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12 Artists | 12 Barbershops | Athens: An Interview with Blanka Amezkua

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By Eva Kekou, [4Humanities International Correspondent](#)

Art, through both its positive and negative aspects, often reveals to the viewer unexplored aspects of him- or herself. Art, in order to touch beauty, is also often obliged to employ irregular materials and methods in order to make an innovative proposal. The surrealists and the Dadaists not only provoked, but also proposed.



This exhibition, Twelve Artists | Twelve Barbershops | Athens constitutes a proposal too; it's an effort to reveal, in places where people look at themselves in mirrors while their physiognomy changes, a repressed dimension of the beautiful. The barbershop is not only about beautification or the barber's professional discipline as he leans over the human head with respect; it also refers to

various kinds of social significance: a **“debt haircut”**, a “revenue haircut”, the deprivation of contemporary man from rights, dreams and dignity in an era where art is called to converse not just with aesthetics but also to engage in social criticism to awaken our consciousness.

So twelve artists, photographers, painters and sculptors joined in a collective effort to project their contemporary artistic visions, exhibiting in the provocative space of a barbershop. Twelve artists, twelve barbershops, twelve spots in the Athenian metropolis that want to believe in the power of art and that invite the spectator to think in an innovative and ingenious way.

12 Artists | 12 Barbershops | Athens was a project that Blanka Amezkua – a Mexican-born artist



educated in the USA who practiced art in various forms in



NYC – organized with Soritis Papanikolaou, a Athenean artist and photographer. Amezkua has been living in Athens for the past two years and exploring every bit of the city by organizing many public art and performance projects across the city. It is very interesting to note how many artists reside at the moment in Greece, seeing

Greece’s current ‘crisis’ and emergency situation as a great challenge for them. I decided to interview Blanka so she could tell us more about this project and give us her insight about Athens.

Eva Kekou: How did you start the artists and barbershops project?

Blanka Amezkua: My artist friend Sotiris Papanikolaou and I wanted to exhibit our work in alternative spaces. But this got quite tricky. So then I suggested that instead of just showcasing our own work, why we didn’t invite many artists to exhibit in odd places such as butcher shops, traditional bakeries and tavernas instead, since I love the feeling of passed time in them, and the history they contain; Sotiris liked the idea. But it was Sotiris who suggested having shows in barbershops. As soon as he said that, I loved the idea and we began. It was a brilliant option!

E: Why barbershops and why in Athens?

B: We both live in Athens. And given the uncertain circumstances we are living in, and hearing about all the financial “hair cuts,” it was natural to be inspired by the nonsense in the financial rhetoric. So we began considering working in places that give actual “hair cuts”.

E: What was your aim and objective with this project?

B: With the 12 Artists | 12 Barbershops | Athens project, the main objectives were a) to invite 12 artists to engage and negotiate a space and with people they had not considered working with before; b) to give barbers an opportunity to collaborate with artists and view themselves as active participants in a creative venture; c) to grant the general public a different artistic experience.

E: Did you reach your aim and objective through the project?

B: More or less we did... We wanted to showcase contemporary art in alternative venues and share this with the general public. So we accomplished this. I would’ve loved to have seen more passerby’s join us during the openings; we did grab some, but the openings, as is the general case, are attended by people who know the artists or the space where the work is being shown. There was also the wonderful coincidence of finding out that a barbershop book had been released a couple of months before we launched our barbershop project, so we contacted the writer and the publisher but they

were not interested in taking part in the project. But the publisher did agree to give the artists a special discount on the book if anyone was interested. I lamented this very much, as I believe the writer is an avid folk author; her work has to do with neighborhoods in Athens, and the history of the city. It's a shame they didn't see the project as an opportunity to join forces, as a couple of the barbers and barbershops she wrote about were actually part of our project. The name of the writer is Zoe Ropaitou and her book is suitably entitled *Barber Shops: Their Evolution Through Time and Barbers*. What a shame...

E: Can you please describe the project as an organizer and as an artist, respectively?



B: As an organizer, it was a humble idea: to bring together an existing traditional space like the barbershop – full of its history and stories, a business which is a part of the social fabric – contemporary artists and the general public. We worked with no budget, and I don't say this in a celebratory way. All participating barbers, artists and organizers worked without a single Euro from anyone.

Everything came from everybody's pocket. As organizers, Sotiris and I could've delayed the project and looked for sponsorship to have a well-dressed and publicized event, where artists would receive stipends for their participation, where all their openings would've been catered, where we could've thanked each barber with a gift for allowing us to intervene in their spaces for two months. That project would've turned out quite differently. For instance, some artists still have their work in the barbershops! That's how generous the barbers were! But for some magnificent reason, through everyone's generosity and the enjoyment of this idea by both barbers and participants, we made it work. We did find a couple of sponsors through ICC Athens and R53- Koupeío, including a wonderful man by the name of Konstantinos Tsakonas, who provided food for each opening and the closing party, held in a space of his in Plaka. Also, Sol beer became our beverage sponsor during the closing party.

As an artist, I am always energized and inspired when I collaborate with other artists and different venues. There is always much food for thought, on so many levels. I hope the same holds true for the participating artists.

E: How was audience involvement?

B: The audience participated in many ways: by attending the show openings, by visiting the barbershop during their opening hours or by simply being a customer and observing the work while they waited to get a haircut.

E: Did you interact with people during the project?

B: During the openings, certainly!

E: Did they understand the aims and objectives?

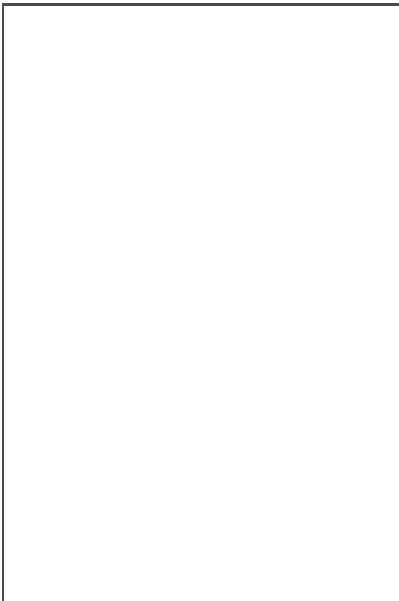
B: I think so.

E: Did they Interpret the project and, if so, in which ways? If they did not, how did they react?

B: They understood there was art being displayed in the barbershops because of the way new objects were placed there. When the openings took place, there was always a very festive vibe, which is something I truly enjoyed. It wasn't your emblematic stuffy opening; they were all nice gatherings.

E: Are you happy with the outcome of this work?

B: Yes. It gave me much creative food for thought and it was a pleasant surprise to see how people



reacted, especially the passerby's that had no idea what was happening. The press was also very generous with the project. It received a lot of publicity. We are so thankful to everyone who showed interest in the project and shared it with their readers or listening audience.

E: Do you want to take this work further in Athens or elsewhere?

B: Being involved in a project for three months was very intense. There were many lessons learned and I am thankful for them. As much as I enjoyed the barbershop project, I want to focus on my personal work at this point. But I know Sotiris will continue working on a similar project.

Perhaps the butcher shop or the taverna project might be next. We will see; I look forward to whatever he decides to do. It's all a surprise these days, isn't it?

E: Would you say that crisis or transition are two keywords for this project?

B: For me, not really. I have been working with the idea of the alternative (working methods or spaces) since leaving New York. Perhaps it was something new and different for Sotiris. This was also the first time he had actually co-organized something, which was quite fascinating, because I felt we worked quite well together despite everything. But I suppose it can be seen that way here, given the current circumstances.

E: How would you characterize exchange? Is it a cultural transmission of elements, a mutual understanding between different cultures through the artistic expression, or can it be analyzed using more elements and parameters?

B: I believe it can be all of the above and more. At the end, it's how well we understand our reasons and motives in moving a project along while working with others and disseminating the idea to the general public clearly. And offering a memorable experience for everyone!

E: How successful was the project in terms of completion and the collaboration with the local community, organizers, the authorities etc.?

B: For the amount of time we had to organize it, for the limited resources, and managing to gather both artists and barbershop owners, I believe it was quite successful. We didn't have to negotiate with any authorities for this project, we or the artists negotiated directly with the barbershop owners. This doesn't mean we were always triumphant in obtaining the spaces; with some, we did have to negotiate or move on to the next option, because things were not working out. It was not easy convincing all barbers. But when we finally had all 12, we all felt great joy. Then our work had just begun. Thanks to the amazing work all the artists created in the spaces and the participation of the barbers, the project garnered much press coverage online, in print and even radio interviews. So this was wonderful, since this way it granted the project and all its participants a moment in Athens written history.

E: Can you please describe an incident or event that was significant for you during the project or while in Athens?

B: Once the project ended, both Sotiris and I were quite overwhelmed, joyous and I suppose a tad of sadness lingered for wrapping up something we had been working on up close for nearly three months. Following the closing party, we wrote and gave our thank you's to all participants. A week passed and we again thanked our food sponsor, Konstantinos Tsakonas, and he responded by ironically asking if the three of us could get together and do what you are doing right now. He wanted to find out how it all went. He had planned for a meeting in September. We received this email on Tuesday of that week; by Thursday he was no longer with us. Konstantinos had passed.

We will forever be grateful to him for trusting us, without knowing us and for believing in and supporting this idea wholeheartedly. He was too generous! His passing showed me how, despite the circumstances, if one looks around, one might find big-hearted individuals that are willing to lend a helping hand. His loss reminded me of how fragile we all truly are. Thank you Konstantinos for trusting us; we will be forever indebted to you!

E: Can you give an overall evaluation of the project using four adjectives?

B: Exciting, unpredictable, enormous, humbling

E: Why do you think public art projects not perceived to be of value by the public?

B: Well, perhaps because the awareness that art can exist in places outside of galleries or museums has not been adequately propagated. STILL!!!

E: How do you understand public art?

B: Public art can be permanent or ephemeral: permanent installations or subtle creative/artistic expressions to be seen only temporarily in the public sphere.

E: Is your art public art or art in public?

B: I feel that what I do is art in public.

E: Is there a distinctive line between public and private space in Athens?

B: Yes and no...In Athens, sometimes the public and private boundaries blend so easily that it is difficult to clearly outline when the public ends and when the private begins and vice versa. I'll share with you a recent experience of this. The other day I was walking by Accademies Street and I noticed there was a space I had never seen before, it was called Iris. So, I walked through the first two doors and the hallway gave me a clear indication it was a movie theater; they had movie posters announcing different international films. Then there were two doors, as in theaters, and I went inside and I sat down. Nobody ever asked me anything, nobody stopped me. And this happens to me often in Athens. So the line of private and public is often blurred for me here compared to other places where I have lived in.

E: How do you experience art, particularly public performance art, in Athens?

B: It doesn't happen often enough...the performances I have often witnessed are more of a political nature; it is basically what I believe the country is currently expressing and needs to express. But I feel artistic performances are not happening as much as they should.

E: What was your idea about Athens, the city, the artistic scene and mentality before you came here, and how has that developed during your stay in Athens as an artist?

B: As with any city, your first impressions can be deceiving. You need to stay and live in it; become familiar with its urban layout, its people, its food, the language, begin to understand what makes the

city work and what doesn't. Just like any other place in the world. I moved to Athens after living in NYC for seven years. I am an artist. The artistic scene is alive and ticking here; the only thing I don't see is the infrastructure to support its artists, either financially or by offering more alternative spaces for an emerging artist to exhibit with some funding. But despite the difficult circumstances, I notice and feel there is a vibrant art scene in Athens right now! Microstructures pop up here and there, this is quite inspiring.

E: What difficulties did you encounter in Athens?

B: The language is my primary difficulty. This has limited the amount of things I can do, and the way I can truly engage with others. It is a limitation but not a complete stop. You see, I speak three other languages (English, Spanish and Italian) so whenever I cannot manage with the little Greek I do speak, I try to save myself with the other three, and when nothing works, I quickly grab someone else and ask for help!

E: How unique and/or peculiar did you think Athens is?

B: Compared to what? I believe it's a unique and peculiar place. For its history, its urban planning, and in the ways things operate here, the city is different because people have different temperaments. Its diversity is also unique, and the weather is also different here, compared to NYC, so this allows for more things to happen outdoors almost year round, which is something quite special when you think about it. This is the first time in a very long time where I don't have to wear boots, a scarf and a coat for nearly six months. I love the weather in Athens!

E: How does Athens compare to other cities, like New York or Mexico City?

B: Athens is much more open and permissive...but I feel it still lacks artistic public performative moments compared to Mexico or New York. And that is simply something that takes time and needs more encouragement. Having the Fringe festival once a year and a performance here and there is not enough.

E: What is so unique/peculiar/characteristic about the city of Athens?

B: Its history, how Athenians battle with that history. I imagine it must be such a huge burden at times. Physically it's one of the most beautiful cities I have seen, with all its complexities. As in any place, you need to live and experience Athens to be able to say something worthwhile about it. Living in Athens has made me discover its many changing sides. And I love them all – some more than others – but overall, I am continuously enchanted by Athens.

I don't drive, so walking through its narrow streets and ending up in random squares is fascinating to me; especially the more you approach the center. I feel I am walking on sacred ground, despite all the maladies that are attached to living in a metropolis. I adore how cafe life spills out into the streets, and young people are everywhere. Athens despite the current confusing times is such a vibrant city.

E: Could you describe one of your current projects?

B: *8 to 8: State of Creative Emergency*. I began this project in March 2012 in Athens as a way to experience actions in public space for twelve continuous hours. A creative mind, it doesn't have to be an artist, is invited to share/show something of his/her making for twelve hours in the public sphere while encouraging public participation. One creative mind per month is invited to create an action.

E: Why this project?

B: Because I wanted to see other actions in public space, and to begin to understand how people react/interact with the ideas presented to them.

E: Why in Athens?

B: Athens is currently my home.

E: What are the aims and objectives?

B: The objectives are to invite a creative mind that has no experience working in public space, in hopes of offering him/her a different working experience. For the public well, 8 to 8 offers an alternative creative experience while moving around in the streets.

E: How did the audience get informed about it?

B: It's mostly by chance, the same way we bump into street musicians or vendors, simply by chance. But I also include the information a week before each happening in 8 to 8's site.

E: How does the public react? Get involved? Understand or interpreted your aims?

B: It is similar to what happens when one walks and is captivated by a musician; if you like what you see you stick around and if you don't you move along. With 8 to 8, people are seldom involved "creating" something so our curiosity as a spectator is already tended to. People approach the action and then things are explained, either by the creator or me. I also give them or share with the public a sheet with information about the action they are witnessing, which includes the intention of the participant and the initiative's website, both in Greek and English.

E: Is the audience in Greece interested, involving, interactive, open?

B: Yes and no. Sometimes children will gravitate towards something they see as different, the particular action, and the parents will just remove them from that curiosity. So in that moment, the parents miss out on having the opportunity to learn something, as well as the children. This is why I believe more actions should happen, outside of festivals, just randomly so people are more familiarized with these creative expressions. All in all, adults come and go; you get mixed reactions.

E: Why you think this is so?

B: I believe that public art is often not taken seriously by the public because there is still a strong notion that creative/artistic expressions (permanent or ephemeral) of value only happen within the confines of museums of accredited and respected cultural establishments.

E: How do public performances contribute to a dialogue in public space?

B: Public space is public. By definition it should be the most free and democratic space that exists within a society. A space to dialogue, share and experience virtually many things with others. It is also the most leveling space we all own, away from everything that belongs to us. Public performances can be a point of entry to discuss virtually any idea/subject, be it creative, social, political – of any type. They can offer the public a different way to experience or a different way to approach any idea and bring something completely unexpected to the table. And this way, granting the viewing public ideas they would've not thought about on their own.

E: How are artists perceived in Greece?

B: I believe this is a universal perception: living artists are not taken seriously and in part, artists are to blame for this. And I say this because if more governmental backing would be given to living artists in the form of grants, subsidies, scholarships and the creation of permanent financial creative opportunities that would allow artists to truly commit to long-term socially engaged ideas, many things would happen differently. And if as societies we were truly committed to this idea, I feel the world would be a more enriched place.

I say artists are partly to blame for this because out of necessity, pleasure, vague expectations, we continue to create and participate, often times without receiving a single Euro in return for our participation. We have accepted and embraced wholeheartedly this disastrous narrative and we continue to send messages that say, "you don't have to pay me for masterfully creating this idea, you don't have to pay me for spending money for the material needed to physically create this idea, and you don't have to pay me for spending hours and hours working on it to materialize it, I don't need a

single cent, I am an artist and I will survive despite everything you don't finance!"

And as artists we do survive despite everything...but it shouldn't have to be this way... We should receive a stipend, as humble or generous as it can be, but there should always be some financial compensation for what we do. Why do we continue to create/work/engage and participate for free? Why?

The perception of artists, worldwide, will only begin to change when artists themselves begin to see and approach what they do differently, and always demand compensation for their creative labor.

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