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## Athens' burgeoning contemporary art scene

Athens Biennale, ReMap and the developing "KM" district prompt an influx of cultural activity

By Jason Edward Kaufman | Web only  
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Work by Manolis Baboussis in ReMap

**ATHENS.** The christening of the Acropolis Museum in June cemented the Greek capital's association with its ancient past, but a growing contemporary art scene has begun to refresh the city's cultural profile. Private initiatives in museums and the market are accelerating the pace of change.

Collector Dakis Joannou remains a significant presence through his Deste Foundation, which shows rotations of works by Jeff Koons, Maurizio Cattelan, Robert Gober, Pawel Althamer and Urs Fischer, among others. But Deste is no longer the only game in town. The Athens Biennale—founded in 2007 by Deste director Xenia Kalpaktsoglou, critic Augustine Zenakos and artist Poka-Yio—put the city on the international contemporary art festival circuit. The second edition (until 4 October) presents more than 150 artists from 30 countries in six separately curated shows, which have drawn visitors despite a venue lacking air conditioning in the former Olympics complex outside the city centre. "Athens was an unexplored place within Europe, a kind of intermediate place in the periphery, but this is changing now," says Poka-Yio.

Another sign of change is ReMap (until 4 October), a project that allows galleries and independent art groups to exhibit in the city centre during the biennales. A young developer, Iason Tsakonias, invites exhibitors to install shows and site-specific works in dozens of properties he owns in the Kerameikos and Metaxourgeio neighbourhoods. The district (known as "KM") includes an important ancient necropolis, but is largely a mix of empty lots, run-down early 20th-century neoclassical apartment buildings and flimsy post-war tenements, many occupied by brothels, drug dealers and immigrant squatters. Bars and restaurants have begun to crop up, but Tsakonias envisages cutting-edge art and architecture transforming the area into a culturally vibrant catalyst for the city's renaissance.

"It's a great idea," says Joannou. "Iason has energised the whole art scene with this, brought international galleries to Athens and created a lot of energy." Most of the 30-odd exhibitors this year are Greek, but foreign participants include Eva Presenhuber of Zurich, Peres Projects of Los Angeles, Andersen's Contemporary of Copenhagen, Parisa Kind of Frankfurt, and Johann König, Giti Nourbakhsh and Isabella Bortolozzi of Berlin. They don't pay rent, but contribute \$1,500 to the non-profit ReMapKM foundation's \$200,000 outlay for administration and marketing.

Joannou plans to exhibit parts of his own collection in the KM district in a window showcase dubbed "Deste Vitrine". Details and a completion date are yet to be set. Meanwhile, in the past year two commercial galleries have relocated to the area—the Breeder and Rebecca Camhi—and Tsakonias says he will offer project space for the Museum of Contemporary Art and other cultural groups.

"The question is how do we identify the area with contemporary art and architecture to enhance the standard of living in a more multicultural balanced manner," says Tsakonias.

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Dakis Joannou

He has enlisted emerging architecture firms such as Atelier Bow-Wow to design buildings, and expects to begin construction of several this autumn. Dimitris Rigopoulos, who covers urban affairs for Kathimerini newspaper, says left-wing opponents fear the project will push out immigrants and lower-class workers, but he believes redevelopment is necessary to save one of the most declining areas of Athens.

"The contemporary art scene in Athens is starting to move and therefore the audience is beginning slowly but steadily to become interested," says Sandra Marinopoulos, president of the Museum of Cycladic Art. In 2007 the antiquities museum began mounting summer shows of contemporary art designed to lure younger audiences. The first was an international survey of video work curated by Marina Fokidis that introduced Athenians to Doug Aitken, Paul Chan, Isaac Julien, Bruce Nauman and Tony Oursler, among others. An exhibition of Thomas Struth is on view until 14 September and Marinopoulos says that Tate Modern curator Jessica Morgan will curate a show in 2010.

A new branch of the Benaki Museum of Greek culture has also bolstered its contemporary programme, recently presenting a show curated by Paolo Colombo that included work by William Kentridge, Natalie Djurberg, Kara Walker and Haluk Akakçe. And Joannou recently launched a project space on the nearby island of Hydra. The municipality gave him use of a former slaughterhouse and he plans to sponsor annual shows of "young but established" artists. "It's not an experimental space for young guys," he says. The first exhibition (until spring 2010) is a collaboration between Matthew Barney and Elizabeth Peyton, and next year the space will be given over to Cattelan.

These initiatives are groundbreaking in a city whose state-funded National Museum of Contemporary Art, founded in 1997, has for years been forced to move from one temporary venue to another while its future home, a former brewery in the city centre, undergoes renovation. An opening date has yet to be set.

Joannou is now joined by a growing number of Athens-based collectors of international contemporary art, such as Dimitris Daskalopoulos, Grigoris Papadimitriou and Constantinos Papageorgiou. "When I started in the mid-1980s there were one or two serious collectors, now there are maybe ten," he says. "More people buy contemporary art for their houses, which was not the case 20 years ago," he adds, noting the recent establishment of galleries with an international programme, including the Breeder, Gazonrouge, Alpha Delta, Ileana Tounta and Rebecca Camhi.

Despite the increased vibrancy of the scene, Poka-Yio says the various elements have yet to form a cohesive and stable agenda for contemporary art. Part of the problem is the lack of support from the state, which devotes resources to ancient sites but has yet to give similar backing to contemporary art. Another impediment is the lack of consistent policy and long-term planning that results from the frequent replacement of culture ministers and institutional leaders with each change of government. "There is a momentum at the moment," says Poka-Yio, "but it's the energy of particular individuals and institutions."

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