Who cares for you?

The notion of a ‘world drawing’ is double-bound. To begin with it seems to suggest the primary-coloured poetics of children’s drawings: little people of many races holding hands across blue oceans and green continents. But as you ponder it a little longer, it resonates with the hegemonic violence of international conflict: geographically identified demarcations and front lines splitting up families and populations, pitting armies and ideologies against each other. This ominous world drawing is constituted by the Green Line of Nicosia or the frontier of the same name dividing wartime Beirut; red lines not to be crossed, and lines ‘drawn in the sand’ by global superpowers against so-called rogue states.

Similarly, Konstantia Sofokleous’s two experimental animations for the Cypriot pavilion at the 2005 Venice Biennale makes significations oscillate between the homely and the uncanny, and between representations of violence and recognition. By connecting the immediate and uncoded idioms of the fairy tale, the nursery rhyme and animation, her work creates a flickering intensity in which an embodied and gendered subjectivity is prepared to share his or her predicaments and perceptions on a planetary scale.

Popular Children’s Poem is Sofokleous’s free interpretation of a popular Greek children’s rhyme that is passed on from generation to generation, and a favourite poem from the artist’s childhood. In it, a girl–in Sofokleous’s version rendered in coloured oil pastels on celluloid–wonders what to do when her doll’s eyes are pecked out by a parrot. The girl asks her grandmother to buy her another one, to make her ‘grief and dizziness’ go away. Another version of the rhyme has it that after the parrot’s assault on the doll, the girl declares that she will go to the doctor to have the eyes put back on. Sofokleous includes both versions in *Popular Children’s Poem*, which becomes a ‘re-enactment’ of childhood memories hinting at hidden autobiographical meaning through the artist’s use of objects and characters from her childhood, such as the animation’s Lego House and Sewing Machine. It was long a staple of critical theory that a scared reader or viewer cannot be a thinking one; you had to keep your mind clear and cool in order to be able to analyse the determining superstructures. But in Sofokleous’s rough animations, what is scary and dizzying moves the mind of her viewer and engages social themes.

This is also true of her animation *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland,* based on Lewis Carroll’s classic fairy tale. His book – and its sequel, *Through the Looking-Glass*–are densely woven texts that employ satire, a surreal cast of fantasy figures and humanised animals in fast-paced narratives straddling absurdity and existential poignancy. They have influenced pillars of the modernist canon such as Joyce and Nabokov, who

borrowed themes and linguistic dynamics from Carroll. Less elitist are the ways in which puns and neologisms from *Alice* have become proverbial–and the way she became a sign of psychedelic initiation in the 1960s. In the song *White Rabbit* (1967) the acid rockers Jefferson Airplane interpreted Alice's adventures as a showdown with logic and proportion, a promise of trippy transformation. They sang, *One pill makes you larger / And one pill makes you small / And the ones that mother gives you don't do anything at all / Go ask Alice when she's ten feet tall*. The literary viability of Alice's adventures recurs with a vengeance in Stephen King's post-modern horror story *The Shining*. Here it makes for a subtext of shock that King reached through "a round black hole' that leads 'deep down in yourself in a place where nothing comes through". [1]

Recently the theorists Brian Holmes and Suely Rolnik have quoted the phantasmagorical charge of Alice's adventures as a "poetical-political laboratory" for the creation of "self and world". In this, going through the looking glass does not translate as an encounter with the unconscious, but a political qualification for "an unusual voyage through the world of subjectivity":

> From the outset we can perceive that things have grown somewhat more complex. For certain subjectivities, the process of formation and deformation of figures seems more fluid. Cultural creators, whatever the contexts in which they work, tend to be particularly capable of bearing up to the dizzying destabilization provoked by an unaccustomed relation of forces. (…) When a fold forms and a world is born, not only a subjective profile is sketched, but also a cultural one, inseparably. There is no subjectivity without a cultural cartography to guide it; and reciprocally, there is no culture without a determinate mode of subjectivization that functions according to its profile. [2]

For Holmes and Rolnik, this describes a breakthrough of artistic thinking to agency in the social space, where art can play a role in connecting selves and ideas and create patterns of collective intention.

The creation of new worlds through a cut into otherness is also what underlies Sofokleous's adaptation of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* [3]*.* Moving away from the twee and dreamy aspects of the fairy tale, she emphasises in her animation–which, with its duration of 32 seconds, is faster than a punk song–the manic strain of the original narrative: its latent violence, its instability and speed. The animation is visualised with images, symbols and text, and maintains language as a central concern to Carroll's fairy-tale. In split-second transitions between key elements from each chapter, the viewer is able to follow the progress of the story at a break-neck speed: from the White Rabbit's watch to a hall with a "little three-legged table", to a tear Alice cries and so on.

1/ David Punter and Glennis Byron: *The Gothic*, p. 249. Blackwell Publishing, Oxford 2004.

2/ Brian Holmes and Suely Rolnik: "Or Through the Looking-Glass: Intermingling subjectivities and the possibility of public life", in *Cat, Microwave, Tinfoil*, ed. Lars Bang Larsen and Lars Mathisen, p. 67. Pork Salad Press and Revolver Verlag, Copenhagen and Frankfurt a.M. 2004.

3/ In my text I refer to the Wordsworth Classic edition of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, annotated and with an introduction by Michael Irwin. Ware, 2001.

Some of the motifs Sofokleous has selected are more idiosyncratic. For example, the orange marmalade that Alice tastes during her lengthy fall through the hole becomes an orange dot in a black tunnel, and the smile of the Cheshire cat is simply a happy curve between a couple of dimples. Her drawing for chapter three is a downwards spiral: chapter three is “A Caucus-Race and a Long Tale” in which Alice and the animals engage in a chaotic race with no beginning and no finishing line, and in which the mouse tells its sad story–in the book rendered typographically in the form of a mouse’s tail. So which event or motif in the chapter has motivated Sofokleous’s use of the spiral: the speed of the racing animals? The shape of the race-course, ‘a sort of circle’? The long and sad tale/tail of the mouse? Maybe it is simply what the Dodo says about the race-course–”the exact shape doesn’t matter”; that the exact identity of the spiral doesn’t matter.

What is more, Sofokleous prefers text, abstractions (for example, wavy lines for the sea of Alice’s tears) and signs (such as spades, clubs, hearts and diamonds) rather than depicting Carroll’s famous animals or characters. Alice herself only appears at the end, drawn on a blackboard in white chalk (revealing that the text we have been reading, written in white on black, is Alice’s words). Apart from that, Sofokleous gives us nothing but a busy bee, a generic outline of the caterpillar, the behind of pig trotting away, a rudimentary depiction of a hedgehog and three sightings of Bill the lizard. There is no White Rabbit (only his watch), no Mad Hatter, Pigeon, Mock Turtle, Gryphon or King and Queen of Hearts–only their words, written on white paper in black pencil. Images and characters are rendered in fast, graphic lines standing clearly and isolated on the white background as so many hectic fragments. Text written in big size indicates when Alice is big, small-size text when she is small.

In our dreams, long and complex narratives are often condensed in sequences that in awaken time make for no more than seconds. Sofokleous’s Alice goes on–and then goes out, as in her vision of impending death, induced by her shrinking:

> *‘for it might end, you know,’ said Alice, ‘in my going out altogether, like a candle. I wonder what I should be like then?’ and she tried to fancy what the flame of a candle is like after it is blown out, for she could not remember ever having seen such a thing.* [4]

But Sofokleous’s adaptation doesn’t really come across as a meditation on death. The animation’s rapid onslaught of text and image is too raw and vital for that. Similarly, her Alice-on-speed can only be considered a caricature of readings that Carroll’s tale is a lamentation of the brevity of childhood and loss of innocence. Instead, this Alice is the unafraid, indignant, questioning, lizard-kicking, ‘stuff and

4/ Ibid., p. 42.

nonsense!' Alice who bravely engages with her surroundings by choosing to deal with her transformations and tribulations.

In the animation Alice lingers in a fleeting negative for a few seconds right before the end–just long enough for the viewer to invest in the idea of who Alice might be–before the appearance of the final lines "who cares for you?" [5]. In this way, Alice's protest in the book against being sentenced to death without trial by the King and Queen becomes an interpellation to the viewer concerning his or her personal relations. It is really over to us: who cares for you? what is your place? Questions to be resolved in the viewer's own time and space. The inner drama of Victorian Alice becomes centrifugal and externalised, converging in the now in one's body, place and linguistic being. As Judith Butler writes,

> Language sustains the body not by bringing it into being or feeding it in a literal way; rather, it is by being interpellated within the terms of language that a certain social existence of the body first becomes possible (…) One "exists" not only by virtue of being recognized, but, in a prior sense, by being *recognizable*. The terms that facilitate recognition are themselves conventional, the effects and instruments of social ritual that decide, often through exclusion and violence, the linguistic conditions of survivable subjects. [6]

Through an artwork so short and so intense, quoting the conventional genre of the fairy tale and produced in the highly readable medium of animation, a thrust of desire towards the Other is produced that resonates with Alice's struggle for 'recognisability' –her problems with finding her right size, her preoccupation with asking the right questions and being seen for what she really is. Indeed, the rapid pace of the animation enhances its performativity as a speech-act: it does what it says literally in the moment of that saying–and when that moment of focus and conflation of language/body/place is over, we are moved to consider our own social existence, beyond Sofokleous's Alice. It isn't a quest for individuation but one for love, or put differently: for trans-subjectivity, for going beyond oneself as the potential one has as a single individual. As Alice tells the caterpillar, "I can't explain *myself*, I'm afraid, Sir," said Alice, "because I'm not myself, you see." [7]. Who other than those who care for you can explain who you are?

Both *Popular Children's Poem* and *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* deal with the volatility or vulnerability of a given order, and engage us in their narratives in the elementary, visceral way that the words and images of nursery rhymes and fairy tales resonate within our self and the way we are situated in the world–through laughter, fear, excitement or grief. Loss awaits compensation and orientation is to be restored, through the repair of the doll's eyes or through the *Alice* viewer's meditation on, or search for, who cares for us.

5/ The full sentence in the original reads: "Who cares for you?" said Alice, (she had grown to her full size by this time.) "You are nothing but a pack of cards!" Ibid., p. 141.

6/ Judith Butler: Excitable Speech. A Politics of the Performative, p. 5. Routledge, London 1997.

7/ Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, p. 70.