
POSTMODERNISM IN THE ART OF THESSALONIKI.
GIORGOS LAZONGAS, DIMITRIS XONOGLOU AND YORGOS TSAKIRIS

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ABSTRACT

Thessaloniki, the capital city of Greek Macedonia, is currently a large city, economically dominant in Northern Greece, and the most important cultural centre in the Southern Balkans. A comparison to Athens reveals significant differences on the economic and cultural levels, in spite of the city being called “co-capital”, by analogy to the byzantine title of “*Symvasileuoussa*” attributed to Thessaloniki with regard to Constantinople during the Byzantine period. Art in Thessaloniki presents certain characteristics which set it apart from the capital of the modern Greek state, and historians often refer to the “School of Thessaloniki”, a reference to the introvert nature of its art (literature and visual arts). The city’s proximity to Mount Athos and its rich cultural heritage has bestowed upon the artists in Thessaloniki a particular spirituality and a tendency towards abstractionism. On the other hand, Thessaloniki was liberated 90 years later than Athens and other parts of the country, and this deprived the city from an early connection to the West. Another restraining factor has been the military dictatorship imposed on the country in 1967 which lasted for seven years and has been a critical factor for the belated entrance of new modernist ideas in Greece. May of 1968 has been a social and cultural phenomenon but has had minimal influence on domestic art. Metamodernism has been a phenomenon which has been minimally present in the field of visual arts. Nevertheless, artists, such as Giorgos Lazongas, Yorgos Tsakiris, and Dimitris Xonoglou, professors of visual arts in various schools of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, are included among those who have demonstrated an admirable ability to adapt to the new reality.

Keywords: *Postmodernism, Thessaloniki, military dictatorship, co-capital, Lazongas, Tsakiris, Xonoglou.*

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Introduction

The conditions for the development of art in post-war Greece had been rather inauspicious. The national schism which began with the Catastrophe in Asia Minor in 1922 continued during the German occupation, in the 1941-1944 period, and culminated during the Civil War (1946-1949). It has had tragic consequences also for young scientists and artists who made the decision to emigrate from the country (to Europe and the United States), resulting in the belated adjustment of domestic art to the European avant-garde. A similar unfavourable situation was created anew during the military dictatorship in the 1967-1974 period.

These conditions in the field of visual arts became all the more difficult in provincial cities outside the capital, where both the number of artists was limited and cultural institutions, mainly museums of modern art, were patently absent. However, Thessaloniki had a certain intellectual tradition, primarily because of its University, as well as a particularly significant cultural heritage, mainly in the fields of byzantine and post-byzantine art. Furthermore, the relationship between its intelligentsia and Mount Athos has exerted a positive influence on art, because, on the one hand, it allowed to pursue, in this regard, a century-long tradition and, on the other hand, it reinforced artistic creation with new contributions in terms of both techniques and the innerness of its forms. This relationship made it easier for works of modern art to embrace the abstractionism of works of sacred art and the emphasis on expressive values which, as we know, smoothly fit the concept of “modern” [1].

This particularity has conferred to the art of Thessaloniki a distinctive “aura”, attributing to local art certain characteristics that somehow differentiate it from the modern version of contemporary art. Some characteristics, such as inner monologue, introversion, and reminiscence of tradition, are attributes that can be found in works of art both in literature and in visual arts.

In any event, Thessaloniki remained a strategic place for Greek governments also in more recent times, after it integrated the national body of the country in 1912 following the struggle of its people. Although the liberation of Thessaloniki in 1912 is considered to be both a conventional limit and a substantial landmark for the beginning of all kinds of cultural and artistic activity in the city, there exist nonetheless aspects of artistic creation that refer to the further past, demonstrating once again that culture (both as concept and action) is closely linked to the city’s inhabitants and to the civilisation such inhabitants expressed and represented [2].

The art of Thessaloniki also includes the so-called “national” characteristics, which may be found not only in its themes but also in the reference to the characteristics of a “Macedonian” artistic language (i.e. patterns from the history of Macedonia, its kings, its monuments, etc.), which are more or less prevalent depending on the developments in the so-called “Macedonian Question”. At the same time, one may notice a certain search for “Greekness”, a residual concept, much in the form of an ideological fossil, from art in the interwar period, expressed through adherence to visual attributes, such as the Mediterranean light, the Greek landscape, Greek everyday life, etc. This was the period of return to Greek roots, which made its appearance anew with artists in Thessaloniki, who showed signs of revisiting the past not only through primeval aspects of Greek civilisation, but also through attributes that characterise folk art. For example, naive tendencies (ethnic art) referring to Greek folk art had come to the forefront anew. The debate on the existence, or otherwise, of a “School of Thessaloniki” has been founded on such models and has relied on the aesthetic theories prevailing from time to time.

The general characteristics of art in Thessaloniki have been summed up, as exposed below, by Kilessopoulou, who nevertheless did not identify any signs allowing to establish the existence of a “School of Thessaloniki”, given that this would require as a precondition the operation of an ideological identity that would lead artists to uniform expressive behaviours, in spite of the similarities that exist in any case. In this regard, Kilessopoulou has identified certain characteristics which are attributed to the tradition of Mount Athos and to Western influences, primarily expressionism [3].

During the period that followed the *Metapolitefsi* (fall of the military regime in 1974), the situation considerably improved, given that the number of cultural institutions has increased, international exhibitions have been gradually organised, and contacts with artistic centres in Europe became closer, whereas some collections have also been acquired, such as the Georgios Costakis collection, including works of the Russian Avant-Garde, and the Alexander Iolas collection, including works of modern American and European artists. Following a short-lived wandering through realism and anti-modernist movements, art in the city of Thessaloniki adjusted to contemporary searches. The road to postmodernism had opened and it was led by artists full of talent and perspicacity.

Greek Postmodernism

Historically, postmodernism is the situation that succeeded minimalism, i.e. the ultimate phase of abstraction, which was actually nothing more than a conscious avoidance of reality. It had by now become evident that colours lacking any deeper symbolism and lifeless geometric shapes no longer appealed to the new way of thinking and to the knowledge background of people who felt the need to become acquainted with other aspects of the world through images having social ramifications and showing sensitivity towards all kinds of problems related to human existence. As expected, it did not take long for art to turn towards new directions determined by works which conveyed a different meaning, a new concept (giving rise to the term “conceptualism”), which also became the battering ram for imposing a new art. Concept took precedence over form, the primary vehicle used being language. The elimination of any visual link with the object was one of the first signs required by postmodernism, together with the essential role of physical processes (for example, gravity or the influence of time), Earth perceived by art as a framework for artistic creation (Earth art), individual action as artistic behaviour (performance), while acknowledging the role of female emancipation and the need to determine identity.

Undoubtedly, postmodernism has set free certain forces, such as the art that relied on descriptiveness, the use of technology, in particular photography, allowing artists to savour any forbidden fruit, which had been exorcised by modernism as new evils [1], [4].

The term postmodernism was coined on the occasion of the publication of *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* (1977), a book by architect Charles Jencks, in which the author defined the new era, following the demolition of emblematic modernist buildings (constructed in Bauhaus style) in the United States (the Pruitt-Igoe housing project in St. Louis). According to one definition, postmodernism varies depending on the context and is confirmed by the varying social sensitivity characterising our world [5].

In visual arts, postmodernism has had many facets without insisting on any particular style. The dominance of concepts and the transfer of such concepts to an artistic level in the form of artistic creation has been the battering ram that ousted abstraction, which, through minimalism, had reduced the work of art to surplus value and to a formalistic product. The use of other forms of art, emanating from drama, cinema, and music, as well as from technological advances, such as photography and video, became part of the artists’ repertoire, enabling them to express social and political critique, serving the new reality imposed on the planet by the geostrategic policy of the Great Powers.

In any event, from 1975 onwards, circumstances in Greece have changed both in the field of politics, following the fall of the seven-year dictatorship (1967-1974) and in the areas of economy and culture. Positive cultural developments could be noted, such as the development of the arts and the creation of cultural institutions (museums and art galleries), which can be attributed to financial prosperity and to the change in the overall conditions. In 1981, Greece became a fully-fledged member of the European Union, and this put in place a new framework for its international relationships while facilitating the acceptance of European activities. According to [6], “from the early 1990s onwards, culture has also been used as a vehicle for ‘urban regeneration’ redesigning the map of Athens and, to a certain extent, albeit in a more limited manner, of Thessaloniki”.

Since then a new light has been shining on Thessaloniki. The city has acquired new museums and great collections, such as those of Georgios Costakis and Alexander Iolas, the number of art galleries has considerably increased, the art market has been flourishing, whereas important and internationally significant visual art exhibitions have been organized in the co-capital, such as the Biennale of Contemporary Art and the Institution of Cultural Capital of Europe in 1997, the School of Fine Arts was created in 1985, etc. Prospects had been gradually changing and the climate was particularly favourable to the new conditions prevailing in art, which was steadily oriented towards Europe and its artistic achievements.

The three artists: Lazongas, Xonoglou, Tsakiris

The emergence of these artists in Thessaloniki coincided with the period in which Greece was keeping pace with Europe in many areas, having as a link a common understanding of principles and values in matters of art and culture. For Greek reality, this has been a kind of new Enlightenment, since the stiffness of the past was eliminated and the future appeared more liberal and audacious in terms of choices. Nevertheless, Thessaloniki was considered to be a more conservative city and its art appeared to be confined within cultural stereotypes lingering from the past where a variety of artists adopted each their own stylistic choices. The absence of a particular school of art was a serious issue which slowed down the pace of any modernist and postmodernist expressions of art in the city, leaving Athens to lead the way.

The School of Architecture, the only school having a visual arts and design department as well as experienced professors, such as Christos Lefakis (1896-1968) and Nikos Sachinis (1924-1989), who had made artistic choices considered to be extremely audacious at that time, paved the way for shaping a new visual understanding to counter the immobility of artists from the older generation. Students who graduated from this school (a multitude of artists with extensive activity) have conferred to the artistic landscape of Thessaloniki a flavour of avant-garde modernism.

For many years Giorgos Lazongas (1945), who had studied architecture and had artistic experiences from Paris, had been a collaborator of Sachinis. From the beginning, he rejected all preconceived ideas and moved freely through various fields, both as a painter and as a performance artist. His studies in architecture have helped him develop the sense of space and the structural dimension of lines, as well as recognise the importance of materials, moving in a semiotic manner and using abstraction for geometrical forms and in fields of multiple meanings, such as environments.

Lazongas has served postmodernism initially through body art, leaving traces of life in objects of everyday life, at times through the “battle” of the sexes, either as conflict in the Freudian sense or as sexual intercourse (Fig-1). Questioning himself the “uniqueness” of the creator, he challenged the concept of the original through photography, the use of collage, and continuous printing. This is a process of search for the “palimpsest” where artists strive to investigate the initial, primeval values of things, employing all means and techniques, in the name of the “concept”, which “tries to guide the painting-plastic creation”, as expressed through photography, sound, or cinema [7].



Fig-1: G. Lazongas, *Environment with turbines, cables, mast, cloth*, 1990, environment with turbines running, 150x150cm, Epicentro Art Gallery, Patras

Dimitris Xonoglou (1949) also taught classes in the School of Architecture, being a painter who had studied in Italy. He has dealt with multiple forms of art, from canvas painting with neo-expressionist versions to readymade objects, installations, and environments, using all sorts of materials, including those that cause material damage (for example, fire), altering the initial “image” of objects: fire as a means, as a dimension to count the distance from Life to Death, from existence to non-existence. Quite often the meaning is hidden behind the destruction of the image, being, as a rule, a book or several pages with words, thus interpreting the dialectic relationship between “powers” as having cosmological, cultural, or theological contents.

Xonoglou’s art has from the beginning been gestural, and the artist has always expressed himself in a plastic or architectural manner whether dealing with bi-dimensional or with spatio-plastic projects. Shapes, structures, patterns are joined together in such a manner that they appear to be obeying a mathematical logic and principles that may also be understood through the temporal dimension [8]. Movement is for Xonoglou a permanent expressive principle (themes in varying dimensions and objects in constant movement), given that the concept has primary importance and leads the gaze of the beholder to morphologically undetermined archetypal forms (Fig- 2).



Fig-2: D. Xonoglou, *The Net*, 1996, Nylon Rope, Iron, Inox, 500x400x160cm, Thessaloniki

Yorgos Tsakiris (1955), who also studied in Italy, teaches classes of painting and sculpture in the newly founded School of Fine Arts in Thessaloniki. He was immediately enthralled by conceptual art, for which concept was the culmination of expression. Tsakiris is an artist moving between painting and sculpture and environments and installations, whereas he has also been an advocate of “Live Art”, cultivating artistic living things, making metallic nest for pigeons, fish tanks, egg incubators, or placing works of art in distant and difficult to access mountains to demonstrate that Art may be assimilated to Nature itself, as well as to Life itself (Fig-3).



Fig-3: Y. Tsakiris, *Pigeon House*, 1997, iron, pigeons, straw, 370x370x670cm, Thessaloniki

Emmanuel Mavrommatis [9] has affirmed that, “in [Tsakiris’] work, the antithesis between expression and history has been maximized and is marginal, because it juxtaposes two extremely vulnerable functions. This one function is the object’s development without the glance – the organic development – and the other function is the glance’s memory which beheld them – these organic and biologic developments – as the form personified by function”.

Conclusion

For various reasons, primarily historical and cultural, Thessaloniki has lagged behind in several fields as compared to Athens, in spite of having been an important city for more than 2,000 years. The field of culture has suffered through several hardships, because the relevant institutions were created following the Great War or, more exactly, after the change of regime brought by the *Metapolitefsi* and the restoration of democracy in 1974. Since then qualitative artistic output has shown an upwards trend, many talented artists chose to remain in the city instead of emigrating, and this resulted in increased artistic activity, development of the arts and the artistic market, and, last but not least, a relative ease in perceiving the contemporary tendencies in European visual arts. It is worth noting that various aspects of postmodernism have flourished in Thessaloniki almost since the 1980s. The artists mentioned in this paper are considered pioneers in their respective fields and this is due both to their studies and to the boldness they have demonstrated in expressing themselves through actions and behaviours that were not customary for the city, while also being the result of their various relationships with artistic centres abroad. It is a fact that, considering the generation represented by the three aforementioned artists, also taking into account the role of the new museums of modern art and the international artistic activities that have taken place in the city in the past decades, the standing of art in Thessaloniki is extremely satisfactory.

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