

## Gerard A. Goodrow *Carpe Diem* The Photographs of Christophoros Doulgeris

Our contemporary post-industrial information society – characterised more than anything else by the fact that the service sector of the economy generates more wealth than the manufacturing sector- has obviously reached its limits. One symptom of this massive social shift is increased urbanisation, which is inherently accompanied by a decrease in and ageing of the population in rural areas.

*Christophoros Doulgeris was born in Serres in northern Greece in 1975. Located in Central Macedonia, Greece, Serres is the capital of a largely agricultural district, with a focus on tobacco, grain and livestock. Since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, it has also become a centre for the production of textiles and other manufactured goods. As a child, Doulgeris then moved with his family to the German city of Essen. The Northern European society he encountered during his youth in Essen was in the midst of a painful paradigmatic shift from a largely industrial (primarily coal and steel) to a service-based society and economy. Among his 'heroes' at the time were a number of representatives of the so-called Düsseldorf School of Photography, students of the conceptually-based photographer couple Bernd and Hilla Becher, who, already in the early 1960s, set out to make an encyclopaedic photographic documentation of the rapidly disappearing monuments to the region's industrial culture. It is thus no coincidence that Doulgeris would later study Sociology at the University of Crete and then Photography at the Camberwell College of Arts in London, thus setting the tone for his future career as a socially engaged photo artist.*

Christophoros Doulgeris sought to document this seemingly unstoppable trend and its effects on the rural population of his home country of Greece. The shift from an agriculturally and industrially based economy to a post-industrial service society, compounded by the outbreak of the global economic crisis in 2008, has left its mark on numerous levels.

The fact that Christophoros Doulgeris is indeed an artist –and not merely a photographer with a background in sociology- is clearly evident in his most recent series of colour images of defunct factory buildings and dust-covered industrial equipment on the island of Santorini. Like the rural school buildings that formed the focus of his previous project, "School Project", the factories of Santorini are "beacons of Greek culture", the centres of livelihood for thousands of residents of the small Cycladic island. The Nomikos family has acknowledge this by converting the old tomato factory "D. NOMIKOS" in an arts factory, producing "new energy".

The works are by no means objective and exhaustive "photo documentation" in the narrow sense of the term, but rather highly poetic eulogies to a past, which serve both as homage and warning. As viewers, we are confronted with images of industrial spaces and machinery, some of which has not been used for more than forty years. This passing of time is more than obvious through the heavy layers of dust that have accumulated over the years, covering the machinery, workbenches and desks with a soft but fragile blanket. In this sense, Doulgeris' photos can be seen as contemporary interpretations of the centuries-old tradition of the *memento mori* and *vanitas* motifs on a grand scale. The art historical terms *memento mori* (Latin: "remember that you must die") denotes a moralistically based reflection on mortality that goes as far back as the Middle Ages. At the centre of these reflections is the transient nature of all earthly goods and pursuits and, perhaps more importantly, the vanity (i.e. futility) of earthly life. We have precisely this in the works of Christophoros Doulgeris, for what we have here are not so much images of a

long-gone industrial tradition, but rather much more evidence of the passing of time, that is to say of transience and the futility of our all too human efforts to stop time, even photographically. “The passage from life to eternity”, Doulgeris explains “as well as the idea of the ephemeron, which always has an expiration date, are ideas which have tormented me..”

Contrary to traditional *memento mori* and *vanitas*, however, Doulgeris’ images –although warnings that we, too, shall one day perish- are only to a certain extent moralizing. Yes, they do indeed point to the negative side of so-called economic and social progress, but their greatest strength is derived from the fact that they emit a sense of hope in the future – or at least in the present. The conversion of a defunct factory space into an exhibition space for contemporary art is but one, albeit prime example. In a certain sense, the artist is telling us with his photos that, although you cannot stop time, you can indeed make the best of what you have. The warning inherent in Doulgeris’ images are thus more than anything else a plea for *carpe diem* (seize the day).

Doulgeris’ photos of dust-covered machines are strangely reminiscent of portraits, not necessarily of family members or state officials, but rather of actors in an ancient Greek drama. The machines are depicted “life-sized” so to speak – already here we have the notion, if only semantically, that the machines are somehow “alive”. The ragged tarpaulins draped over the metal machines are mentally transformed into cloaks, such as those worn by the great personalities of Classical Greece, then political, economic and cultural capital of the known world and cradle of western civilization. Images of the great philosophers Plato and Aristotle come to mind, but also of tragic mythological figures such as Oedipus and valiant heroes such as Theseus. Unlike the tragedies of ancient Greece, however, the drama played out in Douglgeris’ photographs imply a “happy end”, no matter how far away in the distant future this may be. His images of defunct factory buildings and dust-covered machines can thus be read as a plea to follow the example of the Nomikos family and take things -indeed to take our future- in our own hands, to become actively engaged in forming the future of our own society In this sense, they are reminiscent of the so-called ‘Christ Principle’, which was developed by Joseph Beuys in Düsseldorf in the 1960s and forms the basis of his concept of Social Sculpture, which in turn describes art’s potential to transform society:”Just do it ”. An appeal, which also lies at the core of Christophoros Doulgeris’ images of dust-covered machines and defunct factories on the island of Santorini. Carpe diem! For your own sake – as well as for the sake of the numerous “beacons of Greek culture”!