

# On the Surplus Value of a Dream

*Syrango Tsiara, March 25 2013*

The Greek pavilion at this year's Venice Biennale is hosting *History Zero*, by Stefanos Tsivopoulos, a film in three parts accompanied by an archive of texts and images. The film depicts the experiences of three very different people, with very different conceptions of the value of money, and explores the role of money in human relations and the political and social dimensions of either having it or not having it.

The archival material accompanying the film contains examples and testimonies of alternative, non-monetary exchange systems. The archive focuses on the ability of such models to erode and throw into question the homogenizing political power of a single currency, pointing to ways in which, in difficult times, societies can by-pass a monetary economy altogether and use a system of exchange based on goods and services.

*History Zero* comes at an especially critical historical time, when Greece and the other countries of the European South are suffering more than anywhere else from tectonic shifts in the international distribution of wealth and power. The threat from emerging economic powers such as China and India, has led to the subversion of labour relations, the rapid impoverishment of the population and widening inequality between regions within Europe. History shows us, however, that every crisis creates the opportunity for new meanings to emerge in our relationships to each other and to our environment. It is precisely on this cusp, at this time of rupture and change, that the narrative of *History Zero* is situated. It attempts to see our relationship to money poetically, putting it in a broader philosophical perspective, beyond the usual moralising recriminations about corruption, clientelism, consumerism and illusions of prosperity. At the same time it proposes dynamic ways to reaffirm solidarity, cooperation and coresponsibility in response to the present crisis and envisioning the future.

## **History 1**

An elderly art collector lives all alone in her museum-like house surrounded by works of modern art. Suffering from dementia due to Alzheimer's disease, she has a very peculiar, personal way of organising and attributing meaning to objects, based mainly on touch. Her favourite activity is making origami flowers. But instead of paper she uses one, two and five euro banknotes. As her fingers turn them into flowers their monetary value is replaced by their value as colour, material, and shape. From time to time the old lady, dissatisfied by her creation, throws the flowers into a rubbish bag and starts on new ones.

## **History 2**

A young immigrant from Africa wanders around in the streets of Athens pushing a supermarket trolley and collecting scrap metal. For him, finding and collecting this discarded and worthless material is the only way to survive. In his hands, scrap iron becomes 'gold'. It is hard, tiring work. An accidental find, a garbage bag full of banknotes, folded in the shape of flowers, changes his life. He abandons the supermarket trolley, takes the bag of money and leaves.

## **History 3**

An artist wanders around the centre of Athens seeking inspiration for a new artwork in

the confusing landscape of the city. He observes and records street scenes at random with his iPad. He sees the city and the people through digital representations as fragmentary, random images. A snapshot attracts his attention: an abandoned supermarket trolley full of scrap metal. A perfect objet trouvé!

*It could be transformed into the central piece of his next exhibition.*

### **History 0**

History 0 has a different form and narrative. It is an archive of texts and images about alternative economic systems which manage to avoid the use of a single currency, such as communities which invent their own money, adapt the dominant economic system, or organise self-managed associations for the exchange of products and services in order to deal with the severe problems of survival during a recession. Focusing on historical and contemporary applications of alternative social experiments, the archive stands as a clear political statement. It intentionally covers a wide range of cultural and anthropological records. It starts with a display of contemporary models of local exchange systems (LETS), then goes on to a system of cash transfer using pre-paid mobile phone minutes that is evolving as a form of alternative currency (Mobile Money) in parts of Africa. It then takes us to the Sawayaka Welfare Foundation in Japan which is organised around the exchange of services to elderly people, and learn about the experiment of zero rupee notes in India invented by activists as a way of fighting widespread corruption.

Each unit of the archive presents a selected anthology of textual and visual documentation resulting from the study, collection and processing of historical and anthropological material. The units are organised museologically, the heterogeneous material handled with equality, thus activating the viewer's perception, critical approach and interpretation.

The archive is at the centre of the installation. It is the zero point which implies not the end, but a point of departure, of upturn: the beginning of something new. It reinforces the alternative thinking and the concepts negotiated by the film, providing material which feeds into the intellectual experience of the work. It occupies a key position directly opposite the pavilion entrance, and is thus both the starting point and the finishing point of the visitors' walk through the separate sections of the work. The arrangement of the films in three different rooms around the archive is designed to enhance the flow back and forth between the stillness of the archival information and the movement of the cinematic image.

### **The politics of memory**

The appropriation of traces from the past and their transcription into a new narrative somewhere between documentary and fiction is a constant of Stefanos Tsivopoulos' work. For him, documentary and fiction are not bipolar opposites but related intellectual spheres that contribute dialectically to the construction of a reality effect. In *Remake* (2007) he explored television news as a technology for the creation of this reality effect in the period of the Greek dictatorship (1967–74), and in *Amnesialand* (2010), he focused on the way socio-economic mechanisms shifted the interpretational framing of images from a commercial product to a historical testimony in Murcia in south-eastern Spain at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Similarly, in *The Public Library of Borrowed*

Knowledge, presented at the International Studio & Curatorial Program (ISCP) in New York in 2011, he displayed a series of academic books and photographs from the socialist Czechoslovakia of the 1960s, taking advantage of the opportunity for the re-signification of material which he borrowed from his father's library.

In his recent work *The Future Starts Here* (2012), an in situ installation in an abandoned oil factory in the city of Elefsina in Attica in southern Greece, the artist's intention was to demonstrate the political functions of both memory and oblivion. Combining video, performance, and objects, with textual, photographic, televisual, and cinematic archives he created a mosaic of images from the history of labour protests, industrial development and de-industrialisation in modern Greece. Through fragments of the past, material and human testimonies, he composed a poetic manifesto, commenting on the causes of the crisis and how to transcend it, based on material surrounding its creation and decline.

Whatever field of research he chooses, Tsivopoulos' work draws on the past, on collective and individual memory, on the particularities of place and discourse in the public domain. His methods have much in common with those of the historian, searching for material traces of the past through thorough archival research, detecting and bringing to light available visual resources, written and oral testimonies, and investigating his subject by means of a comparative and interdisciplinary approach.

However, Tsivopoulos does not merely aim at visually transcribing an established—or even an alternative—narrative of the past. He rather focuses on the ways the past is visualized and acquires the régime of truth. He treats visual documents as constructions mediated by collective representations, as images that from their inception, structurally incorporate diverse connotations and interpretations which mould to a great extent not only our perception of “what really happened” but also how we define our present and plan our future. He is therefore interested in the ‘imagined’ and mediated memory of the past as constituting the contemporary consciousness of the Diaspora and the formation of subjectivity in a state of displacement and dislocation, without an ideally structured frame of reference.

### **History Zero**

The display of archival material, with the alternative ways of thinking and making political choices it implies, is gaining ground in contemporary art. This is not just to do with an artist's intention to restore visibility to the traces of forgotten human experience through their actual physical presence, but to propose, with the fervour of Hal Foster in his seminal work *An Archive Impulse* in 2004, ways of seeing things which undermine the values attributed to them historically. In this context we could reflect on the self-cancelling banknotes, included in *History 0*, invented by the German economist Silvio Gessel at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which lost their value within a month after twelve stamps had been pasted onto them. Are they any different from the flower banknotes made by the elderly collector?

In this, film and archive are parallel and complementary conceptualizations of the central topic of *History Zero* which is the complex, ever-changing and class-determined relationship we entertain to money, and the mechanisms by which value is attributed, added, and taken away. Useless scrap metal acquires the value of gold to the poor

immigrant, banknotes acquire the decorative value of paper flowers in the hands, and mind, of the rich old collector, while an accidental discovery by the artist could obtain irrational surplus value.

The film, as a living archive of the future, records the discontinuity, the ruptures and the complexity of the present economic regime and the contradictions of human experience within it. It establishes new spaces for the imagination and for memory in which three mutually exclusive states of mind take shape. Each story contains an element which must be subverted in order for the next story to take place. The reversal of the collector's 'logical' relationship to objects permits the 'salvation' of the immigrant and the realization of his dream, but only when he reverses his survival strategy. For the artist, the "resignification" of his chance find, his objet trouvé, asserts modernist artistic practice as assuming power over meaning. Constant conceptual reversals and transgressions of meaning thus make it possible for the film sequence to continue.

The archival material attempts to restore the fragments of the story to an even, linear continuum. But does not the archive itself contain an inherent arbitrariness? What else can we expect from this collection of heterogeneous and fragmented material, but the establishment of new conceptual connotations? If we want to go one step further, film itself can potentially be inscribed in the wide repertoire of choices for the use, fetishisation and devaluation of money which the archive contains. Both archive and film share in the liberating power implicated in dementia or paranoia as they try to see the world through different eyes, as indeed art does overall. For Michel Foucault in the *Archaeology of Knowledge*, the act of constituting an archive is the measure of governability and control, since the one who takes such an initiative, when conditions permit, controls the meaning of 'real' scientific knowledge. If this is so, then for contemporary artistic practice, archiving is like scraping off the 'evident' hermeneutical sediments, the established conceptualizations and cultural inscriptions through which subjectivity is constructed.

In *Archive Fever*, Jacques Derrida returns, in 1995, to Freud's realisation in 'A Note upon the Mystic Writing Pad' of 1925 that there is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory itself. The effective democratization of societies can be calculated in relation to the degree of their participation in the formation and interpretation of an archive. From this philosophical perspective an international art exhibition like the Venice Biennale can also be seen as a constantly evolving and growing archive of artistic choices, a palace of encyclopaedic knowledge, according to the approach of this year's curator Massimiliano Gioni, of emotional and technological memory, a Pantheon of experiences, dreams and reflections on the human condition, persistently being re-inscribed, erased, and broadened. Stefanos Tsivopoulos' *History Zero* attempts to record its own trace in this field of active accumulation, going to the core of the concept of value.

Can the surplus value of a dream be calculated?