

Queering the Memorial: Antifascist Performance and the Murder of Zackie Oh (Ζακ Κωστόπουλος)

Daniel Dilliplane and Christina Banalopoulou

On Friday September 21, 2018, queer activist and drag performer Zak Kostopoulos/Zackie Oh was killed in broad daylight by police and the owner of a jewelry store in the Omonoia neighborhood of downtown Athens, Greece. Both immediately afterward and in the years following the murder, the LGBTQ community has organized numerous protests and constructed various improvised memorial sites that celebrate Zak's life and collectively mourn his loss. Developing an innovative methodological approach that combines sensory ethnography with videography and critical walking, this multimedia research article documents this antifascist public memory project in the act of its collective constitution. Presenting a mediatized version of our embodied interactions with these living memorials to Zak—from topographic archives to repertoires of protests and walking performances—we examine the ways in which the ongoing queering of public memory disrupts not only the institutionalized but also the daily

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Stefanos Gkioultzouglou (soundtrack) makes music—mostly songs—based on a variety of Greek music genres, combined with techniques and approaches from different traditions. He uses his name (Στέφανος Γκιουλτζούογλου) and the “name” Vaktro (Βάκτρο).

and domesticized fascism of the νοικοκύρη: the patriarchal authority of the household's domestic economy.

Warning: This video contains disturbing imagery and descriptions of the violent public murder of Ζακ Κοστόπουλος, the most graphic of which can be found between following timestamps: 01:15-2:25 and 2:58-3:50.



Transcript [*view video at liminalities.net/20-4/queering-the-memorial.html]

[Audio: Protesters chanting «στην Ομόνοια δεν έγινε ληστεία μπάτσοι και αφεντικά κάναν δολοφονία.»]

Στην Ομόνοια δεν έγινε ληστεία μπάτσοι και αφεντικά κάναν δολοφονία.

[A close-up of graffiti of Zak's face on the memorial. Video pans out to reveal the full memorial. Cut to graffiti with the slogan.]

No robbery took place at Omonoia Square. The police together with the masters conducted murder.

On Friday September 21st, 2018, LGBTQ and HIV activist and drag performer Zak Kostopoulos/Zackie Oh was killed by police and the owner of a jewelry store in the Omonoia neighborhood of downtown Athens.

[Images from the surveillance camera and cellphone video of the murder.]

Surveillance videos show Zak stopped by a man at the entrance of a bakery. Then videos show Zak trapped inside a jewelry store across the street.

The curtain rises on a deadly spectacle ... people all around, watching and recording... so much better than movies, TV or even theatre... here you can smell the blood of the actors... zero suspension of disbelief! How exciting... the only thing that gets suspended... is our humanity.

Zak was behind the glass... the transparent fourth wall dividing life and death ... Even now, I beg the wall to remain unbroken ... me the dedicated enemy of realism ... imploring the scene not to unfold into an avant-garde performance ... the problem is that walls are no longer really walls, but membranes ... filtering some lives in and others out ... their sharp broken pieces penetrating the bodies of those who are not permitted to pass smoothly through.

[An image of Koukles—a venue where Zak performed their drag shows—and pictures of posters and graffiti honoring Zak.]

Drag performance routinely smashes the fourth wall. Queer life is daring and dazzling but also always-already rendered sacrificial and expendable. So often, queerness *is* spectacle because so few spheres are curved for it. Unfortunately, so is queer death.

[Cellphone video footage of the murder.]

Just like they always did with their drag alter ego Zackie Oh, Zak decided to break the fourth wall ... to smash through the glass and connect with those passive spectators... they wanted to get out ... to break the division between actor and spectator... what did they get in exchange for putting their life into absolute precarity in order to turn the spectators into relational actors?

Kicks and glass and more kicks and more glass. Kicks from the owner of the jewelry store, from spectators, and from the police ... the pieces of broken glass colonizing their body ... more and more kicks with more and more glass...

[A soundscape of audio looping the words “kicks” and “glass” accompanies violent video]

Until Zackie Oh died ... but that was not enough ... and so...

[The soundscape resumes with a montage of kicks. Until sound and image fade out. Then, images of media headlines appear.]

Cue the media narratives: A humble jewelry store owner, an οικογενειάρχης νοικοκύρης – a decent family man – a householder providing for his family, was forced to defend his property from an immigrant, a junkie, a thief, a parasite.

Never mind the jeweler's role in the systemic parasitism of capitalism and extractivism; never mind the oppression, subjugation, and murder necessary to uphold such a system.

Building upon Ilektra Kyriazidou's approach to noikokyrio as not only a "local model of family domesticity based on heterosexual marriage" but also as a colonization of "the affective ecology of collective intimacy" offering the "promise of inclusion and belonging," we focus on "the narratives and affective compositions and dispositions that condition [its] emergence" ("Neighboring in Times of Austerity" 110, 102).

[First, images of theatre buildings and promotional materials from productions appear, followed by murals of Alexandros Grigoropoulos and Pavlos Fyssas.]

Theatrical and public performances of memorialization contest these narratives and the quotidian fascism they struggle to conceal.

For instance, in December 2018 the occupation Kremlino, put up the show "The three deaths of Zak Kostopoulos: Murdering the Human, their identities, the truth." In November of 2022, the National Theatre of Greece—an institution funded by the Greek state that also funds the police who murdered Zak and who were ultimately rendered innocent by the Greek courts—staged the play "Topography of Death or Lest We Forget" ["Τοπογραφία Θανάτου ή Ας μην ξεχάσουμε"]—a walking performance that maps various murders in public space, including that of Κωστόπουλος as well those of Αλέξανδρος Γρηγορόπουλος, a 15 year old kid who was murdered by the police in 2008, and Πάυλος Φύσσας, an anti-fascist musician who was murdered by a member of Greece's neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn.

[Images of anti-fascist graffiti.]

Highlighting these murders reveals both institutionalized and daily, domesticized, microfascism. As Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari remind us, micro in microfascism does not imply smallness. On the contrary it grasps insidiousness, a fascism that runs through our cells and veins, and that builds its grand scale expansion upon that.

[Short clips of video from the various sections to offer a visual preview.]

This video article documents and participates in the performance practices of this antifascist public memory project. Utilizing the audio-visual essay as a means of communicating the affective textures of our research, this article responds to Sarah Pink's call for an ethnographic methodology that "takes as its starting point the multisensoriality of experience, perception, knowing, and practice," (*Doing Sensory Ethnography* xi). Presenting a mediatized version of embodied interaction with informal public memorials of Zak, it explores the materializing performances of these queer memorials and archives of Zackie Oh's murder in order to keep attacking the microfascism of the *νοικοκύρη* ... a microfascism that requires a face to project and to justify the desire to kill and a membrane to help with the killing. It also contributes to the visceral and humanizing performances of mourning that inscribe life over the death practices of fascism.

Performing the Archive, Materializing the Memorial

[After the above title, POV video: walking on the street and images of the street signs with the following subtitle text: "We need not polarize the relationship between [the archive and the repertoire] to acknowledge that they have often proved antagonistic in the struggle for cultural survival or supremacy" (Taylor 2003, 22).]

We are on Gladstonos, the street on which Zak was murdered. The LGBTQ community keeps erasing the formal name of the street, renaming it Zackie Oh. This back and forth between erasing, rewriting and writing is ongoing.

[Video and images of official anti-fascist memorials on the street, followed by historical images of the Greek resistance fighters Antonis Mytilinaios and Spyros Galatis and the bombed ESPO building.]

The street performs as an anti-Nazi and anti-fascist memorial. A huge bronze book protrudes from the wall of the building on the end of the street, imitating an archive. This building used to be one of the headquarters of the Greek Nazi organization ESPO that served the interests of the German Nazi occupation in Greece. On September 20th 1942, two men from the Greek resistance entered the building carrying explosives. After the deathly explosion, the Nazi regime went after many members of the Greek resistance. The bronze book documents the names of those who were murdered during these investigations. And there are busts reminding us of the faces and names of those who sacrificed their lives fighting the Nazis.

[Videos of the official memorials and the improvised graffiti memorials to Zak.]

We are standing on a formally acknowledged memorial of the fight against Nazism. We are standing on a street that celebrates the victory of the fight against fascism. We are also standing on another kind of memorial... a memorial that reminds us of our murderous contemporary failure ... that does not allow us to fall for the illusion that fascism was actually killed back then and is now dead.

Describing “two walks in the city,” D.J. Hopkins and Shelley Orr utilize a performance-based methodology of pedestrianism to explore urban memorial sites. Building upon that method and echoing the twofold character of their project, our research entails two walks on the street.

The one on Gladstonos, the street that enjoys institutional recognition but also performativity with regard to its preassigned role, and the other on Zackie Oh Street that persists through rewriting and turmoil.

[Images and video of Gladstonos and its shops.]

Gladstonos is a pedestrian street, host to cafes and shops. Its memorials to the historical fight against fascism have a material permanence, but have become part of the background of the built environment, irrelevant to the lived experience of the street.

[Video of Zak's memorial with pedestrians walking past. The following subtitle text appears: "Walking connects one place to another and sews together the remnants of the past found throughout the terrain with the insight produced during the time spent traversing it" (Lagomasino 2020, 13).]

To walk Zackie Oh street is to disrupt typical pedestrian flows and to contest the narrative implicit in the invisibility of the official anti-fascist memorials. Despite being spatially coterminous with Gladstonos, Zackie Oh street is an improvised and ongoing construction, with impermanent memorializations of spray-paint and glitter scattered along the thoroughfare.

Our attention to these memorials caused confusion and annoyance for other pedestrians. Some mocked us as we paid our respects to Zak, because—as we were neither shopping nor drinking coffee—they were unable to see the value of our way of navigating the space. Others actively harassed us because, for them and their murderous normativity, Zackie's murder was always-already legitimately conducted.

[Video of protesters on Zackie Oh street.]

As Athena Athanasiou and Dimitris Papanikolaou write about the protests and memorials dedicated to Zak: "Βγήκαμε στους δρόμους, πρώτα από όλα για να καταγγείλουμε το πόσο προγραμματικά αυτή η «κανονικότητα,» που καμώνεται για φιλήσυχη, διαρκώς προβάλλει το αντίθετό της, το μη «κανονικό,» ως ένα σώμα οιονεί νεκρό. Βγήκαμε στους δρόμους να καταγγείλουμε πως τεχνουργείται αυτή η θανατοπολιτική, που θέλει πάντα να επιβάλλεται ως κοινή λογική. Με κεντρικό σύνθημα «Οργή και Θλίψη Η Zackie Θα Μας Λείψει» (50 *Κείμενα για το Zak* 10).

[Video of bodies physically engaging with the memorials: feet walking over graffiti representing Zak's shoe, a finger tracing the texture of Zak's name written in glitter, etc.]

These memorials to Zak contribute a knowledge that must be accessed through the body, a knowledge that demands that we not be carried away by the illusion that fascism no longer exists. This knowledge must be encountered, felt, embodied, lived, enacted.

[Video and images of the graffiti memorials to Zak.]

Zackie Oh street is a memorial that intentionally does not bring closure. Kostas Giannopoulos writes about this sensorial quest for non-closure: “Ελπίζω η δημόσια αυτή μνήμη να αποτελέσει το σημείο εκκίνησης για τη δημιουργία ενός αρχείου αποκλεισμένων συναισθημάτων και το πρίσμα μέσα από το οποίο θα σκεφτούμε μία γενεολογία τραύματος, δομικής βίας και καταπίεσης που υφίστανται οι κουηρ άνθρωποι” (30 *Κείμενα για το Ζακ* 72).

While Gladstonos celebrates the historical resistance against fascism—because the state recognizes only institutionalized fascism as fascism—Zackie Oh street conducts an anatomy/cartography of microfascism.

[The following subtitle text appears: “Queering should not only engage troubled situations in the here and now. Rather, it forms a prolonged project of universal anticipation/commitment concerning people in different places and times, pursuing alliances with the oppressed beyond sexual and gender minority status alone” (Zebracki and Leitner 2022, 1361).]

The fight against fascism is not finished; if we need memorials of resistance against fascism to remind us of its existence, these memorials are not the statues and archives we can easily spectate from the safe space of a distanced observer and the secure distinction between subject and object, but ones that confront our bodies with the ongoing murderous manifestations of microfascism.

[Video and images of protests.]

The ongoing renewal of the improvised and ephemeral graffiti memorialization speaks of continued life, of life after death, a fugitive life that must be enacted in and through us, through what remains. It is not enough for us to celebrate the resistances that defeated historical fascism, we must live resistances to the contemporary microfascisms that permeate our societies, like the microfascism of the noikokyri.

[Protest audio: Η Zackie ζει τσακίστε τους ναζί.]

Against the Microfascism of the Νοικοκύρη: Protest and Performance

[Video of protesters marching down Zackie Oh street.]

Zak's life was violently cut short by a microfascism νοικοκυραίων and its resonance with the underlying fascism of the liberal state.

Deleuze and Guattari write in *A Thousand Plateaus* that: "Doubtless, fascism invented the concept of the totalitarian state, but there is no reason to define fascism by a concept of its own devising ... the concept of the totalitarian state applies only at the macropolitical level, to a rigid segmentarity and a particular mode of totalization and centralization. But fascism is inseparable from a proliferation of molecular focuses in interaction, which skip from point to point, before beginning to resonate together in the National Socialist State. Rural fascism and city or neighborhood fascism, youth fascism and war veteran's fascism, fascism of the Left and fascism of the Right, fascism of the couple, family, school, and office" (*A Thousand Plateaus* 214).

Zackie Oh's murder and the media narratives surrounding it added another fascism to this ongoing list ... the fascism of the noikokyri ...

Kostas Giannakopoulos argues that: "Η φονική επίθεση εναντίον του Ζακ δεν οφείλεται τόσο στην (ομο)σεξουαλική ταυτότητά του, όσο στην παραβατικότητά του με την έννοια της παραβίασης όχι τόσο των νόμων, αλλά της κανονικότητας των Ελλήνων, στρειτ ανδρών, νοικοκυραίων" (*50 Κείμενα για το Ζακ* 70).

[Images of posters and graffiti honoring Zak, followed by images and videos of protesters.]

The insidiousness of microfascism makes it harder to grasp and so resistance to it won't be celebrated by the state in statues, monuments or official archives. The fight against the microfascism of the noikokyris engages performance tactics meant to shatter the illusions constitutive of our everyday realities.

This fight lives in enactive memorializations that don't merely project the past onto the present but begin from the here and now in order to constitute different futures ...

[An image of Zak's face depicted in spray paint with superimposed text: "If you ever bury me, bury me in glitter." – Zackie Oh]

Such performance practices celebrate and affirm life in the face of the death practices of the fascists and the police.

[Images and video of glittery examples of graffiti, such as a tree on Zackie Oh street covered in pink paint and glitter.]

For instance, Myrto Tsilimpounidi describes how Zak's death transformed Athens in a glitterscape that offered them "a weird sense of protection." They say, "from the very night that we learned of Zak's murder, until about six months on, Athens was a glitter city. Everywhere we went, there was glitter on the streets, there was glitter on the walls, everywhere in the city center. So this collective act, without one individual signing, drastically altered the aesthetics of the city. Even newspapers were writing about it: 'We have glitter in our houses. We walk on the streets and we walk in our houses and it sticks everywhere.' ... When I saw people with glitter, wearing glitter on their clothes, I would think: 'We exist in this city'" ("Knowledge from Below" 150).

[Images of shoe protest and the police headquarters in Athens, followed by graffiti images incorporating the shoe imagery.]

The performance protest tactic of leaving behind a single shoe, inspired by Zak's one black shoe left on scene of the murder, offers another example. Protestors place shoes on the stairs outside the police headquarters, conjuring new life for Zak by representing their absence and drawing attention to the very real but invisible boundaries between the bodies of the public and the ones who police them ... the shoes construct a boundary, establishing a space safe from police while also reaching out and bridging the gap between police and demonstrators ... indicating an in-between step and inviting the police to rediscover their humanity and to cross over to where life is affirmed without murderous exclusions.

This practice of leaving behind disembodied shoes is an example of tactical protest performances that penetrate the diffusive νοικοκύρικο microfascism and conducts future making in the present.

[Protest audio: Αυτό αυτό αυτό είναι σωστό .. κλωτσιά με δωδεκάποντο να βάλετε μυαλό.]

[Images and video of traces of glitter, ripped posters, and faded graffiti.]

Abandoned shoes are discarded. Graffiti and glitter are scrubbed away. But even as these performance memorializations are erased, traces remain. To perceive the traces that persist through these efforts at erasure, you need your sensing, feeling and moving body to breathe, touch and be moved ...

[The following subtitle text appears: “A wider set of multisensory experiences can be accessed by ethnographers who incorporate reflexive research practices into videographic methodologies” (Paterson 2020, 21).]

We not only seek to document and preserve the traces of this alternative and ephemeral performance archive in the form of a video article, but also to contribute to it with a creative and visceral theorizing, activating an abrupt and vital somatic response. Our audiovisual approach to sensory and performance ethnographic methodologies extends the queer politics of these anti-fascist memorials, which—rather than celebrating the preservation of the past—enact futurities that function as a connective tissue, re-membling bodies torn apart by the official mnemonic practices of noikokyrio.

[Credits and Works Cited]

With Music by Stefanos Gkioultzouoglou



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