



Iepe Rubingh, *Chessboxing*, 2003–18. Performance view, Esperia Palace Hotel, Athens, October 2018. From the 6th Athens Biennale.

6th Athens Biennale

VARIOUS VENUES

The goal of the Sixth Athens Biennale, titled “ANTI” and curated by Stefanie Hessler, Kostis Stafylakis, and Poka-Yio, was to provide a screenshot of the era of “post-truth” and fake news, in which mechanisms of resistance have been appropriated by reactionary movements operating in tandem with the rise of populism. Inasmuch as reality is at best fugitive and ambiguous, and at worst impossibly complex and subjective, the ambition of the endeavor necessitated its apparent failure. With the work of more than one hundred artists and collectives, the show as a whole resembled nothing so much as a psychedelic fun house that was discomfiting in its familiarity.

The curators kicked off the show from a boxing ring, the training platform for Iepe Rubingh’s *Chessboxing*, 2003–18, a hybrid sport invented by the artist. It was followed by Panos Sklavenitis’s *Cargo*, 2018, a fantastic procession of mostly naked, body-painted freaks waving crucifixes and bearing nationalist symbols, like some ragtag survivalist cult. Winding among biennial visitors and onto the street to mingle with unsuspecting passersby, this silent gathering evoked not protest but surrender, a breakdown of civil society. The mock-extremist faction Front Deutscher Äpfel’s *How to become a nationalist popstar*, 2018, satirized the commodification of radicalism with a faux political leadership seminar at which stickers and banners bearing their logo—an apple (the fruit, rather than

the company)—were distributed. Touring the exhibition one day, the Front's "Führer" was reprimanded by Hessler for sitting on Anna Uddenberg's *Dom Depot*, 2018, a grotesque spa recliner—*cum*—SUV seat encapsulating an overblown contemporary lifestyle.

The show often exposed the weirdness beneath the surface of conventionality. Yet what is more damaging, fear of the abnormal or the delusion of normalcy? Explorations of the fabrication of identity were connected to states of consciousness dictated and controlled by regimes and corporations, often via the Internet. *Medusa Bionic Rise*, 2017–18, a performance by a group called the Agency, took the form of a self-improvement rally espousing physical enhancement through prosthetics and other body-modification techniques: "Train your body to fit into a given situation." Marianna Simnett's video *The Needle and the Larynx*, 2016, traced the injection of Botox into her throat in an attempt to lower her voice so as to lend it the air of authority associated with masculinity—a procedure that, however, ended up inhibiting her ability to breathe.

Arrayed largely throughout the former offices of the five-story TTT Building, vacated after the country's state-owned postal, telegraph, and telephone service was sold to Deutsche Telekom, the works formed a cacophonous cosmos conversing with festering carpet stains and bureaucratic door signs. It was nearly impossible to wrap your head around the show as a coherent whole: Many installations were performance sets, and the slew of videos required multiple visits. The most effective works were succinct. Sirous Namazi's supermarket shelves suspended mid-fall, *Leaning Horizontal II*, 2018, conveyed a sense of capitalism on the verge of collapse under the weight of inequitable economic distribution, despite the pristine arrangements of plentiful products. The work pointed to a painful contradiction in Greece, where the crisis has been declared over by politicians while the populace still suffers. When one arrived at Florence Jung's *Jung53*, 2017, one encountered a door that might have been closed or slightly ajar; either way, any attempt to push it open met resistance, amplifying curiosity or apprehension as to who or what was on the other side. The exercise revealed more about the visitor than anything else.

Anti- is a meaningless prefix in search of a subject; it needs something to oppose. The biennial seemed to purposefully provoke controversy—as in the online spat in which artist Daniel Keller was accused of abetting the far right—incorporating opposition into its

chaotic state of cognitive dissonance. As a shadow, rather than a screenshot of reality, “ANTI” reflected humanity struggling to survive among ruins of its own making. Spyros Aggelopoulos’s shadow-theater performance *Amusementorium*, 2018, portrayed a postapocalyptic future after an explosion at a soda factory has sent a tsunami of molten sugar across the globe, killing all but sixty people. In order to survive, the survivors fight each other, of course: When Kim Jong-un and Kim Kardashian spar over who has more fans and better hair, she says, “Take it easy, Chubby. I will beat you with my selfie stick.” The Sixth Athens Biennale could be seen as either a “social sculpture” along the lines of Joseph Beuys’s 1972 *Boxkampf für die direkte Demokratie* (Boxing Match for Direct Democracy) or a bonk on the head with a selfie stick. Take your pick. Pick your fight.

— Cathryn Drake

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