Under Construction

How should the Athens Biennale be shaped when everything in Greece is in flux? Christos Paridis on the fifth and the sixth Athens Biennales - a 2-year artistic-political-social project.

Critique / Christos Paridis February 5, 2016

Omonoia Square is the most frequently visited spot in downtown Athens. Signs of the economic recession and of social decline are more evident there than anywhere else in the city: store windows remain broken, cheap clothing is on display in open-air flea markets, wretched immigrants, the homeless, and penniless drug addicts abound, while prostitution of all types marks the streetscape from dusk to dawn. One finds fast-food restaurants and a line of lottery shops alongside kiosks that sell international press and magazines of all sorts. Once Athens's Main Street, this part of town was considered, back in the '60s and '70s, the gateway for villagers who migrated to the capital, escaping from rural poverty. Today Omonoia is the final destination for most of those who dare to cross the Aegean Sea from Turkey, hoping to escape poverty and violent death, and perchance find a better future in Europe.

poka-yio_massimiliano_mollona_xenia_kalpaktsoglou_20153.jpg



[1]The co-founders of Athens Biennale (far left: Poka Yio, far right: Xenia Kalpaktsoglou) with Massimiliano Mollona, Programme Director of the Athens Biennale 2015-2017 “OMONOIA”
© Nysos Vasilopoulos

Bageion, a legendary hotel built at the fin-de-siècle by the German architect Ernst Ziller, has been standing on Omonoia Square more than a century. These days, as soon as you enter the hotel you are at the headquarters of the Athens Biennale. Organized with the contribution of the Athens Municipality, the event combines the fifth and the sixth Biennales into one long-term project, scheduled to run for two years (it has started in 2015 and is expected to run through the end of 2017, when Documenta 14 will open in Athens. It is the first time in history that Documenta is opening outside Germany and Kassel). A jewel at the time of its construction, the Bageion has been in disrepair and completely deserted before its adoption for the Biennale project. The three-floor neoclassical building has soaring ceilings, spacious corridors and guest rooms, and impressive reception and gathering spaces. The place bears the decay of a century like a brand, its mottled plaster walls reflecting the bright light that comes through its grand windows, which face the most historical square of the city. The square lends its name to the subject of the Biennale: OMONOIA, which translates as “concord”. It is in Bageion that art groups, which participate in the Biennale, meet twice a week to discuss and build projects that would be shown in the coming months.

nikos_kessanlis_rhinoceros_1997.jpg **[2]**



[3]Nikos Kessanlis. Rhinoceros. mixed media, dimensions variable
1997. courtesy Klara Romanos © Dimitris Tsoublekas

The opening of the Biennale took place on the 25th of June, 2015, while in the old ballroom of the Bageion Nikos Kessanlis's (1930-2004) emblematic work "Rhinoceros" (1997) was exhibited – a large-scale mixed-media reinterpretation of the well-known woodcut by Albrecht Dürer, that clearly contrasted with the decayed surroundings. The meaning apparently was that art could or even should be reconstructed and readjusted in time. On display alongside it was the installation "Under Construction", a project by the Underconstruction Group, inspired by the façade [4] of the legendary building. A large sign, reading Άντερ Κονστράξιον (ie. Under Construction), has been hung outside Bageion, which could be construed as an artistic gesture, insinuating the collective effort of many different people working towards something new and constructive. I met the artist Poka Yio, one of the founders of the Athens Biennale and its co-curator, along with the head of the current Biennale, Massimiliano Mollona. Yio explained to me why they decided to follow this two-year-process model: "When one chooses to experiment, it doesn't mean that one knows what the outcome would be. We believe that under the conditions in which Greece finds itself an exhibition cannot be organized in the conventional sense. Presently, Greece's future is being reshaped, reevaluated and redefined. With everything in flux it means that even the shape of a Biennale would be in question. Therefore one has to mirror this fluidity by creating a more flexible, open, and on-going workshop-like structure for the endeavor."

underconstruction_group_under_construction_2015.jpg **[5]**



[6]Underconstruction Group, Άντερ Κονστράξιον, (ie. Under Construction). 2015, sign made of wood, dimensions variable
Courtesy Underconstruction Group (Alexandros Laios, Maro Fasouli, Dimitris Foutris). © Marilena Batali

Clearly the crisis has inspired the curators to formulate a biennale concept that transcends the traditional art show, which would put spectacular artwork on display. Instead, at its core are a forum for discussion, co-operation, and an open dialogue among artists, activist groups and other alternative collectives, seeking public resources and greater reach and effectiveness, in a new era of politics and revisionism of staid ideas and ideals. Mollona, an anthropologist and a professor at Goldsmith College in London, views this Biennale as an opportunity - not only for Greece but also for the rest of Europe - to engage in democratic, collective-participatory, and liberal experiments through new art forms, that would change and extend the conversation on the critical and social issues of the new century.

BiennaleOpenAssembly.jpg **[7]**



[8]Open Assembly of public discussion and knowledge-exchange among scholars, activists, self-organised groups and cooperatives at Bageion on November 19th
2015 © Nysos Vasilopoulos

Synapse1.jpg **[9]**



[10]Synapse 1: Introducing a laboratory for production post-2011
Bageion © Communication Team — at Omonoia Square.

Last December, groups involved in the Biennale gathered to discuss possible perspectives on the project and its agenda in a Symposium titled Synapse 1. They are all groups who embrace principles of collectivism, a quality one should not take for granted in the art world. Still, in order for this artistic-political-social project-as-experiment to function and succeed, it has to be immunized against the imperative to exceed the mainstream standard of biennales. This vision defined the order in which different kinds of groups were invited to weigh in on the character and structure of the overall project. The Biennale has issued an open international invitation to all interested parties to work with it and contribute to it. Thus far a number of collectives, such as non-profit organizations and alternative art spaces, as well as the National Theatre of Greece, along with photography groups, sculptors, painters, and conceptual artists, have started working on projects related to the art scene, to human rights, or other burning social issues.

BiennaleCampusNovel.jpg **[11]**



[12]Campus Novel
Bageion © Nysos Vasilopoulos

Does this remind you of the ancient Athens agora? The comparison is not that far-fetched. AGORA was the concept of the 4th Biennale and the current iteration is an extension of it. At the end of March “Synapse 2” will open to the public. If the outcome will reveal a new, creative, and effective way to move forward, the organizing processes will also be reshaped. Still there are not any significant expected landmarks – so far.

What would the grand finale be, at the end of 2017? Poka Yio is concerned about its consequences, and he says: “We hope that the results would represent a fruitful aggregation of the working elements of this experiment. Also, that something tangible would remain after all is said and done, even if it results in nothing more than an artistic construction, such as a collective art workshop. As I said before, Athens doesn’t need another conventional art festival. People out there expect something new which would leave something of substance behind. If there is anything essential and crucial in our times, it is not just artistic creativity but creativity of all kinds. It’s important that art is positioned to contribute to social change more effectively and is not relegated to the margins as unnecessary. Today, as a country, we have limited social infrastructures and outlays. Therefore we must contest the notion that art is superfluous to society. It is time to use our ingenuity, our work, our creativity, and aesthetics to produce for, and contribute to, the common good”.

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