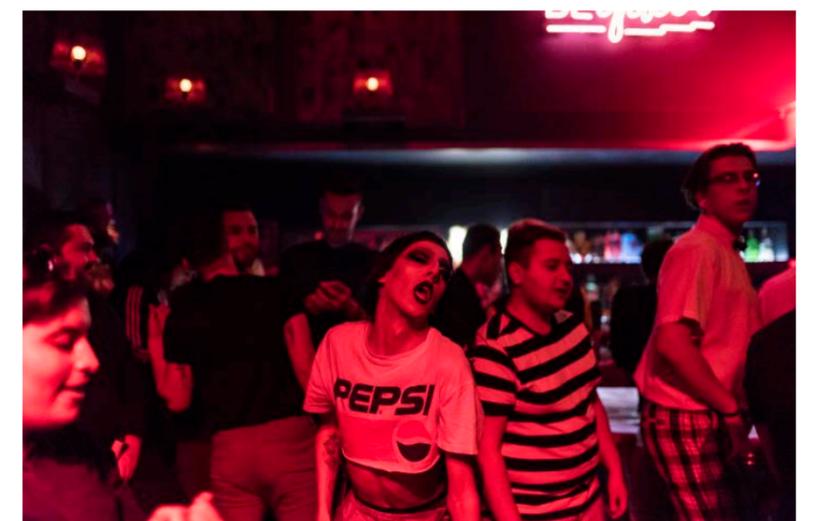




After the shocking death of a much-loved activist, Athens' queer arts scene is on a mission to overcome widespread fear and homophobia. That fight has never been more dangerous, but these voices of resistance are only growing louder.

TEXT ALEX KING PHOTOGRAPHY THALIA GALANOPOULOU

24HR PARTY PEOPLE



It's just after midnight at the University of Athens, where its student halls are packed with people. Hand-printed posters by protest groups hang alongside flyers for punk shows, their shades of red, black and white plastered across a well-worn foyer. The crowd is waiting for a drag show to kick off - the first to ever take place here - when the music grinds to a halt, grabbing everyone's attention. That's when Kangelia Tromokratisch, Space Manifesto and Gingerella - three drag performers breathing radical energy into Athens' queer arts scene - emerge to take over a makeshift stage.

Wearing a yellow wig made from glued-together mop brushes and a bra composed of boxing gloves, Space Manifesto starts sweeping the floor in exaggerated circles, herding people back to free up space. Kangelia is first to grab the mic, lip-syncing to Nina Hagen's 1984 synth-pop banger 'Universal Radio', teasing a crowd that needs a little bit of encouragement before fully letting go. As the place breaks out in a frenzy, something about tonight feels much more meaningful than your average drag party.

Greece has long lagged behind the rest of Europe in terms of visibility, acceptance and rights for the LGBTQI+ community. Since the election of a supportive Syriza government in 2015, however, the country has finally enacted same-sex marriage legislation and a gender-recognition law for trans people - despite huge resistance from its Orthodox Church, who said it would "destroy human beings".

These legislative victories have been spurred by Athens' growth as a hub for queer culture. Despite record levels of unemployment and emigration, artists and activists have been defying severe austerity measures and overcoming the Church's ultra-conservative influence over Greek society.

But defeating the widespread homophobia that still permeates its media, police and streets, requires a continuous fight on several fronts.

"There are so many things to rebel against in this country," says artist and filmmaker Konstantinos Menelaou, a 38-year-old who's originally from Thessaloniki, a sprawling port city in the north. "Before I left Greece in 2001, life was suffocating, the culture was dead and I couldn't express my sexuality. I grew up obsessed with London and New York; I wanted music, fashion and parties - but above all, I wanted to escape."

Back in 2013, Konstantinos founded the Queer Archive in London as a platform to celebrate LGBTQI+ culture and stimulate connections between queer communities around the world. Two years later, he relocated to Athens to finish his experimental feature film *He Loves Me*, a semi-autobiographical story of two lovers trying to salvage their relationship on an isolated Cretan beach.

This year, Konstantinos decided to reframe the Queer Archive as an annual arts festival in Athens. "Greece has been through an economic crisis - but an equally severe cultural crisis," Konstantinos says. "Lots of queer artists self-censor because they're scared of being 'found out' if they express their sexuality... That's why we need this festival: to give authentic Greek queer culture a bigger platform and raise the standard."

Talk to anyone plugged into Athens' queer arts scene and a similar sense of urgency becomes apparent. At Power Dance Club - a new sex-positive club night that pops up in temporary locations - DJ and promoter Giorgis Benias steps closer to the entrance just to hear himself think, the light outside glistening across his faded make-up. "Grow-



OPENING PAGE. Activist Angelos Torticollis midway through becoming Kangelia, his drag queen alter-ego.

THIS PAGE. DJ and promoter Irini Karaoglou during a set at LGBTQI+ venue BeQueer.

OPPOSITE PAGE. DJ Giorgis Benias, who runs the club night QReclaim.

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ing up in Athens can be super rough," he says, dressed in a vintage leather pilot's uniform and a Russian hat. The 23-year-old now runs his own club night, QReclaim, and while he talks about it with an animated warmth, the journey to get here hasn't been easy.

"Going out as a teenager dressed up as a club kid, with my make-up and fur coat, was dangerous. On the streets, people would look at you, stare at you, scream at you, sometimes even hit you. Greeks can be homophobic, sexist and racist - even more so than elsewhere in Europe. We're still 10 years behind."

This is where another layer of urgency comes through - not just a desperation to break from the past, but a fear for safety. In a pivotal event last September, footage surfaced of a confused man trapped in a pawn shop on a busy commercial street in central Athens. Two men pulled him out and began beating him. Police soon arrived only to continue the beating, eventually handcuffing the by-then unconscious man and putting him into an ambulance. Greek TV was quick to frame the event as 'HIV-positive junkie attempts to rob a jewellery store and is killed by its owner in self-defence.' Case closed.

It soon emerged that the man beaten to death in broad daylight was Zak Kostopoulos, 33, one of Greece's most prominent LGBTQI+ activists and the first to announce he was HIV-positive. Each new piece of evidence has only raised more questions, casting doubt on the initial narrative. Yet Golden Dawn neo-Nazis destroyed a memorial left at the sight of Zak's death and paraded around Athens shouting, "Junkies and gays, you're not necessary."

Days later, hundreds of people huddled at the top of Athens' Syntagma Square. Ever since the crisis broke and

the state seemed close to collapse, countless skirmishes between riot police and protesters have played out there. But that night it became a space of reflection, as heartfelt speeches shared by candlelight gave way to the crowd breaking into an a cappella rendition of Madonna's 'Like A Prayer' - one of Zak's favourite songs to perform as the much-loved drag artist Zackie Oh!

"They're killing us," says Myrto Tsilimpounidi, a photographer and sociologist who used to live with Zak. "That's how so many people felt when they heard. It was so personal to so many." Although Myrto comes across as thoughtful and precise in what she says, the anger over Zak's death remains raw. "Despite all the attacks and the fear, she never stopped. That pissed off many different groups, especially the fascists. Zackie Oh! was always saying 'Fuck you!' and that's why we're going to miss her."

Outpourings of support across the city have taken the form of art shows, music videos, street protests and graffiti. "This murder won't be silenced, it won't become just another obituary," read a poster campaign by activist group Ieries Tou Eshous. "Listen up Greeks: Our queerness never dies. You'd better be afraid of us." But one of the most moving tributes was 'Tsipouraki with Zackie', a memorial event and fundraiser held by the drag community at BeQueer. Since opening in November 2017, the venue has established itself as the city's first permanent space for the full spectrum of the LGBTQI+ community.

On a recent Saturday night at BeQueer, DJ and promoter Irini Karaoglou cut a distinct figure during a six-hour set until dawn. With flowing black hair, she's small in stature but her enormous attitude radiates out from the decks, where pauses between mixing are often spent waving a lit ▶

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cigarette above her head as she dances along or shares shots of alcohol with passers-by.

“I don’t like labels... but if a straight male anarchist can dance with a gay guy wearing feathers - and they *hug* - then that’s a real queer party,” says Irini, who co-founded the club night Strap-on Unicorns. “Our society has rigid norms and boundaries, but once you depart from that space, everything is queer.”

In 2016, as a new wave of drag took root in Athens, Zackie became Strap-on Unicorns’ first resident drag queen. Irini vividly recalls one moment that felt characteristically provocative and politically-charged. While miming to Archive’s ‘Fuck You’, Zackie tore down a picture of Ambrosios: the Orthodox bishop who told followers to “spit on” gay people (prompting activists to prosecute him for homophobic hate speech).

“It’s sad that someone has to die so that others can be visible, to live,” she says animatedly. “Zak was a part of us, he was *family*. Few of the leftist or anarchist groups who joined the protests were into queer theory or feminism - some had even been homophobic or transphobic. But under these circumstances, all the different groups became one. They started to talk and to accept their differences.” Irini pauses for a moment, taking another drag on her cigarette.

“Ultimately, we’re all in the same jail - fear,” she says finally. “The one fear that rises above all else is fear of difference, fear of ‘the other’. We want to be safe, so we close ourselves off - and that fear too easily becomes hate. But without ways to open ourselves up to others, we will remain afraid and alone.”

But the fight to end that fear isn’t limited to Athens’ nightlife. The Atopos CVC Gallery sits in a neoclassical

townhouse facing a courtyard lined with bare orange trees in the neighbourhood of Metaxourgeio. Follow the narrow stairwell up a level and you’ll be greeted by an enormous furry arm that extends from the ceiling. This is the work of 25-year-old artist Antigoni Tsagkaropoulou.

“I like to create gender-fluid animals with hybrid identities,” she says, inspecting the stitching of a furry pony complete with breasts and a beard. “When I was studying [at the Athens School of Fine Arts] I felt alienated. I had this urge to discover myself, my own identity and my own sexuality. This exploration seeped into my art, where I began using ‘fluffiness’ as a way of making things that we often identify as weird - like monsters or the uncanny - feel intimate.”

Fellow students thought she was just “this pervy girl making vaginas”, while her references to queer and gender theory went over (male) professors’ heads. But after graduating, she kept creating increasingly ambitious characters, worlds and performances made of fluff until she was commissioned to assemble Fluffy Library as part of UNESCO’s ‘World Book Capital’ celebration in Athens.

Antigoni’s vision for the space has led to parties of a different kind: events and workshops that emphasise experience and ambiguity over more traditional modes of learning. It could be drag queens sharing ‘alternative’ fairy tales that challenge body negativity or, like this morning’s session, a group of young children and their parents exploring the gender politics behind their toys in a lighthearted, non-confrontational way.

“It’s all up to interpretation,” she says. “‘Fluffy’ [the exhibition] could be an extremely safe space. But at the same time, depending on your background, it could also be a threatening place. Right-wing blogs were saying, ‘Look

what they’re doing to our children with these masculine little fairies and dragon princesses.”

“But seeing the backlash on social media, you realise you are doing something which creates an earthquake,” she adds. “As the far-right goes higher and higher, queer and feminist voices of resistance get louder at the same time. Now I feel part of a growing community, making art and talking about ideas that I once only read about in books.”

Kangela Tromokratich was one of the drag queens who took part in those workshops - the same arresting figure who lip-synched to Nina Hagen at the University of Athens, wearing a crop-top made from kaleidoscopic prints of her own face. Part clown, part your-mum-on-acid, Kangela is a punk goddess regarded as one of Athens’ most accomplished queer performers.

She’s also the alter-ego of Angelos Torticollis, a softly spoken 45-year-old with a moustache and shaved head. Angelos spends much of his time at Communitism: an activist-run community space that also hosts Kangela’s Kabaret, a drag night loaded with political satire and social commentary. Today there’s a children’s orchestra practising on the roof, their notes echoing around the building as people fabricate wooden structures and paint banners in the courtyard.

Angel (as he’s known to English speakers) puts on a brew to help conjure a sense of calm. After spending 16 years in the UK, he returned to Greece in November 2016 with two kilos of tea bags and a burning desire to inject some queer energy and gender politics into a stagnant arts scene. “Before I emigrated, I felt like an alien - I didn’t fit in anywhere,” says Angel, a London lilt affecting his tone and choice of words. “I came back to find a completely changed Greece. The crisis has actually been the best thing to hap-

pen to this country because Greeks have woken up. People in Athens are thirsty for change.”

Growing up, Angel never understood why the world seemed so chaotic and unequal. But when he talked about social issues as his normal self, nobody seemed to listen - at least, not in comparison to Kangela. There’s an inherent shock value to her performances: a setting where laughter, irony and sass become powerful tools to get the message across. Zackie’s death only emphasised the need to develop more hard-hitting and politically engaged work. So 16 years after being first diagnosed as HIV-positive, Angel is about to announce his status publicly for the first time in an interview with *Antivirus* magazine. It’s a big step that will likely draw flak - both from within the community and without - due to long-lingering stigma.

“Zak was very open about his status and talked about the stigma around HIV-positive people in Greece - which is just on a different level from the UK. I always thought, ‘Could I do that too?’ He had guts. I looked up to him a lot... but I was scared.”

As he speaks, Angel is busy applying make-up in order to transform into Kangela. One obvious difference between the two is that where Angel is disarming and down-to-earth, Kangela gets bored easily. So when she takes a pause from applying blusher, glancing up at the walls peeling with paint, you can almost feel the shift in personality.

“It’s empowering to become this strong character and say whatever I want,” says Kangela. “It has made me fearless. I think there’s a huge need for that, not just in our community, but all over the world. We’re being fed so much fear all the time. I know it’s not for everyone, but I’ve found my voice. I’m not scared anymore and it feels amazing.”



OPPOSITE PAGE. Drag performer Ilias Gkionis (Gingerella) waits backstage at the University of Athens’ student halls.

THIS PAGE. Artist Antigoni Tsagkaropoulou sits among her gender-fluid ‘fluffy’ animals, intended to make the uncanny feel intimate.