

THE HOLOBIONT RESEARCH PROJECT #1

-Nordic art and cultural interaction and collaboration in Athens, Greece

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Introduction

Athens is a unique place for Nordic artists to experience a very different cultural reality, one that is full of inspiration and possibilities but also contradictions and challenges. This city is at the heart of the political and economic crisis which has gripped Greece since 2008. Culturally, Athens is a melting-pot where a cutting edge, urban, metropolitan lifestyle co-exists with a society which still holds onto traditional values. This is a city where internationality equally means cosmopolitanism, extensive non-european immigration, and an emigration resulting from the current economic situation, and where rapid socio-economical changes have created a strong and mutual solidarity whilst also manufacturing neoliberal indifference, racism and far-right politics.

In spite of these new circumstances, creativity has not been wiped out, but instead exists in all its vitality and in abundance. An increased interest in Athens as an art city has certainly become apparent in recent years and is perhaps best signified by the 14th edition of the documenta taking place in Athens in 2017 for the first time. However, it is important to point out that Athens is a complex and eccentric location, rather than simply an ungentrified capital waiting to be discovered – and this is why we believe that the very conditions of the city will offer something essential for Nordic artists.

In 2015 we launched a project to research opportunities for Nordic artists to collaborate with their peers. The aim of the research was to map Nordic and Greek art-life and to create professional networks, but also to understand tendencies and thresholds of art in relation to different environments, within which the art is taking place. For most of the artists from the Nordic region, the Athenian conditions for culture and art are far from unproblematic.

For artists, working internationally has become more of a standard than an exception. However, there is very little written about that – especially within the framework of *the social*. Our research was born as a response to critical voices from the field, which were, on the one hand, pointing out the difficulties that artists and curators have had when working within different cultural contexts, and, on the other hand, blaming them for cultural colonialism, the glorification of social problems, poverty tourism, the causing of gentrification, representing something they are not eligible to represent, or just being naive and stupid. Also, we were inspired by stories and examples where art, regardless of borders and boundaries, successfully managed to create fruitful collaborations and friendships, mediated important experiences and brought forth relevant questions. All these diverse views are very timely in Athens right now, as there is definitely an interest from artists coming from different realities, who are all targeting their gazes on the city.

This study is all about how Nordic artists could work in this specific location in a way that brings out their best creative potential without causing unwanted impacts, whilst being beneficial for all parties involved. This perspective led us to think fashionably within a context of *social sustainability*, that we soon after found a problematic concept in itself. Thus this report provides also some more generalisable insights about art for people working with culture productions, allowing them to contemplate, experiment and challenge within their field.

The thoughts and conceptualizations presented in this report are overviews of topics we researched from the autumn of 2015 until the end of February 2016, and are not in anyway claiming an exhaustive totality, but rather capturing fragments and observations from something that is a vast and complex subject.

The core of the research group was formed around Teemu Takatalo (visual artist, curator of The Holobiont Project, Finland), Niklas Karlsson (producer of the Holobiont Project and graduate of media and culture studies, Sweden), Elina

Niinivaara (anthropologist and specialist on migration, Finland), Sebastian Boulter (visual artist and researcher of gentrification, Finland/Belgium), Alfred Gundersen (artist, Denmark), Petter Baggeryd (technical coordinator and contact person of the Valand Academy, Sweden), Mapet (street artist, Athens), Philip Pedersen (performance artist), Ólafur Páll Sigurdsson (literature scholar, Iceland), Matina Pantelaki (Greek coordinator of The Holobiont Project), Malina Terkelsen (documentary film director, Denmark), Kalle Hamm (Artist and curator, Finland) and Dzamil Kamanger (Artist and curator, Finland).

In addition to this other artists, curators, academics and creative workers contributed to the knowledge creation of the research project including Antonis Vradis (Junior Research Fellow in the Department of Geography, Durham University, England/Greece), Julia Tulke (PhD student in University of Rochester and editor of <http://aestheticsofcrisis.org>, USA), Joe Painter (Professor of Geography, Durham University, England), Julia Heslop (artist and writer, Newcastle, England), Marina Fokidis (Curator, Head of Artistic Office of *Dokumenta 14* in Athens, Greece), Quinn Latimer (Editor-in-Chief of *The South as a State of Mind* art-magazine, Athens, Greece), Silvia Bottioli (curator and artistic director of Santarcangelo performance art festival, Italy), TWIXTlab collective (art and anthropology, Athens, Greece), Momangen Gallery (Stockholm, Sweden), Ivar Martinsson (graphic designer & illustrator, Sweden), Carolina Trigo (artist and researcher, PhD Candidate in Philosophy at the European Graduate School, Switzerland/Argentina), Dean G Hewett (Manager of Sarri 12 gallery, Athens, Greece), Myrto Xanthopoulou (Visual Artist, Athens, Greece) and our many partners from Greece and the Nordic region.

Part of the research was done during the art workshop *KLIMA* in Paros Island, Greece, curated by Carolina Trigo and Georgia Kotretsos.

The research traverses three different discourses and is categorized thematically – although many of the themes are overlapping.

The first one is on a meta-level, concerning the definition of the concepts and topics themselves; our own identity and agency within the research as culture makers, creators, artists, curators, producers and researchers; but also the position we hold: how we exist spatially and culturally – where we are, and how. Thus the meta-analysis also includes contemplations about some of the basic concepts we are constantly referring to: sustainability, power, difference, aesthetics, networks and so on.

The second layer contains general observations, experiences and memories. This part of the research is concerned more with different realities – practical and imaginary, yet existing – and it is reflective and descriptive by nature and thus dynamic. This part was the most interactive and dialogue centred.

The third stage is conclusive, but in a speculative manner, and directed towards the future. This is probably the closest to the expectations that one could have about the outcomes of this kind of research, dealing with the material, spatial, financial and ethical conditions of international artists collaboration in Athens.

Due to the scale of the work, some of the main topics of the research will be explored to a greater extent in the future and thus not be included in this report in their whole extent, but referentially.

Research topics:

- Social Sustainability
- Agency
- Methodology
- Creating networks
- Space and place
- Community
- Economy
- Ecology
- Identity, difference and otherness
- Gentrification
- Art, institutions and pragmatism
- Nationalism
- Infrastructure
- Athens and urbanism
- Art in Athens
- Financial alternatives
- Nordic collaboration

Thoughts on sustainability, social sustainability and post-sustainability

It seems that the discourse of sustainability is deeply rooted in certain practices and concepts, which are an integral part of contemporary art in the 21st century. If domination of market economy and structuralized top-down violence are applications for the infrastructural organization of everyday life – also affecting the ‘world of arts’ –, *the Reason* has its own deterministic will to architect everyday life conceptually. This is not to assume that violence or rational determinism are the only valid interpretations of human life, but to recognise that such arguments exist strongly in *transatlantic thought*, thus implied also into societies. In other words, there seems to be two prevailing major social paradigms, an infrastructural and lingual, hardly ever used separately. From this basis, we are able to compose a narrative of control – control as a combination of force and prudence.

Sustainability is one of the contemporary discourses of control based on an anthropocentric idea of the exceptional value of human life. It is a narrative for *directing or limiting the societal power to produce protected life* of a kind – no matter how insane the claim might sound in the middle of ongoing ecocide, social oppression and economic crisis. Because life itself is a goal of sustainability, sustainability can be understood as a full-bodied amalgamation of physical force and its rational moderation, where infrastructural, social or political issues become *biological*. Biological in the sense that life is not the matter of course, but a result of governance – an object.

Life, in this context, is not only a vigorous life force. It equally includes production and infrastructure of death as well. The production of life is, most commonly, a normative selection of one life-form over another. More consequential and disturbing evidence can be read from newspapers, human right surveys, climate reports and ideological pamphlets, to name a few, which, in turn, are intensifying the desire to produce life – to produce it better – by enforcing even stronger metaphysical threats to be answered with stronger moral imperatives. Thus, a spiral of life maintaining death is implied in the discourse of sustainability.

Since our interest is in arts, it is appropriate to point out that the previous discourses seems to live strongly within the context of art as well. The idea that artists work is exempt from its social morality and material dependencies does not stand on solid ground in the realm of social awareness and *biopolitics*. Hence we are experiencing art that is increasingly perceived in relation to different social interpretations and ideals congregate around social sustainability. We are talking here solely about social sustainability, instead of particularizing environmental sustainability, as we see it inextricably blended with the processes of individualization, social relations, economy and politics, and thus must be thought *transversally*.

Our intention however, is not to contribute to something that is understood as sustainability. The reason for this is simple. Talk about sustainability is idle as we cannot have any knowledge about it; because there is no experience of it. There are no sustainable modern – or western, or enlightened, how ever you want to call them – cultures, living in a way that living conditions are not consumed more than they are produced. Perhaps we can list some aspects and parameters that we appreciate as useful when thinking about sustainability, but this is not the same as sustainable life itself. The question is not really technical but epistemological, about the nature of knowledge; not only what we know, but *how* we know; more precisely, how the knowledge can turn into social reality. Thus, when there is a talk about sustainability – which is very trendy nowadays – it is actually about some-

thing else, *most probably* something fundamentally unsustainable – stricter social control or new profitable business opportunities – having nothing to do with ways of living which could be able to produce a meaningful and pleasant life for the next thousand of generations.

If we can not say anything meaningful about sustainability, what we can do, instead, is to create social processes, that perhaps, are able to alter the nature of knowledge. From our point of view this process is social and it seems to imply, at least, six preconditions. The social condition for such epistemological change has to have a potential to be 1) free enough to allow people to function freely socially, that is to say, not to be taken over or be dominated by anyone; 2) creative enough to experiment with alternatives; 3) critical enough to understand what is really sustainable and what is not; 4) flexible and dynamic enough to be able to react and adapt to new knowledge; 5) connected to both living and nonliving nature; 6) practical enough to impact social reality.

Instead of sustainability, we call this kind of approach *post-sustainability*; something that comes after abandoning the – groundless and unsustainable – contemporary idea of sustainability. If sustainability is an exact name for goal-oriented life production – lacking any empirical evidence that it works – the idea of post-sustainability is to focus on egalitarian social relations and creativity. More precisely, to create an alternative concept of social sustainability; *a social reality that is able to nourish and maintain social conditions for an open/inclusive definition process for the Social itself* (how ever it appears).

Therefore, social post-sustainability cannot be another absolution project nor just a new rhetoric discourse to reproducing an old habit, but a solid strategy to act and experiment in the social reality. Thus, it has to imply processes for actual qualitative changes in the very ways of being – how to relate socially, how to love, enjoy, to be born, die, to get old, make art etc. – however, based on an accurate

analysis of what are the preconditions of this kind of activity. Furthermore, this should all be understood in a context of the global that has been notably challenged by the constant social, ecologic and economic crisis. Post-sustainability cannot be universalised but, perhaps, invented independently in different social realms.

One could claim that a more urgent object of study would have been something less marginal and more socially important than art. This criticism is justified if we understand art as an *institutionalized form of creativity*, as it is commonly understood. However, if we, instead, understand art as an *extravagant usage of excess of human reason*, we are talking then about something that is closely related with the future; something dynamic that differentiates itself from *repetition* and unsustainable *reproduction*.

Ways of organizing and infrastructure

If the social can only legitimately be defined socially – together – and sustainability is an inclusiveness and durability of this process, as described before, it is consistent to reflect organizational questions of an international artists collaboration in a social context. However, belief in both, social relations and openness, sets some challenges for building a functioning way of organizing, and thus is worthy of some contemplation.

A totally open collective, most probably, does not create deep and vital relations strong enough for problem solving and responsibility, as it attracts people that have very few common interests; however it is essential for coincidences and contingency. A closed collective, perhaps, has a higher potential for a vertical depth of relations, but is exclusive and thus lacks the horizontality, randomness and creative power. One strategy to overcome these problems is to combine the advantages of both approaches and to build a horizontally organized network of different artist groups.

According to our experiences, a group-based organisation is durable as each group consists of several individuals – enough people to take and maintain the responsibilities, but not too many to lose a personal level of interaction. Sharing and intimacy seems to be a precondition for creating an autonomously functioning, dynamic and involved network. On the other hand, openness and inclusion towards new people and partners can be provided by using open submissions for different art activities. The idea of such a strategy is to create a mutual and easily accessible platform for working dynamically on a relatively large extent with a low level of effort.

From this base, we mapped out and put together 17 well locally-connected artists groups/initiatives, from all the Scandinavian countries and Greece, and created a network, to collaborate on the realisation of the research and further activities. Stretching out and combining multivocal perspectives helps us to reach a more genuine view on arts, the city and different social realities, but also exposes a multitude of opinions and views.

We also created a group ourselves, *The Holobiont Project*, to be one entity among the others. With an identity as an art initiative, and by realizing our own cultural activities, we transformed ourselves as researchers into colleagues or network-members, and thus dismantled some restrictive hierarchies whilst established relations on a practical level. This move changed the way we communicate and how we were received and communicated with.

In order for any projects and events to take place, there is a need for some kind of infrastructure. Initially our aim was to find the means to create a space that satisfied the diversity of desires such a network might have, whilst containing many possible functions: a gallery, artist residency, social space, working studios, offices and accommodation. This space would be an international hub hosting local and visiting artists and cultural producers.

However, several factors made such a project challenging financially which forced us to rethink our strategies. The lack of regular income in Greece, especially with art and culture, combined with no state support or funding means that a project that has certain financial instability but regularly high administrative costs risks rapid financial collapse. Therefore we started on a smaller scale with a temporary space which hosts an office, a meeting room and a work space, with the possibility of basic accommodation. As we came into contact with more creative spaces in Athens we realised that utilising these spaces and creating partnerships broadened possibilities and could also be beneficial to local creative initiatives.

Through a combination of necessity and potential we developed a scattered infrastructure and created relationships that enabled us to use several galleries, spaces for presentations and workshops, stages suitable for performance art, theatre and music, and various options for accommodation and additional workspaces.

Combined with what we already have as a space, we can now infuse international artistic and cultural activities into the already existing creative infrastructure in Athens, thereby complementing and enriching the creative milieu. Instead of concentrating activities, this also started to look like a more suitable strategy in social terms as it better serves the different desires of different participants, but also supports the self-management of a wide range of spaces and initiatives.

As a project, we wish to maintain and strengthen this infrastructural network, whilst developing the possibilities of creating a new space which is similar to our initial idea but on a smaller scale.

Greek legislation requires a legal identity for many of the production based activities and other practicalities Nordic artists might want to get involved in. This would be a necessity for things such as long term rental contracts, insurances, various permits, the payment of salaries, receiving voluntary workers from different international programs etc. Also, a long-term presence in Athens obligates tax liability in Greece. The best solution to handle all such commitments is to have a double identity; to exist as an informal initiative and to have legal identity as well. As a part of developing the organisation we are starting a cooperative and researching various ways to enable regular financial incomes in order to cover basic running costs.

The geographic reality of the network model as a way of organizing also brings up some important questions in relation to post-sustainability. Infrastructures of global mass communication and transportation do not exist independently of material

and social realities, and obligations that are far from sustainable. But on the other hand, some kind of geographic dislocation seems to be necessary to avoid socially destructive practices of introverse and regionalism. How can the rich potential of international collaboration and interaction be maintained whilst at the same time avoiding the dependency on infrastructures and social and material conditions that can never be sustainable, no matter what scheme one puts on them? These aspects have to be constantly reflected on when thinking about the objectives of an international artists collaboration.

Methodology

“Prefigurative” is a paradoxical and tempting word that challenges the concept of causality. The word originates from political theory, but is equally applicable to other social contexts. According to Carl Boggs, who coined the term, the prefigurative process embodies, within the ongoing social practice, those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal of the same practice. In other words, prefigurative means a process that includes its own outcomes. Theoretically this might sound groundless, as it seems that the contingency of the process itself is undermined by predefined direction, and thereby there is no creative process, just a realization of a fixed idea. But this is not the case.

A prefigurative process means that there is 1) a contingent motivation that puts a process into motion and 2) a dynamic process that on the one hand develops and experiments new practices, and on the other hand, constantly transports the findings and experiences back to the original motivation in order to renew it. In this sense it is very close to logics or creative processes, where imagination is transposed into practice by experiments, failures, moments of perceptions and reorientation.

A prefigurative process is not the best way to get something predefined done, as the process should allow the freedom to change the original motivation. However, combined together with insights of collaboration and collective working, this seems to be the best way to proceed, as it supports the social aspects of our interests, self-determination and reflectivity.

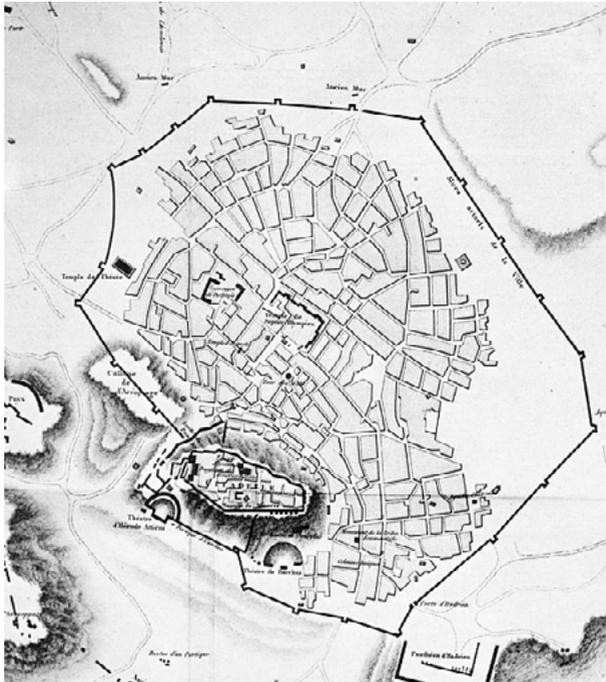
From the perspective of our research, we have been practicing prefigurative methodology by applying our preliminary intuitions and interpretations about social post-sustainability into our own work of collecting and processing knowledge and developing the theory of sustainability. Practically this has happened throughout four steps:

1. By our own direct involvement and participation to the field of the research mainly in Athens but also in the North;
2. By inclusiveness and broadening the research outside of the strict art context and towards collective or participatory methods;
3. By mutuality as a model of collaboration;
4. By using discussion as a primary way to create and collect knowledge.

We would like to emphasise all those relationships and different simultaneous thematic experiences we have been a part of as the primary outcome of the research. Written summaries, which surely have value as communication and a source of inspiration, are always referential and allusive as the actual development and foundational work – the actual knowledge useful for Nordic artists in the future – is *in the relations* we have created. This notion also proposes an alternative to contemporary epistemology, proposed earlier on in this report, *as it defines knowledge as a social practice*.

In other words, instead of only gathering and publishing information, we have established the basic foundations necessary for future Nordic cultural collaboration in Athens. This assemblage of people, venues, group and resources *are* the actual knowledge about Nordic collaboration in Athens useful for future activities.

We have also implied previous ideas to concern production based activities, and started to develop a network based production/curating models we consider suitable for Nordic collaboration in Greece. This means involving autonomously working artist, curators, academics, producers and the potential audiences into the whole chain of production based activities. The process is coordinated by the group itself which shared the responsibility of different tasks as well as the management of the process. The model will be trialed for the first time in the summer of 2016.



The original modern Athens city plan

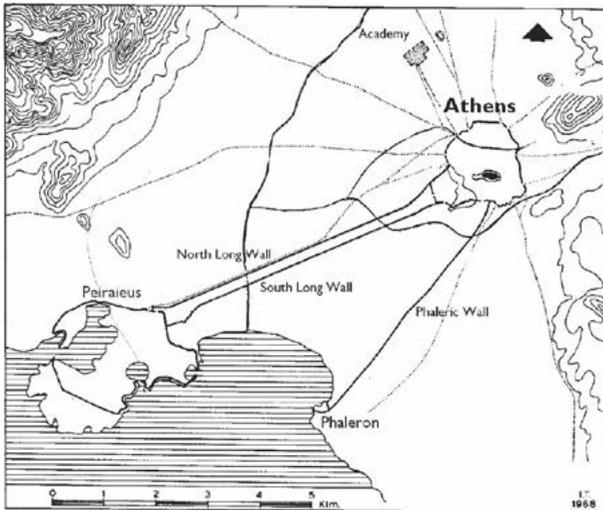
Athens

Chaotic city planning combined with an economic crisis and financial neglect has created a fragmented city with varied architecture, radically different neighbourhoods, crumbling buildings, empty shopfronts and homelessness which can be found alongside bustling shopping areas, brand stores and fully fledged consumerism. There is a vastness to the city which gives the impression that it goes on forever. At the same time, certain neighbourhoods in the city centre act as crossroads.

In creating this project, and in the process of expanding it, we have thought about and investigated the impacts, both positive and negative, that we can have on the environments in which we choose to exist. We have also greatly considered the parts of the city which we think would be most beneficial to us to exist within, and the people we wish to work with, as well as looking at the factors which have shaped this environment.

Despite always being connected to ancient Greece, both the country and the modern capital are relatively new, as in what we are relating to today. The independent Greek state was only founded in 1843, with the then relatively small city of Athens appointed as the capital mostly due to historical reasons. Initially planned to be developed as a triangular city plan between the palace of the king (now parliament), the ancient Acropolis hill and the area of Keramikos, various historical factors have radically shaped the urban landscape far beyond any neat intentional layouts of a crafted capital.

Sudden massive increases in population due to the population exchange of the 1920s and the post WWII and civil war period saw large unplanned housing developments which have created a chaotic cityscape with diverse characteristics, accidental formations and multiple centre urbanism. The port city of Piraeus, once connected to Athens with a walled road which led down to the sea, has been incorporated into greater Athens which sprawls out along the coastline, the mountains and surrounding area. Ancient Greek, Roman and more recent Ottoman structures still exist alongside Neo-Classical buildings, Bauhaus and Art Deco architecture and various modern forms and self built structures. This very organic and accidental shaping of the city has created an array of intertwined cityscapes which look like a collage of villages spreading around every corner and connects to a myriad of satellite towns across the Attica peninsula upon which it is located.



Ancient Athens, the port city of Piraeus and the connecting walled road.

Immigration is a constant factor which has shaped Athens in modern times and continues to do so. The 1920s saw the first such wave as the continued creation of the Greek state led to a population exchange between Turkey and Greece, amongst other places, which massively inflated the population of the city, almost doubling it from 473,000 to 718,000 in 1921. Greeks in the Greek diaspora were forcibly removed from their homes, with many modern Athenian families having migrated from Smyrna, now Izmir, on the west coast of Turkey. New migrants were given plots of land around the small city and over the years this led to an unregulated urbanisation of the surrounding countryside. Fields and streams were transformed into roads and blocks of buildings. During the dictatorship period of 1967-1974 some attempts to modernise the city saw the destruction of many of these original buildings as the residents were promised modern apartments in new taller apartment blocks, though many refused to sell and one can still see old buildings amongst these apartment blocks in areas where such developments happened.

By the 1980s, Athens had serious pollution problems from car use and industry which combined with general traffic congestion led to further regulations and transformations of the city, resulting in developments such as larger avenues and highways cutting through the city and a toll road highway, to better handle large traffic volumes. The lead up to the 2004 Olympics also saw the creation of several large stadium areas as well as an entertainment district, pedestrian roads, the creation of a new airport outside of the city and the implementation of new metro lines. The series of quite sudden changes to the city brings to mind the city planning description Brusselization, a term coined to describe the drastically different and incohesive characteristics of Brussels created through various big and sudden developments that have shaped the city in recent history. Current day Athens has seen a certain amount of urban decay combined with a flight of upper and middle classes away from the city centre. This has created transformations where areas and buildings which used to be quite wealthy have become inhabited

by students, migrants, junkies and squatters as rents and demand have dropped. Simultaneously, some modern Athenian areas away from the centre have become self-contained with shopping malls, newer housing and a certain American city characteristic, whilst other areas resemble working class villages that exist within the city. This city dynamic is the opposite of what one can see in many other parts of Europe, where city centres have become expensive and inaccessible for most of the population whilst economic segregation has led to the low income working classes and unemployed being pushed far from the city centre.



Urban Characteristics

The fact that Athens has an affordable city centre with many empty buildings suggests a lot of potential for cultural and artistic experimentations. Many foreign writers and journalists have pointed to the abundance of street art in the city centre, made possible by a weak state, disinterested police and derelict neighbourhoods. Some cultural squats also exist and host many creative events such as theatre, dance, music and various discussions and presentations. The relative low costs of property rental also means that there is a wide availability of spaces which can be used for galleries, offices, workshops, theatre productions and more. This potential is something which we see in relation to the dilemma for any creative individuals and groups in regards to the effect that their projects have on the environment around them.

It is impossible to have missed the ways in which creativity has flourished in many European cities where conditions such as empty spaces and low costs have enabled creative experimentation and growth whilst recognising that these very processes have led to the destruction of the environment which enabled them. The relation between creativity and gentrification is a constant factor in the way in which we look upon this city and our activities within it. However, the conditions and characteristics of Athens are unique and might not lead to the familiar developments that can be found in other European cities.

It is relevant at this point to also mention that though much physical space in Athens appears to be quite free from state and even traditional capitalist control, power over these areas is manifested through several other forms that may at first seem invisible. The societal power is often balanced between various informal interest groups in local communities such as mafias, drug users and dealers, political initiatives, private entrepreneurs and property owners. Therefore this needs to be taken into consideration when contemplating artistic activities in the city – especially when it comes to events situating themselves in public or abandoned spaces. In many cases already existing power structures might be difficult to interact with and resulting conflicts can even be dangerous. For this reason, local understandings are essential in avoiding unseen, unknown and unwanted sources of potential antagonism.



Current Day Greater Athens with surroundings (Google Maps)

Different neighbourhoods

There is a vastness to Athens which means that a broad investigation of the totality of the city is impossible. Suburban neighbourhoods like Glyfada seem radically different to the Athenian city centre, whilst old working class neighbourhoods like Eggaleo, which is cut off from central Athens by a highway and a long industrial area, appears largely as it's own city or town. When exploring this city and how we would exist within it, our focus became limited to a certain set of distinct central neighbourhoods. However, if we take a look at the bigger picture, they are only a small fraction of the make up of the city.

Exarchia

Often described as the centre of counterculture and anarchists, Exarchia is a central Athenian neighbourhood with multiple characteristics. Street art, graffiti and posters litter the walls in an area with university buildings museums and a multitude of bookshops. Students and subcultural youth, anarchists, immigrants and old people all populate these narrow streets filled with bars, cafes and restaurants. The Polytechnic university campus, which was invaded by the army on November 17th in 1973 after being occupied by students calling for the end of the dictatorship, is located here and maintains a symbolic political value. It is also the place where Alexandros Grigoropoulos was killed by the police in 2008, an event which sparked the rage of youth, and the general population, all over Greece and led to weeks of rioting and became a major historical reference point. The area houses several self organised social centres and squats as well as a squatted park which was transformed from a parking lot in the aftermath of the 2008 uprising.

Amongst other things, it has a bohemian and artistic presence and professional art material shops. Initially we considered that this would be the a good place to open an office and work within but further investigations led us to question this assumption.

“...this implicit yet rigid agreement upon which a certain level of social upheaval and unrest had become possible within the limits of Exarcheia, under a mutual but muted understanding that such unrest would rarely, if at all, spill over to other parts of the city.”—Antonis Vradis, Terminating the Spatial Contract

The area is a physical manifestation of the conflict between the establishment and the far-left/anarchist/autonomist/antagonistic milieu(s), the police seldom enter and if they do so they are ready or looking for confrontation, politicians of all kinds risk being attacked, riots are common and luxury cars are regularly set on fire. Conflicts between various political factions also occurs, sometimes leading to street fights. In addition to this, organised crime exists in the shape of various gangs controlling businesses and drug trade and sometimes they clash violently. There are some indications that the Greek state would like to see a gentrification process in the area (some would argue that it is already occurring but it is highly debatable in our opinion) or a larger planned development as indicated by the reoccurring but unlikely plan to open a metro station on the main square. Therefore the development of artistic and cultural endeavours could aid such a process which would aim towards the pacification of the area combined with increases in living costs. Moreover, many of the factors that we just described could act as major barriers to a free creative project through conflicts with rigid political morality (justified or not), organised crime interests and police brutality. However, the area is of great inspiration through its myriad of social and political projects and DIY initiatives that challenge conventional ways of doing things. Our decision not to base ourselves in this area is in no way a criticism of the fertile environment which exists there, but rather a choice to avoid the complexities that come with it.

Kolonaki

A stone's throw away from Exarchia but a world apart, Kolonaki is the wealthy district of central Athens, populated by embassies, politicians and the upper classes. This neighbourhood offers Parisian style cafes, designer shops, high end restaurants and an unusual cleanliness. It also houses some museums and the majority of the city's private galleries. On practically every Tuesday and Thursday, but not only, there are exhibition openings in Kolonaki that are open to the public. We can see no negative impact on the local milieu by our potential presence in this neighbourhood but a few factors prevent us from locating ourselves there. Financially the area is not as accessible as anywhere else in the city because a bubble seems to exist which has been much less affected by the economic crisis and the urban decay than anywhere else. As the area is financially inaccessible due to high costs, we do not see it as a place where creativity flourishes, but rather as a place where artistic commodification occurs.

Metaxourgio

Metaxourgio is a compact central Athenian neighbourhood with an especially chaotic architectural and demographic characteristic. Crumbling Neo-Classical buildings stand wall to wall with minimalistic modern and brutalist architectural structures, old Greeks mix with young artists and hippies, Chinese workers and Roma families. The area was largely empty until the expansion of Athens in the 19th century and then became a densely populated neighbourhood of artisans and entrepreneurs, boxed in by 4 of the main roads of central Athens, the neighbourhood itself is full of one way streets and alleys. Whilst community organising, guerilla gardening and public events and festivals are commonplace in some parts, other parts contain numerous brothels and open drug abuse and dealing, making it simultaneously creative and collective whilst also potentially dangerous and socially miserable. Some galleries, theatres, bars and restaurants maintain the

creative and social aspects of the area, as well as an abundance of street art and graffiti and a strong community cohesion.

The area is often referred to in relation to art and gentrification in Athens as local entrepreneurial forces are accused of trying to transform the neighbourhood in order to increase property value. The main example of this is the 'biannual contemporary art platform' ReMap which has attracted broad international and local artists participation and has worked closely with the main art institutions in Athens, such as the Deste Foundation and Neon, whilst creating the foundation for the creation of Kunsthalle Athena, a project that is now connected to the upcoming documenta 14 in Athens through both participants and the official documenta publication 'South-as a state of mind'. However, the complexities of the neighbourhood combined with the continuous economic crisis in Athens seems to have halted any development and transformation, or at least slowed it down considerably.

Kentro/Center

Even though all the previous neighbourhoods are considered to be a part of the centre, there is also an aspect of Athens referred to as Kentro, or Center. Based within the triangle of the points Syntagma, Monastiraki and Omonia, this is where you will find the main shopping streets carrying the same kinds of brands and styles as one commonly finds in most global capital cities. Unusually, this part of Athens was becoming increasingly derelict until a few years ago when empty shop fronts started to contain businesses again, reviving the very heart of the commercial city and breathing commodity based life into it. Several banks and buildings were burnt during several days of fierce anti-austerity demonstrations in 2012 and some of these buildings are still derelict as a result. The area has also regularly been the stage for repeated globally broadcast demonstrations, riots and occupations during recent years. Very few people actually live in this area and it can be

considered to be a space where the impact (positive or negative) due to cultural and artistic activities could be minimal on the local population. There are however some city regeneration projects, such as Rethink Athens, largely funded by the Onassis Foundation, that aim to transform large parts of central Athens, using art and culture as one aspect of this transformation. This is, however, a project on a massive scale, involving government institutions and total infrastructural transformations of much of the city centre, therefore resembling urban regeneration rather than the process often referred to as gentrification.

Psirri

Once a neighbourhood of leather tanneries and warehouses, Psirri long had a reputation as a shady place but was intentionally transformed into an entertainment district for the 2004 Olympics. Now several streets are full of restaurants, bars and nightclubs, catering to locals and tourists alike, whilst extensive drug use is still common on some of the lesser developed streets. The area saw a decline after the Olympic games and in combination with the economic crisis many businesses shut down leaving several empty spaces. However, things seem to be changing again as recent years have seen an influx of small start up businesses, migrant shops and restaurants. A few museums and galleries exist as well as a squatted theatre, several independent theatres and an abundance of street art. The population is mixed, old Greek people, migrant communities, newly arrived rich and international inhabitants. The area is a labyrinth of contradictions as partial urban development has had a limited affect and neglect and poverty exist alongside a certain amount of community cohesion and consciousness.

The street art element is strong as young Greek artists have gathered around the gallery Sarri12 and painted most surfaces on several streets, mostly with the blessing of the inhabitants and business owners. The gallery is financed by local entre-

preneurs who rent out holiday apartments in the area and have been involved in neighbourhood assemblies and attempts to keep drug dealers and open drug use away. The gallery and artists connected to it have also provided free art lessons to the mostly migrant children in the neighbourhood and are now developing a theatre group. The Holobiont Project is renting an office from the gallery owners and have initiated a collaboration which offers the possibility for exhibitions, work spaces and accommodation in the area. Due to the already existing connections through both professional and social relationships we feel that we can exist within this environment with a clear and comprehensive understanding of the impacts and opportunities contained through our interactions. We are fully aware of the relationship between art, local business interests and the intentional attempts to transform the area, but we have situated ourselves right in the centre of this process and can see it in a much more direct way than would have been possible anywhere else. We have not made pre-emptive conclusions about this process and do not consider it to be predictable, following an inevitable trajectory and goal as in other cities. Instead, we are considering Athens as a place where we can be aware of processes that we have seen elsewhere, but where we should not take anything for granted.



Street art in Psirri by Cacao Rocks

Gentrification

“Gens [latin] clan or extended family. In England gentry is the social class below the aristocracy that gets its income from landholdings. [...] Gentrification typically occurs when a higher class of people moves into a neighbourhood, makes improvements to property that cause market prices and tax assessments to rise, and so drives out the previous lower-class residents.” - Sebastian Boulter, Representation of Reality, 2015

“Urban theorists have debated it for decades. According to one view, the artists kick it off [...] moving into cheap housing and transforming the area from poor to bohemian – then investors and families follow. Another view is that the developers and public agencies come first, buying up cheap property and then selling it for a profit to the middle classes.” - Philip Ball

Gentrification is a word which is used commonly, but the definition is debatable and often overly simplistic- some academics even argue that there is no such thing and that cities are constantly transformed by a multitude of factors. For many, it goes along with specialist cafes, gastropubs, fixed-gear bicycles, galleries, bohemian vegan pizzerias, street art, boutique hotels and hipster barbers. These might be symptoms and potentially tools, but gentrification is something else and it exists on various levels. It can be described as the process by which an area in a city is transformed by various factors leading to an increase in attractiveness, the influx of new residents, initiatives and businesses, with both positive and negative results. The obvious negative result is that the cost of living increases, leading to long term local residents being forced to move away as they can no longer afford

the new costs. However, the process might also create factors which are beneficial to the neighbourhood such as safer streets due to people being more engaged in their surroundings and socialising outside and with each other, a more pleasant environment and increased creativity. Not all pre-gentrification areas are pleasant, as poverty, neglect and poor-on-poor crime can be prominent and not all change is purely negative.

Sometimes gentrification can occur through unintentional processes, where a series of events leads to the change of a neighbourhood, and eventually the process of gentrification causes an economic transformation with a negative impact. For instance, as cities become more and more expensive, low-income inhabitants are pushed out of neighbourhoods where they live due to increases in rent and pulled towards areas where they can afford to live. Some poorer inhabitants such as artists, squatters, musicians and precarious youth might end up drawn together by financial necessity and common desires. The influx of young, creative and sometimes political people in a neighbourhood can start a process where more people move there, the area becomes interesting and appealing, people start going out there, the media do some reports on it and voilà: It is trendy! Then rents go up, people with money start investing, the area becomes interesting and a more intentional transformation begins. Many of the original inhabitants then have to move, as well as some of the first newcomers, since the factors that attracted them there have ceased to exist. And so the population of cities are often shifted by a series of push and pull factors which are caused by both intentional and unintentional initiatives. However, this is not to say that areas cannot also be transformed by much more intentional processes. Local business and state initiatives can drive gentrification to increase both value and control of areas.

There are several factors that exist around the term and the definitions vary but let us attempt to be specific for the sake of clarity and propose that gentrification is the intentional process where an area in a city is transformed in order to increase

the financial potential for businesses and property owners. The importance here is that it has to do with a process, not symptoms by themselves. The point is this: art and culture are amongst the many factors which can be used to transform an area into something which is profitable for others without any concern for the subsequent effects on local residents or, for that matter, the artists themselves. After the process of gentrification has done its thing, there might just be a sterile monoculture where the playful freedom that artists enjoy is no longer possible.

An awareness of these urban processes of city transformation, both gentrification and regeneration, have been a constant factor in our approach to the city. There is no place in Athens that does not have the potential for negative transformative processes where art and culture could play a part, willingly or unwillingly. However, in the perspective of post-sustainability, it becomes equally essential to not let potentially negative effects influence creative processes. In a recent discussion that we facilitated between some British academics and a local businessman involved in the Psirri art scene, the businessman pointed out that he didn't care about gentrification. He went on to explain this shocking statement further by stating that though he didn't want the old people or the immigrants in the neighbourhood to be forced out due to a transformation of the neighbourhood, he also didn't want to be prevented from being involved in the art scene and the local community. He said that he'll leave the theoretical contemplations of such processes to the academics and continue to be involved in what he wants to be involved in. This fear of a possible negative impact of art and culture in an environment can act as a preventive factor, getting in the way of the processes of creativity. A pre-emptive assumption of a worst case scenario prevents any cultural and artistic interaction, collaboration and existence and at the same time a morally correct and totally sustainable method and approach does not exist. The understanding of potential outcomes of art and culture in the urban environment cannot be predetermined but rather has to be considered as an approach. There are examples of groups and movements that have tried to fight gentrification,

but there are not many success stories. We consider an understanding of these processes, and of the various social and economic components that make up the various areas of Athens, as tools of knowledge against unwittingly contributing to social transformations to which we do not wish to contribute.

Gentrification in Athens

The economic crisis appears to be the strongest obstacle against gentrification in Athens and urban transformations have been fueled more by intentional city developments like those that appeared during the 2004 Olympics. The connections between city regeneration attempts and art projects and institutions such as ReMap and the Onassis Foundation seem to be much more relevant forces, even though they also are not always successful due to a combination of reasons such as corruption linked to politics, illogical bureaucracy and the conflicting interests of powerful families. It is very debatable whether there is any gentrification in Athens going on at all. There is no housing crisis, as in a lack of properties, since rents are decreasing and many properties stand empty. At the same time there is an estimated 50 000 homeless in the Athens/Pireaus region. Many people are emigrating to other countries, moving back home to their parents or moving to villages where their families have property. Lack of wealth and steady incomes have also seen continued degradation of buildings and neighbourhoods. These conditions do carry potentially advantageous opportunities for cultural and artistic activities in the city, and Greece as a whole, without the negative social impacts often connected to such activities. Additionally, many neighbourhoods have seen community projects flourish resulting in self-organised parks, collective kitchens, free health and dental clinics and more. The term gentrification is still widely used but in relation to other cities around Europe it is arguably non-existent. However, the social impacts and relations between international artistic and cultural interactions in the urban environment of Athens, and Greece as a whole, can still be considered with similar analytical tools.

Culture

One could say: “Greek culture is characterized by the ancient history, the Orthodox church, the Ottoman occupation, cultural geography of scattered isolated islands, large scale emigration and remigration during many generations, displacement of Greek population from areas which are now part of Turkey, and, finally, euro-globalization”. “Then”, the one would add, “there are four more periods of Greek modern history, particularly worth to mention, if trying to understand taboos and totems of contemporary cultures and arts in Greece. The first one is the period that started from Ioannis Metaxas dictatorship in 1936, followed by the Nazi occupation between 1942 and 1944, that turned into a savage civil war straight after, finally ending in 1949 and leaving behind a severe discord people are still dealing with. The second is the post-war period that came to a head in the military dictatorship between 1967 and 1974. And the third one: the period of economic growth and particular social stability from the 1980’s to early 2000, culminating in the disastrous Greek crisis of 2009 onwards.

The first period suffocated artists expression with hard censorship, political repression and exiling people. The second ripped Greek culture apart from identity liberation movements which characterized the 1960’s-70’s culture. The third suppressed all creativity under strict economic domination and austerity causing precarity within creative people and leaving them without time and money to actually create.

This saga could be defined as a national(istic) corpus of the cultural identity of Greece – national in a way that it concentrates solely on *subjectification of ‘a Greek’ as a subject of Greek national state*, and objectification of its enemies, not

much else. However, this history might offer some very general premises about the particularity of cultural life in Greece. For example, one could say that a weak social state, nepotism, corruption, patriarchy, regionalism, oligarchy, religion and nationalism are institutionalized within the Greek society because victories and defeats of the past, mentioned in the previously described historical narrative, leading to the situation that the Greek state never managed to establish itself into the society to the same extent, for example, as in the North. However, it is important to note that this kind of historical reading can never explain causality and thus is useless for any deductive conclusions – except the fact that there are individuals working daily to maintain such social practices and, somehow, justifying those deeds.

What the national history does, though, is that it seems to divide people into nations or other segregated social constellations. This, in many cases, takes institutional and infrastructural forms and thus is not just conceptual discourse. Therefore a historical narrative can provide tools with which to analyse existing society on certain degree. However, if we want to understand agency and difference of people living and doing their activities in Greece, or see any post-sustainable social culture developing, there is a need to find alternative ways to narrate one's identity, and stop reproducing collectivized historical narratives as explanation.

This all goes, of course, together with Nordic cultural identity that is equally groundlessly reproduced, for example, by the standards set by Nordic educative, cultural and art institutions, no matter how liberal or diverse this identity is presented – there is no need to ignore nor hide this. Instead of history, we could perhaps talk about inheritance of power and limitations of self-determination.

Conservatism exists and cannot be defeated only by arrogance and blasphemy – as the classical avantgarde and many countercultural movements used to think. Therefore it would be important to create strategies to deal with such an emotional topic that a tradition or myth of origin is. One good way to deal with those is with a certain kind of social sensitivity, that means gentle palpating, observing, asking and listening when acting in social situations or unknown terrains, and trying to bring these situations on personal level where persons, instead of prejudices, can meet as they are. One good way to proceed towards this is to do things together, to overcome any idealistic haze of history with practical activities that establish new bases of ethics, identity and politics in practical form, to be experienced *together*.



Identity and difference

If we view people from a similar perspective than history, we can see that when analysing the social, the most important aim – instead of describing and classifying different characteristics of different cultures or identities – is to try to understand something about difference itself and how to deal with it. This obliges us to shed some light on concepts of individuality and identity.

Usually the word *individuality* represents an enlightened idea of man where the individual is a synonym with oneness – one self-conscious mind or soul attached on one body. However, there are reasons to think of the individual as a more complex socio-biological condition, a territory where biological life and culture are the same.

The word individuality means *in-divisible*, something that can not be divided without destroying it. Even though the definition sounds simple and clear, the actual meaning of it is highly speculative as individuality is not just depending on the content of each individual but also on multifarious and unexplored relations with its ‘components’, whatever they, in each case, are.

For example, contemporary evolutionary biology proposes that a unit of evolution – a unit that can reproduce, survive and thus evolve – is a *holobiont*, a complexity of different organisms and symbiotic activity. Another view proposes that the unit is an inter-relation between an organism and its environment. Both definitions sounds reasonable on some respects. If we add to these an extremely important notion, that individuality exists *regardless* of highly debatable evolutionary biology

concepts of *natural selection*, plus a number of psycho-social insights about desire, language and culture, we are quite close to the broader definition of the individual, whilst still holding onto the idea of the in-dividable, just understanding it more broadly. Individuality is a dynamic, historical and varying concept, not only between individuals, but also with living and nonliving nature and several factors understood of as cultural.

However, there is a certain need to ask how meaningful the concept of the individual is in a world that rather than singularity or in-divisibility, *takes forms of multiplicity, co-dependence, mutuality and augmenting divisibility* (e.g. sharing and giving). Human activities seems to be often more concerned with things other than strict individual existence. A name for this kind of *extended* individuality, that is more than sole individual existence, is called identity.

Roughly speaking, identity can be seen to have two main social orientations: *introversive and extroversive*. The introvert desire is a tendency toward being predominantly active to uphold one's own, often clearly articulated, identity. The extroverted desire is a habit of being predominantly concerned with desiring something that is outside of the identified *self*; thus the identity is dynamic and does not have clear boundaries.

The politics of introverted identity focuses on sustaining a certain already defined identity. This often means that certain institutional and infrastructural solutions are needed to stabilise and secure identity within the society – making society the representation of chosen identity. Consequently, this also means that there are social structures that the identity will eventually get dependent on. Here we can see a societal project, in which the relation between people and the society – institutions and infrastructure – stays more or less the same regardless of the development of the society or its achievements, and it is always, in a way or another, justified by the argument of getting by, or in other words – one's survival. This

justification seems to penetrate widely different social layers from rich to poor, which all are claiming their political motivation to be survival of what they think they are – their identity.

Modern society with its constant growth of infrastructural and technological dependencies, that have become essential for people to exist, is a good example of introversive politics. However, it is important to notice that this is also the case with a paradigm of sustainability, as we criticised in the beginning of this report. Even though societies develop and new innovations are done, they don't really seem to free people to have new desires other than those concerning their own existence; that is, guaranteeing a source of livelihood in one way or another.

This comes clearer if we reflect on 1920's predictions of the future which foresaw falsely, that 21st century societies will have been liberated from wage labor and scarcity. One could, in fact, argue that in the 21st century, life is even more about survival than back then, despite the undeniable technological advances and social development. In modern societies, having a livelihood is not enough, as an increasing amount of work and commitment is needed to save us from contemporary horrors such as climate change and the scarcity of nonrenewable resources. The politics of modern society are based on control, hierarchy, exclusion and strict borders. Politics, driven by this kind of self-perception, have problems to produce, so called, humane surplus, such as diversity of arts, culture and pleasures, as all these aims are predetermined by a common objective to reinforce survival of certain predefined identities (often gender, ethnicity, strength, competitiveness, intelligence etc).

Another approach to politics is to create a social reality that focuses on practicalities and relations that are born out of a desire for factors other than necessity, and which, therefore, are directed outside of our usual self-perception. This would mean a society as a project to desire new and better desires, and extend identities,

rather than to try to define one's own boundaries and protect them. When life is not at stake there is no reason to restrict and exclude, and also identities, as well as culture, can be extended and cultivated in diverse and excessive manner. Practically this means a culture that prioritizes activities other than economy and social control, or, as argued before in this text, aims beyond the concept of sustainability and life production.



WD mural at Sarri 12 exhibition 'Late Night Tale'

Anti-discrimination and excluded identities

Drawing from previous perspectives, we have developed a strategy for social inclusion and anti-discrimination, which is to 1) to create organisational solutions that are able to recognize and deal with difference – having a lot to do with agency, self-determination and autonomy of identities; and 2) to contribute in social development where both, identities and desires, can be cultivated and enriched.

This means that we cannot create a first-hand process for equality and inclusion as any unilateral representation of excluded identities – even when it is done respectfully and with good-hearted motives – is a technique of introversive identity politics, causing *otherness* and dominance of privileged, both in the very core of the structure of discrimination. Instead, we will focus on extroversive strategies, which means announcing publicly our anti-discrimination stance, openness for different identities – including those which are struggling for recognition – and low-threshold participation. We will also, as a collective, act in solidarity with already existing and nascent anti-discrimination struggles. An important part of our processes is to develop and practice different collective curatorial and production models that includes identity sensitivity.

On the other hand, when working on the field of arts, we need to reflect broadly, not only on our own social relations, but on the whole discourse of art as a practice which is often based on aestheticization and utilization of social discrimination. Most commonly this tends to take the form of material and infrastructural dependency between art-life and political actors (authorities and corporate life) producing and maintaining unequal distribution of work, wealth, resources and societal power.

Another aspect is art's tendency to transform social discrimination into commodity and the unilateral benefit of the art-world. This often happens through suppressive one-directional relations. In these, the profit or benefit transfers from down to up from the object of artistic representation to the artists, gallerists, institutions and investors, and the power moves in the other direction, from top to down. Artists should be aware that 'rising awareness' does not necessarily mean that work will turn out in a way that was planned, thus this approach alone might stay too abstract and uncertain. Moreover there is no responsibility taken by the artist if something other than a lift to his/hers personal career happens as a result of the work.

Identity sensitive art proposes that before entering into someone's intimate spaces, artists, galleries and other cultural producers should establish a truly functioning two directional relationship to establish a mutuality between the actors. In this two directional relationship, all sides would have the power to affect the dynamics of interaction or *economy* of relations, as well as how the art is representing its object. As an art project we have to ensure that artistic representation happens with this kind or responsible way.

The success of the strategy can be measured after some time of activity by analysing how excluded identities participated in our activities and the role which they had.

Arts

One could roughly say that contemporary art-life in Greece differentiates from that of the Nordic region. This is not an intention to *localize* aesthetics or works of individual artists, which are in no way possible to compare regionally whatsoever, but to review some social, financial and cultural conditions affecting both the arts and artists. These conditions could be separated into two groups: dynamic and solidified. The first includes those which are in change and can be changed easily; the second, is about conditions established, institutionalized or infrastructuralized in such a way that they have created imperative or deep-rooted dependencies, or are otherwise difficult to change. Here, our focus is on solidified structures such as institutions, galleries, funding, international art events etc., which can variate a lot depending on the location, and thus be discussed and compared. However, deductive – top-down – reasoning about arts and artist's work in different places can not be comprehensive with these parameters, as individual artists everywhere have different relations to the previously mentioned conditions.

At a first glance it seems that Athens has all crucial conditions to be vivid art city. The rents are relatively cheap and there is a big supply of suitable spaces for galleries, project spaces, studios, venues and so on. The socio-political situation might look exciting for those who are not affected by it and who don't care. However, for some unknown reason the city is lacking a distinctive creative wave, typically related to the conditions and times of social turbulences. Or, perhaps, creativity takes unusual forms and thus is not detected – or, most likely, something central is missing in our prediction?

Maybe the meaning of art has changed? Perhaps, the artist's ability to produce, and people's abilities to have aesthetic experiences doesn't reach the aesthetic desires of the present moment? Maybe the political realm is too scary or harsh for artists? Or maybe the current reality lacks a connection to the future, therefore preventing all dreaming.

Whatever the reasons are – perhaps all of those – there are many interesting processes going on, and also, there are plenty of good things about the unclarity of the whys and wherefores causing the lack of contemporary arts. Maybe, in fact, the correct question should be: why is there more art in some other places? Why are some other realities more compatible and alike with requirements of contemporary art-life and the artist's imagination that is influenced by it? If contemporary art is a consequence of certain living standards and socio-political conditions – as one could conclude – what does it tell us about art and aesthetics? This reveals that the question "is there any social post-sustainability in contemporary art" is, perhaps, the same question as "is there sustainability in living standards and socio-political conditions"?

At the moment art-life in Greece is in transition. The old system and its infrastructures are crumbling, the ensuing vacuum is filled with new ones, some parts of cultural life are not affected at all, and, outside of the focus, something totally different is created. There is no clarity if one (or any) of these tendencies are able to solidify within the next social experiment, how, and what that might be.

Today, Athens art-life is dominated by big corporated cultural funds, commercial galleries, some large scale international art festivals and suffering state institutions. To one side of this exists a relatively small but vibrant, grass-roots art scene with small independent and non-profit galleries and venues for performing arts. The exception is independent theaters, that Athens has more of than other European capitals. Also out and alongside of fine arts, Athens is very lively street art and graffiti city.

The big funders are two philanthropic foundations, managing a part of stellar fortunes of the ship owners Niarchos and Onassis, and a contemporary art production company NEON run by collector and entrepreneur Dimitris Daskalopoulos. During the crisis these three entities have significantly increased their importance as financiers and power users in Greek art-life, which has in turn evoked hatred towards them from many artists who have wider social consciousness.

Most of the commercial galleries are located in the posh neighbourhood of Kolonaki and are showing mainly contemporary art suitable for art collectors and the new rich. Most of the galleries are open to exhibiting international artists work with the agreement of taking a commission with every sale. However, economic depression has strongly influenced this segment of art-markets by driving some of the galleries into bankruptcy and making others change their selection to an even more commercial one to avoid financial risks. However, there are some exceptions, for example Elika gallery has been able to compete with the economic depression by maintaining a fresh and diverse program of contemporary art. Another fairly recent development is the appearance of trendy multifunction entertainment spaces combining a bar, venue and gallery, like Booze Cooperativa, Bios and Romantso, this attracting affluent young adults and trendy tourists.

Athens is hosting large scale art events like Athens Biennale, Athens Festival, Digital Art Festival, Athens Art Fair, Athens Film Festival and Athens Comic Festival as well as others. These present the work of Greek and international artists. Some of the events are offering open, often thematic, submission for artists all around the world. Also the 14th edition of the *documenta* is taking place in Athens in 2017. *The documenta case* has been analyzed in more detail in our other research project *North//South Convergence*. The results will be published later this spring and therefore not dealt with in a larger extent here.

Perhaps the most commonly referred to artform in Athens is the popular and appealing spread of street art which is infused everywhere. The Athenian streets are chaotic in many ways and street art fits into them in a seemingly natural way. Displayed in the urban gallery, they are a steady source of tourist snapshots but have also become a part of the international media story spanning back to the uprising of 2008. Artists like WD, Mapet and Cacao Rocks have regularly been interviewed by large media outlets like RT, BBC and the Guardian and their images as well as others are regular features of news reports. There has also been an interest from the more established art world, such as the Onassis Foundation which has held exhibitions with local artists. However, largely this artform exists beyond the art industry and belongs in youth subcultures and the anti-authoritarian movements.



Art and the Social

What we are particularly interested in is the coherence of arts and the social realm. If there is a causality between these two – as we hypothetically predict – we would like to find it and work with it. This suggestion – if it is correct – opens a space for many interesting speculations.

If our prediction is sober enough, it is also justified to speculate that the aesthetic domination of the art industry – big art festivals, ‘important’ galleries, famous curators, prominent financial bodies and institutions which present themselves (or are presented) as the triumph of contemporary art – is, in many cases, also influencing socio-political organization. This influence could be caused by the difference between socio-political standards and the requirements of ‘high-art’ and what exists in the social realities it occurs in. A study of the logic behind is important as the existence of big art festivals and institutions are one central answer to the question: *what is substantive*. This is, of course, also the question we are trying to answer asking by our own projects.

In other words, if there is tendency to establish certain aesthetic norms – as high-profile art events and institutions are doing – this also necessitates certain related socio-political obligations, e.g certain living standards, educational background, utilisation of natural and labor resources, mass communication, logistics and all the social and state structures the previous requires. If these obligations differ radically from the existing conditions of the current reality, we can talk about arts tendency to contribute to socio-political development. This might sound like we are putting too much importance on the power of the arts.

However, throughout modernity, art has been one of the vanguards of progress. This is not only the issue of big 'high-profile' art institutions but any influential trend of being ahead of its time. For example, early 20th century avant garde was successful in promoting progressive forces in Europe of that time, in creation of something we call modern post-industrial societies. This development implied major social and technological changes, that we can largely blame for our contemporary social, economical and ecological problems.

This example is to say that art has the potential to imply a socio-political transformation striving towards certain living standards, educational system, utilisation of natural and labor resources, mass communication, logistics and so forth. *These obligations are also deeply connected to our contemporary aesthetic experience.*

Another way to understand the previous is to think of contemporary art as a language, territorialized in a certain delimited social sphere, but foreign for some other social realms. The tendency to establish ontological separation between different realms of arts seems to be strongly connected to social and geopolitical privileges and power politics rather than different geographical locations. It is important to understand that this is not happening only between countries or regions, but rather within social fabric, between different interest groups and social layers, as countries and regions *are precisely attempts to articulate and solidify those social relations.* Thus ideas of imperialism or colonialism are not really descriptive here despite of some similarities. This is *not* to say that parallel ontologies, independent from each other, exist as such, but to notice that there is a strong tendency to believe so and to act according to that belief.

As contemporary arts seems to have tendency to set unilateral demands on socio-political realities to adapt its standards – instead of contemporary art adjusting into different realities – many people who have experienced the Greek crisis are increasingly finding artistic representations of themselves, their situation and

the crisis in generally, alien. The socio-political realm of people living in Athens are very rarely dealt within contemporary art in a way that it meets the aesthetics of their realm.

For example, Greek art – as a self-representation of Greek artists – is internationally not particularly rated, but *Greece*, as a *noun* and a site of contemporary art, is. The word *Greece*, in a glossary of arts, does not remind one of the experience of many people who live in Greece. Perhaps this is also part of the reason why some people living in Greece feel disconnected from the narrative of Europe. Moreover, the European identity as a project seems only possible in certain socio-political conditions, in Greece these have largely been destroyed by the crisis.

Likewise, means and aesthetics of contemporary art feels totally unimportant, even ridiculous, in some Athenian contexts. For example, moderated artistic civil disobedience – common practice for political artists – does not seem to create any aesthetic significance in the majority of political realities in Athens. Equally, some artistic representations of the humanitarian situation in Greece are often criticised of glorification of social problems and exploitation of the vulnerable. However, the point is not to point out this as a failure but to note that many of these representations can feel totally valid and justified in some other contexts, occasions, locations and situations. This is not a normative statement, rather an example that different realities seems to be established, but only some of them are included within the context of substantial contemporary art.

Moreover, there should be no blame attributed to different social realities but to art, and how it has become integrated with rigid institutions and infrastructures. While the global project is failing, art is shrinking and isolating more and more into its own realm – including the aesthetics. Popular “something-for-everyone” kind of art-centres and museums are not signs of the liquefying of contemporary art, rather, they show how homogenous and infrastructuralized life in general has

become. The cross-disciplinarity between so called popular culture, fine arts and academic research are not necessary signs of diversity, on the contrary they can be seen as blending together *because their sameness* – not because of distance or difference.

Bridging the gap between art and life is rarely about improving flexibility and openness of art, but rather about demanding adaptability from social life to integrate into the same socio-political conditions with art. Or what else are the feelings of guilt and backwardness that many artists are experiencing but demands of change? However, this inquiry for adaptation is rarely sustainable as the idea of progress is mainly dictated by those whose own material and socio-political demands and dependencies are from the lowest end of the scale.

If one was to look at the Athenian art scene from this point of view, it would be fair to say that there is not really a determined art movement in Athens who are trying to establish their own alternative aesthetic and artistic practice, and research and express their own socio-political reality. Also, there is no any institution, academia, publication or bigger art event sensible enough to understand the conditions, dynamics, diversity and particularity of the reality of Athenian every-day life and its aesthetic dimensions. Connecting with the reality does not mean popularising art but finding the forms to express the particularity of space, time and one's position within it. An illustrative example of this is the *Butoh* dance that merged and reformed different influences – traditional and modern – in late 50's Japan, and effectively expressed the experience of a particular socio-political reality in post-war Japan.

Previous discourse of analysis could be one possible angle to reflect also the *documenta 14* exhibition, taking place in Athens 2017, whilst not really coming and growing from the very socio-political reality. Similar critical views can be imposed also on our own project in Athens and the Nordic Cultural Fund financing Nordic

art internationally. Do we want artists and audiences to desire something that only the Nordic region and lifestyle can offer? This kind of critical view is constantly present in our analysis and process: the problematics of social and material preconditions of international collaboration. However, making any further conclusions about this or other speculations about the causality of the socio-political realm and art should be followed by a more detailed social analysis and analysis of the institutional and infrastructural character of arts and aesthetics.

One possible way to overcome previously presented problematics could be to create collaborative practicalities aiming to make self-definitions, autonomy and artists self-management, as well as mutual collaboration between artists from different socio-political backgrounds. Although, we are aware that these aims are not fully grounded as at the moment many artists – paradoxically – cannot afford to commit to self-definition or be self-managed or be autonomous. Therefore *post-sustainability now!* is to, primarily, defeat this precarity.

Economy and financial solutions

Even though economy is perceived as being everywhere and in every relation, in our opinion this perception exaggerates the importance of economy. We would argue that economy is not the cause, but a consequence of social power. There has never been any money that was not attached to a political order capable of backing it. This discourse of power leads us to favor egalitarian structures or decentralised political organization as solutions for unsustainable economy. However, we recognise that ideas of ‘democratizing’ money lacks an understanding of the essence of money as a mediator of social hierarchy – and there is not any other money than this. That is to say, in an egalitarian economy, money has no purpose anymore.

According to our research and understanding of post-sustainability, there are not any sustainable solutions within the domain of the current economic system. Where the money comes from does not make a big difference. We don’t believe in the superiority of a green or social economy as long as they are based in the same monetary exchange as the current economy, or realized by other authoritarian means. For example, according to our institutionalistic analysis, culture does not exist because of its funding, but because it is needed by societies for economic, sentimental or other reasons, whatever they might be.

However, inspite of our criticism of economy, we cannot deny the reality that we are living in. In order to sustain ourselves in the presence of a constant lack of services, resources and products, money is necessary. Therefore, for us, what matters

the most when comparing different funding possibilities, is the practicality of the funding and the strings attached, not the origin of the money.

Moreover, ones financial affiliations are judged socially, which establishes another kind of reality and limitations. Whether this social judgement stems from the most lucid analysis of economy or just plain stupidity, the power of social moralism and the defining affect it can have on our social relations, should not be understated. Whether we like it or not, it is as necessary as money and therefore its role should be recognized when contemplating on financial models.

Transposed to the Greek reality, the previous reasons excludes most of the Greek funding bodies, as they are heavily affiliated with hudge corporations and dominated by local political games. These funds are considered as unethical, especially within artist-run culture.

Fundraising is one of the most supported financial strategies, as it is not tightly linked with institutions and there are no strings attached. However, the money aquired from this way is often small and, for example with crowdfunding, seen as complicated to collect and often too business-minded for most occasions. Therefore the most suitable financial models are public sector or 'independent' art grants, fundraisings and commercial events, collaborations with art institutions like art schools and academies as well as some forms of private funding.

Within the vastness of the existing financial possibilities, we have started to establish relations with Nordic art schools, started discussions with one private financer and mapped out grant funds. The most suitable Nordic funding bodies for this kind of collaboration project are The Nordic Culture Point and The Nordic Culture Fund as well as the regional grant for traveling artists. In addition to Nordic funds there are some international funds, like Democracy and Media Foundation

in Holland, and projects which support our interests – with no strings attached. We also started a process to connect our project with the European Voluntary Service in order to host interested voluntary workers from all around the continent and beyond.

More important than economy however, is the question of primary values, not the economic value of these values. The role of money is to express a hierarchy of primary values, and more precisely, who can afford to have these values. In other words, whose values are more valuable than the others. Emphasising economy as an ultimate matrix of production and distribution, independent from social organization and infrastructure, means ignoring the agency that lies behind people's actions. Thus the economic conclusion from post-sustainable viewpoint could be to create a social relations functioning beyond the formal economy, focusing on creativity instead of production, imagination instead of innovation, desire instead of consumption and sharing instead of possessing.

We suggests that those desires, typically understood to be satisfied by economy, do not need a prevailing kind of economy to be satisfied. Desires of well-being, health, so called basic needs, creativity or development are not dependent of economy – if these are common desires, they will be satisfied whatever the focus of social relations is. This means economy will come after there is a desire. The only thing that economy, in particular can provide is the authoritarian organization of societal power.

Conclusions

Athens is a location with great potential for artist collaboration, and has plenty of opportunities for Nordic artists to work professionally and to develop and deepen their practices, networks and understanding.

What we want to particularly emphasise – and we find progressive as a proposal – is *collaboration as a working method*, implied broadly in creative work itself and processes where creativity, ideas and artworks are made public. This, perhaps, counters a traditional idea of creativity as an expression of individual talent, but, for us, it is clearly in line with the findings of our research.

Collaboration in this context does not mean depreciation of the artist's personal experiences and autonomy, which are typically seen as the core of creativity, but utilisation of collective methods on those practices which are already, in one way or another, social – although, perhaps, not interactive or mutual. If we want to get more metaphorical, this means applying collaborative processes particularly to those obscure borderlands where the personal blends with the social, and the social with the institutional – the in-between is the area in which we are already familiar with, that being, artists doing collaboration.

Practically our idea of collaboration means shared processes of knowledge creation, formulating creative ideas and adjusting intuitions and insights in different physical environments such as galleries, public spaces, publications, but also working together and sharing responsibility when it comes to production based activities, using and creating material resources and spaces, to raise fundings and distribute income and other excess.

However, collaboration is an empty word without a diversity of participating members. Therefore, from our point of view, collaboration requires a wide and open-ended network of artists from different social, cultural and geographic backgrounds. However, it is positive if there is some kind of organizational strategy to guarantee the necessary commitment of the members and ensure shared responsibilities.

From our perspective, riding with the big names or focusing on spectacles does not contribute to the sustainability of the profession, instead it creates myths, which eventually lead to setting stiff standards for creativity, limiting the diversity of arts and artists, and alienating the whole form of life from its social context.

Coming from this base we believe that the best way to promote Nordic arts and create professional opportunities for artists from the region is to establish a broad international collaboration network and work together, instead of trying to promote individual careers, unconnected ideas or other shooting stars.

This can be achieved by the following practices:

1. Creating a diverse network between different actors of the art and culture fields, but also beyond.
2. Starting to organize exhibitions and events of Nordic and Greek artists, within which different collective working methods are created and trialed.
3. Creating a collaboration space in Athens with necessary facilities for working, exhibiting, performing, meeting and accommodating visitors.
4. Using already existing infrastructure as locations for creative interaction, i.e. exhibitions, presentations and workshops, in order to infuse various artists and cultural producers into new environments.
5. Organizing continuous series of seminars, discussions and workshops where knowledge is shared and themes and topics developed further.
6. Making knowledge public and easily accessible in our website.

7. Securing funding for various activities by applying grants, organize fund raisings and events, redirecting already existing institutional funds, and get art schools involved.

In order to be socially sustainable, our approach should be:

- Collaborative – being based on collaboration.
- Mutual – offering equal opportunities for all participants.
- Autonomous – giving attention to independency, privacy and power for each participant
- International/Beyond National – transcending national identities and finding affinity from actual relations between different people.
- Prefigurative – able to apply new findings and ideas dynamically in the practice
- Inclusive – include different identities and people from different origins.
- Holistic – An interdisciplinary approach, connecting art and culture to other fields and walks of life, which are not necessary understood as art.
- Locally connected – have and use local knowledge to facilitate encounters of different cultures
- Identity sensitive – recognize and respect different identities
- Socially sensitive – recognize and respect social and cultural differences
- Site sensitive – recognize and respect environmental particularity
- Economically stable – able to cover expenses
- Transparent – bringing contradictions and problems of different activities visible, not in order to justify the deficiencies, but to clarify their problematic existence and urgency to improvement.

Summary

This research project has sought to further our understanding of Athens, and to a limited extent Greece as a whole, in relation to Nordic artistic and cultural collaboration and interaction. We have developed techniques and approaches which we find to be suitable for such activities, drawing our conclusions from a broad research process, based in part, on some prefigurative foundations and a wide array of conversations that have either challenged or confirmed our assumptions and hypotheses, and constantly furthered our understanding. We do not claim this research to in any way be conclusive, but rather it has opened up channels of knowledge exchange, and thereby provided the foundations for further research, publications, and a better understanding.

The project has led to the creation of a space in Athens which hosts a work area, a meeting room and an office, and which has been the location for meetings between journalists, artists, academics, curators and students since its creation. The Holobiont Project is the practical outcome of the working group which initiated this research, and has grown from consisting of 4 people to 6, with more people expected to join in the near future. A website has been created with a blog and links, as well as a Facebook page and a Twitter account, disseminating articles and information considered relevant to our focus. Our research has been presented in Aarhus, Stockholm, Tromsø and Tampere at events facilitated with our local partners and resulted in discussions and exchanges of ideas that we expect to lead to various projects and meetings.

Partnerships have been developed between galleries, spaces and art collectives in Athens, with the Swedish and Finnish institutes in Athens, with the Valand Art Academy in Gothenburg, Sweden, and several projects, spaces and artists in the Nordic region. Some outcomes from these partnerships will be the creation of an exhibition by two Swedish street artists, Hop Louie and Hello Banana, in Athens in July 2016, presentations by Greek artist collectives as a part of the educational programme at the Valand Art Academy in Gothenburg in the autumn term of 2016 and the pre-productions of a series of art projects in Athens and the Nordic region during the second half of 2016. Furthermore, the Holobiont Project has carried out a pre-project, funded by the Nordic Culture Point, based on researching art and culture in Athens during the lead up to, the duration of and in the aftermath of the 2017 art event documenta 14.

The Holobiont Project will continue to have a presence in Athens indefinitely, applying for funding for various research projects but also productions and the creation of infrastructure which can act as a hub for visiting Nordic artists. The strengthening of collaboration with partners through actualising projects in order to put our methodologies into practice will further the material conditions and provide new possibilities for a continuous presence. Beyond that, we will develop a legal entity in the form of a co-operative and further explore collaboration possibilities with educational art institutions in the Nordic region. We consider this to be specifically relevant in the near future as Athens is increasingly developing as an art city whilst there is very limited local knowledge and presence available for visiting Nordic artists, with the Nordic institutes focusing mostly on ancient Greece and archeology. Therefore, this research project has led to a basis of knowledge, a multitude of possibilities for practical collaboration and interaction and the creation of an independent art and cultural project in Athens, networked across the Nordic region, able to continue facilitate visits and develop projects in the future.

