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Zissis Kotionis. The Text as Assemblage
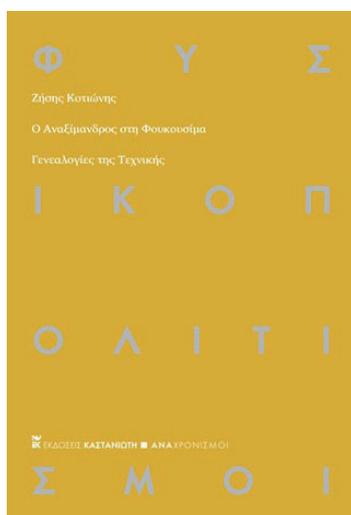
Abstract
The texts by Professor Zissis Kotionis, a Greek architect and artist, declare two urgencies: on the one hand the needs for theoretical speculation as a support for architectural production, and on the other the need for writing as an indispensable element of design research. The centrality of the text as a project is therefore affirmed. The narrative structure of these texts is made of collections of fragments assembled together, which indicate a multiplicity of operational possibilities rather than codes. It does not matter if they are texts of criticism of architecture, theory or poetry: the same structure is repeated and updated giving new meanings to the process of assembling in form of a text.

Keywords
Assemblage — Greece — Fragment

Fig. 1
Zissis Kotionis, *Anaximander in Fukushima. Genealogies of Technique* (2017).

Texts and books have a fundamental importance for architecture as a place for investigation and experimentation. The book has often been a moment of verification, exploration, and systematization of thoughts through catalogs, collections and essays. Today, in a historical moment in which great theories have disappeared and theoretical speculation is fragmented, sporadic and continually contradicted, it is legitimate to ask for what role a book of architecture may cover inside the discipline of architecture.

In January 2017, in the old library of the Onassis Foundation in Athens, Zissis Kotionis, Greek architect and university professor at the University of Thessaly, tells his work as a writer presenting his books in a speech that runs throughout his 30 years of activity. The books were presented in chronological order using projects, realized or not, only to support the description of the books as a sort of attempt to give physical substance to theoretical investigation. This event declares two complementary urgencies: at the one hand the necessities of research theory as anticipation of the design activity, and at the other hand the necessity of writing itself as a tool both for theoretical speculation and for formal research. In this way Kotionis sanctions the centrality, but also the inevitability, of the text as a project.

Kotionis eschews from writing any scientific investigation, preferring instead a text that stands between criticism, personal history and theoretical speculation, and he moves easily, and ambiguously, between these. In this sense, although apparently they look to be essays, these books try to tell stories. The distance from a pure scientific reasoning is explained by the same author by quoting the German romantic poet Friedrich Hölderlin who in *Hyperion* vividly described Greece without ever having visited it.

Fig. 2
Zissis Kotionis, Camp_Med (2016).

Hölderlin's is an imaginary journey in a real place that combines the collective imagination with the desire for physical contact of the body on a certain place. Writing is therefore a mean that unites fantasy to experience in a narrative where imagination and reality can meet.

This type of narrative acquires the distinctive character of the works of the romantic painters who have represented the places they visited - or never visited - of the *Grand Tour* as a *collage* of fragments and ruins both real and fantastic, mixing codes, places and personal memories. The texts of Kotionis seem to be constructed in the same way: they are collections of texts that give rise to a heterogeneous composition made of fragments, pieces that belong to different moments or written for different occasions, personal memories and built projects, which all together meet in the physical place of the book as in a canvas.

These collections take the form of archives, where various texts are collected without a real beginning or an end, a characteristic that determines a sort of incompleteness. The archive, as Superstudio writes in a manifesto published in 1968, is an open tool in constant evolution that avoids to set principles, but that makes hypothesis, ambiguity and doubts as a prerequisite for any research (Superstudio, 1968). In the same way Kotionis avoids to establish codes in favor of a formulation of multiple operational possibilities. The book *The Madness of the Place* (2004) has its roots in the architecture of the Second World War in Greece identified essentially in three fundamental figures for the Neo-Hellenic architectural culture and with the legacies they gave birth: Dimitris Pikionis and the vernacular, Aris Konstantinidis and the modernism, Takis Zenetos and the electronic technology. In reality it is difficult to relegate these architects to clear definitions, as their research and their works transcend any -isms. Kotionis' texts transversely investigate their works avoiding issuing judges but rather identifying three different complementary conditions of existence that cannot exist simultaneously.

By getting together these different conditions, Kotionis reaches the liberty of not to choose and not to take side. It is the freedom to work on new research hypotheses without any constraint. As Peter Turchi points out in *Maps of Imagination: the Writer as Cartographer* (2004, 12), this is a prerogative of the act of writing understood as an act of exploration. This pro-

Fig. 3
Zissis Kotionis, *Tel me, Where is Athens* (2004).

cess of exploration is indeed based on the premeditated and undisciplined combination of various parts. But while the research phase is rigorous and assertive, its assumptions are uncertain.

On this basis Kotionis adopts the technique of *assemblage* in all its production as a precise operational program. In an interview for the exhibition *Terra Mediterranea: in Action* in Leipzig in 2014, he offers an explanation for the installation he presented at the exhibition, called *Camp_Med*, which can be useful to better understand the narrative structure of his books. *Camp_Med* consists of objects found along the coasts of the Mediterranean Sea and then reassembled in the unprecedented configuration of a village-camp.[1] This creative process refers to the *assemblage* technique in which objects found somewhere are de-territorialized and juxtaposed without any precise order, eschewing the use of any physical or mechanical joints. *Assemblage* is by definition a process without any principle of order, without any privileged point of view, and that can spread indefinitely (Barilli 1963, 84-95). Furthermore, for DeLanda (2016), who refers to the work of Deleuze and Guattari who firstly defined the *assemblage* theory in their text *Millepiani, Capitalism and Schizofrenia*, this technique involves the use of heterogeneous elements that are codified and de-territorialized while they still keep their singularity. Kotionis' texts can be interpreted in the same way: an archive of thoughts, projects, and researches, assembled together but incomplete, and with the potential to grow.

Perhaps the clearest example in which this narrative structure is employed is the book *Anaximander in Fukushima. Genealogies of Technique* (2017), a publication that presents the exhibition set up with the same title at the Benaki Museum in Athens in 2010. It is a collection of objects, fragments of texts, and images taken from the work of the Greek pre-Socratic philosophers, combined with texts and works by the architect himself. The narration develops as a series of fragments, without any apparent continuity. What keeps everything together is the fact that Kotionis builds a cosmology that is a world-space where every element belongs.

If we aim to investigate the origins of this narration, we need to look at the past and specifically at Kotionis' first published text, *The Search for Dwelling in Dimitris Pikionis* (1994) which collects the research carried out during his PhD thesis at the Polytechnic School of Athens. Pikionis was one of the leading architects of Neo-Hellenic Architecture and a promoter of Regionalism whose importance is internationally recognized (Frampton, 1980). The famous walk under the Acropolis, a long quasi-oriental style stone and concrete carpet, is a retrospective narration that explores individual and collective stories. It is a non-linear text composed of new and old fragments: the stones found *in situ* are recombined like disordered fragments from the past, together with some long strips of concrete and the sequences of the views of the actual landscape of Athens as frames taken along the spiral path that climbs up to the hill. This project poses the question of the research for a contemporary narrative form realized through non-linear paths that moves between physical, visual and historical fragments.
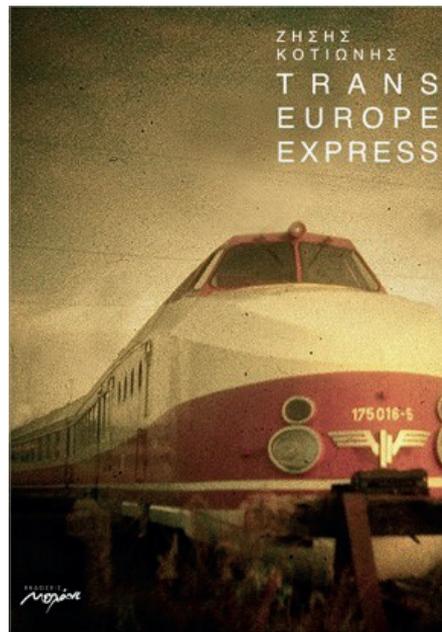
The construction of the text as an *assemblage* allows us to discover and collect apparently incompatible elements, figures and places through the literary journey. This journey is nothing but a movement that does not follow a linear path, but is a succession of spatial-temporal displacements in the

memory of real travels or travels of the imagination. The literary journey is therefore a spatial dimension in which lurks the search for what has been abandoned or forgotten, re-contextualizing it to open up new possibilities. The journey as a story, however, is not intended as a linear story similar to the *Journey to Portugal* by Josè Saramago or the *Balthazar's Odyssey* by Amin Maalouf. On the contrary, it is a fantastic construction that emerges from the collection of real fragments, lived experiences, artistic performances. The writer Milan Kundera (2004) points out that the novel 'The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman' by Laurence Sterne was the first destruction of the story because it is composed by scattered episodes that are simply linked together by the repetitive presence of some characters. As the story disappears, existential questions about the human nature come forward. This *assemblage* becomes the true narrative form implemented by Kotionis as a continuous travel between places, ideas, and forms.

In *Tell Me, Where is Athens* (2010), Kotionis narrates the transformation of the urban landscape of Athens in the last decades. The texts are collected in three groups (theory, rhetoric and projects) and present a fragmented panorama that does not indicate privileged directions. For Kotionis Athens cannot be resumed in a single image but always suggests the existence of some other places in front of us, almost like a *flaneur* that moves on the rough soil of the peninsula of Attica searching for something to discover. The book has a fractal structure that imposes to the reader a continuous change of the distance of the point of view, thus constructing new relationships between inside and outside, large and small, distant and close. It is the same geography of the Attica peninsula that is narrated, but Kotionis' worry is not so much the need to reveal something, but the attempt to elaborate hypotheses for what is not included at a fist glance.

Farewells (2008) is a rapid travel among places with the speed of the airplane. It combines the omniscient view of flying together with the archaic need to physically stand on the ground. A fast rhythm guides the reader between distant places, whose stories are juxtaposed without any particular order. The description of physical places, clearly named in the title of each chapter, is combined with photographs of other places, as a sort of fantastic journey towards an elsewhere. The narrative does not cause disorientation, but on the contrary it provokes the desire to be in a specific place, or better in the many places of the book. Like Hölderlin, the place of memory or expectation is merged with the physical characteristics of a specific place.

A third form of travel is narrated in *Trans Europe Express* (2010) that collects nine journeys through the geography of Europe. Here personal stories overlap with imaginary journeys: each chapter combines two or three names of places, also very distant from each other, and which often seem to have nothing to do with each other. Kotionis builds a new psychotropic map of the genealogy of memory like Ulysses that had images of Ithaca, his home, overlapped to the places he visited from time to time during his trip along the Mediterranean. But unlike the circumnavigation of Ulysses, Kotionis' journeys are constellations where lines, shapes and names generate a myriad of potential and imaginary connections. And yet, while the journey of Ulysses is cyclical, in *Trans Europe Express* every place becomes a pause waiting for a departure in a non-linear journey.

Assemblage is an artistic practice, as evident in the incredible number of artists that have used it, from Pablo Picasso to Damien Hirst. In the text

Fig. 4
Zissis Kotionis, *Trans Europe Express* (2010).

Formativity (2007) Kotionis investigates more accurately how writing and creative process can work together. He involuntarily refers to the seminal *Theory of Formativity* by Luigi Pareyson (1968), where contemplation as an aesthetic experience is substituted by the process of creation as an aesthetic practice. The active action of the artist in forming a work of art represents a radical inversion in the relationship between the artist and his work. *Formativity* indeed focuses on the act of making something and therefore on capability of altering the physical form.

In the same way, Kotionis' stories do not offer an image to be contemplated, but many images that are evolving and can be often contradictory. The narrative of Kotionis in fact avoids any kind of objective description. For example, his built works are never explained in their entirety, but he refers to them only for some specific aspects, appearing often somewhere within the test as necessary counterpoints. It is an attempt to understand more accurately the principles of the research that are at the base of the architectural process. In this way Kotionis not only affirms that a project is close to an artistic practice but that the same writing belongs to design practice.

However, it is necessary not to confuse a simple collection of texts, a widespread format among architecture production, and the narrative project of Kotionis. These are not collections of texts from a particular period or from a specific research. Instead, the whole personal archive made of various materials is used each time to construct new narratives rather than theories. In this regard, two similar publications, and perhaps the best-known works abroad because they are translated in English, help in this regard: *The Ark* (2010) and *Multidomes* (2011). The first is the catalog for the Greek Pavillion at the 2006 Venice Biennale of Architecture curated by Kotionis himself together with Phoebe Giannisi. On a wooden ark, that is clear reference to the biblical narration of Noah's Ark, seeds are collected to be saved from Man's destruction of the Earth. The book is a collective work that collects texts by different authors together with those of the curators of the pavilion. The work is focused mostly on the Greek landscape, and it is not merely a description but it is a narration made of thoughts and actions about the landscape itself. As in other texts, there is a close link between the theme of the research and the narrative form. The book is a

multi-directional journey throughout many voices across the geography of Greece. The many texts collected here reveal spatial displacements and territorial transformations exactly like the spores, the essence of life, are a multitude in continuous movement. The curator of the pavilion becomes the narrator of a shared story because it concerns everyone: like Homer, he inherits stories and brings them back into a collective form.

Multidomes instead is published at the same time with the homonymous exhibition organized at the Benaki Museum in Athens in 2012. The projects presented are built with hypothetical software that generates a housing system that grows, multiplies and adapts to the territory as spores. This system creates a porous, open and extroverted housing systems. The book is another example in which the content and the narrative structure fit together. *Multidomes* are indeed projects built as an *assemblage* of elementary units (the living cell) and among these elements there is nothing but space that is a collective and shared space. It is not a simple collection of texts and works, but it is a narration of the meaning of the multitude. The book opens with a conversation between the author, Elia Zenghelis, Alexandros Kioupkiolis and Yorgos Tzirtzilakis, and then develops into an alternation between texts and projects, in which the sequence actually represents two specific intentions: at the one hand it avoids hierarchies, while at the other hand it constructs a network of references between chapters. It does not seem risky to talk about a semi-lattice structure, which in mathematics indicates an isotropic structure of points without hierarchies, proposed in the architectural discourse by Christopher Alexander (1965) and later by Deleuze and Guattari (1975).

The two texts have a common narrative objective: to tell the story of singularities in parallel with the story of the multitude. Singularity is told with personal stories, the act of dwelling, the adaptation of the peasant to the virtual world through laptops, and linked to collective epic poems, such as the risk of ecological disaster, the evolution of the agrarian world, urbanization processes, and the alteration of the landscape. This aspect of Kotionis' research can be placed between two characteristics of contemporary Greece that represent an antithesis in Greek society. At one hand the epic narrative of the collectivity that pervades the work of the director Theo Anghelopoulos with the use of long sequences that embrace the landscape and the wholeness of human actions. At the other hand the crisis of the bourgeois family described by directors like Yiannis Economides and Yiorgos Lantimos, in which the whole story takes place within the domestic environment of the family apartment. Kotionis does not abandon the epic narration of Anghelopoulos, but he re-thinks it as an expression of a multitude in which the single event calls into question every predominant and immutable narration.

The overlapping of the narratives of Angelopoulos and Economides defines a specific geographic form of the text that links the individual and his wandering on the earth's surface to the panoramic images of the landscapes. In 1968 the brothers Charles and Ray Eames directed the film Power of Tens, in which scenes from everyday life - a couple picnicking on a lawn - is the meeting point between the all-encompassing view from the satellite and the exploration of internal organisms through the microscope. At each zoom out through the powerful lens of the NASA satellite the bodies are positioned within a vast scenario in which are completely absorbed. In the opposite direction, the microscope explores human cells, analyzing what man is made of. This rapid change of scale through the use of the machine

combines the interior with the outside, and the biological life of the individual to the Earth that is in constant evolution.

The text as an assemblage of fragments resembles a series of disassembled and reassembled frames that are able to superimpose the human gaze with the mechanical eye of the satellite. Kotionis abandons the zoom as a linear process and he shuffles and puts together the frames as residual images of the technological information society. In this way he merges the objectivity of the digital device to the subjectivity of the human in a new form of narration.

The architectural book for Kotionis is not an essay, as it does not pretend to establish codes, nor a presentation of his works. On the contrary, there is a coincidence between the narrative form and the contents as a project. The *assemblage*, used by Kotionis as a method of making art and architecture, is also applied to the narration. In the last case, the *assemblage* acquires a double value: the unfolding of the story through combining places, images, fantasies and characters, and the perpetual experimentation and research as the base for the design. The text is freed from the problem of subordination to architectural production and acquires its own autonomy. The text thus becomes a necessary tool for the design, and therefore indispensable.

Notes

[1] Kotionis refers both to the touristic village, a concept investigated also with the projects *Amphibia* for the XIII Biennale of Architecture of Venice, and to the *camp* as a place of negation and control, with a reference to *Homo Sacer* by Giorgio Agamben.

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F. Micocci, Zissis Kotionis. The Text as Assemblage

109