



FIG. 1  
Documenta 14, last public message on Twitter.  
18 September, 2017, 12:09 PM  
Design: Mevis & van Deursen

# Commoning and *Learning from Athens*, Documenta 14 (2017)

## Performative Occupations, Instituting and Infrastructures

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*The paper focuses on Documenta 14, Learning from Athens (2017). Documenta is a large-scale international, periodic, contemporary art exhibition which takes place every five years in Kassel, its permanent home since 1955. In 2017 the exhibition was also staged in Athens, a city which Polish curator Adam Szymczyk saw as a relevant vantage point from which to speak about crisis, austerity and resistance against them. The move followed the attention that Athens has drawn in the past decade as a site to learn from everyday struggles and collective art practices amidst ongoing crisis; particularly in occupations that house migrants and refugees, commoning practices based on sharing, cooperation and solidarity, provide collective grassroots responses*

*to austerity, anti-migrant policies and shape new forms of social organization. Documenta 14 closed its doors by performatively declaring itself as a commons. Its public program had inquired about the commons as a political concept in relation to struggles in migration and commoning in relation to negotiating the boundaries of identities and art institutions. The move to Athens could even be seen as a gesture towards instituting in the commons, since the curatorial team called for solidarity with the city's organizations. Among the envisioned institutional alliances, which ultimately never materialized, was the Athens Biennale, a biennial receiving scarce state support and considered a resilient model experimenting with collectivity. Moreover, by prioritizing partnerships mainly with public institutions, in order to support them as common goods, Documenta 14 pointed to the commons as a savior of the public, rather than as a way to redefine its boundaries, creating a gap in its horizon as a Documenta instituted in the commons. By examining Documenta 14 and commoning in relation to the context, the scope and lastly the instituting horizon, the paper thus argues that the gaps between the performative claim of Documenta 14 as a commons and the potentializing of commoning by the exhibition remain significant.*

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### **Documenta 14: Why commons? Why Athens?**

Documenta 14 closed its doors on September 18, 2017, thanking everyone who was involved in its making with a final message on social media: “Documenta 14 is declared a commons: it is not owned by anyone in particular. It is shared among its visitors, artists, readers, writers, and other participants, as well as all those whose work made it happen.” A reaction under the tweet read: “#documenta 14 is a fraud. By declaring an exhibition funded by the state of Kassel as commons... is like saying that everything produced in this postmodern society is a commons...” (Documenta, 2017).

The exchange is symptomatic of the broader contradictions that underpin large-scale periodic exhibitions like Documenta, commonly referred to as biennials. Intentions to engage with radical politics do not undo the political and economic interests that these kind of city-wide

events depend upon. Documenta 14 is not a commons, a self-organized non-hierarchical space, but an exhibition tied to the decision-making processes of a 64-year-old Kassel-based institution. That the above declaration is performative should come as no surprise given Documenta's organizational structure, which includes a supervisory board, a permanent venue and an archive as part of the non-profit organization Documenta und Museum Fridericianum gGmbH. Founded in 1955, with the aim to restore art, politics and urban development in post-war Kassel, the exhibition is primarily funded by the City of Kassel, the State of Hesse and the German Federal Cultural Foundation. As one of the oldest such periodic event, Documenta holds a significant place in the history of biennials, events which have been on the rise since the 1990s. For a strand of biennial literature, biennials exemplify neoliberalism through their ties to city marketing and the post-Fordist model of production. As Panos Kompatsiaris argues, in the context of post-Fordist processes of accumulation, it is circulation in biennial networks that facilitates the accumulation of economic and symbolic capital for artists, curators, biennials and cities, making debatable how far they broaden participation rather than foster inequalities (Kompatsiaris, 2017, p. 68–70). According to Kompatsiaris, when biennialization, the term used to refer to the proliferation of such events, is taken as a frictionless expansion, questions of how these events unfold in specific contexts are obscured. Moreover, by sharing the broader fascination of the art field for collectives, biennials may be both seen as sites for social value produced through cooperation, the common in Hardt and Negri's (2000) terms, *and* for capturing the radical potentials of artistic labour by precarizing it and turning it into neoliberal spectacle. Documenta is not exempted from this critique. What mostly differentiates it from other biennials is that, next to its history, scale and budgets, each iteration is an enquiry into art and politics marked by its curators' political position towards the contemporary globalized world (Kompatsiaris, 2017).

What compels the organizers of Documenta 14 to declare it a commons? Documenta 14's last public instance echoes the desire of sharing the exhibition between Kassel and Athens, a city which, in the last decade, has emerged as a paradigm to learn from commons in ongoing crisis. Drawing on scholarship that discusses examples from Athens, I understand

commons with commoning practices, values and imaginaries that shape processes of sharing and being-in-common, countering austerity politics and shaping the potential to contest dominant forms of social life under capitalism (Stavrvides, 2016). Proposing to hold the exhibition on equal footing both in its traditional home, Kassel, and Athens, curator Adam Szymczyk deemed that the Mediterranean metropolis was relevant as a vantage point from which to speak about global crises, indebtedness and migration as part of neoliberal and neo-colonial mechanisms of violence, as well as to learn from its solidarity cultures.

The city was central for the exhibition's scope and for its horizon, expressed through curatorial statements that presented the move to Athens as a process of instituting and as a "performative action" (Documenta 14, Press release; Zefkili, 2017). Along those lines, choosing to have a "working title" rather than a title, *Learning from Athens* was meant to point to a different working mode, one that displaced Documenta from Kassel and, for the first time in its history, placed another city so central to the exhibition's curatorial rationale. In bilocating the exhibition, Szymczyk in fact extended a previous trend, which each Documenta echoes since Okwui Enwezor dispersed Documenta 11 (2002) in five discursive platforms across various locations. Similar to other post- Documenta 11 moves out of Kassel, the fourteenth iteration was also paired with an intention to question Eurocentric canons in art (history) and (global) politics, canons which Documenta has been shaping as a hegemonic example in the realm of large-scale periodic exhibitions. While previous iterations only partly moved out of Kassel mainly discursive events or satellite exhibitions, Documenta 14 established partnerships in Athens with various cultural institutions, emphasizing their public character and their equal significance to the multi-venue exhibitions held in Kassel.

The question "why commons?" and "why Athens?" can be considered with broader gestations in the art field, discussed with what sociologist Yates McKey (2016) has coined the "post-Occupy condition" and what Panos Kompatsiaris discusses as a "biennial legitimacy crisis" that affects discursive biennials in particular (2017, p. 4). McKey (2016) sees as a key post-Occupy demand to art institutions the support of movement-based infrastructures, practices that engage with commoning and move in ex-

panded fields of social struggle and collective political organizing. In the post-Occupy condition, commons appeal to biennials as a key political principle opposing neoliberalism. Discursive biennials, which place the exhibition in broader discursive environments, somewhere between an academic conference and an activist site, have been particularly keen to adopt gatherings-cum-occupations or assemblies, modes which were popularised on the squares movement. For example, the 7<sup>th</sup> Berlin Biennale *Forget Fear* (2012) and Documenta 13 (2012) had welcomed Occupy activists in their programs, but were criticized for aestheticizing and co-opting the radical politics of the movements (Kompatsiaris, 2017). Documenta 14 started operating in Athens in 2015, soon after a series of biennials, such as Manifesta 10 in St. Petersburg (2012) and the 10<sup>th</sup> Istanbul Biennial (2013), were boycotted by artists protesting and demanding biennials to cut ties with funding sources that support oppressive political regimes and aggressive urban redevelopment (Warsza, 2017). Critical for Szymczyk's proposal to bring Documenta 14 in Athens was the Athens Biennale's 4th iteration AGORA (2013), for its collaborative curating and participation of many artist collectives. Indicative of the attraction of the Athens Biennale as part of an art scene considered to be thriving in austerity is that while other biennials were severely questioned, AGORA was recognized as a ground-breaking model by the European Cultural Foundation in 2015. During the award ceremony, Adam Szymczyk praised the Biennale as a resilient and participatory model and called for solidarity with it.<sup>1</sup> Discursive biennials therefore function as sites attracted by and welcoming commons and as targets and means through which artist-led or commons-related demands have been expressed (Kompatsiaris, 2017). Whether such instances support movement building and common biennials, rendering them more accountable, inclusive or horizontal, are open questions. However, what becomes visible is that biennials have been turning into "a means of renegotiating the balance of power within art," as Dave Beech notes (2017, p. 19).

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1 — For Szymczyk's call to be in solidarity with the Athens Biennale, see ECF [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mPygBu\\_pxDk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mPygBu_pxDk) (accessed March 25, 2020).

It is tempting to interpret Documenta 14's bilocating as a (performative) gesture towards commoning the institution or instituting in the commons, given the move to Athens, references to commons and solidarity in its curatorial statements, public program and commissioned works, as examined further. Questioning established and instituted modes of practice, instituting in the commons points to a relational process, open to alliances, contingencies and negotiations of engagement that underpin commoning as a practice of sharing. The intention to open up such a horizon was there, as the artistic director called for solidarity with—and intended to activate—forms of sharing with the city's art organizations. However, by examining commoning in relation first to the context, to Documenta 14's scope and instituting horizon, I will be arguing that the gaps between the performative claim of Documenta 14 as a commons and the potentializing of commoning by the exhibition as a process of instituting remain significant.

### **Commoning in context. Questions on public, commons, instituting and infrastructure**

Documenta 14's bilocating was premised on the urge to “act in real time and in the real world” (Szymczyk, 2017, p. 26). The realness that Documenta 14 sought meant speaking (partly) from a city that in the past decade has become a case study for grassroots creativity amidst austerity (Arampatzi, 2018). The Syntagma Square occupation in 2011, similar to Tahrir square or the Indignados movements in Spain, acted catalytically for collective forms of occupying, assembling and horizontal forms of organizing. After Syntagma, such practices of solidarity-making “from below” were dispersed in neighbourhood assemblies, self-managed parks and theaters, solidarity kitchens and clinics. In 2012, more than 200 solidarity initiatives had been created across Greece and 400 were counted in 2016 (Arampatzi, 2018). The theorization of such examples as “emergent common spaces” by architect and activist Stavros Stavrides (2016) or as “urban solidarity spaces” by geographer Athina Arampatzi (2018) informs how I understand commoning: as an everyday practice of cooperation and sharing, based on values of solidarity and equality, which gestures towards alternatives to cap-

italist social relations (Stavrides, 2016). Following ethnographic research by Arampatzi (2018) and activist Olga Lafazani (2017), the role of solidarity initiatives can be summarized in a threefold way: first, they provide mutual support and survival infrastructures for vulnerable groups in an ongoing crisis of social reproduction; second, they broaden political struggle and resistance to austerity, problematizing charity, philanthropy or the NGO logic, in particular of aiding refugees and countering anti-migrant policies; and, third, they experiment with social and economic alternatives for (non-commodified) social relations, strengthening participation in common struggles.

To think about commoning as collective everyday practice, I take the example of the Refugee accommodation and Solidarity Space City Plaza, which was discussed during Documenta 14's public program by Olga Lafazani, one of its coordinators (*The Apatride Society: Indigenous Knowledge 2*, 2017).<sup>2</sup> A former hotel, City Plaza was squatted from April 2016 and for 39 months by different activist groups and refugees to create a space of cohabitation. City Plaza was one of many occupations which responded to the urgent need to provide housing, health and dignified living to refugees arriving in Athens, particularly after the closing of the borders following the 2015 EU-Turkey agreement in what has been coined the 'long summer of migration' (*The Apatride Society: Indigenous Knowledge 2*, 2017). Commoning in City Plaza included the co-working and decision-making processes that enable the collective organization of everyday life, such as cleaning, cooking or learning together, discussing operational questions in open assemblies, devising working groups and rotating shifts for organizing anything from daily tasks to special events. New affective bonds are shaped through sharing as collective social practice, while the need for survival coexists with the quest for collective processes of politicization (Lafazani, 2016). The emancipatory potentials in common spaces such as City Plaza are not a given, but emerge through the cohabitation between refugees,

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2 — The session, as many others from the public program, was streamed and can be accessed on Documenta's homepage: <https://www.documenta14.de/en/calendar/4757/indigenous-knowledge-2-fleeing-and-occupying> (accessed June 20, 2020).

solidarians and volunteers, which requires negotiating different class, religious and cultural backgrounds. Emancipation here may be approached in correlation to what Stavrides sees as a necessary requirement; that is, an effort to open the boundaries of subjectivities, communities and an everyday striving for processes of sharing to remain porous to newcomers and to redefinitions of otherness (2016, p. 3).

To think of commoning and its performative potentials, I turn to social anthropologist Athena Athanasiou, who sees square occupations as examples of instituting performatively “as if it were possible” in the “conditions of impossibility” of capitalist crisis. Instituting what Athanasiou prefers to call “un/common space,” so as to nonetheless, similar to Stavrides, highlight difference, is set against everyday racism, eviction threats, anti-squat or anti-migrant policies (2016, p. 679). For Athanasiou, such performative occupations are not purely non-institutional or anti-institutional, horizontal or vertical, but question these binaries. Drawing on Judith Butler, she argues that the demand for infrastructure in such examples is not a claim for infrastructures that divide and produce inequalities, precarious and vulnerable bodies (which they do), but for insisting on how they can enable forms of “livable life” (Butler, 2015, p. 127, cited in Athanasiou, 2016, p. 681). In relation to City Plaza, as Lafazani noted during her talk in Documenta 14, the effort for emancipating social relations does not abolish the demand directed towards the state to take responsibility towards refugees (*The Apatride Society: Indigenous Knowledge 2*, 2017). There is a tension, however, between common and public, which underpins the theorizations I engage with here and, which is also traceable in Documenta 14. Drawing on Butler, Athanasiou raises the need for public space to survive as “infrastructural good” (2016, p. 689). On the contrary, common space for Stavrides emerges from below and opposes the public, which retains its publicness due to the authority that names it as such. Moreover, common space pushes beyond the idea of communal space, which is simply to be shared through collectively defined processes. Rather, Stavrides sees the commons discourse as an attempt to redefine the antithesis between public and private space, by transforming it into a “myriad of new syntheses” (Stavrides, 2016, p. 261).

Biennials are privileged sites to enquire the overlaps and problemat-



ics of institution, instituting and infrastructure, and tensions between public and common. They often come with the promise of enhancing contemporary art infrastructure, particularly in contexts where art institutions are considered less present or developed, or in itinerant biennials like Manifesta, which every two years takes place in a different peripheral European city that bids to host it. Documenta 14's advent to Athens raised similar anticipations of boosting the economy by employing, by attracting tourism and investments, and as opportunity for artists or curators to access and circulate the global contemporary art circuits, audiences and art economy (Smith, 2017). For curators, biennials may present a more receptive ground—compared to museums—for thinking about instituting, as every iteration is in itself an event curated by a different team. This, nevertheless, remains dependent on the ability of a biennial to mobilize alliances with local authorities, private donors, artist-led spaces and public institutions. As such, infrastructure and instituting may be thought with use and movement, with what literature professor Lauren Berlant sees as an organizational model that enables “forms and modalities within relation” (2016, p. 395). It might mean the patterns, habits, and forms of organization that mediate affective, social, material exchanges and mobilities periodically—every two years in biennials and every five years in Documenta.

Critics pointed out that Documenta 14's coming to Athens drew more attention as an institution with significant power, rather than as an exhibition (Tramboulis and Tzirtzilakis, 2018). Though it seemed to be gesturing towards an instituting process, the question of how such a significant, nonetheless one-off event in this particular instance and context could institute new processes for the long-established institution of Documenta and for/with the Athens art scene remained underexplored and debatable even after Documenta 14's closing (PAT, 2017). As an unprecedented and unrepeatable event for Athens, Documenta 14 generated anticipation with regard to representing the city, enhancing art infrastructures and, in the words of the Athens mayor, “cooperation” between Athens and Kassel (Smith, 2017). With an end budget of 47.3 million euros and employing more than 150 people, many of whom worked from Athens for a long period, Documenta 14 can therefore hardly be contained within well intended performative claims or numbers, either in the anticipation it generated or in its reali-

zation.<sup>3</sup> Instead, and even moreso because its vocabularies tapped on the commons, it requires being examined with the commoning practices in the specific context of Athens, including how it engaged with the Athens art scene and the 40 venues in Athens it partnered with. Whether we term this commoning, instituting in the commons or commoning infrastructure, the question I think should include how biennials, here Documenta 14, negotiate tensions between common and public and whether they can enable or potentialize commoning by sharing the envisioned process of instituting with the context in which they take place.

### **Commoning as scope. Squares, struggles and institutional alliances**

If Documenta 14's coming to Athens can be viewed with Athens' appeal as a city of solidarity and commons and the post-Occupy quest to forge alliances there (read biennialization), where antagonisms and a biennial legitimacy crisis set the tone, a good place to start for tracing the boundaries of its gesture is the initially envisioned, but ultimately not materialized, partnership with the Athens Biennale. The Biennale was a significant pole of attraction, as introduced in the first section. At least since its 3<sup>rd</sup> iteration in 2011, the Biennale has emerged as a significant infrastructure for art and activism gestations in the city. Although it relies on private funders and the municipality, not avoiding the links to gentrification and precarious labor of volunteers typical for biennials, the Biennale has not been receiving structural support by the state for most of its lifespan (Kompatsiaris, 2017). The 5<sup>th</sup>–6<sup>th</sup> iteration of the Biennale, titled OMONOIA, was conceived as an instituting process of two years, between 2015 and 2017, which was meant to culminate with Documenta 14's opening in 2017. Central in this was the occupation–cohabitation in a historical former hotel in Omonoia square, which was envisioned as a long-term space for cooperation between the Biennale, artist and activist groups some of whom engage in some form of commoning. This quest built upon the legacy of

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3 — For the budget see <https://www.documenta.de/en/team>



FIG. 2

Rasheed Araeen, *Shamiyaana—Food for Thought: Thought for Change*, 2016-17, tents with geometric patchwork, cooking and eating, Kotzia Square, Athens.

Photo: Amra Ali

the collaborative and participatory AGORA, but also meant to challenge the Biennale's institutional boundaries by involving the invited collectives to reshape the Biennale's economy and production as a cooperative model. With regards to Documenta 14, despite some initial common steps in conferences and panel discussions during OMONOIA, which communicated a shared intention to explore the possibility of working together, the partnership with the Biennale fell through. This could have gone unnoticed considering Documenta 14's many other institutional partners in Athens. Yet, it is significant in light of their shared interest in commons and opening up institutional boundaries of two very asymmetrical cases in terms of resources and influence in the realm of biennials. Eventually OMONOIA interrupted its program, and the iteration's program director, anthropologist Massimiliano Mollona, as well as Xenia Kalpaktoglou, one

of the Biennale's co-founders, stepped down. Even if only speculatively, I would locate a missed potentiality for opening up a space for negotiating the meaning of commoning biennials from within the asymmetries that characterize the biennial global networks.

The consequence of this unmaterialized alliance may be traceable in the absence of Athens-based collectives in Documenta 14's main artist list and the critique it received for the scarcity of artworks that addressed grassroots practices in Greece in their specificities, beyond the complex socioeconomic global processes that shape them (Demos, 2017). We can only assume that this critique would have been different had the Athens Biennale been included among Documenta's partners, offering a connection to the artist activist groups exploring commoning in Athens. However, this critique is also more concretely set against the backdrop of Documenta 14's materialized institutional alliances. Overall, Documenta 14 prioritized working with mostly public (16 state) institutions. This prioritization of public institutions emanated from a sense of urgency in supporting their continuity against the backdrop of the austerity-led and privatization programs of recent years. "How are art and its institutions made public and part of the common good?" was the question that announced the partnership with the National Museum of Contemporary Art (EMST). With its funds, Documenta 14 enabled the full opening of the museum, for the first time in its nomadic life span, since its founding in 2000. In return, the EMST collection was hosted under the title "antidoron" (counter gift) in the most historical venue of Documenta in Kassel, the Fridericianum. Critics pointed out that by insulating the collection rather than integrating EMST's collection across venues, the gesture risked being patronizing (Weiner, 2017). In Athens, it is debatable if structural changes could be catalyzed with this one-off alliance. Tellingly, after Documenta 14 EMST went back to a limbo between government-defined processes of management and relying for its survival on major private foundations.<sup>4</sup> Documenta 14 thus

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4 — EMST received a 3 million euros donation by the Stavros Niarchos Foundation in 2018, to complete works in the building, transport collection and for equipment. See EMST, 2018, <https://www.emst.gr/en/shortnews-en/temporary-suspension-of-emst-exhibition-program> (accessed March 25, 2020).

drew from theological-political conceptualizations of the common good as the guiding principle for institutions, as well as the more juridical and economic understanding of institutions as resources with social value to be shared. The problem, however, is that these more Western-based ideas of the common good overemphasized cooperation with the public, i.e. the state institutions, compelling the question as to whether they undermined or even neutralized the more radical discourses on the commons as struggles for social life beyond capitalism and state violence in Documenta 14's public program and commissioned works.

The public program engaged with struggles of indigenous populations, minorities, migrants and refugees, the queer, the sex worker, the trans, critiquing the traditional left for marginalizing such voices and not addressing the nexus of colonial, capitalist, racial and heteronormative power. Though not necessarily conceptualised as a space for commoning, there were affinities to commons in the program's strive to move beyond identity-politics, forge affects and alliances between different struggles for "sovereignty, recognition and survival." The Parliament of Bodies was conceived as an institution-in-becoming, a space that can be viewed with Athanasiou's (2016) performative occupation from within Documenta, which sought to queer democratic institutions and large-scale exhibitions, inquiring about possibilities for antifascist, transfeminist and antiracist coalitions (The Parliament of bodies, 2017). It is here that the redefinition of the Other, understood to be Documenta 14's main political proposition, was most visible (Tramboulis and Tzirtzilakis, 2018). The Parliament of Bodies sought to extend legacies of previous Documentas—most notably Documenta 11 (2002), which had inquired about postcolonialism and globalization, but mainly focused on geopolitical relations without inquiring about the agency of political subjectivities through concepts of body or gender (Dimitrakaki, 2003). However, in the context of Athens, this redefinition of otherness was also received with scepticism, as part of a larger gesture of exoticizing Athens and its radical cultures, while at the same time keeping them absent, to a large degree, from its exhibition venues (Demos, 2017; Tramboulis and Tzirtzilakis, 2018).

To a degree, the Parliament of Bodies (2017) addressed the gap of engaging with collective art practices and commoning cultures in the

context of Athens. Headed by philosopher, queer and trans activist Paul B. Preciado, the program was carried in Athens by six Open Form Societies, starting months before the exhibitions opened in Athens. The program did host groups, such as the *Cooperativist Society by Artist Cooperative Athens*, which sought to institute cooperative forms of action from within Documenta. It was perhaps one of the most active societies, *The Apatride Society for the Political Others*, which countered critique to Documenta 14's overall insularity in relation to the grassroots in Athens, by inviting representatives from migrant organizations, activists and scholars engaged in solidarity and commoning, as in the aforementioned example of a member from City Plaza. Did the Parliament of Bodies potentialize commoning through its structure? Yes and no. Activists and migrants were invited to its program, but what the Parliament of Bodies primarily offered, in my view, was a shared discursive space for exchanges and conversations, rather than a space of sharing through doing in common. With its structure of six societies, curatorial agency was dispersed, but this was only to a degree, as the societies were mostly run by artists, members in some waged capacity within the Documenta 14 team, or groups that had formed specifically on the occasion of Documenta 14. Each Society held gatherings, but rather than assemblies based on collective decision-making processes, these were mostly talks, lecture-performances, screenings and moderated Q & A discussions. Nonetheless, as it was not entirely preconceived, but unfolded with some informality and contingency, the Parliament of Bodies was closer to an instituting process, as well as a device pulsing the Athenian context as it was unfolding.

Works in public squares provide the ground to ask how porous Documenta 14 was to the city and how it negotiated the boundaries of public space and common space. Some were performatively occupied by groups who critiqued Documenta 14's insularity and enacted different forms of collective doing and learning in the city. Sanja Iveković's *Monument to Revolution* (2017), is a good example. Iveković reconstructed as a stage the foundations of the *Monument to the November Revolution* (1926) for Rosa Luxembourg and Karl Liebknecht, commissioned to Mies van der Rohe by the German Communist party and later destroyed by the Nazis. Iveković's work was realized on Avdi square in Metaxourgeio, an area of ongoing gen-

trification which many migrant communities call home. Aiming to offer a stage both for commemorating historical antifascist and feminist struggles and potentializing new forms of political action, the work inquired of political struggle and transnational cooperation, while it also invited collectives, activists and theorists from the city to participate in curated or discursive events. An event of discussions, walks and performances was conceived by Gigi Argyropoulou, initiator a.o. of the Green Park occupation in the city, to think with commoning practices as “infrastructures of troubling times,” according to Laurent Berlant’s (2016) conceptualizations. Women from feminist, political or artist collectives were invited by art theorists Angela Dimitrakaki and Antonia Majaca to participate in a collective oral document as well as a closing discussion at the end of June 2017, on the invisibility of women in labor and antifascist struggles throughout history. The artists cooperative C.A.S.A. (Contemporary Art Showcase Athens) organised the one-night event *The Performative Fest of The Commons* by occupying Iveković’s work, at the end of July 2017, after Documenta 14 had departed. Aiming to raise questions on the common struggle between collective artistic endeavours with those displaced and excluded in globalization, the collective festival by C.A.S.A. saw contributions on and off stage from inhabitants from the area, Afghani refugees from the Malakasa camp and female refugees in Petrou Ralli prison, as well as the social kitchen O Allos Anthropos (The other Human—C.A.S.A., 2017). Other performative interventions had already highlighted the problematic relation of Documenta 14 with refugees while the event was running. By stealing a monolith that they were meant to carry in Athens after being recruited as volunteers, the group Lgbtqi+ Refugees in Greece sabotaged Documenta 14 from within, drawing attention to the survival issues queer migrants in particular face. In comparison, C.A.S.A.’s performative occupation was not a disruption, but more an extension of Iveković’s work. Both these unauthorized gestures, however, performed a critique on Documenta 14’s broader institutional politics, which showed an insistence on the notion of the public. At the same time, these performative interventions disrupt or bypass circulation, questioning the conditions one-off events such as Documenta 14 provide for commoning infrastructures in the city, even when they engage with artists, practitioners or migrants.

Among the works that invite thinking of commoning in the context of Athens is Rasheed Araeen's *Shamiyaana – Food for Thought: Thought for change* (2017). Inspired by a traditional Pakistani wedding tent, the work functioned as an open-air restaurant which served free meals to city dwellers in Kotzia square, directly opposite the City Hall and near the central Athens food market. The work continues the artist's long-term engagement with migration, collective food production and more equitable distribution of resources. Here, a communal space emerged daily as people from various backgrounds were able to share a table and engage in conversation. However, its potentials are problematized when thought of alongside social kitchens in the city, such as O Allos Anthropos, which create sharing bonds between volunteers and recipients by cooking, distributing food and eating together. Araeen's work is not charity, nor an urban food festival, like the ones often taking place on the square, but, in keeping the division between those preparing and enjoying the meal firm, it resists a reading as common space. Moreover, the meal was provided by a social enterprise funded by the foundation of one of the richest families in Greece. As such, despite the exchanges among those eating together, the work unavoidably also leaned towards the NGO logic of providing a service and, in my view, negotiated more the boundaries between a private and a communal space, rather than a space for commoning through a collaboration across all its facets.

The most exceptional work in this frame of potentializing processes of instituting commoning and infrastructure is *Victoria Square Project* by artist Rick Lowe, in collaboration with Maria Papadimitriou. The work continues both artists' interest in social sculptures. It is also exceptional as it is the only artwork which still remains active in the city beyond Documenta 14's presence in Athens. The project is hosted in a building located near Victoria Square, which often becomes the refuge for refugees evicted out of solidarity spaces or state-led camps and then met with hostility by the municipality on the square;— for example, one such hostile act happened during the pandemic, in June 2020, when the municipality removed all public benches from the square. *Victoria Square Project* has become a hub for migrant communities and businesses in the neighborhood, who either set up their own activities or participate in projects by artists from diverse



backgrounds and practices. As per my latest visit in June 2019, the space is not run as a commons, but operates between artistic entrepreneurship and self-organization, since a small team coordinates the activities and maintains the building. While the contradiction of working with the municipality is retained, the space is open to newcomers and open to more collective decision-making processes in the future, according to the coordinators (Kalivis, 2019). Given that many squats set between solidarians and asylum-seekers in the city have been systematically raided by the police with eviction orders from both left-wing and right-wing governments, the ongoing presence and open potential of this space cannot be underestimated.

### **Between conditions of (im)possibility and horizons**

I would argue that, rather than only being a tool of German cultural policy and an event expected to have a significant impact on Kassel and the region, documenta must be considered an autonomous, commonly owned, transnational and inclusive self-organized artistic undertaking - one that is carried out by a multitude and not limited to any location in particular. (Szymczyk, 2017, p. 40, 41)

This is the curatorial vision that Adam Szymczyk posits in his essay at Documenta 14's main publication, *The Reader*. "Who owns documenta?" he asks, suggesting that Documenta should not be seen as owned by its stakeholders and that Kassel holds the exclusive right to host the exhibition (Szymczyk, 2017, p.40). Rather, Documenta does not exist for the curator but as an event that recurs every 5 years. In fact, he begins his essay by naming Documenta the institution as a condition of near impossibility for realizing Documenta the exhibition as political, open and inclusive. In the first lines we learn that the Documenta 14 team had to negotiate with Documenta the institution for an initial unequal distribution of funds between the two cities, in order to realize the Athens leg as equal to that of Kassel. Performing institutional critique is prioritized, as the director gives us relatively little insight into the kind of conditions of possibility that Documenta 14 created for sharing its power and agency and instituting



**FIG. 3**  
Rick Lowe and Maria Papadimitriou, lead artists, *Victoria Square Project*, 2017 - , social sculpture, Elpidos 13, Victoria Square, Athens. Photo from the project *Fun Palaces in Athens*, in collaboration with synAthina. Sunday, October 6, 2019.  
*Photo: Alexandra Masmanidi*

ways of being in common with Athens. There are certainly no other voices invited to contribute towards the publication to account for the different institutional alliances in the Athens leg.

In a brief sentence in his essay, Szymczyk suggests that instituting in the commons means performative or practical acts of coming together, like rituals or celebrations, acts of radical subjectivation that contest sovereign forms of power, precarious labour and antagonisms.

In this vision, Documenta is thought as a parliament of bodies that embodies the multitude, able to continue reassembling and institute beyond the event of Documenta 14 as a collective social subject (Szymczyk, 2017). Understood with Hardt and Negri (2004), the multitude is a potentially subversive collective subjectivity in globalization. Considering its queer transfeminist and antiracial politics, the materialized Parliament of Bodies in Athens took on board the known critique addressed to the theorists for privileging the common in relation to white male subjects and production relations. Rather, the Parliament of Bodies gestured beyond identities and privileged subjects—be it women, the formerly colonized or those invisible or precarized by labor. However, the Parliament of Bodies itself acquires a privilege when considering Szymczyk's vision in the frame of biennialization.

The Parliament of Bodies can be seen both as a condition of possibility for instituting transnational infrastructures for commoning, while it compels us to ask what scholars like Stavrides (2016) see as imperative for the commons; namely, how to prevent value produced from some form of commoning to perpetuate power relations and inequalities. The Parliament

of Bodies as a multitude compels one to ask how accumulation of power can be prevented, knowing that discursive biennials are sites where one can accumulate individual reputational capital and further circulate in the global (biennial and beyond) art circuits (Kompatsiaris, 2017). Perhaps the Parliament of Bodies' re-emergence after Documenta 14's closing on two other contexts with a select number of participants from Documenta 14 (Warsaw's MoMA 2018 and Bergen Assembly 2019) illustrates the relevance of this question. Its continuation was premised on a self-proclaimed failure to transform Documenta's economy and institution, "mutating into an apartheid institution-in-becoming and without constitution that parasites other institutions to provoke critical metamorphosis and repolitization" (Artmuseum, 2018). We may see the Parliament of Bodies as a relational device that bears the potential of a performative occupation to queer and disrupt the institutions it will leech onto. However, whether such recurrent performative occupations contribute more to the commoning of institutions like Documenta or, rather, they mark the biennialization of the commons, is currently open.

### **In lieu of conclusion**

Taking as a starting point the performative declaration, "Documenta 14 is a commons," in this paper, I approached commoning and Documenta 14 with the exhibition's move to Athens in a context of solidarity and commoning practices. I located potential understandings and engagements with commoning in institutional alliances, public program and works in public space. Lastly, I referred to the artistic director's vision, which pointed to the commons as a horizon for instituting Documenta as an event that continues to enable performative occupations and transnational alliances, but which unavoidably poses the question of how one can avoid the accumulation of power that circulating in biennial circuits creates.

I would argue that Documenta 14's gesture of coming to Athens was ultimately more defined by its insistence on the notion of the public, rather than its engagement with commoning in the context of Athens. While the public program and artworks were hospitable to commons struggles, making the leap from a discursive or communal space to a common space

based on sharing processes with those actively reinventing the city through collective practices on the ground was not necessarily potentialized. The emphasis on public institutions as common goods largely enclosed cooperation in a frame of state-led institutions, in a context where the state has not been a guarantor for art institutions. As an instituting process based on sharing, the move was underpinned by gaps, as shown through the unrealized alliance with the Athens Biennale. Documenta 14 did not avoid the contradiction of having to rely on public authorities—such as the Athens municipality, which has been leading or tolerating evictions from refugee solidarity spaces—for its venues. The contradiction between inviting activists to be part of their program while relying on those who have the power to enclose commoning in spaces like City Plaza, is not new in biennials. Similar contradictions underpin the Athens Biennale too, which partners with the municipality, while engaging with collective art practices. Documenta 14's insistence on the public appears to be more akin to Athanasiou's (2016) argument, which sees anti-neoliberal politics taking the position of defending public institutions, while criticizing their normative violence, in the frame of a performative ambivalence of decentering the institution. However, isn't this also a limitation in terms of potentializing the horizon of commoning beyond the public and organizing social life beyond dependence on these structures that have the power to enclose commoning? Between Documenta 14's performative claim as a commons and potentializing commoning in Athens as part of an intended instituting process, I would argue that the distance to be traversed remains significant. \*

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