

Stefanos Tsivopoulos in conversation with Katerina Gregos

April 2013

Katerina Gregos: For the majority of the artists of your generation, video/film is but one of the media they employ. You have opted to work exclusively in this medium. What led to that decision? What is the attraction of the medium for you? What do you consider its advantages as well as challenges?

Stefanos Tsivopoulos: It started in a simple way while still at the academy with a simple Hi8 digital camera but it developed very fast, coinciding with the development of the “camera industry”. With almost every new project, I could use a new, “better” camera, better software to edit the material, and so on. For me digital video was the back door to enter the “secrets” of cinema and film—a way of making and learning things by myself. I didn’t use any cinema ‘textbooks’ but learned largely by trial and error. Along the way there were good and bad results but it helped me a lot to personalize the medium by becoming a “one man band”, i.e. script writer, director, producer, cameraman, editor, sound man, etc., and to develop a personal rhythm and attitude towards the treatment of the moving image. In general this process has changed the way I thought about art. The immediacy and directness of the medium is its greatest attribute but at the same time its greatest weakness as it doesn’t always allow for deep reflection and elaboration.

KG: Your work deploys and deliberately conflates several filmic and televisual strategies: the documentary, docu-fiction, as well as cinematic elements, for example. How do you relate to each of these genres and situate them within your own practice, and what are the elements you borrow from each?

ST: *I mainly relate to images and visual language as form and less to genres. Whether cinema, documentary or docu-fiction, images tell their own stories and that’s mainly what I have been concerned with in my practice in so far. The strategies you’re referring to are mainly those of imitation, representation and exposure. Cinema and television often conceal their techniques in favour of privileging the message, whereas in many of my works the process or technique by which television is constructed becomes the content. I am thus mainly concerned with the structure, or language if you prefer, of the moving image and how the language that is so constructed gains credibility. I’d like here to draw attention to what I find fascinating in moving image and image-making in general: the aura of authenticity. Whether cinema or television, documentary, fiction and/or other forms, image making and the moving image in particular is concerned with the way the dramatization, documentation, or even the historicisation of events, creates an aura of authenticity. Media industries are mainly concerned with whether the medium can dictate the message and not the other way around.*

KG: When you say you mainly relate to images, what kind of images are you referring to and why?

ST: *Yes. I should perhaps replace the word ‘images’ with the word Image with a capital “I”. Image stands for the surface of things, the representation of events and the representation of a visual environment. Mainstream media, mainstream cinema, television, even documentaries, etc., deploy a rather one-dimensional format of story telling, which is identified easily. The strategy is a monoform, to borrow Peter Watkins’ term. The hegemony, or dictation if you prefer, of this ‘monoform’ has created a contemporary vocabulary of image making that is very interesting to investigate. It is as if you were wandering around in an artificial landscape with plastic trees and*

mountains made of cardboard. Whether you make a documentary or cinema the differences are very small, in my opinion. It depends on the way you charge the film with this aura of authenticity. In my early works all this was the main topic of research.

KG: If media (TV and commercial cinema) are ‘monoform’ as systems of communication (Watkins cites rapidly editing pictures, displacing the viewer from one subject and image to another, and the ceaseless barrage of visual and audio information directed towards the viewer in a one way ‘mono-linear’ push as examples of monoform) what is the artistic antidote from your point of view and from the point of view of the ‘artist’s film’ as a distinctly separate genre?

ST: *I would say it is a multiform, if I may call it like this, which is, to a certain extent, the nature of all art as well. The work of Watkins is great both in terms of its oeuvre and importance and he is an inspirational figure for many artists. He does not set preconditions in the way he does cinema or, rather, in the way he treats moving images and narratives. The intentions with which an artist constructs images and narratives are crucial. I’m always asking myself whether the decisions I take for my films are usually based on what I want to say. So the antidote is not really one single recipe. When I talk about a multiform the antidote is the artist’s method and language and there can be as many antidotes as there are artists. However, to come back to what you call the “artist’s film”. What we call ‘artist’s film’ engages a very wide scope of aesthetics, techniques and articulations. However, there is a conflict that arises from the nature and history of film as a mass public spectacle on the one hand and the nature of art that is more exclusive, detached from the masses on the other. Or perhaps one could call this a conflict of hierarchies. Video, however, is a very democratic, liberating and powerful tool because of its immediacy and the broadness of its output. It changed the way artists do art, it changed the way we look at images and that in turn has changed what we can expect from art. From political ads to war coverage to Youtube videos, to the leaked drone footage in Wikileaks, to film, it’s all part of a democratic medium that has democratized the world and art as well.*

Aesthetics is only part of what makes an artwork. I see it as a way of occasionally highlighting certain aspects of a work but not as a method. I do not indulge in aesthetics. I go with the flow of things and my videos or films are mainly in tune with my ideas. When aesthetics help me to carry the message in a more clear way then I do see aesthetics as content. I think in the end it’s about striking the right balance.

KG: The film-maker Isaac Julien once said something about this distinction between film in media versus art that struck me. He said that in the over-saturated media world that we live in sometimes video art is looked to as representing an ethical position. Do you agree with this statement?

ST: *In contrast to spoken language, which we are adept at using in order to articulate or communicate an idea, the same cannot be said of the language of video or film. The medium has a power of its own to dictate the message. It is my impression that we cannot control exactly the meaning or the message of art especially when art enters the realm of every day life, so it will be contested and challenged as well. I do agree that video art can be this area where an artist can find a niche to express a deep research and a dedicated work related to the moving image. However I do not think that video art as a medium could represent an ethical position in its totality, but it is an area where different ethics can be contested.*

KG: What of the question of filmic aesthetics? To what extent is having a distinct visuality important to you? So many artists today are fearful of creating beautiful images because they mistakenly associate aesthetics with superficiality. How would you describe your relationship to aesthetics, and particularly to the aesthetics of film and documentary, which you filter and interpret in your own way?

ST: *Well, that's a big question for me, as well. I think I'm at the crossroads between art and cinema at this point of my career. There are certain concepts in the arts that I'm hesitant to come in terms with. For example, as you mentioned, issues of distinct visual identity and/or aesthetics vs. content. Even though they might be valid issues I do question their importance.*

KG: In the last two years your work has, however, shifted away from the analysis of media strategies of representation and cinema research and is now focusing on the relation of images to what you call "the economy of a history". Can you elaborate more on this idea, also in relation to the current work for the Greek Pavilion?

ST: *Yes, indeed it was about how but now it is more about why. How do we produce images, and why do we produce images? Images as one of the highest valued commodities have their place in providing evidence for both history and economy.*

KG: Your work has also dealt with history, past history as well as history 'in the making'. We live in increasingly a-historic and amnesiac times. Eric Hobsbawm, the great historian, pointed out the dangers of this by saying that 'history alone provides orientation, and anyone who faces the future without it is not only blind but dangerous, especially in the era of high technology'. How do relate to this comment as regards your work, which is both historically and technologically aware?

ST: *Well, I believe the way we understand and interpret collective history is largely dependent on personal history. When I first moved from Greece to the Netherlands to study art, first at the Rietveld Academie and then at the Rijksakademie, I was struggling to define – culturally and historically – what it is that I do. Where does it belong? The simple question was, am I a Greek artist or is being 'an artist' enough? And what does it mean to be a Greek artist in the 2000s? What did it mean to be a Greek artist in the 90s, the 80s etc? I realized the impact of politics on the way art and cultural production was taking place in Greece. Politics has been interwoven with the history of art in Greece ever since its independence in 1821. I started going back into the past looking for history, my history, my country's history. I simply wanted to understand where I stood as an artist and the process led me to the reading of history. One of the first things I researched into were the early images that I was exposed to as I was growing up in a small town in Greece. There were two types of images. On the one hand we had the Greek National Television (ERT) that was heavily affected, shaped and stigmatized by the kitsch aesthetics of the Greek Junta of a decade earlier and was responsible for the birth of national television in Greece. And on the other hand I had my grandfather's images from the years of his political exile in Czechoslovakia. When the Greek civil war ended in 1949 the defeated communists fled to countries of the former USSR. I remember sitting on my grandfather's lap as a toddler looking at pictures of Brezhnev or going with him to the communist festivals of KNE (Communist Youth of Greece) that were full of vivid images, banners, posters, young people involved passionately in politics. These were my first images. These hints about my past, which to a certain extent is part of a collective past, is a by-product of history, I would even say of European history. Along the way I found out that many people, and especially artists of my generation, shared similar stories and this was when it became very interesting. I always thought I had a slight detachment from the traditional social fabric of Greece as my mother is Iranian and I was born in Prague. Nevertheless the political times, and incidents that followed my parents in their lives, the exile and cultural exclusion, proved crucial in shaping what I have become today as a person and as an artist.*

KG: And what of the relationship of history and politics in your work? Chris Marker once remarked that he was passionate about History and that politics interested him only insofar as the latter is the cross-section of the history of the present? Do you feel that you relate to this point of view?

ST: *My work started as a search, an investigation into all the aforementioned issues but not really knowing what exactly I was looking for. It was not clear in the beginning and it's not completely clear yet now either. But there are hints and clues and that's what makes my search more consistent and specific, bit by bit: mainly by asking questions about history. For example the work Untitled (The Remake) (2007) is a very good example of that approach. I was interested in exposing the mechanisms, technological, aesthetical, and political, that dictated the historicisation of certain images which propagated the political message and power of the Greek Junta. I jumped into a huge subject and a big taboo for Greek society. A public historical and political discourse, one that takes into account the benefits of the reading of even the darkest pages of history, is lacking support in Greece. The work was my first serious attempt to claim a new sequence of images, a new narrative, from my confrontation with a historical 'Master' narrative. I worried a lot about whether the result was artistically successful or not. But only now I realize that the significance of this early work is precisely in its rupture with an untouchable and rigid scheme of historical representation, and to engage with what Guy Debord calls unconscious history. There were other works that followed such as the Lost Monument, (2009) about the political and financial aid (intervention) of the United States during the Greek Civil War (1945 –1949), in line with the so-called Truman Doctrine. Later, in 1963, a Greek-American organization decided to donate a 4 meter bronze statue of the American president Harry S. Truman to the Greeks. The statue was installed in downtown Athens near the Greek parliament. I once bumped into it and I first thought he was a Greek politician, but when I read the carved marble inscription I realized, much to my surprise, that the biggest statue in Athens was of an American president. I wanted to read more about its history and found out that the statue's sculptor was Felix de Welton, the sculptor of the five marines raising the American flag in Iwo Jima. That's when I decided to make a work about the monument itself. I'm trying to connect the dots and in this effort, which is ongoing, a very interesting picture starts to emerge. It is about revisiting our collective memory or our collective amnesia, where new reinterpretations provide new history. And here I am reminded of a very interesting quote from Chris Marker: "We do not remember, we rewrite memory as much as history is rewritten."*

KG: Many of your works refer to contested political moments, but to what extent do you actually consider your work to be political and how do you understand the term from your point of view as an artist?

ST: *What I define as a political work is one which can potentially generate a political and social discourse and inspire audiences not only within the strict framework of art institutions and art in general. In that respect I do not consider my work political even though it deals with political moments from the recent history of Greece. However this doesn't mean that the work cannot potentially create a political discourse in future times. For example the artist or the curator of the future may find certain works political, capable of generating a political discourse. But that's something we can never tell.*

KG: Research is a very important part of your creative process. How do you go about conducting your research, particularly—as you say—as so many incidents of recent Greek history have been edited out of the history books and collective memory, or deliberately 'forgotten', to suit the political status quo and the national mythology. What is your relationship towards and view on this so-called "archival turn" that has been so prevalent in much recent contemporary art practice?

ST: *In regard to the "archival turn" I believe artists sense that we have hit a wall. As I mentioned earlier, it seems there is nothing left to be seen. Everything has been exposed. We do not need more new images. What we need is new vision. I feel as if this palindromic movement between different times, past, present and future, is like the automatic movement of the camera as it tries to focus on a flat wall. That's what happened to me. I felt that in order to see where I was standing I first had to*

take a couple of steps back. Dealing with archives and history calibrates our sense of the present and eventually gives purpose and guidance for what is to come. Yes I do believe that history (not only Greek history) has been edited and appropriated but that on many occasions this has not necessarily happened deliberately. I was once in a discussion with an old worker from the Greek National Television and he was mentioning the thousands of hours of film footage from the 30s, 40s and 50s that was either neglected, until it simply vanished, or was sold to television broadcasts of different countries because its importance was either not acknowledged or there was no money to maintain and make available such delicate material. This was a revelation because I thought there must always have been a “deliberate reason” behind such constructs as national mythology but this proved the opposite. It revealed a significance that went beyond politics, reflecting, rather, a lack of culture and education.

KG: So what about the work for the Greek Pavilion at the Venice Biennale? Is it grounded more in history or in the present moment of crisis?

ST: History Zero, is different from previous works. It is a film in three parts and a small archive. The film was conceived in the summer of 2012 while I was in Athens and working on another project. I stayed there for almost four months and that was the longest I had stayed there in a long time. The centre of Athens is perhaps the area where the effects of the crisis are most visible. The challenge for me was to make a new work not about the crisis per se but to question what crisis is, where it is generated, and to ask whether there is a way to resist by adopting a different view of the crisis. The work questions the value of money, and the archive is a collection of examples of alternative currencies where the value of money is contested. So the work has a very strong anthropological and associative look through the stories of three completely different individuals, an old demented collector of contemporary art, an immigrant who collects scrap metal, and an artist who collects images. Through seemingly realistic daily routines, I wanted to set a series of questions about how their stories and collections can be interconnected and how the actions of one affect the lives of the others.

KG: If, as in the words of Robert Bresson, the practice of film-making is about making visible what, without you, might perhaps never have been seen, what is it you would like to make visible most in this work for Venice and in your work in general?

ST: I think what Bresson actually meant is a withdrawal from what's expressed through form. Actually I don't think an artist has the power to make anything visible, unfortunate as that might sound; nowadays everything is already there to be seen. What art can do is to empower people to see in different ways, in new ways, and give the opportunity to viewers to rethink for themselves what is already there. There has been a lot of exposure to images and I wanted through this work to embrace what is concealed. In History Zero the three separate stories never meet directly, they only “meet” in the viewer's mind or memory. I'm mostly interested in this aspect of interconnectivity and that all actions do have meaning and affect each other's lives. The work deals with this greater aspect of “what is at work”, what makes the world move. Many would argue that it is money or the constant fluctuation of value. I think in essence it is something else. And I'm very happy if this something else remains invisible and has no name.