# Barbarians in the contemporary art scene: three biennials on barbarism (Istanbul, Limerick, Athens)

Boletsi, M.; Winkler, M.

# 6.8. Barbarians in the Contemporary Art Scene: Three Biennials on Barbarism (Istanbul, Limerick, Athens)

*Maria Boletsi*

## 6.8.1. Introduction: Barbarians, Contemporary Art, and the Genre of Curatorial Statements

Alongside the frequent figuration of the *barbarian* and *barbarism* in political rhetoric since the early 1990s and, even more, in the second decade of the twenty-first century—as shown in chapter 6.4 in this volume—there is also a renewed preoccupation with barbarism in the realm of contemporary art, which warrants critical attention. Whereas popular mobilizations of *barbarism* in public rhetoric from 9/11 to the present tend to use this term as a self-evident tag for specific groups, cultures or acts without reflecting on the legitimacy and implications of its use, this chapter turns to artistic mobilizations of *barbarism* that actively reflect on, and engage with, the concept: its history, its contemporary functions in art and politics, the violent implications of its use, but also the possibilities the concept might hold for articulating critiques of neoliberal capitalism, (neo-)colonial and civilizational rhetoric, xenophobia, and processes of othering in the contemporary world.

Specifically, this chapter zooms in on three recent international artistic biennials in which *barbarism* and the *barbarian* took center stage in their conceptual framework and titles. All three events took place in cities that are situated—albeit in different ways—in the margins or the periphery of Europe: Istanbul, Turkey (2013), Limerick, Ireland (2016), and Athens, Greece (2017–2018). Contemporary art, as this chapter shows, provides fertile ground for critical reflections on *barbarism* in the globalized present, including experimentations with affirmative mobilizations of the concept as a contrarian force that may propel the imagination of alternative presents and futures. Such affirmative mobilizations of barbarism in curatorial statements often work to highlight the potential of (institutionalized) art today to pose as a 'barbarian' force that can resist, oppose or criticize the systems and frameworks in which it is implicated.

The biennials under discussion, two of which were directly inspired by Cavafy's poem "Waiting for the Barbarians,"[1] are the 2013 Istanbul Biennale entitled "Mom, am I a Barbarian?", Ireland's 2016 EVA International Biennial of contemporary art entitled "Still (the) Barbarians" (in Limerick), and the series of events organized in 2017–2018 as a prelude to the 6th Athens Biennale (ANTI, 2018), which bore the title of Cavafy's poem, "Waiting for the Barbarians." The chapter scrutinizes the use of *barbarism* not so much in specific artworks hosted in these biennials but in the

1 For an extensive discussion of the poem, see Boletsi's chapter 4 in vol. 1of the present study, p. 285–334.

way these exhibitions were conceptually framed through curatorial statements and in some of the responses they elicited.

By tracing the functions and meanings of barbarism in the conceptual frameworks of these events, the chapter also sheds light on the instrumentalization of this concept in the *genre* of curatorial statements. Curatorial statements, which comprise texts and statements by curators, generally aim "to communicate the exhibition's *concept* to the general public and the art world professionals providing an insight of what the exhibition is about" (Kompatsiaris 2020, 761). As Panos Kompatsiaris explains, such statements by curators for "large-scale exhibitions embrace a certain grammar, content, language, technique, and tone to the point we can look at them as a genre of writing" (761), marked by recurring patterns that function as "instrument[s] of ascribing value." These include "diplomatic gestures of both negating and affirming dominant culture and commerce" and "combining avant-garde strategies of refusal with marketing techniques" (758). These strategies can also be traced in the curatorial statements of the three biennials under discussion. In these statements, as I will show, evocations of barbarism often serve the main objectives of these strategies.

The biennials that take center stage in this chapter subscribe to the artistic condition of contemporary art in the era of globalization (since the end of the 1980s) that Peter Osborne has termed "postconceptual" (2013; 2017): a condition that reflects the "cultural logic of high capitalism"[2] (2017) and in which biennials emerge as "the dominant form," marked "by two main features: artistic 'contemporaneity' and geopolitical 'globality'" (2015, 175). The scope of such events exceeds the "national" or "regional," extending towards "a geopolitical totalization of the globe, homologous with the ongoing, post-1989 expansion of the social relations of capitalism itself" (2015, 175). In this context, new biennials since the 1990s, Kompatsiaris writes, "are intensely discursive, socially interventionist, theory-driven, and authored by curators as part of the art/theory/critique nexus" (Kompatsiaris 2020, 760; 2017). This nexus, which typifies the postconceptual condition and largely determines new "biennial cultures," follows the "mandate" that "art must be theorized, e.g. explained through concepts, in a way that it expresses a critical questioning about the present world and its hierarchies rather than just being affirmative" (Kopatsiaris 2020, 760). Against this background, *barbarism* becomes instrumentalized by curators as a conceptual tool for a critical questioning of established systems and violent structures in the contemporary world and the hierarchies that underlie them.

Art's fascination with barbarism is of course not a new phenomenon. Nevertheless, the figuration of barbarism in the title and conceptual framing of three recent international art events can be considered symptomatic of a larger trend in socially and politically engaged artistic events and projects. Thus, these events do not constitute isolated engagements with the concept. Through their reflection on barbarism, they converse not only with previous *artistic* traditions and current *political* uses of barbarism, but also with each other. In fact, the curatorial statement of the Athens Biennale explicitly connects this biennial with the two other biennials in Limerick

2 Osborne prefers the adjective "high" to describe the current phase of capitalism over Fredric Jameson's "late capitalism."

and Istanbul that predated it, presenting them as part of a nexus of events and interventions that reflect on the figure of the barbarian:

> Those Barbarians keep on coming, again and again. Recent biennials addressed the question of the Barbarian. The 2013 Istanbul Biennial entitled *Mom, am I a Barbarian?* investigated the Barbarian as a counter-image of civic identity, while Ireland's Biennial 2016 EVA International entitled *Still (the) Barbarians* discussed Ireland as the primary test ground for modern European colonialism. (Heart and Sword Division 2017, n. pag.)

This chapter probes the multifaceted, conflicting, controversial, provocative or conventional mobilizations of *barbarism* and the *barbarian* in the framing of these three events and examines contemporary and historical uses and meanings of the *barbarian* that they draw on or critically revisit.

## 6.8.2. The Istanbul Biennial (2013): "Mom, Am I Barbarian?"

The Istanbul Biennial "Mom, Am I Barbarian?" took place from 14 September to 10 November 2013 and was organized by the Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts (İKSV). Its title was taken from the eponymous book by Turkish poet Lale Müldür (*Anne, Ben Barbar Mıyım*? 2006).[3] As the Biennial's curator, Fulya Erdemci, said in an interview, what inspired the use of this title is the way Müldür turns the conventional, generalizing concept of the barbarian "into a personal, singular question" which can be rephrased as "'Do I have a language? Am I being heard? Do I have a say?'" (Erdemci in Erdemci and Rees 2013, n. pag.). The barbarian is used here as a figure of the absolute Other for which there is no space for expression in the public domain, as opposed to "the classical notion of a 'citizen,' imbued with various rights including the potential to be an actor in the public sphere" (Deniz 2013, n. pag.). The title thereby connotes the linguistic, onomatopoeic basis of the barbarian's definition in Greek antiquity as a person whose foreign (non-Greek) language sounds incomprehensible, and is thus dismissed as noise, non-rational speech, unworthy of serious consideration.[4] But although the barbarian's linguistic inception in ancient Greece was already accompanied by a conception of the other and its language as inferior, the Biennale sought to mine this linguistic dimension in order to reintroduce barbarism as a *positive* concept: one that can point towards new, alternative languages, subjectivities, and worlds that may sound 'barbarian' (i.e., foreign) to existing practices and ideologies, but hold the potential to imagine the 'otherwise.' The title, in Erdemci words, "is about inventing unorthodox alchemical languages to define what we can yet barely discern on the horizon"; hence, she continues, the title

3 As Müldür's title shows, the lexeme *barbar-* is part of the Turkish language too. For a brief discussion of the Istanbul Biennial, from which some parts of this section loosely draw, see Boletsi 2014, 69–70.

4 See Boletsi 2013, 4 and Winkler's Introduction in vol. 1 of this study, p. 2–3.

seeks to "reintroduce 'barbarity' as a positive concept to open up the imagination to the construction of new subjectivities" (Erdemci in Rees and Erdemci 2013, n. pag.).

The desire for different languages that the title was meant to convey can be linked to the intense discontent expressed through the wave of protest movements and political uprisings that had impacted the global community when the Biennale was conceived: the uprisings of the so-called Arab Spring (2010–2012) and protest movements that emerged in the wake of the Great Recession of 2011, most notably the 'Indignados' movement in Spain and anti-austerity movements in Greece and other European countries between 2010 and 2012, as well as the 'Occupy Wall Street' movement (2011). The Biennale's framework, and the foregrounding of barbarism as an affirmative concept therein, was conceived as a response to these contrarian voices and as an attempt to explore art's role in imagining alternatives. Considering that most of these protest events took place predominantly in public space—as attempts to "reclaim the squares and streets for social and spatio-economic justice and equality"—the Biennial set out to draw attention to "the public domain as a political forum" (Erdemci 2013b, n. pag.) and explore its relation to subjectivity, democracy, and freedom. According to the exhibition's conceptual framework, published on the Biennial's website, by making the idea of the "public domain" its "focal point," the Biennial sought to probe ideas and practices that would

> question contemporary forms of democracy, challenge current models of spatio-economic politics, problematize the given concepts of civilization and barbarity as standardized positions and languages and, above all, unfold the role of contemporary art as an agent that both makes and unmakes what is considered public. (Erdemci 2013b, n. pag.)

This focus on the public domain was motivated by developments in Istanbul at the time the exhibition was being planned, and especially the growing protests against the city's ongoing urban transformation. This transformation followed a plan that had already begun in the 1980s, based on a neoliberal model that involved transforming the city towards a "global corporate style," in line with "free market ideology and global trends" (ibid.). More recently, the AKP (Justice and Development Party) government, led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, had launched invasive plans for marketing the city, which were, as Cansu Soyupak argues, presented as "transformative" in that they would create "new habitats for the locals," but "actually pushed the residents of [...] poor neighborhoods to the remotest corners of the city" while boosting "the inclusion of these neighborhoods into the real estate market" by "building multistory blocks" (Soyupak 2018, 89). The spatial politics of these transformation plans thus entailed gentrification, expulsion of certain population groups from specific neighborhoods and their further social marginalization, and the shrinking of public space as a space of political freedom and assembly.

The urban development plans for Istanbul's Taksim Gezi Park, specifically, triggered the so-called "Gezi park protests": a massive nationwide wave of demonstrations and civil unrest in Turkey that began on 28 May 2013. The Gezi protests, as I argue in the following, disrupted the relation between the Biennial's intention as expressed in its conceptual framework, and its actual realization in the fall of the same

year, after the protests had subsided. In line with the Biennial's objective to draw attention to the public domain, the curator announced that the Biennial would use contested urban transformation areas in Istanbul—Taksim Square, Gezi park, and the Karaköy and the Sulukule nieghborhoods, among others—as exhibition spaces (Erdemci 2013a, 26; Soyupak 2018, 92–93).

In its use of *barbarism*, the Biennial's conceptual framework draws a distinction between a negative and a positive tradition in the concept's genealogy:

> As a critique of the highest form of civilization and rationality, which has produced a world of barbarity in its negative sense (through colonial injustice, inequality, repression and violence), many artists of the Western tradition have advocated historically for what was primordial, primitive and irrational (Romanticism, Primitivism, Fauve, Dada and Surrealism for example). (Erdemci 2013b, n. pag.)

The "negative sense" pertains to the common association of the term with violence and brutality, and particularly with violent regimes and sociopolitical structures. The specific connection drawn here between (negative) barbarism and colonialism echoes the term's use in the work of anti-colonial thinkers—most famously in Aimé Césaire's "Discours sur le colonialisme" ("Discourse on Colonialism")[5]—where colonial rhetoric is upended to mark colonial structures (rather than colonized subjects) as barbaric. The positive sense of barbarism, as the curatorial text suggests, is primarily traced in artistic mobilizations of the concept, especially by the early twentieth-century avant-gardes, although the text places Primitivism, Fauve, Dada, and Surrealism next to Romanticism without specifying how barbarism was (differently) mobilized in each of these movements. Barbarism's affirmative use by artistic movements is linked here with the "primordial, primitive and irrational": the specificity of barbarism is somewhat lost, as its difference from concepts such as *primitivism* is brushed aside. Nevertheless, the Biennial's intention to recast barbarism positively clearly draws on the concept's use by the avant-gardes as an oppositional force to the rational structures of (Western) modernity and the violence these led to, as exemplified by European colonialism and by the destructive force of technology, especially during World War I. Dadaism, for example, introduced a shocking, 'negative' kind of art—antiaesthetic, antirational: an art that was 'barbarian' in that it challenged the rational, 'civilized' structures of European modernity and bourgeois culture. The negativity of Dadaist art can be deemed as a form of positive barbarism in that it "turned the negative qualities of crudeness and barbarism into a virtue" (Foster and Kuenzli 1979, 143). Similarly, surrealists were often seen as "barbarians hammering at the gates of [European] culture" (Vaneigem 1999, 20; Boletsi 2013, 78).

According to its conceptual framework, the Biennial sought to update this artistic tradition of positive barbarism by asking whether (and how) barbarism could be mobilized by artistic practices today as a positive force that critically intervenes in, and challenges, contemporary violent socio-political structures and systems.

5 For a discussion of barbarism in Césaire's essay see Winkler's chapter 6.3.1 in this volume.

> In the current context, what does it mean to be a barbarian? After all, galvanizing the limits of the civilized, the "barbarian" reflects the "absolute other" in society, circumnavigating the frames of identity politics and multicultural discourses. But, what does the reintroduction of barbarity as a concept reveal today? Is it a response to an urge to go beyond already existing formulas, towards the unknown? It may refer to a state of fragility, with potential for radical change (and/or destruction), thus, to the responsibility to take new positions. Through the unique interventions of artists, the biennial exhibition aims to explore further such pressing questions and will ask if art can foster the construction of new subjectivities to rethink the possibility of "publicness" today. (Erdemci 2013b, n. pag.)

As a figure of the "absolute other," the barbarian, this passage suggests, makes the contours of civilized society—i.e., the conditions that determine who belongs to civilization and who falls outside it—visible and, by extension, contestable. The questions in this passage, which suggest different ways of imagining a positive reintroduction of barbarism today, echo the avant-gardes as well as Walter Benjamin's notion of "positive barbarism," even though Benjamin is not named in the conceptual framework. Carrying the spirit of the avant-gardes, Benjamin's provocative proposal for a positive barbarism in his essay "Erfahrung und Armut" ("Experience and Poverty") (1933) was meant to challenge the structures of modernity and European bourgeois society, as well as the forces of fascism, and particularly Hitler's National Socialism, which was casting its barbaric shadow over Europe when Benjamin wrote his essay (Boletsi 2013, 110).[6] In the above passage from the Biennial, the investment of the concept of barbarism with a "potential for radical change (and/or destruction)" alludes to Benjamin's risky gesture of casting barbarism as a force of radical change through the destruction of the old in order to "start from scratch; to make a new start" (Benjamin 2005, 732). Remarkably, in the above quote from the Biennial's framework, the evocation of positive barbarism as a force of change through "destruction" is connected with the "responsibility" to take new positions, which would ensure that the future remains open to new, foreign, and thus 'barbarian' languages. These languages involve artistic practices and expressive modes through which, according to the Biennial's text, "new subjectivities" could emerge that exceed the existing categories of identity politics and the current neoliberal order. The Biennial's suggested "positive barbarism" is thus cast as a force of transgression and renewal that could take different directions:

> In the face of excessive production, connectivity and complexity in the world, the simple and direct (and their opposites, the over-complicated and convoluted) are espoused as an expression of the desire to start anew. Against the alarming incompetence of cities, governances and regimes, there is an increase in retreats to the countryside to start anew, develop new communities and alternative economic systems. (Erdemci 2013b, n. pag.)

6 Benjamin put forward the proposal for a positive barbarism in this short essay, but did not return to it in any of his later writings. For Benjamin's use of barbarism in this essay and elsewhere in his writings, see Winkler's chapter 5.3.3 in this volume.

According to this passage, positive barbarism could be imagined as a counterweight to the barbaric aspects of globalization and capitalism ("excessive production"), as a retreat to simpler, more environmentally sustainable and ethical modes of living ("the simple and direct," the "retreats to the countryside" that link barbarism to a form of primitivism or the rural), and as the desire to forge new social contracts, inclusive communities, and alternative, more just economic systems. The Biennial's association of barbarism with inclusivity, social justice or sustainability is of course at odds with the concept's violent history and exclusionary workings. The Biennial's conceptual framework acknowledges this history—"the etymological origin and historical and contemporary meanings of the word are loaded with strong connotations of exclusion" and the term *barbarian* "relates inversely to the city and the rights of those within it," we read elsewhere in the text (ibid.). The Biennial's positive mobilization of barbarism, then, as a concept that could do the exact opposite—help us "imagine another social contract in which citizens assume responsibility for each other, even for the weakest ones, those most excluded"—rests on the aforementioned affirmative uses of barbarism in art and critical theory, but nevertheless falls short of seriously engaging with the concept's problematic, violent workings, which are inevitably enmeshed in its positive recastings.

By evoking the contradictory meanings and uses of the barbarian, the Biennial underscores the concept's versatility, which enables its mobilization to different, even conflicting ends. This versatility underpins the Biennial's attempted inversion of the barbarian from the "non-citizen" and the one excluded from the *polis*, into a signifier for civil disobedience, potentially leading to alternative social contracts that include the formerly excluded.

To bring barbarism to bear on the role of contemporary art, the Biennial's conceptual framework mobilizes different understandings of barbarism. We can distinguish three interrelated ways in which barbarism is linked to contemporary art in the text. *First*, barbarism is associated with critical, engaged art that participates in the public domain as a form of *dissent*—an agonistic force that seeks to turn public space into a (democratic) battleground and "add more conflict to a specific context in order to make this 'battle' and the conflict visible" (Erdemci 2013b, n. pag.). This understanding of art's role in the public domain draws from political theorist Chantal Mouffe's understanding of critical art as art that rejects a consensual democratic model in favor of an agonistic model of democracy, that is, a conflictual democratic space in which different hegemonic projects can compete with each other without necessarily achieving resolution or consensus (ibid; Mouffe 2005, 2007). This kind of art is 'barbarian' in that it strives for the disruption of established social norms, habits, and purportedly commonsensical practices and for constant dissensus that does not allow hegemonic systems to remain unchallenged.

*Second*, contemporary art is linked to barbarism in that it offers a potential means of giving voice to those excluded by the social order. A society's 'barbarians'—the marginalized, disenfranchised or excluded—are assumed to speak 'barbarian' languages that are not heard or understood, and thus find no representation in the social and political order. Art, then, can become barbarian in a *third sense*: as a space that may enable such voices to find expression through artistic means or allow the imagination of alternative languages and worldviews that call for radical change.

"Is it possible that art can provide another way of experiencing the world outside of what is presented as the norm, or the only possible alternative?" the authors ask, and continue:

> Current artistic practices expand from hybrid trials to radical experimenting with unorthodox (even *barbaric*) languages, forms and processes, sometimes acting as "oxygen bubbles" in reality or as inter-subjective agents acting in the symbolic realm. [...] there are no ready-made formulations. In each case, a new formula or alchemy is needed. The Biennial will be the site for such experimentations. (Erdemci 2013b, n. pag.; emphasis added)

Art's "unorthodox," experimental languages—which the text designates as "barbaric," with the slight hesitation that the parentheses betray—may sound estranging, convoluted, provocative, incomprehensible, because they may shape or anticipate languages that are 'barbarian' in the etymological sense or in the related rhetorical sense of barbarism (*barbarismus*). The latter refers to "aesthetically and morally offensive incorrectness of speech," which, as explained in the first volume of this study, "reflects the association of the use of foreign language with inappropriate and amiss language."[7] The artistic languages the Biennial's text aspires to accommodate may sound like barbarian noise because they have not been fully articulated *yet* (pointing at the future-orientedness of artistic imagination) (Boletsi 2014, 70) but also because they may 'contaminate' normative, hegemonic languages with erratic, estranging elements.[8] These barbarisms herald a future 'barbarian' language, the rules and grammar of which do not yet exist (Boletsi 2014, 70).

The Biennial's use of barbarism to stress non-conformity, critical attitudes towards established paradigms, and (radical) newness chimes with one of the main features of the *genre* of curatorial statements today. The language of such statements, as Kompatsiaris argues, stresses "non-conformity and often rebelliousness against existing paradigms" and tries to convince readers that curators "present something new (often radically new) in respect to what has already been said or done" and "appear as both theoretically and socially informed as well as novel, experimental, and unique" (Kompatsiaris 2020, 761). The genre, in other words, subscribes to contemporary art's "mandates for anti-conformism" and "transgressiveness" (761). In the above-discussed passages from the Biennial's framework, the mobilization of (positive) barbarism to refer to "radical change (and/or destruction)," "new positions," "new subjectivities," a "new formula," "the desire to start anew" and to form "new communities and alternative economic systems," as well as experimentation "with unorthodox (even *barbaric*) languages" "outside of what is presented as the norm," can all be understood in the context of these generic features we come across in the framing of contemporary art events. Barbarism lends itself perfectly to such rhetorical strategies, especially owing to its historical meanings in early twentieth-century avant-gardes movements but also, before that, in the nineteenth-century movements

7 See Winkler's Introduction to vol. 1 of the present study, p. 13.

8 For a delineation of linguistic barbarisms (broadly understood) and how they work in literature and art, see Boletsi 2013, Lonsdale 2018, and Lonsdale's chapter 6.6 in this volume.

of decadence and aestheticism. Within the latter movements, the *barbarian* functioned not only as a threat to civilization but also as a redemptive force and a potential source of regeneration of an old, sick world.[9] In light of these traditions in the concept's history, it is hardly surprising that this biennial, as well as the two others discussed in the following, mobilize barbarism in their rhetorical strategies of "embrac[ing] the new and the novel by disavowing the 'old'" (Kompatsiaris 2020, 763).

The Istanbul Biennial's suggestion that art could assume a 'barbarian' role by challenging normative practices and the structures of neoliberal capitalism, carries the spirit of the avant-gardes and thus presupposes art's external position to the system it seeks to oppose. As a figure of the absolute other, the barbarian is, after all, located on the outside of the *polis* or of civilized society. How, then, can art's barbarian aspirations hold up to contemporary art's—and the Biennial's, specifically—implication in the neoliberal economy and the global (art) market that the Biennial sought to interrogate? The conceptual framework's authors acknowledge, in self-reflective fashion, that "in certain cases, the contemporary art world serves as the epicenter of the distribution of neoliberal culture and mechanisms" and that "biennials have been criticized for being catalysts of [urban] transformations in the name of city branding and marketing," which is precisely the kind of transformation of Istanbul's public domain that the Biennial set out to resist (Erdemci 2013b, n. pag.). But although the authors propose this problematic implication as a topic of debate for the Biennial, they do no discuss how this realization may undercut the Biennial's stated intention as well as its affirmative self-designation as 'barbarian.' Is it possible for art to be barbarian—in the way the authors understand this designation—if it is imbricated in the system it seeks to interrogate? If so, on which terms?

By posing such questions, the curators displayed their awareness of the implication of this art event in institutional forces, corporations, the global art market, and the capitalist economy that the Biennial sought to criticize. The conceptual framework thereby tapped into another feature of the genre of curatorial statements: that is, the strategy "of appearing self-aware to the public" not in order "to deny art institutional involvement but to instead accept it while implicitly assuming the art's potential to transform" (Kompatsiaris 2020, 767). Kompatsiaris elaborates on this:

> The biennial operates within a given political economy that involves high profile sponsorship from capitalist states and multinational corporations, among others. To claim that a 'critical exhibition' functions independently from these would simply be deemed naïve. Through self-reflective language the curators typically try to preempt criticism scorning them for hyper-inflating their role as critical intellectuals. (2020, 766)

In the case of Istanbul's Biennial, this rhetorical strategy eventually backfired, as the Biennial's self-reflexive and critical intent was overrun by another historical event. If the spirit of the Biennial's call for affirmative barbarism was limited by the institutional restrictions of a high-profile artistic event (Soyupak 2018, 92), its intention was more effectively taken up by a political event that unraveled in the period be-

9 On the concept of barbarism in the movements of decadence and aestheticism, see Boletsi's chapter 4 in vol. 1 of the present study, p. 310–21.

tween the announcement of the Biennial's theme and conceptual framework (in January 2013) and the actual exhibition (October-November 2013) and ended up overshadowing the Biennial: the Gezi park protests in Istanbul, which lasted from late May to late August 2013 and led to substantial changes in the Biennial's planned activities. Initially triggered as a protest against the urban development plans for Istanbul's Gezi park, which involved the building of a shopping mall on the site of the park, the protests quickly spread across Turkey and ended up addressing much larger concerns, including environmental issues, the diminished freedom of expression and assembly, the violation of civic rights, and the increasing authoritarianism of Turkey's ruling party, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (the AKP), as showcased by the brutal police efforts to suppress the protests. All these were issues that the Biennial's proposed positive barbarism also set out to address and oppose by artistic means.

The Gezi movement affirmed the topicality of the Biennial's theme, which took the public domain as "both a forum for political debate and a space imperiled by development and gentrification" (Verhagen 2013, n. pag.). Nevertheless, the protests eclipsed the Biennial and led its curator, Fulya Erdemci, to announce that the Biennial's public events program would not take place in the public domain (as initially planned) and that the projects commissioned for public sites would be canceled or relocated, "thereby withdrawing the biennial from the spaces occupied by the protestors" (Verhagen 2013, n. pag.). Erdemci, who presented this withdrawal as a "political statement," motivated this decision by arguing that "when we questioned what it meant to realize art projects with the permissions of the same authorities that do not allow the free expression of its citizens, we understood that the context was going through a radical shift that would sideline the *raison d'être* of realizing these projects" (Erdemci 2013, 27; also qtd in Verhagen 2013, n. pag.). The decision was heavily criticized for different reasons.[10] The grounds for this decision—i.e., that receiving permission for this public program from the authorities which the Gezi protests opposed would problematically entwine the Biennial with the authorities and compromise its alliance with the protesters—suggest that its intended 'artistic barbarism' rested on a shaky and precarious ground to begin with: a ground that could not be located *outside* 'civilization' (i.e, here, state authorities, institutions, the Turkish government, the market) but, inevitably, within it. The artistic barbarism would thus need to find ways to contest these 'civilizational forces' from within, without claiming an external position.

The intended affirmative barbarism of the Biennale was perhaps more forcefully realized by the Gezi protesters than by the Biennial itself, albeit by different means: the protesters mobilized new creative, humorous, hybrid, estranging 'languages'

10 Verhagen, for example, writes that the Biennial was "criticized for not intervening actively in contested public areas of the city and so failing to ally itself with the protestors on the ground. Erdemci and her team were also reproached, before the Gezi Park protests and by other critics, for accepting the support of Koç Holdings, Turkey's largest industrial conglomerate, which has served as the biennial's main sponsor since 2001" (Verhagen 2013, n. pag.). On the critique the Biennial faced, see also Jecu and Özgünaydin 2013, n. pag.; Batty 2013, n. pag.; Wilson-Goldie 2013, n. pag.

to resist the authorities and articulate alternative worldviews. Comparing the approaches and strategies of the 2013 Istanbul Biennale with those of the Gezi protesters through the notion of barbarism, Cansu Soyupak argues that the Biennale's call for a positive barbarism, which was compromised by the institutional limitations of this event, was counterpoised by "the 'barbarian' language of the Gezi park protests"—mainly expressed through the younger generations. The 'language' of this protest involved "linguistic barbarism as a strategy of political resistance" (2018, 92). Thus, Soyupak writes,

> While the biennale defined itself as barbarian in an affirmative way [...] the Gezi Park protesters were repeatedly accused of vandalism and barbarism in a negative sense, both in official statements by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and in many newspapers. Although the protesters' alleged barbarism was mostly related to their acts of occupation and depredation, scholarly articles and newspapers also focused on another kind of barbarism that typified the protest. This barbarism pertained to the incomprehensibility and novelty of the language that the protesters employed, especially through their wall writings. (91)

The Biennial's conceptualization of artistic barbarism as a mode of resistance that seems to presuppose an outside position to hegemonic power was confronted with the impossibility of such an external position in the context of globalized capitalism: an impossibility that the Biennial's eventual withdrawal from contested public spaces affirmed. By contrast, as Soyupak also argues, the protesters of the Gezi movement experimented with provocative, humorous, defamiliarizing, and creative languages of resistance—through slogans, banners, wall-writings, performances, and humorous public interventions—that sought to internally interrogate and reinvent the language of the system they opposed.[11] Thus, Soyupak contends, "they used the language of this system (the language of commercialization, pop culture, English as a global lingua franca, even the established language of the left) but hybridized and imbued it with *barbarisms* that led to its mutation into something different" (109). The languages of resistance mobilized by the Gezi protesters, as well as by other protest movements that emerged in the second decade of the tweny-first century, indicate strategies of subverting hegemonic systems and languages that can be captured through the *rhetorical* sense of barbarism (*barbarismus*),[12] broadly understood: possibilities to 'barbarize' such systems from within, by introducing barbarisms, i.e., "foreign, disruptive elements" that invade "dominant, normative discourses and modes of reading, writing, viewing, or knowing" (Boletsi 2013, 5).[13]

11 See Soyupak 2018 and Dağtaş 2016.
12 See also Winkler 2017.
13 For the way such barbarisms function in the literary realm, see Lonsdale's chapter 6.6 in this volume.

### 6.8.3. Ireland's 2016 EVA International: "Still (the) Barbarians"

The 2016 edition of EVA International, Ireland's Biennial, took place in Limerick (16 April–17 July), with Limerick City Gallery of Art and the run-down Cleeve's Condensed Milk Factory as its main venues. It was curated by Cameroonian curator Koyo Kouoh under the title "Still (the) Barbarians." The Biennial was held on the occasion of the centenary of the 1916 Easter Rising, an uprising by Irish republicans against British rule during the so-called revolutionary period in Ireland that marked a key moment in the ensuing Irish War of Independence (1919–1921): even though the insurgents were violently defeated by the British, the uprising fortified popular support for Irish independence. What is more, the event's impact exceeded the Irish context and became a source of inspiration for "anti-colonial resistance across the world" and "part of the growing wave of rebellion and revolution in response to impoverishment and slaughter of the imperial war" (Harkin 2016, n. pag.).

Taking this historical event and its reverberations and commemorations on the occasion of its centenary in 2016 as a starting point for reflection, the Biennial addressed the question of postcoloniality in the new millennium. According to the curatorial statement in the Biennial's call for proposals, Ireland's postcolonial condition would be taken as a starting point for pondering the transversal "forms of mental, physical and institutional decolonization across the world in comparison to Ireland as the primary testing territory of Western colonization systems before their expansion to the global map" ("Open Call" 2015, n. pag.). Kouoh provocatively identified Ireland as the first "laboratory of the British colonial enterprise" which was subsequently exported outside of Europe (Kouoh qtd in "Open Call for Proposals" 2015, n. pag.). The Irish case would thus serve as a point of departure for discussions and artistic responses that would revisit postcolonial legacies globally and the continuing impact of colonialism today ("Still (the) Barbarians: A Symposium" 2016, n. pag.) in various "forms of subjugation, alienation, humiliation and dispossession" ("Open Call" 2015, n. pag.). In the face of these persisting conditions, the curatorial project invited artistic practices that embraced an "aesthetics of subversion, transcendence and reappropriation" (ibid.).

Setting out to critically address colonial mechanisms of othering and exploitation and their contemporary afterlives, the Biennial's conceptual framework echoed the common function of the barbarian as an asymmetric counterconcept, and particularly its pervasive use in European colonial discourses to designate colonized others as inferior and subhuman, and thus to legitimize the colonial project and its 'civilizing mission' (Boletsi 2013, 62, 84). However, the Biennial also evoked affirmative uses of the barbarian by calling for artistic languages of "subversion, transcendence and reappropriation," through which "future utopias of togetherness" might be built ("Open Call" 2015, n. pag.). The call for languages of subversion subscribes to the aforementioned strategies in curatorial statements of biennials to display "transgressiveness," "non-conformity and often rebelliousness against existing paradigms" (Kompatsiaris 2020, 761).

Unlike the Istanbul Biennial, the Irish Biennial did not explicitly identify its call for subversive languages as a call for "positive barbarism." We might perceive Kouoh's curatorial hesitation to overtly endorse an affirmative barbarism as an ac-

knowledgment of the concept's pervasive violent connotations, especially in the colonial context, and of the risks of its affirmative mobilization. Nevertheless, as I show in the following, the title and theme of the Biennial—and the ways in which they were interpreted by critics and scholars—put forward the possibility of reclaiming and recasting this violent concept *otherwise* by those that civilizational discourse has tagged 'barbarians,' including the contributing artists, many of which came from formerly colonized countries.

While the Biennial's theme was inspired by the centenary of the Easter Rising, its title was derived from C. P. Cavafy's poem "Waiting for the Barbarians."[14] The way the Biennial's title relates to Cavafy's poem, as well as its approach to the concept of the barbarian, are open to interpretation. This equivocality is highlighted by the divergent readings of the Biennial's title in interviews, reviews, and other pieces in art magazines, blogs or newspapers. These readings range from an understanding of the title's barbarians as a figure of the external other, to inverse readings of the barbarians as a signifier for the (European, colonial) 'we,' and more nuanced interpretations that see the title's ambiguity as key to grasping the complex, critical treatment of this concept by the Biennial (and by Cavafy).

Liese van der Watt, for example, in her review titled "No More Waiting for the Barbarians," reads the Biennial's title as an affirmation that the barbarians are already among us and that we are barbarians. This reiterates a common reading of Cavafy's poem, but van der Watt derives this message primarily from J. M. Coetzee's novel of the same title. The novel, she writes, "makes it clear that we need not wait for barbarians, they are already in our midst: they are here, they are here now, and they are us" (Watt 2016, n. pag.). The barbarian's identification with the self-proclaimed (European) civilized 'we' chimes with the Biennial's postcolonial rethinking of Europe and the projection of Ireland as a site of colonial experimentation at the heart of Europe. It thus springs from a critique of historical (and ongoing) processes of barbarization of the (formerly) colonized that served the self-definition of the civilized West. Van der Watt writes:

> Still (the) Barbarians invokes a world of personal complicity, of unequal opportunities, of hybrid forms, of asymmetrical power relations, of financial disproportion. It is a postcolonial world that Africans are very familiar with, but Kouoh extends this to Ireland, which she reads as the first place where England practiced its land grab long before it extended its Empire all over the globe. (2016, n. pag.)

Following this line of argument, van der Watt removes the ambiguity of the Biennial's title by suggesting that the participating artists "are way beyond waiting for any barbarians" as they have already "recognised them/us and are already engaging them creatively and productively." The Biennial's attention to Ireland's postcolonial condition facilitates this identification of the barbarians with the former colonizers and, by extension, with agents or systemic forces involved in the perpetuation of inequality

14 See Boletsi's chapter 4 in vol. 1 of the present study, which was devoted to this poem, p. 285–334.

and asymmetrical power relations. It is a position that echoes Claude Lévi-Strauss' well-known dictum:[15]

> The more we claim to discriminate between cultures and customs as good and bad, the more completely *do we identify ourselves with those we would condemn.* By refusing to consider as human those who seem to us to be the most "savage" or "barbarous" of their representatives, *we merely adopt one of their own characteristic attitudes. The barbarian is, first and foremost, the man who believes in barbarism.* (1956, 129)

Ben Eastham reads the Biennial's title in the same spirit, as a means of underlining not only Europe's colonial past but also its complicity with contemporary crises in the global South, which are often thought of as external to Europe. A prime example thereof is the declared 'refugee crisis' triggered mainly by the war in Syria, which was already unfolding when the Biennial took place. The Biennial's postcolonial perspective prompts us to see the processes through which in this crisis "the victims of a war for which Europe is at least partly responsible are turned back at our borders" (Eastham 2016, n. pag.). "We are 'still barbarians,'" Eastham concludes by quoting the Biennial's curator, "'because we have not found a way of living together which is respectful of every human being'" (Kouoh qtd in Eastham 2016, n. pag.).

The title of José da Silva's review of the Biennial, "Barbarians at the Gate: Irish Biennial Finds Inspiration in Easter Rising," suggests that the barbarians are outside, waiting to enter. Although da Silva evokes the popularized figure of the 'barbarians at the gate,' he does not elucidate his use of this figure, mentioning only that the Biennial's title echoes Cavafy's poem "which touches upon the idea that a state needs outsiders in order to define itself" (da Silva 2016, n. pag.). The barbarian outsiders are thereby linked with the (formerly) colonized others (construed as such from a colonial perspective). By contrast, Stephanie Bailey's account of the Biennial opts for a more complex reading of the Biennial's title and theme in relation to Cavafy's poem by tracing in it a radical gesture of questioning dichotomies:

> Aptly, the biennial's title comes from a poem by the eminent poet of the Greek diaspora, Constantine P. Cavafy, in which the barbarians become nothing more than a spectre that haunts an inactive populace 'assembled in the forum,' paralysed by fear (and perhaps longing) for the barbarians to arrive (they never do). The poem's moral is surprisingly simple: the 'other' is nothing short of a projection that offers a distraction—or an avoidance—from inept politics. In many ways, the 'other' is the main theme of this exhibition, yet Kouoh does not take a straightforward or binary approach to the subject. (Bailey 2016, n. pag.)

Discussing the work "Finding Fanon" as exemplary of the Biennial's objective, Bailey aptly traces in it the Biennial's double, parallel exploration of the impact of colonialism on the (formerly) colonized and on (former) colonizers: "The stance the work takes is simple: if we do not face the history of imperialism together, as Fanon and

15 For a discussion of Claude Lévi-Strauss' position on this, see Winkler's Introduction to vol. 1 of the present study, p. 25.

Sartre both warned, we are doomed to the same violent divisions and reductions that were perpetrated by the colonisers in the first place" (2016, n. pag.). The Biennial sees the revisiting of colonial legacies as a common project for formerly colonized populations and colonizers, and a means of overcoming the violence of the asymmetrical counter-concepts of civilization and barbarism. Projecting Ireland as the first British colony and "Ireland's own postcolonial position as both a colony and a participant in the colonial experiments of the Imperial age" also highlights the ambivalent positions that the civilized/barbarian binary glosses over, that is, the fact that "dividing lines—and borders—are never as clearly defined as we think" (Bailey 2016, n. pag.). Taking this message one step further, the Biennial, according to Bailey, is concerned with fostering new languages that can account precisely for this complexity and "for all that is lost in translation when cultures come into contact with—or indeed become absorbed or dominated by—one another" (ibid.).

"Kouoh's title, with its parenthetical 'the,' allows for multiple readings," Aoife Rosenmayer also argues in her conversation with the curator, published under the title "Where the Barbarians Are." Kouoh presents the multivalence of the Biennial's title, inflected through Cavafy, as a conscious strategy: "This possibility of forward and backward shows the complexity of human life—it's not accusatory, it's not about victimization [...] It's just a demonstration of the complexity of togetherness" (Kouoh qtd in Rosenmayer 2016, n. pag.). The Biennial thereby moves beyond the anticolonial reversal of the barbarism/civilization opposition that attached the label of the barbarian to the colonizer—an accusatory gesture motivated by the justified indignation and colonial trauma that marked the voice of anticolonial thinkers like Aimé Césaire.[16] Rethinking how this colonial history haunts the globalized present, the Biennial invites us to take heed of our implication in the ongoing violence of the colonial project beyond the simplistic subject positions of victim/perpetrator or barbarian/civilized.

In 2016, the year the Biennial was held, the journal *Reciprocal Turn: Journal for Artistic Practice and Art Theory* hosted a special issue under the heading "Barbarians Wanted." The issue was devoted to the "iridescent figure of the barbarian" and its increasing uses in contemporary political rhetoric and the media, asking how art can intervene in this political landscape. With Cavafy's poem again playing a prominent role in the Editorial as a means of introducing "the kaleidoscopic motif of the barbarian," the issue hosted both "artistic and theoretical contributions" dealing "playfully, analytically, angrily and inquiringly with the act of naming oneself or someone else a 'barbarian'" (Hirtz and Ziebritzki 2016, n. pag.). The journal's editors, Mira Hirtz and Johanna Ziebritzki, included an interview with Eva Barois De Caevel, a curator involved in the Biennial's organization and catalog, which focused on the use of the term *barbarian* by the Biennial. In response to their question "Who are (the) barbarians within the framework of Ireland's Biennale of Contemporary Art 2016?", De Caevel saw the Biennial's 'barbarians' as the others a society produces "who are essential to the cohesion and efficiency of this society": the term, she contended, applies to any marginalized or excluded group within a society or, in the colonial

16 I am referring particularly to Césaire's essay "Discours sur le colonialisme" (1950).

context, to the subjugation and exploitation of a "whole society [...] by another," adding that the humiliation achieved through the tag of the barbarian becomes "a way to legitimate the exploitation" (De Caevel qtd in Hirtz and Ziebritzki 2016, n. pag.). For De Caevel, these processes of barbarization also resonate in the obstacles artists from former colonies still face in the time of globalized artistic events:

> When a huge part of our work, in this time of globalized exhibitions, consists in trying to obtain visas for artists living in post-colonies so that they can come and install their work in Limerick, we clearly feel that we are still in a time when a vast majority of the world population is deemed too alien to be able to take part in 'our' globalized cultural celebrations. [...] So, ironically, a lot of the artists whose work will be shown during the Biennial are actually treated as Barbarians regardless of the form, concept or content or their work. (De Caevel qtd in Hirtz and Ziebritzki 2016, n. pag.)

Reflections on the topicality of barbarism were of course not only undertaken by art critics and curators in response to the Biennial's title and framework, but were also addressed and aesthetically performed by the artworks featured in the Biennial. Even though an analysis of the hosted artworks exceeds the scope of this chapter, it is worth mentioning the work of Kostas Bassanos *In Search of the Exotic* (2016) as an example of an explicit engagement with the Biennale's title through Cavafy's poem. In this site-specific wall sculpture, Bassanos formed the line from Cavafy's poem "ΕΙΝΑΙ ΟΙ ΒΑΡΒΑΡΟΙ ΝΑ ΦΘΑΣΟΥΝ ΣΗΜΕΡΑ" ("The barbarians are due here today," see figure 6.7) with black letters and placed it on the roof of one of the buildings in the former milk factory—one of the Biennial's main venues. The artist's choice to use the Greek language instead of English (the *lingua franca*), contributed to the line's incomprehensibility for the average (non-Greek-speaking) visitor, for whom the artwork would be immediately visible as part of the building's façade. Greek functioned as a defamiliarizing barbarian language in this case, just as the phrase 'it's all Greek to me' today indicates the barbarian's incomprehensibility, and, by extension, the term's relational nature: Greek, a former signifier of the (civilized) center, becomes a marker of the European periphery and, even more, of the kind of incomprehensibility and opaqueness that accompanies the 'barbarian' from its historical beginnings (Boletsi 2013, 57).

The artwork's description in the exhibition catalog foregrounds the use of the Greek language instead of English as a form of resistance to hegemonic models that promote "an imagery of the same," hinting at the defamiliarizing function of barbarism as an agent of difference. The description also suggests the double function of the barbarian as on the one hand involved in stereotyping and demonization and on the other hand a potential agent of resistance to cultural homogenization. Although the catalog attributes this double function to the concept of the "exotic" (following the work's title), the function pertains much more to barbarism's etymological, linguistic sense: the *bar-bar* of the other does not only produce the other as inferior, but can also suggest the confusing, subversive workings of the other's 'noise' for the hegemonic 'civilized' language. Greek as a (currently) minor language is thus taken up as a means of "resistance through language as a safeguard of cultural identity" ("Still (the) Barbarians: Exhibition Catalogue" 2016, n. pag.). This also chimes


Fig. 6.7: Kostas Bassanos, *In Search of the Exotic* (2016). Installation view at EVA International – Ireland's Biennial 2016. Dimensions variable. Photo Miriam O'Connor. Courtesy of the Artist and EVA International.

with the Biennial's gesture to translate its catalog for the first time into Irish instead of only using "the art world's lingua franca," English (Rosenmeyer 2016, n. pag.). Claiming space for peripheral languages and resisting forms of domination through language (Dunne 2016, n. pag.) was thus another goal that the exhibition's evocation of barbarism sought to achieve.

### 6.8.4. Athens' Biennial (2017/2018): "Waiting for the Barbarians" and ANTI

As the 5th Athens Biennale was held in 2015, the 6th edition was supposed to take place in 2017. However, with Documenta declaring its intentions to hold its 14th edition both in Kassel and in Athens in 2017, too close to what would have been the Athens Biennale's sixth edition, the timeframe of the latter shifted. The presence of Documenta, this quinquennial exhibition of contemporary art that has grown into a global "mega-event" in the art world (Plantzos 2019, 471), generally "seemed to destabilise the Biennale" (Bailey 2019, n. pag.). In 2017, the Biennale announced "a strategic postponing" of its 6th edition "in a year of 'Active Waiting'" that included a series of performative events under the heading of Cavafy's poem, "Waiting for the Barbarians" ("6th Athens Biennale" 2018, n. pag.). The programme during this year, which was launched on 5 April 2017, was curated by Heart & Sword Division, a group of artists, curators, and theorists, and was supposed to culminate in April 2018 with the exhibition "Waiting for the Barbarians".

Eventually, "Waiting for the Barbarians" remained the title of the program of that year of "Active Waiting," but the official title of the 6th Biennale became "ANTI" and was curated by Stefanie Hassler, Poka-Yio, and Kostis Stafylakis. "Waiting for the Barbarians" thus ended up functioning as a "prelude to *ANTI*" ("6th Athens Biennale: ANTI" 2018a, n. pag.). ANTI took place from October 26 to December 9, 2019, in four Athenian venues in the area of the Old Parliament and Syntagma Square, with the iconic TTT (Telecommunications, Telegrams, and Post) building as its main venue, hosting more than one hundred Greek and international artists ("Athens Biennale" 2020, n. pag.). Held in the fall of 2018, after a decade of crisis, austerity, and waves of "revolt, opposition, reaction and regression" in the city, ANTI posed the question of opposition and resistance today. It particularly addressed the "normalization of opposition and non-conformity" in politics, art, (web) culture, and theory, in an era of post-truth and reactionary politics ("6th Athens Biennale: ANTI" 2018a, n. pag.). Much as this focus was largely motivated by the context of crisis-stricken Greece, the Biennial's self-reflexive emphasis on the possibilities for non-conformity, resistance, and critique in contemporary art, politics, and theory adheres quite firmly to the aforementioned features of the genre of curatorial statements in contemporary art events (Kompatsiaris 2020).

In the following, I focus on the conceptualization of the programme "Waiting for the Barbarians" in the context of the Biennial, as it was presented by the team of curators, in order to scrutinize the function of barbarism in the programme's framing. As I will show, the programme's 'barbarian aspirations' cannot be understood without considering the role of Documenta 14 in Athens, to which "Waiting for the Barbarians" was a direct critical response. It is no coincidence that the curatorial statement by the Heart & Sword Division, the team that put together this prelude to the Athens Biennale (henceforth: HSD), starts with a question that echoes the Documenta 14 slogan: "Will there ever be any 'Learning from Athens'?" (HSD 2017, n. pag.).

The Biennial's "Waiting for the Barbarians" program drew on opposed conceptions of the barbarian—as a negative and positive, destructive and creative, disempowered and empowered, evil and messianic figure. We already saw how some of these conflicting versions of barbarians figured in the framework of the 2013 Istanbul Biennial. The Athens Biennale, however, evoked this figure and its permutations to a different end. The curatorial statement by HSD juxtaposes two barbarian figures. On the one hand, in public discourse the barbarian is a figure for external threatening others that have been "ante portas" "since the start of the new century"—a likely allusion to 9/11 and the ensuing threat of terrorism and fear of 'barbarian invasions' (HSD 2017, n. pag.). On the other hand, in intellectual thought and in the field of art the barbarian is often cast in "positive and messianic terms" as "a new nomadic/rootless/hybrid/global subjectivity" (ibid.). The curators denounce the conventional conception of the barbarian as a negative other in a binary discursive structure, regardless of the term's referent: "The Barbarian is neither the ominous Other, the refugee, the migrant, the Muslim, nor the exoticizing and eroticizing orientalist, the 'menace' of the 'northern colonialist'" (ibid.). Instead, they call for inviting the barbarians in, by declaring "a year of Active Waiting," leading up to the Biennial's exhibition in April 2018.

Their short curatorial statement sounds rather cryptic in its treatment of the barbarian, as it does not elucidate the curators' position vis-à-vis the second figure of the barbarian they distinguish (the positive or messianic barbarian in intellectual thought and art) or the terms of their call to invite "the barbarians in." In that respect, an interview they gave on 5 April 2017, characteristically titled "So we decide to become barbarians ourselves" (in Greek), is useful, as it brings the terms of their engagement with barbarism, and the context in which they intervened, into sharper relief. Their reference in the curatorial statement to the barbarian as a figure for the evil other is presented in their interview as a critical response to a "new humanism" in art that exorcizes the 'barbaric' by relegating it to exceptional or marginal phenomena that are not worth serious consideration:

> We begin with the working hypothesis that what we exorcise, what we constantly trace in the image of the other, in Trump, in Soras,[17] in ISIS, in the Golden Dawn voter, in instrumentalized lies, can no longer be understood as a marginal condition [...] or simply a reaction to the economic instability of these times. It is something that [...] has invaded the local and global everydayness. What today emerges in the form of a nightmare must be sought within the mental and social representations of the everyday, in the material of normality. Evil is not just, as a certain tradition dictates, lack or depletion of the good. It is there, and has its own self-existent forms. (HSD in Kleftoyianni 2017, n. pag.; my translation, M. B.)

The barbaric is identified with the "evil" exemplified by the violence of the far right, terrorism, and the manipulation of the public in the era of post-truth. According to HSD, while such forms of barbarism enter mainstream politics, art's reluctance to engage with these phenomena in their own right forestalls a deeper understanding of their workings that would allow us to resist them more effectively.

This kind of barbarism—which for HSD is an autonomous force rather than the derivative, negative part of a binary—is counterpoised by an exaltation of the barbaric in art, where it is invested with messianic overtones:

> A large part of contemporary art and intellectual thought beautified, refined the barbarians. In the new century, this process is reflected in art's selective and often raw enthusiasm for radical political thought. In the recent intellectual history of Documenta and the field of art there are many moments of excitement and ambivalence towards the barbarians. (HSD in Kleftoyianni 2017, n. pag.)[18]

17 Artemis Soras is a controversial Greek businessman and politician, former leader of the extreme right, ultra-nationalist party "Convention of Greeks" ("Ελλήνων Συνέλευσις"), who was convicted in 2019 for defrauding the Greek state and for leading a criminal organization.

18 In Greek: "Ένα μεγάλο κομμάτι της σύγχρονης τέχνης και της διανόησης ωραιοποίησε, εξευγένισε τους βαρβάρους. Αυτή η διαδικασία αποτυπώνεται, στο νέο αιώνα, στον επιλεκτικό και συχνά ακατέργαστο ενθουσιασμό της τέχνης για τη ριζοσπαστική πολιτική σκέψη. Στην πρόσφατη διανοητική ιστορία της Documenta και του πεδίου της τέχνης υπάρχουν πολλές στιγμές ενθουσιασμού και αμφιθυμίας απέναντι στους βάρβαρους."

Although the latter (affirmative) conception of barbarism in art is not put in historical perspective by HSD, it harks back, as we saw, to decadent art and poetry, in which the barbarians were hailed with a mixture of fear and longing as a force of destruction and potential renewal of a decaying civilization.[19] It also alludes to the avant-garde movements of the early twentieth century, and especially dadaists and surrealists, who saw themselves as destroying bourgeois conventions and decorum and unsettling the values of Western civilization and of previous artistic traditions.[20] In theory and philosophy, affirmative conceptualizations of the barbarian can be traced in radical political thought, from Walter Benjamin's "positive barbarism" in 1933[21] to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's "new barbarians": the multitude that is invested with the potential to destabilize the totalizing condition in neoliberal capitalism they call "Empire" (2000). Unlike the Istanbul Biennial, which largely rested on this artistic genealogy of the (positive) barbarian in its conceptual framework, for HSD this artistic endorsement and 'refinement' of barbarism should be met with suspicion, especially with regard to its twenty-first-century epigones: the artistic scene of the new millennium, they suggest, tends to embrace a 'light,' tamed barbarian, stemming from radical political thought but deprived of its political edge.

As they unpack their argument, the main target of their critique—Documenta—becomes unmistakably manifest. Documenta figures as the exemplification of this 'tamed' barbarism within the institutional framework of a (lavishly funded) spectacular artistic event, which to them amounts to a pseudo-critique of the status quo:

> Documenta 11 is enchanted by Hardt and Negri's neo-barbaric multitude. In a different tone, Documenta 12 reads Agamben and poses the question of "naked life" in order to chart "barbarism" within modernity and Western culture. The uprisings that erupted in 2010 are set against the background of the seductive and pseudo-revelational texts of the Invisible Committee. Documenta 13 flirts with animism, searching for unknown life forms in matter and the world of objects. Documenta 14 makes the "native" a leitmotif of its thinking (HSD in Kleftoyianni 2017, n. pag.)[22]

Such institutional endorsements of (a too broadly defined) barbarism are attacked as a form of pseudo-radicalism that pleads for a new ground through the destruction of the old but is in fact too 'civilized' to constitute a real challenge to power or a form

19 See Boletsi in vol. 1 of the present study, p. 310–21.

20 For uses of barbarism in early twentieth-century avant-garde movements, see Moser's chapter 5.1.1 in this volume.

21 On Benjamin's positive barbarism, see Boletsi 2013, 108–38 and Winkler's chapter 5.3.3 in this volume.

22 In Greek: "Η Documenta 11 μαγεύεται από το νέο-βάρβαρο πλήθος των Hardt και Negri. Σε άλλο τόνο, η Documenta 12 διαβάζει Agamben και θέτει το ερώτημα της «γυμνής ζωής» με στόχο να χαρτογραφήσει τη «βαρβαρότητα» μέσα στη νεωτερικότητα και το δυτικό πολιτισμό. Οι εξεγέρσεις που ξεσπούν το 2010 έχουν στο φόντο τους τα σαγηνευτικά και ψευδο-αποκαλυψιακά κείμενα της Invisible Committee. Η Documenta 13 φλερτάρει με τον ανιμισμό, αναζητώντας άγνωστες μορφές ζωής μέσα στην ύλη και τον κόσμο των αντικειμένων. Η Documenta 14 καθιστά τον «Ιθαγενή» leitmotiv της σκέψης της."

of rebellion. From this perspective, we can assume that the Istanbul Biennal's endorsement of the concept would also fall under this category. The curatorial team of "Waiting for the Barbarians" thus seems to criticize precisely those strategies in curatorial statements of global art events that 'sell' transgressiveness, radical critique, anti-conformism, and rebelliousness through "an intellectually slick and sophisticated language practicing controlled critique, political correctness, and social awareness" (Kompatsiaris 2020, 761). The curatorial team sees these strategies as a refined form of artistic barbarism that is integral to the art system and, more generally, the capitalist market. Their critique in fact performs on a *meta-level* another generic feature that typifies the codes of contemporary art: namely, the use of "self-reflective language" by curators, meant to "preempt criticism scorning them for hyper-inflating their role as critical intellectuals" and to acknowledge "awareness of one's privilege" (766–67). By criticizing the conventional codes of (other) large art events as a form of 'fake' barbarism, they perform a meta-critique of sorts that could be perceived as a form of self-awareness *squared*. However, at this point, HSD's critique takes a tricky, controversial turn when they appropriate the label of the barbarian for themselves:

> We live in an age characterized again by various demands of polygenesis, national sovereignty and self-determination. [...] So we decide to become barbarians too. You know, convention now commands us to be polite, not to provoke the arrogance of others, [...] to accept anything that is marketed as anti-hierarchical curating. We think it is high time for all of us to face our urges, our impulses and become what some of us imagined, or others imagined for us: to become barbarians—authentic natives. (HSD in Kleftoyianni 2017, n. pag.)[23]

The 'fake' barbarism of institutionalized art is here counterpoised to a more authentic barbarian identity that they assume for themselves, thereby implicitly situating themselves outside, or in the margins of, the global art system: as 'natives' rather than (inauthentic) critical cosmopolitans. This statement needs to be understood in the context of the widespread criticism levelled in Greece against Documenta 14. With Adam Szymczyk as its artistic director, this grand event in the global contemporary art world, which always takes place in Kassel, Germany, was held in two locations for the first time in its history (since 1955)—in Athens (from 8 April to 16 July) and in Kassel (from 10 June to 17 September 2017)—under the slogan "Learning from Athens." The announcement of the decision to move Documenta to Athens was made in 2013, as the country found itself in the worst phase of its financial crisis (Plantzos 2019, 472). Although a detailed exposition of the criticism against Documenta's gesture exceeds the scope of this chapter, suffice it to say that many of these

23 In Greek: "Ζούμε σε μια εποχή που χαρακτηρίζεται ξανά από διάφορα αιτήματα παλιγγενεσίας, εθνικής κυριαρχίας και αυτοδιάθεσης. [...] Αποφασίζουμε λοιπόν κι εμείς να γίνουμε βάρβαροι. Ξέρετε, η συνθήκη τώρα προστάζει να είμαστε ευγενείς, να μην προκαλέσουμε την υπεροψία των άλλων, [...] να είμαστε καταφατικοί απέναντι σε ο,τιδήποτε πλασάρεται ως αντι-ιεραρχικό curating. Νομίζουμε ότι ήρθε η ώρα να αντιμετωπίσουμε όλοι τις έξεις, τις ορμές μας και να γίνουμε αυτό που κάποιοι από εμάς φαντάζονταν, ή οι άλλοι φαντάζονταν για εμάς, το να γίνουμε βάρβαροι—αυθεντικοί ιθαγενείς."

critical voices saw an orientalist and (crypto-)colonial[24] attitude in Documenta's approach to its second location—an objectification of "Athens as a city from which to learn, per its title, 'Learning from Athens'" (Bailey 2019, n. pag.; Busch 2018, n. pag.), with elements of crisis tourism concealed under a progressive and nominally non-hierarchical agenda. Documenta 14, according to its critics, capitalized on the crisis in Greece, exoticizing Athenians as "suffering Orientals, subject to the colonizing gaze of a superior, debt-free 'West'" and "ended up confirming the harshly familiar and deeply dehumanizing 'crisis discourse' of the previous years" (Plantzos 2019, 472).

As self-appointed barbarians, the members of the HSD team sought to oppose what they saw as Documenta's pseudo-progressive, exoticizing, orientalizing approach. Their response could be epitomized like this: 'If Documenta (or similar art events) wants barbarians, then barbarians they will get!' Their criticism, however, was partly misplaced: it proposed a form of resistance—dubbed as an 'authentic' kind of barbarism—that flirted with nationalism and parochialism, presented as an attempt at self-determination. The nationalist undertones of their gesture were further evidenced by the 'barbarian attire' through which they performed their militant attitude: during a press conference they appeared wearing black costumes reminiscent of Greek brigands, which in the Greek national imaginary are associated with the history of resistance against the Ottoman occupation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Bailey 2019, 14). Their gesture, Stephanie Bailey argued, "brought a historical legacy of national resistance into contact with a contemporary nationalist climate—a strange full-circle that some dismissed as a bad joke" (14).

As a move "laced with over-identification," as Benjamin Busch put it (2018, n. pag.), HSD's attempt to embody an 'authentic barbarism' as a counterforce to an artistic barbarism 'tamed' and appropriated by the neoliberal art system, was ultimately also part of the Athens Biennale's self-aware experiments with forms of opposition. Such *artistic* experimentations unraveled during the exhibition under the Biennale's final title, ANTI. The exhibition's exploration of the possibilities of critique and resistance against the backdrop of a "normalization of opposition and non-conformity" ("6th Athens Biennale" 2018a, n. pag.) integrated some of the concerns of its prelude ("Waiting for the Barbarians") through a more nuanced approach. Mining the "experience of ambiguity, polarity and contrariness inherent in ANTI," the Athens Biennale took the impossibility of an external position of critique and resistance today as its central premise: "we cannot fight reactionary culture and politics in the 'post-truth' era with yet another ANTI. To deal with ANTI means to oscillate between power and revolt by internalizing, reenacting or cannibalizing both" (6th Athens Biennale" 2018b, n. pag.).

In this critical interrogation of art's potential to oppose power we trace a difference with the Istanbul Biennial's conceptual framework, which was partly (and

24 The term crypto-colonialism was proposed by Michael Herzfeld as "the curious alchemy whereby certain countries, buffer zones between the colonised lands and those as yet untamed, were compelled to acquire their political independence at the expense of massive economic dependence, this relationship being articulated in the iconic guise of aggressively national culture fashioned to suit foreign models" (2002, 901). This has been seen as an ongoing situation in Greece's relationship with Europe (and the West).

somewhat naively, perhaps) premised on the potential of a 'barbarian' art to resist from the outside—albeit with the necessary self-reflection on the limitations of such resistance within the institutional framework of a biennial. HSD's suspicion towards the 'tamed barbarians' of the artistic scene that are immersed in the system they aspire to oppose, clearly resonates with ANTI's objectives, yet the possibility of an external locus of opposition—the site of the 'authentic barbarians' that HSD claimed for themselves—is given up in ANTI's curatorial statement. Instead, ANTI seems to pay heed to (internal) forms of opposition that draw on the rhetorical sense of barbarism: a mistake in language or, more broadly, an agent of contamination of a normative language that acts from *within* that language. Thus, the artworks hosted at the Biennale mobilized strategies of mimicry, cannibalization, hybridization, overidentification or subversive repetition as forms of 'barbarization' that seek to destabilize power by internalizing it *otherwise*.

A striking example of such strategies, which became one of the Biennale's most controversial works, was the performance "How to become a nationalist pop star" by Front Deutscher Äpfel, which used overidentification to mimic and satirize the aesthetics of alt-right and fascist parties. Front Deutscher Äpfel is a German artist group of antifascists that since 2004 has been employing the "*gestalt* of the German right-wing extremist parties" to subvert their ideology and strategies from within (Stafylakis 2019, n. pag.). For this performance, the group set up the Biennale's largest installation in a conference room of the abandonded Esperia Palace Hotel, where they placed the Front's headquarters. The performance adopted Nazi aesthetics, with banners figuring an apple instead of the swastika, with the Front members dressed in black military-style clothing including red armbands with the apple logo, and with "a video showing the Front joining far-right rallies dressed like Nazis" (Bailey 2019, 425). The group also set up a workshop, the aim of which was "to challenge the role of local TV reality shows in the normalization of nationalism" (Stafylakis 2019, n. pag.). In this strategy of overidentification, fascist imagery and symbols were undermined by means of an exaggerated appropriation and mimicry (Batycka 2018, n. pag.).

The performance attracted much attention and was met with a fair share of criticism. A strand of criticism stressed the danger of a satirical overidentification being taken seriously or literally by audiences and visitors, offending them or 'contaminating' them with fascist images and ideology (Bailey 2019, 425; Stafylakis 2019, n. pag.). Another strand of critical responses pointed out the superficiality and inexpediency of the Front's exaggerated performance in the discursively muddled present context: in this context, exponents of the alt-right, Nazism or fascism insidiously 'cannibalize' or appropriate contrarian discourses, signifiers, and imagery from the aesthetics or rhetoric of the Left or emancipatory movements seeking alternatives under neoliberal capitalism. It is in this spirit that Morgan Quaintance, for example, questions the Front's tactics of mimicry, as responding "to an outdated 'Triumph of the Will' image of fascism and Nazism, a stable world full of goose-stepping ideologues and Sieg-Heiling skinheads" that "doesn't exist":

> Today, fascism, racism, nationalism and Nazism come together in an ever-shifting, contradictory and amorphous world of floating signifiers, confused allegiances and discrepant alliances. We are talking about a world in which fascists hide their allegiances by

> wearing sportswear such as the Lonsdale brand because the letters NSDA in its logo are similar to the NSDAP acronym of Hitler's National Socialist German Workers Party, or where fascists wear the Palestinian keffiyeh as a symbol of 'freedom' and antisemitism. In other words, cryptic obliquity is the name of the game. (Quaintance 2019, n. pag.)

This kind of 'barbarization' of alt-right aesthetics—a kind of contamination of this aesthetics from within—is indeed tricky as a means of countering an enemy that does not stick to a rigid code or aesthetics anymore, but 'barbarizes' various aesthetic codes and vocabularies to widen its reach. Indeed, the convoluted landscape of post-truth makes art's function as a barbarian force of critique to the status quo—its workings, that is, as an ANTI-force—all the more complex, ambivalent, and unstable. If the barbarian can no longer be imagined as an external threat to a globalized capitalist system without an outside, and if the discursive and aesthetic codes of the left and the right, progressive and reactionary forces, are harder to distinguish in a post-truth era, the efficacy of any 'barbarian' role ascribed to art cannot be taken for granted. This complex landscape poses additional challenges to the contrarian aspirations of artists, but also pushes them towards experimenting with formal and aesthetic strategies and modes of engagement that tap into, but also mutate or repudiate artistic 'barbarian' languages of the past.