

## Women Who Wear Wigs 1999

Women Who Wear Wigs is a video installation consisting of 4 independent units. The units are projected next to each other from 4 video projectors all running continuously for total durations of 45 to 60 mins. The work is made of video recordings of 4 women from Turkey. They discuss when, where, why and how they wear them. Wearing a wig is a well known trope for change of appearance, the creation of a chosen identity, or concealment of a "given" one, but in each of the four cases described below, the wig unfolds beyond generalized and historically stable forms of identity production, and invites a reflection on gender and state repression of a most perilous nature.

Number 1 is Melek Ulagay, aka the infamous Hostes Leyla (stewardess Leyla), of the post-1970 coup d'état in Turkey. The Junta created this fictitious character, a Turkish Airlines stewardess who was supposedly a demented bomber, in other words, a terrorist, the worst of the womankind could offer. As a young woman sympathizing with one of the left-wing youth organizations, she was chosen by the State as a sacrificial goat. Forced into that role, she had no choice but run. In order to disguise herself, she wore a long blonde wig, that made her even more conspicuous in a city where most women are dark-haired, and blond women are considered to be of dubious morals by most people. Hostes Leyla is shot in a wig store first, then in front of her mirror in her bedroom. Her face is always disguised, cut by the frame most of the time.

Number 2 is Nevval Sevindi, a well-known journalist. She has become temporarily bald as a result of chemotherapy following a breast cancer diagnosis. She is also a Polyanna in the most admirably self-contradicting fashion. As opposed to Hostes Leyla, she is shot in a confrontational fashion, in commanding happy pink during chemotherapy where she faces her baldness, and later other fatal colors at the hairdresser's where signs of intimacy, and reflections on womanhood and baldness come forth.

Number 3 prefers her identity not to be revealed because she is concerned for her safety, hence the frame is completely black, and one can only hear her voice recounting her story. She is a devout Muslim student not allowed to enter the classrooms of the university she attends because she wears a religious scarf, which the state does not allow in public buildings. She faces the difficult choice of choosing between faith and education. Her solution is to wear a wig. This way, she looks secular enough to the authorities at the university and her head still be covered as required by her faith.

Number 4 is Demet Demir. She is a transsexual prostitute and activist. Demet is balding. She is a feminist and doesn't like the society's constant pressure on

women to be beautiful all the time. But she uses the wig anyway, as an arm against police repression. Her wigs are important because she has to work as a prostitute. When she is arrested by the police, they ridicule and shave her head as punishment. So once again, she has to resort to wearing wigs, lots of them.

Text:

Kutlug Ataman's 7 hour 45 minute long "semiha b. unplugged" (1997), and the four-screen video projection "Women Who Wear Wigs" (1999) operate on the limits of documentary, fiction, and contemporary art.

In the videos there are no "reality boosters," no sets, props, extra lights or *misè-en-scène*. They are chosen from already existing locations. Ataman, however, comes from fiction, and his films have revealed an ongoing concern of making fiction in order to recreate reality. In his videos, the characters are real, and there is no recourse to montage or fiction editing. One could claim that the "WWW" or "semiha b. unplugged" are documentaries. But they are neither TV-like documentaries, nor classic interviews with talking heads. Although the protagonist may be an actor in real life—as in "semiha b..."s case, or the chemotherapy patient, a journalist (someone who reports reality)—Ataman's characters are not created, and they do not present grand truths. The viewer is called upon to reflect his or her existence through them. One can never ascertain if the stories present a complete truth. Their stories are personal mythologies, although neither imaginary nor un-lived. They tell their story as they see them. Further evidence of their right to individual mythology is in the fact that in the projections they appear larger than life, invading, albeit momentarily, the grand histories, and involving a relationship with the viewer that goes beyond the visual.

The camera's gaze, the situations, places and the times the stories take place are planned but not fabricated. Ataman's questions are often edited out of the final cut. That they respond to questions indicates that there is manipulation, and a visual and contextual discipline. What other option is there to arrive "closer" to present what is called the "truth."

In "WWW," the wig fulfils many functions: it is a tool of disguise for Hostes Leyla and the devout Muslim university student. Although the wig is a weak support for disguise and concealment of repressed, investigated, and/or altogether denied identities, the visual constructions of identity maintain a painful urgency in Turkey. The wig is also a substitute for something "real" and essential, the hair. Hence its lack signifies a biological shortcoming with social implications. By the same token, the reclamation and appropriation of hair signifies gender selection and production. If the harassment by the police by the cutting of hair results in a humiliating lack for transvestites, the government mandate to not allow the religious head scarf in public buildings (the

universities) signify another form of violence in gender institutionalisation, and social engineering over the individual's body. When all projections are viewed side by side, they articulate an enveloping ideological and historical panorama of a place through poignant individual stories.

The handheld camera, that operates without a crew or lighting support, helps naturalize the viewer's gaze. The camera wanders as if you are there yourself before a captivating story, scanning and drifting around the space, and flirting with the image. As in the case of the Muslim girl in where the camera respects her confidentiality by showing only a black screen, the naturalised feeling of the handheld camera adopts for each subject a specific counterparting attitude predicated on her story.

The work is unequivocally manipulative because a work that looks like a documentary is inserted in the context of an art exhibition, a site where a creative process is presumed to be realized or experienced. The videos are presentations in a context that can also allow them to be read as a travesties of truth.

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