



# **Festivalization of cities**

**A critique of Documenta  
and the institutional  
integration of art**

**FABRIKA \* YFANET SQUAT**

**This text was written by Fabrika Yfanet assembly for an event/ conversation about the Documenta 14. Documenta 14 took place in 2017 in both Kassel, Germany, its traditional home, and Athens, Greece. In an event of for the 13th years of Fabrika Yfanet, at 17 of June 2017, this text was presented and discussed for first time.**

**Fabrika Yfanet Squat exists since 2004. We insist on our first spells. To re-invent the revolution. To make self-organisation a dangerous word.**

**yfanet.espivblogs.net**

**Contact: [contact@yfanet.net](mailto:contact@yfanet.net)**

# **Festivalization of cities**

## **A critique of Documenta and the institutional integration of art**

This year's Documenta<sup>14</sup> "Learning from Athens" attempts to "learn" from the Athens of crisis how social relationships and denials are built within it.

The problematic issues regarding Documenta are several: It became the starting point or a debate regarding radical art and its connection to the criticism of social reality. What is this radical art anyway? Who are the artists that sign against the voidance of squats? What limits are there in the critique of such events? (Especially when the official organization of the exhibition proclaims direct criticism of the existing status quo, through an artistic approach and criticism). As an extension of this, it is interesting to see how, on the opposite side of radical art, the same organization of the event forms an essential part of the gigantic cultural industry behind it and other similar exhibitions of radical and not only artistic creation which, in addition to the huge capital invested, are built on labor exploitation and devaluation and more and more often unpaid work and volunteering. We chose to talk about the topic for two reasons. On the one hand, to highlight the contradictions of such events, art itself within the bourgeois society, but also the small or larger struggles and denials produced within it, as was the case with Documenta 14. On the other hand, our squat has a special connection with the institution of art, since the building was purchased in 2006 by the Greek Ministry of Culture in order to house the State Museum of Contemporary Art and the Costakis collection. The question of the exploitation of Yfanet was again raised in public talks, this spring, with the merging of museums and the establishment of the "Metropolitan Organization of Museums of Fine Arts of Thessaloniki" (MOMyth).

## **A Short History of Documenta**

Documenta is a contemporary art exhibition organized every five years in Kassel, Germany. It started in 1955 by artist and art curator Arnold Bode. Its aim was to reintroduce to the German public, 10 years after the end of the war, modern art, which had been originally defamed and then banned by Nazi Germany. It was the first exhibition of modern art, after 1937, with the exhibition of "Degenerate Art," where the Nazis had presented several important works of modern art and artistic vanguards, as examples of degenerate art to be avoided. This is why the name of the exhibition reflects the lack of artistic documentation, due to the prohibition and destruction of a large piece of it by Nazi Germany. Since then, the exhibition has been established as an institution and a company (documenta GmbH) has been set up to take over the artistic as well as the economic part of its organization.

Documenta exhibitions, beyond the emergence of new aesthetic forms, artistic vanguards and movements, their opening to the public and the appropriation of public space, seek from their very beginning to exert social and political criticism, relevant to current events. Gradually, and as we approach the 21st century, the radicalization of the artistic and critical approach of the exhibitions becomes a requirement. The curators and their team are not simply concerned with the aesthetic view, but also use analytical and philosophical tools to challenge existing state and power structures, to undermine them, and to explore denials in social reality. In this context, they attempt the thematic connection with practices and tools of theoretical trends and movements. For example, Documenta 11 (2002) is organized around issues of migration, urbanization and post-colonial experiences, while Documenta 13 (2012) attempts a feminist, ecological approach.

Likewise, Documenta 14 was chosen by the organization to escape from the frameworks of German society and to be set up in Athens, in the space and time it wanted to explore, that is, the social reality of Greece in 2017. Local and international artists expected to learn from the Athenian social environment.

Considering that they overcome the institutional organization of art, through exhibitions such as the House of Representatives, the open communities and the 34 philosophy exercises, they seek to "bring together artists, activists, theorists<sup>1</sup>, performers, children, workers, immigrants, others, aiming at a collective experimentation on the conditions of a radical transformation of the public sphere, the consolidation of social ties, as well as multiple heterogeneous forms of subjectivity, beyond identity and national or state politics", as the curators state.

***another dosis of anti-germanism, once more.***

During the recent months Documenta has been criticized by different sides. Without detailing the different origins of each, we choose to stand on those that came from a wide spectrum of the political arc (from articles that spoke about the "left-wing zombie" coming from Germany, "to talk about an Athens where anarcho-autonomists squat universities and public buildings", or claiming that Documenta refers to "German-style terrorist activism", to other statements, such as that the exhibition "colours sheep with the colours of our homeland" and that "it is a cruel landing in the country", not only from Germany, but from "a whole German-dominated system, the European Union", up to indymedia posts that spoke of "German pseudo-artistic imperialism"). Regardless of the exhibition itself and the myriad reasons why we are -the very least to say- suspicious towards what it stands for, all these reviews focused on one (and only, usually) thing: the exhibition comes from Kassel, Germany, and the Germans come to occupy Greece once more. The exhibition was considered as the vehicle through which the imperialist German state decided to intervene once more in Greece -or that it was the pretext for each side to highlight their agenda (against imperialism, Germany, the EU and Memoranda). Other criticisms even mentioned German money laundering through Documenta, or even the Second World War and the

1 It is characteristic that Antonio Negri was a speaker in the framework of D14 and the 34 exercises of freedom. Also other groups such as the Women's group "To mov" (The Purple), took part in the work by Sanjalveković, dedicated to Rosa Luxemburg, titled "Art of Possibility," towards an international anti-fascist feminist front.

question of war compensations: the Germans came to bring a little of art, to observe the crisis and to say something in our favour, so that we forget about what they did to us and how much they owe us...

From our perspective, we cannot see such aspects of Documenta as a political choice of a state within a more extended plan to enslave the country! On the contrary, we believe that the transformation of Athens into a large stage for political expression (without no responsibility and no reflection in social relations) and artistic experimentation is in line with contemporary artistic / academic / political tendencies within the wider social context.

So we choose to focus on aspects of the exhibition that affect us directly or indirectly, on the integration of radical art, the role of mega-exhibitions in this integration, the relationship of Documenta with the neoliberal policies of cities, but also the labor devaluation on which cultural capital is developed in these exhibitions.

## **Radical art (?)**

The discussion around Documenta poses from the outset the question of the connection of art and politics, the radicality of art, the association of the aesthetic and the political. Based on this, we will try to see if Documenta can eventually "stand up to" to its declared goals. Firstly, we try to view art not as cut off and separate from social reality, but instead, we frame it within the historical context of capitalism, and we try to see how it determines its position, content and form within capitalist society. We will not deal with a history of art or how it was constructed in modernity as a discipline. We are concerned with what is called modern art that begins around the early 20th century, as it is the point where the thread starts to unfold, a thread that brings us to today's artistic production and Documenta. It was at that time that the aforementioned questions were raised for the first time, despite the individual differences between the different modernist movements, that we will not discuss here.

# DOCUMENTA







## **(i) the particularity.**

We could argue here that what is particular in art is its peculiar relationship with the historical reality that generates it. The modernist artwork as an aesthetic creation does not bear any clear meaning. On the contrary, it potentially signifies a rupture with meaning. For example, when some dude decided to pass a urinal as a work of art in the early 20th century, it came into rupture (as a form) with the dominant, familiar meaning of its historical context and its rationalized interpretation. Fountain, as Duchamp named it, in 1917, apparently was not accepted by the museum where it was sent to be exhibited. This rupture with the intimate, with the predominant meaning, that is to say, the relationship between the form of the artwork and its historical context is that which gives content to the work in a dialectical fashion and makes it bear its historical context as a denial of said context. The work, that bears no rational interpretation, relevant to historic reality, breaks away from it, opens way towards imagination and desire. Bound in this world, the work opens a road beyond itself, as it is simultaneously tied to the intimate and partly autonomous. From this point of view, the politics of art exists in the same aesthetic form.

## **(ii) critique of the art institution.**

The period when the movements of artistic vanguard took place was defined by the attack upon the art regime within bourgeois society. The autonomy of art, in the sense that we have given to it in the section above, was considered a political risk due to its potential to oppose the principle of reality and to imagine another reality beyond it, oriented towards the social; that is, in the way that art operates within society (culture, mass media, established homogenizing aesthetic styles and models, spectacle, art market, etc.). From this point of view, their aim was to align the content of the works to the institution, to cancel art, not just as destruction, but as a mutation and transformation into a life practice. At this point, it is important to note that this mutation was not meant as the incorporation of art into life, as it is organized within capitalist

relationships, but as an attempt to organize a new life based on art.

This is roughly and briefly the thread that permeates the movements of the artistic avant-garde that were active until the 1970s. The things from then on took a slightly different turn...

### **iii) the postmodern condition**

From this perspective, we can say that these movements were defeated. The urge to incorporate art into everyday life was realized – except it was embodied in the capital. The restructuring of the class relationship that began in the 1970s resulted in the transformation of the relationship between capital and labor, as capital gradually claims and exploits aspects of reproduction by the proletariat, which go beyond the narrow framework of the production process. Neoliberalism has led to the demolition of any stability of the form (see stable forms of unionism, working class disintegration, etc.), except market hegemony. Everything is equated moments of subjectivity. By incorporating the transformations of the "artistic form" in this scheme, we can say that the postmodern condition has incorporated into the community of capital every "unfamiliar" artistic form, and hence is constructed as a sum of equal subjective moments of aesthetic, where all unfamiliar moments become the new intimate, the new (usable) normal.

Moreover, in the above framework we see that artistic action is efficient for the capital, not within the strict sense of productive process (working time, labor power consumption), but based on the model of productive labor that emerged during that time, and the process of utilization of capital both in the sphere of production, and in circulation. The labor force exploited by the capital expands beyond the worker's hands in the factory's production assembly, and now includes every aspect of human existence (creativity, intellect, special abilities of the subject) -while the exploitative working relationships in the value production process may remain hidden. Creativity, therefore, can hardly be seen today as a personal quality of the subject that can remain unspoiled by capital, in the

name of an alleged purity of the inner self from the commodity world. And that's because art is being exploited by the capital under the sphere of circulation. It produces value-surplus value, by producing "intangible" (cultural) capital that is exploited through the organization of the process of distribution-handling-consumption of the works. In the process of accumulation of cultural capital, the content of the artistic product itself is of secondary importance.

And Documenta is a typical example for all the above.

To make it more apparent, it is worth mentioning some tangible examples of how artistic creation is exploited by capital and transformed into production of surplus value. On the one hand, the process of refinement and the involvement of the *creative capital* in it will come into focus, and on the other hand the creative industry, which has been set around different aspects of art production. In this regard, we will refer to museums and exhibitions of contemporary art such as Documenta and the role they play in capital circulation.

A characteristic example of the transformation of *cultural capital* into an *economic* one, is the process of gentrification, aimed at changing the social composition of an area of a city. Initially a process of devaluation of the most deprived areas takes place, which creates a gap between the actual land value and the potential value that can be obtained. This difference results in real-estate capital investment in buildings and land in these areas, followed by rent increases and a gradual change in social relationships in the region, since only individuals of higher social classes can afford the rents. At the same time, the legislative and urban intervention of the state takes place, by denominating some areas as historic or preserved. The role of the *cultural capital* that takes place around this process of refinement is immense, either through the management of consumption and entertainment in these regions, or the involvement of people that are carriers of cultural-symbolic capital (artists, intellectuals, designers, alternative people and hipsters) of the so-called creative class, which chooses to seek entertainment, shelter, work or consumption in marginalized

or worker neighbourhoods, intensifying the process of gentrification.<sup>2</sup>

We could view the transformation of the symbolic capital into economic capital within the cultural industry in the same frameset. This industry may include publishing, cinematographic productions, television or design companies. Here we are primarily focused on museums and exhibitions of contemporary art.<sup>3</sup> On one hand, museums and exhibitions act as a means of incorporating radical art and pioneering artistic movements, as discussed in the previous section. On the other hand, these museums and mega-exhibitions such as Documenta and Biennale are part of the art market, as they are not museological in nature. The work of art is not only an exhibit, but also a commodity, as behind the exhibit lies a huge market with curators as managers of cultural capital.

At the same time, the effort or even the competition of artists who aim to introduce / integrate their works in such large-scale exhibitions, but also take part in the market, is an uncertain and precarious procedure (at least for a part of the artists). The artwork is not fully integrated into the market, since its value is not determined by competition. Artistic work is not entirely dependent on the market, and its production is not being restructured through lasting competitive pressure from other artistic markets. Subsequently, the choice of works of art that will enter the market is also dependent on other subjective factors, culturally formed and institutionally aesthetic criteria, of spectacle, acquaintances or even reputation.

Even if these exhibitions are not direct points of sale, as in the case of Documenta, they are in harmony with the art market. The participants in the exhibition and their projects will acquire cultural / artistic

2 For further analysis and examples on gentrification, see the pamphlet "Welcome to Gentrification" by the group Bastards with Memory.

3 A little different is the case of archaeological, historical, folklore museums, which, to a large extent, fall within the framework of the market in which they operate and act as an ideological mechanism of the state, since they represent the means of representation and management of the past.

validation through their presentation; said validation can later turn into value. In addition, huge funds and sponsorships are required for the setup. In the case of Documenta, funding comes from the German state and private sponsorships, while at the same time the organizers tried not to associate themselves (at least in the public discourse) with galleries and other private institutions in Athens, considering that they are thus moving away from the market. A "separation" from the market, which makes daily profits from the tickets and which, of course, was built on labor devaluation and exploitation. Indicative is the announcement of the "Documenta Workers' Initiative" on their work contracts for the exhibition. In particular, they complained that while the initial agreement with the Documenta ensured an hourly fee of 9 euros gross, at the signing of the contract they found out that their salary had dropped to 5.2 euros; moreover, it turned out that they were recruited by a work contractor rather than directly by the company (for more information see Documenta employees announcement).

## **Conclusion**

The intellectual curators and invited academics want, as they tell us, to learn from Athens of the crisis using Documenta to connect with the people of the city, immigrants, transsexuals, workers, artists and others, and, in the words of a curator, "to use the existing structures in an attempt to change things, why not from the inside!" We, on the other hand, are a little suspicious, when the call for political art and social change, which is even invested in a radical anti-capitalist and anti-rational speech, stumbles so blatantly in its contradictions, supported precisely by the state and the capital, and even helping its further development at the expense of all the people it is supposed to defend. The emergence of issues, such as the construction of cultural capital through these exhibitions and the work devaluation on which it is based, open an interesting field of critique. And it is the point where we wonder whether this art, which is framed as radical, can actually exert social criticism...

Thus, the call of the Avant-Garde for totality has been defeated,

after the moment of its realization has passed. Any reactions of the artistic subjects, through events such as Documenta, are limited to a reprehensible role, attempting to intervene in the political sphere, while disregarding that without an overall criticism of the institution of art itself and its functioning within society, these complaints remain embedded and exploitable by capital in terms of commodity and spectacle. This is because the human productive power in its totality does not reproduce life, but the world of commodity.

### **And what does this all have to do with the Yfanet?**

As we mentioned above, the building of Fabrica Yfanet was purchased in 2006 by the Ministry of Culture in order to house the "renowned" Costakis collection. From time to time, within the public discourse we see the recurrent demand for the "liberation" of Yfanet from the squatters for "the sake of art" with the aim of "turning it into a multipurpose museum of contemporary art that aims at the respect and development of the complex and its reintegration into the life of the city with contemporary visual and cultural activities of great radiance" as the State Museum of Contemporary Art writes.

### **In the museum, in the museum, I don't want to go**

We have repeatedly written that our meetings, our songs and dances go together with our struggles. None of these fit into the museums and mega-exhibitions of radical art. Collective creation and linkage to the practice of life is still for us a purpose in itself, a promise of happiness. This connection can only be against the logic of profit, against the logic of exploitation, and against the people who view our space and time as a field of profit. Because we do not want our creation to go hand in hand with radical art in their museums and exhibitions, but to open up prospects for conflict with the dominant culture.



