

CITY REPORT

If Brussels teaches us one thing, it's that the world doesn't end at the borders of the village square. No other European city is home to so many different nationalities — 184 to be precise, according to the latest figures. This is reflected not only in the hodgepodge of languages echoing through the city's streets, but also in the diversity of its artistic offerings, which make Brussels a microcosm of a larger, still largely underexposed network of art scenes stretching across cities in Europe and in other continents. Over the next issues, our aim is to map this network, one city at a time, by inviting a writer and a photographer to give us an insight into the art scene of the city in which they live and work.

When documenta 14 descended on Athens in 2017, it was an opportunity for many artists and art workers to rediscover the city, this intellectual and cultural 'ground zero' of Western Europe. The event took visitors far off the cultural beaten track, away from tourist traps and overcrowded landmarks. In the aftermath, people liked to refer to the Greek capital as the 'new Berlin' (an epithet that's also been used to describe the Brussels art scene). This referred mainly to the dynamic influx of artists of various nationalities in search of affordable studio space, and the exciting forms of artistic cross-pollination that resulted. Such superficial comparisons, however, can never do justice to a city's art scene; for that, we need to dig a little deeper, to enlist an insider's perspective, so we can look further than the places that we could easily find ourselves.

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by Nicolas Vamvouklis

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ATHENS

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Museum Alex Mylona, Alekos
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Athens Reinvented

Athens is a city that thrives on contradictions. The birthplace of democracy and philosophy, it continues to carry the weight of its ancient past. Yet, this same history fuels a dynamic, ever-evolving present, where contemporary art finds fertile ground in the cracks of the city's layered identity. Today, Athens is not merely a backdrop for antiquity — it's a vibrant stage for creativity, forging its own narrative as a cultural capital.

The oft-repeated tagline 'Athens is the new Berlin' fails to capture the essence of the city's ongoing transformation. It's reductive, a forced comparison with another capital with a distinctly different trajectory. Athens is not an imitation; it is an original, shaped by its own challenges and triumphs. Like documenta 14, which brought global attention to the city in 2017 and acted as a catalyst for its art scene, injecting energy into local enterprises and spurring international collaborations. Yet this reinvention runs far deeper, reflecting Athens' ability to channel adversity into innovation.

The energy coursing through the neighborhoods of Metaxourgeio, Ex-archeia, and Psirri is palpable. Here, graffiti-covered walls and bustling cafés are as much a part of the city's identity as its ancient ruins. These streets have become incubators for ideas, where art professionals converge to shape a new Athens. As I've come to learn over the years, the scene here is as diverse as its population, encompassing institutional powerhouses, independent spaces and artist-run initiatives.

EMST: The Beating Heart of Art

At the heart of Athens' transformation is the [National Museum of Contemporary Art \(EMST\)](#). After years of delays, the museum was fully opened to the public in 2020; it has since become a cornerstone of the city's artistic ecosystem. Located in a repurposed former brewery, the building's industrial architecture is a testament to Athens' ability to repurpose its past to serve its future.

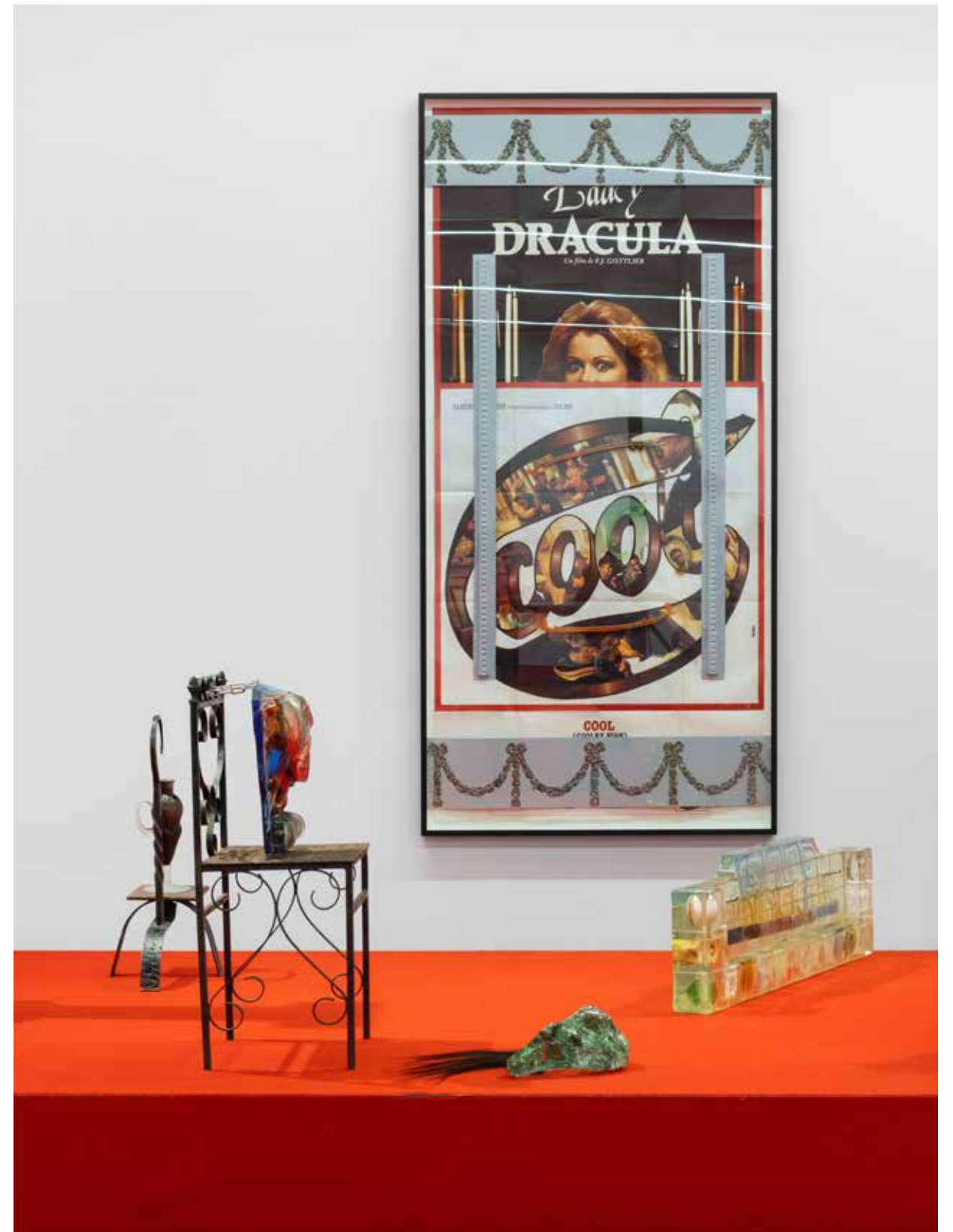
Under the leadership of Katerina Gregos, EMST has redefined what a museum can be. Its programming reflects a commitment to inclusivity, dialogue, and social engagement. During the past year, its exhibition cycle *What if Women Ruled the World?* spotlighted female-identifying artists, challenging patriarchal narratives and exploring themes of power and identity. Highlights included Tala Madani's satirical paintings, Leda Papaconstantinou's performance archives, and Danaï Anesiadou's multimedia installations.

EMST's upcoming flagship exhibition, *Why Look at Animals*, curated by Gregos, promises to break new ground. Featuring 50 international artists, the exhibition will explore the ethical dimensions of the human-animal relationship, placing issues of justice and animal rights at the forefront of contemporary discourse. Solo exhibitions by Janis Rafa and Sammy Baloji have also been announced as part of the exhibition programme, a promising sign that EMST wants to expand its role as a platform for critical exploration.

Beyond its exhibitions, the museum's potential also lies in its ability to serve as a bridge between local and global communities. It has become a gathering place, drawing audiences from diverse backgrounds and fostering a sense of belonging.



Installation view TALA MADANI, 'Shitty Disco', 2024–2025, part 4 of the exhibition cycle at EMST titled WHAT IF WOMEN RULED THE WORLD?, EMST, Athens, photo Paris Tavitian



Installation view DANAÏ ANESIADOU, 'D POSSESSIONS', 2023–2024, part 1 of the exhibition cycle at EMST titled WHAT IF WOMEN RULED THE WORLD?, EMST, Athens, photo Paris Tavitian

Museums: Anchoring Athens' Cultural Identity

Athens' more established museums form the backbone of its art ecosystem, bridging the ancient and the contemporary. At the forefront is the [National Gallery — Alexandros Soutsos Museum](#), a beacon for modern Greek art. Reopened in May 2021 after extensive renovations, its sleek new building embodies the heritage of Greek modernism while embracing contemporary architecture. In 2021, the museum's collection was further enriched by a donation from the Institute of Contemporary Greek Art (ISET), an invaluable archive for scholars and art lovers.

Another institution that goes a long way in bridging past and present artistic traditions is the [Museum of Cycladic Art](#), which merges Athens' ancient heritage with contemporary discourse. Its permanent collection celebrates the profound simplicity of Cycladic sculptures, while its contemporary programme has hosted exhibitions by Lynda Benglis, Jannis Kounellis and Cindy Sherman.

Athens' smaller museums are also indispensable to the city's cultural vibrancy. The stated mission of the [MOMus-Museum Alex Mylona](#), a museum dedicated to modernist sculptor Alex Mylona, is not only to preserve that artist's legacy but also to foster the next generation of sculptors. The museum's rooftop offers breathtaking views of the Acropolis. In 2025, it will host a much-anticipated solo exhibition by Panos Profitis, winner of the Art Athina Award. In the Vathi neighbourhood, another museum dedicated to the legacy of a Greek artist has just opened; the [Alekos Fassianos Museum](#) offers an intimate glimpse into the

life of one of Greece's most beloved artists, showcasing not only his paintings, but also the products of his sustained explorations in scenography and design.

NEON: Reimagining Public Art

If art has flourished outside of traditional institutions in Athens, it's thanks in large part to the vision of NEON, an organisation founded in 2013 by Dimitris Daskalopoulos. NEON's mission is clear: to bring contemporary art into the lives of everyday Athenians by activating unexpected spaces across the city. One of its most ambitious projects was the restoration of the Public Tobacco Factory on Lenorman Street. After transforming this industrial relic into a stunning cultural center, NEON gifted the space to the Greek State, safeguarding its legacy as a hub for art and public engagement. In 2024, NEON hosted the genuinely inspiring exhibition *space of togetherness*. Hosted at the Drama School of the National Theatre of Greece, the show tackled pressing global issues, from migration to social mobility. Curated by Elina Kountouri, it invited viewers to reflect on how these challenges intersect with their daily lives, using art as a tool for fostering empathy. Through initiatives like these, NEON continues to redefine the relationship between art and public life in Athens.



MARIA LOIZIDOU, *Volant Migrants*, 2023, handwoven metal thread, 260 × 312 cm, 225 × 395 cm, 225 × 208 cm, 225 × 340 cm, courtesy the artist and Kalfayan Galleries, Athens – Thessaloniki, installation view 'space of togetherness', NEON at the National Theatre of Greece Drama School | School of Athens – Irene Pappas, courtesy NEON, photo © Natalia Tsoukala



Galleries: A Vibrant Ecosystem

Athens' gallery scene is dynamic, served by a rich mix of established spaces and innovative newcomers. Among the stalwarts is [The Breeder](#), a gallery that has been at the forefront of Athens' contemporary art movement since its inception in 2002. Known for championing artists who blur the boundaries between disciplines, it represents figures like Georgia Sagri and Maria Hassabi, whose works explore the intersections of performance and visual art. Not far away, [Kalfayan Galleries](#) embodies a distinctly elegant approach to art presentation, showcasing a mix of Greek and international talent. Adding global prestige to the mix is [Gagosian](#), the Athens branch of Larry Gagosian's legendary gallery network, located in the cosmopolitan Kolonaki district.

A younger generation of galleries is injecting fresh energy into this landscape. [CAN Christina Androulidaki Gallery](#), which recently relocated to Omonia, captures the city's evolving dynamic with a programme that bridges emerging and established voices. [Callirhoë](#), founded by Olympia Tzortzi, and [Hot Wheels](#), with a dual presence in Athens and London, push boundaries with experimental programming and a focus on avant-garde practices. Together, these galleries reflect the boldness that define Athens emerging art scene.



BANU CENNETOĞLU, *İçin İçin*, installation view at Sylvia Kouvali, Piraeus, 2024, courtesy the artist and Sylvia Kouvali, London / Piraeus, photo Stathis Marmalakis

Heading to the port district of Piraeus, things take on a more industrial flavor. [Sylvia Kouvali](#) and [The Intermission](#) thrive in this unexpected setting, offering ambitious programs that focus on site-specific installations and the moving image. Their presence in Piraeus exemplifies the ability of some initiatives to adapt and innovate, proving that art can also thrive outside of the city centre or its more established neighbourhoods.

Project Spaces: Incubators of Creativity

Athens' project spaces play a crucial role in the city's art ecosystem. This is due to their commitment to fostering experimentation and community engagement. Among them is [ARCH](#), a non-profit institution housed in a modernist architectural gem in Plaka. Just steps away from Hadrian's Arch, the space offers thoughtfully curated exhibitions alongside an incredible library, featuring a large selection of

modern and contemporary art publications including monographs, exhibition catalogues, art theory books and periodicals. This blend of exhibition and research makes ARCH a sanctuary for art lovers and scholars alike.

In Tavros, an industrial neighborhood south of the city center, the aptly named project space [TAVROS](#) explores themes of democracy, ecology, and equality. Directed by Maria-Thalia Carras, the initiative emphasizes accessibility, offering guided tours in Arabic, Albanian and sign language. This commitment to inclusivity distinguishes TAVROS from other art spaces, while challenging them to acknowledge its example.

Equally innovative is [igni](#), a nomadic curatorial project led by Florent Frizet. Focused on ephemeral works and the modalities of appearance and disappearance, igni has showcased its projects in Athens, Paris and Brussels, with its next chapter set to unfold in 2025. Meanwhile, [Enterprise Projects](#) is located in a converted garage in Ampelokipoi. Known for its artist talks and the online EP Journal, the space prioritises dialogue and critical theory, creating a dynamic environment for creative exchange.

Artist-Run Spaces: A Spirit of Versatility

Athens' artist-run spaces embody the city's ethos of collaboration and experimentation. These grassroots initiatives are characterised by their adaptability, often serving as hybrid platforms for exhibitions, residencies and collective projects. Among the standout examples is [KEIV](#), founded by Konstantinos Lianos. What began as an experimental exhibition space has evolved into a hybrid creative studio, where visual artists collaborate across disciplines.



Installation view JOANNA PIOTROWSKA and FORMAFANTASMA, 'Sub Rosa', 2022, ARCH Athens, photo Paris Tavritian



Onassis AIR Fall Open Days, 2024, © Pinelopi Gerasimou for Onassis

In Kato Petralona, the minimalist ethos of [CLOSING SOON](#) stands in stark contrast KEIV's atmosphere of heterogenous artistic activity. Initiated by Orestis Mavroudis, this space is dedicated to the 'economy of means,' presenting exhibitions that emphasise sustainability, environmentally conscious materials and socially responsible production methods. As of 2025, it will transition to a nomadic format, further challenging traditional notions of permanence in the art world.

Finally, another unique venue is [KYAN](#), a project space nestled within the salon of a 1938 townhouse in Exarcheia. Founded by painter Kyveli Zoi, KYAN serves as both a platform for local and international artists and a hub for residencies and site-specific projects. Its intimate setting offers a refreshing departure from conventional white cube galleries, creating a space where art and life can converge.

Residencies: Promoting Creative Exchange

Athens is home to several residency programs that provide art professionals with the time, space and resources to deepen their practices. [Onassis AIR](#), an initiative of the Onassis Foundation, stands out for its emphasis on collaboration and research. Grounded in the principles of 'learning and doing with others,' the programme supports projects that explore intersections of culture, technology and human experience.

Since 2018, [ARTWORKS](#), the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Artist Fellowship Program, has been a lifeline for Greek artists and curators. Supporting nearly 500 individuals, the programme emphasises skill-sharing and professional development, creating a robust network of fellows who actively contribute to the country's cultural landscape. Its focus on mutual support has made ARTWORKS a cornerstone of Athens' creative community.

Adding an international dimension is [Flux Laboratory](#), an artistic incubator located in Athens and Geneva. Directed by Cynthia Odier, the programme focuses on the body as a site of exploration. Situated in the historic neighborhood of Plaka, it operates under the auspices of the Embassy of Switzerland in Greece, with upcoming projects set to merge diplomacy and archeology with contemporary art and dance.

Large Events: Celebrating Creativity

Athens' art calendar is punctuated by festivals and fairs that bring together local talent and international audiences. The [Athens Biennale](#) has consistently reinvented itself with experimental formats. Its previous editions tackled themes of social and political urgency, and there are high expectations for its next iteration, which promises to continue its tradition of provocative programming.

[Art Athina](#), one of Europe's oldest art fairs, has found a fitting home in the Zappeion Mansion, a neoclassical gem in the heart of Athens. Beyond its gallery section, Art Athina has garnered attention for its parallel programming, which combines performances, video and design showcases.

The [Athens Art Book Fair](#), a more recent addition, celebrates independent art publishing. Held in unconventional venues like the Tristraton Arcade, the fair showcases zines, artist books and limited-edition prints. Its grassroots ethos has resonated with younger audiences, making it a must-visit event for anyone interested in experimental publishing.



Performance programme at Art Athina 2024, photo Konstantinos Varotsos

Beyond Athens: A Decentralised Renaissance

While Athens remains the epicentre of Greece's art scene, a growing number of initiatives are flourishing beyond the capital. Thessaloniki, the country's second-largest city, is home to the MOMus network, which includes four art museums. These institutions anchor northern Greece's cultural ecosystem, offering a counterpoint to Athens' bustling scene.

The Greek islands have also become unexpected centres of contemporary art. Hydra, long associated with the DESTE Foundation's Slaughterhouse, continues to draw international attention with its summer exhibitions. Meanwhile, the North Aegean region has seen the rise of spaces like [K-Gold Temporary Gallery](#) on Lesbos, [DEO Projects](#) on Chios, and [Art Space Pythagorion](#) on Samos. These initiatives challenge the notion of art as a seasonal activity, engaging local communities year-round with programmes that emphasise sustainability and cultural exchange. Further south, Thermia Project on Kythnos demonstrates how contemporary culture can drive development in the Greek periphery. By integrating art into the everyday lives of island residents, these spaces prove that creativity can thrive even in the most remote settings.