Athens In Play: The artist, gallery, and spectator in crisis

Elina Lex

Undergraduate student | York University, Toronto, Canada

Athens In Play
The artist, gallery, and spectator in crisis

ELINA LEX

UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT, YORK UNIVERSITY

This paper explores the significance of experimental art spaces in the context of the political and socioeconomic crisis in Athens, Greece. Through ethnographic research, the aim is to examine where these galleries are situated in the socioeconomic moment but also, more significantly, how engaging in them can play an important role to a culture under crisis. By examining "play" through the disciplines of games, participatory, and interactive art, I address the social function of play and how it occupies a meaningful place in one's social life despite being a separate mode of experiencing the world. Specifically, this paper investigates how the act of being "caught up" in play facilitates social connection, meaning, relief, stimulation, and agency in times of crisis.

KEY WORDS experimental, gallery, games, participatory art, play

Prologue

> *The room is masked in a muggy darkness, a stark contrast to the sweltering Athens sun beaming just outside. An art installation of mannequins draped in light and sturdy fabrics dangle from the ceiling and hover around the room. Three men sit around the long wooden table, their backs hunch over their game of chess, closing off any remnants of the outside world. Their eyes gaze down intensely at their pieces. The engineer, a blonde haired light-eyed man, upon seeing his next move, slams his bishop down fervently on the board. His opponent, the mathematician, a dark featured man, answers with equal confidence, slamming the board powerfully with his rook. This continues on for minutes, their movements becoming a blur, making it difficult to comprehend the fate of the game. A third man, a white haired retired sailor sits close by watching every move intently. Every once in a while, he sticks his hand in, arguing in Greek what the next smart move would be. When the game ends, they start again. It is a performance, a certain claim of power. There appears to be something more than just the game they are trying to win. The sailor looks over at me and nods in greeting. He asks me where I'm from and I tell him I'm a student from Canada doing research in Athens for the month. He welcomes me with a smile:*

> *"Welcome to the Kingdom of Corruption."*

The crisis

In 2008, soaring consumer debt and the ensuing "December events" that proliferated from the murder of 15-year-old Grigropoulos by a policeman marked a negative turning point for the city of Athens (Placas 2011). With current social and economic tensions rapidly intensifying in 2010, neoliberal reformations caused the population to experience sudden economic and social impoverishment and insecurity (Placas 2011). In exchange for economic aid from the European Union, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund, salaries and pensions were reduced as taxes and layoffs increased (Dalakoglou 2011:36). With personal and family incomes lost, citizens were now becoming rapidly impoverished as they faced drastic forms of social and economic insecurity. As a result, the country experienced major shifts in its national political landscape, and the occupation of foreign technocrats affected Greece's capacity to self-determine (Dalakoglou 2011:36). Emerging out of this moment of social, political, and economic uncertainty, Athens has seen a surge of anti-establishment organizations, protest movements, and creative responses to negotiate forms of social and civil subjectivity and selfhood.

The goal of this paper is to investigate creative responses, namely the growing significance that experimental art spaces play within the context of neoliberal reformation and the socioeconomic crisis. The aim of my research is to examine not only where these spaces fit within this specific socioeconomic moment but also the kinds of social functions engaging in them can facilitate. Specifically, I look at how being "caught up" in the play of these experimental art spaces can facilitate social connection, meaning, relief, stimulation, and function as a site of agency in negotiating one's own subjectivity. With the concept of

"play" central to my argument, I will explore how "play" touches many interdisciplinary debates from the practice of play in games, to participatory art, and to the very grounds of experimentality itself. In examining this question, I hope to address the role that art and entertainment play in a society under a political, economic, and social crisis of identity.

In play

In his classic discussion of play in human culture, Johan Huizinga defines play as:

> A voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, have its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy and the consciousness that it is 'different' from 'ordinary life.'" [Huizinga 1950:28]

Play is a world within a world, as Huizinga says, "'different' from 'ordinary life.'" People, it turns out, not only have the ability to occupy their immediate physical realities, but they can also "place themselves in imagined worlds and take on alternative roles in those worlds that may be very different from the role they play in 'real life'" (Stromberg 2009:vii). When we become absorbed in an entertainment activity, whether it is a television show, a film, a performance, a game, or a piece of art, we temporarily allow ourselves to lose track of the day-to-day world in order to immerse ourselves more fully into the world of play (Stromberg 2009:13). This process of being "betwixt and between the normal, day-to-day cultural and social states" is what Victor Turner describes as "liminality (1977:465). In his exploration of rituals, Turner defines liminality" as the process in which a person is stripped and separated from their previous status, role, and political/social order. Once separated, they enter the transitional state of "liminality," a threshold between their previous pre-ritual and new post-ritual identity (Turner 1977:471).

More recently, "liminal" symbolism has been applied to other parts of the cultural realm such as the study of entertainment, performance, and play. Play can be interpreted as a form of "liminality" in which the structures of everyday social order are suspended. However, even the ambiguous "liminal" state of play operates under its own rules of time and place, presenting its own collective symbols and view of the world. Being "caught up" in play "is very similar to becoming deeply immersed in a compelling social interaction" (Stromberg 2009:14). It is within this unclassified, transitional, separated state of "liminality" that significant symbols, values, and solidarities are forged. Being transfixed by symbolism has the power to redirect thought, feeling, and action and thus "in strong experiences of becoming caught up, we may feel that our environment and even ourselves have been utterly transformed" (Stromberg 2009:14). Therefore, it is within these spaces that transformation can potentially occur.

Huizinga argues that "in play, there is something 'at play' which transcends the immediate needs of life and imparts meaning into action. All play means something" (1950:1). Through observing play in action, my aim is to understand the social and cultural meanings of play in everyday life. By analyzing play beyond its own confines, I argue that play serves something which is not play itself and it is in fact extremely relevant to one's social life (Huizinga 1950:2). This conceptualization maintains that

play is a present mode of human experience and engagement in the world, rather than a distinct activity (Malaby 2007:101).

Design of ethnography

My goal in the design of this ethnography is to emulate the experience of negotiating between realms of reality/fantasy, everyday/play. The ethnography alternates between two different tones of narrative. Sections of autoethnographic accounts with a story-like prose are designed to immerse the reader in the sensation of being "caught up" in a narrative or anecdote. Inspired by Clifford Geertz's "Thick Description" (1973), these micro ethnographic descriptions are meant to illuminate a larger picture of a broader cultural context. I have offset these narratives with analytic reflections that expand these micro moments in a reflective voice grounded in the "everyday." When reading, the reader is thus situated "in betwixt and between" these two types of narratives (Turner 1977:465). By situating the reader at this threshold, the aim is for them to experience this continuous shift between absorption and detachment, play and everyday, and in turn, reflexively and actively engage with the phenomena I am exploring within my research.

Methods

Fieldwork for this paper was conducted in July 2014 in Athens, Greece as part of a research methods course held at York University, Toronto. During my stay in Athens I conducted three interviews with artist-curators and several other informal conversations with locals engaging in the alternative entertainment spaces along with me. I visited five experimental art spaces, some numerous times: Booze Cooperativa, Taf (The Art Foundation), Art Wall, the Onassis Cultural Center, and The National Museum of Contemporary Art, and additionally participating in the games and works of interactive art being held at these spaces.

Structured observation was a significant method of my research. By clearly laying out plans for observation, I was able to look selectively at social phenomena continuously across different field sites. Structured observation was not only used to decode how the physical topography of these spaces was imagined and organized but it was also valuable in observing and analyzing the human behaviour, performance, and interactions that occurred when people engaged in these spaces. These behaviours, performances, and interactions, namely the kinds of "play" activities and social engagements I encountered, are critical as they make certain social and political statements about the spaces themselves.

While observation methods were significant to my research, they only entailed a portion of my methodology. To expand these observations, active participation, involvement, and engagement in the social life of the experimental art community allowed me to situate myself within the cultural environment of the people I was researching. This method of participant observation, an interactive and engaged approach to observation, also established my role as a spectator and participator in the games and pieces of interactive art I engaged with. In this sense, engaging myself as a spectator has compelled the ethnography to embrace elements of autoethnography, a type of method involving self-observation and reflexivity where autobiographical, personal, inward, and

subjective experiences are connected to a broader cultural, social, and political picture (Ellingson and Ellis 2008:448). In the field, "while participating in interactive reflection with others, autoethnographers engage in embodied action, not just report on distant processes" (Ellingson and Ellis 2008:453). However, I must note this embodied action as a spectator was one of my major challenges. At times I found it relatively challenging to simultaneously engage and participate as a subjective spectator while balancing a detached objectivity. This notion of balance is a recurring theme in discussions of anthropological fieldwork.

To Hortense Powdermaker, balance between involvement/detachment, subjectivity/ objectivity, art/science lies at the heart of participant observation, which in turn lies at the core of the discipline of anthropology (1966:286). To Ellingson and Ellis, autoethnography is a social constructivist method that problematizes these deep-rooted divisions of researcher–researched, objectivity–subjectivity, process–product, self–other, art–science, and personal–political (2008:450). Autoethnography interferes with these dichotomies, "drawing blurry lines between detached, external knowledge and personal, internal knowledge" (Ellingson and Ellis 2008:452). Autoethnographers weave their own lived experiences into their research accounts, resulting in a rich and complex understanding of the cultural environment in which they are working in. In her account of a geriatric oncology clinic, Ellingson writes "I do not study the patients and the staff of the clinic with detachment; my own experiences as a patient filter what I see, hear, and feel" (Ellingson and Ellis 2008:452).

Structured observation, participant observation, and autoethnographic methods were essential in gathering data. However, it was necessary that my own observations be elaborated, tested, corroborated, and expanded upon in order to develop a co-produced understanding with a local perspective. Engaging in these multiple experimental art sites before I began interviewing allowed me to gather a significant amount of data and questions so when I did have the chance to interview artists and curators within the community, I was able to elaborate on my findings on a deeper level. An opening event at the Art Wall gallery led me to meet and interview two of my informants, Filipa and Grigore.

Throughout my interviews I posed questions that concentrated on the evolving significance of experimental art spaces in the context of the crisis moment. As the interviewees were artist-curators working within the contemporary art community today, my questions focused on the effect of the crisis on the artist, the gallery, and the spectator. These interviews allowed my own observations and theories to be tested, elaborated, deconstructed, and in turn enabled their own local perspective to be conceptualized in a co-produced space. I would also like to note that many of the informal conversations I had with locals, whether or not they were engaging in the art spaces with me, were helpful in gaining insight into everyday perspectives on the crisis, entertainment, and Athenian life.

Furthermore, I would like to experiment with the concept of game playing as a research method. While playing a game of chess in Booze Cooperativa with a local Athenian man named Dionysus, I was engaging in a participant observation method, of participating in the immersion of the game while also maintaining a detached observation of the experience. As we played and he guided me through strategies, I was able to see the board through his eyes. Therefore, the chessboard was an object of connection and mediation,

facilitating, and mediating a new paradigm of relating to one another. The board became a common language, allowing us to communicate despite our language barrier. It became a co-produced mental space where knowledge could be shared from both sides. As the game continued, I could feel the comfort between us growing and I found it easier to ask him some questions. The chessboard was thus an object that deconstructed the classic power relations of the researcher-researched relationship. Instead, these typical power relations were reversed, with me negotiating the identity of the "student" and he the "teacher." I must note, however, that this identity was different when I spoke with locals who were female, also students, and closer to my age. Therefore in the field, a certain flexibility of the self and an awareness of the interviewee are essential in conducting active reflexive interviews. Regardless, game playing can function as a social lubricant. Though I only spoke with Dionysus once, game playing can certainly serve as a site for initiating conversation where connection and a potential rapport with a local can be built.

Lastly, as a subset of participant observation methods, photography was a research tool I used in the field. Early stages of fieldwork usually entail the orientation of oneself in a new environment and culture. Photography can be a method of social orientation, offering "the stranger in the field a means of recording large areas … rapidly, and with great detail, and a means of storing away complex descriptions for future use" (Collier 1986:16). Even if the researcher in the field experiences phenomena they cannot yet fully recognize or understand, photography aids in capturing these moments of raw perception (Collier 1986). Photography allows us to revisit these vivid first impressions, inviting a space for future reflection, inter-pretation, decoding, and meaning-making. Through photographic documentation, it has enabled me to grasp patterns, moments of similarity and variation and as a result, it has allowed me to notice connections among the various art spaces across Athens.

As Collier argues, photography can go beyond documenting mere material items of a culture as it can detail

> [h]uman functions, the quality of life, and the nature of psychological well-being. Photography can record not only the range of artifacts in a home but also their relationship to each other, their style of placement in space, all the aspects that define and express the way in which people use and order their space and possessions. [1986:45)]

Photography thus operated as a subset of structured observation, aiding in the process of decoding the identity of spaces. By assembling a photographic inventory of the physical topography, aesthetics, organization, arrangement, activity, and use of space, photography guided me to build connections between these factors that combine to reflect a moral statement or narrative about the values of the group I was studying.

Recent discussions in anthropology and photography have debated whether expressive as opposed to realist documentary images might represent anthropological ideas that "fracture the positivist assumptions [of] realist 'visual notebook' approaches to ethnographic photography" (Da Silva and Pink 2004:158). Photography is inherently prone to subjective influences in perception and representation. What we see, through the lens or not, does not entail one 'authentic,' 'objective,' 'real,' 'true,' or 'whole' glance of reality. The fundamental

nature of photography relates directly to anthropological practice—in the field, we can only obtain partial truths and small slices of reality (Clifford 1986:5). With this in mind, I incorporated photography along with my autoethnographic accounts with the intention of breaking down positivist assumptions of ethnographic practice. As I discussed, photography can be a way to reckon with raw moments of perception. These "visual moments" reflect a "direct transmission of [subjective] experience …hurried, abbreviated, and urgent" (Taussig 2011:19). Apart from their informational and symbolic values, the "visual moment" of a photograph reflects a "lived experience," an encounter with moments and intensities that often "erupt out of nowhere" (Taussig 2011:145). Photography alongside my autoethnographic prose illustrate these raw and auratic experiences "caught up" in the act of becoming, in process, in liminality, in feeling, in affect, bearing moments not yet named, grasped, and "thickened" into meaning (Massumi 2002:15).

The game

Sitting at the long stretch of wooden table again, the darkness of the room now mimics the night of the Athens street outside. It's almost midnight and I'm playing chess with some classmates. Not having played in many years, I am acutely aware of my experience of the game. As it progresses, the pressure of every move intensifies. I can feel myself being captivated and drawn into the world of the game, paralyzed by my next choice. The droning music draws me in deeper, fueling its intensity.

"There's no escape," the lyrics repeat.

With every move on the line, I grow an attachment to my remaining pieces, to the strategy and game that I constructed. I am somewhat aware of the man that walks up and down the table gazing down at the different chess games going on. He introduces himself as Dionysus. His hair is peppered grey and he wears a crisp white button shirt tucked into black slacks. As my classmates play a round, I watch him at the end of the table set up a board on his own, move pieces around and invent strategies. Every so often he takes a step back, takes a drag of his smoke, and gazes down at the board, visualizing it.

When he walks back over I ask him if he plays chess a lot. He says he has been playing the game for many years. He invites me to play a game with him. Sitting down with him, he tells me that he likes to come here –chess is very hard to find in Athens. As we play our first match, knowing I would undoubtedly lose, I tell him to point out to me any fatal flaws in my game. Unlike the players I saw the other day, there was something different about the way Dionysus played. Placing a piece down, he would rotate it in place in between his fingers, twisting it, as if he were fastening the piece onto the board—slowly but confidently. As he waits for his turn, he carefully rolls a cigarette in his fingers. Space and harmony are very important aspects of chess, he tells me. It's important to not simply visualize the pieces of the board as objects but to see the energy of the board, how different parts relate to one another. I again feel myself being drawn into the world of the game. I somehow want to prove myself to him, that I can by some means apply the strategies he's been teaching me. "If you make a mistake, don't let it get to your head," he says, "Move on and don't be disappointed." I wasn't certain if he was speaking about chess anymore.

Can the way people engage in games tell us something about the nature of their everyday world? There is a therapeutic element to engaging in a game. In various attempts to define the biological function of play, play has been described as the "discharge of superabundant vital energy, of relaxing after exertion, of training for the demands of life, of compensating for unfulfilled longings" (Huizinga 1950:3). What is significant is that all definitions signal that play can also improve our immediate reality.

Yet at the same time play can also be the threshold into another kind of reality. We are drawn to play "because it is more suspenseful or exciting or rewarding than life in the day-to-day world" (Stromberg 2009:15). Those absorbed in a game can be so consumed by it to the point of forgetting their surroundings. Like being engrossed in a conversation, playing a sport, or watching a theatrical performance, when we engage in play we become caught up in a "socialized trance," an imaginative sphere distinct from everyday life (Desjarlais 2011:14). This can entail a kind of ecstasy: "to be or stand outside oneself, a removal to elsewhere" (Desjarlais 2011:14).

Dionysus expressed that chess can be a very passionate engagement. Many competitive players work hard on their games, studying the game, practicing the game, sharpening their strategic vision (Desjarlais 2011:10). So why do people become so enraptured by certain activities such as chess? Chess can operate as a self-forming activity, or in Foucauldian terms, a "technology of the self" (Desjarlais 2011:10). Chess players employ a number of technologies of self and subjectivity, "some physical and social, others cognitive, emotive,

mnemonic … The self becomes an abiding project toward mastery" (Desjarlais 2011:10). In the context of the socio-economic moment, this feature of game playing becomes even more significant. Game playing offers agency, emotional fulfillment, and stimulation out of the "boredom and powerlessness of socioeconomic order" of the everyday (Stromberg 2009:158). It becomes a site for people to negotiate their own subjectivities and generate new ways of "framing and modeling social reality which presses on them in their daily lives" (Turner 1977:486). Play is a way to "step out" of "common reality into a higher social order" (Huizinga 1950:13). This enactment of play can be therapeutic, on one level as an escape from the everyday, but also as the grounds for self-improvement inside of the everyday.

What draws Dionysus most to the game, however, is its social dimension. Often times, chess is "taken to be a semi-solitary activity, in which a person is alone with his thoughts for long stretches of time" (Desjarlais 2011:15). However, playing chess is also a deeply social affair. Surrounded by others who also find it a meaningful endeavor, "a sense of commodity often comes with playing chess at a neighbourhood club or tournament hall" (Desjarlais 2011:15). The chessboard is thus an object that is deeply rooted in the social. People interact with it to facilitate social connection. This search for social connection is fundamental to the human condition. Social activities like game-playing make possible an engagement in the world that allow us to feel like human beings, which becomes even more essential in times of crisis. Therefore, chess not only makes a social and political statement about the space itself, but it also signals to the desires of a broader socio-political moment. Here, play means something, extending into other arenas of life and serving something which is not merely play (Huizinga 1950:2).

In spite of being a separate mode of experiencing the world, play generates meaning that is extremely relevant to the immediate reality of one's social life. Play can actually adorn life and amplify it, and to that extent, it becomes a necessity, a life function where its meaning, significance, expressive value, spiritual, and social associations contain a cultural function (Huizinga 1950:9). In Malaby's study of gambling in Greece, games are perceived as inseparable from everyday life in which the unpredictabilities of games are understood as "mirrors for, as well as constitutive of, the uncertainties of their lives" (2007:98). Games have important consequences that manifest not only materially, but socially and culturally as well. Games can serve as models for other high-stake arenas of life: politics, business, health, and social relations (Malaby 2007:109). Even in non-gambling matches like chess, "status and relationships are on the table in place of hard currency" (Malaby 2007:98). As social relationships becomes central to grappling with the crisis moment, game playing is being embraced within these alternative art spaces as a way to satisfy a desire for social meaning and connection.

Participation

Weaving in and out of the tiny rooms, each unit invites a different experience — to sit, to watch, to touch, to draw. The decaying walls of the previous homestead-turned-experimental-art-space/café are covered in messages, drawings, and graffiti writings, adding to the vocabulary of the space. It is hard to tell whether they were put there before or after the conversion.

I walk into a bleached white room. Scattered sheets of paper are sprawled over a tabletop. A book lies open with a pen sitting next to it, inviting me to add to the string of other messages.

I see something hanging there against the far wall; it's sharp metal surface sticks out in all directions.

"Wear it." A sign next to it beckons me.

It's a glove with hundreds of nails attached to its surface.

I put it on, feeling the weight of it on my hand. The inside is not as sharp as the outside suggests, but it still feels rough against my skin. It doesn't fit perfectly and I think about the numerous other hands that might have tried it on.

The breakdown of medium-specific art and the conceptualization of installation art as an artistic practice in the 1960s opened up new ways of engaging the viewer in a work of art. During this decade, "the word 'installation' was employed by art magazines to describe the way in which the exhibition was arranged ... [giving rise] to the use of the word for works that used the whole space as 'installation art'" (Bishop 2005:6). Germano Celant's 1976 exhibition *Ambient/Arte* reconceptualized the "language" of an exhibition display, not merely as a "flat display of objects, but a picture book that tells a story in a certain place in time" (Casciani 2010). Inspired by the installations of the historical avant-garde of the 1910s to 1920s, Celant commissioned artists to interact with and incorporate interior

architecture and environments into their works of art (Casciani 2010). These theatrical, immersive, and experiential installations addressed the viewer as a physical presence in space, presupposing a viewer "whose sense of touch, smell, and sound are as heightened as their sense of vision" (Bishop 2005:6). This embodied interaction, inquiry, and participation are the very substance of installation art (Bishop 2005:24).

The 1990s saw a surge in increased artistic interest in spectator embodiment, participation, and collaboration (Bishop 2012:1). From Alfredo Jaar's display of images taken by Caracas residents through disposable camera handouts in *Camera Lucida* (1996) to the socially interactive installation project of Echo Park's *Construction Site* (2005), the increase of socially geared projects strived to "collapse the distinction between performer and audience, professional and amateur, production and reception, instead emphasizing collaboration and the collective dimension of social experience" (Bishop 2006:10). Activation, authorship, and community were the driving motivations behind the participatory impulse of art in the 1990s. As subjects of participation, the hope was that it would inspire a newfound ability to determine one's own social and political reality. Furthermore, by deconstructing the hierarchal relationship of the artist and viewer, it was believed that collaborative creativity could produce a more positive and equal social model all around. (Bishop 2006:12). By breaking down this boundary between producer and consumer, participatory art also urged an involvement in the viewer, even an interventionist attitude, in the process of production. These works thus facilitated an active engagement of spectatorship rather than a passive one. (Bishop 2006:11).

Today, this attitude of active participation is widely being adopted in independent experimental art spaces across the city of Athens. As the social dimensions of both life and art become increasingly significant within the current crisis moment, intersubjectivity, interaction, and sociability are becoming dominant factors in the consideration of the boundaries between artist and viewer, producer and spectator. It is within these gallery spaces that these ideas are being translated, experimented with, and implemented. In breaking down and eliminating mediating objects such as glass cases and "do not touch" signs, these new modes of artistic production and reception openly invite a direct connection between the viewer and art object, satisfying the desire to touch, connect, and make real the narrative of the object.

Artists are also adopting a "laboratory tendency," where work is open-ended, interactive, and resistant to closure, "often appearing to be 'work in progress' rather than a completed project" (Bishop 2004:52). Promoting an interventionist, do-it-yourself attitude, "laboratory tendency" entails a work of art that invites the viewer to actively participate on the level of production. The table installation inviting the viewer to sit and write a message is a fitting example of this. As viewers come and go, social connection is not only facilitated between artist and viewer, but between viewers as each interaction layers and interweaves one another, made visible in the form of messages. In this respect, the artwork is always in progress, open-ended, and evolving as more interactions accumulate.

I was also informed that technology and digital media has increasingly been incorporated to engage in themes of social connection. With technology producing new abilities to break down social or geographic boundaries, the integration of technology with art reflects a social need for communication and "instant" connection (Vogiatzaki-Krukowski
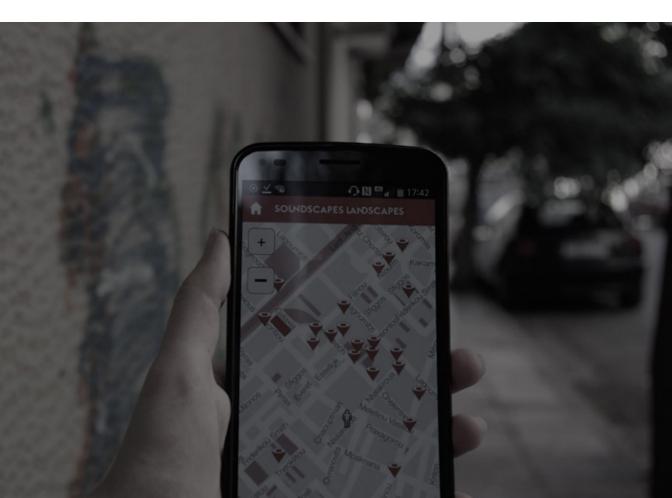
2010). With the integration of technology, art is becoming even more of a global medium, interconnecting different places, languages, and cultures. By mediating new paradigms of relating to one another and to the world around us, the fusion of art and technology has also made it easier to create and interact with new worlds, even more illusionistic and absorbing than ever (Vogiatzaki-Krukowski 2010).

Beyond the gallery: viewer as producer

The narrow streets are empty and still. The sounds playing in my ears fill the void of the abandoned streets. They guide me to a deserted basketball court. A metal wiry fence gates in the cracked coloured pavement. In my ears I hear the sounds of a ball bouncing on the now empty pavement before me. I hear yells and the sound of feet hitting the ground running.

I reach an intersection with a wall covered with a graffiti image of a spider. It comes to life through video art, skittering across the screen.

I come across a block of white washed apartments. I can faintly see pigeons sitting in the shadows of the square window ledges that cut deep into the white concrete. Gazing upwards, more birds sit along the black wires that string between the buildings. On my screen, a silhouette image of birds sitting on a wire appears, echoing the same image that I have just encountered in real life.

I reach a long stretch of street. The sign in the distance reads Mitrou Sarkoudinou. Someone is yelling at me. I turn my head in a subconscious response but no one is there. I hear more voices. They start to build in a frenzy. I realize the voices belong to market vendors. I hear the clanking of change and a busker playing the violin. It is an echo, a memory of an experience, providing a narrative to the now empty street.

Soundscapes/Landscapes is an interactive art experiment hosted by the Onassis Cultural Center of Athens. Through a tablet device, a parallel reality within the city is revealed through sound and image, transforming a simple city walk into an artistic experience. Walking up and down streets, parks, and alleyways, the device provides a seamless soundscape, unique to the viewer's own experience. Hitting different points on the map, speeches, poetry, images, videos, electroacoustic compositions, and sound effects are triggered, bringing implicit narratives of the city space to life. Its intermediality destabilizes the hierarchy of senses, exploring a subjectivity that is embodied and corporeal rather than one that is exclusively visual. It is the experience of engaging at the threshold between two realities: one, the material/everyday and second, the immaterial/virtual.

Here is a case where the fusion of art and technology is being used to deconstruct the relationship between art/viewer, spectacle/spectator. The viewer is, quite literally, absorbed physically into the work of art, situated inside the spectacle. As the device acts as a mediator between realms of "real" and "play," it mediates a new kind of relationship to the space around the viewer, where a new kind of subjectivity can be negotiated. It facilitates a new way of "seeing" the everyday world — it is the everyday but with the volume turned up. The viewer remains close to the everyday social world, but the playfulness of the experience disrupts it, inviting a critical engagement. The sonic and visual elements are surprising and interventionist, prompting the viewer to problematize the everyday world around them. Through the interactive experience, the spectator is given agency, transformed from a passive spectator into an active producer, co-creating and intervening in the creative process. Where they choose to walk dictates how the artwork will unfold. In this way, it is open-ended, unique to the individual's experience, and it is solely through the spectator's experience that the work of art can even exist.

Re-imagining the gallery

> A building animated by the everyday city life. A city animated by a hybrid hyper-building. It does not want to become another static museum.

> —Walking Building, Andreas Angelidakis, video animation at the Every End Is A Beginning exhibit, Museum of Contemporary Art

Virtual reality technologies — like the one being explored in the Soundscapes/Landscapes experiment — also point significantly to imaginings of the gallery space in the context of the socioeconomic moment. In my interview with artist-curator Filipa, she explained that there is a definite re-imagining in the design of gallery and curatorial spaces. Artists, especially within the realm of installation/interactive/participatory art, must consider

architectural and environmental factors of the exhibition space. In its conceptualization of these factors, Soundscapes/Landscapes makes an intervention, extending the architectural limits of a curated gallery space by bringing the work "out there" into the real world. This mentality can first be seen developing in the Dada movement of the 1920s, specifically the Paris Dada Season of April 1921. André Breton coined the phrase "artificial hells" to "describe this new conception of Dada events that moved out of cabaret halls and took to the streets" (Bishop 2006:10). As a descriptor of participatory art, artificial hells embodied a series of artistic and political manifestations that sought to involve the city's public in creative disruption and experimentation in the public sphere (Bishop 2012). Like the projects of artificial hells, Soundscapes/Landscapes embodies an artistic process that extends beyond the work of art itself. Its playfulness imparts meaning into action, reaching outside the walls of the gallery and penetrating materially and meaningfully into 'real' social life. In this respect, play is inseparable from everyday experience.

Andreas Angelidakis' exhibition Every End Is A Beginning at the Museum of Contemporary Art also explores this theme of a museum in transition, in transformation, from the architecture of the built to the architecture of the unbuilt, the immaterial, and virtual. The very atmosphere of the exhibition denotes a museum in transition. The exhibition space itself is semi-lit, industrial, unfinished, a "work in progress" with visible signs of neglect and residues of its previous activity. As you enter, the words on the wall read, "I imagine a visitor entering a museum on their own, perhaps even thinking it may be closed, and the door left open by accident. This way, they experience the museum as a ruin, and every sign inside of it has a story to tell" (Angelidakis 2014).

When work is presented in a curated space, certain ideas about art are reproduced. Filipa's role as a curator has allowed her to see the issues of power at play; a reliance on "expertise" and framing devices like the gallery help us to define what art is. As Marcel Duchamp elaborated, once an object is put into the context of a pedestal or frame, the object immediately acquires some characteristic of work of art (Stromberg 2009:27). Filipa tells me that in the presentation of an exhibition, artist-run galleries attempt to differentiate themselves from collection-based museums. Filipa's role as an artist herself deconstructs power relationships and facilitates a closer connection and collaboration between art/artist and curator. For Filipa, art in a gallery should not be validated by experts or sheltered in specific historical knowledge, but instead it should live and be defined in a social space. This anti-institutional attitude can be seen becoming more significant in the current socio-economic context precisely because it is deeply rooted in social processes. Here we can begin to examine play not merely an activity but as an attitude (Sicart 2014:21). "Playfulness" is fundamental to experimentality. Play is creative and disruptive, giving us room to challenge our cultural values, institutions, ideologies, and the inner workings of the world we inhabit (Sicart 2014:10-11). By "playing with" and breaking down the politics of the gallery, Filipa also believes this creates a space much more accessible and democratized for the visitor to enter and connect with.

Among the various art spaces I visited, many of them were mix-use, combining and integrating art spaces along with a café and/or bar. Filipa explained to me that this was part of the financial model of underground art spaces, a way to finance projects and fund exhibitions without extracting commission from the artists. With that said, the fusion of the café/bar also appropriates social forms "as a way to bring art closer to the everyday"

(Bishop 2006:10). It reinforces the gallery as a social space, not simply for people to visit but to meet other people, network through other projects, have a conversation, drink, eat, play a game of chess, and socially connect. Filipa tells me that Art Wall's social dimension and emphasis on collaboration is the reason for her organization's success, both in Greece and internationally. With that said, this extension of art into the social field brings an otherwise separate way of experiencing the world closer into the realm of everyday life. Play and art are no longer spatially separated from ordinary life (Huizinga 1950:19). Instead, they perform a crucial role on very real social and political levels of life in crisis.

Conclusion

> Even if the everyday is stifling and flat, we should not forget that no one can live exclusively in the unusual, the unheard-of, the unsaid. A slice of reality can reveal poetry, and the frenetic search for the exceptional can yield much that is pointless and trivial.
>
> —Kostas Axelos, Metamorphoses, Estia 1998
>   (Read from device, Soundscapes/Landscapes)

During my stay, a certain pessimistic outlook towards the current state and future vision of Greece was central among the young attitudes I encountered. As a result, many desired escape — to move away, travel, or study in other countries. As I sat outside the venue of a performance theatre with a young woman and fellow audience member, I could see this desire as we discussed her love of engrossing herself in forms of entertainment activities like shows, art, and the Internet. When we become caught up in play, whether it is a performance, a film, or an interactive art experience, "we suspend our disbelief and enjoy these fictions if we were, for a few moments, dwelling in the world they represent" (Stromberg 2009:162). Play is freedom, a temporary "stepping out" of "real" and "ordinary" life" (Huizinga 1950:8).

In contemporary society, "some of our most important commitments and desires are sustained … in activities of play, recreation, and leisure" (Stromberg 2009:162). In a period of intense reshaping to a culture's socioeconomic landscape, we can look to art, entertainment, and "play" spaces to track the resulting changing desires, commitments, and values. Through my research, I not only examined where experimental art spaces fit within this specific socioeconomic moment but also what engaging in them can actually do for people in crisis. Through the examination of games, gallery spaces, and participatory and interactive art, I argue that play inhabits a very important place in culture and human life. Despite being a separate "virtual" mode of human experience, play can mean very "real" things on the levels of social and political life (Huizinga 1950:1). By studying the cultural functions of play, we can begin to destabilize the boundary between realms of 'play' and 'the everyday,' 'the "real," and the 'virtual.' As Huizinga argued, play is much "more than a mere physiological phenomenon or a psychological reflex. It goes beyond the confines of purely physical or biological activity. It is a significant function … there is some sense to it" (1950:1). Play can operate as a self-forming activity. Grigore, an artist

and co-curator at Art Wall tells me that art offers people the agency to make their own world, to find solutions, and to locate issues of self and identity. From chess playing to art making practices, these play activities can perform crucial roles, offering agency, relief, and stimulation in times of crisis. As Nicolas Bourriaud discussed, "Artistic activity is a game, whose forms, patterns, and functions develop and evolve according to periods and social contexts; it is not an immutable essence" (1998:11). These activities can tell us something about the way life is lived in specific social contexts and periods of time.

Beyond the self-forming values of play, play also serves a social function, satisfying a social desire for connection. The experimental art spaces I observed offer people this space for desired social connection. From the level of the artist to the spectator, being "caught up" in the play of these experimental art spaces can facilitate social connection through paradigms of intersubjectivity, participation, and interaction. Within the context of the crisis moment, I see these spaces becoming forms of "micro-topias" (Bishop 2004:54) in the everyday. As facilitators of self-formation and social interaction, these "play communities" can provide provisional solutions in the here and now, where people can learn to inhabit the everyday world in more self-fulfilling ways.

References

Angelidakis, Andreas
  2014   Every End Is A Beginning. Athens: National Museum of Contemporary Art. Exhibition.
Bishop, Claire
  2004   Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics. October Magazine. Massachusetts: MIT Press.
  2005   Installation Art: A Critical History. London: Routledge.
  2006   Participation: Documents of Contemporary Art. London: White Chapel Gallery.
  2012   Artifical Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship. London: Verso.
Bourriaud, Nicolas
  1998   Relational Aesthetics. France: Les Presses Du Reel.
Casciani, Stefano
  2010   Germano Celant: Sharing A Dream. Domus Magazine, October 9. http://www.domusweb.it/en/art/2010/10/09/germano-celant-sharing-a-dream.html, accessed March 11, 2015.
Clifford, James
  1986   Introduction: Partial Truths. *In* Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography. 1st Edition. James Clifford and George Marcus, eds. Pp. 1–26. Oakland: University of California Press.
Collier, John
  1986   Visual Anthropology: Photography as a Research Method. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.
Dalakoglou, Dimitris.
  2011   Crisis and Revolt in Europe. Othon Alexandrakis, ed. Anthropology News.

Da Silva, Olivia, and Sarah Pink
    2004   In the Net: Anthropology and Photography. *In* Working Images: Visual
        Research and Representation in Ethnography. 1st Edition. Sarah Pink, László
        Kürti, and Ana Isabel Afonso, eds. Pp. 157–165. New York: Routledge.
Desjarlais, Robert
    2011   Counterplay: An Anthropologist at the Chessboard. Oakland: University of
        California Press.
Ellingson, Laura L., and Carolyn Ellis
    2008   Autoethnography as Constructionist Project. *In* Handbook of Constructionist
        Research. James A. Holstein and Jaber F. Gubrium, eds. Pp. 445–466. New York:
        The Guilford Press.
Geertz, Clifford
    1973   Thick Description: Toward and Interpretive Theory of Culture. *In* The
        Interpretation of Cultures. Pp. 3–32. New York: Basic Books.
Huizinga, Johan
    1950   Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture. Boston: The Beacon
        Press.
Malaby, Thomas M.
    2007   Beyond Play: A New Approach to Games. Theme Issue, Games and Culture
        2(2):95–113
Massumi, Brian
    2002   Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation. Durham, NC: Duke
        University Press.
Placas, Aimee
    2011   Trickle-down Debt. Fieldsites — Hot Spots, Cultural Anthropology Online.
        http://www.culanth.org/fieldsights/257-trickle-down-debt, accessed August 8,
        2014.
Powdermaker, Hortense
    1966   Stranger and Friend: The Way of an Anthropologist. New York: WW Norton.
Sicart, Miguel
    2014   Play Matters. Massachusetts: MIT Press.
Stromberg, Peter G.
    2009   Caught in Play: How Entertainment Works on You. Stanford: Stanford
        University Press.
Taussig, Micheal
    2011   I Swear I Saw This: Drawings in Fieldwork Notebooks, Namely My Own.
        Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Turner, Victor
    1977   Frame Flow and Reflection: Ritual and Drama in Public Liminality. *In*
        Performance Postmodern Culture. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
Vogiatzaki-Krukowski, Emmanouela
    2010   Art & Technology: An Innocent Relation or a Dangerous Affair. London:
        Brunel University. http://www.academia.edu/5304483/Art_and_Technology_An_
        Innocent_Relation_or_a_Dangerous_Affair, accessed July 18, 2014.