

IRIS TOULLATOU & QUINN LATIMER

Iris Touliatou interviewed by Quinn Latimer

Soft Water Hard Stone: 2021 New Museum Triennial (exhibition catalogue)

2021

Quinn Latimer: *When did you start making your series, Untitled (Still not over you), and where did you start finding these old fluorescent lights?*

Iris Touliatou: I had encountered these objects long before I decided to extract them from their original habitats. They provide a view of Athens, a city I returned to in 2015, or a view of my immediate world, of something very close to home. I observed these dried fixtures hanging in empty offices, shops, and small businesses. And in the way I approach most of my work, I kept paying attention to this image; it grew in me like a friendship with a stranger you walk into every day, an image that reassures you. I grew an attachment and a bond with these objects; I grew a link with their forms and their eras, as they became a case study of several external and internal negotiations that were happening at the time.

QL: *Is that why, after you source them from abandoned offices, you take care of them and work on them for some time before you show them?*

IT: The work is time and love. After their extraction, I engage in an invisible housework of cleaning and rewiring and maintaining them, and I strengthen their connections and their structural components before they go out in public again.

QL: *When I look at these works, I often imagine language traveling through them. I'm thinking about words like "power", "energy", and "economy". But they also suggest different states of language: burning out, being bankrupt, being dependent, but also being transformative and resilient. Your lights use the visual language of Minimalism, Post-Minimalism, and the forms of power and bodies that they connote, but more than that, they seem to short-circuit technical and emotional labor, being a kind of flicker*

between poverty or loss and power. Are you trying to illuminate this flickering specter between the laboring body and the failing economic system in your fluorescent pieces? What's gained for you by putting their dying or their resilient bodies on display for others to see?

IT: I wanted to work with a very minimal and bare language – a language, a syntax, that wasn't entirely constructed by me. A language that didn't only correspond to my own body, mind or states, but also to what I thought was a collective experience at the time.

QL: *You mean the experience of burning out, of bankruptcy, of systematic collapse?*

IT: Yes, and of doubt, and hope. These two things being very vibrant together created this flicker, a charge state. The fluorescent light works came along as I examined my condition of being in the world and of relating to others.

QL: *Your condition of being in the world as an artist, a laborer, a lover, as a friend, as everything?*

IT: As all of these occupations, all very linked and intertwined. The tile of the series is the only thing that remains constant and unchanged throughout the different iterations of the works. It refers to the emotional labor, nodding to the fleeting and permanent intimacies towards bodies, locations, home, jobs, families, friends, etc.

QL: *This emphasis you place on the subjective and corporal nature of reading these lights is interesting in terms of the paused laboring body, who's no longer underneath them, because the office is empty now, gone bankrupt, or in limbo, and yet the lights remain to sketch out the space. What about this idea of decline, though? We often don't think systemically. Everything becomes a personal failure rather than a collective or systematic failure.*

IT: The light works are an attempt to engage with the right here and the right now, but also to reflect on our daily rhythms of activity or inactivity, our dynamic relation to a pace or a resistance to a certain rhythm that's imposed. More than objects, they might be conditions, in which we feel and react.

QL: *What about the paring of an economy of language and an economy of means in your work?*

IT: It mostly comes out of a daily routine and direct experience. Then there's a punctuation of ephemerality, unpredictability, or transformational aspect, an expected change that my pieces often include in their function. I work with found matter or objects that perform what's not considered or accepted as their

normal operative function. These works refuse hierarchies or hegemonies. They also speak to a lineage of artists, women like Lee Lozano, Julie Becker, and Hannah Villiger, and the way their work dealt with intense self inquiry, as well as setting the conditions of their engagement or disengagement with the intimate and the public.

QL: Hannah Villiger made these early effigies in Rome where she would light a piece of palm tree on fire, and throw it in the air and photograph it. I was thinking about your dying fluorescents, and I wondered if you think of them as effigies, too, in some sense?

IT: The fluorescents exude voltage; they make a sound of a crackling wildlife, which evokes fire, burning, and burning out. We listen to a place and certainly a time, which I never thought of as an end. The basic statement of the work is that something needs to change. The work's dysfunctionality creates a disruption, and another kind of time, a time to address the systemic violence that's embedded in time itself and that exerts itself in how are bodies are recognized.

QL: Let's go back a bit: when you were a student in Paris, Ana Mendieta's work and signature migrated into your practice, somehow. How did you use Mendieta's works? What was your draw to her at a time when you were still a student and you were still figuring out your own visual language and your own life?

IT: We have to go back quite far, actually, to 2007. I was a student at the Beaux Arts in Paris and I was working as an intern at a gallery in the city. I remember I had no money to get proper frames for my graduation show and so I decided to steal empty frames from the gallery's depot. I chose the ones that had been previously used for Ana Mendieta's portrait series, *Untitled (Facial Hair Transplant)* (1972). A paper with the credits and her signature was pasted on the back of the frames. So I got my degree in Fine Arts in repurposed stolen frames. But since then, I've also been making these drawings, studies and attempts to perfectly copy her signature. In that way of writing oneself as another, I started engaging with Mendieta's work on a subconscious level, trying to put myself in this other body, and this other body of work.

QL: This question of authorship has been a major question of twentieth- and twenty-first- century art and literature. Yet, as in everything you do, you make the shortest circuit possible. You literally copy someone's signature when you are interested in their work. Is it an attempt to form some co-authorship or something else?

IT: The tile of work *Song* (2007-09), because the act of copying someone's signature feels like when you memorize the lyrics of your favorite song and you tune in and you find some rhythm with the original. But you also sing beside it: or you sing in another voice, deforming and altering the original melody.

It also refers to the signature as a transactional object, value, and commodity in certain economies and markets. It began an ongoing research on the dynamic relationship between the art object, the author, the body, the distribution, etc., sharing affinities with the practices of many of the female artists I mentioned earlier.

QL: I'm thinking about the distance between the signature and the body, and the question of the woman's body, either at the center of her practice —placed there by herself, or by the market — or becoming displaced from it. How do you posit your gendered body within your work? It always seems to be a woman's body against the technological, the natural, the naturalized, against everything.

IT: It's subversive.

QL: How do you think about your body as it enters, or does not enter, your work?

IT: Like various other slippery entities such as time, or the medium of photography itself. For an ongoing series of photographic portraits that I've been working on for over two years now, I walk into commercial photo studios that happen to be on my path to somewhere else. I try to use time that's not supposed to be spent on labor, time when I'm not supposed to be working or performing, in confrontation with labor itself. I connect daily living, routine, and maintenance to an improvisational engagement with spaces and architecture and cities and locations.

QL: These storefronts and photo studios also relate to the spaces where you find your fluorescence lights. They're a different kind of workspace, an economy that still exists but is marginalized and always seem to be on the edge of disappearance.

IT: I'm drawn to these spaces to find material, and to question aspects of inhabitation of my body and other bodies. These spaces, and I'm thinking here of the photographic studios, are spaces that record, legitimize one's identity and legal rights, from citizenship to social statuses, let's say, of marriage, graduation, employment, from birth to funeral and beyond.

QL: How do the people who run these photo studios usually respond when you walk in and you say you'd like a portrait made?

IT: I usually create a narrative to enable a minor intimacy. Getting your picture taken by a photographer is like a mini-psychoanalysis session. I usually ask them to take a very wide frame of the space with me, so that everything I happen to be carrying or everything I happen not to carry is merged with their usually super-cramped background, beyond the authorized empty white square. I never predict or schedule the moment of being photographed. This work has been in limbo for the past year, though, because it was so

hard to access intimacy in a space with someone that you're not related to.

QL: Like so much of your work, this series seems dependent on certain cities and their particular economies. Photo studios in places like Athens or Singapore are very transient places, right? People are going in and out, requesting images by which they'll be tracked by multiple authorities. It's all about surveillance, having the right ID with a picture on it so that you can cross a border, get a job, enter into a system. But then it's also about carrying school pictures of your best friends and family in your pocket. It's quite beautiful. At your solo show at Radio Athènes, I was struck by the way you displayed very small portraits of yourself within larger sheets of glass pressed over them. They reminded me of glass storefronts of portraits studios. From the outside, you can see the backdrops that they've set up. They're going to situate you, and frame you. Yet there's something about glass: it's always moving.

IT: It's liquid.

QL: It was interesting to see your tiny portraits with glass panels over them, situated against your large fluorescent light fixtures, which are also working between transparency and opacity, between a light source and a dulling and an extinguishing of light. There's something in your work that always forms some call and response.

IT: The portraits were taken in Singapore, while I was there on a residency at the NTU CCA [NTU Centre for Contemporary Art] in 2019. The format in which I printed them was called the "wallet" format, and it was the most used print format in Asia. For the exhibition at Radio Athènes, I decided not to frame them in a classical wooden art frame, limiting their subject, but to use a pane of glass. In a similar way, the lights are always installed in a very simple square or linear arrangement, but their content is ready to burst. This tension is what's really interesting to me: the possibility that it could come out, that it could burst. That's what happens with the voltage, the way the lights flicker.

QL: What does the flicker in the light pieces mean for you?

IT: It really challenges me most of the time. It's like my organs are jittering; it's a spark, it's effervescence. It's a set of conscious decisions but orchestrated as an impulse. There's a certain amount of orchestration in them and a certain amount of lack of control. It's an intentional lack of control. It's an attachment, and in attachment sometimes you also have to let go. Or in coping with certain conditions, you have to resist.

QL: Resist what? Resist falling apart? Exploitation?

IT: We live and work in systems that are failing, that are violent, that are oppressive. I think of that minimum amount of meaningful gesture that has no canon, no scale, but is persisting.

SYLVIA KOUVALI

QL: I'm thinking of an essay by Griselda Pollock on Hannah Villiger, where she says that though Villiger used her own body in her work, she wasn't its subject in any sense; she was simply the material. Villiger's body was simply the site of the "daily compulsion" of her practice. I love that: to make a body a daily practice, this compulsion to keep going. It's interesting, because you stage the displacement of the body, similarly, showing it as the site of many daily compulsions. I suppose you can't escape the body in you make your work.

IT: This question of embodiment, an engagement with one's own embodied vulnerabilities, one's embodied mode of being, has been a question for me throughout my own movements and implications for what I make as art and what I make within a social engagement, how I treat others and how I care about natures and futures. Time, routine daily practice is matter running through one's hand, but I use it because I think it reflects a methodology of being present rather than making.

Physically and materiality coincide in this economy that I choose to work in. It manifests as conditions; temperatures, hormones, debts, thefts, gifts, anniversaries, glances, gestures, encounters, collaborations or fantasies. The way I make within a social engagement, how I treat others and how I care about natures and futures. Time, routine, daily practice is matter running through one's hands, but I use it because I think it reflects a methodology of being present rather than making.

Physicality and materiality coincide in this economy that I choose to work in. It manifests as conditions; temperatures, hormones, debts, thefts, gifts, anniversaries, glances, gestures, encounters, collaborations or fantasies. The way I make work is simply evidence of my physical and material limitations, records of affect, emotional contours of life during these increasingly precarious times.