

UNDOCUMENTA'D

# ATHENS

*With Documenta taking up residence in the city for its fourteenth edition, the eyes of the art world are currently trained on Athens. But what is the creative life of the “birthplace of democracy”—and Western art’s ideal of beauty—like when the international circus isn’t in town? Andrew Spyrou takes to the streets to find out.*



PHOTO AURELIEN MOLE, COURTESY THE BREEDER, ATHENS

## GRAFFITI AS ACTUALIZATION OF THE SPATIAL ORDER OF ATHENS

“It’s really a test of your own patience. If it’s already covered in tags, the windows are broken and the walls are collapsing, of course I’m going to paint it.” We’re standing in an unlit building on Akadimias Street in central Athens, one that the architect Ernst Ziller designed as his final residence in 1880 and in which he lived until his death. It has never been open to the public, and has been closed to everyone since the 1970s. Holding up a lighter in the dark to view the intricate mosaics that decorate the walls, ATHI281 is a graffiti artist with a conscience who draws the line at tagging historic buildings. Up to a point. Here, he pins up three large charcoal drawings to a bare wall, in the knowledge that these might not be seen for another decade, when another enterprising urb-ex enthusiast finds his way in. “Of course I don’t mind if people don’t see my work. Some of my favourite pieces are in locations where no one will ever think to look. I have more time to paint in those spots. Less pressure.”

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, the sociologist Michel de Certeau writes of the “network of anti-discipline”, describing how urbanites “actualize” the spatial order of the city to suit their own needs, resisting and refusing the rules imposed by the authorities. Although graffiti might be an obvious example of one such anti-disciplinary process, Certeau in fact included all everyday practices in his category of “tactics” that make a city’s possibilities emerge. In talking to a number of artists, I have become convinced that, among all contemporary cities today, because of its history, architecture, location and contemporary sociopolitical situation, Athens has a creative energy and freedom that make it uniquely conducive to art making today.

Like Athens’s very own portrait artist, ATHI281 has ensured his ever-expanding family of large-nosed caricatures populate all

districts of the city. His signature “throw-up”, which can be executed in a matter of seconds, is a figure seated in a cross-armed huff, portraying Athenians’ “transformation from the reluctant positivity experienced while growing up, to the state of confused frustration abundant today”, as he puts it. His style seems effortless, evoking the iconic imagery of acclaimed Greek painter Alekos Fassianos as well as the humour of the comics of Arkas which are found on every Greek child’s bedside table. But his pieces also cut deep into the Athenian subconscious: a crazed monster surrounded by downward-pointing graph arrows and the caption “Man, the spreadsheets ain’t lookin’ good yo”; a cheerful two-tone character with a long arm evoking the traditional Greek puppet Karagiozi shouting in all caps “THE PROBLEM IS YOU”; a seated office worker alongside a stack of paper labelled “A pile of fuckit”.

What the hopeless smirk on the faces of these works and countless others by ATHI281 misses, though, is the optimism and dynamism present in the city today. Not only is it “the birthplace of democracy”, a truism the media has reminded us of countless times in recent years as Athens has undergone economic and political turmoil, but the region is also the progenitor of Western art as we know it. The architecture of the city doesn’t let us forget this: the Acropolis, with the Parthenon atop, stands strong and beams energy across the city towards its four mountain guards, Penteli, Parnitha, Egaleo and Immitos, on three sides, and to the sea and its fuming port of Piraeus on the fourth.

## AN ANCIENT BEACON

Perennially situated historically, culturally and geographically somewhere between the Near East and the West, Greece straddles languages, cuisines, conflicts and creations. British artist Navine G. Khan-Dossos came to the city for an exhibition and stayed. Her



Above: ATHI281, *Untitled (Syntagma)*, 2015  
Opposite: Stelios Faitakis, *The Elegy of May, Part 1*, 2016

PHOTO AURELIEN MOLE, COURTESY THE BREEDER, ATHENS. ALL OTHER IMAGES COURTESY THE ARTIST

training in Islamic art means a keen enthusiasm for historical depth, and her work explores the tangents such sprawling histories encourage—and in particular the imagery that such complexities produce. A perfect fit for Athens, then, as it undergoes a further historical transformation, this time documented by the international media.

Khan-Dossos tells me that she remained in Athens precisely because of Greece’s unique positioning: “It is the tension between what is left behind of the four-hundred-year Turkish occupation of Greece and the rebuilding of modern Greece in a much more Northern European mode that fascinates me—which buildings have been repurposed or erased, which ones have been made in the classical style, which ones are thrown up without too much aesthetic concern.”

Like ATHI281, Khan-Dossos consciously considers the

permanence and impermanence of artworks, accepting commissions in locations that she hopes will allow for a long-term commitment to the artwork. *Time Is a Tentacle*, a permanent work outside Khan-Dossos’s former studio in the Kerameikos district, and one of my favourite outdoor pieces on display in Athens today, consciously uses the ochre colourings associated with the pottery shards still being unearthed in the archaeological excavations just yards away. For this piece Khan-Dossos directs her passion for patterns at the “meander”, perhaps the best-known of the Hellenic border designs, and which took its name from the twisting River Maeander that Homer refers to in *The Iliad*. Here Khan-Dossos takes further inspiration from ancient Cretan maritime designs, which are also said to have originally informed the shape of the pattern, and which occasionally depicted octopuses clinging on to the outside of pots.

Much like the city itself—a contemporary metropolis that for one reason or another has shunned the computerization of bureaucracy, is surviving very well thank you very much without LCD screens on the backs of taxi headrests, and whose youth prefer to spend their evenings with each other rather than their mobiles—Khan-Dossos’s work explores a basic fascination with the analogue, often in direct opposition to the digital. She utilizes imagery we have become familiar with through modern technology, but embeds them within organic forms and timeless motifs. Though at first glance organic and naturalistic, even *Imagine a Palm Tree*, a floor-to-ceiling mural at the café of the Benaki Museum of Islamic Art, features structural elements referencing wifi symbols and GSM signal indicators—inescapable elements of contemporary society which we are led to believe form essential pillars without which our lives would collapse.

**DEPICTING CONTEMPORARY  
REVOLUTIONARY PROMISE**

Another artist shrewdly investigating the world's multiplicitous histories is Stelios Faitakis. Featured prominently in the brilliant 2006 exhibition *Anathena* at the DESTE Foundation and showcasing its founder Dakis Joannou's collection of work by young Greek graphic artists, Faitakis is probably one of the best-known artists to have broken out of the faded street-art scene. Despite not aligning himself with any political stance, let alone the social mores of the art world, Faitakis's painstakingly dense murals clearly represent the complexity of the state the world has found itself in, a state currently visible throughout Athens, where Faitakis was born and still works.

Pitting authoritarian figures against hordes of balaclava'd youths, and showing virginal waifs draped in lacy lingerie clinging on to bearded patriarchs and archaic deities struggling alongside the working poor, Faitakis insists he is simply "presenting images of the universe and the human condition" for others' consideration. His works might be a visual representation of Henri Lefebvre's *Critique of Everyday Life*, in which everyday life is defined as the junction of "illusion and truth, power and helplessness; the intersection of the sector man controls and the sector he does not control". Lefebvre argued that twentieth-century capitalism transformed the everyday into a space of pure consumption. Faitakis's work, appearing to depict a resistance of some sort, seems to illustrate a promise of revolution, the same one that Lefebvre hoped would be achieved by a critique of everyday life.

Most obviously drawing on his interest in religious icon painting, Faitakis's work also pulls from his past as a graffiti writer (first writing STYL, then BIZARE), imbued with a calligraphic cypsis first noted in the wild-style lettering of his favourite bands and hip-hop groups whose logos he would

scratch into his school desk. He later went on to design covers of now-sought-after LPs by Nineties Greek rap group Terror X Crew. He tells me that he has often complicated the lettering in his work to the point of not being able to remember it himself, an apt analogy for the information overload and bureaucratic opacity we are currently faced with. I am fascinated by the idea of future archaeologists striving to decipher his work.

An admirer of Hieronymus Bosch, Faitakis conducts extensive library-based research before embarking on any piece. His works absorb their surroundings and reinterpret their cultural location, with every minuscule detail of the painting serving a purpose, from "ascribing incredible symbolic depth" to "simply balancing the composition". As we sit in his new fourth-floor studio in Ano Petralona, he tells me that he plans to bring geometry more and more to the fore in his future works, and points to the squared paper of a miniature notebook on his desk. I am astonished that this is the paper on which he plans his grand eight-metre-high works, such as his most recent large-scale commission, a permanent mural entitled *The Elegy of May, Parts 1 & 2* at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris.

**CURIOSITY IN THE CITY**

Although sociopolitical discussions about Athens have plenty of other platforms, a discussion with Nadia Gerazouni, director of the Breeder gallery, probably the most internationally visible of the Greek commercial spaces, inevitably turns to the subject. She tells me that although many artists probably choose not to respond to the situation in Greece consciously, nonetheless "it's hard to ignore". Gerazouni's take on the influx of foreign artists confirms what I have heard from others—that the city is such a flexible and welcoming place that "once people decide to mix, doors open". A complete and healthy



**Above:** Navine G. Khan-Dossos, *Time Is a Tentacle*, 2016  
**Opposite:** Giorgos Gerontides, *Pieces of a Clash*, 2016

state of collaboration can only exist once both local and expatriate artists are comfortable with each other's presence, seeing past any obvious differences and any prejudices perpetuated by the art establishment.

I press Gerazouni to try and put a finger on what ties The Breeder's artists together in the current climate, and her response of "an ever-shifting concept and umbrella under which various projects take place" seems to me a good metaphor for the city itself. The art produced in the city, while not stamped with any heavy-handed nationalism, remains distinctly Greek. This is a consequence of the long-embedded ancient history of the city and the inevitable curiosity that the surrounding (if sometimes crumbling) beauty brings with it.

While the three artists discussed above articulate their relationship with the city in a very public manner, Giorgos Gerontides does something similar in a much more private fashion, archiving his curiosities and fabricating others.

All his works take "collecting" as their central mechanism, a process he calls "a necessity present in every human being", with his pieces made up of minute objects, arranged to create a cohesive whole. Featured in the recent *Equilibrists* exhibition at the Benaki Museum, an attempt at a "survey" of artists working in Greece today, Gerontides presented a collector's workshop. The collections ranged from a haunting vitrine of pieces of shattered taxi windows, sinister baggies filled with hair-ties and SIM cards, and dismantled and reconstructed room fans endowed with a melancholy anthropomorphic quality. The "collector" who inspired the work *Who Is the Man in Red?* *AT(r)opical Collection* was an unknown gentleman dressed in regal red, an image of whom Gerontides found in a box of cassette tapes left on the street. A little research uncovered that the original Tudor portrait had recently been restored at the

Royal Collection in London, with its subject remaining unidentified.

A practitioner of "Neo-Assemblage", or perhaps "Neo-Archaeology", Gerontides's work is particularly poignant. Not to put too melodramatic a point on it, the red man represents today's Athenian—someone who has experienced better times, who may on occasion feel an unjustified shame at his position, but who still proudly holds his head high. He takes care of his possessions, few of which have any monetary value, but all of which he treasures. Or the man in red could be an example of the unfortunately displaced rural poor, navigating the accumulations of pavement potholes so much more adeptly than the so-called urban elite. At the exhibition one can almost smell the nose-crinkling sweetness of the whiff of an unwashed jacket, which is high on the list of olfactory stimulations that the city provides.

**SOFT RUINS**

Documenta has pledged to utilize a great swathe of the city, from parts of the Benaki Museum complex to the contemporary art museum EMST, and from a variety of the city's archaeological sites to less-visited archives. However, despite a great number of eyes being on the city at the moment, it is the energy and curiosity displayed by artists such as those profiled here that are characteristic of contemporary Athens. Documenta inaugurated itself with a *Parliament of Bodies* in the former headquarters of the military police during the junta (1967–74); a number of discussions taking place on Andreas Angelidakis's sixty-eight shiftable trompe-l'oeil concrete blocks, "soft ruins" that bring to light an allegory of the city. Thoughts of ancient Greek democracy being situated within a modernist frame conjure yet another analogy for art making: Athens locates the formality of antiquity within an everyday practice of creation, an immovable foundation atop which rests a great deal of promise.



**"ATHENS IS SURVIVING VERY WELL  
THANK YOU VERY MUCH WITHOUT LCD SCREENS  
ON THE BACKS OF TAXI HEADRESTS"**