

Nakis Panayotidis.

Seeing the Invisible

November 21, 2014 until March 15, 2015

In 1994 at the Kunstmuseum Bern, Nakis Panayotidis had his first large exhibition in a museum. Twenty years after *Nakis Panayotidis: Mnemography*—curated by the then director Hans Christoph von Tavel—and many further international solo exhibitions, the Kunstmuseum Bern is devoting a comprehensive retrospective to this multifaceted artist and one of the leading representatives of *arte povera*. The exhibition *Nakis Panayotidis. Seeing the Invisible* is presenting sculptures, installations, paintings, drawings and photographs executed by the artist since the early 1970s. One aspect that we will be highlighting is the artist's recent work that he made especially for this show in Bern.

Since Nakis Panayotidis's confrontation with *arte povera* while he was studying art in Turin, the currents of this art movement are the formative influence behind his work. He uses the ordinary materials we are familiar with in our day-to-day life, things we have discarded and bear the scars of many years of use. On the other hand, he likewise uses valuable materials such as bronze, but he doesn't treat them as such, giving them the appearance as if they were wet clumps of dirt. The incidental and the transitory fascinate him equally, and are especially manifest in his preference for using light and steam in his work, but not only in these devices. He enjoys playfully experimenting with *objets trouvés*, which he presents as ready-mades in ever-new contexts. Nakis Panayotidis begins each new work by carefully considering the conditions specific to it, so that his art is highly diversified.

His art is unique in many ways. It cannot be narrowed down to a particular movement. Nakis Panayotidis neither pursues certain subject matter nor style, nor practices a technique nor uses a material that we could call a trademark of his work. When realizing an idea, he constantly adheres to the liberty of exploring all the options open to him. He finds his inspiration and art material where he is currently staying or living. He never tires of improvising. He never forces his ideas to conform to a certain style. Thus, it is almost always characteristic for his art that individual pieces can be surprisingly different to the others, even in the case of coherent groups of works. We seldom find visual elements that interlink his drawings, photographs, installations, neon works and bronze sculptures. But when we begin to reflect on content and

the meaning of the works we discover how they are interrelated. His art is conceived in a way that individual works convey an impression of what came before and what will follow. The insight that everything is in a permanent state of flux, is the key focus of his art. He is equally at home with mythology as with the present world we live in. His panel paintings and photographs, his reliefs, object compositions and installations are based on the cultural history and the traditions of the country of his birth, Greece. They are expressions of what the artist wishes to address, be it philosophical or mythological, social equity or inner freedom.

The exhibition has been organized and realized in close cooperation with the artist. The show inverts the chronological order of his work. Nakis Panayotidis begins with the present and from there proceeds to the past. He does not distinguish between different phases of his artistic career and in this way obscures the difference between old and new.

Nakis Panayotidis—A Brief Biography

Nakis Panayotidis was born in 1947 in Athens. The world of theater was opened up to him at the age of sixteen by his older brother, and Nakis Panayotidis was employed making stage sets. In 1966, he moved from Athens to Turin, where he began studying architecture. There he made the acquaintance of the architect and artist Egi Volterrani and the sculptor Mario Molinari, who both influenced him and his work decisively from then on. Together with Volterrani he visited the exhibitions showing at the Galleria Christian Stein, the birthplace of *arte povera*, where he met the artists of this movement. Many years later, in 2003, the newspaper *Repubblica*, after an exhibition at the Palazzo Ducale, Museo per l'Arte Moderna in Genoa, said of him that he was "l'ultimo dei poveri", "the last of the Arte Povera artists". In 1967, he moved to Rome and attended the Academy of the Fine Arts, where he worked in the areas of theater and film. But after just a year he returned to Turin and began working together with Volterrani as well as in Molinari's studio. It was a time of change and Nakis Panayotidis became involved in politics. Already then he was of the opinion that artists could be politically influential foremost through their work. In 1971, Nakis Panayotidis planned to go to Bern in order to visit the grave of Mikhail Bakunin and the Kunsthalle Bern. During his stay there he met Agnès Häussler. They married in 1973 and, since then, both live in Bern. In 1975, their daughter Anastasia Artemis was born. A period of intensive experimentation followed in his art, which was met with harsh criticism. However, this did not deter him at all, but was the trigger for him to turn to exploring new ideas in art.

Today Nakis Panayotidis lives and works in Bern and on the island Serifos, one of the Cyclades, where he stays regularly with his family in summer.

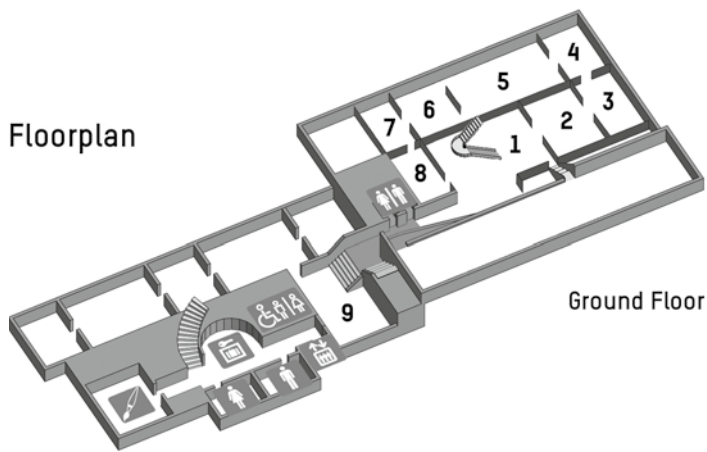
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Burggemeinde
Bern

Floorplan



Room 1: The Past and the Present

Room 2, 3 and 4: Perception

Room 5 and 6: Light and Shade

Room 7: Questions of Meaning

Room 8: Early Works

Room 9 (Vestibule): Film

Façade of the Kunstmuseum Bern

VEDO DOVE DEVO. These three words in neon script on the façade of the Kunstmuseum Bern put Nakis Panayotidis's key message in a nutshell. *VEDO DOVE DEVO*—I see what I must. Everything is always a matter of perspective, perception is never conclusive. Because even when we view something from the same angle, on second glance what we see is never identical with what we initially perceived, and a third view puts a question mark over everything seen in it before. The complexity of ambiguity plays a key role in Nakis Panayotidis's art. He lets the invisible shine through, he shifts our focus to what wasn't there before or was different. Starting with the factual side of what he has before him, he transcends its inherent limits so it becomes linked to new content: between the past and the present, myth and everyday life, reality and illusion.

Room 1: The Past and the Present

Our visitors to the exhibition are greeted by the words *Diventi quello che sei*, 2003 written in Greek letters in neon lights. "You become who you are" is derived from Nietzsche's "How one becomes what one is". The artist focuses his poetic words in a way typical for him, very straightforwardly with no frills, addressing beholders directly and thereby communicating squarely with them.

Writing with neon lights has a special significance for Nakis Panayotidis's work. By presenting his words in a totally minimalist, linear mode, he provokes his viewers to perceive them in a particular way, as for example *Kabul*, 2010, or *EXIL*, 2006. The same is true for the neon inscriptions *Katharsis I* and *Katharsis II* (both 2012). In both cases Nakis Panayotidis takes recourse to the Greek language. The artist turns the individual letters of the words ΔΟΞΑ, ΑΓΩΝ (battle, fame) upside down. They nevertheless remain legible and do not lose their meaning.

The tour of the exhibition begins with the work of art *My time is not your time*, 1989–2014, and also ends with it. Nakis Panayotidis found the preliminary sketch for this work, dating from 1989, again in 2014. The ticking alarm clocks symbolize the progression of time already in the 1989 work. In the new installation the artist also uses sand, which he brought along from Greece. In it he has set up a candle and lit it, in keeping with the example of the candle holders in Orthodox churches, which are filled with sand. Time—and that is the statement the artist is making—did not stop in 1989 but has continued on through to today. But it is nevertheless finite. The candle, constantly burning, reveals what is left.

Nakis Panayotidis created the installation *Ladro di luce* for the first

time in 2005 for the State Museum of Contemporary Art in Thessaloniki and has installed it anew for the Kunstmuseum Bern. The "floating fists" are bronze casts of the artist's hand. They have been mounted directly on the wall so that we have the impression that someone has stuck them through the wall. They hold neon tubes that reflect blue and red light on the wall and simultaneously into the room of the exhibition space. The title *Ladro di luce*—the thief of light—alludes to Prometheus. He stuck a dry branch of giant fennel out into the sky so that it caught alight when the sun chariot of Helios rolled past. The (red) light that Prometheus stole for humanity from the gods is held by the fist of the artist. He has taken it from Prometheus, thus becoming the thief who robbed from the thief. At the same time he is the bringer of light, as he passes on the (blue) light, to which the messages are tied: "We want to dream"; "we want to love"; "we want to know"; "we want to be free".

In the way typical for his art, Nakis Panayotidis takes recourse to the past in order to create it anew, to transform it, present it in an original way and in novel combinations, making it possible each time to perceive it in new ways.

Rooms 2, 3 and 4: Perception (Recent Works)

Nakis Panayotidis's current work is permeated by light too as well as his playful way of implementing it in art: dark on light, light on dark, casting shadows and play with light are constantly themes of his work, he unveils the hidden and brings about shifts in our perception. The canvas *Every Day is One Dreaming Day*, 2014 (Room 2), is covered by a glass plate. It is broken in six places where pieces of broken glass, around which neon has been twisted, seem to violently pierce through the plate. Works of art like this one—or *Because the Imagine*, 2013 (Room 2), *Combat*, 2012/2013 and *Nemesis*, 2013 (both Room 4)—initially seem to express unrestrained aggression due to the broken glass. It is only by taking a closer look that we recognize what the artist was seeking to do. Aggression, issuing from the depth of his pictures into the foreground—the glass panel has been broken from the back—is checked and pushed back through things such as "lead flowers" or by barriers of broken glass fragments. According to the artist, these works are not conceptual art. Instead they are products of his inner idealism, which he expresses in this way.

In order to understand perception and investigate it, Nakis Panayotidis resorts to unconventional means and uses steam. He produces it to create a veil, to make objects practically disappear in clouds of fog or hide them from our view. Thus, in *Nephele and the Diamonds* and *WISE* (both 2013; both Room 3), steam eddies upwards—illuminated by a light source—from half-open suitcases and dissolves in air, hiding content and then revealing it in turn. In *Nasconditi sapere*, 2011 (Room 4), steam rises out of an open drawer in a table for children, which the artist purchased after discovering it in a second-hand shop. The steam obscures the Greek letters of the words *Nasconditi sapere* (hidden knowledge) inscribed into the bottom of the drawer. After five minutes, the flow of steam is interrupted for two minutes so that we can read the words from time to time before they disappear again. The hidden knowledge is then revealed, only to be withdrawn from view again.

With *Nasconditi corpo*, 2011/2012 (Room 4), Nakis Panayotidis figuratively lets body (and soul) disappear in fog. The light, radiating from within, accentuates the dirty cuffs and collar of the shirt. It has something very ordinary about it, as if it had been hung on a hook as a matter of course while someone was in the process of doing something. At the same time, it has something alien about it, a spectral quality. The model for the shirt is to be found in Piero della Francesca's *Il Battesimo di Cristo* (*The Baptism of Christ*; ca 1448–1450), in which a bent over youth is depicted in the act of putting on a white shirt. Something we do everyday in the midst of a mystic scene, with St John the Baptist christening Jesus Christ. A white dove—the Holy Ghost—hovers over his head and at his feet the river seems to have come to a halt. Nakis Panayotidis saw the painting for the first time in 1982 in the National Gallery in London. Since this time the white shirt crops up regularly in his works.

Rooms 5 and 6: Light and Shade

Nakis Panayotidis sees more in light than just lighting. He considers light to have a specific value of its own and it acquires a creative agency of its own in his work, detached from its purely functional relevance. In his photographic works he creates hyper-realistic light phenomena reminiscent of baroque pictures of saints. They introduce a temporal dimension into the static moment typical for photography. Extreme light penetrates dark spaces in the pictures and illuminates them dramatically.

The artist persistently hides his sources of light behind light-sensitive canvases, as for example in *Costretto a condurvi*, *Costretto a indicarvi* (both 2008) or *Risaie*, 2009 (all in Room 5). This light develops—often in one and the same picture—contrasting qualities such as sharp imaging and blurring. By these means he makes his photographs look alien and dream-like, and the artist accentuated this impression by retouching the photographs with paint. When we view these works it is as if we were looking from some time in the distant future back to the far-off present or at our world today in the past. The limits of time and space seem suspended. This impression is especially overpowering in his pictures of the ocean. In *Con lo sguardo del nomade*, 2009, and *Pensato oltre III*, 2011, or *Me Between Sky and Sea II*, 2008 (all Room 5), the line of the horizon in the seascapes appears glaringly white due to the overpowering strength of the floodlight behind the picture as a light source. This measure seems to irritatingly compress the single-point perspective structure of the pictorial space. The beholder stands at the edge of the ocean scene and at the same time the distance appears to hit like a flash of lightning. The ocean is pivotal to Nakis Panayotidis's art. It has been his dear companion since childhood. The artist perceives the Aegean Sea as a passage to other times, other worlds, where the past and future converge with the present and where myths permanently take on new forms. His experience of the sea, transposed to art, is that of permanent flux and mutability. Sometimes Nakis Panayotidis mounts neon tubes in metal profiles over the upper picture frame, which he partially paints. The floodlight illuminates the entire surface of the picture, as we can witness in *La luce crea l'armonia e l'armonia l'architettura*, 1999 (Room 6). The models for his works are not the heroic ruins of classical Greece; instead they are the industrial wastelands on the peripheries of modern cities, where nature takes back her own in scenes of wild regrowth, such as the disused railway station in *Linee di partenza linee d'arrivo*, 2005 (Room 6). The grim and run-down industrial building in *Das Licht jeden Tages II*, 1996 (Raum 6), is the Halyvourgiki factory in Eleusis, which lies some twenty kilometers from Athens. Once a proud steelworks with over 2000 laborers, it symbolized progress and hope in war-disabled Greece. Today it is a ruin. The artist is presenting it in a new light and has filled it with new radiance.

Room 7: Questions of Meaning

Ohne Titel (GOYA), 1986, a painting dedicated to Goya, has a somber ambience and is colored with soot and tar. By playing with light and shade it turns our focus to the name of the Spanish painter Francisco José de Goya (1746–1828), who was very important for Nakis Panayotidis and his art. However, it wasn't the 18th-century artist's painting that influenced Nakis Panayotidis as much as the truly lasting impression he left on him, just as he had on his contemporaries, as a liberal thinker and observer of his times. A moving reminder of this we find in his work *GOYA*, 1985–1987, whereby the word "Goya" is presented in a minimalistic way without any additional elements.

Nakis Panayotidis repeatedly engages with philosophical issues and mythology in his art, as well as addresses themes such as social equity and inner freedom. His extensive knowledge of art and cultural history greatly impact his work. This is especially true for the history of ancient Greece, but not only. He lived in a region literally oozing mythology, he is not only acquainted with the stories from literary sources, he grew up with them. He

probes their meaning and relevance to humanity, incorporating this into his art. An example of his bent for mythology is *In Thebe*, 1987, in which Nakis Panayotidis engages with the figure of Oedipus. Oedipus killed his father Laius, King of Thebes, in a scuffle. When he then freed Thebes from the scourge of the Sphinx, his reward was Jocasta's hand in marriage, the King's widow and thus his own mother. Only later he discovered that Laius and Jocasta were actually his parents, that he had committed patricide and was guilty of incest as the oracle prophesied long ago. In Sophocles's drama *Oedipus the King*, Oedipus stabbed his own eyes out when he learned that his fate had been fulfilled and fled in exile. The work *In Thebe* zeroes in on this part of the narrative. Two glaring lamps blind those viewing the picture, so that they, like Oedipus, cannot see. Thus they do not see the picture and, instead, the picture sees them.

Room 8: Early Works

Nakis Panayotidis's earliest works in the exhibition are devoted to the austere spirit of minimal art. In *I 3*, 1977 and *E 4, E 12* (both 1979) the artist arranged, in the shape of an offset square on a canvas, industrially cut toothpick-like wooden sticks, which he purchased from a hardware store. Within the square he has drawn diagonal connecting lines that demarcate the division between the two parts. The wooden sticks of the respective parts of the figure are colored differently and transform the square into equally large different triangles. The wooden sticks cast real shadows that find a counterpart in shadows that the artist drew in color. By the means of only very slight deviations, Nakis Panayotidis questions the equality of the basic shapes in minimal art. The identical parts have been converted into individual planes through minimal additions of color, painted and real shadows blur perception.

His early paper works are not drawings but collages made of the materials of the "impoverished", such as paper used for packaging and tar, demonstrating Nakis Panayotidis's early roots in *arte povera*. Two works on the subject of light, *Illuminare*, 1986, and *Luce*, 1987, both present a naked light bulb hanging on a cable within the picture plane. The source of light has been covered as if it were an eclipse of the sun, and the radiance of the light bulbs has been additionally impaired by a black sickle and a lead-colored foreign body that is penetrating it from without. These impairments may be the reason why the light bulbs no longer work. These two canvases were executed just before the fall of the Iron Curtain and succinctly articulate how political thought, at the time, could not spring over its own shadow and yield to reason. If we take a closer look, then we can see that the light bulbs are out of square and no longer in their set position. Something has made them—or maybe even the political processes—move.

The two sheets *La mia Africa* and *L'Oriente* (both 1987) present irregular, organically defined bodies representing the silhouettes of Africa and a woman wearing a burka. The black shapes do not cover a source of light in these two compositions. The peaks of the ridges in the black and gray areas reflect the light and offset the relief structuring in ripples that appear to seethe, making the shapes seem to breathe. Like much of Nakis Panayotidis's art, here too light creates the effect of movement, even if there is no direct source of light in the works. It is this impression of motion that suggests life and transformation. Ultimately change triggers the process of gaining knowledge.

Room 9 (Vestibule): Film

The film director Thierry Spitzer accompanied Nakis Panayotidis with a camera. The result is a 32-minute documentary film **Nakis Panayotidis: Are you talking to me?** Part of the film was made while mounting the exhibition at the Kunstmuseum Bern. The film is in Italian and will be screened with subtitles.

In the same room the black box with the work *KABUL, il racconto di un sogno*, 2003–2012, is being shown. It is an homage to his friend and *arte povera* artist Alighiero Boetti, who had his

tapestries woven in Kabul. Nakis Panayotidis learnt about Kabul from Alighiero. In Nakis Panayotidis's eyes the capital of Afghanistan symbolizes an "international magnet". Kabul represents everything, from death and rebirth, destruction and new beginnings, and has thus become a symbol for every single day. Thus the word "Kabul" outshines everything despite the black over-painting.

AGENDA

Öffentliche Führungen

Sonntag, 11h: 23. November 2014, 4. Januar 2015, 1./15.* Februar 2015

Dienstag, 19h: 9. Dezember 2014, 24. Februar 2015
*mit der Kuratorin Regula Berger

Anmeldung nicht erforderlich, Ausstellungseintritt

Rundgang mit dem Künstler

Dienstag, 20. Januar 2015, 19h

Anmeldung nicht erforderlich, Ausstellungseintritt

Griechische Mythen einst & heute

Sonntag, 8. März 2015, 11h–12h30

Die Geschichtenerzählerin Esther Rohner entführt in die griechische Götterwelt und schafft Verbindungen zu den Werken des Künstlers Nakis Panayotidis (Mundart). Für Kinder ab 9 Jahren gratis und Erwachsene Ausstellungseintritt

INFORMATION

Team of curators

Matthias Frehner, Regula Berger

Admission

CHF 14.00 / reduced CHF 10.00

Private guided tours, schools

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vermittlung@kunstmuseumbern.ch

Opening hours

Tuesday: 10:00 a.m. – 9:00 p.m.

Wednesday – Sunday: 10:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.

Public holidays

Dec. 25, 2014: closed

Dec. 31, 2014 / Jan. 1, 2015 / Jan. 2, 2015:
10:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.

Further venues of the exhibition

MACRO, Museo d'Arte Contemporanea Roma,
April – September 2015;

Hess Art Museum, The Hess Collection Winery, Napa, USA,
planned for 2015 / 2016

CATALOGUE

Nakis Panayotidis: Das Unsichtbare sehen/ Nakis Panayotidis. Seeing the invisible

Ed. Kunstmuseum Bern, Matthias Frehner and Regula Berger. With essays by Bruno Corà, Matthias Frehner, Sabine Hahnloser Tschopp, Donald Hess, Petros Markaris, Thierry Spitzer and Hans Christoph von Tavel. German and English. 312 pages, 100 color illustrations. Scheidegger & Spiess, Zurich. ISBN 978-3-85881-444-9

DRAWINGS

For the exhibition, 12 original drawings, 30 x 42 cm, grained paper, by Nakis Panayotidis will be on sale at the Shop in the Kunstmuseum Bern. Price per drawing: CHF 3'000.00 with 20% discount for members of the Verein der Freunde Kunstmuseum Bern and the Bernische Kunstgesellschaft BKG. For more information please visit www.kunstmuseumbern.ch from November 20 onwards.

FILM

Nakis Panayotidis: Are you talking to me?

Thierry Spitzer (director), 32 mins, in Italian with subtitles in German. The film will be screened in the exhibition.

WORKS UP FOR SALE

Some works of this exhibition are up for sale.
The price list is available at the entrance desk.

The exhibition was made possible with the generous support of:



HESS ART COLLECTION