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Tearing down the walls

by Despina Pavlaki 8 Jan 2012

AS OF December 18, Blanka Amezkua completed a project you'll be kicking yourself for not discovering on time. 3///3...three walls on Wednesdays... was an ingenious wall-mounted concept that eliminated the need for a whole other set of walls: the ones enclosed in highbrow galleries. Put simply, it was an alternative way to present art in open spaces, inspired by lottery vendors and executed by Mexican-born American artist Amezkua on a weekly basis for five consecutive hours in different parts of the city since last September.

There's nothing like a brand new Athens resident with a discerning eye that seeks out beauty wherever it may roam.

"I think I'm still in the honeymoon period," says Amezkua, who moved to Athens last May. "I don't drive and I love how this city's urban planning allows you to take so many different routes to get to the same place! Sure, it's a little chaotic, but I've discovered I can get to my apartment ten different ways, so it never gets old. How can you not love that?"

Hailing from Mexico City, where chances are a stray dog will probably mangle you instead of tackling you for food and you're bound to come across extreme opulence and extreme poverty within the space of a single train ride, you can't expect someone who's experienced a 25-million-people city - the second largest metropolitan area in the world - to succumb to the insecurity of living in Athens.

In fact, seen through her eyes, they don't really seem so terrible after all. "So many people say it's tough here but that depends on what you're comparing it to," she laughs. "Having been born in Mexico City and having lived in New York, you're constantly confronted with contrasts on a really sharp level. I feel Athens is a little softer but it hits you in different ways."

Amezkua studied fine arts in California and Italy and has learned to be observant, absorbing fine detail wherever she goes. That's probably how she realised Greek lottery vendors carry what she considers to be the most ingenious public art display in the world: it's light, it's pretty and it's practical. What more could a girl hooked on collaborative art possibly want?

Having come off a two-year project that she initiated inside her own Bronx bedroom as an experiment in intermingling inspiration with the help of the local artistic community (see Bronx Blue Bedroom Project box), private vs public domain was always a concern. So she decided to bring galleries out into the open by constructing three lightweight walls she would take somewhere different every Wednesday - ideally places lacking cultural spaces - and display art executed in different media, including photography, painting, installations, direct architectural interventions. She even got an architect, a professional tattoo artist, and a yoga instructor involved. But we'd best let her walk you through the entire process in her own words:

Step 1: The display

My first concern was how to display the art. At first I toyed with the idea of putting it up on different spots around the city, like a vacant building, where I would install the work for 5 hours, but I felt that was really constricting. That's when I started noticing things around Athens and I saw that lottery vendors were carrying around a really lightweight construction and only needed pins to hang up the paper.

So I went to Praktiker and I bought thin wooden panels, light enough for me to carry around. I used really heavy-duty glue to keep the pieces together and then put fabric on top so it would adhere to the wood and become really resistant. I made sure they were solid and, when I was positive the concept worked and painted them over, I was all set and ready to share it with the world.

Step 2: The exhibited artists

I didn't exhibit my own art because it was never about me. Of course, I'm the project's initiator and I am putting myself out there, so it's about me on some level, but I wanted the work to be about other people: an exchange, a collaboration. I had just arrived in Greece and I didn't really know a lot of people, so I posted an open call in Wooloo.org and LabforCulture.org [networking platforms] and then I emailed everyone I knew in New York and Mexico.

You'd be amazed at the response: I started getting proposals and ideas and that's how I was able to get 17 artists from 13 different countries to participate. I was very clear about the fact I was going to carry the work, plus all the expenses were covered by the artist and myself, so it had to be two-dimensional and easy to transport.



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It was a very humble project, but I still managed to get some artists to fly to Athens for their show: artist Beth Krensky came from Utah; artist Sara Conde from New York and artist Sven Frokjaer-Jensen from Denmark. I was stunned to realise they had given the project such importance.

Step 3: The street

Being outside can be really scary. If you walk into a library, you know how it works, you know what to expect, but being on the street anything can happen. Public space allows you to feel unreservedly universal, because you're removed from everything you know and own. It is also the place that can make you feel the most vulnerable. I'm not sure how to explain this, but placing myself in public space, confronting this fear, gave me unforeseen strength. I really feel displaying work in a public space should be part of every art student's process.

I did get approached by the police about three times, but after I explained I wasn't selling anything and I was only going to be there for five hours, they usually left me in peace. On a personal level, I feel that 3///3 allowed me to familiarise myself with the city, and become a part of it. It was my gateway to Athens.

Step 4: Picking the spots

My initial intention was to go to neighbourhoods that didn't have a lot of cultural spaces, but as the year progressed I realised that Wednesdays were the preferred day for strikes. Whenever there was a strike I was forced to stay within the centre - the farthest I ever got was Paleo Faliro.

On the first day of the project, I was on my way to Marousi when they suddenly announced there was a strike. I was already on the train and I thought it would run all the way to the last stop, but it didn't. They kicked us out at Ano Patisia and I ended up doing it there.

I usually prefer areas with a lot of passers-by, but it also depends on the work I'm exhibiting. The idea was to give each artist two Wednesdays and stay on location for five hours. That amount of time allowed me to feel comfortable, notice the architecture and understand how people moved in that particular area. Documenting the interaction with the public was part of my process so I could reference it to the artist and the people that followed the project through Facebook and the project's website.

Step 5: The people

I had all sorts of reactions and sometimes the people that you least expect are the ones who are interested in the project the most.

I don't speak Greek very well, so I carry a sheet of paper with a statement written by each artist relating to his/her show - in both English and Greek - to hand out. The publicity was sponsored by the Mexican embassy, so we printed these cards for anyone who wanted to know more about the project.

At first they thought I was trying to sell something, but I can't tell you how many people tried to feed me after they realised what I was doing! On my first day, there was this one guy selling a corn on a cob, who insisted on leaving his stall and buying me a gyro because he thought I'd be hungry. These random acts of kindness always happen when you do something out of the goodness of your heart. Generosity will come back to you. When you sit there without a cell phone or an i-Pod and you're fully engaged in the moment, things will happen, whether you plan for them or not.

The Bronx Blue Bedroom Project and other stories

Blanka Amezkua's first experience in collaborative art was a highly creative, highly intimate and highly intrusive project she ran for two years out of her own home in the Bronx, which taught her a really valuable lesson. Projects weren't about sitting in front of your computer and typing out ideas. Collaboration was all about people, it was messy, it was rewarding, it was intense and it was transformative.

So starting in March 2008, with the help of the local artistic community, Amezkua opened up her bedroom in the Mott Haven neighbourhood to different contemporary artists who got to exhibit their work in the place where she slept for the duration of the month.

"I was also asking them to give a workshop based on whatever it was they were exhibiting and to cook a meal, so it was really an extension of themselves on many levels," she says, looking back. "I was asking a lot from them, which is probably why the project only lasted for two years."

The Bronx Blue Bedroom Project was open to the public from Friday to Monday for eight months in 2008 and 2009 and it really cultivated Amezkua's curiosity about artistic exchange. It also served as a highly creative backdrop to a transitional period in her life that, almost two years later, brought her and her husband to Greece with the debt crisis in full sway and without any plans for their future.

Formally trained as a painter, Amezkua became interested in textile art and has been embroidering imagery from Mexican adult comic books on enlarged traditional tortilleros (a cloth used to wrap tortillas) for the past 11 years. Tortilleros are usually embroidered with homely images of little girls frolicking in fields, landscapes or the days of the week, while adult comic books - a very common and highly accessible diversion in Mexico - glorify women as sex objects. Their symbiosis was obviously going to create waves.

"I have been working exclusively with female imagery and I realised that having decided to manifest my work in this very traditional domestic art form had a certain strength in it, which is probably why I haven't been able to stop doing it, although god knows I've tried."

Amezkua's first solo show featuring her idiosyncratic embroideries, *Delicious Obsessions* (curated by Ilias Zaimis), will be opening on January 16 and running through to February 15 at Rooster (4 Agias Irinis Square). For more information on the artist, visit www.blankamezkua.com

- *If you'd like to look back on the Bronx Blue Bedroom Project, visit: www.bronxbbp.com*