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A conversation with iLiana Fokianaki and Antonia Alampi

Founders: Future Climates, Athens

Federica Bueti | Athens | 19 May 2017



iLiana Fokianaki and Antonia Alampi. Founders of Future Climates, Athens. Courtesy Kunsthal Extra City.

In places where funding for the arts is limited, if not practically non-existent, people are pushed to find alternative ways to make, curate, and invent survival strategies to keep going. Very often, these 'practices of survival' come with the burdens of emotional and physical exploitations as result of unpaid labour, over-performance, anxieties, and burnouts. In Athens, Greece, the need to find ways

of surviving is a matter of brute fact for many. But over the last few years, artists and independent art institutions and initiatives have flourished, bringing the city to the attention of the international art community. With this added attention, influenced by the arrival of documenta 14, avoiding a situation in which Athens becomes a backdrop for cultural producers to glamourise the country's misery has become a key topic of concern.

In 2016, curators Antonia Alampi and iLiana Fokianaki, the latter of whom runs the independent art space State of Concept in Athens, met and started talking about the possibility of a project that could address the need for a different art ecosystem. They came up with the idea of Future Climates, a platform borne from their desires, needs and shared experiences of working in southern Europe. Future Climates was launched in Athens on 5 April 2017 with The School of Redistribution, a three-month-long research project, public programme and exhibition. The project considers how small-scale institutions might develop sustainable models under the existing social, political and economically precarious conditions, and how inequalities that too often define the art world can be addressed while creating alliances and developing new cultural practices. In this conversation, Alampi and Fokianaki talk about their collaboration and how they have seen it evolve.





Alexandra Pirici, *Parthenon Marbles* (2017). Commissioned by Future Climates, Athens and Kadist, Paris/San Francisco. Courtesy Future Climates. Photo: Alexandra Masmanidi.

How did your collaboration on Future Climates come about?

Every year as part of the programming of State of Concept, the independent art institution that iLiana has been running since 2013, a guest curator is invited to curate one of the exhibitions. iLiana was following closely the work of Beirut in Cairo (an exhibition space founded by Jen Maier-Rothe and Sarah Rifky) and was particularly interested in the Imaginary School Program, a school project initiated by Beirut and directed by Antonia, which focused on institution building and forms of organising in Cairo. Based on the possible resonances between the cultural and independent landscapes of the two cities, iLiana invited Antonia to think of a new iteration of the Imaginary School in Athens. From there, we started intense conversations, based on what we learned by working on the ground in Athens and Cairo.

Future Climates started taking shape during Antonia's very first visit to Athens. We met cultural players in the city who had very diverse roles, ideologies, and professions, from independent curators such as Evita Tsokanta, to cultural manager Elina Kountouri, who is director of NEON

Foundation, to artists such as Thodoris Prodromidis and Nikolas Ventourakis, to the head of culture of the Goethe Institut, Juliane Stegner, as well as political activists, among many others. That ignited long and intense conversations between us. What quickly emerged was a shared desire to not only address the precarious conditions of small institutions, but also to actively propose new modes of practice. But we immediately thought that a three-month project in Athens, as it was initially planned on iLiana's invitation, was obviously not enough for what we had in mind. So, we decided to create a platform through which the work could continue, develop, grow, and interfere with existing modus operandi. That's how Future Climates came about.

When we started conceptualising the project we both agreed on one thing: that places of crisis, revolutions, and social and economic disasters play a rather seductive role in the cultural programming of institutions worldwide.

What do you mean by a 'seductive role'?

To put it bluntly: topics, places and people that are front news in mainstream media are often equally attractive for the art market, and, at times, even determine international funding agendas; playing a key, but unfortunately only temporary role in shaping artistic and institutional practices. We also agreed on the fact that the artistic life of places with poor or no public infrastructures for arts and culture becomes possible thanks to the work of independent organisations, which usually are dependent on unpaid labour and precarious conditions. On the other hand, it is equally true that small independent organisations, such as State of Concept, have a different type of freedom, because they can develop more flexible ways of working, and a way of thinking and operating emancipated from pressures of audience numbers, formal behaviours, and expectations of institutional growth and expansion.

How do you see your own agency as cultural producers in relation to the current political and economic situation in Greece?

The international attention that has followed the crisis inspired us to pose a larger question: how can this city not be seen as a case study or a metaphor, when the precarious living conditions of many people are not an abstraction, but a concrete, lived reality when the country is going through not only a financial crisis, but an uncertain political future? How can we, as cultural producers, intervene concretely in the current situation? Could the knowledge produced from its precarious but imaginative independent infrastructures be used and 'capitalised' upon?



Alexandra Pirici, *Parthenon Marbles* (2017). Commissioned by Future Climates, Athens and Kadist, Paris/San Francisco. Courtesy Future Climates. Photo: Alexandra Masmanidi.

When you say 'international attention', do you refer to the 'migration' of cultural producers and artists, not least for documenta 14, to Athens?

Many intellectuals became interested in Greece already before documenta 14 moved to Athens. For instance, philosophers like Jacques Rancière and Slavoj Žižek, Alain Badiou and Judith Butler visited Athens from 2009, the same year that Greece was announced as one of the countries under the IMF bailout programme. They all wrote about it, publishing letters in newspapers and online media as a way to bring international attention to the country. This seems to have made the art world more interested in Athens. Since then, several artists have moved here, and many international foundations, curators, artists, and lately even gallerists have shown particular interest in the city and in the art scene, we hope not only because of their fascination with the crisis.

Future Climates is a multi-part project. It includes exhibitions, collaborations with other institutions, a conference and a three-month-long school. Can you explain how the different parts function and how they work together?

The platform we co-founded is called Future Climates, and it is a project that aims to propose viable futures for independent cultural practices. Its objective is to actively shape the forecast of institutional climates by addressing the precarious conditions of individual workers and small-scale art organisations. Emerged in response to the 'changing weather' that affects labour rights, work ethics and funding methods, Future Climates has at its heart the aim to imagine and implement new sustainable economies. Future Climates thinks and acts locally but with an international vocation. It aims to learn and educate by building relations between institutional ecologies in different geographic locations, chiefly focusing on contemporary art and culture in contexts with poor or absent public infrastructures.

Future Climates manifests (1) as a platform for the implementation of new forms of sustenance for small-scale independent organisations; (2) as curatorial frameworks such as discursive programs, temporary schools, new artistic commissions and exhibitions in different cities; (3) as a research project accessible via an (still in the making) online platform. The first project of Future Climates is The School of Redistribution. For it, artist Alexandra Pirici was co-commissioned for a new ongoing action titled *Parthenon Marbles* (2017). The work revolves around the controversial request of repatriation of those marbles from the British Museum to the Acropolis Museum in Athens. This story is an entry point into a larger discussion about capital, accumulation, circulation, production of value, redistribution and the role of the arts within today's economies. Alexandra Pirici collaborated with writer and curator Victoria Ivanova on the writing of the performance's script and body of research, which, among other questions, addresses the art system's inequality and imagines a different scenario for the future of performative art practices in relation to financial tools such as the derivative.

Another work commissioned for the occasion is Navine Khan Dossos' wall painting *Navigating the Numbers* (2017), a humorous reflection on the forms that ideas take once they are 'forced' into shape according to the standards and parameters of funding bodies. Another contribution is by Studio Miessen, a design studio based in Berlin. For the occasion, Studio Miessen has redesigned the interior space of State of Concept. The main intervention consists of inserting a big bar counter in the middle of the space with red neon lights and a smoke machine, to encourage a more informal frame for discussion. Miessen also designed a lightbox as a conventional outdoor bar sign, and a conventional timecode language on the facade communicating unconventional timecode regarding the bar as a social/educational space. Finally, another element of the project is the three-month-long school, co-directed by Evita Tsokanta, who has conceived an incredible programme of lectures and workshops with cultural practitioners, but also lawyers and economists. We are also planning regular visits to local art and cultural spaces, NGOs, experimental for-profit initiatives and cooperatives to understand how they operate, and what their economic structures are. The central

question the programme addresses is: how to transform the increasingly precarious existence of small-scale organisations in Athens into a more sustainable one, both in terms of economy and work ethics?

Why the school of 'redistribution'? What do you mean by this term?

Future Climates is based on the belief in a need for a 'healthier' art ecology. We think that in this ecology, those larger institutions and mega-exhibitions that often receive most of the support and funding from both corporations and the state should take responsibility for the survival of smaller, economically precarious institutions.

In essence, through creating Future Climates, we want to determine new methods, tools, and forms of distribution for transnational cooperation between art institutions of different sizes and scopes that operate in different geographical locations. We would like to create an alternative system of advocacy and support, be it legal, economic, social but certainly not merely symbolic. Can we think of new forms of working together? We feel this is a particularly urgent issue considering the erosion of the welfare state system and the decrease in public support in most Western countries. A redistribution of funds and power is urgently needed.

How does the particular context of Athens, and Greece in general, inform your position? What, in your opinion, are the challenges faced by independent contemporary art spaces like State of Concept in Athens today?

It is quite important to stress that the art visitors who come to Athens rarely see the stark reality of the city; the same goes for other kinds of tourists who walk around the gentrified tourist-friendly city centre. Therefore, since people do not see the crisis, they are actually baffled when they compare what they have read about Greece and what they experience in the city. This is a first indication of how 'crises' can be felt vis-à-vis how they are portrayed. Now, in the context of the art world, independent art spaces with a permanent location and a regular yearly program did not exist before State of Concept opened. More have been able to open, mostly thanks to NEON Foundation's grant programme, which was created in 2013 to support small, independent initiatives and in fact replaces the non-existing state funding for the arts.

However, it is equally important to understand that the precarious condition of most cultural workers and contemporary art institutions is not directly related to the current crisis. The contemporary art field has always been working in the margins. There is no public funding allocated to contemporary art, no governmental body which supports artistic production through grants or bursaries. There is a tiny art market that shrunk even more because of the financial crisis, but that's all. The art audience is very limited. This, in conjunction with the taxing system that does

not even recognise 'curating' as a profession, to give an example, has made the survival of the cultural sector and of art workers almost impossible. So, the local context of Athens, and Greece in general, was the perfect first case study for our project, since this is a country that is generally associated with the wealth of the West, and yet is a 'developing' country with poor infrastructure; a country in a financial crisis that on one hand affects the artistic production negatively, but on the other hand positively through a creation of new alliances under new urgencies.



State of Concept, Athens. Courtesy Future Climates. Photo: Alexandra Masmanidi.

So, if Athens is the first case study, this means there will be other case studies in other cities. Are you planning collaborations and visits to other cities in other parts of the world? Do you see Future Climates as a global platform?

Future Climates aims to 'look' into many geographical locations, yes, but by keeping the local context in mind every time, it directs its attention to a location. We are already in conversation with colleagues in Colombia, Bucharest and other locations, but there are already existing discussions making these locations relevant. We would like to think of this project as a transnational and

intersectional platform that connects different localities, rather than merely global; a platform that can adjust and re-calibrate itself according to the contingencies and situations of different local contexts.

What do you expect from this project? How do you think it will impact the ongoing conversation on the future of the art scene in Athens?

We think (or hope) that Future Climates will exist until new practices will actually be found and implemented. The School of Redistribution that was launched on 27 March in Athens is only its first chapter and we are hoping to write many more soon. We truly aim to create a toolbox for cultural workers, new collaborations between local and international institutions, to propose new ways of operating as well as to assist, with the research and knowledge that will emerge from the School of Redistribution and its participants, the artistic community here in Athens.

We know that it's quite an early stage, but we wonder if you are thinking of continuing the conversation that started here in Athens also in Antwerp, where you have recently been appointed curators of Extra City?

Absolutely. We think it will be a very interesting and challenging experience to work in a mid-scale institution operating in the heart of Europe. In Athens, mid-scale institutions do not exist, and most small ones operate through gift-economy, whereas in Antwerp there is state funding, which is, however, largely granted to large-scale institutions, when mid-scale ones suffer, specifically since they are requested to 'perform' well in numbers: visitors, social media presence, marketing strategies, patronage et cetera. We hope to create a discursive program that addresses these questions in terms of the support system that exists in the local context and how it forms and defines the art eco-system.

Both of you have experiences in building institutions, iLiana as founder of State of Concept in Athens, and Antonia as curator of Beirut Art Center and initiator of The Imaginary School in Cairo. Although different, the two cities are part of what one might call the Mediterranean. Do you think there is a future for a so-called Mediterranean cultural alliance? We ask this question keeping in mind artist Rasheed Araeen's essay 'Preliminary Notes for a Mediterranean Manifesto' (2015) in which the artist expresses his belief in the possibility of the Mediterranean to 'become a great centre of communication, of exchange of ideas, between the West and the East, between the North and the South'.

It is funny you mention Araeen, since we were having a conversation on the subject with Stephanie Bailey of Ocula. Having lived for many years in Athens, Stephanie proposed to consider Greece as belonging to the Global South. So there were many discussions amongst us on geographies and affinities and what they could possibly mean for the cultural practices of the region. And for both of

us who are coming from, living and/or working in these locations, it was quite apparent that new dialogues were being formed. If you think of all that has happened in the last four of five years in political terms: the various social unrests, new forms of activism across the Mediterranean region, it is quite astounding. This has had an immediate affect on cultural practice, and new practices and discourses have emerged. Something not as evident in the past, when in order to be heard and included, often artists and cultural practitioners were forced to adopt the language dictated by the Global North. Now we are witnessing and contributing to a new important shift in critical discourse and practices; new positions and perspectives from the South are emerging, and artists from these regions are making their voices heard. That's an exciting time, a time of big transformations, and there is so much to be done. So, in our view, the Mediterranean alliance already exists in terms of concerns, conversations and artistic practices, it just has not been officially formulated yet. And it is a great opportunity and time to seriously consider this as a possible scenario in a consistent form, in both political and cultural terms, because there can only be gain from such an alliance. —[O]

The contributor wishes to thank Övül Ö.Durmuşoğlu for her inputs and assistance with the interview.