

NIL YALTER

She was born in Cairo in 1938. Having completed her studies in Istanbul, she went to Paris where she worked on painting, sculpture, installations and media for many years. She gave several courses on video arts at Sorbonne University for 1980-1995. She currently lives in Paris since 1965. Yalter is an artist who addresses ethnic problems, cultural identity and women's issues, incorporating various materials and media into her work often. She concentrates on ethnic approaches and social situations relating to migration, cultural identity and women's problems. Photography, documents, computer-video or performance are all used to reach audiences with work about human rights in an interactive way. It is said that the first real Turkish interactive artwork has been made by Nil Yalter. Her art works have been exhibited in Europe, Turkey, Taiwan and America. Some of them are in the permanent collections of Centre Georges Pompidou and Long Beach Museum of Art, California.

Nil Yalter : memory, migrants and workers in 1970s-1980s France

From the 1970s to nowadays, Nil Yalter has completed numerous projects concerned with the lives of women, migrants and working people. Several projects present working women, linking their activities in the workplace to those in the family's sphere. Each time, Nil Yalter includes a gender perspective, showing both men and women in the community she represents. Between documentary and aesthetics, her work reflects a whole section of memory of migrants, workers and women in the 1970s and 1980s in France, memory that is still unknown.

Working for many years with Nil Yalter, this article attempts to account for this by analyzing a few examples of working women. These multimedia documents (photographs, videos, articles, testimonials, etc.) were generally presented in installations. Nil Yalter is now known for her feminist work of the 1970s, but her production has many other interests. The article reveals projects that relate specifically to the theme of working women.

The work produced by Nil Yalter since the 1970s combines the power of testimony with a wide-ranging critique of domination on many levels but specifically from women as workers and migrants. By showing these people's lives, foregrounding their perspectives and giving them value by creating works with a strong aesthetic of both formal and simple but effective beauty, Nil Yalter contributed to a socioaesthetic movement that offered an alternative vision of history of the working-class. A principle feature of these works was to highlight women's role in poor and exploited communities and show the particular conditions of their work through testimonies that are very rare and often overlooked in accounts and artworks about working-class men or migrants. If the reception of this work, between art and documentary, was very controversial at the time, many contemporary artists are now using these types of schema [...] In the period 1970-1980, [...] Nil Yalter's and her multiple partners' work – that is artistic partners, political and cultural partners, sociologists, migrants and workers themselves – are often seen as forming part of an anthropological and aesthetic approach in which testimonies and reality were filmed and photographed and then combined with representations in other mediums such as drawings or texts to form installations. When collected together, Yalter's works offer important insights into a history of the 1970s and 1980s lives and conditions of immigrants and workers which present a unique feminist perspective.

Frontier between Art and Reality

n: LAPIZ. International Art Magazine. Number 60. 1989. p. 32-39. Esther Ferrer

“ To tell the story of the workers of the sea... to get to know these people. To reveal the wisdom unique to each one of them and the wisdom shared by all. To compose images and sounds out of the many fragments of a reality formulated and anchored in the words and intentions of the workers we have interviewed. To create an aesthetic, plastic language which can serve as our contribution to the culture of the working world.”

The above text quite admirably summarises the essence of *Les métiers de la mer*, an installation created in 1982, which included a video display called *The Sea: The World Upside Down*. In this display Nil Yalter and Nicole Croiset successfully capture in visual terms a belief held by workers of the sea in medieval times. They do this by putting one monitor on top of another, both of which contain the same image of the sea, with one of them shown upside down. The result is exceedingly beautiful. Nil Yalter was born in Egypt, raised in Turkey and is now of French nationality. No matter what subject she chooses to depict, whether it be work, the body, confinement, exile, and no matter who the main actors are, be it the Turkish immigrants who work in the clothing factories, the woman held prisoner in La

Roquette, Egypt, of the Marquis de Sade, Nil Yalter uses her own, unique socio-poetic language, a system of signs she has created that enables her to tread that delicate and often ambiguous borderline area between art and reality. Nil Yalter composes, or rather builds in the sense that an architect does, in this area where the different elements of reality and art are brought together. She builds up themes by freely combining different elements (images, texts, objects) with diverse techniques (drawings, painting on paper or leather, video, photography, or the graphic palette, with which she is able to achieve an exceptionally wide range of colors). Her works could be defined as dynamic reading spaces which, depending on the subject, include performances or rituals such as childbirth and hunting, events which discriminate between the role of the sexes in the everyday tasks of survival.

Her art, defined as ethnocritical rather than sociological, combines the methodology of a researcher, an ethnologist, with the sensitivity of an artist. This is true of her countless number of individual works as well as the ones that were created in collaboration with other artists, sociologists and ethnologists, especially those in which Bernard Dupaigne of the Museum of Man participated.

Nil Yalter is conscientious and demanding in the scientific aspect of her work while allowing herself total freedom in the artistic aspect. She discloses the critical content of a given situation by means of intricately woven poetic imagery whose beauty, rather than interfering with the message, only serves to make it more comprehensible. The appreciation of the cognitive realm of her work, together with the emotional impact of its aesthetic dimension, combine to enhance the understanding of the artist's intentions.

Ever since Nil Yalter decided to abandon her comfortable life as a well-known abstract painter in Turkey and take up permanent residence in France, she has managed her fascination with technology into a form of art that combines the mystical world with the logic of the industrial world, reflecting in part her nostalgia for the richness of her native cultural heritage.

WACK!

It is very difficult to choose a selection of works from the long list of works by Nil Yalter. Throughout her long career, Nil Yalter has not only combined different artistic styles and eras, but has also used aesthetic and sociological practices against the established artistic doctrines. She started with impressed early geometric abstractions to conclude with animated video works. Nil Yalter's work fuses artistic traditions from Europe and her native Turkey to examine the complexities of cultural exchange. Born in Egypt to a Turkish family, she was raised in Istanbul, where she studied fine arts, including Western art movements such as Impressionism, Constructivism, and the Bauhaus. Moving to Paris in 1965 to pursue her interest in modern art, Yalter was exposed to a diverse range of media such as painting, drawing, photography, and video. But even when her art production has demonstrated she has a contemporary spirit and innovative approach, which makes any of her works feel at home in the 21st century, we would like to concentrate in a very specific period of her career. It is the period between 1974 and 1979.

We would like to focus our attention on a selection of works which are directly related with the figure of Lucy R. Lippard and more specifically with her book called: *Get the Message? A Decade of Art for Social Change*.¹ There is nothing strange about the fact that many of the concepts Lippard developed in her book are present and unresolved in contemporary society. Therefore, our project tries to highlight some social problems, which have been addressed at the end of the 60's by numerous artists. Although, nowadays most of these problems continue in the minds of many contemporary artists. Hence, many of the works of Nil Yalter mainly developed in the decade of the 70's; they are the result of countless readings and interpretations of critics and theorists. So, our selection of works raises many issues such as: feminism, immigration, personal and sexual identity, violence and the use of mixed media to materialize them.

Faithful to the close relationship between Lippard's theories and Yalter's artistic practice, we would like to read again the paragraphs of the book written by Lippard, in which she mentions, exactly or conceptually, the artistic works of Yalter. The idea for the show booth is not to focus our selection on something arbitrary, but on the analysis which Lippard carried out in her book. Lippard dedicated a whole chapter of the book analyzing a show, which she curated herself, called "Issue", which took place at the ICA in 1980. The show investigates the different strategies made by female artists to discuss different social practices.

Therefore the selection of works is based on the following interpretation of an extract of the whole text, in which you will find embedded, works made by Yalter. Artworks which, from our point of view, have a close relationship with the text's meaning. Here is our juxtaposition of ideas and artworks to design the booth:

"...Nil Yalter also explores fragmentation in their extended video/text/drawing "oblique object" installations about the 14.000 working-class immigrants (Turkish Immigrants, 1977) to urban centers of to the wealthier European nations. Yalter is herself Turkish and the piece in "Issue" focuses on Rahime (Rahime. Kurdish woman from Turkey, 1979), a Kurdish woman of nomadic background making the wrenching transition between her village and an industrial shantytown outside of Istanbul. Married at thirteen, mother at fourteen, she is undergoing a forced triple consciousness rising (as a woman, a worker, and a rural alien), and tragically heightened when her progressive daughter was murdered by a man she refused to marry. Rahime articulates on the injustices of her situation (The Headless Woman or the Belly Dance, 1974). She notes how the rich can't do anything – work in a factory or even fulfill their military service. Croiset and Yalter combine art, sympathetic anthropology and documentary approaches (Temporary Dwellings, 1974). As in their previous works on the city of Paris, women's prison (La Roquette, 1974), and immigrant workers in France and Germany, they bring to rhythm and life the people who make up the statistics of Europe's new, reluctant melting-pot status..."

...To be more specific, a group of women of mixed nationalities living in Paris, who have done large documentary pieces including drawings, texts, photographs, and videotapes about women in prison (La Roquette, 1974), and about Turkish and Portuguese workers at home and in economically imposed exile (Temporary Dwellings, 1974)..." In short, these selections reveal that is possible to think about art as a functioning element in society, and these works made by Yalter are complete example of it. From the 1960s onwards, Yalter has redefined political, ideological, sexual, aesthetical and patriarchal narratives from a feminist point of view. Inspired by poetry, philosophy, sociology, anthropology and ethnology, she transports all these disciplines into a personal and individual context, creating an original and complex artistic field. In her works, the constructed memories seem like spaces for immigration, for exile, for displacement, for interaction and for the notion of "culture", they seem like established spaces, but at the same time, questioned ones. As Lippard outlined in her book: "...the works shown here attempt to replace the illusion of neutral aesthetic freedom with social responsibility by focusing on specific issues. It is all made by women because the contributions of feminist art to the full panorama of social-change art and the ways in which a politicized or topical art approaches, overlaps and diverges from the various notions of a feminist art are crucial to its further development".

**Fabienne Dumont, « Nil Yalter : memory, migrants and workers in 1970s-1980s France »
n.paradoxa, vol. 26, July 2010, p. 52-58.**

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First paragraph :

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INTERVIEW

Q.-

Even though your methodology is like that of an ethnologist, your objectives are quite different.

N.Y.-

Of course they are, because I'm an artist and my work is a search for my own identity through the objects and people that my work portrays. If you look closely at my photographs or videos, for example *Rahime, femme kurde de Turquie*, *La Roquette, prison de femmes* or *La communauté des travailleurs turcs en France*, you'll notice that there is always a spatial relationship between the men and women that appear and the objects around them, such as the table that they sew on, the tools that they use, etc. Rather than concentrate on their behaviour, I work on the relationship between their body language and surrounding objects. But of course there is a critical aspect to my work as well, thus the term *ethnocritical art*. When I do a multi-media installation concerning the immigrant workers, their native culture and Kurdish poetry in exile, for example, my work will naturally have a documentary quality about it. The people talk directly to the camera about their problems, their circumstances, etc., but I don't impose the critical aspect. This emerges on its own from the situation that is being portrayed.

Q.-

Yes, but you choose these subjects because they contain a socio-political aspect that invites criticism.

N.Y.-

Of course I do, but I allow the criticism to reveal itself through the relationship between image/object or man/woman. And naturally, since my work is the work of an artist, I organize it and structure it the way I want to, according to my own aesthetic judgement. But no matter what form I choose to give it, the real content, the critical aspect, will always reveal itself. For instance, the newsmen on TV are always making commentaries and offering analyses that manipulate the way we perceive the situation being discussed. I never do this. My voice is never heard, I let my subjects talk. Of course I have to do some editing, but I keep it to minimum.