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Nicolas Lambouris

Assistant Professor

Frederick University

Propaedeutics on Memorial Structures: The Monument, the Image, and the Nation

The proposed artistic research practice paper/visual essay reflects on my six-year long artistic research project “Propaedeutics on Memorial Structures Vol. I, II, III” (2018-2020), “We Never Had Winners” (2021), and “We Never Had Winners (But We Will Always Have Rocks)” (2022).

We Never Had Winners acts as a starting point of reference to the three-part project titled *Propaedeutics on Memorial Structures Vol. I, II & III*, investigating the social, political and cultural condition of memorial monuments in Cyprus. This last part considers the monument and its extended function as an object, its symbolic use of material—an act of geological appropriation where the material itself is an indicator of an-other historical time—as if bridging the past and the future in present time. Material objects that become memory-agents, monuments, are being transformed into emotional historical artifacts through which contested history (or histories) can be constantly (re)inscribed.

Questioning the complex historical and cultural assimilation of the Greek national narrative in Cyprus—an ideology that shaped the predominant understanding of a Greco-Cypriot, or more precisely of a Hellenic identity on the island: the movement within Greek-Cypriots for the campaign of *Enosis*, and later for the declaration of Cyprus as an independent state in 1960—the work poses a paradoxical statement on the nation’s “failed” symbols of victory. Despite a seemingly celebratory establishment of the Republic of Cyprus, the underlying religious, cultural and political conflict amongst various groups of both Greek- and Turkish-Cypriots urged the nationalist political elite towards a passionate and immediate declaration of all those who fought for the country as national heroes. Tracing their historical context as far back as the 1821 Greek War of Independence against the Ottoman Empire, Greek-Cypriots fervently wanted to validate *their own*, and intensely participate in the lineage of Greek heroes. Elevating their dead war heroes onto celebrated pedestals as glorious symbols of national sacrifice and sanctity was an attempt by Cypriots to claim their virtuous right in political and national freedom, but most importantly to visibly claim and re-affirm their *Greekness*; one that stipulated cultural, national and religious identification with the motherland, Greece, and therefore permitted some form of participation in a glorious historical narrative.

Employing the photographic medium as an interpretive act of the material object, space and time, the project dissects the associations between material and structure, between structure and its visual representation, and between representation and its simulated-signified historical narrative. The work adopts an artistic research approach (both in its production and presentation) through which photographs, photographic archives, found images, objects and material traces form visual constellations of selected sequences and fragmented narratives, allowing for multiple readings and associations. Images of Classical Greek sculpture, fragments of marble, fabricated artifacts, as well as visual displays of both Greek and Cypriot archaeological museums are combined and juxtaposed, with visual accounts and traces of memorial monument surfaces. Photographs and images that act as visual cues point to a research display of a museum collection, a display that brings into question both the institutional function of a museum as a cultural act, and its effect on articulating historical and cultural narratives. The constructed archive—both subjective and re-structured as artistic practice—brings into question the representation of representations; the material object and its photographic image as means of referral and reciprocal equivalences in displaying cultural residues.

Propaedeutics on Memorial Structures Vol. III investigates the condition of monuments and memorials as cultural artifacts in relation to their photographic representations. The project also examines the act of photographing—an act of production and its consequent mediated operation—and appropriating photographic documents as evidence of a particular historical narrative. Through latent significations in both object and photographic record, the project critically reflects upon contested articulations of collective national and cultural narratives pertaining to these sites.

Alois Riegl defines monuments, in their oldest and most original sense, as “human creations erected for the specific purpose of keeping single human deeds or events alive in the minds of future generations.”¹ While this act of commemorating is essentially affective, both monuments and memorials become physical and cultural memory aids, or more specifically “materialistic modes of privileging particular histories and values.”² Inextricably political in their discourse on collective memory, monuments are often directly associated with national history (or histories), national narratives and symbols, operating as public platforms onto which selected contexts, identities and claims are being negotiated. As these man-made structures become constructed signifiers of political, cultural, social and national agendas, they are transformed into asserted historical evidence that eventually permeates into the collective consciousness and actively participates in historical representation. And while monuments can achieve historical artifact status both immediately upon their unveiling, as well as over the course of time, their polysemy is what is most interesting here. They simultaneously become a sightseeing attraction, a material sign and a symbol of a system of values.

The project introduces a number of fabricated sculptural objects that imitate formalistic conventions and vaguely evoke stereotypical symbolisms and narratives of Cypriot memorial typology. In assimilating formal traces such as use of material, form and style, these ambiguous sculptures emerge as familiar cultural structures and are treated as “legitimate” historical artifacts worthy of being photographically recorded and catalogued. Forgeries in their use of material and scale, these “counter monuments” obscure evidence of identification and authenticity, while their visual representation further contributes to the politicized status of the monument-narrative.

Simulating formal conventions used in archaeological photography, the resulting photographic archives enhance the idea that these are indeed valid archaeological-historical finds, objects or sites of historical and cultural value. Textual information included on the photographic plates is carefully selected—and purposely only loosely translated in English—from seminal post-war Greek literary works that defined the modern Greek cultural, political and social identity. As Shanks proposes that we should “think less of photographs than of *photoworks*, with emphasis placed upon acts of cultural production,”³ these images question photography’s function, operating more as a cultural or political act, rather than as an objective scientific apparatus. Much like these constructed monuments pretend to operate as cultural objects in their own right, their photographic documentation challenges the nature of the photographic medium used to record, document and illustrate, but more importantly, to interpret the material past, and hence lay claim to participating in historical narratives.

keywords: photographic archives, photographic mediation, historiography, photographic representation

¹ Riegl, Alois. “The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Its Origin,” translated by Kurt W. Forster and Diane Ghirardo, *Oppositions: A Journal for Ideas and Criticism in Architecture*, vol. 25 (Fall 1982), pp. 21-51.

² Doss, Erika. *Memorial Mania*. The University of Chicago Press, 2010.

³ Shanks, Michael. “Photography and Archaeology.” *The Cultural Life of Images: Visual Representations in Archaeology*, edited by Brian Leigh Molyneaux, Routledge, 1997, pp. 73-107.