



Loukia Alavanou, *New Horizons—Pilot*, 2018, VR video, color, sound, 9 minutes.

## Loukia Alavanou

### STATE OF CONCEPT

The hallmark of Loukia Alavanou's work is the collaging of sounds and images—anything from photographs and disembodied cartoon characters to newsreel and film-noir clips—into incongruous compositions that expose the mechanics of the media in constructing history and manipulating our perception of reality. Her show “Towards New Horizons,” curated by iLiana Fokianaki, presented four exemplary videos, produced between 2005 and 2013, alongside a new installation.

Alavanou's virtual reality installation *New Horizons—Pilot*, 2018, is a stereoscopic counterpoint to the future predicted by the public relations documentary *To New Horizons*, 1940, produced by General Motors to tout the Futurama exhibition designed by Norman Bel Geddes for the 1939–40 New York World's Fair. The slick original, described in the curatorial text, extols the benefits of progress illustrated by a diorama of expressway networks and clips of housewives enjoying the conveniences of consumer goods, encapsulating the optimistic anticipation of a modern utopia at the dawn of what would prove to be the most devastating war in history—not least due to the proliferation of weaponry afforded by the economic miracle of industrialization. Viewed with a virtual-reality headset, Alavanou's drone footage instead surveys desolate postindustrial zones on the periphery of Athens introduced by the confident male-delivered voice-over of the auto company's publicity reel: “In a restless search for new opportunities and new ways of

living, the mystery and promise of distant horizons have always called men forward.” Juxtaposed with an anachronistic landscape resembling that of the Room in Andrei Tarkovsky’s *Stalker* (1979), where one’s desires come true but not always as dreamed, the speaker’s strident optimism provokes bitter irony. Inspired by early Soviet sound experiments, the soundtrack incorporates snippets of propaganda broadcasts. As the film segues to an abandoned airport, the queerly chipper voice of Ginger Rogers in *Alice in Wonderland* (Disney/Decca Records, 1944), describes Alice’s tumble down the rabbit hole while the camera descends the spiral staircase from the control tower: From the vantage point of hindsight, looking-glass logic predicted the future.

Alavanou was born just after the fall of the US-backed Greek dictatorship in the 1970s, during a transitional period in a schizophrenic country emerging from centuries of colonial rule. In a leftist family, she was forbidden to play with Barbie dolls, which her parents viewed as a symbol of American capitalist imperialism. For *Ducktator*, 2012, Alavanou placed her grandmother in front of the camera at a television station and asked her to recall life under the junta. But what we hear is the voice of an anchorwoman taken from period archives; the elegant elderly woman’s mouth moves out of sync with the sound, her own account equally distorted by Alzheimer’s disease, the disjunction rendering her an incoherent puppet and highlighting the gap between reality and media reportage. The fusing of these different realities mirrors the splicing of a democratic system onto a political culture based in a modern history of totalitarianism.

Alavanou’s visual language is brutal and borderline incoherent, but cathartic in equal measure, evoking reality as a waking nightmare or a psychedelic drug trip. A particular focus of her biting critique is the violent, patriarchal structure of society. *Put Your Loving Hand Out*, 2009, starts with the camera focused on a classic half-heart necklace resting on a woman’s sweater. The static image starts jerking to the loud tick of a clock, likened to a racing heartbeat, followed by scenes implying the failure of bourgeois bliss synced with jarring sounds of sirens and shattering china. Though she sometimes draws from an aural archive, Alavanou also often acts as her own Foley artist, producing skin-crawling sound effects that are just unrealistic enough and too loud for comfort.

The taunting trill of Snow White's head bobbing in a black void in the video *Wishing Well*, 2005, soliciting the perfect love we know will never come—as sung by actress Adriana Caselotti, who was uncredited and underpaid for her role in the 1937 Disney film—transforms a saccharine fairy tale into a sugarcoated hell. Alavanou's use of montage ultimately reflects life itself as a fragmented, absurd flux inexpressible by language, and least of all by the popular media.

—Cathryn Drake

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