

**South As State of Mind, Athens, Sept. 2016**Vlassis Caniaris: Arrivederci – Willkommen  
by Christoforos Marinos

Emigration and the Greek economy: why Caniaris's 1976 installation still resonates today



An article in the Financial Times on 7 May 2008 outlined a bleak image of the future of the Greek economy. The writers of the article forecast “a sharp slowdown [which] could result in an exodus of Greek workers to western Europe for the first time since the 1960s”.<sup>1</sup> Although the competent minister of economy and finance swiftly denied the news, declaring that it was unfounded,<sup>2</sup> the article provided Greek journalists with the opportunity to verify the matter on the basis of certain recent opinion polls.<sup>3</sup> According to the polls, the worrying scenario was not far from the truth, and widespread pessimism, increasing economic recession and high levels of unemployment brought back memories that had been deeply buried in the Greek consciousness over the past decades. (And until then the younger generation’s only contact with migration had been through tear- jerker Greek films or popular songs.) But no matter how well-founded the relevant warnings that emerged from the research, there was a marked difference with the

past: “We are not speaking of the migration that the Greeks experienced during the sixties, when thousands of unskilled workers left for the factories of Europe,” noted journalist Nikos Konstantaras. “The situation today is more akin to the phenomenon of bright students who do not return home after their studies.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, the spectre of migration continues to haunt Greece. Only this time, the Gastarbeiter of the sixties and seventies have been replaced by workers with a high level of education wanting to return to their country after a time living abroad, particularly in the European Union.

Vlassis Caniaris’s installation, *Arrivederci – Willkommen*–1976, presented in 2009 for the first time in Greece, prompts us to consider the issue of migration in the nation’s contemporary history. To approach a historical artwork of this kind, it is key to keep in mind not only the morphological elements of the work but also the artist’s own interpretation of the historical and sociological context in which it was created.

The installation *Arrivederci – Willkommen* consists of nine vertical figures arranged over three sections: a corridor and two platforms. The *Willkommen* platform represents the host country – in this case, West Germany – while the other platform, with a sign saying “*Arrivederci*”, indicates the

Vlassis Caniaris *Boudoir*, 1970 detail from installation view at Kunstverein Heidelberg, 1975 Courtesy of the Estate of the artist country of origin – in other words, Greece. The clothing and size of the figures provide clues as to their nationality and social class as well as their standard of living. The southern- European-looking figures on the *Arrivederci* platform seem more miserable than their taller, better-dressed *Willkommen* counterparts, the female figures of which correspond clearly to a Germanic body type.<sup>5</sup> Between the two platforms – the one which bids farewell and the other which greets – there is a railway made of wooden crates with wagons being pulled by a small drummer boy. This corridor symbolises the movement of the Greek migrants, who seem to be trapped in an unpleasant hostage situation, condemned to travel to and fro perpetually.

In interview, Caniaris likens this tug of war to the character of Zampano, the wandering circus strongman played by Anthony Quinn, the ‘naturalised Greek’, in Fellini’s *La Strada*. This comparison with Fellini’s film and its hero discloses on the one hand the existential ballast of the installation and on the other the proletarian character and difficult social position of the migrants of that time. According to Caniaris, “The two platforms are the same mechanism. The capitalistic mechanism that – for many and sundry reasons – pushes out the migrants is the same mechanism that welcomes them and uses them. Hence *Arrivederci – Willkommen*. It’s not a matter of finding out

the why and how, but this is the truth. Under Karamanlis the country lost a large number of workers for whom it could not provide work.”

In fact, according to historical analysts, in contrast to the so-called ‘mobilised diaspora’, national groups that functioned in the framework of the colonial empires of the nineteenth and part of the twentieth centuries, the Greek Gastarbeiter of the Federal Republic of West Germany in the sixties and seventies made up a part of the proletarian diaspora.<sup>6</sup> It should be stressed – and this relates directly to Caniaris’s comments – that there was continuous movement of workers, especially during the seventies, between their country of origin and the country that took them in. The historian Lina Ventura notes, “After the signing of the German–Greek Agreement of 1960, Germany successfully organized the flow of immigrants: migration toward the country was equal to 53 percent of the total number of post-war migrants. [...] According to calculations, 58 percent of Greek migrants to Germany came two and three times. Shortly before the end of migration in 1973, almost one migrant in five of those who had headed toward West Germany arrived for a second or third time.”<sup>7</sup>

The artist provides similar information relating to the functioning framework and political promotion of the labour force in the recent migratory experience of Greek society, but this time as the host country for migrants: “In those days, migration in Germany was controlled, as I suspect was true in other countries as well. Those who were interested passed through a committee and an office in Athens – and corresponding offices in Germany – who were looking for a certain number of workers or specialised abilities. They were given a permit, a pink paper, a copy of which was included in the catalogue of my exhibition in Germany. At least, at that time, there was some control; they weren’t all illegal immigrants. This does not mean that conditions were better. They were worse. But what was written in all the studies was that when the number of foreigners reached 10 percent of the population, there would be problems and very severe, acute ones. We have exceeded that number here and that is why this situation has developed.”

In speaking of the wave of migration in the sixties and early seventies, Caniaris emphasises in particular the children of the migrants, who are the focal point of the Emigrants series. “What interested me most – and I aimed at this especially – was the children of this generation, who were two, three, four, five years old at the time. Little children... that’s why I have included the garbage cans, the toys, the baby carriages, the bicycles...”<sup>8</sup>

Arrivederci – Willkommen is the most mature work of the Emigrants (1971–1976) series, which was begun in Paris after the artist left Greece in 1969 and completed when he returned in 1976 (in order to teach at the Polytechnic).<sup>9</sup> The theme took on new forms in the large installation entitled H elas–Hellas, presented by Technochoros–Bernier in the abandoned Fix ice factory in Athens in 1980. For Caniaris, there’s not a great difference between Emigrants and H elas–Hellas: “I don’t think they are different works from beginning to end. The conditions change, and the reasons change, as do the materials that the artist uses to transform [the work].”<sup>10</sup> And he continues by saying, “To be honest, I really can’t reconsider the theme of the migrants as I did then. In any case, I am neither an economist nor a sociologist... At that time, I associated with people who kept me informed. [...] What can I say today? It is a timely subject”.

The continued timeliness of Arrivederci – Willkommen, however, does not lie (only) in its aspect of dispute or protest, on which most interpretations of the work have been based. A more careful reading shows Caniaris reflecting the socio-political pessimism of Adorno and his ideas regarding both the proletariat (as a historic subject which leads to progress) and art (as a rupture and resistance against society).<sup>11</sup> “My approach,” says the artist, “was always to give shape to something that preoccupied me. But I no longer expect a revolution from such works – that is, to have a revolutionary language like those of that time, which were influenced by May 1968. I never really believed in those things. I’m not one of the fanatics of May. I don’t believe in sudden changes in the world. Everything needs time in order to mature.”

Caniaris’s stance was one of the reasons that, when a 1973 exhibition took place in Berlin during his DAAD scholarship he came into open conflict with politicised groups, which, as well as providing partial financial support for the exhibition, were to help him install and transport the works. “[They] hoped that the moment I handled such a topic [migration] – something no one else had dealt with up to that time – I would issue manifestos. They wanted the work to function as a poster. But all that was of no interest to me, and we clashed. And, of course, they all abandoned me, both the Greeks and the Germans, leaving me alone with the public. I think that [my works] are, without my wanting it, politicised. In other words, they speak about a social anguish, and it doesn’t matter whether it is ‘Left’ or ‘Right’ or ‘revolutionary’. It is an anguish that exists regardless. Personally, that is what interested me and, simply put, that is what I did”.

Perhaps the final point to linger on is the way in which the concept of the installation can be re-evaluated in light of contemporary theoretical analyses. Prominent among these is the argument of art critic Claire Bishop. She explores this particular type of art not in relation to theme or materials but through the experience of the (fragmented) subject. More specifically, Bishop examines the history of the installation according to four types of

viewer experience, “four torches”, as she calls them, that shed light on the history of installation art. Her first model of the viewing subject is based on the psychoanalytical theory of Sigmund Freud, the second on the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and the third on the Freudian death drive, the disintegration of the subject and related post-structural interpretations. The fourth, which draws from the theories of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, focuses on the viewer as a political subject. In short, Bishop maintains that we cannot consider installation art separately from post-structural theories about decentering of the subject, which developed during the sixties and seventies. As she writes, “What installation art offers is an experience of centring and decentering: work that insists on our centred presence in order then to subject us to an experience of decentering.”<sup>12</sup> Bishop’s analysis would suggest that, in our case, we should focus not on the (migration) theme of the installation *Arrivederci – Willkommen* but on the model of the subject that it proposes. And without doubt, despite the fact that the anthropocentric works of Caniaris are narrative-based, his installations destabilise the experience of the viewer without imposing an absolute ideological point of view. Like the tableaux of Ed Kienholz and George Segal – art that, as Bishop notes, is characterised by a symbolic and psychologistic *mise-en-scène* – Caniaris comments on the public sphere of a country in which he never felt at home. His distanced and unavoidably controversial stance, his quest for an alternative experience through a frail socio-political system – these render a work like *Arrivederci – Willkommen* extremely topical today.

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1. Ralph Atkins and Kerin Hope, “Greeks Set to Pay Price for Feel Good Years”, *Financial Times*, 7 May 2008.
2. George Alogoskoufis, “Greek Economy Makes Progress and Shows Potential”, *Financial Times*, 9 May 2008.
3. Nikos Konstantaras, “O fovos tis megalis figis” (“The Fear of the Great Escape”), *I Kathimerini*, 29 June 2008.
4. *ibid.*
5. Caniaris claims that one of the figures on the *Willkommen* platform resembles Brunhilde. Vlassis Caniaris was interviewed by Christoforos Marinos on 30 November 2008 in Athens. All the quotations in this essay are from this interview.
6. Gastarbeiter are workers with contracts for a certain period of time. See Richard Clogg (ed.) *The Greek Diaspora of the 20th Century*, transl. into Greek by Marina Frangou, *Ellinika Grammata*, Athens, 2004, pp. 30–31.
7. Lina Ventura, “Elliniki koinonia kai metanastefsi” (“Greek Society and Migration”) in *Ellines metanastes sto Velgio* (Greek Migrants in Belgium), Nefeli, Athens, 1999, p. 81
8. The clothing used by Caniaris in these installations are his own and his children’s. The toys are also his children’s.
9. *Arrivederci – Willkommen*, which was presented at Caniaris’s exhibition in Hanover and later in Warsaw, is the last work of this period and completes the *Emigrants* series. Another seminal work of this series is *Koutso*, which belongs to the collection of the National Museum of Contemporary Art, Athens.
10. What the artist says about the difference between past and present is characteristic: “Today, the signs and slogans are written with over- stylised letterheads. I remember how we placed signs and they shot at us from the crossroads.” (Vlassis Caniaris interviewed by Christoforos Marinos, 30 November 2008, Athens.)
11. See the introduction by Jochen Schulte-Sasse in the English edition of Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1984.
12. Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History*, Tate Publishing, London, 2005, p. 130