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# Recasting the indebted subject in the middle voice

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/ssi](http://journals.sagepub.com/home/ssi)**Maria Boletsi**

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## Abstract

This article traces the interrelation of two forms of debt – financial debt and the symbolic debt to the past – in order to propose a rethinking of the discourse of debt through the ‘middle voice’, understood both as a grammatical category and, more generally, as an expressive modality that can take shape through different media. Can we revisit discourses of debt through ‘grammars’ that could restore a form of agency to the ‘indebted subject’ and disrupt the asymmetrical power relation between debtor and creditor? To explore this question, the article turns to literary and artistic responses to the discourse of debt against the backdrop of the Greek debt crisis. Through a close reading of the novella *Close to the Belly* (2014) by Sotiris Dimitriou and an untitled art installation by Stefania Strouza (2011), it traces how these works cast *the subject* as produced by the discourse of debt and test alternative conceptions of the indebted subject through the modality of the middle voice. Dimitriou’s novella tries to transcend both the moral discourse of financial debt and the debt to the past by envisioning a disengagement from all debt, which eventually yields a society without past and future. By contrast, Strouza’s installation reconfigures the debtor-creditor relation without renouncing debt altogether. By staging an encounter between Sophocles’ *Antigone* and Marx’s *Capital*, it transforms the power relation of debtor and creditor into a deictic exchange that makes these positions malleable and reversible. Through these works, the article explores the conditions for reconsidering the notion of debt through the modality of the middle voice and the risks but also the politically promising possibilities the middle voice opens up for conceiving the indebted subject and the temporality of debt *otherwise*.

## Keywords

Antigone, conceptions of the subject, debt, financial debt, Greek crisis, Marx, middle voice, symbolic debt, the indebted subject

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## Résumé

Cet article retrace la relation de corrélation existant entre deux formes de dette – la dette financière et la dette symbolique envers le passé – dans le but de proposer un renouvellement du discours de la dette à partir de la ‘voix moyenne’, envisagée à la fois comme une catégorie grammaticale et, plus généralement, comme une modalité d’expression pouvant prendre forme *via* différents médias. Pouvons-nous revisiter les discours de la dette à partir de ‘grammaires’ qui redonneraient une forme de pouvoir au ‘sujet endetté’ et bouleverseraient la relation asymétrique entre le débiteur et le créancier ? Pour aborder cette question, l’article se tourne vers des réponses artistiques et littéraires au discours de la dette dans le contexte de la crise de la dette grecque. À partir d’une lecture minutieuse du roman *Proche du ventre* (2014) de Sotiris Dimitriou et d’une installation sans titre de Stefania Strouza (2011), il examine comment ces travaux conçoivent le *sujet* comme ayant été produit par le discours de la dette et teste des manières alternatives de concevoir le sujet endetté, à partir de la modalité de la voix moyenne. Le roman de Dimitriou essaie de transcender à la fois le discours moral de la dette financière et de la dette envers le passé en imaginant un désengagement de toute dette, qui produirait finalement une société sans passé ni futur. En revanche, l’installation de Strouza reconfigure la relation débiteur-créancier sans pour autant renoncer à la dette complètement. En mettant en scène une rencontre entre *Antigone* de Sophocle et *Le Capital* de Marx, elle transforme la relation de pouvoir entre le débiteur et le créancier en un échange déictique rendant ces positions malléables et réversibles. À partir de ces œuvres, l’article explore les conditions qui permettraient de reconsidérer la notion de dette à partir du procédé de la voix moyenne, mais aussi les risques et les possibilités politiquement prometteuses que cette approche ouvre pour envisager *autrement* le sujet endetté et la temporalité de la dette.

## Mots-clés

Antigone, conceptions du sujet, dette, dette financière, dette grecque, dette symbolique, le sujet endetté, Marx, voix moyenne

In a street artwork by Dimitris Taxis titled ‘I wish you could learn something useful from the past’ (Figure 1), a boy appears caught in the present between a pile of books alluding to Greece’s past – with the titles *Plato*, *Socrates*, *Democracy*, and *Modern Greek History* – and another pile of books on his head, alluding to the present and the future: *Athens Means Luxury*, *Economics*, *Survival Guide*, *No Future*. The work appeared in Athens in 2013, in the midst of Greece’s debt crisis – a crisis that since 2009 has radically shifted people’s understanding of their present and their outlook on the future (Boletsi, 2018b: 4, 7).

The image conveys a sense of resignation and entrapment that stems from the burden of a double debt: a financial debt, pertaining to Greece’s present crisis, and a symbolic debt, pertaining to Greece’s past. The artwork plays with the motif of the ‘burden of the past’, which has been central in Greek literature and culture. Modern Greeks perceive the past as both ‘an asset and a burden’ (Tziovas, 2014: 1), a double trope that underlines the



**Figure 1.** Dimitris Taxis, 'I Wish You Could Learn Something Useful from the Past' (91 Kerameikou Street, Athens, 2013). Photograph courtesy of Julia Tulke.

constitutive role history has played in the modern nation's identity. The classical heritage, particularly, has been key to processes of nation-building (Hamilakis, 2007; Plantzos, 2017: 68) and has functioned as the country's symbolic capital in Europe. But it has also at times turned into a painful reminder of the discrepancy between the classical ideal and the Greek present, generating an image of modern Greece, as Lord Byron put it in 'Childe Harold's Pilgrimage', as a 'sad relic of departed worth' (Byron, 2004[1812–1818]: canto 2, stanza 73; Boletsi, 2018b: 7, 28; Liakos, 2016: 208).<sup>1</sup> In Taxis' graffiti, the debt of the Greeks to their past – especially the classical past, as suggested by the books referring to Greek philosophers – becomes superimposed on the financial debt at the heart of the so-called Greek crisis. Although these debts are of a different kind, in the crisis-years they became imbricated in multiple ways (Hamilakis, 2016: 238–239; Hanink, 2017; Talalay, 2013).

The metaphor of ruins proved to be particularly effective for conveying this imbrication: in newspaper articles, magazine covers, and cartoons about the Greek crisis, the imagery of material ruins from the classical heritage was called to metaphorically evoke the destructive impact of the financial crisis (Boletsi, 2018b: 7). The press drew lavishly on the double association of ruins with a glorious past and the ruination of the present,

casting Greece as ‘an eternal country of ruins, experienc[ing] new ruination’ (Hamilakis, 2016: 237). The ‘iconographic’ ‘comingling of ancient and modern remnants’ in cartoons (Hamilakis, 2016: 237) often suggested not only that the Greeks were untrustworthy when it came to repaying the financial debt but also that ‘the country has disgraced its patrimony’ and squandered its civilizational capital (Talalay, 2013: 269). In such stereotypical discourses, the Greeks thus appeared to be burdened with two debts – to their ancestors and their current creditors – neither of which seemed to be cancelled out by the idea of the West’s debt to (ancient) Greece for laying the foundations for its civilisation (Hamilakis, 2016: 238–239).

Taxis’ graffiti thematizes this double debt, but the relation it stages between past and present functions differently: it yields a critique, on the one hand, of neoliberal ‘good life’ narratives, and on the other hand, of the temporality of debt. The books that refer to the present create contrasts that exemplify the affective structure Lauren Berlant has called ‘cruel optimism’. According to Berlant, the ‘conventional good-life fantasies’ of ‘upward mobility’, consumerism, luxury, ‘job security’, ‘social equality’ and opportunities for all in late capitalism clash today against a ‘precarious public sphere’ that contradicts these fantasies, yet people still remain attached to them even though they cannot attain them (2011: 2, 3). The contrasting titles *Athens Means Luxury* and *Survival Guide* convey precisely this cruel attachment to good life narratives in an uncertain, crisis-ridden present. The title *No Future* reinforces this cruel structure by suggesting that the economy of debt forecloses future prospects. The books referring to Greece’s glorious past (*Plato, Socrates, Democracy*) complete the circle of cruelty by adding another dimension to it: the subject of the present is unable to live up not only to capitalist good-life narratives, but also to the glorious feats of its ancestors.

In *The Making of the Indebted Man*, Maurizio Lazzarato argues that in today’s neoliberal economy, ‘the creditor-debtor relationship’, which is premised on an ‘asymmetry of power’ (2012: 43), has become ‘a centerpiece of politics’ (2012: 23), leading to the production of ‘a particular form of homo economicus, the ‘indebted man’” (2012: 26). This condition of the ‘indebted man’ is now extended to everyone: with Capital as the ‘Great creditor’, everybody is a debtor (2012: 7). ‘The threat of debt’, Lazzarato writes, ‘looms over all Europeans like inevitable fate’ (2012: 165). Especially in the case of the Greek crisis, Lazzarato notes, we may speak of the production of ‘indebted citizens’: ‘Public debt [...] weighs, literally, on every individual’s life, since every individual must take responsibility for it’ (2012: 38; emphasis added). Taxis’ graffiti literalizes this ‘weight’ that contracts the future. But how does debt cancel the future?

For Lazzarato, debt is a means of managing the behaviour of indebted citizens and thus also of controlling the future: ‘debt obligations allow one to foresee, calculate, measure, and establish equivalences between current and future behaviour’ (2012: 45–46). The indebted subject has to fulfil a promise – to repay the debt – which minimises the space of political choices and binds the subject to a limited set of predictable actions in the future aimed at realising this promise. The way austerity politics was projected in Western European public rhetoric as a one-way-street without alternatives is a case in point. Debt replaces what Arjun Appadurai calls a ‘politics of possibility’ with a ‘politics of probability’ (2013: 1, 3) that robs the future of its transformative potential. For indebted subjects, Lazzarato argues, the future ‘seem[s] to be frozen’: ‘for debt simply

neutralizes time, time as the creation of new possibilities, that is to say, the raw material of all political, social, or esthetic change' (2012: 49). Taxis' graffiti exemplifies this temporality of an eternal present that forecloses 'possibilities for action' (Lazzarato, 2012: 71):<sup>2</sup> the young boy is literally blocked by a double burden extending from the past to the future.

Asserting the omnipresence of debt today, Lazzarato makes a link between financial debt and the symbolic debt to one's past:

'Indebted man' is subject to a creditor-debtor power relation accompanying him throughout his life, from birth to death. If in times past we were indebted to the community, to the gods, to our ancestors, we are henceforth indebted to the 'god' Capital. (2012: 32)

Whereas Lazzarato sees Capital as the 'universal creditor' that has now virtually subsumed other forms of symbolic debt (including the debt to the past), in this article I argue that a critical juxtaposition of these two forms of debt, when it moves beyond easy stereotypes, can open up ways of rethinking debt through alternative grammars. Can we revisit discourses of debt – financial and symbolic – through grammars that could restore a form of agency to the 'indebted subject' and challenge the asymmetrical power relation between debtor and creditor? The interrelation of the financial debt and the symbolic debt to the past has intensely preoccupied artistic and literary works created during the crisis in Greece. In the following, two such works will be my interlocutors in probing this interrelation: the novella *Κοντά στην κοιλιά* [*Close to the Belly*] (2014) by Sotiris Dimitriou and an untitled art installation by Stefania Strouza (2011) conceived as part of the exhibition 'Summer in the Middle of Winter' (Kunsthalle Athena, Athens).

At stake in this exploration is the subjectivity produced by the discourse of debt. This discourse involves a paradox: as David Graeber argues, debt – unlike other forms of subordination, such as slavery or caste – rests on an initial relation of 'legal equality' between two parties: two parties enter a 'contract' that puts the debtor 'in a position of subordination', but when the debt is repaid, 'the original position of equality' is supposed to be 'restored' (2011: 233). Therefore, the blame for the dependency, inferiority, and suffering that debt produces for the debtor is not placed on the creditor. Shame and guilt fall on the debtor, who is considered responsible for repaying the debt and 'at fault' when failing to do so (2011: 233). As Graeber puts it, 'it is one thing to tell a man or a woman that they are simply inferior. It is another to tell them they ought to be equals but they have failed' (2011: 233). Debt thus becomes a convenient 'way to tell those one has subordinated [...] that their troubles are their own fault' (2011: 233). Therefore, although debt invalidates the indebted subject and deprives him or her of agency and choice, this subject is nonetheless judged according to the liberal notion of a sovereign, willing subject responsible for his or her fate.

In a previous article, I argued that popular narratives of the Greek crisis, within the country and internationally, constructed the (Greek) subject as either active or passive, following the 'grammar' of either the active or the passive voice (Boletsis, 2016: 8–11). The predominant moralistic narratives of the Greek crisis projected Greeks as guilty of the debt due to their irresponsible behaviour, thereby casting them as 'active' agents, responsible for their plight. By contrast, narratives of the crisis as systemic, mostly from

the Left, presented Greeks as powerless victims of an ailing political system or of the forces of finance capitalism, and thus as ‘passive’ subjects.<sup>3</sup> These accounts, as I argued, drew mainly on two notions of subjectivity: the former was premised on the idea of the autonomous, self-defining liberal subject, and the latter on a notion of the subject as conditioned and determined by social and ideological forces (Boletsi, 2016: 8, 10). The narratives grounded in the notion of a free-willed subject, master of his or her destiny, subscribed to a moral discourse of debt that demanded that Greeks be punished for their own mistakes. This insistence on the grammar of the autonomous subject in the rhetoric of crisis is key to subject(ivat)ing indebted citizens. Finance capitalism wants to sustain the illusion of free will, so that the forces of finance can expand without restraint, while the material effects of these forces can be blamed on individuals or nations for not living up to their responsibilities as debtors (Abbas, 2015; Boletsi, 2016: 10).

Setting out to address debt – financial and symbolic – through alternative accounts of subjectivity that disrupt the passive/active binary and power relation between debtor and creditor, I turn to artistic attempts to mine alternative ‘grammars’. Particularly, I focus on the semantic, political, and affective potential of the ‘middle voice’, which I employ not only as a grammatical category but, more generally, as an expressive modality in language and other media. The works I will discuss intervene in versions of subjectivity that dominate crisis-rhetoric and test alternative conceptions of the indebted subject through the modality of the middle voice.

### Shedding off the debt<sup>4</sup>

Debates about the Greek debt crisis in Greece and Europe centred on ‘judgment’ – one of the meanings of crisis (*κρίσις*) in ancient Greek.<sup>5</sup> Discussions about what caused the crisis regularly turned into a ‘blame-game’, a term that was regularly used in media reports on the crisis. The novella *Κοντά στην κοιλιά / Close to the Belly* (2014) by well-known author Sotiris Dimitriou takes this present time of crisis and judgment as its starting point and goes on to imagine a fictional (anti-)utopian Greek society in the future, which detaches itself from the burden of this judgment as well as from the burden of its past.

In the novella’s first part, the finger-pointing and blame-transfer during the crisis takes centre stage:

When the country went bankrupt our partner countries kept pointing the finger at us; their fingers stiffened.

So we started, baffled, to point at one another.

‘This one is to blame’, ‘and this one, and this one, and that one and the other one there in the corner.’<sup>6</sup>

The finger-pointing is succeeded by a phase of ‘national self-awareness’ that culminates in a carnivalesque frenzy of self-blaming, guilt, and shame:

‘It’s my fault, it’s my fault’ everyone was shouting.

‘Please, it is more my fault.’

‘No Sir, it’s my fault.’

The ‘it’s my fault’ was about to turn into a self-destructive movement.<sup>7</sup>

Agitators appear on a public stage and deliver speeches that expose the public sins of several groups, driving people to public confessions, lamentations, and displays of remorse and self-reproach (Boletsi, 2017: 263). By satirically staging a secular ‘Judgment Day’ of sorts, the novella transposes the theological meaning of ‘crisis’ (*krisis*) as (Final) judgment<sup>8</sup> into the financial crisis, thereby foregrounding the morality of guilt, shame, and fault to which the discourse of debt is tied. As Friedrich Nietzsche reminds us in his *Genealogy of Morality*, the ‘main moral concept “Schuld” (“guilt”) descends from the very material concept of “Schulden” (“debts”)’ (2006: 39). In *The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance*, Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi likens economists to priests ‘denouncing society’s bad behaviors, asking you to repent for your debts, threatening inflation and misery for your sins’, much like the novella’s agitators (2012: 71).

In this first part of the story nobody escapes the ‘guilty’ verdict. If, following Lazzarato, in finance capitalism all population groups are ‘indebted’ to the Great creditor of Capital (2012: 7), everyone is condemned to guilt and shame, as the novella’s following scene exemplifies:

‘Yes, yes, we have sinned’ everyone was shouting by then, bailiffs, dockworkers, drivers, registrars, farmers, minute-takers and lawyers, teachers, professors, pilots and tutors, customs officers, bailiffs and judges – no, not judges, let them be excluded – rectors and hookers.

All the people, one voice of repentance. But the agitator was relentless.

‘Damn you all communistocapitalists.’<sup>9</sup>

By satirically inflating the main tenets of the moral discourse of debt, the novella accentuates its premises. In capitalism, Lazzarato writes in his discussion of Marx’s views on the matter, ‘solvency serves as the measure of the “morality” of man’: solvency and insolvency correspond to ‘[t]he “moral” concepts of good and bad’ (2012: 58). The message that ‘the media, politicians, and economists’ convey when there is talk of debt is this: ‘You are at fault’, ‘You are guilty’ (2012: 30–31).

The economic relation of debt for Lazzarato ‘implies the molding and control of subjectivity’ (2012: 33). How is debt constitutive of the subject? If debt is the speech act of a promise of payment, this speech act, Lazzarato argues via Nietzsche, is not simply conditioned on the memory of the promise to repay the debt, but ‘presupposes a “mnemotechnics” of cruelty and a mnemotechnics of pain, which, like the machine of Kafka’s penal colony, inscribe the promise of debt repayment on the body itself’ (2012: 40–41). Nietzsche argues that the creditor takes pleasure in subjecting the debtor to bodily pain



**Figure 2.** The wall-writing *vasanizomai* in Stadiou Street, Athens, 2014. Photograph by the author.

and sees pain as ‘the most powerful aid to mnemonics’: ‘A thing must be burnt in so that it stays in the memory: only something that continues to hurt stays in the memory’, he writes (2006: 38). Eventually, debt can drive the debtor to self-torture – something Nietzsche links with Christian morality. The ‘bad conscience’ that debt produces leads man to inflict ‘self-torture with its most horrific hardness and sharpness. Debt towards God: this thought becomes an instrument of torture’ (Nietzsche, 2006: 63). Bringing Nietzsche’s views to bear on today’s finance capitalism, Lazzarato finds that the process Nietzsche lays out applies to the way capitalism constructs ‘a person capable of promising: labor goes hand in hand with work on the self, with self-torture, with self-directed action’ (2012: 42).

The novella enacts this process of becoming-indebted as a (self-)torment through the agitators’ public humiliations and people’s displays of penitence. The same process is also encapsulated by a wall-writing with which the novella begins, featuring the verb ‘βασανίζομαι’ [*vasanizomai*]. The wall-writing, which can be translated as ‘I am in torment’, is foregrounded in the novella’s opening lines: ‘The word “*vasanizomai*” appeared on the walls soon after the country’s demise started. Fast as the wind, it filled the whole city.’<sup>10</sup> The novella refers here to a very popular wall-writing that appeared under several repetitions and variations in Greek cities since the crisis broke out and has become emblematic of the urban crisis-scape in the country (Figures 2 and 3).<sup>11</sup> In the novella, *vasanizomai* captures the torment of a people subjected to an unrelenting judgment that turns into guilt and self-blame. But the verb carries an ambiguity that complicates its semantic and affective operations. As I argued in a previous study, *vasanizomai* refers to the condition of the subject: the verb’s subject is the one affected by the action, i.e., the one in torment. This typifies grammatical constructions in the middle voice, in which the subject is internal to the action and affected by it (Boletsi, 2016: 7–8). The middle voice has disappeared as a grammatical category in Modern Greek as in most modern languages, and has been redistributed into the binary distinction between the active and passive



**Figure 3.** The wall-writing *vasanizomai* in Arrianou street, Thessaloniki, 2019. Photograph courtesy of Aggela Boletsi.

voices. Nevertheless, there are still linguistic constructions that convey the *meaning* of the middle voice either through passive or active verbs. In such constructions, the subject is *inside* the designated process or action (Benveniste, 1971: 148; Pecora, 1991: 210) but the agent *causing* the action often remains unspecified or ambiguous.

Moving from grammar to theory, thinkers such as Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Hayden White, and Giorgio Agamben have theorised the middle voice as a form of discourse that resists binary oppositions, such as those between transitive and intransitive, active and passive, subject and object (Agamben, 2016: 28; Barthes, 1970; Derrida, 1982; LaCapra, 2001: 20; White, 2010). In Derrida's thinking, the middle voice converges with his notion of *différance* (1982: 9): it is an operation repressed by the opposition of the active and the passive voice, and, by extension, as Dominick LaCapra writes, it captures 'the 'in-between' voice of undecidability and the unavailability or radical ambivalence of clear-cut oppositions' (2001: 20). As a theoretical concept, the middle voice suspends judgment in oppositional terms (for example, guilty or innocent, perpetrator or victim, active or passive). Even though such a suspension of judgment may harbour political dangers (LaCapra, 2001: 26), I have argued that it also allows for more nuanced and complex positions of responsibility and alternative forms of subjectivity to be articulated (Boletsi, 2016: 8, 23–24). The subject in the middle voice cannot be straightforwardly qualified as either active or passive, agent or victim, as the agent is also the object, or the one affected by the action.

In *vasanizomai*, the middle voice generates ambiguity. The subject is involved in the process, but the agent causing the torment is left unspecified: the agent could be the subject itself – as in 'I am tormenting myself' – or another person or entity – as in 'I am tormented' (by someone or something else). This yields a muddling of the positions of victim and perpetrator, resulting in a precarious agency and obscuring the cause of the torment: features that typify middle voice constructions (Boletsi, 2016: 8).

If the crisis-rhetoric in the novella takes shape as a sadistic process of identifying and shaming ‘guilty’ citizens and making them repent in a ludic tribunal of Justice, *vasanizomai* forms a complex intervention in this process. On the one hand, the indeterminacy of the agent in this middle voice construction underscores the *event* – the suffering – rather than the agent responsible for it, deflecting attention away from the blame-game of the crisis-rhetoric. On the other hand, *vasanizomai* also exemplifies the process of becoming indebted in modern-day capitalism as a form of suffering for which the indebted subject rather than the creditor is held responsible. In his discussion of Nietzsche’s ideas on the matter, Gilles Deleuze traces this ‘internalized’ debt to Christianity. While in imperial formations before Christianity debt ‘remained “exterior” to the individual and his conscience’ (Lazzarato, 2012: 78), with Christianity, Deleuze writes, ‘[t]he pain of a debtor is internalized, responsibility for the debt becomes a feeling of guilt’ (Deleuze, 1986: 142). The novella’s quasi-religious staging of the financial crisis underscores this Christian morality of debt, as it is inherited by modern-day capitalism. In finance capitalism, the external creditor-tormentor – Capital – replaces God and assumes an immanent rather than transcendental existence. Owing to the extreme abstraction of forces of finance, however, this immanent Creditor becomes too obscured and cannot be clearly identified as the external agent causing the suffering. The suffering thus appears as a form of torment the subject inflicts upon itself and is responsible for. Cast in the middle voice, *vasanizomai* epitomises this process: ‘I am in torment’ alludes possibly to self-inflicted torture; yet it also allows for the postulation of a possible external agent-tormentor, albeit grammatically obscured. It thereby makes the process of subjectivation through debt explicit but also contestable.

Significantly, *vasanizomai* also captures the condition of indebtedness as a form of suffering without end. As debt becomes internalised with Christianity, Deleuze writes, it ‘loses the active character by virtue of which it took part in man’s liberation’ and becomes ‘inexhaustible, *unpayable*’, infinite (1986: 141). Suffering becomes interminable too: ‘it is no longer a matter of a suffering through which debt is paid, but of a suffering through which one is shackled to it’ and ‘becomes a debtor forever’ (1986: 141). The wall-writing *vasanizomai* performs this perpetual suffering of indebted subjects: in the present continuous, the verb casts the suffering as durative, while the three ellipsis marks that follow *vasanizomai* in most of its appearances on Greek walls accentuate the suffering as unending and extend it towards the future.

The novella, however, tries to envision a utopian escape from the suffering of indebtedness. After a long-lasting process of blaming, self-chastising, and judgment of collective failures, the country releases the burden of guilt and judgment and enters a new state of ‘lightness’ that entails historical amnesia (Boletsi, 2017: 267). Disengaging not only from the financial crisis but also from the burden of history, which are both projected as sites of collective trauma and neurosis, people try to achieve a debt-less and guilt-less state (Boletsi, 2017: 269). Without compulsory rules and laws, people are free to choose their preferred mode of living based on a wide selection of ideas and worldviews offered by various parties and sects.

One of these parties stands out as ‘having changed the course of the species’, and it is the one that gives the novella its title: ‘the party of the initial complacency’ (‘το κόμμα του αρχικού εφησυχασμού’) also known as ‘close to the belly’ (Dimitriou, 2014: 63). The party’s double title alludes to the happy oblivion of humans when still swimming in

the mother's amniotic fluid, which the narrator likens to the feeling of floating in the sea (2014: 65). In the *locus amoenus* this party constructs, crisis in both its meanings of *distinction* (difference) and *judgment* is suspended: the oneness of the foetus with the mother's body denotes the desire for the wholeness of the imaginary order that resists the separation of the symbolic order (Boletsi, 2017: 269). This state of oblivion is an escape from the double debt of history and the financial crisis. In an interview about the book, the author, Sotiris Dimitriou, addressed this desire for a debt-less, weight-less state in the following words:

Ενα κομβικό σημείο ενθυμήσεως γι' αυτή τη νουβέλα ήταν η αγάπη μου για τη θάλασσα. Κάθε φορά που βρισκόμουν κοντά της, ένιωθα πως κατά κάποιον τρόπο ξεχρῶνα. Δηλαδή, ξεχνούσα τα μικροβάσανα, η θάλασσα τα απαλείφει. Έκανα τη σύνδεση με τη μικρή θάλασσα του αμνιακού υγρού της κύησης και υπέθεσα ότι εκεί υπάρχει πλήρης ευδαιμονία. (Dimitriou qtd. in Spinou, 2015: n.pag.; emphasis added)

A focal point of remembrance for this novel was my love for the sea. Whenever I was close to her, I felt that in some way *I shed my debt*. That is, I forgot small miseries, the sea erases them. I drew the connection with the small sea of amniotic fluid in pregnancy and assumed that there is full bliss there.<sup>12</sup>

The verb Dimitriou uses for 'shedding my debt' – *ξεχρῶνα* (*xehreona*) – merits scrutiny. *Ξεχρῶνω* (*xehreono*) can be used as transitive or intransitive. As transitive, it means 'to pay off a debt' that is my own or repay someone to whom I owe, but it can also mean 'to relieve *someone else* from a debt' by repaying it *for* them (Babinotis, 1998: 1235; emphasis added). As intransitive, the verb denotes that one 'ceases to be in debt' (1998: 1235). These uses allow different ways of positioning the verb's subject in relation to the debt. In the transitive form, the subject can pay off their own or someone else's debt – in the latter case, accepting, as it were, the burden of a debt that is not their own. As an intransitive verb, which is how Dimitriou uses it in the above quote, it becomes a middle voice construction: the subject ceases to be in debt, but the verb does not specify *how* and *by whom* the debt is waved. It can be due to an action performed by the subject (i.e., the subject does something that pays off or erases its debt) or due to an action by another, external agent, or a combination of both.

In Dimitriou's quote, being in the sea becomes a way of ceasing to be in debt, but this state does not involve an active gesture of *repaying* a debt to a creditor. It could even be seen as a *declaration of insolvency*: a leaving-behind of one's debts, a letting-go of the identity of the indebted subject by entering another existential state. The creditor is absent: syntactically, the sentence leaves no room for designating this subject-position. The nature of the debt is also left undetermined, as the verb is intransitive, without object. All we know is that a debt is shed, leading to a blissful state of insolvency or debt-relief. This process involves an act by the subject – entering the sea – but the sea that embraces the subject also participates in this shedding, making it unclear *who* fulfils the promise of repayment or erases the debt: does the subject repay (or renounce) its debts or does the sea do it for him? The subject is thus neither active nor passive. The positions of creditor and debtor are bracketed: emphasis is placed not on who owes and who repays, but on the act of ceasing to be indebted; this act thus unravels in the middle voice.

In the novella, *xehreono* encapsulates a disengagement from the double debt of the crisis-ridden present and the past. As such, it forms the counterpart of *vasanizomai*, which captures the interiorization of an interminable debt by the subject in finance capitalism. From the torment (*βάσανος*) of this interiorization, *ξεχρεώνω* takes us to the fantasy of the subject's unity with the world, as experienced in a mother's womb: a return to the Lacanian imaginary, where no distinctions have been introduced yet by language, no division between debtor and creditor. This state disavows a subjectivity conditioned on debt and registers a desire for reconnecting with one's body.

Searching for ways to break with the condition of the indebted subject today, Berardi examines the relation between language and the economy and pleads for rekindling language's 'affective potencies' by allowing it to reconnect with the body (2012: 13, 18). Such a 'poetic revitalization of language' could engender 'a new form of social autonomy' as an antidote to the 'subjugation' of the 'sphere of affection and language to finance capitalism' and the 'growing abstraction of work from its useful function, and of communication from its bodily dimension' (2012: 13, 19). Berardi describes 'the process of emancipating language and affects' through the notion of '*insolvency*', seen as a means of escaping 'the reduction of language to exchange' and its increasing abstraction and automation in capitalism (2012: 16).

When Richard Nixon 'suspended the convertibility of dollar into gold' in 1971, debt became untied to a 'material thing' (Graeber, 2011: 237). The abolition of the gold standard 'dereferentialized' the monetary economy by announcing that 'the dollar would have no reference to reality' (Berardi, 2012: 30). Money started inventing the world, disengaged from any material referent, any 'reference to physical goods' (2012: 19): this marked the start of finance capitalism and of the 'hypertrophic growth of debt' (2012: 31). Berardi traces a similar but earlier process in poetry: the separation of the linguistic signifier from its referent – the 'dereferentialization of language' – had already taken shape in the poetry of the symbolists, who forgot the referent, granting autonomy to the signifier (2012: 18, 30). Poetry thus 'foresaw' the 'abandonment of referentiality' and the delinking of language from the affective sphere that happened with the financialization of capitalist economy (2012: 19). If poetry anticipated this development, Berardi argues, it can now also provide an alternative by reactivating the 'emotional body' and 'social solidarity' (2012: 20).

The novella also searches for alternatives to the 'torment' of an indebted subjectivity. The party of 'close to the belly' signals an attempted reconnection with the first body, the body of the mother, emulated by the act of floating in the sea. But if the '*insolvency*' Berardi calls for requires a relinking of language with the referent – i.e., the body and the material world – this attempt in the novella goes one step too far: resorting to the unity of the imaginary, the fantasy of 'close to the belly' disavows the symbolic order and thus any conceptual distinction altogether between signifier, signified, and referent. Ultimately, this eschewing of difference cancels the future instead of opening it up to multiple possibilities, hinting perhaps at the problematic tendency to 'uniformity' that typifies many utopias (Jameson, 2005: ix).

Indeed, the development of the future society the novella imagines confirms that this escape from debt is doomed to fail. In the novella's last part, the nation turns into a 'coffee republic' where everybody's life purpose becomes serving or consuming coffee.

What is left of history are just simplified fairy tales and decorative images for coffee cups or touristic products (Boletsi 2017: 270–271):

The cups depicted scenes from the nation's three-thousand-year history. [...] Of course the tourists were stealing the cups as souvenirs but boatloads came to us from Taiwan. [...]

By painting its history on the cups, the nation was finally relieved from its everlasting burden. It now had the force of a newly born nation.<sup>13</sup>

As history is consumed by the present, the fantasy of an escape from all debt ends up reinforcing the tendency Fredric Jameson traced in late capitalism to commercialise, subsume, and empty out history (1991). If debt, following Lazzarato, neutralises the future by minimising the space of possibility (2012: 49), the novella's attempt to *disengage* from all debt – particularly the debt to the past – does not lead to a radically different future: it yields the eternal present of a capitalist dystopia in which babies, as we read, are predestined to serve coffee as soon as they exit the mother's womb (Dimitriou, 2014: 87). By declaring 'insolvency' and disengaging from the past, the country deprives itself of a future. There is no change or openness to unknown possibilities: only a future-less, depoliticised present that ends with the destruction of mankind (Boletsi, 2017: 272).

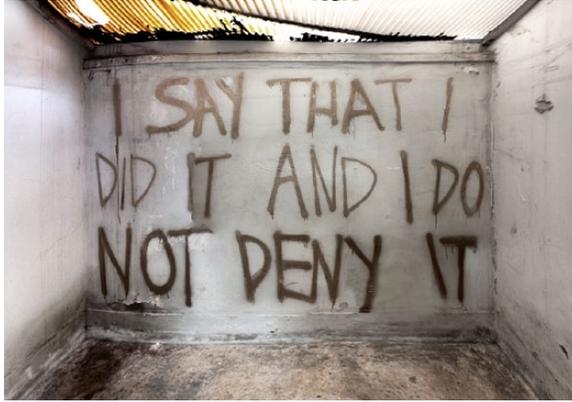
The alternative conception of debt and subjectivity that the middle voice in *xehreono* harbours, however, need not follow the direction it takes in Dimitriou's novella. Muddling the asymmetrical debtor/creditor distinction does not necessarily lead to a cancellation of distinction and difference altogether. The 2010 untitled installation by Stefania Strouza, to which I will now turn, constitutes another attempt to cast debt in the middle voice by linking financial debt to the symbolic debt to the past. The two wall-writings comprising this artwork are not, strictly speaking, linguistic constructions in the middle voice, as in the case of *vasanizomai* and *xehreono*. Nevertheless, with the viewer's participation, they yield an expressive mode through language and image that, as I will argue, approaches the modality of the middle voice. This mode negotiates alternative accounts of subjectivity to those prevalent in narratives of the crisis, that is, the autonomous subject, maker of his or her own fate (a subject in the 'active voice') and the determined subject, victim of forces he or she cannot control (a subject in the 'passive voice').

## Reconfiguring the debt: Between Antigone and Marx

Strouza's work is a site-specific installation conceived in 2011 as part of the group exhibition 'Summer in the Middle of Winter' in Kunsthalle Athena, which was then housed in an unrestored, run-down neoclassical building.<sup>14</sup> The exhibition was part of the biennial event 'ReMap 3' (from September 12 to October 30, 2011), which that year took place in the Athenian neighbourhood of Kerameikos-Metaxourgeio. ReMap 3 included 50 exhibitions, many of which were set up in the area's 'unoccupied buildings, storefronts, spaces and lots' (Bradley, 2011). The installation revolves around two phrases:

They do not know it but they are doing it

I say that I did it and I do not deny it



**Figures 4 and 5.** Untitled (2011) by Stefania Strouza. Gold spray paint on two sides of a 2.10 x 2.90 m wall. Installation view from the exhibition ‘Summer in the Middle of Winter’, Kunsthalle Athena, Athens, Greece. Photographs by Eva Kourou, courtesy of Stefania Strouza.

The phrases are English translations of quotes from Karl Marx’s *Das Kapital* and Sophocles’ *Antigone* respectively, written with gold spray paint and placed as each other’s mirror images on the two sides of the exhibition’s central wall (Figures 4 and 5).

‘I say that I did it and I do not deny it’: Antigone speaks here to Creon, responding to his question ‘do you admit, or do you deny, that you have done this?’ (Sophocles, 1994: 43). ‘This’ refers to the funeral rites and symbolic burial she performed for her brother Polyneices despite King Creon’s injunction. Marx’s line is taken from chapter one (‘Commodities’) of *Capital*, section 4, titled ‘The fetishism of commodities and the secret thereof’ (1965). The quote refers to the process by which people relate products of labour with each other as values, but the phrase has also been read, notably by Slavoj

Žižek, as an epitome of the function of ideology as false consciousness, manifested as a ‘discordance between what people are effectively doing and what they think they are doing’ (Žižek, 2008: 27). This understanding of ideology supports the Marxian notion of the determined subject ignorant of the true social relations that dictate its role in the capitalist system of production.

In Antigone’s line, the subject poses as the source of her actions: autonomous, conscious of her deeds, taking responsibility for them. The subject of Sophocles’ line thus appears as the counterpart of the subject in Marx’s line. These roughly correspond to the two versions of subjectivity I traced in dominant narratives of the Greek crisis: active versus passive (Boletsi, 2016: 8–11). As there is no explicit identification of the quotations’ sources in the artwork, the lines can also function independently of their sources, as fragments that resonate in the Greek social and political crisis-scape in which they appeared in 2011. The artwork was indeed conceived as a critical intervention in the rhetoric of crisis in Greece. According to the artist’s description of the installation, ‘the project explores the notion of political and ethical responsibility and the *schisms* that surround it in the current “crisis” discourse’ (Strouza, 2011; emphasis added). In this context, and at first sight, the two lines seem to stage the ‘schisms’ of crisis rhetoric, and particularly the opposition between the ‘active’ and ‘passive’ subject of the crisis: willing versus determined, powerful versus powerless, guilty versus innocent.

The placement of the wall-writings on the two sides of the central wall of the exhibition makes it impossible for viewers to see them both at the same time. The writings can never face each other. This placement may suggest their incommensurable content, yet it simultaneously casts them as two sides of the same coin, suggesting their interconnectedness and a shared ground or value. Nevertheless, the figure of the coin still exemplifies an either/or structure: when you toss a coin, you acknowledge that there are only two options; there can be no third side or in-between space. Does the installation suggest that ‘political and ethical responsibility’ (Strouza, 2011) can only be addressed through one of the two versions of subjectivity these lines appear to represent and that the viewer will thus have to choose a side?

Although the quotations may function independently of their originary contexts in the installation, they also evoke Marx’s *Capital* and Sophocles’ *Antigone* and invite the spectres of these classics into the new context the installation creates. If Antigone’s line appears to adopt the discourse of the willing, sovereign subject, in the tragedy’s dominant reception she is of course a model of civil disobedience to sovereign power – the heroic figure of a ‘conscientious objector’ (Honig, 2013: 7).<sup>15</sup> She embodies the individual’s right to defy the sovereign in order to fulfil a personal obligation: to properly grieve the loss of a loved one. Her relation to the discourse of sovereignty, however, is anything but straightforward. In her reading of Sophocles’ heroine, Judith Butler argues that Antigone repeats the terms of Creon’s discourse of sovereignty by speaking back to Creon. Butler discusses Antigone’s defiance not only in the act of her brother’s burial but as an act of language, focusing on the same line the installation borrows, in which Antigone refuses ‘to perform a denial’ (2000: 8). As a response to a question posed by an authority (Creon), Antigone’s utterance ‘concedes the authority this other has over her’ (Butler, 2000: 8). Thus,

as she begins to act in language, she also departs from herself. Her act is never fully her act, and though she uses language to claim her deed, to assert a ‘manly’ and defiant autonomy, she can perform that act only through embodying the norms of the power she opposes. Indeed, what gives these verbal acts their power is the normative operation of power that they embody without quite becoming. (2000: 10)

Contrary to a reading of Antigone’s deed in terms of a straightforward opposition to power from a position external to this power, Butler reads the linguistic act that ‘seals’ Antigone’s opposition as deeply ambivalent, because it assimilates Creon’s sovereign discourse and his ‘rhetoric of agency’ in order to oppose it (2000: 11):

Her agency emerges precisely through her refusal to honour his [Creon’s] command, and yet the language of this refusal assimilates the very terms of sovereignty that she refuses. He expects that his word will govern her deeds, and she speaks back to him, countering his sovereign speech act by asserting her own sovereignty. The claiming becomes an act that reiterates the act it affirms, extending the act of insubordination by performing its avowal in language. This avowal, paradoxically, *requires a sacrifice of autonomy at the very moment in which it is performed*: she asserts herself through appropriating the voice of the other, the one to whom she is opposed. (2000: 11; emphasis added)

As an assimilation of the ‘idiom of the one she opposes’, Antigone’s act in Butler’s reading is ‘hardly pure’ and thus ‘difficult [...] to romanticize’ (2000: 23).<sup>16</sup> As Antigone asserts her autonomy, her language betrays its *indebtedness* to Creon’s discourse of sovereignty: this debt becomes manifest at the same moment that her language declares *insolvency* and asserts autonomy from Creon’s law.

This indebtedness, however, does not cancel her agency: rather, it allows her to expose the *vulnerability* of the ‘creditor’s’ discourse. Her deed, which ‘is and is not her own’, may iterate the terms of sovereign power, but it also throws ‘the reigning regimes of representation into crisis’, it confounds the terms of sovereign power and norms of kinship as it rearticulates them (2000: 24). Antigone’s claim exposes the ‘precarious character of these norms, their sudden and disturbing transferability and their capacity to be reiterated in contexts and in ways that are not fully to be anticipated’ (2000: 24). Framed in this way, Antigone’s line is not a pure affirmation of the sovereign subject, but a form of resistance that appropriates and iterates the discourse of the sovereign, using it against itself.

The appropriation and subversion of Creon’s sovereign speech by Antigone yields a form of agency disengaged from the subject’s *autonomy*. In another reading of Sophocles’ heroine, Bonnie Honig also questions Antigone’s autonomy, but from a different angle. Contrary to Antigone’s reading as an ‘isolated, lone, suffering heroine’ (2013: 55), she reads her as ‘a figure of conspiracy’, engaging in a ‘conspiratorial form of communication’ that involves others, and most notably, her sister (2013: 2–3). Honig goes against readings of Antigone as either ‘a figure of resistance’ to sovereign power or a ‘lamer of the dead’ (2013: 7, 19) – two opposed lines of reception that force us to choose between Antigone as an *active* political agent or a universal humanist subject beyond politics (and thus politically impotent or irrelevant). Questioning these seemingly incompatible figures (which, on a certain level, I would add, can be understood in terms of an active/passive

binary), Honig finds in Antigone ‘inspiration for an agonistic humanism’, in which vulnerability, ‘mortality and suffering’ but also ‘natality and pleasure’, ‘powerlessness’ but also ‘power’, ‘principle’ but also ‘desire’, ‘*penthos*’ (mourning) but also ‘*thumos*’ (anger) (2013: 19) become resources for performing a ‘politics of counter-sovereignty, conspiracy, and solidarity’ (2013: 10). As Honig puts it:

Antigone is not merely the lamenting sister Hegel admired nor the political martyr appropriated by dissidents all over the modern world. She is a lamenting sister and she does die for her cause but she is, more fundamentally, a political actor embroiled in burial, kinship, and polis politics, one who plots, conspires, and maneuvers her way in and out of trouble on behalf of the sovereign form that she considers to be hers by right. (2013: 20)

Albeit from different perspectives and through different arguments, Butler’s and Honig’s readings both refuse to ground Antigone’s subjectivity and agency in *autonomy*. Such readings thus cause cracks in the oppositional structure the two wall-writings in Strouza’s installation seem to form. Antigone’s words contain a difference within: her words are not fully her own (Butler) and her deed is not performed in isolation (Honig).

Are there similar cracks in Marx’s line? ‘They do not know it but they are doing it’: rethinking and updating this line, Žižek argues that today the determined subject is in fact a cynical subject who *knows* but pretends not to know. Žižek uses the line to elucidate the contemporary workings of what Peter Sloterdijk called ‘cynical reason’ (Žižek, 2008: 27). Revisiting the idea of ideology as false consciousness (i.e., the idea that people have a distorted representation of their social reality), he revises Marx’s line as follows: ‘They know very well how things really are, but still they are doing it as if they did not know’ (2008: 30).

To illustrate this, Žižek refers to the way people see money according to Marx: money poses as ‘a universal equivalent of all commodities’ and a ‘materialization of a network of social relations’ (2008: 27). People falsely believe that this function is somehow a material, natural property of money, as if a coin’s materiality actually embodies wealth: this idea is at the heart of Marx’s commodity fetishism and the reification of social relations. The same idea also has consequences for the relation between objects and human subjects: it suggests that subjects become passive, determined by ideology, while objects turn into active, determining agents. Questioning the assumption that people do not know this, Žižek argues that they *do* know but act ‘as if money, in its material reality, is the immediate embodiment of wealth as such’ (2008: 28). If Antigone performs a double denial in the above-discussed line, the subject in Žižek’s updating of Marx’s line performs a denial too, albeit of a different kind: it denies *knowing*. This for Žižek amounts to a ‘double’ illusion that ‘consists in overlooking the illusion which is structuring our real, effective relationship to reality’ (2008: 30).

Žižek draws from Sloterdijk to describe the cynical reason that typifies our supposedly ‘postideological’ era: ‘they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it’ (Žižek, 2008: 30); that is, ‘they know that, in their activity, they are following an illusion, but still, they are doing it’ (2008: 30). People know, for instance, ‘that their idea of Freedom is masking a particular form of exploitation’ and yet adhere to this idea (2008: 30).<sup>17</sup> Žižek thereby draws attention not to the unmasking of the ideology that

structures social relations (i.e., critique of ideology) but to the efficacy of what he calls the 'ideological fantasy' itself (2008: 34). His revision of the Marxian formula seems to give back to the subject a form of agency with regard to 'knowing': at least, the subject *knows*. This knowledge, however, is bought at the price of cynicism.

The readings of the installation's lines that I laid out above treat the 'debt' we, contemporary readers, owe to these classics – *Antigone*, *Capital* – as an obligation to reread them against the grain and open them up to new signifying transactions by bringing them to bear on the present. Whether one agrees with Žižek or not, his updating of Marx's line rethinks Marx's debt in the contemporary world *with* and *against* Marx.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, Butler and Honig revisit our debt to Antigone against the grain of this heroine's dominant reception, casting Antigone's subjectivity as less autonomous, without diminishing the political thrust of her words and acts. Strouza's installation, as I will show, provokes such re-readings, and in doing so, invites a recasting of the discourse of debt.

The artwork's materiality contributes to this recasting. The gold spray paint used for the wall-writings creates a shiny reflective surface that emulates the metallic texture of the precious metal, enhancing the impression that the installation emulates a coin. If the installation addresses our debt to Antigone and Marx today, the gold colour metonymically raises the question of the *value* of these lines and the works they were taken from: if we owe to Sophocles' *Antigone* and Marx, how are we to determine the value of these utterances in the present?

With the installation resembling a *coin* structure, the wall-writings can be seen as a form of currency. Returning to Marx here seems inevitable. Marx's line is, after all, derived from his chapter on commodity fetishism and refers to people's misguided understanding of the relation between products and value. In the paragraph to which this line belongs, Marx argues that value 'converts every product into a social hieroglyphic' and that '[I]ater on, we try to decipher the hieroglyphic, to get behind the secret of our own social products' (1965: n.pag.). In other words, we construct a mystical relation between the concrete (thing) and the universal, which we then try to decipher, even though we are the ones who devised it in the first place. For Marx, this is comparable to the way people treat language. Language, like objects, is a social product that people nevertheless perceive as a transparent medium for expressing universal truths. The installation demystifies language: by projecting the 'thingness' of these utterances through the gold paint, it deters viewers from seeing the words as appearances of an autonomous abstract value expressed through them – i.e., as universal truths about the subject. Instead, their value becomes tied to, and contingent on, their 'thingness', their material form: the gold paint on a wall.

The evocation of gold through the spray paint creates an intricate link between financial debt and the symbolic debt to the 'classics' – here, *Antigone* and *Capital*. The gold paint creates the impression that the two lines as signifiers have a material referent that 'guarantees' their value, just like gold used to function as a referent for money until Nixon's abolition of the gold standard set off a process of abstraction that disengaged money from its referent and language from the affective sphere (Berardi, 2012: 19, 31). Does the gold colour in the installation resist the process of language's abstraction that Berardi traces in finance capitalism? Is it a plea for returning language to its material referent?

If gold remains unscathed by time, these ‘golden’ canonical lines should have an eternal value as expressive of universal truths. The installation, however, undermines gold as a ‘standard’ for value. The spray paint is not real gold: it looks like a gold-coating of something impermanent, if not counterfeit. The material referent that could warrant the stable value of these lines is just a coating and is, furthermore, part of an impermanent art form on the decaying wall of an exhibition housed in a dilapidated, unrestored neo-classical building. If, as Walter Benjamin wrote, ‘[q]uoting a text entails interrupting its context’ (2006: 305), this ‘interruption’ unravels here in a precarious space of ruins that contradicts any claim to permanence. The impression of the eternal value of these canonical lines (written ‘in gold’, as it were), which is central to processes of monumentalization, is disrupted: in a space of modern ruins, these lines too appear as ruins of the past with no *inherent* value we can determine by appealing to a universal standard.

The two lines are tied to a material form, but the transience of this form suggests that their value and meaning have to be constantly reassessed in and by the present, just as Butler, Honig, and Žižek revised these lines and just as the installation places them in a new configuration. Against the abstraction and automation of language that Berardi sees as a by-product of the financialization of the economy, the installation reclaims a materiality for these signifiers without, however, resorting to a ‘gold’ standard for their value. The artwork thereby projects the implication of language (and art) in the logic of economic exchange and automation but also finds a way to thwart this logic.

### **The creditor-debtor relation as a deictic exchange and the agency of the indebted subject**

If we are indebted to objects with no intrinsic or universal value, what is it that we owe exactly? The installation restores agency to the indebted subject by allowing the value of the debt to be co-determined by the contemporary debtors – here, the installation’s viewers. The installation’s injunction to the viewer, if there is one, is this: do not take the meaning and value of these lines for granted, read for the cracks in the oppositional structure they initially seem to form, test them in new configurations, treat them, that is, as site-specific wall-writings.

The installation’s set-up, as I previously showed, does not allow the writings to face each other: they seem to have their back turned on each other. Only the visitor’s body moving in the exhibition’s space from one wall to another can trigger an encounter with both wall-writings. Poetry, Berardi argues, or art more generally, is ‘the reemergence of the deictic function [...] of enunciation’ and the ‘here and now of the voice, of the body, and of the word, sensuously giving birth to meaning’ (2012: 21). The visitor’s body is necessary for taking the two utterances out of their isolation and abstraction and turning them into interlocutors in a deictic exchange. The installation thereby brings language closer to the body: through the viewer’s movement, it invites a communicative situation between an ‘I’ and a ‘you’ whereby signs acquire their meaning (and value) in the here and now of the exchange (*deixis*).

Deixis introduces a reversible relationship between an ‘I’ and a ‘you’, through which subjectivity is produced in the here-and-now of an utterance (Bal, 1993: 307; 1999: 189). Following Émile Benveniste, Mieke Bal explains that, because the ‘pronouns *I* and *you*

do not refer outside of the situation in which they are uttered', the second person is essential for confirming the *I* as a speaker (1999: 178). When the perspective shifts, the 'you' turns into an 'I'. This dependency of the 'I' on the 'you' makes the positions of debtor and creditor in this exchange reversible and interchangeable and the line between them more porous.

The viewer acknowledges her indebtedness to two classic texts that have in so many ways shaped our conceptions of subjectivity and agency. But here this debt does not take the form of burden – as in Dimitriou's novella. These works of the past are not sacralised objects that weigh heavily on the shoulders of contemporary subjects – as in Taxis' graffiti. Strouza's installation fosters a space for re-citing these lines through and beyond their originary contexts, in ways that could make them 'mean' or 'know' differently in the present. The work thereby opens the possibility of alternatives to the binary choice of an either passive or active, either determined or autonomous subject that these lines formed at first sight. This initial 'schism' succumbs to the cracks caused by other readings, which recast these lines, and the subject they project, in the middle voice.

The subject the installation calls forth, reads *with* and *against* the language of these wall-writings, attentive to how Antigone's or Marx's voice is never just one but indebted to other voices, and even to each other. The viewer is called to embody a subjectivity in the middle voice: neither a passive nor an autonomous, sovereign subject, the viewer knows she has been shaped by these texts (and thus always indebted to them, never autonomous), but is also invited to actively recast them from the present in new configurations, open them up to incalculable meanings. By making the fragments of two 'classics' part of a deictic exchange with present viewers, the work, to borrow Yannis Hamilakis' words, dares 'to rupture the temporality of [...] debt and imagine an open past which can lead to an open future' (2016: 255). In this way, the installation projects the indebtedness of each line (and each text) to the other but also to the viewer in the present: Antigone and Marx *owe us* their continued afterlives today and in the future.

The reversibility of the debtor/creditor positions in the installation does not invalidate the distinction between the two nor does it cancel out the debt, but grants agency to both debtor and creditor. The verb *xehreono*, as we saw, can mean 'to repay a debt' one owes to someone else, but also 'to relieve someone else from a debt by repaying it for them'. The viewer here 'repays' (*ξεχρεώνει*) in this double sense: she repays our debt to Antigone and Marx but also repays *their* debt to us *for* them. By repaying their debt for them, the viewer gives this debt back as a *gift*: the gift of difference in repetition, which is the promise of these works' renewed, open-ended performance in future presents. *Xehreono* need not generate the fantasy of an undifferentiated wholeness or a renouncing of ties with the past, as in Dimitriou's novella, but can yield, perhaps, an alternative to the economy of debt and its asymmetrical power structure through a deictic exchange that may reconfigure the debt we owe to the classics into our gift to them.

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## Notes

1. This discrepancy was particularly pronounced during European Romanticism, to which Byron's work also belongs.
2. In her brief discussion of Taxis' paste-up, Julia Tulke also relates the sense of time this image conveys with Lazzarato's understanding of how it is to live 'in a society without time, without possibility' (quoted in Tulke, 2017: 212).
3. Boletsi, 2016: 4, 8–11. For a discussion of moralistic neoliberal narratives of the crisis and modes of resistance, see also Abbas, 2015; Butler & Athanasiou, 2013; Douzinas, 2010, 2013; Graeber, 2011. This construction of subjectivity through the 'grammar' of the passive or active voice can also be traced from the European rhetoric on the refugee crisis since 2015 (Boletsi, 2018c: 23–24).
4. Some parts of my analysis of Dimitriou's novella in this section draw from my previous analysis (in Boletsi, 2017) and from a much shorter discussion of the novella in Boletsi (2016: 4–5). In my previous analysis (Boletsi, 2017), I focused on the ways the novella engages with the concept 'crisis' in its different meanings and how it develops a discourse in the middle voice through this engagement. The present article extends and reframes that analysis: it draws attention to the way the novella recasts the (moral) discourse of debt and tries to transcend it by disengaging from the 'burden' of a symbolic and financial debt.
5. In ancient Greek, the verb *κρίνω* (*krinō*), from which *κρίσις* (crisis) derives, meant to 'separate', 'choose', 'judge' or 'decide' (Koselleck, 2006: 358).
6. "Όταν η χώρα βάρεσε φαλιμένο οι εταιρικές χώρες μάς έδειχναν συνέχεια με το δάχτυλο· αγκύλωση έπαθαν. Αρχίσαμε κι εμείς σαστισμένοι να δείχνουμε ο ένας τον άλλον. 'Αυτός φταίει', 'κι αυτός, κι αυτός, κι ο άλλος κι ο άλλος εκεί στη γωνία'" (Dimitriou, 2014: 8). All translations from the novel are mine.
7. "Εγώ φταίω, εγώ φταίω" κραύγαζαν όλοι.  
     'Σας παρακαλώ, πιο πολύ φταίω εγώ.'  
     'Όχι κύριε, εγώ φταίω.'  
     Το εγώ φταίω κόντευε να γίνει αυτοκαταστροφικό κίνημα.' (Dimitriou, 2014: 14).
8. With the Greek translation of the Bible, the term *crisis* in its meaning of 'judgment' becomes invested with the 'promise of salvation' and 'apocalyptic expectations' in the Final Judgment (*teliki krisis*) (Koselleck, 2006: 359).
9. "Ναι, ναι ήμαρτον" φώναζαν πια όλοι, κλητήρες, καβοδέτες, οδηγοί, αρχειοφύλακες, γεωργοί, πρακτικογράφοι και δικηγόροι, δάσκαλοι, καθηγητές, πιλότοι και φροντιστές, τελωνιακοί, δικαστικοί επιμελητές και δικαστές – όχι, όχι δικαστές, αυτοί ας εξαιρεθούν – πρυτάνεις και πουτάνες.  
     'Όλος ο λαός, μια φωνή μετανοίας. Αλλά ο αγκιτάτορας ήταν ανηλεής.  
     'Όυ να μου χαθείτε κομμουνιστοκαπιταλιστές'" (Dimitriou, 2014: 17).
10. 'Η λέξη "βασανίζομαι" εμφανίστηκε στους τοίχους λίγο αφότου άρχισε ο μαρασμός της χώρας. Γρήγορη σαν τον άνεμο, γέμισε όλη την πόλη' (Dimitriou, 2014: 50).
11. Boletsi, 2017: 264. The analysis of *vasanizomai* and the outline of the grammar and theory of the middle voice in this section partly draw from a more extensive analysis of this wall-writing and the theory of the middle voice in Boletsi, 2016 and Boletsi, 2017: 264–266.
12. My translation from the Greek.
13. 'Τα φλιτζάνια είχαν πάνω τους σκηνές απ' την τρισχιλιετή ιστορία του έθνους. [...] Εκλεβαν βέβαια τα φλιτζάνια οι τουρίστες για σουβενίρ αλλά μας έρχονταν караβιές απ' την Ταιβάν. [...]  
     Ζωγραφίζοντας δε το έθνος την ιστορία του στα φλιτζάνια επιτέλους απαλλάχτηκε απ' το διαωμένο βάρος της. Είχε πλέον την ορμή ενός νεότευκτου έθνους.' (Dimitriou, 2014: 85)

14. A reviewer describes it as a ‘beautifully run-down old building, a warren of rooms with peeling paint, ornate moldings and spotty wiring’ (Donadion, 2011).
15. Honig distinguishes three directions in Antigone’s reception by philosophy and political theory: Antigone as a ‘conscientious objector’, a ‘humanist lamenter of the dead’, and a death-driven ‘monstrous creature of desire’ (2013: 7).
16. In his discussion of a South African adaptation of *Antigone* – Athol Fugard’s *The Island* (1973) – based on a reported performance of *Antigone* by a prisoner in which all characters were likely played by the same person, Stathis Gourgouris also hints at such an ambivalence in the play that challenges autonomous subjectivity. The performance of Antigone that Gourgouris discusses raises questions such as the following: ‘Can a person speak as many and remain one? Is Antigone one? Or, conversely, is there something in Antigone that may speak like Creon? Are these two adversaries bound by a voice – a mask – that speaks both their tongues?’ (2016: 12).
17. The recent phenomenon of post-truth politics may be seen as an exacerbation of cynical reason. Proponents and audiences of post-truth rhetoric may disregard facts but that does not mean they are not aware of them. People’s knowledge of the falsity of a statement does not deter them from embracing it if it ‘feels’ true. For this argument, see Boletsi (2018a: 40).
18. Especially after the fall of Eastern-bloc communism, Marx’s debt has been the subject of heated debates, with Jacques Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* (1994) being one of the most prominent and provocative considerations of Marx’s debt – with and against Marx – in the post-1989 world order.

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