On the Brink

Franco Fanelli

“Simply to have demolished their statues

to have driven them from their temples

does not mean the gods are dead”

(Constantine Cavafy, *Ionica*)

From the shadows cast over our time by decades of momentous change but also by demons we hoped were buried far away, we turn to what the art historian Henri Focillon said about the most visionary artists: “Their realm is that of critical moments, when an ancient order is dissolving while another begins.” Today these words raise the distressing question: what kind of order is it that is being born? But just as there is no place where demons can be confined for ever, change itself is unavoidable.

Myths, epic poems and fables insist that it is in the moment of crisis that the hero is forced to pose the right questions to the right counterpart or risk his doom and the end of his story. It is in the moment of crisis that the hero seeks his answers in the extreme depths if he knows how to reach them and how to summon the souls that rest there.

A Greek artist, Venia Dimitrakopoulou, has searched in the lava flows of Aegina, where her studio is located, for the right material with which to summon up the faces of ancient heroes. She has done so, as she explains during an interview with Matteo Pacini, in a “landscape that makes you feel as if there were a myth, a person, a story from afar, hidden within yourself, in the deepest corners of your being.”

Talking about the relationship between culture and landscape, Focillon said this: “The life of forms defines psychological places, without which the *genius loci* would be opaque and intangible [...]. Greece exists as the geographic foundation of a certain idea of mankind, but the landscape of Doric art, or rather Doric art as a place, created a Greece without which the natural Greece would be no more than a bright desert.” The creation of forms by the artist is in this sense a necessary act.

What expression is borne by those heroes petrified in lava? If Gian Lorenzo Bernini could say during the triumphant baroque years that the most interesting time in which to paint a person is when they have just finished talking, in the dark shipwreck we are currently experiencing, it is necessary to call on heroes to shout, talk, even whisper.

Venia Dimitrakopoulou has extracted echoes from the depths of geological catastrophes on the island of Aegina, a place hallowed by the myth and *pietas* of a king who called upon the gods to provide rain for his subjects. The souls of warriors—the Myrmidons, warriors of Achilles, son of Peleus, a son of Aegina?—re-emerge from a pre-classical era. The artist fully identifies with her actions and role (like those of whomever executed the Altamira paintings), enacting a kind of descent to our primordial mothers and creating a bridge between us and them. Such a ritual is also a challenge, a request: are we still capable of understanding and deciphering those voices, or has our consciousness been consumed in just one century that preferred other myths, new gods?

Metamorphoses and nomadism

Venia Dimitrakopoulou lands in Italy with a triptych of shows at a moment that is terrible for Western history and the destinies of Europe. The philosopher Dionysis Kavvathas noticed how this artist moves “from the ivory tower of art to the control tower of social condition.”

The visitor will not miss in the symbolic forms (including the technique itself) used by the artist the many possible answers to the current, dreadful revenants of the twentieth century: populism, nationalism, racism, the return of walls and borders. The visitor will be able to *see* the message, provided they are able to abandon the overused commonplace concepts of much of today’s contemporary art, which flirts cynically with tragedies. The art critic, the late Christos M. Joachimides underlined Dimitrakopoulou’s position, which is contrary “to the ambivalence in current art.”1

Her *modus operandi* is no mere addition to a fashionable trend that has turned stylistic discontinuity into a formidable commercial product. Her stylistic and technical nomadism, which ranges from traditional sculpture to installation, from video to action, from writing to prints, is instead a condition that is coherent and necessary for an artist who, in a classical exile, lives and works on the brink of an epochal shift. The brink is a recurring metaphor in her work, as is the concept of the double, of chronological circularity, of the oxymoron that gives the Italian triptych its name, “Primordial future”. These are all concepts that refer emphatically to that idea of a border, perhaps the most frequent of her artistic themes, alongside metamorphosis, which for the artist represents an essential and poetic condition. Metamorphosis is the theme that binds Ovid to Kafka, Deleuze and Focillon, the last in his Bergsonian concept of forms’ becoming.2

Mater-matter is the interpretative key to understanding the show in Palermo, at the Antonino Salinas Archaeological Museum. The journey that will take the artist to the borders of Italy begins as an epic poem would while also reminding us of *De Reditu* by Rutilius Namatianus, verses where mythology and history are painfully interwoven. There is a clear invocation of the volcanic and archaeological *genius loci*, where to delve into the past is to define a potential dialogue with the present. Mater-matter-matrix: the presence of warriors from Aegina in this first show strongly reaffirms the artist’s cultural and geographic origins, while also creating a comparison with forms of expression born through modernity (writing and poetry as visual art) and with fragile materials, such as Chinese handmade paper, the very opposite of the coarse three-dimensionality and weight of volcanic rock. Tragic masks or Pompeian casts, those heroes, although dead, communicate, demonstrate and predict possible or parallel worlds, like the face, ever restless and changing, of Kaminek von Engelshauen in the novel by Alexander Lernet-Holenia: “[...] From the features a sharpness emerged that was not his own, but perhaps of an ancestor, or even of a descendant he would never have.”3 Palermo will also show the more recent work, the marble spears, some more than two metres tall, that are perfectly in line with her search for an archetype. But there is more: inspired by the random discovery of a thin piece of marble in her studio, these spears are, as the author explains, “androgynous spears, sharp and curved”.

What connects the Palermo show to the exhibition in Turin is the presence of two key works, “The Shirt of Nessus” and “The Secret Armour”. In these two, splendid works on paper, inscribed within the shape of an ancient religious tunic or perhaps that of a banner, covered in tormented writings, the alpha and omega come to life along with a joining of opposites and circularity, like constellations across Dimitrakopoulou’s work.

The first refers to a mythological tale, according to which the clothing stained with the blood of the centaur Nessus, killed by Hercules, starts out as a sweet, magical instrument of love in the hands of Deianira, Hercules’ wife, only to become a cruel, cursed instrument of death once the hero wears it. The second work is covered partly with words to do with fear, a feeling behind both these heinous acts and the xenophobic policies that doom migrants to die in shipwrecks, and partly with heroic acts.

Logos, speech, symbols, poetic writing and literary and graphic automatism invade the Turin-based exhibition; unbound pages and booklets, diaries, artist’s books. The minimalist walls of the Sandretto Re Rebaudengo Foundation Gallery, which display this second station of Dimitrakopoulou’s journey through Italy, have been interpreted by the artist as if they were blank pages. The heart of the show is a monumental epigraph in which words like fire run across a steel plate with a lightning bolt cut into it. Utopia and prophecy collide into one sentence: “[...] And the souls of the artists will be awakened [...] And they will be the visible eyes of a blinded society.” During the 2011 Venice Biennale, the curator Bice Curiger asked the artist Jean-Luc Mylayne what language will be spoken in the future; the artist replied: “Mankind’s true language: writing.”

Turin is a frontier city through which extraordinary “heretics” have passed, from emperor Julian the Apostate to Friedrich Nietzsche, two figures with a common interest in the past and mythology, in view of the possibility of an eternal present, like what we seem to glimpse in the manner with which Venia Dimitrakopoulou converses with myths, history and the recent past–with the avant-garde and modernist tradition, for example.

In the conformist system of the art of today, where there is always some kind of reference, whether in the form of parody or simply a sterile notion, this very frank attitude with regards to the shapes and poetry that have preceded us is in itself a form of heresy, of apostasy. That which for the market is merchandise, good for replenishing the now ever-present art fair sections dedicated to vintage 1960s and 1980s art, instead becomes living material for Venia Dimitrakopoulou, still capable of inspiring energy, tension, anxiety.

We can see this in the third show of the tour, once again in a frontier city, Trieste, the gateway to Central Europe and a fertile place for modern literature, with James Joyce’s persistence of *epos* and Italo Svevo’s psychoanalysis, the descent into archetype. Here the exhibition is in two places. In the villa that hosts the city’s Museo Sartorio, in the first-floor apartment that in 1919 was occupied by Emanuele Filiberto, Duke of Aosta, the artist will place a piece from a few years ago, “Insomnia bed”; inside the drawing room and music room, in an atmosphere imbued with a Proustian sense of memory, sound takes centre stage: “I enjoy awakening something that has slept for a long time,” says Venia.

The final and ideal location for this frontier exhibition tour is the castle of San Giusto, erected on the foundations of an ancient fortress. Here the artist continues through music: an audio installation created with composer Pablo Ortiz in the Museo Sartorio finds its counterpart here in the sound of the “Promahones”, large abstract sculptures. The title, once again, derives from the ancient world. The “promahos” was, in battle formation, the bravest of warriors, the first to bear the brunt of an enemy’s attack or the first to attack. However, by extension, the promahos was also the patron god of a city or a warrior deity. Promahones are also the bastions, defensive walls: here we see another co-existence of opposites, with war creating architectural wonders, as demonstrated by the history of military architecture, counting a fair number of illustrious architects.

Venia Dimitrakopoulou’s “Promahones” should be seen in light of this interpretation. First erected at the Benaki Museum in Athens between 2014 and 2015, now installed in in front of the National Archaeological Museum, these are monumental steel disks, frayed in such a way that they become symbols, graphemes open to many interpretations.

They could be part of an unknown alphabet, musical notes produced by an undiscovered culture, or sculptural installations to be intended, in a neo-minimalistic fashion, as intransitive interference between form and space. Their cosmic nature reminds us of works by Eliseo Mattiacci; their geometric vision hints at Robert Morris. Their title instigates a reflection on the concept of a bastion at a time when it is advisable to defend oneself from builders of new walls. These immense archaeo-sculptures are anchored to the ground with oblique rhythms, rather like Renaissance castle walls that had to absorb the blows from cannon fire following the introduction of new, deadly war machines. Their oblique positioning also makes us think of tilting, mobile bulkheads. They act as musical percussion instruments, capable of producing arcane melodies; the sound, therefore, becomes an integral part of the art. And then the open structure at its extremities greatly enriches the entanglement of shadows projected by these shapes, doubling them, multiplying them.

Traversable walls and bastions made of metal, shadows and sounds, the “Promahones” can also inspire other rhythms, such as those of dance and performance, without being reduced to pure scenography. The artist brings an echo of this to Trieste, which is close to Venice, where in 2018 there was an extraordinary edition of the Venice Biennale entitled “Freespace” and dedicated to the usability, sustainability and collectivisation of space; an architecture made up of open barriers, transparent walls, in a show that made no attempt to hide its complicity with the common themes of contemporary art.

Those who are awake

Revived heroes, an armour of words and verses, “archi-sculptures” the names of which are rooted in military tradition: is Venia Dimitrakopoulou, therefore, an artist in a time of war? If so, it is today’s dragging, ambiguous war, the same that Ingeborg Bachmann predicted in the 1950s, in *Every Day*, as a daily catastrophe and massacre:

War is no longer declared,

only continued. The monstrous

has become everyday. The hero

stays away from battle. The weak

have gone to the front.4

It is undeniable that the Greek artist is proposing allegories of defence, of resistance, more than of attack or aggression, revealing herself to be a sentinel, a member of that community which Martin Buber described as being in a “state of wakefulness,” referring to the words of Heraclitus: “Those who are awake, as opposed to those who are asleep, have a common world, a unique world they are all a part of together.” These are ponderings introduced by Furio Jesi, in an enlightening paper regarding the strength, but also the hidden dangers, of myths: “The process through which mythical imagery scratches the surface between the subconscious to conscious mind constitutes, when dealing with genuine myths, a key factor at the heart of a humanistic balance, also between the subconscious and that which is conscious. The genuine myth, gushing out from the depths of the human psyche, defines a linguistic reality at its conscious level.” This reality corresponds to Heraclitus’s “state of wakefulness” of the collective. “And that linguistic reality - that logos - with its structure impedes any possible dominance of the subconscious that may lead to the annihilation of consciousness.”5

It is only because she belongs to the community (dwindling, we fear) of “those who are awake,” that Venia Dimitrakopoulou can genuinely operate, to quote Jesi, with symbols, allegories and shapes that, once harnessed (one need only think of the reactionary value acquired by the use of fear and thus defence), can generate monsters. She works at a time when the relationship between primary cultures and modern cultures appears to be unhinged; following the twilight of the idea of an ethnographic “primarity” from which one might derive the necessary inspiration to radicalise one’s artistic form, as was the case for historical avant-garde movements (in a tradition which also achieved a certain proto-minimalist idea of painting: one need only think of Joseph Albers in Mexico), in the mixture of cultures and civilisation, the concept of origin lives and remains dispersed into wandering fragments throughout the infinite space of our psyche and imagination.

Cultural belonging is also a concept that goes beyond geographic or anthropological origins; on the contrary, it is the availability of a genuine (and necessary) openness towards the elements and archetypes of a multitude of cultures that characterises a possible and free figure of an artist in the here and now. Potentially, in this sense, the “message,” the seed, the logos, can be gathered and transmitted through unforeseen, unassuming media.

Who, therefore, is the artist-medium? Perhaps the dark wandering projectionist, the Lilliputian Cyparis who, in the splendid novel by Christoph Ransmayr (a visionary who believes in the unavoidable necessity of storytelling), on the desolate walls of the robust city of Tomi on the Black Sea perpetuates the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid, buried there in exile6: “He always spoke in stories, whether speaking of his travels or illustrating the delicate mechanics of that black projector, with opaque reflections, kept in a case enveloped in tulle, the machine in which Cyparis could insert entire destinies and transfer them, humming, into the animated world, into life. Every year, from the Lilliputian’s hands, a world came to life on the wall of Tereus, which seemed to the inhabitants of the robust city to be so far away, so unreachable and so enchanting that for weeks, after the disappearance of Cyparis into the vastness of time, they could not tell other stories [...] for another year”.

1 *Venia Dimitrakopoulou, Promahones*, exhibition catalogue (Benaki Museum, Athens, November 2014 - February 2015), Hatje Cantz Verlag, Ostfildern 2014.

2 It is time to explain the reasons for the presence of Focillon in these pages. In a performance piece, “Source of Life” (2011), Venia Dimitrakopoulou incessantly moulds small blocks of fresh clay with her hands. The act is projected in a video and the result, a multitude of fragments that bear vividly the signs of this pressing action, is placed on a cross-shaped surface on the ground, hinting at a structure that is dear to the artist. We felt this piece was dramatic and yet extraordinarily pulsing with life, a sort of antithesis to the act, a form of secular ritual, carried out by Marina Abramović: in 1997 the artist evoked the tragedy of the Balkan war, which would cause the division of Yugoslavia, by stripping the flesh from bovine carcasses obsessively for six days. To that mournful ceremony we have chosen to juxtapose the creative vitality of the Greek artist, in a work (not too different, but carried out with a different intent, from some of Giuseppe Penone’s recent work) which can be interpreted also as an elegy to manual expression as a tool for knowledge, a concept at the core of Focillon’s thoughts, whose study of the becoming and persistence of forms, so free from chronological preconceptions, was indeed useful for attempting to understand the work by Venia Dimitrakopoulou, which is “dissident” with regards to the current context, through the interpretative key of temporality. “Historical time is successive - writes the French historian - however, it is not pure succession”. And shortly after: “The time of a work of art is not necessarily the time of taste” (H. Focillon, *Vie des forms, suivi de Eloge de la main*, Paris 1943, Italian transl. Einaudi, Turin 1972). At the same time, we also considered the thoughts of Octavio Paz regarding modernity: “I discovered that modernity is not inside but outside ourselves. It is today and the most ancient past, it is tomorrow and the beginning of the world, it is a thousand years old and is about to be born. It speaks Nahuatl, draws ninth-century Chinese ideograms and appears on a television screen [...]. Modernity breaks away from the most recent past only to recover the most distant past and make the Neolithic fertility image a current image of our own [...]. It is the instant itself: a sparrow that is everywhere and nowhere. We want to catch it alive, but it spreads its wings and disappears, transforming into a fistful of syllables. We are left with empty hands. And thus, the doors of perception open and the other time appears, the true time, the one we unknowingly seek: the present, the presence” (O. Paz, *I Confini della Modernità*, in “Il Sole 24 Ore”, 17th January 1999).

3 A. Lernet-Holenia, *Due Sicilie*, Italian transl. Adelphi, Milan 2017.

4 “War is no longer declared, only continued. The monstrous has become everyday. The hero stays away from battle. he weak have gone to the front. The uniform of the day is patience, its medal the pitiful star of hope above the heart. The medal is awarded when nothing more happens, when the artillery falls silent, when the enemy has grown invisible and the shadow of eternal armament covers the sky. It is awarded for desertion of the flag, for bravery in the face of friends, for the betrayal of unworthy secrets and the disregard of every command.”(I. Bachmann, in *Poesie*, Italian transl. Guanda, Milan 1987).

5 F. Jesi, *Mito e linguaggio della collettività*, in *Letteratura e mito*, Einaudi, Turin 1968.

6 C. Ransmayr, *Il mondo estremo*, Italian transl. Feltrinelli, Milan 1988 and 2003.