

The past in the present

ABSTRACT:

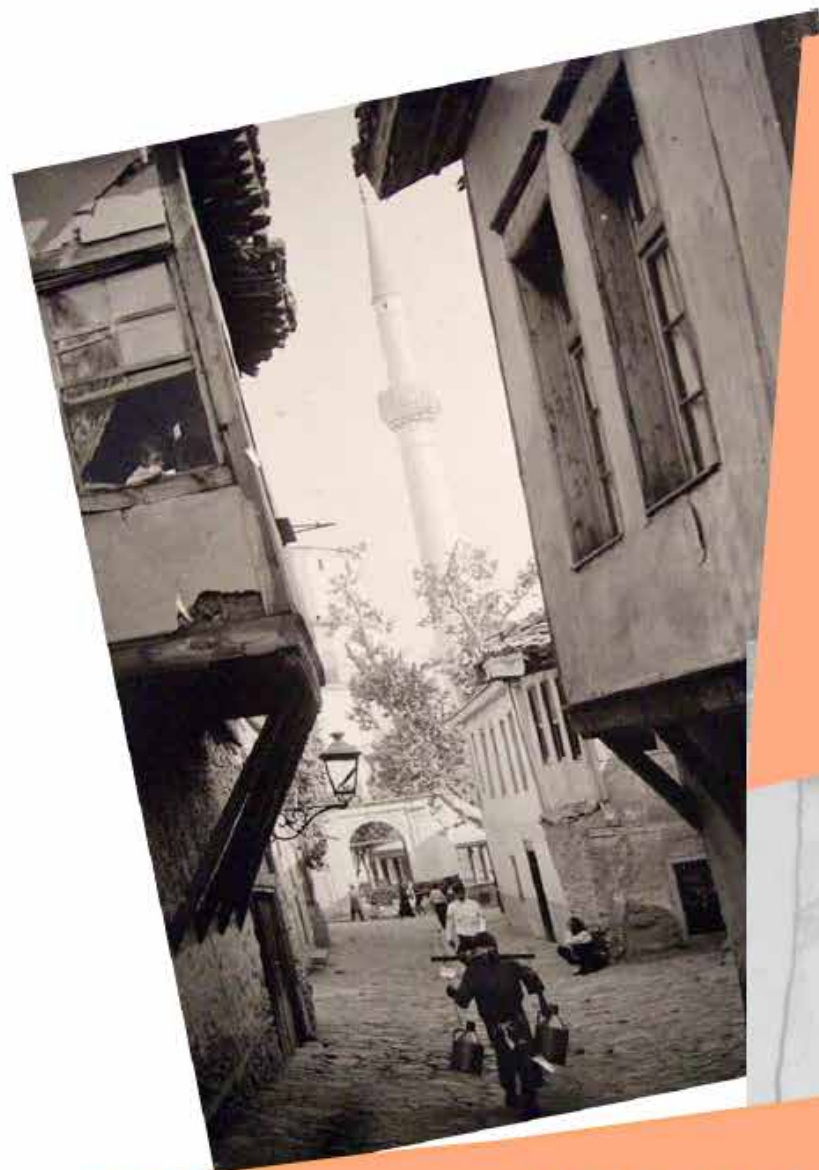
In this project students of the Experimental School of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki used Art to research and communicate their new understanding of their cultural identity and history. They looked at the way the past permeates the present in various ways, observed different attitudes to the past and to trauma, and viewed all the above as unique opportunities for artistic creation. They discovered untold stories about the past of the city and its inhabitants. Shock was followed by the desire to become agents of change, to make the story known to the wider community through their artwork and action, and to help bring about change in attitudes and beliefs regarding history, identity, minorities, multicultural symbiosis, human rights and social justice.

AUTHOR: Ismini Sakellariadi

DOI: 10.24981/2414-3332-7.2019-7

Experimental School of the University of Thessaloniki

Keywords: history, multicultural symbiosis, Holocaust, human rights, social justice art education



The very first demand on education is that there not be another Auschwitz.

Theodor Adorno



This article refers to a project whereby art was used as a tool for research and expression, and as a tool to bring about change. The project was realized in 2017-2018 with 15-year old students of the Experimental School of the University of Thessaloniki. Through it students constructed their own cultural identity and re-examined the dominant perception of identity in their community ('us' and 'them') by realizing its' relativity in space and in time. This process helped students put their own social identity and history in perspective, and to reconsider attitudes and beliefs. They reached a new historical & social awareness, and gained new insights into questions of identity, minorities, multicultural symbiosis, human rights and social justice.

In a rapidly changing world, facing unprecedented demographic changes, efforts are being made to support the ideal of multiculturalism. Our town's past, now largely forgotten, offers an example of multicultural symbiosis: until the early 20th century Thessaloniki constituted a cultural mosaic, including turkish, greek, armenian, jewish and other communities. These communities lived peacefully side by side, each retaining its' language, religion and traditions.

What originally triggered the students' interest in this project was their shock when they realized the original status and the fate of the jewish community. They were shocked to discover that until about 100 years ago it constituted more than half of the town's population, followed by the muslim community, while the greek christian community was only the third community, constituting less than a quarter of the town's population (Μοσκόφ, 1978, p. 10). However, during the second world war 96% of the city's jewish population perished in the concentration camps.

Thus, students began to perceive the first 'gaps' in the dominant narrative, through which they tend to perceive their living space as predominantly greek 'since the beginning of time' – thus 'forgetting' not only 400 years of ottoman occupation but also 450 years of judeo-spanish civilization in Thessaloniki, which boasted one of the most vibrant and advanced jewish communities, which defined the city's everyday life (Μόλχο, 2005).



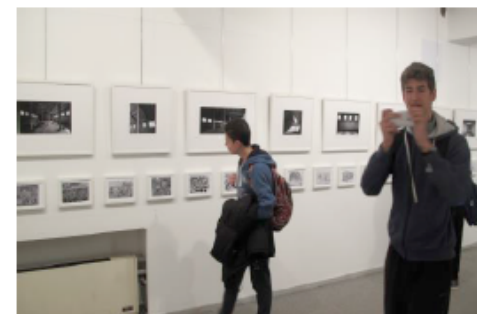


One of the main driving forces in this project was the profound impression upon the students' souls of the film "Holocaust - Night will fall" (https://www.imdb.com/title/tt3455822/?ref=mv_sr_1), a documentary which includes extensive footage from the liberation of the concentration camps in 1945. The persistent question which arose - "How could this have happened?" - prompted students to re-examine everything they knew about their identity and history and to commit themselves to the prevention of discrimination & racist crime.

Originally we set upon looking at the different ways in which the past is present in the present. We watched excerpts from the documentary "Forgiving Dr. Mengele", (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0489707/>), about an Auschwitz survivor who decides to forgive in order to move forward -while also preserving the memory of the Holocaust- though the past often haunts her, emerging in the present in unexpected ways. In 'counterpoint', we watched excerpts from the documentary "A song for Argyris", claiming German reparations.

(https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0936485/?ref=mv_sr_1), about a survivor of Distomo, the site of a Nazi atrocity in Greece, who also transforms his trauma in constructive ways, while remaining celibate and focusing all his efforts on claiming war reparations from Germany.

We also looked at artworks by artists who also focus on the Holocaust, such as the work of the painter and ceramicist Francine Mayran, or on other traumatic experiences, such as the photographs, sketches and drawings made by Greek political prisoners who were exiled and tortured during the Junta. Students also watched a play whereby all the 20th century history of the city of Thessaloniki unfolded, including stories from the everyday life in the city, from an era when people of multiple ethnicities and nationalities lived side by side – prompting them, again, to reconsider all their preconceptions about their cultural identity.



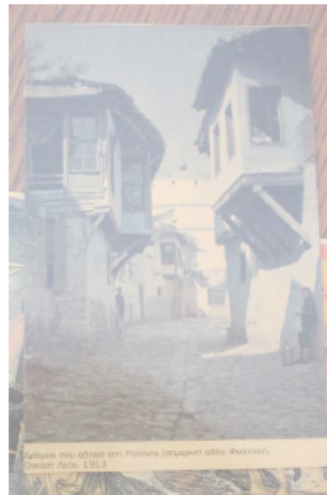
The students' first work was designed at the very beginning of this process, so it focused on the juxtaposition of the present with the past. Students also found pleasure in looking at 'Then and Now' photographs, digital composites juxtaposing past and present, e.g.

http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2014/06/06/d-day-landing-sites-pictures_n_5458026.html,

<http://www.vintag.es/2015/06/then-and-now-combining-amazing.html>,

<https://gr.pinterest.com/andreaetzel/photo-series-inspiration-then-now-photography/>,

<https://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2016/05/london-during-the-blitz-then-and-now-photographs/481851/>



We looked at a street in our school's neighborhood, leading to one of the city's landmarks, the Rotunda. We observed a photograph of a 1913 oil painting of the spot where Philippou street meets the Rotunda. We then visited that spot, photographed it and were photographed in it. Students then collected a number of pictures of the same spot in different moments in time, at the beginning of the 20th century (with wooden houses designed in the traditional macedonian architectural style, with a boy selling water, etc.).

When they originally tried to create an artwork combining these elements they had difficulties drawing, so we had the opportunity to study the rules of perspective with a particular goal in mind.

Following that, they created their own drawing, based on the photographs from the early 20th century, and then proceeded to add photographs and drawings from our 2018 visit (today's multistory buildings, a neon sign next to the Rotunda advertising online ordering of food, a car, themselves etc.)





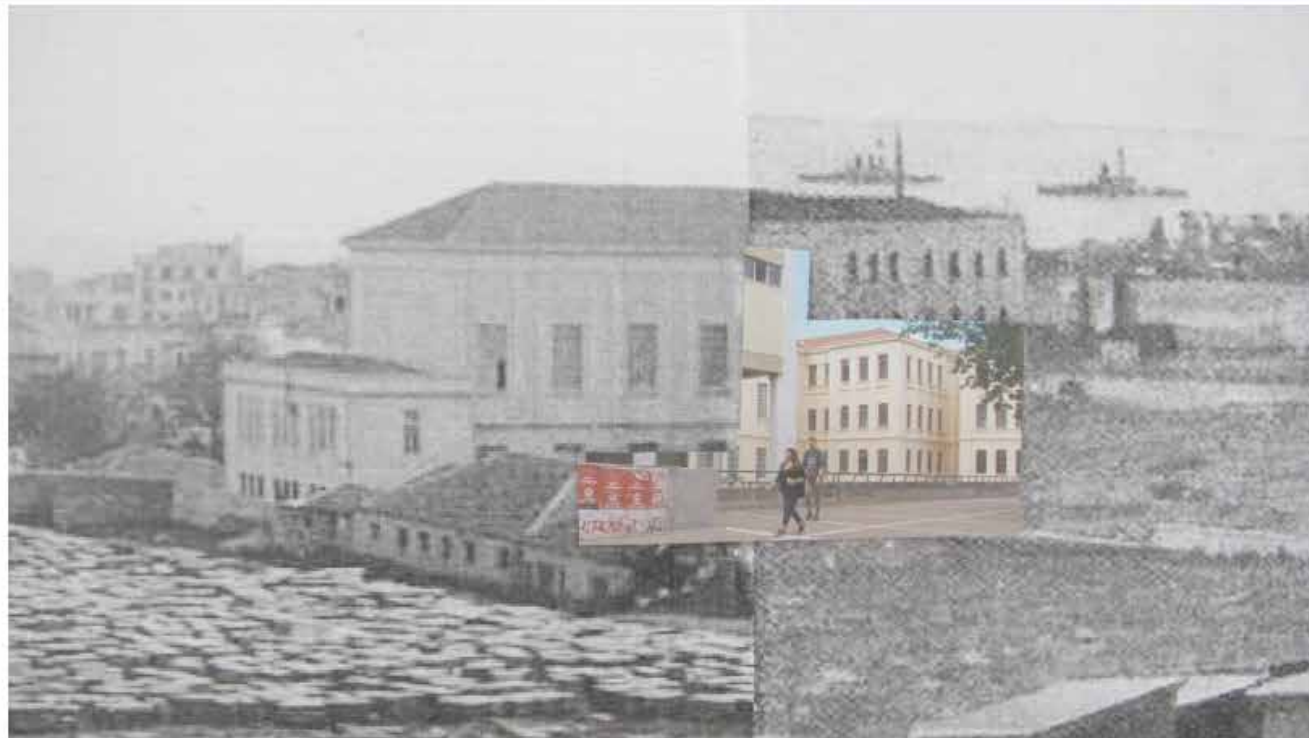
Following that, in our next visit we went one step further: we crossed the street and entered the University campus. By this time we had done all the background studies mentioned above. By now we knew that the vast space where the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki lies today, a space of about 300.000 square metres, used to be the biggest jewish cemetery in the Mediterranean, and included about 350.000 graves. We had learnt that the jewish religion does not allow the disinterment of the dead, and that in the 1940s the whole cemetery was destroyed, the grave materials were used as building materials in various parts of the city, while the jewish community of the city, which used to be the largest community until the first world war, was exterminated at the concentration camps.

Not only had we learnt all the above, but we also wanted to make these facts known: if people are to learn about this past and to understand where discrimination can lead to, they will have taken a large step towards our ultimate goal: "never again"!





So, in order to create our visual messages, we visited the Rotunda again, crossed the street to the Faculty of Philosophy and to the University campus, while carrying with us old photographs of the jewish cemetery. We used 2-3 landmarks (the Rotunda, the Faculty of Philosophy, which used to be the 'Idadiye' School during the ottoman rule, and the White Tower) to locate the spot(s) from which the photograph(s) had been taken.





We focused on a photograph with a little girl in a black dress at the top side of the cemetery. The Faculty of Philosophy (the old 'Idadiye') can be seen at the bottom right. Starting from there, we walked uphill and placed ourselves on the same spot (below it and above it, as it is now a busy street) and recreated the photograph – including the silhouette of a man further down. Students then created works juxtaposing past and present (e.g. superimposing photos with the use of rice paper) in very limited time, in order to show that things are not always as they seem to be – there may be an untold story behind what we see.

This discovery of the city's past, which was completely unknown to the students, helped them realize that the dominant narrative is made up of gaps and silences, as much as it is made up of statements. They were thus able to re-examine their stereotypic perception of history and of their cultural identity and to study the transition from the multi-religious and multilingual ottoman world... to the role of Thessaloniki as a 'bastion' of the linguistically and ethnologically homogeneous greek 20th-century nation state (Mazower, 2006). This homogeneous city of Thessaloniki of the late 20th century, which they hitherto perceived as a 'natural continuation' of ancient greek civilization, and its' hitherto perceived relation with the past, began to be re-examined in terms of an 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1983). Students became aware of the omissions, the silences and the selective 'arrangement' of facts and events which such a construction of the past entails (Friedman, 2009).

A walk in the University campus, or the neighboring greek christian cemetery –which remained intact- will never feel the same. Having realized the role of silence and oblivion, students are hoping to play an active role in the wider community, to inform and to sensitize their fellow citizens, to raise consciousness and help bring about change in attitudes and preconceptions, to promote social justice and to help prevent such atrocities from happening again.

Some of the students who created these works, as well as the younger students who 'took over' this year (as Art is not part of the main curriculum in senior high school) are hoping to create a documentary sensitizing viewers and informing them about everything they learnt about – through interviews with Holocaust survivors or their descendants, as well as with students who use the University campus daily.



These critical elements include developing a deeper awareness of self, developing a deeper awareness and broader perspective of others, developing a deeper awareness and broader perspective of social issues, and seeing one's potential to make change (Alexander & Schlemmer, 2017).

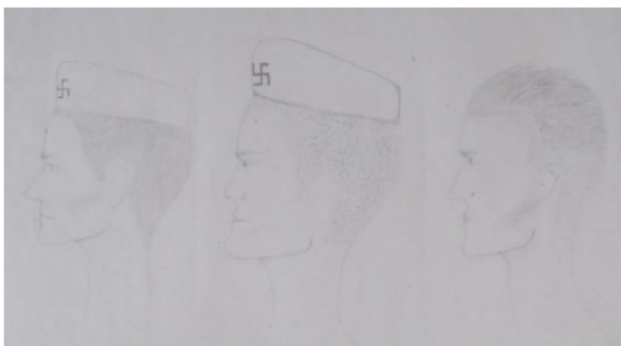
Visual Arts Education has an important role to “raise critical consciousness, foster empathy and respect for others, build community, and motivate people to promote positive social change” (cf. N.A.E.A. Position Statement on Visual Arts Education and Social Justice [Adopted March 2015; Reviewed and Revised March 2018]). Hopefully, through this project we managed to make a small move in that direction, and managed to “enhance awareness, prompt debate, and promote social responsibility and activism” (Smilan, 2017).

They also intend to join the “Never Again” march which takes place once a year in memory of the Holocaust and of the Thessaloniki Jews who perished. They shall also “adopt” the monument for the Holocaust, which was erected in the University campus since 2014 as a reminder that this space once was a Jewish cemetery, and which has repeatedly been vandalized by strangers.

Students are hoping not only to render the invisible (stories/ voices/ experiences) visible, but also to help reconfigure the relations that made it invisible in the first place, and thus re-conceptualize their own cultural identity and their relation to others (Bell & Desai, 2011).

Such educational practices encourage critical consciousness development and support students in perceiving themselves as agents of change and becoming active citizens.





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The old photographs of Thessaloniki have been retrieved from

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/oldthessaloniki/permalink/10156005035864599/>

Ismini Sakellariadi has studied History and Archaeology as well as English Language and Literature at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, and Combined Studies at Middlesex Polytechnic (including Drama, Music and Dance). She also acquired ten years of formal and informal education and training in Fine Art and Ceramics, and has completed postgraduate courses in Ceramics (University of London, Goldsmiths' College) and in Social Anthropology (University of London, London School of Economics). She teaches Art in secondary education (Experimental School of the University of Thessaloniki). She has participated in Ceramics, Photography and Printmaking exhibitions in Greece and abroad.

She has collaborated with the School of Early Childhood Education, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Faculty of Education, teaching Ceramics and assisting with the tuition of undergraduate courses on Visual Arts and Art Education. She has also offered Ceramics courses to Art Teachers.