

The site of the image in the work of Eirene Efstathiou

Ultimately—or at the limit—in order to see a photograph well, it is best to look away or close your eyes. “The necessary condition of an image is sight”, Janouch told Kafka; and Kafka smiled and replied:

“We photograph things in order to drive them out of our minds. My stories are a way of shutting my eyes.”

Roland Barthes¹

In the western universe of the spectacle and communication technology, Efstathiou's work returns to the image as an expressive medium, yet in essence as a writing of contemporary culture itself. Focusing on the 'pile of images' we are deluged by daily, she revisits the function of the image as a mediation between the real and its rendition, to negotiate the latter's implications on collective perceptions of history and the shifts these undergo in personal memory.

As testament of the past, the photograph is never a neutral record, for it incorporates the aesthetic and ideological biases of its maker and the medium on which it features; its reading becomes only possible when the time of its particular subject—now decidedly absent—is projected onto the present time of its viewer.

Efstathiou acknowledges 'the moment when mediation itself flattens the image, homogenizes the event it depicts, becomes a photograph or broadcast'².

She detects in the manipulation processes of the mediated image the tendency of contemporary culture to substitute real experience with its public representation, and disguise there the hegemonic aspirations of the political powers that it represents. The primary photographic material of her works originates both in found images - from television, film, the press, private or public photographic archives - and the artist's own wanderings in the city and the living spaces of those closest to her. She then classifies selected images into new archives, reproduces them by paintbrush or pencil to, finally, arrange them into series.

The choice of subject matter from

common pop culture sources and the experience of the everyday, often with autobiographical references, approaches the interpretation of contemporary history beyond the certainty of a complete linear view, with the ruptures and distortions of individual fragmentary knowledge of history.

The final renderings, cut away from their original context and frozen in the timelessness of their photographic capture, veer toward photography's fundamental capacity to narrate nothing but what it depicts. Without the interpretative assignments of the journalistic caption, or the distance described in a place-name, the image fragments of the final works shift the very act of viewing from the particular to the simply human as both fact (somewhere else, at some other time, to someone else) and possibility (here, now, to me).

'Duration is passion. / A passion you do not see at the movies / because films last no more than two hours / and when the end credits drop / life goes on. / As we say, not as we'd like to, / but as we can.'

Michalis Ganas³

The very process of production is a mediation of the found images anew, which hints at the workings of memory in appropriating reality: it emulates the lens' ability to focus on isolated incidences to mimic the ways memory activates isolation, amplification and repetition in re-constructing experience. In the final works, painting reproduces the duration of its obsessive manual laboring and trans-scribes the image as surface: outlines blur, light and shadow are intensified, allowing vision to reclaim its primal tactile ability - the way a familiar body may be recognized through touch alone - towards an earlier state of inhabiting lived space with the senses. Maintaining obvious references to their original source- the screen's curved frame, the movie's subtitles, the pixilation of a television broadcast - the image fragments are reassembled into series in an almost cinematic manner: challenging the viewer to conceive new associations and invent new narratives. Efstathiou's work alternates between readings of the depicted as sensory experience and as meaning, always in direct relation the viewer's personal mythology and perception.

Commenting on the uncritical assimilation of the mediated image by the distracted mass, she reintroduces the act of viewing as a political act and points to the possibility of a revolutionary narrative of history beyond the accepted symbolisms of desire promoted by the contemporary culture of the spectacle. She uses painting as a medium that requires the viewer's personal engagement, attentive and in silence, to remove the image of experience from its alienating representation and allow its manifold meaning to be drawn out by the viewer as a critical subject.

'Buildings are appropriated in a twofold manner: by use and by perception—or rather by touch and by sight. [...] On the tactile side there is no counterpart to contemplation on the optical side. Tactile appropriation is accomplished not so much by attention as by habit. As regards architecture, habit determines to a large extent even optical reception. Vie latter, too, occurs much less through rapt attention than by noticing the object in incidental fashion.'

Walter Benjamin⁴

In Efstathiou's work, the city as lived place contains both the memory of time and use, at once alluding to the collective fantasy of the modern. *Phantom Neighborhoods* (2008) collects details from the interior elevations of low-rise buildings revealed along the sides of adjacent constructions after demolition. Familiar images trace the physical violence of tearing down and the stripping away of the private as it turns into empty space, given over to public view and decay. Mere relics of construction, the ruins silently preserve in built-in cupboards and objects left behind the imprints of habit and care that once invested the built into a site of home. Inevitably preserved along party walls, these surfaces await the new that will seal them out of sight, insistent reminders of the old that must be destroyed for another image of the city to be constructed. *Neoptolemos Sea* (2008), a variation on the same theme, raises the eyes above street level, at the side elevations of apartment blocks, where the continuum of the urban fabric is

interrupted. Images of naked building faces alternate with excerpts from the demolition permit of the artist's own family home to imply the vacant plot or the lower structure beneath. Exposed to time and the elements, the blind surfaces project the scale of the contemporary city onto the void space that serves to outline them, and dream of the novel suggested in our contemporary desires of ideal habitation. By depicting intermediate urban sites the works explore the notion of the intimate in the transition from private to public: how does our discontent for the monotony of apartment block façades alter as soon as we step through the threshold of our own home? What are the architectural typologies we refer to when identifying public buildings with the insanity of state bureaucracy and which condition of ownership do we appropriate when destroying them? In *Mapping the Moon* (2009), built space becomes a loud symbol for the state power it shelters: beyond its particular geographical borders, western political domination is constructed in the form of a physical wall. A spatial boundary cutting through the occupied city, the wall is not only a reminder of the violent conflict that raised it, but more so, of the ways it intensifies daily life on its two sides. Efstathiou chooses to depict the city in images silent, void of human presence. Motionless and still, with the sound of reality turned down to mute, the anonymous spaces of everyday experience appear as tokens at the margin of the seductive discourse that projects habitation itself as spectacle and consumption. In much the same way a crime scene holds evidence for the act committed, urban landscapes 'acquire a hidden political significance'⁵. Their viewing here resists the free contemplation of the viewer purely aesthetically absorbed, and refers to space as a vessel of memory; to the clashes and transmutations of the social and political powers that give it shape in the endlessly changing course of history.

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¹ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: reflections on photography*. London: Vintage, 1993, p.p. 53-55. References made in this essay to photography as medium are based on a recurrent reading of the above source.

² Eirene Efstathiou, "The Mediated Image: Excerpts from a User's Manual", in *Selective Knowledge* (exhibition catalogue), Els Hanappe (ed.), Athens: MIET (National Bank of Greece Cultural Foundation) & ITYS (Institute for Contemporary Art and thought), 2008, p. 73.

³ Michalis Ganas, *O ypnos tou kapnisti (The smoker's sleep)*, poems. Athens: Kastaniotis, 1989, p.44.

⁴ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", in *Illuminations*, London: Pimlico, 1999, p. 233. I am referring to this particular essay with regard to a comprehensive understanding of the experience of viewing a work of art.

⁵ Benjamin, *Op. cit.*, p. 220.