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REMAP ATHENS: ATHENIAN RHAPSODY

by Kimberly Bradley



Nicolas Party in the bathroom

Greece is obviously still the word in the Eurozone, for reasons that go way beyond the art world. Rehashed every couple of months, the country's dire financial situation is looking worse than ever.

Yet, in the midst of it all, ReMap 3, Sept. 12-Oct. 30, 2011, launched in Athens last month, is infusing one of inner city Athens' roughest neighborhoods, Kerameikos-Metaxourgeio, with a buzzing energy. For the third time, the biannual event -- not really a biennale, definitely not a fair, but far more than just an exhibition -- brought more than 50 separate exhibitions to town for six weeks, most of them into the area's otherwise unoccupied buildings, storefronts, spaces and lots. A temporary art squat, so to speak, that has a bit of a history.

A decade ago, ReMap founder Iasson Tsakonas, a 39-year-old Cornell-educated entrepreneur, bought a building on Kerameiko Street (the area was where the city's ceramic potters lived in the classical era, and part of the district holds Athens' ancient cemeteries). It's now a spacious headquarters for his company, Oliaros, in an area that is still 46 percent unoccupied. He would know, since he literally mapped out the neighborhood as he slowly purchased more buildings and founded the nonprofit KM Protypi Geitoni to focus on urban renewal research and projects as well.

Tsakonas is also an avid art collector, and in the mid-2000s, dealer Javier Peres asked Tsakonas if he could run his gallery, Peres Projects, out of one of his Athens spaces for the summer while his Los Angeles and Berlin galleries were under renovation. A temporary gallery space was found, more collaborative art projects followed, and the idea grew. The first real ReMap was established in 2007 to run simultaneously to first Athens Biennale the same year.

This time around, though, ReMap has been a stand-alone show (the biennale's launch is ReMap's closing week, coming up soon, Oct. 24-30). And according to those who'd seen earlier ReMap editions, it's the best one yet. Scattered throughout the neighborhood are group

and solo shows, independent curatorial projects, street art, public performances and public spaces -- a ton of art in a neighborhood that's as sketchy as I remember Alphabet City being about 20 years ago.

Cute cafes and galleries crop up along the tree-lined streets, but head around the wrong corner and you might trip over a junkie shooting up into his neck or get mugged at knifepoint, as did one artist I spoke to. "It's pretty rough on these streets," mentioned Berlin dealer Mehdi Chouakri, a first-time participant, on opening night, raising his eyebrows. But he seemed enthusiastic about the white space in which he was presenting a solo show by young Italian artist Luca Trevisani, even if it took some time to rid the room of its layers of dust.

The event's informal HQ is a formerly derelict courtyard that Athenian architect Aristide Antonas transformed into a cool outdoor space with free Wi-Fi, a temporary bookshop and workstations (all from pieces donated by Ikea, which is a sponsor of the event). Slick outdoor signage marks exhibition venues like an old hotel or entire buildings, like 43 Kerameikou (ReMap #10), an unrenovated apartment house in which each floor displays two solo shows.

Modern Institute / Toby Webster Ltd from Glasgow showed Nicholas Party a Swiss-born Glasgow School of Art grad who mixes street-art spray-paint elements with meticulously executed charcoal still-life drawings rendered directly on the walls. "It took him about five days," quipped Toby, looking around the large multiroom apartment, completely filled with Party's multicolored stripes and quieter black-and-white drawings.

Across the hall is the Peres Projects presentation of large-format paintings by Leo GABIN, a moniker for an artist collective from Ghent, Belgium. The group makes abstract paintings with a Willem de Kooning-esque panache, which makes you wonder about division of labor -- who smeared, who dripped?

On the building's ground floor, Helena Papadopoulos teamed up with Andreas Melas Projects (the two are merging galleries nearby in January) to show American artist Michele Abeles' photographs, which at first seem as if they are perfectly Photoshopped visual collages, but are actually (and amazingly) images composed in the camera.

Other solo shows nearby included a storefront space displaying two sculptural works by Austrian Neo-Geo veteran Gerwald Rockenschaub (courtesy of Galerie Eva Presenhuber in Zurich), and an intriguing collection of small works on paper -- all dealing with the topic of pain -- by Polish artist Aleksandra Waliszewski. Curated by Marina Vranopoulou of the Deste Foundation, the flat, somewhat surrealist images proved to be hard for viewers to tear themselves away from.

Several of Athens' hippest contemporary art spaces are located in the ReMap 3 neighborhood anyway, and they put on their new shows with a home-court advantage. The Breeder's spacious concrete interior displayed paintings by the German artist Gabriel Vormstein, along with a series of his fun "quadratic sculptures," made by arranging random objects in cement-filled pizza boxes.

The effort at Kunsthalle Athena, a year-old art center run by busy Greek curator Marina Fokidis (in an especially gorgeous neoclassical building donated by Tsakonas), was a sprawling group show in sprawling spaces connected in the back by a massive outdoor rooftop garden. Architect artist Andreas Angelidakis provided a stacked-furniture assemblage and 29-year-old Greek artist Stefania Strouza filled a room with framed aphorisms, like "and thence from Athens turn away our eyes, to seek new friends and stranger companies."

The amount of visual information was overwhelming, but once you find your way around, there is easy sense of community, and the independent projects turn out to be downright fun. In dealer Rebecca Camhi's street-level project space, quirky Greek artist Katerina Kana

photographed passersby to create on-site portrait collages.

Berlin's Galerie Utopia/The Forgotten Bar set up shop in a bar on the courtyard at 10 Giatrkaou with artworks by the multitudes who took part in German artist Tjorg Douglas Beer's project space in Berlin, which had its heyday in 2009 and has been making the rounds as a kind of installation ever since.

The Breeder director Nadia Gerazouni and Nea Gallery curated a tongue-in-cheek show called "Noor: Death in Jaipur" on the upper floor of the Indian restaurant Noor (while I visited and read the show's explanatory narrative fanzine, two Indian guests were hotly discussing one of the kitschy seashell sculptures in language I did not understand).

Then there was You Make Me Feel like a Natural Woman, a collaboration between Greek artists Konstantin Kakaniyas and Antonakis Christodoulou that deconstructs the "male stereotype" in a series of hilarious and vaguely homoerotic self-portraits where the two pose together in manly places, like construction sites and basketball courts.

Late on opening night, the cocktail caravan moved from the Oliaros office to the rooftop of the Classical Athens Imperial Hotel. With a view to the Acropolis, crowds thronged the overwhelmed bar, jokes were bandied about that Greece had officially gone bankrupt, and people frantically looked for carpool opportunities, since Athens' taxi force was on strike.

On Sept. 14, the Athenian art world convened at the Museum of Cycladic Art instead, to catch the winner of this year's Deste Prize. In the museum's packed foyer and in the company of local celebs like Deste Foundation founder and übercollector Dakis Joannou, German museum director and jury member Kaspar König announced that the prize was going to Anastasia Douka. The 32-year-old's installative work *Lazy Susan Not* and that of the five other shortlisted artists (Alexandra Bahzetsi, Irimi Miga, Eytixis Patsourakis, Theodoros Stamatoyannis, and Jannis Varelas) remains on view at the museum until Oct. 30.

In a lot of ways, ReMap is a feel-good event, but this edition is also -- maybe by default, a word we perhaps shouldn't use! -- a bold statement that culture is still important during a crisis. It's an impressive initiative that allows the city to celebrate and showcase its own art scene, which keeps getting better. I felt transported back to the rawer, less commercial times of Brooklyn or Berlin, where long ago, creative work was often on view on pockmarked, peeling walls and the air was thick with still-untapped potential and excitement.

ReMap is already far more refined than this -- Iason Tsakonas' international connections, especially, are too established -- yet the similarities remain. Local and younger artists get a chance to shine alongside the top international stars, and the situations are still fluid, not fixed. "In Greece we can be creative, and the more international exposure we have, the more confident we can become," said Tsakonas. No one quite knows what will happen next, but everyone hopes to find enough there, and here, to avert a Greek tragedy.

"ReMap3, An international contemporary art programme," Sept. 12-Oct. 30, 2011, Keramikos-Metaxourgeio, Athens, Greece

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