

# *OPENINGS: CHRISTODOULOS PANAYIOTOU*

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JUST SHORT of its fourth anniversary as part of the eurozone, the Republic of Cyprus announced in the middle of last year that it was on the verge of becoming the next member state to seek a bailout from the European Union. At the time of my writing, this had not become an actuality—but other dangers loom, and the future of the euro itself is less certain than ever. As if possessed of an ability to foresee the future, Cypriot artist Christodoulos Panayiotou worked with the Central Bank of Cyprus in the months leading to the country's monetary changeover in January 2008 to rescue all the country's Cypriot-pound-denominated banknotes from incineration and made the shredded bills into a sixteen-foot-high heap of paper, titled *2008*. Through this gesture, Panayiotou prompted the symbolic transformation that occurs when economic value gives way to artistic value, by salvaging the material remains of that utterly immaterial entity, money. At the same time, he created evidence within the artwork of the conditions surrounding its creation, a period marked in Cyprus by transition, uncertainty, and a crisis of national identity. This kind of archaeological salvage has become characteristic of Panayiotou's practice since he transitioned to visual art in 2003 after formative stints in dance and anthropology. The observational distance required in the latter of these disciplines has found its way into his art, which tends to involve photographic prints or slide-projector works whose imagery is acquired by mining municipal and state archives in Cyprus and beyond.

Synchronized slide projections such as *Never Land*, 2008, and *Wonder Land*, 2007, exemplify Panayiotou's fascination with the archival material of his native country. (Both will be shown in the artist's first US solo show, at the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis later this month.) For the eighty slides that constitute *Wonder Land*, Panayiotou pored through the municipal archives of Limassol, the town where he was born, and documented the increasing popularity of Disney

costumes among participants in the town's annual carnival from the late 1970s to 2007. *Wonder Land* condenses the carnival's evolution over these decades with a slowly advancing series of slides that emphasize the internationally shared iconography of Americanized popular culture rather than the more traditional and folkloric narratives for which the carnival is celebrated by the town's tourism industry.

Taking a similar approach to the discarded materials of the recent past, *Never Land* reorients a selection of photographs originally captured for *Phileleftheros*, Cyprus's highest-circulation newspaper, into an oblique narrative for three slide projectors that focuses on the years preceding the country's admittance into the European Union in 2004. The images Panayiotou has chosen emphasize awkward poses, expressionless personality types, and a banality that leaves one guessing what these pictures could once have been thought to communicate. Still, a mood of apprehension pervades many of the photos: A man kneels beside a prostrate horse; a costumed dancer stares blankly ahead while a sign reading PROGRESSO hangs ominously over his shoulder.

For a more recent project premised on a similar approach, *I Land*, 2010, the artist unearthed pictures from the country's Press and Information Office in Nicosia to examine how a cult of personality was instilled around the country's first president, Archbishop Makarios III, and the ways in which the government promoted a sense of national culture in the period immediately following Cyprus's independence from Britain in 1960.

All these works suggest that Panayiotou is driven by a desire to unearth alternate meanings to counter the stories official images are intended to convey. In an engagement with the "archival impulse" of much contemporary art, the gesture by which Panayiotou gives pictures a second life is a consequence of a wariness about the very project of archiving and the role foisted on individual images within it. He turns the archive on itself to analyze and subvert the official narratives of, for example, statehood, and to reveal the ways in which apparently banal images possess an innate ability to shape-shift when called on to serve different ends. Panayiotou's own sense of national or local identity isn't what's at stake: His interest stretches to any archive so long as its contents warrant reshuffling. One work, titled *If Tomorrow Never Comes*, 2007, delves into two photographic collections in Naples, from which Panayiotou collected pictures of fireworks exploding above the city, invoking a broad set of significations, given that the local Mafia have used fireworks as a method of communication.

Most often, Panayiotou's found images are mediated by the dusty hum of aging slide projectors that allow his subjects to ceaselessly appear and disappear as phantoms of political history. The artist took a different tack in a recent installation of five framed photographic groupings presented at the Galerie für Zeitgenössische Kunst in Leipzig: *The Invention of Antiquity*, *The Invention of Tradition*, *The Invention of Folklore*, *Arrivals: The Tourists*, and *Arrivals: Santa Claus*, all 2011. The images used in these works were again culled from the archives at the Press and Information Office in Nicosia, but here the physical rather than sequential juxtapositions of his chosen images charged them with a revitalized pictorial potential. Panayiotou's sequences of projected images and his grouped photographic prints both illuminate and interfere with the processes by which historical narratives are fictionalized, mediatized, and received in the present. Indeed, one facet of Panayiotou's project takes advantage of the tension between the materiality of pictures and the immateriality of their intended purpose. Whether the artist presents historical photographs as projections in a darkened gallery or as framed objects on the wall, their juxtapositions and sequencing are rooted in the methodology of comparative analysis that itself forms the bedrock of modern art history, a discipline with its origins—appropriately, given Panayiotou's methodology—in archaeology.

One further aspect of Panayiotou's work complements and builds on his treatment of the archive: his own photographs. They have been used in only two works to date, and they stand in a complicated relationship to the abundance of imagery culled from official sources. The act of producing new images in this environment, Panayiotou suggests, cannot but be a fraught endeavor, as every composed image could itself be implicated in the ambiguities of some future archiving project. This anxiety is addressed in the artist's *Sunrise (1 October 2010, 6.15)*, which offers a view off the coast of Limassol in the early-morning hours of the holiday marking the fiftieth anniversary of Cypriot independence. The sun's warm glow bathes the photograph in what could be taken for nostalgia or patriotism, but its light also casts a shadow of critique, already implied by the blend of romantic kitsch and bureaucratic systematization in the work's title. Evoking (and subverting) several of the functions that a photograph of modern Cyprus might serve, *Sunrise* exemplifies the ease with which an image can adapt to the demands of its context. Panayiotou thus suggests that no photograph is ever immune from being deployed in support of official history or to serve other agendas of representation.

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