

Stefanos Tsivopoulos: Borrowed Knowledge
September 14 - October 8, 2011

Opening Reception

Wednesday, September 14, 6 - 8pm

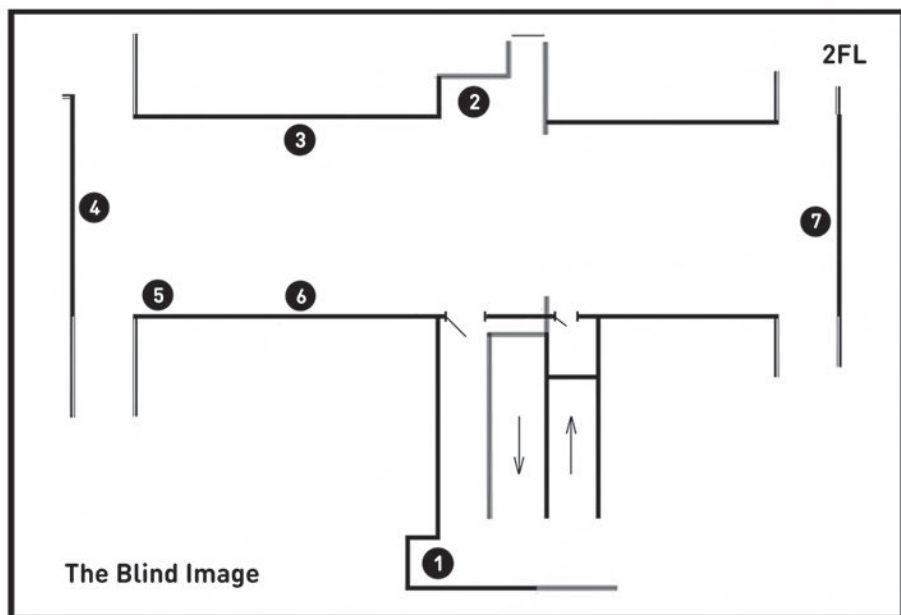
Discussion

Tuesday, October 4, 6.30pm

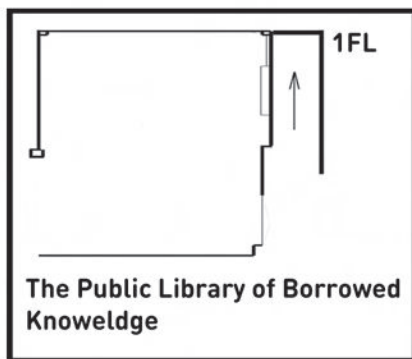
Stefanos Tsivopoulos and Alfredo Cramerotti (Director, Mostyn, Wales)

Gallery Hours

Wednesday - Saturday, 12 - 6pm



- 1** *The Blind Image (Siberia)*
2011
single slide projection
- 2** *The Blind Image (Malling-Merton Rootstock Series)*
2011
appropriated archival photographs
series of 6
8 x 10 in. each
- 3** *The Blind Image*
2011
two vitrines with magazines,
academic, scientific and political books
variable dimensions
- 4** *The Blind Image (Kampf Krampf)*
2011
appropriated archival photographs
variable dimensions
- 5** *The Blind Image (The motherland can hear you)*
2011
open face magazine
9 x 13 in.
- 6** *The Blind Image (Socialismus, I, II, III, IV)*
2011
4 collages of book illustrations
36 x 25 in. each
- 7** *Amnesialand*
2010
Super 16mm transferred to DVD
23 min.



Chronotopia and The Blind Image

Sanne Oorthuizen

[...] What appears in the artwork is its own inner time; the explosion of appearance blasts open the continuity of this inner temporality. The artwork is mediated to real history by its monadological nucleus. History is the content of artworks. To analyze artworks means no less than to become conscious of the history immanently sedimented in them. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London, New York: Continuum, 2002, 1st ed. 1970), pp. 85.

Two men in polo shirts are in the foreground of a black and white photograph. The man on the left narrows his eyes against the sun as the man to his right has crossed his arms in front of his body and is looking sternly out of the frame. Around them a small crowd of people has gathered. All are facing the same direction. A white elevated building arises behind them and as we discern some of the letters that appear behind the people, we can be relatively sure it is a sports complex. But what are the two men watching so solemnly? And what exists outside the frame? We can only guess. The photograph is part of a triptych in the exhibition *Borrowed Knowledge*, a show in two parts: *The Blind Image* and *The Public Library of Borrowed Knowledge* by Stefanos Tsivopoulos. It is coupled with two other photographs, one portraying the back of a man in a long white coat who operates a machine, and the other, in sepia, shows an old car on the side of a lake. The images contain an evocative aesthetic induced by their casual simplicity and odd relation to one another. But what narratives, scenarios or meanings can be deduced or ascribed to them? What do the images tell or hide from us? From what time and place did they originate, and how do they relate to our present?

Over the last four years, Stefanos Tsivopoulos has presented audiences with an ongoing investigation into the construction of history and its representations. His films have merged cinematic and documentary vocabularies with factual and fictional narratives, thereby exploring the implications of socio-political, economic and historical phenomena in the production of images. For *AmnesiaLand* (originally produced for Manifesta 8, Cartagena, Spain, 2010) Tsivopoulos journeyed through oneiric wastelands that were once the site of *La Union*, Cartagena's wealthy mining industry. This site has been left deserted in Post-Fordist times. A science fiction script supports the film, imposing the simultaneous existence of past, present and future. While the filmed footage shows deserted factories and brightly colored ponds of toxic residue, archival footage sheds light on what existed. Tsivopoulos thus works to deconstruct historical narratives by imposing narration that fuses seemingly opposing temporalities, making the viewer question what exactly constitutes history.

In *The Blind Image* similar issues are at stake but Tsivopoulos takes his research a step further when he dissolves all linear narration. Instead, images are forced to function on their own. In this context it may be useful to consider Theodor Adorno's concept of sediment. In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno argues that images are imbedded with history and social labor. Because these concepts constantly change and evolve, images contain an alternative temporality that is in itself fragmented, in flux and thus everything but linear. Images are like a river's sediment: they carry a fluidity and continuous erosion, dismissing any type of structural containment but for their bedding.

The Blind Image consists of reproductions from magazines and educational books that were published between 1967 and 1969 in Socialist Czechoslovakia. Before we come to know their provenance, we can tell that they derive from a specific past. Clothing and a

car on the lake reveal 1960s fashion; a machine shows a modernist technology and design concurrent with that period. A further clue as to their historical nature derives from their materiality. They not only function as representations of science, flora and technology, nor do they solely represent a period in time, a socialistic condition in which labor was the main force, but they are also themselves objects produced by labor. The images constantly oscillate between these forces, creating a hybrid fluidity that never ceases to move. Their inherent temporality exists as a relation to the condition in which the images were produced, but simultaneously, due to their socialistic aesthetics, they presuppose an imagined future that was always to come and that will never arrive. *The Blind Image* is a way of re-reading and re-interpreting images without looking for the explicit information sealed within their textual context, but rather by searching for the knowledge that images themselves can produce.

The books and magazines were produced around the time of Prague Spring, a period of liberal reforms initiated by Alexander Dubcek, who came to power in January 1968. His policies were halted by the Soviet Union on August 21 of the same year when the red army invaded Prague, filling the streets with soldiers and military tanks. Despite these efforts to counter reform, Prague Spring already signalled the dwindling influence of the totalitarian grip of the Soviet Union, until its dissolution in 1989. The breakdown of the socialistic system finds itself not far from our present. Since the decisive historical schism of 1989, capitalism and neo-liberalism have become the new political powers, constantly tightening their grip, adding to class divisions and making large parts of society "invisible." A strong emphasis on individual agency within the parameters of the system persists and a space for collectivity or the commons is often denied. Currently, with protests breaking out all over the world, ruling governments toppling and austerity measures instated, we find ourselves groping in the dark. By appropriating existing images and refraining from producing any new images for his work, in *The Blind Image* Tsivopoulos takes a personal political stance as he converts the concept of austerity to a means of production.

This becomes particularly clear when we look at his *Socialismus Series*, which evolves around labor as the main force of the socialistic system. It represents different aspects of knowledge and its distribution based on the economic-political model of Socialism. The four large-scale collages each focus on one specific subject: space/universe, crops, machines and aeroplanes. The images, which were cut from the books on show, echo the period of modernity and of the imminent technological revolution that was already dissolving human labor. The theme of universe and space was omnipresent within Cold War politics. The Space Race or Star Wars saw the Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin as the first man in space. His spacecraft Vostok completed an orbit of earth on April 12, 1961. *Socialismus VI* shows a tribute to Gagarin on a page from one of the academic books. Also here it is interesting to refer to Adorno: "The artwork is at once process and instant. Its objectivation, a condition of aesthetic autonomy, is also rigidification. The more the social labor sedimented in the artwork is objectified and fully formed, the more the work echoes hollowly and becomes alien to itself."¹ The collages are at once forceful in their supposed "objective" repetition and inherent artistic labor, amounting to a temporality that at first glance might seem like a narrative but is solely dependent on the viewers interpretation.

Like the collages, the work *The Blind Image (Malling-Merton Rootstock Series)* likewise deals with repetition but in a slightly different manner. Six individually framed

¹Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London, New York: Continuum, 2002, 1st ed. 1970), pp. 100.

book pages present what seems like the same type of plant roots, set against a black background. As the images are not cut from the page, but presented as pages from the books, we assume that we may be able to gather more information. But because the text surrounding the images is written in a language that most probably differs from our own, we find ourselves again groping in the dark. As democracy is failing and neo-liberalism is taking over, the appropriation of images that derive from a political and social system that was intertwined with utopian ideals and failed to produce becomes a way to reconsider our current state of affairs.

In *The Blind Image*, Tsivopoulos not only questions what constitutes images and our understanding of history, but he uses images as part of a poetic and associative language which aims to find an in-betweenness or chronotopia: a utopia within time and space. Chronotopia is sedimented and fragmented; it triggers narration but will never rest to become narrative. An imaginary space thus hovers over the exhibition, inviting visitors to temporarily occupy. The single slide projection *The Blind Image (Siberia)* incorporates this imaginary space as a brightly-colored landscape that was made from light and again returns to light. Its futuristic quality makes us wonder whether we are looking at a tourist destination or a Siberian landscape. In the case of the latter, we may think of some of the darkest pages in the history of Socialism. Adversaries to the Communist regime were sent to concentration camps in Siberia to work in the mines. As Tsivopoulos states: "It is a lost place onto which we can project many different stories and thoughts, keeping in mind the fact that it derives from the socialistic production of images from the 1960s." As mentioned above, the illustrations contain aesthetic references to a specific socio-political context. The act of inscribing them with one's own meaning becomes an act of cultural translation in which a hybrid, transient or translational identity can be formed. Hence, as it evades any clear definition, Tsivopoulos' idea of "borrowed knowledge" becomes at once imaginative and political.

A collateral event to *The Blind Image* is *The Public Library of Borrowed Knowledge*, which aims to open up a participatory dialogue relating to the idea of knowledge production and cultural translation. After an open call to the public of New York, various books and titles were contributed. *Borrowed Knowledge* takes as a starting point a more personal trace, namely the academic books that belong to the private library of Tsivopoulos' father, who is originally from Greece. Just before the Greek dictatorship commenced in the mid 1960s, his family was forced to leave the country, fleeing to Socialist Czechoslovakia. The books and images that form the basis for *The Blind Image* derive from the educational system of 1960s Czechoslovakia. Their displacement in Greece brought about an interesting transference of knowledge. As the books contained specific information, written in Czech, they did not offer any literary support. The illustrations thus floated in a sea of letters and words that could have any meaning and could therefore be infused with different language, stories and thoughts.

As mentioned above, the illustrations contain references to a specific socio-political context. The act of inscribing them with one's own meaning becomes an act of cultural translation where a hybrid, transient or translational identity can be formed. Hence, as it evades any clear definition, Tsivopoulos' idea of "borrowed knowledge" becomes at once imaginative and political. As current neo-liberalist tendencies put increased emphasis on a specific individual agency within the capitalist system, *The Public Library of Borrowed Knowledge* attempts to counter this by inviting the visitor to actively, personally yet collectively, participate in the shaping and sharing of knowledge.

Imageries for the blinded minorities

Matteo Lucchetti

Borrowed Knowledge, Stefanos Tsivopoulos' first solo show in the United States, represents a large step forward – characterized by a new openness – in the artist's research for the last ten years on documents, archives and history. This research has lately focused on existing relationships between the visibility of the mass workforce and its representation in image-making that connotes each zeitgeist. It is not by chance that on this occasion the artist has decided to not produce any new images, understanding his role as an activator of critical thinking, surrounded by a crowd of images in the contemporary mediascape.

"What does it mean to create an image today?" – was one of the recurrent questions that accompanied Tsivopoulos in his digging into the constructions of imageries of the past. These included former Eastern European propaganda for the masses, in which his father found his own form of escapism, as in *The Blind Image* works, and the economic flourishing middle class, exploiting the labor connected to the intense mining activity in the Murcia region, as seen in the film *Amnesialand*. Both projects, that in this show collide in the same space, made use of documents in order to create a journey into historical paradigms that seem to be lost. These images have thus lost their sense of belonging to something. In the *Kampf Krampf* series, for instance, we see three images from the rhetorically constructed Soviet magazines' iconography, cut out from their original context. They appear to float in the triptych they now belong to, making them readable as an entry point to a struggle to represent a socio-political episteme.

The disappearance in *Amnesialand* – which the voice-over in the film calls "The Event" – is the factual destruction of nearly all visual memory linked to that particular space and time in Spain, while in *The Blind Image*, this concept refers to the ideology that made possible a visual narrative bound to a specific idea of Socialism. Four collages – titled *Socialismus I, II, III and IV* – describe four different moments of the paradigm brought to life by an imagery built up on propaganda assumptions. Each little image is a cut-up from the library of the artist's father, exiled to Czechoslovakia for his communist beliefs during the Greek military Junta of 1967-74. The four stages of Socialism seem to lead one to the other: the labor in the corn fields, the agricultural machines, the airplanes and aeronautics, and the Space race and its protagonists. Each cosmogony in pictures is directly connected and fuels the following, as subsequent diegetic spheres in which each one is in a cause and effect relationship with the other. Similarly, society and its workforce are key elements and motors of the pyramidal development that Socialism represented during the Cold War. This hermetic system of propaganda is put into dialogue, in the exhibition space, with a work that represents an epiphany of the standardization that any mass production thinking brings in itself. The *Malling-Merton Rootstock Series*, is composed of six cut-outs of a rootstock illustration, used all throughout the twentieth century to make apple production efficient. This series, found in a Soviet science book, refers to an agricultural method that was, and is, common on a global scale. In these six pieces not only is the Eastern Bloc narrative mirrored by this method of mass production, but on a broader scale, it makes apparent a dynamic of normalization underlying the place of images in the construction of a collective understanding of the role of society.

In the exhibition space, facing the *Socialismus* series, the artist puts two vitrines, in which the book collection of his father – previously used only as a source to his visual juxtapositions – is shown as an archive to its full potential. A Foucauldian partition is played by Tsivopoulos in this piece, where the books are now presented as fully discursive contents, and displayed as a collage of covers, that contain the codes to access all the other works in the room. Four publishing genres compose the selection – in which the Eastern European sci-fi titles stand out. Among these, there is the famous Capek's play *R.U.R. (Rossum's Universal Robots)*, where for the first time (1920) the word "robot" appears, derived from the Czech word "robota" that stands for forced labor. In the dystopia described by Capek, in which the automation of work leads to the creation of biological entities enslaved to industrial production, a counterpart lies in the utopian horizon that permeates *The Blind Image* materials and their time. The knowledge gathered through the choice of these books, functions here as a testimony of how subjectivity is able to draw a path even in a highly normed mediascape, such as the late 1960s in Czechoslovakia. The library's owner, specifically through the texts put on show, acquired an autonomous knowledge through a daily appropriation of information, storytelling and images, and breaking medias' vicious circle that is beautifully deconstructed in the other works. This personal escapism was not an easy thing to obtain, as the projected specter of a Siberian landscape reminds us at the entrance of the show.

When the past is covered by a "white silence", as in the case presented in *AmnesiaLand*, the act of remembering is comparable to the political statement that Karl Marx expressed in the "18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte" (1852), where he described the events around the Napoleon III dictatorship, as a layering of different shades of grey, one on the other, so to communicate that repetitive dynamic on which history is written and that is also central to the indissoluble acts of remembering and forgetting. And it is precisely in this repetition that everyone's autonomous attempt to access knowledge plays a revolutionary part in the process of understanding and writing history and its imagery.

With *The Public Library of Borrowed Knowledge* - in which everyone is invited to contribute with their own experience of 'borrowed knowledge' - Tsivopoulos prefers to re-articulate the premises of his artistic practice in the light of a wish for openness of the outcomes of his work. It is exactly in this step that the leap forward, mentioned before, resides. It is in this perspective that *The Public Library of Borrowed Knowledge* has to be seen and analyzed. The strategies behind the two parts of the show are similar but have two different outcomes: in both parts knowledge is presented as a tool to emancipate the gaze of the subject from any enclosed imagery, but in the latter an open proposition takes place, and an imaginative power to think knowledge otherwise takes the shape of an open and on-going archive for borrowed knowledge.

Borrowed Knowledge is a poetic investigation into memory and imagination by ISCP artist-in-residence Stefanos Tsivopoulos. In 2011, ISCP launched an annual initiative to offer three ISCP residents and one ISCP alum the space, time and challenge to produce new works and to engage with the context of their presentation. This is the second show in this series of solo exhibitions.

Stefanos Tsivopoulos (born 1973, Prague) graduated from the Gerrit Rietveld Academie Amsterdam in 2002, and received his Masters from Sandberg Institute Amsterdam in 2004. He participated in residencies at the Rijksakademie van beeldenden kunst, Amsterdam; Platform Garanti, Istanbul; and IASPIS, Stockholm. Recent solo shows include *Amnesialand*, Heidelberg Kunstverein; *The Real The Story The Storyteller*, Smart Project Space, Amsterdam; and *Lost Monument*, Art Forum, Berlin. Group shows include Manifesta 8, Murcia; 1st Athens Biennale; Witte de With, Rotterdam; BFI Southbank, London; Centre Pompidou, Paris; Kunsthalle Fridericianum, Kassel; ev+a Biennial, Limerick; ACF, New York; Museum of Contemporary Art, Athens; Centre Photographique d'Ile, Paris; and Essl Museum, Vienna.

Sanne Oorthuizen is an independent curator and writer based in Amsterdam. She is currently a participant in De Appel Curatorial Programme 2011/2012.

Matteo Lucchetti is an art historian, independent curator and art critic. He currently lives and works in Paris, where he is curator in residence at the Kadist Foundation.



above: *Malling-Merton Rootstock Series*, 2011, appropriated archival photographs, 8 x 10 in. each
front cover: *Kampf Krampf*, 2011, appropriated archival photographs, variable dimensions

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