

a forest and a tree

Within the last twenty years, the interest of the art world in the “other” has caused artists from non-Western cultures to highlight their identity and cultural origins and to locate themselves within that arena. Theories and practices that inflated the importance of cultural criteria assumed that racial or cultural difference was essential to empower these artists.¹ However, attributing a different social and historical space to non-Western artists has marked them as “others.” *a forest and a tree* challenges the current practice of reading the works of non-Western artists through the filter of national, ethnic, or cultural origins. This exhibition seeks alternative interpretations of these works that are more constructive in perceiving the relationship between the self and the other. These works are shown together to demonstrate the aesthetic and intellectual ground that they share.

In *a forest and a tree*, the works of each artist acknowledge the power structures and antagonisms in society and imply a relationship to universal human conditions.

Trembling Time by Yael Bartana questions national identity and the state’s imposition of a belief system. In *how to make a refugee*, Phil Collins criticizes the representation of the other in the mainstream media. *This is Disney World* by Esra Ersen voices the conditions of repressed minorities. Jakup Ferri’s video *Save Me, Help Me* foregrounds the process that a non-Western artist has to undergo in order to gain recognition.

Emily Jacir’s *from Texas with love* underlines the human desire for freedom. *Somebody Else’s Car*, an intervention by Ahmet Ogut emphasizes divergent potentials implicit within the system. Ultimately, *Stock Exchange* by Sislej Xhafa questions the position of

¹ Rasheed Araeen, “A New Beginning: Beyond Postcolonial Cultural Theory and Identity Politics,” *Third Text* 50 (Spring 2000), 10.

the subject in relation to economic systems. Each artist searches for alternatives to the existing situation by suggesting new formulations of self and other. Although the sources of these works are the events that shape each of the artist's societies, and each work presents events or narratives derived from everyday experience, these works are open to diverse readings, and encourage the viewer to reflect on them in a larger context.

a forest and a tree is different from the exhibitions which have emphasized the positions of the local and global, such as *How Latitudes Become Forms*, in the Walker Art Center curated by Philip Vergne in 2002, and different from *Unpacking Europe*, in Boijmans Van Beuningen Museum, Rotterdam curated by Salah Hassan and Iftikhar Dadi in 2001, which reversed the relationship of self and other. *a forest and a tree* is also different from *Manifesta III* that was entitled *Borderline Syndrome: Energies of Defence*, Ljubljana, curated by Francesco Bonami, Ole Bouman, Maria Hlavajova, and Kathrin Rhomberg in 2000, which interrogated the inner borders of Europe. *a forest and a tree* does not emphasize the artists' different backgrounds or identities, rather tries to find their common ground, an appeal to a universal humanity at large, and explores alternative subject positions.

The title, *a forest and a tree*, is derivative of the expression "not seeing the forest for the trees," meaning that one loses the big picture by focusing too greatly on the details. The slight change to this expression comes from the object of the thesis that is to find a way of reading and interpreting the relationship of the part to the whole in such a way as to neither deny the specificity of the artwork, nor rule out its condition in a larger context.

Yael Bartana, in *Trembling Time*, 2001, films a scene from a highway overpass in Tel Aviv during Memorial Soldiers Day, a day of remembrance of the dead. The cars pass by at their usual pace until the moment we hear a siren. At that moment each car starts to slow down and stop. People get out and stand by the cars, showing their respect for the ones who have been killed. That moment continues for couple of minutes. Then the drivers get back in their cars and continue driving normally. The film continues as a loop for seven minutes. Bartana's manipulation of the scene makes the viewer feel that the people in the video are in a daze although the sound of the siren and its effect on the people are a constant reminder that the scene is experienced in real time. She depicts the scene in Tel Aviv where government and social life are intertwined. The momentary halt reveals the texture of life in Israel. Bartana's strategy is to foreground an event without staging it, and transform that event into a visual metaphor.

how to make a refugee, 2000, by Phil Collins is an eleven-minute video made during a photo-shoot of a young boy and a family in Czagrane, at the Kosovan border. The artist focuses on the representation of refugees in international media by showing the consumption of the other by Western media. His camera voyeuristically witnesses the process of creating news. The video reminds us that there is no direct contact with absolute reality, but always a filtered experience, a mediated and constructed one. In *how to make a refugee*, the political aspect of the camera, as a mediated documentary device, lays bare the power relationship between self and other, between subject and object.

Esra Ersen's *This is Disney World*, 2000, is a ten-minute video projection about

street children living in Istanbul. She lets the children describe their feelings, either by monologues or sometimes solely by singing. By foregrounding the mutual feelings that we all share as human beings, she effaces the distance between self and other. Talking to the street children in Istanbul, she reveals their invisibility in the urban space, and she makes explicit the circumstances that cause them to be who they are. In *This is Disney World*, Ersen draws attention to cultural and racial marginalization in Istanbul where the children are marginalized because of their social and cultural status. However, although the video takes place in Istanbul, the work definitely talks about marginalization in any society either because of economic or ethnic reasons.

Jakup Ferri, in *Save Me, Help Me*, 2003, shoots a ten minute twenty four second single-channel video in which the artist, in close-up, sits casually on his bed surrounded by his portfolio. For the duration of the piece, he describes his art works by showing photographic documentation in his native language. The artist, akin to a street vendor, has a confrontational relationship with the audience, which is assumed to be made up of curators and collectors. The artist's motive is simply to sell his art or to be picked up by a curator. At one point he utters "Give me some money! Help me!" By drawing an analogy between the artist and vendor while appropriating the language of marketing, Ferri exposes the infrastructure of the art world.

In *from Texas with love*, 2002, Emily Jacir drives during the daytime for an hour on a Texas highway while listening to fifty-one Arabic songs. The video consists of blue sky, which is the one third of the video screen, and the action of driving endlessly. The motive behind the artist's action is to ask a simple question to the fifty-one people in her family, her friends and her acquaintances who live in Palestine: which songs would they

want to hear if they had the opportunity of driving non-stop for an hour. In Palestine, it is not possible to drive for an hour because of the Israeli checkpoints. The artist compiled people's suggestions for music, put them on a soundtrack and listened to them while she drove. In a way, this very small gesture that we take for granted, such as driving freely, can mean freedom for people living in other parts of the world.

Somebody Else's Car, 2005, by Ahmet Ogut is a double-slide projection, which documents two separate performances. In the performances the artist takes on the guise of an intruder, who tampers with two private cars parked in a parking lot: the first he transforms into a taxi and the second into a police car simply by applying ready-made paper cut-outs. In many ways, his deft, precise movements recall those of a thief; yet whereas a thief by definition steals or takes away, Ogut performs a creative action, even it involves applying worthless materials. There is, in fact, a double process taking place in the project. By transforming one car into a taxi, a provider of public service and the other into a police car, a symbol of power and control, the artist is foregrounding the two divergent potentials implicit within the system.

Sislej Xhafa's video *Stock Exchange*, 2000, realized at the Ljubljana train station, shows the artist performing in front of the departure and arrival board, dressed as a businessman. He is making the hand gestures of a stock broker, conveying some of the information on the train travel board in sign language. In this piece, the artist makes an analogy between the flow of the money of the stock market and the flow of traveling people—the movement by humanity—while appropriating the language of economics. Xhafa uses this language to criticize the economic values that have caused displacement for especially Eastern Europeans. By foregrounding the situation of traveling people who

are forced to go elsewhere to work due to the economic conditions at home, he makes a direct link between their need to immigrate and the worldwide economy.

This exhibition seeks to associate the artists' concerns in an expanded field and to encourage understanding of the relationships between the universal and the particular. The multi-layered, semi-abstract quality of many of the visual elements in the artworks makes it possible to view their issues of national identity, immigration, exile, and the lives of the refugees and repressed minorities from a wider perspective than one defined by geography or ethnicity. The absence of visual specifics in most of the works invites viewers to make connections and associations between different situations and to interpret disconnected and fragmented contents as inter-relational and applicable to a variety of contexts.

By broadening the meaning of the works in such a way, *a forest and a tree* also asks whether art can be the space in which social issues, with their particularities, can be extended beyond individual cases, and be understood through more universal implications. Are there ways to reflect on the issues of immigration, exile or the formations of national identity that are addressed by these works while remaining respectful of the particularity of each work?

That *a forest and a tree* includes almost exclusively video works does not position it as a medium specific exhibition or its artists as video artists. Video is not intended here to be an identifying material or medium that defines the artist but should be seen as another material put to use in the service of an idea.²

² Lucinda Furlong, "Tracking Video Art: Image Processing As a Genre," *Art Journal* Vol. 45, No.3 (Autumn 1985): 234

Exhibition checklist:

Yael Bartana

Trembling Time

2001

Video projection

Duration: 7 min.

Courtesy of Annet Gelink Gallery, Amsterdam

Phil Collins

how to make a refugee

1999

DVD

Courtesy of the artist and Kerlin Gallery, Dublin

Esra Ersen

This is Disney World

2002

Video projection

Duration: 9 min. 10 sec.

Courtesy of Platform Contemporary Art Center, Istanbul

Jakup Ferri

Save Me, Help Me

2003

DVD

Duration: 10 min.

Courtesy of the artist

Emily Jacir

from Texas with love

2002

Video installation; DVD and MP3 with 51 songs

Duration: 60 min.

Courtesy of Alexander and Bonin Gallery, New York

Ahmet Ogut

Somebody Else's Car

2005

Slide Projection

Courtesy of Platform Contemporary Art Center, Istanbul

Sislej Xhafa

Stock Exchange

2000

Video

Duration: 4 min.

Courtesy of Magazzino Arte Moderna, Rome

Yael Bartana

Yael Bartana was born in 1970. She studied at the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in Jerusalem and graduated from School of Visual Arts in New York where she received an M.A. in computer art. Currently based in the Netherlands, she has lived and worked in Amsterdam and participated in the residency program at the Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten. Within the last decade, Bartana's videos have been exhibited mainly in Europe include 2004 Liverpool Biennial, and 2002 Manifesta 4. And more recently in North America, she participated in the "Tele-Journeys" exhibition, 2002 at the MIT List Center followed by a solo show at the same gallery.

Phil Collins

Phil Collins was born in 1970. He graduated from University of Manchester in 1994 majoring in drama and English literature. In 2000, he finished his masters in fine arts at the University of Ulster. Collins participated in the PS 1 Studio Program in 2001-2002 and IASPIS Program, Stockholm in 2004. Currently based in Belfast, he has worked in Belgrade, Baghdad, Ramallah, and the Basque Country. Recently, he has participated in the "Universal Experience: Art, Life and the Tourist's Eye" at Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art, 2005, "Normalisation" at Platform Contemporary art Center, 2005, in Istanbul and "Tir na nOg" at Irish Museum of Modern Art, 2004, in Dublin.

Esra Ersen

Esra Ersen was born in 1970. She graduated from Marmara University Faculty of Fine Arts, Istanbul in 1995 where she received graduate and post-graduate degrees. In 2000, she received a post-diploma from Ecole Beaux-Arts de Nantes, in France. Recently, she participated in the exhibition “Whatever Happened to Social Democracy,” at the Rooseum Center for Contemporary Art in 2005, 2003 8th Istanbul Biennial, and 2002 Manifesta 4. She participated in the exhibition “How Latitudes Become Forms,” at the Walker Art Center in 2002 and had a solo show at Moderna Museet, Stockholm in 2001.

Jakup Ferri

Jakup Ferri was born in 1981. He earned a bachelor’s degree from the Academy of Arts in Pristina in 2004. Most recently, he participated in the 9th Istanbul Biennial in late 2005. He also presented his work in “Coalesce: With all due intent” at the Model Arts and Nilland Gallery in Ireland, and in the Biennial of Young Artists at the National Gallery in Bucharest in 2004. In 2003, he participated in “In den Schluchten Des Balkan” at Kunsthalle Fridericianum in Kassel and in “Fish Doesn’t Think’ Cause Fish Knows Everything” at the National Gallery in Pristina.

Emily Jacir

Emily Jacir was born in 1970. She earned a bachelor degree from the University of Dallas, Irving (1992) and a master in fine arts from Memphis College of Art, Memphis (1994). She participated in the Whitney Independent Study Program in 1998-1999 as well as in the PS1 Studio Program in 2000-2001. Recently, she participated in the 2004 Whitney Biennial, and the 2003 8th Istanbul Biennial. She also had presented her work at Alexander and Bonin Gallery in 2005 and at Debs & Co. Gallery in New York in 2003.

Ahmet Ogut

Ahmet Ogut was born in 1981. He graduated from the Fine Arts Faculty of Hacettepe University in Ankara with specialization in painting. He participated in the exhibition “I am too sad to kill you” at Istanbul’s Platform Contemporary Art Center in 2006, the “Placebo Effect” at the Sparwasser HQ in Berlin in 2004, and in the “Yugoslav Biennial of Young Artists” in Serbia & Montenegro in 2004. He recently held a solo show at the Mala Galerija Ljubljana in Slovenia.

Sislej Xhafa

Sislej Xhafa was born in 1970. He first produced his art after migrating to Italy and enrolling in the Florence Art Academy in order to obtain a visa. Currently based in New York, Xhafa has lived and worked in Italy and England. Over the last decade, he has participated in the 2004 1st Sevilla Biennial, the “Hardcore” exhibition in Paris in 2003, also the 2001 7th Istanbul Biennial, and 2000 Manifesta III.