

*Exhibition Review: “Native American Art at Documenta 14 and
the Issue of Democracy”*

Documenta 14, Kassel, Germany and Athens, Greece (April-July, 2017)

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As democracy seems to be faltering in a number of places around the globe, the current political moment raises questions about how art might serve as a means and mechanism through which democracy can be forcefully reasserted. The dual documenta exhibitions in Kassel and Athens in the summer of 2017 seemed to question the relationship between art and democracy, as well as that between Global North and Global South, which the exhibition ambitiously seemed to want to unite. Held every five years since 1955, the well-funded exhibition came to showcase advanced and challenging art of the West; it became associated with a 1970s agenda of moving art into life and thereby expanding democracy.

Democracy continued to be a preoccupation for Documenta in 2017. Among other points of emphasis, the 2017 Documenta foregrounded historical and emerging artists who engaged with democracy in dynamic ways. Many experimented with producing a kind of democracy effect, or with critical thinking about the shifting communities of which we are part during an era of instability and globalization backlash. Native artists engaged with the representation of specific indigenous peoples who have been marginalized subjects in western exhibition spaces. These new representations not only destabilize western art institutions, but also assert the right of Native people to access the cultural realm of high art as a cultural and intellectual resource that offers ways to work through generational and other shared trauma that has resulted from brutal colonialist persecution.

Taken together, art by these artists suggests that trauma has become central to recent political art that takes on the issue of democracy. The democracy effect has to do with asserting the migrant and indigenous persons not only as an image or body but also as a subject who uses art to construct a wider community. It also has to do with the revival of oppressed or forgotten traditions that seek to revise

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the institutional boundaries of western art. In a recent book C. Fred Alford argues that beyond individual trauma, group trauma also exists. The latter results when a hegemonic social group restricts other groups' access to what he calls "cultural resources [that] a society provides its members to ward off trauma."¹ His list of these possibly withheld cultural resources includes education, a sense of a coherent community, philosophy, religion, music and last but not least, art. Trauma can also be intergenerational and passed on when an older generation is unable to communicate its trauma, or as he says, "when the way it [the older generation] speaks and the way it acts are at odds."² He suggests that there is an inherently political dimension to the experience of trauma and that knowledge can result from historical and group trauma.

As an icon of the origins of democracy, the Athenian Parthenon was frequently referenced in Kassel, most obviously in an installation by the Argentine artist Marta Minujín, *The Parthenon of Books* (originally installed in Buenos Aires in 1983) which featured donated books banned from various countries throughout history. Minujín positioned her structure on a site where the Nazis had once held a book burning, directly in front of the Kassel Fridericianum, one of the oldest museums in Europe and itself a neoclassical emulation of classical Greek architecture. This juxtaposition pointed to Germany's aesthetic debt to Greece, one that should have merited the exchange of a gift of similar permanence. It instead foregrounded the fact of Greece's ongoing financial crisis—a cultural situation that is a direct consequence of Greece's present indebtedness to Germany. Unfortunately the tensions between Greece and the E.U. concerning Greek debt, controlled by mostly German multinational banks, along with the hardships imposed by E.U. austerity measures and its refusal to forgive the Greek debt, added a further layer of tension to documenta's complex exhibition arrangements.

The figure of transience and rootlessness in a world of nation-states has become a crucial testing ground for public discourse on democracy, for, in addition to the loaded question of how to represent the body of the displaced, recent art critiques current notions of what constitutes a democratic society or community. Arguably, these artists generate a democracy effect in asking us as viewers to confront our own understanding of lived democracy—of belonging and of sharing a commitment to community needs as they arise. I use the term "democracy effect" to suggest that in being asked to think about how we are to be attentive to the needs of community we enter a frame of mind that is itself democratic. We might even talk about the rise of a critical mass of contemporary art that is concerned with the ethics of lived democracy. The displaced thinkers of the exiled Frankfurt School, Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse, advocated for such an ethics in their belief that culture (and aesthetics) must carry within it the remembrance of the immensity of human suffering. Noam Chomsky and George Yancy recently reconnected to this idea and underscored that the possibility of social change hinges upon the

capacity to witness and empathize with suffering that we ourselves do not know.³ By educating the viewer about empathy for others and refiguring our relationship with the needs and concerns of new communities as they are presently being formed, these current artists concern themselves with the democracy effect.

New art by Native artists evidences a pedagogical engagement with this democracy effect, focusing it on the revisionist histories of colonialist expansion and the trauma it continues to generate. The contributions to Documenta by the Native curator Candice Hopkins, and Native artists Beau Dick and the collective Postcommodity, underscored the historical trauma and “colonial aphasia” that resulted from “extractive colonialism,” that is, from the expansionist and genocidal drive for capital in North America in the nineteenth century.⁴ Their scholarship and artwork forward a revisionist history of westward expansion, one that also revives forms of indigenous art and accompanying Native knowledge systems that western empiricism actively sought to erase over centuries. In foregrounding the language of storytelling and oral history Hopkins’ revisionist scholarship declines to conform to the language of conventional historical discourse. Hopkins describes the most dramatic moment of North American colonialism, the “gold rush” on the Lingít Aaní, the land of the Tlingit and Tagish people, also known as the Yukon territory, from 1896 to 1899. The artists Beau Dick and in the Postcommodity collective also cast a critical eye upon the (western) art gallery and museum, key institutions that have formulated and policed the canon and boundaries of western culture since the nineteenth century. State policies such as the Indian Act of 1876 (Canada) facilitated the extraction of natural resources of various kinds during the historical period of colonialist expansion, and are manifested to the present day. Last year, on March 26, 2018, prime minister Justin Trudeau delivered an official “statement of exoneration” to the descendants of six Tsilhqot’in war chiefs who were executed in 1864. The exoneration related to what Anglos have called the “Chilcotin War” in 1864, when the Tsilhqot’in killed Anglos who they’d discovered in the process of constructing roads on their land; in response the British Columbian colonial government arrested and executed their chiefs.

Last year’s Ottawa ceremony could only take place after decades of activism that urged reconciliation and improved relations between federal governments and indigenous people that it had displaced and abandoned or worse during the modern era. This activism includes the actions of the artist and master carver Beau Dick. Dick, a hereditary chief from the Namgis First Nation (and sadly, who passed away in July 2017), had in 2014 culminated days of travel across all of Canada with the ancient ritual action of breaking a copper (which is the cutting or breaking of a traditional copper shield) on Parliament Hill in Ottawa. The breaking of a copper is part of a traditional shaming ritual which, as Dick explained, “is a challenge, it is also a shaming, and it is also about banishment.”⁵ In reviving this almost forgotten ritual of the Northwest coast, Dick made clear that his point wasn’t protest but



Postcommodity, *The Ears Between Worlds are Always Speaking*, Aristotle's Lyceum, Athens, 2017, photo by the author

rather to trigger a “waking up [of] consciousness” about old colonial and economic relations between federal governments and First Nations communities which had their origin in colonial extraction campaigns and its consequences, such as the Tsilhqot’in executions of 1864. In a display of cooperation and shared experience with the trauma of colonialism, Giindajin HaawastiGuujaaw, a master carver of the Haida Nation, had provided the copper for Dick’s ceremony. In his contribution to documenta in Kassel, Dick carefully arranged three intact coppers among the masks and figures from his “Undersea Kingdom” series of 2016-17. The masks in his installation depict Raven, Bear, Big and little Whale, and Dzunuk’wa among other figures in Kwakwaka’wakw cosmology.⁶ The coppers are then material reminders of the Namgis Nation’s demand for Anglos to come to terms with the violent history of colonialist destruction and genocide. Beau Dick positions these artifacts and instruments in the galleries of documenta, claiming a space for indigenous objects within the institution of western art. The masks’ and the coppers’ status as both non-art and art challenges the traditional boundaries or limits of the art institution. Perhaps these masks, like other objects Dick has placed in previous exhibitions, were also returned to Alert Bay and danced for a final time before they were ceremonially burned.

The U.S.-Southwest-based artists’ collective Postcommodity completed a site-specific sound installation in Athens titled *The Ears Between Worlds Are Always Speaking*. The installation was situated in and around the ancient ruins of Aristotle’s Lyceum, itself positioned between the Athens Conservatory of Music, the Athens

War Museum, and the Hellenic Armed Forces Officers Club. For eight hours each day, interspersed with periods of silence, two Long Range Acoustic Devices (LRADs) broadcast this two-channel “hyperdirectional opera” sung and spoken in several languages, and combined music from Greece and the Southwest. The type of “hyperdirectional” speakers installed by Postcommodity are electronics originally developed by the military for psychological and other types of warfare but which the collective appropriates and deploys differently. Postcommodity appropriates this technology, once used to vanquish marginalized people, to illuminate the plight of the displaced “during a time of the greatest mass migration in history,” as the group has stated.⁷ The opera’s libretto focuses on stories of “long-walk” migrations and forced displacements from around the world and throughout history, and therefore open the work to oral and indigenous histories. The visitor makes her way about this ancient site of the Lyceum, transversing where Aristotle’s ancient “Peripatetic School” also walked the same gardens and developed new forms of knowledge. She moves between the sounds of oral histories, song or “narratives of self-determination” in this space spoken by subjects whose trauma formerly silenced and marginalized them.⁸ Postcommodity thus encourages but does not require a dialogic pedagogical moment that opens to indigenous knowledge systems; no material trace of Postcommodity’s intervention is left at this ancient site. They use the ephemeral, non-material medium of sound to propose a radical expansion of the boundaries of western knowledge systems.

Perhaps the engagement of recent art with migration, colonialism, or with democracy in decline in both historic and present-day manifestations, attempts to recover art as a psychic and therapeutic engine and, with it, returns to older notions of human progress and the necessity of a shared notion of social cooperation and the civic good. John Dewey, twentieth-century American philosopher and educational reformer, forwarded these ideas. Dewey understood that the perpetuation of democracy relied not so much on a system of government, but on an ethics and a guided sense of identity grounded in civil society and in membership in a community that is responsible and responsive in addressing social needs. He thought that this frame of mind should be provided by enlightened and empowering teachers. He also considered this ideology central to the strengthening of democracy. Critical and progressive art of the present positions us to think about the interconnectedness of the human communities of which we are all now part—even those of the displaced and marginalized that are arguably among the most transient. Perhaps the art that I’ve discussed here also offers a critical reckoning with its own political possibilities.

1 C. Fred Alford, *Trauma, Culture, and PTSD* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 2.

2 *Ibid.*, 3.

3 George Yancy and Noam Chomsky, “Noam Chomsky: On Trump and the State of the Union,”

New York Times, July 5, 2017.

4 Candice Hopkins, "The Gilded Gaze: Wealth and Economies on the Colonial Frontier," *The documenta 14 Reader*, Quinn Latimer and Adam Szymczyk, eds. (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2017), 219-250; for the term "colonial aphasia" see pp. 239-40.

5 Martha Troian, "Copper broken on Parliament Hill in First Nations shaming ceremony," *CBC News* (July 27, 2014): <http://www.cbc.ca/news/indigenous/copper-broken-on-parliament-hill-in-first-nations-shaming-ceremony-1.2719175>.

6 Wall labels in documenta Hall, Kassel; *documenta 14: Daybook* (Munich: Prestel, 2017), August 15th entry.

7 *documenta 14: Daybook* entry

8 Ibid.