

PROCEEDINGS OF THE PERFORMING SPACE 2023 CONFERENCE

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Public Space, Enchantment and Resistance

Anthi Kougia

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Public Space, Enchantment and Resistance

Anthi Kougia

Theatre-Performance & Visual Artist

Abstract

This paper presents three site-specific performance works that reflect processes of ongoing research related to theatricality and the exploration of performance spacing through the experience of enchantment. By setting weird creatures or paradoxical “off” situations in public space, the intention of the artist is to plant small acts of resistance through challenging the hard logic of materials, reversals, surprises, deviations and distortions of the given perspective.

Keywords: Site-Specific Performance, Public Space, Enchantment, Women.

Public Space, Enchantment and Resistance

“Almost a century has passed since Max Weber argued in “Science as a Vocation” that “the fate of our times is characterized, above all, by the disenchantment of the world,” a phenomenon he attributed to the intellectualization and rationalization produced by the modern forms of social organization” (Federici, 2019, p. 188). Federici (2019) writes that “re-enchanting the world is a practice that is central to most anti-systemic movements and a precondition for resistance to exploitation (...) for it connects what capitalism has divided: our relation with nature, with others and with our bodies” (p.188-189).

Drawing from Federici’s concept of re-enchantment, in this paper I will present three site-specific performance works, whereby enchantment was used as a means of exploring public space and the limits of theatricality from a feminine perspective and through female bodies. By enchantment I mean acts of challenging the hard logic of materials, reversals, surprises, deviations and distortions of the given perspective, whilst using the absurd and humour as a proposed means of resistance against rigid socio-political systems.

Through the site-specific performative interventions, I intend to explore the grassroots and bottom-up perspective which suggests a radical, feminine, collaborative and politically engaged approach.

The following works — by using public space as a playground- invite citizens to reclaim, redefine and re-imagine their relationship with public space, one that is becoming more and more disenchanted, less and less collective and mostly a platform for consumption.

“TOURISTAS” by Anthi Kougia

“Touristas” is considered an ongoing project. Kougia’s adventure started in 2019. The idea is that the artist dressed in a massive costume becomes an ephemeral, in-transit creature and in collaboration with a local photographer, explores various cities in all their trauma and glory.

“Touristas” is a very special and not exactly discreet creature that wanders around the world. This creature creates a universe that alludes to various different worlds: from the mythological figure of Atlas that carries the world on his shoulders, to animals such as snails or turtles that carry their own home, able to hide inside their shells. What initiated the creation of the costume was the act of carrying. What do we carry within us when we relocate ourselves in space? The name “Touristas” uses irony, as the creature, — a tourist in the city — becomes a sightseeing object itself. In this way, the work attempts to explore how people see and experience what is perceived as the Other.

Figure 1

Touristas, 2019, Lisbon. Photographer: Manon Yanes.



“PARADISE SUFFERS” by Anthi Kougia & Lara Buffard

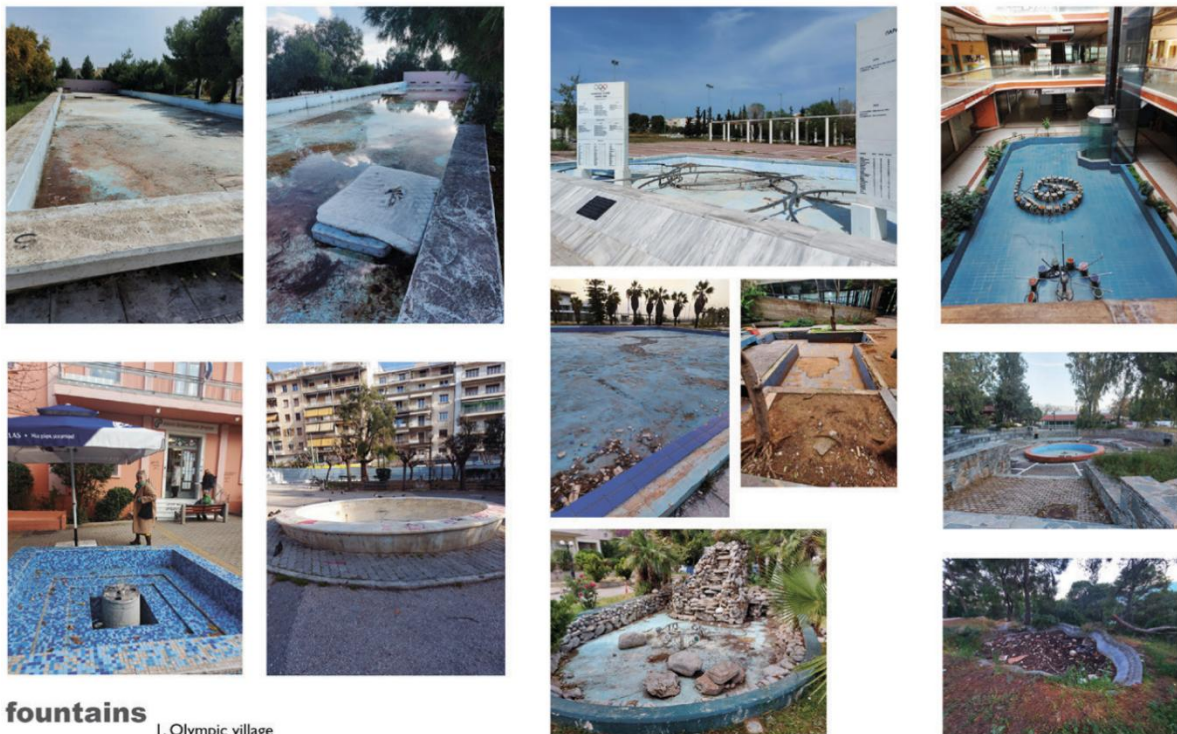
“Paradise Suffers” is an experimental documentary capturing a series of site-specific performances set inside and around Athens’ empty fountains. The artists map their location, explore, ‘interview’ and ultimately inhabit some of these abandoned sites.

The presence of fountains in the cities is traditionally associated with symbols of cleanliness and purification but also with wealth and prosperity. The work aims to explore the symbolic presence of the empty fountains in the public space of Athens and the way or even containers of wishes and desires (for example, coins landing in their pits.), they have now been transformed into spaces of lost hope and neglect. They stand for remnants of a past prosperity or a fallen utopia. Topographically, and paradoxically, while they are always in the centre, they are empty and derelict. Decay comes into focus.

The performers are dressed in specially designed costumes-sculptures, which are made entirely of family-inherited objects, such as porcelain and lace ornaments. They are fine and fragile and were used for decorative purposes to beautify the home to display an air of luxury, as has often been the case with fountains in the public urban landscape.

Figure 2

Empty fountains of Athens, From Anthi Kougia's archive.



fountains

1. Olympic village
2. Chalandri
3. Kypseli
4. Elliniko
5. Polytechnio
6. Psychico

Exploratory Interventions

The performers equipped with their tools, approach each fountain as workers/archaeologists of the absurd and follow a series of performative actions, including measuring the fountains' dimensions, taking notes relevant to their surroundings and collecting samples from their interiors. This ritual is repeated in each fountain that the performers investigate, representing a metaphorical excavation or a utopian wish-granting. This ritualistic pattern highlights the fountain's significance as a public site and imagines it as being part of contemporary, urban cultural heritage.

Interviews

In the beginning, the performers, recalling the fountains' lost cultural and symbolic qualities, treat those as if they were deities and ask them to make their wishes come true. They ask them a series of questions with the intention to juxtapose the past and present qualities, stories, facts, and properties of the fountains within the public space throughout the years. As they proceed, the performers take a closer look at the fountains, both their materiality

and what they stand for. They come to attribute human qualities to them and eventually feel the need to treat them with tenderness.

Inhabiting

The two characters, ultimately, occupy and inhabit the empty fountains by performing domestic and often intimate activities such as bathing, eating, doing laundry and gardening. Drawing from the Greek saying “TA EN OIKΩ MH EN ΔHMΩ” — which translates to “what happens in the house should stay in the house”, the artists completely reverse things and bring it all out in the open.

Figure 3

Film Still from the performance documentary “Paradise Suffers”.



PHILOXENIA & PHILOTIMO by Anthi Kougia & Evdokia Noula

Over the past few years we have been developing two fictional characters, Philoxenia (Hospitality) & Philotimo (often deemed untranslatable). Through these characters, the artists embody the stereotypes and marketable clichés mobilised by the Greek tourism industry, which is repeatedly framed as the saviour of the country’s fragile economy. Philoxenia & Philotimo are the two hostesses of the Greek summer, whose priority is to keep tourists happy and serve their needs with special attention. By employing exaggeration, irony and over-identification, our concern is to explore and then misuse the aesthetical language of touristic national branding.

In autumn 2023 we created a video documenting Philoxenia & Philotimo executing several impromptu performative interventions in the touristic areas of Athens. The work

aesthetically resembles a cheap promotional/marketing video, advertising the services the two characters provide. As part of their provided services, Philoxenia & Philotimo welcome tourists at the airport, clean and mop Syntagma square, organise treasure hunt games on the hill of the Acropolis where the participants are invited to find the hidden democracy, and offer “mataкия” — the Greek protective measure against the evil eye, in this case against the deprived locals that envy their prosperity.

Through these interventions, we aspire to instigate, document and spread performative narratives that subvert the grand fiction of Greek tourism, confronting thereby the exploitative and devastating conditions of seasonal labour on the islands and the crypto-colonial structures of hospitality.

Occasioned by the rapid touristification and the neoliberal fantasy of rendering Greece an accessible paradise for tourists, our work questions the use of Philoxenia & Philotimo as market products, rather than according to their true meaning, that is, as forms of care and solidarity towards those in need. The work draws on an antithesis, as the Greek state capitalises on hospitality, whilst — during the recent refugee crises — people are being left to drown in the Mediterranean Sea.

Figure 4

Film Still from the video Philoxenia & Philotimo.



Embracing an interdisciplinary approach combining anthropology and performance, we foster a collaborative research framework which will inform our attempt to shape a feminist and resistant response to the above paradoxes. Our interest as artists and our experiences

as precarious female workers, especially during the tourist season, led us to pose questions about Greek ethos and hospitality, which is marketed, selectively exercised and highly associated with economic activity and the branding of Greek summer.

Conclusion

I feel that what spurs my work is the word resistance. Yes, by being playful. Yes, through femininity and softness against rigid systems. Yes, by planting nonsense in dead fountains or mopping the marbles of the Parliament. In an attempt to re-enchant the world.

References

Federici, S. (2019). *Re-Enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*. PM Press.