People across Europe have protested against the government's austerity measures but some have also found a creative way of getting their message across

[AFP/Getty Images]

ARTS REINVENTING A BROKEN BUSINESS

Stuck between art as expression and as commodity, creators in Europe are having to rethink how to promote their work – whether for profit or for social purpose.

Eliza Ridgeway
journalist

On Barcelona's streets this spring, white hands sprouted, rigid, from bank buildings and street corners. Begging, clasping a noose, scrabbling for change, the plaster casts – dubbed the "HANDS" project by four young Spanish artists – confronted passersby with the stress of constant economic and political worry.

HANDS PROJECT

As wages fall, taxes rise, pensions crumble and jobs continue to disappear, countries like Spain, France and Greece remain mired in recession and see further cuts coming. Stalled in the economic downturn, arts supporters are playing it safe, funding less work with more constraints. This diminishes opportunities in the art world, but it has also summoned creativity, driving artists to experiment.

In France, young creators are pitching their projects to strangers online, seeking tiny investors from the internet public in a new form of dispersed patronage. Meanwhile, in Greece and Spain, arts organisations have been testing new ways to draw in a cautious, cash-strapped public. Accepting food donations in payment for theatre tickets and writing grants to subsidise free-admission days, some groups have reimagined their business model instead of shutting down. And across Europe, shuttered buildings and vacant streets offer an opportunity to design students who make art in abandoned spaces via deal-making or illicit occupation.

"On a very simple level, buildings were lying empty, someone unlocked the systems, and they were brought back to life," architect Jeremy Till said. He heads up the Central Saint Martins College of Arts and Design in London. Regenerative projects like Spacemakers, in Brixton, England provide models for success. Spacemakers, a non-profit organisation, convinced small businesses to pop-up on an abandoned commercial street, offering three months' free rent as incentive, and brought in art exhibitions and live music to draw customers back to the area.

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The bastions of fine art that cater to super rich buyers, such as the annual Frieze Art Fair, continue to go strong even in the midst of double-dip recessions and faltering austerity regimes. The wealthiest art buyers remain wealthy. But for producers in the middle or the bottom of the arts economy, solutions have to be found outside the realm of governmental funding or commercial marketplaces. And they rely on public participation to bring projects to life.

"Certainly in architecture what one is getting is a new generation of people who are working in fringe locations doing things which architects normally wouldn't do," Till said, referring to projects such as the non-profit Assemble, which used reclaimed materials to erect a temporary cinema underneath a motorway's flyover in East London.

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During the global economy's boom years, decadent projects by architectural superstars sprang up celebrating shiny forms, peculiar shapes and weird technologies.

"One reaction to that has been a sort of implicit rise of the quiet, the quiet architects who aren't showy, they aren't flashy," Till noted.

Seeking value in an uncertain time

Nicolas Dorval-Bory, one of two principals at the French architecture firm Betillon/Dorval-Bory, worked on a project this year emblematic of this departure from opulence, a 20-square-meter apartment renovation done for €33,000 (just over $44,000) that sought luxury in efficiency, not decoration. The project, "Appartement Spectral", incorporates glowing light and stark white reflective surfaces, using unconventional sodium lamps and fluorescent tubes to create a heightened effect that also maximises energy savings.

"Today austerity in Europe is a fact, but it also came with an awareness of environmental issues, energy wasting. In our architecture, we try to go beyond those limitations," Dorval-Bory said.

But for every hopeful story of a new cost-cutting measure or bootstrapped do-it-yourself project, there may be far more missed opportunities not making the news. Till described a "risk aversion" currently hitting the design industry that is part of a wider reaction to economic downturn. Cash-strapped governments give design contracts to firms large enough to demonstrate profits and high turnover, while deals with smaller, unproven companies remain untaken risks.

Francoise Privat, who operates a small art gallery in Paris' third arrondissement, similarly sees sculptors shying away from risky large projects, restricting themselves to models and designs while they wait for a buyer ready to invest.

Citing a period of economic "pessimism" in France, she has turned to international art fairs as a way to connect to a more robust market, and said she wishes more French citizens would desire a piece solely for the pure fun of its beauty. "People are afraid to buy a work of art, not knowing the future," she said. "Interested people think right away, 'but tomorrow, will your artists have value?'"

Adelle Hughes, associate director at Whyte's, an auction house in Ireland, said that she has seen people gravitating towards figurative pieces one can "read", work that feels "safe and reassuring".

"Today's successful buyer/bidder is shrewd. They are cautious, they are looking for a safe investment," she explained. "Art is for most an emotional purchase but now clients are asking more questions before they buy."

This caution can come at a cost. "Abstract art and work by emerging artists that might be perceived as edgy is not selling terribly well at present in the secondary market," Hughes noted.

After a massive investment spike during Ireland's "Celtic Tiger" boom years, she has seen art market prices pull back. Museums have little budget to acquire pieces, and corporate buyers who were previously very visible on the scene have faded away. But on the flipside, she said, failed businesses have been auctioning their art collections – "a better investment, in the long run, than their shares".

The audience is everywhere

Stuck between art as expression and as commodity, creators in Europe are having to rethink how to promote their work – whether for profit or for social purpose. Crowd-funding services such as Kickstarter, Groopio in Greece, Oocto based out of France, PPL in Portugal and FundIt in Ireland all provide a platform where artists can describe a project and sign-up micro-donors, fans or interested strangers who contribute a few euros towards a project they find appealing.

In addition to giving an artist visibility and a way to quickly receive funds electronically, the sites also offer a crash course in marketing. The Spanish crowd-funder KissKissBankBank, offers marketing tips to its young artists, helping them prepare an appealing pitch and a clever donor rewards system as they tap into the "collaborative economy".

Artists have long struggled to market themselves, but now, the alienation and rebellion of experimental work coincides with a larger cultural sense of solidarity and suffering. More of Europe has come to know the economic uncertainty once limited to bohemian dreamers.

Maria Tzanakou utilises words to leave her traces on the building. Short verbal puns are transformed into ephemeral sculptures on the walls of Kunsthalle Athena, through a laborious process of imprinting digital projections on surfaces, using just a pencil as her medium [Blind Adam]

Douglas De Cavalho, a painter in Bilbao, turned to teaching English to support himself as he concluded he was "crap at selling himself." Yet he celebrated the alternative street art projects that thrust themselves at viewers in Bilbao, sculptures and tiles glued to building facades as unsanctioned "permanent interventions".

Greek artist Maria Tzanakou invoked a parallel phrase, “public intervention,” to describe her work trailing lines of letters along buildings, pencilled-in puns that linger as text sculptures.

“I believe that sharing is a strong form of resistance,” Tzanakou said.

She is participating in the Kunsthalle Athena’s “This Must Be the Place” exhibition, running through August 2. The Kunsthalle - a flexible art centre dedicated to the visual culture - is staging “political speeches” in addition to the physical exhibits, performance art pieces touching on authority and how people react to it, on money, and on the rise of conservatism in Greek society.

THIS MUST BE THE PLACE - INTERVIEWS

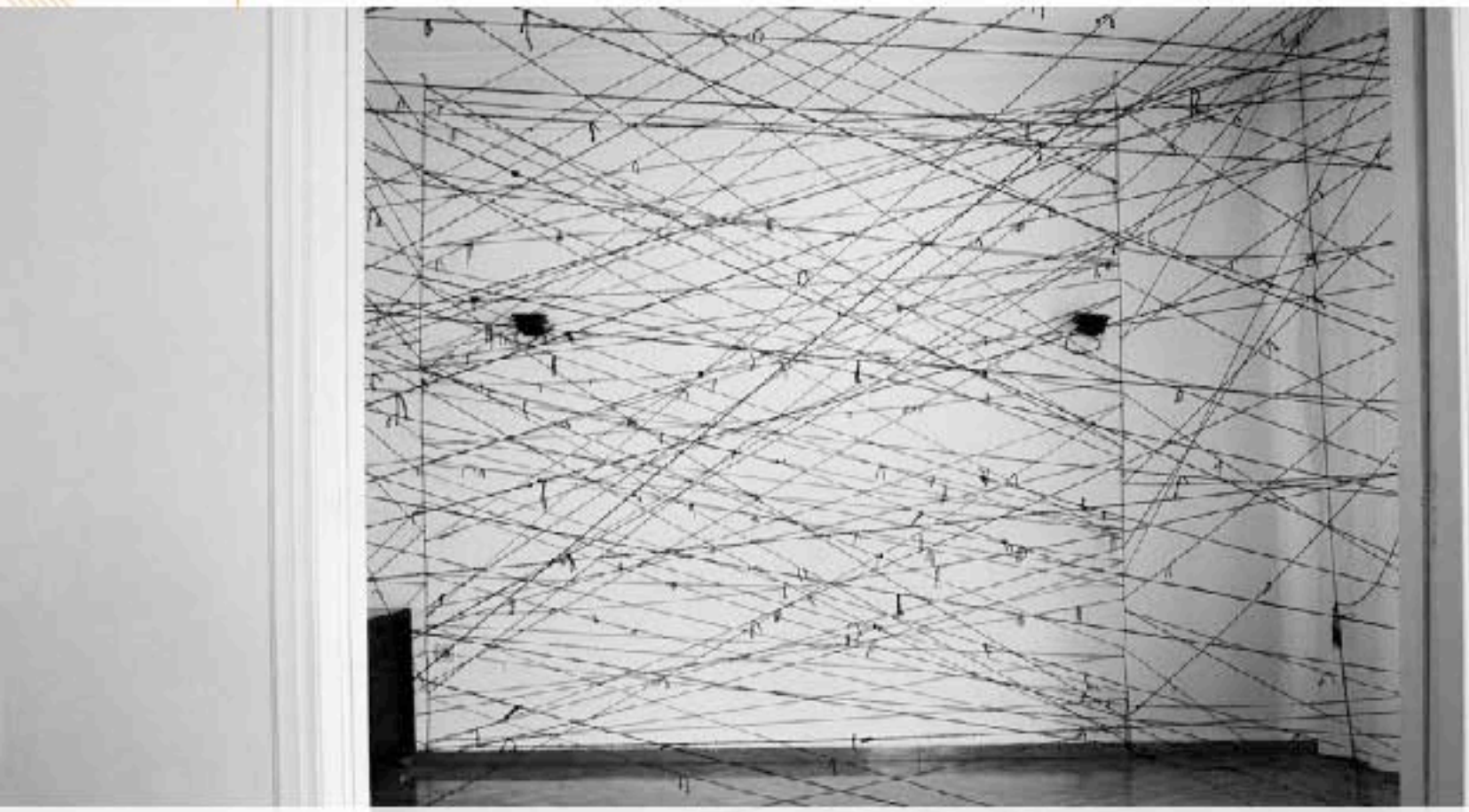
"Audiences conceive of art as something very exclusive … therefore, it is difficult for contemporary art to attract people," said Marina Fokidis, founding director at the Kunsthalle. She said that they took a page from the independent music scene, inviting local groups to the space, to bridge worlds and offer a different model of hospitality to their neighbours. "We tried to create a space where you would feel like spending time, to relax and share your ideas within the exhibition space, surrounded by the artworks, as you do in bars and concerts."

Art invoking catharsis

As they plead the case for their underfunded commodity, arts producers – particularly radicalised ones – have a heightened focus on social needs. Their work makes cultural space for a community to grieve and, some hope, to celebrate.

Mateu Agusti, one of the artists whose eerie plaster hands reached out from buildings in Barcelona, said he and his collaborators wanted to provoke reactions and new kinds of conversation about the crisis. "HANDS is only another public protest, a shout that comes from within, a way to express something," he said, "But what really matters is the pedestrian's expression, discourse and discussion."

Fokidis said that while many Greek artists have not plunged into the politics of economic hardship, "I think they are going to wake up and let some sorrow - moral and political sorrow - be part of the work." To enter the Kunsthalle is to engage with these themes. One passes through a bloody euro, projected by the artist Angelo Plessas on the facade of the building.



Thanos Kyriakides' sculptural, sartorial pieces use knotted twinings of woolen yarn to evoke skeletons, or puzzles, or archeological remnants of another time. Juxtaposing the industrial revolution, the middle ages, even ancient Greece, all with the current moment, he implicates a sense that "actually everything is collapsing" [The Breeder]

Thanos Kyriakides, an artist exhibiting within the Kunsthalle, described the oppressive daily feeling of calamity in Greece as like a "poisonous gas" that permeates everyday life, a continuing decline with no end in sight. Working in the face of an uncertainty so dire that it feels like an economic war requires, he said, a kind of perverse heroism.

"A crisis is something that happens like a fracture, almost like an intermission. [But] this is now getting to be a solid situation, a new orthodoxy," said Apostolos Vasilopoulos, a curator at the Kunsthalle. "I would say that it feels like an end of an era .... Something needs to die, and this takes a lot of nerve to go through - a lot of humour and belief in something that does not exist yet."

ALTERNATIVE FUNDING

Arts groups are turning to new business models, many based around private philanthropic support, to fill the gap left by shrinking government funding.

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journalist

After half a decade of economic hard times, last year ten countries in the EU still saw their GDP in decline, despite economic bailouts and austerity meant to reduce national debt. As much as a third of the Greek population subsists near or below the poverty line, and as of this spring, unemployment hovered at approximately 27 percent in both Greece and Spain.

Data is only gradually emerging to measure economic austerity's impact on arts and culture in Europe, as countries recalibrate and continue to cut. A new round of EU funding, "Creative Europe", is set to launch in 2014. But Geoffrey Brown, director of the funding consultancy Euclid International, described its effect as "a minor contribution to arts funding in Europe, which is mainly the responsibility of each country – through national, regional or local government funding mechanisms."

ALTERNATIVE FUNDING

Exploring funding options

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Brown chaired a conference this spring addressing how arts groups can reduce their reliance on public subsidy – across much of Europe, arts organisations have relied on governments to fund half, or more, of their budgets. As part of sweeping austerity measures, funding for arts and culture has been slashed in countries like Spain and Greece, while nations such as France and the UK are hotly debating how far to extend cuts to their own cultural programmes.

Museums and performance venues in countries like Greece have seen their budgets reduced to a fraction of their pre-crisis size, sometimes losing up to 100 percent of their government funding. And France's proposed termination of a public programme paying seasonal unemployment wages to performers met with tumultuous protest this year. In the UK, where arts programmes have already moved towards earning income and soliciting private philanthropy, the cuts have not been as devastating yet still fill the news.

To fill the gap left by shrinking government funding, arts groups are turning to new business models, many based around private

ALTERNATIVE FUNDING

'The Carrot Revolution'

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Marina Fokidis, the founding director at the Kunsthalle Athena, said that when they started in 2010, it would have been useless to ask for money. But they successfully petitioned a donor for use of their space, an aging neoclassical building in the heart of a rough but lively neighborhood. Artists act as sponsors, working at the Kunsthalle at their own expense, and young people pass through as volunteer curators as they search for other, permanent employment.

John Zervackis, COO of the Stavros Niarchos Foundation's Athens office, said that the foundation has actually seen a drop in arts applications and explained that many organisations have reduced their programmes, and begun to consider the need for an organised fundraising department.

"Most of them used to depend on state funding and that doesn't exist anymore," he said. "They do just the basics. If in 2012 they were running 100 performances, in 2013 they will do just 60 or 70."

The foundation is building a €566m (just over $728m) cultural centre in

ALTERNATIVE FUNDING

The foundation is building a €566m (just over $728m) cultural centre in Athens to donate to the Greek state and launched a €101m ($130m) crisis initiative last year, aiming to respond to immediate suffering but also to build towards a vibrant future for Greece.

"We would like to support a smart country to exit the crisis – you need education and culture to do that," Zervackis said.

Philanthropic support can be stymied by Europe's comparative lack of tax incentives. In the United States, where art is heavily dependent on philanthropy, donations can be deducted from citizens' taxable income. In Spain, by contrast, the government recently raised a tax on cultural goods, such as theatre tickets, from eight to 21 percent. In protest, the Bescano municipal theatre starting offering tickets for free – but asked patrons to purchase a carrot (taxed at four percent) for €15 at the door. It was dubbed the "Carrot Revolution".

Economic stability vs artistic freedom

Lack of funding is not new for artists who struggle to demonstrate their value as a cultural service and commodity. The downside to a move

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ALTERNATIVE FUNDING

Lack of funding is not new for artists who struggle to demonstrate their value as a cultural service and commodity. The downside to a move away from government investment in arts, argues Jeremy Till, the architect, is that a risk-averse market may tend to support narrower genres. Expecting fiscal independence of arts groups may "potentially wipe out a whole layer of art, having to do with public accessibility and grassroots activity."

But all sources of funding, ultimately, come with strings attached. That conundrum plays into the fierce independence artists voiced as they discussed their predicament.

"We could apply for public funding, but we decided not to," Fokidis said of the Kunsthalle. She writes, teaches and freelance curates to make a living. "In Greece, the system is so corrupt that we would have to make big compromises, which would be too high a price to pay for our intellectual freedom."

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Graffiti on a wall in Athens shows a protester wearing a full-face gas mask, to illustrate the violence and extensive use of tear gas by government forces [Getty Images]

Street art in Greece includes a pig in police uniform waving his baton. Amnesty International condemned the “excessive force” used by Greek security forces in suppressing protests against austerity measures [Getty Images]

A girl walks past graffiti in Lisbon showing Angela Merkel, the German chancellor, as a puppeteer controlling Portuguese Prime Minister Pedro Passos Coelho and Foreign Minister Paulo Portas. The government's austerity measures are being highly contested by the population [AP]

A man opens the door of a building next to graffiti in central Madrid. More than six million Spaniards were out of work in the first quarter of 2013, raising the jobless rate in the eurozone's fourth biggest economy to 27.2 percent, the highest since records began in the 1970s [Reuters]

Graffiti in Athens shows a child reaching out to the stars of the European flag. Young Greeks have become embittered, and thousands have left the country in search of a better future [Reuters]