

# The Financial Crisis in Athens: An Empty House as Public Sculpture by Maria Eichhorn

Laurence Kimmel

## Art as process of making private space public

For the artwork *Building as Unowned Property* for *documenta 14* (in 2017), artist Maria Eichhorn<sup>1</sup> described and documented the purchase of a heritage house in Athens in order to remove it from the market and stop the speculation process around the property. *Building as Unowned Property* is a work in progress. At the time of the *documenta 14*, Eichhorn focused on an initial property at 15 Stavropoulos, close to Plateia Amerikis. This property did not prove suitable, and the artist is currently looking for another building and says that the project is still at the beginning of its realization.

The article discusses the value of the artwork in comparison with direct political action. Has politics-oriented conceptual art more impact on the public than political action?

The project process includes all activities, from research to bureaucratic interactions to the processing and notarization of official documents, involved in property acquisition. It is a long-term process, similar to those she has developed in artworks in the last years. According to Polly Staple, Director of Chisenhale Gallery, «the work is an attempt to use the law, as a proper language»<sup>2</sup> to develop a legal process that becomes reproducible, even if the outcome cannot be achieved today. A core aspect of Eichhorn's work resides in this tension and contradiction between aiming at a goal that seems utopian while making the process reproducible through legal means. The process of the purchase of a house in Athens and the statements of the artist, along with the statement of the curator, have been presented in the *Museum of contemporary art* in Athens from the 8 April to 16 July 2017.

Similarly, Eichhorn intervened for *documenta 11* in 2002 through her Maria Eichhorn Aktiengesellschaft [Public Limited Company] (2002–).<sup>3</sup> She transferred all shares of the company to itself, so that the corporation belonged to itself, or, in Eichhorn's words, «it ultimately belongs to no one,» so that «the concept of property disappears.»<sup>4</sup> This action is also in continuity with her previous infamous work *Restitutionspolitik/Politics of Restitution* (2003), where she uses the tool of the «agreement» to remove works of art from the market,<sup>5</sup> by making explicit the conditions that exclude them from it. For *documenta 14*, she exhibited the documentation of the process for the purchase of the targeted building by *documenta* and Museum Fridericianum gGmbH. The price of the first house was 140,000 € for a plot surface of 282 square meters and a total interior surface of 212 square meters, equating to 658 € per square meter. Eichhorn's artwork consists of converting the status of the building into that of unowned property. «Acting within the existing Greek legal framework, the property is designated for public use, to be legally converted into a property that *de facto* does not belong to anyone. Once its status has been changed in this way, the building will exist in the city much in the same way that a sculpture does in public space, disputing fixed notions of public and private property vis-a-vis the impact of economic crisis on the urban space.»<sup>6</sup> The aim is to claim the building as primarily a matter of public, rather than profitable interest.

1 Maria Eichhorn, *Building as Unowned Property*, Conversion of a building's legal status, legal studies, documents, building, and plot at Stavropoulos 15, 11252 Athens, Zürich: Migros für Gegenwartskunst; Athens: *documenta 14* 2017.

## Process art in an economic and political context

Greece, where the property is situated, is the country most affected since the financial crisis struck in 2009. Real estate prices in the general Athens area have plunged so low that in some cases houses are sold at one tenth of their previous market price, according to data posted in the *General Secretariat of Information Systems*: «In the

<sup>1</sup> Maria Eichhorn, *Building as Unowned Property*, Conversion of a building's legal status, legal studies, documents, building, and plot at Stavropoulos 15, 11252 Athens, Zürich: Migros für Gegenwartskunst, Athens: *documenta 14* 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Polly Staple, «1000 words: Maria Eichhorn», in *Artforum*, April 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Maria Eichhorn, *Maria Eichhorn: Aktiengesellschaft*, Cologne 2007, p. 25.

<sup>4</sup> Okwui Enzavor, *Documenta 11*, Berlin 2002.

<sup>5</sup> Maria Eichhorn, *Restitutionspolitik/Politics of Restitution*, installation of sixteen paintings (München: Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, 2003) was a provenance research conducted on all paintings presented in an exhibition handbook, library, talks, and discussions held in the exhibition space, in order to attempt to identify these cultural assets obtained under conditions of Nazi persecution, to research the provenance of these hitherto unclaimed works, and to publicize these findings.

<sup>6</sup> Adam Szymczyk, Plaque, *Building as Unowned Property*, Athens 2017.

first quarter of 2017, there were houses in certain areas of Athens that were sold at 100 euros per square meter while the zone price was 1,250 € per square meter. In most cases, the price paid for a property is five and six times lower than its fair value. Many owners cannot afford to pay taxes on their homes or other tax obligations due to the economic crisis and are forced to sell them.»<sup>7</sup> Eichhorn focuses on the urban and architectural effects of the economic situation, as stated in her manifesto: «The economic crisis that has taken its toll on the entire continent of Europe and unleashed social, economic and political chaos in Greece is clearly reflected in the urban space of the city of Athens. Owners have abandoned their buildings because they can no longer pay the increased property taxes or because tenants can no longer pay their rent. The buildings are left to themselves and the inevitable process of deterioration. The City of Athens has registered more than 1,500 vacant buildings in the city center alone.»<sup>8</sup> For the first time, *documenta 14* was organized in two different cities: Kassel, Germany and also in Athens, Greece. Curator Adam Szymczyk wanted to address the political context of the financial crisis in Europe. As Germany and Greece were the main protagonists of the political debates in Europe over the last ten years, he organized exchanges of works of art between both cities, and commissioned artists that addressed the political issues and dilemmas that are ongoing today between Germany and Greece, often with the background of their shared history, especially as it relates to WWII events. As a German artist developing her process art in Athens and exhibiting in Athens, Eichhorn's work addresses this social and political context.

### **Critique of the market from outside and from within the market**

Through searching for an uncommon way in the legal framework to acquire property and making it unowned property, Eichhorn works outside the usual property acquisition process. Eichhorn's process acts as revelation of the usual process. Her artwork has an economic and political aim, as it is set in opposition to the values of the actual capitalistic context of Athens. This politics-oriented artwork is based on political action, intertwined with the means and process.

The process to acquire property and making it unowned needs to be further developed within the existing legal framework and from within the market. The process tackles the difficulties and paradoxes attached to this necessity. The economy of the artwork itself should be financially aligned with the values that are defended in the work. Today, the metaphoric value of the process, and the symbolical value of the house itself that create the value of the artwork *Building as Unowned Property*. The documentation of the process as it has been exhibited at *documenta 14* has been acquired by the Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst in Zürich, and only the usual copyright protection applies. With the growth of the influence of the art market, such an ethical position requires the development of the artwork without it being allied with the values of the financial art market. If this artwork were subject to speculation in the art market, the alliance with the market would be too high to meet Eichhorn's aims. The way *Building as Unowned Property* is linked to the art market has been made in accordance with the ethical values that are defended in the artwork itself.

Pierre Bourdieu wrote in his essay *The Production of Belief* (1977),<sup>9</sup> that there is a financial paradox that needs to be mentioned about artworks and what their aim and value is in the future, especially about conceptual artworks that present themselves as disconnected from the market (especially when the concept is about this disconnection from the market). Bourdieu argues that the experience of art is one of misrecognition, because the accumulation of symbolic capital hinges on disavowing economic capital to guarantee profit in the long run.<sup>10</sup> The value of Eichhorn's ideas, now and in the future (intellectual profit linked with symbolic value), cannot be totally disconnected from the paradoxical economic value of the artwork in the future. The future relevance of Eichhorn's idea will depend on the evolution of the economy in the very long term. The value of the artwork in terms of economic and political ideas is its impact on reality, as political statement and critique of the logics of the market. The exhibited documentation serves as tools for a possible impact in the future, in this case the possibility of restitution of a cultural good to the public realm. The even more diffuse value is the empowering of the public about the future of the property. By acknowledging that the process of *Building as Unowned Property* acts from outside and within the market, the challenge will be to maintain this ethical balance in the future.

### **The artwork questions the definition of public space**

For now, the ethical value attached to the artwork is to maintain a use for the building, instead of it becoming an empty unused ruin. A building that is used encapsulates the value of a living environment rather than that of a dying and decaying city. The aim of a potential unowned property is to create value for no one in particular and at the same time for the public, that is for everyone. The pure version of this idea is impossible, as there is always

<sup>7</sup> Philip Chrysopoulos, «Real Estate in Athens Sold at Ridiculous Prices Due to Crisis», in: *Greek reporter*, <http://greece.greekreporter.com/2017/06/23/houses-in-athens-sold-at-ridiculous-prices-due-to-crisis/>, accessed June 23 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Eichhorn 2017 (as note 1).

<sup>9</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, «The Production of Belief», in: *The Field of Cultural Production. Essays on Art and Literature*, Cambridge (UK) 2004, pp. 71, 81.

<sup>10</sup> Jeannine Tang, «Future circulations: On the Work of Hans Haacke and Maria Eichhorn», in: *Provenance. An Alternate History of Art*, ed. by Gail Feigenbaum and Inge Reist, Los Angeles 2002, p. 173.

an entity that owns the land in the actual system, whether a city council, state or federal government when it becomes public property. In the framework of the existing system of ownership, the house could become a public building.

The *documenta 14* team under the direction of Adam Szymczyk mentions on the plaque of the artwork that «the building will exist in the city much in the same way that a sculpture does in public space.» A public sculpture has this status usually because it is set in public space or in a public building. In the case of the house, no one could guess at first sight that it is a public sculpture. With plaque and QR code as indicator, as at the time of *documenta 14*, the gaze of the visitor is altered and the artwork can be perceived as public sculpture in the public space of the city.

Since the process of the artwork is set in the context of Athens, the observer questions the notion of public space under the lenses of the heritage of the near the Ancient Greek *Agora* as iconic symbol of the notion of public space. The aim of the artwork to acquire the house to make it unowned or public property questions the notion of public space today, and how it is considered in the artwork. The building and the garden become public space in the political sense if they become used by the public, with all the array of frictions and negotiations attached to the idea. In reference to Jacques Rancière, public space is not about neutrality. Public space has a political complexity, as Habermas calls it,<sup>11</sup> and also a symbolic and economic complexity, since public space is the regulatory body, proper to democracy, of the conflicts between the political order (elaboration of the norm), the symbolic order (the circulation of belief) and the economic order (the valuation of resources).<sup>12</sup> Sociologist Eric Dacheux takes into account the complementary and conflictual intricacy of these three mutually interrelated orders: economics (development of resources), politics (the elaboration of norms) and symbolism (the construction of belief).<sup>13</sup> As Jacques Rancière states, public space is thus the result of a historically situated compromise between the three orders, and public space is the instance proper to democracy where the conflict between these three orders are regulated. Public space is therefore not an a-historical datum, but an evolutionary space crossed by contradictory tensions, where democracy is founded and re-founded, each time at the risk of dissolving.<sup>14</sup> These dynamics and dialectics are stopped in the case of the intermediate state of the closed house, even if it is materially maintained. While it is locked, the building becomes neither «institutional public space» nor «insurgent public space».<sup>15</sup> Having a closed house and inaccessible garden as public space would not be aligned with the function of public space inherited from the *Agora*.

The concept of the artwork initiates a thinking process about the actual economic and political situation. In this sense, the artwork creates another kind of public space when it is discussed by the public and refers to the discussions and debates that were happening on the ancient *Agora*. In the sense of Jürgen Habermas,<sup>16</sup> public talks act like the unfolding of a public sphere when individuals can come together in free discourse and identify societal problems, and through that discussion influence political action. Major public debates around Eichhorn's artwork occurred in Kassel<sup>17</sup> and of course Athens, and via widespread press in professional newspapers such as *Artforum*<sup>18</sup> and generalist newspapers including *Süddeutsche Zeitung*.<sup>19</sup> Public debate acts like the interface between the conceptual sense of the artwork and the economical action on reality.

### **The public ownership of a formerly private house is a provocation**

The house is usually for private use. In contrast, the house of the artwork becomes a public building, and its garden a public space. Using it fully as public space, accessible to anyone, means setting each place of the house in direct continuity with the street, without any physical boundary. The visitor experiences a shift between the old and the new status of the place, and this shift questions the possibility of public use of the house. There is a potential community use by temporary users that could live and work there in turns, but there remains a difference with delineating it as a public space.

If the building becomes accessible, it could be visited with the same gaze and expectation as one has when visiting a museum. The difference between this artwork and a public museum is that the building itself is the artwork. There is a disjunction between the usual status of the rooms and its new public status, and a disjunction between the appearance of a former private house and its new public status. In the same way as the above-mentioned tension between aiming at a utopian goal and making it reproducible, there is an inherent tension between the

<sup>11</sup>Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, Cambridge 1991.

<sup>12</sup> Eric Dacheux, «Une nouvelle approche de l'espace public», in: *Recherches en Communication* 2007, No. 28, p. 24. (Dacheux 2007)

<sup>13</sup> Dacheux 2007 (as note 12), p. 16.

<sup>14</sup> Dacheux 2007 (as note 12), p. 17.

<sup>15</sup> Jeffrey Hou, «Making public, beyond public space», in: *Beyond Zuccotti Park: Freedom of Assembly and the Occupation of Public Space*, hg. v. Shiffman, Ron, Rick Bell, Lance J. Brown u. Lynne Elizabeth, Berkeley 2012, p. 97.

<sup>16</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, Cambridge Massachusetts 1989.

<sup>17</sup> Discussion «Athen: Leerstand, Commons und das Recht auf Stadt (dt/en), Constantina Theodorou (Athen), Maria Eichhorn (Berlin), Norma Tiedemann (Kassel)», during *Re-learning with Athens* conference, Universität Kassel, 21 June 2017.

<sup>18</sup> Staple 2017 (as note 2).

<sup>19</sup> Catrin Lorch, «Maria Eichhorn: ein befreites Haus», in *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 28. April 2017.

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creation of a house as public sculpture and the reality of having the adequate architectural characteristics for public accessibility.

2 Maria Eichhorn, Exhibition *5 weeks, 25 days, 175 hours*, Chisenhale Gallery, London 22 April 2016 – 29 May 2016.

### **The intermediate state of its inaccessible condition**

During the process of acquiring the house, the place has remained closed to the public.<sup>20</sup> In its intermediate state, a plaque with QR code indicates the artwork. «The building is to be kept locked and is to be viewed and accessed only from the outside. A sign with a brief text about the work is to be affixed to the building. A website or a QR code for public or mobile tagging can be cited on the sign.»<sup>21</sup> It appears first as an intermediate state of the artwork, in expectation of a resolution of the acquisition process.

This intermediate state requires consideration. The impossibility of access can be seen as conceptually fruitful in itself. When perceived through the lens of Eichhorn's previous artworks, especially the exhibition of conceptual performance at Chisenhale Gallery in 2016<sup>22</sup> *5 weeks, 25 days, 175 hours*, this intermediate state is demonstrated to already be artistically significant. Eichhorn closed the gallery for the duration of the exhibition and Chisenhale Gallery staff were not working during the period. In the same way as for the intermediate state of *Building as Unowned Property*, a plaque has been placed on the gate of the gallery, and a public debate has been organised to discuss contemporary labour conditions.

In the same way as *5 weeks, 25 days, 175 hours*, the artwork *Building as Unowned Property* raises questions about economic and political issues without opening the building to the public. This intermediate state may persist for a long time, or potentially become permanent. Even if there is a dead end to the process and the house remains removed from public use, the empty house has the potential to encapsulate the conceptual aspects of the project. French philosopher Mehdi Belhaj Kacem explains how the concept can emerge from the «void».<sup>23</sup> In this way, the conceptual aspect of the artwork becomes even more effective. The loss of usual use of the house is already *unheimlich*, as would be the shift to a totally public status. It is a radical intermediate state already, that aims to counterbalance the radical shift to commercial speculation if the house was set on the market. This already radical symbol stays in the intermediate state if the unowned property proves itself to be impossible to realise.

### **The documentation and the empty house as operators**

*Building as Unowned Property* displays two different layers of intervention: firstly the political action of the property acquisition, and secondly the means and process chosen by Eichhorn. The two main artistic means are the exhibition of the legal documentation of the property acquisition and the house as public space. In the intermediate state, it is the house indicated by a plaque. The sense of the artwork emerges through the relations between these two means.

The documentation will be «the archive» when the project is realised. Symbolic value emerges according to Foucault in the chapter «The statement and the archive»<sup>24</sup> of *Archaeology of Knowledge* through the interplay of differences between a series of discursive events and other series of events.<sup>25</sup> The writings and documents displayed by Eichhorn are developing a comment on the events of the acquisition process. The events are the political action initiated by Eichhorn, and the series of events of the legal procedure. According to Foucault, an impact on the future is possible by creating a «form of historicity [that] operates upon economic structures, social institutions and customs, the inertia of mental attitudes, technological practice, political behaviour, and subjects them all to the same type of transformation.»<sup>26</sup> Through the operation on different levels (action and concept), Eichhorn's artwork has a diffuse but even more efficient impact than if it would function on one level (or with two dissociated levels). According to Staple, Eichhorn seems to be «eluding easy definitions and anarchically tilt at the impossible,»<sup>27</sup> but in the long term, Eichhorn is defining new concepts by the interaction between political action and its documentation and indication. This creates the potential of action and thinking for the future.

Her conceptual practice can be viewed in relation to a wide community of artists, ranging from Hans Haacke to Daniel Buren and Marcel Broodthaers. Benjamin Buchloh's landmark essay *Conceptual Art, 1962–1969* (1999) reflects on these practices as critique of institutions. For Buchloh, their use of bureaucratic structures and administrative procedures turns «the violence of that mimetic relationship back onto the ideological apparatus

<sup>20</sup> Although exceptionally a visit took place at the beginning of the *documenta 14*, when Eichhorn led art journalists inside the house.

<sup>21</sup> Eichhorn 2017 (as note 1).

<sup>22</sup> Maria Eichhorn, *5 weeks, 25 days, 175 hours*, Chisenhale Gallery, London 22 April 2016 – 29 May 2016.

<sup>23</sup> Mehdi Belhaj Kacem, *L'affect*, Auch 2007.

<sup>24</sup> Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of knowledge*, New York 1972, p. 92-93.

<sup>25</sup> Foucault 1972 (as note 24), p. 74.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>27</sup> Staple 2017 (as note 2).

itself, using it to analyze and expose the social institutions from which the laws of positivist instrumentality and the logic of administration emanate.»<sup>28</sup>

### Conclusion

*Building as Unowned Property* by Maria Eichhorn comprises the action taken by Maria Eichhorn and the lawyers involved in the project, and the conceptual aspect of the work: exhibition of the documents, and indication of the house in the city of Athens through a plaque. The archive of the legal actions and the process, and the empty house, function as operators of thinking about the context of the action: the social and political crisis in Athens, Greece, and Europe.

If the outcome realised is not unowned property but public property, the action becomes more feasible, and this raises debates about public property and public space. This is especially relevant in the context of Athens, near the place of the ancient *Agora*. On top of aiming at questioning the notion of public space in the city, this situation reinforces the notion of public space for debate amongst citizens.

Tensions and contradictions arise between aiming at a goal that seems utopian in the actual legal framework while making the process reproducible through legal means. These tensions increase the conceptual potential of the artwork and initiate even more thinking processes and debates around the artwork. Critique around the difficulties and impossibilities of the process arise, but very efficiently become part of the conceptual process. Minor critiques about the inadequateness of the house to host the public become also part of the debate.

In reference to Foucault and Rancière, creating a conceptual artwork tackling different levels of intervention and understanding has more impact on the public than only political action. At the time of writing, Eichhorn is still working towards the realization of the artwork through the acquisition of the house. Even if the political action of acquisition for public or unowned property is not realized, the conceptual potential of the artistic process is at its highest in this intermediate state of the artwork.

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<sup>28</sup> Benjamin Buchloh, «Conceptual Art, 1962–1969: From an Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions», in: *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed by Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, London 1999, pp. 531-533. The essay was originally published as: Benjamin Buchloh, «De l'esthétique d'administration à la critique institutionnelle: From the aesthetic of administration to institutional critique», in : *L'Art conceptuel: Une perspective*, ed. by Claude Gintz and others, Paris 1989, pp. 29–31.