The Entrancement of Ruins
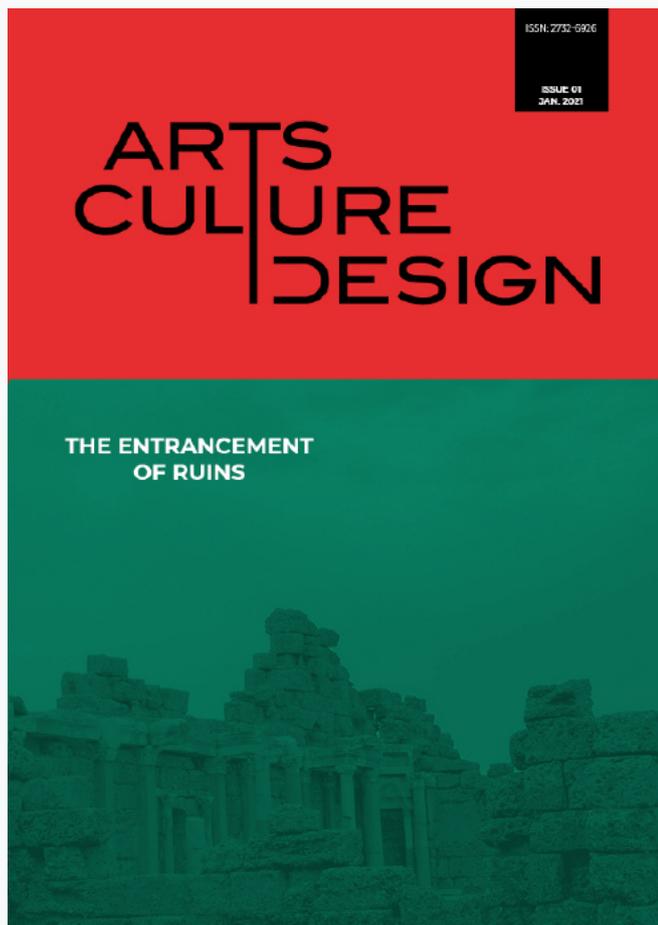
BOOK REVIEW ON PALIMPSEST

Christos Varvantakis, PENELOPE PETSINI, NIKOS PANAYOTOPOULOS

BOOK REVIEW
ON PALIMPSEST

East and west of the Wall [...] a half-world of ruin, drawn in two
dimensions, crags of war.
(Le Carre 1963:11)

Like all walls it was ambiguous, two-faced. What was inside it and
what was outside it depended upon which side of it you were on.
(Le Guin 1974:1)

Dr. Christos Varvantakis
Goldsmiths, University of London

Fig1
Nikos Panayotopoulos – Penelope Petsini:
Topography of Terror, Niederkirchnerstraße,
Berlin. From the series Aufarbeitung: The Wall.

The photographs of Petsini and Panayotopoulos in "Palimpsest" trace the remnants of the Berlin Wall and of the world that it had both embraced and been embraced by: traces of the time when the Wall was a concrete, material entity, and of the trail this era has left. In documenting these, they act as a poignant reminder that the Wall was neither built in a day, nor demolished overnight. Official histories have singled out August 13, 1961, the day that the Wall made its appearance in the media around the world, just as they have prioritised images of people demolishing parts of the wall on November 9th, 1989. But just as there was a border before, with fences already in place during the 1950s, so also the Wall and its traces (material and immaterial), survive to this day. The Wall, and what preceded and followed it, is as much a site which amplifies time as it was a spatial dividing line - a place in which past and present meet to consider the ruins of an *unfinished rhetorical discussion* (*see* Bruner 1989).

But then again, the Wall was ambiguous from the moment of its conception. For the West, it was assimilated to the enclosure of a concentration camp, suggesting a direct lineage between the practices of DDR and the Nazi Germany. Conversely, for the DDR it was the 'anti-fascist protective wall', a boundary line between two opposed worlds. As one of the core visual icons of the 20th century, the Wall has been signified according to political intention and will. *These are its ruins, its legacy and histories*, I think while looking at these photographs, in which almost no humans appear. Humans are present, of course, albeit as shadows, photographs and statues: timeless reproductions of human presence. There are habitual spaces, particularly in the second part, and there are human traces hinted at across the series, but the photographers deliberately omit the contemporary human presence. The images are of ruins, remnants, traces of what had been the DDR (and hence also of the former Eastern Bloc in general), fragments - or rather inscriptions - of the city's history. The complexity of the means by which such traces are being erased or preserved is also apparent in the second part, 'Restricted Areas'. This section documents spaces associated with the notorious Stasi, which are carefully preserved and extensively exhibited as sites of memory closely identified with the former Eastern bloc -the photographers

seem to visually and critically explore how the process of signification helps associate DDR's legacy with the terror of a surveillance state.

From the cold landscapes of the ruined Wall in the first part, ("Aufarbeitung: The Wall"), to the coldness or warmth of artificial light in the second, ("Restricted Areas"), the photographs are *cold*; mostly low-saturated, pale, dim. This kind of iconography provides a stark contrast to the re-invented, vibrant cosmopolitanism of Berlin, which is the way the city wants to talk about itself, to itself and to the world. The photographers insist on the cold, frosty atmosphere, which has been a central iconographic element of the Cold War. In so doing, they seem to critically revisit naive conceptions of the Cold War as an era with a distinctive beginning and end-date, and instead explore its traces (and the absence of its traces) in our era. And they do so by way of a project entitled "Palimpset", in a Berlin, which can itself be thought of as a palimpsest: a city in which History is incessantly inscribed, erased and re-inscribed (*see* Dekel 2013, Huyssen 2009).

In "Palimpset", Petsini and Panayotopoulos are tireless visual investigators of the dialectic between History and oblivion. They provide a minutely detailed visual document of the processes through which history is being written; a record of the city's attempts to produce a single cohesive narrative, a single timeline, a unified history. Their record testifies that elements regarded as excessive, which do not fit, or which point to *multiplicity* and deconstruct any attempt at a cohesive singularity, are being pushed towards erasure in a myriad ways: by means of disposal, demolition, dismantlement and re-signification, as well as through being placed in museum selves and souvenir shops (Varvantakis 2009). This exhibition is a documentation not just of History or of *a* history, but of the processes by which history is being made – of how it is being written and of how it is erased. As Nadia Seremetakis (2004) once put it, "We live in the era of earthquakes... The future is certain. That which is unpredictable is the past".

ACKWNOLEDGEMENTS:

REFERENCES

Bruner, M. S. (1989) 'Symbolic Uses of the Berlin Wall, 1961-1989.' *Communication Quarterly,* 37(4): 319-328.
Dekel, I. (2013) *Mediation at the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
Huyssen, A. (2009) *Present pasts: Urban palimpsests and the politics of memory*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
Le Carre, J. (1963) *The Spy who came in from the Cold.* Pan Books.
Le Guin, U. K. (1974) *The Dispossesed.* New York: Harper & Row.
Seremetakis, N. (2004) *On the Brunches of Memory* [http://www.seremetaki.com/en/odi_elia.htm].
Varvantakis, C. (2009) 'A Monument to Dismantlement.' *Memory Studies*, 1(2): 27-38. DOI: 10.1177/1750698008097393.

"PALIMPSEST" PRE-PUBLICATION

Dr. NIKOS PANAYOTOPOULOS
Professor of Photography

Dr. PENELOPE PETSINI
Department of Political Science and History, Panteion University, Athens.

Fig2
Nikos Panayotopoulos – Penelope Petsini: Gedenkstätte Berliner Mauer, Bernauerstraße, Berlin. From the series Aufarbeitung: The Wall.

Fig3
Nikos Panayotopoulos
– Penelope Petsini:
Gedenkstätte Berliner
Mauer, Bernauerstraße
Berlin. From the series
Aufarbeitung: The Wall.

Fig4
Nikos Panayotopoulos – Penelope
Petsini: Gedenkstätte Berliner
Mauer, Bernauerstraße Berlin.
From the series Aufarbeitung:
The Wall.

Fig5
Nikos Panayotopoulos – Penelope Petsini: Wall remnants, Bernauerstraße, Berlin. From the series Aufarbeitung: The Wall.

Fig6
Nikos Panayotopoulos – Penelope Petsini: Friedhof Park, Berlin. From the series Aufarbeitung: The Wall.
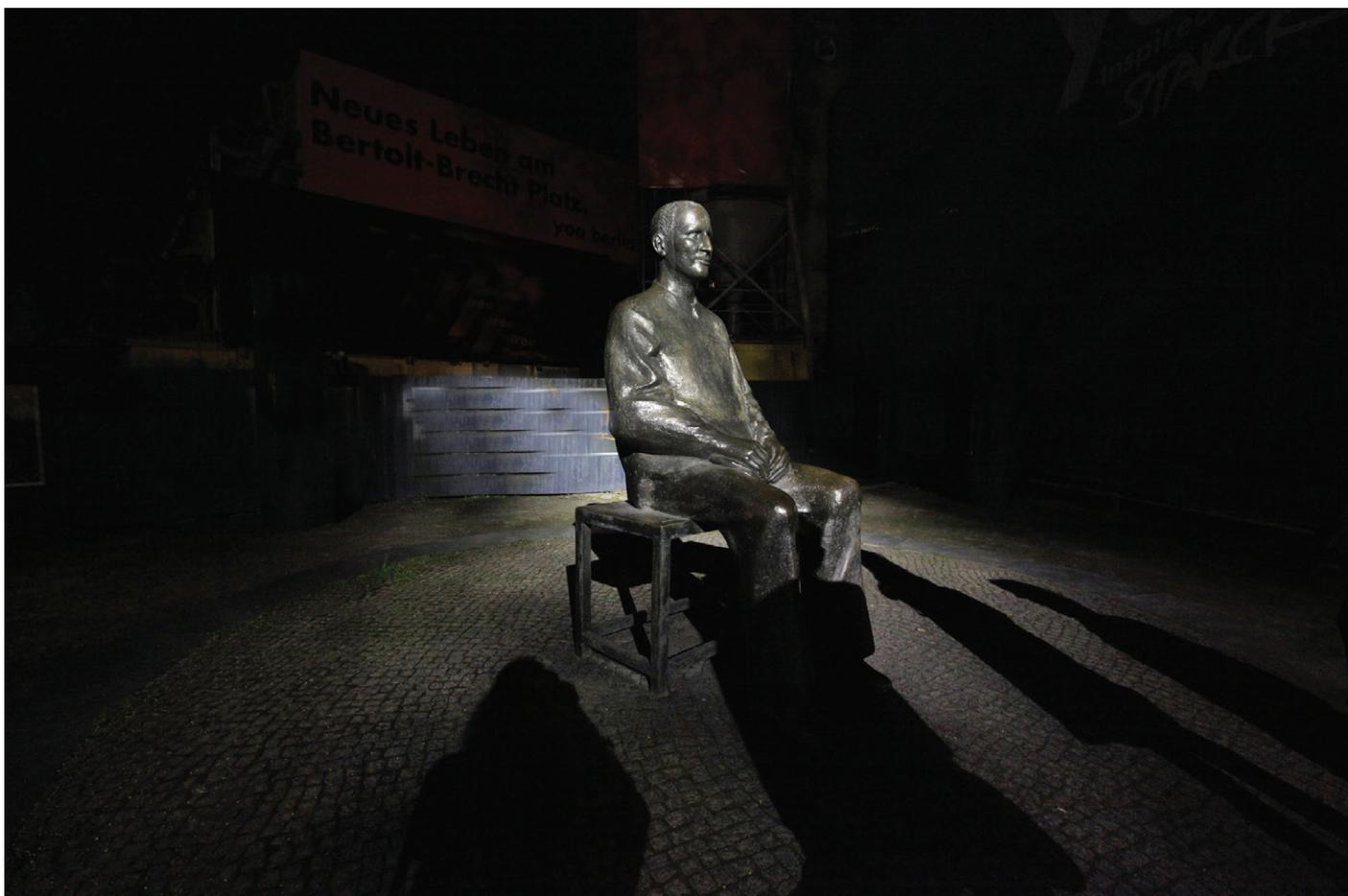
Fig7
Nikos Panayotopoulos – Penelope Petsini: Friedrichstraße, Bertolt Brecht statue, Berlin. From the series Aufarbeitung: The Wall.
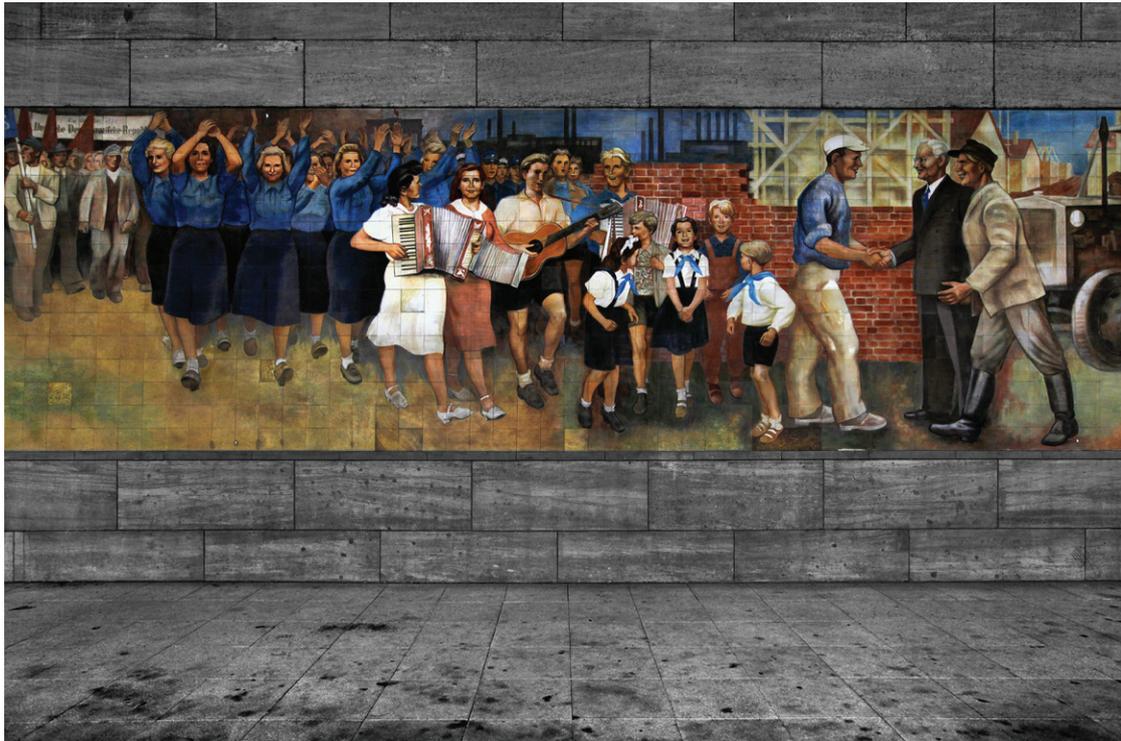
Fig8
Nikos Panayotopoulos – Penelope Petsini: Wilhelmstraße, North Wall - former
House of Ministries, Berlin. From the series Aufarbeitung: The Wall.

Fig9
Nikos Panayotopoulos
– Penelope Petsini:
Holocaust-Mahnmal,
Ebertstraße, Berlin. From
the series Aufarbeitung:
The Wall.

CHRISTOS VARVANTAKIS

Christos Varvantakis has a a background in social anthropology and sociology and his research focuses on the intersections of childhood and public life, media, politics, archives and urban environments as well as on visual and multimodal research methodologies in the social sciences.

C.Varvantakis@gold.ac.uk

PENELOPE PETSINI

Holds an MA in Image and Communication (University of London, Goldsmiths College, 1999) and a PhD in Arts and Humanities / Photography (University of Derby, 2004). She is Principal Researcher in the post-doctoral programme «Censorship in Visual Arts and Film» (CIVIL) in the Department of Political Science and History, Panteion University in which she teaches the MA course "Censorship: Interdisciplinary approaches".

ppetsini@gmail.com
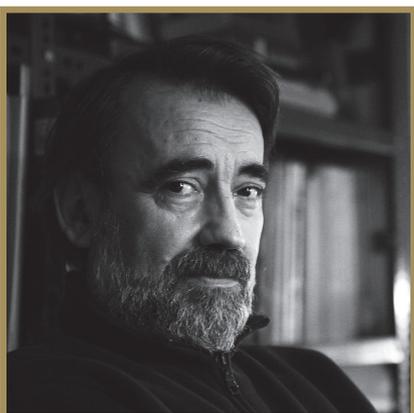
NIKOS PANAYOTOPOULOS

Studied photography in London (BA, Polytechnic of Central London 1977) and holds a PhD in Arts and Humanities (University of Derby, 2008). His photographic work as well as his texts on photographic theory and criticism has been exhibited and published extensively both in Greece and abroad. He joined the Photography Department of the Technological Educational Institution of Athens in 1986 from which he retired as an Associate Professor of Art Photography in 2012.