

**SUCH NICE  
WINDOWS**

## SUCH NICE WINDOWS

Phil Coldiron

Let's start with the simple word 'on'. We find it sandwiched, in the title of Dimitris Athiridis' film, between an obscure noun and the name of one of the most high-profile art events in the world. Compared to its humbler cousin, 'about', 'on' sets a tone of intellectual seriousness. Sontag, for example, loved it: "On Style", *On Photography*. As a reflection of Athiridis' filmmaking across the 14 hours of *exergue – on documenta 14* (2024), such intellectualism is perhaps a little misleading: if its duration implies, not without reason, that we're entering the realm of Very Serious Cinema, the work itself, both its camera and its editing, is remarkably relaxed, almost breezy in its lightness of touch. But as a reflection of the film's subject—the 2017 edition of Documenta, expanded by artistic director Adam Szymczyk beyond its usual home in Kassel to a parallel presentation in Athens, the whole involving some 250 artists spread across more than 80 venues—the high-seriousness is more accurate. Time and again, we hear Szymczyk and the members of his curatorial team reiterate their aspirations to do nothing less than rethink, from the ground up, the role and place of art in a time of polycrisis by, as the show's title announced, "Learning From Athens."

In one of the many press conferences we're shown, Szymczyk avers that he finds it "unsexy" to admit he wishes Documenta 14 to be a catalyst for conversation. I saw no part of the exhibition myself—presumably next to no one saw the *whole* of it—so I can't offer a verdict on its success as a show, but he surely succeeded to get people talking. Anyone who leaves *exergue* curious about the critical response to Szymczyk's edition can find volumes of writing on it online; it produced more impassioned and intelligent criticism (much of it ranging from negative to ambivalent) than any art event in recent memory.

This response, and Documenta 14's influence over the last eight years, is all but entirely absent from Athiridis' film. If that seems surprising for such a long, thorough documentary *on* the exhibition, let me offer another reading of the title that might explain this exclusion. As Szymczyk finally clarifies in the last of the film's fourteen chapters, an *exergue* is the small space on a coin outside its main design (beyond, say, the portrait of a royal), left over for certain bits of information that mark the object's specificity—most often, the date of its issue. He uses the term to respond to a critic who expresses what she sees as a lack of curatorial cohesion in the show. For Szymczyk, the curator's presence is something like this little mark; it appears as a small, specifying detail in the margins of the exhibition's design. Let's then follow his lead, swallow the hyphen, and read the film's title as a statement: what we're watching is an attempt to zoom in on that detail, to open it up for further study.

Szymczyk tells an interviewer at one point: "I would really like to make sure that each appearance of this project called Documenta 14 in public is a performative one." This manifests in some overt ways, as when a press conference expands to include the involvement of artist Hiwa K (who shows a video and plays guitar) and singer Carmen Amor. On a deeper level, however, *exergue* formalises Szymczyk's somewhat odd ambition to turn the whole of the curatorial process into a performance—even those parts that normally remain invisible. If the emergence of the star curator is one of the key narratives of art in our century—and I think, for better or worse, it is (though its arc seems to have concluded)—we've nonetheless rarely been obliged to consider the curator as artist. Or stranger still, as *art*.

An obvious question: what does the curatorial, as role, as performance, turn out to look like? Unsurprisingly, there's no single answer. The cast Szymczyk has assembled—besides himself, the most prominent players include Paul B. Preciado, Pierre Bal-Blanc, Katerina Tselou, Dieter Roelstraete, Monika Szewczyk, Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, and Christoph Platz—is a whorl of strong personalities, and there is considerable fun (and occasional pathos) in watching them attempt to work both together and in public. If the movies produced a funnier scene last year than the group straining to humour Preciado while he insists that, no, really, Deleuze and Guattari's idea of the wasp and the orchid is the most sensible way to frame this Documenta, I haven't seen it. As a cringe comedy, with the professional meeting its central dramatic locus, *exergue* might reasonably fit into a canon alongside *Nathan for You*.

At least one reviewer in the arts press has asserted that *exergue*'s value resides in its being a "radical act of transparency." Given how much of contemporary art depends on mechanics kept out of view, there's much interest in seeing a gallerist attempt to steer Szymczyk and his team towards a young artist whose market value might stand to rise the most of anyone on her roster from inclusion in the show; in watching a room of curators locked in together for days on end until they've slashed half a million euros from their artists' budgets; in wondering whether something as banal as electricity costs could ruin a global art event. Taken from this angle, *exergue* reframes Szymczyk's aspirations to collapse the boundary between curation and art under a more obvious rubric: institutional critique. But then, what to do with the knowledge that we're watching a group of institutional actors self-consciously perform transparency? It's a question that pins Documenta 14 very much in its moment, the years in which literature was dominated by self-consciously transparent works which came to be recognised as autofiction: Knausgaard's *My Struggle*, Cusk's *Outline*, Lerner's trilogy—and so on. If autofiction's transparency now seems passé in literature, *exergue* raises the question of whether performing one's day-to-day for an audience might yet retain some vitality in other contexts—another conversation worth having.

This text was commissioned by Open City Documentary Festival to accompany the screening of *exergue—on documenta 14* (2024; dir. Dimitris Athiridis) at Institute of Contemporary Arts, 18–20 April 2025.

Read the full series online at: [opencitytexts.com](https://opencitytexts.com)