

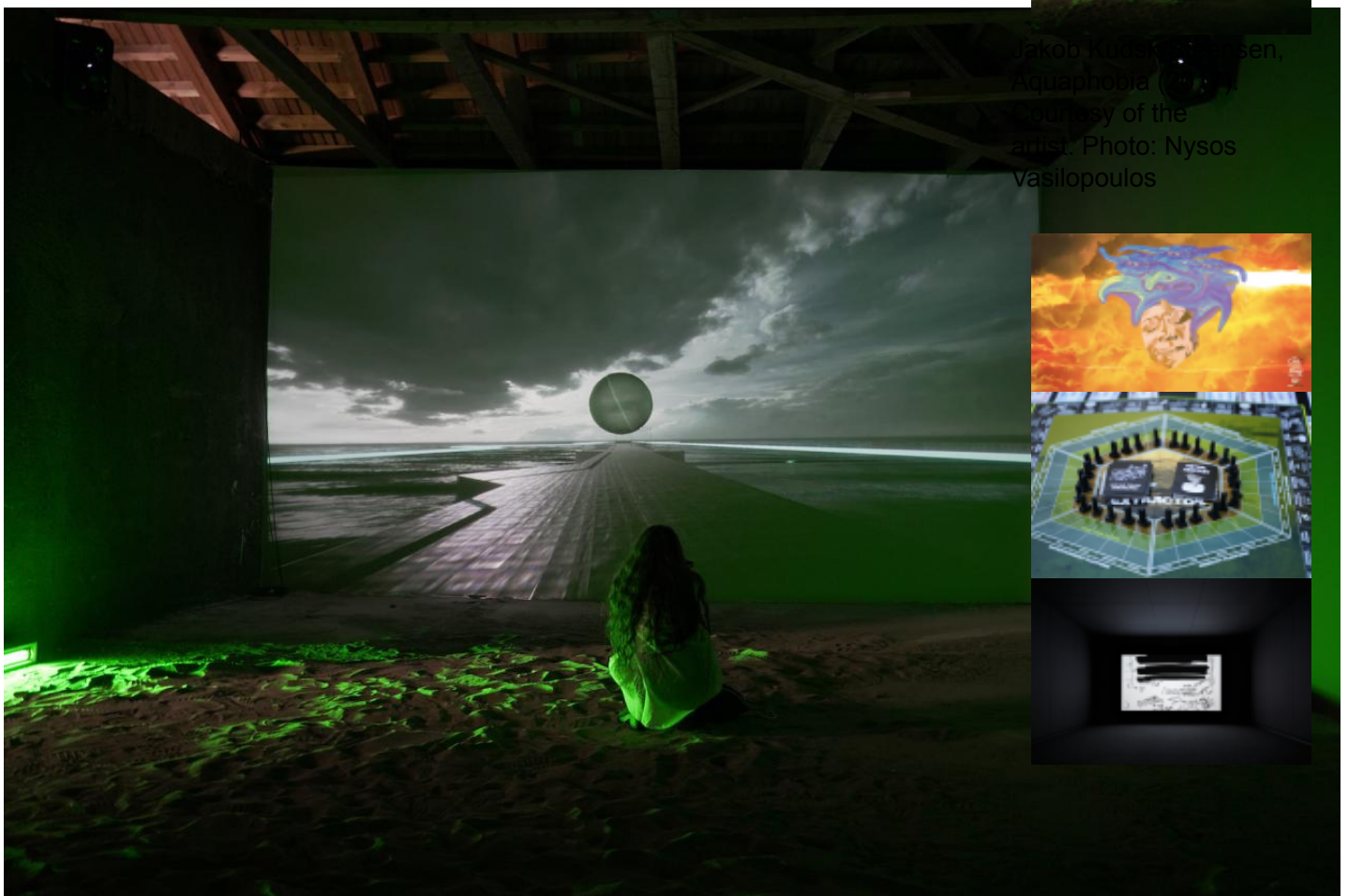
ADVERTISING ADVOCACY ^{14.10.2021}

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by Bianca Heuser

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Jakob Kudsk Steensen,
Aquaphobia (2017).
Courtesy of the
artist. Photo: Nysos
Vasilopoulos



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This year's Athens Biennale is filled with art that foregrounds care – but are these heartfelt works at odds with their crammed (and heavy-handedly critical) surroundings? Bianca Heuser wanders through a dilapidated former department store, searching for space to take a breath, and considers the pitfalls of a packed programme.

Holding a biennial in the rubble of an abandoned Athens department store feels darkly “on brand” for this stage of our late capitalist death spiral. But upon entering the first of four venues hosting the seventh Athens Biennale (curated by Omsk Social Club and Larry Ossei-Mensah), the former department store Fokas, I am reminded, despite my best efforts, of the “über” German anti-joke: *Ist das Kunst oder kann das weg?* (Literally: Is this art or trash?) Of course, this joke’s on the philistine asking something this ignorant and not the art in question. Case in point: the purported first victim of this sentiment, a gunky bathtub by Joseph Beuys, scrubbed/destroyed by two SPD members during an art party in 1973. On Fokas’ eight windowless floors, however, this exhibition adds new dimension to the question.

First of all, there is the confounding aesthetic overlap between the art on display and the haunting leftovers of mall advertising. There was the ghost of a former Abercrombie & Fitch store in the staircase, a group of six identical bald and faceless men in black on a third-floor pillar, Minnie and Mickey Mouse in joyful embrace elsewhere. Most spookily, though, especially considering that the shopping centre has been closed since 2013, there were gigantic posters of hand sanitizer bottles on literally every floor. Where did these prophetic pictures come from? We might never know. But the commercial aesthetic of these mall relics reverberates through many of the artworks on display in a real “art imitates life” kind of way. Simon Denny’s 2019 *Extractor* installation – a playable artwork that held a game night inviting players to step into the role of the online data ghouls exploiting users’ privacy on their way to the cryptofeudalist mountaintop – fits into this setting seamlessly.

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Secondly, and this is really quite unfortunate, shoving literally hundreds of artworks into this dilapidated building does nothing to honour the works or their artists. After two or three floors, I was completely overloaded with visual information (which the colourful wallpaper and residual advertisements didn't help); the exhibition itself just felt cramped. At the press conference, the curators spoke of their difficulty editing this Biennale. Now I know what they mean. But by indulging their varied tastes and ostensible goal of maximum inclusivity, I can't help but feel they robbed some of the invited artists of a true opportunity to showcase their work, refusing them the space it required. Similarly, the overly political, buzzword-heavy and yet weirdly abstract blurbs introducing the artists felt shallow. Why does the work of every artist from a marginalised community have to be made about the injustices they may or may not have suffered? Of course all art is by nature political, but defining nearly every work by its political position (or, in some cases, even just by the identity of its creator) feels reductive.





Besides, the works that really spoke to me were the ones that came from an explicitly personal, even intimate place. In his video *Good People TV – episode 2: Should you be open* (2021), Ndayé Kouagou encourages the audience to reflect on their ideas of comfort and belonging. As the artist explores the inherent unknowability of other people, his stream-of-consciousness narration segues into a lyrical dissection of the egomaniac, materialistic vision of life that's prominent beyond criticality in (at least) the Western world today. "There is no more comfortable place than the loser's one. No one is as free as a loser. If you're obsessed with freedom", he begins, delivering some of the truest and most subversive insight of the whole Biennale, "I truly advise you of becoming a loser [...] They can do whatever they want, or not do whatever they want, so being a loser can be an amazing way to live." It's funny because it's true.

Perhaps the only other work on display at Fokas that was granted adequate space to breathe – which it kindly extends to the viewer – is Wu Tsang's film *Girl Talk* (2015), in which the lauded poet and scholar Fred Moten joyfully dances in a lush sunny backyard to serpentwithfeet's rendition of the eponymous Betty Carter song. Bathing in the natural light of the four-minute video was refreshing on a spiritual level. Some actual sunshine also flooded manuel arturo abreu's installation *Untitled (Herramienta, FamilySearch)* (2018–ongoing) on the department store's top floor, which featured archival genealogical records made illegible by the asemic writing in which they were transferred onto the walls of the exhibition space. I loved this work for its conceptual clarity and effortlessly beautiful execution, which required neither a screen nor an explanation.





Simon Denny, *Extractor* (2018) (detail). Photo: Nysos Vasilopoulos

Another kind of family search continued beyond the courtyard of the Biennale's next venue, the Schliemann-Mela Hall. In a small room to the back of the neo-baroque building, the curatorial platform as they lay w/Abdu Ali + Markele Cullins dedicated their installation to family in the queer sense of the word. Abdu Ali founded as they lay as a space for "critical dialogue, collaboration + radical envisioning for Black creative futures". In collaboration with Markele Cullins, they have erected a shrine to Black queer role models such as Audre Lorde and the legendary disco singer Sylvester, among others. Though the installation radiated the kind of love and devotion that is integral to artist and organiser Ali's practice of radical care, the work felt strangely cast aside.

After I left Athens and unfortunately missed the duo's performances scheduled for later in the week, I heard some gossip that confirmed my suspicions. On their Instagram accounts, as they lay detailed their frustrations with the Biennale, lamenting its logistical issues and their treatment by its leadership. They vented about the unsatisfactory accommodations, and the dismissive attitude the director showed when confronted with their complaints – and made a point of illustrating their good-faith approach to addressing the alleged mistreatment. It all sounds depressingly familiar.

At the former Santarozza Courthouse, on the other hand, a lack of attention to detail doesn't seem to be a problem. On three floors, ten established – or at least on their way to becoming established – artists finally are given a decent amount of space. There are the mystical, timeless photographs and a video by Ana Mendieta (R.I.P. and also fuck Carl Andre) which she took of figures she carved into limestone walls of Cuba, Jersey State

André), which she took of figures she carved into limestone walls of Cuba's Jaruco State Park. Behind a curtain, there is Judy Chicago's *Women and Smoke, California* (1971–72) which features a group of long-haired, naked women painted different colours lighting smoke bombs in the desert and which, needless to say, totally rocks.

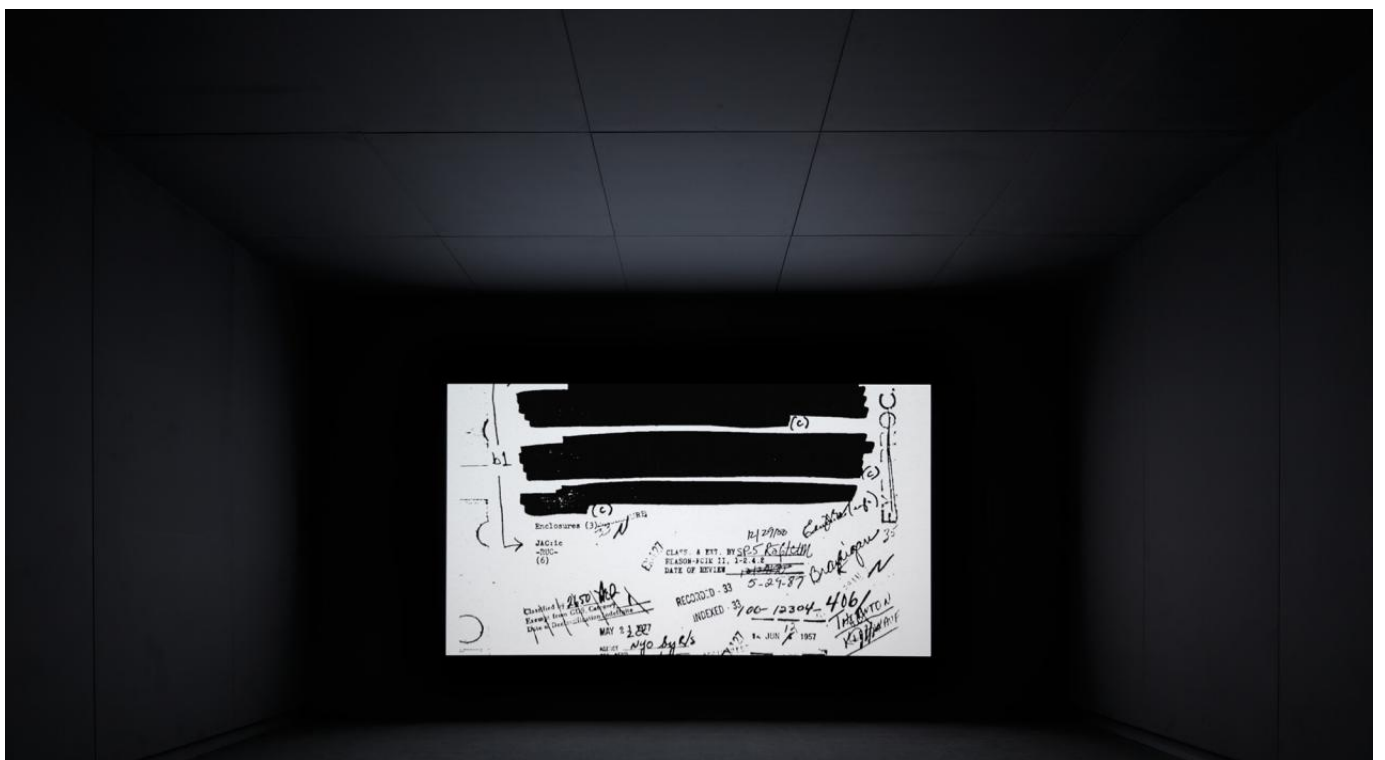
In another room – and another video – Rodney McMillan's *Preacher Man* (2015) takes a seat on a wooden chair in the dark heat of a South Carolina night to recite an epic text by Sun Ra. Had he the people and the power to rule over them, McMillan's character starts out, he would not let them know peace. They will find peace, freedom, and equality in death, he says. When the United States speaks of peace, he argues over the sound of a barking dog and humming insects in the background, they speak of death. From there on, his poetic monologue meanders into an abstract, chilling ode to death, nothingness and peace.

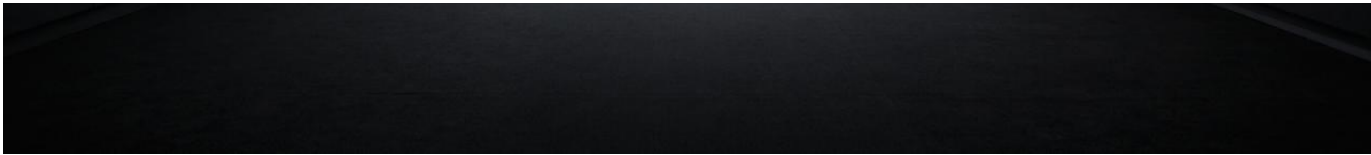
By contrast, Victoria Santa Cruz's 1978 video *Me gritaron negra* (*The Shouted Black at Me*), an excerpt from the film *Victoria. Black and Woman*, speaks in direct language. Accompanied by rhythmic drumming, the artist, full of pride, dignity, grace and wisdom, tells the story of how she overcame the self-hatred white supremacy had, for a good portion of her life, successfully drilled into her. The chorus of Black women and men on her side periodically joins in her chant, in a powerful tribute to their Blackness and self-love. The video illustrates how long the conversations the Biennale vows to centre have been going on – and how little has changed in the 43 years since Cruz made it.

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Beyond the glass facade of the exhibition's fourth venue, the glamorously empty and air-conditioned Onassis STEGI, director Steve McQueen's video installation *End Credits* (2012–16) pays homage to Paul Robeson, an African-American singer and Civil Rights activist who was blacklisted by the FBI in the 1950s, but whom US surveillance agencies began investigating as early as 1941, five years before he organized the National Crusade to End Lynching with W.E.B. DuBois and Albert Einstein. All of this and so, so, so much more is documented in the FBI's recently declassified file on Robeson, of which the director obtained a heavily redacted copy under the Freedom of Information Act. McQueen then scanned the file's thousands and thousands of pages, which run up the screen like rolling credits at the conclusion of every movie. They are accompanied by a nineteen-hour spoken-word soundtrack – a sort of dramatic but mostly bureaucratically monotone reading of the file.





The scope of these papers is beyond perverted. The fact that you cannot consume the entire piece in one or even two sittings elegantly illustrates this. The reports repeatedly mention his wife and his child. They debate whether or not he should be issued a new passport. They irrefutably prove the United States government's lasting commitment to oppressing its citizens of African descent and the working class (just two of its many consistent agendas of marginalization). It is obvious that the blacklisting of Robeson and many of his contemporaries for their honourable and courageous civil rights activism foreshadows the later state-sanctioned murders of Black Panther Party members whose goal of uniting the American working class Robeson, too, addressed.

After visiting the hopelessly overcrowded former department store, the similarly run-down Schliemann-Mela Hall, and even the rather beautifully gutted former courthouse, I wish the work of younger and less established artists had been handled with the same amount of care and reverence as McQueen's was deservedly given. I wish it had been granted a fraction of the space. Since it wasn't, even for all their lofty speeches on the subject of inclusion and representation, the leadership of the seventh Athens Biennale inadvertently ended up telling on themselves – which, after all, also seems very “on brand” for the cultural institutions of our time.

Athens Biennale 7: ECLIPSE

Curated by Omsk Social Club and Larry Ossei-Mensah

24 Sep – 28 Nov 2021

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