingly disconcerting, instigating startling mix-ups of perception and recollection. In Whitney's case, I cherished the double presentation of his paintings, as well as their juxtaposition with Tracey Rose's red pillar *Tower #1 Caryatid #1: Made for Hoerikwaggo*, 2017, at EMST. The pairing triggered a curious chain reaction of monochromatic effects that carried the viewer into adjacent galleries, where Synnøve Persen's deconstructed Sámi flags proved unexpectedly reminiscent of Ellsworth Kelly's abstractions. Another engaging repetition was that of R. H. Quaytman's elusive yet mesmerizing works, although the grouping of her paintings in Kassel's Neue Galerie makes quite an impression in its own right. They are part of a series dealing with the discovery of the fact that the titular figure in Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*, 1920, famously immortalized as the angel of history by Walter Benjamin, was mounted on top of a portrait of Martin Luther. Quaytman's forensic explorations contribute to a German Jewish theme that unfolds across the exhibition and that, especially at the Neue Galerie, evolves into an account of German guilt that seems to offer no possibility of reparation, let alone any glimpse of redemption. No reason for optimism or enthusiasm here.

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Above: Piotr Uklański, *Real Nazis*, 2017, C-prints, text plate. Installation view, Neue Galerie, Kassel. Photo: Nils Klingor.

Right: Maria Eichhorn, *Unlawfully acquired books from Jewish ownership* (detail), 2017, mixed media. Installation view, Neue Galerie, Kassel. Photo: Mathias Völske.

Below: Marta Minujín, *Parthenon of Books* (detail), 1983/2017, steel, books, plastic sheeting. Installation view, Friedrichsplatz, Kassel. Photo: Falkenstein Heinz-Dieter/Alamy.



And yet this grim section is one of the show's strongest parts, anchoring the German-Greek axis in historical material and reminding us of a cultural geography that emerged two centuries ago. Around 1800, classical Greece established a firm grip on the imaginations of a generation of German thinkers and poets, and this Romantic fascination with the Hellenic world was passed down to some of the most influential philosophers of the Western tradition, from Hegel to card-carrying Nazi Martin Heidegger, all of whom viewed Germany's spiritual mission as a fulfillment of Greek beginnings. In the Neue Galerie's staging of this genealogy, we encounter art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann, the creator of the cult of Greek beauty, reclining in his Arcadia, and we come across a kitschy rendering of the Parthenon that was shown in a legendary National Socialist exhibition in the early 1940s. On the first floor, Piotr Uklański (every Polish artist you have ever heard of is in this Documenta) presents a chilling follow-up to his well-known 1998 installation *The Nazis*, composed of stills of actors playing henchmen of the Reich; *Real Nazis*, 2017, is a roundup of actual Nazi soldiers and/or party members, such as Joseph Goebbels, Joseph Beuys, and August

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Sander. A Gerhard Richter portrait of Arnold Bode, founder of Documenta, hangs near Bode's sketches from a trip to Greece. Also nearby are works on paper and canvas by members of a family whose notorious paterfamilias, Nazi art dealer Hildebrand Gurlitt, accumulated a vast trove of modernist art confiscated from Jewish families. Szymczyk was hoping to show works from Gurlitt's stolen collection as part of his Documenta. Instead, this archaeology of anti-Semitism and guilt culminates in an ambitious work about Nazi looting. Centered around a tower of books stolen from Jewish families, and including, among its many elements, the establishment of a new research institute focused on the restitution of looted art, Maria Eichhorn's unforgettable piece is the principal contribution to this exhibition. Its power has nothing to do with the vacuous generalizations found in some of the more annoying works that try to make moral statements, such as Marta Minujín's ridiculous Parthenon of censored books on the Friedrichsplatz. Eichhorn's *modus operandi* is based on the opposite: specificity. □

*Documenta 14* is on view in Kassel through September 17.

DANIEL BIRNBAUM IS A CONTRIBUTING EDITOR OF *ARTFORUM* AND THE DIRECTOR OF MODERNA MUSEET IN STOCKHOLM.

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