

New forms of Interactions

National Museum of Contemporary Art, Athens

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Since the National Museum of Contemporary Art, Athens (EMST) was founded in 2000 its core mission has been to allow equal access to art for all. To meet the needs of contemporary society and to respond to social changes, EMST Without Borders was launched in 2009 to bring closer to the Museum space non profit organizations such as drug abuse rehabilitation centers, immigrant groups, The Hellenic Society of Palliative and Symptomatic Care of Cancer and Non-Cancer Patients (PARHSYA), the Athens Association of Alzheimer's Disease and Related Disorders, and others. The program is run by Marina Tsekou, the Museum's Education Curator.

On the occasion of its five year collaboration with the Photographic Workshop of the Rehabilitation Center "18 Ano", the exhibition Interactions recently took place in the Museum's Project Room (February 6th – March 2nd, 2014) where five photographic and video works were exhibited.

Walking into the room a large scale projection entitled Wall was the first thing to grab the viewer's attention. The photographic workshop's latest work which was created for the purposes of the exhibition, Wall consisted of a digital slide show in which the photographers of "18 Ano" presented themselves performing a series of choreographed actions in the EMST peristyle. According to Marina Tsekou and Stamatis Schizakis, curators of the exhibition: "The physicality and movement of

the creators indicated their need to determine their position in the group, to determine their relationship with the "other" and ultimately with society, in a straightforward, humorous and equitable manner. Choosing as backdrop and action space the familiar Museum space they revealed the value of cooperation and interaction between EMST and the photographic workshop". The powerful portraits of the participants, who directed their gaze straight towards the viewers, created an atmosphere of introspection that made the viewers ponder over their own existence. Although the portraits were deeply personal, at the same time, they could reach into the soul of each and every viewer.

Four more works, entitled Portraits 4 (2009), True story (2010), Realistic Realities (2011) and Inflow (2012), were presented on video screens on a large table on the side wall. The photographers of "18 Ano" approached their subjects with unique sensitivity and special concern. Each work dealt with issues of identity and representation of the self in social and natural environments. Starting this exploration from their own personal space with the documentation of their memories, emotions and experiences the creators then proceeded to an experiential investigation of their homes, families and the cities in which they live. Apart from being self-representing these works triggered the viewer to delve into a similar process of self-retrospection.



Photography Workshop 18 Ano, Wall, 2013, digital photograph



Photography Workshop 18 Ano, Inflow, 2012, video still



View of the exhibition Interactions

The joint program that has been designed by EMST and “18 Ano” has been organically integrated into the treatment program of “18 Ano” and relies primarily on psychotherapy and art, reinforcing the role art plays in both treatment and reintegration. Through their participation during these five years in exhibitions and events organized by EMST, as well as through their systematic practice of the art of photography integrated in their therapy program, the group of “18 Ano” gained aesthetic knowledge and experience which each member eventually had the opportunity to express creatively through his/her own artwork.

As Marina Tsekou states in Best Practice I, A tool to improve museum education internationally (Emma, 2012) “the program EMST Without Borders is an all inclusive, participatory program with educational, cultural and social connotations which meets the challenges of the contemporary fast-changing society and affirms the new role of museums in it. Our intention and ambition is to attract the interest of more associations and social groups and to build collaborations with many other professionals (museologists, journalists, psychologists, social workers, art therapists, etc.) aiming at the continuous improvement of the program, the activities and the museum’s social interaction”.

The exhibition Interactions, as well as all previous exhibitions of the Photographic Workshop of the Rehabilitation Center “18 Ano” which have been held at EMST have given the participants,

former drug users, the opportunity to socially reintegrate, expand their horizons, get a better understanding of themselves and of the ways contemporary artists work, and build trust and self confidence. At the same time they have raised public awareness, have contributed to dissolving many preconceived judgments about former drug users and have reduced social isolation. Initiatives such as this one are very important to continue and to develop further. Interactions, curated by Marina Tsekou and Stamatis Schizakis, was held at the National Museum of Contemporary Art, Athens from February 6th until March 2nd, 2014.

Bibliography

Emma, N. (ed.) (2012), *Best Practice I, A tool to improve museum education internationally*, Rome: Edizioni Nuova Cultura.

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View of the exhibition Interactions