

## **The ‘Silence’ Of the Sculptures: Censorship Phenomena in Contemporary Greece. Open-Air Sculpture and Historical Remembrance Monuments**

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### **Abstract**

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*This article was written on the occasion of the acts of vandalism committed in Athens, in 2018, against a modern open-air sculpture named “Phylax”, the work of visual artist Kostis Georgiou. The sculpture had been erected in the late 2017 in an open-air space on the seafront of Athens. However, it caused intense reactions among extremist political and religious groups, which claimed that the sculpture “brought to mind” (sic) the figure of Satan. This brought to the forefront various other incidents of censorship of art in Greece which show that, in spite of living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, some citizens continue to be driven by Dark Ages misconceptions and that it is not possible to eliminate, or at least limit, this phenomenon. There are many reasons behind the impulse of organised or non-organised groups of citizens to impose censorship. Generally, the reason put forward, in artistic and social life in Greece, has been that the works represented an “attack on the people’s national and religious beliefs” or an “attack on public decency”, in whose name there have been interventions in the freedom of expression. Historically, open-air sculpture has been considered in Greece the optimum means for expressing sentiments with a national or religious connotation. The criteria according to which this form of art is perceived have evolved depending on the era and the region, i.e. depending on time and place.*

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**Keywords:** Open Air Sculptures, Kostis Georgiou, Phylax, Censorship, Documenta 14, Outlook, Art Athina, Old Faliron

### **Introduction**

The Greek Constitution and legislation protect the freedom of expression in every possible way as the fundamental right of the people to freely think and express themselves in a democratic country. This tradition has been unwaveringly maintained in the approximately two hundred years of the country’s independence, with the exception of some short periods of abolition of the democratic regime and during the Nazi occupation.

Nevertheless, censorship, as a political and social phenomenon, has never stopped appearing in the Western world, regardless of laws and regimes, given that it can take various forms and that it extends from personal insult to attacks on the environment and on various aspects of public life that no legislator can fully contemplate (Green, J. & Karolidis J. N., 2005).

There have been many such phenomena in the history of modern European culture, forcing thoughtful civil societies to react and to defend artistic freedom in every possible way. The Nazis attitude towards freedom of thought is always cited as a negative example to be avoided and many references have been made to the burning of books in 1933 in many German cities and to the infamous “Degenerate art” (*Entartete Kunst*) Exhibition in Munich in 1937. This was an exhibition that from the beginning raised aesthetic, together with racial, religious, and political, concerns. According to the Nazi Minister of Propaganda, Joseph Goebels, degenerate art “insults German feeling, or destroys or confuses natural form, or simply reveals an absence of adequate manual and artistic skill.” (Foster et al., 2004: 281).

The spirit of freedom of expression was very recently conveyed, in Documenta in Kassel in 2017 (also held in Athens), by the impressive and at the same time iconic installation of artist Marta Minujín, with the name “Parthenon of Books”, exclusively constructed with thousands of banned books. This was a work-symbol of the freedom and democracy that every citizen in this world needs (Documenta 14, 2017).

In Greece, there has been no shortage of instances of intervention by various persons and bodies intended at preventing the exhibition of works of art which, in their opinion, were an insult to either public decency or the nation and religion. These circles have not been particularly preoccupied by questions of aesthetics.

One of the most striking examples of censorship in recent years in Greece, that was very much publicised, involved the great and extremely important “Outlook” exhibition, held in 2003 as part of the Cultural Olympiad in Greece. More specifically, two works exhibited by artists Thierry de Cordier and Thanassis Totsikas caused reactions due to their contents and they had to be removed from the exhibition by order of the then government.

This was a “victory” for those circles, which, in spite of representing a minority, appear to be capable of influencing political decisions. Cordier’s work was a small drawing, among many others, with the title “Asperges me” (depicting a Christian cross together with a penis), while Totsika’s work was an “Untitled” photography (of him copulating with a watermelon). The foes of the works originated from political and religious organisations and considered that these were not works of art and that the choice of their themes was insulting to the nation, the religion, and the morality of Greeks. Unfortunately, the government’s decision “rewarded censorship and thoroughly undermined the grandiloquent slogan about the ‘ecumenical’ character of the Cultural Olympiad” (Papanikolaou, 2017: 177).

Another case ended up before the courts, after the work was removed by order of the prosecutor from the “Art Athina 2007” exhibition, an annual art event of international importance. This was a work-video by artist Eva Stefani that displayed, according to the charges brought, “a private part of the female body under the sound of the national anthem”. Thus, the charges of insult to public decency and to the national emblem have been easy to draw up.

“The phenomenon of censorship does exist in Greece in the 21<sup>st</sup> century”, as noted by the editors of an interesting publication on this issue, and it is, unfortunately, reproduced at a noteworthy frequency, whereas it is found that the State is unwilling to prevent it and that civil society is unable to directly and effectively intervene (Ziogas et al., 2008: 9).

Indeed, less than ten years from publication of the above book, another incident of censorship, this time accompanied by acts of vandalism, occurred in the Greek capital, in 2018. It was directed against the open-air work of art “Phylax”, by internationally renowned artist Kostis Georgiou, which had been erected on the seafront of Palaio Faliro at the initiative of the local administration. The work represents a flying figure (in the form of an angel) in vivid red colour, which was, however, characterised as a “devil” by the same minority groups who requested that the work be removed. Nevertheless, the Mayor of the city defended his decision and refused to comply. As a result, the sculpture was literally overthrown from its pedestal during the night by people who had covered their faces.

This was an act of absolute vandalism against a public work of art and the only one that has ever been recorded as an absolute and violent means to restrict freedom of expression in the modern-era history of Greece.

### **Historical monuments and their perception by the public**

Open-air sculpture has its own history in Greece. It was developed after the country gained its independence (1821) and its themes have originated from the long history of the country, both ancient and modern, mostly featuring busts and statues of ancient philosophers and heroes of the Revolution against the Ottoman Empire. Historically, open-air sculpture first appeared in the Greek territory in the Ionian Islands, in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, with monuments dedicated to Greek intellectual figures (Christou, 2001).

The persons represented are usually well-known figures from the Struggle against the Ottoman Empire, such as Theodoros Kolokotronis, Patriarch Gregory V, and many others, who, being historical figures, serve the purpose of perpetuating historical memory. In this regard, art has faithfully served the national consciousness of citizens who saw in these figures the continuation of the Greek nation and the reinforcement of national identity at a critical period of time for the country, when, as a newly-founded state, it had to project its existence through time on the European political and cultural scene. Besides, the visual language chosen was classicism, which was used as a vehicle to convey Greek values and ideals. In this regard, according to Stelios Lydakis (1981: 12), “classicism had awakened historical consciousness and had allowed [artists] to strongly feel their hellenicity”. Furthermore, according to Syrago Tsiara (2004: 15-16), “the past emerges in the present with the help of memory [...]. Memory is inherent to the building of an identity. This is demonstrated by the fact that loss of memory is the equivalent to deprivation of identity. Memory’s role in shaping personal identity is crucial, because it gives meaning to human life.”

This was the kind of works produced by Greek open-air sculpture, highlighting in many cases the fact that art is “militant” and advocates the values of religion and the nation. In smaller cities, in particular, the works commissioned were, as a rule, monuments reflecting local history, dedicated to figures that played a prominent role in defending the so-called national interests. For example, in Thessaloniki, the most impressive and monumental sculptures are dedicated to Macedonian king Philip II, to Alexander the Great and to his teacher, Aristotle. The objective was to reinforce collective memory. Similar conceptions also prevailed in many European countries. People had been accustomed to see their models and they could hardly accept any deviations therefrom (Papanikolaou, 1985). In any case, moral, religious, and political values prevail in sculptures of this type (Panagiotakis, 2014).

In modern years, open-air sculpture has also been enriched with free-standing works, which either served decorative purposes, in association with the architecture of buildings, or displayed allegorical and symbolic meanings, based on the aesthetic values and the prevailing stylistic choices.

The development of open-air sculpture has for the most part been conservative. It has not been easy for the notion that public urban space may be capable of operating also as museum space to take hold. This is why the choice of expression and style had a realistic hue, in spite of the strong pressure exerted by representatives of modernism in art. There have been few known criticisms to the aesthetic choices of artists in sculptures of this type, which were widely accepted as long as the hero-model was not figuratively deformed.

With regard to the public’s perception of these sculptures, in general, Panagiotakis (2014: 481-483) published the results of a questionnaire given to a sample of 50 people, all residents in Thessaloniki, as to how familiar they were with them. It may be seen from the answers of the respondents that the overwhelming majority appears to know the historical figures and the corresponding monuments to a greater extent than other sculptures. Respondents were not interested in the sculptor’s name or style used. Recognisability and the monumental aspect of statues dominate in the conscience of people regarding the moral recognition of the figure represented.

As observed by Panagiotakis (*ibid.*: 308, 309), State legislation does not contribute to changing the manner in which sculptures are made, given that “legal decisions impose authoritarian, plastic restrictions on the creation, thought, and imagination of Greek artists” and installation of sculptures in the urban space “is linked to a series of specific and targeted political, economic, and social factors.” Therefore, the context for creating historical monuments is rather restrictive from the beginning and this does not facilitate adaptation to contemporary aesthetic concerns.

It is obvious that, through the recognisability of historical figures, the beholder is also capable of recognising their roles and their contribution to the nation. Harmony between the external aspect and the internal essence of the figures represented is an unwritten rule. “Recognising the struggles and the contribution of the combatants of the nation has been the objective of all States through time,” as appropriately noted in a recent collective publication (Gounaris, 2014: 7). Through time, models have changed to a considerable extent. There are new “heroes” now (Papanikolaou, ). However, in several cases, the old models have subsisted like “fossils” that, at times, have a negative influence on the citizens’ consciousness.

In spite of all the changes that have occurred through time as to the perception of open-air sculptures, there will always be those citizens who will “see” those works having in mind their own points of view and ideologies that will undermine collective memory and actually annihilate its main purpose which is to be perpetuated from one generation to the next.

### **Kostis Georgiou’s “Phylax”**

In early December of the year 2017, the sculpture named “Phylax”, a work by artist Kostis Georgiou representing the city’s guardian angel, was placed at a prominent location on the seafront of Palaio Faliro, in Athens. The work was privately sponsored and it was put in its place by the technical services of the municipal authority.

It is made of bronze, painted red, and it was placed on a column (used as its pedestal), designed by the artist, which is 4.5 metres high, totalling a height of 8 metres together with the sculpture (which is 3.5 metres high). It is indeed an impressive complex that dominates the entrance to the city (**fig. 1**).

The history of the Faliron area goes back many centuries. Faliron has been the oldest port in Athens and the harbour used by Athens before the development of Piraeus and its port. According to Greek mythology, the hero Theseus set sail from Faliron for Crete, together with other young men and women from Athens, who represented the blood tribute of the defeated Athenians to Minos, King of Crete. The purpose of the trip was to kill the Minotaur and free Athens from this human tribute. Theseus succeeded in his mission. He killed the Minotaur with the help of Minos’ daughter, Ariadne, and upon returning to Athens he became king of the city.

It was in this “mythical” place that the municipal authority decided to place the statue “Phylax” made by sculptor Kostis Georgiou and, according to Mayor Dionysios Chatzidakis, the work had the symbolic role of “protecting” the city like a guardian angel. Indeed, the Mayor cited Crete’s mythical guardian (at the time of Minos), **Talos**, who was a winged bronze giant made by Zeus himself or by the god Hephaestus. Although made of bronze, Talos (whose name meant “sun”) was animate and had been tasked with protecting **Europa**, Minos’ mother (Kakridis, 1986). From a typological point of view, Georgiou’s work shows similarities with representations of the mythical guardian of Crete on ancient coins from Phaestos (3<sup>rd</sup> century BC), in particular with regard to its winged appearance and the way it “faces” the world. “The purpose of guardians in ancient mythology,” said the Mayor of Palaio Faliro, “is to protect the city, but every citizen perceives the work of art according to their own sense of life and according to their own sensitivities,” also stating that the notion of “guardianship” does not necessarily have Christian origins (source: [www.iefimerida.gr](http://www.iefimerida.gr) 28.12.2017). This is precisely the spirit of Georgiou’s work: to link the notion of protection and security with the concept of freedom by using ancient morphological types, as well as hard materials (bronze), to enhance the dynamics of the sculpture. Furthermore, due to the great height of the entire complex, the statue has a role of supervision of the surrounding areas, from the land to the sea.

The sculpture is representative of the style of the artist (painter and sculptor), who is well known from his many exhibitions in Greece and abroad and even more so for his supersized open-air sculptures that have been placed in iconic spaces in cities in Europe and Asia.

As a rule, his sculptures have a semi-abstract aspect, without departing too much from realistic representation, in a manner that somehow reminds surrealist works. Elongation of forms is probably one of his stylistic particularities, as well as intensity of movement that provides the forms with a vision-like character, i.e. makes them look like visions.

A characteristic attribute of his works is the vivid red colour, which the artist uses to adorn both his sculptures and his paintings. In the work in question, the “Phylax” in Palaio Faliro, the red colour is the colour of fire or, better said, the colour of blood. It looks like a small bright “sun” tasked with the crucial duty of shedding its light on the city day and night. From an aesthetic point of view, this choice of colour was particularly successful, given that it is in perfect contrast with the endless blue and its countless shades in the sea and in the sky lavishly stretching in front of it. On the other hand, from a symbolic point of view, it emphasises the value of life itself.

Undoubtedly, Georgiou’s work is of high quality having features that make it a symbol of action and energy, evolving in a metaphysical dimension. I consider that it has an important place in the history of neo-Hellenic Greek open-air sculpture, should it finally remain in this location permanently.

## Reactions

As already noted, the sculpture has caused many reactions, leading to a large debate among the public about the role of open-air sculpture and who can protect artists and their works. It also became evident that familiarisation of people with historical monuments, memorials, and national heroes has created wrong impressions as to what an “abstract” or symbolic work may represent in a city square. As a result, some minority groups find it hard to understand the deeper meaning of an open-air sculpture, which, as a work of art, adheres to rules that are not necessarily related to personal beliefs and values reflecting their own models. The boundaries, which, when crossed; may result in “misunderstandings”, are certainly unclear and it now becomes the responsibility of institutions – in addition to education – to protect Art and its people.

From the very beginning, Georgiou’s “Phylax” appeared to be incomprehensible by a public which expected something different, although the work’s expressive language did not refer to hard-to-understand concepts. The concept of spiritual protection is an incontestable human need and it is not the exclusivity of Christian thought, but can also be found in other realms. This is where the reactions originated from. There exist extremist ideologies that have a different view of things. These can be found in all places. However, in this case, their representatives considered, in an entirely erroneous manner, that the winged red form could not be associated to the guardian angel of Christianity, something that was not the intention of the artist. His purpose had been to use the “primitive” element to remind the ancient origins and values through modern aesthetics, as externalised in morphology, dimensions, and colour.

The position of extremist (political and religious) minority groups, which “profoundly” claimed that this was not a representation of the well-known guardian angel but of the fallen from heaven Lucifer, has had far-reaching consequences. The issue ended up before the Greek Parliament, where an extremist political party claimed that the “work worships the devil”, that it represents blasphemy to Christianity and that, therefore, it should be removed from the particular space.

Then religious fanatics, accompanied by a priest, demonstrated and participated in a ceremony meant to exorcise the demon with holy water. All this occurred at the dawn of the year 2018 AD. The Mayor responded with humour to this movement by saying that, “following the demonstration of the faithful, the exorcism, and the ceremony with holy water, the statue has been purified and, therefore, there exists no longer any risk for the city of Palaio Faliro” ([www.alfavita.gr](http://www.alfavita.gr), 4.1.2018). Of course, he never thought of backing off from his original decision to have the statue erected in the city.

On the other hand, the sculptor responded by saying that “it is not possible to confer to a sculpture thoughtless practices. There have never been any reactions abroad. What were we supposed to do? Place a statue of Neptune, because it would be next to the sea? The reasoning of the work of art is to provide new codes, to make people think. It has nothing to do with religions and symbolisms” ([www.iefimerida.gr](http://www.iefimerida.gr), *ibid.*)

In the meantime, the matter was further publicised and several intellectuals in the country expressed their support to both the Mayor and the artist.

Just when the tension appeared to be de-escalating, all of a sudden, in the early hours of 18 January 2018, a group of people wearing hoods pulled down the statue causing severe damage to it (**fig. 2**). This was one of the most extreme forms of vandalism against a work of art that ever took place in Greece in the two hundred years since its independence. Citizens got scared. Imposing censorship through violence was an unprecedented issue.

Faced with this unique act of vandalism, the Ministry of Culture issued a statement emphasising – among other things – that “freedom of expression and creation are basic conditions of democracy” ([www.kathimerini.gr](http://www.kathimerini.gr), 19.1.2018).

In addition, Dionysios Chatzidakis, Mayor of Palaio Faliro, shocked by the violent act of vandalism said: “This extreme action is a truly sad event, both in terms of the vandalism against the sculpture and of the violation of the context of freedom in which we supposedly live. It is extremely dangerous, because actions of this type are toxic and they can be compared to a contagious virus that can easily attack everybody,” and he promised to put the sculpture back at its place.

([www.kathimerini.gr](http://www.kathimerini.gr), 19.1.2018). The artist, disheartened, made the following statement: “A work of art has been named for something it is not, it has been exorcised and sprinkled with holy water for something it is not, and it has been completely misread. There has been a great misunderstanding. It has been named for something it is not, paint was thrown all over it. However, I do not attribute meanness to those who did that. They have no education in visual arts, they have no sophistication. You have to be knowledgeable to approach certain subjects, in particular to approach matters of visual art. They do not know what this is all about, ‘they know not what they do’” ([www.thetok.gr](http://www.thetok.gr) 19.1.2018).

Lastly, the Chamber of Visual Artists has issued a statement indicating, among other things, the following: “[...] We express our deepest sadness that a part of our society, be it a small one, is being manipulated by arbitrary interpretations of a work of art. People have mobilized against this work to save themselves from an imaginary-inexistent ‘Satan’, when our lives are destroyed every day by decisions taken by earthly ‘satans’ having very specific names and qualities. Savage practical attacks against art and ideology, in general, represent a very dangerous phenomenon of fascisation of our society.”

In any event, irrespective of whether the sculpture will be put back to its place, the intellectual damage sustained is irreparable. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in the Athens of Documenta 14 and of the Parthenon, this act is extremely hard to understand. I will reproduce here with emphasis the conclusion in the statement of the Ministry of Culture: “Darkness is not a colour. It is the end of all colours.”

## **Conclusion**

Censorship in Art is certainly not a new phenomenon and it has a long history. It is due to the plurality of ideologies that influence people according to their education and their experiences. In Greece, there have been several interventions in recent years in many artistic fields: from visual arts to drama and cinematography. However, the act of vandalism against the “Phylax” of Kostis Georgiou is unprecedented. The work has been attacked by both political forces and religious actors. Symbols are protected by the law against attacks. However, so is the freedom of expression. Citizens should try and understand diversity, in particular those who still cling on ancient heroes – models of open-air sculptures and are not capable of accepting the various changes that are taking place in contemporary societies. In spite of representing a minority, they succeed in imposing their will, against the principles and values that every citizen may discover in works of art. Respecting public works of art that have been designated as monuments by the institutions is a necessary condition for a nation’s progress and development.

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**Fig. 1.**





**Fig. 2.**