



Greek Modernism: A National Scenario. Experiences and Ideological Trajectories

Annie Malama

National Gallery – Alexandros Soutzos Museum

Abstract

This paper aspires to comment on the idea of suggesting an alternative scenario concerning the national narrative about Modern Greek Art, in the context of the curatorial approach I personally followed for the exhibition *Versions of Greek modernism: experiences and ideological trajectories* (actually one of the sections of a broader temporary exhibitional project, entitled *Unknown Treasures from the National Gallery Collections*, that took place in the National Gallery-Alexandros Soutzos Museum in Athens from October 2011 to January 2012).

Choosing the works for this particular section I was responsible for, was a great opportunity to challenge the certainties of linear presentation adopted in the permanent exhibition of the museum and the rather outdated historiographical scheme it is based on. More specifically, instead of continuing the reproduction of long perpetuated stereotypes, motivated by a sometimes compulsive need to showcase masterpieces, to demonstrate an unbroken continuity in space and time, exclusively based on superficial formal comparison of the output of the Greek visual arts production and its international counterparts, I suggest it is about time that we enrich the issues posed and focus on broader cultural, historical contexts.

In other words it is essential to discuss the terms of modernity in Greece wondering about the specific artistic production and reception conditions, the broader social and institutional reality, the viewing of art itself as a means of constructing certain social identities, the connection of various social and national identities, the notions connected with image production, the creation eventually of *le champ artistique* (to borrow Pierre Bourdieu's term).

Introduction

The temporary exhibition *Unknown Treasures from the National Gallery Collections*, took place in the National Gallery-Alexandros Soutzos Museum in Athens from October 2011 to January 2012 and it was made up of different smaller exhibitions. The curators of the museum were asked to select the pieces for their sections, in an independent spirit. That means that each section could function as an absolutely independent unit. In other words, each one of us was assigned to select works from our respective areas of expertise in order to propose individual exhibitions that eventually would be united into one, proposing an alternative narrative to the one presented in the National Gallery's permanent exhibition. What is important to clarify right from the beginning is that suggesting a different approach or another way of interpreting featured works was not requested or even considered. The proof is that most of these separate exhibitions simply ended up reproducing the story told in the permanent exhibition.

The different sections were structured following the main principles on which the permanent display is based, they reflected it and enriched its respective subsections; the 19th century Greek painting collection, the early 20th century Greek painting modernist experimentations, versions of Greek modernism during the Interwar period, post-war contemporary art collection, selections from the National Gallery sculpture collection, paintings from the Western European art collection. Nevertheless, *Unknown Treasures from the National Gallery Collections* exhibition offered also the chance to present part of the National Gallery Prints and Drawings Department, which is not represented at all in the permanent display, due to preservation reasons and to lack of room. Dr Marilena Cassimatis made quite an interesting effort to comment on the prints and drawings collection formation in accordance with the museum's acquisition history, and also to communicate recent research findings and attributions. Furthermore, as the initiator of the project, Professor Marina Lambraki-Plaka, Director of the National Gallery-Alexandros Soutzos Museum, put it in her introductory catalogue text it was an idea mostly related to the National Gallery expansion project that is about to happen. The main question was to prove that the Museum has numerous "masterpieces" in its collections that deserve to be exhibited:

Featuring works from the National Gallery and Evripidis Koutlidis Foundation collections, this exhibition is important on several grounds. The most obvious *raison d'être* for this event, which realizes a personal vision of mine, is an indication of things to come: we wished to bid our farewell to the old museum by displaying a selection of the important works scheduled to form part of the permanent display after the completion of the expansion project. With twice as large a display area, the new National Gallery-Alexandros Soutzos Museum will be able, not only better to preserve the artistic heritage of Greece in its collections, but also to mount exhibitions featuring a far larger number of works for the benefit of the public; a wider-ranging exhibition agenda, moreover, will be made possible. (Lambraki-Plaka, Mentzafou 2011: 442)

So, perhaps it would be more accurate to rephrase my initial phrase and explain that this paper does not refer to the temporary exhibition *Unknown Treasures from the National Gallery Collections* as a whole, but specifically to the section that I was responsible for, entitled *Versions of Greek modernism: experiences and ideological trajectories*. The works selected in this particular exhibition section were especially chosen in order to interact with the body of works that comprises the

narrative of the permanent display of the National Gallery concerning the history of Modern Greek art in the 20th century. In my opinion, these works from the exhibition provided an opportunity to challenge some certainties and to re-examine the way main historiographical questions may have been transformed into perpetuating stereotypes, motivated by the, sometimes compulsive, need to showcase masterpieces. This need also feeds into the desire to demonstrate an unbroken continuity in space and time, or to superficially compare, based on formal analysis of the output of the Greek visual arts production and its international counterparts.

What I am arguing is that it is impossible to keep using the discussion on aesthetic, morphological terms, to avoid focusing on a broader historical and cultural context. That is basically the main symptom, probably the most characteristic one, of the hectic situation that the history of modern Greek and European art is suffering from in Greece as a field of productive academic research and knowledge. A situation which has started to change slowly, mainly in the last two decades. Instead of discussing art works in a self-referring, introvert way or suggesting a linear, homogenizing scheme for their presentation, it would be far more appealing to engage more the politics of representation, attempting to trace various subcultures and reflect on the interplay of ideologies and representations, on questions of context, identity and group membership.

It has already been sufficiently discussed who resembles whom and it is not that fruitful to keep suggesting Greek analogues for Matisse, Derain, Braque or Picasso, to name but a few. The loans and influences on Greek artistic production are often prominent, and at any rate traceable. (Καφέτση 1992: 17). Further and perhaps more interesting comparisons may certainly exist, or emerge in the future, yet any such discussion should include attempts to interpretation, or example, to seek the causes and historical conditions that helped to shape the development of modern art as such in Greece. It's not a question of tracing superficial resemblances; on the contrary, there is a strong danger that these hypothetical parallels could end up providing a distorted version of reality by suggesting the false idea that the field of cultural production in both Paris and Athens is similar. At least if one agrees with Pierre Bourdieu's statement that art is a social practice, a certain social field, which includes certain agents and their interaction.

Thus it is rather pointless to keep insisting on the linear scheme of presentation adopted in the permanent exhibition of the museum, a presentation which actually reproduces a rather outdated historiographical scheme based on two main ideological myths regarding Greek national identity. The first myth corresponds to the "renaissance of the Greek civilization" and the second one to "its uninterrupted continuity" from ancient to modern times (Ματθιόπουλος 2003a: 428-429). These two myths, strongly present in political and cultural realms, as well as in the collective consciousness, have been supplemented in the second half of the twentieth century by a third one, the myth of (or yet better, the strong desire for) the Europeanisation. Emphasising the European identity, as integral part of the national identity, became indeed a constitutive aspect of modernism in Greece.

According to the Director's greeting, written (or, revised) almost two years ago, on the National Gallery's official website "the care for the creation of artistic collections is almost contemporaneous with the independent Greek state and expresses the desire of the Greeks to see a renaissance of the arts *in what has been their ancient cradle* [...] The institutional role of the National Gallery is to collect, safekeep, preserve, study and exhibit works of art towards the aesthetic

training of the public, the on-going education through art and the recreation that it is able to provide, *as well as the self-awareness of the Greek people through the history of art, which expresses the national history on a symbolic level.* [...]” (<http://www.nationalgallery.gr/site/content.php?sel=66>, emphasis added).

Strangely enough though –at least for somebody who is not familiar with the deficiencies of Greek institutions, their inadequate relationship with social needs and the acanonical nature of the Greek bourgeois class (due to the rather abrupt and awkward transformation of a former province of the Ottoman empire to a modern state, and the subsequent conversion of a rather traditional society to a capitalist one)– despite the fact that a National Gallery was founded as early (for Greek standards) as in 1900, it “essentially remained a nomad until 1976, when the current building, designed by the architects and professors Pavlos Mylonas and Dimitris Fatouros, which began to be built in 1964, was completed and inaugurated” (<http://www.nationalgallery.gr/site/content.php?sel=66>). As for its permanent exhibition mentioned above it was organized and presented to the public just twelve years ago (in 2000).

Conditions are probably now mature to stop taking this nationalist discourse for granted and to start examining it as a powerful ideological product with certain historical parameters. Perhaps today even more, when, at a time of a pervasive crisis, museums around the world regard their collections as living, renegotiable, constantly redefined fields, sometimes succeeding to serve a very powerful social function (Heuman Gurian 2010: 15-25, Chainev Gagnon 2011: 375-378).

In Greek art history frequent reference is made to “modernity”, or “modernism” vs. “academic” or “tradition”, yet the historical connotations of these terms and their signification in the Greek context, which in turn is neither homogeneous nor informed by commonly shared ideals or mutual pursuits and objectives, is not frequently clarified. Of course, it needs to be clearly stated that there is no such phenomenon as *a unique* Greek case, or, as Professor Matthiopoulos indicates the multifaceted realm of art “cannot be limited – either geographically, socially, or ideologically – within the confines, behaviours and aesthetic concerns of the upper social classes in Athens. If we were to identify on the map the main geographical areas and social environments where Greek artists produce and market their work, three distinct areas would emerge:

- Greek provinces, from Crete to Epirus, Macedonia and Thrace, as well as the lower-class districts and areas around the capital and other large cities, such as Thessaloniki, Volos, Patra, Corfu.
- The urban centre and middle-class districts in Athens and their scarce equivalents in other major Greek cities, such as Piraeus, Volos, and Thessaloniki.
- Finally, Paris, where all artists – with very few exceptions – who left to study abroad between 1920-1940 gathered and remained, some for a shorter or for a longer period.” (Ματθιόπουλος 2003: 402)

The above distinction, of course, must be seen in relation to an overall scheme of progressive interaction between all three areas, and certainly in conjunction with their broader cultural connotations. Geography in this case is suggestive of a number of existent cultures and subcultures.

The artworks for the section, *Versions of Greek modernism: experiences and ideological trajectories*, part of the broader project *Unknown Treasures from the National Gallery Collections*, were selected with the

intention to inspire a debate in this direction; they were sourced from the National Gallery–Alexandros Soutzos Museum collections, specifically from the department corresponding to the sections described in the permanent display as: “*Interwar Period 1922-1940: Generation of the 1930s: Tradition and Modernism, Expressionism: Projection of the Inner Image*” and “*In the Aftermath of World War II – Continuity and Rupture: The Generation of the 1930s and its Successors.*”

The selection included both artists whose work, at least of specific periods, is already featured – extensively, in some cases – in the permanent display of the National Gallery (as is the case, of well-known names in the Greek context, such as Yannis Tsarouchis, Nikos Hadjikyriakos-Ghika, or Yannis Moralis, as well as Yorgos Gounaropoulos, Spyros Vassileiou, Aginor Asteriadis, Errikos Frantziskakis, Nikos Engonopoulos, Diamantis Diamantopoulos, Nikos Nikolaou, Yerassimos Steris, Alekos Kontopoulos), and accommodated artists who are not featured at the permanent display at all, such as Dimitris Vitsoris, Orestis Kanellis, Dimitris Yoldassis, Dimitris Davis, Kostas Plakotaris, Kostas Iliadis, Polykleitos Rengos.

“We took into consideration as our guiding principle for the display and the guidebook the immediate needs regarding expression and function that art was expected to meet in the new society and the new State,” explains Marina Lambraki-Plaka, Director of the National Gallery, in the introduction to the permanent display guidebook, in 1999.

However, it would be more accurate to admit that the twentieth century material presentation at least, expresses a clear effort to prove the connection between Greek artistic creation and common European trends. It is basically an obvious attempt to strengthen the official national scenario about Greek modernism, taking into consideration the two of the three above mentioned areas of artistic production; the urban centre and middle-class districts in Athens and their scarce equivalents in other major Greek cities, and, by all means, to suggest their strong connections with the main artistic centre of the first half of the twentieth century, Paris.

In the *Versions of Greek modernism: experiences and ideological trajectories* section the scope expanded to reflect the varying rates in the perception and deviating alternatives in the management of the modernist models. The works were contextualized in conjunction with what can be described as the *champ artistique* (Bourdieu 2006), the possible social areas of circulation of these models, the expectations that these created and to which they were expected to respond during the time of their emergence. A clear effort was made to examine the different kinds of audiences that different works had been produced for and also show their mingling and coexistence in a certain artistic environment, mostly supported by the State (i.e., by organizing the Panhellenic exhibitions), as the powers of the market were weak and anemic at the time.

Another key point of convergence has been that all works selected in this section were but different versions of the cityscape, whether true landscapes or genre paintings, interiors or still lifes, nudes or portraits. Cityscapes in the sense that they capture representations of city life, social roles and functions and which ultimately contribute to the establishment of role models, evaluations, social and cultural relationships.

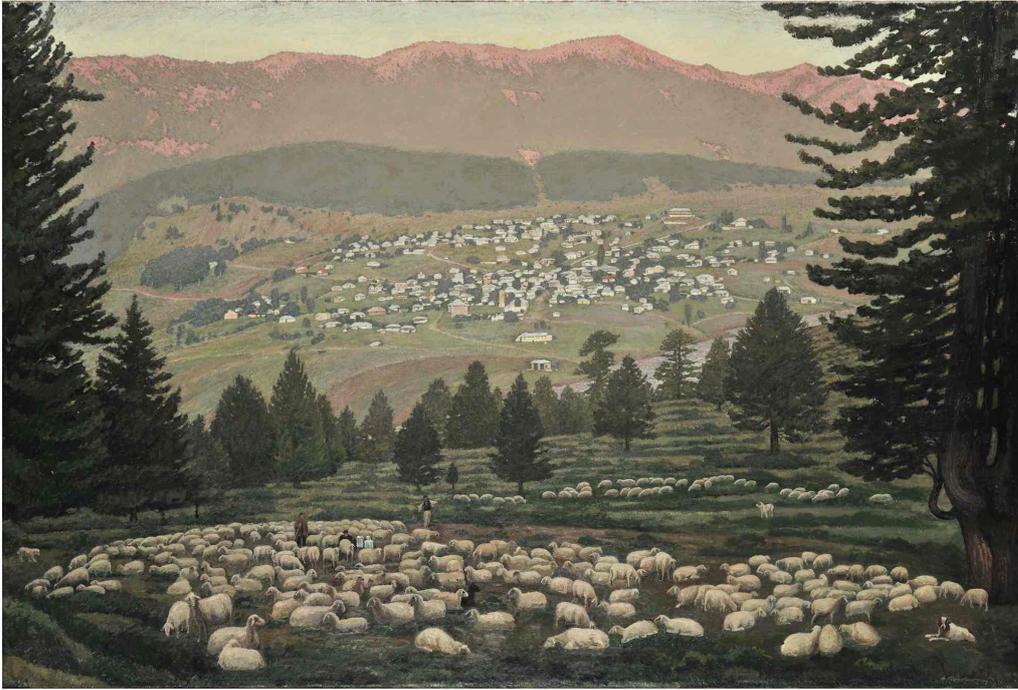


Figure 1: Dimitris Yoldassis, Samarina, ca. 1960 (?), Oil on canvas, 128.5 x 194 cm. National Gallery-Alexandros Soutzos Museum (inv. n. Π.5448)

Even the landscape paintings by Yoldassis, depictions of rural scenes, or people engaged in farming activities, could be considered cityscapes, in the broad sense of the word. Both because they are informed by a bourgeois outlook and because, already by the interwar period, “capitalism, not only as a broader economic framework and institutional environment, but also as a cultural structure, was expanded to dynamically penetrate throughout Greece, the older as well as more recent regions, incorporating rural microcultures financially, politically and culturally” (Ματθιόπουλος 2003: 403).



Figure 2: Yorgos Gounaropoulos, The Exhibition, 1912, Oil on canvas, 70 x 90 cm. National Gallery-Alexandros Soutzos Museum (inv. n. Π.3037)

To this modernist lifestyle and its distinct domains, to mentalities and attitudes one painting serves as the best possible introduction – so that we may begin the story from the beginning –: *The Exhibition* by Yorgos Gounaropoulos, the earliest (1912) from the works in my section. Whilst Gounaropoulos is featured in the permanent display with paintings made in the distinctive style that characterized his later work, based on a stand-alone colour background and on drawing, which defines outlines in the figures, in this section we decided to exhibit two of his early works: *The Exhibition*, and a *Self-portrait*, both very close to the academic atmosphere in the Athens School of Fine Arts, from which the artist graduated in 1912.

The Exhibition, a dark interior in an art gallery, takes as its subject – and as a distinct category as far as social identities are concerned – art lovers, the viewing of art itself, aesthetic enjoyment as an organic characteristic of the urban identity, and as a rite of initiation to it, creating a *mise en abyme* situation for the viewer. An understanding of the requirements and conditions for modernism in Greece does not only imply the notion of rupture. Beyond convergences or deviations, differences or similarities, “what links Greek art with the European models of each period on the morphological level in an internal, essential manner is the reproduction of more or less the same production and reception conditions” (Καφέτσι 1992: 18). It is this key aspect that this work illustrates, albeit in an academic fashion concerning iconography and style.

It is important that private art galleries, such as the Stratigopoulou Art Gallery and Nina Rocque’s Studio, emerged in Athens in the mid-1920s and early 1930s. If this work by Gounaropoulos provides an opportunity to partly identify the conditions of a distinct social domain, that of art, it is worth noting as well, that this work was produced in 1912, when the Balkan Wars broke out. This date is considered by historiography as Greece’s entry into the 20th century (Ματθιόπουλος 2003: 401). The reference to the creation of a modern Greek cultural identity developed during the interwar period, largely during the second decade of the 20th century, and in most cases was realized in the aftermath of Second World War.

“Modernity and history seem condemned to co-exist, in a self-destructive union that endangers the survival of both.” Reading Paul de Man, Dimitris Tziouvas argues that there is “some sort of analogy between the degree of the modernity of a period and its dependence on history and tradition. The more urgently the former is manifested, the more evident is the attachment to the latter. This perhaps explains the emphasis on Greekness at a time of modernity and a prevalent modernist tendency.” (Τζιόβας 1989: 20).



Figure 3: Yannis Tsarouchis, Banner painted for the Panhellenic Popular Arts and Crafts Exhibition, 1949, Glue and colours on cloth, 206,7 x 141,2 cm. National Gallery-Alexandros Soutzos Museum (inv. n. Π.1560)

Indeed, from a certain point onward and in gradual progression up to the 1930s, modernism in art was identified with the acceptance of the “non-Europeanized” (Ματθιόπουλος 2003: 406). At the same time, paradoxically, it was in this sense that the connection with Europe was identified. Underlining “Greekness” meant being more modern. Thus, a second landmark work in this section is the banner by Yannis Tsarouchis (1949), made for the Panhellenic Popular Arts and Crafts Exhibition at the Zappeion Hall. If already by the 1930s, the theoretical debate on Greekness had met with entrepreneurial activity, by the late 1940s, the notion of Greekness had become a State-supported, institutionalized activity with financial implications.

Associations for the production of ‘folk’-popular handicrafts had enjoyed ample support and promotion by the State at the permanent display of Greek products installed at the Zappeion Hall in 1933, supported and encouraged by Prime Minister Venizelos and managed by the banker D. Loverdos. This was not so much because these products met the contemporary consumer needs as because they responded to the demand for a ‘Modern Greek culture’. [...] The consequences of setting up a national network for marketing ‘folk’ – traditional art and handicrafts in the form of local associations and limited companies brought into contact ‘folk’-traditional art with urban consumers (Ματθιόπουλος 2003: 414, 416).

The content and connotations of “Greekness”, did not remain immutable in time, and its various manifestations in art were diverse and often unexpected, since they did not always adopt direct morphological correlations. In other words, an artist did not have to paint figures in traditional costumes in order to prove his interest in tradition and in the modernist associations that this implied.



Figure 4: Dimitris Vitsoris, *Lady*, ca. 1925 (?), Oil on canvas, 39 x 28 cm. National Gallery-Alexandros Soutzos Museum (inv. n. II.6663)

Even artists such as Vitsoris, whose work is characterized by an introverted style of a psychological, expressionistic nature, dealt with the fabricated argument of Greekness and the will to produce an art of national characteristics and modernistic character. Seeking to dispel “a misunderstanding that is deeply ingrained in the public, as well as in several artists, regarding the content of Greek art”, the artist wrote: “The light, the Attic sky have been regarded as the main, the only Greek quality. Wrong. Who confines Greek art within the narrow geographical boundaries of Greece does injustice to it. It is unfair to limit Greek artists to the touristic beauty of the Greek landscape only, as they have the right to be touched by the inner human conflicts and to allow their inner self to respond to external events” (Βιτσώρης 1940: 28).

His view is ultimately not too different from a statement made by the Greek minister of Education, Yeorgios Papandreou, – which reflected his policy, of course – ten years earlier, in 1930, or from the remarks made by Yannis Tsarouchis in *Zygos* magazine, in a special issue questioning: “Are there any points of contact between Modern art and the ideal of Greek art?”, shortly after the mid-1950s, a time when this debate was still going on strong.

According to Papandreou, it was necessary “to grasp the truth that only National art is of international interest,” (Papandreou 1930) and Tsarouchis, ultimately very close to Vitsoris, remarked that, “Even though we Greeks are appreciative and proud of the fact that so many

columns, Caryatids and pediments adorn Gothic buildings, it is no less true that the true religion of our ancestors is to be found, rather, in those works that, irrespective of the form that they take, whether neoclassical, or not, are the product of that bliss we feel by accepting ourselves – for what we are – and by the unlimited respect for our great desires” (Τσαρούχης 1956: 19).

Yet, the works on display, and the concept of their configuration in my section, firstly trace another, also preeminent, manifestation of the – distinctive – artistic domain in the modernist period: the fact that artists formed groups in order to facilitate their access to the market, to deal with the bureaucratic procedures required in order to organize an exhibition, to communicate with the public and related institutional entities, sometimes even some demands of a trade union nature.

In theory, these groups ought to originate in stylistic and ideological agreements, and reflected common aesthetic pursuits. In practice, though, this was not the case, as demonstrated on various occasions, since aesthetic and ideological aspects of the convergence were most of the time fragile and uncertain. Their divergence, similarly, was not important, even though a climate of false tension was sometimes created and, moreover, groups often functioned as communicating vessels. Such collectivity ultimately served as a supporting mechanism for the careers of individual artists (Μάλαμα 2009, Ματθιόπουλος 2009: 226-228).

Most works in this section were produced by artists who were associated during the interwar period with *Omada Techni 1930* [Art Group 1930] or *Enossi Eleftheroi Kallitechnai* [Free Artists’ Union] (created in 1935) before most of them went on to form *Omada Stathmi* [Group “Level”, as stathmi is the Greek word for “level”] (1949) and *Armos* [Joint] (1949) in the aftermath of the War, while some also became members of the artists’ branch of EAM (the communist National Liberating Front).

In all cases mentioned above one may discern an honest effort on the behalf of the artists to escape from academic painting and conservative styles by trying to renew their artistic codes. Still, none of these attempts actually goes further than visual experimentations, nor challenges the principles of an empirical rationality. Therefore the role of the art is inevitably being limited to decorative aims.

Omada Techni 1930 [Art Group 1930], in which modernist artists of a liberal political background became active, was formed by D. Stephanopoulos, M. Tombros, and A. Theodoropoulos and developed a very active exhibition agenda. Participating artists were interested in current artistic developments in Paris and at the same time made an effort to equally distance themselves from academism – which continued to be popular – as well as from the Impressionist and Post-impressionist styles ideologically supported by Zacharias Papantoniou, who was the Director then of the National Gallery and an established art critic.

Group members included the followers of the school that came to be known as the Paris School, Vitsoris, Gounaropoulos, Kanellis, Vassileiou, Asteriadis, Hadjikyriakos-Ghika. In 1935, the group splintered; Ghika, Gounaropoulos, and Tombros organized their own event, Vitsoris, Asteriadis, Vassileiou continued as *Omada Techni* until the War.

The year 1935 was also when *Enosis Eleftheroi Kallitechnai* [Free Artists’ Union] was formed, mainly by left-wing artists, including Dimitris Yoldassis, a former member of *Omada Techni*, Dimitris Davis, Kostas Plakotaris, Alekos Kontopoulos. They were joined by Nikolaou, Moralís, and Rengos. Their stylistic tendencies were “primarily realistic and neoclassical, in the manner of A. Derain” (Matthiopoulos 1999: 161); their first exhibition took place in 1935, and D. Galanis, a

Greek artist with an established presence in Paris, and Y. Halepas, a sculptor, who, till today in many cases, functions as a kind of archetype of the deviant artist social type in Greek art history, were guests of honor, in a gesture to show who the group considered as their guides in contemporary Greek art.

Almost immediately after the end of the Civil War, new collective schemes emerged, which seemed once again to reflect an indeterminate landscape in the arts. Vassileiou, Asteriadis, Frantziskakis, Kanellis, Rengos were members of *Stathmi* [Greek for “level”], formed in October 1949. Ghika, Moralis, Nikolaou, Tsarouchis, Engonopoulos were members of *Armos* [Joint], which was formed shortly after.

It is certainly not unjustified to associate the output of the members of *Stathmi*, artists who had been actively involved with the causes of the Resistance and EAM [the communist National Liberating Front], with an anthropocentric, socially aware, realistic art, with stylistic and morphological references to “folk” and post-Byzantine art (Μάλαμα 2009, Ματθιόπουλος 2009: 226-228).

Similarly evident is the association of the *Armos* members with the liberal political circles and the pursuit of a European version of Greekness, the “irrationality of surrealism” (Ματθιόπουλος 2009: 228), or abstraction.

Yet, irrespective of any deviations in subject matter, style, even quality, in these artists’ output, it is hard to identify any distinct aesthetic and ideological qualities that set them apart, unless one knows in advance the group of which a particular artist was a member (Καλλιγιάς 1950). In fact, it is possible that members of different groups may sometimes share more affinities compared to members of the same group.

The group *Akraioi* [Extremists] was also formed in the same year as *Stathmi* and *Armos*; its manifesto was signed by Alekos Kontopoulos. Members of the group were also Antypas, Gaitis, Maltezos and Hytiris. *Akraioi* may not have developed an exhibition activity, yet they were the ones to propose an artistic stance that seemed to redefine the broader role and function of art for the first time, at least as far as their statement of principles is concerned, which was ultimately their only public gesture.

As mentioned in their manifesto, “original contemporary art seeks to break through the impenetrable screen between reality and the imaginary, between the world of common sense and the realm of dreams. Never before has a similar effort been made to demonstrate the inextricable relationship between man and the cosmos [...]. In the face of the collapse of the context and content of tradition, where we all stand in awed longing, authentic contemporary art hopes that there will come a day when man will be able to establish a new intellectual synthesis, in which to be free and integral!” And goes on to affirm: “And we are on the side of those who believe that the poetic reality of inner human truth was never before so close to becoming an activity adapted to the manifestations of life, a way of life, an expression of life” (Κοντόπουλος 1949: 349-350).

In the context of the vague distinctions between groups, it is interesting to note that the *Akraioi* manifesto might well have been signed off, at least up to a certain point, by artists such as Vitsoris and Tsarouchis, whose views were discussed above. Nevertheless, in a broader, sober consideration, not necessarily a praise, nor a criticism, the potential of these views was never realized, and experimentation in Greek modernist painting limited itself within the confines of an

aesthetic treatment, oscillating between realism and Greekness, dramatically changing, at any rate, the relationship between painting and the reality as perceived by the eye.

Conclusions

Revisiting a National Museum collection is inevitably, even unintentionally, a clear case of restructuring a national narrative, by creating or reintroducing a sense of national self. The *Versions of Greek modernism; experiences and ideological trajectories* temporary exhibition section attempted to propose an alternative scenario concerning the national narrative of Modern Greek Art; more specifically the Greek artistic production covering the Interwar period and the first decades after the Second World War.

One fundamental precondition of course was the fact that the approach suggested by the current curatorial choices could function in relation to the respective subsection of the permanent display of the museum, present in the same building. It had to provide complementary material to enrich the already existent presentation and at the same time challenge the certainties of the rather outdated historiographical scheme that its permanent counterpart is based on. Nevertheless, by expanding the criteria of selection for work on display, beyond purely qualitative criteria in aesthetic terms, my curatorial approach intended to broaden the view and suggest works of art which may not claim the title of the “masterpiece” but which are far more representative of a broader cultural context and more honest as far as the image of the art field in Greece is concerned. In order to strengthen a line of argumentation that reconsiders stereotypes, the exhibition focused on introducing the presence of parallel artistic currents and respective subcultures instead of reinforcing the scheme of a linear, homogenizing presentation of Greek artistic production. At the same time it implied the importance of highlighting specific production and reception conditions, necessarily taking into account the institutional context.

It is important to point out the constant need to determine national identity by referring both to Greekness and Europeaness, the use of tradition as a means of achieving modernism and, paradoxically enough, of modernism as a motive to discover and explore tradition so to claim a Europeaness of sorts. Furthermore, the inevitable exhaustion of modernistic experiment in the limits of the parisian *retour à l'ordre* artistic movement (with quite few exceptions), during the Interwar at least, is indicative enough of an artistic field not emancipated enough in order to deeply question the terms of its own existence and identity. Thus, it remains unable to test its own limits beyond empiricism.

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