



## When the Periphery Laughs

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Uroš Čvoro and Chrisoula Lionis

When the Periphery Laughs

### **When the Periphery Laughs: Humor and Locality in Contemporary Art from Greece and Bosnia and Herzegovina**

Uroš Čvoro and Chrisoula Lionis

**ABSTRACT:** This article examines the use of humour in contemporary art from two nations understood as “peripheral” states within Europe: Greece and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). Focusing on the concepts of “locality” and “visibility,” this article makes clear the way artists from both nations are framed as local narrators with a “geopolitical burden.” This burden entails the responsibility to represent national histories and trauma, often leading to a reading of art practice as over-determined through the prism of local representation and national identity. Focusing upon the work of two artists from both regions that are highly visible on the international art circuit (Stefanos Tsivopoulos and Mladen Miljanović), this article investigates the way that humour in contemporary art mediates this burden by establishing a local identity “code,” which serves to mobilize anti-nationalist politics, and problematize external normative perceptions of regions in “crisis.” In so doing, this article aims to demonstrate how humour harnesses a performance of marginality to undermine stereotypes of life under crisis, whilst offering alternative views both of each nation’s past, and its way forward into the future.

**KEYWORDS:** humor, crisis, contemporary art, Greece, Bosnia and Herzegovina

“A Greek and a Turk were sitting at a party. Someone told a Turkish joke and the Greek guy got offended. The Greek guy walked up to the Turk and asked him, ‘Don’t you get offended when you hear these Turkish jokes?’ The Turk replied, ‘For you they are jokes, for us they are memories.’”

“I think therefore I am, says a Bosnian. Then disappears without a trace.”

- Jokes from the website *Europe is Not Dead*

In spite of the gravity of its name, the website Europe is Not Dead commits itself to chronicling seemingly innocuous content—inter-ethnic jokes emerging from each nation within Europe (Seignovert). Despite claiming to represent a form of inter-European affection (described as “brotherly teasing”), the most striking aspect of the website is the way in which it operates as a trove of historical and contemporary conflicts, representing a “narcissism of minor differences” (Ignatieff 1999: 37–40).

For instance, nations most likely to ridicule Bosnians are Croatia, Slovenia and

Montenegro, and the nations most likely to take aim at Greeks are Albania, Macedonia and Turkey. Further still, both Greece and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) are over-represented on the map, and thus receive above and beyond their fair share of “brotherly” ridicule.

We open our analysis of humour in contemporary art here by considering Europe is not Dead for two reasons: firstly, the website’s excessive emphasis upon Bosnian and Greek “brothers” signifies an ideological positioning of Bosnia and Greece as the internal Other of Europe: simultaneously “inside” and “outside.” Secondly, this website is an example which makes clear a lingering naïve association that links humor with happiness or a “positive attitude,” thus representing the belief that laughter stands opposed to the “rigid fanaticism” of ideology (Zupančič 2008: 217). This approach to humor is a reflection of what Sara Ahmed describes as the “promise of happiness,” where happiness is more than an individual psychological attribute, and is understood as the moral imperative to “restore” the normative family, community or nation (Ahmed 2010: 229). Applying this framework of humor to Europe is not Dead we expose the belief that content drawn from decades of collective trauma is by virtue of its ability to elicit laughter a measure of cultural and social cohesion and “solidarity” (Žižek 2002: 203) as representing an inherently ideological position. The link between the “promise of happiness” and humour within the contemporary European context takes on particular importance in a political climate where multiple ideological positions are founded on the concept of “restoration.” Today the fault lines of European “solidarity” are resoundingly linked to an idea of “restoration”: from Brexit to the powerful resurgence of forms of populist nationalisms (Čvoro 2014: 3) as personified by the rise of Marie La Pen or Geert Wilders, to the rise of Golden Dawn and of anti-austerity movements in Greece,

and nationalist-driven denial / revisionism of genocide and violence of the nineties in BiH (and across the region of Former Yugoslavia).

In this article we focus on humour generated through contemporary art from two nations understood as “peripheral” states within Europe—Bosnia and Greece. These nations are characterized as peripheral as a result of their recent histories (whether “post-conflict” in the case of Bosnia or austerity in Greece), and because they have been framed as the symbolic spatio-temporal margins of Europe: simultaneously inside and outside. Here we find it useful to draw upon Vassos Argyrou’s characterization (applied originally to Greece & Cyprus but certainly applicable to Bosnia) that this area has always been denied a sense of being wholly European but also refused the classification of unequivocally oriental (Argyrou 2016). This also recalls Maria Todorova’s Saidian inspired critique of the way in which the “Balkans” are described as an in-between “incomplete self” of Europe: semi-civilised, semi-oriental, semi-colonial (Todorova, 2009:17). These areas have thus repeatedly been asked, as Argyrou explains, to perform a number of roles: “what Europe was (uncivilized), could have been (Ottoman) and was becoming (classical, yet modern)” (Argyrou 2016).

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate the pronounced impact this ideological positioning of Greece and BiH has on contemporary art practice from the region. Our analysis focuses upon how strategies of humour intervene in the expectation that artists from sites of crisis perform a role akin to local informant, narrating national histories and experiences of collective trauma for the international art market. Although providing background to changes in art infrastructure in both nations, our aim here is not to provide an exhaustive account of contemporary art in Greece and BiH.<sup>1</sup> Rather, analysis is framed by discussion centred on how humour relates to the

key concepts of “locality” and “visibility” that each impact on understandings of contemporary art from BiH and Greece. Our goal is not to provide a psychoanalytic account of humour in contemporary art, nor is it to braid our analysis closely to a single theory of humour. We draw on conceptions of humour offered by key philosophers, to demonstrate the ways in which humour relays “local” knowledge and identity, offers an alternative narration of conflict and trauma, and presents alternative understandings of the past, present and future.

To this end, we focus on the work of contemporary artists Stefanos Tsivopoulos and Mladen Miljanović because they offer a clear window through which to understand how humor is harnessed as a local identity “code” that problematizes external normative perceptions of Greece and BiH whilst mobilizing anti-nationalist politics. To understand this, it is particularly important to appreciate that external perceptions of these regions are responsible for the consistent framing of Greece and BiH as characterised by the experience of crisis and conflict. This perception in turn informs readings of art practice as a cultural mediator of post-crisis/conflict and a “return to normality.” Moreover, these perceptions of Greece and BiH through “crisis” establish a reinstatement of neoliberalism under the teleological narrative of “normalization.” These perceptions are of course not confined to the political arena, and are echoed in international exhibitions, which subsume the agency of art (and humor) under the narrative of normalization. Yet at the same time, as a reaction to external perceptions of the regions, “the local” has been romanticised as a protection representing authenticity, tradition, and continuity against the homogenization of globalization. Populist political discourse has tapped into the ‘local’ anxieties to garner support for xenophobia. In this context, the space of the local becomes a key

ideological battleground in the present, something that is directly addressed in the practice of Tsivopoulos and Miljanović.

## **Visibility**

It is important to flag here that our choice to focus upon the work of Tsivopoulos and Miljanović is driven in part by their high visibility on the international art circuit.

More specifically, our analysis is underscored by the understanding that an important aspect of both Tsivopoulos and Miljanović's work is their participation in international exhibitions as representatives of their nations. Both artists have a significant global profile, as indicated by their participation at the 55th Venice Biennale in the national pavilions of Greece and BiH. The 2013 Venice Biennale arguably stands a highly significant and politically charged gesture of temporal realignment of two European peripheries: in 2013, just as Greece was emerging into the global spotlight as the symbol of global financial meltdown, BiH was returning to the global art stage in Venice after a decade-long absence. Art from the Former Yugoslavia in many ways already had its moment in the global spotlight through the series of "Balkan themed" exhibitions in the early 2000s, including *In Search of Balkania* (Graz 2002), *In the Gorges of the Balkan: A Report* (Kassel 2003), and *Blood and Honey: the Future's in the Balkans* (Vienna 2003). Conversely, Tsivopoulos's participation at the Venice Biennale can be understood as signalling the moment that international emphasis turned toward cultural production in Greece. In the space of a few short years, this attention toward Greece has been intensely magnified and is most clearly visible in the decision for Documenta to be hosted in Athens (alongside Kassel) in 2017. This however can also be evidenced through events such as *IdeasCityAthens* (2016), the Athens Biennale (beginning in 2007), and the opening of both large private cultural institutions such as NEON and artists-run-

spaces that were almost non-existent in the Athens a decade ago (Zefkili 2016; Rikou and Chaviara 2016).

The convergence of local politics, international interest, and art world emphasis on these regions has meant that artists are increasingly framed as local narrators with a geopolitical burden.<sup>2</sup> Put differently, the unprecedented visibility and emphasis upon these sites and states understood as Europe's periphery for their turbulent recent histories has meant that artists from these places are burdened with the responsibility of representing histories and experiences of crisis. In this context, Tsivopoulos and Miljanović's work has become over-determined through the prism of "local representation" and national identity. Both bridging and building upon our previous work on cultural representations of national identity (Čvoro 2014) and the ways that humor operates as a means of forging collective identity, connection to place and undermining the authority of those in power (Lionis 2016), our aim here is to demonstrate how the humor deployed in the work of these artists diffuses this burden of representation. More specifically, we are interested in the ways humor harnesses a performance of marginality as a way of undermining stereotypes and offering alternative views, both of each nation's past and its way forward into the future. Before outlining how Tsivopoulos and Miljanović use humour in the works as means of diffusing this "burden," we need to position the intentionality and agency of their humor. While we address the typologies of humour used in the next section, our emphasis is on how this humour speaks to the socio-political and cultural "locality" of each artist.

## **Humor and Locality**

Today we find ourselves more than two decades out from the end of the Cold War when socio-economic events saw the emergence of a globalized art world and a new

scale of international exhibitions that in turn gave rise to an emphasis on art produced outside the Euro-American world. However, with the rise of art festivals, biennales and art fairs across all continents, the art world (and indeed art market) has increasingly acknowledged sites previously understood as peripheral as new art centres. Crucially it has not however been able to achieve this without giving way to spectacle and a “rapid othering” of the geographies and cultures that inhabit these new peripheral art centres.

Focusing on two artists who have achieved international recognition in the most prestigious and globally visible of art events (the Venice Biennale and Documenta), our work here is underscored by an understanding of how humor in contemporary art is radically different to other vernacular forms such as cartoons, jokes, memes, comics *etc.* Aside from the fact that audiences and socio/economic structures for the publication and dissemination of these forms of humor are different in many respects, contemporary art that employs humor has a significantly different approach to time. In simple terms, art takes time. The processes of its (possible) commission, creation, installation, exhibition and analysis have longer gestation, whilst vernacular forms often achieve their ability to elicit laughter by the speed at which they’re able to respond and react to topical events.

This temporal difference creates something that can be described as “slow humor,” where laughter at contemporary art provokes an enquiry, as opposed to the self-affirming function of laughter that comes as a response to jokes and other vernacular forms. At the same time that contemporary art has located an emphasis upon the periphery, it has also seen the rise of what Hal Foster described over two decades ago as the “artist as ethnographer” (Foster 1995). Described as the “ethnographic turn,” contemporary art audiences are now accustomed to practices that



draw upon research to represent cultural difference. Further, they are arguably also accustomed to an art world that assesses an artist's cultural capital in accordance with their ability to represent their experience/cultural and national background from sites of political, social and economic instability. This system for valuing the significance of art practice is often accompanied by essentialist framings of identity (and artist's biographies), and simplistic glorifications of locality as a site of resistance: something that when considered together, can smack of orientalism. Through an analysis of how humor is activated within the works of Miljanović and Tsivopoulos, we hope to demonstrate the potential for humor to slow down, or even momentarily halt, this process of rapid othering within contemporary art.

A key aspect of this process of slowing down comes in the capacity for humor to facilitate a context-specific mode of belonging that expresses both a sense of location in space, and distance from that space. On the one hand, Tsivopoulos and Miljanović use humor to communicate what Arjun Appadurai calls "locality": a structure of feeling and mode of belonging specific to a place (Appadurai 1996: 178). In these works, locality expresses itself through linguistic, cultural and embodied forms of expression specific to the particular areas, and primarily understandable in those terms: it is funny because it operates as a "secret code" of sorts (Critchley, 2002: 17; Lionis 2016: 92). Yet on the other hand, this locality is also a translation of the global into the local (evident in their use of modernist aesthetics), where the secret code of locality is understood as a mythologised marginalised identity on the international art circuit: it is funny because the secret local code is dictated by global geo-politics. We argue that the work of Tsivopoulos and Miljanović oscillates between the two positions as a way to radicalise the binaries underpinning conceptions of artists with a geopolitical burden; as a way to adopt marginality as a

critical position, while questioning the very premise and need for marginality in contemporary art.

It is important here to flag that although we identify the typologies of humour evident in works discussed herein (*i.e.* particular forms/genres such as pastiche, irony, parody), we deliberately avoid a fixation on the analysis of these typologies as this a problem that has arguably contributed to the scarcity of scholarship on the role of humour in contemporary art. Sheri Klein, the author of *Art and Laughter*, comments that this paucity of scholarship may come as a result of humour being defined too narrowly within art history (Klein, 2007:5). Klein draws here on the fact that though parody, irony, satire, absurdity and caricature, for example, have formed the basis of many art historical endeavours, until very recently few authors used a broad definition of humour in their discussion and analysis of art. The problem with these historical approaches is that they limit the scope of research by demarcating each typology of humour as distinct, thus focusing upon the mechanics or modes of humor rather than the consequences of humor.<sup>3</sup> Rather than an emphasis on typologies, our analysis focuses on how artists adopt marginality as a critical position, and more specifically, how the humour in the works centres on two key issues and their relationship to Greece and Bosnia: the performance of identity, and the representation of traumatic histories.

Although the perceived marginality of Tsivopoulos and Miljanović is seen directly in their work representing their mutual nations within the Venice Biennale, this marginality is also unsurprisingly linked to their biographies. The child of political refugees (his father a Greek and his mother an Iranian) and born in the Czech Republic, Stefanos Tsivopoulos has become one of the most recognized Greek artists of his generation. Currently working and living between Amsterdam, New York and

Athens, Tsivopoulos's work is characterized by a coming together of long term research projects and allegorical narratives that simultaneously draw upon and come up against historical film and photographic archives. This emphasis is evident throughout the artist's oeuvre that deals with the creation of images from diverse geographical and historical spaces. Although Tsivopoulos takes a truly global approach, his practice also clearly locates focus on the construction of documentary/news imagery and nationalist iconography of Greece. This is evident not just in the works discussed herein (*History Zero* and *The Lost Monument*) but also clear in examples such as *Remake* (2007) that painstakingly recreates news television from the period of the Greek dictatorship and *I Rebel Therefore We Exist* (2012), an installation that draws upon archival documents to investigate the history and current crisis of the labor movement in Greece. Considered as a whole, Tsivopoulos's approach involves the deconstruction of the documentation of events and news stories, resulting neither entirely in archive, no narration, nor re-enactment: rather there is cutting across the techniques, aesthetics, strategies and outcomes of all three modalities, thus exposing their interdependence.

Banja Luka based Miljanović takes the locality of Bosnia and Herzegovina as his departure point, which is then abstracted into a universal symbol. His works often articulate geo-political problems in material forms, which are then subverted through the introduction of humor and an absurdist outsider perspective. This approach is apparent in his performance *At The Edge* (2011-) that has been carried out in series of galleries including Zagreb, Venice and New York, in which Miljanović hangs out from gallery windows by holding onto a frame (sometimes several stories high) thereby "suspending himself" between the inside and outside of the space. This approach was also apparent in Miljanović's work *The Garden of Earthly Delights*

(2013) created for the Bosnia and Herzegovina national pavilion in the 2013 Venice Biennale. Drawing its title, composition and background from Hieronymus Bosch's Renaissance triptych, the work consists of three granite panels with engraved tombstone drawings found in parts of BiH, featuring images of deceased people accompanied by precious objects. The choice of subject matter in the work carried a heavy symbolic burden because it was the first in a decade to represent BiH at the international event. This was compounded by the ever-present tension within BiH between the Muslim-majority Federation with its capital Sarajevo and the Serb-dominated Republika Srpska with its capital Banja Luka. Miljanović directly engaged this geopolitical burden through the work by making it about posthumous desires of its inhabitants. His method of fusing materiality with humor as a way to articulate the relation between marginality and complex geo-political histories also features in his more recent work *Strike 1* (2016).

## **Strike 1**

Miljanović's *Strike 1* (see fig. 1) consists of large granite panels engraved with a nation-state map of Europe, featuring countries in the Balkan Peninsula (Serbia, Croatia, BiH, Slovenia, Hungary) and middle-Europe (countries such as Austria, Germany, France, Luxembourg, Switzerland). Drawing both from his work as a professional tombstone engraver and his service in the BiH army, Miljanović overlays the map with military symbols: color-coded arrows capture directions of movement, icons suggest modes of movement (air, water or land), and symbols indicate intensity of attack, position or defense. Taken from military handbooks, these standardized brightly-coloured monochromatic symbols capture an invasion through a well-coordinated and aggressive campaign. The direction of movement is inward towards continental Europe from different peripheries, including an intentionally incorrectly

positioned Afghanistan on Germany's eastern border (which is itself incorrectly placed to the east of Serbia). In the bottom right-hand corner of the map is a legend explaining the iconography: strategies of crossing borders and getting work permits in economic centres of Europe by people from a small Bosnian village Osječani.

In an immediate sense, the work is about the shifting geo-political spaces of Europe in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Strike 1 maps the geo-political paradoxes of the present by overlaying the spatial limits of Europe according to the different national and international bodies that define it: the nation-states, the Council of Europe, NATO, the Schengen Zone, the transportation corridors and hubs all have different versions of limits and exclusions with the EU. The title of the work captures the militaristic language that permeates so much of the public discourse on cross-border exchanges, as much as it references the clash between the different geo-political organisations and regimes of that space. The form of the military map is crucial; in that it recalls both the conquest and control of the nation-state territory, and points towards the production of knowledge about space as a way of controlling and regulating movement.

Strike 1 marks an important continuation in Miljanović's practice of radicalizing identities within established regimes of power and representation. This includes his use of military iconography (drawing on his service in the army and reflecting the ethno-nationalist and neo-colonial militarization of the Balkans), and his references to monumental aesthetics (through the use of granite, which also appeared in Garden). But this also includes his approach to the 'East European' identity paradigm in contemporary art as a system of service, hierarchy and systematization (evident in his earlier Art Attack painting series, which featured maps of his plans to 'invade' key galleries in Western Europe).

In one respect, Strike 1 functions as a materialization of the populist fantasy of war-crazy Balkan hordes as one of many illegal migrants invading Europe and stealing jobs. In part, the humor of the work comes because it operates as an ironic monument to the “alternative facts” of this ideological pathology. In other words, it is not difficult to imagine a map such as this—including the geographic errors—in the minds of the global far-right demagogues when thinking about migration. But in equal measure, the work ethnographically documents strategies that economic migrants have used in order to circumvent restrictive migration laws. Legend explanations of the symbols on the bottom right-hand corner of the map are written in language somewhere between a police report, a tabloid newspaper headline, and macabre village gossip. Thematically they cover stories about political and clerical corruption, privatization of the social sphere, and marital infidelity and violence. A large majority of the legend explanations read like guide/manifesto of strategies on how to evade EU working visa restrictions. Importantly however, the incongruous and absurd elements of these narratives also lend to them a joke like quality, whereby a “normal” situation is punctured by an element of surprise that facilitates not only laughter but also a survival strategy:

“A divorced male (40) in a relationship with a female (55), “married” her mother (83) in order to be legally entitled to inherit her Switzerland pension’; ‘Earning money by painting walls in locked Switzerland flats, in order to avoid inspections and the police’; ‘Obtaining dual Bosnian and Serbian citizenship. After 3 months of working in Switzerland with a Bosnian passport, I cross the Slovenian border and go back with the other passport in order to obtain legal residence for the next months. Repeat the procedure, for as long as it is necessary’ (sic); ‘A girl is going to “marry” her boyfriend’s

father to legally inherit his German pension’; ‘An unemployed Switzerland male citizen is offering citizenship marriage for 5000 CHF’; ‘After 3 months of working illegally in one Switzerland restaurant, a girl (20) had to go back for 3 months of pause to be legally able to go again. However, by throwing her passport into the water she was able to take out a new passport with which she could start working immediately.’”

A key aspect of experiencing this work rests upon our ability to relate to the stories depicted on a personal level and decouple them from militaristic aggression implicit in the title. This includes understanding that both the artist and spectators from the Balkans (and the authors of this article) have relatives or friends with similar stories; but it also includes the awareness that the title Strike (*udar*) recalls *udarniks*, highly productive workers under socialism that embodied the ethos of hard work for a better tomorrow. Informed by personal familiarity with the context of the work, the “strike” shifts from being a “strike at” (Europe) to “strike for” a better life (MSUV 2017: 7).

The different narratives in the work are framed by the map legend as the punchline that punctures the totalitarian iconography with the locality of marginal subjects on the periphery of Europe. This has the effect of apprehending and mapping Europe from the perspective of the villagers: for example, Germany is geographically much closer to the Balkans because of the high number of *gasterarbaitem* (guest workers) from the region. The inclusion of lived experiences of migrants from the periphery as a key to understanding the map contrasts the militaristic symbolism of the space. Bright red lines of military movements (of attack and diversion) become traces of movement, memories and strategies of migrant labourers. This creates a striking contrast between hierarchical procedures and infrastructures that regulate the speed of movement across borders, and lived experiences of that space from the

margin. The geopolitical space of Europe becomes less a collection of strategic locations, and more akin to a clash between multiple narratives as they map onto space through movement. This coming together of multiple narratives and the question of movement through space and time is also crucial to Stefanos Tsivopoulos' *The Lost Monument*.

## **The Lost Monument**

Tsivopoulos' work *The Lost Monument* (2009) brings together an archival installation and a four-part video work centring upon the history of a real and immensely controversial bronze sculpture of American president Harry Truman located in the "historical triangle" central district of Athens. The archive component of the work is made up of photographs and footage that tracks the monument from its construction, delivery and erection in 1963 to its forced removal, and multiple attacks against it including its bombing in 1987. Tsivopoulos's choice to focus on the statue is informed by the fact that it has served as something of a lightning rod for anti-American movements and sentiments throughout the Cold War and in the years since. This is because the Truman statue was originally commissioned by AHEPA (American Hellenic Educational Progressive Association) to commemorate the "Truman doctrine" and the influence of the US President in Greece via the Marshall Plan. As the first incarnation of the Marshall plan, the Truman doctrine (announced in 1947) held two specific aims for Greece: the first was to rehabilitate the country's economy following WWII, and the second was the elimination of communist influence over Greece (Vetsopoulos 2009: 296). By focusing on Truman's presence both symbolically and historically, Tsivopoulos's work brings to light the ongoing legacy and political influence of the Marshall Plan, and thereby the enforcement of the ideological vision of the United States and the foundation stones of the European



Union (Holm 2010, 215–216). Further, through its emphasis on the Truman doctrine the work makes clear the ways in which Greece has repeatedly been pitched as a linchpin to political stability, or put differently, the first European domino that must not fall.

Where the archival component of the work presents a historical documentation of the monument, the video is described by the artist as deploying a “cinematic vocabulary” that ties together four sub-stories each relating to a particular political situation, social response and memory in Greek history (Bailey 2011, 71). Although the video concludes with footage of the statue in its actual location in Athens, it is in the most part made up of fictionalised sub-stories that cross both time and geographical locale. The first is of these is of two farmers, who when ploughing the fields, chance upon the buried statue and proceed to dig it from the ground with their bare hands (see fig 2). Clearly unimpressed by its economic value, describing it as “junk” and “worthless,” they proceed with some difficulty to throw the statue over a cliff and into the sea. The second story is that of a small group of lounging wealthy Greeks who (in a style reminiscent of Greek Weird Wave cinema) are startled when suddenly the Truman statue drops from the sky and into their pool. The third story follows a Turkish fisherman and young boy who discover the statue as it comes up within their fishing net. They too proceed to return the statue into the sea concerned it will bring them trouble, claiming that it is likely from an ancient civilization (Turkish or Greek) or perhaps fell from an American tourist ship. The final sub-story is that of a group of African migrants washed up on the shore of what we assume to be Greece alongside the Truman statue. Of the four groups, they are the only which seem to admire the statue, planting it on its feet and proclaiming that it is likely a Greek god.

Although each facilitating humor through the element of visual surprise, when considered together these four fictionalized (mis-)treatments of the statue represent the ways that historical memory becomes entangled in material form. Although much more subtle and based on historical events, like Tsivopoulos' *History Zero*, the work focuses on problematic exchange, and in turn its social and cultural implications. The work also asks questions of when and where contested histories become embodied and memorialized; this is clear in the way that the Truman statue is shown to literally follow and impose upon four distinct groups as they struggle to understand how to best deal with both the history and economic value the monument represents. These four groups (the farmers, the elite, Turkish nationals and African migrants) are all essentially caricatures, each depicted as reflecting both stereotypes and particular histories. For instance, farmers only care for economic value, the elite are concerned with aesthetic appeal, the Turks are concerned with historical belonging and ownership, and the migrants are problematically pitched as superstitious and naïve. Further, the reaction of each group is reflective of particular aspects and responses to the Marshall Plan. This is most clear in the response of the farmers who search for something to lift them out from poverty, and the Turkish fisherman who (calling to mind the joke which opened this article) are concerned with cultural, economic and military territorialism. If the first three stories are reflective of the Marshall Plan as a means to counter the global threat of communism, then the final sub-story is suggestive of a new spectre of global conflict—that of the refugee. Indeed, when considered alongside Germany's recent announcement of its plans to create a "Marshall plan with Africa" to curb mass migration (Pelz, 2017), Tsivopoulos's projection appears eerie in its accuracy of political memory and its deployment in the present.

Where the video component of *The Lost Monument* alludes to this history through metaphor, the archival installation chronicles the statue's history through documentary practice and aesthetic. In more recent years archival elements of this work have been incorporated into Tsivopoulos' celebrated work *The Precarious Archive* (2015). Exhibited in Kassel as part of Documenta14, the work brings together a substantial archive of political documents and photographs relating to post-war Greek history with a particular focus on the Cold War and the Greek Junta of 1967–1974. Centring on the notion of “keeping history alive” this interactive work involves the engagement of audience members and a performer that work together to constantly reshuffle and rearrange the archive on display. Significantly, an ethnographic observation of the work in Kassel reveals how Tsivopoulos' attempt at keeping history alive triggers not only a sense of curiosity amongst international art audiences, but also engenders responses indicative of trauma and self-identification in Greek audiences. One such example comes in a 65-year-old Greek diasporic woman living in Australia, who although unfamiliar with trends and tropes of contemporary art, connected to *The Precarious Archive* through her personal traumatic memory of living through the Greek dictatorship. This resulted in a response that stood apart from the quiet of other audience members in the room, and oscillated between anger (the cursing of photographs of Greek dictator Giorgios Papadopoulos) to laughter of recognition at photographs documenting hyper-nationalist pomp and the valorization of folkloric traditions at public events during the junta.

Of particular significance here is that in his archival practice Tsivopoulos brings together “real” archival images alongside fantastical allegorical videos. In the case of *The Lost Monument*, the result in installation is a coming together of the real with the utterly unreal; the video crosses through localities, time and space, whereas

the archive firmly places the monument in its geographical place and history. This collision of aesthetics is reminiscent of the strategy employed by Miljanović in *Strike 1*. In both of these works we see the “rational” (as represented through military maps and photographic/video archives) bump up against illogical or absurd depictions of history where monuments fall from the sky and geographical maps appear scrambled. This deliberate undermining of aesthetics standing in for objectivity and the rational is amplified by the multiple mediums employed in the two works; those reminiscent of war monuments (bronze statues and marble headstones), those associated with the documentary (archives and maps), and those associated with modernist aesthetics (minimalism).<sup>4</sup>

The subversion of the universalism associated with all three of these mediums and aesthetics is but one dimension of the humor elicited through these works. The humor in these works is also informed by the ability to operate in a liminal space between the real and unreal and the clear defiance of what philosopher Jacques Ranciere would describe as a “distribution of genre.” For Ranciere, the world is divided between those who can and those who cannot afford the luxury of playing with images, or put differently, the engagement with fiction (Ranciere: 2007). Although Ranciere’s elucidation upon the concept of the distribution of genre was previously described in terms of Israel/Palestine, it is also applicable to Greeks and Bosnians, who as people often imagined as both victims/perpetrators of global conflict and unrest, are confined to a “rational,” “documentary” depiction of their experience; a space in other words of limited possibilities and capabilities (Lionis 2016: 88). The significance here is that both works manage to represent traumatic collective histories but do so by employing humor as a tool of opacity, thus diffusing pre-inscribed roles and expectations. Forging not just smiles of recognition for

audience members familiar or intimately connected to the histories they represent, but also a moment that opens history to a different mode of perception.

More generally, the humor in both works relies on incongruity, an attribute understood by contemporary humorologists as key to why we laugh. The most widely accepted theory of humor and often associated with the work of Arthur Schopenhauer, Immanuel Kant and Soren Kierkegaard, incongruity theory essentially argues that laughter emerges as a result of incongruous situations, representations of observations (Morreall 1987:130). This incongruity also lends humor one of its greatest assets, its idiosyncratic relationship to time. For those “in the know,” humor has the ability to fuse together the past, present and future: for as Simon Critchley rightly observes “humorous pleasure would seem to be produced by the disjunction between durations and the instant” (Critchley 2002:7). The ability to appreciate the way that the “unreal” operates as what could be described as a temporal “snap” in this work. This snap is facilitated when humour makes elastic political histories by bringing them into the present. The collapse temporal and geographical space that creates the “snap” of humor, is however contingent on the audience’s familiarity with the geographies, histories and experiences they represent. The appreciation of the humor of Tsivopoulos’s work is therefore gained through a complex understanding of historical legacies and the material forms in and through which they are embodied. This too underscores the humor of Miljanović’s Strike 1, and is equally visible in The Black Hole (fig 3.).

### **The Black Hole**

The Black Hole (2016) is a circular wall installation consisting of small irregularly sized black shapes arranged into a large circular formation resembling the shape of Earth.

For this work, Miljanovic worked with a road maintenance crew for two days to fill the potholes on the 232-km road between Sarajevo and Banja Luka. He traced the shapes of the potholes, which were then cast and arranged into a circular shape. In an immediate sense, the work is a translation of the inherent political problem of BiH in spatial and material terms: the black hole in question represents the seemingly unbridgeable political gap between Banja Luka and Sarajevo as two capitals of 1996 Dayton Peace Accord defined entities of Federation (with a Bosniak majority) and Republika Srpska (with a Serb majority). In casting the negative space (physically and politically) that makes the trip between Sarajevo and Banja Luka difficult, Miljanovic recasts a political problem in material and spatial terms. The casts become the sculptural traces of the political dysfunction of BiH, the ineptitude of its politicians; a reminder how political elites sequester political debate (and real problems) into nationalist trolling. Miljanovic reassembles the context for understanding the “road,” reminding us that such spatial and temporal conceptions have significant consequences for understanding individual and collective responsibility.

However this highly localised problem of failing road infrastructure also operates as a universal symbol for the failed journey to post-conflict democracy and the European Union (EU). This is clear in the fact that within political discussions of the EU, roads are one of the most frequently used metaphors to capture the process of post-socialist transition and EU integration (Petrović 2012: 104). In this sense, The Black Hole is the material emanation of the space that defines the rift between Republika Srpska and The Federation and much as it defines the rift between the Balkans and EU. The hole thus represents the inability to imagine a post-nationalist Europe.

The work also represents a radicalisation of local identity. Miljanović's repair of the road is simultaneously a form of post-socialist privatization of the social space (who owns the fixed parts of the road?), a parody of neoliberal celebration of the DIY life philosophy (in the absence of infrastructure, or political will to fix it, he just does it); and a form of socially engaged practice (fixing the problem which impedes his daily existence by using his own funds and time). The Black Hole in many ways functions as social practice in terms of its outcome, yet its material product (the wall installation) is a parody of modernist aesthetics as the global art lingua franca. The complex social, cultural and political background that informs the meaning of the work is (intentionally) abstracted and obfuscated into instantly recognisable post-minimalism.

Regarding obfuscation of complex histories, the use of infrastructure to narrate (post)conflict in The Black Hole connects it to a longer tradition of absurd political humor in BiH. In 1988, a highly popular Sarajevo-based comedy group Top List of the Surrealists (Top Lista Nadrealista) made a sketch about the future of Sarajevo divided into East and West by a Wall. In what was a clever reversal of the coming down of the Berlin Wall (and disturbingly prophetic anticipation of the war and present-day division of Sarajevo between the Serbs and Bosniaks), the Surrealists structured the narrative around the accidental encounter of two ethnically defined garbage-men crews from the opposite sides of the wall. The two crews are initially happy to see each other after years of separation and decide to celebrate by going to a bar, but the encounter soon escalates into inter-ethnic clashing caused by their inability to agree on which bar they should go to (one being on the Serb side of the wall and the other on the Bosniak). The two crews disperse after hearing approaching

police sirens leaving one garbage-man stranded atop the wall. Rather than trying to flee, he is surprised by how dirty the wall is and proceeds to calmly sweep it.

There are at least two ways to read this sketch: as an intentional play on the cliché of the simpleton-Bosnian from the opening joke who behaves absurdly because they fail to understand their predicament (being disturbed by the dirty wall rather than by city torn by war and divided along ethnic lines); as a black humorous take on the ideological interpellation of the subject (the worker who is so indoctrinated and docile that they are more concerned by the maintenance of the infrastructure of division than by its social and political causes and effects).

The Black Hole takes this same approach but expands it to the whole space of BiH (rather than just Sarajevo). The road becomes the space of division (rather than connection), and its potholes metaphors for the political unwillingness to create a dialogue between Sarajevo and Banja Luka. Like The Surrealists, Miljanović on the one hand plays into the cliché of the simpleton Bosnian who “misunderstands” social practice and uses it for his own ends: according to the artist, he often travels on this road, so the act of fixing the potholes is firstly intended to make his life more comfortable. But Miljanović’s seemingly mundane act of fixing roads is rendered absurd by its broader context, which also raises the question of the possibility of social practice in a country like BiH. What does it mean to create a work that engages the community that is living in decades of poverty, high unemployment, political corruption, and ongoing nationalist tensions? And what is the aim and outcome of such work? Ironically, for Miljanović, the outcome is a minimalist wall installation, which is both a material representation of the “black hole of BiH,” and a modernist abstraction removed from its lived context. In this sense, The Black Hole is about the



process of cultural exchange (of meaning) that enables a locality to become globally visible. This is also the key theme of Tsivopoulos's work *History Zero*.

## **History Zero**

Described by the artist as bringing a “poetic and imaginary observation of crisis” (Tsivopoulos 2015), the artist conceived of *History Zero* (see fig.4) in 2012 whilst he living in the Athenian neighbourhood of Exarcheia, an area notable for being a bastion of anti-authoritarian political activity and, more recently, gentrification. First exhibited within the Greek Pavilion at the 55<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale in 2013, the piece is significant for several reasons, not least of which is that it marked a turning point in international attention toward contemporary Greek cultural production. Further to this, the work has been shown to be almost prophetic in its rumination upon how Greece is increasingly understood as a kernel of alternatives—both economic and political.

The work consists of two strikingly different elements. The first is a fictional large-scale video work that brings together the narratives of three disparate yet interconnected individuals living in Athens. The second is an archive of “real” alternative forms of currency that operate outside the state or crown. Within its presentation at the Venice Biennale, the work occupied the space around the rotunda of the Pavilion. In this installation, the audience first encountered the archival aspect of the work and proceeded to move in a circle through three equally sized rooms which each screened an episode of the *History Zero* film.

Entitled *Alternative Currencies: An Archive and Manifesto*, this archival component of the work is divided into 32 panels, each dedicated to a specific alternative exchange. Presented alongside data from community organisations, activists, historical studies and ethnographic accounts, these panels document

exchange practices ranging from “mobile money” operating via cell phone airtime throughout various African nations, to the Rolling Jubilee fund organised by non-profit Strike Debt to buy and abolish medical debt in the United States. Deliberately designed to create an experience where real and fictional accounts of the crisis jut up against each other, the archival component of the work is compelling precisely because although documenting existing diverse contemporary exchange systems, they seem equally as “unbelievable” as the fictional exchange system depicted by the artist in the video work that follows. In contrast to the archive, the video component of the work employs a deliberate aesthetic that is far from didactic, instead arresting for its cinematic qualities and its extreme lightness of dialogue. This large-scale History Zero video is divided into three video episodes that bring together the stories of three disparate yet interconnected “collectors” living in Athens: an African immigrant who scours the streets and dumpsters of Athens collecting scrap metal within a supermarket trolley; a German artist visiting Athens who is seemingly enamoured with what might be described as the aesthetic of crisis in the city; and an elderly Greek art collector suffering from dementia.

The first of episode presented is that of the elderly art collector who is depicted connecting primarily through touch with her clearly sizable and valuable art collection, leaning in, grazing and even kissing items on display with her home. As though a sign of both her deteriorating mental state and extensive wealth, the woman is depicted as though enchanted by the items within her collection yet seemingly finding greater satisfaction in creating origami flowers from large euro banknotes. Transforming these notes into her own works of art, the woman then moves on to discard the origami into large black garbage bags, as though disappointed with her own creation. It is through this action that her life intersects with that of the African

immigrant. Shown to be quite literally surviving of the detritus of the capital of crisis, the young man is depicted plunging through dumpsters and searching Athenian streets for scrap metal collected within a shopping trolley. Stumbling upon a black garbage bag the man proceeds to be amazed by a discovery of discarded origami flowers (clearly the same as though introduced to the audience in the previous episode) and both hastily and gleefully stuffs the garbage bags under his shirt. The final episode of the work introduces us to a German artist, who in search of inspiration for his next project, moves through the Greek capital documenting graffiti and detritus of the city with his iPad. His search is then shown to conclude with the discovery of a shopping trolley full of scrap metal. It then becomes clear that this trolley (previously owned by the migrant) is destined for the collection of his patron, the elderly Athenian art collector.

What is striking about the exchange is the way in which at each step it requires the process of abstraction from the local to the global: the migrant sees the found bag of cash as his access to mobility (and promptly discards the shopping trolley), the artist recognises the urban waste material as found art object, and the collector will purchase this object as a way to increase cultural capital. Modernist aesthetics—specifically, the aesthetics of the found object—here function in the same way as money: by abstracting specificity into a cultural commodity, modernism affords specificity to visibility.

The “zero” dimension of the work is explained by Tsivopoulos as signifying the moment at which the lives of protagonists intersect and consequently become the moment at which alternative exchanges are made possible. In other words, a moment of transformation. This point zero is also however the moment that facilitates the humor in the work, as it is the “zero” points of each of these stories that signify the

moment in which subversion of expectations (in terms of social status and material value) are made clear. Our laughter at these moments of point zero, mark not only the “aha!” moment of recognition, but also represent what Henri Bergson would describe as the “robber robbed” (Bergson 2009). For Bergson, this dimension humor is marked by an attempt to pursue the aim of general social improvement, something that in turn facilitates a subversive moralism. He explains that humor “makes us at once endeavour to appear what we ought to be, [and] what some day we shall perhaps end in being” (Bergson 2009:24–25). By using humor to point to series of alternative economies of exchange, Tsivopoulos simultaneously offers a critique of multiple market structures, but also facilitates a moment where the audience is encouraged to imagine alternatives. The success of this aspect of the work is however reliant on the politics of locality—that is, Athens as a newly discovered cultural laboratory—that enables the exchange to take place. It is this politics of locality that gives the work its bitter-sweet edge: the fact that the migrant wins, while uplifting, is beside the point: his victory will only further enable these exchanges. And our cheering at his victory illustrates our complicity.

On the surface, the three episodes and Tsivopoulos’s archive allude clearly to the diverse experiences of Athens and Greece within economic crisis and yet can be interpreted as doing so with an air of optimism. Although predating the GREXIT saga that came to a head with the ‘OXI’ referendum in 2015, the work was created during the rise of SYRIZA and at a time when Alexis Tsipras and former Finance Minister Yanis Vaorufakis were touted as a viable and tantalizing left alternative in an increasingly conservative Europe. This stands in stark contrast to how these two figures are viewed in the country today: Tsipras is frequently accused of being a liar, and despite his popularity outside of Greece, Varoufakis is often understood as

reckless and as responsible for driving up creditor's demands.<sup>5</sup> In lieu of the events of these last few years, the reflection on cultural production in Greece underscoring Tsivopolous's work can be understood as even more prophetic than its consideration of economics and currency exchange. This never before seen interest in contemporary cultural production in Greece is most obvious in the fact that Documenta14 took place in Athens (alongside Kassel) with an aim clearly expressed in the title of "Learning from Athens." Described by Varoufakis as an exercise akin to "rich Americans taking a tour in a poor African country" (Kahane 2015), Documenta 14 is emblematic of the way in which Athens is increasingly couched as a capital of creative cities, or more problematically described as "the new Berlin." Greece is of course not at all used to holding this level of attention, being more accustomed to its ancient culture looming large both domestically (in terms of national identity, tourism and institutional funding) and international interest (Chaviara and Rikou 2016: 49).

Perhaps not surprisingly, this sudden interest in Greece by the international art world has led to both to ambivalence and anger from local communities, as well as art and cultural workers and researchers. This is acutely obvious in local critiques of Documenta14 (an event that operated under the curatorial rationale of "Learning from Athens") which ranged from scholarly analysis in inter-disciplinary research projects such as "Learning from Documenta," to accusations of "colonial attitudes" by employees and now notorious graffiti pieces around the city, which critiqued the exploitative neo-liberal tenets of the exhibition with statements such as "Dear Documenta, I refuse to exoticize myself to increase your cultural capital. Sincerely, oi i8agenies [the natives]" (Demos, 2017). Above all else however, Documenta14 makes it clear that in the wake of near economic and political collapse, Athens has been re-morphed, or in the least re-imagined as having been lifted from the "intellectual

desert” (Prevalakis 2016) status that it held prior to the crisis. For Elpida Rikou and Io Chaviara this mutating art scene since 2008 can be characterized by several key approaches to the representation of the experience of crisis. These include (1) the way in which Greeks shamelessly left behind their previous lifestyles (2) the acceptance of failure and the re-examination of history as a way to move forward, and (3) a creative exercise in imagining the future (Chaviara and Rikou 2016:48). Although Rikou and Chiara do not claim that their list is exhaustive, what is of particular interest here is the ways in which *History Zero* cuts through these characterisations obfuscating comfortable or simplistic readings of how the work reflects upon the crisis. This is of particular interest in that this precisely what the work to resist the exoticisation of Greece under crisis. One of the ways in which the work is able to achieve this is because it is ultimately difficult to ascertain whether the work is positivist or negative. Put differently, without familiarity with the artist’s intentions gleaned from further reading, it is unclear whether the alternative art currency that circulates between his three protagonists is put forward as a critique of new found interest of cultural production or not.

The political significance of this cannot be underestimated, for it is in its political opacity that work offers the space through which to resist what can be described as the “violent othering” (Bailey 2016) of Greece and its people. This leads us to another important question that arises when looking at *History Zero*: namely that of is “which Greek is missing here”? This ambiguity is in part achieved through resistance to the temptation to explore motifs of Greeks in crisis to which we are now well accustomed and arguably form the basis of blatantly orientalist tropes (Chaviara and Rikou 2016:49); there are in other words no protest banners, no hungry pensioners and no rebellious youths. Through the exclusion of the stereotype of Greek

as victim that has emerged in the wake of the crisis, the work also crucially evades a certain self-exoticization and self-heroicization that too has become amplified since 2008.

Through the economic crisis in Greece, and in the aftermath of civil war in Former Yugoslavia, both populations (Greek and Bosnian) have been viewed under distinctly Orientalist frames. This tenet of the crisis is analysed at some length by anthropologist Konstantinos Kalantzis who notes the saturation of rioting iconography as lending an aura of superiority for those in leftist politics in and centred upon Greece (Kalantzis 2015: 1039). In light of this, we argue that the humor in the work of Tsivopoulos and Miljanović be understood as signifying a complex response to Orientalist projections from Western Europe. Tsivopoulos resists the self-orientalising trope that increasingly marks Greek cultural production where people exhibit a kind of “European negritude . . . as a means of asserting cultural superiority” (Kalantzis 2015:1040) over “core” European nationals and their tutelage. As Kalantzis has convincingly shown in his analysis of middle class and diasporic Greeks, the analysis of humor indicates not only the complex subject position that counters Western European hegemony, but also complicates center-periphery theories of identity (Kalantzis, 2014: 57–58).

Tsivopoulos’ refusal to exoticize resistance and Miljanović’s refusal to present a “Balkan art safari” demonstrate the way in which they approach the narratives of (post) conflict and crisis. As we have argued, they use locality as a site from which to engage the homogenization and power structures implicit in the international art circuit, while remaining critical of the fetishization of the local and the way it easily slides into populism and nationalism. A key aspect of all these narratives is their use of laughter to create symbolic and temporal ambiguity: they represent Greece and

BiH as being “in waiting” (Yalouri 2016:40); knowingly and strategically fluctuating between the positions of poor victims and defiant heroes. The formal compositions of their work—resembling documentary practices—raise the question of ethnographic authenticity (Clifford 1988). Yet, as we have argued, the use of humour prevents any attempt to interpret these works through documentary conventions. If there is any ethnographic accuracy in these works, they are at odds against searching for any supposed authenticity. The work of Tsivopoulos and Miljanović is a representation of the Balkans that originates in ethnography and documentary practice but eschews any notion of specific “locality.”

**To understand the politics of this position, we can conclude with a Bosnian joke-curse from the nineties: “May you see your house on CNN.” This joke captures the paradox of global visibility that accompanies conflict and crisis: seeing your house in BiH on CNN during the nineties was only possible if it was the site of destruction. It explains the local experience of regions that find themselves thrust into the spotlight, followed by humanitarian interventions. High visibility comes at a price of becoming “the latest victim,” where critical agency is reduced to cry for being heard and seen: as in the existential questioning of the Bosnian or the historical burden of the Greek from the opening jokes. In art world terms, this can be translated into a crisis being followed by uncritical celebration of all cultural activity as finding normality amidst chaos (NGO-sponsored art in Former Yugoslavia in the 1990s), followed by the “CNN moment” (Balkan exhibitions in early 2000s, Documenta in Greece), followed by gradual disappearance/assimilation into another locality of contemporary art. Our own intervention into this sequence in many ways serves as the retroactive intellectual scaffolding through an academic publication. But what the CNN curse also signals is that humor has the ability to survive this process by not being funny anymore: when a joke becomes a more accurate representation of the world than the media report. It shows a level of criticality that is able to apprehend the power dynamic of the periphery laughing, as well as the**



**temporal relation to crisis and conflict. Our hope is to have contributed a layer of conceptual armour to this laughter.**

<sup>1</sup> The renewed interest in contemporary art in BiH and Greece has led to several in-depth studies being published in recent years. Some notable examples in this regard are the work of Miško Šuvaković and Uroš Čvoro in the Former Yugoslavia and the work of Eleana Yalouri and Elpida Rikou in Greece.

<sup>2</sup> The term ‘artist with a geopolitical burden’ is used by Serbian artist Vladimir Nikolić to describe the predicament of using cultural heritage as an access point to the international art scene (Nikolic).

<sup>3</sup> In this paper we call upon the typologies of humor set out by Buijzen and Valkenburg who developed forty-one humor categories for audio-visual media. These typologies include absurdity and irony (evident in work Strike 1), stereotype and visual surprise (in The Lost Monument), repetition and transformation (in History Zero), and ignorance (The Black Hole).

<sup>4</sup> The reference to minimalist can be seen in the final scenes of The Lost Monument that depict the pedestal of the Truman statue in a way that is reminiscent of Piero Manzoni’s iconic minimalist work Socle du Monde (1961).

<sup>5</sup> The ‘OXI’ referendum of 2015 saw 61% of Greeks vote against accepting further bailout packages and subsequent austerity measures from their creditors. Tsipras’ decision to accept a bailout package (whose terms were even more harsh than those rejected by the referendum) as a means of staying in the Eurozone has meant that his popularity has nosedived, as has support for SYRIZA.

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Figure 1. Mladen Miljanović, *Strike 1*, 2017. Installation engraved drawing and paint on granite. Installation view at Museum of Contemporary Art RS. Photograph: Drago Vejnović. Courtesy the artist.

Figure 2. Stefanos Tsivopoulos, *The Lost Monument*, 2009. HDV, 27 min. Photograph courtesy the artist.

Figure 3. Mladen Miljanović, *A Black Hole*, 2016 Installation Plaster objects. Installation view at Museum of Contemporary Art RS. Photograph: Drago Vejnović, Courtesy the artist.

Figure 4. Stefanos Tsivopoulos, *History Zero* (video still), 2013. A film in three episodes, 2K, Color, 5:1 surround, 34 minutes. Commissioned for the Greek Pavilion at the 55th Venice Biennale. Photograph courtesy the artist.