

Hypesterism

I went digging, when I returned from Athens – mourning as I was the loss of orange trees and the smell of jasmine – as to the origins of the word ‘hype’. It has several possible roots, I learn: the most accepted derives from the Greek ‘hyper’ as in ‘over’, like ‘hyperbole’, overstating. In the 4th century BC there was a demagogue called Hyperbolus who would orate in exaggerated tones from the Agora, while the god Hyperion’s name means ‘watcher from above’, overseer of what rises in the east.

I was thinking about the nature of hype because I had chosen to visit this city of ancient and recent ruins, balancing on the edge of Europe, at a moment when it is, on the one hand, stretched for and stripped of resources and, on the other, charged with the artistic expectation that comes from being on the edge. The pinkish wisps of the sky at dusk were enough to convince me that hype is based on more than, but also just, hot air: I didn’t want to add to it.

As an outsider to the city (and a writer) it is hard not to romanticise the past grandeur of decaying buildings, which hold the possibility of being filled anew – imagine the installations! – but that also reflect in their tarnished mirrors an oracle of an end. Architect Aristide Antonas writes in his essay ‘The Construction of Southern Ruins’ in Documenta 14’s takeover of Athens-based magazine South as a State of Mind: ‘When we wander through contemporary Athens, we experience its collapsed materiality ... as a prophecy that announces the cataclysmic ... collapse of Europe.’

Athens has been held to the demands of time-keeping Brussels, but is planted with the timeless trees of the Levant.

The resources of stretched-out time and vacant space are perhaps what are beckoning Greek artists back to the capital, sometimes to open small project spaces, of en, among those I met, having studied abroad. These basic but necessary elements for art-making are beginning to draw international artists to the city, too. The idea for relatively recent arrival Navine G Khan-Dossos's Imagine a Palm Tree installation on the top floor of the Benaki Museum of Islamic Art comes out of botanical histories rather than ruins. Upon arriving in Athens, the artist began to hear tales about the disappearance of palm trees from its cityscape, the causes ranging from state-led remodelling away from symbols of the 'Orient' to disease. In the Benaki's previously closed cafe, her floor-to-ceiling mural transforms oral legend into a technicolour haven of trompe l'oeil tiles, with the painted palms acting as signifiers of a place away from geographic co-ordinates.

The seemingly depthless idea of a 'south' beyond actual compass points is currently mined by the aforementioned Kassel-based art festival, which will open part of its programme in venues across Athens in one year's time. The second synapse of the Athens Biennale, held while I was in town – more as a series of symposia than a biennale in any exhibition-based sense – also took on the idea of 'south', which was presented by one speaker as a grammar, suggesting rhythm, rule and imposition, as though Greece was being made to fit others' templates.

During my conversations with Athens-based artists and curators, Documenta 14 hovers as a quasi-mythical, still undefined presence. As one would expect from a population already well aware of its creditors, there is a healthy level of criticality – though not generally hostility – about the extent to which the temporary exhibition will engage with its new context. (In the 1920s, 'hype' was a slang word that referred to being shortchanged; by the 1940s, it had become linked to market value, meaning to 'increase or inflate'.) There is much to be debated, such that I write in my notes: 'dialogues more than objects'.

The first project space I visit is 3 137, on a narrow street in the anarchist neighbourhood of Exarcheia, opened in 2012 by three artists to host public events in their shared studio. The glass shopfront of the mezzanine space is part-covered by Chrysanthi Koumianaki's calligraphic symbols, conceived out of Renaissance designs for an ideal city, which she uses to translate graffiti

slogans collected on Athens's streets. These designs were tests for her contribution to the previous group show 'Through the Fog' at State of Concept, the city's first non-profit gallery, which establishes dialogues between Athens and elsewhere and shares architectural details with 3 137 in its original glass facade and terrazzo marble floor. The trio tell me that when they initiated the space there was already a good deal of cultural activity going on, but that this mainly took the form of pop-up programmes or happenings which lacked commitment or continuity.

Now they are not alone. Other scattered project spaces include Radio Athènes, which is showing Rallou Panagiotou's balmy film and sculptural installation about a derelict Greek tourist resort, Kalypso (Volume II); Circuits + Currents, a sporadic space and radio station run by students of the School of Fine Arts; and Fokidos, based in the 1940s-era apartment of artist Sofia Stevi, whose intimate exhibitions fuse with the domestic realm. While Stevi tells me that social relations are the real, or only, fabric of the art scene here, the prerogative of the occupied (since 2015) ex-cafe Green Park is to 'rebuild modes of collectivity and ... reclaim friendship for its political importance' – a project which is of course not without its tensions. In contrast to Fokidos's inward-looking stance, Green Park holds neighbourhood assemblies, participates in migrant solidarity, and positions itself against 'cultural monopolies, "creative cities" and their production lines of co-optation'.

It is not so much, that having established themselves in the last four years in an economically void city, these spaces share an ethos or approach – though they do at times overlap; but more that in the absence of larger institutions (the National Museum of Contemporary Art remains closed; NEON is one of the few private foundations for cultural funding), they only have each other. The presence of like-sized, if not always likeminded, initiatives creates an informal network between peers, but as the market is elsewhere, this looks little like 'networking'.

The imminence of Documenta means that Athens's artists and project spaces must keep defining themselves – for themselves, but also in relation to a larger perceived picture. Hopefully this will have the effect of further strengthening their own identities and strategies, as well as fending of the hypesters.■

