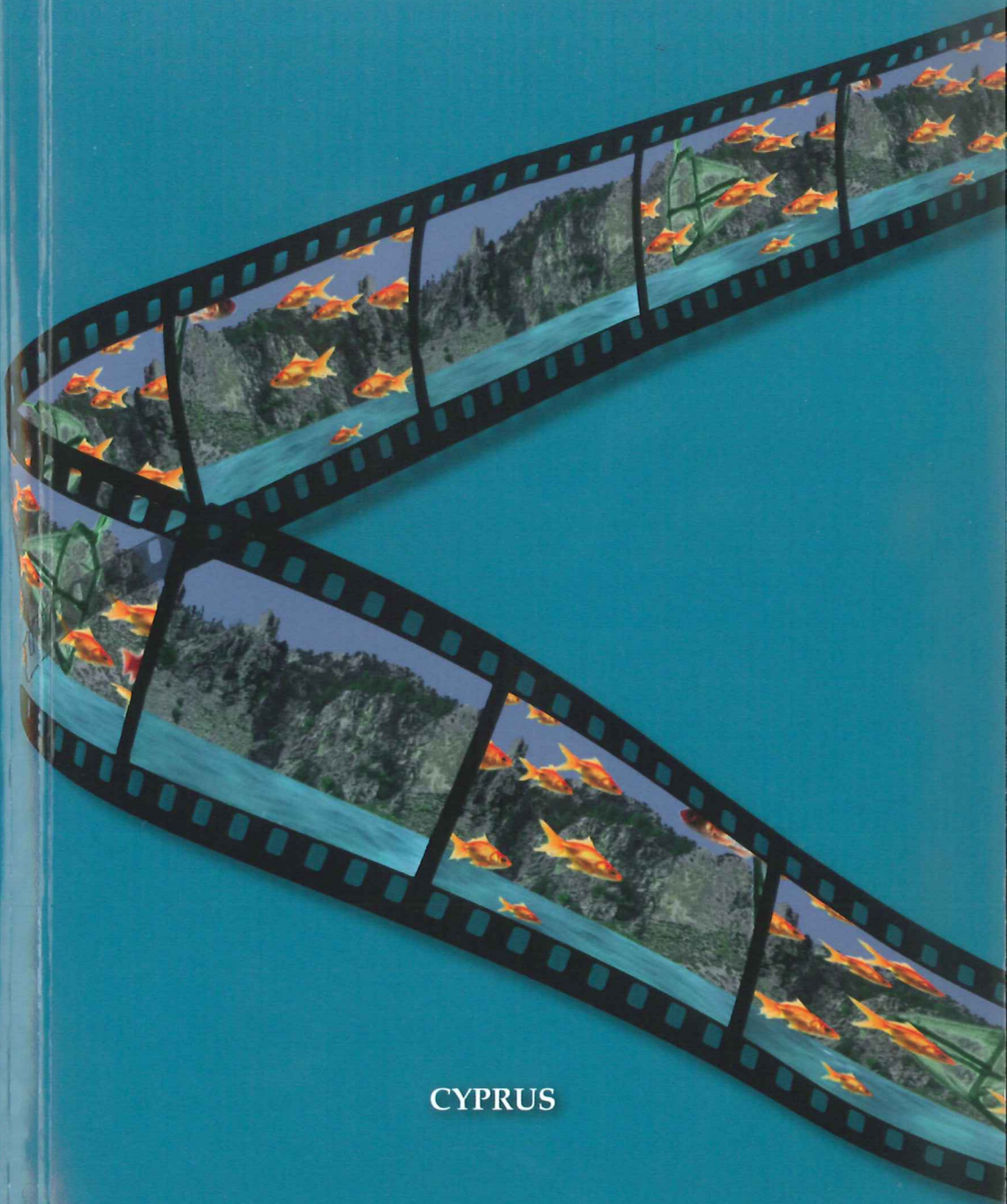


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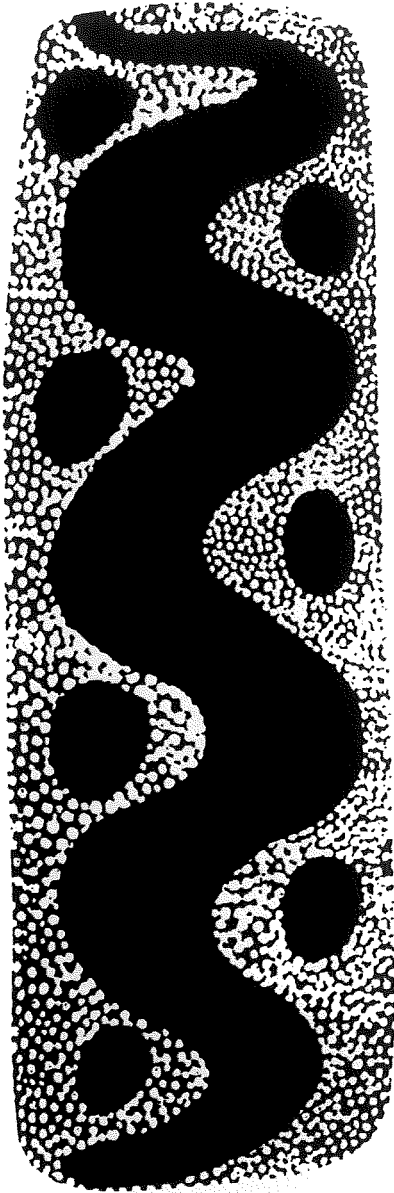
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The Little Land Fish: Experiencing Place, Homeland, and Identity in an Exhibition of Contemporary Cypriot Art

'Penned by Samad Behrangi, *The Little Black Fish* is the story of an old fish telling his 12,000 children and grandchildren a tale themed around justice, equality, questioning dogma, and swimming against the tide. The tale concerns the efforts of the little black fish in his troublesome voyage to the sea and eventual freedom' (*The Little Land Fish* 9). Taking Behrangi's tale as the starting point, two Cypriot artists' associations (Turkish Cypriot EMAA and Greek Cypriot EKATE) put out a call for artists to submit works for an exhibition that took place between June 19th and July 19th, 2010 at the Sanat Liman space, within the framework of the 'Portable Art' project of Istanbul 2010 European Capital of Culture. The works were selected by the author and Zeynep Yasa Yaman, who also co-curated the exhibition.

The little fish of Behrangi's story served as an allegory for the island of Cyprus, so the exhibition was titled *The Little Land Fish*. The little black fish had to resist the long-entrenched ideas of its family, neighbours and wider community about the 'proper' way of life, the very space of existence, and the fixed identity of the individual as a member of a specific group, in its effort to transcend physical, mental and ideological borders, so as to establish an identity for itself. Cyprus, a 'floating' land at the eastern end of the Mediterranean has had a turbulent history; its fortunes and notions of identity have largely been determined by geography, and decided upon by agents other than itself. Its recent past and its present are marked by conflict and division, and by ideologies of collective ('ethnic') difference and of separation. The works in *The Little Land Fish* offer counter-narratives and alternative visions to such ideologies. They negotiate space — both in actual and symbolic terms — as a 'homeland' that is fluid; and identity as a shifting, rather than fixed, concept. They visually deconstruct the vocabulary of dominant political rhetoric, and they subvert discourses of 'us' and 'others'. At the same time, they counter-propose narratives of commonality, either by constructing a space of shared experience, or by focusing on the individual experience of the greater historical forces, as a process that resists the constructs of hegemonic ideology.

Two of the artists incorporated the actual figure of the little fish into their takes on the exhibition's theme: Adi Atassi (b. 1962) created an *Untitled* painting triptych [Fig. 1], in which the outline of the island is transformed into a lone fish at first, and then into a whole swarm of them, within the parameters of the canvases

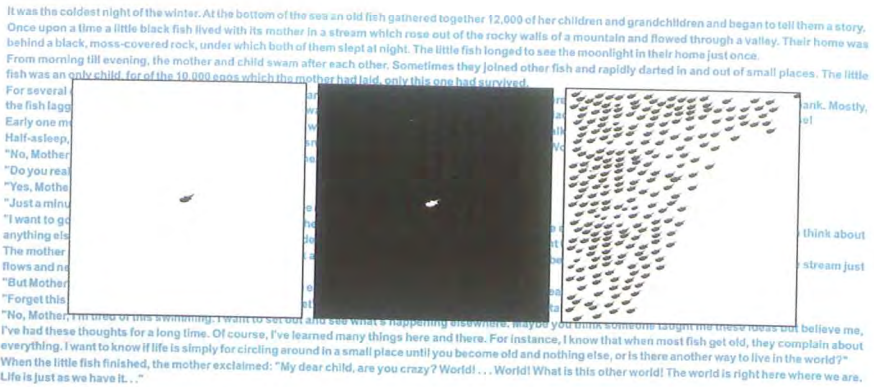


Fig. 1: Adi Attasi, *Untitled*, 2010. Triptych: acrylic on canvas, 100x 100cm each; printed text on transparency, 200 x 400 cm

that, in turn, 'float' on a sea of text — the opening lines of *The Little Black Fish*. Lia Lapithi (b. 1963) gives a humorous twist to a more literal visualisation of the topic: in a one-minute video loop aptly titled *The Little Land Fish* [Fig. 2] — the background is taken over by the bare, rocky volume of the Pentadaktylos mountain range. This mountain — one of two on the island — has become an iconic image for Greek Cypriots ever since the 1974 military invasion by Turkey that has separated the country into two halves: Pentadaktylos dominates the skyline of the 'occupied' (in the eyes of Greek Cypriots) territory. In her video collage, Lapithi shows the mountain as it is seen from inland — the way it is seen from the South (from the dominant Greek-speaking Republic of Cyprus) — yet she has placed in the foreground the sea: a view possible only if one were to look from the North (such as, from the southern coast of Turkey), but for the 'wrong' side of the mountain! To the sound of the water, several fish are 'swimming' in mid-air (above the sea) while a spoon net is chasing after them unsuccessfully!

The playfulness of sight and sound in Lapithi's video, and the impossible reversals of viewpoints contribute to feelings of uncertainty and displacement, while hinting at the degree of absurdity that is one of the ingredients that have gone into the making of the so-called 'Cyprus problem' in the past sixty or so years. The work by Nicos Kouroussis (b. 1937), on the contrary, constitutes a sombre look at the current state of affairs. His *Protagonists* is a ten-metre long and three-metre wide carpet [Fig. 3], the surface of which carries digital prints of leading politicians from Cyprus, Greece, Turkey, the USA, the UK and the UN, who have, in the second half of the 20th century, been somehow involved in the scheming and intrigues of the island's politics and overall fortunes. Kouroussis's work amounts to an accusation, directed at both external and internal entities and personae (the 'negative' photo prints accentuate the 'sinister' character of those portrayed), that have 'contributed' to the modern-day plight of the Cypriot people, who are in turn invited to literally step upon them (their images).

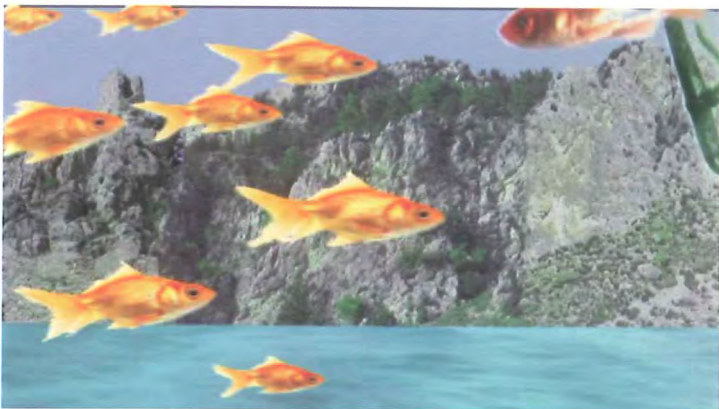
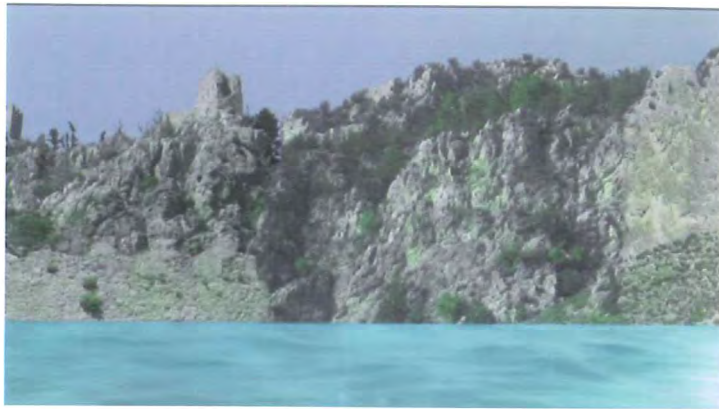


Fig. 2: Lia Lapithi, *The Little Land Fish*, 2010. Digital video, 1 min loop



Fig. 3: Nikos Kouroussis, *The Protagonists*, 2008. Digital prints on carpet, 1000 x 300 cm

Unlike most of the artists in the exhibition, Kouroussis was already an adult during the 1974 political and military events (the Greek-junta led coup against Cyprus' president Archbishop Makarios and the subsequent invasion by Turkey). At the other end of the age spectrum, the three members of the artists' team GRUP 102, — Özge Ertanin (b. 1976), Oya Silbery (b. 1979) and Evren Erkut (b. 1985) — were not yet born when these events took place. In an intriguing coincidence, the three young Turkish Cypriot artists utilised imagery and symbolism that are similar and parallel to Kouroussis'. But instead of the solemn and rather straightforward negotiation by the Greek Cypriot artist, GRUP 102 offer a more distanced



Fig. 4: GRUP 102 (Özge Ertanin, Oya Silbery, Evren Erkut), *Tester*, 2010. Wood and Plexiglas shelves, fluorescent lights, glass bottles, photos on paper, variable dimensions

yet more subversive take on the images and the emblems of the ‘protagonists’, the institutions and the collective symbols that have been involved in Cypriot politics in recent decades. In *Tester* [Fig. 4], they are turned into labels for perfume bottles, which are lined up as if on shop shelves. They are images and symbols that have been among the ingredients of hegemonic narratives, which have perpetuated their validity time and time again; it is finally time for their de-construction and de-mythologisation.

All of the iconographic material used in the above two works has been contributing to a discourse of conflict, of division and of difference among the two main ‘ethnic communities’ in Cyprus. A number of works in the *Little Land Fish* exhibition strive, by using other imagery, to emphasise sameness and togetherness, and to expose the artificiality and suspect character of the rhetoric of separation and otherness. *We Are Identical* [Fig. 5], by Serhat Selişik (b. 1975) and Doğuş Bozkurt (b. 1981), makes a direct, almost ‘in-your-face’ statement about the inability of Cypriot peoples to acknowledge their sameness: multiples of the same headshot are engaged in a shouting match, one that is both futile and absurd.

Some of the other works employ subtler means of constructing narratives of sameness and/or sharing, such as by the charting of a common space and culture, in opposition to official discourses of division. In *CMYK: Colour Separation* [Fig. 6], Tatiana Ferahian (b. 1970) created a number of near cartoon-like drawings (reminiscent of images in schoolbooks), which portray scenes of religious and ‘national’ gatherings of the Greek and Turkish communities from the recent past, complete with corresponding emblems and architectural referents, such as flags, a

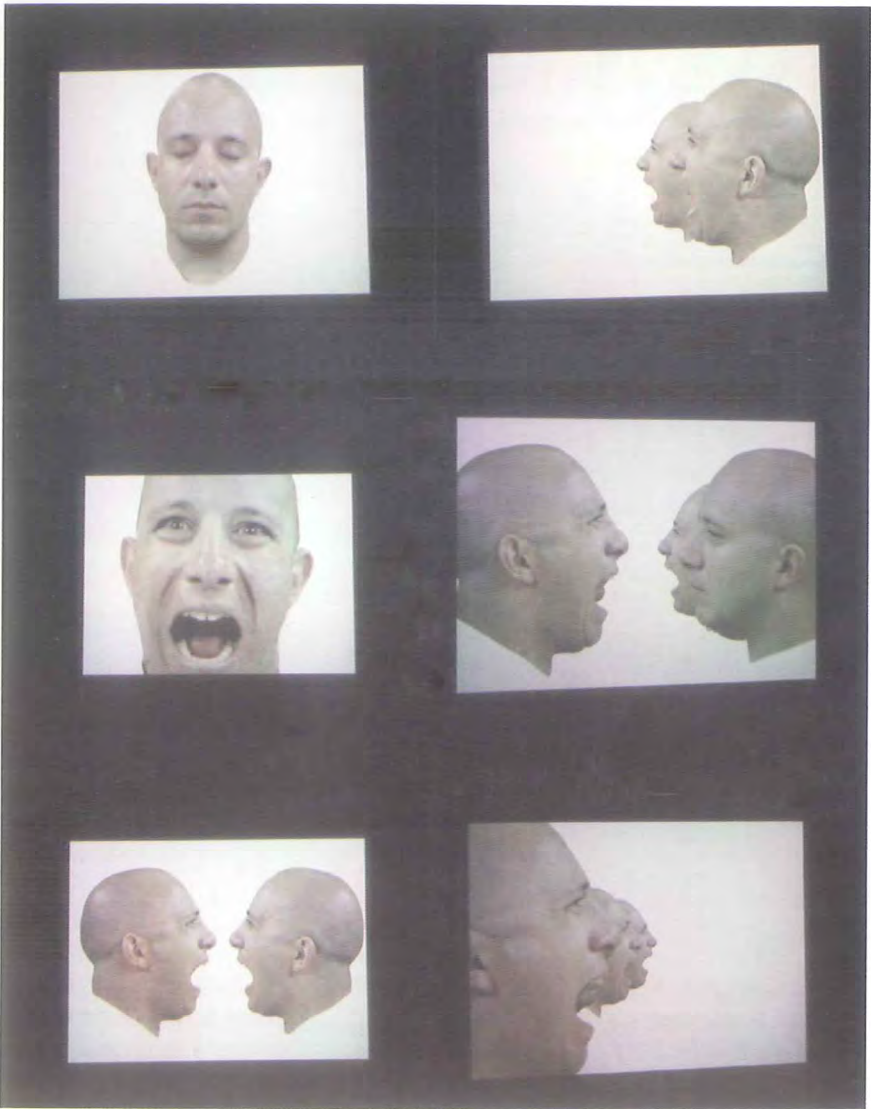


Fig. 5: Serhat Selişik and Doğuş Bozkurt, *We Are Identical*, 2010. Digital video, 1 min loop

church, a minaret. The same five drawings are reproduced in four monochromatic rows — each employing one of the basic colours used in printing. By alluding to the process of colour separation, the work points to the ideological constructs of ethnic and religious divisions, just when the very mundane character of the scenes themselves, and people's everyday life in general, point to the opposite effect. This is reinforced in the same artist's *Turkish Coffee* [Fig. 7], where similar



Fig. 6: Tatiana Ferahian, *CMYK: Colour Separation*, 2009. Ink on aluminium plates; twenty pieces, 22 x 22 cm each

views have been painted on the bottom of several coffee cups, aligned on a wall. These are cups specifically used for the traditional coffee drunk in Turkey, Greece and Cyprus, which is alternately referred to as Turkish, Greek, Cypriot, even, Byzantine. If the ‘banality’ of everyday architectural and other signs may arguably tend to reinforce — on a less conscious level — notions of national identity, the great similarities among supposedly distinct signs may well, according to Ferahian’s works, point to notions of sameness and of past experiences of co-existence between the now separate Cypriot communities.

A more subtle as much as unexpected form of commonality emerges from the installation *This Is How I Will Remember You* [Fig. 8] by Vicky Pericleous (b. 1976). A large Plexiglas box, lit with yellow neon lights from the top and the bottom, contains a great number of picture frames, all containing photographs of interiors — of rooms in Cypriot households. These snapshots of everydayness from a recent past, include copies of several variations of the same boy portrait, which

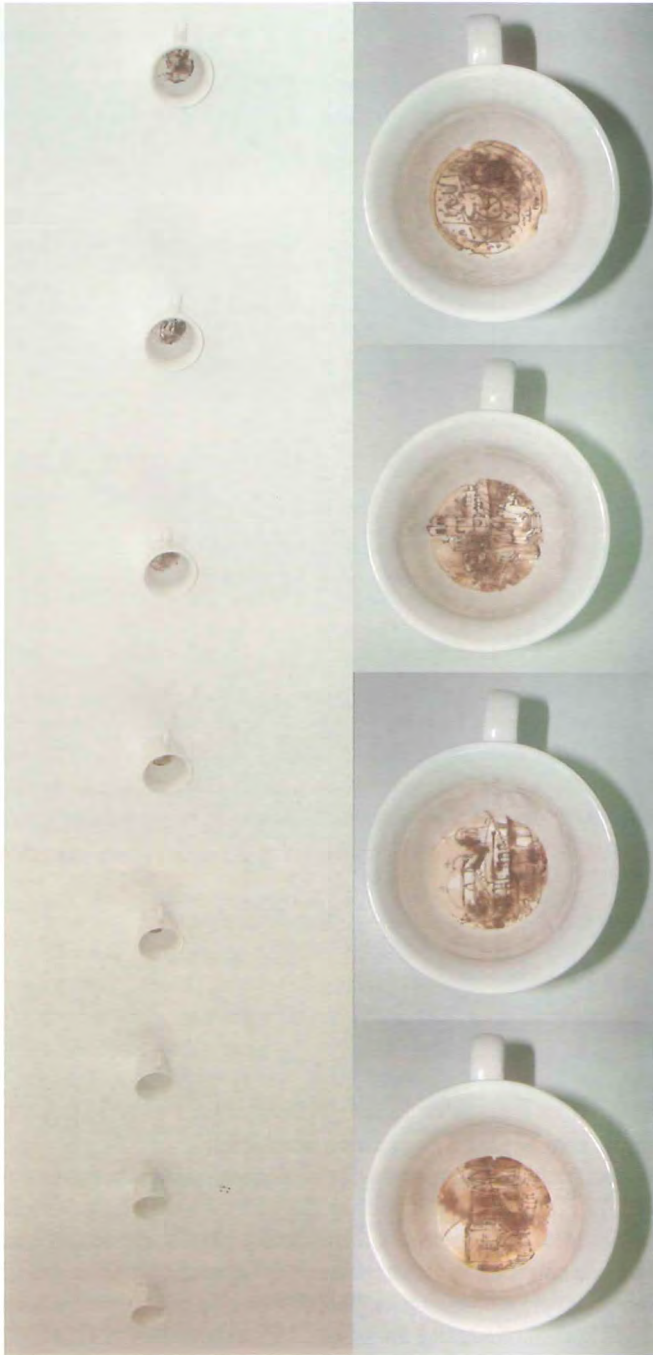


Fig. 7: Tatiana Ferahian, *Turkish Coffee*, 2009. Eight coffee cups, 7 x 9 x 5.5 cm each; ink and coffee on rice paper



Fig. 8: Vicky Pericleous, *This Is How I Will Remember You*, 2009. Perspex, fluorescent light, photographs, frames, 140 x 110 x 110 cm

were massively printed and framed in various sizes and shapes [Fig 8 details]. The original work was probably painted by Italian artist Bruno Amadio (perhaps, 1911–81; also known as Bragolin). These copies were widely circulating from the 1950s onwards, and a great many of them were decorating Cypriot houses in the 1970s (and even later). Framed as if in a time capsule, these glimpses of a nostalgic, melancholic domesticity foreground a wide sharing of visual codes — despite, or perhaps because of, the banality or kitschness of such imagery.



Fig. 8: Vicky Pericleous, *This Is How I Will Remember You*, 2009. Perspex, fluorescent light, photographs, frames, 140x110x110cm, details

In three other works from the exhibition, there are different negotiations of (the Cypriot) space: as a fluid, not-easy-to-map environment, as an estranged ‘homeland’, and as an uninviting new land. In *ILAND I: Possible Worlds*, Melita Couta (b. 1974) reassesses the notion of ‘topos’ — geographical, physical, ideological — as a fluid, constantly changing map, one that resists fixity. This sense of fluidity is accentuated by the equally non-fixed installation parameters — the 100 ink drawings of ‘maps’ (on paper serving napkins) adjust to, and take over, any given site [Fig. 9].

In a series of *Untitled* photographic collages, Mustafa Erkan (b. 1959) has created palimpsests of recent Cypriot history. Emblems from the colonial era and the independent Cypriot republic are superimposed onto each other, along with fragments of Identity Cards and other visual cultural referents, in an allusion to the multiple and often conflicting forms of collective (state, ethnic or national) identities that Cypriots have been required to adopt in the twentieth century [Fig. 10]. The tensions and uncertainties of such ‘identities’ have generated a sense of estrangement from the homeland for many Turkish Cypriots, several thousand of whom have migrated abroad in recent decades — a state of affairs hinted at by the old suitcase fragments in one of Erkan’s collages. Many other inhabitants of the country, however, have been experiencing alienation of a reverse kind: the many thousands of settlers who have been brought from Turkey to the northern part of



Fig. 9: Melita Couta, *ILAND – I: Possible Worlds*, 2009. Ink on paper [100 drawings], 24 cm diameter each

the island during these same decades are regarded as unwanted aliens not only by the Greek Cypriots in the South, but also by many of the Turkish Cypriots in the North. *Untitled* by Özgül Ezgin (b. 1965) is about these people: a series of still



Fig. 10: Mustafa Erkan, *Untitled 2*, *Untitled 3*, 2010. Digital photographs, 85 x 100 cm, 66 x 100 cm images [Fig. 11] is continuously projected while their voices are heard speaking of their own uprooting from villages in Turkey, and of their lives in a new place

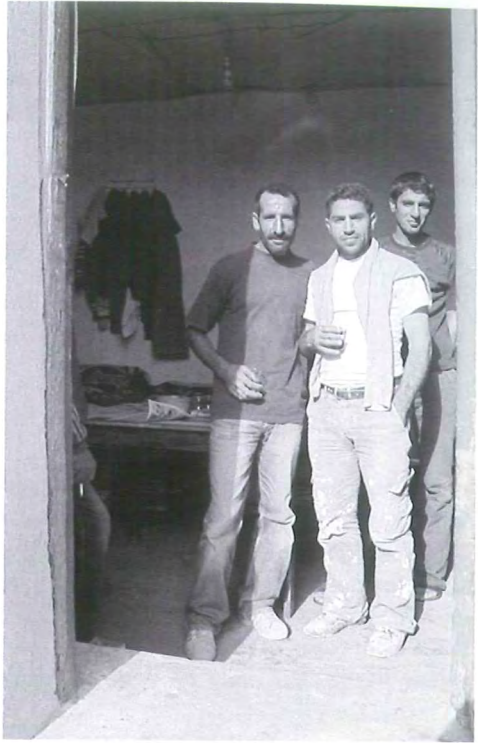


Fig. 11: Özgül Ezgin, *Untitled*, 2008–2010. Projection of still images with sound



Fig. 12: Zehra Şonya, *Untitled 1*, *Untitled 2*, 2009, 2008. Mixed media, 105x90x170cm, 45x70x10cm

where the locals are not as accepting and welcoming, though they do want them as workers.

Yet, while in Ezgin's work the Turkish settlers experience life in Cyprus as a partly unwanted minority, the two *Untitled* pieces [Fig. 12] by Zehra Şonya (b. 1972) point not only to the conflicting attitudes of many Turkish Cypriots toward Turkey, but also to their experience as a 'minority' within the wider Turkish milieu, living under the threat of a cultural assimilation that many of them (want to) resist. *Untitled 2* consists of a piece of wooden container used for transporting goods from the Turkish mainland to northern Cyprus. To the stamped inscription 'LEFKOSE / K. KIBRIS T.C.' ('Nicosia / Cyprus'), the artist has prominently painted 'A' over the letter 'E' — replacing the mainland spelling of the town with the one used by the Turkish Cypriots. The dense array of large nails placed around the inscription leaves little doubt of the poignant state of affairs.

In *Experimental Storytelling* [Fig. 13] by Klitsa Antoniou (b. 1968), the experiences of displacement and the corresponding trauma are given a more personal (autobiographical) character. In a four-and-a-half minute video, a girl's dress, that the artist wore when she became a refugee in 1974, becomes the focus and the object over which a series of fortune tellers offer 'insights' as to the owner's past, present and future. Their sayings, whether factual, correct or not, aim at a state of healing, one that however remains open-ended.

Equally elusive is the realisation of a catharsis, despite the agonising ritual in which a (now, adult) woman is engaged in *The Calm* [Fig. 14], by Yioula Hatzigeorgiou (1968). A four-minute video consists of a performance by the artist, in which she struggles to get rid of the heavy material (soil, stones, seeds?) with which her clothes are loaded, in a process that alludes to ancient rituals of mourning.

Parallel references to customs relating to mourning and the dead, but also allusions to the traumas and memories of the everyday and the banalities that also go into the making of our identities, are contained in *Anti-Funeral Gifts* [Fig. 15]



Fig. 13: Klitsa Antoniou, *Experimental Storytelling*, 2009. Digital video, 4 min 34 s.



Fig. 14: Yioula Hatzigeorgiou, *The Calm*, 2009. Digital video, 4 min

by Andreas Savva (b. 1970). In a juxtaposition to the funerary offerings that many ancient peoples placed in the tombs in order to accompany the dead for eternity, Savva ‘packages’ (using rope or wrapping foil) daily objects — clothes, toys and other common accessories — into long, snake-like formations: an allegory of the fluid and contingent nature of the human condition.

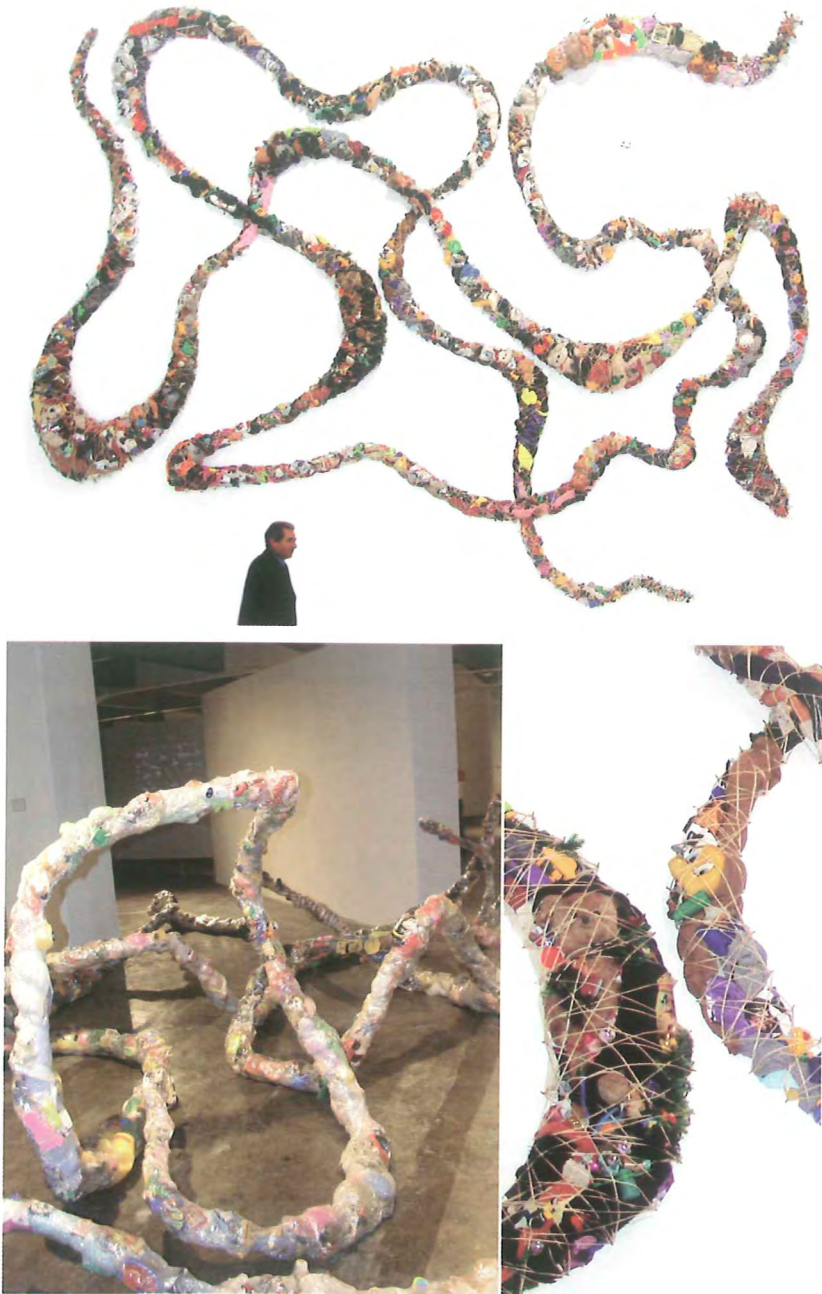


Fig. 15: Andreas Savva, *Anti-Funeral Gifts*, 2010. Readymade objects, rope and wrapping foil, variable dimensions



Fig. 16: Yiannos Economou, *Fear Is A Man's Best Friend*, 2010. Digital video, 4min 50s

Yet, despite such fluidity and the contingency of human existence, people seek certainties, boundaries and fixed identities, all of which they acquire within the parameters of a group, a community, a state or a nation. These parameters offer a sense of security and of belonging, largely experienced in juxtaposition to those seen as ‘not belonging’ (with us), those outside (of our ‘inside’) — the Others. Fear is among the forces that perpetuate this discourse of ‘us’ and ‘them’. Yiannos Economou (b. 1959) created a video work entitled *Fear Is A Man's Best Friend* [Fig. 16]. As the camera moves among the ruins of now obsolete military

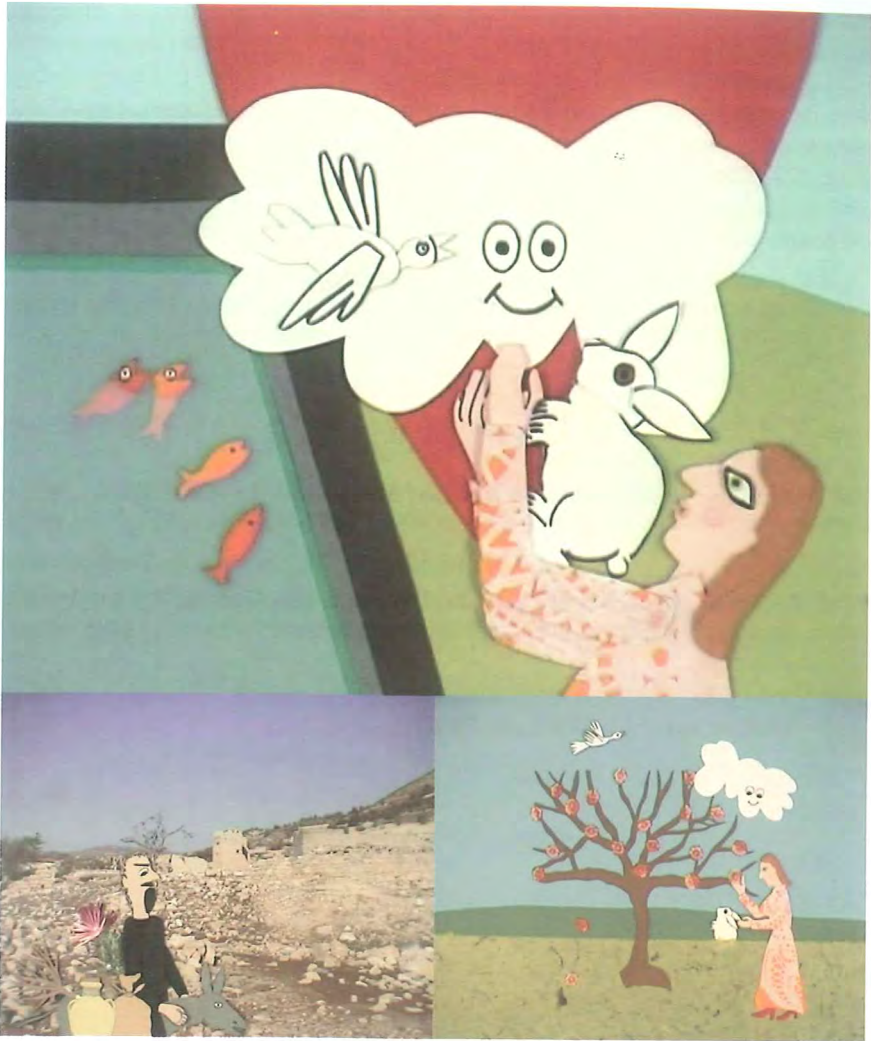


Fig. 17: Katerina Attalidou, *Re Member! Remember 'The Cloud In Love'*, by Najim Hikmet, 2009. Cut-out animation on DVD, 13 min

fortifications that are scattered round the Cypriot countryside, a claustrophobic, visual and aural labyrinth emerges, one that gradually dissolves into white noise and illegible TV images.

If such a fear-laden uncertainty is the dominant element in the current state of affairs in Cyprus with regard to the island's division, the attitudes of the two 'ethnic communities' toward each other, and their views of the future, what could be the breakout of such a deadlock? Art can hardly give the answers, let alone the solutions. But it can manifest alternative visions and other imaginings, thus

subverting the dogmatism of any givens, of the entrenched notions of space, identity and community — of ‘us’ and of the ‘others’ — much as the little black fish of Behrangi’s tale has to overcome. Katerina Attalidou (b. 1973), in conversation with another persecuted artist (the Turkish writer, Nazim Hikmet), created the cut-out animation *Re Member! Remember ‘The Cloud, In Love’ by Nazim Hikmet* [Fig. 17]. Hikmet’s and Behrangi’s fairytales are the kind of alternative visions and imaginings that artworks can be; and, as such, they can have a lasting effect on people’s lives.

Calm and happy, the fish was swimming on the surface of the sea and thinking, ‘Death could come upon me very easily now. But as long as I’m able to live, I shouldn’t go out to meet death. Of course, if someday I should be forced to face death — as I shall — it doesn’t matter. What does matter is the influence that my life or death will have on the lives of others...’ (Behrangi online)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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