

Institutionalizing Photography: Cultural Pluralism and National Institutions

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Founded in 1997 the Museum of Photography in Thessaloniki constitutes the first “national” institution in Greece dedicated to the medium of photography. Being the result of a conference initiated by the Greek Ministry of Culture in 1994 defining Greece’s “national policy for art photography”, the new museum seems to summarize the way contemporary Greek photography is institutionalized through the last three decades.

The paper focuses on the way in which this institutionalization is correlated with the photographic production of the mid-1970s and 1980s, as well as with how this was received and interpreted by the contemporary critique.

On a second level, the Greek paradigm is compared to photographic trends on an international scene, and more specifically with what is called as “The New British Document”, a photographic movement that emerged during the 1970s and 1980s and was directly connected with the cultural policy followed by a number of art institutions in the U.K.

Towards a New Museum: Thessaloniki's Museum of Photography

Until the mid-1970s Greek photography followed certain predetermined norms, ranging from the exotic orientalism of the late 19th century and the pre-War pictorialist views of the Greek countryside to the stereotypical images of the islands produced by the National Tourist Board during the emergence of mass tourism in the 1960s. The main institution supporting this photographic production was the Greek Photographic Society (Elliniki Fotografiki Eteria, EFE); its members, traditionalist in their aesthetic choices, were in their great majority amateurs.

It is only in the late 1970s and early 1980s that this cliché iconography was replaced by new modes of recording and interpreting the Greek environment, which largely explored the contemporary urban landscape. The change in iconography coincided with the emergence of a generation of young photographers trained abroad (mainly in the UK and in France). The amateurism of the previous decades was abandoned in favour of a more professional approach of the photographic medium. The appearance of this young generation of photographers came along with the establishment of photographic publications, magazines and galleries exclusively dedicated to the promotion of the photographic medium. During the 1980s photography studies were introduced in Greek technical universities, while at the same decade the first photography festivals were established (International Photography Month in Athens in 1987 and Photo-synkyria in Thessaloniki in 1989).

By the mid-1990s the need to support Greek photography was realized by the state cultural policy. This is clearly indicated by the conference organized by the Greek Ministry of Culture in 1994, aiming to define Greece's "national policy for art photography". Having represented almost every tendency of Greek photography, the conference was considered as highly successful. As a result, a working group was constituted; it proposed the establishment of several state institutions that would be charged with the production, study, promotion, conservation of Greek photography.

Thessaloniki's Museum of Photography was founded in 1997 within the framework of the events surrounding the celebration of the city as the Cultural Capital of Europe for 1997. Hosting the international photography festival "Photo-synkyria" since 1989 and being the homeland of numerous photographers that were active during the last decades, Thessaloniki appeared as the ideal city to place this first national institution exclusively dedicated to photography.

Stathatos' "New Greek Photography"

The establishment of this new museum should be seen as symptomatic of a general tendency to institutionalize contemporary Greek photography. The museum came to house and promote the photographic activity produced during the last decades, namely since the mid-1970s.

The work of these young photographers was labeled as "New Greek Photography" by John Stathatos, one of the most famous Greek photographers and critics. Having lived and worked for several years in the United Kingdom, he became acquainted with international trends in photography theory and practice. During the 1990s John Stathatos emerged as the key theoretical advocate of contemporary Greek photography, curating three major shows presented in Greece and abroad¹ and writing catalogue entries and critiques.

1 "A Post-Classical Landscape: The Greek Photography in the 1980s" (1988), "The Invention of the Landscape: Greek Photography and Landscape" (1996) and "The Image and the Icon: The New Greek Photography" (1997).

By labeling this production as “New Greek Photography”, Stathatos introduces a new “movement” or even “genre” within contemporary Greek art. In this paper I will attempt to analyze the movement’s characteristics as these were raised by its theoretical advocate, seeking to trace the procedure by which this new photographic representation was “invented” and legitimized as a national photographic school.

Examining all three survey exhibitions, one discerns that several ideas recur in Stathatos’ writings. To begin with, the majority of the photographers, as well as the largest part of the photos included in the displays are repeated. Making long and detailed references to the photographic events since the mid-1970s, Stathatos seems convinced of the path-breaking work of these young Greek photographers, believing that they launched a new movement in the photographic history of Greece. He attributes the emergence of the movement to the professional orientation of these young photographers, who in their majority studied abroad, as well as to their aspiration to establish new institutions for the promotion of the photographic medium (journals, publications, galleries etc).

On a second level, the curator strives to locate and accentuate the common intentions that appear in contemporary Greek photography. Irrespective of the wide range of styles employed, he distinguishes several recurrent themes in these photographers’ works. As he argues, they seek to investigate aspects of contemporary Greek urban society and culture, “dealing with what in America came to be known as “social landscape photography”.² For Stathatos, among contemporary Greek photographers there is a conscious attempt to explore Greece’s “post-classical landscape”; in their images he recognizes an effort to subvert earlier stereotypes of sublime classical landscapes and/or picturesque islands promoted by organisms like the National Tourist Board.

Although striving to reject previous models, Stathatos cannot escape the contextualization of these works within a sub-narrative of Greekness. However, his way of defining Greekness is differentiated from the previous norms. In the “Invention of the Landscape”, he employs a discourse quoting Simon Schama’s “Landscape and Memory”.³ Contextualized within the broader framework of postmodernism, and more specifically within the movement of New Historicism, Schama’s views put emphasis on interpretive strategies, cultural contexts, or even on singular stories and places, namely what it is called as microhistory.⁴ Pondering multiple interpretations over a single truth, Stathatos argues that the representation of the Greek landscape has moved away from a “monolithic” national scene to become a palimpsest that awaits the reader-researcher to explore it.⁵

Selecting and pointing out everything that could link specific photographic works, Stathatos seeks to consolidate a photographic production under a common label. Thus, he claims that these photographers share a common imaging, namely that of social landscape, and devise a counter-discourse to combat preconceptions of Greekness. But most of all, the unifying link between them is found in their conviction and awareness that their work is launching a new beginning in Greek photographic history.

2 John Stathatos (ed.), *Post-Classical Landscape: Greek Photography in the 1980s* (Athens: Hellenic Center of Photography 1988) without page numbers. The term “social landscape photography” was used by Lee Friedlander to characterize his own imaging of American society.

3 Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, (New York : A.A. Knopf, 1995).

4 Catherine Gallagher , Stephen Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism* (University of Chicago Press 2000) pp. 49–74 and *passim*. Quoted by Patrick Brantlinger, ‘A Response to Beyond the Cultural Turn’, *The American Historical Review*, December 2002, Vol. 107, No 5, <http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/ahr/107.5/ah0502001500.html>, last accessed on May 1st 2008.

5 John Stathatos (ed.), *The Invention of the Landscape*, (Thessaloniki: Camera Obscura 1996).

“The New British Document”

One cannot examine the emergence of New Greek Photography as a genre as well as Stathatos' attempts to legitimize it as a national school outside his own formation. As mentioned previously, Stathatos had for many years lived and worked in the U.K.. There he became familiar with several practices popular in the late 1970s and early 1980s, like Victor Burgin's post-marxist critique of representation, John Tagg's critique of photography's institutions based on Foucault or Jo Spence's radical photographic feminism.⁶ A comparison with the British photographic situation during the 1970s and 1980s will significantly shed light on the way Stathatos seeks to conceptualize contemporary Greek photography.

Starting from the institutional framework, during the 1970s several developments related to photography took place in Britain. Numerous galleries exclusively devoted to photography opened at the same period; the Photographers' Gallery in London in 1971, the Impressions Gallery, in York in 1972, Stills Gallery in Edinburgh, in 1977, and the Association of Welsh Photographers, later Ffotogallery Cardiff in 1978. Furthermore, in 1982 the National Museum of Photography, Film and Television, as a branch of the Science Museum was established in Bradford, while the Royal Photographic Society (RPS) moved its library and archive from London to Bath in 1980. In 1998 the Victoria and Albert Museum opened the Canon Photography Gallery dedicated to exhibitions of photographic art. Thus, the 1970s and 1980s were characterized not only by the extension of provision for photography collections and exhibitions, but also by an increase in major institutions located away from London.⁷

Since the 1970s there have been significant developments in art practices founded in the new centrality of critical ideas to the visual arts. Within this framework photography was radically reevaluated, accommodating art discourses like the critique of representation, institutional critique or identity politics. Photography works were utilized to raise issues of cultural identity, multiculturalism, tolerance of cultural, sexual, religious, racial otherness.

In an attempt to take account of ethnic diversity, institutions like the Greater London Council took a lead in supporting multicultural initiatives. An example can be the formation of the association of Black Photographers, which was later renamed to Autograph. Racism, the post-colonial context and desire to explore ethnic difference, figure centrally in these photographers' practices. Exhibitions which have explored these themes include “Disrupted Borders”⁸, which connected work from widespread parts of the world –all of which in some way treated questions of cultural integration and marginality.

Informed by the theoretical outline of multiculturalism, the way Britishness is portrayed was subsequently altered. Organized in 1986 at the Chicago Museum of Photography the exhibition “The New British Document” gave its name to a group of photographic works that were produced in Britain during the so called Thatcher years. Best exemplified in the work of Paul Graham and of Martin Parr, this trend operated in the territory traditionally reserved for documentary photography, reinterpreting, nonetheless, that genre through new approaches to photographic representation.

With his *A1—The Great North Road*, (1981–1982) and *Beyond Caring* (1984–1985) series Paul Graham sought to document social fractures of the British society, collecting everyday images from the motorway or the unemployment offices. Martin Parr, on the other hand, approached modern British society with a satirical and witty look, criticizing consumerism, foreign travel and tourism, family and relationships within a petty-bourgeois context. Taking

6 Simon Watney, ‘Tunnel Vision: Photographic Education in Britain in the 1980s’, *Afterimage*, Jan/Feb2006, Vol. 33, Issue 4.

7 Liz Wells, ‘Photography as Art’ in Liz Wells (ed.), *Photography: A Critical Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge 1997) p. 288.

8 Sunil Gupta (ed.), *Disrupted Borders* (London: Rivers Oram Press 1993).

distances from the colonial legacy, the image of Britishness that both Graham and Parr project is based on the representation of the other, whether s/he is an immigrant, an unemployed or a member of working or petty-bourgeois classes. Britain appears as a country of tolerance, while cultural diversity is mobilized to bridge every difference inherent in British society. Founded in the late 1980s, this trend was to reach its apogee during the 1990s, when the New Labour elevated Young British Artists into the major British cultural product that, functioning as a brand⁹, secured the integration of any alterity and smoothening of every political antagonism.

Legitimizing New Greek Photography

Promoting an aestheticized version of documentary photography, New Greek Photography works coincide with international tendencies resulting from the circumscription of photography's informational role as well as from the rising of its exhibition value. As his curated exhibitions manifest, Stathatos has a firm and clear view of contemporary Greek photography, as firm and clear as his intention to promote this specific photographic "genre".

Through Stathatos' survey exhibitions the documentary photography of the 1980s is signified anew, and is further aestheticized within its new context. It becomes one of the dominant tendencies in Greek art, with its commercial value increasing. Having worked for many years in U.K., Stathatos seems quite familiar with the popularity the works of the New British Document enjoyed. It was exactly this successful recipe that Stathatos wished to apply in contemporary Greek photography. Apparently, organizing survey exhibitions of contemporary Greek photography seems to fall into this same conceptual outline.

As previously mentioned, two of his three exhibitions were organized just a few years after the conference regarding the "national policy for art photography", held in October 1994 under the auspices of the Greek Ministry of Culture.¹⁰ The conference highlighted the insignificant presence of collectors interested in Greek photography and especially in contemporary Greek photography. Most of the representatives concluded that the lack of museums and institutions failed to raise the market's interest in this photographic production.¹¹ Aspiring to develop an art market for Greek photography, they proposed the organization of survey exhibitions that would examine and promote the tendencies and the character of contemporary Greek photography.¹²

One of the basic objectives the conference set was "the promotion of Greek photography abroad".¹³ The conference's outcome can be traced in the establishment of Thessaloniki's Museum of Photography, as well as in the organization of exhibitions like "The Invention of the Landscape" and "The Image and the Icon". Both the museum's founding and the exhibitions were part of the celebration of Thessaloniki as Cultural Capital of Europe for 1997. It is not by chance that, within this framework, the city is presented promoting "the

9 Simon Anholt introduced the notion of "nation branding". He is an advisor to the governments of many countries (U.K. apparently), cities and regions on nation branding, public diplomacy, economic development, public affairs, cultural relations and trade, tourism and export promotion. See www.earthspeak.com

10 *Imerida yia tin Kallitechniki Fotografia, [Conference for Art Photography]* (Greek Ministry of Culture, National Cultural Cities Network, Athens 1994).

11 Alkis Xanthakis, 'I agora tis fotografias', ['Photography's market'], in *Imerida yia tin Kallitechniki Fotografia, [Conference for Art Photography]*, Ibid, pp. 22–26.

12 Yannis Demou, 'Dynatotites ypostiriksis tis fotografikis dimiourgias', ['Potentials for supporting photographic creation'], in *Imerida yia tin Kallitechniki Fotografia, [Conference for Art Photography]*, Ibid, p. 30.

13 Thanos Mikroutsikos, in *Imerida yia tin Kallitechniki Fotografia, [Conference for Art Photography]*, Ibid, pp. 15–17.

European spirit” as well as “a vision for a united Europe”.¹⁴ Greece’s cultural policy in the 1990s is identified with the dominant model of Europeanism, a model that it is based on the “respect for cultural identities, tolerance for cultural differences in a framework of plural democratic values”.¹⁵

The “New” and the “Ethnic”

Two are the aspects promoted in both New Greek Photography and New British Document. First, its “new” character: adding the prefix “new” not only distinguishes contemporary Greek photography from previous practices; it also alludes to youth, namely the young age of the artists, a quality that recurs in Stathatos’ writings. As Julian Stallabrass argues, there is a much wider trend in commodity culture to favour youth, or at least its appearance. As a marketing quality, youthfulness becomes an appealing tactic even for those art events that attract older audiences, which like to think of themselves as sprightly.¹⁶ For both the Greek and the British paradigm, youth constitutes an advantage that could be traded in various ways. Artists can remain young for a while, or even be labeled as “young”, responding to demands of the art market.

Secondly, both photographic trends are described in their national contexts. When examining contemporary urban landscape, apparently ubiquitous as a theme in both photographic productions, one may wonder how Greek or British this can be. In reality, Graham’s unemployed, Parr’s industrial workers, Maligkoura’s immigrants in Omonoia square, or Alkidis’ passer-by are typical images of the global city.¹⁷ Greece’s representation is not based on its sublime classical past, neither on the picturesque model promoted by the National Tourist Board; similarly, Britain is not displayed as the inheritor of its colonial legacy. Instead, what is represented as genuine Greek or British is the environment of socially marginalized groups living in a contemporary global city.

Arguing in favour of a social landscape photography, these photographers could be linked to Hal Foster’s “artist as ethnographer” model. Foster recasts Benjamin’s “Author as Producer” 1934 model, according to which progressive artists should try to transform social relations, by intervening in the modes of production. In the ethnographer paradigm, the artist is an observant – participant working on behalf of the cultural or ethnic other and recording a cultural event.¹⁸ Descending from the humanistic photography of the mid-20th century, these photographic practices or “concerned photography” according to Cornell Capa, seems to get contextualized, in their larger part at least, within what is called as art’s ethnographic turn.

Examined through an ethnographic prism, recording a social landscape is transformed into a forced “othering” of the photographed subjects. Issues of cultural or ethnic identity are introduced into the works as “exotic additions” by the artist-ethnographer. Thus, the Greekness or Britishness promoted in these photographic works is apparently reduced to this supplement, to this “flavour” that transforms the represented subjects into a domestic alterity.

14 See http://www.hri.org/culture97/welcome_gr.html, last accessed on May 1st 2008.

15 “Pro Cultura” Charter adopted at Thessaloniki (1997). See ‘Action Plan on Cultural Policies for Development’, http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.phpURL_ID=18719&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html last accessed on May 1st 2008.

16 Julian Stallabrass, *Art Incorporated* (Oxford University Press 2004) p. 84.

17 Saskia Sassen, *Global City, New York, London, Tokyo* (Princeton University Press 2001).

18 Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge, Massachusetts- London, England: The MIT Press 1996) p. 171–173.

Photography's Ethical Turn

The discourse developed on New Greek Photography and New British Document singles out and emphasizes the notion of the documentation of everyday life. Despite their more than obvious aestheticization, their value is exclusively determined in the context of their capacity of documenting life. As Boris Groys puts it, today's art aspires to become life itself.¹⁹ Appropriating the common world, this art-becoming-life alters art's own status. Its validity is treated in terms of morality, putting art itself into crisis. Aesthetic judgment is equated with an ethicopolitical one, hinting at a general tendency in art, described by Jacques Rancière as an ethical turn.²⁰

As Rancière argues, this contemporary disparagement of the aesthetic seems to disregard the "aesthetic regime of art", as this was expressed by Enlightenment and is still operative today. According to the French philosopher, contemporary art practices seem to misapprehend one vital aspect inherent in the aesthetic: its ability to treat contradiction. It is a fruitful contradiction discerned in art's relation with social change, as this is exemplified in the conflict between art's autonomy and the belief in art's mission to fulfill the promise of a better world.²¹

Overlooking the aesthetic, contemporary art practices seem to accomplish their social engagement with translating art into terms of life, blurring the borders between art and non-art. The emphasis on socially concerned photography is symptomatic of a broader transformation that art is undergoing during the last decades. Its ethical orientation, smoothening any contradiction inherent in the aesthetic, should be linked with contemporary art's attempt to endorse a consensual view of society. Rancière explains this trend as the aesthetical configuration of the post-utopian condition, namely the undoing of the Revolution's alliance between political and aesthetic radicalism, which followed the fall of Communism in the early 1990s.²²

In the Greek and British paradigms artists seek to shake away previous stereotypes in their "national" photographic representations. In reality, however, they conclude in creating a new fixed image: mobilizing a discourse of cultural pluralism, they attempt to present a "politically correct" image on contemporary Greek/British culture. Despite the social issues raised, these images are seemingly apolitical. Enforcing an aestheticized ethical discourse on cultural identity aims at achieving political consensus and eradicating every conflict and antagonism from the political field.

Cultural pluralism constitutes one of the dominant models of the cultural policy that the European Union promotes. Greece in the 1990s is a country striving to prove that it can support the vision of modernization and of the European Union. As a fertile field for Greece to improve its image, culture has a significant role to play. By promoting "the principles of multiculturalism and the respect of the expression of cultural identities", Greek state seeks to broaden "its role and presence in the broader international scene, the institutions and the international organizations".²³ This cultural framework, besides approaching to the official cultural policy of the European Union, recalls the practices that were successfully

19 Boris Groys, 'Art in the Age of Biopolitics: From Artwork to Art Documentation', from the Catalogue to *Documenta 11* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2002) pp 108–109.

20 Jacques Rancière, *Malaise dans l'esthétique* (Paris : Editions Galilée 2004) pp. 143–173.

21 Ibid, pp. 60–64.

22 Ibid, p. 169.

23 Costas Simitis, 'Parousiasi ton theseon tou PA.SO.K' ['Presentation of the PA.SO.K (Greek Socialist Party) positions'], Athens, March 29th, 2000, <http://www.costas-simitis.gr/content/76>, last accessed on May 1st 2008.

implemented in countries presenting a higher rate of multiethnic population, like United Kingdom under Blair's New Labour.²⁴

Adopting the ideological construction of cultural pluralism, both Greek and British cultural policies achieve to promote the model of a tolerant and modern country, an image that fits perfectly within contemporary neoliberal capitalism. Taking advantage of the postmodernist discourse of cultural pluralism, they tend to permeate the social groups and pacify them. By distinguishing concrete groups with specific interests, objectives, values and "culture", these policies manage to absorb several social tensions. The image of alterity that is promoted trivializes the essential differences between social, ethnic or cultural groups. Dismantled by its true identity and "trapped" within its picturesque representation, this alterity presents no danger for the social order.²⁵

New Greek Photography and the New British Document are invented as new "genres" and become institutionalized. By being supported by state institutions, they are a posteriori legitimated as national schools. They are, however, "national schools", made to fit to the needs of a global art market. Mobilizing an essentialist "difference" or a desirable "otherness", they create a convenient "brand" for their own cultural product, succumbing, thus, to the demands of late consumer capitalism, which operates, as Mari Karmen Ramirez argues, through the marketing of the appearance of "difference" and "particularity".²⁶

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24 See Julian Stallabrass, *High Art Lite: British Art in the 1990s*, (London and New York: Verso 1999) pp. 170– 195. Louiza Avgita 'Kataskevazontas ti "Nea Vretania": I "Nea Vretaniki Techni" tis dekatias tou '90' ['Constructing "New Britain": The "New British Art" of the 1990s'], in 3rd *Panhellenic Conference of Art History*, Thessaloniki 2–4 November 2007, proceedings forthcoming.

25 Slavoj Zizek, 'Multiculturalism, or The Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism', *New Left Review*, I n. 225, Sep- Oct 1997, p. 37. Slavoj Zizek, 'From Politics to Biopolitics...and Back', *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 103, n. 2/3, Spring/Summer 2004, p. 508.

26 Maria Carmen Ramirez, 1996, 'Brokering Identities: Art curators and the politics of cultural representation', in Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson, Sandy Nairne, (ed.) *Thinking About Exhibitions* (London and New York: Routledge 1996) p. 25.

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