

# Stefanos Tsivopoulos in Conversation with Rehan Ansari

Wednesday, March 4, 2020

*In an ongoing series on social justice and making art in a time of crisis initiated by the Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation, **Rehan Ansari**, Brooklyn-based writer, playwright and artist, speaks with institutions and individuals whose work centers on art and social justice. Here he talks to artist **Stefanos Tsivopoulos** about what has value in a time of crisis and how he came to make *History Zero* (3-channel video) and *Alternative Currencies: An Archive and A Manifesto* in the midst of the Greek financial crisis. Both works are part of *Relational Economies: Labor over Capital*, the current exhibition at *The 8th Floor*. He will also be in a conversation titled *Before There Was Money There Was Debt* with anthropologist David Graeber on Sat, Feb 29.*

Rehan Ansari: What was it like to make art, *History Zero* and *Alternative Currencies: An Archive and A Manifesto*, in the middle of a crisis?

Stefanos Tsivopoulos: My work was inspired by urgency, because Greece was in crisis at that time. ‘Crisis’ was the word that everybody used to describe a situation that had no precedent.

RA: How would you characterize crisis as an artist?

ST: A crisis occurs when there's a lack of understanding of what exactly is happening and it has to do with a change in our lifestyle, the change being unknown and a negative, and us entering a situation where we have to redefine, and probably sacrifice things. That was the question during the financial crisis. It had to do a lot with the economy, but the economy was just the starting point.

RA: How did you think about it and how did it show up in your work?

S T: When you think about why the economy went south, and why Greece was unable to do well in the EU, you have to think about the past, as in “what led to this?” My work often has a retrograde movement, it investigates the past but also the future. So when you are in crisis and ask why, you realize it has to do with moments of decision making, and

I'm talking about not just the decisions of the country and politicians, but also personal decisions and aspirations. What informs those?

RA: Aspiration or delusion drives all of the characters in your three-channel video *History Zero*: the wealthy art collector who is losing her memory but desires to make origami flowers, the man who's homeless, and perhaps a refugee, foraging for items of value in the trash, and the artist who is searching for meaning in objects on the street. You make their search look beautiful.

S T: The beauty of delusion is very interesting. The question that I asked myself was how can I best portray the way we deal with value in our lives, and what value means for each one of us. How consciously or unconsciously, we contribute value to things, with our daily actions. What better way to look at this question than through art, because art itself is the ultimate commodity, with an intrinsic value in the global market.



Stefanos Tsivopoulos in conversation with David Graeber and Sara Reisman as part of the event *Before There Was Money There Was Debt* on Saturday, February 29, 2020. [Image Description: A photograph shot from behind an audience who are watching three people in a panel discussion. The three people are sitting in front of a work by artist Stephanie Syjuco entitled "Free Texts," which is comprised of takeaway flyers that are printed in black text on white paper. The flyers are spread across two gray walls.]

RA: Are you suggesting that value can be found in places other than through the market?

ST: Value can be found in many different places and ways. People in small communities can create value from trust, aspiration, hope and so on. Major economies or even the stock market are based on such principles too. In the market objects gain value

through prestige, or have an attached surplus valuation. In essence nothing has realistic value. It is all a scheme. That is what I have tried to portray in the work: the different characters attach different value to the same object. The homeless man collects scrap

metal that he takes to a facility where they melt it as a first step to form new commodities. The artist attaches his own value to things by selecting what to photograph. The artist is a mediator between the world he sees and another world that will find his art valuable. The last character, a recluse art collector, redefines what value is, because she loses the cognitive ability to identify the object-commodity with its intrinsic value. Her memory loss sabotages the whole structure. She counteracts all principles by inserting a new principle, which is the principle of beauty, and empathy, looking beyond the value of form and material, and finding new aspirations. For example, she makes origami flowers, and animals, out of 100 and 500 Euro banknotes.

So yes, each one of these characters aspires to create something through the process of collecting. They are all collectors, which is not what I thought at the beginning. The homeless man is collecting junk metal, the artist is collecting images, and the art collector collects art objects. So the answer to the question; What creates and adds value to things? is "us". . Things themselves don't have any value.

RA: What is behind aspiration? Their search, as you have constructed it, is attractive. Will they end up happy?

ST: The problem of what forms aspiration is becoming a little clearer for me. The Greek people wanted to experience the promise of middle class living, the things that Western Europe has. But Greece is a poor country. How do you become the consumer that the European Union and globalization demands of you, when you don't have the means and the capital for it?

RA: It seems that you want to tease out the advantages in dislocation; that it doesn't just mean rootlessness, meaninglessness, and being out of place and time. With the character losing their memory, it seems there is an opportunity in her detachment. She is the most creative and uninhibited about making flowers from paper money. More so than the artist struggling to find attachment to found objects and the homeless person who has no option but commitment to survival. Though even those two find an out, the homeless man finds the money in the trash and the artist finds inspiration. How did you come to view detachment in this way, that the most displaced has the most freedom?

ST: All three are displaced. Displacement is a very strong condition that I carry as a person and as an artist. I did not connect that with detachment, so that is something to think about. This is the first time I am discussing this point regarding the work. The immigrant is the most obviously displaced, but the artist as well. He doesn't belong to anything. He's totally like a cut out, in front of all these images of the young and the graffiti and he doesn't understand any of it. He records everything, as if the way to see and understand reality is through the screen of his iPad. I left my country 20 years ago. I was born in Prague in the early 70s where my mother, who is Iranian, met my Greek

father. They both came from families who were in political exile from their respective countries. So going back to your point in the question of constantly being in a place where you don't fit or belong, my state of not belonging anywhere dictated that I become an artist. For the last 20 years, I've lived in the Netherlands, Sweden, Istanbul, and Berlin, until moving here. I still travel a lot, and have peers who experience the world with this kind of detachment. It is a new human condition, a paradoxical state of being, that you become accustomed to by repetition. Repetition contextualizes it. Similarly, the three characters live very paradoxical lives. Look at the homeless man with the supermarket cart collecting scrap. His activity is a paradox, but he does it every day.

RA: Two unusual locations that show up for you as a European artist are Turkey and Iran.

ST: In order to understand Greece you have to know Turkey. Greece became independent 200 years ago but for 400 years it was under Ottoman rule. Lot of words used by Greeks in everyday life are Turkish. However, Greece is a country that is always trying to find answers in the West, not in the East. To me Athens and Istanbul felt very similar. I suppose I am always aspiring for a place that feels like home, but most Greek artists do not see Turkey the same way. During my time in Istanbul I also went to Iran, it was an absolute revelation. I was introduced to Rumi (a 13<sup>th</sup> century Persian poet). It was 2009 and Iran had protests, it was a devastating time to go. I wanted to make a film related to why my family left Iran. I found a producer and we started scouting locations. Then I had to leave, because my visa was only 25 days, and my Iranian collaborators called me and said they couldn't work with me. They feared for their lives. People were disappearing for the smallest things, like holding a green balloon. So this film was an aspiration to understand family origins that did not go anywhere.

RA: The condition of displacement, in this case, is not simply a matter of choice. You cannot just go back. They won't let you. Is there a silver lining to crisis?

ST: Yes. There is a new generation in Greece that transcends the post-war ideologies of the left and right. There is solidarity in the feeling that you are all in it together and pushed down by a system that favors the banks, the rich, and corruption. Also, the young are not interested in the 9 to 7 working life, or middle class aspirations, since it didn't work for their parents. The crisis proved that the issue is not just the economy. It is cultural. Culturally there has been a lot of confusion around Greek identity. We are a young country, but having to deal with how to live the legacy of ancient Greece. We are trying to catch up to Europe but we deny that our roots run through the east. I try to work with the pieces of the cultural imaginary, to see how these pieces fit together. This was part of my thinking at the time of creating *History Zero*. Each of the three episodes of the film has a circular movement; an inner time. The work is a perpetual loop.

RA: *Alternative Currencies: An Archive and A Manifesto* cannot be more explicit. The book about it, produced for the Venice Biennial, functions as a handbook for economic justice.

ST: Correct. It's a contrast to the film. I felt compelled to make a book, as you describe it, of my research into alternative currencies. I didn't just want to make a catalogue of images of the exhibition. For the Greek pavilion at the 55th Venice Biennial, where I first presented the work, it was silkscreened on a wooden wall. It was a circular interior space right in the entrance of the pavilion and from there the audience would go on to watch the three videos. At The 8th Floor we have tried something entirely different. There's so much material that has accumulated that I thought of presenting it in an archival form and do justice to the urgency these types of currencies have. The archive's form is more explicit but it shares the same ideas as the videos, in that any object can become a currency and even an economic system. The communities, sampled in the archive, have set their own rules. They can aspire for a new economy beyond the Euro or the Dollar. The Euro felt like a jail for Greeks. The only way to escape it would be by creating alternative economic models.

RA: What continues to draw you to the archive? How do you wish to expand and circulate it?

ST: Nothing much has changed since 2013, in fact you see more and more financial inequality. Poverty has become normalized for Greeks. I am expanding the archive with a public program that includes economists and a series of performances so that questions can be asked and debated about alternative currencies and what problems they solve. The audience has an opportunity to say what they feel about the economy, about value, and how we can imagine new systems of financial exchange without inequality. I want people to be informed and inspired at the same time. As for the presentation, I'm very happy with the way we did it at The 8th Floor. It's an entirely new direction for the archive. For *Relational Economies* we created an entirely new space with shelves, and boxes that contain a plethora of images and texts about all the different currencies. The original archive contained 32 items. It is much more now. Additionally, I designed a series of posters based on the original photographs that several of the communities sent us. Most of these images portray women using these currencies because women are central to these community-based alternative economies. It's hard to find a lot of such images online so we had to contact all of these communities, and ask them for images and for the actual currencies because we did not know how they looked, or where to find them. Everyone was very gracious.

RA: What is your next work?

ST: I am going to make a film about the refugee crisis in Greece. There are two kinds of people who come to Greece and don't stay long: tourists and refugees. Both have aspirations to escape their lives. Western Europeans come to Greece to get a break from their lives, while refugees are leaving theirs to get to Western Europe. Greece is in the middle.