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POP 938 Wednesday 13 June 2012

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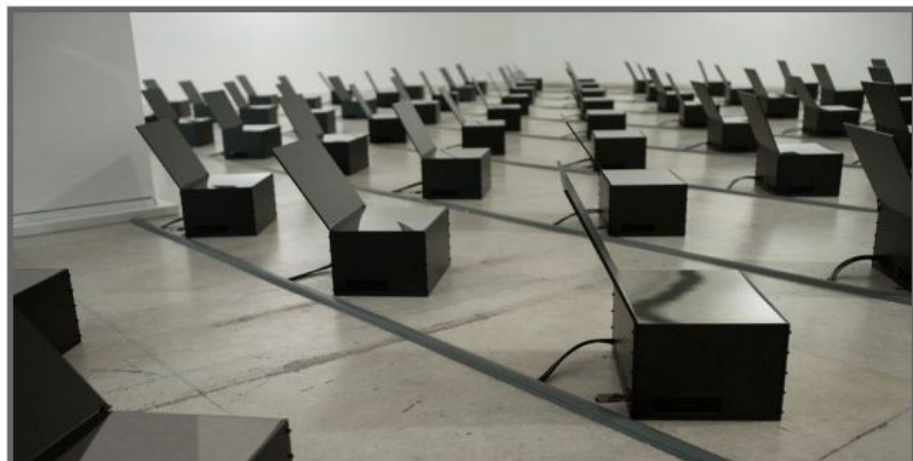
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Today's post forms the first of an exclusive POP series which aims to cover the crisis in Athens via a creative perspective; presenting an open dialogue with Greek artists, designers and directors - all experts in their fields - about living and working in the current economy. Because if the financial infrastructure of Central Europe is spiralling as fast as the downturn of the markets, what investment could possibly remain for the arts?

We spoke to innovative thinkers who are ready to approach the future without these doomed superlatives. But our first in the series - acclaimed installation artist Danae Stratou - chooses to use this to her own advantage: utilising what she refers to as the 'language of the enemy.' 'It is time to open the black boxes!' at the Zoumboulakis Gallery, 20 Kolonaki Square (five minutes away from the central Greek parliament, Vouli) takes the tendency for exaggeration when in crisis and amplifies it within a terse immersive structure.

One hundred industrially produced aluminium boxes each display a word and a corresponding sound, collated from answers to Danae's online open call to the Greek people through her non-profit organisation Vital Space, asking, 'What do you feel is being threatened?' and 'What would you like to protect?' Liberty. Fundamentalism. Revolution. The tensions in the rigid order of the system - much like that of our current financial institutions - are heightened by unfathomable scales, increasing from zero to figures in their trillions.





Accompanied by an influx of trivialised numbers and a cacophony of explosions, flat lines and heart beats, these words provide necessary weight. 'How can an art project be important today? The ultimate question. Can it? Does it matter?' Danae asks, her entire body leaning forward, slumping like a question mark into the conversation.

We met in the courtyard of the Zoumboulakis gallery on the final day of the exhibition to continue our discussion.

Danae, if you could tell me about how the exhibition came about?

It started with two notions that came together and connected. It was about a year and a half ago that I was discussing Wikileaks with a Portuguese journalist. What does this mean in our time, the need - why do Wikileaks exist? It's a bit extreme in a way. And this obviously reflects the need for transparency in our time. We don't want to keep things covered; having all of the authority and politicians doing things without ever sharing what is happening.

Or sharing the repercussions, either.

Exactly, all these hidden secrets. So we were discussing this and then it was the same week that they had found the black box of the airplane that was flying from Brazil to France, and there were two hundred people killed from France.

This guy Michael Parealla is leaving the house - he had come to interview my husband who is an economist - so you know, this crisis has been for a year in the conversation in my home every day. Because my husband Yanis Varoufakis has become quite well known internationally now; he's one of the people who have really given a proposal for a solution for the Euro.

Michael leaves the house and says, 'It is time to open the black boxes.' And it just clicked to me, it was like it hit a nerve. It gave me basically the form with which I could express through an artistic language what is happening around me.

What did you want to emphasise with the exhibition?

There was a need for urgency and the element of time. So I thought of numbers - of this counting down or count up, like a time bomb basically - it's this emergency. This is like a huge alarm basically, saying 'What happens if we don't change course?'

About half the boxes show measurements or scales that are based on real statistics but of a different kind. So global economy can be one and it's based on statistics of today or measurements of today, projected into the future.

Let's say the ideas we want to protect can't be measured - because how can you measure freedom, or dignity or love? I have made a scale to a 100, as a scale symbolically close to the human being - it's one lifetime, let's say. Where you have the results of the economic crisis or the threatening things, I scaled it to 100 because it tends to become bigger than what we can control.

I wanted to start this in Greece, it is very important to me that it is topical for here. It's my reflection of the crisis and I need to reach out to a wider audience, not to be addressed in just an elite of the arts. So I thought, how can I do that? And this idea came up of the open call. So you put people into this procedure and this gave them first a way to express themselves which was almost therapeutic, I believe.



FUTURE

9,742,828,089,952

There is a collective sense of power. How did you see the two languages working together?
I wanted it to be global. That anyone can understand - English is the global language, and I wanted it to be Greek as well. Because I wanted Greek people who were here to feel it is theirs. If it goes to Paris, it will be in French and in English, and if it goes to Japan it will be in Japanese and in English.

In the end you have a global expression on what this is. This project... it's like a living organism in a way, and it's changing all the time. It's amazingly energetic. For me as an artist, it's given me so much back.

How does it feel in the time that you have planned the exhibition that the crisis has escalated?

It was a bit obvious that this is where it was going. Because I have been in this discussion it's not a surprise to me, but it feels even more urgent that this exhibition does travel. The idea behind the black boxes, and behind Wikileaks - is that we need to bring these issues into light. So the more of these things we have now - these kind of projects and different expressions through all of the arts - it's extremely important. I will try really urgently to take it to different places. Because the project is there, it is only a matter of taking it.

It is completely relevant everywhere, isn't it? Anybody can understand and empathise.
Exactly, and people will send their words and it will be again energising this cycle: localising and globalising.

Why did you want to have the element of interaction in the exhibition? You can walk around, you are part of the scale, and of the problem in a way.

The interaction with the work itself gives the possibility for the viewer to make it his own. It becomes an experience. It works and it functions on a deeper level than just intellectually or visually; you become physically involved in this way.

I wanted it to start in a commercial space in Athens and not in a museum space, because I wanted it to energise an economic circle as well. Each box can be sold for a very low price for what it is, as an art object. It can be sold one by one, a collector can take it all... it is very flexible so that it can function in real terms.





Why did you want to have such a rigid order?

All these choices are not exactly really conscious at the beginning... it's a bit also intuitive. I believe in geometry, I think that through rhythm and repetition it helps to pull you in. It's a common thing in my work that you will see a lot of geometrical shapes. These two things I believe create a sort of trance state that functions in a subconscious way and it affects you abandon the conscious reality.

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What would you like to continue to do with Vital Space?

I would like to be able to raise money in order to invite many artists to participate and energise an interdisciplinary dialogue as well; like a think tank or a platform that can create dialogue and awareness.

The reason I started this is because I needed to reach outside of myself and to address something wider. I think it's not a time now to be this kind of artist, about themselves and their egos. It's the opposite. We need to be humble and to work together to do things and this is what Vital Space is about, basically.

And all of these issues that are at the forefront, those that can be changed, are here in this exhibition.

As I wanted to reflect as many different social groups as possible, we collaborated from the beginning with different non-profit organisations. One is working with homeless people in Athens, one is working with immigrants in Greece, and two are environmental. I worked with them in order for them to communicate the project to their own network and then also to collect words. 10 percent from the profits of the exhibition goes back to these groups.

This is also another expression of the work which I think is very important - you reach out through different kinds of non-profit organisations and then you can offer something back as well. It is like a cycle: it is energised.

Danae Stratou will travel the exhibition 'It's time to open the black boxes,' from September onwards.