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# Marina Xenofontos in conversation with Linnéa Bake

An otherworldly humanoid figure is looking at herself in the mirror surface of the table she is seated at. Marina Xenofontos' elegant yet strangely disproportionate narcissus seems as if caught in the moment of reconciling an ideal of the self with reality, maybe; or, an already lost future with its fragmented past. The mannequin, smoothly carved and assembled from CNC-cut parts, reveals material frictions and inaccuracies, evoking a sense of glitch and error emblematic of Xenofontos' approach to storytelling through material process and presence. In a deliberately non-seamless gesture of moving between analogue and digital realms, the Cypriot-born artist works with media ranging from found objects to kinetic sculptures; from installations employing the ephemeral effects of natural light to manifestations in painting, writing or film. Having recently been awarded the 2022 Camden Art Centre Emerging Artist Prize at Frieze London, Xenofontos continues to impress with her formally varying yet unequivocally compelling way of reframing larger culturally, geographically or ideologically determined versions of history through personal narrative. Curator and writer Linnéa Bake met with Marina Xenofontos at her studio in Athens to discuss narrative layers and temporal loops in Xenofontos' research, her artistic take on historiography as a space for the subjective recovery and retranslation of (others') memories, and her interest in archives and their unlikely protagonists: from 1980s conspiracy theorists to discarded dinosaurs.

Linnéa Bake: *But we've met before* was the title of the first exhibition of yours that I saw, and indeed I have this slightly disorienting sense of déjà vu when it comes to experiencing your work. In that exhibition, which took place at Hot Wheels Athens in 2020, the works on view seemed less connected on a formal level – ranging from kinetic sculptures, objects cast in bronze and paintings to a larger-than-life humanoid figure “carved” out of MDF –, but rather in their shared character of evoking an undefined sentimental feeling. You've once compared the process of putting together an exhibition to the gesture of activating a “poetic loop”. In relation to this idea of the loop, can you talk a bit about your artistic approach?

**Marina Xenofontos:** I set about with an interest in materials, symbols, and elements that are not necessarily connected on a formal level, but are rather entangled by ties in history and politics. These may be found objects that I reform or modify to glean new meaning, or further concentrate the associations inherent in them. I often find myself attracted to elements that could be considered malfunctions from the manufacturing of production, which I then document and exhibit. As these malfunctions crop up in my own practice, I like to fold them in as well, affirming them as a breeding ground for further invention.

LB: Your work is very personal, autobiographical at times – in this context I am interested in your relationship to objects and memorabilia, and whether you would say it is a nostalgic one. In your recent exhibition at Akwa Ibom in Athens you presented curtains, which you made at different points of your life; including in the works' captions a detailed account of times, places, types of fabric, and even information on where the fabric was bought. It is as if you make yourself the object of a meticulous process of documentation, and it makes me wonder what this process means for you in terms of detachment? In that gesture of removing yourself from the autobiographically infused narrative, do you become like an external narrator of those stories, as if they were a fiction?

**MX:** The meticulous documentation was something I would do as a way of recording, and then in the process of exhibition-making a decision was made with the curator Maya Tounta to present the photos and all the information I would collect for myself as a sort of archive. I've had an interest

in sculpting and creating a certain atmosphere through it in my practice, and this investment has roots in the curtains. I started making them as a child and have made them for every space I've lived in. So, when we decided to collect them in the exhibition, to create a new installation in Akwa Ibom's space, it also made sense to show how they existed in all their previous homes. Recalling these memories is not me being nostalgic, I am not nostalgic at all. Rather I see it as a grounding of sorts, an intention to narrate a process.

LB: Some of the objects you are drawn to seem to tell the stories of other generations, speak to their desires and disappointed dreams. I'm thinking among others about the kinetic dinosaur you “excavated” from the Municipal Gardens in Limassol, left behind since the late 1980s as a remnant of an attempt to create a Jurassic Park-themed type of amusement park. You were born in Cyprus, but in the last years, your education and career have taken you to Amsterdam, New York, Paris, and now Athens. How does that sense of detachment I spoke about earlier determine your relationship to Cyprus, its locally specific history and narratives, which all the while seem very present in your work?

**MX:** Growing up in Cyprus there's a very heavy sense of history recorded and etched out in the environment; fragments of war and rapid development for example. Growing up, I observed my father and his generation always wanted to remove or destroy anything deemed as old, or from the past. As if they wanted to forget it. I find myself resisting this urge, trying to recover these memories and symbols through my work. I feel the drive for newness can also become a loop that pulls you further in the past. So even though I live abroad, which inherently brings with it a sort of detachment, I can't see myself as ever being totally separated from that space mentally.

LB: In relation to what you describe as the recovery of memories, I have an ongoing curiosity about your project on Christophoros Kyriakides, a Cypriot architecture draughtsman and self-declared inventor born in 1949, whose archive you uncovered after encountering the board game “Six Continents Stars Compass” that he self-published in 1988. Kyriakides filled pages with mathematical diagrams, drawings of space shuttles, journal entries, anagrammatic poetry, maps, and his ongoing effort to





get a visa to enter the US, documented in various letters directed to the embassy, or Ronald Reagan himself. The dense material you found in Kyriakides' notes and drawings, which you have presented in exhibitions and published in the publication *We are not alone – We are a fly in the milk of infinity* (2016), is heavily infused with a sense of conspiracy in relation to local Cypriot as well as world politics – as Antreas Panagides writes: "in the world of Christopher Kyriakides all lies lead to the truth!" How do you situate yourself in relation to this material you uncovered, and would you say you were taking on a curatorial approach towards this archive?

**MX:** With Kyriakides' board game, I could sense an appeal to the rules and instructions inherent in these kinds of games, and the ways they may break down or be disrupted, which I found mirrored in my investments as well. When I initially uncovered the work, I was attracted to his methodology of recording, the obsessive note taking, the diagrams, the photocopies on photocopies. He has a way of merging all his ideas, his concerns and theories into these otherworldly forms. The material brought up questions of an alternative local history, and the American Dream as imagined from Cyprus. All the theorising created this sense of an absurdly individuated position that really stood against the highly didactic versions of taught history. There was a freedom in the work that you rarely uncover, both in form and content.

LB: The idea of the game, and chance, played an important role in your encounter with Kyriakides – now you are working on a video game, whose main character is an avatar you've been working on in both digital and physical, sculptural forms for some years now. The gesture of moving between analogue and digital versions of the same avatar, and retranslating its compelling sculptural presence into other, virtual realms is really interesting to me. The character's name, *Twice*, seems to speak to this transgression and to introduce a temporal layer in the work, which I would be interested in hearing more about from you. It takes me back to the initially described feeling of having been here before.

**MX:** When an image or material moves from digital to analogue, or the other way around, it creates the possibility of its infinite reproduction or reanimation, which suggests a sort of timelessness. But in the process inaccuracies always arise, slip-ups, cracks, and defects that complicate it, and transgress the object's immutability. So there's a sense of returning to the work, but it can never truly be the same.

LB: As in some of your previous works, the video game will play with the idea of multiple possible outcomes; like encountering a fork in the road, or tracing down the different branches of a tree diagram. Can you share a bit about the process of collaboratively writing the script, and the ongoing development of the main character *Twice*?

**MX:** When first creating *Twice*, I wanted to make a video game about a girl that repeatedly failed to complete every task asked of her, eventually leading to a sort of breakdown. As I was rendering the character on Blender, I drafted monologues out of borrowed poetry books, translated folklore songs. She became a sort of symbol for that state of suspension in a time before understanding. Then the process of making the video game halted momentarily, as I shifted into making a video with *Twice*, and at the same time started

creating the physical mannequins. In the past year, I began reworking the script for the video game with Aristotelis Nikolas Mochloulis. We experimented with a choose-your-own-adventure style of writing, plotting out various arches that would inevitably either loop back to the beginning or end in failure: restart game.

Opening spread: Marina Xenofontos, Screenshots from mocap footage during the making of *Twice Upon a While*, 2023. Edited by Stefanos Chrysanthou; Previous page: Marina Xenofontos, *Twice Upon a While*, 2020, MDF wood, metal, mirror, 154 x 140 x 206 cm, 2020. Photo by Adriana Glaviano; Opposite: Marina Xenofontos, *Twice upon a while*, 3d animation single channel video projection, 3:14 min, 2018.

