

# A Thick Fug of Smoke

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## An Anatomy of the Personality of the Akarnanian Artist-Ethnographer Panos Charalambous

*What do they want, all those who believe  
they're in Athens or Piraeus?  
Someone comes from Salamis and asks someone else  
whether he 'issues forth from Omonia Square'.  
'No, I issue forth from Syntagma', replies the other, pleased*  
George Seferis\*

Elias Petropoulos, in his study of Turkish coffeehouses and hookah (*Turkish Coffee in Greece*), mentions that, at the time, the only extant examples of such coffeehouses were to be found in Thessaloniki and Kavala, failing to mention anything about Athens. Yet, years later, Philippos Philippou would rectify the omission, pointing out that a coffeehouse of this type existed on Omonia Square, on 60 Stadiou Street, until recently. Its patrons were divided between Greeks who smoked hookah (mostly people from Asia Minor and Constantinople, Arvanites, and sailors), and Egyptians who smoked *mu'assel*. Owner of the Hellas Coffeehouse was someone called Mitsos Kordoroubas, hailing from Aitoliko. Panos Charalambous, a (near) countryman of Kordoroubas, arrived in Athens sometime in the mid-1970s, apparently via Omonia Square, stayed for a while, left for Italy, and then came back again later. Charalambous is an Akarnanian from Xiromero, an area whose inhabitants mostly work as fishermen or tobacco farmers, often as serfs of big landowners and the tobacco industry – a still-thriving industry at the time.

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\* "In the Manner of G. S.", in *Collected Poems* (revised edition), translated, edited and introduced by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995), 52.

As an internal migrant, the only connecting link with the home that Charalambous left behind were the coffeehouses around Omonia Square, blanketed in a thick fug of smoke, yet young Panos had already set his mind on going across the border, on traveling to Europe, which was still considered –at the time– as a hotbed of contemporary thinking and a breeding ground for the artistic avant-garde. Indeed, the years that followed, during which he traveled to Italy, and then went on to study at the Athens School of Fine Arts under Nikos Kessanlis, were years dedicated to the study of the European avant-garde phenomenon. Who could know what place Xiromero and its everyday life had in the young artist's heart?

Shortly after, however, Charalambous would start introducing tobacco in his first exhibitions, both as an indicator of his origins and as a component of a particular artistic ethnography. In "The Artist as Ethnographer", Hal Foster defines a particular Temporary Autonomous Zone (T.A.Z.) of contemporary art, which he describes as "artistic ethnography". The author discusses the current significant influence of anthropology on contemporary art, tracing its origins in the proto-anthropological character of Surrealism (associated with Georges Bataille and Michel Leiris) in the 1920s and 1930s, and the *négritude* movement (associated with Leopold Senghor and Aimé Césaire) in the late 1940s and early 1950s. In these early forms of artistic anthropology, Foster identifies two main types: anthropology as auto-analysis (as in Leiris) and anthropology as social critique (as in Bataille). Ethnography in Europe, even in its later "artistic" form, may have been connected with colonialism's collective tolerance, but Charalambous's artistic ethnography, along with Elias Petropoulos's non-artistic ethnography, is a totally different story. Both Charalambous and Petropoulos become "one of them", one of the coffeehouse patrons, when sitting there. Indeed, there is no divergence between the observer and the observed. The ethnographer here is more like an eye-witness than an examiner.

Charalambous has been working on the tobacco series for almost a quarter of a century, and this project has now probably come full circle. Although he never (?) was a smoker himself, this work constitutes both an archive of the memory of his origins and a sui generis history of the modern world, since the Spanish 'discovery' of tobacco in the New

World marks the beginning of an era of expansion which would unfold across a multitude of fields during modernity. Thus, this 'Museum of Tobacco and/or Smoking', which gradually came into existence over the course of this twenty-five-year period, contains tobacco itself, photographs, drawings and videos of tobacco fields (all of which have become collectible items, since tobacco is no longer cultivated to such an extent in our country), various paraphernalia of smoking consumption (e.g. cigarette holders, pipes, packs, etc.), and an assortment of cultural ephemera (e.g. texts and advertisements), along with a record of the dematerialization of tobacco ash, smoke, as an ectoplasm, a specter of a thing that no longer exists.

The United States –the country from which tobacco originally came, and also the country which created, almost single-handedly, the mythology of smoking, captured in a slew of Hollywood movies– was the first country to lead an anti-smoking campaign. Despite not being the first such campaign in history, it may deliver a definitive blow to this social phenomenon – or something along those lines. Naturally, the rest of the world followed suit. And so, in spite of delays and opposition to it, this trend has arrived in tobacco-loving Greece, the 'small village of indomitable Gauls' of Southeast Europe. First came the smoking ban on airplanes, then the ban of tobacco advertising (or was it the other way around?). Next came the ban on tobacco cultivation, and then graphic warning messages, and in some countries even graphic pictorial warnings, began to appear on cigarette packs. Finally, smoking itself was banned, initially in public places, and in the future a total ban on smoking may be introduced. So nowadays, particularly since the beginning of this year, smoking has been associated with interdiction and transgressive behavior. The current forms of interdiction seem to be (also) persecuting pleasure. "Whereas smoking cigarettes was once an act of defiance, it is now largely an occasion for guilt, although defiance and guilt have always belonged to the psychology of cigarette smoking – forms of the violence of transgressing the interdiction of a taboo. Cigarettes have always been identified with the illicit",<sup>†</sup> as Richard Klein wrote almost twenty years ago.

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<sup>†</sup> Richard Klein, *Cigarettes Are Sublime* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press), 17.

What sets apart Charalambous's work from that of the majority of his peers is the fact that it rests on three firm foundations: the European avant-garde, world cultures (anthropology and ethnology), and the traditions and memories of his homeland, both in the strict sense (that is, Xiromero) and the broad sense (which, perhaps, encompasses the entire Balkans). In our country, there are only a few examples of artists who have been obsessively exploring a theme over a twenty-five year period – usually the opposite is true: a constant alternation of forms, just to stay in the rat race. On the one hand, this impels me to classify Charalambous rather among the ranks of erudite scholars than among the ranks of his fellow artists. On the other hand, however, his true affinity with his material, his fondness for and experience of the place, push me to the opposite direction, towards excluding him even from the ranks of his 'conceptual' fellow artists, ranks which are usually plagued by pointy-headed, killjoy commentators, people who have a better knowledge of art history or, worse still, the current art magazines and journals than of their own birthplace, their own children, or their own uncle.

No, Panos Charalambous is immune from such accusations. His work –both the work about tobacco discussed at length above, and the work about sound ghosts which is still ongoing– contains sufficient fondness and experience. And one last thing: the more one knows him, the more one understands that the well-known demand for demolishing the separation between art and everyday life has been met in his case. I don't know if this is an ingredient of artistic success (there have been many strange goings-on in these bleak, Biennale-centric days), but, in the difficult times we are living, it seems like a life model worthwhile to follow.

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**Thanassis Moutsopoulos**