

DAVID FERRANDO GIRAUT

LABoral Centro de Arte y
Creación Industrial, Gijón

'In the end, there is no control of the unconstitutionality or irrationality of the law beyond the ballot boxes or social movements', says a voice-over at the start of *Speech Prosthesis (an Alchemical Conversation)* (2014), the latest work by Spanish artist David Ferrando Giraut, which was staged as a solo show at LABoral. The four-channel video installation explores how irrationality, triggered by greed and fear, runs rife in current processes of political decision-making. Ferrando Giraut's 'case study' is the Spanish government's controversial revision of the energy laws last year, which resulted in penalizing the renewable-energies sector, whereas only a year earlier it had been incentivized.

Ferrando Giraut's immersive work was shaped as a conversation between the four natural elements – wind, water, earth and fire – which assumed several guises across the different components of the installation: as voices, as colours, as objects and as sounds. Each channel of the video featured a specific background colour (yellow, blue, green or red) and two digitally animated, rotating objects, each signifying the ways in which human beings have harnessed these natural elements throughout history. Earth, for example, was represented by three prehistoric stones and a hydraulic hammer; water by a Greek amphora and a water cooler. Wind took the form of bellows and an artificial-respiration machine. Finally, fire was embodied by a tinderbox and a camping stove. The use of this genealogical set of objects is a recurrent strategy in the recent work of the London-based artist, one that allows him to impress upon the viewer the sense of a historical continuum, which he sees as having been supplanted by the rhetoric of rupture, of relentless 'life-changing technological revolutions.

In front of the panoramic widescreen projection at LABoral, four speakers, in the triangular forms of the alchemical symbols

of the four elements, were placed on top of metallic poles. The speakers were positioned in a square formation, creating a space that you had to enter in order to hear the different parts of the quadrasonic soundtrack. The audio featured fragments from interviews that Ferrando Giraut had conducted with a local group of experts, including an environmental activist, a lawyer, an economist, a geologist, a climate-change specialist and a philosopher of science. In a clear nod to Bruno Latour's concept of the 'Parliament of Things' – a rejection of Modernity's dualistic distinction between nature and society, which was first mentioned in his oft-quoted book *We Have Never Been Modern* (1991) – the artist employed the experts' testimonies as if to give a voice to the objects. These voice-overs offered varied insights into the energy problem in Spain, emphasizing not only the political and economic motivations behind the recent revision of government energy legislation, but also the impact that traditional methods of energy extraction are having on the environment.

Despite the local nature of its source material, *Speech Prosthesis* tackles universal issues, particularly the widely discussed question of whether to endorse 'Anthropocene', a recently popularized term coined to designate a new geological era marked by the deep transformations caused by humankind. But it is the work's critique of the irrationalism of much contemporary politics – expressed mainly through the experts' voice-overs – that makes this piece so timely.

While it clearly belongs to the tradition of research-based art, *Speech Prosthesis* doesn't avoid formal experimentation. Crucially, and despite the seriousness of its claims, it's a sensuous and enthralling work. The objects mentioned above rotate mid-air on the screens for the duration of the piece (24 minutes) and the voices – carefully treated with sound effects that evoke the four elements – become haunting cyphers for our mistreated ecosystem: they're like voices of conscience that stubbornly emerge from near-oblivion. Ferrando Giraut's installation is not just an illustration of a critical creed or a documentary-style piece about a political situation, it endeavours to tell us about something we might already know, but in a way that we've never been told it before.

LORENA MUÑOZ-ALONSO



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THIS IS NOT MY BEAUTIFUL HOUSE

Kunsthalle Athena

Rarely has a show been so aptly titled. In a magnificent wreck of a building, in a magnificent wreck of a city, the non-profit art space Kunsthalle Athena hosted the show 'This Is Not My Beautiful House'. The line is from the Talking Heads' track, 'Once in a Lifetime' (1981), which is one of the few pop songs that manages to be as uplifting as it is bleak. I'm sure it's no coincidence that it also includes the words: 'into the blue again, after the money's gone', which pretty much describes the situation the Greek capital has found itself in after years of crippling economic crisis. There may be no government funding in Athens right now but, thanks to a rare mix of philanthropy, private initiative and cheap rent, the art scene is, on many levels, thriving.

The Kunsthalle Athena was set up in 2010 by the dynamic curator and writer (and occasional frieze contributor) Marina Fokidis, in a semi-derelict 19th-century building in Metaxourgeio, a once-affluent neighbourhood of Athens that fell on hard times and is now experiencing the first buds of gentrification (The Breeder and Rebecca Camhi Gallery are also in the area). The Kunsthalle – which is run by volunteers, survives on donations and hosts a lively talks programme as well as exhibitions – states that it wishes to learn 'through the experiences and insights of others' and 'through mistakes – not least its own'. It's also wonderfully self-reliant: in a country battered with gloom and humiliation, the gallery declares that it 'will be what we make of it for as long as we want to make it'.

Sensitively curated by Klea Charitou, Marina Fokidis, Eleanna Papathanasiadi and Apostolos Vassilopoulos, 'This Is not my Beautiful House' included the work of four Greek artists, Anastasia Ax, Apostolos Georgiou, Socratis Socratous and Kostis Velonis. Meaning emerged through a mix of suggestion and imagination via installation, photography, sculpture and painting, all of which inhabited different rooms in this deeply atmospheric mansion with a sense of both possibility and despair. Dislocation was the



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order of the day; remnants from previous shows haunted the once-grand rooms like welcome ghosts taking stock of the present.

Ax's installation, *Exile* (2014), evoked a sort of 21st century Pompeii. Large, whitewashed triangular shapes, some collapsed, some loosely strung together, filled the space. The work seemed to be in a state of flux; it had been smashed up, walked over and then categorized by an archaeologist, the results of which were displayed in a vitrine. Ax seems to be asking: 'How we do make sense of history as we are living it?'

Georgiou's large untitled painting from 2012 depicts a man and a woman falling over two chairs, their faces obscured. Are they fighting, having fun, drunk? Who knows? But then, what do we ever know of other people's motivations, despite the fact that we're all the same species? What I do know is that this powerfully ambiguous painting, rendered in the artist's trademark dusty lilac, brown and eucalyptus-green palette, stayed with me long after I had left the gallery.

Gardens – sites of solace – often feature in Socratous's finely wrought sculptures. For *Stolen Garden* (2014) he cast branches, leaves, flowers and fruit from the National Garden of Athens in bronze: some are national symbols of Greece, while others are weeds. Delicate, despite the toughness of their materials, these melancholy objects seemed to have grown through the ancient floorboards and been rendered immobile at their moment of flowering.

Fascinated by 'failed builders', Avant-garde theatre and working class history, Velonis's sculptures combine both personal and historical references. *Tribune Leading to the Ramp and Ramp Leading to the Tribune* (2014) is an enigmatic Minimalist structure that evokes both stairs and anvils; it was paired with a black and white photograph of a man slumped on a wall next to an empty pram. It's a desolate, mysterious pairing; a private moment juxtaposed with a Modernist shape. A deceptively simple video by Velonis from 2010 was also on show: it's a single shot of a photograph of classical ruins attached to a wall with a bulldog clip, fluttering in the breeze. Titled *How One Can Think Freely in the Shadow of a Temple*, it's a question as a statement of fact, and one that is still as achingly relevant – in the words of Talking Heads – as it ever was.

JENNIFER HIGGIE

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David Ferrando Giraut
Speech Prosthesis (An Alchemical Conversation),
2014, installation view at LABoral Centro de
Arte y Creación Industrial

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Foreground: Socratous
Stolen Garden, 2014; background: Anastasia
Ax, *EXILE*, 2014, installation view

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Ash Kilmartin
OHN, 2014, neon sign operated by resident
studio artists

OCTOPUS 14: NOTHING BESIDE REMAINS

Gertrude Contemporary,
Melbourne

Gertrude Contemporary has a special place in the hearts of the many who have passed through its doors. Since its inception in 1985, the gallery, project space and studio complex has fostered and supported artists, curators, independent publishers, writers and academics. For Melbourne's arts community, it's the next step up from the rich array of artist-run initiatives for which the city has become known.

Gertrude Contemporary originally occupied a former home-ware factory and emporium, Johnston's, which opened in 1889. The model for the gallery was New York's PS1, which repurposed a school as artists' studios and exhibition spaces. But Gertrude is now at the next stage of its institutional career. Though well funded by state and federal government, the gentrification of the surrounding inner-city suburb of Fitzroy has caused rents to soar and Gertrude must now find another home.

Gertrude's history is the focus of the 14th edition of its annual 'Octopus' exhibition, for which it invites a curator to develop an idea for a show. Tara McDowell, who recently arrived in Melbourne as the inaugural associate professor and director of the Curatorial Practice PhD programme at Monash University Art Design and Architecture (MADA), curated 'Nothing Beside Remains'.

One of McDowell's innovations was to stage the exhibition throughout Gertrude Contemporary's rabbit-warren of corridors, storage spaces, stair-wells and staircases, as well as in the gallery. Visitors accessed the show through the usually private studio entrance, walked up a steep flight of stairs and then percolated throughout the building. Artists Saskia Schut and Scott Mitchell programmed a series of readings by local writers, publishers and designers, which took place in the gallery's shop-front entrance. That McDowell is a newcomer to Melbourne led her to examine the traces of the gallery's history that many locals have, perhaps, overlooked simply because they are so familiar.

The histories revealed by the exhibition have curiously universal echoes. Lining the entrance stairway was an untitled series of photographs from 2010–12 by Georgian artist Otar Karalashvili, which document the hand-made notes that people looking for work attach to Tbilisi's buildings and street lamps. Other pieces in the show also explored forms of labour. Allan Sekula's *Untitled Slide Sequence* (1972/2011) is a series of 1970s black and white slides of employees ending their shift in an aerospace factory, while Harun Farocki's film *Workers Leaving the Factory* (1995) interweaves footage from the first film by the Lumière brothers with other clips of workers exiting factory gates.



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A number of past and present Gertrude artists engaged directly with the building's inhabitants. At the top of the stairs, Agatha Gothe-Snape created a cosy den with comfortable chair, reading light and crocheted rug, where she and gallery invigilators read from texts that former studio artists nominated as having been influential during their residencies (*An Uncertain Reader*, 2014). Ash Kilmartin's neon sign spells out *OHN* (2014) – the only remaining letters of the building's original sign. It was illuminated as the last studio artist to leave the building turned it on, and then turned off by the first to arrive the next day.

Other works also drew attention to the fabric of the building. Nicholas Mangan's *A Division of time that neither begins nor ends here ...* (2014) is the finest of geological cores, drilled from the gallery and studios' timber-and-masonite surfaces, and presented in a glass-fronted display case embedded into a corridor wall. Zarouhie Abdalian's *Simple Machines* (2014), a series of small black lacquered wooden wedges, were placed on the floor, in ceiling cavities and in other unexpected spaces. Susan Jacobs re-assembled the vast conveyor belt that had lain untouched in storage at the rear of the building in the downstairs gallery: *Conveyor (George Watts is a traitor)* (2014) was a monument to redundant industry.

The exhibition's apt title, 'Nothing Beside Remains', is a quote from Percy Bysshe Shelley's sonnet 'Ozymandias' (1817), an ode to the ravages of time. Gertrude Contemporary will move to a new, as yet undecided, venue in 2016, in a location that hopefully is not too far from its original roots.

REBECCA COATES