# A POST-CLASSICAL LANDSCAPE:
## GREEK PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE 1980s

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Photography, we are often reminded, is the youngest and most international of the visual arts. This is a comforting sentiment, yet in practice, photography often turns out to be as insular as its siblings. Consider any of the many histories of photography currently in print, and you will be lucky to find anything other than token references to work from outside the charmed North Atlantic Circle: in other words, the United States, France, Germany and Britain, with passing nods to the other industrialised states of Europe and to Japan. After all, it was only a few years ago that a glossy new magazine with "International" in its title editorialised about an ambition to act for "our most creative artists, be they from France, the rest of Europe, the USA or Japan".

The problem is exacerbated in the case of countries undergoing cultural or political colonisation during photography's formative years. Inevitably, their earliest photographic representation was in the hands of outsiders who were at best ignorant of and at worst hostile to the native culture. Thus, India was depicted for the West through the lens of Samuel Bourne and Linneaus Tripe, Egypt through that of Maxime Du Camp and Francis Frith, and the Middle East, including Greece, through that of Felix Bonfils.

It is of course pointless to decry these photographers and their colleagues; they were there because photography was a new medium, based on technology developed in the West, and if they had not photographed in these countries, then for a while at least no one would have. And it would be frankly ridiculous to condemn Monsieur Bonfils for not sharing much in the way of cultural background and attitudes with a Greek palikar from Epirus or a Maronite peasant. Nevertheless, whether he liked it or not, and even whether or not he realised it, his representation of the Middle East had to conform to what his audience in France expected and wanted; an audience consisting, in his own words, of "those spirits curious about and enamoured of beautiful things". And so, with the passage of time, each photo graphically colonised region came to be represented by a very narrowly defined and surprisingly similar set of conventions; once the superficial difference between Parthenon, Holy Sepulchre and Pyramid is discounted, most mid-19th century travel photography can be largely reduced to two themes: monumental architecture and exotic natives.

Throughout the early 19th century, Greece remained in an anomalous position; politically the European out post of a rapidly decaying Ottoman Empire, it had also long since become fashionable as an adventurous adjunct to the Grand Tour. As such, it offered the erudite French or English traveller the opportunity both of perambulating, Herodotus in hand, though scenes of deliciously decayed classical splendour, and of complaining bitterly about the food, the insect life, and the constant danger from bloodthirsty banditti apparently in sensible of their glorious heritage.

Few visitors appear to have noticed that under the picturesque surface of Ottoman domination lurked not just a bewhiskered and kilted peasantry, but also a complex web of economic and social groupings as far reaching, cohesive and supra-national as that of

the European Jews: included among these were a Phanariote haute bourgeoisie occupying important positions in the imperial administration at Constantinople, a group of self-administering villages in Central Thessaly manufacturing and exporting red cotton to Germany, small semi-autonomous Greek islands in the Aegean and Ionian seas engaged in the grain trade from the Levant to Western Europe, and above all the mercantile diaspora which implanted Greek communities from Amsterdam to the Bay of Bengal. It was largely thanks to the resources of this Greek diaspora that the War of Liberation which broke out in 1821 was brought to a successful conclusion with the creation of the first modern Greek state in 1833.

For much of the century, Greece (or more usually, Athens and its Acropolis) remained a frequent stop-over for photographers on their way to the more commercially lucrative stamping grounds of Egypt and the Holy Land. Amongst them, the photo historian Alkis Xanthakis has identified the presence of Henry Fox Talbot to wards the end of the 1840s. In *The Birth of Photography,1800-1900*, Brian Coe attributed certain surviving calotypes of the Eastern Mediterranean to Talbot's friends Bridges and Calvert Jones, who also travelled in the area at the time, but in an issue of the Greek magazine *Pandora* published in 1865, Xanthakis traced evidence of Talbot's Athenian visit: “A certain Englishman, Fox Talbot, whom we ourselves saw before the year 1850 in Athens, photographing with feverish zeal the ancient monuments of the Acropolis...”.

Again according to the invaluable Xanthakis, the first Greek photographer about whom we have any information was one Sotiris Georgiadis, who maintained a studio in London; of Mr. Georgiadis nothing more remains than a paragraph in a Greek politician's memoirs, by whom the unfortunate pioneer is dismissed with the comment “Returning homewards, l saw a sign reading Photographic Studios of Sotiris Georgiadis. Without a moment's hesitation, I instantly ventured forth and discovered indeed a Greek technician, who, however, had nothing memorable about him beyond the indisputable fact of being Greek”.

The earliest Greek photographer whose work survives in any quantity was the painter Philippos Margaritis, a professor at the Athens school of Fine Arts who opened a studio in the mid-1850's. From that time on the number of professional Greek photographers in creased dramatically, both in Athens and other leading Greek, European and Middle Eastern cities. Their work, however, was rarely distinguishable from that of their European colleagues: society portraits, ceremonial group photographs, and, in increasing quantities, albumen prints of classical sites and antiquities for the already voracious tourist industry. Many of these latter prints survive, anonymous, in the enormous albums compiled by 19th century tourists in which views of the Parthenon sit cheek by jowl with vistas of Rome and the Alps.

In essence, while Greek photography of the period is of considerable historic and social interest, from a purely photographic viewpoint it appears to be of largely parochial importance. With the popularisation and rapid spread of amateur photography in the nineteen-twenties and thirties, pictorialism became the dominant photographic aesthetic, a position which remained unchallenged for nearly fifty years. Some early photojournalist such as Petros Poulidis and the Gaziathis brothers produced interesting archival material, while Spyros Meletzis documented the German occupation and the subsequent civil war.

During the forties and fifties a few Greek photographers achieved international prominence in the fields of documentary and photojournalism; they include Dimitris Charisiadis, Thanassis Tsangris and Nelly Seraidari, who had photographed refugees from Asia Minor in 1925 and earned the ultimate accolade of a *Life* magazine cover in 1940. Probably of greater value was the work of those then relatively obscure photographers, working mostly in the provinces, who concentrated on recording the Greek countryside and its people. Essentially dedicated amateurs – Kostas Balafas, for example, was an employee of the National Electricity Generating Board who devoted his spare time to photographing Epirus –, their activities were not unconnected with a nostalgic ruralism already evident in both literature and folk studies since the end of the previous century.

Such movements tended to glorify what were seen as authentic but increasingly imperilled peasant values, their virtues magnified by the unpalatable chaos of the cities and particularly the mindlessly expanding Athens-Piraeus conurbation. Of course these images, taken with the best of intentions, inevitably traduced their subjects. Here again the only aesthetic strategy was pictorialism, so that the long-suffering peasants and shepherds who are the subjects of the photographs invariably fall into stylised poses, silhouetted against dramatic skies or staring nobly back at the camera in close-ups. Seduced by an idealised image of a world they could no longer enter, the only approach available to these photographers was a romanticism totally alien to their subjects.

By the late seventies, Greek photography was in the doldrums. Insofar as photography had any role outside of purely functional applications, this revolved around the obsessive world of local and international amateur photography competitions. Some of the reasons for this state of affairs were endemic: a complete lack of photographic education at any level, a crippling tax on equipment and film, which were (and are) classified as luxury goods, a paucity of technical and theoretical in formation and even a copyright act which still excludes photography from its provisions. Rather more subtly, progress was stifled not only by the widespread identification of photography with an idyllic and regressive pictorialism, but also by a succession of visual conventions so pervasive that it seemed virtually impossible to escape their influence. Initially, as we have seen, they were those of the cultured or would-be cultured 19th century traveller; later they were replaced by a cult of the rural picturesque, and later still, from the early sixties onwards, by slicker but equally pernicious conventions which depicted Greece as a Kodachrome paradise of noble ruins, blue skies and golden beaches.

The decisive turning point in contemporary Greek photographic history can be fixed at November 1979, the date on which five young photographers launched the Photography Centre of Athens (PCA). Costis Antoniadis, John Demos, Yiorgos Depollas, Nikos Panayotopoulos and Stefanos Paschos were responsible for the conception and implementation of what remains a unique organisation by which all the functions of a national photographic centre are served, if on a relatively modest scale, by individual photographers; launched and maintained without any kind of official support or sponsorship, the PCA took the form of a non-profit cooperative whose ambition was to provide a focus for creative photography as well as a permanent exhibition space for both Greek and foreign photographers. The founders had several points in common: between 30 and 40 years old at the time, all but one had studied abroad, and all five were professionals who earned their living in photography while maintaining a

commitment to personal work. The ability to earn an income, however unsteady, from their professional activities was crucial, since virtually all the centre's funding had to come from the members themselves.

To see the venture in proper context, it must be emphasised that Greece still lacks any of the institutional support taken for granted elsewhere in Europe: there are no degree level courses, no National Photography Archive or collection, and the chronically underfunded Ministry of Culture has no relevant department or staff. Since 1979, two of the founders (Demos and Paschos) have resigned, to be replaced by Stelios Efstathopoulos. Though a few irregular grants have at times been made through government agencies, funding is still largely dependent on the members; Depollas in particular continues to carry a large share of the centre's deficit, in part through a subsidised subtenancy extended by his own studio.

Except during the summer months, exhibitions are rotated every three weeks, and by this time virtually all Greek photographers of any interest or promise have shown work there. Foreign photographers are regularly invited to exhibit – wherever possible, with the assistance of cultural organisations such as the British Council, which helped present the work of Elisabeth Williams, Mari Mahr and Nicholas Sinclair among others. The Centre also organises seminars, audio-visual programmes and open exhibitions on an irregular basis, and has been instrumental in sending work by Greek photographers to venues abroad.

Nor has the PCA remained a voice in the wilderness. The other major support structure for photography in Greece has been Stavros Moressopoulos' magazine *Photografia*, which was also behind the Hellenic Centre of Photography, the organising body of the 1987 Athens Month of Photography. Patterned on the equivalent Paris and Amsterdam events, the Athens Month managed to put on 52 exhibitions, ten conferences and six workshops with an impressive level of foreign participation and a minimum of official subsidy; a repeat performance is planned for 1989, with the emphasis on recent European photography. A number of new galleries in Athens and in Thessaloniki have also started showing photography, and there is an increased awareness of the medium both in the fine-arts world and among the general public.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, the greatest problem apart from official indifference on anything other than the most short-term and opportunistic level has been the poverty of critical and theoretical debate. Few if any fine-art critics are qualified to pursue such a debate, which is left to a handful of practising photographers, notably Panayotopoulos, Antoniadis and Demosthenis Agrafiotis. Before going on to a consideration of the work itself, it is worth touching briefly on the question of nationality and national identity as applied to the arts. It is generally accepted that whereas birth, legal status and indeed conscious choice normally dictate a person's nationality, insofar as it there is any value in classifying artists by region or country, it makes more sense to do so on the basis of residence, influences and cultural climate. This is sometimes a problem in discussing Greek artists of all kinds, who have an even greater propensity for spending their working lives abroad than the rest of their European colleagues.

For example, in a review of the 1987 Month of Photography published in *Le Monde*, the eminent critic Patrick Roegiers singled out Lucas Samaras and Constantine Manos as "the

best known representatives” of Greek photography (16.4.87). Except in a very superficial sense, this is not a particularly helpful comment; though born in Macedonia, Samaras emigrated to the States at the age of twelve and is by now clearly American – as the reference works put it, “United States, (born Greece)”. Similarly, despite publication of an influential monograph devoted to Greek rural communities, Manos’ career has been based almost entirely outside Greece, and appears to have been unaffected by working conditions in his country of birth.

Can any meaningful conclusions be drawn from the current state of photography in Greece? The first is that there is still no hard and fast line drawn between fine art practice and at least some forms of applied photography, particularly in the documentary mode. The second is that insofar as there is a dominant aesthetic, it is in effect that of modernist photography with its emphasis on the value of representation, even if this aesthetic is not universally acknowledged or accepted. So far, the absence of any vigorous critical debate appears to have handicapped the emergence of more experimental practices, and where these have been attempted they are usually imitative of foreign work rather than genuinely innovative. There are however signs that the situation will change over the next few years, particularly as reciprocal contact with the rest of Europe becomes more frequent.

In the meantime, I believe that the work of the eight participants in this exhibition reflects an intention common to the majority of Greek photographers working in the last decade, and that the successful achievement of this aim marks a crucial milestone in the country's photographic history. By this I mean that the photographers in question, irrespective of the wide range of styles employed, are all basically concerned with exploring facets of contemporary Greek society and culture; in other words, they are dealing with what, in America, came to be known as social landscape photography. At the same time, a conscious and deliberate effort has been made to escape from the visual conventions mentioned above, whether classical landscape with columns or Tourist Board posters.

Most of the photographers included in this exhibition first began working in the documentary mode, and in deed a number of them have continued to do so insofar as their professional activities are concerned; Panayotopoulos, for example, has produced some brilliant photo-essays for Greek magazines on themes such as national elections, the after-effects of earthquakes and life in remote mountain villages. Unfortunately, the relatively unsophisticated tastes of newspaper editors and a deeply entrenched closed shop for press photographers have resulted in an extraordinarily primitive level of “hard news” imagery; the only field open to young, innovative photographers is that of feature work for a wide range of periodicals, but even here editorial conservatism is a limiting factor. Under the circumstances, the most interesting work is invariably produced by photographers in the margins of their professional career, and is directed at the equivalent of Britain's ‘independent photography’ sector – but with this important difference, that no grants of any kind are available for such projects.

If the unifying feature of their work is, as I have suggested, its exploration of the contemporary social landscape, what strategies have been deployed? One point which strikes the viewer is that in contrast to the insistent ruralism of the past, the focus is now almost exclusively urban, corresponding to the realities of late 20th-century

demographics. Two of the younger photographers, Eleni Maligoura and Nikos Markou, have produced tightly edited documentary series about quintessentially urban subjects: Omonia Square at night, and the now condemned Athens gasworks. Working in colour under difficult conditions, Maligoura navigates the shifting population of vagrants, night-hawks, prostitutes, petty crooks and insomniacs who hang about this seedy downtown centre (a cross between Picadilly Circus and Victoria Station), discreetly avoiding the twin perils of voyeurism and sentimentality. Markou's black and white prints, on the other hand, extend a grave, somehow formal courtesy to the workers he portrays in their gothic factory – a courtesy which owes nothing to any abstract idealisation of their condition.

Characteristic also is a concern with detail rather than the grand sweep, a detail which is ultimately far more illuminating than any rhetorical generalisation. Stelios Efstathopoulos' sequence on funerary monuments in Athenian cemeteries concentrates on a characteristic feature, the inclusion of faded photographic portraits of the deceased among the votive paraphernalia. Wrapped in plastic, in cheap, cracked frames, or merely thumb-tacked to a cross, the gaze of the dead bears witness to the abiding power of the photographic image in the popular mind. Nikos Panayotopoulos goes outside the urban environment for his cibachromes of chapel interiors, but here too the emphasis is on the accumulation of telling detail, the unselfconscious juxtaposition of traditional and contemporary objects; his images are a reflection of the Greek attitude to Orthodoxy, a paradoxical yet comfortable combination of respect and familiarity.

In different but very personal ways, Periklis Alkidis and Panos Vardopoulos both turn to the Athens streets for their subject matter. Alkidis is a true street photographer, pushing his way through crowds by day or night, snatching portraits from deliberately distorted angles and imbuing them with a grotesque sense of absurdity; his vision of the city is both angry and conspiratorial. Vardopoulos, in this selection from his sequence *Driving*, takes the viewer on a dusk-to-dawn journey through an almost mythic version of the sprawling city, its classical fragments and concrete bunkers luridly illuminated by a combination of moonlight and artificial light; unlike Maligoura's teeming Omonia Square, Vardopoulos' night streets are populated only by cars and a single group of three still children, out long past their bed-time.

Antoniadis and Depollas make use of more elaborate formal devices than their colleagues, a strategy which allows them to adopt a distanced, even critical stance towards their subjects. Antoniadis' photographs show the most anonymous face of Athens: the windowless back walls of apartment blocks, waste ground, parking lots, building sites. The principal variety in these images seems to come from the ubiquitous advertising hoardings with their implacably crass representations of the consumer good life – except that Antoniadis has stripped out the original advertisements, and replaced them with his own photographs of utterly normal, everyday people. Depollas' brilliant *On the Beach* series is simultaneously the bitterest and the funniest work in the exhibition. Deliberately shot on long out-of-date roll film and printed with an absolute minimum of contrast, given dead-pan handwritten captions like "A couple paddling" and "A young woman posing", they isolate their subjects from the hurly-burly of Attica's overcrowded and polluted beaches and turn them into the protagonists of a slapstick movie, or heraldic monsters rearing out of a viscous sea.

This, then, is a cross-section of Greek photography towards the end of the eighties: exploratory rather than introspective, its practitioners move through the post-classical landscape with little faith in certainties, but justifiable confidence in their questioning. In the process, they have illuminated certain aspects of contemporary Greek life and culture in ways which no other medium could have done.

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