

\*ANTONIS DANOS

## Andreas Karayan's pioneering, queer counter-discourse in 20th-century Cypriot art

**ABSTRACT:** The pioneering depiction of male nudes by the Cypriot painter Andreas Karayan (b. 1943) caused quite a stir in the Cypriot art scene, when exhibited from the late 1970s onwards. Using Constantine Cavafy's poetry as a starting point and recurring reference, Karayan portrays the male nudes as both sexual(ized) subjectivities, as well as, and because of their eroticism, embodiments of social protest and queer subversion. Even more subversive, however, are some other works, from the late 1970s and through the 1980s: images of (fully dressed) young men in public spaces – bus stops, streets, coffee shops – and of sailors and soldiers in seemingly banal conditions (for instance, resting before or after an official parade). Such works, for the first time in Cypriot art, not only brought, literally, into the open, (homo)erotic desire (gazes are exchanged, seeking response, or are directed toward the viewer), but they are also imbued with political irony and critique that interrogate issues, and queerly subvert discourses, of power, desire, and national and other 'sacred' symbols of collective identity.

**KEYWORDS:** gay art, Andreas Karayan, queer counter-discourse, male nude, public sphere, Cyprus

In my life, I have always walked either crookedly or against the current!

A. Karayan, "Days in Stuttgart"<sup>1</sup>

In March 1979, Cypriot painter (and more recently, writer of semi-biographical literary works) Andreas Karayan (b. 1943) held his first exhibition in Nicosia, Cyprus (it was only his second exhibition, after one in Athens the previous year). Even before the opening, his works (as soon as they were set up) were causing a bit of a stir. Rumors reached the gallery that the

<sup>1</sup> KARAYAN 2015a: 36 (from "Days in Stuttgart [1972-77]"): "Life was so organized that even pedestrians would get on the pavement on the right side and get off on the left. I, constantly confusing the two directions, had to cross myself, hoping to find the right side. I would absentmindedly walk on the wrong side, receiving comments and reprimands by passersby. I don't know how, but in my life I have always 'managed' to walk either crookedly or against the current!" All translations from Greek are mine, unless indicated otherwise.

archbishop might demand the taking down of the show, something that did not materialize, after Karayan appealed personally to the Minister of Justice, who ended up opening the show himself! His paintings of male nudes, often overtly (homo)eroticized, were the source of all the anxiety.

This was a time in Cyprus, when the cause of gay and lesbian rights had not yet made any inroads. Homosexuality was not decriminalized on the island until 1998, following the legal victory, in the European Court of Human Rights, of architect and gay activist Alecos Modinos, in 1993. Not only it took the Parliament five years to implement the Court's decision, but the majority of MPs unequivocally declared that they voted for the change in the law only as an obligation imposed from without; and they stressed that homosexuality was "foreign" to ("true") Cypriot culture, which for most of them meant a conservative Greek Orthodox, heteronormative family-centered society. Despite this legal victory, collective gay activism in Cyprus did not emerge until in the new century<sup>2</sup>. Back then, only a few individual heroic voices were raised for gay rights. Karayan's was one of such voices<sup>3</sup>, the only one in the Cypriot visual arts; his oeuvre constituted what we can today recognize as queer counter-discourse. Even though, as it will be analyzed further on, Karayan's counter-discourse involves largely homo-erotic and homo-sexual subversion, my use of "queer" is not restricted to sexuality and/or gender "identity". It concerns, moreover, a wider stance of opposition and resistance vis-à-vis any orthodoxy and system of power and control (especially, control of the body and its erotic manifestations).

It is mostly the poetry of Constantine Cavafy (Konstantinos Kavafis, 1863-1933) that has constituted the 'source' for Karayan's (homo)erotic male nudes, offering an unexpectedly queer take on the Alexandrian's poems, some decades before this aspect was brought to the fore by recent analysts

<sup>2</sup> Collective gay (and, more recently, more subversive queer) activism and visibility did not arise until into the 21st century. I must point out here that, due to the de facto partition of the island since Turkey's military invasion in 1974 (a result of which was forced population relocation – Greek Cypriots to the South and Turkish Cypriots to the North, with almost no contact among them, until the first years of the 2000s), my analysis concerns the overwhelmingly Greek Cypriot culture and society in the area controlled by the Republic of Cyprus.

<sup>3</sup> Only a handful of individuals were publicly and eponymously fighting for gay rights in the 1980s and 1990s in Cyprus. Karayan was one of them: he wrote regularly in the mainstream press, either arguing for the decriminalization of homosexuality or publishing historical texts on "homosexuality and art", "gay cinema" etc. – he was the only such presence in the Cypriot press of the time.



of the poet's work. As it turned out, Karayan's work was soon 'embraced' by the local arts public, in part, due to his classicist/realist style; equally helpful for the wider acceptance of his work was the (superficial) connection made to the already established paintings of the male nude by Greek artist Yiannis Tsarouchis (1910-1989). The 'affinity' with Tsarouchis was reinforced, in the minds of viewers, with Karayan's paintings of sailors and soldiers (that are frequent subjects in the older artist's oeuvre, as well). What such convenient connections seem to have overlooked, however, is the politically subversive character of these depictions in Karayan's paintings in the years from his first exhibitions to the end of the previous century.

Unlike Tsarouchis's more 'abstract' depictions, Karayan's sailors and soldiers are specifically placed in the public space, in seemingly banal conditions (for instance, resting before or after an official parade), yet highly eroticized, thus foregrounding issues of power and desire, and interrogating national and other 'sacred' symbols of collective identity, often with an ironic and/or playful manner. Equally subversive are his images of (fully dressed, yet also eroticized) young men in public spaces – bus stops, streets, coffee shops. These works brought, literally, (homo)erotic desire into the open – gazes are exchanged, seeking response, or are directed toward the viewer –, at a time when homosexuality and homoeroticism were absent from the public sphere, unless under persecution.

## CAVAFY

"I 'used' Cavafy as a shield, to be able to tell certain contemporary things about estrangement, secret taboos, and to offer a critique of the erotic" (KARAYAN 2015b).

This quote (repeated in variations, throughout the artist's career) indicates the importance of Cavafy's (erotic) poetry to Karayan's artistic oeuvre. The Alexandrian's poems have constituted a constant reference point for the artist's works, especially in the depiction of the male nude – both as an erotic subject, as well as an agent of socio-political protest. Such aspects are manifested already in his early male nudes in the 1960s (when Karayan was still struggling with his sexuality)<sup>4</sup>, but especially in the works of the

<sup>4</sup> Even though he has referred to photography in magazines such as *PHYSIQUE PICTORIAL*, which he "discovered" in the early 1960s while still a medical student in Athens, as the "inspiration" for his first works of nude youths, Cavafy has been the source and overarching referent for his male nudes, throughout his career.

“Cavafy section” in his first solo exhibitions (1978, 1979, 1980, 1981) in Greece and Cyprus; the male figures embody the kind of desire and eros that still did not dare to speak their name publicly in the two countries. Such works constituted, therefore, “a means of protest against the suppression of the relationship between two men, which inevitably leads, as shown in the [Cavafy] poems, to the estrangement of the two lovers” (KARAYAN 1980: n. p.).

It is the intertwining of the erotic and the social (hence, political) in Karayan’s works (which, as we’ll see further down, is not confined to his nude subjects) that makes his work a pioneering, queer creation, the only one in 20th-century Cypriot visual arts<sup>5</sup>. Moreover, having Cavafy’s poetry as a constant source and reference for his erotic-sexual works, Karayan has been a pioneer in unveiling the “radical dynamic of sexuality and identity in Cavafy’s work” (PAPANIKOLAOU 2014: back cover), a process that has, otherwise and more widely, been taking place in the 21st century.

In *San K’ Emena Kamomenoi* by Dimitris Papanikolaou (2014), the author embarks on deconstructing the decades long, prevalent (especially in Greek literary criticism) image of Cavafy as the “old homosexual” (PAPANIKOLAOU 2014: 16), “solitary, isolated and sexually inactive” (22), living his desires more as fantasy and unfulfilled longings, and unveiling (or revealing) (homo)sexual elements in his poetry (and other writings) of the later years – hence his “eroticism”. Instead, he foregrounds Cavafy as both a “prototypical poet of modernity and modernism” (39), as well as an active agent “at the historic juncture when a non-normative sexual behavior transforms into a homosexual subjectivity” (14-15).

According to Papanikolaou, Cavafy, in his poems, reconstructs a biography of the homosexual self, ending up creating an identarian platform, from which one can speak, and a subversive set of discourses about the homosexual self” (2014: 23). It is such a foregrounding of Cavafy that, I believe, Karayan’s oeuvre has (for decades) accomplished: a homosexual subjectivity emerges, that demands and claims a public presence, as the agent of a radical and subversive (against every seemly hypocrisy and authoritative suppression) eroticism.

In some of the early “Cavafy works” (FIG. 1), homoeroticism is manifested unashamedly, even if confined in private spaces. Instead, the sketches that

<sup>5</sup> The only other such case, within the wider Cypriot cultural scene, is the poetry of Elias Constantinou (1957-1995).

Karayan made in dialogue with specific poems by Cavafy, in the 1993 bilingual (Greek and German) publication *Thirteen Erotic Poems* [*Dreizehn Liebesgedichte*] that came out in Berlin (Janssen Publications – another equivalent publication came out in Cyprus, 20 years later), are more overtly and unapologetically sexual. For the images in this publication, Karayan has referred to erotic and sexual imagery that he came across in the 1960s and 1970s:

‘Good’ pornography influenced my work. Jean Cadinot, Tom of Finland, even some sadomasochistic magazines that I found in some ‘special preferences’ bookstores in London, triggered a series of works with which I wanted to express the times, [and] the suppression I experienced on my return to Cyprus. [...] My art is erotic art. The erotic is the sense of life, of touch, of pleasure; to paint bodies [...] that give you the impression that they were borne out of an erotic act between the artist and the canvas. (KARAYAN 2016: 113-114)



FIGURE 1. Andreas Karayan, *Soldier and Nude*, 1978, oil on canvas, 100x83cm. Collection of the Tellogleio Foundation, Thessaloniki [Image courtesy of En Tipis Publications].





FIGURE 2. Andreas Karayan, *Dream*, 1995, oil on canvas, 100x150cm. Collection of the artist [Image courtesy of En Tipis Publications].

Following these sketches, he created larger (oil on canvas) works, based on the same poems, but ‘darker’ and in their sexuality (including portrayals of men in fetishistic leather gear in toilets and ‘dark rooms’), and more overt in their sense of protest (FIG. 2)<sup>6</sup>. These works in a way continue from the earlier *Cyprus 82-85 trilogy*, the parts of which (*The Martyrdom of St. Sebastian* (FIG. 3); *The Temptations of St. Anthony*; *The Annunciation*) are probably the most political of the erotic-sexual works. Karayan has frequently narrated these works as portraying and, at the same time, protesting against the suppression and stigmatization of non-normative sexuality, in Cyprus:

My subject matter is influenced by the socio-politico-erotic conditions in Cyprus. [In these works] my main theme is power, people’s relation to authority. [...] I feel strongly this suppressive relation between authority and the individual. I see the criminalization of the body by the guilt [of the individual] that results from such authority; it is not a clearly defined guilt, but it nevertheless suppresses the

<sup>6</sup> Works from these groups, along with the earlier *Cyprus 82-85 trilogy*, were included in Karayan’s large exhibition, “Cavafy: 62 years from his death”, in 1995, in Berlin and Athens, and then in Nicosia and Limassol.



FIGURE 3. Andreas Karayan, *The Martyrdom of St. Sebastian (Cyprus 82-85 trilogy)*, 1982, oil on canvas, 150x200cm. Collection of the Vorres Museum, Paiania [Image courtesy of En Tipis Publications].

individual, both spiritually and sexually, or socially. This is the guilt I wanted to portray in the trilogy [...]. (KARAYAN 1985: n. p.)

Karayan's words echo Michel Foucault's analysis of sexuality, as a network and a discourse of control:

Sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries gradually to uncover. It is the name that can be given to a historical construct: not a furtive reality that is difficult to grasp, but a great surface network in which the simulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledge, the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another, in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power. (FOUCAULT 1978 [1976]: 105-106)

The desire to expose and protest against the strategies of control and restrictions that Karayan had been experiencing upon his return to Cyprus in the late 1970s, became even more urgent with the advent of AIDS. The AIDS scare in Cyprus reinforced the conservative attitudes and prejudices



against gay people (the “gay disease” label was easily adopted by society at large), delaying even further the rise of collective gay rights-and-visibility activism in the Republic<sup>7</sup>. Karayan, once again, turned to Cavafy:

I used, in [the works based on] “Cavafy”, the erotic aspect, aiming at expressing the suppression, the taboos regarding homosexuality, and issues related to AIDS. When I created the [new] Cavafy series in [the early 1990s], it was the time of AIDS; it was sweeping; it was shocking. [...] AIDS came down like a catapult! That’s what I wanted to express in the Cavafy works. (KARAYAN 2014: 69)

Some of these works (FIG. 4), rather than the earlier sadomasochism of *The Martyrdom of St. Sebastian*, portray, in scenes of bondage, a masochistic self-restriction, reflecting the epidemic’s new state of affairs, whereby gay people had to self-‘censor’ their sexuality.

All this raises, however, the question whether Karayan is actually exhibiting a ‘conservative’, as much as superficial, attitude toward sadomasochism, which is long established as a consensual, even if controversial (or notorious), arrangement that aims at psycho-emotional as much as sexual gratification of those involved. His above-quoted reference to the “criminalization of the body” by authority, and the suppression of the individual, in relation to *The Martyrdom of St. Sebastian* (FIG. 3), seem to suggest as much. The matter is more complicated, however, in (and due to) its contradictions. Even though he has called the painting, “a nightmarish work”, the sentence continues, “a painterly ‘choreography’ of the body and its forbidden pleasures [...]” (KARAYAN 2015a: 102; my emphasis). In this imbued-with-tensions description of *St. Sebastian*, he even includes religious references (Karayan was raised as a Catholic<sup>8</sup>): He likens the soldier by the window, to an “angel-judge”, while he talks of two of the other figures (the oversized head at the lower right-hand corner and the reflected image, on his glasses, of a young man in the distance) as engaged in an “erotic

<sup>7</sup> The first ‘official’ gay rights group was not established until 2010, as LGBTI Cyprus (Accept). More generally, the ongoing, de facto division of the island (known as “The Cyprus Problem”) has functioned as an alibi for the conservative political and religious elite (the Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus being an all-powerful institution) to obstruct progressive changes in human (including gay) rights, projected as detrimental (or, at best, secondary) to the “national” cause of the country’s “liberation”, for the achievement of which, a virile heteronormative masculinity is paramount (see, for instance, KAMENOU 2011: 26-29).

<sup>8</sup> “Being a Roman Catholic [...] was another indication of [my] difference [...]. Three “cosmetic” adjectives [“Armenian”, “Catholic” and, occasionally, “sissy”], like the Lord’s wreath of thorns, stayed with me for a long time. I felt like a contemporary holy martyr” (KARAYAN 2015a: 50).

fantasy". He points to the dominance of the "executioner", and he stresses the prevalence of the "martyrdom" in the Catholic Church, as "a combination of agony, *pleasure and atonement*" (my emphasis). He adds that, as a (Catholic) teenager, he had gone through such a "martyrdom", in his effort, at the time, to suppress the "callings of the flesh" (102).

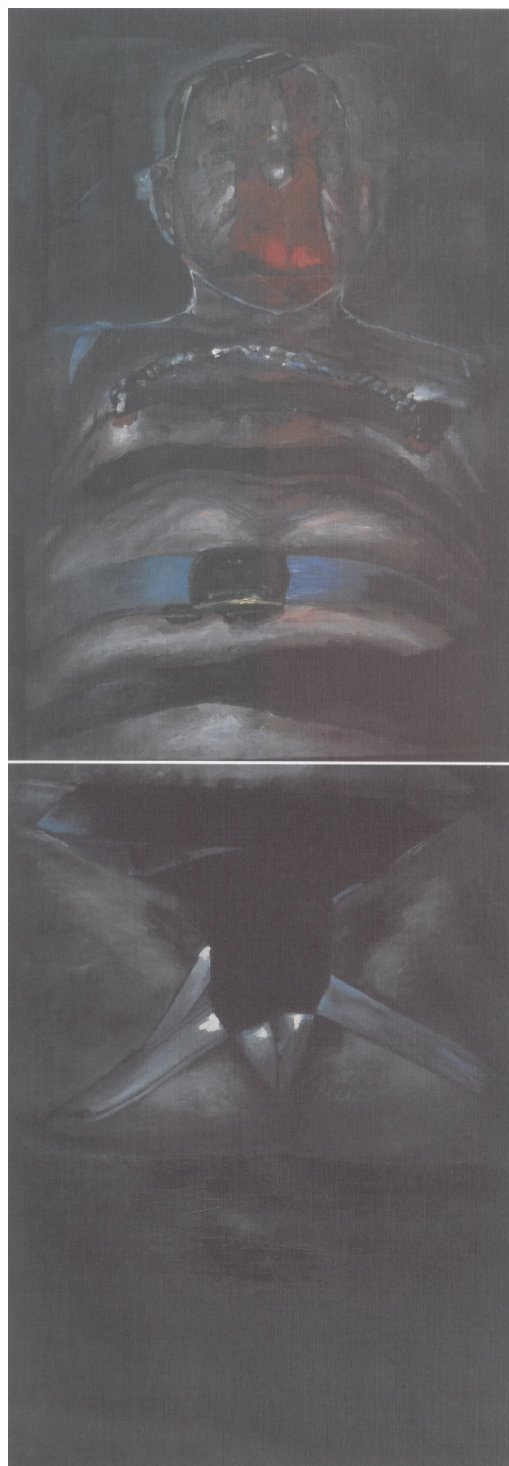


FIGURE 4. Andreas Karayan, *Protest* (diptych), 1989, oil on canvas 222x77cm. Collection of the artist [Image courtesy of En Tipis Publications].

In these works, therefore, Karayan projects the personal as political<sup>9</sup>, within the framework of the erotic: the unapologetic sexuality of the images foregrounds the artist's resistance to the (due to the AIDS crisis) renewed regime of stigmatization and marginalization of people of non-normative sexualities – a powerful, even if lone (at the time, in Cyprus), stance of queer counter-discourse.

## QUEERING THE PUBLIC SPACE I: UNDERMINING HEGEMONIC IDEOLOGY

In spite of the overt eroticism and sexuality in many of Karayan's works, from early on in his career his paintings entered, as he characteristically points out, into some "very respectable parlors" of the high bourgeoisie, which, "exhibited a 'liberal' spirit, up to a point, of course" (KARAYAN 2016: 115)<sup>10</sup>. One of the factors that contributed to the gradual acceptance of his erotic works (by "good society" art connoisseurs), is their accessible, realist-classicizing style: "The basis of my painting is derived from the Renaissance. [...] I was struck by Masaccio's works at the Brancacci Chapel; he, along with Piero della Francesca and Caravaggio, have been my teachers" (KARAYAN 2015a: 74-75). Elsewhere, he has referred to David Hockney, whom he met in person, when Karayan was living in London, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and whose "paintings of nude boys, [were] coming to life" in his sleep (KARAYAN 2011: 44). More recently, Karayan mentioned ancient statues as another source for his works (KARAYAN 2022). All this confirms the eclectic character of his painting<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> The *Martyrdom*'s photo-realist style was derived from pornographic magazines. "From [pornographic] magazines, I derived models and ideas, and I transformed the sexual into political" (KARAYAN 2016: 113).

<sup>10</sup> "Eventually, the public surprised me! After the initial reaction, they accepted and loved my work, either because they wanted to show that they 'knew' [about art] – [since] I had come to Cyprus with excellent reviews from my Athens exhibition in 1978 – or something in my paintings moved them, or because they appreciated my honesty; in any case, the works sold, and the 'revolution' entered some very respectable parlors! Of course, we are talking about the high bourgeoisie that exhibited a 'liberal' attitude – up to a certain point, of course" (KARAYAN 2016: 115).

<sup>11</sup> In art historical terms, Karayan's oeuvre can be placed within the wider framework of postmodern resurgence of representational painting in the 1980s and 1990s, especially, in relation to the rise of "gay art", and in parallel to other artists who have focused on the male body, in a classicizing manner: such as the Indian born British painter Michael Leonard and the American David Ligare. However, in addition to these artists (gay) eroticism, Karayan's work displays (queer) politics and subversion (in closer affinity, perhaps, to some of the works by American painter Delmas Howe).



More important for the eventual embrace of his work by the Cypriot art public was the convenient connection that was made between his painting and that of Yiannis Tsarouchis. The latter was responsible for the popularization of the eroticized, young male nude in modern Greek art. Even though this was a revolutionary intervention in 20th-century Greek art, Tsarouchis's rendition of the male nude was a highly aestheticized, almost fetishist portrayal, within a wider discourse of "Hellenicity" (Greekness), which, if anything, reinforced an ethnocentric discourse, rather than disrupting it (as will be proposed, in the next section, regarding works by Karayan)<sup>12</sup>. The Greekness narrative (part of the wider project of a Greek modernism) was a prominent aspect in the work of the artists (as well as writers, architects et al.), who are usually bracketed within the so-called "Generation of the [Nineteen]Thirties" that dominated the aesthetic (and in great part, ideological) definition of 20th-century Greece, as well as, in great part, the Greek Cypriot cultural environment<sup>13</sup>. Karayan, who remembers being excited to have seen, in the early 1960s, an exhibition by Tsarouchis for the first time – "Tsarouchis's works implied all I couldn't taste" (KARAYAN 2008: 141) –, often quotes Tsarouchis telling him that Karayan's treatment of the male figure was distinctly different from his own<sup>14</sup>. And, as Karayan himself correctly points out, "I have a critical disposition in my work; that is, the erotic element is filtered through a critical stance – that's our main difference with Tsarouchis." And he adds: "My social stance is always the erotic position. I mean, for me, the erotic [...] is a political stance [...]" (KARAYAN 1985: n. p.).

It is such a stance that permeates much of Karayan's other (beyond

<sup>12</sup> "It was Greece of the time [of the aesthetics] of Tsarouchis, with [his] Piraeus's houses, and the nude young men who expressed an idiosyncratic eroticism, of their own rules and clearly defined roles. On the contrary, for me, the erotic was a diffused energy with multiple manifestations which I experienced and painted" (KARAYAN 2015a: 61; from the chapter, "Two Journeys to Greece" – "The Second Journey" [1978]).

<sup>13</sup> The Greek aesthetic landscape of the second part of the 20th century, especially, the poetry and the music associated with the ideological aesthetics of the Generation of the Thirties (such as the poetry of Giorgos Seferis, Odysseas Elytis, Yiannis Ritsos and Nikos Gkatsos, or the songs of Mikis Theodorakis and Manos Hadjidakis) has been of paramount importance in the making of the aesthetic milieu of Greek Cypriots (see also note 16).

<sup>14</sup> "The sexual and the erotic are forces that can shake the foundations of a static and conservative society. Imbued with such ideas, I returned from London. In Cyprus, the male nude was taboo – in Greece, it had been established by Tsarouchis. I met the master in 1983, at my show in Ora Gallery. Upon seeing my *Martyrdom of St. Sebastian*, he said: 'You, Mr. Karayan, in your painting you dare to do what I never did'" (KARAYAN 2016: 114-115).

the directly erotic, nude) works. In many other of his paintings, the now clothed, public body (again, to quote Pananikolaou on Cavafy) “acts, as a body within history, within aestheticism, within the politics of the self [...]” (PAPANIKOLAOU 2014: 68). Correspondingly, the body, in Karayan’s works, acts as a body within contemporary history, erotic and (because erotic) also political: whether it’s the Cavafian, young nude bodies – erotic subjects-objects of desire, as well as agents of protest and revolutionary dynamics –, or the eroticized bodies of sailors and soldiers – agents of collective, national symbolism and of hegemonic ideologemes, which are undermined by the very eroticism and sexuality of the agents themselves.

The male nudes were not the only works that invited, at least some, comparison with Yannis Tsarouchis. Way more, were his works with soldiers and, especially, sailors<sup>15</sup>. But again, the affinity is superficial: Karayan’s works are imbued not only with the aforementioned critical gaze, as well as with a hefty dose of irony; they are often importantly political. In *National Holiday (25th of March)*, from 1984 (FIG. 5), under a theme that refers directly to the ‘sacred’ symbolism of the nation, Karayan playfully sexualizes the men-carriers of that symbolism and ideology, in a homosocial setting. Rather than a portrayal of the pomp and ceremony of the national[ist] rituals, the sailors are here shown before or after a parade or some other event, thus undercutting the (hetero)normative associations of the viewers with the painting’s title; instead, allusions are made to the potential (homo) erotics of an all-male gathering, accentuated by the placing of the weapons in relation to the young men’s bodies, and their overall postures.

Already back in his 1980 exhibition, Karayan had included, next to the “Cavafy” group of works, another group, under the overall theme of the “25th of March”. The specific date is of supreme importance in the (modern) Greek national narrative, equally important in Cyprus, among Greek

<sup>15</sup> His portrayals of sailors ended up becoming his most sought after works, to such an extent that, not wanting to be forever characterized as the “painter of sailors”, in 1999 he announced that he would stop painting them, “for good”. But he has had, several times, to go back on that decision, under pressure by gallerists or clients (or, as he put it, in 2014, “without them [meaning the paintings of sailors, as well as of cyclists, another of his commercially popular series of works], I wouldn’t survive financially” [KARAYAN 2014: 68]). But these later, made-to-order works in the new millennium, are often almost exact reproductions of parts of/or variations on earlier works, according to clients’ wishes! Inevitably, they do not contain the intertwining of the political and the erotic, of the earlier works.



FIGURE 5. Andreas Karayan, *National Holiday (25th of March)*, 1984, oil on canvas, 150x200cm. Private collection [Image courtesy of En Tipis Publications].

Cypriots<sup>16</sup>. Commemorated annually (and existing as an official holiday in Greece, celebrated with full pomp and circumstance, and as a school holiday in Cyprus, celebrated with student parades), it alludes to the supposed date (March 25, 1821) of the start of the Greek Revolution (as the Greek War of Independence [from the Ottomans] is referred to in Greece). While there is hardly any historical evidence to substantiate the specific starting date, it was not chosen arbitrarily, since on the same date the Greek Orthodox Church celebrates the Annunciation of the Virgin Mary. This not only conflates the national with the religious (a conflation that is widespread within Greek national discourse<sup>17</sup>), but it additionally parallels the annunciation of the birth of Christ (and thus the ‘salvation’ of humankind) with the

<sup>16</sup> The majority of Greek Cypriots consider themselves as part of the wider Greek nation (the expression “Cypriot Hellenism” is widely used as a self-referent), never adopting any notion of a Cypriot “national” identity. All-important Greek national referents, therefore, such as the symbolism of the 25th of March, are as important in the Republic of Cyprus as in Greece, incorporated in all levels of public education.

<sup>17</sup> See, for instance, DANOS 2002.

‘annunciation’ of the “re-birth” of the Greek “nation” after centuries of “enslavement”. Karayan noted, in the 1980 show’s leaflet, that the works constituted “a different negotiation of persons and situations”, suggesting, presumably, a non-normative or queer rendering of the sacred subject. Karayan, in other words, erotically and sexually re-narrates the nation in deviance from the dominant, heteronormative (and homophobic) nationalist discourse.

Such a counter-narrative is perhaps nowhere more pronounced than in two other of that earlier group of works (“25th of March”), which include soldiers (importantly, they are *stratonomoi* – military police), again, at the margins, both spatially and temporally, of the official ceremonies. In *Heroes Street* (diptych), from 1979 (FIG. 6), the figures are on the side-lines of whatever celebratory events are taking place. Here, however, instead of the playfulness of the sailors (FIG. 5), we face a more sinister portrayal of authority; in particular, the figures on the left (smaller part of the diptych) stand for authoritarian power: the two men in (military or police) uniform are sketchily portrayed in the background, as if the unseen agents of control. In front of them, civilian authority is represented by the two figures in lay clothing, the style of which, especially of the figure in front (perhaps, a Secret Service officer), alludes to the Junta period in Greece, which was in power until a few years before the painting’s date. The senior military officer in the middle of the composition (on the left of the larger part of the diptych) makes the transition to the youthful military group on the right – the flag-bearing members of the military police. Once again, the young men are sexualized, in the tightly fitting trousers<sup>18</sup>, the closely knitted bodies and the placing of the flag poles (in an equivalent way to the sailors’ weapons in the previous work).

All the allusions to the hetero-normative perpetuation of nation and power are present, yet the apparent agents of nation and power are not actively involved in the rituals that perpetuate them. They are on the side-lines, in a state of rest and/or waiting; as such, it can, in one way, be read as if they constitute a homosocial microcosm, parallel to the official, normative arena, temporally (and spatially) outside or in the margins of the public

<sup>18</sup> “The soldier’s uniform, which envelops a young body, is his oppressor because it negates his subjectivity. It is an element of violence, but at the same time it is an erotic element because it expresses the force of authority” (KARAYAN 2002: 28).





FIGURE 6. Andreas Karayan, *Odos Iroon [Heroes Street]* (diptych), 1979, oil on canvas, 83x150cm. State Collection of Contemporary Cypriot Art, Nicosia [Image courtesy of En Tipis Publications].



FIGURE 7. Andreas Karayan, *25th of March: The Holy Family – The Flag Bearers* (diptych), 1978-1980, oil on canvas, 83x200cm. Collection of the Vorres Museum, Paiania [Image courtesy of En Tipis Publications].

arena, in a semi-private (almost conspiratorial, in its latent homoeroticism) state. Yet, it is a state in which the viewer cannot help but partake – the figures are lined-up, not yet for the parade or other pomposity, but to be looked at, and inevitably engage with the viewer. The latter has come to the work in order to witness the hegemonic performance of the nation, alluded in the title and symbols of the painting; instead, the viewer is witnessing the queering of that performance, which is subverted; not only it is not taking place, but it is also being replaced by an eroticization of its agents, with the scene having been turned into an erotic spectacle of looking. As such, this homosocially erotic setting may, alternatively, be seen not as constituting a parallel, non-normative arena, but as the queering of the very public, hegemonic space itself: the masculinity of the symbols of authority, of the army, and of the nation are clothed in (homo)erotic desire and aesthetics – not in secrecy, not in the private (or even a parallel) realm, but in the public space of pomp and circumstance<sup>19</sup>.

This undermining of national[ist] hegemony is even more pronounced in the diptych, *25th of March: The Holy Family – The Flag Bearers* from 1978-1980 (FIG. 7), perhaps, the most politically subversive painting by Karayan. The title of the work recalls the ‘sacred’ (such as in the period of the Junta in Greece) tri-motto of fatherland-religion-family. Seemingly, the painting brings these three together: on this most important national holiday, the “holy family” of petit bourgeoisie is earnestly walking toward or from the space of the parade. In contrast, the group of young soldiers (of the military police) is not moving towards any place; they have set aside the flag poles and are not wearing their caps. In their relaxed, homosocial setting, it seems that the narrative of authority, tradition and nation is (temporally and spatially) interrupted, producing instead an erotics counter-discourse.

<sup>19</sup> It is interesting to compare such works by Karayan, to paintings from the early 1970s, by some of the so-called New Greek Realists: for example, some of the images in the 18-panel *Frieze* (1972) by Chronis Botsoglou (1941-2022), or in the polyptych *Patridognosia [Greek History Lesson]* (1976) by Jannis Psychopedis (b. 1945), are equally realistic and seemingly banal portrayals of either men in uniform or spectators at nationalist events such as parades, which constitute critical views of the dictatorship era in Greece (1967-1974), yet without the subversive (eroticizing) queering found in Karayan’s works.





FIGURE 8. Andreas Karayan, *Coffee-house in Omonoia Square* (Athens), 1980, oil on canvas, 50x90cm. Private collection [Image courtesy of En Tipis Publications].

## QUEERING THE PUBLIC SPACE II: BRINGING THE EROTIC OUT INTO THE (BANAL) OPEN.

If in the above works (Figs. 5-7), the public male eroticization is situated within collective, national symbolism, equally subversive is the queering of snapshots of banal situations, such as of young men (at times, again, soldiers or sailors, at others, men in civilian clothes), sitting in coffee shops, doing nothing remarkable (FIG. 8).

I was fascinated by Omonia Square [in Athens]. [...] There dominated an idleness and an unspecified mystery, due to intense eroticism and narcissism. It was solely a male world. Young soldiers, sailors and working-class lads lounging in coffee shops or at telephone booths, posing sensually. I passed through as a spectator, and I recorded everything around me, either with a camera or in my sketch book. I was enjoying the theatricality of it all, full of unfulfilled promises. [...] In Salonika, I was impressed by the uniformed youth sitting at the seaside cafes, in the afternoon". (KARAYAN 2015a: 66 and 76; referring to his first exhibition, in Athens in 1978)

In most of these works, the only activity is that of looking – gazes exchanged among the figures and/or directed toward the viewer, who is drawn into the exchange (FIG. 9).

This is even more pronounced in a third group of works, also from the 1980 exhibition, under the overall theme of *Bus Stops*, which, according





FIGURE 9. Andreas Karayan, *Soldiers in Coffee-house in Salonica*, 1976, oil on canvas, 83x100cm. Private collection [Image courtesy of En Tipis Publications].



FIGURE 10. Andreas Karayan, *A Certain Gaze (Bus Stops)*, 1979, oil on canvas, 90x81cm. Private collection [Image courtesy of En Tipis Publications].





FIGURE 11. Andreas Karayan, *Street In Nicosia (Bus Stops)*, 1980, oil on canvas, 80x90cm. Private collection [Image courtesy of En Tipis Publications].

to Karayan, deal with “Man [Anthropos] and the political landscape” (KARAYAN 1980: n. p.). Interestingly, and more urgently, the scenes are now placed more squarely and specifically in the Cypriot urban landscape<sup>20</sup>. In these works, the (homo)erotic play is no longer contained in private interiors, forced into the closet by the normative bourgeois morality of Cypriot society; it is instead an interaction brought out into the open, thus reinforcing the political in the erotic. Gazes are being exchanged between the figures (FIG. 10); or, they are seeking response (FIG. 11), including, from the viewer (FIG. 12).

The scenes are framed within the public, social sphere, with direct political references: pasted political posters and leaflets make up the background against which several male figures are placed. In agreement with Karayan’s insistence on the eroticism of the male figure as a protest, he juxtaposes the overt calls for justice and freedom in the posters (interestingly, the setting is Nicosia’s Freedom Square), with the covert but equally revolutionary (homo)erotic discourse unfolding in these seemingly banal

<sup>20</sup> It is interesting to note that, the kind of *daytime* “cruising” (more overt in *The Gaze* [Fig. 10]), though fairly common (especially in the 1970s and 80s) in places such as Athens or Salonika, was (and is) not that common in Cyprus, not even in the capital Nicosia.





FIGURE 12. Andreas Karayan, *Young Man in Yellow T-shirt (Bus Stops)*, 1979, oil on canvas, 91x82cm. State Collection of Contemporary Cypriot Art, Nicosia [Image courtesy of En Tipis Publications].

excerpts of daily urban routine. His representation and queering of the public, does not concern merely the space of public activity, but, as far as I'm concerned, the public sphere as analyzed by Jurgen Habermas, as the space of public discourse:

By "the public sphere" we mean first of all a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens. [...] Citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion – that is, with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions – about matters of general interest. (HABERMAS 1974 [1964]: 49)

Importantly, state authority, even though “is so to speak the executor of the political public sphere, it is not part of it” (HABERMAS 1974 [1964]: 49); as a matter of fact, the two stand opposite each other.

The Habermasian public sphere (which he defines as historically constructed within European modernity), however, soon disintegrated, mostly due to its expansion, whereby it was no longer a ‘space’ for disinterested rational-critical debate<sup>21</sup>. Several commentators, however, have traced problems with Habermas’s “public sphere”, within its very inception as that ideal space of rational discourse. Nancy Fraser (1990) points out that, this bourgeois, masculinist construction of the “public sphere” contained several exclusions in what constitutes the discourse of “matters of general interest”. Among them, are the so-called “private” interests and issues, such as those “pertaining to intimate domestic or private life, including sexual life” (71). In the *Bus Stops*, Karayan subverts such a restriction, foregrounding a counter-public, which ties in with Fraser’s notion of “alternative” publics, which she calls “subaltern counterpublics”, that have historically been constituted by “members of subordinated social groups – women, workers, peoples of color, and gays and lesbians”. These counterpublics signal the existence of “parallel discursive arenas”, where counterdiscourses are invented and circulated (67). Karayan, however, rather than forming a parallel counterdiscourse, he injects into the dominant public discourse of social justice, expressed in the pasted posters, a queer demand for justice regarding, as well as visibility of, non-normative sexuality, something hitherto contained into the private realm and thus as not a matter of concern in the public sphere. “[Q]ueer commentary [...] sees intimate sex practices and affects as related not just to family, romance, or friendship but also to the public world governing both policy and everyday life. While to many these spheres are separate, in queer thinking they are one subject (Berlant and WARNER 1995: 346-347).

Fraser, moreover, makes the important point that, “public spheres are not only arenas for the formation of discursive opinion; in addition, they are arenas for the formation and enactment of social identities”<sup>22</sup> (68). She stresses that, “preferences, interests, and identities are as much as outcomes

<sup>21</sup> See Habermas’s *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*; for an extensive synopsis of the book along with critical commentary, see CALHOUN 1992; for a very brief analysis of the concept, see also HABERMAS 1974.

<sup>22</sup> In this, she criticizes “psychoanalytic accounts of identity formation”, including much of feminist theory, in that they “neglect [...] identity construction in relation to public spheres” (FRASER 1990: 79, note 25).

as antecedents of public deliberation, indeed are discursively constituted in and through it” (72). This, I believe, ties in with the Foucaultian analysis of sexuality, quoted early in this paper, based on which Papanikolaou refers to sexuality as “the connection of erotic desire with its discourses and their social negotiation. Sexuality is not so much as a deep trait of the inner self, as much as a surface network that connects discourses, bodies, power/s, and resistance/s” (PAPANIKOLAOU 2014: 17). It is to such connections that Karayan’s *Coffee-houses* and, especially, the *Bus Stops* works allude to, and with which he has set up a queer counter-discourse, standing against the dominant bourgeois public’s morality and strictures, in the last decades of the 20th century, long before, wide-spread gay and queer activism emerged in Cyprus, in the new century.

In these works (Figs. 8-12), furthermore, the young male bodies *perform* the public sphere, the way that Michael Warner refers to the “performative dimension of public discourse”<sup>23</sup> (2002: 82). For Warner, counterpublic discourse is far more than “the expression of subaltern culture” or “reverse discourse” (2002: 87). Instead, “[c]ounterpublics are ‘counter’ to the extent that they try to supply different ways of imagining stranger-sociability and its reflexivity; as publics, they remain oriented to stranger-circulation in a way that is not just strategic, but also constitutive of membership and its affects” (2002: 87-88).

Going beyond the “dominant [Habermasian] tradition of the public sphere”, in which “address to a public is ideologized as rational-critical dialogue” (82), Warner elaborates on the “poetic world-making” aspect of a/the public, that can bring about a world “in which embodied sociability, affect, and play have a more defining role than they do in the opinion-transposing frame of rational-critical dialogue” (88). Such sociability, affect, and play are manifested in Karayan’s *Coffee-houses* and the *Bus Stops* works. They manifest “an understanding of queerness” that points to the “necessity [of] a culture [...] in which intimate relations and the sexual body can in fact be understood as projects for transformation among strangers”<sup>24</sup> (WARNER 2002: 88).

<sup>23</sup> Warner builds on, as well as criticizes Fraser’s “counterpublics” (“Fraser’s description of what counterpublics do – ‘formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interest, and needs’ – sounds like the classically Habermasian description of rational-critical publics with the word *oppositional* inserted” [WARNER 2002: 85; emphasis in original]).

<sup>24</sup> For Warner (2002), “stranger-sociability” (or “-relationality”) is an essential aspect (for the formation) of a public, to which he refers as a “relation among strangers” (55).

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## THE AUTHOR

Antonis Danos is Associate Professor in the Dept. of Fine Arts, Cyprus University of Technology. Research areas: the ideology and aesthetics of the construction of nation states and “national” identities; gender and sexuality in art; the Mediterranean as a “hybrid” and “anti-hegemonic” political and cultural space, including anti-canonical experiences of modernity. Some publications: “Twentieth-Century Greek Cypriot Art: An ‘Other’ Modernism on the Periphery”, *Journal of Modern Greek Studies*, 32, 2 (2014); “Mediterranean Modernisms: The Case of Cypriot Artist Christoforos Savva,” in *Critically Mediterranean: Temporalities, Aesthetics, and Deployments of a Sea in Crisis* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); “The Mediterranean as Anti-Hege-  
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