



Gliding into Other Realms of Form and Space While Dissolving Distance into Language

On the work of Athanasios Argianas
on the occasion of the exhibition *An Ear of Arms (around you)*

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Athanasios Argianas has spent a significant amount of the last fifteen years in water, swimming. A good habit, but among other things, also a practice useful for listening to what surrounds us and finding a sensitive stance, one that leads us to observe things from the right distance, so they might be ‘sensed’ as far away – therefore closer – and thus distilled. So as to rethink and translate an image into the right language. To render it in the form of a vision, to make it emerge in the very essence of time, of the existent and of existence.

Unlike Athanasios, I am no natural swimmer, but I tune in to his gaze and, as if by reflex, I can almost perceive that visual rhythm and that changing sonority of the ‘outside’ world, typical of being underwater: an elusive sonority that expands and contracts like breathing, like the beating of wings. And so I attempt to capture his horizon, aligning with his wandering gesture and caressing the forms, *these forms*, with words.

“I think what my works always do is they kind of tend to tilt each other, and I think they interact in that way [...]. What links things together are parts of structure, elementary vocabulary and intuition methods. The work is meant to be reflexive and open to interpretation as well.”¹ Sequencing material manifestations of information, perceptions, sensitivities, affections, ideologies and letting them flow in the studio in Athens (initially) and in the exhibition space in Milan (later), in a constellation of interactions between sculptural bodies: a rhythm of free connections in a state of change, of altering frequencies and tonalities. Observation time thus becomes one of suspension and recovery. It becomes a space where the image is a rhythmic stopping point that turns into language.

Like punctuation with the canonical emotional-intonational, distancing and syntactic functions, *An Ear of Arms (around you)* comprises a corpus of sculptures that Athanasios devised and produced specifically for this project, structural models made up of various linguistic signs that together form a thorough yet essential grammar, one that stimulates a new period, a *new beginning* each time. The moment of the exhibition thus triggers a kind of symphony that generates germinative connections between the individual works and the air, the space around them. Inspired by references that partly latch onto the natural element and illustrations in the physical sphere, the works on display are pervaded – as much in their form as in their ‘stance’ – by continuous lines, chasing one another in a decidedly asymmetrical pattern, traversed by a sort of vital and energetic flow that the artist orchestrates with an eye influenced by the expressive and decorative relevance typical of Art Nouveau. As Athanasios specifies: “My interest in pre-modern design comes from an idea of Art Nouveau and Art Deco as a potential movement of modernism without reduction; a formalism that embraces ornament and emotion, before the linear introduction of ‘pure’ form.”² Intellectual and sentimental honesty towards a style that in the artist’s practice is found in a genuinely processual approach, never pushed beyond its regular rhythm and a far cry from passing fads. A proceeding that does “not count or accumulate works and actions, but weighs them up and makes them think”³ in a subtle and profound time.

May sentences be structured on bodies and like bodies. And thus writing no longer describes the image but becomes the image itself: “taken aback / away, and given away.” A subtle and nuanced wordplay for you the viewer, for all of you. A jolt, a gift, a revelation that unravels and tilts its textual content within segments that give expression to *Song Machine (taken aback / away, and*

given away) (2022): a copper and aluminium ear made up of folded arms that touch each other in every direction until they embark on an open and shared embrace – an intimate entanglement, a freestyle stroke. The ear not only symbolically acts as a backdrop to an emotional feeling⁴ but becomes accomplice to a more inclusive gesture: one embraces and listens to a vision, a thought, an idea, a dream. It is an empathic listening process which links us collectively and individually, in the urge to adopt a gesture of giving and receiving, ever more pressing.

Reminiscent of the public and architectural wrought-iron signage to be seen in the European capitals during the heyday of Art Nouveau, the undulating, serpentine course of this work formally recalls the sinuosity of the forged steel profile of *Lateral Waveforms (series)* (both 2022), where the sculptural reworking of the shape of the *Cichorium intybus* wild grass unfolds as the key ornamental motif, expanding through active and lively curves, amid the adoption of sudden and elegant angles, emphasising the use of the so-called ‘whiplash’ effect typical of the Art Nouveau period. Like an extension of particles that are at the same time waves and molecules oscillating at a given frequency, tassel strings infuse the sculptures with a movement of constant fluctuation between an inside and an outside, in a synchronic and grammatical development where each line becomes “contour and volume, and then stature, with gait and figure”⁵ constantly differing.

“Things are not really linear and repeatable; they are always a complex set of circumstances and coordinates.”⁶ So too in the concatenation of brass ribbons ‘plucked’ and supported in places by casts of Athanasios’ partner’s fingers and hands, each individual loop ensures the tension of the next. Acknowledging itself as “stroke, outline, attitude and position,”⁷ and thus mode and pose, each segment in *Song Machine (an ear of arms)* (2022) marks the volume of space and winds between figuration and abstraction, in a modular modernism of attractions and retractions. “It is a constant play of gravity, the lack of levity metaphorically and literally.”⁸ And while the ‘conflict’ between the edges leaves some of them casually free to rise upwards unnaturally, the hardness of the material does not prevent it from imitating the elasticity typical of a fabric ribbon: the ‘lie’ of the representation that teases the sense of humour, “the infinite flexibility and plasticity of the accent in the reappraisal of a language that has no objective pronunciation.”⁹ Phrases engraved on the brass expand and accentuate the title of the exhibition, with a scoring that touches the most exposed part of the ribbon and leads us to weave around the sculpture, measuring the emotional distance between it and our body. “Only with language you can do something like this plasticity, make it the width of a hair and the length of the wingspan of a plane at the same time.”¹⁰

Going back to his interest in Art Nouveau, Athanasios continues: “There are also very current concerns in this period, in the way it holds nature as a pinnacle, equal to if not larger than humanity, contrasting with the later futuristic obsession with functional form, and the dualism of the manmade world: a techno-lust that leads to today’s Anthropocene problems.”¹¹ It is in this way that *Extinction Harmonics (Turtle Shell x 2,5)* (2022) – brushing past and then intersecting with its components – aligns 3D resin and polyester scans on the wall recalling turtle shells. Here we find the presence of nature, albeit rendered in the form of immaculate contemporary fossils: synthetic skeletons that trace other skeletons, refuge-structures of an absence that has yet to settle inside. The formal restitution follows a wave-like, almost mechanical volume, in potential harmonic proximity between individual bodies.

“These shapes are kind of ghosts, used as modules of architectural structures, abstracted and re/deconstructed as if immaterial; passing ‘through’ themselves, as if fluid, and separated in strips like broken into frequencies.”¹² Borrowing from other forms and species, Athanasios goes on to drive the gaze and gesture towards the exploration of the marine kingdom of the *Pinna Nobilis* or fan mussel – the largest bivalve in the Mediterranean Sea, now on the verge of extinction.¹³ *Extinction Harmonics (Pinna)* is the translation into an aluminium cast of two open shells placed ashore, like two bodies relating for the first time in an unexplored habitat, approaching until they touch and intertwine in a phasing “where akin is not kinship but reaches to dissolve our boundaries.”¹⁴ The shiny inner side – almost mirror-like – the rough outer side, echoing the ‘scaffolding’ function¹⁵ that the shell exerts on the seabed, each mussel fan is a small ecosystem in its own right, a portion of nature redesigned in “the translation that leaves us open and vulnerable, trying to connect our bipedal world to one of other realms.”¹⁶

Continuing in that material, physical and structural coherence and sculptural approach to the concept of time that should precede every artistic gesture, the two bas-reliefs *Clay Pressing no. 11* and *Clay Pressing no. 12* (both 2022) are the expression from thought to form – and vice versa – of a series of tactile visions. Cuneiform tablets, grids, quasi-scrolls of fossil moulds that look like 3D renderings: what remains imprinted on these surfaces is the action of a blind process during which the artist crates a mould and ‘feels’ it haptically, pushing the clay out, building then a negative, to be cast into a positive. An action of the pure recording of a movement that is nothing other than a ‘writing by gesture’ of an ever-changing alphabet, where residues and failures emerge and sink, intersecting with cavities reminiscent of volcanic seabeds from which flows of magma subtly veined with fuchsia emerge in the form of crumbling bougainvillea leaves. Language becomes an all-round material hybrid, a complex body to be moulded with accents and tones, dipping in and out of cognitive thought, like sometimes – only sometimes – being underwater.

[Translation by Ben Bazalgette]

- 1 Athanasios Argianas on the show *Hollowed Water* at Camden Arts Centre, London, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WnZ8g2yGGNo>.
- 2 Email exchange with the author, August 2022.
- 3 Federico Ferrari, *Sub specie aeternitatis. Arte ed etica* (Reggio Emilia: Edizioni Diabasis: 2008), p. 17.
- 4 *In An Ear of Arms (around you)* there is no music. When Athanasios makes use of it in his practice, he defines it as “another level, like a text, a vector of meaning, of codified emotional and affective states.” (Email exchange with the author, August 2022.)
- 5 Jean-Luc Nancy, “Corpi guardati” in *Il corpo dell’arte* (Milan/Udine: Mimesis Edizioni, 2009), p. 38.
- 6 Martin Herbert in conversation with the artist in *Athanasios Argianas: species counterpoint* (Milan: Lenz, 2021), p. 78.
- 7 Jean-Luc Nancy, p. 39.
- 8 Email exchange with the author, September 2022.
- 9 “Time After Time: Athanasios Argianas’ *Hollowed Water* Playlist,” *The Quietus*, 11 April 2020: <https://thequietus.com/articles/28096-athanasios-argianas-camden-arts-centre-hollowed-water-playlist>.
- 10 Martin Herbert in conversation with the artist, p. 76.
- 11 Email exchange with the author, August 2022.
- 12 Email exchange with the author, September 2022.
- 13 According to various studies, the presence of the *Pinna Nobilis* has been hypothesised back as far as the Miocene, some twenty million years ago. In the past, it was largely exploited for the gathering of byssus, a filament produced by adult specimens and used to produce valuable textile fibres.
- 14 Jennifer Kabat, “The music of weight” in *Athanasios Argianas: Species Counterpoint* (Milan: Lenz, 2021), p. 50.
- 15 The shell known as *Pinna Nobilis* provides many other filtering organisms (sponges, crustaceans and sea worms) with an ideal position for feeding.
- 16 Jennifer Kabat, p. 46.