

No cash in the ATTIC



LIFE SPORT

Text JESI KHADIVI

While GREECE continues to suffer under austerity, *artists and curators in Athens* are getting together to find creative solutions to the lack of money.

Since the 2010 Eurozone crisis, Greece has been in free fall. General unemployment has remained at around 20 to 25 percent for the last four years, and youth unemployment is currently 48 percent. Despite a brave attempt at negotiating a better deal, last August the government conceded to Eurozone demands to increase cuts to benefits, healthcare and pensions. Today, a Greek citizen commits suicide every 45 minutes. Things are bleak.

Unsurprisingly, the impact on the Athenian art scene has been equally dire. Those artists with savings have left, and the newly built State Museum of Contemporary Art can't afford to open. In spite of these desperate conditions, people who remain are resilient. With nothing to lose, an anything-goes atmosphere pervades in the Greek capital. Workshops are opening in place of decimated businesses, which often double up as galleries and event spaces. And the city's low cost of living has also attracted foreign artists and curators. While the job market is prohibitive, for young people from expensive cities like London, Paris and New York, it's a place to try out new ideas.

Moreover, the international market is taking an interest in the city, too. Next April it will co-host documenta 14 – the first

time the festival has been held outside its home in Kassel. While this has caused consternation for some – Greek politician Yanis Varoufakis told Spike magazine it was like rich Americans holidaying in a poor African country – its presence may be beneficial. Titled “Learning from Athens”, the event will offer featured artists funded opportunities to examine Greece's recent woes as well as its geopolitical identity as both the seat of European culture and the gateway to Asia.

Generation Collective Innovation

Greek mixed media artist Kostas Ioannidis, who has two sound installations based on Ovid's *Metamorphosis* at the Onassis Cultural Center New York this spring, doesn't agree that documenta will be unambiguously bad in itself. "All eyes will be on Athens again, just like with the 2004 Olympics," he says. "Everything will look brighter for a while, but for me the question is how many of these artists and curators that come for documenta will actually stay."

Curator Iliana Fokianaki is hopeful. "These visitors enrich our city," she says. "Anyone who isn't happy that documenta is coming to Athens is narrow-minded, to say the least. We shouldn't expect miracles, but it will bring an international community to the city." Fokianaki is the director of State of Concept, a non-profit gallery in Athens founded in 2013 to promote young artists and support students through free consultations. Featured in *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *Frieze* and *Art Forum*, the independently funded gallery has helped draw the spotlight back on the city's talent by hosting shows by new artists alongside established names like Jessica Warboys, Basim Magdy, and

Cao Fei. Prior to this, Fokianaki worked for commercial galleries in London, before returning to Athens in 2005. "When I first moved back the capital was a tabula rasa," she says. "It was disheartening to see Greek art students without the appropriate tools, so I decided to give some of my time."

Part of a wave of galleries pooling their resources to help people get by, State of Concept has prompted young Athenians to think differently. One of the most compelling new institutions is Circuits and Currents, a cultural centre run by students from the Athens School of Fine Arts. Funded by a DAAD grant, it encourages a critical stance on the status quo through programmes like Survival Kit, an educational initiative run with the Academy of Fine Arts Munich to explore the possibilities of art during the economic crisis. So far the scheme has enabled 30 students from Athens and Munich to collaborate on exhibitions and conferences.

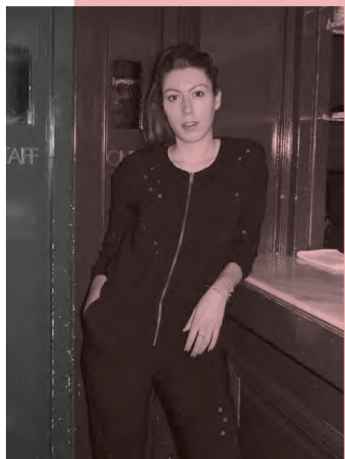
Organiser Lefteris Krysalis feels the spirit of the course reflects the way in which the art scene is learning to live without gallery sales and investment. "New types of artistic practices have started to appear," he says. "People are getting around the lack of money and jobs by collaborating.



Circuits and Currents
Photo: PANOS DAVIOS

Things aren't quite there yet, but it seems as if the whole art scene is trying to detach itself from institutions. It's very interesting. Maybe you could call it a survival mechanism."

This also seems to be the case with LIFE SPORT. Established in 2014, the art space is funded by the sweatpants it sells made by a family-run business. Consequently, all the money it makes goes back to local producers while providing cash for future projects such as exhibitions, screenings and lectures. Indeed, the decision to sell jogging bottoms also reflects their local ties. After researching Athenian fashion, they chose the city's ubiquitous casual trousers as an emblem of resistance that, as its website suggests, "defy notions of social stratification, gender and age".



Kalliopi Tsipni-Kolaza
Photo: PANOS DAVIOS

Have Art, Will Travel

LIFE SPORT also collaborates with the New Mexico-based artist Puppies Puppies, the Vilnius-based curator Valentinas Klimašauskas and the Portuguese artist Pedro Barateiro. “We’re about the experience of life as sport,” says company representative ‘Vasilis’, who declines to give his full name, saying the organisation is about the group, not individuals. “This is subversive because expectations of productivity and constant self-optimisation have infiltrated all areas of contemporary life,” he continues. “LIFE SPORT tries to regain emancipation and learn to listen to our own intuition by finding value outside the economic situation. It’s about owning our experience, and reclaiming independence over simple aspects of our lives and ourselves.”

Other galleries are surviving by developing similarly adaptive models. Prior to the 2010 crash, the Greek art market was self-contained, but afterwards it began to look outwards. This has, in part, been stimulated by the arrival of foreign artists, but is also the result of the way in which the internet has eroded national borders as a supranational platform for exchanging art and ideas. “There is an active young art scene in Athens that has a strong peer-to-peer network, both locally and internationally, and I’m looking

forward to seeing where it goes,” says curator Kalliopi Tsipni-Kolaza. Indeed, Tsipni-Kolaza’s work is symptomatic of this shift. At the 55th Venice Biennale she launched the Contingent Movements Archive, an online information arena about the future of the Maldives – currently under existential threat from flooding. Elsewhere, her project “Rave-olutions”, a film about the alternative music scene in Palestine, recently won the International Curatorial Competition organised by Forecast Platform in collaboration with Berlin’s HKW.

This new crop of artists, curators and galleries have brought a global outlook with them. One example of this is The Breeder gallery in the ancient district of Kerameikos. Founded in 2002, it recently introduced a residency programme for young foreign artists to create work inspired by Athens. The results are displayed in The Breeder Skin project, a year long show that also runs a competition for artists to display work on the exhibition room’s façade.



ATH1281, Breeder Skin Project, 2014
Installation view at The Breeder
Courtesy: the gallery

Old Money for New Hopes

NEON gallery also has a global stance. Founded by private collector Dimitris Daskalopoulos in 2013, the non-profit organisation works with major art world figures to bring “contemporary culture in Greece closer to everyone” through free exhibitions, workshops and events. One such collaboration was “Current”, a recent performance art project open to the public held in conjunction with the Marina Abramović Institute, where participants used exercises devised by the Serbian artist to create their own works. This year, NEON will also launch an exchange for young curators with London’s Whitechapel Gallery, which builds on the success of “TERRAPOLIS”, an exhibition the two galleries organised in 2015. Featuring 25 major Greek and international artists including Sarah Lucas, Athanasios Argianas, Eleni Kamma and Richard Long, the show speculated about the relationship between art and nature, and was held in the garden of the French School at Athens – the first time the institution welcomed the general population since 1846. “Our space is the city,” says NEON’s director Elena Kountouri. “And sometimes it has felt like we’re working in a void, but we’ve always tried to respond to the urgency of the situation.”

CEO of food conglomerate Vivartia, NEON’s proprietor Daskalopoulos has, for decades, provided essential patronage to young artists who would otherwise struggle due to the scarcity of public funding. Another equally significant benefactor is millionaire Dakis Joannou, who founded the DESTE award in 1999, which showcases the work of unrepresented Greek artists. Last year’s winner, Angelo Plessas, walked away with 10,000 euros in prize



ANGELO PLESSAS
Eternal Internet Brother / Sisterhood
(1-3), 2015
Courtesy: the artist and The Breeder
Photo: Giorgos Sfakianakis

money, and enjoyed an exhibition at the DESTE foundation’s showroom in Neo Psychiko, a converted paper factory re-designed by the American architect Chris Hubert in 1998.

“Greek artists and curators have always had to rely on private institutions like NEON and DESTE for cash,” says State of Concept’s Iliana Fokianaki. “The ministry of culture has always been completely ignorant about contemporary art, and even when there were funds, curators and artists had to endure endless bureaucracy to access even the tiniest amount of money, which was never available to young creatives anyway. In this sense, the ongoing crisis hasn’t altered these material conditions, because we’re still working on our own. What’s different is that we’re closer than ever before.”

Considered in the context of Greece’s post-war history this makes perfect sense. Since 1945, the country has slouched from civil war to military dictatorship, and more recently from recession to seemingly terminal austerity. Meanwhile, the rest of Europe has been content to look away. Given this hardship, Greek artists and curators have always been resilient and inventive, and this current generation is no different. In fact, this attitude arguably defines how they think about art.

“The Greek government just increased VAT on art sales from 13 to 23 percent,” says artist Kostas Ioannidis. “This is what the future’s gonna look like. So of course you’re going to see more people looking for collaborations and funding abroad. But I believe in the idea of diaspora. Art has no borders and artists are, by definition, nomads.”



KOSTAS IOANNIDIS
The making of “memory of, memory of, memory of”,
a sound-video installation commissioned by the Onassis Cultural
Center NY in conjunction with the exhibition
“Gods and Mortals at Olympus”, which will be presented there
throughout the spring of 2016