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ATHENS— ANCIENT AND MODERN



Opening Ceremony of the Athens Olympics of 2004 in the stadium designed by Santiago Calatrava.

ATHENS IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Marina Kotzamani

Situated at the Eastern tip of Europe, modern Greece has partaken of both Eastern and Western cultural elements. The presence of an Eastern heritage along with a Western heritage has been notoriously difficult to negotiate for Greeks. In modern times, Greece became a state in 1834, having been under the Ottoman Empire for four hundred years. Since its inception, the modern Greek state has been anxious to claim a position in the European family. To this end it has strongly emphasized its hereditary, cultural, and material connection to ancient Greece, the cradle of Western civilization. Identifying modern with ancient Greece and establishing continuity between ancient and modern culture has been the most significant ideological project of the modern state and instrumental in forging national identity. This effort has had pervasive influence on all aspects of Greek life from the nineteenth century to the present.

Establishing historical continuity for Greek civilization has also largely involved homogenizing it and purging it of vibrant Eastern elements, primarily those associated with folk and popular arts. A firm polarity was thus put into place in the nineteenth century with the Western heritage, classical Greece, and “high culture” on one side and the Eastern heritage, folk, and popular culture on the other. In spite of ideological manipulation, Eastern elements survived and developed in parallel with, or in assimilation to, official high culture. Contemporary Greek culture then is a hybrid of Eastern and Western elements. Since the 1990s, the arrival of new immigrants in Greece from Eastern Europe, Asia, and Africa has been reinvigorating Eastern influences in the culture in new ways.

It is easy to ascertain the hybrid character of Greek culture empirically by taking a walk in the historical center of Athens, especially the downtown area surrounding the central marketplace of the city, the Varvakeios. This is the busiest and most vibrant shopping center of Athens, catering to a lower middle- and working-class clientele. The flavor of Eastern elements in the culture is prominent here. One can buy anything at the market area from herbs to a whole lamb, including intestines, or a wedding dress. One can get shoes, clocks, and lamps repaired. Indeed, the area has also traditionally been settled by craftspeople. In recent years, the Varvakeios has

rapidly been turning into a multicultural center with the new immigrants flocking to the area to find work, set up a business, or socialize.

Newcomers to the neighborhood, however, do not only include downtrodden Easterners but also high culture art sophisticates of a Western polish who frequent the art galleries, theatres, trendy restaurants, and bars that moved there over the last decade and continue to grow in number. Obviously these enterprises are on the side of Western “high” culture. The same applies to state institutions focusing on modern and contemporary art, which have recently opened in the wider area extending below the Varvakeios such as the Benaki Museum of Peireos Street, a lively museum housed in a stylish new building, and Gazi, a former gas factory turned into a complex of exhibition spaces.

Besides westward-looking contemporaneity, ancient Greece also has a strong presence in the neighborhood. The entire area around the Varvakeios extends to the south of the Acropolis and the ancient agora, offering stunning views of the archaeological sites. Indeed, the ancient agora of Athens geographically forms almost a continuum with the modern agora. Classical Greek theatre also has pride of place in the neighborhood through street naming. Directly below the Varvakeios, in Psiri, there is a complex of narrow, small streets bearing the names of all the illustrious ancient Greek dramatists. These streets surround Plateia Theatrou (Theatre Square), facing the Varvakeios from the west.

The strong connection between theatre and the agora that existed in ancient times is also in place in contemporary Athens. In antiquity both the theatre and the agora were broadly participatory and popular public institutions where all sorts of exchanges happened, making for great spectacle. This is true as well of the contemporary marketplace in Athens, a quintessentially theatrical space, featuring a formidable mixture of Eastern and Western influences, high and pop cultures, classical and contemporary elements, the mainstream and the marginal, the native Greek and the multicultural.

True to their function as signposts, the streets of the ancient dramatists guide us to approaching antiquity in a contemporary spirit as a living culture, exuberant and chaotic. In a great *coup de théâtre*, Theatre Square is not a square in the traditional sense of an open urban space; most of it is occupied by a stately, Bauhaus-style public building that leaves little room around the edges for use by city dwellers. On the south side of the square is Menander Street, a favorite meeting place of Pakistani immigrants who frequent the numerous ethnic barber shops in the area. Menander Street ends at the neoclassical building of the National Theatre, an emblem of high culture. The sharpest antithesis between high and low, though, is on Sophocles Street. At the beginning of the street is the landmark building of the Athens stock exchange which recently moved to another venue, in the middle of the street there is a stylish expensive hotel, and at the end is a municipal shelter for the homeless. Dominating Aeschylus Street is a derelict neoclassical building with gaping doors, windows, and a collapsing roof, looking like a scenic design for tragedy. On the

opposite side of the street among dark alleyways and passages there is a building that is used as a mosque. In a delightful touch of irony, where Aeschylus converges with Aristophanes Street there is a steak house and across from it a warehouse for marble statues, with a set of classically inspired specimens in the show window contemplating the smoke and smell of charred meat.

Indeed, Athens emerges as a most theatrical city, a city where, at the heart of its historical neighborhood, art and life inspire each other. Drama is played out in the streets, combining elements from East and West in sharp antitheses or bold syntheses. Yet, at least in mainstream or official culture, Greece is still not entirely comfortable with the hybrid character of contemporary culture. This became clear once again with the hosting of the Olympics in Athens in 2004, a landmark event concerning Greece's relation to Europe. Greece was able to organize the Games successfully and to silence critics in the international press, who prior to the Games had criticized the country's (Eastern-flavored) organizational competence and expressed doubts about whether Olympic preparations would be completed on time. The hosting of a successful Olympics boosted the prestige of the country internationally. The Olympics proved to be a test that Greece was able to pass concerning whether the country, a longtime member of the European Union, actually forms part of Europe in an integral way.

While Olympic preparations relied on, and showcased, hybrid contemporary Greece in its Eastern and Western guises, official policy promoted the Western aspects of Greek culture. The Opening ceremony of the Olympics, designed by director Dimitris Papaioannou, predominantly emphasized the ancient heritage. Indeed, the slogan of the Athens Olympics was that the Games return to the country where they were born. Ideologically, the ceremony aimed at reaching global audiences through the traditional, commonplace way of approaching Greece as the source of Western civilization. Papaioannou relied heavily on images based on pre-classical and classical art, recognized worldwide as Greek. In an impressive scene of the Opening ceremony history paraded in floats, showcasing masterfully executed *tableaux vivants* modeled after ancient Greek art. The parade led from ancient Greece through Byzantium to modern Greece, attesting to the enduring relevance of the continuity thesis. The historical expedition ended in the early-twentieth century, marginalizing the presence of contemporary Greece. No wonder—the continuity thesis presupposes that contemporary Greece has an identity primarily through its hereditary connection to ancient Greece.¹

This special *PAJ* section on Athens comes at an opportune time after the Athens Games to complement the anemic presentation of contemporary Greek art and culture at the Opening Ceremony of the Olympics. It features some of the best and most dynamic work produced in Greece post-2000. The works discussed reflect themes and formal explorations current in global culture, while also responding to central concerns in Greece today from non-mainstream perspectives. The selections set up complex discourses, jointly employing a great variety of media from high tech to handicraft. Contemporary culture in Greece emerges as less claustrophobic than

in the past, more open to and aware of international developments in the arts and culture. This is reflected in novel attempts to define national identity not through the historical continuity between ancient and modern Greece, but in terms of participating in today's global cultures.

Artistic expression in Greece is entering a new phase of maturity and coming into its own. The works selected argue for a greater emancipation of contemporary Greece from antiquity. While some of the artists chosen do draw on antiquity, others feel free to ignore or to reinvent it. The presence of non-Western elements in the culture, a source of anxiety in the past, is now regarded as a positive quality enriching multicultural expression. This is evidenced, for example, in imaginative uses of folk and popular, Eastern-based cultures that participate in international discourses or in a new, clearly articulated interest in Greece's Balkan neighborhoods. While there is a strong artistic tradition of drawing on folk arts and culture in Greece, the contemporary artists discussed in the section employ these elements with more freedom, dissociated from antiquity.

Folk culture, quintessentially thought of as being restricted to the local, is perhaps an unlikely source within which to look for global themes and approaches. The selections adopt unpredictable explorations. The nineteenth-century folk play *Golfo*, totally unknown outside Greece, is transformed into a postmodern multicultural performance for global audiences, fleshing out a novel perception of national folk culture as a hybrid of ethnic and international pop elements. A Gypsy settlement outside the urban plan of Athens is recast as an alternative museum for all, aspiring to reinvent the museum as a popular institution for today.

Other global themes include the mobility of contemporary culture, contemplating its metaphysical, existential qualities, or the bolder presence of new immigrants and marginalized populations. A central concern of the works that I discuss is the exploration of new performance modes for the classics that are responsive to the global era, ranging from a chorus-based approach to *Antigone*, evoking collective expression on the Internet to an interpretation of the play into a compact, solo performance suitable for traveling. The well-known visual artists who approach Beckett highlight the strong non-verbal content of his work in imaginative interpretations ranging from technology to text to the two-dimensional world of animation and to an installation of theatrically charged handicraft inspired by the Byzantine tradition of mosaics.

The works I am presenting tend to be theatrical and playful. Admittedly, this is an idiosyncratic selection centering on criticism and reflecting my own tastes and interests. There have been competent surveys of the contemporary arts in Athens and I do not wish to add to them.² Without being an overview however, the spotlight on Athens does convey the spirit of contemporary work produced in the city. Discussion is organized in three sections focusing on works whose subject matter is the city itself (Athens as Utopia), production of Greek plays, classical and modern (*Antigone* in the Global Era), and installation and performance works based on Samuel Beckett (Beckett made in Greece). There is notable work I do not discuss, including art by

women artists, who happen to be underrepresented in my selection. In addition to discussion of particular works I am including a conversation with four professionals in the arts, entitled “Living and Working in Athens.” The conversation takes up themes raised in the essay in a free-wheeling manner that allows for multiple voices to be heard. Moreover, our exchange introduces new themes such as nationalism, racism, and contemporary curatorial approaches.

A special focus on Athens has a double perspective, as it is also essentially a view on Greece. Greece is a small country of eleven million inhabitants, half of whom live in the capital. If one can make it in Athens, one can make it anywhere in Greece. In spite of Thessaloniki’s prominence in the arts in recent years, longtime efforts to decentralize cultural activity in Greece have had scant success. *PAJ*’s spotlight on Athens comes at a turning point in its history. The city is rapidly changing into a large multicultural metropolis, losing its homogeneous, homey feel.

Traditionally a nation of the diaspora and of emigrants, Greece is now for the first time in its history receiving immigrants, like many other European countries. The country has become more prosperous over the past thirty-five years and emigration has largely stopped. The new immigrants, most of whom settle in Athens, have had a strong impact on the city’s acquiring a strong multicultural character. The new metropolitan identity of Athens is also strongly evidenced in the large-scale construction of public works such as the new airport, the metro, and large highways and underpasses. This has accelerated since 2000 and was propelled by the Olympics. Another positive effect of the Olympics on Athens is that the quality of life in the capital improved. This was badly needed in a city overpopulated, overbuilt, and congested by traffic. Since the Olympics Athens has become cleaner, more functional, and pleasant to live in. Buildings were cleaned of soot and traffic, especially at the historic center, which was redirected to leave more free space for pedestrians. It is now possible to visit all the antiquities in the vicinity of the Acropolis on foot. Such planning has given new life to the historic center, which has become an extremely popular hangout.

Culturally, horizons are expanding. Unprecedented construction activity of public buildings relating to the arts is currently in the works. Hopefully, this will provide a solid foundation for bold cultural development in Greece into the twenty-first century. The new museum of the Acropolis—designed by the internationally distinguished architect Bernard Tschumi—is finally ready to open to the public. This is a minimalist building situated across from the hill of the Acropolis. The new cultural planning in Athens does not only cater to antiquities; it puts more emphasis than ever before on modern and contemporary art. Besides the Benaki Museum of Peireos Street and Gazi, mentioned earlier, Athens will also soon have a National Museum of Contemporary Art. This will be housed in the former factory building of Fix, a huge, Bauhaus-style construction at the beginning of Syngrou Avenue, which leads to the coast.



Top: Acropolis Museum, designed by Bernard Tschumi. Photo: Bernard Tschumi.
Bottom: A car set on fire in the riots of early December 2008 in Athens; in the background is the University of Athens on Panepistimiou Street.



Towards the end of Syngrou Avenue, planning is under way for a major complex of cultural buildings, including the National Library and the National Opera House, to be designed by another acclaimed architect, Renzo Piano. Besides opera, renovation and expansion of other state-supported theatre and performance spaces is also underway. The original house of the National Theatre, a landmark building from 1901, is being renovated. As for the Athens Festival, held over the summer months in the capital, it has now acquired several new spaces along Peireos Street, a former factory area. Previously, performances of the festival offerings had been confined to Herodeion, the Roman amphitheatre below the Acropolis. The new spaces have effectively allowed the festival to present avant-garde work by celebrated directors from Europe and the U.S. such as Thomas Ostermeier, Deborah Warner, and Elizabeth LeCompte, attracting younger and more sophisticated audiences.

The festival has yet to acquire its artistic identity but under its new and able director, Yorgos Loukos, it has the potential to become an important institution, showcasing contemporary trends in international art that will certainly invigorate local theatre production. Eyes are also on the National Theatre and on its new artistic director, Yannis Chouvardas, appointed in 2007. So far, Chouvardas has been more inclusive than his predecessors, inviting many acclaimed, but also up and coming directors to stage work at the National Theatre, such as L. Voyatzis, R. Pateraki, D. Mavrikios and S. Kakalas. Indicative of Chouvardas's open-minded approach is the introduction of the new project *Common View* at the National Theatre, presenting theatre-related work by visual artists.

There is perhaps an overabundance of theatre offerings in Athens. In the 2007–2008 season, there were over four hundred productions of plays in the capital, a vast number given the size of Greece. Perhaps more collaborations in fewer productions would yield more substantial results. A notable new trend is a strong emphasis on performance by young theatre groups, which was very limited prior to 2000. This is sparking interest in the work of Greek visual artists who have been more eager than theatre people to explore performance in their work. For example, the Benaki Museum of Peireos Street (there are two Benaki Museums in Athens) recently presented a retrospective of performance work by visual artist Leda Papakonstantinou, an important pioneer of performance art in Greece in the late-sixties.

Among the most interesting offerings on view in Athens in the spring of 2008 were two exhibitions of contemporary Turkish and Iranian artists respectively, attesting to the stronger presence of multiculturalism in Greece.³ The exhibitions are also indicative of Greece's greater openness in recent years to exploring its Eastern heritage and Balkan roots. Regarding the visual arts, galleries have been multiplying in Athens with spaces opening in previously underprivileged neighborhoods at the historic center of the capital, currently undergoing transformation. New gallery spaces such as The Breeder, Gazonrouge, Antonopoulou and The Apartment focus on work by young artists or on collaborative projects that include international contributors.



Contemporary view of the theatre of Dionysus in Athens. Photo: Bonnie Marranca.



Sophocles' *Antigone*, directed by Lefteris Voyatzis, theatre of Epidauros, summer 2007; Amalia Moutousi as Antigone and L. Voyatzis as Creon. Photo: Evie Filaktou.



Constitution Square in the heart of Athens. Photo: Bonnie Marranca.

On the socio-political front, the most important issues Greece is grappling with at present relate to the environment, education, and health care. Oddly enough perhaps for a country so dependent on tourism, Greece has a poor record of observing regulations to protect the environment. The burning of forest land by haphazard fire and by arson has created huge catastrophes in Greece in recent summers, seriously depleting some areas, including Athens, of their last remaining green havens. Even though the state is theoretically committed to replanting trees in forest areas, cunning developers always find ways to acquire burned forests for construction. A positive outcome of the fires is that they have triggered citizen mobilization for environmental causes, such as tree planting, a form of activism previously almost unknown in Greece.

Regarding education, Greece is currently under a great deal of pressure to undertake reforms in its system, many of which are required by the European Union. While there is consensus that the educational system needs to be improved, there has been strong resistance to reforms, especially in higher education, in such issues as the introduction of private university education in Greece and the setting up of an evaluation system of departments and faculty. Resistance has taken the forms of student occupations of university property, demonstrations, strikes, and abstention from teaching. To a certain extent protest has been motivated by concern that reforms might tighten the control of the state on academic institutions or threaten the public and free—relatively speaking—status of education in Greece.

Concerning social security, Greece faces the problem of developing an integral and comprehensive social security program, unifying under one umbrella the multiple public health care and pension funds, which have been under threat of bankruptcy in recent years. The task has met with considerable resistance from professional unions that have prosperous funds, such as the journalists or employees in the banking sector. Dealing effectively with the socio-political problems described will enable Greece to maximize gain from its major investment in the cultural infrastructure in Athens.

In conclusion, the cultural scene in Athens is pregnant with promise. There is remarkable activity both on the state policy level as well as in free enterprise in the arts, which is certain to yield fruit. We are on hold. More focused on the present than ever before, cultural expression in Athens aspires to live up to the capital's evolving metropolitan identity. At the same time, it exhibits a multiplicity of interests and approaches reflecting tendencies worldwide. There is a lot of energy, creativity, and originality in the arts in Athens. Moreover, there is strong desire on the part of the artists to communicate more effectively beyond national boundaries. I risk the prediction that contemporary art from Greece will become more prominent internationally in years to come.

ATHENS AS UTOPIA

At first sight, Panos Kokkinias's photographs have nothing to do with Athens. This artist has a flair for utopias. In *Visitors*, a series of recent large-size color photographs, exhibited at the Xippas gallery in Athens and in Paris in 2007, the shot of space is

dominant in his characteristic manner, containing the human figure in small scale. The photographs look like arrested, frozen moments of an unfolding drama that has a Robert Wilson-like feel. Space has an artificial, unreal quality, looking like a theatre or film set. Compositions are meticulously planned. Surfaces are well-lit, stark, polished, and geometrical. The minimalist, deliberate gestures or contemplative posing of the solitary figures on the sets invite us to see them as characters. As the title of the series *Visitors* suggests, these are figures in transit, caught in the midst of action. They occupy places of transport such as a platform, the corridor of a hotel, or an underpass. Where are these figures coming from? Where are they going? The pictures emanate mystery and existential angst, imbued by theatricality.

At a closer look, the spaces in the *Visitors* series are recognizable to Athenians. Most have been shot in the sites of the ultra modern post-2000 constructions in Athens, the trendy lifestyle restaurants and hotels, or the public works such as the airport and the metro. These sites in Athens constitute material Kokkinias likes to work with. In *Visitors*, he has left the chaos of daily living out of his compositions. Though familiar, his spaces have an alien quality, which is precisely how Athenians feel about the actual new spaces in the city where they are currently inscribing history.

Alienation can be liberating. Living in a city of ancient monuments, where the value of antiquity is overemphasized, has tended to leave Athenians with a creative block and a feeling of powerlessness. In the words of Nobel Prize laureate poet George Seferis, “I woke up with this marble head in my hands / Which exhausts my elbows and I do not know where to put it; / It was falling into the dream as I was rising from the dream / Thus our lives joined and it will be hard for them to disentangle.”⁴ In Kokkinias’s pictures, Athenian spaces figure as clean slates inspiring freedom to create, unburdened by the weight of history.

The stories in the *Visitors* series are intriguing and subtle. In the photograph entitled *Urania* the new metro of Athens looks like a place out of a science-fiction movie, a futurist construction of shiny metal and glass. A lonesome woman in a blue uniform is in the frame, pointlessly cleaning a spotless glass surface. This absurd gesture has metaphysical qualities; on the opposite metallic surface are reflected the blurry shadows of people. The only living soul in the metallic world of the metro is in dialogue with shadows, through the act of cleaning.

In Kokkinias’s pictures, the metro becomes a space that generates poetry. The artist not only approaches spaces as clean slates but his characters as well. There is nothing specifically Greek or Athenian about the characters in the *Visitors* series. Their defining characteristic, frequently highlighted by the presence of a suitcase, is that they are in transit. This offsets them as global rather than as Athenian citizens. Indeed, the photographs have an aesthetic that appears inspired by the Internet, rather than by Greek culture and tradition. The clear lines of the spatial design and the loud colors evoke online sites for games in some pictures. The solitary small-scale figures of the visitors in these spaces look like avatars about to execute actions programmed in the games.

In the photograph entitled *Aliki* a woman is leaning on the wall of an underpass, half of which is in darkness, while the other half leads to light. A large arrow is pointing at her. What direction will she take? Or will she remain motionless? In another picture entitled *Leonidas*, a man is awkwardly balancing on the periphery of a circle on a geometrically patterned floor. This is the foyer of Megaron Mousikis, a concert hall built in marble. The shot of the foyer is claustrophobic. The visitor appears trapped in a shiny box, where the geometry on the floor determines his options; will the avatar of this man start zooming around the periphery of the circle? Or will he move to another pattern on the floor? Far from being simplistic, as in many video games, these options in the *Visitors* series are invested with significance. There is anxiety in the stasis of the characters, distilling the existential essence of the communications culture. Moreover, characters have a flexible sense of identity that interprets well the novelty and the impermanence of our world. Employing contemporary idioms, Kokkinias approaches Athens as a fictional or virtual space, projecting its present into an indeterminate, malleable future.

Indeed, a changing city invites play with possibilities. In contrast to Kokkinias, whose work is devoid of tradition, Ioannis Savvidis, a visual artist, looks to the past for inspiration. In *Athenscope*, a recent work exhibited at the 2007 First Biennial of Athens, he playfully recasts the history of Athens, questioning central preconceptions about national identity. Similar to the *Visitors* series, present-day Athens is unrecognizable in *Athenscope*. The artist does not present one, but three versions of the contemporary city, all of which are invented—Athens A, B, and C.

Unlike Western European capitals, Athens became a capital recently, in 1834, as Greece had been under Ottoman rule and cut off from the West for four hundred years. The rich history of the city has had many ruptures. *Athenscope* presents views of what the city would look today if history had taken alternative courses. The developments the artist imagines are plausible; they may have happened. Most important, they are based on and engage collective fantasies of the Greeks about their own history. The play with possibilities exposes the history of the actual city as a construct, particularly the tenet of historical continuity from antiquity to the present, central to legitimizing the claim that Greece belongs to the West.

In Athens A, Savvidis assumes that back in 333 Emperor Constantine made Athens (instead of Constantinople) the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire. Athens was never subjected to Ottoman rule and participated uninterruptedly in developments in Western culture. In this version, historical continuity would not be wishful thinking but reality. Present-day Greece would be a more “significant” nation on the global map, like Italy. Athens would be a metropolis like Rome, featuring great institutions of culture and of learning. By contrast, in version B, Athens is a provincial town, remarkable nevertheless for its archaeological sites. What if the choice to make Athens the capital in the nineteenth century was a historical accident? After all, Nafplion had been the first capital of Greece for a few years. Savvidis imagines that back in 1834 our ancestors decided to make Corinth—another coastal town with antiquities—the capital of Greece, instead of Athens. Athens C has the shortest fictional history.

It is a post-socialist capital; in this version, Greece, with the exception of Crete, which remained capitalist, became part of the Eastern bloc after World War II. This development too might have been possible had the left emerged victorious from the civil war that occurred after World War II in Greece. A significant number of the population aspired to socialism.

So far *Athenscope* consists of three large maps of the city, one for each version, and several architectural studies, designs, and photographs, which “document” fictional projects, monuments and sites. This is all in black and white assuming an austere quality that aims at “verifying” the objectivity of each version. Viewers mostly gather information about each city through studying the specific projects. In the words of the artist, the maps themselves are “locked,” providing no detailed information, for example, about what the particular buildings or empty spaces in each version are. A twist to the pseudo-scientific character of the project is that the maps themselves bear traces of the body and of human effort, as they are handmade. In fact, the black outlines on the large white surface have an organic quality, making the city in each version appear like a body, the body perhaps of collective fantasies, highlighted by the artist in the act of drawing.

The studies for specific projects in each version are playful and thought-provoking. In Athens B, the non-capital, Savvidis provides a study for an Acropolis theme park that an entrepreneur proposes to build to make profit. This would provide “education” about the monument as well as entertainment, complete with a replica of the cannon that had destroyed part of the Parthenon for visitors to play with. Such a project would be inconceivable in present-day Athens where the Acropolis provides the very foundation of the modern city’s cultural identity. Similar to Athens B, in Athens A the Acropolis would not have the great emblematic value it has in the actual city. In the absence of the gap created by the Ottoman rule, the connection to antiquity in Greece would have evolved through the Renaissance, as in the West. The Acropolis then would be part of several culturally significant monuments. An architectural study for Athens A concerns Eleonas, the original site of Plato’s academy, and a neglected area in present-day Athens. In the artist’s version, antiquity co-exists in the Eleonas with a baroque-style palace, in a landscaped park, evidencing an eighteenth-century ruler’s wish to tame nature with culture. Athens C, the socialist version, is full of surprises too. Savvidis imagines that during the socialist period access to the sea surrounding Athens was rigidly controlled by a wall surrounding the coast, so as to prevent defections to capitalist Crete. There is a photograph “documenting” the wall.

Savvidis has been collaborating on *Athenscope* with a team of fourteen specialists from various disciplines, including not only architects and city planners but also economists advising on the financial viability of the fictional projects, like the Athens theme park. The artist also wishes to engage novelists who would write stories, highlighting the myths and culture of each fictive version of the city. It would be fruitful for Savvidis to set up more events that stimulate free discussion about the project, such as guided tours of the cities, with which he has already experimented,

or “scientific” panels. Indeed, *Athenscope* has potential to stimulate richly interdisciplinary discourses, comparing cultural constructs about Athens across a wide range of fields. As such, it would be a perfect project for a university to support.

If in the work of Savvidis and Kokkinias, Athens inspires invention, in Maria Papadimitriou’s work TAMA, the focus is on the actual city. However, the artist is interested in a part of the city little-known to Athenians, left out of official guide books and city planning. TAMA began as a site-specific work-in-progress at Avliza, a small, marginalized Vlach-Romanian settlement of “Gypsies” in the northwest of Attica. In 2002, Papadimitriou shaped TAMA into an installation that she presented at the Biennial of Sao Paulo. As the artist explains, city planning does not just apply to urban space. With TAMA she wished to draw attention to, and to help people who are affected by changes in a metropolis, but are powerless to react.⁵ The work is disoriented as a form of activism, exposing problematic dynamics of power between high and popular culture. A more interesting quality of TAMA is that the study of the Rom settlement has inspired work responding to the transience of contemporary culture.

TAMA is an acronym that stands for “Temporary Autonomous Museum for All,” while also being a word in modern Greek, “tama,” which means “votive offering.” The artist’s ingenious idea is that the settlement itself constitutes an alternative museum, subverting the traditional conception of a museum as a venue of high culture *par excellence*, featuring exhibits of timeless value, untouchable and unchanging. A series of colored photographs that the artist took of the Avliza settlement aptly exemplifies her point. These are chaotic, surreal compositions of objects, highlighting impermanence.⁶ More importantly, they argue for an alternative conception of public space where the private forms part of the public. There are numerous shots of makeshift houses that can be made by combining any material from plastic to cardboard to textile. These are incomplete by urban standards of housing; many have gaping holes where doors and windows are supposed to be or no provision for windows or doors. In some there is just a roof where all domestic activity takes place, delimiting an indeterminate space that is simultaneously private and public. Apart from documenting the museum, the photographs are a tribute to the inventiveness of poverty. Functionality has primary importance in the Avliza structures, strictly driven by personal need. At the same time the makeshift houses in the photographs are interesting aesthetically.⁷

Over and above functionality or aesthetics though, what is exhibited at the Avliza museum is life itself. For instance, Papadimitriou has also included photographs of the Rom settlers of Avliza in her collection of material illustrating the museum. As the artist and well-known critics have pointed out, the best way of approaching TAMA is not as an art product but as a nexus of relations that have developed over time among the artist, the people of Avliza, the public, and friends and colleagues of Papadimitriou. So TAMA is really the story or record of these relationships, and is essentially a collaborative and interdisciplinary project.

Just like the acronym TAMA, the homonymous word in Greek meaning “votive offering” has an inviting quality. TAMA is an open invitation to all to participate, to offer an exhibit, or to make themselves available at Avliza, the space of the alternative museum the artist proposes. Papadimitriou solicited contributions aimed at improving life at the Avliza settlement. These were proposals that were collected in the catalogue of the Sao Paulo exhibition of TAMA. The contributions are imaginative and impressive in variety. They include observations by an anthropologist on the women at Avliza; designs by architects and artists for dormitories, public baths, and playgrounds; literary and theoretical works; a proposal for a mobile cinema set on two trucks.

As the catalogue exemplifies, all contributions to TAMA come from solid representatives of high culture: artists and professionals. Even though extremely inclusive in theory, TAMA in fact maintains a rigid distinction between high and pop culture, subverting the original aim of enabling marginalized populations to enter into discourse about urban space in Athens. Even though Papadimitriou developed close relationships to the Avliza inhabitants over time, the settlers themselves only have a presence in the TAMA project as images or subjects of studies. Shouldn't the work allow us to hear, in integral ways, the settlers talking about their own culture, which inspired the contributors, or giving opinions about the proposed works of TAMA designed for their space? The only popular culture contribution to TAMA in the catalogue is by a famous Rom musician Yorghos Magas, an exception to its exclusionary cultural politics.⁸ At the Biennial of Sao Paulo, Papadimitriou had a video of Magas playing the *clarino* in an idyllic, open-air setting.

Indeed, as it stands, TAMA is in danger of reinforcing stereotypes, whether positive or negative, about Rom culture. Unlike the work of Kokkinias and Savvidis, where the free play of the imagination is an asset, the utopia of the alternative museum needs to be more firmly grounded in the realities of the popular culture space that inspired it. Relations on more equal terms with the settlers would doubtless have been challenging, as there would be unpredictable, contradictory, odd, or even offensive material for Papadimitriou to deal with. Letting popular culture speak for itself would have made the museum more genuinely participatory. The artist regards TAMA as an ongoing project and has strong interest in drawing on pop culture to articulate forms of living for the contemporary world in her work, as evidenced by her *Cosmotel* (1998), *Lov car* (2003), *Novocomum on Wheels*, and *House in Progress* (an offshoot of TAMA, 2007). TAMA certainly still has potential but the project needs to be recast in more democratic ways to live up to it.

In conclusion, in the works on Athens by Kokkinias, Savvidis, and Papadimitriou, the identity of the contemporary city does not rest on antiquity. These artists part ways with stereotypical constructions of Greek identity, resting on the glories of the ancient heritage. They all reconstruct Athens as a utopia, responding to the city's novel and open-ended multicultural character. Kokkinias and Savvidis free themselves of the weight of history that traditionally has crippled modern artistic expression in Greece. Ignoring tradition, Kokkinias explores the future of Athens as a global,

twenty-first century metropolis partaking of the new communications culture. Savvidis reinvents the past, exposing the continuity of Greek culture from antiquity to the present as a fictive ideological construct. Papadimitriou focuses on the traditionally undermined Eastern folk roots of Greek culture to develop an alternative conception for a museum responsive to international trends in contemporary art. However, the project's limitations indicate that the relation between Western and Eastern cultures in Greece is still tense, even in avant-garde projects. All in all, the works on Athens discussed in this section point towards the need, apparent in Greece as elsewhere, to redefine national identity for the twenty-first century.

ANTIGONE IN THE GLOBAL ERA

While everybody has heard of Sophocles' *Antigone*, few non-Greeks know about *Golfo*, written by Spyros Peresiadis in 1894. *Golfo*, a shepherdess, is the protagonist of a famous nineteenth-century Greek melodrama of betrayed love, set in the rural countryside. There is a strong connection between *Antigone* and *Golfo* in modern Greece. The two plays are emblematic of national identity in its two faces: the Western and high culture associated with ancient Greece, and the folk and popular culture associated with the modern country and its Eastern roots. *Antigone* has traditionally been taken to represent the quintessence of tragic magnitude and lofty moral values in Greece. It has been a staple of open-air summer festivals at the ancient theatres. A school text for years, the tragedy also evokes moral clichés and pedantic knowledge of grammar and syntax to Greeks over thirty. At a lower register, *Golfo* has been fervently embraced by popular culture and has come to symbolize pride in folk values. The play was basic to the repertory of the *bouloukia*, itinerant popular theatre companies active until the 1950s in Greece.

Golfo also features prominently in Theodore Angelopoulos's landmark 1974 film, the *Traveling Players*, in which the director fleshes out Greek national identity as a synthesis of high and popular, ancient and modern cultures. Playing *Golfo* becomes a highly charged point of reference in this film, linking popular culture to the ancient Greek tragedy of the Atreides and to Greece's modern history. In the film, the character of the actress playing *Golfo* is also Electra. Indeed, *Golfo* has traditionally been associated with classical Greek ancestry in an effort to validate popular culture.

The three productions discussed here, two of *Antigone* and one of *Golfo*, encourage questioning about high and low culture in a contemporary framework. Lefteris Voyatzis's *Antigone* premiered in the summer of 2006 at the theatre of Epidaurus before an audience of 19,000 people. This was an extremely stark production that relied primarily on the actors and the text. The unobtrusive set by Chloe Obolensky was designed to set off the natural landscape, a barren and steep cliff at Teatro Petras, where I saw the production. All the action took place on bare earth and there was no specially demarcated area for the stage. In its extreme simplicity, the production almost appeared to set *Antigone* on a clean slate, inviting the audience to experience the play unburdened by cultural norms.



Aliki by Panos Kokkinias, from the series *Visitors*, 2007. Photo: Courtesy the artist.



A makeshift house from the Avliza Vlach-Romanian settlement in Attica. *Untitled*, 2000, included in T.A.M.A. (Temporary Autonomous Museum for All) by Maria Papadimitriou. Photo courtesy the artist.



Prostitutes in the area of Plateia Theatrou (Theater Square) at Psiri in Athens.

Voyatzis wanted to find a way to inhabit the tragedy, to make it familiar, bypassing the forbidding, paralyzing awe of its greatness. He did not hesitate, as he has said, to weave into his version his own feelings and memories of growing up in post-civil war Greece.⁹ Indeed, the director explored in *Antigone* the complex situations that arise when a state has just emerged out of a civil war, indirectly alluding through ancient Thebes to Greece's history since the 1950s, struggling to heal civil war trauma. The civil war, which broke out between the left and the right from 1946–1949 has had profound impact in Greece, in the post-World War II era. It is only recently that Greeks have begun to look upon this conflict in a more dispassionate way. For many decades since the 1950s, the civil war permeated all interaction between people and continued to divide relatives, friends, and neighbors. This happened in a subtle, indirect way because the oppressive right-wing governments in power after the civil war prevented free expression.

Voyatzis focused on the chorus in his interpretation of *Antigone*, putting primary emphasis on how the aftermath of the civil war affected the people of Thebes. Dressed in low-key daily wear of the 1950s, the chorus evoked modern Greek crowds of civil- and post-civil war Greece, as captured in the striking documentary photographs of Voula Papaioannou, exhibited in 2006 at the Benaki Museum on Peireos Street.¹⁰ Chorus members frequently gave the impression of passers-by or onlookers who want to find out what is happening without drawing attention to themselves. Their manner was indirect; there was a great deal of suppressed fear, pain, and anger. Moreover, there were subdued conflicts and partisanship. When Antigone was about to be taken to her prison, some chorus members were distant and dispassionate while others were sympathetic. They moved close to her but not too close for fear of Creon. When, encouraged by Teiresias, they confronted Creon, they held hands, forming a protective, solid body. During the scene with Creon, as arguments were heard for and against freeing Antigone, the chorus split in two with some chorus members stealthily leaving one group, hurrying to join the other.

A unique feature of this production was that all characters, including the principals, fluidly emerged out of the chorus to play their parts and were assimilated back into it after they had finished performing. This unitary conception of the chorus and protagonists invited audiences to recognize traces of Creon and Antigone in the chorus, highlighting the issue of collective responsibility for reconciling civil strife. Creon and Antigone were not the typical heroes of tragedy, greater than the average person. Rather, they were closer to modern anti-heroes or to the hero that is our next-door neighbor: fallible, uncertain, figuring their way as they went along. Both were presented as rigid, inexperienced novices. Antigone was an adolescent with childlike behavior; her stubbornness at times made her comically trip and fall on the ground. Creon moved rigidly too, giving the impression of a new king trying to cover up his inexperience in the ways of ruling.

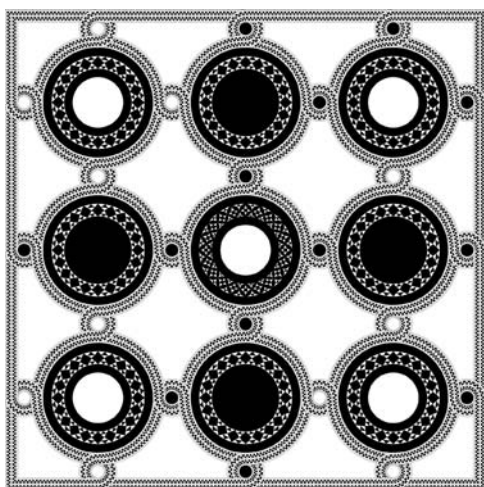
Adopting a conciliatory perspective on the civil war, Voyatzis kept equal distances from both protagonists, and he seemed more interested in exploring how they were both wrong than in how they were right. Far from being demonized however, the

fallible protagonists encouraged the empathy of the people with whom they shared responsibility. At the end of the production, Creon rejoined the chorus, finding comfort in people like him, who recognized elements of themselves in him. In a civil war, blood bonds vacillate between attraction and repulsion. Voyatzis fleshed out this insight by having Creon and Antigone strongly relate not only to the chorus, but also to each other. What gave their conflict tragic substance was that they are relatives. As a new king Creon (played by Voyatzis) needed to hold onto his decree to define himself. With Antigone's defiance he could only do so by destroying his own flesh and blood and hence himself. The dilemma was posed again in a more devastating way in the scene between Creon and Haemon that became central to this interpretation, a ravaging conflict between a father and his own son. Civil war history acquired existential depth in Voyatzis's *Antigone*, which the director explored in physical, deeply moving ways. Creon came to blows with Antigone and later with Haemon; the hostile embracing had painful, ambivalent qualities of love and hatred.

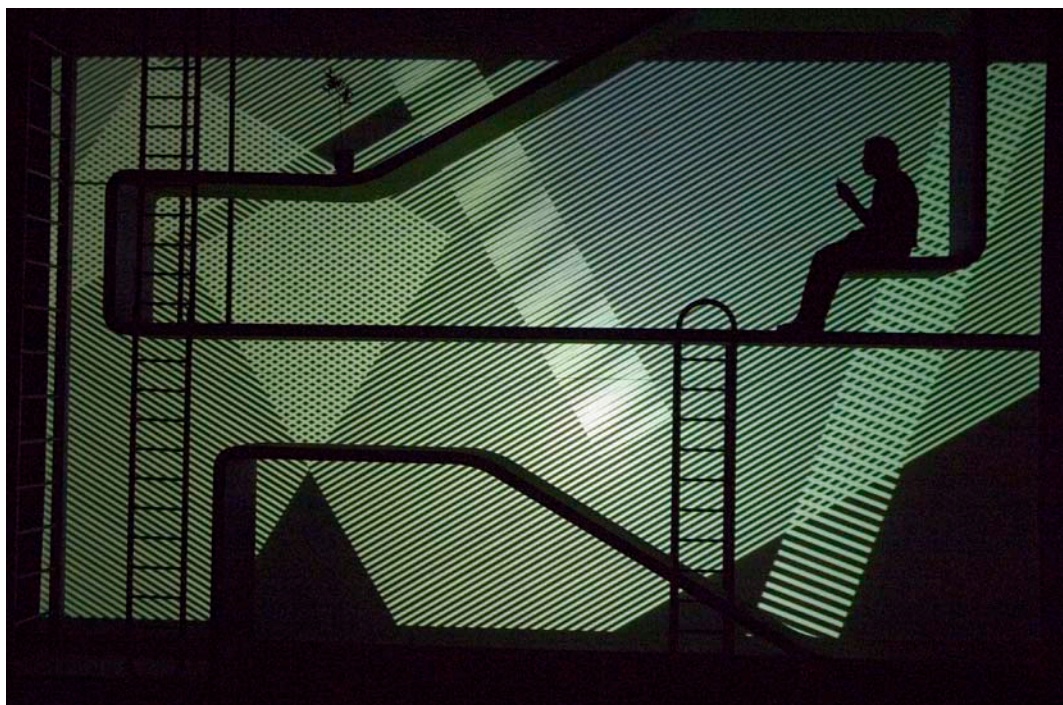
Civil war politics aside, Voyatzis's chorus-based approach to tragedy also appeals to contemporary sensibilities. The Internet's potential as a vast popular forum for direct democracy, or the new face of terrorism targeting the common people on a mass scale, compels us to revisit popular expression in art. The emphasis on character has been a staple of twentieth-century stagings of tragedy. Perhaps the time is now ripe to focus on the chorus and on other popular elements of tragedy in production. In this respect, Voyatzis's *Antigone* points to a fertile direction for the staging of Greek drama.¹¹

If Voyatzis explored collective themes and forms in *Antigone*, Aris Retsos reduced the text to minimalist solo performance. In spite of differences in approach, Retsos shares with Voyatzis a concern to inhabit the classic in order to explore it in a direct way, bypassing cultural stereotypes. Retsos's performances of the play emphasize rhythm and ritual as opposed to literal meaning. Sitting on a chair, he performs *Antigone* in unassuming dark clothing and a white half-mask. With the text of the tragedy in front of him, he proceeds to perform it like a musician, reading it in terms of a richly nuanced rhythmic system he has developed, which accounts not only for meter and prosody but also for the differing speeds punctuation imposes. He intones his reading on two strings, employing a banjo-like instrument and a four-note system. His recital is a very dramatic form of musical theatre where the audience must primarily be a listener. The chorus, which has more complex rhythms than in the spoken parts, forms the backbone of Retsos's interpretation. In his readings, it is possible to distinguish individual chorus members talking but also the multitude, the voice of the city that seems to come directly out of the performer's stomach.

Retsos's interpretation induces deep concentration, stimulating the audience to experience tragedy metaphysically. The immobility of the performer on stage, along with the formal, rule-bound interpretation, clashes with an internal hyperactivity of tonalities and vibrations, creating an overpowering feeling of being caught between mobility and immobility. At other times, as in the lamentations of the central



Left: *With No Hands*, 2003, video installation by Nikos Navridis. Views of the balloon were taken by a camera placed inside it. Photo courtesy the artist. Above: *The End*, Venice Biennial 2007, mixed media installation by Nikos Alexiou inspired by Samuel Beckett's short story. A digital print of the installation's matrix, depicting the mosaic floor of Iviron monastery at Mount Athos, Greece. Photo courtesy the artist.



Breath, 2005, based on Samuel Beckett's play. Video installation by Nikos Navridis, as presented at the Istanbul Modern. Photo courtesy the artist.

characters in *Antigone*, the controlled, precise delivery of the choral parts contrasts with the vibrating broken voices of the mourners, creating tension between opposing movements towards chaos and structure.

Retsos's emphasis on non-literal meaning in tragedy evokes landmark experimental work of the 1960s and 1970s in the U.S., such as Andrei Serban's *The Greek Trilogy*. Even though the text of Serban's production was in ancient Greek, his interpretation primarily relied on image or on image in combination with rhythm to uncover the power of tragedy. Retsos privileges sound, stubbornly resisting the image. This is salutary in the contemporary era, where the flooding of images makes it increasingly difficult to be engaged by them. As the artist himself has pointed out, his approach is "traditional," harking back to Aristotle who gave low priority to spectacle in the *Poetics* and claimed that the power of tragedy can be felt simply through reading.¹² Retsos's interpretation shows that reading need not be a silent, mental activity, and instead highlights its sensual, performative qualities.

The sound-based performance of Retsos has closest affinity to *karaghiozis*, a shadow puppet form of theatre that was very popular in Greece until the mid-twentieth century. Just like Retsos, the shadow puppet player performed a one-man show, doing the voices of all the characters in it. Even though *karaghiozis* does have a visual component, oral features have clear primacy over the visual: the simple moving of the figures on the screen does not yield a performance. In the absence of a screen, though, as in a radio broadcast, an audience can visualize the characters and the sets, as there are fixed rules of representation in this genre, set by tradition.

Retsos does insist that in performing he is trying to represent what performance of the tragedies in ancient Greece must have been like. The performer himself strongly evokes a visual shadow with his immobility and white mask. When he performed *Antigone*, his figure cast a long shadow sideways, the shadow of a shadow. Yet, unlike *karaghiozis*, Retsos has no tradition to rely on; his performance then is essentially about himself and his effort to approach the Greek texts. As a form of autobiography, his work is closer to modern rather than to traditional forms of performance. Besides being utopian, Retsos's personalized approach to the Greek classics has a tragic, absurd quality. How can a lonesome performer, cut off from the cultural traditions of ancient Greece, give voice to the chorus as a communal, civic body?

Perhaps the most original feature of Retsos's solo performance of the classics is that, like *karaghiozis*, it is a portable form of theatre. Retsos can put all he needs for his *Antigone* performance in a suitcase. In extreme cases, he may even dispense with the suitcase and carry everything in his body. This evokes not only the shadow puppet theatre but also experiments of the avant-garde, such as Marcel Duchamp's *Box in a Valise*, which contains in a suitcase the entire body of his work in condensed form. How much can one personalize or downsize a classic? Drawing on marginal Greek culture Retsos develops an original, abstract approach to tragedy, responsive not only to avant-garde experimentation but also to the mobility and transience of

contemporary world culture. His *Antigone* suggests that products of local, national culture can have a place in today's global culture.

A contemporary production of *Golfo*, *Golfo 2.3 beta*, deals even more boldly with the issue of the relation between center and periphery. *Golfo 2.3 beta* is the first directorial work of Simos Kakalas, a twenty-seven year old artist from northern Greece who trained as an actor. The ambitious project of his three-actor troupe who performed the play is to locate the current position of modern Greek drama in European civilization.¹³ In Kakalas's highly entertaining production, there is no trace of *Golfo* as the pastoral Greek melodrama. Nor does *Golfo* relate to classical Greece or to high culture in any way. *Golfo 2.3 beta* constitutes a formidable mixture of pop cultural elements and media, featuring Greek, Balkan, and Japanese references; video, the Greek shadow puppet theatre, life-size paper dolls, naturalist, improvisational, and cabaret-style acting. Exploring the contemporary relevance of *Golfo* involves looking at local tradition through a multicultural lens, as Greek culture today is a hybrid, partaking of global culture.

Subverting nationalist tenets, the production does not only defamiliarize *Golfo*, but anything presupposed to be quintessentially Greek, including what is most solid, such as language. Upon entering the auditorium, audiences are met by two musicians who play Balkan-type Gypsy music and interact with the audience in a comical, revue style. The musicians frame the play, introducing and closing its production and occasionally commenting on the action. Surprisingly, they do not speak in Greek, but in English with an Eastern European accent, highlighting the Balkan roots of Greek folk culture, and at the same time relocating it in a global context, where the dominant language of communication is English.

The performance of *Golfo* itself involves a more radical cultural relocation of Greek tradition: the play is interpreted by three masked actors in the formalized manner of the Japanese Manga cartoons; in addition the actors perform in front of videos of Japanese snow-covered mountainous landscapes. Though alien to traditional Greek culture, Manga is a form familiar in contemporary Greece: children's cartoons on TV are predominantly designed in this style. For Kakalas and his generation, Japanese Manga has been as important to their cultural formation as the national and nationalist culture they were exposed to at school. Manga allows Kakalas to inject new life into *Golfo* by interpreting the dated Greek melodrama in terms of a current pop form. In the contemporary interpretation *Golfo* is not a melodrama. Kakalas adopts an episodic, scene-by-scene way of presenting the story, giving up the tight plot of the melodramatic genre. If the story of *Golfo* is entertaining today, it is so for different reasons than in the past. The exaggeration of passion appears comical, yet it is also deeply moving at times.

Kakalas's production simultaneously explores two themes. On one level, *Golfo* is about the story of the shepherdess, unhappily betrayed in love. On another, this popular melodramatic story functions as a metaphor of what happens to national culture in its pure, idealist guise in the age of media and global culture. In the contemporary

production the heroine also represents, in a tongue-in-cheek way, Greece itself. She wears fashionable, sexy clothing in the national colors of white and blue; the ribbons hanging from her sleeves make her appear like a cheerleader for Greece. Golfo appears on video in between scenes waving a Greek flag that progressively becomes more bloody and torn as the plot of betrayal thickens. A traditional patriot, naïve in the ways of the communications world, Golfo/Greece is doomed to fail. If Golfo cannot serve as a model to contemporary Greeks, nor can the characters surrounding her, who exhibit a watered down version of multiculturalism coming from TV and the mass media. Towards the end of the play a lonesome Golfo stands on stage amidst gigantic cardboard cutouts of the rest of characters that look like advertisements for a movie. On video in the background is a collection of the world's flags.

Combining melodrama and irony, Golfo's sad story encourages thinking about how Greece, a country on the periphery of global culture, can influence international developments in integral ways. The production itself constitutes an engaging response to the problem that the metaphorical story of the shepherdess poses. *Golfo 2.3 beta* focuses attention on the periphery in yet another way. It challenges the absolute hegemony of Athens over the provinces in Greece, still considered a cultural wasteland. *Golfo 2.3 beta* is a production that took shape on the road to great critical acclaim before it was shown in the capital.

Approaching *Golfo* as an experiment, the director attempted to reinvent "poor," or itinerant, theatre, drawing inspiration from the flexible performance conditions of the popular acting troupes of the past that would perform the play throughout Greece. *Golfo 2.3 beta* is a low-budget production that has made necessity rather than aesthetics the driving force of its creativity. The stage for *Golfo*, a simple frame created by three poles directly evokes the improvisational structures of itinerant troupes that could easily be set for performance anywhere. The gas lamps of yesteryear have been replaced by lights made in China and bought at IKEA. Today's extremely noisy open-air spaces have necessitated the use of microphones. Actors perform in front of a screen where scene changes happen instantly and unobtrusively through the use of video.

The most original feature of Kakalas's poor theatre project is a recasting of the relation between theatre and audience. The challenge of performing in the provinces for the modern troupe was that they had to deal with people, unaccustomed to going to the theatre, who reacted in unpredictable ways to what they saw. For example, they would exit and reenter the space, eat and talk during the performance, or comment loudly on the action. This drove the performers to experiment in presenting their story in ever sharper, clearer ways, so as to hold the audience's attention.¹⁴ Provincial audiences then became co-creators of the spectacle in the sense that their reactions enabled the troupe to test the effectiveness of their choices, as used to happen in some of the best popular theatre of the past. Conflating the distinction between high and low culture, Kakalas was able to communicate with these audiences without compromising the sophistication of his production. In this way, his approach invites comparison not only to traditional forms of poor theatre but

also to experimentation of the avant-garde in the twentieth century, inspired by the vision of recreating popular theatre.

In conclusion, contemporary production of these two emblematic plays, *Antigone* and *Golfo*, bears strong influences from popular culture, assimilated into sophisticated art experimentation. Whether in its extended, chorus-based form or the contracted version for the suitcase, these *Antigones* take high art off its pedestal. Thematically, Voyatzis's exploration of the civil war as collective trauma also relates to popular theatre. Bypassing content, Retsos focuses on formal aspects of his popular source, employing it to approach tragedy in abstract terms, as aural solo performance. With regard to *Golfo*, popular theatre has inspired the reinvention of poor theatre for today, as well as the construction of Greek identity as multicultural and moving beyond national boundaries. With newly found self-confidence, *Golfo* asserts its autonomy of *Antigone* and of ancient Greek culture.

BECKETT MADE IN GREECE

Owing perhaps to the centenary of Samuel Beckett's birth in 2006, there have been frequent productions of his plays in Athens since 2000. The most interesting current approaches to Beckett, however, do not come from theatre but from the visual arts. Beckett has attracted the attention of three major visual artists: Nikos Navridis, Alexandros Psychoulis, and Nikos Alexiou, who work with new technologies or combine new and traditional mediums, such as handicraft. These artists explore Beckett's theatricality in original, unpredictable ways, attesting to the classical value of his work.

Of the three artists, Nikos Navridis's work has the closest affinity to Beckett, in that it has a powerful existential quality, expressed in poetic terms. Since 1995, the artist has been working with breath as a primordial element defining human existence. Employing lightweight material such as latex or sound sensitive equipment, Navridis transforms the energy of breathing into form that can be appreciated through seeing, hearing, or touch. Breathing thus acquires boldly physical, sensual qualities in his work, most of which consists of video or installation. The artist's work on breath constitutes a thematic cycle of "enormous poetic and cathartic power" according to Rosa Martinez, who curated Navridis's *Breath*, based on Beckett, for the 51st Venice Biennial in 2005. Indeed, Navridis has recently been experimenting with particular works by Beckett. In the fall of 2007 he presented an installation at the Tate Modern entitled *First Love, a Song and the Yogi*, which incorporated Beckett's short story *First Love* as part of a triptych installation orchestrating breaths as light and sound. The installation was part of the museum's symposium *Deep Breath (on Samuel Beckett)*. A work based on *Rockaby* is another major project in progress.

It is no wonder that Navridis would be drawn to Beckett's *Breath* (1969), a wordless, minimalist play featuring breath as the protagonist. Unlike Beckett, Navridis presents breathing in *Breath* as part of a sound continuum beginning with a sigh and ending with an exhalation into a balloon. Indeed, for Navridis, breathing is energy that is never lost. He likes to think of the void as space that is always filled.

Employing light and magnified sound, Beckett fleshes out the physicality of breathing in a landscape of garbage. There is an amplified inhalation while the light rises in intensity, followed by a pause and an amplified exhalation to a dimming light. Rather than have audiences passively contemplate the action as outsiders, Navridis has interpreted *Breath* as a video installation, inviting them to experience the work. Viewers walk into a dark room where eight overhead projectors compose a disorienting, mobile landscape of garbage, making it difficult for them to find their way out. Life emerges as a difficult crossing or as a journey full of struggle. A guttural, awe-inspiring inhalation and exhalation underscore effort aurally.¹⁵

Navridis's work stimulates thinking beyond words of the importance of the visual and the aural component in Beckett. For example, breathing is tangible and audible not only in *Breath* but also in *Rockaby*, where the protagonist awaits death, encased in a rocking chair. The mechanical back and forth movement of the chair is the woman's breathing, creating a powerful sense of her predicament, while the chair's frame encasing the woman represents her body. Woman and chair are inextricable, forming an eerie sculptural installation of sight and sound.

Even though not directly attributed to *Rockaby*, Navridis's *With No Hands* (2003) has close affinity to Beckett's play. It is a video of two screens placed next to each other. The first shows the black form of a woman lying on the floor and slowly rising as she blows air into a huge white balloon without using her hands. What makes her body rise up is literally and poetically her breath, trapped in the inorganic latex form. The movement of her body blowing air into the balloon is almost a rocking, suggesting life's origin in the womb as well as its fragility, as in *Rockaby*. Moreover, the mobile sculptural composition of the woman and the latex containing her breath strongly evokes *Rockaby's* body in the chair. In Beckett's play we mostly hear the character's voice through a recoding, which creates another perhaps internal sense of her presence. Resorting to technology of his own age, Navridis has placed a camera inside the latex to document, in the second screen, the effort of breathing air into the balloon. This presents an inside view of the woman's body, complementing the external view in the first screen. When the balloon gets deflated at the end of the work, we see the white surface shrinking rapidly into formless mass, while in the first screen there is the black form of the woman collapsed on the floor.

In exploring the physical attributes of breathing through technology Navridis shapes breath into a character, articulating unexplored possibilities of approaching a monologue; seeing, hearing, or talking to oneself acquire new meanings. Technology also allows Navridis to experiment with novel ways an audience may experience a work. Just as in *With No Hands*, in *Parallel Narrations* (2004) Navridis experiments with "placing" the audience within the body of the performer. *Parallel Narrations* is a sound installation featuring the breathing of individual performers of a music concert. Visitors can hear these breathings by walking into spaces where microphones deliver sound vertically in a tightly delimited area. This allows performance to be experienced at a novel, primordial, pre-linguistic, or pre-musical phase of unknown parameters. In *First Love, a Song and the Yogi*, Beckett's novel figured as a sound

composition of breaths since Navridis had discarded the text. This aural material was connected to a light source sensitive to the intensity of sound, projecting light on the huge glass windows of the Tate Modern. Clearly, such innovative experimental work goes towards reinventing Beckett's poetics for today.

Unlike Navridis, whose work integrally relates to Beckett, Alexandros Psychoulis has only presented a single Beckett project. Psychoulis is a versatile artist who has been working in a variety of media, from animation and interactive technology to performance and knitting. In 2004 he collaborated on the production of *First Love Playback*, yet another rendering of Beckett's *First Love*, interspersed with texts by the poet Thanos Stathopoulos. The most interesting feature of that production, produced by Art Syndicate and premiered at Teatro Hora in the spring of 2004, was its visual conception, originating from director Emmanuel Koutsourelis's inspiration to interpret Beckett's work in a two-dimensional space in terms of light and shadow. Working with a team of well-known collaborators, Koutsourelis shaped the novel into a monologue, delivered in a non-rhetorical, low-key manner into a microphone by the actor Konstantinos Markoulakis.

The production was an engaging piece of visual theatre where the actor figured as a hybrid character, part real being, part shadow. He moved in a shallow two-dimensional composition on two levels, made of metal and set in a large, rectangular frame containing a screen. Occupying the entire front part of the stage, the frame resembled a movie screen. A projection of animation on the screen, designed by Psychoulis, illuminated the actor's figure as a black silhouette, a shadow lacking mass. Most of the time the character appeared to be a part of the set design and the animation, going through a repetitive pattern of movements on the skeletal frame, as in a loop. At rare instances the light projector went off and his voice was heard coming through the shapeless darkness; at others, he ventured out of the frame and was seen in flesh and blood.

Somewhat paradoxically, Psychoulis has termed the character a breathing shadow and has insightfully commented in the production program, "Whatever breathes in this production is darkness." The production highlights the interplay of ambivalent, relational opposites as key to the novel. Indeed, the protagonist in Beckett's novel links his first love to the absence created by the death of his father. Moreover, he talks about a relationship that has been long over, trying to capture, through narration, its elusive memory in the present. In a similar spirit, in *First Love Playback* light is inextricably bound to shadow as love to death, as present to past, as presence to absence, as matter to void.

On a related note, *First Love Playback* also sets up an antithesis between high technology as employed in the production, and the world of print, evoking the production's origin in a novel. The two-dimensional production appeared like the huge page of a book, where the black silhouette of the actor frequently gave the impression of moving as if writing on a line. Indeed, the repetitive movements of the choreography effectively contributed to viewing the character in solid terms



Golfo 2.3 beta (2007), directed by Simos Kakalás. Elena Mavridi as Golfo, holding a bloody Greek flag. Photo courtesy the artist.



Golfo 2.3 beta, 2007, directed by Simos Kakalás. Elena Mavridi as Golfo and Theodoros Oikonomidis as Tassos, wearing Japanese-inspired Manga masks. Photo courtesy the artist.

as a hieroglyph or a letter of typography. The occasional appearance of landscapes made of lines or of huge letters on the screen intensified this effect. Viewing the shadowy figure as printed matter allowed for apprehending the character in terms of another two-dimensional medium that, in contrast to light and shadow, has solidity and permanence. Indeed *scripta manent* (writing lasts)! This was yet another way of emphasizing ambivalence in this interpretation. In *First Love Playback*, allusions to typography have a self-negating, ironic quality since they are produced by and contextualized within animation.

The production's aesthetic owes a lot to animation, making use of clear lines, shapes, and colors. At the same time, as Psychoulis has explained, *First Love Playback* has affinities to traditional forms of shadow theatre. Beckett's plot appears clearer in outline and simpler; at times, *First Love Playback* sounds like an adventure story. However, simplicity never becomes simplistic. Rather, the production displays the potential of a pop form such as animation, owing probably to its ingenious interplay between traditional and contemporary mediums, from acting, print, and shadows to video and digital technology.

Is the production of *First Love Playback* considered theatre or is it a new hybrid genre going beyond it? This is not an easy question to answer. Similarly to Navridis, the team of *First Love* employs Beckett and the new technologies to pose vital questions about contemporary theatre. Their approaches are strikingly different aesthetically as well as metaphysically. Navridis works with breath and air while the team of *First Love* works with images. While Navridis attempts to give body to, to fill the void, the team of *First Love Playback* playfully comments on its ambivalent nature. Is the breathing shadow an entity or not? The answer is "both."

Nikos Alexiou also evokes Beckett as the inspiration of his latest work, *The End*, an installation that opened at the 52nd Biennial of Venice in the summer of 2007. Towards the end of Beckett's story of the same title, the hero is, or has a vision of himself, in a boat at night being carried away by the waves. As he distances himself from the shore he sees the city where he was born as a last image before removing the cap at the bottom part of the boat. Lying down on the boat while it is sinking, he sees the landscape close in on him and then dilate to the sky like exquisite fireworks. In a manner perhaps uncharacteristic of Beckett, death is linked in this story to an exquisite moment of ecstasy. Alexiou's installation is an attempt to represent the fireworks, the city, or the ecstatic moment before death. While, as the artist says, this is a work born out of darkness, it is extremely uplifting, colorful, and beautiful. Indeed, the work bespeaks of an erotic relationship to death that the artist is intimately familiar with, and which, according to Alexiou, is also characteristic of monastic life on Mount Athos.¹⁶ *The End* establishes an original and integral connection between Beckett's story and the Byzantine tradition.

Alexiou's work relies quintessentially on craft. Working with material such as paper and straw, he has been creating exquisite web-like installations. The master web for *The End* comes from the mosaic floor of the chapel of the Iviron monastery at Mount

Athos, an intricate decorative composition of circles that the artist has meticulously copied onto material such as paper cutouts and straw. Combining craft with technology, Alexiou has also reproduced the master web digitally. The installation is a free reassembling of fragmentary patterns to create a new work of webs that invites multiple associations not only to Beckett's city and the Byzantine tradition but also to the psychedelia of the sixties, and Stanley Kubrick's films. Indeed, according to Alexiou his *End* is an autobiographical work incorporating everything he has been working on and loves.¹⁷

Alexiou feels free to reassemble the work differently every time depending on the space where he is installing it. In Venice, *The End* created a very atmospheric, operatic effect with exquisite lace cutouts hanging from the ceiling in front of a central projection of the mosaic's circles psychedelically moving and changing color. As set up at the Museum of Byzantine Culture in Thessaloniki this was a more subdued work, with fragments of the mosaic's patterns spread out over the entire museum, interlaced with the museum's exhibits, along with slides of the setting up of the work in Venice and with Alexiou's other work. At the open-air court of the museum, a large black cloth was freely being blown and torn apart by the winds, sobering the work and evoking its two key origins: the death boat in Beckett's story and a monk's garb, in the orthodox religious tradition. Clearly, *The End* is about what chaos and darkness can give birth to. In Beckett this is a story; in Alexiou, an installation.

Beyond the beauty of the decorative designs, what is gripping about *The End* is that Alexiou employs the designs as part of a dance or a theatre composition where the characters are not human, but tiny pieces of matter forming fluid, changeable shapes. My boldest impression of seeing Alexiou's work in Thessaloniki was that of watching a ballet of inanimate objects, or of walking into a theatrically charged space, bearing traces of, and inspiring, acts. Most of the delicate webs are handcrafted, evidencing, as Alexiou has mentioned, his struggle with matter. At the same time the webs invite viewers to recombine their elements. Alexiou makes the refuse material that went into creating the works part of *The End* itself. Assembled in neat piles next to the museum's artifacts, refuse invite us to see the exhibits, as well as Alexiou's own work, not as lifeless masterpieces of art but as primary material for shaping new works.

Alexiou's action-oriented conception of matter has its origin in how he conceives of a web. A web for him is a pattern, or a design of movement, as in choreography.¹⁸ As he has noted, the mosaic floor is essentially the floor of a stage, especially designed for the performance of the coded ceremonies of the Greek Orthodox Church.¹⁹ Viewed in this way, monks are actors going through prescribed movements on the floor mosaic. For Alexiou, the church ceremonies constitute, in the Aristotelian sense of drama, imitations of actions. In copying the floor and in representing its patterns on his own materials, Alexiou is also functioning as an actor, mimetically. Drawing attention to the physical process of copying in craft, Alexiou then extends the traditional, Aristotelian conception of mimesis to include the craftsman. Nor is his account of how he created the work irrelevant, as he himself makes it part of his all-inclusive, autobiographical work.



Opening ceremony of the Athens Olympics of 2004 in the stadium designed by Santiago Calatrava.



The theatre at Epidaurus today. Photo: Bonnie Marranca.

Far from being arbitrary, Alexiou's inspiration to depict Beckett's city as a web has strong grounding. As a representation of a pattern or a design of movement a web represents human interaction. A handcrafted web is, in Alexiou's own words, theatre, city, or democracy itself. In the contemporary era, webs allude not only to handwork but also to technology. Technology has an auxiliary role in *The End*. He has mostly used the computer as a kaleidoscope to see the different patterns it is possible to compose out of the mosaic's grid. While some of the webs are computer-generated, technology alone could not produce *The End*, since as craft the trace of handwork so essential to this work would always elude it. Indeed, Alexiou has found a non-trivial way to reassess the power of theatre and of live interaction going through touch, in an era privileging the image and virtual contact.

To sum up, even though aesthetically very different, the approaches to Beckett of Alexiou, Navridis, and Psychoulis have similarities as well. Their works have a substantial metaphysical or existential quality, which, however, has a contemporary feel, parting ways with the traditional, dated approach to Beckett as theatre of the absurd. Combining traditional and new media these artists experiment at the boundaries between theatre and the other arts, extending our conception of theatre in the contemporary era.

POSTSCRIPT, DECEMBER 9, 2008: ATHENS IN FLAMES

I have presented a positive picture of living in Athens in this introduction; reality though is more complex than any synthesis. This special section on Athens had just been completed when breaking news of riots in Athens stunned Athenians as well as people worldwide. For three days now, young people hooded and dressed in black have been on the streets at the center of Athens occupying university property; setting fire to public and private buildings, cars, and garbage cans; and vandalizing landmark monuments and looting stores. Even though the hooded perpetrators have caused similar incidents of smaller magnitude in the past in Athens, nobody knows for certain what their profile is. Their violent behavior is nihilist, bereft of all ideology. The current incidents were initially provoked by a policeman's shooting and killing a fifteen-year-old boy in downtown Athens. Grave as it is, the incident itself no longer appears as the cause of the ongoing vandalism that is acquiring the proportions of social revolt by youth that is spreading to other cities throughout Greece.

As students and others have been joining in demonstrations in downtown Athens, there is a sense that the behavior is an extreme expression of widespread dissatisfaction, even despair, in youth due to the high cost of living and poor salaries in relation to other European Union countries, a mediocre university education, a problematic health care system, and growing unemployment. In politics, there is incompetence and lack of vision. Corruption in society is rampant, with grave economic scandals involving high-ranking politicians, church leaders, and judges. Yet the scandals are never fully investigated and the culprits get away with their offences. This also notoriously applies to the criminal behavior of policemen, for which punishment is lax. Social injustice is perhaps causing rage which can no longer be contained. Downtown Athens now appears like a city bombarded in war. Moreover, it is a

defenseless city. The government does not seem to have a comprehensive plan of how to deal with the situation. Chaos reigns. The rioting is perhaps a mark of Athens's turning into a metropolis. Similar outbreaks of violence have occurred recently in Paris; however, whereas in Paris the aggressors were immigrants, in Athens reaction comes from disaffected youth. Athenians are stupefied, enraged, and sad. Nobody is certain at this point what the recent violent incidents mean or what their impact on Greek society will be.

NOTES

1. For an analysis of the Opening ceremony of the Athens Olympics of 2004 see M. Kotzamani, "The Year Athens Went Global: the Olympics in Theater, 2004 and Beyond," *Synchrone Themata (Contemporary Issues)* 104, Summer 2009 (forthcoming).

2. For a survey of contemporary trends, artists and institutions in Athens in the visual arts see *Flash Art*, Focus Greece, Vol. XL No. 256 (October 2007): 86–104. For a survey of the contemporary theatre in Athens see Marina Kotzamani, "Contemporary Theater in Greece: Alive and Well," Special Issue: Western European Theater at the Millennium, *Western European Stages*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (Winter 2001): 89–98. See also the Yearbooks of the arts magazine *Highlights* covering all the arts in Athens: Dina Petropoulou, ed., *Greek Culture. Yearbook 2005–2006; 2006–2007; 2007–2008* (Athens: Filotheamon and Highlights, in three volumes). For a perceptive account of contemporary culture in Athens see George Sarrinikolaou, *Facing Athens: Encounters with the Modern City* (New York: North Point Press, 2004).

3. Work by contemporary Turkish artists was presented at the exhibition *Sampling* (2008), Center for Popular Art and Tradition; see section "Living and Working in Athens" below. Contemporary Iranian artists were featured in the exhibition *Lion under the Rainbow, Art from Tehran*, Art Athina 2008, Athens.

4. Excerpt from George Seferis, *Mythistorema III*, translated by N. Valaoritis and Bernard Spencer, in Nanos Valaoritis and Thanasis Maskaleris, *An Anthology of Modern Greek Poetry* (New Jersey: Talisman House, 2003), 98–99.

5. See M. Pournara, "Clarinos and Nomads at Sao Paulo," *Kathimerini* 9/3/02, in www.kathimerini.gr accessed May 3, 2008.

6. Numerous photographs are included in M. Papadimitriou *TAMA, 25th Bienal de Sao Paulo* (Athens: Hellenic Ministry of Culture, 2002) (bilingual edition, Greek and English).

7. What attracted Papadimitriou to the settlement was that the Rom living in Avliza are dealers in antique furniture. They have a trained eye aesthetically, which shows through in the way they organize their lives. Unpublished interview of Maria Papadimitriou conducted by M. Kotzamani, March 5, 2008.

8. Yorghos Magas, "I am not a slave to money. I am a slave to my art," in M. Papadimitriou, *TAMA*, *ibid*: 110–111.

9. See interview of Voyatzis with Vassilis Angelikopoulos, "Antigone with Memories of the Civil War" (in Greek), *Kathimerini*, 20/08/06, www.kathimerini.gr accessed February 23, 2008.

10. See Voula Papaioanou, *The Photographer Voula Papaioannou. From the Archive of the Benaki Museum* (Athens: Agra and Benaki, 2006). See also “Photographic Archives. Voula Papaioannou (1898–1990)” in www.benaki.gr. Photographs of Voula Papaioannou are also included in the production program for Voyatzis’s *Antigone: Sophocles, Antigone* (Athens: The New Stage, 2006).

11. Voyatzis is probably building on earlier work by Karolos Koun, focusing on the chorus in classical Greek drama production. Koun was the most important director of the post W.W. II–era in Greece.

12. Unpublished interview of Aris Retsos by Marina Kotzamani, January 15, 2008.

13. See statement of the Horos Theatre Company, in *Golfo Version 2.3 Beta*, the production’s program, n.p.

14. Unpublished interview of S. Kakalas, by M. Kotzamani, March 12, 2008.

15. Unlike Beckett, Navridis presents breathing in *Breath* as part of a sound continuum beginning with a sigh and ending with an exhalation into a balloon. Indeed, for Navridis breathing is energy that is never lost. He likes to think of the void as space that is always filled. Unpublished interview of Navridis with M. Kotzamani, March 12, 2008.

16. See Christophoros Marinos, “The Image on the Carpet. A conversation between Nikos Alexiou and Christophoros Marinos,” in Nikos Alexiou, *The End* (Athens: Hellenic Ministry of Culture, 2007) (bilingual, Greek and English), 107–116.

17. Unpublished interview of Alexiou with M. Kotzamani, March 19, 2008.

18. See Alexandra Koroxenidis, “Talking to Nikos Alexiou,” in Nikos Alexiou, *Angel Rolling up the Heavens* (Athens: Hellenic Ministry of Culture, 2005), 20–31.

19. See Christoforos Marinos, “The Image on the Carpet,” in Nikos Alexiou, *The End*, *ibid*; unpublished interview of Alexiou with M. Kotzamani, March 19, 2008.

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Biographical Notes

NIKOS ALEXIOU is a visual artist combining handcraft and technology in installations. He represented Greece at the 52nd Biennial of Venice and has also recently participated in the Biennial of Alexandria, Egypt and the Biennial of Contemporary Art, in Thessaloniki, Greece, as well as the Winter Festival of Sarajevo. Alexiou also creates scenic and costume designs for theatre. Recent work includes *Medea*, by D. Papaioannou, for the Beijing Olympics.

SIMOS KAKALAS is a young actor and director based in Thessaloniki. He founded and serves as artistic director of the theatre company Horos (2002), which focuses on production of Greek plays. Kakalas directed a remarkable production of the Greek classic *Golfo* by S. Peresiadis, the last version of which, *Golfo 2.3 Beta* (2006), has been touring in festivals and theatres internationally.

PANOS KOKKINIAS is a photographer, represented by Xippas gallery in Athens and in Paris. He has also taken part in art exhibitions internationally, including Maison Européenne de la Photographie in Paris and Macro in Rome. His work is in notable collections, such as the Yale University Art Gallery, the Musée de la Roche-sur-Yon in France, and Fondacion Telefonica in Madrid.

NIKOS NAVRIDIS is a visual artist working mainly with video installations. He has exhibited his work internationally, including at the 51st and the 49th Biennials of Venice, the Caixa Forum in Madrid and the Biennial of Istanbul. Recent work includes *First Love, a Song and the Yogi* at the Tate Modern, as well as a drawings installation at the Bernier/Eliades gallery in Athens. Navridis was recently named Professor at the School of Fine Arts in Athens.

MARIA PAPADIMITRIOU is a visual artist focusing on installation and performance. She has represented Greece at the Biennial of Sao Paulo (2002) and has been exhibiting her work internationally, including participations in Manifesta 4, Frankfurt, and the Museo Cantonale d'Arte, Lugano, Switzerland. She also teaches in the Department of Architecture, University of Thessaly, Greece.

ALEXANDROS PSYCHOULIS is a visual artist working with multiple media, including animation, video, installation, handcraft, digital technology, and performance. He represented Greece at the 47th Biennial of Venice and has exhibited his work internationally at Deitch Projects in New York and the Benesse Museum in Naoshima, Japan. He teaches in the Department of Architecture at the University of Thessaly, Greece.

ARIS RETSOS is an actor and performer. Since 1992 he has been presenting acclaimed solo performances of Greek drama, such as *Ajax* and *Antigone*. A recent work performance, *Bad Blood*, is based on poetry by Arthur Rimbaud. Retsos has also worked as an actor in film with notable directors who include N. Papatakis, N. Koundouros and G. Panousopoulos.

LEFTERIS VOYATZIS is a highly distinguished director and actor. He has mostly been presenting work with the New Stage, a company that he founded (1988) and heads. Voyatzis has directed exemplary productions of Western classic and contemporary authors, including Moliere, Goldoni, Sarah Kane, and Thomas Bernhard. Over the last decade he has also directed and acted in highly acclaimed productions of plays by contemporary Greek dramatists, including L. Anagnostaki and G. Dialegmenos.