



# Repeating brokenness: Repair as non-reproductive occupation, improvisation and speculation

Gigi Argyropoulou and Hypatia Vourloumis

## Introduction

Repair is commonly associated with improvement, with making better, with fixing. But what happens when it is impossible, and even undesirable, to fix what is broken? Or when we are not only incapable of total repair but also seeking to politically and collectively attend to the breakdowns and crises that expose the corruptions of a dominant system? If logistical and algorithmic capitalism operates through constant improvement what would it mean to refuse to improve ourselves, to claim our incompleteness, to jay-walk, to live with brokenness? These questions are ones we have been grappling with for several years in Athens, Greece. Through practices of illegal occupation and repair, we have been engaging in a wayfaring ‘wayfinding’ through social and cultural experimentation (Ingold, 2000).

In the following, we return to these experiments of symbolic and physical repair, namely the occupations of the Embros theatre in 2011 and Green Park café in 2015 in central Athens, and the community building and performance making these occupations enabled. Responding to a lack of cultural state and private funding and infrastructural support, exacerbated by Greece’s bankruptcy and debt crisis which officially began in 2010, pressing questions at the time of occupying and repairing these two public buildings were: how can those who are broke, take over the means of production of abandoned spaces infrastructurally, organisationally and aesthetically? Furthermore, how were practices of improvisation, speculation and non-reproduction addressed and manifested by

the respective occupations' refusal to reproduce the norms and conventional structures of cultural production by staying in a zone of experimentation and open participation? These are just some of the questions and practices we seek to elaborate on in these notes. In so doing we think through the improvisatory and speculative practice of repair and the ways in which repair can also be contingent on the avowal of repeating brokenness and a refusal of improvement: we ask, what must be repaired and what must be refused in order to enable the organisation of alternative cultural structures?

### **Occupying, repairing and performing in Embros and Green Park**

In November 2011 the Mavili Collective, a small group of performance makers and theorists who took their name from Mavili Square where they often met, occupied the Embros public theatre, a state owned building left empty for seven years.<sup>1</sup> After a series of meetings held over a period of several months with people from the arts and education, Mavili composed and released a manifesto which openly called for collective efforts to occupy Embros with questions and ongoing processes of experimental cultural production rather than use the space to release finished and fixed products (Mavili Collective, 2011). Mavili's call was ephemerally addressed by a large showing in support of the occupation that included people from diverse art, architectural, theoretical and cultural fields. Importantly, repairing the infrastructure of the building through DIY methods was necessary before the occupants could begin experimenting with different forms of instituting and performance.

These repairs necessitated, as Stephen Graham and Nigel Thrift note in their essay 'Out of order: Understanding repair and maintenance', processes of 'ongoing, situated inquiry' and 'improvisation' (2007: 4). In the context of Embros this situated inquiry and improvisation entailed cleaning the space, identifying structural problems of the building, as well as organising, displaying, reusing and archiving the props, costumes and objects used during the theatre's past life and found abandoned in dusty heaps strewn across the theatre. Workers such as engineers, plumbers and electricians also offered their time and knowledge mostly on a volunteer basis or at a discount price, while costs were covered by pooling finances between members of the collective and their friends and acquaintances. These repairs enabled the opening twelve-day program of the Embros occupation which brought together around 300 presenters entailing several generations of cultural workers across different practices including, but

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1 The members of Mavili Collective were: Anestis Azas, Gigi Argyropoulou, Argiro Chioti, Georgios Kolios, Kostas Koutsolelos, Georgia Mavragani and Vassilis Noulas.

not limited to, artists, academics, anarchists, immigrant performance groups and students, all of whom occupied the same stage. Seeking to disrupt the hierarchical structures of the art market, the program primarily emphasised the sharing of works in progress, open rehearsals, and incomplete experimentations, reversing audience's expectations and the usual categories and consumption of theoretical and cultural production.<sup>2</sup>



*Image 1. Embros Reactivation, 2011. Photo: Georgios Makkas.*

Four years later, the occupation of the Green Park café in 2015 was formed from a large collective of people who met in Embros and who now called for joy, friendship and politics to emerge in more unexpected broken places (Green Park, 2015). Also state owned and abandoned for seven years Green Park required even more labor to clean the space from tons of rubble and waste, attend to structural problems, provide water, electricity, furniture, again offered on a volunteer or discounted basis by different collaborators. What would an infrastructure of friendship, joy and brokenness entail in practice? This, along with many others, was the inevitable aporia emerging from the returning to and repairing of these two spaces so as to re-address cultural production and collectively rethink the

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2 For details on this opening programme see: <https://mavilicollective.wordpress.com/re-activate/programme-day-by-day/>.

processes of decision-making and organisation through models of mutual aid which emphasised voluntary cooperation.



*Image 2. Cleaning of Green Park, 2015. Photo: Evi Kalogiropoulou.*

Once the programs were up and running the collectivities and presenters involved joined forces so as to attend to the continuous repairs and maintenance required ranging from cleaning, guarding equipment, lending or borrowing technical infrastructures such as lighting and consoles, cutting multiple sets of keys so different people could attend to the needs of the buildings and cultural programming in shifts. Although the Mavili manifesto had initially stated that no monetary exchange would take place in the space of Embros someone one day anonymously turned a glass upside down on the bar with putting money in it. This became a collective pot and was a practice repeated in Green Park also. People continuously donated cash, which allowed both spaces to run a bar to support daily expenses, gradually reimburse those who had contributed money for the initial supplies and services required and further strengthen the structural problems of the buildings that were constantly breaking down. Audience members and passing visitors became active participants in attending to structural issues of the physical spaces by sharing their know-how and labour while also participating in the critique and direct action of the cultural programmes through lively Q&A sessions. Balancing between structure and improvisation, the events of each day were always in the making, never fixed,

reprinted and re-organised daily in response to new arrivals and expressed desires to participate, while the presenters and audience actively produced the space through new ideas for actions and curation, drink and food offerings, impromptu debates, the donation of equipment and tools, informal reflections and discussions. Thus, in both occupations coinciding practices of repair and performance production happened at the same time where forms of cultural experimentation were contingent on the actual material conditions of the respective spaces. Resisting, in Antonio Gramsci's words, the cultural 'manufacture of consent' (Gramsci, 1971) sedimented by reproductive practices within the Greek milieu, the programmes of Embros and Green Park produced unexpected, unfamiliar spaces in the heart of Athens drawing large and diverse audiences expressing their own civic capacities to challenge assumptions and norms of cultural spaces through the collaborative repair of the material conditions in which the performance of new ideas and visions could take place.

### **Breaking (with) the terms of order**

All efforts to attend to the site-specific needs and repairs of the two occupied spaces were readily offered by way of a sharing of time, know-how and resources by the participants involved. These responses reflect the ways in which, as the Greek debt crisis deepened (and deepens still), what was increasingly collectively perceived to be glaringly out of order were the terms of order themselves. As Cedric Robinson emphasises in 'The terms of order', western liberal political and economic structures must be treated as objects of inquiry and denaturalised. Troubling the myth of state leadership in western democracies that supposedly instills the illusionary management of order over chaos Robinson seeks to 'abuse the political consciousness' (Robinson, 2016: 6) by uncovering institutional and historically patterned mechanisms of power and authority, and detailing radical epistemologies and ontologies preceding and exceeding those mechanisms. By attending to what was out of order and to be repaired in the spaces of Embros and Green Park through improvised ongoing situated inquiry was also to critically engage reproductive systems that concretise political and economic rules. The emphasis on non-hierarchical organisational structures within the occupations and the call for collectively-run autonomous spaces and art-making were, in both cases, a refusal of the terms of order that manifest and produce capitalist social relations. The collective moves to Embros and Green Park were attempts to reflect upon questions of functionality, representation and identity by refusing to settle for a fixed political character, by refusing to reproduce models of management and cultural authority, by refusing a marketing of the spaces and the reproduction of the power relations emanating from both the state and the conventions of oppositional organising. In the context of Greece, the crippling

austerity measures, over-taxation, sale of public lands and resources, evictions and privatisation of Greek public goods so as to meet the conditions laid out by Greece's lenders after it defaulted in 2010 reveals the ways in which the Greek 'debt crisis' is a mode of governance and expropriation. At first, as the Greek state sunk into further debt resulting in a further defunding of cultural production the Mavili Collective attempted to engage in processes that sought to improve conditions in the cultural sector through dialogues with state mechanisms. However, as the crisis escalated and the dialogue with state actors deteriorated, the occupation of Embros was initiated as a practical experiment and a paradigm of direct action where 'artists, theoreticians, practitioners and the public will meet and try out models beyond the limits of their practice and the markets' structural demands of the artistic product' (Mavili Collective, 2011). Through the occupation of Embros which after a few years enabled the subsequent occupation of Green Park, the cultural producers involved forwent demanding rights from the state as a solution to the situation or an act of repair and instead deployed 'friendship as a political relationship in a struggle against cultural and artistic monopolies, "creative cities" and their production lines of co-optation' (Green Park, 2015). Thus, in their rejection of state cultural policy both occupations sought to repair broken spaces so as to encourage experimental practices and collaborations that broke away from the established terms and conditions of social, cultural and political order and reproduction.

### **Brokenness and non-reproduction**

Both the occupations of Embros and Green Park as refusal of the terms of order of cultural policy can be understood as instances of fugitive planning and collective study where the 'plan is to invent the means in a common experiment' (Harney and Moten, 2012: 74). The Embros and Green Park manifestos and occupations rejected the separations inherent to the status quo of cultural institutional affiliations, professionalisation, induced cooperation, and public relations by offering the option for participants to share resources, to willingly engage in experiments in curation, exhibition, and performance, to choose to engage in an immeasurable and unpredictable being and thinking together. The occupations were spaces of collective study as they specifically sought to produce structures that not only responded to the precarious cultural landscape of Greece but also encourage emergent practices bound up with building 'infrastructures of transformation' (Berlant, 2016), where transformation here has less to do with the physical infrastructure provided for life to happen in and more about questioning the organisational notions of structure and transformation altogether. Echoing Lauren Berlant our interest was in how 'the repair or replacement of broken infrastructure is ... necessary for any form of sociality to

extend itself' and 'how that extension can be non-reproductive, generating a form from within brokenness beyond the exigencies of the current crisis, and alternatively to it too' (Berlant, 2016: 393). Embros and Green Park were efforts and ephemeral voluntary cooperations that sought to extend a non-reproductive sociality from within brokenness where a practice of material repair was necessary for other practices of cultural collaboration to be generated. The performances and presentations in both occupations were non-reproductive because they were ongoing experiments with the informal where the inhabitation, repair and maintenance of these disintegrating spaces were, simply put, a way for people to get together, to find refuge, to collectively share practice and thought. This practical experimentation through a process of continuous 'non-reproductive' trial and error both embraced and challenged collective capacities for repair where artistic and curatorial forms, contents and approaches were determined by the material conditions of the spaces. The site specific particularities, histories and constraints of the spaces drove and constructed experiments that cannot be reproduced as structural models since operations and strategies initiated in order to address the repair of specific broken spaces were contingent on emergent methods of improvising ways to live in brokenness as a means to invent and extend alternative forms of cultural representation.

### **A poetics of repair: Potential**

One of the experimental practices of fugitive planning, living with brokenness, and non-reproductive repair and representation emerging from Embros was our collaborative project *Civic Zones*. In the summer of 2012 as Greece was in the throes of negotiating another loan installment from the IMF, ECB, and European Commission while bracing itself against a new set of austerity measures and witnessing the alarming legitimisation of an organised neo-nazi political party, we set off on a walk through the dilapidated centre of Athens armed with masking tape, a marker pen and a camera. We began from the occupied theatre, heading in no particular direction, marking abandoned spaces with the words 'potential' and its equivalent in Greek 'εν δυνάμει' (*en dynami*). As urban impoverishment deepened, empty spaces proliferated. Yellow and red signs for 'to rent' and 'for sale' multiplied and still multiply throughout our cityscape. As we walked we imagined these deteriorating empty spaces be given life; scrawling on them, we called out for their transformation by way of anomalous and illicit repair, organisation and inhabitation. In this jaywalking project, by making spaces present we sought to draw attention to the invisible, to what are materially sites of haunting, contemplation as well as potential dynamism. This experiment in a poetics of repair sought to live in and with ghosts, with the brokenness of things, to experience haunting as 'an animated state' where 'social violence is making

itself known' and where 'repression or blockage is not working' (Gordon, 2004). Thus, in mending things that alter those things in unpredictable ways, the aim is not to return them to their original state and function, but to create new forms where making and repairing are one and the same, where fugitive planning is 'the ceaseless experiment with the futural presence of the forms of life that make such activities possible' (Harney and Moten 2012: 74). To occupy and maintain neglected social and cultural spaces is to live in and repair the very notion and practice of sociality and cultural production through brokenness. Our walk materialised a performative refusal of settling where exiting a broken political and economic system potentially takes place by an illegal breaching of walls: collective attempts to fugitively plan the repair and transformation of haunted abandoned spaces as modes of emergent inquiry and 'aesthetic sociality' (Harris, 2018).



*Image 3. Civic Zones: Potentials, 2012. Photo: Gigi Argyropoulou and Hypatia Vourloumis.*

### **Return, repetition, non-reproduction**

Repair requires necessary return: a tuning into hidden frequencies and reverberating echoes, an attentiveness to the brokenness that is historical dispossession where reparation is not compensation but a keeping alive across non-reproductive difference. For, to engage with ways in which transformations and extensions can be non-reproductive is to work through questions surrounding the historical social reproduction of life itself. Paul Preciado

reminds us that the ‘evolution of culture (technology, ideology) feeds back into the regulation of life, influencing – and obfuscating – the means by which power carries out the fundamental task of controlling and managing reproduction’ (Preciado, 2018: n.p.).



Image 4. *Civic Zones: Potentials*, 2012. Photo: Gigi Argyropoulou and Hypatia Vourloumis.

The denaturalising of reproduction across ‘different regimes of power that operate on life and that, in their entangled complexities, constitute us as subjects – as *political living fictions*’ exposes the illusory nature of separations based on the reproduction of dominant categories such as class, race, gender, sexuality (Preciado, 2018: n.p., emphasis in original). The occupations of both Embros and Green Park refused these divisions by bringing together people usually separated by regimes of power and the working conditions of art production. Sharing the spaces and stages diverse collectivities including queer, feminist, anarchist, migrant and refugee groups and activists, theorists and performers across different classes, institutional standing, ages and ethnicities intersected so as to work upon questions of social and artistic reproductive labour. Moreover, in taking over the means of production the occupations were a collapse of the separation between the labour necessary for maintenance, repair, forms of housework, and material and immaterial artistic practice: after each performance the presenters, regardless of how ‘established’ they were or not, were responsible for sweeping and preparing the stage for the next presenters, bartending, cleaning toilets etc. The illegal occupations as direct actions and autonomous experiments ‘outside’ the conventional rules of the market necessarily

heightened an awareness and collective mindfulness of their dependence on reproductive labour in terms of work and art as inseparable practices. In the ruins of a building repair and maintenance now come to function as a continuous practice of re-imagining labour along with social and artistic conditions. Thus, allowing for disordering experimental cultural and social forms to emerge from brokenness through practices of repair is to always contest the potential of such repair and maintenance in relation to communication, transmission and reproduction.

Graham and Thrift argue that along with ongoing situated inquiries and improvisation, practices of repair also necessitate complex theorising, 'simple repetition' and 'clear' communication (Graham and Thrift, 2007: 4). Yet the repetitions and communications inherent to repair are rarely simple and always contingent on variation. As Gilles Deleuze writes in 'Difference and repetition', repetition must be opposed to generality because 'beneath the general operation of laws' there is always the play of varying singularities, such as the variations unleashed from the repeating of festivals and the act of throwing dice (Deleuze, 1994: 25). Critical of epistemologies of representation, identity and recognition, for Deleuze, the varying singularities of difference and divergence manifested within every return, refrain or repetition emerge from the contingencies and intensities of every encounter and the 'discordant harmony' of communication as it leaps and metamorphoses in 'differential flashes' (Deleuze, 1994: 145-146). The inevitable discordances and disagreements flashing from new encounters and ideas, undetermined collective organisation, and the maintaining of occupied spaces by open assembly entails a repeated confrontation with sedimented practices and imaginaries of social composition and reproduction. For Deleuze it is imperative to return, to repeat a throwing of the dice so as to unfurl a resonance where 'divergence itself' is 'the object of affirmation within a problem' (Deleuze, 1994: 198), since innate to the aleatory character epitomised in the successive throwing of dice are the differential and unpredictable outcomes and relations generated. To return to the neglected and decaying spaces of Embros and Green Park was to choose and engage an 'affirmation within a problem', to take a collective chance, to risk disagreement and collisions, to speculate upon and live with the differential consequences of repeated repair.

## A poetics of repair: In speculation



*Image 5. Civic Zones: In Speculation, 2015. Photo: Gigi Argyropoulou and Hypatia Vourloumis.*



*Image 6. Civic Zones: In Speculation, 2015. Photo: Gigi Argyropoulou and Hypatia Vourloumis.*

On the 24<sup>th</sup> of January 2015, one day before the elections in Greece and a few months before the occupation of Green Park, we returned to and repeated our *Civic Zones* walk and marked the walls and spaces with different words now: 'in speculation'. We walked with the knowledge of the spectacular failures of austerity, the deeper poverty and abjection of the city and its people, we walked carrying both the personal and collective knowledge formed from the potential and impotential of many struggles: undeniably hopeful that there would be an electoral victory for the Left. Playing with the multiple meanings of the term 'speculation' as it relates to both financial operations as well as artistic ones, we were aware that the emphatic refusal of representational politics from within occupied spaces which now looked to a political party running on a platform of anti-austerity and debt relief meant a shoring up of the terms of order of elected state leadership. Proving Robinson correct, Syriza, the party voted in to power on January 25, 2015 (Coalition of the Radical Left), embraced the ethos that there is no alternative to the neoliberal order of things and has proceeded to implement harsher austerity measures and the auctioning of public goods and resources in the interest of securing the bank rolling necessary for the maintenance of state authority. To keep on refusing to reproduce these ongoing structures of governance and improve ourselves according to set political, economic and social parameters means to persistently stay in the zone of experimentation and alternative speculation.

### Repeating brokenness

The repair, performances and gatherings the occupations of Embros and Green Park required and enabled were speculative practices bound up with the repudiation of the categorisation, measurement, and marketisation of those practices. If for capital the future is a matter of financial speculation, the occupations materialised alternative valuations of social and cultural relations and practices which, in their repetition, cannot be fully fixed, predetermined or commodified (Houston et al., 2016). To choose to *show up* in these spaces and gatherings in constant uncertainty and risk is to engage with the sense and knowledge that different worlds already exist and are speculatively produced with others. Yet, these spaces and practices require the reproductive labour necessary for their maintenance. For as Marina Vishmidt insists 'to say art is 'speculative' is ... to impute to it a form and method of thinking and doing which is open ended in its relationship to means and ends and, thus, to (social) values and (economic) value' (Vishmidt, 2016: 43). For Vishmidt it is imperative that we always attend to the ways in which the *social* character of art is itself a form of material labour that in its transformations must confront its own institutional reproduction (Vishmidt, 2016: 45). The community-run spaces of Green Park

and Embros, in their repair and attempts at institutional transformation were forced to look at cultural and artistic production's own labour conditions before and while it experimented with broken material as sites for speculative metamorphosis. The solidarities and shared labour necessary as conditions of possibility for the occupations and the artmaking within them were constitutive and reverberate as dissonant refrains where repressive images, ideas and languages of dominant cultural and political representation and identity were rejected for the *work* of imaginative aesthetic sociality. Repeating brokenness in our refusal to get with the program, to become better indebted subjects, to improve ourselves according to the illusory terms of political capitalist mechanisms is to embrace a collective labour that produces social disorder. It is to ask: what must be produced and reproduced as repeated and divergent refrain in order to not reproduce dominant models of socio-economic state and financial management? Perhaps one way to address this ever-present question is to invent the means to fugitively plan ceaseless experiments in abandoned spaces that are repaired so as to remain in incompleteness and brokenness together as repeated speculative rehearsal for social non-reproduction.

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## the authors

Gigi Argyropoulou is a theorist, curator, dramaturg and researcher working in the fields of performance and cultural practice based in Athens and London. Gigi has initiated and organised public programs, conferences, interventions, performances, festivals and cultural projects both inside and outside of institutions. Gigi was co-editor with Hypatia Vourloumis of the special issue of *Performance Research* 'On Institutions' and publishes regularly in journals, books and magazines.

E-mail: [01crash@gmail.com](mailto:01crash@gmail.com)

Hypatia Vourloumis is a performance theorist and holds a Ph.D in performance studies from New York University. Publications include essays and experimental writing in *Theatre Journal*, *Performance Research*, *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory*, *The Happy Hypocrite*, art catalogues and edited volumes, among others. She is co-editor with Gigi Argyropoulou of the *Performance Research* special issue 'On Institutions'. Her teaching and research interests include anticolonial, feminist, critical race and queer theory; music, poetics, language; sound studies and popular culture; aesthetic theory and practice. She teaches critical theory in the MA Art Praxis at the Dutch Art Institute.

E-mail: [hypvour@gmail.com](mailto:hypvour@gmail.com)