“When screenplays become form”

The practice of Artemis Potamianou has always dealt with two subject areas: dominance as it emerges from the practices of the institutions of power in society and the art world, and the art object itself through the qualities that define it as such.

From the clinical, bright and bare spaces of art museums that try to steal attention from the works they should host (WHITE CUBE, 2003-4) to the role of men in shaping art as we know it through the cabinets of curiosities (UTOPIA, YOU WERE ALWAYS ON MY MIND, 2010) and the handling of confinement through the elaborate, handmade wooden cages—the cabinets of curiosities ‘for women’, in the sense of a nest built by the mother-nurse—(WHICH SIDE ARE YOU ON?, 2019), Potamianou examines the mechanisms that perpetuate the models of dominance, excluding, assigning roles, defining acceptable behaviours, determining what’s right and wrong and ultimately setting one’s course.

At the same time, whether her approach is respectful and subtly awed, as in one of her first ‘imaginary museums’ (SECOND PAPERS, 2006-2007), or cheeky and playful as in the irreverent collages of the RE-VIEW SERIES (2008-2019) where the works of old masters of art history are forced to mingle with the heroes of children’s comics, Potamianou measures herself against what Walter Benjamin defined as the “aura”[1] [2] of the art object: this elusive, fragile quality that fades away and, in economic terms, gets depreciated through mechanical reproduction, undermining the ‘here’ and ‘now’, the magic and ultimately the authenticity of the work.

In her practice Potamianou explores the conditions and degrees of this ‘depreciation’ by changing the parameters. As she alters the variables of the equation one-by-one, sometimes imperceptibly and sometimes scandalously heavily, she delivers an ‘anatomy class’ on what ultimately is the mystery and the workings of artistic creation.

For instance, *SECOND PAPERS* examines the unapproachable, the distance from the artwork as a key attribute of religious icons[3] and explores its worshipping value by altering the spatial and temporal context, enabling viewers to evaluate the experience and choose their own ‘favourites’ from art history.

By contrast, in *Which side you are on?_Fences*, the first work that visitors see in the exhibition, the chain link fencing does not leave much choice. The material itself carries some powerful connotations, one’s course through the space is predetermined, the chain link’s shadows on the floor and walls together with the embroidered red texts add a labyrinthine aspect commensurate with that from the first contact with any artwork… and all this exacerbates one’s disorientation in a space that’s empty before and behind the chain link. There is no obvious reason for fencing, yet the fence does guide viewers to the single point of access to the show, setting boundaries as all good fences do. After all, “Good fences make good neighbours”[4].

And if viewing is manipulated, what else is it?

In this exhibition Potamianou continues the exploration of confinement from her previous show (WHICH SIDE ARE YOU ON?, 2019) which, it is noted, took place *before* the outbreak of the pandemic.

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1 Walter Benjamin, The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, translated by Harry Zohn from the 1935 essay, New York: Schocken Books, 1969, p. 4

2 Walter Benjamin, *Essays on Art* (The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction; A Short History of Photography; Eduard Fuchs, collector and historian), Greek transl. D. Kourtovik, Athens: Kalvos 1978, p. 15

3 ibid, p. 39

4 Robert Frost, “Mending Wall”, *North of Boston,* poetry collection, 1914

Starting from the notion that "The liberty of the individual is no gift of civilization"[5] (the artist is familiar with Freud from her work on the Uncanny), Potamianou does not even attempt any exploration of freedom. She knows it would be futile.

The delusional need for it, the "irrationality of unfreedom",[6] conformity and set boundaries constitute the introduction to the first chapter in this exhibition.

At the same time, as she usually does in her work, in a way that recalls the world building of contemporary narration and videogames and in a process where the artwork is built layer-upon-layer, this first work in the exhibition is dedicated to Emily Dickinson.

The poet's history is well known: the "open" poems of Dickinson were censored as they were edited by publishers and translators. For years her special use of punctuation was 'corrected'; everything that was groundbreaking, authentic, unique about her work was molested towards a more conventional, more digestible form of poetry that would not alienate contemporary readers. She is one of several women artists who sought a chance for their voice to be heard and then to preserve the authenticity of that voice without translations and interpretations, so as to be judged and earn the place they merited among their male counterparts.

Writing under a male nom-de-plume as Currer Bell, Charlotte Brontë published *Jane Eyre,* a novel we will find again later in the exhibition and one of the first books that Emily Dickinson read. With excerpts from this book and a declaration of freedom which the context almost negates, Potamianou then uses verses from Dickinson's poems to go back to managing fear, identity, the solitude of artistic creation—and its refutation.

The chain link fence alludes to ownership and boundaries as well as to confinement and obstructed access. Yet it is perforated: ideas and creativity are not easy to hold down, as the examples of Brontë and Dickinson demonstrate.

Potamianou's gaze is that of a painter. Her research is not meant to arrive at a literary analysis. Dickinson's work is used initially for its experiential value, as a mechanism for artistic self-knowledge that works inversely to *Why I Am Not a Painter,* the poem in which Frank O'Hara compares his experience to that of a painter to affirm his identity as a poet. On a second level, the use of the work of Dickinson and all the other artist in the show constitutes a post-productive process—the 'art of appropriation' has been a staple in Potamianou's career from the outset—where the 'sharing' of culture comes true. Artemis often describes herself as a DJ; here, in a show that offers so many alternative narratives, 'screenwriter' would be more fitting.

"When artists find material in objects that are already in circulation on the cultural market, the work of art takes on a script-like value: "when screenplays become form," in a sense."[7]

The next work, *Which side you are on? Mirror,* uniquely reflects Duchamp's saying that "The creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act"[8] as well as the "here" and "now" that make up the notion of its authenticity according to Benjamin.[9]

Here, due to the mirror the equation of authenticity necessarily includes the viewer and the specific context in which the work is displayed. The work's technical reproduction is, of course, possible. What is unique and unrepeatable is the moment it captures. By changing the viewer's usual role into that of a participant, Potamianou captures time. Each viewing produces a new work, different from

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5 Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, translated and edited by James Strachey, W. W. Norton & Co.,1963

6 Herbert Marcuse, *Five Lectures, Psychoanalysis, Politics, and Utopia*, transl. Jeremy J. Shapiro and Shierry M. Weber, London: Penguin 1970

7 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction: Culture as Screenplay,* transl. Jeanine Herman, New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2002

8 Marcel Duchamp*, The Creative Act*, lecture notes, 1957

9 Walter Benjamin, *Essays on Art*, op.cit., p. 14

the one before. So which one do you copy? Every slightly distorted mirror image gets trapped behind the wire mesh of the construction and plays with the mirror—a symbol of vanity in art history, absolving it. What is it that gets trapped behind the grid—time? The viewer? The reflection? The verses of Dickinson are multiplied in their multiple reflections, her questions about the soul, her anxieties over existence are magnified, the frayed ends of the red thread upset the neat order of things, the self as the centre of the world, triggering an almost mystical experience that makes it hard to turn one's gaze away. From the artwork's early function as an "instrument of magic"[10] to Duchamp's "It is the viewers who make the paintings", in *Which side you are on? Mirror* the viewer, trapped or otherwise, is the only one who can save us from authority.

A path away from authority is laid tile-by-tile in the next work, *Silent Revolt.* In these portraits the personal objects are stet into concrete to articulate a series of alternative accounts of stories of a silent everyday reality; a motif made from the traces of women—real women—who lived in the past or live among us, claiming their own space and role in the structure of things. Here the grid is inside the concrete, as an element that renders the structure as firm and solid as these women. In *Silent Revolt* we meet *Jane Eyre* again. Charlotte Brontë has been much criticised, initially for the way she portrays the hero's unstable Creole wife but also for how she indoctrinated whole generations of women into specific models of happiness. The arguments that were valid in the context of Victorian times now sound weak, when the mechanisms they end up serving are known.

"The suppression of instincts—for sublimation is also suppression—becomes the basic condition of life in civilized society."[11] Marcuse describes how "sexuality and the sexual object are desensualized in "love"—the ethical taming and inhibiting of Eros. This is one of the greatest achievements of civilization—and one of the latest. It alone makes the patriarchal monogamous family the healthy "nucleus" of society."[12]

On this Potamianou does not propose that we 'burn the books'. She accepts that the seeds of patriarchal rhetoric are embedded in us; the best we can do is acknowledge them as such, examine them and leave them behind us.

Besides, Brontë herself speaks more generally through her heroine, shortly before the well-known excerpt that denounces the narrow-mindedness of men who confine women to knitting stockings and embroidering bags, when she says: "Millions are condemned to a stiller doom than mine, and millions are in silent revolt against their lot. Nobody knows how many rebellions besides political rebellions ferment in the masses of life which people earth."[13]

It is this "nobody knows" that *Silent Revolt* depicts. The voice of the unseen women is there for those who have ears to hear it or eyes to 'read' it.

This time the post-productive process of making the work does not employ the creations of famous masters. The viewer-participant of *Which side you are on? Mirror* becomes viewer-protagonist as well as creator in *Silent Revolt*. The relations between viewing and creating are further entangled, and a collage emerges that depicts different eras as it records history. The concrete portraits of Potamianou afford equal space to all women—an equality they don't enjoy in everyday life—and next to favourite artworks they guiltlessly present fashion and beauty items, the tools and utility objects that accompany women, demonstrating both their differences and similarities.

For her work *May,* Artemis employs as her starting point a different example of female voice and creativity.

In today's culture, May Morris would be what some mockingly call a nepo baby[14]. May's work was overshadowed by that of her talented, larger-than-life parents, William Morris and Jane Morris.

10 Ibid., p. 20

11 Herbert Marcuse, *Five Lectures,* op.cit.

12 Ibid.

13 Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre,* 1847, vol. I, ch. 12.

14 Nepotism baby

Artemis starts from this artist who was trapped behind her family name and returns to reference the wooden cages of her previous exhibition. The cage here becomes a wooden structure, an additional grid that, just like the Morris family, provides support to enable the display of the works. Artemis reworks the embroidered "Seasons" by May Morris. After successive abstractions the colourful rose garden with the parrots about to fly away free is now traced in black and white and, together with the ever-present chain link motif, makes up the background behind a Mondrian grid on which Potamianou sets the fruits of her handiwork this time.

The choice of medium is no accident. Just like society, especially in the case of women, aquarelle does not forgive. Some lapses can be corrected, concealed from the gaze but never obliterated—and the tolerance of paper is limited.

Aquarelle as a medium has something feminine about it, being clear, ethereal, lightweight, for years associated with women's hobbies—their artistic 'pursuits'—without the power and passion ascribed to oil. At the same time it registers every move on the paper, requires patience, clear use, diligence and self-discipline. Is it a coincidence that women were trained in that medium when these were the exact qualities that society expected of them?

In *May* the birds—symbols of female fragility—are trapped. The aquarelle gives them substance but traps them into the grid with the link chain, just as Morris herself had embroidered them on her tapestries to decorate the walls; to embellish without ever attaining their freedom.

Even the lines of the drawing that attempt to escape the boundaries do not adopt a trompe-l'œil logic. It has nothing to do with illusionism and is not meant to 'deceive the eye' of the viewers, but the interpretation is exclusively up to them. Is the drawing trying to stake a claim in space, to become autonomous? Another reading would be that its 'liberation' would reinforce the binds that keep the grid in place, and this points more to the high wall of trees and thorns in the tale of the *Sleeping Beauty;* having pricked her finger on the spinning wheel, she awaits the man who will awaken her from her hundred-year sleep—yet another story whose feminist reading turns it into a horror tale.

The stories of creation amidst confinement, be it actual or that of obscurity and social exclusion, continue in *The Supper.*

The collage of the work's female artists recalls the RE-VIEW SERIES, but the sandbags and the iron frames/scaffolding that keep them apart bring to mind the fortification measures taken in museums during WWII or the way in which artworks are encased for shipping. (Depending on the viewer's mood, they may also bring to mind the walled-in Antigone in Sophocles' eponymous tragedy—especially if one were to focus on exclusion mechanisms throughout the history of art.)

The title references both the Last Supper and Plato's *Symposium*. What can they be discussing, these twelve painters who are depicted (in self-portraits, mostly) working or painting as proof of their existence and their actions? What is certain is that despite their solitary course they are not alone.

In a visual argument about creation not really being a solitary process, what Potamianou presents in *Supper* is a different mosaic of women, a Chorus whose members share their stories alongside the unfolding plot.

Indeed, talking of frames, in literature the term 'frame narrative' indicates the inclusion of a new subplot within the main story. So it is a fitting description for the stories of these women who acted on the margin of the scene where they rightfully belonged. All of them—and others, too—put into practice the saying "where there is no path, you build one. From scratch, step by step." Their personal stories became the building materials for the paths of others after them. In any case, their work is here and demands its rightful place, articulating a political discourse and creating narratives which are relevant to every human who has experienced the burden of the power of another human, institution or social setting on their back.

The exhibition concludes with a game of perception and memory: *Gilt Cage,* with direct allusions to the emblematic Mary Wollstonecraft,[15] is at first sight precisely that: a piece of a house detached from the whole and trapped in a cage.

The iron grid, the red colour that runs through the exhibition (blood is in woman's nature—she does not fear it) and the roses are here, too.

The home—a woman's setting—has all the embellishments that Wollstonecraft would see as marks of conformity, of woman's severance from society.

Outside the cage (an 'out-of-the-house' associated with men), an empty chair similar to the one inside invites the viewer to sit, just as the work itself invites interpretation.

At a first reading the dust-sheeted furniture suggests loss, preparation for a long absence, or abandonment. Inside the cage time stands still, seasons don't count. The initial sense of loss is shaken by the gloves and the other objects left on the covered furniture. An indication of a life after —but after what? Whose are they? Are they Nora's, who has fled Ibsen's *Dollhouse?* The interpretations are open, many and possibly personal ones, but the feminist reading of the work is clear: the woman has escaped the cage, and the man who watched her from outside is no more. *Gilt Cage* is the end of an era.

The familiar, the sense of security and even the memories play games with the viewer, but the cage which was a prison in the past does not allow the return to it. And that's a good thing.

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Writer

15 "Taught from their infancy that beauty is woman's sceptre, the mind shapes itself to the body, and roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adorn its prison." Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 1792