A vertical column of thin black lines on an orange background. The top half consists of straight, parallel lines. The bottom half features a wavy, liquid-like section where the lines curve and overlap, resembling a splash or a drop. The text is centered horizontally between the straight and wavy sections.

Nikos Arvanitis: Re-locating the Thrills

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a.antonopoulou.art gallery

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Put your Function in my Form

by Christopher Marinos

Admittedly, one of the most 'creepy' scenes in the history of cinema is that of the wedding ceremony in the cult masterpiece *The Freaks* (1933) by the American director Tod Browning. When the ill-favoured dwarf Hans and the 'normal' Cleopatra decide to get married the company of freaks welcomes the beautiful bride with a horrifying song-toast, which repulses her. And it's no surprise: for Cleopatra, the uncanny phrase "Gooble Gobble One of Us We Accept Her", which the enchanted members of the company constantly repeat, is the baptism to another, 'different' identity, which apparently she is not ready to accept yet.

And since life has its ups and downs (and art, after all as well), several decades later, Joey Ramone (frontman of the legendary American punk-rock band The Ramones) identified himself so much with that particular movie scene that he wrote the piece *Pinhead*, wanting to share with all what was self-evident: "I don't want to be a Pinhead no more". And, as a result, by replacing the word gooble with the word gabba he created the famous catch phrase "Gabba Gabba Hey!" which was to become later a trademark of the group, making their fans delirious every time it was played.

One could argue that the common element between these two incidents is the eternal confrontation between the Self and the Other, as well as the attempt to transform it into a cathartic creation – in other words, the rationalization of a singularity (let's not necessarily call it 'trauma') which must be disclosed at all costs and become a work of art. Although the succession of such events in the course of history of art and culture – especially that of «rock 'n' roll» – is a common phenomenon, its documentation is not

<< **Blitz Bop (When Joey, Johnny, Dee Dee and Tommy met Walter)**

Iron, 250 x 80 x 40 cm, 2008.

even half-completed, since those who continued the «secret» history between rock, high art and philosophical thought were very few – a history that started to be woven by imaginative writers such as Richard Meltzer (*The Aesthetics of Rock*) and Greil Marcus (*Lipstick Traces*).

In the last decade, however, the principles of such a discursive or intertextual approach are increasingly supported in the visual art field and as a result there is an increase of artists, whose objective it is to bring to light these cultural 'encounters' in the form of a new proposal. What would it be like to have a sculpture of 'visionary bareness', which would have as a starting point a quarrel between Rimbaud and Television's Tom Verlaine? What kind of shape would the house of Bela Lugosi have if an architect such as Gropius designed it? What would a performance about the Devil be like, if it was based on a debate between Mick Jagger and Michael Bulgakov, under the watchful journalistic gaze of Ambrose Bierce? Some might find this game with the conventions of storytelling superficial, abnormal, or even sacrilegious perhaps, but such a non-linear composition apparently contains a more philosophical aspect. A characteristic example is Tom Robbins' whimsical novels.

If there is an artist who could be considered to be the godfather of this "reconstruction through deconstruction" of an image-history, having as a goal to explore the space it occupies in our consciousness, in the field of visual arts, it is no other than Mike Kelley. For example, let's take his piece *Extracurricular Activity Projective Reconstruction # 1 (A Domestic Scene)*, presented in the large group exhibition *Apocalypse*, at the Royal Academy of London in 2000. Commenting on the operation of memory as an artistic process, Kelly chose from his archive a photo from a school play depicting two men inside an apartment. Then, he tried to reconstitute the represented scene in two different ways: first, by di-

recting an improvisatory half-hour play and then by reconstructing in the exhibition space an installation based in every detail on the apartment's decoration. Discovering the relationship between Sylvia Plath, the original photograph, and the fate of the apartment's residents depends on the knowledge, concern, and imagination of the viewer (and the reader of this text).

In his solo exhibition *Re-locating the Thrills* Nikos Arvanitis attempts to render an equivalent 'magic marriage'. As in Kelly's work, what is primarily important in Arvanitis' approach is the alchemical process: in a paradoxical way, all the elements and references that he consciously uses in the five works of the exhibition seem to be "waiting to get married". The sculpture *Blitz Bop (When Joey, Johnny, Dee Dee and Tommy met Walter)*, for example, is the three-dimensional metal expansion in space of the linear shape of lightning. As the title suggests, for Arvanitis, this massive symbol of power, fury and destruction combines several references that range from bombing and extermination (hence the German word 'Blitzkrieg'), to the satirical aspect of a Ramones song (*Blitzkrieg Bop*) and the expressionistic aesthetics of a modernist project. In this particular case, the project is the *Monument for the fallen of March (1920-22)* by the architect Walter Gropius, which was built at the cemetery of Weimar in memory of the workers killed during the reactionary movement *Kapp Putsch*, in 1920. The meeting of the Ramones with Gropius is, of course, an «explosive» combination by itself, and this creates the necessary, 'refined' balance between the form and the content of a work such as *Blitz Bop*.

Apart from the lightning, in Arvanitis' universe we come across the equally conceptually charged symbol of the star. The series of drawings, *Star System for New Purposes (Your Rodchenko in my Bauhaus)* takes to the limits of common logic the dialectic of rock with Modernist art: these stars could just as well be referring



to the mythology of rock, the spiritual search for truth, freedom and love. Nevertheless, the parenthetical title of the series refers to the minimal techno track Rodchenko in *My Bauhaus* by the New Yorker 'muzak star' Candy Chang, at the same time that the complex system of black and white stars consists of a critical deconstruction of both Rodchenko's constructivist compositions (*Destiny and Gravity*, 1919) and the concept of the (art) star system in general. With these six drawings Arvanitis proceeds – cryptically – to an institutional critique: The concept of utopia dissolves in a cold, frozen landscape, a complex of geometric forms, just as if the white cube has undergone a robotic mutation. If the gallery was an 'autobot', it is very likely that it would have been transformed into such an abstract shape.

Although not mentioned in the title, Rodchenko could also be hiding behind the next piece, *Drive In* (Damien goes to Hollywood), since he was the one who designed a series of cinema cars, that is a mobile movie projection system, which was to be presented at the Pan-Russian agriculture exhibition of 1923. Nevertheless, the protagonist in Arvanitis' special Drive-in is none other than the 'super art star' Damien Hirst and his famous spot paintings. About these works – to which Hirst has given the name of a drug – Stuart Morgan has written that the choice of colour is done in accordance with emotional and aesthetic criteria. For Morgan, identity, language, and duration (as repetition and definition) are the three key features that compose the work of the British artist. Could we say the same thing about Arvanitis' hybrid construction? And why is Hirst going – instead of Frankie – to Hollywood? Perhaps the answer lies in a recent statement by Hirst, on the occasion of the great auction of his works, in September 2008: "Deep inside, I am a punk. I was too young to be a punk, I think

<< **Titles For Works (Jello Revisited)**

Wood, iron, speaker, amplifier, mp3 player, sound,
duration 15min 30 sec, 134 x 33,5 x 23 cm, 2008.

I was 12 years old in 1977, that's why I think I have been waiting until now to do all these things". Arvanitis' video-construction livens up Hirst's LSD (2000) and simultaneously a psychedelic trip to the heart of both the experience of colour and the colour of money.

The experimentation with colour continues in the drawing *Pleasure* (After Peter Saville), which is nothing but a colour shift of the cover of the album *Unknown Pleasures* (1979) of the post-punk band Joy Division. The black cover with the white Fourier analysis at the centre, remarkably designed by the eclectic, post-modernist graphic designer Peter Saville, is transformed into a colour diptych. The 'unknown pleasure' becomes plain pleasure, which means pure pleasure. Fourier's electromagnetic wave, which ingeniously described the psychological ups and downs of Joy Division's *Death Disco*, but also their suicide singer, Ian Curtis – changes without losing its elegiac nature to a more optimistic scenario. Through this second deconstruction of Fourier's scientific view, the sketch becomes a minimalist work of art, which is strongly reminiscent of Robert Smithson's conceptual experiments.

The game with the titles – thus with the language – and the meaning that they have for each piece culminates with the sound sculpture *Titles For Works* (Jello Revisited), which is a remake of Jello Biafra's spoken-word piece, *Names for Bands*. While the singer of the Dead Kennedys proposes a list of names for bands by satirizing simultaneously the music industry, Arvanitis invents titles for various untitled works of art, but also for pieces by young artists who, for some reason, face difficulties finding the right title. Thus, the impromptu loudspeaker from which the piece is being played, does not only environ the rest of the works in the exhibition but also completes the exhibition, by functioning as a transmitter of criticism of the art market and its various dictates:

"Every once in a while somebody will come up to me and ask me to come up with a title for their work:

"I am tired of all those other titles, think of something good!"

I'd expect the artist to wanna take care of that ... right?

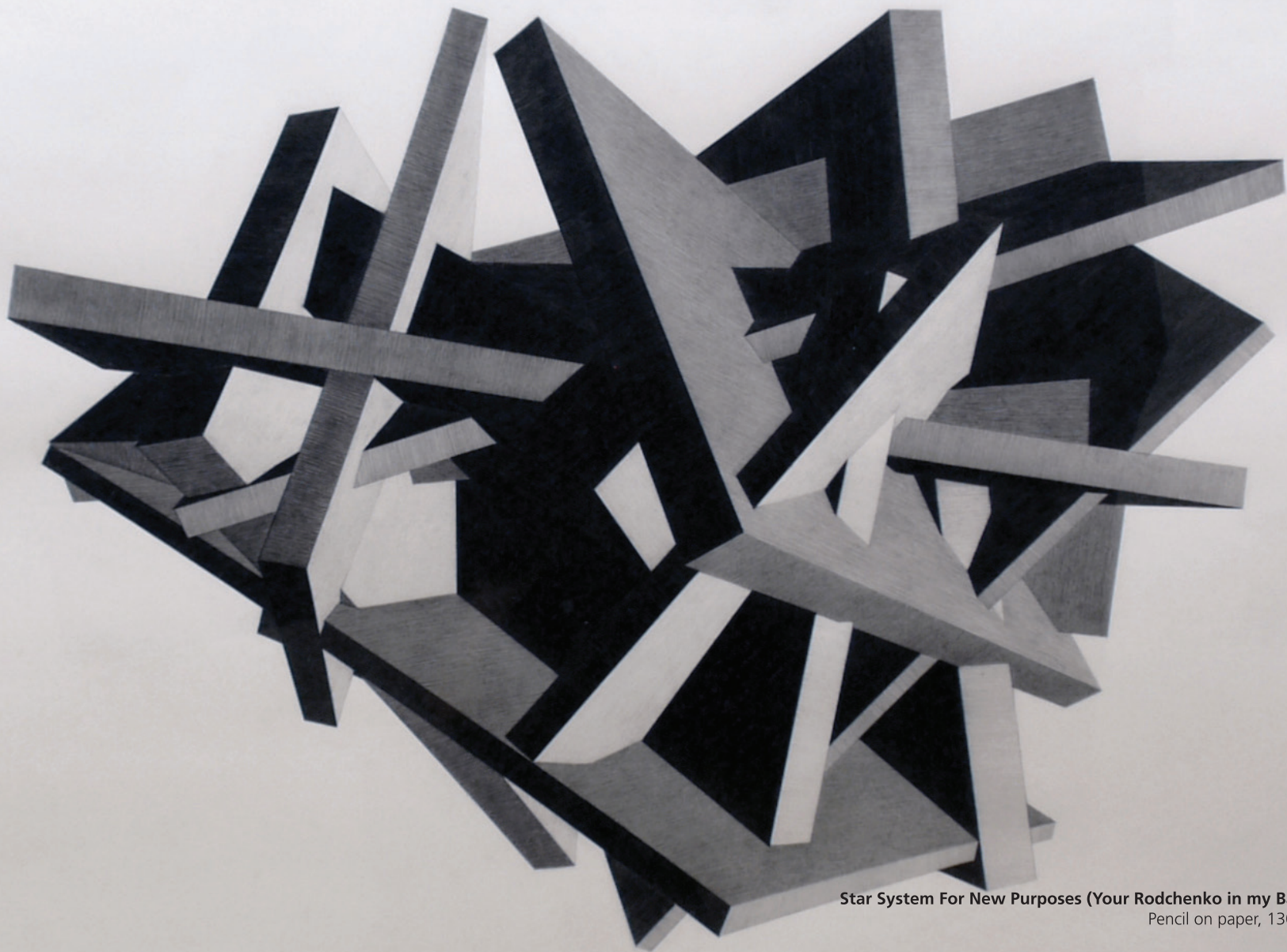
But oh no, not in the academies, where we are shaped to admire, to be spectators of our own medium and of our own system ... »

The paraphrasing that Arvanitis attempts with this particular work reasonably makes us wonder if the secret of the exhibition *Re-locating the Thrills* is hiding in its title. Fast rewinding, the first thing one wonders is "why"? Why redefine the thrill? And in addition, during this redefinition or relocation, isn't there a risk of losing something from the original point of experience? And finally what is this experience, and to whom does it belong?

Overall, *Re-locating the Thrills* is an exhibition in which the society of the spectacle, the imperative of utopia, and the system of the art (market) are being distilled through the personal filters of Arvanitis' memory. Knowing that the artist lives and works in the birthplace of Bauhaus, Weimar, and produces music too, one must conclude that we are dealing with an art that licks conspicuously the walls of experience, challenging us to "think the emotion and feel the thought". In all his works – moving or not – there is the element of action that the words include, of the search for the 'thrill' in a volatile era, but also of the direct recording of the width of the 'disorder'. Today, unfortunately, this disorder is becoming more and more literal, depending more on the orbit of the stock market and less on the search for pure experience and social change, which art should serve under other circumstances. But because we do not know if Rodchenko, Gropius, and Hirst would fully endorse *Relocating the Thrills*, Arvanitis manages to merge our existing forms with his own, unique *modus operandi*.



Star System For New Purposes (Your Rodchenko in my Bauhaus)
Pencil on paper, each 130 x 95 cm, 2008

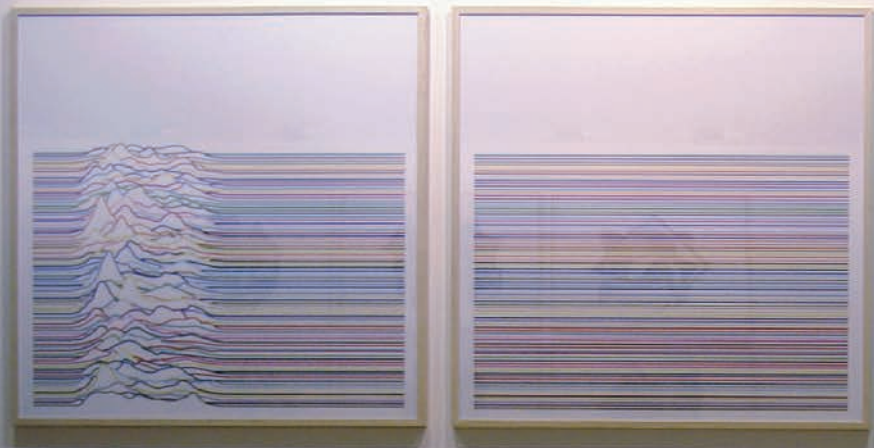


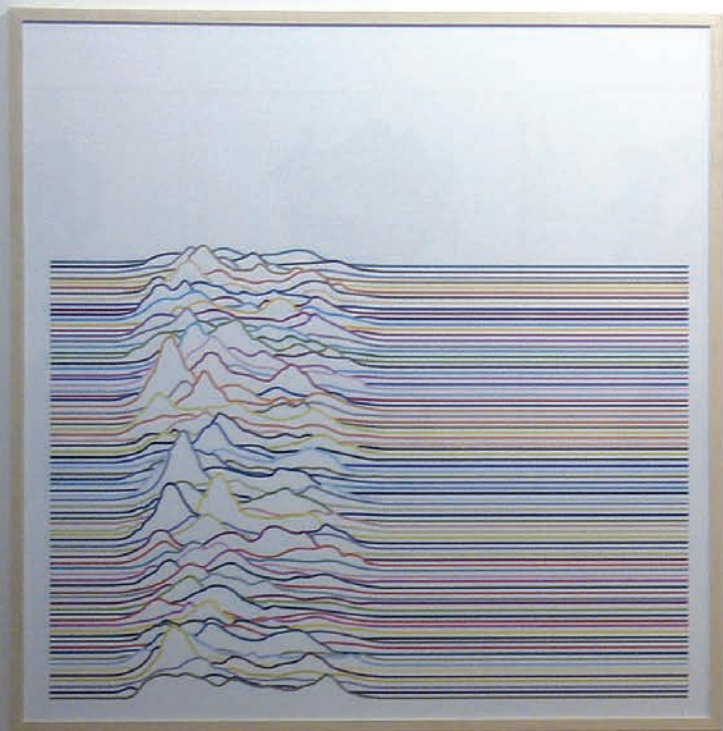
Star System For New Purposes (Your Rodchenko in my Bauhaus), detail
Pencil on paper, 130 x 95 cm, 2008



Drive In (Damien goes to Hollywood)

Wood, aluminium wheels, animation, duration 6 min on loop,
350 x 150 x 125 cm, 2008.





Pleasure (After Peter Saville)

Digital print, edition of 5, each 113 x 113 cm, 2008.

Photography by Dora Economou and Nikos Avanitīs

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Nikos Arvanitis (b. 1979, Athens, GR) studied at the Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna, A, at the Athens School of Fine Arts, Athens, GR (Erasmus scholarship) and at the MFA course "Public Art and new artistic Strategies" at the Bauhaus University of Weimar, DE with scholarships from the DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service) and the A. S. Onassis Public Benefit Foundation. He won the first prize on the "ZeitGenosse Schiller" Competition for public art, Weimar, DE, 2005, was nominated for the "5th DESTE Prize" of the DESTE Foundation, Athens, GR, 2007, and he won the 2nd Prize of the Spyropoulos Foundation Award, Athens, GR, 2009. In 2009 he participated at the 2nd Athens Biennial, Greece and in 2010 at the 2nd Rennes Biennial, France. His Work has been exhibited in Austria, Greece, Cyprus, Iceland, Germany, Poland, USA, Sweden, Serbia, France, Egypt and Belgium. Arvanitis co-founded the artist-duo Barking Dogs United with Naomi Tereza Salmon in 2005.

Christopher Marinos is a writer and curator based in Athens, Greece. He is the founder and co-editor (with Thanos Stathopoulos) of the online art magazine kaput. In 2005-06, he worked as an art historian/researcher for the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Athens (EMST). He was the editor of Possibilities: Interviews with Young Greek Artists (futura, Athens, 2006) and Meatspace: Art in a State of Emergency. Since 2002, Marinos has been contributing regularly to various Greek art journals and exhibition catalogues. In 2006-07, he co-edited (with Xenia Kalpaktsoglou) the visual arts section in Velvet monthly magazine. He is the Athens correspondent for Flash Art International and Modern Painters, and a founding member of the Reading Group. He is one of the curators of the 2nd Athens Biennale 2009 entitled "Heaven".

