

2017 ABOG Fellow Rick Lowe

Victoria Square Project: Athens, Greece

Field Research Report
Jan Cohen-Cruz
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Context

Victoria Square in Athens, Greece is conveniently located via public transportation and is pleasantly laid out with flowers, trees, and benches, but is not on the tourist trail. Cafes on adjacent streets, with few patrons, extend seating into the square. Depending on the time of day, small clusters of young people, families, couples, and individuals sit reading or talking in a range of languages—Greek, Arabic, Somali, English, Afghani, Ukrainian, and more. Some are dressed in the traditional veil, others in jeans and other western style dress. Like most of Greece, it has not fully recovered from the 2008 world recession.

The *Victoria Square Project* (VSP) is located just off the square on the carless Elpidos Street, which also houses apartment buildings, a Romanian dance hall, a UNICEF-sponsored clinic, and Laki's Ouzeri, a fish tavern. It occupies the ground floor and basement of a six-story building otherwise the home of a school of economics. When I visited in May 2017, two men were playing dominoes in front of VSP: Darius, a neatly-dressed Greek in his early sixties perhaps, and Rick Lowe, a tall African American in his mid-fifties, with a ready smile and a welcoming demeanor. People passing by slowed down to look at the traditional Ukrainian garments that were then featured in the windows; Lowe jumped up and invited them in.

Often seated crocheting at one of the windows is Click, a Zimbabwean organizer and craftswoman. On the day of my visit, some visitors from the University of Houston were touring VSP's ground floor and downstairs studio. A group of youth with Down syndrome were rehearsing for the show they would perform in front of VSP a few days later. A woman in all black with long red hair entered, looking for Rick and one of his two main partners, Maria Papadimitriou, to pitch a project she wanted to do there. Rick's other core partner, Ellie Christaki, a young architect and organizer, was at work on *one to one*, a four-page weekly newspaper they publish.

Evolution of Victoria Square Project

Lowe describes the *Victoria Square Project* as a social sculpture, the term that conceptual and political artist Joseph Beuys used for seeing society as a whole as a work of art to which everyone can contribute creatively. As described in *one to one*,

Working with various community initiatives, local businesses, institutions, the municipality, artists, and other individuals and groups, *Victoria Square Project* seeks to elevate the cultural and historical assets of this vital crossroads in Athens. Each participant helps us better understand the cultural, historical, and political dynamics in this area.

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In other social sculptures he has instigated, especially *Project Row Houses* in Houston, Lowe allows the work to find a flow within its community context, noting, “It’s a process of engaging a community of people, that’s where the work is and the real value.” He explores how to generate energy that allows people to want to get involved creatively; and in this case, how to weave in the existing creative energies of Athens and more specifically Victoria Square, whereas mostly creativity is defined as individual. His focus is artists, local business people, residents—including a large immigrant and refugee population—and students, who live, work, study, and/or have property in the neighborhood. Rick notes, “Many artists come to us with ideas, thoughts, hopes, and dreams that our project may be a vehicle for. A woman from the neighborhood brought her silk screen materials and has been doing workshops, and used that process on the outside of our building. Someone else is making handbags in our studio space.”

Lowe and his team are equally interested in people who don’t consider themselves artists but who he sees as creative practitioners: “So many people have a creative side. Like a grocer here who is a great poet and has even published, and an employee at the nearby Greek restaurant who also plays guitar. We highlight them. Culture and creativity within this community will connect people to each other and propel this place forward.”

Rick says he’s doing community development; calling it art provides the opportunity to “make something special even if it’s mundane by strictly aesthetic standards. Calling something an art piece brings it attention.” And attention should be paid: to the refugee who’s typically seen as a drain on resources but also has something to contribute from her culture. To a small business, trying to stay in place despite economic hardship. To local artists, who feel ignored by international festivals like Documenta, the one promoting VSP. To students, who want to learn how their work can benefit more than just them. To international travelers, who want a more nuanced experience of what Greece is today. An artistic approach is crucial because, as Thomas Kuhn articulated in [*The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*](#) (1962) we often don’t see what is in front of us; we see what we expect to see.

Kuhn describes an experiment wherein people were asked to identify playing cards very quickly. After a while, black hearts and red clubs showed up, the reverse of the norm. They at first identified them as red hearts and black clubs and then just got confused. It’s unthinkable for a heart to be black to someone who has only ever seen it as red. Artists like Lowe in effect ask: what gets us to see what we don’t expect to see—more nuanced and with more variation?

Rick is pleased that so many passers-by stop; that was his hope in choosing this location: “The square is too busy; it’d get lost. Here it stands out.” He points out that since the center opened, the city has been cleaning that street again after years of neglect. There are still some drug addicts sitting in front of buildings but Darius and others tell them to move. Lowe had feared vandalism; when they moved in there was a lot of graffiti on the building, whose ground floor had been uninhabited for fifteen years. He pays Darius to open, close, and tend to VSP, and a local woman to keep it clean: they are “eyes on the space.” So far so good. The more people in the neighborhood are connected to it, the less likely it will be vandalized, Rick says.

The chain of events that brought VSP into being began in June 2015, when Lowe was invited to give a presentation at a conference in Athens. It was the period that refugees were pouring into Athens at an

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alarming rate due to fighting and strife in Syria, Afghanistan, parts of Africa, and elsewhere. The square was full of refugees who has just arrived and were trying to travel north and west to Europe when the borders closed. Greece was debating the referendum to pull out of the EU (which lost); protests were frequent.

The next month, back in Houston, organizers of the art event Documenta 14 met with Lowe about participating in that event in Kassel and Athens in 2017. In April 2015, he was among 100 artists that Documenta chose and brought to Athens to orient them to the event. Rick returned to Athens in June 2015 to begin figuring out what he would do. He knew he wanted to understand the situation of the immigrants and refugees in Athens, so Documenta set up meetings for him with numerous organizations. By July, Rick asked for someone on the ground; he couldn't possibly manage it from the US. They brought on Ellie Christaki, a careful and thoughtful organizer with an art background. Rick was struck by how little she spoke in their interview but decided to try working with her on the ground and he's been very happy. By not speaking much, other people do, which is the point. However, his 24,000 euro fee from Documenta is not enough to cover her fulltime salary, so Rick drew on other funds, including his multi-year McArthur grant and his A Blade of Grass Fellowship. The space costs \$1,000 a month including utilities. He intends to keep it going until April 2018 at least, seeing a year as the minimum to test the concept. Then he and his partners will assess if it is valuable to continue VSP.

Between June 2016 and January 2017, Rick met with many people, with Documenta's help, to discuss the situation of immigrants and refugees in Athens. He asked if they thought it would be valuable to make a space where immigrants and refugees could express their culture. Some anarchists said no; they are against anything connected to any institution. Some local artists said they were not interested in immigrants and refugees as a theme for art. Others said yes.

In September 2016, Rick invited refugee organizations from all over Athens that he'd met with one-on-one on previous trips to come together. Some thirty people did, from associations for Somalis, Nigerians, Zimbabweans, Syrians, Afghans, Bangladeshis, Ukrainians, and Albanians. Lowe found that few had a strong cultural component. Melissa, an organization for refugee and immigrant women located in the Victoria Square neighborhood, highly values culture but lacks the space to fully support such events. Lowe wanted aligned neighbors like Melissa. He found the space on Elpidos Street, which translates as "hope," and leased it.

In November 2016, Rick undertook the same process with artists as he had with immigrant and refugee organizations, meeting with artists individually first, then on his next visit inviting them to a collective meeting. He didn't want the same antagonism towards his project as was developing vis-à-vis Documenta, in relation to which a lot of local artists felt left out, especially ironic given the theme of this year's exhibition, "Learning from Athens." Nine of the thirteen he invited came. One, Maria Papadimitriou, was initially cynical about Documenta but became the most involved local artist, when she saw what Lowe was doing and how. Lowe says that she is "a great mouthpiece, and a good balance with Ellie." She's a known artist, who represented Greece in a Venice Biennale. Her art project, Suzy Tros, is on the outskirts of the city and as such, in a similar spirit of access outside major art centers, but it is artist driven, not community driven like VSP. As with the organizations, not many of the artists ultimately became involved, but it was important that he reached out and had their support. He hoped to find money to commission them to do free workshops but hasn't so much yet. The artists getting involved largely have connections to this neighborhood, such as a silk

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screen artist who has one apartment here and another in Berlin. Another local artist with local ties, Nicos, is doing a film project about the neighborhood which will be presented as an installation in the downstairs space. Once an artist or member of a cultural group gets involved with VSP, they pull in others, who can then imagine what they could do there.

Several artists characterized VSP to me as a relief from the tension between Documenta and Greek artists, who feel under-represented in the festival. Two scholars, Rikou and Yalouri, have created an independent critical research project, “Learning from Documenta,” an ethnography of the festival. They cite Lowe’s presence as an instance of positive exchange that has already occurred because of Documenta’s presence in Athens. In “The Messy Politics of Documenta’s Arrival in Athens,” in *Hyperallergic*, April 10, 2017, Risa Puleo quoted Yalouri:

It’s one thing to think about what Documenta is going to leave behind when it goes in terms of cultural policy; it’s another thing [to think about] what is left behind at the level of personal involvement and collaborations and artworks and experiences and impressions and feelings and so on. The two outcomes may be connected.

In January 2017, Rick leased the ground floor and basement of 14 Elpidos Street. They didn’t have an opening per se. When they got the place cleaned up and painted and the lights turned on, they covered the walls with project manager Ellie Christaki’s maps, which indicated the locations of immigrant and refugee organizations, small businesses, and artist projects in the area. The chairs don’t match; many are scavenged, contributing to the feeling that everything could have a value and ought not be too quickly discarded. Saw horses and planks make up tables, contributing to an energetic feeling of “do it yourself.” The chairs and tables create an atmosphere inviting participation, evidenced by people bringing other things that could be used there.

From January through July 2017, Lowe spent about ten days a month at VSP. Between visits, project manager Ellie Christaki and a young participant who’s connected to local businesses have been doing interviews and photography respectively for the *one to one* newspaper, in Greek and English. Maria Papadimitriou has continued to rustle up participation from local artists. Ellie and Maria have facilitated artists’ ideas that align with VSP. After meeting with Maria, Ellie, and/or Rick, the artist writes a proposal to which Maria and Rick respond. The criterion is to activate one part of the square or a local business. If it’s not very connected to Victoria Square, Lowe makes a suggestion to connect it. “That’s the only criteria; we don’t say no,” says Ellie. “We work it out. So that takes longer.” Ellie’s main challenge with local people has been to understand what is happening at VSP and to find new ways to get them interested. The newspaper, distributed to a growing list of businesses named on the back, is a great aid.

Ellie does not have aspirations for the space per se; rather she is fascinated with seeing how it takes form. She wants to find the best way to communicate what’s happening here—that as a cultural response to the problem of refugees and immigrants in Athens, it’s a community space, not just Documenta. People can participate in workshops, learn things, hear about new books, and enjoy music and screenings. If locals ask for something they want at VSP, Ellie and the team can eventually go to the municipality about supporting it. The biggest surprise for Ellie so far has been the range of people using the space as their own. Two university courses met at VSP the spring 2017 semester. The architecture school at the National Technical University

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held a post-graduate level course on sustainability and participatory design. It will continue next year, meeting at VSP twice a week, featuring invited professors from Greece and abroad, doing presentations that are open, using methodology of participatory community including interviews and understanding history. They held another course in undergraduate design, focused on students imagining small installation around the square. A number of local people go beyond their formal duties, like Darius fixing things, or simply sitting on the benches out front and having coffee, as a neighborhood artist and an 87-year-old resident were doing one day during my visit, “so it’s not us and them.”

Goals

The *Victoria Square Project*, notes Rick, has two parallel objectives: 1) to be a cultural space, opening people up by doing and seeing art, and thereby expanding the area’s identity in a more positive light; 2) to explore if this openness can be a catalyst for strategic, political action. That is, there’s an opportunity for the municipality to use VSP to promote positive value here. However, it’s taken Project Row Houses, Lowe’s acclaimed art and community development initiative in Houston, twenty years for that city to begin to look at it as a possible area of investment. Given how long it often takes, if it happens at all, for city government to recognize cultural assets and support them accordingly, Rick’s goal is to move in that direction, not necessarily “accomplishing” anything on that scale short term. But he ponders what might lead the city to recognize the creative surge that VSP embodies in one of its most neglected areas. Lowe and his colleagues take that creative energy as a sign that the neighborhood is worthy of investment, that all these people have invested in it. They seek anything to help communicate that to the city and other potential funders. Lowe met with the local Neighborhood Council at their request but so far it has not led to municipal interest. On the other hand, launching VSP as part of an international festival has at least given the project some visibility.

VSP is trying to include the immigrants and refugees in Victoria Square to tell a story of everyone coming together for the benefit of the entire neighborhood. During the summer of 2015, Victoria Square went from being a vibrant area with restaurants and shops, despite financial hardships since the recession of 2008, to a makeshift refugee camp that blocked off the possibility of those businesses operating normally. Businesses on the square came together and put “for sale” signs in their windows as a symbolic gesture to the mayor to do something. Other than some dispersal of refugees, they got little municipal response at the time and nothing since. The ongoing crisis, now that the square is not an ersatz refugee camp, is the lack of investment there.

Rick emphasized that other than creating VSP as a platform and framing it as a way the community can contend with the issue of refugees and immigrants, *he’s not doing VSP*. That rests with people within the diverse local communities, through their creative expression and cultural exposure, to embrace their identities, claim its value, and make it available for a larger community to appreciate, simply by seeing it out there. Rick observed that immigrants and refugees here as elsewhere are seen only as a liability. He knows everyone has something valuable to bring to society and the space amplifies that. VSP is an opportunity for the various groups to celebrate their cultures and expose them to other people. Lowe avows that he is not trying to force a conversation. The space is a little quirky, offering people the opportunity to do something they’d like to do. He hasn’t spent any energy trying to convince people to come—there’s a bottled-up energy, people just needed the space.

Activities and Partners

Lowe explains that using art, culture, and creativity to regenerate a neighborhood has to go beyond him or any individual. So he reaches out to other creative folks, who he recognizes in many walks of life.

Local Small Business Community

Anna and Giorgio, owners on the fish restaurant catty-corner from VSP, connected Lowe to local business people for inclusion in their weekly newspaper, *one to one*, which maps businesses in the Victoria Square area and acts as a “meeting point” for neighbors. Every issue presents interviews with two local shop keepers. Anna and Giorgio have had the restaurant there since 1984 and have seen the neighborhood and indeed the whole country change. They see fewer children and families in Victoria Square because of economic hardship and the challenge to first establish a career. They view the refugee influx as a temporary challenge in 2015, not responsible for hardships that pre- and post-date it. Nonetheless, they explained that, “It was difficult for us and for the refugees when Victoria Square was where they were staying, sleeping, and eating. We want to keep our city clean. There was more a problem among the refugees than with other residents, with conflicts across religions for example.”

Anna and Giorgio brought together local shopkeepers for *one on one* because they thought it was good for the neighborhood and Athens more broadly:

All Greece has been hit hard; Victoria is part of that. The TV and newspapers say only bad things and showed only bad images about Victoria, not the good. So thank God something good is happening. The *Victoria Square Project* is trying but it may find closed doors. This is a good project but few talk about it. People were scared in 2015 when they heard what was happening in Victoria Square; especially because a lot of shops closed so there were not many lights in the streets. The shop closings were not because of the refugees but both things were happening at once. Prices and unemployment went up, so people did not have money to go out to eat or have a coffee.

The biggest concern about VSP that Anna and Giorgio have heard is that, “Some people come here to make something good but that doesn’t happen; it’s only words. They are waiting to see what it will be.” There is also the concern that it’s not in VSP’s control to make the changes the neighborhood needs.

Anna and Giorgio are glad that VSP is continuing at least one year. They think it will help perception of the neighborhood but don’t know to what degree: “We need help for the neighborhood, Victoria Square, and the Center. If we don’t have quality of life and good cultural life, it’s not good for anyone.”

Immigrants and Refugees

Click from Zimbabwe is one of the founders of Melissa, which describes itself as “a network for migrant women in Greece, promoting empowerment, communication and active citizenship.” She was head of the United African Women’s Association in Athens; her co-founders were leaders of Greek, Nigerian, Filipino, and other national women’s migrant associations which formed to empower women to speak up for themselves. As Click describes it:

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We come from societies where women don't speak up and aren't heard. Why must we separate ourselves by country? We are all women. I grew up in a country where whites discriminated against blacks. So this organization is to encourage each other: we have skills and we women speak sense. So do something for ourselves. Melissa means "bee:" we are talking bees. They say women talk too much but not for no reason: for reason and peace. I am a professional beekeeper. There are female workers in the hive keeping it clean and keeping all the creatures fed like women. Males in hive only make the queen pregnant.

Click was part of the meeting of refugee groups that Rick brought together: "It was inspiring to meet them but I've only seen someone from one other group at VSP." She attributes that to only these two organizations fully appreciating the place of culture in people's lives.

Melissa expanded in 2015 when refugees were stuck at Victoria Square. They saw women with children getting one meal a day, which, noted Click, "is okay for adults but not enough for kids." So they prepared breakfast for 240 kids per day. They asked for food in local shops, bakeries, and grocers. One of the cofounders is a chef and made scones. They gave each person a food box. "Some companies gave us lunch boxes; some boys came here from Amsterdam with 5,000 candies and gave them to pack as well." Then the borders were closed and the government put the refugees into camps. They weren't people seeking to stay in Greece but were en route to Europe where many had family members. Melissa made backpacks for the children with toys, toothbrushes, and donations including Colgate toothpaste, pampers, raincoats, thong shoes. They solicited donations through Facebook. They taught women from the neighborhood to make toys; people donated wool, books, pencils, and crayons. They set up daycare so young children were cared for while women learned Greek, English, and crafts like knitting. They accommodate some 150 women who come from the camps each day with their children. The camps are too spread out to reach each directly, plus the women need to get away.

Nadina, one of the six Melissa founders, is Greek. She explains that for all its vitality, Victoria "became unloved" in the years since the financial crisis of 2008. Making matters worse for migrants has been the rise of the far-right organization Golden Dawn. In 2014, Nadina and five colleagues with networks of migrant women in Athens each from their respective countries wanted to bring the women together, in a center, and reclaim visibility near the heart of Athens. Victoria has a high-density migrant population. A central idea, in addition to providing services including meals and classes and childcare, was to replace negative images of migrant women with positive ones. They have been working with even more refugee women since the summer of 2015 when they opened the center, coinciding with the refugee crisis. When Nadina and her colleagues explained this vision to Rick, he said it was very close to his concept. He decided it made sense for him to be in Victoria, too. The whole neighborhood had become allies for Melissa because they shop here and have gotten to know the people.

As regards attitudes towards immigrants and refugees in this neighborhood, Nadina has seen a lot of hostility, suspicion, and reservation since the recession began in 2008. Once they opened Melissa in 2014, they started talking to people door to door, discussing agendas, and welcoming them to the center. She believes they improved attitudes towards migrants to some extent. But they need partners to do so fully, and therefore welcome Lowe and others who come to the neighborhood and engage with people in the same spirit, in order

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to “create synergies around one locality.” “There’s been a natural flow of activities with *Victoria Square Project*. We do some projects there and Rick brings some people to do activities here as well.”

Like Anna and Giorgio, Nadina emphasized duration; Documenta has received a lot of negative publicity and has to respond to the cynicism of critics. So it is very important that initiatives like VSP are stronger than Documenta generally and have a life beyond it. For example, last year, Melissa created a Ukrainian embroidery event, but now they are crowded with their refugee programs and can’t feature the same individual culture every year. So this year, the Ukrainian event was held at VSP. People like Click, who has her own table for crocheting at VSP, are instrumental, facilitating workshops at Melissa and VSP, expanding them both. Nadina also praised the newspaper that VSP produces. Nadina does not see the relationship with VSP as competition because they credit each other.

Maria Ohilebo is the Nigerian co-founder and chef at Melissa. She said the decision to bring the various migrant organizations together was in order to learn more about each other and provide better services. She was co-founder and president of an organization for Nigerian women in Athens. The flow of refugees caused them to work with that population as well, so now Melissa serves both. Their space is open to any organization for meetings. Maria would like Lowe to acquire and renovate more buildings in the neighborhood for low-income housing. Lowe expressed an interest in that idea, she said, given its relationship to what he’s done with Project Row Houses in Houston. She appreciates that VSP already adds to local cultural representation, for the first time in that neighborhood:

It’s good to have something like this because it changes the mind set of people. Seeing them doing things, seeing migrants help other migrants, others think, ‘we’ve got to wake up and do something.’ This is the area of Golden Dawn, it’s like a no-go area for migrants, so to see them here means change is on the way.

Like Melissa’s name, which translates as Bee, Maria said she “looks forward to a sweet end product.”

Anna, from the Ukrainian community, has been in Athens since 2005. Her mother came there in 1995 when the Ukraine left the Soviet Union, and there was no work. Anna stayed behind with her grandmother and looked after the kids. After university, she came to Athens at age nineteen. She knew about VSP from Melissa because of their collaborations. She spoke with Ellie about doing something cultural, first with a Ukrainian woman facilitating a traditional egg decorating workshop for Easter. A “Saturday school” that promotes Ukrainian traditions, dance, songs, etc., participated along with the local Greek school that Anna’s son attends. The twenty participants were Greek, Polish, and Ukrainian. They promoted the workshop over Facebook, by handing out flyers, and by word-of-mouth. Anna then spoke with Ellie about doing an exhibition with Ukrainian traditional clothes that opened May 21 to mark a May 28th Ukrainian holiday celebrated throughout the diaspora worldwide. The opening celebration involved 150 people in front and inside VSP. Anna did it at VSP because “it’s open, all people can come and look.” She could have displayed the traditional clothes from her friend’s collection at the Ukrainian embassy but it’s very far; more people can come here.

Now Anna wants to host something common to Romania, Moldova, Bulgaria, and Greece, but with local variations. She wants to do it in a park, so there’s space to folk dance and more people can come, see it, and

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participate. So VSP becomes part of a neighborhood ecosystem, hosting what it can host and supporting events elsewhere in the neighborhood. Anna sees VSP as offering the neighborhood,

[S]omething brand new, including things for children. I like that other people can see what I put up here and learn about my country. Now there are problems in the Ukraine that began three, four years ago. We [Ukrainians in Athens] had meetings about it, and believe this is a way to present a better view of the Ukraine. In the Ukraine we have refugees from cities with war. This project [VSP] is a good response; we should do it in the Ukraine as well. I still send clothes and money; other people help, too. But we need more.

Local Artists

Maria Papadimitriou is a renowned Greek artist who Documenta approached about participating at Suzy Tros, an “art canteen” she curates in Athens. There she cooks and serves Greek soups and invites everyone from the area to come eat and participate in art activities. She says she is the first Greek art space open as an “offering” for others. Then Documenta said they didn’t have money for the Greeks, just for artists from abroad. When she realized they had invited Rick, she perceived that he in effect had replaced her. Friends in common urged her to meet him but, she says, she “was angry that he was coming there to do what I am doing.” Then Rick reached out to her. She reports: “I was quite tough. But he was nice and his project sounded interesting.” They began working together and now she is one of his key partners.

Maria and Rick simultaneously came up with the idea to publish a local newspaper featuring local businesses. Ellie asks two business owners per issue when they came here and to talk about the square. The newspaper locates the two featured shops on a map. Rick put her name with his for the paper’s conception, which she likes. The shopkeepers like that it’s free advertising. With a fee for the photographer it costs them 200 euros per issue to produce.

Maria has brought terrific filmmakers, poets, writers, dancers, theater people, and an oral historian to VSP. She identified many of the groups with the refugees. So they have the three core groups: business people, artists, and refugees. She spoke to local people about what they need, what is missing? She heard back that they want missing histories of the neighborhood, like information about a woman who was thrown out the window of an adjacent building by the Nazis during WWII. They want to see the neighborhood cleaned up. They like that the building VSP occupies is now freshly painted. She described VSP as “a Trojan horse into the municipal government, with Documenta’s help.” She characterized Greeks as, “Very political, in many different parties that didn’t want to work with each other but that they put aside in this project. We care that we do something together for everyone’s good.”

In response to teenagers hanging out in front of VSP, the staff wants to create the Boys and Girls of Victoria Square Project. They organized a photography competition via cell phones. The young people didn’t know how to approach such a competition. Maria asked them to snap anything important happening before their eyes from home to school. First prize was an iPod that costs fifty euro. Second prize was a karaoke mic, worth forty-five euro. So the youth started taking photos. Maria explained, “We look at them together and make suggestions, so they learn as they go. We discuss how narration works in an image. What do you want the

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image to tell?” She’s also asked them to think about cultural commonalities first by making a list of foods in common across the Mediterranean and beyond. Her aim is “making their brains work again.”

Asked about the biggest challenges, she replied, “None.” Asked if she’d change anything, she said, “No. We are adding things all the time. We have the platform and just add.”

French artist Anne-Laure Franchette offered a workshop called “[New semantic for wild greens.](#)” On May 30, approximately twenty participants walked around Victoria Square, collected “wild” plants (e.g., that sprung up of their own accord), and brought them back to the space. They then looked at botanical illustrations and used the technique of nature printing to make an A5 zine (a small hand-made publication). Next, they invented new names for those wild greens, as a way of saying that they can be more than “*mauvaises herbes*” (“bad seeds” in French). Describing the workshop as “looking at the overlooked,” Franchette’s ongoing work explores cultural perception, categorizations, and cycles of production and misappropriation.

Vascia A. Vanezi is an artist who found VSP through Documenta. She has a nearby studio, has taught teenagers in the area, and has family ties here: her mom lives here and her son was raised here. She came to meet with Maria about a project she began four years ago. Walking her dog in the park, she began collecting objects, images, and sounds. She doesn’t photograph people but rather what they leave behind. She draws on Hannah Arendt’s book *The Human Condition* to divide life into three tasks: 1) we have to eat and breath and have sex, as animals; 2) we have to work to have our own identity; 3) we have to work together as community. The connection she saw to VSP is that the refugees became homeless, and are in a bare situation.

Rick told the story of a young refugee who said it has resulted in her “seeing myself small in my own eyes”—she’s only fifteen, but she can see her world shrinking in size. She doesn’t know the value of where she came from, having left under duress and maybe shame. He explained that the work they present at VSP in some way connects people from the area. Maria explained this is not a space of exhibition but more a laboratory for engagement with community. The question was how would Vanezi’s work benefit and engage that population? Rick mused that it would be good for people to learn how she collects these things; to engage them. How can they turn their dog walks into collecting? Could she connect with them as a collection team? So they grow in their understanding of this method. If it’s just an exhibition, they won’t invest themselves. But if they participate in doing it, they will be engaged and proud. The conversation eventually led to a “weaving workshop” that Vanezi facilitated later that month.

Other upcoming projects included the screening of a film about refugees of today and from 1922 featuring a historian, Professor Mazaur, from Columbia University. It was to be projected outdoors in front of the restaurant which is closed that Sunday. VSP agreed to put out 100 chairs. They were also preparing the presentation of the story of a revolutionary woman named Elektra from WWII killed by Nazis on that very block. Maria wants to rename this part of the street Elektra, to create bonds among people here.

Students

Students from an undergraduate design class from a nearby university have been meeting at VSP and, during my visit, presented projects they’ve been researching. One was “Homeless and Stray Books.” Two students proposed setting up a corner of VSP for people to donate books in different languages and with lots of

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pictures. They researched other free libraries in public space. They imagined people sitting in Victoria Square, with books that had been donated available to peruse on shelves they would build in the square. Rick proposed doing it in a limited timeframe when people can be there to explain and make sure the shelves and books are not vandalized. He suggested they try it for a week and see how it goes.

I asked one of the students how it's been to come here a few times this semester. She said it was great to see a space "that's non-egotistical about art. You can make art and you also bring art making to others, and everyone is very nice and friendly and welcoming."

Coda

Rick tells me "his secret:" it's a particular methodology he's committed to, not a particular outcome, which he lets emerge. He spoke about leaders who are so competent that they don't leave space for others. Moreover, he asserts that he doesn't know anything except how to frame an idea; he has no capacity to accomplish it. Even with Project Row Houses, he found the houses and then talked to other artists about doing something with art there, but didn't even know how to write grants. So he had to start talking to people, getting them interested in the idea, and figuring out how they could participate: "I never put forward what I can do. Or people will just let me do it and that'd be myself. What I do is use my gift of making people feel comfortable. Here, I'm a portal to get them in, then they talk to Ellie and Maria."

As regards his vision for VSP, as a maker of *things*, Lowe never had confidence in the intuitive and unconscious. But he finds this kind of work easy and natural. When he went from making things to Project Row Houses, the biggest challenge was the question of form and content, because the artistic content he's after is not important to everyone. In this context, many benefits come from being an artist and able to talk about this kind of work as art. "If we just say we're doing community development we can't access the same resources. So there's a practical reason to call it art. It also gives you the opportunity to make something special even if it's mundane. Calling something an art piece brings attention." But he also wants political support—that decision makers in Houston and Athens, be they from the church, government, or wherever, see his strategy as a way to invest in people and areas deserving of more.

Addendum: April 2018

The Victoria Square Project continues to thrive. Frequent programming draws robust participation. The team has been great at organizing a range of events such as Wednesday open lunch, which has been particularly effective at getting people from inside and outside the neighborhood to come together. Exhibitions continue to thrive, the most recent a photo exhibit in collaboration with City Plaza, the refugee squat. It's beautiful work and thoughtfully curated. Attendance has been so good that VSP staff extended the run. Click is very active with a number of workshops, and the African dance on Sunday evenings has maxed out the space; some thirty-plus people attended the last Sunday Lowe was there. They've successfully moved into a planning phase, and are in discussion with a number of Athens-based organizations and leaders about sustaining the project.

In March, VSP brought together thirty trained planners and architects to work on a mapping project to move a visioning agenda along, organized by one of their neighbors who is an architect and planner. Over five days, eight hours per day, they mapped out possible strategies to sustain and grow the organization. When they

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broke into groups, some met downstairs, some upstairs, and some outside. Outside was particularly interesting because now that the restaurant, with VSP's help, has received permission from the municipality to do outdoor dining, the street has really changed.

VSP leadership has been in discussion with high-level folks who founded Action Aid, the director of Solidarity Now, staff from the organization Earth, and other cultural leaders about sustaining the project. VSP had a large event April 21–22 in collaboration with Action Aid and the Athens Capital of Books celebration. The municipality had requested that they participate and the collaboration with Action Aid grew from there.

Lowe has agreed to write about the neighborhood planning that VSP has embarked on for the first issue of A Blade of Grass Magazine, anticipated in Fall 2018. Tune in then for more.