

# A stage in the gallery

S I S Y P H U S / T R A N S / F O R M

**Gaia Clotilde Chernetich**  
31 January 2020

## **Dimitris Papaioannou's first site-specific work for an art gallery, at Collezione Maramotti**

Photos © Julian Mommert

'What is wrong with the theatre?' This is the question Dimitris Papaioannou directly addresses to his audience – but we'll get to that later. We're gathered here in the spacious hall of the first Max Mara fashion factory in Reggio Emilia, Italy, after a performance of Papaioannou's *Sisyphus/Trans/Form*. Commissioned by Festival Aperto and Collezione Maramotti, this is his first site-specific piece for a contemporary art gallery – the Collezione Maramotti, an eclectic collection originally started by Max Mara founder Achille Maramotti. As we converse with the Greek art creator – who became world famous for directing 2004 Olympic opening ceremony in Athens (another, impressively gigantic in situ performance), we are enchanted by his ability to unveil new facets of human imagination and reality.

Collezione Maramotti's coordinator, Sara Piccinini, gives us some background history. Their first ever dance performance, in 2009, was Trisha Brown's *Early Works*. Initiating something of a 'contemporary tradition' many choreographers have since accepted the invitation to create for the Collection's original facilities, contributing to a history of high-level performing arts programming by Max Mara and Reggio Emilia's Fondazione I Teatri. The site-specific dance repertoire has been enriched with new works by Shen Wei, Wayne McGregor, Hofesh Shechter and Saburo Teshigawara. And for Papaioannou, *Sisyphus/Trans/Form* was just an *arrivederci*: as the performance will be touring and his new creation (to be premiered in Athens on 6 May 2020) will return to different Italian cities over the next seasons.





### Sisyphus/Trans/Form

Mixing some stage elements from Papaioannou's previous work *Still Life* (2014), *Sisyphus/Trans/Form* is a 40-minute event on the second floor of the concrete building of Collezione Maramotti. Inspired by the ancient myth of Sisyphus, whose destiny is to repeatedly roll a rock uphill only for it to roll down again, the piece displays an itinerant structure combining different elements – visual, corporeal, material. Once upstairs, the landscape is visually dominated by concrete and acoustically by silence – interrupted only by the sounds of the surrounding audience,

and by the performance itself, now and then amplified by a microphone held in the choreographer's hands.

In fact it is Papaioannou himself who, as master of ceremonies, magnetically drives the action around by pointing a warm light towards its main focus: a crackling stony wall (that audiences may already have seen from *Still Life*), carried by the performers in turn on their shoulders. We feel their breath as their bodies struggle with weight, effort and resistance. Around them, the gallery artworks are covered with milky sheets of light plastic, impeding interaction with the performance in favour of a mute co-presence.

The attention is thus focused on the performance as a combination of the performers' movements and the illusory visual fragments they create. Technical mastery and fervent imaginative invention generously characterise the work, while shamelessly exposing the secrets of Papaioannou's elegant handling of illusions. We recognise some of these salient features from other titles of his repertoire such as *The Great Tamer* (2017) and *Since She* (2018, for Tanztheater Wuppertal Pina Bausch).

From the moment the performers start passing through the wall, thus revealing its foam-rubbery soul, we feel as if we were in front of a stunning magician, openly showing us secret tricks. Performers Pavlina Andriopoulou, Costas Chrysafidis, Ioanna Paraskevopoulou, Drossos Skotis and Christos Strinopoulos move in a

**We feel  
as if we were  
in front of  
a stunning  
magician,  
openly  
showing us  
secret tricks**

crystal-clear manner while they appear and disappear behind the wall, playing into Papaioannou's aesthetic poetics, where assemblages of body parts compose unusual, mythological and monstrous imagery: men and women with an anomalous number of limbs; broken, elongated, deviated, metamorphic or even impossible shapes that use the interplay between the chiaroscuro and the different densities of the materials as if to invent reality through a series of impossibilities. Articulating light and heavy materials, rigidity and suppleness – but also oscillating between the flesh of exposed skin and the textile armour of black suits and dresses that cover and uncover the performers' bodies – the piece claims a dialogue with both materiality and the spirit.

### **The space and the stage**

So: what is wrong with the theatre? Speaking with us in the gallery hall after the performance, Papaioannou doesn't give a straightforward answer to his question. Instead, he admits to being sceptical about the trend of bringing dance into museums. For when dance enters the gallery, different kind of artworks coexist, regulated by different hierarchies: historical, disciplinary, spatial, durational... He respects and loves both stage and gallery, but doesn't find it natural or necessarily desirable to mix them, or to force them into a dramaturgical dialogue or even a spatial encounter.

As visitors, spectators or even as voyeurs, we can admire the engineered beauty of *Sisyphus*, but the piece



deliberately expresses a desire to see it as theatre – what Papaioannou calls his ‘pure’ art. In transposing his creation from the theatre’s black box to the exhibition hall, Papaioannou decided to cover up the artworks on display, not only to protect them from the unpredictable movement of the audience but also to focus our attention on *Sisyphus*. The space thus becomes a hybrid between the less governed environment of the gallery and the positioned perspectives of theatre stalls, the audience moving to new vantage points as the performance unfolds.

Though Papaioannou still considers it an experiment, *Sisyphus/Trans/Form* nevertheless creates both beautiful images and a strong nostalgia for the stage, where the presence and proximity of spectators and performers is gripping. At its heart, it suggests a discourse on the complexity of freedom and our inevitable human search for it. Exactly as it is for Sisyphus, whose stone falls to be lifted again, and again and again – not until a resolution to his labour is found, but to keep the meaning underlying his gesture of lifting the stone alive. ●

