The past is present
Curating multi-temporality: the contemporary and the classical

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Abstract A recent trend within classical studies has been to readjust our perspective on what we call the classical by insisting 'on the inextricable role of classical antiquity in informing the present and the importance of the study of antiquity for the practice of history and the humanities themselves in a technologically advanced, rapidly changing, globalized world'. Of course, classical eras existed and persist in several civilizational traditions. Here the focus is on the classical in its encounters with the contemporary in the field of contemporary art and curating. In this context, following James Porter's topical propositions about 'what is classical in classical antiquity', the classical is considered as something that describes not a series of real properties in the world but a set of attitudes about the world; something that is predominantly a 'habitus and a structure of feeling, by definition elusive, fleeting, paradoxical', and which is 'always in question and uncertain of itself'. This concept is used to rethink the classical alongside reframing strategies for contemporary art in cultural institutions with historical collections, and to reflect on curatorial and artistic practices that engage with the notion of non-linear temporality.

Keywords: Benaki Museum, classical art, contemporary art, curating, museology, multi-temporality

When faced with the complex task of curating contemporary art for a museum (in this case, the Benaki Museum, Athens) which is also a repository of historical objects and documents (ancient, medieval, modern), the question of the classical and its dynamic relation to other temporalities occupies, almost automatically, a central place in the curatorial discourse. How do classical objects interact with 'pasts' and 'antiquities' from different spatiotemporal dimensions? How can we enact a contemporary-classical connection that considers this plurality of times and places of 'the classical' as well as our proper historicity and our own contemporaneity? Would it be possible to forge a set of mapping and hermeneutic tools for examining these connections, founded on the principle of a 'liquid' version of time, where 'creases' and 'folds', discontinuity and anachronism, replace stability, timelessness,  

1 Holmes 2020.
evolutionism and presentism? In sum, is the turn to antiquity and/or the classical by artists and institutions alike a re-turn, or is it always in the now? And, if we admit its ‘nowness’, should not our contemporary engagement with classical objects and cultures supersede the authority and autonomy of the classical as an object of study? In this way, could we consider it instead to be a dialectical position which exceeds boundaries, stable definitions and delimitations, enabling ‘contaminations’ between various historical eras, thus always also including the pre-classical, the post-classical and even the anticlassical?

Presenting a curatorial programme undertaken at the Benaki Museum from 2011 to 2021, while referencing theories for a ‘radical museum’ as well as key texts on contemporaneity and the future of the classical, I will here present some experiments in curating the classical in multi-temporal contexts from the contemporary art programme of the Benaki Museum in Athens.

**Chronological disjunctions and ‘radical museology’**

Historical occurrences that enact the ambiguity of notions such as nostalgia and memory, time and materiality and the life of objects and their agency, call for a hybrid methodology combining art historical, anthropological and archaeological ‘tools’ in order to investigate the past as present, to ‘open up’ time and put into practice its ‘creases’ and ‘folds’ (as per Michel Serres). Apart from academic scholarship, which has produced very topical contributions to this effect, artistic, curatorial and museological discussions and practices have enriched this problematic while reflecting on their own challenges and possibilities. This process is in fact inextricably linked to raising awareness of how we come to conceive of museums as we do; to redefine our relationship with the past by (re)conceptualising the museum according to the fluidity of globalisation; and, to appreciate objects for their ‘performative’ value, one that could give space to new, fluid and unexpected interpretations.

The objective of proposals for what Claire Bishop has referred to as a ‘radical museology’ have shifted the focus of many curatorial practices towards the possibility of the museum presenting a history through a display. In fact, the very term of ‘radical museology’ is concerned with the complex issue of temporalities. It refers, according to its author, to new and critical aesthetic strategies that aim to

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3 ‘Time is paradoxical; it folds or twists; it is as various as the dance of flames in a brazier—here interrupted, there vertical, mobile, and unexpected’ (Serres & Latour 1995, 58).
4 See for example Nagel & Wood 2010; Didi-Huberman 2003. An early seminal study on the non-linear irregular time of the history of art was provided by George Kubler in *The Shape of Time* (1962).
5 See for example Smith, Enwezor & Condee 2008.
6 For more see Deliss 2020.
7 Bishop 2013.
'allow viewers in the present to grasp past constructions of temporality different from their own [...] not as utterly foreign, but as both familiar and distinct.'

Current experimental practices in these directions (at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven or the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in Madrid or the Musée Calvet in Avignon, for example) are in fact based on an understanding of ‘dialectical contemporaneity’. Claire Bishop posits this term as an approach to rethinking the museum, the category of art that it enshrines and the modalities of spectatorship it produces. Art historians dealing with contemporary art museums, or the display of contemporary art in institutions with wider historical scopes, have shifted their attention in this direction. In order for a more radical model of the museum to take shape, one offering a more politicised engagement with our historical moment, they propose that institutions start by rethinking the category of ‘the contemporary’ and the conditions of its exhibitions. This rethinking, theoretically undertaken and applied to the field of contemporary art by numerous topical and sharp critical essays, goes hand in hand, almost by default, with rethinking the category of the classical.

One of the gates by which this discussion might be entered is located in a recent thesis that proposes substituting modernism’s insistence on progress with a non-linear perception of time, to think of our relation with history in constellations and to ‘use’ cultural artefacts independently of periodisation. This is the object discursive position, adopted for example in the critical reader entitled What’s the Use,’ which, by mapping exhibitions and museum case-studies, explores the interplay between art, use, history and knowledge. The point of the authors is to demonstrate how connections between the past and the contemporary activated within these relationships are staged and narrated. In addition to its various merits, this methodology is effective in revealing interwoven layers of time, interrelations of objects and events across eras, thus helping us to understand history as filled by the presence of a ‘now’.

A number of contemporary artists focus on this paradoxical relationship between the contemporary and the classical. For instance, Jeff Koons appropriates ancient sculptures in creating a hybrid fusing different styles and times; Paul Chan translates Plato’s Hippias Minor or works with versions of the figure of Odysseus investigating the political purpose to our engagement with ‘the Greeks’; Charles Ray adopts formal ‘neoclassical’ traits in an effort to reveal ‘historic relationships across the surface of the sculpture’; Allyson Vieira explores the continuity between antiquity

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8 ten Thije 2016, 359.
9 Bishop 2013, 6–8
11 Aikens 2016.
and contemporary art, calling attention to the elasticity of time via material, process and structure;\textsuperscript{14} Charis Epaminonda makes installations incorporating objects and fragments from different times, often borrowing from the museological language of display. The same goes for exhibitions such as \textit{Serial Classic} at Fondazione Prada (May–24 August 2015), co-curated by Salvatore Settis and Anna Anguissola, which focused on the ambivalent relationship between originality and imitation in Roman culture and its insistence on the circulation of multiples; the exhibition \textit{The Classical Now}, curated by Michael Squire (2018, Bush House Arcade, King’s College London), investigated how contemporary art-works shed light on ancient visual traditions; and, \textit{Plato in LA: Contemporary Artists’ Vision} (18 April–3 September, 2018, Getty Villa, Los Angeles), which addressed the Platonic tradition while challenging our perception of the world, society and knowledge.

In such projects, versions of the classical or the ancient are ‘used’ to raise questions pertaining to a synchronic (or rather poly-chronic) perception of time and the complex condition of contemporaneity. Artworks or exhibitions thus contribute to a growing awareness of temporal complexities. In this way they join thinkers who embrace what is variously termed ‘polychronic’, ‘heterochronic’ and ‘anachronic’ readings as tools for art historical interpretation, paying particular attention to diversities rather than uniformity and multiplicities that are experienced culturally, temporally and spatially. In the well-known series of interviews between Michel Serres and Bruno Latour, Serres concludes: ‘We are archaic […] in three quarters of our actions. Few people and even fewer thoughts are completely congruent with the date of their times. We live many temporalities at once,’ considering the temporal rupture as the equivalent of a dogmatic expulsion and arguing that objects and circumstances are in fact ‘polychronic, multitemporal, and reveal a time that is gathered together, with multiple pleats’.\textsuperscript{15}

In this thinking of non-linear time, anachronism reemerges as a structuring element of any lived present, remembered past or imagined future, in much groundbreaking art historical scholarship. The work of Georges Didi-Huberman exploits key ideas developed by art historian Aby Warburg (1866–1929), putting forth the point of view of the ‘survivance’ of the past in the present.\textsuperscript{16} The term, inspired by Aby Warburg’s \textit{Nachleben}, afterlife or survival, signifying both a temporal continuity and a chronological disruption, describes objects which are ‘sustained in a perpetual “afterlife”’, remaining in ‘a cluster of hidden passions, eternally archaic and eternally present in a perpetually renewed antiquity’.\textsuperscript{17} According to Didi-Huberman this concept seeks to overcome the eternal opposition between the evolutionary model required by history and the ‘atemporality’ associated with anthropology, thus

\textsuperscript{14} Vieira 2015.
\textsuperscript{15} Serres & Latour 1995, 61.
\textsuperscript{16} Didi-Hubermann 2017.
\textsuperscript{17} Papapetros 2003, 169–176.
opening up art history in order to ‘open time’. Interpreted thus, the concept of *survivance* is considered in a contemporary context to broadly suggest a ‘bursting forth of life’. This line of thought is also explored in the influential study *Anachronic Renaissance* by Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood, which posits that a work of art is ‘a strange kind of event whose relation to time is plural […] a message whose sender and destination are constantly shifting’.

Furthermore, in the field of philosophy and aesthetics, discourses such as Giorgio Agamben’s essay ‘What is the Contemporary?’ have been essential for revealing the theoretical potential of the multiplicity of time at play around the very notion of contemporariness. Agamben concludes that the contemporary can be defined as ‘a singular relationship with one’s own time, which adheres to it and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it’. ‘More precisely,’ he writes:

> It is important to realize that the appointment that is in question in contemporariness does not simply take place in chronological time: it is something that, working within chronological time, urges, presses, and transforms it. And this urgency is the untimeliness, the anachronism that permits us to grasp our time in the form of a “too soon” that is also a “too late”; of an “already” that is also a “not yet”. […] The present is nothing other than this unhived element in everything that is lived. […] And to be contemporary means in this sense to return to a present where we have never been.

These texts introduce a way of thinking about time that is useful when studying contemporary art practices engaging with classicism, post-classicism or even anti-classicism: that contemporariness does not exclude the past — rather it comprises it, not as a source, or a beginning, but as an essence that is very much alive and its discovery has the potential to make the world otherwise. Writers committed to investigating the category of contemporary art, like art historian Terry Smith, propose, in fact, an understanding of the contemporary as an ‘awareness of what it is to be in the present whilst being alert to the “presence” of other kinds of time’. The contemporary as a new understanding of time based on the idea of ‘contemporaneous temporalities’ considered as much a modern as an ancient concept, and promoting the simultaneous existence of affinities and differences in any present moment and place, becomes a key concept for contemporary art and curating. Smith asserts that in order to be as concise about what contemporaneity is

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21 Agamben 2009, 39-54.
23 Smith 2006, 703; 2009, 255.
asking of art curatorship ‘the first step is to recognize that the object of contemporary curating is much larger than contemporary art. It must encompass all other art: art from any and every past, current art that is not contemporary, as well as projective, future art.’\textsuperscript{24} This joins voices advocating for ‘demodernizing possibilities’ in curatorial and museum practices, described by Charles Esche as a process that allows for ‘linking the contemporary to past moments and places through art, so that history can be reconstructed and new futures made possible’.\textsuperscript{25} Such an understanding of contemporariness echoes positions claiming the potential of \textit{cosmopoiesis} in the field of the classics, such as Brooke Holmes’ eponymous essay, where she asserts:

\begin{quote}
[...]: given the enormous impact of Greco-Roman antiquity on shaping our own presents and its potential to shape us further, I see our responsibility to classical antiquity and the legacies of “the classical”, whether pernicious or inexhaustible sources of beauty, strangeness, and unexpected futures, as nothing less.\textsuperscript{26}
\end{quote}

Considering, as per Agamben, contemporariness in terms of ‘introducing into time an essential dishomogeneity’,\textsuperscript{27} transforming it and putting it in relation with other times offers a meaningful insight for considering installations that mix up chronological moments and reassemble them, thus constructing such ‘contemporaneous temporalities’. Two examples would be Dahn Vo’s or Christodoulos Panayiotou’s works for the 2015 Venice Biennale. Panayiotou’s installation \textit{Two Days After Forever} for the Cyprus pavilion was paradigmatic of a consideration of liquid chronologies, through what he calls ‘choreography of time’.\textsuperscript{28} For example, the works \textit{Fundus} (Fig. 1), \textit{Opus Tessellatum} and \textit{Opus Vermiculatum} are mosaics pieced together from borrowed ancient tesserae, which were held in storage at the Archaeological Museum in Nicosia, Cyprus. Panayiotou was granted permission by the Cyprus Department of Antiquities to borrow these unidentified elements in order to create this series of new wall mosaics. The resulting pieces are composed as ephemeral artworks that only exist for the duration of the exhibition, since the elements were returned after the end of the exhibition to the Archaeological Museum in Nicosia, to be dismantled and thus de-created.\textsuperscript{29} The installation destabilised the epistemic structures of archaeology and rejected hierarchical relationships in time and space but also between high and low objects, originals and copies, by integrating ‘classicism’ in a reflective stance toward the

\textsuperscript{24} Smith 2012, 29.
\textsuperscript{25} Esche 2017.
\textsuperscript{26} Holmes 2016, 269–290.
\textsuperscript{27} Agamben 2009, 52.
\textsuperscript{29} Excerpts from \textit{Two Days after Forever}, exhibition guide, Cyprus Pavilion, at the 56th Venice Biennal, 2015.
‘master narratives’ of western civilisation. Classicism was used as a ‘cognitive device’, charged with political content, as a ‘learning experience for looking into the present, which is equally fragmented time’.

The artist claimed the potential of ‘simultaneous temporalities’ to lay new foundations to our relation with history, based on difference and rupture but also a spontaneous sense of affinity. He invested in the affective experience created by the presence of the object and its materiality, its deformation or its poetic reconstruction in order to shatter the idea of a common past and put forth subjective and imaginative experiences of individual presents.

Dahn Vo’s exhibition in the Danish pavilion for the Biennale of the same year had the significant title *Mothertongue*, and was arranged as an architectural intervention restituting the initial character of the pavilion and placing within it works assembling fragments of ‘archaeological’ (in the broader sense) objects and found materials which have travelled through time, and which all structure our

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present. In the sculptures showcased in the pavilion, Vo referred to hybrid identities by using recuperated objects acquired at auction and ancient pieces or found materials that he arranged in assemblages that highlighted clashes, gaps and inconsistencies. These tensions revealed global antagonisms around identity politics and cultural colonialism, challenged given categories and reveal the cultural fragmentation’s destructive impulse and its potential. The classical, as one of the components of these sculptural assemblages, the mutilation of ancient artworks and the focus on this mutilation — rather than the ‘beauty of the fragment’ — invites contemporary reflection on the beauty attributed to ancient fragments, but also on their destructive nature, of the tortured body and on the violence with which western man treats nature and culture.32

These discourses have developed in parallel with an epistemological ‘reimagination’ of the field of classical studies. Its agents reflect, in similar terms,

...on the study of the past in relationship to the pressures — disciplinary, institutional, ethical, political, material—of the present’ by putting forth ‘new thinking about the temporality of antiquity, whether through revisiting notions of anachronism or by activating a sense of ‘deep’ time. 33

Studies such as Deep Classics: Rethinking Classical Reception (2016) and Postclassicisms (2019) remind us that spatiotemporal ‘tradition’ is not just what happens to the past after the past, but an extension to the question of ‘why, the past, qua past, continues to compel our attention’.34 On this level, art and art history coincide on various points with revisions of the field of the classical toward notions of ‘deep time’, ‘postclassicism’ or the ‘future of the classical’. Salvatore Settis’ concept of the classical shifts the, so far, accepted perception of classicism as the ‘studied attitude of reverence to things classical, which is to say to products of culture that are felt to be exemplary and of the first order’,35 for example, toward something that has been constantly re-defined rather than simply received, its scope for the future being to investigate its multicultural dimension and its multiplicity. According to Settis, instead of focusing on a false sameness between our civilization and the classical (Greco-Roman culture seen as the cradle of Europe), we should concentrate on revealing disjunctions and misunderstandings, and on its shifts between identity and otherness ‘for accessing an even wider comparison with “other” cultures in a

34 Butler 2016, 15.
“genuinely global” manner.” Such studies, also go hand in hand with strands of archaeology such as archaeological ethnography, which try to establish transcultural spaces of encounters and interactions centred around materiality and temporality, ‘enabling the active coexistence of multiple times which are given substance and agency through the durational qualities of materials and their sensorial and mnemonic reception by humans’.

Curating multi-temporality in the Museum

But let us return to the initial questions: how can these practices give the classical new meanings and agency for addressing urgent matters of one’s own time, informing current artistic and curatorial practices? Could it be by associating it with a re-definition of the contemporary that describes it as ‘the one who inhabits the present incompletely and so is anachronistic with respect to it’, as Agamben proposes?

According to Claire Bishop’s concept of ‘radical museum’, historical collections are ‘a museum’s greatest weapon in breaking the stasis of presentism’, opening up the possibility of staking a meaningful claim to an engagement with the past and the future. This kind of critical reframing of the museum and its curatorial strategies urges us to reconceptualise, make sense of and, ultimately, apply the common practice of creatively engendering connections between the classical and the ‘contemporary’, or the ‘past’ and the ‘present’ (and of course the ‘future’). One could say that this direction is pursued now with another addition: the consideration of a mesh of things or relations, the role of objects in a system, in networks that do not separate animate and inanimate, as per latest studies on ecological ‘interdependence’.

Thinking of the past and the future in those terms helps us reconsider the importance of dispositifs, such as the exhibition, the archive or the collection, capable of enacting alternative, non-linear temporalities. The way we chose, associate, present and compare objects establishes a new relation between the ‘then’ and the ‘now’, constructing historicism, nostalgia and the untimely or anachronism.

In the case of the Benaki Museum and the contemporary art programme put forth since 2011, the theories and studies briefly summarised above have, in fact, served as a theoretical and methodological tool-kit to conceive and construct exhibitions that address, interpret and contextualise the contemporary-classical or, more broadly, the present-past-future connection. They lay the foundations for a museum programme that proposes ways to enact multi-temporality in sensorial, mnemotechnic, theoretical, spatial and immersive ways. It is hoped that this genre of

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36 Settis 2006, 110.
37 Hamilakis 2011, 399–414.
38 Bishop 2013, 24.
39 Morton 2010, 265–293.
curatorial practice can also contribute, besides shifting our ‘feeling’ of the classical and creating artworks with ‘cosmopoietic ambitions’40, to making familiar an understanding and a consciousness of time that transcends linear historicity and continuity, not only as content but as method, process or even, simply, everyday life. The reflexive, critical, collaborative and eclectic properties of such a method would then contribute to imagining and making exhibitions that overcome fixed perceptions on what museum institutions should do, collect, preserve and showcase, opening up their potential for an active role in society.

Here, I will present case studies from contemporary art exhibition practice, more particularly in the museum context. I will try to explain how the aforementioned problematic, joining the fields of classics, contemporary art, curating and also archaeology, can serve a different ‘mission’: one seeking to redefine the role of museums in the present while ‘using’ objects from the past for critical museology. My point of entry to this discussion coincides with my curatorial ‘mission’ to develop a contemporary art programme for an encyclopedic museum or a ‘Museum of Greek Culture’, and more specifically for the Benaki Museum in Athens. The Benaki Museum, founded by Anthony Benakis and donated to the Greek state in 1931, is best described, by virtue of its collections and archives, not only as a museum of Greek civilisation, but also as a resource for studying Hellenic culture in a historical context which expands from prehistoric times to the twentieth century. Through the contemporary art programme, the Benaki Museum expresses a commitment to supporting emerging knowledge about its collections and to establishing a dialogue between contemporary art and historical artefacts. This scope, and its priorities, encourage a programmatic re-reading of the ‘past’; that is, one that is based on questioning all given definitions of the ‘artefact’ and of the institution and its historical narratives and on redefining, first and foremost, what this ‘past’ means, particularly when it involves (as often as it does in Greece) the ‘classical now’.

This conversation became more topical for the Hellenic contemporary art world in 2017 when Greece, its heritage and its ‘classicisms’ (paradoxically for a country traditionally considered as being on the margins of Europe) occupied the forefront of the international art world, due to the presence of documenta 14’s in Athens. The critical engagement with classical tradition was inscribed in (to quote 2017 documenta director Adam Szymczyk on the Learning from the Athens programme) ‘a lesson in breaching the normative economic, political, and geographic divisions, and attempting a shared experience mediated by culture and, more specifically, the contemporary art exhibition’. For Szymczyk, Athens stood at the time metonymically for that ‘rest’ of the world that has not become (and could not yet become) a part of documenta in a proper sense, due to lacking privileges. By overcoming binaries such as past vs present or North vs South, Adam Szymczyk and

his team built their discourse on the opposition between the current image of Greece as a backward country and the classical glory of a culture considered to have been the cradle of European, and more specifically German, civilisation in order to address global capitalism, economic crisis, inequality and the ‘global south’ by destabilising the very certainties of the western cultural canon. Around and in Athens, as well as in Kassel, artists, academics, curators, activists and viewers engaged in forms of collaborative, participatory and discursive practices, to rethink what the reception of history, antiquity and classicism means, and to reframe them in a field mostly concerned with the significance of any ancient past for the present moment and an extended world community. On the other hand, this position has been criticised by Greek critical theorists claiming that the very idea of ‘classical debt’ as the pretext for a contemporary blockbuster exhibition, rather than acting as an emancipatory force, ended up producing a ‘public consisting of silent bodies, trapped in highly romanticised discourses of the past and ultimately unable to defend themselves’.41

For institutions in Athens, like the Benaki Museum, this line of thought was anticipated with projects aiming to revise strategies of collecting and exhibiting. They explore ways to build meaningful and reflexive connections between historical periods and the contemporary in its various forms. Consequently, the case studies I will be presenting here engage with, and reflect on, the classical in non-exclusive, non-hierarchical and non-binary ways. They certainly fall within a trend, undertaken by many ‘encyclopaedic museums’ such as the Louvre, the Musée d’Orsay, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the British Museum, and so on, to activate permanent collections in the present by proposing to artists to engage in a contemporary-classical or present-past dialogue. Taking this experiment one step further, the focus here has been to explore the classical not as an autonomous entity but as an element that takes part in a discursive practice (in Foucauldian terms). The exhibitions presented below make a case that one of the ways to study ‘the classical in contemporary art and visual culture’, as is the case of this special issue of CLARA journal, would be to consider this dialogue within a broader temporal, discursive and critical network of things and ideas. The reflection on what the relation between the classical and the contemporary could be does not always have to be limited to revisiting works or texts that adhere to the classical era; it extends instead to questioning the ways that we have been instituting, narrating and exhibiting time. This way the contemporary-classical connection becomes part of a broader programme, which aims to highlight the ‘anachronic qualities of art’: these could be summed up, as per Nagel and Wood, as ‘the ability to hold incompatible models in suspension without deciding’. This is why few of our examples showcase exclusively classical objects in dialogue with contemporary art. Most of them focus instead on interpretive systems of thought, knowledge or communication that address the

41 Plantzos 2019, 469–492.
construction of relations to, between and among times, objects and subjects. These relations put forth an engagement with the classical that is not only one of dialogue but also one of questioning, substitution, hesitation, contamination, projection, *detournement*, disruption and even opposition.

1. **Animating the classical**

*The Cookham Erratics* was a commission for artist Andy Holden for the main building of the Benaki Museum (Figs 2–3). The exhibition took place from 12 October–4 December 2011 in the halls dedicated to ancient sculptures and artefacts. As part of the series ‘Artists in Dialogue with the Benaki Museum’, which programmatically commissioned works dealing with issues that reflect on the role of the museum in the representation of history, memory, knowledge and tradition, the work addressed the conditions of viewing, and the authority of historical narratives. Holden engaged with the context of the Benaki Museum’s classical and Roman sculpture galleries through a personal archaeology, combining the use of craft, anecdotes and changes of scale to attempt to investigate the relationship between personal memory, monuments and the authoritative nature of narrative. This site-specific work,
entitled *The Cookham Erratics*, consisted of six knitted sculptures which were situated on plinths and placed among the Greek and Roman antiquities exhibited on the ground floor of the Benaki Museum. These sculptures, constructed of steel, foam and mixed knitted yarns, were enlarged replicas of small stones and pebbles collected by the artist from the churchyard at Cookham, England, the setting for a celebrated painting by the British artist, Stanley Spencer. The title refers to glacial ‘erratics’, which in geology define pieces of rock that are not native to the area in which they rest, but instead are moved by geological forces from one location to another, as an analogy to the ways objects on display in museums have survived and ‘moved’ across times, places and contexts. The connection to Cookham, the churchyard and Stanley Spencer is explored in a text that comes from a speaker hidden inside each of the sculptures, in the form of a series of episodes from a recorded monologue delivered by the artist. Thus, the rocks engage in a dialogue with one another, whereas the ancient sculptures of the Benaki Museum and the people who wander through the museum’s halls take the role of their audience. The text unravels in fragments, snippets of a story, ranging from the personal and art historical, to the whimsical and speculative — drawing on, and reflecting upon, philosophical ideas such as animism and panpsychism, but also upon recent developments in contemporary philosophy,

which have turned towards ‘object orientated thinking’ or ‘speculative realism’. Indicating, through the reference to geological erratics, a journey undertaken, the fragments of this story reflect the fragments of artefacts on display in the exhibition halls. They enact, with the participation of the viewer, the very presence and life of things, considering them as vectors of temporalities. The work thus prompts questions about the authoritative nature of institutional narratives, such as the one of Greek culture, by disrupting, interfering and altering them.

2. The end of the museum / an archaeology of its future

Produced for the same commissions programme, ‘Artists in Dialogue with the Benaki Museum’, You’ll see; this time it’ll be different was a site-specific work by artist Adam Chodzko (Figs 4–5). For his project, Adam Chodzko staged a ‘retrospective’ exhibition of imaginary Benaki Museum posters from the near future, installed along the liminal space of the ramp of the Benaki Pireos 138 building. The posters advertised fictional future exhibitions of some of the museum’s objects and documents as if they were to take place in abandoned or repurposed spaces around Greece: an old factory, an abandoned shipyard, a suburban discothèque, etc. By mixing distanced and heteroclite temporalities through the objects represented, the work proposed to break with the confines of cultural context and project the survival of museum artefacts into the future. Through this collage series, the Benaki Museum was seen to have spread into surprising and awkward venues across Greece, ending up scattered and yet whole. By considering the museum as an emotional, idiosyncratic and hybrid living being, with the possibility of integrating into daily life, this ‘museum of the future’ would be founded on antinomy instead of homogeneity, on disruption instead of continuity, on randomness instead of intent. The free association of artefacts and documents, deprived of information about their use, time and place, as well as the allusive titles of the shows (The Pleasure of Turbulence, Greedy Elders and the Rituals of Fashion, Jealous Animals, The Next Time of Innocence, etc.) function within the appropriation of museological dispositif (promotional poster) to parody and critique the arbitrariness of historical exhibition narratives. The work addressed the ways in which classical, non-classical and anti-classical objects would change symbolic properties when freed from their canonical, temporal and geographical context, telling us not only stories about the past but also representing the dreams or anxieties of the future.
Fig. 4 Adam Chodzko, *You’ll see, this time it will be different*, installation view, Pireos 138-Benaki Museum, Athens, 2013. Courtesy the artist. Photography: Leonidas Kourgiantakis.
3. **Pre-classical genealogies and museum display**

The exhibition-installation by artist and architect Zissis Kotionis entitled ‘Anaximander in Fukushima’ (3 October–16 November 2014, Benaki Museum, Pireos 138) stems from Pre-Socratic cosmologies, where the technical thought of Western civilisation is to be found in a weakened state (Figs 6–7). Reading the Pre-Socratic philosophers functioned here as the artist’s guide through the discovery and collection of ‘ruins’ of technical civilisation, piled up on the earth’s surface during his ritual meanderings in the Greek countryside. Kotionis collected from the grounds and the shores trivial fragments of technical objects, incidental findings, while performing ritualistic gestures that bring together the body and the ground. He put this practice in analogy with a contemporary event: a drastic shift of the tectonic plates in the depths of the Pacific Ocean, which caused, in March 2011, a tsunami along the north-eastern shores of Japan. In Fukushima, TEPCO’s seaside nuclear plant was stricken by the tsunami, which developed into a fire, causing the closed, controlled system of the ‘natural’ process of nuclear fission to disperse.

*Fig. 5* Adam Chodzko, *You’ll see, this time it will be different*, installation view, Pireos 138 - Benaki Museum, Athens, 2013. Courtesy the artist. Photography: Leonidas Kourgiantakis.
catastrophically into the surrounding environment. This event was interpreted by analogy with the modern-day ruins found and collected; they were agglomerated and rearranged in a makeshift archive as evidence of the artist’s outdoor wanderings, set against the background of the Fukushima disaster. The objects collected during these unstructured tours were classified in lines and patterns to generate genealogies of manmade objects with a geometric structure. Within these genealogies, we come across both shapes that describe the structure of the world in the cosmology of the Pre-Socratic philosophers, and incidental technical findings, trash of the Greek countryside, as well as parts that reference the structure of the nuclear installations. This collection and exhibition process reveals the multiples ‘lives’ of objects in time as well as the agency of hybrid practices inspired by anthropological and archaeological methods. This random archive of relics of technique thus indexes, by the artist’s gesture, the disrepair of our civilisation.

4. Dismear vs the ‘classical canon’

The group exhibition *Ametria* (Figs 8–10), organised in collaboration with the Deste foundation in 2015, was a curatorial exercise which

prepare(d) us to receive, [...] that antiquity — and its relation to the present — is not just something lucid and idealized that has to do with measure, democracy, abstraction, beauty, harmony or greatness but also something dark and unspoken that encompasses all the things that psychoanalysis calls ‘death drives’ and Cuoghi terms ‘purposeless drives’.42

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42 Tzirtzilakis 2021.
As per the concept of Roberto Cuoghi, who conceived of the whole project, Ametria is the privilege of disproportion, of excess, the rejection of an overall vision, the error that turns out to be right. This powerful position was, for our five-member curatorial team, the starting point of a mission to explore different strategies to overturn the ancient ‘symmetria’ found in harmony, clarity, balance, perfection and beauty — associated with the classical — and mine the collections for objects that promote instead a distortion of the established artistic hierarchies.

Approximately 150 objects were selected from among the Benaki Museum collections, in order to refer to a diachronic principle of dismeasure across all media and realms of creativity. The items, which were mixed with the Dakis Joannou Collection’s contemporary artworks, ranged from nineteenth-century drawings and designs to topographical surveys of Athens and original antique sculptures, vases, Byzantine icons, or modernist photographs, Islamic and Christian manuscripts, embroideries from various regions of Greece, ex-votos, flags or tokens, and so forth. Historical artefacts, works and documents and the contemporary art were associated through the distorting lens of irrationality, of impulse, of the unconventional; by digging up unseen objects, the aim was to reveal, through visual and intellectual assemblages, alternative meanings related to ‘an original purposeless drive, which chooses neither to have nor not to have and whose sole intention is to be exercised without reserve’. This programme also corresponded to the idea that the past is not only what is already written, but also, and mostly, what is missing (accidentally or
deliberately) from historical narratives, what has been repressed, set aside, neglected or forgotten. The abandonment of chronological boundaries (objects from all eras were mixed together with no indications of chronology) and of established classifications (artworks were exhibited alongside destroyed documents, humble artefacts and functional objects) contesting the positivity of historicism and art value.

The exhibition’s ‘labyrinthical’, open-ended display system further helped to resist these hierarchies while offering new perspectives for considering the past as well as the classical. Objects such as an antique torso, a photograph of Nelly’s from the Delphi festival, a contemporary ‘Prometheus’ by Yannis Varelas, the Stylites, the prophet Mohammed, rituals such as sacrifices or the dervish dances, and mythological creatures like Medusa, the Minotaur or Pan were integrated in a sort of atlas of excessive or repressed sexuality, madness/love and narcissism/heroism. They referenced passions (love, envy, hatred), drives for excess, disproportion and deformation, as well as antisocial behaviours such as suicide or hermitism. Dystopian places such as prisons and eroded and destroyed objects such as architectural models, mythical or historical, were used as mediums for building a sensory (and not cognitive) device of access into the past and the future, inhabiting the connections that happen before meaning occurs. Emerging in the dim light and the narrow paths of the ‘anticlassical’ labyrinth, which altered the conditions of viewing, were accounts of bodily drives, occult practices of human nature, tales of belonging and world-making potentialities.
Through the focus on the unusual, the diverse, the marginal, the excessive, the eroded, the illegible, the ironic and the erroneous, the concept of Ametria helped to devise a research and display method based on ‘free association’ and ‘fragmented narrative’. The dismissal of historical narrative in favour of synchronicity tried to reinforce contemporary art’s strong inclination toward challenging the consumerist imperative of the exhibition and re-implementing its conceptual and social properties. This exercise was inscribed in curatorial imperatives that urge museums to prioritise discursive, interdisciplinary work and to use all kinds of objects, to conduct fieldwork in the museum and to fuel experiments which aim to ‘breathe(s) presence back into the artifacts, restore(s) consciousness to their unfinished status, and help(s) to heal the disposition of the institution’.\(^{43}\) In this sense, as Clementine Deliss states, ‘the museum becomes the region and the collection the practice’, generating a context that is ‘partial and unfolding, built on adjacencies rather than ethnicities’.\(^{44}\)

\(^{43}\) Deliss 2020.
\(^{44}\) Deliss 2016.

https://www.documenta14.de/en/south/456_occupy_collections_clementine_deliss_in_conversation_with_frederic_keck_on_access_circulation_and_interdisciplinary_experimentation_or_th
5. ‘Liquid’ time & institutions

The need for revision of classicism’s authority on the present and its importance for challenging ‘the hardcore modernist position’ not only concerning national identity but also concerning artistic autonomy, form and value was at the core of the *Liquid Antiquity* project, organised by Deste with the collaboration of the Benaki Museum from 4 April to 17 September 2017. In the year when the Benaki Museum’s Pireos venue hosted part of documenta 14, this project proposed to study contemporary receptions of the classical, not by exhibiting artworks but by instead curating discourses and visual narratives which reframed our contemporary understanding of the classical. *Liquid Antiquity* was mainly ‘an exhibition in book form’, an indexical reference book made of *lexemes* such as ‘myth’, ‘origins’, ‘jouissance’, ‘craft’, ‘materiality’ and ‘debt’, which introduced new readings of themes, representations or concepts associated with the classical (*Figs* 11–12). The book also comprised interviews between Brooke Holmes, professor of Classics at Princeton University, with contemporary artists Jeff Koons, Urs Fischer, Asad Raza, Mathew Barney, Kaari Upson and Paul Chan. Videos of the interviews, which discussed the

[accessed 16 September 2021].
contemporary-classical connections in the artists’ work, were also presented in the antique galleries of the Benaki Museum of Greek Culture. The main idea was to propose a different world in which to inscribe the classical-in-the-contemporary conjunction by modifying the experience within which the past-present symbiosis is enacted. These ‘polychronic’ interpretations proposed through the book and the show were meant to change the sensorial, temporal and spatial experience of classicism. The curatorial process went hand-in-hand with reflecting on new methods, new tools and new display practices, in order to ‘undo’ the timelessness and authority attributed to the classical and its traditional museological presentation.
Through the collaborative and transdisciplinary methodology adopted in the broader Liquid Antiquity project (not only the book and exhibition but also various workshops that preceded or followed the main event), Brooke Holmes and the collaborating team tried to establish discussions rather than assertions, and to form creative propositions, and at the same time reconsider not only the object but also the subjects of classicism. The critical reception of the classical, through discourse, was used to articulate an opposing pull between preservation and creation, originality and multiplicity, theory and practice. Redefining the role of the artist as well as the role of the ‘interpreter’ or the audience marked the engagement with a question that contemporary art — and its practice and its institutions — have been struggling with for many years: the reconsideration of the boundaries between the roles of artists, curators and viewers through tactics of reshuffling and interchanging tasks, swapping positions and building more complex relational networks.

6. Instead of the classical or craft as power

Right after (and as a consequence of) the confinement due to the 2020–2021 Covid-19 pandemic, the exhibition entitled ‘Robinson Crusoe stayed home. Adventures of design in times of crisis’ (25 February–13 June 2021, co-curated with artist Kostis Velonis) could be perceived as a radical gesture which proposed the everyday, the handmade, the DIY in opposition to the classical (Figs 13–15). The exhibition refers to one of the first novels of modern history, a work by Daniel Defoe, which was first published in 1719 under the title The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, of York, Mariner: Who Lived Eight and Twenty Years, all alone in an uninhabited Island on the Coast of America, near the Mouth of the Great River of Oroonoque. The approach on which we focused is that of ‘Robinson as maker’. The exhibition explored the relations between the autonomy of art and the ‘heteronomy’ of everyday life by activating practices from the full spectrum of creativity and interpretive concepts like work, performance, functionality, production, exchange and participation. That particular aspect assisted us in considering the dead ends of technology, overproduction and overconsumption, through the self-sufficiency of construction. The exhibition stemmed from the occasion when a large part of the permanent nineteenth-century collection (including many neoclassical works and representing the institution of the ‘neo-hellenic’ identity through a return to myths of national continuity and the classical ideal)45 was relocated from the third floor of the Benaki Museum of Greek Culture to the new Benaki Museum building located at 138 Pireos Street as part of the anniversary exhibition, ‘1821, Before and After’. The new exhibition of works and commissions by 37 contemporary artists ‘occupied’ the vacated areas of the permanent collections, left in a transitional stage. This museum

45 For more, see for example Gourgouris 1996.
space, with all its complex relations, was evacuated, stripped of meanings and returned to a primitive state, in a savage environment, like the jungle of Robinson’s island. Then, artists came, in an almost parasitic way, to invent, in analogy to Crusoe’s adventures, new ways to ‘inhabit’ the museum.

The voids left by the relocation of the nineteenth-century works, the showcases, the objects’ traces and their absence provided the context for an exhibition focused on craft, design and DIY, triggering an empirical investigation of questions related to material fragments of modernity. The works selected referred to manual labour as a genre that does not distinguish between invention and practice, and which is connected to the idea that people and things are not diametrically opposite categories. The exhibition thus set materiality and temporality as the lines along which to develop a discourse on the contemporary, the boundaries of artistic autonomy and the relationship between art and politics, art and everyday life. As an extension of that particular reasoning, many artists investigated the ‘rhizomatic’ relationships between objects, subjects and nature, deploying ‘natural’ materials in combination with appropriating structures and objects from the ‘artificial’ world. This way, they stressed polysemy, polychronicity and poly-materiality, repetition and fluidity. *Débordements* of ancient objects were included in this discourse: for example,
in *Pro itu et Reditu*, Stefania Strouza adopted the form of ancient Mediterranean ‘petrosomatoglyphs’, which signify the beginning or the end of a journey, to propose a contemporary version of ‘votive offering’, which, in the context of the pandemic and its impact on the movement of people, refers to travelling as a consumer commodity, a commercial ‘experience’ of the tourist industry, and re-examines the value of ‘stasis’.

Craft was here interpreted by the artists as an ability or capacity to act in order to reclaim artistic independence and freedom, and to overcome the function/aesthetics, private/public, product/work of art and past/present splits. It thus resulted in formulating a pressing question: could becoming aware of the ‘gaps’ in the modern, industrial, capitalist system ultimately help us to redefine ‘things’ and our relationships with them in a way that transcends the anthropocentric inhibitions of both classicism and modernity? And, what role, ultimately, will craft play towards humankind regaining access to an inestimable, sharp, ‘secret’ reality that isn’t defined by frameworks, boundaries and dual relationships?

Conclusions
The main hope and ambition of this exhibition programme has been first and foremost to perform a ‘dialectical contemporaneity’ (Bishop) conceived as ‘an anachronic action that seeks to reboot the future through the unexpected appearance of a relevant past’. In this context the idea of the classical is, hopefully, transformed through exhibition-making from permanence to a relation, from originality to plurality of experiences, acknowledging a synchronicity in every past artefact in any present moment. This aimed, in turn, to reframe our consideration of alternative ways of being in time other than historical evolutionism. The process described above can also be considered as a means for ‘declassicisation’ or even of ‘demodernisation’, in the sense that all exhibitions (as both these concepts) tried to resist permanence, immutability and conservatism in order to destabilise the very notion of historical time and subjectivity according to which knowledge of the past was organised and constructed. Comparison, juxtaposition, appropriation, assemblage and site-specificity are some of the strategies put forth in order to overturn the authority attributed to historical, museological and classical boundaries,

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46 Bishop 2013, 61.
while proposing more fluid versions of historical understanding and contemporariness.

By exceeding the past-present and tradition-progress binary perspective, and by being alert to what Smith calls ‘multi-chronicity’, such strategies of staging the contemporary and classical connection dispense with the confinement of contemporary art to the present and of classicism to the past. These associative and open-ended connections between different pasts, as well as the enactment of a ‘multiplicity of ways of being in time’, contribute to redefining the classical not as permanence but as a fleeting substance, a relation referencing the plurality of experiences in the world, as well as the multiplicity of possibilities to inhabit it. Classicism, associated with other figures of the past and the future, is then considered not so much as an era, a set of given formal or even moral characteristics like measure or a given subject matter, but mainly a way for contemporary subjects to consciously engage with historicity.

Given the globalised environment’s repercussions on a contemporary conception of ‘the world’, the homogenisation and smoothing of cultural differences or the effects of communication networks on traditional notions of time and presence, these methodologies make a case for abandoning historicism in favour of the ‘anachronic’ and/or the ‘polychronic’. The kind of examples I mentioned, as well as the theories they are linked to, have been very useful for reflecting upon and reconsidering a ‘narrativist’ and relativist perception of the world, and to explore classicism’s structuring capacities for the present. They confirm the hypothesis that contemporary art lends itself to propose a pioneering model for investigating the potential offered by thinking ‘multi-temporally’ and for revising the relation between historicism and presentism.

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47 Terry Smith 2011
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