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Why Them and Not I?

An Account of Kalliopi Lemos's Art Projects About Human Dignity

On the occasion of the Conference on the 'Imagination of Human Rights' in Bielefeld, sculptor and site-specific installation artist Kalliopi Lemos was invited to participate and present some of her art projects that focused on the human condition and human rights, especially about issues concerning physical and psychological displacements and the mistreatment of human dignity.

This work has been largely influenced by Lemos's personal life experiences. She was born in Chios, Greece, an island situated at the eastern part of the Aegean Sea, and grew up in Athens. Her childhood memories are filled with painful, heartbroken stories of her maternal grandparents, their violent uprooting from their homeland Smyrna (modern Izmir, Turkey) and their moving to Chios. In 1922, they had to flee their homes due to the exchange of populations between Greece and Turkey and create a new life in Greece. And Lemos still holds a vivid memory of their tears, the laments and the songs full of longing for a freed country where they could return back one day. The hardships of forced migration and the humiliation of finding oneself with nothing and at the mercy of others have marked the artist's psyche deeply.

Then, at the age of twenty, Lemos herself migrated to London to follow her husband who was already working there. Away from family and friends she had to make home a new country. After time and effort she succeeded in calling London home, but such migratory experiences have been instrumental in her sympathizing with the increasing numbers of people who have been making risky efforts to cross borders and make Europe or the States their new home.

As a result, for the last decade Lemos has focused on the creation of sculpture and site-specific installations that explore psychological and physical passages; the latter in the form of migration and forced displacement, as both are for her a manifestation of the human being's effort to go through life, enduring all the behavior of the social body as it inflicts abuse, pain, cruelty, even hypocrisy.

Crossings: A sculptural trilogy about migration

In 2003, while on holiday in Chios, Lemos came across some abandoned, worn wooden boats in the beach. Although not an unusual site in the Greek shores, the artist could immediately see something different in these boats and soon she found out that these were used to smuggle migrants from the coasts of Turkey to the Greek islands, with the hope of advancing to the Northern European countries. The stories of the efforts of thousands of people from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria, Tunisia, Somalia and other regions of the Middle East and Africa to cross the European borders were imprinted on those vessels. Instantly Lemos felt the urge to use them in her installations and she started collecting authentic boats used by traffickers and left abandoned throughout the Greek shores. These dilapidated vessels were once filled with hopes and aspirations for a place to live, but also with tears and fears, agony and despair. And although abandoned, they would still bear immense historical and emotional significance and they epitomized human suffering; so, their treatment as sacred objects became paramount for the artist.

Soon the idea of an ambitious three-part project was born. It was titled *Crossings* and it took the form of three public space installations in three different cities, in Eleusis (Greece) in 2006, Istanbul (Turkey) in 2007 and Berlin (Germany) in 2009. It was developed as an interdisciplinary project that aimed to reach out to different countries, from Germany and its powerful position in policy making, to Turkey, that functions as a mediator between East and West, and Greece, that has become one of the three main points of entry to Europe for undocumented migrants (the other two being Italy and Spain).

Eleusis

Crossing (Fig.11.1) was the first installation of the project and it was shown in Eleusis from 2006 to 2009. An upright, 11 to 12 meters high structure of seven migrant boats was put together with all the vessels facing outwards in a circle, as if they were holding hands and showing their wounds to the world. The structure was reminiscent of a Sign of an ancient Greek public grave or a small chapel. The upright positioning of the boats was meant as the symbolic gesture of lifting up someone who has fallen. Their interior was anointed with pure beeswax as a purifying ritual for the healing and sealing of a wound. Furthermore, Lemos constructed and installed wooden sheds in the surrounding area, drew on them human silhouettes and wrote the first names and dates of birth of actual migrants who had entered Greece that period.

Fig. 11.1: Kalliopi Lemos *Crossing* (2006)

This gigantic structure was installed within the ruins of an old oil and soap factory, where some of the Greek refugees of 1922 got their first jobs after their relocation from Asia Minor to Greece. And the choice of Eleusis as a stage for this first installation was not arbitrary; its archaeological site features one of the most known ancient Greek shrines, the shrine of Demeter and her daughter Persephone. The myth goes that Demeter lost her daughter, but with Zeus' intervention, Persephone would leave the underworld and return to her mother once a year. So this place symbolized strongly the cycle of nature and the connection between life and death. For Lemos it was the perfect space for starting a public dialogue about refugees' experiences, their hardships, their dreams and their inherent rights.

The work remained in this space from 2006 to 2009. It was the artist's first effort to show the world the terrible tragedy of undocumented migration and to initiate an understanding of these people's struggle and agony. Ultimately, according to the artist, the installation belonged to the place it was created and in 2009 it had completed its circle of life, so she decided to burnt it down in a private funeral-like ritual that included a performance with the narration of Yiannis Ritsos' poem 'Persephone' and fragments from T. S. Elliott's 'Four Quartets'.

Istanbul

The second installation, *Round Voyage* (Fig.11.2), was staged in Istanbul in 2007, within the grounds of Bilgi University in Eyup, at the innermost tip of the Golden Horn, where East and West meet, where one can find the ancient remains of the first settlers of Byzantium. Two migrant boats were put together and were inverted one above the other, in a form that brings to mind the yin and yang symbol. A steel arch construction, a bridge, was made to hold the boats in place and it was painted in different colours, bringing to mind a rainbow, a symbol for hope and regeneration.

Fig. 11.2: Kalliopi Lemos *Round Voyage* (2007)

This work was shaped in the form of a loose circle, like the cyclical flow of life, reminding us that where one journey ends, a new one starts, and how it must feel to be in between borders, cultures or identities. Still in public view since 2007, it symbolizes unity and the whole of the world where differences are bridged and peaceful solutions to problems are adopted.

Berlin

For the third and final installation of the *Crossings* project, Kalliopi Lemos collaborated with the Akademie der Künste. The work *At Crossroads* (Fig.11.3) was shown in Berlin, it was presented in connection with the 20th anniversary of the fall of Berlin Wall and it was installed in front of the Brandenburg Gate. It featured nine of the remaining collected migrant boats, one placed on top of the other inverted horizontally and supported by a large-scale wooden structure. It occupied 180 square meters, so it was very effective in the openness of the Platz des 18. März.

The installation formed a 13-meters tall cross so as to symbolize Berlin as a crossroads of migration in Europe and a policy making centre. At the same time, this tower-shaped structure became a tower of anticipation and hope, but also of despair and loss. This dark and ominous construction, rising from the shadow of the opulent Brandenburg Gate, challenged the gate's classical beauty and its symbolism of the power and principles of the Western civilization.

Fig. 11.3: Kalliopi Lemos *At Crossroads* (2009)

Navigating in the Dark: a journey within

Following the highly acclaimed *Crossings* project, in 2011 Kalliopi Lemos turned towards a more introvert approach for the examination of the human condition. It was again a three-part exhibition that took place in Athens, Crete and finally London. Not explicitly connected to human rights, Lemos's new project *Navigating in the Dark* was more about the human journey through life, the navigation towards self-realisation, reminiscent of a migrant boat navigating at night and searching for a light. Its central idea was the search for the base within our self, the move deep within, in order to feel secure and survive in times when things collapse around us (e.g. political and economic systems, environmental changes, borders re-calculated etc). And ultimately what we achieve inwardly eventually brings changes to the outer reality. It was an examination of humans and their relation to the society, but more importantly their relation to themselves – understanding, acceptance and effort for a better life, a life true to the self.

Athens

Placed within the courtyard of the Benaki Museum in the centre of Athens, in the midst of an urban and very busy environment, the first part of the *Navigating in the Dark* project explored the relationship between the collective and the individual and the transition towards an inner journey. According to the artist, when social, political and economic systems are in crisis, we must turn to ourselves and rediscover our base. This first show aimed to create a metaphor for this transition from the social to the personal and for the beginning of the journey within.

The Benaki courtyard was dominated by a platform that featured four large-scale steel abstract sculptures such as *Bear All Crawl* (2008) (Fig.11.4), acting as the four cardinal points, and an hexagonal 'beehive' structure that was filled with water and twelve steel heads. This 'beehive' could be perceived as a place of initiation, with the heads semi-submerged in water, evoking the act of entering the darkness and commencing the journey.

Fig. 11.4: Kalliopi Lemos *Bear all Crawl* (2008)

Rethymon

Located in Ibrahim Khan mosque, in Rethymnon, Crete, the second exhibition explored the spiritual path of the journey. The site, originally a Christian church that was later converted into a mosque, had great significance for Lemos, as it underlined the human need to connect with the spiritual world. The motif of the boat could again be seen in some of the works exhibited and the passage from earth to sky, from matter to spirit and to a deeper self-exploration.

One particular sculpture, the *Odysseus's Boat* (Fig.11.5), was particularly poignant of the process of the life journey and the remnants from the experience;

Fig. 11.5: Kalliopi Lemos *Odysseus's Boat* (2011)

featuring a wooden boat and twelve, semi-abstract salt heads positioned throughout its length, it symbolized the crossing and the lonely search for self-awareness. The salt heads, with their distorted expressions of pain and agony, encapsulated the meaning of life, what remains from this journey and reflected the difficulty of the voyage, the achievement of reaching the destination as well as the experiences of life that shape each person's individuality.

London

The third and final part of the *Navigating in the Dark* project took place at the Crypt Gallery of Saint Pancras Church in London, which was originally a burial place. It focused on the ultimate journey through darkness, the passage through death, the connection with the unconscious and the final transition from an outward existence to an inward self-awareness.

Fig. 11.6: Kalliopi Lemos *Wooden Boat with Seven People* (2011)

The installation was located in an underground space and it aimed to evoke strong feelings, reminding us of the dark side of the unconscious and the intense discoveries that we might dig out while exploring hidden sides of the self. Three boats – found objects (Fig.11.6), stripped down of any colour to expose the raw wood – were each filled with snakes, crows and human figures made of steel and were accompanied by an evocative sound installation. Additionally, a vaulted space in the Crypt was filled with white paper sculptures of semi-transparent bees that hovered in the air like migrating souls.

Pledges for a Safe Passage: An installation for the 3rd International Biennial of Canakkale

When Lemos was invited to participate in the 3rd International Biennial of Canakkale, in Turkey in 2012, the theme of undocumented migration was again revisited. The site-specific installation *Pledges for a Safe Passage* (Fig.11.7) focused on this ever increasing global issue and it was dedicated to the struggle and hardships thousands of people endure in the hope for a better life. It marked the process of a passage, a journey from one place to another, from one situation to another, from life to death, from hope to despair.

The work (Fig.11.8) featured an unused boat found in Canakkale that was covered with numerous handmade and readymade votives, called *tamata* in Greek, that had inscriptions with the names, date and place of birth of migrants that entered illegally Greece's borders. These votives, used extensively in the Greek Orthodox tradition, acted as individual prayers for the safe journey and the realization of the dream. Simultaneously, however, they also became a met-

Fig. 11.7: Kalliopi Lemos *Pledges for a Safe Passage* (2014b)

Fig. 11.8: Kalliopi Lemos *Pledges for a Safe Passage* (2014)

aphor for the human drama, expressing the fear, the agony and the uncertainty that each migrant experiences in the effort to cross to another border. Made of recycled aluminium soft drink cans, the votives were also meant to point to the excessive consuming habits of the Western world and the division between rich and poor as one of the causes for the displacement of people.

I am I between worlds and between shadows: A parallel event of the 13th Istanbul Biennial

More recently, Kalliopi Lemos's incessant artistic preoccupation with the human condition and the offence of human dignity has resulted in her latest project *I Am I Between Worlds and Between Shadows*, which concentrated on women's experiences and the frequent abuse of their self-respect. Organised as a parallel event of the 13th Istanbul Biennial in 2013, the exhibition was concerned with the human rights of women and children and it underlined how, in many different ways, women still face, and still have to put up with, behavior that is insulting, wounding, oppressive and overpowering.

The exhibition consisted of an installation that featured seven evocative sculptures, each one positioned in different classrooms of the Ioakimion, an old girls' school in the historic area of Fener in Istanbul. In this way, they stood like remote islands, expressing the psychological isolation and loneliness experienced after violation. A sound installation was also incorporated so as to enhance the atmosphere of the old school, while on the pupils' desk one could find recent newspaper articles with incidents of violence and mistreatment against women all around the world. Made of steel fillings, fiberglass and mild steel, the sculptures referred to the brutal violations directly or indirectly affecting all women. But the story was also about the mundane violations, the struggle to combine and achieve and the daily sacrifice of the feminine that causes so much suffering to the soul, and to society as a whole.

Fig. 11.9: Kalliopi Lemos *Hen on Crutches* (2013)

Fig. 11.10: Kalliopi Lemos *Hanging Hare* (2013)

Among the works, the *Hen on Crutches* (Fig.11.9), with no wings or legs, hangs suspended like a piece of meat, bringing to mind all those countless women that have been victims of trafficking, or the millions of underage girls forced into arranged marriages still in many parts of the world. The sculpture *Hanging Hare* (Fig.11.10), on the other hand, features a multi-breasted hare hung from his ears. The numerous breasts are nothing else from what is expected of women; to be wives, lovers, mothers, professionals and daughters. The expectations are high, diminishing the space and time for a woman to maintain a connection with her inner self. Other sculptures show a mutilated body of a woman on leg stands, a female headed body of a deer that brings in mind the myth of the sacrifice of Iphigenia, or a sculpture of a goat with female breasts placed away from its body, a

metaphor of the woman who ‘sprints’ throughout her life due to all her increasing responsibilities.

The choice of the space was particularly significant as Lemos saw in it the neglect and pain that her sculptures also conveyed. The school offered a stark and disturbing contrast of how life starts full of dreams and expectations and what the reality might later bring. Closed for almost thirty years, the artist found it exactly as it was on its last day of operation, with all its desks, books, maps, and files. So she left it intact as a dramatic stage for her haunting female-animal sculptures, each expressing the distortions of the psyche due to pain and abuse and displayed on its own in one of the rooms of the high school. On the desks of the classrooms the visitor could find the latest newspapers’ articles with news about unjust and violent behaviour against women from all over the world. As a contrast to this ghostly environment one could hear, from the sound installation, the sounds of children laughing, singing and reading fairy tales, bringing to life some of the school’s past glory.

Epilogue

Art, in all its different forms, can be a powerful tool in raising awareness of social issues and injustices. A thought provoking work can change a person’s perception and it can have a great impact on his/her views. An image can sometimes have such a power so as to affect people profoundly and bring them together in a deeper and more meaningful sense than a new law or a new policy. Understanding this, artists of the 20th and 21st century have long used their practice in order to communicate ideas about issues of identity, gender politics, racism, abuse and disrespect of human rights. Who has not felt pain and anguish in front of Pablo Picasso’s famous work *Guernica*, inspired by the bombing of the Basque town during the Spanish Civil War?

Over the last decade, sculptor and installation artist Kalliopi Lemos has created works that draw extensively on themes such as undocumented migration, human suffering and a person’s journey through life. Central concern in her art is the upholding of human dignity and, with that in mind, she often explores cases of mistreatment, inequality and disregard of human respect. With her projects, Lemos aims at engaging the viewer with such issues and re-evaluating his/her understanding of the world. Through works of art that aim to communicate the desperation, hardships and violence many people endure today, Lemos creates explicit images of suffering and pain. The viewers of her exhibitions are thus confronted with the harsh realities of our world and hopefully, empathise

and realize their obligation to protect the rights of both themselves and those of less fortunate human beings. More importantly the artist attempts to awaken the common feeling of humanity and the spiritual quality within all people so that, in spite of the pervasive chaos we are living through, there is beauty and harmony to be rescued and installed back in our lives, and inspire people to imagine a better world.