

The Garden of Dystopian Pleasures

Pedro de Senna, Foivos Dousos, Fil Ieropoulos and Richard Pfütsenreuter

Notes on Contributors

Pedro de Senna is a Brazilian theatre practitioner and academic. He is a Senior Lecturer in Contemporary Theatre Theory and Practice at Middlesex University, London. His current research focuses on the relationships between Futures Studies and Performance Studies; and between theatre, education and society. He has published on theatre translation and adaptation, directing and dramaturgy, and disability aesthetics. In his practice, Pedro has extensive experience as a director, workshop facilitator, performer and dramaturg. He is an associate director with SignDance Collective, a disabled-led dance-theatre company using sign languages as a basis for their choreographic practice.

Richard Pfütsenreuter is an independent artist and dramaturg. He studied theatre in Berlin and has worked for various theatres and performance groups over the last 15 years. With the group Panzerkreuzer Rotkäppchen he regularly explores themes of the post-GDR. His solo performances primarily explore the connections between ideology, body and control in late capitalism.

FYTA is a conceptual audiotextual performance duo, consisting of Fil Ieropoulos [Buckinghamshire New University] and Foivos Dousos [Royal Holloway]. Since 2012 they have participated in a number of events as performers, but also as curators. They were founding members of the queer music label Fytini (with over 30 releases), the performance art platform Sound Acts (presenting the work of 80+ artists in three years) and the activist space AMOQA with various collaborators from the queer scene. In 2021 they are presenting the video opera “Orfeas 2021” based on a queer adaptation of Claudio Monteverdi’s *L’Orfeo*.

Foivos Dousos has completed his PhD on narcissism in new media cultures and maintains a strong research interest in Lacanian psychoanalysis, literary avant-gardes of the 20th century and queer & feminist formally innovative writing. As a poet, he has published work both in Greek and in English – in 2019 one of his poems was included in the collective volume *A Queer Anthology of Sickness* by Pilot Press and he collaborated with poet D. Mortimer on the Pamphlet “We are the same number now”.

Fil Ieropoulos was born in Athens in 1978 and raised in northern Greece. He studied media arts in the UK and in 2009 completed his PhD on poetics and film, under the supervision of Nicky Hamlyn and Judith Williamson. He has been working at Buckinghamshire New University since 2003 and his films, performances, artworks and writing have been shown in numerous festivals, conferences and showcases around Europe.

Abstract

This article offers a reflection on the authors' curation of (Dousos and Ieropoulos) and participation in (de Senna and Pfützenreuter) *The Garden of Dystopian Pleasures*, a performance festival that took place at the Athens School of Fine Arts in 2018. Dousos and Ieropoulos present their thoughts around the need to curate such an event in the first place, discussing the context within which they operate, the Athenian art scene, while making the case that ambiguity as a political and poetical tool must not be surrendered to the right. De Senna and Pfützenreuter discuss their experiences in creating and performing right-wing personas that blur the lines between what is real and what is performed; engaging in strategies of overidentification, they initiate a discussion around the ethics and role of critical artistic practice in response to contemporary right-wing radicalisation and aesthetics. Mirroring the curatorially experimental nature of the festival, the contributors speak from multiple positionalities. As such, the structure and tone of the article attempt a destabilisation of the form of a conventional academic paper, avoiding an overall, singular summing-up of the positions presented, and allowing for shifts in register.

Keywords

Overidentification, ambiguity, curation, post-truth, Athens,

The truth ... is that which runs after truth – and that is where I am running, where
I am taking you, like Actaeon's hounds, after me. When I find the goddess's
hiding place, I will no doubt be changed into a stag, and you can devour me, but
we still have a little way to go yet. (Lacan 1977)

Introductory notes

In this article we revisit our experiences as curators and participating artists in the 2018 performance festival *The Garden of Dystopian Pleasures*. This event, curated by artist duo FYTA in collaboration with the Ministry of Post-Truth¹, took place in September of that year at the Athens School of Fine Arts and hosted more than forty artists and academics across six days of lectures, happenings, screenings and performances. The event focused on contemporary debates around the so-called post-truth era² and the emergence of the alt-right.

These phenomena, closely linked to the ascendance of Donald Trump to the US presidency, Brexit, the rise of online neoreactionary extremism, and the increased militarisation of EU immigration policies in the face of the ‘refugee crisis’, offered several starting points for our thematic orientation. A short extract from the first curatorial statement sets the tone for the event:

With the unimaginative left being unable to respond and identity politics having been appropriated by the bad guys, the world can’t help feeling that it experiences a regression to a pre-WW state or an acceleration towards an even greater catastrophe. Is there a way forward and out of this mess? Can we rethink identity politics? Can we repackage hope as sexy? Can we assist fake-news trolls to their self-destruction? *The Garden of Dystopian Pleasures* looks at ways of dissecting and digesting the enemy, through overidentifying with monstrosities of post-truth society and re-evaluating the politics of (guilty?) pleasure.

The Garden of Dystopian Pleasures sought to open a space in which the politics and poetics of truth and its undoing could be called into question, and where the libidinal investments of political identifications could be approached through the lens of embodied artistic expression. This article is split into four sections. In part one, FYTA (Fil Ieropoulos and Foivos Dousos) present their thoughts around the need to curate such an event in the first place and briefly discuss the context within which they operate – the Athenian art scene. They then address some of the challenges around their curatorial decisions and the tensions in their ‘artists as curators’ hybrid approach. Finally, two of the participating performers, Richard Pfütenreuter and Pedro de Senna, reflect on their experiences in creating and performing right-wing personas that blur the lines between what is real and what is performed, and initiate a discussion around critical artistic practice in response to contemporary right-wing radicalisation and aesthetics.

Before discussing the festival in detail, it is important to provide the reader with some information to do with FYTA's curatorial past. *The Garden of Dystopian Pleasures* was the duo's largest curatorial effort to that day, after having worked on a number of events and initiatives, including the identity politics festival of performance Sound Acts, the social space Athens Museum of Queer Arts, the anti-documenta anti-colonial project of Documena, the anarchic queer cabaret Glam Slam! and the publishing initiative Queer Ink. Although *The Garden* did not directly allude to queer politics and aesthetics, anyone mildly informed about FYTA's work would testify that there is a sense of queerness underlying both the artistic and curatorial practices of the duo. Working within and as part of the queer arts community has been fundamental for FYTA and this can be seen in this festival by the platforming of an abundance of queer performers, but also the curatorial structure itself: philosophical papers coexisting with drag shows and psychoanalytic workshops sitting next to pornographic films. By the same token, audiences attending the event were very similar to those frequenting events with more explicitly-stated queer and identity-politics themes and contexts.

FYTA: some context

Art and politics in Athens

Bringing politics into the domain of performance art or discussing politics as performance is by no means new, and there has been considerable attention given to the phenomenon of post-truth in the wider cultural sphere (D'Ancona 2017; Ball 2018; Farkas and Schou 2020; Davis 2018). However, there was – at least at the time of the event– an almost total lack of artistic engagement with post-truth phenomena not only in greece³, but internationally. *The Garden of Dystopian Pleasures* was an initial attempt towards a dialogue on these issues.⁴

While post-truth has international relevance, FYTA's frame of operation was Athens and our curatorial work was grounded in this locality, both in terms of the cultural context in which

we operated and as a dialogue with a specific art scene with its own history and internal tensions. The *Garden* took place less than a year after the close of documenta 14, a quinquennial Kassel-based exhibition which was in 2017 for the first time in its history co-hosted by another city, Athens. The arrival in Greece of one of the world's most influential international art exhibitions, with a budget of around €37 million and some 1,500 exhibits, would inevitably have profound effects on the local art scene. It was in this context that the staging of the *Garden* took place.

It seemed to FYTA that documenta 14 adopted a highly politicised discourse in its curatorial tone: from a generalised opposition to 'neoliberalism' to references to indigeneity, documenta introduced and canonised an agenda of 'political art' heavily influenced by contemporary discourses of the left.⁵ The documenta approach largely resembled the aesthetic apparatus of what the artistic duo BAVO has defined as 'NGO art':

Most symptomatic in this regard, is the rise, over the past decade, of what might be called 'NGO art' or even – analogous to the humanitarian organization, Doctors Without Borders: 'Art Without Borders'. With such humanitarian organizations, these art practices share the idea that [...] what is needed are direct, concrete, artistic interventions that help disadvantaged populations and communities to deal with the problems they are facing (BAVO 2007, 23)

Our curatorial approach in *The Garden of Dystopian Pleasures* was an attempt to diverge from documenta-style 'humanitarian art', not so much in disagreement with its intended political aims but with a sense of anxiety about what we perceived as its ineffective pursuit of these aims in a post-truth context.

Quite ambitiously for the size of our operation, we wanted to reframe what political art can be or should be in Athens – outside of the politico-aesthetical conventions of mega-

exhibitions such as documenta – or at least make a case about what we perceive as the antagonistic political art of our times. We were sceptical of the re-emergence and re-canonisation of the idea of artists as ‘resisting bodies’, truth-tellers and courageous fighters against all oppression.⁶ While an in-depth analysis of documenta’s politics is not within the scope of this article, we consider its ideological apparatus to be largely reliant on a series of emancipatory utopianisms – in stark antithesis to our ‘dystopian pleasures’.

Documenta moved to the greek capital with the slogan ‘learning from Athens’ and the main lesson at least at the beginning of the public programme seemed to rely on a conception of greece as a territory of resistance and dissent – greeks after all ‘proudly fought’ against the neoliberal forces of the EU.⁷ Through this lens, documenta could see in greece a synecdoche for the ‘resisting’ global south in the widest sense. The artistic director of documenta 14, Adam Szymczyk, has suggested in an interview that they “were not so interested in the art scene of Athens, but rather in the city as a living organism. And that goes beyond contemporary art. Athens is not alone, it also stands for other places in the world: Lagos, Guatemala City...”.⁸ This particular vision of political art could not be launched in Kassel (where the exhibition normally takes place every five years) as Germany ‘represents’ the oppressive northern neoliberalism; so, Athens offered the ideal counterpoint – a locus of southern resistance (within the Schengen zone).

Examples of what we call ‘emancipatory utopianisms’ come from several high-profile commissions of documenta 14: Angelo Plessas’s work, *The Making of Brotherhood/Sisterhood and Tantra Rising*⁹; Annie Sprinkles’ film, *Water Makes Us Wet*¹⁰; a series of public discussions focused on theories of ‘the commons’¹¹; and multiple events and exhibits operating within a discourse of (ill-defined) global indigenous rights.¹² Without dismissing the public programme and exhibition in its (vast) totality, we can nonetheless say that as local actors with stakes in the political art terrain, we felt at times that the overall result was a confusing and at

times surreal mix of mega-institutional othering processes and *kumbaya oppressed-of-the-world-unite* naivety. This contradiction went largely unchecked, or at least non-thematised, by participating artists, curators and academics. Some of the most important questions raised by documenta's arrival were left hanging: who are the indigenous resisting bodies in the case of greece? How does this analysis of local resistance deal with the rising of extreme nationalism?¹³ And most importantly, what was the positionality of documenta's curators and artists in this dichotomy of 'bad' Germanic neoliberalism versus 'good' resisting indigeneity?¹⁴

Within this context, it was important for us to move some steps back, re-approach art and politics, and examine a space outside of what we perceived as the dubious utopianism of documenta, while retaining a progressive, yet self-reflexive and critical, political direction. We believed that a potential way to go beyond established narratives was through looking at the beast that documenta pretended not to see: a new form of totalitarianism that is completely immune to the old-school liberal humanism – a post-truth hybrid that constantly changes forms as it appropriates different languages (including those of the left, anti-authoritarianism, identity politics etc.) and media. In this political landscape, before we can answer whether there is still hope for progressive politics or begin to think about political strategies, we have to first understand how the opposite side has built its defences and its semiotically complex – ever expanding – framework of operation.

Art and the alt-right

Defining the term 'alt-right' presents challenges inasmuch as the term is used popularly to refer to phenomena associated with various political factions and ideologies of the right. For the sake of this article, we use the term to refer to far-right groups who situate themselves on the periphery of mainstream politics; whose primary organisation is online; and which came to prominence following Donald Trump's accession to the presidency of the US. Importantly,

while the alt-right shares many characteristics with the traditional extreme right (misogyny, nativism, racism, Islamophobic and anti-Semitic beliefs), it also presents a series of unique characteristics, including a new visual vocabulary of memes, irony, nihilistic language, and use of trolling and ambiguity, humour and irony.

Early on in our discussions around this event, we realised that seeking alternatives to the clichés of ‘humanitarian art’ comes with a potential danger. In the new cultural horizon, many of the tools of critique and subversion traditionally associated with the left and the progressive artistic avant-gardes of the previous century have been partly or completely co-opted by the alt-right.¹⁵ When it comes to political engagement, we have reached a point where it seems that the only way forward is through a sombre and straightforward literality. Employing ambiguity, nuance or irony is often automatically dismissed as irredeemably dangerous and when an artistic work presents attributes associated with ‘problematic’ behaviours there is a need for explanation or explicit moral contextualisation.¹⁶ Our hypothesis here is that the rise of the alt-right has successfully pushed progressive discourse into an uncomfortable new sincerity where the only tolerable position is the repetition of certain agreed moralist imperatives.

We would argue that the left,¹⁷ while understandably quick to condemn the ‘alt-right’ range of methods, did not engage with the medium-specificity and the content of these methods. For example, by placing popular alt-right meme Pepe Le Frog on the same ADL database as a swastika, we are missing the specificity of the aesthetic experience, semantic associations and political mobilisation that online right-wing communities produce. Pepe started his journey in culture as an online meme capturing a sense of melancholy and alienation, was appropriated by the alt-right in the early 2010s and became an integral part of their memeing around Donald Trump. Pepe’s history is important for us to understand that he is not just another hate symbol, but – perhaps more dangerously even – is a symbol that captures a

series of meanings that go beyond its political use: from nihilistic trolling (Burton 2016) and incel solidarity (Beauchamp 2019) to the DIY creativity of meme culture; and from the childish edgelord-ism of *South Park* (Poniewozik 2015) to full blown white supremacist conspiracies of the ‘great replacement theory’(Charlton 2019).

The visual languages and affective politics of the alt-right are not a secondary characteristic of a political movement, but a massively politicised field of communication and propaganda that cannot and should not be overlooked. Conflating the medium and the message is not the solution: if the alt-right uses memes, irony and strategic ambiguity, it does not mean that these practices can be seen as inseparable from the meaning they convey and therefore are inimical to progressive politics. If these visual and affective means are disqualified as necessarily reactionary, what are the viable alternatives for the left to communicate its messages? Is the only way forward to adopt a new sincerity, in which clarity and consensus are increasingly valorised? In any case, for us, a rigorous study of the alt-right creative processes and codes is of extreme importance.

Curating the *Garden*

Art and ‘freedom of speech’

Angela Dimitrakaki and Harry Weeks in their introduction to the recent edition of critical theory journal *Third Text* on anti-fascist art discuss the dangers of the aestheticisation of the alt-right, mentioning the example of ‘the exhumation of Julius Evola’s recombiant occult fascism and its legitimisation as ironic neo-reaction to be consumed as, well, aesthetic pleasure brought to you by art’ (Dimitrakaki and Weeks 2019). Julius Evola’s theories have recently returned in fashion amongst the alt-right to the point that the Atlantic named him ‘the intellectual darling’ of the alt-right (Momigliano 2017). Having previously worked on conspiracy theories, the profound antisemitism of contemporary greeks and the affinity

between the occult and neo-reaction, we have been interested in Evola for quite some time. So, when we received a performative email stating that Mr Evola himself (dead in 1974) would like to speak at our event, we thought this would be a fantastic opportunity to deconstruct the recently resurfaced 'super-fascist'. In agreeing to stage this performance, our decision was not guided by a sense of depoliticised 'aesthetics', nor in the direction of some ironic celebration of Evola. Curating an Evola-inspired performer or even a psychotic reincarnation of his amongst a festival of generally left/far-left-leaning critical practitioners was an equally history-driven and psychoanalytic guttural curatorial decision to force our audience to witness early fascism in the making.

Much as the viewing of Leni Riefenstahl's *Olympia* is important as a documentation of Nazism, the performative lecture of Julius Evola was not at all ironic and as such, utterly horror-inducing. Having witnessed that, we were surprised to see the *Garden* mentioned as an example of aestheticization of fascism in a footnote of the Dimitrakaki and Weeks article. Their suggestion seems to be that the very use of Evola's name is in itself an endorsement of fascism, and that to permit his words to be spoken somehow valorises them. The implication here is that the left should impose a thematic limitation on what may be spoken about, under the banner of no-platforming (but who is here to be no-platformed? Evola himself? Or his reincarnation?). For Dimitrakaki and Weeks, the context of the performance seems irrelevant. Neither author attended the festival nor contacted FYTA for documentation of the performance; the curatorial aims of the *Garden*, its wider programme and the political history of its curators are of no interest: all complexity is left aside the moment the name of a fascist is mentioned.

Without wishing to enter a wider discussion of no-platforming as a political strategy, we would like to highlight what we see as politically dangerous within the conceptualisation of no-platforming implicit in Dimitrakaki and Weeks's article. Our criticism of this argument does not rely on a laissez-faire idea of freedom of speech but focuses on the fact that such a view

makes it impossible to understand – and counter – the language of the enemy. It is important to stress that, in our view, indulgence of dystopian pleasures (to refer to the event's title) is not some sort of ecstatic experience of liberation from social conventions. Our preoccupation with 'enjoyment' does not aim to facilitate a Dionysian orgy where anything is permitted as long as it provides instant aesthetic gratification. And as much as we criticise a certain leftist tendency towards political purity, we are equally, if not more, critical of 'anti-PC' positions promoting a naive liberal advocacy for unconditional freedom of speech.¹⁸

For the sake of the discussion, we can schematise the two sides of the debate as follows: on one hand, art becomes the vehicle for social emancipation through guiding people to the right way of behaving; in this view, any engagement with the pleasures at stake in the dystopian is to be avoided entirely. On the other hand, art is conceived as a form of radical creativity that leads to a libidinal paradise beyond social conventions; anything is permitted as long as it has an aesthetic value. Both positions seem to point towards a similar end goal: a world of frictionless human co-existence – in the first case a world without the friction caused by ideological disagreements and in the second, without the violent restrictions imposed on individuals by social norms. In the first, that which is troubling is excluded (no-platformed) creating a 'safe space'. In the second, everything is included creating an 'open forum of ideas.' It is this fantasy of frictionless co-existence that reminds us of Leo Bersani's argument from his 1987 essay, 'Is the rectum a grave', where he offers a critique of the two poles of pro- and anti-sex feminism, suggesting that both are similarly 'oversimplified versions of a nonidentitarian sexuality and subjectivity'. Bersani, drawing from Lacanian psychoanalysis, argues that the way aggression is intertwined with sexuality makes it impossible to either 'reject' or 'approve' it without crashing into the limitations of discourse (Bersani 2010). For Bersani, anti-sex feminists like Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin in their rejection of pornography are led to dismiss all sex as a reproduction of violent hierarchies¹⁹; their sex-

positive opponents on the other hand see consensual sex, and specifically consensual sex within BDSM communities where the forms of power and violence are incorporated into sexual practices, as ‘inherently loving and nurturing’ and sexuality ‘as continuous with harmonious community’. For Bersani, the first position envisions a version of the world without the alienating effects of sex (through avoiding it altogether), while the second ignores the inherent alienation²⁰ and aggression of human sexuality (through embracing it as inherently ‘good’). Similarly, we don’t think one can ‘approve’ or ‘reject’ people’s subjective relation to ideology. We need to find ways in which to engage with the enjoyment, discontent and most importantly alienation produced within the world of meaning. In our understanding, those who argue for a strict de-platforming of all ideas deemed potentially damaging envision an impossible ‘safe space’ where audiences are completely shielded by experiences that might disturb or challenge them. On the other side, those who argue for an uninhibited ‘freedom of speech’ think of audiences as completely capable to engage with a wildly antagonistic spectrum of ideas and affects, ignoring (or underplaying) the violence, discontent and epistemic exclusions produced in such encounters.

The Garden of Dystopian Pleasures was not built on the premise that the world gets better when people enjoy more.²¹ On the contrary, we wanted to investigate the idea of responsibility – even the enjoyment of (super-egoic) responsibility – and to reflect on the very notion of freedom and freedom to enjoy. For us, enjoyment is a constitutive part of all oppression, so we are keen to understand the different dimensions of the phenomenon. What is the enjoyment of the oppressed and oppressors – what are the differences, and what is the dialectic between the two? How can we build a political analysis out of this understanding? How can we re-conceptualise power, community, political praxis in this context? An embodied encounter with these forms of enjoyment through art can offer a nuanced way to understand

and deal with them. Only then can we articulate a new ethics²² that goes beyond a sense of moralistic certainty and teleological utopianism.

On ambiguity

When curating a creative showcase on post-truth, we considered it an opportunity to play with notions of truth as such (for example, in the description of acts, the communication of the event, and its social media presence); in each of the pieces presented later in this paper, we invited the audience to take a critical distance and reflect on its truth, its message, its intentions. We consider this an essential part of the role of arts in political discourse and an important step for the ideological self-determination of the audience.

Instead of offering our audience some safe distancing mechanisms, as parody, for example, often does, most of the performances presented at the *Garden* avoided making clear what their ideological starting point was. This, of course, causes awkwardness, unease and confusion, as the audience has to work harder and without having an obvious safety net to lean on when controversial material is approached. Later in this article, Pfützenreuter discusses this when he presents an account of his participation in the *Garden* and its reception. For us, this encounter with the audience and its potential danger defines a new space for political art, one we consider essential in the post-truth era. After all, isn't post-truth about exactly this disorientating feeling? Post-truth is not about logical processing of words; it is not even about discussions and conventional understandings of textual communication. Post-truth relies heavily on affect and complex visual semiotics, on ambiguity and contradictory signalling. And this is why we think art is of tremendous political importance at this precise moment: it can help audiences and art practitioners alike understand how this spaghetti of political complexity and cultural semiotics operates and expands its digital and real-life influence.

We would not claim that ambiguity is in itself sufficient to create complex dialectic or progressive political mobilisation. But if we hold to the idea that ambiguity is an important tool in the creation of nuanced artistic artefacts, what would be the way to employ ambiguity while maintaining critical self-reflection and accountability? Is there a way to avoid an approach that is virtually identical to alt-right nihilistic irony and produce antagonistic positions? Artistic methods could potentially and have historically brought politics and poetics in an explosive mix that has been as open in its form as it has been polemic in its positioning. In our curatorial approach we opted for a type of political art that prioritised posing a series of questions, as opposed to offering convenient answers.

In this curatorial horizon, we focused our attention on artworks that expose and work with their internal contradictions. This type of performative gestures produces a sense of uncertainty and suspicion in the audience that could be useful in navigating the media environment of the post-truth era, as for us this would be the ideal disposition against all information coming through online and offline media. Critics of this approach suggest that we live in times when this particular type of discourse is considered *a priori* dangerous. They go further, suggesting that to speak of internal contradictions at a time of war is a reactionary decision; that this is not the time for nuance, but for bold positions and clearly stated assertions. On the contrary, we think that irony, meta-narratives and self-referentiality are too precious a set of tools to be unconditionally surrendered to the neo-fashion.²³ This would in fact be a declaration of semiotic defeat.

Of course, we do not claim that there is a singular way to deal with such issues and we certainly do not intend to centre the ‘edgelord’²⁴ as the sole speaker of truth within leftist circles. We are well aware that we have to examine rigorously our methodological ambiguities – or, more correctly, our methodologies of ambiguity – and we have to constantly re-negotiate the subjective positioning of those exercising them. Taking ambiguity as an important tool for

dialectical political art does not mean that we discard in any sense the advances made through identity politics or leftist discourse more broadly. Ambiguity does not aim at erasing all certainty one might have but rather at questioning the process that allows certainties to be produced. And building on that, recognising one's internal contradictions should not stop one from taking political decisions, making strategic alliances and hoping for a collective improvement of social relations.²⁵

Between overidentification and disidentification

At the intersection of embodiment, political critique and strategic ambiguity, we find ourselves between two ideas with similar genealogies but divergent reference points: On one hand, we see our (curatorial and performative) work in dialogue with the concept of overidentification as developed by Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek; on the other hand we relate to the concept of disidentification as represented in the work of theorist José Muñoz in his analysis of queer performance.

In order to understand this combination of ideas, we will first discuss overidentification, an idea initially formulated by Slavoj Žižek in his analysis of the Slovenian band and art group Laibach. Žižek defines Laibach's artistic strategy as a process that:

“frustrates” the system (the ruling ideology) precisely insofar as it is not its ironic imitation, but overidentification with it – by bringing to light the obscene superego underside of the system, overidentification suspends its efficiency (Žižek 1993)

According to this definition, overidentification is not about taking a critical distance to the object of criticism but going the opposite direction and taking it more seriously than it takes itself. And in fact, such a strategy offers new tools when dealing with authoritarian regimes, not only because it short-circuits their censoring mechanisms,²⁶ but most importantly because it invites the audience to take an ethical position not only in relation to the performed act but

to the actual regime that is being reproduced on stage.

As a form of critique, overidentification is different to parody, within which the critique to the ruling ideology is achieved through caricature and clearly distancing exaggeration. Within overidentification practices, the viewer is not told what is right or wrong (not even by being presented with caricatures of what is insinuated as ‘wrong’), but has to decide for themselves what is morally unacceptable and what is permissible, what is to be proudly enjoyed and what is a ‘guilty’ pleasure that one should be ashamed of experiencing. We do not consider this process a form of moral relativism but, on the contrary, an exercise in embodied ethics. Our curatorial practices aim to open up, facilitate and deepen difficult discussions around consensus reality and political mobilisation.

If Laibach developed this strategy in reaction to the authoritarian regime of 1980s Yugoslavia, one has to ask whether this can be applied in the contemporary context where authoritarianism has embraced its inner contradictions and paradoxes in spectacularly unexpected ways.²⁷ Anthropologist Frederick Schmidt (Schmidt 2019) discusses this in his analysis of overidentification as an artistic methodology in the Athenian context. Schmidt, writing on the work of FYTA, considers the possibility of a meaningful differentiation from the Laibachian overidentification: the difference comes through the idea that we can infer the actual standpoint of the artist once we start deciphering their contextual framework. In the case of our *Garden*, the overall curatorial decisions themselves, which included many academic presentations dismantling the alt-right and performances with antinationalist rhetoric, provide a framework for more morally dangerous work to be ‘afforded’. Looking at FYTA’s queer activist background in general, and this is what leads to the second term which is to be discussed here, one can wonder whether our own embodiment makes us unable to perform a full-on overidentification project the way Laibach could.

Over the years of staging works of overidentification, we have often encountered a unique paradox: while we employ narratives, figures and visual language of oppressive structures, both us as a duo and our close collaborators inhabit bodies that have been historically and epistemically excluded by these structures. We realised that no matter how hard we tried, we were by default unable to deploy a self-reliant and complete overidentification strategy. By reflecting on these experiences, we saw the function of what Jose Muñoz describes as a process of queer disidentification as an additional tool to be added to the mix. For Muñoz:

Disidentification is a performative mode of tactical recognition that various minoritarian subjects employ in an effort to resist the oppressive and normalizing discourse of dominant ideology. Disidentification resists the interpellating call of ideology that fixes a subject within the state power apparatus. It is a reformatting of self within the social. It is a third term that resists the binary of identification and counteridentification. Counteridentification often, through the very routinized workings of its denouncement of dominant discourse, reinstates that same discourse (Muñoz 1999, 97).

Following Muñoz' theory of disidentification we see how by inserting ourselves in these 'oppressive' scenarios we are at the same time subverting them – the very embodiment of right-wing personas, for example, becomes a space of alienation for both ourselves and the audiences. Embracing and investigating contradictions becomes a key component of this process. If as Muñoz suggests 'as a practice, disidentification does not dispel those ideological contradictory elements; rather, like a melancholic subject holding on to a lost object, a disidentifying subject works to hold on to this object and invest it with new life'; queer performance can deconstruct authoritarian ideologies while identifying with their 'dystopian pleasures'.²⁸ In this oscillation between over- and dis- identification we aspire to continue creating and curating political art that addresses questions of alienation, enjoyment and identity without relying on moralising certainties and totalising truths.

Richard Pfütenreuter: *DUSTOPIA* in the *Garden*

The show

DUSTOPIA or a perverse autohemotherapy was a performance I developed for *The Garden of Dystopian Pleasures* in September 2018. It uses the form of a scientific lecture performance, combining life science and DIY-Biohacking with technocratic and racist utopias of infinite life. It demonstrates and mocks the construction of ‘alternative facts’ by pseudo-scientific authorisation techniques. Its ideological starting point is naturalisation, the belief in natural explanations for social life – which is the basis of most ideologies.

Bonding with the audience and constantly mixing truth and lie, the show stretches the boundaries between far-right ideology, conservative, (neo)liberal and pre-communist beliefs. Without making the case for ideological relativism, the performance examines the ‘dystopian pleasures’ and the libidinal surplus in the production (and consumption) of fake news.

On stage there is a table with a laptop, connected to a microscope and a projection: ‘Blood – the perfect functional food’. Richard, a man in his thirties²⁹, is standing next to the table, wearing a white lab-coat and a dinosaur mask; next to him, there is a chattering fake duck. All of a sudden, he bites the duck to death and starts to explain the natural, instinctive thirst for blood – as the purest form of nutrition. After this ‘contribution to the performative character of the festival’³⁰ he starts his ‘serious scientific lecture’, using a slideshow with a fake bio, elaborating on his double-track career in theatre as well as in medicine/haematology.

The first part of the lecture presents a cultural history of blood, based on its use for nutritional, religious or medical purposes, emphasising the simultaneity of adoration and taboo. Between the lines, he tries to bond with the audience by references to menstruation or homosexuality, underlining the constant discrimination through cultural taboos. The message is clear: forget obsolete traditions – objective natural science will bring enlightenment and

freedom! He constantly emphasises the German ability to learn from its history of discriminatory taboos ('world champion of "historical workup"'), as the basis for rationality and science.

And what could be a better symbol for the 'objective observation' than a microscope? Stabbing into his finger the 'scientist' starts to observe his own blood, when he is interrupted by an incoming Skype call from his girlfriend. The audience waves and cheerfully answers her greetings, although it is just a pre-filmed recording from Skype. She complains about the absurdity of Richard being on a stage, finding it pretty cool to stab himself for a drop of blood, whilst she is really bleeding at home. She pulls out a tampon, waves it and offers a blood donation for the show. Distressed, Richard breaks off the 'call' and insists on continuing with 'real science': the observation of his own blood. Using the microscope wired to his laptop he presents a first 'projection', showing an enlarged picture of blood cells.

On the first zooming level, the white blood cells are loosely grouped – in the shape of an iron cross. As he 'zooms in' they are even more enlarged, forming a reverse swastika and the words 'white powa'. Now the audience starts laughing loudly. The 'scientist' explains, that the red blood cells don't matter, but the essence of life is embodied by the white blood cells, keeping our blood 'free from intruders and germs from outside'. The last 'zoom-in' of the microscope shows the white blood cells with blurred faces of German Neo-Fascists. They look aggressively but he's still in denial, declaring they are just 'a little group of outraged middle-class leucocytes instigated by some free radical plasmids'.

The 'scientist' declares natural science has proven that 'social imbalances' like racism cannot be explained by the humanities anymore. In fact they are caused by blood diseases, that MUST be cured by blood therapy. This cure requires the consumption of blood – preferably human blood. To avoid ethical problems, he recommends two options: blood transfusions and autohaemotherapy. In an excursion to soviet cosmist³¹ Alexander Bogdanov, he illustrates the

history of revitalising blood transfusions in the early Soviet Union, and the contemporary attempts in Silicon Valley. He is linking early Soviet and late capitalist scientific traditions that want(ed) to create ‘super humans’ and the perfect society on the basis of blood. In present day Californian utopia, older people can buy blood and the younger ones can earn ‘some extra money’ (Haynes 2017) – thereby linking the circulation of blood with circulation of money ‘for the greater benefit of all’.

For those who are ‘not willing’ to invest financially in their own health, Richard recommends a DIY-autohaemotherapy, inspired by ‘alternative medicine’ and the logic of homeopathy. In this popular ‘alternative logic’ you can cure diseases by giving very small doses of the poison itself – in our case: our own blood, infected by ‘social diseases’. The white blood cells would recognize the defects of the consumed blood as an external invader, thus ultimately curing any personal or social ‘disbalance’ – even racism – with racist science. Consuming your own blood is promoted as the ideal combination of auto-therapy and the perfect nutrition at the same time. As a healthy, sustainable and warm to-go-meal, blood is presented as the perfect nutrition for today’s entrepreneurial selves.

To ‘help overcome cultural taboos’ he finishes with an ‘Own Blood Cooking Show’ with references to ‘Greek cuisine’. While playing the 1980s hit *Let’s get physical*, Richard punctures a vein of his hand, blood is dripping out. He prepares four different dishes with his own blood: First is a blood pudding ‘for the traditionalists’, because it dates back to Ulysses. The second creation is for the religious spectators: freshly consecrated own-blood-wafers with a finish of traditional incense. The third dish ‘for those, who like it more kinky’ is a bowl of whipped cream with ‘red sauce’. The final course is ‘for the real men, for the fighters, for the true Greeks’: he puts on a white catcher mask, takes a Greek flag, the other fist pointing at his face, blood dripping in his mouth – the self-sustaining own-blood-circuit is closed.

The perception by audience and media

Directly after the performance some people come to the stage, while I am still treating my bleeding hand. Apart from those who want to help or applaud, two people are interested in my blood. A young woman tells me that she actually is a scientist and everything I said ‘is really true’. She quickly touches my wound and licks the blood. I ask her whether she thinks this is a good idea in times of blood-transmitted diseases like HIV. Another man grabs a blood-wafer, telling me that they actually work in a spiritual way. When I argue that my lecture had a critical approach, he tells me that I am wrong, because what I said on stage is true and he has already experienced it. Talking with some spectators afterwards, I was surprised at how many of the authorisation techniques I used worked. Even those spectators who took the whole show ironically, still believed in my medical biography, because I seemed confident when using the venous catheter.

Some days later, two newspapers write about the performance: first *i efimerida* and then the tabloid *Star Press*, which basically copies and further spins the first article. They scandalise the event with headlines like: ‘Dread at the University of fine Arts: German artist offered his blood to the audience!’ (2018, 1), presenting photos of the spectator licking my blood. Although they realize the show is dealing with post-truth, they produce fake news about the show and my intentions. *i efimerida* suggests a hermeneutical ‘What was the intention of the artist?’, with an interesting interpretation. Inspired by my arm-bandage with a German flag and the word ‘Spielführer’ (‘game leader’ or ‘playful Führer’) the article explains I would symbolise the German austerity policy in Europe and suggest to the inhabitants of the poorer European countries to eat themselves (Daloukas 2018). In *Star Press* the article is followed by a right-wing populist article about the death of queer activist and performer Zak Kostopoulos, expressing understanding for his murderer³².

Theses

‘I don’t want to know, who I am’ said the East German author Heiner Müller (Rüter and Irmer, 2009). It creates structural difficulties to write about one’s own art. Nevertheless, the performance and its reception revealed some of the potentials and pitfalls of (performance) art as a means of political critique and intervention, which I will summarise in six theses:

(1) Faces of Regression in Leftist Art

I share FYTA’s views on the actual regression in ‘leftist’ art, mostly apparent in moralistic / humanistic approaches or ‘Dionysian’ ones, which just celebrate creativity itself. This regression can have a variety of overlapping faces, from postcolonial exoticism (‘Shut up and listen to the authentic indigenous!’), to accelerationist fetishizing of progress (‘Glittering cyber-future will save us, go go go!’) or art that believes it can substitute political change itself. These tendencies are linked to the current weakness of the political left and the philosophical and aesthetic weaknesses resulting from such a predicament (Hirsch 2015, 9). Political art should ‘make reality impossible’ (Müller 1990, 13) and ‘arouse longing for another state of the world’ (Müller 1983) – less by praising utopias but rather by using its specific aesthetic abilities to subvert ‘capitalist realism’ (Mark Fisher).

(2) The Framework is Crucial

I experienced the *Garden* and the Athens queer performance scene as an excellent environment for my performance. Its (mostly) critical but nevertheless open-minded audience did not reflexively reject the ambiguous experiment. In the tradition of documenta 14, I offered new age utopianism and the fetishizing of Greekness, mixing Greek myths of superiority with German ones.

(3) Paradoxes of Enjoyment

Playing with overidentification provokes a paradox: you want to entertain the audience and need their attention, but at the same time you are the ‘bad guy’, shocking or even insulting them. On stage, you are eating from the ‘forbidden fruits’ of unethical behaviour on behalf of the audience, but possibly lose control of the material – as evidenced by the spectators who claimed that ‘everything was true’. Overidentification has to deal with the risk that it may be taken too seriously, and by that potentially reproducing the examined ideas.

Overidentification, Brechtian ‘*Verfremdung*’ (alienation) and grotesque comedy are ways to undermine the right-wing strategies (as de Senna examines precisely in the following section). In contrast to the nihilistic irony of the alt-right mentioned by FYTA, there is something at stake: the audience is invited to deal with its own involvement in ideology. As a performer I tried to avoid pure complacent comedy, which would offer the opportunity to ‘laugh it away’.

(4) The Fetish of ‘Objective Science’

After the so-called end of grand narratives (which were in fact just replaced by neoliberal ones) and in times of post-truth, many liberals or social movements (like Fridays for Future) fetishize ‘objective science’. It is seen as the embodiment of reason itself and the opposite of ideologies, taboos and prejudices. However, they underestimate the political and ideological function of the self-declared ‘non-ideological’ positivism. The latter has often been the willing accomplice of political power, whether in Fascism or recently as the leading ideology for the degradation of the welfare state. Overidentification can playfully reveal this fetishism, when a lab coat, fake biography and the convincing use of a venous catheter seem sufficient to make me become a medical professional.

(5) Dangerous Feelings

Apart from political relativism, or a problematic liberal belief in the equality of all opinions,

it is necessary to understand fascists, including their fears and pleasures. It is difficult to defeat right-wing ideologies, while denying their traces in one's own personality – the deep personal involvement that preforms desires and prolongs oppression via enjoyment.

Overidentification is the opposite reaction to that denial: it exposes the hidden paths between our utopias and fascist nightmares. On stage one has the 'privilege' to dive deeply into this creepy mud of embodied ideologies.³³ However, the perception of one's own entanglements in problematic ideologies does not produce cathartic liberation, but can only be a first starting point for a feeling and questioning these entanglements.

(6) Taboo and the exposure of denied intersections

One of the crucial questions in my work is: where are the conditions and intersections of all those (embodied) fascist, religious, bourgeois, neoliberal etc. discourses? In which taboos do they overlap? Taboos often develop a life of their own. Most people feel, but could not explain why it seems normal to eat the blood of another species boiled in its own guts, while preparing a 'Tampon-Schnitzel' – as my girlfriend suggests in the performance – could possibly 'contaminate' the whole kitchen. When a singer in today's Germany shouts an antiracist statement on stage, it happens that a leftist dramaturg feels 'frightened' and reminded of 'pre-45 speakers' (@bernd_stegemann, September 14, 2019) – simply because the singer is shouting. At the same time, people are shocked when it turns out their neighbour is a fascist killer, because 'he was always so calm and polite'. The liberal relativism, which demands every opinion to be treated equally (as long as it is presented politely) has always been an easy terrain for fascists and racists, insisting on 'free speech'. Today's German liberal public doesn't have a conception of fascism nor the feelings associated with it – apart from antiquated taboos and Nazi clichés.

Ultimately, overidentification actually takes the way of homeopathy, when it 'treats'

spectators with small doses of the fascist poison itself. By doing that, it uncovers the numerous ideological traces between right-wing beliefs and democratic public or common sense. There is probably no definitive cure for fascist feelings – just the constant need for ‘remembering, repeating and working-through’. (Freud 1958)

Pedro de Senna: *Aurora Dourada*

Origins

Aurora Dourada is an ongoing practice-as-research project, looking at some of the connections between performance, performativity and right-wing ideology. It began in 2013, in collaboration with FYTA. Its first iteration was ‘Alvorada Dourada’, a video shown at the Athens Biennale 2013, in which ‘Pedro’, a Brazilian fascist, is disenchanted with the turn to the left Brazilian politics has taken. Brazil had been governed by the Workers’ Party since 2002, and notwithstanding that government’s many failings, general public and political discourse had shifted decidedly to the left. In 2013, however, protests that had begun as a local rally against a rise in bus ticket fares were weaponised by the right and turned into a national anti-government movement.³⁴ Still, ‘Pedro’ is not happy with the chaos in his native country, and looks around the globe for like-minded individuals; he finds his ideological home in Greece’s Golden Dawn, inspired by their ideals of beauty, order and purity, and by the historical legacy of glorious Athens in the fifth century BCE. He decides to apply to join the party – there is only one problem: he is not Greek enough. He embarks on a journey of transformation, in order to become truly Greek – first by learning the language, which according to him ‘offers the key to a culture’; and he does so by learning phrases from popular music and anti-immigrant slogans. Verses from pop songs such as Giannis Plutarchos’s ‘Tonight I bleed’ (Απόψε αιμορραγώ) lead him to talking about Blood and Pride – the slogan for Golden Dawn. According to FYTA, ‘the limits between normal greek culture

and its alleged fascist diversion blur – with language being key, a language which through metaphorical and metonymic slides reaches from an innocent artistic expression to racial hatred and back again.’ (‘Alvorada Dourada’)

At that stage of the project, my primary concern was exploring the interstices between nationalities, expressed linguistically in a performance incorporating both Portuguese and (broken) Greek³⁵. The racist and xenophobic language was tempered by a quaint foreign accent; attempts to write in Greek had spelling mistakes. These ‘imperfections’ rendered the characterization somewhat comical in its bathos, the character moving from the downright unpleasant to the almost endearing. At the end of the video, ‘Pedro’ still cannot get to be accepted in the party but promises that, Sisyphus-like, he will keep trying. Right-wing nationalism was on the rise globally, but still on the margins of mainstream discourse, and still liable to being derided – or so I thought. The assumed final victory of liberal, progressive discourse (both very problematic terms, admittedly) was an error of calculus many have made, and have since regretted.

The new context

Five years later, it was clear the situation was very different. At *The Garden of Dystopian Pleasures* in the Summer of 2018 it is not so easy to laughingly dismiss the rise of the right (was it ever?). Brazil’s president Rousseff (Workers’ Party) had been impeached in what many described as a parliamentary coup, and her former vice-president was in charge. Elections were to be held in November, and a hitherto semi-obscure far-right congressman, Jair Messias Bolsonaro (yes, that is his middle name), a former captain in the army, is in with a strong chance of winning.³⁶ Infamously, during the Rousseff impeachment vote in congress, he dedicated his ‘yes’ vote to the officer who had been responsible for Rousseff’s torture during the military dictatorship in the 1970s. And there was of course another

complicating factor to the narrative. Events had somewhat taken a turn: Greeks had elected the left-wing Syriza party to government, and had since been ‘humiliated’ by the European Union. Can ‘Pedro’ go back to Brazil? Is he still Brazilian enough? Brexit Britain looks promising... but that would mean adopting a whole new national identity.³⁷ Still, he is taking no chances. He believes he is ready, and he is in Athens to deliver, in Greek, a speech staking a claim to his Greekness at the cradle of Western civilisation. He has learnt the language well; he has moved to Kilkis, a border town in northern Greece, the prefecture that has been at the crossroads of refugee land-routes into the European Union (Greek Council for Refugees 2015); he is ready to shed his own blood to defend it from any potential foreign threat.

In this instalment, renamed ‘Aurora Dourada’ – a better translation for Χρυσή Αυγή (Golden Dawn), now that ‘Pedro’s’ Greek has improved – I attempted a more sombre approach, stretching the limits of the risible. Formatted as a TED-style talk, in this presentation ‘Pedro’, now transliterated as Πέντρο, talked about his journey. Mobilising a number of patriotic and nationalistic clichés, I created a speech that highlighted connections between football culture, nationalism, pop culture, the Olympics, the Orthodox Church, the cult of Alexander the Great, Balkan history, and party politics, peppered with their attendant misogyny, homophobia, racism and xenophobia. The mood was darker, and while the performance was delivered earnestly, I anticipated some laughter to emerge from Πέντρο’s overidentification. In my estimation, the absurdity of bursting into a football stadium chant in the middle of the presentation, or the overabundance of right-wing tropes would suffice to cause the alienation (in Brechtian terms) that would allow for the cracks to show, and for audiences to enjoy themselves. In reality, the effect on the audience was not at all what I had anticipated. There was very little laughter in the room; some audience members walked out. As a couple of women did so, I improvised a ‘joke’ about their periods.

Žižek, Brecht and ethics

The tension between Brecht's *Verfremdung*, present in the comical bathos of 'Alvorada Dourada'; and Žižek's overidentification, expressed in 'Aurora Dourada', is worth exploring. In 1989 Žižek had warned that 'it is no longer sufficient [...] to seek to demonstrate how the object proffered by ideology as natural and given is the product of a discursive construction, the result of a network of symbolic overdetermination', (Žižek 1989, 11) which is of course the Brechtian promise. Something else is needed, according to him, to truly disrupt the systems of capitalist power, which in themselves are such that they contain (and therefore co-opt) any possible critique. As such, the earnestness of my performance (as opposed to alienating critical distance) was key, and I knew I had to tread a fine line. One must not forget that the audience at the *Garden* was, it must be assumed, a knowing one, participating in an event at the Athens School of Fine Arts organised by FYTA. I tried to pitch the performance accordingly. Graham Wolfe suggests that actors 'can indulge in the transgressive, Anti-PC fantasies [...] while knowing that, for the gaze of the big Other, no *actual* enjoyment is going on here – it is all for the service of liberal-minded Art.' But, he continues, 'The actor's enjoyment is 'problematic' not simply because it is so out of place in a progressive society but because, in its very reality, it interferes with the audience's ability to safely indulge their own fantasies'. (Wolfe 2014, 122) Indeed, the audience members walking out of the performance attest to that discomfort.

Still, Wolfe asks: 'What if the properly Brechtian strategy today is to *overidentify* with the part, to *excessively enjoy* these roles?' (Wolfe 2014, 122-3). The question is asked in relation to actors performing others' texts, but the situation is further complicated (and perhaps aggravated) when the actor, as in my case, is also the writer/creator of the piece. One must then consider ways in which the process of writing itself can be seen to be performative; the role of 'the writer' is being performed, and at the same time this writer is operating 'in character'.

There are, in other words, three selves present – the writer, the writer in character, and the character. When I write the text for Πέντρο, I am, at least to some extent, already in character. Of course, while Πέντρο’s spoken Greek might be very good, my written Greek is not so much. So the text is written originally in English, and then translated into that language; once again the interstices of culture and language, the gaps between character and performer are exposed by practical necessity. In this sense, a process of self-alienation (now with a Lacanian twist) takes place, as one observes oneself enjoying the roles (character and writer) one is performing. There is a Barthesian pleasure in this, a *jouissance* to be found in encountering the grain in the text, the voice. In a manner of speaking, the artist indulges in fantasy, so the audience don’t have to.

But what fantasy is this, and at what cost might it be rehearsed? In Athens, feedback from some audience members after the event suggested that the performance was ‘too close to the bone’; that some of the things Πέντρο said had been all too often heard around family dinner tables. The performance started to cross over from the realm of fantasy into the harsh realities of lived experience. Indeed, three days after my performance, queer activist Zak Kostopoulos was murdered in Athens. The barbarity (and closeness – Zak was a friend of the event’s organisers) of the murder gave me pause: whose words was I voicing in that city? Then, perhaps, the fragments of Greek culture I rehearsed in my performance were indeed a means to

traverse and subvert the fantasy frame that determines the field of meaning...ie, the frame within which, precisely, the ‘symptom’ appears as some alien, disturbing intrusion, and not as the point of eruption of the otherwise hidden truth of the existing social order. (Žižek 1992, 140)

In this respect, they may be perceived as politically useful. Still, the fact remains that the lie embodied by the ‘symptom’, which I was attempting to highlight had already been exposed,

erupted in the violence against immigrants, and the brutalisation of everyday political, social and familial discourses. Was there anything left to subvert, any fantasy frame to be exposed? It is possible that my enjoyment in the role was shared by audience members, in a way not dissimilar to that alluded to above by Pfüzenreuter; that the fantasy was entertained and indeed indulged in, by those who laughed *with* (as opposed to *at* Πέντρο). As FYTA have pointed out, an invitation is made to the audience to examine its own ethical positions, and walking out may in fact be the only tenable response to the performance. And yet, most of them stayed until the end, when Πέντρο walks off the stage in confusion about his identity.

Notwithstanding its efficacy or otherwise as political strategy, it is clear that there are ethical questions that need addressing in my practice. Key among those is the precisely the question of platforming ideas, as briefly discussed above by FYTA. Must some things never be said, regardless of context or intention? Linguistics has taught us the constitutive power of language. Theatre itself has been defined as ‘discursive embodiment’ (Ley 2009); and by reproducing discourses on stage, embodying them, theatre has the power to summon them into an existence that is all too present, material. Like the summoning of the image of the torturer in Dilma Rousseff’s impeachment procedures, my words may be perceived and indeed received as an act of violence against those who have heard them for real. There is also the question of distance, and place of speech: the very alienation that I believe made my original performance possible makes it problematic for me to indulge in appropriating a reality that, essentially, is not mine. There is a question here about the role of the artist in relation to their place, both physically and metaphorically, articulated in the paradox of not/belonging. I am a Brazilian immigrant to the UK, married to a Greek woman (whose family is from Kilkis). To what identity(ies) can I lay claim? From what point(s) of view can I speak? I would like to think that my international existence might afford me the ability to approach questions of nationality and nationalism with some degree of understanding. Still, having the ability is not

the same as having the right to do so, and these are questions I continuously ask myself in my practice. My answers depend as much on my state of mind as they do on any objective exterior reality which might affect it.

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Notes

- ¹ A collective of artists, academics and performers based in Athens, London and Berlin. Two years after the 'Garden of Dystopian Pleasures', the ministry co-organised a conference at the Freud Museum London focusing on Psychoanalysis and Post-truth. See: <https://www.freud.org.uk/event/psychoanalysis-post-truth-us-election-special/>
- ² We have to acknowledge that neither 'post-truth' nor 'post-truth era' have accurate and satisfying definitions. Can we take as a starting point Matthew D'Ancona's (2017) metaphorical construction, an era defined by: "the declining value of truth as society's reserve currency, an

abandoned gold standard of verifiability”)? We supplement this not only with the observation that this is a period when liberal media orthodoxies were challenged by the rise of alternative digital outlets and grassroots (mis)information, but also with the idea that there is a truth, which for the subject divided by language is always lost, yet always to be pursued. It is this truth that, we shall argue, is at stake in the confrontation with a dystopian pleasure.

³ The use of a small g for greece and greek in FYTA’s writing is an antinationalist gesture

⁴ This article has been long in the making and we’d like to thank those who discussed our main arguments and provided critical feedback; Daniel Mapp and Jordan Osserman, in particular, offered valuable comments throughout this process

⁵ An in-depth discussion on the politics of documenta 14 can be found in Audrey Schmidt’s interview with Fil Ieropoulos for the Melbourne-based art magazine *Minority Report* (Schmidt 2018)

⁶ The public programme of the exhibition was named ‘the parliament of bodies’ and the initial cluster of events ‘34 exercises of freedom’ - including a plethora of artworks and discussions that could be largely grouped under these characteristics. Art historian Kostis Stafylakis offers his account of some of these phenomena (Stafylakis 2017)

⁷ Greece after the 2008 financial crisis was pressured by the EU, ECB and the IMF to adopt a brutal austerity program leading to political turbulence that culminated with the ascendance of left-wing party SYRIZA to power. In this context, greece was often valorised by the European left as an example of people revolting against neoliberal policies imposed by bureaucratic technocrats.

⁸ *Translation of the original in German* (Balzer 2017)

⁹ (Plessas 2017)

¹⁰ (Sprinkle 2017)

¹¹ (‘The Cooperativist Society’ 2017)

¹² (Hinderer Cruz, Kambouri, and Tsomou 2017); for more on indigeneity and documenta 14 see also Schmidt 2018.

¹³ At the time, Golden Dawn, the greek neo-Nazi party was the third biggest political party in parliament and its rhetoric was largely a narrative of ‘resistance’

¹⁴ While this is a rhetorical question here, Helena Smith writing in *The Guardian* offers a compelling response (Smith 2017).

¹⁵ (Simoniti 2018)

¹⁶ In a notable Screen Rant review of the classic horror film *The Shining*, the representation of abuse for example is coded as problematic as it doesn’t address the problems of domestic violence and child abuse (‘Why *The Shining* Hasn’t Aged Well’ 2020)

¹⁷ We are aware that such generalizations have their own limitations but for the sake of argument let’s accept this schematic grouping.

¹⁸ FYTA have reflected on how the demand for ‘free speech’ has been weaponised by right-wing politics of the past decade in their durational performance n(EURO)logy at Bâtiment d’Art

Contemporain in Geneva. In this performance a series of blood soaked 'Je Suis Voltaire' posters functioned as the backdrop for a xenophobic monologue delivered by two doctors / cardinals. More info around this artwork in Rahul Rao's article "Critique In Hysterical Times." The Disorder Of Things (blog), November 7, 2017.

<https://thedisorderofthings.com/2017/11/07/critique-in-hysterical-times/>

¹⁹ In Bersani's words: 'The ultimate logic of MacKinnon's and Dworkin's critique of pornography—and, however parodistic this may sound, I really don't mean it as a parody of their views—would be the criminalization of sex itself until it has been reinvented' (Bersani 2010, 20)

²⁰ It's worth pointing out that in our analysis, alienation follows a Lacanian orientation, where the term describes a split, an internal alterity, a becoming 'alien' or 'other' to oneself. And in that sense, there is no 'over-coming' alienation as it is a fundamental pre-condition for the subjectification process as such; alienation is constitutive of the subject's becoming. We found an illuminating discussion around the Lacanian definition of alienation and its relation to notions of freedom in Graham Smith's (unpublished) MA dissertation titled "Alienation, Separation and the Question of Freedom in Lacan's Seminar XI"

²¹ Although it is interesting to see this idea, which reminds us of Herbert Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization*, getting traction again.

²² For a more comprehensive discussion of the tension between notions of ethics and common moralism see also: Lacan, Jacques, Dennis Porter, and Jacques-Alain Miller. 2015. *The ethics of psychoanalysis, 1959-1960*.

²³ Colloquialism referring to neo-fascists

²⁴ Stemming from internet subcultures, a term to describe those who take controversial positions in order to provoke – those who enjoy taking the most contrarian position in every debate

²⁵ Besides our work as political provocateurs, we have participated over the years in queer arts projects that focus on other aspects of the political struggle, involving community outreach and empowerment. Does that make us unfaithful to the great cause of political provocation?

²⁶ See for example Laibach's performance in North Korea, captured in the documentary, *Liberation Day* (Olte and Traavik 2017)

²⁷ As, for example, in the case of Donald Trump who can pose as a totalitarian leader and at the same time as an insincere clown – and the second does not undermine the legitimacy or effects of the first

²⁸ Two artists whose work can be argued to share a similar approach to this overidentification/disidentification fusion are Pascal Lièvre and Benny Nemerofsky Ramsay. Their video "Patriotic" is a hyper-camp yet harsh and pertinent critique of propaganda aesthetics, in which the George W. Bush Patriotic Act of 2001 is set to a synthpop cover of Celine Dion's Love Theme from the film Titanic. In the end result, the viewer is presented with what could be a homoerotic, patriotic US army pinkwashing nightmare.

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- ²⁹ This differentiation between author, performer, character and the third-person-view are a concession to the readability of this text. The ambiguity between the performer and the scientist-persona is essential for the show, in regards to biography, rhetoric, facts and the production of fake news.
- ³⁰ The following unreferenced quotes are quotes from the show.
- ³¹ The cosmist movement started in the second half of the 19th century. It aimed to fulfil the promises of Christianity (e.g. immortality) by modern science. The movement strongly influenced the intellectual debates at the turn of the century and became very important during the Russian revolution. Even though the movement was opposed by Lenin, it strongly promoted the almost religious belief in technology in the Soviet Union.
- ³² <https://www.amnesty.org/en/get-involved/take-action/greece-justice-for-zak/>
- ³³ Speaking about privilege: the fact, that I (as a white cis-male German) am hardly affected by everyday discrimination and even played with that privileged role probably increased the unease for many spectators.
- ³⁴ In spite of these protests, in 2014 President Rousseff was re-elected; in hindsight, it is however clear that the seeds that eventually led to her impeachment process in 2015-16 had been planted.
- ³⁵ The Portuguese parts of the video were subtitled in Greek. In 2020, the video was selected for exhibition at the Art Athina (digital) Art Fair. At that point, the left-wing Syriza government had come and gone, Golden Dawn leaders were in jail and Greece had returned to the ‘normality’ of the right-wing Nea Dimocratia government of Kyriakos Mitsotakis. The fact that Art Athina chose to include the piece in its 2020 exhibition is a reminder that all is not well under the sun. The video can be seen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sE6fJrcMjhs&feature=youtu.be>
- ³⁶ Bolsonaro went on to win the election in the second round with 57.8 million votes (55.5% of valid ballots).
- ³⁷ Indeed, in April 2019, I performed a new iteration of the character, at the University of Surrey, at an event called ‘Between Myth and Memory: Contemporary Politics and the Performance of History’. The presentation, in English, and titled ‘Mythologising and overidentification: reflections of a Brazilian fascist abroad’, took the shape of a speech at an academic symposium in which ‘Pedro’ confesses to being confused after having read Žižek ... In this performance, his accent in English slips between Greek, Brazilian and British, as his identity as an international ultra-nationalist starts to unravel. Even so (and not unlike in Pfitzenreuter’s *DUSTOPIA* performance at the *Garden*), I was approached by an audience member who believed I had actually attempted to join Golden Dawn.