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The grand European Art Tour: How India's faring in three of the world's biggest art events

Our columnist traces the cracks in Greece's economy in Athens, one of the venues for prestigious exhibition 'documenta'.

Gauri Gill's photographs installed in the Epigraphical museum, Athens. | Gauri Gill

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The best-known annual art event in the world takes place every June in Basel, Switzerland. The most renowned biannual show is mounted in Venice, Italy, every odd year. And the most prestigious exhibition of them all, called documenta (the small "d" is not a typo), happens once every five years in Kassel, Germany.

Once in 10 years, Art Basel, the Venice Biennale and documenta are on view at the same time, an alignment of the stars that makes a summer visit to Europe obligatory for those interested in contemporary art, provided they have the means. 2017 is such a year, and since I tick both boxes at the moment, I've spent much of the past three weeks viewing documenta 14, the 57th Venice Biennale, and the 48th edition of Art Basel.

Adam Szymczyk, the Polish curator of this year's documenta, added a wrinkle to the itinerary by spreading his show over two cities (instead of the staple one at Kassel). Its working title, *Learning from Athens*, tells you which town was tacked on to our must-view locations for our grand tour. It was a city with which I had unfinished business I believed would remain unresolved, because I hadn't liked the town much on my first visit and did not believe I would go again. But this is where our 2017 tour would begin.

The way down

My first visit to Athens was in 2004, on the eve of the Olympic Games' return to their original location. I thought I had it all figured out. The Greeks were overhauling the major sites for the Games and, by visiting just before, we'd experience the restored sites without the crowds.

The National Archaeological Museum, for instance, was to open a month or so before the grand event. But when we got there, it was resolutely shut. There had been little delay, they told us, but it was definitely opening in a week. I thought to myself, "I haven't come all the way to Athens to leave without seeing the golden mask of Agamemnon", and changed all our bookings so that we get a day in Athens at the end of our trip. And so, after the standard tour of Mykonos, Delos, Santorini, and Crete, we returned to Athens, and found the museum still shut. Almost done, will be open in a week, they told us.

Other Athens highlights were in similar disrepair. The Parthenon was covered in scaffolding, Athen's central Syntagma Square was a construction site lined with huge tiles waiting to be laid, and so on. When Greece went into a long recession four years later, I was sad, but hardly surprised.

Battle wounds

In 2004, we'd paid 55 euros a night for a hotel room barely large enough to contain us as well as our luggage. This time round, thanks to the downturn and the rise of the sharing economy, the same amount got us an entire apartment with a sit-out. We were happy to see a largely scaffolding-free Parthenon and the wonderful new museum at the base of the Acropolis where sculptures from the temple to Athena are being moved.

The archaeological museum was open and its many treasures exhilarating. But evidence of the nation's troubled decade was palpable everywhere. It was obvious in certain cases, the increase in the number of beggars for example, but also in small things. One afternoon, I noticed a 30-something man learning to serve tables in the small restaurant where we lunched. I could tell from the way he carried

himself that he was well-educated and had started his career in a white collar job. Thus far, the poor chap was a hopeless waiter.

Then there was the fist-fight between members of a motorcycle gang which brought traffic to a halt in one of the town's main squares. A shocking sight in a major European capital, made tragicomic by the fact that some of the 50-odd gang members could afford only mopeds. No respectable Hell's Angel would stoop that low. Part of me wanted to get up close, while the more sensible half understood a brown-skinned guy should not mix with that company.

Brush with art

The exhibition, documenta, began promisingly, with a polished display in Athens' National Museum of Contemporary Art or EMST, and a funkier one in the city's main art school, the Athens School of Fine Arts. On the downside, there were few viewers in any of the venues, and the event did not seem to have excited the Athenian public.

Gauri Gill's works at the Athens Epigraphical Museum. Credit: Gauri Gill

The most interesting Indian contribution was Gauri Gill's display of photographs in the Athens Epigraphical Museum. In general, I'm not a fan of using museums as venues for contemporary art shows. Too often, the old work feels more vital and engaging than the new. Contemporary art fares best when placed alongside artefacts that aren't exceptional in themselves, like the ones in Bombay's Bhau Daji Lad Museum, for example.

Gill, however, had chosen the perfect spot. The Athens Epigraphical Museum is a collection of ancient inscriptions carved in stone, such as a 2,300 year-old copy of the 2,600 year-old laws instituted by Draco, the first recorded legislator of Athens in Ancient Greece. That stringent set of rules gave rise to a term used constantly in Indian political discourse: Draconian.

Gill placed images from her series *The Mark on the Wall* above and beside the museum's exhibits. In this series, ongoing since 1999, Gill has documented the use of walls as a tool of visual learning in Indian schools. She captures schoolrooms containing folk tales, anatomical drawings, maps and instructions – most of them inscribed or painted rather haphazardly.

I've seen and admired many images from this series before, but they felt perfect placed beside the museum's austere antique messages. The photographs, like the stone exhibits, foregrounded the nature of instruction, documentation and interpretation, but did so in a deeply contrasting way, setting off an interaction that illuminated both the old and the new.

A number of the inscriptions in the museum were steles or gravestones. These resonated with works from two other projects that Gill displayed. The first, titled *Traces*, were photographs of graves in Rajasthan, simply made by impoverished people, gradually consumed by the sands. The second was the remarkable *Birth Series* in which Gill captured a midwife supervising her grand-daughter's birth in a humble village home. Like the Greek steles, these photographs evoked questions about the cycle of life, mutability, and memory, which lingered after we left the museum's precincts.

This is the first of a two-part column. The second part will cover exhibitions in Venice, Basel and Kassel, highlighting Indian contributions to those shows.