

HERE & THERE

Katia Kameli, Esra Ersen, Maya Schweizer

Curated by Catherine Bernard and Mary Cremin

February 10 – March 17, 2011

Amelie A. Wallace Gallery
SUNY College at Old Westbury

Opening Reception: Thursday, February 10, 2011
4p.m. – 7p.m.

Artist Talk: Thursday, March 3, 2011
5p.m. – 7p.m.

Here and There

Dissolution, *Passengers*, *La Corsa del Venditore* (*The Run of the Sellers*) are works that look at the impact of migration on the life of populations in different parts of the world: Algeria, Turkey and Italy. These works by Katia Kameli, Esra Ersen and Maya Schweizer analyze the mapping of new cultural spaces, the boundaries of which are drafted by the experiential stories of people who are living in interstitial situations.



Kameli, *Dissolution*, 2009, video, 3:50 min. Sound designer Benoit Fort.

Katia Kameli's work titled *Dissolution* (2009) shows a maritime landscape with boats on the Mediterranean Sea. The film is sequenced in four looped sections filming one boat, possibly a ferry boat, slowly crossing the frame as it enters a port, followed to its docking by a tug boat. The smoke of two chimneystacks blurs the image of the moving boat, while it progresses slowly through the frame and disappears, leaving behind the still images of other boats anchored in the distance, the only other movement being created by the chimney smoke. The background sound, a distant rumble with an occasional police siren is juxtaposed to the diffuse images and accompanies the slow rhythm of the video.

A boat crossing water, a recurrent theme in Kameli's work, stands for displacement and the journey of immigrants. Boats have been crossing the Mediterranean Sea for decades, carrying millions of Algerian migrants who provided cheap labor to the post-WWII French economy. The history of the Mediterranean passage is an integral part of the troubled history of Algeria relations with France and is also an integral part of the Algerian imaginary, for the ferries crossing to France provided people with hopes of a better life and living conditions, often paired with the disillusion of immigrant life and status.

The images in *Dissolution* possess an evident plasticity that, along with their classical composition and diffused light bring to mind an aesthetic present in European landscape paintings, which is combined with a transcultural component crucial to Kameli's own experience as an artist living between different cultures. *Dissolution* acquires a contemplative even meditative quality from the slow paced images, while the absence of specific references allows the viewer's imagination to evolve with the slow crossing of the boat.

Conveying a sense of *in-betweenness*² is fundamental to the artist. Kameli says:

*Being in between and every kind of hybridization are central motifs in my work. This is because of my own history. I have always traveled back and forth between many different countries.*³

Similar themes of *in-betweenness* and of transcultural experience are present in Esra Ersen's *Passengers* (2009), a two channel video installation that projects two works simultaneously: *The Neighborhood* (21:16 min.) and *The Trip to Bosphorus* (28:10 min.). Her work however, looks at migration from within Turkish society.

Ersen's practice lays somewhere between documentary and fiction, a characteristic found in *Passengers*. The artist often embeds herself in a specific context and only after an initial period of research during which she shares time and experience with the subjects, does she start filming. This involvement with the communities with which she collaborates results in works that combine elements

¹ For more information about the history of Franco-Algerian relations see: Affan Seljug, "Cultural Conflicts: North African Immigrants in France," in *International Journal of Peace Studies*, http://www.gmu.edu/programs/icar/ijps/vol2_2/cover2_2.htm
John Ruedy, *Modern Algeria: the Origins and Development of a Nation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005).

² The concept of *in-betweenness* was established in post-colonial theories of culture by Homi K. Bhabha. It was however predated by that of rhizomatic structures in postmodern societies exposed by Deleuze and Guattari in *Mille Plateaux* (1980).

³ Katia Kameli, *Interview with Silke Schmickl*: http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/nafas/articles/2008/katia_kameli

of documentary and narrative formats to explore the tensions between the communities and their larger socio-political environments⁴.



Esra Ersen, still from “The Trip to Bosphorus” (28:10 min) of *Passengers*, 2009, 2-channel video installation, Sound developed for Vebi Koc, Istanbul and Tanas, Berlin

For *The Trip to Bosphorus*, Esren approached a group of women who migrated to Istanbul many years ago, but had never stepped out of their neighborhood and took them on a trip to the sea. The trip stands as a metaphor illuminating the social disparities between those living on the periphery and those living at the center of society. Many migrants —Turkish or foreigners — come to Istanbul in search of a better life, which translates often as a passage to Northern Europe through the Bosphorus, a symbol of the hopes for the immigrants.

As the bus rides through the diverse Istanbul neighborhoods, the passengers look silently and attentively through the windows, while the landscape shifts through different districts. When the group approaches its destination, expectations arise. Everyone gets off and the passengers get close to the water, watching as tankers, ferries and small embarkations navigate on black waters, surrounded by an industrial and polluted landscape.

⁴ For *Brothers and Sisters* (2003), Ersen spent several weeks in *Talarbasi*, an Istanbul neighborhood where Nigerians, Ghanaians and Ethiopians share the difficulties of immigrant life with Kurdish, Greek and Gypsy peoples.

⁵ <http://www.tanasberlin.de/index.php?lang=en&nav=rueckschau>
See text by Fatos Ustek

The viewer senses the passengers' melancholy as they board the bus for the ride back, perhaps because their expectations about visiting the sea and seeing the Bosphorus weren't met.

The Neighborhood, projected simultaneously with *The Trip to Bosphorus*, depicts the place where the migrants and their families live. Immigrants who settled in the periphery of Istanbul have created strong communities with their own social rules that function as a form of dystopia that opposes the idealized vision of Turkish society promoted by the ruling party.

Still shots show buildings, playgrounds, shops, people walking on the street of the neighborhood. Ersen also films murals depicting idyllic landscapes on the exteriors of poorly maintained buildings – waterfalls, trees at sunset, a seagull above the sea – while at intervals the camera shifts to other aspects of the urban landscape or to the view of a highway separating the neighborhood from the rest of the city. Myriads flags hang from poles, windows, or across the streets, as the video was shot during an electoral campaign. The flags of different political parties hang side by side with the laundry in the windows of apartment complexes. The cheerfulness of the colored flags contrasts the gray landscape, embodying the conflict between election promises and the impoverished life conditions of the district.



Maya Schweizer, still from *La Corsa del Venditore* (*The Run of the Seller*), 2008, video, 7:30 min.

Maya Schweizer's work differs from the direct portrayal used by Ersen. In *La Corsa del Venditore* (*The Run of the Seller*), Africans who immigrated to Italy, in this case to Florence, are never seen but talked about by an outsider. *La Corsa del Venditore* takes the form of a monologue spoken by an Italian woman talking on her cell phone, presumably to a friend, and describing a

scene that she just witnessed. Well dressed, the woman is pacing in front of the Florence train station, flanked by what the viewer assumes are her daughter and granddaughter. She describes in detail a scene during which African street vendors harassed by the police, were forced to quickly fold up the blankets used to display their merchandise on the pavement and run away. To her surprise, the vendors settled down only a block away, as if playing a game of cat and mouse with the police.

Here Schweizer uses the absence of the actual protagonists as a metaphor for their invisibility in the eyes of the population. Anyone who has walked through the streets of any large European city cannot but notice the street vendors who are ubiquitous in tourist places, selling trinkets illegally, often running away from the police. The scene's banality betrays the indifference and the forgetfulness applied to immigrant groups. The surprise shown by the Italian woman on the phone can only be understood as a critique of the social invisibility that characterizes the condition of immigrant populations in their host societies and the life it implies.

The simple staging and the use of black and white reference the neorealist Italian movies of the early 1950s, reinforcing the story telling aspect of the video. The use of off-screen protagonists underlines the actual distance between the narrator and the subject she describes. This specific *mise-en-scene* evokes the concept of social and political invisibility described by Ralph Ellison in his novel, and endured throughout the 20th century by migrants and minorities⁶. The theme is recast in a present day scenario through the use of a cell phone. Such social invisibility is only challenged when social unrest or protests arise, and when the same population becomes the stuff of newspaper headlines and is portrayed as dangerous to the values and proper functioning of the society.

The films in *Here and There* propose a reflection about the relation between immigrants and their host society rooted in 19th century colonialism and 20th economic imperialism, and their social, political and economic contributions to postcolonial societies. The migration and displacement of populations will increase dramatically in the decades to come, intensified by climatic changes and their ensuing socio-economic disasters. These works provide important messages that ultimately aim to trigger further analysis, hinting at the necessity to invent socio-cultural and geo-political spaces that resist the imposition of global economic and political forces⁷, while they demonstrate the pertinence of the concept of trans-culture to fully apprehend our foreseeable future.

CATHERINE BERNARD

⁶ Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, (1952) is a novel in which the character, a black man, discuss his social, political and intellectual invisibility in the American society of the time.

⁷ For a discussion of free market policies and their implications in the global economy, see Naomi Klein: *The Shock Doctrine: the Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (2007).

Here & There explores the in-between spaces of migration. The creation of new spaces and new cultural geographies necessitates a remapping of citizenship; in terms of the acceptance of new citizens and the recognition of migrants with illegal status and their essential contribution to metropolitan societies.

The UN Convention on the Rights of Migrants defines a migrant worker as a "person who is to be engaged, is engaged or has been engaged in a remunerated activity in a State of which he or she is not a national." From this a broader definition of migrants follows:

"The term 'migrant' in article 1.1 (a) should be understood as covering all cases where the decision to migrate is taken freely by the individual concerned, for reasons of 'personal convenience' and without intervention of an external compelling factor."⁸

These definitions are indicative of the current difficulty in distinguishing between migrants who leave their countries because of political persecution, conflicts, economic problems, environmental degradation or a combination of these reasons and those who do so in search of conditions of survival or well-being. It is the motives for migration that are used to classify such movements.

Within the present global circumstances we have reached a point where the political rhetoric of economic crises, issues of migration, the rise of nationalism and climatic catastrophes are part of the everyday. The discourses surrounding these issues are played out through the media which, rather than activating a response have generated a universal passivity. This exhibition's intention is not to create a new awareness but to add to the enduring critique of what it means to be an immigrant, and issues of cultural alienation. The homogenization of cultures through globalisation and the ineffectual policies of integration of world governments have led to a disenfranchisement and alienation of minorities. Hannah Arendt refers to the process of "human artifice", where we are not born equal, but become equal as members of a group on the strengths of our decision to guarantee ourselves mutually equal rights.⁹

One of the bases of cultural pluralism is the awareness of the cultural politics of various migrant groups. What is invisible becomes visible. It is within this transparency that migrant groups can make an impact on improving the relations between their adopted environment and creating a cultural awareness

⁸ <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/social-and-human-sciences/themes/social-transformations/international-migration/>

⁹ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1951), 297.

that is necessary to not only retain their own identity but for it to become part of a broader consciousness. In the publication *Location of Culture*, the post colonial theorist Homi Bhabha states that the "The social articulation of difference, from a minority perspective, is a complex, ongoing negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation".¹⁰

The traumatic events within our global histories - slavery, war, migration, diaspora, peasant rebellion, and revolution have informed our current position.

We have reached an unprecedented point in history in terms of population movement; UNESCO estimates "40 million foreign workers, 20 million refugees, 20 - 25 million internally displaced people as a result of famine and wars". These figures are a testament to the effect of post-colonial and imperial conflicts. What has become highly problematic within this is the notion of what Avishai Margalit refers to as "symbolic citizenship," which is defined by the culture of surveillance and security – it is divisive in that it enforces a culture of discrimination in determining who is viewed as a good migrant or bad migrant.



Esra Ersen, still from "The Trip to Bosphorus" (28:10 min) of *Passengers*, 2009, 2-channel video installation, Sound developed for Vebi Koc, Istanbul and Tanas, Berlin

¹⁰ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge Press, 1994), xix.

The consistency with which this policy is replicated globally has led to a significant rise in nationalism and the emergence of a culture of fear that has been fore-fronted by government propaganda. On writing about migration, the cultural theorist Edward Said refers to how the "world's secular and religious authorities have sought new or renewed modes of governance. None has seemed so easily available, so conveniently attractive as appeals to tradition, national or religious identity patriotism. And because these appeals are amplified and disseminated by a perfected media system addressing mass cultures, they have been strikingly, not to say frighteningly effective."¹¹ Within periods of recession these sentiments can accelerate as is currently being demonstrated by the mass exportation of Roma from France. The French Government claims this relocation is "voluntary", as each Roma adult is paid € 300 and each minor is paid €100 to leave. Such governmental policies highlight the existing racism that is still endemic within society at large.

That is not to say that there has not been a backlash and counter movements to combat these policies. There has been an evolution in the strategies of resistance and the empowerment of minorities through groups whether political or community orientated. Within the current stasis one cannot understand contemporary culture without acknowledging the demographic and phenomenological impact of minorities and migrants. The legacy of post colonialism and imperialism is integral to our cognition of history. Our understanding is limited by European political thought and it is only through recognizing its limitations that we can work through it and expand our understanding of the shift in the current politico-cultural system.

MARY CREMIN

¹¹ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 237.

Katia Kameli, Esra Ersen, Maya Schweizer
Curated by Catherine Bernard and Mary Cremin

February 10 – March 17, 2011

Amelie A. Wallace Gallery

Opening Reception: Thursday, February 10, 2011
4p.m. – 7p.m.

Artist Talk: Thursday, March 3, 2011
5p.m. – 7p.m.

Amelie A. Wallace Gallery
Director: Hyewon Yi
Location: Campus Center, Main Level
SUNY College at Old Westbury
Route 107, Old Westbury, NY
516.876.3056/2709

Gallery Hours:
Monday – Thursday, 12:00a.m. – 4:00p.m.
and by appointment



**GOETHE
INSTITUT**



DOONAGH YOUNG
gallery

