

ARTFORUM
February, 2003

A THOUSAND WORDS

Kutlug Ataman talks about *I+I=I*

I started working in the art world largely because of my experience with the film industry. In film, waiting for funding can be very frustrating, so while I was sitting around with my video camera waiting for the money for my second, and last, feature—a cult film about Turkish transvestites called *Lola + Bilidikid* (1998)—I had the idea for *kutlug ataman's semiha b. unplugged*, 1997. I started to shoot the first Turkish opera singer, Semiha Berksoy, who was then ninety-four years old. She had been left behind as opera evolved in Turkey during the twentieth century. What's fascinating is how this caused her to begin constantly changing her identity, rewriting and reinventing herself, constantly fighting to stay on stage though she wasn't wanted anymore. For me, this is a metaphor for death. Also, in Turkey, which is a very structured society, to have her discuss her own personal history was, for me, a way to mirror Turkish life and make fun of its artificiality.

The Semiha piece was also a way to reopen a critical discussion that was interrupted during the '70s, when Hollywood became so dominant and, perhaps, when *Cahiers du cinéma* became more like *Daily Variety*. I wanted to engage the whole '60s discussion of objectivity in documentary and to make the point that it's impossible to make an objective film. By making *semiha b. unplugged* almost eight hours long—it's about an entire life, after all—I wanted the audience to have to return to this piece again and again without ever being able to see the whole thing, and to be forced to make their own Semiha out of the fragments that they do see.

Ultimately, though, it's structure that counts. In *Never My Soul*, 2001, I had my subject talk about her life as a transvestite. We filmed it, and transcribed what she said. Then she relearned it, and we refilmed that. I intercut these two versions to create a kind of “parallax view.” I wanted to create a formal expression of her parallel situation, a woman who is also a man with a penis. People always talk about identity, but that's too easy. For me it's the figure of a formal problem. I pretend to make simple videos, but these are never unstructured.

In *I+I=I* I double the image in order to present the “double life,” so to speak, of my subject, Nese Yasin, a woman who was exposed to the ethnic fighting on Cyprus between the Greeks and the Turks as a child. I project two images onto walls that adjoin in a

corner, so that she is reflected into herself: She's sitting at the end of a table in one image, and at the other end of this same table in the second image. It's a very still picture, in which this woman recounts her experiences and memories; and the table connects her to herself, making her seem almost like a trompe l'oeil, uniting her two images through history and discourse. On one side, she tells the story of how her father went missing and how they had to flee the Greeks. Simultaneously, on the other side, she recounts how the Turkish army took over the northern part of the island, claiming that they were bringing peace. In fact, that invasion was very destructive. She talks about what happened after the event, and how she fled again to the southern, Greek side of the island for a time.

All my subjects feel like natural extensions of myself. I don't do a film with people just because they're interesting, but because they have the same problems or obsessions I have. That's why I can talk to them so easily and why the works feel as though I'm having a conversation with myself. That was especially true with the subject of me *Four Seasons or Veronica Read*, 2002, whom I met because we collected the same kind of flower, the hippenstrum. With Semiha, I was dealing with my Turkishness. I had just returned to Turkey from the US, and everything felt so artificial, facing the old me in my old city, so I was attracted to this old woman who was constantly reconstructing herself.

I+I=I, too, presents someone just talking, but this speech is direct and, in a way, internal, as opposed to what "the filmmaker wants." You could say that Nese was interviewing herself. I believe the conversation with oneself is always the most honest. Using talking heads is something you're not really supposed to do when you're making "proper" documentaries, but I allow my subjects to talk because only in actual speech can we witness this amazing rewriting of one's history and reality. What else is there? Talking is the only meaningful activity we're capable of.

-KUTLUG ATAMAN

"Talking is the only meaningful activity we're capable of." Thus spoke Kutlug Ataman when we met in New York recently. Curious words for someone trained in "narrative film" at UCLA's graduate film program, a Hollywood conduit where cinema is considered the presentation of actions, not words. Not so for this Turkish filmmaker and artist, whose "video vérités," shown at biennials in Istanbul, Berlin, and Venice, as well as at Documenta 11, are centered on individuals who do little more than speak. This speech, however, is no ordinary ramble. In it, we witness something extraordinary. In works such as the nearly eight-hour-long *kutlug ataman's semiha b. unplugged*, 1997, and

the recent multiple screen *The Four Seasons of Veronica Read*, 2002, Ataman has invented a sort of mini-genre in which the act of speaking becomes the primary event and the audience is left to put the story together without being able to see the whole at any one time. His latest installation, *1+1=1*, premiering this month at the Serpentine Gallery, centers on a Turkish woman caught in the middle of the armed conflict on her native island of Cyprus.

In Hollywood, "character arc" is filmmaker parlance for an action that demonstrates an internal change. If the film industry—and American culture in general—is built on the priority of visual action over speech, then Ataman's oeuvre represents a compelling turn on this idea: a way of taking the act of speaking—and its significance—seriously. In his epic length conversational work, Ataman even suggests that speaking is the most interesting action of all.

-SAUL ANTON