# The Image of the Berlin Wall and Its Reflection in Greek Artists' Work

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#### 1. Introduction

The division of Berlin, the blockade of the two sides and the construction of the Wall were issues that concerned not only the social and political scene, but also German and international artists who lived in the German city at that time. Among them there were Greek artists who moved to West Berlin during the Cold War era and faced such a situation and the radical spirit of reform. The main reason for their decision to move was the Regime of the Colonels in Greece from 1967 to 1974 when public freedoms were replaced by censorship and police repression.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, during that period art exhibitions and art production were limited. Since then several artists, writers and intellectuals, the first victims of authoritarian rule, abandoned Greece.<sup>3</sup> In particular, a lot of them moved to West Berlin since Greek - West German relations started to restore due the restorative EU frameworks, NATO policies and bilateral agreements such as the German-Greek "Agreement of employment of Greek people in Germany" in 1960.4 In this context of cooperation, the German Academic Exchange Service (Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst- DAAD) supported Greek artists by giving them the opportunity to express themselves freely and to explore the artists' networks in Western Europe. 5 Consequently, Greek artists were influenced by then current social and political situation in West Berlin. Through their artworks they expressed their complaints about the existence of the Wall, the division and the consequent involvement of the communication.<sup>6</sup>

In addition, in order to declare their personal position on this crucial issue, Greek artists used their own visual vocabulary or adapted contemporary artistic practices from German and international artists who also lived in West Berlin, right in the center of the divided world, next to the Wall. Indeed, Greek artists came in contact with the international artistic trends since they took part in Berlin's ,scene' and shared social situations through networks. Meanwhile, Christos Joachimides, a Greek curator and art historian in Berlin, played a pivotal role as he promoted the development of a fruitful dialogue between Greek and international artists. This dialogue would manifest itself in a series of exhibitions, including the *Szene Berlin Mai 72*, an exhibition where Greek artists exhibited their work alongside with works of the members of the Fluxus movement, the Critical Realism, Viennese Actionism Movement, the Neue Wilde group and international artists who presented new combinatory art forms. Among these artists in West Berlin were Constantinos Xenakis, Alexis Akrithakis, Kostas Tsoklis, Jannis Psychopedis and Elias Zenghelis.

The main purpose behind this research is to explore a new approach of Greek artists' artworks and to interpret them in combination with their political and social context. In particular, this research goes beyond analyzing the impact of socio-political issues on art and while examining the contemporary artistic materials used by international artists in West Berlin, the metropolis of social movements and free artistic expression. Thus, the artworks of Greek artists were analyzed in conjunction with the

study of international artistic practices and the use of methodological tools by the *Theory of the Avant-Garde* and the sociological theory concerning the concept of the ,scene and ,networks, since they belonged to Berlin's art scene. Therefore, the contact of Greek artists with the social networks in Berlin, i.e. the international artistic avant-garde trends helped them to broaden the spectrum of arts.

As a result, artists expressed interest in everyday life and re-associated art with society. They deliberately rejected the traditional art forms, standards and conventions. In contrast, they were seeking for alternative art forms, innovative or experimental artistic practices, in order to express their concerns about socio-political issues. The artistic production of that period could probably be referred to as a means of radical reversal or a tool against the established social, political and cultural system. Within this atmosphere Greek artists sought a discourse with other international artists and with the German city as well in order to express their doubts, following the international radical trends in West Berlin.

This study constitutes a relatively new area which has emerged from the international artistic cooperation as well as from the Greek artists' socio-political position. It narrows the literature gap and the outstanding research in the field of art history concerning the contact of Greek artists with the cultural scene, social networks and the contemporary artistic avant-garde trends in Berlin.

## 2. Research questions

In the work described here a series of questions are explored which concern the broader approach of German political issues of that period from the Greek artists' visual point of view and the way in which they expressed their concerns about them. More specifically, this study examines the visual perception of the Berlin Wall from Greek artists during their stay in West Berlin and how it is being reflected in their works.<sup>10</sup>

It is of great importance to explore Greek artists' participation in the alternative artistic scene in Berlin, their integration into networks and even their connection with different social networks developed in different places e.g. Kneipenszene, Hochkulturszene, Neue Kulturszene. In addition, this study attempts to answer questions regarding the dialectical relationship between art and broader political issues that inspired and motivated Greek artists who lived right next to this historical symbol of division. To what extent were Greek artists involved in the handling of German issues that concern German current affairs and what was the attitude of people who did not share the same historical past with the German artists? What were the ideas expressed by Greek artists since they were experiencing the Berlin Wall's effects on everyday life and how did they express their concerns about the division of the city, the opposition to the system and establishment in their artworks? What artistic means did they use in that period characterized by technological development and which artistic experiments resulting from the conciliation and interaction of art with social and political actions did they use? How effective was their connection with the international Berlin's art scene and how did European and American art that prevailed during that period in Berlin influence Greek artists?

The answers to the above questions extensively concern this study and suggest a new approach of artworks in a framework of socio-political analysis which relates not only to the international artistic avant-garde, but also to the social or political history of that time. Thus, in this pioneer study it is ascertained that the reference to crisis and doubt not only describes the social present, but also determines the way in which reality is acquired and signaled in art. As a result, the reversal climate in West Berlin motivates the rupture with tradition and the conventional art forms, but on the other hand it promotes radical new ideas.

## 3. Research methodology

The use of methodological principles and tools of sociological theory was in particular carried out through the concepts of ,scene' and ,networks', as formed in Helmut Kreuzer's theory of Bohème as well as the sociological approaches to these concepts by Ronald Hitzler and Michaela Pfadenhauer developed in Germany in the mid-20th century. According to them, people who take part in the scene share social situations through networks which are essentially covered by a network of social relations without strict coherence. In addition, Kreuzer defines Bohemian society as the subculture of the unconventional intellectuals in the Romantic movement of the 19th Century who disregarded conventional standards, rejected bourgeois conformity and led an alternative way of life. Following this theory, it can be observed that the art scene in Berlin during the 1960s and 1970s presents certain similarities to the bohemian scene of the Latin Quarte. In particular, Greek, German and international artists in West Berlin supported the bohemian subculture and other alternative or even rebellious ways of expression as they belonged to Berlin's alternative scene. Another important methodological tool is drawn from Peter Bürger's theory of avant-garde in order to reveal the sequels between the historical avant-garde of the early 20th century and the ,neo-avant-garde' which includes the artists examined in this paper.

Research data was collected through the examination of a significant number of primary archival documents, oral histories, conversations with artists and art historians in Berlin, Leipzig, Halle, Prague, Paris, Thessaloniki, Athens and Crete, as well as from secondary sources deriving from libraries, museums, institutes and state institutions in Germany and Greece. Based on this data, in conjunction with the study of international artistic trends and the use of methodological tools by the *Theory of the Avant-Garde* and the sociological theory concerning the concept of ,scene' and ,networks', we also analyze the current political conditions through Greek artists' perspective. Meanwhile, the study of modern German political history was crucial in order to analyze Greek artists' work based on the socio-political situations of that period in Berlin, an approach that had not been conducted previously. It is also really important that through the researching in archives and private collections artworks were discovered that have not been studied and have not been presented in exhibitions or been published in the press before. So in this way, on the one hand we will be able to make out both the social and political issues that concerned them and on the other hand analyze the artistic materials and tools used by them to express their concerns about the Berlin Wall.

#### 4. Results

The present study confirmed the findings about the reflection of the Berlin Wall in the work of the Greek artists who lived in West Berlin during the 1960s and 1970s. Specifically, Greek artists mentioned their personal views on the above socio-political issue and expressed the social protest through contemporary artistic means, highlighting their concerns to the public by connecting everyday life to art. In particular, the division of the city gave rise to the creation of a series of collages and photomontages by Konstantinos Xenakis through which he sought to explore the weakness of human communication, the absence of the dialogue between the citizens and its consequences in everyday life. <sup>17</sup> He used signals to create a language that everyone could understand in order to connect his work with the Berlin's social, political and historical reality. Xenakis developed his own visual vocabulary using the concept of fragmentation and he tried to interpret the reality, highlighting its impasse. In Xenakis' collages there is a direct political connotation since they consist of large mirrors that reflected Berlin mo-



1 Constantinos Xenakis, 1971, collage with white cones, 41,5 × 31,5 cm, West Berlin, Constantinos Xenakis' Archive

numents or traffic cones that prohibited the entrance to the Eastern sector of Berlin. In these collages, specifically, Xenakis reconstructed reality using slides glued to photographs, depicting the Wall, the Kurfürstendamm area and Siegesallee, absurd pieces of plaque, while at the same time he used white cones, allowing the public to cross the Wall at the Point of Potsdamer Platz. He deconstructed the wall by placing these white cones in the Western and Eastern sectors and at the same time he emphasized the need for communication between the two sides. The cones are set on various locations in Berlin, next to the Wall on the West and East sides, in front of the Brandenburg Gate (fig.1), at Checkpoint Charlie, in the Tiergarten and the Bundesstraße behind the Victory Column (Siegessäule). Specifically, he developed the idea of a visual alphabet with cones and shapes, basically seeking the communication and usually following a linear layout, similarly to his engravings and Egyptian hieroglyphics. In a similar way, the German artist Wolf Vostell leads the viewer through fragments of reality which were reorganized according to the principles of décollage, a corresponding technique that it is also observed in the works of Xenakis. However, Xenakis combined techniques of photomontage of Dada artists in Berlin with the liminal of Surrealism.

Similarly, the reflection of the Berlin Wall is observed in the work of Alexis Akrithakis who developed a personal visual code as well. Specifically, in his paintings there are encrypted elements of reality, while at the same time between 1967 and 1971 he dealt with photography. He captured snapshots of everyday life - or rather its absence - depicting barbed wire and railing openings which once functioned as entrances, mostly belonging to ruins that had been cleared due to the construction of the Wall; for example entrances and windows of houses and shops that were bricked up after the removal of their inhabitants (fig.2). The Greek artist also photographed signs warning the impasse, signs placed at the end of each sector's control in West Berlin like the sign with the inscription "Ende des französischen Sektors".



2 Black and white photo directed by Alexis Akrithakis, West Berlin

Kostas Tsoklis, on the other hand, incorporated organic and inorganic materials which are allegorically linked to the harsh political and social developments, and in particular to the Berlin Wall in his work. On the one hand, he used newspapers with crucial content, despite the ephemeral nature of the paper, on the other hand, he experimented with materials such as cement, stones, iron and reinforced concrete (béton armé) for the construction of three dimensional columns, alluding to the construction of the Wall but probably also to Brutalism architecture based on Le Corbusier's theories or Wolf Vostell's corresponding works. In addition, he proposed acute- rectangular shapes with rough monochrome surfaces and intense linearity, so that by using the solid and insulating material of the cement in combination with dull colors and the use of gray shades, he would express his violent feelings about current affairs as well as the arbitrary imprisonment of people. Meanwhile, it is noticed that he was inspired by the ready-mades of the Dadaists, but even in this case again the references to images such as the construction of the Berlin Wall are obvious. Jannis Psychopedis, in contrast to the prementioned Greek artists, created works that emerged broader issues of history, ideology, politics, cultural identity, issues of political-social oppression and division through the visual discourse and the fragmented world of images. One of the most characteristic pieces of his work of that period related to the issue of the division and communication is the series *The letter that did not arrive* is mainly associated with images from West Berlin and Greece. In addition, this specific series of artwork is a correspondence, a form of communication that did not take place. It consists of painted collages and random findings such as ropes, hair and bags. Psychopedis used shabby items that have no essential features in common; a metaphor for the loss of communication. The communication issue in his work is therefore obviously related to the divided Berlin and the disconnection between the East and the West. Meanwhile the atmosphere of the city in Psychopedis' artwork can be compared to the corresponding paintings of German expressionist artists and New Objectivity such as Conrad Felixmüller and Ernst Ludwig



3 Elias Zenghelis, Rem Koolhaas, Madelon Vriesendorp and Zoe Zenghelis (OMA group), Exodus, or the Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture: Training the New Arrivals (Axonometric projection), 1972, cut-and-pasted photolithographs and gelatin photograph on paper,  $27 \times 36.8$  cm, MoMA, New York

Kirchner or even Hannah Höch's collages, depicting the complex structure of a modern city. This correlation is based on the fact that West Berlin for Psychopedis was pulsating with critical reflection and intense questioning, a new avant-garde that was associated with the great artistic upheavals and the modern art movements of the early 20th century. The Berlin Wall was a source of inspiration for Elias Zenghelis and OMA Group (The Office for Metropolitan Architecture) who created the series entitled Exodus, or the Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture. 18 Particularly, Exodus is a dystopian interpretation of Cold War Berlin with an allegorical character prescribing a world in a different space and time but with clear hints at the present. It focuses on the effects of Berlin's Wall on its citizens in both their physical and emotional fields. Exodus is a clear reference to Cold War Berlin, a hypothetical, non-local urban project which is located in the center of London. This series consists of 18-projects that describe the steps to be taken in order to create an architectural oasis in the center of London. Specifically, the city was divided into two parts by two long walls, the ,good half' and the ,bad half'. The inhabitants of the ,bad half 'are increasingly leaving their part of the city trying to enter the ,good 'part of the city. 19 In order to reverse the continuing mass migration towards the ,good half ', to stop the movement of the population and, at the same time, to create positive conditions for residents, the authorities build walls to separate them. This would create a ,zone' with strong metropolitan expediency that would be separated from the rest of the city and its inhabitants would be transformed into "volunteer prisoners of this architecture" (fig.3). However, in *Exodus* the Wall becomes the precondition of freedom through self-imprisonment. Particularly, the wall constrains the inhabitants' life but meanwhile freeing the volunteer prisoners. Moreover, it describes and criticizes the ,disciplined society' which oppresses the entire social structure and the ideal model of enclosure as found in the plan Jeremy Bentham's panopticon prison.<sup>20</sup> There is a general climate of intimidation and discipline maintained by power, in which the subjects are subjugated and the whole daily life is subject to external control for manipulation purposes.

Moreover, it is clear that the direct contact of Greek artists with the international artistic avantgarde trends of West Berlin at that time and their connection with Berlin's international scene and different social networks helped them to broaden the art production field. This change is due to artists' connection with everyday life issues, aside the prevailing cultural policy, a trend which had begun to emerge in the context of social culture. In particular, Greek artists were engaged in artistic experimentation and extended the existing morphological art forms, the relationship between art and everyday life and the artist's role, expressing their protest against the social and political issues in an original and direct way. Therefore, it is demonstrated that Greek artists have expressed their thoughts and concerns on issues that were either related to their country or Germany. Regarding the way in which Greek artists expressed their thoughts on these Berlin issues, it is observed that they cast aside the abstract painting which was dominant until the mid-60s and they chose different means of expression, while sometimes they turned to more representative paintings. An important factor to this art trend was the widespread dissemination of both the image mainly through the media and the need of artists not just to experiment with new expressive means, but also to express their opposition to the division in a more eloquent way. In this case, however, they followed German standards and especially the Critical Realism, seeking to awaken and activate the critical function of the viewer towards the modern social and political reality.

Furthermore, it is noted that Greek artists reused pictorial and expressive art forms of the avant-garde artists of the early 20th century. This is an important finding in order to understand how Greek ,neo-avant-garde' artists revisited the historical avant-garde, which highlights that little is known about that. For instance, they found artistic standards in Dadaist activities or photomontage. Mean-while, they borrowed elements from European and American art that prevailed during that period in Berlin such as Pop Art, Critical Realism, neo-Dadaism and neo-Realistic trends deriving from the Dada movement by the transformation of the object. They focused on innovative trends in contemporary international art in Berlin and then they used these new artistic trends to the artistic scene in Greece. Indeed, it is noteworthy that during the Cold War era, elements such as the use of unconventional material, the intervention of space into the artwork and the concept of the ephemeron were introduced into Greek art. The social and political situations also favored the new, various forms of photorealistic art with critical content in the spirit of Pop Art.

Although the socio-political issue of Berlin's division did not relate to their country, Greek artists were concerned about it. Moreover, Greek artists tried to get closer to Berlin's inhabitants' environment and everyday life through displaying everyday objects or monuments in order to convey more accurately the socio-political issues of Berlin to their artworks. In addition, they intended to raise public awareness on a social and personal level, confirming once again the trend towards social cultural policy and the promotion of the idea of participating viewer.

#### 5. Discussion

The findings of this research noted that in Greek artists' artworks during their stay in West Berlin there are clear references to the Wall, the concept of freedom, the impasse, the confinement and communication, the growing crisis, the frustration of the social and political conditions of the post-war period

especially in the center of the divided world. Meanwhile, Berlin's unconventional spirit along with the city's culture, plurality and the heterogeneity of its inhabitants enabled Greek artists who moved there during the Cold War era to express their social and political concerns about it. Greek artists definitely created artworks which brought up one of the fundamentals issues of the Cold War era: the lack of communication related to the authoritarian characteristics of the National Socialist past. They focused on this issue within their artworks in order to share experiences, feelings and the everyday life in general with other citizens of Berlin. Moreover, each artist composed a personal visual code and tried to create a new way of contact in order to bridge the communication gap between people by criticizing it at the same time. In other words, Greek artists wanted to create a common language which would be accessible to everyone by using common symbols and road signs. In addition, Greek artists did not follow the conventional artistic practices of their country, but they deliberately rejected standards and the traditional art forms. In contrast, they were seeking for alternative art forms, innovative or experimental artistic practices which they found in Berlin's contemporary art scene. This was also encouraged by their direct contact with the international artistic avant-garde trends of that time, the cultural scene, the social networks and Berlin's unconventional spirit as well.<sup>21</sup> However, among them they used familiar visual vocabulary, techniques and methods as well as, such as collage and photomontage. Thus, Greek artists adopted figurative symbols of everyday life and road signs, such as the signals in the work of Xenakis, who used narrative, realistic and everyday elements to refer to the communication impasse in modern societies, but also to transform them into a common language which anyone could understand.

Indeed, Greek artists used new art forms, new expressive means with socio-political references and this could be explained by the rise of artistic experimentation and various alternative practices formed in the alternative art scene in Berlin where Greek artists also belonged to. Furthermore, it is a fact that this alternative art scene which emerged in Berlin in the late 1960s promoted ideas toward socially oriented cultural politics, bringing art closer to the people and outside the commercial gallery system. Thus, the art function of that period could probably be referred to as a means of radical reversal or as a tool against the established social, political and cultural system. Moreover, it is proved that the role of the artist and the viewer, the subjects of the works and the expressive means have changed. These changes reveal on the one hand, the connection of ,new avant-garde' with the historical avant-garde of the early 20th century and on the other hand, the contribution of Greek artists who lived abroad to the orientation of the contemporary Greek art scene towards the field of international art. Remarkably, this contribution confirms their osmosis with the international art scene in West Berlin and their contribution to the development of artistic practices both in Germany and Greece. However, the most conspicuous observation to emerge from the above study is the new interpretation of the work of the Greek artists that integrates them into the Berlin scene and consequently even into the contemporary Euro-American artistic scene.

#### 6. Conclusion

The present study provides evidence that although Greek artists moved to a foreign country and specifically to West Berlin during the 1960s and '70s, they achieved to be and even to feel integrated into the scene of the German city. The main proof behind this is that Greek artists felt connected to Berlin's socio-political issues, especially to the Berlin Wall. This connection was particular influential to their artwork. Exploring the division of Berlin through Greek artists' view as well as through a sociological and aesthetic analysis, it was conducted that a pivotal role in their participation to this very

German socio-political issue was the fact that they came in contact with the cultural scene, the social networks and Berlin's unconventional spirit. Additionally, new cultural forms and a subculture that supported experimentation, a modern incarnation of Bohème, as described on Kreuzer's theory, and other alternative ways of expression that were developed in Berlin's scene. We could also talk about a scene, as defined in the sociological theories of Hitzler and Pfadenhauer. In this unconventional atmosphere Berlin's alternative scene enabled the Greek artist to express their protest against the concept of division, impasse, enclosure etc. in a more direct approach since they followed the international artistic avant-garde trends of that time. Not only did they borrow elements from European and American art that prevailed during that period in Berlin, but they also transferred these new artistic trends to the artistic scene in Greece after a period of political and cultural instability. They focused on innovative artistic trends and when the democracy was restored in Greece they introduced these contemporary trends to the artistic scene in Greece which led to the modernization of Greek art. These results go beyond previous studies, such as those by Harri Veivo, Petra James and Dorota Walczak-Delanois (2019), showing that Greek artists mainly moved to Paris during the Cold War era.<sup>22</sup> Contrary to earlier findings, this study identified a great number of Greek artists who moved to West Berlin and who created artworks with political and social context; an approach that had not been conducted previously. However, additional research needs to be conducted to determine the impact of the 1960s generation of these artists on the work of the next generation of Greek artists in relation to modern political recruitments. This could eventually lead to a more thorough understanding of how Greek artists, who lived in Berlin during the 1960s and 1970s, contributed in the development of new artistic trends through the artistic experimentation.

## Notes

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## Photo credits

- Fig. 1: Constantinos Xenakis' Archive. Online available: Constantin Xenakis Official Site, https://constantinxenakis.org/(18/10/2018).
- Fig. 2: Alexis Akrithakis, Exhibition Catalogue, Berlin 2003, p. 10.
- Fig. 3: Rem Koolhaas, Elia Zenghelis, Madelon Vriesendorp and Zoe Zenghelis, *Exodus, or the Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture: Training the New Arrivals (Axonometric projection)* 1972, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Online available: https://www.moma.org/collection/works/406?sov\_referrer=artist&artist\_id=7558&page=1 (16/02/2018).

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