



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

This is a repository copy of *Underwater: Where Environmental Aesthetics Meets Magical Realism*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/175530/>

Version: Accepted Version

Article:

Tzanelli, R orcid.org/0000-0002-5765-9856 (2020) *Underwater: Where Environmental Aesthetics Meets Magical Realism*. *Transfers*, 10 (2/3). pp. 110-114. ISSN 2045-4813

<https://doi.org/10.3167/TRANS.2020.1002308>

© *Transfers* 2020. This is an author produced version of an article, published in *Transfers*. Uploaded in accordance with the publisher's self-archiving policy.

Reuse

Items deposited in White Rose Research Online are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved unless indicated otherwise. They may be downloaded and/or printed for private study, or other acts as permitted by national copyright laws. The publisher or other rights holders may allow further reproduction and re-use of the full text version. This is indicated by the licence information on the White Rose Research Online record for the item.

Takedown

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



eprints@whiterose.ac.uk
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

GALLERY REVIEW

Underwater: Where Environmental Aesthetics Meets Magical Realism

Underwater Gallery, Aghios Pavlos Underwater Caves, Amorgos, 84008, Greece.

<https://www.singlebreathphoto.com/home>

A unique exhibition was launched between 19-22 September 2018 in the deep blue waters of Amorgos, Greece.¹ Amorgos is the easternmost of the Cyclades islands, neighboring the Dodecanese island group. The island's rich aquatic life and architectural beauty featured prominently in French director Luc Besson's internationally acclaimed English-language film on freediving, *The Big Blue* (*Le Grand Bleu*, 1988), transforming the island into an international destination for tourists and freedivers. The exhibition, which came by the title "Underwater Gallery: On a Single Breath," was installed at a depth of 7 to 17 meters inside a sea cave in the area of Aghios Pavlos, below the Monastery of Hozoviotissa. This is where the famous window of the 'big blue' opens the building to the Aegean Sea, affording visitors a bird eye's view to the Aegean. Therefore, the Gallery's connection to Besson's artwork is indisputable.

IMAGE 1: Underwater Gallery Main Cave (image courtesy of ©Stefanos Kontos)

The exhibition included photography shot underwater between 2013-2018 in various parts of the Aegean Sea by freediver and cinematographer, Stefanos Kontos. Nine photos were placed in the underwater cave and another three nearby in a smaller cavern leading to a deadlock flooded by artificial light. The subjects of the photographic exhibition included a submerged shipwreck, a medusa, a starfish and a World War Two mine ball; the three extra images, framed in tripods sank in the sand, depicted a rock, a coral and a shipwreck. Some of these photographs had also featured in a 2015 exhibition under the curation of Eugenides Planetarium (Athens) with great success. The 2015 exhibition attracted great attention, with particular success among schools and families wishing to become familiarized with the Greek underwater world.² In fact, the initial design of the underwater installation near Amorgos was based on this spectacular

exhibition: staged amphitheatrically in the Planetarium's circular room, the images were organized in a panoptic style, possibly to make sure that marine life and land "gaze back at the visitor" to command their attention.

IMAGE 2: Eugenides Planetarium Exhibition "On a Single Breath" (image courtesy of ©Stefanos Kontos)

It is worth exploring the intentions of the maker of this exhibition, as well as what made it unique. The Gallery's official website states that "'On a single breath' represents a freediving philosophy, a pure form of interaction with nature and is expressed by a fine art photography & cinematography concept that seeks to bring the unique experience of freediving to the surface and share it with the world."³ Therefore, innovation related to a combination of the technique of creating these images (without breathing equipment at depth between 3-35 meters and the production of an aesthetic dimension in encapsulating the marine world). Part and parcel of a new mobilities trend in recreational pursuits, freediving communicates an environmental aesthetics of risk. All the divers involved in the exhibition's installation and curation worked "on a single breath" (*ápnōia*: *ápnōia*), the practice and decision of not using oxygen masks while working underwater. Freediving involves voluntary risk-taking of physical, cognitive and emotional nature – what sociologists call "edgework" and consider as a subcultural community-building mechanism.⁴ This distinguishes the endeavor from Jason De Caires Taylor's serialized underwater museums in Cancun, Granada, the Bahamas, Lanzarote and England, which explore Anthropocenic imaginaries. Contrariwise, "On a Single Breath's" main intention centers on deep pedagogical engagement with native seascapes through extreme sport.

A second technical innovation involved the display of the photos in the sea, with the help of a special technique involving printing the images on aluminum, followed by special light fixtures to illuminate the images. The staging, which was supervised by teams of diving experts under and above the water, was supported by high-voltage electricity, involving spot and flood lighting equipment. Reflecting Kontos' determination to educate visitors into the importance of sea-life, the exhibition was free

of charge. Visitors could dive in to see the exhibits with proper support and even attend short scuba-diving courses at the local center in Amorgos. Thus, the exhibition's organizers promoted at least four different versions of 'authenticity': the creation of unmediated versions of underwater reality; their immediacy of engagement with underwater landscapes and seaworlds ("on a single breath"); their original presentation of these worlds as parts of Greek (land)scapes; and the style in which they "taught" visitors to apprehend all the above in visceral styles.

The result of placing images of sealife and marine ruins among living creatures was, in the words of the Gallery's creator, Kontos, "magical." This situates this unique project between wildlife photography, art and documentary-making, all of which were recognized by National Geographic in Kontos' work. Frantz Roh, German proponent of the "New Objectivity," an artistic trend that dominated interwar European art as a rejection of individualistic expressionism, used in his introduction to magical realism in art the term "magic" to indicate that "the mystery does not descend to the represented world, but rather hides and palpitates behind it."⁵ Interviewing the freediving artist, I found out that his project split between what Roh had announced as "New Objectivity's" core thesis and a respect for the natural environments.⁶ Magical realism, including Roh's "New Objectivity" variation, resorts to artistic representations of ordinary mysteries as a testimony that they do exist and we should find ways to bring them to discourse: make them visible. At the same time, the project's involvement in the development of a hybrid trend of tourism is indisputable. This trend brings together the philosophy of "edgework," which informs freediving subcultures, and the pragmatic needs of film-induced tourism inspired by Besson's film, suggesting that the Underwater Gallery is connected to realist planning on the development of the island as an international athletic and tourist destination.

Kontos supports this pathway to development, but his primary commitment concerns freediving as a holistic philosophy, promoting unmediated engagement with the marine worlds. Therefore, one may conclude that the Gallery's atmospheric staging in *chiaroscuro* (light illuminates only particular areas, mainly living subjects) and *sfumato* (natural haziness allows for objects, such as shipwrecks to slowly "emerge" from

darkness) styles is not a technique of advertising, but a way of directing perception and commanding the attention of audiences for pedagogical purposes. This is magical-realist pedagogy by artistic methods. We should not miss the fact that Kontos is a Greek educated abroad, who now aspires to globalize the gaze upon Greek natural landscapes. Without attributing intentionality to the artist, his willingness to make Greek seascapes known (visible) to the world may be aligned with that of Greek identity-making. His initiative supports a much-needed constellation of mobilities in a country suffering the effects of a massive economic collapse.

Rodanthi Tzanelli is Associate Professor of Cultural Sociology at the University of Leeds. She is the author of several published academic contributions and twelve monographs, including the latest *Magical Realist Sociologies of Belonging and Becoming: The Explorer* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2020).

E-mail: r.tzanelli@leeds.ac.uk

¹ Tornos News, “First Underwater Gallery on ‘Big Blue’ Amorgos Island,” 18 September 2018, <http://www.tornosnews.gr/en/tourism-businesses/thematic-tourism/32584-first-underwater-gallery-on-big-blue-amorgos-island.html>.

² Giota Konstantinidou, “Για Να Δεις Τις Φωτογραφίες Του Στέφανου Κόντου Πρέπει Να Βουτήξεις Στη Θάλασσα,” *Mikropragmata*, 2 March 2019, <https://mikropragmata.lifo.gr/zoι/gia-na-deis-tis-fotografies-tou-stefanou-kontou-prepei-na-voutikseis-sti-thalassa/>.

³ Underwater Gallery, “On a Single Breath,” <https://www.singlebreathphoto.com/home>.

⁴ Stephen Lyng, “Edgework: A Social Psychological Analysis of Voluntary Risk Taking,” *American Journal of Sociology* 95, no. 4 (1990): 851-886.

⁵ Frantz Roh, “Magical Realism: Post-Expressionism”, edited by L. Parkinson Zamora and W.B. Faris, *Magical Realism* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, [1925] 1995), p. 15.

⁶ Rodanthi Tzanelli, *Magical Realist Sociologies of Belonging and Becoming: The Explorer* (Abingdon: Routledge), chapter 1.