

UNRESOLVED AND UNANSWERED AND UNSPOKEN

Haris Epaminonda interviewed by Jacob Fabricius
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The following interview between Jacob Fabricius, curator and director of Malmö Konsthall, and artist Haris Epaminonda took place during the installation of VOL. I, II & III at Malmö Konsthall in April 2009. The first part of Epaminonda's project, VOL. I, is a book containing approximately 120 Polaroid images, mainly re-photographed from books and magazines. Detailing places, situations, and collections, the book reads as the photo album of a well-traveled artist, anthropologist, or tourist.

VOL. II & III were exhibited as two installations, which transformed the two Malmö Konsthall gallery spaces into rooms of wonder and possible historically hidden secrets. Filled with an assembly of images, plinths, and objects, the exhibition offered an enigmatic puzzle that remains unresolved and unanswered. The spaces juxtaposed the modern and the ancient as compressed time and memory, undoing institutionalized notions of display within a museum context.

Jacob Fabricius: *One of the first things you did when you arrived in Malmö was to buy second-hand books. Can you briefly explain what kind of books you were looking for and how you would use them in the process of working?*

Haris Epaminonda: I am interested in books made during the 1930s up to the 1960s as I very much like the painterly qualities of the images printed during that time, their colours, and the way the images appear on the paper. These images are taken from books that belong to a past time, from a scattered and fragmented image of the world. If we could say that books are testimonials of people who have written about, traveled, studied, and documented the world, unconsciously striving to make sense of it and, consequently, themselves, then perhaps I am doing nothing more than putting bits of this puzzle together in ways that construct my own subjective image of the world. I guess such an image is, as with every image, in accordance with that which one pays attention to and, therefore, caught within one's own manifestation of reality.

JF: *You are very particular about frames. Every detail of them is well considered, and they are unique in terms of sizes, colours – everything, really. They are becoming almost as important as the image – this is not true, of course – but they give the image a three-dimensional character. Could you comment on their importance?*

HE: The frame is part of the work, since only then does it become an autonomous object. I see the different groupings of framed images and other elements in the space creating a bigger picture and eventually becoming part of one unified and inseparable cosmos. Such a picture can exist, for me, somewhere between the various constellations and relations created in the space and the impressions that might remain later in the mind of the viewer.

JF: *In some of your films you use a moving image within a still image, and the still image becomes the frame, so to speak. Would you agree there is a very distinct sensibility for time in your work? If so, how?*

HE: Yes, I like to create images where time feels as if it does not exist. To think of time in relation to movement, I imagine the work to live outside real time, that is, without any movement or logic except that found within the realm of fantasy.

JF: *You often take the full page and frame it as your work. Why is the full page important?*

HE: I do not really see the pages themselves as my work. The work in most instances takes shape once it is installed in the space, as a kind of spatial assemblage of images. The images and objects, taken out of their context and juxtaposed together, have, for me, the potential to turn into detoured metaphors.

JF: *When we began talking about the exhibition, you sent a sketch of twenty very different plinths that you wanted to be made. Some look like normal plinths, but others look like they are taken straight out of De Chirico's paintings. They become sculptures or architectural objects themselves. You mentioned that you were inspired by the Pergamon Museum. Could you talk a bit about how that is present in the show?*

HE: Actually, I mentioned the Pergamon Museum because I visited it not long ago and was really fascinated by it. I like museums because they are odd places, totally constructed, full of “things” taken out of context, often of a ghostly nature. . . . I remember very vividly the Egyptian museum in Cairo—quite an amazing place; the eerie room with the mummified bodies . . . and the vast number of pedestals and vitrines in each room. . . . Thinking about museums and pedestals . . . and of the Greek word “mouseion,” which translates as “the seat of the muses,” in literal terms, the pedestal would be as such a “seat” on which an artifact is placed in order to be looked at. In *The Disquieting Muses* (1916) by De Chirico there is an interesting

relation between the pedestal and the object, the seat and the seated. Coming to your question about how the twenty pedestals idea developed, in fact, they grew gradually through sketches and drawings into more abstracted forms inspired by various features found in ancient archaeological sites. For example, the Sumerian structure the Ziggurat of Ur, the Cambodian Angkor Wat site whose pyramid-like shaped structures have profound similarities with that of the Pre-Columbian Mayan monuments, tombs, and temples in Chichén Itzá, Monte Albán, and Guatemala, which, nevertheless, all have clear similarities with the pyramids of Egypt. I had this image in my head of placing an ostrich egg on each of the pedestals, but left as is, with its natural colour and texture, becoming one unified form together with the geometric structure that supports it. The egg almost feels as if it could be hand-mastered out of the finest porcelain into an object that only resembles the real thing, the real egg. Perhaps that is the destiny of the elevated “muse,” to be stripped of its meaning as the personification of inspiration and creativity and become a mere signifier of its own self-image.

JF: *Would you like the exhibition to have a similar feeling as The Disquieting Muses?*

HE: In some ways, yes, though if it would be the case, I suppose it would be not so much in the feeling of melancholy that the painting evokes, but rather its sense of displacement and stillness.

JF: *I spoke to Hans-Peter Feldmann last year about the pyramids in Egypt. He said he would not want to visit them, but rather keep the image and imagination of the pyramids that he already had. I guess it is about keeping one's own manifestation of reality alive without being confronted with possible changes. Can you relate to that?*

HE: I like to think in this way for example when it comes to films. If you never watch a film twice, you stay with that first impression even when, through time, what is left to ponder is not the story but just its sense and some scattered images here and there.

JF: *When we talked earlier today, you showed me the framed image of two girls looking at two empty golden frames on the wall (you had simply cut out the images from the golden frames). So, you refer here to the meta of looking! Our audience at Malinö Konsthall is basically looking at an image of two girls looking at nothing (a hole in the frame). You commented on how many things in your book VOL. I and in the show are about “looking at” and “being looked at.” Could you expand on that notion?*

HE: I was referring to the notion of looking at something and being looked at as a choreography of gestures and projections. It is said that without the looker there would be no “thing” to be looked at, so we can only really look at something when we become this thing that we are looking at. Imagining then as a possible scenario the two girls looking at the absent image, as if they look into a mirror and see only an

empty void, an image that has no resemblance when reflected and so they become mere phantoms. When we, in turn, look at the girls, looking into the hole in the frame, we double up the act of looking, so in the end we look at the empty hole through the gaze that is looking at itself and in a way we, in effect, become this absent image.

JF: Tell me about your approach to the book VOL. I. You changed the layout a few times. What were your thoughts about it? How did it develop, and how is it structured now, if it is structured?

HE: The book, a collaboration with the designer, ended up consisting of about a third of the Polaroids that I have made so far. When I was asked to decide on the order of the images for the book, I became aware that it was almost impossible to avoid repetitious patterns or narratives between images even though it was not intended when taking the photographs in the first place. I felt it was important to keep a rhythm that remains fluid and in flux between one image and the next. I wanted to create the sense, while going through the pages, that although within each image individually there is a constant shift of perspective, one can still drift along through the passages of space and time nearly undisturbed.

JF: There are also Polaroids in the exhibition and as photographs they are quite vulnerable, they turn yellow and vanish after some years. They are not even produced anymore and still you insist on using this medium. Why?

HE: If the Polaroids fade away, there is nothing I can do about it, and I would not wish to prevent such a process if that is the way they have been manufactured. What that would mean though is that they are not static since some kind of chemical reaction would need to happen on their surface, probably as a reaction to the outer atmosphere. Ultimately, they would behave more or less like a living organism. To me that is part of their beauty.

JF: I actually find the process and how you describe it quite poetic. In the end, the Polaroid will become minimalistic, monochrome! Now, on another topic, I would like to talk to you about your work at the Berlin Biennale in 2008. You managed to create a glass cube within Mies Van Der Rohe's mega glass cube—Neue Nationalgalerie. It seemed like a weird waiting room for anthropology and art, a rather sterile space that somehow detached itself from the rest of the exhibition. It produced its own space within the space, and within this small space you managed to merge and juxtapose past and present issues of political utopias and cultures, cultures of collecting, art, and history. How did you decide on this work within and in relation to the space? Could you explain its content and how you structured it?

HE: The installation took place in one of the two former cloakrooms of the museum built out of two long rows of wooden panels joined on one side to shape a corner. My thought was to transform this area into

a room with the rest of the walls constructed out of glass, and so create a sort of micro world within the enormous glass cube that the host building resembled. I wanted people to walk into this room not really knowing how to look at it. The objects and the collages, the books and the glass vitrines, the plants, and the fish tank all eventually came together to form what later seemed to become a constellation of spatial, formal, and abstract analogies, both in relation to one another and to the museum itself.

JF: The installation and especially certain elements—like the plant—seem to have a clear reference to Marcel Broodthaers' museum. Could you please comment on this possible influence?

HE: It has not been a conscious influence but I'm happy there are obvious connections.

JF: The plant seems uncanny in the space, as if it has been completely misplaced.

HE: The plant has an unusual shape. To me it looks more like a creature than a real plant, and maybe like the marabou. It is something between odd and beautiful. I like to create tensions between things because I think it is in this tension that something begins to happen.

JF: I would like to speak more about your relation, if any, to Giorgio de Chirico, Max Ernst, and Surrealism . . . and their use of masks, the exotic, and manipulated history.

HE: If it is that the work shares qualities with that of Surrealists, I think it might be especially in the tendency to juxtapose disparate elements together to create new relationships between things. The use of masks and the exotic are somewhat a means through which one can potentially delve into unknown territories, something that the surrealists were very keen on. As for De Chirico, I see him not so much as a painter but more as a sculptor in that he managed to create an entire universe in which one is left to contemplate and move without an end in and around the space of the image.

JF: You are bringing many studies of the world together and letting people look at it out of context with fresh eyes. Do you think that we know too much and that modern archaeology has taken out the mystic element of ancient culture and discoveries? And that we, therefore, need to see them out of context again?

HE: Perhaps . . . although I would like to believe that there are plenty of things we have not yet discovered and that might remain forever unknown and out of sight.

JF: The exhibition is called VOL. I, II & III, the book is VOL. I, and the two disconnected spaces in Malmö Konsthall are

SYLVIA KOUVALI

VOL. II and VOL. III—do you consider these as chapters in an ongoing series of volumes, as in a book?

HE: If I were to imagine such a book, it would be one that could be read and looked at in a random order without beginning and end or any thematic divisions.

JF: *Your works evoke a dreamlike distant world. In the 1950s and 1960s, a period from which many of your magazine images and collages come, the idea of progress and a fascination with the future appear filled with both hope and fear, and your work seems to float between a real and a potential or illusory past/future.*

HE: I like to think of the past as having no “telos.” History, as with found images, belongs to the past. Although the moment is taken out of context, it bears the promise of eternal transformation.

JF: *In the last space of your installation a small projection—Super 8 film transferred to DVD—shows a Marabou Stork facing the camera, minding its own business. The peak of the film for me is when the Marabou slightly turns its head towards the camera and yawns. Is this the turning point in the installation?*

HE: I suppose the film itself has a turning point as you find yourself standing in front of the screen looking at the bird looking back at you as if you two begin to participate perhaps unknowingly in a game of nuances of movement and gestures until it becomes clear that this is just as much an illusion, the mere flat surface of the projection screen.

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