

The Precarious Arts of Balance

Marilena Zaroulia

On a dimly-lit theatre stage, light goes up on the face of a grey-haired, prematurely old woman, with an unblinking gaze, sitting still on a mechanically controlled, wooden rocking chair. The rocking is slow, slight, mechanically controlled, without the assistance of the woman. She speaks one word, after a long pause: 'More.'¹ Then the rocking starts, and a recorded voice is heard; the voice underscores the rocking, this precarious yet strangely comforting, embrace-like act of toying with balance. In Samuel Beckett's short masterpiece *Rockaby* (1980), the body of the actor is separated from the voice, which is heard as voice-over, working as narration, as afterthought, as memory that has not yet been quite remembered. This repetitive, monotonous movement, this rocking emerges as an absurd and poignant performance of the cycles of life and death - and of acts of endurance in between. What does it mean to survive, to endure, to balance in this constantly revolving world? Is the rocking body of the woman maintaining this precarious balance a metaphor for an ongoing struggle with loss, lack and the urge to continue?

Kalliopi Lemos's work shown in the *In Balance* exhibition subtly and, perhaps unintentionally, dialogues with *Rockaby* and Beckett's later works, meditations on the pathos and futility of human existence. The exhibition includes works developed in a variety of media, by means of materials that range from the fragile to the austere. Among other exhibits, the visitor encounters a video installation of a woman trapped in an iron sphere; seed-like sculptures, arranged on axes as if on scales calling for the visitor's interaction with them; smaller air-dried clay figurines wrapped in Japanese paper balancing in ambivalent positions; and a series of intimate, close-up photographs of details of the human body framed in boxes. All the works capture and extend the artist's ongoing exploration of bodies, scales and the quest for balance. Lemos invites her visitor to consider the human duality - body and mind or spirit, inside and outside, material and immaterial - and to ponder on the materials required in the human's attempt at achieving balance.

Balance, in Lemos's artistic worlds, emerges as an art, beyond aesthetics or creativity, in other senses of the word. The art of balance signifies the skill, the craft or technique required to achieve an 'upright position', which, according to the artist, is the bodily manifestation of human dignity. Lemos has engaged with this question of standing upright as a performance of dignity in many of her works. Most notably, in *Crossing* (Elefsina 2006-2009), the first part of her site-responsive, monumental, sculptural trilogy on migration, Lemos had placed seven boats – battered relics of migrants' crossings from the coast of Turkey to the islands of North-East Aegean – in an upright position. The boats –sacred objects, remnants of the desperate attempt at finding a safer shore – stood in for the migrants, the 'precarious lives' (to use Judith Butler's terms) standing tall under the blazing Mediterranean sun, reclaiming

¹ All references are from Samuel Beckett 'Rockaby' in *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Dramatic Works* London: Faber & Faber, 1990. pp. 433-442.

their position in the world of the humans. Balance in that context involved work and persistence, was performed through and beyond pain.

A chorus of seven air-dried clay figurines that are exhibited in *In Balance* further elaborate on this interplay between the art of balance, physical and psychological pain and dignity. The elegant, fragile figurines, precariously standing on wooden surfaces, are women whose limbs are mutilated and their faces are not clearly visible; their positions, though, manifest an intense struggle of balancing acts. One figurine lies on her back: is she lying on water or has she just suffered violence? Another is in a yoga-like position; or is she embodying the aftermath of torture? The distinction is subtle, yet important; to achieve balance, what should one endure or survive? What are the dangers, what are the sacrifices or the (seemingly unavoidable) compromises?

The art of balance in Lemos's work signifies a practice as well as the labour and careful observation involved. The visitor discovers how precarious is balance and how attentive and detailed the search for balance is while rearranging the beautiful ornament-like, stainless steel weights in the axis of Lemos's seed-like sculptures on the lower ground of the Gazelli Art House in London. On the walls of the room, a series of drawings/collages blend the existential with the political, offering a subtle yet necessary commentary on the lack of balance in the contemporary world of violence, uneven distribution of mobility, and superficial, consumerist euphoria. Drawings of seeds merged with images and cuttings from the press on current issues like terrorism, migration ['Migrants fuel raft economy in Turkey'] or inequality ['Greed is good after all – it sends Death to the poor next door'] highlight the pursuit for balance as a global demand in a world, where precarity underpins human existence in material and immaterial ways.

As I am walking up the stairs to the upper galleries of the Gazelli Art House, I am struck by a series of three boxes-frames in the inside of which miniature theatrical scenes unfold. In the middle one, a mutilated figurine stands in the middle of a room, isolated if not imprisoned. At the background, there is a multitude of windows through which we imagine other eyes looking at the figurine. Beckett's dramatic world echoes through this tableau:

till in the end/the day came/in the end came/close of a long day/sitting at her window/quiet at her window/only window/facing other windows/other only windows/all blinds down/ never one up/ hers alone up

Loneliness, absence of communication and confinement; how does one balance in this kind of world? On the other side of the room, the close-up details of a human body, the eyes of a person semi-closed feel like they are piercing through me; an image of balanced serenity or of submission?

While piecing together the striking visual elements of Lemos's body of work exhibited in *In Balance*, I am suddenly taken by surprise by a sound: the sounds of the imprisoned woman in 'At the Centre of the World', the video shown in the galleries downstairs. The woman's audible struggle, as she is attempting to balance in this constantly moving beautiful sphere (which is now standing on my feet on the

upper gallery), the sounds of the iron sphere rolling on a concrete floor and the visceral sounds of pain of the human body bring the dramaturgy of Lemos's exhibition together in unexpected manners. Like the woman in Beckett's piece is rocking endlessly, the unnamed woman in the video is rolling endlessly, searching for the art of a precarious balance. In Lemos's body of work, balance emerges as a personal and political call, a practice and relation – with the world, with ourselves and each other.

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