



## REINCARNATION OF POETRY

MARINA GIOTI IN CONVERSATION  
WITH MARINA FOKIDIS

The Secret School (stills), 2009. Courtesy: the artist

“Things are looking up? Huh?” asks Alan Bishop—maverick underground musician and ethnomusicologist—to a camel resident of the Cairo zoo as it is staring up to the sky. The serene (yet full of self-sarcasm, or self-mockery) dialogue is interrupted by the next scene: a formation of military planes flying over the city. Their deafening sound moves us immediately to another condition: that of the so-called Arab Spring.

A series of shots of Tahrir Square reveal the political turbulence under which Marina Gioti’s film is being shot. Yet it is neither reportage nor a documentary in the limited sense of the genre. *Invisible Hands*—the artist’s first feature film, which premieres at documenta 14 in Athens—tells the story of a music band in parallel to the story of a country undergoing social change. Unfolding between the two critical elections that marked the post-Arab Spring period in Egypt, a period of continual hope and disillusionment, the film “juxtaposes the tragicomedy of politics and art making in a troubled periphery,” as the artist aptly describes.

## MARINA FOKIDIS

Alan Bishop moved to Cairo shortly after the 2011 revolution, at very “difficult” and uncertain times, for the pursuit of a quite ambitious project. I am quite impressed by his decision and equally by your drive to follow his adventure—just like that—without a prefixed idea or financial plan for a movie. What really prompted you to buy the tickets, take your camera, and go?

## MARINA GIOTI

I am going to quote Alan Bishop on this, one of his lines in the film: “It just happened—manifested by cosmic fate and driven by situational metaphysics. How often do you put yourself in a position for something extraordinary to happen?”

It was out of a string of coincidences that I found myself in Cairo. I knew Alan through music: from his curatorial project the ethnomusicological label Sublime Frequencies, his solo work as Alvarius B, and of course his longtime band, the Sun City Girls. There is no easy way to describe the Sun City Girls, as there is nothing like them. I can throw a few adjectives out there to add to the confusion: prolific, enigmatic, uncompromising, exotic, provocative, unclassifiable. They were more a factory of musical, artistic, philosophical, theatrical, and political ideas than just a band. I was a fan of Alan’s and the Sun City Girls’ music, yet I was more fascinated by his artistic and organizational methods, his *modus operandi*.

I first met him in person in 2011. Back then, we were organizing underground concerts in Athens and we invited him to play with his brother Richard Bishop as the Brothers Unconnected, the successor band to the Sun City Girls, after their dissolution. A year later I bumped into him at a festival in Belgium, where I was living at the time. He told me that he’d moved to Cairo and was working with young Egyptian musicians who were translating some of his old lyrics into Arabic. Why does an accomplished musician decide to move to one of the most troubled places in the world at this particular time and form a band with three Egyptians nearly half his age? Knowing the lyrical content of his work, which is ambiguous and outré even by Western standards, I was intrigued and half-jokingly asked if I could come to Cairo and document the project. He was immediately positive on the idea. I kept thinking about it for some time, and talked to my friend Georges Salameh, a filmmaker and photographer of Greek Lebanese descent who also speaks Arabic. Georges was convinced straightaway and we booked our flights to Cairo to film the band recording their first album. Alan paid for part of the tickets and in return it was decided that he would keep our footage as documentation.

He is an obsessed archivist. It was a fair deal. We landed in Cairo a few days before the first democratic elections occurred in the country, a year after the 2011 uprisings. For us it was more of a research trip to the unknown, as we didn’t know what to expect and there was absolutely no idea about a film at that point. What we found there—the people, the situation, the country—was a fascinating universe, yet one that was actually creating more questions than answers. So we kept coming back for three years. I think that the film actually manifested itself when we stopped asking questions.

**MF** And then you were determined to do a feature documentary? Or, how would you describe your film?

**MG** I am not sure anymore if this film is a “documentary,” although we started it as such. It’s a true story, of course, but while documentary often strives for objectivity, exposing truths, offering information, we were intentionally on the other end of the spectrum. Sometimes I think of it as a musical, as probably the most important things said in this film are sung.

**MF** How would you describe Alan’s approach toward the global sociopolitical condition—an approach that also seems in synchronicity with your beliefs and ethics?

**MG** I can’t, of course, talk about Alan’s views or approach to politics. I wouldn’t even bother talking about mine. **It’s not a constructive discussion anymore. Truth is, we are in the hands of despicable psychos. We all saw it coming but did nothing about it. Interesting times. Good luck to all of us. End of conversation.**

**MF** Watching your film, I felt that the protagonists, Alan Bishop and the Egyptian musicians Aya Hemeda, Cherif El Masri, and Adham Zidan, lived differently the situation of the post-Arab Spring condition. This is of course evident as they come from different geopolitical, geographical, economic, and cultural backgrounds. What are the values/non-values, political stances, and cultural morals that unite and divide all of them, all of you?

**MG** Alan as a character in this film is an American in self-exile, preferring to be part of the chaos and uncertainty of a Middle Eastern capital than living in the States. I think this speaks volumes. Self-exile is becoming a growing trend among liberals in Trump America nowadays, but Alan is already on his seventh year in Cairo. I guess he didn’t need Trump to be elected to find out that he is happier and more inspired in some other part of the world. But this is not the case with the other characters, who are Egyptian, face uncertainty and grim prospects where they live and have nowhere else to go.

**MF** The differentiations of living and working in the same political reality as it manifests between the self-exiled and the local artists is an interesting point to discuss further. It entails nuances of divisions, connections, and consecutive hierarchies (even if false at times) between “south” and “north,” “east” and “west,” “strong” and “weak,” the global-cosmopolitan and the local-cosmopolitan. Will the relationship between the ones who are embedded in the politically-socially-economically wounded locus and the ones who live in it as passersby ever be on equal terms?

**MG** It has never been on equal terms. The largest parts of the planet have always been exploited by the “savvy” smallest, through colonization and its modern version, globalization. The current absurd phase of globalization allows for a free movement of goods but restricts the movement of people. Since we are all nominally allowed to book a flight and travel if we have the money, this doesn’t mean that we experience a passport equality. Any Westerner can be a cosmopolitan, a traveler, a nomad, a tourist. Someone from the West who travels to another country to work is an expat. People from the rest of the world are not exactly allowed the cosmopolitan or the expatriation concept. They are called migrants and refugees, which in effect nowadays means “intruders.”







**MF** Yet, the cosmopolitan-local, eventually is also an essential position that might start subverting the power system. Economy is still a burden that produces forced displacement colonial attitudes and abuse even among colleagues from alternate economical realities—but if it was not there then we will have a very dynamic interchange between all the different types of cosmopolitans. Before we get “lost in translation” with respect to terms, let’s discuss the notion of language as a signifier of meaning within your film. Lots of different questions arise in reference to Alan’s experiment of *translating his lyrics from English to Arabic*. The notion of translation seem like a core element in the plot.

**MG** Translation is indeed a central and recurring theme. We see the characters trying to express Bishop’s poetry, songs he wrote twenty-five to thirty years ago, when he was their age, in the United States. The repurposing of songs for different markets and languages is not a new concept in music. However, a poetic content featuring themes about creeping globalism, gun fantasies, waterboarding and torture and military madness is quite unusual for the translation language chosen. Translation is sort of a metaphysical backbone in this story, as we continuously experience the reincarnation or the reappropriation of poetry in a different time zone, era, and language. This process had a strange timing and was inadvertently catalyzed by the shifting sands of the Egyptian terrain. When translated by Egyptians in their twenties, these songs gained a different momentum and came to express the experience of living in present-day Cairo, with all the mixed feelings of hope and despair, of expectation and disillusionment, which almost felt like an alchemy, considering how old the songs were.

Translation also serves as a narrative and metaphorical tool in the film, because it underlines the cultural differences as our characters try to express not only Alan’s poetry but their own feelings, too. We translate because we want to communicate. A translation is never perfect; it’s always incomplete. There are misunderstandings and misinterpretations, glitches in the flow of communication between people from different backgrounds. Embracing the risk of misunderstanding is the only way to communicate, I think.

**MF** There is a scene where the discussion evolves around the word *hebot*. The word alludes to a sort of dark feeling and cannot be translated from one language to another, yet it feels familiar. This is a good example.

**MG** That was exactly the feeling in the period after the 2011 uprisings. That is also the feeling of being Greek during the long years of austerity. Although Greek and Egyptian culture are closer than the American and the British, I can’t easily think of a word for it in Greek, either.

**MF** This discussion about language and its connection to cultural and national identity brings to mind *The Secret School* (2009), an older film of yours that is being presented in Kassel. The work reveals how a set of historical facts—which were actually fabricated by the church—about the survival of one’s own language becomes a tool for nationalism and religious belief. Even more how visual “representation”—or, better, iconography—assisted in the construction of false history. Issues of hegemony, dominance, and nationality are central here.

**MG** In *The Secret School* a painting indeed becomes an instrument to distort history in order to promote nationalist and religious agendas, to establish a “post-truth,” as we call it today, but which was a

concept invented hundreds of years ago in political rhetoric. I am not trying so much to reestablish the truth in this film. I am just adding my own distortion as I reappropriate an appropriation, and the way I do it is through sound and language.

All dominant narratives that constitute history, even truth, have always been problematic. They represent subjective viewpoints forced by those who have power upon those who don’t. Often in my work, I am trying to symbolically claim this power back, as in art you have the power to subvert narratives, even change reality, which of course doesn’t happen in real life.

**MF** But by recording reality (and not a condensed, sexy version of it) as you have done in some works, you might also be changing it. A certain way of filming manifests in some of your works where narration takes place through a set of almost still images—poetic and harsh at the same time. This way of dealing with real time, even if fictionalized, seems much closer to the way we perceive life: a set of blurred images and thoughts that do not necessarily follow a predetermined plot and do not bar leads for the next sequence.

**MG** In my 2014 film *As to Posterity* I use the present-day Athens landscape in a fictional way, as a city devoid of people. It’s not fiction, of course, as it was happening in front of my camera—the streets were never empty but just less busy due to recession and high gas prices. I just had to wait a few moments to press the record button and get this “urban desert” effect. The city often felt like a necropolis. Even the people you would encounter in the streets were moving around silently, like ghosts. The sound of the city was eerily low. When you see a city without people you get all sorts of interpretations, most of them dystopian, related to some sort of catastrophe. My viewpoint, though, was that of an archaeologist. I saw Athens as peaceful ruins of a bygone age, as relics of the present. I was reading Robert Smithson’s essays at the time and was influenced a lot by his ideas on landscape. Notably, in his 1967 essay “The Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey,” Smithson orchestrates and documents an experiment: a parody of an urban travelogue to his suburban birthplace, Passaic, where he assumes the role of an archaeologist, envisioning contemporary structures, as if seen from the future, in ruin form.

**MF** How is living in Athens for you in 2017, amid the never-ending scenario of crisis?

**MG** We are already eight or nine years into a crisis that is not exactly as it has been communicated—“a Greek problem” or “the problem with the Greeks.” Seeing it spread even to wealthy states in the EU over the years looks more like a carefully executed plan to dismantle all social welfare in the EU and move assets from the south to the north of Europe by means of inhuman austerity measures with the excuse of a largely fabricated debt. In Greece it almost happened overnight through a shock treatment. In the rest of Europe it’s been done incrementally, little by little. It’s ongoing.

Greeks are privileged to be the unfortunate avant-garde in this process. I think we went through all stages of depression, learned to re-appreciate money and possessions, learned to live inside uncertainty and lack of prospects, learned to handle our defeat. In this sense I have the feeling that we are better prepared to face what seems like the state of the whole wide world from now on, without any sort of illusion. Being prepared, of course, doesn’t mean things look less dark than they really are.

**Marina Gioti** (Athens, 1972) Filmmaker and visual artist based in Athens, Greece. She studied Chemical Engineering, Environmental Management (MSc), Filmmaking, and Media and Communication (MA) in Greece, the UK and Belgium. Although she went through a formal cinema training, in her work she explores the aesthetic and narrative capacities of media, through videos, installations and hybrid media works. In her filmic work, she often manipulates found footage, in order to revisit and retell old, forgotten stories. She has also co-curated two exhibitions and programmed experimental and documentary films for screenings and film festivals. Her films and installations have been screened and exhibited worldwide at both international film festivals (Toronto IFF, Transmediale, Jeonju, Viennale, Les Rencontres Internationales) and exhibitions (Art Space Pythagorion, Thessaloniki Biennial, Wrocław Media Art Biennial, Bozar Brussels, CaixaForum Barcelona, Deste Foundation, Museum of Cycladic Art and the Onassis Cultural Center).

**Marina Fokidis** is a curator and writer based in Athens, founding and artistic director of Kunsthalle Athena, and founder and part of the editorial board of the biannual arts and culture publication *South as a State of Mind*. She was curator of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Thessaloniki Biennale for Contemporary Art (2011), the commissioner and curator of the Greek Pavilion at the 51<sup>st</sup> Venice Biennale (2003) from March 2014 until December 2016 she has served as the head of the artistic office, and from January 2017 she is a curatorial advisor of documenta 14.



*As To Posterity* (stills), 2014. Courtesy: the artist