

# NOTES AT THE EDGE OF LANDSCAPE

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## Abstract

This thesis examines landscape in the course of an itinerancy and positions the road as its constant figurative as well as allegorical component.

The examination is applied on a cohesive body of original photographic work selected from two published monographs and it is juxtaposed with comparable photographs from other practitioners on the field.

My methodological approach in the production of the photographs combines technical and morphological elements from the genres of subjective documentary and landscape photography.

This synthesis entails a variety of conceptual choices, embodied practices and operational devices as well as the deployment of different formats and techniques. Similarly, the commentary on the photographs relates both the indexical guarantee and the photographs' symbolic significations.

Seen in the light of the Greek landscape tradition that runs from the picturesque and the mythological to the constructed and the staged, this thesis associates the representation of landscape with the experience of travel and argues for its contingent nature.

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## 1. Introduction

What sets the submitted published work apart from the work of other Greek practitioners dealing with the ever so diverse notion of the 'landscape', is how firmly the concept of the landscape is interlocked with that of the journey. As such, the road is the most emblematic feature of the series and for this reason a constituent of its title. Whether it is depicted as part of the landscape or not, it nevertheless constitutes the conceptual thread of this work: without the road there is no access to any of the sites on view. By the same token while it facilitates movement within the environment it also functions as a constant reminder of human intervention as it cuts through, like a scar, the actual as well as the representational landscape.

In this respect, more than depictions of certain sites, the images serve as manifestations of encounters throughout my wanderings. Lacking any pronounced political, geological or historical connotations, the existence of the depicted landscapes as something worth seeing derives from the meaning I have attached to them. As I will show, this meaning varies depending upon the case (the encounter, the site) and whether it is captured instantly or constructed over time.

The photographs that serve as a case in study are selected from the published monograph *Notes at the Edge of the Road* (2006, *Notes* hereafter) and supplemented by images from *Kath' Odon* (1998)—a published itinerary that precedes the former chronologically and conceptually. In addition, published photographs that have been edited out from both monographs, details from contact sheets and relevant images by other practitioners in Greece and abroad will be used in order to discuss the cultural context and the methodologies applied.

The commentary on the photographs is quite elastic as it combines the indexical guarantee in a realistic or symbolic way. In the wake of the poststructuralist notion of the disruption of certainty and the non-determinacy of meaning, every

photograph or body of photographs can be subjected to different contexts. As long as there is no text to anchor meaning to—and there is not—all exegeses are provisional, conditional and subjective.

The text is divided into four chapters. In the first, a review of Greek landscape photography is sketched while an emphasis is placed on three cases of contemporary practice. Unfortunately, existent literature and critical thinking on the topic is extremely rare in English and whenever references in Greek are unavoidable, the translations are mine.

The second chapter outlines the theme(s) that give the publications their defining coherence and explains the relevance and criteria for the selection of the methodologies adopted.

Chapter three discusses the published work. This includes an analysis of selected photographs with cross-references in the field of contemporary Greek Landscape Photography, the role of the road as well as the process of conceptualization and production of both the imagery and publication itself.

The impact and the reception of the published work by scholars and critics (monographs and publications are submitted in the appendix), is discussed in the fourth chapter.

## 2. The Greek paradigm<sup>1</sup>

In the trend for the newly-formed peripheral nation-states to establish a flawless national identity throughout history,<sup>2</sup> Greece was not the exception. Indeed, it took over a century for the Greek landscape photography to seriously question *what* is photographed, *why* and *how*. With two notable exceptions,<sup>3</sup> landscape photography in Greece was obsessed either with the representation of the classical antiquity, in the period before the second world war, or right after it, with the 'Greek soul' meant as an always high-spirited, superficial folklore. The former was premised on a parochial pictorialism applied on trademarked ancient ruins; the latter on a lyrical modernism depicting trademarked natural beauties. In either case, "rarely the landscape was allowed to speak for itself."<sup>4</sup>

Criticism and theory were no less atrophied. If a hellenocentric verbosity compensated for pictorialism's inferiority complex towards painting and art, modernist attempts "at delineating an aesthetic theory and vocabulary unique to photography" were confusing if not contradictory.<sup>5</sup>

This scene has been progressively changed over the last thirty years. On the one hand, the stereotypical imagery of Greece no longer exhausts itself only on the Aegean islands while technically, in the best of its cases, it has become less pompous and more refined. Still, destined for the market rather than for itself, skin-deep symbolism and exoticism prevail.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, a new generation of Greek landscape photographers has started to produce (and is still

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<sup>1</sup> Stathatos' *The Invention of Landscape: Greek Landscape and Greek Photography 1870- 1995* (1996) is the only available study on the subject to date. Papaioannou' doctoral dissertation *The Photograph of the Greek Landscape: Between Ideology and Myth* (in Greek) that includes later developments is forthcoming.

<sup>2</sup> Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1993) is a classic on this topic; see especially chapters 5 and 6, pp: 67-111.

<sup>3</sup> Elly Seraidari in the 20s and Voula Papaioannou from 1945 to 1955; see Stathatos, 1996: 33-4 and 37 respectively.

<sup>4</sup> Stathatos, 1996: 33.

<sup>5</sup> See Moschovi, 2009: 61-6

<sup>6</sup> Stathatos claims that this industry of idealized imagery of Greece "may be becoming innate" (Stathatos, 1996: 38). Papaioannou' main argument is that while in Western Europe and United States landscape art photography was to a certain degree popularized, in Greece the opposite process took place: by selectively emulating themes and techniques from art photography, market-oriented landscape photography predominates.

producing) work that is modest and ironic in tone as well as self-aware and inquisitive about its premises.

Setting aside short-lived attempts to undermine the canonical 'programme' of the camera (e.g., pinhole and disposable cameras etc.), most of this work operated within the documentary genre.

Informed by postmodern attacks on the medium's indexicality and its truth-claims, this work has gradually embraced a conceptually expanded notion of the 'document' that includes (in chronological order):

- a) A critique of Modernism's universal narratives and its implicit lyrical humanism meant as the undermining of the preconceptions of what constitutes the national iconography-identity of the country (Greekness).
- b) A different politics of representation meant as an intervention in the representation of the photograph as an object rather than the actual 'taking' of it.
- c) An attack at the heart of the document meant as a disconnection from the detonative use of photography's indexicality (the 'real' referent).<sup>7</sup>

Based on the exhibitions, publications and critical commentary on offer at the time *Notes* was published (2006), three cases stand out. It is worth noting that even though all of them adopt the aforementioned characteristics in one way or another, each one is premised on a different tradition, these being new topographics, travelogue and constructed documentary.

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<sup>7</sup> See Moschovi's delicate treatment of this progressive transformation in Moschovi, 2006: 16-22 and 2009: 66-73.

If 'first nature' connotes land that is innocent and free of any human alteration, and 'second nature' is land altered for utilitarian purposes, 'third nature' or *Terza Natura* is an Italian Renaissance term that connotes human alterations of nature made for a non-utilitarian purpose. The later manifests itself in gardens and, "in a more metaphysical sense, in landscape pictures."<sup>8</sup>

*Terza Natura* (2003) is the title Yiorgis Yerolymbos gave to a series of square-format photographs taken from a large-scale construction of a motorway that runs from coast to coast across Greece's northern border (see figs. 1, 2). Following in the footsteps of the New Topographics, Yerolymbos rejects the Modernist iconography of the landscape as Promised Land and documents its ephemeral transformations with high precision and formality, the concept being the aesthetic potentials of a land damaged or under construction.<sup>9</sup> However, while the New Topographics imply a critique of progress, Yerolymbos takes progress as given and unavoidable.<sup>10</sup> His concern is purely aesthetic, hence *Terza Natura*: the metamorphosis of the construction of industrial service roads into "a kind of post-industrial sublime."<sup>11</sup> The later is attempted both in the production (high definition cameras, distance from the subject matter) and in the representation (large prints, data sublime) of the photographs.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Grundberg, 2005, np.

<sup>9</sup> Almost a century after Duchamps' *ready-mades* (1916) that disconnected art from aesthetics, New Topographers considered the purity of form as a sine qua non precondition for beauty and both, form and beauty, as a sine qua non precondition for art; see Robert Adams, 1996: 23-36.

<sup>10</sup> Ideologically speaking, this critique of progress belongs to progress itself. Setting intent aside, most of the imagery of the New Topographics could also be read as a fine document of progress. It is the same ideological inversion that characterizes the bitter writings by elite 19th-century bourgeois travelers lamenting the vulgarization of nature by the tourism then emerging. The lyrical descriptions of the privileged sites under invasion could be part of a travel brochure as well; for a theory of tourism see Enzensberger, 1958.

<sup>11</sup> Moschovi, 2003, np

<sup>12</sup> On the concept of "data sublime" in contemporary art photography, see Stalabross, 2007.

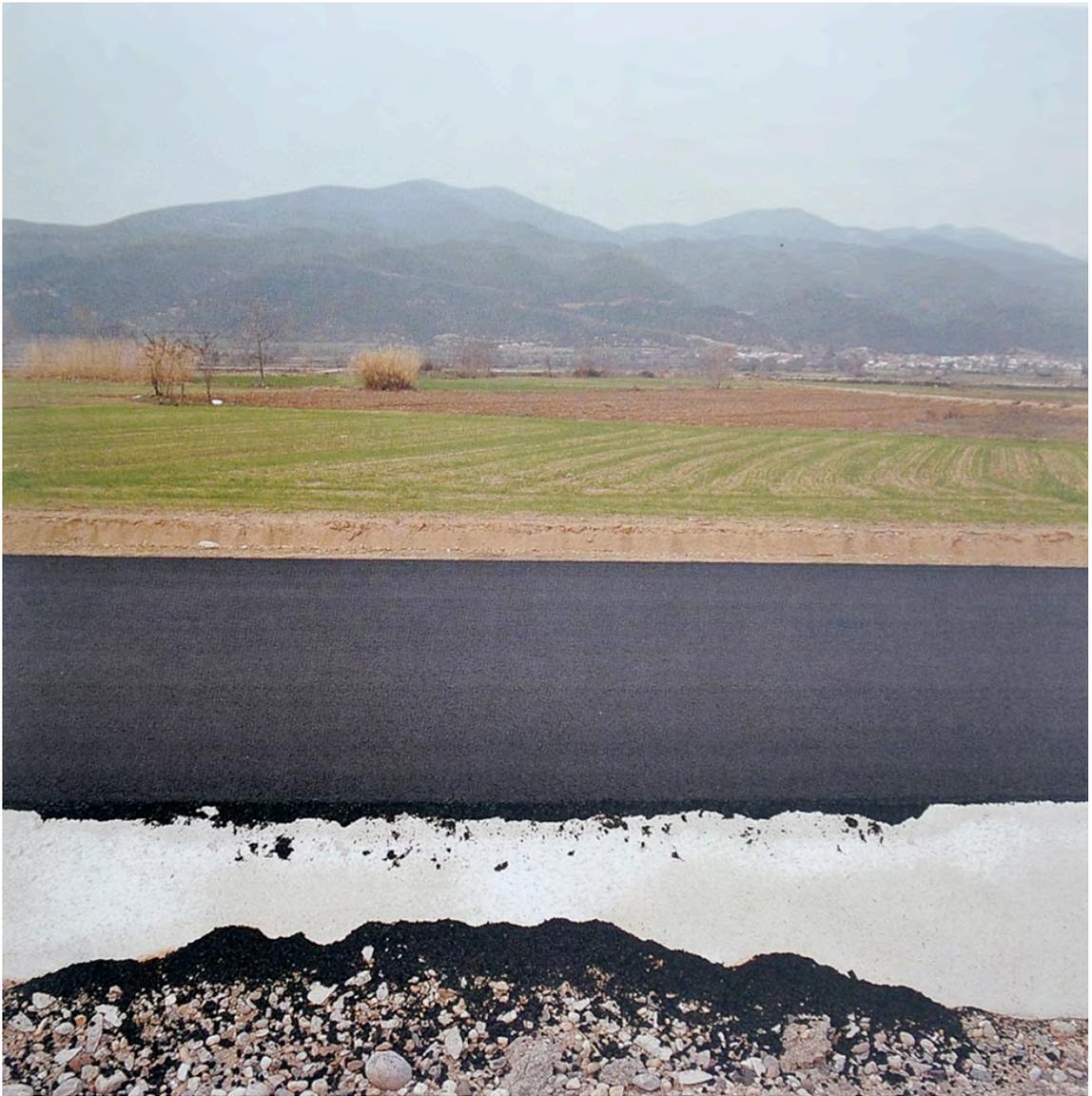


Fig. 1. Y. Yerolymbos, Siatista, Western Macedonia (from *Terza Natura*, 2000-3).



Fig. 2. G. Yerolymbos, Asphalt works, Xanthi, Thrace (from *Terza Natura*, 2000-3)

Nikos Markou (2003) also fabricates the aforementioned sublimeness either by using high-definition panoramic format cameras (an emblematic format in its own right) or by selecting exceptional physical or light conditions—that is, out of scale constructions, dramatic light, overloaded skies, etc. (see figs. 3, 4, 5). For, unlike other countries whereas the notion of the sublime was first depicted (German Romanticism) or discussed (Kant), Greek nature is predominantly small-scale and Greek atmospheric conditions generally mild.<sup>13</sup> Markou knows this well and his main concern, it seems to me, is not a realistic representation of the Greek landscape; after all, neither the title of his work (*Cosmos*) nor the titles of his photographs (dates of exposure) correspond to any connotations to Greece or Greekness. *Cosmos* (2003) —a documentation of half-finished or worn-out metal constructions and unattractive debris embedded in the environment, occasionally interrupted by serene images of unadulterated nature— exploits the indexical character of straight photography in order to comment metaphorically upon the unfulfilled promises of Modernity and the redemptive role of nature.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> One of the cornerstones of the ancient Greek theory and practice (architecture) is '*metron ariston*' meaning 'everything in due proportion'; see Liddell & Scott, 1996: 1123, c.v.

<sup>14</sup> For Papaioannou, "Markou's concern seems to focus on a latent landscape in-between the urban, the touristic and the developed" (2011: np, my translation).



Fig. 3. N. Markou, 20.06.2003 (from *Cosmos*, 2000-3)



Fig. 4. N. Markou, 17.02.2002 (from *Cosmos*, 2000-3)



Fig. 5. N. Markou, 28.07.2002 (From *Cosmos*, 2000-3)

Sharing the aforementioned photographers' high definition of and physical distance from their subject-matter, Panos Kokkinias' landscapes (see figs. 6, 7)

are meticulously yet discretely constructed allegories set in the countryside. Kokkinias usies the landscape as a *mise en scène* whose contents (lighting, props, camera position, actors) compose a set of unresolved riddles that touch upon the modernist premises of the medium (verisimilitude, decisive moment, truthfulness, etc.). 'Real' or otherworldly, contingent or staged "the artifice behind their making is cleverly concealed as they do appear authentic, so much as to verify their inauthenticity."<sup>15</sup> Like the titles of his pictures —named after the nearby insignificant village or location— Kokkinias seems to suggest that the fabrication of the picture does not matter as much as its reading. As for the latter, it is carefully left open.



Fig. 6. P. Kokkinias, *Syrna*, 2001 (From the series *Landscapes*, 1997-)

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<sup>15</sup> Moschovi, 2006:18



Fig. 7. P. Kokkinias, Megla, 2004 (From the series *Landscapes*, 1997-)

In conclusion, we could discern some common theoretical concepts and operational practices that characterize the aforementioned cases:

- Landscape is depicted as an indefinite natural *space* rather than as a concrete natural *place*.<sup>16</sup> Being a space, the photographers are not concerned with its particularities and its cultural connotations (Greece, Greekness).
- Landscape is treated not as an unmediated experience but as a mediated pictorial construction.<sup>17</sup> This means that landscape is taken as a signified medium in itself upon which secondary mediations are applied.
- In this sense, Markou's and Yerolymbos' interventions are implemented during (distance, format, high-definition cameras) and after the exposure (large prints, data sublime). Kokkinias, also constructs the subject matter itself (staging).
- The technical means in use and the size of the exhibition prints are homogenous and standardised. Mounted on a tripod, Yerolymbos exclusively employs a square format and prints 125 x 125 cm, Markou, for the most part, uses a panoramic format and prints 65 x165 cm, Kokkinias exposes a large format view camera and prints 125 x150 cm.

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<sup>16</sup> Place connotes specificity, particularity, finiteness, closeness, familiarity. By contrast, space signifies abstraction, generality, infiniteness, distance, the uncanny. For de Certeau, *place* is the physical framework of human actions while *space* is related with perception and experience; see de Certeau, 1988: 117-8.

<sup>17</sup> Meant as a particular place, a concrete natural environment shared and shaped by its people and its pictorial representation, landscape has been gradually interpreted as an artistic depiction of an observable natural space: a scenic view proper. This ontological shift is best exemplified in the vernacular English expression 'look at the view' (also identical in Greek parlance), which does not specify a real referent; see Mitchell, 2002a: vii-viii.

- Likewise, the selection of the landscapes themselves is predetermined and, save Kokkinias, it is iconographically homogeneous. Yerolymbos depicts specific construction sites from a large industrial project; Markou looks for the deficiencies in the man-nature front—and secondarily for untouched land; Kokkinias searches for sites that best serve his 'prefabricated' scenarios or vice versa.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Quite recently, all three photographers undermined the document's attachment to a 'real' singular referent by adopting Wall's *near documentary* practice meaning the digital montage of fragments of the real photographed in real time. For a critique of this new hybrid medium described as "a digitally painted photograph", see Stallabrass, 2010: 103-6.

### 3. The contribution

Starting from the last feature—i.e. intentionality—the only predetermined element that gave *Notes* its modus operandi is its determination to move 'freely' in nondescript territories. If an explorer seeks the undiscovered and the unknown and a tourist is after the obvious and the cliché, a wanderer is the traveler who moves in a casual or aimless way, yet knows what is vital when he sees it.<sup>19</sup> Without a starting point, destination or end point—the book starts and finishes literally on the road—*Notes* is a succession of anonymous yet ordinary sites encountered on a journey.

In this respect, when I set off to photograph, what is premeditated / predetermined is not the actual landscapes I am going to photograph but the actual journey I am prepared to undertake to find them. More than depictions of certain sites the images serve as manifestations of encounters throughout my wanderings. However, as I will argue, if the encounter with the sites is 'accidental', the photographs will be nothing but that; they are precise and visually structured so their formal balance and symmetry becomes inherent and not noticeable as such.

Either overtly depicted or strongly suggested, the road is the unifying thread that makes the encounters possible and gives the series its iconographic and conceptual coherence.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Semantics might be telling here: in contemporary Greek, the noun *anagnose* (reading) comes from the ancient verb *anagignosko* which means to read, to know again, to recognize; see Liddell & Scott, 1996: 100, c.v. Also, the vernacular verb *diavazo* (to read) corresponds to the noun *diavasis* meaning a passage; see Babiniotis, 1998: 481, c.v. Lastly, in ancient archaic poetry the noun *eme*, *oimos* (οἴμη, οἶμος) has a double meaning: a way of song (poetry) and a road, path, stripe of land; see Liddell & Scott, 1996: 1206, c.v.

<sup>20</sup> In Jackson's insightful assessment, "roads no longer merely lead to places; they are places" (J. B. Jackson, 1994: 190). *Place* here should be taken as *space* as Jackson uses the terms interchangeably. Following the above quotation and in the same paragraph he writes about roads: "In the modern landscape, no other space has been so versatile" (J. B. Jackson, 1994: 91).

At the same time, though, the depicted road is a metaphor and like every metaphor it is a passage to or a symbol of something else.<sup>21</sup> But unlike other signifying systems like speech or writing, a photograph is "at once metaphor and at the same time the trace of the metaphor's cause."<sup>22</sup> Regarded in this way, *Notes* stands both for a represented external reality *and* for an inner geography.

Guaranteed by the medium's verisimilitude and titled after extended geographical areas, the photographs in *Notes* serve initially as re-descriptions and therefore re-inventions of a given geography.<sup>23</sup> As such, the images require us to face a terrain (Greece) we are passing through without a second glance and for which we are responsible. It is an iconography of another Greece, familiar yet distant.

Concurrently, the same titles seem to underline that the landscapes depicted have 'happened' to be there as opposed to being representatives of the specific areas. Being 'accidental' stops in an ongoing journey, the landscapes compound an elusive and fragmentary geography of associations / experiences / reflections.<sup>24</sup> the road characterizes the process not the regions, and plays a dual function:

a. It is a methodological tool: it facilitates as well as restricts my movements and my operational techniques within the landscape: driving a car is used as a mediated way of seeing and the road as a landscape in its own right.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Metaphor comes from the Greek word *metaphora* meaning carrying, transporting; see Liddell & Scott, 1996: 1118, c.v. In this respect, a road is a metaphor in every sense of the word.

<sup>22</sup> Osborne, 2000: 137

<sup>23</sup> The only thing that is not contingent in photography is its indexicality.

<sup>24</sup> The road has been used variously across media: in Kubrick's *Lolita*, which is based on the Nabokov novel (1989), the road becomes a synonym for escapism and invisibility; for Kerouac (1976) the experience of the road is reflected in the style of his writing: an unedited, improvised stream of consciousness; in Frank (1986) the road is part of his autobiographical tour and a stage upon which America is made manifest.

<sup>25</sup> It is indicative that—along with its verisimilitude—photography has dominated painting in the depiction of nature; all technological media accommodate distance and separation. Modernists (f64) sublimated this separation in their quest for form in the wilderness; new topographers made it a cause for nostalgia.

b. It conveys the qualities/symbolic values I attribute to it, which include an experience of not belonging, a contextualization of a retrieved image from the history of the medium, a realization of the ephemeral, a reflection upon nature's contemporary face and the position of animals within it, etc.

My methodological approach combines technical and morphological elements from the genres of subjective documentary and landscape photography but it purposefully departs from both. By subjective documentary I mean the documentary practice in which the mediation between objective significance and subjective experience is most effective.<sup>26</sup>

Technically, my work is a combination of:

- All formats (small, medium, large).
- Diverse operational techniques (snapshots, 'straight' and staged exposures, re-exposures of the same landscape during the day and/or different seasons).
- Varied embodied practice (photographing from a moving car, engaging with animals).

Morphologically, my work emulates the pictorial lexicon of romanticized or topographic representations of landscape in order to subvert its aesthetic and ideological validity. As such:

- The selected landscapes are ordinary in every sense, lacking distinct historical, political and geological features.<sup>27</sup>
- Panoramic vistas, epic views, exuberant vegetation, overdramatic skies, reductive formalism, transcendental or luminous light, etc., are not the rule; whenever they occur, they are undermined by the overall

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<sup>26</sup> Robert Frank exemplifies this performance. No matter what he depicts, we always feel his assertive presence. As he put it, "I'm always looking outside, trying to look inside" (Frank, 1995: 12). On the mediation between objective understanding and subjective experience in *The Americans*, see Stimson, 2006: 105-35.

<sup>27</sup> In the words of J. B. Jackson the essence of landscape "is not its uniqueness but its similarity to others" (J. B. Jackson, 1984: 147).

representation.<sup>28</sup>

- Despite sharing affection for the familiar and the everyday with the New Topographers' postmodern stance, my work endeavours to trace the mundane away from the suburbs, occasionally on the move, and far from the nostalgic or didactic.

The elasticity in the adoption of photographic conventions, embodied *modi operandi* and conceptual strategies corresponds to the diversity in the production and representation of the actual photographs. Mentioned earlier, while the encounter with the landscapes is contingent, their final images are not; they are matter-of-fact without being factual. Some of them combine the small hand-held camera and travel photography within the snapshot aesthetic (see figs. 13, 14, 20); others incorporate medium or large format camera and landscape photography within the straight or directorial aesthetic (see figs. 25, 26, 31). Snapshots, a usual operational practice in social documentary, signify definitive episodes in the course of a personal itinerary within the landscape; inversely, 'objective' views, a standard directorial practice, assimilate the temporal and the contingent. Sometimes it takes a fraction of a second for an image to be materialized, sometimes an entire year.

However, the above heterogeneity of means does not make itself apparent in the construction of *Notes* in so far as the connecting link (i.e. the road) in the succession is structural, not formal. There is one photograph per spread and the viewer / reader is engaged in the journey right from the start as he / she seamlessly advances from one picture-encounter to the next without noticing differences in format and / or operational practices.

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<sup>28</sup>Thematic differences notwithstanding, modernists and new topographers alike appear to share a similar methodological approach to their subject matter in terms of purity of form, the use of monochrome, and abstraction, a fascination with the view, idolization of the light; in brief, an instrumental approach to the physical environment as something distinct from us which we own and view spiritually, mystically, transcendently, romantically or nostalgically, depending on the case.

Accordingly, the exhibition prints vary from roughly 27 x 40 cm (small format) to 50 x 50 cm (medium format) and 60 x 72 cm (large format). Their presentation depends upon the kind of the exhibition (i.e. solo, group) and the exhibition space itself. Unless it is otherwise stipulated, the principle is for the viewer to see them both individually and as a unit.

In conclusion, the novel values my work brings forth in the field of the Greek landscape photography are the following:

- The landscape is examined as contingent as it is encountered in the course of a personal journey.
- The road is part of the landscape and is used as an iconographic leitmotif and a methodological tool.
- There is a fusion of means, techniques and practices.
- The selected landscapes are anonymous, non-photogenic, insignificant.
- Being part of the habitat, animals are a recurrent theme throughout the journey.
- The construction and representation of the images does not invest on any pronounced connotation, iconic (i.e. sublime) or otherwise (i.e. Greekness).
- Lastly, seen as a survey of the Greek provinces, my work is a critique of the dominant picturesque iconography of Greece.

#### 4. The submitted work

Already present in my first monograph *Kath' Odon*<sup>29</sup> (1998), the road as landscape became my sole preoccupation in *Notes* (2006). *Kath' Odon* is a documentation of the exigencies of the agricultural multi-tribal societies living along Greece's northern borders and the road leads to places and people. Whenever it appears in the landscape it is usually perceived as a supplement, a background to an action performed by the natives, whether this be a wedding, a funeral, a Sunday stroll or something else (see figs. 8, 9 and 10).



Fig. 8. Wedding, Macedonia, Greece, 1997 (from the series *Kath' Odon* 1993-7)

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<sup>29</sup> A Greek expression meaning 'on the road', 'en route'



Fig. 9. Funeral, Epirus, Greece, 1993 (from the series *Kath' Odon* 1993-7)



Fig. 10. Archangel, Macedonia, Greece 1994 (from the series *Kath' Odon* 1993-7)

Yet, not quite. *Kath' Odon* is not only the documentation of a provincial society but a personal journey as well.<sup>30</sup> Like *Notes*, the book begins and ends literally on the road (see figs 13 and 14). The landscapes depicted alongside it are also inner landscapes. In the manner of Frank, (see fig. 11), the picture plain is subjectivized by introducing traces of my concurrent situation into it.<sup>31</sup> 'Seeing through' becomes an instinctive and spontaneous device that transforms 'objective' reality (the landscape, the road) into an imprint of subjective experience.



Fig. 11. Robert Frank, *View from hotel window*, Butte, Montana, 1955-6

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<sup>30</sup> The monograph's full title is: *Kath' Odon: Egoumenitsa - Evros*. The first component implies the journey itself (see footnote 29 on p. 20); the second delimits the geographical area: Egoumenitsa is a small town in the northwest corner of the country and Evros is the river that forms the border in the northeast.

<sup>31</sup> For an analysis of Frank's subjectivization of the gesture of reportage based on Wall's (1995) notion of the "fusion of reportage and performance," see Stimson, 2008: 111-5.

An example of this practice that precedes *Kath' Odon*, we see in fig. 12.

Made in 1991, this photograph is not included in the monograph but was selected for the first major group exhibition on landscape in Greece (*The Invention of Landscape*, 1996).<sup>32</sup>

Taken through the window of a moving train, a sun is rising (or setting) above a country road that traverses the lower half of the picture plane diagonally. The window itself makes its presence visible as pieces of scotch tape and dirt in the shape of exclamation marks are stuck on it, creating a separate plane superimposed on the dampish landscape. Both, the white tape and black dirt are quite distinct as they 'sit' against the blackness of the earth and the grayness of the road/sky.



Fig. 12. Macedonia, Greece, 1991

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<sup>32</sup> See Appendix under 'Exhibition Catalogues'.

That said, the photograph associates two discrete realms: an 'interior' one (the photographer) and an 'exterior' (the landscape). Moreover, it imposes a movement on our gaze that runs from the clues of the 'inside' (i.e., metaphors of the photographer's situation open to interpretation)<sup>33</sup> to the blurry landscape 'outside'. This kind of blurring is intrinsically photographic and goes against the whole notion of the documentary meant as a predominantly clear description of what it is.

But from the subjective point of view, that is precisely what we have here: what the sun lightens is fragmentation (the scotch tapes), awe (the dirt), escape (the country road), in sum: inconclusiveness (the blurring).

The same associative function is performed by marks inscribed on the windowpane in figs. 13 and 14 —the cover and the concluding images in *Kath' Odon*. In fig. 13 the illuminated raindrops reveal a lacerating detail. In fig. 14, what appears to be a fierce sand storm, a centrally positioned star (the crack) rises above a shrine on the left and leads the way to a road receding on the right.

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<sup>33</sup> "For Paris Petridis, the true face of Greece is not the soft south with its islands and beaches but the northern borderland which he patrols with his camera: unfriendly, rain-washed landscapes, seen with the tired glance of the refugee through the dim and grubby window of a long distance coach" (Stathatos, 1996: 42).



Fig. 13. Macedonia, Greece, 1997 (from the series *Kath' Odon* 1993-7)



Fig. 14. Macedonia, Greece 1993 (from the series *Kath' Odon* 1993-7)

In the period between the two publications—roughly from 1998 to 2000—I kept on photographing the Greek provinces across the country. Slowly but steadily, I was moving away from the narratives of small rural communities as becoming absorbed by the landscape itself. The latter is no longer the background for the socio-political manifestations of life: it comes into the foreground and everything else is embedded into it.<sup>34</sup>

A selection of this work entitled *Mediated life: The constructed Greek landscape* was published in the Italian review of black and white photographs and texts *Private* (2000) in a special issue dedicated to contemporary Greek photography.<sup>35</sup> In the accompanying text I noted: "A work-in-progress, this series deals with aspects of contemporary life: the notion of artificiality, our alienation from nature, the displacement of nature itself [...] are some related issues. Constructed or not, these photographs are attempts to trace human intervention upon nature, to accommodate space and, when feasible, to be allegoric" (Petridis, 2000: 8).

Looking at the reproduced photographs in hindsight (see figs 15 to 19), we could discern the technical, morphological and thematic features that would later characterize *Notes*: the omnipresence of the road, different formats, desolate landscapes, clear-cut forms, head-on exposures, the liminal state of animals (see figs 16 and 19), the undermining of stereotypes (see figs 17 and 18) and a definite sense of exile and disorientation.

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<sup>34</sup> Landscape begins with the withdrawal of nature as a living everydayness, and establishes itself as a *view* "when it absorbs or dissolves all presences into itself" (Nancy, 2005: 58). On the conceptualization of landscape as an entity that differs from nature, see Nancy (2005), Dean, 2005: 12-3, Mitchell, 2002c: 265-6 and Andrews, 1999: 1-22

<sup>35</sup> See appendix under 'Contributions to Publications'.



Fig. 15 Thessaly, Greece, 1999



Fig.16. Sterea Hellas, Greece, 1999



Fig. 17. Aegean Sea, Greece, 1999



Fig. 18. Arcadia, Peloponnese, 1999



Fig. 19. Mani, Peloponnese, 1999

*Notes* starts where *Kath' Odon* ends: on the road. In the latter, the crack on the windscreen shows the way amid a sandstorm; being the last image in the book it is also an allusion to the journey continuing. In the former, the windscreen's filthy curve directs the view into the open: the journey is beginning (see fig. 20).



Fig. 20. Peloponnese, Greece, 2000 (from the series *Notes at the Edge of the Road* 2000-6)

Technically, the image conveys the experience of a fleeting impression. It is a snapshot taken intuitively that blends together death (the capsized truck), rebirth (the blooming yellow flowers) and passage (the blurry foreground) in an expressive way (the broken sun).

Given the immediate expressiveness of the view, nothing could have prevented me from pulling over, mounting a medium or large-format camera on a tripod and making a direct, frontal, 'objective' picture. My aim, however, was not transparency or/and 'objectivity', but a photograph directly responsive to my current experience (see fig. 21).



Fig. 21. Contact sheet (detail), Peloponnese, 2000

This kind of operational practice is absent in the Greek paradigm. And so are animals as subject matter.

Surprisingly, the representation of animals as a subject in their own right is extremely rare in the imagery of both the modernists and new topographers. Today, animals are confined by and large to factory farm units. Contemporary art photography has portrayed this 'imprisonment' as an allegory for a concentration camp of at times epic proportions.<sup>36</sup>

Koudelka has consistently portrayed animals in the documentation of his self-imposed odyssey around Europe. In his book *Exiles* (1988), animals are metaphors for the existential ordeal that is undergone in a stark and displaced life and are represented as such: dead, trapped, disoriented, threatening and threatened (see figs 22 and 23).<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup>See Sternfeld, 2003: plate 8 and Gursky, 2010: plate 62.

<sup>37</sup>See Koudelka, 1988: plates 3, 8, 10, 16, 28, 48 and 52. On the vicissitudes of living in exile, see Said's seminal *Reflections on Exile* (2002).



Fig. 22. Josef Koudelka, Turkey, 1984



Fig. 23. Josef Koudelka, Scotland, 1977

In contrast, the animals in *Notes* seem to come from another world in their stoic apathy. Depicted in eight out of twenty five images contained in the book, animals are allowed full representation / participation within the imagery and play an equivocal role: with the charm of beings which are alien to their image they captivate us into their own captivity; by being apathetic they keep us away. Do they stand as the self-evident occupants of the landscape from which we are excluded? Are they as indifferent to the landscape as the landscape is to us?

Technically, animals are exposed in all formats, distances and photographic conventions depending upon the case (the encounter).

Take for example figs. 24 and 25 (see next page) for example. Notwithstanding their technical or iconographic differences (i.e. distance, format, light, colour, atmospheric conditions), both images seem to suspend the same riddle: who is blocking whose way? Who is in exile?



Fig. 24. Peloponnese, Greece, 2000 (from the series *Notes at the Edge of the Road* 2000-6)



Fig. 25. Macedonia, Greece, 2005 (from the series *Notes at the Edge of the Road* 2000-6)

Wandering into nondescript, anonymous areas is to be receptive to unanticipated encounters, latent associations and concealed dispositions. In a way, the more ordinary the landscape, the greater its capacity to induce us to exercise our imagination.<sup>38</sup> Everything that stands on the side of the road is in a state of unresolved deposition and is triggered by a *lapsus* in the landscape—a small difference that interrupts its ordinariness and reactivates the mind.

For methodological reasons I will discuss two such encounters: one stimulated memory and re-contextualization, the other required intuition and persistence.

Indeed the scattered oranges on both sides of a paved road as it cuts through a construction site, reminded me the famous Fenton photograph from the Crimean war as well as Seawright's associative image (the titles are telling) from the Afghanistan war (see figs 26, 27 and 28 respectively).



Fig. 26. Epirus, Greece, 2004 (from the series *Notes at the Edge of the Road* 2000-6)

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<sup>38</sup> Batchen makes a similar point when discussing commonplace photographs that "can shift the burden of imaginative thought from the artist to the viewer" (2009: 270, fn 5). The deadpan photo-conceptualism of Ruscha (2006) and Smithson (1996) could be seen in this light too.



Fig. 27. Roger Fenton, *The Valley of the Shadow of Death*, 1856



Fig. 28. Paul Seawright, *Valley*, 2003

If Fenton's cannonballs and Seawright's artillery shells stand as metonymic substitutes for the human losses, in fig. 26 the conflict is between man and nature and the casualties are on nature's side.

However, the oranges could also be seen as an allegoric accident along the road, a humble reminder of the ephemeral and the mortal, a *memento mori*.

As a matter of fact the photograph was constructed with this in mind. Initially, the oranges were on site but not in sight from the camera's vantage point, so the 'accident' became meaningful only after their position was deliberately rearranged within the frame. Unlike Fenton's monochrome and Seawright's near monochrome photographs, I repositioned the oranges so they look more discrete within the frame, their presence not immediately seen or felt.<sup>39</sup> Otherwise, being in the foreground and of a domineering colour, oranges would have limited the reading of the photograph. For the oranges to be signified as an insignificant, accidental detail, the presence of the place must be established first.

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<sup>39</sup> As I mentioned earlier, Fenton's masterpiece was known to me long before I made the picture (2004). What I did not know was that he evidently positioned the cannonballs on the road; see Kelsey-Stimson, 2008: xxxi, fn 37. On the other hand, although Seawright's work in Afghanistan (2003) focuses on the concealed, downplayed details (see Stathatos, 2003), the emphatic positioning of the already sizable shell cases within the frame takes aim, it seems to me, at the deafening absurdity of the war.



Fig. 29. Detail from contact sheet, no. 39, 2002

Exposed within a year of one another from a different angle and under different light and colour conditions (see figs. 29 and 30), a clearing and a grove seem to have found their definite coexistence as we see in figure 31.



Fig. 30. Thessaly, Greece 2003

A creek flows across the centre of the picture plain, separating a thick wood of naked trees from a bare dumping ground. Grass has also begun to grow around it; not much but enough to make a difference. Indeed, more than composition, vantage point or colour, it was this discreet gesture of nature that made the photograph complete in my eyes. No matter how framed, composed or coloured it is, the place in figures 29 and 30 seems to suffer the indignity of being nothing but a sterile dumping ground—nowadays a fashionable photographic repertoire. In contrast, in figure 31, the grass relates the two planes (the ground and the grove) chromatically, compositionally and conceptually. Acculturated and unadulterated nature are no longer segregated in a representation both evident and rigid. Assisted by the enhanced presence of the trees in the composition, the recuperating 'function' of the grass rebalances the frame, adds time, releases ambiguity.



Fig. 31. Thessaly, Greece, 2003 (from the series *Notes at the Edge of the Road* 2000-6)

The sequence ends where it begins: on the road (see fig. 32).

There are journeys, not destinations, geographic or otherwise. Landscape alone does not establish a personal identity; it is not a token of historical succession either.

Perhaps, this is the underlying theme in *Notes*: landscape itself is contingent; and every categorization of it is both futile and meaningless.<sup>40</sup>

The series' title, *Notes at the Edge of the Road*, is suggestive of this contingency. Notes are usually associated with text: quickly noted observations for future use. In the context of this work the use of the word *notes* aims to imply that despite the finality of the images (it is a finished piece of work, after all) even within the 'eternal' landscape, everything is in flux—ephemeral, unpredictable and ever-changing. Exactly like a journey; an actual as well as an internal one.



Fig.32 Thessaly, Greece, 2001 (from the series *Notes at the Edge of the Road* 2000-6)

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<sup>40</sup> The Greek word for wandering, *periplanomai*, has a double meaning: drifting around aimlessly and being deceived (from the ancient verb *planomai*, meaning to be in doubt, to be at a loss, to be misled; see Liddell & Scott, 1996: 1411, c.v.).

## 5. The reception

In a market saturated with coffee-table books and image-bank illustrations, my work has been used and disseminated at the highest possible level.<sup>41</sup>

While still a work-in-progress, images from *Kath' Odon* were selected for the first major retrospective exhibition of the New Greek Photography *Image and Icon* (1997) held at the Macedonian Museum of Contemporary Art and curated by John Stathatos.<sup>42</sup> In his introductory essay he writes: "[...] Sparer and more poetic, "*Kath' Odon*" is not a travel narrative, but could be the journal of such a narrative: unwelcoming landscapes, grabbed on the move from behind the misty windows of trains or buses endlessly shuttling between one anonymous destination to another."<sup>43</sup>

At the time *Kath' Odon* appeared on the Greek market (1998) works of this character (i.e. subjective documentary) were almost entirely absent.<sup>44</sup> Commissioned by the *Times Literary Supplement* to review monographs from the history of Greek photography that best convey the character of the country, Stathatos selected *Kath' Odon* to conclude his list. In his commentary he notes: "Perhaps the most encouraging development for contemporary Greek photography has been the emergence of a talented new generation of practitioners. Among them is Paris Petridis whose prize winning documentary sequence *Kath' Odon* (On the Road) is a thoughtful account of the "other" Greece, following the country's extended northern border from west to east. These striking and intelligent images of a rapidly changing world move easily from bleak landscapes to the eerie surrealism of small market towns with their cast of bored teenagers, grizzled shepherds, morose refugees and listless army

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<sup>41</sup> See Appendix.

<sup>42</sup> See Appendix under Selected Group Exhibitions (1997)

<sup>43</sup> Stathatos: 1997, p. LVIII. Stathatos is here commenting on a portfolio of landscapes from *Kat' Odon*, later incorporated into the monograph.

<sup>44</sup> Economopoulos' *Balkans* was published in 1995 in New York and its theme, strictly speaking, is the socio-political tribulations in the Balkan peninsula.

conscripts. In the present circumstances, Petridis's reminder that Greece is as much a part of the Balkans as it is of the Mediterranean is timely."<sup>45</sup>

The social significations the road plays in my work is highlighted by Hercules Papaioannou curator of the group exhibition *Photometaphores*<sup>46</sup>: "The photographs of Paris Petridis single out some of the significant social functions of the motor-car, a number of which derive their power from the world of tradition and archetypes. The car decked to carry the newly-weds away from church [see fig. 8, p. 22] is presented as a metaphor for the commencement of a new life while in the background we make out, both literally and metaphorically, the first crossroads. At the other extreme [see fig. 9, p. 23], both spiritual and emotional, we encounter the undertaker's hearse, symbolizing man's final journey, the last road taken in the mortal world. A road travelled at a slow, stately pace."<sup>47</sup>

From the commentary on *Notes* I have selected two readings: the one takes the depicted landscapes as a pretext for communicating more personal deeds; the other focuses on the social significance of the representations.

In the recently published *Greece Through Photographs* (2009)—a collaborative work that studies the political history of Greece and its photographic representation<sup>48</sup>— Alexandra Moschovi writes: "The photographs in Paris Petridis' *Notes at the Edge of the Road* series shun the photogenic elements of the classic picturesque image of the Greek countryside. On the one hand, the landscape to the right and left of a provisional road is, almost by definition, lacking both in 'natural beauty' and historical / mythological reference points. On the other, nothing seems to be happening to justify the scenes being photographed. [...] In the zone between existential questing end *ennui*, these photographic wanderings refute the commonplace quality and expectations of functionality ordinarily associated with the photographic record."<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> See Stathatos, 1999: 19.

<sup>46</sup> See Appendix under Selected Group Exhibitions (2002).

<sup>47</sup> See Papaioannou, 2002: 15.

<sup>48</sup> See Appendix under Contribution to Publications (2009).

<sup>49</sup> See Moschovi, 2009: 285.

Lastly, in his forthcoming book on Greek landscape Papaioannou's assessment of the *Notes* reads as follows: "It is hard to find an analogous, notable work that dives into the anonymous Greek landscape without idealizations, determined to discover the real domain that lurks between the 'guarded' monuments and the insatiable tourist zone."

## 5. Conclusion

Greek landscape has been traditionally depicted in a picturesque or a mythological context and, more recently, as constructed (Yerolymbos) or damaged (Markou) land or as a pretext for the staging of extraordinary allegoric scenarios (Kokkinias).

This thesis examines landscape through the experience of a wandering within undistinguished, insignificant and ordinary territories. Driven neither by a sociopolitical predetermined aim nor by a clear instrumental directive, the encounter with the landscape was subjected to chance and its representation was constructed accordingly.

However, the synthesis of techniques, operational practices and pictorial genres deployed for its photographic depiction was not intended as yet another virtuosic or experimental act for its own sake: a malleability of means does not necessarily entail an instrumentality of ends.

More than an 'objective' record or a discursive construction, a successful metaphor or a pleasant form, my concern throughout has been to visualize and render photographically not a predetermined representation and interpretation of the landscape, but the diversity and process of its conception.

Traced in a fleeting impression or emerging from an open encounter, suggested in an ordinary site or gradually revealing its connotations, latent in unsuspected situations or referencing cultural associations, landscape is indelibly entwined with the process of its conception; it is a mere contingency.

## 6. Appendix

### Details of the Existing Published Work

#### Solo Exhibitions

- 2004 *Roadside Details*, AD Gallery, Athens. Greece (Oct 17–Nov 30)  
1998 *En Route*, Municipal Exhibition Hall, Thessaloniki, Greece (Feb 14–March 31)  
Traveled to Musée Jean Jaurais, Castres, France (April 1-May 21, 1999)

#### Selected Group Exhibitions

- 2008 *Aspects de la Photographie Hellenique*, Theatre de la Photographie et de l' Image.  
Nice, France (Sept 18–Oct 30)
- 2006 *The Cyclades Through the Lens of 20 Contemporary Greek Artists*,  
Museum Of Cycladic Art, Athens, Greece (Jan 7-Feb 27)
- 2005 *Mittelmeer Biennale*, City Hall, Cologne, Germany (Oct 13–Dec 20)
- 2004 *Everyday Hellas*, White Box Gallery, New York City (June 3–July 3)  
*Topo-graphies*, a.antonopoulou,art Gallery, Athens, Greece (Aug 03-29)
- 2002 *Trans-photo-metafores: Trajectories and Intersections*,  
Macedonian Museum of Contemporary Art, Thessaloniki, Greece  
(Exhibition tour: 2001 Montpellier, France; 2002 Centro Andaluz de la  
Photography, Spain; 2003 Apollonean European Art Exchanges, Strasbourg,  
France; 2004 Museum 'Caen', Normandy, France)
- 1999 *Territories - Communities*, Galerie Municipale de Chateau d'Eau,  
Toulouse, France (Nov 26–Jan 10, 2000)  
(Exhibition Tour: 2000 Cultural Center of Contemporary Art, Larissa, Greece;  
2001 Cultural Center for Contemporary Art, Rethymnon, Greece;  
2002 Skopelos Photographic Center, Skopelos, Greece)
- 1997 *Image and Icon: The New Greek Photography 1975-1995*,  
Macedonian Museum of Contemporary Art, Thessaloniki, Greece  
(Exhibition Tour: 1997 Mesiak Fotografie, Bratislava, Slovakia; 1998 Royal  
Photograph Society, Bath, UK; 2000 Moravian Gallery, Czech Republic; 2001  
Karsh-Masson Gallery, Ottawa, Canada).
- 1996 *The Invention of Landscape: Greek Landscape and Greek Photography*,  
Vafopouleio Municipal Center, Thessaloniki, Greece

## Monographs

- 1998 *Kath' Odon*, Istos, Athens  
2006 *Notes at the Edge of the Road*, Agra, Athens  
2007 *The Rum-Orthodox Schools of Istanbul*, Agra, Athens

## Contribution to Publications

- 2009 *Greece through Photographs*, Melissa, Athens  
2008 *Contemporary Greek Photography*, Futura, Athens  
2000 *The evolution of contemporary Greek photography*, Private, No. 24,

## Exhibition Catalogues

- 2008 *Aspects de la Photographie Hellenique*, Theatre de la Photographie et de l' Image, Nice, France  
2001 *Trans-photo-metafores: Trajectories and Intersections*, Macedonian Museum of Contemporary Art/Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Thessaloniki, ISBN 960-86392-2  
1999 *Territories - Communities*, Galerie Municipale de Chateau d'Eau, Toulouse  
1997 *Image and Icon: The New Greek Photography 1975-1995*, Ministry of Culture, Greece  
1996 *The Invention of Landscape: Greek Landscape and Greek Photography*, Camera Obscura, Thessaloniki, ISBN 8602-7672-01-1

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- 2007 "Heronimus Bosch's Oranges at Epirus", by John Stathatos, *Photographos*, no159, March 2008, pp. 34-5  
"At the Roads Edges", by Nina Kassianou, *To Vima*, 15/04/2007, p.52  
2006 "The Memory of the Glance" by Aris Maragopoulos, *Ithaca*, National Book Center of Greece, April 2007, p.13  
1999 "Pioneers of National Pride", by John Stathatos, *TLS*, 16/8/1998, p.18-9  
1998 "The Black and White Limit", by Panos Kokkinias, *To Vima*, 15/11/1998, p.6  
"Greece, Faces and Landscapes" by N. G. Xydakis, *Kathimerini*, 23/12/1998, p.1

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