



Profile

Katia Arfara

Artistic Director of the Onassis Cultural Centre's theater and dance departments since 2010. After majoring in Greek Literature and drama at Athens University, Arfara received a Master's degree in Theater History at the same university. She then went on to receive a doctorate in Art History at Pantheon-Sorbonne University in Paris. In 2014, Arfara initiated the Fast Forward Festival and also served as its artistic director. For one month in June of 2016, she resided in Tokyo at the invitation of the Saison Foundation as a Visiting Fellow.

Onassis Cultural Centre

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Presenter Interview

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The Onassis Foundation was established in 1975 in accordance with the will of the shipping magnate Aristotle Onassis to honor the memory of his son Alexander who had died in an airplane crash, in order to use the money that would have been his inheritance for philanthropic purposes. It was the foundation that funded the construction of the Onassis Cultural Centre as a comprehensive culture facility that opened in 2010. Its facilities include a Main Hall (880 seats), Small Hall (220 seats) and an Exhibition Hall (600 sq. m), as well as an outdoor theater and other facilities. Since 2014, the Centre has organized the Fast Forward Festival at public and private spaces around the city. In 2017, the festival commissioned major Japanese artists whose works deal with the country's contemporary society, including Akira Takayama's "Piraeus / Heterotopia." In this interview we spoke with Katia Arfara, the artistic director of the OCC's theater and dance departments and founding director for its annual Fast Forward Festival held each May, about the programs of the Centre that is currently a stimulating influence on Greece's contemporary scene and the festival.

Interviewer: Shintaro Fujii [professor, Waseda University]

I would like to begin by asking you about your experiences and career up until coming to the Onassis Cultural Centre.

At first I was studying classical Greek philology and theatre. After that I got a Master's degree in drama and then I went to study in France where with the cooperation of Paris University III I was able to get a doctorate in art history from Paris University I in 2006. For my doctoral thesis, the key word was theatricality and it dealt with the relationship between the performing arts and visual arts in North America and Europe. It looked at the neo-avant-garde movements in the second half of the 20th century such as the happenings and the performance art and artists like Allan Kaprow, John Cage and the Judson Dance Theater while focusing on the 1980s and 1990s and the work of emblematic interdisciplinary artists such as Jeff Wall, Cindy Sherman, Tony Oursler, The Wooster Group, Jan Fabre and Romeo Castellucci. I was concerned with hybrid practices happening between the performing arts and the visual arts and between theory and practice, and that still connects to what I am doing today.

After I got my doctorate, I was teaching in different theatre and art history departments such as Paris University I and Paris University III, while conducting my post-doctoral research in Frankfurt with Hans-This Lehmann. I thought of working as a re-

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searcher and teacher, but after I had been in Paris for ten years, a big change came. The Onassis Foundation was establishing a culture center in Athens and they were seeking applicants for directorship in the theater and dance departments. So I applied and I was chosen. When I joined the staff of the Centre it was still in the preparatory stages.

Before the establishment of the Onassis Cultural Centre, what was the contemporary theater scene in Greece like?

Athens is a theatre city with an important number of theatres and a very active independent theatre scene. Regarding the public institutions, we have the National Theatre of Greece in Athens and the National Theatre of Northern Greece in Thessaloniki – they are both repertory based. We also have few international festivals such as the Athens and Epidaurus Festival that has been held every summer since 1955, the Kalamata Dance Festival in the south of Greece, Dimitria Festival in Thessaloniki, the experimental MIR festival in Athens and few others more.

Our exchanges with the international theatre scene have been intensified since 2006, when Yorgos Loukos took the direction of the Athens Festival, nevertheless with a few exceptions, the performing arts of Greece were not known in other European countries. That is why one of the first things we wanted to do when the Onassis Cultural Centre opened was to become a base for the creation, production and “exportation” of works in order to connect Athens and Greece to Europe and the world. It was one of our priorities to introduce local artists in the international scene and be able to actively engage our international partners to coproduce and invite Greek projects. At the same time, it was important to make ourselves part of the international network of performing arts organizations by coproducing international artists, participating in European networks, etc., etc. To name some of the partnerships we have forged since 2010, in France we now have partnerships with Théâtre de la Ville, Festival d'Avignon, Odéon, and Festival de Marseille, while in Germany our partners include Berlin's HAU, Hamburg's Kampnagel, and Frankfurt's Mousonturm, in the Netherlands the Holland Festival, Noorderzon in Groningen and Spring Festival in Utrecht, in Brussels Kunstenfestivaldesarts, in London Sadler's Wells and Barbican, in Switzerland's Kasernen Basel and Theaterspektakel in Zurich. We have also established partnerships in Latin America, the Middle East, the US, in Japan and other Asian countries with a specific focus on South East Asia.

Around the time that the Onassis Cultural Centre opened, the European Commission revealed that the Greek government had been hiding the scale of its financial deficit and the value of the national bonds dropped drastically and threw the country into a financial crisis. The decision was made for the IMF and EU to provide financial aid to Greece, and in return the Greek government was directed to raise taxes and reduce the national budget drastically. We believe that this greatly affected arts and culture policy, and wasn't the Onassis Cultural Centre also affected?

In the wake of the Lehman collapse and the ensuing global financial crisis of 2008, Greece had a change of government and the Greek Debt Crisis occurred in 2009. It was in 2010, when the results of the crisis were being felt most seriously, that the Onassis Cultural Centre opened. It was a time when the very foundations of Greek

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*Fast Forward Festival

Started in 2014, this is a comprehensive contemporary arts festival held every year in May. The festival commissions Greek and international artists to create research-based, site-specific works in public, private or semi-public spaces in Athens centre and its periphery. Developing innovative production methods at the intersection of visual and performing arts, this interdisciplinary festival explores diverse aesthetic forms of socially engaged art, stimulating public discussions on social, economic, and ideological issues. Since 2015 the festival has invited major Japanese artists from the performing and the visual arts scene such as Akira Takayama, Hikaru Fujii and Chim↑Pom.

*Hikaru Fujii

Born 1976. Artist, video artist. Graduated from the DEA course of the University of Paris VIII for the arts, philosophy and aesthetics. Based on his belief that art exists on a foundation of strong social and historical connections, He creates video installations based on in-depth field research that explore the social issues involved in existing systems and frameworks in experimental ways. Fujii is the winner of the Grand Prix of the Nissan Art Awards supporting Japanese artists active on the international scene.

society were shaken, and as a new arts and culture facility we were expected to show a sharp artistic vision and a dynamic artistic program.

It is hard to say that the policies of Greece's Ministry of Culture ever provided a sufficient amount of support for contemporary artists, but after the debt crisis struck the amount of funding and grants for the artists was cut for several years. They have been recently reestablished but they remain greatly diminished. However, the Onassis Foundation and the Cultural Centre are 100% private-sector organizations with no funding whatsoever from national resources. Of course, we are not completely free of effects of the austerity measures as they affect our audience, our local partners and the broader cultural and social landscape within which we operate. The effects of the debt crisis on Greek society and the arts and culture have been so dire, that I would like to refrain from making any generalizations here.

The 2017-18 program of the Onassis Cultural Centre has featured some of the world's leading artists and works, including Joël Pommerat's *Ça ira (I) Fin de Louis*, Robert Lepage's *887*, Alain Platel's *Requiem pour L.* and Akram Khan's *XENOS* (note: meaning foreigners or outsiders, and having its world premiere at the Onassis Cultural Centre in February 2018). And for your Fast Forward Festival that uses not only the Cultural Centre but also venues around the city, your programs have included not only Japanese artists like Hikaru Fujii but other internationally famous artists also familiar to the Japanese audience like Walid Raad, Rabih Mroué, Mark Teh and Ho Tzu Nyen, many of whom are known for their site-specific works and exhibitions. Would you tell us about your policies for programming?

For our 2017 theater season we have chosen to work on the theme of History, Archeology, Memory and Identity. This exploration was the link between our experimentation with Greek tragedies that we staged for the first time, Joël Pommerat's *Ça ira (I) Fin de Louis*, which is about the French Revolution, and Akram Khan's *XENOS*, which is a work that involves memories of World War I.

The Fast Forward Festival expands and deepens this exploration on an expanded archeology and the construction of history looking at the city of Athens as a palimpsest. Athens today is built on top of various strata. So our concept was to dig into these layers of our ancient and contemporary history proposing alternative narrations of the past and critical reflections on the present.

About more than half of the festival's program is made up of works that we commission directly to the artists. They are site-specific in nature and research-based. We make sure that a dramaturge is assigned to each project, a team of researchers from different disciplines is formed around the artist and a good amount of time is spent creating each work through diverse discussions and visits about the respective communities and experts in Athens, with attention carefully paid to their political dynamics involved in them. Since we can't just throw the artists we bring from outside into the chaotic jumble that is Athens on their own, we employ a system that assigns dramaturges and researchers to work as partners supporting the artists. Fast Forward Festival is full of the blessings of teamwork.

In parallel, the team searches for venues according to the needs of each project. It is important that there is dramaturgy involved not only in the work itself but also in the

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venue. Each work is a combination of curatorial and dramaturgical decisions on various levels, from the micro to the macro. All the projects of the festival relate directly or indirectly with each other in an horizontal way which creates a hyper-dramaturgy, on which the festival's curatorial approach is based. What we have then is the rhizome (note: subterranean stem, root stock) that Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari talk about as a model for culture based on interdependent structures beyond any kind of hierarchical organization and linear narration.

I attended the festival this time and I found that, indeed, though each work was excellent taken on its own, but I also got a strong feeling that they also connected with each other in a positive way that deepened their meaning. And I clearly had a strong feeling that the program was painstakingly planned and each work was the product of much time and effort. Normally, it is theaters that spend a long time and effort to create a work and after that the festivals buy those works from various places for performances, but with Fast Forward Festival it seems to be the opposite.

I feel lucky that we are in a position where we can spend so much time and effort on research. Of course, that also increases our workload! Fast Forward is a hybrid festival which mainly takes place in the city. So, if you start out on the presumption that you, as the curator, can use concepts and methods that are thought to be important and apply them to the actual programming, things soon start to go wrong. You have to spend time with the artists and the researchers and the communities involved, giving them enough space for reflection and dialogue and choosing the right methods case by case. It is only what comes out organically of that long process that could lead to an outcome which could be challenging artistically and relevant to the broader society.

Fast Forward Festival's modest ambition isn't to simply present art works to the citizens, by deliberately taking performances and exhibitions out of the theater into the city. We rather intervene into the urban fabric to get people to think critically about the relationship between arts, society and politics. I consider the festival as an open, inclusive platform which invites the citizens to see the city of Athens and its communities in a different light. Said in another way, getting out of the theater means opening the arts to city spaces, to public spaces, and that means that not only that the arts become part of the public space, but more than that we re-integrate the arts in the public sphere testing the potential and the limits of their social role. I think it is very important that people can shift their point of view and experience Athens with completely new eyes, with what I call "the eyes of an outsider."

As a festival, we are seeking to deliberately work ourselves into the network of organizations and facilities that the city is structured around. Because of the focus on heritage this year, we collaborated not only with the old National Library, the Acropolis Museum, the Law Library and the National Theater, but also with various other institutions, schools and communities with a specific attention to marginalized and migrant communities. Unlike other countries of Western Europe, Greece doesn't have a history of overseas colonization, so in the Athens of the past there were no immigrant communities of foreigners from former colonies. Besides the existence of small minority groups since its constitution, Greece tended to be seen as a homogeneous

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white, Christian community. However, those days have been over for many years now. The Athens of today is not only a mix of diverse communities but it even has an extreme right political party, now the third largest party in the parliament (Golden Dawn), with an ultra-nationalist agenda that preaches xenophobia and racism. These are the realities today. So, we have to think about politics on all levels, from the micro to the macro when we operate with the tolls of art and culture in the Athenian urban landscape.

The video installation *The Primary Fact* that you commissioned to Hikaru Fujii was based on the “incident” of the discovery about 80 human skeletons in 2016. It is said that the skeletons were of young men who joined a revolt led by the aristocrat Cylon of Athens against a usurper of power who were later executed (c. 632 B.C.). It was a wonderful work that was very well thought out. And I believe it was one of the works that proved the success of your theme this year's festival of “archeology.”

Yes. Cylon himself who had planned the revolt was able to escape, his fellow rebels who stayed behind were all executed without proper trial, and it is said that the skeletons may well be theirs. Later, after the Solon reforms and such in the 6th century B.C., democracy took root in Athens, and it is said that the Cylon revolt and ensuing executions were a cause of the birth of democracy. Hikaru Fujii himself suggested this recent archeological discovery as its subject that included questions of life and death, politics and democracy and history and the present.

What we chose for the venue was classrooms formerly used for science experiments by the chemistry department of Athens University. It was never renovated and just stayed unused with the experimental equipment still in place, so we transformed the top floor of the building into an exhibition space. With the exception of this top floor, the remainder of the building is used as the library of Athens University's law department. Archeological research today involves chemical analysis, and since Cylon's revolt is related to the birth of democracy and rule by law, this was a perfect venue. In close collaboration with the chief archaeologist Stella Chrysoulaki and with the cooperation of a Greek choreographer, the work included a reenactment of the execution of the young rebels based on the archeological and anthropological analysis.

There were some discussions about why we had chosen a foreign artist to do this work about Greek history rather than a Greek artist. But the reason we did is because a foreigner could bring an objective viewpoint to the subject that a Greek artist couldn't. That meant it could have forms of expression that would not come out if it were done by a Greek artist. If we had commissioned a Greek artist, it probably would not have had the same freedom to explore this excavation beyond taboo and stereotypes with such a clinical and “neutral” approach. I believe that this work indeed proved the importance of the “eye of the outsider” that I spoke of earlier.

It seems to me that a work like this that delves deeply into the society could not be done by a foreign artist working alone. Surely this work was an effective product of your festival's working method of creating a team and taking the time to delve deeply through discussions with various communities and scientists.

And it doesn't just apply to foreigners, even Greek artists find it hard to dig down to the inner workings of society. In fact it may be even harder for Greek artists.

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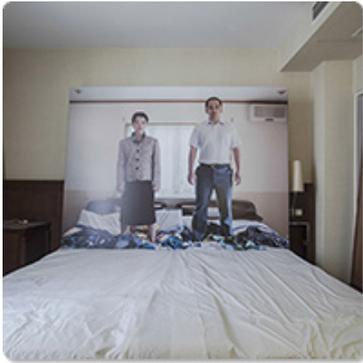
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*Tokyo Heterotopia

This project seeks to explore the history of Tokyo and Asia by focusing on the unique ethnic communities in Tokyo by having participants carrying an FM radio broadcasting a text written by the artist that leads them to religious facilities, monuments, the remains of former refugee compounds, ethnic restaurants and the like.

Don't Follow the Wind

Photo: Andreas Simopoulos



While it is true that the cost of living is not high in Greece, I was surprised to find that the price of admission for your Fast Forward Festival's events is never more than 10 euros, which is extremely inexpensive.

Compared to the countries of Western Europe, admission fees in Athens have always been low, and because of this, we are determined to set the ticket cost for our festival even lower, and in fact a large number of our events are free of charge.

I think it is wonderful the way a private-sector organization like the Onassis Foundation and its Onassis Cultural Centre is successfully engaging in programs with such deep consciousness of the public needs while maintaining such a level of artistic excellence. To commission such outstanding foreign artists to create works must require a very large budget.

We don't release information about our budget. It is not exceptionally large but it is carefully and cleverly managed with transparency and respect to all our collaborators and partners. Theaters that receive public funding are of course obliged to release reports about their operating budgets for the sake of accounting transparency, but we are a private-sector organization.

Would you tell us about the number of staff members working at the Culture Center and what the organizational structure consists of?

The Cultural Centre as a whole employs over 100 people on a permanent base with many seasonal collaborators. The staff members involved in production, education, marketing and communication are not working for our theater and dance departments alone but also for the music and educational department and all the other events, so it is hard to say exactly how many work for just the theater and dance departments.

Unfortunately, I wasn't able to see your Japan Feature at last year's festival, but I would like to ask how it was received in Athens.

Please allow me to clarify that I am inviting artists and not countries. The stronger presence of Japanese artists in the two last editions resulted from my interest on their practices and their connection with the key concepts of the Fast Forward Festival. In 2017 we explored the theme of forced displacement and statelessness. In this frame, Akira Takayama presented *Piraeus/Heterotopia* (based on the format of Takayama's *Tokyo Heterotopia*), Hikaru Fujii's *Piraeus/Heterochronia* and we also had a site-specific version of *Don't Follow the Wind* project curated by Chim↑Pom, Kenji Kubota, Eva and Franco Mattes and Jason Waite (note: *Don't Follow the Wind* is an ongoing exhibition that can't actually be visited, as it is located in the radiation-contaminated no-entry evacuation zone around the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant, damaged by the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami). It represented a big adventure and turned out to be extremely well received. The cooperative efforts of the staff here in Greece went well and the response from the audiences was good. Takayama and Fujii focused their work in the multilayered migration history of the harbor of Piraeus and also in the neighborhood of Drapetsona, in an attempt to connect the "sensitive" center of Athens (Omonoia square) with the port reconstructing mentally the walls which linked Athens with its port in the ancient times. One of the

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“X-Apartments Athens”

Based on a concept put forth by Matthias Lilienthal, X-Apartments (a hybrid project in which audience walk through the city in pairs to visit performances held in existing residential buildings) have been held around the world since 2002. For the second Fast Forward Festival in 2015, Katia Arfara and Anna Muelter co-curated an X-Apartments program in two districts of Athens: Kypseli with its large immigrant population and Larisis, an area where a new urban area and an old residential area inhabited primarily by manual workers intersect. The buildings used for the performances were older buildings from the 1950s and '60s in these two areas near their respective train stations. One of the 15 invited participating artists was Akira Takayama who invited Tetsuo Ogawa, a homeless artist who lives in a park in Tokyo and runs a café named Enoaru where payments are made by bartering of goods. Takayama proposed to explore the various aspects of homelessness in both Athens and Tokyo and their relationships with dominant living models. Together with two former Athens homeless they built three make-shift houses at the construction site of the new Athens national railway station.

aims of Fast Forward Festival is to overturn preconceived concepts and I believe that this choice of locations and itineraries contributed to the success of the projects. *Don't Follow the Wind* commissioned new works to artists such as Meiro Koizumi and Kota Takeuchi for a hotel at the Omonoia square which has been abandoned the same time when Fukushima disaster occurred and they have also organized a Forum of Forced Displaced people within the hotel bringing together displaced people from Fukushima, Syria and Athens.

Were your encounters with these Japanese artists due largely to your experience of residing in Tokyo for a month at the invitation of the Saison Foundation as a Visiting Fellow in June of 2016?

I have been selected by the Saison Foundation because of a project that I wanted to develop with Akira Takayama. Our collaboration in *X-Apartments* in 2015 went extremely well and I wished to expand my dialogue with him. Saison Foundation generously gave the opportunity to explore not only Akira's world but also the contemporary Japanese artistic scene both in the performing and the visual arts and I am grateful. It was truly a strong experience for me, one that you might even call explosive. I was able to meet unbelievable artists, curators and thinkers but also to familiarize myself with the Japanese culture and history. Taking these encounters as a starting point, I am in a position where I started to deepen and expand my relationship with Japan, for which I feel very fortunate.

Will you be inviting any other Japanese artists to next year's festival?

I am making preparations to do so but many things are still undecided, so I can't give you any names at this point in time. I will have to ask you to wait a little longer for an answer to this question.

I want to thank you very much for taking to give us this interview while still in the midst of your festival. We look forward with great expectations for things to come from the Onassis Cultural Centre and your Fast Forward Festival.

Thank you for your interest to the FFF!