

THE ARTIST AS SECOND-ORDER OBSERVER New Thoughts on the *Oeuvre* of Vlassis Caniaris

In my initial approach to the *oeuvre* of Vlassis Caniaris, I used the term *Concrete Realism*¹ to characterise his works produced after 1959, that is, the series of paintings entitled "Homage to the Walls of Athens..." and his subsequent works. In hindsight, I believe that, although this term – taken from the specialised terminology of art history—is not completely inappropriate, I should take this opportunity to redefine it in the light of new understanding and on the basis of different theoretical principles. What I was trying to say back then, was that in the Caniaris *oeuvre* the positions of Realism and Concrete Art are replaced by a new synthesis. I still believe this to be true, though it fails to describe the more far-reaching aim of his artistic strategy—Caniaris' fundamental striving to conceive and establish art as a means and opportunity for cognition, understanding and criticism.

To understand, you must act.

"As far as I am concerned, there is real space (for instance, a room, a kitchen, a gallery) and the work, which is also a thing (a chair, for instance), a colour (such as blue), a relationship (for instance small/large, pleasant/repulsive), a treatment of the space (i.e. reality) (for instance, crumpling, destroying) and of those within it. The form, the dimensions and the content which I give to this work of art—if it is a work of art—is an attempt to make the viewer see everything I've already described from another point of view and from the very beginning, in such a way that our connection to the world and our position in it is constantly put to the test."

This reflection on his work, developed by Vlassis Caniaris in an interview over thirty years ago,² seems to me to be more than an important key to understanding his *oeuvre*. It also makes it clear that the artist was dealing not with questions of style, but with very fundamental problems rarely addressed in artistic circles. However, particularly at this time, these questions were being studied intensively in psychological research institutes and artificial intelligence laboratories: as questions about the structure and functionality of "cognition" or as questions about the forms and conditions of the "self-organisation" of natural and social systems. Take the experimental psychologist Jean Piaget, for instance, who wrote in 1966 (and this quote stands up well next to Caniaris' words above): "The object is only a momentary snapshot from the continuous flow of causal connections, and it becomes clear sooner or later that reality exists behind the appearance of transformation systems. These transformations can, therefore, only be portrayed if they are actively reproduced or prolonged. This then comes down to the fact that, strictly speaking, it is impossible to produce a real likeness, and that the way to understand objects is to interact with them by dismantling them and putting them together again."³ To give another example from a different research approach, cyberneticist Heinz von Foerster reached the same conclusion, coining the phrases, "to understand, you must act" (the aesthetic imperative) and "always act so as to give rise to further possibilities (the ethical imperative) in 1973."⁴

As far as I know, Caniaris did not directly tackle these theses from scientific circles I have referred to here. As an individual constantly reflecting on his own experience, he reached the conclusions in his own way and in his own language which today cover vir-

¹ See Michael Fehr, "Konkreter Realismus. Bemerkungen zum Oeuvre von Vlassis Caniaris" in *Vlassis Caniaris in the Museum am Ostwall*, Dortmund 1993; Vlassis Caniaris, *Konkreter Realismus. Skizze einer künstlerischen Strategie*, Nuremberg, 1991.

² Quoted from: V.C., *Autobiographische Notizen*, in: Fehr, 1991, p. 136

³ Jean Piaget, Bärbel Inhelder, *L'image mentale chez l'enfant*, Paris 1966, quoted here from the German translation: *ibid*, *Die Entwicklung des inneren Bildes beim Kinde*, Frankfurt, 1990, p. 11.

⁴ Heinz von Foerster, "Das Konstruieren einer Wirklichkeit" (1973); in Paul Watzlawick (ed.) *Die Erfundene Wirklichkeit*, Munich 1985, p. 60.

tually all fields of scientific argument under the terms "Radical Constructionism", "System Theory" or "Autopoiesis"—though they were only rarely addressed in the fine arts.⁵ Following a brief outline of these general thoughts, I would therefore like to deal with some individual Caniaris works, the significance of which I have already attempted to discuss elsewhere.

Constructing a world out of the flow of experience.

A fundamental assumption of so-called Radical Constructivism, i.e., the theory of knowledge which is used by various scientific disciplines—from biology to linguistics and psychology to economic science—to establish their respective fundamental principles, and which is also described as System Theory, is that it is impossible to determine whether what we perceive corresponds at all to objective reality. In fact, to go even further, we cannot even be certain that what we perceive and describe as an object can even be distinctly separated from the rest of the world. Because these questions cannot be answered objectively, radical constructivists or system theorists assume that, as Ernst von Glasersfeld put it, "Cognition and knowledge cannot be the expression of passive receptiveness, but are the result of action taken by an active subject."⁶ Von Glasersfeld goes on to say that these actions should not be seen as the practical use of objects that exist independently of the user. Instead, action that can lead to cognition and knowledge is the operation of that cognitive authority described by Jean Piaget as organising the world by organising itself.

The theory of knowledge as understood by Radical Constructivism thus becomes an examination of perception and its conditions. In essence, it aims to determine how a subject can manage "to construct a fairly lasting, regular world from the flow of experience" (von Glasersfeld) and, furthermore, to determine the construction of objects produced for this purpose.

Making pictures and objects is a classic *operation* as defined by Radical Constructivism or System Theory. As a medium of experience and as a way of putting those experiences into concrete form, a picture is always a world design, that is, an attempt to snatch objects from the flow of experience. However, only in works of art does this action become a conscious action of the self—the self which organises the world by organising itself or, in other words, does it become a reflexive construction capable of illustrating the conditions of its perception of the world in its world image.

Of course, the conditions of perception have been an important subject of the fine arts at least since the invention of photography. However, the analysis of these conditions remained an examination of external reality, to which perception seemed only to react. Only when the fine arts and their means were emancipated from the constant need to represent, that is, from Concrete Art, was the door opened to the examination of perception as an independent, autopoietic operation, and it became possible to view facts as the result of this operation.

Caniaris developed the position outlined here completely independently. This is shown not only by his works, but also by his *Autobiographical Notes*⁷ in which he reflected in detail on his artistic activity. He writes, for example, about the genesis of his series of pictures known as "Homage to the Walls of Athens..."(1959): "I wrote on pieces of sackcloth and linen in red, blue and black paint the kind of slogans found on the walls of Athens during the occupation. I covered the finished work wholly or partially with paper or cloth soaked in plaster. When they were dry, I wrote more over the top. Then I cut

⁵ See Michael Fehr: "Michael Baduras Konkreter Realismus", in: M.F. (ed.), *Michael Badura, Werke bis 1991*, Nuremberg, 1992, p. 9 ff; "Radikaler Konstruktivismus und Konkreter Realismus. Zur Position des Werks von Jan Meyer-Rogge", in M.F. (ed.): *Jan Meyer-Rogge Balance of Power*, Nuremberg, 1994, p. 9 ff

⁶ Ernst von Glasersfeld, *Einführung in den Radikalen Konstruktivismus*, in Wazlawick, 1985, p. 22 ff

⁷ See Caniaris' *Autobiographische Notizen*, in: Fehr, 1991, p. 129 ff

into some of this surface or removed part of it, destroying some of the new slogans and revealing the old ones underneath. That went on until I felt the work was laden with as much life and memories as this imitation of reality could hold. In fact, my intervention was a real act to create a concrete object."

This description shows on the one hand that in developing the "wall pictures" the artist started from a realistic artistic concept and appeared before the canvas in the various roles as an actor in the various political groups whose slogans he painted. However, the last sentence of this quotation at least makes it clear that through these actions he had become an observer of the political debates. Caniaris himself pointed out in the next paragraph of his *Autobiographical Notes* that the "wall pictures" became the basis for him for a new approach to painting and his role as artist that essentially corresponds to the assumptions of Radical Constructivism. "During a trip to Paris for the "Greek Art" exhibition, I stopped on the Simplon Pass. I had with me the two or three basic colours I use. I worked for hours up there on this gigantically high, unending wall of snow. So what I had to isolate was not my work with a panel, but my work beyond the panel."

The Mop - a new aesthetic starting point.

One of the first objects that Caniaris produced after a phase of formal experiments was the sculpture "Mop",⁸ which can be found today in the Museum voor Hedendaagse Kunst in Ghent: a metal prop fixed to a board wrapped with a mop soaked in white paint. Perhaps the piece of fabric was not a mop at all, but a piece of canvas—this is not quite clear. However, whether it is canvas or a mop, it is clear that the piece of fabric does not appear here as a painting medium or a mop, but as an element that is combined with the metal prop into an amorphous form. Only one thing is really certain about this form: that it cannot have been derived from a practical function, yet it was obviously made intentionally. In other words: Caniaris' "Mop" provides no point of departure for the practically orientated way of looking at things, or one fixated on "meaning." Such "questions of meaning" therefore lead nowhere; and they say a great deal about the interest in cognition of those who view the object from this perspective, instead of recognising that the "Mop" is a work which gives the viewer an opportunity to observe oneself. The fundamental insight to be derived from Caniaris' "Mop" is the fact that our reflex action when faced with practical objects—in this case the metal prop and the piece of fabric—is to search for a practical explanation, no matter how dysfunctionally they are arranged. In other words, and to see it in a more positive light, the restrictions imposed on us by instrumental reason can only be overcome through aesthetic perception, that is, perception which can distinguish among form, function and meaning, and reflect on their respective limitations.

This makes it possible to experience the object and—for those who want to—much more. For "Mop" is a clear allusion to Marcel Duchamp's coat hook fixed to the floor and, as such, it is a reflection of the way the "ready-mades" work—those now famous objects with which Duchamp used to criticise what he called "retinal" art, while at the same time demonstrating the other intelligible possibilities. The "Mop" hypostatizes the fact that this concept was likely to be misunderstood (and, in fact, often was), and was to remain a utopian concept. By covering the metal prop (the coat hook) with the mop, Caniaris not only made an ironic allusion to its installation on the floor of Duchamp's studio, but at the same time made it ineffective as a "ready-made", chiefly because he completely dysfunctionallyizes the hook, which is fixed to a board, and makes it available as a transportable object. Caniaris' "Mop" has such a direct and concrete effect, as an obviously and in every way pointless object. Furthermore, insofar as the "Mop" is a reflection of one of the most significant artistic positions of this century, it can also be seen as an intentionally placed new starting point with reference to all possible forms of

⁸ List of Works, 61/10

world designs, not least those from the sphere of the fine arts. Consequently, in a wider sense, the "Mop" can therefore also lead to their observation and reflection.⁹

Love of things as a criticism of materialism

The "Mop" is also a key work in the artist's *oeuvre*: as the first sculptural object, this work concludes Caniaris' experiments with breaking up the picture surface, and is the first in a long series of works in which Caniaris deals with *objets trouvés* from reality, mainly articles of clothing. Here, in his works "On the Economic Miracle" the artist can be seen in dual roles as observer: as observer of the achievements of the economic miracle, as well as the observer of his artist colleagues. The latter are known as the Nouveaux Réalistes who (not only) from his point of view became victims of the consumerist frenzy which they professed to be criticising in their theoretical works. Caniaris developed an independent position here by applying the techniques of consumer goods aesthetics—techniques which were hypostatized into artistic techniques in the works of the Nouveaux Réalistes—to unsuitable material: discarded and worn articles of clothing. In this way he revealed not only the way beautifying techniques work, but also the actual shabbiness of the products of the economic miracle.

Caniaris' sculptures and objects developed from observation of the economic miracle, its mechanisms and victims, were often very ironic/polemic in nature, but always based on a profoundly human position, from a love of things which people acquire and use to shape their lives, their desires and dreams. In subtle experiments, Caniaris drapes the *objets trouvés* on simple constructions of wood and wire mesh until he had elicited their inherent history, told by their creases, wear and other signs of use, and, through a reconstruction of the inner condition of their former owners or users, had displayed them as immaterial sculptures. Comparable to psychoanalytical strategy, which is concerned less with individuality and more with the deeper, superindividual structures of the inner organisation of man, Caniaris' efforts were aimed not at the reconstruction of individual histories, but at the construction of basic forms of interpersonal communication and typical attitudes. However, he was still always concerned with making a personal statement: "The industrial landscape, the magic of the dustbin, the abundance of Arman or the sparseness of Klein, in general the eye that opened to a strange world meant nothing to me until someone took a personal stand, made a choice and judged. (...) Ethics are based on becoming aware of "who" represents "what." The achievement of the washing machine was simply not enough to "make us all unite to march onward together."¹⁰

Witnesses and observers

After 1969, when Caniaris had to leave Greece because of his courageous and very successful exhibition against the *junta*, he found himself again in the position of an immigrant worker or guest worker ("Gastarbeiter"), albeit not for economic reasons. From 1971 he began to systematically devote himself to this problem. As his project plan for an exhibition on the subject in 1971 shows, he adopted an explicit observer role: "My aim is to use scientific principles to determine the problems, circumstances, reasons and perspectives of a section of the population who—from their number—could make up an entire European nation. My connecting theme was to observe a group of people: first of all in their home country and then, over a longer period, in the new country where they had come to work, covering everything this problem entails: realities, dreams, conditions and perspectives."¹¹ As Caniaris consistently maintained his role as an observer in carrying out this work, and refused to allow the political isolation or functionalisation of his work, he met with a great deal of misunderstanding. People expected unambiguous,

⁹ To this extent the "Mop" is comparable with John Cage's piece '4'33, and his concept *Silence* ("By silence I mean a freedom of anyone's intentions")

¹⁰ Caniaris, *Autobiographische Notizen*, in: Fehr, 1991, p. 134 f

¹¹ *Ibid* p.139

usable "pictures" from him, and could not get to grips with the "foreignness" of the precise yet subtle figures, ensembles and objects he produced in Berlin at that time.¹²

Caniaris commented on his experience with this project as follows: "...in the end, I was left with the understanding that—although I obtained and tried to consider information and interpretations from all kinds of specialised fields—without realising it I remained an artist after all and created an artistic representation. He himself recognised this "weakness" of the "guest worker" project and dealt with it in his next major undertaking, the installation called "Hélas Hellas", completed in 1980 in Technochoros-Bernier, by making contemplation and observation itself the subject of his work.

Quite apart from the fact that Caniaris planned a retrospective of his own work with this installation, it can be interpreted not only as a comprehensive exposition of the political iconography of Greece after World War II, but also, and perhaps more rightly, as a virtuoso work on the various forms of perception, observation, contemplation and respective attitudes, as a work which uses the various forms of perception and the degree of their respective self-awareness as an infallible parameter of political behaviour. For instance, in "Hélas Hellas" one finds "witnesses" who, as in his very first programmatical painting "Athens (Zoro)" from 1956, appear as basically uninvolved observers, as observers whose position means they can only observe, and not intervene in the observed action. However, other "witnesses", who—although their position in the work also prevents their intervention—adopt the role of commentators to the extent they are withdrawn from the "current" activity. Still other "witnesses" observe without being involved but are so close to the observed activity that they could become participants and the subject of observation by other observers. Finally, in the group of figures "Couple (Passers-by)" one sees a subtle study of looking the other way, as in the group "Activists" the aggressive type of observer who tries to control effects. On the other hand the group "Visitors", and above all the "Lady in the Style of Manet" make it clear, that the deliberate (still) "not noticing" or the desire to be noticed can have a proto-political function, in that they try to attract the attention of the still undecided, distracting it from the potentially more important. These various forms of perception and observation are linked so artistically in "Hélas Hellas" that they reveal all kinds of variants of these fundamental positions—above all when one visualises the observers of the installation as visitors who themselves become the subject of fictitious observation formulated in the figures and subject of observation by other visitors influenced by this fiction. This results in a highly reflexive interweaving of reciprocal observer positions and roles, focused on one figure: the artist and an empty canvas on an easel: a figure in an openly receptive observer attitude and his medium, which is not a mirror, but has to be worked on by him as the subject. However, this is a second-order observer position: it is aware that, no matter how skilful the arrangements may be, the observer is always part of the observed situation and alters it by observation, and that this dilemma cannot be solved by objectifying the observer position, but only by means of a radical, a fundamental subjectivity, by reflecting on one's own limitations. In the words of Vlassis Caniaris: "I have nothing more to offer that the burden and the difficulties of my own questions, questions with which I have taken great pains, which I put with conviction, and which I constantly make every effort to try and answer."

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Translated from German by Ruth Laskowsky

¹² Many years later, in an exhibition at the Karl Ernst Osthaus-Museum in Hagen in 1991, Caniaris therefore logically showed these figures and installations in the form of an ethnological presentation.