

# Meta-Media and the Multiple Presence:

Beyond the Between in the Works

of Marianna Christofides and Elizabeth Hoak-Doering

MARCIA BRENNAN

Viewed together at the Cyprus Pavilion at the 54th Venice Biennale (2011), the artworks of Marianna Christofides and Elizabeth Hoak-Doering form a unique constellation of presences and possibilities. How does matter coalesce and how do the stars align in the intricate play of images and items, thoughts and things, which collectively form, inform and unform their artworks? In their installations, Christofides and Hoak-Doering work within and beyond the medium and the middle to present impossible possibilities in which the present moment is constituted as multiple. Curator Yiannis Toumazis provides suggestive insight into the creative workings of this alternative microcosm, which is situated amidst the bustle of Venice's festive, seasonal atmosphere. As Toumazis observes, "the pavilion creates a passage, a dark and tacit space illuminated only by the artworks, *les ombres portées*."<sup>1</sup>

Thus in this quiet, ephemeral arena of projected shadows and etheric portals, which appears in the sixteenth-century Palazzo Malipiero in Venice's San Samuele Square, viewers enter a singular space where familiar conceptual categories, their corresponding material forms, and their accompanying taxonomic structures are re-presented in order to challenge existing systems of order. The Cyprus Pavilion thus showcases the curation of epistemologies as much as it does works of contemporary art. In the gallery's dark, illuminated passages, the works can be viewed metaphorically as mobile stairs leading viewers beyond familiar boundaries, just as each piece can be approached as a graded step – or "gress" – into the heart of a thoughtful transgression.

## Drawing Blank: Duplicates and Duplicities – Marianna Christofides

How exactly do the artists create such purposeful (dis)continuities in the floating spaces of this transitional, transgressive domain? Notably, a transgression can be seen as a step beyond a step. While the term implies a violation – with a clear sense of being out of bounds – the word also conveys a highly compelling sense of stepping beyond familiar boundaries and exceeding established limits.<sup>2</sup> Viewed in this shifting light, transgressions can – and do – take multiple forms, especially when they are placed in the dark, illuminated passages of *les ombres portées*, in the open portals of open questions that form a breach into expansiveness.

In the Cyprus Pavilion, Christofides' installation *Blank Mappings* (2010-11) can be seen as just such a breach and just such a portal, as this composite work embodies the creative transgressions of the multiple presence. In *Blank Mappings*, the artist's constructed formations appear at once as non-formations and in-formations, as intricate

<sup>1</sup> Yiannis Toumazis, in email correspondence with the author, March 3, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> See the entries on "transgress" and "transgression" in *Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: Merriam, 1969), p. 940.

white relief maps display the reciprocal possibilities of presence and absence embedded in the subtle topographies of convex solids and concave voids. The work consists of three laser-engraved prints of the Old Town of Nicosia, the capital city of Cyprus, which is currently divided into northern Turkish Cypriot and southern Greek Cypriot regions. Christofides juxtaposes an aerial view of Nicosia with two variations of the town plan, which feature alternative views from the north and the south. This complex terrain is further accentuated by the existence of solid white surfaces on the maps, ambiguous regions that the artist describes as “a mapped blank which manifests an exposed mastery and harnessing of space. A charted record of absence and negation.”<sup>3</sup> Thus in *Blank Mappings*, Christofides presents the ghost impressions of an antique city that lives in the present moment, a divided yet unified space that is conjured through diaphanous veils of overlaid meanings that make a mark while drawing a blank.

By posing the open question of whether the white areas constitute spaces of conjunctive overlap or disjunctive division, Christofides creates a multiple presence, an ambiguous domain that sustains mutually complementary *and* contrasting associations of integration and fragmentation, plenitude and erasure. In their meaningful indeterminacy, the artist’s modified geographies produce a paradoxical landscape in which seemingly oppositional subjects cohabit on the unified surface of the work. Extending these associations formally and thematically, the series of prints is placed sequentially on backlit worktables, where the gaps and edges between the individual sheets are deliberately left showing, thus forming a compositional arrangement that mirrors the symbolic content of the piece. That is, the worktables provide the underpinning illumination that makes visible the maps’ varied and fragmented surfaces, while at the same time forming a single base that lights a common ground.

Such themes of doublings and duplicities, of reflected oppositions and reciprocal displacements, recur throughout Christofides’ works. In her composite configurations of visual culture, the artist presents and re-presents collected fragments that both form and frame the ephemeral history of this multiple presence. Thus *Stereoscapes* (2011) are dialogical multimedia installations that feature apparently identical images that the artist has collected over time from various parts of the world. While initially the photographic prints seem to derive from an identical negative, closer observation reveals their significant differences. *Stereoscapes #1* presents the juxtaposition of two almost identical, magic lantern glass slides with two laser-engraved text panels placed on electroluminescent sheets, while *Stereoscapes #2* is a 2-channel video with sound showing a nighttime landscape. Viewed together, the *Stereoscapes* present multiple plays of identity and identification, of similarity and difference, which appear to meet one another’s gaze in deceptively reflective surfaces. *Flyaway Inlays* (2011) engages similar themes, as the artist displays an atlas page featuring, among others, a British map of Cyprus, circa 1914, and maps of unrelated locations, including Jerusalem, Hong Kong, Aden, the Siberian Islands, Beijing, and India. The display is flanked by a series of mounted postcards of the same period as the map, depicting these locations. Interweaving these disconnected connections, *Flyaway Inlays* places the aerial and terrestrial planes into an unstable, ongoing conversation that unfolds on multiple planes of similarity and difference, just as the illuminated museum display case houses the shifting coordinates and eclectic historical landscapes that form altered, readymade geographies.

## A Ghost of a Chance: Mechanical Signatures and Spectral Histories – Elizabeth Hoak-Doering

While Christofides’ installations productively destabilize composite border zones to engender new configurations of possibilities, Hoak-Doering’s kinetic arrangements of floating furniture couple familiar presences from the domestic landscape with modern sensor technology that traces the transgression. In her installations, Hoak-Doering pairs unseen motion detectors with traditional household items that she has fitted with attached motors

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3 Per the artist’s description of the installation on her website, at <http://www.mariannachristofides.com/index.php?/2010/blank-mappings/>.

and prosthetic drawing styluses. In so doing, her installations draw on the material solidity of the visible world to map and measure a typically unseen, intangible, and intrinsically relational domain—namely, the realm of dynamic energy, in motion, over time.

When Hoak-Doering first displayed these works in the exhibition *things, witnesses!* at the Nicosia Municipal Arts Centre (2009), she commented on the vision underpinning her installation:

“The objects were borrowed from people living on both sides of the divided city of Nicosia – objects as diverse as a metal bed frame, an architect’s stool, a hat rack, and a kitchen table – but all at least thirty years old. The personal stories about the objects became a sound installation that is intended to make a distinction between the human story, and the object’s own. Viewers trigger hidden motion detectors as they circulate in the exhibition, and these activate appropriated motors. This passive interaction with viewers over the course of days produces drawings unique to each object, and also sounds, both of which were later exhibited separately”.

Thus in this complex multimedia installation, the artist “uses objects as witnesses to the layered and implicitly politicized stories common in Cyprus.”<sup>4</sup>

Like Christofides, Hoak-Doering creates richly composite perspectives that interweave seemingly oppositional conceptions of subjectivity and objectivity, while incorporating multiple viewpoints into the unified space of the artwork to present history as multiple. Reflecting the inherently experiential character of interactive art, Hoak-Doering’s works raise open-ended questions regarding the ways in which objects can serve as “material witnesses” to human histories. When placed together in the galleries of the Cyprus Pavilion, Hoak-Doering’s pieces imaginatively furnish the floating world of *les ombres portées*, as selective illumination spotlights the suspended objects while projecting their shadows onto the background walls. Toumazis’ curatorial approach thus evokes Platonic associations of caves and shadows as it creates a second, parallel world that both corresponds to, and suggestively departs from, familiar conceptions of everyday reality.

Still (and unstill), there is more. While the motion sensors detect multiple encounters between human bodies and the spaces they inhabit, the ghost of the machine maps the traces of these chance movements into the visual records of the furniture drawings. These intricate linear configurations are generated by a mechanical stylus, and they appear as sketches on sheets of Mylar that are placed on the floor. The sheets are replaced at regular intervals and subsequently labelled so as to identify their object-creator, along with the date and time-span of the work. Paradoxically, when the furniture drawing is completed, the human hand documents the mechanical signature of the artwork.

As this suggests, the furniture drawings both instantiate and reflect richly composite presences of bodies and machines. Yet still (and unstill), there is more. The image of a sensitive mechanical instrument with a drawing needle poised above blank Mylar that records wavy outlines and irregular patterns calls to mind a host of modern technological devices. They include the EEG (electroencephalogram) scans of brainwaves, the ECG (electrocardiograph) lines of the heart monitor, the polygraph chart of the lie detector, and the pen of a seismograph that measures the shifting tremors of the earth’s surface. While distinctive in their functionality, each of these devices produces a visible record of an otherwise invisible realm that reveals the electrical impulses of the brain,

4 Per the artist’s description of the installation on her website, at <http://ehdoering.com/works-things.php>. For a discussion of the thematic resonances of Hoak-Doering’s suspended furniture and the works of the modernist artists Marcel Duchamp and Jean Tinguely, see Yiannis Toumazis, “Scribes of Time and Space,” an essay that accompanied an exhibition of Hoak-Doering’s drawings at the Pharos Centre for Contemporary Art, 2009. A copy of this essay can be found on the artist’s website.

the rhythmic beats of the heart, the verbalized telling of a truth (or a lie), and the unstable ground beneath one's feet. Incorporating these associations, the abstract, epiphenomenal designs of the furniture drawings represent existential and aesthetic embodiments of the multiple presence. In the ungrounded ground that restructures the familiar horizontal and vertical axes of walls, floors, and ceilings, the ghosts of chance movements become suspended in the multiple tensions and multiple tenses of our dynamic historical present.

### Beginnings and Ends: Androgynous Sequences and Alternative Edens

As this heading suggests, Hoak-Doering's and Christofides' works pivot on a complex play of reversible associations in which multiple – seemingly oppositional – subjects become incorporated into the unified structures of their artworks. By constructing such impossible possibilities in transgressive zones that are located beyond and between the middle of things (meta-media), Christofides' and Hoak-Doering's works can be seen as provocatively androgynous constructions. Fluidly conjoining 'masculine' and 'feminine' qualities into a single composite entity, the androgyne is itself a notably transgressive figure that transcends familiar categorical boundaries by incorporating its opposite into itself.<sup>5</sup>

Viewed in this light – once again, in the shifting light of *les ombres portées* – both beginnings and ends can be seen at once as curatorial and androgynous concepts. In various ways the pavilion ends where it began, with the convergence of the two artists' works in a single gallery. In the final room, a piece of Hoak-Doering's floating furniture appears alongside Christofides' *Sequence* (2011), an installation consisting of three frames of photographic images on a laser-engraved mount. Collected by the artist, the images depict the prostitutes of Yoshiwara, Japan, circa 1912. Perhaps the best known of the historical photographs of Tokyo's red light district, they show courtesans sitting behind latticed grids of wooden windows, cage-like structures that call to mind prisoners behind bars and creatures on display as much as they do alluring arrangements of feminine presence. Due to political pressures, such brothel display practices became prohibited in 1916, only a few years after the photographs were taken. With their complex compositional formats and difficult subject matter, this charged corpus of visual culture is situated in a transgressive zone where the possibilities of sensual desire meet the dehumanizing effects of human commodification.

Complementing Christofides' *Sequence* is Hoak-Doering's *hat rack* (2009), a suspended piece of 'feminine' furniture. Conjoining oppositional associations, the hat rack appears to be 'head over heels', thereby connecting *and* reversing familiar conceptions of tops and bottoms. That is, the heavy wooden hat rack is both physically and conceptually inverted, as the item is presented floating on its head with the tilted base of its underside exposed to the sky. In this overturned position the object appears to be drawing, as though a strand of thought runs directly from the reflective oval face of the hat rack's mirror through the stylus that touches the sheet on the floor.

Through such polyvalent performances, Hoak-Doering's and Christofides' installations resonate broadly with themes that thread through contemporary artistic practice, including the subjects of world picturing, temporal and spatial heterogeneity, place making and unmaking, the contingent connections that unite subjects and objects, and the ways in which the present potentially encompasses multiple pasts, composite histories, and a range of emergent presences.<sup>6</sup> Yet at the same time, their works can also be seen as reflecting a vision of contemporary Cyprus as itself a complex, internally divided and unified location, a post-colonial domain filled and emptied

5 Regarding the figure of the androgyne in modernist aesthetics in general, and in Duchamp's oeuvre in particular, see Marcia Brennan, *Curating Consciousness: Mysticism and the Modern Museum* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), esp. pp. 33-40, 66-87.

6 For a thorough and insightful discussion of the field of contemporary artistic practice, see Terry Smith, "The State of Art History: Contemporary Art," *The Art Bulletin* XCII (December 2010), pp. 366-83.

with multiple associations of living historical presences and absences, of differences and commonalities, overlaps and disjunctions. Assembled together in the Cyprus Pavilion, their installations can be seen as constellations of suspended, floating possibilities, as the open domain of *les ombres portées* houses dark, illuminated passages where glowing shadow play lights the transgressive sparks of the multiple presence.