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NARRATIVES OF CRISIS: REPRESENTING CAPITALIST REALISM PART II: THE GREEK CRISIS



Billboards

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BILLBOARDS

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ABSTRACT

Keywords:
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This visual essay explores the intricate dynamics of interpreting visual art, particularly within the realm of photography, and the compelling role of inconclusiveness within the narrative. By showcasing previously unreleased images from 2013, it explores how viewers often confront images with an innate desire for resolution, driven by societal norms and shared viewpoints shaped by media and personal experiences. However, the essay challenges this instinct by focusing on instances where visual artworks, captured through the photographic medium, deliberately omit crucial contextual information. In doing so, viewers are prompted to question their instinctual conclusions and embrace a sense of discontentment. The essay focuses in 2013 Greece, during a period of financial turmoil when billboards stood conspicuously empty. While these vacant billboards were widely interpreted as symbols of a nation in crisis, I argue that the reality behind their abandonment was rather mundane - a legal crackdown on illegal constructions. This disparity between perception and reality served as a foundation for the project "Leaving Utopia," highlighting the power of visual inconclusiveness to challenge prevailing narratives and provoke critical inquiry.



NIKOLAS VENTOURAKIS is a visual artist living and working between Athens and London. His practice situates in the threshold between art and document, in the attempt to interrogate the status of the photographic image. A quest that unfolds in the decisive years of the digital revolution, when a crucial overlap between producers and viewers seems to have reset all previous critical discourses. Central to Ventourakis's visual work is a denial for a one-way resolution and an invitation to embrace an ambiguous imagery, where the photographic is not yet real, and the familiar is a projection of a mix of memory - stemming from both private and media experiences - with abstract thinking. Ventourakis' fascination lies in our need for stories to be conclusive, which cannot but clash with the impossibility for apparent pictures to provide any evidence nor "objective truth".

BILLBOARDS (2013-2023)

My interest in photography lies in how we tend to read images and how there seems to be a requirement for the stories shared through visual means to be conclusive and with clear outcomes. I focus on the misinterpretations and the assumptions that occur when the meta-information provided to accompany visual artworks is partial and inconclusive and the viewer is required - or feels obliged - to fill in the blanks.

Quite often, on the first interaction with a piece of visual communication, this happens using conventional abstract knowledge of similar situations; commonly based on prevailing and dominant shared viewpoints, which are perpetuated either by personal anecdotes or formed into cohesive narratives by the Media. However, inescapably one reaches the realization that there are occasions in works of art presented in the photographic medium where all the pointers that could help resolve the presented narrative are missing. The viewer is asked to reconsider and question what is it that they are looking at in the form of images and even more importantly what is presented to them and by whom. This way a line of inquiry is opened for the viewer to let them use the discontentment of being denied a resolution, towards questioning their instinctive conclusions.

During the height of "The Crisis" back in 2013 billboards in Greece stood empty. The constructs and the frames were still there, but no products or services were advertised on them. For the main line of thought at the time the empty billboards served as the perfect visual anchor of the financial meltdown in the country. There they stood, products of a consumer

and capitalist system, existing without function. A failed state, a failed society, failed people. Articles were written in prominent international newspapers, films were produced, screened and awarded in festivals.

Poetic language was used about this newly discovered continent that was Europe in the beginning of the 21st century, where billboards advertise no brighter lives and the people were offered a multitude of dystopian futures. Meta-narratives were built to support the structure

The reality of what led to the crumbling remains of the billboards, however, was much simpler and mundane. The billboards did not stand empty due to the "Unprecedented Crisis". They had to be abandoned as tools of commerce when the Greek government following pressure from grassroots citizen groups was forced to solve the issue of the innumerable illegal constructions. The new law, instead of fixing the issue, simply made all billboard advertising in public space illegal. The result was that all advertising had to stop with immediate effect and the posters taken down. The potential misreading of the situation with audiences and media projecting back on the billboards, which themselves exist to advertise widely capitalist ideas and to promote products and services formed the bases for a different project that was developed titled "Leaving Utopia". Ten years later, following years of unending crisis, with truly unprecedented environmental destruction, with the cost of living driving even more people into extreme poverty, the billboards still stand empty in Greece.

[The images in this visual essay are presented for the first time and are from 2013]



All Figures:
Untitled, 2013-2023, photographic image, dimensions variable.
Courtesy of the artist





















