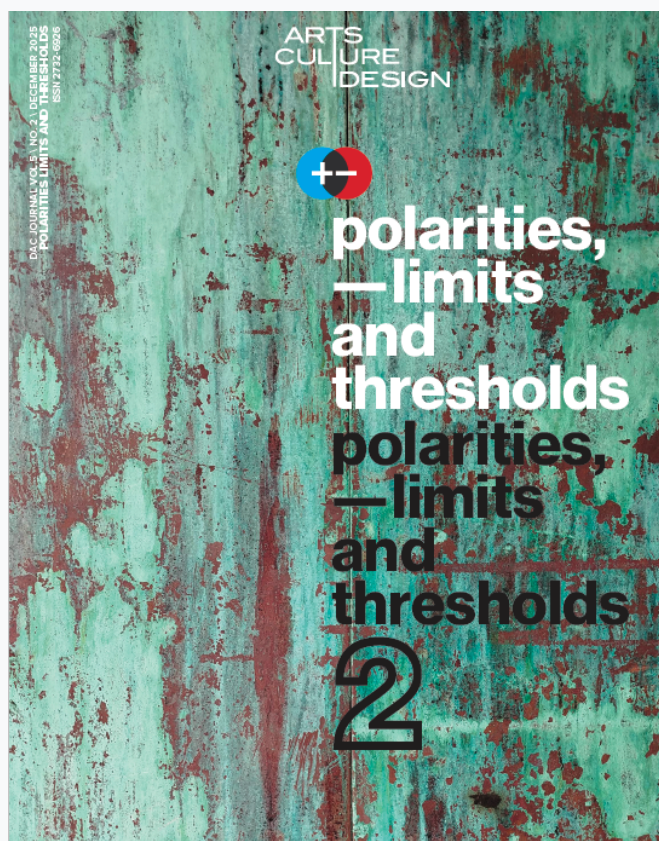


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RENA PAPASPYROU: AN EXPLORER OF THE URBAN SPACE SINCE THE 1970'

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RENA PAPASPYROU: AN EXPLORER OF THE URBAN SPACE SINCE THE 1970’S

ABSTRACT

Review of the exhibition Rena Papaspyrou: Images Through Matter, at the Hellenic Centre, London (October 2 – November 16, 2024). Curated by Inês Costa, Curator of Focal Point Gallery and Nayia Yiakoumaki, Director of the Hellenic Centre with Grace Strasen, Public Programme & Events Co-ordinator, The Hellenic Centre.

The Hellenic Centre, in London, hosts Rena Papaspyrou’s Images Through Matter, her first solo debut exhibition in London and the United Kingdom this autumn. The audience has the opportunity to view and appreciate the work of one of the most important artists of the generation of the 1970s in Greece, and the first woman elected Director of the Third Painting Studio at the Athens School of Fine Arts (1993–2005). Her artistic expression involves elements and materials of the urban space, such as wood, metal, mosaic tiles, which until today play a central role in her practice. She explores the possibilities of matter by drawing most of the times on materials connected to the city, such as on wall surfaces that she removes from buildings. She marks and wades in with color and ink on the subtle changes on each surface, projecting simple images that emerge from the existing patterns.

INTRODUCTION

In autumn 2024, the Hellenic Centre in London hosted the solo exhibition of one of the most important artists of the generation of the 1970s in Greece and the first woman elected Director of the Third Painting Studio at the Athens School of Fine Arts (1993–2005). Rena Papaspyrou’s Images Through Matter, her solo debut exhibition in the United Kingdom was curated by Inês Costa, Curator of Focal Point Gallery and Dr. Nayia Yiakoumaki, Director of the Hellenic Centre. In the open plan room, the twenty-two works exhibited, coming from different private and public collections located in Greece and directly from the artist’s studio, were the most representative of her oeuvre, from 1977 onwards, a period of her strong presence in the Greek art scene. The exhibition brought



Figure 1
View of the exhibition.
Photo by Ash Knotek,
provided
by the Hellenic Centre.

together examples of Papaspyrou’s works, incorporating wood, metal, mosaic tiles and other materials connected to the city, which eradicate the boundaries between public and private, outdoors and indoors, visibility and invisibility, permanence and decay, painting and sculpture among other, and bring to the fore an alternative point of view of how these can be perceived and treated [Fig. 1].

In the last years, the Hellenic Centre, founded in 1994 and located in an early 20th-century building in central London, has made an effort to familiarise its audience with Greek postwar art. By organising this exhibition in a city with international audience and by inviting art critics and curators of London’s main art institutions, the Hellenic Centre managed to show how Papaspyrou’s experimentation and engagement with elements and materials of the urban space is equally important to that of other Postwar artists outside of Greece who opened the borders of painting and sculpture. After all, in the short introductory text of the show, Dr. Yiakoumaki puts Papaspyrou’s work in an international context by noting: “The exhibition presents a thorough body of works by a female contemporary European visual artist.” I believe that the Hellenic Centre makes



Figure 2
Rena Papaspyrou,
Shadows of the hand (detail), 1974,
1 to 12 ball point pen drawings.
Courtesy of the artist.

an effort to bring important Greek Postwar artists to the forefront, as they are not widely known outside Greece, apart from those of the Greek diaspora such as Jannis Kounellis (1936-2017), Lucas Samaras (1936-2024) and Stephen Antonakos (1926-2013). In 2023, it organised the launch of the publication *After the explosion you still hear the light* (2023), which focuses on the artistic practices of the 1970s in Greece, and presented the solo exhibition of Vlassis Caniaris (1928-2011). Prior to Papaspyrou's exhibition in March 2024, it had invited Costas Tsoclis (b. 1930) to talk on his work. Similarly, it had organised a conversation on Papaspyrou's art between Linsey Young, Curator of British Contemporary, Tate Britain and curators from Greece on the occasion of her exhibition.

Papaspyrou was born in Athens in 1938. She studied painting and mosaic at the Athens School of Fine Arts (1958-61). After her graduation, she left immediately for Paris with a scholarship from the French government and the National Organisation of Greek Handicrafts, to attend the École des Beaux-Arts (1961-67), where she continued her studies in mosaic. During her stay in the French capital, she had her first solo exhibition at La Maison des Beaux-Arts. After completing her studies, she moved back to her home city

where she presented her second solo exhibition of mosaic works at the gallery Astor in May 1967. According to Papaspyrou, already in this first body of work, she experimented with different materials. She incorporated large pieces of glass, broken bottles, metals and tiles. Moreover, she had developed an interest in mixing different materials in her colors during her studies in painting in Athens. On April 21, a few days before the opening of her show, the dictatorship came into power, which lasted until 1974. As a protest against the Junta, Papaspyrou, similarly to other artists of her generation, decided not to participate in any exhibitions. After the restoration of democracy in 1974, she focused on the concept of shadow, an experimentation that drove her to the important future development of her art. In the work *Shadows of the hand* (1974), she draws with pen the projection of a hand and its distortion on a sheet of newspaper [Fig. 2]. During this experimentation with shadow and light, Papaspyrou “faced the problem of the autonomy of the material surface.” As she notes: “In other words, how will the special character of each material...be preserved, both in the light and in the shaded part, without being lost under the layer of coloring matter (paint, ink, etc.)?”

Although these early experimentations with shadows and mosaics were not included in the Hellenic Centre exhibition, which could be perceived as retrospective – since it focused on her art from the late 1970s onwards – it is important to mention them, as they form the basis of Papaspyrou's core visual vocabulary. The exhibition was not arranged in chronological order. Instead, it offered the freedom to the viewers to discover visual, material and conceptual connections between the artworks. On the left wall, entering the gallery space and next to the introductory text of the curators, Papaspyrou, who was personally involved with the arrangement and installation of the show, placed her four *Small samples from the Urban Landscape*, produced from 1979 to 1981 [Fig. 3]. They served as an introduction of the main materials she has focused on. On the first square-shape Plexiglass, the artist has attached numerous pieces of paper, of different shape, size, quality and texture, such as wrapping papers, napkins and black and white photocopies, along with plastic bags and bubble wrap. They are damaged, burnt, cut, creased, stained and marked. In the next three pieces, we come across used metals, wood and wall surfaces respectively, of different size, quality and color. These materials can be found in any city; however, the particular ones originate from Athens – the city that Papaspyrou has lived her whole life. Similarly to other artists of her generation, mostly in Europe and the United States, she is following the Duchampian concept of readymade. She turns to the urban space to collect her materials, her discoveries. Her art is no longer the result of the artist's work in the studio, as was the case of the early avant-garde art at the time of Cubism, instead it is the result of her interaction with the urban space and its conditions. Moreover her works remind us the ‘Non-Site’ sculptures of Robert Smithson (1938-1973), who, in 1968, exhibited in the gallery space bins of rock, sand or earth (monuments of antiquity) found during his journeys mostly in the countryside of his birthplace, New Jersey and the rest of the country. Likewise, Papaspyrou brings the outdoors in the gallery, moving away from painting and sculpture.

In her *Small samples from the Urban Landscape*, we see the damage caused by the surrounding environment and time. They seem to share the same qualities as living organisms. They carry the anticipation of many postwar artists to bridge art with life and to foreground contingency and duration, such as of the Arte Povera artists Giovanni Anselmo (1934-2023) and Jannis Kounellis, who incorporated living or degradable mate-

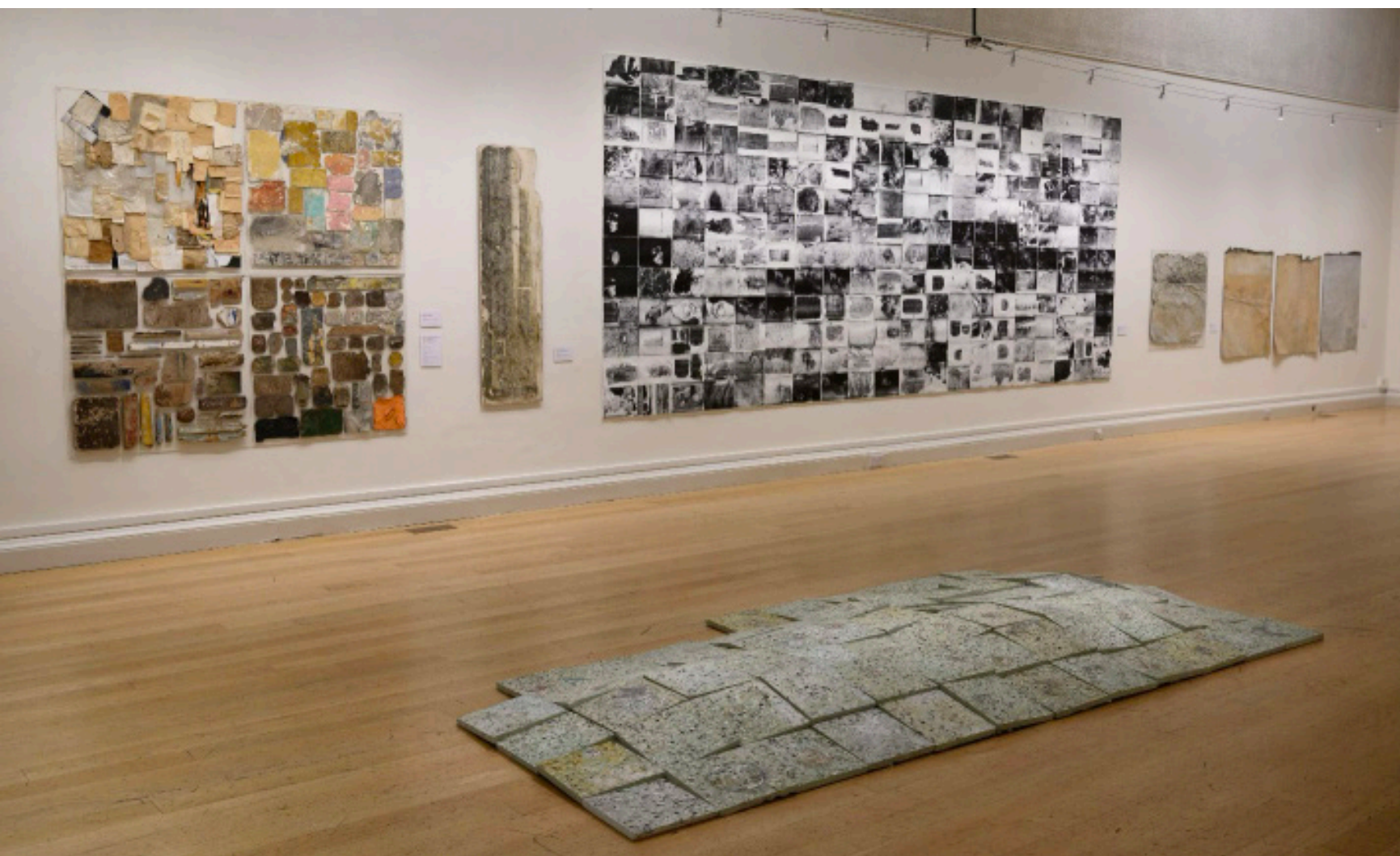


Figure 3
View of the left wall of the exhibition.
Photo by Ash Knotek,
provided by the Hellenic Centre.
Small samples from the Urban
Landscape, 1979-81 (on the left),
Photocopies Directly from Matter,
1980-82 (in the centre);
Images through Matter, 1983-1984
(on the left of the previous work);
Episodes in Matter, 1980 (the group
of three metal works at the right);
Images through Matter, 2018 (on the floor)

rials. Especially the first “sample,” according to the art historian and curator Christoforos Marinos, who has worked closely with Papaspyrou, “is intentionally exposed to time and the wear it brings.” The artist has not framed the papers, but instead she has attached them on the Plexiglass surface, aiming at their further alteration by the environmental conditions. The dust, the slightest air and the movement of the viewer can affect the paper. In particular, this “sample” and the one with the different metals are stimulated by the movement of the viewers, as they lean close to the works to read them, since some of the papers are pages from art books (in English and French) and some metal pieces have words, indicating their previous life.

On the same wall, a large synthesis of black and white photocopies (1979-82) was exhibited [Fig. 3]. Papaspyrou first started projecting shapes in the dark on photosensitive photocopy paper in the beginning of the 1970s. At the end of the same decade, she

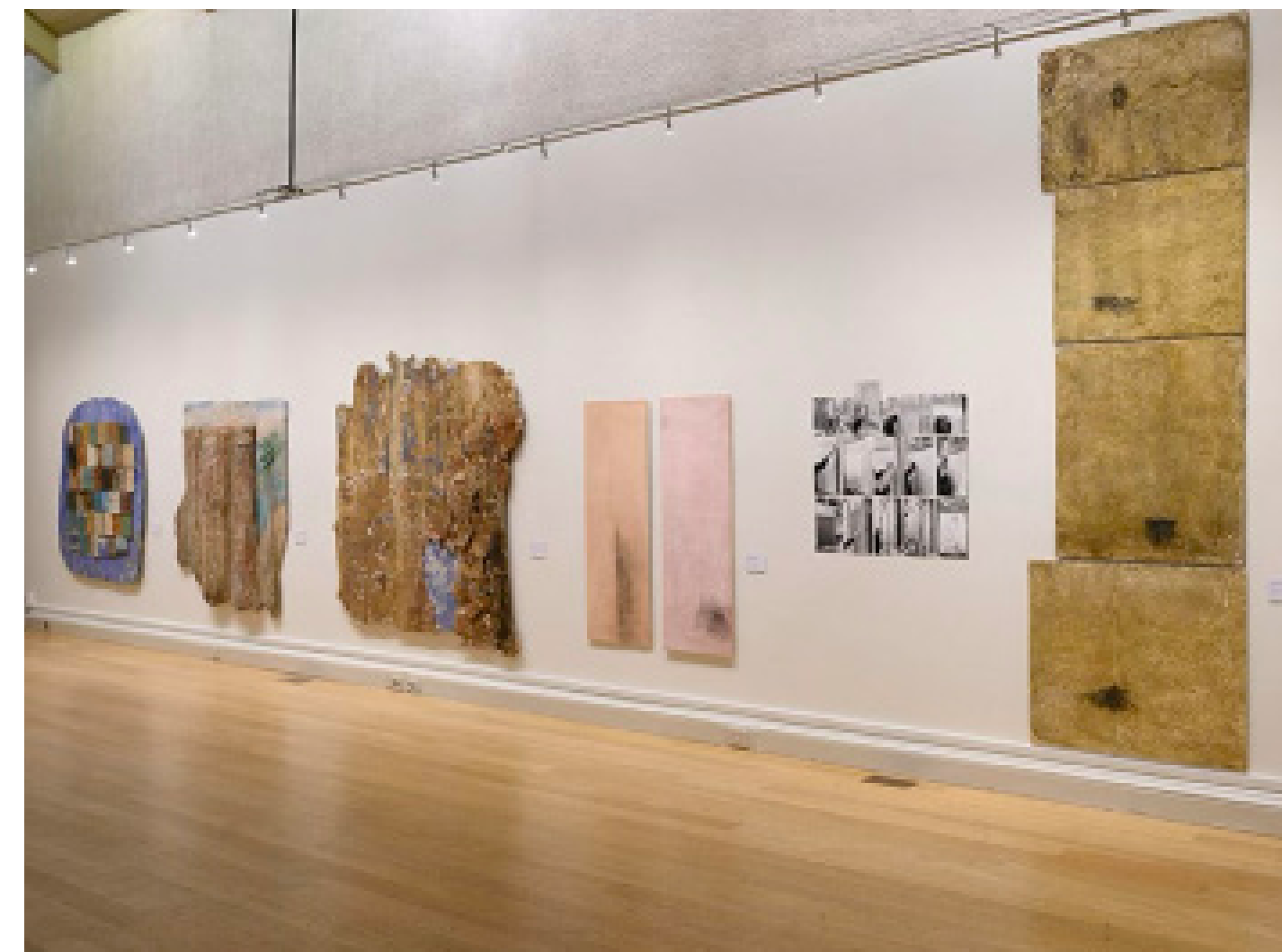


Figure 4
View of the right wall of the
exhibition. Photo by Ash Knotek,
provided by the Hellenic Centre.
Stilponos 7 (Episodes in Matter), 1979
(three vertical wall pieces at the right
and photographs next to them)

began photocopying the materials that she found in the urban space. She was using the photocopy machine of the Athens School of Fine Arts, where she was teaching, as photocopyers were very rare at the time. According to Papaspyrou, she got into the process of photocopying because she could not keep all the materials that she was collecting from the streets. To some extent, these photocopies served as evidence, as an archive/catalogue of her materials, but they also functioned as experimentation, a novel and unconventional way to produce art, as was the case with other artists in the 1970s, who embraced technology’s accessibility and new potentials.

In her photocopies, we can detect the four main materials – and even the exact same objects – that she uses in the Small samples from the Urban Landscape. Papaspyrou’s works expand the sense of their own space literally and imaginatively, a stand similar to Frank Stella (1936-2024), who argued that a painting should not end at its framing



Figure 5
Rena Papaspyrou,
Vryaxidos 11 & Aspasia, 2021 (right
work), detachment of large pieces
of wall plaster, paper and pencil.
Photo by Ash Knotek,
provided by the Hellenic Centre.

edges but should expand in the surrounding space and should take into account the act of viewing. The viewers discover the range of Papaspyrou's materials that connect one work to another, a process that stimulates their imagination.

Three large pieces of metal sheets and a detachment of a wall surface from the 1980s were exhibited on the same wall, connecting the works but also making a transition from the "samples" and the "photocopies" artworks. The metal sheets belong to the series *Episodes in Matter* (1974-81) [Fig. 3], where Papaspyrou concentrates on more solid elements from the urban space, such as detached wall surfaces, pieces of asphalt, floor slabs, wood and metal sheets. They carry subtle physical changes on their surface, which she calls "episodes," due to corrosion and wear over time. In most cases, she highlights the "episodes" with pencil. The adjacent wall piece [Fig. 3] belongs to the series *Magic Rooms* (1984-85) and is under the umbrella of the general series *Images through Matter*, which started in 1981 as continuation of the series *Episodes in Matter*. In this body of work



Figure 6
Rena Papaspyrou,
Staircases – 9 Krissila st., 2017,
paper, polyester, pencil.
Photo by Ash Knotek,
provided by the Hellenic Centre.

Papaspyrou marks and wades in with color and ink on the subtle changes on each surface, projecting simple images that emerge from the existing patterns of the wall. Her viewpoint is very close to that of Leonardo Da Vinci in “Treatise on Painting,” who argued that if we look closely at walls stained by dampness, we might discover strange forms, landscapes, remains, rocks, battles and other images. In both cases – the Episodes in Matter and the Images through Matter – the viewers are encouraged to discover and create with their imagination new images and shapes other than the ones pointed out by Papaspyrou.

On the wall across, her first detachments of the surface of the walls of an old building was presented, which took place in front of the public, on Stilponos Street, in Pagrati, and then exhibited at gallery DESMOS in Athens in 1979. This work is always accompanied by photographs, capturing the artist during the process of the detachment in front of the public [Fig. 4]. Influenced by the innovations taking place in the artworld – the exploration of the relationship between art and life expressed through the integration of everyday materials and the development of performance art and happenings – her first attempt took place in front of the public because Papaspyrou wanted to emphasise that her art was not the result of her work in the studio. In part, it is created in the urban space, the source of her materials. She adopts the strappo technique, used by conservators to detach frescoes from the walls. She gives a new life and voice to these surfaces, which will gradually fall apart in the streets of the city. Papaspyrou becomes a “ragpicker,” a “collector of traces,” who discovers and gives attention to traces of the past on the fragile surfaces of the walls, the pieces of wood, the metal sheets and pieces of asphalt, while at the same time she expresses her imagination and inner world. This art piece is the first step of working with the detachment process and technique, which became her unique artistic expression, also visible to the adjacent works.

By bringing parts of architecture and other elements of the urban space, destined to be destroyed either by time or by human intervention, into her studio and working on their elements, Papaspyrou strips off their original character and transforms them into ‘a space in between.’ In architectural terms, it is a space, which is neither internal nor external, but rather a transitional, connectional space. Her surfaces become the meeting point of her inner reality with the external world, a transitional object that provides security to explore, imagine, create and express herself.

The three artworks exhibited in the central zone of the gallery were produced in the last ten years, proving how Papaspyrou’s art is progressing and remaining fresh and at the same time loyal to her artistic practice. On the central wall, Vryaxidos 11 & Aspasias (2021) is a large installation of various detached wall surfaces from a dilapidated house that until recently was on the streets 11 Vryaxidos and Aspasias in Pagrati near her apartment [Fig. 5]. She started the process in 2015 and completed it in 2020, during the first quarantine period of COVID-19 pandemic. Here, Papaspyrou creates a new and improvised wall with the pieces she removes, without following the original arrangement on the building. Without any intervention on her part, her associative images spring from the unseen side of the wall. The viewer discovers stratifications and traces that belong to different periods, such as old graffiti and different coats of painting. Between the wall fragments, she has added notes of scattered phrases, left by friends as a form of communication during the quarantine, and sheets of newspapers. In different parts of the surface, Papaspyrou has written the dates she carried out their removal. In a way, the installation

serves as a diary, with a twist. The public wall enters the private sphere of the exhibition space, while the private notes become public spectacle.

Papaspyrou also creates installations that move away from the wall, but still carry painterly and drawing elements. Her installation of tiles (mosaic type) on the floor of the gallery belongs to the series Images through Matter [Fig. 3]. The tiles are readymades, commonly found in houses and middle-class apartments of the early postwar years in Greece. Papaspyrou creates with ink images emerging from the existing mosaic patterns. Her tiles usually cover the floor or the walls and are reminiscent of interior spaces. In the Hellenic Centre, Papaspyrou presented its latest and reworked version, first exhibited in 2018. In particular, the tiles are placed on the floor on top of gravel, giving the illusion that they break or explode, revealing the gravel underneath.

The last central installation of staircases entitled Staircases – 9 Krissila st. (2017), hang from the ceiling beams, cannot be categorized as sculptural or painterly work, but rather a hybrid [Fig. 6]. They are constructed by special modeling paper and polyester, materials that offer the potentiality to mold the wavy shape of the mosaic steps outside the artist’s apartment. Papaspyrou then drew the “episodes,” including her footprint, in the resulting surfaces. This work presents the artist and the curator with the freedom to exhibit them in different ways: hanging on the wall or from the ceiling, leaning simply on the floor or even “hovering” over the heads of viewers.

It is clear that the human being is in the centre of Papaspyrou’s art. The incline and dimensions of the staircases and the instability of the floor with the mosaic tiles determines the movement of the body, the relationship of space with the body and vice versa. Additionally, the majority of her works have been created within the limits, dimensions and possibilities of her own body, since Papaspyrou peeled off the pieces of wall plaster to the height she could reach. We should keep in mind that her art takes as a point of departure the urban space, the city of Athens, which is tailored for the needs of its inhabitants. As a result her art is connected to the idea of measure and harmony, concepts that preoccupy the ancient Greek philosophers (and later Humanism), who argued that the human being is the measure of all things. She digs for the measure in the fragments of the past and the present of the city, a stand similar to other artists of the 1960s and 1970s, especially in Europe, who tried to create novelty by turning to history and memory in order to express their concerns for the present. Those who are not familiar with the history of Greek postwar art, may think that these experimentations of Papaspyrou and other artists were belated. They occurred at the same time, in parallel to the postwar art tendencies that developed in the rest of Europe and the United States. Similarly to Papaspyrou’s effort to shed light on the unseen side of the walls, I hope this exhibition, its reviews by different art critics, together with the presentation of the important Greek artist Vlassis Caniaris’ work along with that of Joseph Beuys (1921-1986), which is still on view at Tate Modern, have contributed in bringing to the international foreground the “unseen” development of Greek art, which flourished in this crucial for the visual arts decade.

NOTES

1 After 1977, Papaspyrou strongly entered the Greek art scene, with apogee among other: her long collaboration with DESMOS (1971-93), one of the most important Greek galleries that gave voice to many postwar Greek artists; her participation in numerous group exhibitions in

and outside the borders of Greece; and her numerous solo exhibitions in important museums and galleries in Greece; the honor to represent Greece at the São Paulo Biennial (1983); and finally her large installation in one of the metro stations in Athens (2011). Rena Papaspyrou, <http://renapapaspyrou.gr> (Online: September 9, 2024)

2. Hellenic Centre, <https://helleniccentre.org/event/rena-papaspyrou-images-through-matter/> (Online: November 24, 2025)

3. Ibid.

4. Elpida Karaba, theorist and independent curator, and Stamatis Schizakis, Interim Deputy Director and Curator, Lens-based and New Media, National Museum of Contemporary Art in Athens were invited.

5. Many biographical information are found in Papaspyrou's website <http://renapapaspyrou.gr> (Online: September 9, 2024)

6. Conversation with the artist Rena Papaspyrou at her apartment in Athens, August 28, 2024.

7. Bia Papadopoulou, in the exh. cat. The years of defiance: The art of the '70s in Greece, curated by the author, organised by the National Museum of Contemporary Art, Greece (EMST), December 15, 2005 – May 7, 2006, Athens: EMST, 2005, 9.

8. Rena Papaspyrou, “Φως και σκιά, η αυτονόητη συνθήκη” [Light and shadow, a self-evident condition], interview with the author, CultureNow, Athens, Greece, 20 October 2021.

9. Andrew Causey, *Sculpture Since 1945*, Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

10. T.R. Brookes, “INSIDE / OUTSIDE and the [in between]” (Doctoral dissertation) Wellington: Te Herenga Waka—Victoria University of Wellington, 2012.

11. Robert Smithson, “A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects,” in Nancy Holt, ed., *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, New York: NY University Press, 1979, 82. First published in *Artforum*, September 1968.

12. Christoforos Marinos, Εικόνες στην Ύλη: Η Ζωή των Μορφών στο Έργο της Ρένας Παπασπύρου [Images in Matter: The Life of Forms in the Work of Rena Papaspyrou], Athens: futura, 2023, 40.

13. Ibid. 41.

14. She talked about this, during the press conference, in the morning before the opening of the exhibition.

15. Frank Stella, *Working Space*, Cambridge, Massachusetts & London: Harvard University Press, 1986, 9-10.

16. Conversation with the artist Rena Papaspyrou at her apartment in Athens, August 28, 2024.

17. Yorgos Tzirtzilakis, “The Mystery of the Smeared Wall,” in the exh. cat. Rena Papaspyrou: The Unknown Side, edited by Christoforos Marinos, Afroditi Panagiotakou and Yorgos Tzirtzilakis, Athens: Onassis Foundation 2021, 265. This catalogue was published on the occasion of the installation Vryaxidos 11 & Aspasia: The Unknown Side by Rena Papaspyrou, presented at Onassis Stegi, December 2021 – February 2022.

18. T.R. Brookes, “INSIDE / OUTSIDE and the [in between]” (Doctoral dissertation) Wellington: Te Herenga Waka—Victoria University of Wellington, 2012.

19. Sofia Eliza Bouratsis, “Rena Papaspyrou, Surfaces A User’s Manual, The Dialectical Relationship Between Everyday Life and Matter,” in the catalogue of the exhibition with the same title curated by the author, Athens: National Gallery Alexandros Soutsos Museum, 2024, 26.

Bourachis’ approach is based on Donald W. Winnicott’s psychoanalytic study of the connection of the true self with the external world. See Donald W. Winnicott, *From Playing & Reality*, United Kingdom: Tavistock Publications 1971. Found at <https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/winnicott1.pdf> (Online: 17/10/2024).

20. For the Hellenic Centre, Papaspyrou adjusted the installation according to the specific architectural elements, dimensions and conditions of the particular space. When exhibited at Stegi, the Onassis Foundation Building in Athens in 2021, it had the shape of a corner wall.