

In Dialogue with Melina Nicolaides

By J.W. Mahoney



A veteran of the Cairo Biennale (2001), Cypriot visual artist Melina Nicolaides never failed to engage with the Cairo art scene ever since. CP enters in dialogue with Nicolaides to explore her interdisciplinary practice, her projects between Cairo and other locations, the drivers behind her concepts and her perception of contemporary clichés.

CP: Prior to our dialogue we chatted about your earlier experiences as a painter, and your gradually deciding to explore other mediums. Every artist whom we can call “interdisciplinary” has her/his reasons for this particular process of “shifting”. That usually involves a shift of concept that goes with the shift of medium. What would be your own reasons, should you be able to define one?

MN: Yes certainly, but I’ll go back first: I distinctly recall during a studio critique in graduate school, being cautioned by New York artist Robin Hill, that I ran the risk, as a painter, of remaining a ‘dinosaur’ in the art world. As an artist though, this warning did not preoccupy me heavily, as I knew that in essence, if I ever tried to ‘fake’ anything, I’d be burying myself anyway. Hence trying to force a change of course would be clearly impossible.

In one’s life, however, stasis - in relationships, surroundings, lifestyle, daily work, including studio practice, in consuming visual production of other creators, and everything - does not ultimately lead to equilibrium, but to stagnation. We see it too in international art events today, where there are great works sometimes, and many times there is stasis and a

repetition of the same, without much growth necessarily in the given or 'curated' idea, and with more care given to the 'theme' than the depth in the artworks themselves. To answer your question, moving to live in my homeland recently for the first time created the shift; my painting is emotionally pure and unfettered by specified 'issues', untitled even, but in the particular environment of Cyprus, I found that there were also other things that I needed to say, and this required a categorical expansion into other mediums. This shift is a learning process, a whole universe of new information which, as for all working artists, necessitates a break out of the static balance of one's work, and a departure from the comfort zone.

I think all artists are acutely aware at all times of the presence or the absence of this driving element. However, all this new information is of no use unless the foundation is strong, whole, unshakable, and even unchanging. Otherwise it's just incoherency and change for change's sake only, without the result having any real and substantial existence or real presence - its just a loud and empty statement. And when you knock at the shell of that egg, you will certainly hear the hollow rap of emptiness.

CP: Speaking about international art events, curators and Artistic Directors of international biennials today seek "particular fields" for their curatorial laboratory process; descriptions of one or more of personal states like "gender", "identity", "migration", "nostalgia", "memory", etc. Where would your process and art production fall here?

MN: Perhaps since my Cairo Biennale participation in 2001, where such themes were explored and interweaved between artists of both eastern and western backgrounds and sensibilities, I wondered if I could choose, if asked to specify. It is hard I think, almost impossible to find only ONE word to define a whole praxis; perhaps 'identity' is the closest that fits I believe, with some reservation to its limitations when isolated as an idea.

I explore this identity in a very personal way, as it's what I have been 'doing' all my life - moving between continents. My work is personal but it is by no means autobiographical, I would never want to limit myself

inwardly like that, and my 'egó', in the Greek sense of the word, is certainly not that self-centered, nor am I here to feed to the voyeuristic needs of today's society. Personally, I find work that is universally comprehensible and applicable, much more intriguing and effective; and when dealing with this particular issue, it is important to be equally aware of the parallel existence of individual and group identities. For me, artwork doesn't necessarily have to equate with 'activism' by any means, but engageism perhaps - engaging intellectually or emotionally, creatively, and certainly also actively.

I value my long quest and my studio research and appreciate that today we must be multi-lingual artists to be able to communicate globally.

And for that I do not approach sensation: I hate when something has 'shock-value' that is empty, as extremism does not necessarily translate into profundity. The only thing that truly annoys me in art, as in any other creative field, is the pressure to be extreme for the sake of it. Because the reality is, when it is shock for shock's sake only, in the end, those who really can, will detect the odor of voidness from a mile away.

I mean, do you recall the sensation created by Lady Gaga in a meat dress? Seriously, didn't that dress just really smell? Brilliant indeed perhaps, but from its mass 'public', how many millions really, really understood the implications and meaning behind its "effect"? In the art world, let us not let extremism overshadow the effect of all the artists whose work genuinely 'provokes' thought. Perhaps what some artists forget, I think, is that an ostrich is a very big bird, yes - but it can't hide when it needs to, and it also can't fly. As far as 'labels' are concerned as an issue, I don't believe that serious artists need necessarily to work within labels; labels are not good and they are not bad.

They are 'just there' as curatorial reality, not as an actual catalyst for art production. I have worked very hard for my career and my practice, made many sacrifices for it, and learned a lot by watching without interfering, listening without talking, and engaging when it was the right moment; hopefully this process will never wane.

Just for the sake of argument, let me take your earlier mentioning of the curatorially sexy label 'gender' as an example: gender as a term - when female - gives me the shivers in the cases where this label used by art

CP: Your process of shifting and continuous change is linked to projects like the installation Trambala; you conceived the project in one way, assembled it in another, and showed it despite certain constraints from the Egyptian customs before the work entered Egypt. Would your artwork tolerate the discrepancy between concept and final arrangement?

MN: Yes, the installation Trambala, was created for the exhibition 'Split' at Darb 1718 Center for Art and Culture and that particular experience of showing in Cairo was certainly an 'exercise' in adaptation, and produced a result that I had in no way anticipated. Through the example of Cyprus, Trambala addressed the globally occurring practice of appropriation or erasure of national, cultural and personal identities by the more powerful - those who wish to maintain their dominance at the expense of others. It is also about the danger of how pressure from the outside can deplete a culture from the inside.

The story began as a result of the 'intervention' of a Mr. Mohamed T.M., Customs Official, which added a new dimension to the piece and certainly expanded on my original intention. Although this artwork was supported by all the necessary amount of official paperwork for its transfer from Cyprus, Mr. Mohamed's action of imposing his personal green signature across each piece, quite honestly sent me into a rather pitiful outburst of anger and sadness upon opening the crate, having witness such incidents before in the past. However, after a combination of incensed and rational thought, we all realized that such occurrences raised many pre-existing issues in Egypt - the question about what is considered art; to whom is it art, and to whom it is expendable? What gives a person in a position of power the license to do this and is there a distrust of art itself or just misunderstanding? Ironically, with this gesture, Mr. Mohamed had unwittingly added new dimensions to the work, by illustrating precisely the concept of Trambala - the act of the appropriation and erasure of another's identity, in this case, of mine and the work itself. I felt that, effectively, this human intervention from a different culture had given this artwork a history which could not and should not be removed nor disregarded. We recall, as when The Large Glass broke in its shipping crate, Duchamp said he admired the

cracks as they added a new element, contributed purely by chance. In this case the new element was a deliberate act and an active intervention, and where a repetitive visual element on the 7 pieces created its own unity and harmony which has now become integral to the piece itself. For Trambala, these signatures add a new energy, a new identity, and eradicating that signature would be a mistaken attempt at rewriting its history. But more importantly, it was a real happening, unstaged, and a real process for both myself and the piece itself.

Having said that, let us hope that the individuals who finally settle into being the future Ministers of Culture and the Fine Arts Sector Heads will examine such oversights and unresolved issues of Cairo as an international art center, with more efficacy than has been done in the past..

CP: Reality, this is a good pivotal point to explore praxis. So for a Cypriot artist - and I am here using the word "Cypriot" as a physical reality and not as a curatorial label - how do you perceive reality around you? The reality that inspires and informs your work.

MN: During the years I spent living in the USA, in Europe and in Asia, I think perhaps the one thing I was acutely aware of was the question of what is "authentic". Of course, that is an enormous subject in itself which I have tackled in different ways over the years, but for our more specific purposes here, we can ask, How many of the people we know, artists or not, are actually "themselves", and not a persona or mask in some way? Why have we reached the point that altering reality has become so necessary to advancement and survival?

In Cyprus, I am finding changes in reality that exist elsewhere in the region, but which here are magnified by the smallness of the island and its history-old inclination to adapt. In today's chapter of history, it feels sometimes that even the villages no longer seem 'real' in Cyprus anymore. There in the main platia - square - on Sundays, you will find gathered together all the struggling Sri Lankese, Philippino, Vietnamese women who are systematically cooking the curries for, and raising the Cypriot kids in the houses. No one is disputing that their presence and their work in those homes is aiding others in need elsewhere, however, this phenomenon raises so many questions - to what effect

are these individuals filling the emotional, cultural, intellectual roles that we should still be fully assuming ourselves? Have we transplanted struggling people with different concerns and needs to fill our own holes; while at the same time creating holes within other families in remote societies? Having actually witnessed the occurrence from both sides, I wonder sometimes, who is taking over and how?

And here we are again tackling another of the hot issues: 'migration'. Cyprus exists always, within the permanent struggle of its political problem, but now a societal, cultural and demographic one is causing massive internal identity-gouging and reshaping, so to speak. It has not however, like other parts of Europe, seen anything of the restrictive politics and growing resentment against immigration. Yet. But I feel that it is brewing, especially in an economy that cannot integrate work-seekers from countries of Asia to Eastern Europe. And we are not alone though - across, the Mediterranean, even next door in Lebanon, but perhaps less so in Egypt, we must often order our food in English at restaurants. Why and when did that happen? Very difficult subject that of migration, and the effects it has on both sides of the exchange. Erasure of identity - yes, that certainly, as you can imagine, greatly informs the work.

CP: Then do you have a particular and ideal form of production that you perceive as authentic enough to you as a consumer of art who is also an art producer?

MN: It is always wonderful to find the exceptions in all the noise of too much art being created by 'producers' who don't really see or feel or know, who deliver unfeelingly to the 'required' themes of the moment, constructing things physically/intellectually 'sell-able' but dead inside with no real heartbeat or blood or history or thought or pain or depth or memory - just the façade of these issues. A wonderful example to the contrary, is the Korean artist Kimsooja. She showed a beautiful installation in the Cairo Biennale of 2008, which by the way, if I recall correctly was also 'signed' at customs. Her art is not seen in any label, though she can still exhibit as an Asian artist without concerns, and tap into other countries and cultures as a backdrop and source without appropriating or distorting them. In her art production one can tell that her eyes see, and

that her heart hears - you know what I'm talking about. Kimsooja's work is a perfect example. It is a great feat to be able to truly capture the essence of something, of an idea, and to be able to communicate it; to be so closely aligned with your work that it cannot be severed from who you are. For me, it was the reality of constant relocation that required me to find the ability to define myself independently of any one place but also through all of these positions as well. Hence, as an artist, it would be fulfilling to be identified as having ultimately achieved this alignment, to have done it with a heart and a brain of some substance, and at the end of the day, to have achieved at least, a real 'knowing' of some simple truths about life.

CP: In this work we see the bubbles' movement. The bubbles have an ephemeral consonant cluster, both visually and metaphorically. The water - by default - reflects sensibility, tranquilly and calm, yet the almost frenzy-like movement of the bubbles may reflect panic. How do you see this controversial image as the creator of the work?

MN: For me, the visual image of moving bubbles all conjure up the perception of consciousness, of states of being, togetherness, the middle state of being alone and yet not totally alone. Each bubble in isolation..clusters symbolize a lack of solitude, a shared solitude, each bubble breathing in solitude. We are each alone in this world, even if we are apparently not so. Our collective solitude perhaps is the controversy of our times. The ephemeral state of the life cycle of each bubble represents everything - worldly possessions, daily realities - that forcibly do not last. The underlying aim of this work was the need to remind ourselves that it may soon be time that we get back to the simplicities, and not suffer the loss of self before we are even gone.

CP: Do explain to us now if you can, how this piece ultimately turned out to be an abstracted but visual narrative of the days in which the Egyptian revolution took place?

MN: Well, the preliminary underwater shooting was done late last year in Sharm, and the main segment shortly after in Cyprus in much deeper waters. While working through hours of footage on the computer

last January, and having just returned from another trip to Egypt, as everyone, I watched the events that began on the 25th of that month abruptly unfold day after day hour after hour. All the world swayed back and forth with the protesters, each time taking a deep breath before each day of rage, of Black Wednesday, of the march of millions, the day of redemption, and of departure. Through this experience, a narrative for these rising bubbles emerged, and the original concept of this piece transformed from the idea of breathing in solitude to an idea of the capacity of mankind, of the collective - to breathe together as one. Transfixed by the images on both screens, the working of the footage quite uncannily merged and visualized into a story, abstractly mirroring the different stages the revolution in Egypt took in those 18 days, and breaking down into five 'chapters'. These segments also paralleled the stages of life's journey - isolated people coming together, finding a common voice, laboring, fighting alongside each other, through troubles and struggle, and then the moment after it is all over and things must begin again. The work and the editing were completed soon after with a wonderful collaboration with the Greek composer Chrysanthos Chrystodoulou for the soundtrack, whose work in exactitude echoed what I heard in my own head. The interaction of image and sound brought another level of untethered emotionality to the visual material, and shaped the structure and rhythm of the 'time' we must pass through to live the experience of those intense days.

CP: And where does the narrative of the film leave us and does it reach at all past the days of the revolution?

MN: Certainly the question now for everyone is the Egypt of today and tomorrow amidst the reality of charting a future anew. The events of those 18 days proved that a people can manage to find a collective voice, a unity, a common breath - and that a determined youth, in just a few days, grew up years, and lived all the cycles of life. It too was the first time that any recent generation felt a universal solidarity on this level, watching others shed so fast the individualism that has shaped our times. Those breaths made in collective solitude were finally to witness the power of the tenacity of people - of men and women, and young and old - when breathing together.

In 'Homo Bulla - 18 days', there are feelings of crescendo, and then tranquility, a climax and an explosion, and then nothing, as if it were a universe recreated. Emotions range from the assured affirmation of human connection and hope, the darkness of struggle in a storm of air bubbles appearing like stars in a distant galaxy, in the noise of a dark spinning void; police sirens and police lights in the darkness, danger, death and killing; and finally, a rebirth borne from the tenacity of mankind. The final 'chapter' of this work leaves us with the inexplicable feeling that comes after those tumultuous, heady moments of equal belonging and joyous mutual achievement are over, where there is the new landscape of a new beginning; five bubbles representative of each stage of this experience, are faced with the inevitable unknown of new boundaries and new realities to be redefined, and a warning sound that the next stage is vital.

CP: But this rhythm is massively different than Trambala, not mentioning even the painting practice.

MN: Every medium has its own capacity to express and we learn and adapt with each exercise in expression that we undertake. The installation Trambala although it did incorporate the element of movement, was a rather stark and straight assemblage at first thought; while exploring the space in Cairo I decided to show it as a curve rather than a straight line to suggest cyclicity in its message rather than a rigid and final calamity.

Through the medium of film, in compressing the cycle of human life into ten minutes, past, present and future became restructured one within the other. Furthermore, we can understand the contemporary art practice in relation to the totality of global culture, which transcends national, geographic or racial limitations, and be applied to any time, any moment in history where a people have felt their solidarity. In today's world, it reminds us of the importance of the reconstitution of collective memory, of re-establishing identity, of these perfect moments in time when we are all breathing together as one - men and women who have the courage to fight for their dreams and aspirations in one unified breath.

This work is therefore dedicated to all of the silenced voices and stifled breaths who, like those in Egypt, were able, and will be able, in a moment, to find their new

voice and identity, and also find the strength to persevere afterwards in a state where the unknown becomes the reality and the road ahead of new beginnings is long. This satiated ‘breath of life’ reminds us that solidarity is, indeed, a beautiful and potent truth. It is a way we show our oneness with all of humanity; to liberate us from the mundane human concerns of which Loukianos spoke. It is a way to reaffirm our own humanity in the social and political situation of our times.

Excerpt from ‘ON HOMO BULLA - LLA AYS’ by J.W. Mahoney:

“Beyond a certain point there is no return. This point has to be reached”

Franz Kafka, from the Blue Octavo Notebooks, 1917-1919

Whenever art and politics meet, usually one or the other wins - either art submits its visionary watchfulness toward the service of what appears to be a moral expediency, or the dramatic content of serious politics inspires an essentially private vision.

Cypriot artist Melina Nicolaides’ 10 minute short film, ‘Homo Bulla -18 Days’, fulfills both criteria: it offers a politically accurate symbolic vision of the Egyptian Revolution of early 2011, and has transformed the chaos, uncertainty, and proactive unity of those 18 days into a dynamic ballet of abstract forms, turning the rhythms of those social forces into an unlikely set of natural images: bubbles of air rising as separate elements and as masses, toward the ocean’s surface from deeper underwater. Melina Nicolaides has been significantly received internationally as an abstract painter, and as such, her paintings have reflected a display of forms emerging from her personal interiority - so her new film work is a shift of both media and intention. In daily, sometimes hourly, contact with friends in Cairo during the revolution, the essentially darkly inspiring grace of its crisis, and the beauty of its eventual success, made art-making for Melina, with and around it, an open aesthetic necessity for her.

As an abstractionist, Melina’s “characters” aren’t literal people, but bubbles. These forms are symbols of people - who rise, move apart, coalesce, and rise again, no matter what is ahead of them. They emerge from their underwater domain, an environment that has

been manipulated into a dark and grainy atmosphere of unidentifiable consistency, that befits the origins of this exodus towards a common purpose and aspiration. Below water, air will inevitably rise, as the people of Egypt did, irrepressibly. And as Kafka suggested, this “point of no return” was, in fact, reached in the spring of 2011. The German cultural theorist Peter Sloderdijk, has said, about these days: “A given culture never possesses a complete vocabulary for itself..”. In the era between Plato and Leibniz almost everything to be said about God and the world was expressed in terms of a spherology. Think about the magical basic principle of medieval theosophy, which says, God is a sphere whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. One could almost claim that the individualism of the modern era signifies an unconscious realization of this dogma.” So Melina Nicolaides is using exactly this form, a sphere, but in flux, in a progressive visual uncertainty, expressed as a series of bubbles - in an aesthetic language that implies both autonomy and fragility. And in ‘Homo Bulla’, Melina Nicolaides offers - allegorically - a number of issues at once: the grace of our individual fates’ power to create and survive collective change, and the capacity of art to embrace and essentialize the reality we live in.

We behold a progression of nearly sepia-toned bubbles, moving in directions that appear as natural as they are as naturally uncontrolled, flowing in unanticipatable patterns, toward an unmistakable reunion with its own element, air. Melina Nicolaides’ work looks like a rhythm of visual circumstances, at first. Groups of bubbles emerge from below, in groups, then away from each other, sometimes. This is a clearly realized social poem - visually both beautifully complete and narratively a story whose end is left unfinished. Ultimately, what it signifies is so culturally portentous - the continuing beauty, and evanescence of each individual’s presence in a continually collective drama.

It is 21st century art. For certain.

J.W. Mahoney

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