

Tales of objects

The painted still lifes of the seventeenth century which represented scenes of material affluence, extolling wealth and property through oil-painting were, according to John Berger, the first advertising representations of goods.¹ This was followed by a flood of mass-produced, industrial goods which transformed the culture of needs into a culture of consumption.² In their overwhelming majority, people, in the Western world at least, now live surrounded by objects of every nature (functional, decorative, personal), creating a reality which is as stifling as it is unavoidable, and which is portrayed with abounding eloquence by what is now official photographic and broader advertising. The art of photography, however, in spite of the fact that it very methodically depicts the world around us, does not seem to regard this brave world of constantly renewed objects as vital raw material. Even rarer are the instances of photographers, such as the Spaniard Chema Madoz, dedicated in the meta-poiesis of everyday things, who are concerned with the nature and the function of objects in a depth provided by time. Within this framework, the case of Natassa Markidou constitutes a distinct particularity, since in a career of 20 years, almost all her works focus on objects or installations of objects which bear the seal of a personal style and a coherent approach.

In the first of these works, *Rituals* (1986 – 1993), Markidou scene-sets a series of complex still lifes which make references to indeterminate cults or religious rituals. The images suggest concepts such as magic, mysticism, paganism, a feeling which is strengthened by the discreet

¹ Berger, John, *Ways of Seeing*, Odysseas, Athens, 1993.

² Stachel, Urs, and Thomas Seelig, 'Foreword', in *The Ecstasy of Things*, Fotomuseum Winterthur, Fotostiftung Schweiz, Steidl, Gottingen, 2004. The reference is to the essay by Michael Jacob 'On the Poetics of Things in Modernism', pp. 7 – 8.

presence of fire, which adds a brush-stroke of the present tense. But *Rituals* are performances without ceremony, symbols without worship, images devoid of meaning, if the significance of the photograph is dictated by the one-way relation with an actual fact. In undermining the magical verisimilitude of the photograph, they suggest that this may be imposing as real a fleeting construct, a coincidental juxtaposition.³ Markidou goes beyond the stage-set – on to the composition of an imaginary reality, the convincing existence of which requires the creation and rendering of contrived symbols.

The *Journals* (1994) is a small unit of four works each of which includes 12 variations on the same composition, chiefly with organic materials (shells, leaves, tree barks, etc.), each of which is usually spread out on a sheet of paper. The arrangement of the compositions in a grid suggests some indefinite but periodically repeatable unit of time, while the sheets of paper, similarly, connote the journal narrative. At the same time, the individual compositions extend to a hesitant encounter with one another which testifies to a sense of unity, both chronological and narrative. The imaginary construct of the photograph here meets up with another construct, equally arbitrary, although of high standing: that of time and of its axiomatic division.

In the next series, the idea of ritual recurs, with the age-long Asian tradition of the *Shaman* (1997 – 2004), as magus and healer, as the subject. In the installations which constitute the hypothetical therapeutic field of action, features such as shells, leaves, roots, and sand form enigmatic microcosms. As in the first series, it remains unknown whether the ritual part has gone before or will follow. Each installation has as a basis a photograph of human limbs, which hints at an interesting ambivalence: are these limbs which are in need of healing, or is this a

³ Markidou, Natassa, *Rituals*, Camera Obscura XVI, Winter 1992.

reference to the modern religious use of icons and, consequently, the imperative need for a therapeutic distance from them?

In *Weapons* (1998 – 2000), we come face to face with a series of imaginary objects which are intended for war or hunting. Markidou isolates and photographs each one of these against a white background, adopting the semiotics of the archaeological find, which is set down with clinical neutrality. Yet this is only a rhetorical figure, since, as Stathatos points out, photography and archaeology are both methods of recovering the past which, although they are considered impartial testimonies, are subject to the indefiniteness of interpretation.⁴ These strange objects, made chiefly from wood or metal, frequently present a peculiar and on occasion rather elegant geometry for the theoretical threat which embodies the identity ascribed to them. If the concept of ritual in the other works involves the illusion of a duration, here the objects seem to have been detached from deposited layers of historical time. They remain, however, equally hermetical and strange – outside any attempt at classification, since the beholder has no way of knowing whether they belong to one or more cultures, whether they come from the same or different periods. Markidou shows a genius for using the imaginary to speak of the arbitrariness both of the real and of photography.

In *Monuments* (2000 – 2003), the same line of thinking extends into another area. A series of imaginary monuments is photographed where they have been supposedly 'discovered'. Markidou chooses an angle for the shot which lends to them a feeling of monumentality. The shades of black and white, as in the earlier series, stress the pseudo-scientific neutrality of a work which wishes to resemble a plain record. But whereas in the previous series this feeling is reinforced by the full-frontal,

⁴ Stathatos, Yannis, *Archaeologies*, Thessaloniki Museum of Photography, Thessaloniki, 2003, p. 16.

centred shot of a composition which extends on one level, in *Monuments*, made from the kind of lowly materials which can be found washed up on a sea shore, the object rises up in perspective through the natural landscape which it adorns. Markidou's anonymous points of landscape recognise the significance of the monuments, from the Acropolis to the Red Indian totem, as indicators of an individual and collective identity and agent of history. Their form and positioning in space walk the tight-rope between prehistoric art and land art or environmental sculpture, signalling the gestures which punctuate the natural landscape, breathing into it the human spirit.

Markidou's meticulously organised photographs are the conclusion of a creative task which starts out from the selection of objects on the basis of their formal qualities. This is followed by sketches in which the idea of a hybrid object is hatched, and, finally, the construct, in which the primary materials are placed in new contexts and are transformed into unusual sculptures or ephemeral installations. Her obviously hand-made constructs seem to be suspended in their indefinitely pre-industrial look, refusing any aesthetic preening, as if they are coming from some post-modern junk shop. They thus effectively safeguard their enigmatic identity which effectively hangs from the fine thread of the single-word title of each series. At the same time, Markidou emphatically shuns the sense of a personal style, both in the construction and the photography, thus creating works with an economy of materials and forms which suggests the latent functionality and the vital simplicity of primitivist art, when functionality and aesthetics were the two sides of the same coin. At the same time, series such as *Weapons* or *Monuments* recall the fascination of the *objets trouvés* of Marcel Duchamp, who introduced the commonplace object into the world of art, thus raising, *inter alia*, the

issue of the link between art and the everyday, as well as that of the authenticity of art.

Markidou's insistence on the studied disguising of the imaginary as the real classifies her work in the small but sturdy group of artistic works which bear the title of *false documents*, photographs, that is, which adopt the style of the document only in order to undermine its absolute authority. In this context, a special place in her influences appears to be occupied by the emblematic *Herbarium* of Joan Fontcuberta (1985): a collection of photographs of non-existent plants, made from parts of other plants, which parodies the apparent objectivity of the medium of photography through a series of – literally – 'still lifes'. The *Herbarium* is engaged in an open dialogue with the relevant work of Karl Blossfeldt, which in the inter-War years was elevated to the position of a basic pillar in the *New Objectivity*, stressing the aesthetic dynamic released by the 'artful' classificatory approach to nature. The two works in the end condense the approach to photography at the beginning and end of the twentieth century: blind faith in the rhetoric of naturalism was succeeded by the quest for flaws both in reality and in its image. On the Greek scene, important works with the same line of thinking were *Unpublished Documents* (1991) by Yiorgos Depollas and, some years later, the *Thirteen Strange Deaths* (2000). Markidou's work, however, seems to have many affinities with the *FRIT Institute* of Antonis Mikhailidis, of the early 1990s, in which an imaginary institute from Chicago exhibited the finds of Dr Rawlingson from the civilisation of the Mydonians of the Stone Age, which were discovered, supposedly, in the inter-War years in Greece. The exhibition supported particularly convincingly the undertaking as it employed display cases, plans, maps and 'genuine' artefacts of the Mydonians (mirrors, figurines, weapons, tools, etc.), all made by the hand of the artist. The catalogue, apart from a theory about

the evolution of the civilisation in question, contained photographs of the artefacts, the scholars, and the premises of the institute. Here the 'deception' of the viewer claims as a necessary constituent his/her direct relation with the raw material of the manufactured reality, exploiting the authority of archaeology, the documentary power of photography and the need for belief or the acquired acceleration with which we manifest this belief.

Markidou's photography series, which are in this publication arranged in a dialectical relation, displaying an organic continuity and defining with clarity the context of her work, constitute a double abstraction: first comes the detachment of the objects from reality as a whole, and their transposition to a 'neutral' environment. This is followed, as a second degree of abstraction, by the conversion of the object or the installation into an image. Part of their fascination lies in the fact that they bring out how powerless the beholder is in the face of images which do not bear accompanying information, when, that is, he/she attempts a personal interpretation, which up to that point was involuntarily entrusted to other hands. It also lies in the constant counterpoint between a modern, technological medium of reproduction and a raw material which seems to derive its root from cultural archetypes. The game of mystery between art and life, between imaginary primitivism and technological culture, between reality and its representation, with minimalist aesthetics and an introvert intuition as a guide, resembles an enchanting tale. It is perhaps for this reason that the rock couplet declares: *fairy tales are not true / but at least they're not lies.*⁵ It is this spacious but demanding verge that is inhabited both by the art of Natassa Markidou and the photographic medium with which she has chosen to serve it.

⁵ The lines come from *Strange Song*, on the record *A Glance like Rain* by the *Wooden Swords* rock group, 1997.

Hercules Παπαϊοαννου

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