

THEN AND AGAIN

Rethinking Ritual in Contemporary Balkans

Artists

Martin Atanasov is a visual artist and researcher. In his work, he explores the queer body, homosexuality in the context of Bulgaria, and the political and social transition of Bulgaria after the fall of the communist regime. The main media and forms which Martin uses in his visual research are photography, video, photobooks, and texts. Some of his recent works are the self-published photobook and project *How To Forget Your Past Fast*, exhibited at festival Circulations, Paris, France, in 2023; *Notes on Cutout Study*, installation and photobook exhibited at GARA art space, Sofia, Bulgaria, in 2023; *Between the Wild Grass*, sound piece/conversation with Katy Bentall and installation part from the project *New Ecologies*, exhibited at Swimming Pool Gallery, Sofia, Bulgaria, in 2023; *Nature Index*, self-published photo zine in collaboration with Konstantin Georgiev, 2021–2023. He lives and works in Sofia, Bulgaria.

Ali Cem Doğan is currently working on several film projects as a cinematographer. He is a lecturer in the Izmir University of Economics' Fine Arts and Cinema & Digital Media departments and one of the founding members of İzmir Darağaç Collective. He grew up in Izmir and completed his undergraduate education at the Media and Communication Department of Izmir University of Economics in 2013. He completed his master's degree at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki in 2018. "I engage in the audio-visual documentation of narratives that evolve through the use of rhetoric and symbols. My focus revolves around exploring the identity, socio-cultural existence, and struggles of individuals within their communities, serving as the foundational elements of my storytelling. Through my works, I visualise a space for these narratives, while other times, I position these characters right at the centre of their own stories." He lives and works in Izmir, Turkey.

Armin Graca is a photographer and storyteller born in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Graca uses his camera to document everyday social life, telling stories through visual experience. Street and documentary photography are his main interests, and he spends most of his free time taking photos on the streets. In addition, he works on long-term documentary projects. In 2023, he won the First prize at the Brussels Street Photography Festival and a Grand Prix award and First prize at the Sarajevo Photography Festival. He lives and works in Belgrade, Serbia.

Teodora Ivkov is a visual researcher and artist. Through her work, she explores her personal and national identity with a focus on collecting overlooked artefacts and gestures, often weaving her research process into a story told through photography, tactile objects, books, and exhibitions. She graduated in Fine Arts Photography from the Academy of Arts University of Novi Sad and holds an MSc in Product and Service Design from the Sapienza University of Rome (2020 with honours). Currently, she is a PhD student at Sapienza studying photography as a visual method for design research. She lives and works in Rome, Italy.

Marietta Mavrokordatou's practice explores the possibilities of image-making. Employing autobiographical elements, she reimagines these from the spectator's point of view, finding ways to relate anew. The presentation of Mavrokordatou's narratives leads back to the photographic medium itself, where she directly addresses its formal parameters. The photograph becomes at once a depiction of both itself and the artist. Usually working with a succession of images, the fiction is created in the rhythm found somewhere between the gestures, the gaps, and the disruptions. She holds an MFA in Fine Art Media from The Slade School of Fine Art. Her recent solo exhibition, *GIRL*, took place at Thkio Ppalies, Nicosia. Recent solo and group exhibitions include: *Ah This!*, Felix Gaudlitz, Vienna (2023); *Homotopy Type Theory*, Oslo (2023); *Park Activity*, Nicosia (2023); *Our Misfortune, Thousand Julys*, Nicosia (2022); and *Power, Corruption & Lies*, Unit 3 Projects, London (2022). She lives and works in London, UK.

Luka Pešun is a photographer. His primary interest revolves around exploring the meaning of identity, family, and belonging with a focus on queer as opposed to the norm. His work is mostly digital and documentary in nature but also includes appropriation of images found in family albums, screenshots, and analogue photographs that exist somewhere between being staged and real. Questioning meaning in regard to context, he explores things from mundane to

personal with a particular interest in the relation between a person and the space they inhabit. He holds an MA in Photography from the Academy of Dramatic Art and has exhibited in various group and solo exhibitions throughout Croatia, including the 36th Youth Salon in Zagreb. He lives and works in Zagreb, Croatia.

Marius Ionut Scarlat is a documentary photographer. He is interested in social issues from Romania, playing with the tension that new narratives can introduce in the field of documentary photography. In his projects, he insists on addressing the tensions and conflicts arising from his move to Spain. His work has been recognised and awarded in several national and international competitions, such as PHotoEspaña, Magnum Photos, Futures Photography, The Emerging Photographer Fund, Visa pour l'image, and Matera European Photography. Beyond his artistic pursuits, he contributes to the academic realm by teaching classes at the University School of Arts TAI. Scarlat lives and works between Romania and Spain.

Stratis Vogiatzis is an anthropologist, writer, filmmaker, and visual artist whose work is closely related to the posthuman or post-anthropocentric discourse. At the heart of his practice lie polyvocality and collaborative modes of working. He is the founder of the Caravan Project, an interdisciplinary collective that mediates diverse forms of knowledge production – human and non-human engaging in collaborative projects that emphasise agency and encounter, transformability, listening, and making space. His works belong to museums and private collections. He has published five books and directed several independent documentaries and films distinguished at international film festivals. Born and raised in the island of Chios, Greece, he now lives and works in Athens, Greece.

Gerta Xhaferaj is a visual artist and photographer, with a background in architecture. Employing both spontaneity and methodology, her artistic focus lies in a historical and documentary style, seeking profound engagement with specific realities to extract intense aesthetic experiences. Emphasising the purpose of revealing the typically unseen, her approach encapsulates a holistic exploration of contemporary dynamic, exploring diverse media, including photography, video, installation, and sound. She is the recipient of the 2022 VID Grant by VID Foundation for Photography in Amsterdam. Her work has been exhibited in Galeria 17, Pristina; Larnaca Biennale, Cyprus; Jelsa Art Biennial, Hvar Island; MOCA, Skopje; Zeta Gallery, Tirana; Manifesta Biennial 14, Pristina; Vogue Photo Festival, Milan; Bazament Art Space, Tirana; Galeria e Bregdetit, Vlorë. Holding an MSc in architecture, she is currently pursuing an MA in Fine Arts at FHNW University of Art and Design in Basel, where she lives and works.

Curators

Yorgos Prinós is a visual artist. His work explores issues of power and violence at the intersection of human psychology and politics, often focusing on the human figure in urban space. He uses his own images alongside found footage from media and the Internet. He holds an MFA from the Yale School of Art and has presented his work in venues across Europe, the United States, and Asia. Alongside his artistic practice, Prinós has co-edited several catalogues, contributed to various publications, and co-curated exhibitions internationally. He lives and works in Athens, Greece.

Dimitris Tsoumplekas is a visual artist. He is primarily concerned with the influence of the private on the public (and vice versa) and the way in which the immediate environment shapes and gives meaning to our individual and social experiences. His photographic work is dominated by the landscape, both literally and figuratively. Parallel to his solo exhibitions, he has participated in many group presentations in Greece and abroad. Alongside his artistic work, he has edited various photo books and catalogues and curated several international exhibitions. He lives and works in Athens, Greece.

Welcome Note

Kostas Kostis

Professor, Director of MIET–National Bank of Greece Cultural Foundation

Coffee, cigarettes, and stories... patents that appropriate everyday materials... fleeting touches... identities under renegotiation... images within and on top of other images... grandparents and grandchildren, newcomers and locals...

Nine female and male artists from the Balkans re-explore in their own unique ways ritualizations that transcend the boundaries of individual experience and come to join Jung’s world of symbols, providing “readings and meanings to the diverse facets of humanity’s soul”.

The exhibition *Then and Again. Rethinking Ritual in Contemporary Balkans* examines the semiotics of the everyday that constitute the contextual framework of rituals.

At the same time, it delves into the performative dimension of photography, both in its capacity as evidence of novel rituals and a means of ritualization in itself, as well as a standalone contemporary ritual.

A fruit of collaboration between the MIET–National Bank of Greece Cultural Foundation, the Goethe-Institut, and MOMus–Thessaloniki Museum of Photography, the exhibition heralds a new era of extroversion and synergies that will materialise in the emblematic Villa Kapandji, a branch of MIET in Thessaloniki.

I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to Stefanie Peter and Eleanna Papathanasiadi for their exemplary collaboration, to the curators of the exhibition, Yorgos Prinós and Dimitris Tsoumplekas, for their bold outlook, and to my associates, Elia Vlachou, Kákia Kampantai, and Dimitris Theodorakos, for their impeccable coordination.

Then and Again

Stefanie Peter

Rituals are as much a part of being human as language, using tools, creating symbols, and making music. Cultural traditions indicate how enduring and pervasive rituals are. Archaeological findings suggest that humans have always cultivated rituals, and biology tells us that ritualization is an essential feature of animal behaviour and contributes to evolutionary processes. In other words, contemplating rituals means contemplating human nature, society, and culture.

There is no way to avoid rituals. Some may be important, to a greater or lesser degree, to specific people, societies, or groups. But even if we don’t see ourselves as ritualized beings and our society is not based on rituals, we are bound to encounter them in the course of our lives, as surely as the sun rises and sets.

Rituals permeate our social and personal realms and leave their mark on us. We may experience the rites and ceremonies that we encounter as edifying or tedious, oppressive or empowering, innovative or ossified.

Contemplating rituals means exploring their power over our lives and their place in our society. For people who have grown up in the modern and late-modern industrialised West, ritual has been marginalised in the cultural and intellectual landscape to a large extent. In historical terms, it was the influence of Protestant and Enlightenment thinking that led people to distrust ritual. When set against science, reason, and the market, ritual was often dismissed as a rather ineffective means of dealing with the world.

Ritual is, however, making something of a comeback in the most recent debates, and there has been a rekindling of public interest in its creative, critical, and transformative power. The bonds that hold our society together are evidently undergoing change. Different realms and institutions, both private and public, are experimenting with cultural transfer and the possibility of reinventing or modifying rituals. While in the past, the emphasis was on the fixed, constrained nature of rituals, the attention is now on their dynamic dimension: Who creates them? Who changes or preserves them?

Wearing your team’s colours at a football match or having a coffee break at work; giving birth in the hospital and making a speech in parliament; watching Netflix or tending the garden; waiting at a bus stop or taking part in a rave; weddings or May Day demonstrations – these are just some of the activities that have been conceptualised, analysed, and theorised as ritual. Wherever we go, we are surrounded, it seems, by rituals.

In its broadest sense, ‘ritual’ is not a discrete act of a specific type but rather a quality inherent to the act performed that can extend across an entire behavioural spectrum. As a meta category, ‘ritual’ covers both religious and non-religious rites, the traditional and the new, the stipulated and the improvised, the human and the non-human. Here, it intersects with a range of other cultural domains, such as play, gaming, performance, and theatre. If ritual is an act, it is also an idea, something we think about. Ritual is, first and foremost, practice. As is the case with cooking, swimming, and politics, we learn about rituals by carrying them out. But in addition to performing rituals, people also step back to reflect on rituals, and to read and write about them. Rituals are a practice of thinking and of knowing.

The more an action is formalised, stylised, and enhanced in aesthetic terms by gestures, music, art, and performance, the more it is given a spatial and temporal setting; the more it is tied in with divine powers, founding figures, and historical or mythical events, the more it comes to resemble a ritual.

Rituals are a symbolic code for interpreting and dealing with everyday events.

The exhibition project *Then and Again. Rethinking Ritual in Contemporary Balkans* was occasioned by observations we made after the end of the pandemic in Athens, Belgrade, Sofia, Bucharest, Tirana, and other cities in Southeast Europe: people would congregate in larger groups in public squares, cafés, and restaurants and celebrate the lifting of restrictions by being together, a simple act that was itself a cause for celebration. This return to gregariousness – which was, on the face of it, sufficient unto itself – raised more general questions about the form and meaning of social rituals in this part of the world, and we decided to investigate it artistically.

Photography seemed an appropriate medium to use, and we were extremely fortunate to be able to engage Yorgos Prinós as curator. Once he had brought Dimitris Tsoumplekas on board, we could embark on our journey together. Starting in Athens, we initially went to Thessaloniki, where Hercules Papaioannou spontaneously offered his help and supported the project emotionally and intellectually thereafter. From there, we moved on to Tirana, where the group of participating artists and curators discussed their work, played football, and helped provide orientation for the collective exhibition.

The coming together of nine very different artistic positions resulted in a constellation that found an ideal venue in which to present its work in Thessaloniki’s Villa Kapandji. The show is tied together thematically by the idea of ritual – or, to be more precise, what Martin Atanasov, Ali Cem Doğan (on the Darağaç Collective), Armin Graca, Teodora Ivkov, Marietta Mavrokordatou, Luka Pešun, Marius Ionut Scarlat, inmates of Chios Penitentiary and Stratis Vogiatzis, and Gerta Xhaferaj understand by it: gambling as a rite of passage among Romanian teenagers; “Aunts from Germany” and Bosnian grandfathers as anchors of memory; accounting practices in Darağaç, an industrial quarter in Izmir threatened by gentrification; flowers as a symbol of censorship in amateur videos made during the Hoxha dictatorship in Albania; patents devised as a survival strategy in a Greek prison, ritualised processes in the darkroom, and the idea of ritual as embodied knowledge.

I would like to thank our partner, the MIET–National Bank of Greece Cultural Foundation, its team and its director Professor Kostis, for the wonderful process of cooperation, and the MOMus–Thessaloniki Museum of Photography – and Iro Katsaridou and Hercules Papaioannou, in particular – for their invaluable support. A very special thank you to the artists, curators, and my colleague Eleanna Papathanasiadi for their commitment and enthusiasm.

Contemporary Rituals / Photographic Questions Hercules Papaioannou

Curator, MOMus–Museum of Photography of Thessaloniki

Starting from its early emergence shortly before the mid-19th century, photography, although quintessentially modern in nature, maintained certain ritualistic traits as a medium. The initially rigid staging for portrait-making in the studio, with the Sunday clothes and the limited variety of poses, suggested a short and strict ritual, both individualised and collective. The portrait’s background, usually featuring a painted landscape or classic decoration, subtly underscored the emergence of the modern subject in the foreground, leaving behind the mist of history and the romantic perception of nature. As its addition to every formal family or social occasion became gradually necessary, photography came to consolidate its place in the contemporary condition, as the notion of individuality decisively penetrated the shell of the close-knit society. At the same time, it maintained the mysterious aura of ritual – a certain kind of magic that many in the past believed involved a process that elicited something inner, undefinable from within them.

A long time has passed since then. Photography has rushed through the 20th century and entered the 21st through overlapping technological revolutions and social rearrangements, which seemed to posit photography increasingly in a rational world, now defined by ever-expanding algorithmic capabilities and determinants. However, the magic of the ritual did not seem to recede, as the older photographic rituals remained in full bloom, with new ones emerging as well. Evidence is the case of the selfie, under the constellation of which people self-direct themselves casually, in usually indifferent versions and on every available or contrived occasion.

In the *Then and Again. Rethinking Ritual in Contemporary Balkans* exhibition, organised by the Goethe-Institut Athen and curated by Yorgos Prinós and Dimitris Tsoumplekas, photography as a contemporary artistic practice examines lesser-known micro-rituals within today’s societies, invents new ones, or illuminates the ritual element within the creation of analogue photographs themselves. Focusing on the geographical region of the Balkans, where Western modernity maintains until today a fluctuating degree of permeation, it includes works by nine emerging photographers created on assignment for the exhibition under the mentoring of the curators, who are seasoned artists themselves. With personal and collective experience as their main starting point, the participants attempt to endow the concept of the ritual with a novel meaning, engaging issues that embrace family history, juvenile additions, human touch, sexual orientation, confinement, immigration, and the notion of contemporary identity. To achieve this, they employ several practices that include, among others, ‘pure’ photography, collage, performativity, video editing, painterly gesture, and the diaristic approach. The fruit of this collective effort seems to question the nature and objectives of ritual in a world where individuality and breathless change thrive in place of collectivity and regular periodicity. In this light, the exhibition invites us to ponder photographic exploration and the sharing of often private rituals as a precious nest of experience and exchange, exorcising Polish sociologist and philosopher Zygmunt Bauman, who deemed the contemporary post-modern condition as a “hotbed of uncertainties”.

A Ritual in Nine Acts Dimitris Tsoumplekas

“In Europe, happiness stops at Vienna. Beyond, misery upon misery, since the beginning.”

–Emil M. Cioran

From the onset and the exhibition’s subtitle, we stumbled upon certain problems. As we see it now, this stumbling has something inherently Balkan within it, a bodily memory that we share with all the participants.

“The sidewalks were like minefields, the paving stones would tilt and spit mud up on your pant legs. This turned walking into a peculiar exercise indeed, full of careful assessments, jumps, hesitations, searches for detours. Not walking, but manoeuvring.”

So, we tried to manoeuvre through this awkwardness, or at least define it: Which Balkans are we talking about?

“At the end of the twentieth century, people spoke as if the Balkans had existed forever. However, two hundred years earlier, they had not yet come into being [...] From the very start the Balkans was more than a geographical concept. The term, unlike its predecessors, was loaded with negative connotations – of violence, savagery, primitivism – to an extent to which it is hard to find a parallel.”²

What is a ritual, after all? A term that, upon first hearing, alludes to something relatively ‘picturesque’, past-like, at times dark, let alone all the religious connotations, the tourist exoticism, the staled local traditions...

“We can define rituals as symbolic techniques of making oneself at home in the world. They transform being-in-the-world into a being-at-home. They turn the world into a reliable place. They are to time what a home is to space: they render time habitable. They even make it accessible, like a house.”³

Oddly enough, we were indeed feeling quite “at home” within this ritual concept, most likely because the main problem with this concept is a similar ambiguity of definition to the one that surrounds the Balkans – this awkwardness of identity that besets the Balkan peninsula. Ritual is a malleable concept that can easily slip into an umbrella term that can include funerals, national day parades, elections, holy communion, the Sunday football match, the experience of cinema-going, getting bounced at clubs, morning coffee...

Regardless of whether they include all these or not, however, rituals foremost concern our relationship with time. On the first level, they work to generate meaning within the life cycle, endow it with rhythm, sweeten routine, delineate power, establish hierarchies, and forge correlations.

In an era where our relationship with time is predominantly disturbed, it is not unusual for rituals to be limited and pushed to an area that shares more with spectacle than everyday life. As the notion of free time becomes looted – in the workplace and on social media – and relationships deteriorate, the notion of the collective recedes and the communal dries out. Moreover, the bigger picture of a planet that discards its seasons environment-wise, and its differences culture-wise is not particularly helpful.

“Everything is becoming more uniform in its outward manifestations”, as Stefan Zweig grumbled already in 1915, “everything levelled into a uniform cultural schema. The characteristic habits of individual peoples are being worn away, native dress giving way to uniforms, customs becoming international. Countries seem increasingly to have slipped simultaneously into each other; people’s activity and vitality follows a single schema; cities grow increasingly similar in appearance.”⁴

In this uniform world, the Balkans – which left us quite indifferent or even hostile as we were drawn like bees from the fascinating metropolises of Western Europe – suddenly loom more interesting, as if they are salvaging a field of heterogeneity: small local particularities that, however swept away they become from the

galloping neoliberal development through the years, still remain discernible.

In an area where our relationship with place is loaded and an era where our connection with time becomes increasingly fragmented, we got together with young artists from these regions in order to pose a set of questions together. Online in the beginning and later up close, in a seminar in Tirana. What we saw was that stereotypes aside, we share a common language, cultural references, tastes, social reflexes, and, above all, memories – memories that pertain to social space and family relations, the distrust towards the state apparatus, and the remembrance of the neighbourhood and the community. ‘Rousfeti’ (political favours), ‘daraveri’ (doing business), ‘philotimo’ (love of honour), ‘meze’ (the appetiser snack), grumbling, baksheesh (the bribe), the feast, or ‘haraç’ (the horizontal tax per capita) are commonly understood terms precisely because they derive from a shared historical memory.

This connection then translated, in a somewhat unexpected manner, into a common thread that traverses all works and their relationship with the notions of experience, memory, and personal history.

Whether talking about their *Gastarbeiter* relatives from Germany, the neighbourhood’s artisans, our petty-theft delinquent brothers, our obscure grandparents, the tangle of the ‘murky’ state officials, our silent fathers, our awkward touching, the silent oppression, the ageing of objects, the patents created by necessity, the wish to escape, the safety of confinement, the dusted alleys, the ill-fated (sometimes arid and sometimes muddied) landscapes, and the flowers blooming in our absence, there is a common thread. Indeed, somewhat vague, or *air de famille*, as the French would have put it.

One might think that all these exude a rather sullen mood, a nostalgia for a past that never really existed in the first place, small or grand rituals as a solace for the famed Balkan melancholy.

“Why part with unhappiness, when it’s the only wealth some nations have – the crude oil of sorrow is their only inexhaustible resource. And they know that the deeper you dig into it, the more you can excavate. The limitless deposits of national unhappiness.”⁵

However, these works are not nostalgic and do not speak about unhappiness. Rather, they speak about a kind of happiness, and, as noted by Gospodinov, happiness “doesn’t make it into the history textbooks (there only battles, pogroms, betrayals, and bloody murders of some archduke make the cut), nor does it make it into the chronicles and annals. [...] Swords are not forged from happiness, its stuff is fragile, its stuff is brittle. It does not lend itself to grand novels or songs or epics. There are no chains of slaves, no besieged Troys, no betrayals, no Roland bleeding on a hill, his sword jagged and his horn cracked, nor any fatally wounded, aging Beowulf... You can’t summon legions under the banner of happiness...”⁶

And as Wim Wenders recently confirmed in *Perfect Days*, ritual may entail happiness after all...

...happiness that we should start wearing on our lapel like a flower or hanging on our ear like an earring.

“One afternoon, years later, after yet another terrorist attack somewhere in Europe, I spent hours in the museum at the Hague. As if in a shelter from another time. It was full of people who had run away from the news of the day. A girl in jeans and a sweater was standing in front of *Girl with a Pearl Earring*. I was standing a step away from them, not moving. Their faces one and the same. So time is merely a piece of clothing, an earring...”⁷

- Georgi Gospodinov, *Time Shelter*, transl. Angela Rodel, New York: Liveright, 2022.
- Mark Mazower, *The Balkans: A Short History*, New York: The Modern Library, 2002.
- Byung-Chul Han, *The Disappearance of Rituals: A Topology of the Present*, transl. Daniel Steuer, Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2020.
- Stefan Zweig, *The Monotonization of the World*, German History in Documents and Images website, last retrieved on April 6, 2024: https://germanhistorydocs.gdi-dc.org/pdf/eng/prob_zweig_monoton_en.pdf
- Gospodinov, op. cit.
- Ibid.
- Ibid.

Photographic Ritual Spyros Yannaras

Looking at the work of these young photographers from the Balkans over and over again, I feel, in my capacity as an external observer, as if I have been confronted with an intractable iconological riddle, one that bears the twofold meaning of the word, both as an enigma and impassable scripture. Long hours of observation transform the photographic images into captivating hieroglyphics. I use the word ‘hieroglyphics’ probably in the most enchanting or magical sense of the term. By its very origins, every ritual reveals itself to the uninitiated or the stranger to it as a riddle. In brief, ritual is an apocryphal sequence of acts that is illuminated from the inside and only by engaging in active participation in it.

I would like to begin with a fundamental contradiction, one that appears to be untangled by this photographic endeavour (I almost wrote “photographic event”) artistically, that is, by setting its very materials in motion: by establishing a conversation. And I explain: photography, like any other type of image, suggests an outreach as if saying, “Look here, look at me!” On the contrary, ritual replays a founding gesture of introversion, a highly charged “Let no one ignorant of geometry enter”, as Plato would have put it. It demarcates an inside and an outside by imposing a dividing line. The photographic image transforms the point of contact with the viewer into a point of encounter and potential initiation of conversation. Ostensibly, they appear almost as two completely antithetical gestures.

The photoloniki collaboration presented at Villa Kapandji in Thessaloniki establishes, upon first glance, an extremely challenging conversation (an artistic gesture, possibly?) between the photographic image and the codified human deed that we call ritual. A conflation between the notions of ‘seeing’ and “now we see things through a mirror, by enigmas”, as Paul the Apostle exclaimed in his famous letter to the Corinthians. It invites you to a circuitous reading. In other words, if the viewer stands solely at the images, they will find themselves – like the ignorant confronted with a series, or in this case, successive series of hieroglyphics – in front of an intellectually and aesthetically challenging language, alas unfathomable. However, an entire world becomes illuminated upon placing them in a ritual context.

Every photographic work establishes not just its very own narrative but its entirely unique language of ritual, a personal idiom, as one might say. To put it differently, the succession of images functions in a way that mirrors that of language as a succession of signifiers. The marrying of photography and ritual coalesces eventually into a double invitation or, ritually speaking, a double invocation to the viewer to see and invest a minimum effort to integrate themselves into a state of becoming, which does not amount plainly to a duplication of the mode of outreach but mostly to a multiplication of this invocation. An imperative command: See and step inside.

In this light, I argue that, on a first level, it is highly challenging – and I mean potentially fruitful – to ‘read’ every ritual photographic gesture as an opaque spell. What are the strictly arranged images in Armin Graca’s photographic collage trying to say? The shaken images or flowers by Gerta Xhaferaj? The dance of hands in Luka Pešun’s images?

Initially, they seek to attract, in the most bold and instinctive sense of the term, that is, to captivate the viewer’s gaze as if capturing a prey, which, once caught, is transformed into an organic element of the ritual. Hence, this captivation, I think, becomes

a prerequisite for the ritual’s realisation. Without the beholder’s input, images remain an unshared gesture or unspoken speech, an undelivered letter, a vacant pirouette, a plain and therefore dead self-referentiality, a sad “Je me comprends”, as is the fate so often of so many artworks, installations, and performances. Here, it is worth emphasising the group exhibition in its guise as an event, that is, the common, or more rightly, multiple gesture that seeks a ‘shared’ attunement, a locus of intersection and encounter between these disparate works or disparate idioms, to reach concurrently and reciprocally a common discourse. A symbolic transmutation, to say the least. To achieve this performative state and outline not simply a meaning but a semantic subject behind each photographic work, a mere contribution on the part of the viewer is not enough; rather, their active participation and synergy are required.

“Ritual is older than myth”, Walter Burkert used to say, and I believe that, already from eras lost in the deep recesses of time, the concept of ritual has been constantly and fervently posing the same questions: “for what reason” and “to what end”. As in the most brutal religious rituals ever conceived by man – and I refer to the human sacrifices of the Incas to the God of the Sun – the viewer, in our case, exists only as a participant, as an energetic subject who is called to sacrifice not their life but their notorious postmodern dispassion; to mitigate their ever-expanding desire (in the image of the universe), so that the vital desire of the photographer to exist as an artist and an active subject within the fabric of the world can be satisfied.

The photographic gesture of each photographer, meaning the proposed and almost dance-like succession of their images, illuminates an aspect of themselves or their lives and, consequently, a part of the contemporary world. We might say that the founding reason behind the ritual is the constant endowing of the word with meaning over and over again. This is a world that photography has been painstakingly tracing since the very first day of its invention. The gaze I cast upon the word immediately places me within its fabric as an active artistic subject. And this, although in a rather brief and schematic manner, is the objective of the ritualistic initiation into the contemporary state of becoming. This gaze is not identical to that superficial sweeping of the surface of things that characterises late modernity in its daily rhythm but rather presupposes an ontological labour for the forging of a personal gaze, of a view on the world.

If each photographic work functions as an idiomatic ritual language, what is the role of each photographic image within it? Does it work as a word or a digit? Does it work as a thousand words, according to the famous dictum, or as an autonomous and, therefore, conceptual linguistic entity within a complete narrative? As a semantic linguistic fragment or an incomprehensible unit within a fractured discourse? I have the sense that, by being an organic part of an iconological narrative, each photograph reserves the role of a lexeme, a pure word, cleansed from any affixes or suffixes. A word charged, depending on the case, with a specific semantic content that lies on the edges of meaning, at the liminal site of ‘being’ and ‘non-being’, or rather, ‘I am’ and ‘I am not’.

These photographs, these photographic units, although they serve as a photographic document that evidences each time a specific event, such as Teodora Ivkov’s Serbian *Gastarbeiter* who send gifts to their relatives from Germany, do not function in any way as illustrated captions or a photographic depiction of a certain subject. That is why I deem it more essential and fruitful for someone to approach them initially as standalone photographic narratives and, only after seeing them and striving to ‘read’ them, to seek the input of the explanatory text that supplements each artistic work.

The second question with regards to each photograph is whether and to what extent these photographic lexemes stand as a complete artistic work; whether they could potentially detach themselves from their photographic sentence and ritual role and act as standalone photographic artworks, adorning the wall of a collector or lover of photography. Here, the articulation of an answer proves hard since we tread into the rugged and, at times, uncharted premises of the notion of the subjective. I feel that the common trait that unites all the photographers who participate in the exhibition is their burning desire to fulfil their personal artistic gestures. Their agony seems to revolve more around the composition of a photographic narrative than about each photographic lexeme. I don’t suggest that they underestimate the image, yet they seem to approach it not as a standalone work but rather as a photographic unit and digit towards the formulation of an iconological discourse, a photographic mosaic.

Therefore, I argue that in the era of the narrative, specifically of the iconological or virtual narrative, the aesthetic primacy of the artwork has more or less fallen by the wayside. The aesthetic, technical, and compositional perfection of the photographic image finds itself displaced as a priority in favour of the urgent need to articulate a personal discourse made of images. The present reveals itself, mainly to younger generations, as a relentless, if not frenetic, sequence of images. It is not simply captured with images; it is an image in itself. The dominant discourse today is articulated through images. The photographic gesture – at times a photographic howl – of these young photographers from the Balkans serves as an artistic identity card that is primarily existential in its heart. The photographic commentary on their immediate reality, on their individual or national present, is nothing more than a resonant attempt to assert an energetic ‘I’. Each photographically rendered ritual constitutes a certain kind of (partial or incomplete) initiation into the subjective territory of each artist. The subjective space can never be conveyed in full but only as a fragment or shred. The sum of the ritual fragments presented in the said exhibition signifies the artistic attempt of young photographers or artists who work with images to claim and solidify their position in the present by commenting on it – a position in the historical here and now that amounts to a place in the world.

The subjective, fragmentary discourse exposed (I feel the urge to say howling) in this exhibition conjures, on a second level, an archaeology of the present. The artistic subjective gaze of each artist photographer on their immediate surroundings – in this case, the Balkans at the beginning of the 21st century – forms an entity of photographic and semantic fragments of the said present, the raw material for the future archaeologist. The philosophical question that arises with every similar gesture is whether and to what extent the future archaeologist will manage to formulate a coherent view of the fragmentary and increasingly fluid present of our era.

Perhaps the specific artistic work might add another brick to the understanding, not simply of our unstable present but rather of how contemporary art works to its full extent. It could eventually work as an artistic commentary on the ever-discontinuous reality and a subjective iconological caption on the multitudinous reality. The 21st-century human feels the existential need to mumble a faint ‘I am here’, namely, to attempt to see themselves as a whole within a terminally ruptured and shattered present.

Then and Again

Rethinking Ritual in Contemporary Balkans

24.5–6.7.2024

MIET–National Bank of Greece Cultural Foundation
Thessaloniki Branch
Villa Kapandji
108, Vassilissis Olga St.
Thessaloniki, Greece

Exhibition

Artists

Martin Atanasov
Ali Cem Doğan (Darağaç Collective)
Armin Graca
Teodora Ivkov
Marietta Mavrokordatou
Luka Pešun
Marius Ionut Scarlat
Inmates of Chios Penitentiary and Stratis Vogiatzis
Gerta Xhaferaj

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Dimitris Tsoumplekas

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Goethe-Institut Athen
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General Coordination: Eleanna Papathanasiadi

Production Coordinator

Stergios Karavatos

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Visual Identity

YOOOP Studio

© Texts: the authors

© Works: the artists

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Traces of Lineage

Armin Graca

My knowledge of my grandfather, Omer, is limited. I only know that he was born in Sjenica, Serbia, and held a prominent position as a government official in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. His image exists solely in family photographs. They portray a tall, imposing figure with a dark complexion and an ever-clean-shaven face.

My father rarely discusses his own father. What is left of him are some photographs, a few documents and personal items, a testament to the enigmatic figure whom I never had the chance to meet. His life, shrouded in myth and reality, serves as the focal point of my exploration into the intricacies of familial bonds and the echoes of the past in the present.

I start my journey by talking to my father. Meeting him makes me feel like I am treading the narrow path of my past. A part of my grandfather lives in him, and through him, in me. I meet these parts when we sit down for our daily morning coffee. This is our thing: Father's many cigarettes, two coffees, and one storyline I follow.

As I sift through memories and anecdotes, I confront the transient nature of identity, moulded by loss and shaped by the passage of time. Omer's legacy, intertwined with my father's and my own, becomes a testament to the fluidity of selfhood and the enduring power of lineage.

Each photograph becomes a witness to the interplay between myth and reality, capturing the essence of a man whose presence lingers in the shadows of my consciousness. I aim to piece together the fragments of Omer's life, weaving a tapestry of remembrance that transcends the boundaries of individual experience.







The Censorship of Flowers

Gerta Xhaferaj

As a child, I used to record everything.

Hours-long sequences of my family eating dinner on any given weeknight, my mother dancing, my cousin's loud wedding, a decade's worth of New Year's fireworks. Nothing was too grand or too minuscule. There was no hierarchy in place to dictate what I was documenting at the time; I would simply pick up my camera and press record when I felt like it. The video camera in question was a model acquired by my parents in North Macedonia in 1998. The device became integral to capturing family events. Looking through the archive, I notice that the footage has been overwritten by another recording. In the middle of my cousin's wedding ceremony, a pink flower suddenly appears. As the rose cuts through the chaos of the celebration, the silence of the garden is almost deafening. A couple of seconds later, we are suddenly thrust back into the chaos of the wedding.

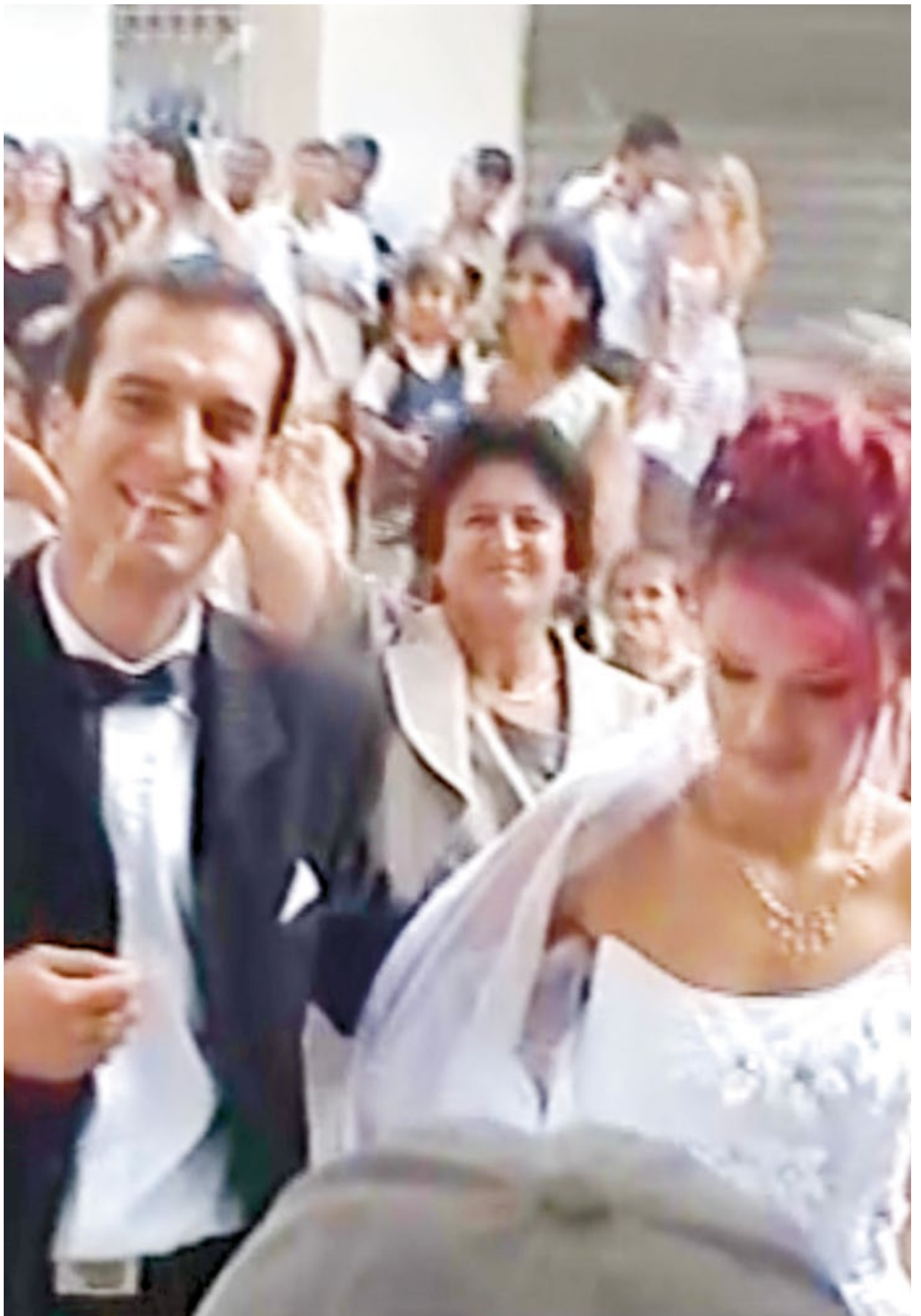
My father loved flowers.

He had seen my trembling footage as a sort of work to treat and restore. Something that should be smoothed over. In an attempt to save his daughter's documentation of her surroundings, he taped over the most erratic and blurry parts with still portraits of roses from his garden. Was he embarrassed by my shaking hand? Did he think that someone from outside the family would ever see this footage and think, "Oh, what an unprofessional video?" Or could he not stand to see his imperfect daughter's creations? Is his fixation an escape from the hard job that he had? Being the Head of Police during the transition era in Albania, he constantly encountered violence, pain, civil war, and massacres following the dictatorship. Later, I discovered another reason he might have chosen flowers as his subject when filming. During communism in our home country, the only TV station available to the public was the state-run TVSH. Between shows, there would be a so-called interlude/intermission. To fill these gaps in their program, the station would display footage of flowers and still-life images.

Before starting this project, I hated flowers.











Books of Promises

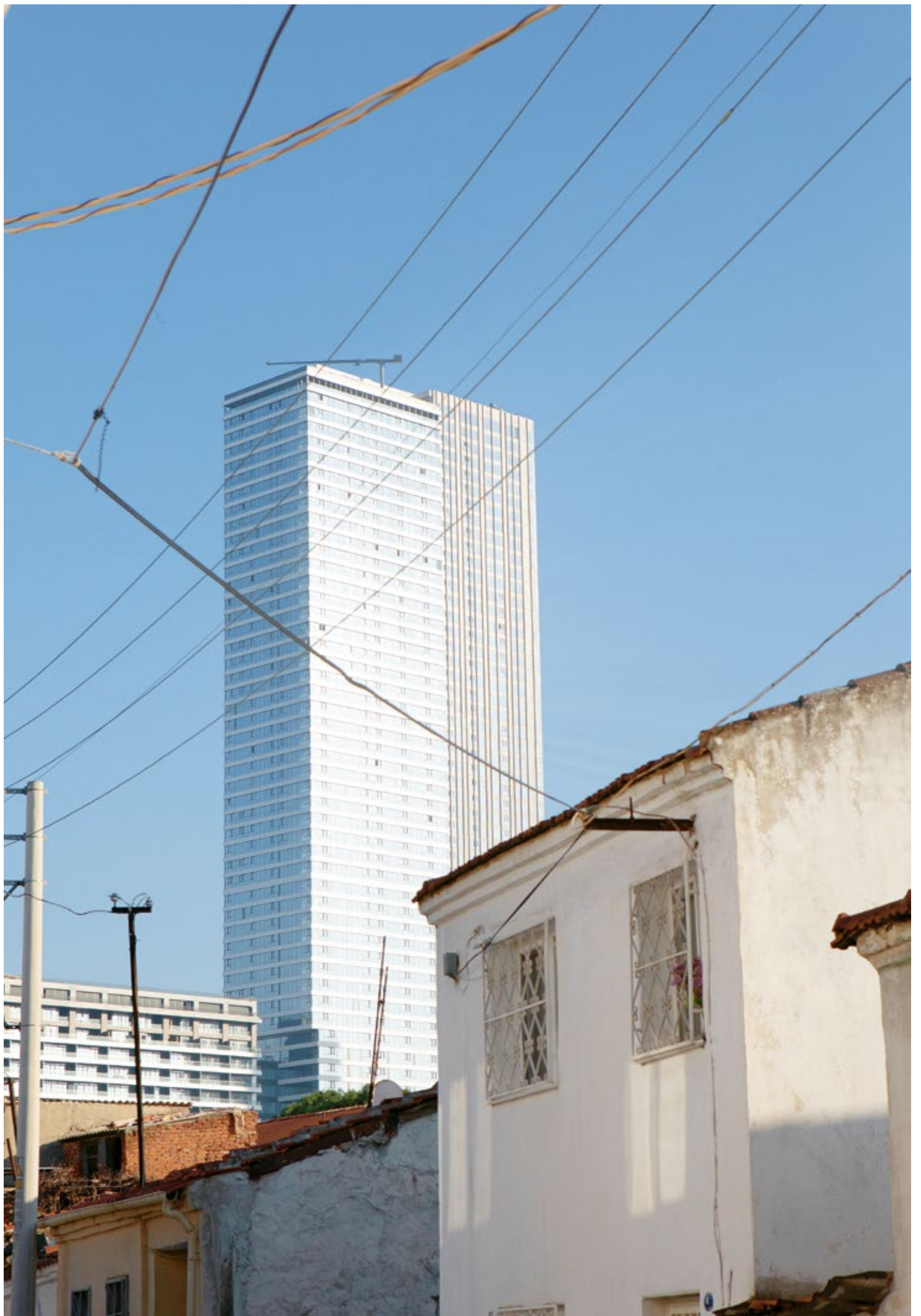
Ali Cem Doğan (Darağaç Collective)

The small market in the neighbourhood functions as a bank. Its ledger book is full of names of people living in this small industrial neighbourhood of İzmir named Darağaç. Some names are crossed out, while others are moved to a bigger ledger book. The owner of the market, Firat, knows even the paycheck dates of people. He never insists because his old calculator never makes mistakes.

When we started to move into the neighbourhood, the locals were excited. New faces, at least someone different. They told us that the skyscrapers would come to the neighbourhood. Every building will be demolished. This was nine years ago. Throughout the years, newcomers met with the old-timers. Old-timers were car mechanics, carpenters, and repair shop owners; newcomers were artists. They invited us to their shops. We shared tools and knowledge.

Now, skyscrapers are rising around us. The ones that shadow the sunset in the west, the ones that shadow the sunrise in the east. It's their sunset and sunrise now. The greedy owner of that house in the corner is rubbing his already sweaty palms, waiting for that right moment of opportunity for more than thirty years. Will the gods of concrete hear his praying and give him those four flats instead of this old, ruined family home?

Skyscrapers grew; they rose as high as possible. To the sky, to space. We grew inside, sharing the streets, our houses, our plates, our dreams. What is more concrete than a dream?





**dyed blonde hair...
still beautiful.**



Behind Seven Hills and Seven Seas

Teodora Ivkov

Behind Seven Hills and Seven Seas delves into the intricate layers of migration, identity, and cultural constructs that shape the contemporary narrative surrounding the mythical figure of the Aunt from Germany. Drawing from my own personal experiences on Gastarbeiter in Germany, as well as the collective memories and stories passed down through generations, I start a journey to explore the complexities and nuances of this semi-fictional character.

At the centre of my exploration lies the symbolism embodied by the Aunt from Germany – “the goddess of migration”, an omnipresent family member in contemporary Balkan culture. Through discussions with my friends and random passengers on social media about gifts and objects that She used to bring from Germany, we recall together the image of Her.

As the narrative unfolds, through introspective reflections and storytelling, we start to unravel the complexities of identity formation in the context of migration and the profound impact of cultural constructs on shaping our perceptions of self and belonging.

Through the medium of video essay, I invite viewers to join me on this journey of both self and collective discovery, as we navigate the blurred lines between reality and myth, longing and belonging, in the search for Aunt from Germany – a symbol of hope, aspiration, and the perpetual pursuit of a better life.



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While talking to my friends about Maša's spiral staircases, milk chocolates and big fake Christmas tree,







The Gambler

Marius Ionut Scarlat

The Gambler is a project about street craps and how it is used by a group of young people in Romania as a rite of passage to construct a new identity.

It all started while I was working on another project in the area, and every time these kids saw me with the camera, they would ask me to take their photos. I began taking their pictures with no intention of creating a project or telling anything about them. As I delved into the material, I discovered familiar stories that deeply resonated with my own experience. Many of these young people were the children of my parents' friends, and I saw myself reflected in their lives and in the traditions we shared. The presence of the game of craps in their daily routines did not go unnoticed by me, especially because my father had also been involved in this game in his youth. It is not only a form of entertainment but also a means of earning money and, more significantly, of building and affirming individual and group identity. Each roll of the dice reveals a universe of personal expression, camaraderie, and identity-seeking amidst a cultural context rooted in tradition and community. This project arises from both social and personal concerns, exploring the complex interaction between rural youth, tradition, and the risks associated with gambling. Through these images, I aim not only to document their lives but also to reflect on my own identity and connection with a place that could have been my home if circumstances had been different.

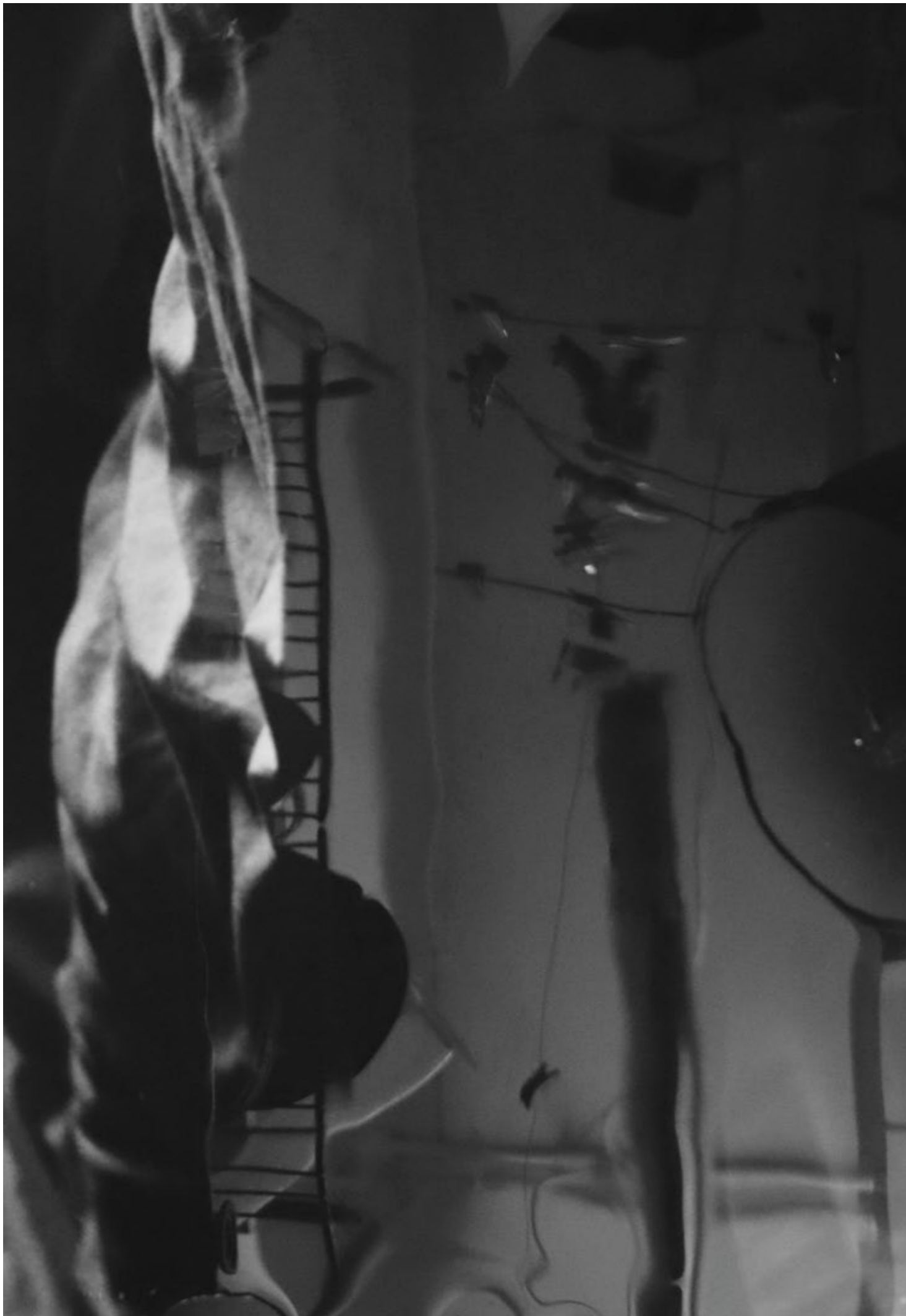






Autoportrait

Marietta Mavrokordatou



Oscillating between privacy and exposure,¹ the series *Autoportrait* consists of five photographic prints. Shot in analogue, printed in the darkroom, and re-shot digitally, *Autoportrait* can be considered as a narration of process or a depiction of photographic time, analogue and digital, respectively. The word 'exposure' itself holds a duality: at once representing exteriority, being exposed to, and the photographic medium, the duration of exposure.

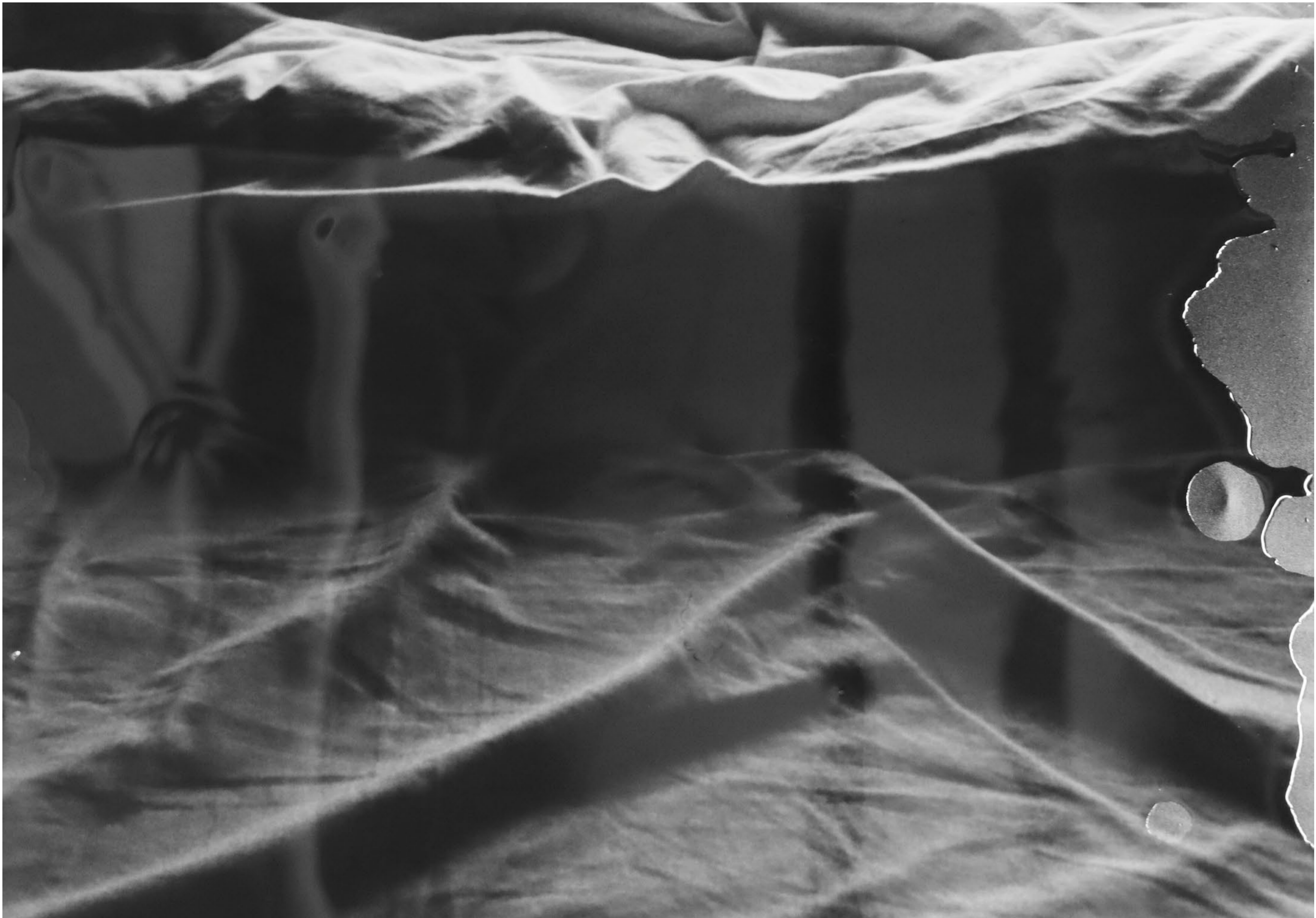
For a moment, the darkroom clock, ventilation, and pipes are reflected in the wet analogue photograph of the artist's bedroom. Discarding the vertical mode of waking life, there is a parallel sense of horizontality found in both sleep and exposure, flatness. On the matte surface of the paper, the two rooms become One. "In dark space, pictorial depth is guaranteed or twinned by the introjected interiority of the subject. This interiority can be characterised as an inconsistent system of metamorphoses – a spatial extension inwards."²

Examining the qualities of the physical and the virtual, the lasting and the fleeting, as well as embracing the potential of the private as interior and intimate, *Autoportrait* is inherently a piece on metamorphoses – "as the belief in the spatial organisation of vision is replaced or supplanted by the unknowably superb risk of experiment"³ and chance.

¹ Kirsty Bell, *The Artist's House: From Workplace to Artwork*, London: Sternberg Press, 2013, 260.

² Lisa Robertson, *Nilling: Prose Essays on Noise, Pornography, The Codex, Melancholy, Lucretiun, Folds, Cities and Related Aporias*, Toronto: Book*hug Press, 2012, 51.

³ Ibid.









Touch

Luka Pešun

This series combines archival family photographs with new images I created, collaborating with actors and dancers to interpret the meaning of touch.

Touch is a fundamental part of human existence. We, as humans, depend on it.

It's often used to express and amplify a sense of connection and closeness. Studies have shown that affectionate contact is essential for brain development from the moment we're born. We need it regularly, and its benefits reach far beyond childhood.

Throughout humankind's history, touch has been one of the main forms of relating to each other. Many social interactions include this contact, but the meaning always depends on the context. The 'how', 'where', 'when', and 'between whom' the contact is transmitted determines whether it is deemed acceptable and proper or not. It falls within the construct of social norms and is also personal.

We can define touch as any form of bodies coming in contact with each other or themselves. Touch can extend to a kiss. We can use it to self-soothe. It is a bridge between us and the rest of the world; with it, we can cross the barrier of apparent separateness.

We use it to express both joy and grief, anger, lust, passion, and love. It can be casual, practical, personal, or ceremonial, but more than anything, it is primordial.







Cutout Study: A Personal Study (Chapter 2)

Martin Atanasov



Cutout Study is a long-term visual research project that deals with the queer body within the context of Bulgaria. Separated into two chapters, the first explores the archive as a perspective, and the second investigates a personal study and the experiences of the author. The cutout acts as a metaphor and a desire to create a space for a personal and collective queer narrative. In the cutouts, the body is researched and defined as a territory in which one could code homosexuality, missing narratives, and identity, and it is a visual gesture that helps to reimagine the body. The text within the work is drawn from a collective questionnaire conducted with gay men living in Bulgaria born after the 1990s.

In the piece *The End of the Language*, the artist explores his body through one of the exercises from *Nutricula* (a performance solo language created by Yassen Vasilev and Philip Kwame Boafo), which examines the body through a series of instructions that aim to test and reimagine its limits and functions and to deconstruct (un)conscious habits of movement. In this piece, the viewer is introduced to a full body image. In the video piece *Video Note*, the author plays with the idea of the cutout in a moving image context – a close-up of his body is repetitively present and in a breathing movement, a form of a gesture of calming down and grounding the body.

Cutout Study grows through the idea of healing and the desire to reimagine a different personal and collective narrative.



**THERE IS
SOMETHING IN
THE SHADOW**



Patent(a)

Inmates of Chios Penitentiary* and Stratis Vogiatzis

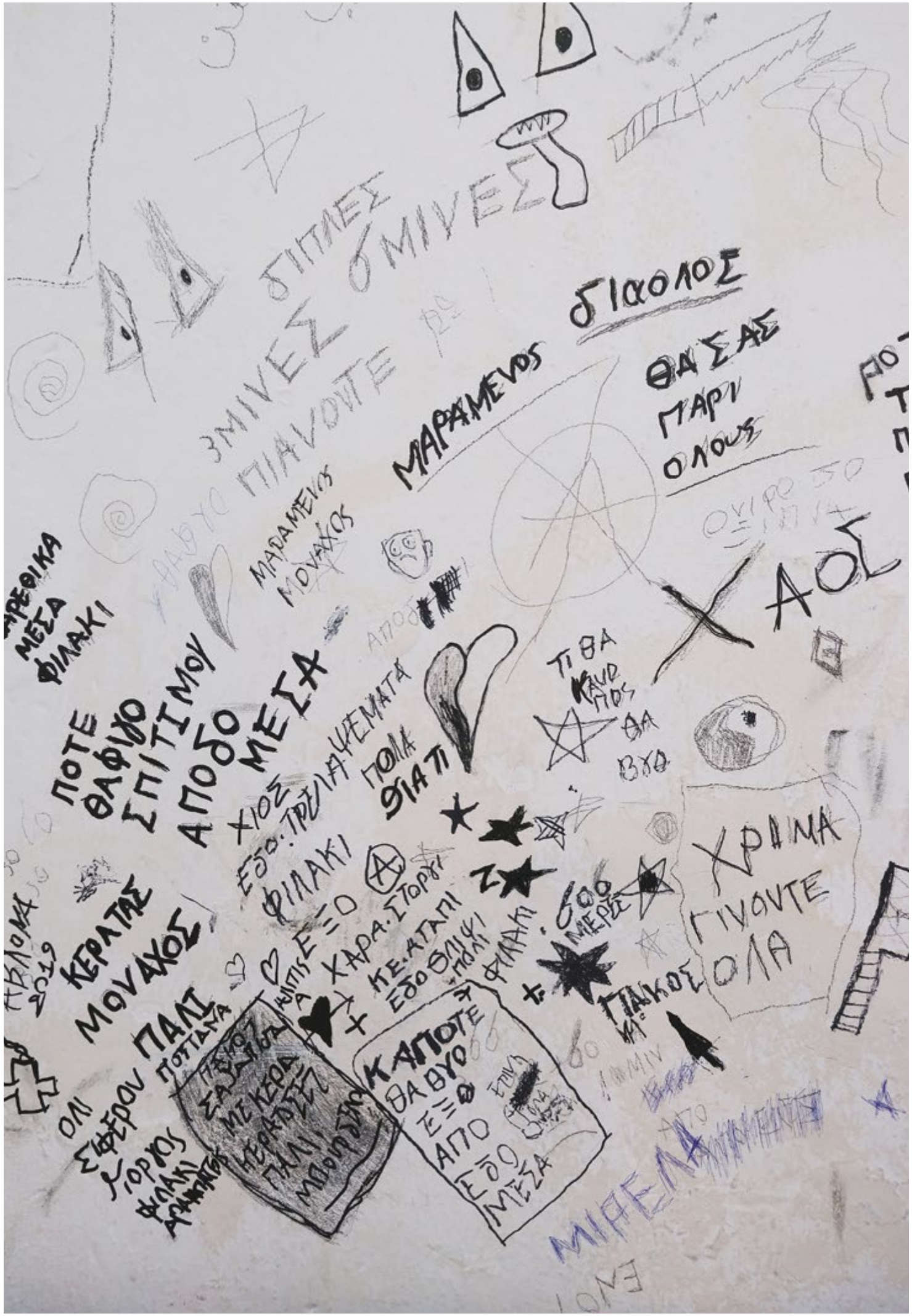
*Marco, Taxiarchis, Christos, Fotiev, Emiliano, Hassan, Naim, Beria, Ambroz, Beny, Angelos, Mehdi, Mohamed, Motaz, Nikolaos, Theocharis, Christos, Giorgos, Giorgi, Sofiane, Fasil, Pouassi, Walid, Jafary



The project *Patent(a)* regards inventions, DIY constructions, or designs the inmates created in order to cope with the harsh reality of confinement, inventing solutions both practical and symbolic using various forms of media (photographs, texts, drawings, sketches, collages, and constructions). The anthropologist and visual artist Stratis Vogiatzis organised co-creative workshops in painting, creative writing, sculpture, and photography from June 2022 until September 2023 in Chios prison, in which he collaborated with twenty-four prisoners from seventeen nationalities upon the concept of *patent(a)* and their meaning-making within the place of confinement.

The project *Patent(a)* suggests a counter-mapping of the prison landscape, illuminating those unseen geographies. Each *patenta* is a cryptogram of the experience of incarceration. As a whole, they convey an embodied condition of mutual fragility, a porous condition of relationality in an environment where the body is inextricably linked to repression, confinement, and demarcation methods. We see the inmates' works as alchemical constructions, as complex social patterns that carry their hopes, longings, anxieties, and fears. While most of the *patentas* concern practices of reappropriation of cheap materials, they constitute daily ceremonies and performative acts of transition and transformation. Each *patenta* as an improvised juxtaposition encloses a marginal spatiality and constitutes a kind of counter-order, undermining the entrenched narratives of a hierarchical public culture and, why not, constituting a new language for conceiving the real. Through these assemblages, anti-capitalist narratives are formed. From prisons and slum ghettos to refugee camps, people are inventing solutions out of nothing, creating *patentas* as a means of asserting their deprived dignity. Inmates' *patentas* encourage us to invent our own patents in response to the challenges of our time.





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