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CONTACT (/CONTACT)

## Interview with Elli Papakonstantinou. Vyrsopeiseio and the Potential of New Artistic Production in Greece | HERMAN BASHIRON MENDOLICCHIO

(/2015/09/interview-with-elli-papakonstantinou)



Elli Papakonstantinou. Photo by Alex Kat

Current events and developments have pushed Greece to the forefront of international attention. The cultural and artistic sectors are struggling to survive and must constantly imagine new ways to create, innovate and produce art and culture in “difficult times”. Recently, I had the opportunity to speak with Elli Papakonstantinou, theatre director and artistic director of Vyrsopeiseio. In this interview Elli tells the story of Vyrsopeiseio, one of the most interesting spaces devoted to contemporary art and creation in Athens. She also speaks of the international collaborations and residency program currently being developed there, as well as her own company, ODC Ensemble, and some of their future projects.

**HBM: Could you please introduce Vyrsopeiseio, the space, its story, and outline your main aims and activities?**

**EP:** Vyrsopeiseio, also known as VYRSO, is an independent space for the arts, run for artists, by artists. VYRSODEPSEIO is a former tannery, a space, where animal skins were torn off. The art produced there tries to keep that tradition alive.

VYRSODEPSEIO is also the headquarters of my company, ODC Ensemble. Formed in 2011, it is a cross-cultural and interdisciplinary group in constant evolution, maintaining a core of Greek, German and French artists. ODC Ensemble is committed to creating engaged art by building a bridge between activism and the arts. ODC Ensemble has performed all around the world and is a member of international networks and civil society platforms.

In these times, when Greece has become a project, an experiment, a work in progress (or regress?), our work is inevitably an experimental project in progress.

But going back to the origins of Vyrsopeiseio, first of all, I must say that I'm an artist and theatre director, and that my company is formed by multi-disciplinary artists. So, none of us was a producer, or had any idea how to produce a show or, even less, how to run a space when the economic crisis hit Greece and most paid productions and art programs were forced to come to a halt. 2011 was a year of social upheaval, with demonstrations and riots spreading throughout Athens and defining our everyday lives. Above all, there was great hope that we would be able to reshape our lives and make a change if we all worked together towards certain goals. VYRSO is the result of this belief. It is the result of a collective *in situ* work –more than 100 people collaborated to create the space and many groups supported this effort, lending us their technical equipment and know-how. The space was launched in 2011 with the first performance, which I directed, *META* (a performance on catastrophe and the end of Capitalism). This performance was the result of collaboration between Athenian citizens, activists and professional artists. Some performed in the final show, others supported the different aspects of a very demanding site-specific performance. *META* to my great surprise, turned out to be a huge success and performances ran for almost a year, with more and more people discovering us.

Of course, this kind of network around VYRSO was connected with broader citizen networks in Athens, namely, the “Indignados” occupying Syntagma Square and other citizen platforms. People supporting the ‘VYRSO project’ insisted on backing the structures we created and keeping the space running.

So this is how things happened. Since 2011, ODC Ensemble has been based at Vyrsopeiseio, which is, by the way, the largest nineteenth century tannery of the Balkans and a real beauty, a monument, preserved by the Greek Ministry of Culture. The company transformed it into a multi-stage, versatile space for contemporary performing arts, located in the post-industrial undeveloped area of Votanikos, in the center of Athens.

Of course, VYRSO is a grassroots and artist driven project but, at the same time, it is a vibrant cultural cell that greatly helps the growth of innovative hybrid art. It is also an experiment on how to produce art in “difficult times”; an evolving project of synergies and co-operations.

While carrying a rich weekly program, it serves as a platform for networking between artists, activists, international organizations and individuals. It offers a space where companies and artists can rehearse, organize workshops, build and show their plays and performances.

Through the seminars, educational programs and residencies for artists from all over Europe, Vyrsopeiseio is fully engaged in intercultural dialogue through art.

Since its creation, Vyrsopeiseio has hosted artists in residency, workshops, master-classes, seminars and educational programs.

#### ACTIVITIES THROUGHOUT THE YEAR:

Site-specific performance/theatre/dance, artist residencies, new dramaturgy support, live music, seminars and educational programs such as dramaturgy and performance workshop, visual arts exhibitions, community and activist projects, media art, clubs, music and dance festivals and so on.



Vyrsopeiseio

**HBM: What is the role of VYRSO in Athens? How do you connect with the city and its inhabitants?**

**EP:** The involvement of local communities and volunteers is essential to the artistic work of ODC Ensemble and Vyrsopeiseio. Mixing professionals and amateurs on stage (approximately twenty citizens have joined the company), including communities in the creation process or in the functions of the space is a way to accomplish things together in times where individuality leads nowhere.

Also, the company launched a network of volunteers, artists and activists in different disciplines (theatre, music, dance, visual art, film/video, literature and architecture) in order to create an exchange leading towards the generation of new aesthetics.

VYRSO is situated in a neglected post-industrial area in the heart of Athens, ignored by most Athenians until the project was launched. But, in reality, it is a very lively area with a particularly interesting human geography: two gypsy camps and a strong Afghan community coexist with the local sub-proletarians and the so-called white trash. This is not a no-man's land after all!

In one sense, the VYRSO project is also a means for Athenians to discover ANOTHER city and its inhabitants. Real people live and work in an area from which industries moved and stray dogs bark in the streets at night. The drive to VYRSO is an experience in itself for most of the audience, "preparing" them for an artistic experience intended (as stated in the ODC manifesto) to destroy theatrical expectations. This holistic experience of dissociation wished to launch Athenian citizens into a dynamic political dialogue in order to embrace change and new potential.

I personally detest the term "community work" and its practices stemming from a centralized authority aimed at controlling social deviation under the pretext of "generous pay-back or volunteer work".

VYRSO *does* no community work, VYRSO *is* a community work as it is the result of a generalized urge to: A) survive collectively B) create new structures and explore the potentials and power of a new way of political thinking in art production, and also in rehearsals.



ODC Ensemble. Re-Volt Athens. Photo by Alex Kat

**HBM:** Do you develop international connections and projects? What kind of partnerships, networks and international collaborations are you currently developing?

**EP:** International collaboration is a primary task for me and a lot of partnerships and collaborations have been realized during VYRSO's short but adventurous life. First of all, VYRSO is a proud member of the *Trans Europe Halles* network and of IETM. VYRSO actually hosted *IETM Athens Plenary 2013*.

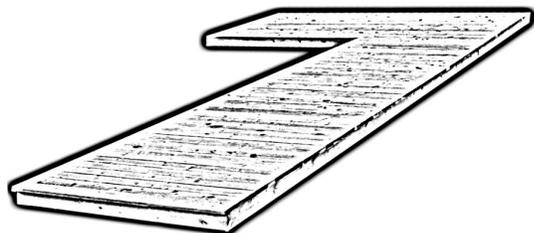
Together with other European partners, over the next four years we will be carrying out two *Creative Europe* projects. *Europe Grand Central* is a European partnership of residencies and workshops on the theme of border crossing, while *Creative Lenses* is a project aimed at mapping and developing exciting new models of art production.

But I am also working very hard to develop independent, sometimes smaller scale, collaborations. For example, together with Barcelona's *Antic Teatre*, we have created an exchange platform for Catalan and Greek artists, presenting works in Barcelona and in Athens. Last year, we co-organized a month of Greek playwriting in France with *Panta Theatre* in Caen: four Greek playwrights and four Greek directors rehearsed with French actors and presented four full new productions.

The political and humanitarian crisis and paralysis in the independent cultural sector is my main worry at the moment. Hoping to generate potential and to help out, in September I will launch a campaign called *Share Your Spares*. This campaign aims to raise awareness on the critical situation of independent theaters in Greece and to collect spare technical equipment from cultural centers in Europe.

# doc(K)

International Art Residency



**HBM:** Could you please talk about your new project *Doc(K) Artistic Residency*?

**EP:** We have witnessed an ongoing interest, on the part of artists, to visit Greece during this political moment and see how artists manage to maneuver this situation, while also being inspired by them. Since its inception, VYRSO has been offering workspaces and accommodations for selected international artists and companies. We have developed closer relations with some of these artists, which have led to collaborations and common projects. I would like an artistic residency to be, as an experience, a real osmosis and not a tourist agency or a cheap holiday in Athens. Of course, I believe it is important for artists to travel abroad, to disconnect with their everyday life and connect locally in order to develop work. But this is not enough.

So, this year I wanted to give potential VYRSO residents some extra tools and provide this residency with an extra focus. VYRSO is launching a curated artistic residency in Athens. *Doc(K)* is an artist residency focusing on the idea of using documentation as an art form. The residency is addressed to artists from all areas: visual art, theatre, music, dance, graphic design and media arts. *Doc(k)* will introduce participating artists to the Athenian art scene and, at the same time, will co-create the metadata of their projects. The *Doc(K)* residency team will document the process and the final work of the participants, exploring the idea of documentation as a new way of relating with the final work. *Doc(K)* will conclude in 2017 with the show *Doc(K)umenting*, presenting all participating artists from *Doc(k) International Art Residency Program*.

**HBM:** In terms of cultural funding, do you have any institutional support? How do you fund your activities?

**EP:** All the activities of Vyrsopeiseo run under the auspices of the Greek Ministry of Culture, but the contradiction is that, in reality, there is no institutional support whatsoever concerning the space or our activities. That means that there is no funding either for producing or co-producing, and no support, either in kind or technical, coming from Greek institutions. VYRSO belongs, as a space, to private owners.

Unfortunately, this contradiction reflects the broader situation in Greece. Since 2011, there have been no subsidies or funds supporting cultural activities and the independent culture sector is struggling to survive. As an artist, I started looking for possible alternatives to produce art in the framework of civil society and through collaborations. I felt that, instead of receding, art production should play a lead role in the socio-political changes of Greece. With this belief, came the urge to apply unconventional models to cultural production. After three years, enriched by dozens of festivals and co-productions, I now believe that models coming from the art world can be extremely inventive and can also be exported to other fields.

In a sense, Vyrsopeiseo has become a brand name linked to innovative structures, production models and political movements, serving as a possible prototype. It is not WHERE we make things move (spatial references are significant as we are based in an extremely underdeveloped area in Athens, BUT do not delimit us, in the sense that we also produce 'outdoors' moving to other spaces of equal interest), but mostly HOW we make them move: by means of collaborations and with a broader bottom-up contribution.

**HBM:** Speaking about the future, what are your next projects?

**EP:** A) The cultural sector is, of course, going through terrible times with every production now cancelled after five years of austerity, 80% unemployment, the banks shut and the whole economy coming to a halt.

At Vyrsopeiseio we are struggling against all odds and trying to be inventive and optimistic. In this frame of mind, we are launching a campaign, hopefully with the support of international networks. The idea is that two trucks will cross Europe in October 2015 (from north to south and from west to the east) reaching out to organizations that may have spare technical equipment that they would be willing to give us, even technical equipment considered obsolete. This equipment can receive a new life in our organization and will be crucial for our sustainability. After some filtering, VYRSO will also distribute the material to other cultural organizations in Greece.

B) As an artist, I am directing ODC Ensemble's new piece "RE-Volt Athens", a political visual performance which attempts to depict life in Athens. It will be presented at Musiktheatertage Vienna (September 3, 2015) and at Neukoellner Oper Berlin (November 6-7-8, 2015).

I am also rehearsing for the next ODC performance on Antigone and the idea of democracy.

- Vyrsopeiseio (<http://www.vyrsopeiseio.com/en>)
- ODC Ensemble (<http://www.odcensemble.com/>)
- *Doc(K) Artistic Residency* (<http://www.vyrsopeiseio.com/en/dock>)
- IETM Athens Plenary 2013 (<https://www.ietm.org/athens>)
- Europe Grand Central (<http://teh.net/projects/europe-grand-central/>)
- Creative Lenses (<http://teh.net/projects/creative-lenses/>)

Contemporary art, English, Interviews, Theatre, Athens, Elli papakonstantinou, Greece, Odcensemble, Vyrsopeiseio, Contemporary art, Theatre

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