

STOP MAKING SENSE

Born in Germany, raised in Greece, moved to Belgium, working as an artist in the expanded field of performance and 'social sculpture': it should come as no surprise that the mercurial biographical trajectory of **Danai Anesiadou** (° 1973) has produced an artistic practice of matching convolution, willed confusion even. Tapping from a wide variety of sources in the adjoining realms of leftfield popular ('low') culture and the canonical forms of high culture, the art of Anesiadou – and of its ever-changing cast of collaborators and travelling companions – is perhaps best appreciated, enjoyed and 'read' against the referential backdrop of avant-garde cinema and the envelope-pushing, genre-bending, mould-breaking film art of such maverick *auteurs* as John Cassavetes, Alejandro Jodorowsky and Alain Resnais. In her collaborative work with stage art stalwarts Hans Bryssinck and Diederik Peeters, she has explored the tenuous diegetic fictions that underpin narrative conventions in feature films of the lowly gothic/horror variety – sprinkled with a generous dose of operatic satire that reveals the true extent of her artistic debt to her scenographic training and earlier forays (now long forgotten, and mainly for good reasons) into the world of dance and theatre. In the programmatic (and programmatically titled) performance *A Night of Psychomagia*, which premiered at the fifth Berlin Biennial in April last year, she convincingly married a strong sense for the theatre of autobiographical confession with her long-standing interest in the netherworld of magical practices, occult rituals and its secret knowledges: partly inspired by her encounter with the aging tarot master Jodorowsky, Anesiadou's "night of psychomagia" also offered the audience an uncomfortable, at times hilarious insight into the neurotic mess of her stage character's family history and private life.

Compared to the ruthless, gut-wrenching exhibitionism of that performance, Anesiadou's subsequent film *X, A & M*, made in collaboration with Brussels-based artist Sophie Nys, may have seemed positively icy and tame, academic even – an impression made even more inescapable once it became clear that the project was based on a shared enthusiasm for Alain Resnais' elegiac, elusive Nouvelle Vague classic *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* from 1960. Parts of *X, A & M* were shot at Nymphenburg Palace in Bavaria, the lavish original site of Resnais' detached character study (itself set in the present-day Czech spa town of Mariánské Lázně or Marienbad); yet there also appeared scenes set in a dentist's office, as well as in the bizarre timewarp that is the Paul Delvaux museum in St. Idesbald – the source of yet more subdued Surrealist stoicism. Periodically enacting parts of the original, Robbe-Grillet-penned dialogue (here heard in voice-over) of *L'Année dernière à Marienbad*, Anesiadou appeared – alongside a stone-faced, lugubrious-looking Diederik Peeters, of SPASM fame – as a mysterious, world-weary young woman locked inside the desolate dreamworld of Central European, aristocratic sanatorium culture, the imagined decadent backdrop of some of her earlier work, likewise engaged in a scenography of mood (one of dejection, primarily) rather than straightforward narration.

Danai Anesiadou's perennially inconclusive fantasies of submersion and escape, of disappearance into a physically rendered 'subconscious' or dissolution into an oceanic state of subliminal formlessness, acquired a truly monumental new

dimension in the *ISOMOSIS/ISOFIX/ISOMOPOLIS* project she developed for Etablissement d'en face in Brussels this spring – a three-day festival of sorts (again, featuring many long-time collaborators) set inside a huge, cavernous styrofoam 'sculpture' that doubled as a seating structure for an audience happy to submerge itself in the artist's bizarre, idiosyncratic dreamworld. In one of the festival's many high-water marks, Anesiadou orchestrated her own pharaonic entombment, encircled by a motley crew of semi-mythical figures in oddball outfits pulling strings (literally so!) and humming jazz standards – a decidedly disorienting ritual that was preceded by the artist's trademark performance of freestyle mudras, as the intricate play of hand gestures in Buddhist and Hinduist liturgy is really known. In their original, religious context, mudras are used as authenticating gestures that signal the subject's entry into a state of blissful transcendence; but they also relate to yogic practices and healing – and it is this last aspect which firmly identifies the "theatre of therapy" as the prime signifying locus of Danaï Anesiadou's performance art.

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