

# Documenta 14 exhibition in Kassel, Germany: The censorship and defaming of art

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Two works of art dealing with the fate of refugees and exiles have become the focus for fierce attacks at this year's documenta art exhibition in Kassel, in central Germany.

The first target was a performance and poem by the Italian social commentator and media activist Franco "Bifo" Berardi, who denounced the mass deaths of refugees in the Mediterranean. His piece was titled "Auschwitz on the Beach." Following protests, the performance and reading of his poem were canceled in what can only be regarded as an act of political censorship.

The second controversy concerned an obelisk by the Nigerian artist Olu Oguibe, which was denounced as "degenerate art" by the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party. "Degenerate art" was the term used by the Nazis in the 1930s to justify banning and suppressing all progressive art. The obelisk evokes the tragedy of the Nigerian civil war. Its pedestal bears the biblical quotation: "I was a stranger and you cared for me" in four languages.

documenta 14 is one of Europe's leading exhibitions of contemporary art and takes place every five years in the city of Kassel. This year's exhibition stood out for the many artists addressing burning social problems such as war, immigration, oppression, the consequences of new walls and borders, and the destruction of nature and culture. The exhibition met with a mixed reaction, with many media outlets denouncing its political nature.

An additional source of controversy was the fact that this year's documenta chose Athens as a second venue—recalling the country's historic role as the cradle of democracy, now threatened by vicious European Union (EU)-International Monetary Fund (IMF) austerity diktats.

In contrast to the often hostile attitude of much of the media, the public has turned out in record numbers for documenta 14. The artists' concerns have received a positive resonance, despite the individual weaknesses of their representations. A very diverse public appeared much more willing to engage with the questions and perspectives raised by the artists on culture and society than the media representatives.

## Berardi's performance

The announcement of Berardi's performance on the documenta web site stated: "The Archipelago of infamy is spreading all around the Mediterranean Sea. Europeans are building concentration camps on their own territory, and they pay their *Gauleiters* in Turkey, Libya,

Egypt and Israel to do the dirty job on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea where salted water has replaced Zyklon B."

By employing such blunt language, Berardi intended to denounce the deadly policy adopted by European states to deter refugees from reaching the continent—a policy that has turned the Mediterranean into a mass grave. Art has quite rightly the task of sharpening perceptions and focusing attention on crucial issues. The title "Auschwitz on the Beach" was deliberately chosen to provoke and polarise.

Berardi is a philosopher, writer, media activist and long-standing critic of capitalism. He was expelled from the Italian Communist Party in the 1960s because of alleged "factionalism." He is considered to be the leader of Italy's anarchist movement. In the 1980s he worked with Félix Guattari in developing an alternative psychoanalysis, and in the '90s he promoted so-called cyberpunk. His most recent book, *Futurability* (2017), was published by Verso Press. In 2009, he wrote a counter-manifesto to the famous Futurist Manifesto authored by Filippo Tomaso Marinetti in 1909.

Berardi's broadside against the refugee policy of the EU at documenta was evidently a thorn in the side of those directly or indirectly responsible for the policy. There was a veritable wave of denunciations in the regional and national press of Berardi's "outrageous comparison with the Holocaust."

In *Cicero* magazine, Alexander Kissler denounced Berardi and political contemporary art as a whole: "Stupid remains stupid ... labels don't help ... This is so irrevocably stupid and vain and revisionist, it renders any refutation superfluous ... art as the battlefield of the left, open dialogue reduced to hermetic thinking, buzzwords instead of thought."

Several organizations, including two which had sponsored documenta, the city of Kassel and the state of Hesse, vehemently demanded the cancellation of Berardi's performance. The mayor of Kassel spoke of an "huge provocation," because any comparison with the Holocaust was impermissible.

Jewish organizations also entered the fray. "The question of how we deal with the memory of the Shoah and the terms associated with it, and how we inform future generations of this inconceivable crime, is a matter for all of us," declared the chair of the Jewish community in Kassel, Ilana Katz.

Christoph Heubner, vice-president of the International Auschwitz Committee, commented: "Nobody, whether politician or artist, should misuse the name of Auschwitz for their own political or artistic campaigns."

The Holocaust commissioner of the World Jewish Congress, Charlotte Knobloch, also demanded the cancellation of the performance. She asserted: "To describe the refugee issue with terms

drawn from the context of the systematic National Socialist extermination of the Jews ... is untenable, testifies to unspeakable ignorance, and lacks any sense of shame.”

This contorted argument does not reflect well on those putting it forward. Several generations have learned from the Holocaust that people must never again be persecuted or killed on the basis of their religion, origins or skin colour. There are no grounds for arguing that someone who points out similarities between the many thousands of deaths of helpless refugees in the Mediterranean Sea and the unspeakable conditions in Libyan refugee camps with the Holocaust is denigrating the victims of the latter. The reference to the criminal treatment of refugees does not question the singularity of the Shoah, but it does warn that they could face a similar fate.

Twenty years ago, when German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer (Green Party) justified German participation in the bombing of Belgrade with a comparison to Auschwitz, there was no such outcry.

### “Shame on us”

Following the barrage of criticism Berardi and the documenta team eventually agreed to cancel the planned performance. In its place, a discussion took place on August 24 entitled “Shame on us.” The title referred to the many criticisms made of Berardi, but also to the shame European states should feel for mercilessly abandoning millions of immigrants to a cruel destiny.

On the home page of documenta 14 its artistic director Adam Szymczyk tried to justify the cancellation. They wanted to “neither simply accept the allegations nor abandon discussion and critical thinking,” but on the contrary encourage a dialogue.

At the August 24 event the rotunda of the Museum Fridericianum was overfilled with interested visitors. Over 150 people crowded in front of the entrance could not be allowed in. The Alliance against Anti-Semitism in Kassel demonstrated in front of the museum waving an Israeli flag. Over a megaphone a speaker from the organisation absurdly claimed that comparing the Holocaust with the situation of the refugees in the Mediterranean was anti-Semitic.

For his part Berardi distanced himself from his evocation of Auschwitz. Referring to the title of his talk Berardi declared: “I am ashamed of fascism in Europe, which I cannot stop.” He waved a piece of paper featuring his poem “Auschwitz on the Beach”: “I do not need it, I can write a better poem,” he shouted, tore up the paper and promised never to publish it.

“I will not use the word Auschwitz, but the concept remains,” he said in his contribution. He wanted to do something shocking to confront the people of Europe with the suffering of refugees in the Mediterranean. “I wanted to use the name of Auschwitz as a protective shield, against fascism, which is returning. Against the Holocaust which lurks on the horizon!” If the EU prefers to drown the people, “then I call that destruction.”

Berardi’s contribution led to a lively discussion. Many visitors were of the opinion that radical rhetoric was perhaps the only way today to arouse people. “The word Auschwitz hurts, but the misery of the refugees also hurts,” said one young woman.

### “Degenerate art”

Toward the end of the discussion, the curator of documenta 14, Hendrik Folkerts, drew attention to the other Kassel controversy: “In connection with Olu Oguibe’s obelisk, the AfD has used the concept of degenerate art,” he said. “I would urge everyone to pay as much attention to this word as the word Auschwitz.”

Kassel’s culture committee had discussed purchasing Oguibe’s obelisks, which had been erected in the city centre. One city councillor Thomas Materner, a member of the AfD, rejected any plans that the city retain the work of art and threatened to organise protests in front of the obelisk “every time a refugee commits an act of terror.”

Materner then denounced the obelisk in the jargon of the Nazis as “ideologically polarizing degenerate art,” claiming there was much public anger directed against the art work. In the style of the Nazis the term “degenerate” is used to conjure up imagery of sickness, abnormality—something unnatural.

To their credit, other factions on the council were in favour of purchasing the documenta art work. The final location is still unclear and the money required remains to be budgeted. Mayor Christian Geselle said there were no legal or technical reasons to prevent the art work from remaining in the city centre. A survey of over Kassel 5,000 citizens revealed that more than 60 percent favoured retaining the obelisk on the city’s Königsplatz.

The stance taken by the AfD against the obelisk has been criticized in the media, but the party’s open embrace of Nazi-style ideology and language indicates the most reactionary elements of society have been encouraged by the incessant and brutal policy of deportations of refugees combined with the attacks on freedom of expression.

There is a close link between the reactions to Berardi and Oguibe. Both are an expression of a massive shift to the right in official politics and the media. While the AfD openly articulate its far-right agenda, representatives of the mainstream media stoke up a debate about the Holocaust to cloak their own support for right-wing policies—the partitioning of borders, brutal deportations, support for new wars, attacks on democratic rights and demands for censorship.



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