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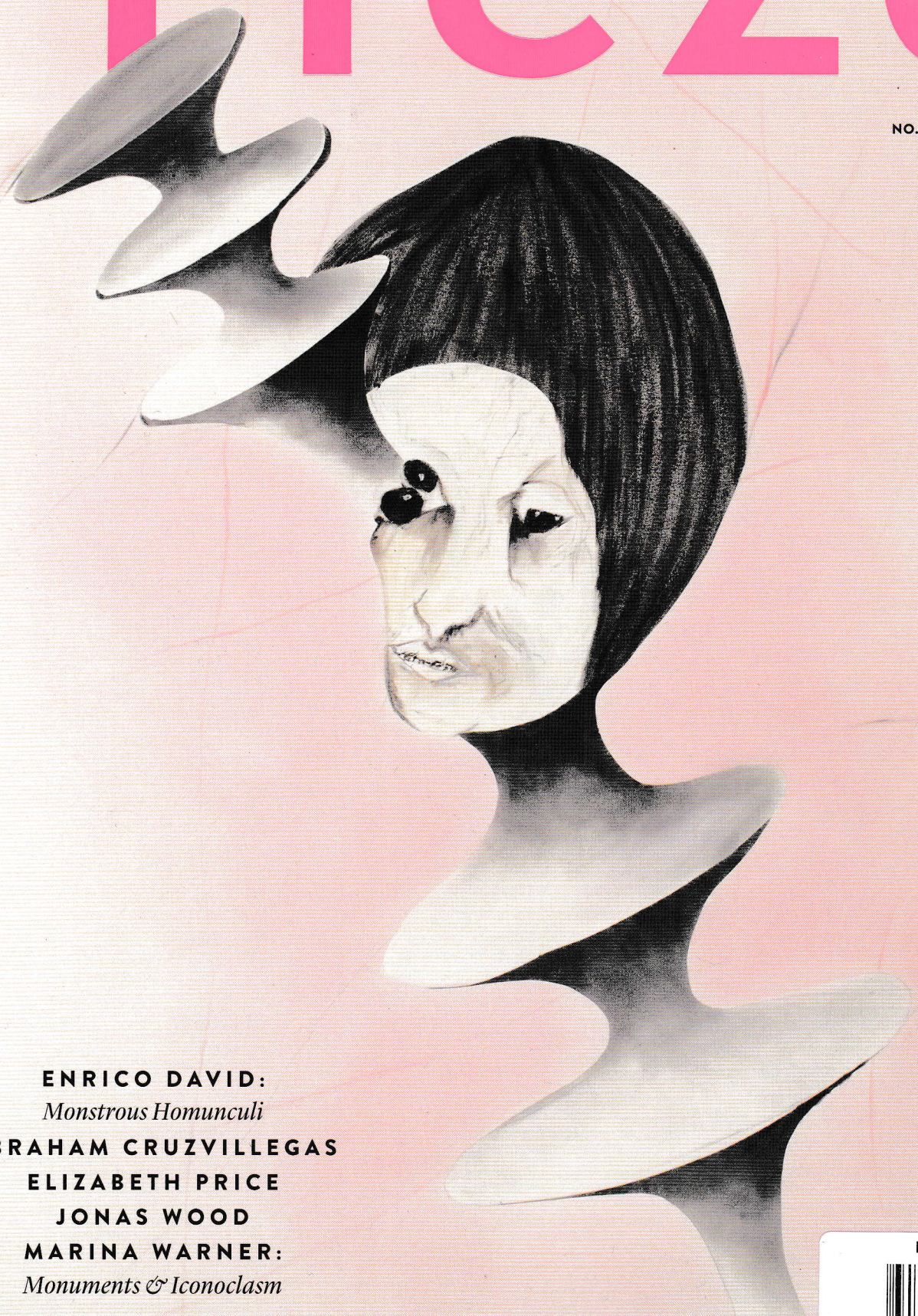

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'Greek artists have always been in crisis.' I feel as if I heard that phrase numerous times in Athens this summer, a mantra to meditate on as the world fell apart.

It has a lot of truth in it. 'There is no infrastructure,' writer and curator Iliana Fokianaki told me one afternoon. 'The ministry of culture is completely infatuated with ancient culture. Even in the past, there was very little money for contemporary culture, not just visual art.'

In some ways, the crisis years have brought a sense of purpose. Some of the commercial art scene's blandishments has been displaced by self-initiated projects with more idealistic rhetoric. Fokianaki's non-profit space, State of Concept, which she founded in 2013, is a rock-solid example.

Still, economic uncertainty and political chaos weigh down the future. In the summer, the Greek people rejected austerity in a public referendum only to have their anti-austerity government forced to buckle by the European institutions. Struck by the resulting political whiplash, even those who had been unshakeably committed to the project of Greek culture began to talk about leaving.

In 2017, Documenta will split itself between Kassel and Athens. Say what you will about this gesture of symbolic reconciliation between Northern and Southern Europe, it has given the Greek art scene a promising landmark in a future that is otherwise draining away. Another mantra I heard more than once: 'I won't leave until I see what happens with Documenta.' And yet, as Fokianaki said, only half-joking: 'Who knows if there will even be a country then?'

After eight years of this grind, you might expect more visibly radical changes. To me at least, the professional art scene felt as if it was still holding its breath, waiting for Documenta, waiting for the weather to clear.

'What I see is that most artists are holding firm to their own ground,' the artist and curator Poka-Yio tells me one day. If you want to understand how Greece's professional art world has reacted to the crisis, you could do worse than look at the Athens Biennale, of which Poka-Yio is co-founder together with Xenia Kalpaktsoglou and Augustine Zenakos. It began in 2007 with the soon-to-be-prophetic title 'Destroy Athens'. This was a big deal in Greece, seen as establishing the kind of ambitious contemporary institutions that had always been lacking. 'Destroy Athens' and its sequel, 'Heaven', were relatively lavish affairs, but funding disappeared, and so the biennale has had to make do with less, even as the urgency of the world around it grows.

'The recipe for a biennale asks for money, art production and people,' Poka-Yio theorizes. 'When you take something out of that equation, what do you have left? Do you still have something that can be called a biennale? Yes – if you emphasize the others.' With funds for art production drying up, the third and fourth editions, 'Monodrome' (2011) and 'Agora' (2013), put more and more emphasis on people over product. 'Agora' broke with the idea of top-down curating, sourcing ideas through an open call. 'Omonoia', which opens this month with Massimiliano Mollona as director, removes still another seemingly invariant convention, that a biennale should come together all at once. Technically, it will comprise the fifth and sixth Athens Biennales rolled into one, climaxing as Documenta begins in 2017: an IV drip of art instead of an all-at-once injection.

This experiment in making virtue of necessity might tell us a lot, arriving through subtraction at what is most vital about a contemporary art event. At the same time, the Greek present also reveals certain romantic platitudes to be particularly shopworn. 'Once, in a conference, a colleague of mine, an older curator, told me that great art has carried on through crisis, that we don't need money,' Poka-Yio recounted, shaking his head. 'I said, "What the fuck are you talking about? My pockets are full of unpaid receipts and invoices for the biennale."'

One evening, I found myself at an outdoor performance space. Blue lights cut out of the night the forms of two guys leaning over their instruments. The music was joyfully chaotic, the park teeming. There was an improvised bar and, behind the shallow pit where the band was playing, a cavernous building, walls studded with graffiti, full of more people.

This occupied space, Green Park, represents one of the more interesting tales of artists feeling their way through the crisis. 'When the crisis came I was feeling better in a way, because it made you equal,' Vassilis Noulas, one of the architects of the Green Park occupation, told me, invoking the 'artists have always been in crisis' theme. 'At first, it feels like a slap in the face that wakes you up. But, after a while, it's like being hit in the face over and over.'

Noulas is one of the founding members of the Mavili Collective, a group of experimental theatre artists who, back in 2011, spearheaded the occupation of the historical Embros Theatre in the centre of Athens. That was the year of the mass occupation of Syntagma Square. Embros picked up on the same energy. You hear about that occupation a lot in Athens, from both artists and activists, as a highlight of the recent epoch.

Hundreds of people of diverse political tendencies and tastes flowed through Embros to debate art's place in the world. The vicissitudes of the occupation over the following years are too complex to trace here. Suffice it to say that Green Park is a sequel of sorts initiated by those, like Noulas, who feel that the theatre occupation, which continues with a different cast, became rather inflexibly dominated by anarchist principles.

'We want to create another paradigm of occupation, an artistic occupation,' he explained: 'One that is more open.'

The space's founding manifesto talks about remaining self-consciously 'imperfect and incomplete'. I read this as a hard-won lesson about political art spaces: that they function best when they are not *too* political, when they can serve as a meeting space for different projects instead of becoming the project itself. What organizational alternatives it can find beyond the anarchist one of rule-by-whomever-debates-the-longest is unclear – they propose the willfully vague term 'friendship' – but it is intended, first of all, to be enough to evolve.

Green Park was an abandoned cafe and event space. Scavengers had stripped it of anything that could be sold off. The occupation crew hauled out hundreds of bags of debris, returning the space to working order. At any given time, it could be facilitating a programme of sculpture in the park, or hosting debate on the role of private money in Greek cultural life. The initial ten-day Green Park programme, whose theme was 'Joy and Politics', coincidentally led up to the 'NO' referendum. Green Park became, spontaneously, a space in which to experience the ups and downs of that moment together.

Back in New York, I called Gigi Argyropoulou, the only other member besides Noulis of the original Mavili Collective to have continued into Green Park. I asked her where she thinks it is all going. 'At Embros,' Argyropoulou replied, 'we could feel the pressure from outside, of people saying: "What are you?" "Are you a squatter institution?" "What are you doing here?" "Are you doing the post-political thing?" We have at least learned to say that we won't reply to this question, and we won't feel guilty that we don't know. It's like an art project: you think you know what to do. But, in reality, you just have methods for dealing with problems.'

Another way to phrase it might be to say that if you don't put your own ideas into crisis, you can't expect to face crisis honestly. That may sound obvious, but one of the things I take from my Greek colleagues is what a long and tortuous task it is in practice.

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1
Poster for the
Green Park event programme,
June, 2015

2
'Panda Sex',
exhibition view at State of Concept,
2014

Courtesy
1 Green Park • 2 State of Concept,
Athens