

**OPENING SPEECH OF ATHENS BIENNALE OMONIA  
REX NATIONAL THEATRE.  
ATHENS  
NOVEMBER 2015**

I thank the National theatre for hosting us in this beautiful venue, and the municipality for their support and Poka Yio and Xenia for having involved me in this wonderful journey.

It is probably not obvious to you why an anthropologist should direct an art biennale. Some of you will know anthropology as the discipline that was born under the British Empire to better understand the cultures of the colonies so that they could be ruled better. But anthropology's early founders were Jewish emigres, artist belonging to the French surrealist movement or oxford-based socialists with a subversive soul. Their anthropology cast a critical glance on mainstream society through the eyes of other cultures. After the devastation of the first world conflict and the economic crisis that followed, anthropologists looked at the south as a space where the political and economic foundations of Europe could be re-imagined. In 1922 Marcel Mauss wrote the famous book on the gift in which he argued that reciprocity, cooperation and sharing (commons) are much more productive and sustainable forms of living than the ideologies of competition, individualism and privatization of life that sustained western societies. As anthropologist, I have been researching on in issues of poverty, inequality, labour and uneven economic development my whole life. In the 1990s I moved to the UK when a bright and young labour MP Tony Blair was gathering huge popularity around his proposal of a new left for Europe. I did my fieldwork in Sheffield, North of England where I lived in a poor working-class neighborhoods and worked in two steel factories. In my research I was trying to understand how the working-class survived the disastrous economic austerity imposed by Thatcher government, which had privatized and destroyed the mining and steel industries and turned the city into a gigantic shopping mall. An economic model that Blair himself, I soon discovered, totally endorsed. In 2008 I moved to Brazil at a time when in the midst of global economic recession, the country was experiencing an unprecedented economic growth under the charismatic leadership of president Lula da Silva an ex-metalworker and leader of the anti-dictatorship movement. During my fieldwork I lived in favelas, worked in factories, cooperatives and with homeless and migrants organizations. Researching on a grassroot level I tried to understand whether Brazil's new economic wealth was reaching the millions of families that lived in extreme poverty. Today I find myself in Greece, at Europe's crossroad, between south and north; east and west and at another important historical juncture, when from the ruins of an enduring and disruptive economic crisis new political forces and experiments are rising.

Anthropology has taught me that history is made by small actions performed in the everyday by different sections of civil society. Informed by anthropology this biennale will invite the public to take part with us in this historical moment of change. This public will come from different sections of society and include those who are located at the very margins of history – unemployed, informal workers,

migrants and all those who have been pushed into a state of precariousness especially after 2008 who judging by the statistics are a growing army and includes the middle classes. We will ask them to join the biennale in their own terms, neither as sociological categories nor as romanticized political subjects. Avoiding analytical abstractions that dehumanise We will let civil society speak for itself.

Here is where art comes into play. Let me give you a few examples of how artists' run spaces and cultural organizations are rethinking urban politics in Europe:

They are committed to collective, process-based and open-ended ways of working.

They are aware of the performative dimension of politics and the play of emotions, desires and affects in material life.

They experiment with new institutional forms that cut across the state and the market, self-determination and institutionalization, autonomy and the collective.

They struggle against the privatization of the state and provide free welfare, food and education using culture as both a common resource and as space of democratic participation.

Athens biennale has always been one of these subversive and experimental art institutions. I want to thank Poka and Xenia for their inspiring example. Agora, the name of AB's last edition was set in the empty building of the former Athens stock exchange. Agora captured the sense of urgency and effervescence of that moment of capitalism in crisis and of popular rebellion against austerity that coalesced in Syntagma square in May 2011. It did so through a subversive format, which shifted authorship from the artist and the curator to the public itself and set up discursive, performative, grassroot and research-based dialogues between art professionals and people from different disciplines. Agora was a call for the public to come together and collaborate in a moment of economic crisis.

But times have changed, we now live in a state of permanent crisis, there is no inside or outside to capitalism, and even social democratic states are rapidly shrinking so that the new public is dispersed across different communities of interests, different institutions and economies.

Today we have with us some of these urban groups from the art sector and outside it that emerged from the anti-austerity movement and practice some forms of cooperativism, commons, self-organization, performative politics and participatory democracy. From that historical moment of reaction, critique and hope in May 2011 these groups now face the challenge to survive in the longer term and be sustainable. We all here, as art institutions, citizens or workers face the same challenge. In the next two days we will discuss how the alternative economies, performative politics and institutional experiments of these groups

can become sustainable models for life after the crisis and after capitalism as we know it. We will involve in this reflection scholars and intellectuals who have been engaged actively in these experiments – as activists rather than simply studying them. All together in the next two days we will set the key issues and themes to bring forward in our programme in the next two years in the spirit of co-determination.

By bringing together this edition and the next edition, AB will run continuously over the next two years. This signals our commitment to go beyond the short-term temporality of art events and build lasting relationships and cultural infrastructures both material and immaterial. In the next two years we will continue to host top international scholars and intellectuals and commission Greek and international artists who are willing to stay in Athens for sometime, connect with our network and reflect with us on the themes and practices are important for us. We are committed to an open methodology revolving around the idea of the laboratory intended as:

A way of pooling initiatives, ideas and resources

A space for hosting and display projects, workshops and events of different solidarity initiatives

A base out of which autonomous projects, artwork, meetings, research interventions and collaborations may develop

A centre of transnational exchanges of initiatives outside and inside Greece.

A centre of national and transnational academic research

A site of production of models, prototypes and policies.

A political collective that follows not JUST ONE aim, but facilitates and mediates between diverse aims and needs.

Our main stage will be the city of Athens. Cities are magical entities, seductive, menacing, marked by beauty and excess contagious, stereotypical and mythical. No city is ever one. There is the city of hawkers and the city of finance, the city of tourists and the city of homeless, dilapidated historical centres and middle class ghettos each of them with different degrees of publicness. Cities speak to us in different voices, smells and physical gestures, much of which, as writer Italo Calvino remarked, are invisible to us. We will ask the city of Athens to illuminate us, in the spirit of Walter Benjamin, but also to make us rebels (a reference to David Harvey) and experiment with new forms of sociability and existence.

In the next two years we will be mainly based in Omonoia Square an important urban landmark where migrants, homeless, street vendors, office workers, retailers, professionals and tourists come together everyday. Omonia means unity. But our Omonia will not be a space of uniformity. It will be a space where differences do exist and are productive, a space that is both individual and common and whose boundaries and thresholds are constantly transgressed.

Let me tell you. I am aware that it will not be easy. We will fail and fall, come together, part way and start again like in a dance rehearsal. Because each of us is a different body. But if we are committed to this collective movement in the next two years we will discover together new ways of thinking and acting and enter a

new space where art, life and politics come together. And along the way we will have fun!