



Jennifer Nelson, *Democracy is a party*, 2019, HD video, color, sound, 10 minutes 53 seconds. From “Anatomy of Political Melancholy.”

“Anatomy of Political Melancholy”

THE SCHWARZ FOUNDATION AT ATHENS CONSERVATOIRE

An appropriate setting for a show titled “Anatomy of Political Melancholy,” the Athens Conservatoire was envisaged as part of an ambitious Bauhaus-style cultural complex designed by architect Ioannis Despotopoulos, much of which was left unbuilt; in 1976, not long after the fall of the Greek military junta, construction was halted for lack of funding. The show’s portrayals of individual desperation and collective surrender by twenty-four artists imparted a widespread sense of hopelessness as a political affect: an emotional disorder encompassing disorientation, disillusionment, disenfranchisement, disaffection, and resignation triggered by pervasive sociopolitical contradictions.

The tone of the exhibition, curated by Katerina Gregos, was set by bold texts stenciled on the pristine modernist walls, part of the ongoing project *The Tourists—a campaign (#make yourselves at home)*, 2015–, by the Greek collective Depression Era. The English statement YOU’VE GOT A GREAT FUTURE BEHIND YOU, for example, was seemingly answered by the ambiguous ΔΕΝ ΚΑΝΑΜΕ ΤΙΠΟΤΑ (WE DID NOTHING). Four faux tourism posters stacked on the floor—one of them an image of refugees stumbling out of a life raft onto a beach bearing the legend EMERGING ECONOMY—offered acerbic commentary on the socioeconomic rupture between truth and reality. Yorgos Prinos’s

photographic series “Prosaic,” 2009—, intimately juxtaposes power and vulnerability in candid close-ups of denizens of Wall Street at the inception of the global economic crisis. Adrian Melis’s *Ovation*, 2013–18, is a sequence of seven videos of the members of various European parliaments clapping at the completion of legislative votes. Hypnotic waves of applause crescendo and diminish, the emptiness of the gesture apparent as cameras pan across the politicians’ bored expressions.

In the film *Impotence*, 2017, the artist Ariane Loze plays four friends who disagree on the responsibility an individual has to society after one laments: “I have the impression that I am born and raised in a world I cannot change, a world to which I cannot bring anything, and which is getting worse and worse.” The attitudes expressed—from alienation and despair to belief in the power of single actions to produce incremental transformation—reflect the confusion of the contemporary collective unconscious. Eirene Efstathiou’s *Artifacts (For the Revolution)*, 2013, uses the form of the photographic still life to suggest that revolution begins at home. The images depict everyday objects that played roles in protest and insurrection, from a chunk of Turkish delight alongside a cup of coffee (recalling the Ottoman cafés where revolts were planned) to the makings of a Molotov cocktail.

Jennifer Nelson’s “video embroidery” *Democracy is a party*, 2019, is titled after a phrase from Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras’s call for a popular referendum on the bailout plan in 2015. (The government disregarded the result of the vote, which was a resounding “No.”) Dancers and musicians animate the traditional fertility pattern of a bridal dress, materializing and multiplying on-screen along with their chanting, playing, and singing. At the center of it all, a grandmother is reading the 2013 children’s book *I Know How to Say No*, by Kristina Rassidaki, explaining the importance of setting boundaries through instructive examples such as Snow White’s being too polite to refuse the witch’s apple and the Greek refusal of Mussolini’s demand for surrender in 1940. “No, children,” the grandmother comments, “is just a little word of enormous significance.” Eventually her voice is subsumed by the raucous cacophony of a Greek chorus as it collides with repeated excerpts from Tsipras’s speech, embodying the dysfunctional discord of modern democracy.

If the exhibition was an anatomy of a collective pathology, its soul was Katerina Apostolidou's *If you will only remember to keep your eyes open . . .*, 2017. Installed in a dark corner where it was easy to miss, the meditative three-channel video installation focuses on a suburban park in Athens. A storm passes, a couple jogs by, insects and tortoises go about their business at their respective paces, flowers sprout in an otherwise bleak landscape. Across the screens appear phrases taken from one of Rosa Luxemburg's letters from prison, in which she describes a garden outside her window as a metaphor for the cosmos, imparting, in this context, an instructive message about the necessity for faith in the inexorable renewal of the natural order.

— Cathryn Drake

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