

“The future is built from fragments of the past”<sup>1</sup> Hans Ulrich Obrist muses in his introduction to *The Athens Dialogues*, invoking Edwin Panofsky. How the future is constructed from fragments, Obrist asserts, is dependent on conversations, which is, in many ways, the main thrust of his curatorial practice. His ‘Interview Project’ has been ongoing for years, and is a curatorial framework in which he conducts extended interviews with artists, many of which last for hours on end. It is with this method that he approaches the central question of *The Athens Dialogues*: “how the influence of Greek antiquity is absorbed and contested by contemporary practitioners.”<sup>2</sup> Comprising of interviews with twelve artists,<sup>3</sup> and a photo essay by Ari Marcopoulos, Obrist posits his interpretation of Panofsky to address this question.

The curator’s introduction sets up some wobbly ground, the basis of which is leaning into a Western art historical narrative of linear progress. The application of Panofsky’s quote to the relationship between Greek antiquity (‘past’) and contemporary art (‘future’) creates a faulty framework in which contemporary art is post-time and post-place. This perception of ‘past’ is a common positioning for places with well-known ancient histories in the Western imagination, and Greek antiquity is often framed as a source rather than an actual context with its own specificity and entanglements. Obrist’s dependence on this perspective is solidified by his later question, “is antiquity a toolbox?”<sup>4</sup> creating a visual— uncomfortably analogous to the looting of Athens— in which ruins can be renarrativized with ease, and without conceptual or cultural implications.

The question of Greek antiquity and contemporary art, in itself, has the fantastic potential to address issues of visibility, transnational dialogues including race, gender, and sexuality, appropriation, cultural diplomacy, and the narrativization of art history, amongst other prescient issues that many of the interviewed artists address incisively. Most of them embrace exploratory, open-ended approaches to thinking about intersectional, non-linear space and time. Importantly, their ideas align well with

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<sup>1</sup>Hans Ulrich Obrist. *The Athens Dialogues*, 10. Athens: DESTE, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Hito Steyerl, James Bridle, Apostolos Georgiou, Danai Anesiadou, Adrián Villar Rojas, Charles Ray, Elizabeth Diller, Shuddhabrata Sengupta, Christiana Soulou, Isaac Julien, Ranjana Leyendecker, Jeff Koons.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 97.

contemporary scholarship around multiplicity, or 'global modernisms' as it is often called, where such thinkers write *into* the art historical canon by including both local and transnational stories and disrupts the myopic linearity of the Western narrative. As this area of study is still developing, it strikes me that Obrist was ideally poised to explore this multiplicity through *The Athens Dialogues*, but disappointingly, the artists' perspectives are often restricted by Obrist's Western-centric methods.

While Obrist envisions a past severed from the present, by contrast, most of the interviewees do not see themselves as temporally dislodged. As artists such as Christiana Soulou, Hito Steyerl, and Shuddhabrata Sengupta illustrate in their interviews, the structures through which we understand histories and temporalities are by no means fixed. In fact, they are malleable and, in some cases, mythical. Interestingly, Soulou challenges Obrist's invoking of Panofsky with a citation of Roland Barthes where he refers to the contemporary as "inactual."<sup>5</sup> Soulou continues by describing a present that is not temporally polarized but an "atmospheric mixture" of periods. Sengupta steps outside of temporality altogether, and eloquently questions the location of West as part of a larger argument around the narrativization and mythologizing of history in general. He also points to mythology as part of history, and speaks about the connections between Greek and Sanskrit traditions. In doing so, he positions linearity as a Western construct and gestures to transnational dialogues.

Relatedly, artists like Danai Anesiadou, Isaac Julien, and Adrián Villar Rojas suggest that the selective nature of the Western narrative has significantly affected the way Greece is understood in the broader imagination, specifically, by solely framing it as the 'cradle of Western civilization.' Rojas notes that this process began with the archeological excavation of Athens by the U.S., U.K., France, and Germany in which the funding did not extend to digs related to Eastern cultural traces. Anesiadou reflects the removal of colour from the stolen Greek marbles, an act that literally erased signs of antiquity's multiethnic cultures and polychromatic artistry. By extension, Julien questions the perception that Greek antiquity moved exclusively Westward, and describes his filmic exploration of a local Mediterranean history that acknowledges the southern and eastern African countries that share the region.

It is disappointing that Obrist's arguments about temporality are incompatible with these artists' contributions. Perhaps in an attempt to open up space for diverse perspectives on the topic, or due to his disinterest in the continued study of antiquity,

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 85.

Obrist's reassertion of the decontextualized Panofsky quote quickly begins to read as disengagement with both Panofsky and the artists included in the book. Although Obrist makes no mystery about the book being about his own practice (The first sentence is, "everything began when I was seventeen years old with Peter Fischli and David Weiss."<sup>6</sup>), one might ask, to what end? What are the stakes of this project to Obrist? Why are these artists being engaged? And further, why would antiquity be a toolbox unless it was the property of the West and dislodged from its context? Or a series of representations of something misunderstood? Once I started asking these questions, I realized this was a case of transmission pedagogy gone awry. When a curator becomes more engaged with their own practice than the material conditions of artistic production, the best thing to do is for us to just look elsewhere.

Redeemingly, the artists largely carry this book (with some exceptions, for example I did not find the inclusion of Jeff Koons particularly amusing, assuming this was a sort of irony I could not read). And a contribution that should not go overlooked is that of Ari Marcopoulos' photographic essay that threads throughout the book. The fragmentary nature of *The Athens Dialogues* is visually offset with over 120 of Marcopoulos' incisive photographs rhythmically dispersed. The images are anti-narrative, avoid direct illustration of the texts, and, importantly, capture the quotidian heterogeneity of contemporary Athens. Ruins, museums, labourers, abandoned storefronts, public busses, political graffiti, and portraits of young Athenians, are benevolently captured and are an apt inclusion in this book. These photographs reminded me of Allan Sekula's essay "Photography and the Limits of National Identity," in which he writes about a photographer who stares at a mass grave, realizing she is looking at something that history has not memorialized. She searches for truth, not in the academy, but by crouching down to the earth and digging for that which is buried.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 9.

<sup>7</sup> Allan Sekula, "Photography and the Limits of National Identity." *Grey Room* 55 (Spring 2014): 32.