

Explanatory note and an invitation for discussion.

by Christos Avramoudas

Usually the pieces of art that I am working on, at least for the last 20-25 years, have had no significant starting point. This means that I have no fixed ideas in my mind, or a pre-conceived title and a general aim towards completion, when I start. It is random occurrences, the liberating qualities of non-traditional materials, irregular arrangements produced by actions that are not considered as 'arty' or 'crafty', change, transience, and the employment of serendipity that keep me motivated and engaged in creative procedures, and not a pre-perceived value attributed to the object of creation as a final product to be exhibited in a gallery. The older I get the more distant I become from the classic notion of a unitary autonomous subject and the clear boundaries of a 3D object (with a start, middle and end, etc) in a Cartesian universe where the mental does not have extension in space and the material cannot think.

If there is a starting point in linear time for this piece it must have been, vaguely, 20 years ago. I was tracing, with pencil on tracing paper, lines, shapes and contours of female models out of popular picture magazines and artistic photo-books, and also organic or inorganic forms out of pictures that looked promising. I would then mix and match them for no apparent reason, or use the pencil and eraser in a surrealist automatic drawing mode, letting my hand move randomly over the images in directions that I never planned them to go. In one of those drawings, although the whole posture was set to be viewed as the front of a woman standing on her feet, there was a sort of escalating 'twist' from her torso downwards, and the actual bottom of the woman was twisted at the front. Also, there was a significant 'cut', a straight line that separated the head from the body, which made it look disassociated, and as if it were sliding away.

Around that time, I was looking for jobs around Melbourne to work as a fulltime stonemason in marble factories. One day, I was traveling by train into an industrial zone, but the train stopped halfway down the tracks and reversed backwards towards the start of the trip. I did not reach my destination that day; likely because of my poor comprehension of English back then, I did not understand the announcement from the speakers, or that an unexpected event had occurred on that line. Soon after this, a potential employer told me, while I was explaining my qualifications for the job (a qualified carver with a bachelor's degree in Fine Arts), that working as a labourer in a factory would be a step down for me. In a way, that was a funny statement because, as a working class man

who married a woman from a middle class family, although my education provided me with the opportunity to pursue a career as an Art teacher at schools, I had neither the money nor the time to attain a Diploma in Education. So, I was personally climbing up the social ladder, but professionally I was stepping down. (Προσωπική **άνοδος** και επαγγελματική **κάθοδος**.)

I was also completely unaware of C. Jung's writings about 'enantiodromia' or 'the union of opposites' or 'synchronicity', but the way that the three events happened within a week (the drawing, the train reversing, and what the man said) resulted in me associating them, in the back of my mind, with the tendency of things to change into their opposites without really changing their basic structure. The drawing acted as a reminder of this for the future to come.

I did not work on this drawing until years later. In my regular habit of opening my sketchbooks and visual diaries, one day, while flicking through their pages, there it was: helping me to become more conscious of its context within these events. For quite a long time my focus was on bricolage, intertextuality (the notion that nothing is original, everybody is influenced by everybody else) and the passionate reading of C. Jung.

I was obsessed with this gradual decline of our daily consumption of products into mountains of rubbish. I was carried away into a cosmological fantasy; being an impersonal but central part of a world doomed by a generally increasing capitalistic entropy, where the wrapping, the bottling, the packaging, the labelling, of the product is far more important than the product itself, where we buy products not because we really need them but because they are symbols of social status. Being part of a world where consumerist ideology is a dominant part of culture and brings about anthropological change, initially as an external power at first, pressing the subject into subordination, then manipulating the human body and our sense of self-identity.

In an effort to reach an equilibrium, some emotional discharge in a cathartic way, I was collecting useless everyday little objects (mostly from rubbish bins or off the streets) putting them side by side or gluing them together, in an amateurish and unflattering way, deprived of any aesthetic or critical thoughts, employing again surrealistic techniques to suppress conscious control over the making process, allowing the unconscious mind to become the principal factor in the absence of reason. In this state of mind, feeling an everyday constant degradation of aesthetic values, an image of a fragmented female body, uncoordinated and insufficient became more appealing and interesting to me.

It was initially from the drawings and paintings by Braque and Picasso from their first Cubist period at the start of the 20th Century that I was introduced to visual tricks that are rather unsettling, more conceptual rather than visual. The breaking up of unitary focus into multiple perspectives and the slicing of the human figure into smaller planar components and then reshuffling the shards into structures of a shallow bas-relief space became more vivid and acceptable in my mind. Mainly, I felt a strange familiarity with the Cubists' discoordination and re-orientation. It felt like a topographical air-photo of my mind at that period.

Another parameter adding to my very confused state of existence was the fact that I had moved from a monocultural society (Greece) to a multicultural one (Australia), and the deep effect it had on me, in particular, speaking English in everyday interactions. I was preoccupied by the neo-colonial Us and Them binary of social relations in everyday life; the struggle to understand how meaning is generated, disseminated, and contested within systems of power and control, and the understanding of myself as a coherent whole being subjected to contradictory influences and variables.

And so, it was as a fully integrated person in a new country with a fulltime job as a stonemason, and a father of a small family, that I felt interested in working again on the drawing.

The notion of a headless woman was always in the back of my mind from Greece, but I always felt uncomfortable with the idea. This time it was a woman with a detachable head (like a doll's, that you can easily take off and attach a different one) that I was thinking of.

It is very important to underline here that these realisations initially happen through creative processes, and during the making of art, and belong to a visual and tactile semiconscious way of thinking that is quite different from the cerebral, voice based, verbally communicative way of thinking through spoken or written language. What I know now about the same drawing is different to what I knew back then. This knowledge derives from the literature that revolves around these matters. Theories and critical thoughts that have been cultivated in institutions and artistic circles. This literary dimension of art comes to me always after the visual-tactile one. So, I am more consciously aware now that although the body of the woman I was drawing belonged to a single woman, a woman very dear to me (like a mother, a wife or a long-time girlfriend) and a woman the same race as me, the head belonged to many different women of northern European decent.

Blonde blue-eyed women that I didn't know well or not at all. Hollywood actresses that I watched on films, TV presenters delivering the news, Australian women that I met and talked to briefly, saleswomen, etc. All of them fascinating and attractive, from the male gaze perspective, however also distant, unfamiliar, and instilling in me a hostile and untrustworthy feeling.

This multifaced head represented a better alliance with the Cubists' approach of multiple perspective images presented as if viewed from many different levels at once. I was fascinated by the network of broken lines that the Cubists use and the all-over tessellation and constructive use of 2D visual slices as if they were tiles in a mosaic pattern. But it was the wild exploration of the subconscious that I wanted to put down on paper, a topographical view of my mind exploring the paradoxical nature of reality, and not to imitate the Cubists' innovations about European pictorial space, the human glance and visual perspective.

It was through C. Jung that I was introduced to Depth Psychology, where I realised that the unconscious contains repressed experiences and other personal-level issues in its 'upper' layers, and transpersonal (archetypal) forces in its depths. These primordial elements of the collective unconscious form a very solid context from which the contents of cyclic and sequent changes derive their meaning. I have also realised that it is a significant part of our human condition to generate mytho-religious symbolism. All human minds and lives are ultimately embedded in some sort of mythmaking.

Gradually I saw, through the bricolages that I was creating (this absent-minded, cheap and unrefined conjoining of useless everyday objects), the guidance of an integrating factor which was not of my own making, symbolised by the emergence of quaternities and mandalas (circular structures where there is a dynamic play between polar opposites, and the compensatory attempt to form an ordering structure in a way that is not straight, but appears to go in circles or spirals). I also realised that the human collective unconscious possesses a large measure of objective reality. The unconscious works qualitatively rather than quantitatively. The archetypes have a nature that cannot, with certainty, be designated as purely psychic, and meaningful coincidences (like the drawing, the train reversing, and the employer) can participate in both realms (mental and physical).

But I was trained as an artist, not as a scientist, and I do not think that my artworks will qualify as scientific research that explores the relationship between the conscious and the unconscious. As an artist I was instinctively depending on

artistic freedom in a bohemian sense that does not serve some moral or didactic purpose, and I was brought by my own free 'spirit' to meet, greet and acknowledge the ominous works of psychological forces, hidden subconscious mechanisms, a world of human laws, and a world of institutionalised knowledge that run parallel with the creative processes.

A big part of my own myth-making mechanisms is my belief that art is an attempt, by talented and gifted individuals or groups, to explain the riches and wonders of humanity in emotionally exciting (and very often entertaining) storytelling. I saw artists as intelligent empathetic people who applied their extraordinary sensibilities and sense of elegance and style to cover reality with layers of their own inventions.

For most of us, reality that is perceptible only through our senses remains opaque, and presents a dead weight which our sensibilities do not have the strength to lift. It is thanks to artists' inventions and discoveries that we are able to integrate these opaque sections and bring ourselves to a state of mind to accept these layers within our own minds, and see the world through their lenses. We live life in a lucid dream through music, songs, lyrics, poems, novels, films, paintings, sculptures, performances and rituals of all sorts. For this part of the world of art I am always thankful and respectful. It is when art becomes elitist and exclusive, wraps itself in fake mysticism, or sterile academic obscurities inaccessible to the everyday person, that I want to disassociate myself from it.

Having all this in mind, I was working on the drawing, on and off, showing more commitment without making major changes. It was on the day of our return as a family from a summer vacation up in Queensland that I felt the urge to work intensively on the drawing again.

It was again through surrealist automatism, but this time I used watercolours as if I were trying to transfer the warmth and colour of the tropical waters from Queensland to the paper. The result had a turquoise blue liquid movement in and out of the drawing, a sort of connection with something external.

The drawing slowly became part of the mandalas I was working on, a connecting 'bridge' between two opposite poles that for me were symbolising introversion and extraversion.

Life went on, and for several years I didn't work on it at all because it served its purpose as the mediator between two, representing the constant flux, the field of tension between two opposites. It was when my daughter was preparing herself

for V.C.E. exams and I came across and read a chapter, from a chemistry book, about Galvanic cells, electron transfer, and oxidation-reduction reactions, that I saw an opportunity for a different approach. In that chapter, there is a demonstration with pictures showing a container with a strip of zinc metal dipped in an ionic solution, and another container with a copper strip dipped in a different ionic solution. The metal strips are connected to each other with a piece of wire, and that's where the flow of the electrons happen. The solutions in the two containers are also connected to each other by a salt bridge. The salt bridge contains an ionic compound. The ions flow through the salt bridge to complete the circuit. This is the basic structure of a battery. The container with zinc is called the anode (η **άνοδος**). The container with copper is called the cathode (η **κάθοδος**).

To me, although this was a scientific narrative, it had a lot of artistic merit and gave a new meaning to my drawing, a holistic view, an ordering structure of a closed circuit. Now the metaphor I was using for a piece of art going through stages, balancing between extraverted stages (that are open to many people, seeking attention and interaction, etc.) and introverted stages (of self-referential enclosure, isolation, inability to connect, etc.) became stronger. Now in my imagination the woman was made of copper, accepting electrons from the wire, and at her feet copper atoms are formed.

This convergence of chemical energy into electrical energy, the movement of the electrons down in the cathode and the formation of copper atoms from copper cations at the bottom of the container, sounded like a good metaphor for all the stimulation and social input that I get during the working week in the building industry, and the release of this energy (mostly negative), the transformation, the convergence, into art during the weekend. I also saw it as a sign that this artwork should be more self-referential than the others, a redirection back to the source.

Bernstein once said that when he is amongst people, he feels lonely, and when he is alone, he feels the presence of people and the validity of their actions stronger and more vividly. I have realised that I am quite that sort of person, and if I wanted to do right with this piece of art, I should work on it all alone, especially during the night when there is not much light to look around and noises to distract me. Then, take off my everyday glasses and put the introspective glasses on. The plan was to reach a state where the actions, the events, all that happened during the week and had an impact on me, would become alive again in my mind, urging me to get them out of my system and onto a piece of paper. And then, take these glasses off and put thicker ones on: to examine the mechanisms that allow this

convergence, focus on the nature of art, comprehend the structures behind the retina, recognise the world of art as an environment that produces artists and pieces of art (and not the other way around), focus on the linguistic aspect of art, as a subdivision in the domain of culture, that has the function of constituting concrete individuals as subjects.

The coronavirus restrictions came after my decision and gave me a good excuse to go to extremes with my isolation. This time I worked on a bigger scale and used more expensive materials. I also wanted to imitate George Braque and make it look more like a landscape and not a human figure (a nude). To use his altitudinous perspective that he also copied from another great European recluse, Cezanne. The ‘waterfall’ effect of his paintings agreed with my notion of the electrons going down in the cathode.

It is needless to say that the more I work on it, new contradictions appear making it less clear, less representational, unidentifiable. But within its general absence of rational optimism there is a constant variable in this painting, the notion it gives me of a wonderful fleeting sensation that I will never fully grasp and understand. It is like a swim and a play in a sea of meaningless contradictions where the properties we attach to objects fall apart under analysis, where life has no intrinsic meaning. This might sound nihilistic, but it is not pessimistic, and I am well aware that there is plenty of old-school European theories behind it and quite a lot of versions and interpretations.

My point of view is that there are no valid truths. All truths are artificial and derive from an insecurity that we as humans feel in the sight of real life. By saying this I don’t mean that my belief (the only truth is that there are no truths) is superior than other beliefs. I am saying that my belief is true for me and what people believe as true is true for them, there is no discrimination or measuring scales to apply to them. Also, the above declaration doesn’t mean that I sign my resignation as a fully functioning individual in the face of a world without meaning. It is more that I resign from the philosophy and politics of identity. I rather support otherness or difference over identity.

A big part of theoretical thought inquires into the very concept of canonicity. The aim is not just to help us see what an artwork means or how valuable it is, instead it queries our common-sense notions of what it is to ‘mean’ in the first place and poses criteria by which we evaluate art. There is always some theoretical background with us humans, whether we like it or not. For example, the most

common reaction to a piece of art – saying either ‘I like it, or ‘I don’t like it’ – falls under Freud’s Pleasure Principle. All art involves interpretation.

In this enormous construction that we call the world of art there is a plethora of theories, schools of thought, systems of knowledge, centres and epicentres, ideologies, movements etc, that shape our critical thought, our aesthetic sensibilities or valuations and reactions towards a piece of art. Some of us are academically inclined and some of us are not. Some of us find theoretical thought interesting or helpful and others find it to be elitist or like an alien language, but all of us fall under the influence of the major systems of knowledge: modernism, existentialism, Marxist theory, the psychoanalytic approach, feminist theory, structuralism and post-structuralism, reception theory, post-colonialism, cultural studies etc, to name a few.

We also live in a post-modern world. The grand narratives of truth, science, reason, progress, and universal emancipation have not only been historically discredited, they also failed to understand the complexity and multiplicity of the human condition, because our understanding is always a matter of partial, partisan interpretation, and because the world in itself is in no way partial.

Truth is the product of interpretation, facts are constructs of discourse, the human subject is as much a fiction as the reality he or she contemplates, a diffuse self-divided entity without any fixed nature or essence.

As the title suggests, this explanatory text is an invitation for discussion. The biggest part of the creative procedures involved in the making of the painting happened in strict isolation, and without me thinking of an audience. The part of this presentation that was created with the potential in mind to reach an audience, to attract interest and to create a positive environment for discussion, is this written text. I would like here to thank the Greek-Australian Cultural League for their outstanding commitment and involvement in the cultural affairs of the Greek community here in Melbourne, and the coordinators of this event, especially Vasy Petros (for her rare ability to accept the ‘other’), giving many artists the opportunity to showcase their achievements, and organise a vibrant and diverse exhibition.

I am also extremely interested in addressing the audience with 3 inquiries. Your involvement in answering these questions will make this piece of art an ongoing process, a vehicle for communication and not a stale composition.

It will also give me an idea of what makes the cogs and wheels of the world of art turn these days.

So, to the members of the audience who had the patience to read all the above and are interested to be involved in a conversation:

- Do you agree with this explanation or not? (Please give reasons and support your argument).
- If you are a creative artist, what is the driving force that motivates your artistic endeavours? Are there truths in relation to your art that you hold as valid and unquestionable? Are there beliefs that you find rather fake or artificial? (Please support your opinion and give explanations).
- If you are an art lover, what makes you interested and involved in the world of art? Are there aspects of this world that you find unattractive or difficult to understand? (Please support your opinion and give explanations).