

Saint Vitus Dance: Holy Things Dripping Sweat in Lauren Wy's AUTODESIRE VOL. 1

by Annette LePique | October 4, 2021



Featured Image: Installation shot of AUTODESIRE in Gallery Two of Western Exhibitions. Center image sits a square wooden table and two chairs where visitors can request specific volumes of AUTODESIRE. To the right of the table, volumes of AUTODESIRE are closed and mounted on the gallery wall. Each piece's wooden spine lists the artist's last name, volume number, and title where appropriate. To the left of the table, two pieces are exhibited on the gallery wall. A final piece is displayed on the wall directly behind the central viewing table. Photo by James Prinz, courtesy of Western Exhibitions.

Alice through the looking glass, St. Teresa's translucent veined ecstasy, Sylvia's rhinestone tears trickling to wet the country ground. Fantasy is hard work; tell that to the Sadeian Woman or Louise and her spiders. Our scene opens at the end of the world, it's a blazing stage. Take the man at his word when he says, "I am become death."

Lights,
camera,
ACTION!

Beneath the desert's floodlight suns and Planet Hollywood's unearthly glow, a champagne orgy twitches to life. The video for Britney Spears' song "Work B*tch" was made during her 2021 Las Vegas residency, a time in Spears' career that exists hand in uneasy hand with her father's coercive conservatorship. While the song itself is a cavalcade of sex—buying it, having it, knowing it—bodies writhing in lockstep, it is a performance girded by desperation. It's the truth of a life where nothing good has happened in stillness. A slow death lives here, something ill thrust upon your shoulders again and again. Maybe it's Maybelline. Or maybe it's the systems that suffocate, exsanguinate, and leave only a husk behind. What then does this, can this, mean for pleasure? For fantasy? Where

can we find the seeping cracks, the friction of two weeping irises, the obliterating grace of pouring one honeyed yolk into the other? Salt crystallizes around each hole, now frozen halos. It's so swift, so fierce, that which lies between. You want it? You better work.

Sigmund Freud was a Taurus. Sex then is never just sex, it's a biological imperative, sacral spun candy, that welcomes manifestation of life both comfortably worn and shine fluttering just within reach. Lauren Wy's *AUTODESIRE VOL. 1* is a story of eros. The primordial, oozing eros that was here before, during, and after the body's final bow. No matter the apocalypse, there's always a curtain call for every virtuoso. We love a good encore. Your body is that endless stage, the delicate infinity of a cat's eye snail shell. It's home and un-home, the place to break your bread, bed, and back. There's a reason why Schubert named the quartet "Death and the Maiden." It is a story of what comes next, a tale that presents the possibility of the next. A next after death, a next in death. Wy frames *AUTODESIRE* as a graphic novel machine, akin to the Surrealists' game of exquisite corpse. Two hundred and thirty-two process-based drawings made with oil crayons build off, collapse in on, disassemble, reassemble, finalize, notarize, change, shift, explode, and implode the fragments of a heroine's erotic memories, half-formed stories, shifting accounts, fevered imaginings, both through and after death.



Image: Tight vertical shot of Gallery Two in Western Exhibitions. In the center of the frame is a square wooden table, where four drawings from Lauren Wy's "AUTODESIRE" are exhibited. Each piece is composed of two handmade hinged wooden panels and all are open to reveal the drawing inside. All sit at a perpendicular angle to one another. Clockwise from top to bottom: shades of foamy green dominate the picture plane in the top installment, hot magentas follow in the sketch to the right, the sketch at the bottom pools with swathes of saturated blue, and a goldenrod yellow palette defines the final image. The legs of two chairs can be seen in the image's upper corners, framing the table. Photo by James Prinz, courtesy of Western Exhibitions.

Let's read death here as a metaphor. Those self-abnegating impulses that swirl throughout each unconscious, those desires that twin pain and pleasure. Our heroine's journey does not end at death. Rather that is just the beginning of the story. Thanatos and Eros both burn here, it's how your thresholds exist on the same continuum. Wy's heroine might be dead, dancing with splayed limbs and bloodless lips, but she is also frozen in a cycle of repetition and articulation. In each drawing, each memory, each wish, language fails. There's a breakdown of form and narrative. The body as symptom and smoke signal to the heavens centers a fundamental indeterminacy. Our relationship with each piece changes and shifts through Wy's use of pressure, friction, and optical blending of wax color. The eyes don't follow the lines of bodies, rather bodies are found everywhere and nowhere, with deeply saturated oils imbuing each scene with the inevitability of the erotic. True north cannot hold within the hall of Dionysus. Revolution can only be found within the hysteric discourse.



Image 1: Close up of Wy's piece, *AUTODESIRE: Revenge of the Odalisque 3*. Bodily forms both appear and disappear within the picture plane; lines of various pressure and length merge and intertwine. A woman's face, lips parted, is visible in the top right corner of the image. Blues, greens, yellows, and grays dominate the color palette. A swath of pink crowns the top of the image as pink rivulets of color drip into the cacophony of the picture plane. Lauren Wy, *AUTODESIRE: Revenge of the Odalisque 3*, 2021, Oil wax crayon on hand dyed, hand-cut 150lb Arches oil paper 9 1/2h x 13w x 112d in. open, 9 1/2h x 6 1/2w x 1d in. closed.

Image 2: Close up of Wy's *AUTODESIRE: The Naiad and the Scorpio 18*. Ripples of navy, mustard, and aquamarine skim the image's ground line. A mass of bodily forms undulate as one in the center of the picture plane; limbs and orifices are intertwined. These figures wash in falling sheets of sea-glass greens, blues, and the aged yellow of sunned glass shards. Lauren Wy, *AUTODESIRE: The Naiad and the Scorpio 18*, 2021, Oil wax crayon on hand-dyed, hand-cut 150lb Arches oil paper 9 1/2h x 13w x 1/2d in. open, 9 1/2h x 6 1/2w x 1d in. closed.

In Turkish, the word *odalik* refers to a chambermaid or female attendant to women of the court. Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres' 1814 oil painting *Grande Odalisque* depicts a nude, fantasized and orientalized, physically impossible and presumed sexually available, *odalik* passively gazing at the viewer. In Claire Denis' 2001 film *Trouble Every Day*, the main character's wife lives another day while the nameless maid meets a brutal end by sexual violation. A sexy "French maid" costume currently goes for seventy-five dollars on the Leg Avenue website. Sometimes the best revenge is memorialized, frozen for posterity. Near the top of the picture plane in Wy's *Revenge of the Odalisque 3*, there is a deep swath of pale meat pink. Rivulets of that same shade of blush run down the picture plane like splashes of a celebratory fountain or sugared spurts of blood. The blush from blood that can emerge from the body each month, and the blush from exertion, as propulsive jets of burgundy stain your hands, in Artemisia Gentileschi's 1620, *Judith Slaying Holofernes*. Outlines of mouths and grasping hands emerge amidst the serpentine shadings of color. Barbara Creed's *Monstrous Feminine* proposes that the appearance of blood in art can signal the presence, ever felt, of the archaic mother. It's the primal scene, a new birth, again, again, and again.

Maybe all mothers have eight legs. Louise Bourgeois' relationship to psychoanalysis (herself being an analysand off and on from 1952 through 1985) has been much discussed as that period left an indelible mark upon her artistic practice. Wy cites Bourgeois, specifically her *Insomnia Series*, as formal inspiration for *AUTODESIRE*'s structure. Created in 1994 to 1995, *Insomnia* contains two hundred and twenty works on paper made during bouts of sleeplessness. Though the direct correlation between *Insomnia* and *AUTODESIRE* is the quantity of work, both series contain studies of in-betweenness: they are remnants of penetration, our veils between worlds, shared road maps to purgatory, the reminder that we're both awake and dreaming.

Andachtsbilder is the art historical term to describe images meant to invoke the feeling of devotion. Such images usually depict Christ or Madonna in a state of pain, exhaustion, or beatific contemplation. These images were usually crafted as objects that could easily be carried with someone, something to be touched throughout the day. Some personal relics could also contain fragments of bones: items of, from, and to which the body will return. Bones are a reminder that there

SIXTY INCHES FROM CENTER

is beauty here, something holy in its wants and urges. Each *AUTODESIRE* installment, every chapter, is covered by the shade of a bleached white bone. Two handmade hinged wooden panels open to display the drawing inside. The art may be shown or stay closed and concealed, a tightly held secret. Saint Rose Philippine Duchesne was the first saint canonized by the Catholic Church west of the Mississippi River. Saint Rose resided in what is now the Old Saint Ferdinand Shrine in Florissant, Missouri. Rose prayed in a small room under the building's staircase, next to a reliquary that contained a small shard of St. Valentine's hip bone. Infinity can exist in the curves of the pelvis; you just need to know where to look.

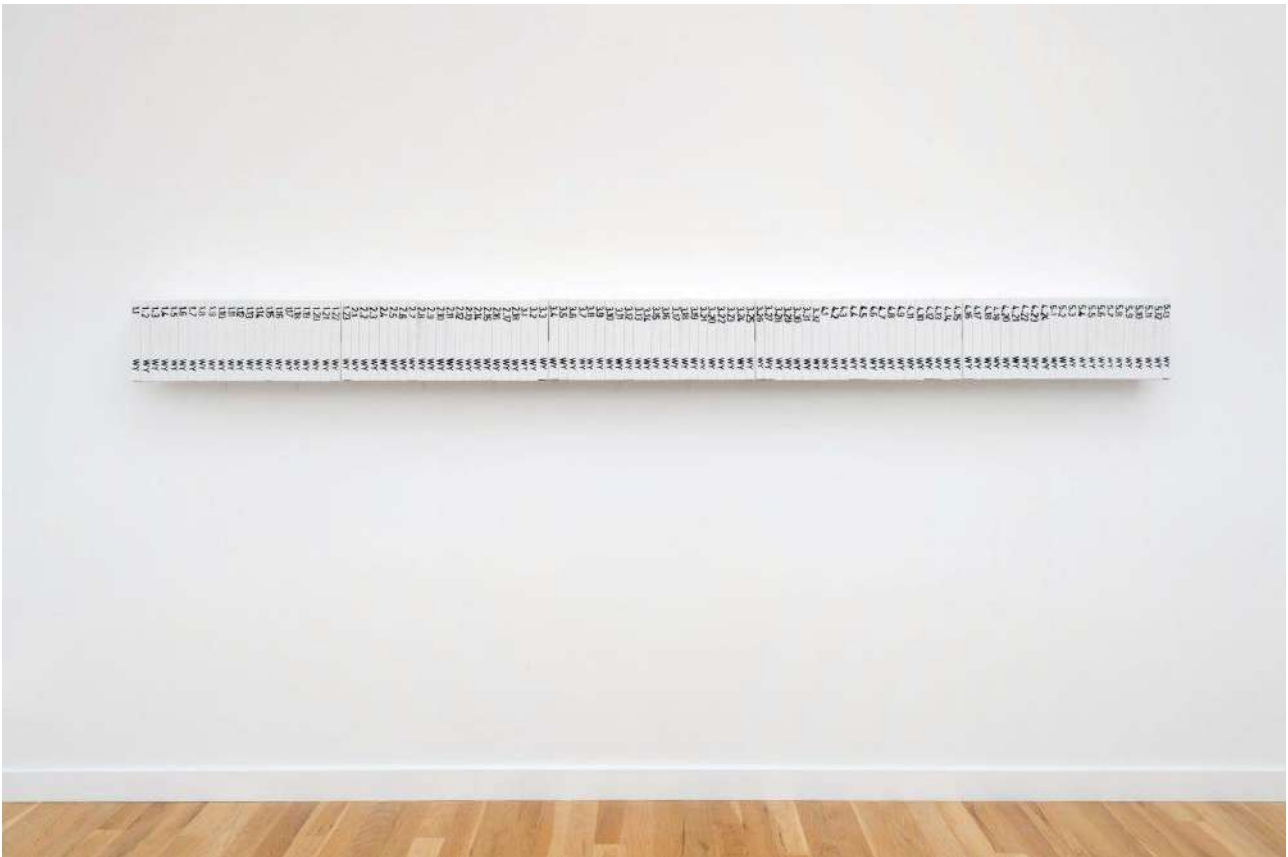


Image: Installation view of Chapters 1-5 of Lauren Wy's "AUTODESIRE" in Gallery Two of Western Exhibitions. Volumes 1.1 through 5.17 are closed and mounted on the white gallery wall. Volume numbers and the artist's name are marked on the spine of each volume in black lettering. Photo by James Prinz, courtesy of Western Exhibitions.

In Maryse Meijer's novel *The Seventh Mansion*, the skeleton of a martyred child saint comes alive in secluded woods to perform miracles, of a sort. Think of them more as reminders. Reminders that even as the world burns relish the heat on your face, as another stands beside you and feels the same. It's the kinship to your step, a dance laced with bolts of lightning. Smell the ozone on your fingertips. Bones, color, cum, sweat, spit, all from the body and to which we ultimately return. *AUTODESIRE* is our treasure map, a way forward in crisis, the feeling of warm hands on your shoulder. To dance, to feel, to live in this body and all its weariness is both blessing and curse. But why not? Grasp back as hard as you can.

Lauren Wy's AUTODESIRE VOL. 1 is on view at Western Exhibitions through October 30th. For hours, location, and pandemic guidelines, please visit their [website](https://sixtyinchesfromcenter.org).

UPPING THE ANTI

Lauren O’Neill-Butler on the 6th Athens Biennale

October 30, 2018 • Athens

ON FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 21, 2018, thirty-three-year-old queer activist and performer Zak Kostopoulos was killed in the streets of central Athens. His attackers, who brutally beat him in a jewelry store, where he sought refuge after being harassed by three other men at a cafe, have not been charged as of this writing. And by attackers, I mean not only the two men who commenced the hate crime but also the police who continued to exert excessive and unwarranted violence toward Kostopoulos after (finally) arriving on the scene.

More than 140 people involved in the Athens- and Kassel-based exhibition Documenta 14 penned an open letter to Alexis Tsipras, the prime minister of the Hellenic republic, and to Giorgos Kaminis, the mayor of Athens, in protest of Kostopoulos’s death. On September 26, more than five hundred people attended a protest rally, where they joined hands, marched from Omonia Square to Syntagma Square and then to the jewelry shop on Gladstonos Street, and chanted, “With rage and sorrow, Zackie we will miss you.” Amnesty International has called for an independent investigation of the murder, and, as of last week, the curators of the Sixth Athens Biennale (aka AB6)—Stefanie Hessler, Kostis Stafylakis, and Poka-Yio—dedicated their exhibition, “ANTI,” to the memory of Kostopoulos. He was a friend to many involved in putting together the show.

A small army of volunteers seemed to be keeping things afloat when I arrived at the press conference and preview at noon on October 25 in the ex-hotel Esperia Palace, one of four AB6 venues. I took a seat under the flickering fluorescents and opened the show’s text-laden catalogue to read the curator’s short statement on the first page, which concludes: “In Athens, revamped and ready to receive its post-crisis visitors, the pressure is building once again. We can only hope that our friend is the last victim of a darkness that will be left behind.”

When can we do more than hope?

When is such fragile optimism not enough?

And is Athens truly “post-crisis”?

Greece’s decade-long economic bailout just ended this past summer, and austerity measures are ongoing. Though my trip was short, the city seemed to still be precariously in the trenches.

I didn’t come to the show looking for solutions. Kicking off the conference, representatives from various ministries discussed aspects of AB6’s revitalization of the city—namely, its engagement of empty, decaying buildings in Athens’s commercial center. That dead stock is partly what makes this biennial a less sleek outing than others of its ilk—Gwangju just used a dilapidated building too, but Athens seems to have *more*, particularly when it comes to unoccupied administrative offices. On several occasions I also heard the show’s earliest visitors compare the sundry themes AB6 gestures at—posthumanism, mimesis, parafiction, speculative realism, the wellness industrial complex, financialized global capitalism, to name a few—to the Ninth Berlin Biennale, which was curated by the collective DIS. Those viewers also tended to use the word *more*, followed by *gritty*, *material*, and *local*. I took it as a good omen.

In just over a decade, the Athens Biennale has come a long way: From the first edition in 2007, which carried the prescient and provocative title “Destroy Athens,” to its latest iteration, featuring nearly one hundred artists and collectives, with two-thirds coming from other countries, it has grown by leaps and bounds. During the conference, Poka-Yio spoke of cocurating the first edition and the achieved intention of putting Athens on the international art map, while Hessler discussed AB6’s goal of taking an uneasy screenshot of our moment, and Stafylakis touched on the some of the more dystopian aspects of the work on view.

As I had only a few days to catch it all, as an outsider parachuting in, my notes are necessarily selective, abrupt, and woozy. It was enough of a trip to toggle between the ancient artifacts and sites that I *needed* to see—what fool wouldn’t traipse around the Acropolis in perfect October weather?—and a banquet of contemporary art.

So here’s an inevitably incomplete short list of what stood out to me at the performance- and video-heavy “ANTI,” much of it flourishing in a gray zone that good art usually mines. In the abandoned Benekeios Library, a building currently owned by the Hellenic parliament, there is Cao Fei’s dreamlike *Rumba II: Nomad*, 2015, a nearly fourteen-minute video featuring the robotic vacuum cleaners attempting to tidy up construction sites in Beijing. Notable is the rubble and dust around the video’s installation, which I assumed is not part of the work.

The lion’s share of “ANTI” is on view in the five-story TTT building. Built in the early 1930s, the TTT formerly housed the public phone company, whose labor unions left behind curious flourishes when the company was sold to Deutsche Telekom, such as wads of paper stuffed into holes in the walls. **With none of that removed, the curators used such wacky aesthetics of administration to their advantage, as in the so-called president’s chamber, where grimy, soiled carpets doubling as sound insulation line the walls around Lauren Wy’s brightly hued drawings of inexplicable figures in creepy cultish actions.**

Most of the AB6 artists have been given their own room to display their work. In some cases, this is ideal, as with Marianna Simnett’s video *The Needle and the Larynx*, 2016, which is set in a doctor’s office, and with the Agency’s nearby wellness enhancement-oriented clinic *Medusa Bionic Rise*, 2017–18. It also works well for Linnéa Sjöberg’s tattoo station *Salong Flyttkartong*, 2018, and Spyros Aggelopoulos’s *Amusementorium*, 2018, for which the artist turned traditional Greek shadow puppets into figures ranging from Freddy Kruger to Slavoj Žižek and had them battle in surreal situations for the first few nights. I could go on: I loved Nicole Wermers’s baby-changing stations inlaid with terrazzo flooring for her series of sculptural “Moodboards,” 2018, and Celia Daskopoulou’s paintings from the 1970s and ’80s of zoned-out, tired women (likely mothers).

An array of programming, panels, and lectures will run over the next several weeks at AB6, much of it by and including intergenerational groups of emerging and established artists. Surrounding and sustaining that work is a persistent local community working to keep the memory of their friend Zak Kostopoulos alive and to bring justice to his family. Linger above all of that, there is hope, and maybe something more. Departing Athens, I remembered the ancient Greeks had a neat word for the work of disclosure and revealing truth, *aletheia*, which runs across so much twentieth-century philosophy (for Heidegger and Irigaray, it was also a refusal to forget). Perhaps it’s more of that, and not so much the gesture of *anti*, that we need right now?

— Lauren O’Neill-Butler

Shows & Exhibitions

At the Athens Biennale, Artists Fight Against Social Media and Fake News With an Unlikely Weapon: Nuance

Plus, four artists in the show to watch.

Hili Perlson, October 30, 2018



Wy Lauren, *The Gift* (2016). Courtesy of the artist.

The curators of the 6th Athens Biennale did not take the easy route, opting to build a show around Instagrammable installations or semi-overlooked Modernist treasures. Instead, they chose to respond in what feels like real time to the herd behavior and binary thinking that is fostered by the Internet. Their sprawling exhibition, “ANTI,” which opened on October 26, attempts to pinpoint what curators Stefanie Hessler, Kostis Stafylakis, and Poka-Yio describe as a crisis in the world today.

During a panel discussion on the biennial’s opening day, the curators argued that without an adequate way to express life’s complexities and nuance in social media posts, we have opened the door to fast-spreading and polarizing non- and half-truths.

Binary ways of thinking and fundamentalist identity politics have proven to be divisive and often counter-productive in the cultural realm especially, they said. With this biennial, the curators make the case for carving out a space for complexity in cultural discourse; for the

license to stand for something as well as its opposite; for slight nuances that depend on context and malleable self-definitions that accept differences of experience.

Complexity With a Vengeance

How do they attempt to achieve that goal? Let's call it complexity with a vengeance. For one, the list of participating artists includes a host of practitioners working as collectives, under ever-changing monikers, or in temporary formations, including The Agency, OMSK Social Club, The Peng! Collective, Front Deutscher Äpfel, or The Bound Collective, to name a few.

There are also participants whose practices elude strict definitions, like the musician, performer, and filmmaker Actually Huizenga. The biennale also includes the fashion designer Angelos Frentzos, who tests the boundaries between his main occupation and art-making. Frentzos presents his latest collection, which is entirely based on bathroom interiors, at the biennial's main venue, the 1930s Telecommunications, Telegrams, and Post (TTT) building in central Athens.

Spread across four adjacent venues, this low-budget biennial shares aesthetic and thematic concerns (as well as some artists) with the 9th Berlin Biennale in 2016. But the Berlin show curated by the New York-based collective DIS now feels quaint in comparison—optimistic, even. Pre-Trump and Bolsonaro's election victories in the US and Brazil, the world was very different two summers ago.

That is not to say that the Athens Biennale is bleak or dispiriting—particularly when compared to documenta 14, which closed its Athens leg just over a year ago. "ANTI" is a young, vibrant, and sometimes messy show. Many of the works are time-based video installations or performances taking place in public spaces throughout the show's run, rendering it impossible to view the exhibition in its entirety.

The curators of the biennale shift our gaze to ever-morphing counter- and sub-cultures, to voices that look for ways to subvert the market's ability to absorb and repackage pretty much anything. Your latex fetish was commodified to sell magazines? Make it weirder. Your burnout is mined for value in the self-care industry? Pervert it. Your progressive views are abused as fodder for reactionary politics? Complicate your rhetoric.

Below, we spotlight four of the artists who tackled these issues head-on. (...)

Lauren Wy

Not all of the works that stand out in the Athens Biennale are in new or nontraditional media. The Chicago-based artist Lauren Wy, who is an MFA student at Northwestern, fills a small room in the TTT Building with luscious crayon drawings on paper. The magnificent appeal of the figurative drawings contrasts their modest scale: they depict intimate snapshots of much larger stories that evoke dangerous fantasies. There are scenes of baroque plays of submission and dominance, games, orgies, and tenderness. Yet there is a certain naiveté to the activities of this strange hedonistic cult. It is as if its members have figured out a way to eliminate sin, guilt, jealousy, and corruption, or are completely oblivious to their existence. Glimpse into their universe once, and you might be changed.