ATHENS BIENNIAL

1st Athens Biennial 2007

Prayer for (Passive?) Resistance

Conference

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Old Parliament – National Historical Museum, Athens

ABSTRACTS

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Art in the Era of Metapolitics

The relationship between politics and art continues to be a topical issue today, yet not in terms of traditional political engagement. It is only natural that the techniques of power are being transformed at a time of dramatic change, and so is critical discourse. It may therefore be necessary to rethink the critical, political role of art: But how? Such a proposal was formulated for instance in the context of the art event *Documenta 11,* involving the examination of art practices along with the issue of biopolitics, which has already been developed by theorists, such as Foucault and Agamben. Yet, is this enough? Is biopolitics now perhaps only one of the aspects of modern metapolitics? Can it be perhaps that the very discussion of biopolitics ultimately entails a repulsion of the political? Is it perhaps necessary to return to the broader picture and discern the political stake: the conflict between metapolitical, post-democratic trends and smaller or larger, more or less valid (or invalid) efforts for repoliticalization.

Metapolitics and post-democracy in the work of thinkers, such as Crouch, Rancière, Mouffe and Žižek, signals the shift from a conflict of ideological visions incarnated in various political forces to a stage where authority is allocated to "illuminated" technocrats (such as economists, public opinion experts, etc). Similar developments also emerge in the international art scene, that is, the financial magnification of international events, the dominance of the curator/connoisseur and "neutral" – "objective" curator teams and, finally, the imposition of acquiescent curating and theoretical concepts, which attempt to absorb every deviating art practice. In this context, how can it be possible to repoliticalize the players involved in the art scene as well as the discourse produced in it? How can it be possible for art to contribute to the radicalization of democracy, which is a prerequisite for its own (always relative) autonomy in spite of all its inherent incongruity? Obviously, there are no magical, immediate or "spontaneous" answers to these questions, nor is there any possibility for outside radical critique and reestablishment of the social and artistic landscape. Besides, today the radically new immediately becomes the object of appropriation by power and commerce. This is why the invitation extended to us by an event, such as the Athens Biennale, thus entitled, is a challenge to ourselves, to the inherent conflicts of our own (national, political, financial, artistic) identities.

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Neil Mulholland

Party Fears Two: Social Network Theory, Contemporary Art and Countercultures

This paper will address the rise of social network theory since the late 1950s and its developing association with contemporary art practice and cultural management. The presentation will examine the ways in which a naïve advocacy and application of social network theory has progressively contributed to the instrumentalisation of dissent via the illusory convergence of art discourses and countercultural practices. The paper will investigate the cultural potential of closed systems (argots, prosummerism, haptic perception) in a globalised culture preoccupied with the deterministic lingua franca of viral open networks.

Maria Theodorou

Architectural Resistance

Since the 1990s, urban planning has fallen prey to the international real estate market and the petty visions of local politicians, who fantasize the rebirth of their cities through architecture. At the juncture of architecture, economy, and politics a star system has developed of architects who construct impressive buildings around the word in exchange for full compliance with their clients' orders. Intensive urban and rural building activity is tightly concentrated, establishing horizontal or perpendicular islands of prosperity in fully controlled areas, whereas the landfills of impoverished natives and immigrants increasingly spread in the overblown cities. The problems of the cities today are considered as purely technical-financial issues, which require corresponding solutions and management by experts. The failure of the architectural visions of the 1960s and '70s seem to censor any "critical" architectural approach.

Nevertheless, in the early 21st century, there is an emerging trend, among architects and small architectural teams, of resistance against the dominant manner of architectural education and practice. The objectives of architectural resistance are to interpret today's urban trends, to study the concept of "resistance" in the history of architecture, to formulate positions and develop practices. Moreover, the current interest in the 1960s and '70s is not accidental. The number of publications, exhibitions, and conferences related to radical architectural gestures of the past increases, and topics related to the architectural utopia and the relationship of architecture and authority are introduced in the lecture agenda of architectural schools What has already been witnessed as happening at a microscale with numerous teams is the recognition of the need to energise the social and political role of architecture, where this role must be redefined with respect to the conditions prevailing today.

How does Athens fit into all this? The abandoning of the city to the real estate market is at full tilt right now. Is there a wish to resist, though, over and beyond the customary positions of the political parties? Greek architects in the 1960s and '70s were extremely politicised due to the political circumstances of the time. Yet, was there ever a connection made between architectural production and politics, beyond the self-evident connection of architecture with

political authorities? If the architectural model of the classical Athens is a universal, stereotypical political symbol, can it be perhaps that in modern Athens this stereotype stifled every effort to consider architectural production in political terms? Is there any possibility to consider architecture in Athens as a political issue in the context of the current neoliberal democracy? Can resistance against existing stereotypes develop, whereby the relationship of architecture with the political will circumvent the stereotype of the politicalization of architects?

Panayis Panagiotopoulos

Let's Get out of this Town -Political Culture and Authenticity on the Right and the Left

This paper aims to engage with the issue of Greek political culture by exploring habitual, ideological and emotional rejections of Athens.

The paper posits that Athens is defined by more than its constitutional myths. In addition to its positive stereotypes and magniloquent narratives (democracy, art, philosophy) provided by the "great European reborrowing", over the last 50 years representations of Athens have also developed through negative cultural iconography.

It is a fact that the completion of the city's urbanization processes (reconstruction) in the late 1960s came hand in hand with the manifestation of a constant feeling of rebutting the relationship with the city; a feeling that has become a fixed feature of Greek public life.

This feeling has nothing to do with the actual conditions of, and life in, Athens. Instead, it constructs a spectral Athens described as a compulsive condition of alienation – national, existential, and moral. Life in the mega-polis — as opposed to life in, for instance, the utopia of the children's fiction *Lilipoupoli* — negates elements of our culture, detracts from communication, desensitizes inhabitants and so on.

In contrast with other European and Mediterranean metropolises, Athens' experience of urban identities and anti-identities have been purely fragmentary. On the other hand, the collective subjects continue to turn to other sources for the formation of their identities, including the ever more mediated and powerful ancestral village.

Thus, it was that both the circulation of negative stereotypes on the public, national, and interpersonal level and the consolidation of the alienating conceptualisation of the city/Athens came to acquire wide-ranging political meanings.

The paper argues that the rejection – *primarily* on the level of ideology and the imaginary — of the urban experience is now a core

element in Greece's political culture. More specifically, it investigates the concept of authenticity as the nodal point at which various historical and behavioural factors meet, re-producing aspects of Greek conservatism across the entire political spectrum.

This feeling of discomfort with regard to Athens, the appeals to an imposed 'humanity' or a 'low petit-bourgeois quality', are expressed in verbal flux, habitus and stereotypes that have spread across the political spectrum. Nonetheless, it is still possible to identify different functions and divergent tropes depending on the socio-political origins of the agents of this culture.

In particular, the conditions of social modernization that have held since the restitution of democracy in 1974 have allowed for the development of anti-urban narratives, which can be described as divergent without necessarily being antagonistic.

The first, which is chiefly expressed by the lower/popular classes and the mainstream audiovisual media, employs anti-Athens rhetoric to moderate cultural insecurities, but above all else to counter the fear of caste loss. Fed by traditional stereotypes of the city and the village, it is imbued with community- and family oriented philosophies. This narrative, which predates the restitution of democracy and was not changed by it, is rendered especially pointed by the disorganization of labour and the globalization of the city. An alternative label could be: 'conservative insecurity/redoublement' in the face of the city. Although it mostly expresses the insecurities of the working classes and vulnerable petit bourgeois groups, one could place this particular rejection of the city on the Right of the political spectrum.

The second narrative pertains more to higher bourgeois classes. Though actuated by a professed *acceptance of the city*, it is constantly shifting in a field demarcated by the idealization of the historical past (wishing to save Alexandras Avenue's historic refugee housing, which was built in the wake of the Asia Minor Disaster of 1922) and by the condemnation of mega-structures (such as Athens' *The Mall* shopping centre). The worship of neo-classical architecture, anger at the legal framework that saw two-storey neoclassical structures replaced by multi-storey concrete blocks, appeals relating to the city's lack of greenery and the mass abandonment of Athens' historical wards are a few of the ideological and behavioural determinants of this tendency. We could label this narrative 'cultural/class intermixing anxiety' and examine it as yet another

version of cultural differentiation functions. The loss of discrete social features, the probable bolstering of complex forms of living in which older cultural hierarchies are abolished in favour of newly-minted identities, the bourgeoisification of the city, and, above all, cultural practices are systemically blamed. Stemming largely from areas to which the Left is sensitive, this narrative employs radical symbolisms. The paper argues that this narrative encompasses elitist and 'bourgeois' motifs of rebuttal: it is certainly not by chance that it pointedly ignores developments in the mass culture of consumption and reveals knee-jerk reactions against policies of mass democracy.

The two narratives cross and at times cross-fertilize as they feed into Greek political culture. They also participate in a third stereotype — that of *authenticity* — which, depending on the narrator, may be paralleled with *populariness*, with *purity*, with the *Greek soul,* or even with *quality.*

Jeremy Valentine

Stereotypes, Causality and Ethics

In this paper I want to try and relate one of the general themes of the Athens biennial to the theme of the conference. I want to look critically at the assumptions embedded in the notion of the stereotype in so far as it relates to activity in the sense of the agent, that which acts, and passivity in the sense of the patient, that which is acted upon. To do that I will begin by discussing Walter Lipmann's classic discussion of the stereotype (in *Public Opinion,* 1922). For Lippman, stereotypes are inevitable facts of the world because they condense both a finite economy of thought, arising from the fact that it is impossible to sense and experience everything, with a preference for the familiar and already known, the situated and embedded nature of existence. Of course, Lippman did not regard the existence of stereotypes as a good thing. For Lippman they could be overcome, but not eliminated, by journalism informed by political science. As we know, Lippman's optimism has not been satisfied. I don't want to dwell on the possible reasons for that. Instead I want to turn to a contemporary thinker in the American pragmatist tradition of Lippman, the political philosopher William Connolly. Connolly does not really talk about stereotypes but there is a term in his vocabulary that has similar characteristics, namely faith. For Connolly faith simply refers to our finite economy of thought and experience and the ways of life we build on that in the expectation that they will go on forever. Justifications for that, and defences of it, give rise to forms of conduct that produce phenomena similar to the stereotype. But Connolly's critical response to faith is quite different to Lippman's response to stereotypes. For Connolly it's not simply a matter of finding out more stuff. Rather it's a matter of changing one's relation to one's own faith or, to use Lippman's term, the stereotype through which one is constituted, by critically challenging one's own assumptions. Only on that basis can one challenge the faith of others. Connolly calls this conduct 'agonistic respect' or 'agonistic pluralism'. I will conclude by discussing two important consequences of Connolly's position. Firstly, a grammatical shift from the active-passive distinction to what can inadequately be called a politics of the middle-voice. Secondly, a justification of the fact that Connolly's ethic needs no justification.

Evelyne Jouanno

Emergency Biennale in Chechnya – when creation has to engage with destruction

We are living in a world of global wars. Wars signify violence, destruction, and turning normal orders upside down, both materially and spiritually. Almost everyone in everywhere has to confront with such a critical reality today. In this context, destruction can be seen as a metaphor of our current state of being.

Destruction also becomes a central issue of debates and a starting point for inventive projects. Even innovative projects are somehow started with acts of destruction of the established order. And creation has to go through a kind of engagement with destruction. No surprise, the first Athens Biennial is entitled *Destroy Athens*. It is certainly ironic, but really falling into the tendency of the time.

It is in this perspective that I'd like to introduce *Emergency Biennale in Chechnya,* which has been conceived and developed as a reaction against a particular background of destruction: destruction of a population, a society, a culture, and an identity.

Wishing to reintroduce Chechnya to international attention while questioning the phenomenon of proliferation of the international Biennials, Emergency Biennale in Chechnya underlines the urgent necessity to redefine the critical, cultural, and social commitment of art to reality as well as our human responsibility as actors of both artistic and social life.

Emergency Biennale in Chechnya opened on 23 February 2005 in Grozny, Chechnya, and in Paris, Palais de Tokyo. It was organized in three weeks, without any budget, showcasing more than sixty international artists who accepted to provide a work and its duplicate specifically devised to fit in suitcases that were to be shipped to Chechnya and various other cities in the world for mirror exhibitions. After two years of an itinerary around the world and involving new artists and new suitcases for Chechnya, the project is planned to stop before end of 2007 in Grozny where the artworks and their twins will meet. The collection will then become the base of a museum, though this will remain nomad for an indeterminate period.

Per Hasselberg

The Good Society and the Nuclear Option

In my work, I try to make ideas visible and create links between these ideas and their physical imprints within specific contexts. When the context is not given, I search for one that corresponds to my questions. I am particularly interested in cases in which the context leads to wide connections, and, as such, I programmatically seek a point that summarizes this larger context so as to let the work evolve from it.

The central laundry in Hökarängen, a suburb in the "subway city" of Stockholm, stands for a dominant but debated ideal of urban planning that is known as "neighbourhood planning". The structure of this "subway city" may be said to sum up the modern project and the idea of "the good society". The idea behind this structure is to create democratic people and thereby counteract the kind of totalitarian movements that lay behind the Second World War. Intrigued by this architectural model for democracy, I moved to Hökarängen for the work *Konsthall C*.

In this neighbourhood, I found the R3 heavy-water reactor, that provided district heating to the next suburb, Farsta from 1964 to 1974. R3 was part of "The Swedish Policy" that combined a civil atomic energy programme with a military function. Freedom of action was the compromise that unified both opponents and proponents of a Swedish nuclear bomb. In the work *OPTION*, I bring together the Swedish nuclear arms programme, which was kept secret for decades, and "The Policy of the Third Path", a system founded on the compromising rhetoric that characterizes Swedish social democracy; even though this was not primarily devised to manufacture nuclear arms, they wanted to have the option.

Viktor Misiano

Resistance on Stage?

Resistance is again the focus of current debates. It raises a lot of questions, perhaps unanswerable, but still so urgent as to call for discussion. Can resistance be realized in the center and more so given that a biennale is, in fact, a product of the establishment? Could it be performed on stage? Or should an authentic guerrilla be always underground? Is there an aesthetic of resistance? Or is resistance something related to the message and content of the work? Do we really know against whom we resist? Could (and should) we resist against a resistance that turned into being a fashion, as it has in fact become? How can we distinguish an authentic resistance from the false one?