



Self Portrait,
Michelakakis

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George Michelakakis, Visual Artist in 'the Time of Death'

Making an image means putting [the human] into the world as a spectator [...] producing the trace of one's absence on the world's inner wall and constituting one's self as a subject who will never see him or herself but who, seeing the other, allows the other to see what they might share (Mondzain 2010:313).

Ever since the association of “ways of seeing” visual images (Berger, 1972) with multiple interpretive processes bringing into play viewers’ own knowledge and beliefs, explorations of the figure of the artist as image-maker take place within discourses that seek to determine the role of the artist’s intentions, whether actual or ascribed, in the viewer’s interpretation of the meaning of an artwork with or without the aid of an “informed eye” (cf. Maes, 2010). Yet without returning to the idea that artworks contain *inherent* meaning, to something discoverable independently of particular artist/viewer relations to the artwork, the figure of the visual artist also has the potential to lead us back into a consideration of the fundamentals of a subject-world relation. In such a project one presupposes a certain understanding of the relationship of the artist, the artwork and viewer to their world and, in particular, to their historical era, an understanding that takes this relationship to be mutually informing in productive ways. In this paper and its sequel, “George Michelakakis, Art as Re-collecting Goya’s *The Third of May*”, we aim to explore this relationship by considering the meaning and significance for contemporary visual culture of a certain phenomenon broadly associated with the modern Western European historical trajectory which, having previously oriented itself in relation to a visionary future, now finds itself in the grips of what, borrowing from Picasso, we will be

referring to as “the time of death”. Having first emerged with the retreat of French Revolutionary ideals during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, by the late twentieth century the time of death has established itself as a world-shaping force. We aim to illustrate the impact of this phenomenon on visual culture through a discussion of the artistic practice of the Greek-Australian visual artist, George Michelakakis.

To examine Michelakakis’ *oeuvre* in relation to our thesis we proceed via a set of unusual associations: (1) Michelakakis’ artistic practice, which we introduce auto/biographically in the first section of this paper and analyse in some detail in the sequel; (2) Francisco de Goya’s famous painting, *The Third of May 1808 in Madrid* [Figure 1], whose significance in relation to the time of death we explain in this paper and whose formal details, including the enigmatic deployment of light, we discuss in relation to a selection of Michelakakis’ works in the sequel; and (3) Picasso’s reflections on Goya’s painting along with his own portrayal of death famously in *Guernica*. As we elaborate below (section 3), although Picasso was troubled by and struggled to explain the source of light in *The Third of May*, in particular Goya’s positioning of the much discussed lantern, he was nonetheless convinced that the painting “truly places us in the time of death”. What does death signify in this context? What is the relationship between death and the lantern that Goya inserts in *The Third of May*? What is it for the artist/viewer to be placed in the time of death and how does Michelakakis’ artistic practice respond to this positioning? These are the overarching questions that guide our analysis in this paper and its sequel (hereafter “our questions”).

In the present paper we argue that, while Goya is understandably a source of inspiration for Michelakakis, something significantly more than a relationship of inspiration connects these artists, despite the obvious temporal and cultural distance between Francisco de Goya (1746-1828) who served as the official painter of the Spanish Royal family, and George Michelakakis (1945-), a Greek-Australian migrant and political activist of the Left. The different historical moments to which the artists belong are nonetheless deeply connected to the abyssal movement of modern Western history’s nihilistic being. In both cases the artists’ experience of this history is in terms of the retreat of solidarity understood as the site and vision of the self-determining gathering that the French Revolution proclaimed, the wilful togetherness that springs from the liberation from imposed institutional

forms as portrayed by David, painter of the Revolution, in *The Tennis Court Oath*. For Michelakakis this experience extends to the late twentieth century retreat of Marxist ideals. Significantly for our analysis, both artists address the death of the gathering conceived as the schism between the indeterminate gathering, the mass of people historically readied to enact the call to gather, and its devastating institutional forms. But whereas Goya’s *The Third of May* opens up the field of the gathering of death, almost two centuries later Michelakakis finds himself dwelling in the already established world of death, uncovering its logic through an artistic path traversing more than forty years. In section 1 we illustrate the astonishing diversity of Michelakakis’ artistic production and, in conversation with the artist, identify those aspects of his *oeuvre* that speak to the overarching questions we raised above. In section 2 we locate the auto/biographical study of section 1 within our broader philosophical approach to art criticism arguing that the former must be incorporated into an approach that views the artistic practice under consideration as at once being informed by and informing the historical, whilst also addressing trans-historical questions. In sections 3 and 4 we begin formulating a substantive answer to our first three questions. Our paper concludes by identifying a selection of Michelakakis’ works whose careful study (in “George Michelakakis, Art as Re-collecting Goya’s *The Third of May*”) will allow us to demonstrate how they are deeply marked by the monism and world-shaping power of the historical phenomenon of the time of death, thus giving an answer to our fourth question.

1 George Michelakakis – visual artist and political activist

George Michelakakis belongs to the generation of migrants who arrived in Australia from Greece in the latter part of the post-war mass migration era. Migration was already a feature of the Pireas household into which he was born on the 12 December 1945, the year of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Michelakakis’ father, a member of the Greek Left, was a migrant from Crete who made his living as a cobbler in Athens. His mother, a deeply religious woman dedicated to the teachings of the Church, was an Asia Minor exile. Michelakakis’ earliest connections with drawing came in the form of a child’s creative escape from the excessive poverty and hardship of European life in the World War II aftermath, which was compounded in Greece by the fierce class conflict that led to the Civil War.

After serving in the military during the enormous social and political upheaval that produced Greece's 1967 military dictatorship, Michelakakis returned home to Pireas to study plastic arts and theory of art at the Athens based Vakalo School of Art from 1967 to 1971. He initially participated in group exhibitions and competitions, which earned him the 1968 Novice Award for pencil drawings produced in Cyprus whilst serving in the military. This activity was cut short when, joining other artists in protest against the Junta, he refused to take part in further cultural events. [See Figure 2.]

Michelakakis recalls his formative years as largely constrained by three possible life narratives: religious subservience, political activism and emigration. In the artist's words:

Before and during military service and whilst I was studying art, my artistic production reflected the apprehensiveness, the confusion and lack of direction that characterised young people of the time who were being pulled between religion and nationalism, and between exploration of their sexuality and the pursuit of some sort of living amid rather hopeless prospects. For the children of the working class with an interest in the visual arts, there were no avenues of information or support, unless their parents could afford to send them overseas (Michelakakis, 2016).

On the voyage to Australia and after arriving in Melbourne in 1971, Michelakakis produced drawings consisting of charcoal on cardboard. These works, like those he had produced in Greece, typically applied oil, charcoal or ink onto re-shaped and deliberately roughened cardboard surfaces. [See Figure 3.]

Whilst Michelakakis' initial Australian production focused on the esoteric and existential concerns that had informed his artistic practice in Greece, soon after coming into contact with Melbourne's vibrant Greek-Australian Left community and, indeed, after joining the Communist Party of Australia, his art took an explicitly political turn. This reflected the realisation that the issues he had previously attributed to the failings of a personal psychology were in fact symptomatic of a wider social inequality and systemic injustice. From 1972 to 1974 Michelakakis worked on a series titled "Torturers", which was first exhibited in Melbourne in 1978 at the Pinacotheca gallery and in Sydney in at the Bondi Pavilion. [See Figure 4.]

These pieces, variously hanging from the ceiling or the wall or sitting on the floor, consist of charcoal, led and ink drawings on cardboard backed onto wooden frames with plexiglass overlay. Whilst their form was inspired by the stiffness and limited mobility of the figures of shadow puppet theatre, thematically they referenced Kostas Varnalis' poem, "Dictators" and the poetry of Yannis Ritsos. From 1980 until 1987, during which time he had relocated to Sydney, Michelakakis produced the series titled "Curtains". [See Figure 5.] Continuing to reference an all-pervasive violent public and political culture that annihilates any semblance of solidarity, the "Curtains" are made from similar materials to those used in the "Torturers" series. This time, however, the cardboard surfaces are painted using acrylics and they are pierced throughout with three or four centimetre dark threads hanging out over the surfaces and sometimes exceeding the plexiglass with which they are covered.

Between 1989 and 1990 Michelakakis turned his attention to the "Books", a series of room length sculptures made from reclaimed discarded and second hand books sourced from around Sydney. [See Figure 6.] Working in cultural spaces defined by the loss of solidarity the artist aspired to re-assert familiarity with and control over regimes of knowledge production. Some of the works in this series were exhibited at Sydney's Art Space in a group exhibition. A number were transported to Greece towards the end of 1991 when Michelakakis returned to Greece to care for his elderly mother. Most were destroyed.

The truth is I wasn't at all inclined to care about the fate of these works. They were the product of deeply disturbing times that I wanted to leave behind (Michelakakis, 2016).

Immediately on returning to Greece Michelakakis was drawn to the newspapers and magazines that he found scattered on the streets of Pireas.

Because I never had a professional relationship to my art I had no need of confining myself to conventional choices of materials or organising my work around a particular medium. Over the years, I found myself increasingly drawn to the rubbish around the place and to its deployment in accordance with its specific symbolic power depending on where I was living. This kind of relationship to used and discarded objects dates back to the First World War and the disillusionment of many of Europe's artists (Michelakakis, 2016).

Repeating the techniques previously applied to Sydney's "Books", Michelakakis collected and compiled newspapers and magazines for use in his next series. "Man of Sorrows" was the first of a number of series that would feature drawing directly on newspaper. [See Figure 7.]

Production of the "Newspapers and Magazines" of Greece occupied the artist from 1992 to 1996. Whereas Sydney's "Books" had aspired to stand in for an absent solidarity against the background of the monumental failures of knowledge regimes, these works continued to deploy the same symbols in a new effort to denounce the superficiality of the cultural values that dominated Greece's public-political culture in the 1990s.

This was a period in which desperate people who were flowing into Greece in the hope of surviving the collapse of the "socialist regimes" in their own countries, were willing to do almost anything to survive. Racist attitudes flared alongside new opportunities for exploiting the vulnerable. For the first time in a long while the Greeks felt "superior" and they were eager to make this visible to all (Michelakakis, 2016).

The "Newspapers and Magazines" consist of drawings on newspaper of various sizes as well as floor length and extendable sculptures made from carved piles of newspapers and magazines, which were decorated with objects sourced from around the artist's neighbourhood, including blades, glass bottles and snail shells. These works remain in the basement of Michelakakis' family home where they were conceived, most likely in partially destroyed form. [See Figure 8.]

They were the product of a sense of the precariousness of everyday life in Greece at the time, my disgust at the ruthlessness of Greece's nouveau riche, the cheats who were exploiting the vulnerable, as well as my feelings about the hopelessness of the situation (Michelakakis, 2016).

Towards the end of 1996 and during 1997 Michelakakis worked on two more series. The first, his "Portraits of the Artist", apply pastels to broadsheet newspapers pierced with hanging black threads and featuring a variety of images of household tools and equipment found in the family home such as hammers, screw drivers, spatulas, sewing awls, knives, forks and brushes. These works consist of triptychs in which an image of the artist is flanked on either side by an image of one of these tools. [See Figure 9.] The "Portraits of Friends" series commenced following a short visit to Australia.

These Portraits were like a crack in the darkness, a magical light, like an image that can only exist in a dream state (Michelakakis, 2016).

Referencing a by-gone world, an irretrievable solidarity, the "Portraits of Friends" consist of thirty pieces of dry pastels applied to broadsheet newspapers pierced with black dangling threads and buttons. [See Figure 10.] Both series are located in Pireas.

A more pessimistic outlook, centred on the all-pervasive consumerism of everyday life and the failure of values, has subsequently dominated Michelakakis' artistic practice. Reduced copies of the "Portraits of Friends" were used to create "Labels for Consumer Products", a series made from ninety relabelled cheap wine bottles sourced from the local supermarket. Three copies of each of the thirty portraits function as product labels for the ninety otherwise symmetrical bottles that are displayed alongside one another. [See Figure 11.] During this period, Michelakakis also worked on a satire of the Greeks' relationship to religion and the power of the Greek Church, which gave rise to "The Artist's Urine" consisting of fifty small prescription bottles that had been given to the artist's grandmother in the 1950s and 1960s. The bottles are displayed in four metre length rows. [See Figure 12.] The artwork is located in the artist's family home in Pireas. Continuing to critique Greek society, from 1999 to 2001 Michelakakis also produced a number of large format drawings on newspaper. However, this work was cut short when he moved to Ikaria for eight years. On the island, Michelakakis' artistic practice referenced the problem of environmental degradation in works made from animal products (the faeces and wool of goats), sea salt and rubbish that washed up on the beaches. These consciousness-raising "Environmental Works" were shown at a number of group exhibitions held on the island over this period. [See Figure 13.]

Since returning to Sydney in 2009 Michelakakis has produced two more series of works, which were exhibited at The Shop Gallery in 2015 and 2016. Responding to the global refugee crisis, the first, "Blankets and Talismans", which was exhibited alongside a selection of the earlier produced "Curtains", consists of a range of talismans made from fabric, decorated with black paint and sewn onto regular single sized blankets sourced from Sydney's op shops and army disposals. On the weathered blankets, the talismans symbolising familiar markers of success and religious or

political commitment are portrayed in a negative light.[See Figure 14.] Indeed, “the swastika, the Euro, the crucifix, the gospel, everything foregrounds the symbols of our subjugation, of our voluntary servitude” (Karalis, 2015). The second series, “That Obscure Object of Desire”, reacts to the Greek Church’s opposition to the Australian Marriage Equality campaign and to the hypocrisy within the Greek-Australian communities with respect to sexuality. It consists of fifteen pieces, twelve drawings of male and female sexual organs and three of newspaper and promotional materials focused on the Church’s opposition to the Marriage Equality campaign. All fifteen pieces are surrounded by religious symbols, which are painted in gold on black backgrounds from various materials including fabric and cardboard. [See Figure 15.]

2 Art criticism as philosophical critique

The previous section documents Michelakakis’ reflections on the creative process alongside the artworks produced in relation to his experiences of his times diachronically, transnationally and from within urban and rural settings. Certain lines of continuity, both thematic and in terms of the artist’s style and choice of materials run through Michelakakis’ artistic practice. We have observed the impact of an intensified experience of alienation from the dominant values and public discourses of the times, which the artist links to the crushing power of the retreated solidarity that we mentioned at the outset. In many ways Michelakakis’ *oeuvre* participates in a long-standing tradition of deploying visual art as a form of protest. The critique of political violence, of class exploitation, of widespread consumerism and hypocrisy, the desire for and loss of relations of solidarity and of their institutional supports, as well as the artistic enlistment of ephemeral, discarded and otherwise useless objects to the service of new meaning-making, are all worthy of further study in their own right.

However, our present aim is to move beyond piecemeal considerations of how these particular(series of) artworks form new signifiers in relation to their themes. Although the artist’s image-producing practices form part of our inquiry, our approach to art criticism cannot be confined to the discussion of such meaning-making practices. Nor can we be focused primarily on the artist’s intentions in producing the artworks in question, though such reflections certainly play a role in our appreciation of the meanings of the

artworks to be examined. Despite being illuminating for certain purposes, the above observations do not suffice for an approach to art criticism that aspires to comment on the capacities of visual cultural production to speak to fundamental, philosophical questions concerning the subject-world relation. Indeed the questions we posed at the outset, and our rationale for considering the sort of opening that Goya’s *The Third of May* creates for Michelakakis’ artwork, arose from a broader conception of the role of the viewer as critic than as a mere interpreter of new signifiers since, at stake here is the ontological significance of the image-making and the artwork. Thus, before proceeding to give an account of the terms of reference of a substantive answer to our questions, we will explain briefly our understanding of a critical practice that is philosophical in its orientation.

Recognising the power of art to engender philosophical questions, Erin van Alphen follows Hubert Damisch in proposing a critical practice that pays attention to the *trans-historical* dimensions of artworks (van Alphen, 2005: 195). This he suggests is to take the artwork’s agency to function *as thinking*:

If art ‘thinks’, and if the viewer is compelled to think with it, then art is not only the object of framing [...] but it also functions in turn, as a frame for cultural thought (van Alphen, 2005: 193-194).

Although we agree that a focus on art’s agency, its productive power or ability to act as a “frame for cultural thought” does indeed fall within the scope of a philosophical approach, our discussion thus far suggests that van Alphen’s characterisation is rather one-sided and perhaps too general for our purposes. In suggesting that our focus should be *trans-historical* questions, the proposal downplays the significance of *appropriately situating* philosophical questions in relation to the historical phenomena being explored, which may nonetheless extend beyond specific historical moments. That Michelakakis’ artworks, like Goya’s *The Third of May*, are activated at the site of the inheritance of the French Revolution is significant for the philosophical questions we have posed. As we can see from the “Curtains”, the “Books”, “Portraits of Friends” and “Newspapers and Magazines” for which the retreat of solidarity is pivotal, the artist arrives at the site of the production of the visual objects only after monumental historical events have given rise to the possibility of visual portrayals revealing that which

shapes the subject's fundamental orientation to the world. Michelakakis' "Curtains", which call forth the infinitely disorientating death of an entire historical era, are the strongest case in point but, as will become clear once we have explored the impact of the death of time on the historical era (section 3) that frames possibilities for artistic production within the time of death (section 4), the point holds for these other works as well. So appealing to trans-historical questions, though necessary, will not suffice to differentiate our philosophical approach to art criticism.

Given the role played by the historical era in the production process, the artist is in one sense a late-comer concerning possibilities for the disruptive framing of cultural thought to which van Alphen appeals. Arguably, the producer of the "Curtains", the "Portraits of the Artist" or the "Portraits of Friends" is already dead in death. At the same time, in so far as the artist is this late-comer with respect to the time of death, in enacting this death with the production of his art, he is also positioned to announce the arrival of the time of death to his world, a world that directly springs from this time. The artist is thus a messenger and a herald whilst also being the message and the prophecy of what is already the case. Ultimately the artist is the pain of the deadly wound the world is, a wound that art cannot heal. The only option is to move deeper into the depths of the wound: death in death. In this regard art is not so much a critique of *different aspects* of the world, no matter how abhorrent, but a struggle with the fundamental orientation that informs its various dimensions. The artist is therefore ghostly in the sense of being *not-in-and-of* this world and, in giving visual shape to the singularity of the 'this', his artwork is relatively powerless to effect change. So although we are indeed interested in Michelakakis' artwork with a view to accounting for its agency or power to shape cultural thought as van Alphen (2005: 192) proposes, left unqualified this suggestion attributes too much power to the visual object. If what defines art is its power to reveal and give shape to what is truly fundamental to the world, and if in the present historical moment this fundamental is *death*, then art is also powerless to overcome this death. Moreover, in such a case the practicing of this powerless power defines the singular being of the artist, which incorporates and extends beyond the specificities of biographical and interpretive relations. Here singular being *thinkingly registers* the historical in a way that *produces*

the fundamental in the shape of the artwork. The artwork is thus the product and an agent of this encounter. On this account, we can adopt an approach to art criticism that views visual objects and the artistic practices giving rise to them as at once informing and being informed by the historical, without thereby reverting to an approach that focuses exclusively on artworks as expressions of the times that produced them. Let us turn next to the substance of this mutual agency and, specifically, to the significance of death for the artist.

3 Death and Vision

Death is indeed central to the modern Western European experience of history, as we can well appreciate when viewing paintings like Goya's *The Third of May* and Picasso's *Guernica*, to give two prominent examples spanning the previous two centuries. Both works depict the senseless loss of life, the former with a scene from the execution of Spanish patriots by the Napoleonic invading French army and the latter with a representation of the Spanish city of the same name in the aftermath of the dropping of Nazi bombs during the Spanish Civil War. Having left behind the eighteenth century tradition of historical painting that produced bloodless battle images featuring acts of heroism, these emotionally charged works no doubt reference the specific mass killings in order to draw the viewer's attention to the horrors of war.

Yet, contrary to initial appearances, as visual representations of death both paintings do more than just this; they also open up and reveal a deeper layer of historical disturbance, one that frames and informs the specific instances of the all too human violence they depict. For Goya and Picasso, as for Michelakakis, death transcends the materiality of the specific deaths brought about by senseless wars. T. J. Clark hints at this in relation to Picasso when, at the conclusion of his study, *Picasso and Truth*, he reflects on Picasso's response to the civilisational impact of the bombing of Guernica:

For suppose modernity were to come upon an instant in which the whole imaginative structure of habitation – of being "in", of shaping the world around in an implicit model of room and window – looked death in the face. Suppose this were more than a one-time atrocity. Suppose that in the bombing of Guernica modernity in some sense encountered

its future and saw a whole form of life collapsing – ceasing to exist as the determinant form of the human (Clark, 2013:281).

Significantly from our perspective, with *Guernica* modernity “looked death in the face” in the final and all-encompassing sense of an implosion of the world under its own historical weight. From the standpoint of the Western European gathering, this death is the terrible anti-vision of the future represented as the site of a total collapse. It is in this sense that Picasso’s depiction of death, a depiction of an historical event of exceptional brutality, nonetheless also serves to orient the modern Western gathering and to shape its historical mode of being in its fundamentals, albeit negatively in the present instance.

In so far as he proposes reading Picasso’s *Guernica* in terms of a collective death that floods the future of the Western European gathering, Clark alerts us to the idea of a *fundamentally altered* experience of historical time. For, as Emanuel Levinas observes,

Since the Bible, we [Western Europeans] are accustomed to thinking that time is going somewhere, that the history of humanity is going toward a horizon, even if it goes through detours or vicissitudes. Europe built its vision of time and history on this conviction and this expectation that time promised something. Despite its rejection of transcendence and religion, the Soviet regime was the heir of this conception. Since the 1917 revolution we felt that something was still being heralded, prepared, in spite of obstacles and mistakes. Even though the collapse of the Soviet system entails many positive aspects, it causes a disturbance that reaches profound categories of the European consciousness. Our relation to time is in crisis. In fact, it seems to me that we Westerners absolutely have to situate ourselves in the perspective of promising times. I don’t know to what extent we can manage it without it. This is what I find most disturbing in the present situation’ (Levinas, 1994:133).

By comparison with *Guernica*, which we might say visually functions in the extended aftermath of the loss of “promising times” that Levinas laments, the experience of history in visionary terms informs Goya’s *The Third of May* in an explicit way. Although, its image of the executed bodies ahead of the seemingly endless line of those awaiting execution depicts a similarly all-encompassing devastation, *The Third of May* nonetheless focuses our attention on the martyr facing the firing squad with upraised arms in despair.

Here death is not reduced to the apocalyptic destruction of a gathering that has turned against its own future. For in the relationship between the martyr and the firing squad through which we encounter the very horizon of an infinite failure to connect, we are nonetheless reminded of a vision of togetherness, one that the French Revolution had announced and which violently retreated in its bloody aftermath. As we argue in the sequel, this experience of history in terms of the retreated vision provides the context in which Michelakakis’ work derives its significance.

Moreover, through its depiction of the death of the gathering, Goya’s painting arguably points us in the direction of a history that is even more complex and intriguing than that of Picasso’s *Guernica*. For, as we argue elsewhere, it suggests that the death of the gathering already belongs to the gathering of death.¹ At the beginning of the 21st century we still find ourselves in the abyssal spaces of the Revolution’s idea of the gathering that has retreated. Against the receding horizon of the future this historical gathering of death is being intensified through both the repetition of deaths and the deepening of death. We might say, the worst keeps happening anew precisely because it has already happened in the sense of having drawn us into the depths of its abyssal momentum. Thus it is not just the future that is implicated in *The Third of May* but all dimensions of historical time or, indeed, of the death of time.

4 The time of death in art

For Clark, it is only against the background of the supposition of modernity’s total collapse – a collapse we have associated through Goya with the death of time – that we can make sense of the enormity of the artistic challenge Picasso faced when painting his *Guernica*. Clark sum up this challenge with the question: “How on earth was painting to represent such an ending without falling itself into spatial rubble, a spatial nothing [...] This was the problem.” (Clark, 2013: 281). That Picasso grappled, perhaps inadequately and over some period, with this problem is also suggested by his own reading of Goya’s achievement with *The Third of May*, as reported by two of his friends in separate conversations with Picasso. In one of these conversations, Gilot recalls Picasso saying that Goya’s painting:

truly places us in “the time of death”. All the elements in the picture are chosen and placed in a hierarchy, deriving from the enormous square

lantern, placed on the ground in the centre of the canvas like the light of eternity (Gilot's recollection of Picasso's words, cited in Clark, 2013: 250).

Similarly, in another conversation about *The Third of May*, Malraux recalls Picasso commenting:

And then there is the enormous lantern on the ground, in the centre. That lantern, what does it illuminate? The fellow with upraised arms, the martyr. You look carefully: its light falls only on him. The lantern is Death. Why? We don't know. Nor did Goya. But Goya, he knew it had to be like that (Malraux' recollection of Picasso's words, cited in Clark, 2013: 248).

Unable to say why Goya placed the lantern in the scene as he did, Picasso nonetheless confidently identifies his own artistic sensitivity with that of Goya: having realized that Goya “places us in ‘the time of death’”, he shares with Goya both the knowledge that the lantern *is death* and the inability to say why this is so. But awareness of “the time of death” leads Picasso no further than to an appreciation of the death of time itself, as evidenced by his *Guernica*.

Picasso's inability to give an answer to the question Goya's lantern poses may have had something to do with his failure fully to appreciate that in reality Goya's lantern is death in the deeper sense of shining light on *the gathering's otherwise invisible schism*. Elsewhere, we argue in some detail that Picasso was haunted by the schism between the stone-like formed gathering of the members of the execution squad and the fluid formlessness of the executed patriots that he had visually encountered in *The Third of May*.² This would explain why he took death at once to define the painting as whole whilst also being identified with the enigmatic lantern that, in a visually surprising manner, is the only object that Goya placed in the space *between* the line of victims and their executioners' rifles.

What we are suggesting is that the deaths depicted in Goya's painting, the executions, presuppose death as the schism that operates, not on the level of a visual *event*, but rather as the invisible field in which the viewer is forced to dwell – a field that has been constituted *through and as* the gathering of death, which the likes of Picasso could not avoid. In essence the viewer is placed *between* the indeterminately gathered victims depicted in the artwork as indiscriminately receiving the force of the violent act, and those who enact the killing, the faceless executioners. The viewer is thus situated in the empty space of the schism between the formless mass of

powerless people who have been disconnected from the now ossified institutional forms to which the firing squad alludes, and the firing squad as the formed gathering that violently imposes itself just because it is *not connected* with the mass of citizens.

Although the depicted act of killing presupposes this schism between form and formlessness, in so far as one participates in the historical aftermath of the visual event it is the twenty-first century viewer who gives effect to the schism itself by dwelling in its space. In contrast to the viewer of *Guernica* who arguably participates in the visual event simultaneously as victim and as perpetrator of the apocalyptic violence, in dwelling in the space of the silent violence of the schism – the death before deaths that *The Third of May* announces – Goya's viewer is positioned to imagine the very overcoming of the schism itself. For at the same time as looking death in the face through the eyes of the martyr, one can imagine the transformational possibilities were the members of the firing squad able to lift their heads and look back upon the martyr's face.

It is precisely this appreciation of the possibilities opened up by schism of death that distinguishes the artistic practice of George Michelakakis as a fellow traveller in the time of death. Ultimately Picasso's reference to the time of death signals the death that frames particular deaths, a death that, as we can appreciate from the careful study of Michelakakis' works that will follow, marks the pleasures of peace just as much as it denounces the killings linked to wars. The time of death lays bear the meaning of the historical moment, which, referencing one of Michelakakis' series, constitutes something like the dropping of a curtain between individuals and peoples who have thus become unrecognisable to one another. As we argue in the sequel, Michelakakis' “Curtains” give visual presence to the invisibility of the schism of death that Goya's lantern illuminates.

Indeed, as we hope to show in the analysis to follow, between the light of Goya's lantern, which in occupying the centre of *The Third of May* execution scene, illuminates the invisibility of darkness, and the all-consuming darkness portrayed by the black surfaces of Michelakakis' curtains we can trace the explosive formulation and the no less astonishing reformulation of key moments in the story of “the time of death”, a fundamental orientation of the world that Picasso could only name. Like two cupped palms, the images of the lantern and the curtain hold the era together, an era that is proving itself to be nothing short of a prolonged Third of May.

In exploring the character and significance of the ‘time of death’ in Goya and Michelakakis, our story will thus focus on the famed power of one famous piece of art in relation to a series of works by a comparatively unknown artist. In particular, we propose an account of the significance of the movement of Michelakakis’ artistic practice from the faces of the “Torturers” to the all-encompassing darkness of the “Curtains”, the institutional failures in the shape of the “Books”, the “Newspapers and Magazines” and ultimately to the visionary power of the “Portraits of Friends”. Whereas with *The Third of May* Goya marks a beginning in creating the opening of death, Michelakakis silently takes stock of a kind of end, redefining this beginning in terms of a perpetual intensification, where the world of the time of death is concerned.

Notes

- 1 “Picasso’s *Guernica* and the *Time of Death*”, working title of paper in progress.
- 2 Ibid.

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Artworks



Figure 1: Goya, *Third of May 1808*. Oil on canvas, 268 x 347 cm, 1814. In Museo Del Prado Madrid. Image courtesy of Wikipedia. Retrieved 20 October 2016. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Third_of_May_1808.



Figure 2: Michelakakis, *Sketch*. Pencil on paper, 21 x 30cm, Kirinia, Cyprus, 1966. Artist's personal collection. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 3: Michelakakis, *Self-portrait*. Charcoal, ink, tempera on cardboard, 100 x 70cm, Melbourne 1971. Artist's personal collection. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 6: Michelakakis, *Melancholy and the Inability to mourn in public*. 965 books and other materials, 8.6m x 1.12 x 19cm, Sydney, 1991. Image courtesy of the artist.

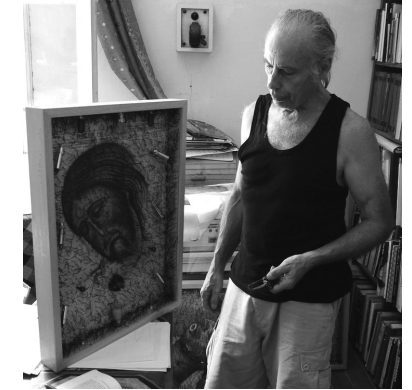


Figure 7: Michelakakis, *The Man of Sorrows*. Pastels on newspaper, thread, light bulbs, 40 x 70 cm, Pireas, Greece, 1993, pictured with the artist. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 4: Michelakakis, *Torturer*. Charcoal, ink, tempera on cardboard, 79 x 80cm, Melbourne 1973. Private collection. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 5: Michelakakis, *Curtain*. Acrylics, charcoal and threads on cardboard, 200 x 110 cm, Melbourne, 1981. Artist's personal collection. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 8: Michelakakis, *The Alphabet of the Nation*. Part of 24 piles of newspapers and other materials, 30 x 40 x 30cm per pile, Pireas, Greece, 1995. Image courtesy of the artist.

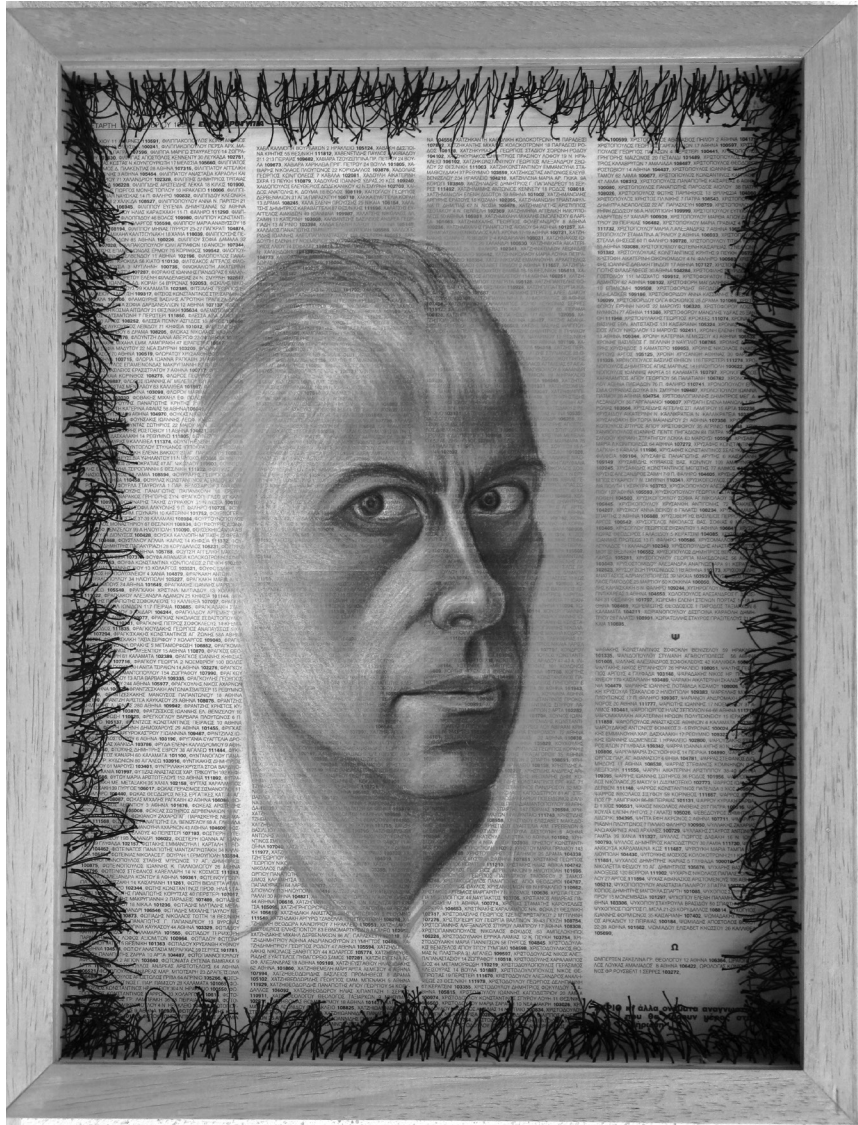


Figure 9: Michelakakis, *Portrait of the Artist*.
One part of triptych, pastels on newspaper and thread,
30 x 40cm, Pireas, Greece, 1996.
Artist's personal collection.
Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 10: Michelakakis, *Portrait of Tes Lyssiotis*.
Pastels on newspaper, thread and buttons,
40 x 57cm, Pireas, Greece, 1998.
Artist's personal collection.
Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 11: Michelakakis, *The Blood of an Indian Migrant in Greece*. Three bottles of wine, wax and labels, Pireas, Greece, 1999. Image courtesy of the artist.

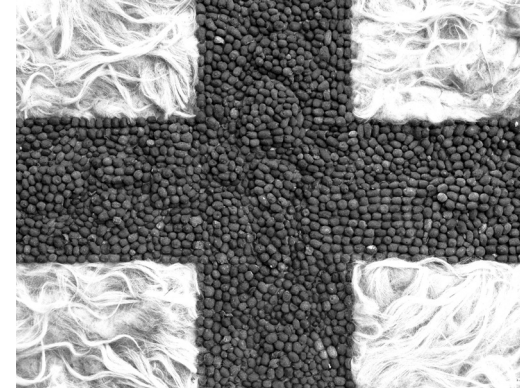


Figure 13: Michelakakis, *The Destruction of the Mountains*. Goats' faeces and wool, 100 x 80cm, Ikaria, Greece, 2006. Image courtesy of the artist.

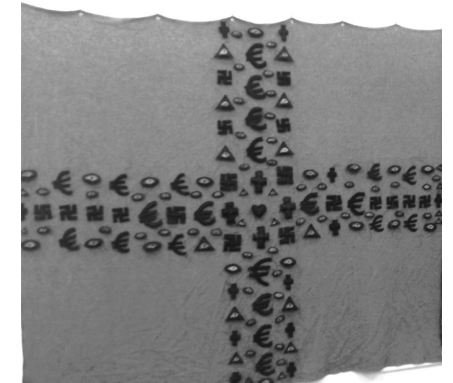


Figure 14: Michelakakis, *Blanket with Talismans*. Blanket, paint, fabric, thread, 200 x 180cm, Sydney, Australia, 2015. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 12: Michelakakis, *Medicine for the Treatment of Religiosity*. 50 bottles containing the artist's urine, Pireas, Greece, 1999, pictured with the artist. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 15: Michelakakis, *Safe Icon*. Pencil on paper and other materials, 49 x 55cm, Sydney, Australia, 2016. Image courtesy of the artist.