

CHRISTODOULOS PANAYIOTOU

Christodoulos Panayiotou interviewed by Elena Parpa (excerpts)
Translated by Andry Panayiotou
Phileleftheros Newspaper
24 March 2011

Elena Parpa: Being in Rio at carnival season must have been a great coincidence.

Christodoulos Panayiotou: To be honest, I pursued this. I had already settled on a set of views concerning the Limassol carnival and I wanted to draw comparisons.

(...)

EP: However, what did you gather from the experience on a personal level? What did you come to understand about yourself?

CP: I got to realize that, through time, I have trained myself to observe from a distance; this means that I am left with the handicap of not being able to take part. I usually focus on collateral damage and on detail. Of course, this may well be a form of participation.

EP: What does this frantic festival reveal about the Brazilian psyche?

CP: Brazilian identity is rich in contradictions just like the Cypriot one, although they arose from diametrically opposite narratives. Ultimately, should there be something in common between the two societies; this would be the disparity between rhetoric and practice. Carnival multiplies, and strangely enough transcends these structural contradictions in a fragmented manner. There is much that I have not been able to understand yet, but it does seem to me that the society in Rio has structured its consciousness around the pride of the accomplishment of the perfect mixture and in a way, carnival illustrates this myth by embodying it.

EP: *How exactly is this “narrative of mixture” manifested?*

CP: While comprising the response to the eugenic ideology of the colonialist past, the metaphor of cannibalism has been the fundament of the Brazilian identity. It seems that much of the national pride of Brazilians stems from the cannibalistic logic that calls for the assimilation of all the cultures Brazilians have ever interacted with. This supports the idea of the perfect meeting of opposites: the colonists and the aborigines, the slaves and the nobles and so forth. This attitude is diametrically opposed to the hellenocentric and occidental obsession of Greek Cypriots, which places emphasis on purity and racial continuity. Of course, when one becomes conscious of the social inequality that lies underneath this philology, one realizes the disparity between myth and reality, a phenomenon observed in Cyprus as well. I believe that when it comes to Brazil, this serves, largely, as a means of doing away with guilt whereas in our case, it is the very outcome of guilt. In the case of Brazil, it presupposes an effort that looks ahead, or at least that is what I wish to think. In Cyprus, it is enforced as a desperate effort that insists retrospectively.

EP: *After your research at the archives of the Municipality of Limassol for your work “Wonder Land” and the Limassol carnival, I wonder what your conclusions about our own psyche are, in relation to our own search concerning issues of identity beyond this guilt-related connection with the “other”.*

CP: The aspect of the Limassol carnival that has always fascinated me is the manner in which it captures the distance between “being” and “seeming”. I believe that this inconsistency characterizes the Greek Cypriot society on all levels. We do not masquerade so as not to be our selves, but so as to become an “other self”, a structured and static one; that is, the other that we long to be; the self who succumbs to symbolic domination and who reveals our weaknesses. I have never felt that the Limassol carnival fulfills, even minimally, the myth of overcoming oneself. On the contrary, I would say that it reveals our complexes.

EP: *In an interview, you stated that “The Limassol carnival parade is a revelation of everything we would like to be, of everything we know we cannot be, and of everything we cannot afford to accept that we are.”*

CP: Indeed, and I still believe that the Limassol carnival is a system that multiplies our basic structures.

EP: *I wonder if creation for you is only possible with the changing of geographical locations. Even though your work is influenced by your experiences on Cyprus, it is completed from a distance.*

CP: If there is something I did earn out of all these journeys, it is a better understanding of my own relationship with Cyprus. The peculiarity of the meeting with the “other” has been true as far as

I am concerned, only via comparisons and juxtapositions. Perhaps, I have never managed to travel after all. I am referring to the Cavafian understanding of “The City”. But then again perhaps I shouldered the “Cities” - a schizoid burden, characteristic of our times. During my last visit to Berlin, I realized how radically I recalled emotions, relations and experiences concerning this city and the time I was living there. In other words, I believe that developments such as the increased democratization of traveling have brought about a change. Throughout the centuries, memory has been organized around space whereas nowadays it is often organized around time.

(...)

EP: *For the purposes of I Land you dug in yet another archive. How did this work come about?*

CP: I was interested in the early days of the Republic of Cyprus and the image bank of the Press and Information Office is the richest photographic archive covering this period.

EP: *What is it that you were interested in regarding this period?*

CP: Our archaeology as a state, and generally the recording of themes that I consider fundamental in the process of current structures of our society.

(...)

EP: *Where does your interest in the practice of archiving originate from?*

CP: I am not interested in archiving beyond the point where it reveals the ideology it is characterized by. I am referring to the point that it fails to annihilate. The aesthetics of archives does not appeal to me as an end in itself either. What I am interested in is the historical narratives, their memory and their structures. Through their weaknesses, archives enable us to see and perhaps reinterpret

(...)

EP: *Have you ever felt that your work is misinterpreted?*

CP: Perhaps, but I don't think this is important. Art enforces a space where all potential for misinterpretation should be protected.

SYLVIA KOUVALI