



Left: Robert Kuśmirowski, *D.O.M.*, 2004, mixed media, dimensions variable. From "Hotel Paradises," Esplanade Building, Faliro Olympic Complex, Athens.
Right: Mark Wallinger, *Threshold to the Kingdom*, 2000, still from a color video, 11 minutes 10 seconds. From "How Many Angels Can Dance on the Head of a Pin?" Esplanade Building, Faliro Olympic Complex, Athens.



2nd Athens Biennale

VARIOUS LOCATIONS

Cathryn Drake

THE ORGANIZERS OF THE Second Athens Biennale, "Heaven," were perhaps hoping for divine intervention when they proposed transforming a hulking onetime parking garage, with salmon pink walls, into a paradise. Part of the disused Faliro Olympic Complex, the meandering space, more evocative of the underworld, imposed its own aesthetic on the biennial. Nevertheless, whether through administrative acumen or the will of the gods, artistic directors XYZ (Xenia Kalpaktsoglou, Poka-Yio, and Augustine Zenakos) managed to pull together an edgy and distinctive exhibition on a minuscule budget.

The garage's entropic warren was filled with a refreshingly unconventional selection of nearly 150 international and Greek artists divided into six individually curated sections. Although the different, and disparate, parts did not cohere as a whole, they sounded common notes that often enough resonated in harmonious chords. Introduced by a disorienting corridor of mirrors, the biennial's first section, curator Chus Martínez's "World Question Center," was framed as a dialogue on the nature of heaven inspired by James Lee Byars's 1969 performance of the same title. Documented by Jef Cornelis in a black-and-white video, the original performance finds the artist and other participants robed in white, like so many oracles, gravely asking philosophical questions that seem designed to prompt epistemological exploration. The works in the show responded with hypotheses ranging from Maria Pask's projected images of a typical nudist utopia in *Naturist Campsite*, 2001, to Eric Beltrán's

series of faux relational diagrams. Among the mostly banal propositions, the most compelling was *The Giant*, 2009, a disturbing video by Mariana Castillo Deball in which captions on a static gray screen narrate the interior monologue of a hunter who inexplicably finds himself roasting and eating his own flesh down to the bones, instead of his kill.

This depiction of gluttony taken to its grotesque extreme was a fortuitous preface to "For the Straight Way Is Lost," curated by Diana Baldon, in which about a dozen works (mostly video and film) portrayed the various states of purgatory, as defined by Dante in his *Divine Comedy*. Domenico Mangano's *La Storia di Mimmo* (Mimmo's Story), 1999, represents another deadly sin, sloth, in an intimate portrait of the artist's middle-aged uncle, who bemoans his pointless existence while lounging around his apartment half-naked. Biennial architect Andreas Angelidakis nicely converted the exhibition space to evoke a seedy squat, its walls constructed from filing cabinets. Scattered along a corridor in which heating ducts hung perilously low, a series of graffitied lockers by Christoph Schlingensiefel, *Stahlweg I–XII*, 2006, created a fascinatingly lurid journey in which cryptic film clips of slithering serpents and unidentified people could be viewed through peepholes. Meanwhile, giant black flies cruised around like earthly avatars of Beelzebub; they were especially drawn to nine light boxes inscribed with texts by Tom McCarthy that linked the exhibition's allegorical obstacle course together via quotes from Dante and from various artists.

Other curators' sections—including "Heaven Live," Dimitris Papaioannou and Zafos Xagoraris's program of temporary installations and performances on the waterfront of nearby Faliro Park—offered rewards more or less in keeping with the cosmic theme. In "How Many Angels Can Dance on the Head of a Pin?" Christopher Marinos presented Mark Wallinger's beautiful video projection *Threshold to the Kingdom*, 2000, in which travelers emerge through the automatic doors of an airport arrival terminal, as if awakening from a dream or reaching the pearly gates, to the accompaniment of an angelic chorus singing Gregorio Allegri's *Miserere*. Most poetically encapsulating the biennial's thematic ideal was Ryan

McNamara's deadpan video *I Thought It Was You*, 2008, the standout in Cay Sophie Rabinowitz's otherwise bloodless "Splendid Isolation, Athens." Two screens show the artist performing the same spastic dance to the eponymous Herbie Hancock recording; Under the strobe lights of a disco, McNamara seems anesthetized, his movements desultory; arriving in a desert in a mechanized wheelchair and dancing to a boom box in broad daylight, he becomes an ecstatic eccentric. A poignant statement about the essential dichotomies of light and darkness, the work raises the question: Is paradise just a state of mind?

The strongest section was Nadja Argyropoulou's almost campy "Hotel Paradises," whose constellation of inspirations included J. G. Ballard, Robert Smithson, and other poets of postwar psychological and spatial limbos. Indeed, the word *paradies*, in addition to being German for "paradise," implies that which lies parallel to death, as critic Molly Nesbit has pointed out—suggesting a kind of purgatorial in-between zone (and coming perilously, perhaps intentionally, close to being a homophone of *parodies*). At the entrance, Robert Kuśmirowski's *D.O.M.*, 2004, a run-down graveyard complete with dirt and a bench from which to contemplate grim mortality, gave way to similarly gothic films, full of skulls and vampires, by Kenneth Anger and Jan Švankmajer. Younger artists such as Vassilis Karouk and Paul Chan (with *Reverie*, 2009, and *Untitled [After Lacan's Last Laugh]*, 2008, respectively) depicted more sexually explicit s/m cravings. Playing on desire's double-edged nature as the conduit to both heaven and hell, Argyropoulou cites Ballard's short-story cycle *Vermillion Sands*, set in an imaginary resort rich in futuristic luxuries but poor in happiness or fulfillment. Standing in like a proxy for Ballard's resort was *Hotel Palenque*, 1969–72, Smithson's slide-show meditation on a decaying Mexican caravansary through which one could easily imagine vampires wandering restlessly. While "Hotel Paradises" provocatively collapsed the categories of blissful paradise and purgatorial limbo, earthly existence and anomic afterlife, the art-world definition of heaven remains pretty clear: It's a place where biennials no longer all look the same. In that sense, "Heaven" lived up to its title. □

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