

The Highlights - Interview with George Kontos

"What one is escaping from is inextricable from, if not defined by, what one is escaping to."
-Adam Phillips

George Kontos, *Fallen Trademark*, 2007

Transitions of time and space are never neutral occurrences. The very term 'transition' veils how things change when they happen. The role of the artist in representing where we are and where we are going (e.g., that change 'is happening'), and our relationship within such a temporality, is often one of ambivalence. Is it enough to say that change is happening? How do we locate the subject within change(s)? The reasons for such ambivalence are of course numerous; evidencing experience is a difficult matter.

To construct an artwork that proposes (what should happen in face of a given), while also not adhering to a strict teleology, supports a continuing mainstay of the artwork as ultimately being concerned with a problem instead of presenting the solution. No matter how urgent a proposal the work attempts to articulate, it is a reluctant proposal in that it does not wish to be constrained, to be time-bound. With this enduring sense of urgency, artworks place more value on the desire for, than on the account of.

In early August I conducted a studio visit with George Kontos in Los Angeles, where he lives and works. I was shown a number of works that were being made for an upcoming exhibition entitled *Scykranes*. Over the course of this visit, the dialogue focused on a video work of live-action and animation entitled *Skycranes*, a large C-print entitled *Corporate Dumpsite*, and a wall mounted work consisting of a pedestal and its corresponding object made entirely from Plexiglas entitled *Fallen Trademark*. The following conversation was recorded during the studio visit.

ERIC GOLO STONE: William Dean Howells, the American author and literary critic writing about the use of romanticism and realism in the early twentieth century, declared: "There is little significant difference between romanticism and realism, because each sought to widen the bounds of sympathy, to level every barrier against aesthetic freedom, to escape the paralysis of tradition." It seems that your work wants to make a similar claim, to escape a paralysis of tradition by making objects that attempt to evade the possibility of locating tradition(s) or points of origin: architecture/various formal practices/professions, a particular event, a historical source, narrative timeline.

George Kontos, stills from *Scykranes*, 2007

GEORGE KONTOS: I don't want to come across as being in opposition to traditions or points of origin, not overtly. The iconoclast character is a bit of a myth. There is a difference between posing a strict critique and evading the subject matter of the critique. Instead of the work evading these various traditions, practices, I am using them to achieve a visual result that can...the critique is in regards to a location, not a practice. Downtown LA is the place. I don't want to talk about architecture...I want to avoid a conflicted position. When was tradition ever paralyzing? (Laughs.) We are more familiar with symbols and trademarks than the actual locations of what they stand for. In the video we see a vague, or not so vague, 'stand in' for the MGM logo. This symbol being transported through the sky and crashing atop a specific structure is something horrific, because it is an accident. And without the sign, the structure is an unidentifiable power. The sign on the building makes it able to be located.

EGS: It becomes accountable.

GK: In Greece I only knew the sign as a floating logo, never the location of the sign, the structure and physical place of a sign such as the MGM logo. Many of these traditions are being processed now in a global sense. The artist today certainly counteracts traditions, but that is a tradition in itself - new traditions are being developed...I refuse to act in architecture; I am interested in executing ideas in a different space from what architecture has provided, from what it provides as a practice.

EGS: Refuse - what about making use of negation? Negating a past, whether it is negating a practice, conceptualization, or construction/structure. Do you see these modes of negation as categories of destruction? Transition? Critique?

GK: The works act as functions that change operations, going through a series of modifications, each one substituting for, or acting against, the other. Negation might be too

strong a word.

EGS: Negation is far better than to foreclose. Though I am not sure negation is a great place to start anything.

GK: I see the changes or transitions as how the objects contrast each other by their construction materials, drywall, black Plexiglas. Materials and forms that take into consideration an understanding of something disassembled but at the same time each of them can work to reflect meaning from each other, disassembled and syncretic. The chronology of the short video is altered with the presence of the other works in the space. I am interested in the video being a building block for the other pieces to take its place. In *Scykranes* we see a corporate logo as sculpture being lifted up by a helicopter to the top of a corporate tower and then violently dropped. At this point the viewer might remember the image of the very same, or a similar, logo sculpture rendered as a 3-D object, *Fallen Trademark*. This creates a shift.

EGS: So the works act as "functions that change face and go through a series of modifications." I'm interested in the use of a series of changes, that you are piecing together a timeline. In recognizing these changes/modifications, how do you see the works as evidencing the conditions of change(s)?

George Kontos, *Corporate Dumpsite*, 2007

GK: The works present comments on a confusion of identity and location. LA is a perfect model to work within such a crisis. Physically and diagrammatically, we see a specific location, downtown LA. The other works are free floating; the work entitled *Corporate Dumpsite* is located in a constructed landscape, one from memory - a setting in Greece perhaps, memory providing a basis for a desired location, misinterpretations of place, and their (the art objects') proximity to one another, physically and psychically, extend this feeling or instance of confusion...These are conditions within change.

EGS: It seems you are thinking about how a work presents its relationship to the conditions of its time and place. You say the exhibition works on a pluralistic level where individual works (the video, C-prints, drawings, sculptural objects) are meant to be interrelated, while each individual work also acts on its own to provide other meanings. I think this is the case

in all exhibitions. However, what I found particularly consistent in your exhibition was the idea that the works provide a peripheral insight, or as you have stated a disassembled vision, to/from something else. This peripheral or disassembled perspective is interesting, in that it evidences or sets up a relationship/desire to a "central apparatus," or if central is too strong let's just call it another character/place/event. The obvious example being the video *Scykranes*, which presents clips of information that hint at a narrative as a movie trailer might, and yet the clips are not edited from a singular completed film or footage. In many ways the video clearly utilizes the expected structural conventions of the movie trailer, steady anticipation leading to brief glimpses of a central plot and characters, all within a short duration. I was interested in the implications of a trailer existing, along with the other works in the exhibition, as evidence of a past event. The imaginative construction of this event became central to further understanding the work, and the work provided possible insights into the event. This idea that the video was what remained of a past event also alluded to an archeological encounter with a relic from the past, which perhaps we can address later on. Yet as I begin to think more on the video, separating it from the other objects in the exhibition, I see it as acting without a past, as a proposal, as a preview for a yet unreleased/unrealized work by the artist - a preview of what might be wanted, the present imperfect.

GK: I agree with that interpretation. I wanted the video to act as evidence of a past event and at the same time to propose a future possible.

EGS: The video may act as a trailer of a past completed work, a preview of a soon to be completed work, or a preview of a future possible work, yet in all instances the video is a preview of what might be/what is desired...in which case, thinking about the imagery, then it is an imaginary glimpse of a rather dark possible reality. There is an anxiety that surfaces regarding time and space and perhaps your location within such.

GK: I think the dark possible reality is already here...I am frequently awoken by glaring light from police helicopter spotlights...without getting into the clichés of why LA can be so difficult to access, a general sense of isolation, I am exaggerating these already existing conditions.

EGS: Why do you want the work to exaggerate these realities that are already there?

GK: Anytime we render something it appears exaggerated.

EGS: To want to counter a process of historicization while simultaneously relying on your own interpretation of history in order to present an idealized alternative of 'what could be' should not necessarily be considered a 'bad' thing, as long as it realizes the imperfect methods of both the historical and subjective telling...It seems that the work in this exhibition obfuscates the viewer's attempts at realizing a timeline.

GK: Information is disseminated out of a timeline, but is not always presented within the context of a timeline. Information is usually presented out of context. A clear chronology is impossible in LA. LA accommodates a confused sense of history and time. The work in this exhibition tries to illustrate this. I don't think the video makes it difficult to understand a timeline. Perhaps the other objects in relation to the video complicate that timeline, but...I think art is a selective process of rendering and judging...and its more complicated than just that.

EGS: You have mentioned the opening scene of Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* (1960) many times in regards to influencing *Scykranes*...In the film's opening sequence a statue of Jesus, suspended by cables from a helicopter is flying over the newly developing neighborhoods of Rome. Journalist Marcello and the photographer named Paparazzo follow in a second helicopter. Marcello's helicopter is easily sidetracked by a group of bikini-clad women sunbathing on a rooftop. (The not so subtle symbolism of Jesus is soon replaced by an even less subtle example of the profane, modern lifestyle and architecture of the new Rome)...I see how *Scykranes* was influenced by Fellini's opening sequence, and yet *Scykranes* is devoid of a Marcello and the interaction that plays out with the women on the rooftop. Save for the police officers, which give very little signs of life, and the fleeing group of pedestrians, your video presents very little human interaction. Can you talk about that a bit?

GK: Yes, the downtown LA I have rendered in *Scykranes* is vacant. The only times we see people are when they are running away or standing in confrontation. I wanted to build anticipation, to create a feeling of isolation, both in the imagery, lifeless streets, and how the imagery is rendered (live action animation), the only movement is vectoring from left to right. The helicopters, as anthropomorphic characters, may have an authority but in contrast to the police who exercise a total control, their role is far more ambiguous. *La Dolce Vita* is there, but so is a collective memory of science fiction and horror B-movies.

EGS: You came to Los Angeles from Greece in 2003, with a formal architecture degree.

You graduated with a Masters from CalArts. You worked as a designer for a civic/public art studio in LA, so you have for some time now had this relationship to another industry, another education, other tools.

GK: Art has some sort of authority in being able to judge, to take on these various industries, including itself, because they don't work alone in themselves.

EGS: You find there is an ineffectiveness of these practices, when they act within their particular focus?

GK: Yes, they are not effective for what it is I want to do - that's why art is an attractive model for thinking individuals to operate within...it says, here is a place for an interdisciplinary practice that questions all its contents and questions itself as a container for those contents. This is an important question that needs to be asked again and again. What is art's effectiveness?