

# AN INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTODOULOS PANAYIOTOU

Christodoulos Panayiotou interviewed by Jason Farago  
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The world outside is frightful, but love might get you through. In the allusive, unabashedly romantic art of Christodoulos Panayiotou, heightened emotional states run right up against the cold realities of modern life: macroeconomics is as intense as an opera aria, and the fact of a border can dredge up the strongest of childhood memories.

His installations and archival projects, seen recently at the last Documenta and Venice Biennale, take many forms: a floor covered in copper, a massive pile of pulped banknotes, a YouTube-backed lecture of ballerinas and Bette Davis. But every work is a nest of rumors and reminiscences, and winds its way into the head as much as the heart.

Panayiotou was born in 1978 in Limassol, Cyprus. He spent years as a dancer before turning to fine art, a shift solidified in 2005 when he won the DESTA prize, Greece's most prestigious award for contemporary art. We met for breakfast in Athens this April; Panayiotou, something of a dandy, was dressed all in white, and confessed he wasn't much of a morning person. The international art world had come to town, and boulevards in the Greek capital had been shut down for the opening of Documenta, which came with a German state visit. We talked about ballet and theater, ancient and modern, but we both knew there was no escape from the twin pressures of debt and migration that had pushed Greece to the brink. We were in the birthplace of drama, after all.

**Jason Farago:** *Much of your art traffics in two registers at once, which seem weirdly opposed to one another: a political register and an emotional register.*

**Christodoulos Panayiotou:** I don't think that there's a radical contradiction there. Politics can and should

be informed by emotion. And emotions are, at the same time, subjected to the political realm. There's a common idea that emotion is non-contextual and non-negotiable. But if you look closer, emotions are efforts that are constructed, manipulated, cultivated and so forth. The politics of emotions and the emotions of politics is what has always fascinated me.

**JF:** *As a child, as a young dancer, how much of your interest in art and culture was initially driven by emotional forms of expression?*

**CP:** I am inclined to romanticism, let's say... [*Laughs*] That's how I was driven into both ballet and contemporary dance, although it's not one of those typical careers where you start at seven years old.

**JF:** *Where did you train?*

**CP:** I started in Cyprus. Then France, then London.

**JF:** *Your art has something in common with ballet, which is an art form where narrative is present but not totalizing. There's a space between the written narrative and its manifestation on stage. The myth of Giselle or Odette or La Bayadère is manifest through the body...*

**CP:** I never thought about that in respect to my work, but ballet is indeed a very peculiar form of expression. It has two languages, which often do not cooperate, but coexist onstage. You have the plot, *l'argument*, for example about a woman who dies in the first or second scene and comes back as a spirit in the final one. At the same time you have a second, kinesthetic language, a technical language of extremely codified movements. These movements, even though they could be considered as codes, remain completely empty of significance. Just a series of empty signs. The narration can barely dance and the technical language, the *pas*, all these codes, *l'arabesque*, *le pas de chat*, *le pas de bourrée*: they cannot really narrate.

So, maybe to attempt to connect this to your first question, you have here an art which is regarded as a highly sophisticated emotional expression—ballet—that is radically central to a political project: the governance of Louis XIV. Ballet was elevated by him as the highest expression of his political power. The codification comes from him, and his establishment of the Académie royale de danse. Louis XIV was a dancer himself. He put performances together, and he performed the leading role in front of his guests. A lot of the technique and spatial organization of ballet comes from that. The very strict scenic hierarchy, for instance, and the articulation with a central focal point. The world is ballet, and he is in the center of it.

*JF: And it later becomes, for the Soviet Union most famously, an international expression of collective state power.*

CP: Yes! Ballet seems to work as a façade for every form of power. Contradictory ones as well. Even though it was connected to the imperial past, it becomes, as you say, one of the Soviet prides during the cold war. Perhaps because of its components of hierarchy and discipline, which is what every exercise of power is attracted to.

*JF: In Cyprus—a place that is both Europe and not Europe— what sort of position did ballet have in the national culture, or in people’s daily lives?*

CP: It’s symptomatic of many subjects of colonial history, I believe: ballet somehow imposed itself where there was no choreographic tradition. It was adopted in Cyprus with independence [in 1960]. Only in the 80s did contemporary and modern techniques start emerging, timidly. We still don’t have a national ballet company. But we have a very strong culture of children, girls mostly, having ballet classes from a very young age.

*JF: This Documenta features a number of choreographers, and dance is ever more present in museums these days. Yet one of the only ways I can distinguish between dance and performance is whether you’re allowed to use your phone to take pictures or not. I’ve watched very serious choreographers who’ve come into the gallery space, and who are either not prepared for or are indifferent to a certain kind of looking. Is it a kind of bastard medium?*

CP: You know, it has not always been like this. Modernity reinvented theater in the west as a “sacred” ritual. Before the turn of the century, during the Belle Époque, people were going to the theater to be seen and not to see. The orchestra seats were lit as brightly as the stage. In Molière’s days, the public was actually sitting on stage. Greeks were staging their tragedies in open-air theaters, under the strong morning sun.

It’s only with the rise of naturalism in the theater, under André Antoine, that you have the invention of the director, the *metteur en scène*, and simultaneously the immersion of the public into hypnotic darkness. The first thing that Antoine does is to turn off the lights in the house. That creates the dichotomy we know today as the basis of theater. A revolutionary decision at the time. Suddenly actors could step past the conventions of bourgeois celebrations and elevate theater, again, into an art form. But I think we’ve held onto that format far too long, to be honest!

*JF: Yet even someone like Brecht, or his great predecessor Erwin Piscator, who both wanted to prevent spectators from getting*

**SYLVIA KOUVALI**

*absorbed in the narrative and maintain critical engagement—even they demanded your full attention.*

**CP:** It seems to me that Piscator and Brecht tried to negotiate this relationship by thinking from the stage itself—and without questioning the physical separation between stage and public. So Piscator brings film on stage, he splits the stage, he marks spaces of simultaneous actions. Brecht as well, mostly through revolutionary formats of dramaturgy. But the convention remains very strong.

I found myself, many times, wanting to be done with it. But both my training as a dancer and my training as a spectator have inculcated this as the ethics of watching a performance. You might not like the play, you might not respect the director, but there remains, usually, a respect afforded to the performer. Even beyond the performer, the act of performing.

**JF:** *Which is not what you see, at least I think, with dancers in galleries. People treat them like objects.*

**CP:** Another old problem. *[Laughs]* I think this relationship between spectator and performer is quite a cruel one.

**JF:** *Your photographic diptych Le Fauteuil de Sarah Bernhardt (2010) engages with these questions of artistic invention and theatrical convention.*

**CP:** I have some fascinations that come into my work. I try to fight them, but sometimes I surrender. Sarah Bernhardt is a very complex construction, and she remains very poorly understood. I think she's somehow the archaeology of what we understand today as the star system. Actually the first star would probably be Marie Taglioni, the ballerina who first went en pointe. She's the romantic ballerina assoluta. Bernhardt, a bit later, would incarnate this absolute star. She was, at the same time, a very talented sculptor, a student of Rodin. Do you know her sculptures?

**JF:** *Not at all.*

**CP:** Yes. She's pushed out of museums. Last time I was in New York, I returned to the Met specifically to see one of her sculptures, which I discovered there during my previous visit: a very beautiful marble bust of her lover Jacques Damala. He died very young, and she visualized him on a deathbed of flowers. I looked everywhere, but it wasn't there anymore. There's still one on display at the Musée d'Orsay, but I think it's been moved next to the toilet or the café somewhere...

Part of the mythology of Sarah Bernhardt is the fauteuil, the seat—and I wanted to document it as a sculpture. Supposedly she had this fauteuil sculpted for her, carved into a rock on the island of Belle-Île-en-Mer, off the coast of Brittany, and she would sit there and recite poetry to the ocean. I see it very much as inscribed in the history of sculpture, rather than the history of theater. It's almost a very early Land Art piece.

*JF: The relationship between theater and loss in the Bernhardt piece continues in Dying on Stage (2014–ongoing), in which you enumerate all sorts of deaths in the theater, some literal and some symbolic. From Maria Callas and Kermit the Frog to Molière, who literally died on stage during Le malade imaginaire.*

*CP: Dying on Stage is neither a performance nor a lecture. I never conceptualized it as such. Every year, on my birthday, I would present a chapter to my friends, along with YouTube videos. YouTube is a machine of associations, and I think my brain works like this as well. At some point the videos and texts added up to a body of work, and a friend then invited me to present it publicly, and then some curators invited me to do it here and there, and then it became what it became. But it's a very large body of texts, associations, dramaturgical flows, that were not intended to be a single mass. When Jérôme Bel invited me to do it in Paris, he called it a truc, a thing, neither a lecture nor a performance. I think that's what it is.*

*JF: I suppose you could call it an autobiography.*

*CP: It is very personal, yeah. Maybe an autobiography, as you say, constructed by biographies of others. I enjoy performing it, because I haven't performed since I left dance. It's much more gratifying when you stand in front of people than when you put objects in a gallery.*

*JF: Is being a fan—watching these videos over and over—an important part of that work?*

*CP: It departs from that point. If there is a theoretical substance in it, it's actually the disturbance of the position of the spectator. Watching the character dying, while knowing in advance that he or she will die.*

*JF: Because when you really die on stage, the show's over.*

*CP: Or it just begins. I am convinced that our stages still conserve something from the cruelty of the Roman arenas.*

*JF: Or even earlier. The playwrights of this city had their work staged in festivals that included sacrifices, celebrations of war*

**SYLVIA KOUVALI**

victories...

CP: We have a very constructed understanding of ancient Athenians, but theater might be a place where some potential for opposition existed. The most famous Greek playwrights were very critical to the Athenian crowd. The violence of Greeks towards their enemies was represented.

JF: The Persians.

CP: *The Persians*. But sure, when you think of the ancient Greek theater as the highest point of democracy, and then you remember that there were slaves in this society, that women could not attend, it's a very different understanding.

JF: *It's very easy for an artist in the United States, or from western Europe, to go to the Met or the Louvre and to ignore the classical tradition. To say it lies so far in the past that it has no applicability. Whereas if you're from Greece, if you're from Cyprus, it's much harder to get away from. I mean, the Acropolis; look out of the window now, wherever you turn! It's always sitting on top of you! It comes with a certain burden.*

JF: *Some of your works, such as the photographic series The Invention of Antiquity (2012), explore how Cyprus's national government used certain kinds of history, certain myths, as a means to ground its own power.*

CP: We have the feeling that identity, and especially national identity, is something quite inflexible. But it's actually a very flexible process. It's a constant invention and reinvention. Cyprus is a very complex national construct, as you know. Multiple, in fact. Two conflicting nationalisms, Greek and Turkish. During the 60s, with the establishment of the Republic of Cyprus and the first presidency, there was a strong effort from the Greek Cypriot leadership of pan-Hellenization, let's say, of Cypriot history. A lot of other narratives and a lot of other layers of Cypriot identity were suppressed—

JF: *Including the Ottoman layer.*

CP:—especially the Ottoman layer, but also the Venetian, the Lusignan, the Phoenician.... Cyprus has been part of many big empires. They could all belong equally to Cypriot history. But in the west, nationalist narrations are above all narrations of purity. So you have to clean things up. And both competing nationalisms in Cyprus adopted this model.

JF: *When you were growing up, was the tension between the Greek and Turkish sides of the country ever-present?*

**SYLVIA KOUVALI**

CP: I was born and lived all my life in peace. There has not been fighting since 1974. Having said that, I'm very worried, because nationalism continues to build up, while the Cyprus conflict is getting distilled into a kind of hyper-conflict.

But I grew up in Limassol, on the coast. It's much lighter there. You don't see the barbed-wire line dividing the island, you don't witness the separation. Growing up next to the sea results in a much more open, allusive, and abstract way of thinking, I believe. But also perhaps a reluctance to face the problem.

JF: *Another Cypriot city, Paphos, is the European capital of culture this year. How much did you perceive—during those ballet lessons, maybe—that Cyprus was turning west?*

CP: Recent Greek Cypriot desires of belonging never really matched with geography. The island is ambiguously located between the current constructions of Europe, Africa and the Middle East, but there has been—especially through the project of “Europeanizing” and joining the EU—a conscious effort to turn one's back to the Middle East and look towards the European prospect, whatever that is.

Aesthetically, these vain Cypriot efforts of belonging manifested themselves, and still do, through many contradictions. You can see how palm trees appeared and disappeared in certain historical periods. You know that even here in Greece, there was a political decision at the turn of the last century to cut down most of the palm trees. Athens used to be full of them. It had to look less “Oriental” at some point, which means more “European.” Yet I have noticed a recent return, which is just as problematic. In Cyprus, palm trees are being reimported, from Egypt mostly, as decoration for the gardens of big mansions. The same with belly dancing, which seemed regressive and out of fashion at some point. It came back in the early 2000s as a western type of “Oriental dance.” They're boomerangs, these efforts.

JF: *Your slideshow Wonder Land (2008) looks at these changes in Cypriot identity through archival documentation of the carnival in your hometown.*

CP: The whole island comes to Limassol to party during Carnival. Like almost everything else, the Carnival is inscribed by Greek Cypriots into Hellenic narratives, especially in the political discourse—when mayors and other politicians talk, it always goes back to Dionysos and all that stuff.... [*Laughs*]. What I was looking at is how Americanized the carnival became after 1974. So from the municipal archive, I was able to systematically isolate all the photos of Limassolians dressed up as Disney characters. Disney melting into the Middle East.

**SYLVIA KOUVALI**

JF: *Do you go back to Limassol often?*

CP: I spend a lot of time there. I wish I could spend even more. I don't live anywhere, I'm afraid. Which is very unhealthy socially and emotionally. But at the same time, it's a condition that I try to embrace.

JF: *Well, it's also a condition that only a European can enjoy right now.*

CP: Right. It might be a fading privilege. I'm not sure it's going to last much longer.

JF: *Zygmunt Baumann, the late sociologist, suggested that the real division in global society isn't between west/east or north/south, but between people who are allowed to move and people who are not allowed to move.*

CP: I belong to a generation that profited immensely from the European project, in terms of mobility. The way I studied, the way I moved, Erasmus and all that.... I am definitely a child of the European project, and it's extremely destabilizing to see all this falling apart, and simultaneously terrifying to imagine what is to come. We are not even trying to construct something better—for the moment, all we're doing is trying to push away the disaster, as long as we can. That's what happening politically in the whole of Europe.

JF: *This is the rise of Emmanuel Macron. Everyone will vote for him not because they think he's the greatest person in the world...*

CP:...but just because they have to stop Marine Le Pen. I don't know for how long this can last. We are entering dark times, again. I would be interested to know if society has come to this realization before, but I have the feeling that the rhythm with which we are destroying what was built after two world wars proves something about human nature. I hate to use these two last words. But from this position I can only see the future either with despair or with cynicism. I try to avoid both, but honestly? I feel rather out of hope.

JF: *World War I was like this. Everyone knows it's coming for two or three years. Nobody wants it. But it's this inevitability.*

CP: I think it's going to be longer and darker. The abstraction of the enemy into the "terrorist" is a new condition. Terrorists used to be our own people: IRA, ETA, 17 November and so on. It is a huge semantic leap, with disastrous consequences.

JF: *I went to the Acropolis Museum earlier this week, and I saw a group of children, Syrian refugees, smiling and running around*



*as they looked at some of the greatest art in world history. They were completely at home, and yet not home. I nearly started crying.*

CP: It is devastating. I have no words, really, about how our governments deal with refugees. Both on a basic humanitarian level, but also from the perspective of our recent history, and our own potential future. I read an article recently, and it argued very coherently that, in the past, millions of people had to die for the west to come to a realization that something had to change. With this current situation, we seem to have arrived at the realization of a problem with far fewer deaths. And this article suggested, therefore, that this whole situation we are living is a highly sophisticated mode of war that will be seen as a very peaceful period in the future. It made sense when I was reading it. But zooming out, to that level of macro-history, is not relevant to our common lives. Because we live now, here, in our micro-lives. You're right: being able to travel freely in 2017 is an immense privilege. We should not surrender to fear. We should fight so everybody can have it.

<http://evenmagazine.com/christodoulos-panayiotou/>

**SYLVIA KOUVALI**