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Hiding the queer identity in painting: The case of the Greek painter Diamantis Diamantopoulos

ABSTRACT: The article explores the nuanced and often concealed representation of queer identity in prominent Greek artist Diamantis Diamantopoulos, who navigated his identity within a conservative society by utilizing themes of masking and heterotopia. His works, particularly from the late 1970s to 1980s, reflect a struggle with his sexual identity, often portraying mythical monsters and homoerotic themes. These paintings reveal his internal conflict and societal pressures to conform to heterosexual norms. This research, based on Goffman's theory on social roles and Eribon's books on sexual and class identity, delves into how Diamantopoulos's adherence to social decorum influenced his artistic expression, leading to the sublimation of his queer identity into coded visual language. The analysis leverages Michel Foucault's concepts to interpret the latent anthropocentrism and eroticism in Diamantopoulos's work – mostly focusing on the male human body –, offering a critique of the societal constraints on queer expression. Ultimately, the article posits that understanding Diamantopoulos's oeuvre requires recognizing the interplay between his personal identity and broader socio-political contexts.

KEYWORDS: history of contemporary Greek art, Modernism, social class, heterotopia, male nudes, installation, transformation

*To be pleasant to everyone,
Even to myself,
I always dressed my face in masks
That are liked*

(Ouranis 1953)

THE MASK OF NORMALITY

The mask was used to serve ritualistic ceremonies in primitive societies and by ancient theatre actors to perform a role. In each case, a mask was used to transform the face (HARTNOLL 1968: 7-50). However, the mask enables the wearer to construct a different facial identity, to construct a mask that is added to the face and changes it according to the role that the subject wants to play in a particular space and time. Indeed, Cesare Ripa (1613) calls the mask an element of lying (“bugia”), deceit (“fraude”) and deception (“inganno”; see also PANOFKY 1939: 69-93).

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On the other hand, in his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* Erving Goffman uses theatrical practices to define the social role of an individual associated with a social position. He compares a closed political, structural, or cultural system to the theatrical space and the subjects acting within it and calls it a *social installation*. He points out that, just as an interaction between the spectators and the actors takes place in the theatrical space, the main hall, the stage and the backstage, the same happens in the social installation: just as actors try to respond to the expectations of the spectators by playing a role on stage and leaving a part of themselves in the backstage, so people adopt accepted roles by concealing or transforming certain aspects of their true self, through defensive and protective practices, to achieve a symmetrical communication with their social environment (GOFFMAN 1959: 1-9 and 160-162).

To respond to the social stereotypes of the time, the mask of normality is mainly found in various social groups of stigmatized people, such as those who are excluded because of their racial, ethnic, political, or religious identity and those whose sexual preferences, especially homosexual preferences, do not adhere to social norms (GOFFMAN 1963: 126 - 139). However, because homosexuality is mainly manifested in very private moments and is related to the prevailing moral behavior, it could be said that its concealment is a more frequent phenomenon. Society's explicitly disapproving, often offensive and violent, reaction to homosexual people forces them to shape their relationship with it and transform their subjectivity by playing unquestionable and acceptable roles.

THE HETEROTOPIA OF HOMOSEXUAL ARTISTS

In the case of homosexual artists, things are a little different. This is because, according to social stereotypes, they seem to be eccentric individuals with a particular attitude. We could say, using Foucault's terminology (Foucault 1984), that in the heterotopia of all homosexuals, society incorporates the heterotopia of homosexual artists. Although in modern times gay artists do not hesitate to project their sexual identity, both through their behavior and through their artworks, things were not so easy for artists of earlier periods, even in the twentieth century. Also, it is not certain whether the word *homosexual* was used in the countries of South-eastern Europe before 1960, although it was established in Western Europe as early as the end of the nineteenth century (HAPERIN 1989: 155 n. 1 and 158-159 n.17). In the

best-case scenario, the word *kinaidos* was used for men and *lesbian* for women in Greece, until 1970. The former is an ancient Greek word meaning the passive homosexual, and the second, which is better known, comes from the island Lesbos, which was the home of the ancient Greek poetess Sappho. However, the most prevalent descriptions of homosexuals were mocking, insulting or abusive (ERIBON 2009: 23-26). Homosexual artists were treated in the same way. Moreover, they had to cover their sexual identity more than anonymous homosexuals, because they were known to a wider audience.

THE PAINTER DIAMANTIS DIAMANTOPOULOS

Diamantis Diamantopoulos was a homosexual Greek painter (STEFANIDIS 2021: 249-250 and 304), born in 1914 in Magnesia, Asia Minor, now western Turkey, and found himself in Greece as a refugee, at the age of eight, after the Asia Minor disaster. Afterward, he experienced the loss of his loved ones (first, his father and then his brother), and he was forced to work from a very young age, mainly as a manual worker, for his own and his family's survival. Despite his financial problems and the fact that he was always working, he studied painting at the Athens School of Fine Arts (1931-1935), as he showed his artistic talent from an early age. He later traveled to various parts of Greece to learn about Greek traditional and Byzantine art. He also travelled to Italy and France, where he became closely acquainted with modern art movements.

Although Diamantopoulos had participated in many exhibitions, in Greece and abroad, as early as 1940, there were long periods of time when he was absent from the artistic scene, and he finally retired in 1983 until his death in 1995. The occasional negative criticism he received, his disapproval of the commercialization of art and the art circuits, as well as his livelihood needs, are the main reasons for his artistic isolation and possibly his depression (KOUNENAKI 2005: 173-182).

Diamantopoulos lived at a time when the issue of Greek artistic identity was very important to Greek artists. Their desire to discover the roots of Greek art in post-Byzantine and folk painting, as well as their aim to follow European modernism, were their main concerns. It was in this context that the 'Generation of the 30s' was born, with Fotis Kontoglou, Yannis Tsarouchis, and Nikos Engonopoulos as its main representatives. With the exception of Kontoglou, who adopted the rules of Byzantine painting, the

latter two combined the Byzantine and folk painting traditions with modern artistic movements such as Fauvism and Surrealism (KOTTIDES 1993).

Although the dominant issue in the artistic field at the time in Greece was the research on the issue of Greekness, as well as the tendency of artists to combine Greek traditional art with the modern artistic movements of the West, Diamantopoulos argued that the quality of the artwork is degraded when the artist imitates forms of the past. For this reason, he was systematically concerned with the evolution of art and modern movements and set as his goal a new realistic painting, strictly delimited by technical rules and representative of visible reality. As one can see in many of his paintings, Diamantopoulos was greatly influenced by Fauvism and Matisse's paintings in particular. His parallel livelihood, teaching drawing in secondary schools, and writing his essay on art, played an important role in coupling practice with theory. What he was most interested in was grounding the drawing technique in a scientific theory. That is why he analyzed the painting path on the white surface of the painting, from the initial design to the filling with paint and framing. In addition, he considered it necessary to exhibit the drafts along with the finished works, to indicate painting techniques to young artists. Both his special interest in the drafts and the whole preparation of his artistic creation are indicative of a continuous research path to discover new techniques, which he applied to render in his own way the physical and collective reality of his time (DIAMANTOPOULOU 2018: 164-166).

Man, as the main creator of this reality, acts as a necessary driving force and features prominently in most of his works. In many of his anthropocentric works, especially the one-face ones, male figures are depicted, clothed, half-naked, or naked. The truth is that through the depiction of the body, particularly the nude, Diamantopoulos, like most modernist artists, was able to experiment with the possibilities provided by colors for rendering the flesh and molding the form, limiting to the necessary lines that render the anatomical details of the body. Indeed, it is no coincidence that many of the subjects he chose to paint, such as the soldier and the footballer, were also painted by Yannis Tsarouchis, with whom they were friends for a time and who, although older, regarded Diamantopoulos as the wise man of the group (STEFANIDIS 2021: 52-58). In fact, Diamantopoulos, who adopted the views of modernist artists, found the artistic technique more important than the artistic subject itself. However, aesthetic qualities did not overshadow

Diamantopoulos' conscious choice of subjects, as his choice to paint workers and bricklayers to express his socialist views by depicting human labor. In the same context, it is interesting to identify in his works indicative elements of his homosexual identity. In this direction, we will examine depictions of men, distinguishing them into three categories according to their appearance, namely naked, semi-naked, and clothed men.

Diamantopoulos painted a few male nudes, most of which were drawings exhibited in a group exhibition at the Romvos Gallery, in Athens, in 1947. In fact, they are works he painted mainly in his early artistic period, until 1949. It is worth noting that until 1978 most of his nudes were female. In his male nudes, the body is formed by rough contours and open forms, in which color acquires a dynamic material presence and functions as an active mass. Bodily plasticity is rendered by balancing the constituent elements of the chromosome scheme in three dimensions. That's because his initially two-dimensional formed contour by the elementary lines of the drawing seems to be swelled by the chromatic mass in such a way that the depicted form indicates its vital functions. We could say that the flesh of the bodies that Diamantopoulos paints is the flesh of his painting itself



FIGURE 1. Diamantis Diamantopoulos, *The Dive*, 1931-1936, tempera on paper, 43×30cm, Private Collection.



FIGURE 2. Diamantis Diamantopoulos, *Bathers*, 1928-1930, tempera on paper, 60×47cm, Private Collection.

(DIAMANTOPOULOU 2018: 166-177). In *The Dive* (FIG. 1), the suppleness of the bodies is conveyed only by the curvature of the contour and the minimal, but strictly considered, linear markings, on the buttocks, back, and sternum, to create the sense of movement and the pulse of life of the naked young body. The small penis is barely discernible in the swimmer in the second plan.

In *Bathers* (FIG. 2), there is a gradual revelation of the male genitals, with its realistic imprint on the young man's body in the background. However, a more erotic mood is evoked by the curves of the man in the foreground, with his back to the viewer. It is worth noting that in the female nudes the curves are not as pronounced, but even when they are, the bodies do not radiate the same eroticism. In some cases, the female forms are rigid and static, while the male forms are more mobile.

Most of the semi-naked figures that Diamantopoulos paints refer to manual work and people of labor, such as designers and workers. In *Drawing* (FIG. 3), the young man's huge and solid palms are in constant dialogue with his semi-naked body, so that his attempt to draw is rendered in entirely physical terms. The dynamics of his fingers are more reminiscent



FIGURE 3. Diamantis Diamantopoulos, *Drawing*, 1937-1949, tempera on canvas, 100×70cm, National Gallery of Athens.



FIGURE 4. Diamantis Diamantopoulos, *Builder*, 1949-1978, oil on canvas, 150×94,5cm, Private Collection.

of the fingers of a sturdy worker than of a designer. On the other hand, along with this obvious masculinity, there is also a latent eroticism in the depiction of the youthful chest and the suggestive triangle of the genitals. Similarly, in *Builder* (FIG. 4), a half-naked man is depicted, with his sun-burned arms and face and the evident signs of physical labor.

However, eroticism is also implicitly projected in this painting, through the underwear protruding from the trousers and the right hand, which is depicted between the belt and the trousers, in the direction of the genital area. In addition to these indications, we must consider the fact that to paint the concrete workers and bricklayers, Diamantopoulos used as models, unbeknownst to them, the workers he saw in a construction site opposite his studio. This means that he systematically observed their bodies, perhaps not only with artistic interest but also with sexual interest (DIAMANTOPOULOU 2018: 180 and STEFANIDIS 2021: 250-259).

The allusions in the works depicting clothed male figures are also noticeable, as the clothes are applied in such a way as to highlight the naked, offensive body parts beneath them. For example, in the work *Spongers* (Fig. 5), the genitals are marked with the blue triangular shape on the



FIGURE 5. Diamantis Diamantopoulos, *Spongers* (detail), 1949-1978, oil on canvas, 152,5×200cm, Private Collection.



FIGURE 6. Diamantis Diamantopoulos, *Cyclists*, 1949-1978, oil on canvas, 65×37cm, Private Collection.

all-white clothes. The spreading of the legs of one of the spongers also contributes to this. Furthermore, the feminine posture of the last sponge on the left highlights the naked body. Similarly, the body of the young man in *Cyclists* (Fig. 6) is feminine, as is the emphasis on his backside.

Diamantopoulos never spoke openly about his sexual preferences. Moreover, he lived for a long time out of the public eye, and, towards the end of his life, he chose isolation, which gradually led to depression. This happened because he disliked superficial public relations and refused to sell his works, especially to the newly rich. His sexual identity has always been discreetly hidden behind clothing, professional, or any other status of his subjects, while at the same time, he created female nudes (STEFANIDES 2021: 249-250). He lived, of course, at a time when conservative and homophobic views were the norm in Greece. Nevertheless, in artistic circles, some individuals bypassed social disapproval and dared to declare their homosexuality directly or indirectly. Indeed, Manos Hatzidakis, an important Greek composer declared his sexual identity with the phrase: “they say that artists are either communists or homosexuals. However, I am not a communist...” (SARANTAKOS 2014). Similarly, Yannis Tsarouchis, a former friend and then antagonist of Diamantopoulos (STEFANIDIS 2021: 52-59), did not hesitate to depict the young men with whom he socialized, naked or half-naked and with an overtly erotic mood as a central theme in his works. However, Tsarouchis belonged to the bourgeoisie, he did not face difficult living conditions as Diamantopoulos did, and was extroverted and communicative, unlike Diamantopoulos, and socialized mainly with people from the artistic world.

Historically, many queer artists have tried to hide their sexuality and personal life. Some of them created works of art that implied their queerness, such as Lucian Freud’s painting *Naked Man on Bed* (1989), Paul Cadmus’ painting *The Bath* (1951), and Pierre Commoy and Gilles Blanchard’s photograph “Vive la France” (2006). These works were presented in 2013 in Musée d’Orsay, as part of the artistic exhibition *Masculin / Masculin. L’homme nu dans l’art de 1800 à nos jours* (Exhibition Catalogue 2013). The exhibition also included the work of Belgian Symbolist painter Jean Delville *L’Ecole de Platon* (1898). In this work, there is an idealistic mask that covers latent eroticism and is based on an idealistic aesthetic, i.e. the expression of an idea through embodiment. The work depicts Plato in the form of Christ among his naked or semi-naked students. However, their shapely erotic

bodies hide latent homosexuality (Dekeukeleire, 2020) behind the painter's idealistic vision (COLE 2005: 301). Parallels can be drawn between Diamantopoulos' work and that of Jean Delville, who lived around the same time (1867-1953). Like Diamantopoulos, he lived in poverty and was against the commercialization of art (COLE 2010: 129-146).

The question that arises, then, is whether social class could be one of the reasons why Diamantopoulos concealed his homosexuality. Considering that personal issues are directly related to political circumstances, the French writer, Didier Eribon, in his autobiographical novel, *Retour à Reims* (ERIBON 2019; see also LOUIS 2020), relates his unpleasant experiences as a gay man to the working-class town where he lived until his adolescence. In particular, he addresses the stereotypes of masculinity and the patriarchal family, as well as the homophobia that characterizes the lower class. He also refers to his marginalization by the Parisian bourgeoisie because of his class background. He talks about the insults he received and the shame he felt, both for his homosexual and class identity. In fact, in his book, *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self*, he discusses at length the issue of insult and its authoritative role in self-determination. It says specifically:

The act of naming produces an awareness of oneself as other, transformed by others into an object....(The person who insults me) is letting me know that he or she has something on me, has power over me. First and foremost, the power to hurt me, to mark my consciousness with that hurt, inscribing shame in the deepest levels of my mind... The insult lets me know that I am not like others, not normal. I am queer: strange, bizarre, sick, abnormal. (ERIBON 1999; Eng. tr. 2004 15-17)

Diamantopoulos respected the working-class, as a socialist, and believed that he somehow belonged to it, as it is evident from his interviews, in which he constantly refers to the manual jobs he was forced to do to survive and the fact that he never stopped working (DIAMANTOPOULOU 2018: 154, 186-189). He was therefore class-conscious, and certainly conscious of his homosexuality. He might not have wanted to add another label to himself. He was, after all, already socially marginalized, as a working-class man, but most importantly as a refugee. The people he associated with, when he worked as a manual worker, were lay people, like his family, nurtured with stereotypical moral values. The fact that, during the German occupation of Greece, he worked as a drawing teacher in high schools in Athens and the provinces played a decisive role. His status as a teacher

required him to obey the rules of decency and moral behavior and adapt to the stereotypes of a conservative society, especially provincial society. It is therefore possible that the fear of negative heterodetermination prevented self-determination through his behavior or artistic creation. It is also possible that he saw his sexual identity as a burden or even did not want to accept it. It is to this hypothesis that one of the most enigmatic and controversial group of paintings of his last years of artistic creation (1978-1980), *Teratologies* (FIG. 7), leads us. These are works depicting mythical monsters which, according to the Greek art critic Peggy Kounenaki, function as symbols of power and reflect the artist's personal nightmares or social positions (KOUNENAKI 2005: 120). These works were associated with the persecution mania that Diamantopoulos manifested. In one of these works, in which two male figures are depicted, the lower part of the body resembles an animal. Most likely, they are satyrs fighting. However, there is also an obvious eroticism in the way they fight and in the way one body touches the other. If, indeed, Diamantopoulos is depicting one of his nightmares in this painting, it could be his homosexual desire, which he is struggling to repel from his life.



FIGURE 7. Diamantis Diamantopoulos, *Teratology*, 1978-1980, oil on canvas, 144,5×122cm, Private Collection.

EPILOGUE

Of course, class identity is not the only cause that led Diamantopoulos to hide reference to his homosexuality. Moreover, any attempt to interpret the works based on the artist's life, i.e., talking about the artist in the absence of the artist himself, is risky. In addition, the research for expressive modes and technical solutions generally characterized Diamantopoulos' artistic career. However, as Michel Foucault noted (1966), visual language marks things, and as it is a brain function, it cannot be independent of experiential perceptions. On the other hand, the intense anthropocentrism and latent eroticism in Diamantopoulos' works, as well as the rich material of his interviews, open the way for the removal of the mask of normality and the approach of his homosexual identity.

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