

ADAM SZYMCZYK

“I don't trust the choice between yes and no”

Adam Szymczyk is the artistic director of documenta 14, which will take place in Kassel and Athens. In an exclusive interview prior to the referendum, he makes a plea for understanding Greece.

Interview: Margarita Tsomou, Athens

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Adam Szymczyk, born in 1970, is the artistic director of documenta 14, which will take place in Athens and Kassel in 2017. | © documenta 14

ZEIT ONLINE: Mr. Szymczyk, how have you experienced the past days in Athens?

Adam Szymczyk: It's quiet, the streets are empty, less vibrant than usual; even the demonstrations are not as energetic as they are otherwise. People are waiting. They are in a kind of state of shock and traumatized. A trauma that has lasted for years and blocks their ability to react. I haven't seen either enthusiasm or panic, but rather introspection, worry, and even shame.

ZEIT ONLINE: Why shame?

Szymczyk: People are ashamed to have been put in the position of the pariah, the outcast. That's a poison that has been fed to the Greeks for years. Sooner or later they'll have to vomit it out.

ZEIT ONLINE: The conflicts in Europe are meanwhile being staged as an antagonism between Germany and Greece. It's certainly not easy to be the one to bring an international exhibition based in Germany to Greece. How do you feel in the middle of the storm?

MARGARITA TSOMOU



The activist and journalist Margarita Tsomou, born in 1977, is editor of *Missy Magazin*. She has both German as well as Greek citizenship and champions a German solidarity movement with Greece. Syriza, the Coalition of the Radical Left, is the subject of her dissertation.

Szymczyk: The discussion about Greece versus Germany seems absurd to me. With documenta 14 we want to put our finger on it and “exhibit” the discussion. During a crisis, the danger of availing yourself of national mechanisms for the purpose of justifying political maneuvers increases. This polarity has to make way for polymorphic vision.

ZEIT ONLINE: What do you want to contribute to it?

Szymczyk: I’m amazed at how recklessly people pass judgment on “the Greeks.” We want to turn the perspectives around and urge people to look at Europe and the world from the vantage point of Greece—we are taking action from here. We are, so to speak, a kind of alternative project to the prevailing rhetoric.

ZEIT ONLINE: *Learning from Athens* is the working title of the next documenta, which will open in Athens in April 2017 and in Kassel in June 2017. Can Greece set a good example for others?

Szymczyk: “The Greeks” are constantly being infantilized from the outside. We’ve also noticed this, among other things, since we began working here in Athens. We want to change the direction of learning from the teacher to the student. The example of Greece emblematically reveals Europe’s contradictions and future. It’s not a system error that’s occurring here—the system itself is in a deep crisis. My approach is to leave the position of power, of authority, as far as possible and assume the position of weakness in order to exercise solidarity and learn from it.

ZEIT ONLINE: What does that mean for your work in concrete terms?

Szymczyk: It’s a matter of trying to unlearn privileges and not wanting to “teach” or even “help” anyone. In concrete terms, I’m not prescribing a thematic scope for the exhibition but inviting artists to Athens and Kassel and urging them to develop new works based on what they’ve experienced in both cities.

ZEIT ONLINE: Greece is regarded as an isolated case. Yet you say it’s symptomatic.

Szymczyk: It’s not just about Greece. Maybe we should stop operating with this word. Let’s talk about the debts that are forced on poor countries—the entire African continent, the global South has the same problem, and has had for decades.

ZEIT ONLINE: You’re a native of Poland, have lived in Switzerland, and you’re now organizing an international project in Athens and Kassel. What perspective are you taking up on “the South”?

Szymczyk: The traveler from the North to the South is a familiar figure. People set out southward on expeditions. Can we imagine a traveler who takes new routes that shake up the political and cultural division of the world and the power in North/South and East/West? The reverse direction of the journey—from the South to the North—for example, is interpreted as “the journey of the migrant worker.” Can we imagine different, new, and unconventional routes for a traveler to take without lapsing into cultural stereotypes? That would possibly be a meaningful perspective.

ZEIT ONLINE: Europe is currently dividing itself up into creditors and debtors. The creditors appear to be equivalent to the “Europeans,” while the debtors—the Greeks, for example—are running the risk of even losing their place in Europe.

Szymczyk: The principle of the federation should be taken seriously. Either the idea of Europe is still premature or politics is not yet in a position to conceive of this solidarity. Europe was kidnapped by the markets, democracy is closely bound to financial requirements. At the same time, Europe bears historical responsibility for the destruction of other continents and their peoples. All of that is to be forgotten because we're now aware of our values and are starting from scratch? I don't trust the discourses and the emphasis on Europe's fundamental values. We should talk about our differences instead.

ZEIT ONLINE: In your concept for documenta 14 you speak of a genealogy of democracy.

Szymczyk: The concept of democracy needs to be extended to non-citizens, the immigrants, and not only restricted to those who enjoy the right to vote. Two kinds of logic are colliding: on the one hand the logic of the markets, and on the other the bodies that want to speak. Do they have the right to speak and be heard, or is this right only valid within the scope of what is financially feasible?



One of the yet unpublished symbols of documenta 14: an owl in Athens. It can turn its head 270 °, thus taking unusual perspectives. | © documenta 14

ZEIT ONLINE: The idea of the referendum was celebrated in Greece as an act of democracy, because it integrates the population into the negotiations. Among the European partners it was perceived as a provocation.

Szymczyk: The referendum is considered a faux pas, impolite conduct. The government is accused of not having any manners—it started with their style of clothing and is ending with the referendum. A referendum is both a seldom as well as a risky act. For me, the question is whether the vote signifies a real democratic step. It certainly allows people to speak when no one is listening to them. But other democratic mechanisms need to be developed that give people the space to express themselves by saying more than just yes or no.

ZEIT ONLINE: What exactly can we learn from Greece at the moment?

Szymczyk: The people here are attempting to organize themselves. There are vacant buildings everywhere that are being taken over by artists, solidarity projects that provide help in a variety of fields, and immigrants. Athens in crisis has become an open city, one could compare it to the Colosseum, which was overrun by beggars, criminals, and whores until it was “cleansed” in the nineteenth century. In this sense, Athens is also a refuge, because people are showing solidarity for one another. But outside Greece it is feared that this solidarity could be contagious like a virus: so that it doesn't spread, Greece has to be put under quarantine.

ZEIT ONLINE: What kind of virus are you talking about?

Szymczyk: The extreme austerity measures have brought about extreme reactions. A very politicized climate prevails in which everyone has to position him- or herself. Politics is not a discipline for specialists but an expression of subjectivity. Everyone is a zoon politikon in the best sense. Doctors have now assembled themselves at the hospital bed and are trying to cause the patient to suffer as severely as possible according to every trick in the book. They say that they're just doing their job. Maybe we should revert to homeopathy or sorcery.

ZEIT ONLINE: If you were Greek, how would you vote in the referendum?

Szymczyk: I don't trust this alternative, this choice between yes and no. There's so much more to say. With this dichotomy we remain stuck in the same game. Politically, both paths could be wrong. By voting no, people are acting in the heat of the moment. And yet, to cite Joseph E. Stiglitz: I know how I'd vote.