

# CONTEMPORARY GREEK PHOTOGRAPHY:

## MYTH OR REAL?

*“At what time do we define art as contemporary? When it is produced by artists who are still alive and continually developing? When it involves the latest new movement to differ from all previous movements? Or is it simply a chronological question, no matter in what era the style may have originated?... Perhaps our contemporary era begins at the point where style as the hallmark of a period disappears. This began to happen in the 70s.”*

Manfred Schneckenburger, Art of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

### Introduction

The question of what is really contemporary in art has been and still is a grand issue; the same question can be applied to the art of photography in Greece. Can we really talk of a characteristic *Contemporary Greek Photography* or is it more appropriate and correct to talk of common characteristics in the pictures of several Greek photographers? The fact is that undoubtedly there are contemporary photographers or artists who use photography as a means of expression in the country. Also, it is a fact that since the 1970s, significant changes took place in the field of Greek photography and very engrossing contemporary works evolved from those days till today. Third, it is a fact that some Greek photographers are already exhibiting their works in contemporary art spaces around the world.

The case of Greece as far as it concerns photography is an interesting but also confused one. When deciding to explore the nature of photography of a whole nation one needs to take into account important elements such as: sociological traits, religious beliefs, geographical location, general characteristics of the

nation's people & history. Of course, not in a stereotypical sense but in a way that helps in revealing several things about photographers' works.

Greece is a country with a very powerful connection to its glorious ancient history and this is evident in many aspects. Concerning the art of photography, there are several photographers in the country who derive their themes from this connection to the past and very often this leads to works that show a certain nostalgia and melancholy for what was before and no longer is.

Additionally, there is still a very strong connection to the traditional family structures (although this is changing in the last years), much stronger than the one in certain Central and Western European countries. This connection also comes forth in some photographic works.

Next, Greece is a country where religion still plays a major role in the lives of its people. Rarely ever will someone declare themselves an “atheist” in this part of the Balkans whereas in countries like the Czech Republic or England this is much more common. Religion, God, beliefs are very often the subjects of Greek artists in general, not only of photographers.

What has also affected contemporary photographic creation in Greece is a general belated interest in photography. This realization requires an endless analysis that cannot be made here but one should mention one of the basic reasons for this delay: the political and economical situation. For instance, even in the 1910s there were still areas in today's Greece occupied by the Turks and later in the 1950s a bloody civil war tore the country apart; those were conditions in which art could not easily flourish.

It comes as no surprise that at a time when surrealism, constructivism and experimentation led to great works by photog-

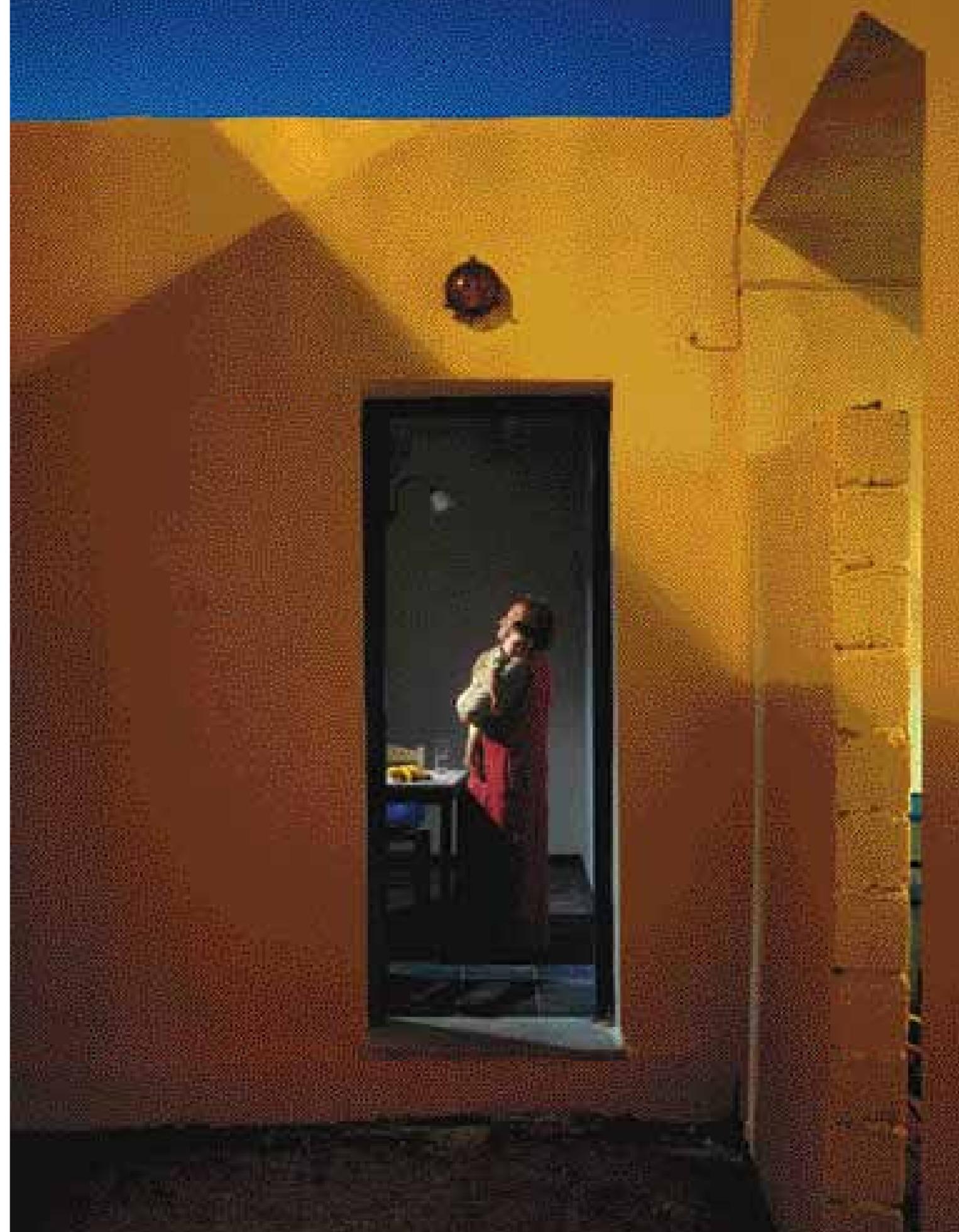


*Pavlos Fysakis, from the series “Land Ends”, 2007*



Abraham Pavlidis, from the series "Hearths of Tradition"

Panos Kokkinias, *Theoni*, 2006 >



raphers in Central and Western Europe in the 1930s, in Greece most photographers took pictures of ancient ruins, landscapes and classical studio portraits.

Concerning contemporary photographic creation important critics and writers in the country agree that it evolved in the 1970s and 1980s. All of the above, along with other elements of course, have brought certain common features to photographic works made by Greeks. Yet, I believe that it is a most complicated issue to talk of a unified, unique and concrete Greek photography.

### Nostalgia for the Past

One of the basic factors that has influenced the modern Greek world is a remembrance of the past and this has in turn affected the arts world. Nostalgia for the past is evident in the works of several Greek photographers. One of the most important photography critics, writers and curators in Greece, John Stathatos writes

very correctly, as far as it concerns this photographic nostalgia, the following: "...photography plays a significant role in the construction and definition of national identity - largely because photographic images seem to carry the promise that past experience can after all be retrieved and understood, but also because the invention of a coherent photographic narrative is seen as a legitimate source of national pride".

In addition, it's very important to mention that there was a profound delay in photography, and especially art photography, becoming a major player in the life of the Greeks. For instance, and as Stathatos writes, there was not even one photographic club in the country back in 1900 at a time when England had 256 clubs!

In the 1920s and 1930s several amateur photographers emerged but mostly from the Greek high society; that is, people who could afford photographic equipment and had an abun-



Nikos Markou

dance of free time in their daily lives. But even then the subjects tended to be more of a romantic, almost pictorialistic nature. The Greek landscapes, ruins and stereotype images of peasants prevailed. (Yet it should be mentioned at this point that there were also photographers who took war pictures from, let's say, World War II and the Asia Minor catastrophe as the photography historian Alkis Xanthakis explains in his last book). This is a crucial point to make as it proves the immense gap between Greek photography of the times and European or American photography. This is one of the basic reasons why it took so long for Greek photography to become "contemporary".

It comes as no surprise then that the editor of the British Journal of Photography, Simon Bainbridge commented on the evident

nostalgia for the past after studying the works of several Greek photographers during the 1<sup>st</sup> Photobiennale organized in Thessaloniki by the homonymous Museum of Photography; and his conclusion was shared by other foreign visitors of this event. But it should also be noted that many Greek photographers and writers are fully aware of this nostalgia and in many cases works inspired by it show high quality.

#### The last significant 30 years

The situation began changing impressively rapidly about thirty years ago. It is characteristic that the art critic Kostas Ioannidis who recently published the theoretical book *"Contemporary Greek Photography: a century in thirty years"*, explains that he

chose this title because he believes that in thirty years the Greek photographic production experienced things that took eighty or more years in other parts of the world (p. 13). In addition, one of the basic photography critics in Greece Hercules Papaioannou, who studied photography in the United States, notes characteristically that, *"In the past two decades Greek art photography has grown enormously, deriving stimuli both from the international photography scene, with which it now keeps pace, as well as from the fast development of Greek society"*.

In his prologue to his book *"Thoughts on Photography"*, the significant photography teacher and critic Platon Rivellis notes that photography has become even more "fashionable" in Greece. In addition, he mentions the nonexistence of a photographic audience in Greece in the 1970s (this sounds rather incredible when compared to the situation in other European countries of those days).

Certainly, there were events, people and efforts that helped in placing photography in a better position in Greece's art reality. For instance, in 1979 the *Photographic Centre of Athens* appeared; it was a relatively small exhibition hall that managed to invite interesting photographers from abroad. In addition, in 1977 *"Photographia"* magazine was published and showed new photographic works. A couple of years later, in 1988, the Photographic Circle was established by Platon Rivellis. It is a photographic school and meeting point that focuses mainly on quality black & white street photography. Furthermore, Aris Georgiou started the organization of the festival *"Photosynkyria"* in Thessaloniki (he was the one who together with Apostolos Maroulis & Yannis Vanidis established in 1987 the Greek Museum of Photography - later to become the *Thessaloniki*



Stratos Kalafatis, from the series "Archipelagos", 2006 - 2009



Evi Karagiannidis, from the series "Athènes, 7 jours après Paris" 2008

*Museum of Photography*). Next, in 1988 the International Month of Photography by Stavros Moresopoulos started being organized in Athens and the same year the journal "Photographos" was first published by Takis Tzimas & Menelaos Meletzis.

### New Greek Photography

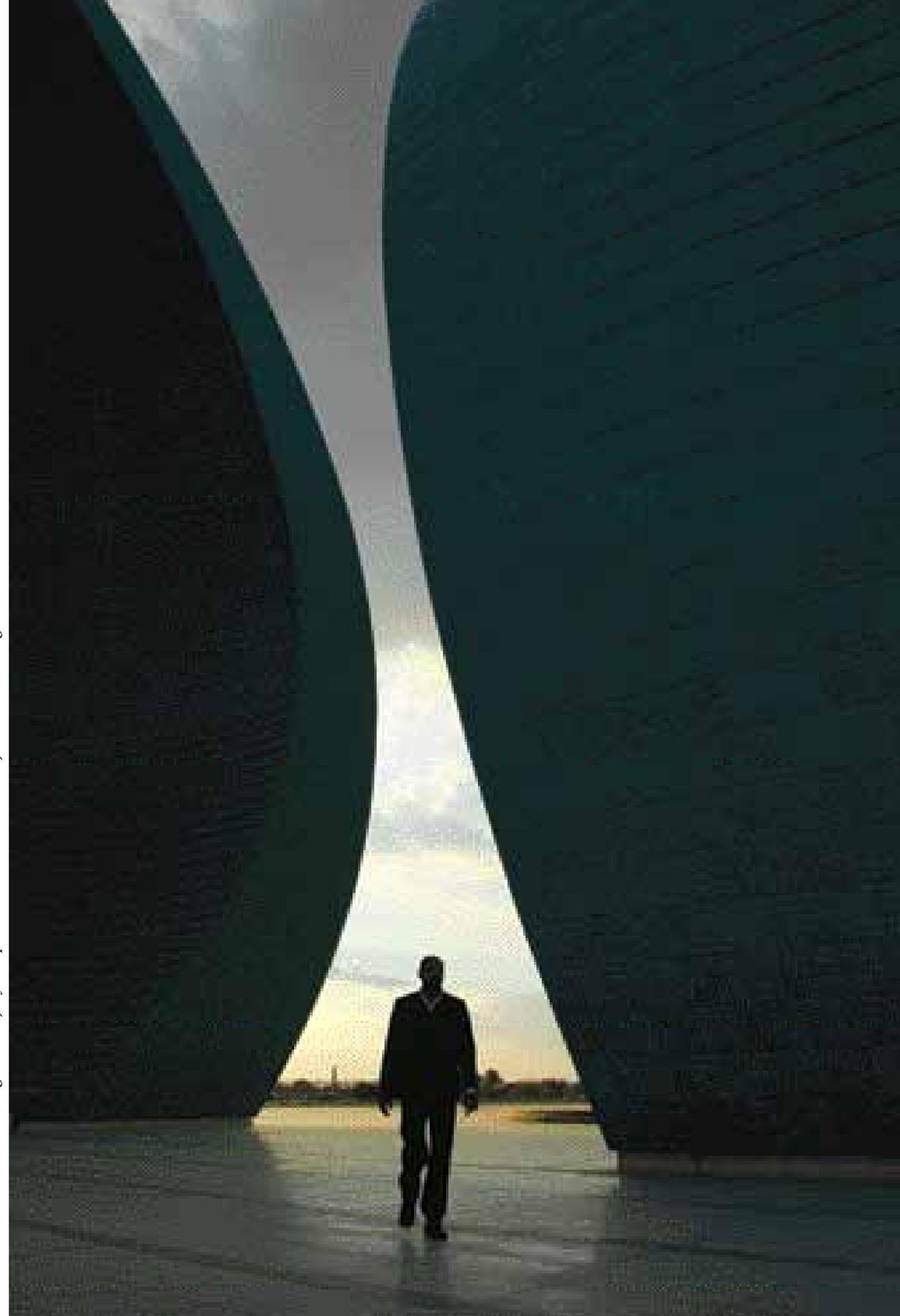
Back in the 1990s, the term New Greek Photography was coined and a relevant group exhibition was organized and curated by the photographer and critic John Stathatos (in 1997). The show "Image and Icon: New Greek Photography, 1975 - 1995", presented the work of 44 photographers and artists, who used the medium of photography to express themselves, in an effort to reveal/show/point how photography had finally evolved into a basic art form and how the photographic image had transformed itself in the period 1975 - 1995 in Greece. Showcasing various photographic techniques and styles, this large group exhibition presented to the public the works of photographers and artists like: Alexandros Avramides, Demosthenis Agrafiotis, Periklis Alkidis, Kostis Antoniadis, Aris

Georgiou, Yorgos Depollas, Lizy Kalliga, Nikos Koukis, Eleni Malingoura, Lia Nalbantidou, Nikos Panagiotopoulos, Epameinondas Schizas, Yannis Psychopaidis and so forth.

### Photographic Tendencies

According to anthropological and social studies, Greeks are very anthropocentric people - the human being is important. Their body language is intense, they need the presence of the other, they can talk about personal topics with a stranger, they are open and so forth. Although the situation is somewhat changing these days, back in the 1980s and 1990s, things quite fell under the above description and this is evident in several photographic works. As this paper doesn't aim at categorizing photographers to particular genres, it will only mention at points specific names and works that share certain characteristics without implying that a particular photographer belongs to a particular photographic genre. Some of the photographers who are interested in the human, in their own way (i.e. documentary, conceptual, fine-art, modern, postmodern etc) are for instance, John Demos, Ilias

Yannis Kontos, Baghdad Daily Life: Iraqi man walks towards the Martyrs Memorial in Baghdad, 2003





Myrto Apostolidou

Bourgiotis, Stelios Efsthopoulos, Nikos Economopoulos (by the mid-eighties, he was among the most successful professionally, being the only Greek who joined the Magnum agency in 1990), Kostas Ordolis, Haris Kakarouchas, Stratos Kalafatis, etc.

In addition, one of the basic tendencies in Greece today is to make pictures in the manner of Struth, Gursky and so forth. Huge color prints, perfect technique, spaces usually with no human presence, images that are often "cold & objective" and sometimes look unconcerned. What is also growing is an interest in staged photography in the manner sometimes of Gregory Crewdson. In this respect, one can now mention the names of

Manolis Baboussis, Panos Kokkinias, Kamilo Nollas, Yorgis Gerolympos & Nikos Markou.

Furthermore, there are many interesting works that are worth mentioning here without them being necessarily linked to a tendency. That is, it's worth mentioning the color pictures from a Greece that is disappearing by Avraam Pavlidis, the experimental work made by Takis Zerdevas, the black & white and color work of Evi Karagiannidis, the Polaroid pictures of wall corners by Kostas Kolokythas, the stereoscopic autoportraits of Athina Chroni, the domestic details of Yannis Theodoropoulos, the nudes of Stefanos Paschos & Stelios Skopelitis, the recent work of John

Stathatos, the art & fashion images of Tassos Vrettos, the portraits of Chara Varsamidou and so many others.

One should also not exclude the works of the youngest, or less known, generation such as those of Myrto Apostolidou, Adamantios Kafetzis, Myrto Papadopoulos, Alexandros Christodoulou, Yannis Chiotopoulos and so forth as well as the excellent photojournalistic work by Yannis Kontos, Yannis Behrakis, Lefteris Pitarakis, Louiza Gouliamaki and others.

To make this paper more complete, one should note, at least shortly, the Greek-American Constantine Manos and Lucas Samaras, respectively. The famous Magnum photographer Manos created his well-known "A Greek Portfolio" in the 1960s on islands and other traditional Greek locations and Samaras made his famous polaroid auto-transformations in the U.S. Yet, both belong to a different discussion.

What has played a truly crucial role in the evolution of contemporary photographic creation in Greece is the movement of Greek photography students to English universities. The phenomenon of Greek students in England is one that deserves deeper analysis (if it isn't already being prepared by someone; for instance, the writer and curator Alexandra Moschovi is already lecturing in England on issues concerning contemporary Greek photography). The way their work is affected and how it develops when they return to Greece is of high importance. Although some argue that most of the students simply "mimic" what they see abroad, this is certainly not always the case and it is a fact that this has resulted in more contemporary creations. In this respect, the following photographers can be mentioned: Vassilis Kantas, Eva Kalpadaki, Margarita Myrogianni, Yannis Katsaris and others.

### Photographic Education in Greece

The details concerning photographic education in Greece will simply be pinpointed to make the whole picture more thorough. At a time when other European countries have not one, but even three or more, universities that offer master and doctorate degrees in the field of photography, Greece can only offer a bachelor's degree at the Technological University of Athens. This phenomenon has a link to the generally problematic education in the country and this is a very long discussion that is of no relevance at this point. The nonexistent postgraduate studies result obviously in the decision of several students to continue their studies abroad and mainly in England.

Next, the Athens School of Fine Arts does have a photography department (the professor is Manolis Baboussis) but one cannot graduate from the university as a photography major. But, it's worth-mentioning that since its establishment in 2000, several students have chosen to complete their art major with photographic works.

Last but not least, there are dozens of private schools where photography is being taught but the situation is somewhat more complicated; others teach more contemporary works, many only teach classical street photography, some mainly commercial photography and so forth.

### Epilogue and Conclusions

I believe that one of the most severe drawbacks in the evolution of contemporary Greek photographic creation is a profound "addiction" on the work of great masters and particularly Henri Cartier-Bresson. There are dozens of clubs, public or private schools that praise unceasingly the works of the French maitre

and never move on to presenting other, more contemporary, genres of photography.

Next, in general, Greek photographers are very poor at finding methods for self-promotion. There are, of course, dozens of Greek photographers who know very well what is necessary for the promotion of their work and some of them are already being represented by private galleries or the Thessaloniki Museum of Photography. Yet, on the other hand, there are other photographers in the country with high-quality portfolios but no knowledge of art promotion. What is very important and needs to be improved is the way photographers promote their work domestically and internationally. For instance, it was only until very recently that Greek photographers heard of portfolio reviews and how helpful the latter can prove to be in the promotion of works. Inevitably, more efforts need to be made for the promotion of good Greek photographers, careful choice is necessary, repetition of the same authors needs to be avoided and, in some cases and as the photographer Evi Karagiannidis puts it sort of pessimistically, *"If I look at photography the way it is presented by Greeks abroad, I feel disappointed"*.

There is still quite a confusion as far as it concerns photography as an art form in the land of Homer; although things are getting better and better as time goes by. For example, there are still several people in the country who don't comprehend why photography should be considered art (this goes back to the general problematic educational system) and one may find even today published readers' letters in the best-selling photographic magazine in the country "Photographos" who seriously question photography as an art form. Perhaps a nice reference to this can be found in the words of Alfred Stieglitz, stating that, "There is art or no art. There is nothing in between."

In addition, there is an intense confusion concerning the categorization of photographers vs artists who use the medium of photography in their works. What makes things even more complicated is the absolute absence of postgraduate photographic studies in Greece.

There are very good contemporary photographers in Greece but, on the other hand, there are also several very traditional and classical ones who in a way neglect or are unaware of what is going internationally in the field of photography. Another issue is the absolute nonexistence of a photographic museum/major art space in the country's capital Athens concentrating solely on photography.

To conclude, photographic creation in Greece is promising. There are excellent photographers in the country, institutions like the Thessaloniki Museum of Photography or the Benaki Museum that promote photography, Greek works are exhibited abroad and overall things are moving fast. Let us just hope that this fast drive towards the future will also be a quality one and that mistakes of the past shall be avoided.

*"The illiteracy of the future will be ignorance not of reading or writing, but of photography"* László Moholy-Nagy

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Viktor Koen, Toy No. 24, from the series "Dark Peculiar Toys", 2006