

Ocula Magazine | Exhibition

Punk Under the Parthenon: The Callas Drop L.S.D. in Athens

By [Stephanie Bailey](#)

Athens, 21 December 2022



Exhibition view: The Callas, *Love Solidarity Death (L.S.D.)*, Onassis Stegi, Athens (26 November–30 December 2022).
Courtesy the artists and Onassis Foundation. Photo: Pinelopi Gerasimou.

So many things have shaped the landscape of contemporary art in Greece since the 2000s, from the Athens Biennale's agitprop and Dakis Joannou's DESTE Foundation's summertime slaughterhouse shows on Hydra, to Gregory Markopoulos' unfolding magnum opus in Arcadia, *Eniaios*. Then there's The Callas.

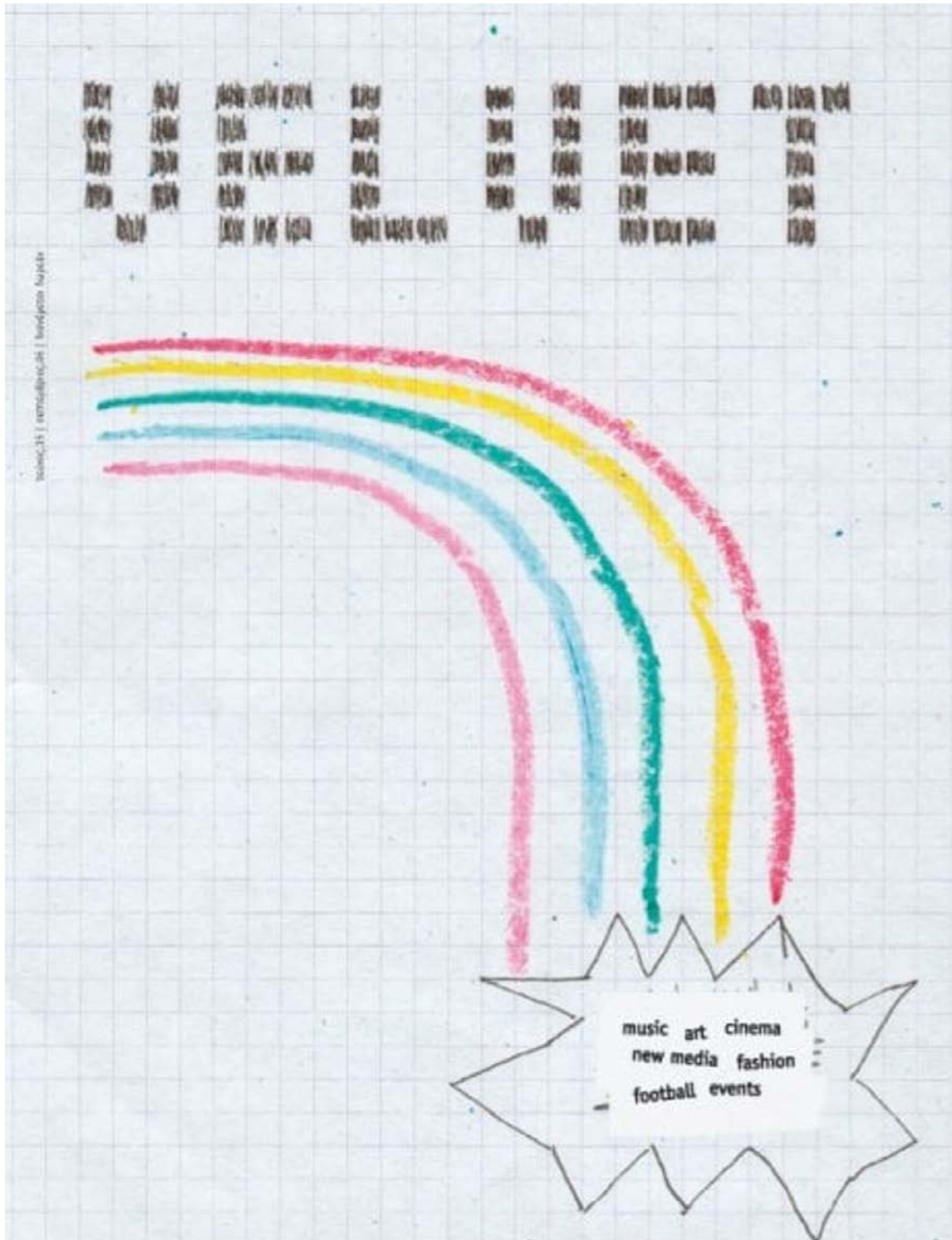
Formed by Aris and Lakis Ionas in 2004, The Callas is a band, a trans-disciplinary art project, and a state of mind. 'A visual score', by their own account, 'where sound, lyrics, rugs, publications, sculptures, films, clothes, parties, paintings, performances, [and] objects come together.'



The Callas, *The Walk* (2022). Embroidered tapestry. 190cm x 190cm. Courtesy The Callas and Onassis Foundation.
Photo: Pinelopi Gerasimou.

The brothers, once known to perform in Superman outfits, became a fixture in Greece's art and underground music scenes when they returned to Athens in 2002 after completing MAs in mixed media design at London's Chelsea College of Arts.

Setting up Velvet Room, their studio and event space in downtown Athens, they launched the Athens Contemporary Art Map in 2003, followed in 2004 with *Velvet*, a free magazine connecting music, cinema, art, and everything in between. That year, they staged their first gig at Bios, an arts venue that has long hosted a beautifully eclectic list of acts, including DJs Krush and Jazzy Jeff.



In 2008, the year they directed the music video for 'The Good Anarchist' by British post-punk band Television Personalities, they launched the art-music project Selvet Bus, which travels around Greece with a constellation of collaborators. *LUST Magazine* came next in 2009, established with all women writers plus one boy—that is, the musician The Boy, who dances in a pink-lit studio backed by curtains of golden tassels in the music video for the 2009 Callas track, 'Lipstick'.



The Callas, 'Lipstick' (2009) (still). Music video. Performance by The Boy. 2 min 16 sec. Courtesy The Callas.

Now a four-piece outfit with Aris on guitar/vocals, Lakis on bass/vocals, Chrysanthi Tsoukala on drums/vocals, and Chris Bekiris on guitar, the band's music draws on the pulsations of psychedelic rock, no-wave, post-punk, and dream pop. Voices surf thick bass-lines and smashing beats, as attitudes and moods transform into sonic shapes and music videos double as artworks.



The Callas, Άντρας Γυναίκα (2020) (still). Music video, directed by Lakis & Aris Ionas – The Callas. 3m 27 sec. Courtesy The Callas.

Take the video for the 2020 track 'Άντρας Γυναίκα' ('Man Woman'), a celebration of the anarchic self from the band's first Greek-language album, *Είμαι Ένα Ξενοδοχείο* (*I'm a Hotel*). Echoing Billie Whitelaw's mouth-centred video performance of Samuel Beckett's 1972 monologue 'Not I', a set of stubbled, rouged lips chew gum for the song's duration. A bit of a woman, a bit of a man, as the lyrics suggest. And what of it.



Performance catwalk by The Callassettes, 26 November 2022. Exhibition view: The Callas, *Love Solidarity Death (L.S.D.)*, Onassis Stegi, Athens (26 November–30 December 2022). Courtesy the artists and Onassis Foundation. Photo: Aggelos Kaltsis.

The Callassettes are a hallmark of the band's identity. Their styling fuses elements of Robert Palmer's 'Addicted to Love' with the aesthetics of The Velvet Underground and the choral, Dionysian aura of the Erechtheion's caryatids.

Described as women they've grown up with, The Callassettes were originally recruited to showcase the textiles the Ionas brothers have designed for some 20 years. Handwoven, knitted, and embroidered by their mother and aunt, black grounds, fluorescent patterns, and pithy lines call back to the likes of the Memphis Group, Superstudio, Parthenis, Dorothy Iannone, and traditional flokati rugs.



The Callas, *Anatoli* (2022) (still). Music video created for *Love Solidarity Death (L.S.D.)*, Onassis Stegi, Athens (26 November–30 December 2022). Courtesy the artists.

But they soon became the band's resident muses. Always wearing sunglasses, they appear draped in Callas knits or lounging on them dressed in white lace in music videos and live sessions, as seen in *Love Solidarity Death (L.S.D.)*, an exhibition of new works by The Callas / Lakis & Aris Ionas at Onassis Stegi in Athens (26 November–30 December 2022).



The Callas, *Beware of the Dogs* (2001). Video loop presented on TV monitor. Courtesy The Callas.

Curated with long-time collaborator Nadja Argyropoulou and produced by Onassis Stegi, *L.S.D* opens with a series of capes draped over two rose-tinted mirrors lining either side of a small entrance space: an installation cutely titled *Narcissus Hangover Vol. 1 and Vol. 2* (2022).

A 2001 video, *Beware of the Dogs*, plays on a TV set on the floor; staring up to camera, the brothers pant while shaking white straws behind their backs like tails. Created the year Greece adopted the euro, the work recalls Oleg Kulik's unhinged 'Mad Dog' performances staged amid post-Soviet Russia's chaotic transition to liberalism, if tempered by a restrained, buttoned-shirt, turn-of-the-millennium swagger.



The Callas, *Last night I dreamt I vomited light* (2022) (still). Three-channel video loop installation. 2mins 46sec. Courtesy The Callas.

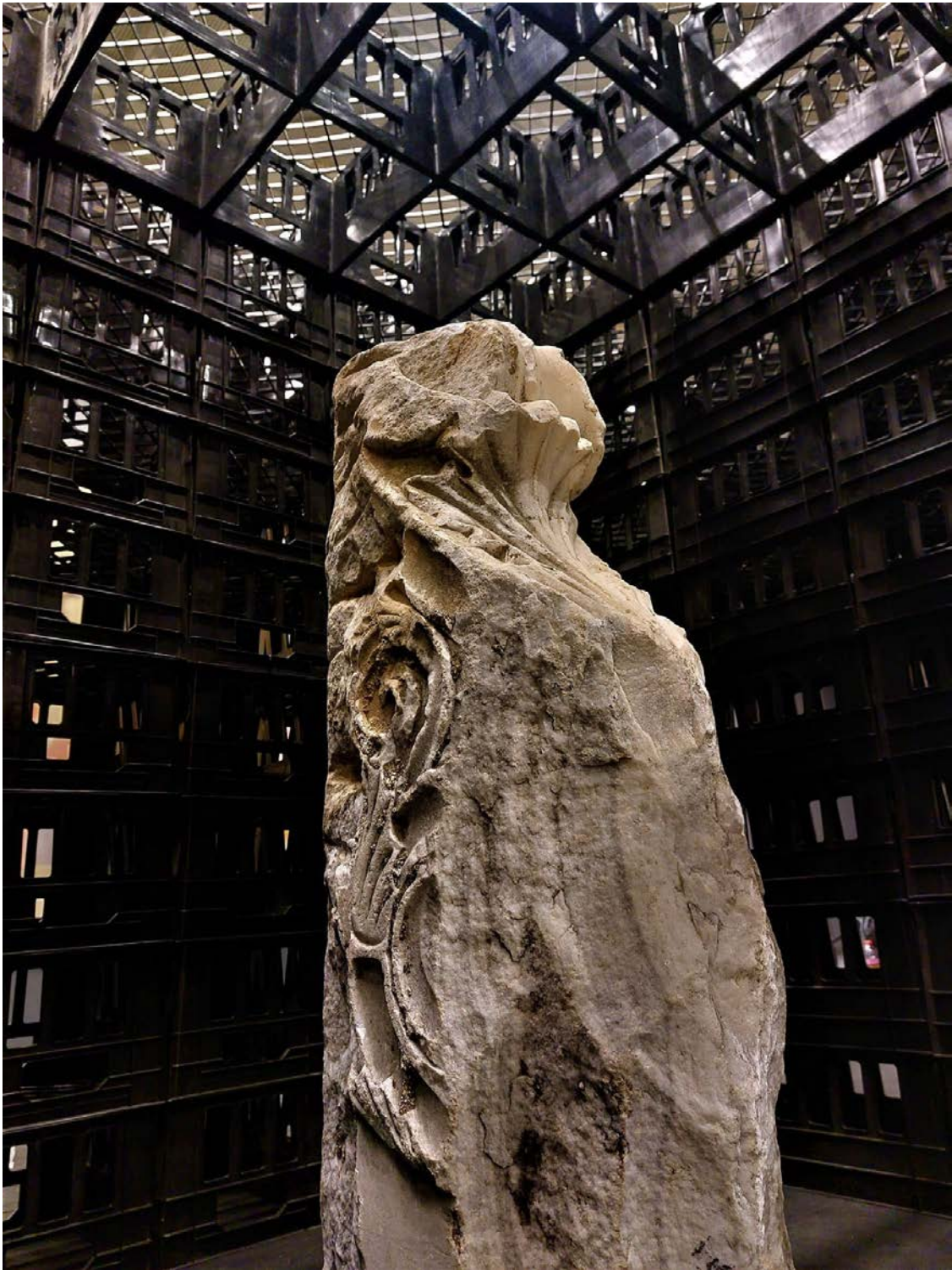
The sound of the three-channel video installation *Last night I dreamt I vomited light* (2022) pours into the entryway from a back room. A quick-fire splicing of Athenian surfaces keeps time with a rolling bass-line and top-hat, while tonal guitar strums slip, slide and still at points where the image stream zooms out to pause on something recognisable, like the sun.

The work is a reference point for *East Beat* (2022), a central stage in the main exhibition hall. Both compositions draw from the textured pedestrian paths designed by artist and architect Dimitris Pikionis in the 1950s to connect the monuments of the Acropolis to Filopappou Hill.



Performance catwalk by The Callassettes, 26 November 2022. Exhibition view: The Callas, *Love Solidarity Death (L.S.D.)*, Onassis Stegi, Athens (26 November–30 December 2022). Courtesy the artists and Onassis Foundation. Photo: Aggelos Kaltsis.

During The Callas performances, Callassettes arrange themselves on *East Beat*, their capes blending into a mosaic of patterned tapestry cuts covering the surface. They also climb a quasi-megalithic structure just behind it, created from Athenian pavement slabs—a concentration of the city's energies rising up, the artists have noted—aptly titled *Punkthenon* (2022). The structure is angled towards *Ark* (2022), a chipped floret-carved neoclassical marble hunk enclosed in a room made from black plastic crates, like a post-modern naos.



The Callas, *Ark* (2022) (detail). Marble, plastic crates. Courtesy the artists.

Invoking at once the museological display of the Parthenon marbles, the plan of the Parthenon itself, and a mapping of the Acropolis and its downtown surroundings—a psychedelic blend of ancient, modern, and contemporary—these central stages are surrounded by a kaleidoscopic clash of fluorescent colours, geometric patterns, and organic shapes.



The Callas, *Ark* (2022) (detail). Marble, plastic crates. Courtesy the artists.

Twelve uniformly sized canvases sprayed gold are covered with patterned textile pieces that combine to create dancing constructivist figures. They line the top of the wall separating the main hall from the entryway like metopes.

Part of the 'Working Class Madonnas' series (2022), three larger versions of

these

exuberant works, each 1.9 by 2.8 metres, are installed on either side of the central stages. Titles define each figure. *Madonna of the Finger* shows an abstracted

body

flipping the bird. *Madonna of Kick Balls* is a jagged black-striped silver flokati torso poised to kick a pair of balls—one black, one red—with a curved,

patterned

leg.



Exhibition view: The Callas, *Love Solidarity Death (L.S.D.)*, Onassis Stegi, Athens (26 November–30 December 2022).
Courtesy the artists and Onassis Foundation. Photo: Pinelopi Gerasimou.

Free-form embroidered tapestries on the walls create evocative scenes: irregular multicoloured compositions filled with cross-hatching patterns, textures, and everyday forms (like an egg) rendered iconic.

Am I Vertical? (2022), a psychedelic landscape centring a cypress tree, acts like a precursor to the tonal shift that occurs at the back of the room. On cream-primed canvases, frothy spray-painted pastel shapes—among them, the cypress—pay homage to Giorgio Morandi, one of many influences the Ionas brothers cite in a promiscuous mash-up of high and low, this and that, here and there.



The Callas, *Am I Vertical?* (2022). Embroidered tapestry. 190 cm x 170 cm. Exhibition view: The Callas, *Love Solidarity Death (L.S.D.)*, Onassis Stegi, Athens (26 November–30 December 2022). Courtesy the artists and Onassis Foundation. Photo: Pinelopi Gerasimou.

Am I Vertical? is named after The Callas' 2013 album produced by Jim Sclavunos of Nick Cave & The Bad Seeds, who produced the band's 2015 album *Half Kiss Half Pain*, and worked with them to instil deeper tones of rembetiko, Greece's version of a blues tradition, into their music.

The video for the 2013 track 'East Beat' alludes to rembetiko's roots in Asia Minor and the Ionas brothers' family connection to that region via Smyrna, with a figure shrouded in a black veil and another holding loukoumi. 'Anatoli', a track and video released for *L.S.D.* extends the sentiment, its title translating to 'East'.



The Callas, *East Beat* (2013) (still). Music video for 'East Beat', directed by Angeliki Hatzi and Maria Damkalidi. Courtesy the artists.

In keeping, The Callas connected past and present undergrounds in a 2022 show organised by the City of Athens and curated by Christoforos Marinos to explore rembetiko's legacy.

Among works by 50 modern and contemporary Greek artists, including Yannis Tsarouchis, The Callas presented *Bellou* (2004–2021), a makeshift stage of colourful plastic crates illuminated by a string of wired bulbs held up by plastic broom poles. The work is installed in Onassis Stegi's foyer for *L.S.D.* but without the unstretched painting forming its backdrop for the rembetiko show, with cloudy smears of charcoal, nail polish, lipstick, mascara, eyeliner, alcohol, ash, and body liquids manifesting the pungent, sweaty, smoky air of a raucous den.



The Callas, *Bellou* (2004–2021). Plastic crates, wired bulbs, mops, and brooms. 210 x 160 x 125 cm; *Tasting the floor, bands, real bands, people, real people, room expands and shrinks, cheap party lights, movement indicates rubbing, twist and turn, serpentine through sweaty bodies, purple booms, feedback crawls, disorientation of temporary feelings* (2021). Charcoal, nail polish, lipstick, mascara, eyeliner, alcohol, ash, and body liquids. 210 x 330 cm. Exhibition view: *Rembetiko* curated by Christoforos Marinos, Athens Municipality Arts Center, Athens (10 February–3 April 2022). Courtesy the artists.

That painting's title speaks to the atmosphere The Callas conjures: *Tasting the floor, bands, real bands, people, real people, room expands and shrinks, cheap party lights, movement indicates rubbing, twist and turn, serpentine through sweaty bodies, purple booms, feedback crawls, disorientation of temporary feelings* (2021).

Lustlands, for instance, was an epic gathering staged over two summers at the brothers' Peloponnese family farm in Thermissia, which went on to show at Family Business in New York in 2013. The farm has long hosted happenings. Most recently, a precursor to *L.S.D.* in June 2022, making a portal from city to countryside out of the disco lights flashing to recordings of cicadas installed by

the stairs leading to the Onassis show. (As Lakis told Argyropoulou: 'Urban and non-urban are an interchangeable living reality for us.')



Exhibition view: The Callas, *Love Solidarity Death (L.S.D.)* at Thermissia, Peloponnese, 21 June 2022. Courtesy the artists.

Taking place over one day in June 2013, *Lustlands Vol.II* included artists who speak to the DIY culture that has long defined the Athenian art scene, including Alexandros Tzannis, who established Saigon, a space for visual art and sound in Athens; Stelios Karamanolis, Tula Plumi, and Yorgos Stamkopoulos, founders of the Daily Lazy collective and online platform; and Maria Papadimitriou, founder

of Souzy Tros Art Canteen, who worked with Rick Lowe to set up Victoria Square Project for documenta 14 in 2017.



Stelios Karamanolis and Pavlos Tsakonas, installation view: *Lustlands, Vol. II—On The Great Eastern (After Andreas Embiricos)*, Thermissia, Peloponnese (4 June 2013).

Among the audience at Thermissia that year were attendees of DESTE's annual Hydra project, including Laura Skoler, a trustee of the New Museum, which included The Callas in *The Same River Twice*: a 2019 survey of Greek contemporary art curated by Natalie Bell and Margot Norton, staged at the Benaki Museum in collaboration with DESTE.

Skoler's unfiltered delight at spotting two people grinding on the roof of the farm house as part of the event pretty much summed up the *Lustlands Vol. II* experience, which Nadja Argyropoulou curated after *The Great Eastern*, a novel by 20th-century Greek surrealist Andreas Embiricos.



The Callas, *The Great Eastern* (2017) (film still). Courtesy the artists.

The Callas tapped into Embiricos' story about an ocean liner's hedonistic journey from Liverpool to New York in 1867 for their eponymous 2017 film, whose soundtrack was co-written by Sonic Youth's Lee Ranaldo. (Ranaldo went on to collaborate with the band for the 2018 album *Trouble And Desire*.) Shot in black and white, five people await a ship that never seems to come, as ennui translates into amplified registers of desire, melancholy, and familiarity.



The Callas_, *In lust we trust_* (2020). Embroidery. 200cm x 200cm. Exhibition view: *Athens Laundry – Bougada* (2020), curated by Theodora Malamou. Photo courtesy Theodora Malamou.

Screened as part of Ben Russell's documenta 14 cinema-performance festival 'Hallucinations', *The Great Eastern* gets to the heart of The Callas project, which feeds off life's affective, bodily intensities. Hence the phrase 'In Lust We Trust' appearing on one of the artists' tapestries, which curator Theodora Malamou hung from a balcony in 2020 as part of the project *Athens Laundry – Bougada*.

'Punk,' The Callas wrote when curating *Part Time Punks* at DESTE in 2007, 'is Lust... for creating, for love, for sharing...' Their world is about the family and friends you make and keep along the way, after all.



Jackie Lentzou, *La Jalousie* (2016) (still). Music video for The Callas, 'La Jalousie'. 6min 22sec. Courtesy the artists.

With that, The Callas' enduring artistic collaboration with Argyropoulou forms an undercurrent to *L.S.D.* As ever, the show programme brings together Callas collaborators; here, the band PapithedogTV, writer Ian F. Svenonius, and filmmaker Jackie Lentzou, who directed the Hi8 music video for the 2016 Callas track 'La Jalousie', named after an Alain Robbe-Grillet novel.

'Solidarity for us is something we apply every day since we started as brothers playing football, later building this whole team that make up The Callas, which can be sound engineers, graphic designers, dancers, performers, musicians,' Aris told Irini Nikolakaki for *Athinorama*. 'It is a means of support for everyone in a daily process of creation. And as the circle keeps getting bigger, you can be led to much broader concepts of what solidarity means.'



The Callas, *Sick* (2021) (still). Feature film. 73 mins. Courtesy the artists.

More recently, they worked with actors Nikos Zeginoglou and Melia Kreiling over the pandemic to produce *Sick* (2021). The non-linear film tracks a far-flung romance between Athens and Los Angeles, with mobile phone clips stitched into an audiovisual tapestry that feeds off the tensions between fragments. Because what is solidarity in the face of death, if not a loving connection. —[O]
