

Vicky Karaiskou
Open University of Cyprus

Greek culture in the years of internationalization

Abstract

The radical transformations, economic and political, which gradually took place in Greece after 1974 created a new framework for the reception, understanding and use of the various manifestations of artistic creativity and of culture in general. In the 1980s, political stability, economic development, and particularly, the changed position of Greece on the European map with its entry into the European Economic Community at times made the notion of culture a tool of politics, and at others a means of boosting the nebulous concept of national identity. In the middle of that same decade, economic prosperity created new requirements among the population, one of these being an involvement with art, in its various forms. A mistaken interpretation of the democratization of culture, in conjunction with a media explosion, gave products of art the role of social distinction. Thus on the one hand, involvement with culture was experienced as participation in an entitlement, as a freehold on property, as it were. On the other, artistic creativity in general, and particularly anything new and avant-garde, was identified with a dynamic attitude to life, with financial success and social recognition. This created an environment without precedent in Greek terms which eradicated the ideological inertia of previous decades.

Introduction

A survey of Greece in the 1980s clearly reveals the defining features which shaped the perception, reception and management of culture. The need

to defend and preserve Greece's cultural heritage from the alleged erosion which close relations with the European Union would bring defined one fundamental axis. On the other hand, a readiness to project a modern face formed new conditions. The political management of the existing ideological patterns, together with the sharp rise in the standard of living and the attitudes resulting from that, made a significant contribution both to the ongoing conflict between Greekness and Europeanization, between tradition (Close 2005; Tsoukalas 2001; Veremis 2001; Veremis & Koliopoulos 2006) and modernization (Diamantouros 2001; Leontaritis 2001; Veremis 2001) and to the ways in which these created the new models.

In the wake of the first period after the restoration of democracy and Greece's entry into the European Economic Community in March 1981, the need for freedom was crystallized in the ideology of the new socialist governing party (Anastasiadis 1993; Clogg 1995; Kazakos 2000; Liritzis 2000; Voulgaris 2002, 2003); in the promise of equal rights for all in opportunities for development, progress and, above all, power; and in the permanent removal of class boundaries, which resulted in the dynamic rise of the lower social strata (Close 2005). From the mid 1980s in particular, the public gradually prioritized individuality and consumerism (Iordanoglou 2003; Kazakos 2000; Veremis & Koliopoulos 2006; Voulgaris 2002), as a result of the simultaneous expression both of the internal policy of acquired rights and equal opportunities as well as of the competitiveness of the European perspective. The intense emotional reactions brought on by the fear of the loss of Greece's own cultural identity were balanced by the material benefits which flowed from the entry into the European Economic Community – transforming the idea of a European coalition into a source of personal gain. Therefore the need to defend and project the self within a society which visualized social identity, while providing everyone with access to material goods, led to the gradual aggrandizement of excess and pleasure.

On the ideological level, the use of the terms sovereignty, independence and justice in combination with the adjectives popular, national and social played a particularly significant role. This correlation equated and linked terms and symbolic concepts, creating an intense emotional charge, and at the same time, encouraging the already existing comfortable ambiguities. In particular, the identification of popular with national made it insidious to distinguish

between the two concepts, and this nullified any attempt towards a rational approach of the practical problems and actual reality (Voulgaris 2002). The term 'people' (*laós*) acquired a shade of meaning somewhere between nation and working class (Gavriilidis 2006), and was understood as being identical with the middle class, the non-privileged and the lower middle class. This ambiguity contributed in a conclusive manner not only to its very wide acceptance and adoption, but also to its transformation into a term which was *per se* a symbol, leading to the birth of the phenomenon of secularism (Alivizatos 2001; Mavrogordatos 2001; Tsaousis 2001; Veremis et al. 2011). So from having been hailed by the generation of the 1930s as the genuine custodian of Greekness, it now became 'the authentic exponent of legality' (Veremis et al. 2011, p. 44) – an interpretation with very specific political connotations. On the pretext of the above collocations, role models were reversed, away from the few and best, and towards the many and average, while the terms 'elite' and 'authority' were considered hostile to the 'people'.
Culture within the borders and out of them

Official cultural policy in the 1980s was actuated simultaneously by two poles, which intersected and supported one another: the first was that of the ancient legacy and of mass, popular culture, while the second was that of European and Greek identity. In both cases, one pole served to present a veneer for Greece's European face abroad, while the other appeased the conservative culture at home, supporting its convictions and needs as a counterweight to the other.

The insistence on elevated national cultural values, all of them encapsulated in the demand for the return of the Parthenon marbles, formed the central pillar of external cultural policy in the 1980s. The marbles matter had engaged public opinion since as early as the start of the 1950s, but activity directed towards their repatriation had been intensified at the beginning of the 1960s. The demand was first made officially by the Greek Minister of Culture at the International Conference of UNESCO in Mexico in August 1982. Its elevation to a matter of 'national importance' (Anon 1988, p. 29) and its treatment as a major ingredient of national identity, together with the sanctity of the location from which they had been taken, turned the demand into an existential problem, polarized the public around rigidly restrictive positions and raised the demand for their return into an issue-spectacle,

suitable for internal consumption, which both enflamed and dampened the Greek psyche, nurturing divisions in the bipolar Greek and/or European identity.

The media value of the return of the marbles and the way in which the symbolic significance of the antiquity was recognized are also demonstrated by the fact that the repatriation demands never included all the ancient artefacts which had been removed from the country, but focused exclusively and solely on the cultural symbols which had already been brought into play by the foreign policy of the 1970s, in order to achieve Greece's entry into the European Economic Community. Observations such as 'What will we do with the Elgin Marbles unless we make sure at the same time that our fellow citizens are intellectually aware enough to understand their value?' (Pilihos 1983, p. 2) eloquently describe the gap between the emotionally-charged nationalist slogans and everyday reality. The elevation of the marbles to the status of cultural fetish added to the veneer of understanding and appreciation, the superficiality and lack of substance in the approach to part of the past which, from the foundation of the modern Greek state, had acted as the psychological security base for the Greek people.

The vagueness of the constituent parts of the Greek identity, which inevitably resulted in the question, 'Where do we belong?' was an often repeated subject of discussion in Greek society. It was rekindled on the occasion of the 'Europalia' in 1982 – the first official presentation of Greece abroad in its new European identity – and led to the contrasting phenomenon of Neo-Orthodoxy. It is interesting to observe the way in which the anti-western policy of the left-wing parties and of the governing party itself crossed paths with the religious and cultural anti-westernism of the Orthodox Church, and the reflections of some of the intellectuals of the time – from both the left and right of the political scene – regarding the value of the traditional Greek way of life. The deep marks left on Greek society in the 1980s by this bizarre conjunction were due to a superficial consensus: that conservative discourse, which always typified the introverted culture of Greekness, and which, to a large extent and because of the seven-year military junta, had been identified with the carriers of repression and isolation, assumed the guise of free thought and action, change, progress, modernity and insubordination which characterized the thought of the

left-leaning parties. In this way, the search for the authenticity of the Greek Orthodox tradition, and its interpretation through a variety of criteria derived from different experiences and directed towards different needs, explained Greekness on the basis of the particularity and singularity of its world view. That created differentiating, and in essence, phobic visions which aimed equally at the often ideologically diametrically opposed supporters of the groups involved.

A particular point, where all the above antitheses, and direct and indirect political objectives were reconciled, was the institution of the 'European City of Culture, 1985'. This was the result of an initiative by the Minister for Culture, Melina Merkouri, which at its inauguration, was renamed as 'Athens, Cultural Capital of Europe'. The opening ceremony was carried out with the Parthenon as a backdrop, in exactly the same way that in January 1977 – only six months after the renewal of the country's candidature to become a member of the European Economic Community – the General Director of UNESCO, with the very same background, had sent a message appealing for the monuments of the Acropolis to be saved (Anon 1977). In both cases there was television coverage of the ceremony, which was also transmitted on international networks. In November 1985, just before the start of the Cultural Capital events, the European Economic Community supported the restoration and conservation work on the Acropolis monuments with the sum of 13 million drachmas, about 5000E – a symbolically charged gesture, especially given the intensity of the demands for the return of the marbles. In the intervening six months, instead of the emphasis in the events being placed on the artistic production and culture of the other member states of the European Community, so that the Greek public might have the opportunity to get to know and become familiar with them, it was set rather on a Greek-centred foundation. This was in accord with the official foreign policy of the Ministry concerned, thus overshadowing the European identity which the new institution advocated.

Experiencing culture and its expressions in a festival atmosphere intensified the confusion regarding the essence and real challenge of communion with artistic creativity. That created an additional veneer of knowledge and comprehension, encouraging, at the same time, distortions and providing fertile soil for all sorts of manipulation. The recreational

content and the disparate programme of events scheduled for 'Athens, Cultural Capital of Europe' based on the dimension of the spectacle (Aggelikopoulos 1985; Doumani 1986; Vasilopoulou 1985), was essential in homogenizing the people and maximizing the desired result, which was to rally round the axis of Greekness. The huge participation in any events of mass or popular nature demonstrates precisely the dynamic which these practices had acquired in the meantime and the needs they met. Of interest, in regards the points it touches on, is an article from the mid 1980s by P. Efthymiou, later Minister of Culture (2000-2004), in which he comments on the approach to, and experience of the manifestations of culture as mass culture and consumption in all spheres of social life, and as a concept identical to leisure. This notion creates the obligation for a work of art to be 'socialized', to use the channels of the market, following the "tastes" of the average public' (Efthymiou 1987, p. 45-6). The invocation of the prestige of culture on the one hand, and on the other, its ill-conceived democratic exploitation, in a way which was radically opposed to the procedures and institutions that elevated its products into works of official or high art, favoured the adhesion to already familiar symbolic patterns of speech and image, homogenizing the reactions, creating mass compartments and recycling in public space all the behaviours of personal space. The emergence of the social identity of the culture vulture, as a direct consequence of, and reaction to this average culture of the masses, took shape at exactly the opposite pole and reflected the abstention from the prevailing social symbolisms, in other words from the sum total of visual and verbal labels which constituted the veneer of comprehension.

Kitsch as an indicator of the abuse of symbols

R. Hamilton's work, *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing*, which was presented at the 'This is Tomorrow' exhibition in London's Whitechapel Art Gallery in August 1956, not only marked the start of pop art but was also prescient in regards to the morals of the whole of the western world over the following decades.

The middle class, in the course of its social advancement and its efforts to convince (first itself and thereafter the target class) that it had the qualities required for its social elevation, adopted and reproduced the art and aesthetic conventions of the establishment. In this way it expressed its symbolic acceptance of the ideology, the cachet and the superiority of the members

of the upper class. But the absence of any empirical relationship with the culture of the urban environment and consumer goods, through lack of time in which to come to terms with them, and the simultaneous divorce from its own set of references, as well the absence of any cognitive background that education could have provided, served to disorientate its aesthetic identity, which at the same time was also shaping the aesthetics of the peripheral areas of Greece. Within the new historical reality of Greek society, the now acquired right to the ownership of material goods was also expressed in the appropriation of the symbolic dimension of works of art, both from the western academic tradition as well as that of Greek tradition (both academic and folk). Both traditions promoted specific cultural values and provided the illusion of participation in the essence of their aesthetics through the reproductions and consumption of copies. A very well-observed publication from 1884, *Κάτι το «ωραίο»: Μια περιήγηση στη νεοελληνική κακογουστιά* (*Something 'beautiful': A tour of modern Greek bad taste*) eloquently presents an interpretation of the aesthetic preferences of average Greeks throughout the country as this emerges from the manner in which they incorporated into their own environment the copies and imitations of objects and works which were reference points in western culture (Benjamin 1978; Berger 1986).

Official cultural policy in its attempt to meet the expectations and needs, that to an extent had itself created, stressed, on the one hand the borrowings and symbolisms used, thus encouraging the dispersion of kitsch, and on the other, contributed further to the identification of pivotal concepts such as tradition or classic with beauty and Greekness. In conjunction with the downgrading of education and the treatment of culture as a festival, which drew its essence and set its limits within the context of leisure and the spectacle of mass participation, it turned the latter into a successful channel of communication with the so-called 'soul of the people'. Cultural centres, which spread throughout the country thanks to the active involvement of politicized groups of youngsters and of municipalities, functioned under the same guidelines. Although they were built to close the gap between the well-educated upper classes and the middle strata, and to improve the quality of life by providing an outlet for creativity, and by informing and educating, they developed a variety of activities which were only a partial answer to the previous challenges, since they were understood exclusively through the

logic of exploiting leisure time. They were therefore shaped in accordance with the existing social models for the use of cultural products, and with the conventions of anodyne recreation demanded by the market. In these conditions, the discouragement of critical thought, disputation, debate and genuine knowledge of, and acquaintance with something different, which might bring into question structures considered entrenched and fixed, was almost inevitable. Proof of the most important casualty caused by the illusion of comprehension of, and participation in cultural developments was the particularly limited numbers of visitors which the National Gallery and private galleries constantly attracted. On the other hand, events such as the 'Panellinia', (Panhellenic Exhibition) (Doumani 1988), which was organized and structured to include mass appeal, together with individual and isolated exhibitions and events (Christofoglou 2003; Savvopoulos 1985; Stefanidis 1985) which were planned without any cohesion by public agencies, intensified the confusion regarding the criteria which defined the quality of the cultural product, and further, placated those taking part, while at the same time, simplified and distorted in their minds the real significance of involvement with culture and its forms.

Contemporary art in the era of consumption

In contradistinction to official policy, the gradual but steady re-orientation of the art market, that is private initiative, towards contemporary artistic production – Greek and international – was matched by an even more limited public which was now allied to the values engendered by the new economic order of things and summed up in the notions of the new and the different. The sole approach and demonstration of flexibility in this direction on the part of the state and within the country, came with the successful application to mount the '2nd Biennale of Young Artists from Europe and the Mediterranean' in November 1986, in Thessaloniki. Successful though it was as a festival (due to the astute manner in which it was presented) it was precisely because of that it failed to create the infrastructures that would have contributed in the long term to some genuine contact with contemporary artistic creation, giving Greece the position of an equal partner in the European multiculturalism, with its own distinct contribution.

The tipping points for contemporary artistic production in Greece during the 1980s were set by two seemingly unrelated phenomena: the exhibitions

organized by the DESTE Foundation, which for the first time brought the Greek public into contact with the contemporary visual arts scene; and the radical changes in the landscape of the means of mass communication. The later included: the abolition of the state radio monopoly in May 1987 (Liritzis 2000), and the arrival of satellite TV in December 1988 and private channels in November 1989. In practice, both phenomena made a significant contribution to the crystallization of the way in which contemporary art was engaged and received in the following decades. The DESTE Foundation was set up in 1983 by a Cypriot collector and entrepreneur, Dakis Ioannou, and initially aimed its exhibitions and sponsorship of art abroad. When it appeared in the Greek environment it was already carrying the prestige of a valid cultural foundation. On the other hand, after 1988 the publication of a series of life-style magazines (Karakousis 2006), directed at a very broad public, made their new aesthetic and ideological mark immediately apparent through the discourse and imagery which they adopted. International art (mainly artworks and artists considered to be flagships for the international scene) appeared in their pages in a colourful and user-friendly layout which did not discourage non-specialized readers. At the same time it was connected to the new emerging social values. Certain titles, subtitles, page headings and texts commenting on the first two exhibitions of the DESTE Foundation, in 1988 and 1989, may be taken as heralds of the new moral values which were to inundate Greek society in the years immediately following, and as confirmation of the way in which art and culture were already indissolubly linked to consumer models. The presentation of exhibitions and of cultural activity generally was often in pages bearing the titles/headings 'Art and Spectacle', confirming the involvement with forms of culture as making part of leisure time activities. Allusive puns and verbal patterns ('Art-os [Greek for 'bread'] and spectacle') were equating art with basic nutritional items and hence underlined, in an indirect manner, the vital needs which art is designed to meet. At the same time, the evaluative equation of the experience of the spectacle with concepts concerned with survival, as well as the symbolic charge borne by culture, created complex ideological patterns which fed the capricious, utilitarian and superficial way of approaching works of art.

The impression created by the subject matters of the DESTE Foundation exhibitions confirms that there was not merely an aesthetic but also an

ideological gap between Greek and international artistic accomplishments. The exhibition 'Cultural Geometry', in January 1988, at the House of Cyprus in Athens, mounted by Jeffrey Deitch and consisting entirely of works by foreign artists from the D. Ioannou collection, gave the puzzled public of the Greek capital the chance to experience direct contact with recently-produced works by artists, the overwhelming majority of whom were young and unknown, and who were making their presence observable on the international stage. Together with the exhibition 'Psychological Abstraction', which followed the next year, in the same place and again mounted by Deitch, they attempted to pose a series of reflections, approaching the works of art from a point of view which was, in Greek terms, entirely unconventional: a critique of marketing mechanisms and advertising in the first; and a commentary on the ways of handling and promoting the consumer product, together with the visual experiences created by the mass media in the second. Both coincided with the current experience of the unabated rise in consumerism in Greek society.

The third in the series of exhibitions by the foundation, entitled 'Τόπος-Τομές' ('Locus-Incisions') in the same year, this time mounted by a Greek, is of interest because it was the first seriously structured exhibition that presented exclusively young, Greek artists within the country. It is important to stress the private nature of the initiative, in contradistinction to the lack of corresponding interest on the part of the Greek state, whose sole move in this direction had come abroad, with the exhibition 'Emerging Images', which it had organized within the context of the 'Europalia' in 1983 (Christofoglou 2003). Its transfer to Athens later was again accomplished on the initiative of, and with funds provided by DESTE, and it was presented at the Intercontinental Hotel – part of the group of enterprises belonging to the foundation's collector. The reluctance of public agencies to support and bear the costs for the presentation of such exhibitions within Greece was due, in large part, to the role occupied by art and, by extension, the agencies representing it, in the minds of the public. Even though the psychological emancipation from the past and the resultant cultivation of contemporary forms of artistic expression in local production were significantly reinforced in the 1980s, references continued, to a large extent, to have their roots in the historical and ideological accretions of previous decades. The vacillation between the aesthetically new, without references or a historically accepted

past, and the remembrances brought by forms of expression which were, again, new in Greek terms but already ideologically charged, is clear in the reception of environmental art. As a new genre and manner of visual art expression for Greece at the start of the 1970s, it had created powerful points of contact with the public, since it was identified with the tense political and social milieu of the times, with the result that it continued to affect public reactions even when those conditions had been removed.

In the 'Locus-Incisions' exhibition in 1989, the use of the same location as that of the previous two exhibitions symbolically equated the Greek artists with their foreign counterparts. On the other hand, their presentation within the framework of the activities of this particular foundation also, and by association, highlighted their qualitative equivalence, simultaneously bestowing prestige which was translated into social recognition, with financial rewards. Dealing with contemporary Greek visual art works on the basis of their competitiveness on the international stage and on the terms shaped by the latter was unheard of for the Greek milieu. This fundamentally ideological shift was due exclusively to the fresh needs engendered by the prosperous society, particularly within the Greek environment, and to the rekindling of the symbolic distinction which the use of a work of art enjoyed. The risk involved in something new and the challenges it might give rise to were balanced out by the familiarity which the life-style publications brought with them and the new models they created. In a very short time and thanks to the new social values which had taken shape, what had once been thought reckless and *recherché* acquired the stamp of being an indispensable term which guaranteed the right to participate in the new social order of events.

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