

HERE & THERE

Katia Kameli / Esra Ersen / Maya Schweizer

Curated by Catherine Bernard and Mary Cremin

15.09.10 - 23.10.10

Here & There was exhibited in Amelie A. Wallace Gallery, New York
February 1 - March 3, 2011

Dissolution, *Brothers and Sisters*, and *The Run of the Sellers* (*La corsa del venditore*) are three films that look at the impact of immigration on the life of populations in different parts of the world: Algeria, Turkey and Italy. These films participate to the mapping of new cultural spaces, the boundaries of which are drafted through the experiential stories of people who are living in interstitial situations, such as the ones explored by Katia Kameli, Esra Ersen and Maya Schweizer.

Katia Kameli's film *Dissolution* shows a maritime landscape with boats on the Mediterranean Sea. The film is sequenced in three 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. It progresses slowly through the frame and disappears, leaving behind the still images of other boats anchored in the distance, the only movement being created by the chimney smoke. A very light background sound, with an occasional police siren is juxtaposed to the diffuse images and the slow rhythm of the film.

The theme of a boat crossing the water is a recurrent theme in Kameli's work where it stands for displacement and has also been used by other Algerian artists such as filmmaker Zineb Sedira. Boats have been crossing the Mediterranean Sea for decades, bringing millions of Algerian immigrants 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 France¹ 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 disillusionments that accompany immigrant life and status.

The sense of in-betweenness that characterizes the conditions of migrants is fundamental in Katia Kameli's work. In *Dissolution* it takes a contemplative aspect and possesses a meditative quality that accompanies the slow paced images, the absence of specific references lets our imaginary develop with the slow crossing of the boat. Kameli :

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.²

The images themselves possess an evident plasticity with their classical composition and diffused light. They bring to mind an aesthetic present in European landscape paintings and reinforce the stillness of the narrative, while establishing the very sense of transcultural experience crucial in the artist's work.

A similar theme of *in-betweenness* and intercultural experience exists in *Brothers and Sisters*, although explored in a very different format. Director Esra Ersen's film is based on direct testimonies and comments on the life of African groups of immigrants who reside in an Istanbul neighborhood named *Talarbasi*, where Nigerians, Ghanaians and Ethiopians share the difficulties of immigrant life with Kurdish, Greek and Gypsy peoples.

The opening sequence of the film shows a group of young men standing in front of the gates of the main train station in Istanbul, the gates of Haydarpasa, a historically and symbolically important place, for it also welcomed the Turkish migrants from provinces who came to the capital in search of a better life during the 20th century and still do today. Many Africans come to Istanbul in hopes of a passage to Northern Europe, but few succeed and many remain in the city where they settle precariously. They are segregated and confronted by a lack of access to education for their children, the scarcity

of jobs and discrimination. Esra Ersen is careful also to establish divergences of points of view and cultural attitudes among those who come from Nigeria, Ethiopia or Ghana. By doing this, she reinforces the sense of identity of each group and thus avoids generalities to characterize the status and fate of migrants seen in mass media representations.

While the commentaries captured by Ersen's film shows a common and clear awareness of the problems faced by each, they also establish the knowledge that similar socio-economical spaces are shared by immigrants and minorities globally. The African migrants in Istanbul insist that they represent an economic power comparable to that of Black Americans in the US and to that of Turkish immigrants to Germany who have greatly contributed to the strength of German economy.

The end of the film closes in on a photograph of the Sultan Ahmet Mosque, a 17th century landmark celebrated for its interior decoration of blue tiles. The image hangs in the corner of a room and shows an aerial view of the mosque with a plane passing above in the direction of the sea. We come then full circle and are left with the image of the dream of flying towards a better world.

In contrast to the direct testimonies used by Ersen in constructing her film, Maya Schweizer offers a video in which Africans who migrate to Italy, in this case to Florence, are never seen but talked about by an outsider. *La Corsa del venditore* or *The Run of the Seller*, 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, accompanied by what the viewer assumes are her daughter and granddaughter. She describes in detail a scene of African street vendors harassed by the police, who had to rapidly fold their blankets, used to display their merchandise on the pavement, and flee. To her surprise, they 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 symbol for their invisibility in the eyes of the population. Anyone who has walked through the streets of a large European city cannot but notice the street vendors who are ubiquitous in touristic places, selling trinkets illegally while often having to run away from the police. It is a scene the banality of which betrays the indifference and forgetfulness applied to many immigrant groups. The surprise shown by the Italian woman on the phone can only be understood as a critique of such social invisibility that characterizes the condition of immigrant populations in their host societies and the life it implies.

The simple staging and the absence of color reference the Italian movies of the 50s, and reinforce the story telling aspect of the narrative. This adds distance between the narrator and the subject she describes, recalling Ralph Ellison's concept of social and political invisibility that has been suffered throughout the 20th century by migrants and minorities³. This situation of course is challenged when social unrest or protests arise, in which case the same invisible population becomes the stuff of newspaper headlines and is portrayed as potential danger to the values and proper functioning of the host society.

The three films in *Here and There* propose a reflection about the consequences of 19th century colonization and 20th economic imperialism that have defined the relation between northern and southern hemispheres. We know that the movement of populations and forced displacements will continue to increase dramatically in the decades to come, as a result of climatic changes and ensuing economic disasters. These works provide important messages that ultimately aim to trigger the analysis of a state of becoming, and that of socio-cultural and geo-political spaces that resist global economic and political forces, while they raise the importance of the concept of transculture to fully apprehend our foreseeable future.

CATHERINE BERNARD

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*, www.gmu.edu/programs/icar/ijps/vol12__2/cover2__2.htm
John Ruedy, *Modern Algeria: the Origins and Development of a Nation*, Indiana University Press, 2005

² Katia Kameli, Interview with Silke Schmickl: http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/nafas/articles/2008/katia_kameli

³ Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 1952 is a novel in which the character, a black man, considers himself socially, politically and intellectually invisible in the American society. The novel examines the issues faced by the black American population of the time.