

# A GREEK STORY

"How can we design and implement art structures that align with the big questions raised in the public sphere?"

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The Greek antiquity and the neoliberal-driven Greek crisis stand out as two landmarks: two ideas of Greece and of 'Greekness' that recently turned my country of birth into an international brand name and inspired narratives connecting European values to this dual 'Greece'. These two main ideas and respective narratives acknowledge, firstly, that Greek antiquity influenced and shaped the core of contemporary European values and therefore European culture since the 19<sup>th</sup> century and, secondly, that the recent Greek crisis somehow signalled the downfall of the spiritual and humanistic Europe as we know it. I will not discuss these ideas and narratives, but rather work within the framework of this contention to understand my approach to art in times of crisis during the years 2011-2016 and the collective attempt to rethink art in the Agora (i.e. art as an integral part of the public space

and debate). The Greek experience (ancient and recent) points out that all art is political one way or another and that art is best remembered in times of crisis.

That the world is changing ever faster has become a platitude. However, an awareness and acceptance of the fact that future literacy and the ability to think together about possible and preferred futures is important and needs to be fostered and is emerging across the political, cultural, social and business sectors of Europe and beyond. It is with the above strong belief that I am discussing art in the Agora, through my experience as a Greek performance maker and cultural manager.

Let me say from the outset that I chose to return and to live in crisis-struck Greece because I strongly believe crisis is a catalyst for change and that a transition from the private to the public sphere carries along with it multiple positive 'gifts'. Interestingly enough, *crisis* means 'judgment' in Greek, while *catastrophe* means 'turnaround'. In my case, destruction signalled a break with the past and an artistic shift, giving birth to new ways of thinking about art. Destruction proved to be a prerequisite for critique, self-reflection, political thinking and also a reminder of what art really 'means'. When any semblance of certainty vanishes due to historic circumstances, a New Map reveals itself to the individual; a distant horizon, replete with obscure and thus far unheard-of interconnections between humanity and the ecosystem, emotions and weather phenomena, the most vulnerable person and the most powerful leader, poetics and reality. This New Map depicts an expanded, infinite Universe, open to imagination and human potential. It reveals new categories and connections across things, pushing our thinking and therefore art into new, unfamiliar directions.

Before continuing, I feel compelled to stress that our experiences of the contemporary Western world vary significantly, thus making it impossible to share a deeper understanding of what it means to live in times of turmoil. I even find it difficult to step into the Greek crisis reality which is a completely different experience to the Western reality as we know it today: an 'unreal' reality and a rupture in time.

## THE ANCIENT GREEKS: ART IN TIMES OF TURMOIL

Theatre has evolved in my country in parallel with the notion of citizenship. Some of the ways in which we produce, understand and think of culture nowadays originate from antiquity. Today, some of these ideas can and have been reappropriated and revisited by artists in the light of today's world. In order to be able to build a common life with respect to values and culture and to ultimately solve the puzzle of collective and individual existence, during the austerity years of crisis we had to search in all possible directions to understand what doesn't work and to derive inspiration and ideas. It is with this intention that I will refer to how ancient Greeks made art and what it meant in those times to design structures in an ethical and inclusive way. Let me point out here the significant fact that the Athenian culture ignored and marginalised slaves and women, rendering them almost invisible. While I concur with that criticism, I believe that the centrality of art in Greek antiquity is an important concept that I will further discuss in relation to contemporary Western art.

Indeed, ancient drama was at the epicentre of the public sphere and the public discourse and life of the Agora, contributing to a collective political reflection and to the formation and education of free

Athenians: citizens who were not only able to exercise their democratic rights, but who were also able to conceive laws and design new ways of governance and of co-existence. In antiquity, culture was seen as a pulsating active field, while grammar, logic, rhetoric and art provided the tools to shape free male citizens who could actively defend their values.

The education and formation of such active citizens through art could be realised thanks to the existence of the *horigoi* or as we would call them today: ‘art sponsors’. The etymology of the word is telling: *horigos* means *the one that carries the chorus* (in other words the one that ultimately gives voice to the citizens) as opposed to today’s *sponsor* (*the one who spends*). The *horigos* would contribute to the city by disclosing the conflicting dynamics that operate in the field of democracy and that ultimately make up the *polis*; by contrast, today’s sponsoring describes spending and artistic production destined for consumption in a capitalist market.

The *horigoi* were rich Athenians, responsible for finding the actors, chorus and musicians and for nursing and accommodating them over a period of 11 months (the time needed for the preparation of the drama). The cost covered by the *horigoi* was considerable. Every year 700-800 chorus members, 30-50 actors and 20-40 musicians in total were employed. The *horigoi* contribution to the community was cherished and considered the most prominent private contribution to the city. Other rich Athenians would contribute to the community by sponsoring (by law) the maintenance of warships or the catering of the army. However, the largest private donations would be granted to art.

What a strategic choice, indeed. Why was art such a central social activity for a nation at war? I think the answer lies in the fact that the Greek dramas opened a direct dialogue with history: art served the Athenians, offering the appropriate locus to look into the contradictions, the challenges and the failures of their society. The Greek dramas addressed an audience of soldiers, who made wars to defend their culture, learned the importance of arguments and of reasoning when defending publicly their views in the Agora and who then drew on theatre to face their worst possible fears, taboos and failures. The Greeks lived in times of turmoil and of radical change and would make use of all possible tools to reflect upon their social transformation and present history. Art was a major central political tool.

### **MAY 2011: "HOW CAN WE LIVE?"**

In recent history, post-war subsidy models were occasionally adopted in Greece. It was in the late 1970s, after the *Metapolitefsi* (the fall of the military junta of 1967-1974) and the democratic period following the dictatorship, that the National Subsidy System was established, marking a long period of state-dependent art production. Such was the inherited reality for artists of my generation up until 2011, when the neoliberal agendas terminated all national subsidies and cultural programmes.

Back in May 2011, the world as I knew it was falling apart. I found myself at a loss before this fact: what kind of polis and theatre can emerge when the system breaks down? Does contemporary theatre speak to the concerns of today’s audience? What kind of citizens are called upon to support theatre off and on stage? Eventually, the dominant question shared amongst the majority of Greeks was: “How can we live?” How can we live a fulfilling life in an inclusive society and how can we de-

sign new structures that will align with the new needs and values? Theatre claimed anew a central meaning in Greek society.

2011 was a year of intense social unrest. The various protests and the movement of the *Aganaktismenoi* (Indignant) in Athens were part of our everyday life. The political system had reached its limits. Such was also the case for the dull lifestyle of crass materialism that was slowly dying, along with the social class it had long privileged. The crisis brought about radical changes in life and in the cultural sector. Nothing was coherent and consistent anymore. National identity and social cohesion were damaged (this crisis was, in fact, a violent redistribution of wealth and a social class war), self-esteem was lost (also due to the rising unemployment, reaching a phenomenal 70% in the cultural sector), everyday life was shattered (demonstrations, universities shut down, the city of Athens turned into a relic of what used to be my town of birth), infrastructures were destroyed (the education and health system, for example). In the end, our very political system, democracy, failed us, marking the rise of the far-right party (the so-called Golden Dawn) and the violation of the Greek constitution (the Parliament voted overnight for the so-called “Multiple Legislation Law”, which consisted of pension laws and pharmaceutical industry regulations.) In the cultural sector, heavy taxation was imposed on art companies and the Hellenic Broadcasting Corporation (ERT) was forced to shut down for the first time in Greek history. And, of course, the aforementioned termination of state funds, leading to the collapse of the National Subsidies System, without warning, in 2011.

Our generation was raised with the certainty that it was the state’s duty to support and provide for the arts; but overnight everything we took for granted was gone. In the years to come, the absence of a subsidy system and the reignition of the Agora, thanks to the Athenian demonstrations, shaped many artists of my generation, their passions, ideas and work.

During the recent crisis years in Greece, I made a ‘social turn’ in my art defined by an urge to create in a state of emergency and by rejecting ‘aestheticism’ in order to make room for art as a space for activism and education. It is to my understanding that the sudden rupture with the past and the collapse of the subsidy system, actually, contributed to inclusion and shaped a type of strong-voiced art that emerged out of a system of new values; a type of art that was not dictated by the success standards of the industry or by institutional structures, which are always eventually operated by the ones in power.

The shared question ‘how can we live?’ was fundamental and opened a widespread public dialogue boosting the importance of the public space and the Agora. Art became the common space to phrase relevant questions and to collectively imagine new ways of living in a city that still remained in a paradoxical state of destruction and construction.

### **VIYRSODEPSEIO: HOW CAN WE DESIGN AND IMPLEMENT STRUCTURES THAT ALIGN WITH THE BIG QUESTIONS RAISED IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE?**

In seeking a new meaning for art, production models, formats and language, I started thinking how to design new structures that would meet the urgent changes that took place around us. Through an instinctive drive rather than a well-planned idea, I launched a series of meetings at an abandoned

leather factory in Athens, later known by the name *Vyrsodepseio*. There, in the midst of an almost deserted area, a group of people of various backgrounds met for a month, driven by the need to comprehend the shifting reality around them and to imagine (and actively reclaim) a better future. These meetings ultimately culminated in a performance, which saw the contribution of many. *META: A Performance About the Catastrophe of the World* resulted from that unique historic moment, which we felt compelled to jointly shape. Soon, a community of people began to form around the first group. Long abandoned, the industrial remnant of the building began to throb with life again, similar to a sea monster waking from a deep sleep. Over sixty individuals cleaned the building, took care of the wiring and contributed in all possible ways to this project. Thanks to all those people who set up the space and left their mark on the venue and its *modus operandi*, *Vyrsodepseio* emerged in the midst of an Athenian post-industrial junkyard as a social experiment, teaching each and every one of us that the inner and outer reality, poetry and applied economics, generosity and art, political imperative and aesthetics are inextricably bound.

For all of us, *Vyrsodepseio* was not just a space but also a cause; a locus of collective expression, a network of artists and citizens, a cradle of contemporary art, but also, ultimately, an open experiment which answered the question: “How can we design and implement art structures that align with the big questions raised in the public sphere? How can we turn social art into the epicentre of our city’s transformative force?” Thanks to the dimensions of the space - over 3,000 square metres - it soon became a meeting point for hundreds of artists and activists; a vivid hub for exchanging ideas.

During its active years, the prolific weekly program of *Vyrsodepseio* encompassed theatre, dance and music performances, as well as festivals and educational workshops featuring a number of co-productions. Over forty new theatrical and dance performances were staged, along with ten music festivals, annual platforms of drama and contemporary performing arts, two international site-specific festivals, and many programmes of international artistic exchanges and residencies. Special emphasis was given to international networking.

Since its founding, *Vyrsodepseio* ran under the auspices of the Hellenic Ministry of Culture. It should be noted, however, that it has never received any state funding whatsoever but was run successfully thanks to the support of 300 volunteers and of our audiences. *Vyrsodepseio* existed from 2011 to 2017, at which time it shut down as a space but retained its status as a human network.

I argue that *Vyrsodepseio* was itself an art project in constant dialogue with the societal transformations taking place all around us, a structure easily described as chaotic or inconsistent but also one noted for its strong values. It emerged as a space that demonstrated power (an important display during the confrontational years of 2011-2016) and provided safe shelter for a network of activists. “One could not have found a better symbolic space to host the ODC project; *Vyrsodepseio* is perhaps the most apt location in the world, if not for the former gunpowder factory housing Cartoucherie de Vincennes in the outskirts of Paris”, says Grigoris Ioannidis, drama theorist and critic.

Strong emphasis was placed on various collective processes, among which were participatory design

processes, co-curations, collaborations of every possible form engaging many stakeholders. Sitting around tables for the purpose of co-designing or at the general assemblies, *Vyrsodepseio* relied on the wider community (the *polis*) in order to exist and to thrive. This empowering project certainly shaped my political thinking and made me believe that collective Eutopias can actually be achieved.

### **ODC ENSEMBLE: WHAT ART?**

Destruction radically shifted artistic orientation in Greece and in doing so forced many of us to question for whom, by whom and with whom we make art - the answer being for the people, by the people and with the people. As artistic director of the theatre company ODC Ensemble, I experimented with how to create collective art that would be meaningful and outrageous, much like the reality we lived in. To use the words of Grigoris Ioannidis again: “ODC was built on this premise of *opening up*. But the concept alone was not enough. In the years following the founding of ODC, it became clear to everybody that contemporary artists should come up with a new set of tools helping them address two worlds at once: the realm of the one or several texts, and the contemporary world. A performance can bring these two worlds together only through unrest and alertness. This is not just about modernising the classics. This coming together is an encounter between two worlds speaking the same language, comprehending each other, in effect, complementing each other”. (Ioannides, *Vyrsodepseio: A theatre in crisis*, 2018c:22-23)

Real life crossed paths with our secret, imaginary worlds, giving rise to intense and outrageous works of art. Some of the main points of this work can be found in ODC’s manifesto:

*Real life has bypassed civilised manners long ago: raw aesthetics for neo-medieval times without a God: Unrefined and raw aesthetics clash with the aesthetic imperatives of bourgeois, slick, flawless works of art. Instead, we chose to draw on the raw, fresh reality, on the violence and extremities that were manifest in the public sphere at the time.*

*Embrace the bewilderment of the audience in the face of persistent dislocation. Displacement of the viewer is a political act. Any site is a stage: turn foyers into rivers, turn real spaces into Utopias, turn Utopias into real spaces.* The industrial space of *Vyrsodepseio* allowed me as a stage director to do things that would normally be prohibited in conventional theatrical venues; I created and performed promenade shows in utopian spaces and large-scale interventions. For instance, flooding the entire foyer of the industrial building to take the audience on a boat trip into the different areas of the building or lighting a whole show exclusively by means of torchlights and real fire.

*The systematic use of the unexpected and the technique of assemblage* were brought together to form the premises of a new non/verbal language, based on the improbable. These were some of the techniques I systematically used in order to introduce my audience into a new political utopia.

*Content is at the core of the new rupture with the past: conflicting narratives should be heard:* I gradually became more interested in the topography of the public space; the great, corporeal presence of the masses protesting in the streets directed us to works of epic proportions and of polyphonic dramaturgies. Occasionally serving as the librettist and writer of the company meant that I had to voice conflicted

stands in multifaceted narratives mirroring the noisy struggles of the outside world. I have come up with the term *theatre of the polis* to describe this open dramaturgy which is from/with/about the citizens of a politically-polarised world; dynamic entities that I don't want to neutralise or come to terms with.

As part of developing an actor's method, I investigated rehearsal techniques favouring pluralism and confrontation, convinced that it is not enough to tackle 'political' plays if the very process of rehearsal lacks freedom or encourages passive attitudes.

For all of us, the members of the ODC Ensemble and Vyrsopeiseio, the years of the crisis were years of hard work; a break with everything we had taken for granted.

### HISTORY INSPIRES

I cannot measure the impact of our choices or deeds on our community or on ourselves. I'm afraid that shared secret experiences cannot be measured. Sometimes it is the small changes in the way we see life or in our habits that have a greater impact on ourselves and on our surroundings. It is a qualitative and not a quantitative impact and, as such, it is very difficult to measure. A pat on the shoulder to walk through the dreary night. A funny thought that sticks in the corners of your mind and you can't discard, not without giving up an old piece of your mind the next day. Being aware of one's fragility but also that one is still in the warm care of others. Did we contribute to the greater socio-political changes of our times? Who knows? But even if our molecules smile to this conviction, our lips should stay sealed. Because at the end of the day, what matters is where we positioned ourselves at the time and how wholly we expressed our longing for life.

The collective is a body, too. The figures of 'the city' and of 'Utopia' have long been intertwined. On the whole, this project offered a way forward and enabled people to collectively think about what might happen next, away from the populist and fear-mongering political and cultural saboteurs that were trying to take over the public arena. This conception of the present history in terms of both catastrophic reality and utopian possibility that shaped our art and lives, sprung from a transformation in the mind of our society. In all our paths of thought and art production during these years, there was a strong sense of opening up to a collective 'utopian consciousness'.

The Greek experience points out that all art is political one way or another and that art is best remembered in times of crisis. The centrality of art in Greek antiquity and recent times is a very important concept insofar as it refers to the state policies, the artists and the public. It demonstrates that when state policies collapsed, the void that was created by the absence of such policies on the ground was occupied by the artists and their fellow citizens in the name of social emancipation.

During the last decades the decline of the social utopia in the West suctioned ideology's surrender to the politic of *things* brought about by the laws of profit. Architectural, artistic and urban ideology were left with the utopia of *form* as a way of recovering the human totality through an ideal synthesis, as a way of embracing disorder through order (Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia*, 1976c: 47-8). This resulted in the appreciation of art as an aesthetical product empty of content. Utopia of the form

is socially and politically regressive, yet, remains fundamental to the Western cultural avant-garde.

Nowadays, in the light of the European value crisis, the rise of fascism, the refugee 'problem', new forms of poverty, post-truth and neo-conservatism, artists must reclaim a central place in the Agora, daring to be radical in form AND content. Visual artist Jannis Kounellis phrased beautifully his artistic drive: "I am against the condition of paralysation to which the postwar [period] has reduced us: by contrast I search among fragments (emotional and formal) for the scatterings of history. I search dramatically for unity, although it is unattainable, although it is utopian, although it is impossible and, for all these reasons, dramatic."

Europeans are confronted with many questions as to how we would like European values to continue to develop. What do we regard as valuable, what are the elements and factors, the material and immaterial values that affect our quality of life? All these questions are worth an answer but they form part of the greater question: "How shall we live?". As the crisis spilled over from Greece into other European countries, this question becomes even more difficult to answer and a good reason is that we now live in fragmented and polarised societies where unity is unattainable and utopian. It is precisely in this division or even arbitrariness that I see my place as an artist serving as a connector and a mediator in order to engage with the wider community and reshape fracture into public discourse. "There is something that unites us all", whispered a performer in the performance META, while guiding audiences through a fictional, post-apocalyptic museum of human skin processing according to the concept of the performance.

I understand that the spinning world is a fact and that this continuous spinning movement generates confusion and fragmentation. But let's take a moment and some distance to contemplate. What is the ultimate desire, the driving force in culture and art, if not to reunify fragments of the past and the present in search of the element that unites us all? And who are the real actors in culture? We think it's the NGOs or the institutions, but the Greek experience (ancient and recent) sheds light on the fact that the real actors in culture are the individuals that, despite their differences, take the risk to consciously engage in a dynamic relation with humanity.

