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'he Grand Promenade

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It's not often that Plato is mentioned in a press conference, but then we were in Athens. Anna Kafetsi, curator of 'The Grand Promenade', declared 'love is everywhere in this exhibition, mainly in the platonic sense'. With the air as soft as warmed honey, it was hard

not to agree with her, even before seeing the show.

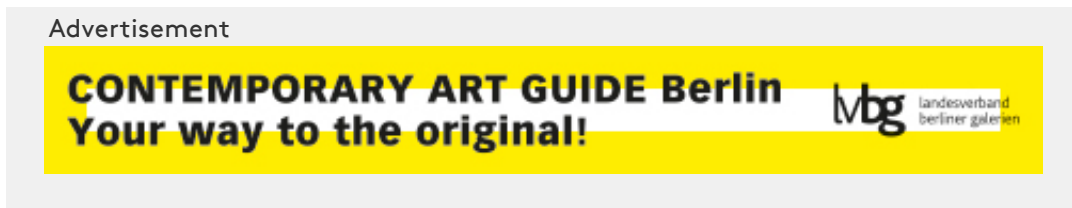
And that, possibly, is the problem. Contemporary art in Athens has a lot to compete with and I don't just mean the seductive weather. The weight of history, in the shape of the Parthenon, looms over the city, diminishing everything in its orbit. Perhaps indifference to the creative possibilities of the present is one of the reasons contemporary art here has been slow to take off. Nonetheless, this ambitious exhibition – organized by the National Museum of Contemporary Art (of which Kafetsi is Director) – refused to be cowed by its surroundings. This augurs well for the 2008 opening of the Museum's permanent building – the only non-profit space dedicated to contemporary art in Athens, apart from the Deste Foundation.

The exhibition title refers to the Grand Promenade of the Unification of Archaeological Sites, a majestically named footpath that winds around the base of the Acropolis, taking in pine groves and archaeological sites. Kafetsi's idea was to create an 'open' museum combining Athenian heritage with contemporary art and daily life. Forty-four international and local artists were invited to choose a site for their work, including not only the Promenade but various other locations around town.

It became clear that despite the portentous and self-consciously 'mystical' nature of some works (j'accuse Per Barclay, Wolfgang Laib, Anish Kapoor, Ulrich Rückriem and Y.Z. Kami) and some of the sweeping curatorial choices (what links, for example, Christian Boltanski, Silke Otto-Knapp, and Thomas Hirschhorn is beyond me), the show was rich with ideas. While it could never hope to realize its wildly ambitious aims (to explore 'relations between the public and the private, fiction and reality, memory, the landscape and history, the dream and the journey, the community, democracy, utopia, multiculturalism, migration and the City'), it made brave attempts to do so.

Apart from the overblown bathos of Ilya and Emilia Kabakov's *The Falling Angel* (2006) – a huge sculpture of an angel lying in the dust – the most effective pieces employed a light touch to explore the vagaries of time and nuances of place. In the gloriously named *Shrine of the Nymphs*, Susan Philipsz installed speakers that played her rendition of the elegiac Syd Barrett song after which the piece was named: *Long Gone* (2006). Barrett's death had only

just been announced, yet with spooky prescience Philipsz had recorded the song weeks beforehand. Tourists paused, startled, as a disembodied voice sang 'the people they come with garlands in their hands but no-one understands why for so long I've been long gone'. Nearby, Steve Roden suspended his delicate polyhedron sound-sculpture, *Oionos* (Omen, 2006) – created from recordings of instruments he had discovered in a local museum – from a tree next to a stone chapel built by Dimitri Pikionis, the architect responsible for landscaping the archaeological sites around the Acropolis in the 1950s. Pavel Buchler's giant speakers *The Castle* (2006), broadcast excerpts from Franz Kafka's novel of the same name, including a sentiment familiar to tourists everywhere: 'you are a stranger, a man who isn't wanted and is in everybody's way ...'



<<https://bit.ly/2qbNPDd>>

Elsewhere, Silke Otto Knapp's group of ethereal paintings of dancers looked at home in the natural light of the 17th century Turkish Baths; and Khalil Rabah's New Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind, an idiosyncratic museum themed around the symbol of the olive tree, was a powerful reminder of the political situation only hours across the sea from Athens. With photographs, pamphlets, furniture and letters, Michael Blum's installation, *A Tribute to Safiye Behar* (2005) transformed a few small rooms in the art school into a mini-museum devoted to a fictitious Turkish feminist and radical; a gesture that asked more questions about history's fluid relationship to truth and representation than most of the other pieces in the show put together.

'The Grand Promenade' lost its energy in more conventional spaces such as the Technopolis, four soulless industrial buildings filled with work loosely connected by 'philosophy, politics,

democracy and community'. Highlights included Vlassis Caniaris' series of figurative sculptural tableaux 'Immigrants' (1971–6); Evanthia Tsantila's bold pen and ink drawings exploring 'how to make the incomprehensible appear' and Lina Theodorou's video installation, *Loan* (2006), depicting ghost factories and abandoned villages around Greece.

'The Grand Promenade' is an important exhibition for Athens, and despite occasional weaknesses, should be applauded for making clear that it's time for the city to honour its past by exploring its present more deeply.

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