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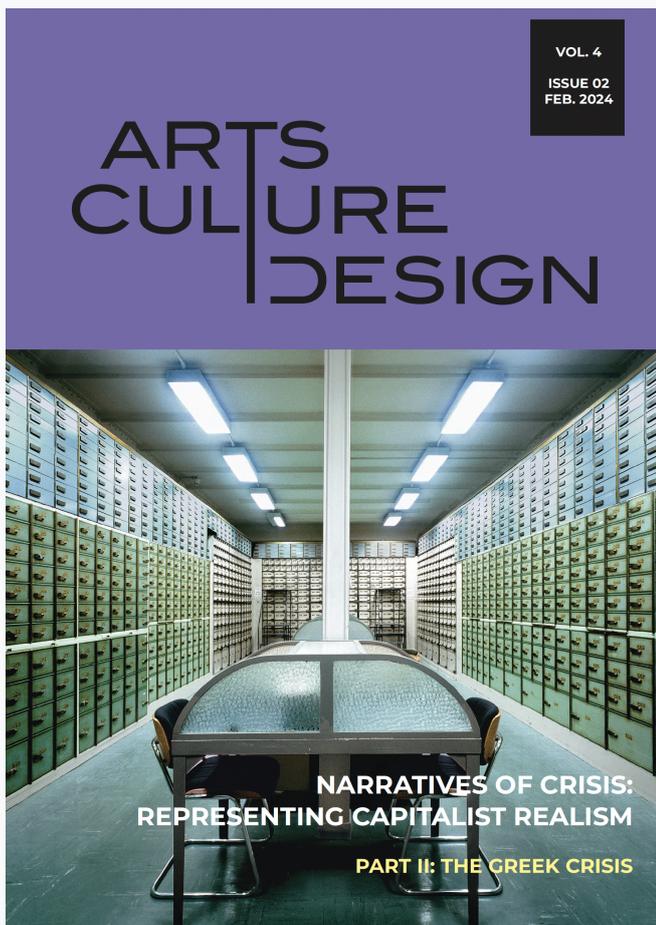
MedPhoto Festival

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MEDPHOTO FESTIVAL:
THE CASE OF A SOCIALLY ENGAGED LENS-BASED ARTISTIC INITIATIVE
AT THE SOUTHERNMOST EDGE
OF EUROPE

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ABSTRACT

This review is a critical reflection of the evolution and impact of the MedPhoto Festival, an international lens-based festival initiated in Greece in 2016 amid the refugee/immigration crisis. Created by a diverse collective of individuals, including photographers, activists, curators, and scholars, MedPhoto aims to cultivate a socially engaged cultural community. The festival, rooted in Crete, expands its activities across Greece through exhibitions, educational workshops, discussions, and publications, addressing pressing contemporary issues.

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Figure 1: Richard Mosse, *Grid-Moria* (2016-2018), Installation shot from the exhibition *You Refuse to Understand, You Don't Say Anything, Watching Me Die*, ROMANTSO, Athens, 2018

In 2016, during the escalation of the refugee/immigration crisis, an international lens-based festival named MedPhoto was initiated in Greece by a small grassroots collective in cooperation with the Contemporary Art Museum of Crete. MedPhoto derived from an encounter of people coming from diverse disciplines (photographers, activists, graphic designers, curators, journalists and scholars), whose objective has been to establish a socially engaged cultural community. Having Crete as its point of departure (since this island constitutes an emblematic crossroad of various civilisations and a pivotal geopolitical site in the history of the Mediterranean), MedPhoto has been developing a wide range of activities across Greece, such as exhibitions, educational workshops, open discussions and publications, all of them explicitly oriented towards the cultivation of a radical dialogue on urgent contemporary issues. It is this ongoing endeavour that I will briefly reflect on in the following lines, pointing to some of the most noteworthy events MedPhoto realised and emphasising particularly its latest exhibition which addressed the endangered notion of democracy.

MedPhoto's inaugural edition, *Borders - Crossroads* (2016), focused on two interdependent threads: on the one hand, the violent dislocation of massive populations from the Middle East and Africa caused by extensive military conflicts (involving Western imperialist armies, fundamentalist religious groups, dictatorial regimes and "mercenaries of large multinational companies"), political oppression and extreme poverty; on the other, the

financial recession, the political deadlock, the increasing racism and the social unrest in the wider area of southern Europe (Michail, 2016, 50). To mention only a few examples of this exploratory course, in the exhibition *Critical Archives I: Ruins*, Davide Monteleone's and Francesco Zizola's works, both referring to the shipwreck of Lampedusa (the case of a boat, carrying hundreds of African refugees, which sank at the shores of the Italian island in 2013, resulting in the death of 366 people), had key significance in bringing us "closer to the individuality of those people who are lost and most usually are referred to as numbers", while Antoine D'Agata's *Odysseia* (2011-2013), with its non-linear typological sequences recording fragments of refugees' routes across Hungary, Slovakia, Ukraine, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia, created a tapestry of the "no-way-out situation" these people are stuck in – with many "civilised" states being partially responsible for this (Vorgia, 2016, 29)[1].

I should note here that the (mostly) conservative, if not outright hostile, politics of the European Union during that period came as no surprise to a milieu of artists and scholars in Greece who had previously already articulated a critical stance against the formal narratives which ruled the continent. Being part of this milieu, the curatorial team of MedPhoto organised its next intervention, called *Europe: The Faces and the Territory* (2017-2018), starting from the hypothesis that the then current phenomena were inherently associated with some of the very constitutional principles of the EU as outlined in the "Declaration on European Identity" that was released during the

Copenhagen Summit in 1973. This historic declaration has probably been the first explicit statement of a long-standing institutional effort to designate a singular, unified European identity. This effort was incited by a coalition of transnational elites seeking to be defined through a secure (and securitised) territorial and political dominance on the inside while also securing an influential role in the globalised market; an attempt fundamentally rooted in the positivist (but in fact transcendental) imperative of unlimited progress tied

antagonistic) aspects of "Europeanness" for the sake of the sustainability of EU's imperialist character (Cope, 2019). And this effort also seems to be disaffirmed by the very history of Europe which, apart from being constantly (re)shaped by the association between cultures, religions, languages and peoples, is also overdetermined by glaring class divides and economic interests confronting each other. I insist on these remarks, because it was precisely that scope under which Med-Photo's main exhibition approached mul-

Figure 2: Johan Grimonprez, *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* (1997), Installation shot from the exhibition *CRITICAL ARCHIVES IV: Documents,* Contemporary Art Museum of Crete, 2019

to European modernity. This effort, however, seems to systematically disregard that "adaptation to the power of progress furthers the progress of power, constantly renewing the degenerations which prove successful progress, not failed progress, to be its own antithesis" (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002, 28).; and it seems to overlook the fact that collective identities are multi-layered structures, the composition of which depends, to a great extent, on objective social relations and practices rather than on abstract concepts imposed by decisions from above that attempt to conceal or suppress the most diverse (and often

tiple identity construction mechanisms, by tracing some of their visual manifestations through insightful projects such as Robin Hammond's *The New Europeans* (2016), Rineke Dijkstra's *The Buzz Club, Liverpool, UK / Mystery World, Zaandam, NL* (1996-1997) and Jérôme Sessini's *The Calais Jungle* (2015-2016), among others. Within the same conceptual framework, multifarious considerations of the European territory, with all the hues and meanings that it carries (a site of memory, a land of state dominance, an exile, a battlefield), also unfolded, based on photographs from Simon Norfolk's *For Most Of It I Have No*

Words and from Mark Power's contribution to the Magnum group project *Periplus*[2]. The enquiry of that second curatorial project was substantially deepened by the multimedia installation *You Refuse to Understand, You Don't Say Anything, Watching Me Die* (2018), which MedPhoto co-organised with Athens Photo Festival and Thessaloniki Photobiennale and which took place in Athens[3]. The works presented there – T*he Bureaucracy of Angels* (2017) by Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, *Grid-Moria* (2016-2018) by Richard Mosse, and *Uprooted* (2017) by Daphne Tolis – proposed three quite unusual perspectives on war, considering it to be a salient aspect of "Europeanness". Keeping their distance from merely portraying symptoms, these works foregrounded the issue of the objectification of the other – extensively discussed by Richard Mosse and the audience during his public lecture at the venue. Some works also highlighted the problematic character of the technical image itself (Flusser, 2000, 14–20), regarded as part of apparatuses of surveillance and dehumanisation[4].

Feeling the need to look deeper into the development of a critical discourse on how the technical image represents or simulates (or even contributes to the production of) reality, MedPhoto's third edition, *Archive: Between the Public and the Private* (2019), delved into the ways that power relations are refracted through visual documents[5]. Partly seeing to expand on Allan Sekula's perspective on the politics of representation, the works that the festival presented that year at the Contemporary Art Museum of Crete

centred on how the technical image had been treated from the start as an archiving instrument by default and as a practice which has always found itself in the flux of classification, preservation and circulation of fragments forming pieces of both official and counter-hegemonic narratives (Sekula, 1986 and 1978). Thus, the curatorial team sought to place works such as Johan Grimonprez's *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* (1997), which anatomises the ideological function of the mass media, in dialogue with research-based projects of an activist orientation, such as Forensic Architecture's *The Murder of Pavlos Fyssas* (2018), and with others, such as Max Pinckers's *Margins of Excess* (2018), which question the very processes that authorise certain subjects to impose codes that link visual signs to their referents and define our perception of reality.

Interwoven with notable matters of contention in contemporary politics, all the above enquiries of MedPhoto culminated in the festival's latest edition (2021), in which the curatorial team eventually (and not at all surprisingly) opted to directly address what is actually at stake today and lies beneath every social conflict: *democracy* – the big concept upon which the foundations of the West were, allegedly, built[6]. What is democracy? A state form or an ephemeral event, a way of organising pleasures or a commercial brand, an emancipatory project or mere lifestyle, a synonym for colonialism or a field for the emergence of collective subjectivities? Grounded in Jacques Rancière's argument that what makes democracy a "properly political" notion is that it is con-
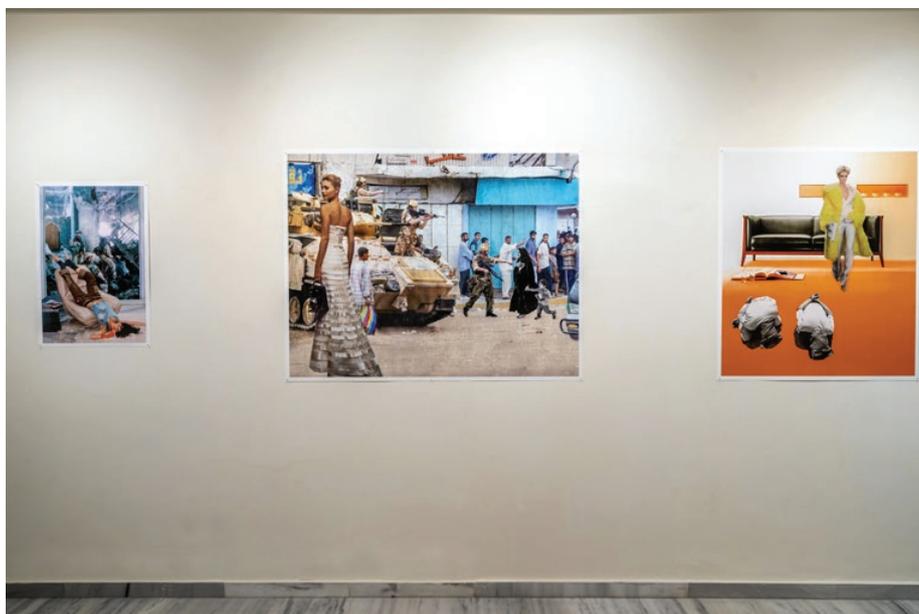

Figure 3: Martha Rosler, *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home, New Series* (2004-2008), Installation shot from the exhibition *CRITICAL ARCHIVES V: The Future Is Unwritten*, Contemporary Art Museum of Crete, 2021

Figure 4:
Martha Rosler, *In the
Place of the Public:
Airport Series* (1983-pres-
ent), Installation shot
from the exhibition
*CRITICAL ARCHIVES V:
The Future Is Unwritten*,
Contemporary Art Mu-
seum of Crete, 2021

stantly fought over, MedPhoto's central exhibition developed around this perpetual struggle for the appropriation of *democracy* and for its meaning (Rancière & Hazan, 2011, 76-81).

Indicative enough of those concerns was Martha Rosler's *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home, New Series* (2004-2008), an artwork fundamental to the exhibition's structure. Re-using a technique she had employed in the late 1960s to criticise the US invasion of Vietnam, Rosler constructed a photomontage series, combining mass media pictures from the war in Iraq with Western lifestyle imagery. By integrating scenes of military violence into the domestic space of a living-room or by blending fashion models with tanks, Rosler visually speculated on the existence of causal relations between different levels of social experience which have been deliberately disassociated from one another by dominant ideology: the spectacular, cultural imaginary that the U.S.A. fosters for itself, on the one hand, and, on the other, the wars that this state wages abroad (which are supposed to be something distant, something concerning the *others*). And thus, by reconfiguring the "shared sensible order," Rosler explores what can become legible and intelligible by the community – herein, the multiple faces of imperialism (Rancière, 2004, 39-45).

An elaborate interplay between Rosler's work and certain photographs by Luc Delahaye (referring to institutions and processes with a decisive role in recent history) was further triggered by their spatial juxtaposition in the museum. Situated in the long tradition of documentary photography, while also conveying an implicit sense of a staged-like performativity, Delahaye's large-scale photographs incorporate a distantiated gaze towards catalytic events, oscillating between the immediacy of information and a time dilation through which they engage the viewer. A meeting of the UN Security Council, an ordinary congregation of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, or an intense moment from the trading floor of the stock market are hardly reduced to mere news coverage. The visual completeness, the level of detail, and the complexity of Delahaye's images contribute to the activation of historically specific connotations accompanying each social reality he reports on – which the MedPhoto collective was greatly interested in. The inaccessible centres of more or less legitimised decision-making, the fragmentary and, at the same time, monumental and aesthetic aspects of which Delahaye interlaces, constitute an apophatic response to the question that concerns the character of *democracy* today, in Europe and beyond.

Seeking to address more specific queries linked to the larger question of democracy – namely, to consider the possibilities we activate or disempower each time we invoke *democracy* (to paraphrase Rancière) and how we could reconceptualise democracy as a tool for critiquing social reality (Rancière & Hazan, 2011, 76-81), MedPhoto's curatorial approach drew certain connections

among various elements of a globalised, asymmetric warfare game. Barbed wires with their intimidating materiality (like those seen on Rafal Milach's pictures from the electric fence at the Hungarian-Croatian borders) and shady mechanisms for the construction and dispersion of information (like those insinuated in Jonas Bendiksen's project about Veles, the town which became an epicentre for the production of fake news that might have had an impact on the election of Donald Trump in 2016) were read as interrelated parameters of the ominous condition within which *democracy* is enclosed by technocrats. In another implied association, the exploitation of female domestic workers in Lebanon trapped in the abusive system of *kafala* (an issue stressed in Evangelia Kranioti's *Beirut Fictions*, 2015-2019) was examined as a partial case-study on the vulgarity of power relations that spread in full scale (yet indistinguishably) over everyone's life through the sophisticated mechanisms of absolute control developed by financial institutions – a metonymy of this could be

of self-organisation and re-claiming the commons.

In relation to the commons as practice (and before I complete this short overview), I should mention a MedPhoto ongoing project intended to expand access to, and the distribution of, knowledge. I am referring to *Nomadic Library*, the first mobile collection of photobooks in Greece. Photobooks have been an immensely popular framework for the encounter of the photographic image – indeed, of worldwide appeal. Also, many of the photographers and artists that MedPhoto had been collaborating with often choose to present their work in this form. Yet, what sparked the *Nomadic Library* initiative was the collective's belief that the photobook should be systematically studied in connection with the semiology of the image and the social relations that surround it (Barthes, 1977). For the collective, the photobook first needed to be materially accessible by wide audiences (also in the periphery) and, secondly, to be theoretically contextualised. Since 2018,

Figure 5
Luc Delahaye, *132nd Ordinary Meeting of the Conference* (2004), *Security Council* (2003), *Trading Floor* (2012), Installation shot from the exhibition *CRITICAL ARCHIVES V: The Future Is Unwritten*, Contemporary Art Museum of Crete, 2021

found in Manolis Baboussis's *Busts* (1997-1998). As a counterpoint to this pervasive climate of threat and its numbing effect, anti-hegemonic discourses over gender, race and class were brought forth, as in Gloria Oyarzabal's series *Woman Go No'Gree* (2019), combined with quests for alternative socio-political formations, as those traced in Yannis Stournas's *Kinematography* (2014-2017) exploring autonomous and de-commodified social centres that operate on the basis

MedPhoto has amassed a collection of 300 significant photobooks which tour the country, a collection granted for free to universities, cultural centres, photography schools and public libraries across Greece. *Nomadic Library* is accompanied by educational workshops that engage local communities, emerging artists and students. There is also an effort of the curatorial board to translate historic essays on photography into Greek, making them available to the public for free, bypassing
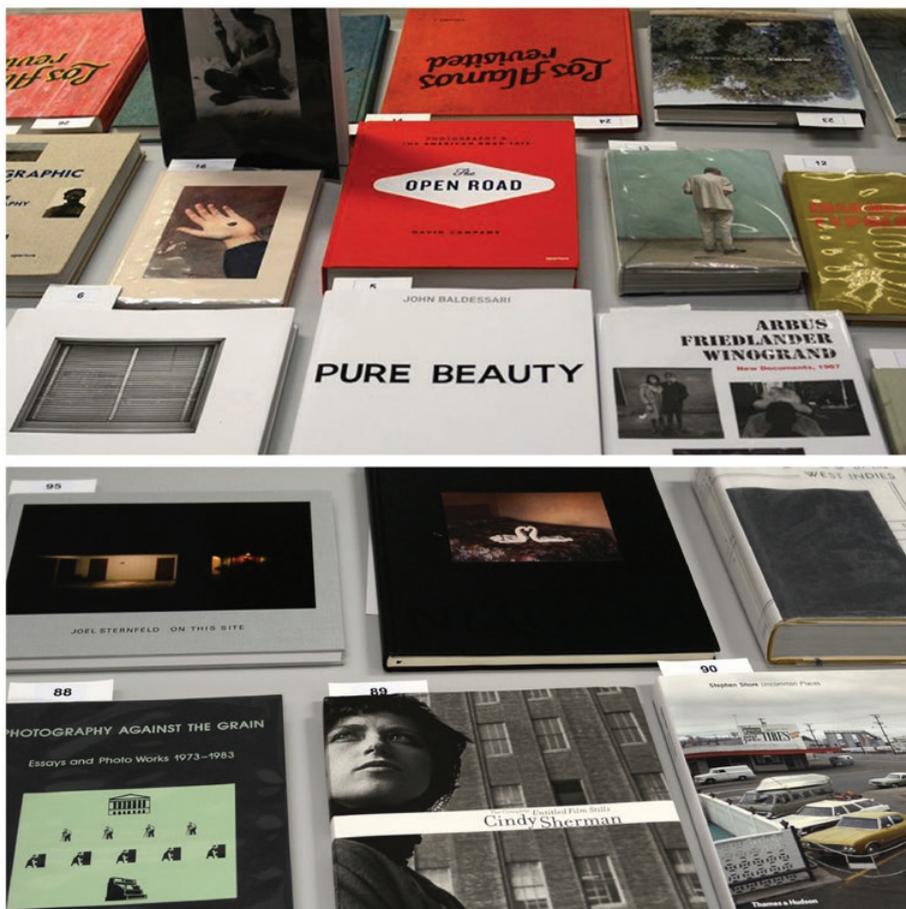
Figure 8:
Photobooks from
the *Nomadic Library*
collection

the typical commercialisation of "open access" materials. This ever-growing project aims to function as a toolkit for approaching photography as a multi-modal cultural phenomenon rather than images on display in art institutions with "visitors"; as a repository of ideas and practices which explore the various combinations of cognitive elements with visual qualities; a mapping of contemporary artistic quests in constant interaction with the socio-political reality[7].

To conclude, the experimental curatorial culture that generated MedPhoto's activities corresponded *mutatis mutandis* to an aesthetic of "cognitive mapping" – that is, as put by Fredric Jameson, to "a pedagogical political culture which seeks to endow the individual subject with some new heightened sense of its place in the global system" (Jameson, 1991, 54). Far from aligning with occasionally trendy and conceptually partial agendas, as those that often appear as "turns" in the art

market, MedPhoto persists with ostensibly old, yet unresolved, issues associated with our (capitalist) social totality which are subject to historical change. It is interested in the range of representational efforts that confront this ungraspable totality (Jameson, 1991, 297-418). Lens-based media, being favourably connected to reality, are "called upon" in MedPhoto's interventions, but not so as to restore historically precedent types of naïve realism compatible with the reproduction of the status quo. Instead, our question remains how abstract knowledge is connected with empirical data, what constitutes the latter, and how those who have no or little power – those who are governed – access these forms.

NOTES

[1]The exhibition *Critical Archives I: Ruins* was hosted in the Contemporary Art Museum of Crete and was curated by Maria Maragkou, Pavlos Fysakis and Pasqua Vorgia. .

[2] The exhibition *CRITICAL ARCHIVES III: Identities* was presented in 2018 at the Contemporary Art Museum of Crete and was curated by Pavlos Fysakis, Maria Maragkou, Dimitris Kechris and Yorgos Karailias.

[3] The exhibition at ROMANTSO in Athens was curated by Dimitris Kechris, Pasqua Vorgia, and Apostolos Zerdevas.

[4] By the term "technical image" I mean (following Flusser) the image that is produced when rays of light are captured by means of optical, chemical and mechanical devices on sensitive surfaces. Therefore, I refer to reproducible images which are the result of the use of either analogue or digital cameras.

[5] The main exhibition *CRITICAL ARCHIVES IV: Documents* of the third edition was presented in 2019 at the Contemporary Art Museum of Crete and was curated by Pavlos Fysakis, Dimitris Kechris and Maria Maragkou..

[6] The main exhibition of MedPhoto's fourth edition Democracy (2021) came under the title *CRITICAL ARCHIVES V: The Future Is Unwritten*. It was presented at the Contemporary Art Museum of Crete and was curated by Dimitris Kechris and Pasqua Vorgia, under the artistic direction of Pavlos Fysakis and Maria Maragkou.

[7] At this point I ought to mention by name the persons (additionally to those already mentioned in previous footnotes as curators of the exhibitions) who are or have been members of MedPhoto's organisational team, and the persons who have advisorily, curatorially or technically contributed and whose participation has been extremely precious: Eleni Pagkalia, Ioannis Markakis, Vangelis Tatsis, Giorgos Gavrilakis, Olga Gortsa, Christina Kalligianni, Rafaela Karagianni, Elena Ntosa, Kiriaki Fragkiadaki, Ioanna Chronopoulou, Dora Chalari, Makis Faros, Nikos Markou, Giorgos Moutafis, Yorgos Prinos, Marinos Tsagkarakis, Natasha Christia, Charalampos Kydonakis, Haris Grigorakis, Niki Petraki, Anastasia Tzigounaki, Ioanna Zouli, Kostis Kalantzis, Yannis Hadjinicolaou, Andreas Meladakis, Georges Salameh, Alexandra Saliba, Yorgos Yatromanolakis, Eduardo Cadava, Angela Dimitrakaki and Penelope Petsini.

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