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A Stunning Exhibition in an Athens Park Sets A New Standard for Digital Art

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June 8, 2022 1:20pm



Dries Verhoeven, Happiness, 2016
COURTESY ONASSIS

When it comes to creating exhibitions, there are two categories that are particularly difficult to pull off: the digital exhibition, laden with technical productions and sub-par display options, and the exhibition in the public space, which means jumping bureaucratic hurdles while being attentive to a myriad of community stakeholders.

In an incredibly ambitious move, the Onassis Foundation in Athens has staged “Plásmata: Bodies, Dreams, and Data” a digital exhibition in Pedion tou Areos, or Ares’ Battlefield, an old military training ground since converted into one of the city’s largest parks..

“And you know, it was like a battle,” Afroditi Panagiotakou, the Director of Culture at the Onassis Foundation, told *ARTnews*. Reclining on a couch at the Onassis offices, wearing a mesh disco suit and platform heels, Panagiotakou discussed the challenge of orchestrating the massive public undertaking.

“When it comes to the things that we do in our own venue, we really have zero concern on whether we’re going to be liked or not,” she said. “But when we go to the public space, there should be none of this confidence. You have to find the tricky balance between: how am I going to present worthy, challenging works, and also respect the fact that I’m acting in a public space.”

This question seems to sum up Panagiotakou’s personality, which contains both an assertive sense of her tastes and values, while being deeply aware of her duties. Aside from her civic ethos, Onassis’s cultural funding is second to none in Greece and represents a huge responsibility for all involved.



A Unique Foundation



Eva and Franco Mattes, *The Bots*, 2021

Photo : Courtesy Onassis

The Foundation was founded by Aristotle Socrates Onassis, a Greek shipping magnate and husband to Jackie Kennedy after JFK's assassination. After the death of his son Alexander in 1974, Onassis directed a whopping 40% of the profits from his shipping company – even today, one of the world's largest oil and petroleum transporters – to the Alexander S. Onassis Foundation, dedicated specifically to supporting cultural works and activations.

Panagiotakou and her colleagues at Onassis have a great burden, one which the public is constantly commenting on.

“For our 10th anniversary we are compiling a book called *Onassis Would Be Rolling in His Grave*,” said Panagiotakou. “People tell us this all the time.”

Greece's conservatives often brand the Foundation as a shelter for “perverts” – i.e. LGBT community, anti-racists, and all the categories of people opposed to them. The “Onassis would be rolling in his grave,” feedback came at times like when the Foundation projected the face of Zak Kostopoulos on the side of their building, a trans activist who was beaten to death, practically in broad daylight.

The programming at Onassis does not fall so easily along one side of the culture war, at least as we understand it in the US. *Frankenstein – The Lost Paradise* for example, a new play by the controversial

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understand it in the US. For example, for example, a new play by the controversial writer Lena Kitsopoulou, was introduced to me a tad nervously by a staff member as, “Not politically correct...at all.”

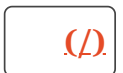
When it came to “Plásmata”, the goal was not to be provocative.

“We are guests of the park and the public. That space is not *ours*,” Panagiotakou said..

To prepare, Onassis’ staff spoke with everyone from people living in apartments around the park down to the kiosk and restaurant owners nearby.

“Everybody. I think that is why it was so welcomed,” said Panagiotakou. “No one has destroyed anything. Yet.”

It’s All in the Details



Refik Anadol, *Quantum Memories–Probability* (2021)

Photo : Courtesy Onassis

“Plásmata” opens with *Quantum Memories–Probability* (2021), a gentle yet monumental work by Refik Anadol, a Turkish-American new media artist.

As trance-like music pulses gently, colored waves of particles shift and crash like froth against the surfaces of a digitally-rendered white cube. In the sunny glow of the early evening, there is no glare or blinding shining light. The animation, made using artificial intelligence, a quantum computer, and millions of public domain images of nature, is simply there. So far as 3D-rendered animation goes, it has

illions of public domain images of nature, is simply *there*. So far as 3D-rendered animation goes, it has a familiar vibe, something one might come across on Instagram. People stand there, entranced, take photos of it and of each other. It is a safe work, executed with incredible quality.

If the rest of the exhibition had looked like this, however, “Plásmata” would have been a disappointment. But the remaining 24 works are a show of not just the diversity of what digital art can be, but a new standard by which we might judge what it means to have an “immersive” exhibition. Cheap projections on drywall this is not.

The exhibition’s success lies its keen sense of detail for technical production and how each work interacts.

“Every work has been configured, re-designed, for the public space,” Prodromos Tsiavos, Onassis’s Head of Digital Development, told *ARTnews*..

Not only were the works re-sized and weather-proofed (when applicable) and accompanied with specially composed soundtracks (which do an excellent job of not overlapping), there is a massive team at the park dedicated to monitoring for glitches or crashes.

Each work is accompanied by a personal doyen who is there to explain the work to inquisitive attendees. All of these attendants communicate with Tsiavos, Panagiotakou and other staff members via group-chat to flag malfunctions and provide suggestions based on audience responses.

The Form of Digital Art



Works that contain technical components are high-maintenance. At a basic level, many exhibitions of digital work lack the level of care needed to properly present works at their best. Onassis has the standards and the funding to provide the intense stewardship these works require. Better yet, screen-based works were freed from the ugly confines of the typical TV or computer monitor that dominates in many digital exhibitions.

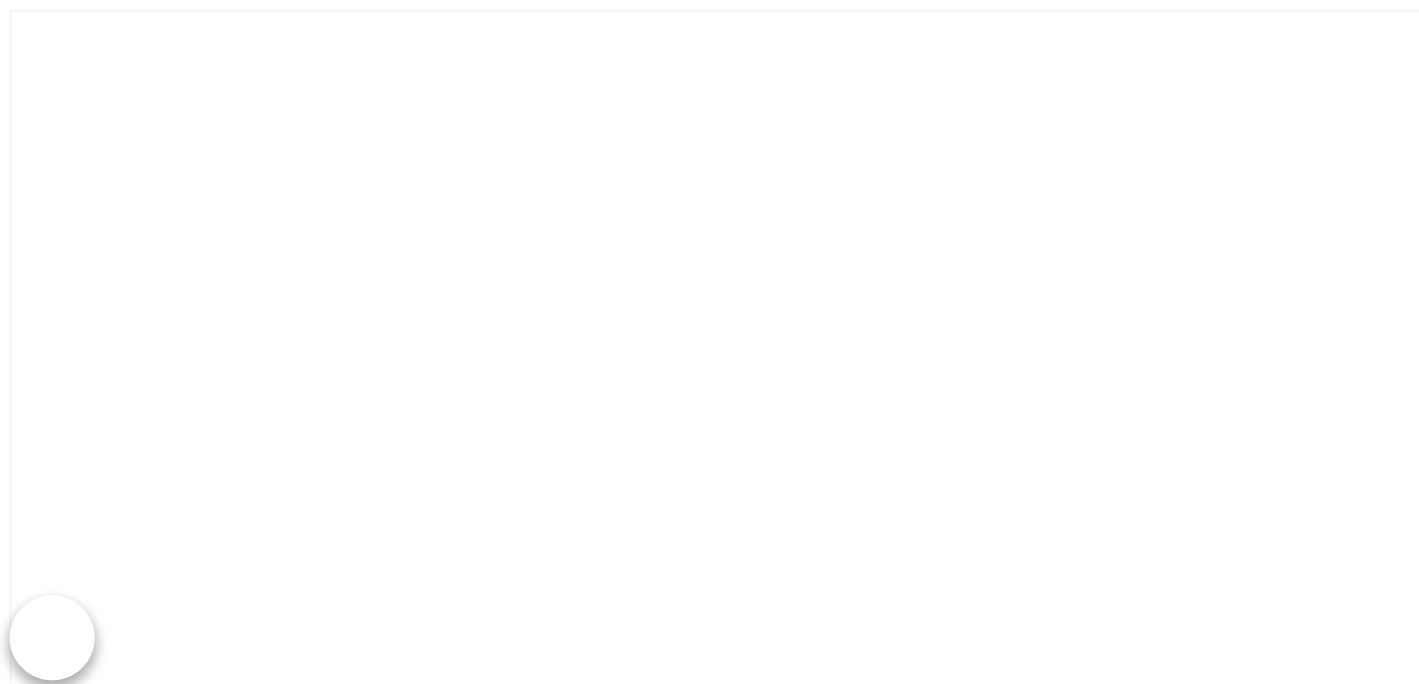
“We’ve seen so much of it during the pandemic, why should we see screens again?” said Tsiavos. “We spent a lot of time testing LED screens so that the digital art wouldn’t just be about the screen.”

When seeing works like *طلعت*, *Moon-faced* (2021) by Morehshin Allahyari, an AI-generated work that explores the genderless, poetic description of ‘moon-faced’ and depictions of beauty in Persian portraiture, it is less that there is a screen in front of the audience but a crystal clear apparition. In this sense, Tsiavos’s comment really hits home. It’s as if the work has been freed from its screen-context, its screen-confines, though of course, it is a screen that is displaying this work.

As certain new media works are shunted to the side in favor of pieces that live well online (i.e. don’t have to be experienced in person or which photograph well, at least), Elliot Woods, one half of the artistic duo Kimchi and Chips, commented that he would have liked to see a greater range of non-screen based works. “If not now, when?” Woods asked.

But “Plásmata” did have a nice selection that showed the variety of forms that technologically-driven art can take. The video work *Eclipse* (2019) by Tony Oursler was projected onto trees, *FRANK* (2016) by Cecilie Waagner Falkenstrøm was mainly auditory, and consisted of a suspended microphone and hidden speakers, *Another Moon* (2021), by Kimchi and Chips, projected beams of light into the sky to render, aptly, another moon.

While these kinds of technical considerations make up a great part of how an audience experiences digital art,, it is the content that provokes the most thought and dialogue. But including challenging work in a public space is a sensitive art.





Dries Verhoeven, *Happiness*, 2016

Photo : Courtesy Onassis

Take *Happiness* (2019) by Dries Verhoeven, for example. Confined in what looks like a miniature public bathroom and outfitted with the green cross symbol of pharmacies, is a robot who tells audiences how to take illicit drugs and how great they make you feel.

“For some people, sex is connected to shame and self-consciousness,” explains the robot. “Crystal meth can take these [feelings] away.”

Though her silicone face prompts the typical distress of the uncanny valley, she is stunningly emotive when she tips her head back in pleasure, her eyes squinting in the orgasmic relief of the heroin whose effects she is modeling.

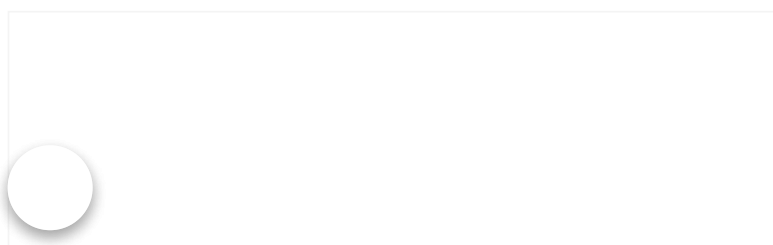
“If we placed *Happiness* in the beginning of the exhibition, that would be an issue,” said Panagiotakou. “We thought a lot about where to place each artwork. So we decided to build a kind of adventure where you meet different kinds of information or feelings at the right times, so when they arrive, you’re ready for it.”

There is something hypnotic about the way one travels through the park. By the time one sees a work like *Happiness*, there’s no sense of shock, or abruptness. And these more provocative works, of which there are very few, are shifted physically out of easy sight.

Frederik Heyman’s *Virtual Embalming* (2020), which contains some nudity, was enclosed in an area surrounded by trees and brush, quite literally off the beaten path.

The scale of the works also increase in size as one moves through the exhibition, excepting, of course, Anadol’s first work. “Plásmata” climaxes with a jaw-dropping work the size of a small building. *Divided* (2022) by SpY appears, all at once, a giant glowing red sphere split in two pieces, surrounded by an intricate network of scaffolding. People mill about it, dwarfed, children running beneath their feet. It is *awesome* in that original sense, yet a restive place in which to come down from the winding artistic journey that is “Plásmata”. To have experienced “Plásmata” is to genuinely feel one occupies the future, a place in which technology is not draining, banal, or evil – for once.

Public Improvement or Gentrification?





Installation view

Photo : Courtesy Onassis

That this park was full to the brim with people is not something many could have imagined even just a few years ago.

During the financial crisis Greece has endured in recent years, the park gained a reputation as a place where addicts lounged and mugging persisted. Additionally, there was a demographic shift as more immigrants moved to the neighborhood.

When Onassis premiered the first iteration of this public, digital exhibition in Pedion tou Areos, the team wasn't sure if they'd be able to convince the public to come. Tsiavos described that first show, "You and AI," as a "test run." While people were hesitant, the show ended up being a success and helped change public opinion of the park.

When asked if he had considered that these exhibitions might contribute to gentrification in the city, Tsiavos said that he wasn't concerned. "Of course, gentrification is a huge conversation as rent prices are rising," Tsiavos said. "But in the case of Pedion tou Areos, It is not that one group is replacing another, but that there are just many more people coming to the park."

This change began during the pandemic when Athenians spent more time outside to combat the isolation and drudgery of COVID-19 lockdowns. The improvements in employment rates also affected the makeup of the park, Tsiavos claimed. Regardless of their effect on this process, which isn't to be discounted, Tsiavos said Onassis is doing all that it can to encourage the local community to visit the exhibition. They will begin rolling out guided tours in Arabic, Urdu, and Farsi in the coming month.





Installation view at Plasmata.

Photo : Courtesy Onassis

It is the pride of the Onassis team that they can be a big part of improving the Athenian quality of life, whether that means donating playgrounds or creating accessible paths at the Acropolis. But there's no doubt that this is a power that has to be wielded carefully, with the utmost effort.

“There were so many times when we said, ‘Oh, maybe we shouldn’t do this next year, but this should be something that only happens every couple of years,” said Panagiotakou.

“But now that it’s finally here, and we’ve settled the issues, we’re always there, even when we’re not supposed to be working. It’s an incredible feeling, and now it’s impossible to imagine that we wouldn’t do it again, soon.”

