

## **The Apology of Socrates in Kaufbeuren** / by Maria Maragkou

Angelos Spartalis, an exceptional artist of our times, but at the same time innocent in a period of cultural crisis, tackles two old tragic issues that he updates transforming them in a surreal fair.

“The Apology of Socrates in Kaufbeuren”, Angelos Spartalis most recent work, is inspired by an enlightened man's sentence in an era when Democracy is frightened, therefore absurd. With the pretext of atheism, Athens of the 5th century B.C. sentences Socrates to drink hemlock.

The second tragic historical event is more recent and takes place in the 20th century in Bavaria, between 1939 and 1945, in Kaufbeuren mental hospital and its branch at Irsee where approximately 20,000 innocent people have to die. It is a practice of euthanasia that is part of the experiments performed by the Third Reich. The last child to die at the age of three years old is executed by the chief nurse in 1945.

Angelos Spartalis connects these two events in Greece, at the dawn of the third millennium, when Democracy is once more so frightened that it becomes absurd. The artist does not live anymore in the confined, slowly informed world of the Athenian democracy of the 5th century nor in the years of Hitler's totalitarianism whose crimes were revealed later, but in the blessed (or cursed?) age of the Internet where massive crime becomes a perfect image and enters people's homes. Easy to grasp and to digest. From the bombing of Serbia to the dismemberment of Yugoslavia to crimes committed during the Gulf war, in Iraq and Syria to beheadings by jihadists today.

“The Apology of Socrates in Kaufbeuren” is hosted in the old building of the Justice of the Peace Court (Irinodikeio) of Aghios Nikolaos, Crete that is no longer used. The building has been sealed. The only things left in the courtroom are the stand, the judge's bench and the portrait of Jesus Christ on the wall making the building the ideal place to present this artwork – a 16mm film and a mural-size oil painting on canvas that could be a wall painting. This is where the artist plays with the notion of fake. And he has his reasons for this. An oil-painting that could be a wall-painting, a projector that keeps projecting a film although the feed reel is out of film and is spinning like crazy, a Socrates – incarnated by a splendid Ilias Logothetis, as an inmate in the Third Reich's hospital pretending to be the Athenian philosopher. In the nine meter long oil-painting there are hysterical nurses who are flirting with the patients, a harlequin (an allusion to the history of art from which no one can escape and to “grandfather” Picasso) depicted alongside with bloodthirsty trivial details from Dirck de Bray. There are also army officers dancing, a dead hare (a tribute to “father” Beuys), a little girl dressed as a princess, an angel from old paintings.

A whole world, well painted and depicted in a surreal way as to the composition and the characteristics of the painting, where the sentences “No future” and “Hochspannung, Lebensgefahr” (meaning “High Voltage, Danger of Death”) have

a prominent position; sentences with timeless importance connecting the past with the present, maybe even the future, for fear of menace.

The modern artist is searching to answer his own ontological question using the means at his disposal. He goes back in history, in sources and uses canvas, color and film based on his own sensitivities and particularities against his time since the medium is not what matters in art. Societies that once eliminated dissidents nowadays have the privilege to ignore them. The artist, most of the times an exile in terms of current habits and common taste, is defending himself. The issue Angelos Spartalis chose to treat is a testament of his own positions about art and life. The Apology of Socrates in the doomed hospital testifies the guilt of mankind for crimes of complicity that it committed by remaining silent and sometimes apologizing.

This outlines the ideological-social context of an important issue of modern history of art that searches into archives, – remember Jean Clair’s borderline exhibition about human body in Venice in 1995 where a great part of the material was retrieved from Hospitals and crematoria of that time – exhibits, treats archive material and remains open to it.

Angelos Spartalis himself says that he intended to create a bittersweet artwork. Probably. Sometimes, tragic is confessed with humor.

**Maria Maragkou**

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