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THE ENTRANCEMENT
OF RUINS
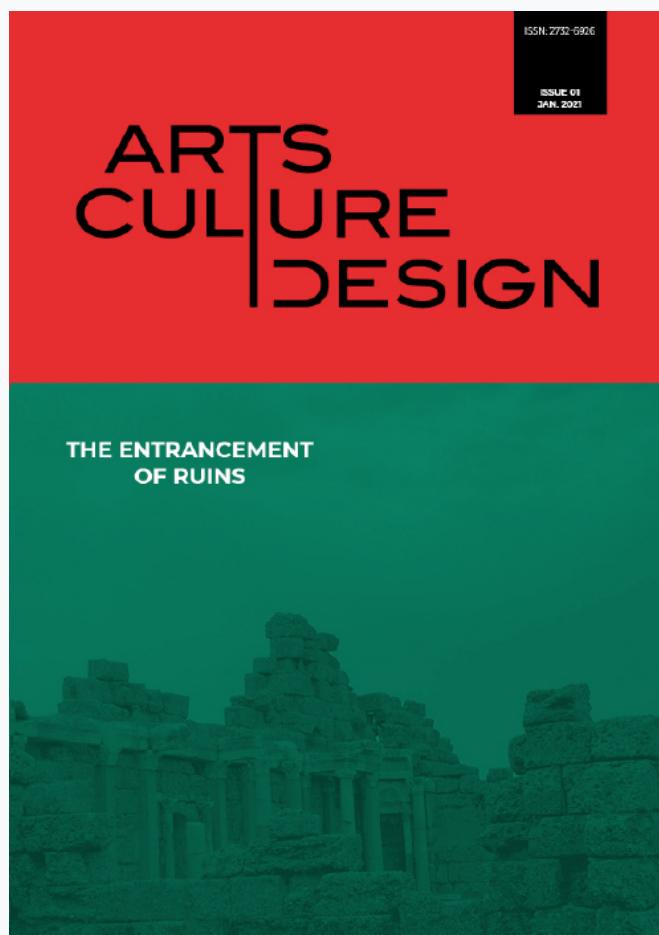
THE BEGUILING ALLURE OF RUINS

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Figure 1: View of the Buffer Zone, Nicosia, still from the art project, Urban Walker, 2009, single screen audio-visual projection by Haris Pellapaisiotis. Photograph, Pellapaisiotis, 2009.

ABSTRACT

This essay argues that the symbolic depiction of ruins through countless photographs and other forms of represen-tation of the Nicosia Buffer Zone, rather than challenge the military division of the city, seems to sustain a territorial border mentality based on expectations of division and what a military zone should look like. It argues that the ruin is not simply a remnant of the past and therefore a signifier of what once was but is a physical space that can be occupied in the present as a catalytic site for experimentation in living and individuation.

In 2009 I had invited the anthropologist Peter Loizos to lead me on walk that resonated with him through Nicosia. Peter had suggested retracing an early morning path he took every day from the flat that he rented when he first moved to Nicosia in early 2000, following his retirement from the London School of Economics. The walk cut across the flow of morning traffic from the Syrian Arab Friendship Club restaurant to the British High Commission, inside the Nicosia Buffer Zone (BZ). Entering the last phase of our walk, Loizos and I stopped to photograph what was ahead of us before we continued into the ceasefire zone, which extends into the BZ. We were looking at a military landscape, but this was not the familiar and much-iconised ruinous parts of the BZ, but a countryfied scene of untamed nature; Loizos commented:

> We are now entering the ceasefire zone, that's why there is no photography, there is military on both sides, in the middle is the UN, we will probably see a UN watchtower in a minute and all this extravagant untamed nature is because nobody has built here since 1974, or even earlier, perhaps 1964... I don't know the military history of this particular piece of ground; it might have been an earlier point of conflict rather than a later point. You've got to know exactly what you are looking at in Cyprus – because different things destroyed different communities at different times. You mustn't assume everything happened in one year – it didn't! It's [a] very important part of Greek [Cypriot] official propaganda to pretend that everything went wrong in 1974, whereas anyone who really knows the history knows that things started to go wrong in the middle 1950s... (P. Loizos, "personal communication," April 11, 2009).

The BZ is often depicted through its ruinous parts which are deemed photogenic and such images have come to be seen as symbols of a military landscape, of division and conflict. The visual language that is often used in the construction of such images borrows heavily from a style of photography known as social documentary, which has become synonymous with the idea of faithfully documenting the world as it really is. As is often the case with the way the Nicosia BZ is depicted, such an approach to photography often replicates expectations of what the aftermath of a warzone should look like. And so, the images that emerge of the BZ perpetuate already established ideologies through familiar forms of representation and they themselves are subsequently imitated, recirculated and re-performed, when in actuality the BZ is paradoxically both a more mundane and complex space. To illustrate this point, below we see a set of postcards depicting Nicosia as an exclusive militarised zone, dramatised through its off-limits appeal.
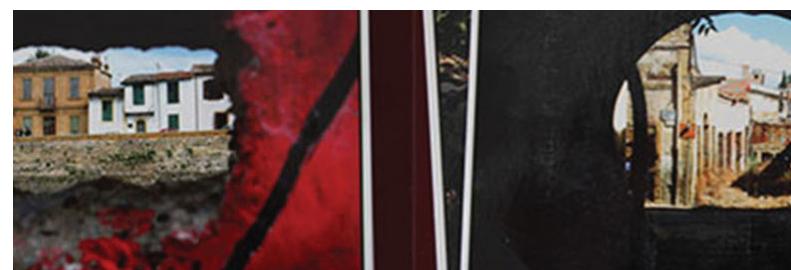

Figure 2: Photograph of postcards of the Nicosia Buffer Zone. Original postcards credited to Cyprus International Press Service. Composite arrangement photographed by Pellapaisiotis, 2017.

In contrast, the photograph below, Fig. 3., taken by the author, shows a more mundane view of one of the crossing points of the BZ in Nicosia, whilst Fig 4., shows that the photographs above are in fact postcards designed to be sold as landmarks of the capital. It would not be stretching the comparison too far to suggest that the iconic visuality of such images as in Fig.2, do colour our vision of the BZ as an exotic military zone and contribute to the preservation of the aura of discordant sides at war with each other.

Figures 3 & 4: Ledra Street, Nicosia Buffer Zone checkpoint and postcard stand. Photographs, Pellapaisiotis, 2017.

Even acclaimed photographers and artists who purport political and aesthetic

Figure 5: Kaimakli village, Buffer Zone on the outskirts of Nicosia. Photograph, Pellapaisiotis, 2008.

ideologies beyond the obvious and sensational, still find themselves succumbing to expectations of sensationalising what is considered to be military geography. For example, in advance of the academic workshop *Liminal Zones – Nicosia, Cyprus* 2008, I was contacted by an international photographer who was contributing to the workshop, to show him some less well-known areas of the Buffer Zone.

of militaristic symbols and ghostly ruins from inside the Buffer Zone (Fig 7&8). This is a type of imagery that can be accessed from image banks such as Google Images and has already been iconised by countless visitors for whom the Buffer Zone is an exotic site. In short, when a socio-politically historicised site such as the Buffer Zone gains preference over less politicised locations in Nicosia, the artist becomes incumbent with the need to be seen to perform the semantics of the politics of place, within which she or he has now situated themselves.

Figure 6: Kaimakli Buffer Zone with photographer Armin Linke and architect Aristides Antonas, surrounded by Greek Cypriot soldiers as Linke points his camera towards the Turkish occupied side of the Buffer Zone. Photograph: Pellapaisiotis, 2008.

Figure 7: Nicosia Buffer Zone. Photograph, Armin Linke, 2008.

The photographer's broader work claims an interest in depicting the way human intervention shapes the landscape. I was disappointed but not surprised that in the end, he did not use the photographs he took during our walk on the outskirts of Nicosia; I suspect for the simple reason that this part of the Buffer Zone stretches into flat, visually unexceptional fields, probably mined by both sides, but not visible and therefore not iconic enough as a landscape of military conflict. Instead, on the web page of the conference there appeared the familiar irresistible photographic depictions of a miscellany

Figure 8: Nicosia Buffer Zone. Figures 7 & 8. Show photographs taken by Armin Linke, for the conference Liminal Zones – Nicosia, Cyprus 2008. Downloaded 10/12/2020 from: http://liminalzones.kein.org/sites/liminalzones.kein.org/files/newimages/ReN_005353_2_C/index.jpg

In an earlier essay titled *The Art of the Buffer Zone* (Pellapaisiotis, 2014), I had written how on the ground the signs are never quite as clear as they are assumed and the boundaries not as stable as they are anticipated. Artists situating themselves within a real political space are compelled to engage with the symbols, narratives, and meanings which reside within the spaces of the place out of which they operate. It is expected that artists placing themselves within such environments are seen to find meaningful ways by which their art may interrupt, challenge or disturb existing narratives or they may find themselves unintentionally contributing to the stabilisation of existing political or ideological viewpoints. However, operating out of what is deemed to be a politically charged environment does not necessarily secure a more dynamically political outcome. It is not surprising then to find the artist and theorist Victor Burgin, after his involvement with the art project *Suspended Spaces*, 2011, which used the ghost town of Famagusta in Cyprus as a site for thinking of "Europe based on its sidelines, its absences, its overlooked factors, and its forms of otherness" (Introduction, 2011), warning that the convergence of art, politics, and place may result in "a place of hesitation for those no longer sure of their direction, or a place of prevarication for those unclear in their intent, even the site of an evasiveness that preempts criticism…" (Burgin, 2011). Although clearly a different location to Nicosia, Famagusta is part of the continuation of the Buffer Zone that cuts across the island. As Burgin indicates, the artist (international or local) cannot simply function as a global political commentator without some sense of reflexive recognition of their role as a new narrative agent of the place and locality out of which she/he operates.

Certainly, the consistent images which have emerged from inside the UN-controlled area have been ones of vacant spaces, abandoned buildings and the stillness of dusty objects waiting for their past owners to repossess them as if to bring them back to life. Such picturesque scenes hold a strong visual allure for those who do get to journey inside the UN militarised zone, but they also seem to sustain a territorial border mentality rather than challenge it. If one could read any value in such photographs, then for Greek Cypriots it is one of nostalgia and a desire to repossess something that was lost and could somehow emotionally be regained through the verisimilitude of the photograph. Cultural theorist Nikos Papastergiadis' writing on the work of the artist Socratis Socratous raises the following concern: "does art *only* add more rubble to history?" (Papastergiadis, 2012). The question as it is expressed by its author is more general than specific to Socratous' work. Nevertheless, within the context of Cyprus' political history, it is legitimate to consider whether artists undertaking the task of addressing complex political issue are, in the end, simply adding another layer of sedimentation to already over-crusted narratives and ideologies of territorial thinking. Papastergiadis refers to Socratous's photographs by emphasising the compelling allure of the ruin for artists in general, whilst referencing Sigmund Freud's and Walter Benjamin's fascination with the subject. Some of Socratous' photographs do depict the disused Nicosia airport with its broken windows and debris-filled corridors – the ruin is there in his work, although I am less convinced that he is driven by the usual picturesque aesthetic associated with the subject. He is too sophisticated an artist for that and this is demonstrated in his sculptures, where the aspect of the ruin gains complexity as it is presented in dialogue with the modern and the archeological at the same time. In fact, his reference to ruins resulting from the 1974 war in Cyprus, must be seen in parallel to a Nicosia that is being constantly dug up to reveal its heritable past, which archeologically is traced back to its ancient roots via a succession of colonisers. Often, such archeological finds come to light because of planning to build modern habitats and commercial properties in and around the city's historic medieval centre. Nicosia can be described as a city where the physical arrangement of construction and excavation, set against the ruins of war, are ever present to the eye, and where histories are tangibly caught up in the making of the modern capital in ways that interact with life-narratives in the present. It is the potentiality of the interconnective dialogue that is created by the coming together of these elements that I find appealing in Socratous' work. I don't share Papastergiadis' view that the artist desires to find in ruins "forgotten histories and alternative ways of being"

(Papastergiadis, 2012).

Indeed, leafing through Socratous' book *The History of the War of Cyprus,*[1] what catches my interest is that the artist casts his attention beyond the obvious militarism of the divide to include everyday spaces outside the military zone, thereby indicating how the web of militarism extends further than what is symbolically recognised as a military site. Writing about military geographies, Rachel Woodward explains that military

Figure 9. Sculptures by Socratis Socratous, Katalogos, 2016, solidified modelling sand, dimensions variable. Πλάνητες [Planetes], installation shot, Shelley Residence, Pafos 2017, European Capital of Culture. Photograph, Orestis Lambrou.

geography, "at its most extreme is an ideology which subordinates civic or governmental ideals to the military, and promotes a policy of aggressive military preparedness, but militarism may not necessarily manifest in this way" (Woodward, 2004). Thus, militarism can best be understood as the effect of the military and as something that effectively spreads like an atmosphere beyond the obvious signs and sites of war. In fact, we may indeed fail to recognise the shapes and forms of "militarism" beyond the recognition of the military, and therefore become the unwitting agents of ideologies contrary to those we seek to criticise. This may have to do with the way the beguiling allure of the ruin, as a material signifier, is associated with time beyond the present and with something lost, rather than as a living site whose future potential is that it is in dialogue with the past.

Sometimes it takes an outsider-insider

such as anthropologist Yael Navaro to recognise the contagiousness of militarism as it extends into a haunting of social reality. It is important to acknowledge that Navaro is Turkish – as opposed to Turkish Cypriot– and therefore, like Loizos, an outsider-insider to Cyprus. As an observer, looking from the outside in, in her book titled *The Make-Believe Space: Affective Geography in a Postwar Polity,* she refers to the ruin in relationship to the Turkish occupied north part of Nicosia which she explores through the notion of affect in terms of its transmission and its endurance as a presence that lingers like a phantom, permeating spaces and objects. Thus, for Navaro the ruin is something generated through relations and "people participate in the making of ruins" (Navaro 2012:152). Affect as an energy transmitted through ruins is therefore the product of generative relationships, but it also has an afterlife where 'affect' itself may propagate new relational practices that bare on the personal and the subjective and may extend beyond the visual ghostly allure of ruins to influence the creation of polity in the present. She substantiates this position by explaining how objects and property "exert a phantomic presence" (Navaro 2012:14), in spite of the bodily absence of their owners. Her argument rests on demonstrating how Turkish Cypriots have lived in a state of the phantomic for decades in spaces and properties left behind by Greek Cypriots after the 1974 military division of Cyprus. In her book, she argues that this state of affectivity has produced an enduring "melancholic" presence that permeates "in all social, political, legal, and economic transactions in northern Cyprus" (Navaro 2012:14). According to Navaro, the creation of "affective geography in a postwar polity" is structured on the phantasmagoric presence or melancholic absence of the other through ruins. Navaro's text is specific to her experience of north Nicosia in particular. However, what is relevant in the context of this essay is her attempt to nail down the aftereffect of affect as a tangible presence that is contained within spaces and which continues to have an impact on the societal as part of collective consciousness. In other words, the society learns to live with the ruin in such a way as

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[1] The title is derived from a publication by Antonio Maria Graziani's The History of the War of Cyprus, published 1687 which offers an account of the Turkish conquest of Cyprus, 1570-1571.

to ignore its affect, but nevertheless the visual presence of ruins form part of the collective perception of the place.

This observation raises the question from both a political and art perspective of how we may rethink our participation as artists and intellectuals within such a complex space as Nicosia in ways that allow us to move away from hegemonic interpretations of territories. The challenge to art is how to be actively involved in creating assemblages that may indicate the becoming of the type of spaces we wish to live in and which reflect the type of subject we wish to become.

This is largely a hypothetical question but one which nevertheless has an urgency and I will respond to by referring to a walk I had undertaken in Nicosia with the Turkish Cypriot activist Murat Erdal Ilican, for the art project *Walking Narratives and Affective Spaces*. This project has been developed by Haris Pellapaisiotis where the artist invites someone to lead him on a walk anywhere in Nicosia that holds some personal resonance for them. Nicosia is explored as a fluid space that engenders individual narrative connections that emerge through lived experiences and are then developed into narrativised artefacts through a process of engagement, dialogue and collaboration between invited contributors and the artist. Murat led me on a walk starting at the furthest northern point on the Venetian walls of the old Nicosia town or as he pointed out "the furthest southern point depending on which side of the fence one's perceived place of positioning, origin, or reference is". We cannot cross into the BZ because it is "fenced off by a razor wire with UN signs, hanging cameras and wildly grown trees and bushes". Instead, we make our way inward and westward toward the busy part of the old town and through the streets of the old Turkish neighbourhood of Tahtakale. As Illican explained, these streets are filled with histories and stories of their violent past, provided that one knows how, where and what to look out for. "The marks are there that indicate a particular intolerance or hate that the space possesses" of a time of blindness and outrage that have led to killings. He further comments on how our shared walk was taking us "both towards the future and towards the past at the same time, allowing for a privileged present to present itself; to be admired, observed

and walked through". As we walked, he talked of how for an instance in time and space what had come to constitute the social and politically real in Nicosia was temporarily ruffled, when for several months a part of the BZ was occupied by a local variant of the global Occupy movement. He had participated in the occupation of the BZ, which he refers to as a short-lived period of utopianism, and in many ways, more real than the ongoing international settlement negotiations that for decades have produced next to nothing for Cypriots other than to maintain the status quo of the division. In my conversations with him I begin to understand how those participating in the Occupy the Buffer Zone (OBZ) movement interpreted their presence within the BZ as a community 'other' to traditional or even contemporary notions of Greek and Turkish Cypriot identities. For him, identity is something to be discovered rather than simply inherited. This view is in contrast to what he considers to be a liberal agenda of bi-communal thinking that is fostered by an intellectual elite, which nevertheless continues to hold onto more established notions of identity. He points out that bi-communality and reconciliation, which originated in radical thinking, communal activism and civic action, have over the years been appropriated and watered down into liberal agendas (Demetriou and Ilican, 2018). In contrast, the core of the OBZ experiment emphasised the necessity for the appropriation of the BZ as a living space where multiple communities could test and experiment with practices of the everyday that went against conventionality. The Buffer Zone, as lived by the OBZ community, was no longer simply a "dead zone" filled with ruins but was transformed into a radical space of possible activations and experimentation, where individuation was formed and tested through relational practices of everyday living. It became a space transformed, where the becoming of being and the becoming of place became inextricably bound together in a way that does not allow one to be seen merely as an 'effect' of the other. By this logic, the identity of being emerges only in and through the material spaces it occupies, but also by the same logic the spaces occupied gain their dynamic identities by the way of being. For the occupants of OBZ, any territorial definitions of ethnicity, "Greek or Turkish, Greek Cypriot or Turkish Cypriot", had little

currency. Identity became something to be discovered, imminent and contingent upon the ability of the actants involved to capture a wider range of forms of knowledge by experiencing the continued social dynamic of living together outside territorial thinking and by creating their own spatial reality. As Ilican expresses, "the Buffer Zone, [is a space] where there are many beasts, but no sovereigns and *where once lived many Occupiers in freedom*" (Ilican, in unpublished doctoral dissertation Pellapaisiotis, 2020).

As a conclusion, what can be extrapolated from the short-lived life of OBZ is the radical proposition that art needs to step out of the melancholic aura of the image of the ruin and to step into the ruin as a physical space that can be occupied in the present, not in terms of a watered-down liberal agenda of bi-communality and reconciliation, but as a catalytic site for experimentation in living where individuation of the subject to come can become.

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