

***The Spectre of the People*, Thessaloniki PhotoBiennale 2023: OW.GR
interview with Magdalini Gkogkou**

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Ana Carolina Fernandes, Demonstration against education against cuts made by Bolsonaro, Rio de Janeiro, May 2019

Magdalini Gkogkou: One could characterize populism as a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. How did you decide to approach it in the context of a photography exhibition and what was your initial objective?

Julian Stallabrass: I have been researching the subject for a book about the relationship between cultural and political populism in the contemporary art world and beyond. It struck me that some artists who make work that has wide popular appeal, and make brands of their own personalities, sometimes parallel the statements and behaviour of populist politicians. Photography and video are central to this parallel because they are so important to the conduct of politics. With photography, it has been so since the beginnings of modern democracy.



Daniel Mayrit, from the series *One of Yours*, 2022.

MG: Can art and photography offer the public tools for critical thinking against the manipulative tools of populism?

JS: That's a big part of what the exhibition sets out to show. To give just one example, when you see Daniel Mayrit performing as a populist leader for the camera, many viewers will find it funny but will also think about the various techniques by which populists put across their message visually: how they pose, what they wear, how they are lit, how they are made up—in all, how they construct their photo ops.

MG: In recent years, Greece has confronted significant political and economic challenges. Given that the exhibition is being held in Thessaloniki, I would like to inquire whether there is a correlation between populism as a phenomenon and the Greek experience?



Vangelis Vlahos, *This event has now ended (July 7, 2015)*, 2016-2017, detail

JS: Absolutely there is, and I had good advice, especially from the Museum of Photography curator, Hercules Papaioannou, on Greek work to show. Populism has a highly ambivalent character: it can seek to expand democracy and overcome its deficiencies, and equally it can threaten it with authoritarianism. Under Syriza, you had a taste of the former, as the government tried to take on the EU and its programme of privatization and cuts. The work of Vangelis Vlahos points to the betrayal of the popular will that would take place, as shown with an accidentally exposed document. An uncanny video of the empty Greek Parliament chamber by Stefanos Tsivopoulos makes visible the democratic deficit. And in his documentary photos, Dimitris Michalakis shows both the terrible conditions of the financial crisis, and the uprising against the imposition of austerity.



MacDonaldStrand, *No More Flags*, 2021, video still

MG: Were there any ethical concerns that you were confronted with during the preparation of the exhibition?

JS: Yes, the most obvious was how to deal with right-wing populist material. My exhibition does not set out to be neutral, and has a partisan position politically, while exploring a very wide range of artistic approaches. So right-wing material is framed within the work of artists who do not share that ideology: for instance, in a disturbing video by MacDonaldStrand of far-right demonstrations in the UK and the US in which their flags are blanked out to be a uniform white. And in DISNOVATION's remarkable map of the online culture wars, which lays out an entertaining and dizzying set of brands, personalities, memes and slogans along the axes of left and right, and libertarian and authoritarian.



Sinna Nasseri, Tulsa, Oklahoma, 2020

MG: Generally speaking, I would like to ask you what role an image plays in a political situation and if it possesses the power to alter the course of political events.

JS: Images play a huge role in politics, as the salience of the culture wars shows, and all the disputes over the truth of images which was the subject of the previous PhotoBiennale main exhibition, 'The Record and the Real'. It has long been so: at the beginning of the twentieth century, Mark Twain's 'incorruptible kodak' revealed the horrors of King Leopold's regime in the Congo in a way that words alone could not. Images and the way they are distributed and seen in the digital age are central to the conduct of politics, from the performances of leaders and followers to the way in which protestors put across their views and assemble as collectives. In the exhibition, Sinna Nasseri's work shows aspects of the visual culture of the deeply split political realm in the US, as people perform their identities. And the Archive of Public Protest supports radical protestors in Poland as they confront their authoritarian government, and through their creative dissent form an alternative image of 'the people'. We live in an image-saturated society, so images are necessarily central to the conduct of politics.

MG: Art has the potential to provoke emotional reactions and to be what we call 'food for thought'. What kind of emotions or reactions do you hope visitors to the exhibition "The Spectre of the People" will experience?



Kimberly dela Cruz, 15-year-old Jazmine Durana cradles her month-old daughter Hazel at the wake of her partner John 'Toto' Dela Cruz who was killed by men in black masks on January 26, 2017 in Navotas. She said she heard the suspects accuse Toto of stealing and using drugs before they shot him four times. Toto was 16 years old.

JS: It is hard for me to take a distance from the exhibition that I have been working so closely on for the last year and more, and I am looking forward to seeing what people make of it. I think that it reflects some of the qualities of populism itself—there are parts that are visually loud and even vulgar, especially when it comes to dealing with the very rich, as in the work of Lauren Greenfield and Dougie Wallace; there are parts that are deeply serious and thoughtful, with work dealing with those excluded from ‘the people’ and condemned as enemies—for instance, in Paolo Pellegrin’s photographs of a Roma family, or in Kimberly dela Cruz’s images of those targeted by death squads in the Philippines. Other works are more analytical and dispassionate. I hope that viewers will come away, having experienced a large range of emotions and thoughts, with a feeling of the depth of the crisis of democracy, but also of hope at the many people who risk their safety, and on occasion their lives, by seeking to extend democracy and challenge authoritarian regimes. I find hope and inspiration, for example, in the women protestors who Prarthna Singh celebrates, and in the creative dissent of protestors in Brazil, as shown in fine photographs by Ana Carolina Fernandes.