

EMMANUEL C. KYRIAZAKOS

Department of Primary Education, University of the Aegean  
kyriazakosm@gmail.com

GEORGE KATSADOROS

Department of Primary Education, University of the Aegean  
katsadoros@aegean.gr

## **“On the Streets of Diversity”. Urban Space as a Birthplace of Free Expression and Artistic Creation: the Case of Nikolas Asimos in the Exarchia Area of Athens**

Artistic creation depends to a great extent on man-made environment and relationships that connect the artist with it, as well as on his/her experiences and perceptions. The singer and actor Nikolas Asimos still remains, 35 years after his death, an emblematic figure of Exarchia, a central area of Athens, frequently associated with intense anti-authoritarian activity. In this research, we focus on the social-cultural conditions that prevailed in the area, between 1976–1988, a period when Nikolas Asimos lived there and created the majority of his work. Through content analysis of the opinions of people who knew him or dealt with him on a professional basis, we argue that the urban space of Exarchia greatly contributed to the creative mood of the specific artist, providing him with the appropriate conditions for free expression of his work and ideas.

*Key words:* urban space, creativity, music, Exarchia, Nikolas Asimos

# „На улицама разноликости“: Урбани простор као место рођења слободног изражавања и уметничког стваралаштва: случај Николаса Асимоса у крају Егзархија у Атине

Уметничко стваралаштво у великој мери зависи од окружења које стварају људи и односа који уметнике повезују са тим окружењем, као и од искустава и перцепција самих уметника. Уметник Николас Асимос и даље, 35 година након своје смрти, остаје симбол Егзархије, краја у центру Атине, који се често повезује са интензивним антиауторитарним активностима. У овом истраживању фокусираћемо се на социокултурне услове који су постојали у овом крају између 1976. и 1988. године, у периоду када је Николас Асимос тамо живео и створио већи део свог укупног дела. Кроз анализу садржаја мишљења људи који су га познавали или са њим имали додира преко свог запослења, тврдимо да је урбани простор Егзархије многоме допринео креативном расположењу овог уметника, омогућивши му прикладне услове за слободно изражавање радова и идеја.

*Кључне речи:* урбани простор, креативност, музика, Егзархија, Николас Асимос

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. The multiculturalism of urban space as an element of inspiration and artistic creation

Modern cities consist of a crossroads of cultures, mainly, because for many people they are a pole of attraction for 'a better tomorrow', as far as their living conditions or professional development are concerned. As Varvounis and Kouzas mention (2019, 25) "cities are characterized by cultural hybridity". The native population, but also those who immigrate to the big cities, in the 'societies' of economic self-centeredness (Meraklis 2021, 27), are presented with opportunities such as getting to know and often mixing elements of their culture with those of other nations, sometimes in the form of experimentation, as it happens in the field of gastronomy or art, which often leads to excellent results (Watson, Hoyler & Mager 2009, 862-863).

Cities are communication networks (Tsangaris & Pazarzi 2018) and have always been typical sites of exchange, where conflicting and confusing perceptions and representations constantly intersect (Chatzinakos 2020, 184). Nowadays, globalization contributes to the exchange of cultural values among people (Raikhan et. al. 2017), who communicate through complex linguistic and cultural filters (Crozet 2017, 7). Especially for musicians, the need to communicate with the public, often leads them to search for new hearings, to include in their musical experiences and subsequently incorporate and capture in their new compositions. The urban space is a place of such stimuli and a field of many artistic inspirations and discoveries.

## 1.2. Urban space as a field of organization and free expression of social groups

Space is a product of relations and a representation of history, life and, generally, the real world (Massey 2008, 11, 30). Urban spaces actively participate in the social life of the city (Karanikolas 2019, 36). The streets, although they are regarded as ordinary, act as mediators, as they give us access to the culture of each place and each time. At the same time, it is what connects the past with the present and the future (Hickey 2010, 161-162). Often, the urban space turns into a place of gathering for people with different perceptions and ideas, people who cannot and neither want to compromise and keep up with the prevailing social norms of their time, marginalized people who appropriate urban space and use it for their own 'needs' (de Certeau, in Massey 2008, 47). As Kouzas (2017, 74) mentions, these individuals "do not necessarily have a causal relationship with the area, but may simply have been attracted to the specific space and act there". To an extent, this is due to the spatial isolation and marginalization of these individuals, who organize themselves into social groups and try to spread their own ideas, as a form of resistance to a 'globalized system' of modern urban culture<sup>1</sup>. Groups of these individuals, who are active in specific areas, are characterized as alternative groups with their own subculture, they follow their own value system and a different way of life than the majority of the city's inhabitants. This marginality by choice, found mainly in young people, is mostly derived from their reaction to political systems and in general from the bourgeoisie system of values and ideas. Youth participation in these subcultures functions as a form

---

<sup>1</sup> Foucault (1982, 781) states that these struggles are not only struggles against some form of authority, but also struggles for individual recognition.

of resistance to the adult world and is often reflected not only in the way they behave and act, but also in the way they dress (Williams 2007, 580-582). They usually adopt an unconventional lifestyle, non-conformist and possess a rebellious mood. These groups are usually found in places such as the urban 'centers' of megacities (Kouzas 2017, 66-67, 71, 78, 93-97).

In Athens, one such case is the area of Exarchia, mainly known as an area where anti-authoritarian groups operate, having associated its name with revolutionary struggles<sup>2</sup> and tragic events<sup>3</sup>. Exarchia, as Della Puppa (2016, 52) argues,

“represent the embodiment of the conflict between diametrical opposed perception of urban space: The city where roles and tasks are given and disciplined in the name of an imposed common good, versus the undocile space of negotiation where actual needs and means to satisfied them are woven together.”

In the area streets one will find people from many different social groups, anarchists, autonomous, anti-authoritarians, fighters of the extra-parliamentary left as well as groups of punks, immigrants, hooligans, writers, marginalized social groups, ordinary users of the city (Cappuccini 2016, 32). Exarchia remains to this day (unknown until when) the 'Galatic' village of Athens (Cappuccini 2016, 33)<sup>4</sup>, although governments have tried to change that<sup>5</sup> (Ioannou 2016, 334-338, 434). One of the most characteristic and emblematic figures of Exarchia square was the artist Nikolas Asimos<sup>6</sup>, a vivid example of the relationship between the urban space and the creator, which continues to this day, 35 years after his death.

---

<sup>2</sup> Such as the revolt of the students of the Polytechnic University against the dictatorship in Greece, in November 1973, with the basic slogan 'bread-education-freedom'.

<sup>3</sup> Bloody clashes between citizens and the police and cold-blooded murders. Most recently, the murder of 16-year-old Alexis Grigoropoulos on 06/12/2008 by a special guard of the Greek Police, which caused chain protests and clashes in almost all Greek cities (Close 2011; Vradis 2012; Karanikolas 2019, 184; Katsikana 2021, 94-95, 98).

<sup>4</sup> Similar areas like Exarchia (also stigmatized by the media and the majority of society) can be found in many areas of other countries, such as the Møllevången area in Sweden, known for its anti-racist activist movements (Hansen 2022).

<sup>5</sup> Among the most characteristic state interventions was the "Areti" operation of the Greek Police in 1984, with the argument of clearing Exarchia square of marginal and unconventional groups (punks, homosexuals, drug addicts).

<sup>6</sup> Nikolas Asimos (1949-1988) was mainly a songwriter, but he also dabbled in acting and sketching. He wrote over 100 songs, mostly with socio-political content.

## 2. METHOD

### 2.1. Research tool

As part of a wider thesis research<sup>7</sup>, many interviews were conducted with people who knew, collaborated or dealt with Nikolas Asimos mainly due to their profession, whose opinions regarding the urban space of the Exarchia area where the artist lived, are presented in this paper.

The unstructured interview was used as the main research tool. As the researcher must always take into account the historical period, geography, perceptions and representations of social groups (Tsangaris & Pazarzi 2018), questions were formulated in such a way as to form a comprehensive view of our research question (Robson 2010; Seidman 2013), namely, whether the conditions that prevailed in the urban space of Exarchia at the time Asimos lived there (1976-1988) influenced his artistic creation and the circulation of ideas.

The method of purposeful sampling was chosen for practical reasons, as the interviewees were acquainted with the artist or worked with him at different time periods. The interviews, parts of which are presented in this work, were carried out from June 2021 until November 2022. The research was based on the view that the urban landscape and the relationships of people within it can form suitable conditions for artistic creation and free expression.

### 2.2. Participants

The number of interviewees<sup>8</sup> amounts to twelve people, who knew Asimos on a personal<sup>9</sup> or profession level<sup>10</sup>. More specifically, amongst them there were three directors, five musicians, two singers, a journalist and a person generally involved in the arts.

---

<sup>7</sup> Concerning the influence of rumors in social networking towards the making of legendary figures.

<sup>8</sup> From now on (int.- job title)

<sup>9</sup> Fellow artists and friends.

<sup>10</sup> Directors, journalists, etc.

### 3. RESULTS

#### 3.1. Who was the artist Nikolas Asimos?

His real name was Nikolaos Asimopoulos and he was born in Kozani<sup>11</sup> in 1949. He later changed his surname to Asimos, which in Greek means someone of low or no importance or social recognition. During his student years at the Faculty of Philosophy in Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, he was involved in theater and music. In 1973, before graduating, he decided to go to Athens and pursue his dream in music (Allamanis 2000).

He formed musical groups with which he played from time to time in various music scenes. However, due to his quirky and irritable character, there were often fights with his partners or place owners and the groups did not last long: "I believe with his peculiar character and not being able to create any music group, the only way he could stand out was to go around with a bunch of freaks, singing his songs interspersed with skits as an actor" (int.6, artist).

So, he decided to communicate with the world in a different way, on the street (Kouzas 2017b, 27), organizing outdoor music theater performances: "Poet of the streets, that's how I call him (...) it was conscious" (int.2, singer). "What always impressed me was his devotion to his beliefs and his obsession with being in the 'market' and mingling with the crowd singing his songs at his outdoor concerts" (int.10, director).

He also tried to make some money to make ends meet by selling various publications and tapes outside the Polytechnic University: "I met Nikolas Asimos, at the right side of the gate, of the Polytechnic University, where he had his small table and sold books, which were of anarchist content (...) Over time we became friends" (int.3, director). "I met him in the fall of 1977. At that time, Nikolas had a small outdoor 'shop' in front of the Polytechnic University. The wandering 'shop' was a cart with books and tapes, independent, underground publications and publications by small and alternative publishing companies, mainly of political content, anarchist publications, newspapers and pamphlets of organizations of the extra-parliamentary left, philosophical and mystical books, psychology, etc. (...) In addition to books, he also sold 'pirate' cassettes with rock music and independent Greek artists. When I say 'pirate', I mean tapes that were

---

<sup>11</sup> Kozani is a city in northern Greece, 120 km south-west of Thessaloniki and 470 km from Athens.

not produced by official record companies, but illegal copies or personal productions” (int.4, director).

He was opposed to every form of human authority and tried to spread these ideas through his songs, which very soon made him well known and respected in the spaces of the anti-authoritarian movement of the time (there’s a following section of a song lyrics).

*You fornicate yourself in the brothel-society,  
You sell your soul for superabundance,  
They put brakes to your heart, your mind takes a plug  
for thousands like you, a socket will do.  
You will be on battery  
to perform work  
with super information, food and fun  
you will sail in euphoria.<sup>12, 13</sup>*

With the help of the famous Greek singer Vassilis Papakonstantinou, he released his own record<sup>14</sup>, for which he was accused by the anarchist circles of Exarchia for compromising with the ‘system’ as a result of which he returned to the streets again and promoted his songs through the ‘illegal’ tapes<sup>15</sup>.

*Me with my ideas  
and you with your money,  
I think you only want them as your own,  
I don’t want your conversation  
nor even to acquaintance you.<sup>16, 17</sup>*

---

<sup>12</sup> Song: With Battery, Lyrics-Music: Nikolas Asimos, in illegal tape No 000003 – 1979.

<sup>13</sup> Song lyrics were translated from Greek by Emmanuel C. Kyriazakos. Alternatively, other translations can be found at <https://lyricstranslate.com/el/%CE%B7-%CE%BC%CF%80%CE%B1%CF%84%CE%B1%CF%81%CE%B9%CE%B1-battery.html> and <https://lyricstranslate.com/en/nikolas-asimos-lyrics.html>, (Lyrics Translate, Accessed May 21, 2023).

<sup>14</sup> In 1982, in the MINOS company.

<sup>15</sup> Until the end of his life, he had released eight bootleg tapes.

<sup>16</sup> Song: Me with my ideas, Lyrics-Music: Nikolas Asimos, in illegal tape No 000008 – 1987.

<sup>17</sup> Song lyrics were translated from Greek by Emmanuel C. Kyriazakos. Alternatively, other translations can be found at <https://lyricstranslate.com/el/ego%CC%81-metis-idhe%CC%81es-mou-i-my-ideas.html> and <https://lyricstranslate.com/en/nikolas-asimos-lyrics.html>, (Lyrics Translate, Accessed May 21, 2023).

A year before his suicide, he participated with 5 of his own songs in Vassilis Papakonstantinou's album and the media at the time once again took a note of him. From 1976 until his death<sup>18</sup>, he lived in the area of Exarchia, which was his place of action and creation (Allamanis 2000). Because of his songs<sup>19</sup> and his life attitude, he is considered as an emblematic personality of the Exarchia square and in general in the ranks of anarchist circles<sup>20</sup>.

### 3.2. Exarchia: the 'colorful' and historic area that turned into an 'avaton'

Exarchia is an area in the center of Athens, named after a great merchant, Exarchos. In the past it flourished because prominent personalities of the artistic and political spheres spent their childhood there and it was a place for meeting and interacting with spiritual people (Apostolopoulou 2016; Varvounis & Kouzas 2019, 60). One interviewee offers a universal description of the Exarchia region and comments on the way it may have influenced Nikolas Asimos: "The area of Exarchia has been the liveliest area of Athens since World War II. It is the center of ideological ferments and searches, social experimentation and collective expression. It is the preeminent space for questioning and searching for new forms of expression and struggle of anti-authoritarian movements (...) It is a field of various processes that in several cases disturbed the stagnant waters of public life. That is why it is a point of reference for anarchist and anti-authoritarian movements and at the same time a field of expression of the politics of repressive mechanisms (...) In Exarchia new ideas are born, movements are formed and stimuli that cultivate opposition to the system and an anti-establishment attitude. That child from Kozani found himself in this environment, he was influenced by its socio-political advances and thus formed this contradictory personality" (int.7, singer).

---

<sup>18</sup> Due to serious personal and psychological problems he was facing, he decided to end his life in March 1988.

<sup>19</sup> There are more than a hundred of them, with the best known having a social revolutionary content.

<sup>20</sup> Exarchia had been characterized as an area where groups of the anarchist space gather. This was the reason why it often became the target of state power enactment, whenever there were phenomena of social unrest and resistance. Asimos, because of his views and songs, was one of the many who were persecuted and suffered from this situation, as mentioned in works by representatives of the anarchist space and beyond (Christakis 2008; Romvos 2009; Ioannou 2016; Peppas 2018). Thereafter, his expressions and song lyrics have often become a slogan for spreading anti-authoritarian ideas.



As Giannitsiotis (2007, in Avdikos 2016, 44) points out, cities are not only spaces of economic and political management, but areas of human daily experience, representation and imagination and fields of power and resistance strategies. Thus, in the first years of the post-colonial period, Exarchia became the meeting point for ‘different’ people with ideas and dreams for a change. One interviewee comments very aptly: “It was a place like an Ark” (int.11, musician).

Through this diversity of characters, ideas were born, mainly artistic, that changed the facts of a hitherto ‘stagnant’<sup>21</sup> Greece. For the significance of this area in later social and political developments, one interviewee commented: “Exarchia was for several decades a place of fermentation, criticism, questioning, dialectic of ideas and opinions, conflict and disagreements, testing new propositions and ways of behaving, integrating or rejecting different elements, tolerance and acceptance of all innovation and diversity (...) Exarchia, as an experiential field, have influenced, overtly or not, a large part of artistic and intellectual creation, but also the formation of social perceptions and the awakening, sometimes, of social reflexes” (int.4, director). Someone spoke with nostalgia for the area: “Back then, Exarchia was very nice... an artistic center, we used to gather with people who would sit and talk... then there was also the hippie trend, yoga etc., you know. And there were such of discussions” (int.11, musician).

Since the end of the 70s, the media of the time characterized Exarchia as a ‘ghetto’ region of the anarchist space<sup>22</sup> (Vradis 2012; Della Puppa 2016, 53; Ioannou 2016, 249; Tsangaris & Pazarzi 2018), as an area with two main fields of reference: the political field<sup>23</sup> and the social<sup>24</sup> (Ioannou 2016, 1).

### 3.3. The area of Exarchia in the first years of post-dictatorship period and the emergence of the anarchist movement

Of particular importance in the case of Nikolas Asimos, is to examine the socio-political conditions that prevailed in Exarchia, between 1976-1988, i.e. the period he lived there, and to what extent they influenced him

---

<sup>21</sup> There was a dictatorship for seven years (1967-1974).

<sup>22</sup> Also, Exarchia has been characterized as the ‘Mecca’ of graffiti (Tsangaris & Pazarzi 2018), the street art that contributes to local cultural identity (Cercleux 2022) and that confirms urban polyphony (Zanella 2018, 217). The social phenomenon of graffiti is mainly an act of reaction against capitalism and the separation of classes and races. A process whose main aim is to change society in the future (Awad et al. 2017, 178-179).

<sup>23</sup> Area of action of anti-authoritarian groups.

<sup>24</sup> Drugs, prostitution, delinquent behaviors.

in his way of life and thinking. One interviewee believes that the censorship imposed by the dictatorship on many artists led to an artistic explosion in the early post-colonial years: "There was clearly a silence in arts until '74, but Nikolas already existed. With the post-colonialism there was an explosion of political song. They held events with art containing social messages (...) In other words, there was a lot of singing with social content and with more progressive ideas (...) In this new ideological juncture, in a way, Asimos was consciously following his own anti-authoritarian, a more, view on things look, let's say. That concerned both art and the social reality around it (...) even if we forget the political-economic, social attitudes, there was also a new and radical tendency pioneering for art. I think Nikolas was inoculated with both of them. He was a man who envisioned new ways" (int.1, musician).

Among the ideas that were discussed in the 'public square' of Exarchia were the first attempts to spread the anarchist philosophy. The specific area has been linked as a place of formation and action of anarchist groups. One of the interviewees remembers and describes that period when Nikolas Asimos lived in Exarchia: "At that time in Exarchia there was an anarchist movement (...) After the post-colonialism time, I want to remind you that there was propensity for young people to engage in culture. All that current of the first post-colonialism years soon dissipated... politically there was an intense activity in culture, in all the neighborhoods, with clubs, with theater groups and so on, which slowly began to decay" (int.3, director).

The French anthropologist Pierre Sansot (in Meraklis 2021, 67) believes that just as man is in the likeness of the city he lives in, so the city is in the likeness of its people. The 'stamp' of the area as the headquarters of the anarchist movement has remained until today, as a result of which the phenomena of conflict between groups of anarchists and the police is a frequent phenomenon and the area is characterized as 'avaton', 'state (of Exarchia)', 'cradle of subculture' (Ioannou 2016, 255, 293). Asimos, within this environment could express himself freely, was inspired by it and created most of his overall work. Another interviewee talks about ideal conditions that prevailed in the '80s in the 'free' area of Exarchia: "In the favorable political and social environment of the time and in the 'fertile soil' of Exarchia that gave him the space to function as an independent" (int.6, artist).

However, the social taboos of the time did not allow everyone to understand the special way that everyone chose for tdefining both self and collective identity (Varvounis & Kouzas 2019, 29-31), as Meraklis

also mentions (2021, 28), in the city, in order to attract the interest of the rest of its members, you have to stand out either by your clothing or your behavior: “Nikolas was a non-integrated person, a rebel by nature. He went against everything, by choice, consciously and stubbornly. Against every conservative and petty-bourgeois habit and logic. He was a ‘revolutionist with a... cause!’ A figure who claimed to live the way he wanted, to dress and speak the way he wanted, without the given social commitments of the modern Greek post-political reality. At that time, Nikolas, in held a more social profile, he was interested in communicating with others, philosophical, as well as political conversations and dialectical confrontations. He did not hesitate to mess with everyone and everything (...) For some people, this ‘margin’ was a threat, for others a picturesqueness and for some an embodied ‘utopia’. The postcolonial era was a social mixer, a melting pot of ideologies, an arena where various dynamics developed and competed or were tested. Nikolas, therefore, appeared in there like a gladiator among beasts, an unconventional personality” (int.4, director).

#### 3.4. The heaven and hell of Exarchia: From recognition to destruction

Asimos lived most of his artistic life in Exarchia. It was the preeminent place for his actions, a place of inspiration and creation, a place of daily fermentation. There, Asimos is musically ‘liberated’ and finds fertile ground for expression, since the area gathered young students or artists who exchanged opinions and ideas, with tolerance for diversity and with the aim of collective functioning. Nikolas Asimos was not an artist who ‘lived’ only through his appearances on music stages. He liked conveying these performances on the street and through musical theater happenings and his interaction with the casual audience, tried to spread his ideas indirectly. As Smith (2018) mentions, street art is a complex form of reaction or protest, either because it is done consciously and comes from the ideological views of the artists, or because the message they want to convey is randomly addressed to everyone: “He was happy with it, it was his habit, it was his need to play on the street (...) He did it wholeheartedly” (int.8, musician). “In street theater, he would address each passer-by personally, and each passer-by was his unsuspecting spectator” (int.5, journalist). As M. Hulot<sup>25</sup> mentions in his foreword to the anthology ‘Avaton’ (2022, 7-10), Exarchia has always been an area characterized by freedom of speech and expression and for this reason it was the first place

---

<sup>25</sup> Journalist pseudonym.

in Athens to introduce street art. On the other hand, many artists try to 'steal' some of the glory of the already recognized artist. An interviewee points out that other artists, mainly actors, accompanied Asimos in his street performances, believing that they would gain the recognition and appreciation of others: "When Asimos did something like a show and so on, people gathered, he did street theater... and I tell you other actors were also going there, so people would call them anarchists" (int.12, musician).

His choice evolved over time into a livelihood need: "Asimos was a 'folk' musician. As I found out, he believed in the immediacy of contact. For Asimos, the street was a space of expression and a field for cultural communication, social contact, a source of primary experiences, but also a place of work, from which he could earn the necessities for his livelihood. On the street he plays his music, talks to known or unknown people, sells tapes he has recorded, opens Homeric quarrels with those who disagree with him. The road is both a choice and a necessity. Actually, he 'lived' on the streets of Exarchia" (int.7, singer).

An interviewee refers to the 'love' of Nikolas Asimos for the 'street', with a typical comic incident: "I had met him once, it was one of those youth festivals... and suddenly I see him outside selling the tapes, with his guitar, and I tell him 'you're out of it, you sitting outside and playing music for them on the street, not up on the stage' (*laughing*)" (int.1, musician).

Some interviewees talked about the artist's need to communicate, but also, the problems he had caused: "I remember that he was performing in different happenings in Exarchia square. Nikolas needed to play his music somewhere, so he held various events in the square and played with his guitar, destroying at the same time everything that he considered that was spoiling his aesthetics (...) He wanted to be on the street with everyday people and, in fact, if he ever saw anyone in the audience who was well-dressed, he might have offended him" (int.3, director).

Because of this behavior, Nikolas Asimos quickly became the 'red rag' of Exarchia square for the police: "At that time, in Exarchia, two people had taken this role: Rolf Pohle, a German, who had come to Greece, lived in Exarchia, but the police was chasing him because he was part of the Baader Meinhof team<sup>26</sup>... The second one was Asimos! Wherever Asimos went, after a while he was surrounded by policemen. They were after him. After that, he becomes completely schizophrenic. I'm talking about the end of the 80s, where you couldn't talk to him, he had an incoherent

<sup>26</sup> Also known in the media as R.A.F. (Red Army Faction). It was an organization that conducted urban guerrilla warfare and operated in West Germany.

and dismissive spiel of everything (...) I have the impression that Asimos carried a form of schizophrenia inside him, he started doing strange things, which only a bipolar person could do. But when he worked on his music and played, he changed” (int.3, director).

Some interviewees believed that regardless of the social and political conditions of the time, Asimos lived in his own world and his essential problem was solving the internal problems he faced: “I think that Nikolas’ problems were internal, but the socio-political conditions did not help at all in solving them. On the contrary, they made things more difficult” (int.9, musician). “As strange as it may seem, Nikolas lived in his own world, which was not a very happy one, regardless of whether or not anyone referred to it. Indeed, one would be right in asking whether... his whole life was strongly influenced from his own opinions and perceptions or even prejudices. He created with his mind non-existent enemies and windmills which he fought vigorously and untouchably like Don Quixote. That was Nikolas and that’s the fact: He was not a fortuitous person” (int.10, director).

### 3.5. Exarchia without Nikolas Asimos: Can one exist without the other?

The authors L. Christakis (2008) and T. Romvos (2009), consider that Asimos was one of the most characteristic figures of the Exarchia square. The poet and psychiatrist Sotiris Pastakas relates Nikolas Asimos to the cynic philosopher Diogenes, writing that “he established a figure of attitude, form and behavior that has no precedent in the Greek culture industry” (Asimos 2020, 10). In art there are often symbolisms and coded messages in order for the artist to express himself and spread his ‘beliefs’ (Karanikolas 2019, 28) and Asimos criticized everyday life problems in a way that was unique and special for his time. Many of the interviewees spoke of the influence he received, but also the way he in turn influenced various social groups: “Each person is formed in the context of dialectical interactions with his society, his era, his history and tradition, his position in production and social stratification, the education and information he receives, ideological choices and human relationships. We are creatures of social and cultural conditions and at the same time we are co-shapers to a lesser or greater degree, positive or negative, of our social relationships and patterns of life and behavior. The great intellectual creators, scientists, artists, intellectuals, decisively influence social and cultural life. Asimos, without being a high-level intellectual creator, influenced many young people from the marginal and the anti-authoritarian space” (int.7, singer). “Always, the era in which one lives in shapes him and influences his perceptions. Life lays the canvas, offers the data, but personal choices are

clearly the ones that determine the course of each one. And this path is unique every time, as each of us is unique, and chooses, processes, acts and deals - successfully or not - with the circumstances he is faced with. And, in turn, it is also a part of social becoming, which it also affects to a certain extent in its own way" (int.4, director).

However, Christakis (2008, 31) considers that there was a plan to alienate and essentially neutralize youths who frequented Exarchia and who sought their orientation through discussions and free actions. We also recorded interviewees' opinions that inevitably compared the Exarchia of that time with today: "There were political and social events, initially, which were later falsified, as it always happens where there are young people at the base, and a fertile ground for exploitation by the authorities" (int.6, artist). "Indeed, Exarchia experienced a creative period from the 60s to the 80s. But drugs, anger and intolerance prevailed. What should the artist do about that?" (int.9, musician). "The history of the Exarchia was quite extensive, but I believe that the real identity of the Exarchia at that time has been replaced today by a smaller identity" (int.2, singer).

One interviewee tried to delineate and reposition the phenomenon of the Exarchia area on an objective basis: "Exarchia was a minority phenomenon... the great anarchist festival of the Exarchia, of which Asimos was a part, was a minority phenomenon in Athenian society" (int.5, journalist).

#### 4. DISCUSSION

According to French anthropologist and sociologist Pierre Sansot (in Meraklis 2021, 180), the true urban place is the one that modifies us, that is, when we enter it, we also change as people, depending on the experiences that each of us has (Tuan 1975, 151-152). For an artist, the environment in which he lives is very important. It is his 'world' and the field in which he will interact, observe, listen and in general, the one which will give him the stimuli to create (Kyriazakos 2019, 67). Artistic creation is affected to a certain extent when the space of inspiration and action of the artist is the urban environment, with the particular, at times, prevailing socio-economic conditions of the city (Watson, Hoyler & Mager 2009, 856-858; Meraklis 2021, 27).

In the case of Nikolas Asimos, during the period when he lived in the Exarchia area, in the center of Athens, the conditions were open to the interaction he was looking for, but at the same time disastrous, after he could not overcome the problems he was facing and he decided to end his life on March 17, 1988. Perhaps his effort can be captured through

in two verses by another suicide poet, Minas Dimakis (in Meraklis 2021, 142) “The life we asked for, has not been given to us. We kept the dream, only in our hearts”.

Thirty-five years after his death, Nikolas Asimos continues to live on through his work. He rightfully holds a place among the outstanding artistic personalities of Greece. To this day, many books, articles, songs have been written for or dedicated to him. Even television programs have devoted shows to his life and remarkable work. He is also frequently mentioned by many people in the arts, mainly through well-known singers who include his songs in their live repertoire. Even on the Internet, there’s still a very active online community that follows him (Kyriazakos & Katsadoros 2022, 270-272). After all, art can change our beliefs, our way of thinking and in general, what we want to be and how we want to live (Kieran 1996). Artists are admired because they can capture many emotions in a work of art, which not everyone can do (Tuan 1975, 152). The stake now is whether his work will continue to exist and inspire future generations. As one of the interviewees of our research typically states: “While he was alive, no one paid attention to him and he was just a peculiar figure of the Exarchia and the center of Athens. When he died, the way he died, he attracted the attention of people, even more of so those who regarded him as a good ‘product’, that could bring them profits (...) This is the real thing and I assure you that when his name stops being heard, then he will be forgotten too (...) No matter how we see it, Nikolas was a brainy but also quirky person” (int.10, director).

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Nikolas Asimos was a charismatic and special artist, a leading figure with innovative and pioneering ideas and works, but at the same time uncompromising and quite peculiar. A modern Don Quixote, who all he wanted was to communicate and spread his ideas through his songs, in which he was looking for ‘redemption’. Regardless of the turn his life took, his relationships with his friends and artists, remains a bittersweet memory to those who knew him and to those who dealt with his case. Although he didn’t embrace any ideology, he enjoys, even today, a very special appreciation and respect from the representatives of the anarchist area.

He lived from 1976 to 1988 in Exarchia, an area of Athens, in a period of great socio-political changes, where the fermentation of so many different people and ideas led to an artistic ‘explosion’. Based on our analysis, it is proven that Asimos was surely influenced by the urban space of Exarchia, where he found the right conditions for free expression, communication

and dialogue, as well as the conditions that pushed him effortlessly to the completion of his artistic work. He interacted with people who frequented the area and who could express themselves freely and in any way they wished. It is no coincidence that Asimos created most of his artistic work during the period he lived there. He was one of the most popular and recognizable faces of Exarchia square. He was inspired and influenced by his surroundings and, in turn, those were inspired and influenced by him. Certainly, Asimos would not be the same artist if he had never been to Exarchia. On the other hand, the history of Exarchia would not be the same without him...

## References

- Allamanis, Giorgos. 2000. *Dichos kavatza kamia: vios kai politeia tou Nikola Asimou*. Athens: New Borders - Publishing Organization Livani.
- Apostolopoulou, Natalia. 2016. "Diasimoi' Exarcheiotes, apo ton Palama eos ton Asimo." <https://www.news247.gr/afieromata/diasimoi-exarcheiotes-apo-ton-palama-eos-ton-asimo.6469945.html> (Accessed April 14, 2023).
- Asimos, Nikolas. 2020. *Ta tragoudia*. Athens: Syneditions.
- Avaton. 2022. *Avaton: mia anthologia epeidi ta Exarcheia yparchoun*. Athens: Bibliothèque.
- Avdikos, Evangelos. 2016. *I poli: laografikes kai ethnografikes optikes*. Athens: I. Sideris.
- Awad, H. Sarah, Brady Wagoner & Vlad Petre Glăveanu. 2017. The street art of resistance. In *Resistance in Everyday Life: Constructing Cultural Experiences*, eds. Nandita Chaudhary, Pernille Hviid, Giuseppina Marsico & Jakob Waag Villadsen, 161-180. Springer.
- Cappuccini, Monia. 2016. Exarchia, il quartiere radicale di Atene che è già un mondo a sé. In *Pratiche insorgenti e riappropriazione della città*, ed. Enzo Scandurra, 32-44. SdT Edizioni. <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/54528526.pdf> (Accessed June 23, 2023).
- Cercloux, Andreea-Loreta. 2022. "Graffiti and street art between ephemerality and making visible the culture and heritage in cities: Insight at international level and in Bucharest." *Societies* 12 (129): 1-25, <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc12050129>
- Chatzinakos, Giorgos. 2020. Urban experiments in times of crisis: From cultural production to neighbourhood commoning. In *Cultural Heritage in the Realm of the Commons: Conversations on the Case of Greece*, ed. Stelios Lekakis, 183-212. London: Ubiquity Press. <https://doi.org/10.5334/bcj.k>



- Christakis, Leonidas. 2008. *Ta Exarcheia den yparchoun stin istoria sto charti sti zoi*. Athens: Tyflomyga.
- Close, David. 2011. "The riots of December 2008: their causes in historical and international contexts." Paper presented at Eighth *Biennial International Conference of Greek Studies*. <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/14946193.pdf> (Accessed June 23, 2023).
- Crozet, Chantal. 2017. Globalization and culture. In *Global Encyclopedia of Public Administration, Public Policy, and Governance*, ed. Ali Farazmand, 1-8. New York: Springer International Publishing. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-31816-5\\_1319-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-31816-5_1319-1)
- Della Puppa, Giulia Anna. 2016. Sketching a new approach to urban conflicts, fieldnotes from Exarchia, Athens. In *Uniconflicts in spaces of crisis: Critical approaches in, against and beyond the University*, eds. Kostas Athanasiou, Eleni Vasdeki, Elina Kapetanaki, Maria Karagianni, Matina Kapsali, Vaso Makrygianni, Foteini Mamali, Orestis Pangalos & Charalampos Tsavdaroglou, 50-60. <https://urbanconflicts.wordpress.com/> (Accessed June 27, 2023).
- Foucault, Michael. 1982. "The Subject and Power." *Critical Inquiry* 8 (4): 777-795.
- Hansen, Christina. 2022. "'The Capital of Love': Activists Resisting the Stigmas of Malm through Storytelling." *Antipode* 54 (6): 1760-1780. <https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12872>
- Hickey, Andrew. 2010. When the street becomes a pedagogue. In *Handbook of public pedagogy: Education and learning beyond schooling*, eds. Jennifer A. Sandlin, Brian D. Schultz & Jake Burdick, 161-170. N.Y.: Routledge.
- Ioannou, Dimitris. 2016. "Exarcheia 1974 – 2004: schediasmata mias Ntelezianis geografias." PhD diss., National Technical University of Athens. <https://www.didaktorika.gr/eadd/handle/10442/37432>
- Karanikolas, Johnny Damien. 2019. "Art and Crisis on the Streets of Athens." PhD diss., Faculty of Arts, School of Social Sciences, Discipline of Anthropology, The University of Adelaide.
- Katsikana, Mantha. 2021. Gender in resistance: Emotion, affective labour, and social reproduction in Athens. In *A feminist urban theory for our time: rethinking social reproduction and the urban*, eds. Linda Peake, Elsa Koleth, Gökbörü Sarp Tanyildiz, Rajyashree N. Reddy & Darren Patrick/dp, 92-114. John Wiley & Sons, Inc. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119789161.ch4>
- Kieran, Matthew. 1996. "Art, imagination, and the cultivation of morals." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 54 (4): 337-351.
- Kouzas, C. Giorgos. 2017. *I epaiteia stin poli: morfes organosis, stratigikes epiviosis, taftotites*. Athens: Papazissis.
- Kouzas, Giorgos. 2017b. "Street musicians, artistic practices and survival

- strategies. An ethnographic example (Dionysiou Areopagitou Street, Athens)." *Ethnology and Anthropology* 28 (17): 25-42. <http://www.anthroserbia.org/Content/PDF/Articles/38603979183d42fb8ca040aea7d8749d.pdf> (Accessed April 15, 2023).
- Kyriazakos, C. Emmanouil. 2019. "Music and environment: from artistic creation to the environmental sensitization and action- A circular model." *Open Journal for Studies in Arts* 2 (2): 57-70. <http://centerprode.com/ojsa/ojsa0202/coas.ojsa.0202.03057k.pdf> (Accessed April 15, 2023). DOI:10.32591/coas.ojsa.0202.03057k.
- Kyriazakos, Emmanouil & George Katsadoros. 2022. "I laografia sti sygchroni psifiaki epochi: i erevna tou laikou politismou mesa apo tis diadiktyakes koinotites. I periptosi ton tragoudion tou N. Asimou sto YouTube." In *Paidagogiki Erevna sto Aigaio, Praktika 6is Imeridas Ypopsifion Didaktorou*, edited by Alivisos Sofos, Emmanuel Fokides, Maria Chionidou-Moskofoglou, Michail Skoumios & Marianthi Oikonomakou, 262-277. Rhodes: Paidagogiko Tmima Dimotikis Ekpaidefsis, Panepistimio Aigaiou. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/364621965> (Accessed April 15, 2023)
- Lyrics Translate. n.d. "Bataria." Accessed May 21, 2023. <https://lyricstranslate.com/el/%CE%B7-%CE%BC%CF%80%CE%B1%CF%84%CE%B1%CF%81%CE%B9%CE%B1-battery.html>.
- Lyrics Translate. n.d. "Ego me tis idees mou." Accessed May 21, 2023. <https://lyricstranslate.com/el/ego%CC%81-me-tis-idhe%CC%81es-mou-i-my-ideas.html>. Massey, Doreen. 2008<sup>3</sup>. *For space*. SAGE.
- Meraklis, G. Mihalis. 2021. *Gia tin poli*. ed. Aristeides N. Doulaveras. Athens: Stamoulis.
- Peppas, L. Antonis. 2018. *Ellines Anarchikoi (1890-2015)*. Athens: Isigoria.
- Raikhan, Sadykova, Myrzabekov Moldakhmet, Myrzabekova Ryskeldy & Moldakhmetkyzy Alua. 2014. "The interaction of globalization and culture in the modern world." *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 122 (2014): 8-12. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.01.1294>
- Robson, Colin. 2010. *I erevna tou pragmatikou kosmou: ena meson gia koinonikous epistimones kai epangelmaties erevnites*. Transl. Vasiliki Dalakou & Katerina Vasilikou. Athens: Gutenberg.
- Romvos, Teo. 2009. *Tria fengaria stin plateia*. Athens: Vivliopelagos.
- Seidman, Irving. 2013. *Interviewing as Qualitative Research: A Guide for Researchers in Education & the Social Science*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Smith, Ryan Matthew. 2018. Indigenous graffiti and street art as resistance. In *Street Art of Resistance*, eds. Sarah H. Awad & Brady Wagoner, 251-274. Palgrave Studies in Creativity and Culture. Palgrave Macmillan Cham. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-63330-5\\_11](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-63330-5_11)

- Tsangaris, Michael & Iliana Pazarzi. 2018. *Unauthorized outdoor graphics as urban expressions in the time of the crisis*. <https://hal.science/hal-01855429/document> (Accessed June 27, 2023).
- Tuan, Yi-Fu. 1975. "Place: an experiential perspective." *Geographical Review* 65 (2): 151-165.
- Varvounis, G. Manolis & Giorgos C. Kouzas. 2019. *Eisagogi stin astiki laografia*. Athens: Papazissis.
- Vradis, Antonios. 2012. "Patterns of contentious politics concentration as a 'spatial contract'; a spatio-temporal study of urban riots and violent protest in the neighbourhood of Exarcheia, Athens, Greece (1974-2011)." PhD diss., Department of Geography and Environment of the London School of Economics. [https://etheses.lse.ac.uk/3120/1/Vradis\\_Patterns\\_of\\_contentious\\_politics\\_concentration%20-.pdf](https://etheses.lse.ac.uk/3120/1/Vradis_Patterns_of_contentious_politics_concentration%20-.pdf) (Accessed June 30, 2023).
- Watson, Allan, Michael Hoyler & Christoph Mager. 2009. "Spaces and networks of musical creativity in the city." *Geography Compass* 3 (2): 856–878. [https://compass.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/j.1749-8198.2009.00222.x?saml\\_referrer](https://compass.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/j.1749-8198.2009.00222.x?saml_referrer) (Accessed April 25, 2023). DOI:10.1111/j.1749-8198.2009.00222.x
- Williams, J. Patrick. 2007. "Youth-Subcultural studies: Sociological traditions and core concepts." *Sociology Compass* 1 (2): 572-593. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9020.2007.00043.x>
- Zanella, Vieira Andrea. 2018. Inventive reXistence: notes on Brazil graffiti and city tension. In *Street Art of Resistance*, eds. Sarah H. Awad & Brady Wagoner, 201-222. Palgrave Studies in Creativity and Culture. Palgrave Macmillan Cham. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-63330-5\\_9](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-63330-5_9)

Примљено / Received: 07. 03. 2023.

Прихваћено / Accepted: 14. 09. 2023.