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Who Are We, Where Do We Come From, Where Are We Going To?¹

Greek Cypriot Women Artists in Contemporary Cyprus

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Who are we?

This paper is about Greek Cypriot women artists. In particular it concerns their art, their careers, and their relation to politics; the way they were influenced by politics in Cyprus and how they represented the political upheavals of the time in their own practice. Although all these artists experienced the several phases of Cypriot history in a different way, they all have something in common: the fact that these artists were women living in a colonised, patriarchal country under Greek Cypriot nationality. Their practices are the result of what they experienced and an analysis of their work will reveal the artistic strategies they applied as a response to the politics in Cypriot society.

To recognize the practice of these artists we need to understand where they come from and the socio-political circumstances from which they emerged. Right up until the first decades of the twentieth century it was rare to hear of a “professional” Greek Cypriot woman and even rarer, a professional woman artist. Even those women who eventually became pioneer artists were not considered to be “serious” artists at the time: as a result until 1990s no studies were

undertaken regarding their careers and their practice. One can easily guess the reason for which Greek Cypriot women artists have been marginalised like many other women artists around the world; patriarchal conventions restricted women to the domestic sphere and holding the position of mother, wife and caretaker of the household. Consequently, the first generation of professional Greek Cypriot women artists who emerged during British rule had to deal not only with the political upheaval of the time but, also, the restrictive patriarchal view of a woman's role within Cypriot society: this simply entailed serving her husband and taking care of the house and the children. It would have been unthinkable to overstep these boundaries until quite recently.

The boundaries which have determined women's position in the Cypriot society were strongly linked to each other and their impact was crucial on women's life since economic, social and political power were all controlled by men. Clearly, British colonial rule offered a platform to women to negotiate the public-domesticated barriers and over the years there were a number of channels that empowered women to participate and to be considered equal providers in traditionally male dominated activities such as war, employment and politics. This was possible after women's involvement in the 1955-59 anti-colonial struggle which affected their status and challenged traditional devices of public-private sphere.

The question of Greek Cypriot women being active members of the society and, consequent to this, to participate in political issues is until nowadays under discussion by a number of Cypriot socialists and feminists. In general the interest in women's studies and the role of women within Cypriot society has only been focused after the 1980s. The fact that Cypriots had to deal with long occupations, followed by the anti-colonial struggle and the inter-communal conflict left little space for women to take action in the public sphere. As Roussou points out "there has been no room to mention, much less consider, the existence of women and

the specific nature of their problems” (13). Nevertheless, women did participate in a number of ways despite the fact that history often neglected their long efforts due to the male authorship of historical writing.

This paper is thus dedicated to a small selection of artists whose practices underline discourses related to Cyprus’ politics and gender relations. These artists are role model of women found in transition between the private and public sphere, elaborating their roles as mothers, wives and professional artists in Cyprus. To understand their practice it is necessary to recognize from where these artists come from; their social-political emergence is essential in order to evaluate their impact upon the history of Cypriot art.

Where do we come from?

The 1950s were a watershed in Greek Cypriot women’s appearance in visual arts. The persisting practice of the pioneer artist Loukia Nicolaidou (1909-1994), alongside her solo exhibitions in 1930s, paved the way into a profession previously unavailable to women, that of the artist. Despite the increasing number of women getting into art education and art practice, Cypriot women emerged as individual artists rather than a group or a movement. Hence, it is not surprising that -like many other women artists worldwide- their practice was not readily accepted by the public at the time. However, what is striking is that until nowadays their practice has been marginalized without any patronage or acknowledgement of their contribution and impact on Cypriot culture.

The very fact that the practice of artist Nicolaidou was promoted and publicized only in the 1990s after a woman’s initiative (by the art historian Eleni Nikita) affirms the active canon of male dominance throughout the years. Indeed, the dominant patrons of Cypriot art embraced

rather traditional theme choices (such as realistic landscapes and ideal portraits). For this, Nicolaidou's practice for a period of years was not taken seriously while the marginalisation had led to the artist's reclusive life and her later "self-exile" in London. Significantly, Nicolaidou was an avant-garde artist who introduced a radical art practice, something that was at the time far from the culture prominence established by the "fatherhood" of Cypriot art. While in the majority of male depictions woman is represented as mother-wife in countrywoman roles, Nicolaidou presented a rather undomesticated side of woman in Cyprus. For this, Nicolaidou's practice constructed a distinctive approach to female representation; among a variety are sensual nudes like *Gazing* (1933-37) and bare breasted women reposing at the beach like *Girls at the Seaside* (1933-36). Clearly, Nicolaidou's discourses around femininity and gender relations are in contrast to the traditional female image in which patriarchal conventions restricted women within the domestic sphere holding the position of mother, wife and caretaker of the household. Throughout the British colonial period women's social roles changed by the active intervention made from a number of women who fought for women's rights in the public sphere. Hence, Nicolaidou's visual images are predominantly politicised views of women's lives and activities.

In order to become artists in 1950-60s Greek Cypriot women commonly migrated from the protection/seclusion of patriarchal society in Cyprus where academic training was not accessible and pursued art education in European centres like Greece, England and France. Despite the lack of support by both government and public, the number of women artists grew as art classes were introduced in schools. Among these artists are Rhea Bailey (b. 1946), Stella Michailidou (b. 1941), Lia Lapithi (b. 1963) and Marianna Kafaridou who until nowadays address questions on politics through their practice. Influenced by preceding European trends like Expressionism, Futurism, Dada and Surrealism these artists expressed their avant-gardism

throughout their careers with a variety of styles and forms. Their practice is the outcome of what they experienced in respond to the broader social context of politics in Cyprus. These artists endeavour to represent contemporary socio-political events and this offer a strong sense of the political impact in their practice and career. Combined, both their practice and careers, consists a documentation of cultural diversity of expression in modern Cyprus. Each of the artists has interpreted the political events and the context of their practice form an affirmation of the political involvement of women artists in contemporary Cyprus. To comprehend more, a further analysis of the status of Greek Cypriot women artists is required.

The status of Greek Cypriot women artists has long been predisposed from the problematic connection between women and the political state of affairs in Cyprus. Given the status of Cyprus as an ex-British colony, composed by two major communities, Greek and Turkish, it is not surprising that Cyprus' political-historical interpretation is based on nationalism and patriarchy's processes within Cypriot traditional society. As Vassiliadou explains "Cypriot women's relationship to nationalism, within a context which reflects the politicization of ethnic differences on the island, forms part of the ethno-nationalist agenda of each community, and contributes to an understanding of the politics of separation and the exclusion of women from the political processes" (Vassiliadou, *Questioning* 460). For a long time women's perspectives were neglected and ignored under patriarchal discourses; even today, almost everything revolves around the ethnic conflict in Cyprus. Given the centrality of nationalism in the social-political history of Cyprus it is not surprising that it was actually through nationalism that women's first reactions commence to emerge. This first began in the 1950s with their involvement in the national liberation struggle and later with their demonstrations after the 1974 Turkish invasion.

The generation of women who emerged after the 1960 Independence of Cyprus have some common characteristics among them; they all come from educated middle-class families who supported their choice to study abroad to gain art education. In later life, as graduates from art institutions, they had to survive the professional struggle of the art market. Moreover to this, to become artists they dealt with a number of key issues: their choice to practice art as professional artists; their relation with their partners and the ongoing politics of the time. Throughout the years of Independence, all Cypriot artists had to work as tutors to support themselves, their families and their art. Experiencing their roles as fragmented as “woman”, “wife”, “mother” and the imperative of becoming a “professional artist” is a common characteristic between women artists in Cyprus. A case of such artist is Rhea Bailey who in order to make a living had to teach in secondary education. Her employment in as art educator had after-effects in her practice:

I used to travel around Cyprus for the teaching position and I detested it. I became Sunday painter; the only day I could dedicate to my art. I used to sketch during days and then work on it on Sundays or holidays. My work was no longer a spontaneous one, my paintings were made in stages and I was always adding elements on it. I remember one work was equivalent to one month. Within a year I had an average of twelve paintings. I used to feel odd about this... Then I was dealing with students and had to travel long distances that made me feel exhausted. I was not able to continue at the same pace as before. Teaching cost my focus in art (Bailey).

Bailey, Michaelidou, Lapithi, Kafaridou and other women artists of the post-Independence generation came across the swinging balance between home and professional career, a balance

for long implicated by patriarchal constitutions that had left little space for women to negotiate their personal choices. For the most part these choices were complicated by economic dependence and requirement of personal time to practice art. As Woolf has argued in her essay concerning women and fiction it is essential for women to have financial autonomy and “a room of their own” to create. Without a doubt, women’s long endeavour to have personal space and time was confounded by their domesticated duties and responsibilities.

When we look at Bailey’s practice domesticated experiences are reiterated as a response to the gender relations in Cyprus. These experiences are represented in a variation of visual images like in the *Fusion of Time* and *Who Are We, Where Do We Come From, Where Are We Going To* both revealing alternative views of women’s lives within patriarchal Cyprus. Bailey’s 1974 *Fusion of Time* offers a powerful visual to identify women’s position between patriarchal tradition and post-Independence modernity. Bailey’s viewpoint in *Fusion of Time* is rather unusual. In this work Bailey depicted a space with a man seated next to two flower pots while the background setting leads to a corner with a large cross depicted. The man sitting in the foreground of the image, is situated in a quasi empty space, arguably indoors of a household. Bailey’s usage of vivid colours of yellow, green and white reveals particular visual codes. Without a doubt this work is bounded to a localised perspective of Cyprus; the use of bright yellow, green and white clearly recalls Cyprus’ flag. Hence, Bailey’s *Fusion of Time* is a straightforward representational strategy to approach patriarchal Cyprus. The work is produced as a construction of a large space within walls –boundaries of the private sphere- among a background setting that is leading to a large dark cross between black walls. Arguably, the man’s image along with the universal ecclesiastical icon, the cross, reveals the close relationship between Greek Orthodox religion to the patriarchal society. Bailey’s choice to represent the man

in darkish purple-black formal outfit (suit, waistcoat and tie) along to clean shining shoes connotes that the represented man belongs to above middle class. In addition to the man's formal appearance the emphasis on the man's masculine moustache reveals a fusion of time caught between tradition and modernity.

Indeed, *Fusion of Time* is situated as a transition between traditional patriarchal Cyprus and post-Independence modernity; while in the past women in Cyprus were holding a passive and supportive role to men, post-independence Cyprus endorsed full time employment for women. This was a massive challenge for patriarchal structure since it formulated an open channel for women to embark the public sphere. While full time employment set women in public domain, at the same time exposed women at the social thread of the clean-dirty house:

Dilemmas are posed in these women's lives since they need to work in order both to contribute to the household income (and to be 'modern' and 'Western'), whereas at the same time the family needs to be looked after (by women) and the house to be kept clean (Vassiliadou, *Women's Constructions* 56).

While embarking the public domain and a career oriented future women found themselves in a double chore role between the privacy of the house and the exposure of the street. Arguably, the function of the house as private and the street as public are "interrelated and work in conjunction with one another, reflecting the dominant discourses on sexuality and morality" (Vassiliadou, *Women's Constructions* 54).

The interior of the large space represented in *Fusion of Time* seems like a calm place to be; this is also shown by the man's figure who is seated in a rather relaxed position while his hands are held together. As it was discussed at a first look Bailey's work exposes masculinity

and patriarchal expectations in regards to women's support role to men. Man's presence seems elusive suggesting that he is there for a purpose. This brings the question: if the man's expectation is to be 'served'? Clearly, Bailey's work explores the politics of domestic duties while questioning gender discourses in modern Cyprus. Though there is no woman's presence in *Fusion of Time* the work bears feminine constructed aspects. The centralised image of a side table with flower and embroidery suggests a link between women, nature and crafts. Parker examines the making of embroidery as art/craft created in the domestic sphere usually by women. Parker's stirring comparison of embroidery made by women in the domestic sphere for "love" whereas painting was produced mainly by men in the public sphere, for money is crucial in identifying "different conditions of productions and different condition of receptions." (5)

In particular, for centuries embroidery was synonymous with femininity and signifier of "the embroiderer to be a deserving, worthy wife and mother" while "displaying the value of a man's wife and the condition of his economic circumstances." (Parker 11) Bailey in *Fusion of Time*, therefore, gestures the female presence while challenges the male-dominated tradition in Cyprus. The figure of the man is shown alone in a large space occupied by two flower pots and a side table. Bailey challenges academic tradition evoking traditional patterns of female-male relations. Her choice to represent male figure within the domestic sphere (clearly, from the side walls) without company provoke the norms of traditional art. Surely, images of men seated are not common as women's domesticated poses in artworks.

On a different note is Stella Michaelidou's practice. Clearly, influenced by French Dadaist Marcel Duchamp, her remarkable 1973 *Rubbish Bin* can be understood within the context of her direct approach to political matters in post-independent Cyprus. *Rubbish Bin* is composed of a large yellow bin at the centre of the work that seems to be fixed on the back side

wall. On top of the bin fixed on the wall there is a yellow setting with the inscription “Ne jetez rien a terre ces paniers sont a votre disposition”. The work is divided into two blue sections by a red line; the upper larger section is composed of the bin and the inscription whereas the other setting forms a collage of used tickets, matches and other litter. Michaelidou’s choice of colours is certainly not haphazardly made; yellow represents Cyprus, blue and red accordingly to Greece and Turkey. The inscription on top of the basket ‘Ne jetez rien a terre ces paniers sont a votre disposition’ (translated as ‘do not throw anything on ground, these baskets are at your disposal’) gives a clear direction that the ground should be clean. Strangely, despite the request, the bin is empty and the ground full of litter.

The artist’s choice of subject- matter on a yellow litter basket reveals aspects of political discourses in post-Independence Cyprus. Obviously, the visual structure that Michaelidou presents with her collage suggests a foreign presence in local politics. Arguably, *Rubbish Bin* illustrates the political situation after the 1963 inter-ethnic conflicts broke out, partly encouraged by the two motherlands, Greece and Turkey. The bin (yellow) could represent the Republic of Cyprus established in 1960 as a two-communal state of both Greek and Turkish Cypriot communities. The choice of blue and red possibly refers to the influence that two communities had from their motherlands, Greece and Turkey. Like the wall inscription’s disregard, the agreed constitutional government did not last for long. Soon after the 1963 ethnic conflict, the tension was spreading around the island and Turkish Cypriots withdrew from the constitutional government and established their own administration. The inter-ethnic clashes continued until 1974 when the Greek military junta instigated a *coup d’etat* in Cyprus, which was followed by the Turkish military invasion.

Around the same time of Michaelidou's *Rubbish Bin* construction Rhea Bailey produced *Who Are We, Where Do We Come From, Where Are We Going To*. The work is unquestionably a social statement of Bailey's political convictions over the events before 1974. The 1974 work embodies a clear message of an incisive political and social satire that is critically analysed by the artist. While the work was initially based on a black and white newspaper image that had intrigued the artist it became the artist's own expression made by images that had provoked something in her subconscious (Bailey). Bailey's satirical work contains a number of a rather 'civilised' species of monkeys (or, at least, looking quasi-human) standing in line in order to greet the one who in Bailey's words is the 'grand' ape, the one who is in leadership. The appearance of the figures, all in suit outfits, gives the impression that they are members of the middle and higher class. Bailey position on politics is clear; she symbolically depicts the situation of Cyprus being a male dominated country. The appearance of male monkeys seems to be the same for all; no facial expressions, no gestures and nothing to reveal their existence besides their gaze towards their leader. The altogether 'nothingness' is what makes the work so interesting and significant.

It is useful here to look again at the title of the work *Who Are We, Where Do We Come From, Where Are We Going To* that was initially used by Paul Gauguin in 1897. Obviously, there is a counter of words –Gauguin's work is entitled *Where Do We Come From, What Are We, Where Are We Going-* and themes- Gauguin evolves on Primitivism style to his Tahiti work. Clearly, Baileys' work is far from Gauguin's primitive image of exotic women in Tahiti. Gauguin's work is purely on women's representations whereas Bailey's cynical work is on the male dominated status of Cyprus.

Bailey's cynicism derives from the ambiguity of national identity during the ethnic conflict. For this, she constructs a scene of male monkeys that is striking from the black figures - and their bizarre shadows- in a white background. The central figure –the largest monkey- is presented like an actual ape with fur and no clothing. It can be said that the work is a response to the events that took place during the ethnic conflict. Bailey's symbolic presentation of humans as monkeys reveals the political incomprehension of the time: “monkeys as non-human are unable to comprehend and appreciate adequately the human spirit's creation because the world of specifically human experience is closed for them. For them is simply non-existent” (Gorny). Likewise, in reality, the indifference between the two communities became agent of the ethnic conflict which was supported by the incomprehension on cultural matters. At this point, Bailey's satirical response evolves into a strategy with universal significance. The artist's employment on monkeys figure within the framework of the maxim of the three wise monkeys ‘see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil’ confirms the western interpretation of the proverb; this is to turn a blind eye while at the same time refuse fanatically to acknowledge certain facts. Certainly, one of the facts is the ongoing gender discrimination and the unresolved issues of women's role in Cyprus.

Where Are We Going To?

“It's even worse in Europe” publicized in 1989 the Guerilla Girls, obviously referring to the ratio of women artists' exhibition and public appearance. Noticeably, Cyprus could simply not be listed in the Guerilla Girls tour in 2007 since the same year Cyprus ranked position 82 out of 128 countries at the *Global Gender Gap*. Following the Guerilla Girls' appeal for a universal involvement in feminism Greek Cypriot artists Lia Lapithi and Marianna Kafaridou after years of individual practice decided to band together as a local act on gender discrimination. Questions around the gender gap are until today embraced by the first Cypriot feminist art group; *Washing-*

Up Ladies elaborate in exposing the ongoing gender discrimination and the undervalued feminist issues in Cyprus. The innovative group elaborates on the “brainwash” they -like most women in Cyprus- experienced into accepting many “female” roles (Costa).

The group initially addressed their concerns around women’s relation to domesticity and politics in contemporary Cyprus. In doing so, *Washing-Up Ladies* launch their action having as initial device an extension of their very own identity; a washing machine that is, doubtless, the most useful appliance for the household. The group introduced their project via a unique combination of visuals and texts that exposed feminist perspectives through a sarcastic approach. In 2006, during the Urban Souls Festival in Nicosia, *Washing-Up Ladies* staged an event using on site a washing machine. The public was invited (women were charged one euro whereas men two euro) to bash the domesticated appliance with a hammer. This was happening under the artist’s gaze until the machine was reduced to metal. During the same year the group performed the short video *Hurting the Washing Machine* in which the two artists violently bash and eventually demolish the washing machine.

Arguably, the washing machine embodies significations of modernisation while at the same time is considered to contribute to women’s emancipation. In patriarchal society women should be grateful to the invention of the domesticated appliance. In fact recently, in 2009, official Vatican’s newspaper *Osservatore Romano* questioned what contributed most to the emancipation of Western women; responses included the right to abortion; the contraceptive pill; working outside the home; and the washing machine (Bryant). Therefore, if the washing machine is signifier of women’s emancipation and modernisation then why two young women would wish to hurt it and eventually destroyed it? Given the centrality of “female” roles and patriarchal expectations it is not surprising that it was actually through this stereotype that

women's first feminist reaction emerged (similar to earlier discussion related to women and nationalism). In "hurting" the washing machine, a device apparently invented exclusively for female use, *Washing-Up Ladies* aim to provoke patriarchal conventions over the gender norms while simultaneously establish a platform to expose feminist issues.

In order to address their feminist perspective the group elaborates a number of devices to establish their platform; all devices function as "reminders" of ongoing gender issues. Such reminders form the video *Hurting the Washing Machine*; two women fervently knock the washing machine until destroyed and no longer performs a function. What is interesting is, although the invention of washing machine improved the everyday living conditions, yet, in a paradox way reinforced women's domestication; this is due to expectations on the gender of the washing-up person. The collective action of the two artists to band together to destroy the object of their rage is, clearly, a protest against all domesticated stereotypes dictated by patriarchal conventions. For Hadjipavlou and Gregoriou the washing machine becomes a metaphor of the much needed "de-socialization process" in Cyprus (72-75).

Clearly, socialization starts from education. For this, *Washing-Up Ladies* endeavour to re-educate or simply to remind some simple facts relating to gender issues. An educational device is the *Care Labels* project (5 banners, 90x300cm each) that offers a rather innovative convention of care labels for using the washing machine. In doing so, the group replaced traditional washing instructions with ones that are "political correct" but these could affect public's health and gender; "washing is not a *solo* activity" and "womanhood is wasted" are - among many- challenging the myth of washing-up function as a female duty. Care labels are no longer hidden in manuals or inside the kitchen; now, care labels consist a visual code to explore

gender issues. The viewer is invited to watch, look, participate, consider and interpret what *Washing-Up Ladies* endeavoured.

An additional device is the *Role Playing Washing Machine* (consisted of two thousands boxes with detergent powder) that functions as a toy washing machine that is designed for use by boys only. The box gives instructions on how to be used by boys aged 2 to 99. After all, as the two ladies strongly support equality starts from an early age and especially at home. *Role Playing Washing Machine* stands as another reminder of traditional tendency of socio-political perspectives on the domesticated role of women. As Hadjipavlou and Gregoriou point out

By inverting and exaggerating the normative genderization of the washing machine –*for boys only*- the artists expose, embarrass and parody the identity of the male user. In “protecting” vocally the “male only” identity of the toy-user, the artists are actually exposing the constructiveness masculine privileges and the potential fragility of masculinity (74)

Washing-Up Ladies' commitment to introduce a visual perception of feminist issues in a patriarchal society where the concept of “feminism” recalls awkward “foreign” influences is certainly an immense challenge. This is mostly due to the long establishment of boundaries between the domestic sphere (private and invisible) and the public sphere (political and visible). Their public action aspire to deconstruct the established domesticated female role, while, simultaneously they elaborate a solid platform to address women's issues. *Washing-Up Ladies*' actions are promising due to fact that both artists associate in it using their very own female corporeality. The artists are not in distance mocking certain stereotypes; their action is direct provoking patriarchal conventions.

Conclusion

Until today Cyprus is predominantly preoccupied merely on politics while women's issues are ignored and left aside. Women's choices are still manoeuvred by society's expectations on what they should be; a model role of wife-mother. It is not surprising the fact that from the foremost generation of pioneer Greek Cypriot women three out of six never got married, one got divorced at a young age and another got married at a late age (Nikita).

Likewise, artist Loukia Nicolaidou, soon after her marriage had abandoned her promising career and got isolated in motherhood. The practice of Bailey, Michaelidou and Washing-Up Ladies documents the existence of unresolved and ongoing gender issues. Undoubtedly, gender stereotypes require a radical deconstruction to prevent potential dilemmas on women's role in Cypriot society. For this, it is imperative to abolish gender prejudices and modify gender issues within contemporary Cyprus.

Perhaps, it would have been prudent to launch the reconstruction from the language. Stangos wonders if there are any hidden patriarchal rules that had invaded the Greek language, and it was anticipated that professions like photographer (φωτογράφος) and painter (ζωγράφος) in Greek exist only as a male gender and that if you refer to a woman you have to use a female article and the male noun. Thus, every time we want to refer to a woman writer, critic, philosopher, or historian in the Greek language, we have to use an androgynous gender. Therefore, it is necessary to abolish such prejudices within the Greek language; language is the instrument that enforces prejudice through the generations and should be modified, in order to challenge the stereotypes of the past.

Notes

Title is taken from Rhea's Bailey's 1974 painting.

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