

## Destroy, They Said

*In what was billed as an attempt to “de-Hellenize” contemporary Greek culture and relieve it of its Classical past, the 1st Athens Biennial sprang into being.*

BY LILLY WEI

This past fall, Athens succumbed to the pandemic of biennial fever and mounted the 1st Athens Biennial, provocatively titled “Destroy Athens.” The joint inspiration of curator Xenia Kalpaktoglou (who is also the director of the Deste Foundation), artist Poka-Yio and critic Augustine Zenakos (collectively dubbed XYZ), the title signified an attempt to free contemporary Greek culture from its classical heritage, to de-Hellenize the present and bring Greece into some alignment with actual 21st-century global and national realities, purged of clichés. Any exhortation to “Destroy Athens,” however, was more rhetorical flourish than incitement to terrorist acts (with the exhibition’s \$2-million budget underwritten primarily by the multinational giant Deutsche Bank, “taking it to the streets” was hardly an option). Nonetheless, the title proved unnervingly (if accidentally) apt. As the biennial opened, wildfires raged out of control in the Peloponnese, the official response to this disaster was devastatingly inept, and, for good measure, a passionately contested general election had the country in an uproar. Kodwo Eshun, a participating artist and founder of the London-based Otolith Group, summed up the biennial’s goals at a press conference, defining Hellenism as Orientalism in reverse and proposing the symbolic destruction of its false codes.

### Technopolis

The organizers wanted Athens to have a place of its own on the contemporary-art circuit and collaborated with the more established Istanbul and Lyon biennials toward that end, scheduling the show’s run for the maximum convenience of the international art set. On view Sept. 10–Nov. 18, 2007, in the Technopolis



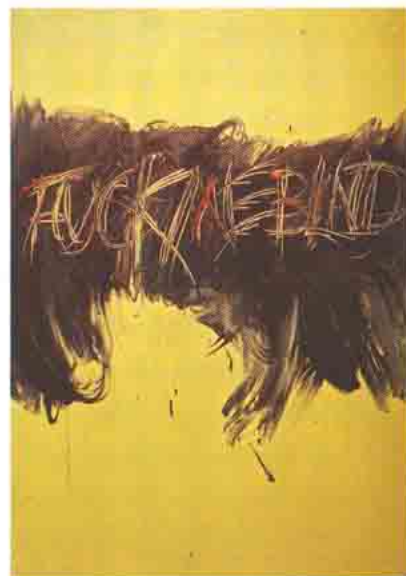
*Temporary Services & Angelo: Prisoners' Inventions, 2002-ongoing, mixed-medium installation, dimensions variable.*

complex, “Destroy Athens,” with its youthful, indie ambience (although older mavericks were included as well), was favorably compared in the local press and by informed visitors to the adventurous 2006 Berlin Biennial. The 57 artists and collectives selected for this debut biennial fit comfortably in the vastness of Gazi, the former municipal gasworks, a spectacular edifice that retains much of its original machinery. Many of the participants were the usual international art-stars-of-the-moment, but local artists were also included. There were quite a few new commissions, and the overall quality of the works, almost half of which were videos, was high.

Because the stated purpose of the biennial was to reshape the narrative of contemporary art, the show was organized into six “chapters,” named successively “First Day,” “Second Day” and so on, with the sabbatical seventh omitted because, according to Kalpaktoglou, there is no rest in today’s world. The divisions provided a narrative thread that drew the viewer through Gazi’s vast industrial labyrinth. The narrative, the curators explained in the catalogue essay, “is linear but syncopated so that chapter to chapter the atmosphere changes radically.” The First Day (its presumed linkage to the first day of Judeo-Christian creation tenuous to nonexistent) was dedicated to “noise,” to public harangue and participation, as evidenced in works such as Julian Rosefeldt and Piero Steinle’s explosive 7-channel video installation *Detonation Deutschland* (1996), a 54-minute demolition derby that used looped footage to show the blasting of German buildings after World War II.

The Second Day (and the one that was assigned the greatest number of artists) was described as an investigation of “Place” and “History,” a project not without its ironies, since it was based on constructed and fictional sources. In this section was the Otolith Group, who resurrected French filmmaker Chris Marker’s *The Owl’s Legacy* (1989) and made it the heart of their *Inner Time of Television* (2007). Shown on a bank of video monitors, Marker’s film originated as a 13-part television show consisting of interviews with dozens of intellectuals, such as Michel Serres, Iannis Xenakis and George Steiner, who variously discussed Greek philosophy, mythology, language and other related subjects. At the time of its making, *The Owl’s Legacy* was more or less shelved, its simplifications widely seen as denigrating to “Greek identity.” Now, though, in the context of “Destroy Athens” and the curators’ anti-Hellenism, it offered a more resonant, multi-layered dissection of Greek (and Western) heritage. The self-certainty of the interview subjects was gently mocked by the appearance behind many of the speakers’ heads of an owl, which is not only a symbol of wisdom but also the attribute of Athena, the city’s patron deity.

Sounding a more political note was Stefanos Tsivopoulos’s video installation, with actual and recreated footage of the 1967 coup d’état that brought the military and Georgios Papadopoulos to power.



*Derek Jarman: Fuck Me Blind, 1993, oil on canvas, 99 by 70½ inches. Private collection. All photos this article, unless otherwise noted, Vassilis Polychronakis, courtesy Athens Biennial.*

*John Bock: Li'l One with Arugula, 2006, video, approx. 35 minutes.*



Called *Untitled (Remake)*, 2007, the video simulates a contemporaneous broadcast, seeking to demonstrate how television edits, deforms and “remakes” reality as it records it. Other artists included in this section were videographer Eva Stefani, who alternated images of the Parthenon with pornography;



*Julian Rosefeldt and Piero Steinle: Detonation Deutschland, 1996, multichannel video installation, 54 minutes. All photos this spread in the Athens Biennial.*



*Folkert de Jong: Seht der Mensch (The Shooting Lesson), 2007, Styrofoam, polyurethane foam, pigment, approx. 15 by 26 by 26 feet.*



*Georgia Sagri: Below is the Sea and Our Desert is Beside Us, 2007, performance video.*



*Terence Koh: The Son, 2007, post-performance installation of smashed statuettes.*



*Aidas Bareikis: Easy Times, 2007, mixed mediums, dimensions variable.*



*The Otolith Group: Inner Time of Television, 2007, video installation.*



Elodie Pong: *Untitled (Plan for Victory)*, 2006, video, approx. 1½ minutes; in *Athens Biennial*.



Kimberly Clark: *Crusade Rotterdam*, 2007, mixed mediums; in *Athens Biennial*.

Olaf Nicolai, whose video created a “metaphysical” biography of Alekos Rodakis, a 19th-century craftsman about whom nothing is known, although the house he designed for himself on Aegina is a Greek proto-modernist landmark; John Kleckner, with his watercolor renditions of some of the more brutal Greek myths; Folkert de Jong, who contributed *Seht der Mensch (The Shooting Lesson)*, 2007, a monumental sculptural installation composed of Picasso-like, carnivalesque figures in painted Styrofoam; and Picasso himself, who was represented by a small drawing of the Parthenon from 1959 that he made to help liberate Manolis Glezos, the Greek Communist who tore down the Nazi flag planted on the Acropolis during the German occupation and was later arrested by the Greek government for leftist activities.

The Third Day was devoted to the concepts of refuge, hell and mania—as represented in work from such artists as Olaf Breuning, whose video follows a hapless backpacker through the villages of Africa in a screwball, Monty Python-esque take on colonialism; Gregor Schneider, who showed a video titled *Weisse Folter (White Torture)*, 2005-07; Robert Gober, with his *Dog Bed* (1986-87) and a 1991 beeswax torso; Sean Landers, with his text painting *Mi Odio (My Hatred)*, 2005; Mark Manders, with three elegantly skewed, subtly ominous architectural installations including

*Machine Designed to Provide Persistent Absence (Reduced to 88%)*, 2002; and Georgia Sagri, a young Greek artist whose performance was an intimate (and somewhat intimidating) one-on-one with the viewer. Lurking near the end of a narrow wooden corridor, Sagri waited, sibyl-like, for the viewer, to whom she recited one of four texts in Greek, each about a crime of passion. She then demanded a response from the almost invariably bewildered visitor.

The Fourth Day was a brief respite, devoted to pleasure; there were, pointedly, only two artists in this chapter. Assume vivid astro focus (Eli Sudbrack) contributed a characteristically extravagant, psychedelically colored, interactive installation; while Torbjørn Rødland showed an Arcadian video of two young girls whose daydreamy thoughts seemingly coexist in perfect peace with a gritty Eminem and Snoop Dogg soundtrack. The Fifth Day was allotted to violence, visualized by Aidas Bareikis in *Easy Times* (2007), a macabre, motley installation populated by emaciated ghouls that suggested extras from a *Totentanz*; by the Dutch collective Kimberley Clark in *Crusade Rotterdam* (2007), a mountain of crushed rubbish topped by two figures, one of whom resembled a gym-outfitted *Liberty Leading the People*,

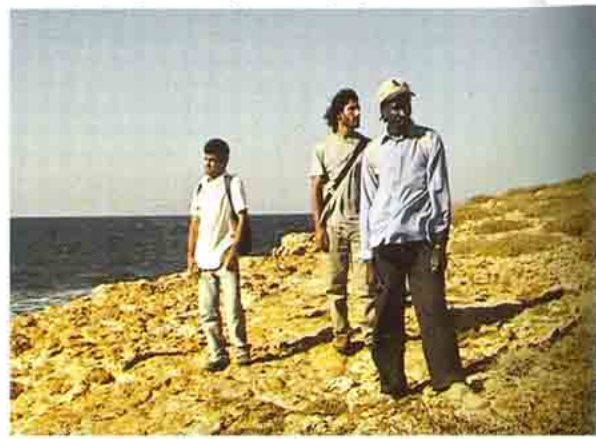
both brandishing wooden shafts that intersected, from a certain vantage point, to form a cross; by John Bock in his typically frenetic and irreverent send-up of slasher films, this one a video starring himself as a loan shark beating up a delinquent borrower while a young girl urges him on; by Terence Koh in a statuette-smashing performance as well as a whitened bronze figure, cast from his own body so that it resembles a kouros, naked, emasculated, lying on the ground; and by Narve Hovdenakk in his *Neo-Man* (2005), a video showing the artist dressed in civilian clothes but armed with a police ID card ultimately masturbating in front of an unwitting driver he has pulled over and interrogated.

Concluding the exhibition was the Sixth Day, which the curators called the end, a “real end,” presumably meaning an apocalyptic terminus, lacking either redemption or transcendence. Elodie Pong’s video of an avalanche is a sublime, natural reiteration of Rosefeldt and Steinle’s video of German buildings being demolished, the work with which the “story” began. Other contributions included Peter Dreher’s monumental grid of paintings, in which each small canvas pictures an identi-

cal, transparent glass of water—a project he began in 1970, usually making one a day since then, in a ritual that validates the act of painting as a record of time passing. Also included in this last section was Christian Marclay’s *Boneyard* (1990), a floor piece consisting of hundreds of cast-Hydrostone telephone receivers, whitened relics of an obsolete technology; the late British director Derek Jarman’s agonized, defiant calligraphic scream of a painting, *Fuck Me Blind* (1993); and a life-size jail cell with replicas of objects made by prison inmates—the work of the Chicago collective Temporary Services in ongoing collaboration with Angelo (last name not given), a high-security prisoner. The final work in the show’s “narrative” was Eleni Mylonas’s video *Lamb of God* (2007), with its hauntingly repetitive, this-is-the-way-the-world-ends thumping sound, made by a bleached, bloated sheep carcass as it bumped against the rocks, washed by waves. Here was a timeless image of death and sacrifice connected to the present by the revelation that the artist found the sheep’s body in the water on the day the U.S. invaded Iraq.

Kalpaktoglou, Poka-Yio and Zenakos’s largely dystopic vision—which provided something both to look at and think about—resulted in a singularly consistent and engaging exhibition. Tempered by a disarming skepticism and noncommittal shrug, their message seems to be simply that this is how it is, and if there can be no better world at the moment, a critical, unenti-

Stefanos Tsivopoulos: *Land*, 2006, video, 8 minutes; in “*Her(his)tory*.” Courtesy Museum of Cycladic Art.



Yorgos Sapountzis: *Knock knock monument*, 2004, video, music by Oyvind Torvund, 1½ minutes; in “*Her(his)tory*.” Courtesy Museum of Cycladic Art.





Zineb Sedira: *Saphir*, 2006, two-screen video projection, 18 minutes; in "Her(his)tory." Photo Rebecca Constantopoulou and Fanis Vlastaras.

locked dynamics of change and preservation. Participating were 12 artists working in a variety of mediums who, according to Morton, addressed "ritual" and the ways it might "preserve a reality, and in so doing overturn it." Its opening salvo was a 1985 Allen Ginsburg photograph of the magician Harry Smith "transforming" milk into milk, while Roger Hiorns showed an untitled work from 2007 also featuring organic fluid—a light filter smeared with the artist's ejaculate. He attached the filter to one of the numerous mercury lamps that light the Parthenon at night. Meanwhile "The Young Athenians," an exhibition by Edinburgh-based writer and curator Neil Mulholland, showcased 18 Scottish artists in a spirited and ironic presentation of Edinburgh as the new Athens.

### The Museum of Cycladic Art

"Her(his)tory," another ambitious, concurrent exhibition, offered its own reading of the Hellenic past, this time in juxtaposition with the globalized present. Curated by the Athens-based independent curator Marina Fokidis, the show was not, as the title might suggest, a feminist project. Its subject was "her" and "his" history taken together, or "history in common." However opaque the title, "Her(his)tory" proved to be an exceptionally handsome, beautifully installed show of video art imaginatively inserted into the Museum of Cycladic Art complex, with its priceless trove of Bronze Age figurines and other artifacts. The exhibition occu-

piated two floors of the museum's gilded 19th-century mansion and new white-cube addition. "Her(his)tory," rather than "destroying" Hellenic tradition, embraced the historical stratification of culture, as well as the anthropocentrism that was the central premise of this emphatically humanistic civilization. There were many, perhaps too many, familiar names in this exhibition of 29 artists—among them Doug Aitken, Darren Almond, Douglas Gordon, Annika Larsson, Bruce Nauman, Tony Oursler and Anri Sala. Many of the works were also familiar but looked refreshed in this exceptional setting. They ranged from Gary Hill's 1995 *Bind*, with its image of Jacques Ellul's book *Humiliation of the Word*, on a TV monitor that was wrapped in cable, to Paul Chan's haunting *5<sup>th</sup> Light* from 2007. Some of the pieces were elegant, such as Isaac Julien's *True North* (2004), which looked fantastic straight up, not needing the theatrics of its recent presentation at the Brooklyn Academy of Music as part of *Performa 07* [see *A.I.A.*, Mar. '08]. Others were humorous, such as Rodney Graham's crowd-pleasing *Vexation Island* (1997), a riff on the tale of Robinson Crusoe, and Cory Arcangel's *Sans Simon* (2004), a manipulated retaping of Simon and Garfunkel's 1984 Central Park concert. As the duo sang on TV, Arcangel used his hands to block out Paul Simon whenever he appeared, in a gesture with mul-

**Concurrent with the biennial was "Her(his)tory," a show that elegantly inserted video art into the Museum of Cycladic Art complex, with all its treasures.**

multiple implications. Several of the newer international favorites were present—artists such as Seth Price, represented by *Digital Video Effect: "Editions"* (2006), a 10-minute sampling of videos and a film, and Atlas Group (Walid Raad) with his *I Only Wish that I Could Weep* (2000), which follows a Beirut security guard as he turns his closed-circuit surveillance camera away from the crowd and focuses it instead on the setting sun, to capture its transient beauty. (Fokidis placed the projection above the desk of the security guard at the museum, in one of her many felicitous interactions with the existing location.)

A number of lesser-known artists from the region added a welcome edge to "Her(his)tory": Angelo Plessas, with his mocking, controversial *Super Instant Perfection Seeker* (2007), set up as a channel on YouTube; Yorgos Sapountzis, with his *Knock knock monument* (2004), a surveillancelike film of the artist taking a nocturnal stroll while wearing a wacky, taped-together mask made of his parents' kitschy bric-a-brac; and Amsterdam-based Stefanos Tsivopoulos (also in the biennial), whose 2006 *Land* features three men of different nationalities wandering through a rocky landscape asking questions about it, as if they were immigrants in search of ways to navigate or dominate the place. At the short video's conclusion, the camera

Stairwell installation view of Haris Epaninonda's *Nemesis 52*, 2003, video, approx. 13 minutes; in "Her(his)tory." Photo Rebecca Constantopoulou and Fanis Vlastaras.



mental deconstruction of the one we have is more salutary than are avoidance and idealization. "Destroy Athens," they insisted, was not a survey of contemporary artistic production and did not offer opinions about the future and future practice. It was simply a "story" they wanted to tell that had "meaning between the moment it happens and the moment it ends."

### ReMap KM

As with any biennial, there were numerous ancillary events, bundled here under the heading "ReMap KM" and organized by international curators, with the help of both local and international galleries such as The Breeder, AD Gallery, Rebecca Camhi, Xippas, Andreas Melas Presents—all innovative Athens galleries—joined by Blow de la Barra (UK), Johann König (Germany), Rodeo Gallery (Turkey), Peres Projects (U.S./Germany) and Spencer Brownstone (U.S.). Located in the downtown Kerameikos/Metaxourgeio (KM) section of Athens, until recently a sketchy, derelict neighborhood of squatters and brothels, these side exhibitions made for lively, if unpredictable, viewing. Two of them were linked directly to the biennial. "How to Endure," curated by London-based curator and critic Tom Morton, offered another take on the "Destroy Athens" theme, exploring the skittish, inter-



View of "Fractured Figure," showing (foreground, left to right) sculptures by Pawel Althamer, Dan Colen and Urs Fischer with Martin Kippenberger painting on wall; at the Deste Foundation for Contemporary Art. Photo Stefan Allenburger.

retreats to reveal that the land in question is a tiny, rather barren island—a succinct comment on territorial imperatives and their absurdities. Cypriot artist Haris Epaminonda was represented by *Nemesis 52* (2003), a lushly colored, kaleidoscopic sequence of mirrored images, in which balloons slowly expand and deflate, and silky coral-pink and white fabrics converge to suggest secret female flesh. The work was installed in a stairwell—another instance of curatorial impishness—so that the viewer had to look down on it from the position of, say, a lover or voyeur. Filmed in Algiers, *Saphir* (2006), by Zineb Sedira, who was born in Paris

of Algerian parents, is a two-screen projection reminiscent of the films of Alain Resnais and Marguerite Duras. Slow and gorgeously crafted and choreographed, based on the erotics of memory, the two projections create an evocative parallel space for a man and woman who otherwise never meet, while the city itself—its sky, sea, boats, harbor, stepped walkways, windows and hotel—is revealed to be the true object of their desire.

### Deste Foundation

At the Deste Foundation, the present tense corporeal was explored in dealer Jeffrey Deitch's exuberant exhibition, "Fractured Figure," consisting of 50 heavy hitters—mostly current, mostly male—whose often handmade works were in part culled from the highly regarded holdings of Deste originator Dakis Joannou, arguably Greece's preeminent collector of contemporary art with an emphasis on the irreverent and perverse. In the current spirit of esthetic collaboration (how many curators do you need to install a lightbulb?), Deitch was supported by a formidable team of kibitzers that included Massimiliano Gioni, Urs Fischer, Patrick Arnold, Maurizio Cattelan, Ali Subotnick and Joannou himself. The third in a series of highly popular exhibitions that began with "Post-Human" and is dedicated, Deitch has stated, to a new approach to figurative art, the "Fractured Figure" roster included Pawel Althamer, David Altmejd, John Bock, assume

vivid astro focus, Cattelan, Fischer, Robert Gober, Folkert de Jong, Martin Kippenberger, Terence Koh, Jeff Koons, Mark Manders, Paul McCarthy, Tino Sehgal, and Tim Noble and Sue Webster.

According to Gioni, "Instead of being idealized or fantasized, the figure is fractured, exploded, and imperfect" and "embodies a sense of cultural dysphoria . . .," a thought shared by the biennial with which it also shares many artists, although to much different effect. At Deste, there was style, swagger, vivacity and weirdness—a combination that was ultimately more euphoric than not, as evidenced by Altmejd's fabulist *Giant 2* (2007); Fischer's three women (the Three Graces?), instances of his melt-away, always seductive candle sculptures, and an equally irresistible *Bread House* (2006); and Koh's baroque, grottolike installation of mouth-watering white chocolate. Deitch pleads for a renewed embrace of our humanity, and while this disrupted version of it may not be exactly human, who could say no to such a proposal?

And as for destroying Athens, it seems better to renegotiate its future, adding it to what is gradually becoming a more inclusive, iconoclastic and imaginative international discussion. □

*"Destroy Athens," the 1st Athens Biennial, was on view Sept. 10-Nov. 18, 2007, along with "ReMap KM," a parallel biennial. "Her(his)tory" could be seen at the Museum of Cycladic Art [June 4-Sept. 29, 2007]. "Fractured Figure: Works from the Dakis Joannou Collection" appeared at the Deste Foundation [Sept. 6, 2007-Mar. 29, 2008].*

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