

Of Loss and Retrieval

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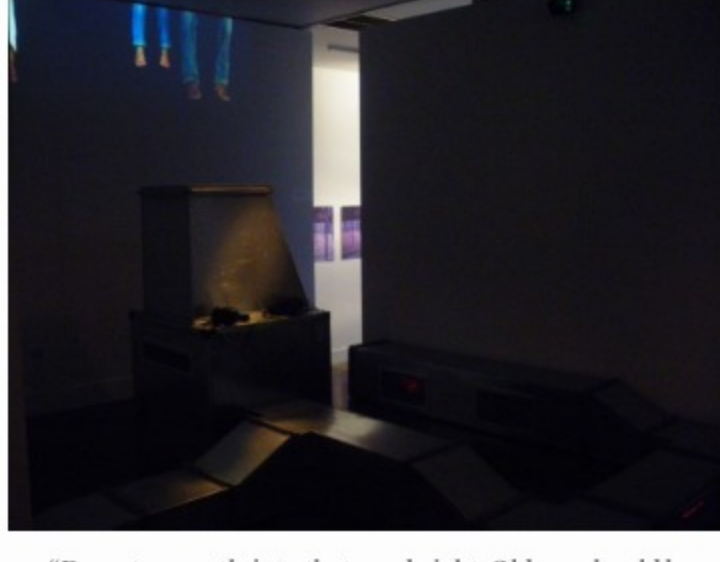
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Photo of an unknown boy, which we can imagine to have been Kostas, who went missing in 1922 during the evacuation of ethnic Greek refugees from Smyrna. Image courtesy of Red Cross Archive, Greece.



Makis Faros's photographic documentation of his forthcoming art project Radio Feed Memories (R.F.M.). Cars traveling through tunnels will be 'invaded' by audio feeds (over the car radio) with announcements from the 'future' of persons gone missing during the current crisis. Image courtesy of Makis Faros and vitalspace.org



"Do not go gentle into that good night, Old age should burn and rave at close of day; Rage, rage against the dying of the light." Dylan Thomas (1914-53). Image courtesy of Makis Faros and vitalspace.org



Installation by Makis Faros, EMST (National Museum of Modern Art, Athens, 2012). Image courtesy of Makis Faros and vitalspace.org



Artistic intervention by Maaïke Stutterheim; stickers with the words "To Be Gifted" pasted on empty shop windows in the center of Athens. Image courtesy of Maria Papanikolaou and vitalspace.org



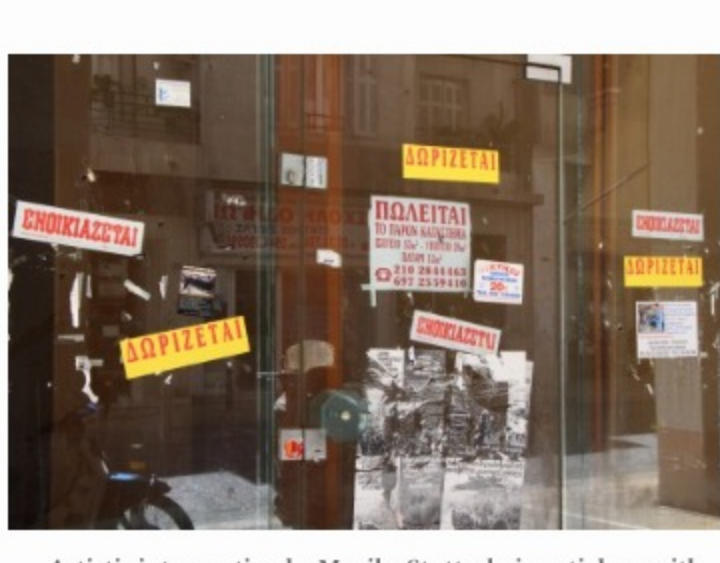
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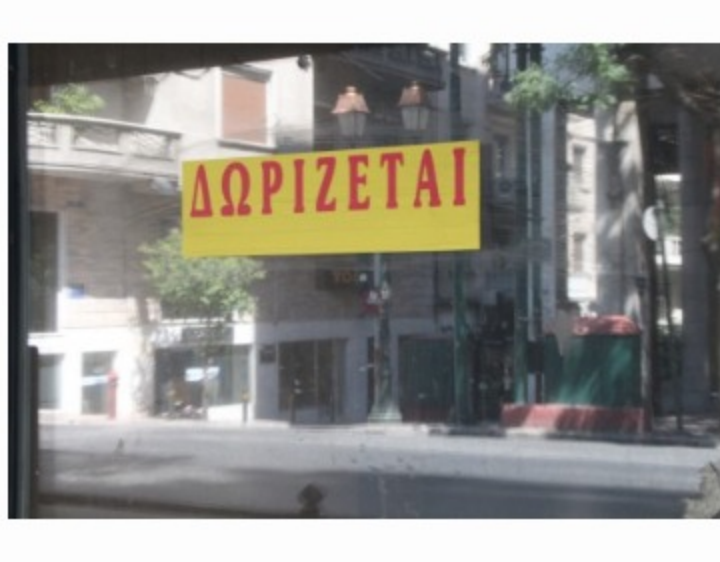
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Introduction

Normal people, normal countries, normal times associate nostalgia with the bittersweet moment when the present is ambushed by a long lost image, a smell, a memory.

Greeks do not live in normal times. To us, nostalgia comes with a heavy footprint, the sickening thud of an impact, a tendency to plunge into a brief rage, which, soon after, yields an unwelcome longing. Odysseus minus the happy ending crossed with Prometheus *sans* his modernist rehabilitation.

Radical Absence: A Fading Soundtrack

This is an important announcement: Kostas had thick black hair, combed back, was wearing a pale red shirt and had a gold medallion hanging around his neck by a silver chain. The medallion depicted a trireme and had his name, Kostas, as well as his date of birth, 3 March 1918, etched on it. He was last seen by his sister Maria on Smyrna's western quayside at around noon of the 7th day of September 1922. If anyone has any information regarding Kostas, who would now be sixty years old, leave a message for Maria Kardamili by calling the Red Cross telephone line on 245362.

Next announcement: Katerina was five years old when she was separated...

To all of us who were raised in the 1960s, this was a central part of our upbringing's soundtrack. In the absence of television (which reached Greece in the very late 1960s), the radio was our only live window to the world. And these radio announcements, read in a stolid, formal male voice for one endless hour each afternoon, ensured that, from infancy, we would learn to associate radical absence with our national psyche.

To have missing persons in one's home, one's community, was not only normal: it was imperative. While the roll call of the disappeared, of those whose lives were cut but never pasted, seemed endless, every announcement was pregnant with the possibility of some miraculous reunion. The slenderer its probability, the greater the anticipated joy. It was, in a sense, a kind of hope-preservation principle, akin to a natural isomorphism, a mass psychology equivalent to Newton's energy conservation principle.

Splendid reunions were not unknown. Once television reared its ugly screen, reality shows would, occasionally, live broadcast the awful (or was it moving?) sight of octogenarian brothers and sisters trying to rise from their seats (once the director had lowered the screen separating them from one another), tears streaming incessantly from their bleary eyes, edging toward one another, hugging, failing to utter a single word, crying.

Time's inexorable passing reprieved the survivors of the "Asia Minor Disaster" (as Greeks called the events of 1922) of their ordeal, of the crushing question of what had happened to that young boy or small girl whom they had last seen on the quayside as Smyrna burned. By the mid-1990s, all that pain, plus the small mercies it came with, had faded into the nation's vault of unwanted memories.

The memory of those radio announcements withered at about the time Greece's European 'path' allowed us to believe that we had become a normal nation, capable of run-of-the-mill 'European' concerns, aspirations, and dramas. We allowed ourselves to believe that Smyrna and the disappeared were part of a long gone Orientalist past. That no Greek would disappear again on some quayside, real or imaginary, leaving behind a trail of pain and nostalgia. That we would now only die public, well-documented, boring deaths, in accidents involving modern cars on European-looking highways, or of cholesterol-induced heart attacks. That we would never go missing again.

Missing in Siatista

Yiorgos Chatzis had been missing since August. He was last sighted at the Office of Social Security (IKA) in the small town of Siatista, where he was told that his modest monthly disability allowance of €280 had been suspended. Eyewitnesses reported that he did not utter a word of complaint. "He seemed stunned and remained speechless," a newspaper report said. Soon after, he used his cell phone for the last time to place a call to his wife. No one was at home, so he left a message on the answering machine: "I feel useless. I have nothing to offer you anymore. Mind the children." A few days later, his body was found in a remote wooded area, suspended by the neck from the cliff that was to be his last resort, his mobile phone laying on the ground nearby.

The wave of suicides that the Great Greek Depression has triggered caught the attention of the international press after a retired pharmacist shot himself in the middle of Syntagma Square, leaving behind a heart-wrenching anti-austerity political manifesto. The fact that Chatzis's suicide came without a manifesto does not make it any less poignant. His quiet desperation had an ill-defined power, a tender despondency that can, perhaps, shame into silence even the most callous of austerians. His family's silent, dignified grief a bridge to the Greece of the 1960s when that forgotten, now dead, Maria had used the Red Cross radio announcements service to register her grief over a long-lost boy called Kostas.

Red Cross Radio Days Redux

The missing of the 1920s left behind a radio trail that lasted for decades, and shaped our lives, our audio imagery, our sense of loss and place. What will the 'missing' of the 2010s leave behind?

Unwilling to leave this question to the sands of time, Makis Faros, an artist, musician, and indefatigable Athenian, has put together his own, arresting reply. His next art project, R.F.M. (Radio Feed Memories), will be modeled on the Red Cross announcements of the 1960s and 1970s, and will revolve around persons who have dropped out of sight now. Men and women who, like Yiorgos Chatzis, have either gone permanently 'missing' or who have fallen off society's radar screen, living rough on the streets of some city or swept up by the latest wave of emigration. These radio announcements will then be 'fed' surreptitiously into the radios of cars that enter tunnels all over Greece (tunnels long enough to have been equipped with special transmitters, so that no radio signal loss is experienced). For a few seconds, or minutes at most, drivers and their passengers will find their music or chat radio interrupted by R.F.M.—like announcements from the future, when the Marias of Greece's future will be appealing for information regarding the Kostas who have been 'cut' out of the present.

Just like the announcements of our 1960s radio days, the new announcements will be read out in monotone, dispassionate, male voices, giving out only the barest, factual information, notifying and making official the missing person, leaving to the imagination the personal details, the private horrors, the longing, the nostalgia, the loss. All over the land, as cars enter and exit tunnels their occupants' minds will be made briefly, minutely, aware of a mosaic of shared, embarrassing loss.

"Through Radio Feed Memories," concludes Makis Faros, "my position vis-à-vis today's circumstances, becomes clear: We live in a state of war!"

Empty Spaces for Free

If the Red Cross radio announcements were central, albeit sad, aspects of our childhood soundtracks, our image of Athens was forever punctuated by the rectangular yellow stickers on which printed red letters spelled out one of two words: ΠΩΛΕΙΤΑΙ [FOR SALE] or ΕΝΟΙΚΙΑΖΕΤΑΙ [TO LET]. Pasted all over the city, in a country where, thankfully, real estate agents were never really red tapster, or vendor or buyer, landlord or renter, these two signs formed a yellow and red tapestry.

Greece's wholesale bankruptcy, in 2010, turned a light sprinkling of these familiar and soothing notices into a disconcerting ocean of yellow and red. As the Greek state became insolvent, Europe imposed upon it the largest loan in human history, so that the Northern European bankers would be repaid. To receive these misanthropic loans, however, the Greek state had to raise taxes and cut off most expenditure on 'luxuries' such as benefits, pensions, health, and education.

Within a year, businesses had closed shop, labor had been liquidated, and taxes on property became the state's only form of lasting revenue. Which meant, naturally, that homeowners could no longer sell their houses even if they were willing to accept ridiculously low prices (as a house now translated into an increasing tax obligation to the insolvent, and thus, insatiable state). Additionally, rents collapsed, dovetailing with incomes in a dizzying, downward spiral, leaving homeowners in a position they had never imagined: unable either to sell their bricks, cement, and mortar or to rent them. By 2012, the joke went that parents were threatening their misbehaving children thus: "If you continue like this, I shall transfer the title deeds to your name!"

The result was a buyer's market for houses, without the buyers. The ΠΩΛΕΙΤΑΙ and ΕΝΟΙΚΙΑΖΕΤΑΙ signs proliferated, plastered in large numbers and on unexpected surfaces. It was this flourishing of the red and yellow signs that energized Maaïke Stutterheim, a Dutch artist who was spending a couple of months in Athens as part of the Snehta Residency (Athens written backwards), to come up with her ΔΩΡΙΖΕΤΑΙ project.

Her preliminary idea was to print a third type of yellow and red sticker that offered an alternative to FOR SALE and TO LET: FOR FREE. Initially, she thought of the Greek word ΔΩΡΕΑΝ, whose etymology comes from ΔΩΡΟΝ, which means "gift," with ΔΩΡΕΑΝ loosely translatable as "FOR FREE." However the aesthetics of ΔΩΡΕΑΝ were all wrong, in the sense that the passerby's eye would not immediately see the connection with the 'longer', familiar words ΠΩΛΕΙΤΑΙ or ΕΝΟΙΚΙΑΖΕΤΑΙ, two words which end in "AI." This is why Maaïke decided to take the advice of Maria Papanikolaou (a member of vitalspace.org) and opt for the passive tense of the verb: ΔΩΡΙΖΕΤΑΙ [to be gifted]

Six-and-a-half thousand ΔΩΡΙΖΕΤΑΙ sticky notices were printed and pasted strategically alongside the traditional signs over a two-month period. Thus, a dialogue between the concepts of rent, property (ownership), and giving began across the breadth and width of central Athens. Maaïke focused on placing her stickers on the windows of empty, abandoned shops with a view to creating awareness of the inanity of so much empty space; hoping for some legislative change that would, as in the Netherlands, open these spaces up to occupation after a year of remaining vacant. ¹ Interestingly, owners seem to have got her message, perhaps more so than anyone else, judging by the speed and eagerness with which they have been removing Maaïke's stickers from their properties.

Epilogue

The rituals of emptiness can be filled with meaning, but only if critically informed by the artist's eye. As a boy, listening to the never-ending Red Cross announcements, the feelings of sadness had no redeeming power. We just wanted them to be over, to stop reminding us of unalterable loss.

Similarly, today, the articles on suicides, with or without accompanying explanatory notes, leave a lacuna behind that plugs no existential hole, lends no hope, carves out no nests into which optimism can return. The empty storefronts act as spatial evidence of lack, vacuum, absence, loss. Even when an eatery opens up where a bookshop used to thrive, there is little solace.

But when an artist intervenes well, creatively attacking the apathetic bystander with irresistible sounds and images that force even the most dispirited proverbial 'idiot' to take another look, to see the emptiness, then hope comes alive again. Makis Faros's R.F.M. project will, when completed, touch a few lives momentarily but it will do so in a manner that operates like a population-wide redemption. Maaïke Stutterheim's project has already extracted life from the dead and nothingness the crisis spread in its wake. You may think, dear reader, that these are slim pickings. But you would be wrong. After all, it takes only one act of kindness, in a sea of cruelty and hypocrisy, to make both hypocrisy and genuine humanity possible. Similarly with emptiness and loss: a flickering momentary 'presence' can eliminate the crushing absence.

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