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ART

How Archaeology Has Fueled Successful Art Experiments

An arts festival in Athens created an opportunity for international artists to think through the power and impact of archeology on nationalism and history.

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Installation view of Hikaru Fujii, "The Primary Fact" (2018) at the Library of the School of Law, University of Athens, 2018 (photo by Nikos Papangelis for Hyperallergic)

ATHENS — The material culture of a city like Athens, spanning millennia, has always been a fertile ground for artistic interventions, testing the role of history in the construction of our lived realities. Sites abound throughout the Attica region, bearers of complex and multilayered narratives, even those still shrouded in mystery. For instance, a mass grave containing eighty bodies at

[Faliron Delta](#), in the south of Athens, has been cloaked in mystery since its uncovering in 2016, during the construction of a park located beside the cultural center of the [Stavros Niarchos Foundation](#). While the site has been excavated and documented, the findings are not conclusive. According to archaeologist [Stella Chrysoulaki](#), it is, apparently, one of the most extensive archaic cemeteries in Attica. Inspired by this discovery and research, Japanese artist and film-maker [Hikaru Fujii](#), dedicates his multidisciplinary project "[The Primary Fact](#)", recently on view at the [Library of the School of Law](#) to explore these singular deaths. These men were executed sometime in the late seventh century BCE Athens (a rather poorly documented period in Greek history), and many other details are known. At the time of their execution, the men were

young and healthy, but they were dehydrated to the point of near-death, their hands were tied behind their back with iron bonds, and they were clothed. But the main question remains: how exactly did they die, who killed and why were they buried like that?

Fujii's intervention, part of Athens' Fast Forward Festival organized by Onassis Cultural Center, does more than merely repeating or documenting the obvious; the central body of work in his multi-channel installation is a choreographed performance, in which, under the direction of choreographer Patricia Apergi, young Greeks re-stage the moment of the execution with great fidelity to detail. Scientists involved in the excavations (led by Chrysoulaki) are interviewed at length, to discuss minutiae of the excavation work that can provide insights into the everyday life of archaic Greece, and precise measurements that will enable the performers to recreate this strange event. For the archaeologists involved, on the other hand, "The Primary Fact", is a kind of experimental forensic archaeology, testing through live bodies in space, how and why were these people found in such awkward positions, with signs of stress.



Installation view of Hikaru Fujii, "The Primary Fact" (2018) at the Library of the School of Law, University of Athens, 2018 (photo by Nikos Papangelis for Hyperallergic)

Following the curatorial concept of Katia Arfara, curator of the festival (spanning across contemporary art, theater, performance and dance), Fujii engaged in what Arfara called "the field of an expanded archaeology questioning scientific certainties and historical linearities", exploring not just the obvious relation between history and archaeology, but the instrumentalization of one in the service of the other. Fujii explains to

Hyperallergic, "turning the constative language of science into the performative language of art". The case of Greece is particularly interesting in light of classical archaeology's role in creating a modern concept of the ancient world, in which supposedly the foundations of a democratic west lie, mimicking the classical world as imagined by European humanists, conflict-free and teleologically directed towards Christian salvation. It was precisely Hikaru Fujii's interest in the history of democracies, that led him towards Faliron Delta.

According to the historian Thucydides, it is rumored that around 634 BC, an Athenian noble named Cylon, attempted a coup, but was opposed by another noble, Megacles. Cylon and those who followed him took shelter in the Temple of Pallas Athena, on the Acropolis, a sacrosanct refuge, but while Cylon managed to escape, his followers were persuaded to abandon the temple on condition that their lives would be spared; they subsequently stood trial and were summarily executed. Is this story related to the eighty bodies? There's no way for us to know (there's only six kilometers between the Acropolis and Faliron Delta). The seventh century BCE was a turbulent moment of profound transformations, and Fujii couldn't help wonder whether the Cylonian affair was related to the subsequent birth of Athenian democracy. Social unrest was widespread then and the political establishment was failing until a century later with the reforms of the Athenian lawmaker Solon. Unlike other well-known burial sites in Athens, such as Kerameikos, where well-to-do Greeks were laid to rest, Faliron Delta showcased the lives of the poor. People who were excluded from politics and often from the grand narrative of Greek democracy; telling their story is an act of historical rectification.



Installation view of Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, "Unconformities" (2017) at the Acropolis Museum, 2018 (photo by Paris Tavitian for Hyperallergic)

A highly regarded event internationally, the Fast Forward Festival, contends with a wide range of issues pertaining to the public domain. The fifth iteration, of which Fujii's intervention was part, tackled contemporary understandings in archaeology's role in the formation of nationalism and cultural memory. This objective was provocatively expressed by "Unconformities," a project by Lebanese duo, Joana

Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, that in 2017 earned the Duchamp Prize, at Centre Pompidou in Paris. Presented in the newly established Acropolis Museum, on the southeastern slope of the Acropolis, it was the first contemporary art project to have ever been shown at the museum.

The award-winning mesmerizing installation, consisting of geological materials (alongside drawings, writing and a video) displayed in vertical cylinders, suspended in an experimental resin, and called time capsules, contain geological debris dug out from three cities: Athens, Beirut, Paris, where the artists' practice has been defined. . Beirut, their hometown, is site of the Lebanese Civil War and their first laboratory; Paris is where they live and work; and Athens, an experimental site where they have been working since their

video, “I Stared at Beauty So Much” (2013) featuring the poetry of Cavafy. Through the rich geological substrata of cities, the artists attempt to read continuity and change.

But that would be too simple. How is it possible to read history from the deep time of geology? Hadjithomas and Joreige explain, “Unconformities is in fact a geological term. It refers to a surface that interrupts the chronological order of several strata, creating a missing interval, a discontinuity in time, or a hiatus.” Two contiguous parts are not supposed to be together, and should have been separated by hundreds of years, but they’re not, and this phenomenon sparked their interest in the nonlinearity of history’s physical traces. The materials they’re dealing with, to be sure, are not of archaeological value, but mere residues from construction sites where these core samples are drilled out (consisting of rock, clay, limestone, etc) to determine the consistency of the ground and then immediately discarded. With the help of geologists and archaeologists, the artists study this material, in order to understand the nature of these gaps, in history-rich sites such as Beirut’s Martyrs’ Square, Athen’s rich deposits in Monastiraki or Kerameikos, and the parafluvial deposits in the Louvre area of Paris.



Installation view of Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, “Unconformities” (2017) at the Acropolis Museum, 2018 (photo by Paris Tavitian for Hyperallergic)

These ‘borehole cores’ are dug at different intervals and distances, often encompassing several kilometers, and then reassembled in the time capsules, ordering their often interrupted sequence. These gaps are for the artists not only unexplainable, but also paradigmatic of yet another process: “Another strange thing is that for years we have said that the history of Beirut was difficult to write and to

apprehend particularly following the Lebanese Civil Wars, but this project clearly tells us that the destruction of the war and madness of the real estate projects allowed us, paradoxically, to have better access than in a more protected city like Paris. Destruction paradoxically leads here, in a terrible way, to knowledge”. The video included in the installation is shot entirely in Beirut, recycling unused scenes from their film [“Je Veux Voir”](#), shot during what is commonly known as the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah War or the July War, in juxtaposition with views from their window in Beirut, where skyscrapers rise out of nowhere at a rapid pace.

The festival curator, Katia Arfara, explains the degree to which archaeology has played a role in the birth of a political consciousness in a modern nation, and therefore, is the subject of a continued contestation. Moving from site to site in a taxi, we spoke about archeology's still near-holy status, catalyzed since the turn of the century, in service to the formation of Hellenic identity and Greek nationalism. Through the curious eye of the artists involved in these two projects, we can better see how historical inconsistencies and gaps have been the rule rather than the exception. The work of Fujii on the one hand, and of Hadjithomas and Joreige on the other, while not necessarily scientific or quantitative, qualitatively serves to decolonize archaeological knowledge from its role in the legitimation of European historiography.

Until today, most archaeological institutions remain off-limits to artists. This raises questions about what roles large private organizations such as the foundations Onassis or Niarchos can play in highlighting internal conflicts within a national archaeology. Hadjithomas and Joreige noted, "This project allows different disciplines to confront each other and produce something alternative when they meet. It is deliberately a poetic recomposition of these elements that offers possible, not definitive, narratives."

Fast Forward Festival, *organized by Onassis Cultural Center at different venues throughout Athens, included "Unconformities" by Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige was on view at Acropolis Museum (Dionysiou Aeropagitou 15, Athens) and "The Primary Fact" by Hikaru Fujii was on view at Library of the Law School, University of Athens (17-19, Mavromichali St & 104, Solonos St, Athens) from May 2-16.*

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