



What is to be Learned? On Athens and documenta 14 so far

– Stavros Stavrides

The choice of the artistic director of documenta 14, Adam Szymczyk, to focus this internationally acclaimed exhibition on crisis-ridden Athens has indeed been controversial. It was not only the choice to split the exhibition and its programme between Kassel, the event's traditional base, and Athens that has fuelled the debate, but also a widespread view that Germany and Greece are in a continuous state of friction, if not hostility, concerning the handling of the Greek public debt. True, documenta 14 explicitly attempts to build bridges through art between the two countries. Yet what is perhaps most interesting in this approach is how it problematises crisis as an opportunity for artistic creativity. 'Despite the chaotic and

Stavros Stavrides considers documenta 14 and 'Learning from Athens' in light of the city's local cultures of solidarity.

dramatic situation we are still in Athens and we intend to stay, learning from whatever comes', Szymczyk noted in 2015. 'But ... we don't want to illustrate the crisis. We believe that the real image of the crisis *doesn't exist and it perhaps should not be imposed.* We

just try to exist in this state of crisis, every single day – in Germany and in Greece.'¹

How can one learn from Athens? How can one understand Athens as a site that supports and engenders experiences that are meaningful for its inhabitants? And what do these inhabitants see and feel when they are actually enveloped by prevalent mythologies connected to their city's history? What seems to be crucially important in this process is to realise that Athens is not only the result of various layers of inhabiting practices but also the product of ideologies of urban identity construction violently imposed by dominant elites in their effort to literally shape the city. Neoclassicism, for example, became the prevailing aesthetic and organisational narrative that actually shaped the city plan in the nineteenth century and legitimised interventions in emblematic monuments (such as the Acropolis complex); vestiges of epochs unworthy of remembering (or those 'insultingly vulgar' compared to the 'ancient glory') were thus destroyed.

It is important to remember that Athens, although now a more multicultural city than it used to be, has a very strong identity within the dominant narrative of Western civilisation, and this identity is propelling tourist-oriented consumption. Caught in the web of this identity-imposing narrative, some Athenians even resort to its glory in their attempt to preserve a kind of collective self-respect as they experience blows to their 'national pride'. This feeling of collective humiliation is largely connected to the results of policies imposed by 'outside' agents such as the International Monetary Fund and the European Union who have dictated devastating measures: immense salary and pension cuts, the sale of public assets, and the dismantling of rights and of the welfare state together with a growing loss of national sovereignty.

To learn from Athens, then, one has to understand first the concrete and lived ideologies permeating today's Athenian *everydayness*. True, lots of people feel themselves to be foreigners in this context – perhaps because they came to the city during the last decade hoping to find work, or because, in attempting to escape war and destruction in their own countries, they tried to reach through Greece a kind of illusionary promised land in Northern Europe. And although these people are not really trapped by the humiliation-pride syndrome of Greek-born Athenians, they live in a city that is permeated by its convolutions and jolts. Immigrants and refugees may be presented as obstacles to overcoming national humiliation, or even as the very cause of it – having allegedly destroyed the Greek economy, or the purity of Greeks' European descent, and so on. If one wants to learn from Athens, one needs to look for exchanges among the city's current inhabitants beyond the hostilities connected to this

1 Adam Szymczyk, quoted in Alanna Martinez, 'Documenta Still On For Germany and Greece... Despite That Whole Debt Thing', *The Observer*, 23 July 2015, available at <http://observer.com/2015/07/documenta-will-still-be-jointly-hosted-by-germany-and-greece-despite-debt-mess/> (last accessed on 13 December 2016). Emphasis mine.

syndrome. Such exchanges, which so often unfold under the radar of the dominant media, are primarily connected to cultural and ethical cross-fertilisations. These gestures of support and mutual aid need to be understood in the context of the particular potentialities and antinomies of Athenian (and Greek) identity.

Despite hostilities based on well-known schemas of racist delineation, of ‘unpolluted identities’, Athenian identity is a recent and precarious construction. (Perhaps this is one way that Athenians are particularly suited to understand the needs and aspirations of refugees.) Athens owes its identity to an imported (or rather, imposed) Bavarian prince, who applied a neoclassical lens of ‘ancient-glory’. Through both archaeological investigation and infra-

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structural development – universities, libraries, schools and hospitals – Otto Friedrich Ludwig’s reign (1832–62) sought to formulate both a modern state and a national identity for Greece’s inhabitants. Despite its small size, Athens became the capital city. Many Athenians today are also newcomers to this city; their fathers or grandfathers having been born in villages spread all over Greece. Contemporary Athens is essentially the result of a huge ‘internal immigration’ that unfolded after the Second World War and culminated in the 1960s and 70s. Athenians thus don’t exactly identify with the city they live in. Most of them regularly visit the villages or small towns of their ancestry. So, for Athenians *autochthony* as a mythology rests on very precarious foundations.

This complicates the notion of community in Athens today. On the one hand, memories and fragmented experiences of rural or non-metropolitan communities (rehearsed mostly in vacation periods) shape the imaginary of today’s Athenians of Greek origin. On the other, immigrants and refugees also carry strong memories of community life, and often reinforce those memories by building local networks of mutual support. Solidarity and collaboration in the current period of crisis emerge at the intersection of such shared imaginaries of community (although their history may differ greatly). Notably, encounters of such kinds acquire their meaning and momentum by being connected to the realities and dreams of community support as distinct from the lost support of the welfare state. The Greek state is not considered by most Greeks – and even less so by immigrants – as a benign and protecting force, something to be trusted (a mythology that is probably stronger in Northern Europe).

What is perhaps distinctive about Athenian society’s response to crisis is not the proliferation of differences in identity and life values, but the re-emergence of community values and practices beyond state-regulated relationships and institutions. In various dispersed initiatives throughout the city, people rediscover forms of mutual aid and collaboration buried under a collapsing social safety net, supposedly effective during the previous era of collective ‘well-being’.² There is an expanding network of social health clinics which are self-managed and based on the voluntary contribution of doctors, pharmacists and municipal employers. And there are self-sustained neighbourhood centres, which provide educational and cultural support to those who can’t afford to pay relevant private or public institutions. For example, one could refer here to the Lapidona Social and Cultural Center, established by local activists in the Vyronas neighborhood. Lapidona is housed in an occupied building that belongs to the municipality and has developed programmes of mutual help, language programmes, dance and philosophy lessons, music and theatre festivals and collective cooking and refugee support initiatives. Another very successful example is a social club run by leftist activists in a rented building in the Nea Smyrni neighborhood, which organizes, for example, language lessons and cultural events along with political discussions.

2 Before the crisis, especially during the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK – nominally socialist, actually social-democratic) administrations (1981–89; 1993–2004), populist policies connected with a consumption-oriented economy created a welfare state that was becoming more and more indebted. Public debt, of course, is one among many reasons for today’s socio-economic crisis. Greek society is actually trapped in the restructuring mechanisms of the EU, which create a new geometry of power within the ‘union’, resulting in new neocolonial relationships.



There are social kitchens that cook for the most vulnerable victims of austerity and there are expanding barter networks. And there are ongoing efforts to organise food-focussed trading ‘without intermediaries’ – that is, by bypassing the big supermarket chains that control the food market and make products more and more expensive. This form of trade became visible nationwide when potato cultivators in Northern Greece decided to organise their own open-air market in an effort to lower the prices imposed by in-between traders and to secure decent returns for their own hard work. Soon various local markets became organised and, in certain cases, local municipal authorities tolerated or even encouraged them. Declared ‘illegal’ and closed down by police raids, many of these informal markets have nevertheless survived. There is also a tendency towards collaborative projects that treat work and economy as areas of collective mutual support and action (e.g. coffee shops, computer and courier services, small alternative trade shops).

All these initiatives give new meaning to communitarian relations, which are not circumscribed within closed communities. Expanding practices of sharing, of urban commoning, are indeed establishing communities of solidarity in the making.³

So, how can an international art exhibition promote a process of learning from Athens? Is it a precarious experiment for contemporary artists, a gesture of support for artistic production in a country devastated by crisis; is it an opportunity for artistically exploring new experiences (being there, ‘existing’ in crisis)? Is it an exoticising gesture, which sees Athens as the most intriguing place to explore – a site of unprecedented socio-economic crisis bound to fuel cultural crises? Or could documenta 14 indeed be a process of observing, even encouraging, practices of freedom?

This last idea is embodied in some of the programming leading up to the opening of the mega-exhibition. Between October 2016 and February 2017, the Athens Municipality Arts Centre at Parko Eleftherias became the venue for the public programme ‘The Parliament of Bodies’, in which activists, musicians, artists, critics, theorists and writers were invited to ‘exercise freedom’ in different manners and formats within the building. Parko Eleftherias (Freedom Park) originally served as the military police headquarters during the years of right-wing dictatorship (1967-74) by the anti-communist Greek military junta. The aim of documenta’s public programme was to reclaim the building as ‘an experimental public sphere, a setting for the exercise of freedom through acts of speech, movement and living

3 See Stavros Stavrides, *Common Space: The City as Commons*, London: Zed Books, 2016.



presence, inspired by Foucault's definition of freedom as practice'.⁴ Does this indicate a possible lesson to be learned in Athens? Isn't this rhetoric on freedom rather something that pre-exists any visit to Athens, a rhetoric strongly rooted in the individualist imaginary of a politically correct version of liberal values?

True, on the level of rhetoric, the 'exercises of freedom' appear to be oriented towards a confrontation with prevailing ideas of freedom and democratic consensus: 'Might it be possible to think the Greek notion of *eleftheria* (freedom) against the capitalist notion of freedom?'⁵ However, by not distinguishing between collective and individual practices, or between different levels of struggle, this approach risks promoting a strange patchwork of examples that equate personal radical identity choices with contemporary insurrectionary events. There is a huge difference between struggles for collective freedom and self-determination and individual radical actors. Combining the two makes it easy for almost everybody to agree that freedom is obviously the highest and noblest value. But to do so is to escape the stakes at issue: freedom for whom? In what social context and against which rules that may confront, limit, subvert, distort or even hijack practices seeking social emancipation?

In the current crisis in Athens, it is above all collective rights and the shared freedom of groups and communities that are being harshly suppressed. Collective rights connected to work, to the crossing of borders in search of a more decent life, to public health, to education, to rights of access to the urban commons (which are being privatised and sold). This is why it is meaningless to refer to the brutalities of the 1967-73 dictatorship as a way of reinforcing the rhetoric of freedom-based democracy - then as now, collective freedoms are those most at stake. Even the installation in the Parko Eleftherias building, *DEMOS* (2016) by Andreas Angelidakis - a collection of foam blocks providing the 'soft architecture' for the 'Parliament of Bodies' events, to be rearranged and used as seating by visitors - seem to reflect this ambivalence: the recasting of the democratic imaginary in the form of abstract differentiated presences in an abstract space 'for all' is also presented as a 'democracy in ruins'.

It is not that a confrontation with the most conservative attitudes concerning individual rights is without meaning today. In both Germany and Greece aggressive racism and xenophobia need to be urgently challenged by political activism and cultural and artistic performances. This is perhaps why certain Greek politically engaged art groups (such as the

4 '34 Exercises of Freedom', documenta 14 website, available at <http://www.documenta14.de/en/public-programs/928/34-exercises-of-freedom> (last accessed on 30 January 2017).

5 *Ibid.* One might also question this reference to a distinctively Greek version of freedom.

Adesportes Skyles theatre group) chose to be part of documenta's programme. Yet one needs to study the many different kinds of recent movements (including urban, social and workers') to see if there is indeed something to be learned from Greek society's recent struggles. And surely this does not happen if one simply assembles an ever-expanding mosaic of thinkers, actors, projects and views. The unfolding programme of different 'societies' (such as 'The Apatride Society of the Political Others', 'The Society for the End of Necropolitics', 'The Society for Collective Hallucination', 'The Cooperativist Society', 'The Society of Friends of Ulises Carrión', etc.) is indicative of a kind of pastiche approach that potentially neutralises any radical discourse.

At the centre of Athens's inventiveness and its agonies today is the problem of survival, the problem of reweaving the social fabric that has been so violently damaged by austerity politics – policies that separate, victimise and destroy increasing numbers of individuals and devour collective rights. If one can learn something from Athens, it is that disempowered and exploited people may only resist collectively. According to Gustavo Esteva, *comunalidad* (commonality) can be considered 'a collection of practices formed as creative adaptations of old traditions to resist old and new colonialisms, and a mental space, a horizon of intelligibility: how you see and experience the world as a We'.⁶

One such formation emerged in Athens during the Syntagma Square occupation in 2011, which attracted thousands of participants: a renewed awareness of the meaning of democracy was expressed in concrete acts. This was not a parliament of bodies. It was actually a dense network of micro-communities protesting in front of the Parliament Building and in direct confrontation with a discredited and simulated democratic representation. Syntagma Square epitomised collective aspirations for justice and everyday sociality – both devastated by dominant austerity policies. The right to speak, for example, was re-established in and through this democracy of bodies by rules invented in order to block narcissistic soliloquys and the dictates of 'enlightened' leaders. This right was given a renewed momentum by the collective decision to draw lots among potential speakers – a reinvention of an ancient democratic ethos which, following Jacques Rancière, is based on the conviction that everybody has the right to have an opinion and thus the right to participate in governing.⁷

During the occupation, as well as in neighbourhood assemblies and self-managed initiatives, bodies arranged themselves in patterns that gave shape to democratic space, to space as democracy. Those were and still are events and processes of urban commoning based on efforts of egalitarian coordination and on the creation of a common ground on which common struggles may grow. Whether all local protagonists advocating for documenta 14 are interested in furthering such a struggle is rather doubtful, however. A small case in point would be Giorgos Kaminis, the mayor of Athens, who has always been against mobilisations such as Syntagma Square, and who was invited to give a supporting speech to documenta 14. Not surprisingly, it was he who linked the documenta events with a much-welcomed boost to the city's tourist industry.⁸

The lesson of Athens lies not in the reinvention of individual freedom. Instead, one needs to study carefully the multifarious networks of solidarity that expand in, against and hopefully beyond crisis. It is possible that art will profit from such a lesson by becoming more modest. Artists may learn how to listen and how to nourish imaginaries of social emancipation. Will the forthcoming exhibition support such an attitude? Will the institutional, economic and cultural affinities of the documenta organisation encourage such approaches to art? We need to wait and see: looking perhaps most keenly for art practices inspired and triggered by the collective inventiveness of people in search of survival-through-sharing. Because it is through such everyday collective practices that dreams of a more just future society develop.

6 Gustavo Esteva, 'Hope from the Margins', in D. Bollier and S. Helfrich (ed.), *The Wealth of the Commons: A World beyond Market and State*, Amherst, MA: Levellers Press, 2012.

7 See Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (trans. Steven Corcoran), London: Continuum, 2010.

8 The mayor was also one of only a few politicians to support the EU's austerity blackmails in 2015, which resulted in a brave majoritarian 'no' in the public referendum.

Afterall will publish a retrospective response to documenta in Athens in 2018.