Documenta is the art world’s version of a G-20 Summit. This year, the iteration of Documenta 14 has coincided with the Basel Art Fair and Venice Biennale and differs from the other venues mentioned because it is not of a commercial context. It is a think tank that began in Kassel, Germany in 1955 and occurs every five years as a curatorial platform of experimentation and trendsetting exhibition planning. Curators prime themselves to respond to the ideas and theories forwarded. Documenta 14 continues through September 17 and is split between Kassel, Germany and Athens, Greece.

Leora Maltz-Leca, associate professor of contemporary art history and chair of the history of art and visual culture at Rhode Island School of Design and the newly appointed curator of contemporary projects at Redwood Library and Athenaeum in Newport, Rhode Island, attended Documenta 14. She was “Cornered” by Artscope’s Suzanne Volmer to share her impressions of the event.

SUZANNE VOLMER: WHAT MOST INTERESTED YOU AND WHAT DID AUDIENCES SEEM TO MOST IDENTIFY WITH?

LEORA MALTZ-LECA: In my view, Documenta was deeply invested in recasting modernism as a colonial enterprise, founded on and fueled by plunder and exploitation. It illuminated the extent to which racism, xenophobia, anti-semitism and slavery are embedded in the intellectual and artistic project we call modernism; they are its [largely repressed] verso or underside. This is not a new argument by any means, but the scale and rigor with which it was made was exemplary. This aspect of the exhibition probably resonated with me most because [in my own art history lectures at RISD] I have always taught modernism in this way: as an aesthetic project embedded in an economic and political one. But I grew up in Africa, where one can’t help but understand modernism as the cultural project of colonialism. For Adam Szymczyk and his team of brilliant and thoughtful curators to use Documenta not to plug novelty or to stage a grand new theory, but rather to recast the historical record of modernism, was exceptionally refreshing.

WHAT WERE THE ARCHING IDEAS OR TRENDS OBVIOUS AND LESS OBVIOUS?

Although there was a pointed refusal of a single overarching theme – save, perhaps, the notion of “learning” as a kind of Brechtian “un-learning” – there were numerous microthemes that played out in various artworks, each time with slight differences and varying perspectives, ultimately forming a rich tapestry of meaning and countermeaning, learning and un-learning.

Perhaps the most consistent concern was a radical sensitivity to site. The decision to split the project between Kassel and Athens speaks to this, and it shaped the exhibition at the macro level, so that the work in Athens plumbed the ancient and recent histories of the city: its Classical past, its proximity to North Africa and the Middle East, its economic travails, its refugee crises. But site determined, too, the specific groupings of works shown at individual venues, be it an art museum, a former train station, a one-time post office or a working library. In each case, there was enormous self-reflexivity about the histories and contradictions of that site, its epistemological possibilities and limits.

For instance, in Athens, much of the work installed at the Athens School of Fine Art dealt with reclaiming lost or overlooked histories of art institutions, and often radical pedagogical experi-
ments in places like Valparaiso, Chile or West Bengal. In Kassel, by contrast, the history of the Holocaust was palpable. It was chilling to see Marta Minujín’s life-size Parthenon of censored books in Friedrichsplatz, in the very place where books had been burned by the Nazis; or to view art installed in the train station, and then to see [in Bonita Ely’s installation] photographs taken of Hanna and Beate Ruth Speier, ten- and eleven-year old Jewish sisters, who were sent to the death camps from that same train station.

At the Neue Galerie, Documenta work was skillfully interwoven with the museum’s collection, incorporating and dialoguing with the institutional memory of the site to historicize the Holocaust as embedded in centuries-old discourses of racism and colonialism. A copy of Le Code Noir, the 1685 legal manual on slavery, was on view. Nineteenth-century prints of racial “types” were displayed. And the museum’s collection was recast. For instance, soon after entering, one encountered a row of neo-Classical marble sculptures by Carl Echtermeier from the 1880s, allegorical embodiments of the European nations. But they were prefaced by a trio of Benin bronzes taken during the punitive raid of 1897, plaques that narrated the kingdom’s history since the thirteenth century. So, we come to understand that the removal of the bronzes occurs — not by coincidence — at the very moment when European states are attempting to invent themselves as coherent entities. Such juxtapositions implied the dialectical dependence of these works; that the invention of one nation hinges on the cultural erasure of the other. And that colonial plunder and nationalist myth form the ground of both modernism and its museums.

**WHAT WERE THE STANDOUT ARTWORKS, AND THEORIES AFOOT AND FROM WHOM?**

To remain at the Neue Galerie: Maria Eichhorn’s project, Rose Valland Institute Library and Reading Room, was a brilliant investigation of the Nazi looting, sorting, and stealing of Jewish books and art, detailing filed and lost lawsuits, rigged auction records and the massive extant archive of “lost” and stolen works that suggests just how unsettled this history remains. It was one of many reading rooms and book-related projects at Documenta that confirmed for me not just the embeddedness of contemporary art and books — which is one impulse behind the Redwood’s new Contemporary Art initiative, that reading is inherent to making — but also the historical interdependence of the two.

The Neue Galerie exhibition concluded with Israeli artist Roee Rosen’s video “The Dust Channel,” a wonderfully quirky domestic drama involving classical musicians, obsessive vacuuming and hairy armpits. It riffed on the phobic projection of “dirt” onto the other — a constant of the racist imagination that extends, says the artist, to Israel’s own abusive treatment of refugees and illegal immigrants. And the opening work in the building was “Carved to Flow,” Otobong Nkanga’s installation on soap, black soap made in Athens with charcoal, that powerfully recast the Victorian obsession with cleanliness and/as whiteness, and all its devastating implications of “cleansing.”

In Athens, Sammy Baloji’s “Tales of the Copper Cross Garden: Episode 1” (2017); Maria Lai’s thread geographies, wonderful hybrids of exploded books and loose threads; Amar Kanwar’s poetic film “Such a Morning”; and Hiwa K, “Blind as the Mother Tongue” were all standouts for me.

**CLOSING THOUGHTS?**

In general, the attention to history — especially to showcasing lost, forgotten, marginalized and repressed histories — was a defining feature of the exhibition. This is less a theme than an ethics of redistribution. Shows like Documenta are usually a gathering of the most important and celebrated art stars, or at least a mix of stars, mid-career artists, and unknowns. This Documenta featured, instead, a great deal of people and places that have been written out of modernist history: Sami artists from Norway, Aboriginal artists from Australia, and mid-century painters from Albania. Documenta 2017 consigned its high-profile platform to the largely unheard, the voiceless, the silenced. And in an era when such silencing seems only to be on the rise, Adam Szymczyk and his team are to be applauded.