

## COMMENTARY

“Dispatch: Istanbul”

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P. Labazov, V. Mizin, A. Shaburov TWO AGAINST THE RUSSIAN MAFIA

Blue Noses Group, video stills, 2003, 25 minutes

As seen in exhibition “B-Fact,” Bilgi University Gallery, September 20 – 27, 2003

At the time of the 9<sup>th</sup> Istanbul Biennial, at least fifteen other exhibitions appeared in venues ranging from a shopping mall to the underground tunnel of a 19<sup>th</sup> century tram. Artists from the Middle East, Europe and Asia, along with an occasional American, constantly intersected and communicated on many different levels. At Proje4L in Levant, an upscale business district of Istanbul, a panel of artists and critics from Central Asia sponsored by the Christenson Fund, showed videos and commented on the production of artists in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. They spoke of complex negotiations between the international art world, local politics, the rejection of Soviet legacies, nurturing of historic traditions, and multiple modernisms. The videos were dramatic, tragic, erotic, and slapstick. In one video, Kasmalieva Djumaliev from Kyrgyzstan performed “Farewell Song,” in which she played a traditional instrument, the gulnara, off key, and slowly cut off her

extremely long hair (based on a Kyrgyz tradition of wearing yak hair). Her avant-garde stance combined with an incredible dignity.

The philosopher, curator Ali Akay's *Future Democracy* was at the Akbank Art and Culture Center). It included video and sculpture that presented ordinary people caught up in global trends, bachelors rooms of urban workers (Gemzay Toksoy and Altan Bal), urban shop keepers as well as their children who sang songs from their village backgrounds (Claude Leon), a transsexual collector of obsolete weapons (Seza Paker), and frank interviews with people on the street about "What they think would make the world a better place" most of whom logically said "peace." (Susan Kleinberg).

The chic Gallery Nev in upscale Tesvikiye displayed Shirin Neshat, and other well known artists. They included the benchmark sculpture from the third Istanbul Biennial, Hale Tenger's *I know People Like This Too* (1992) which addresses the timely topic of the people ignoring the stupidity of macho leaders using Hear-No-Evil, See-No-Evil, Speak-No-Evil Monkeys and Priapus figures that form stars as if on an unspecified flag.

The Istanbul Art Museum Foundation collaborated with the Akmerkez shopping mall to show eighty Turkish artists. Balkan Naci Islimyeli's "Yeniden" subverted the department store format with a powerful anti-war statement by using dismembered dummies in a wasted garden of Eden and the poetry of the famous Turkish socialist Nazim Hikmet. The same foundation supported "And..." an exhibition held at the art gallery in the Military Museum that included eighteen Turkish, Central Asian, Balkan and Mediterranean artists who showed work they made at a two week residency called "Meeting of the Artists, held in July in Marmaris, Turkey. The works ranged from tiny drawings to room size installations.

"Poet's Garden," a pairing of poetry and art at Gallery Apel, a brick walled gallery in the heart of the oldest district of the city, included an artificial garden full of evocative urns referring to Greek mythology (Sakine Çil), a cypress tree made from barbed wire (Tuğrul Selçuk), a hanging garden of bottles containing poems relating to nature (Kurucu Koçanoğlu), and the luscious work of Selma Gurbuz with her menagerie of mythological animals. Hasan Bulent Kahraman in a multi-part installation "Abstraction-Materialization" analyzed the conceptual shift from the abstract word play associations of traditional Ottoman poetry to nineteenth century materialism based on concrete visual reality.

Huseyin Alptekin and the Sea Elephant Travel Agency organized *B-Fact*, an off-beat, open-ended and provocative event that unfolded over several hours. The Sea Elephant Travel Agency is a loft space in Istanbul that sponsors small seminars concerned with what Alptekin calls "Mutual Realities, Artistic Exchange, Inter-regional Solidarity, Recognition, Switch, Hospitality". Alptekin has been an outsider/insider conceptual artist, based in Turkey and functioning internationally for many years. In this collaborative exhibition, he worked with Halil Altindere and Vahit Tuna in Istanbul, Minna Henricksson, based in Helsinki and Love Enqvist, based in Sweden.

Several works in *B-fact* were about slow travel connected to ordinary people. In their simplicity all of these artists embraced a counter-discourse to the grand narratives of travels that seek out ruins of the past as well as the government and war oriented focus of contemporary media. In their acceptance of the mundane and the local they also counter the pretensions of the international biennale format. Timo Vartianen Finnish artist and mushroom picker (a reference to his roots in the Karelian area of Finland) presented a collage of sound, writing, photographs and clothes in "Walking and Hitchhiking." He has covered amazing distances: 8000 km through Russian, the Baltic countries, Poland, Sweden, Germany, Denmark, Sweden, and Finland. His journal is a travel log with entries like "Nights" "Fear" "Pleasure" "Wild Animals." Swedish artists Love Enqvist and Martin Berling documented their "Stockholm-Istanbul: A Paddle Trip Through the Baltic Sea, Danube and the Black Sea," with the canoe, the paddle, and photographs. Conceived as a three month performance, the artists performed an act of endurance as they embraced the physical experience and constructed an alternative to political geography. Underscoring that gender differences still matter on the road, two women, Kristina Junzell and Jessica Jalmo, of Sweden traveled by the definitely less macho means of train through Stockholm, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Serbia, Macedonia and Greece to Turkey for their "Stockholm-Istanbul: A road movie through "The New Europe." As an alternative to the catastrophes of daily news information, they spoke with ordinary people about their dreams for the future, what makes them happy and what is important to them.

As a partner to the travelers' narratives, the Finnish artist Kaija Kiuru, originally from Lapland, created "Chamber," 2002. Using dozens of antique circular tablecloths that the artist collected in secondhand shops, she constructed a temporary domestic shelter from the fruits of thousands of hours of work. Kiuru is concerned with the nature of home and women's lives and the fact that 80 percent of the world refugees are woman and children. The simultaneous fragility and semi transparency of the tent created a stunning resting place.

The Bunker Research Group (BRG) is Huseyin Alptekin's own project working in collaboration with Minna Henricksson(Finland) and Staffan Jofjell from Sweden. Under the paranoid dictatorship of Enver Hoxa in Albania from 1946 to 1985 , about 500,000 concrete bunkers were constructed as weekend work projects for socialist citizens, apparently to protect Albania against an imagined enemy. These bunkers now stand as useless and decaying structures all over Albania. The BRG drove around the country documenting their trip with video as both a road trip and a harsh black and white scientific study (Jofjell), with photography that suggest the now oddly romantic character of these crumbling, useless structures (Alptekin) and exquisite watercolors torn from a sketchbook and taped on the wall (Henricksson). Alptekin invited Kaija Kiuru to create a lace cover for a bunker. The lace domesticated these useless shelters. The BRG connects reality and paranoia, derelict socialist structures and contemporary art, change and stasis.

The Istanbul "B-Fact" (other versions appear in other places, it is always in a state of change) intentionally only partially incorporated all of these travels into an art world

format- it is mostly about what happens along the road, conversations, meetings, listening, collaborating.

B-Fact included two other segments in different venues. Near Taksim Square, the heart of contemporary Istanbul and the elegant Marmara Hotel, a street level foyer was the site of “Bathers,” (2001-2003) a video by Elina Brotherus. On three large facing screens nude Finnish bathers slipped in and out of a cool Northern lake dispassionately entering and leaving the vision of the never moving camera. Brotherus’ piece is about the ordinary event of bathing, familiar as an art subject, but here the watcher is not in control of the models, as in paintings like those of Rembrandt and Cezanne.

Finally, we moved to the top floor of the Marmara Hotel to see the performance of the Blue Noses Group. Ten floors below in Taksim Square, Siberian artists, Alexander Shaburov and Slava Mizin began exploding firecrackers out of their pants. Part of their on-going “25 Short Performances About Globalization ”, they had managed to get by all hotel security with the firecrackers taped to their legs. The result was hilariously funny as a spoof on militarism and terrorism, as well as suicide bombers, ironically only two months before the real thing happened only a few blocks away. Blue Noses Group also had videos in the gallery display that almost took over the show from the unobtrusive passages through Europe by the other artists. In a work like “Two Against the Russian Mafia,” with 5 episodes, including Attack of the Clones, and Show Girls,” they used a combination of cut outs and video with slapstick humor to appropriate the Russian militia TV series. The heroes (the artists) take on the absurdity of the social sphere from pop culture to globalism.

*B-Fact*, as well as the other local exhibitions in Istanbul, opened up communications among cultures and artists from all over Europe and Asia. As an extension of the Biennial, these types of shows and events are a major force toward international understanding, and an important alternative to the destructive, separatist forces at work in the world today. Oddly, it seemed to me that only a few American artists and critics engaged in this international dialog; they often seemed to be carrying on a separate conversation.