

Solidarity

Live your Greece in myth

Audrey Schmidt, *Athens and Kassel*

The experience of 'documenta 14' in Athens was necessarily shaped by the Athenian landscape itself, which was well traversed considering that it spread across 47 venues with up to 30 kilometres between some of them. There has been a documented spike in politically motivated graffiti in Athens in light of the economic crisis, which became central to the tourist experience along with the ancient ruins and abandoned shopfronts that collectively created the ambience of a post-apocalyptic genre film. It was this intersection of the cityscape and some of the artworks that was the most engaging aspect of the now widely criticised recent edition of the quinquennial exhibition. Amid the heavy-handed curation and uninspiring (or intentionally de-spectacularised), sprawling form cut by 'documenta 14' across Athens and Kassel, sat a rare instance of synergy: a collaboration between Waanyi Aboriginal artist Gordon Hookey and the bleak urban landscape shaped by the Athenian crisis since 2009. The graffiti has become so much a part of the 'context' in Athens that documenta curators organised for Hookey to take a tour with bombers and writers assigned to work with him on the project. While the idea of this graffiti tour did nothing to dispel my hesitations with regard to the prevalent nationalistic discourse of Greece, land of the south, land of disobedience; be it by chance or divine intervention (curatorship), this context suited Hookey's practice better than most.

The curatorship of documenta's Artistic Director Adam Szymczyk and the endless supporting texts and public programs came to shape the experience of the exhibition into an authoritarian political statement on the current state of neoliberalism, globalisation and its precarity. Aside from the obvious contradictions inherent in positioning the 31 curatorial workers of 'documenta 14' as the morally unsullied, anti-capitalist custodians of an exhibition with a €37.5 million budget, Szymczyk went on to claim, at the April press conference in Athens, that 'an exhibition should be an experience, without great programmed expectations'.¹ This position perhaps accounted for the lack of information available prior to and during the previews, but completely ignored the prescriptive curatorship that near-policed the 'experience' of audiences. As a result, the artists and artworks included in 'documenta 14' often felt ancillary to Szymczyk's curatorial agenda.

The coopting of activist language and imagery in order to create an association between a product or brand and the desire for liberation is hot right now. From Just Cavalli's 2013–14 advertising campaign, to Dior's 'we should all be feminists', right through to this year's Pepsi commercial with Kendall Jenner. In such a cultural environment, it is rarely long before consumer-

ism coopts countercultural movements, reducing their aims and methods to a set of marketable slogans and signs. It was perhaps this environment that bred my scepticism for documenta's brand of activism (or 'crisis romance') that seemed to equate art tourism with being a part of the solution, supporting the cause: 'Learning from Athens'.²

Hookey's work has often been described as incorporating multiple aesthetic styles and practices, exploiting the interplay of text and pictorial elements to cut across the conventions of historical painting, pop art, graffiti, surrealism and mural art.³ Hookey's work in Athens, *Solidarity* (2017), was painted directly onto the concrete walls of the Athens School of Fine Arts. A raised black fist, a symbol of unity or solidarity, rises out of the earth at the end of a rainbow that extends out of frame. The tree-like roots of the clenched fist, housing glimmers of gold and silver love hearts, reach down to meet the pavement and the word 'solidarity' written in bold red text – the 'O' also taking the form of a heart. Etched into the blue sky are the words of Che Guevara: 'Let me say, at the risk of seeming ridiculous, that the true revolutionary is guided by great feelings of love.'

In his essay on graffiti in post-crisis Greece, Yiannis Zaimakis emphasises the use by writers of prominent political figures, popular heroes and revolutionary vocabulary works to 'achieve [a] political message passing effectively across different types of publics'.⁴ Characteristic of Hookey's work as well, *Solidarity* was not only accessible in its public positioning but also in its highly familiar subject matter. The entry of political messages regarded as marginal by the media/popular culture into public discourse is a key effect of both graffiti and Hookey's oeuvre and, as such, their synchronicity proved particularly successful.

While on the surface *Solidarity* may seem overly optimistic, the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow seems to imply a veneer of cynicism to the utopian mission of marginalised solidarity as one that is steeped in fantasy. The pot of gold remains (almost) unattainable as the end of the rainbow itself is a constantly moving target. Between the word 'solidarity', over the roots of the fist, was a pre-existing graffiti 'piece', and at the top right another sample of graffiti read 'crapumenta' in Greek. In my conversations with Hookey ahead of writing this essay, he expressed his desire to tread carefully in Athens, to not be too 'loud' in imposing concepts or ideas on the Athenian context – a position Szymczyk would have done well to consider. Hookey's scrupulous incorporation of the local graffiti into his work rather than seizing the space wholly for himself was clearly demonstrative of these intentions. So despite the acknowledged utopianism of 'solidarity', there was a real, felt understanding for



Gordon Hookey, *Solidarity*, 2017, installation view, 'documenta 14', Athens School of Fine Arts, 2017; acrylic paint on concrete; image courtesy and © Gordon Hookey/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2017; photo: Stathis Mamelakis



Gordon Hookey, *MURRILAND*, 2017, installation view, 'documenta 14', Neue Neue Galerie (Neue Hauptpost), Kassel, 2017; oil on linen and mural; image courtesy and © Gordon Hookey/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2017; photo: Michael Nast

the oppression of others – a sentiment that Hookey has revealed is intimately tied to the Aboriginal worldview which resides in ‘empathy and kinship with everything’.⁵

Hookey’s distinctive paintings, which he describes as ‘accumulative’, have something else in common with a wall inscribed with multiple layers of graffiti – the latent potential to build alternative, or counter-hegemonic spaces of representation that challenge existing social structures and narratives that have historically worked to obscure and pervert the course of justice. For the Kassel leg of the exhibit, Hookey’s work *MURRILAND!* (2017) rewrote the popularly imagined history of his Australian home state, Queensland, inspired by Congolese painter Tshibumba Kanda Matulu’s *History of Zaire* (1973–74) – a foundational reference proposed by the roaming art platform Frontier Imaginaries.⁶ The rainbow of *Solidarity* extended into this work and ran through its 10-metre length, referencing the Aboriginal Rainbow Snake motif and exemplifying Hookey’s accumulative approach.

Hookey and the graffiti writers of Athens worked to challenge hegemonic spaces of representation primarily through the dissident use of language and repurposed iconography. This was remarkably apparent in *MURRILAND!*, which employed Aboriginal English and wordplay to disrupt conventional linguistic meaning and reposition language itself as a tool of colonialist oppression. As Hookey has often noted, English is his second language – being violently alienated from his first – and so he considers it his right to use and pervert the English language and culture with unrestrained and wilful freedom in his art practice.⁷

MURRILAND! itself referenced the broad term ‘Murri’ that encompasses all Aboriginal people of Queensland and so, in its renaming, Hookey has reclaimed the state whose borders have since been defined by a western approach to mapping (defined by colonisation) rather than by the distinct Aboriginal language groups or Nations within, and across, those boundaries. The repositioning of colonialist Australian insignia was poignantly illustrated by a map-like inset showing an enlarged view of the Southern Cross with the word ‘Austika’ affixed. This deft association with the swastika – itself a symbol commandeered by fascism – succeeded in illuminating the white nationalism the Southern Cross has come to represent.

On the mural extension of Hookey’s 10-metre canvas in Kassel, an army of anthropomorphised kangaroos with the Aboriginal flag reflected in their sunglasses, stood armed with ‘New Clear Proliferation’, emphasising again the importance of, and strength in, alliances and camaraderie as a revolutionary blueprint. Another inset of the mural revealed the reappearing pot of gold, led by an arrow to a disembodied white arm holding an Aboriginal flag – again calling into question the illusive concept of solidarity, implying that the guardians of, and thus also the contemporary obstacle to, true solidarity remain with the white Australia that has consistently failed its First Peoples.

One key example of linguistic subversion in Athenian graffiti came to mind with ‘Live your myth in Greece’, the slogan coined by the Ministry of Tourism during the 2004

Summer Olympics, repurposed to read ‘Live your Greece in myth’.⁸ In amongst documenta’s sweeping political statements and suffocating prescriptive texts and guides, Hookey’s inclusion felt like a much-needed spotlight on the mythology of unity in an exhibition that claimed to be unified by its representation of marginalised artists, without dismissing the importance and power of solidarity. The biggest farce of documenta can be found in the words of Alain Locke in his seminal 1928 critique of art-as-propaganda: ‘[I]t perpetuates the position of group inferiority even in crying out against it ... according to the exotic tastes of a pampered and decadent public.’⁹ While the public wasn’t necessarily ‘pampered’ by a decadent spectacle in the context of ‘documenta 14’ in Athens, Hookey navigated the contradictory authoritarian tone of the exhibition with a play on revolutionary vocabulary that encouraged the viewer to re-evaluate where mythology, history and propaganda intersect – without pandering to curatorial exoticism.

1. See Hili Perlson, ‘The Tao of Szymczyk: documenta 14 curator says to understand his show, forget everything you know’, *Artnet.com*, 6 April 2017: news.artnet.com/art-world/adam-szymczyk-press-conference-documenta-14-916991, accessed 8 September 2017.

2. ‘Learning from Athens’ was the controversial working title of ‘documenta 14’.

3. See, for example, Joseph Pugliese, ‘Gordon Hookey: Theatres of war’, *On Reason and Emotion: Biennale of Sydney 2004*, exhibition catalogue, Biennale of Sydney, 2004, pp. 110–13.

4. Yiannis Zaimakis, ‘“Welcome to the civilization of fear”: On political graffiti heterotopias in Greece in times of crisis’, *Visual Communication*, vol. 14, no. 4, 2015, pp. 393–4.

5. Gordon Hookey, ‘Terrorism and terraism’, *Borderlands e-journal*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2006, p. 7.

6. Although the completed first canvas of *MURRILAND!* was unveiled in Kassel as part of ‘documenta 14’, an earlier stage was shown at Brisbane’s Institute of Modern Art in 2016, and later stages will be exhibited at Eindhoven’s Van Abbemuseum in 2018.

7. Hookey, op. cit.

8. Zaimakis, op. cit., p. 380.

9. Alain Locke, ‘Art or propaganda?’, *Harlem*, vol. 1, no. 1, November 1928.

‘documenta 14’ was on display in Athens from 8 April until 16 July 2017, and in Kassel from 10 June until 17 September 2017.

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Cover:
Hossein Valamanesh, *Hasti Masti*, 2016,
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