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Signage for "Destroy Athens"



The Gazi, site of the 1st Athens Biennial



Tunnels at the Athens Biennial

Julian Rosefeldt & Piero Steinle
Detonation Deutschland (still)
1996

APPETITE FOR DESTRUCTION

by Brian Skar

The most oft-noted irony of the first **Athens Biennial**, Sept. 10-Nov. 18, 2007, was the disastrously timely title, "Destroy Athens," which was plastered on stark boldface posters all over the city just weeks after the worst wildfires on record threatened actually to, well, destroy Athens.

At the biennial press conference, Athens mayor **Nikitas Kaklamanis** was eager to stress the phoenix-rising-from-the-ashes metaphor attached to the €1.3 million event. Yet as a piece of cultural-tourism-garnering showmanship -- the website quite correctly notes that biennales are "an instrument of the economic strategy of the world-wide cultural industry, and a vehicle for the development of cities" -- the show is a bit baffling.

An abject "Destroy Athens"

At first glance, the mayor's mythological reference would seem to be out of step with the entire "Destroy Athens" concept, which the biennial's curatorial team of **Xenia Kalpaktoglou**, **Poka Yio** and **Augustine Zenakos** crafted, after all, to lay waste to the association of Greece with classical culture, not to mention goofy images of gods and togas, and give it a cutting-edge makeover. On the other hand, even as they reject this heritage, the curators can't help but to draw on it, writing in their joint catalogue essay about confronting their viewers with "monsters." In effect, Kalpaktoglou, Yio and Zenakos have put together something that seems less the first Greek biennial and more the first abject biennial.

Held in the **Gazi**, a former gasworks which was reconfigured by the Italian architectural firm of **Gruppo A 12** for the occasion, the show brings together 56 artists or art teams, plus a wide variety of ancillary events and projects (an accompanying magazine and art radio station, accessible on the project website, for instance). It is organized like a haunted house, with visitors passing through six vaguely demarcated chapters dubbed "days," still more mythology, Biblical this time.

Entering through a sort of bomb shelter door, visitors to "Destroy Athens" enjoy what might be called a concentration-camp ambience that becomes increasingly claustrophobic as they wend their way from one chamber of the old brick gasworks building to the next via seven-foot-high, dark grey sheetrock corridors, with mesh netting overhead filtering any natural sunlight. One young artist was heard to say that she had to jump a fence just to catch her breath.

Julian Rosefeldt and Piero Steinle's seven-channel video installation *Detonation Deutschland* (1996) serves as the mission statement of the biennial. The various video loops, shown simultaneously on screens that surround viewers in the show's first chamber, consists of almost one hour of continuous footage of building demolitions in post WWII Germany. It signifies the cathartic destruction of the fraught-past in order to make way for the ever-anxious present -- though it's also a bit of operatic spectacle in itself, telegraphing a metaphysical sense of overwhelming historical weight.

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Nikos Kessanlis
Proposition for a new Greek sculpture
 1963



Edward Lipski
King
 2007



Bernhard Wilhelm
The Rose (still)
 2007
 Photo by Sofia Tachias



Narve Hovdenakk
Neo-Man (still)
 2005



Torbjørn Rødland
Love all This & Dogg (still)
 2004

Further in, the curators find in the work of **Nikos Kessanlis** a kind of historical antecedent for their own project. One of Greece's most well-known painters and former dean of the **Athens School of Fine Arts**, Kessanlis -- who died in 2004 -- is represented by *Proposition for a New Greek Sculpture* from 1963, a metal drum hanging from the ceiling with a crumpled-up canvas attached to the underside and the words "Proposition pour une nouvelle sculpture Grecque" stenciled in military lettering around the outside, certainly a Nouveau Realiste parody of traditions of cultural greatness.

More contemporary is the work of British artist **Edward Lipski** (b. 1966). Lipski's sculpture *King* (2007) depicts a totem-like African king figure in gold with an exaggerated afro enveloping his entire head and a gold chain big enough for Old School rapper **Slick Rick**. The swirling together of kitsch and grandiosity makes a particularly edgy portrait of black culture.

Ditto German artist **Bernhard Wilhelm**'s video *The Rose* (2007), which deals with gender stereotypes via a sequence in which a black man dons the harem-like uniform worn by the soldiers in the Greek Presidential Guard. He practices the soldiers' stiff-legged official walk before trying it out in public amid a crowd of men in black leather who could either be attending a skinhead rally or gay pride parade. This is followed by a scene in which the protagonist, still in costume, plays a choreographed whack-a-mole with cream-filled chocolate puff pastries arranged on a table, a messy, nonsensical, **Paul McCarthy**-esque gesture with all kinds of juicy bodily overtones.

The tone of the whole experience is in-your-face, unrelenting, draining. Around any corner you are likely to be confronted by something like Oslo-based **Narve Hovdenakk**'s *Neo-Man* (2005), a video in which a plain-clothes policeman threateningly stares in through a car window, whipping out his dick to wag it at the viewer.

The curators have provided brief respites from this narrative of unreason -- the fourth "day," for instance, offers up a video by Norwegian artist **Torbjørn Rødland** of loafing Lolitas on a swing, caught in a reverie (albeit scored to snippets of **Eminem** and **Snoop Dog**). The work is shown in an isolated outbuilding by itself, next to a fun **assume vivid astro focus** installation in an outdoor courtyard.

But things immediately plunge back into horror in the next section. And what sticks in the mind from the whole experience are nightmarish pieces like **John Bock**'s *Lütte mit Rucola* (2006), a video depicting a carnivalesque torture scene, or New York-based sculptor **Aidas Bareikis**' installation *Easy Times* (2007), a swirling thicket of screaming, deformed figures in Halloween masks, covered in burn marks, surrounded by plastic flamingo lawn ornaments, broken toys, insects and some sort of goopy substance on the rafters and floor.

A high point in this respect -- if you can call it such -- is a work by the collective **Kimberly Clark** (formed of **Iris van Dongen**, **Josepha de Jong** and **Ellemieke Shoemaker**) titled *Crusade Rotterdam* (2007). They have amassed a mound of industrial refuse within one of the Gazi's chambers, surmounted by two female mannequins. From a certain angle, the staffs that the two figures grip separately come together to form a cross -- still another statement of the omnipresent Calvary of despair "Destroy Athens" taps into.

The show comes to a close, fittingly, with the



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Aidas Bareikis
Easy Times
 2007
 Leo König Inc. & Eleni Koronaiou
 Gallery
 Photo by Sofia Tachias



Kimberly Clark
Crusade Rotterdam
 2007
 The Breeder & Diana Stigter
 Photo by Sofia Tachias



Eleni Mylonas
The Lamb of God (still)
 2007
 Courtesy Ileana Tounta
 Contemporary Art Centre and the
 artist



Gary Hill
Bind
 1995
 Courtesy In situ, Fabienne
 Leclerc, Paris



Atlas Group (Walid Raad)'s *I Only
 Wish that I Could Weep* (2000) in
 "Her(his)tory"
 Photo by Rebecca
 Constantopoulou & Fanis
 Vlastaras

accomplished work of **Eleni Mylonas** (b. 1944), a Greek artist who splits her time between New York and Athens. Mylonas' spare, mature video offers the simultaneously revolting and mesmerizing image of a dead lamb slowly washed ashore on the beach. The video is called *Lamb of God* and, we are told, was captured on the first day of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, thus hammering together in a single point myth, the abject, and the groping for larger social significance that characterizes "Destroy Athens."

"Her(his)tory" at the Museum of Cycladic Art

Still, overall, the Athens Biennial has an adolescent air -- the appetite for destruction, the sexual themes, the angst -- a vibe perhaps accounted for by the show's ambition to serve as a kind of growth hormone rapidly kicking Greece's art scene into the full maturity of the international spotlight. More sober is an associated show "Her(his)tory," curated by **Marina Fokidis** at the **Museum of Cycladic Art** and the adjoining 19th-century **Stathatos Megaron** mansion. The Museum of Cycladic Art is, of course, known for its collection of early Greek artifacts, and so if anything, dedicating a large section of its galleries to contemporary video work represents an even sharper statement about rethinking historical priorities than the biennial.

Visitors enter by way of the Stathatos Megaron mansion and are greeted by *Bind* (1995) by the American video artist **Gary Hill**: a small television with an open copy of French philosopher **Jacques Ellul's** *The Humiliation of the Word* literally bound by cables so that it covers the screen of the set. Like Rosefeldt and Steinle's video of demolitions at the beginning of "Destroy Athens," this work serves as a mission statement -- Ellul's book is all about the desecration of sacred culture by entertainment culture, and Hill's work amplifies this critique as it physically enacts it.

"Her(his)tory" contains a fair amount of art by familiar names doing familiar things: **Doug Aitken**, **Paul Chan**, **Isaac Julien**, **Bruce Nauman** and **Tony Oursler**, among others. One of the most affecting works is *I Only Wish that I Could Weep* (2000) by **Walid Raad / Atlas Group**, which replays the feed from a closed-circuit security camera in Beirut, turned from its perfunctory duties of surveillance toward the sunset, a moment of beauty snatched from a dark present. The piece is amusingly placed above the security guard's post at the entrance to the show, proving that curator Fokidis is determined in her own way to shake up any lingering impressions of staidness at the institution. Other pieces are installed in fireplaces or above doors, playing off their context.

Amid all this, a few young Greek artists even get a piece of the spotlight, including Cyprus-born **Haris Epaminonda** (b. 1980), whose *Nemesis 52* (2003) is installed at the bottom of a staircase so that it is best viewed looking down over the railing from above. It features images of balloons lowly inflating and deflating as well as the artist's own rubber-gloved hands manipulating pink and white silk. The otherwise ordinary actions turn unsettling and mesmerizing -- as well as strangely sexual -- through the simple technique of mirroring the screen down the center. Athens-born **Lina Theodorou** (b. 1970) has a video in which two women strip off plumber uniforms and belly dance in a public urinal, as if to emphasize the erotics of art bursting out in the strangest of places.

Athens galleries "ReMap KM"

Art in strange places was the literal idea behind



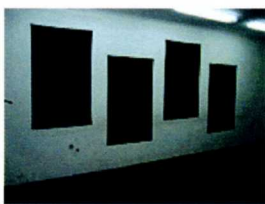
Haris Epaninonda's *Nemesis 52* (2003) in "Her(his)tory"
Photo by Rebecca Constantopoulou & Fanis Vlastaras



Lina Theodorou
Plumbers (still)
2006
Photo by Rebecca Constantopoulou & Fanis Vlastaras



A hole in the wall at Peres Projects' space in "ReMap KM"



Andrew Rogers's black flags at Peres Projects



Black Puss performing at Andreas Melas Presents

the other big event of the biennial's debut weekend: "ReMap KM," a kind of block party for which galleries set up squats in previously abandoned buildings in Athens' dodgy Kerameikos and Metaxourgeio neighborhoods (the "KM" of the title). Invited galleries included top Greek dealers like **AD Gallery**, **The Breeder**, **Eleni Koroneou Gallery**, **Loraini Alimantiri**, **Ileana Tounta / gazonrouge**, **Rebecca Camhi Gallery**, **Vamiali's** and **Xippas**; Europeans like **Blow de la Barra** (UK), **Ibid Projects** (UK), **Johann König** (Germany), **Nice & Fit** (Germany) and **Rodeo Gallery** (Turkey); and even New York's **Spencer Brownstone** and L.A./Berlin-based **Peres Projects**.

Not a lot of sprucing up was done aside from a little ad hoc flooring here or there, or a sledgehammer hole in the wall leading to a further room. In the typical manner of guerrilla exhibitions everywhere, the galleristes-cum-squatters kept their spaces in much the same shape as their previous tenants had left them, shoe scuff-marks and beer cans everywhere, each room with its own distinct lingering odor.

Still, the art looked good. Peres showed a **Terence Koh**-engineered copy of **Praxiteles' Hermes Carrying the Child Dionysus** dipped in black, as well as four black American flags by **Andrew Rogers**, a reference to the '80s L.A. hardcore rock band **Black Flag**. The dark punk vibe fit right in, as the night found visitors enjoying the stylings of **Black Puss** -- the one-man offshoot of the Providence, R.I. art-rockers **Lighting Bolt** -- playing downstairs at the space of Greek gallery **Andreas Melas Presents**. At one point it was difficult to distinguish who came to look at art and who came just to cadge a couple cans of Mythos beer, the local brew.

The atmosphere had a sense of muted tragedy, though, since the show represented gentrification in action. We basically had a block party in someone else's neighborhood but forgot to invite them. **Jason Tsakonas**, a local developer who supplied the locales, has scooped up some 65 properties around the KM neighborhoods for prime rates. And he's got big plans. Despite his seemingly good intentions to foster a community where he says there is none -- the place is full of brothels, one of which was just opposite Andreas Melas Presents -- remapping the neighborhood sounded as much like a threat as a promise. "Destroy Athens," indeed.

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