Art-historically speaking, the summer of 2017 will be remembered in Athens as the one ‘when Documenta came to town’. Heralded as one of the global art world’s most important events, Documenta has always aimed at ‘documenting’ what is going on in the art world – and beyond it. The organisers of the famous quinquennial, which has taken place in Germany’s Kassel since 1955, decided this time round, for its 14th edition, to spread its art-show wings between Germany and Greece – the two countries that symbolize for many the ‘best’ and ‘worst’ of the Eurozone.

Documenta 14 was divided between Athens (8 April to 16 July) and Kassel (10 June to 17 September), and coincided with the Venice Biennale, Art Basel and Skulptur Projekte Münstet. It was also the first time that Greece became a main protagonist in the avant-garde global art scene. Herds of journalists and art lovers flocked to Athens to traipse around venues with their Documenta 14 tote bags and maps, dazed (by the sun) and confused (by contemporary art’s profundity).

The Athens-Kassel diploid, which featured hundreds of works by around 160 artists (many of whom were newly commissioned for Documenta 14) which were spread over 40 venues in Athens (plus around 24 in Kassel), was the brain-child of Adam Szymczyk, Documenta 14’s artistic director. The working title of the show was ‘Learning from Athens’. Now, what exactly Szymczyk and his crew learned remains a mystery because they were more in the mood for ‘unlearning’: Szymczyk stated at the press conference on 6 April: ‘We believe that unlearning what we believe to know is the best beginning’. Szymczyk’s preference for remaining ‘in the darkness of not knowing’ therefore gave Documenta 14 a rather Socratic raison d’être.
**Documenta history and facts**
Pioneering artist and teacher Arnold Bolde created the first *Documenta* in 1955. Nazi Germany’s rift with avant-garde art, which it deemed ‘degenerate’, led Bolde to try to put post-war Germany back on the contemporary art map. The first *Documenta*, organized as part of Kassel’s biennial horticultural show, drew 130,000 people. Its success story has continued. *Documenta 13* (2012) attracted 904,992 people. *Documenta 14* in Athens attracted 339,000 visitors and in Kassel, by 30 July, it had received 445,000 visitors. Today, *Documenta* is considered to be at the forefront of the avant-garde art scene – the intellectual art guru of sorts.

Each *Documenta* traditionally runs for 100 days, although *Documenta 14* broke that rule by running for 163. Profits are made primarily via ticket and catalogue sales. Funded partly by the city of Kassel and the state of Hesse, as well as by the German Federal Cultural Foundation, *Documenta 14*’s budget topped up to around 37 million euros. Some of that money made its way into Greek cultural institutions (it funded, for example, necessary building and renovation work at the Tsarouchis Foundation), and that aspect of *Documenta* was very welcome.

**Highlights of Documenta in Athens**
*Documenta* was a boost for Greece’s capital. A breath of fresh, artistic air. It came at the right time, too, considering that Athens’ cultural worth has been invested in by both private initiatives and the state in recent years, as exemplified by the new Stavros Niarchos Foundation’s Cultural Centre, designed by Renzo Piano, the opening of Athens’s National Museum of Contemporary Art, the expansion of the National Gallery and the new Goulandris Museum of Contemporary Art, which is being built in Pangrati. Cultural tourism is certainly one way forward for Athens, and *Documenta 14* helped put the spotlight on Greece’s cultural stratifications, from the ancient to the contemporary.

Now for the artistic highlights. Let me mention just a few of the most striking images which featured in *Documenta 14*’s Athenian ‘branch’: from Ibrahim Mahama’s sack-sewing scenarios in Syntagma Square, to Aboubakar Fofana’s indigo (real, live and bleating) sheep at the Agricultural University of Athens; from Cecilia Vicuna’s giant, red, woollen womb, hanging from the ceiling in the National Museum of Contemporary Art, to Bili Bidjocka’s giant chess board at the Athens School of Fine Arts; from a ‘Hallucinations’ Film Festival, to Rick Lowe’s Victoria Square Project, which brought together immigrants and Greeks of the local community via art workshops; from Rasheed Araeen’s arty canteen, offering free food in Kotzia Square, to the many works...
which lay somewhere between the zones of art and music, and were performed at the Megaron Mousikis or presented at the Athens Conservatoire and not forgetting the wonderful pieces of furniture – tables, stools, armchairs – transformed into musical instruments by Nevin Aladag at the Athens Conservatoire and Artur Zmijewski’s film ‘Glimpse’ at the Athens School of Fine Arts – a harsh black-and-white slap in the face over the plight of refugees in Paris, Berlin and Calais.

These examples are just the tip of the iceberg from a Documenta that crossed borders in many ways. National borders were literally crossed in Ross Birrell’s project ‘The Transit of Hermes’, a 100-day, 3,000-mile journey on horseback from Athens to Kassel. Four people rode through Europe accompanied by ‘Hermes’ – a six-year-old Arravani stallion. Arravani are Greek ‘gait’ horses, the last remaining herds of which are found in Greece and Germany. The riders set off on 9 April from Dionysiou Aeropagitou walkway under the Parthenon and reached Kassel’s Frederichsplatz on 9 July. There, they lined up in front of a very different Parthenon: Argentine artist Marta Minujin’s ‘Parthenon of Books’ – a contemporary model of the ancient temple, covered in banned books. Apart from bridging Greece to Germany, Birrell’s project also bridged time in terms of equestrian art – from antiquity to the avant-garde.

But the real highlight of the show, for me, was all that happened between the National Museum of Contemporary Art (also known as EMST, from its Greek abbreviation) and Documenta 14; EMST was the main venue for Documenta 14. This museum, which has been struggling for 17 years to open its doors to the public, suddenly became jam-packed with art and finally showed its worth. So many commented on what a wonderful museum it is.

On 7 April, German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier officially inaugurated Documenta 14 at EMST. On the following day, Documenta 14 opened to the public, and Marta Minujin’s performance entitled ‘Payment of Greek Debt to Germany with Olives’ also took place there. The timing was tricky, however, considering that, the day before, Greece and the EU finance ministers had agreed and signed the
third bailout. Some felt that Minujin’s performance was laughing in the face of Greece’s plight. The artist, however, whose work has often been inspired by ancient Greece, had a different opinion: for her, the world is indebted to Greece, in fact, ‘Everything comes from Greece. The debt is already paid’, Minujin stated.

The deal struck between EMST and Documenta 14 was a kind of art exchange – EMST hosted Documenta 14 so that EMST’s collection would be hosted at Kassel’s Fridericianum Museum. This marked the first visit of the collection of Greece’s National Museum of Contemporary Art to Germany. Around 200 works, two-thirds of them by Greek artists, proved to be a great showcase for Greek art. EMST director Katerina Koskina saw this as ‘a challenge and an opportunity for the Greek artists. Believe me they deserve it!’ One of the artists whose works were chosen was Eirene Efstathiou. She stated …

‘I was proud and moved that my work was exhibited in Fridericianum. I had the opportunity to see my work in relationship to the other works in Documenta 14 as a whole, but also to see my work situated within the historical continuum of Greek modern and contemporary art as it is articulated by the EMST collection, which it should be said includes important foreign artists as well. In short, it was a great experience!’

And so, finally, Greek art got its ‘day in the sun’, as they say, in not so sunny Germany.

The criticism
‘Let me greet you over this pile of junk’, said one journalist to another at the press preview. The ‘junk’ in question was part of a work by Daniel Knorr. Truth be told, ever since Duchamp, the line between reality and art has become so fine that sometimes you find it hard to see the art in a pile of junk. But let’s face it, there’s plenty of junk in our culture, so of course artists are going to use it.

Crisisnite was rife. The far left saw Documenta 14 as a kind of artistic German occupation. Greek gallery owners were peeved that Documenta 14 didn’t do anything for them, but instead chose to collaborate only with public institutions. And the Greek people? Sadly, many of them were unaware that Documenta 14 had even happened because, frankly, avant-garde ‘ain’t their thing’. The Athens Biennale’s tongue-in-cheek working title ‘Waiting for the Barbarians’, was another critical back-lash.

Conclusion
Was Documenta 14 a suspicious German art offering – the sugar coating on a bitter pill called crisis? A Trojan horse or a gift horse? I prefer to be positive and see it as the latter. Maybe culture can help us beat the crisis after all, but only if we believe in Greece’s cultural worth.

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