

GEORGE TOURKOVASILIS *STRANGE SWITCH*

Melas Martinos (*Strange Switch*), Akwa Ibom (*Spent*) and Radio Athènes (*The Night, Sleep*) present a retrospective survey of the multifaceted work of photographer, writer, and poet George Tourkovasilis (1944-2021), composed in three chapters.

Text by George Tourkovasilis, published by Zygos in their May – June 1980 issue:

SELF-PRESENTATION

My studies in photography – “reading” and “writing” – began in France when I was already 25 years old. A late diagnosis of an “illness” that I seem to have developed young. There must be many who suffer from the same disease: being photographers without knowing it, tormented for a lifetime by a sensitive eye left unsatisfied, all because they never chanced to take a camera in their hands and gain consciousness of the power that hides behind their gaze. This kind of thing isn’t strange in Greece, where the language of photography is merely mumbled—we can’t really say that it’s articulated. I had to find myself in Paris to learn to read and write photographically!

Photography started as a Western invention and developed into a systematic visual language with both grammar and syntax chiefly in America. There’s no purely Greek photographic tradition to speak of all that took place in Greece was the application of linguistic lessons and the impact of aesthetic currents that first appeared abroad. We’re all primarily heirs to American photography, going back to the daguerreotype portraits of the 1800s, the pictorialism of 1880 – 1914, the straight photography of Paul Strand and Stieglitz, the pure photography of Ansel Adams and Weston, right through to the last currents of surrealism, contemporary portraiture and reportage, and conceptual art. Instead of us Greeks ignoring this rich tradition in favor of a Balkan, nationalistic mediocrity, we should study the history of photography; it is the only way we’ll be able to master all that is universal in this language, and wholly harness it as a medium in service of our own personal and national expression.

Through my ten-year-long study of Western photography, I will introduce a few exercises, or “studies,” taken from the recent exhibition at the Photography Center of Athens that surveyed the first period of my work. On the street, in rooms, and even in the studio, I try to photograph people when they least expect it. These candid portraits are simultaneously a reportage, a testimony, and a record of a moment (a snapshot). And because they look absolutely balanced in space and time, they give the impression that the model had been posed, i.e. placed in the appropriate position with much care, like photographers used to do in the past. To achieve this, I search for spells of facial harmony in motion; the model moves or for a split second unwinds and relaxes—a moment of truth for the model and the photographer. Something akin to an electric spark binds them into a communion that lasts as long as a flash’s burn. There are snapshots documenting carefree characters standing on the street or indoors that seem contrived. Every right and balanced composition gives off the impression that someone placed things there; this happens because we are accustomed to the notion that reality is random and chaotic and unable to give birth to such harmonies. The “spontaneous” snapshots of Cartier-Bresson are images so full of visual cues, so articulately composed in their entirety, that they make it difficult for us to believe in the existence of a world so perfectly formed. On the other hand, Eugene Smith’s perfectly composed reportages are products of some direction. The portraits I make are reportage, and the reportage are portraits.

I am so devoted to the human face that every day I devour figures in a crowd; with an exploratory gaze, I search for hidden meanings. Even when my subject is a group of people, I prefer to sacrifice a full-body view to get a little closer to the details in a face (or a hand); to do this I use a lens – the Nikon 85mm – that is a little tele and a little normal, suitable for portraits and reportage. When I’m not photographing people in the street, magnetized by the information-brimming idiosyncrasies of faces of every age and gender, I try to capture the faces of boys that haven’t yet gone to the army—a subject wronged by photographers. Society seems more tolerant of boys at this age because, while the girls have been charged with playing the “female role” many years before them, the boys are only obliged to “manhood” after 20 when they enlist. Their anguish to escape this imminent molding is borne out in their attempts to “delay” the army and by extension their subordination to a social myth. Therefore, boys of “pre- military” age are freer and more authentic than their female friends of the same age; another manifestation of the well-known inequality. The sway between feminine and masculine – preset as a strict dilemma, rather than a self-governed integration – is a feverish, dramatic mental state to be in, that endows teenage faces with bountiful meaning. Being exceptionally sensitive to signals these faces transmit, I attempt to interpret them in different ways. In these photographs, lonesome, pensive boys sit resting their faces on their palms (a variation on Rodin’s “Thinker”). At times, they bow their heads, conceal their faces with dark shades or hats, or turn their backs to the lens. The element: “face” – with its luscious hair – forms a dialectic relationship with the element: “hand.”

Either hair covers the face leaving only hands to speak, or hands and face together assume a melancholic, meditative pose in some vacant room. In another expressionistic treatment of the same subject, I distort the face, removing its daily dress to express an opposite, equally real emotional state. The feeling is ecstatic, an explosion of unfathomable joy and optimism, the provocation of youth as it defies the grim prospect of coming of age, bestowing teenage-hood with a divine instant of eternity. Here the faces of boys are made in full motion, with rich ripples of hair caught in the wind. Avedon has given us such wonderful images of hair billowing around famous women’s heads – Loren’s, Deneuve’s, Twiggy’s – and advertising, in general, has largely used such romantic photographs of women with untied hair rolling in the wind to advertise perfumes or shampoo; images that genealogically tie back to Art Nouveau, to the Renaissance of Botticelli and Michelangelo, to the paintings of Pompeii, and finally to ancient Greece. I simply invert the subject, and at the same time respond to the Avedon impulse, and make a comment on advertising photography. I use commercial mannerisms (hair blowing in the wind) to perform a twofold inversion. An inversion of subject: the heads of boys instead of girls. An inversion of substance: instead of a cold commercial message, an expression of real emotion.

Ultimately, advertising has authored no new poses or expressions; it has simply reconfirmed, stylized, and exploited some of those already around us that painting saw first. It has, though, perfected the expressive arsenal of photography to the point that if you wanted to move further into any artistic inquiry using photography, you would have to pass through the linguistic conquests of advertising photography (carried out under the pressures of financial competition with the help of sizable financial means.) I believe the advanced language of advertising photography, void of human meaning, must be taken up again by artists to express their ideas; in other words, they must help photography stand on its own two feet, returning to the art of photography its expressive vocabulary that advertising co-opted, evacuating it from any traces of life.

Translation: Aris Mochloulis

BIOGRAPHY

Known to a wider audience as the author and illustrator of 'The Rock Diaries' [Τα Ροκ Ημερολόγια] (Odisseas, 1984), the archetypal book of the local underground music scene of the 70s and 80s in Greece, Tourkovasilis was also the personal photographer and longtime assistant of Yannis Tsarouchis, who hired him in 1969 in Paris to photograph models and scenes to use for his paintings. A graduate of the Law School of Athens, with an unfulfilled dream of directing (Costas Gavras was his mentor from 1962 to 1967), in 1968, Tourkovasilis left his postgraduate studies and ambitions of directing and moved to Paris where he settled for the next ten years.

In addition to his collaboration with Tsarouchis, Tourkovasilis worked professionally as a portrait photographer, recording Tsarouchis' models outside of work, and Greek artists at the Cité Universitaire, such as Silia Daskopoulou and Periklis Korovesis. Of particular interest are photographs he made capturing personal moments with his partners and friends, as well as a series of photographs that toy with the line between posed fashion photography and play. Tourkovasilis returned to Greece in August 1976. In the spring of 1980, the Photographic Center of Athens presented his first solo exhibition entitled 'Faces and Spaces' [Πρόσωπα και Χώροι], which kindled a years-long collaboration with Giorgos Chronas and Odos Panos Publications, for which he often wrote articles and contributed photographs. His collaboration with Chronas on the book 'Motorcycle Rites' [Τελετές Μοτοσυκλέτας] (Odisseas, 1981) proved a pivotal point in Tourkovasilis' career, seeing him compose a photographic portrait of the races between young motorcyclists in Keratsini.

Warm thanks to Tasos Gkaintatzis, Victoria Fassianou, Natasa Koliou, Marina Legaki and Kyriakos Tsiflakos for entrusting us with works from their collections.

DEDICATIONS

George Tourkovasilis has deeply touched me both as a person and as a collector. On the one hand, I have been influenced by his photographic work of unparalleled aesthetic value but also of evocative emotional weight; on the other, by his witty, articulate, as well as impactful written and spoken word; and finally, by his measured, philosophical attitude towards life. I believe that both his contemporaries, artists and not, as well as the generations that follow, have much to learn from the calm power of the legacy he has left behind.

Kyriakos Tsiflakos

Reading this passage, I think of George. I'd like to thank him for the inspiration he gave me to create and to live.

"By writing in my Diary, I discovered how to single out the most vivid moments in life. Within its pages, I wrote only what really interested me, what I felt most intensely about in every moment, while I discovered that this passion, this enthusiasm, created a tension in me that often had a negative effect on whatever work I undertook. I always had an interest in the present. I captured whatever hadn't lost its warmth and humanity, and liked to put it down with a fleeting spontaneity. In this way, I gained a love for the immediacy of emotional response to any experience, revealing to me that the power to recreate, depends, more often than not, on our emotions and less on a shrewd, critical understanding of the world around us." – Anais Nin

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Marina Legaki

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Spent / The Night, Sleep / Strange Switch
Akwa Ibom / Radio Athènes / Μελάς Μαρτίνος
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