

Neratzinha is my cup of tea

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The first time I had that feeling of puzzlement was around 15 April 2015 in Brussels. It was the presentation of the ECF Princess Margriet Award to two European art institutions, one of them the Athens Biennale. I'm not based in Belgium and these kind of trips usually take time and organization. Like many others, when I evaluate an event as highly important, I have to save money and time and jump into—preferably—a train. Each time I find myself among an international audience, more or less familiar faces, among which very few Greeks. At this moment I should mention that I am not based in Greece either. Greece is some kind of island in terms of accessibility in comparison to the conditions for travel that the countries around central and western Europe offer to its inhabitants. The ticket prices in Greece are much higher than in other core destinations, a fact that contradicts the low local incomes. As a result, most Greeks travel less than other Europeans. Accordingly, the familiar Greek faces I encounter at big international events mostly belong to the Greek art diaspora. The lack of Greek representatives at these events corresponds with the likelihood of Greek artists participating in big international exhibitions. That night was different though—and now I take you back to Brussels in April 2015, when that feeling of puzzlement occurred.

It was the first time I was witnessing such a consistent audience. Many Greeks related to the Athens Biennale flew in to share the happiness of the moment in support of the honoured institution. There were also a large number of renowned representatives of the Greek art scene. The composition of not-yet-existing coalitions and the overwhelming percentage of highly prestigious Greeks present was confusing in terms of space and context. I felt as if Greece is positioned somewhere between Belgium and France. At some point during the speeches that were part of the bestowed honour, chief curator of *documenta 14* Adam Szymczyk came onstage. His inspiring speech announced a new chapter for the Athenian art scene. His

curatorial plan to share the ground of *documenta 14* between Athens and Kassel, as well as the announced collaboration between the paramount institution and the Athens Biennale were groundbreaking news. Everything became clear this way.

Even if that enigma was solved, the following period my puzzlement turned out to be persistent and it expanded to Athens. Since the very beginning of the Athens Biennale, one of its goals was to put the—then ignored—Greek art scene on the global art map. Obviously this mission had now been accomplished. But what happens when an overlooked local art scene suddenly gets the artistic spotlight?

Athens unexpectedly got onto the contemporary art rollercoaster, not only because part of the *documenta* team moved in and thereby became host to the biggest art residency ever; but also because numerous representatives of the international art scene were present there, at the right place and the right time. What the general population perceives as cheap rents and low living costs made it an affordable adventure for many. The sudden interest of such an overwhelming amount of newcomers to the—until that moment—very local art scene, along with their well-informed interpretations of the alternatively flourishing crisis conditions, generated feelings in many locals that could be depicted by a raised eyebrow.

While research, experiments, hard work, opposition, criticism, coalitions, broken coalitions, strategies, lectures, drama, gossip, presentations, provocations, critical approaches, misunderstandings, performances, parties, events, openings, talks, so much information, endless meetings and many worries were taking place, a sense of bitterness was often felt. Athens became the complicated field that emerges when the global meets the local, and theory meets praxis. Add to that the intense meeting between the privileged and the angry. There has been so much written about this field that I don't see any reason to elaborate on it further. But I need to say that in my view, *documenta 14 only* took place in Athens, and consisted of the preparation period, the programme itself, the reactions and counter-actions that were provoked, as well as the effects of the venture on the local art scene. The endeavor created the actual basis for most of the activities that that have recently kept the art community busy and forced broader understandings among its members.

The activated whirlpool changed Athens into a field of 'opportunities' where art world members developed different attitudes and ways of moving around. These dynamics generated a fiery aura, but a part of the local art scene decided to ignore

the elephant in the room, which surprisingly proved very possible. This plethora of modi operandi I wanted to comprehend for its different ways of being actively present in the art world during an era of encounters between politicized localities and the burgeoning need to regenerate global knowledge. Among this intense crowd there was a group of newcomers that set up a residency, which I liked the most for their research process and networking. These Capacete guys had been invited and that's probably why they didn't act like chancers. The Capacete group in Athens consisted of South Americans and two Greeks, both of whom had developed their careers internationally. Their working processes incorporated a research field as broad as their network, and they were actively present, as much as many others were. Now I realize that, contrary to the general norm, they became *included*. Throughout tough times, they created friendships and they reached and engaged a warm audience for their events during a period in which everybody in Athens was sick of art-gatherings.

As part of their engaging programme they launched 'neratzinha parties' and they kept on serving neratzinha at their public meetings. Actually, they are the inventors of this striking cocktail, which in my view is an equivalent of their ways of being present in Athens. Neratzinha is the Greek equivalent of caipirinha. To make this cocktail, cachaca is replaced by tsipouro, as those spirits taste similarly and share common connotations. Lime is replaced by neratzi and brown sugar makes the other ingredients bond. Neratzinha made a strong introduction in the artistically hyperactive city.

Neratzies are bitter orange trees that can be found in almost every single street of Athens. They line the streets on the left and right sides and with a few meters of distance between each other. They fit in the identical square gaps of absent paving stones that cover the Athenian sidewalks. These short trees are covered with shiny leaves of a deep green colour. It's not easy to find information on why neratzies are decorating Athens. It seems that their proliferation is based on their prettiness and durability, while they also contribute to cleaning the heavily polluted atmosphere of the city. Their fruits, which look identical to oranges, have a tendency to stay on the trees for very long periods, because they are considered inedible. They are extremely bitter and for that reason nobody harvests them. Or rather, almost nobody, as these naratzia fruits often are used as ammunition in street fights among different groups of kids who play aggressive games. Generally the

Athens' neratzies are so familiar that they are taken for granted, even though their blossom evokes a sense of gratitude as it magically covers up the odour of the city's contaminated air. This fragrance starts somewhere in April and lasts for a period of about three months. It fortuitously accompanied the Athenian edition of *documenta 14*.

The neratzinha cocktail created conditions for dialogue and functioned as proof of a respectful effort to actually look into the host's eyes, away from preconceptions. This playful cocktail evolved on the ground, from a very familiar element of the Athenian urban landscape, and it created openness. It also confronted the locals with the realization that what prevents them from eating those fruits is a cultural choice. Moreover, what is identified as inedible is simply a matter of taste; after some quick research I found out that neratzia are tasty ingredients in other cuisines.

During those Capacete encounters, we all disregarded our bio-eco-food concerns and consumed this distillate of Athenian pollution with joy. In my understanding, neratzinha is a manual for how to land, engage and connect to a place, as well as how to exchange and have something to say (individually or under a group-umbrella) in the ongoing globalized arena. In this time in which local communities are confronted with puzzlement because of unexpected and often imposed meetings with others, I personally choose to move around in a neratzinha-manner.