

## Phone interview with Athanasia Kyriakakos

Old and new media artist from the USA and Greece, currently based in Greece, about the artist's multiple roles in society

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We catch Sia on her mobile phone in the midst of animated activity at the Yarmouth Hippodrome <[http://fo.am/txoom/2002\\_hippodrome/08-12](http://fo.am/txoom/2002_hippodrome/08-12)>. You can get a glimpse of the space Sia set up for the project she mentions in the interview, in Plovdiv at CFront 01, on <<http://cfront.org/cf01/workshop01/ssbradley/cfpeople/ima/exh/ex5.jpg>>.

**Hello Sia, how are you?**

I'm great, I'm in Great Yarmouth disassembling a circus. I was with a group called txOom, we were performing in this mixed reality environment, and we're just disassembling it. Today is the closing.

**Is this a place where you work?**

Nononononono. I'm just collaborating with the group. I was performing the entire week.

**So Sunday is a working day for you?**

No. We built this together. This is a collaborative effort.

**Can you describe the space you are in?**

Right now I'm in the middle of a circus ring with a big star in the middle, a swimming pool underneath the boards. There's red and yellow and blue curtains all around. And there used to be projection screens. We projected images that were distorted and affected the audience that entered the space.

**Why are you there? What led you to this collaboration?**

A common interest: to affect the audience and allow the audience to affect us. The f0AM group creates spaces that are interactive

and change with sound and image as the audience moves through the space. The work that I usually do involves coffee readings – performative interventions that are constantly changing through the interaction of the audience. They revolved around the interaction with the audience, and how the audience affects me, and I create an extended family out of them.

**Can you present the people you work with, and perhaps also they want to present themselves?**

I don't know if they are prepared for this, but let me see if I can find the leader of the group, which is Maja Kosmanovic. Where is she? I'm walking through the circus, through some green curtains, and... I found a person named Nat who's very involved, who was building the space, collaborating with us. Maybe I'll ask her whether she wants to contribute.

**Do you want to present yourself? We are here in a live performance in Zurich, and you are also in a performance setup...**

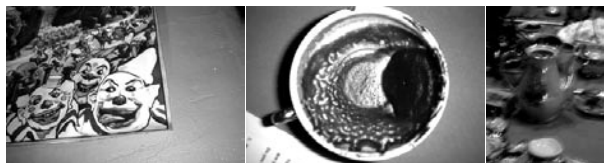
Nat: Yeah, actually we're deconstructing at this very moment. So we're taking down fabrics dangling from the whole circus space, and ... unplugging everything, and there's like fifteen people running around not knowing exactly what to do but somehow doing it.

**What is, or was, your role in the whole setup?**

Nat: I am part of txOom Holland, it's txOom Holland and txOom Belgium, and they were the initiators of this event. And I'm a writer and a critic, and I've been doing user research the whole week. I've been interviewing people about how they experienced the environment. I've been interviewing people the whole time, and asked them about their response, and there'll be a DVD and a publication about this project.

You'll find more information on <<http://fo.am>>.

[The conversation gets interrupted by a technical line problem. We call again.]



Hello Sia, I think we got interrupted, but we're back on-line.

Oh, great, I can hear you better now, too.

**What are your plans after this project? We understand you are breaking up the setup now.**

I'm leaving for Greece in a few hours, where I'm preparing for the Venice Biennial actually, which has been an accumulative research project, and actually I'm going to be representing Greece for it. So it's gonna be like six months of hard work until summertime.



**You'll have to tell us all about it as it goes along.**

Actually it's a project I started with CFront when I was invited by you to come and participate in the workshop that you were doing in Plovdiv, where I set up a video installation about dreams and daily life in Greece, and I interviewed back then people who lived in Plovdiv to tell me their dreams, and this has continued for the past two years, so wherever I go, I try to go out into the street and interview people about what they see at night and record their daily life simultaneously. So it's been an ongoing-process piece. And this is part of what's going to be presented as well this summer.

**We are also dealing with dreams here. Not so much the dreams at night, but the dreams in life. Can you tell us something about your dreams, and the context in which you think you can realize them?**

My own personal dreams evolve from anything from childhood aspirations, who I want to be and what I want to accomplish

in my life, to just seeing everybody else's dreams and trying to realize them with them. Even this research that I've been doing, like... you can see how people all want... desire just about the same things. I mean, we all have our basic needs, first of all, happiness and love. And so... how do we achieve these things? So for me, it has to do... through my art work, really, and I've decided that our life as people is just marked by the people that we meet along the way. So what I do is try to have a positive effect on other people, and in return, I get that back. And that's what is my biggest, really, my biggest dream in my life, is to connect. And I think



I'm doing ok with that, and it makes me very happy. But because we live in a society that disconnects us at this point, and creates situations in which we are not sharing any more.

#### **What position does work take in your life?**

Work as in a way to make money or work as in art work?

**Whatever... well, work as being busy, well... I don't know. Perhaps you don't want to distinguish like this between personal life and professional activities... work as in professional activities, I intended to say.**

I involve myself in activities that have to do with people, like... whether it is in my art work, where I create performative spaces where people can interact with me, or when I am teaching, because that's the way, professionally, how I actually am able to make a living, because you... when I'm in the classroom, I give to my students a lot, but I think in return I get even more. It's that

sort of situation that I try to achieve also in my art work, where it's a give and take situation. So, does that answer the question?

**Sure... but also, how does your work relate to your family? ... to your family life?**

Oh, it's very evolved. First of all, my art work is... I try to recontextualize daily ritual in Greece which I borrow from my family, or other things that I have learned within my family, within the people who have brought me up, the villages that I have grown up in. I use all those things in order to create the new spaces, so I take something as simple as coffee reading, or when you read, drink coffee with your family, and then read the coffee grounds. And I create a performance out of that, it's creating a really intimate space in a public arena. So, I use everything that my family has given me. And I also believe that very simply, like that all the things that my grandmother knew how to do are embedded in my head, like I can do the exact same things. So, it's really important to me. I don't separate it.

**How do you feel as a woman artist in Greece? Are there any problems relating to your work from this?**

Well, it's very easy to be, first of all, when you are a woman, to... your work to be labeled as feminine. But... and in Greece, there is enough discrimination anyway, because it is a bit of a sexist society..., but also most of the curators in Greece happen to be women, which helps incredibly.

**That sounds pretty good, yes.**

So, the best curators in Greece are women. And very powerful women at that, too. I think if your work is honest and you work really hard..., you might have to work a little extra, but it gets recognized, with time. Yes, with time. And it's about patience and persistence and really believing in what you're doing, and making it as truthful as possible.

**You have lived for some time in the United States, so you have two contexts in which you have been working, an American context, and the Greek context, perhaps even more contexts. How do these relate to each other? How are they different?**

**What are the differences in opportunities, in one and the other, in the way of working?**

Well... well, being an... being an American, there's an efficiency in the workspace, and there is opportunity that is equal. In Greece, it's really about whom you know. Unfortunately. There have been... for me, in my life, trying to sort out being an American woman and having all those choices in a free society, and also being a Greek woman and all the expectations that your family might impose on you, or that society might impose on you, has been a bit difficult at times. But at some point I found some peace in the fact that I was a person, and I could make choices for myself, and I left behind, from the Greek, let's say, side, the things that I did not like, and I made the choices that I wanted in my life, in the way I want to lead my life. So it's been a real strength in my work, the schism that has created me in many ways. It's... I also have a real critique about America and its policies, and especially its foreign policies, so I think having somewhat of the... an outside approach as well, being Greek, I can see that, and being there, and living in Greece, gives me a double perspective – really, living in the Balkans, not just Greece.

**Your description of Greece reminds a lot of Bulgaria, or other countries of the East. To what extent is Greece part of the West? It's part of the European Union, but how do you position Greece in this geography?**

It's a really interesting question, but for me, Greece is somewhere in-between. Greece is between the West and between the East. Even in aesthetics. Greek aesthetic is... you can say that... shall I say that very Turkish sort of look that persists through the Balkans. The music which is part of the Balkans. The food, we can find some Greece and goes East and a little bit North. But yes, it's a Western country. And it's... being part of the European economy, even within the past two years, that I have returned to Greece, I have seen an accelerated change in Greece, not necessarily good, sometimes, because people leave behind values, ways of life, ways to communicate, that had... that were unique to Greece, and which made Greece the special place that it is. And now they become much more individualistic and work-oriented and family-oriented, and things that made Greece

strong are being left behind. And they're adopting new ways, and none of this... that are not necessarily good for them in terms of defining themselves. Even the way they dress is... much more... less individualistic, they're starting to all look alike, you know, the shops are filled with the same pairs of pants. Where has the personal taste gone? I don't know?

**Sounds a bit like Bulgaria under Communism, when you had no choice when you went to the shops, you had only sort of uniforms.**

Yes, we're going into a Western uniform, is what we're going in, and that's a very extreme comment, you know like a way of life, how many hours do we work a week? When is the appropriate time for somebody to go into retirement? You know... I disagree with a lot of these policies. Yet on the other hand maybe this is a change that Greece needs to go into... in order to go forward.

**How do you personally intend to go forward? What are your ideas? In what direction do you want to develop your work, yourself? ... for the future?**

Hmmm... big question. My... I think I'm one of those people that observe, borrow, and then throw back out. So, what I want to do is just... see the world, feel how it's built, and learn about the people one by one basically, and use all this knowledge to create the next round of work. Each time, using things that are familiar to all of us, and then just recontextualizing them somehow. I'm throwing them back into the city, taking them from villages and bringing them into a cosmopolitan space. Or taking something from a cosmopolitan space and taking it out into a village, and mixing that sort of reality and focusing on what is human and basic to all of us.

**How would you wish the future of the society in Greece to be? You were talking about which direction it has taken but what would you wish?**

I don't know, perhaps... very difficult question... I would want people to think before they acted I mean it is huge demands and a big critique and for example when the option of credit cards opens up, instead of everybody rushing to buy a credit card, figure out what it means to have a credit card, and owe money

back to a bank for the next thirty years. People are just being pushed... not pushed around, but presented with this modern economy, and they're buying into it without thinking about it. I don't have a problem with it, I just want... I would like for the Greek and the whole world to be better educated in their choices. Perhaps that's what I would want.

**You say that you work with people and that people and their reactions are very important to you. This is on a micro-level, let's say. Do you think your work can somehow help on a more macro-level. How do you make the link between this micro-level of working with people very closely, how do you make the link to politics or social questions at large?**

I think that we can make a difference one person at a time. And that person can touch another person. For me it's... in politics or at a bigger scale, I can't push that, but just put the idea in somebody's head, and through conversation or through gesture, through motion, I think it's enough sometimes for it to go further to the next person. And at that point it becomes something bigger and broader.

**What do you think the artist's place in society is, or role in society?**

We have multiple roles. And we play multiple roles in order to exist within this fighting. I mean, first of all, it's to do, to be a reflection of it, to reflect back the way we understand our community, and our society and the politics, create a... it's a bit... create a critique about what is happening and find a way to express it in a way that people can understand it at many different levels. We do multiple things, from PR for ourselves to becoming engineers and all, architects, we're teachers, we are advocates for all sorts of causes. We're newspeople, reporters, we... I don't know, like... we're in everything.