

OVERGADEN.

COPENHAGEN ART FESTIVAL

In sculptural and performative improvisations Yorgos Sapountzis explores urban space and its monuments.

INTERVIEW

The Dream of the Moving Statue

By Pernille Albrethsen

**Pernille Albrethsen** *Your sculptural performances in public spaces feed on the surroundings in a particular way, in which statues and monuments become part of your work. Yet you prefer not to think of your interventions as site-specific. How come?*

**Yorgos Sapountzis** I like to use the public space, the city, as a scene, but I don't analyse the history of the space. When I make use of a public monument, it's something the viewer knows already, which means that I have a better 'log-in' on the viewer. It's your sculpture in your city, but it's also my sculpture in my work. Trying to be part of things is important to me. Early on, I decided that my performances shouldn't take place in the black box or the white cube. I wanted to use reality as a backdrop, so that what I do will both be part of reality and form a contrast to it. When I see a public sculpture that interests me, I try to keep away from googling it, because I like the moment of the connection to be the moment of the performance - to make it *my* connection with this thing. If I pre-connect with it through obtained information on the history or on the person the statue portrays, it becomes less interesting for me as an artist because I then have a pre-given image, a fixed interpretation, that I must relate to. I'd rather go beyond that in order to see what could be the possibility of this thing. In that sense it's not about site-specificity.

**PA** *If you don't carry out research about the statue you employ, then what do you start from?*

**YS** I look at it, I stare. I stare to see how I can form a reaction to it. I like to think that the statue tells me what to do. I used to think that I was doing things, but then I realised that because of my observations the sculpture actually influences my view and tells me what to do. It's a dialogue. Of course, I



Yorgos Sapountzis: *Die Herausgerufenen*, 2012. Performance, 21 January 4pm, Frankfurter Kunstverein, Frankfurt. Photo: Norbert Miquletz

recognise the history and the aesthetics of these things, but I try to find my own connection, to build up my own relationship with them. It fascinates me that the statue is out there and that it influences all of us. It's both yours because you pass it all the time living here and part of my experience as a tourist in Copenhagen. This also brings up the question of power in public space. You decide to place a vase on the table in your own home, but in a city who decides? Sometimes there's an urban programme saying, we should change this or that. Sometimes new things arise by accident. In any case, the city is a result of a complex, multi-layered programme of years and years. It's like what the Danish artist Kirstine Roepstorff says: 'Who decides who decides?'

**PA** *What about the city of Copenhagen, the scene for your performance in Denmark - what do you observe here?*

**YS** To me what's curious about Copenhagen is the vast amount

of public sculptures. I have never seen a city that contains that many bronze sculptures! It's especially overwhelming because of the small scale of the buildings. It struck me when I visited the city in January. The wind was cold and strong, when I went out on my first exploration of the city. There was nobody in the streets except for these sculptures. I kept running in to them on every street corner, in every square. Some people led me to *The Little Mermaid*, but this sculpture is nothing once you enter the park lying next to her. I was amazed by the number of sculptures here. It felt like the city had been constructed by a nine-year-old girl who had done her best trying to be very exact and careful about placing the appropriate amount of flowers, sculptures, benches and so on, evenly scattered around the city.

**PA** *Particular materials, colourful fabric and aluminium tubes, are almost always part of your performances. It reminds me of a kind of colourful version of scaffolding, like the ones used when restoring sculptures. Is that part of the idea?*

**YS** Actually, it's not about scaffolding but more about drawing. The tubes make it possible to make fast drawings in the air. Together with the fabric I can do very effective things - 'making space' really fast while enabling a dialogue with the statue. In addition, the materials form a contrast to the statue itself. The statue is made out of bronze, and so is the fabric, the clothes, the statue is wearing. So to have real fabric and create something abstract around it means contributing something ephemeral and anti-monumental. These materials might 'attempt' to be objects, but for me they are more folds, more drawings.

**PA** *Do you think that you're in some sense liberating the sculpture, freeing it from its own history or significance?*

**YS** I don't want to put a title on what I do. I never think of how it will end. Instead I look for a relationship. That's why I address the space between the statue and myself - in a way filling the gap between the two parts. I think it's interesting how you can make something out of this abstract situation. That's also why I like to leave the interpretation open - in order to surprise myself and to leave it to people to form their own conclusions. When I did an exhibition in New York last winter, everybody was like 'Oh, Occupy Wall Street!' because of the tent-like materials. I like this, because it makes me feel that I have made a cup, a container which the viewer too can fill with his own ideas and viewpoints.

**PA** *Could you imagine engaging with contemporary or abstract sculptures?*

**YS** I've used contemporary sculptures. For the performance *West* I used abstract sculptures situated in West Berlin made in the 1980s and early 1990s. There, you have this amazing abstraction in public space - a huge curve or a big ball - in front of the buildings. However, lately I've become more interested in figurative sculptures, because they so directly relate to the body, which means that they address everybody, including those who don't know anything about art. In one of my videos, *Knock Knock Monument* from 2004, I have included my mother's porcelain figures. My mother is not particularly educated in art, but her collection shows we all have this need to reflect on forms. My mother *has* to have these figures

that she carefully puts in order, placing the glass figures on one shelf and the porcelain ones on another. I really like this need, this necessity.

**PA** *The way you address the statues in public space - rearranging them, both physically and conceptually - could be thought upon with regards to the classical sculptor's dream of the living sculpture. Is it the dream of the moving statue?*

**YS** Sure. I feel we have become more fixed in our stories. We've stopped wondering what these things are and why we're surrounded by them. This means that we become more conservative than we need to be. This also has to do with over-information. Actually, I don't know if Wikipedia is a good thing. We learn, but we also learn what is the right answer for everything. Every city has a culture programme designating how the city should be perceived by tourists. This organised mapping of the city destroys the poetry of accidental things that could happen. We tend to limit ourselves in public space because we fixate things too much. But things are not that fixed. That's why I attempt to operate before the categorisation of things, before we decide that a flower is not a being, but a dog is, and a statue is not living. Art has the power to go before that and say: 'No, I don't accept that!' Your view has a power. What you see is developing your own sight. You can transform what you see and make it into something else.

*Pernille Albrethsen is an art critic and Nordic editor of the online magazine Kunstkritikk.dk.*



Yorgos Sapountzis: *Apparère*, 2011. Performance, 1 April 8pm, Fondazione Morra Greco, Naples. Photo: Danilo Donzelli

When the Hurlyburly’s Done

By Gregor Quack

My most abiding memory of a work by Yorgos Sapountzis comes from an evening of performance he and I organized in 2010 at Humboldt University, Berlin. Readings, sound works, and performances took place throughout the large Prussian building. The sequence of events that night was choreographed. Instead of letting visitors roam freely throughout the building, a participatory performance by Sapountzis – in which visitors were led *en masse* from piece to piece – was to structure the entire night, to set the mood for and frame the other works. When visitors arrived at the first meeting point, in a cramped, fluorescently lit university hallway, they could identify the artist right away. Although he blended in visually, wearing the Berlin art-scene uniform – a plain, outdoorsy wind-breaker, comfortable jeans and running shoes – what gave him away was the almost childlike exhilaration with which he zipped back and forth through the crowd. One by one, he offered visitors long plastic tubes affixed with tree-branches. When, without any further instructions, he started walking off down the corridor, the crowd followed, branches clutched and in virtual silence – merging for the next two hours into a single rustling, moving grove of leaves. Outsiders were confused. One concerned member of the student government’s socialist faction asked if we had a permit for what looked to him dangerously like a religious procession. When the parade accidentally walked through a packed lecture, the surprised students rose to applaud. And when, the following morning, university officials found some branches left behind in one of the hallways, they were alarmed at the sight of what they took to be the preparations for a new form of protest against the Chilean head of state’s scheduled visit to the university that day.

Although the artist welcomed all of these interpretations, I was convinced that the image of a moving forest, which stayed with me long after the performance, had its roots in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, the tale of an ambitious Scottish nobleman who murders his own king in order to usurp the throne. In the fourth act of the play an already murderous and paranoid Macbeth revisits

the three witches who in Act I have sent him down his cataclysmic path by foretelling his accession to the throne. Accompanied by hypnotic chants (‘double, double, toil and trouble’), they answer his demand for further clairvoyance by saying: ‘Macbeth shall never vanquished be, until / Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill / Shall come against him.’ Even in ‘a dark cave’ filled with ‘secret, black, and midnight hags’, Macbeth relies on his common sense and concludes that he has nothing to worry about. Clearly, he tells himself, trees cannot move and therefore, can never ‘come against him’. But when his enemies’ army begins to rip out trees from the forest, using them as ‘leafy screens’ to disguise their numbers during an advance on Macbeth’s stronghold, he ‘begins to doubt the fiend that lies like truth’.

While Yorgos Sapountzis spent much of his young adult life around theatres in Athens, before beginning to work in visual art full-time, it seemed to me that the choice of channelling this part of *Macbeth* was evidence of more than just a taste for the theatrical. What is most remarkable about the witches’ prophecy is that it succeeds in deceiving the preternaturally suspicious Macbeth precisely because it is factually accurate. Macbeth’s hubris is a direct result of the arrogance and false sense of comfort created by having what seems like an informational advantage. The same philosophical belief that information and knowledge are two different, and even opposed, categories governs the work of Sapountzis. The gesture at the core of his relationship to his audiences is one of, literally and metaphorically, raising screens that diffuse the barrage of information we are trained to receive from the world, giving voice to ritual, belief, superstition and love – modes of understanding that an informational overload often drowns out.

Before his solo exhibition at Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi in Berlin last summer, Sapountzis spent about a week in the gallery’s wood-panelled exhibition spaces and the immediate neighbourhood. The gallery is located in a part of town singularly loaded with historical significance. Just around the corner, for example, is the Bendlerblock complex, notorious for having been the site of a failed assassination attempt on Adolf Hitler, and architectural icons such as Mies van der Rohe’s Neue Nationalgalerie are within easy view. Sapountzis had decided to make this built, sculpted



Yorgos Sapountzis: *Fast Cast Past*, 2011. Photo: Nick Ash

history his own, but not by undertaking and then presenting some bookish artistic research project. Instead, he approached it in ways that seemed natural to him, carrying out a week-long, intensely physical ritual. Like the witches circling around the cauldron and throwing in ingredients, Sapountzis began to combine what he saw before him, following, it seemed, a precise recipe that only he was allowed to know. Wearing work clothes and his usual, pitch-black beard, he spent time in a nearby park copying the grandiose pose of a naked, and distinctly fascist-looking, sculpture by German sculptor Richard Scheibe and then proceeded to mash together film footage of the already strange combination with pictures of a later and decidedly more vulnerable work by the same artist.

Inside the gallery, he used his signature array of soft, perishable materials – messy plaster casts, jars of pickled vegetables and damp-smelling shrouds of second-hand fabric – to imitate the orderly patterns of German pavements and the hard, obsessively regular terrace around the Neue Nationalgalerie. Finally, the day before the exhibition opened, he proceeded to fold up the fabric and heaped bundles of it into the cupboards and corners of the gallery, leaving only a small sculpture, entitled *Fast Cast New Body (His Arms, His Legs)*, made out of rods, rags and plaster casts, sitting in the middle of the central space. If he had been following some secret recipe, he was now deliberately deleting entire sections of it. A video in the back room depicted the artist methodically pacing in the room – the camera frame shaky and mostly pointing towards the ground. Projected on a wrinkled cloth, and accompanied by a distracting, abstract soundtrack, composed by Sapountzis’s frequent collaborator Øyvind Torvund, it seemed to allow glimpses of what had happened over the previous days, only to make their subsequent obfuscation all the more apparent.

Withholding and then supplying incomplete information are typical strategies for Sapountzis. In many works visitors cannot help but feel like they’ve arrived either too early or too late for the action. Often in Sapountzis’s work, media that we

are used to understanding as direct sources of information, such as newspapers or surveillance videos, are tampered with to strip them of their usefulness as such. In an interview for a recent publication he explains his practice of tinting newspapers, used as draping in many of his installations, in bright primary colours: ‘The process of colouring is actually what’s important. I try to push back the world of information. Not in relationship to what it says in the respective articles, but in general. I think that we all try to constantly stay super-informed. And I think there is a big problem with that, because being informed often has little to do with improving your life or with learning.’

If art is a form of communication, how are we to understand works of art that delights in depriving us of what we are trained to desire most – information? A quote comes to

mind when pondering the frustration of trying to identify what Sapountzis is conveying through his performances, videos and installations. Reflecting on his motivation to continue thinking about one particular aspect of *Macbeth* that had stubbornly eluded his scholarly understanding, the writer Thomas de Quincey wrote: ‘But I knew better; I felt that it did [produce an effect]; and I waited and clung to the problem until further knowledge should enable me to solve it.’ The best way to experience the work of Yorgos Sapountzis is to join him in his attempt of finding the most instinctive, immediate approaches to the world around us and then to see, rather than think about, where they will take us.

Gregor Quack is an art critic for Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung and co-founder of Kleine Humboldt Galerie in Berlin.

CV

**Yorgos Sapountzis** (b. 1976) was educated at the School of Fine Arts in Athens and the University of the Arts in Berlin. Recent solo exhibitions include Westfälischer Kunstverein, Münster, 2012; Ursula Blickle Foundation, Kraichtal, 2012; Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin, 2011; Fondazione Morra Greco, Napoli, 2011; Simone Subal Gallery, New York, 2011, and MUSAC, León, 2010. Furthermore, his works have been included in a number of group exhibitions, among others *Track*, Ghent, 2012; *Pink Caviar*, Louisiana, Humlebæk, 2012; *Demonstrationen*, Frankfurter Kunstverein, 2012 and *Based in Berlin*, Berlin, 2011. Yorgos Sapountzis lives in Berlin.

GUIDED TOURS

**Sunday 26 August and Sunday 2 September at 3pm** Overgaden invites you to a guided tour of the current exhibitions. Afterwards we will serve coffee and cake. The events will be in Danish.

PERFORMANCE

**Tuesday 28 August at 10pm** you are invited to join one of Yorgos Sapountzis’ ritual performances where places and monuments in the centre of Copenhagen are rediscovered. The performance starts below the mosaic ceiling at Stærekassen, The Royal Theatre, Tordenskjoldsgade 5, Copenhagen K.

EATING & READING

**Saturday 20 October at 5.30pm** there will be a finissage of Yorgos Sapountzis’ exhibition. For the occasion the artist will prepare a dinner which will be served with readings of heroic stories.

UPCOMING EXHIBITIONS

**Friday 9 November 2012** Overgaden presents a group exhibition by Suzanna Asp, Maija Luutonen, Sini Pelkki and Pilvi Takala and a solo exhibition by Stefan A. Pedersen. The last day of the exhibitions is 20 January 2013.

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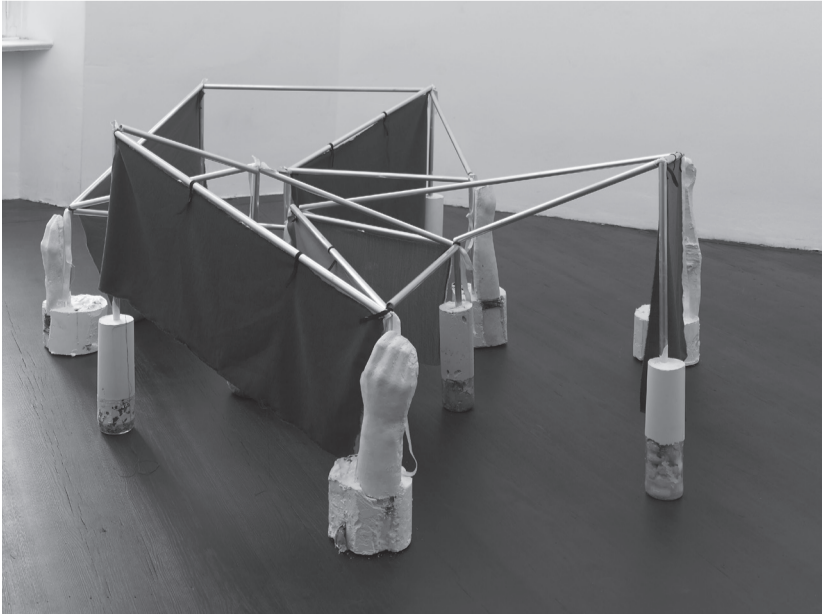
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Yorgos Sapountzis: *Fast Cast New Body (His Arms, His Legs)*, 2011. Photo: Nick Ash