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## OTHER THINGS CAN HAPPEN, SPACE IS THE PLACE

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The title of this text is a play on artist Eirene Efstathiou's series of paper-matrix lithographs and screen prints *Other Things Happen in July Besides Swimming* (2016). In this work Efstathiou refers to the Greek political events of July 1965 and July 2015, further developing and expanding upon her practice as space and time traveler through different temporal political and social landscapes. The two juxtaposed Julys here, understood by the artist as historic moments asymmetrically connected to each other, are the events in July 1965 when the prime minister of Greece, Georgios Papandreou, was forced to resign by the king and was replaced by members of his party. That July in 1965 saw the largest number of street protests on record. The political instability that followed made way for the junta usurping power just two years later. The second July the artist refers to is the month in 2015 when, in a national referendum, a large majority of Greek citizens rejected the austerity measures imposed by the country's lenders and the subsequent ignoring of the result by the creditors and the signing of the third memorandum by prime minister Alexis Tsipras. The populace, exhausted by street protests, now gathers in front of ATM machines.

In my offering this background to the works it is important to note that the images that make up this series are not exegetic ones. They do not tell us a clear story but rather, through their overlaying archival newspaper footage covering both events, blur facts and actions. By way of contemporaneous overlays that bend time, bodies, objects, and place, Efstathiou's images are at once specific and fuzzy, dense, obscure, mundane, fleeting, and particular. In her countering the usual ways of seeing and representing the axiology of crisis Efstathiou's practice simultaneously stems from and performs a "dialectics of seeing." As Susan Buck-Morss writes in her book *The Dialectics of Seeing*, in his unfinished *Arcades Project* Walter Benjamin was interested in how visual phenomena make up historical materiality where "the presentation of the historical object within a charged force field of past and present, which produces political electricity in a 'lightning flash' of truth, is the 'dialectical image.'"<sup>1</sup> Akin to Benjamin's

<sup>1</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*. (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1989) 219.

conjoining of the terms *dialectics* and *images* in order to critique and interrupt dominant modes of historical conceptualization and interpretation, Efstathiou's work conducts a method for another mode of critical materialist historiography through an alternative rendering of historical experience. By way of visual juxtapositions that break up smooth conceptions of time, the artist's dialectical images materialize historical objects "'blasted free' of history's continuum."<sup>2</sup> However, these dialectical images are fragmented and contingent, depicted as and through oblique re-collections. Thus, the artworks reveal, in their obscuring of historical and representational certainties, an aesthetic stance critical of evidentiary proof as well as the theoretical possibilities generated by an embracing of ephemera and affect as fluctuating archive that in their sudden emergence as dialectical images make up internally differentiated and contrasting historical constellations.

Efstathiou is a revisionist historian, where revision here entails a re-visualizing that refuses transparency and historical positivism. Her emphasis on gleaning insights, aesthetic as well as historical, from microfilm negatives (which are often reversed in her practice of archiving and painting), news articles as well as zooming in on newspaper photographs to emphasize detail and obscurity at one and the same time, belie a political refusal on the artist's part for standard historical narratives. At the same time, Efstathiou does not disregard or belittle the force of political protest, past or present, and, in fact, as evident in her larger oeuvre, pays detailed homage to crowd scenes throughout modern Greek history, acknowledging the political necessity for and affective power and agencies of protesters in their different yet connected social movements in time and space.

How does Efstathiou manifest her own protest and demands with those bodies, times, and places she traces and holds up for us? In this series, made up of several chapters, Efstathiou creates and occupies a space between the literal and the unreadable where artistic and social expression are faced with their own ever-present inexpressibility. To occupy such a space in between is to move in ways that refuse foreclosure and linear determinacies, to keep open possibilities through "fractal thinking (poethical or compositional thinking)."<sup>3</sup> For instance, in the chapter *Funeral*, images of Sotiris Petroulas' funeral and the mass protests this ritual galvanized in 1965 press against and blur with a depiction of a 2015 archaeological find, and in so doing produce an ethical and compositional thinking surrounding the relation between the ephemerality and erasure of political events, movements, and identities with unquestioned national certainties set in stone. A stone statue of the dead that feels like a recognizable yet mysterious alien presence. The artist's method, which works specifically and directly with and upon media technologies of seeing, materially create for us, the viewers, an experience of seeing "images moving in conjunction with each other at different angles and speeds" suggesting "a different sort of memory, or storage."<sup>4</sup> As felt and made clear in Efstathiou's work, memory is not regressive but generative and, as such, allows for correspondence between different pasts, communications, traces: "a haunting in time, of time, a folding of time."<sup>5</sup>

The affective turn in Efstathiou's work brings forth "ghosted bodies and the traumatized remains of erased histories."<sup>6</sup> Her ephemera function as queer evidence that open up new possible horizons because, as José Esteban Muñoz writes,

Ephemera is always about specificity and resisting dominant systems of aesthetic and institutional classification without abstracting them outside of social experience and a larger

<sup>2</sup> Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 219.

<sup>3</sup> Denise Ferreira da Silva, "Fractal Thinking", *Accessions: The Overview Effect*, no. 2 (2016).  
<https://accessions.org/articles2/fractal-thinking/>.

<sup>4</sup> Patricia T. Clough, "The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social: An Introduction", in *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social*, ed. Patricia Ticineto Clough and Jean Halley (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007) 18.

<sup>5</sup> Clough, "The Affective Turn", 19.

<sup>6</sup> Clough, "The Affective Turn", 3.

notion of sociality. Ephemera, and especially the ephemeral work of structures of feeling, is firmly anchored within the social. Ephemera includes traces of lived experience and performances of lived experience, maintaining experiential politics and urgencies long after these structures of feelings have been lived.<sup>7</sup>

I read Efstathiou's paintings as dialectical ephemera for their capacity to specify and obscure at one and the same time both the materiality of the dialectical image and historical progress while always firmly anchoring her structures of feeling within past traces and everyday presences of the gesturing social. Furthermore, *Other Things Happen in July Besides Swimming* opens up new horizons through an outside alien presence and seeing. For there is another historical factor that is key to these images and that is the advent of space travel conducted in 1965. So the other things that happen in July are ones also unbounded from earthly planes, where the very act of public seeing is shifted with the first images of life on earth photographed from outer space. This seeing straight down, as if through a microscope, is captured in the artist's images of jostling people seen from above, and from photographs of the city's lights at night. Planetary life and light are brought together in imagery of outer space blending with long lists of national locations of protests and shorter lists of open banks as reported by newspapers in 1965 and 2015 respectively (see *Is there Life on Mars?* and *Bank Holiday*). Street views attend to particular locations and everyday objects; bodies and their parts, specifically hands and ears appear repeatedly, where the politics of speech acts, commodification, and social reproduction are touched upon in order to think through the material doings necessary for both the oppression and sustenance of planetary human life (see, for instance, *Bleach* and *Tomorrow*).

In this series Efstathiou undoes the dialectics of her seeing between past and present by pushing against dualistic oppositional positions. Other things can happen. And space is the place where other things can happen. To claim that "other things happen in July besides swimming" is to perform a remembrance of things past, to not let them lie, but it is also to speak of a possible what else, to a possible outside. A simultaneous zooming in and out so as to be in space undoes the dialectics of seeing. This asymmetry produces an alternative to dialectics resulting in a form of "political antagonism that draws on the powers of the outside."<sup>8</sup>

"Space is the place,"<sup>9</sup> Sun Ra says. Space traveling with Eirene Efstathiou we get to be historical subjects of and "out of this world." To be out of this world is not to succumb to easy escapism but rather to politically claim the "outside" as one's own, of making an otherworldly matrix that bleeds a revised past to a claimed present and possible futures.

<sup>7</sup> José Esteban Muñoz "Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts", *Women & Performances: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 8 no. 2 (1996), 10-11.

<sup>8</sup> Andrew Culp, *Dark Deleuze* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2016) 35.

<sup>9</sup> John F. Szwed, *Space is the Place: The Lives and Times of Sun Ra* (Edinburgh, UK: MOJO Books, 2000) 134.