

Artists in Greece are fighting for their rights and accessible culture for all

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Her powerful voice resonates across the empty theatre. Actress and director Fotini Banou is preparing for a performance, “even though we don’t know when we’ll reopen,” she says. In mid-March, the Greek government decided to close cinemas, theatres, museums, archaeological sites, schools, universities and essentially all common spaces (except for supermarkets, pharmacies, hospitals and doctors’ offices) in order to stem the spread of the coronavirus in the country which has seen 4,279 cases to date, including 203 deaths. A scenario similar to the one that occurred in Italy would be a disaster for Greece, where the health system has suffered under [ten years of austerity policies](#).

Since 18 May, the Acropolis of Athens has once again been accessible to the public, as are all of the country’s archaeological sites and museums. Open-air cinemas have been open to the public since June. Indoor theatres, however, remain closed. Banou and her colleague Dimitris Alexakis are currently waiting for official authorisation to reopen the curtains at TV Control Center (also known as KET), a theatre for artistic, social and political experimentation they founded together in the Kypseli district in the heart of Athens.

While their main source of income relies on revenue sharing between artists, “a sustainable cash flow through perseverance,” as they deal with the crisis provoked by COVID-19 they cannot count on the help of a state with, according to Banou, “no tradition of helping independent artists” and [public debt](#) that amounts to roughly 180 per cent of GDP. Since opening their theatre in 2012, Alexakis and Banou have received no financial support from the successive governments of the last few years. Though the culture minister Lina Mendoni insisted in late May that there would be “[no summer 2020 without culture](#),” the decisions made mostly in favour of historical heritage sites and public institutions have left those outside of official circles to fend for themselves.

Kypseli has seen no lack of initiatives. Since early May, Alexakis and Banou have joined weekly meetings organised by about 50 culture workers from the neighbourhood.

“Everyone shares their fears and struggles. Some independent venues, especially those with rent to pay, might have to close their doors. What artists are experiencing with this pandemic is a sort of collapse,” says Alexakis. “It’s a drama, a tragedy even,” says Banou.

In this tragedy, an alliance between artists was born and Kypseli now teems with cultural and community spaces. In the 1950s, the neighbourhood was home to writers, intellectuals, actors and painters. It was a chic neighbourhood with a vibrant nightlife. In the 1980s and 1990s, people from Africa and Asia settled there, making it one of the most multicultural parts of the city today. Unlike other areas of the capital, rents in Kypseli remain affordable and the neighbourhood, free of Airbnb rentals, is once again attracting gallery owners, painters, actors and musicians looking for spaces to create. It is this social stratification that brought artists together around a question after the

lockdown : “What do the inhabitants here need ? How can we reopen spaces in a way that responds to community needs ?”

In response to the reality of the neighbourhood, where men and women bending over to dig through rubbish is a daily sight, artists began to reach out to various initiatives, including feminist NGOs, African women’s associations, a detox centre and migrant communities. Their aim was to strengthen local associations rather than making demands of the state. For example, Alexakis joined the food aid collective [Khora](#), which prepares and distributes up to 200 free meals a day. In this spirit of solidarity, musicians, theatre and visual artists lend each other spaces and even materials to create, join forces with detox centres to set up ceramic workshops, and with NGOs in the neighbourhood to put on writing workshops.

“Communication is now possible,” says Meteoritis, who is involved in this mutual aid movement. The closure of his bookstore [O Meteoritis](#) in March came as a hard blow. The space with its pastel green storefront is located in the heart of [Kypseli](#) on the pedestrian street Fokionos Negri, which was emptied of foot traffic for two months. In late June, Benoît partnered with the local organisation [El Sistema Greece](#) to invite local musicians to play in front of his bookstore. The open-air concert breathed new life into the neighbourhood and drew passers-by into his shop, where buyers have become increasingly rare.

Further up the street, not far from the bookstore, three young painters have repurposed the studio where they previously hosted educational activities for children before the lockdown. During the quarantine, Katerina Charou, Vincent Meyrignac and Olga Souris asked themselves what they could do to help once the absence of the local government became clear. “We had no contact with the town council during the lockdown. We simply never saw them. After that, a sense of urgency was born, which led to the meetings between artists and the need to mobilise,” explains Meyrignac. “If the state doesn’t want to invest in the neighbourhood’s cultural life, and in contemporary culture in general, we choose to rely on local initiatives,” he adds. In May, all three joined the Kypseli network and are currently preparing to open their exhibition space [Noucmas](#) to organisations with the aim of giving free courses and showing films. “We keep in touch with what’s going on in the community. Creating, reflecting, and continuing to communicate with the people of the neighbourhood by opening our workshop to them is as necessary for living as the most basic needs,” says Charou.

A national mobilisation for workers’ rights

While these initiatives are reshaping Kypseli “to the point that life here is being reorganised,” as Meteoritis explains in front of a row of books, the entire culture sector is mobilising across Greece. The national movement [Support Art Workers](#), which for the last two months has been bringing together people working in the culture sector, has given independent artists an opportunity to make their voices heard. “Culture isn’t something abstract, there are people behind it. That’s what we are trying to show with this campaign which works to educate trade unions on the precarious conditions faced by artists,” explains Konstantina Karameri, cultural project manager.

Karameri has participated in [several demonstrations](#) with the 24,000 others members of the movement since May. “We are asking the government for a support plan for the next six months and the regularisation of royalty payments and the status of independent artists.” According to the artists, the government has yet to respond to demands relating to the most urgent needs and many of the difficulties related to workers’ rights existed before the quarantine. “This has been a problem with the system for years. A significant percentage of people in the culture sector work without a contract and are paid under the table. The result is that they are not registered anywhere and have to do jobs on the side to survive,” she explains. “When you’re not registered you have no rights. We need regulation. If you don’t work for public institutions like the national theatre, for example, you

don't receive any aid from the state."

Independent venues also suffer from a lack of visibility. "There isn't a small theatre company that didn't start off in a space like ours. It's integral to the culture and provides a base for the more commercial theatres," says Alexakis of KET. "But at an official level, no one talks about them.

"Our culture minister Lina Mendoni doesn't seem to be aware of this and is proposing solutions that completely neglect our [non-institutional artists and culture workers] needs. At the same time, she spends her time being photographed in front of the Acropolis."

According to [a study by Eurostat](#) on the share of government expenditures on cultural services in 2018, Greece is at the bottom of the list with the lowest percentage of 0.3 per cent out of an average of 1 per cent in the European Union. The [2020 official national budget](#) dedicated to culture amounts to €334.2 million and to date includes no emergency plan in response to the health crisis that has impacted the entire sector.

While various groups, including the Greek Federation of Performing Arts (Πανελλήνια Ομοσπονδία Θεαμάτων -Ακροαμα), which comprises 43 unions, are trying to open a dialogue with the state, the government of Kyriakos Mitsotakis announced in mid-June the [abolition of arts and music education](#) in middle and high schools. Cultural events remain banned and indoor theatres closed. At the same time, Greece has allowed international flights since 15 June in anticipation of foreign visitors. "We are going to welcome thousands of tourists but the venues will remain closed. Where's the balance?" asks Karameri.

With a tourist sector that contributes [more than 20 per cent to GDP](#), opening up the country is essential to avoiding another economic catastrophe. "They're still looking for a magic bullet for recovery but the recovery never comes and the economy is still just as fragile and burdened by debt," says Alexakis, who sees an urgent need to unite the struggle of cultural workers with that of health workers, migrants and climate activists. To do this, they will have to continue to make their voices heard in the coming months. "If there is a true general mobilisation, artists will be able to make themselves visible," says political scientist Gerassimos Moschonas.

While taking action, artists are working hard to keep cultural life alive. Alexakis and Banou remain hopeful that their play about the Jewish community of Janina will take place and that Fotini will be able to perform the traditional songs of Epirus in front of an audience. When and under what conditions remains to be seen.

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