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**The Military Dictatorship of April 1967 in Greece and its repercussion on the Greek visual arts scene.**

## **Introduction**

The 21st of April, 1967 has been a portentous date in the history of modern Greece, as a group of right – wing army officers seized power, imposing a regime of military dictatorship, also known as the Regime of the Colonels or the Junta. The dictatorship came after a period of political instability in the country, intercepting the normal course of things at the political, social and economical sector.

Obviously this kind of disorder could not leave the cultural life of the country unaffected. The imposing of the dictatorship had a strong impact on the evolution of the visual arts in Greece, mainly because it came at a time when Greek art, for the first time in the modern years, was finding its pace. The desire for synchronization with the international art was being finally fulfilled and for the first time Greek artists were part of the international avant guard. The visual arts scene was flourishing, the audience's interest was growing and the future seemed promising and optimistic. Then the Junta came to interrupt this upswing.

In this presentation we will attempt to explore:

- i) the effects of the dictatorship on the Greek visual arts scene and the artistic production of the period
- ii) the reaction of the art world

mainly through exhibitions and works of Greek artists that were created and exhibited in the country during the seven years of the Military Regime.

## **A review of Greek art until 1967**

### **Foundation of the Greek State – 1940**

As far as art is concerned, ever since the foundation of the Greek State, Greece was living in the periphery of the major European art centres of the time, influenced mainly by Munich (second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century) and then by Paris. The artists and intellectuals were proud of the masterpieces of classical antiquity but completely indifferent for the Byzantine tradition and the folk art, which was still alive at places.

European modernism of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century could not easily reach Greece, which was going through an eventful period. The victorious Balkan wars (1912-13) were succeeded by the catastrophe in Asia Minor (1922) and the National Division that followed. The prevalent ideology regarding the lost dream of Great Greece and the disappointment that was caused by the national humiliation, contributed to the emergence of the concept of Greekness, which had a great impact on art. In the spirit of the Greek identity quest, the so called Generation of 1930, figured prominently during the mid - war period trying to combine the pursuits of the international art with the Greek tradition. Suddenly Greek folk art, naïf painters (Theofilos, Makrygiannis painter) and the Byzantine tradition were discovered. Modernism and tradition were the two main elements of the idiomorphic Greek modernism and constituted a dilemma that dominated Greek art for many years. The dictatorship of Metaxas (1936-40), following the examples of German Nazism or Italian fascism that used art in order to create ideologies and influence the masses, conveniently took advantage of the idea of Greekness that had already been established in Greek art.

## **The Forties**

The 40s was an extremely difficult decade for Greece. The country had to face the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War, the Foreign Occupation and a harmful Civil War. The primary concern of the Greek people who suffered war damages, hunger and diseases, was the survival and the Resistance against the conquerors. Many artists were involved in the Resistance, some of them joining the various Resistance Groups and others helping through their art (engravings, posters and other printed material for the causes of the Resistance). Engaged art, serving the goals of the Resistance, and art inspired by the Greek epopee in the battlefields during the War and by the sufferings of the Greek people during the Occupation, constituted a big part of the artistic creation during this period.

In Greece, artists deliberately abstained from cultural activity<sup>1</sup>, the country was lacking institutions relevant to the visual arts<sup>2</sup> and art events were extremely limited. The dialogue between Greek artists was problematic but most importantly all contacts with the international art scene, and especially Paris, the art center of the time, were paused. Under those circumstances no consistent artistic activity could take place.

The term “introspection” has been used to describe the state of Greek art during this period. Tonis Spiteris characteristically mentions “... the personal creation matures in the

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<sup>1</sup> With the exception of the Professional Artistic Exhibitions (Επαγγελματικές Καλλιτεχνικές Εκθέσεις) (1942, 1943), which were organised by the Greek State on an idea of the Italian Occupation Authorities and that is why they were initially sabotaged especially by the artists which were connected with EAM - National Liberation Front (ΕΑΜ – Εθνικό Απελευθερωτικό Μέτωπο).

<sup>2</sup> The Artists' Union (Ένωση Καλλιτεχνών), precursor of the Chamber of Fine Arts of Greece (ΕΕΤΕ – Επιμελητήριο Εικαστικών τεχνών Ελλάδας) was founded in September 1944.

silence of the ateliers. The fruits of those explorations will come to light only after 1948”<sup>3</sup>.

Indeed the artistic activity started going out of the recession after the Liberation (1944), but still even then the social and political circumstances were not normal as the country was living the Civil War. Political persecutions of the time compelled a significant part of the Greek artists and intellectuals to exile themselves<sup>4</sup>, fact that has its own particular importance for the evolution of Greek art.

After the Liberation, the need of the artists, especially the younger ones, to restore contacts with international art was intense. Greek post war art was on a turning point. The artistic acquisitions of mid – war period, the Generation of 1930 and their descendants, were exhausted and it was only natural for the art world to look forward to Europe asking for new experimentations and exchange of ideas. This need was better met by the end of the Civil War, a period of reconstitution for Greece, when the art world finally was able to come out of the isolation and restore contacts with the international art centers.

### **The fifties**

The major breakthrough in the Greek post war art is considered to be the movement of Abstraction. It appeared in Greece with an important delay in comparison to Europe<sup>5</sup> and it could be connected mainly to the new abstract art tendencies which appeared the same period in Europe and in the USA (art informel, abstract expressionism etc)<sup>6</sup>. Abstraction had already run its course in Europe but in Greece it was considered as avant-gard and it was identified with the most vigorous and revolutionary elements of the art world. The reception of abstraction was not without reactions, mainly by the most conservative art cycles and by the leftists who considered it as a formal expression strange and different to the Greek idiosyncrasy and the Greek way of life.

The first abstract attempts appeared in public in 1950-55, however 1960, the year that Spyropoulos won the UNESCO price in the Venice Biennale, is considered to be the milestone for the acceptance of abstraction by the Greek art world and audience.

Undoubtedly the 50's was a transitional period for Greece. The society was trying to cure the traumas caused during the difficult years of the Occupation and the Civil War. Most importantly it was trying to find its orientation, turning eyes to Europe. The political

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<sup>3</sup> Τώνης Σπητέρης, *Η τέχνη στην Ελλάδα μετά το 1945*, Οδυσσέας, Αθήνα, 1983, p. 16 (the quote has been translated into English by Eleni Ganiti).

<sup>4</sup> Around 150 scholars of the French Institute in Athens (IFA) left Athens for Paris with the historical ship “Mataroa” after the initiative of Octave Merlier and Roger Millieux of the French Institute in Athens, in order to avoid persecutions. Most of them were leftists, members of EAM or EPON – Revolutionary Youth Organization of Greece (ΕΠΟΝ – Ενιαία Πανελλαδική Οργάνωση Νέων).

<sup>5</sup> Abstraction emerged in Europe around 1910. W. Kandinsky is considered to be the “Father” of non figurative art.

<sup>6</sup> Μαρίνα Λαμπράκη – Πλάκα, «Αφαίρεση», *Τέσσερις αιώνες ελληνικής ζωγραφικής*, Εθνική Πινακοθήκη – Μουσείο Αλεξάνδρου Σούτζου, Αθήνα, 2000, p. 206

situation was not stable yet but the economy was improving allowing a wider audience to show interest in arts. The visual arts scene noted a remarkable progress. Many artists and art critics traveled abroad to study under state scholarships, international exhibitions took place in Greece while Greek artists started exhibiting abroad. New exhibition venues opened, art specializing magazines started being published [1955: *Zygos* (Ζυγός), Art Review (Επιθεώρηση Τέχνης)] and the already existing art columns in newspapers and magazines increased.

### **The sixties**

The 60s have found the abstract ideas established in the minds of artists and audience, helping them to acknowledge and accept easier the new art experimentations that were being formed in Europe and in the USA. New ideas and trends were transferred to Greece without delay and for the first time Greek artists were a part of the international avant guard. These were mainly artists who were living abroad, especially in Paris.

Art scene was flourishing. The number of art galleries in Athens increased and some of them started cooperating with international galleries. Exhibitions were organised outside Athens, (in Thessaloniki, Patras, Volos in the Greek islands as Hydra and Mykonos and elsewhere). Most importantly Greek artists living outside the country increased contacts with their homeland and many of them even started returning permanently, bringing a refreshing air to the Greek art and introducing the latest art tendencies.

The growth of the tourism also favored art in many ways. Foreign collectors who were visiting the country during the summer period discovered and started buying Greek art. Greek contemporary artworks decorated the cruise ships and the Xenia hotels that were being built or renovated during this decade by the Greek National Tourism Organisation. The art market expansion along with the construction industry development created a need for art works and this also resulted to the founding of Art Schools and Institutes for applied arts<sup>7</sup>. A wider art audience obtained at this time easier access to the art object (art venues, exhibitions etc) and a better buying ability (financial prosperity, cheaper multiple art works) growing art consciousness and aesthetical criterion.

This bloom was abruptly interrupted by the imposing of the Dictatorship in 1967.

### **1967: The first reaction**

The imposing of the dictatorship on the 21<sup>st</sup> of April, 1967 numbed the entire Greek society. The first reaction was the silence, as artists consciously decided to abstain from any public activity, believing that they could fight the Regime by boycotting it.

The “silent” period lasted two years, until 1969. Obviously there were voices that disagreed with the absence from the cultural life, arguing that artists and intellectuals, the most sensitive elements of the society, should speak up and take place showing their

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<sup>7</sup> *Αίθουσες τέχνης στην Ελλάδα: Αθήνα – Θεσσαλονίκη 1920 – 1988*, Αποψη, 1988, p. 43.

protest. Furthermore there were the younger artists, at the beginning of their careers, who felt restrained being unable to express publicly, to be part of the art scene and form their own artistic idiom. We should not forget that all artists needed to work in order to survive, not only financially but also artistically. Isolation was not the solution. It would only have led to the devitalizing of Greek art.

There have been discussions concerning a collective appearance of the artists with exhibitions that would take a character of protest and resistance against the Military Regime. R. Kennedy's assassination was considered as the right occasion and timing for such reappearance but this finally never happened<sup>8</sup>.

### **Break the silence: The exhibition of Vlassis Caniaris**

The exhibition that signaled the exit from the artists' silence came in May of 1969 by Vlassis Caniaris (b. 1928). This historical and much - discussed exhibition took place in New Gallery, Athens and had an intense political and in a way activist character, as it aimed not only to protest against the Regime but mainly to activate the Greek people.

The works displayed included human members and objects in plaster, barbed wire, red carnations, all of them –especially plaster and carnations- with a deep symbolic meaning. The plaster, which morphologically belonged to Caniaris' work (he had already used plaster from 1963-64), was a direct reference to Papadopoulos' famous phrase "*Greece is sick. We had put her in plaster. She shall remain in plaster until she recovers*". (Η Ελλάδα ασθενεί. Την έχομε θέσει εις τον γύψον. Θα παραμείνη εις τον γύψον μέχρις ότου ιαθεί.).

There was no exhibition catalogue as Caniaris himself had censored the texts that were going to be published in order to avoid the exhibition from being "targeted" by the Junta. The artist says "*My aim was to keep the exhibition from being targeted because then others would have lost their courage, those who were working in the context of the resistance*"<sup>9</sup>. Instead of catalogue each visitor was offered a red carnation growing in a small plaster cube, also symbolic of the idea that the carnation is growing despite the plaster.

A few days before the exhibition Caniaris had sent abroad three packages containing the small plaster cubes with the carnation, photographs of the works and a biography so that they could be used in case of the exhibition being "targeted" by the dictatorship as he was afraid.

The exhibition was a great success -Caniaris had to make another 1000 plaster cubes with carnations for the people visiting the exhibition during the 21 days that it lasted- fulfilling its aim. Even the international press published the story. After the exhibition, the artist

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<sup>8</sup> Πέγκυ Κουνενάκη, *Νέοι Έλληνες Ρεαλιστές*, Εξάντας, Αθήνα, 1988, p. 24

<sup>9</sup> Lina Tsikouta, "Chronology", *Vlassis Caniaris. A Retrospective*, National Gallery and Alexandros Soutzos Museum, Athens, 1999, p. 397

had to leave the country for Paris because he was in danger of being arrested by the Regime.

## **I. Exhibitions**

### **Exhibitions with meaning**

After Caniaris' exhibition, art activity began again, especially from 1970 and onwards. The majority of the artists refused to participate in state events (Biennales, Panhellenic exhibitions, etc) so most of the exhibitions were taking place in galleries, private venues or foreign institutes. Some of those exhibitions took the form of anti - dictatorial expressions, indented or not, as the works presented, indicative of the new art tendencies most of the times, were with multiple meanings and could be translated according to the sociopolitical context. In any way those events contributed to the creation of a climate of solidarity and united artists and audience against the dictatorial regime.

#### ***Maria Karavela – A voice of protest***

In November 1970 Maria Karavela (b. 1938) had an exhibition in Astor Gallery, Athens, which is considered to be the first environment presented in Greece (the artist herself called it “exhibition in space/space exhibition”). The gallery walls were painted grey while red and white tied sacks, reminding of humans, were positioned in various places throughout the gallery. In the middle of the gallery space there was a cage with a white real size human figure in it. The symbolism of Karavela's environment against the suppression of the Regime and the references to freedom, death and isolation were obvious.

In May 1971 Karavela created a second environment at the Athens – Hilton Gallery, with even stronger content. A square cell was installed inside the gallery space, with inscriptions in red paint –e.g. the words freedom and help- written on the external walls. Human figures in real size were lying on the gallery floor. The artist managed to create a claustrophobic, tragic environment with simple, easily understood elements so that the viewers, whose participation was necessary for the whole work to ‘function’, could perceive her message according to their experience, their sensitivity, their personality<sup>10</sup>. This exhibition was censored and violently shut down by the Military Regime a few days after the opening. The artist left for Paris losing also her teaching position at the National Technical University of Athens.

Karavela is one of the few cases of artists who expressed clearly and very early her anger and opposition towards the Junta and those two exhibitions had a clear anti-dictatorial meaning.

#### ***Elias Dekoulakos – The exhibition that never happened***

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<sup>10</sup> Αρετή Αδαμοπούλου, *Ελληνική μεταπολεμική τέχνη. Εικαστικές παρεμβάσεις στο χώρο*, University Studio Press, Θεσσαλονίκη, 2000, p. 68.

Elias Dekoulakos (b. 1929) produced a series of paintings in 1968-73, adopting a kind of photographic realism with a critical content in order to declare the violence of the dictatorship and express his contempt towards the Regime. He produced a series of paintings, using the airbrush, that were supposed to be displayed in Athens – Hilton Gallery in 1973 but a few hours before the exhibition opening the police -after the accusation of a school teacher- demanded that some of the exhibits should be withdrawn because their content was provocative for the public shame.

It is funny how the authorities censored the exhibition for the wrong reasons, failing to see the true meaning of the works (similar incidents were not uncommon). The artist refused to withdraw the paintings and the exhibition was cancelled. It was also decided by the Gallery, which was housed inside the Hilton Hotel, and the Hilton director to stop exhibitions for a while, though this meant the final closure of the Gallery<sup>11</sup>. The Dekoulakos' exhibition however was held later, slightly modified, at the Nees Morfes Gallery, Athens.

### ***Theodoros Sculptor (Papadimitriou) - Sculpture for public participation – Participation prohibited***

In 1970 Theodoros (b. 1931) introduced a new series at his work, presenting in Goethe Institute, Athens the exhibition *Sculpture for public participation – Participation prohibited*, accompanied by a manifesto. It was an environment consisted of metallic, solid cubes and balls, metallic helmets, hearts made of various materials, cage and the new element of his work the “matraque – phallus”. It's worth saying that the word “matraque” in French means the bludgeon of the French policemen which was widely used during the events of May of 68. These objects, the manifesto and even the exhibition title, caused eloquent references to the dictatorship.

### ***Dimitris Alithinos - The encased people***

In 1972 Dimitris Alithinos (b. 1945) had his first solo exhibition at Studio 47 (organized by the Desmos Gallery), Athens, where he trapped real people in constructions, leaving just their legs and arms out<sup>12</sup>. The concept of trap and restriction reflected the restrictions of the Junta.

In 1973 in Ora Cultural Center he presented a performance juxtaposing a bourgeois dining room with people encased in white boxes with their limbs standing out under the title *Happening*, making a statement about the social contrasts under the Colonels<sup>13</sup>. The white boxes could be considered as a direct reference to the cells and again to the concept of restriction.

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<sup>11</sup> *Αίθουσες τέχνης στην Ελλάδα: Αθήνα – Θεσσαλονίκη 1920 – 1988*, Άποψη, 1988, p. 73.

<sup>12</sup> Αρετή Αδαμοπούλου, *Ελληνική μεταπολεμική τέχνη. Εικαστικές παρεμβάσεις στο χώρο*, University Studio Press, Θεσσαλονίκη, 2000, p. 73.

<sup>13</sup> *The Years of Defiance. The Art of the 70's in Greece*, National Museum of Contemporary Art, Athens, 2005, p. 34.

### *New Greek Realists – criticizing through painting*

The art group *New Greek Realists* (1971-73) consisted of 5 young artists, Jannis Psychopedis (b. 1945), Kleopatra Digka (b. 1945), Chronis Botsoglou (b. 1941), Kyriakos Katzourakis (b. 1944), Yannis Valavanidis (b. 1939). The group represented in Greece the art trend of critical realism, which was then emerging internationally. In March 1972 they organized an exhibition in Goethe Institute, Athens, presenting paintings with critical references to the actual events of the period, including works which commented the Dictatorial Regime. A second exhibition of similar content took place in Kohlias Gallery, Thessaloniki.

## **II Artworks**

### **Symbols and meanings: Anti – dictatorial Art Works**

As we have already seen, Greek artists were influenced by the dictatorship. Works with critical content were created and exhibited during the seven years; however these were not the majority of the art production. As Alexandros Xydis mentions, in the beginning of the 70's the number of Greek artists dealing with the painful Greek affair have been reduced. Instead, many of them were occupied with the considerations of the international art at that time (the society of consumption, the technology, the isolation of the individual, the suffocation that life in the big cities can cause, the search for new art mediums that could express all those concerns), expressing their reaction with symbols or references to more general situations<sup>14</sup>.

With the exception of a number of artists who politically belonged to the Left Wing, (some of them had an active anti-dictatorial action) and produced works of political, anti-dictatorial content, those who created such works were mainly socially - minded, in a wider sense, artists (such as V. Caniaris or M. Karavela that have been mentioned above). Most of these artists continued to express their social and political concerns in various ways throughout their careers. Of course there is the case of artists who created just a couple of such works, returning afterwards to their own artistic expressions. Art works with critical references to the dictatorship were even produced and exhibited in the first years of the political change – over, but these won't occupy this presentation.

### **Painting the “black years”: The case of Dimosthenis Kokkinidis.**

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<sup>14</sup> Αλέξανδρος Ξύδης, «Το σημερινό πρόσωπο της Ελληνικής τέχνης. Πορεία ως το 1974», *Προτάσεις για την Ιστορία της Νεοελληνικής Τέχνης, Α. Διαμόρφωση – Εξέλιξη*, Ολκός, Αθήνα, 1976, p. 262 (the quote has been translated into English by Eleni Ganiti) .



Dimosthenis Kokkinidis is one of the most representative cases of artists that produced anti-dictatorial works during the dictatorship. He could be characterized as a social minded artist, creating work –mainly until the 80’s- of critical content and eloquent references to the social and political history.

In May of 1967, stimulated by the recent events, he started painting a series of works under the title *Memory of evil times* (1967-68), depicting distorted images of the dictators and their people (priests, judges etc.), drawn sometimes almost like caricatures, in an expressionistic style and other times abstractly. These paintings are full of symbolisms. The presence of the American flag suggests the American interference while the Greek flag appears repeatedly changing forms and symbolisms: red is blood, stripes are prison bars. The judges, “faceless individuals, victims and victimizers simultaneously”,<sup>15</sup> are painted sometimes faceless and other times like human puppets or even mechanical constructions, stressing this way their obedient attitude throughout the seven years of the Junta. As the artist himself says, he stopped painting these works in December, with the exception of some less provocative paintings which he created in spring of 1968, when he realised the danger and he understood that they could not be exhibited.

*Memory of evil times* was the starting point for his second entity of paintings on the dictatorship, entitled *Identities* (1968 – 74), which were exhibited in 1971 in Zouboulakis Galleries, Athens. *Identities* depicted the victims of the Regime, friends of the artist, well known personalities or complete strangers (often taken from the photographs found in the newspapers), who have been arrested, brought to trials, imprisoned or tortured. The same symbolisms and meanings appear here: the color stripes which refer to the person’s confinement, the radio, the only way for the Greek people to learn from foreign radio stations the real situation of the country, the black, turned-out kerosene lamp becomes an expression of the absence of light<sup>16</sup>, which could mean the absence of freedom or democracy, the person drawn without a mouth implies his inability to talk freely etc.

At the same time with *Identities*, Kokkinidis created the entity *Motherhood* (1968 – 74), inspired by the birth of his daughter. In *Motherhood* he deals with the relationship of mother and child, the fear for the future, especially the future of young people, and the absence of the mail figure, the father, who often during those years was in prison or in exile. Symbolisms are evident in this entity as well; the stripes –on the clothes, on the cage, on the child’s bed- are again declaratory of the confinement and the inability to act. This is also shown by the drawing of the little boy without an arm. The absence of the father is stressed by the existence of his photographs on the walls.

### **Painting the “black years”: Some examples**

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<sup>15</sup> Andreas Ioannidis, “The painting of D. Kokkinidis”, *Dimosthenis Kokkinidis*, metropolitan Hospital, Adam Editions, Pergamos S.A., Athens, 2002, p. 24.

<sup>16</sup> Andreas Ioannidis, “The painting of D. kokkinidis”, *Dimosthenis Kokkinidis*, metropolitan Hospital, Adam Editions, Pergamos S.A., Athens, 2002, p. 26.

Giannis Gaitis (1923 – 1984)

During the first years of the dictatorship Gaitis created a series of paintings renouncing the Regime<sup>17</sup>. We should also note that the characteristic Gaitis' "little men" that first appeared around 1967 and took their final form in the years of the Dictatorship, may not be irrelevant to the prevalent sociopolitical situation as they were an expression of protest.

George Touyas (1922 – 1994)

In the exhibitions "Hellas 1969" in Athens and in 1970 and 1971 in Thessaloniki and Nicosia he showed figurative paintings in the spirit of critical realism which were critical of the dictatorial regime.

Alexis Akrihakis (1939 – 1994)

During the period of dictatorship he created a body of political works<sup>18</sup>, always with his idiomorphic artistic expression full of humor and irony.

Dimitris Mytaras (b. 1934)

During the years of the dictatorship he created a series of works of social criticism with references to the Junta.

Sotiris Sorogkas (b. 1936)

In his exhibition in Athens – Hilton Gallery he presented black and white compositions where a red carnation was standing out implying the opposition against the Regime (also reminding of Belogiannis case).

Lefteris Kanakakis (1934-1985)

Until the early 70s Kanakakis' paintings depicted still lives and interiors but during the years of the Dictatorship he created a series of works of political - critical content.

The artists mentioned above are some of the most representative cases. Of course there have been other artists that produced works of anti-dictatorial content but the limited time of this presentation does not allow a more detailed reference.

### **Art in the years of the dictatorship: Some conclusions**

As mentioned above, the dictatorship came at a time when the visual arts scene in Greece was flourishing, causing a serious regression mainly because it interrupted the contacts with international art, putting the country into isolation, especially during the first years. The return of Greek artists, who had studied and lived abroad and were bearers of new and refreshing ideas, stopped. A number of artists inside Greece had to leave the country for obvious political reasons, while the rest decided, as we have seen, to abstain from art activity as a reaction to the dictatorship. During this "silent" period the art dialogue

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<sup>17</sup> Λορέττα Γαΐτη – Charrat, «Βιογραφία», Γιάννης Γαΐτης. *Κριτικός κατάλογος*, Ίδρυμα Ιωάννου Φ. Κωστοπούλου, Αθήνα, 2003, p. 48.

<sup>18</sup> Thanassis Moutsopoulos, "Utopia 3: The rift with Power", *Great unrest. 5 utopias in the 70s, a bit before – a bit after*, Patras European Capital of Culture 2006, p. 337.

between artists themselves as well as between them and the audience was paused. Furthermore the censorship that was imposed as well as the doubtful aesthetic standards of the dictators and their people responsible for the art and cultural policy, did not contribute at all to the progress of the Greek art.

After the first two years, artists decided to break the silence and started exhibiting again. Obviously many of them were influenced to some extent by the overthrow of democracy and the tragic events that followed fact that was depicted in their works. Art works and exhibitions with political and anti - dictatorial meaning appeared. Sometimes the meaning was clear, more often the message was implied through symbolisms because of the censorship. The audience learned to decode messages, sometimes even to receive and translate the multiple meanings of an artwork according to the prevailing sociopolitical context. *“(...) this interesting form of anti – dictatorial solidarity, favored, among others, the reception of art tendencies, which some years ago would have been considered radical. Both artists and viewers were readier than ever to exceed the traditional conservatism of the average Greek of the time. Radical forms, like radical ideologies, had a bigger impact, maybe because the dictatorship did whatever possible to fight everything that was radical (...)”*<sup>19</sup>.

Indeed it is noteworthy that during the period of the dictatorship, elements such as the use of unconventional material, the intervention of space and time into the art work, the concept of the ephemeron (environments, installations, happenings, performances) were introduced into Greek art. The social and political conditions also favored the new, various forms of photorealistic art with critical content in the spirit of Pop Art and –what is considered to be its French version- Nouveaux Realism. Constructivist - geometrical tendencies can also be traced in the works of a number of artists (e.g. P. Xagoraris, Opi Zouni etc.) who were working in their ateliers and starting from their own experimentations converged to a common field of research.

All these tendencies and experimentations will lead Greek art to the pluralistic decade of the seventies and the post dictatorial era.

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*Note: Greek bibliography is written in Greek language whereas bilingual editions (i.e. both in Greek and English) are written in English. The bibliography is in chronological order.*

## **Cultural Resistance under the Junta (1967-1974):**

### **Translation and the Pursuit of Absurdity**

**Christiana Mygdali**

Definitions of absurdity constitute indicative political statements. Social norms and the preservation of existing values obviously benefit from negative connotations of the concept. On the other hand, individual differences find a discursive space when non-conformist ways of expression, usually regarded as ‘absurd’ compared to the standards of a particular society, are welcome in the public sphere. I believe that the Junta period in Greece can be studied as an example of how this influential concept was used both in a conservative and in a subversive way.

The Greek military dictatorship has often been viewed as a puppet regime with no coherent political or ideological programme. It is, thus, remarkable that it lasted for seven years. The most common explanation for the reluctance of intellectuals to attack the regime in the beginning, is that its representatives and its practices were so incoherent that it became almost impossible to attack, even though its almost inexistent ideology could have been an easy target for them. However, persecution, exile and torture of a great number of intellectuals did happen under the Junta and the importance of such memories should not be underestimated. Greece was indeed, as proclaimed by Papadopoulos, put ‘in the plaster cast’, and when this plaster cast was finally removed Greece was different in many ways. In this paper I will discuss how authoritarian policies coming from an incoherent and ridiculed regime triggered dissident practices in the cultural production of the period, and especially in the field of publications. I will look specifically at the pursuit of absurdity as a key concept emerging from a corpus of translations published under the Junta.

The Index of Banned Books, preventive censorship and the practice of abstention from cultural production, known later as the ‘authors’ silent boycott’, introduced by established Greek authors of the time, are only some of the reasons why translation emerged as the main means of cultural resistance in the field of publication under the Junta. Petros Markaris, the main translator of Bertolt Brecht’s works during the Junta period, explained that Greek translations of the time had a function similar to that of allegory. In his view, ‘this became possible because of a secret conspiracy between

producers and consumers of culture'.<sup>1</sup> The authoritarian practices imposed by the regime made readers alert to coded interpretations ascribed in the gesture of translating and publishing a particular text. These interpretations were relevant to the political situation of the time and were mediated mainly via paratextual features, prefaces, footnotes, indexes, commentaries and illustrations that were not included in the original work, but constituted vital parts of the Greek translation. Moreover, the practice of translation allowed all those involved in its production – i.e. publishers, translators, editors – to avoid full responsibility of the content, as it had already been published earlier elsewhere.

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In what follows, I will concentrate on three key texts published under the Junta. These texts are:

- a) Erasmus's *The Praise of Folly* translated by Stratis Tsirkas and published by Iridanos press in 1970.
- b) André Breton's *Manifesto of Surrealism* translated by Eleni Moschona and published by Dodoni press in 1972.
- c) An extract from Foucault's *The History of Madness*, translated by Fragiski Abatzopoulou, which appeared in the literary journal *Iridanos* in 1974.<sup>3</sup>

I believe that bringing these texts together in my analysis works towards mapping the poetics of cultural resistance against the Junta regime, but also demonstrates the political significance of the concept of absurdity itself and of the way it's been rearticulated with other concepts, such as gender, uniform ideology and mental instability in modern Greek culture from the Junta period onwards. I will insist on the role of paratextual features produced by the translators of the texts under question in order to superimpose on these texts their own interpretations, because they are much more noticeable by the public, due to their additional nature.

I will start by looking at Breton's short biography as offered by Eleni Moschona instead of a preface to her translation of Breton's work. It starts as follows:

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<sup>1</sup> Personal interview with Petros Markaris, (Athens, 28 October 2007).

<sup>2</sup> This is a characteristic shared by translations and republications, and I believe it offers an adequate explanation why these two practices were used by intellectuals of the time as protecting shells to contain their ideas.

<sup>3</sup> This issue came out after the fall of the dictatorship, but in the editorial it is made clear that all its contents were produced under the Junta and the point of publishing this issue was to summarise the regime's impact on cultural production.

Ο Αντρέ Μπρετόν ορίζει σαν αφηρησία της πνευματικής του διαμόρφωσης το 1913, όταν 17 χρονών, (γεννήθηκε στις 18 Φεβρουαρίου 1896, στο Tinchebray) πηγαίνει για ιατρικές σπουδές στο Παρίσι.<sup>4</sup>

Moschona here recognises Breton's authority over the beginning of his intellectual birth. By putting the date and place of his birth in brackets, she questions the norms of biography as a genre and emphasises freedom of individual choice. A few pages later, she presents Breton as an inspiring leading figure amongst young people of his time:

Ο Αντρέ Μπρετόν γίνεται τώρα το επίκεντρο του θαυμασμού όλων των νέων που επαναστατούν ενάντια στην κατασχύνη της «κατεστημένης» λογοτεχνίας. ... Στα μάτια τους συγκεντρώνει όλα τα στοιχεία που συνθέτουν έναν «οδηγητή»: τον φανατισμό για την ελευθερία και την αίσθηση αυτού που κάνει την καρδιά να χτυπάει πιο δυνατά.<sup>5</sup>

Moschona, seems to have realised the need of Greek youth – what we usually call ‘the student’s thirst’ – for an inspiring ideology that would bring them together in fighting against the authoritarian regime and, most importantly, creating a set of values and principles that would give way to their creativity and enthusiasm. The use of the word ‘οδηγητής’ alludes to the Greek tradition of left-wing educational practices. She does not fail to mention how Breton was always between communism and anarchy, pointing to two possible directions of political orientation:

Στην πραγματικότητα, ο επαναστατικός στόχος του Breton υπήρξε πάντοτε ξεκάθαρος: μια μεγαλεπίβολη ιδέα μεταμόρφωσης του κόσμου. Μια παθιασμένη αιώρηση ανάμεσα στον κομμουνισμό και την αναρχία, που τη θεωρούσε αναγκαία για την ποιητική δημιουργία.<sup>6</sup>

Total freedom of expression and the pursuit of collective dreams, no matter how utopian they may sound, are the characteristics of Breton's work which Moshona

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<sup>4</sup> Moschona Eleni, ‘Αντρέ Μπρετόν’ in Breton André, *Μανιφέστα του Σουρεαλισμού*, trans. et ed. Moschona Eleni (Athens: Dodoni, 1972), α'-ιστ', p.α'

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p.θ'.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. ιβ'.



chooses to emphasise in her preface, ascribing to the text an open but guided interpretation.

I will now move to Tsirkas's translation of *The Praise of Folie*: First of all, I would like to look at Tsirkas's preface as a pastiche of translations. Amongst other authors, Tsirkas takes the opportunity to quote Stefan Zweigh and Michel Foucault. I will concentrate on these quotes, because I believe they are particularly relevant both for the pursuit of absurdity and for the function of translation in Greece under the Junta.

Here, Tsirkas quotes Foucault from 'Maladie mentale et psychologie', published in 1956:

Το τέλος του ΙΕ' αιώνα είναι σίγουρα μια απ' εκείνες τις εποχές όπου η τρέλα ξαναδένεται με τις ουσιαστικές δυνατότητες του έναρθρου λόγου. ... Ουσιαστικά, η τρέλα δοκιμάζεται στην ελεύθερή της κατάσταση· κυκλοφορεί, αποτελεί μέρος του κοινού σκηνικού και της κοινής γλώσσας, είναι για τον καθένα μια καθημερινή εμπειρία που πιο πολύ γυρεύουν να την εξυμνήσουν παρά να τη δαμάσουν. Ως τα 1650 περίπου, η ευρωπαϊκή κουλτούρα στάθηκε παράξενα φιλόξενη σε όλες τις μορφές τις εμπειρίας. ... Στα μέσα του ΙΖ' αιώνα τα πράγματα αλλάζουν. Σ' ολόκληρη την Ευρώπη χτίζουν μεγάλα ιδρύματα περιορισμού που δεν προορίζονται μόνο για τους τρελούς, αλλά και για τους ανάπηρους και φτωχούς, τους γέροντες που δυστυχούν, τους ζητιάνους, τους αθεράπευτα άνεργους. Κοντολογίς, όλους εκείνους που αναφορικά με την τάξη της λογικής, της ηθικής και της κοινωνίας, δίνουν σημεία «διαταραχής»... Είναι γιατί ο κόσμος του αστισμού που συγκροτείται θεωρεί μεγάλο κουσούρι ... την τεμπελιά, την ανικανότητα να πάρουν μέρος όλοι αυτοί στην παραγωγή, στην κυκλοφορία και στην συσσώρευση του πλούτου.<sup>7</sup>

This extract from Foucault may be referring to the period between the 15<sup>th</sup> and the 17<sup>th</sup> century, but it could also be read as a short manifesto of the ideas surrealist poets wanted to establish in everyday life, by accrediting all forms of individual experience and expression.

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<sup>7</sup> Tsirkas Stratis, 'Πρόλογος' in Erasmus Desiderius, *Μωρίας Εγκώμιον*, trans. Tsirkas Stratis (Athens: Iridanos, 1970), p.22-24.

Then Tsirkas moves on to quote Stefan Zweig's *Erasmus of Rotterdam (Triumph und Tragik des Erasmus von Rotterdam)*, first published in 1934, in Beratis's translation<sup>8</sup>:

Ποτέ δεν ξέρεις ακριβώς ποιος μιλάει. Είναι ο ίδιος ο συγγραφέας που μιλάει σοβαρά; Είναι η Τρέλα που πρέπει φυσικά να της συγχωρηθούν οι πιο τολμηρές αλήθειες; Χάρη σ' αυτό το διφορούμενο, ο Έρασμος δημιουργεί για τον εαυτό του μια θέση που τον κάνει άτρωτο και του επιτρέπει όλες τις τολμηρότητες. Δεν είναι δυνατόν να συλλάβεις την προσωπική του γνώμη κι αν κανένας τα βάζει μαζί του γι' αυτούς τους σαρκασμούς, γι' αυτές τις τσουχτερές καμιτσικιές που τις μοιράζει τόσο αφειδώλευτα γύρω του, θα μπορούσε να υπερασπίσει τον εαυτό του απαντώντας κοροϊδευτικά: Δεν το είπα εγώ αυτό αλλά η κυρία Stultitia - και ποιος θα μπορούσε να πάρει στα σοβαρά τα λόγια μιας τρελής;<sup>9</sup>

What Zweig describes as avoiding responsibility of the content, by attributing it to Stultitia, is, in my view, the mechanism put in practice by Greek translators of the time: they can say that they are not responsible for the content. Rather, the author bares the blame.

In the same line of thought, J. M. Coetzee has pointed out two instances in Europe of the 1930s in which 'efforts to enlist Erasmus in the rivalries of the day were still being made'.<sup>10</sup> He argued that Erasmus's take on the role of the intellectuals in times of conflict becomes even more complicated when these 'men of theoria' are faced with the question 'what is to take a position'.<sup>11</sup> In Coetzee's view, *The Praise of Folly* 'makes out a position which is not a position, steering clear of the play of power, clear of politics'.<sup>12</sup> I believe that reading Erasmus in the light of Foucault brought both Coetzee and Tsirkas to realise this particular function of Folly's discourse. This 'position of ek-stasis, in which one knows without knowing',<sup>13</sup> is what Tsirkas praises emphatically in the conclusion of his preface:

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<sup>8</sup> Zweig Stefan, *Έρασμος*, trans. Beratis Giannis (Athens: Govostis, 1949)

<sup>9</sup> Tsirkas Stratis, 'Πρόλογος' in Erasmus Desiderius, *Μωρίας Εγκώμιον*, trans. Tsirkas Stratis (Athens: Iridanos, 1970) p.25-26.

<sup>10</sup> Coetzee J. M, *Giving offence: Essays on Censorship*, (USA: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p.100.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p.99.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p.100.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p.99.

Να ελέγχουν την εποχή τους σε καιρούς που υπάρχει λογοκρισία και Ιερά Εξέταση και να εξετάζεται το καθετί με τη μέθοδο της ειρωνείας ή των συμβόλων, στάθηκε πάντα η τακτική των ελευθέρων πνευμάτων, αλλά σπάνια χρησιμοποιήσανε αυτό το ιερό δικαίωμα που έχουν οι τρελοί να μιλάνε ελεύθερα με τόσο επιδέξιο τρόπο όσο ο Έρασμος σ' αυτή τη σάτιρα που είναι το καλύτερό του έργο, το έργο το πιο τολμηρό και ταυυτόχρονα το πιο καλλιτεχνικό της γενιάς του.<sup>14</sup>

I will now concentrate on Fragiski Abatzopoulou, and her preface for a short extract of *The History of Madness*, which she translated for *Ηριδανός*. In this preface, she argued that the analytical categories of reason and madness deprived western European people from a large part of human experience, as they tried to define themselves as 'the opposite of mad' and, thus, structured their system of values on this bias. She concludes by positioning Foucault's text amongst the essential theoretical approaches relevant to Greek issues of the time, offering it as an example of justified publishing activity as opposed to an unsystematic and, more or less, disorientated publishing burst, comprised mainly of translations:

Αν ένα από τα πιο καυτά προβλήματα σήμερα είναι ο αποπροσανατολισμός του ατόμου, πώς και ποια γνώση και ποια ψυχοπνευματική στάση μπορεί να συμβάλει στην ψυχική του ανασυγκρότηση, αφού μάλιστα μέρος της αποσυγκρότησης ο Φουκώ κι άλλοι επιστημολόγοι, το χρεώνουν στις δομές με τις οποίες αυτή η γνώση κι η ζωή είναι δεμένες; *Ίσως σ' αυτό το σημείο να παίζεται το δράμα των διανοουμένων*. Όπως η υπερφορτισμένη συνείδηση προκαλεί συχνά την αυτοκτονία, έτσι κι ο υπερφορτισμένος θετικισμός προκαλεί ψυχικές εξαρθρώσεις. Τα λόγια που ξοδεύονται για να αναλυθεί η φαντασία κι η τέχνη, συχνά μοιάζουν ξόρκια άπραγων ανθρώπων – εξαιρετικά πολυπραγμόνων άλλωστε – που ταμπουρώνονται βιαστικά πίσω από νεόκοπες λέξεις, όχι άλλωστε διαφορετικές απ' ό,τι οι παλαιότεροί τους. ... Παρουσιάζοντας αποσπάσματα από το βιβλίο του Φουκώ ... πιστεύουμε ότι κάπως αγγίξαμε το πρόβλημα που καθιερώθηκε πια σαν «σύγχρονος ελληνικός εκδοτικός οργανισμός».<sup>15</sup>

Both illustrations accompanying the translated text (works of art to which Foucault refers) and Abatzopoulou's footnotes are, in my view, equally important to the preface of the translation. I would like to concentrate on footnote number 6, which describes the Ship of Fools (*Stultitera Navis*, Πλοίο των Τρελών) as a literary and

<sup>14</sup> Tsirkas Stratis, 'Πρόλογος' in Erasmus Desiderius, *Μωρίας Εγκώμιον*, trans. Tsirkas Stratis (Athens: Iridanos, 1970), p. 28, my emphasis.

<sup>15</sup> Abatzopoulou Fragiski, 'Για την ιστορία της τρέλας του Μ. Φουκώ' in *Ηριδανός* 7-12 (Athens, November 1973 - November 1974), p. 9-10, my emphasis.

visual motif of the Renaissance period. Abatzopoulou mentions a few examples of works of art in which this theme is prominent, amongst which she places Koumantareas's 'Αγία Κυριακή στο Βράχο', a novella published two years earlier (1972) by Kedros in the collection *Τα καημένα*. However, extracts of this novella had already appeared in *18 Texts*, the key anti-dictatorship publication which has been read as the first literary publication to have openly opposed the regime. I would like to first emphasise the translator's effort to 'propose' more texts to the reader, both written and visual. What strikes me is that Koumantareas's novella is one of particular interest for the concept of absurdity under the Junta in Greece. It is a story told by an old sailor to two of his friends about a ship whose crew consists of pirates pretending to be a troupe of actors. He describes in detail their invasion of a small city by the sea. The power of the invasion can be read as an allegory for the justification of violence when revolting against norms and authoritarian practices. The story celebrates absurdity to the extent that, when the course of narrative is interrupted and the listeners pose questions, they suspect all of its absurd elements to be narrative techniques:

«Αλήθεια», πήρε αμπαρίζα ο Μανώλης, ο τρίτος καπετάνιος, «τι τάχα γύρευαν σαλόνια, χαρτοπαίγνια, τόσος πλούτος σ' ένα τέτοια καράβι, να'ταν τάχα φαντάσματα της Αγερινής, για στημένα στα μάτια όλων;» ...Κι αυτός πάλι ο Φαραώ τι σου λέει; Πραγματικά δεν ήξερε να μιλά, μην τάχα είναι κι αυτό κόλπο της ιστορίας, μιας κι όλα ως εδώ διφορούμενα και σαν ποντίκι με τη γάτα παίζουν;<sup>16</sup>

In my view, it was translators, publishers and authors who played cat and mouse with censorship under the Junta in Greece. The game, however, became very popular and its fans, the Greek readership of the time, became alert to and able to grasp the subtle nuances of theoretical discourse and less obvious threads of narrative, much like the listeners of the old sailor's story in Koumantareas's novella. Moreover, what seems to me to be the main gain of the game is that it encouraged readers to take part in the pursuit of absurdity as a symbol of difference and as a break from norms. The Junta regime was an obvious restrictive structure but, by fighting against it, Greek intellectuals found ways to subvert authorities in general and start creating a space for expression of individuality in gender, politics, and the ethics of mental stability as

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<sup>16</sup> Koumantareas Menis, *Τα καημένα* (Athens: Kedros, 1972), p. 110.

well as a space for questioning standard definitions of what is normal and what is absurd.