

Tobacco Area

An old man now and former smoker

Nikos Karouzos,

*The Mellow Behavior of Barbarossa**

The twentieth century, at least as far as the visual arts are concerned, offers copious examples of artists who have dealt with the topic of memory and archiving.

What is more, any artwork dealing with archival production is bound to raise, again and again, the same question: what is an archive? For one soon realizes that the object created by the artist, in any given instance, is of the least importance here. Instead, the important thing here is the fact that the artist actually relinquishes his traditional role to assume a new one. Panos Charalambous, in his exhibition *Tobacco Area*, declares that for the past twenty-five years he has been examining the social history of a plant, *Nicotiana rustica*. If there ever was a plant that was part and parcel of the adventure of modernity, this is it.

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So, which are the qualities acquired by the artist in his attempt to define this topic? Before long, the artist becomes an archivist (by compiling lists of smokers who are still alive and lists of smokers who have died), a chronologist (by drawing up tables of dates and counting the years of tobacco, as if creating a new, revolutionary definition of time), and a sculptor (by producing his own forms and objects, and using tobacco as his raw material, since subject matter and raw material converge in his exhibition). But above all the

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exhibition mounted, as acknowledged by the artist himself, is an addendum. The artist compiles his own lists, defines his own archives, and makes his own groupings. He produces what, for him, is important or not. This endeavor involves an oscillation that can also be found in modernist configurations of visual archives, an oscillation between the essential and the objective and a presentation of the accidental and the particular. For visual archives are often created on the basis of the 'trivial', thus searching for meaning and significance in places often ignored by objective science.

The archive created is an annotation. The artist archives, constructs or manages a specific material. This process follows several methodical steps. Annotation in *Tobacco Area* works in two ways. First of all, the act of annotation constitutes a return to personal experience. In this case, the act of annotation is a product of reminiscence. Hence, such an artistic output indicates a return to the self. The artist, assuming the guise of a Cartesian philosopher, indicates that knowledge comes from within himself. Knowledge thus derives from one's own self rather than other people or sense experience. By the same token, owing to its central function to keep and preserve, memory is the only repository of knowledge not derived from sense data. Memory, therefore, serves as an instrument for gathering such data.

Annotation, however, does not stop here. Ultimately, the artist is interested in 'objectively' defining his thematic framework. His video about a walk across the tobacco fields (*A Walk*), which is included in the exhibition, defines the space, the background against which his subject unfolds. Likewise, his video about a group of smokers who smoke sitting at a round table, with a clock looming high on the wall, defines the time. In a way, the artist constructs a transcendental setting which is structured through space and time. And then he goes on to create his own mnemonic sequences, labyrinths, pathways or impasses, reminding us thus that the production of such an archive involves the deployment of constantly reconfigured mnemonic sequences. Additionally, several parts of the exhibition serve as a votive space.

Still, *Tobacco Area* is not merely a superimposition of memory. Rather, it is essentially a political exhibition. The artist refers to the issue of tobacco policies. And this is

not a project that he 'merely recalls'. It is not a project that exhausts itself in a ritual of memory, as important as this may be; rather, it is a competitive endeavor. The smoking ban serves as a means for the appropriation of public space by neoliberal ethics, constitutes a new definition of surveillance, of the clean and immaculate body.

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