The Need for a New Revolution

The 6th Athens Biennale expressed the need for an urgent new self-identification of the confused contemporary community, either in local or in international terms - an urgent need of a new “revolution” that would define the 21st century. Christos Paridis writes about the exhibition, which he describes as an adult playground for those who are seeking questions or answers to present and future nightmares.

Critique / Christos Paridis March 13, 2019

The selection of the TTT building as the main exhibition space of the 6th Athens Biennale has been more than plainly clever. An emblematic building in downtown Athens, located at15 Stadiou Avenue, TTT was built in the 1930s and designed by modern architect Anastasios Metaxas. It is considered one of the most architecturally notable edifices of the capital. Serving for 85 years as the headquarters of the Organization of Hellenic Telecommunications (OTE), the building has seen the switch from analogue to digital technology, symbolizing the leaps to modernity through technology in early 20th century. Its selection for this occasion couldn't be cleverer, as we experience a leap in art to new mediums, inspired by new technologies.

1.Anna Uddenberg_Dom Depot.jpg



[1]Anna Uddenberg, Dom Depot
Courtesy of the 6th Athens Biennale 2018

The TTT building has long been shuttered and neglected, due to the economic crisis, as are many office buildings in the same district. A similar fate befell the Biennale's second site, the Esperia Palace, located across the street. A luxurious residence for businessmen visiting the capital for more than four decades, with a popular restaurant in its first floor, it is now left to its fate, often looted by intruders of all types. Both venues, who have benefitted from the tourism boom of late, will soon be transformed into five-star hotels.

A third biennale site was unknown even to the locals - the historical Benakeios Library, a property of the Hellenic Parliament, located west of the Old Parliament and hidden behind orange trees and the TTT Building. Although it has been closed since 2004, it opened especially for the 6th Athens Biennale for a limited run.

On the TTT building's five walk-up floors, one would encounter the work of 99 local and international artists collected under the exhibition title and theme "ANTI- [2]". The exhibition was curated by writer and curator Stefanie Hessler, artist and curator Poka-Yio (one of the founders of Athens Biennale), and artist and art historian Costis Stafylakis. The exhibition's critical concept draws on forces and phenomena oppositional to the mainstream. It interrogates and critiques social and cultural norms and normalization processes manifested in the fields of entertainment, self-therapy, display and spectacle, technology, and commodification. They also present a range of spaces and movements that define the worlds of gender and sexuality today, including liminal sex practices, new wave feminism, and gender self-determination.

Exploring the impact of digital and post-digital cultures, with a special reference to how they construct us as late modern subjects, the curators probe the way cyber culture has made ordinary the performing of the self in the public sphere, through the creation of avatars and other types of alternative digital personae. What may have appeared unconventional a short time ago – various,

multiple, and parallel social media personae – has become the bedrock of the mainstream.

As soon as you enter TTT, you encounter Pınar Öğrenci [3]'s (b. 1973, Turkey) counter-advertisement project, *LED Light City Istanbul*. Öğrenci has aggregated iconic LED matrix signs of Istanbul, from kebab and jewelry stores to Bosphorus cruise lines, into an electronic screen, which she has made to run like a stock market digital display. Entering the ground floor space you confronted Yuri Pattison [4]'s (b. 1986, Ireland) installation *Public Solitude (Crisis Cast) - Border Force*, which included a piece of furniture formerly a part of the border security infrastructure at Heathrow Airport's Terminal, while Anna Uddenberg [5]'s (b. 1982, Sweden) Jacuzzi-like sculpture (titled *Dom Depot*) "negotiated levels of comfort versus self-awareness in commercial spaces that are meant to be relaxing and intimate," as the exhibition didactics inform us.1 On the same floor, fashion designer Angelos Frentzos [6] (b. 1972, Greece) has opened a pop-up boutique, in the tradition of the anti-fashion shows of the 1980s and the 1990s.

2.Pinar Öğrenci_LED Light City Istanbul.jpg **[7]**



[8]Pinar Öğrenci, LED Light City Istanbul
Courtesy of the 6th Athens Biennale 2018

13.Yuri Pattison_public solitude (crisis cast)_border force.jpg **[9]**



[10]Yuri Pattison, Public Solitude (Crisis Cast), Border Force
Courtesy of the 6th Athens Biennale 2018

From the 1st floor upward, one gains the sense of having entered an enormous science lab devoted to “body hacking” – the cyborgic enhancement of the human body that sometimes reaches aplasive and dystopian levels. Artist Marianna Simnett [11]’s (b. 1986, UK) video work, for example, precipitated tragic outcomes in her real life. In *The Needle and the Larynx,* Simnett had Botox injected into her cricothyroid muscle, an organ in the throat associated with breathing and the functioning of the vocal cords. Intended to lower the timbre of her voice, the intervention relaxed her throat tissue to an extent that ended up causing her difficulty in breathing while losing her voice for a period of two weeks. Another work focusing on harmful medical procedures was Tabita Rezaire [12]’s (b. 1989, France) installation *Sugar Walls Teardom*, centered on a pink gynecological examination chair. As the curators write, it addressed "how bodies, and the womb especially, have been exploited historically and continue to be subjected to control exerted by the medical-legal-industrial complex to this day." *Sugar Walls Teardom* uncovered the exclusion of black women from the dominant narrative of scientific progress, and "celebrates the contribution of black women’s wombs to the history of science." With a completely different attitude, another work dealing with female sexuality and objectification was Marianne Maric [13]’s (b. 1982, France) black and white photographs portraying “women fountains” (*Femmes Fontaines*) – women posing on and next to public fountains, resulting in images that mimic orgasmic ejaculation.

Tabita Rezaire,Sugar Walls Teardom installation view, 2016,Installation

with HD video,21 min 30s, Edition of 3 **[14]**



[15]Tabita Rezaire, Sugar Walls Teardom, installation view, 2016
Installation with HD video, 21 min 30s, Edition of 3

Courtesy of the 6th Athens Biennale 2018

The Needle & The Larynx by Marianna Simnett **[16]**

Video of The Needle & The Larynx by Marianna Simnett
מריאנה סימנט, המחט וחלל הגרון, ערוץ הפעולות המקריות

All the works in this section manifested the ambiguous, fuzzy boundaries between sarcasm and self-acceptance. Berlin- and Munich-based artist group The Agency [17] (Magdalena Emmerig, Belle Santos, Rahel Spohrer, Yanna Thones) set up a gym of the next generation, a performance–installation titled *Medusa Bionic Rises*, directly referencing "the neurosis of the gym" as the curators defined it in the exhibition text, using "velcro-stripped prosthetics, body altering rituals, amino-acid and protein cocktail-disguised concoctions in a futuristic bar." In this immersive and theatrical performance the members of The Agency and dancers/gymnasts offered to whoever

wanted to participate a special workout process in which the boundaries between a sarcastic parody and a serious and accepted gym exercise program were essentially undefined. One could say that as an installation/performance playing with ambiguity, Medusa Bionic Rise could be considered a plausible scenario of the post-humanist era, when health will be fully transformed into the cult of “healthism”. On a similar note, Marisa Olson [18]’s (b. 1977, Germany) video project *wellwellwell.guru* soberly exposed our receptiveness to the wellness hysteria, taking on the persona of a "star coach." According to the curatorial description, “the character of her self development web guru is unabashedly penetrating the unconscious of the listener in a neuro-linguistic programming technique of guided visualization, offering the mirage of temporary escapism."

In Geumhyung Jeong [19]’s (b. 1980, South Korea) beautifully choreographed performance, *Spa & Beauty*, the artist used elements drawn from spa and body treatment rituals. "Is this performance a ritual of technosexuality or a simple display of the versatile uses of the products?" asks the curatorial text. A display of scrubbers and brushes, torsos enhanced with hair transplants, a variety of fake beards, rubber, latex, plastic, and hairpieces, the work resembled a museum of horrors as well as an exhibition of erotic prosthetics. Also tapping into the posthuman realm, Johannes Paul Raether [20]‘s (b. 1977, Germany) ANTI-piece, *Schwarmwesen*, was a video work featuring a performance the artist had made in prominent touristic sites. Wandering around central Athens’ popular districts of Monastiraki and Plaka, disguised as an extraterrestrial, he caused terror and surprise. In a different work, a star of the Chinese queer scene, artist Tianzhuo Chen [21] (b. 1985, China) presented the futuristic video *G.H.O.S.T.*, in which a half-naked protagonist, wearing "ornamental garments of sci-fi paraphernalia" - a demonic, cyborgic, and queer character - appears over the Ganges River, "like hallucinogenic figures of Tibetan Buddhism."

What if, on some day in 2023, there would be a global extinction event? Korakrit Arunanondchai [22]’s (b. 1986, Thailand) and Alex Gvojic [23]’s (b. 1984, USA) post-apocalyptic film reveals a nightmarish world filled with ruins and sympathetic rats. In it, an iconic huge rat is the last surviving species and a compassionate guardian at the same time. More rats, technological utopias, and mass catastrophes were to be found in the work of Tokyo-based artist collective Chim↑Pom [24] (Ryuta Ushiro, Yasutaka Hayashi, Ellie, Masakata Okada, Motomu Inaoka, Toshinori Mizuno), *SuperRat*. The premise for this work is that after the Fukushima nuclear disaster, a new breed of poison-immune rats began flooding urban areas in Japan. Members of the artist collective captured a number of these SuperRats, only to have them taxidermied and painted yellow, to resemble the popular Pokémon character Pikachu. Their sculptures posit these rats in relation to small human houses amid ruins, in a way that is reminiscent also of Godzilla, from the 1950s Japanese monster B-movies.

Many works presented in the exhibition challenged the norms of the art scene and their inclusion can be read as a poke at the mainstream selection criteria of art exhibitions. One example was Sascha Jahn & TheBoundCollective [25], who brought the practices of the BDSM sexual subculture into public view, displaying mummified couples of different ages and sexual orientations on pedestals and benches. Another example was *The Civil Financial Regulation Office* - a suite of long-deserted offices on the 2nd floor that appeared to have been reoccupied by office workers. A team of six persons were tasked by the Berlin-based activist group The Peng! Collective [26] to call up, on a daily basis, representatives of financial regulatory and policy bodies in Europe, such as the European Central Bank. The insistent and systematic calls represented an attempted to connect directly between financial technocrats and citizens who are demanding adequate answers to pressing questions concerning EE policies. In that way technocrats were challenged to "see through the complexity of their own field of expertise and were reminded of their ethical orientation."

On a more explicit political note, one of the most impressive video works in the exhibition was *Seasteading*. In it, American-born artists Daniel Keller [27] and Emmy-winning documentary filmmaker Jacob Hurwitz-Goodman [28], who share their lives between LA and Berlin, dissected the Seasteading Institute – a group headed by the libertarian activist Patri Friedman and supported by Silicon Valley entrepreneur Peter Thiel – which aspires to create politically and legislatively autonomous societies on man-made floating islands, as an escape plan toward a new society. The two artists attended a conference held by the Seasteaders in French Polynesia, and filmed a documentary revealing "the libertarians’ despise of democracy, their interest in transhumanism, and their uncomfortable proximity to the radical NRx [29]neoreactionary movement." In the exhibition space, Keller's and Hurwitz-Goodman's film is shown next to a promotional video made by the

institute from the footage the artists had shared with it, as part of their agreement.

The Seasteaders by Jacob Hurwitz Goodman and Daniel Keller [TRAILER] **[30]**

Video of The Seasteaders by Jacob Hurwitz Goodman and Daniel Keller [TRAILER]
ג'ייקוב הורוויץ-גודמן ודניאל קלר, מיישבי הים (קדימון)

Callum Leo Hughes [31]' *ebabes/eboys* installation, which documented female and male members of the ebay community who are using their bodies to market items, had images in which "Objects blend with human forms, producing fetishistic materializations captured in partial body pics." This was one more case of a project where the boundary between art and commerce was intentionally undefined and blurred. Proving that in the coming years the international art scene, in its effort to mirror an outrageous, haunting, and continuously changing environment, will increasingly confuse contemporary art with unconventional (anti)socio-economic phenomena and initiatives.

14.Callum Leo Hughes_ebabes_eboys.jpg **[32]**



[33]Callum Leo Hughes, Ebabes Eboys
Courtesy of the 6th Athens Biennale 2018

Many other works referenced forms of deviant consumerism, like Maryam Jafri [34]'s (b. 1972, Pakistan, based in NYC and Copenhagen) *Product Recall: An Index of Innovation* - a collection of products launched in the market during the 20th century, but then withdrawn as complete flops and failures (and how could it be otherwise, when one finds out that candies named Ayds were marketed as a weight-loss product, and products such as food substitutes for children, titled "I hate peas" or "I hate corn" were considered good ideas). Stockholm-based Sirous Namazi [35]'s (b. 1970, Iran) sculpture *Leaning Horizontal II* had the form of a supermarket shelf tilted at a 45-degree angle and filled with neatly arranged Greek products. In the context of the host country, Greece, the angling of the shelf was a not-too-subtle reference to the local economic crisis.

Maryam Jafri,Product recall An index of innovation, 2014 2015, installation view Photo Nysos Vasilopoulos.jpg **[36]**



[37]Maryam Jafri, Product Recall: An Index of Innovation, 2014-2015, installation view
Photo: Nysos Vasilopoulos

Courtesy of the 6th Athens Biennale 2018

12, Sirous Namazi, Leaning Horizontal, 2012, Supermarket shelving system (steel, lacquer, plastic), supermarket products, 180 x 249 x 94 cm_1.jpg **[38]**


CORN FLAKES
CORN FLAKES
CORN FLAKES
NESCAFÉ
NESCAFÉ
NESCAFÉ

[39]Sirous Namazi, Leaning Horizontal, 2012
Supermarket shelving system (steel, lacquer, plastic), supermarket products, 180 x 249 x 94 cm

Courtesy of the 6th Athens Biennale 2018

Georgia Fambris [40] (b. 1973, Greece) showed paintings on commercial leaflets, of the type that is slipped under apartment doors, or the IKEA catalogue, being turned into canvases "on which humanoids struggle to come to terms with animated furniture and appliances that become vehicles of self-destruction, or escapism." Meanwhile, the paintings by the deceased Celia Daskopoulou's (1936-2006), in which, as the curators note, "women with the unnatural mask of beauty that male-dominated society has enforced through various role models, are replaced by a series of increasingly dark portraits that have a dramatic undertone." In the 1970s, Daskopoulou was one of the first Greek women artists who applied feminist ideas to her art. The inclusion of her works in the biennale was an interesting homage to an artist who had lived her most productive years in Paris of the 1970s and wasn't actually acclaimed in Greece as one would have expected. Her work, influenced by the first period of feminism of her generation, could be considered a predecessor of the contemporary approach of psychoanalytic gender identity that dominates young artists' work.

The 6th Athens Biennale resembled an adult playground for those who were seeking questions or answers to present and future nightmares. The first argument of the three curators in their joint statement, which appears in the exhibition catalog, regarding the question, "How does opposition play out today?" was as follows: "At present, an oppositional stance, an attitude of ANTI (a Greek word meaning 'against' as well as 'instead-of') - an 'antitude'- seems to encompass wide arenas of social life, including cultural expressions, identity politics, art labor, media and scripted protagonist impersonations on Netflix, as well as 'weird' advertising, videogames. and music video productions". They added, "The mainstreaming of ANTI takes diverse, ambiguous, and often incommensurable manifestations ...ranging from dreadful to delightful and everything in between."

Therefore, where is opposition standing as a weapon against conventional sociopolitical standards? What is to expect through the normalization of the nonconventional?

As a spectator at the 6th Athens Biennale I was often surprised, intrigued, sometimes even repulsed by the work of a number of exhibits, while they clearly introduced me to and alarmed me about what to expect of the years to come. Was it the fact that all participating artists were essentially expressing - more or less - a dark, pessimistic, and ambiguous historical (as well as future) moment? Was it the fact that technology and new media are dominating contemporary life, threatening the preservation of what we all - without any doubt - believed democracy had been? Might even the curators were surprised themselves with the size of insanity and anxiety of the new generation of artists worldwide?

One thing that one couldn't help but perceive while visiting the exhibition in Athens was the need for an urgent new self-identification of the confused contemporary community, either in local or international terms - an urgent need for a new "revolution" that will define the 21st century. But a "revolution" that cannot and will not occur with old terms. The impasses of the new liberal economy and the European politics that are facing the end of their dominance will soon collapse anyway. Artists, either under the influence of the political movements of our times or seeking their own political or gender identity (which are in fact exactly the same), are bound to imagine the mainstream of the future. Alternatives to today's "anti-culture" cannot escape being the accepted culture of the decades to come. On the other hand, if an opposition wants to remain as such and not be normalized, it will have to constantly reproduce and reinvent itself. As the curatorial group has stated, "the exhibition device becomes a purgatory without a purge."

As far as I am concerned, criticism and dialogue were (and should have been) the exhibition's main ingredients. As a dialectic conclusion, I could describe it as the ultimate optimistic approach of our changing times. In that case, the purge will definitely not come through art, but most probably

through the new ANTI inteligencia. Through intellectual approach and theoretical analysis, these are the selective risks a new generation of art spectators should take.

- 1. All the quotes in the text, unless stated otherwise, are taken from the curatorial text in the exhibition catalog and website [2].

Source URL: https://www.tohumagazine.com/article/need-new-revolution

Links
[1] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/1.Anna%20Uddenberg_Dom%20Depot.jpg
[2] https://anti.athensbiennale.org/en/6th-athens-biennale-anti
[3] http://pinarogrenci.com/
[4] http://www.yuripattison.com/
[5] https://www.annauddenberg.com/
[6] http://www.angelosfrentzos.eu/
[7] https://www.tohumagazine.com/file/2pinar-%C3%B6%C4%9Frenciled-light-city-istanbuljpg
[8] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/2.Pinar%20%C3%96%C4%9Frenci_LED%20Light%20City%20Istanbul.jpg
[9] https://www.tohumagazine.com/file/13yuri-pattisonpublic-solitude-crisis-castborder-forcejpg
[10] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/13.Yuri%20Pattison_public%20solitude%20%28crisis%20cast%29_border%20force.jpg
[11] http://www.mariannasimnett.com/
[12] http://www.tabitarezaire.com/
[13] https://www.tumblr.com/safe-mode?url=https%3A%2F%2Fmariannemaric.tumblr.com%2F#_=_
[14] https://www.tohumagazine.com/file/tabita-rezairesugar-walls-teardom-installation-view-2016installation-hd-video21-min-30s-edition
[15] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/18%2C%20Tabita%20Rezaire%2CSugar%20Walls%20Teardom%20installation%20view%2C%202016%2CInstallation%20with%20HD%20video%2C21min30s%2CEdition%20of%203.jpg
[16] https://www.tohumagazine.com/file/needle-larynx-marianna-simnett
[17] https://www.postpragmaticsolutions.com/
[18] http://www.marisaolson.com/
[19] https://vimeo.com/geumhyung
[20] http://www.johannespaulraether.net/
[21] http://tianzhuochen.com/
[22] https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/3707
[23] http://alexgvojic.com/
[24] http://chimpom.jp/
[25] http://www.saschajahn.com/the-bound-collective/
[26] https://pen.gg/
[27] http://www.dnlklr.com/
[28] http://jacobhg.com/
[29] https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/02/behind-the-internets-dark-anti-democracy-movement/516243/
[30] https://www.tohumagazine.com/file/seasteaders-jacob-hurwitz-goodman-and-daniel-keller-trailer
[31] https://callumleohughes.com/
[32] https://www.tohumagazine.com/file/14callum-leo-hughesebabeseboysjpg
[33] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/14.Callum%20Leo%20Hughes_ebabes_eboys.jpg
[34] http://www.maryamjafri.net
[35] https://anti.athensbiennale.org/en/artist/sirous-namazi
[36] https://www.tohumagazine.com/file/maryam-jafriproduct-recall-index-innovation-2014-2015-installation-view-photo-nysos
[37] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/Maryam%20Jafri%2CProduct%20recall%20An%20index%20of%20innovation%2C%202014%202015%2C%20installation%20view%20Photo%20Nysos%20Vasilopoulos.jpg
[38] https://www.tohumagazine.com/file/12-sirous-namazi-leaning-horizontal-2012-supermarket-shelving-system-steel-lacquer-plastic

[39] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/12%2C%20Sirous%20Namazi%2C%20Leaning%20Horizontal%2C%202012%2C%20Supermarket%20shelving%20system%20%28steel%2C%20lacquer%2C%20plastic%29%2C%20supermarket%20products%2C%20180%20x%20249%20x%2094%20cm_1.jpg
[40] https://georgiafambris.weebly.com