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What the Structure Defines: An Interview with Kutlug Ataman
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Kutlug Ataman's hybrid films set oral tradition in opposition to history. They are neither fiction nor documentary proper. They embody the postmodern interpretation of history as a popular consensus on facts instead of a "hard science." History is founded on fragile variables, and Ataman's films reinforce the powerful influence and impact of individual subjectivity on our notion of collective history.

While this view of history has been articulated and expressed in various mediums, most notably theory, photography, and fiction, Ataman examines historiography as the history of his witnesses. The people Ataman films are largely disenfranchised and disempowered, but by claiming the protected authority of historians or biographers, they rewrite their conditions through poetic expression. In his art, the individual crafts history. When Ataman's subjects tell their stories, they mold narratives filled with misinformation and self-misrepresentation. But these factual liberties are more eloquent expressions of experience than a straight articulation of data and details. His subjects describe a fluid history that expresses reality as it is lived, as blend of self-conscious fiction and immediate emotion.

Ataman's *Women Who Wear Wigs* (1999) consists of four simultaneous video projections, which feature four women telling the story of how and why wigs have altered their appearances, overt identities, and personal histories. Journalist Nevval Sevindi opted to wear a wig after her battle with breast cancer and the side effects of chemotherapy left her without hair, as well as undermining her definition and sense of her feminine identity. Melek Ulagay protested the military dictatorship in Turkey and was obliged to wear a wig to avoid arrest and possible murder. As an artificial blonde, she disguised herself as Leyla the Stewardess, taking on a mythic fame within the activist resistance movement. Demet Dcmir wore a wig to pass as female when she worked as a transsexual prostitute. She tells about the symbolic, performative, and transformative significance of the wig she wore after police had violently cut off her natural hair or when her hair was thinning from the stress of constant police brutality and social persecution. The women tell compelling stories, enhanced by their charismatic articulation of their experiences, responses, and interpretation. The fourth video offers a strikingly different

experience because its protagonist is invisible; only her words are projected, in white subtitles over a black screen. She tells her story as an Islamic woman forced to wear a wig to attend a university where the wearing of head scarves is forbidden. She speaks of feeling as if her identity was being effaced by the requirement to appear neutrally Western. By juxtaposing these four stories, Ataman creates a delicate yet searing portrait of identity as defined by carefully defined factors inside and outside ourselves. The disguise of a wig has enabled each woman to simultaneously hide and enhance selected aspects of her identity, establishing a mutated self marked by the conflict between social stereotyping and personal myth-making.

This mythomania is magnificently enacted by Semiha Berskoy in *Semiha B. Unplugged* (1997). Through her confessions, fabrications, embellishments, and reminiscences, the Turkish opera star tells not only her own story and but also the story of Turkey from the Ottoman Empire to the modern state. Haggard and rouged, the eighty seven-year-old Semiha has the grotesque magnificence and resilient fragility of a Weimar Germany cabaret diva. She cocoons the viewer in her extravagant exhibitionism. It is difficult to stop watching her. She is still a star, even if she is now hideous and shameless, whereas she was once glamorous and seductive.

Perhaps Ataman's greatest work is *Never My Soul!* (2001). Like the women in Pedro Almodóvar's films, the sear, Ceyhan Firat, has the poignant glamour of one who was not born pretty, yet who has made herself beautiful through an alchemic brew of unique personality and artifice. As in Almodóvar's films, the definition of a woman is as much about myth as about gender, and Firat's glamour as she relates her story is enhanced by her status as pre-op trans gender. Her sex may be a physical reality, but her identity as a woman is as hyperreal as the roles played by Turkan Soray, the Turkish film star whose name she has adopted. The very structure of *Never My Soul!* features another kind of artifice. Ataman first filmed Soray telling her story; her words were then transcribed so that she could relearn them and perform them a second time for the camera. Edited together, the two versions create a discontinuous narrative that Ataman calls a "parallax view" of his subject. The elements of artifice in Soray's story make her touchingly human, and therefore real, while at the same time rendering her unbelievably beautiful.

Ana Finel Honigman: In the pamphlet for your retrospective exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery, you are quoted as saying, "I believe art is about beauty always. Positive art celebrates it. Negative art laments the lack of beauty, protests the lack of beauty in life." Are these positives and negatives moral distinctions?

Kutlug Ataman: Beauty is less an issue of morality than it is the essence of art as the essence in everything. It is subjective but not necessarily moral or amoral. Nor does

beauty refer solely to visuality. Instead, it relates to a wider understanding and engagement of all forms of expression—including but not limited to film, art work, or text. There is beauty in all these processes. In my work, I do not refer to beauty in the way it is used in everyday life. When I discuss beauty, I am not referring to it simply in an attractive face or a lovely garden, and I am not referring to any set of moral concerns. As an artist, I relate to beauty almost as shorthand for art.

Finel Honigman: Do you consider it necessary for the terms of beauty to be constantly changing?

Ataman: Social norms as well as subjective definitions of beauty are prescribed and therefore constantly changing. When working with visual material, an artist becomes hyperaware of this conceptual fluidity. These are constructs and, as constructs, they are loaded with ideology. Our perception of beauty or morality belongs to different views and perspectives, which can sometimes clash and other times help each other evolve into entirely different sets of terms and definitions.

Finel Honigman: Yet your subjects discuss beauty. They appear to have a very acute awareness of beauty's responsibility and currency. In *Women Who Wear Wigs*, the revolutionary describes how a male colleague was captured after trying to protect her. She states that her femininity protected her and endangered her friend. This awareness is anything but superficial. And even while Western women can afford to ideologically reject the power of beauty, it can sometimes be a necessary tool for survival in situations of extreme opposition.

Ataman: I agree. I have also found myself in situations where the only way to avert danger is by playing into the aggressor's sense of power. Since beauty gives power but also attracts it, it can be a definite survival method. You do not need such sophisticated tools in the West. But a bullied secretary might want to resort to flirtation as a way to rise up the ladder or to simply defend herself from others' aggression. And let's face it, sex is a powerful tool, which both men and women use. By saying this, I am not passing moral judgement. It is not a moral issue for me. You either use it or choose to deny it, but survival is also a choice.

Finel Honigman: Are you aware of traditional genre constraints when producing your work?

Ataman: For me there are multiple ways to look at my work. If I make people laugh through an experience that is positive and light, then I consider the result to be beautiful. But often my characters say and do things that are upsetting or difficult to absorb. They

visit difficult areas. People can find themselves reflected in these rough psychological spaces. I never censor these shifts or try to stay faithful to either comedy or tragedy. People might call this decision ugly simply because they demand preparation for being confronted with stories they might consider disturbing.

Finel Honigman: You never dramatize events; instead you allow beauty and ugliness to be exposed through their narrative contrast.

Ataman: We articulate absence through presence and express a thing's presence by highlighting its absence. This process is a little like the work of Rachel Whiteread, very roughly speaking. Rather than look at a structure, you are looking at what that structure is defining. The structure is therefore implied by what it is not. Ultimately, this method makes both the structure and its absence appear more complex and essential through its purpose and relationship to other things. The empty spaces point to its existence. When my characters talk about their stories, like in *Women Who Wear Wigs*, they do not offer a clear political narrative. They never say, "I am so and so and I represent this political party or that political party." They never say, "I want to revolt." They do not talk about gay rights, human rights, or women's rights. They never articulate these big issues. Instead, they talk about personal, everyday, little stories. These stories are ultimately stronger than lessons and speeches. Through these stories they define their lives and point out their context. From this comes an impression of the bigger society. Without any encyclopedic description of Turkey, you get an idea of Turkey through its imprint on these people's stories. In a way, their stories are disturbing and often devoid of a clear message, or empty of hope, because they never say, "We will have a revolution and things will change." But there is hope, because these stories show the hopeful act of changing or crafting an identity within a social context, which is ultimately a tool for survival.

Finel Honigman: Do you feel that you have or want to maintain an objective relationship to your subjects and their lives?

Ataman: I am a curious person. I try to avoid making moral statements or distinctions, which I feel diminish the work of art. I protest, by allowing my subjects to protest, the lack of beauty. The TV presenter who speaks about her breast cancer and chemotherapy experience in *Women Who Wear Wigs* articulates an attitude about feminine identity that would be unacceptable to a lot of feminists. Her identity is rooted in her own perception of idealized feminine beauty, which also happens to be the socially clichéd combination of long, blond hair and big breasts. She derives pleasure and power from this conventional perception of a beautiful woman. She works in the media, and her profession depends on her image as well as her intellect. This is her reality but, along

with her body, her ideals of beauty were attacked by breast cancer. The illness attacks her breast, which might have to be removed, and the treatment causes her to lose her hair. This is a huge intervention, a horrific interruption in her life. She talks about how she defends her ground. We all defend our defining lines by our stories.

Finel Honigman: What do you consider to be the effect of telling their stories to you and being aware that they will be seen—or in the case of one woman in *Women Who Wear Wigs* simply heard—by strangers?

Ataman: I look at people like buildings. Instead of walls and rooms, we have stories and experiences. As long as we can live these stories, express these stories, tell and retell these stories, then we can stand up, the way a building stands. Talking is the only meaningful activity we have. Once we are no longer willing or allowed to tell our stories, we collapse into conformity. I like to look at my subjects in this way. My interest in recording them is not a service or anything like that. I am interested in their stories and how the telling functions in the context of their lives.

Finel Honigman: A lot of the commentary on your work describes it as about "fluid identities," yet your work seems more about tensions and constraints than fluidity. Your subjects struggle to define themselves in opposition to very strict, set perimeters. They do not seem flexible, nor do the constraints surrounding their formation of an identity.

Ataman: You are right, I should take issue to people's perception of my work as relating to "fluid identities." Obviously everything is in constant flux, as it ought to be, and everything is prefabricated, yet continuously re-created and reformulated. But I do not think identity belongs to the individual. Identity is like a jacket. People you never see will make it and you wear it. Identity is something other than you, outside of you. It is a question of perception. You can be aware of it and manipulate it, play with it, amplify it, or mask it for infinite reasons.

Finel Honigman: How does your work relate to the politics of identity?

Ataman: I find these discussions predictable and tired. I believe in an absence of identity, but I still need to define people. I need to define myself. I need categories to put people in. Otherwise, it is impossible. We all need a vocabulary of identity in order to exist socially. It is like a Gabriel García Márquez novel in which you are forgetting everything, so you compulsively put stickers everywhere, in order to understand and remember.

Finel Honigman: How do your subjects subvert this classification? How do they assert their ambition to self define?

Ataman: My characters or subjects are very loud. They are confrontational people and hard as rock. They complain. They nag. They harp. They insist on telling their stories, but they are practical and will change if necessary in order to survive. They will lie. Semiha mythologizes herself. Even within the film her story is unstable. She changes herself as if she is changing her clothes. Ceyhan, a transvestite, does the same. I am interested in transition.

Finel Honigman: Gay identity is perceived as fixed. The most common narrative of gay identity, in pop culture or even art, is the story of identity, or identification, discovery. The interest is on coming out, but after being out, gay identity is often depicted as set—without the maturation and alterations allowed in heterosexual love stories.

Ataman: I agree that gay identity is a ridiculous formula. In the beginning, the focus on coming out was necessary, but now that narrative is passé. It doesn't interest me anymore, and I don't think it is inherently that interesting. The way narratives become fixed after the first revolutionary steps is problematic in many areas of the identity-politics discourse. It is the same as the narrative of the "working woman." Those issues are not inspiring to me. What awakes me in my characters is their individuality. They are not infected with rote Western concepts of gay liberation or women's liberation. They are just who they are, without knowing the terms. They are struggling with their everyday experience, and I think that tension makes the work fresh.

Finel Honigman: How does this struggle to self-define, without narrative or historic expectations or conventions, manifest itself in the lies your characters tell?

Ataman: Identity is an intellectual thing. You can change it. You can change who you are or your history by choosing to tell a different story each time. You can lie, like Semiha. History does not live in the past; it only lives in the present. You select your memories. You select what you tell. Lies are more real to me because they are immediate. Retelling the facts, as they are supposed to be told, means much less. The facts are not interesting. Recounting facts is like creating systems of documentary. It is creating catalogues. I am interested in a person's lies because of the reasons they lie. Those are far richer and more compelling than the reasons they would have to recite the facts. What purpose do their lies have? What result are they aiming for? I am not referring to lies as moral issues, but simply as nontruths.

Finel Honigman: Myths?

Ataman: Yes, myths.

Finel Honigman: Do you see history as a popular consensus on fact? Do you consider history a trustworthy authority?

Ataman: History, as an authoritative system, was a necessary evil, perhaps needed to keep people together. It is deeply linked to nationalism, patriotism, and prejudice. We need radar telling us how we are being manipulated and how we manipulate others through telling our "histories." As a child, you discover that you are the lead, the star, in your own movie. After that discovery, we then need to learn the effects as well as our motivations for changing our plot.

Finel Honigman: Something fascinating about Turkey is how the old glory of the Ottoman Empire is retained in the country's present-day narrative. Do you see your subjects as reflecting something of this dichotomy between disempowerment and the memory of power?

Ataman: I cannot see what makes my works inherently Turkish. That is for someone else to see, but I do see that my characters are like monuments upheld by their strong stories. They keep adding more and more rooms to their buildings. Still, with that said, I strongly think Turkey is still going through the aftershocks of an implosion. It was twenty times its present size, and in a relatively short amount of time-it shrank. People who are alive did not live during the previous glory, but unfortunately the educational system and the present ideology focus on yesterday and never today. Because history is myth, people refer to the past as a method of deflecting their own attention from the fact that they don't have much to be proud of in their present lives. In Turkey, creativity is curtailed by the military, and social repression exists on all levels. So there is very little happening today to advance the culture or national identity. Without much to be proud of today, you resort to looking at a myth of a past in order to find your "identity." Still, I was never interested in any of that. In fact, *Semiha B. Unplugged* is about the history of the modern republic. I was showing how she lives today by re-creating the past only for her. I was returning to the past for her individual pleasure and purpose. She is not trying to make that claim you comment on "Oh, we used to be such a big empire, blah, blah, blah" No, she is only working this myth for herself. She is a real career woman. She lives today, and she is contemporary because she creates history now by way of constantly re-creating her own history.

Finel Honigman: How do these stories translate from one language to the subtitles? How do you think the experience is altered? Specifically in *Women Who Wear Wigs*, where the voices mix, leaving it unclear whose voice tells which story.

Ataman: In this installation, I really wanted those competing voices in order to point out how these narratives compete with each other for space—each trying to have its own say. Each story shoulders the other. But I install that project completely differently in Turkey. There I install it with sound sticks, so that the sound emerges immediately behind your head as you watch, conflicting with the cacophony around you. In England, people are mainly accessing the dialogue by reading the subtitles, but I will use sound sticks again at the Tate Triennial with *The 4 Seasons of Veronica Read*, to produce a murmur instead of a cacophony.

Finel Honigman: In other interviews you have referred to your characters as Brechtian. Do their personalities evoke those in Bertolt Brecht's plays?

Ataman: I was not referring to my characters as much as my method. By pointing out how the machinery works, I am following Brecht. For example, *Semiha B.* is impossible to watch in its entirety. The film is eight hours long, and in order to watch it you need to ask questions about your role in the process. Are you watching a film, and how active can you be during that experience? Are you supposed to recline and enjoy, or are you encouraged to think actively? With *Never My Soul!*, for instance, you never know if it is real, if she is acting, if she is a woman, if she is a man. My role is disrupted as well. It is never comfortably clear where there is a director and whether that director is an artist or a journalist. This condition exaggerates an awareness of these definitions and their synthetic perimeters. Therefore we are no longer placated by the pleasure of watching a Hollywood flick in which we are lost in illusion; instead we are constantly forced to remain unsettled. This process is a Brechtian concern because it requires an intellectual, inquisitive engagement with the artwork.

Finel Honigman: *Never My Soul!* disrupts the delineation between actor and manipulator or liar, because we see how Ceyhan commands her own performance. At times, she overtly makes you her surrogate audience, usurping the assumption that actors are mere ciphers channeling the influence of directors and writers. How did you feel this rearrangement of authorial control relates to the audience's sense of unease or inquiry into the passive nature of their role as spectators?

Ataman: Many of my subjects have the same qualities of being so real and at the same time theatrical. These characteristics complement each other rather than competing or canceling each other out. But my concern was to parallax everything, so everything is

reflecting back to itself. Subjects like Ceyhan and Semiha aid in the process of creating these metapieces, because they are constantly referring back to their roles as actresses and therefore instigating the viewer's investigation into the nature of these assumed and prescribed relationships. Ultimately this artifice makes you realize how reality is created and how lies can be no less true than what is understood as truth. Truths are also fabricated. People like to describe themselves as "very real," but we create our identities.

Finel Honigman: To what degree would you say identity is self-defined? Don't histories of persecution tragically confront us with the limits of self-definition?

Ataman: We make ourselves to an extent, but it is true that outsiders define our identities. It is another layer of artifice that is imposed by others. I would break electronic equipment as a child to dissect it and discover how it could function in its seemingly magical ways. As an artist, I think I am still doing the same thing, only now with people. I am attracted to personalities and interested in distilling them to their components or ingredients.

Finel Honigman: Women are often seen as having amoral tradition, whereas men have histories, perhaps because women have had to justify their options and critical inquiry with greater narrative assertion than men. Most of your subjects are women. Is it their artificiality, the complex and self-conscious mixing of what you term "ingredients" that appeals to you?

Ataman: No, I think it is far more practical. Women are mostly more verbal. They can talk about themselves more easily than men. Men mostly prefer to remain concise. Men, mostly straight men, give short answers. You find yourself interrogating them, whereas with women, one question can inspire a whole flood of talk or storytelling.

Ana Finel Honigman completed her Masters of Studies degree in the history of art and visual culture at Oxford University in summer 2003. Since graduating from Sarah Lawrence College in spring of 2000, she has been a frequent contributor of exhibition reviews, artist interviews, and feature articles to *Time Out* (New York and London), *Sculpture* magazine, *Tema Celeste*, and other art related publications. She is currently assistant editor at *Artnet Magazine* for artnet.com.