

Towards a non-binary island: on the NIMAC exhibition and other demons (Online Article)

Historical Note

This online article was published on Facebook by [afoa](#) on 10/07/26.

Content

Towards a non-binary island: on the NIMAC exhibition and other demons

Rahme Veziroglu & Panayiotis Achniotis

1. Not everything that declares itself “anti-occupation” supports liberation

This text comes from a polyphonic space in which we have a yearslong practice of having difficult conversations with one another safely. Our spectrum ranges from building archetypes for horizontal organizing practices, to the best way of making tarhana/τραχανά. We consider using this space particularly meaningful in addressing the concerns we share about the debate going on about the exhibition at NiMAC. In it, we recognise a political reflex much older than this exhibition and larger than one artist: what does being against occupation mean in Cyprus? Who gets to decide who is a collaborationist of what occupation? And more importantly, how can we keep the struggle alive to find the words and the languages to speak about Cyprus beyond the imposed binary thinking that has trapped us in the same maze for decades now?

For those who did not follow, the main reason for the protest at NiMAC and online campaign was the participation of Emin Çizengel in an exhibition, based on the fact that he designed the TRNC flag in 1984. The Ecologists Party lobbied against the exhibition and two people protested at the opening night with a placard that read “stop normalising the occupation #artwashing”. The demands are the cancellation of the exhibition or removal of Çizengel’s work and an apology and statement from Çizengel, from the curator Esra Plümer Bardak and the NiMAC administration. Çizengel’s work in the exhibition is part of the Republic of Cyprus State Collection and temporarily on loan. The campaign continues online.

Before getting into the thorny jungle of political terminology, we say it plainly and clearly from the beginning: the protest may appear to use a language that on paper sides with liberation and anti-colonialism, but the trouble lies exactly in this ‘on paper’ aspect of it which overlooks and erases context and reproduces the same binary, punitive, status-quo logic that has kept Cyprus politically and imaginatively trapped.

We recognise ‘normalising occupation’ as a serious concern. We are deeply troubled by the material forms of normalisation: the unlawful greed economy built on GC properties in the north and the relentless culture of plunder that is deteriorating every fiber of the moral and political compass of the community. We are mobilising against the hardening of the border regime, increased surveillance, institutional separation, the everyday reproduction of partition, and the political/financial investments

that make reunification less possible.

Here's where we consider the problem begins: political concepts lose their gravity when they become metaphors, moral badges or slogans detached from material histories, intention, practice and consequence. Here these concepts are not approached as situated political questions but as 'copy-paste' accusations derived from liberation movements that have strong support and credibility. This repeats a colonial reflex: importing a moral vocabulary while avoiding the difficult work of embodied political understanding.

We need to remind ourselves that the so-called "Cyprus problem" is not just a case of "invasion and occupation" and that it didn't start in 1974; it started even before 1963. We need to remind ourselves why positioning in this way has been of crucial importance for imagining a future beyond nationalist division and imperialist domination in Cyprus. This is not to deny the Turkish army's occupation nor the struggles that comrades in the north are waging against it. It is to say though that, amid the deepening division of our country, we cannot afford to buy into narratives and actions that contribute to further entrenching nationalist domination and status quo—be it in the name of anti-occupation, of anti-imperialism, of the nation, or whatever else. We need more than ever to build a vocabulary of our own that goes beyond buzzwords.

There are two interconnected angles from which we are going to approach these claims: methodology of the protest and the political imagination derived from it. We will look into methodology from the lens of a) conceptual appropriation and b) symbolic gesture. We will then address the general context: what does the wider political horizon of the protestors reveal in relation to their current narrative.

2. On methodology

Today we observe on a global scale that the critical vocabulary of anti-capitalism/nationalism/colonialism/authoritarianism is methodically taken out of context and utilised in the service of maintaining, deepening and/or capitalising on these very hegemonic structures. It functions as a semantic trap. It is important to address and dismantle these systemic strategies that not only serve this purpose but also, perhaps more importantly, hijack the intellectual and physical labour of the people working on the ground who meticulously lay the building blocks of (re)unification of communities, collectives, sectors and classes. But this is not at all an easy task. The trap is sneaky, ready at all times to take advantage of stigma, categorise, divide and adjudicate.

We are more familiar with this methodology when utilised by institutions and people holding political power. A much more troubling impact of the trap is achieved when it is internalised and adopted as a legitimate method of political debate by people seemingly closer to the grassroots level. The danger here is that hegemony no longer comes from above, from the institutional level. It begins to circulate and reproduce itself through people.

Reproduction operates in several directions. Firstly, decontextualised concepts generate an obscure communication zone from the start through selective erasure and reduction. This obscurity is instrumental in making wider ideological investments harder to see. Secondly and consequently: demands voiced from a place of erasure, force a defensive response and a start from absolute zero at that, a journey laced with many other traps. Needless to say, life itself does not have space in this debate, only one-dimensional interpretations of macro structures. Those few who take on this exhausting task and engage are categorised in the either/or binary, the remaining majority are pushed into silence simply because they want to avoid the trap or into giving more space to damaging arguments.

The claim of the protestors operates as if what happened before 1974 can be set aside for the sake of the argument. It intentionally overlooks that the early meanings attached to the TRNC were not uniform and it was not widely perceived as the establishment of the occupation regime, and having gone through decades of violence and several displacements, many TCs experienced or hoped it might become a passage toward safety, liberation, and/or true independence. It overlooks that so many people who are staunch supporters of reunification, took part in recognition efforts in the early years—some of which are highly praised by the protesting groups as well. But the protestors claim authority over what information is allowed in the debate.

To say this is not to romanticise the establishment of the TRNC, nor to deny Turkey's orchestration and militarisation, or the local structures of dispossession that followed. It is not to dismiss the pain the giant flag on Pentadaktylos inflicts on people in the south. It is to insist that the historical experience of the communities of this island should not be reduced to a one-dimensional either/or binary and that any genuine politics of Cypriot independence must be able to hold that painful complexity. 'Life' under the occupation in itself carries this tension, weight and pain as well. This absolute zero entry point would quickly be regarded as the 'victim card', so any attempt to undo the intentional erasure quickly instigates the ancient blame game. An uneven platform of debate cannot raise a flag of justice. Neither should a foreign vocabulary be translated into local context with such negligence.

Further accusations against Çizenel include 'collaborating with so-called TRNC authorities' referring to receiving a lifetime achievement award and taking part in the bicomunal technical committee of culture. Moreover, an image of the artist receiving the award from a bureaucrat is being circulated as proof of him endorsing the occupation, as well as the fact that he joined the island-wide mourning of the recent passing of dearest Sevgül Uludag, ignoring the fact that she too received an award from Ersin Tatar a couple of years ago. As a person who has done some of the hardest and probably the most important work on this island towards reconciliation, Uludag's life and struggle serve as a big lesson for all of us in how to hold the complex realities of our island with care. While this constitutes another example of claiming authority over what information is valid and what is accepted as controversy, it also reveals something larger: in this context, what adding a political charge to 'collaborating' does is obscure opposition to continuation of life in the north.

In the north, people cannot live, work, exhibit, teach, receive salaries, organise, archive, publish, or maintain cultural life without some contact with existing structures. To call every such contact "collaboration" is not an anti-occupation position, instead it becomes an opposition to the continuation of life in the north under unresolved conditions. This argument does much more than point the finger at one artist; it polices the entire field of cultural existence in the north. This becomes clearer when we connect the political horizon of these groups with these claims, which we will come to later. That being said, we insist on the critical work that needs to be done across the divide of exposing who is capitalising on the partition and how, but that work must go beyond reducing politics and/or expression to a mere symbolic gesture.

Symbolic gestures are not void of meaning. Especially in the context of liberation movements, they are used to popularise movements, they can disturb the consensus that works in favour of oppressors, shift the balance of the public discourse. Boycott, refusal, wearing symbols, all have their place.

When the gesture is detached from the material, cultural and historical conditions it claims to confront, when it reproduces the socio-political conditions that it supposedly opposes, when it does not contribute to or take account of actual conditions of coexistence, repair, accountability and dialogue then it risks becoming a reactionary performance.

If the horizon is reunification as claimed, what does this gesture build and what does it damage? Who gains social, moral, political, or financial capital from the gesture? Who becomes more vulnerable afterwards? Who is asked to carry the consequences? These are the hard questions a symbolic gesture has to take into account.

Does it give moral and social capital to people already positioned safely? Does it make intercommunal cultural exchange more precarious? Does it stir up suspicion in both communities? Does it harm potential spaces of non-tokenised cultural collaboration? Does it inflate nationalist tendencies? Does it make the work of groups harder by allowing nationalist actors to appear as defenders of liberation?

Yes. This is the cost of this symbolic gesture.

Images from the protest were reproduced in the south by reactionary nationalist pages— including the one which started the hate campaign against the painter Gavriel—and journalists, with the masses spewing racism and hate in the comment section. Additionally, ELAM's councillors are now demanding that the city require for all art exhibitions held in municipal venues that information about the works on display be provided. In short, the ground has been paved for the next act of censorship.

What we are dealing with is clearly damaging to the few people, groups and collectives that are already in precarious conditions and carrying a lot of weight in the struggle for reconciliation, anti-nationalism, liberation and freedom of artistic expression.

3. On political imagination

The protest uses decolonial language but the surrounding vocabulary reveals a very different picture regarding their actual political horizon. This horizon allows us to contextualise the root of their demands.

The protestors refer to the south as 'free areas', again, reducing the whole Cyprus problem down to a mere, one-dimensional, mono-ethnic outlook, erasing other colonial, geopolitical and internal fractures; as well as minimising the current xenophobia, racism, corruption, authoritarianism, censorship that prevails within the Republic of Cyprus. Protestors also see no issue with using expressions like "at least ELAM are Cypriots" in response to a Turkish Cypriot protesting against ELAM's anti-LGBT+ campaign.

Beyond the NiMAC protest, we have witnessed a series of claims made by this group, further pointing to how the same-old anti-occupation trope enables the continuation of the partitionist status quo. For example, claiming that "Bizonal Bicomunal Federation is apartheid" is not only inaccurate, as any apartheid system supposes the racial, economic and social superiority of one group over another, but also is insulting to people who have suffered or are suffering under such regimes, such as in South Africa and Palestine. Whilst it is not the scope of this text to lay down the arguments in favour of a BBF, characterising the only viable political horizon that has been informing efforts to unite our people and get rid of foreign armies over the past 50 years as "apartheid" is telling of the inability to constructively contribute to any anti-occupation struggle.

Further, stating that "the Republic of Cyprus is the only solution" erases the fact that the Republic of Cyprus is itself part of the problem. A structure that has been weaponised by the GC elites to exclude all other communities from power, a structure that has enabled TC invisibilisation cannot be part of the solution. Indeed, demanding from RoC institutions to exclude people who are actually its legitimate citizens on the basis of a supposed collaborationism with the occupation has no place in liberation.

The figure of the TC is the one of the "eternal Other" within the Cypriot context: never Cypriot enough

for the GC majority, nor Turkish enough, not recognised or interpellated, not a political subject with agency, not a foreigner yet not a local, a citizen but not a compatriot. Independently if this “Other” designed the RoC flag in 1960 or the TRNC flag in 1984, it’s the continuation of this Otherness that enables structures of domination – such as the occupation in the north and the conversion of the RoC into a second Greek state in the south – to continue.

4. To conclude

Protestors admit themselves that on several occasions when they tried to stop his participation in other exhibitions/events in the RoC, they did not receive support from curators, collaborating artists or institutions. So when examined closely, the accusation of ‘ignoring sensitivities’ becomes manufacturing sensitivity.

This is not about Emin Çizenel.

This is about asking what kind of political culture we are building when contact becomes suspect, when lives under oppression – and occupation! – are asked to explain themselves from absolute zero again and again, and when those with privileges gain moral and social capital from gestures the consequences of which are suffered by others.

A politics of liberation cannot be measured only by what it refuses. It also has to be measured by what forms of relation it makes possible. The radical work is building safe enough spaces of contact where these difficult conversations can take place, and where we cease to be “Others”.

[Needs Turkish Translation](#), [Online Articles](#), [Decade 2020-2029](#), [2026](#), [afoa](#), [Community of Struggle](#), [Undefined Location](#)

From:

<https://movementsarchive.org/> - Κυπριακό Κινηματικό Αρχείο

Cyprus Movements Archive

Kıbrıs Sosyal Hareket Arşivi

Permanent link:

https://movementsarchive.org/doku.php?id=en:digital:afoa:art_binary

Last update: **2026/07/13 11:08**

