

BALKAN ARTISTS IN MCWORLD

1st section: "Greeks Bearing Attitude"

An interview with writer Aris Maragkopoulos

May 5, 2002 by Myrna Kostash

Appeared in <http://www.dooneyscave.com/archives/143>Filed under *Latest*

Meet Aris Marangopoulos, full-time professional writer in Athens and member of the Society of Greek Writers; interviewed, in a literary hangout in Athens' fashionable Kolonaki quarter. This was three months after the annual meeting of the International Network for Cultural Diversity (an initiative of the Canadian Conference of the Arts) which, in September 2000, had been held in Santorini, Greece. Aris had not been at the meeting, but, feeling grim about globalization and its impact on the planet's smaller cultures, and wanting to do something about it, was duly elected to be Greek representative to its Steering Committee. When we talked in November 2000, he had drifted away from the Committee, overcome with pessimism about Greek artists' ability to organize effectively around the issues.

"The Greek language has minor access to global civilization and is prone to be dominated by the English language and American television and cinema. Nobody in the arts community here understands this."

Aris writes reviews, does translations, some teaching, he's written a book about James Joyce. This is a man from a working class Athenian family who supported himself at the Sorbonne [during the years of the Greek colonels' junta 1968-1974] by distributing flyers door to door. As soon as the junta collapsed, he was back. Any regrets about coming back? He grimaces and turns away and I let it drop.

In the left-wing newspaper *Avgi* Aris wrote a militant article about Greeks' right to cultural diversity. He addressed the Greek Left directly about what they are doing about cultural diversity, about how leftists can't talk about politics without talking

about the cultural fact and the essential nature of diversity. They have responded with sympathy but there's been no follow-up. The Minister of Culture in the social democratic government of the PASOK party, Theodoros Pagalos, who has since resigned, seemed only concerned about the Olympic Games and the Cultural Olympiad. "Now here's a problem of globalization: everyone, from the guy with the kiosk to the cabinet ministers, is anxious to make a profit during the Games. So the organizers will bring in glamorous artists who have nothing to do with the real culture here." I remember that, for the 2000 Olympics in Sydney, Australia, with a whole continent of diverse arts to draw on, the impresarios hauled out Olivia Newton John.

"In the last ten years, the 'American Way of Life' has been able to become the vision for everybody: everybody now talks about money, our novels depict a country where life is lived out in bars and on yachts, as if we were in Monte Carlo or Palm Beach. Twenty years ago, everything was manipulated by the Left intelligentsia; now we've passed on to the 'cosmopolitans' of a single American culture. The essential parts of Greece are absent. We artists are going through very hard times now – when you protest the public treats you like a clown, you are ridiculed, you're an oddball. I feel like an exile."

Marangopoulos is old enough to feel the generation gap. Younger artists, with their techno savoir faire, have easier access to the "techno-maniacs" of the multimedia and glossy magazines and television, with whom they engage in reproducing all the cliches of American mass entertainment: "a virtual reality that dominates the actual."

If you had a meeting with Culture Minister Pagalos, what would you say to him?

"Very basic things. We don't have a well-organized national library, it's still housed in a hundred-year-old building, it has no computers. We should have a network of urban libraries; those we do have are barely functioning with a staff of local clerks. We have no film museum nor national cinematheque. Instead, a lot of the Ministry's money is shoveled into the Megaron Musikis [concert hall in Athens] which is owned by a media tycoon. Neither our museums nor our archaeological sites are being managed imaginatively enough to bring young people into real and useful contact with the past. Instead the Ministry is sponsoring the Olympiad. We don't have a

Translation Centre, we don't have professional literary translators for languages other than the mainstream ones, nor training for them. There are five literary translators who carry the bulk of translating Greek literature on their shoulders.

“You notice I don't bring up individual artist's grants. That's because this is utopian. Five years ago I made a big effort with a promising new Minister. I promoted a petition of forty-five writers asking for some kind of system of artist's grants so we could live and work with dignity. Nothing happened. We repeated the petition with each subsequent minister and we know that for the next four years [until the Olympics are over] we will have no response at all.

The Greek Society of Writers is impecunious along with its 210 members. Government funds just cover the rent on offices and a wage for a secretary. They've been advised that even these funds will be stopped in two or three years because "all artists' organizations should be self-supporting in the marketplace." This is the language of 'harmonization' with Europe. The stupid thing is that some artists here do believe the ideology that the artist should lead his miserable little life without state support. It's a stupid romantic belief with no basis in reality.

“And so it is difficult to co-operate with foreign artists who don't understand how undeveloped our situation is. We are a rich enough country – really, it's embarrassing. At first, I was hoping to make some people here aware that our problems are also present in other countries and so they should take our situation seriously, but when the Greek journalists wrote not a single word about the INCD in Santorini, I began to have my doubts. I can't be the only one writing about these subjects; I'll be reduced to an 'obsessive'.

“This is a difficult country. Some people's only expression against globalization is to refuse to buy a computer.”

He was a man after my own heart and part of my generation and I understood him completely. But what I needed to understand was precisely that younger generation on the other side of the gap from us. I knew that part of that generation had turned up in Seattle, Windsor, Prague, precisely to say No to mindless globalism. In fact, in

Prague, where once it was Sovietoid cops who beat up on dissenters it is now the Czechs' very own independent and democratic and capitalistical men in blue who are doing the dirty work. Human rights observers in Prague are expressing concern over allegations that protesters still behind bars have been mistreated following last month's anti-globalization demonstrations in the Czech capital. "When they took 25 of us to the third destination we had to run toward the bus through two lines of police who hit us in the kidneys with their truncheons and fists. They laughed as they hit us." [*Manchester Guardian Weekly*, October 12-18 2000] Thinking of the shattered plate glass windows of Seattle's designer downtown and looking for an analogy with south-eastern Europe, I wondered, as I left Greece and traveled north into Bulgaria, Macedonia and Serbia: Would alienated young Balkan artists be willing to throw stones through the windows of McDonald's to make their point...?



Aris Marangopoulos circa 2003-4.