

## TATIANA TROUVE: ANGELUS NOVUS OF OUR TIMES

“Where am I?” is the question Tatiana Trouvé’s installation first triggers in me. And then I think: “These are the ruins of a refugees’ camp, but over there, at the other end, there is the entrance to a strange, white, clean space. Could it be the inside of a space vessel, a reminder of Stanley Kubrick’s “2001 A Space Odyssey”?”.

I am simultaneously experiencing surprise and familiarity: there is a scene reminding me of images of abandoned refugee camps seen on television and a second scene seemingly inspired by an iconic movie. What does their co- presence mean?

Very quickly this second question morphs into one of identity: “Who am I when looking at this enigmatic dual space?”. This third question emerges because I belong neither to the refugee camp nor to the pristine white space. I am a visitor looking at an installation at the Petah Tikva Museum of Art. Why am I suddenly standing in the middle of two scenes which so far I have only seen on a TV screen or a movie screen. And now a fourth question : “Where is my space, where is my life?”

Tatiana Trouvé not only creates a troubling loss of understanding, she installs a loss of bearing, I do not know anymore what we think , I lose my personal space. In other words I lose the comfort of my identity.

I believe Tatiana Trouvé wants us to be disoriented by her installation because disorientation is frequently a condition for creative thinking.

In any case, this momentary loss of identity led me to thinking, reading and thinking again.

What follows is the result of this personal process.

It is not a psychoanalytical interpretation of Tatiana Trouvé’ s unconscious intent, it is the effect her creation has had on me and the ideas which through disorientation it has triggered.

## THE WAR AGAINST CIVILISATION

In our region, war is a very real and concrete phenomenon with lasting and painful consequences, people die, people are horribly wounded, families mourn, the dead are buried, sometimes the bodies are desecrated or held hostage, people are tortured, imprisoned.

And yet we live with these wars and their cohorts of horrors.

We live and we try to maintain a certain level of cultural activity: movies, theatre plays, concerts, opera and plastic art exhibitions in museums such as Tatiana Trouvé ’s show : “ The Great Atlas of Disorientation”.

It is a courageous effort which succeeds in its objective of defending culture as a pivotal aspect of human experience for what would humanity be without culture?

But this effort, because of the obstacles we have to overcome, drains our energies and makes us unaware of the clear and present danger civilisation at large is facing. The danger is another war, a vicious war with a very clear objective: “ ... it is a war (...) fought against everything which until now seemed impossible to put a price on.”<sup>1</sup>

The recent sale of the painting “Salvator Mundi” by Leonardo da Vinci for more than 400 million dollars shocked the world because of the huge amount of money it entails.

But in reality what is frightening is not the price paid, it is the fact that there is a price. What we are witnessing is yet another victory of money over what seemed until now priceless.

This catastrophe has been unfolding during the last twenty years and a large part of contemporary art has been participating in it blindly.

The only possible way to understand the meaning of this triumph of kitsch is by realising that it is the celebration of the victory of money over meaning. To pay a huge amount of money for a gigantic balloon dog or a pink heart does not mean that money is worth nothing. On the contrary, it proves that money decides anything it wants: it can both put an astronomical value on a meaningless object and buy an icon of civilisation.

As the proverb says “Money speaks” and it is telling us that a painting by Leonardo da Vinci is worth twenty giant balloon dogs. The number doesn’t matter, what matters is that there is a number. In other words, as could be expected, not only does money speak but it also acts. And the actions we are witnessing seem to be those of an omnipotent child who would be in possession of the keys to the City. How is this possible, what has happened to civilisation?

In 1920 Paul Klee painted “Angelus Novus”, a water colour representing a slightly childish and ironic character, its hands raised, facing the spectator.

The philosopher Walter Benjamin bought it in 1921.

“ Angelus Novus” now belongs to the Israel Museum in Jerusalem because as Walter Benjamin was fleeing nazi persecution he gave it to George Bataille who then entrusted it to Gershom Sholem.

Walter Benjamin killed himself in Port-Bou at the border between France and Spain which he wasn’t allowed to cross because he was a German Jew, a refugee fleeing certain death.

A beautiful and moving monument by Danny Karavan commemorates this tragic event.

The little water colour painting by Paul Klee has become iconic because Walter Benjamin saw it as a representation of the angel of History, a key concept in his “ Theses on the concept of History”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Le Brun A. , Ce qui n’a pas de prix, Éditions Stock, Paris,2018 ( my translation from French).

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin W., Selected Writings,Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2004.

This is Walter Benjamin's interpretation of Paul Klee's angel:

"His face is turned towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. The storm is what we call progress."

This complex and somewhat mysterious text has led to many interpretations, some are mystical others are Marxist, they all reflect different aspects of Benjamin's multifaceted philosophy.

I believe that Benjamin's angel of History symbolizes the responsibility mankind has to its past. History is a tempest which is pushing us forward, but we must, as we advance towards the future, keep remembering the past. We must remember the dead for they are the true witnesses of our lives. We must protect the memory of the tragedies of the past because the very nature of mankind is to have survived them. We are the descendants of victims and perpetrators.

So, according to Benjamin, for humanity to protect its essence, just like the angel of History, it must advance towards the future while looking at the past.

Tatiana Trouvé's "Great Atlas of Disorientation" puts us in this very position: standing at the border between the memory of a catastrophe and a vision of the future. Standing in the middle of Tatiana Trouvé's installation we become angels of History.

The installation is however not an utopia, it is a warning: "As you progress towards the future, remember the past, make it a monument, cherish it." This, I believe, is the reason the refugees' cardboard shelters are cast in bronze: they are monuments erected in the memory of the past. The recent past and the ancient past. For we were all once refugees.

We can now return to the cynical catastrophe I was describing earlier: an omnipotent child has taken control of our world and made kitsch its supreme value. I believe this is happening because the triumph of money has pushed art into producing trophies for winners. Therefore, art has ceased to connect us to our past and to push toward the future.

Art it is forced to celebrate a never ending present.

In our dystopian world, art's function is altered, it is expected to produce the mirrors in which, just like omnipotent children, the victorious contemplate themselves.

A certain segment of contemporary Art is trapped in this narcissistic loop just like the angel of History would be if he ever lost sight of the "single catastrophe" which for ever will precede humanity's present.

The challenge now is to try to redefine what in Art is absolutely fundamental and must at all costs be protected to avoid disappearing in this narcissistic trap.

## HAUNTED ART

The art prized by today's winners attempts to make us forget the past, it aims at locking us up in a "present with no presence"<sup>3</sup>

Art, as I love it, has presence, something in it escapes my understanding and yet, it is this very otherness which attests to the presence of the artist.

Art must be haunted by the ghost of the artist and this is the opposite of an art celebrating its author.

Self congratulatory art is exactly what kitsch is about, and its function in congratulating itself is to celebrate the people collecting it.

The art I love is haunted, it is an art protecting the mystery of its own creation.

T.S. Eliot wrote: "These fragments have I shared against my ruins."

The ruins of the artist's presence is an image which suggests that of an art haunted by the ghost of its creator. An art which is quintessentially fragile, difficult to observe because of its fleeting nature.

Rilke wrote: "...I can see further into paintings. I feel closer to what language cannot reach."

To catch a glimpse of a masterpiece's essence takes time, it takes learning and it takes discretion. Going to a Museum should be like walking silently in a forest hoping to catch the glimpse of a deer.

Narcissistic art, the one which is inflicted to us by today's tacky and brazen directors of consciousness is the opposite. It is "in your face", insolent, inescapable and loud. In our new world everything is upside down: the ghosts are hiding because they are frightened.

And while the ghosts hide in fear, the stars of today's art system are drunk with themselves, with their triumphs, with their so called originality.

And yet, Adorno warned us: "The more completely the artist's intention is taken up into what he makes and disappears in it without a trace, the more successful the work is."

This, therefore, is the condition for authentic creation to emerge: the artist's intention must disappear in the very process without a trace.

Where is Tatiana Trouvé's intention in "The Great Atlas of Disorientation"?

It is nowhere, and because it is nowhere, it is everywhere. Not the intention itself but its essence.

When I went to visit her, Tatiana insisted: "To live somewhere is to be at home everywhere" and I am sure she did not mean invading and imposing oneself in

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<sup>3</sup> Le Brun A, op.cit.

someone else's home but rather to be light as a feather, to be a visitor one welcomes because she respects the home hosting her.

Ghosts only appear at night, they don't mean to frighten, they simply want to visit at a time when they do not disturb.

Artists such as Tatiana haunt us rather than shock us. They tiptoe in our interior landscapes, and the trace they leave is fragile but lasting because it is unfinished.

We are possessed by the silhouettes who haunt "The Great Atlas of Disorientation" because just like us they are incomplete.

## THE TROJAN HORSE

So, Tatiana Trouvé's "Great Atlas of Disorientation" is subversive because, discreetly like a frightened ghost, it denounces the world we live in.

And yet, Tatiana Trouvé is by no means a marginal artist, she is a star of the art world, her work is collected by the most important actors of contemporary art, shown in famous museums and defended by powerful galleries.

This apparent contradiction was instantly resolved by an unexpected image which slowly emerged in me: for some seemingly incomprehensible reason I started to think of the Trojan Horse.

In Homer's Iliad, Ulysses has the idea of building a huge wooden horse which the apparently retreating Greek army will abandon on the shores of Troy.

Attracted by its mystery the Trojans, certain that it symbolises the Greek army's acceptance of defeat, install the gigantic horse in the midst of their city. At night a hidden gate opens in the belly of the horse, silently a group of Greek warriors headed by Ulysses emerge. They then open the doors of the city to the awaiting Greek army which taking advantage of darkness has sailed back, disembarked and regrouped awaiting Ulysses and his men to let them in.

The Trojan Horse has become a concept, that of a successful stratagem and as such, an accepted way of waging war. It is not betrayal, it is not cowardice, it is intelligence, it is cunning, it is the result of a proper analysis of the forces in presence and as such very often it is successful.

Tatiana Trouvé's installation of the "Great Atlas of Disorientation", or any other of her fascinating pieces, in the very heart of contemporary art's largest institutions is, I believe, such a ploy. It is a Trojan horse because it is celebrated by those it so smartly denounces.

Installing the "Great Atlas of Disorientation" in the Petah Tikva Museum is a supremely refined ploy because this Museum clearly is not one of the large art institutions I described earlier. We are therefore shown the Trojan Horse without being Trojan and, if we raise to the occasion, we can become the privileged witnesses of its efficiency. We become Ulysses' companions, we are the Greek soldiers being informed of the ruse before it is deployed.

One last thought before concluding.

## TATIANA TROUVE IS OUR PENELOPE

There are many interpretations of the origins of the Trojan horse, one captured my imagination: in Ancient Greek the word "Horse" can also mean "Boat". There is therefore a close link between the two dimensions of Ulysses' destiny: the warrior and the sailor. The Iliad and the Odyssey, humanity's oldest poem.

Tatiana Trouvé's "Great Atlas of Disorientation" also has these two vocations, it is a Trojan horse and it is Ulysses' boat.

Remember: the second room of the installation is an apparently empty white space but it is in fact criss-crossed by lines reproducing the antique sailing routes. Possibly the routes Ulysses during the Odyssey was desperately trying to rejoin to sail back to Ithaca where Penelope, his wife, is awaiting.

And while Penelope waits, hoping against all hope, she is creating and destroying a tapestry, her unfinished masterpiece which must remain unfinished for her to keep her link to her husband, to her past.

Penelope also is an Angel of the future, she is pushed forward by time itself, but she is resisting this by being faithful to her absent Ulysses.

To conclude, I propose that Tatiana Trouvé is our contemporary Penelope, creating but never finishing because she is fully engaged in keeping the past present.

Will we, like Ulysses, manage to survive all the traps awaiting us during our Odyssey?

The future depends on our tenacity, may we be inspired by remembering that we never know what the past has in store for us.

## Bibliography.

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