

CHRISTODOULOS PANAYIOTOU

Christodoulos Panayiotou interviewed by Hans Ulrich Obrist
Kaleidoscope
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Hans Ulrich Obrist: *For you it's almost the brutally early club.*

Christodoulos Panayiotou: I do not get out of bed early. I need to sleep a lot...unlike you.

HUO: *So how many hours do you sleep?*

CP: To be functional I need to sleep at least eight hours a day.

HUO: *Einstein slept for twelve hours.*

CP: Descartes slept very long as well. He died here in Sweden, you know. He was invited by young Queen Christina, who decided to have him as her tutor in philosophy and mathematics. Descartes' health was very fragile and he used to stay in bed until noon. He actually attributed his most important ideas to this habit, and said that he did his best thinking when he spent the morning in bed. Ignoring his poor health, Queen Christina scheduled her lessons with him at five o'clock in the morning. This is believed to have compromised his health and to have caused his death.

HUO: *We should dedicate this interview to the memory of Descartes. Which year did he die in Stockholm?*

CP: I think it was in 1650. We should dedicate this interview to what he could have written had he not died so young.

HUO: *I wanted to ask you if you have any heroes.*

CP: I come from a region where the only function of heroes is to validate the national and historic narrative, so I have learned to like ideas more than people. As a result, I admire people through their ideas.

HUO: *Like?*

CP: Laclos, Diderot and Caldéron, as well as contemporary theater pedagogues like Brecht or Augusto Boal from the post-Brechtian tradition. Grotowski as well. These are just a few references of thinkers I admire in connection to the idea of “The World as a Stage.”

HUO: *That’s also Zé Celso’s idea. Do you think there is an analogy in theater to what happened in art in the 1960s? Grotowski, Boal and Zé Celso are perhaps not so far away from Allan Kaprow in art: all four were blurring the boundary between art and life.*

CP: In some individual cases there is such an analogy, but I think that, in general, there was a very different positioning at play back then. The whole idea of narrative and narration has been the fundamental negotiation of modern theater: how to re-invent narration, how to move beyond the Aristotelian model and how to create new pedagogical methods. In contrast, narration has almost been a taboo word in modern art. In the 1990s, theater and, to a greater degree, cinema were introduced as strategies in contemporary art often via the format of scenario, by a generation that you are connected to and probably as a reaction to the previous one. In effect, “theatricality” is nowadays becoming a key notion in the viewing of contemporary practices as well as in the revisiting of earlier practices. This often happens as a metaphor or as an aesthetic reference, but usually the many claims and failures of modern theater are not relevant to the tradition behind contemporary art.

HUO: *Do you also have some musical influences, like Nina Simone?*

CP: I admire Nina Simone. I think of her as being an amazing combination of the emotional and the political. A few days ago, I was watching an interview on YouTube where she was asked about her position as a civil rights activist, and whether she sings from anger. After a long pause, she replied, “No. I sing from intelligence.” I find her answer fascinating.

HUO: *I thought it would be interesting to follow epiphanies, as you have had numerous different moments already in your trajectory so far: a trajectory in dance, in choreography, and a trajectory in contemporary art. I was wondering how it all started— if you had, as a child, an epiphany that brought you into art or, before art, brought you into dance and choreography. Was there a trigger or was it more of a gradual process?*

CP: I think it was the opposite of an epiphany, actually. I have only a vague memory of my childhood, but I do remember of not having any specific talent. Later, I turned into a good dancer but in general, I was not very capable at doing things. As a reaction to that, my creativity developed through an interest in understanding things. This has always been my basic motivation and it probably still is. So, there was no moment of epiphany but a very slow process formed by observations and reactions.

HUO: *Was there a rupture between your former practice in dance and choreography and your current one in contemporary art?*

CP: I have never been to art school. I studied dance and after that anthropology. The transition from my very brief dance practice was smooth and conscious. I actually don't feel that I am doing something very different now. The legacy I am referring to has always been the same idiosyncratic one. It might sound paradoxical, but I see all these as an inevitable continuity.

HUO: *Do you have dreams or projects you really wanted to realize but couldn't for one reason or another?*

CP: No, I don't think so. Apart from the fact that I always wanted to direct Frank Wedekind's *Spring Awakening*. It almost happened in the past, and I hope it will happen in the near future.

HUO: *In many works, like in the confetti piece from a Limassol Carnival Parade or 2008, the shredded pile of bank notes, you revisit the context of Cyprus. You have been traveling a lot and it's not by coincidence that we are doing the second interview in a hotel. I was wondering about the connection between exile and Limassol, your hometown, as a resource for your work.*

CP: I never felt that I was in exile. We are blessed and cursed to live in this specific historical moment when traveling is extremely easy and practically becomes a purpose in itself. The radical aspect of the possibility to be both here and there is a fundamental condition in the way

the Western world is evolving. Inevitably, this is the condition with which I make sense out of my experience in Cyprus.

HUO: *Several artists from Beirut, for example, make work related to war. In some way, you grew up in the environment of war and so I suppose the conditions in Cyprus are personal as well as also political.*

CP: I think it functions on a double level. The political reality in Cyprus is very relevant to the political reality that produced the scene in Lebanon; nonetheless, the artistic expression and the coherence of the artistic production in Lebanon are not comparable to the individualistic case of Cypriot artists. For this reason, I am convinced that the consciousness you are describing is a very complex constellation and that it is not merely the direct result of the political condition we are living in. In addition, it is often the preconceptions of others that categorize artistic practices. To be honest, I often feel that in the midst of all this, artistic practices get translated into political representations or projections. Cosmopolitanism is also a major issue: Where does contemporary cosmo-political expression come from, and to whom is it addressed? Personally, I have always believed in the integrity of the individual voice beyond any form of regional representation.

HUO: *Can you tell me about the works Wonder Land and Never Land?*

CP: Yes, these works follow a formatted series of titles. They are all readings of existing archives and image banks.

HUO: *Like the piece you are researching now in Stockholm, which will also be constituted by archival pictures. Where does your fascination for archives come from?*

CP: What I find most interesting in archival pictures, apart from the aesthetic value that time adds to them, is actually the value they gain via the very process of archiving. This attaches a paradoxical dynamic to the images that reveal the past while they project the future. Beyond this, I do not think that I have developed any systematic way in which I approach archives. For instance, in the case of *Wonder Land*, the archive is used as visual proof of an observation that I had made before resorting to iconography, that is, the Disneyfication of the Limassol carnival and the way this contrasts with the official narrative. The municipal archive functions, in this case, as an illustration of my view on this social event. In *Never Land*, I dealt with

the archive of the newspaper *Phileleftheros*, which was totally destroyed in a fire in the late '80s and was radically modified in 2000 due to the introduction of digital photography. The history of the archive itself, comprising a very concise anthology of the '90s, defined the outcome of the work as well as the final form of the presentation. Finally, in the first part of the work I am currently developing, *I Land (1960-1977)*, the official records of the Press and Information Office of Cyprus are approached through a more systematic perspective. My research is taking a long time and the themes are isolated and classified around the articulation of the official history and the accidental records of ego-histoire.

HUO: *In the interview for the Actors Studio, Al Pacino was asked what he would like God to say to him when he arrived at the pearly gates of heaven. Al Pacino said, "Rehearsal at three."*

CP: *[Laughs]*

HUO: *What would you say?*

CP: I am convinced that I will not arrive at the pearly gates, so I have to make it in this life. The Western world is evolving. Inevitably, this is the condition with which I make sense out of my experience in Cyprus.