

The Risk of Art

What else could this ‘pavilion’ for Cyprus represent than something of the risk of making work that raises doubt as to the truths of a culture, especially when our only reward might be to arrive at less secure ways of encountering this culture. Nietzsche’s interest was in the risk and the breach in the very making of a work of art, and that it be driven by this ‘interest’ as opposed to, say the ‘disinterestedness’ of Kant. Consider the ramifications of our time that Agamben has lamented and warned us against when he says, ‘only because art has left the sphere of interest to become merely interesting do we [now] welcome it so warmly’ⁱ

Jalal Toufic’s essay in this publication, *Realistic Magic; or, I Never Cared about Magical Realism*, addresses the status of the image. His work is involved with the relation of the affective power of the indexical through the mass produced image in public circulation – in this instance the image of Saddam Hussein. He is referring to the contiguity in image and referent, a component of sympathetic magic. Toufic recognizes that, “in the unconscious and with rare exceptions we still generally believe in the ontological identity of the model and image especially photography/cinema/ video image since it is indexical”. In the large scale assemblage of photography based paintings of Mustafa Hulusi and the intricately time-troubled collages and videos of Haris Epaminonda - albeit in this instance in the context of an international Biennale – we are in the territory of this relation and, as always, the unconscious.

‘Old earth, no more lies, I’ve seen you...’ⁱⁱ, is a fragment from Samuel Beckett that tears a path back through the assumed coherence of its meaning, what Slavoj Zizek observes in the so-called ‘failed’ last novel of Raymond Chandler, ‘Playback’. Zizek shows that rather than attempt to understand the failure of this novel through Chandler’s personal tragedies – that can only serve to, “elude the inherent logic of the failure” – Zizek claims that, precisely because of this failure it produces, “an entire ethical narrative, forced choice ... guilt ... and [a] traumatic situation, is repeated”ⁱⁱⁱ. To return, to play back is a repetition and Beckett too plays back – perhaps nowhere more inscrutably than in his play, ‘Krapp’s Last Tape’ where the subject/protagonist is undone as he listens to the tape recorder unwind the early versions of himself: voices from the archives of his recorded diaries.

For Hulusi’s installation the central space of this 17th Century apartment has been re-formed as a white cube while a second room retains its elegance and domestic character. Hulusi’s works have an intense relation to diminished and expanded scale, and importantly between the referent, photography and painting. For example in the room there are two large paintings, one, grapes on the vine and the other the image of citrus fruit, both painted and scaled up from photographs taken by Hulusi – gigantised, and unlike advertisements scaling up of images, the gigantic holds within it a version of the small from which it came. Hulusi is a Turkish Cypriot, part of the Diaspora, born in London, and has produced work before based on photographs taken by him in Cyprus, and to this he returns. Titled, *The Elysian Paintings*, they are made in collaboration with professional illustrators – from a palimpsest of sources: the faint trace of the bucolic ideal in Chinese and Korean political propaganda posters and the double nature of kitsch. Their luminous surfaces show a less solid flesh than we expect to find in *this* world.^{iv} The breadth of this reach across manifestations of the image for example, is in a poster of 2004, with an appropriated photographic portrait of British Prime-Minister, Tony Blair with “Mustafa Hulusi” stretching the width of the image – something other than an imposition. *The Elysian Fields* are the Island of death in the afterlife, yet Hulusi’s ‘field’ is of *this* earth. Toufic elsewhere speaks of the value of the one who produces work in relation to a place when one is not there. Hulusi is both ‘there’ and ‘not there’, and his journey a return to produce these luminous presences, these paintings that also say something of the ‘presencing’ that all borders generate.

Either side of these spaces that hold *The Elysian Paintings*, are the video installations and the deceptively intimate works of Epaminonda: collages, escoriating and beautiful. They collectively form a kind of liminal space through the imagery of a past – the mid 20th Century – yet they don’t address a period in time, perhaps so that it might be the past, again. They are composed of images or pages taken from French magazines from the 1950’s or the found images of monuments: churches and memorials from the city of Berlin, itself an archive. The monuments touch upon Bataille’s iconoclasm in relation to the edifice of architecture, “to loosen this *arché* from its resolution, turning it into a mere beginning which is never more than the semblance of an inauguration.”^v There’s a question as to what is at stake in approaching time in the image, in this instance as the monument loses hold of its iconic nature – the

time which gave it its fullness, the 'subject' of the image no longer the monument itself but perhaps, what Roger Caillois, speaks of as the psychasthenic experience, "an attraction by space' or in the case of darkness an "assimilation to space"^{vi}: the fear of losing our distinction between ourselves and our environment. Collages produced from images of people clustered in and by domestic interiors are domesticity and time-scape combined that undermine, but cannot be released from, a semblance of place. For Elaine Scarry such rooms have a potential far past their claim to harbour and protect, "While the room is a magnification of the body, it is simultaneously a miniaturisation of the world, of civilisation..."^{vii}

Epaminonda's videos find their sources and appropriative force from those archives of images that arise like a regular beat into our lives: through the transmissions of television and cinema, both in Cyprus and the region of the Eastern Mediterranean. *Tarahi I* and *Tarahi II* for example, filmed from the transmissions of Egyptian television with its still visible echo of 1960's culture, are a gesture towards re-tendering the figure of woman as represented in television soaps/ melodrama. They embalm the valuable excess of the emotions in melodrama through montage. For Bazin, 'It is montage, that abstract creator of meaning, which preserves the state of unreality demanded by the spectacle.'^{viii} While her film, *Nemesis 52* (2003) is a wry shrouding of pleasure. There is a meeting between the sensorium of technology and the question of the status of the image here.

A status heightened by the assumptions associated with identity and the lived consequences of the deception when we are caught within a teleological impulse of history, that all events such as this succumb to, in this instance it is, 'The Republic of Cyprus, Pavilion at the 2007 Venice Biennale'. The question remains, how to construct another 'scene' that is not compromised by the absorption of the failures of modernity, born of the fantasies of the enlightenment, and the international diplomacy that has trailed in its wake to, in this instance, leave a constellation of divided countries in this region. A condition sustained by a mobilization of nostalgia that the grammar of power always substitutes for the vicissitudes of memory.

Hulusi's photographs of fruit and flora are imbued with an uncanny fullness as they cross the threshold of painting. Its not nostalgia as much as a form of reverie, of the kind that Bachelard refers to, "reveries of will... because reverie is nearly always associated in our minds with a state of relaxation, we fail to appreciate those dreams of focused action which I will call dreams of will. And so when the real stands before us in all its terrestrial materiality, we are immediately persuaded to [forget the existence of these] unconscious impulses, the oneiric forces which flow unceasingly through our conscious life"^{ix} Hulusi's work does not 'forget', the attention is redoubled.

Any registration of the oneiric in Epaminonda's work can be found in her approach to her sources, where the closer she comes in appropriating from her sources the more diffuse they become. Her works reach past the additive affect or logic of photomontage, cut into they have a shifting transitional space, for here there is a kind of greater emphasis of the haptic in vision: a touch that retains an attention to the relation between surface and a 'deep space'. They often retain the context of the image, the full page, along with the marks of usage, its stains: the reciprocity of the haptic.

The idea that any archive however, simply stores the memory of a culture is best encountered by a refusal to accede to this illusion. What an archive can give up of a past is closer to Walter Benjamin's proposition that, "the past can only be fixed in the image that appears once and for all in the instant of its alienation, just as a memory appears suddenly, as in a flash, in a moment of danger."^x In my research I accessed the archives of Cyprus Broadcasting Corporation in Nicosia. I was compelled by those films not broadcast, raw footage, before the sound track and voice over were added: what I heard was a kind of loss of sound and voice-over in strangely silent documentaries, in the heightened effect this loss created: an attempt to record conflict it became a wayward, cool violence, that of military and civilian militia operations in the streets of Nicosia in the 1960's without the illusion of seamlessness we experience in the montage of image and voice over through broadcast. I was perhaps confronted with the contemporary fate of the voice in these dormant un-transmitted images.

The earlier paintings of Hulusi's such as, *Untitled, (Flower and Hand)*, (2005), *Untitled (Rose and Hand)*, (2005), *Untitled (Portrait of Spring)*, (2006) for all their presence, they too hold a dormant core as they repeat the motif of the disembodied arm - so present in his work - that extends toward the flower or fruit, frozen before it is grasped, abstracted. Though reproduced in this catalogue they are replaced in the exhibition by paintings taken in the Spring leading up to the exhibition and painted on site in Venice. So, the 'less solid flesh' in these tender images act as revenants, the affect of which

transfers to the finely wrought, large scale paintings of pure white flowers, and the succulent weight of figs, citrus, and grape. There's no doubting the fine line Hulusi navigates between photorealism, and an intensification of the emotions, between arboreal pleasures and something far darker, what Sotiris Kyriacou has referred to as enchantment and estrangement. As it was for Baudelaire "the more concrete and solid matter seems, the more delicate and difficult the work of the imagination."^{xi}

The idea that Hulusi's work is compelled to repeat certain images can be considered in the light of two dream images from cinema that he has spoken of: Scenes from Tarkovsky's *Ivan's Childhood* from 1962 and from Ridley Scott's *The Gladiator* from 2004; both films of war. There is the heightened reality of the dream in Tarkovsky. A boy reaches to offer the apple, his soft young arm, disembodied against a background of arboreal bliss, silvery and ebullient, is abstracted from him. Just as Tarkovsky's film in its entirety is infused with the after-image, so too are Hulusi's paintings, and in particular this image from Tarkovsky's cache of dream sequences. The dreams of this child at war is not an escape but his desire to be haunted, its a form of memorisation, not so much lost innocence but the possibility of registering its loss in dreams. Maximus however is not the somnambulist, his visions – again a disembodied hand as it brushes the long grasses – are sleepless. The ambiguity of the address within these sequences is in all of Hulusi's work, through his desire to show the possibility of surviving or morphing the spectacle. His cool abstract posters act as a kind of call to calm amidst the urban chaos of London – amidst what Baudrillard saw as "the non-communication of the mass media" – in the East End, yet are not so far from the hyper-real loss embedded within the fruits and flowers he so precisely frames against fantasised blue skies.

Nelly Richard in her essay on the group of artists known as the Avanzada in Chile in the years leading up to the dissolution of Pinochet's government in the late 1980's writes of the what 'unofficial' works of art encountered, "Unofficial works produced under a military regime...avanzada artists disrupt[ed] the order imposed on language by the figures of authority and their grammar of power. [challenge] the subordination of language to ideology. The coup shattered the preceding framework of social and political experiences, also destroyed all the language and models of signification..."^{xii} To view something in the context of an official archive is to be confronted by fragments of this shattered scene, residing within the claimed stability and authority in the archive: From the cool obscenity of the images of British army troops shooting fire into the underground burrows concealing Cypriot resistance fighters, to the bucolic agricultural festivals' beautifully crafted mobile displays, or the social documentary on the role of women. This all comes down to us as inheritance, whatever is found there not easily relieved of this status. For example the extended presence of president Markarios, the political and religious leader who died in 1977, in the films of his many returns to Cyprus, showing ecstatic scenes of massive crowds surrounding the building that frame his figure on the balcony high above, his speech modulated and repetitious to ensure the imprint of his memory is marked with his capacity to return. Then the extraordinary film footage of the long funeral procession and burial. However, my awareness that it may be possible for the psychic inheritance of these images to be broken, to have an interlocutor, intervene into the stability of these images was caused by the sense that these too were being played back. Such images are not unique to Cyprus, they mirror the formulaic reportage of all historical events, for example the camera lingers on women lining the streets of the long procession, weeping, lost to themselves, lost to their own lives: the fantasy that these images instruct and re-define what mourning will be, and for whom. A question for Baudrillard was, "Is there still, on the edges of hypervisibility, of virtuality, room for an image? Room for an enigma? Room for a power of illusion, a veritable strategy of forms and appearances?... forms are not free, figures are not free. They are on the contrary bound: the only way to liberate them is to chain them together..."^{xiii}

Text by Denise Robinson

ⁱ Giorgio Agamben, 'The Most Uncanny Thing', in *The Man Without Content*, publ. Stanford University Press, 1994, pp. 4

ⁱⁱ Samuel Beckett, *Samuel Beckett, For to End Yet Again*, John Calder, London, 1999, pp. 53

ⁱⁱⁱ Slavoj Zizek, *Enjoy Your Symptom, Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*, Routledge, New York and London, 2001, pp. 69

^{iv} Salvador de Madariaga, *Elysian Fields, A Dialogue*, 1937, George Allen & Unwin, London. A play pp. 9

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- ^v Georges Bataille, *Against Architecture*, MIT Press, Paperback edition, 1989, Chapter, The Hegelian Ediface, pp. 4
- ^{vi} Roger Caillois, *Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia*, October, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England, 1984, no. 31, pp. 72,74
- ^{vii} Quoted by Dave Hickey from Elaine Scarry, 'The Body in Pain, The Making and Unmaking of the World', New York, Oxford University Press, 1985, 27-59, in *Robert Gober*, Catalogue essay, Dia Center for the Arts, New York, NY, 1993, pp. 34.
- ^{viii} André Bazin, *What is Cinema, Volume 1*, University California Press, 2005, pp. 45
- ^{ix} Gaston Bachelard, *Earth and Reveries of Will*, Trans. Kenneth Haltman, Dallas Institute of Humanities and culture, 2002, pp.
- ^x Giorgio Agamben, paraphrasing Walter Benjamin, *The Man Without Content*, *ibid* pp. 105
- ^{xi} Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867), *curiosités esthétiques* (Paris: Michel lévy frères, 1873), pp. 317
- ^{xii} Nelly Richard, Special Issue, *Art & Text Margins and Institutions, Art in Chile Since 1973*. *Art & Text*, pp.17
- ^{xiii} Jean Baudrillard, *The conspiracy of Art*, edited Sylvere Lotringer, *SEMIOTEXT(E)*, 2005, pp.127