



East is West: Three Women Artists

14 January – 15 February 2012
Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore
Earl Lu Gallery

Curated by Dr Charles Merewether

THREE PATHS: THREE LANDSCAPES

Nezaket Ekici (Turkey)

Almagul Menlibayeva (Kazakhstan)

Mariana Vassileva (Bulgaria)

This exhibition features three women artists from east of west, who are now living in Berlin, a city too once divided along these lines. The name given to the exhibition is both a reminder and provocation, a reminder of the kinds of differences that had been used to characterize the world, most especially from the Modern Era of the Sixteenth century on. In the Twentieth century, these differences were etched again in the imagination of peoples as ideological, defining a people's subservience under the banner of the national championed by totalitarian regimes.

There should be perhaps a question mark after the title to emphasize the propositional status of the statement. The end of an era we may say, with reference to 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union, a period following the Ottoman Empire. It is true that there has been an enormous influx of peoples from 'Eastern' countries, of those parts of the World into the 'West,' reminding us of the history of such terms that, while historically informed, have been more recently driven by the political economy of globalization. And yet, perhaps too, these historical lines of demarcation and difference have been also shaped by changes and imperatives of survival and by the character of social formation, of individual perception as much as the shared geography of their lives. This is the provocation. Can we simply say East is West? Perhaps not quite.

What is important to recognize in the work of these three women artists is that they do not fetishize their homeland or origin, as if preparing the ground in order to sell it off to the voracious global marketplace, such as that of the art market. This is not to say they abandon their cultural point of references

that they are most familiar with, in which they have grown as artists and which they nurture as an integral reference to their practice and to being in the world. Quite the opposite, for each of them seeks to share differences as a point of exchange, a conversation, not a line of demarcation. These three women artists are brought together to provoke this subject of discussion. Each of their works explore the line between biography/autobiography, between the individual/social, to re-articulate, reconstruct if not then to redefine the concept of a shared community. Their work is animated by an energy that seeks to open up, to share and at times transform distinctions and differences. This is played out through the performative, through a relation to and interaction with their audience. The performative demanding its subject to stage the 'now' time, a demand that calls upon an immediate engagement with an audience, a shared space. And yet while performance unites them, they take three paths that, in their winding and unfolding are parallel in movement.

Through the focus on the performative, on physicality, on the body, each of them takes the everyday as a recurrent point of departure. What is given by each, what we see or observe are performances of the everyday, small gestures and rituals constructed through various various forms of technique such as duration and repetition. Through this means, they create a symbolic narrative of the everyday. In this regard, the work shares certain forms with an older generation of performance artists, a generation that shaped the character and condition of contemporary art from the Sixties onwards. On the one hand, this younger generation is less engaged with the kind of extreme challenges that artists like Vito Acconci and

Bruce Nauman, Chris Burden, Yoko Ono, Valerie Export or Marina Abramovic brought to their audience. On the other hand, this present generation continues to emphasize the body, on its immediate presentness and on its shared conventions and limits or boundaries that shape its survival in the everyday. Arthur Danto writes of this in his essay 'Danger and Disturbance: The Art of Marina Abramovic' (Marina Abramovic, *The Artist as Present* [New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010, p.29]. Danto likens the character of 'presence' to that of a metaphysics of art and to the discourse on icons. We see this most clearly in the films of Soviet director Andrei Tarkovsky, some of whose work was powerfully informed by icon painting and writing of the great Russian theoretician Pavel Florensky. This creation of a space, a performative space of the body, that encircles both the performer and audience, is what unites all three women artists in this exhibition.

These reference points are especially relevant to the work of Almagul Menlibayeva, whose work draws also upon strands of Sufism and Shamanism as practiced across Central Asia. She couples a powerful portrait of the fate of women in and after the Soviet era together with the resurgence of a residual shamanism amongst women as a force of resistance. In this regard, Menlibayeva brings into the heart of the city the image of devastation symbolized by the ruins of Soviet occupation and the presence of the nomadic Kazakh woman. The allusion to shamanism in her work is to be found in the utter concentration of her characters - that often include the artist - in actions that defy any obvious sense or logic. It is as if their actions are informed by a communicative force outside of the real. This power is transformative and transmits to the viewer as an audience who, in willing to participate, suspends disbelief. A space is created in which the audience enter, become one with what they see, with the characters and its unfolding narrative.

Nezaket Ekici similarly creates this performative space of action, of interaction, using the most mundane, everyday gestures and actions. She draws from the everyday that, through a performative reading, creates a metonymic form of the everyday. The performance creates a space for the audience to go beyond the immediate everyday. Through an emotional attunement, her work suspends the relation of the audience and individual to the real, of the grounding to matter of identity or the materiality of the contextual. Ekici leads her audience to imagine a space in which to share an experience that borders on pain or a dream-world, the unimagined, that crosses the borders of difference, transgressing them at times, collapsing these cultural differences through the intimacy of her performance.

For Mariana Vassileva, this emotional bonding is again central to her work. Her actions are informed by the observation of the incidental, almost seemingly casual, occurrence that provokes a space for meditating on time and on an unbounded space that exceeds the transient nature of everyday life. The sense of this space is as an imagined possibility that energizes the characters beyond the physical or mundane of everyday actions. This creates an interaction with the audience, a form of sentient communication with others or with the immediate world around them. And, even though this is, at times, driven by a sense of solitariness, the work of Vassileva seeks to bring it into a shared space as a form of meditation, a self-reflexive relation to being in the world. Engaging with the work of Vassileva, we experience a kind of lyrical anthropology of the self and the rhythms of everyday life which appear to be different or singular in its relations to the commonplace norm of everyday life. This is measured by a sense of humor, of an irony that seeks to share such differences lightly. We may say, such work is offered as a form of gift, a space in which to see and experience the world differently and hence, the possibility of seeing the world anew.



Nezaket Ekici, Tube Dolomit (2009), Performance documentation. Photo by Andreas Dammertz.

NEZAKET EKICI

Statement

Nezaket Ekici's videos, installations and performances are often process-based in character. They involve the viewer both intellectually and emotionally, by means of their themes as well as their form. Complex, often controversial contents enter into a suspenseful interplay with their aestheticizing presentation. In this, the field of tension between her Turkish origin and education on one hand, and her living environment in Germany on the other, plays a central role. Cultural and individual borders are of equal interest to her as the possibility of transgression and connection. Although her own body is usually at the centre of her work, it is still possible for the viewer to experience its topicality for him- or herself. The viewer's associations and experiences become an integrative part of the work of art.

Bio

Nezaket Ekici was born in Kirsehir, Turkey, in 1970. She has received an MA in Art Pedagogy and Art History from Ludwig-Maximilians University Munich, Germany, and an MFA from Hochschule für Bildende Künste Braunschweig, Germany. She has



Nezaket Ekici, Atropos (2006), Performance documentation, presented at "Double Bind", DNA Galerie. Photo by Stefan Erhard.

participated in numerous solo exhibitions, such as *Personal Map (to be continued...)* (2011), *Zitate* (2010) and *Double Bind* (2006), as well as group exhibitions at the Istanbul Modern (Turkey), Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art (Canada) and PS1 Contemporary

Art Center (USA), amongst others. Her work is part of many public collections, such as The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts (Canada), Kunstmuseum Heidenheim (Germany) and MARTa Herford (Germany). She lives and works in Berlin.

ALMAGUL MENLIBAYEVA

Statement

My educational background is in the Soviet Russian avant-garde school of Futurism, which I combine with a nomadic aesthetic of post-Soviet, contemporary Kazakhstan – something that I have been exploring in recent years through my photographic and video work.



Almagul Menlibayeva, *Exodus* (2009), HD Video, 11:21 min.
Courtesy of Priska C. Juschka Fine Art.



Almagul Menlibayeva, *The Aral Beach 2* (2011), Duratrans print in lightbox, 91 x 122 cm. Courtesy of Priska C. Juschka Fine Art.

I use specific ways of expression in modern and contemporary art as a vehicle to investigate my personal archaic atavism as a certain mystical anthropomorphism. In other words, I explore the nature of a specific *Egregore*, a shared cultural psychic experience, which manifests itself as a specific thought-form among the people(s) of the ancient, arid and dusty Steppes between the Caspian Sea, Baikonur and Altai in today's Kazakhstan. In the Russian language, *Archaic Atavism* is personalized as a being, which points to and creates a different meaning. We are not just speaking about an idea or archaic element in the collective subconscious of a people, but about the embodiment of our archaic atavism, which becomes an active entity, just like a creature itself. Our archaic atavism is not just internalized, but also externalized. It is as if it has been awakened by the post-Soviet experience of the indigenous Kazakh people, who are becoming their own after 80 years of Soviet domination and cultural genocide. Suddenly it (*Archaic Atavism*) became interested in enculturation and in behavioural modernity. It also began to have entertaining dialogues with the transnational circulation of ideas in contemporary art. For this dialogue, I have chosen the medium of video and photography and I like to work with the notion

of memory and reality. My archaic atavism is interested in my video explorations in the Steppes and in post-Soviet Asia. By editing raw data and combining documentary and staged footage, I become *its* voice, enabling a cultural exodus from long oblivion. My work raises metaphysical questions such as *Who am I?* and *Where shall I go?*; this (psychic) experience and perspective marks my artistic language.

Bio

Almagul Menlibayeva was born in Kazakhstan, in 1969, and studied at the Academy of Art and Theatre at Almaty, Kazakhstan. Her recent solo exhibitions include *Transoxiana Dreams* and *My Silk Road to You* (2011), *Daughters of Turan* (2010) and *Exodus* (2009). She has participated in the 4th Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art, Sharjah Biennial 10, the 51st Venice Biennale, representing the Central Asian Pavilion and will be part of the 18th Biennale of Sydney in 2012. Her works have also been featured at film festivals in France, Japan, Switzerland and Brazil, amongst many others. In 2010, she won the Prix de la Nuit Award for her work *Exodus* at the 8th International Festival Signes de Nuit, Paris. She lives and works in Berlin and Kazakhstan.

MARIANA VASSILEVA

Statement

Mariana Vassileva transforms still life and movement through visual representation into new energetic harmony. She is not interested in the physical act of the movement, but in the mental process behind it. In a minimal way, she transforms objects, situations and manners, and presents them in another reference on a lyrical level. The spectator begins to appreciate the work



Mariana Vassileva, *Tango* (2007), Video, 00:45 min loop.
Courtesy of DNA Galerie



Mariana Vassileva, *Toro* (2008), Video, 05:00 min. Courtesy of DNA Galerie

through the emotional movement into a strangely represented world. In this process, one is animated toward a heightened sensibility of daily variations.

Bio

Mariana Vassileva was born in Bulgaria in 1964 and studied at the Universität der Künste in Berlin, Germany. She has had several solo exhibitions, such as *Mariana Vassileva – Die sanfte Brutalität der Gleichzeitigkeit / The gentle brutality of simultaneity* (2011), *Index Glass* (2009), *Speedformel* (2007) and *Spiegel / Licht* (2005), amongst others. She has also participated in the Microwave International New Media Festival, Hong Kong (2011), the 4th Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art (2011) and the 17th Biennale of Sydney (2010), as well as numerous other group exhibitions, such as at the Tate Britain (UK)

and Museo Reina Sofia (Spain). Her work is part of several public collections, such as The Israel Museum (Israel), Kunsthalle in Emden (Germany) and La Colección de Arte Contemporáneo del Ayuntamiento de Pamplona (Spain). She lives and works in Berlin.

Bruce Nauman, Chris Burden, Yoko Ono, Valerie Export or Marina Abramovic brought to their audience. On the other hand, this present generation continues to emphasize the body, on its immediate presentness and on its shared conventions and limits or boundaries that shape its survival in the everyday. Arthur Danto writes of this in his essay 'Danger and Disturbation: The Art of Marina Abramovic' (Marina Abramovic, *The Artist as Present* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010, p.29). Danto likens the character of 'presence' to that of a metaphysics of art and to the discourse on icons. We see this most clearly in the films of Soviet director Andrei Tarkovsky, some of whose work was powerfully informed by icon painting and writing of the great Russian theoretician Pavel Florensky. This creation of a space, a performative space of the body, that encircles both the performer and audience, is what unites all three women artists in this exhibition.

These reference points are especially relevant to the work of Almagul Menlibayeva, whose work draws also upon strands of Sufism and Shamanism as practiced across Central Asia. She couples a powerful portrait of the fate of women in and after the Soviet era together with the resurgence of a residual shamanism amongst women as a force of resistance. In this regard, Menlibayeva brings into the heart of the city the image of devastation symbolized by the ruins of Soviet occupation and the presence of the nomadic Kazakh woman. The allusion to shamanism in her work is to be found in the utter concentration of her characters - that often include the artist - in actions that defy any obvious sense or logic. It is as if their actions are informed by a communicative force outside of the real. This power is transformative and transmits to the viewer as an audience who, in willing to participate, suspends disbelief. A space is created in which the audience enter, become one with what they see, with the characters and its unfolding narrative.

Nezaket Ekici similarly creates this performative space of action, of interaction, using the most mundane, everyday gestures and actions. She draws from the everyday that, through a performative reading, creates a metonymic form of the everyday. The performance creates a space for the audience to go beyond the immediate everyday. Through an emotional attunement, her work suspends the relation of the audience and individual to the real, of the grounding to matter of identity or the materiality of the contextual. Ekici leads her audience to imagine a space in which to share an experience that borders on pain or a dream-world, the unimagined, that crosses the borders of difference, transgressing them at times, collapsing these cultural differences through the intimacy of her performance.

For Mariana Vassileva, this emotional bonding is again central to her work. Her actions are informed by the observation of the incidental, almost seemingly casual, occurrence that provokes a space for meditating on time and on an unbounded space that exceeds the transient nature of everyday life. The sense of this space is as an imagined possibility that energizes the characters beyond the physical or mundane of everyday actions. This creates an interaction with the audience, a form of sentient communication with others or with the immediate world around them. And, even though this is, at times, driven by a sense of solitariness, the work of Vassileva seeks to bring it into a shared space as a form of meditation, a self-reflexive relation to being in the world. Engaging with the work of Vassileva, we experience a kind of lyrical anthropology of the self and the rhythms of everyday life which appear to be different or singular in its relations to the commonplace norm of everyday life. This is measured by a sense of humor, of an irony that seeks to share such differences lightly. We may say, such work is offered as a form of gift, a space in which to see and experience the world differently and hence, the possibility of seeing the world anew.

The exhibition introduces three women artists from outside of Western Europe who have taken up residence in Berlin. Integral to their practice is performance that is recorded and subsequently shown as independent video work. Their practice involves both themselves directly as the subject, as well as others. Some of the work explores the subject of women as well as cultural differences that lie within their countries of origin and between national boundaries.

Participating artists:

Mariana Vassileva (Bulgaria), Almagul Menlibayeva (Kazakhstan) and Nezaket Ekici (Turkey)

Opening reception: Friday, 13 January 2012, 6.30pm

Talk by the three artists and special performance by Nezaket Ekici

Monday, 16 January 2012, 4.00pm

Earl Lu Gallery

Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore

The Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore (ICAS) is the curatorial division of LASALLE College of the Arts. It runs seven galleries, comprising some 1,500 square meters of gallery spaces dedicated to exploring new and experimental art across the Fine Arts, Design, Media Practices and Performing Arts. Its programme focuses on showcasing international, Asian, Southeast Asian and local contemporary arts. Its outreach programme includes regular publications, seminars and symposiums, visiting artists talks and events of contemporary performance, installation, design and music/sound practices. The ICAS is committed to providing a cultural and educational tool for students and the Singaporean audience to advance their knowledge and appreciation of the contemporary local, regional and international arts, that is not otherwise available in Singapore today.

Gallery Opening Hours: Daily 10am – 6pm (except Mondays and public holidays)

LASALLE College of the Arts

1 McNally Street, B1-03 Singapore 187940

Tel: +65 6436 5070 Email: icas@lasalle.edu.sg

Website: <http://www.lasalle.edu.sg/index.php/galleries>

Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/ICASgalleries>

**INSTITUTE OF
CONTEMPORARY ARTS**
s i n g a p o r e

Acknowledgements

The curator wishes to thank all those who made this catalogue possible, in particular each of the three artists, Isrudy Bin Shaik Mohamed and Jessica Rahardjo from Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore, Johann Nowak and DNA Galerie (Berlin), Priska Juschka and Priska C. Juschka Fine Art (New York) and Leslie Yew and First Printers.

All information is accurate at the time of print.