

Archipelago #4
Melancholia

Living forward, looking backward

Ioli Tzanetaki

A pair of orange View-Master stereoscopes next to a stack of 'reels' showing stills from 9/11. A megaphone accompanied by a monotonous broken sound which gives the impression that it has not been used for a long time. A paper PRIMARK bag placed within a vacuum bag. A kid's inflatable armband abandoned on a beach by holidaymakers now placed in a cardboard box covered in EU postage stamps and filled with Styrofoam packing, as if the item was fragile. All those objects, placed on pillars commonly used to exhibit artefacts in museums, could be found in *Remains of a Summer Bliss*. This is the very poignant title of Bill Balaskas' exhibition which took place in Athens, Greece in October 2016. These objects, so common to all of us who lived through the 90s, now have a different use as museum objects. Next to them a neon sign hangs on the wall forming the word 'Amaurot' which stands for the principle city of Thomas More's *Utopia*. The sign is half lit to form the word 'A...rot'. This can be read as a sign that the Utopia of the past that we so desperately hold on to, no longer exists...it probably never did. The end of the summer stands as the metaphor for the present of the Greek people as well as for the present of everyone who has had a similar experience of falling out of the bubble created by an accelerated consumer-driven reality. Items, such as the orange View-master stereoscopes, are now probably collecting dust, stacked away in storage, acting as a last grip on an idealised past. A past now remembered through an old mega-phone, a kid's arm-float; when presented on museum pedestals, these consumer items can make memories feel almost-worthless, irrelevant. But, it is these objects and the excessive



consumerism mentality of the 90s which is now haunting us in the form of a colossal debt.

Debt creates an attachment to the past as it is 'past decisions, past consumption, past investments and past pleasures' which have caused it. The attachment to the past through debt obligations continues to haunt the present. Individuals, even whole societies, feel trapped by their past debt obligations and are unable to act towards the future. This means that both 'collective and individual agency are restrained' (Ibid.) therefore signifying that the logic of debt is as much political as it is economic. Ironically, capitalism is a politico-economic system intrinsically connected to the future. This can be seen for example, in the fact that the productivity growth of capitalism is powered by an optimism suggesting that the future will be better than the present. But, simultaneously it is precisely this mentality which through debt repayments creates strong connections to the past leading to a distinctively different kind of political economy compared to the first relationship. In situations where debts exceed a particular amount, 'economic activity becomes locked into a perpetual repetition, aimed at honouring commitments to the past'. The items shown in Balaska's exhibition act as a reminder of the fact that, when living in an accelerated and fetishist futurity that is wholly dependent on speculative growth, the connection with the excessive consumerist boom of the 90s becomes an inevitability. By legitimising the idea of living outside one's means and promoting an endless accumulation of objects capitalism produces a culture of debt. Greece stands as an example of how this phenomenon can be experienced at a national level.

Since the 2008 financial crisis, public policy focused on injecting money into the financial sector and decreasing support for the household sector. For instance, social investment such as disability benefits, health care, pensions and university tuition fees has dropped dramatically in recent years. This decline in social support led households to undertake more debt to replace the government support and welfare provisions. Therefore, many households borrow because it is necessary and not out of choice. What was before seen as a public responsibility became an individual responsibility. The individualisation of the responsibility to care for one's own health care, education and so on, along with the commod-

ification of these services, comes together with the individual responsibility to cover one's debt and often the inability to do so. Sigmund Freud in his essay 'Mourning and Melancholia' recognises two different reactions to loss. One can go through the process of mourning where after a painful period of reformation they eventually recover and let go of the past. This process of mourning is usually connected to cases where the individual does not feel that the loss is their own fault and can therefore regain the agency of their future. Alternatively, one might not be able to undergo the mourning process 'correctly', as they blame themselves for the loss, and are not able to ever externalise its source. When in a state of Melancholia, as this is called, an individual is unable to maintain the slightest hope of having agency towards the future. This is the condition created by the moral obligation one feels to repay their debts. Similarly, an individual in debt considers their inability to cover it as solely their own fault without considering the social conditions that led them to this



result. Living within a capitalist system obsessed with the ideas of 'freedom' and 'choice' encourages the finger of blame to be pointed at the individual for their own exclusion, ignoring the social conditions which not only breed this very exclusion but also rely on it for its own existence.

Additionally, the dependence on debt as a form of social security is not unanimous. As it has been found the factors that mostly prompt indebtedness are a fall in income and a change in circumstances with job losses being the most important cause of a decrease in income. Therefore, it is the already disadvantaged who are affected the most by debt dependence. For the already marginalised by configurations of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, mobility and so forth, debt often becomes a means through which to cope when presented with exclusion from education, health care, disability benefits and other such goods

which used to be publicly provided. The inability to cover these unrealistic repayments exasperates their exclusion and marginalisation, while the responsibility which was previously public is now limited to the individual in the form of debt recovery. They exist in a constant state of melancholia for a future that has been denied for them. The appearance of numerous new forms of individual debt highlights this phenomenon. For instance, student loan debt, mortgage, credit card debt etc. affect millions of people. The increase of debt in our economy aside from affecting people at an individual level also means that a whole society can become trapped into a repayment of commitments of the past, and through it 'entire societies can become indebted'. In these cases the responsibility for the loss is shifted from the individual to the national body which consequently becomes trapped within a state of melancholia. It is for this reason that Athens makes a very fitting location for Balaskas' exhibition as Greece is one of the most striking examples of the recent financial crisis of a society in debt.

Since 2008, Greece has been going through its most profound transformation in recent history. It is experiencing the most turbulent social, political, cultural and economic



situation since the fall of the military Junta in 1974. This transformation is inherently linked to an uncontrollable humanitarian disaster, the collapse of private and public institutions and the feeding of a paralysing uncertainty on all aspects of life. The continuous city riots, rising unemployment and strict austerity measures have crushed any sign of social and political stability. A spectacle is surrounding these transformations and is looming all over the world. A spectacle created by the media, politicians, economic analysts and other so-called experts. This spectacle has created the myth of what is called the 'Greek Crisis'. It is the representations comprising this spectacle which have created an image of Greece as being monstrous and failed. The myth of 'Greece in Crisis' and everything this narrative entails such as lazy lifestyles and people living above their means has come to represent what everyone recalls with hearing the word 'Greece'. This myth and the perceptions it creates is also internalised within the Greek mentality. It acts as an apparatus of control and a way to conform Greece to the dominant standards presented by Western-Europe. By constantly focusing on the inconceivable growth of Greece's fiscal deficit those representations are intended to create a general feeling of guilt which brings the Greek population to a condition of inertia and melancholia. Greece is put in the condition of the 'Indebted Society' which creates the impression that their only choice is to repay the creditors. Interdependence between debt and guilt is created and becomes a generic physical, mental and emotional condition. As Maurizio Lazzarato states, it turns the entire society into a 'Factory of the Indebted Man'. The debt itself becomes a 'semantic mechanism of discipline and control' while, through public debt the whole society becomes indebted. It produces a specific mentality, the mentality of the promise to honour one's debt but more specifically accepting the fault of having entered the indebted relationship. As Nietzsche mentions, the concept of 'Schuld' which is the German word for guilt originates from 'Schulden' which are the



debts. As those representations of Greece have shown, when the discussion is about the issue of debt the media, the politicians and the economists only communicate one message: that the Greek debtors are at fault; they are guilty. This guilt weights on every individual as each of them individually must take accountability for it (ibid). The responsibility of the loss i.e. the covering of the debt, rather than addressing the systemic mechanisms that have caused such a loss, falls exclusively onto the national body which exists within a constant state of melancholia.

'The barbarian', as Walter Benjamin calls the contemporary man, considers nothing as permanent but because of this he sees alternatives everywhere. Therefore, he finds himself constantly standing on crossroads. In such an environment confidence and trust become necessary denominators for any creative action. Contrariwise, fear and lack of confidence completely counteract any possibility of action. The conditions created by debt cause those exact sentiments which lead to the suspension of any action. This is exactly the situation Greeks experience in the present. The looming of debt over each individual has turned the whole nation into a condition of inertia and any possibility of action has collapsed. This way the creditor gains control over the debtor and the impossibility of his future behaviour. For the Greeks there seems to be no way out of this condition apart from reimbursing the creditor and conforming with the rest of Europe. It is this mentality of the lack of choice which led Greece in 2010 to accept the second bailout plan imposed by the IMF and Europe and add austerity on austerity. At the time of the imposition of the 'rescue package', as it was famously advertised by the creditors, European politicians, financial experts and the media suggested that everything Greece had of any worth had to go.

The threat of the huge debt seems to loom over all Greeks and the only solution they can see is to repay the creditor. By the construction of this myth guilt and fear are inscribed in the mind of each individual. But, it is due to this mentality that Greece has entered a period of 'permanent crisis' which can be called 'catastrophe'. It seems impossible to get out of this catastrophe by applying and imposing the same principles that led to it. As Lazzarato mentions 'debt is not an economic problem but an apparatus of power'. Therefore, debt stops being something subjective and becomes something existential, it starts from the narrative created by the creditors which in turn creates a myth and is thus an aesthetic, a social and a political matter as much as it is an economic one. Balaskas through his exhibition asks Greeks to confront their complicated reality and go against the dominant perspective which declares that 'ignorance is bliss'. If we are asking to find even a possibility to get out of the current condition of constant melancholia, we also need to analyse and evaluate the current situation through a different lens. We need to look beyond the individual or, in the case of Greece, beyond the national responsibility for the loss. We need to look at the systemic mechanisms which have caused it in order to allow space for mourning. Greece should use the differences that make it unfit for Europe to find a way out of its current situation.

Greece is the bad sheep of Europe. That's its virtue.
Good thing there are black sheep like Greece to
mix things up, to refuse a certain Germano-French

standardization, etc. So, continue being black sheep
and we'll get along just fine...

Felix Guattari, Naples, July 15, 2011

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Colophon

Thank you:

David Martin for your patience, Catherine Smiles for both your patience and your keen eye, Sinazo Chiya (Stevenson gallery, Cape Town) for image permissions, Sarah and Enclave for hosting us, and to everyone who took the time to submit to this issue of Archipelago.

Design:

pssss.co

Print:

calverts.coop

Typeset in:

Harbour

Crimson

and Work Sans

Kindly Supported By:

Goldsmiths Politics Department

+ Goldsmiths Annual Fund