

ARKADAŞLAR (FRIENDS)

Article by Antonis Bogadakis
Muhtelif, Issue 3
2008

The historical incredulity that derives as a result from unresolved territorial disputes surfaces as a kind of testament (or temptingly as a dispensation) for those who in their attempt to come to terms with the principles that condition such incredulity decide to distinguish the infinity of things from its structural presuppositions. The question of Cyprus, so eminently timely these days, prescribes not only what is definable about its nature but also what is knowable in the sense that under the guise of a problematic dissimulates the possibility of delineating what is called 'historical'. In an attempt to resolve a piece of political puzzle that seems in the first sight to be admittedly easy one enters to a whole range of manifestations that each one separately weave each other into the ideology of the historical form that bore them.

Part of the C19th political knot called the '*Eastern Question*' the political problem that the current situation in Cyprus poses evokes a multilayered stratification of phenomena that in a microcosmic level reflect the historical struggles of civilization itself. This patch of Mediterranean bliss has attracted through the centuries a mass of historical contradictions. History for Cyprus has been always coming in the form of the Mediterranean Sea that surrounds it amassing in the island's shores the tide of events that patiently shaped the culture and society of its people. Its people on the other hand was the power to establish the extraordinary order of events that sealed the island's destiny; events not so much grandiose in historical scale and importance but significant in the formation of a kind of psyche of what we are used to call civilization.

Conquests and invasions, wars and social upheavals, subjugation and colonization, nationalism and ethnic division stamp the route of three thousand years. It is not my intention to give a detailed account of the history of Cyprus. It is not feasible to do so here, anyway. My aim is to touch upon possible variations that reflect representations of an island whose identity

has been for such a long time reduced to gestures of stubbornness and incredulity to move forward, to free oneself from the ties of historical formulations and self-deception, in a sense – to paraphrase Matthew Arnold’s words - to establish an era which will find its motive-power in the intelligence of men as well in their practical sense. But this kind of intelligence and practice that can be the motive power for a new era in the island has been numbed by the enforcement of pain as a historical residue of a reality that is neither a right nor a dream but rather a fixation. Today one might be tempted to use Althousser’s words and say that the whole population of Cyprus has no more history in their lives than they have in their dreams.

The Cypriots seem to live in an asymmetrical time. Divided into two their consciousness bears an unresolved alterity, which from a certain perspective denounces what is historical about it, while it sustains two different forms of silence. On the one hand (from the point of view of the Greek – Cypriots) surfaces a consciousness of pain that has developed through the years into a source of cognitive desperation one, which from a certain point has been transformed into bitter eloquence. In this context history resounds as a mere echo of the tiring and predictable rationality of the present whereas the reality of the historical falls all the more into pure silence. If the customs and the morals of the Greek-Cypriot community seem to testify that reality is a particular perception of the legitimate that caters for its historical perception, then what is missing in these acts and the anachronistic self-delusion that they represent is the real voice to do so. In that sense it turns out that the voice of this part of Cyprus is the simulation of a voice that through the process of time has developed into an inevitable morality, which suffers in its own silence. Both falsified and forgotten the suppressed nature of such a morality appears as knowledge in despair of dealing with its own strangeness while it pretends that it speaks the language of atonement. The new reality as it has emerged from the island’s brutal division in 1974, which has become the face of the true impact of the logos of pain has exorcised its truth in the realm of fetish producing out of it a surplus of reality in order to defend and legitimate itself. The legitimate language has occupied the unreal voice and in the midst of this confusion appears the phantom of bitterness. On the other scale of this asymmetrical and destabilized construct, on the other side of the green line that defines it exists in silence the Turkish-Cypriot community, which awaits as much as the visible and legitimate counterpart a solution to the problem. The prevailing silence in this case is the pain of not being allowed, not being able to exist, not even being able to articulate the language of such a pain. This is the other extreme of the island’s inevitable morality. That which does not exist does not have a language. Or rather it has; in this case the mediated, supplementary and primarily dictated language of somebody else, of an intruder who appropriates the Turkish-Cypriot community’s right to speak. It is

a language that expresses calamity through its identification with the external consciousness that the intruding body falsely claims to be Turkish-Cypriot, thus an empty language, a non-language. Through time this kind of identification has developed into a preposterous wound that festers and cannot be healed. The Turkish-Cypriot community being under the influence of knockout medication does not feel the wound's pain; it only observes it like a hideous spectacle. Anesthesia has become through the years a peculiar identity that hinders the unmaking of the Turkish-Cypriot community's tragedy. The fatality of such a present has become a judgment of its own without being able to pronounce any judgment at all. This strange present has been already part of the island's history, whose abstract and simultaneously mimetic character, its very lack of mobility includes an element of great importance, a new shiver (a historical one) that strokes the blindness of future time, of what time will be through history. A pain that doesn't speak and a silence that longs for a voice: both converge to the same point that is to the fact that the problem of Cyprus is a problem of sounds.

Panayiotou's art is a point of departure not only of the specific aspects of the politics that surround it but also of the true opening to the consciousness of what these politics fail to understand. It becomes an embrace of the unnamed but existent, of the silent but still in need to speak. He collects the abandoned modes of perception and history that he finds scattered in the body of his native island and turns them into the potent force of an aesthetic language that mobilizes consciousness both as an artistic and subjective praxis as well as the living language of a long forgotten and deliberately lost community. Panayiotou is not, furthermore, disillusioned as to what a mnemonic relationship between the subject of this consciousness and the artist's own imagery can infer. His own intervention comes not so much as a break in the serenity of a prefixed situation. Instead it implicates an anticipation of an identity that is related to the collective past time. In his own perceptive schema spectatorship becomes the dialectic project of remembering not in terms of perceptual ambiguity but through the enactment of a process during which the aesthetic intervention has been transformed into memory.

At the same time through memory Panayiotou communicates to his audience a certain belief that by avoiding the realistic representation of a political situation, by defying the temptation of being appropriated by the politics of image construction he claims his own faith to an art that substantiates the distance between what is past and what is present while it examines the unresolved melancholy of this distance. In his video work with the title '*Arkadaşlar*' that was shown at the huge lumacom screen atop the towering Marmara Hotel in Taksim Square in Istanbul, Panayiotou deviates from a subjective urge to represent the real by means of fetishising its

object. In this video, where two jet-fighters from the British base in Cyprus were commissioned to draw with the smoke of their trails a heart on the sky, the iconography becomes the dilemma of the historical mind as mnemonic process that withholds its ability to use the symbols and the symbolic language that constitutes consciousness by giving emphasis to the act of converging the communal myths of the past with the specificity of the real in the present. The piece's narrativity, which includes references to the island's colonial past as well as it highlights the role that this colonial past has played in the shaping of Cyprus' current political situation, expands the subjective and purely textual aesthetic of its meaning to include the initiation of a new tonality, a new linguistic competence that operates in the level of consciousness and establishes what in politics is not self-reflective and obvious.

Panayiotou is the first Greek-Cypriot to have been invited as a resident artist by Platform-Guaranti Center of Contemporary Art Turkish institution. By transferring his own artistic practice and beliefs about the common and shared consciousness of the two divided communities to the very heart of the consciousness of a city (Istanbul) that is also in a remarkable way both lost and fixed in time, Panayiotou defies the (historically) imposed belief for a memorial of what is claimed to have been lost. Moreover he opts for the excavation of a memory that eradicates the collective void of a false division by means of the images and the myths that constitute the identity of Cyprus. His implicit reference to Aphrodite (the heart made by the jet fighters' traces), the goddess of Love who according to Greek mythology surfaced from the shores of Cyprus, is a direct but somehow silent confrontation of a consciousness that structures its own system of traces and signs with a reality that disassembles the potential that these traces and signs stand for.

At the same time in its delicate but obviously ironical manner the iconography of 'Arkadaşlar' promises precisely that, which while it comes from memory in the form of knowledge (but decisively not as the tradition that certain understanding of history imposes), will inevitably be transformed into the gesture that the common past of the two communities is for the future. In that sense and by means of an emphasis put on the fact that the work shows British jet fighters as post-colonial remnants this heart of love and anamnesis, this precarious effect of a mythological time and of contemporary consciousness defines the archive not of what is to be preserved but of what is to be born. In the end 'Arkadaşlar' diffuses the motion of a gesture and the tonality of an irony into a meaning that seems to be eternally interwoven with Cyprus. The reflection of such an identity becomes for Panayiotou the distinctive way to unsettle those trivial orthodoxies whose lingering power of formulation disfigures the force of expression that persistently desires

to change them. By stressing on their ambivalence and by extending their economy to the point that they reveal a more poetic perspective, he prevents the conditions of the aesthetic reality from conferring its values as a reward on history.

On the other hand this very practice on behalf of Panayiotou introduces the spectator to a significant drama within which one finds those tools that constitute the elements of one's critical ability. With his work the spectator is engaged with a process during which one is not only responsible for the way one perceives the work itself but one is also responsible for the way that his or her critique signifies his or her position in relation to the production of culture (of its gestures, iconography, sounds etc). Nevertheless in the case of 'Arkadaşlar' the element of cheerfulness is not a mental twist that defies the ability to endure what is felt as injustice. On the contrary it portrays the historical despair to the extent that this in its ephemeral manner can be changed and to the extent that it seals the accumulation of pain that commands no language. Like a cenotaph on which consciousness and history converge, 'Arkadaşlar' composes time out of silence.

For three days and on the occasion of the official visit of the Greek Foreign Minister to Istanbul in June 2006 Panayiotou with his video work 'Arkadaşlar', which had been previously shown as part of his video installation 'Truly', elucidated the city's nights by offering not another symbolic gesture of the empty language that contemporary political art often does but the potential of a new language for those who desire reconciliation. He infiltrated the price that the fragmented representation has to pay to history by holding out against it. He also identified in history's archival language and in the geography of disputed politics the possibility of a trace, of a mnemonic reserve for those in the future who will attempt to reconcile should the ones of today fail to do so. 'Arkadaşlar's' aesthetic gratification confesses an aesthetic materiality free from historical necessities. Its schematization planes away in a reckless but romantic way the circular regularity of political processes. Thus discovering a mathematical formula the work decodes a harmonious sentiment, whose vowels make its echo vulnerable but significant. An incredulous task indeed!