

What Keeps Mankind Alive? 11th Istanbul Biennial (12 Sept-8 Nov 2009)

Lisa E. Bloom and Betti-Sue Hertz

The curatorial collective of the 11th Istanbul Biennial, What, How and for Whom (WHW),¹ set out to investigate the question 'What Keeps Mankind Alive?' – the last song of the second act of Bertolt Brecht's *Threepenny Opera* written in 1928² – within the context of the present global political and economic situation. The collective, comprised of four women curators, carefully constructed their biennial, in which feminism plays a major role, by tackling head on the double failure of socialism and neo-liberalism from the perspective of the region that includes Turkey and Croatia, where they are based.³ The feminist aspect of their project may be most readily recognized by the sheer volume of work by women, mostly from Eastern Europe, the Balkans, Central Asia and the Middle East. The Biennial addresses both local and international audiences directly with questions about the contemporary world in the midst of a global economic crisis whose effects are not just being felt in Istanbul or the art world but everywhere.⁴ For these curators from Zagreb, the financial crisis has created an opportunity for the renewal of politically astute art and critical thinking. They boldly brought forth works with imagery based in the realities of

contemporary women. The Biennial raises questions and problematics throughout by tapping into conceptual and narrative practices, which collectively provide a very impressive map of the pressure points equally for both men and women living today between the ruins of two failed ideologies.

It was interesting to learn that the curators had specifically decided to assure that the inclusion of women was equal to that of men and that the biennial was shaped, in part, by this factor among others, yielding a 50% female participation, which is not only significantly higher than most biennials but also follows the singular precedent in Istanbul with Rosa Martínez's Biennale in 1995 where women formed 60% of the selected artists. Among the women in the exhibition the age range was also quite wide as WHW was also interested in giving some historical weight and more importantly context – and possibly legacy – to the ideas that were circulating in the exhibition. However, even more significant, when works from the 1970s, for example, were presented by an artist, that artist was often, when possible and relevant, represented by more recent work, providing



Left: Maria Ruido *Amphibious Fictions* (2005) two stills from video, 33'. Courtesy of the artist. Above: Canan Senol *Fountain* (2000) still from DVD, 57' and below: Canan Senol two images from *Exemplary* (2009) Courtesy of the artist.

audiences with a trace of a single artist's trajectory over time. All of these factors were set against a post-Marxist thematic response to Brecht's question, and an interpretation of the contemporary moment as reckoning with a political gap that is situated between post-communism and a faltering capitalism.

The women artists in the exhibition employed a wide range of themes about negotiating their lives in an ideological void, including personal histories. Another relevant topic was the changes in the female labor force and its often negative effect on women's lives, with artists using personal, documentary and fictional forms, to represent specific situations and real life stories. Especially moving and revealing was Maria Ruido's documentary, *Amphibious Fictions* (2005), which, with its close focus on women's work in the textile factories in Barcelona, uncovers the precarious conditions for workers in an age of increasing transnational capital. The artist places this current situation within a historical trajectory concerning the limited options for working-class and poor women.

Of special interest is the work of Canan Senol, who is represented by two completely different works, one more conceptual and the other an epic narrative animated collage. *Fountain* (2000) was one of the first works encountered when entering the main exhibition space in Antrepo No. 3. It is a conceptual work comprised of a live action video of a single shot of enlarged breasts of a lactating woman. Swollen with milk, the breasts hang down and milk slowly drips out from each of the nipples in syncopated rhythmic alternation. Yet, with all that they have to give, the milk they produce just drips and drips landing somewhere off screen. To open a group exhibition with this quiet, but nonetheless disturbing image, where all that a woman can give on this most basic biological level, is wasted, is one example of the curators' bold feminist stance. Senol is also represented by a new work, *Exemplary* (2009), which follows one Turkish woman's journey through the many transitions of life and as the catalogue text states, 'problematizes the oppressiveness of the institutions of marriage and family, the political and religious instrumentalisation of the female body and the implementation of the notion of female beauty as a topos of orientalisation and consumerist exploitation.'⁵ As is evident in the language used to describe this and other works, WHW is unrelenting in their critique of the present conditions for



Top left: Danica Dakic *Isola Bella* (2007-2008) HD video, 19'07". Courtesy of the artist.
 Above: Nilbar Güres *Unknown Sports* (2008-2009). Courtesy of the artist.
 Right, above and below: 2 stills from Natalya Dyu *Happystan* (2007) video, 5'10". Courtesy of the artist.

women, and the brutality and cruelty that many women have had to endure in the domestic, religious and political spheres, including wars, rape and abject devaluation.

WHW took great pains to follow in the Brechtian path and this is evident in many of their choices of works. Certainly the idea that the viewer should not be positioned as a passive receiver of entertainment, or even scenarios and ideas, but as an engaged participant in the production of culture as well as an informed political subject, is evident in works throughout the exhibition. Since a good many artists are from countries that were once under communist rule, either Soviet or otherwise, the Marxist aspect of the Brechtian artistic experience as well as the modernist absurdities that fuel this distancing technique are ripe for contemporary adaptation. These theatrical techniques are evident in a new video by Danica Dakic titled *Isola Bella* (2007-2008). This work features performances by residents of the Home for the Protection of Children and Youth in Pazaric near Sarajevo, where they tell fragments of their own stories behind masks of animals and historical character-types such as queens or indians, etc., and collectively make up the audience, as well. In this moving work, which features older and younger adults who were effected by the Bosnian war of the early 1990s, and

continue to reside in the home, while not overtly feminist, is an excellent example of how larger events effect lives of the most vulnerable members of society emphasizing how this population is often made even more "other" or marginalized by historical circumstances.

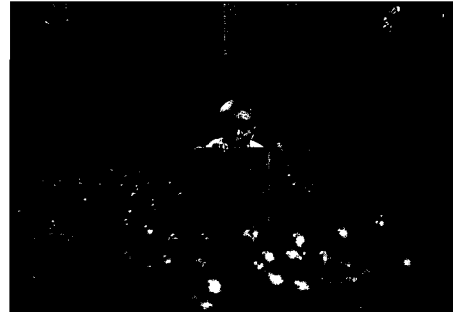
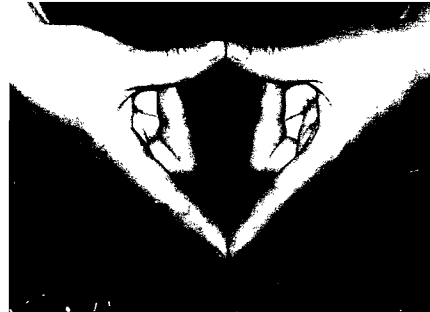
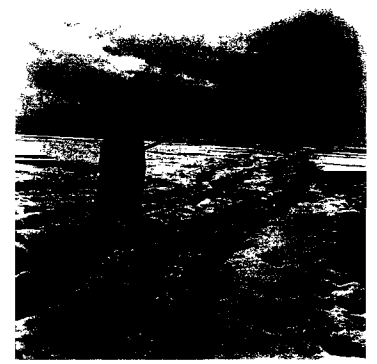
This is also underlined in Natalya Dyu's ironic video, *Happystan* (2007), that is set to the cliched words of a song written by Andrey and Aliya Belyayev, one of the richest couples in Kazakhstan. The video highlights how the fake smiles and illusions of happiness pouring from the lyrics of the song and from different forms of upbeat advertising throughout the city contrasts with the footage of forlorn faces of the people living in the city, highlighting the depressive quality of daily life in Almaty, the city where the artist lives. This dark video suggests that women are enduring oppression of one type or another, without any possibility of stepping outside of their circumstances.

The limits of consumerism in the domestic sphere, is examined in collages, drawings and photographs by Nilbar Güre° titled *Unknown Sports* (2008-2009). In this work the artist demonstrates how traditional gender roles are shifting in contemporary Turkey. Her humorous displays employ the female body as a sculptural apparatus, donning mixed up

Left: Igor Grubic
East Side Story (2006-
2008) still from a
2-channel video.
Courtesy of
the artist.



Right: Rena Effendi
*Pipedreams: A
Chronicle of Lives
along the Pipeline*
(2002-2007)
Courtesy of
the artist.



Left: Lidia Blinova
Hand Ornaments
Courtesy of the
artist.

Right: KwieKulik,
Zofia Kulik
*Activities with
Dobromierz*
(1972-1974)
Courtesy
of the artists.

costumes for the production of femininity. By taking traditional female practices of consumption and cleaning such as body hair waxing or vacuum cleaning and transforming them into obsessive practices Güres highlights how sexually perverse some of women's daily practices actually are. The series questions what constitutes normative sexual practices for women and makes troubling associations between consumption, domestic violence and sexual abuse. If the women's movement has made some progress at least in addressing issues pertaining to the domestic sphere in Turkey, a project by Igor Grubic titled *East Side Story* (2006-2008) that focuses on the violent attacks by homophobic Nationalists against gay men and lesbians who participated in the first Gay Pride celebrations in Belgrade and Zagreb in 2001, shows the continuing effects of deep hatred and political strife for the demonstration of sexual difference in early post-Communist Serbia and Croatia. The artist juxtaposes two videos, documentary footage of the attacks and an interpretation of the same event performed in Zagreb a year later by contemporary dancers, some of whom had participated in the Gay Pride celebrations. These public dances were performed at the actual sites where the Gay Pride celebrations originally took place to healing effect. Seen against the backdrop of the long arm of trauma from the

ethnic wars, together these videos reveal how intense nationalistic hatred, ethnic cleansing, and gay bashing are part of the same cycle of intolerance and violence. They also show the importance of persistence in the face of repression for gay activists and community members during a period of political transition into neo-liberalism.

Another example of how the curators placed injustice, intolerance and inequality on the agenda rather than more optimistic themes is the curators's inclusion of Rena Effendi's black and white photographic series, *Pipedreams: A Chronicle of Lives Along the Pipeline* (2002-2007). This project was six years in the making and focuses on the effects the oil industry has on the women and men living near the second longest oil pipeline in the world. The photographs span the pipeline's construction and its opening in 2006, revealing the human consequences of corporate abandon and resistance to the government's ability to alleviate suffering despite these countries' open acceptance of the pipeline with its promises of progress fueled by petro-dollars. The documentary series recalls Farm Security Administration photographs from the depression in the United States in the 1930s, but in this case offers an explicitly critical view of modernization as the photographs followed the 1700 km oil pipeline through Georgia, Turkey and her own country, Azerbaijan.

Women artists who were active in earlier decades, who shifted artistic practice towards more contemporary idioms were highlighted in the exhibition, providing images for a deeper reflection on the importance of art making during turbulent political times. For example, when Lidia Blinova adapted the forms of traditional ornamentation to the making of shapes by using her own hands as a sign making system, it was considered a major break with a long tradition without wholly rejecting it. It is an enactment of the elaborate mathematical and abstract system of decorative patterning prevalent in Kazakhstan, where it is now not inscribed on the body but constructed by the body. KwieKulik, the Polish husband and wife team's slide show from the 1970s of domestic life featuring their baby boy in the midst of oranges and cardboard boxes produces a different vision of familial social relations that looks fresh and of the moment. Sanja Ivekoviæ, from Zagreb, who has been working since the 1970s did a project specifically for the Biennial titled *Turkish Papers 09*, 2009 which consists of crumpled red sheets of paper scattered throughout the floor of the biennial that details the main points from a report on the status of women in Turkey by Turkish NGOs. The report highlights examples of gender inequality in Turkey, including the alarming number of honor killings. The red printed sheets are presented as rubbish to emphasize the indifference of the Turkish population to this issue.

WHW's selection of works that sacrifice the authoritative stamp of modernist mastery and post-modernist irony seems especially salient given the current global economic crisis. Considering the serious human consequences of the economic issues that we are all facing now, the Biennial was careful not to bury all manner of anger and political activism. The curators also went to great lengths to deliberately dismantle the logic of a neo-liberal framework and challenge the art audience to relinquish their privilege as consumers of high art. Here, to posit the question, '*What Keeps Mankind Alive*' is, to subvert a self-satisfied neo-liberal subjectivity and make art central to a critique of the free market order. In keeping with the Brechtian spirit, the curators ask how art can help to visualize power and its obscene excess, yet also at the same time avoid the aestheticization of poverty and suffering. Many of the artists responded by relinquishing their privileged positions to provide many different entry points to women's experience through works of art. The results were so effective and timely that we found that responding merely as viewers could not be enough, and that

the Biennial itself was a call to action, a catalyst for all of us to locate and identify issues that matter, and situations that need to be addressed through whatever means necessary to answer the call to keep womankind alive, healthy, well, educated and free.

Lisa Bloom is the author of *Gender on Ice: American Ideologies of Polar Expeditions* (University of Minnesota Press, 1993), the edited anthology, *With Other Eyes: Looking at Race and Gender in Visual Culture* (University of Minnesota Press, 1999), and *Jewish Identities In American Feminist Art: Ghosts of Ethnicity* (Routledge, 2006). Bloom currently teaches in the Visual Arts department at the University of California, San Diego.

Betti-Sue Hertz is director of visual arts at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts since December 2008, where she is organizing *Renée Green: Endless Dreams and Time-Based Streams* (2010). She was curator of contemporary art at the San Diego Museum of Art from 2000-2008, where she produced several major exhibitions and catalogues including *Eleanor Antin: Historical Takes* (2008); *Animated Painting* (2007); and *Transmission: The Art of Matta and Gordon Matta-Clark* (2006).

Notes

1. What, How and For Whom is a curatorial collective based in Zagreb. It was founded in 1999 and is comprised of four members, Ivet Curlin, Ana Devic, Natasa Ilic, and Sabina Sabolovic. See: Ebru B. Yetiskin '(Net)achmental Arts and the Work of What, How and for Whom?' *n.paradoxa* vol 23 (2009) pp.29-35.
2. *The Threepenny Opera* was written by Bertolt Brecht in collaboration with Elizabeth Hauptmann and Kurt Weill.
3. There are two Biennial publications: *What Keeps Mankind Alive? The Guide* (Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts, 2009), which presents the artists and *The Texts* (Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts, 2009) which situates the ideas of the Biennial in the context of essays by a wide range of critics and scholars.
4. The only other biennial encountered by either author that seriously took up the issue of Neo-liberalism and contemporary art is the 2008 Taipei Biennial curated by Manray Hsu, based in Taipei and Berlin and Vasif Kortun, based in Istanbul.