

NUIT BANAI ON DOCUMENTA 14



Graffiti, Dionysiou
Areopagitou Street,
Athens, April 9, 2017.
Photo: Louisa
Gouliamaki/Getty Images.

INAUGURATED BY ARNOLD BODE in 1955 in the bombed-out ruins of Kassel, a formerly industrial city that ended up on the eastern fringes of what had newly become West Germany, Documenta was famously intended to heal the wounds of recent European history by affirming the continuity of (Western) modernism. At the core of this civilizing mission was abstraction, whose formal language became a symbol of individualism and artistic freedom, and a means to differentiate West from East in the early years of the Cold War. Kassel thus became the stage for the construction of the contemporary in relation to highly contested (art-) historical, sociopolitical, and ideological entanglements. Circa 1955, the formation and future of "Europe" as moral arbiter and guardian of humanistic values was given a place and an aesthetic in Kassel, underscoring its identity as the border of the West.

Countless other artists likewise present works that make visible the multiple narratives and subjectivities that have been contained, repressed, or erased by the dominant powers and the histories they tell. Among my personal discoveries were Erna Rosenstein, whose 1979 paintings of her parents, murdered trying to flee the Łódź Ghetto, are rendered in a haunting surrealist figuration; and Edi Hila, whose muted paintings show Albanian land- and cityscapes in a state of postsocialist decay. A few works spoke directly to the immense distances and vastly different contexts involved in the exhibition's integration of the border into its formal structure—for example, Sokol Beqiri's *Adonis*, 2017, for which the Kosovo-born artist grafted branches from an oak tree in Kassel onto an Athenian oak at Athens Polytechnic, a symbolic site where student protesters were killed in great numbers after staging an uprising against the right-wing government in 1973.

GALERIE MITTERRAND



This is the Documenta I always wanted:
difficult, demanding, experimental, and
unafraid to take risks.

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