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Off the Beaten Path

Marianna Vecellio

As a TRAPEZIST I jump from one trapeze to another hanging searching for that unknown, & the STRIPPER didn't know that zyx is xyz. While the alchemist changes zyx into xyz, within the context of universal possibility.

Anna Boghiguian

Written in 1973, these few lines bring to an end *Mémoires d'un voyageur* by Anna Boghiguian, which was published in 1995 on the occasion of her solo exhibition at the Espace Karim Francis in Cairo. The catalog contains pencil drawings of her imaginary impressions of the city, with squares and mosques, minarets and shops, streets full of traffic and a swarming labyrinth of cars and people, creating a *comédie humaine* of singular multitudes. The drawings lead us into an exploration of everyday life, in search of the universal potential of the world, like acrobats flying from one trapeze to another, or like alchemists striving for gold.

Boghiguian was 49 in 1995 and had recently returned to Egypt from Canada, where she had been living from the early 1970s to the late 1980s, studying art and music at the Concordia University in Montreal and alternating her work as an artist with frequent travels around Europe, Asia, and America.

Made between 1981 and 1986, *ZYX-XYZ* was Boghiguian's first series of works, consisting of about 400 photocopies taken from her 100-page artist's book of the same title, to which she applied paint, collages and a stamp of a head, and from which more or less recognizable faces and figures emerge. Before then, she had created some abstract works characterized by gestural forms and the use of salvaged supports such as sheets of cardboard and pages from newspapers.¹

In one of her notebooks from that period, with its spirals of acid colors and stamps of heads, we find notes jotted down in pencil and pastels, including the following on the work process:

From 1981 to 1986 was the time it took to complete the work; it was a simple and concrete procedure for changing my life. I found the stamp of the head in Amsterdam. The form of the stamp of the head is very simple, so I tried to break its rigidity by creating an image of the brain [...] The work is in black and white and color. It is necessary both in life and in the metaphysics of life. The various stages are repeated in the inner journey that a human being undertakes in some periods of her life. The song is the product of a journey made to the temple of Apollo [...] The poem derives from a conversation with the Sphinx.²

Like the acronym *ZYX-XYZ*—*z* from *zoe*, the Greek word for “bare life” as opposed to *bios*, *y* for “why,” pointing to the enigma of existence, and *x* standing both for *xerox* (time), and for the symbol of the unknown—the drawings are alchemical codes that accompany the journey of life, exploring

the mystery of existence. Even though it is harmless in its anonymity, the stamp of the head that bursts onto the painted surface, corrupting its specific pictorial quality, constitutes a particular, antagonistic trace: it represents the interruption of a flow of time.

The background, a jumble of signs in a living, viscous territory, is typical of her paintings of those years, which were a stratification of different artistic styles and an accumulation of signs carried out using photocopies, pencil, pastel, gouache, watercolor, acrylic, collage, and writing. The palindrome in the title of the series points to the reversibility of the image and of the references it contains, opening up to a number of diverse, original perspectives. “One nature delights in another. One nature triumphs over another. One nature dominates another,” wrote Bolus of Mendes in his *Physica et Mystica*, a treatise from the first century AD pointing to the alchemical power of painting.

In those early years, Boghiguian’s practice already expressed the key aspects with which she would later deal during the course of her artistic career: the artwork is seen as an open and dynamic entity to be programmatically revisited; like the stamp that rises to the surface, the work bears with it the theme of repetition. Her early series and exhibitions reveal a constant linguistic hybridization that incorporates sculptural elements and found objects. Her works offer a metaphorical interpretation of reality where life becomes an inner but also an outward existential journey, in which humankind has experience in the world and of the world. And time, both permanent and impermanent, unravels in a series of ever-repeating stages, like photocopied pages, always the same and always different.

Boghiguian is a highly cultured artist. Before moving to Montreal, she had studied political science at the American University in Cairo from 1964 to 1969. Located in Tahrir Square, not far from the Egyptian Museum, in a place that would become the theater of the Arab Spring revolution in 2011, the American University was opened in 1919 and soon became a symbol of a Europeanist vision that wallowed in the splendors of a multicultural Egypt that is no more. Boghiguian was born into a family of Armenian origin who in the early twentieth century moved to Cairo, where they opened a clock shop. She attended the Nubarian Armenian School and grew up in Heliopolis, a neighborhood inhabited by foreign minorities, known for the presidential palace and for the buildings put up by the Belgian banker Édouard, Baron Empain, who went to Egypt to oversee the construction of a railway line and then built this district in the desert.

Her feeling of being on the outside and her multiculturalism, her education and the fact of being part of the Armenian culture, helped create a peculiar cultural imprint that has been a distinguishing feature of her artistic and personal life. It has made her sensitive to events on the borderline, to social contradictions and political conflicts, which she observes as a human being and as an artist. It is precisely from the *ZYX-XYZ* series, as well as from her intense traveling around the world, that Boghiguian started building up a map of existence that is not just geographical or political but also one of decadence and wretchedness, of outcasts and unknown crowds, of leprous bodies and desert landscapes, of mountains and temples. It is a search for a sense of the other, embodying an all-encompassing feeling of being part of the world, both human and compassionate.

Heads, Trains, Rivers, and Labyrinths

Picked up one day in a shop in Amsterdam, the stamp of the head that invaded Boghiguian’s notebooks in the early 1980s, contaminating the rigidity of the image, is the entangled expression of a stream of consciousness, of mobility, and of a universal flow that, although at times interrupted by vortices, dizziness and snarls, always represents time—one that may occasionally appear motionless. The entanglement is also the labyrinth of city streets: the “brain,” as Boghiguian calls it, is the map of the city, with its circular alleyways, bottlenecks and flyovers, like those that crisscross Cairo and Alexandria. As the artist writes in *Anna’s Egypt*:

*The life of the alleyways is a universal life, and the basis of existence in all Egypt, like the course of the Nile, which is where the real life of Egypt actually flows, reflecting the culture of the city and its social and economic hardships. Life in the alleyways moves forward like the flowing of the Nile, with past and present mixing with the future. Time is permanent and impermanent, a dimension that is unknown and unclear for most Egyptians of a certain class. The desire for immortality of Ancient Egypt has unwittingly continued in modern Egyptians, and time has become formless.*³

In the 1970s, Boghiguian started traveling continuously. Travel is a metaphor for constant transformation and mutation, for staying and for resisting: it is the journey of Oedipus wandering, singing the song of life—the “song of existential loneliness”—together with Antigone, to whom Boghiguian refers as “Anti-gone,” implying “go-against,” in one of her drawings. Proceeding primarily means staying still within the process.

Many of Anna’s works were made during her travels—or rather they are peculiar to her being a traveler. They are recordings of her experiences and of her time. “Is my theme the instant?,” asks the Ukrainian-Brazilian Clarice Lispector, Boghiguian’s favorite author: “The theme of my life. I try to keep up with it, I divide thousands of times into as many times as the number of instants running by, fragmented as I am and the moments so fragile—my only vow is to life born with time and growing along with it: only in time itself is there room enough for me.”⁴

Time acquires various forms in Boghiguian’s work: it may be as linear as the journey of a train, or labyrinthine like the alleyways of a city; it may be metaphysical or the recording of a physical experience. In any case, it always brings an echo with it, the echo of poetry and the mystery of the Sphinx.

During her travels, Boghiguian has produced a substantial number of notebooks and sketchbooks, collections of images of and reflections on what she sees. Like authentic film scripts, they intertwine her personal experiences, isolated as instants, with an often partial and indecipherable tale. They tell of migrations and cities, of rivers and lovers, of deserts and trains. Every theme opens up a micro-world, which is expressed through constellations of meanings.

Trains often enter the artist’s narratives as a metaphor for migration and expansionism, for the Western colonialist ambitions in the East. Trains unite territories and bring people closer together; they are used for transporting goods from ports to inland and from cities to coasts. Railways tell the commercial, political, and cultural stories of a country. The French made railways in Morocco, the Italians in Libya, the British in India. There is a whole mythology of trains.

The journey is time, time is the train, the train is the river, the river is the head, the head is the city, the city is Cairo, Alexandria and then it is Montreal, Palermo, Athens, Rome, Mumbai, Istanbul, Ani, Angkor Wat. The city is also Ithaca, a metaphor for the discovery of the self along the course of a whole lifetime, as maintained by Constantine Cavafy (1863–1933), a poet and intellectual in the early years of the twentieth century. His poems were already in the artist’s notebooks in the late 1970s; she visited his house in Alexandria for the first time in 1983, putting the seal on her eternal bond with his figure.⁵

Cavafy And Decadence

When approaching the translation of poems by Constantine Cavafy, the Italian poet and writer Guido Ceronetti maintains that those who live a long life are forced to retrace their own steps.

Greek Orthodox by religion, Cavafy was born in Alexandria, to which his parents had moved from Greece in the mid-nineteenth century, and where he would die in 1933. The city was a subject of

research for Cavafy as it is for Boghiguian. Described by Ceronetti as the “pleasure hole,” Alexandria was a cosmopolitan place inhabited at the time by Armenians, Italians, French, Arabs, Muslims, and Jews of the region. It was here that Cavafy set his lyrical works that told of the myth of an “omnipresent” beauty, homosexual love, the melancholy of time lost and, especially, the decadence of the Ptolemies and Hellenistic Roman ages. Ceronetti observes the magic ability that Cavafy’s poetry has to appear in the form of a metamorphosis, just like a *kathrépti méghisto*, a great ancient mirror that captures the image of a young man—both what we see and its hidden, metaphysical side.

The perpetual motion of history, wavering between triumph and decadence, or of the young man in Cavafy’s poem who, looking into the mirror, sees his body transform and deteriorate, becomes a reflection on the circular nature and symbolic conversion of the order of things and of the world. For Boghiguian, converting means changing, transforming, and mutating by inverting orders.

In Cavafy’s poetry, Boghiguian observes the metamorphosis of history and the collapse of time. The poet focuses on a particular historical moment, that is, the end of the reign of Cleopatra, of the Ptolemies, and of the Graeco-Roman period, whose main theater was Alexandria. Poems such as *The God Abandons Antony* and *Waiting for the Barbarians* describe the decadence of the human race, something that Boghiguian recognizes in the present-day world as well as in the Egypt that emerged from the 1952 revolution, leading to the end of the monarchy and the colonialist occupation by the British:

*Cavafy once wrote a poem about an empire that had gone bankrupt. There had been a coronation, and instead of real jewels, they used artificial stones. Yet, everyone knew they were fake. It reminds me of a lot of things happening in the world now. We know things are not as they seem. Nasser came on television one day and claimed that he had won the 1967 war, but the BBC announced he had lost. So he took it out on the radio, and suddenly you could not listen to it anymore in Egypt. And then when it became clear that we had lost, Nasser said he would leave the presidency, but we all knew he would return. It’s all theater in the end.*⁶

In Boghiguian’s view, decadence is the moment when moral ideals are lost and everything becomes more physical. When we no longer have idealistic debts to any religious dogma, the artist says, “the body comes back to mind.”⁷ For Cavafy, the body is that of young men, the “fleeting shadow of pleasure,” whereas for Boghiguian it is that of human beings in their ordinariness, as symbolically represented by painting, encaustic, and wax. “I hope to achieve the height of the human ordinariness. If I become the ultimate ordinary human being then I will say that I have become the most human.”⁸

The Bees and the Birds: the Animal Body

In her research, the feminist theoretician Elizabeth Grosz maintains that art is not the sole prerogative of human beings but rather it belongs to the animal, non-human world as do impulses, excesses and intensities. Art is where “becoming is [the] most direct force.”⁹

On the island of Manial in Cairo, Boghiguian’s studio has a large terrace that looks out over the An-Nasr-Mohammed aqueduct and the Nile. From the terrace, everything is in movement: the traffic is like lines of ants, the aqueduct snaking its way to the citadel recalls the bends in a river, and the chants of the *muezzin* break the flocks of birds into black splinters.

A number of encaustic paintings hang on the terrace. Painted on two-hinged wooden panels, reminiscent of old traveling altarpieces, they are portraits of Buddha, sacred images destined to

accompany the artist on her travels around the world. A technique used by the Greeks and Romans, as well as by the Ptolemies, encaustic is made by burning beeswax mixed with colored pigments and then spreading it on wooden panels using heated irons. The wax ensures that the paste retains its color and does not fade.

Even if Boghiguian mainly works with drawing and watercolor on paper, together with her increasing forays into installation—which has flourished in her recent participation in international art events such as dOCUMENTA(13) in 2012 and the Istanbul Biennial in 2015—she reserves an almost intangible space and dimension in her artistic practice for encaustic painting. When talking of encaustic, Boghiguian talks of bees and eternity. The sticky, dense surface comes into contact with all manner of dirt; cigarette ash, hair, dust, and other residues turn the image into a dynamic object, endowing it with a degree of living materiality. Like the head stamp in the *ZYX-XYZ* series, the wax once again breaks through the “rigidity” of painting and brings the work into the flow of life, transforming it into an empathetic object.

During her residency at the Castello di Rivoli, Boghiguian created a series of drawings inspired by Friedrich Nietzsche’s stay in Turin in 1888 and the beginning of January 1889. The intense exchange of letters between the philosopher and his acquaintances reveals an unstable man affected by frequent nervous breakdowns. Signs of his mental fragility, which ultimately led to his confinement in a psychiatric clinic in Basel in January 1889, were beginning to emerge. Despite this, the period was a creative one—he wrote *Ecce Homo, The Antichrist and Nietzsche contra Wagner*. An episode that seemed to tip him into emotional crisis was when he witnessed a horse being whipped in Piazza Carignano, which prompted him to defend it strenuously. Boghiguian’s drawings describe his psychological and emotional transformation: he is portrayed in a pensive mood among the mountain peaks; then crushed by the violence against the horse as he observes its slaughtered body; and, lastly, turned into a Sphinx and surrounded by people drinking during a bacchanal. Boghiguian translates Nietzsche’s spontaneous defense of the animal into an act of liberation of the Dionysian and a consequent descent into the body. Of the various anecdotes taken from his writings, she dwells on the image of the bird of prey, which he frequently cites, portraying it in several drawings in the act of capturing a lamb. Nietzsche’s vulture comes down below from the sky to eat corpses. Always in contact with the body in its most carnal form, this scavenging animal represents the ambivalent condition of those who are between earth and sky.

A part of Boghiguian’s work since the early 1980s and up to the closing image of the series on Nietzsche and Turin, the Sphinx and its enigmas invite the work to open to the world and the possibilities of its encounters. Her use of the stamp, contaminating the pictorial language, and of the encaustic that transforms the painted surface into a vital and never static place (both a sacred image and a pile of dirt), her metamorphic representation, and her hybrid figures and narrations between the human and non-human world are all conditions that transform the artwork into a liberating act. Such a revelation is embodied in her 1981 self-portrait, where she represented herself as a hybrid, three-headed creature based on a fresco of the three ladies in the Palace at Knossos, placed at the entrance of the labyrinth: an identity split into countless experiences.

It’s easy to close one’s eyes and imagine Cairo; one consequence is the movement of the bodies and colors and lights of the cars. It is a show without a plan and it culminates in intricacy and entanglement, a well-known theme the solution to which is not a problem, however, just as the neurotic is comforted by his neuroses.¹⁰

Through her work, with its perpetual evolution steeped in otherness, in contact with the unfailing and unique order of the world, moving between high and low and constantly observing social, eco

logical and political transformations, Boghiguian reminds us that the experience of art is a spectacle that acts upon us, self-generating, without a plan. It reminds us, too, that it is in encountering and interacting with (*entanglement*) in/determinacy that the very essence of art and its experience come about.¹¹

¹ With their combination of drawing and text, these works anticipate Boghiguian's use of writing in later years.

² The artist's reflections is in a notebook dating from the early 1980s.

³ A. Boghiguian, *Anna's Egypt. An Artist's Journey* (Cairo and New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2003), p. 20.

⁴ C. Lispector, *Água Viva* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 2012).

⁵ The artist has devoted a considerable body of works, which are still in the making, to the Greek poet, from her first notes in her notebooks of the 1980s to a full-blown elaboration of works shown in the exhibitions at Cavafy's house in Alexandria and in Cairo in 1996, through to the 2007, 2009 and 2010 series shown at the solo and group exhibitions in Thessaloniki, 2007, Beirut, 2008, Istanbul, 2009, and Athens, 2010.

⁶ A. Boghiguian, "Roundtable One: The Past," in *Here and Elsewhere*, exhibition catalog, ed. by M. Gioni, G. Carrion-Murayari, N. Bell, N. Azimi, and K. Wilson-Goldie (New York: New Museum, 2014), p. 39.

⁷ A. Boghiguian in H. Khan, "Towards a Poetics of Dispersal: An Encounter with Anna Boghiguian," in *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, no. 21 (Cairo: Department of English and Comparative Literature, The American University in Cairo and The American University in Cairo Press, 2001), p. 279.

⁸ I. Wassmann, "My Little Universe," in *Middle East Times*, Parramatta (Sydney), July 14—20, 1992, n.p.

⁹ E. Grosz, <https://visrfreeschool.files.wordpress.com/2013/09/grosz-art-and-the-animal.pdf>, pp. 6–7. "Properties and qualities—sounds, rhythms, harmonies, in music, colors, forms, relations, and depth or visibility and invisibility in painting, planes, volumes, and voids in architecture and so on—take the task of representing the future, of preceding and summoning up sensations to come, a people to come, worlds or universes to come."

¹⁰ Boghiguian, *Anna's Egypt*, p. 36. Boghiguian's use of the term "entanglement" is intriguing. The American physicist Karen Barad consistently uses this word to explain her theory of Agential Realism, according to which the world is made of entanglements defined and separated by intra-actions. The world is conceived as a series of intra-actions, or operations that constantly reconfigure matter and determine the "definition of differences" of individuals instead of assuming their existence as independent and antecedent. The notion of intra-action marks an important step in many fundamental philosophical notions such as causality, space, time, matter, knowledge, being, responsibility.

¹¹ "Thinking has never been a disembodied or uniquely human activity. Stepping into the void, opening to possibilities, straying, going out of bounds, off the beaten path—diverging and touching down again, swerving and returning, not as consecutive moves but as experiments in in/determinacy [...] All life forms (including inanimate forms of liveliness) do theory. The idea is to do collaborative research, to be in touch, in ways that enable response-ability." K. Barad, "On Touching—The Inhuman That Therefore I Am," in *differences: a Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, vol. 23 (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2012), pp. 206—23.