



Left: Chris Marker, *The Owl's Legacy*, 1989, still from a TV show commissioned by La Sept, thirteen episodes, each 26 minutes. From Chris Marker and the Otolith Group's *Inner Time of Television*, 2007. Right: Julian Rosefeldt and Piero Steinle, *Detonation Deutschland*, 1996, still from a seven-channel black-and-white video installation, 54 minutes.



1st Athens Biennial

VARIOUS VENUES

Diana Baldon

"THE MINDLESSNESS OF POWER sometimes creates a memory from what was meant to be amnesia," Chris Marker observes in *Inner Time of Television*, 2007, the words appearing on a wall above a bank of video monitors as part of an installation made by the London-based Otolith Group in collaboration with the French filmmaker—and put on view in this past fall's First Athens Biennial. Appropriately enough, given the setting, the work is centered on Marker's *Owl's Legacy*, 1989, a little-known television series (never before screened in Greece) consisting of interviews with some forty intellectuals—including Michel Serres, George Steiner, and Iannis Xenakis—who discuss Greek philosophy and myth, ancient concepts of the soul, the etymology of Greek-derived words, and other subjects. Behind many of the talking heads is a colorful owl that stares intently at the viewer, seemingly guarding the legacy of Marker's title. But in the context of a biennial intended to undermine the power of the cultural stereotypes that inform perceptions of Greece, the insistence of this owl (the emblem of ancient Athens and companion to Athena, goddess of wisdom) served more to reflect the intransigence of the idea of the "cradle of civilization." Indeed, *The Owl's Legacy* emerged in the show—which was somewhat hyperbolically titled "Destroy Athens"—as a nuanced take on the theme around which curators Xenia Kalpaktsoglou, Poka-Yio, and Augustine Zenakos organized their exhibition, fodder for their argument for a break with the antiquity that haunts the country and its people.

To set the tone, the show opened with Julian Rosefeldt and Piero Steinle's video installation *Detonation Deutschland*, 1996, which consists of footage of building demolitions in postwar Germany. As aggressive, and also

clearly linked to the exhibition's premise, was Eva Stefani's *Acropolis*, 2001, a video continually switching between images of the Parthenon and 1970s pornographic film clips, pointing to the iconic building's timeless exploitation in the West's collective memory. Such works were set within a narrative framework consisting of six "days," each focusing on a different idea: civic participation (day one); place and history (day two); refuge and hell (day three); a brief pleasurable interlude (day four); violence (day five); and possible conclusions (day six). Visitors were directed through these sections along a linear route, or "journey," through the Technopolis, a former gas factory.

Such a degree of curatorial control is a dangerous strategy but here ultimately generated an unexpected strength, thanks in large part to the complementary narrative elements in the films and videos on view (many of them made specifically for the biennial): Olaf Nicolai's *Rodakis*, 2007, for example, a documentary portrait of Alekos Rodakis, a craftsman who in the 1880s built a stone house on the island of Aegina that would inspire a number of mid-twentieth-century architects wishing to incorporate popular traditions into their modernist plans; and Stefanos Tsivopoulos's *Untitled (Remake)*, 2007, which examines, in part with re-created footage, the political instrumentalization of television in late-1960s Greece, when the country was ruled by right-wing dictator Georgios Papadopoulos.

The tension between historical and contemporary modes of representation also created a point of departure for Stelios Faitakis's *Socrates Drinks the Conium*, 2007, a vast mural that juxtaposes Byzantine religious iconography with latter-day war and riot scenes: Christian saints with Palestinian-style head scarves are set against a golden sky dotted with planes and bombs. The impact and immediacy of this work was interestingly complicated by a small drawing nearby, *Parthenon, 02/07/1959*, by Pablo Picasso, which the artist made in order to raise funds to liberate imprisoned Communist Manolis Glezos, the "hero of the Acropolis," who at eighteen managed to steal the Nazi flag installed there during the German occupation.

The emphasis on the local context diminished in the later "chapters," where the focus shifted to a more abstract narrative in which viewers were confronted with

increasingly bleak scenes of a violent and disturbing nature—among them footage of vomiting in Thanassis Totsikas's video *Untitled*, 2007; a sculpture by Dutch collective Kimberly Clark that riffs on the hedonistic excesses of youth (*Crusade Rotterdam*, 2007); and Martin Skauen's filmed drawings that seem to illustrate Pasolinian tortures (*Felix Culpa, A Handmade Massacre*, 2006–2007). After such hard-hitting works, the last episode, in which "everything comes to an end," was perhaps inevitably anticlimactic, its highlight the installation *Prisoners' Inventions*, 2002–, made by another collective, Chicago-based Temporary Services, in collaboration with a prisoner in a high-security jail in California who is identified only as Angelo. The work consists of a re-created prison cell, surrounded by replicas of improvised objects, including sex dolls and condoms, made from Angelo's designs.

Significantly, the cohesiveness of the biennial proper was counterbalanced by a number of concurrent exhibitions, organized by international curators and commercial galleries in the formerly squatted buildings of the Metaxourgeo

neighborhood (a move perhaps inspired by the urban integration of the 2006 Berlin Biennial). The group shows "How to Endure" and "Young Athenians," both affiliated with the main exhibition, and curated by Tom Morton and Neil Mulholland, respectively, offered alternative readings of its theme—the former premised upon rejecting the "notion that preservation is conservative and change is progressive," the latter presenting eighteen Edinburgh-based artists, playing on that city's reputation as the "Athens of the North." The ambitious nature of numerous other, independently organized shows made clear the desire of the local art community to put Athens on the global art map. (The pioneering Breeder gallery, for instance, presented work by German artists Uwe Henneken and Stefan Rinck and the promising young London-based Greek artist Athanasios Argianas.) In conjunction with the biennial itself, these ancillary exhibitions demonstrated that its curators had accomplished one of their primary aims: establishing a dialogue between Greece and the international art world that reaches beyond the owl's legacy. □

DIANA BALDON IS CURATOR IN RESIDENCE AT THE ACADEMY OF FINE ARTS IN VIENNA.