

## **Athens-Beijing installation by Harris Kondosphyris**

### **26th Biennale of Sao Paolo**

It is a fact that we are living in a constantly changing world whose boundaries are being abolished by the constant movement of populations and the peregrinations of their cultures. People's constant moves, both voluntary and involuntary, cause rapid alterations in the modern landscape. Every day new questions are raised with regard to the contemporary cultural identity and to the ever-shifting cultural and geographic frontiers. Although the urban landscapes and city maps change from one year to the next, we are frequently ignorant of the population mix in the place we live in. At the same time, we are inundated every day by new shades of language and the seemingly imperceptible infiltration of cultural elements. Many times we are bombarded with so much extraneous information that our mind cannot record it. But subconsciously, this information operates and influences by creating new situations that seek different means of perception, since modern cities appear to have been built peacefully and noiselessly by people of different origins who create a new civilization within the chaos.

At the 26<sup>th</sup> Biennale of Sao Paulo, whose theme is "Image smugglers in a free territory", the issue is examined of whether and to what degree the artists of our era can, through their works, propose artistic zones free of all sociopolitical influence, belonging to no one, and to which like smugglers they can secretly "import" elements from different cultures so as to create areas of free communication through art.

Greece is participating in this international dialogue with the interactive installation Athens-Beijing by Harris Kondosphyris, which investigates basic issues in human communication and self-knowledge, by exploring the theme of migration. The artist himself is a migrant to Central Africa and later repatriate to his homeland-collaborated with the Hellenic-German musician Vassilis Kokkas, the Hellenic-American poet Panos Bosnakis and the Hellenic-Austrian biologist Orestis Davias in the process of constant creation of the work through the synergy of music, poetry and the stimulation of the senses of smell and touch. The two parts of the work (Migrant's Art and Heart of Dark) suggest another way of perceiving reality, which not only mobilizes the cognitive machinery of the mind, but also activates the viewer's creative imagination by its sensory approach to the physical world.

The Migrant's Art, an architectural landscape at the level of the viewer's visual horizon, emerges in space and appears in the light in direct dependence on its own shadows, scale and dimensions. In the ambiguity of the moment in time (dawn or dusk?) it is perceived by the senses by means of "shadow theatre" that projects it in space, in collaboration with the diffused scent of remembrance and sweet nostalgia, the sounds of electronic music and whispered poems in a new idiomatic language. The Art captures the gaze. The projective slope of the two sections and the light that falls on them create shadows of different depths and sizes in three-dimensional space, while the total effect of the shadows brings faintly in mind the vague archetypal shape of traditional Chinese pagoda and its strong reflection.

The windows of the pagoda, which once hosted familiar images, are now blank openings whose form retains traces of uprooting. They look like scars of memory, like Chinese ideograms that project their shadows onto the wall and thus reappear, as happens when film negatives are developed. The dreamline, ideal world that appears to be dispersed in space uses as a thematic point of departure the age-old cultural baggage that Chinese migrants bring with them when they travel to places other than their country of origin. At the same time, common cultural elements assimilated by different cultures are emphasized indirectly. A characteristic example is the showdown theatre, a tradition in the East that was imported into Greece long ago and has become

an integral part of the Greek cultural tradition. The pagoda and its reflection flood on the horizon before the viewer's eyes, leaving shadows moving to and fro quietly and unobtrusively, creating another shadow theatre. But here, the leading role is now played by the familiar traditional Greek figure of Karagiois, but by the unknown and unfamiliar emigrant who walks on the city streets as inconspicuously as a shadow.

A fellow traveler is this memory voyage of Word and Image in Vassilis Kokkas' electroacoustic music that the work emits, structuring the environment with the architecture of sound, alluding to a mysterious place that carries sounds of primeval memory and overseas journeys. Also contributing to this feeling are the fragrances of biologist Orestis Davias, who uses mixtures chiefly of myrrh and mastic which, according to the therapeutic methods of the East, revitalize the spirit and enhance the energy reserves within us. The whispered poetic words of Panos Bosnakis, taken from his series of poems on the theme of migration entitled *Emigraphs*, create a new dialect based on the corruption and recombination of the English language, the main *lingua franca* of modern communication, while still remaining open to influences from other linguistic cultures.

On the walls flanking the work, words are written in low relief in the new but somehow familiar poetic language, nurturing our hope that perhaps something the barrier of linguistic communication will be abolished. The sounds of music converse with the new words and emphasize the musicality of this hybrid language. Poetic words are created constantly and explore the assimilative, re-creative power of language and its ability to become something new, perhaps implying that it is created within a ceaseless changing daily environment.

If the Migrant's Ark activates the viewer's imagination by supplying his mind with associations of ideas, then the second part, Heart of Dark obliges him to take an active part in the current social landscape and to become aware that he is a part of a multicultural whole. Human figures, outlined in life size, are standing on a sidewalk in downtown Athens, although it could just as well be any other modern megalopolis. Their portraits in reflecting sheets of stainless steel have dents, rips and scars so that by means of light and reflections they are projected like shadows in space, where they meet the viewer's physical presence.

The particular, existing persons of different nationality and origins that are reproduced, although giving the impression that they have been rendered with comparative uniformity, retain some special features of their personality. Familiar and unfamiliar, ordinary people in our multicultural daily life comprise a contemporary mural, and on their journey they shape the influence the constantly changing landscape of the modern city; we in our haste do not notice them, nor do we know who they are or what their daily lives are like.

The portraits repeat with some accuracy the movements of the militia company in the famous Rembrandt painting *Night Watch*. Up until fairly recently we know neither the names, nor the activities of the militia members who played an important role in the city of Amsterdam, having been appointed to safeguard the city's freedom and prosperity, even though they were not allowed to take any part in the decision-making process. Research in the city's historic archives brought to light the names and activities of all these unknown-now known-people who had played a decisive role in the daily life of the city. <sup>1</sup> In the wink of an eye, the active but invisible citizens of another age become the mirror of the present.

Viewers are included in the Heart of Dark, owing to the reflective properties of the steel sheet that functions as both mirror and inflector, and are seen simultaneously in the cold, hard multi-figured mural of a big city today.

Through an ongoing, two-way relationship, like reflections that have not yet met in the mirror, the shadows determine the otherness of a particular moment in a particular place. At the same time, the mirror-reflectors become passageways that permit entrance to another dimension and another reality, one which invites us to become acquainted with it and to speculate about its limits.

But the real protagonist remains the viewer, who becomes part of the work because his movements change his reflection and his place in the composition. The viewer depicts and is depicted by the distorted image; he sees his own "foreign" reflection among figures that are foreign to him. Through this mirroring, the existence of the "other" is immediately perceived, while at the same time an unexpected opportunity is provided to transcend the ego, as subject becomes object and the viewer becomes the viewed.

In essence, Harris Kondosphyris utilizes real phenomena of Greek life, such as the increasing number of Chinese migrants who co-exist quietly with the rest of the population, in order to make an ironic comment on the stereotyped Western images of other civilisations that differ from its own. The routine story of a migrant living in a new place is reminiscent of the myth of Dido who, self-exiled in Africa with her demands limited to the minimum, achieved the maximum, winning her own place in foreign land. By wandering and searching in much the same way, modern artists are called upon to convey their contraband images, creating common meeting points for all of us strangers, different and similar, who remain foreigners and emigrants since our cultural identities, our superstitions and our viewpoints are always part of our baggage.

In the intensely multicultural societies of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the issue of co-existence with the foreigner occupies a primary position. It is a challenge that transcends geographic original and cultural identity, since the acceptance of diversity and the understanding of otherness can be accomplished only through the recognition that each of us is a foreigner within himself or herself. In this context, in which there is an urgent need to find other means perceiving and understanding the world around us in which we take part, the need for synesthesia in art seems more timely than ever before. In the work Athens-Beijing, Harris Kondosphyris and his fellow voyagers remind us that art becomes, or can become, a synergic way of experiencing a difficult reality by opening passageways so that we are not content with superficial reflections, but may perhaps have an opportunity, like Alice, to enter other realities through the looking-glass.

### **Irini Savvani**

Art historian and critic

1A Th van Deursen, "Rembrandt and his age- the life of an Amsterdam burgher" "Rembrandt the Master and his workshop/ Paintings, Yale University Press, 1991

### **Athens-Beijing, Harris Kondosphyris**

#### **26th Biennale of Sao Paolo**

25.9 - 19.12.2004

Ciccillo Matarazzo Pavilion

Sao Paolo, Brazil

Organized by: Greek Ministry of Culture

With the support of: Greek Consulate of Sao Paolo

Greek Commissioner / Curator: Irini Savvani

Exhibition organized in Athens: CHEAPART