

University Seminar #703: Modern Greek Studies

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Speaker: Sotirios Bahtsetzis

Topic: "Cinematism against Visual Regimes: Undoing Gender in Contemporary Art in Greece"

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### **Summary of Presentation:**

Bahtsetzis started by looking at the work of Chryssa Romanos, who was one of the most important Greek artists in the 1970s; these developments in the '70s and '80s are important, he said, for a re-evaluation of contemporary art, because of their explicit feminist or gender-oriented character. He opened his presentation with a theoretical background for this critique on gender, accompanied by slides of seminal works from that period, including shots of Warhol in drag, of Cindy Sherman and of Marina Abramovic, and suggested that we think about replacing the term "self-referential" with the term "medium-referential," because the so-called self *is* the medium. With the Warhol photographs, for instance, it's not just the real person Warhol who subverts gender stereotypes, but Warhol mediated through the lens of the camera; the use of photography thus constitutes an employment of a rhetorical device. Bahtsetzis referred to Foucault's term *dispositif*, which he said was not just an artifact or a mental image, but the connection between the representation, the optical device (camera or monitor), and their perspective viewer. The artists on whom he focused in this talk were people who reflect on their gender identity as mediated by technology—Warhol's "I want to be a machine" as an aesthetic manifesto. Understood as a *dispositif*, Warhol is this image-making machine, and is something that others can draw on after him. In Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, we see that gender categories are constructed through behaviors repeated over time. The body-oriented works Bahtsetzis focuses on in this talk can intervene in these discourses about gender. The "rhetoric of the pose" is a fundamental characteristic of these gender-oriented visual *dispositifs*. Warhol introduces a new paradigm of performance that's deployed in feminist art in the late 70s and 80s, in such works as that of Hannah Wilke and others.

Bahtsetzis then turned to contemporary Greek artists, and showed and commented on slides by artists including Leda Papaconstantinou. Lynda Benglis, and Georgia Sagri, including a performance piece called "Do Jaguar" performed in New York during the summer of 2009. He also showed clips from the work of Katerina Papageorgiou, a choreographer based in Berlin, and argued that her pieces, which draw on the cinematic freeze-frame, couldn't have existed before cinema, and involve the internalization of the cinematic view. He ended with one more piece by Georgia Sagri, "The Invisible Ones," which documents her own performance both in video and in a script that authorizes the viewer to reconstruct the performance, and thus raises the issue of the archival documentation of performance art, and whether or not such performances are

“reproducible” or even recordable. The visitor enters the room alone and has to record the performer with a video camera, while the performer enacts being the victim of violence. It was subsequently presented in New York, where the performer a black male, extending the issue of documented and undocumented violence to a racialized context as well. What is important in this case is that violence exists as the videotaped evidence operated by the viewer, who becomes an accomplice in this panopticonal setup where they become both observers and observed, since later visitors will see their recordings. These works thus confront our hegemonic cinematic way of thinking, and attest to the strong power of the image to address and possibly change social reality.

### **Summary of Discussion:**

Q: Let me preface this by saying there is a long feminist tradition in this field, and you obviously know where the concepts you’re using come from. But these examples are so provocative, they might be signaling to us that the theory we’ve been using has not kept up with the images. For example, if you want to argue that the works wouldn’t exist before cinema, you’re suggesting that there’s this component of voyeurism and the gaze. But it seems to me that first of all, right now we don’t know what cinema is: if these were videotaped that’s not cinema. So putting the theory together with these examples, do you feel like anything is missing from our way of theorizing these works?

A: The point of reference for me here is Deleuze’s idea of a cinematographic philosophy: if we’re trying to address this issue of what cinema is, it’s not just the Hollywood classical cinema, but the way that perception is formed through the experience of moving images. Cinema, screens, television. This philosophy may not exist, but this work is a starting point for the development of this kind of philosophy. And certainly art works faster than theory or philosophy. I’m trying to bring these things together. Foucault talks mostly about linguistic acts, but it would be interesting to incorporate the idea of images when talking about the *dispositif*. There’s another issue I tried to quickly point out: I’m talking about a performance, but I’m thinking about a cinematic way of thinking. In this specific case, of performance art, I think this happened already, going away from these types of body-oriented performance, which still exist, but the further development is a cinematic-based development.

Q: On the “Invisible” piece, it seems that there is a sense of violence being done by the lights, the very recording of the pose, there is an implication of violence every time one sees this by virtue of the way it is staged. The issue of cinema will occupy us a lot in this conversation, I think. One could argue that the dance of Martha Graham is also influenced by cinema, the way we think about movement. But more important for me is the issue of reproducibility and substitutability, both because of your argument and because of the pieces you discuss. There seems to be a suggestion that the performativity of gender that these works supposedly try to undo or elucidate in a negative sense is undercut by the fact that the pieces themselves show a relentless reproducibility: it’s any woman, any black man. I wonder how we’re going to deal with that constant reiteration, without an actual iteration.

A: You said it better than me, it's exactly that. It's anybody, anyone. That's the point: works or images that play this canon of reiteration against the social canon. Anybody could be in this situation, in the place of the actor. And when one proposes this as an opportunity, I think that's the radical gesture behind it. Definitely this goes for Martha Graham, too, certainly cinema wasn't discovered yesterday, and all art of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is influenced by that. But about Graham I would say we have more this idea of the Benjaminian aura, the artist on stage, a performance not of the medium itself but of the personality, of the stage personality of the actor. You have this in the entire performance lineage that start with Martha Graham and maybe ends with Marina Abramovic. And they're influenced by artists who work with the notion of personality, like Beuys.

Q: Do you think that the cinematic aspect of this performance brings something else into play, another dimension, perhaps the invisible actor who is performing this violence? Some metaphysical perspective on this routine violence?

A: It's not my interpretation, though it is a possible one. The idea of exposing the context in which such violence can occur, it's an exposure of the mechanized context, which has to do with society. I think the "invisible you" would link it more to the idea that we are always in linked to others in some way, that we are influenced by the action of others and they are influenced by ours.

Q: Could you talk about any potential affinities you drew in studying Georgia's work, any connections to fifth-century depictions of violence? There it's so rich with narrative and it's loaded with meaning and content, and there's this curiosity with the idea of the unknown, the interchangeable nobody or anybody.

A: I'm not a researcher of Georgia's work yet, and I think it's important to give time to artworks to develop, but perhaps Georgia could talk about that herself. She always refers back to silent movies like Buster Keaton, and that silent violence there. I haven't thought about that as a point of reference, but it would be interesting to think about whether the violence itself is the narrative or it's about the way of showing this. If there is violence in the slapstick of Buster Keaton, is there a hidden narrative there?

A [Georgia Sagri]: It's the same with my piece "The Jaguar," there is something missing, it's a narrative of sorts but the central part is missing, everything is happening because of this car, but the car isn't there.

A: Would you like to talk about that specific work?

A [Sagri]: It's a very simple idea, something is missing, which is the car. It's all about this Jaguar, this girl working at the car store, and she is also displayed beside the car, she's doing all these movements to present the car, because it's her job. There is a PowerPoint there to give the script for the girl to continue her job, she's putting her foot on the platform, the circle on the floor is the moving platform, and we have her doing these Jaguar sounds, all this ridiculously stuff that a girl beside a car can do. In the end

the loop has to stop, and the only way I thought of to have that happen is this idea of Godard that in order to have a good movie you have to have a girl and a gunshot, so I put in the script that the girl is shot in the end: after the lunch break, another girl arrives in the shop with black clothes and kills her, she falls down. I didn't want to have the death be a permanent thing, though, in order to continue the loop I wanted every look to look the same. So I thought the effect would be to have a scarf to put on my chest, and then be down for a second and then come up again. So we have all these missing things, the center is missing.

A: I did my interpretation without asking you, do you find that this is close to your work?

A [Sagri]: I don't know, we have had so many conversations that I think they're viable to me, and I think they're important to you and what you do is very important.

A: There's always this difference between the position of the art theorist and the artist.

A [Sagri]: But we have a very good correspondence. It was so good for Sotiris to be here for the past month, to have more intense conversations.

Q: I'm not sure how to talk about Buster Keaton in phenomenological terms, but I would like to comment about his violence, that he transformed violence in what he did. Other people who tried what he did ended up in the hospital, but he was trained in stunt work. It doesn't address the way you're talking about it, but I wanted to inject that.

Q: There is something comic in the two pieces by Georgia because they're really about making violence visible. When the light is committing the hitting at the same time as there is an invisible imaginary violence being committed, that creates a certain kind of performativity of gender, and that's precisely what's missing in the performativity: when it's assumed and reproduced as such, the artwork is actually making visible this violence. It's not always an issue of the violence of the gaze in the cinema, the cinema is also a way of making the violence visible.

A: Would you also see this in former pieces—I didn't have the films here—but of Leda Papaconstantinou in 1968, does it apply to them as well?

Q: That's a good question, the images that Duchamp has also do that, so it sounds like that piece would. The technique she uses is very similar to Beckett in "Not I," by the way, the celebrated theatrical piece with the talking head, the language is really not I, the destruction of the sovereign subject by this beheaded body. There are all kinds of parallels there.

A: it's very interesting because when I talked to Leda Papaconstantinou she said the founding moment in her career was a scene in *Potemkin* by Eisenstein, the image of an old woman when someone punches her eye and breaks the glass; she said that this is a point of reference for her entire work. This brings it back to the argument that the

violence and gender are somehow linked in the role of cinema in this development of performance and performativity.

Q: As a curator, when you said that there was a tendency to evade direct relations with gender, can that be used as a good thing for someone who is trying to intervene in this scene in order to present exhibits that bring to the fore the issue of gender in Greek artwork?

A: I think it's important, and work that has to be done, whether you like it or not. There was a moment in the art scene in the 1980s and the beginning of 1990s when Greece had to work to catch up with the things that were developing in Europe and the U.S. The modernization of Greek society was an important part of this discourse that didn't happen publicly. So I think it's important to go back and do both. I did an exhibition that addresses how you can talk about first-wave, second-wave, and post-feminism in one exhibit, but there was never an interesting critical exhibition on second-wave or post-feminism in Greece, which I think is symptomatic. In the only existing book on Chryssa Romanos, the word "woman" doesn't even appear; it's attempt to not talk about feminism at all because the effort is to be equal. But that's an interesting point: the argument isn't that they're good artists despite the fact that they're women, it's because they're artists who develop interesting conceptual tools through this. There was a book a year ago on Leda Papaconstantinou, and Nikos Xydakis of *Kathimerini* writes in a review that he won't refer to this theme at all, as if the concept feminism, implicit or explicit, doesn't apply at all to Leda's work. But I'm also at the University of Thessaly, where we have a Gender Studies department, it doesn't have the long tradition of departments in the U.S. or Germany, but it's at least started.

Q: How do you feel about the implications of being a male scholar mining the terrain of women's art that is specifically about feminism and gender politics?

A: Well, I wouldn't say feminism, I see feminism as part of the broader research on gender. I wouldn't call myself a feminist, but I think that research on gender applies to all, it's like a palimpsest. Even if first-wave doesn't exist anymore, we have second-wave and post-feminism and queer theory, and pop feminism, and it's all existing in a palimpsest. They all coincide, one on top of the other. If you want to work historically on that you can't help going through all those developments.