

TOMORROW

Dear friends, I was asked to welcome you in the city of Athens. The title of this meeting is: "Tomorrow". And I accepted. The invitation honors me. Nevertheless I am in an awkward position. Where do I speak from? Who am I? And, by the way, who are you? But gladly enough, I don't have to answer this too!

So, I will try to say it as simple as possible; I will speak as an artist of this city, as a resident of this language, as a citizen of this state, the Greek Democracy, which is crushed under the weight of History, so: *Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome to the city of Athens!*

Athens

And I will start by saying that Athens is an invisible city, because whoever comes here thinks he knows it already! Athens occupies an important symbolic field that is supposed to be in the foundation of our contemporary world. This is quite problematic. Because this is the reason why people are unable to look, to see, to listen, what is, really, happening here. And this is not something new; it has been like this at least for the last two hundred years.

I will tell you a personal story. When I was living abroad, people would, often, ask me where do I come from. I enjoyed inviting them to play the "Guess where do I come from" game. The surprising thing was that they would rarely mention Greece. Even though I would help them and say that I come from a European country and then from a country of the South, furthermore a country of the Mediterranean. They would mention Israel, Turkey, Portugal, which is not even in the Mediterranean, but not Greece. Greece, most of the time just wasn't there. It was out of the Horizon. This is not an accident. There is a reason for that, inherently related to our present impasse, the "crisis". Not the local, the Greek crisis but the broader European crisis and furthermore.

Let's try now to get closer, be more precise, let's stay in Athens and talk about the state called "Greek Democracy". This state is build around a glorification, an apotheosis of the classical 5th Century B.C. all the rest was and still remains uninvited. The first excavations that took place on the Acropolis after the creation of the Greek state preserved only the elements concerning the 5th Century and threw away all the other archaeological strata. The rest was of no importance. Luckily enough there were some ancient pits that gave us information about what happened on the Acropolis. The identification was so strong that the young Bavarian Prince Otto, which became the 1st King of Greece considered the idea to built his palace on the Acropolis itself. Around 1832 when the newborn state gives some first signs of stability the journal of the state is bilingual. In German, and Greek. And the parliament had three parties; they were literally, officially, called: "The friends of France", "The friends of England" and "The friends of Russia". There were no friends of Germany because they controlled already the Government.

And there is another story that I find even more revealing. You've probably already heard about Lord Elgin who took the sculptures of the Parthenon, literally, back at home, at his place! But do you know what was the first thing he did when

he got home? He washed them well. Why? Because they were not white enough. They were bearing still some of the initial paint they had in ancient times. So instead of learning from what he saw he corrected reality to fit in his narrative. A narrative that served a specific need, of his society, of his time. The ancient colors should leave.

In a peculiar way I identify myself to these members of the city who were washed and thus lost something of themselves. I feel that I, as a Greek, and the people that you'll see in the streets and you'll try to understand what they are talking about, they are parts of the same body which has been washed again and again and it has been unable to fit in the idea that others had about it. And it is condemned to fail again and again.

Why is that important? Because this apotheosis led to a grave misunderstanding of the Greek antiquity. This glorification outplaced the most important contribution of the Greek experiment which was, thus, rendered harmless, comfortable, tamed. And this land, paradoxically, is still connected to the subterranean source of European history that pass through Athens and never let it close around herself but keep connecting it to other times and places, in the past and the future alike. Hence the importance of this place. As long as this subterranean movement is ignored, Europe, is missing a tool of self-understanding.

So, I invite you to consider that the most important aspect of the ancient Greek adventure was its failure. It was not about creating a knowledge we can put in our pockets and in our universities. It was about a devastating experience that almost led to a total demise. This omission had catastrophic consequences for centuries now. Even the colonialism was built upon the "fact" that the European world was superior because it had "something" the "others" didn't. And this something was this objectified knowledge rooted in antiquity. Not only the Greek antiquity but this one precisely was absolutely necessary because it was regarded as the foundational moment. So now we should realize, at last, that instead of talking about the knowledge that we can keep in a pocket, put in a box or a certificate we should also admit we are haunted by questions, desolated, marching through a desert and this is the best thing that could happen to us. People can only meet in the desert. Ancient Athens laid an unanswered question in the foundations of our world. It's gift to us is this bold failure.

Tragedy, Philosophy and Democracy

Let's go further now and be more specific. Tragedy, Philosophy and Democracy, all three of them are related to the Athenian and the Greek experiment. We need to place all three of them together. If we neglect one of them, the remaining two are losing their depth.

If you take Tragedy out of Democracy you don't realize, neither the depth nor the courage of the questions articulated at the time.

If you think of Tragedy without Philosophy then Tragedy becomes a commodity. Like it happens, nowadays, in theater and the arts.

If you take the Democratic quest and the political questions out of Philosophy, then you don't realize that Philosophy responded to political realities. That reduces Philosophy to a mere academic distraction.

Tragedy is the more subtle element of this puzzle. Because Tragedy is introducing what we need most today. Fragility. The conscience of the impossible. The weakness. The darkness that stands near protecting us from ourselves. Tragedy

is our last resort against the inclination for total solutions, against the temptation of a totalitarian society.

And since this is a meeting about performing arts I will gladly go further and say that in tragedy we can see that the Greek reality was led to a more and more complicated definition of what is human, it released all the possibilities, it put up against gods and men and by doing so it liberated so much energy that the social matter was destabilized, the symbolic and other structures were unable to keep the society united, the whole became more and more volatile, the atmosphere became explosive in a personal and a social level until it was blown into pieces.

This destruction is the voice which shouts through the ages that man cannot fit in space and time, man cannot fit in any description, man cannot fit in any system. That is why I say that this apotheosis, this whiteness, is obstructing our view, prohibiting seeing the limits of ourselves.

I will try now to give you an example. I will talk about the end of the Ancient World. Ends are not easy to define, in collective History as well as in personal life. Regarding the end of the Greek Classical World we refer usually to the Peloponnesian war but I'd suggest an equally devastating moment; The "Bacchae" of Euripides. It is supposed to be the last play of the last classic tragic poet.

I will try to resume, to make sure we are all in this together:

Pentheas is the king of the city of Thebes. He denies the new cult that arrived from the East, the cult of Dionysus. He considers it a fraud and a superstition. He supports the order, the law, a logical narrative that oversees the functions of the society. But he is unlucky. Dionysus himself arrives in the city disguised as a man, a priest of his own cult. They meet and Pentheas continues to deny Dionysus and even puts the God in jail. This is the turning point where the control is passed from man to God. Dionysus gets out of the jail, destroys the palace, humiliates Pentheas and finally kills him horribly through the hands of his own mother. Agavi, that's her name, will bring his head to the palace, unable to see what it really is. Blinded by the god she thinks it is the head of a lion. When she realizes what has happened everything is over. That's the story.

The end is brutal and merciless. We could say that the God won but the way he won gives us reasons to doubt this victory. Both sides try to prevail by force, by crushing the other. Dionysus wins by force and he punishes people who were keen to his cult. He is arrogant and provocative. What he leaves behind is an unburied body torn to pieces. This treatment evokes the doubts of the poet who was accused as an "atheist" at his time. The end finds everybody devastated, man and god alike. This is a complete impasse, nothing's left.

And this is not a "modern" theory. The ancient tradition says that Euripides was killed by wild dogs, sent by Dionysus to avenge him. It was known and discussed. Now think that "Bacchae" is talking about it's own root, tragedy is born out of the cult of Dionysus. And Thebes is the starting point of the Greek race, the first city, founded by Cadmus, a character of the play. When Euripides hits, he hits hard, at the root of Greece, Athens and Theater. He rips off his own voice. And after having shaken everything he stays suspended, perplexed, in a world without certainties, left with nothing. Or maybe not? I'd dare to say that something is left. A warning. That our world will never be complete. We will always be in the shadow of need, vulnerable. Thirst and hunger is our destiny. We will be forever hunted by the "question", the desire for understanding. Relentlessly hit by the need for justice, beauty and truth.

Today Tomorrow

Shyly enough I've been already talking about "Tomorrow". About the temptations that lay within. Namely despair or totalitarian society.

Athens is an exceptionally loaded terrain in terms of symbolic value, it is jammed with "meaning". That is why it is appropriate to talk here about the future. It is the land of the courageous "questions", not the land of the answers. The land of enormous impasses and bold hope. This exceptional position is followed by fear and constant struggle. It is like a rain falling upon the land and the people without their consent. But it is localized, it is here and we are obliged to assume the situation. It is easy to see that the importance of things is amplified.

I have lived most of my life next to the Acropolis. I really hated it. Now when I go out and see it I feel electrified. Now we can see that our so-called democracies are ill and exhausted. Thus the contradictions of the History of the Acropolis are further more indicating Democracy as a quest.

Especially today. Athens is a battlefield where thousands of people die every day, physically and psychologically. Nevertheless we shouldn't forget that a battlefield is always a meeting point. Keeping this in mind, alone, transforms it. We do have a margin where we can influence the situation. The struggle is relentless and extenuating. If you choose this path I wish for you; clarity of mind, in order to distinguish things fairly, strength, in order to endure and aptitude to embrace happiness whenever it appears.

This is Athens, and like all places it also holds the secret of the world in its details. The fact that we talk about "Tomorrow" here, today, is already a statement that the future is not against the past, it needs to examine it. It also proves that the future doesn't ignore the present time either. This "critical" present, filled with gaps and man-eating questions. As we speak, a huge transformation is taking place in a "catastrophic" way. The Greek experience doesn't validate the phrase: The "Crisis" is an opportunity. If it is, it's an opportunity for few. Let me remind, though, that the term "catastrophe" (Καταστροφή) is originating from theater, more precisely tragedy. It is an ambivalent term which is not clear whether it is a moment of relief or a moment of utter grief. The same goes for the word "Crisis" (Κρίση). It means "Judgment". And judging a situation doesn't mean acting under the state of emergency disregarding one's values. Judging means, first and foremost, examination and attention in search for truth. Crisis is the moment we meet the truth, the truth we are seeking everyday of our life even if we don't have the courage to admit it.

Let's bring things closer now. It looks like economy, politics, culture and society seem aimless and hence they are unable to function together. There is a problem in our symbolic structures. The meanings, the tools, we have in order to describe, realize, and decide afterwards, seem broken. We witness the emergence of a huge lack of meaning. And a lack of meaning suggests we have simultaneously a legitimization problem. Because as you see the institutions and their representatives speak a language they do not believe. They deceive the society.

And since we didn't address this legitimization issue it became more and more serious, it evolved to, what we could call in English, a governmentability problem.

Living together will become more and more difficult. Imagine this famous "common ground" becoming more and more limited. And what does that mean? Violence! In all levels of society. But especially state violence. Because when the state lacks legitimization, when it cannot govern, it will govern by force. This is precisely what is happening in Greece.

Violence is present in all channels of communication. No matter the scale, the tiniest and the massive, alike. The reality of the people, here, now, is the reality of other people, elsewhere, in the near future.

Artists and Art

And when a society is aching, when the experience of an era becomes irrational, then the body of the artist becomes a laboratory of this pain. In a simple, blunt and realistic way.

A new generation of artists is emerging these days. Along with them new practices will come to light. Tomorrow belongs to them! And I am terrified to say this! The mere fact that this will be their time means that this will be the time of their death! When I am talking about death, I'm not talking, only, about this singer that literally died a few weeks ago with a knife stabbed in his heart, I am also referring to these nameless people that will die abandoned, drowning in their highest hopes and in their most bitter truth. Thus they are giving their lives, their bodies and their time, to prepare the ground for the others that will emerge after them, others that will have names and faces.

Art is a nonsense that becomes important because we insist. Our persisting attention is protecting the things that were pushed aside. By doing so we simultaneously reformulate, every moment, the definition of art. In order for art to be meaningful, it must confront itself continuously, in a way that often seems self-destructive. Otherwise, it is just a decoration of an unjust world, a sedative against hope, a detergent of all kinds of injustice. Tomorrow requires from us to push art to places that nobody expects. Tomorrow doesn't permit art to reproduce itself in any level. And it should ask questions! Bold and often unnecessary questions about issues already resolved.

Especially now. Now that the need for a "solution" calls for the dominance of a unique voice. This inevitably will lead to confrontations and dilemmas that will force us to choose sides. And those confrontations will be violent and urgent to a point that middle grounds won't be tolerated. There will be no gray areas. If we don't defend the space available for conversation it will disappear.

Of course, desire remains the biggest issue. We should bring desire in the discussion again. Not as a right but as a precarious fact. Desire is being directed, consumed and lost. The looting of desire is presented as a personal emancipation. But when we talk about desire we are not talking about somebody wanting to do something with somebody else. It is not something private, it exists both in a personal and in a social level. It is something we cannot name, something that passes through the walls. It transcends issues that seem incompatible at first glance; big and small issues, where what is private and what is collective are both under continuous negotiation. Tomorrow, that means soon, desire will be out on the streets, you will see crowds crying it out loud. Tomorrow we will be exposed. There is no other way.

Art is now called to cover the fields that have been left out of the conversation, especially today that economy tends to disregard every other way of thinking. As a result, if something cannot be quantified, if something cannot be bought or sold, it doesn't exist.

Art, by definition, cannot fit in this frame of thought. On the contrary, Art is finding merit in the insignificant, Art is searching for the untold and the unfindable. Art denies to be just a cog indifferent of the whole, without considering life and death alike.

We are all now facing a critical situation. Our era perceives civilization, either as a tool to commerce, or as a superfluous commodity. And it seems ironic because this is the moment it needs it the most.

Art is called to talk about issues such as...

The memory of the sacred, the memory of death that we cannot discuss anymore without grimace.

Sexuality and the generalized consumption of the body.

The absurdity of injustice and the liberating force of solidarity.

The failure of common sense and the reexamination of "truths" that kept us sleeping.

The distinction between private and public, that seems to be an unresolved pseudo-dilemma.

The notion of "we", the notion of what is common, what keeps us together.

The mystery of faith, and conviction, that lays subtly everywhere.

And of course the thirst for passion, love, eros, without end.

We will not bring these, and other issues, back, they are already here because they never left, they are vibrating constantly hidden into our flesh.

It is time for us to be exposed, to say big words, like me here, in front of you. Knowing we will be judged for them. Like lovers. And maybe we could finally talk about things that seemed tired and washed out. We could even talk about love. As an enigma. Love is not an emotion. It starts as one and it evolves to become a state, some kind of knowledge. Love is an initiation, the more it advances the more it becomes transparent and thin, invisible, surrounding all things. In the end it seems abstract, almost absent, strange.

We are near the end and I would like to propose some tools that may help some of you tomorrow. Each time you will have to decide what to do, where and when to do it. Decisions, that's what art is all about.

I think that we could evaluate everything we do, through three different points of view that are deeply interconnected.

The quest for beauty, the quest of truth and the quest for kindness. And I say kindness, not justice, in order to underline that justice is not about pointing who's wrong, it is, above all, about changing one's life and confronting the impossibility to be right no matter what you do.

So, those three qualities are interconnected, they coexist in one another. To separate them is problematic. The more we advance in one of them, the more we find ourselves considering the other two. They tend to merge in one but this can never happen either, there will always be a "tension" between them.

So:

- A world of justice, without beauty is a prison.

- A world of truth without kindness cannot exist. For instance some will claim that the law of the jungle, the law of power, is the true law, and in a way it is. Justice, though, doesn't allow stopping there; it forces us to seek a deeper understanding.

-A world of beauty without moral judgment or desire for truth is a world of lies and pain. An ugly world.

In the days to come we should examine what we do, from all three points of view, especially when we reach an impasse. Maybe it will enable us to find a different description, a breach to a different route.

Epilogue

In Greek, there is an interesting relation between the word erotisi (ερώτηση) which means “question, and the word erotas (έρωτας) which doesn't mean something erotic in the same sense it does in English. Eros is a confusing word, dwelling between love and passion, addressing equally the mind and the body. It is an overwhelming need of the being. So, erotas (έρωτας) and erotisi (ερώτηση) though they are so close are not etymologically related! Their common root is even deeper. They didn't give birth to one another. They come from and lead to the same place led by an invincible urge. With this deeper connection between question and desire, between eros and the quest of the mind for light and truth, for something difficult to define, I reach the end of my speech.

Desire is the flesh of the rest of our lives as we proceed to “tomorrow”.

Desire will move us, will create our days, as we desire to live, to understand, to create. All these are never easy nor safe, as it is never clear whether the darkness is obscure and if the light illuminates.

Tomorrow remains a question and I suppose that we could probably think this question as the quest for what is Beauty, what is Truth and what is Kindness.

Have a nice stay.

Alexandros Mistriotis

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