

Either You Get it Or You Don't

A Conversation on LGBTQIA+ Refugees's #Rockumenta Action

Sophia Zachariadi and Krista Lynes

In June 2017, the refugee rights group LGBTQIA+ Refugees Welcome abducted a participatory artwork from the global contemporary art exhibition Documenta 14, held in Athens to highlight the city's centrality to European imaginaries of crisis. They then released a ransom note and accompanying video via social media, in which they addressed the artist, Roger Bernat, condemning the fetishization of refugees by Documenta, and highlighting the precarious conditions queer migrants face on a daily basis. This conversation between Sophia Zachariadi (LGBTQIA+ Refugees Welcome) and Krista Lynes seeks to trace the possibilities and predicaments of the art action, and its legacy for the group, for public art practice, and for thinking refugee rights in Athens and elsewhere.

KL: Can you begin by giving an account of how you came to participate in Documenta, and in Roger Bernat's The Place of the Thing (2017) specifically?

SZ: The action took place in Spring 2017. The collective, LGBTQIA+ Refugees Welcome, was in a situation where it was faced with two reactions: first of all, people ignored the existence of this collective and this community—this population within the refugee population—and secondly, people were amazed that a collective for LGBTQI refugees existed, because it was the first time that a collective formed around a group of people who were claiming these specific rights. There aren't collectives of women's refugees, or refugees with disabilities ... People were amazed by it, but at the same time, they were neglecting it. We had the same reaction from queer collectives. These were people whom you expect to show solidarity, but many were indifferent. They said "Ok, nice, this is very nice; it's good that this exists," but they didn't do anything to help out. Most of the help came from abroad.

Some people who were part of the collective were a bit pissed off by this. So we decided to fuck someone over. We didn't know who it would be. Would it be Athens Pride [the organizers of the pride event]? The queer community who wanted to approach us often benefited from white privilege. It wasn't their intention to exclude necessarily, but they weren't in touch with other immigrant and non-white people. Their approach was a little bit too "Western."

Then, the proposal from Documenta came along, and we thought that this presented an opportunity to fuck someone over! It did, because Documenta was popular in Athens in 2017. It allowed us to be noticed, because people now learned of the exist-

ence of this collective. At the same time, many knew of us before, but they didn't do anything. We thought, "We will take 500 euros from the participation while doing very little, perfect!" and secondly, we will have more popularity. Prior to the event, we had approximately 1,000 "likes" on Facebook; immediately after, we had 3,000 "likes." It's not that this is very important, but it's what happened to our visibility. After that, we had people reaching out to us to do research, to interview for a magazine or a newspaper, etc. So it was nice—a bit tiring but nice.

KL: What was your encounter with Roger Bernat and Documenta like?

SZ: First of all, someone came from Documenta, and invited LGBTQIA+ Refugees Welcome to be a part of the project. We decided to see what the project was about. The artist, Roger Bernat, came to us to explain his project. Refugees in the collective asked Bernat why he wanted to take the stone and bury it in Kassel. He answered, "This is something that either you get, or you don't!" In my mind, I thought, "Okay, you are going to be double fucked!" and when I voiced this opinion to the collective, they said "Perfect!" [SZ and KL laugh] Let's say that I had the instinct, and then everything came together. My instinct said, "We need to fuck someone over" and this was a very good moment to do this. The group agreed that we were going to do this because the artist was not very nice nor very polite!

KL: What were the challenges when you had to go through with the actual action? There is, of course, the symbolic resonance to it, accepting to participate, and then there is the actual "doing" of the action itself.

SZ: We had no idea how to handle it. First, we wondered how we would interact with the stone. We decided first to steal it; we agreed, all of us! Then we thought we might smash it, destroy it. We thought to leave it somewhere where it would stay forever. We had many thoughts about how we might proceed. We thought how we might vandalize the rock, but in the end we decided simply to steal the rock and write a ransom note that would include the story of the rock's journey. We agreed collectively on the idea of a ransom note, but after we went around the circle in the group, and each contributed an idea of where the stone might be (languishing without papers in a prison on the island of Samos, drowned and sunk to the bottom of the Mediterranean as EU coast-guards twiddled their thumbs, deported to Turkey after appealing twice, etc.). This was the strongest part of the ransom note, I think. This part of the project came completely from the refugees in the collective and not from the allies.

It was a better solution because it opened it up beyond the subject of Documenta. It was not simply an act of vandalism, an indication that we didn't like Documenta. Our problem wasn't with Documenta; it was that people were unaware of these refugees' context, and the extra difficulties they are facing as both refugees and LGBTQI people.

KL: In this way, it recenters their experience, and allows space for it.

SZ: It's like taking the popularity of Documenta and opening it up. This was part of the project that Roger Bernat missed. He couldn't understand that "We don't care about your project, my dear!" We were using it to talk about a wider subject and situation that

is happening all around the world. He couldn't get that far, because he was narcissistic about the project.

This is why we had the idea beyond the project to do the hashtag #rockumenta, and to take the stone around the city, to the park, to asylum centers where it would wait in line. This never happened because of practical reasons—the rock was huge and difficult to carry. Also, after the press release from Roger Bernat [in which he claimed that LGBTQIA+ Refugees' action activated the artwork and was therefore part of its concept], we didn't want to continue engaging with the stone. We decided that we had completed the action and it was finished.

KL: The initial idea, then, was to carry the stone around the city to locations of importance to LGBTQI refugees and take pictures of it with the hashtag #rockumenta?

SZ: Yes, and particularly the ones that are mentioned in the ransom note. Then we thought to add more, to have the stone have coffee, go for lunch, site see, whatever. In any case, after the action it was the Pride March, and the collective had many things to do. We could have continued the action from time to time, though, but we decided to end it.

KL: How did the performance work out on the day itself?

SZ: To be honest, in this collective, we never plan how we're going to perform an action. If someone wants to dance, we say "Perfect! Do you need something for the performance? You need a dress? Ok!" and we help the person get a dress. We work out what money we can give to the different aspects of the performance. For Documenta, we had a very basic idea, which we didn't even know would work. We didn't know if someone from the artist's team would accompany the stone or secure it when it was our turn, or take their own documentation of our performance. We thought that if there were someone accompanying us, we would tell them that some members of the group felt uncomfortable and would ask them to give us an hour for the performance and then return.

In the end, they left the rock and went away and let us be! So it was easier for us to take the rock and take the time we needed—to dance, or have fun. It was very free! We took scarves, masks, helmets etc to hide our faces, so were free to do whatever we wanted to do. What you see in the video is what happened during the two hours that we stayed at the Polytechnic School. The performance was completely random. There was make-up and scarves. People could dress as they liked. We went to a nearby house and got dressed. We played music, and someone spontaneously used the rock as a drum. We just had lots of fun!

I was taking the video and dancing, trying to give some basic direction, but mostly following them. The only part that was directed, was when we recorded the group lifting the rock up and carrying it away. It was very simple.

After this, we tried to put the rock into the trunk of a car. It was completely silly! It didn't fit, so we had to carry the rock. We had many ideas about where we were going to put the rock, and we brought the rock to a nearby house and we left it there. We went to another house and prepared the video, did the voice overs. It was very close to the time when we were supposed to return the rock. We had already prepared the ran-

som note, which we printed in multiples. We sent two “spies” (whom Roger Bernat and Documenta staff had never seen) who pasted it to the door of the Polytechnic School and scattered the flyers around the entrance. We instructed them to stay there to see how they would react. They took photos from far away of Roger Bernat reading the ransom note! [SZ and KL laugh]

KL: So good!

SZ: And at the same time, we were uploading the video! [SZ and KL laugh] All this occurred simultaneously, and the stone itself was 300 meters from the Polytechnic School in one direction; we were 300 meters from the School in another direction, and everything was actually extremely close to Roger Bernat.

KL: Then you posted the video and ransom note to Facebook and other sites?

SZ: Yes, and we sent press releases, which we sent to Greek and international newspapers and the media more broadly.

KL: So the story emerged because you distributed your action, not because Documenta complained about the rock being stolen?

SZ: Yes, although I’m sure Roger Bernat’s press release helped to circulate the story also. In any case, ultimately Documenta used our action to its own benefit. Because it was an interaction with the work, and they called it an interaction, and many people thought it was part of Documenta itself. We had anticipated this but we didn’t care. This is something where, “either you get it, either you don’t!!!” [SZ and KL laugh]

KL: Yes! Because Bernat responded to say that he had suspected something was in the air, that you had activated the work, and that this was all part of the larger piece itself... So, clearly, he didn't get it!

SZ: But we don’t care! Our goal was visibility! Visibility of the existence of the collective, first, and secondly of the circumstances, the conditions, and the difficulties that LGBTQI refugees face in Greece.

KL: How do you think the staging of your encounter echoes some of the larger relations between a well-funded and enormously visible German exhibit coming to Greece in the first place?

SZ: Your question goes to the wider problem that we have: that basically in this generation, we are trying to mix activism with art, activism with food ... This is not necessarily a problem—feminists say that “personal is political”—but they don’t say to mix everything into a salad! Art isn’t necessarily political; political art doesn’t necessarily have a broader impact. Conversely, you can have actions that are even more political than political groups. I think the problem was Documenta, from the very beginning, was trying to touch on everything. Those who visited were artists, tourists, who came to visit for a few months, but nevertheless believed that they could talk about a country that has its own background, culture, political and economic situation, etc. One should

be cautious about talking about issues from which one is only remotely connected, that isn't part of one's life experience. It's the same with movements like #BlackLivesMatter. The situation in Greece is so recent; it started only in 2010.

KL: Can you speak to what that action means for you now, two years later?

SZ: I'm very tired of Documenta and the whole discourse around it. #Rockumenta was a very interesting act, but we will never have the opportunity to do it again. It was the first time Documenta was held in Athens, and we were in the very beginning of the refugee crisis. This was the moment to do something; we didn't even schedule it. The priority for us was actually the 500 euros the artist was offering to those who participated in carrying the stone, but we didn't like the way the artist's team approached us.

It's interesting to me that many people have their own interpretation of the act we performed; they label it "anti-racist" (which it is, but in a different manner), "feminist," queer ... People are obsessed with the symbolism of the action, which is tiring for me. People ignored the fact that what you had was a vulnerable group of people with completely different political, social, religious or cultural backgrounds; even how they understand their gender and sexual identity is completely different. Most people wanted to see their own fantasy confirmed—their understanding, their position, their angle—but they didn't have a need to come into contact with the people who performed #rockumenta and do a cultural exchange. They saw us as a political group. I told most of the allies who came that LGBTQIA+ Refugees Welcome is not a political group; what is political is the experience that these people hold. To call the group political is a colonizing gesture.

KL: What were the political investments in the action?

SZ: You know, in my analysis, the action was a way of raising our middle finger at Documenta. It's very rare that vulnerable groups have the opportunity to do such a thing. What did they gain from the action? Nothing! They just had fun; this is also important. This is what's important about the legacy of #Rockumenta. Normally, movements take action by marching, creating a spectacular or fabulous event. Very few decide to sit down with a group of people to understand their needs, to see how they see themselves and evaluate political actions with them. But most people want to take an act like #Rockumenta, analyze it, and put it somewhere to remember it, maybe do a PhD on it! I'm not minimizing the importance of doing research—this is an important part of the social work our cooperative EMANTES wants to do—but it makes me upset when the analysis trumps the lived experiences of people.

KL: It seems to me that that was the whole problem with Bernat's art work—that it was not about contacting people, or finding out what people's experience was, but rather about allocating space for you in a larger art project. One of the problems is how to respond in a way that isn't on the terms of that invitation. Resistant actions often get reabsorbed by the artwork itself, and we're not any further in understanding the real experiences of LGBTQI refugees. It strikes me how difficult it is to create new actions in this context, when they are always being recaptured, the conditions are always changing, and the landscape is already so determined. It's hard to create something that isn't already understood under a particular category, under

a particular flag, or within a particular politics. This makes it impossible to understand what people need from telling their stories.

SZ: In my experience, this is impossible. I'm not there to do this for them. I'm not a god, or a savior. What can I do? Can I provide space for you? What do you need? Do you need someone to escort you to asylum services? Very nice! Providing a space where people can share experiences, not feel weird or uncomfortable. For example, now we're running a project with a trans woman who has 12 years' experience as a ballet dancer, being part of schools, doing Latin dance, hosting events. She works now as a sex worker, which isn't a problem, but she would like to leave it for another job. We decided to find a space to rent and EMANTES will hire her to start dance classes. She can teach, but she can also express herself artistically. This is what I think the movement is missing: at the same time that it wants to help promote something, it also wants to promote itself as something unique to follow; so from the beginning the relation is not created in a context of selflessness

KL: So what do you think the legacy was of the #Rockumenta action, then? Particularly versus doing community-based actions?

SZ: I guess it's ironic, because in two minutes of video, you make a myth; you fantasize about LGBT liberation, refugee liberation, which is great! I had a moment when we were creating the video, just prior to posting it, I felt euphoric. But after that, the reality sets in. There are still the same people with the same problems—problems that would never occur to you.

KL: Do you feel then that it was too much? Too much to ask of peoples' time and effort, given the long-term effects?

SZ: It was a really nice experience. My problem was in how it was received. It's not about the act itself, but how you understand and evaluate it. How do people understand the horrible things they see in photo or art exhibitions? These were my thoughts as a photographer: I don't need to go there and take photos; I'm just going to help and most importantly to BE there, present, to experience it; flesh and blood. It's not a bad thing to take a photo. It's a question of how the audience understands itself in this relationship.

So I'm left with the feeling that some things were done in vain, even though it wasn't in vain. As a collective, we didn't focus on this act. We did it, and then we moved on with our lives. But the allies and researchers who came had a different understanding; they were obsessed with the thing! Which means that you've lost something in the process.

KL: Why do you think that was?

SZ: The people who came in solidarity but weren't part of the act (or even those who were part of the collective almost from the start), didn't understand that LGBTQIA+ Refugees Welcome wasn't a political group in the way a Western perspective understands it. If it were a political group, there wouldn't be allies in it, because it wouldn't

need them. From the beginning, there are power relations, whether you like it or not. There can't be neutrality when the existing relations are unequal.

KL: So this was taken up as a political issue more than an issue for refugees?

SZ: It's not that. I just don't understand how people have the expectation that such acts will change things. When you have a large mass event—for example, let's take May 1968—people thought the world would change. It happened through art, through photography and video—the photo with the soldier and the girl offering him a flower. In the contemporary moment, we shouldn't expect that an event like Documenta or #Rockumenta can do something radical. It's stupid; it's a fantasy!

Basically, to my understanding, the difficulties are so massive that you need to do many interventions from many different sides. You need to use your imagination and be extremely flexible, open-minded and patient and most importantly have no expectations. Things we do go above us; we don't owe them, we just offer them to the universe let's say! And that's it.

#Rockumenta pointed a finger, and made the point through humor that there are some people who are facing really serious problems that larger audiences are not aware of. It wasn't moralizing ("You should help LGBTQ refugees!"). Documenta has plenty of resources and money, and they come and say "Ah, do a little dance for us! We'll give you 500 euros!" It's a combination of all these forces that makes the action unique. This is why I said it would never happen again. It's the context that makes it unique.

KL: It was clearly a response to being asked to participate on the terms of the artist, and for his credit, in an event that billed itself as having a big political dimension and a big public audience. It erased the local context to make room for its own fantasy of what the political would look like in Athens. The #Rockumenta action itself then became iconic, it has its own magnetic force. But it's interesting to think about all the stuff that happens around that action, what is continuous with the action's message, but largely invisible.

In relation to the documentation of #Rockumenta, what's interesting to me is to think about how all these other issues are happening around that one action, and those things don't get seen or visualized. It's a way of moving away from the idea that you have one image, and that one image is the image that defines the political moment, that's oppositional or political. We see it, and then we leave it behind. How can you represent the continuity of a set of efforts visually, when #Rockumenta was just a blip in it? What you seem to be saying is that this will never happen again, it's a reduction of what it is you do as a group, and it doesn't represent all the things you want to do.

There's a pleasure to me in seeing the continuity of the action over the space of its unfolding. Particularly in relation to your details about how heavy the stone was, for instance, and how you couldn't fit it into the trunk of your car, or through the door of the house where you were keeping it. These images and stories are not about the symbolic moment or the face-off between #Rockumenta and Documenta, but about what it takes to do political work, and to resist being captured by these politics, these stories, or these images. I wonder, in talking with you, what you think is the most meaningful intervention by LGBTQI+ Refugees?

SZ: Documenta wanted to use us, but we wanted to take this fact and use it for our own purposes. And it worked! I'm simply disappointed that people liked the glamorous

part, but very few of them would do the hard work of doing something that counts for an individual person—not for the symbolism, not for the politics. People don't think about how difficult it is to create a collective, how difficult it is to keep it, and how difficult it is to work with vulnerable people. There are many things that I wouldn't do for their politics, but I do them because they are more important. Their requests are more important than my political ideas.

KL: I've seen that the collective has organized a whole series of other artistic activities that are more grassroots, poetry readings, etc. Can you say something about how art functions in those spaces in a different kind of way?

SZ: The most valuable part of any kind of collaboration is to open a dialogue. The problem with Roger Bernat, as an example, is that he didn't come to the collective to open up a dialogue about how to approach this project, to say "I have this idea, and you can do this or that, or propose something?" It was not a dialogue. It was, "I am using you, your body, to do something for me, to take my photos, to gather my material, to do the final act. It shouldn't be that. But when someone comes to do a poetry workshop, and acknowledges that they come from a Western background, and that they have a skill—spoken word poetry for instance—and I can show this approach, but you can do whatever you want with it. The workshop leader never said "this is not the way to do things," rather she encouraged everyone to do what they wanted with the approach. Here are the tools! If you want, you can use them; if you don't want to, don't. She encouraged participants—"This is lovely! This is powerful!"—and let them do what they wanted. That is called a cultural dialogue or cultural exchange. We don't know where the starting point is; we come from different locations. If one comes and says "I have the money, I have the crew; I have the material," then this is a problematic starting point for cultural exchange.

KL: Can you talk about what the shift from LGBTQIA+ Refugees to EMANTES entailed?

SZ: We have a dilemma in Greece, where either one does something institutional or one goes outside institutional structures. It's a bipolar situation: if you do something on an institutional level, you're not considered a movement, you're basically banned. It's another (mostly urban) myth.

KL: Is it about a kind of purity of politics?

SZ: Yes of course, but it's also like a story that an old lady would tell you, "Don't go over there; bad people will come." But then you go and you see that there are a lot of people working very hard, with a very concrete set of thoughts about how to do things. The people who work institutionally are more 'true' because they've gone past the political correctness, the purity of politics. They understand the contradictions. I've been on the other side of this institution/activism divide, and so it is challenging for me to be part of building something in this gap between institutional work and working outside of it. EMANTES aims to work in this gap.

KL: What is the most important work that EMANTES has to undertake?

SZ: With its legal entity, EMANTES has much more space than a grassroots initiative to put pressure on authorities regarding the rights of LGBTQI+ refugees and asylum seekers, to send reports to asylum services, to access camps and hot spots, to receive funds, to rent spaces etc.—in short, to do anything that is connected to EMANTES' two cornerstones: psychosocial support and raising awareness.

KL: *How do you work with the community to determine EMANTES' actions?*

SZ: It's highly important, especially when you work with very vulnerable people, to help them feel strong again. EMANTES aims to work on a case by case, creating systematic and long-term support. It is not just about providing services but to give space to dialogue, to co-create an action plan according to each person's needs and skills. It is about working together and respecting each other; it is about staying active.