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**THE CONCRETE REALISM OF VLASSIS CANIARIS**  
**Outline of an Artistic Strategy**

**I. Retrospect**

With "Athens (Zoro)" Caniaris painted a picture in 1956, at the beginning of his career, that in retrospect seems like a bozzetto of the large installation "Hélas Hellas", which he realized eleven years ago. What becomes clear in a comparison of the two works is the immense formal development and thematic variety that are characteristic for his oeuvre and that make it so difficult to grasp. For Caniaris not only made his own way through the aesthetic interrogations of the last decades, but always steered clear of the artistic mainstream, wherever it came in contact with his own course. Thus the solutions and answers to which Caniaris came corresponded at most with the external aspects of contemporary trends. They were always discovered and substantiated through a basic approach of his own, through a dynamic that has two mainsprings: the objective of developing and applying a comprehensive diagnostic instrument with the work of art and an unaggrieved, acute vision of social, cultural and personal asymmetries, for - if you like - pathological symptoms in the industrialized societies.

Caniaris was never interested in art as art. Far more, he was always occupied with the question to what degree art or, better, artistic work might be a means to win perceptions and make them vivid. His formal developments and discoveries never remain and end in themselves but are always examined in terms of the degree to which they are suited to make a particular content - experiences and evaluations - comprehensible, or capable of conveying them, and those are then pursued if they prove themselves productive in this sense.

Caniaris scarcely gave in to the success of his works but largely reacted skeptically to acclaim, which for him in any case always came too late and often not from the right camp. Caniaris more than once sought then to realize his conceptions with a new approach at a different location and in another context. Thus his early painterly work and the great picture series "Homage to the Walls of Athens" came about between 1956 and 1960, during his stay in Rome, where he moved after the conclusion of his studies. In Paris, where Caniaris worked in the 1960's, he pursued in a highly idiosyncratic way the dissolution of the classical pictorial concept and developed a unique language as object-maker and arranger. In Athens, where he moved for almost two years immediately after the putsch of the colonels, he could test the language - convincingly, and with great success, in an exhibition for political freedom. Differentiated, sharpened and expanded to include the disposition of rooms, Caniaris applied his medium to the examination and presentation of the situation and condition of the guest worker; the result of a two-year work phase in the first half of the 1970's in Berlin was the exhibition "Guest Worker - Foreign Worker", with which Caniaris moved from Berlin through various museums in West Germany and then to London. Finally, in 1980, in Athens once more, Caniaris summarized his experiences with the installation "Hélas Hellas" and in this great spatial picture realized the pinnacle, thus far, of his creative production.

Much like his debut as a painter, this installation provoked great attention. Nonetheless, and despite its reconstruction in Dortmund in 1983, this work too remained scarcely noticed in Western Europe. "Hélas Hellas" hereby suffered a fate similar to that of the Athens exhibition against the colonels in 1969 which Caniaris reconstructed in 1970, considerably expanded, in the Museum of Modern Art in Paris: Here as there, the absence of a specific socio-historical context proved to be a decisive

shortcoming. Shown more or less without their roots, the works could not develop their great power, remaining uncomprehended and unassessed as artistic achievements.

Caniaris was and remains an outsider - as an artist, with respect to society, no less than with respect to the community of artists; as a foreigner with an immediately comprehensible language as much as a native whose vision has been schooled by foreign sources; as a witness equally for conquerors as well as conquered, but in different ways discomfiting; as sometimes intuitive, then again purposefully unsynchronic in a time without memory and visions: The tension in which Caniaris' creation stands in relationship to recent art history results from a deep, insurmountable skepticism that the artist repeatedly felt - above all, there where he found himself with his work in the centers of artistic development. As though encouragement could destroy the work for him or deprive him of the possibility to pursue his inquiries further, Caniaris avoided affirmation from the art world - however much he was dependent on it. Thus it was originally in Berlin, where with a stipendium the D.A.A.D. enabled him to work independently, and then later in Athens, that he could realize his complex artistic demands.

The reserve, even the scruple, that Caniaris developed as an artist becomes immediately apparent on the basis of the catalogue of his works included here: It demonstrates, if regarded quantitatively, a production that has grown constantly more limited in the course of the years. But this should not be misunderstood. For in the decreasing pictorial production what is manifest is that Caniaris became increasingly cautious and with increasing frequency dispensed with materializing his concepts. Not that everything seemed to him to have been said and done already, but rather the discernment that much had already been said and shown, without having had consequences, caused him to become ever more restrained and to assume an ascetic position limited to professional observation and reflection, similar to that which Marcel Duchamp developed.

## **II. Concerning the Early Work**

After completing his studies, Caniaris commenced his career with representational, realistic painting, admittedly not from nature but from the start as a painter of inner, remembered conceptions. The most important work of this brief first phase is "Athens (Zoro)", a relatively small, simply painted picture. It has significance, above all, as outline of a comprehensive iconographic program whose individual features Caniaris developed in part only much later: From a single, realistically undefinable standpoint, one looks at a cityscape whose individual elements seem, to be sure, like stage sets that have been pushed together for a theater brochure. "Athens (Zoro)" is thus not a picture striving for an exact replica of external reality; far more, as a collage of spatially and temporally disparate phenomena, it brings precisely together various experiences of the artist in post-war Athens in a simultaneously comprehensible, scenic moment. Simplistically, three planes can be distinguished: the houses, the people (actions) and the idols. Thus one sees in a plainly symbolic way different buildings - apartment houses and factories, old and new, simple and representational structures: those of the "haves" confronted with those of the "have-nots" - and thereby acquires a sketched "picture" of the dynamic and the contradictions in Athens of the 1950's when, following the disorders of the civil war, the massive expansion and renovation of this city began in a development of fantastic speed. Within this scenic structure, on the other hand, the painting shows in an almost poster-like confrontation three scenes that allude to the political situation: in the center, a man tearing up a handbill and cattering it in the wind, to the left three policemen who, with weapons aimed, are about to force their way into the house, and in the right

foreground, on the roof of a house, two people who watch this scene. But above this realistic-real scene, like something happening on the stage, one sees an idol of the American dream factory, alluding as a motif to the mediterranean open-air cinemas: Zoro the avenger, galloping along on his horse. This film scene formulates the contradiction to which Greece saw itself exposed to in the 1950's: the intellectual and economic dominance of Western society, above all American, on which one orientated himself even though in doing so he became its victim; which brought technical and cultural progress that was nonetheless only to be had at the price of destroying the old; and which promised freedom and justice but permitted them only in the somewhat larger context which it delineated.

"Athens (Zoro)" is, to be sure, not only important as the outline of an iconographic program. Far more, this early picture sketches the basic elements of the reflexive structure that Caniaris differentiated and expanded in "Hélas Hellas" almost 25 years later: Here, as a two-dimensional painting, Caniaris already developed his complex portrait of reality through the intermeshing and overlapping of various levels of image and reality. Thus the two scenes "Arrest" and "Handbill-Tearing" that essentially represent different temporal as well as spatial moments are given simultaneity and at the same time thrust onto a stage through the observation of the "Witnesses", in so far as the viewer of the picture, for his part, observes the "Whitresses". In the different orientation of the two figures that can be detected in the process - one figure is more orientated toward the "real" theatrical event, the other more to the "fictive" film scene (which, by the way, those acting on the stage cannot observe) - the different moments that represent the "Theatrical event" and the "film scene" are now, however, drawn into correspondence: If only as film figure but therefore no less imposing, Zoro the avenger rides for the freedom of repressed Greeks - an ironic-sarcastic commentary of the artist on the political situation in his country and a farewell to the art of political protest, specifically to the demands of Socialist Realism with which Caniaris, like many of his artist colleagues, grappled - indeed, had to grapple.

If with "Athens (Zoro)" Caniaris was thus very early at the end of the path his training had indicated to him, the picture nonetheless contained in one detail the germ for the great picture-series, "Homage to the Walls of Athens...": To the left, beside the door surrounded by policemen, Caniaris many years later discovered a first, minute "wall painting".

But before it came to this sequence of pictures, Caniaris still had a distance to travel: "Toward the end of 1956 I had arrived at almost abstract memories and reconstructions of the depths of the sea - that is, at colors that reminded me of that which I missed", he writes laconically in his autobiography - and does not reveal that with these pictures he had distanced himself completely from the tradition of contemporary Greek painting. This, however, became unmistakably clear on the occasion of this first solo exhibition in Athens, at which he showed 36 art informel pictures. The strong reactions in the press as well as the public that accompanied this first presentation of non-representational art in Greece are legendary and, on the occasion of a reconstruction of the exhibition in 1990 in Athens, were documented in a book.

In retrospect, what makes Caniaris' works from this time significant, however, also in context of international art informel, is the fact that he never entirely broke away from notions of content but, on the contrary, tested through informel a possibility to arrive at something behind the external pictorial realities. A key to this approach is in the pictures "The Catastrophe of Marcinelle", in which Caniaris, reflecting on the mining accident, found a concrete ground for giving up the realistic manner to painting. The transition is made particularly clear by work 57/8a, which as if an image of an icision

on the upper edge of the picture, still barely manages to make the surface of the earth recognizable.

However this picture series was valued at the time and may be valued afterwards, for Caniaris at least, even before the successful exhibition in Athens, the further development of this approach was no longer possible. In Rome he had seen works by Jackson Pollock and immediately understood that he would never catch up with the American. In this situation Caniaris experienced the asynchronism that would later cause him frequent concern, for while he regarded his previous work as no longer relevant and was seeking for a new approach, the public and the critics for the first time and with great resistance accepted that which for him was already passé as something new. "I nonetheless carried on", Caniaris wrote "and at the end of 1958 arrived at a surface on which the paint in larger quantities formed a relief".

### **III. The Wall-Pictures - Concrete Realism**

The term Concrete Realism was developed approximately ten years ago in a discussion about the works of Caniaris that Max Imdahl and I conducted. The first autobiography of the artist, included in the volume but unknown to us at the time, confirms, if only retrospectively, that this term was aptly chosen: There Caniaris describes what, with respect to contemporary art theories, almost equals the squaring of the circle. For realistic and Concrete Art were then as now not only competing concepts but mutually exclusive ones - antithetical positions, above all, with respect to the question whether art still has a representational function at all - that is whether it, in whatever manner, can vouch for something literal or should only be produced as itself.

The essential characteristic of Concrete Art is, according to its own conception of itself, that it represents or means nothing that it is not: In Concrete Art neither the material and its form are embodiments of a particular idea which surpasses, one way or another, that which, de facto, the material and its form are; nor does there exist in Concrete Art - at any rate, in the radical version - a principal indifference in the relationship between form and material; far more, in radical Concrete Art material and form arrive at an indivisible unity in as much as the form proves itself an characteristic of the material and the material a concretizing of the form. Works of Concrete Art thus evade the recurring recognition based on the application of terminology. For they denote nothing that could be specified outside themselves. Works of Concrete Art demand instead a non-connotative reflection and gain imaginative value to the degree the viewer is successful in realizing anew this experience as such.

From the point of view of Concrete Art all - and whatever - representational artistic methods therefore operate in the "as if" category, for with them there is a fundamental discrepancy between material and form, between pictorial matter and picture or - expressed in terms of semiotic theory - between the sign and the signified. Therefore, from the point of view of Concrete Art, all representational art is only occupied with the appearances of reality, whereas Concrete Art, according to its own selfconception, truly works with and within reality.

In contrast, seen here from the point of view of representational and, above all, of realistic art, the Concrete appears to be the last creation, so to speak, of idealism, of the prototype of l'art pour l'art, since every sort of reference to social reality is missing. Consequently, in opposition to the Concrete, realistic art therefore lays claim to bringing reality in fact to contemplation, be it as consternation, the naming of

passions and opponents, as the representation of social conditions, or as the contriving of alternatives with a view toward a total perspective.<sup>1</sup>

Realistic art comprehends itself as a method "that treats the stuff of experience to arrive at the inherent patterns of objective reality, as the deeper-lying, concealed, mediating, not immediately comprehensible correlations of social reality" (Georg Lucàcs, 1938). To that end it makes use of the most varied artistic forms of representation and techniques: For realistic art, reality seems presentable, and only from a particular objective, "solely in approximations of details or in concentrations and combinations, in exaggerations and metaphors that do not mirror reality but translate into that which is comprehensible, sondory forms which in turn assume the character of the real."<sup>2</sup> Hence Bert Brecht's famous definition of realism reads: "Realistic means exposing society's causality complex / unmasking the ruling viewpoint as that of the rulers / writing from the point of view of the class which has at its disposal the broadest solutions for the most urgent problems in which society finds itself / emphasizing the moment of development / making possible the concrete and the process of abstracting."<sup>3</sup>

These intimations should suffice to make clear that Concrete and realistic Art share merely the claim of doing justice to reality, but in its realization develop very different, even mutually exclusive strategies that develop from completely dissimilar notions about the relationship between art and reality. In Concrete Art the work of art does not substitute for reality but is exhibited as part of reality. Thereby, Concrete Art aims at evoking in the viewer real experience that as a paradigmatic lesson should enter into the experiencing of reality. Concrete Art attempts to guarantee actual experience in terms of the work of art by putting the work of art as nature - one could also say as the thing itself - before our eyes. The realistic method, on the other hand, aims at bringing to light the nature of things - in other words, precisely that which may evade the immediately experienced. The realistic method presumes that that which we perceive of reality is only its appearance and seeks to make its true nature comprehensible by actualizing the appearance as appearance. Thus, in realistic art one seeks to produce reality in the work of art and not, as in the Concrete, reality conceived as art(work).

Without elaborating further about where the oppositions between Concrete Art and realistic art in particular arise, it can be recorded at this point that both strategies - each in its own way - are idealistic, in at least one respect: Concrete Art by idealizing the viewer, by not comprehending him as an historic subject with particular, limited experiences, skills and interests, realistic art by negating the contradiction that the reality in a work of art should be scrutinized, that this for its own part cannot be scrutinized and that it should nonetheless prompt the viewer to a different practice. There, at the same time, is a sketch of where the possibility of a fusion between these two artistic approaches lays, above all: in the conception of the viewer as a social as well as an autonomous subject.

That realistic art can prompt concrete experience and tangible experiencing is a known platitude: Trompe l'oeil, that appearance so perfectly integrated into reality - the painted door, for example, has this effect. To cite a contemporary example, something similar radiates from the figures of Duane Hanson. They are so closely approximated to the external appearance of people that it requires some effort to perceive them as figures and not as people. However, the sense of Hanson's sculptures, one can presume, does not consist in producing a trompe l'oeil - to make the outer appearance

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Klaus Herding, Realismus - eine Frage des Ziels, in: Als guter Realist muß ich alles erfinden, Internationaler Realismus Heute, exhibition catalogue. Hamburg/Karlsruhe, 1979. pp. 20 f.

<sup>2</sup> Uwe M. Schneede, Als guter Realist muß ich alles erfinden, idem. p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> Bertolt Brecht, Über Realismus (About Realism). Frankfurt, 1971. p. 70

so perfect that the viewer is tricked. Far more, these works are calculated to give the viewer a shock that should set in motion a reflecting over the relationship between the image and that which is portrayed. If one does not want to deny entirely that such a reflection can arise - it is probable that the viewer ask how and not why the illusion was created - it remains to be noted that Hanson's figures can only prompt reflection about art's claim to reality - not, however, about the reality represented. For the reality, at least the external, seems not be made a problem, but is completely swallowed up by them.

This functions differently in the case of the "Flag Pictures" of Jasper Johns. One can note here that realistic and Concrete Art merge or can at least become so intertwined that between the image and that which is portrayed an "identity crises" can be diagnosed. According to Max Imdahl, it results from the fact "that on contemplation of the 'Flag-picture' a structurally neutral understanding of the function of the flag, as it corresponds to the experience of a commonplace object, as well as a structurally differentiated understanding, as it corresponds to the experience of a phenomenon in Concrete Art, is thematically incorporated", and therefore "imparis the phenomenal, apparent identity of flag and concrete image, both the identity of the flag with the flag and the identity of the picture with the image."<sup>4</sup> It should be noted, however, that this identity crises diagnosed by Imdahl can only develop with things like a flag. For what is peculiar to the flag consists in the fact that its structure is phenomenally well known, that it is more or less external and cannot be separated from its appearance; in addition, the flag is used not as material but as appearance, and therefore the comprehension of function occurs phenomenally. (That the "Flag-pictures" were indeed a stroke of luck is demonstrated by John's abortive attempt to transfer the problem developed here to three-dimensional objects, his "sculptmetals". For with these the functional identity between the representation and the represented (sculpture and actual artifact) was no longer a given).

John's "Flag-pictures" are cited here as an important theoretical point of reference, even if a retrospective one and one not observed by Caniaris. For Caniaris' picture series "Homage to the Walls of Athens...", created in 1959, turns the problem under discussion in a completely different direction: "On pieces of sacking and wax I wrote with red, blue and green colors slogans similar to those one found on the walls of Athens during the time of occupation. I covered this with paper of cloth saturated with plaster... and wrote further slogans over them, made cuts in part of the top layer, thus destroying the new slogans and revealing something of the old. That proceeded so long until, in my judgment, the work was laden with so many memories and lives as this imitation of reality was capable of supporting" (Autobiography). Thus the painting style in Caniaris' pictures, that proclaim their identity as concrete paintings and as pictures, does not lead, as with Johns, to the questioning of that which is portrayed but, on the contrary, to its elucidation. Caniaris' wall-pictures have concrete effect as *painting* - precisely the effect of the slogan-smearred walls of Athens, and at the same time are realistic, because they reflect as *pictures*, using the example of the Athenian walls, the political conflicts in Greece (occasioned by the Italian-German occupation and then the civil war). There of course remains to be noted that, as with the "Flag-pictures", here the particular achievement of these paintings is also based on the peculiarity of the pictorial subject - its essentially phenomenal structure - which they, however, utilize in a decisively different manner. For it is demonstrated in "Homage to the Walls of Athens..." that the socially given - here flags or walls smearred with slogans - can not only be called into question through autonomous artistic action in the sense of Concrete Art - but can be simultaneously crystalized. In the words of Caniaris: "My intervention was a real action, to create a concrete thing. The realism comprised not just the finished work, but also the process of creation".

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<sup>4</sup> Max Imdahl, "Is it a Flag or is it a Painting? in: Wallraf-Richartz Jahrbuch, XXXI. Cologne, 1969, pp. 225 ff.

#### **IV. Caniaris' Dissolution of the Picture and the "Works Concerning the Economic Miracle"**

In wall-picture 59/20 Caniaris for the first time moved beyond the frame of the picture - two pieces of wood attached in an improvised way to the left of the stretcher continue the inner structure of the picture outside the frame by serving both as its support and its material embodiment - and from now on the artist was occupied with seeking a new basis from which he could operate. Like many artist colleagues at this time, Caniaris experimented with different materials and techniques to extend and define more precisely his pictorial means. Unlike the results of many of his contemporaries, Caniaris' works from this phase nonetheless maintained (until today) their improvised-tentative character, thus remaining truly recognizable as experiments and thus making evident, for all the completeness and formal confidence they proclaim, that they were a step along the way and not the objective of the artistic effort.

Still within the context of the wall-pictures, Caniaris next arrived at monochrome white surfaces that remained structured within themselves and assumed the character of reliefs. In another experimental series, Caniaris was occupied with the extension of the interior structure of the picture beyond the body of the picture: Typical for this approach are the works that, through iron rods mounted in the surface - from the side, from above or from below - thus function only as base-points or points of intersection for dynamic vectors. A third experimental series was dedicated to the dissolution of the physical body of the picture into a formation within the room. Here Caniaris broke down the normative relationship between the frame and the canvas stretched over it, opened the picture plane by cutting a "window" into it or draping the canvas on it and, finally, found a new picture support in wire mesh.

As an unassuming and neutral picture support that without a frame was stable in itself, of any desirable size, capable of being formed from the three-dimensional to the sculptural and yet still diaphanous - for Caniaris the simply ideal means to realize his conceptions. At first nailed to the stretcher together with other materials, then used in place of canvas as a pictorial support, finally as a freely formed structure a constituent element of the sculptures, wire mesh - or better: Caniaris' handling of wire mesh - became a significant sign of his emancipation as a painter. Canvas could be drawn together on the wire mesh, become an object, and could be replaced (first in 1961) by fabric and articles of clothing. Then the mesh was bent to a sculptural form, as support and material for wall-objects, and finally to proper sculptures: Wire mesh and bent metal rods gave Caniaris the technical and formal possibility to combine whatever materials he chose - found objects as well as canvas and paint - and to accommodate them in sculptures or objects.

It is typical for Caniaris that he always referred his formal discoveries back to the question of what he could thematically formulate with the new resources. And thus his technical-formal development proceeded apace with the search for a new theme, which he hoped to find in Paris.

One must keep this in mind when approaching the next group of works, which Caniaris realized in 1962-63, certainly under the influence of the *Nouveaux Réalistes* but in increasing opposition to this group - indeed, as criticism of their artistic approach: the "Works Concerning the Economic Miracle".

These works consisted primarily of found materials, above all articles of clothing which Caniaris wrought, with the help of the newly found technical medium, into

threedimensional objects and life-sized figures. While the *Nouveau Réalistes*, true to their second manifesto, regarded "the world as a painting, as the great fundamental work whose fragments, full of comprehensive significance, (they wished) to appropriate for themselves", in the hope that "the real, in the most various aspects of its expressively laden totality" would reveal itself (Paris, 1961). Hence, while they attempted through euphoric consumption to capture Kandinsky's "great Real", Caniaris saw through the naiveté of this concept and occupied himself with the means that quicken the intoxication of consumption: was active as disassembler and anti-decorator - what one would describe today as a deconstructivist. Materials, clothing, accessories, once offered and purchased as *dernier cri*, now no longer so new and chic and somewhat deformed by use, are brought - lovingly, one might say - with the help of wire frameworks, distemper, glue and pins - into those forms from which their owners had once hoped for protection and a better appearance. In the exhibition "Shop", organized in 1963 by a Brussels gallery, there resulted from this approach a confrontation with the consumer-system in that the works were shown in context and, according to all the rules of the window-dresser's art, were presented like a "final offer".

Important about these works is that Caniaris, unlike the *Nouveaux Réalistes*, did not rely on the effect of things, did not, as they did, simply withdraw their practical use and aestheticize them, through various isolation techniques, but - in a true development of Marcel Duchamp's concept of the *ready-made*, to which the *Nouveaux Réalistes* referred - used the aesthetic functions of the things artistically. Taking the clothing as an example, his work aimed at demonstrating the functioning of aesthetic utility-promises, the mechanisms of the consumer-goods aesthetic, by precisely reconstructing with clothing their function to create a beautiful appearance. Caniaris thereby overcame the problems on which Johns foundered with his "sculptmetals" and which is visible in exemplary manner in Hanson's figures. For in these works he did not equate form and function of form: Clothing is material brought into a particular form; its function only becomes clear through practical use; should clothing be shown separated from function - for example, dropped on the floor - it appears as material in coincidental form, or at least a form from which evident conclusions about its function cannot be made. If to this extent there therefore exists in the case of clothing a principal difference between form and material, so the significance of the consumer-goods aesthetic consists in the fact that with its techniques this difference can be selectively suspended, the function of form and material can be a way of pulling the wool over one's eyes. In that Caniaris, however, applied the techniques of the consumer-goods aesthetic to worn-out clothing, not only were these techniques called into question, but the true qualities of the articles of clothing - their trifling quality and their shabby state - came to view.

To be sure, despite the recognition bestowed on him through various exhibitions in Paris and Brussels, Caniaris had soon given up the hope of being able to accomplish something with his work. "It is a joke to want to do battle with the supermarket. I have nothing against canned soup. On the contrary. But it is tragic - at least for the persons concerned - that we mean canned soup but call it *belle cuisine*", he wrote in his autobiography, and began his search anew.

An important phase in this connection was the exhibition in the Teatro della Fenice in Venice, where Caniaris for the first time, if only because of an organizational blunder, was able to create a proper environment, a room.

## V. Concrete Psychology and Psychological Realism

For the Wall Pictures as for the "Works Concerning the Economic Miracle" it should be noted that as an artist Caniaris reacted to that which was given in each case and created his work out of the situation and with the respectively given media. Entirely a part of the reality in which he found himself and that he moulded, he never placed himself in a meta-standpoint but consciously subjected himself and his work to the given conditions. Caniaris was thus always insider and outsider in equal measure, the classical bordercrosser. For wherever he became engaged with a situation, a phenomenon or even just materials, he was not only concerned to preserve their particular character and, where possible, to foster them, but attempted with all his means to hinder their being functionalized or exploited for the artistic process.

Caniaris developed a deep love for things. But it was never anecdotally colored. Far more, he saw in things concretizations of qualities, wishes and weaknesses of their original owners, unknown to him, and attempted to reconstruct what he recognized about them themselves. Not as freely disposable *objet trouvé* but as trace, as vestige: Caniaris preserved his found objects, defined in one way or another by someone else through particular use and to that extent conveying an obligation, as testimony to a personal history, in order to let them "speak" with each other at some time in one of his works.

The perfection of the artistic means that Caniaris had achieved at the beginning of the 1960's was the prerequisite for the fact that he could develop with found objects a reflection of psychic conditions. He acquired access to them, above all, through the analysis of posture, through which the inner feeling of a person can find expression and stamp the way of using an article of clothing: In subtle attempts Caniaris draped the found objects so long over simple constructions of iron and wire mesh until he had coaxed from them their intrinsic history, legible in wrinkles, wear and tear, and other traces, and could virtually reconstruct the posture of their support as immaterial sculpture. Comparable to the psychoanalytical strategy, which is also not concerned with individuality but with deeper-lying, superindividual structures of people's inner organization, Caniaris' efforts were not aimed at individual histories but at collectively formed characters, at elemental forms of interpersonal communication or at typical attitudes and postures. Thus his constructions with clothing, above all, apart from the polemic-ironic aspect as criticism of the economic miracle, are concrete reconstructions from and with particular material, but as such bring realistic "images" to light, insights of a fundamental nature for which the concrete artifacts are merely a vessel.

To phrase it with an old-fashioned term, Caniaris' sculptures and objects bring the soul of things to view: Caniaris is the puppeteer about whom Heinrich von Kleist in his famous text questioned a fictional counterpart "If he believed the mechanic who governed the puppets were himself a dancer, or at least must have a sense of the beautiful in the dance?" And as answer received: "That when an enterprise, from the mechanical side, be slight, it follows not that it could be performed entirely without sensitivity. The line which the focal point has to describe would, to be sure, be simple and, as he believed, in most cases straight. (...) On the other hand, from another side this line would be something very secretive. For it would be nothing other than the course of the soul of the dancer; and he would doubt that it could be found otherwise than thereby that the mechanic places himself in the focal point of the puppet - i.e., dances."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Heinrich von Kleist, Über das Marionettentheater (Concerning the Puppet Theater), in: Collected Works. Munich, 1967.

The sureness and the precision that Caniaris developed in dealing with things were the basic for the success he had in 1969 with his extremely courageous exhibition against the colonels in Athens. Caniaris placed his resources at the disposal of the organization for political resistance, he planned the agitation and aimed with his action at the mobilization of people. In this process he was concerned, above all, for the application, not for the development of his artistic methods and insights: "The idea of people fixed in plaster goes back to the years 1963-64. The works that came about in 1969 express a particular state of being put in plaster that everyone in Greece had to bear after the military putsch," Caniaris writes in his autobiography, and: "The red carnation is the flower of struggle. Precisely for this reason, it was selected and employed".

Even if in retrospect Caniaris stresses the political-actionist character of this exhibition and holds it for less significant from an artistic point of view, it nonetheless still contained an important moment in the artistic respect, as well, that Caniaris could admittedly develop only later. For with the red carnation, a collectively anchored symbol in Greece, especially after the death of Bakujiannis, Caniaris succeeded with his language in gaining a connection to the collective iconography, for the first time found access to that reservoir of historical models, myths and symbols.

A representative example for the comprehensive artistic means and complex expressive possibilities that were at Caniaris' disposal at the beginning of the 1970's is the "Roller Skater" from the work-group "Guest Worker-Foreign Worker" that was created in Berlin, beginning in 1973.

One is tempted to understand this life-sized figure as allegory, and indeed, many of its elements can be interpreted allegorically. Understood in this way, in allusion to historic antecedents, it presented a reversal of the *Hermes/Mercury* topos: *Hermes/Mercury* does not appear here as a beautiful, naked youth decked out with winged shoes and staff but as a scarecrow, warmly dressed and capable of being pushed across a limited field like a chess figure: What is shown is consequently the image of a mute, unassuming knight, available any time and everywhere, according to the strategies of capital (whereby - as *pointe* - comes the fact that *Hermes* in Greece was regarded as the god of petty thieves and vagabonds and could thus, in modern terms, be the god of the "guest-workers"). But however logical this or a similar interpretation may sound, at the decisive moment: With respect to reality, such a mere allegorical interpretation falls short of the mark. For it remains an open question whose preconception of the "guest worker" is shown here: that of those who employ the "guest workers" or those who labor as "guest workers".

The sense of the "Roller Skater" consists in keeping a question such as this one open. It is, in any case, a false question; for in it is manifested the attempt to comprehend reality through clichéd conceptions. Caniaris confronts this attempt by concretizing an unclichéd conception: makes visible to us as "Roller Skater", in concrete form, the stuff from which we and the others form our conceptions. Differently phrased: Caniaris shows illusion as illusion by visualizing it concretely as reality. Basically, the "Roller Skater" owes something to the same dialectic application of affirmation techniques with which Caniaris could permit the artificiality of the economic miracle to unmask itself on the basis and through the example of articles of clothing. Only that here he included far more - materials, conceptions, myths, symbols and an inner attitude - in the concrete treatment. And however contradictory these materials are, so contradictory is the "Roller Skater", as well. He is literally composed of everything: of that little bit that the "guest workers" in West Europe had brought with them, whether a suitcase or a memory, and that for which they hoped; the result of an attempt to formulate truth and hope from trash - a concrete utopia in the Blochian sense. Thus the "Roller Skater", like other pieces from this work-group, is, correctly understood, a

mental sculpture. Its point of reference is not the material reality; far more, as a concrete object it transcends the reality of conceptions that determine the reality of the "guest worker".

## VI. "Hélas Hellas"

In 1980, after two years of preparation, Caniaris showed his great installation "Hélas Hellas" in an abandoned factory, the *Technochoros-Bernier*, in Athens. In this installation Caniaris drew together all of his experiences as artist and traveler: "Hélas Hellas" was not a retrospective in the usual sense that linear development was traced but a spatial construction which was structured through the revival and reflection of earlier work phases.

"Hélas Hellas" was a construction in two rooms, a small anteroom and a very large main room whose walls Caniaris, picking up on the experiences of the "Wall-Pictures" of 1959, had partially painted. In these two rooms Caniaris showed approximately forty figures that, singly or composed into groups, were installed in the room in the form of the stations of the cross; above these figures and thereby above the heads of the viewers was situated a "painting" of lengths of colored material and pieces of laundry that Caniaris had hung on clotheslines throughout the entire room; and even above that stood or sat - sometimes very high up, on ledges or on the pillars - further figures, which Caniaris termed "Whitesses", who through their posture and orientation made reference to the happenings in the room below. "Hélas Hellas" was thus a room-picture that could be entered by the visitors and that surrounded them like reality - that is, in a ratio of one-to-one. This corporeal aspect of the construction was reinforced on the occasion of the opening, during which sheep were roasted on two grills in the main room so that a strong smell was produced that immaterially united the visitors to that which Caniaris produced.

"Hélas Hellas" was entered through the anteroom, in which one first encountered the "Cocktail Group" and then, just within the main room, the "Artist" before a blank canvas. To the left of the main room one then saw the "Seller of Lottery Tickets", two "Witnesses" and, high above on the wall, a "Saint (St. George)". Following this one arrived at a scaffold with the group of figures "Activists" and then at the wall opposite the entrance, with the group "Uriners". As the next station followed the "Artist" and the "Passerby" and finally, after the "Man Pulling a Clothesline", the group of "Dropouts".

Viewed iconographically, "Hélas Hellas" is a reflection about political attitudes - to be seen are several fundamental points of view: actionism, escapism, the fellow-traveler mentality and that bearing witness - and a reflection about the role of the artist in a social context. Caniaris developed this program as a reflexive structure in space that, consciously alluding to Velasquez's "Las Meninas", makes the viewer a constitutive element of the whole. "Hélas Hellas" is a rhetorical architecture, as cosmos of variously overlaid relationships in which a viewer's way of behavior is integrated and, furthermore, he himself compelled to self-reflection.

For the understanding of the unique structure of "Hélas Hellas" Erving Goffman's theory of "Frame Analysis"<sup>6</sup> is helpful. In this theory - that the frame within which perception takes place determines the structure of the perception - Goffman also made his fundamental thesis explicit with reference to the "theatrical frame" and thereby, exemplarily, visualized it in the relationship between applause and laughter:

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<sup>6</sup> Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis, An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. New York, San Francisco, London 1974

Applause can be produced by theater-goers only as public and always applies to the acting achievement; it is therefore "officially" registered by the actors only as performers - not, however, by the actors as figures in the sense of the event presented. In contrast, theater-goers can laugh both as public and as spectator. As public they laugh, for example, over an unsuccessful acting achievement and thereby take for granted that the actors do not "officially" register this reaction - that is, overplay as figures at every chance. Should the theater-goers, on the other hand, laugh about a scenic situation or a figure being presented, they thus react as spectators and accept it if the actors hear this laughter not as figures but as performers and occasionally even interrupt their performance to allow room for such a reaction. That means, however, that the "theatrical frame" consists of at least two different frames - a real one (actor-public) and an illusionistic one (figure-spectator); it draws its characteristic effect from the different forms of the transcription of the one in the other and also from the ability of the participants always to differentiate anew between these transcriptions.

Caniaris' installation "Hélas Hellas" is far more complicated than Goffman's theater model. For in it numerous frames can be distinguished that simultaneously set up interferences and form a variously self-reflexive context which the visitor cannot observe without himself becoming part of it: First, the installation is shown as the exhibition of an exhibition. The figures in the entrance hall ("Cocktail Group") point to that; they function in the role of the public, to be sure, in so far as they stand within the exhibition, however are not shown as spectators but are amusing themselves. Secondly, that which can be seen from the viewpoint of this group ("Public") behind the "Artist" figure in the large room appears to be that which should be artistically transformed - that is, "reality". The "Artist" figure creates this frame because it is placed in direct proximity to the entrance situation in the large room and is oriented toward the "Public". Thirdly, however, everything to be seen behind the figure of the "Artist" in the large room can be interpreted as pictorial content. This framing is due to the isolated position of the "Artist" figure as well as the strangely dead relationship between it and the "unpainted canvas", whose neutral orientation, furthermore, is the prerequisite for the shifting relationship. In the large hall itself there are three frames to be distinguished: the level on which the viewer moves, as on the street, and is confronted with situation and protagonists of public life; above that, as second level, the "heaven" of flags and laundry, suspended from clotheslines; finally the "kingdom" of the "Saints" that as "Witnesses" can be made out above the "heaven" on pedestals or ledges. Direct connections and intersections between these levels/frames are present, for example, in the figure occupied with the clothesline or with the "Saints" who gaze down at the events on the ground with its "real" situations, or the connections are also formulated through the fact that these situations have the character of stations of the cross. From the point of view of the "Spectators" who look down into the room from a gallery on the end wall, however, everything that happens in the room (including the figure of the "Artist") appears from another angle - namely, as "reality", and only the "Public" in the entrance area has another status. Finally, it must be noted that everything described thus far is part of the installation, the result of artistic effort and, as such, has a quite different status, in turn, than that of the actual visitor can be. Yet here, too, the frames create interferences and compel the determination of position. For the (actual) viewers move on the same level on which the figures "Public", "Artist", "Actionists", "Dropouts" etc. stand and enter into the same relationship with the "heaven" and the "kingdom of mythological figures" as the figures on the level of "real" situations. Thus the visitor is virtually stripped of his role as visitor and himself made a part of that which is presented, a part of the work of art.

"Hélas Hellas" transposes the viewer into a concrete utopia. And, to be more precise, on the one hand because everything shown - the figures and groups of figures, the emblems and symbols, the slogans and postures: reality, conceptions and values,

past, present, and that which determines the future - is put on view while maintaining the respective individual worth and the respective relationship that exist, is in this way made equal and to an equal degree related to the viewer. Thus the viewer is transposed into a status that in life is reserved for the gods: He receives freedom in the face of time and space and can wander back and forth between different worlds, the material as well as the immaterial. Secondly, however, Caniaris' installation has the character of a concrete utopia because it compels the visitor to his own transcendence. For since he is made a part of the work of art, he is exempted from his day-to-day considerations - similar to a dream or an experimental situation - but on the other hand, his reaction to the situation shown is virtually provoked. Because in the installation all essential reactions, however, are already formulated, the visitor can scarcely behave any longer in a naive way and is thus prompted to self-reflection. Nevertheless, in this status the viewer takes exactly the role that Caniaris assigns the artist: Just as in "Hélas Hellas" the perspective view of a total situation is abandoned - this was still decisive for the picture "Athens (Zoro)" - and instead individually determined attitudes about individual situations within the total situation are made possible, in this work Caniaris also dissolves the hierarchical relationship between artist and viewer. Because for him it is a question of working out that the constitution of the artwork as artwork is dependent on both, the artist and the viewer. In Caniaris' words: "I accept it if my works are not immediately regarded as works of art. It is left to the viewer to find himself prepared, without judging, to see and to comprehend something more. In my work I do not make reference to aesthetic aspects. Should they be present they could only, in my view, contribute to a more comprehensive understanding. Perception leads to an image that can help us, in one way or another, to discover what is present - without a final reason and not as something given by god but as something changeable and mortal like ourselves. If we accept that perception is the basis of approximation and creativity, its result can possibly - but only possibly - be something which can be termed a work of art."

Translated by David Galloway

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