

Building a Hub for New Art ‘Under the Shadow of the Acropolis’

Many associate culture in Athens with ruins and ancient artifacts. But the Greek government and several big philanthropic foundations want to put the city on the international contemporary art map.

By Roslyn Sulcas

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ATHENS — “Sea, sun and sex, with some Greek columns in the background,” said Poka Yio, the artistic director of the Athens Biennale. He was summing up the Greek government’s tourism campaigns in the 2000s as he led a visitor around a rambling former department store that was one of the sites of the 2021 edition. Part of the motivation for starting the biennale in 2007, he said, was to change that stereotype: “We wanted to put Athens on the contemporary art cultural map.”

Fifteen years later, Athens is certainly on the international art crowd radar, though more as a curiosity than a major hub. Despite the pandemic, 40,000 visitors attended the monthlong Biennale, which ran through November. According to the organizers, 10,000 of those came from abroad, and the Greek capital also teemed with world-class exhibitions, including the Neon Foundation’s 59-artist group show “Portals” in a newly renovated former tobacco factory.

“If the political powers understood how much Athens is being talked about as a contemporary cultural destination, they might pay more attention, because it means money and image,” said Katerina Gregos, the director of the National Museum of Contemporary Art, known as EMST. But contemporary art, she added, is relatively new to the Greek scene. “We have been living under the shadow of the Acropolis for a long time” she said.

Gregos, who was born in Greece and was the founding director of the Deste Foundation, before later taking up the EMST job last summer, was referring to the cultural dominance of Greece’s classical heritage, which attracts most of the sector’s state funding.



“We have been living under the shadow of the Acropolis for a long time” said Katerina Gregos, EMST’s director.
Panos Kokkinias

“It’s understandable,” she said. “When you have such an incredible cultural heritage to safeguard, it’s an enormous responsibility, and we are a small country with finite finances.” She added, “The modern Greek nation state was fashioned according to classical ideas, so this consciousness is part of our identity.”

As a result, she said, there has been very little government support for contemporary visual art, with no funding body like the Arts Councils in England, Canada or Australia, or state-funded organization to support individual artists. Instead, the gap is filled by private institutions like the Deste, Neon, Onassis and Stavros Niarchos Foundations, which hand out grants, host artist residencies and put on exhibitions.

“The big foundations have played a huge role in changing attitudes to contemporary art by creating an ecosystem,” Yio said. “And Athens has another distinctive element, which is small initiatives. So many people come here now to open art spaces because it’s so cheap.” The 2017 arrival of the every-five-year Documenta exhibition — the first time the major art world event had been staged outside Germany — was a game changer, he added.

Yet these private sector initiatives, whatever their success, do not “substitute the need for a public policy,” Gregos said.

The Greek government seems lately to agree. In July 2019, Nicholas Yatromanolakis, a Harvard graduate, was appointed secretary for contemporary culture, before being promoted at the start of 2021 to the culture minister’s deputy, responsible for contemporary culture.

Interviewed in his office in the graffiti-strewn central Athens district of Exarcheia, the 46-year-old Yatromanolakis said that contemporary culture hadn’t previously been seen as a serious contributor to the economy, or important to Greece’s international image and soft power.



Nicholas Yatromanolakis, Greece's deputy culture minister, among works from the EMST collection. Collection of the National Museum of Contemporary Art, Athens; Maria Mavropoulou for The New York Times

“The pandemic hit the contemporary sector very hard, and I think the prime minister recognized the need to invest more on that front,” he said.

One of Yatromanolakis's first projects was to get EMST open quickly. The museum, which was founded in 2000, was a nomadic operation for 15 years before a 1957 former brewery in central Athens was chosen as its site. But even then, long delays in construction and financing, widely seen as symptomatic of systemic dysfunction, meant it wasn't fully operational until just before the coronavirus pandemic broke out in early 2020.

Around the same time, Gregos was approached by the culture ministry to run the museum. She was both excited and skeptical about the idea, she said, because the Greek economic crisis that began in 2009 had meant deep cuts in all areas of government spending. But she accepted. “It is Greece's flagship institution for contemporary art,” she said. “You couldn't be offered a more interesting and challenging job.”

Contemporary cultural projects in Greece are currently allocated around a quarter to a third of the culture budget — which has averaged around \$400 million for the last seven years — while the rest is allocated to the classical heritage sites. It is a relatively small amount when spread between heritage projects, the national theaters and museums, and contemporary culture, said Yerassimos Yannopoulos, a lawyer and board member of EMST. (For context, France's culture budget is around \$4 billion.)

“The prime minister is very much behind this idea of promoting contemporary culture, and Nicholas Yatromanolakis is a really brilliant guy, but Greece has been in a dire situation since the debt crisis,” he said. He added, “And you can't turn things around by sticking to the glorious archaeological legacy.”



“Maple Row Sunflowers,” a 2019 work by Daphne Wright, in the exhibition “Portals,” staged by the Neon foundation in a newly renovated former tobacco factory. Natalia Tsoukala, via NEON

Yet Yatromanolakis said binary thinking can be unhelpful. “I think pitting the classical against the contemporary is unproductive,” he said. “It should be collaborative,” he added, citing as an example a 2019 exhibition of works by the British artist Antony Gormley amid ruins and classical artifacts on Delos island.

In a follow-up email, Yatromanolakis sent the figures for state funding for small-scale contemporary projects, showing a notable augmentation, from around half a million dollars in 2015 to around \$11 million in 2020. He also highlighted additional European Union funds from the Recovery and Resilience Facility, set up to mitigate the impact of the pandemic, which offers another half a billion euros to Greece's culture sector, equally divided between heritage and contemporary projects.

Afroditi Panagiotakou, the director of culture at the Onassis Foundation, said that the lack of focus on contemporary culture in Greece was the reason for creating the Onassis Cultural Center. That building, with its two theaters and exhibition spaces, opened in 2011. "We were in an economic crisis and the Greek state simply didn't have the means," she said.



The Onassis Cultural Center in central Athens, which opened in 2011, is funded by the Onassis Foundation. Stelios Tzetzias

But successfully supporting contemporary art requires more than just money, she added. "Ultimately the people who change the scene are the artists themselves," she said. "Our role is to support them, work with them, be there for them."

Yatromanolakis said that the private foundations frequently worked closely with the state, citing the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center, which houses the Greek National Opera and Ballet, and the Onassis Foundation's funding for a new elevator for the Acropolis. "It's not a competition," he said.

He added that the most ambitious project on his agenda was labor and social reform for freelance artists, whose needs aren't taken into account by current taxation and employment law. "If we don't fix that, we won't have the tools to enable culture professionals to live from their work," he said. "There was nothing in place for contemporary culture, so you have to start from scratch," Yatromanolakis added. "Despite all the horrible things the pandemic brought, I think we can use this as a turning point on how we do things."

Athens might not have financial power, said Yio, the Biennale director, but with its influx of migrants and artists, it was a rising metropolis, "a counterbalance to the London-Paris-Berlin tripod." Greeks, he added, have never had "a bourgeois understanding" of art. "Modernism was missed here, and we are now trying to make huge leaps," he said. "We don't have many of the systems and structures that other countries have. But this is a very positive thing, too, and part of what makes Athens so seductive. Everything is still possible in this place."

A correction was made on Jan. 7, 2022: An earlier version of this article misspelled the surname of the Greek deputy cultural minister. He is Nicholas Yatromanolakis, not Yatromanalakis.

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