

OF ABSENCE

OR THE CATASTROPHE THEORY

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The images flooding the screens of **Adonis Archontides's** installation *The Phenomenal Present* comprise largely banal moments selectively captured and composed by the artist into what could be seen as a reflection of how he perceives the world, as well as the way our subconscious makes sense out of the events we remember, or at least choose to recall. Certain images may trigger personal recollections in the spectator, adding another layer of meaning to the projections. Thus these ephemeral episodes, along with the spaces and bodies they record, are both portrayals of objective events and components of subjective narratives.

Immersed in the multiple screens of the video installation, the viewer absorbs the culled images once removed as sensory events, in an environment reproducing the artist's psychic peephole, in turn exposing the mechanics of the media and its power to influence our conception of reality. Evoked too is the element of chance in the encounters that coalesce to constitute a life, the accretion of circumstances that congregate like magnets to form a totality. All of this alludes to identity as ultimately performative—the happenstance of where we are, what we do, what we see, and what we select—and to the precedence of the image in the definition of individual and collective histories. Yet there is freedom as well as fate in this phenomenon: finally it is not what the media chooses to show us but what we choose to see.

Video installation: *The Phenomenal Present* (2012-ongoing)

Savvas Christodoulides plays with the temporal identities of objects by reincarnating rescued fragments of refuse in whimsical fabrications that manifest the itinerancy of meaning and form through contextual juxtapositions and titular designations. The artist synthesizes disparate elements of formerly unrelated things to produce, in the words of Marcel Duchamp, spontaneous new condensations of meaning "just as though there were no contradictions between them." The constructions embody a dual essence because we can still discern the former functions of the parts, understanding them in terms of both what they were before and what they are now. It is telling that the assignment of names has such a powerful influence on the way we see things and people, perhaps more than physical appearance. The jagged plywood pieces comprising the topography alluded to in *Black Mountain* are held together by a metal structure that seems so precariously balanced that even the slightest touch would cause total collapse of the composition, just as its significance would fall apart without the title.

Just as these objects are found and reassigned, we relocate and acculturate ourselves to the places where we can be fruitful and fit in, and very often this entails adapting one's name to the local alphabet or tradition. Indeed the seemingly chance collision that characterizes the unlikely collusion of these now-sensical forms conveys the essential folly of fixing identities according to conditions so fluid and provisional

as this or that. The dynamic contingency of the strange encounters these sculptures embody causes them to vibrate with the infinite possibility of unexpected unions and reconciliations. There is so much magic, hope, and empowerment in the happy coincidences of these objects, once distinctly other and now together as one. Most of all, the apparent simplicity of their compositions lends a generosity and transparency to the profound and mysterious act of creation.

Sculptures: *Arabesque II* (2017), *Black Mountain* (2017), *Epitaph* (2017), *Red Mosque* (2017), *Flag* (2016), *Temple* (2014), *Arabesque I* (2013)

Petros Efstathiadis portrays various people in his Macedonian village, Liparó (population 400), in darkly humorous situations that evoke both decay and regeneration, yet most of all how little really changes between political regimes and catastrophic events. Local residents act out alternative realities that make fun of the banality of life in the town, where globalization seems like a mere sneeze in the face of enduring customs and quotidian survival. Nevertheless the "Lohos" (Squadron) photographs portray an everyday preparedness for revolution. "You can make anything you need from what you can find around you," the artist explains. "I used to create bombs from my mother's hairspray cans."

The Balkan region comprises a volatile cocktail of cultures with long unresolved territorial disputes in which semantics are hotly contested, exemplified in the current passionate conflict over the state of FYROM using the term "Macedonia" in its name to associate its rather diverse population with the legacy of Alexander the Great. Yet while political empires come and go, wiping out swathes of history from the accounts as well as people of undesirable ethnicities, the people stay much the same. Residents of Liparó still speak the Turkish-Slavic dialect that has been forbidden since the establishment of the Greek state and is useful for communicating across adjacent national borders. The slogan "We didn't cross the border, the border crossed us" resonates strongly in this geopolitical context.

Artworks: Site-specific installation *The First and Last Attempt to Find the Gold in the Belfry* (2018); photographs from the series "Prison" (2014) and "Lohos" (2013); videos *The Last Normal Man* (2016), *Diamonds* (2015), *Shelter* (2014), *Shit* (2012), *Liparó* (2010)

Mustafa Hulusi's *Mood Reel* is a filmic montage comprising images of the sort we are bombarded with daily in the media, with Hitchcockian graphics at the end that hint at the mass hypnosis induced by the manipulative mechanics of the media. The fast-paced, visceral footage produces the impression of a single mishmash of exoticism that serves to reinforce prejudices and notions of otherness. The movie clips portray romantic stereotypes played by beautiful actors in picturesque backdrops, accompanied by a pastiche of epic music in vaguely Oriental

styles that are out of synch with the places depicted—that is, if they really exist.

In an interview Hulusi recalls his own idyllic childhood visits to northern Cyprus, which seemed to him a paradise but by the 1980s had lapsed into underdevelopment and deterioration in the wake of the political division: "I think everyone was fully aware that the island was a pawn in this wider geographic military game, as it had always been, and this was aimed at subjugating the native people of the Middle East, for example, in order to extract their natural resources." In his fictional *The Empty Near East*, the island is abandoned after a catastrophic event and nature takes over its ruins, left by so many waves of civilizations: the land is the ultimate victor.

Video: *Mood Reel* (2016)

In his "poetic archive of the human condition," **Ali Kazma** depicts our existence as a series of ritual acts of faith in the face of the inevitability that everything will disintegrate and eventually perish. He examines the routine activities and labors people perform that are imbued with significance beyond their productive functions, along with the institutions that impose and enforce social order. The "Obstructions" films record people who use their bodies to resist conformity, hardship, and death. *Jean Factory* focuses on the production of an iconic piece of modern clothing at an Istanbul plant, where the movements of female operators wearing traditional headscarves mimic the robotic rhythm of the machinery. "I am interested in how we transform things and how the things we transform in return transform us," Kazma explains. In his mesmerizing videos we see the continual revolution and conflict inherent to that precarious dance as the source of life's beauty.

Intrinsic to these endeavors is the notion of progress and preserving the idea of a linear development of civilization. Thus institutions that form part of Michel Foucault's "carceral archipelago" of social control and discipline are also subjects of interest for the artist: in *School* we see portraits of Ottoman leaders alongside embalmed animals, illustrating an established account of history. *Taxidermist* observes a practice employed by museums, which choose to preserve specimens of certain species to represent the evolution of the natural world. It is strange watching the technician take out the innards of a dead animal, stretch its clean skin over a plaster imitation of its original shape, and insert staring, unseeing glass eyes to create an uncanny but inert similitude of a living thing. All of these ultimately futile exercises are testaments to humanity's incessant drive to shape and control the physical environment.

Videos: *Home* (2014), *Prison* (2013), *School* (2013), *Clerk* (2010), *Taxidermist* (2010), *Jean Factory* (2008)

For *A Minimum of Visible World*, **Vicky Pericleous** has reconstructed the remains of a village, Petrofani, left behind by Turkish Cypriots forced to migrate to the north after the

schism of 1974. Next to the border, constituted by the UN-policed buffer zone, it is a beautiful place surrounded by a green landscape and grazing sheep from nearby farms. Videos of the village surroundings recorded by CCTV cameras are projected onto the walls of the exhibition space, eliciting the notion of places as temporal, transitional, and subjective. In this way, the two spaces—the constructed one here and the other there—come together to form a third inhabited by the viewer.

The title is a phrase taken from Jorge Luis Borges's "The Circular Ruins," which invokes abandoned structures as sacred shelters for refugees who find them adequate to fulfill their basic needs. Similarly the exigencies of the present have imposed a new narrative on the fragments of Petrofani in the form of a bird community that now inhabits them. Pericleous has thus placed a replica of a purpose-built 1960s pigeon house from Paphos among her miniature ruins to provoke the tension between the utopian ideals of modernism and what could be seen as failed or obsolete spaces—as much as between intention and the inevitability of change and displacement as a fact of life. Ruins carry their own fascination as relics of the past imbued with sentimental or symbolic value, and yet they also signal the futility of rootedness to a place or any claim to permanence. And so we come full circle in realizing the freedom to envision any place afresh: like the birds, we make home where we find a minimum of visible shelter.

Installation: *A Minimum of Visible World* (2018)

Artist **Eleni Phyla's** interactive installation *Move So That I Can Hear* was inspired by a realization she had while driving on the south side of Cyprus when the car radio spontaneously tuned in to a Turkish-language station, broadcast from the "other side": radio signals cannot be stopped by barricades and so each culture can still infiltrate the other side of the border. Visitors will activate radios as they move through the space past various transmitters, the language of the broadcast determined by physical proximity rather than the identity of the listener, reflecting the rambling reach of the ripples of culture. In that light, isn't a nation really a borderless phantom?

"We all lived together perfectly fine until the invasion," the artist says. In fact it is the distance introduced by physical division that causes the gap in communication and understanding. Because the receiver may or may not comprehend the program or where it is coming from, any gaps in understanding are filled with preconceptions and even paranoia sustained by lack of access or proximity to the other culture. The peril, and the paradox, is the illusion of the free flow of information: the means of transmission is in the hands of those with the political power to manipulate the perception of the other, and most of all the state. Yet attempts to control populations and secure borders largely backfire, resulting mostly in desperation, misunderstanding, rage, and violence. The fact is that, like radio waves, humans have always relied on freedom of movement to survive; it is the



Adonis Archontides, *The Phenomenal Present*, 2012-ongoing



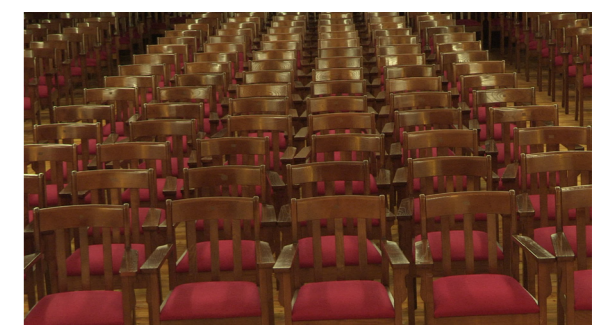
Savvas Christodoulides, *Arabesque I*, 2013



Petros Efstathiadis, *Monitor Room*, photograph from the series "Prison," 2014



Mustafa Hulusi, *Mood Reel*, 2016



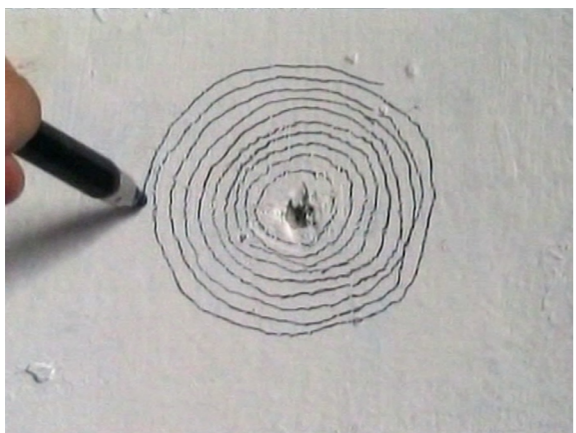
Ali Kazma, *School*, 2013



Vicky Pericleous, *A Minimum of Visible World*, 2018



Eleni Phyla, *Move So That I Can Hear*, 2015



Leonard Qylafi, *Nail Song*, 2006



Efi Savvides, *Emmanuel*, 2016



Stefanos Tsivopoulos, *Land*, 2006

stopping that causes conflict and the need to keep the others out.

Sound installation: *Move So That I Can Hear* (2015)

Leonard Qylafi's time-lapse documentation of the post-Communist development of Tirana's urban topography, *Estate* evinces the phenomenological alchemy through which subject and environment, person and place, intermingle to become an indistinct emotional entity. The artist recorded the changes daily from his window over the course of two years as a spatial chronology resonating his complex emotional reaction to what he perceives as a process of both progress and regress. Reflecting our unconscious perception of an incrementally changing environment, the video follows the destruction of a greenhouse to make way for modern apartment blocks, a reminder of the haphazard evidence left behind by toppling regimes in the path of economic development and colonial occupation. "When you live within this process you become part of it in a sense," Qylafi says. "So you try to record the event as if you can stop it and give yourself time to reflect on it."

Nail Song and *Private Show* are meditations on our mourning of things that have come to define a place as well as the way ruins form an essential part of our reconstruction of the past. *Whispers & Shadows* follows an excavator digging in the dark of night accompanied by a woman reciting Aristotle's "Politics," emphasizing the disparity between contemporary reality and the ideals of democracy. Together the leisurely swing of the shovel and the soothing incantation comprise a hypnotic ballet that reflects a feeling of powerlessness over the inexorable trajectory of progress. Indeed *Sisyphus* portrays an insect's futile attempt to surmount a brick wall, reflecting our inability to overcome our own Nietzschean "will to power."

Videos: *Whispers & Shadows* (2011), *Sisyphus* (2009), *Estate* (2007), *Private Show* (2006), *Nail Song* (2006)

Cyprus is a country of refugees displaced within their own contested territory, the border an emptied space of land, with foreign refugees occupying the limbo of a leftover colonial territory. For her project "The Empire Is Perishing; the Bands Are Playing," Efi Savvides has recorded the stories of several migrant families living in Richmond Village, in the Dhekelia military base, legally a British Overseas Territory. Emmanuel Ramadan was born there in 2000 to an Ethiopian mother and Sudanese father who were taken in twenty years ago after being rescued at sea. Victims of a legal tug-of-war in British courts about who should take them, they have lived in an in-between state ever since. Ramadan talks about growing up in Cyprus without a nationality in the form of legal documents, not able to go on a school trip around Europe, and being picked on by his classmates: "A kid called me black. I felt like I was out of place, like I didn't belong

there." He also conveys the boredom of displacement and uncertainty, the pain of constant moving and leaving friends behind, the inability to work, and the desire for a "new" life. His father is among the claimants that have just won an appeal against the British government, so there is hope on the horizon. Thus imminent absence hangs over Richmond as the families who have made it their home disperse and its physical structures are demolished, all disappearing into memory. Where we make our home is determined largely by force, fancy, or chance. We become a part of the place we inhabit for a time, just as the landscape surrounding us inevitably becomes an aspect of our identity, the stage for our life story.

Artworks: Photographs from the series "The Empire Is Perishing; the Bands Are Playing" (2017); videos *Emmanuel* (2016) and *Vignettes of the Camp* (2016-18)

Stefanos Tsivopoulos's *Land* presents an allegory in three refugees who wake up on an uninhabited island and attempt to locate themselves by asking: What is the name of this place? Which rule or control is exercised over this area? Is it private or public property? Is this an autonomous territory or an in-between place defined by surrounding territories? Where can we go from here? The urge to situate oneself in such terms resonates with the artist's own complex identity: "I am the son of immigrants. My mother is Iranian and my father's family lived in political exile for years out of Greece," he explains. "I have been living and working outside Greece for a long time now, and every time I revisit my country I feel like a newcomer."

A recent news clip on Greek TV depicted a fighter jet patrolling a couple of miniscule islets near Turkey that have long been pawns in a bitter dispute over a territorial "gray zone" that has driven the two nations to the brink of war. The absurdity of the surveillance viewpoint from the window of the plane over what are essentially vacant rocks highlighted what is really at stake: control of resources, in this case oil extraction rights. *Amnesialand* encapsulates this global dilemma in a fictional account of the rise and fall of a Spanish mining community from human exploitation to exhaustion of natural resources and an environmental catastrophe that leaves behind a wasteland. The setting is a future where images no longer exist, leaving those in power with the means to reconstruct the archives to their own ends. And yet *Geometry of Fear* portrays the equally ominous vacuum of administrative power embodied in the empty parliament chamber during the rare absence of a Greek government between elections in June 2012.

Videos: *Geometry of Fear* (2012), *Amnesialand* (2010), *Land* (2006)



I am from there. I am from here. I am not there and I am not here. I have two names, which meet and part, and I have two languages. I forget which of them I dream in.
—Mahmoud Darwish

In *The Presence of Absence, or the Catastrophe Theory* artists from Albania, Greece, Turkey, and Cyprus, along with a British artist of Turkish Cypriot origins, present videos, photographs, and installations that convey the poetic power of the particular in our understanding of the universal. The works of these ten artists coalesce in a collective examination of landscape and memory, amnesia and nationalism, identity and resistance, fragmentation and displacement, alienation and longing for places that may not really exist.

All of these artists are associated with modern states formerly united by the Ottoman Empire that have since taken vastly different directions guided by the vagaries of realpolitik and ethnic strife. The complex history of this region—straddling diverse areas defined as Europe, the Balkans, and the Middle East—reflects enduring cultural threads and ruptures that transcend national borders. The current context of Cyprus embodies a state fractured not by cultural differences among its population, but by the myth of nationalism engendered by external forces in the interest of exploitation and control of a territory. Thus it begs the question: Does conflict cause the formation of borders, or the other way around?

The alchemy of place is a potent mixture of history and conquest, cultural memory and mythology, landscape and geopolitics, with the narratives of victors inscribed onto any topography in the form of physical and ephemeral remains. Colonialists, empires, democracies, and despots, as well as sudden catastrophes—including those designed precisely to induce panic and disorder—impose new orders and trigger transformations that mark a terrain, leaving a cultural residue whose origins are often forgotten in the mist of collective amnesia. Absence is also present in the people torn from their homes, as evoked by Mahmoud Darwish's poetic meditation *In the Presence of Absence*.

The memory of a generation is as short as the roots of history are deep. Thus erasure and sentimentality go hand in hand, as do ideology and ruins, in the formation of tendentious historical narratives in the interest of the powers that be. Yet the traces of our tumultuous past creep up through the cracks of collective unconscious just as displacement stirs nostalgia, and the flow of language and culture is a river that cannot be halted. We know that history holds the key to what is to come. So these artists turn our gaze to the ephemeral things that have become part of our identity, the things we take with us wherever we go, and the things that return to their origins like moths to the light.

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