

white wall

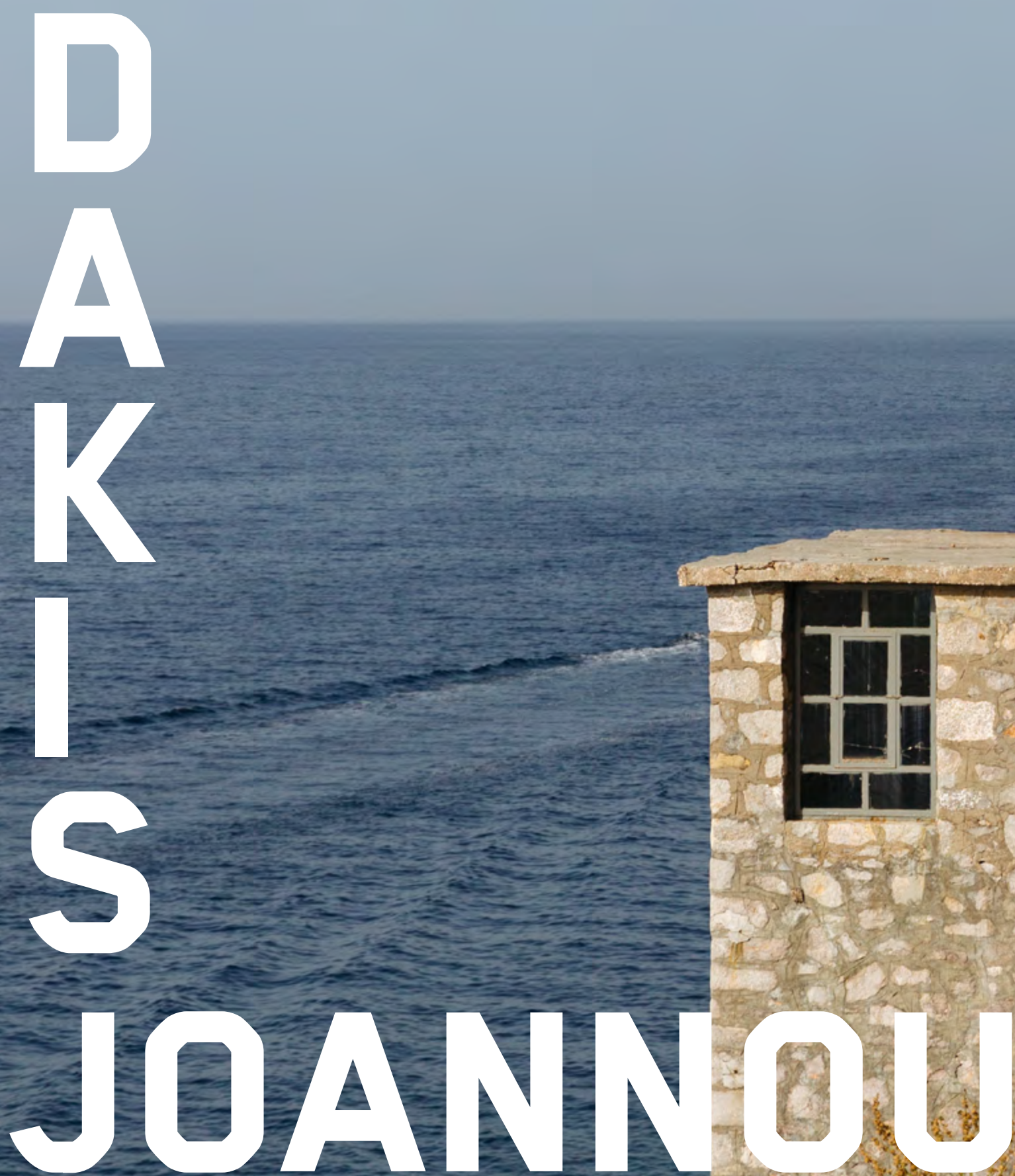
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TOM SACHS - LOUIS FRATINO - JEAN-MICHEL OTHONIEL - MICKALENE THOMAS -
DAKIS JOANNOU - RANDY OLSON & MELISSA FARLOW - DIOR IN ATHENS

A photograph of a stone building with a window overlooking the ocean under a clear blue sky. The building is constructed from rough-hewn stones and has a small, dark-framed window. The ocean is a deep blue with gentle waves. The sky is a clear, light blue. The overall mood is serene and coastal.

DAK I S JOANNOU

Continuing a collection built on
conversations and friendships.

BY MICHAEL KLUG



Installation view of "The Greek Gift" at DESTE Foundation Project Space, Slaughterhouse, Hydra (June 22-October 31, 2021), photo by © Paris Tavitian.



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For Dakis Joannou, it always starts with a conversation. His art collection, now one of the top in the world, is driven by his relationships with artists, many of which are decades-long. He founded DESTE Foundation, with locations in Athens and Hydra, in 1983, prior to buying any art. He was passionate about contemporary art and began organizing a few exhibitions with Greek artists. “I had no interest in collecting at all,” he told *Whitewall* over Zoom this summer. “My idea was being in conversation with art and playing a role with the art discussion.”

It wasn’t until 1985, after striking up a connection with Jeff Koons, that he purchased his first piece, *One Ball Total Equilibrium Tank*, featuring a basketball floating in the middle of a fish tank. “From then on I understood what collecting really was, and understood that collecting could be something very creative,” he said. “Especially when combined with the activity of DESTE Foundation, which is public, you can make some statements, express some ideas, and it can be very alive. The relationship with the artists is really what started the collection, and that has continued since everything.”

His collection has grown to include works by Urs Fischer, George Condo, Maurizio Cattelan, Kiki Smith, Helmut Newton, Robert Gober, Chris Ofili, Kaari Upson, Nari Ward, and many more. He has acquired in-depth bodies of work and maintained lasting friendships. And that personal dialogue has resulted in the current exhibition, “Greek Gift,” on view at DESTE Foundation’s Project Space in Hydra through October 31.

Curated by Joannou’s close confidant Massimiliano Gioni, it acts as a closer look into the collector and collection. “We started to focus on an idea of doing a show about the relationship I have with the artists,” said Joannou. Inspired by the chess move named Greek Gift sacrifice, in which a bishop is given up in order to checkmate, Joannou made the first move with his own sculpture of a smoking pipe on a Coca-Cola bottle, *1965/2015* (2015), on the roof, and invited artists to make the next moves. Joannou and Gioni would then respond in kind, and so forth. Artists like Upson and Ashley Bickerton created new works, and Fischer contributed his unique digital sculpture released as an NFT, *CHAOS #1 Human* (2021).

“The whole story ended up being about my thirty- to forty-year relationship with the artists,” said Joannou. “It’s a personal thing, this show.” It’s also a look at his easy dialogue with Gioni, the curator and friend he’s worked with for close to two decades, who suggested interesting pairings such as a work by Ward with one by Chen Zhen. “When you get things that aren’t meant to be together and you put them together, somehow different energies are created. The whole show is about this,” said Joannou.

Athens has seen a growth in cultural happenings like Dior’s Cruise 2022 show and documenta 14 in 2017. “There has been an incredible transformation in the art scene,” Joannou agreed. “It’s really becoming a very vibrant city.” There this summer, DESTE Foundation is presenting “Anti-Structure,” on view through October 27. This, too, is an exercise in conversation, where curator Andreas Melas has placed five pieces by Fischer to engage with the work of 21 Greek and Cypriot artists. “We did the Urs Fischer installation first,” explained Joannou. “And then Andreas found this kind of connection. It works well. You couldn’t really have one without the other. It’s a nice match. It’s not a marriage, it’s an engagement.”

The title of the exhibition comes from the term coined by Victor Turner, a cultural anthropologist who in 1969 described a state of perpetual transformation. In that time of upheaval and change, as he wrote, “new symbols, models, and paradigms arise—as the seedbeds of cultural creativity.” Which is a description that could not feel any more relevant to our current moment.

Works by Yannoulis Chalepas, Tony Moussoulides, Aliko Panagiotopoulou, Rallou Panagiotou, Nausica Pastra, Christiana Soulou, Iris Touliatou, Takis Zenetos, and more explore radical new ideas and expressions via sculpture, installation, painting, video, and other media. The exhibition creates connections both in conceptual theme and visually via Fischer’s winding, stretching installation resembling something like larger-than-life veins running throughout.

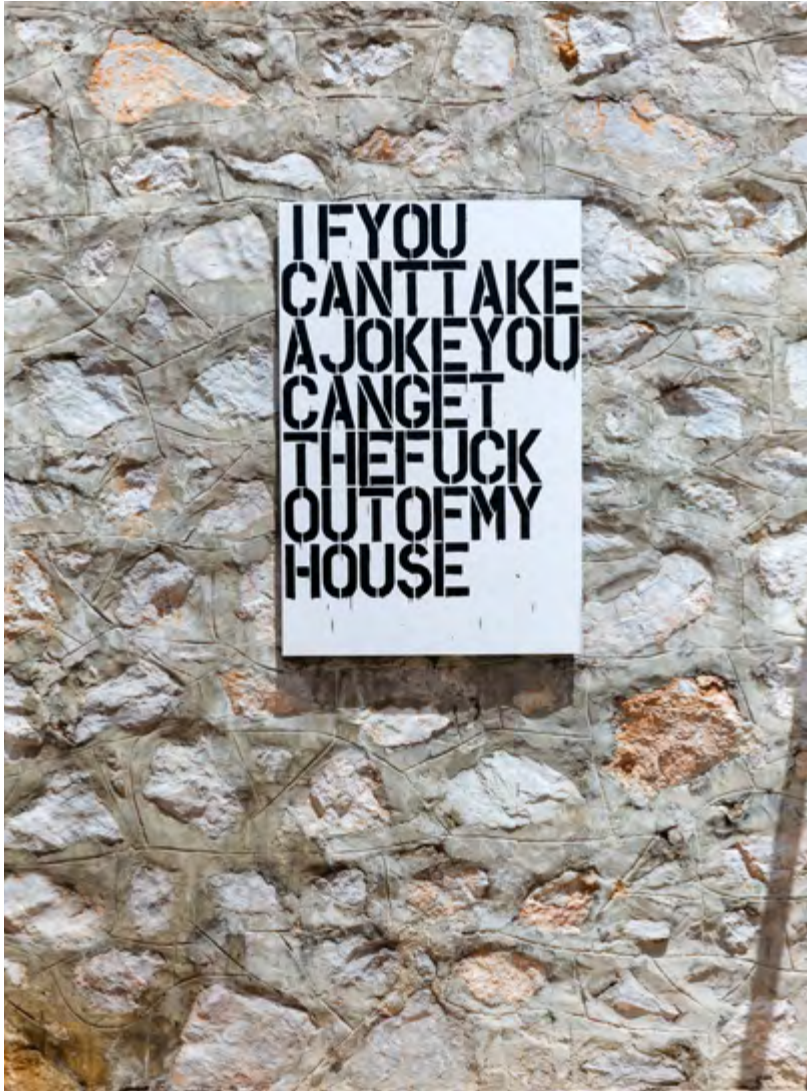
And throughout, although the art market continues to change, Joannou continues to collect, sometimes more in depth with his artist friends, and sometimes striking up with someone new. “It’s just like meeting a person. You get along or you may not get along. That’s how the relationship develops. The art of course is a separate thing, but that’s where it starts from,” said Joannou. He’s even dipped his toe into the NFT craze of 2021, purchasing one by Fischer. “I got my feet wet. Let’s see where it takes me,” he said.

“I cannot imagine living in any other way. The last fifty years I’ve been living surrounded by art,” Joannou said, closing out the Zoom call. “Whether I’m collecting or not collecting—even as a student I was surrounded by Picasso posters and Modigliani posters. It’s been part of my way of life.”



Portrait of Dakis Joannou by © Alexia Antsakli www.artflyer.net (In background: Seth Price, *Untitled*, 2008.)

Installation views of "The Greek Gift" at DESTE Foundation Project Space, Slaughterhouse, Hydra (June 22–October 31, 2021). (Clockwise from top left: Christopher Wool, *If You*, 2001, photo by © Paris Tavitian; Matthew Barney & Elizabeth Peyton, *Blood of Two*, 2009, photo by © Paris Tavitian; David Shrigley, *Please Don't Kill Us*, 2007, photo by © Paris Tavitian; Ashley Bickerton, *Ocean Chunk: Indian Ocean/Aegean Sea*, 2021 © the artist and photo by George Skordaras.)







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