

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN THANASIS TOSIKAS AND CHRISTOFOROS MARINOS

Thanasis Totsikas interviewed by Christoforos Marinos
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Christoforos Marinos: *You grew up in Nikaia, Larissa, and at the age of fifteen, which is relatively young, you left in order to study painting at the Athens School of Fine Arts. How did it happen?*

Thanasis Totsikas: I did not want to get my high school diploma. I attended preparatory courses for fifteen days and passed. From when I was a kid all I wanted to do was to paint.

CM: *Did you start off as an apprentice?*

TT: Yes, yes. I apprenticed to a hagiographer, not Byzantine but a classical one. I was fascinated by that. By the fact that he painted like Vermeer. I would go there and watch him. His name was Ginis. It was two of them: Ginis and Papamerkouriou; the latter died. I saw him through a window, he was in a basement. A remarkable figure. So, I became an apprentice there. Since I was in school, in primary school, I have been painting. I remember my teacher telling me to study at some art school. I enrolled in one, ABC, through correspondence. I would send sketches, that sort of thing. It lasted a couple of months, then I quit. Afterwards, I continued on my own. I would go to the countryside, in the fields and paint silly stuff. I did several things.

CM: *I imagine that what inspired you at first here in the countryside were songs, music in general.*

TT: That is another element. I was always interested in music. I don't mean to say that I have a lot of experience with it, only through my art. All kinds of art share a common secret which you get to

understand.

CM: What is this secret? Can you feel it?

TT: It is not something specific. It's the whole thing.

CM: Is it emotion?

TT: Yes. There is emotion. I felt it when I was making drums, when I was listening, when I was recording. At some point, in 1983, I wrote music as well. Various sounds in huts, barns. I am interested in music generally. I've been thinking about making an album for years. It's been on my mind for years but I haven't done it. I am talking about modern music. I also listen to Greek, classical music. But I like contemporary music too, Xenakis and Christou for example.

CM: I don't think that anyone would describe you as a traditional artist. You are not interested in tradition either, right?

TT: No. I avoid it. Tradition itself makes you to leave. The more you understand it the more you keep your distance.

CM: Do you think that it has to do with your generation? The detachment from tradition, I mean. Or is it something that has to do with only you?

TT: It is a historical phenomenon. Human-centered. But I detest it. I collect clarinets, genuine stuff. As is the creating of musical instruments.

CM: One would say that your relationship with your homeland, your birthplace, is more intense and certainly more complex.

TT: It is parallel. At the same time, you become aware of what you are supposed to do.

CM: I remember a photo of a paradoxical residence of the artist dedicated to Sylvia Plath, taken in 1982. Why did you dedicate it to Plath?

TT: It was a period I have been reading Plath. It was touching. It was at my grandma's house, in the garden. I dug, put water, put some stuff, an old TV set, a couple of seats and some strings. I have also put a black cloth over the table. There was water flowing.

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CM: *Did you read a lot of literature?*

TT: I was interested in poetry. Not literature so much; I cannot remember what everyone said in the beginning so I cannot make connections later. I wanted to sense things directly.

CM: *Are you talking about Greek poetry?*

TT: Yes, Greek. Cavafy and such.

CM: *Did you read any philosophy?*

TT: At times. It was more of a personal matter, a matter of development.

CM: *What about the Ancients?*

TT: Not so much. I was skeptical about the Ancients. It is a kind of personal process regarding this subject. I have not read much, nor have I delved into the bibliography. I was always into the adventure of the thinking process and the concept of introspective reflection, of consciousness. It is not as if you acquire consciousness at some point and you hand on to it. You are called to be conscious of your time and space. Then it becomes deliberate, not subjective. You try to keep it objective. Depending on where you find yourself, that is. I was also interested in Taoism.

CM: *Did you find anything interesting in Taoism?*

TT: Yes. For instance, it states: "When hungry, eat. When thirsty, drink." How else could it be? This is of relevance to you as well, to your field.

CM: *How do you mean?*

TT: About the Tao: when you are about to express it, it escapes you; when you do not say it, it still escapes. It somewhat defines it. Not physically, though. It is an adventure of the thought, like an entity, this philosophical inquiry in Time. And towards yourself. To be able to justify things. To forget, even. Forget about Time.

CM: *However, it seems that you manage to reconcile technology with nature, which is quite important.*

TT: They are both the same.

CM: *I recently read in the newspaper “Eleftheria”, an interview of Thanasis Papakonstantinou, the composer who is from Larissa. It is an interview done in 1993 that I found on the internet, on a site dedicated to him called “The Valley of the Tempe”. At some point, Papakonstantinou talks about the emotion that nature evokes in him when he is in the countryside; he mentions you as well.*

TT: Yes, we are pals. I initiated them, showed them a couple of things... and then they became passionate about them. I have known Thanasis for years. What with the music, the creation of musical instruments... He got into it and he liked it.

CM: *Let’s take the work you created for “Outlook”, for example. How do you manifest your relationship with nature? Didn’t it cross your mind that it would be provocative?*

TT: When I thought about doing this artwork, it didn’t even occur to me that it could provoke. It was like the other works I have created. Or, rather, it had crossed my mind, but that was not my intention. I wanted to, like, interpret the place. I’ll take you there to see it sometime. I wanted to do something to evoke the same shock I felt when I visited the place.

CM: *I read the comments you made after the exhibition. You spoke of artistic freedom, of how this country lacks behind in this matter. You also spoke about how your colleagues were not supportive of you.*

TT: Yes, they were all looking at... Instead of people saying that Totsikas is someone serious... They think that I was having sex with a watermelon.

CM: *Anyway, you were within the context of contemporary art, of irony, vulgarity, eroticism. You enjoy combining contemporary art with your own experience.*

TT: Certainly, but then again it also has to do with the science of imaging. That is to say that for something to catch the eye -mind you that was a big exhibition – it must be powerful.

CM: *In any case, it wasn’t intentional.*

TT: No, it was not.

CM: *That, too, was part of a series of artwork of still life you have created.*

TT: Yes, it was a series of still life. There was also another work, which I have not included in the exhibition of course, a still life with a watermelon and I am next to it, having sex with the watermelon. Yes, still life. . . sort of. Still life. Some things emerged, and then. . . it is what I paint. It is not erotic either. The erotic part was about art itself. Not erotic in the literal sense. . .

CM: *For the love or art you mean.*

TT: Yes, that's it. I wanted to expose myself. I took responsibility for it. Because usually the case is that we show our work and say, "I like it, I don't like it, it is nice, I was not interested in it". Everyone says his own thing. But I wanted to create some sort of situation in relation to the people who would visit the exhibition. To create a situation, an incident. To ensue, in a way, a shock culture.

CM: *So, you are interested in shocking. Do you think that this is a necessary element in art so that it can be effective?*

TT: No, but usually all artworks have it-if they are interesting. That's not the intention. It is just included in it, it is refreshing.

CM: *It is avant-garde.*

TT: Both avant-garde and refreshing.

CM: *Shock has always been associated with the avant-garde.*

TT: Right, with renewal and existence. With the consciousness of existence. This is pure existence. It is conscious.

CM: *How is this shock linked to the agony and the resourcefulness? According to you, that is.*

TT: It has to do with how you are, how much you are interested in it. This work, too, is a kind of resourcefulness. I am interested in contemporary issues. But as sensation goes, certain procedures are avoided during the production, when this is being created. For example, collaboration may prove excruciating. The result as such may count, but then. . . It shows me that I need to do things alone; it is important.

Collaboration may ruin your mood.

CM: When you talk about collaboration, I suppose that you refer to the paintings you had done on car paint-coated sheets.

TT: Yes. I had to go to the repair shop. To find someone. To wait for ten hours. Thankfully, I found someone I knew, an efficient guy. And I would go there. A lot of noise, though. Quite an ordeal. I would wait two-three hours. It was too much. It is like focusing. You get in trouble. Even when photo exhibitions are concerned. You must go there and wait, do things...

CM: You haven't stopped creating art, though.

TT: No. There is no problem. There is no saturation, no dead-end. Nor the question of "What should I do now?" When people tell me that "It's all been done", I reply that "Since it's all been done, do what you enjoy". You do what you enjoy.

CM: The series of artwork you did for "Outlook", did you start it in 1997 with the work "Ducatti-Totsikas" that you created for the 47th Venice Biennale?

TT: Yes. However, those resemble the movement of a tongue that are more globally projected. Either through the motors or, let us say, with the sexual. Thus, there can be contrast; a reading rather.

CM: Wouldn't you say that these works are like parables? Human beings crushed by machines?

TT: No, that happened because I loved those things and I wanted to convey this joy. I haven't attributed it to anything in particular. What? Can't I have a motorcycle? That's all I mean.

CM: I think that your work with Ducatti is a deeply social artwork. How can I put it? It's like seeing Greece on the motorcycle in 1997, getting modernized, wanting to move forward but falling flat on her face.

TT: Not to mention the frenzy of consumerism. Could be. But I did it out of love, because I loved these things, the bikes. Even just purchasing one means a lot. I even took a couple of pictures. It is about the acquisition of something new, the process. Then... I had the accident.

CM: If I am not mistaken, this series started the year before, in 1996, at the "Greek Realities" exhibition in Berlin. Am I right?

TT: That's right. There, too, I experienced the same feeling: I had my new car and I was proud of it. I had

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chosen a nice color, too. A greenish one...

CM: *Did you think of this as a statement? Did you mean to convey something? You boasting in front of your new car?*

TT: Look, you enter different areas and you want to possess these virtues. The ethics. It requires deep knowledge. The red or the renovation of the birth of the image.

CM: *I must say that you have quite a sense of humor. Your works are characterized by sarcasm, a subtle humor that contains some sort of wisdom. The video you showed in "Art Athina 2004" with the Kappatos Gallery... how did it come about? What prompted you to do it?*

TT: That, too, originated in the property I had bought. These things are social, human-centered phenomena. It's the suffering in life, the oppression; a torture. That video was shot with one take, no rehearsals. If you rehearse, you may not have the outcome you are looking for.

CM: *Is material important to you?*

TT: Yes, it is of relevance.

CM: *You are not concerned with technique, though. What we call "the fetishism of technique".*

TT: No, technique is not a problem at all. It is obviously dealt with. For me that is no issue. It is enough to have that sensation. It is obvious. The sensation must be conveyed. Meanwhile, craftsmanship interested me in the past; I have a sort of inclination towards it, and it gives me the ability to solve such problems automatically. There is a kind of perceptiveness regarding the materials.

CM: *I wonder whether you consider your work folk art. If you do folk art. Which, of course, is timeworn. A distorted folk art.*

TT: Right... Even the fact that you bring it up, that you mention it... It is folk...

CM: *Or folklore. I don't know how you perceive these things.*

TT: It is the verbal. Let alone the fact that even at this very moment that we speak, these are interconnected. Folk art is what a contemporary artist does.

CM: *What he does or what he should be doing?*

TT: What he does. The rest is recollections, no need to say these things. Just the fact that you mention it is bad. You need to forget about it.

CM: *Don't you have recollections? Aren't you influenced by anyone? Lucas Samaras for example? Or Beuys?*

TT: Yes, definitely. Picasso, Beuys. Samaras, not so much. Although he is connected to self-photography. Samaras has no archetypal virtues.

CM: *What do you mean?*

TT: The depth of the object is not present in his works a lot. Which is important. It could be personal, of course. Whereas Beuys... he is in a different kind of organic state.

CM: *I guess that Beuys has had an influence on you, especially with anything related to the issues of energy, of the primal.*

TT: Yes, but they seem so classic to me that no one should remember them at all.

CM: *What should motivate you, then?*

TT: What you want to do. What you want to create, what you have inside. You do what you want to create. You're supposed to have some kind of education, of knowledge.

CM: *Experiences.*

TT: Experiences. These must be backed ideologically. There should be organized within you. Where will they stem from?

CM: *Who are the Greek artists that have influenced you? Even older ones whose work is of interest to you.*

TT: There are artists I find interesting.

CM: *Akritbakis, for example?*

TT: Yes, Akrihakis... However, as I have already mentioned, they do not have the archetypal depth. This is what you should avoid later and do lighter stuff. But if you want to refer to them, to find things to hold on to for the purposes of your own education etc., they must have this. You choose this as a point of reference. Indian music, for example, or Picasso, or Beuys, or the one who would do the nudes in the bath, the impressionist. Bonnard. You choose them as your teachers. Even they, however, should lead you to lighter stuff; they have their own depth.

CM: *When you say "lighter", do you mean more superficial?*

TT: Either in form, in process, in construction, in sensation, or in speech. To avoid pomposity.

CM: *As in "less is more".*

TT: In a way, yes. It blocks seriousness. I am also interested in certain virtues one must have. On the other hand, one is free to do as he wishes, or to attain things through the conquest of something, through what he has conquered. All these things matter.

CM: *What do you think these virtues must be?*

TT: The aesthetic part, the aesthetic discourse. It should come naturally. There is no code or method that one can use to teach it. That's a very important virtue, a basic one. Because it is linked to how things are done.

CM: *Let us discuss the works you are currently doing, the impressionistic ones that you will show at the "Gazon Rouge" Gallery, in Athens. Before this interview, you talked to me about Cezanne. You think of them as teachers and that everything is related. The black and white photo that you will use in the exhibition is a reference to the black and white photographs that were seen on the back of the books that examined the work of these artists. You work with certain aesthetic codes.*

TT: It may be the case that what you do is your own problem. Such things help you have the reason you want to have. I don't know if it is a random kind of thing. It feels necessary to make that choice in that particular moment. The fact that you choose the one that suits you, is...

CM: *Art, automatically.*

TT: Yes. That is art. The fact that you get to decide what's done, the conditions. The definition per se is

what art is. The fact that you get to define it.

CM: *Does anything new interest you?*

TT: It always does. That is my philosophy. It's what keeps me going. The idea of something new. That is what I do, what I embrace. What else is there? Embrace yourself? You do what you do, what you want to create. Or vice-versa. The rest is fanaticism, insecurity. To support different things in order to feel safe, whatever the reason.

CM: *In a few words, in your mind, what afflicts Greek as well as contemporary art is the fact that artists don't feel the need to. . .*

TT: You should not have a complex about Velasquez. . . You should feel as his equal. Excuse me.

CM: *So, you think that only under this condition can one, including you, create something new.*

TT: One must reach a point where he can create something new. That's how you get to create something new: when you have no complex about Velasquez, El Greco or Picasso. You classify them, you appreciate them, or you identify with them. . . At the same time, you demythologize. There is no other way.

CM: *Is this something you have felt since the beginning or did it occur to you along the way?*

TT: It has been a while. I often say that I've been dead for ten years.

CM: *Why do you say that?*

TT: Perhaps because. . . this is completely personal.

CM: *Do you also say that you are reborn?*

TT: No. I simply don't identify myself with any social or cultural commitments. . .

CM: *Emotional. . .*

TT: Yes.

CM: *Don't you think that what you do has social implications?*

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TT: Of course. First and foremost. It concerns you when you are about to create something, the time frame.

CM: *Also, the stance you have against these things.*

TT: You take a stance; you express an opinion.

CM: *It is some kind of comment as well, I suppose. Do you realize that your artwork comments specifically on Greek reality?*

TT: I never thought of it this way; that I stay in Greece. Even if these things are done fast like classifying, organizing them. On the other hand, you have to be aware of it, but not be intimidated by it. As abstract as tradition is, so is contemporary art.

CM: *This is a bit contradictory, because on the one hand you say that you don't feel as if you live in Greece, and on the other hand the place that defines you is the Plain of Thessaly, the nature, the countryside. . .*

TT: It is about personal choices, about experiencing certain things. To go to the mountains. I wanted to experience this. I do not go there to isolate myself but to engage properly. It is about process. Like with computers. It's about such concepts. And you exist as a human being. It's not about living in New York or wherever. These things are anthropocentric. It's where the human being is, not where he lives.

CM: *Anyway, the fact that you did not live in a metropolitan center such as, Paris, or London, does not seem to have hindered your career.*

TT: It's a matter of communication, which exists. As far as the social part goes, it exists whether we want it or not. Let's take this village, for example: you have to filter everything or reality catches up with you and it can become suffocating.

CM: *Filter? How do you mean?*

TT: So that you don't get distracted. So that nothing stand in the way of your determination to do whatever you it is you want to do. Because this social place is a cultural victim. You know become aware of it, you know what it is, but you can do nothing about it.

CM: *So, you try to shield yourself. Do they see you as the village idiot?*

TT: They call “Idiot” someone who has given wrong information about things. Then, they ask for his collaboration because they live in a cultural, organized. . .

CM: *In their own little bubble?*

TT: Yes, in their own little bubble, with their own laws, their own relationships.

CM: *What did you mean by saying that the cities are finished? Do you believe that when an artist lives in the city, he is not able to concentrate?*

TT: No, no. It is just a historical phenomenon which is blocked and is mostly used by administrative structures. The productive ones no longer exist.

CM: *However, art theory and art critics support it; the fact that the city is a prime source of inspiration for an artist.*

TT: About that. . . Take, for instance, the idea behind the exhibition in the “Gazon Rouge” Gallery: it includes another idea too. Near the place where these works were created is a village called Sklithro. I would like to organize an exhibition there, in the middle of nowhere, at the elementary school of the village. It is something I would like to do. The artwork will be exhibited and people will come and roam in this place, in the countryside. It is a bit metaphysical. It goes beyond the administrative structures and is more consecrated, I suppose. The two pieces of land I have bought in that region are something like a project. I didn’t buy them for any other reason. That is why I would like for this work to be exhibited there sometime.

CM: *That would be a nice statement coming from you.*

TT: It’s not as if one is to ignore New York or any other city. I am not against any of it, I am just suggesting. It is just that the city constitutes a congested social phenomenon. It is not a matter of ideas, of proposals; it is a matter of time. Some things become self-regulated with time. There already exists a trend toward rural areas. IBM will have their premises built in the mountains because, now, it is restricted by cultural structures. Can you imagine becoming a victim of such a structure? I want to be able to function in my life, to exist the way I want. It is not something radical.

CM: *So, you see nothing radical in this.*

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TT: No. It is not about suggesting some system to be universally imposed.

CM: *There is no recipe for these things, there is no book of recipes for art.*

TT: What one needs to do is to have this kind of character. The rest falls into place. It cannot be the other way round. You cannot do something in order to have this kind of character.

CM: *In regard to art, what would you say characterizes you, what do you use as a rule of thumb?*

TT: In art you must not have a positive attitude. You must have a totally negative attitude. Art belongs to the realm of negative sciences.

CM: *A negative dialectic, that is.*

TT: Yes. This is where the core, the sparkle, the dialectic, the birth of an idea, lie.

CM: *Is this why you told me that you like telling people that you've been dead for years?*

TT: In order to rid yourself of the surroundings. You are more yourself. You do not have the kind of relationship that alienates or binds you. For me, however, the fact that I do this exhibition at the gallery now, is an issue. That incident is about the work, about the fact that I do an exhibition.

CM: *How do you mean?*

TT: It is related to the perspective of the artwork. It is related to the fact that these are paintings, as well as to the concept of the painter, the concept of the myth, of the exhibition. But I don't want to project this. It is just the way I think about it. The fact that these works are created there, matters. On-site, naturally, with absolute consistency. You can't do whatever you like. I could expose them right there, in the woods... These works are like the fruit you take to the market. Like a kind of transaction, just like in the ancient marketplace.

CM: *Why did you choose this impressionistic kind of visual art? Are you being ironic towards technology?*

TT: It's about the pixels... It is also about the allure of painting. It's Bonnard. It's the colors. It's the

material itself that leads to other situations. A system emerges. A method. Everything is done through a system. I am interested in color as well as in the way I interpret nature. The impression it makes on you. Just being there is Zen. It is an ideal. It is personal, too. Now, I do this. Let's not get over our heads. Now, you do this. What matters is that you make it clear to yourself and you say: "Now, I do this." Whatever the consequences. You do not do it because you suddenly felt like doing a painting.

CM: This is a painful process. But I find it interesting that from the same natural environment emerge new forms: photos, paintings, videos. Every time it is a new thing.

TT: Exactly. In 1986 or 1987 I went to Mount Athos to visit father Paisios. He was an ascetic; he was like a saint. I was impressed by the way he lived. This stone cabin that I built in this property is the result of that experience.

CM: You experience, that is, a feeling of asceticism.

TT: Asceticism in a way of being who you want to be. No excuses. These things are personal, they are personal moods. Now that we are talking, we talk. At some point, an agile person may say... No, it does not have to be an agile person. But he may get around. He does not have to be agile in the questions he asks, nor in his answers. But he gets around... When you are in touch with someone.

CM: Do you think that this landscape is coming to an end?

TT: No, I still have some time left.

CM: Nevertheless, the works you are showing now do not have the element of shock that we mentioned before.

TT: The point is to attain this kind of sensitivity. This is what the shock is; to attain something that is elusive, which you cannot approach. These works have this tremendous sensitivity. Sensitivity has no grip; it cannot be grasped by forms or ideologies or schools.

CM: So, it is like poetry. An inner flame that you cannot pinpoint, you cannot grasp.

TT: Yes, it is like poetry. It is the emotional element as well. I wanted it to be there, to convey it strongly. A refinement, as well. These works have no grips. I don't know if I succeed in this, but that is what I am interested in. It is something extraordinary. The ideas, the idea of a powerful work... these things do

not interest me. Occasionally I would collaborate with people who would say, “Thanasis, we should do powerful stuff...” I am not interested in this.

CM: What do you think of your relationship with the collector Leonidas Beltsios? In 2005 he curated your participation in the exhibition “Visions” that was organized by the gallery “Kappatos”. It seems that you have become quite close. He has been supporting you for years.

TT: We see each other occasionally, we talk. He is someone who encourages you for what you do, he is open to ideas. Someone who appreciates what you do. Being constantly criticized can be tough... I tell him the truth about how things go. Leonidas cares, these things give him joy. I tell him about the gaffes...

CM: Gaffes?

TT: Yes. The thing is that we shouldn't commit blunders.

CM: The artist you mean?

TT: All of us as well. Not to go on thinking that what you do is something extraordinary, amazing. It requires self-criticism.

CM: Do you engage in self-criticism?

TT: All the time. To be grounded. It is personal, it is a matter of existence. In relation to yourself. So that you know how you want to be. People wander, express opinions. But it is a matter of personal choices, what you do. Then comes the synthesis of identifying with other people, with social matters.

CM: Which probably does not interest you.

TT: No. As I feel the need to admire someone, I believe that there must be someone who needs what I do. There is another reason: to communicate, to convey something, to discuss some things.

CM: Have you found any interlocutors?

TT: It is hard. Essentially, you discuss with yourself. It is a more substantial dialogue.

CM: How does your everyday life involve this?

TT: My daily life is such that I try to hide what is most precious to me. That's how things are, you cannot mix them.

CM: Does this mean that you are a different person out there and here? That you present yourself in a different way? That you hide things?

TT: No, but you don't mention stuff. You just find your daily path. You avoid it. To be able to avoid it, I try to use my humor.

Nikaia, Larissa. November 18, 2006.