

## Where centre and periphery meet: art history in Greece

Review of:

*Art History in Greece: Selected Essays*, edited by Evgenios D. Matthiopoulos, Athens: Melissa Publishing House, 2018, 150 pp., 22 b. & w. illus., €19.50 pbk ISBN 9789602043790

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*Art History in Greece: Selected Essays* is perhaps too straitened a title for this candid and engaging collection. As accurate as it may be—each of the volume's six chapters does, in fact, address Greek art history—the title nonetheless fails to convey the scope and wider relevance of the essays gathered here. The book is as germane to the historiography of today's global art history as it is to our understanding of the specific conditions of the discipline in Greece and Cyprus. This is not to discount the importance of Greek historiography but to insist on the interest of this volume for the discipline as a whole. What is made clear by this anthology is that the ideological impulses that shaped art history in Greece and Cyprus are precisely those that gave rise to the discipline itself. For this reason, Greek historiography is perhaps uniquely illustrative of how local disciplinary practices simultaneously resist and restate art history's putative status as a transcultural discipline.

There is no question that the book's intended audience is international in scope. Published in English, the volume begins with 'Art History in Greece: An Outline'. Here, Nikos Daskalothanassis provides a short introduction to the major political, cultural, and institutional forces that have shaped the discipline in that country. A key point of the essay—and one that is echoed across the following chapters—is the outsize role that the field of archaeology has played in defining the terms by which art history could (or couldn't) develop in Greece. This is not merely a case of competing methodologies, of debates over the relative value of empirical versus interpretive approaches to visual culture (as if methodological disagreements are ever entirely disinterested). The authority accorded to archaeology is wholly ideological, experienced by Greek scholars and lay audiences alike as an existential necessity for national independence. It is only with this historiography in mind that Daskalothanassis' sober pronouncement on the state of the field can be understood in the forward-looking, optimistic sense intended: 'I do not think that it is an exaggeration to assert that the cultivation of the academic discipline of art history in Greece, entrapped within the pathways of its related fields, was of an ancillary

nature until, at least, the post-dictatorship period, that is, until the beginning of the 1970s'.<sup>1</sup>

After 1974, the field began to develop as an independent discipline. Art history is increasingly a part of university curricula, graduate programs are advancing, and research centres devoted to the study of the visual arts have been established in recent years. An achievement of particular consequence for Daskalothanassis is the founding of the Association of Greek Art Historians (EEIT) in 2001. He notes with justifiable satisfaction the young organization's achievements, among them sponsorship of five national conferences. The present book is, in fact, a project of EEIT, and was prompted by the association's participation in the 2018 convening of France's Festival de l'histoire de l'art as the official guest country. It is thus appropriate that the volume's closing chapter is devoted to 'A Brief History' of EEIT, and it is there that the reader learns that Daskalothanassis is one of two past presidents of the association among the book's seven contributors. One also gleans there that a woman has not yet held that post. Women are likewise absent from the list of distinguished international scholars invited by EEIT to conduct seminars or deliver public lectures.

While questions of gender equity in the discipline or the impact of feminist art history in Greece regrettably go unaddressed, the volume does not shy away from confronting complex, sensitive, and ongoing issues of nationalism. A lengthy essay by Evgenios D. Matthiopoulos affirms the historic scope and intellectual ambitions of the volume. Based on a talk he originally presented at the first EEIT conference in 2000, the essay's title, 'Art History within National Borders', signals Matthiopoulos' interest not only in the discipline's history in Greece but in the relationship between art history and nationalist ideologies more generally.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Matthiopoulos suggests, local historiographic concerns are, in the case of Greece, inseparable from the discipline's eighteenth-century European origins and its current global operations. After all, classical Greek art served as the standard for Johann Joachim Winckelmann's aesthetic judgments just as it provided the material proof of his deterministic model of the history of art. In a way, then, a certain history of Greek visual culture was internalized by the discipline from the start. The fact that some eighteenth-century Greek scholars eagerly took up the arguments put forth in Winckelmann's 1764 *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums* points to a particular—and particularly intense—opportunity for identification, both with Winckelmann's Enlightenment intellectual endeavours and with the culture he apotheosized. With this in mind, Matthiopoulos poses what he suggests is the 'real question' for Greek art historiography: 'How was art history used in the framework

<sup>1</sup> Daskalothanassis, 'Art History in Greece: An Outline', 12.

<sup>2</sup> This essay was first published in Greek in Evgenios D. Matthiopoulos and Nicos Hadjinicolaou, eds., *I istoria tis technis stin Ellada*, Herakleion: Crete University Press, 2003, 419-75.

of the various ideological currents that were formulated, frequently divided the public, yet jointly shaped Greek intellectual life?’<sup>3</sup>

Matthiopoulos takes up the question by laying out three main tendencies in Greek art history, which has largely focused on Greek visual and material culture for reasons of disciplinary prejudice (inculcated by Winckelmann) and apparent political necessity. These tendencies—or ‘myths’ as Matthiopoulos calls them—arose after the 1821 War of Independence. The first asserted that Greek culture underwent a rebirth with the end of the Ottoman occupation, returning to the aesthetic values and forms exemplified by ancient art of the Classical period. This myth holds that Greece’s natural, authentic cultural sensibilities had been suppressed, first by Rome and then by the Ottoman Empire. Roman oppression persisted through the Middle Ages, which allowed for the aberrant Byzantine visual regime to choke out native classicism; Ottoman designs were similarly deemed alien and deleterious. Yet, Greece’s native classicism proved to be dormant rather than extinct. The ascendance of Neoclassicism in Europe at the time of liberation made possible the immediate resuscitation of ‘true’ Greek art. Contemporary artists and architects were encouraged to adopt Neoclassicism and become a ‘Pheidias the younger’, while scholars found in archaeology a means to glory in service of the new Greek state.

The proliferation of Neoclassical buildings and monuments, especially in Athens, in the early years of the new Greek state came at the cost of many Byzantine structures. So persuasive was the myth of rebirth and its attendant devaluation of Byzantine forms that the levelling of derelict medieval churches and other monuments was sometimes undertaken to make way for new buildings. Further losses resulted from the zeal of some Greek and foreign archaeologists who had little interest in the medieval artefacts that rested between them and the real Hellenic past. This negligence of Greece’s Byzantine history by nineteenth-century custodians of the country’s cultural heritage is, Matthiopoulos asserts, widely acknowledged. ‘This fiction [of cultural rebirth]...allowed, as is well known, the destruction of dozens of Byzantine churches, with the condonement—if not the connivance—of the state services’.<sup>4</sup> Even so, the destruction of Byzantine monuments by the Greeks themselves has been the subject of few sustained, scholarly studies.<sup>5</sup>

The problem with a myth of rebirth is that it first requires death. And if cultural death was possible in the recent past, then it stands to reason that it could

<sup>3</sup> Matthiopoulos, ‘Art History Within National Borders’, 19.

<sup>4</sup> Matthiopoulos, ‘Art History Within National Borders’, 33.

<sup>5</sup> Ada Hajdu cites the 2011 Ph.D. dissertation by F.K. Spachidou, ‘I Vyzantini techni ston elliniko typo tou 19ou ai’ (Aristotelian University of Thessaloniki) in ‘Pavilions of Greece, Serbia, Romania and Bulgaria at the 1900 *Exposition Universelle* in Paris’, 48-75, *Balkan Heritages: Negotiating History and Culture*, Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2015. Hajdu notes that ‘most buildings erected after Greek independence were neoclassical in style, and Byzantine vestiges were sometimes demolished in order to make room for new construction’, 51.

happen again, and soon. More reassuring for a newly liberated country (especially in the context of accelerating European nationalism) is the possibility of ethnic or cultural permanence. Thus, the concomitant emergence of a second myth in the nineteenth century, that of Greek continuity. This trend in Greek art history held fast to the satisfying idea that a national spirit is indomitable, whatever material evidence there may be to the contrary. Scientific-seeming support for this conception of cultural identity came chiefly through the writings of Hippolyte Taine (1828-93), whose amplification of philosophical Positivism put forward the idea that all forms of human behaviour are guided by the distinct but intertwined influences of inherited traits, local conditions and mores, and historical situatedness. The phrase '*race, milieu, et moment*' summarized Taine's overarching account of the apparent vagaries of cultural expression. Taine's Hellenic translator, the high-court judge and amateur archaeologist Achilleas Agathonikos, prefaced his 1882 Greek version of *Philosophie de l'art en Grèce* (1869) with the observation that, thanks to the 'proof' provided by the book, 'no one can doubt that Greece was and is the fatherland of the genius of art'.<sup>6</sup> Also enlisted in support of the myth of Greek cultural continuity was folk art. The apparent persistence of certain pre-Ottoman forms of dress, of symbols and craft techniques, and of vernacular architecture among Greeks was taken by adherents of the continuity myth as evidence of ethnic indelibility. What seemed to survive best, according to some ethnographers, were the fundamental forms of Greek visual identity. Thus, the distinctive helmets of Alexander the Great's army survive in women's folk costume in northern Greece as elaborate scarf-headaddresses and the essential form of the ancient cuirass persists as a 'belt with silver sequins'.<sup>7</sup>

While hats and belts are easily enlisted as descendants of helmets and breastplates, such facile equivalences are more difficult when it comes to tracing the aesthetic program of Hosios Loukas back to that of the Parthenon. Yet accommodating Greek medieval culture to the theory of continuity was essential for its success both as a historical argument and as a political instrument. Matthiopoulos explains how scholars went about making the case for continuity:

Byzantine monuments were raised up by Greek archaeologists...as the retort to 'Greek-slaying' European historians, in an attempt to bridge the chasm between ancient and modern Hellenism. The newly developed field of

<sup>6</sup> Matthiopoulos, 'Art History Within National Borders', 34. Matthiopoulos refers here to Hippolyte Taine, *Filosofia tis technis en Elladi*, trans. Achilleas Agathonikos, Athens: Georgios Fexis, 1879, which was first published in *Parnassus* 3, 1879, 437-39, 546-74. Taine's theory about the roles of inherited traits, contemporary conditions, and historical place for cultural production found their first coherent expression in his "Introduction" to *Histoire de la Littérature Anglaise*, Paris: Hachette, 1863-64.

<sup>7</sup> Matthiopoulos attributes these observations to Angeliki Hadjimichali (1895-1965), a collector, historian, and popularizer of Greek folk culture. Matthiopoulos, 'Art History Within National Borders', 48.

‘Greek Christianity’ (Hellenochristianismos) was established as an ideological substrate in support both of the myth of unbroken cultural ‘continuity’ and of the history of Byzantine art in Greece, while being instrumental in ‘baptizing the pagans’.<sup>8</sup>

Unsympathetic to the rhetorical gymnastics required to make this argument, Matthiopoulos scoffs at the declaration of one proponent of the continuity myth that Byzantine patterns appeared after ‘Greek meanders were interknit in cross shapes and were purified’.<sup>9</sup> Just as credulous of continuity was another scholar who claimed to see in the frescoes at Mount Athos works by the hand of a Christian Apelles.<sup>10</sup> Still others sought to attribute the Italian Renaissance wholly to Byzantine artists, arguing that it was their works that preserved the artistic traditions of Classical Greece. According to this account, ‘Raphael’s teachers were no more than copiers or imitators of the Byzantine models’.<sup>11</sup> Matthiopoulos is quick to inform his readers that not all Greek art historians succumbed to the ‘dominant ethnocentric tendency’ of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But those Greek scholars attempting to advance alternatives to the rebirth/continuity mainstream ‘would have to wait a long time to be heeded’.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Matthiopoulos, ‘Art History Within National Borders’, 40. Among the ‘Greek-slaying’ historians whom apologists for the continuity myth sought to discredit was Jakob Philipp Fallmerayer (1790-1861), whose career unfolded largely in Bavaria. Fallmerayer advanced a racist theory that the Hellenic people who inhabited Greece in antiquity had ceased to exist on the Greek mainland by the late Middle Ages and had been effectively replaced by Slavic peoples. ‘Not a single drop of real pure Hellenic blood flows in the veins of the Christian population of modern Greece’, was among Fallmerayer’s most inflammatory conclusions. Cited in Alexander A. Vasiliev, ‘The Opening Address to the First Congress of Byzantino-Slavo-Oriental Studies’, New York, 1946, 219-20. Vasiliev confirms here that Fallmerayer’s theory had been discredited but also notes warily the resurgence of interest in Fallmerayer among Soviet scholars. Racist theories—and myths of rebirth and continuity—were still being debated in 1946, when Vasiliev hopefully pronounced ‘The aim of our Congress and of Byzantino-Slavonic-Oriental studies in general is to throw bright light, among other matters, upon Byzantino-Slavonic relations and mutual influences, so that, being far off Fallmerayer’s extremes, we may elucidate the problem of and prove that Byzantino-Slavonic relations and influences are of utmost value for both countries, for Byzantium and Russia’. (221)

<sup>9</sup> Matthiopoulos, ‘Art History Within National Borders’, 40. Here, Matthiopoulos refers to an assertion by the theologian and Byzantinist Georgios D. Lampakis (1854-1914).

<sup>10</sup> Matthiopoulos, ‘Art History Within National Borders’, 40. In this instance, it is a remark by historian Spyridon Lambros (1851-1919) that Matthiopoulos cites.

<sup>11</sup> Matthiopoulos, ‘Art History Within National Borders’, 51. This bold assertion was made by the businessman and amateur historian, Demetrios Vikelas [Bikelas], *Peri Byzantinon*, London: Williams and Norgate, 1874, 108-10.

<sup>12</sup> Matthiopoulos, ‘Art History Within National Borders’, 43.

Appeals to the continuity myth grew even more emphatic after World War I. Newly gained territory was ceded back to Turkey, and the need to assert national integrity was more urgently felt. Perhaps the most visible statement of this doubling-down on the continuity myth outside Greece itself was the 1946 London exhibition, *Greek Art 3000 BC - AD 1945*.<sup>13</sup> Presented in the Royal Academy and sponsored by the National Association of Hellenes in Great Britain, the exhibition traced the 'Hellenic spirit' from its earliest manifestations in Bronze Age Cycladic sculpture to the work of contemporary Greek potters. Along with such expected exemplars of Hellenic achievement as Classical sculpture, Byzantine icons, paintings by El Greco, and works of folk art were less obvious proofs of continuity. So-called 'Faiyum portraits' produced in Egypt during the period of Roman imperial rule, for instance, were included in the exhibition as 'a bridge between Classical and Byzantine art'.<sup>14</sup>

Only political necessity could dislodge the historiographic trends of rebirth and continuity. And this eventually happened after the Second World War, with Greece's strengthening economic and military alliance with Western Europe. What gradually took hold in the decades following that war is what Matthiopoulos calls 'the myth of Europeanization'.<sup>15</sup> In this conception, Greek visual culture is part of a dynamic flow of ideas and practices from the Aegean to the Barents Sea rather than a font of superior forms. The visual culture of medieval Greece was accommodated more convincingly by this model than by the continuity theory. Byzantine art, according to the myth of Europeanization, was not an aberrant project that needed to be shoehorned into a narrative of Hellenic triumphalism but a catalyst for the movement of artistic forms throughout medieval and early modern Europe. On the face of it, Europeanization would seem to promise immunity from facile, ethnocentric interpretations based on suspect morphological resemblance of the sequined-belt-as-cuirass variety. Yet, as Matthiopoulos shows, ideology and art history are endlessly inventive companions. He describes a moment from a major public lecture on El Greco by a senior scholar under the sway of Europeanization who,

proposed for the familiar [hand] gesture of Theotokopoulos' figures...[that] "the union of the two middle fingers signified the Union of Greece and West. Greco brought to the West, with this symbolic gesture, the message of the inclusion of Greece in the European Spiritual Community."<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> The exhibition opened on 15 February 1946 and closed on 18 March of the same year. All 583 works on view came from British private and public collections. *Exhibition of Greek Art, 3000 B.C.-A.D. 1945*, London: Faber & Faber, 1946.

<sup>14</sup> Charles Seltman, "Introduction," *Exhibition of Greek Art*, n.p.

<sup>15</sup> Matthiopoulos, 'Art History Within National Borders', 63.

<sup>16</sup> Matthiopoulos, 'Art History Within National Borders', 65. This lecture was delivered in January 1960 by Angelos G. Procopiou, chair of General Art History in the School of Architecture at the National Technical University in Athens.

Matthiopoulos seems to relish with a kind of intellectual Schadenfreude such strained moments of scholarly orthodoxy. Perhaps the most astonishing of these illustrations of ideologically-driven interpretation is one proposed by Marinos Kalligas, who assumed the directorship of the National Gallery in Athens in 1949. Kalligas adhered to the myth of Greek continuity, which led him to assert 'as proof of "Greekness" the strange mysticist theory that the interior space of an Orthodox church is morphologically the inside view of a negative cast of an ancient Greek statue!'<sup>17</sup>

Matthiopoulos's bemusement gives way at times to frustration, though, and his aim is clearly not to mock the discipline to which he has devoted his intellectual and professional life. Only near the end of the essay does the cause of his sardonic tone reveal itself. 'In conclusion, I would like to point out that since the early 1990s Nationalism is on the rise forcefully in the ideological-political arena, mainly manifested as a defensive mechanism against international developments, the escalation of nationalist conflicts in the Balkans, and the increasingly tense relationship between Greece and Turkey'.<sup>18</sup> Matthiopoulos's occasional hints of sarcasm are likely a reflexive bulwark in the face of current cultural and political tendencies. Though addressed specifically to the conditions of art history in Greece, Matthiopoulos' chapter and his final note of caution are not without relevance to the current state of global art history.

Further contextualization of Marinos Kalligas's transformation of the National Gallery between 1949 and his retirement in 1971 is provided by contributor Lefteris Spyrou, whose chapter on the museum explains how its collection was remoulded into the service of the continuity myth despite the institution's internationalist origins. The National Gallery was founded in 1900 with the express intent of creating in the Greek capital a locus of European cultural modernity along with a site for the education of young artists and the edification of the general public. Its early organization emphasized its internationalist outlook. Six galleries held the collections, which were largely arranged by national or regional school. Italian, French, and Dutch and Flemish art each had their own rooms; works on paper were contained in another; 'European art' filled a fifth; and a sixth room was devoted to Greek painting. This was utterly transformed with Kalligas's arrival. Under his direction, the National Gallery took its name literally and displayed mostly Greek painting of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Other parts of the collection were deemphasized. It was, as he explained, 'a matter of national prestige', noting that 'even Yugoslavia, Bulgaria and Turkey have already well-organized National Galleries'.<sup>19</sup> By this term, Kalligas meant museums devoted to

<sup>17</sup> Matthiopoulos, 'Art History Within National Borders', 59. Marinos Kalligas proposed this theory in *I Aisthitektiki tou Horou tis Ellinikis Ekklisias ston Mesaiona* (Athens, 1946).

<sup>18</sup> Matthiopoulos, 'Art History Within National Borders', 71.

<sup>19</sup> Spyrou, 'The National Gallery's Display in the 1950s and Its Contribution towards the Formation of the History of Art in Greece and the Canon of Modern Greek Art', 80.

an unequivocally national art. It was not merely a matter of keeping up with regional rivals. What Kalligas claimed to discern in modern Greek painting was a new artistic tradition that revealed the persistence of an essential Greek aesthetic impulse. This impulse in modern painting manifested itself most clearly in the work of artists of Greek heritage who lived or pursued their training outside Greece, where they enjoyed the cultural freedom and social support necessary for the inherent traits to emerge. Greek artists whose formation took place wholly under Ottoman influence had a harder time expressing their Greek nature.

Ever since the liberation of the country, all artists, regardless of their aspiration and achievements, have had to face the problem of making their art a mirror of Greek life and character...At first they confined themselves to dealing with Greek subjects alone; later they imitated earlier Greek Techniques, and finally they no longer sought to achieve Greek expression through external means, but, starting from its fundamental elements, to reach a point where the outer forms of their art would follow accepted international modes of expression, while the work of art itself remained essentially Greek.<sup>20</sup>

The role Kalligas ascribed to the National Gallery was that of 'spiritual mirror of the nation'.<sup>21</sup>

In addition to promoting the idea of an essential 'Greekness', Kalligas's National Gallery participated in Cold War stratagems involving 'soft power' by excluding such politically suspect tendencies as socialist realism from its narrative of modern Greek art. The problem, of course, was not the style's failure to summon Greek ideals but rather its association with communism by way of official Soviet art. Socialist realism aside, Kalligas generally favoured representational art over abstraction. This prejudice is codified in Kalligas's deployment of a Wölfflinian schema whereby Greekness in art could be discerned systematically. Among the attributes of Greek sensibilities are anthropomorphism, clarity, simplicity, and proportion. Strong abstraction, Spyrou explains, was anathema to the director's vision.<sup>22</sup>

The narrative around which Kalligas oriented the collections of the National Gallery endures and, as the author of the volume's fourth chapter, Areti Adamopoulou, notes, the museum remains at 'the epicentre' of efforts by the Greek state to present a modern and thoroughly European cultural identity. But the situation in Athens (or in Thessaloniki, for that matter) cannot be taken as fully representative of the condition of Greek art history. In Cyprus, art history continues to be markedly overshadowed by archaeology and is absent from the curricula at

<sup>20</sup> Spyrou, 'The National Gallery's Display in the 1950s', 91.

<sup>21</sup> Spyrou, 'The National Gallery's Display in the 1950s', 95.

<sup>22</sup> Spyrou, 'The National Gallery's Display in the 1950s', 79.

many of the republic's universities. And, in the university departments where art history can be studied, a variation of the continuity myth adapted by Kalligas for the National Gallery tends to hold sway: research on twentieth-century Greek and Cypriot artists dominates, leaving pre-modern visual and material culture largely the domain of archaeology.

Of greater urgency for Adamopoulou is the experience of intellectual or academic disenfranchisement by art historians working in the Republic of Cyprus.

Cyprus remains divided *de facto* and not *de jure*. In theory, therefore, all discussion of issues pertinent to education in art history borders on illegitimacy. Institutions of higher learning in Northern Cyprus are, as a rule, connected to Turkey; they are termed 'illegal' by the Republic of Cyprus and the United Nations. Art history is taught in two of these institutions, in the Eastern Mediterranean University...and, sporadically, in the Near East University.<sup>23</sup>

Only after reading completely Adamopoulou's essay does the full import of its title reveal itself. 'Born of a Peripheral Modernism: Art History in Greece and Cyprus' puts into play an even more complex idea of 'periphery' than that activated by the previous chapters. What Adamopoulou observes in Cyprus is a disciplinary practice that is out of bounds: a Greek art history developing outside Greece; a humanistic field forming itself outside the usual matrix of academic standards and governance; a mode of inquiry distinguishing itself from archaeology by aligning with Eurocentric (and inherently exclusionary) conceptions of modernism. The conditions of art history in Cyprus, Adamopoulou explains, are also those of Greece, 'a discipline born of a peripheral modernism'.<sup>24</sup>

This distinctive milieu is the subject of Aris Sarafianos' provocative contribution, 'Art History in Greece Today'. The chapter sounds a counterpoint to Matthiopoulos' retrospective essay. 'We have come so far since the [first EEIT] Conference in 2000', Sarafianos notes. Yet Sarafianos's purpose is not simply to celebrate the discipline's growing prestige in Greece but to describe and account for its distinctive character. The two broad trends that he identifies in current research are perhaps unsurprising: first, a widespread engagement with European art history by Greek scholars who are well-versed in 'cutting edge' methodologies; and, second, a strong interest in Greek art of the twentieth century, analysed using the tools of social art history. Less apparent to observers outside Greece, though, are the intellectual and social impulses propelling these disciplinary currents.

Sarafianos describes the attraction to modern Greek art as 'an eccentric historical "arrangement" that is at odds with the much greater scope of art history

<sup>23</sup> Adamopoulou, 'Born of a "Peripheral" Modernism: Art History in Greece and Cyprus', 109.

<sup>24</sup> Adamopoulou, 'Born of a "Peripheral" Modernism, 110.

in other Western countries'.<sup>25</sup> He defers further analysis of this 'eccentricity' except to observe that 'This strange state of affairs can neither continue nor can it be overturned without some rigorous historical and critical investigation of the paradoxes presently besetting the narrow definition of the discipline in Greece'.<sup>26</sup> His reticence on the causes of this inclination toward the study of modern art is surprising—especially in light of the preceding chapters. Surely a major source of the allergic response to pre-modern Greek art is the resurgent nationalism noted by Matthiopoulos at the end of his chapter? The younger generation of scholars came of age during a period of hopeful internationalism; devoting themselves to the study of modern and contemporary art would ensure engagement with their global counterparts while also signalling rejection of the stark politicization of art history deployed by such predecessors as those chided by Matthiopoulos.

Assessing the ideological currents that inform the research of one's contemporaries—not to mention one's own scholarly practice—requires both reflexivity and critical distance. No one writing historiography is without blind spots. That said, Sarafianos explores with persuasive subtlety the practice of art history in Greece today. On the muted reception of visual culture studies by Greek art historians, for instance, Sarafianos provides a compelling assessment. He begins by acknowledging that the flat response in Greece differed markedly from the tumult prompted in other places by the critical challenge visual culture posed to art history's investment in the material specificity, originality, and integrity of objects. It would be tempting, Sarafianos acknowledges, to attribute this ho-hum reaction on the part of Greek scholars to a lack of 'depth of critical thinking and analysis'. But this would be mistaken. What instead tempered the reaction to visual culture was its familiarity. 'Intellectualist distance from the particular materiality of art works...[is] a special feature of Greek art history—one that is so obvious that it usually passes unnoticed'.<sup>27</sup> This observation serves as a springboard for a consideration of the 'abstract and disembodied' character of Greek art history.<sup>28</sup> Sarafianos begins by offering the hypothesis that the absence of collections of European art in Greece has rendered the discipline indifferent to the material specificity of works of art. He quickly dismisses this explanation in favour of an account that implicates instead 'the particular professional skill sets of whole generations of art historians in Greece, depending on whether they started out in philosophy, literary or philological studies, or in archaeology'.<sup>29</sup> It is ultimately an issue of 'the absence of a *habitus* of interpretive and experiential involvement with the art objects themselves'.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Sarafianos, 'Art History in Greece Today', 113.

<sup>26</sup> Sarafianos, 'Art History in Greece Today', 113.

<sup>27</sup> Sarafianos, 'Art History in Greece Today', 121.

<sup>28</sup> Sarafianos, 'Art History in Greece Today', 123.

<sup>29</sup> Sarafianos, 'Art History in Greece Today', 123.

<sup>30</sup> Sarafianos, 'Art History in Greece Today', 124.

Sarafianos' intent with 'Art History in Greece Today' is not merely to provide a critical assessment of the field but to advance a set of practices that will address pressing social concerns. Greek art historians' 'intellectualist distance' from their objects of study carries implications beyond those of interpretation. Modes of perception, he notes with reference to Jacques Rancière, are "'forms of political subjectivity'."<sup>31</sup> 'Dematerialized' or 'conceptual' habits of mind direct scholars away from issues of lived experience, including those of labour (that of the art historian as well as the artist). Most alarming, this inclination toward material detachment risks complicity with contemporary neo-colonial conditions. His final sentence may be directed to his Greek colleagues, but it is also an exhortation to the field as a whole: 'A properly organized academic community...will have to grow up and defend the field from the ravages of the now actual "deconstruction" that is attacking and encroaching upon every aspect of life today'.<sup>32</sup> With this, Sarafianos crystallizes the volume's thesis: art history has never been a disinterested discipline. And the potency of its attachments to ideologies of nationalism, fictions of ethnic and racial identity, myths of material abundance, and erasures of labour not is not merely a concern of historiography, it is also a cause for individual reflection and collective action among all art historians.

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<sup>31</sup> Sarafianos, 'Art History in Greece Today', 128. Sarafianos here refers specifically to Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. and intro. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2006) 9.

<sup>32</sup> Sarafianos, 'Art History in Greece Today', 130.