

SLANT

ON THE GROUND: ATHENS

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Andreas Angelidakis, Antonio Negri, and Paul B. Preciado at the opening of the Public Programs of Documenta 14 at Parko Eleftherias, September 14, 2016. Photo: Stathis Mamalakis.

ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE MOMENT: Greece is at the center of a convulsion in global capitalism. Athens, the birthplace of democratic ideals, experienced one of the earliest documented economic crises in the Western world, in the fifth century BCE. Even now, as an early warning sign of things to come for the European Union—and the epicenter of the biggest refugee crisis in history—Greece is a natural case study. Adding to the fracas is the inauguration this April

of one of the world's largest art exhibitions, Documenta 14: "Learning from Athens (Working Title)," directed by Adam Szymczyk.

Szymczyk proposed the concept for his edition of the Kassel, Germany-based quinquennial after attending the opening of the fourth Athens Biennale, in October 2013. Titled "Agora," it took place in the city's former Stock Exchange building and largely eschewed the exhibition format in favor of an open forum for the exchange of ideas. "I am trying to figure out a way to move to Athens," he said at a tavern later that night amid a euphoric, rowdy crowd infused with copious wine and raucous *rebetiko*.

Initiated in 2007, the Athens Biennale has inhabited any number of evocative unoccupied spaces, from structures built for the 2004 Summer Olympics to a former gasworks, now a municipal cultural center called Technopolis. "Nobody could foresee the crisis in 2007," said cofounder Poka-Yio. "The name, 'Destroy Athens,' was like a premonition." Last summer the no-exhibition model of the Athens Biennale reached its apex in "Omonoia," intended to unfold over two years in a series of meetings, or "synapses," under the leadership of Massimiliano Mollona, an anthropologist specializing in labor politics. At the inaugural conference it was already apparent that art-world habits of exclusivity conflicted with desires to promote social change. Later an anarchist group running a refugee squat refused to collaborate, among others, thwarting the biennial's attempt to incorporate political and community groups around the city.



View of Athens Biennale — Agora, November 23, 2013. Photo: Neil Cummings.

It was clear by last summer the format was not working, and Mollona resigned, followed by biennial cofounder Xenia Kalpaktsoglou, leaving Poka-Yio to pick up the pieces of an ambitious show with few resources and appoint Whitechapel curator Nayia Yiakoumaki as new director of research and international networks. The next edition, “Waiting for the Barbarians,” will open in April 2017 as an exhibition cocurated by and around the work of Romany artist Delaine Le Bas and her family archive, displayed in the suggestively decaying Bageion Hotel and other vacated ruins around the central Omonoia neighborhood. “From postwar depression and civil-war damage to a society of false prosperity, the buildings are emblematic of what’s happened in Greece over the years,” said Yiakoumaki.

Spaces left empty by the crippled economy are an open invitation to artists and curators, who have filled in the gaps with DIY residency and exhibition programs, often financed through crowdfunding. Creative collectives are proliferating. Daily Lazy—currently comprising artists Stelios Karamanolis, Irimi Miga, Tula Plumi, and Yorgos Stamkopoulos—began as a blog

with nomadic exhibitions and will soon launch a space in the basement of the café-bar **Εφημερίδα** (Newspaper). “Like it or not, Greeks have had to reinvent themselves and find new means of working and exhibiting,” said curator Christopher Marinos. Sited in a former parking garage owned by artist Vasilis Papageorgiou’s family, Enterprise Projects alternates between studio and exhibition space. Founded in 2012 by artists Paki Vlassopoulou, Chrysanthi Koumianaki, and Kosmas Nikolaou, the storefront 3137 Office showcases collaborative projects, most recently “After the explosion...you hear the light,” a series of discussions and exhibits focused on revolutionary art practices of the 1970s. Many Greek artists have returned from living abroad, including Georgia Sagri, who spearheads **Υλη[matter]HYLE**, “a semipublic, semipersonal space that aims to bring together art, politics, and sciences” in an apartment building populated mostly with the brass plaques of former tenants.

Foreign creatives are moving in, attracted by the mild climate and low cost of living, with the idea that they can somehow withdraw from or at least mediate their participation in the commercial market. Documenta has injected a sense of excitement into this system, and the anxious political situation offers plenty to talk about—or, more cynically, to be “inspired by,” most famously for Ai Weiwei, who followed his controversial work about asylum-seekers on Lesbos with an exhibition last summer at the Museum of Cycladic Art. German artists Lukas Panek and Paul Makowsky found the premises for Super—opened in October with “Free Drinks”—on a real-estate website before ever setting foot in Athens. Around the corner, French architect Matthieu Prat resides in an unfinished building as a collaborative design experiment called *Kassandras*, initiated in a 2016 workshop with students from Prague’s Academy of Art, Architecture, and Design. Currently he and British artist Navine G. Khan-Dossos are working with residents of the Eleonas refugee camp to design a communal space with tables for playing *távoli* (Greek backgammon), a game that is common across the Near East.



Yiannis Pappas in “As One” at the Benaki Museum, March 10, 2016. Photo: Cathryn Drake.

Public funds have disappeared along with the market. The National Museum of Contemporary Art (EMST) has sat empty since its completion in early 2014. First the pristine white elephant caused rancor in the art world after the firing of founding director Anna Kafetsi, seen by many as a casualty of the Piraeus Bank president’s spouse’s desire to control the \$35 million structure. The retrofit of the Fix Brewery building, truncating the impressive horizontal lines of Takis Zenetos’s original modernist structure, has been roundly criticized too. Current director Katerina Koskina has braved the troubled waters, and last October finally succeeded in mounting a show, “Urgent Conversations: Athens–Antwerp,” which intertwined the collections of EMST and Belgium’s MuHKA. Yanis Varoufakis, the former Minister of Finance and principal player in the 2015 negotiations over the Greek debt crisis,

attended the opening with his wife, artist Danae Stratou, who contributed the immersive 2004 video installation *The River of Life*. Critic Margarita Pournara, in the newspaper *Kathimerini*, noted however that it was hardly cause for celebration: Only a portion of the building had opened, more than a decade late, and the collection will not be accessible for at least most of next year while Documenta uses its spaces. Culture minister Aristides Baltas was sacked just a couple of days after appearing at the show's inauguration and replaced by actress Lydia Koniordou.

Private foundations such as Cypriot collector Dakis Joannou's Deste and the Neon Organization, founded by collector Dimitris Daskalopoulos, are taking up the slack in arts funding. This includes mounting major international exhibitions in places like the cash-strapped Benaki Museums, taken over last spring by Marina Abramović's "As One," a showcase for young Greek performance artists organized by Neon. The annual grants awarded by Outset Greece, a program sponsored by Neon, have been the driving force behind most recent local activity. It provides support for Radio Athènes, a new nonprofit launched by Helena Papadopoulos; State of Concept, founded by curator Iliana Fokianaki, which hosts projects with emerging artists and curators from Greece and abroad; and curatorial duo Locus Athens, whose show "The Thickness of Time" is currently reanimating the spaces of the former foreign press club with films by six artists and a revival of its vintage bar.

Into this dynamic milieu landed the spaceship Documenta, greeted by many with enthusiasm, while others viewed it as a mission dispatched by an alien race to study a troubled, once seminal civilization. Almost immediately, a group of young artists expressed skepticism in a declaration stenciled on city walls: DEAR DOCUMENTA: I REFUSE TO EXOTISIZE MYSELF TO INCREASE YOUR CULTURAL CAPITAL. SINCERELY, THE NATIVES.



Left: **Dear Documenta** graffiti. Photo: Cathryn Drake. Right: **Documenta 14** artistic director **Adam Szymczyk** (right) at **Learning from Documenta**. Photo: Giorgos Sakkas.

In September, the writer and philosopher Paul B. Preciado kicked off the first events of Documenta 14's public program, "Parliament of Bodies: 34 Exercises of Freedom," in a former Greek Military Police headquarters used for interrogation and torture under the junta in what is now called Freedom Park, a block away from the US embassy. Amid modular seating designed by Andreas Angelidakis to evoke the ruins of the Pnyx, artists, academics, and activists have been presenting lectures on subjects such as international arms trading, conducting digital-detox meditation sessions, and even leading a "Torture and Freedom Tour of Athens." The Apatride Society of the Political Others, an ongoing forum for disenfranchised peoples—such as those compelled to migrate across the borders of gender or nations—recently gathered the heads of local immigrant organizations to air concerns, for example, over the inability to get citizenship for children born in Greece.

The Greek press responded with scathing reviews, questioning its relevance to a nation searching for practical solutions as the refugee crisis reaches critical proportions and camps have become ghettos with unacceptable living conditions. Stefanos Kasimatis, a political writer for the mainstream *Kathimerini*, made fun of a session on ecosex led by Beth Stephens and Annie Sprinkle as promoting "masturbation al fresco" and argued that the Documenta curators express aversion to the very capitalists who pay their "fat salaries." As always, but especially here, art is unavoidably politics: While the German-funded Documenta 14 aims to give voice to subjugated populations, Angela Merkel is teaching beleaguered Greece a lesson and German corporations are snatching up Greek companies, including newly privatized

airports and a major phone company. “The criticism is that they are not really dealing with the Greek issues, what’s happening now,” explained Neon’s director, Elina Kountouri. “What got them into trouble is the title, Learning from Athens, which created a lot of expectations.”



View from Documenta workshop at the Polytechnic School, sculpture commemorating student deaths on November 17, 1973, by Memos Makris. Photo: Cathryn Drake.

As it happens, Documenta is learning how to navigate the tricky realities of a country that has suffered centuries of colonizers and untrustworthy governments. “The most controversial point is the fact that they are occupying historically loaded spaces,” said Elpida Rikou, cofounder of the anthropological research study Learning from Documenta, established by professors of Athens’s Panteion University. During former President Barack Obama’s visit in November, violent protests exploded on the street outside of Documenta’s workshop at the Polytechnic School, located just inside the gate demolished by government tanks in 1973 to crush the student uprising against the CIA-backed junta. Last month Preciado fielded concerns at the think tank’s panel “The Politics of Curating,” characterizing the very production of the

exhibition in Athens as an act of protest. “There is a struggle between the institution of Documenta and the project of Documenta 14, and this is not a smooth relationship,” he explained. “We are learning what Athens means beyond the city itself as a cultural question for Europe today,” he added, “and we won’t be able to fully understand it until we go through the whole process of making the exhibition.”

“So far the most important thing Documenta is offering the city is this engagement in the conversation, even argument, between people who are trying to answer all these questions,” The Breeder’s George Vamvakidis concluded. “Even the bad reviews and criticism are positive because it’s energy being circulated.”

Indeed, Athens is a gregarious organism bursting with connections and contradictions, fermentation and disorder. The street corners and cafés are still the best place to get news—and that is why, to learn anything true, you must stay a while. This much we know: The revolution won’t be funded, and this spring Documenta will mount a spectacular exhibition throughout city museums and archaeological sites. “Everyone is triggered by Documenta and is programming around it,” Yiakoumaki says. There will still be much more to discover in the open city—and there may be a new government, and even currency, by then too.

Cathryn Drake is a writer based in Athens.

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