

EXILE AND BECOMING

A Step to the Right

Open Space Zentrum für Kunstprojekte

Vienna, Austria

September 9–October 3, 2009

"A Step to the Right" builds its aesthetic narrative around "the politics of becoming"—the paradoxical process through which a new cultural identity is forged yet not reduced by the process. The exhibition is framed by the migrant experience, captured both in the artists' subjects and the artists themselves. Maintaining that one must revive the sociopolitical arguments around "becoming," curator Gülsen Bal embodies the contemporary imperative to fortify the role artists play in challenging established codes of power relations. Here, Bal presents three artists—Songül Boyraz, Petja Dimitrova, and Alban Muja, all immigrants to Austria—who examine the "space



of interruption . . . and bring moments of rupture into existential territories."¹ Bal's aim is to emphasize the union of resistance and creation in the artworks—essentially, strategies of survival that shift power dynamics in subtle ways.

Vienna, where the repercussions of geopolitical fragmentation between former eastern and western blocs in Europe continue to unfold, houses the exhibition venue Open Space Center for Art Projects. The title of the show, "A Step to the Right," implies a literal movement from East to West as well as a political one, alluding to the right-leaning political agendas inherent in contemporary Austrian politics.

In Boyraz's installation "Import Bride—Broken Dreams" (2009), multiple videos play simultaneously and deliver documentary-style interviews of Turkish women after their arranged marriages in Austria. The overlapping of their voices combined with the swell of narrative

renders a poignant incomprehensibility. The viewer can't discern each individual story, but understands that these represent hundreds of unique stories.

The installation includes framed sketches of each woman's portrait, made by Boyraz and adorned with embroidered "wishes" hand-stitched by each woman. A kind of articulated bride's trousseau, each portrait and its attendant wish reveals the women's dreams; Seyhan's stitching reads "I wished to be a journalist." Sule's reads, "My dream is to study at University." The portraits have a naïve quality, as do the faces in the videos. One might be tempted to assign a kitsch aesthetic to the works, but instead they stand as tender testimony to the seemingly indefatigable mythology of marriage as a safe haven and incubator of dreams. In this context, however, it is a mythology haunted by imminent disappointment as each bride struggles to realize her dream.

With Dimitrova's installation "blue card for Ketī" (2009), the artist directs the viewer to "those sex-specific, emancipatory practices that flow into the collective process of resistance,"² suggesting a "bio-political" strategy that subsumes and subverts standard patriarchal practices that appropriate the female body. The strength of this work is twofold: it manifests in the courage of the subject, Ketī, a Bulgarian migrant, and in Dimitrova's careful attention to detail in delivering her story. Dimitrova's video is the focal point of her installation and opens with several re-takes edited together to form a prologue: "I wanted to become always artist. It's only my father who has turned my life upside down." "No, I wanted to live my own life and have packed my bags in 1989." "Austria has never been my destination, but I stayed here and went through almost everything..." Ketī's story continues to unfold with adventures, abuses, compromises, and confrontations with racism. It is, however, free of sentimentality and self-pity. Her humor and dignity offer a riveting focal point. Told from a less optimistic point of view, this migrant's story might be harrowing, but Ketī personifies fortitude, especially in those moments when her deeper struggles underscore her performative delivery.

Dimitrova's sensitivity with the camera extends Ketī's story beyond her words, deepening the context of the protagonist's life. Her hopes, realized or dashed, are captured in her material surroundings as much as in her stories—the empty Chanel perfume bottle is framed and hangs on the wall amid other examples of the remains of luxury, including the cultivated red roses on the patio, which Ketī absent-mindedly touches again and again. These small details evoke the complex web of aspirations and assimilations that form this migrant's experience.

Pasted directly on the plywood wall behind the video monitor, black-and-white computer printouts document the historical continuum of Ketī's former life as a rising Bulgarian gymnast in parallel with two decades of landmark shifts in Austria's increasingly restrictive immigration laws.

All images

From video installation "blue card for Ketī" (2009) by Peta Dimitrova



In reference to making his video *Free Your Mind* (2007), Muja writes, “I thought about how I could free myself . . . from the torture of trying to find myself in the work of another artist.” Through emitting a litany of international artists’ names in continuous procession, Muja attempts to completely rid himself of their presence. Addressing the thin line between welcome influence and overbearing burden, Muja’s work reflects his desire to reclaim artistic sovereignty by dissolving the authority of his artistic mentors. The piece unexpectedly speaks to the process of becoming by illustrating that migration can refer

to both internal and transnational movement, and can be tied to an exorcism of nationalism mirrored in the dissolution of overarching power. Muja’s choice to use an extreme close-up of his own face as he recites the names begs the question of whether exorcism or self-conscious homage will be achieved. But, in the end, the words become increasingly obscure, leaving only hollowness in their wake.

Political artwork needn’t be strident, and these works impart a nuanced, imaginative engagement with the questions they explore. The three “strategies” generate meanings that reach beyond the migrant experience, issuing reminders of the invaluable things that make “becoming” a natural experience for some and a profoundly foreign experience for others, depending on the dynamics of power. Both the visible and invisible mechanisms of repression are present here, but the unique experience of the individual is what resonates with a universal note, tracing a world lost and a world yet to come.

VICTORIA HINDLEY is an American artist and writer living in Vienna. Her work can be viewed at web.mac.com/victoriahindley.

NOTES 1. Gülsen Bal, “Exit Strategies,” published in the statements book from 1st Art and Design Symposium (Istanbul: Yıldız Teknik Üniversitesi, 2009). 2. Peja Dimitrova, “A Step to the Right,” exhibition Curatorial Statement at Open Space Zentrum für Kunstprojekte in Vienna, 2009.

ART OF PEACEFUL PROTEST

One Day: A Collective Narrative of Tehran

Intersection for the Arts

San Francisco

November 4, 2009–January 23, 2010

The city of Tehran has been a hotbed of political unrest in the wake of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s reelection last June. As the world watched, Iranians took to the streets in peaceful protest and their government turned on them, sometimes brutally. For the eight Tehran artists and one Iranian American in “One Day: A Collective Narrative of Tehran,” the challenge was to create an exhibition that could address fresh psychological wounds without letting politics dominate.

The show’s organizers are Taraneh Hemami and Ghazaleh Hedayat, two Iranian-born artists who have studied in the United States. Hemami left Iran in 1978, shortly before the Islamic Revolution, to attend college, and later settled in San Francisco. Hedayat is a generation younger, and recently returned to Tehran after completing her MFA at the San

Francisco Art Institute in 2005. Their long-distance collaboration produced “One Day,” a complex portrait of contemporary Iran that shows how the country is often misinterpreted by both those within and those outside its borders. The exhibition is shaped by the artists’ experiences of freedom in the U.S., and their peers’ collective hope for such a future in Iran.

Nima Alizadeh’s installation “This is Tehran, Voice of Islamic Republic of Iran” (2009) infuses the gallery with an official voice of propaganda, providing a foil for the subtle subversion of other works in the exhibition. The audio recording of snippets from Radio Tehran includes statements such as, “We are going to show our strong fist to the world” and “There are many enemies awaiting a chance to crush us.” Declarations about Iranian strength and the peaceful aims of the government, along with misleading statements about the U.S. and Israel, abound. The voice is not confrontational; it could be that of an imam or a teacher. Spoken in Farsi, the phrases create a sonic atmosphere reminiscent of Tehran’s streets. On the walls, the same sayings are printed in white. They blend into the surroundings, becoming a supporting element of the cityscape.

In Neda Razavipour’s video *Find the Lost One* (2009), two screens play footage of Tehran citizens walking on a street. In one film, someone has “disappeared.” Razavipour challenges viewers to identify the one who has been erased from the official media record and who has most likely