

Review

Destroy...Alexander Iolas: The Villa-Museum and the Relics of a Lost Collection

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Abstract: The paper comments on the event *Destroy...Alexander Iolas* held on the occasion of the re-edition of Iolas' biography, 25 years after the collector's death.

Keywords: Alexander Iolas; post-war art; history of collections; Museum studies; art collectors

1. Introduction

The name Alexander Iolas (born Konstantinos Koutsoudis, 1908–1987) is well known amongst scholars of post-war art. He was a collector, a patron and a dealer of avant-garde art (surrealism, pop art, nouveau réalisme, arte povera) with a lifelong passion for antiquities. Director of the Hugo Gallery in New York and co-founder of the Jackson-Iolas Gallery in 1955 [1], Iolas organised Andy Warhol's first solo show in 1952 that presented 15 drawings inspired by the writings of Truman Capote. Subsequently, he owned and operated a chain of art galleries in Paris, New York, Milan, Geneva (Iolas- Engelberts Gallery), Madrid (Galeria Iolas-Velasco), Rome (Galleria Iolas-Galates) and Athens (Iolas-Zoumboulakis Gallery), exhibiting works by Max Ernst, Jean Tinguely, Wols, Ghika, Martial Raysse, Yves Klein, Niki de Saint Phalle, Paul Klee, Roberto Matta, Takis, Lucio Fontana, René Magritte, Tateishi Tiger, Harold Stevenson, Öyvind Fahlström, Eva Aeppli, Victor Brauner, and many others (see list of exhibitions).

Iolas was born in Alexandria (Egypt) to a Greek bourgeois family and he studied music and dance. At the beginning of his career he mainly worked as a dancer in Berlin, Paris and New York. A serious injury forced him to abandon dancing in the mid-1940s and undertake the profession of the art dealer, taking advantage of his connections with artists in Paris, but also in New York, where many European

artists found shelter during the wartime period. By the mid-1970s, Iolas closed his galleries and moved to Athens (Greece), envisaging the creation of a museum where his 'mythic' collection, enumerating approximately 10 thousand artworks, would be displayed.

2. Destroy...Alexandros Iolas

The celebrated Villa Iolas (1,700 square meters) is located in the northern suburbs of Athens (Hagia Paraskevi), in an area enclosing approximately 6,500 square meters. The construction of the bi-level villa-museum began in the 1960s. According to his biographer, Iolas commissioned Dimitris Pikionis, whom he met in France through his compatriot Christian Zervos, and later the Greek architect Manolis Karantinos to design the villa. However, this information has been contested by Ekonomou [2]. The villa's decorative elements proposed to evoke Iolas' eccentric and vagarious personality. On each side of the main entrance, two pillars were placed with two animal-shaped Italian marbles on the footing, representing Iolas' astrological signs: Aries and Leo. The carved in bronze gilt-edged gate was prepared by the Greek artist Giannis Kardamatis [3] (pp. 139,145).

Figure 1. Exterior of the villa Iolas during the event *Destroy Alexandros Iolas*. [©]Giorgos Nanouris, source: Christos Paridis/ http://www.lifo.gr/team/pathologika/33678.



The history of the villa Iolas is more or less well known. Current research on Iolas is reduced to the work of the so-called Filopappou Group, an artists' collective whose activity dates back to 2001. Since 2008, the group has made remarkable efforts to recompose the history of Iolas' collection and create an archive of photographs, videos, documents, objects, and interviews that bring to light unknown aspects of Iolas' personal and professional activity. These efforts were apparently motivated by the show *Alexander Iolas: twenty years after 1987–2007*, that took place at the Down Town Art Gallery, in January 2007 displaying a series of artworks and objects from private collections in

Europe and overseas that formerly belonged to Iolas. The exhibition under the title *In a twist we met Iolas* was organised by the group on the occasion of the third Athens Biennale-Monodrome in October–December 2011 and included a series of recorded interviews with art professionals and historians who had met Iolas. Their principal concern was to form an oral history archive that situates, for the first time, Iolas' activity in the context of Greek art, culture, and politics of the 1980s.

The one-day event *Destroy...Alexander Iolas* (Figure 1) was more of a protest rather than an exhibition - a protest viewed as a cultural form of resistance [4]. It took place in the ruins of the celebrated villa Iolas, in November 2012, 25 years after the collector's death. The event was organized on the occasion of the re-edition of Iolas' biography by his intimate friend, the reporter Nikos Stathoulis and Elsa Angelopoulou. It displayed a series of Iolas' personal photographs (Figure 2) — also appearing in his biography—hung on the walls while copies of press-cuttings, reproducing the scandalous articles against Iolas that appeared in the Greek press in the years between 1983 and 1987, were placed on the ground, on which visitors could step (Figure 3). These documents together with the dilapidated villa and the book-length biography constitute today the only remains of Iolas and his lost collection, furnishing testimony of the rise and fall of one of the most important personalities of the post-war art scene.

Figure 2. Interior of the villa Iolas during the event *Destroy Alexandros Iolas*. [©]Giorgos Nanouris, source: Christos Paridis/ http://www.lifo.gr/team/pathologika/33678.



Clearly the organizers of the event did not propose to present these documents to the public as means of documentation since their abusive content is well-known in the Greek society. In fact, their placement on the ground is, arguably, indicative of their intention to finally minimize the articles' influence over the opinion of the public, turning its interest in the perpetual scandal of the State as evinced in its unwillingness to protect its cultural heritage. In fact, their principal demand was for the villa Iolas to turn into a cultural center functioning under the auspices of the State. This manifestation can be otherwise viewed as an effort to stage political and social praxis and react against it through the visitors' involvement [5,6]. One might even argue that in the context of relational aesthetics the same event may be alternatively considered as an artistic manifestation in the form of images, objects and human beings whose interaction encourages the viewer's productive existence in Nicolas Burriaud's terms [7,8]. Although displaying specific content, the event constitutes a participatory, interactive, visitor-centered project. It is indispensable for the visitor to step on the scandalous articles symbolically condemning their content (Figure 4). On the other hand, it is crucial to decide whether the event was concerned with its effect on the visitors or with the visitors' effect on the central theme of the event, since their physical presence fulfilled the organizers' ambition to demonstrate the fact that the public itself actively rejects – tramples - the defamatory comments against Iolas which formerly provoked exasperation and debate.

Figure 3. Interior of the villa Iolas during the event *Destroy Alexandros Iolas*. [©]Giorgos Nanouris, source: Christos Paridis/ http://www.lifo.gr/team/pathologika/33678.



The empty villa is today a place of both memory and disdain. Clearly, this off-the-beaten-track exhibition has met no parallel. It questioned the role of press in building or consuming the public image of an artistic persona during the 1980s, challenging the ambiguity of the cultural and historical value of a private art collection in reference to its owner's public morality. The case of Iolas evokes additionally the role of media in directing public opinion, affirming that the conception of benefaction in the domain of culture is identified with a morally-dependent action indicating a certain sort of virtuousness—of which Iolas was deprived in the opinion of the public. The show's primary display was, however, the public's proclamation against the Greek State's negligence towards Iolas, aiming at directing its interest in what is left of the villa.

3. The Villa-Museum

Although the villa proposed to be Iolas' primary residence, it mostly resembled a museum containing approximately 30 rooms with marble tiles installed on walls and floors. The ground floor in particular presents a series of large rooms, connected to each other with open gates, where special mechanisms of secret lighting were installed in order to spotlight the canvases hung on the walls. Works by Warhol, Matta, Brauner, and Niki de Saint Phalle, were placed in separate rooms. Other rooms displayed Iolas' collection of ancient Greek, Roman, Egyptian, Chinese antiquities and byzantine religious icons, juxtaposed with works by Kandinsky, Calder, Picasso, and Dali, to name but a few of the artists whose work Iolas collected [9–11]. One of the rooms was turned into a library which contained rare editions of books, all covered with white horse leather. The basement was mainly a *vestiary*, where Iolas' costumes from his dancing and theatre performances were kept.

Inarguably, Iolas' intention was for his villa to turn into a museum after his death, or more precisely into a Center, one of the few Centers of Contemporary Art located in Europe during the period in question. Museums, according to Iolas, cannot but host the past. Contemporary art has nothing to do with the museum [12]. Iolas' conception of the Center of Contemporary Art resides in his admiration for Warhol's celebrated New York studio, commonly referred to as Factory. It proposed to be a place in which all aspects of artistic production and interaction would be encouraged. Between 1976 and 1980, Iolas donated a part of his collection to the newly-founded Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, an ambitious institution whose conception was in keeping with Iolas' ideas, including his portrait by René Magritte (*Le bon exemple*, oil on canvas, 1953), Matta's monumental canvas titled *Les puissance du désordre* (1965), three works by Luis Fernandez elaborated between 1951 and 1964 (*Nature morte géométrique, Deux pigeons, Lapin*), a *Méduse* (installation, 1980) by Takis, a statue by Brauner (*Tot în tot*, 1945) and a few others.

At the same time, Iolas warmly supported the idea of the creation of the Macedonian Center of Contemporary Art in Thessaloniki, the first of its kind in a Greek province, enhancing its collection with 44 contemporary artworks including Warhol's *Alexander the Great* (silkscreen, 1981), a drawing by Victor Brauner (*Composition*, 1955), Eliseo Mattiaci's *Space* (mixed media, 1981), Dennis Oppenheim's *Brain* (construction, 1984) and *Ground Tremor* (construction, 1984), Jean Tinguely's *Danse Macabre* (construction, 1969), Niki de Saint-Phalle's works *Adam* and *Eva* (papier-mâché, 1968), a *Woman* and a *Man* (1973) in bronze by Novello Finotti, and many works by Greek

artists (Opy Zouni, Petros, Costas Tsoclis, Alexis Akrithakis, Pavlos, Takis and others). He also commissioned many Greek artists to elaborate works to be displayed in his villa-museum.

At the beginning of 1980, Iolas had already transferred his entire collection to Athens and was in search of an architect that would undertake the transformation of his villa into an art center-museum. At the same time, he encouraged many contemporary artists to transfer their studios to the area surrounding his villa and work there. However, it was his collection at first and then his personal life that became frequent issues of contention in the contemporary Athenian press. Apparently, exposing his collection to the public through magazines, TV shows [13] and social events provoked various reactions starting with him being accused of illicit trade in Greek antiquities, a major issue in contemporary Greek society. This accusation impaired his reputation and created an air of mystery and doubt over the provenance of his entire collection, which was in reality legitimately acquired abroad [14].

Figure 4. Interior of the villa Iolas during the event *Destroy Alexandros Iolas*. Photo by Chara Kolokytha.



Stathoulis insists that Iolas achieved the repatriation of more than 2500 ancient Greek objects. However, the intentions of the collector remain obscure. A letter on behalf of the auction house Sotheby's in London dated October 9th, 1980, which is reproduced in Iolas' biography, makes things more complex. It seems that Iolas planned, as early as 1980, to sell his entire collection starting with the *antique* objects that he owned. The Sotheby's representative suggests in the same letter that 'the best and more profitable way of presenting all your objects is to sell them in the house were they look absolutely splendid,' adding that Iolas' Modern Art Collection should be sold in their important summer sale in London, 'to which buyers from all over the world come'. By virtue of this one might argue that it was his decision to sell his collection that motivated the attacks against him. A lot of conversation has been made in the years following Iolas' death about his intention to donate his collection to the Greek State and the latter's unwillingness to accept it. The main argument has been the avant-garde character of Iolas' modern art collection with which the Greek art world was little acquainted. This fact is to be linked with the State's cultural policies over the same period or, more

generally, the reception of modern European and American art in post-war Greece—an issue not yet examined.

Subsequently, Iolas was under attack by the newspapers *Auriani*, *Apogeumatini*, and *Ethnos*, which met great success by commenting systematically on his personal life and his sexual orientation, on the Roman orgies held at the villa, presenting him as a drug addict and a whoremaster who seduced juvenile boys in his shameless villa. These articles were primarily based on the account provided by a transvestite who used the pseudonym 'Maria Callas'. 'Iolas accused of having orgies', 'Iolas' scandal made high society tremble', were some of the titles that appeared in the front pages of the Greek press [15,16]. Most articles focused on the fact that justice has become an instrument of local 'corrupted' high ranked elites who supported Iolas and *forced* the authorities to suppress his scandalous activity. A key role in this was played by the friendship that Iolas preserved with the leader of the opposition party [17,18]. The newspapers' columnists became 'champions of truth' literarily abusing Iolas' personal life, while in the *libel trials* that followed in contemporary press many high society members were drawn in.

By the mid-1980s, Iolas could find no official support in the Greek capital. Stathoulis identifies these articles as politically motivated attacks reflecting a *rotten* political system of polarization and decay which was subsequently unmasked and culminated in contemporary economic crisis. An anecdote appearing in his biography epitomizes Iolas' frustration. In 1985, Iolas commissioned Andy Warhol to create the celebrated series of paintings based on the theme of the *Last Supper*, the famous work by Leonardo da Vinci, asking him to replace the figure of Judas with a Greek. Until the end of his life, Iolas experienced social ostracism. Following his diagnosis with HIV, the situation became worse. In 1987, while on a trip to New York, the collector died [19]. Soon after that, the villa was plundered and the greatest part of his collection was stolen. What was left of it was transferred to Iolas' heirs who sold it to private collectors.

Conclusion

From the title alone it is evident that the event drew on the concept of irony in disgrace. *Destroy Alexander Iolas* was not held as praise to either the work, or the activity of Iolas as one might have expected. It affirmed that memory is indissolubly connected with material remains, highlighting the continuous misfortune of Iolas' property and the unprecedented injustice paid to both his work and personality. What is left of Iolas carries the memory of destruction and violence. The press-cuttings with the disgraceful articles against Iolas continue to monopolize our interest today since they constitute the only concrete evidence that we dispose of together with a few anecdotes, accounts, and memoirs by his intimate circle that loosely describe his lost collection [20]. Perhaps the title of the event could not have been more accurate. It affirms that the name of Iolas remains synonymous with destruction. The show constitutes the latest manifestation held in the memory of the celebrated collector merely resuming Iolas' age-long activity into a decade of disgrace and spoilage, which is in reality all that is left of him in public memory.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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Appendix

List of exhibitions held at the Iolas Galleries:

1958: Ghika, Gallery Iolas, New York.

1960: Foldès, Gallery Iolas, New York.

1961: Takis, Gallery Iolas, Milan.

1962: R. Magritte: paintings, gouaches, collages, Gallery Iolas, New York.

1962: Niki de Saint-Phalle, Gallery Iolas, New York.

1963: Magritte, Galerie Iolas, Genève.

- 1963: Matta: peintures, dessins, Galerie Iolas-Engelberts, Genève.
- 1963: Max Ernst, Galerie Iolas, Genève.
- 1963: Copley, Gallery Iolas, New York.
- 1963: Bernard Pfriem, Gallery Iolas, New York.
- 1963: Gregory Masurovsky, Gallery Iolas, New York.
- 1963: Takis, Gallery Iolas, New York.
- 1963: G. Beery, Gallery Iolas, New York.
- 1964: Martial Raysse, Gallery Iolas, New York.
- 1964: Tinguely: Meta, Galerie Iolas, Paris.
- 1964: Max Ernst: cap capricorne, Galerie Iolas, Paris.
- 1964: Takis: dix ans de sculpture, Galerie Iolas, Paris.
- 1964 : Magritte : le sens propre, Galerie Iolas, Paris.
- 1965: Tanning, Gallery Iolas, New York.
- 1965: V. Brauner: Peintures, Galerie Iolas, Paris.
- 1965: Leonor Fini, Galerie Iolas, Paris.
- 1965: Ghika, Galerie Iolas, Paris.
- 1965: Yves Klein, Galerie Iolas, Paris.
- 1965: Martial Raysse, Galerie Iolas, Paris.
- 1965 : Niki de Saint Phalle, Galerie Iolas, Paris.
- 1965 : Wols, Galerie Iolas, Paris.
- 1966: Matta, Galerie Iolas, Paris.
- 1966: Paul Klee, Galerie Iolas, Paris.
- 1966: Takis, Galerie Iolas, Paris.
- 1966: Fontana, Galerie Iolas, Paris.
- 1966: Les Lalannes, Galerie Iolas, Paris.
- 1967: Roberto Crippa, Galleria Iolas-Galates, Rome.
- 1967: Victor Brauner, Galerie Iolas, Paris.
- 1967: Copley: Ballads, Galerie Iolas, Paris.
- 1967: Crippa, Galerie Iolas, Paris.
- 1967: Magritte: les images en soi, Galerie Iolas, Paris.
- 1967: Richard Hamilton, Gallery Iolas, New York.
- 1968: Miguel Berrocal, Galeria Iolas-Velasco, Madrid.
- 1968: Pino Pascali, Gallery Iolas, Milan.
- 1968: Victor Brauner: dessins, Galerie Iolas, Paris.
- 1968: Max Ernst: le néant et son double, Galerie Iolas, Paris.
- 1968: Lucio Fontana, Galerie Iolas, Paris.
- 1968: Louis Fernandez, Galerie Iolas, Paris.
- 1968/9: 8 sculptures de Magritte, Galerie Iolas, Paris.
- 1969: Dorothea Tanning, Galerie Iolas, Paris.
- 1969: Mattiacci, Galleria Iolas, Milan.
- 1970: Stanislas Lepri, Gallery Iolas, New York.
- 1970: Edward Ruscha, Gallery Iolas, New York.

- 1970: Victor Brauner: Frontières noires, Galerie Iolas, Paris.
- 1970: Raynaud, Galerie Iolas, Paris.
- 1970: Vera Fabre, Galleria Iolas, Milan.
- 1970: Niki de Saint Phalle, Galleria Iolas, Milan.
- 1971: E. Berman, Gallery Iolas, Milan.
- 1971: Max Ernst: lieux communs, décervelages, Galerie Iolas, Paris.
- 1971: Dorothea Tanning: Ouvre-toi, Gallery Iolas, Milan.
- 1971: Takis, Galleria Iolas, Milan.
- 1972: Martial Raysse: Six Images Calmes, Galerie Iolas, Paris.
- 1972: Roger Nellens, Galerie Iolas, Paris.
- 1972: Copley, Galleria Iolas, Milan.
- 1972: Fausta Squatriti, Galerie Iolas, Genève.
- 1972: Eduardo Chillida, Galeria Iolas, Madrid.
- 1972: Dessins: Claude et François-Xavier Lalanne, Galerie Iolas, Paris.
- 1973: Harold Stevenson: altar of peace, Gallery Iolas, New York.
- 1973: Jorge Castillo, Galeria Iolas-Velasco, Madrid.
- 1973: Alekos Fassianos, Gallery Iolas, New York.
- 1973: Max Ernst: perturbations, délices et orgues, Galerie Iolas, Paris.
- 1973: Matta où, Matta qui ne renonce pas à ta part de violence, Galerie Iolas-Creuzevault, Paris.
- 1973: Pavlos, Galerie Iolas, Paris.
- 1973: Tsoclis, Galerie Iolas, Paris.
- 1973: Jean-Pierre Raynaud, Galerie Iolas, Paris.
- 1974: Constantin Xenakis, Gallery Iolas-Zoumboulakis, Athens.
- 1974: Giorgio de Chirico, Galerie Iolas, Paris.
- 1974: Hernandez Pijuan, Galeria Iolas-Velasco, Madrid.
- 1974: Campano: La ventana, Galeria Iolas-Velasco, Madrid.
- 1974: Man Ray, Galerie Iolas, Paris.
- 1974: Répertoire: Roger Nellens, Galerie Iolas, Paris.
- 1974: Victor Brauner, Galerie Iolas, Paris.
- 1974: C. Tsoclis, Gallery Iolas, Milan.
- 1974: Réalisations et projets d'architectures de Niki de Saint Phalle, Galerie Iolas, Paris.
- 1975: Marina Karella, Galerie Iolas, Paris.
- 1975: Öyvind Fahlström, Galerie Iolas, Paris.
- 1975: Jean-Pierre Raynaud, Galerie Iolas, Paris.
- 1975: Pol Bury, Galeria Iolas-Velasco, Madrid.
- 1975: Matta: L'oeil-etre, Galerie Iolas, Paris.
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- 1976: Fassianos, Galerie Iolas, Paris.
- 1976: Paul Thek, Galerie Iolas, Paris.
- 1976: Onomatomanie de Victor Brauner, Galerie Iolas, Paris.
- 1976: De Stefano, Galeria Iolas-Velasco, Madrid.
- 1977: Chillida: Obra grafica completa, Galeria Iolas-Velasco, Madrid.

1977: Alberto Gironella, Galeria Iolas-Velasco, Madrid.

1980: Petros: Ambiguous utopia, Gallery Iolas, New York.

1980: Lazongas, Galerie Iolas-Samy Kinge, Paris.

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