

Nil Yalter

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Nil Yalter

Editor

Derya Yücel

Texts

Derya Yücel
Juan Vicente Aliaga
Fabienne Dumont
Melis Tezkan

Conversation

Adriano Pedrosa

Design

Vahit Tuna, Design&Consultancy
İstanbul

Design Assistant

Ayşe Bozkurt

Translation

Nazım Hikmet Richard Dikbaş

Proofreading

Emre Ayvaz
İlkay Baliç

Print

MAS Matbaacılık
Soğuksu Caddesi, No: 3
34408 Kağıthane
İstanbul
T. (212) 294 10 00

Print Run

500

Printed in 2013

Supporters

Tansa Mermerci
Ari Meşulam
Müge Sevil
Melkan Gürsel-Murat Tabanlıoğlu
Taha Tatlıcı

GALERIST

Galerist Sanat Galerisi AŞ
Meşrutiyet Caddesi No: 67 K: 1
34340 Beyoğlu
İstanbul
Tel.: +90 (212) 252 1896
www.galerist.com.tr
info@galerist.com.tr



Revolver Publishing
Immanuelkirchstr. 12
D – 10405 Berlin
Tel.: +49 (0)30 616 092 36
Fax: +49 (0)30 616 092 38
info@revolver-publishing.com
www.revolver-publishing.com

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ISBN: 978-3-86895-330-5





Photo: Mayotte Magnus Levinska

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A Word for the Future...

Derya Yücel

Since the 1960s, in her multiple practice which redefines political, ideological, aesthetic and patriarchal narratives from a unique feminine viewpoint, Nil Yalter has proposed ways of experiencing life and the world via art. Throughout her artistic career, she interrogated, reoriented and dismantled without destroying everything she inherited –culture, history, language, tradition, identity –thus becoming a pioneer in sociological and ethnocritical aesthetic practices with her courageous and visionary approach.

This book focuses on Nil Yalter as an artist who continues to bear witness to the society she lives in from a critically sensitive viewpoint, and is the first in-depth study on her life and art. In the book, we opted to present Yalter's art and life via a selection of articles that adopt a versatile, multi-faceted approach that progresses via concepts. In addition to my own biographical article in which I try to present Nil Yalter's life and art along parallel lines, the article by the art historian Juan Vicente Aliaga focuses mostly on the artist's

work from the 1970s and 1980s from the viewpoint of "Feminism and Gender". Fabienne Dumont, the art historian who for many years has worked with Yalter, examined her works on migration and the working class via the concepts of feminism and labor. Melis Tezkan focused on the digital technologies the artist has especially since the 1980s in the context of philosophy and identity and analysed Yalter's contribution to the field of media art. With the interview he carried out with Nil Yalter, Adriano Pedrosa allows us to hear the artist speak in her own words about her life and career, allowing the readers of this book to sense the atmosphere of the artist's studio in Paris.

We would first like to extend many thanks to Nil Yalter herself for her dedication and patience in supporting every stage of the preparation of this book in which works – many of them perhaps to be seen for the first time by the viewer– are presented with a subtle approach in this comprehensive study. We would also like to offer our endless gratitude

to Adriano Pedrosa, Juan Vicente Aliaga, Fabienne Dumont and Melis Tezkan, the authors who, with their articles, generously contributed to the distinguished stature of this work. I would also like to express my heartfelt appreciation to the Galerist family for their praiseworthy and pioneering efforts in the presentation of this book to the world of art.

The act of reading an artwork is based not only on a detailed knowledge of the historical environment the artist lived and worked in, but also on the transmission of the memory of her instinctive judgment and critical sensitivities. This book is a necessary response to the disconcerting delay in documenting Nil Yalter's contributions to the field of contemporary art in Turkey as an art historical figure, and we believe it will contribute both to local and international art, serve as a source in the context of both the past and the present in terms of her historical/artistic practice and nurture new creative horizons in the future.

We invite you to become part of Nil Yalter's life and art.

Nil Yalter

Derya Yücel

“The world needed me to be seen, discovered and understood. If I did not exist, then the world didn’t either!”

Simone de Beauvoir¹

Nil Yalter’s life and art is the story of a long adventure that begins in Cairo and reaches as far as Paris –just like the river she was named after passing through Egypt discharges into the Mediterranean. This is the adventure of an artist who shaped her intellectual and imaginary map herself, inhabited the cracks of identity, belonging and memory, and constructed her life and art in a parallel manner.

Nil was born in 1938 in Cairo, where her father was appointed as part of his duty as the General Director of the State Liquor and Tobacco Monopoly of Turkey. She was four years old by the time they returned to Istanbul with her mother Güzin Berkmen and her father Kenan Yalter. The 1930s and 1940s were an era during



Nil Yalter with her mother Güzin Berkmen, Istanbul, 1946

which the young Republic followed the Western model to elevate itself to the “level of contemporary civilisation”. The country was still far from industrialization and social rights had not yet developed to a satisfactory level, and there was no widespread freedom and equality. However, the rulers of Turkey implemented their preference for a clear change in culture, which pointed towards the “Westernization” of almost all sections of society.

The 1950s were perceived in Turkey, as in other parts of the world, as years when the “winds of democracy” had begun to blow.

It was during these years that Nil enrolled in the Istanbul American College for Girls and began to paint, continued her French les-

sons with her grandfather Sabri Berkmen and took lessons in ballet and modern dance. She saw Galina Ulanova’s poetic dance and the way Claude Bessy eluded the darkness to take off into the air, as “*humankind going beyond its boundaries and reaching out to a perfect order*”.² In 1955, with her school friend Engin Cezzar, they staged Shakespeare’s *Othello* at the college, and she played the role of the young girl in Gogol’s *A Marriage* at the Pocket Theatre founded by Haldun Dormen, thus experiencing her first taste of the theatre. The same year, Nil travelled to Paris to explore the French art world; she did not feel close to École de Paris, but she was influenced by Russian constructivism, and the movements and concepts of Pure Abstraction and Hard-Edge.

Nil began to make inroads into the culture she grew up in, and to learn to tread softly along the borders of the place she was in, and sought to discover and try to understand what lay beyond those borders. She always sought a place beyond: other sounds, other worlds, and a different future... “The ‘woman’, who is offset to know only the absolute artificial contingency of life, can gain her freedom only if she assumes the responsibility of her existence”³ says de Beauvoir. Reading these lines when she was eighteen, Nil too was a “real creator who gave meaning to the world

and therefore to her life”⁴, and a young artist seeking her own path and her understanding of art possessed a vision beyond her own era.

“...The art I desire must include theatre, but also painting, dance, music, words... In other words, it is a fully prosperous, competent thing I want. Nothing should be missing in it...”⁵

After all, “...to imagine is to begin the process that transforms reality.”⁶ Nil set out for the first time to discover this competence that she could feel but could not name –she was only eighteen. In 1956, she married the French pantomime artist Theo Lesoualch whom she had met in Istanbul. They performed pantomime together for over a year along a track that covered first Iran and then India. From Tehran to Tabriz, and from Varanasi to Chennai, she would in later years transfer into her works the



Nil Yalter, İstanbul, 1956

“...desolation and abandonment that has millions of faces” she witnessed as she travelled in fourth class compartments side by side with people infected with leprosy, in the faces of the children and women she made pictures of⁷. During this trip, Nil turned into a ‘stranger’ who didn’t feel at home anywhere. Facing the weakness and ambiguity within the borders of her thoughts,

¹ Hikmet Saim, *Kadının Gizli Dünyası* [The Secret World of the Woman] (Istanbul: Arion Yayınevi, 2004), p. 25

² İstanbul’un Kadınları [The Women of Istanbul], interview, Atilla Tokatlı, 1961, *Milliyet* - ³ Simone de Beauvoir, *Kadın: Bağımsızlığa Doğru* [Woman: Towards Independence], translated into Turkish by Bertan Onaran (Istanbul: Payel Yayınevi, 1970), p. 38 - ⁴ *ibid.*, p. 169 - ⁵ Nil Yalter, İstanbul’un Kadınları [The Women of Istanbul], interview, Atilla Tokatlı, 1961, *Milliyet* - ⁶ bell hooks, *Critical Fictions* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991) - ⁷ Derya Yücel, interview with the artist. Paris, November 2012 -

body and actions, she ended her journey once she recognized the disquieting sense of questioning and alienation she felt inside.

The paintings she produced during this trip were exhibited for the first time at the Mumbai French Cultural Center from 7 to 13 April 1957. Nil then returned to Istanbul, focusing more on her paintings, married Dr. Selçuk Gerede and opened her first solo exhibition in Istanbul in 1961 at the Turkish-German Cultural Centre Gallery. She also retained her ties with theatre, and in 1963 and 1964 designed the costumes for many plays including *Othello*, *The Ballad of Ali of Keşan* and *Midas's Ears* for the Gülriz Sururi-Engin Cezzar Theatre. In 1963, she attended the 3rd Paris Biennial with her abstract compositions with Nurullah Berk acting as the commissar for Turkey. In 1964, her fourth exhibition was held at the Turkish-German Cultural Center Gallery with two other young painters of the period (Ömer Uluç and Fikret Andoğlu), and one of her paintings was purchased by the Academy.⁸ Nil received no formal education from any master, workshop or academy, and against the current of the prevailing academic approach to art, was an autodidact. Her exceptional condition also enabled her to create her unique approach.

“...First and foremost, she has a manner of colouring that does not fancy after those meticulous, languid harmonies. Fields of colour have been solidly applied onto the canvas. These fields are not the kind of drifting, flitting daubs we witness in so many other painters. They possess architectural structure; they are based on sketches, and a pattern of masses... May Nil Gerede continue along her path, it is quite probable that she will attain her purpose one day.”⁹



1

Nil showed interest in Byzantine and Ottoman art in her early canvas paintings, and produced geometrical and lyrical abstractions. She developed a synthesis of the aesthetics of Western art and Eastern-Islamic art particularly in her paintings, and discovered that there were intersections and similarities in these seemingly different approaches. During her research into these intersections, she found a way out of the potentially static dead end of schematization by producing ‘variations’. Abstraction and variation combined elements of Constructivism, Suprematism and the style of Bauhaus, and components from Byzantine and Islamic art were added to this. Merging the analytical and the poetic, Nil developed a sensitivity that formed relationships between artistically and technically different topics and fields via her version of the East-West synthesis.



2



3



4

1 In the role of the young woman in Gogol's *Marriage* at Haldun Dorman's Cep Tiyatrosu, Istanbul, 1955
2 On the road to India, Istanbul, 1956
3 Iran, 1956
4 India, 1956 - 1957

⁸ Jale Yılmazbaşar, Şehrimizde Sergiler [Exhibitions in Our Town], Milliyet Newspaper. 13.03.1964 Istanbul, p.6 - ⁹ Nurullah Berk, Cumhuriyet Newspaper, column piece titled 'Resim, Heykel, Dekorasyon' [Painting, Sculpture, Decoration], 1961



'Dyptique'
'20th / 21st century', 2011
Paintings on canvas, 1966 - 1969



Nil Yalter, Istanbul, 1960

“...nothing in life is beautiful, subtle, or competent of its own accord. Beauty, subtlety and competence should be created not in a fantasy world but in the real world, and the only way to achieve this is not to dream, but to act... The human being can create the world, and realize himself/herself only through action.”¹⁰

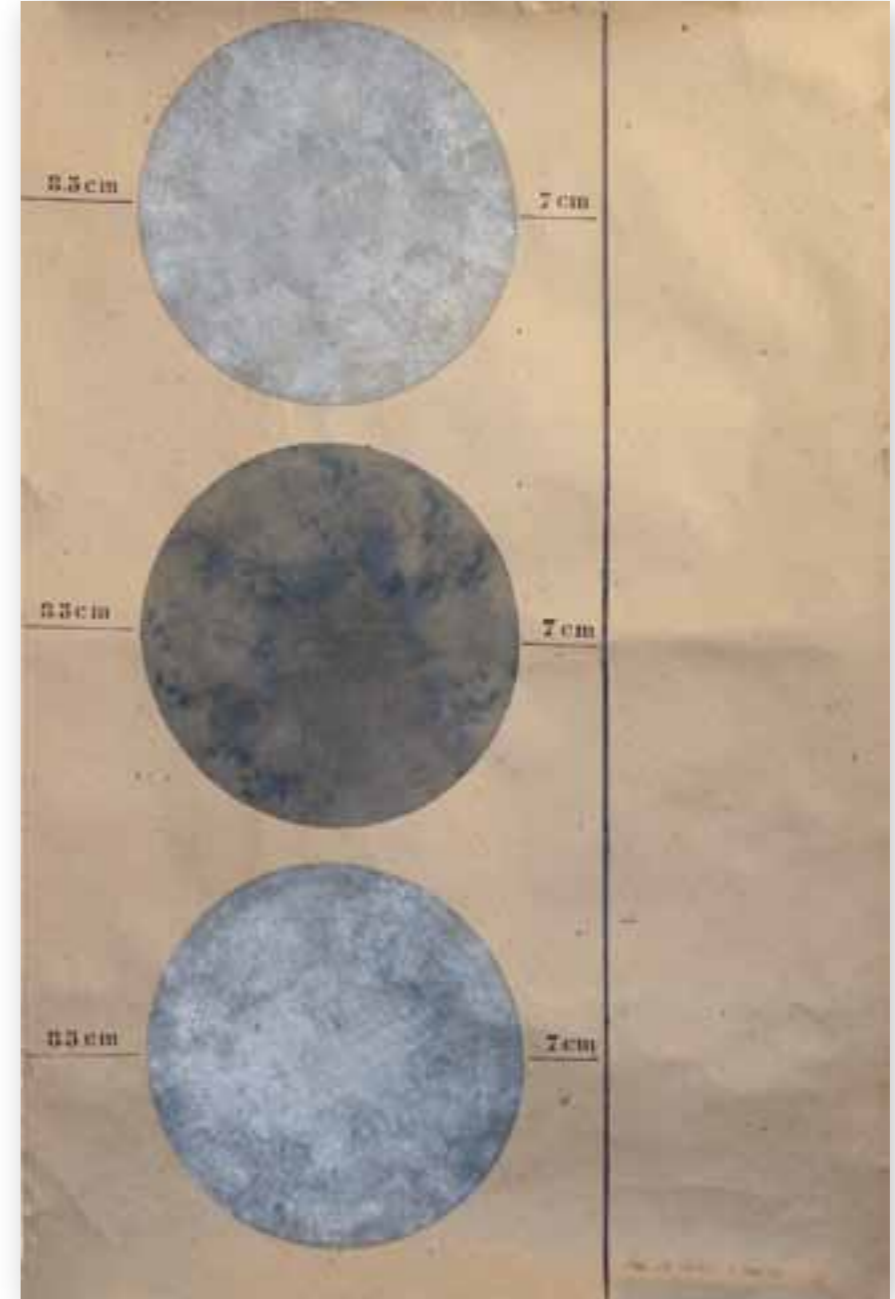
And so Nil realized herself through art. Was art not an attempt to reconstruct the world through a humanistic sense of liberty, and was not the kind of liberty to act as reference in this endeavour the liberty of the creator?¹¹ Nil decided to reject the boundaries of the conditions she found herself within, and to reopen the paths that would prepare her liberty; and in 1965 she migrated to Paris.

“...When Nil Yalter took the decision to permanently settle in Paris, she did not only forsake a comfortable life, but also dared to set out on a new adventure. The structure of the canvas paintings produced during this process was far from all types of complication and hesitation, and based on clear lines and forms

–a quality that has always attracted my attention.”¹²

Although the artist herself describes her first years in Paris when she “worked a little and suffered a lot”¹³ as times of thinking, researching and seeking her path, she was, in fact, at a crossroads where her cultural/critical artistic practice was taking shape. Because this period when the 1968 movement had begun to mature, structures of “power” that intervened in forms of representation were criticized and methods of reversing the established maps and distribution models of the narratives of sovereign superstructures were sought, had a significant influence on Yalter’s art. The artist was experiencing the aftermath of the Paris of 1968 on the one hand, and the Turkey of the 1970s on the other; and she frequently visited Istanbul during the period following the military coup by memorandum of 12 March 1971. This was a period when curfews, students’ protests and a chain of arrests dominated everyday life in Istanbul. During this time when anti-democratic pressure increased and some political parties and workers’ unions were closed Nil Yalter was experiencing a process of increased interest in socio-cultural and political phenomena and turned towards conceptual explorations instead of canvas painting in her artistic production.

“I was in Istanbul in the days after the approval in Parliament of the decision to execute Deniz Gezmiş and his friends. I followed the unfolding of events day by day, and I produced a work that showed the date of the executions getting nearer with silver circles and letters. I wrote newspaper headlines on butcher paper using pads and cut



'Deniz Gezmiş', 1972

¹⁰ Nil Yalter, İstanbul'un Kadınları [The Women of Istanbul], interview, Atilla Tokatlı, 1961, Milliyet - ¹¹ Simone de Beauvoir, ibid., p. 181 - ¹² Necmi Sönmez, 'Nil Yalter: 20.yy/21.yy [Nil Yalter: 20th century/21st century]' Galerist exhibition catalogue, Istanbul 2011, p. 21 - ¹³ Esther Ferrer. LAPIZ, No.60, 1989, pp. 32-39

'Topak Ev', 1973
Installation
Photo: Mayotte Magnus Levinska



out a photograph of the judge who symbolically broke his pencil to announce a death sentence. This work became the turning point for me to depart from painting, and head out in a different direction.”¹⁴

As the 1970s were shaping up in Turkey along an axis of social-political crises, the world at large was witnessing the consolidation of women’s movements, the development of important feminist work in America, the acceleration of the Radical Women’s movement with the impact of the theoretical work of Shulamith Firestone after Betty Friedan and new inspiration provided for female artists who adopted a critical approach by Linda Nochlin’s article dated 1973 and titled “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?”¹⁵ Nil Yalter believed that feminism was not merely a defence of women’s rights, but a philosophy and politics of liberty. According to the artist, the relationship between gender and power is not random, or accidental but systematic. If the “personal was political” then Nil Yalter was to seek nourishment in interrogating the body, sexuality, language and everyday existence; and rethink history, culture, ways of forming memory, art and images. The first work in which she realized her conceptual investigation and clearly displayed her artistic orientation was *Topak Ev/Nomad’s Tent*. This solo exhibition, held in 1973 at A.R.C. Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville in Paris and produced by Suzanne Pagé, revealed that the artist would not only focus on the theme of “women” but also include ethnographic and sociological methods in her practice. She travelled to the Niğde region in 1973, visited various settlements, spoke to the yöruk, collected materials, and carried out research on

the tents used by Turkoman nomads, and their life styles.

“In this huge tent, referred to as *Topak*, there is a reason for everything, every element of the tent qualifies a certain thing. For instance, in response to the black tents of patriarchal tribes, the *topak tents* are the zone of women. The roof of this tent opens up to the sky in a circle. This is where light comes in, illuminating the environment of the woman. The rugs on the floor and the plaits on the corners of the tent are, just like women’s hair, a decoration, an element of beauty; whereas the hanging fringes symbolize abundance.”¹⁶

At *Topak Ev/Nomad Tent*, which could be described as an ethno-sociological exhibition, in addition to the full-scale tent, the artist used panels to describe and explain the features of the tent, its interior and exterior structure, dimensions, sections, decorative elements and materials used in its construction. Brief passages from, a novel by Yaşar Kemal *The Legend of the Thousand Bulls* and a documentary film shot by Mithia Kolesar in Turkey on nomadic tents also accompany the exhibition. This exhibition was shown at Projekt ’74 in Cologne, Germany, the following year. In 1973, Yalter began to use the portapak camera produced by Sony in 1965 as a medium in art production – around the same time as women artists in the US and Europe. Began using it Yalter was the first among artists from Turkey to use video, as an artistic medium and she explains her interest in the camera for being “for the first time, a medium outside the fields of the male-genius artist myth like painting and sculpture”.¹⁷ With the inclusion of the use of

photography and video Nil Yalter’s interdisciplinary art practice adopted a hybrid form between documentation and art; and after *Topak Ev* continued to develop towards identities and societies subjected to economic, social and political discrimination.

Identity is a social structure, and a shared identity is a symbolic formation, the product of social imagination. In cases of religion or gender change, or migration, the ties with the common identity might be severed, or the common identity might become indistinct.¹⁸ Nil Yalter constructed her artistic identity as she oscillated between worlds rendered different, and realized that no identity could exist in a pure and unadulterated state anymore. From this time on, she focused on the social position of women, migrants and workers, because shared identities, inscribed with local and personal elements belonging to the artist, could be elevated to a level of shared universal belonging through art. The artist’s 20-minute video-performance work from 1974 entitled *Headless Woman or Belly Dance* which was shot by Joël Boutteville points towards a shared belonging (woman) without emphasizing representation/difference or a nostalgia for authenticity. The video begins with the artist writing, in a circular line, the words “la femme véritable est à la fois ‘convexe’ et ‘concave’...”¹⁹ [‘the real woman is both convex and concave’] around her belly. This body-centred approach is political from the outset, because gender codes and culture shape the relationship between the “woman” and her body.²⁰ In *The Headless Woman* the body appears not as a fetish object, but as a memory-space constructed within the framework of social, ideological and psychological structures.

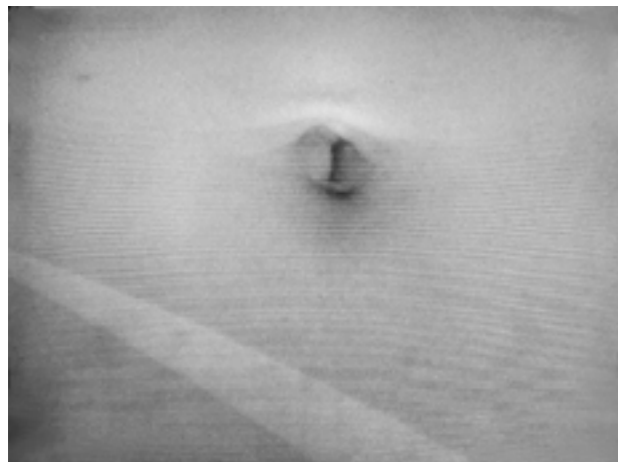
Henri Lefebvre states that the question

as to who controls a certain space is of vital importance, and that the spaces we cannot determine are those which determine us. According to Lefebvre, the production of space is an ideological act and space has never been “empty” or “innocent”. Whether concrete or abstract, since any attempt to define a space always serves a “strategy”, and thus contains a reflection, it is also political.²¹ Urban space for Yalter was, reminiscent of a dynamic scheme of a shared existence, and attracted her interest as a field where social relationships were reproduced. The artist began to reinterpret Paris from the viewpoint of “two strangers” along with Judy Blum, the American artist she met in 1973, during the *Topak Ev* exhibition. The work titled *Paris Ville Lumière / Paris City of Light* was the product of this period and became the first work that Yalter produced in collaboration with another artist. This research, supported by the black and white photographs taken by the two artists, their sketches and notes comprised the everyday and work life of the city described by architects and urban planners, and its spaces divided into religious, bureaucratic, cultural, political and commercial categories. The artists attached the photographs they took in the twenty arrondissements of Paris to pieces of cloth and they added their notes, paintings and drawings and on to pieces of cloth each one of which corresponded to an arrondissement.

“With this work, we formed a panorama of Paris. Every panel presents a critical view of one arrondissement. For instance, in the panel related to Montparnasse, the 15th arrondissement, we exposed the housing crisis created by

¹⁴ Esra Yıldız, ‘Nil Yalter ile Söyleşi [Interview with Nil Yalter]’, Sanat Dünyamız, Issue 125, İstanbul 2011, p. 51 - ¹⁵ Çiçek Kumral, ‘Feminist Sanat Tarihinin Temelleri [The Foundations of Feminist Art History]’, Türkiye’de Sanat Journal, May/August 2002, issue 54, p. 46 - ¹⁶ Zeynep Oral - Nil Yalter interview. Milliyet Sanat Journal, İstanbul, 1974 p. 10 - ¹⁷ Derya Yücel, interview with the artist. Paris, November 2012

¹⁸ Jan Assmann, *Kültürel Bellek [Cultural Memory]*, translated into Turkish by Ayşe Tekin (İstanbul: Ayrıntı Yay., 2001), p.130-138 - ¹⁹ *The real woman is both convex and concave...* René Nelli, *Érotique et Civilisations* (Paris: Weber, 1972) - ²⁰ Seyla Benhabib, *Modernizm, Evrensellik ve Birey* [Modernism, Universality and the Individual], translated into Turkish by Mehmet Küçük (İstanbul: Ayrıntı Yayınları, 1999) - ²¹ Henri Lefebvre *Yaşamla Söyleşi: Sosyalizm, Günlük Yaşam ve Ütopya Üzerine [Interview with Life: On Socialism, Everyday Life and Utopia]*, translated into Turkish by Emirhan Oğuz (İstanbul: Belge Yay., 1995)



'The Headless Woman or the Belly Dance', 1974
B&W video, 24'
FNAC, Fonds National d'Art Contemporain
Sammlung Verbund, Centre Pompidou
Istanbul Modern Collection

real estate speculation. In number 18, Pigalle, we condemned sexual exploitation and how the female body has turned into an erotic spectacle. The 1st arrondissement is the Louvre, and the 3rd is the Paris Stock Market. This is important because, women were not allowed into the Stock Market building back then. Joël sneaked us in, and after all, they did not realize we were there because of the chaos and activity, we took photographs, made notes about our observations...”²²

The city is both homogeneous and fragmented and every space that is integral to social life is formed according to the “organizational forms of power-knowledge strategies.”²³ Within this system, the “prison” is one of the most important spaces that serve functions including discipline, surveillance, supervision and normalization. Therefore the women’s prison whose walls were still partially standing despite having been demolished attracted their interest. As work continued on *Paris Ville Lumière*, the 11th part of which featured this newly demolished prison, Judy Blum met Mimi, a woman who had served a year in there. Mimi’s story inspired *La Roquette, Prison for Women*, a work that Nil Yalter would create in collaboration with Judy Blum and Nicole Croiset. Yalter and Judy Blum wrote Mimi’s story in docu-fiction form. In *La Roquette, Prison for Women* which also featured Blum’s drawings, Yalter realized, for the first time, a video recording with Nicole Croiset. In the videos in which the prison walls serve as a backdrop, we never see Mimi’s face; she talks about her days in the prison in a monotonous tone, and the objects that appear on the screen provide

details of the everyday life and experiences of inmates. This work is important not only in terms of its focus on the physical and spiritual isolation of a woman, but also because spaces of discipline reflect gender roles and their impact. *Paris Ville Lumière / Paris City of Light* and *La Roquette, Prison for Women*, criticized at the time of their production as symbolic and artistic gestures by feminist activists and as purely socio-political research projects by artists²⁴, were exhibited for the first time in 1976 at the A.I.R. Gallery in New York. The same year, *La Roquette, Prison for Women* was purchased by FNAC (Fonds National d’Art Contemporain) and remained locked in the basement of this museum for 30 years until it was recalled in 2007 to travel the most prestigious museums of the world for two years as part of the comprehensive exhibition on feminist art history titled “WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution / 1965-1980” and curated by Connie Butler.

With *Paris Ville Lumière / Paris City of Light* and *La Roquette, Prison for Women* Nil Yalter and Judy Blum were invited to an exhibition titled “Questioning Architecture” to open on 15 November 1975 at Galerie Rinoceros and organized by the socialist municipality of the time. Their friend, Alain Fleischer, who was making a science-fiction film on Paris at the time, was also included in the exhibition upon the recommendation of the artists. However, the gallery administrators found Fleischer’s film obscene, and for the added reason that it contained anti-propaganda against Stalin, did not include it in the opening of the exhibition. In protest of this exclusion, Nil Yalter and Judy Blum withdrew their work from the exhibition. The



1



2

1 'Amicale France-Turquie / Turkish-French Friendship Association', 1976-1980
2 'Great Strike / 4 Artists / Turkey', 1976-1977
Nil Yalter, Canan Beykal, Yusuf Taktak, Orhan Taylan

bigoted intervention they faced despite critical freedom being an essential part of art, was according to the artist an unacceptable attitude of the authorities determined to disregard any idea that was different. Nil Yalter and Judy Blum withdrew their work definitively, and they received the support of other artists taking part in the exhibition who reversed their works for the opening.²⁵ Following this and similar interventions, Nil Yalter founded the group “Femmes en Lutte / Women in Struggle” with Dorothee Selz and Isabelle Champion-Métadier in 1975. The group also included artists, writers, architects and filmmakers such as Liliane Camier, Isabelle Champion-Méta-

²² Derya Yücel, interview with the artist, Paris, November 2012 - ²³ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, translated by Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Press, 1977) - ²⁴ Diana Quinby, 1970'lerde Fransa'da Sanat ve Feminizm [Art and Feminism in France in the 1970s], *Feminizmin Arşivleri* [Archives of Feminism], No. 8, December 2004: <http://www.nilyalter.com/texts>

²⁵ Derya Yücel, interview with the artist, Paris, November 2012

dier, Michèle Katz, Milvia Maglione, Cristina Martinez and Anne Saussois, and aimed to act against gender discrimination on the cultural scene. Meetings held at studios did not only develop the artists' ability to move together, but also created a means to consolidate interdisciplinary dialogue and methods of collective production. It was also during this time that the United Nations declared 1975 "International Women's Year" and UNESCO held an international event in Mexico. "Femmes en Lutte" protested against these events in which feminists from all over the world took part.

"...We didn't take part in that exhibition, we protested it. We were against it. Why should there be a specific year for women? Is there a specific year for men? Is there a specific year for dogs? No... So we explained to them why we disagreed, and why we thought that it was a bad idea..."²⁶

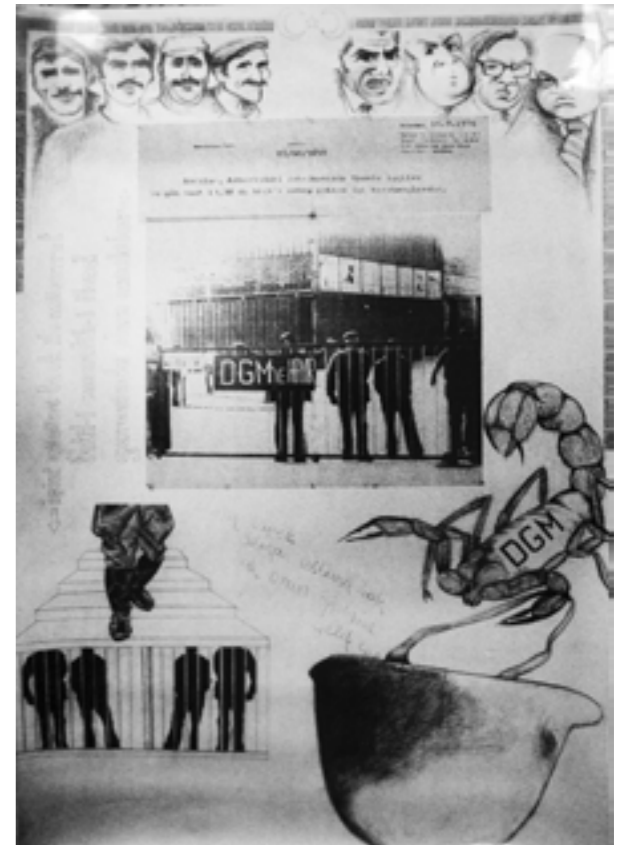
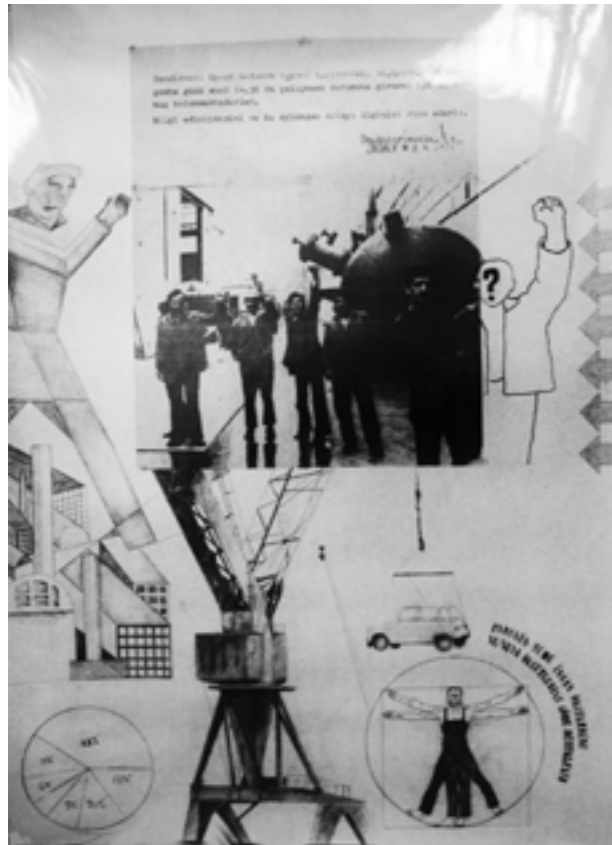
Although the horizon opened by Marxist-feminism excited Nil Yalter, she never adopted a rigid stance, and did not insist on responding to each problem from within Marxist-feminism. In contrast, she was open to new questions and new conflicts. She became aware of the danger posed by the taming of feminism at a very early stage. bell hooks claimed that feminism could act as a magic wand that could change the life of women, but that this could be achieved only by constantly reconstructing feminist theory, and acting in solidarity with other social movements.²⁷ Nil Yalter, too, was involved in social movements and politically engaged both in Istanbul and Paris from the 1970s on. She was a member of the (clandestine) Communist Party of Turkey, and along



'Great Strike' / Posters, 1977

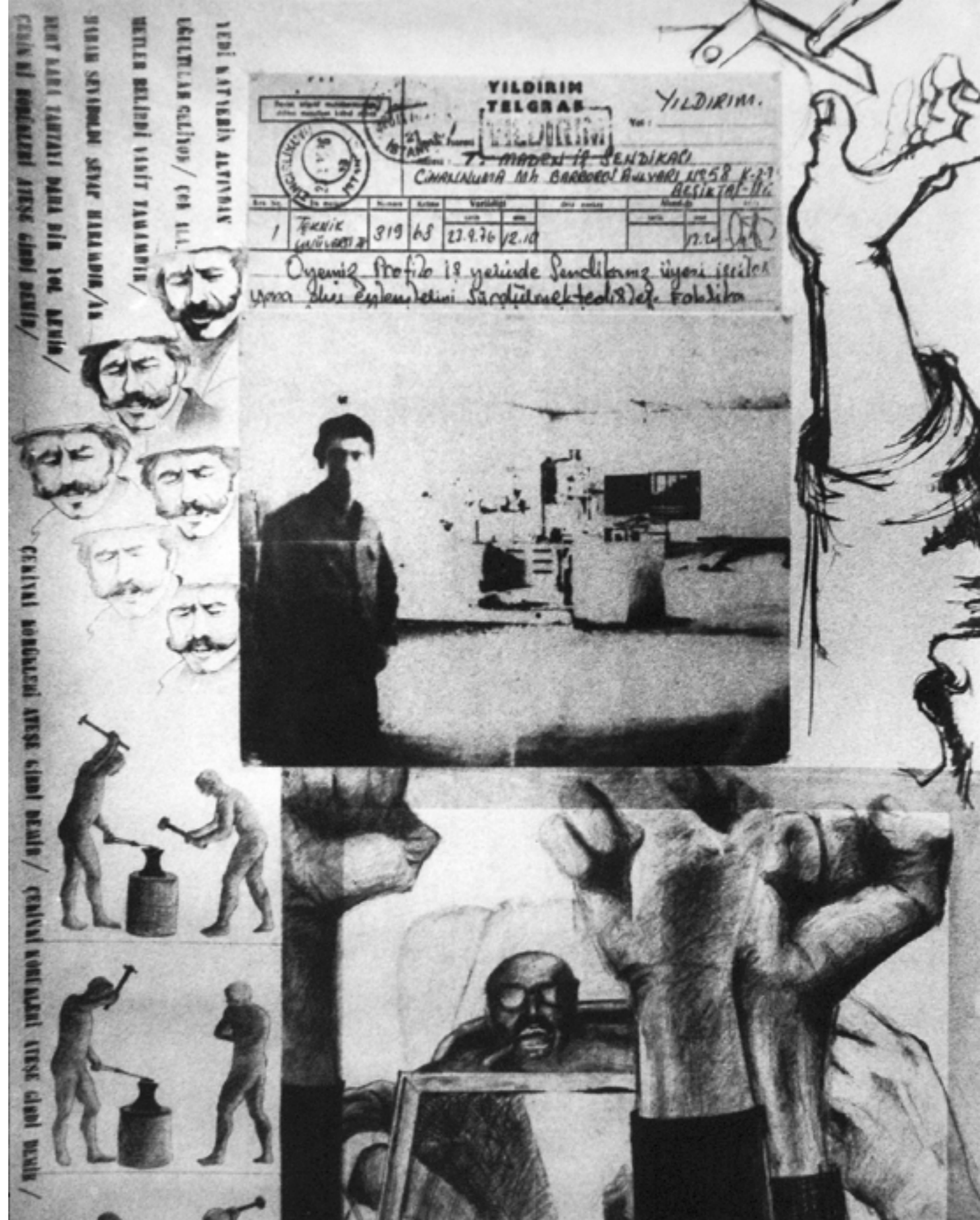
La fête de l'Humanité / The Festival of the French Communist Party

²⁶ Interview: Dilek Winchester-Yasemin Özcan Kaya, *Haksız Tahrik/Unjust Provocation* exhibition book, Ed. Ayşegül Sönmez (Istanbul: Alef Yayınevi, 2009), p. 96 - ²⁷ bell hooks, *Feminism Is For Everybody: Passionate Politics* (Cambridge: South End Press, MA, 2000)



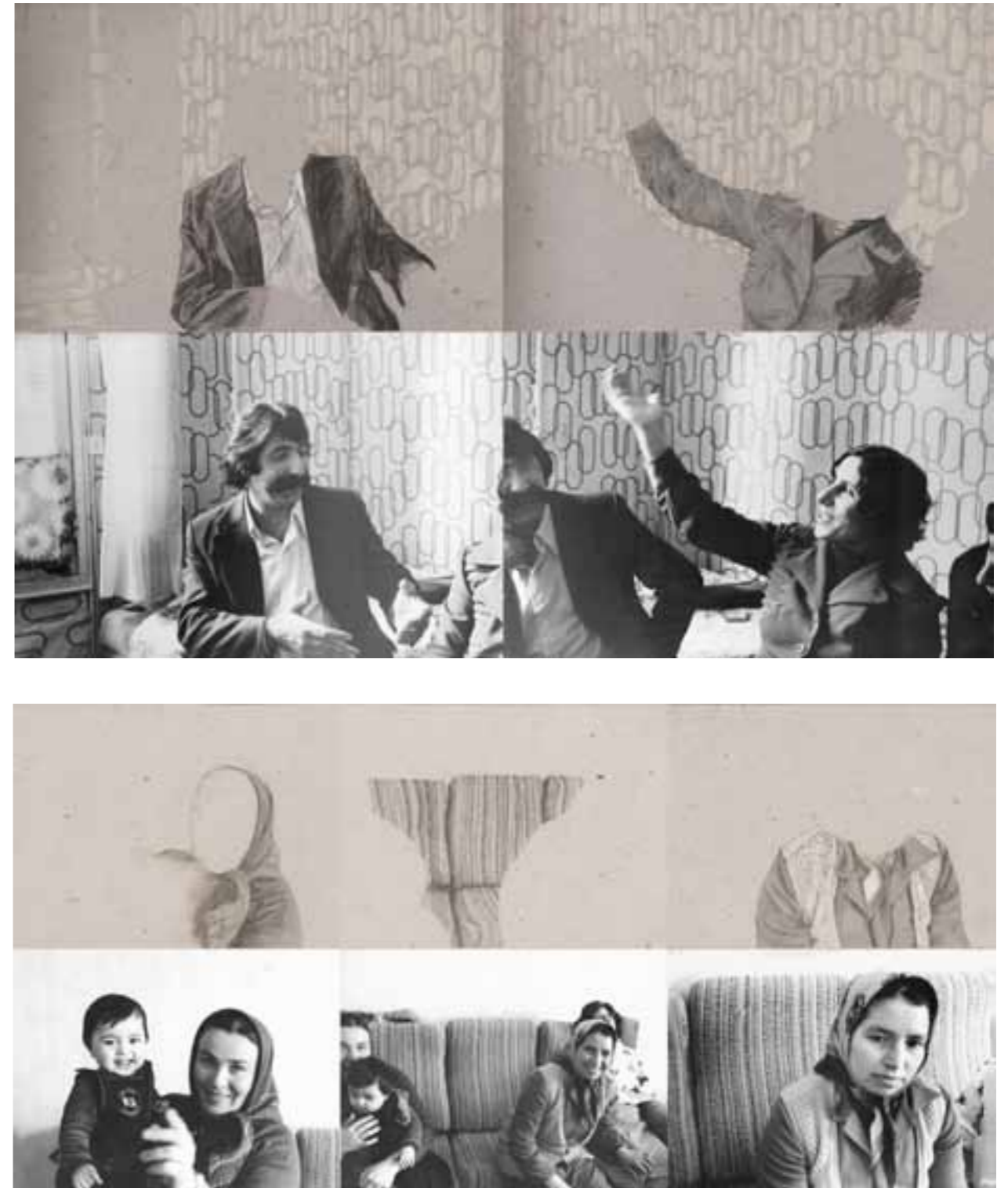
'Great Strike / 4 Artists / Turkey'
1976-1977

'Great Strike / 4 Artists / Turkey'
1976-1977





'Turkish Immigrants', 1977
B&W video, 20', photographs and drawings
Reydan Weiss Collection, Essen, Germany





'Turkish Immigrants', 1977
B&W video, 20', photographs and drawings



'Turkish Immigrants', 1977
B&W video, 20'

with her partner Joël Boutteville she founded "Amicale France-Turquie / The Turkish-French Friendship Association" in 1976, that would remain active for four years. Video screenings and exhibitions open to the public were held at the association, and political conferences were organized. These were the years when Nil Yalter's socio-critical production accelerated. During the same period, Turkey was suffering from political conflict and the complete congestion of the wave of economic and political change that has begun in the 1950s. Great masses were rapidly entering the political field on a wide scale, traditional patterns of belonging were being dissolved and traditional political structures (of the state and political parties) were experiencing a deep crisis of authority and representation, and during such a process where the tradition of criticism was being interrupted by sharp interventions²⁸ it was possible for art to open new paths. Along the same path, in an example of collective art practice, Nil Yalter carried out a collaborative project with Orhan Taylan, Yusuf Taktak and Canan

Çoker (Beykal). They secretly took 12 posters measuring 100x125 cm and featuring workers' union actions from the "General Mourning" action on 16 September 1976, to the *Great Strike* of 1977 carried out by Maden-İş [Miners' Union] against MESS [Metal Industrialists' Union of Turkey] to Paris. In addition to these posters prepared by using a method similar to mural newspapers, the exhibition featured strike photographs, workers' letters, and threat telegrams from employers, and was displayed for the first time at "La fête de l'Humanité", the festival of the French Communist Party. These works, exhibited in November 1977 at Paris Galerie Jean Larcade and later within the scope of the "Nazım Hikmet Week" initiated by the Turkish Academics and Artists Association in West Berlin²⁹, are reminiscent of agitprop posters from the time of Mayakovsky.

"...We assemble photographs, We assemble telegrams, We make paintings... The strike continues... We do not dramatize the events. We are not trying to add splendour to it. We continue to



'Turkish Immigrants', X. Paris Biennial, 1977
B&W video, 20', photographs and drawings

*make paintings... The Paris exhibition is a cross-section of this process.*³⁰

Nil Yalter's artistic practice, collective in nature, continued to develop in collaboration with political and cultural networks and communities such as associations, workers' unions and non-governmental organizations. The artist met with immigrant people through the association she founded, and increasingly focused on the lives, living conditions and political exile of Turkish, Portuguese, Algerian and Chilean immigrants. The immigration process

that began in Turkey in the 1950s gathered speed in the late 1960s with the guest worker programmes developed by European countries to supplement their lack of work force. By the 1970s, the entry of the capitalist market system, initially unique to the "developed" world, into "third world" countries became a natural process that triggered waves of international migration.³¹ *The Turkish Immigrants* series, created by Nil Yalter and Nicole Croiset in 1977, communicated important statements regarding what life felt like for immigrant workers in France. This work was realized

²⁸ Necmi Erdoğan, "Demokratik Soldan Devrimci Yol'a: 1970'lerde Sol Popülizm Üzerine Notlar" [From Democratic Left to Revolutionary Path: Notes on Leftwing Populism in the 1970s], *Toplum ve Bilim Journal*, Issue 78. Autumn 1998 - ²⁹ Cumhuriyet Newspaper, 29 November 1977

³⁰ Genel Grev [General Strike] / 4 Ressam [4 Painters] / Turkey exhibition catalogue, 9 November - 10 December 1977, Galerie Jean Larcade, Paris - ³¹ Cemal Yalçın "Göç Sosyolojisi [The Sociology of Migration]" (Ankara: Anı Yay., 2001)

with the support of two sociologists. Gaye Petek-Salom and Jack Salom, responsible of *The Turkish Immigrants* at the French immigrants Social Services and Harmony Bureau, facilitated the establishment of a relationship of trust between immigrant families and the artist. *The Turkish Immigrants* is comprised of video and photographic recordings of women, men and children's daily lives, their problems, demands and desires; and also the meticulous and detailed drawings of Nil Yalter. The only missing detail in these drawings of immigrants is the faces. Instead of either an authentic representation, or a marginalization of immigrants from Turkey, the distance brought on by the artist's interpretation was preserved. These works were first shown at the 10th Paris Biennial in 1977.

*"Before the opening of the Paris Biennial in 1977, Turkish Radio had announced that the work I realized with immigrant workers was going to be shown at the exhibition. The immigrants I had visited and worked together came to the opening of the exhibition. At the entrance of the museum, they showed their worker's IDs, and the museum director of the time through a fit saying, 'their kids are going to come in and touch everything'. And I told him that I would withdraw my work if they were not allowed in and in the end, they came in and visited the exhibition."*³²

The migrant workers series that began in 1977 with drawings, photographs and video recordings would go onto assume further layers over time until 1992 with the computer interventions, 2D/3D virtual and DVD-Rom interactive images. The lines Nazım Hikmet

wrote in 1952 in Varna gave their name to Nil Yalter's series on migrant workers: *Exile Is A Hard Job I* was exhibited for the first time in 1983 at the A.R.C. Modern Art Museum, Paris; whereas *Exile Is A Hard Job II* was shown for the first time in 2009 at the Paris Migration Museum, the artist's current comments added for every new display. The production practice of Nil Yalter which is spread across the process is related to the memory structure proposed by an extension of time-space unique to the artist. This method, in which the traditional representative perception of art is broken and transformed, appears as a significant quality of many of the artist's works. The work titled *The AmbassaDRESS* dated 1977/1980 is such a work. A white silk dress, related to Nil Yalter's personal history, is at the center of this work, which is an integrated installation, formed of photographs, drawings and a video. The experience of the artist, which spreads out, like the concepts of time and space, across the process between narrative and the languages of the medium, is prominent here, too. The diversity of the work in terms of its media is the outcome of an approach that allows the viewpoint of the audience to differentiate. The artist leads the viewer to details of the dress, forms visual compositions, and encourages the viewer to create meaning via images. The artist repositions the common signs between image and memory via a dress and the story that takes shape around it and combines parts of the continuous struggle against meaning and history. Settling accounts with the past and history is a considerably loaded/tense practice, and the dress in the center of the work belongs to a figure that belongs to Nil Yalter's personal memory.³³ In dealing with the concept of the



'Temporary Dwellings'
Paris - New York - İstanbul, 1974 - 1976
Photos, objects and drawings

³² Derya Yücel, interview with the artist, Paris, November 2012 - ³³ From the exhibition text of "Nil Yalter: Fragments of Memory" curated by Derya Yücel within the scope of CuratedBy_Vienna: East By_SouthWest at Galeri Hubert Winter, May 2011, Vienna.





'Temporary Dwellings'
Paris - New York - Istanbul, 1974 - 1976
Photos, objects and drawings

'Temporary Dwellings'
Paris - New York - İstanbul, 1974 - 1976
Photos, objects and drawings







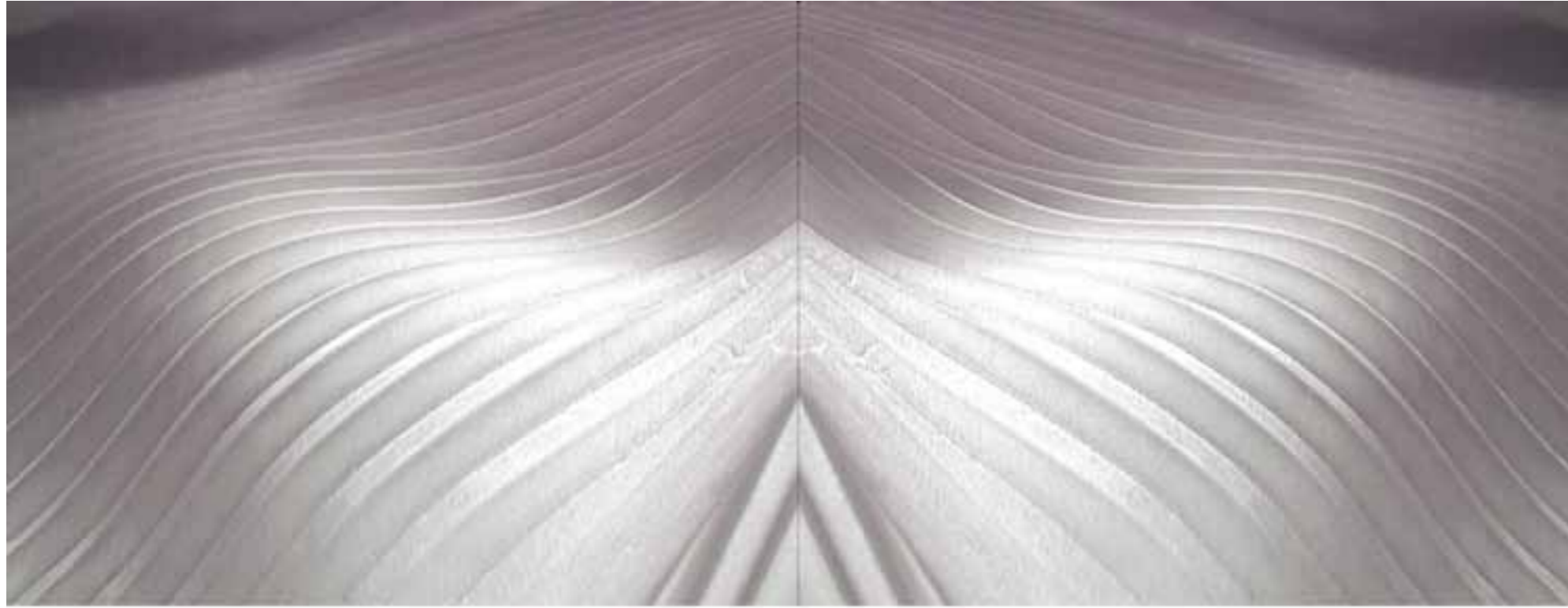
'The AmbassaDRESS', 1978
Video, 7', dress, photos and drawings



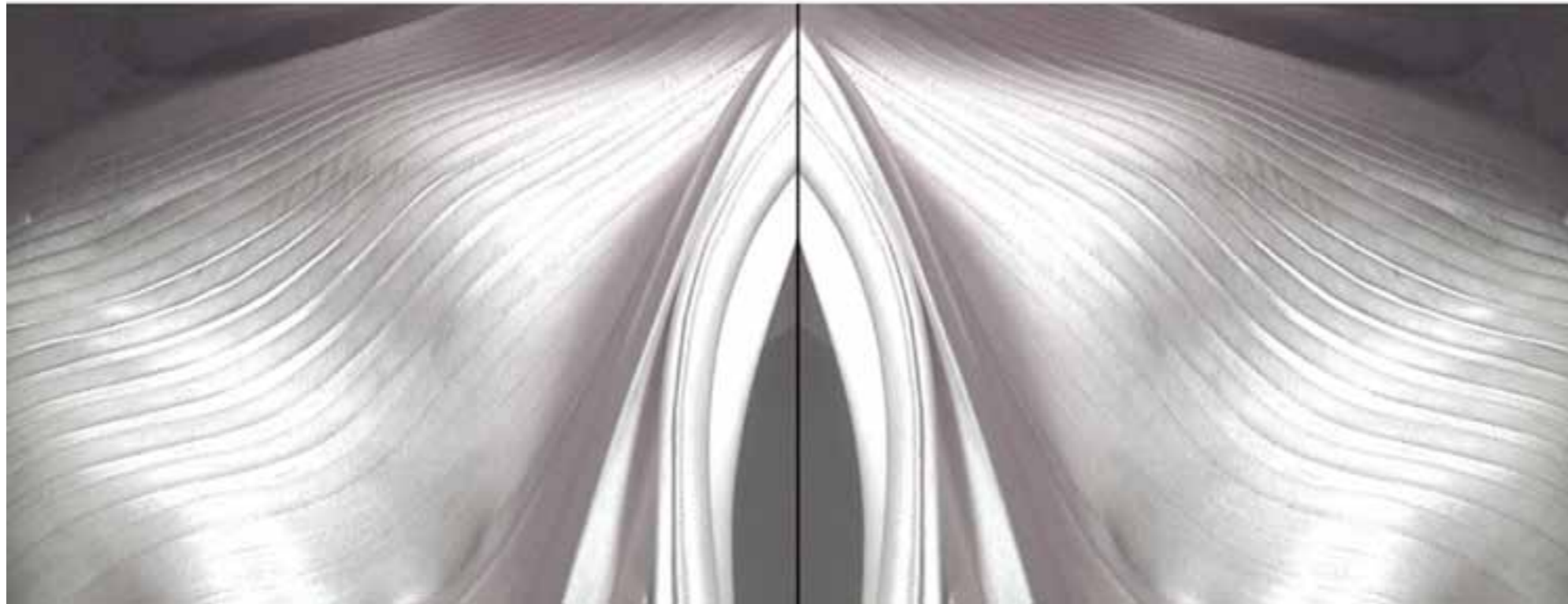
The ambassadress said to me that she did not know anything about the concentration camps. She told me that she also saved Jews during the war. A Jewish lady begged her to save her pekingese dog. She took the dog and gave her a noble Chinese name :

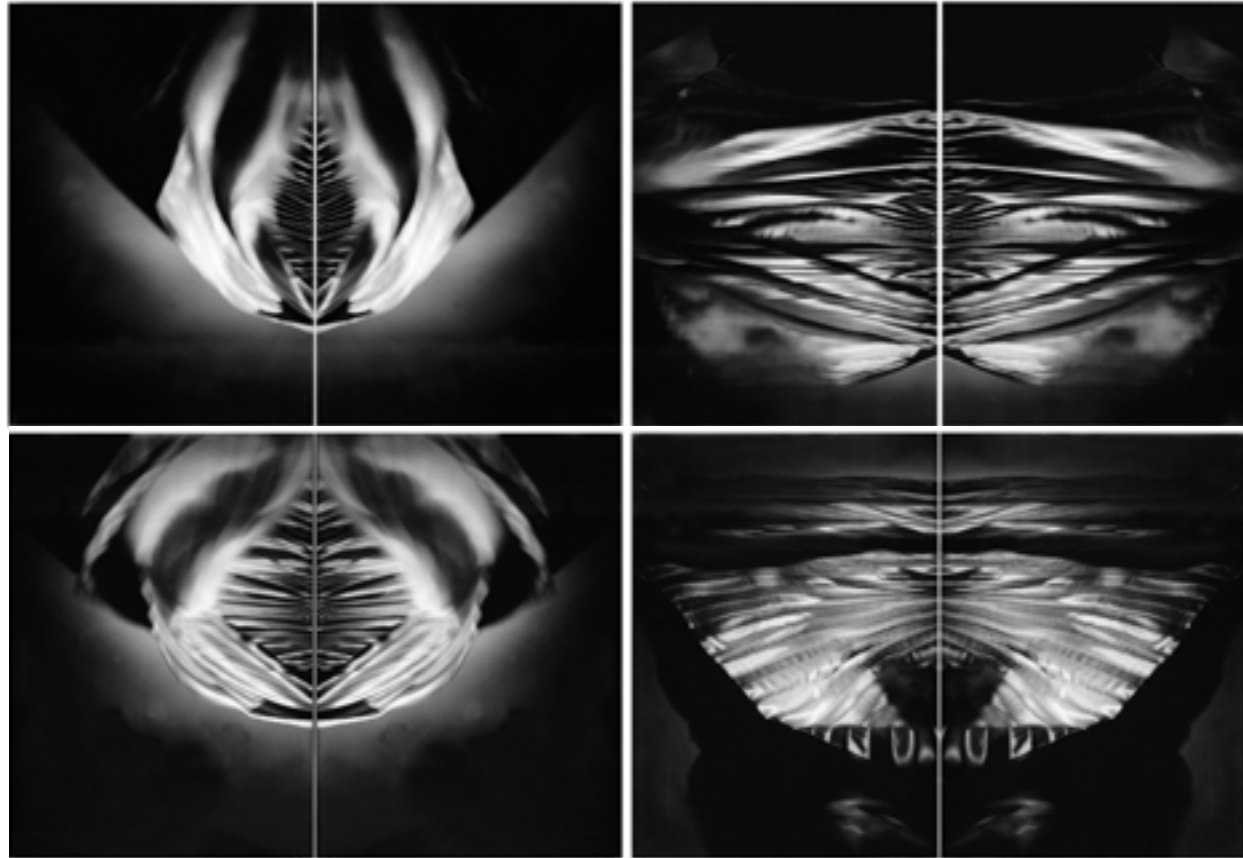
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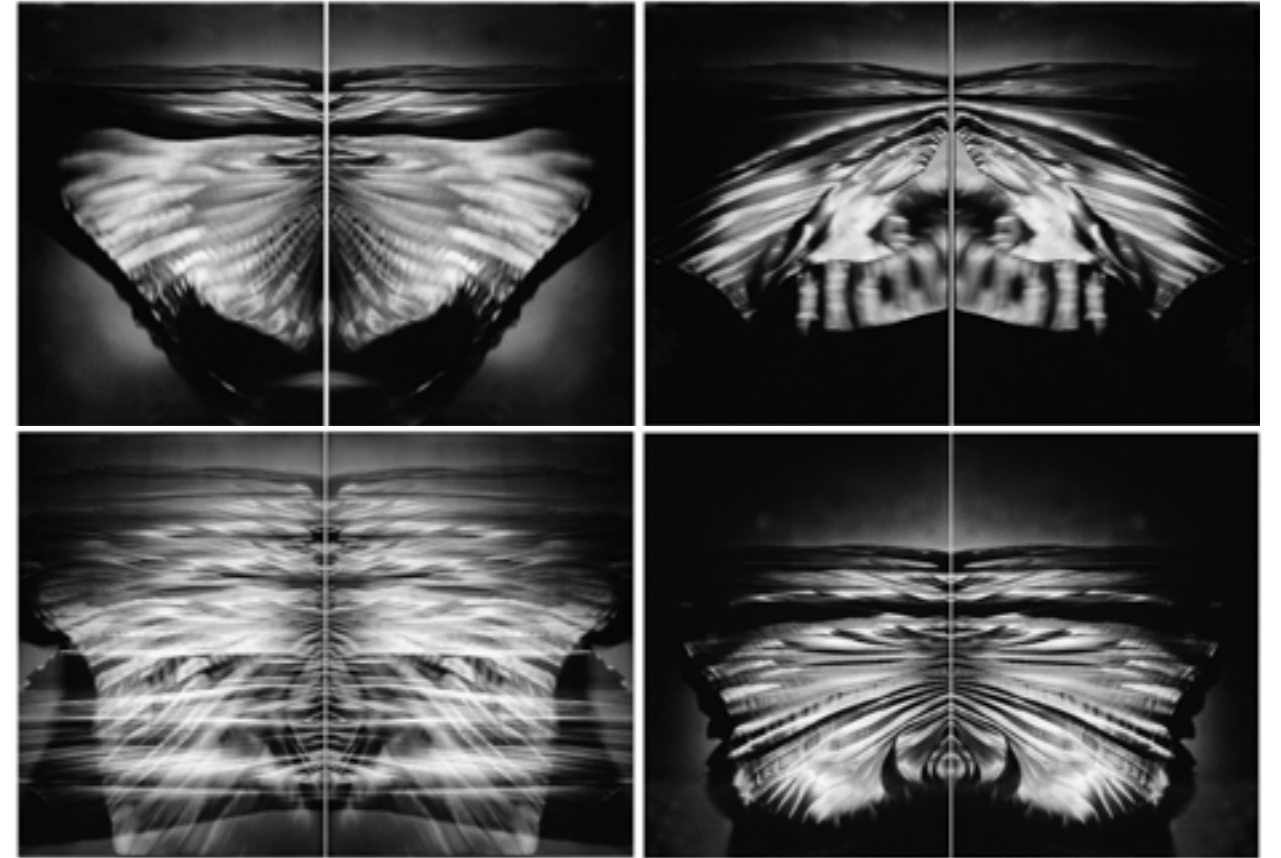


'The AmbassaDRESS', 1978
Video, 7', dress, photos and drawings





'The AmbassaDRESS', 1978
Video, 7', dress, photos and drawings





“woman”, highly significant in terms of her work, the artist has always refrained from repeating the hegemonic narrative that situates female identity in a marginal position. Yalter prefers to present the “female” identity as a figure who for a very long time was not given legitimate representation, and her approach is to point out, expose and criticize phallogocentric power structures.

The stories and struggles of women, immigrants and workers form the spine of Nil Yalter’s art. She detects the current situation of widespread problems through socio-critical art, and continues to use ethnographic methods to understand and reveal human communities

and their relationship with the home, country and the universe. Whether in the homes of immigrants, or in slums or ghettos, Yalter does not lightly abandon living evidence of suppressed histories. *Temporary Dwellings*, the work in which she uses cities as sites of observation and research, was produced during the period from 1974 to 1976 when she carried out research on immigration in cities such as Istanbul, Paris, Grenoble, Lyon and New York with the ethnologist Bernard Dupaigne. These works, which present scenes of despair that emerge during immigration, settlement and the effort to establish a sense of belonging, are shaped as hybrid productions that stand

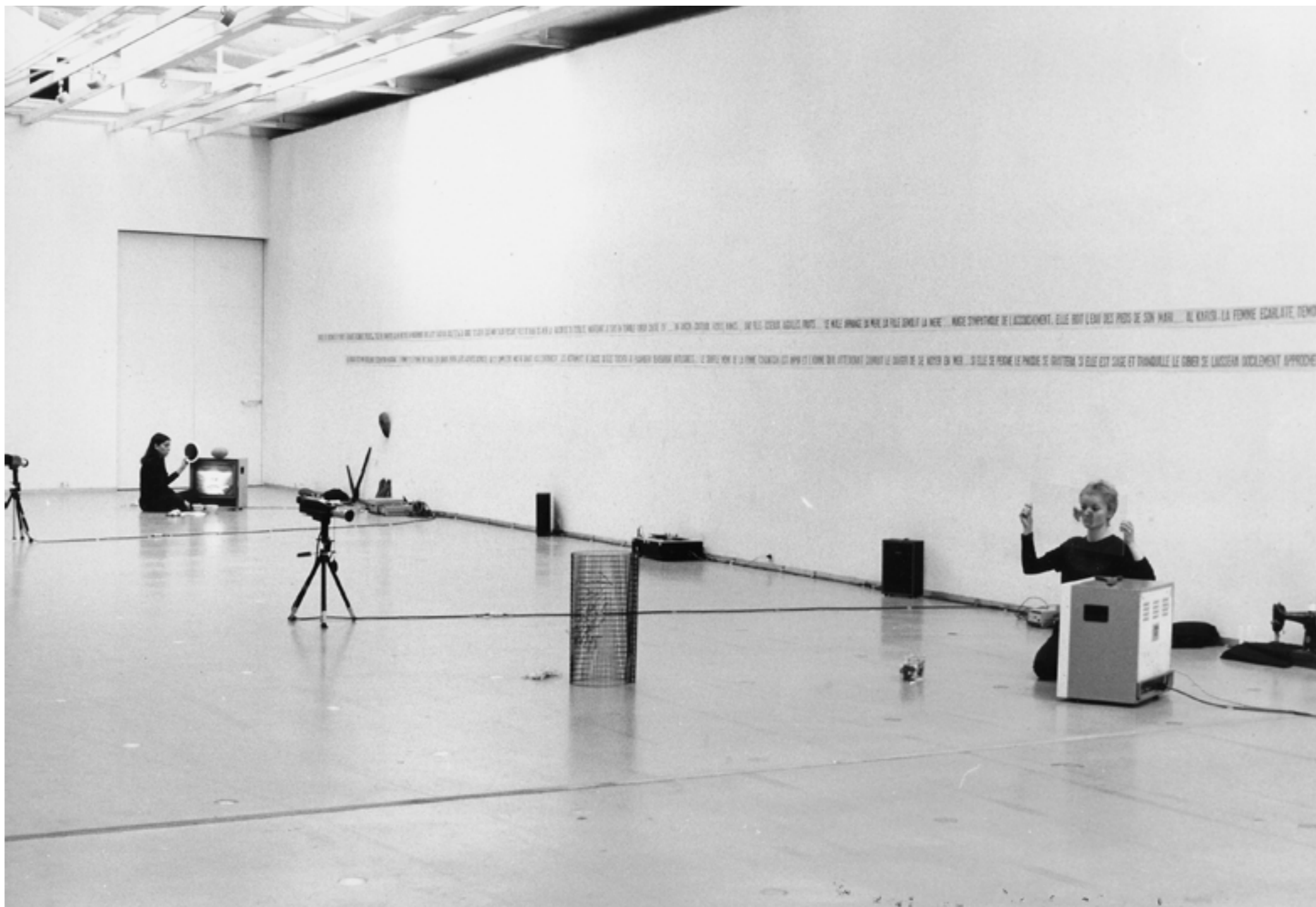


'Rahime, Kurdish Woman from Turkey', 1979
 Nil Yalter / Nicole Croiset
 Video, 55', photos and drawings

between drawings, photography, found objects, text and videos on the one hand, and an aesthetic-documentary on the other. In these works, the “city” is not experienced merely as a physical reality, or the sum of collective histories, memories and monuments; but rather as a fluid signifier that contains unexpected, incalculable, multilayered comments and narratives. The story of a woman who lived on the periphery of Istanbul intensified Yalter’s interest in the issue. The story of Rahime’s immigration from Diyarbakır to the ghettos of Istanbul, a cleaner lady she met at a friend’s home in 1978, is familiar, and resembles the reality of thousands of other women living in this land. Customs, blood feuds, child brides, disappearances and poverty... Nil Yalter does not turn Rahime’s story into fiction, and does not turn it into an act of agitation, but she insists on retaining the distance of a transmitter, or a narrator. As in her previous work, the artist invites the viewer to join in the testimony she documents with photography, drawings and video.

“...We grew up together, my daughter and I, we became friends. We grew up. She was like a mother, a tree for me, that gave me shade and let me sit beneath it... Unfortunately, fate intervened, and killed her... And I was left like a fish, drying out on the sand after the sea has receded. That is my story...”³⁴

Apart from the video she produced in collaboration with Nicole Croiset, the work titled *Rahime, Kurdish Woman from Turkey* comprising Nil Yalter’s photographs and drawings was exhibited in 1980 at her solo exhibition at the Centre Georges Pompidou, and at the event titled “Issue” which was curated by Lucy Lippard



'The Rituals', 1980
Nil Yalter / Nicole Croiset
Video performance

³⁴ From the texts of the work “Rahime, Kurdish Woman from Turkey”.



'Harem', 1980
B&W video, 45'

at the ICA in London the same year. The artist sent the catalogues of the events her work was included in and every article published on the shows to Rahime, and after a hiatus from 1980 to 1993 when she could not come to Istanbul for political reasons, she met Rahime once again in Istanbul.

*"I saw her again when I came to Istanbul in 1994 to open an exhibition. Rahime had become a candidate in the upcoming elections. She used to tell me, 'I managed to move forward in life with the strength you gave me'. It wasn't me who changed her life, but it is important to lend a voice."*³⁵

Thus, from the 1970s on, Nil Yalter did not only include the voices of these people, who were only very rarely listened to into memory, but she also allowed them to resonate through the use of plain media. In addition to the disciplines of anthropology and ethnology, the artist was also inspired by sociology, poetry and philosophy; and by conveying these disciplines to a personal context, formed her unique and complex area of artistic activity. She always preferred to use contemporary narrative forms and media, and also showed an intellectual interest in intersections between computer-generated images, myths and rituals and the art of performance. The one-hour video-performance titled *Rituals* realized in February 1980 by Nil Yalter and Nicole Croiset at the Paris Modern Art Museum, is a reinterpretation via feminist perspectives and performance aesthetics of certain rituals that belong to Turkish, Scottish and Siberian cultures. This performance underlined the similarities between rituals of different cultural traditions, traditional patriarchal doctrines and sexist taboos, and was presented to the viewer in the innovative set-up of an interactive and synchronized video installation. This interdisciplinary performance, created in order to explore and challenge the symbolic meanings of rituals, the social division between women and men and gender roles, was carried out in a detailed and synchronized manner by the artists.

Instead of fulfilling expectations related to an orientalist perception and viewpoint, Yalter rejected the claim to an authentic discourse and pointed to the image of a 'woman' who was shaped by religion and power. The artist had been interested in architectural elements and the topic of space since the time when she



'Harem', 1980
B&W video, 45'
Drawings and photography

³⁵ Esra Yıldız, 'Nil Yalter ile Söyleşi [Interview with Nil Yalter]', *Sanat Dünyamız*, Issue 125, Istanbul 2011, p.54



'Harem', 1980
B&W video, 45'
Drawings and photography



made abstract paintings. This was because space described the material space of human existence as an ordering, classifying and positioning entity. Just like in “Harem”, architectural space is a powerful shaper of behaviour, it has the potential to determine or propose behavioural patterns through its structure and order.³⁶ In this context, the Harem, which was a product of “ideology” and a panoptical space of power with its architectural form closed to the outside world, its latticed windows, and gaps extending up to three meters between living areas and the windows and doors, also presented the framework of a project that Yalter completed in 1979-80. In addition to photographs, drawings and collages, *Harem* also contained a video-performance by the artist, and related the 24 hours of two concubines who lived in the harem of the Topkapı Palace. The method she applied to use tradition and cultural heritage was different from that of certain post-1980 non-Western contemporary artists who ended up consolidating their ‘other’ in their works. In opposition to the exotic imagination of the ‘harem’ of the Orientalist gaze, the ethno-sociological methods the artist uses to include remnants of social/individual memories into her practice are evident in this work as well. The woman we see in the photographs that Yalter took in the Harem section of the Topkapı Palace is the third-generation granddaughter of a slave who was brought from modern-day Ethiopia to the Harem. The 45-minute video presenting the body of the artist herself and eight drawings and collages is accompanied by a text containing quotes from the letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu who closely witnessed the life in the harem while she lived in Istanbul from 1716 to 1718.

“...As a metaphorical work which treats myriad details that cannot only be understood through a feminist approach without surrendering to stories or a decorative fervour of narrative, *Harem* points to a turning point ‘with no before or after’ in the artist’s line of development. The *Harem* theme, later addressed by many other artists as well, is presented as a visual aggregate by Nil Yalter.”³⁷

Just like *Harem*, which was first shown at the Paris Modern Art Museum in 1981, the work titled *Women at Work, Women at Home* also presented an argument on Nil Yalter’s prescient art practice. This work in public space, which was realized as part of the 1981 La Rochelle Festival, initiated by the Mireuil Provincial Assembly and organized by its Visual Arts Director Joël Boutteville, created direct and unexpected encounters with the viewer in public buses, bus-stops and street billboards, and thus in the very midst of everyday life. According to Yalter, public space is a socio-cultural indicator, and artists may use it as a functional platform. *Women at Work, Women at Home*, produced in collaboration with Nicole Croiset, transformed the commercial advertising billboards spread out across the city in an extraordinary way. The two artists succeed in transforming this medium that of the advertising industry which affirms the patriarchal viewpoint that often treats the woman as an object of desire, a housewife, a mother or a partner. Into a socio-critical platform the posters, designed using photographs, texts and drawings, present the stories of ten different working-class women, two of which are immigrants. This series of fragments that emerged from the thoughts, problems and dreams of



'Women at Work, Women at Home', 1981
Nil Yalter / Nicole Croiset
A public space project

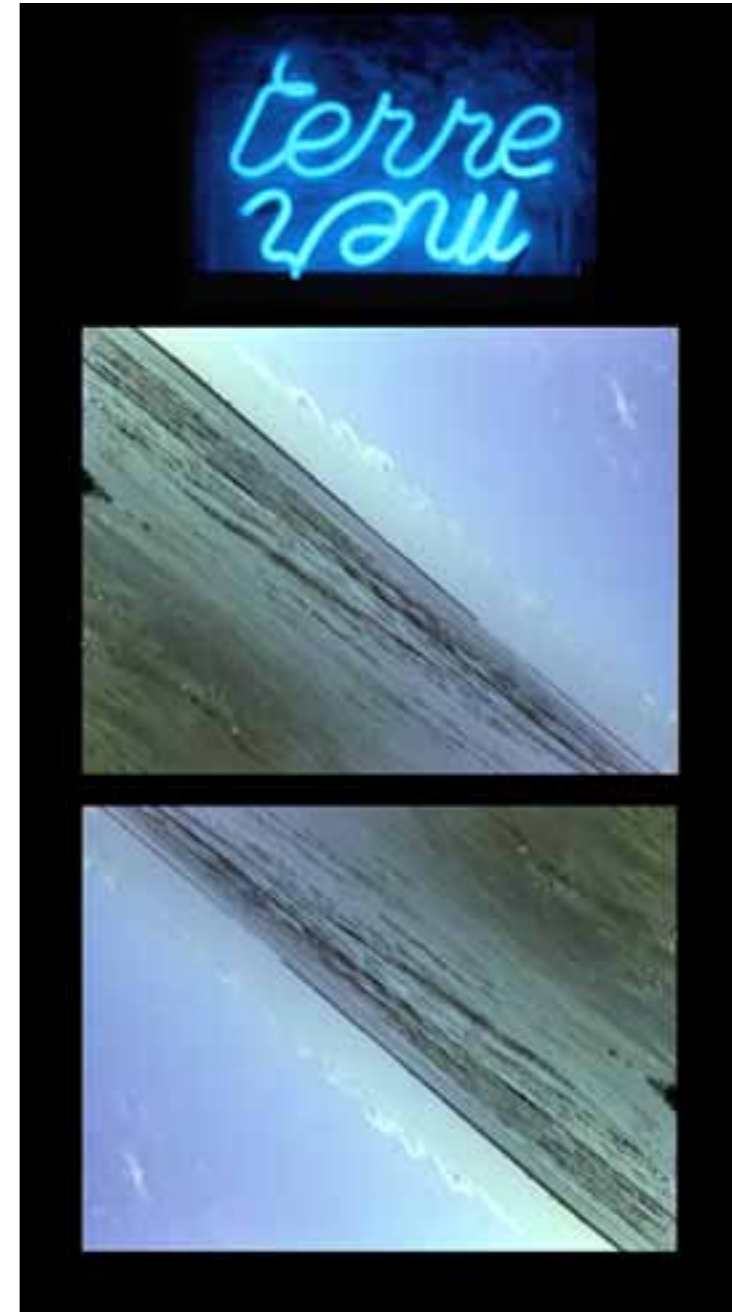
³⁶ Eşin Kasaplıoğlu, "Mekanda Kalite Ölçütleri [Criteria of Spatial Quality]", *Sanat-Tasarım Journal Issue 1*, Mekan, YTÜ, 2004, Istanbul, p. 10 -
³⁷ Necmi Sönmez, 'Nil Yalter: 20th/21st century' Galerist exhibition catalogue, Istanbul 2011, p. 26



'Professions of the Sea / Les Métiers de la Mer', 1982
Nil Yalter / Nicole Croiset
Video installation



'Professions of the Sea / Les Métiers de la Mer', 1982
Nil Yalter / Nicole Croiset
Video installation



women at work or home, with their family and during their spare time, aimed to record an 'ideal' simulation, but the 'truth'.

*"...billboards are used to repeat keywords or sentences from the women's stories. This enables the artists to lend form to the experiences, fear and happiness of these women. These urban installations create an area that goes beyond the visibility of a landscape that belongs to women to present intersecting scenes from the reality of factories, the world of workers and their family life. These symbolic gestures do not only reveal class and gender differentiation, but also show the participation of women in a certain social order including unpaid housework. Thus, the artists produce a participatory performance between the vehicles these women use to travel to work and the spaces of home and work."*³⁸

After this period, Nil Yalter continued to reveal the nomadic displacements between the public and the private, memory and modernity and the archaic and the contemporary worlds using metaphorical and feminist methods. *Les Métiers de la Mer/Professions of the Sea*, completed with Nicole Croiset in 1982 and first exhibited the same year at the La Rochelle Festival, focuses on the contemporary narratives of sea workers via mythological stories. This 3-channel video installation was exhibited inside a platform made in the 16th century in this city on the Atlantic coast. One of the videos in the installation features the sea workers talking about their working conditions, daily work, beliefs, and superstitions. The other two monitors, one placed facing up, the other down, show aesthetic expressions related to these stories, and images of artistic associa-

tion. These images have been edited to look like as if they changed directions when they collide with the surface of the water. This video-installation where reality is appropriated in the form of an aesthetic reflection, is accompanied by panels featuring quotes from the Finnish epic *Kalevala*, texts and photographical compositions. The ancient *Kalevala* epic³⁹ is used in *Les Métiers de la Mer* to communicate how in a market shaped by the fishing industry, capitalism, backed by globalization as it changed dimension in the 1980s, deepened the gaps between the rich and the poor and how the workforce market was layered with problems of job security, low pay and sexism. This epic, which ends by Väinämöinen leaving *Kalevala* to find the light to bring it to the people, becomes a metaphor shedding light on the struggle of the invisible to become visible.

*"Why? To tell the story of sea workers... To get to know these people... To reveal the unique wisdom each of these individuals possess, and to share that wisdom. To form the fragmented images and sounds of an anchored reality they formulate with their words. To create an aesthetics, a plastic language that can serve as our contribution to the culture of workers..."*⁴⁰

Nil Yalter's artistic language, which clearly presents a historical-social syntax, contains the distinctive viewpoint of Marxist-feminist consciousness, and a knowledge-action relationship, which nurtures this viewpoint. Acting from this viewpoint, the artist advocates the representation of the knowledge of the disenfranchised social classes through art. This is why factories, a significant part of the story of the working class, become the departure



'Cadence 2x8', 1984
Nil Yalter / Nicole Croiset
Video installation, Renault Sandouville

point of some of her works. Factories are at the center of the "Fordist pattern of mass production, where unskilled labour is put to work on single-purpose machines to produce standard goods."⁴¹ The role of unions, organized to give voice to the social rights of factory workers – with migrant workers forming a significant percentage – including housing, education and

social security, play an important social and political role. Thus, upon the invitation of the workers' union of the Renault factory at the Le Havre harbour and within the scope of the event titled *Sculpture dans l'Usine/Sculpture in the Factory* Nil Yalter and Nicole Croiset completed their site-specific video-installation titled *Cadence 2x8* in 1984. The 2-channel vid-

³⁸ Fabienne Dumont, translated by Derya Yücel 'Nil Yalter: Memory, migrants and workers in 1970s-1980s France', n.paradoxa, Issue (26 July 2010), p. 57
³⁹ Elias Lönnrot, 1849. Translated into Turkish by Hilmi Ziya Ülken, 1965, *Lâle ve Muammer Oğuz* (Kıralı Ofset, 1982) - ⁴⁰ Nil Yalter - Esther Ferrer interview, 'Frontier between Art and Reality', LAPIZ. International Art Magazine. Vol. 60 (1989). pp. 32-39

⁴¹ Krishan Kumar, *From Post-Industrial to Post-Modern Society: New Theories of the Contemporary World* (New Jersey: John Wiley&Sons, 2009), p. 67

eo-installation featuring eight monitors and mirrors is composed of the collage-editing of footage shot in the Renault Sandouville factory. In these videos, the bodies of the workers have become part of the constant rhythm created by large industrial machines. The body is like an extension, a continuation of the machine. Futurism and Constructivism claimed that machine dynamism had to be freely expressed, however these rhythmical sounds, noises and movements are not the construction of the new world that these movements believed in. This seemingly endless rhythm is a fluctuating part of the gigantic mechanism that represents the consumer society nurtured by objects of desire. *Cadence 2x8* was first exhibited as a site-specific installation at the Renault Sandouville factory where this mechanism was in operation, and later the same year at the André Malraux Museum.

Figures that occupy the subject position in Nil Yalter's works are often workers, immigrants and women. When the axis of these identity structures is considered, it is not surprising to discover a map related to the personal memory of the artist, since Yalter constructed her identity via an oscillation between worlds rendered differently. Placing the archaeology of the self and identity at the center of her works, the artist treats the tension between the past and the present along with the remnants of her personal memory. Her 1987 work which entitled *Pyramis ou le Voyage d'Eudore / Pyramis, the Voyage of Eudore* inspired by Chateaubriand's text *Les Martyrs*, and which interprets personal reality and ancient mythology together, was conceived during her trip to Egypt. Various images from the Luxor Temple are presented in this 3-channel,

12 monitor video-installation. Fluid images of sphinxes from a sealed time of the ancient continent are transformed into 'human' faces as if to refer to Oedipus's response to the riddle. In these fictitious scenes, images are symmetrically diversified, meshed and deformed, alluding to the change in the artist's personal memory as it passes from one time period to the other. Reconstructed through the act of remembering, the "past" can only appear if a relationship with it is formed. Here, the act of remembering is a consciously formed relationship with the past, which transgresses cultural formation and rupture. Although the artist is aware that memory is related to social conditions, she does not consider accepting a dependency to the social "framework" that shapes memories, because there is no "pure truth of remembering" and identity is a concept that contains multiplicity. There can be no unity without diversity, and no selfhood without others.⁴² Nil Yalter uses art to create an awareness of this, and courageously declares that there is no unadulterated condition possible for identity.

"...The artist's in-depth exploration of the same themes via different content in her work produced since 1965 underlines her conceptual tendency that makes reference to a fertile memory. This tendency is both hermetic in structure, and in an unusual manner, aims to reach, via oppositions, the finest ends of its own existence at places where the geography, climate and history of the three old continents intertwine."⁴³

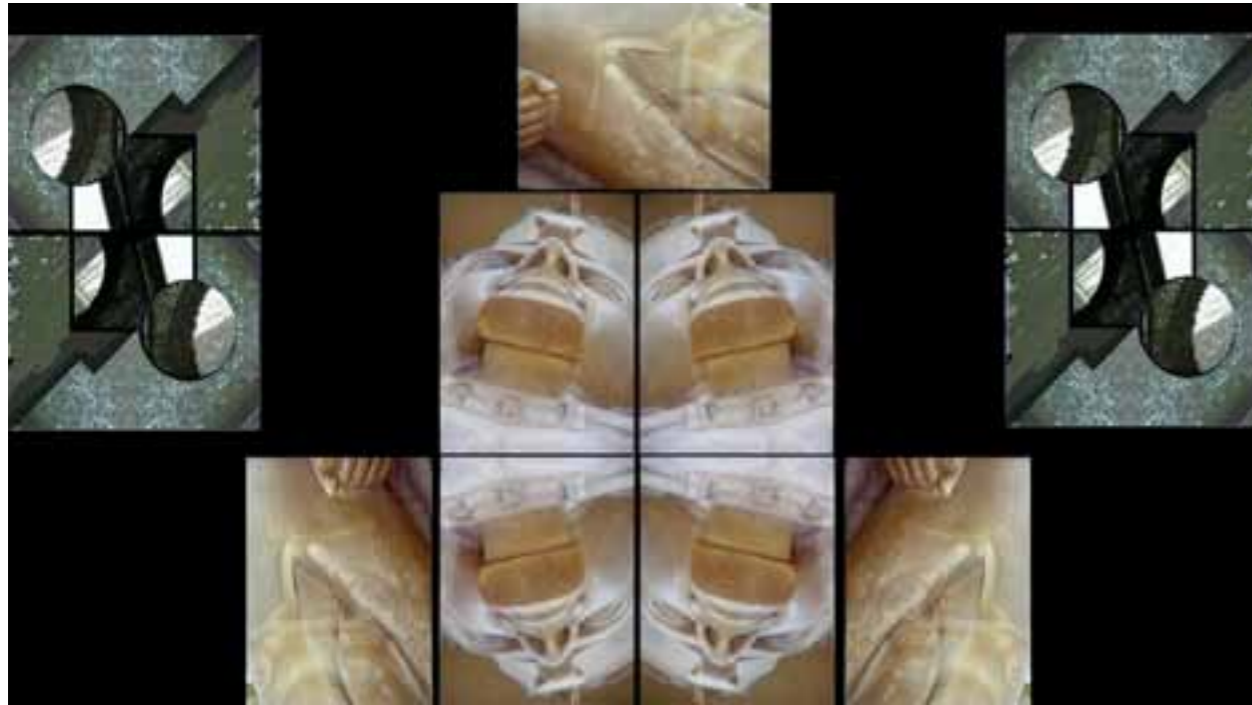
The 1980s became a new period for Nil Yalter in which she did not only carry out



'Pyramis, The Voyage of Eudore / Pyramis ou le Voyage d'Eudore', 1987
Video installation

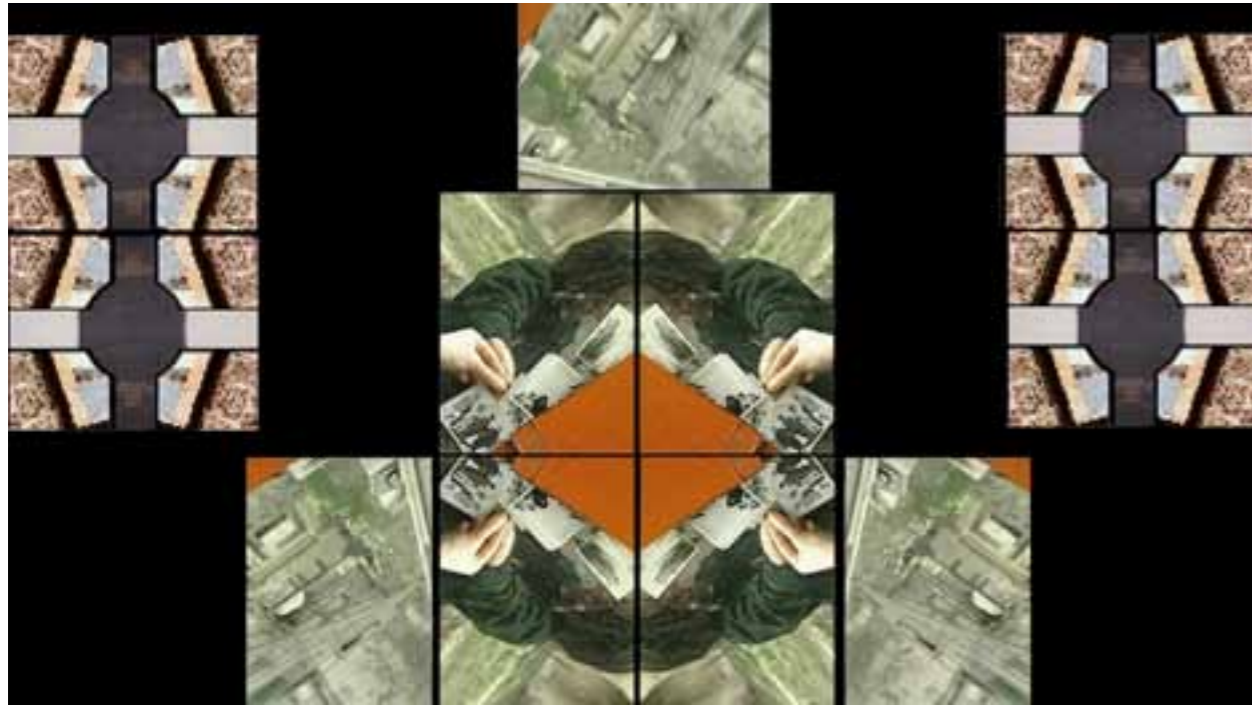
⁴² Jan Assmann, *Kültürel Bellek* [Cultural Memory], translated into Turkish by Ayşe Tekin, (Istanbul: Ayrıntı Yay., 2001), pp. 4 and 135 - ⁴³ Necmi Sönmez, 'Nil Yalter' video installations exhibition catalogue, Akbank Art Center, Istanbul 1994, p. 7



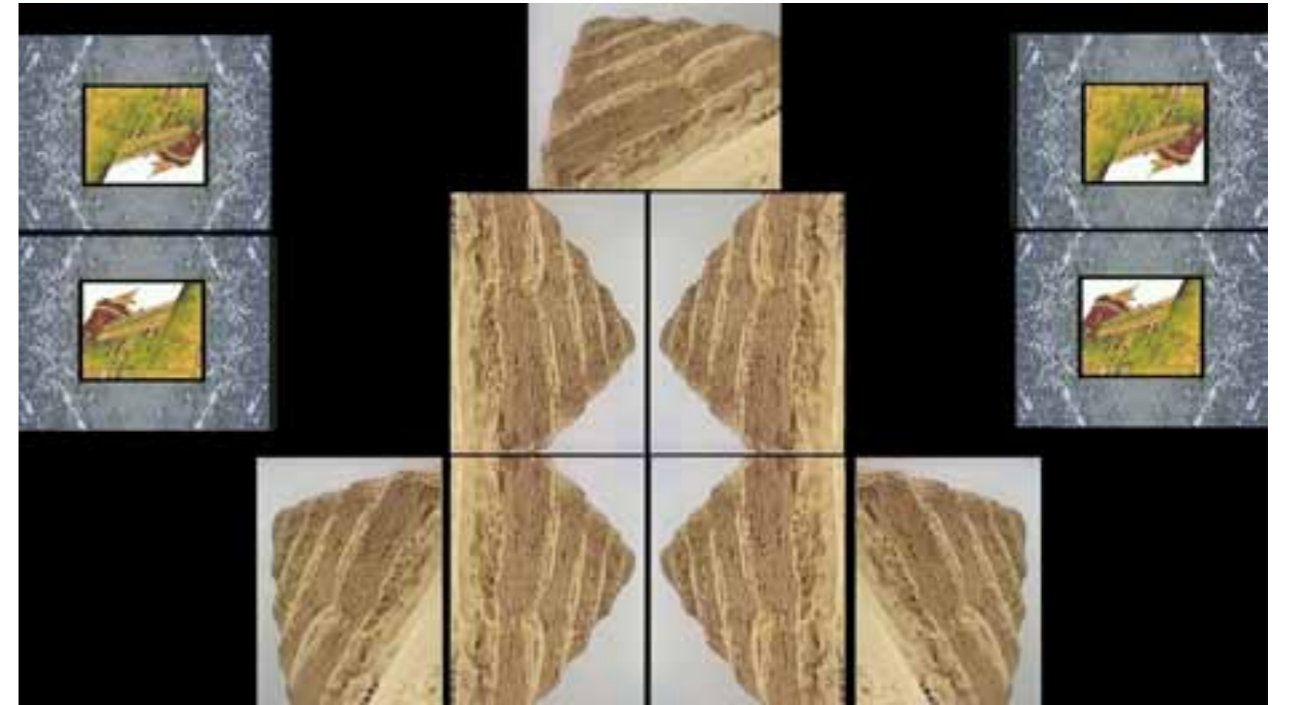


'Pyramis, The Voyage of Eudore / Pyramis ou le Voyage d'Eudore', 1987
Video installation





'Pyramis, The Voyage of Eudore / Pyramis ou le Voyage d'Eudore', 1987
Video installation



a deep research into her own identity which provided her with new content, but she also diversified her artistic media. The artist explored the artistic language of new media and computer technology for over a decade, and investigated the limits and potential of this medium in technology books and practical experiments. The work titled *Télé-Totem* which she exhibited in 1985 at an event in Angoulême was the first video work in which the artist used computer-assisted colouring. For *Pyramis ou le Voyage d'Eudore*, a work exhibited in 1988 at the Saint-Simon Museum in Angoulême, a commune in south-western France, Yalter used Silver, a computer featuring software which enabled her to apply two-dimensional effects onto video cassette. She began producing multimedia productions in 1989 by making drawings with the computer named Graph9, and began to combine the flowing images of video with two-dimensional virtual images. The first work in which she carried out a comprehensive experiment with the digital coding possibilities of these new technologies is *Hommage à Marquis de Sade / Homage to the Marquis de Sade*, dated 1989. This site-specific video installation dedicated to the Marquis de Sade who spent 32 years of his life incarcerated in prisons and mental institutions, yet became an indispensable reference for philosophy, and literature in the 20th century was exhibited at the 200th anniversary of the French Revolution. The work was displayed in an old altar within the scope of a festival organized in Le Havre as a multi-monitor installation that represented the altar form. Either erased from history as a moral degenerate, or worshipped as a godlike genius, the Marquis de Sade is brought back down to



earth by Yalter as a symbol, and she salutes the author's radical understanding of freedom, and the traces of existentialist thought that seep into his texts. At the same time, and as if to refer to the Sadean paradox, the 'female' figure positioned naked or covered at the center of the videos seeks to define the 'human being' within its universal drama in order to persistently attach itself to its particular position.

*"I'll wager you imagined you were working wonders in reducing me to agonizing abstinence from the sins of the flesh. Well! you were quite mistaken... you've made me create phantoms which I must bring to life..."*⁴⁴

According to de Beauvoir, the most important achievement of the author who haunts the history of thought like a phantom is that he makes us feel anxious.⁴⁵ The de Sade glorifies free thought and nature, disrupting not only our perception of sexuality, but also that of ethics, metaphysics and aesthetics. According to de Sade, "imagination is the ene-



'Circular Rituals / Transvoices', 1992
Video, 1'

⁴⁴ Simone de Beauvoir, *Must We Burn De Sade?*, translated from the French by Annette Michelson, Peter Nevill (1953), p. 53 - ⁴⁵ *ibid.* p. 85

my of the system". With her boundless fantasy and deep imagination, Nil Yalter, too, continues to search beyond stereotypical forms of expression in the field of art. Her aesthetic-analytical style progresses towards producing the semantic possibilities of new technologies, which the artistic fantasy that came before it tried to apply. According to Yalter, 'art', even when technology is involved, is a powerful field where unique rules can be created, and the language of the new media will disrupt the boundaries of traditional categories in artistic production. Technology had a tremendous effect not only on Yalter's working methods but also on her aesthetic approach. The sociological dimension, which had slipped to the background of her works from the mid-1980s on, was gradually replaced by a conceptual and individual system of thought. According to the artist, the power of the new media resided not in separating or criticizing the truth through virtual images, but in the artist creating an invisible mental language between herself and the computer. In 1992, Yalter travelled to Marseille on a grant, and spent months working on the 3D animation software Anyflo developed by Michel Bret, and SGI IRIS 4D, a workstation developed in the early 1990s by Silicon Graphics. At the end of this intense period, she realized works that associated topics and fields that differed artistically and technically.

The departure point of the work dated 1992 and titled *Calligraphy* – another work in which she underlines the concept of "technology as tool" – is a text written in kufic script, the oldest known form of calligraphy in the Islamic art of calligraphy. Using the ancient East-West synthesis, Yalter draws attention to the relationship between the Islamic art of calligraphy

and three-dimensional virtual images created in a computer environment. The harmony and intersections between tradition and modernity, expressed by the artist in her early paintings, are replaced in this work by ambiguous tension. The gestural expression in the art of calligraphy assumes a different identity in this infinite space created by the computer, and the colours lose their modesty and are lost in the metallic light of cities, which form the crust of the contemporary life. Another video work which makes reference to, in addition to the dual concepts of memory-modernity and archaic-contemporary, almost all concepts involved in Yalter's artistic production such as ritual, belief, immigration, women, gender and subculture is *Circular Rituals / Trans-voices*. This one-minute video, exhibited in 1992 at the Whitney Museum, New York and Paris Centre Georges Pompidou, departs from Claude Lévi-Strauss's work *Tristes Tropiques*⁴⁶ published in France in 1955, which documents the author's anthropological work carried out during his travels to Brazil, the Caribbean and India. Beyond the idea that pagan cultures built their settlements according to a circular order, the forming of a circle is also the beginning of magical rituals. This circle is the symbol of determining and protecting the boundaries of the step taken into a spiritual world. The use of the closed form of the circle in life-rituals is not accidental. In Yalter's *Circular Rituals* magical rituals are intertwined with demonstrations of protests in contemporary life. In the video produced using tools of new technology, images of migrant and women workers taking part in protests in the streets of Algeria are accompanied by the poem "I Am" dubbed by the artist herself. The video also



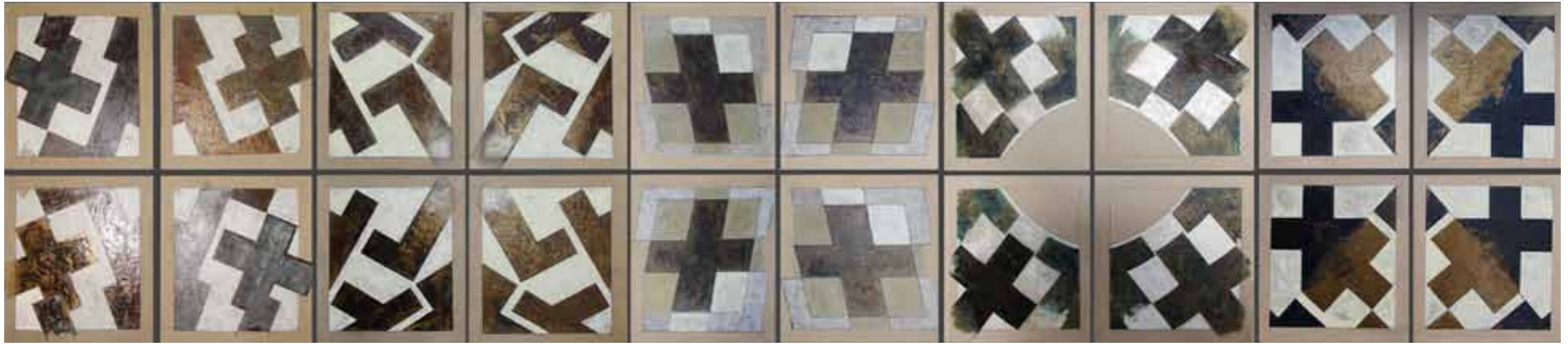
'Television, the Moon', 1993
Nil Yalter / Florence de Mèredieu
Video installation and 3D images

previsions the reproduction of social structures in Europe around discourses of pluralism, the crystallization of the differentiation that emerged with a perception of integration as a threat towards assimilation and the experiences/outcomes of calls to the currently debated calls for new nationalisms in countries which receive migratory waves and possible scenarios for the future. The multi-layered reality of society is transmitted via a multi-layered narrative in Yalter's works. The diversity of her works in terms of media is the outcome of an approach that allows the viewpoint of the audience to differentiate. The video instal-

lation titled *Télévision, the Moon*, first exhibited at Koninklijk Palace in Antwerp in 1993 is composed of 12 monitors placed above each other that feature varying modules. The work which was produced in collaboration with author and art historian Florence de Mèredieu using film, sound, text and three dimensional virtual images, leads the viewer towards details, and encourages the creation of meaning under the influence of text-sound and visual compositions.

"On appearance, the viewer might think that this video-installation is the work of a single

⁴⁶ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, translated by John Weightman, Doreen Weightman (Penguin, 2012)



artist. However, this collaborative project bears interesting outcomes for both the artist and the author that go beyond discovering the boundaries of their own creativity by forming common fields of experience. Nil Yalter translates Florence de Mèredieu's text on the desert, sand and corporeal sentiments into a visual language. This visual translation is not simply a moving image of the story. By transferring a reality from one medium to the other, by passing through the space of art and technology, by forming a deep opposition between the real and the virtual, the artist investigates the active power of the image."⁴⁷

When in 1994, Nil Yalter returned to Istanbul for the first time in 13 years for her solo exhibition at the Aksanat Cultural Center, she visited the Chora Museum, which provided the inspiration for her multimedia work titled *Pixelismus*. In addition to the 28

canvas paintings that she produced on the basis of the Chora mosaics, the work is composed of an 8-chapter CD-ROM book, computer generated images, digitally processed compositions and three-dimensional virtual images. In the variations influenced by murals, the artist applied the means provided by new media, and in this work, which she describes as "the materialization of the virtual image", she uses "Pixel"⁴⁸ both as form and metaphor. This work treats the "square form" as a cultural and artistic phenomenon, and is shaped around the eight theoretical texts of Kazimir Malevich. Although the work that they began with Nicole Croiset's *Quadra* was interrupted when the computer broke down four months into the project, the CD-ROM work *Pixelismus* continued on a Power PC Macintosh and was completed in 1996 as an electronic book by Nil Yalter, David Apikian and Nicole Croiset. Exhibited the same year at Paris Espaces Interactifs - Europe, Pavillon de



'Pixelismus', 1996
Nil Yalter / David Apikian / Nicole Croiset
Interactive CD-ROM

⁴⁷ Diana Quinby, 1970'lerde Fransa'da Sanat ve Feminizm [Art and Feminism in France in the 1970s], *Feminizmin Arşivleri* [Archives of Feminism], No. 8, December 2004: <http://www.nilyalter.com/texts> - ⁴⁸ Picture Element, in digital imaging the smallest addressable element in a display device



'Terra Nomade', 1997
Interactive CD-ROM





'Terra Nomade', 1997
Interactive CD-ROM



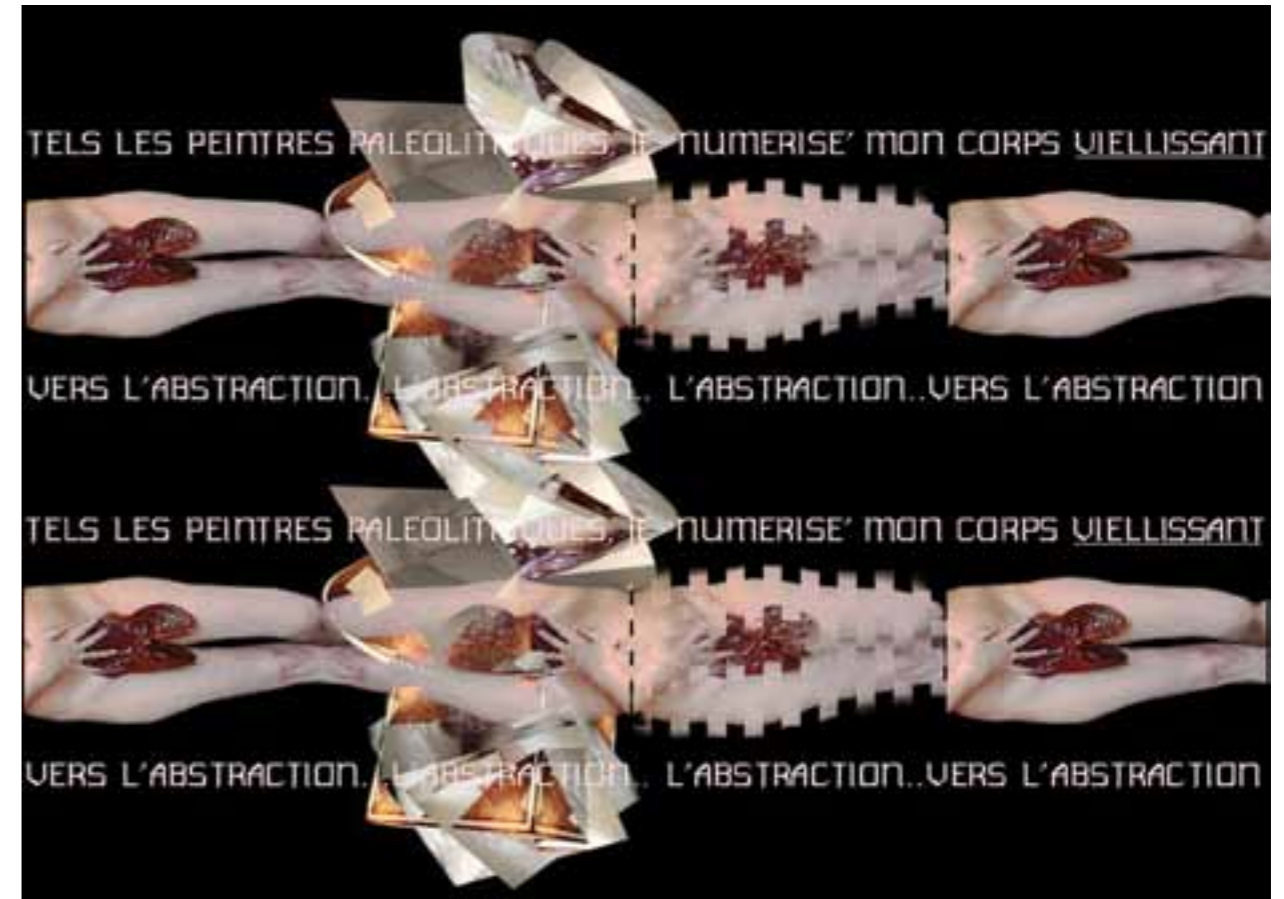


Bercy, *Pixelismus* presented the viewer with free circulation among Byzantine mosaics, the perfect rectangles of Malevich and the pixels of the digital age by dissolving virtual images and sounds within each other. Having turned towards exploring the role of the viewer in forms of observation and perception in *Pixelismus*, Yalter opened her exhibition which transformed the art viewer into an active participant at the Istanbul Akbank Art Center on 5 March 1998. This exhibition, featuring the artist's interactive CD-ROM installation, played a pioneering role in the Istanbul art scene of the period. This interactive CD-ROM, in which the artist brings together migrant Turkish workers and 13th century Turkish poetry, creates a virtual tour space for the viewer to explore. From virtual reality to the naturalist realism of Dadaloğlu, from Paris migrants to the dance rituals of American natives, this virtual journey aims to create a specific interaction between the viewer and the work, and therefore, between the viewer and the artist. As the artist states in the exhibition catalogue, "People travelling in the labyrinths of this boundless world of technology become 'multidimensional' nomads living the virtual adventure of the future."

*"At the threshold of the 21st century, 'multimedia', which is capable of bringing together and presenting to the viewer images, sounds and texts, will allow great possibilities. From this viewpoint, there is no doubt that new technologies open new paths for artists. For artists, a new field that could be called artistic research is being born. Connections between new technologies and art, lead the audience towards CD-ROM and internet projects in spaces of interaction. In the near future, people will view such art events in their own spaces."*⁴⁹

Using the aesthetics of new technologies that reflect the spirit of the age in her works, and acting courageously in following digital developments, Yalter applied methods of dispersion-fragmentation-displacement to both formal and intellectual fields. A work in which she focused on the concepts of identity and time, and explored the state of being a woman with candid revelations, *Skin Story* appeared as a work that placed the artist's own body at the center of the work. This interactive CD-ROM that was completed in 2002, the artist pulls at her own skin as if it were an artificial shell she wanted to tear and get rid of, and assumes no other role

⁴⁹ Nil Yalter, "Terra Nomade" exhibition catalogue, 5 March-2 April 1998, Istanbul



'Skin Story', 2003
Interactive CD-ROM

than that of herself. Because "skin is an obstacle, it is a narcissistic envelope which protects the psyche from the potential chaos of the world. It is a door that the human being opens and closes at will, but often unwittingly... It is not only a metaphor for the depth of the ego, but also a form of determination for the boundaries of the body."⁵⁰ In *Skin Story* the skin becomes a specific object that presents the passing of time, physical corrosion and one of our most private anxieties, aging, for viewing. The art-

ist dismantles the female body which has been idealized, aestheticized and eroticized in both social life and in the field of art since time immemorial, or has been turned into a taboo by the masculine gaze and is often surrounded by an abstract aura. In the face of time and life, Nil Yalter emphasizes the therapeutic power of "Art". If life, as Novalis proposes is an "illness" that we have been thrown into (Heidegger), that we are alienated from (Marx), the truth of which we are isolated from (Kant, Schiller), or

⁵⁰ Didier Anzieu, *Deri-Ben*, translated into Turkish by Nesrin Tura Demiryontan (Istanbul: Metis Yay., 2008), p.1 43; Didier Anzieu, *Skin-Ego*, translated into English by Chris Turner, Yale University Press, 1989.

'Skin Story', 2003
Interactive CD-ROM



we forget ourselves in the “normapathology” of mediocrity (Nietzsche, Deleuze, Guattari, Oury), then art might be one of the best treatments for this illness.⁵¹

“For a multicultural guerrilla, new technologies form an alternative platform, an autonomous zone. By using new media in the field of art, by working on cultural topography, I process the body of the artist aging in a degenerating society. The body of the artist is a vector for social topics: digitization, virtual forms, words, hypertext, interaction... I am a female shaman on a knife’s edge. The surface I write my message on is my own skin. Just like a snake, I leave traces of my skin along the paths I traverse.”⁵²

In *Skin Story*, exhibited in 2003 at Paris Galerie des vidéastes, Espace Landowski, not only the boundaries, but also the shelters of the body have changed. The body in the work of Nil Yalter, both as a woman and an artist, becomes a collage of external components, which blurs the distance between the self and the other, and have guided her art and life from the very beginning. Beyond art’s individual-intellectual healing power, the stimulating effect it will have on the viewer and therefore society becomes part of Yalter’s almost entire art practice. In this context, the continuity of her collective production in communication with non-governmental organizations and



various associations extends into the 2000s. *Diyarbakır / Mardin / Istanbul*, a project the artist developed in collaboration with AÇEV⁵³, the Mother-Child Education Foundation that carries out projects in the field of education and social services was the product of a process that began in 2005. First exhibited in 2006 at Galeri G-art in Istanbul, the artist worked with women, men and children who took part in AÇEV’s educational program for the production of this interactive video. In such programs carried out by the foundation, the female population in the eastern part of Turkey of which in the early 2000s 19% still

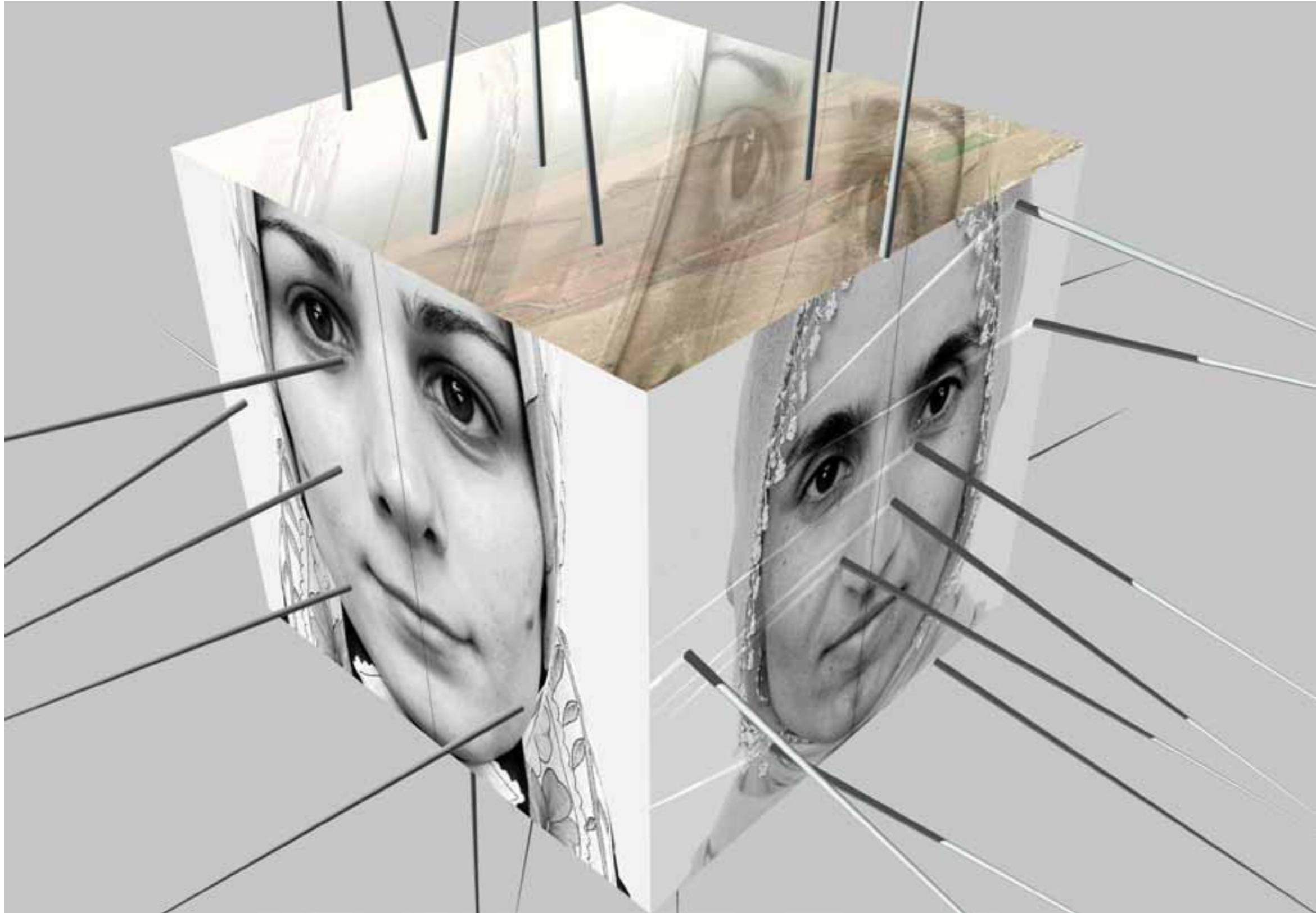
did not have reading and writing skills is the priority target audience. Yalter observed the process of these educational programs carried out for the benefit of these low-income families who did not have access to educational means. The artist recorded the life stories of people who participated in

the educational program, carried out interviews with them, and blended these accounts with the cultural layers of a wide geographical area. In the images of the work, the phenomena of time and space, historical buildings and human portraits clash, merge, separate and thus, traces of cultural diversity from the Hittites to the Assyrians, from the Seljuk Empire to the Byzantine and Ottoman Empires are re-interpreted. The people in this interactive vid-

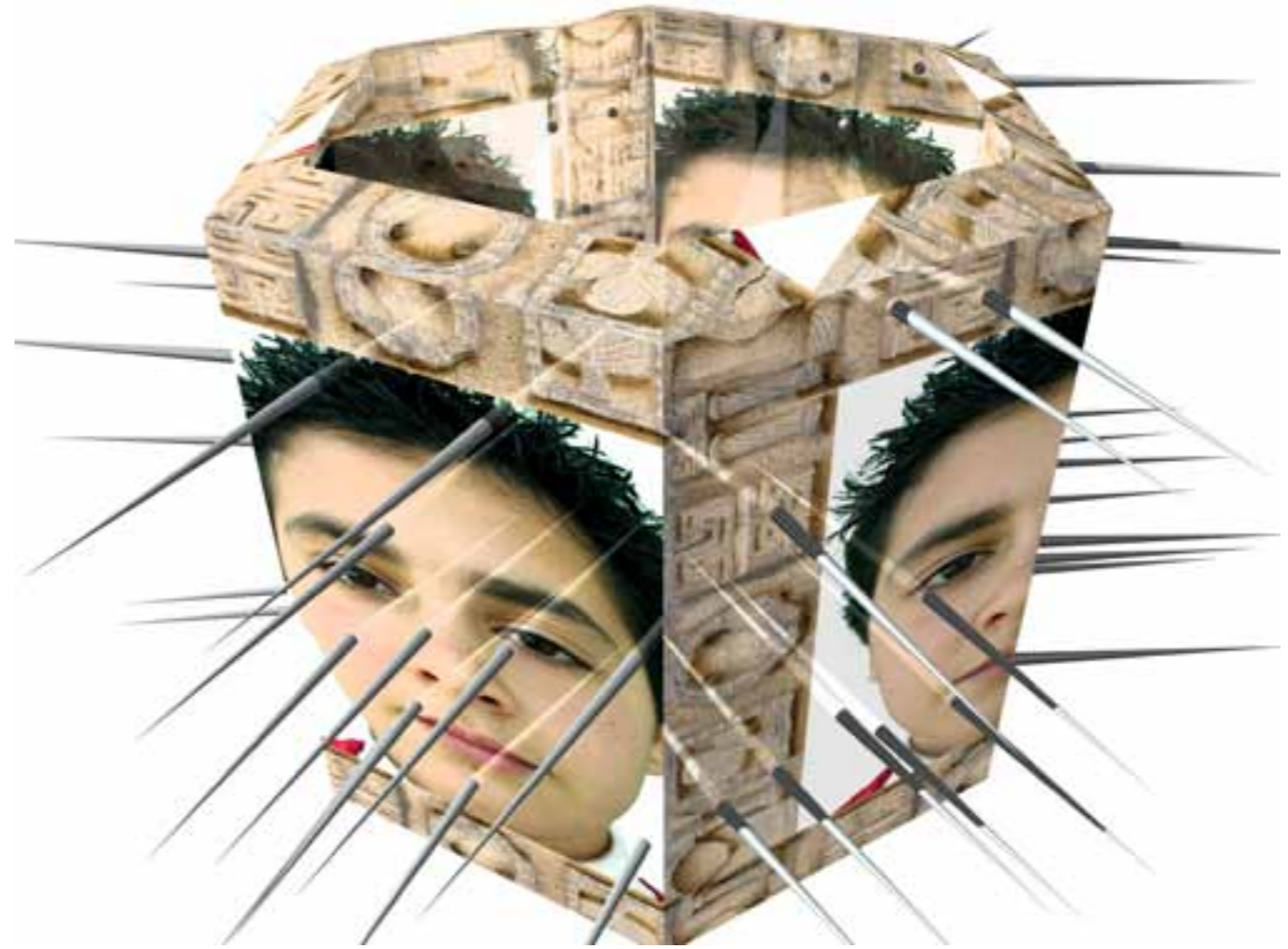


'Diyarbakır / Mardin / Istanbul', 2005
Interactive DVD-ROM

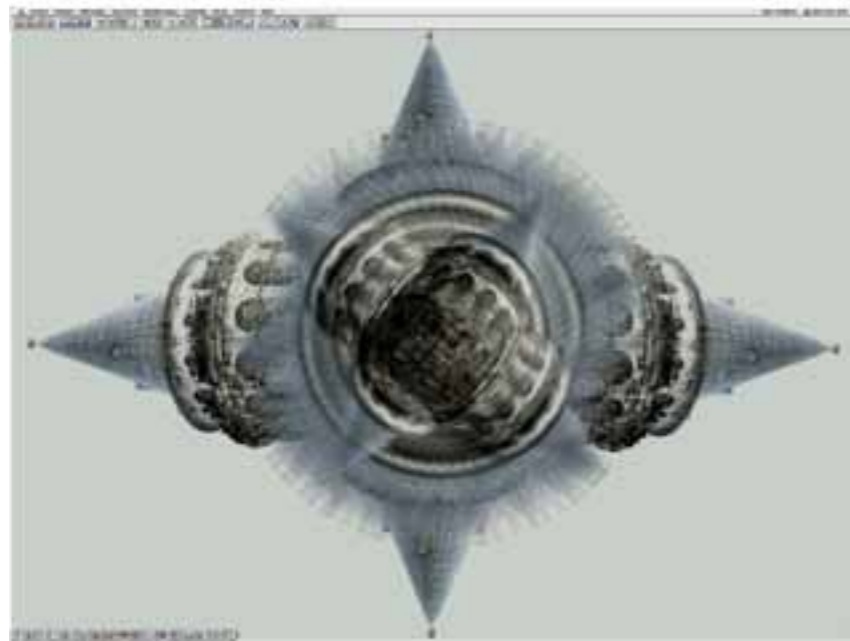
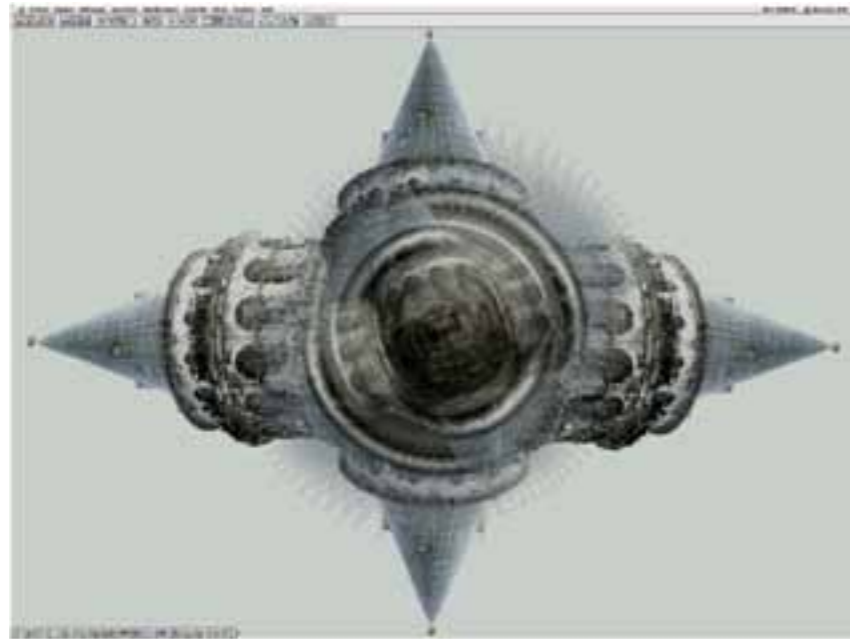
⁵¹ Dr. Özgür Uçkan, 'Sanat Felsefesi: Dün, bugün, gelecek... Hemen şimdi!' [Art Philosophy: Yesterday, today, the future... Right now!] conference series: Vol. 2. Kant ve Schiller: Yargı Yetisi, Oyun, Terapi, Politika ve Sanat [Kant and Schiller: Judgment, Play, Therapy, Politics and Art], The Empire Project, 20 October 2012, Istanbul - ⁵² Nil Yalter, interview with Rosemarie Martha Huhn, Contemporary Artists, 5. Edition, December 2001, St. James Press, issue 2, pp. 1857-1860 - ⁵³ Anne Çocuk Eğitim Vakfı, the Mother and Child Educational Foundation.



'Diyarbakir / Mardin / Istanbul', 2005
Interactive DVD-ROM



'Diyarbakir / Mardin / Istanbul', 2005
Interactive DVD-ROM



'Diyarbakir / Mardin / Istanbul', 2005
Interactive DVD-ROM





Le Jardin de la Speculation
Cosmique exhibition, Galerist
Photo: Barış Özçetin

eo that was created by processing plain images using digital tools are not only the subjects of a work that belongs to Nil Yalter. They also become active participants with the drawings they make and the texts they write.

“Nil Yalter writes a new silk road story, constructed by electronic codes... Wandering through the artist’s electronic book, we enjoy her poetical narrative; faces full of meaning that appear on top of the Diyarbakır city walls, the image of the Galata Tower transforming into a compass, thorny portraits superimposed upon various geometrical forms, the symbolism of multiplying, diversifying letters, the video of a six-year old girl painting with her hands dyed with henna... The work presents a multidirectional experience where digital images clash and decompose, multiply and transform.”⁵⁴



From painting to photography, from photography to computer interventions, from three-dimensional virtual images to interactive works, these multilayered transitions presented in various media continue to reveal themselves both in Nil Yalter’s contact with contemporary reality, and the emphasis she lays on the plural aesthetics of the 21st century. Having begun her visionary practice with quests towards various directions, the artist was always interested in

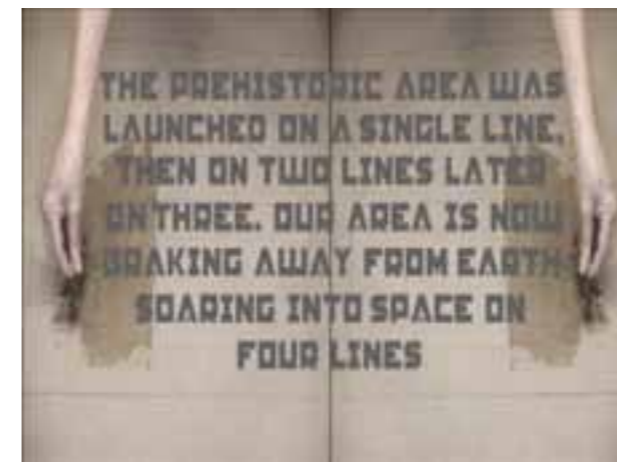
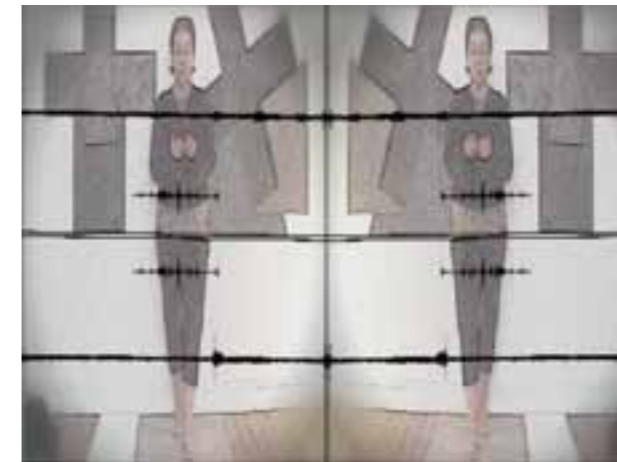
a total art, a total act of creativity, which would bring interdisciplinary relations to the surface. The series titled *Sound of Painting* produced from 2005 to 2008 and shaped between canvas painting, video-sound installation and performance techniques is another argument Yalter proposes for a total understanding of art.

“Sound of Painting” is composed of a performative video in which she records the making of six large-scale canvas paintings, and a sound installation she derives from the timbres of the materials she used in making these paintings;

and the work is inspired by her visits to Çatalhöyük, a nine thousand year old settlement. The architecture of this ancient city in Central-Southern Anatolia is based on a rectangular plan which is in harmony with the radial order of Yalter’s canvasses. The geometrical ornamentations on the layered interior walls of Çatalhöyük houses display formal

similarities with the patterns that appear at the end of the painting performance of the artist where she scrapes thick layers of paint off the canvas. Through the sound of her paintings, Yalter gifts us with the shared essential wisdom of a consciousness that cannot be constrained by time, space or cultures.

Another Nil Yalter work which links traditional cults to the spirit of the age is the



'Sound of Painting', 2008
Video, 14'
Painting on canvas

2009-dated video titled *Lord Byron Meets the Shaman Woman*. This work departs from a line by Lord Byron, the English poet who, while believing in the formative powers of history on national consciousness, refused to compromise with aristocratic-bourgeois society and spent his life immersed in deep conflict and contradiction. The body of the artist is in the center of the video in which the “meeting” of the poet with the female shaman points towards a metaphorical concept. The artist, acting like female

shamans who are capable of entering the form of animals, rubs stones to each other, speaks in a melodic tone, and rolls her body covered in fur across the ground, creating the atmosphere of a ritual. It has been claimed that although male shamans historically replaced female shamans, the female identity lived on in various guises in the male shaman. In this sense, in *Lord Byron Meets the Shaman Woman* the artist abandons her individual identity to design actions that resemble a process of di-

⁵⁴ Dr. Cemre Altan, Çağdaşlaşma Süreci Öyküsü [The Story of the Modernization Process], Galeri G-art exhibition catalogue, Istanbul, 2006

'Sound of Painting', 2008
Video, 14'
Painting on canvas



'Sound of Painting', 2008
Video, 14'
Painting on canvas







'Lord Byron Meets the Shaman Woman', 2009
Video, 15'





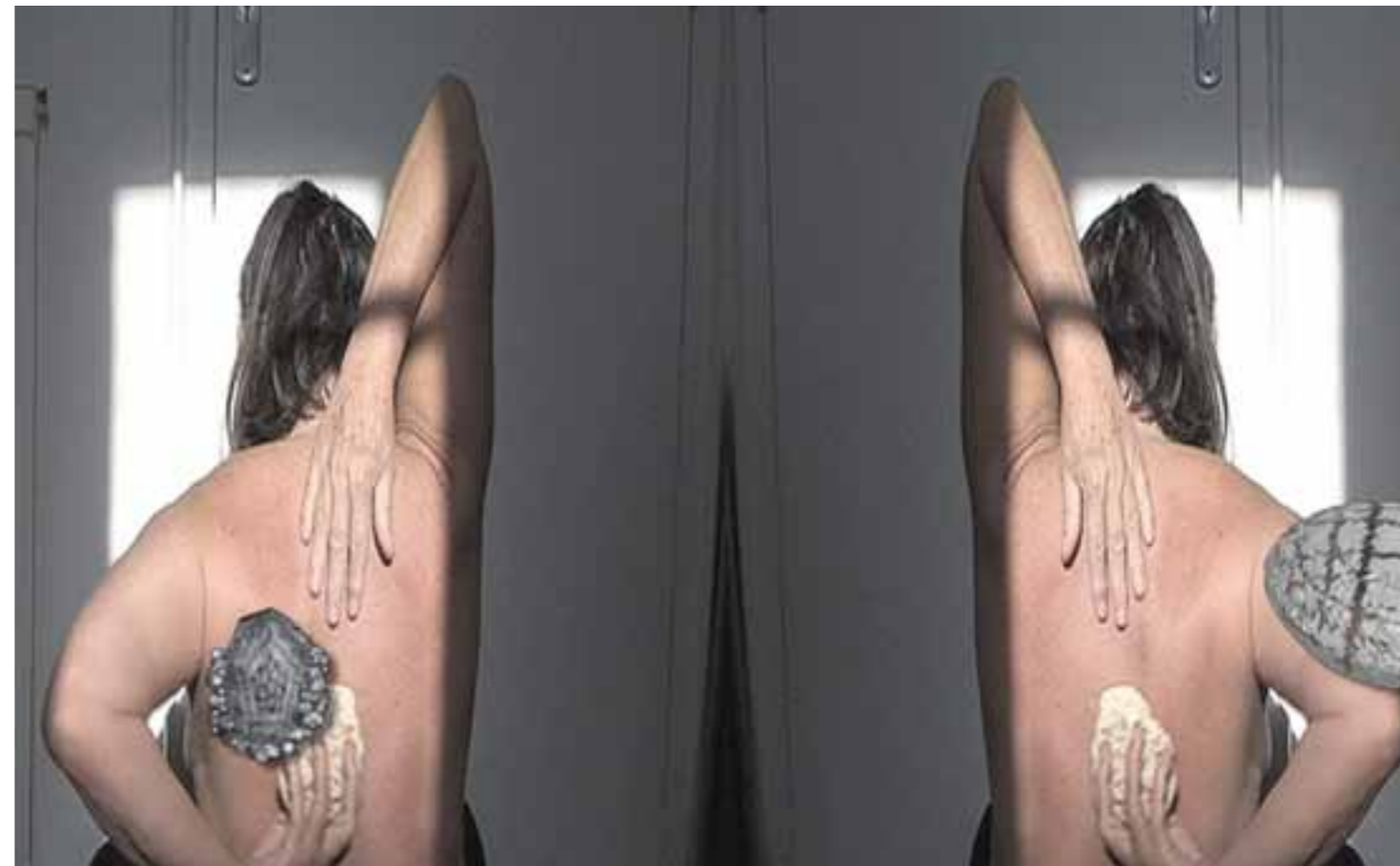
'Lapidation', 2009
Video, 10'

gestion, fragmentation, self-surrender and self-discovery. Again, in a similar manner, the healing effect of art, as proposed by the “expanded” theory of art, is connected to the healing power of shamans. The artist associates herself with the shaman, the “conveyor of esoteric knowledge, protector of psychological and ecological balance, binder of visible and invisible worlds, guide of spirits and talented healer”⁵⁵ and re-edits the ritualistic images for the video.

“This video reminded me of Clarissa Pinkola Estés’ book Women Who Run With The Wolves (1992). Like Estés, Yalter shows that women possess a powerful creative force. In this work, wearing a white fur coat, Yalter rolls, sits and crawls through space as layers of natural elements magically ebb and flow under, over and through her body. Transparent, fading images represent a vanishing species of women who do not run with the pack, but passionately follow their own instincts. Watching this video, I started to wonder if enough women could tap into this vitality and together set the world right.”⁵⁶

In the general sense, for feminist artists, de-

veloping a critical language against masculine signs is a process that begins with the ‘body’. Nil Yalter, too, in her works that depart from the context of her body, criticizes the political and social understanding of the body in a patriarchal framework. The synesthetic impacts she creates with her performances that are often presented in ritual form are effective in consolidating female solidarity. The subject of her video-performance titled *Lapidation* where she uses her body as a substitute object is *rajm*, the punishment by stoning still implemented today in sharia law. According to the regulations of *rajm*, if the person manages to survive after being buried under stones during the punishment of lapidation, then she or he might be spared from execution. Although there might be a chance of salvation for men, there is none for women. Since in this sentence, although men are buried into the ground only up to their waist, it is mandatory to bury women deeper. In this video which Nil Yalter dedicates to ‘shadow women’ images of men recording the implementation of *rajm* live with their mobile phones are presented. These images clash with the stones that move closer and then further to the



⁵⁵ Prof. Dr. Fuzuli Bayar, *Ana Hatlarıyla Türk Şamanlığı [Outlines of Turkish Shamanism]* (Istanbul: Ötüken Neşriyat 2006) - ⁵⁶ Nancy Atakan, *Flash Art*, January-February 2012, p. 141, <http://www.nilyalter.com/texts/17/nil-yalter-flashart-by-nancy-atakan.html>

artist's back turned towards the viewer and her moving body, forming a symbolic experience of the pain. Formed with three-dimensional virtual images and the geometrical deformation of sounds and images, *Lapidation* deciphers the fact that gender roles are a fiction of power. The video-performance project Nil Yalter realized with Melis Tezkan the same year represents the interactive aspect of this project. This interactive performance titled *Untitled Performance* and presented within the scope of the 'Honor Games Festival' which included November 25, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, took place on 20 November 2009 at garajistanbul.

*"Interaction will not merely be part of the work; the sensitivity of the viewer will be playing a concrete part in the effective finalization of the performance. The work we propose, as a project in which video and performance non-hierarchically share the same platform, will be carried out from a feminist viewpoint, thus not only in order to protect women, but with an intention and petition for independence that criticizes power, discrimination and violence related to sexuality (enforced suicide, honor killings, harassment, torture, symbolic violence, oppression etc.)..."*⁵⁷

Whether painting or performance, the 'action-based' production method of Nil Yalter that permeates almost all of her artistic practice, developed with the aim of reclaiming fields –like identity, women, immigrants, workers and the body– exploited by dominant discourse. These fields at times also include the history of art, or the morphology of the aesthetic-plastic language, and this method is a significant characteristic of Nil Yalter's pro-

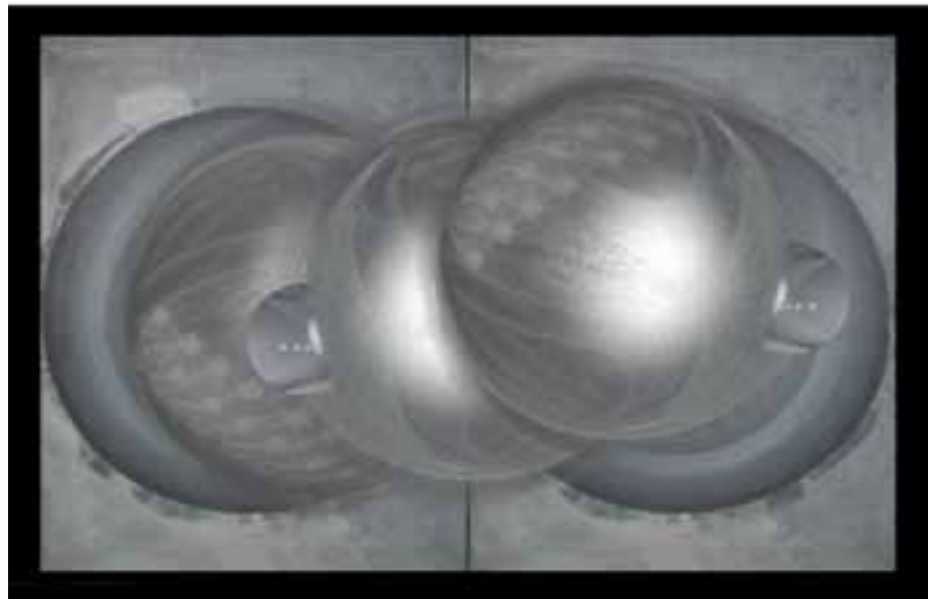
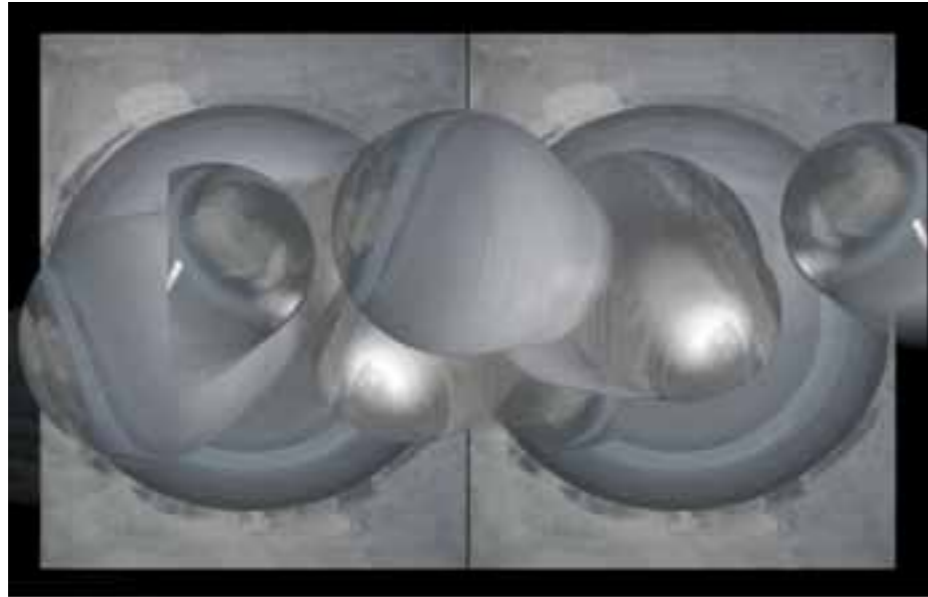
duction practice, which extends across her process. This unique construction of memory is a way of overcoming the boundaries of the medium via the extension of time-space between her works. Another work she applies this method is the video-animation titled *20th / 21st Century* dated 2011. This composition in which the boundaries of the tradition of artistic production are shaken and the perception related to traditional representative art is broken and transformed, emerged through the transmission/translation of the canvas paintings Yalter produced during the period she migrated to Paris into the language of new media. For the first time after a long interval, the artist exhibited her geometrical abstract paintings, mostly on large-scale canvasses, at her solo exhibition in Istanbul, which was curated by Necmi Sönmez. At this exhibition titled *20th / 21st Century*, held at Galerist from 24 November to 20 December 2011, the artist interpreted the paintings she made from 1965 to 1969 via computer-aided animation in video more than forty years after they were executed. This approach forms a bridge between the past and the present, and like the "Fragments of Memory" exhibition realized within the scope of the "Curated_by Vienna" event at Galerie Hubert Winter in Vienna, Austria, displayed a unique character in which the artist's sustained practice was taken into consideration as a consistent whole.

"In bringing together works that were literally produced in two different centuries using different techniques, Nil Yalter takes her audience through a time tunnel... Since the 20th / 21st Century exhibition is a consistent whole constructed upon a reciprocal dialogue from the

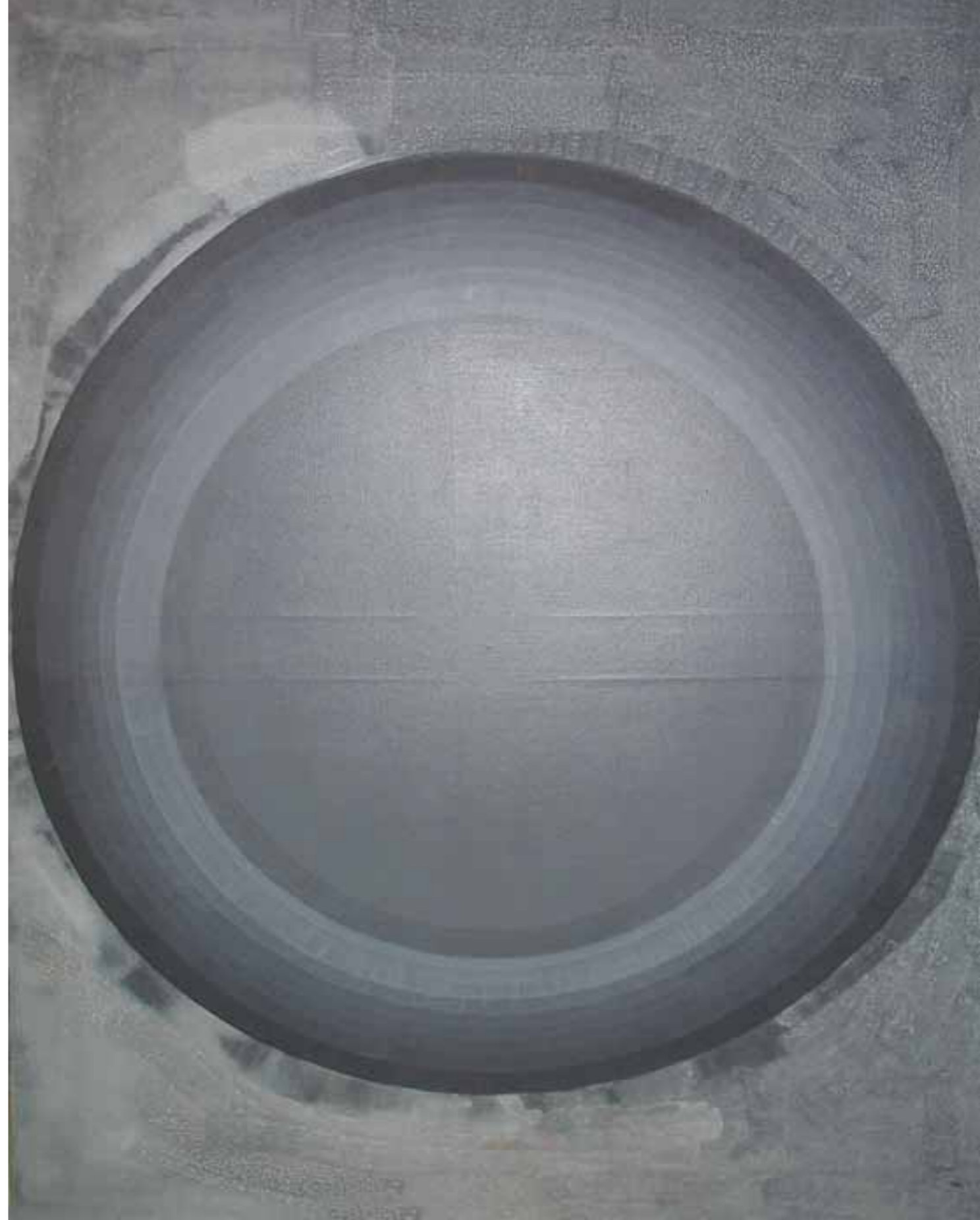


'Apollon Tapınağı Didim'
20th / 21st Century, 2011
Paintings on canvas, 1966 - 1969
Video, 2'

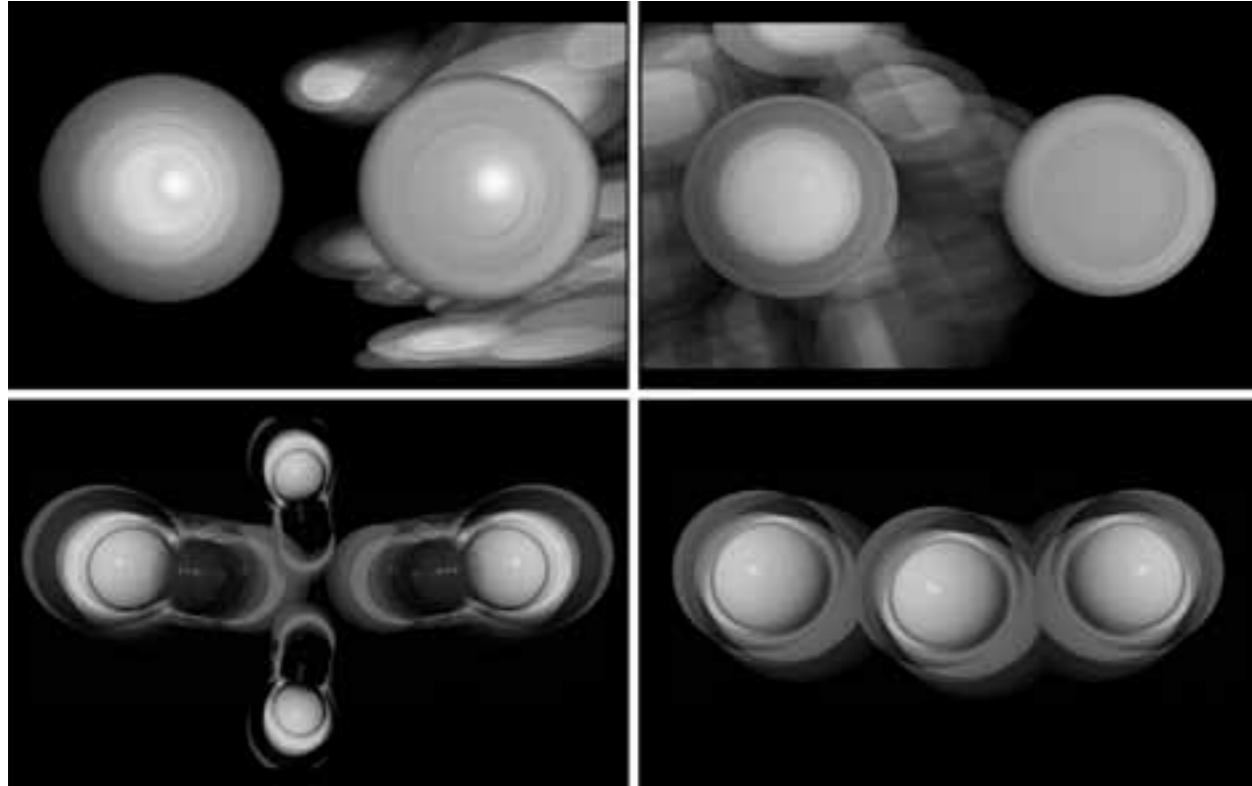
⁵⁷ Nil Yalter / Melis Tezkan, November 2009, <http://nilyalter-melistezkan-untitled.biriken.com>



'Yuvarlak Form'
20th / 21st Century, 2011
Paintings on canvas, 1966 - 1969
Video B&W, 2'







'Oval Form'
20th / 21st Century, 2011
Paintings on canvas 1966 - 1969
Video B&W, 2'





Nil Yalter 20th / 21st century exhibition, Galerist
Photos: Mustafa Nurdođdu



'Walls. Construction/Demolition', 2012
Posters

selection of the works to their presentation, it unlocks the scope of an ordinary gallery exhibition to embrace the artist's own subject matter, framing the concepts of memory, time and interpretation..."⁵⁸

Competent in placing artistic expression in an intertemporal context, another work by Nil Yalter, which applies the method of interpretation by conveying memory, is the poster series titled *Walls. Construction/Demolition*. At the solo exhibition of the artist held in 2012 at the Espaisvisor Galeria Visor in Spain, which presented a selection of her works from 1970 to 1980, the work titled *Exile Is A Hard Job V* was reproduced as a wall poster and pasted along the streets of Valencia. Torn and fragmented the next day, the posters continued to be spread across the city with enduring resistance throughout the exhibition.

Today, too, everything that is suppressed, scorned and forgotten that refuses to relinquish its visibility, inhabits the inroads opened by dislocatory practices such as deconstruction, feminism and immigration. All strategies that

are positioned outside the sovereign discourse continue to return by occupying cultural and intellectual fields, as Nil Yalter courageously progresses in her artistic practice, which manifests itself as a strategy of resistance. The journey of the artist who refuses to choose between an authentic discourse and homogenizing modernity, witnesses the dissolution of histories and cancellation of borders and wanders the fractures of memory resembles "...to journey not like Ulysses, on the way home, but like Abraham, cast out of the previous house of knowledge and destined never to return."⁵⁹

Nil Yalter presents a historical-artistic syntax, which is open to a common grammar, language and versatility. In a fragmented world, she uses "Art" as a compass that points towards the future, and continues to disrupt, interrogate and reorient all manners of dogmatic heritage she may come across. In the artist's practice, which is nurtured by critical thought, the fluidity of life is transformed into more permanent forms. And how fortunate for us that we continue to witness her effort.

⁵⁸ Necmi Sönmez, 'Nil Yalter: 20th Century/21st Century' Galerist exhibition catalogue, Istanbul 2011, p. 6 - ⁵⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, Pittsburgh, 1969, quoted in Iain Chambers, *Migrancy, Culture, Identity* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 70



'Walls. Construction/Demolition', 2012
Posters

Center of Gravity

Feminism and Gender Perspective in Nil Yalter's Work from the 1970s and 80s

Juan Vicente Aliaga

The goal of this text is to analyze Nil Yalter's artistic practice in the 1970s and 80s in the light of its contributions to feminism and questions of gender. I shall try to do so following a chronological order.

To understand the complexity of Yalter's sociopoetic and ethno-poetic aesthetic, it is necessary to keep some biographical elements in mind. Among them, her initial interest in abstract art, which she discovered while in Turkey through Skira's books and which she was able to see in real life on her arrival in France in 1965. Her fascination for geometry and intense coloring is present in some later works (in the series *Temporary Dwellings*, 1974 and in *Algerian Marriage in France*, 1977) and especially in the period from the 1990s to such an extent that the artist herself used the expression *baroque-oriental*¹ to define her work, highlighting with this term the freedom to use and combine different techniques and elements influenced by her own culture of origin.

This enthusiasm for color and abstract forms does not come merely from her discovery in her youth of the works of Kazimir Malevich or Serge Poliakoff² and of other artists known in Europe, but also from her attraction to some visual codes of Byzantine and Ottoman art (present in the patterns of geometric lines used in oriental tapestries and rugs) which allow for the symmetric multiplication of images and colors through a specular effect. On arriving in Paris and coming into contact with an array of different artistic manifestations, she could contemplate which path to follow. After some years of reflection and doubts, she decided on an ethno-poetic kind of approach, which entailed the adoption of a political position without renouncing aesthetics at the moment of tackling certain social realities. Her position was influenced by her commitment to different activities carried out by the Turkish Communist Party, an illegal organization in her country. She also became inter-

ested in questions of displacement and exile, that is to say the experiences (and penuries) of migrant communities (Turks, Algerians and the Portuguese in France, Puerto Ricans in the United States, but also the Gypsy and Kurdish communities in Istanbul). Likewise, and this will make up the epicenter of this text, Nil Yalter devoted herself to participating in different actions and practices with a strong feminist content. In many of her works, all of these components I have mentioned converge and embrace one another.

May of 1968 had many consequences, and without a doubt the primary one was the politicization of many sectors of the populace, not just among students. Criticism of the authoritarianism of the State and other institutions (among them, the university) was one of the principal axes, as exemplified by the imaginative signs and graffiti in the streets of Paris. Nonetheless, the subjugation of women to patriarchal power wasn't a cardinal motive for struggle, although there was a famous meeting about the question of women in the occupied Sorbonne. Therefore, some women decided to organize themselves on their own. Between 1967 and 1970, different work groups were formed that debated the causes of the oppression of women. And some of these names had significant impact: Monique Wittig, Antoinette Fouque, Christine Delphy, among others. In the Spring of 1970, the seeds of the MLF (Mouvement de Libération des Femmes) were planted at the University of Vincennes. Nil Yalter didn't just breathe these airs of

revolution, but actively immersed herself in all kinds of activities realized by Femmes en lutte and also by the Collectif Femmes/art, active between 1976 and 1980 in Paris.

Over the course of the 1970s, Yalter unfurled her creativity through different artistic procedures that let her confront the problematic of women until this came to form a veritable center of gravity of her production.

Crossing, and likewise overcoming, the separations and divisions established in some white Anglo-Saxon middle-class circles of feminism³, Yalter confronted different contexts and other periods (contemporary France and Ottoman Turkey, for example) and within those materials she felt concerned by facts and realities that affected women (and also men) of different origins and countries: Turks, Kurds, the French, Germans. Her transnational gaze confirmed that the oppression of women was found in any area of the world. In Paris, she soon came into contact with circles of women who began to be aware of the multiple discriminations and the lack of rights of the female population in a chauvinist regime. Among these women were: Nicole Croiset, Judy Blum, Françoise Janicot, Lea Lublin, Nicola L., Esther Ferrer, Mathilde Ferrer and Dorothee Selz.

Some of these women came together at the workshop of Françoise Janicot on March 11, 1978 and carried out *Action de cinq femmes*. That day, Nil Yalter gave a performance inspired by the daily life of a harem, using different objects and a text in which, without

¹ Interview with Nil Yalter by Esther Ferrer, "Frontier between Art and Reality", *Lápiz*, n° 60, Madrid, 1989, pp. 32-39. ² Another of her influential readings was the *Dictionnaire de la peinture Abstraite* by Michel Seuphor, 1957.

³ Some feminists, such as the artist Faith Ringgold and the collective Where We At: Black Women Artists revealed the relegation of black women within feminist ranks in the United States. See *Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, MOCA (Los Angeles, 2007), pp. 287-288 and 314



beating around the bush, she drew a connection between the struggle of women and the struggle of classes. She had known the poverty faced by immigrants and their families in France. An imposed fragility that was doubled in the case of Turkish women, subject not just to the racism of French society but also to a reclusion to the domestic area and the care of their children, without any possibilities of personal or professional realization. An experience also suffered by Turkish women in their own country.

After a period of acclimatization and of searching in the area of creation, in 1973 Yalter, far from her country, conceives *Topak Ev* (which can be translated as *round house*), a large-scale piece that clearly evokes the yurts or tents used by the nomads.

The work reproduces a circular space with one entrance opening. From the tent hangs skins and some texts in Turkish and in French by the Kurdish writer Yaşar Kemal about nomadic life. Likewise, it included a text by Bernard Dupaigne, an ethnologist from the Musée de l'Homme with whom she would collaborate on other occasions. The text analyzes the sexualized dimension of the yurt (a cosmos in miniature) and the different roles traditionally attributed to men and women. Women, assigned to the tasks of the home, are enclosed in a space that supposes a way of life on the road to extinction.

It was exhibited in one of the most innovative spaces for contemporary art in France: ARC, in the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, directed by Suzanne Pagé. With this work, Yalter considers the question of the home and of displacement as it occurred in nomadic communities. Likewise, we confront an ancestral space that has been traditionally feminine, and which invites contemplation,

as one of the photos on Nil Yalter's webpage seems to convey, in which she appears seated on the floor with her legs crossed, surrounded by the metallic framework that sustains the yurt. It is also a space of enclustering, a jail for women, and a workspace (in another of the photos one can see inside the tent some cheeses placed upon a skin: a clear allusion both to the alimentation of the nomads and to women's role as nourishing mother). The rounded form can evoke the sky, but perhaps one can also detect a timeless maternal symbolism. With this construction, allusive to those existing on the steppes of central Asia, Yalter tried to not only make visible a way of life in which women carried out a principal role, even if subsidiary to men, but also to bring to occidental culture (after Paris it was exhibited in Le Mans, Cologne, and Göttingen) the energy of a culture that was ignored in Europe.

Some time later, Yalter once again immersed herself in the rites and customs of her own country from a questioning angle with regard to the lack of sexual autonomy that society (both French as well as Turkish) granted to women. *The Headless Woman or the Belly Dance* is the result. This is a twenty minute video that relies on three elements: the body in performance; a written fragment of a text by the sociologist and historian René Nelli, *Érotique et civilisation* (Weber, Paris, 1972); and the word.

Symbolically, the video begins with a shot of a woman's navel and belly while oriental music plays. On writing the text in a circle, this same woman reads it aloud, as if wanting to reinforce with her own voice the seriousness of what Nelli has written.

I transcribe the text here so it can be understood in its proper perspective:

"The true woman is simultaneously both 'convex' and 'concave', nonetheless it is necessary that she not be deprived, neither in a moral nor a physical sense of the central principal of her convexity, her clitoris. This hatred of the clitoris in fact corresponds to an age-old horror that man has always had for this 'virile' –and also natural– component of a woman, the very part that is responsible for her orgasm in the absolute sense. Every possible step has been taken in order to impede this orgasm, including physical and moral mutilation. From such a starting point it is hardly surprising that, having liberated herself from the 'shame of having a clitoris' and the 'sin of pleasure', women have subsequently recuperated not only their personal equilibrium –the equilibrium of a dual polarity –but also all the available resources of their sexuality, a sexuality that is both concave and convex."

It is important to note that Yalter begins from her own navel (*omphalos* in Greek, which refers to the Baetylus or stone that Zeus placed in the oracle of Delphos to mark the creation of the world) to write a text which emphasizes the masculine hate of the clitoris. That animosity is explained because clitoral stimulation or masturbation entails full sexual autonomy of women who, therefore, don't need anyone to achieve pleasure.

In 1968, Anne Koedt published *The Myth of Vaginal Orgasm*, which provoked an enormous polemic in the United States. Koedt questions Freudian theories that explain that women's sexual maturity is reached through vaginal penetration. According to the inventor of psychoanalysis, if women don't achieve orgasm in this way, they can be considered frigid. Koedt's overturning of Freud's prejudices, dressed up in supposed scientific authority, are based on the confirmation that the vagina is not an area

of high sexual sensibility and the clitoris, on the other hand, comprises an erogenous zone that leads to climax. Men's fear of clitoral orgasm would be based on the fact that they fear themselves unnecessary in the process of women's achieving pleasure, given that coitus was not a determining factor for reaching orgasm. That said, Koedt also acknowledges that mental or psychological stimuli also exist, in addition to physical stimulation.

René Nelli says that the true woman is concave and convex, giving to understand that pleasure is achieved both through the vagina as well as through the clitoris. Current feminisms wouldn't speak of "true women," for every person is different and experiences pleasure in a different way. Written in 1972, it was a liberating and relevant text, for the function of the clitoris was unknown to many women and men. Yalter makes the sense of the text her own by inscribing it around her navel, her belly, her hips, thereby creating a labyrinthine drawing that evokes a spatial configuration advocated for by some feminist voices: in contrast to the rectilinear and Cartesian geometry of the patriarchal substratum there would come circular, oblong forms, spirals, labyrinths that would be more in keeping with the female body.

In the video, once the text is written, the body that had remained immobile begins to move to the rhythm of the music and a female voice, as if that dance implied that once the origin of her own sexuality was acknowledged the woman shows her enjoyment.

The title *The Headless Woman or the Belly Dance* can indicate different readings: on the one hand it seems to be a reference to the misogyny of the Surrealist movement that had such a great cultural impact in France

(remember the novel in images by Max Ernst, *La femme 100 têtes* [The Hundred Headless Women], 1929): a movement that was based on the annulment of the thinking ability of women reduced to materials. Yalter avoids showing the protagonist's head in the video, insisting above all on the appropriation of sexual pleasure through enjoyment and dance, which in this case comes from the Middle East. There are different hypotheses with regard to the origins of this dance: some point to a traditional practice of childbirth, others indicate that it was a dance to the moon in which the female dancers let their uncovered bellies be impregnated with fertility; other sources allude to ancient Egypt, and gypsy migrations: it is known that fundamentalist Islam prohibits this kind of dancing. Western colonial appropriation of belly dancing made these female dancers be seen as an example of dubious morality.

That said, it seems that one can deduce from Yalter's polysemic video the need, above all, to proclaim, beyond any cultural or gender-based conditioning, that the female body, which has been colonized by men, belongs entirely to women.

During that same year of 1974, Yalter begins a work in collaboration with Judy Blum.

From its first activities, the feminist performance workshop at Fresno College and Cal Arts, in California, encouraged teamwork as a way of avoiding the marked individualism of the genius artist so strongly seated in the chauvinist tradition of art.

Two foreign women, Judy Blum and Nil Yalter, undertook the project of subjectively mapping the French capital (subjectivism was also reclaimed from a feminist position versus supposed masculine objectivism). The result was *Paris Ville Lumière*.



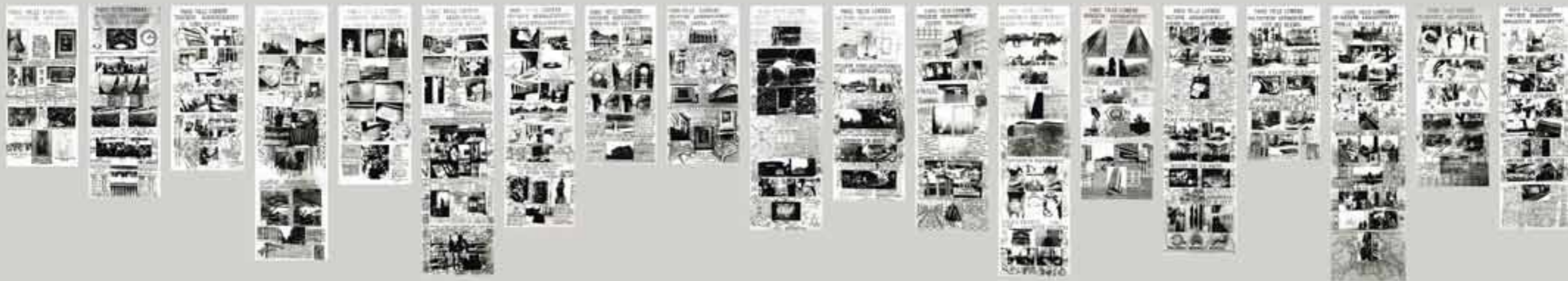
This is a work of considerable dimensions made up of vertical fabrics that included photos, texts, and printed drawings in which the two artists confronted the myth of the French capital through the procedure of representing each and every one of its twenty neighborhoods (*arrondissements*). For each neighborhood, they reproduced some of the cultural and/or touristic monuments or events for which they are known alongside news relating to their current social problems under the right-wing government of Giscard d'Estaing. Below I include some examples so that the crux of the project can be better understood, although I will concentrate on one of the panels, specifically the panel devoted to the XVIII. arrondissement, for containing clear feminist content.

The sociopolitical perspective of both artists included the questioning, among other subjects, of the growing real estate speculation that had taken over Montparnasse, or the problem of the jails (la Santé, in specific) in Denfert-Rochereau.

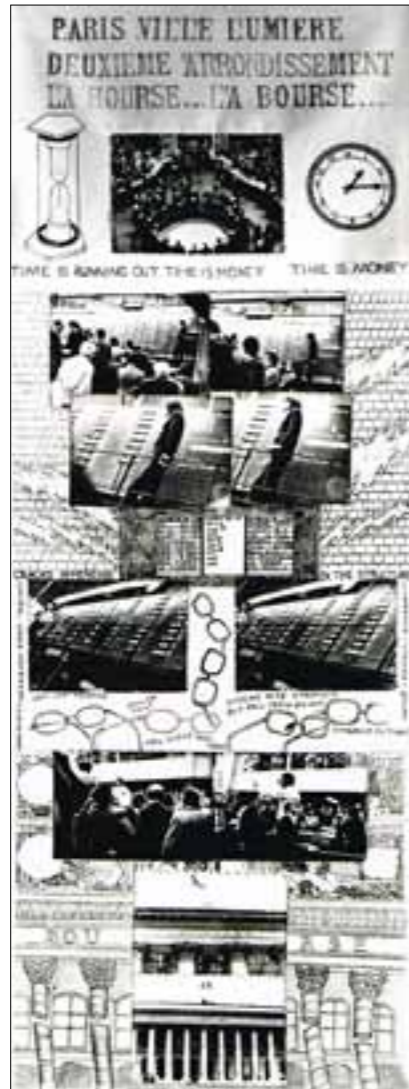
A feminist gaze took on centrality in the section focused on Pigalle and Montmartre. This panel collects images of the Abbesses metro



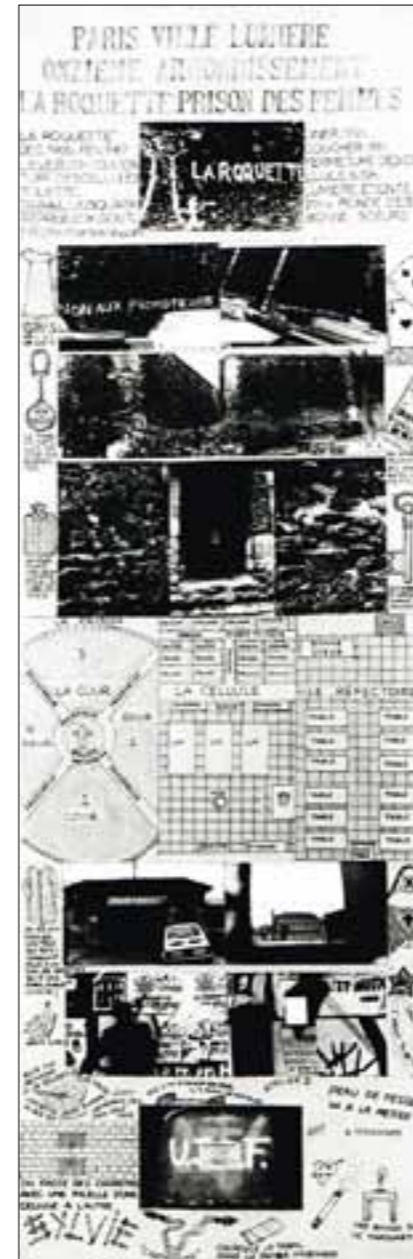
'The Headless Woman or the Belly Dance', 1974
B&W video, 24'
FNAC, Fonds National d'Art Contemporain
Sammlung Verbund, Centre Pompidou
Istanbul Modern Collection



'Paris Ville Lumière', 1974
Nil Yalter / Judy Blum
Installation on 20 districts of Paris
Photos, drawings and texts on cloth



'Paris Ville Lumière', 1974
Nil Yalter / Judy Blum
Installation on 20 districts of Paris
Photos, drawings and texts on cloth



'Paris Ville Lumière', 1974
Nil Yalter / Judy Blum
Installation on 20 districts of Paris
Photos, drawings and texts on cloth

and drawings of feminine lingerie. In addition, some texts allude to the men who congregate around the prostitutes while noting that some of these women offered the chilling figure of fifty services per day. Interspersed are photos of the Sacré Coeur, right above the lower section of the panel where a map alludes to the verified fact that 25% of the manual labor in France is made up of foreigners (from Algeria, Morocco, Chad, Senegal, etc.). In this panel, the problems of the immigrants and the working class go hand in hand with the exploitation of the prostitutes. This supposes a drawing away from classic socialist thinking which considered that women's liberation should be secondary to achievements for the working class which, if achieved, would bring equality. Nil Yalter and Judy Blum underscore the need for both to join forces and for both to have the same priority.

Also that same year, Yalter begins the series *Temporary Dwellings*, twelve collages in which she employs an ethnological methodology made up of photos, drawings, texts, and objects arrayed in an orderly fashion in rows or levels that allow her, along with a video, to put a face to the daily life of workers who live in slums and other precarious neighborhoods: Auber-villiers and Nanterre, near Paris; Istanbul; New York (the Puerto Rican community). Although the central axis of this work is a reflection on the dire conditions of life of people displaced to unhealthy neighborhoods, Yalter's gaze focuses on the everyday experience of women. In one of the collages, her eye rests on the gypsy women of Eyüp, a popular neighborhood of Istanbul, and their children who wear daisies in their hair. The drawn flowers offer a bit of joy and visually soften the poverty of the background. In gypsy families as well as in others, women always take care of the children.

In that so-very-productive year of 1974, Nil Yalter collaborates with Nicole Croiset and Judy Blum on one of her projects of greatest scope: *La Roquette, Prison de Femmes*.

After a fortuitous encounter with a woman named Mimi who spent a year in the Parisian prison of La Roquette, they started this highly unusual project.

State repression increased after May of 1968; there then arose the Groupe d'information sur les prisons (GIP) made up of Michel Foucault, Jean-Marie Domenach, and Pierre Vidal-Naquet to inform society about the detained students; an action that allowed newspapers and television stations to enter the jails, which had been forbidden until then.

However, life in women's prisons was still an invisible issue. The procedure employed in this project consisted of using photographs, drawings, texts, and a video that helped to reconstruct some fragments of women's everyday jail experience, while at the same time avoiding moralizing. The focus, still from a sociological perspective, didn't aspire to an absolute objectivism, given that the personal story of Mimi was key to the reconstruction and recreation of the prison. The photographs focused on a significant aspect of life in the cells: those objects necessary for survival: a plate and spoon, bedding, cigarettes...; the drawings sketched the architectural structure of the prison (its panoptic tower); the control and surveillance exercised by the jailor nuns over the prisoners was also shown; the visual presence of religion in the jail is present in the Sunday Masses. Other drawings portrayed everyday scenes: the work of the prisoners, their moments of recreation: playing cards. The video shows the incomplete face of a woman and a disturbing image of a wall on

which an action takes place: some hands pass others necessary objects: a blanket, a jar.

The work was shown in a feminist space/cooperative, the A.I.R. Gallery, in New York, in 1976, which exemplifies Yalter, Croiset, and Blum's clear political position.

In 1975, together with more than twenty artists resident in France and Germany (Timm Ulrichs, Anne & Patrick Poirier, Hervé Fischer, Joan Rabascall...), Yalter participated in a symposium in Germany, in a town whose name became the title of a project: *Neuenkirchen*.

In this work, Yalter adopted a clearly micropolitical posture on delving into the daily life and work undertaken by two women: Mrs. Meisel and Mrs. Schmidt. The first appears in a video washing dishes: the camera focuses above all on the action of cleaning, omitting the worker's face and thereby giving to understand the alienation of a boring and routine task. In the case of Mrs. Schmidt, Yalter used a double visual strategy: in the photographs, she is seen milking a cow whereas in the drawings, the same woman has lost her face, her body remaining inscribed upon a background of rectangular tiles. This de-personalization allows Yalter to point out the objectification of the work performed.

The video mentioned above is divided into two parts that demarcate a precise division in terms of gender: Mrs. Meisel performs a task considered feminine: washing the dishes; in the second half, a man is engaged in target practice, an activity forbidden to women at that time.

Well into the 1970s, Yalter continued exploring the conditions of life and survival of some disadvantaged groups, specifically that of immigrants from her country.

Turkish Immigrants, 1977, is a set of pieces

made up of black and white photographs, drawings, and a video, made in a period during which Yalter was active in the Turkish Communist Party. An association allowed her access to some Turkish families who lived in all kinds of penury through lack of jobs. This work was exhibited at the Paris Biennale of that same year.

In the drawings, both men as well as women are portrayed without faces, clearly allusive to the loss of identity experienced by individuals who are forcibly displaced from their country for economic or political reasons. In other pieces, the lack of faces could be interpreted as a sign of alienation.

The video is set in the interior of a house, a small space occupied and shared by women, men, and children. The camera offers close-ups with the stories of these immigrants. Again, a focus on gender is highlighted, for the women discuss issues about the care of their offspring and the lack of intimacy with their spouses due to the narrowness of the space; the men, in turn, speak of their conflicts at work: one of them mentions the accident he suffered on falling from a scaffolding. Nonetheless, the epicenter of the video is a child who plays with a few utensils. In the final section, a woman talks about the fables that are told about France: radiators in the streets, elevators in the buildings, folding beds. The reality is something else. Despite her disenchantment and frustration, a smile remains on her face.

The video concludes with a child who carries a dirty and broken doll in her arms. This videographic work seems to offer a metaphor of pain: it begins with the story of the man who suffered the accident, who the doctors give up as being a hopeless case, and concludes with the metonymy of the incomplete body.

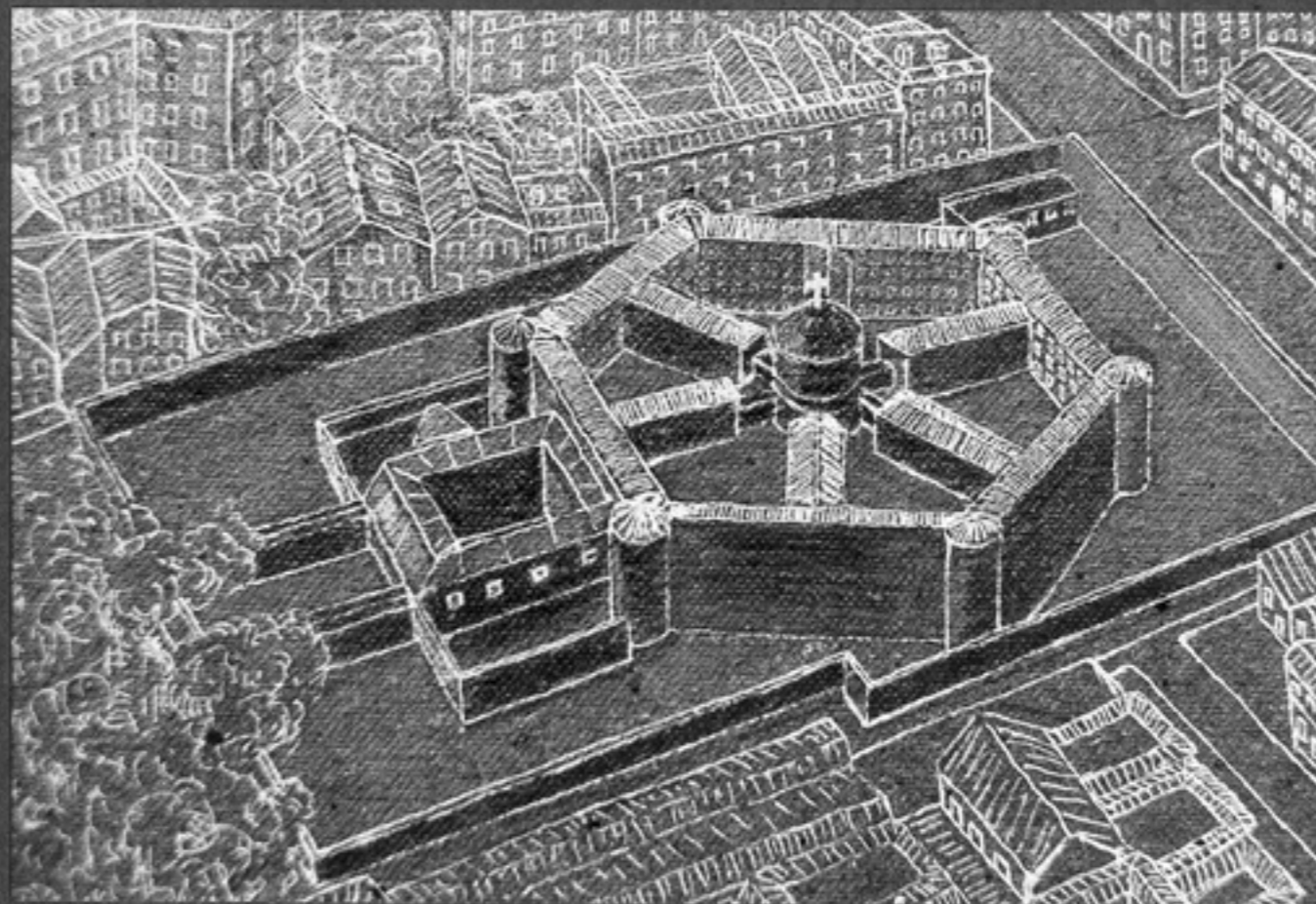


'La Roquette, Prison de Femmes', 1974
Nil Yalter / Judy Blum / Nicole Croiset
B&W video, photos and drawings
FNAC, Fonds National d'Art Contemporain



'La Roquette, Prison de Femmes', 1974
Nil Yalter / Judy Blum / Nicole Croiset
B&W video, photos and drawings
FNAC, Fonds National d'Art Contemporain

'La Roquette, Prison de Femmes', 1974
Nil Yalter / Judy Blum / Nicole Croiset
B&W video, photos and drawings
FNAC, Fonds National d'Art Contemporain



LA PRISON: UNE CASERNE UN PEU STRICTE, UNE ECOLE SANS
INDULGENCE, UN SOMBRE ATELIER, MAIS, A LA LIMITE, RIEN DE
QUALITATIVEMENT DIFFERENT. (MICHEL FOUCAULT: SURVEILLER ET PUNIR)



THEN SHE TOOK ME TO THE LINEN ROOM WHERE SHE GAVE ME TWO SHEETS, THREE BLANKETS, A BASIN, AND A PITCHER. FROM THERE WE WENT ON SEVERAL WALKWAYS IN THE MIDDLE OF WHICH WAS A CHAPEL. IT WAS SO DAMN COLD. IT WAS ABOUT ELEVEN AT NIGHT.



A WOMAN (CONVICT) CAME TO GET ME, AND I WALKED DOWN A LONG HALL. SHE LED ME INTO A ROOM WHERE THERE WAS A TABLE AND A BENCH. SHE ASKED ME IF I WANTED SOME SOUP. I ACCEPTED WITH PLEASURE, SEEING IT WAS COLD AS HELL; I TOOK TWO HELPINGS. THEN SHE



BUT I DIDN'T HAVE TIME TO THINK ABOUT IT LONG BECAUSE THE CHICK NEXT TO ME STARTED TALKING. FIRST SHE ASKED ME FOR A SMOKE, WHICH I GAVE HER, AND SHE ADVISED ME TO KEEP THE BUTT. THEN SHE TOLD ME TO HIDE ALL MY STUFF BECAUSE MARIE-THERESE WAS A THIEF!



...BECAUSE MARIE-THERESE WAS A THIEF!.. THE OTHER ONE HEARD THIS AND THEY STARTED QUARELLING IN WHISPERS. FOR MY FIRST NIGHT THERE WAS ATMOSPHERE. FINALLY THEY SHUT UP PROMISING TO SETTLE THE FIGHT THE NEXT DAY. I FELL ASLEEP BECAUSE I WAS SO TIRED. 10 DECEMBER 66.

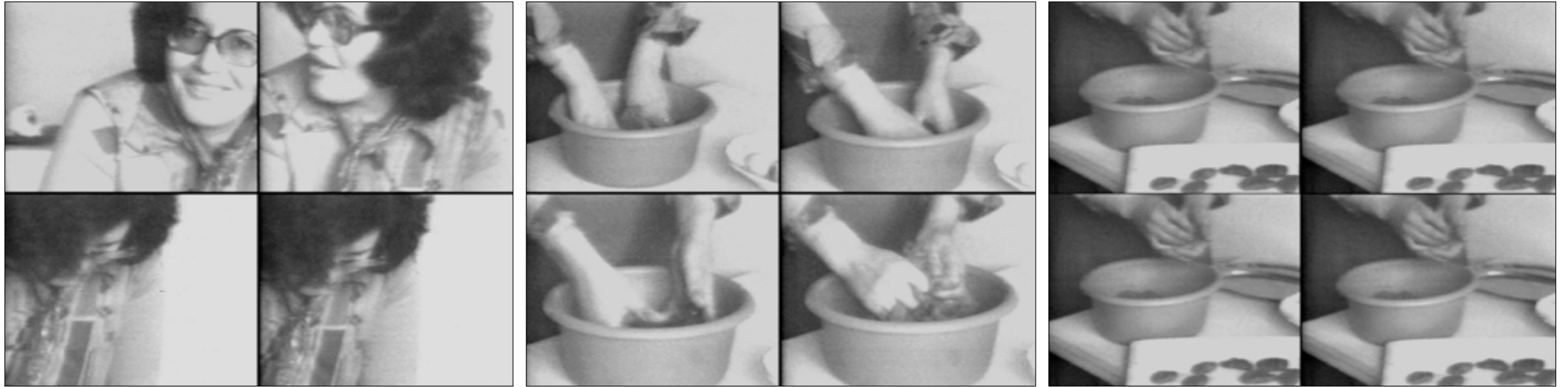


'La Roquette, Prison de Femmes', 1974
 Nil Yalter / Judy Blum / Nicole Croiset
 B&W video, photos and drawings
 FNAC, Fonds National d'Art Contemporain





'Turkish Immigrants', X. Paris Biennial, 1977
B&W video, 20', photos and drawings



'Meatball', 1977
B&W video, 2' 30", photos and drawings



'Le Chevalier d'Eon', 1978
B&W video, 15'
Photos and paintings

The *Turkish Immigrants* series includes other scenes of daily life.⁴ The roles are perfectly delineated: in a polyptych (ten photographs and five drawings in three rows) one sees images of meatballs being made (two women handle this task) while a man with a dark flowered shirt rests on a sofa with two other women. The kitchen seems not to be a masculine space.

For obvious reasons, Yalter devoted herself to what she knew, showing the Turkish community abroad with empathy. But she did not limit herself to this. For *Algerian Marriage in France*, 1977, she made a journey to Dreux with the goal of investigating the ceremony around the wedding of Algerian immigrants. For a woman like Nil Yalter, with an education like hers, the Islamic customs were surprising. In this work, men are noticeable by their absence.

It is a series of six black and white photographs of the interior of a dwelling occupied by a group of women and children. The women all wear colorful clothing. The ornamented decoration of the room is highlighted by a chromatic intervention made by Yalter through forms that resemble tiles, wallpaper, the geometric shapes that come from oriental arabesques.

The women prepare for the event, the betrothal. We see them seated, playing music, dancing, talking, laughing. The happiness in their faces is duplicated by the color that surrounds the black and white photographs.

As a result of her own experience (the protagonist was her husband) Yalter conceived *Le Chevalier d'Eon* in 1978. This work, comprised of a video and photographs, was inspired in particular by the book *L'étrange destinée du chevalier d'Éon* (1945) by Pierre Pinsseau, which tells the life of Charles de Beaumont (1728-1810), a French diplomat, traveler and spy who dressed in women's clothes to the point where his colleagues doubted his true sex or thought him an hermaphrodite (today, the term "intersex" is preferred over the pathologized "hermaphrodite"). These doubts (Michel Foucault has written about the Western obsession of ruthlessly identifying the "true" sex, whether male or female, but not both at the same time⁵) stemmed from the fact that in different periods of his life, this gentleman appeared in public as a man and a soldier, and at others as a woman, sowing confusion.

This piece, which could be seen for the first

time in 2012 (EspaiVisor, Valencia), many years after its conception, consists of a video, which begins with Baroque music by Domenico Scarlatti and the split image (this division is clearly symbolic of the masculine/feminine duality) of the protagonist: a middle aged man wearing large glasses and a turtleneck sweater, who later transforms: he puts on makeup, stockings, high heels, and a boa.

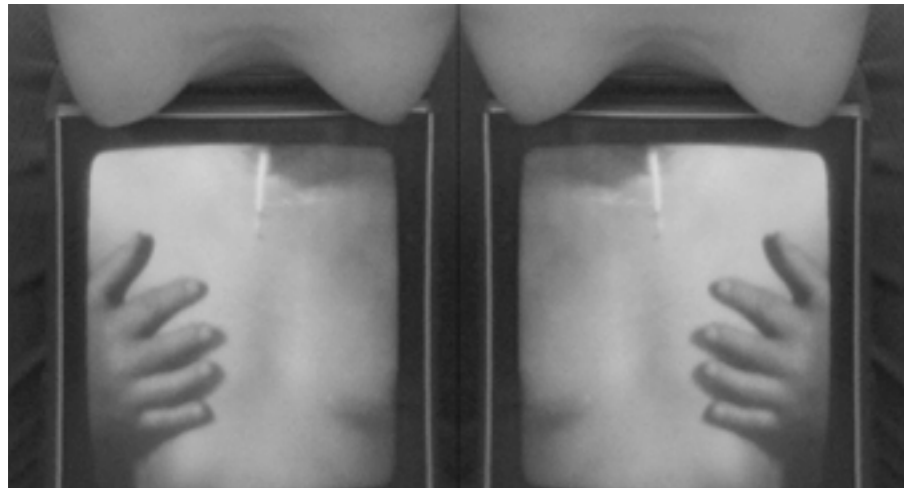
The double image revolves around the line that joins and separates them, giving to understand a visual instability. At one point, the subject caresses a boa beside a monitor that shows him in makeup and with loose hair. This video is presented in such a way that multiplications of the body are generated, particularly the face. It is a sort of *mise en abyme*, in which the individual appears with a serious expression, in a narcissistic and contemplative attitude. There is also space for reflection on the equality between women and men; this is shown particularly in a masterful section in which the new gentleman of Eon lies on the floor with his legs spread and at their crux a monitor shows some talking lips which recite a text from the period of Louis XVI:

*"Après avoir été toute ma vie, honnête homme, zélé citoyen, brave militaire, le triomphe d'être femme est de pouvoir être cité à jamais au nom de tant d'autres femmes qui ont prouvé que les qualités et les vertus dont les hommes sont si fiers n'ont point été refusés à mon sexe." [After having been an honest man all my life, a diligent citizen, a valiant soldier, the triumph of being a woman is to be cited in the name of so many women who have demonstrated that the qualities and virtues which men are so proud of have not been denied to my sex.]*⁶

Yalter's gaze lingers on the process of transformation of the figure portrayed, who is seen as he shaves his chest; once clean of hair, he molds his breasts with his hands to caress a woman's bosom. The images Yalter created underscore the splitting, the masculine/feminine duplicity. In those years in France, except for Michel Journiac's photographic and performance works on transvestism, and the political and activist irruption of the Front Homosexuel d'Action Révolutionnaire (FHAR) in 1971, the presence of a flexible and malleable conception of gender was very rare.

⁴ A question investigated by Michel de Certeau in *L'invention du quotidien*, Paris, Union générale d'éditions, 1980. - ⁵ Michel Foucault, "Le vrai sexe", *Arcadie*, n° 323, November 1980, pp. 617-625

⁶ The quote comes from *La vie militaire, politique et privé de mlle d'Éon connue jusqu'à 1777 sous le nom de Chevalier d'Éon*, written by M. de la Fortelle, in 1779.



'Le Chevalier d'Eon', 1978
B&W video, 15'
Photos and paintings





'Rahime, Kurdish Woman from Turkey', 1979
Nil Yalter / Nicole Croiset
Video, 55', photographs and drawings

'Rahime, Kurdish Woman from Turkey', 1979
Nil Yalter / Nicole Croiset
Video, 55', photographs and drawings





'Rahime, Kurdish Woman from Turkey', 1979
Nil Yalter / Nicole Croiset
Video, 55', photographs and drawings

Out of Yalter's extensive investigations of nomadic communities and human groups that are displaced or in a situation of expulsion and/or exile, her project developed with Nicole Croiset, titled *Rahime, Kurdish Woman from Turkey*, carried out in 1979, demands attention.

This installation⁷ consists of panels with photographs, drawings, objects (bits of fabric), texts (pages from the *Quran*) and a video in which different questions converge: poverty, exile, gender violence, class discrimination...

I will try to unravel the video's main ingredients:

The first subject to be tackled references economic differences according to one's place on the social and power scale. One sees street scenes of a dirty and decrepit neighborhood where children are playing. A little girl plays with a doll and various materials and objects: earth, ash, cotton, and a crib. Yalter seems to tell us that social differences are present among the rich and the poor since birth.

The tone is demanding and subtle; the images of the girl and her toys act as metaphors of the dereliction without any need for words.

The question of housing is addressed. Some women pass bricks between themselves until they've erected a cement-less wall that covers the entire screen: a metaphor for precariousness and solidarity in the slums of Istanbul.

A shift in the video lets it tackle the problem of the presence of girls in schools under a patriarchal culture that looks down on them. Despite sexist obstacles, some changes are taking place in the newer generations.

The subject of forced marriages with mi-

nors is introduced: "They give you to a man and that's it," a woman wearing a hijab says, seated before a mirror as if making a confession. A painful metaphor resounds in her tale: "Twilight came before dawn; the sun set."

At that moment, the story of Rahime begins.

Married at thirteen, she bore her daughter, Senem, a year later. Her daughter was everything for her; she learned at school everything that her mother didn't know and then taught it to her (the narration shows an inversion of the roles of mother and daughter). On leaving school, she worked as a maid and then in a garment factory (it's probable that the strips of fabric used in the installation alongside the panels with photographs and drawings allude to the daughter's job).

Rahime says: "She was like a tree for me, that gave me shade and let me sit beneath it; unfortunately, fate killed her."

From this moment, Rahime's pain surfaces in the video through visual and audio repetitions that add intensity to a heartbreaking story.

The murderer meets Senem and asks her to marry him. Senem answers that she won't because they are cousins and recommends he search for another girl. He insists and praises her beauty. He then threatens her: "If you don't marry me, I'll kill you." And he did so, committing suicide afterward.

In addition to the spoken narration, the images allow for the reconstruction of the scenes that obsess Rahime: the chairs and fabrics of her daughter's workplace, the table set with glasses of tea, the murderer's arrival, the bodies' falling, the rivulet of blood...

The final section of the video shows the

time Rahime spent in the hospital where her daughter died. Rahime as *mater dolorosa* and social worker at the hospital. She wanted to know what death was. The video concludes with a song, an elegy.

In 1980, Yalter renews her collaboration with Nicole Croiset. In *The Rituals*, the space of the ARC where the performance took place was divided into two equal areas in which there was a video camera and a monitor. Each camera was connected to the monitor of the opposite space. With this, they accentuated the interconnection between the two areas and the movements of each performer.

The symbolic value of the acts is large for it appeals to subjects like maternity, menstruation, and the social differences of patriarchal origins which penetrate the division between the feminine and the masculine. The sentences spoken by the artists come from misogynistic Turkish lexicons, traditions and rites (for example: "le mâle arrange la mère; la fille démolit la mère" ("a son fixes the mother; the daughter destroys the mother") and they create a separation that the women's gestures belie. A set of rituals that are likewise found in other cultures, such as Scotland or France.⁸ The slow and serious tone of the performance translates the ballast of some chauvinist rituals that are difficult to eradicate.

In 1980, Yalter creates *Harem*, delving into one of the most enduring myths of the masculine imagination with regard to women. As Fatema Mernissi, born in a harem in Fez in 1940, wrote:

"(...) *the harem is a code. Wherever there is a harem the idea of public space doesn't exist, because space is divided into two spaces: women's*

space and men's space. But there is no public space, so therefore citizens don't exist either; in that sense, they are like women as well, they are also in a political harem; they cannot speak, only the caliph may speak."

In this installation, made up of drawings, photographs, and a video, the life stories of two women in an Ottoman harem, named Nakşidil and Dilaver, take on capital importance.

It is a meditation on a cloistered space, without light, full of hallways, rooms, lattices and closed gardens; a palatial enclosure, Topkapı Palace, where opulence and extravagance abound but in which women are enslaved, totally at the service of the whims and desires of the sultan.

The video begins with the music of oriental drums and flutes and the image of a woman whose face cannot be seen beside a monitor multiplied into others, like a kaleidoscope.

This beginning is an index of the aesthetic procedure (the *mise en abyme* effect) used by the artist, for the voice of the narration will reiterate over the course of the video some facts of the tale of these two women and the images will also duplicate what the story tells, thereby generating a greater emotional charge.

Everything in the video is the preparation for an event: the references to the hammam in which the women clean and embellish themselves; the allusions to the sprinkling of perfumes in the rooms, the preparation of delicacies; the women getting dressed in luxurious clothing and shoes with precious pearls; a sumptuousness in the service of one goal: *l'événement* [the event]. What is this? The sultan, also called absolute master, enters

⁷ Lucy Lippard was able to see the relevance of this work by Yalter and Rahime's conscience as a woman, worker, and a woman displaced from a rural setting. See Lucy Lippard, *Get the Message? A Decade of Art for Social Change* (New York: Dutton, 1984) pp. 127-129. Lippard included Nil Yalter's work in the exhibit *Issue: Social Strategies by Women Artists* (London: ICA, 1980)

⁸ Annette Messager created a series of works called *Ma collection de proverbes*, 1974, a set of received ideas about women that she embroidered by hand. One example: "Femme en colère, mer déchainée" (Angry woman; unbridled sea) - ⁹ For more about Fatema Mernissi, see: <http://www.orienteyemediterraneo.com/19.html>



'Women at Work, Women at Home', 1981
 Nil Yalter / Nicole Croiset
 A public space project

the scene attired in a crested turban and lets a handkerchief fall before his concubines to indicate which has been chosen: Nakşidil. A choice that entails rape.

In the Gynecium of the harem, the hierarchies are well defined: thus, the sultan's mother exercises her power over the other women, the odaliques (sold by their fathers to the sultan) and the Nubian slaves. On the other hand, the only men present are eunuchs whose suffering is recounted in this video with all kinds of details. The eunuchs are castrated men who are exploited by another men.

Harem is a work that recovers materials and narrations from other times but which also looks at the present day; that is why Nil Yalter herself appears in the video (in one intervention, she draws a feminine face on a mirror on which she writes *déguisement obligatoire* [obligatory mask]) to accentuate the endurance of atavistic chauvinist behaviors in the present day. To do this, she also introduces into the video some images from a French television program in which two women (one of them is Françoise Giroud) debate with some men about abortion, abuse, and the persistence of discrimination.

The final images show a television that emits a Hollywood-like movie with an upper class man and woman together beside a sofa on which some photographs of lower class Turkish women are resting. With this ending, Yalter seems to raise the question of solidarity among women, even with the determinants arising from class difference.

The final work I am going to analyze is also focused on the subject of social classes. I refer to *Women at Work, Women at Home*, a project undertaken with Nicole Croiset in 1981.

It is an experience in a *ville nouvelle* [new

town] (Mireuil) of La Rochelle, a neighborhood of houses lined up in rows. There is a feminist self-awareness group there, and Croiset and Yalter decided to resume¹⁰ their interrupted activity with ten women who had participated in earlier projects.

Both artists noticed that the bus line that linked this suburb of new houses with the center was used only by women. In those years, there was only one car in most families and it was driven by the men. The bus stop areas were used to hang posters with the eloquent title of *Femmes au foyer/Femmes au travail* [Women at Work, Women at Home]. They also did this inside the buses. Yalter and Croiset didn't want to leave any gaps in this activist action, with which they wanted to emphasize the double workday performed by women. Still today, in any corner of the globe, in the immense majority of instances women take care of the domestic chores. In addition, Yalter and Croiset also carried out a performance in which two screens show the work of some women in a factory and in the home, as well as photographic images of both of these. Croiset and Yalter repeated the monotonous actions of the workers. The performance had a great success, for it resonated with the everyday reality of every woman.

In the period covered in the text, Nil Yalter created an impressive body of work whose center of gravity was feminist practice. This was without a doubt what allowed her, in an adverse context, to thread with a sociopoetic language her art with questions of great social significance.

Translation into English
 from Spanish: Lawrence Schimal

¹⁰ As told by Nil Yalter to Esther Ferrer in "Frontier between Art and Reality" in *Lápiz*, n° 60 (Madrid:1989), pp. 32-39. *Consciousness-raising groups* were a pillar in the education in equal values put into action by feminism since the middle of the 1970s. Some of the first groups appeared in New York in 1967, guided by the Radical Women, among them Shulamith Firestone, Anne Koedt and Kathie Sarachild.



'Harem', 1980
 B&W video tape, 45'
 Drawings and photography



Feminists, Immigrants, Workers: Struggle's Connection

Fabienne Dumont

During our many conversations over the past decade, Nil Yalter often maintained that she did nothing for the first seven years of her arrival in France, in 1965. This “nothing” actually covers a whole maturing of works that will emerge from the 1970s. This period of integration into French culture is a time during which Nil Yalter paints, observes, campaigns for the rights in Turkey, is involved in the cultural branch of the communist movement and immerses herself in ethnographic and feminist texts.¹ All this breeding-ground allows a very quick arising of multimedia works, to a high rate, from the start of *Topak Ev*'s production in 1973. The latter is noticed by Suzanne Pagé, then director of the ARC, the very contemporary side of Modern Art Museum of the City of Paris, which devot-



ed her a solo exhibition. Then, feminist projects and those related to immigration and the working class will succeed each other and mix, while Nil Yalter fits into the avant-garde artistic movements.

Since the 1970s, Nil Yalter also fits in the Parisian feminist collectives, allowing discussions and exhibitions.² Thus, she shows a first version of *Harem* in the artist's studio of Françoise Janicot during a day organised by The Women/Art Collective, and makes one of the few videos showing these groups in action: *March 11, 1978, Action of 5 Women*. This video was found by chance during the monographic work undertaken with the artist and then digitized, what is very precious as it reveals the exhibition held and captures the atmosphere of this feminist



'Topak Ev', 1973
Installation
santralistanbul Collection

¹ About her biography, see Fabienne Dumont, « Nil Yalter, artiste à la confluence des mémoires migrantes, ouvrières et féministes », Christine Bard (dir.), *Les féministes de la deuxième vague* (Rennes: PUR, 2012), pp. 177-189 - ² The history of the French feminist art movements is traced in Fabienne Dumont, *Femmes et art dans les années 1970 - 'Douze ans d'art contemporain' version plasticiennes - Une face cachée de l'histoire de l'art - Paris, 1970-1982*, PhD, September 2003, PUR, Rennes, to be published in 2013





actions' day, while few people are aware of the existence of French groups of women artists. It also shows the recurrent interest of the artist for the role of women in communities that she encounters.

From there, Nil Yalter will conduct a work that emphasizes the connections between gender, or the position of men and women, and various issues and develops an interest in workers' and immigrants' lives. This text focuses on some projects that connect immigration issues, feminist and gender issues, an ethnographic look and labor issues – a quadruple focal omnipresent in Nil Yalter's path.

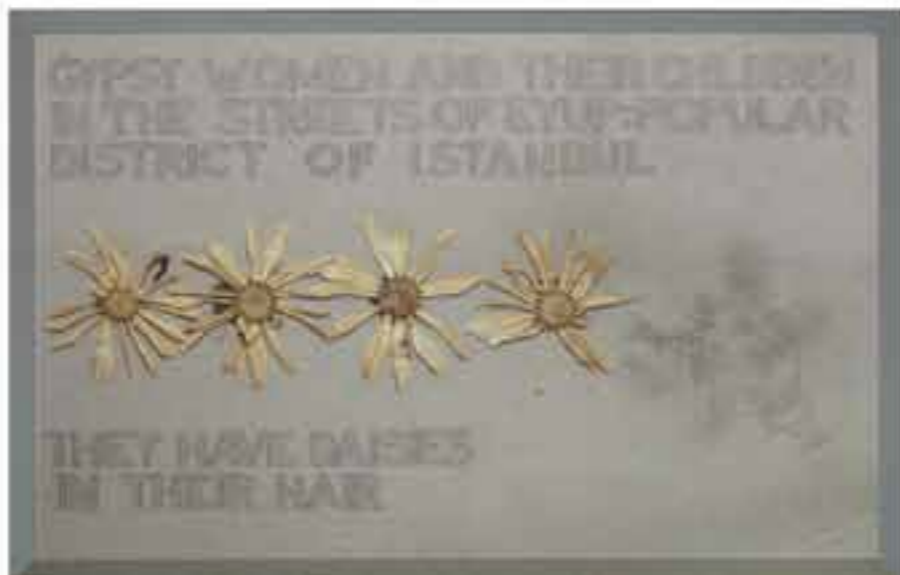
Houses of Misery

A first series of works is dedicated to the habitats of immigrant populations, temporary and poverty-stricken habitats³ that others are filming with a purely documentary approach – for example, Henri Storck, *Les Maisons de la misère* (Houses of Misery, 1937). These *Temporary Dwellings*, created between 1974 and 1977, were the subject of an exhibition in a cultural center in Grenoble, which gave them their name.⁴ A dozen boards, composed of photographs, objects and drawings are accompanied by videos. In 1978, interviews with Turkish workers, made as part of an exhibition at Lavuun Gallery in Ghent, in Flemish Belgium, complete the series. Finally, in a permanent reworking, Nil Yalter recreated an installation of a dozen of these panels and videos' extracts related to immigrant issues in 2011 for an exhibition at Hubert Winter Gallery in Vienna, Austria. Seven of these panels and four extracts from videos have been purchased by the Tate Modern in 2012. This last assembly includes excerpts from *Diyarba-*

kir Mardin / Istanbul (2005), *Exile is a Hard Job* (1983), *Immigration and the New Town* (1979) and from *Temporary Dwellings* (Servenoble and L'Isle-d'Abeau, 1977).

The extract used for *Temporary Dwellings* allows us to hear the testimony of a woman who tells about her arrival in France, with all the difficulties in crossing the border, as she had no papers. The video goes along with a series of photographs, which show some sheep, but it is not included in this new layout. Similarly, the original videotapes, which have not been presented since their unique projection in Servenoble in 1977, are not visible in their entirety at the Tate Modern. But the two panels of this set are present. Dated 19 May and 22 November 1977, they include photographs of low-rise buildings, living spaces of these populations, which coexist with objects found on the site, like samples of ground, posters, glass, rope, wall or house, and a few handwritten words that identify them summarily. These elements of a particular anthropology are associated with drawings, creating a tension between a trivial real and an imaginary treatment, very graphic and meticulous, which humanizes these representations of tough life experiences. All other panels are designed on this model, taken between a recovery of symbolic and disparate elements and a technique of colored pencil which made them tend to myth, fiction, and storytelling by a minimalist touch. Similarly, in videos, testimonies of workers and housewives come to enshrine in a filmic look that takes into account the scene, textures, faces, stops on humans and their environment, that gives them time to exist, to express, in words, but also by the sliding of

³ The nomad's tent, made in 1973, *Topak Ev*, is actually precursory of this series. See Fabienne Dumont, "Nil Yalter: memory, migrants and workers in 1970s-1980s France", *n.paradoxa – International feminist art journal*, n° 26 (London: July 2010), pp. 52-58 - ⁴ Nil Yalter : *habitations provisoires, Paris, ville lumière, travail collectif sur les immigrés turcs à Paris*, Maison de la culture, Grenoble, 1977



'Temporary Dwellings 2'
Paris - New York - İstanbul, 1974 - 1976
Photos, objects and drawings
Colección Olor Visual, Barcelona, İspanya

'Temporary Dwellings'
Paris - New York - İstanbul, 1974 - 1976
Photos, objects and drawing
Tate Modern Collection
Photos: PIXELSTORM Vienna





'Temporary Dwellings'
 Paris - New York - Istanbul, 1974 - 1976
 Photos, objects and drawing
 Tate Modern Collection
 Photos: PIXELSTORM Vienna

LUNDI 17 AGOUT. LA PLUIE NOUS SURPREND ET LES ÉGOUTS ÉCLATENT.



UN GROS PLUIE NOUS SURPREND ET LES ÉGOUTS ÉCLATENT.



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UN GROS PLUIE NOUS SURPREND ET LES ÉGOUTS ÉCLATENT.



16:00hr. LE CIEL S'ÉCLAIRCIT. ON MONTE VERS LES BIDONVILLES...



UN GROS PLUIE NOUS SURPREND ET LES ÉGOUTS ÉCLATENT.



UN GROS PLUIE NOUS SURPREND ET LES ÉGOUTS ÉCLATENT.



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UN GROS PLUIE NOUS SURPREND ET LES ÉGOUTS ÉCLATENT.



DÉBRIS RAMASSÉ DEVANT LA MAISON N°33



DÉBRIS RAMASSÉ DEVANT LA MAISON N°37



DÉBRIS RAMASSÉ DEVANT LA MAISON N°39



the camera which fully integrates them and by the way, humanizes them. We are in the presence of people, with their harsh reality, their distinctive situations and their dreams, their myths, their hopes. This tension is present in all the artist's work, a connection that gives them a great strength, a great presence, a real closeness and a real political and artistic content, corresponding to what is stated in Jacques Rancière's *Malaise dans l'esthétique*: "The essence of art is to make a recutting of material and symbolic space. And this is where art relates to politics."⁵

In 1978, during an exhibition project at Lavuun Gallery in Ghent, Nicole Croiset and Nil Yalter make several interviews' videotapes with Turkish workers who have been immigrating in this city. Men refusing the two artists talking to women, they are introduced

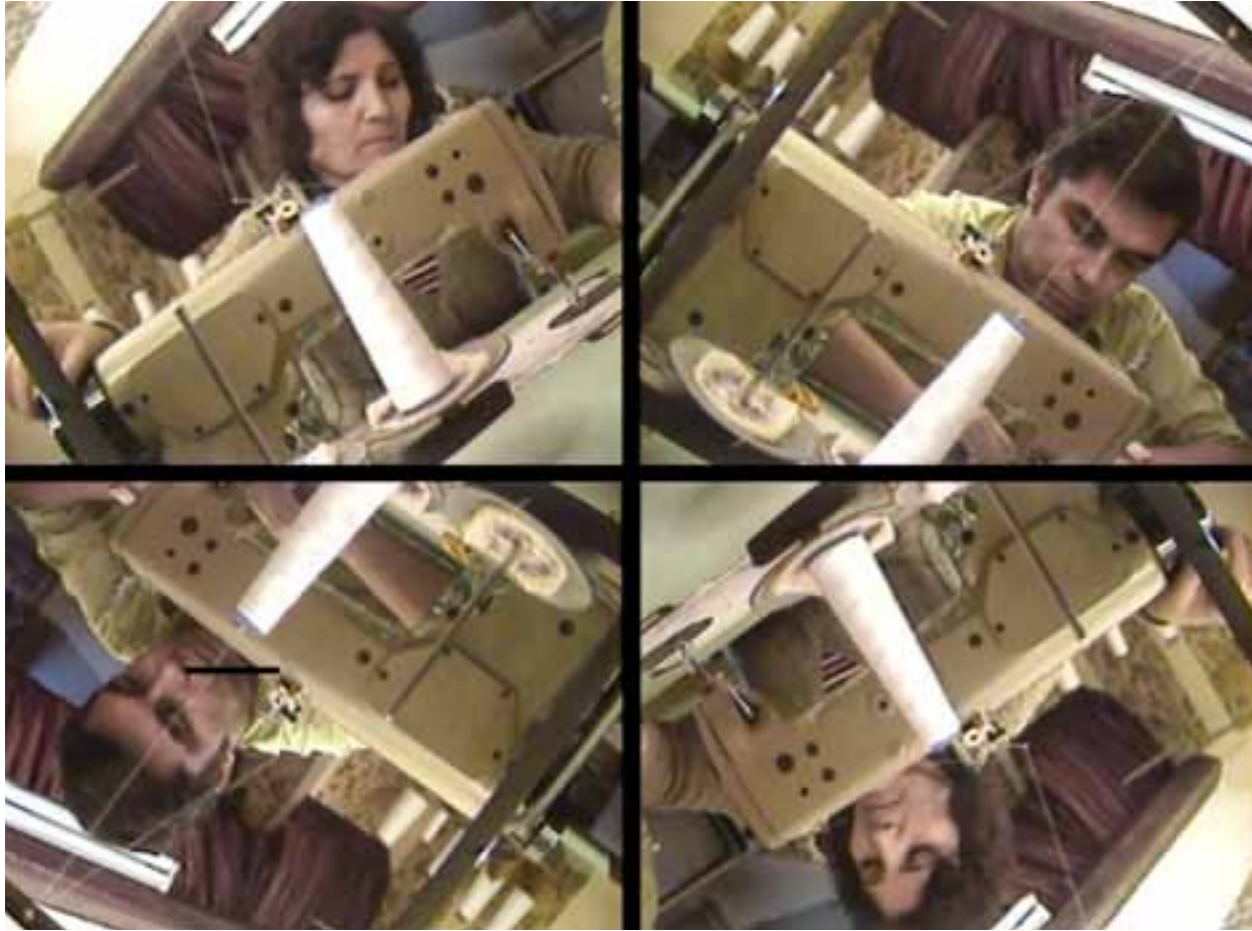
by images of their living spaces, showing the women with their children in the courtyards in front of the houses, in the Turkish quarter of the city. Contact with the Turks came from a political friend, because all men come from a very fundamentalist Turkish village, making it impossible to talk to women. In addition to the videos, some photographs and drawings, now lost, were part of the installation. This early work set up the workprocess and the aesthetics of Nil Yalter –which combines photographs, videos, objects, drawings–, to which could apply a thought emitted by the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu on one of his disciples, Abdelmalek Sayad:

"He listens, and records, and transcribes, and transmits, without phrases, words that he attracts and receives [...] with sympathy without

⁵ Jacques Rancière, *Malaise dans l'esthétique* (Paris: Galilée, 2004.), pp. 36-37



'Exile is a Hard Job', 1983
Video installation, 20'
Photos, texts and painting



'Exile is a Hard Job', 1983
Video installation, 20'
Photos, texts and paintings





'Exile is a Hard Job', 1983
Video installation, 20'
Photos, texts and painting

*pathos, with complicity without being naive, an understanding without deference or condescension."*⁶

Strange Strangers

In 1970, Marcel Trillat and Frédéric Variot shot a film, titled *Étranges étrangers*, which focused on immigrant labour. Nil Yalter focuses on the very same theme in her installations, combining rites, myths and beliefs with often sordid realities. Arrangements of these installations and video montages turn them away from documentaries or activist movies and push them towards contemporary art, even if border areas are blurred. In any case, a particular aesthetic is taking place, which matches the definition given by Sylvain Roumette:

*"But I think the style is precisely what we cannot change. [...] because it is completely involuntary. It is the expression of something we cannot control; this is the ability to create relationships: hitherto unseen relationships between objects, relations between images, between images and sounds, between memories and emotions, etc."*⁷

Thus, between 1976 and 1977, in collaboration with two sociologists, Gaye Petek-Salom and Jack Salom, along with Nicole Croiset, she made a series of interviews that are displayed in the 1977's Biennale de Paris under the title *Turkish Workers in Paris*. In the exhibition, videos are accompanied by drawings and photographs made by Nil Yalter. The issue of labor is recurrent, initiated by the project *An Experience of Socio-ecological Art: Neuenkirchen*, in 1975.⁸ The series

⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, preface, Abdelmalek Sayad, *L'immigration ou les paradoxes de l'identité - L'illusion du provisoire* (Paris:Raisons d'agir, 2006), p. 11 - ⁷ Sylvain Roumette, in Guy Baudon, Anne Baudry, Jean-Louis Baudry... [et al.], *Le style dans le cinéma documentaire* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2006), p. 23 - ⁸ See Fabienne Dumont, "Repenser l'art à partir d'une prise de conscience féministe élargie, et vice-versa? Le cas des plasticiennes des années 1960-1970 en France", Malika Combes, Igor Contreras and Perin Emel Yavuz (dir.), *À l'avant-garde ! Art et politique dans les années 1960 et 1970*, Bern, Peter Lang, in press and F. Dumont, *n.paradoxa*, op. cit.



'Neuenkirchen', 1975
B&W video, 15'
Photos and drawings

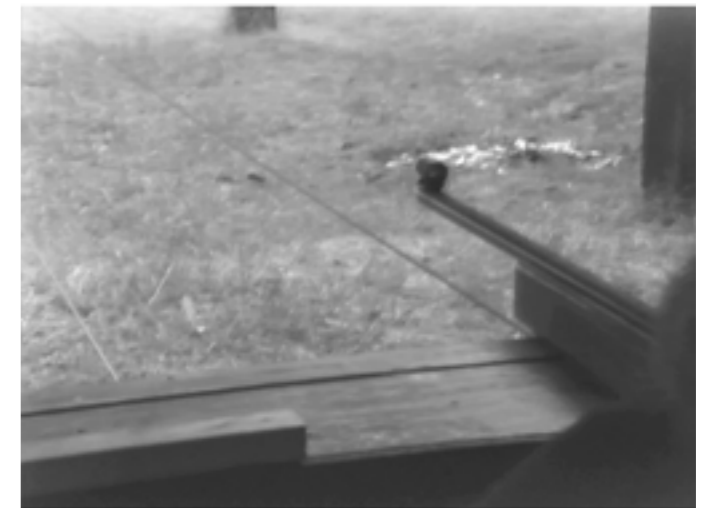


'Neuenkirchen', 1975
 B&W video, 15'
 Photos and drawings





'Neuenkirchen', 1975
B&W video, 15'
Photos and drawings



of photographs is interesting because it evokes the feeling of loss of identity specific to the exiles, a paradox of identity very well analyzed by Abdelmalek Sayad in the case of the Algerian population:

*“The so-called immigration, about which we treat as such in a place and a society is called elsewhere, in another society or for another society, emigration. As two sides of the same reality, emigration remains as the other side of immigration, in which it persists and survives [...].”*⁹

Photographs of Turkish people in their familiar environments are associated with drawings where faces have disappeared, where the artist insists on details of clothing, everyday objects, anything that individualizes them and also mentions their beliefs and tastes. This split identity also echoes the particular situation of an exile, caught between two worlds that coexist in him or in her. As Gaye Petek-Salom points out:

*“The awareness of Turkish families’ heads of the need to extend the stay in immigration is accompanied by a heightened need to assert their otherness. [...] With the arrival of women and children and the birth of other children in a foreign land, Turkish men definitely defined themselves through the word gurbetci (state of those who live far from their native land), cultivating this membership to another land, this chronic feeling of nostalgia.”*¹⁰

In this same installation, in fact, girls who live with their parents in a caravan undergo the same treatment: between harsh realism and humanization through drawing.

Finally, in 1983, the Museum of Modern Art of the city of Paris offers once again the possibility of a personal exhibition to Nil Yalter: *Exile is a Hard Job*. This exhibition is an opportunity to develop a little more the links between myths and reality, to question how they are shaped and how issues of labor, immigration and feminism meet.¹¹ The title, borrowed from Turkish poet Nazim Hikmet (1902-1963), as well as some of his poems, are inscribed on the walls, echoing the video that shows the everyday life of illegal workers in ready-to-wear workshops in the street of Faubourg Saint-Denis in Paris, the destitution and misery of which are far from the initial fascination for the West. Yalter confronts the reality of migrant workers, their poverty, their loneliness, to their original culture, through poems from the Turkish and Kurdish folk culture that evoke exile, that immigrants bring with them. Poetry brings dignity, as highlighted in these lines of Nazim Hikmet, from the poem “Living” in *Letters to Taranta-Babu* (1935), dedicated to Henri Barbusse, his struggle’s companion against fascism:

“Living... one to one and / all together / as we weave a silk / living like singing in a chorus a hymn of joy / living / and yet how a strange case Taranta-Babu / what a funny story that / this thing incredibly beautiful / this thing unspeakably happy / is today so hard / so close / so bloody...”

Photographs accompany texts and video, which also leave a place for the experience of the women –who are waiting in Turkey or accompany the exile:

*“Is it possible that you’re destined for another / years come, years have passed / years have passed and years have returned / I’m only a love letter / that you tore without deigning to read it.”*¹²

In the interviews, the workers refer implicitly to the regularization of undocumented workers in 1981 and the reunification of families that followed, but their line of work also posed the risk of contracting a particular disease, because synthetic fabric dust has carcinogenic effects if workers are subjected to it for long periods. The problems evoked are those of clandestinity, accommodation, language, isolation, confinement, homesickness, that these workers, attached to the extreme left, lucidly analyze:

“We sell our labor force, our youth for a few pennies. [...] The bourgeoisie uses unemployment to reinforce racism against foreigners. [...] While the true cause of unemployment in France is the economic crisis.”

Their touching and involved stories are subject of a constant artistic work: inverted, reversed, split video images, insertions of fictional, performed scenes, echo their words and their memories, also transcribed in texts, photographs, interlocking the reality and the beliefs. This is the artistic work that allows to link a political and human vision.

These works are precious witnesses of a particular historical period, because they give voice to neglected populations. Indeed, historically, the Thirty Glorious Years in France (the post-war boom) needs an important labor supply, and migrant workers are so solicited. In addition to Algerians and the Portuguese, Af-

ricans and Turks are working on construction sites, in metallurgy and manufacturing. The 1973 oil crisis marked the end of the official policy of recruiting foreign labour, and the 1980s witnessed the emergence of a powerful streak of racism that in turn, led to the formation of anti-racist movements in France – notably SOS Racisme in 1984.¹³

Most Turks came from rural Anatolia, deeply disrupted by the progressive urbanization and the loss of traditional agricultural income. Germany and France, but also the Netherlands and Belgium hosted these exiles from the 1960s. Gone for economic reasons, the coup d’états that hit Turkey leads them to bring women and children and settle in France. Men work in the construction sector, in automobile, plastics, rubber, forestry, ready-to-wear fabrics (36% of workers in the Parisian district of Sentier were Turkish), but only 19% of women of this generation were working. People interviewed by Nil Yalter are not those of the political refugees of the 1980s, but the workers of the 1970s, and she particularly focused on Turkish populations, due to her own culture. Men have created associations and then claimed their belonging to the Turkish culture by external signs and such as the establishment of Islamic schools, and marriages with spouses, men and women, chosen in Turkey. All this history is reflected in Nil Yalter’s projects.

In 1980, Nicole Croiset and Nil Yalter perform *The Rituals* at the Museum of Modern Art of the City of Paris, an interaction between two areas of action that combines performance and video duplex. Each artist interacts in her own room with some objects in response to images that pass on the monitor

⁹ Abdelmalek Sayad, *L’immigration ou les paradoxes de l’identité - L’illusion du provisoire* (Paris: Raisons d’agir, 2006), p. 15. - ¹⁰ Gaye Petek-Salom, “Turcs de France”, in David Assouline and Medhi Lallaoui (dir.), *Un siècle d’immigrations en France - Troisième période, 1945 à nos jours - Du chantier à la citoyenneté ?*, Au nom de la mémoire, Paris, 1997, p. 57. - ¹¹ This is also the case with *La ville nouvelle* (The New Town, 1979), where men and women of Portuguese origin express this paradoxical feeling of exile. See F. Dumont, *n.paradoxa*, op. cit.

¹² Extracts inscribed on the walls of the exhibition hall - ¹³ Gaye Petek-Salom, op. cit., p. 48-65.



'The Rituals', 1980
Nil Yalter / Nicole Croiset
Video performance



'The Rituals', 1980
Nil Yalter / Nicole Croiset
Video performance

next to her. These monitors are the only channel of interaction between the two women. Their actions contradict or illustrate beliefs about birth and hunting in the Anatolian civilizations, creating a real deconstruction of gender stereotypes. Among the rites staged, we see a performer who is violating the prohibition of touching arms, and the consequences of this act are immediately visible on the monitor: the game escapes. At another time, one puts a drop of blood in a glass of water, provoking dead fish showing on the screen, as in the popular belief that if menstrual blood falls into the river, all the fish would die. The two performers include themselves in an interactive game that is very successful, underlining beliefs' stigma, avoidance rules which limit the activity's sphere of women, and emphasizing gender assignments.

Videos that run on monitors were previously shot and assembled, as actions are thoroughly prepared. Nil Yalter performs in this way a

shaman dance in the reserves of the Musée de l'Homme, fitted with a mask belonging to the museum's collection, to revive these museified objects by showing their previous use in their original society. The two artists also perform a series of actions related to the text of the anthropologist Michèle Nicolas on Turkish folk beliefs concerning births, for example: "According to the general opinion, when a pregnant woman is getting more beautiful it is because she waits for a male heir. If her face is becoming ugly, it is because she is carrying a girl. [...] Male arranges mother, daughter demolishes mother."¹⁴ This link to texts, whether from ethnology or myths, is recurrent in the work process of Nil Yalter, which combines words with images, allowing ideas to flow via another mode of apprehension. Thus, she focuses on temporary dwellings, on living conditions of different communities in their relations to beliefs, which are tools to give a sense to experience.

¹⁴ Michèle Nicolas, *Croyances et Pratiques populaires turques concernant les naissances (Région de Bergama)*, Publications orientalistes de France (Paris: 1972), p. 70.

The Wretched of the Earth, from La Rochelle to Sandouville – 1980s

In the 1980s, several projects are concerned with the working conditions of men and women, in factories in La Rochelle, then with professions related to the sea – now vanished –, and finally, in a car factory in Upper-Normandy – industries about to disappear in the 2010s. All these works are part of collective artistic projects which involved Nil Yalter: La Rochelle's cultural network for the first two cases, an exhibition of the factory's cultural committee in the third one.

Other artists also created works for these festivals or group exhibitions. We are confronted with the terrible working conditions of these people from La Rochelle to Sandouville, echoing *The Wretched of the Earth*, the title of the work by Frantz Fanon, a pioneer of postcolonial thought.¹⁵ Fanon insisted on domination and alienation that affects communities and individuals. In the path of Nil Yalter, immi-

¹⁵ Frantz Fanon, *Les Damnés de la terre*, François Maspero (Paris, 1961) - ¹⁶ Catalog of Festival de La Rochelle, 1981, p. 9.

gration is always present, but this is well and truly the question of work that dominated the intention, as the artist seeks to "develop an artistic and aesthetic language as a contribution to a work culture."¹⁶

In 1981, a project with Nicole Croiset looks at women workers and Turkish workers in two districts of La Rochelle, in response to a proposal of the international meeting of contemporary art in La Rochelle. *Women at Work, Women at Home* presents circulation's places and daily lives of women workers, between their commuter towns and the city center, by a poster affixed on billboards along the route they are taken and inserted inside the bus. A performance realized in La Rochelle combines work tools with slide films and actions by Nicole Croiset and Nil Yalter, thus creating multilayered portraits of these women. These women also collaborated on ten round panels displaying elements selected from the workers' lives. The entirety magnifies a monoto-



'Algerian Marriage in France', 1977
Photos and painting





nous everyday life by valuing these women's activities.

Finally, less known for having never been showed again, the project called *Toprak* consists of two interviews' videos with Turkish workers in the neighbourhood of Villeneuve-les-Salines. The screenings take place in the café where the interviews has been conducted, at the same time that the posters are placarded on bus stops along the route taken by the women workers. These videos, for a long time considered lost, were digitized by the National Library of France in the framework of the monographic work I undertook with Nil Yalter. Both artists clearly give voice to workers, explaining their situation and desires.

Faces are interrupted with images of work and life places of immigrants: a construction site with painful scrap iron's noises, social low-rise buildings built near a road, low-rent buildings built to accommodate a maximum number of people in areas without any stores. Other combinations are made: monitors replace televisions in families' interiors, images of the outside environment of the home are broadcasted at the same time as the interview, in which men and women tell their stories. At other times, images shot in Turkey in 1975 are projected onto white pages of a book whose pages are turned, where words are inscribed (on these blank pages appear words written in black marker like "I will not exchange a handful of dry land against the land full of factories of France."), along with the translation of words from Turkish to French occurs: "We are homesick. Every year we go back there for holidays. I love my country and especially my village. I will never exchange a handful of dry land of my country against the land full of factories of France."

The combination of screening, white pages and narration constitutes layers of memories

and experiences that give depth and complexity to the experiences. The real, the memory and beliefs become interlocked within this editing and in this shoot. The use of several techniques allows the multiplication of approaches and the choice of different types of documents. Women are always related to children in these videos, they care for them, and children are present when they are interviewed. These scenes show the pregnancy of their presence in their lives, so it is not systematic for men, opening a feminist reading of the distribution of daily tasks. Framing done from very near makes these people familiar to us, gives us the illusion that we are entering their privacy, knowing them, such as this woman:

"My husband went into exile eight years ago. It was hard for us. Children were small. Growing up, they helped me to endure my husband's exile. We cultivated fields, planted potatoes, beans. We irrigated lands. Four years ago, we bought a tractor. He sent us money. The land was just enough to feed us. Then, a child got married and we spent the rest of money for him. We ploughed fields. We kept animals, we milked them. In the evening we made our milk, our butter, yoghurt and cheese. Our life in Turkey was very good, comfortable. With the departure of my husband, we were demoralized. Even if I had been forced from Turkey, I would not have left my country. It is the absence of my husband that made me leave the country."

Others, asked about their workplace, mention the economic crisis that reduces recruitment, their desire to go back, the difficulties associated with a poor knowledge of the French language. In this feedback game, witnesses have a right to inspect their records. We then show a family watching his own testimony on



a monitor in the living room, the artist filming their reactions when they listen to the history of the multiple jobs held by the father. The translation of the mother's testimony, with images of a group of women who knit and talk in a living room, is instructive:

"I'm cleaning the house, I knit, people visit me, I answer to letters of the country. What else do you want to do in a house? Sometimes when I have time I walk in the parks, in the market. I take the children to school in the morning and in the afternoon. What else do you want? At our home, there are vineyards, fields, there is work for us, but not here. We remain in houses. When we get bored, we go out a bit. We did not want to stay at home, but we still stay."

'Women at Work, Women at Home', 1981
Nil Yalter / Nicole Croiset
A public space project



Women's confinement, explicit here, is clearly shown by the whole series of videos made in the 1970s and 1980s. Another band evokes the maintenance of Turkish culture, by sending teachers for children, and Turkish assistance to help them integrate into the French culture, as he says:

"Teenagers who will return without a profession to the country will form a large army of unemployed. [...] If he succeeds his apprenticeship, he has a profession, if not, he joins at home the army of unemployed who are unskilled workers like him. Most Turkish teenagers in France are in the second category. In this case, when we think of the workers and their children's return, we see an army of unemployed arising in Turkey. To prevent this, we try to encourage and make the teenagers and their families understand that they need to learn a trade."

Others speak of the loss of social position, having no other choice but to a labor in France, despite their studies in Turkey. This Turkish community in Villeneuve-les-Salines,

filmed in 1981, is representative of the challenges faced by immigrant workers in France, as well as of immigration and work policies carried out in France in the 1980s. This work is also representative of the aesthetic debates of the time, fed by the theories of the Frankfurt School. The organizers of the meetings of La Rochelle are in fact asking artists to make a production link with people, whose sociocriticism practice is the common point. This request fits into discussions of that time, especially the relationship between form and content addressed in the socialist and communist conferences that took place in Avignon in July 1981, which could be summed up by a quote from Herbert Marcuse:

*"The artwork is so re-presenting the reality while putting it in charge. The critical function of art, its contribution to the liberation struggle, lies in the aesthetic form. An artwork is authentic or true neither by its content (that is to say a 'correct' representation of social conditions), nor by its 'pure' form, but because content becomes form. It is true that the aesthetic form takes art away from the news of the class struggle – from the news pure and simple. Aesthetic form is the autonomy of art towards the given."*¹⁷

In 1982, both artists return to La Rochelle to interview men and women workers whose professions are related to the sea. The final installation, *Les Métiers de la Mer* [Trades of the Sea, 1982], includes two video installations and a carousel of slides, which overlap the places filmed. Panels of proverbs, along with photographs of the sea are arranged on a wall and other texts on another one. *La mer, domaine du monde inversé* (The sea, area

of the reversed world) is projected in an annexed chapel on two monitors installed one over the other, in a ceaseless inverted images' game, with kaleidoscopic forms. Some scenes are performed by the artists, who use elements related to the marine environment, like stones, nets, bags of wheat destined for Bangladesh. The sound made by Benoist Baillergeau takes the deafening noise of the sea, of the wind, of knocking boats, creating a sound environment suitable for editing. Some words punctuate the shots: salt, water, sand fit into a triangle, are then blended, because beliefs indicate that sea has the specific feature of mixing these three elements. Screen's *mise en abyme* in the editing multiply these gestures in an infinite, eternal space and time: "Listen to the storm, the pebbles speak."

Quotations arranged around the main installation echo Finnish myths compiled in *Kalevala*, accompanied by photographs of boats stranded on the beach at low tide. The *Kalevala* is derived from the ancient Finnish poetry, transmitted orally, whose unification in a written epic poem was achieved in the nineteenth century by Elias Lönnrot, like *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* of Homer. This mixture of mythology and reality is a recurrent practice of the artist. The extract evokes tears of a boat that wants to be given again to the waves, giving a mythical depth to contemporary experiences contained in the interviews and workplaces' images broadcast on monitors placed at the center of the room.

Phare [Lighthouse] includes a series of testimonies, interrupted by stories from people who represent different trades, from nurse to dockworkers. An activist of the CGT (a strong worker's federation) evokes the return of the boats, the sort of fish that follows, and women's work in the evening auction. She evokes



'Les Métiers de la Mer', 1982
Nil Yalter / Nicole Croiset
Video installation

¹⁷ Herbert Marcuse, *La dimension esthétique – Pour une critique de l'esthétique marxiste* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1979), p. 22



the harsh conditions of these tasks, which exhaust workers who are poorly paid, with little job security. Over the testimonies, government measures are also discussed, especially those of the Prime Minister of the Sea, Louis Le Penec, designated in 1981, but also the struggles' progress for rights or the degradation of the marine environment due to overfishing and inactivity that follows. Others testimony of entire lifetimes devoted to this activity, of group solidarity, while the images show the places mentioned and the work being done. The evolution of the activity is visible with pleasure industry

experience and the history of an engineer who became a naval architect, created the company named Stratifié laminé, which became Michel Dufour SA in 1969 and was taken back by Marcel Bich in 1976. While filming boats' making in the shed of the shipyard, a CGT militant explains the struggles that have marked the history of this business, social struggles and changing working techniques. Men and women alternately express their conditions of work and life, their stories and their desires. Over the testimonies, images mingle with stories to feed our imagination, linking struggles and inscriptions in traditions and beliefs that shape a particular universe, now disappeared.

Finally, in 1984, Nil Yalter and Nicole Croiset share the daily life of a car factory, as part of a collaborative project related to these work conditions, "Sculptures in the factory." Sandouville, near Le Havre's harbour, lives through the Renault car factory, established in 1964. The history of the factory mirrors that of factory employment, with layoffs, strikes, profits, economic recessions, but also the labor influx, including immigrants. Both videos forming *Cadence 2x8* were shown in the collective exhibition, at the factory and at the André Malraux Museum. In the installation made at the heart of the factory, mirrors put under some monitors reflected once more images, diffracted them in other viewing angles, widening the space and creating a true ceaseless abyss' game. The tapes themselves were edited in part right side up, in part with pictures returned, thoughts for this references' game, also echoing the rhythm of the work, its endless repetition, its perpetual reiteration. One of the bands diffuse the sound created by Benoist Baillergeau, based on the sounds recorded in the factory environment, the other diffuses only interviewees' voices.

The common thread of the narrative is the metal, which comes in a roll at the beginning and ends as cars, after passing through various stages of the assembly line. Car wrecks and floors are brought forward by robots and we see a ballet of gray metallic boards, in a real science fiction scene, populated by monsters and humans enslaved to these infernal manufacture cadences. The gray metallic aesthetic contrasts with some brightly colored machine, creating a special atmosphere, wonderful and terrifying at the same time, interrupted by muffled sounds of the factory, and testimonies of some working men and women. The camera also films monitors that return in feed-back images of workers' tasks that are accomplished at the same time, interlocking spaces and acts in this ghostly world where machines seem to be advancing alone. Women workers appear at the end of the chain, during the assembly of the inner parts of the car.

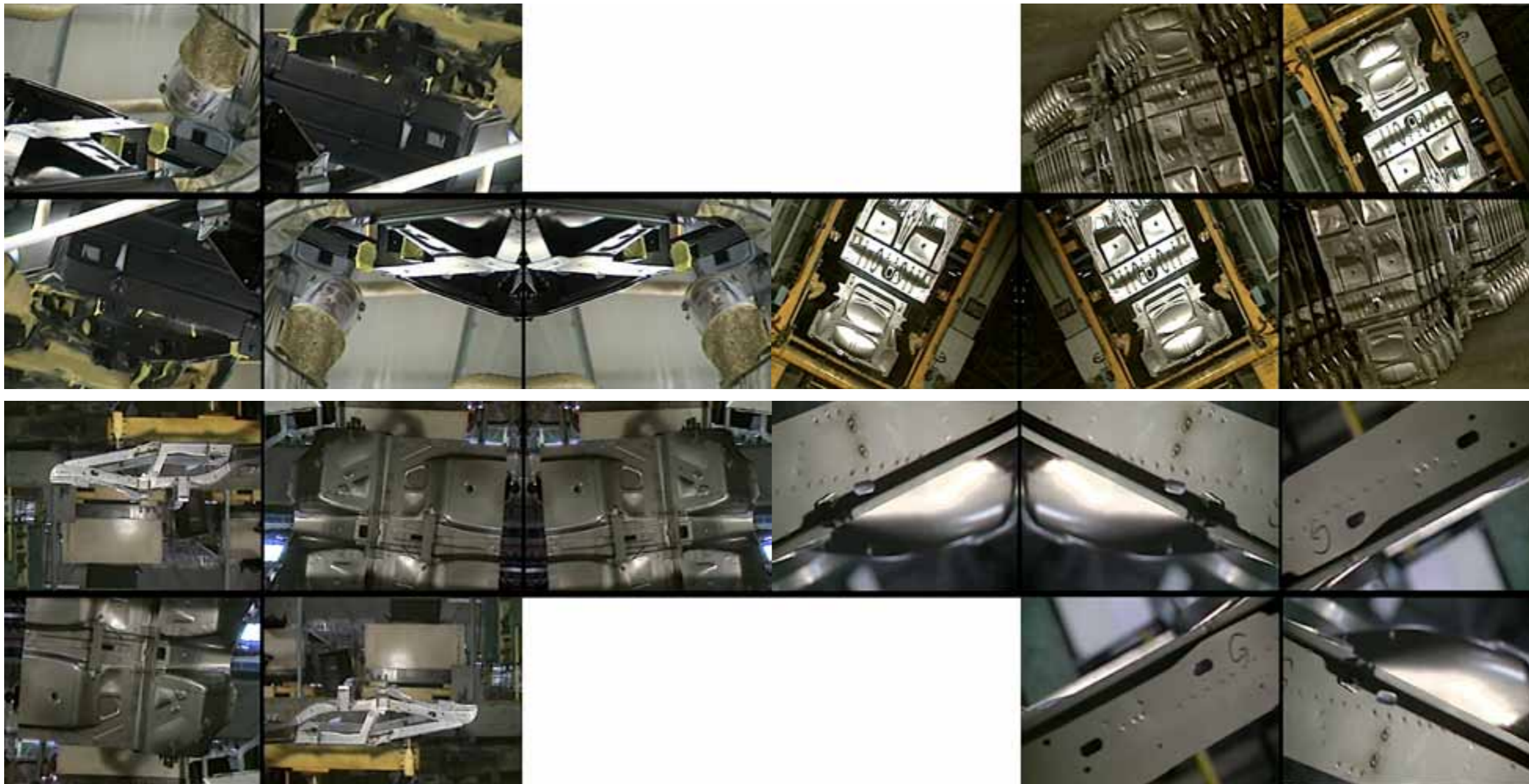
The project comes from a demand of the works council to celebrate the 20th anniversary of its creation, in collaboration with the city cultural center, a structure created in 1961 by André Malraux in the context of cultural decentralization, which benefits to projects led by Nil Yalter. As part of this reflection on the conditions of life and work, some interviews made in Sandouville evoke increased aggressiveness due to this task automation on assembly lines, the effect of rates on the workers' nerves, and the need to learn a real trade by rethinking how to build cars in order to restore meaning of their work, today dehumanized. This self-reflection on their conditions participate in this humanization of workers, immigrants, men and women who live in harsh conditions, because criticism and complaints are mingled with desires, proposals, struggles, thoughts on a better life –which the minimal and engaged



'Cadence 2x8', 1984
Nil Yalter / Nicole Croiset
Video installation, Renault Sandouville

aesthetic chosen by Nil Yalter serves wonderfully.

This huge work done by Nil Yalter and her partners opens up a direct testimony of the 1970s and 1980s' struggles, both in the feminist field, in the work field or for the recognition of immigrants' experiences. These three fields interact continuously in the installations proposed by Nil Yalter, who attempts to present as much the harsh reality of everyday life, giving us retrospectively rare and precious documents on the history of workers' and immigrants' struggles, as the commitment to myths and beliefs that shape the reading of their experiences –hence her interest in ethnography. These projects form a pioneer artwork of what is now developed under the appellations of postcolonial work, who are interested in borders, nomadic identities and migration. Fed by an entire political baggage, Nil Yalter transferred in the artistic field concerns that still resonate today with accuracy, whether the lives of women, immigrants or workers. Time has come to see them in their full extent and creative richness.



'Cadence 2x8', 1984
Nil Yalter / Nicole Croiset
Video installation, Renault Sandouville



'Cadence 2x8', 1984
Nil Yalter / Nicole Croiset
Video installation, Renault Sandouville



'Cadence 2x8', 1984
Nil Yalter / Nicole Croiset
Video installation, Renault Sandouville

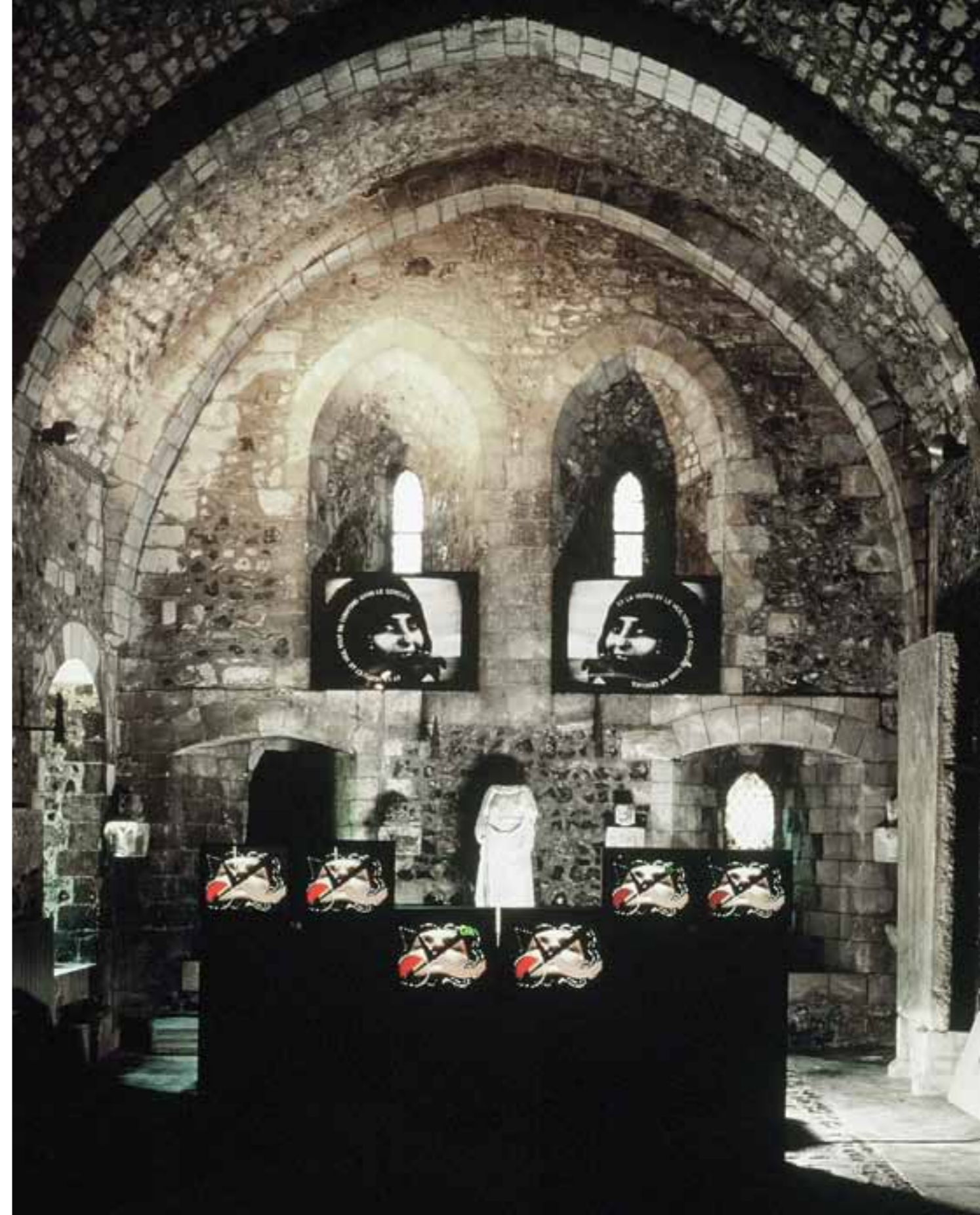
Nil Yalter and Nomadic Aesthetics

Melis Tezkan

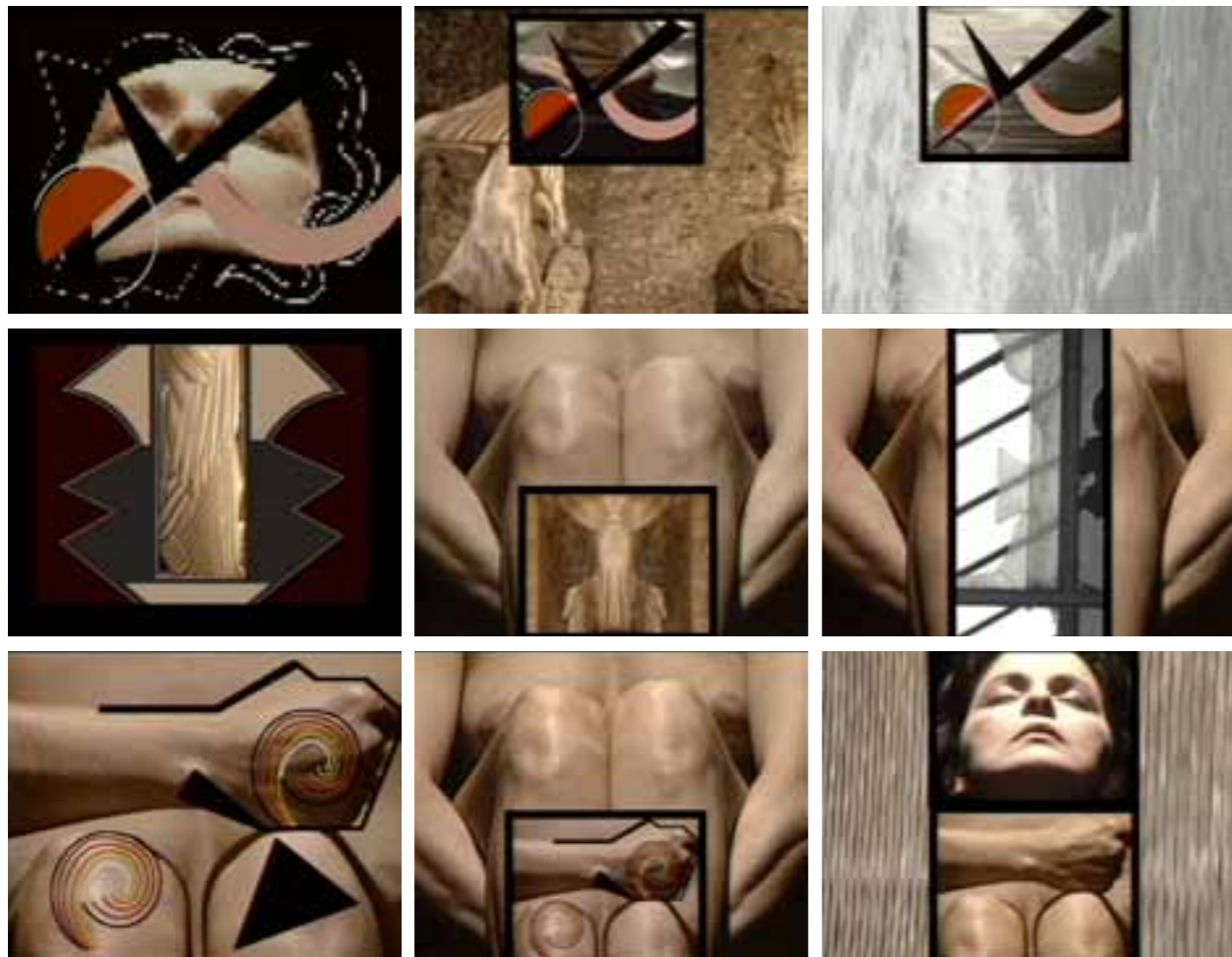
Nil Yalter was born in 1938 in Cairo, she moved to Turkey with her family when she was 3 years old. When she was 18, she walked from Istanbul to India, which took a year; and at 27, she settled in Paris. She began her artistic career by acting when she was 16, at the Robert College where she was studying; in India she practiced pantomime and mimodrama; upon her return to Turkey, she chose a field where theatre and the plastic arts met: she focused on stage and costume design. The rest is history: abstract painting, installations, videos, performances, works on CD-ROM... Nil Yalter describes her own style as “baroque-oriental” and her journeys have an undeniable influence on her work; both in terms of her subject matter (immigrants, absence from home, nomadic culture) and her style: the artist’s syncretism comes to life in forms where East and West, the modern and the postmodern and cultural tendencies beyond such hierarchies intersect. And Yalter passes effortlessly from one tradition, or one

discipline to the next. What the artist finds attractive in nomadic culture is not only the connection she forms with her own roots, but also the freedom nomads display in passing from one place to another.

In all the works Nil Yalter has produced since the 70s it is possible to find an element related to the subject’s search for absolute freedom. The subject in question may be Yalter herself, or the protagonist or narrator of a story. In both cases, a woman’s struggle for freedom and equality as an individual is present in almost all of her works, because whoever the subject of the work might be (Rahime, Mimi, Portuguese immigrants, the women of Diyarbakır, the Renault Factory, the city of Paris...) their *alter ego* is the female artist who seeks to surpass herself. As Oscar Wilde writes in *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*, “Every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter. The sitter is merely the accident, the occasion.”¹ In every portrait she depicts with her camera, Nil Yalter also re-



¹ Oscar Wilde, *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*, first published in 1890.



'Hommage à Marquis de Sade', 1989
Video installation

veals the female artist immersed in her struggle to create. After all, the act of producing is different for a woman than it is for a man; women, as “bearers of life” have a unique relationship with the creative process that renders them fundamentally different from men. In this context, Yalter’s video installation from 1989 titled *Hommage à Marquis de Sade* occupies a special place in the artist’s career. *Hommage à Marquis de Sade* is like a manifesto of Yalter’s style in the

period from 1985 to 1993 during which she consciously emphasizes her inner journey both as a woman and an artist. Nil Yalter comments thus on the works she produced during this period: “During the period in which I did this kind of [ethnocritical] work I was very active in politics. [...] until I began to feel that I needed to get away from it. [...] I felt the need at this time to give more attention to my own, personal art, which I had been developing all along.”²

Yalter created this work in honor of the Marquis de Sade who rejected religious values and materialism, and is considered the pioneer of nihilism. She exhibited it in a small church as an *in situ* multi-screen installation representing the altar. And this is also precisely where the act of deconstruction begins. In this video installation, all concepts appear alongside their complementary opposites: East-West, past-future, interior-exterior... The fluidity and transience of cloth and water run parallel to the solidity and permanence of sculpture and geometric forms to shape the image³; and the female figure, both seductive and seduced, is placed at the center of the image. When the artist quotes Sade –“Nothing belongs to me, nothing originates from me”– she actually underlines the second part of this statement and interprets it thus: “[ethical, political and religious obstacles are barriers that the creative woman (the artist) must bring down].”⁴ Images of derelict factories that appear from time to time in the background in the video also point towards the world of production. Patterns automatically drawn onto the naked female body left in the middle of scenes of ruins, which Nil Yalter describes as “constructivist viruses”, cite the female avant-gardes of Russian origin that art history has almost forgotten today. Despite all the obstacles they faced during their time, they (Nadezhda Udaltsova, Olga Rozanova, Lyubov Popova...) played an active role in the story of modern art. The “praise” mentioned in *Hommage à Marquis de Sade* is not only aimed at Sade’s own understanding of freedom, and at the self-construction of the subject, but also at all dissenters and uprisings that did or did not succeed in making history. From this viewpoint, it is no coincidence that the *Marquis de Sade* in-

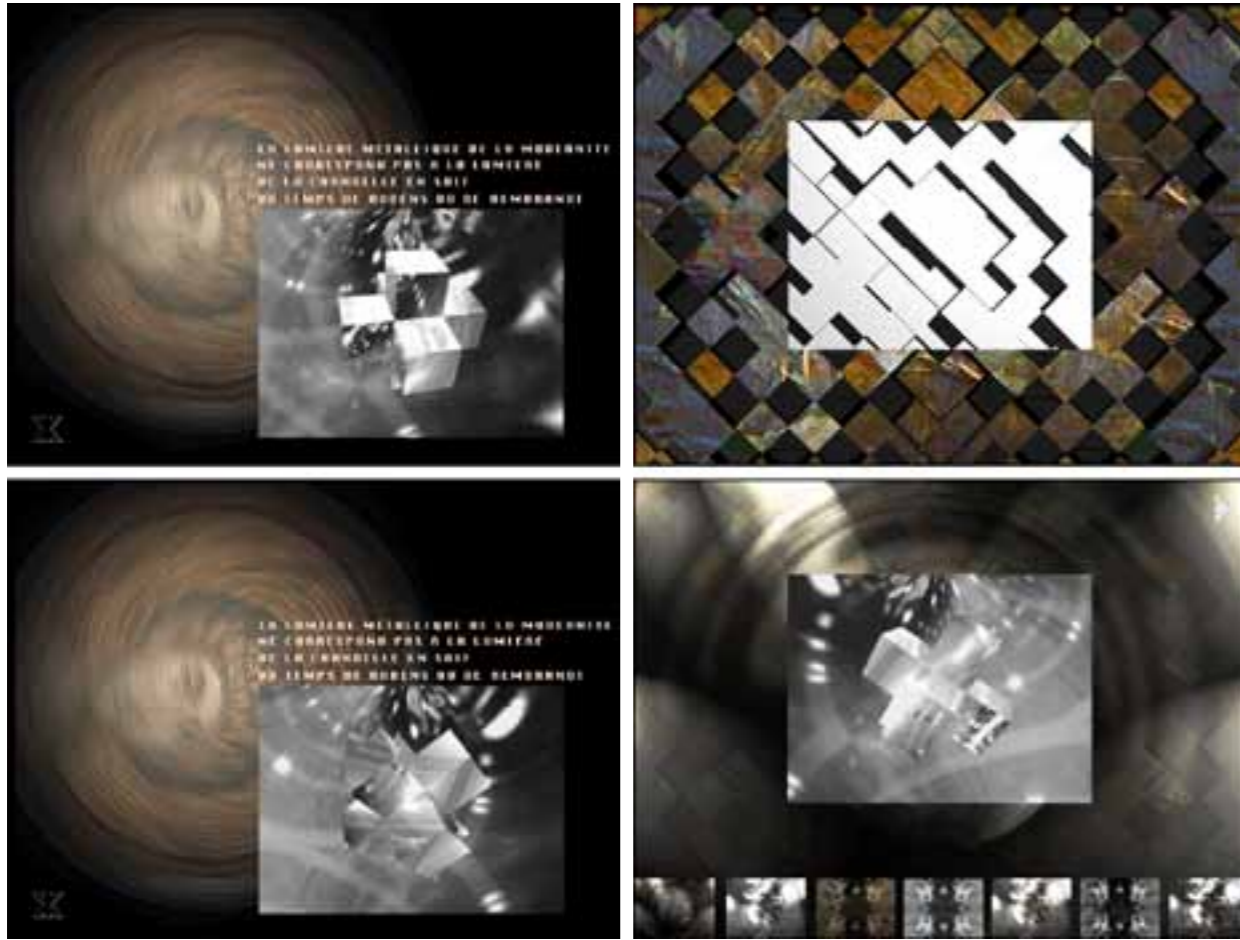
stallation was produced within the scope of a festival organized on the occasion of the 200th anniversary of the French Revolution.

Combining two-dimensional images with video, *Marquis de Sade* also announced that Nil Yalter was about to switch media. From this date on, the artist produced two-dimensional works in a computer environment, and from the 90s on she went on to create interactive, three-dimensional work. In this sense, Yalter also carries out her own deconstruction in the *Marquis de Sade* video: departing from herself, she does not only conduct an autocritique of the creative woman, but also migrates, once again, towards new forms.

The interactive CD-ROM titled *Pixelismus* (1996) that explores virtual images in the light of Kazimir Malevich’s texts and Byzantine art is another form to which Yalter migrated towards. In this work, created in collaboration with Nicole Croiset and David Apikian, the personal world of the artist plays a significant role; this time Yalter departs not from her body, but from her autobiography. In 1993, she traveled to Istanbul, where she had not returned for thirteen years, and visited the Chora Museum under the feeling of remoteness brought on by the many years spent away from the city. The 28 variations she depicted with inspiration provided by this visit formed the bases of *Pixelismus*. The project contemplates the relationship between mosaics and pixels in the light of Malevich’s theoretical texts on modernism. 3D images and electronic sounds are added to digital and analogue video images; this multiple aesthetics is exhibited as an electronic book made up of 8 chapters. Each chapter is named after Malevich’s theories: the movement of color; the fourth dimension;

² N. Yalter; this interview was carried out by Esther Ferrer. “La Frontera entre la vida y el arte” (“Frontier between Art and Reality”), *Lapiz*, n°60 (Madrid: spring 1989), p. 39

³ Sculptures in the church where the installation was placed, and the geometric shapes in the video images - ⁴ M. Tezkan, “Gerçekliğe Alternatif Bir Gerçeklik: Nil Yalter Videosu [A Reality That Presents an Alternative to Reality: Nil Yalter’s Videos]”, *RH+SANART*, n°60, 2009, p. 65



quadrangular; the infinite Suprematist color white; the metallic light of modernity; masses; speed and direction of movement. The Chora mosaics remind the artist of Malevich's Suprematist forms; and she goes on to associate them with digital pixels, which she regards as virtual mosaics. This video, too, like *Marquis de Sade*, features factory images. Therefore, in both works, references to religious images and modern times –both in the industrial and the artistic sense– exist side by side. The artist used Christian images alongside Islamic references in *Marquis de Sade*, and in *Pixelismus* she chose a church that was converted into a

mosque by the Ottomans in the 16th century as a departure point.

Even before *Pixelismus*, Nil Yalter had developed thoughts on the relationships between new technologies and historical images, and between science and aesthetics. In her 1992 video titled *Calligraphy*, geometric forms superimposed upon backgrounds of abstract patterns and photograms are accompanied by electronic music, as in *Pixelismus*. The image of the woman covered in cloth, the uppermost layer of the *Marquis de Sade* installation, is also introduced in *Calligraphy*. In this video, the kufic script finds itself a virtual body via the 3D technique;

and plastic geometric shapes from time to time replace this body; they are, in turn, immersed in metallic tones and transformed into dust dispersed across the surface. It is almost as if *hat*, the art of Ottoman calligraphy which combines image and the language of writing, has set out on a journey in modern times. According to a 15th century dictum that appears in kufic script in *Calligraphy*: “The virtue belongs not to the scientist, but to the science he might discern.” Nil Yalter believes in change, science and adapting to the times; and seen from this viewpoint, she is a modern artist in the complete sense of the word. However, by questioning analogies between technology and historical forms, she shows us that blind reformism has no difference from chauvinisms based on faith or science. Yalter regards technology not as a goal but as a tool; and rejects the fetishization of technology, a field she, too, closely follows.

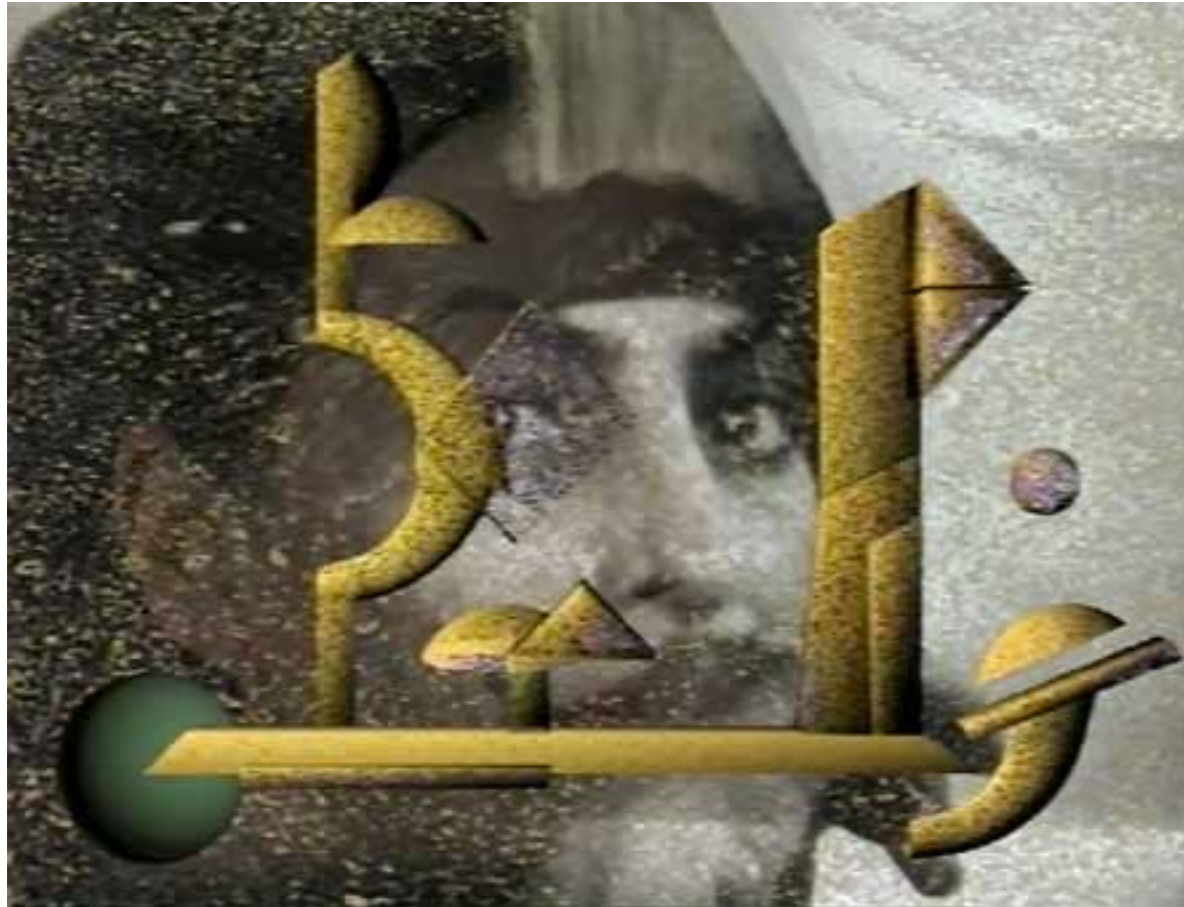
From 1989 on, 2D computer-generated images, and later, 3D images enter Yalter's artistic vocabulary; and in many of her videos produced after this date, accompany analogue or digital images. In Yalter's works, these techniques are not used to support or aestheticize the image but instead to form a *bug* in the image, and via these bugs, to activate *intertextuality* and to open the work onto other fields. This opening is often constructed between the modern and the postmodern, and the East and the West. These forms, which we could describe as *bugs* or *viruses*, oscillate between the surface of the image and the viewer, thus forming a link between the viewed and the viewer, rendering the viewer part of the image. For instance, in a recent work titled *Lord Byron meets the Shaman Woman* (2009), as the artist carries out a shamanic performance augmented with electronic



'Pixelismus', 1996
Nil Yalter / David Apikian / Nicole Croiset
Interactive CD-ROM

sounds, the surface of the *bugs* formed of three dimensional geometric shapes (spheres, cubes, cylinders) is determined by the fur the artist is wearing, the space she is located in, natural textures and the photograph of a figure she calls “Mother Shaman.”⁵ Thus the *bug* constantly sheds its skin and acquires a new one, generating horizontal and vertical expansions: it not only opens up new spaces via *intertextuality*

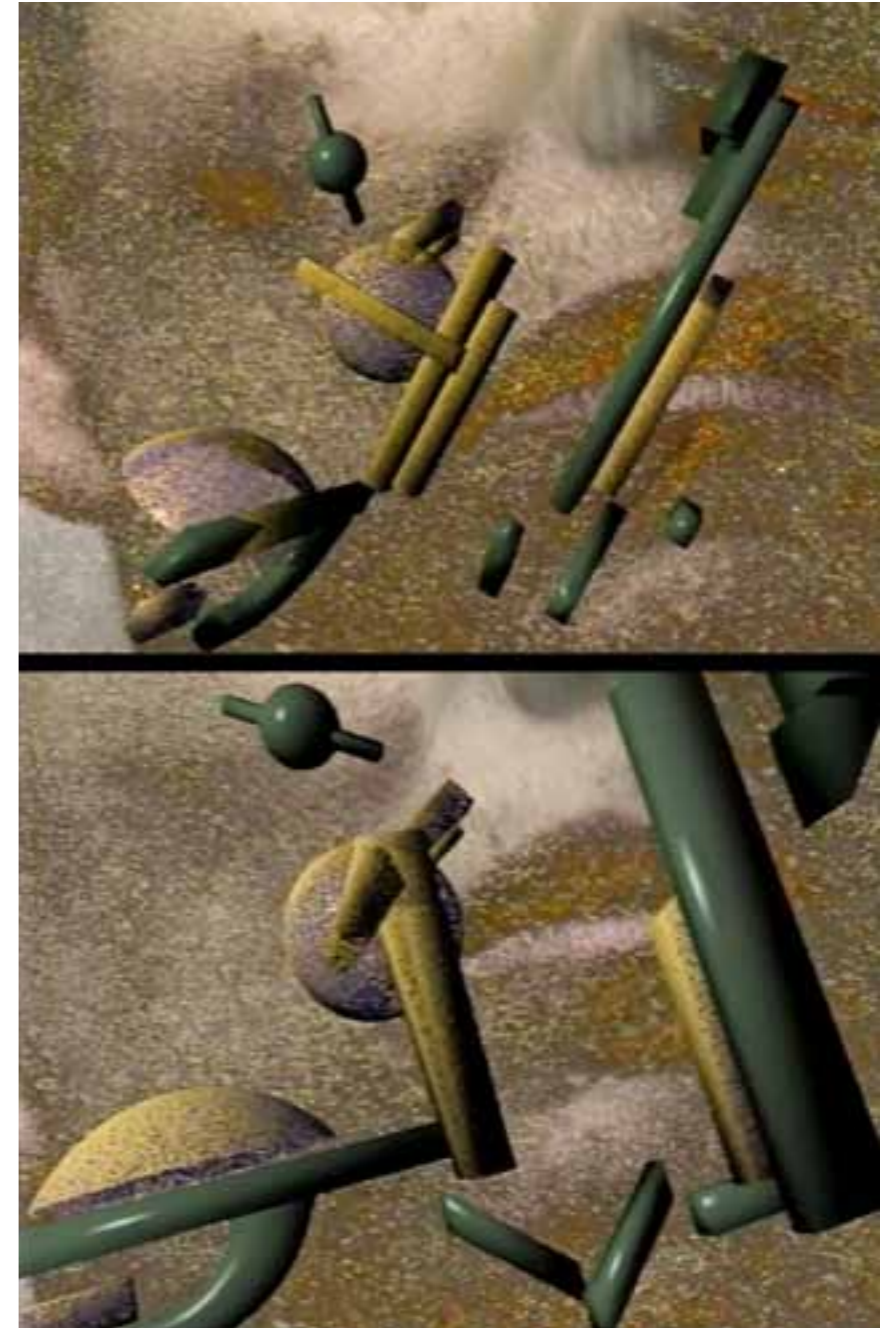
⁵ This is the name that Nil Yalter has given to the female shaman in the photograph gifted to her. This figure has played an important role in Yalter's life and artistic practice.



(between exterior and interior, and nature and the city) but it also expands the field of the video towards the viewer. What creates the expansion effect is the movement of the geometric forms as if they were spilling out of the frame; and the effect every movement has on the texture of the *bug*. So much so that the *bug*, in the manner of a shaman, changes form during every journey it sets out on; organic or inorganic it finds itself occupying different bodies.

The shaman figure plays a significant role in Nil Yalter's works. The artist's interest in the shaman can be assessed both via the relationship between performance-ritual-video, or via the overall influence of nomadic culture on her

work. In her 1979 video *Shaman*, Yalter enters into a trance, accompanied by ritualistic music, and wearing a mask presented to her by her ethnologist friend Bernard Dupaigne (a mask that was collected from a Central Asian Turkic tribe in the 19th century). She carried out this performance in the basement of the Musée de l'Homme in Paris and recorded it from a fixed camera angle. She would go on to use some images from this video for the performance titled *The Rituals*, carried out by the artist with Nicole Croiset at the Paris Modern Art Museum. In this performance, as the two artists communicate with each other via closed circuit video in the two different zones they created



'Calligraphy', 1992
Video with 3D images, 3'



'Lord Byron Meets the Shaman Woman', 2009
Video, 15'



'Shaman', 1979
B&W video, 15'



'Shaman', 1979
B&W video, 15'

on the same platform, they question the social position of women accompanied by rituals assembled from different cultures. In *The Rituals*, screens and patterns drawn on transparent layers are placed before the lens of the camera and are used, like the mask in the *Shaman* video, to trick the eye and to transform the image into another image.

In terms of ritual, although an important part of nomadic events of entertainment, the mask is used to represent those who are not present, or to use one who is present to replace one who is not. As noted by film theorist Teshome Gabriel, in *Nomadic Cinema* the screen often replaces the mask; the function of the screen or the mask is transformative.⁶ In Nil Yalter's works such as *Shaman*, *Rituals*, or *Harem*; the use of the mask, the screen within the screen, or the illusory transparent layer, are components of the "transformation" also mentioned by Gabriel. Over time, transformative elements in Yalter's videos are replaced by *bugs*. In such works, the way in which the artist faces the viewer in front of the camera with the use of a fixed camera angle increases both the performative impact of the work and the communication with the viewer (*Lord Byron Meets the*

Shaman Woman, *The Headless Woman*...) Thus performance, although it involves staging, belongs more to reality than fiction, and the communication with the viewer is an important part of this reality.

Nil Yalter's performance videos convey the transformative influence of ritual. Whether the subject is the artist herself, or another performer (Rahime, Mimi, etc.) the ability, like shamans, to inhabit one being and then to travel to another, and to carry out displacements with the help of the ritual are among the main effects of the experience of the performance. Mikhail Bakhtin, the Russian philosopher and literary theorist, also writes of the impact ritual and carnival have upon the viewer and the participant; he interprets the "carnavalesque" as that which can temporarily disrupt hierarchies.⁷ The carnival is the method to become another, even if momentarily.

In works that Yalter produced using this particular style, the use of non-Western traditions to deconstruct both the works themselves and established hierarchies serves the questioning of beliefs and female identity in various societies. The use of the rational and the primitive in tandem, drawing on both *intertextuality* and

the *carnavalesque* play significant roles in the hybridization of the work and create a multicentric aesthetics. This multicentric aesthetics – multiple aesthetics – exists in almost all of Yalter's works; components serve to question each other without destroying each other. When modern/postmodern, rational/primitive, Western/Eastern elements that belong to different geographies and chronologies exist side by side as they do in Yalter's works, they also introduce questions such as which tradition is rational or primitive, or which one is modern; and in this sense they form critical responses to the centrism of colonialist/post-colonialist discourse.

Harem, realized the same year as *The Rituals*, is another work where performance, ritual and video art merge. It establishes relations between the East and the West and focuses on social roles assigned to women. Like in *The Headless Woman*, an ironic language is employed. The narrator (the artist herself, or another performer) that features in many of Yalter's videos and could be considered a part of her style is featured also in *Harem*. This black-and-white, 45-minute video is divided into sections although it has not been edited. Written and

dubbed by the artist, and performed for the video⁸ also by the artist, the main movements displayed in this harem story, are distorted, ritualized and with the help of the fixed camera angle, underlined versions of everyday gestures. Despite its fairy-tale like atmosphere, *Harem* is a *performative* work, which emphasizes the contemporary references of this word. As the artist herself states in the video: "The hierarchy in the harem is a system with a complex structure where every detail has its own unique function." Every gesture in the video, and every image that represents a gesture are related to both image and sound, and are also equally independent. Every scene within itself, and the sum of all scenes, ironically relate the functions of the female body. In this video too, although manually and using the transparent plate method, Yalter creates a *bug*. In some scenes she writes text on the plate, or makes a drawing; in some other scenes, she changes the field and meaning of the image using different materials, for instance by surrounding the image with Polaroid photographs. In this video the *bugs* have a much greater impact than a simple *virus*; thus in some places they occupy the entire image. From this viewpoint,

⁶ T. Gabriel (1939-2010), "Thoughts on Nomadic Aesthetics and the Black Independent Cinema: Traces of a Journey", *Out there: marginalization and contemporary cultures* by R. Ferguson and M. Gever (Cambridge: the MIT Press, 1992), pp. 404-405 - ⁷ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, translated by Hélène Iswolsky (Indiana University Press, 1984). (This book was written in 1940 and first published in 1965 in the USSR.)

⁸ *Harem* is also exhibited as an installation. Photographs used in the installation feature a different woman face.



'Harem', 1980
B&W video, 45', drawings and photography

the image in *Harem* is a “covered” image, and the entire video is based on the eye, and the gaze. It is not by coincidence that the artist emphasizes the word “gözde” (the word means *favourite*, or *mistress* in the harem context, however its literal translation is ‘in the eye’) as she speaks about the hierarchy in the harem. The concealed nature of the image and its progression as if it had trapped the subject within everyday gestures, recreates the experience of the incarceration created by the looks of others suffered by women, by incarcerating the gaze of the viewer. As the French video theorist Françoise Parfait also states in this video that the trapped state of the woman in the harem is a metaphor for the contemporary woman as “an object of the gaze, and a surface image.”⁹

In her career that spans over forty years, Nil Yalter migrated from one form to the next, from one discipline to another; and it was her identity as a woman and her journeys that always followed in her wake. Although nomads possess no sense of geographical belonging, there is a nostalgia felt towards the point of departure. Thus, Yalter’s nostalgia is felt towards her own culture and her identity as a woman. As a consequence of her nomadic identity, her works bring different cultures and women together. But Yalter’s nomadism does not only derive from her movement from one location to the next, or from one discipline to another.

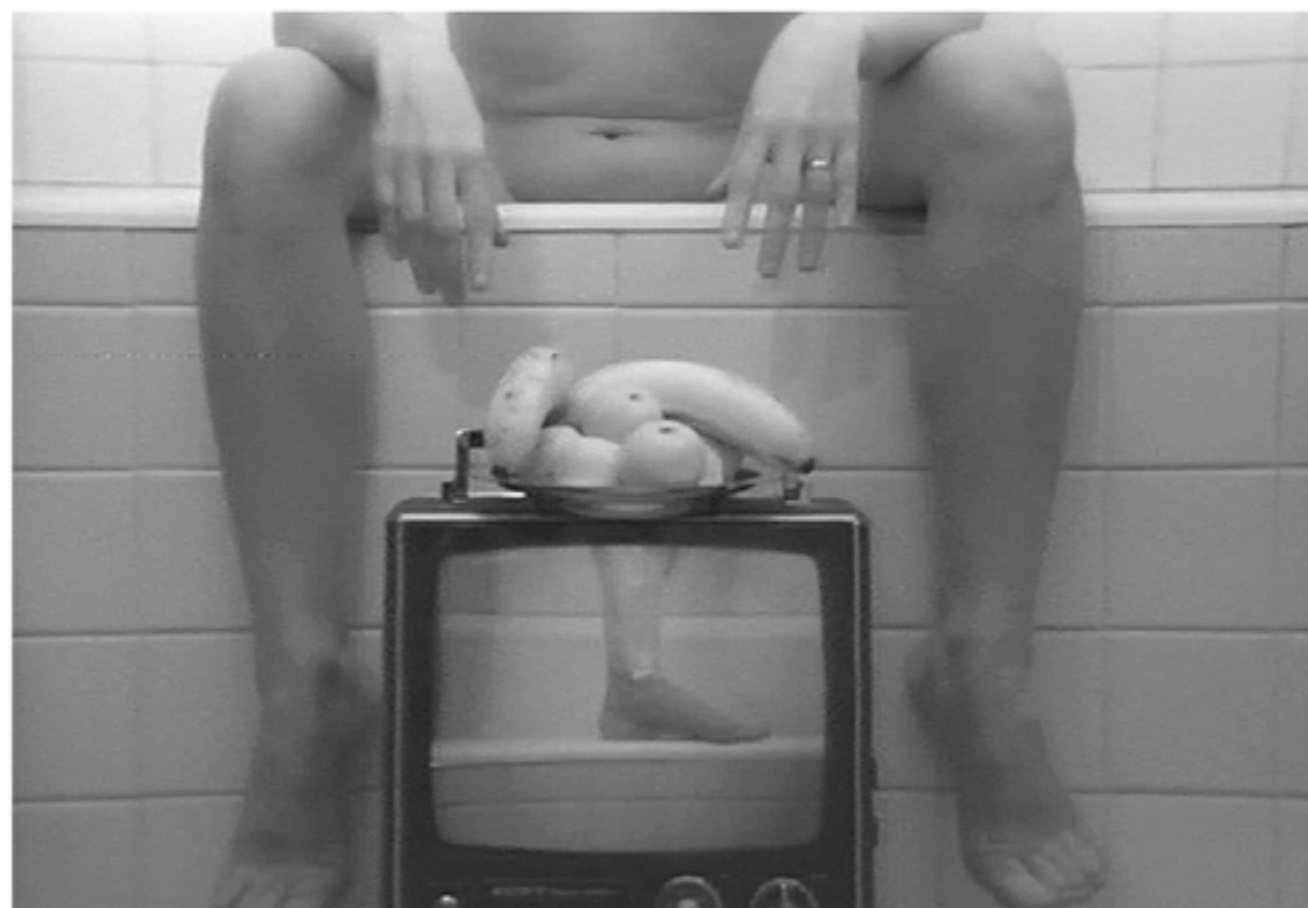
With her work titled *Hommage à Marquis de Sade*, the artist clearly reveals that the unique and free formation of the subject enters into its own deconstruction. The experience of nomadic existence may contain nostalgia towards its own roots, however, it is also the experience of the richness of its encounters

and the re-definition of the self according to the other as a consequence of these encounters. Yalter’s nomadism, too, derives not from the fact that she is constantly moving in the physical sense, but from her never-ending search for identity. In this sense, the nomadic aesthetics present in Yalter’s works is not merely formal or geographical, but an intellectual movement.

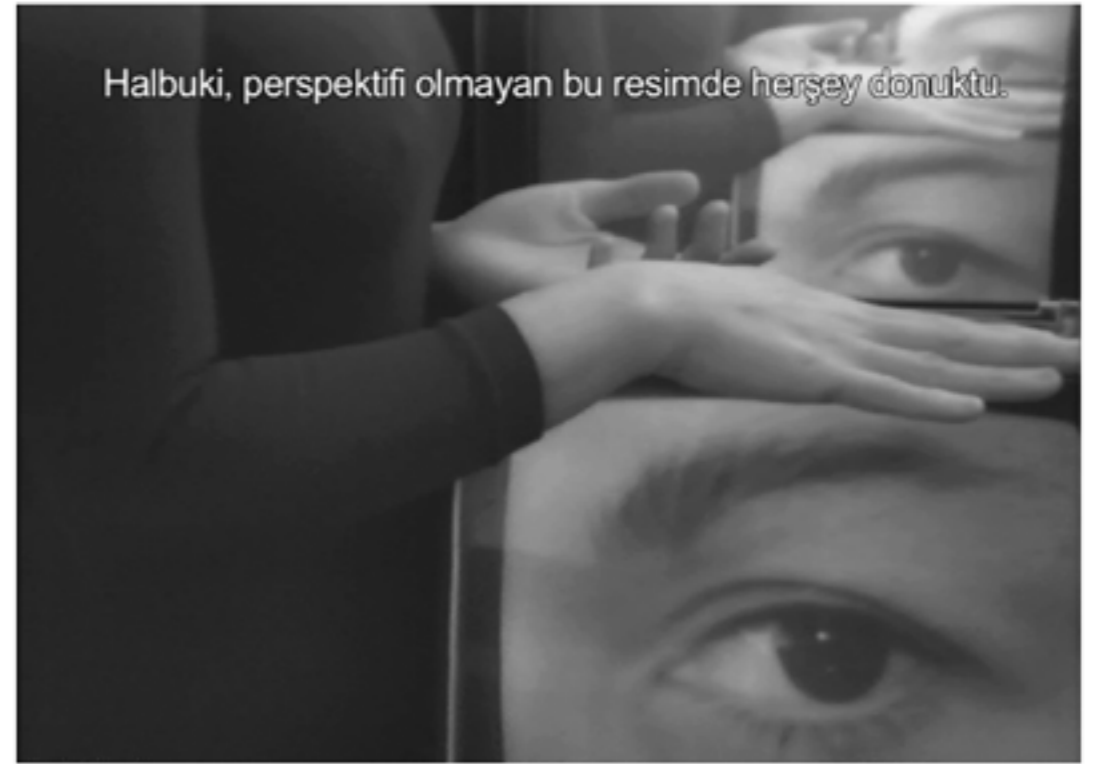
“Nomadic thought” (*pensée nomade*) became the subject of a few generations of philosophers including Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari; and one of them, Rosi Braidotti defined the “nomadic subject” as a multiple being, and the intersection of many subjectivities. According to Rosi Braidotti, nomadism is not the absence of borders or countries, but “an acute awareness of the non-fixity of boundaries.”¹⁰ In the same manner, for Deleuze, nomads have no history, they only have geography.¹¹ The multiple quality of Nil Yalter’s subjectivity which is also reflected in her works underlines not her “placelessness” but the fact that boundaries can be changed and overcome. Her works always feature the subject and the place, however they are part of a multicentered system and multiple aesthetics. Philosophy perceives the nomadic subject as a component of an individual of the future. This individual is not more civilized than, or superior to others; its freedom stems not from its universality, or certitude, but the multiplicity it contains. Nil Yalter’s search for absolute freedom is nurtured by journeys and encounters as well; the artist reproduces herself with every new work and questions her own identity. She is a visionary not only because of her art, but also because of her way of thought; and her view of nomadism is not merely a theme, but an artistic and personal attitude.

⁹ F. Parfait, *Vidéo : Un art contemporain (Video : A Contemporary Art)* (Paris, éditions du regard, 2001), p. 255. - ¹⁰ R. Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2nd Revised edition, 2011), p. 66 -

¹¹ G. Deleuze and C. Parnet, *Dialogues*, Translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (The Athlone Press: 1987), p. 23



'Harem', 1980
B&W video, 45', drawings and photography





'Harem', 1980
B&W video, 45', drawings and photography



Nil Yalter, Studio Visit

Adriano Pedrosa

I first learned about Nil Yalter's work through my colleague Jessica Morgan in 2012, a year after I co-curated the 12th Istanbul Biennial. As a senior Turkish artist with such a rigorous and extraordinary body of work developed over more than four decades who inexplicably had never been included in the Biennial, I was dismayed not to have had the chance to meet her while I was doing the research for the exhibition—after all, it is particularly rewarding for a foreign curator to introduce a “new” artist in the Biennial. Surely Nil Yalter would have become a central figure in the 12th Istanbul Biennial, concerned as we were with the relationship between politics and aesthetics through issues of history, gender and sexuality, immigration, violence, and abstraction, all of which appear in her works throughout the years. The privilege of exhibiting Nil Yalter's work at the Biennial will belong, sooner or later, to another curator. Yet my interest in female pioneers extrapolates my work in Istanbul, so in February 2013 I made a one day trip to Paris specially to meet the artist

and learn more about her work. Anticipating the exceptional opportunity of the conversation, I asked the artist if I could record our meeting for my own archives. The conversation was full of extraordinary revelations and after leaving her studio I was certain that I had experienced that rare privilege in curatorial research: meeting a true pioneer. In May 2013 I was asked to write a preface to this monograph, and instead proposed to publish this conversation. What follows is an edited version of that first visit to Nil Yalter's studio in Paris on 14 February 2013, something that was not originally recorded to be published. The conversation is here accompanied by photographs I took during the studio visit, another obsessive attempt to record my research, travels and encounters. Some additional information such as dates, titles, institutions and cities have been added in parentheses. A few passages of the conversation were left out and others were edited for clarity and concision. I've also removed several of my dumbfound reactions and exclamations that redundantly





punctuated our conversation: “Fantastic!” At the end of my visit, Nil Yalter asked me to add my name to the spiral of others that circled the peephole of the studio door, perhaps her own, more poetic way to record the visits she has received there.

Adriano Pedrosa.: What is the first work of yours that you consider to be an important one?

Nil Yalter: My first important work was shown at the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, ARC, with Suzanne Pagé. In 1973 I had a one person show there and I exhibited the *Torak Ev* (1973). I was one the first artists in France to do an installation, but we did not call them installation at that point, we called them environmental art. Afterwards, that work went to an exhibition in Cologne, in 1974, and then shown three other times (Göttingen, Mans, Grenoble 1975). It was all fine until I started to work on immigration and immigrant workers, but after that it was too much.

A.P.: Why?

N.Y.: People said it was not art, it was politics. It was too early for that kind of work, in 1974, 1975.

A.P.: Many younger artists are working with these issues now.

N.Y.: Everyone now is working on migration,

immigration, nomadism, but at my time it was too early. And I was involved politically. I couldn’t go to Turkey for 13 years. You don’t go to people’s houses and knock doors and say I’m going to film you. You must first get involved with the workers’ associations and the political parties, it cannot be done otherwise. My second one person show was in 1983, again with Suzanne Pagé, and the work dealt with clandestine immigrant workers in textile manufacturing (*Exile is a Hard Job*, 1983).

A.P.: At the ARC as well?

N.Y.: Yes. But it was also too early. I then became more involved with these issues, yet galleries and collections did not look at my work.

A.P.: You were ahead of your time.

N.Y.: I was always showing in important places and received fees for doing the work, and then kept the work. This is how lived. I also did workshops, I taught, like all artists. They were very big projects, video installations. I never thought of selling, and sold very little. I didn’t do the work for selling. In 1974 I made a work called *Paris Ville Lumière* and before that I made *Temporary Dwellings*, that same year.

A.P.: I want to go back a little and ask you about your personal history, your relationship to Istanbul and Cairo.

N.Y.: I was born in Cairo in 1938, at the beginning of the Second World War, because my father was sent there.

A.P.: Turkish parents.

N.Y.: Yes. Sometimes they make the mistake of saying I am Egyptian, but I just happened to be there.

A.P.: Do you have an Egyptian passport?

N.Y.: No, but I could have one. I stayed there until the age of four or five. I think we came back to Istanbul in 1942.

A.P.: Was your father posted there?

N.Y.: Yes, but he was not a diplomat. He was working there. At that time all tobacco and alcohol were a monopoly and he was an economist and a tobacco expert, working for that monopoly. They sent him to Cairo because the Egyptians were building a tobacco factory and he had to supervise the construction. He got married, took the boat and I was born in Egypt.

A.P.: And then at age four you went back to Istanbul and was there until when?

N.Y.: Four or five, I don’t remember. I stayed there until I was 27 years old.

A.P.: Did you go to art school?

N.Y.: I have never been to art school. Every media I have used in my work, I have learned by myself. I started drawing and painting at the

age of five. My grandmother was very keen on drawing and she made me draw things, and that is how it started. I have never learned anything at school, I am an autodidact in everything.

A.P.: When did you start making art professionally?

N.Y.: I was doing abstract work, very much influenced by Serge Poliakoff, the Russian painter who lived in Paris. We didn’t have anything in Istanbul. It is amazing that you came and made a biennial in that crazy city. But in 1958 there was nothing, not a single gallery, no museums, no books, nothing. My father would buy books from Skira and I would see the little reproductions.

A.P.: He was interested in art?

N.Y.: He saw that I was talented and he wanted to push me. And my first show was in the Goethe Institut in Istanbul, in 1960, and it was called *Nil Yalter*. I made a show every year from then until 1965, including once in the Academy of Fine Arts in Istanbul.

A.P.: Were you in touch with any artists there, like Füsün Onur?

N.Y.: With many artists, but not her. She is from my generation, but I did not know her. I was in touch with some of the older ones.

A.P.: Like who?

N.Y.: İlhan Koman, the sculptor, Nuri İyem, Ömer Uluç. I was always with artists, but they were some 15 years older than me, so the generation right before me. I went to the English High School and then to the American College.

A.P.: And Cengiz Çekil?

N.Y.: No.

A.P.: And when did you come to Paris?

N.Y.: In 1965 I settled in Paris. I went back to Turkey every year for the summer for a month. But from 1980 until 1993 I could not go back to Turkey because of my political engagement. So I didn't really see the beginning of contemporary art in Turkey, which started in the 1980s.

A.P.: Any female artists back then of your generation?

N.Y.: Aliye Berger, a wonderful woman, but she was much older than me.

A.P.: She was a painter?

N.Y.: An engraver. There was also Fahrelnissa Zeid, a great painter. But from my generation it is just Füsün Onur, who is exactly my age.

A.P.: I interviewed Füsün, she went to the United States in the 1960s.

N.Y.: But we didn't do anything contemporary in Turkey those days. There was nothing. I was one of the artists showing a lot, but it was always abstract painting.

A.P.: Why did you move to Paris in 1965?

N.Y.: Because of the older generation, most of them had been in Paris.

A.P.: It was the place to learn about art back then.

N.Y.: It was, although I had an Anglo-Saxon education.

A.P.: Did you feel that staying in Istanbul would have been too limiting?

N.Y.: I wanted to go away. I don't know if Füsün



sun [Onur] told you the same thing, but there was nothing in Istanbul. I did these exhibitions, I sold some abstract paintings, I did costumes for the theater, it was okay. But I wanted to learn, you see. I didn't even know about Pop Art. There was this very important book by Michel Seuphors, *Dictionnaire de l'Art Abstrait* (1958). We had one copy of it and we passed it from one to another. That is how I learned about Constructivism, and at the age of 18 I knew about Malevich. I was completely fascinated by it but I did not dare go there, I stayed with Poliakov. That book with the little re-

productions was going around, and at one point I said, I must go, because I will never develop anything in Istanbul. As did Füsün, probably she went because of that.

A.P.: She went to the Maryland College of Art and came back in 1967.

N.Y.: Paris was an exciting city at that time. I lived the 1970s, when Paris was the best art scene in Europe. Now it is not the same. We were a bunch of people doing contemporary art. In London there was nothing; the ICA was the only place. I made a show there with Lucy Lip-pard called *Issue* in 1980, a wonderful exhibition.

A.P.: When you came to Paris in 1965 you were doing the abstract work, how did it change?

N.Y.: Oh it was terrible, it took me six, seven years. It was a shock. The first shock was Ileana Sonnabend, who had a gallery here at the Quai de Grands-Augustins. I remember she had an Andy Warhol show, with the flower wallpaper; I went there and said, this is very important but I don't understand it. Then she went from there to Rue Mazarine, for about 10 years. That is where I learned about contemporary art. Ileana was a wonderful person.

A.P.: What was the turning point for you, from the early abstract works that you were making to the more conceptual, politically engaged pieces later on?

N.Y.: It was 1972. I had met all the conceptual artists.

A.P.: Like who?

N.Y.: Like Robert Morris and all the artists that came to Ileana's gallery. She liked me very much, but not as an artist, because she didn't even know what I was doing. We had dinners all the time. I met Bruce Nauman, I met everyone.

A.P.: Was she showing female artists?

N.Y.: She only showed Lee Bontecou.

A.P.: Ah, wonderful artist. Did you meet her?

N.Y.: No.

A.P.: So you were really in touch more with the male artists?

N.Y.: Nobody showed women artists then. Yvon Lambert told me one day, that he would never show a woman artist, because you never know what she would do, she could fall in love, go to Australia with a man, make a child. At that time we made a group and did a lot of political, feminist action during the 1970s.

A.P.: With who?

N.Y.: Esther Ferrer. We were a group of artists, writers. Esther's job was to go to the galleries and find out how many women to men they were working with. We would meet every 15 days in each others' studios.

A.P.: What was the group called?

N.Y.: Femmes en Lutte [Fighting Women], which I founded in 1975 with Dorothée Selz and Isabelle Champion-Métadier. There were not only artists, but also art historians in the group, and other people involved in the art world. But nobody would show women artists in the 1970s here. The first one who started to show women artists was Suzanne Pagé. She showed me first, with Tania Mouraud. And then later she showed Annette Messager. She was the first one in a museum to do that. Perhaps Vieira da Silva before that, but no contemporary artists.

A.P.: Were you in touch with Vieira da Silva?

N.Y.: No, I love her work but I didn't meet her.

A.P.: And Louise Bourgeois?

N.Y.: Yes, I met her in New York. In 1976 I went to New York to the A.I.R. Gallery and The Kitchen, a women's co-op gallery that was directed by Nancy Spero. There I showed *La Roquette and Prison de Femmes*, which is part of *Paris Ville Lumière*. New York was very different, women's liberation movement was very

LA RUE DE LA GOUTTE D'OR



IN FRANCE ABOUT 25 PERCENT OF THE INDUSTRIAL LABOR FORCE ARE FOREIGNERS
THE ACCIDENT RATE FOR MIGRANT WORKERS IS 8 TIMES HIGHER THAN THAT FOR INDIGENOUS WORKERS

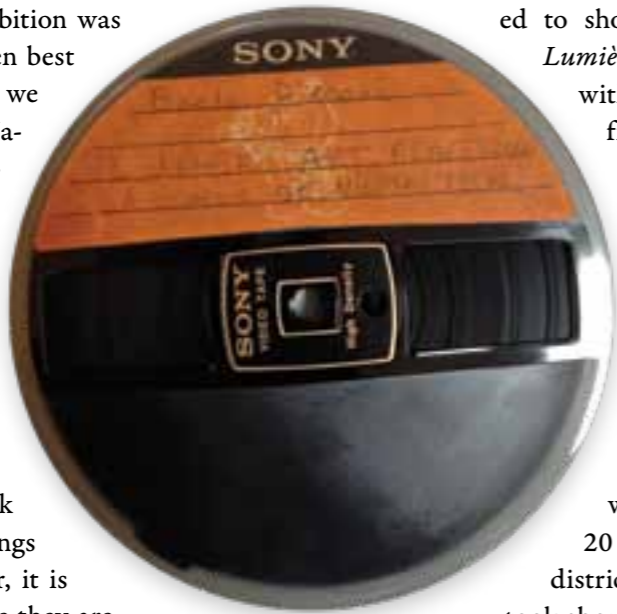


strong, women artists were taking things in hand. Louise Bourgeois came to the meeting, she was already 60 years old. At that period she was doing the wonderful marble sculptures. She had started doing more contemporary work, because she was doing very classical work before that.

A.P.: Nancy Spero was always doing very powerful political work. How was your connection with her?

N.Y.: She was a wonderful person. Very fragile. And also her husband, Leon Golub, they were wonderful. In New York we had very

good reviews, the exhibition was chosen as one of the ten best shows in 1976. When we came back, the Fond National d'Art Contemporain, the FNAC, bought *La Roquette*. It has a lot of video and photography and 16 drawings, and I made photos of the drawings, and so I could make three other editions. I actually think the photo of the drawings are in some way better, it is very interesting because they are more conceptual. So FNAC bought that work and it stayed in that basement for 30 years, it got lost there. All of a sudden there comes Cornelia Butler, who wants to do this show called *WACK, Art and the Feminist Revolution* (Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 2007), she sends me an email that she wants to see *La Roquette* and *The Headless Woman or the Belly Dance* (1974), and she comes here. I told her to ask the Fond National; part of their function is to loan pieces, it is



the biggest collection in France but it has no walls, it is all in the basement. They lend or donate to other museums. They had *La Roquette* that had stayed in the basement for over 30 years without being showed, and usually when something stays so long without being showed it is gone. The show traveled from Los Angeles to Washington, DC (National Museum of Women in the Arts, 2007), to MoMA PS 1 in New York (2008), and then to Vancouver (Vancouver Art Gallery, 2008-2009).

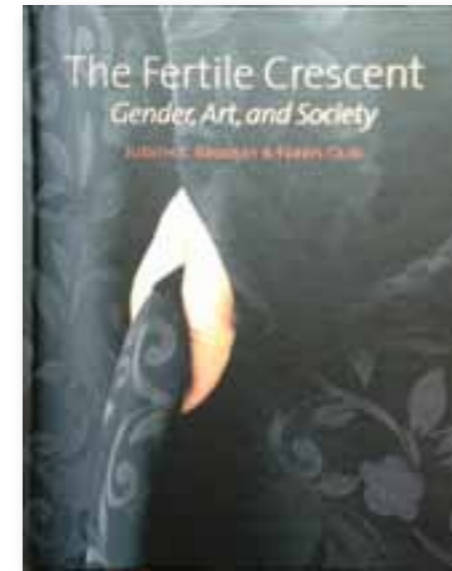
A.P.: Tell me more about *La Roquette*.

N.Y.: That is related to what I wanted to show you, *Paris Ville Lumière*, which I made with Judy Blum. She is from New York and is living there now; her parents are from Vienna but she was living in Paris at that time. We decided to do collaborative work and we went and visited with my camera the 20 *arrondissements*, the districts of Paris, and we took about 1,000 photographs.

It took us about six months. All the photographs are sewn on cloth and we made graffiti around them. It is a large work, 20 pieces, one for each district, and it takes about 15 meters on the wall. I will show it to you.

A.P.: How did you get to the subjects in each of the 20 districts?

N.Y.: In the 3rd district, for example, we took the stock market. We entered there and just photographed what was going on inside. For the 11th district we saw that there was a wom-



en's prison that had been pulled down five years before but the walls and the entrance were still there, so we focused on that. By chance, when she was taking her child to school, Judy met a young woman called Mimi, who was taking her son to the school, and mentioned she was an artist. Mimi said that if we wanted information on what was going on inside the prison she could tell us because she had been there for a year, five years before. So we got together and she gave us information that we included in that district: it was built as a panopticon, the nuns were the guardians. After we made that 11th *arrondissement*, I realized that it was such an interesting subject that we should do a separate piece about it. So that is how *La Roquette, Prison de Femmes* came about. We showed both works together in New York, we showed the video of *La Roquette* in The Kitchen in 1976.

A.P.: Shall we see it?

N.Y.: Yes, let's see it, I have to take it out. [unpacking the work] It is like a dazibao, the Chinese newspaper.

A.P.: There is a critique of the city in the title, which seems ironic, *Paris Ville Lumière*.

N.Y.: Yes, of course. Women were not allowed to enter the stock market. They didn't even notice that we were women when we went in. There were no computers at the time, they were shouting.

A.P.: Each place was chosen specifically to somehow represent that *arrondissement*, as a fragment of the whole?

N.Y.: I think this is the look of two artists who are strangers or immigrants, people who have migrated to Paris, we are immigrants, too. The look we had upon the city.

A.P.: Your personal gaze on the city.

N.Y.: Yes. For example, the immigrants live in the 18th *arrondissement*.

A.P.: [reading] "In France about 25% of the industrial labor force are foreigners, the accident rate for migrant workers is 8 times higher than that for indigenous workers. Moroc. Clean streets. Algérie."

N.Y.: Here in the 18th *arrondissement*, there

are prostitutes for immigrants inside. And here is some writing: “Dans la rue de la Butor” there are women closed inside and they do 50 “passes” by day; it is really the worst state of prostitution.

A.P.: Where has this work been exhibited?

N.Y.: This was exhibited first in a group exhibition titled “L’architecture en question” [“Questioning architecture”], in a small gallery in Paris (Galerie Rinoceros, 1975). Then it was exhibited in the outskirts of Paris in a Maison de Culture (1976). I also showed it in a big exhibition I had at the Maison de la Culture de Grenoble (1977). Then I took it with me to New York in a bag, installed it with push pins at The Kitchen in 1976. In 1979 I took it to Budapest to the only place where contemporary art could be exhibited back then, a club with a wonderful space (Contemporary Art Club, 1979). I showed it once in Istanbul (Habitat II, Yuksel Sabanci Art Center, 1996), and that is all. This should be bought by a French museum or the city of Paris.

A.P.: Of course, it is a fantastic work.

N.Y.: This is the 5th *arrondissement*, with the Sorbonne. And this here is Beaubourg, in the 4th *arrondissement*; they are still building it, can you imagine? It opened in 1977, so in 1974 they are still under construction. This piece is history.

A.P.: Fantastic.

N.Y.: And it is in excellent shape. I was very, very careful about it. This is also very interesting. This is the 6th *arrondissement*, where all the galleries were, and here you see the prices of the artists’ works.

A.P.: What is the technique?

N.Y.: It is ink pen with gold pen and some silver crayon.

A.P.: The photographs are printed on canvas?

N.Y.: Yes. We must find the 11th *arrondissement*, which will take us to La Roquette. This is the 1st *arrondissement*, we made it on the Louvre.

A.P.: Do you still keep going back to Istanbul often?

N.Y.: Once or twice a year. I have an apartment there with my sister. If I have work I go back to Istanbul, also I am working with Galerist there, who is making a monograph on all my work, the first one. I have to go back in May, because I am in a jury.

A.P.: Is your sister here or there?

N.Y.: She is there. She visits me often, but she lives in Istanbul.

A.P.: Have you seen many biennials in Istanbul?

N.Y.: I have only seen two of them, the one in 2007...

A.P.: Curated by Hou Hanru.

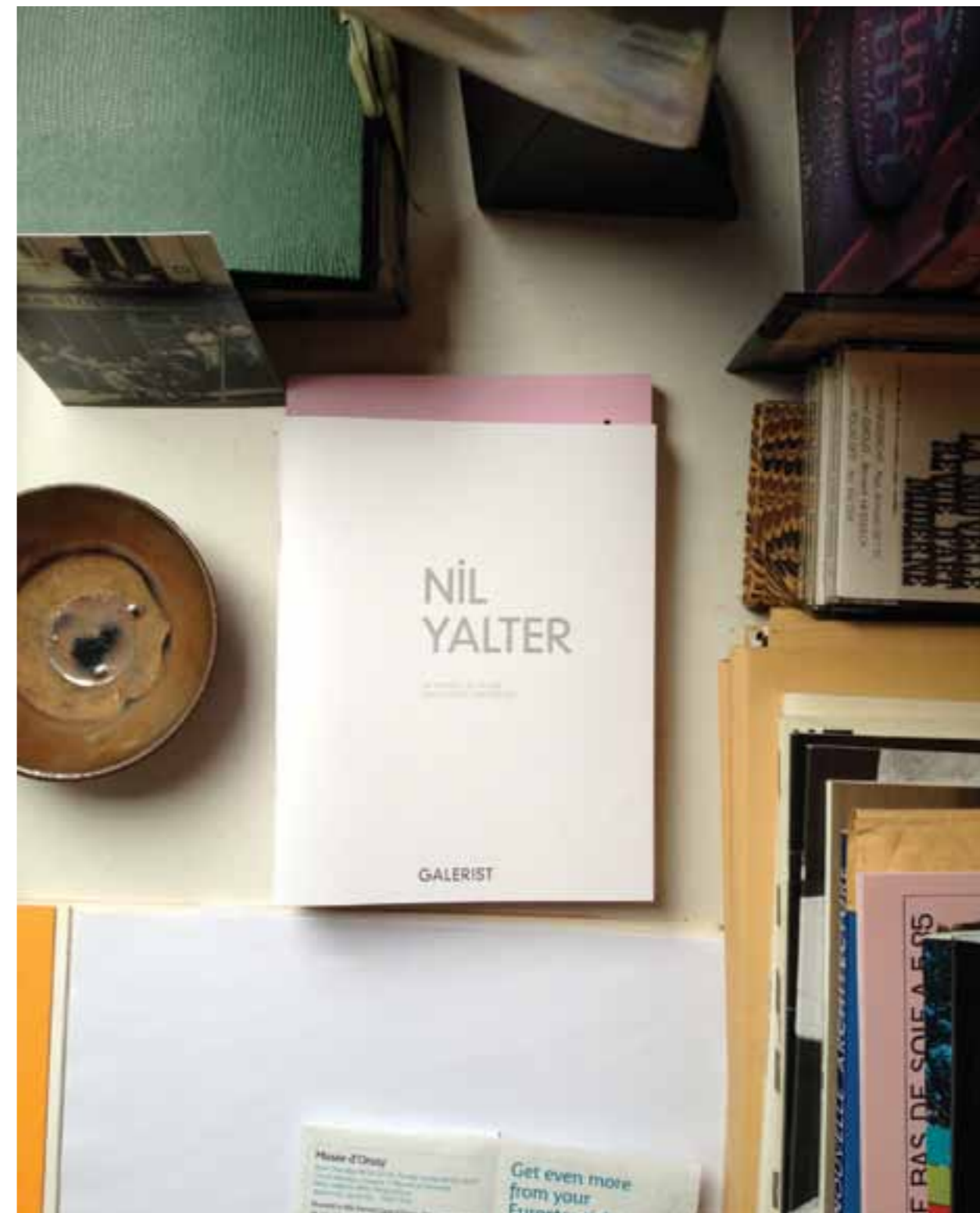
N.Y.: ...and yours. I am not very interested in biennials at the moment, because there are too many of them. But yours was a very good one because it was not like a biennial, it was a wonderful show, that’s all. I am probably the only important Turkish artist that has not been in a biennial in Istanbul, because I live and work here. It is ok, because they invite very few Turkish artists and they select the ones that live there.

A.P.: I was not aware of your work when I was curating the biennial, I must confess. And I was very much interested in bringing key senior female figures and developing clusters of works around these female anchors, that was what we did in the biennial. That is why Füsun was there.

N.Y.: Füsun’s room was fantastic. I think it was one of the best parts of the show. [...] This is La Roquette, you see. Mimi gave us all the clues on what was going on there. This is the entrance door.

A.P.: Beautiful work, really, and very well preserved.

N.Y.: I don’t have children, so I have no other



responsibility, I take care of my work. Many artists of my generation in Turkey did not have children. I couldn't have coped. But here, too, most of the women artists don't have children; Annette doesn't have children, for example.

A.P.: We were talking about this turning point in the 1970s, and I wanted to ask what was the first work that you made in this sense?

N.Y.: In 1971 there was a coup d'état in Turkey, as always, and there were three wonderful young leftist men who received death sentences and were hung. I was in Istanbul during all the process of this horrible tragedy and I started doing a work on rough paper, with circles getting nearer and nearer to a line, and also writing the headlines of the newspapers in Turkish. There is a point where the magistrate breaks his pen, which means death sentence, and they were hung. I started going towards the tent after this. Just before that I was painting, from 1965 through 1968. Last year I made computer generated images with these paintings and showed them together at Galerist, it is called *20th/21st century* (2011). I started with this idea of the circle, and the men that were hung were represented by three circles, getting nearer and nearer.

A.P.: And the text?

N.Y.: The text appears on another paper. There are about five or six. One of them is lost. I also painted a sheep skin with circles like this. I sent this back to Paris in 1972, I hired a room, installed the works, and took people there and explained it to them; it was an installation. At that time I had met Bernard Dupaigne, a very dear friend who was an ethnographer at the Musée de l'Homme, who told me where to find the material. Because to do the tent I went to Anatolia, in Turkey, and found the nomads living in those tents; Bernard showed me the way to find them.



A.P.: What is the title of work?

N.Y.: *Topak Ev*, which means "round house", it is from 1973. I also call it the *Yurt*, the tent. That political work gave me a consciousness to go and see what was happening in my own country. Paris is wonderful, but what was going on in Turkey? I told Bernard that I wanted to do a sort of dwelling, a woman's house, because women built these houses, also in Central Asia. It is a woman's house, but she is also imprisoned inside the house. So we found these nomads and I found out that every woman that had a son, a brother or a husband went up to the big city, to Istanbul, and were living in favelas. Some of them had gone from the tents to Germany or France as migrant workers.

A.P.: Here, I have the image of the work in my computer.

N.Y.: Yes, that is it. So you see, there are always the same circles. These are shamanic dresses. Bernard helped me; I saw a lot of the dresses at the Musée de l'Homme. I did a lot of research on Central Asian shamanism. The tents have a shamanic signification.

A.P.: That is fantastic.

N.Y.: The tents are originally made from wood but I made them from aluminum.

A.P.: So this is the structure and you hang the objects on it?

N.Y.: Yes, and the felt is an industrialized material. I painted these sheep skins, you have two of them on the wall, and there are collages all around. The work can be mounted and dismounted easily like the nomads' tents.

A.P.: And this is the piece that you sold to Santalistanbul?

N.Y.: Yes, but I do not know its exact condition, my gallery in Istanbul is trying to find out.

A.P.: This is a historical piece. How large is it?

N.Y.: It is 3 meters in diameter, ten people can fit inside it. I should have brought you my first video, which I made in 1973, recording the public coming in and out of the tent in the exhibition, it is a wonderful video.

A.P.: The tent is really a turning point then.

N.Y.: Yes. But they thought I was going to do tents all the time. The nomads build the tents because the soil is poor, and they have to go from one place to another, looking for water. It is not romantic, it is not ecological. It is like the favelas, people do not own the land. In Turkey, at least, I don't know how it is in Brazil.

A.P.: They don't own the land there either.

N.Y.: Some of them went to Germany and France as migrant workers. That is why I went on doing temporary dwellings, working with the migrant workers, this was natural after the tent.

A.P.: Remember I told you about the exhibition I am developing for Rio de Janeiro next year? Well I would love to include that work.

N.Y.: You have to ask them, I have no idea.

A.P.: Could you tell me more about the objects that are hanging outside the tent?

N.Y.: Bernard, my friend the ethnographer, showed me all the shaman costumes of the Turkic tribes of Central Asia in the basement of the Musée de l'Homme. They are kept there in refrigerators. I was very much impressed. He gave me a photo of a woman shaman. I bought a book called *Le Shamanisme* by Mircea Eliade, the historian of religions. He says shamanism is not a religion, it is a psychology, a sociology. It is mystical, but it is not a religion. So I made the tent and also made some paintings. Things have to hang because they need to bring good things from the sky to the earth, to the tent. That is how I started to do these skins and build the tent myself. Let me look for an image.

A.P.: I also wanted to ask if you were in touch with any of the Turkey based artists that live in Paris.

N.Y.: Sarkis, a very good friend of mine.

A.P.: And Yüksel Arslan?

N.Y.: Oh yes, also a good friend. We had the same political engagement in the 1970s. [...]

Here is the image of the tent. You see all these sewing with leather.

A.P.: Is that you?

N.Y.: Yes. I am building the tent, as I always have done.

A.P.: At the Musée de la Ville?

N.Y.: Yes.

A.P.: It is an extraordinary piece. What is written here?

N.Y.: It is taken from Velimir Khlebnikov, the Russian poet, a text on flying and moving people. There is also some text by Yaşar Kemal, a Kurdish writer from Turkey.

A.P.: What is remarkable is that you come to Paris to find this material, which is of course outside the Western, Parisian context, going to the shamanistic, which is a discourse that is outside modern and contemporary art, but still connecting these two spaces in Paris, the Musée de l'Homme and the Musée de la Ville.

N.Y.: Yes, and later I made a video performance in 1979 at the Musée de l'Homme with shamanistic instruments and masks given to me by Bernard (*Shaman*, 1979).

A.P.: Are there other pieces that draw from these references?

N.Y.: One of my last pieces is a video called *Lord Byron Meets the Shaman Woman* (2009). And these are the collages that were around the tent. All these are excerpts from Yaşar Kemal's book (*The Legend of the Thousand Bulls*, 1971) on the nomadic tribes, how they are thrown from one place to another. When Suzanne Pagé showed it at the ARC public said that the

piece belonged at the Musée de l'Homme.

A.P.: But what is interesting is the crossover.

N.Y.: Yes. It was great to be in Paris in the 1970s. We were a bunch of people doing new things but there were no collectors for these things, and the galleries were headed towards American art. So it was good and bad at the same time.

Paris, 14 February 2013
Photos: Adriano Pedrosa





JE SUIS UNE ARTISTE
I AM AN ARTIST

I AM A MUSLIM FROM BOSNIA HERZEGOVINE
I AM / A JEW FROM SALONIKA

JE SUIS / UNE JUIVE DE SALONIQUE
/ UNE MUSULMANE DE BOSNIE

I AM A CIRCASSIAN FROM RUSSIA
JE SUIS
UNE CIRCASSIENNE DE RUSSIE

I AM AN ABAZA
UNE ABAZA

I AM A FEMALE JANIZARY
JE SUIS UNE FEMME JANIS / SAIRE

A GREEK ORTHODOX
UNE GRECQUE ORTHODOXE

I COME FROM TURKEY, I AM FROM FRANCE
JE VIENS DE TURQUIE, JE SUIS DE FRANCE

I COME
JE VIENS DE BYZANCE
FROM BYZANTIUM

ET DE L'ASIE MINEUR /
I AM FROM ASIA MINOR / I AM

I AM A MONGOL, A NOMADE, AN IMMIGRANT WORKER
JE SUIS UNE IMMIGRÉE
UNE NOMADE, UNE MONGOLE

EXILED
EXILÉE

I AM THE MESSAGE
JE SUIS LE MESSAGE I AM



Nil Yalter

Nil Yalter (born 1938, Cairo), a pioneer in the French feminist art movement of the 1970s was educated at Robert College, the prestigious American secondary educational institution in Istanbul. Yalter has lived in Paris since 1965. She participated in the French counter-culture and revolutionary political movement of the late 1960s, immersing herself in the debates around gender, migrant workers from Turkey, and other issues of the time. She also experimented in different media including drawing, photography, video, and performance art. She was a member of Fighting Women, a group of women artists who were active from 1976 to 1980. Her earliest feminist work, *Topak Ev*, a study of private, public, and feminine spaces dates from 1973. *The Headless Woman or the Belly Dance*, 1974, is a classic of early feminist art. In 1978, she mounted a performance and installation acting out everyday life in a harem using a few pieces of furniture and utensils as part of “A Day of Actions,” held in the studio of one of the other members of the collective. The video of that day was found in 2011 when art historian, Fabienne Dumont, was working on a book about Nil

Yalter. It was digitized by the French National Library and is one of the few videos of the French feminist art movement in the 1970s. One of Yalter’s interests is Shamanism; she has created two videos, *Lord Byron Meets the Shaman Woman*, 2009, as well as a previously unviewed video from 1979, *Shaman*. This last work employs shaman masks from Paris’s ethnographic Musée de l’Homme, and reflects her resistance to the appropriation by museums in the West. She has had many solo exhibitions including several at the Museum of Modern Art of Paris, starting in 1973 and coming up to the present time.

Her work was included in the influential WACK! exhibition in the United States which traveled from the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art to the National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, DC, the Museum of Modern Art PS1 galleries, and the Contemporary Art Center, Vancouver, Canada. Her sculptures, videos, and installations are in the permanent collections of the Tate Modern, the Istanbul Modern, Centre Pompidou and the Fonds national d’art contemporain, among others.

Biographies

Adriano Pedrosa is a curator and writer based in São Paulo. He was adjunct curator of the 24th Bienal de São Paulo (1998), curator of Insite_05 (San Diego, Tijuana, 2005), co-curator of the 27th Bienal de São Paulo (2006), artistic director of the 2nd Trienal de San Juan (2009), curator of the 31st Panorama da Arte Brasileira (São Paulo, 2009), co-curator of the 12th Istanbul Biennial (2011), and is director of PIESP—Programa Independente da Escola São Paulo.

Derya Yücel is an independent curator, writer and lecturer. She is a member of AICA Turkey (International Art Critics Organization). She now teaches as a part-time lecturer at the Art and Design Faculty of Istanbul Culture University, the Art and Cultural Management Department of Istanbul Bilgi University and at Istanbul Okan University. She curates national and international solo and group exhibitions, and since 2004, has written articles on art for magazines and newspapers. She curated the 6th and 7th Korean-Turkish Contemporary Art Exchange Exhibitions that were held in Incheon, Seoul and Istanbul. In 2008, she curated the “Save As... Contemporary Art from Turkey” exhibition, organized in collaboration with santralistanbul and

Triennale Bovisa in Milan, Italy. For the Istanbul 2010 European Capital of Culture organization, she curated the “Portable Art Projects: Memory City” exhibition which was exhibited in various venues across Istanbul in 2008-2009, and the “Openly: International Women Artists Video Exhibition” held at Sanat Limanı/ Art Port at Antrepo, Istanbul. She was invited to “Curated By_Vienna: East by South West” and she also curated the Nil Yalter solo show at Galerie Hubert Winter in Vienna, Austria, in May 2011. Her book titled *New Media Art and the New Museology* was published by Istanbul Culture University in 2012.

Fabienne Dumont is an art historian. Her PhD is on women, art and feminism in France in the 1970s and her thesis will be published in 2013. She has taught history of contemporary art history and is currently Professor at the Ecole Européenne Supérieure D’Art de Bretagne (The Brittany School of Fine Arts). As an art critic, she has written extensively about feminism, gender and queer issues. She has published an anthology of feminist Anglo-American theoretical texts titled *La rébellion du Deuxième Sexe – L’histoire de l’art au crible des théories féministes anglo-américaines (1970-2000)* (Presses du réel, 2011) and is preparing a

monographic essay about Nil Yalter titled *Nil Yalter, À la confluence des mémoires migrantes, du féminisme et du monde ouvrier*. She also contributes regularly to edited books, conferences, seminars, exhibition catalogues, but also to journals about art history, women’s history and gender history. Her specialist knowledge of public and private archives, which she regularly contributes to enrich and organize, has led her also to cooperate in the organization of exhibitions both in France and abroad.

Juan Vicente Aliaga lectures on Theory of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Universitat Politècnica of Valencia, Spain. He is working on feminism, gender and queer studies. He has also lectured on the representations of micropolitics, postcolonialism, the Arab world, history and memory. He has curated some exhibitions such as “Feminist Genealogies in Spanish Art: 1960-2010”, MUSAC, León, 2012; “Claude Cahun”, Jeu de Paume Paris, 2011, Art Institute of Chicago, 2012; “Akram Zaatari. The Uneasy Subject”, MUAC, México City, 2012; “Martha Rosler”, Centro José Guerrero, Granada, 2009; “La batalla de los géneros/Gender Battle”, CGAC, Santiago de Compostela, 2007; “VALIE EXPORT”, Camden Arts Centre, London, 2004; “Han-

nah Höch”, Museo Reina Sofía Madrid, 2004; “Pepe Espaliú”, Museo Reina Sofía Madrid, 2003; “Miroslaw Balka” IVAM, Valencia, 1997. He contributes to *Artforum* (New York), *ArteContexto* (Madrid) and *Critique d’Art* (Rennes).

Melis Tezkan completed her secondary and high-school education at the Galatasaray High School; and also focused on theatre and classical and modern dance during her studies. She completed the Visual Communication Department at the Nice Sophia Antipolis University in France. She completed her MA degree at the Sorbonne Nouvelle University at the Cultural Management Department. She completed her PhD in 2012 on the aesthetics and technologies of contemporary art at the same university; her thesis will be published in autumn 2013 by Editions L’Harmattan in Paris. Since 2006, she has produced works in the field of theatre, performance and video with Okan Urun as part of the interdisciplinary art collective biriken. biriken has attended important festivals in the US, Germany and the Netherlands. In 2009, she collaborated with Nil Yalter for the video performance *Untitled* within the scope of the Temps d’Images Festival held in France and in garajistanbul, Turkey.

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