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PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art, PAJ 92 (Volume 31, Number
2), May 2009, pp. 45-54 (Article)

Published by The MIT Press



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LIVING AND WORKING IN ATHENS

**Ioannis Savvidis, Laertis Vassiliou,
Maria-Thalia Carras, and Sophia Tournikiotis
in conversation with Marina Kotzamani**

Four young professionals in the arts living and working in Athens are the focus of this conversation. Ioannis Savvidis is a visual artist particularly interested in space, who mainly works with video, installation, and architectural design. He is based in Athens and Berlin. His recent work was shown at the first Biennial of Athens (2007) as well as at Art Athina (2008). Savvidis is a member of Stadtwald, a group of urban action based in Berlin, of Osservatorio Nomade, and of the Rufus Corporation. Laertis Vassiliou is an actor and a director. As an actor he has worked with distinguished theatre directors, including Roula Pateraki, Theodoros Terzopoulos, D. Mavrikios, and Robert Wilson. He has directed Mrozek's *The Emigrants* and more recently *One in Ten*, a performance about immigrants in Greece, which was invited to the theatre festival Mess in Sarajevo the fall of 2008. He also works in film and television. Maria-Thalia Carras and Sophia Tournikiotis are art curators. They founded (in 2004) and co-direct *Locus Athens*, a non-profit contemporary arts organization that does not have a space as such but curates projects in various sites in Athens, organizes talks and art film screenings, and publishes art books and catalogues. Recent work includes *Sampling* (2008), an exhibition of seven contemporary Turkish artists at the Center of Popular Art and Tradition in Athens.

The city of Athens, sensitive to the population's evolving, multicultural identity, inspires and shapes the work of the participants in this conversation, all of them reflecting divergent fields in the arts. They are skilled in employing artistic concepts and media to explore subjects relevant to the new global era, such as immigration and tourism, and adopt a variety of approaches, from playful postmodern discourses to site-specific performance and archiving work. This conversation also highlights Greece as a country of diaspora, its participants having been brought up in or lived abroad over extended periods of time in diverse countries, including Germany, Albania, and England. This explains their strong interest in approaching central concerns in present-day Greece and Athens as outsiders, from alternative, critical perspectives. Subjects range from the new immigrants to international relations with its Balkan neighbors, including Turkey, with whom relations have traditionally been strained. Their work exposes sensitive issues such as racism, censorship, and nationalism. Regarding national identity, the relation between Greece's European and Eastern heritage also surfaces in the conversation. Unlike older generations of Greeks or

even current official state rhetoric, participants freely draw on Eastern elements in Greek culture, without feeling that this detracts from their European identity. On a related note, they are inclined to explore the ancient heritage in terms of pop culture with nonchalance and humor. Other characteristic features about living in Athens emerge in the conversation, such as the inadequacies of city planning, which has resulted in extensive illegal building, and the necessity for small-scale projects, which allow for intimate, face-to-face interaction. The conversation was taped in Athens, on April 18 and 21, 2008.



KOTZAMANI: How is space relevant to the work you do? How does living in Athens engage you?

LOCUS ATHENS: As the name of our organization denotes, we are interested in the city and how it works. We founded Locus Athens in 2004 with the aim to do experimental projects of contemporary art that would be *in situ*. We place the work in a certain space and are interested in the social discourse this produces. We also try involving the people associated with the particular space we choose in our projects, who may not be the people who go to art galleries. We set up a dialogue between the space, the people, and the art and are open as to what will ensue.

KOTZAMANI: Have you had to deal with sensitive issues in the projects you have undertaken?

LOCUS ATHENS: Yes. For example, for *Disco Coppertone* we solicited works on tourism from contemporary Greek and foreign artists. They explored the subject from conflicting perspectives, from tourism as fantasy to tourism as a product of capitalist industry. The works were designed for and presented in 2007 at a transit space in Piraeus, where tourists on cruises embark. The project compelled us to deal with issues of nationalism and censorship in ways we had not foreseen. The guards policing the space would not let us put up two works by Carolina Caycedo: a Greek-Albanian flag and a Turkish-Cypriot-Greek flag. [She is an artist who combines elements of flags from countries in tension, creating new flags to represent them.] Their reactions against these flags were so vehement and insulting that we decided not to show them so as not to jeopardize the entire project. We do not only work in public space. We have also used private spaces, spaces we have found by ringing people's doorbells. Setting up a work in a space is like living at a different place every time. You get to know the life of a certain area, if only briefly. The kind of art curating we do is personal and creative from beginning to end.

SAVVIDIS: Isn't this mode of operating characteristically Greek? In Germany for example, you cannot find a space by ringing people's doorbells; you have to go through institutions. It's easier in Athens than elsewhere to invade a space and to become part of a network. This may have to do with the small scale that allows for personalized interaction.

LOCUS ATHENS: You are right about Athens; relationships between people here easily become personalized, human. Let's not idealize, however. Our invasions are ephemeral; as soon as we leave a space we are forgotten. But the people do participate in the process of making a project happen.

VASSILIOU: You've been talking about "invading" a space. Isn't there a danger of voyeurism in what you do?

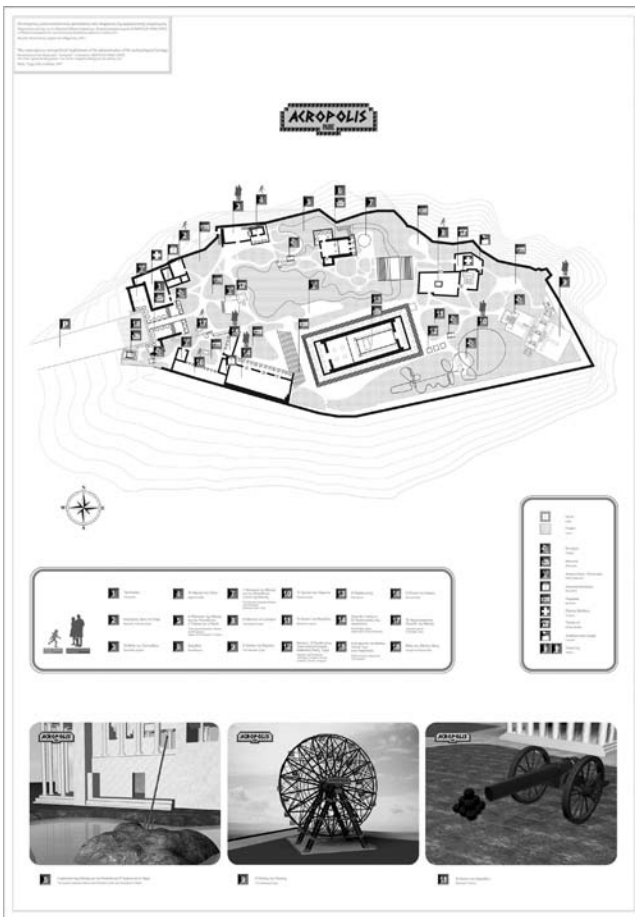
LOCUS ATHENS: We certainly risk alienating people with what we do, as happened with the guards at Piraeus. But it is not our intention to create embarrassment or to approach the people associated with a particular space as picturesque curiosities. In *Disco Coppertone* there were all sorts of reactions and all could be heard. Oddly enough, perhaps the art people complained that the works blurred with the background and became invisible, while the tourists easily spotted them and were more responsive to them. We don't aim at transposing a polished, finished product into a space. Rather, space becomes an integral part of the work itself.

SAVVIDIS: Space is a dominant element in my work too. I am interested in how symbolism is created in the city where I live. How do modern Greeks read their own history? The question intrigues me partly for reasons that have to do with my background; I am the son of Greek immigrants and grew up in Germany. I always had the sense that the Greek part of my heritage was unexplored. I focus on how public memory is inscribed in space. Greece is a paradise in this respect; there is so much material here. For example in *Athenscope*, through a series of maps and other architectural designs, I question the continuity of Greek culture through the ages, a myth that has profoundly marked Greeks for generations. I present three alternative versions of contemporary Athens that are possible had history taken different turns. You see how historical memory is constructed, how stereotypes take root. There is great detail to my architectural designs so that they will be convincing.

KOTZAMANI: Why do you like to work with architectural design?

SAVVIDIS: In my maps, I approach design as a set of socially meaningful signs. This is why design is intriguing to me. I also like the semblance of objectivity, a distancing from the identity of the artist that design entails. The self is no longer at the center of the work. This allows for more substantial questioning. I think of myself as an artist-researcher, especially as a lot of my projects are based on historical research of space.

VASSILIOU: When I think of space in relation to Athens what comes to mind is Omonia Square, the favorite hangout of immigrants in Athens. This is like a seething cauldron. Since 1990, when the immigrants arrived in Athens, you can hear so many foreign languages around Omonia. There is a multiculturalism that wasn't there before. It is no accident that theatres have always been at the center in a city, where every sort of cross-fertilizing is possible. As a director, I am interested in spaces like Omonia, where there is a mixture of cultures. My work centers on the problems of the new immigrants in Greece; I am an immigrant myself, of Greek-Albanian



Left: *Athenscope* (2007), an installation of mixed media by Ioannis Savvidis. Detail of an architectural study for a theme park on the Acropolis, for Athens B. Courtesy the artist.

Bottom: *Disco Coppertone* (2007) an exhibition on tourism curated by Locus Athens at OLP in Piraeus, a transit space for passengers on cruises. Photo courtesy Locus Athens.



descent. The title of my recent work, *One in Ten*, refers to the current percentage of immigrants in Greece.¹ If this ten percent had a voice, they could disturb the Greek bureaucracy, which actually pushes them towards forming a ghetto and to becoming violent. My discourse in theatre is political in the Greek etymological sense of the word: it is about the city, the polis.

KOTZAMANI: As Laertis touched on, over the last fifteen years Athens has been turning into a multicultural city. Let's explore how multicultural concerns figure in your work. I recently saw *Sampling*, the exhibition of contemporary Turkish artists that Locus Athens curated at the Center for Popular Art and Tradition, a folk art museum. It was striking to see a large inscription in Turkish at the façade of the museum that read in translation, "Are you one of those that we could get Europeanized?"² For Greeks, the question put in play the Oriental elements of Greek culture, in a context where such elements are considered quintessentially Greek. A folk-art museum in Greece has traditionally been taken to exclude multiculturalism by definition. Perhaps your exhibition opens up the possibility of conceiving a Greek folk-art museum in a new way. Can you talk about your curatorial approach?

LOCUS ATHENS: The museum is housed in a landmark interwar building that combines modernism in original ways with Arts and Crafts. The exhibition poses yet again the problem of how you combine modernity with tradition in a new context. Most of the works we exhibited in *Sampling* rely on tradition, which in the case of the Turkish artists has a firm Oriental basis. Yet this is a tradition that we also partake of as Greeks, frequently not acknowledging its Oriental nature. We wanted the Greek public to approach contemporary Turkish as well as Greek art as simultaneously strange and familiar.

KOTZAMANI: Why did you choose to mount an exhibition of individual Turkish artists as opposed to an exhibition of contemporary Turkish art?

LOCUS ATHENS: We didn't want the Greek audience to approach the exhibition with preconceptions about the nationality of the artists. We wanted them to put aside ideology and politics so as to be able to appreciate the works as contemporary art. It seems that the exhibition responded to a real need, as many people came to see it. On an individual basis, Greeks and Turks get on with each other. Even though we tried to avoid the national issue, on the institutional level we had problems securing funds for the exhibition because its subject was considered sensitive, on the Greek side, as well as on the Turkish side.

KOTZAMANI: Are you interested in curating more projects involving artists from the Balkans?

LOCUS ATHENS: Yes. Greece is on the periphery of global culture. Why should it follow Western models? Besides, Western art is already fully developed. What can Greece contribute to it? We want to collaborate with other countries on the periphery, which we relate to on a more equal basis.

KOTZAMANI: Laertis, your work also poses the question of multiculturalism in a Balkan context since you are dealing with immigrants from Eastern Europe. There have been numerous works on the new immigrants in Greece in recent years—on television, in movies, as well as in the theatre.³ Most plays I have seen tend to be naturalist melodramas. *One in Ten* stands out: it is humorous and dynamic, making claims on the part of the immigrants. Perhaps the reason your work is powerful is that it is a performance. You have chosen professional actors from Eastern Europe who are also immigrants in Greece doing jobs to survive. Your actors do not imitate the life of the immigrant; rather, they carry it in their bodies, they show it.

VASSILIOU: It is now trendy in Greece to write about immigrants. The works are full of clichés about the poor but honest toiler. Which immigrant is clean? I chose the performance mode because I wanted to show the life of the immigrant as it is. In the production actors introduce themselves by their real names. *One in Ten* is not theatre. I didn't write a play and then choose the actors. Rather, I chose the actors and developed the work with them.

KOTZAMANI: I also found it interesting that you insist on difference. We hear the actors speak in their own languages at times, there is even a quarrel conducted in two foreign languages. You make fun of the insistence of Greek employers to call them by Greek names. At the same time, you remind Greeks of their own emigrant background. In a moving scene, the actors quote verses from traditional Greek folk and pop songs about immigrants to express their own alienation. So while you insist on difference you also explore what Greeks have in common with immigrants.

VASSILIOU: As immigrants, we want to be integrated into Greek society but not to be assimilated. We want to keep our distinct identities. I refer to Greek emigration with conciliatory intent. Remembering helps us live peacefully with each other. Greece currently has a very absolute stance towards immigrants: either you are Greek or you are nothing. I should say, however, that while the state is nationalist and racist towards immigrants, on a personal level, the people are warm and receptive. Greek families in my neighborhood have furnished the houses of my relatives and have helped them get papers. In the culture of ordinary people as opposed to high culture, there has always been multiculturalism in Greece. There are old Greek pop songs with Muslim names, such as Mustafa and Hanoum.

KOTZAMANI: Ioannis, how has the experience of living and working in two countries, in Greece and Germany, come across in your work?

SAVVIDIS: I wouldn't have been able to do *Athenscope* had I not also been German. I wouldn't have as clear and detached a perception of the history of Athens as an ideological construct. In the two cities that I know well, Berlin and Athens, there have been major turning points in historical development. In Berlin there was the *belle époque*, Nazism, and the new face of post-war Germany. To go further back in time, in Athens there was antiquity, Byzantium, the Ottoman rule, the modern period. Germany and Greece have different perceptions of history, though. Whereas

Germany has dealt with its responsibility for World War II and with its guilt, Greece continues to live in a lie. It does not acknowledge responsibility for its historical mistakes and always plays the victim.

KOTZAMANI: So you've been saying that living in two cultures nurtures a critical look towards history in your work. In the *Terrace*, a work from 1996 that I admire a lot, you combine references from Berlin and Athens, as well as from your own immigrant background.⁴ Can you talk about this work?

SAVVIDIS: *Terrace* was a wooden Greek-style terrace painted in the national colors of white and blue that I had set up in a dead zone of the Berlin Wall, inaccessible on foot. The work referred to my identity as the son of immigrants and to Greece as a utopia, or as an internalized space. The skeletal, incomplete structure of the terrace also referred to Berlin as a city in transition at that time. Moreover, it also evoked contemporary Athens as a city of gaping, incomplete buildings: the ancient ruins and also the haphazard, improvisational style of houses built transgressively outside, but also occasionally inside, the city plan.

KOTZAMANI: Yes, these are the “temporary” houses, always under the threat of a demolition that never happens. Indeed, besides the complex multicultural references, another striking element of *Terrace* is its emphasis on the temporary. This comes through not only when we consider Berlin in the nineties, and Athens and the immigrant's situation, but also in that the work, set up in an inaccessible zone of the Wall, could only be viewed by passengers traveling through the area by train.

SAVVIDIS: In retrospect, the *Terrace* was also temporary in that it was destroyed by strangers who transgressed into the dead zone. I was crying when I saw my terrace in ruins; this work was a form of psychoanalysis for me. The temporary has profoundly marked me personally and it comes across in my art. My parents always perceived of their situation in Germany as temporary. Our home in Germany was packed with boxes of kitchen appliances that my parents wanted to take to Greece with them. Those boxes were the first monuments to time that I ever saw. When we finally opened them, years later, the appliances had become cult objects. My choice to settle in Athens had to do with a need to clear up who I am, to deal with temporariness.

KOTZAMANI: Laertis, like Ioannis, you have an immigrant background and you explore immigrant identity in your work. Is the temporary important to you?

VASSILIOU: There is an important difference between old and new immigrants. Old immigrants, of the generation of Ioannis's parents, conceived of their situation in the host country as temporary because they aspired to return to their home country. For the new immigrants there is no going back. They come to Athens to stay and this makes them more demanding. What's different from immigration in the past is that the new immigrants are now altering the character of the host country.

KOTZAMANI: Is this why the title of your work refers to a percentage, *One in Ten*, to denote that you are dealing with the current problems one in every ten inhabitants in Greece is facing?

VASSILIOU: Yes, my production is of the here and now. One of the three actors in my work is Bulgarian. Bulgaria joined the European Union since my production opened, and the problems we present no longer apply to him. In 2015, immigrants in Greece will constitute twenty-five percent of the population and the situation in this country will be entirely different. What I understand by “temporary” is the actual. My production is in flux, dating as the actuality of immigrants in Greece changes. *One in Ten* got excellent reviews in the press; I even think it was overrated. The enthusiastic reception was not due to the fact that it’s a timeless masterpiece but rather to its good sense of political timing: it said the right things at the right time.

KOTZAMANI: The temporary is also important to the work of Locus Athens, in a different way. You don’t have a permanent space where you show work. Is this a choice for you or a necessity?

LOCUS ATHENS: Both. The cost of maintaining a gallery space in Athens is considerable. Moreover, exhibiting at galleries has little impact in Athens, as people have little grounding in contemporary art. Having a permanent space also limits what you can explore, channeling your options into becoming more institutional or more commercial. Institutions tend to malfunction in Greece and people are suspicious of them. It is easier for us to persuade people to give us their spaces when we go to them as individuals rather than as representatives of institutions. On an individual basis, people are also more open to seeing things. You get the right people at the right place—this is how things happen in Athens. On the down side, it is more difficult for us to find funding from institutions when we approach them as individuals. We don’t exclude moving to a permanent space in the future. Flexibility is the key to how we see things.

KOTZAMANI: We are living in a city where antiquity is present everywhere. Establishing a direct connection to ancient Greece has been the most important ideological project of the nineteenth-century Greek state and has been weighing heavily on us, even incapacitating modern artistic expression. Ioannis has already spoken about how *Athenscope* deals with historical continuity. Is Greek antiquity or history important to the rest of you?

LOCUS ATHENS: Our only project relevant to antiquity was *Nothing Really Matters*, which we did in 2006 with Los Super Elegantes, a group of visual artists who also do music performances.⁵ The group did a video, giving free rein to their own stereotypes and fantasies about Athens. Images have a banal and flat, postcard-type quality. The video recontextualizes antiquities in a lighthearted, ironic way. The Acropolis figures in the video as a visit to a nightclub named “Acropolis,” while at Theseion one of the group members picks up a poppy and they all leave.

KOTZAMANI: How did you show the work? What were the reactions of the Greek public to it?

LOCUS ATHENS: The video was part of a performance at a stylish hotel in Athens, which included a music performance by the Super Elegantes and simultaneous swimming in the pool. In a city like Athens, where lifestyle is all-important, the performance encouraged a viewing of antiquity in new terms. Athenian audiences didn't fully understand the work though. The lifestyle crowd was enthusiastic about the performance but only focused on the form and missed the deeper implications of the work. As for the critics and the art sophisticates, they generally expect events to be serious and have difficulty in seeing that something light may have depth.

SAVVIDIS: We need humor, especially when it comes to dealing with heavy-handed subjects like antiquity. I have a work similar to *Nothing Really Matters*, where I have recontextualized the symbolism associated with the Marathon run. Contrary to what those with high-flown ideas about antiquity would think, the actual course of the run between Marathon and Athens is a banal journey, in one of the ugliest areas of the Balkans. I videotaped the course from a car and collaborated with musicians to set it to electronic music, sensitive to the rhythm that the succession of images produced. I showed the work at the foyer of a club in Berlin. Only at a place like this could the work unfold its full potential.

KOTZAMANI: What about you, Laertis? Is antiquity important at all to you, given that you focus on the present? In *One in Ten* your actors pose like models on a runway, carrying glossy pictures of the antiquities which they introduce with a slogan of the ministry of tourism: "Live your myth in Greece." This seems like another recontextualizing of antiquity that has affinities to the work of Ioannis and Locus Athens that we just discussed as an element of humor. Do you agree?

VASSILIOU: Yes, there is a lot of irony in these scenes. I wanted to show what "Live your Myth in Greece" means to the immigrants. It means getting entangled in the Greek bureaucracy, getting beaten up by the police or prostituting yourself for a few extra Euros. When I first came to Athens, I went to see the Acropolis, which I may never have seen had socialism not collapsed. It was moving to be walking in a city where Socrates once lived. But I have a class problem with antiquity as the expression of an aristocratic culture. When we admire the Acropolis our mind does not go to all the slave labor that went into building it or to workers' accidents. There are no plays about such subjects in the Greek canon.

KOTZAMANI: Doesn't *Trojan Women* present Athenian imperialism critically, from the point of view of the slaves? I mention this play because I know you are involved in a production of the play at the National Theatre of Albania to be staged by the Greek director Takis Theodoropoulos.⁶

VASSILIOU: In fact, the play is also important to me in another way. I am currently working on another improvisational performance about immigrants, entitled *Project Iliion*. This is based on stories of immigrant women living in Athens. "Iliion," as you

know, is the name of Troy, but also of Liossia, a present-day immigrant neighborhood in Athens. The word “project” refers to the design, the project of Greek society to bring women from the Balkans here to work as barmaids, prostitutes, strippers, servants, or nannies. In a leading position in the Balkans in the present day, Greeks “sack” Balkan cities and carry away the women, evoking the ancient Greeks in the *Trojan Women*. Today’s Hecuba is a prima ballerina of the Bolshoi, currently working in Athens as a stripper. I was taught about Greek antiquity at school in Albania, but never felt a responsibility to carry it, the way Greeks do. Antiquity belongs to museums. I am interested in the present.

NOTES

1. *One in Ten* was produced by and opened at Thetro tou Neou Kosmou in the season 2007–2008.

2. This was a work by the Turkish artist Ozlem Gunyol. For a photograph of the work, set up at a space, see the catalogue of *Sampling*, Athens: Locus Athens, 2008, p. 35.

3. Laertis Vassiliou has acted in several TV series and films about immigrants: *E Agape Erthe apo Makria* (*Love Came from Far Away*), directed by M. Manousakis for Antenna channel; *Ston Helio tou Egeou* (*Under the Aegean Sun*), directed by V. Douros, Antenna channel; *Mirupafshim*, feature film, directed by G. Korras and Ch. Voupouras; *Omeros* (*Hostage*), directed by K. Giannaris. For examples of recent plays on immigrants see Vassilis Katsikonouris, *To Gala* (*The Milk*), Athens: Kedros, 2006; Yiannis Tsiros, *Axirista Pigounia* (*Unshaved Chins*), unpublished, produced at Porta Theater in 2006, directed by V. Papa-georgiou; Yiannis Mavritsakis; *To Tyflo Semio* (*Blind Spot*), Athens: Nefeli, 2008, an excellent new play on the subject of immigrants.

4. The *Terrace* was presented in 1996 in Berlin, as part of the exhibition *Kunststationen, Art on the Railway*, curated by Herta Schonewolf, Prof. Dr. Dieter Schnebel, and Ronald Munzer.

5. *Nothing Really Matters* by Los Super Elegantes was presented at the Roof Garden of Athens Imperial, Classical Hotels in June 2006.

6. Euripides’ *Trojan Women*, directed by Takis Theodoropoulos for the National Theatre of Albania, premiered on July 17, 2008 at the ancient theatre of Vouthrotos in Albania and will form part of the National Theatre’s 2008–2009 season.