'This is the time. And this is the record of the time'[1]: A post-modern photographic *Grand Tour*.

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Landscape, architecture and monuments have been popular in photography ever since it was invented, due to their value and stillness. Contemporary photography rediscovers and renews this subject matter, often allowing for a new appreciation of the historical within contemporary context. Greek photographer Paris Petridis has created a significant body of work in the greater Eastern Mediterranean area, attempting to bring forth readings of various historical and cultural layers of what emerges as a very complex semantic field.

Keywords Photography, monument, art, Eastern Mediterranean, landscape, time, ruins

Architecture, monuments and landscape views were popular in photography from the very beginning, ever since the invention was announced in 1839. It wasn't just their established value in art and culture. In the early years, when exposing a sensitized plate required up to several minutes in bright sunlight, their immobility provided an undoubtedly privileged availability. It was only in 1839 that the Parisian optician Noël Marie Paymal Lerebours assigned to a group of converts to the new medium the mission of depicting landmarks all over the world, including the Parthenon, the Pyramids and Niagara Falls. The natural and cultural wonders of the planet began to head towards an audience increasingly thirsty for sharp images. Soon, in 1851, the French State commissioned the *Missions Héliographiques*: a record of towers, castles, bridges and churches around the country that established photography's value for recording the form of a monument as well as its condition (Rosenblum 1989: 99-100). The 'mirror with memory', as Oliver Wendell Holmes called the medium (Alan Trachtenberg 1980:74), was also utilized by colonialism, producing surveys from the ends of the earth, contributing to the understanding of its complexity while simultaneously constructing an illusion of universality.

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Characteristic here is the work of the British John Thomson in the Far East, between 1862 and 1872. It should be noted that archaeology (the science of rescuing and studying ancient and recent monuments), tourism (marketing these monuments) and photography which is massively (re)producing their image, were founded or invented in Europe the same period, that is the first half of 19th century, an era crucial in the process of forming nations-states (Papaioannou 2014: 88). The circumstances left their mark on the photograph of monuments, which was widely propagating *ruinophilia* from the 19th century, primarily through commercially-oriented images that at the same time validated local national ideologies, reinforced the collective memory of the past and introduced the audience of the 'periphery' to the modern values of the western gaze.

In recent decades, the photographic art has disengaged from the stereotypes of the picturesque and of documentation in the depiction of monuments. It often prefers to trace their broader condition, to dig for leads ephemeral or permanent, to include them in new aesthetic and conceptual practices. In Marialba Russo's series *Roma: fasti moderni. Il disordine del tempo* (1993), for example, the deep shadows falling on the Roman ruins appear as a metaphor for chasms of matter and time, the unbridged distance between what survives and what is lost for good. Lee Friedlander in the series *The American Monument* (1976) focuses, with the Vietnam war still fresh, on the small patriotic monuments spread all over the vast American territory examining, through the static or dynamic context of the surrounding space, how the persistent remembrance of the war constructs an abstract idea of heroism. In turn, Martin Parr in the series *Small World* (1985) observes how the crowds that swarm daily over the Parthenon or the Pyramids can substantially alter the experience one can have facing such timeless monuments. Evdoxia Radi and Epaminondas Schizas in the *Test of Time* (1995) took Polaroids of historical monuments in Greece and France, then inflicted multiple forms of violence on the instant image while it was developing.

Figure 1: Evdoxia Radi - Epameinondas Schizas, from the series *The Test of Time*, 1995.

By removing the Polaroid paper backing, they were left with a semi-transparent work in which the gaze seems to traverse layers of time. The unpredictability of the intervention, coupled with the triptychs composed from different angles, vitally deconstruct the relationship between form and color: if the monument bears on its body the texture of history's violence and time's corrosion, is it possible for its image not to echo the process?

In a different spirit, Paul Seawright in his *Sectarian Murder* (1987-1988) series depicted spots in Northern Ireland where murders took place, rooted in religious hatred. Everyday places like a playground, are inscribed here in the collective consciousness due to the journalistic shards which dig painfully into every image. Bernd and Hilla Becher studied *anonymous sculptures* for forty years, starting in the late 50s, that is the form of industrial buildings such as blast furnaces or water towers (Bernd & Hilla Becher 1970).

Figure 2: Bernd & Hilla Becher, from the series *Water Towers*, 1965-1997.

Their rational typologies involving groups of frontal views depicted structures in almost deserted industrial zones, exploring an unseen industrial aesthetic largely defined by functionality. The last two series mentioned here bring out the difference between *picturing a monument* and *monumentalizing* it through the image. In the first case, a monument is already perceived as such. In the second, the noun turns into a verb. The representation is called upon to validate the *commemorability* of the place or building. One doesn't even need to visit it; the photograph acts as a conceptual verification of monumentality. Of course, this view con-

siderably broadens the idea of informal monuments via choices which differ radically from the state-controlled ideology of memory.

If these works constitute a very rough framework for considering monuments and their image in historical and contemporary terms, what is the postmodern Grand Tour of Paris Petridis bringing to the conversation, as he wanders in monuments in the Eastern Mediterranean (Greece, Lebanon, Palestine, Israel, Egypt), cross-fertilizing the contemporary with the archaic, the classical, the biblical?[2] His photographs recall a genealogy of urban views free of people but full of their traces and deeds. The point of departure seems to be the famous daguerreotype *Boulevard du Temple* (Paris, c.1838) which Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre took from his window, in which the idol of just one person is recorded in the image, due to its long exposure time. The photograph, coming from the early experimental stage of the medium, was compared by Giorgio Agamben to Doomsday, due to the lack of people on a noisy boulevard. As Agamben commented, on Judgment Day each one will be called to confess alone (Agamben 2005: 36).

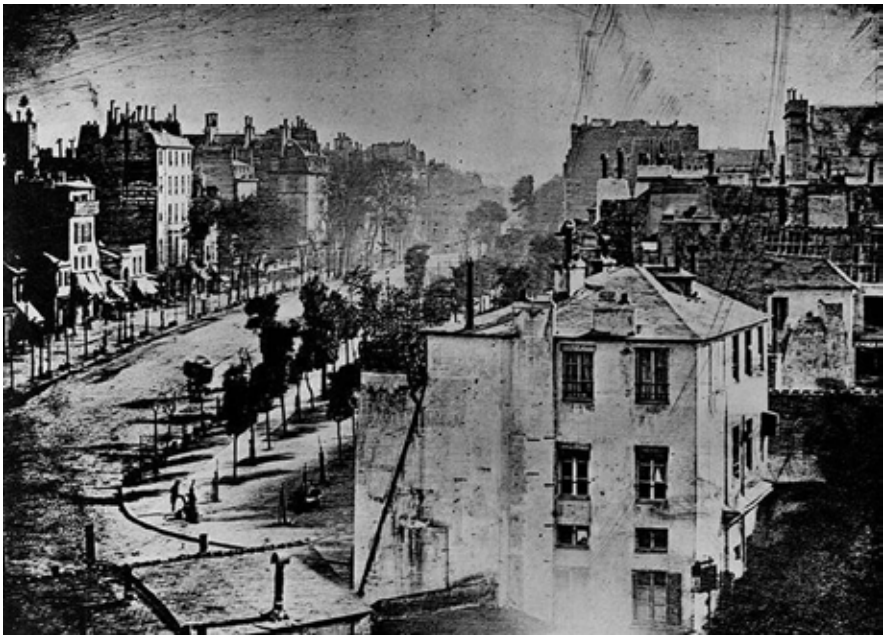

Figure 3: Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre, Boulevard du Temple, Paris, c.1838.

The genealogy crosses Charles Marville's Paris in the mid-19th century, an era when the grand changes to the city's urban planning were taking place, before moving on to Eugène Atget in the first decades of the 20th, in which he recorded the French capital before its transformation into a contemporary metropolis.

Figure 4: Eugene Atget, Mannequins, Paris 1925.

The American Walker Evans brilliantly connected this historical thread with the modernist ethos, invoking in his work the aesthetics of Gustave Flaubert: namely, the coexistence of naturalism and realism, the absence of subjectivity, the 'documentary style' (Goldberg 1981: 360, 364). These elements, discernible in the work of Petridis, endorse their spiritual affinity with the same genealogy. But nothing is often as vague as a 'documentary style' photograph, whose ostensible neutrality favors a generalized, at times even arbitrary interpretation. This perhaps explains why contemporary art embraced its aesthetic in an era in which an intentionally unspecific polysemy dominates almost programmatically (Papaioannou 2017: 10).

Representations of empty spaces, interior or exterior, abound in contemporary photography, appearing diametrically opposed in spirit from the postwar street photography, which vibrated with narrative immediacy, and was overflowed with the excitement and drama of everyday life. Max Kozloff would ask as early as 1980: *Where have all the people gone*? (Max Kozloff 1987:197) Both the *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape* (1975)[3] exhibition and the "Dusseldorf school" established in the 1970s by Bernd and Hilla Becher would play a crucial role in establishing this trend, which is based in clinical surveying and

profuse arraying of information. Using tools similar and dissimilar, both the exhibition and the school favored an austere, detached way of perceiving place. Reacting to the human-centered rhetoric of the spectacular that advertising had rendered excessively omnipresent, and to the unjustifiable optimism of consumerism, a substantial part of photographic art turned to the experience of the commonplace, of disinterested detachment, the dark side. Donald Meinig had in any case issued the timely warning, which Petridis would frankly endorse, that landscape is 'something that might be observed, but not necessarily admired" as it may "involve aesthetics but it is not defined by it' (Meinig 1979: 2). This affection with the vacant space partially intersects with 'ruin porn', a recent eschatological inclination within photography to follow derelict places of all kinds which is related, closely but not exclusively, with the desertification of Detroit (Brian Doucet, Drew Philp 2016). The popularity of this iconography may also hinge on its offering the spectator a sense of oversight and control. A space evacuated, visually or actually, freezes and becomes devoid of action. If these images are correlated with another current photographic abundance, that of deadpan portraiture, one may conclude that the contemporary scene openly favors an inert, passive social condition.

Petridis does not use light to stupefy. Like Atget and the Bechers before him, he mainly works early in the morning, when the public arena is at rest, avoiding intense shadows or unnecessary tensions, often pursuing the kind of diffused lighting that pays democratic attention to every single detail. His photographs, with their high resolution and extended depth of field, present themselves as artful information records, in which the power of recording and describing covers the subtle aesthetic gestures. The views are often general, as in the photograph of the ruins of the Roman *Galerius Palace*, surrounded in a suffocative, if not threatening, way by robust massively developed apartment buildings. This may serve as an unintentional indication that democracy has prevailed over imperial aristocracy, a hegemony that does not seem here to have led to any discernible architectural refinement. And as the fencing has been carefully left out of the frame, historical and contemporary life seem to blend. The view is also general in Beirut's *Martyr's Square* which, although the scene of fierce battles during the civil war (1975-1990), was named after the Lebanese independence fighters executed there in 1931. A symbol of the city's division during the fratricidal conflict, appears today more like a political history open class: Roman ruins coexist with the new architecture summoned to efface the visible wounds of war. The new grand Mohammad Al-Amin mosque looms at the back, while in front of it, on a humbler scale alongside the flow of daily life, a Christmas tree stands out and a monument dedicated to the martyrs' sacrifice. How many generations of martyrs, of various ethnicities and religions, were sacrificed here between the Roman occupation and the recent war? The House of Beirut (*Beit Beirut*), another locus of deadly civil strife, is depicted using a medium-range view. The female portrait in the empty window announces an exhibition of works (hints of which are visible in the background) by a postwar photography studio. The vintage coiffure and melancholy expression point to a rather fragile urban prosperity, especially if

combined with the noticeable time corrosion and what look like bullet holes. But not even the photograph in the front has escaped damage. Its mutilation seems literal as well as metaphorical, of a generation and an era.

Petridis prepares his shots using a micro-semiotic method, practicing such a meticulous control over every compositional aspect that recalls the art of stage design, often taking preliminary shots. The unnatural stillness of the images invites the viewer to study their content -usually dense with information- for signs and hints. If Robin Kelsey in his *Photography and the Art of Chance* (2015) researches chance as a factor in photography, the work of Petridis seems to consciously ignore it. The only notion of chance in his work is perhaps an impromptu counterpoint of signs or something entirely extempore. It is interesting, though, that the impromptu can occur even after such a level of control. That is the case in the *Davidka Square* photograph in Jewish West Jerusalem. The square was named after the mortar (in the center), a weapon that made a significant contribution to the 1948 victory, to which the monument is dedicated. The symbolism here is clear: little David (which is how this kind of mortar is named) won again huge Goliath—and, this time, not only in Scripture. The shot was taken during the Sukkot celebration, in the course of which tents are pitched in open spaces. The holiday stands as a symbol of the harvest and the forty-year long exodus from Egypt but, visible in public space, the tent potentially recalls a military campaign. A possibility of violence lurks in the atmosphere, as the mortar seems to aim a nearby building, but also because of the handicapped people sign in front of a war memorial. Lee Friedlander and his series become relevant here. On a rooftop in the image's upper left side, though, and on a balcony in a more central area, black and white portraits can just be made out. They belong to the series *Time is Now, Yalla!* (Let's go!) by the French street artist JR, in which portraits of casually posed Israelis and Palestinians are mounted side by side in public spaces in both communities. The work openly defending peaceful coexistence fades here almost entirely, leaving the narrative of rupture center stage. The photograph testifies involuntarily to whose voice has the greatest impact on the public discourse in the region.

Paradoxically, the monuments in Petridis' photographs are often neither centered nor in the foreground. In some cases, they don't even seem to be the subject. Take, for example, the photograph of the Giza pyramid on the outskirts of Cairo, in which the famous monument appears behind a tourist zone. The pavement here imperfectly echoes the pyramid's shape, just as reality in various parts of the Eastern Mediterranean bears somehow awkwardly the weight of history. Petridis spots a bent over tree whose trunk, thin but resistant, has risen up again into the vertical, a metaphor suited, as much it is accidental, to the Egyptian youth who stood up demanding change and reform (which, of course, extend far beyond the formalistic, such as the trimming of the tree's foliage). At another monument to the 1948 Independence war, in Tiberias on Lake Galilee, an off-centered canon is depicted in a disorderly view containing road signs, advertisements, wires, lamps. The wrenching difficulty of approaching the local and

linguistic context of the image (the same holds for other images, too) reveals the superficial ease with which photography was hailed as a universal language in the postwar period. One can, of course, make out the red figure at the traffic lights demanding a stop (for observation?) in the empty public space; the road signs pointing the way to religious tombs (religion is a major cause of clash in the region); also, a solitary dollar sign (profit is a sure return of every war, beyond ideology and fanaticism); the vacant hotel parking lot decorated with flags, confirming tourism as the only widely accepted form of internationalism that invites peaceful, ephemeral invasions; the mural which, by transforming the pastoral into the urban, the traditional into the contemporary, appears, despite the abstract mood, to be a suitable metaphor for quite many countries besides Israel. The scene contains tension and complexity, elements inextricably woven into the condition of the region, and the poignant remembrance that war is never far away, as a weapon is once again silently threatening the public space.

The photographs in this group were mainly taken at street level. In one of the very few that this was not the case, Petridis gazes Thessaloniki's body from above. One traces the layers gradually, as if peeling an onion: the massively developed apartment buildings and their blind facades, neoclassicism and timeless monumentality, the minaret and the Byzantine curve, the austere volumes and the lack of nature. Everything means *something*, yet all elements together mean *nothing in particular*, unless part of the meaning is hidden in the unexpected opening, in the obvious withdrawal of history, the marked absence of the organic, the brashness with which the architecture of commercial apartment buildings imposes itself as a kind of causality.

But monuments do not all fall into the same category. Some are treasured hearths of civilizations, like Rachel's tomb in Bethlehem, where the gate proves to be a double boundary: an entrance into the womb of historical time and a violent spatial separation of two communities. Others, such as Alexander's bust in Alexandria's Stanley Quarter, are totally unburdened by historical time: Beside the humble, white bust a building rises up with Greek columns and meanders, as unfinished as the vision of the great conqueror, perhaps an echo of his centuries-long influence on the city that bears his name. Also, monuments have not always enjoyed respect. Many have survived the madness of the times and of people out of sheer luck, religiosity, or because obliteration itself is hard, and bureaucratically demanding, work. Or, as the series *Westminster Boxes* (2001) by Christophoros Doulgeris reveals, they have survived thanks to the providence of power: The day before May 1st 2001, on which a huge demonstration against the Iraq war would take place in London, the authorities covered a number of statues with wooden box-like constructions to prevent the vandalism of statues of national heroes and historical figures. Since when, though, have monuments required protection to the extent of hiding from view before a peaceful gathering of people?

Some, like the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, are grand in both scale and importance. At the opposite end of the spectrum, the Ottoman fountain in another photograph looks like a barely noticeable punctuation. The *Indian Cemetery* in Dendropotamos, Thessaloniki, comes

across as a paradox: Housing the remains of 520 Indian victims of the First World War, it ignores the Hindu cremation tradition. In the same place, one finds more victims of the same war in a de-sacralized mood dictated most probably by necessity: the remains of Hindu Muslims, Sikh, a few Christians and the ashes of another 220 Indians. The humble colonial servants of the British are buried separately and a long way from the city's British military cemetery, in an equally humble settlement on its outskirts where a bare fence is the only barrier dividing absolute poverty from deathly calm. In the photograph of the *Yedi Kule* (Seven Towers), a Byzantine castle in Thessaloniki which became a prison as well as a place of torture and execution), the rigidity of stone and an austere geometry dominate, despite the diagonal stairs and embrasures. This is an introverted monument, with all its openings closed, its heavy secrets sealed, no visible way out. The sign Teaching Class mounted on a rusty door may thus hint at the most vital lesson the place can offer: being able to eavesdrop on the torments of the imprisoned (who, for many years, also included political prisoners). Proclaiming the Yedi Kule a monument in the 1980s endorses a noticeable paradigm shift in the local monument history, as until the early twentieth century, academic interest in Greece stopped at the Hellenistic period.

Petridis' work in the Near and Middle East engages indirectly with the 19th-century tradition of depicting monuments exemplified by photographers such as Maxime du Camp or Francis Frith. Petridis even uses a slow, heavy, large-format camera reminiscent of that era. Back then, photography documented the existence of monuments in an allusive desertedness, in an enigmatically indefinite time. Individual figures would sometimes play the role of a scale index. Petridis' return today to the Parthenon and the Pyramids in a condition of artificial desertedness brings out a dense network of relationships, information and values that interrupt or redefine any attempt at recollection. Of course, photography, as a suspended narrative and a time switch, favors memory as much as oblivion; it can show as well as hide. And the decision on what falls within which side is not usually photographic. When, after the Wall came down, Hitler's hideaway was found in East Berlin, it was decided that, for reasons of domestic peace, it should be covered up for another fifty years (Funder 2008: 70). Diametrically opposed to that decision, the bell tower of the Gedächtniskirche in West Berlin was not restored after the catastrophic bombing of 1943 as a reminder of the Second Great War. But if memory (in Greek, the words 'memory' and 'monument' have the same root) is now aggressively besieged by ever-growing volumes of information, in the era of the absolute present tense and the one-way flight towards an undefined 'ahead', can monuments as material sites stimulate collective memory? Is there a place today for the monument in a shallow memory whose data is rapidly changing? And what, after all, is the meaning of an, often indirect, monument survey in a late capitalist, post-democratic era?

Petridis reflects on the broadening of the notion of 'monument' from a landmark of universal range to a construction which publicly serves the current political situation. In addition,

he detects how a monument's historicity is repeatedly ruptured by the current condition, as it is increasingly perceived in terms of rapid stimulation shifts. If a monument is now situated in a flowing, complicate field of signs, in a public space that is traversed rather than experienced, can we still hear the echo of historical time? W.J.T. Mitchell is probably right to consider the landscape as a 'social hieroglyph' (Mitchell 1994: 5) offered up for close reading, like an image-text. Petridis's *landscapes with monuments*[4] adopt this view, piling up times, spaces and social data. After all, Petridis suggests, every epoch deals selectively with the past and gives birth to new layers of history. But as Stavros Stavridis is aptly pointing, "The past as legitimization of the present is almost always a past invented to justify, not a past explored to raise issues" (Stavridis 2002: 31).

This series of photographs, far from the exotic and picturesque tradition, seems to work on a critical boundary: the near tectonic friction between the historical and contemporary world, order and disorder, rationalism and improvisation, lethargic East and expansionary West, older ideologies and the prevailing one of our epoch: that of the free market. Petridis searched for critical boundaries in his previous work too: In his *Kath' Odon* (1998) series he crossed elliptically the Greek borderline, a neglected Cold War boundary and military buffer for the "Danger from the North"; in *Notes at the Edge of the Road* (2006) he anthologized his samples on the margins between civilization and nature; in the series *Here: Sites of Violence in Thessaloniki* (2012) he examined locations in Thessaloniki where lives were violently taken and crimes of all sorts committed; in *The Rum-Orthodox Schools of Istanbul* (2007) he researched the condition of the, once prominent and now decaying, Greek schools of Istanbul.[5]

Petridis is not the only one tracing such boundaries. The curators of the Greek contribution in the Venice Biennale of Architecture in 2002 proposed the "unconditional, absolute realism" as an 'unbounded desire for familiar space, for residing in a constant situation of need' (Koubis, Moutsopoulos and Scoffier 2002: 78). They claimed that the rawness of the Athens architectural paradigm should be examined beyond idealisms, utopianisms, ethnocentrisms. Much earlier, Richard Sennett spoke of the need to introduce some disorder into western cities as a condition of freedom (Sennett 2004). Very few of Petridis' photographs seem to represent this "raw" paradigm as well as the one from Athens. Here, arising out of architectural layers created over decades and neglected public space, there is a "deficit of collective will, the battle of entropy [...] in an area where things accumulate without tactical plan, use or aesthetics; where repeated discontinuities and vertiginous chasms weaken every prospect of cohesive meaning, leaving in common view what looks as if it was originally born as used, exhausted, left aside" (Papaioannou 2015). The quote may be from an essay on the landscape work of Yiannis Pantelidis, but refers equally to Petridis' urban views, no matter if the heterogeneity of the photograph is crowned by the absolute monument.

A lesson to be taken from Petridis' photographs is that even the most noteworthy monuments (those not recycled as eras change) cannot easily be seen outside of complex, frag-

mented contexts. If, in the past, the construction of a cohesive ideology (which included monuments) looked like a tight costume, the glamorous ideology of globalization allows us to swim in an, only seemingly broad, post-historical, post-ideological condition in which the monuments function as recognizable landmarks and are consumed mostly as visual signs. Or, in the words of Krasznahorkai, they allow the realization that 'history was, if not the most bitter, at least the most amusing proof that there is no possible access to truth' (Krasznahorkai 2015: 30). What Petridis examines, of course, is simultaneously an internal photographic affair: It is about the distance dividing the tactile materiality of a monument and the photograph which withdraws it –as an image now- into what is often a more private viewing, seeking to perceive it in a beneficial silence. The Bechers were right after all: Photography today competes in *mnimiopoiitiki* force with the natural status of monuments –both those already known and those declared by photography. If a monument is a time trap, photography proves itself equally adept at the process. And for a sensitive antenna, as that of Petridis, the transitions between history and contemporary life make the Eastern Mediterranean a suitable field for research, since its monuments often survive in a condition of "absolute realism". His photographs are rather meant to be discovered by someone bending over them and digging carefully like an archaeologist, instead of just attempting to make a strong impression on the viewer. This way, acknowledging the "constant situation of need", they grant an active role to the viewer, against the contemporary trend. And they recall the insistent destiny of photography in the lyric Laurie Anderson recited from above, in a clearly ominous song that is becoming ever more relevant:

This is the time. And this is the record of the time.[6]

Notes

[1] The Grand Tour appeared in the 18th century as a tour undertaken by aristocratic offspring, initially to the Roman monuments of southern France, northern Italy and Rome. Later, the tour was extended to include the Holy Land and Egypt, while in the 19th century it also came to include Greece and the Near East.

[2] The exhibition, which is considered emblematic for contemporary photography, was shown in 1975-1976 at the International Museum of Photography of George Eastman House, in Rochester, New York, curated by William Jenkins. Contributing photographers: Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, Joe Deal, Frank Gohlke, Nicholas Nixon, John Schott, Stephen Shore, Henry Wessel Jr., Bernd and Hilla Becher.

[3] *Landscape with monument* could act as a contemporary metaphor of the historical term *landscape with ruins*.

[4] www.parispetridis.com.

[5] The Greek word *μνημειοποιητική* (monumentalizing) is coined from the Greek words *μνημείο* (monument) and *ποιητική* which stands for *making* and also for *poetry*.

[6] Laurie Anderson, lyric from the song "From the Air", released with the LP *Big Science* (1982).

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