

## **i m the sexiest man in jamaica**

It may be a little bit unpleasant to initiate a text by mentioning about a 'good conversation' but it was the case; one of the few occasions for me of having an undisrupted, five-minute chat with my schizoid-minded friend and mentor Vasif Kortun in a cab heading towards Frankfurt Airport. We started to exchange quickly our initial impressions on the recent Manifesta. I was dumb as usual as I have been in commenting on XL shows, feeling incompetent to produce an overview for that size of spectacle but Vasif wasn't. He said he was surprised by the extent in which the works and the artists in the exhibition evaded a self-positioning in relation to their subject matter. Some points with strong social repercussions were raised but you couldn't see artists' stance in them. I agreed with him on a particular case, the striking video piece of Erzen Shkololli with the title *Hey Europe*. For a comparison, we considered works that were familiar to us and some first-hand parallels in formal qualities rang the bells in our minds and we came up with two pivotal connections that would later serve as a tentative frame for an exhibition that is still under construction.

The first piece that echoed Erzen's *Hey Europe* was Vahit Tuna's video *Europe, Europe Hear Us* (2000). The film starts with pictures taken from a football training field and in tune with the techno-beats on the background, the camera moves erratically on the awkwardly drawn, irregular white lines, the uneven surface of the pitch devoid of any turf, the shabby lightening system and the muddy goalposts. Suddenly the frame shifts to a close-up head; his red hat and scarf, revealing his sympathies for the Turkish national team, cover the face as a balaclava. He waves his fist to the camera and shouts out an actual, well-known slogan in Turkey: "Europe, Europe Hear Us / Hear the March of the Turks / Ain't No Way You Can Handle Them / Beware of Them You European Faggots". Chanted in European Cups or national games this slogan reveals clues about the Turkish nationalist psyche: a sense of being excluded, an appeal to a heroic past in compensation for the current troubles, the trauma of the loss of the Empire, the fiction of a homogenous Europe as a fetishised enemy, male fantasies of penetration, homophobia etc. The performance of the fanatic supporter in Vahit's video can transparently deliver this sense of threatening through his anonymous and frightening appearance and later through the fireworks he flashes on the pitch. Yet there is a displacing element in the whole setting, there is a smell of something else; something like a parody.

In his photograph series of *Besetzungen* [Occupations] from the early seventies Anselm Kiefer presented himself in soldier trousers, with a Nazi salute in front of some prominent squares and monuments of Europe. Far from being an affirmation of the tragic past and iconography this strategic staging aimed to undermine the rhetoric of fascist revivalism through the grotesque gap in dimensions of the giant boulevards and sculptures, and the dwarfed figure of their supposed occupier in the midst of them. Similarly, the hooligan enacted by Vahit himself and the referred nationalist imagery in general was ridiculed by the emphasis on the poor quality of the facilities of the football field, an indication of the inequality between the recklessly defiant Turkey and its superior Other, Europe. The ironic dimension was more apparent in another piece by Vahit, sharing the same title. In a picture published in the catalogue of Manifesta3, we see a footballer performing perhaps the most difficult and spectacular figure, an overhead kick. Yet, there is something peculiar in the image: the ball in the air is actually a basketball. The guy in the picture is forcing his own rules to someone else's game; echoing conservative forces in Turkey (fascists, army, national-leftists etc.) arrogantly insisting that Europe has to concede on the social particularities of Turkey during negotiations on a membership to EU (Of course, my reading of this pair of works is a little bit hampered by the results of the last World Cup and the recent juridical reforms in Turkish parliament in favour of adjustments to the EU standards, I have to admit; but this ground has always been slippery and you never know what we will be in the next stage). In his video piece Vahit pursued a strategy of acting out a social type in his own figure but by doing this in an odd surrounding which would in turn ridicule the performed persona and displace the associated qualities of nationalism. The second piece, the photograph and the slogan typed underneath, aims to attain the same result through estrangement by bringing two unrelated items together. A mixture between *parody* and the Situationist technique of *détournement* was Vahit's solution to the need for attaining a critical distance.

The second video piece we related to Erzen's one was Ayşe Erkmen's *Emre and Dario* (1999). Both of them displayed figures set on complete white background. In Erkmen's work we see a young, handsome male figure dancing to the song, *Istanbul C'est Constantinople* of Dario Moreno, a Turkish Jew who got famous in France and Italy in fifties. The lyrics of the song (varying in its different versions in different languages) has a side-motif of producing a corrective representation of the modern republic of Turkey; a mission that was later assigned to some famous Jazz vocalists like Eartha Kitt and Sherley Bassey or to the contributions to Eurovision song contest with pathetic results. Yet, it is hard to correlate the dancing figure in Erkmen's video to the representational mode inherent in the soundtrack. He tries sometimes to mime his lips to the song, but with a careless failure. There is no single trait in his outlook, clothing or dancing which could hint at a particular culture, pinpoint him to a geography -a deliberate strategy on Erkmen's side, supported by the sterilisation effect of the white background. The representational mission

of the song is thus being contrasted with and unravelled by the cosmopolitan quality of the dancer -perhaps as a surrogate of the artist herself, considering the information that he is actually Erkmen's son.

Again, to mention a second piece in relation to the former may be useful to underline the inherent ironic dimension. *Emre and Dario* was shown along some other works of the artist in *İskorpit* in Haus der Kulturen der Welt Berlin and later in Badischer Kunstverein Karlsruhe, an exhibition that claimed to offer a glimpse of the 'Recent Art from Istanbul'. One of the other works, *Y 756577* (1998) was a poster-size photograph of two bears leaning romantically towards each other in a natural environment. The picture was actually purchased by Erkmen from an advertisement agency that provided ready-made, spectacular but anonymous images for commercial purposes and was later used in a solo show along with similar photographs. In using directly commercial images the artist attempted to question the concept of authorship on one side and the relation between capital and the production of visual culture on the other. Erkmen has been much more at home in remaining within the frame of that sort of problematisation and in that sense *Emre and Dario* was an ironic gesture functioning against any attempt of cultural pigeonholing. In parallel to this gesture, she chose to reframe her *Y 756577* for the occasion of *İskorpit* and installed a slowed down version of *Istanbul C'est Constantinopolis* behind the poster. It appeared like the two bears so affectionate to each other were murmuring the clumsy version of this love song and a work which was originally devoid of any association with cultural identity was cunningly transformed into a biting critique of the whole exhibition, in which the affection of our two heroes to each other become the mocking metaphor of the two sides of the show: on the one hand artists from the periphery who welcome invitations from the venues of the centre without questioning the representational constructs of those events; and on the other, directors and curators of those group exhibitions who feel they have thus accomplished their mission of constituting a multiculturalist social democracy.

In Erzen Shkololli's *Hey Europe* we see a single figure placed in the middle of the frame against a white background (just like *Emre and Dario*). The song of a folksinger well-known in Albania, Shkurte Fejza, shown here with her traditional costume, covers the whole video (like the two other pieces) and her song starts with an interpellation directed towards Europe (as it was the case in Vahit's *Europe, Europe Hear Us*). The lyrics are a little bit long so it shall suffice to give some excerpts: *Hey Europe I'm addressing You a letter / As Albanian of Old Albania / How are my sons / You know well that they're in emigration / Hey You gray-haired Europe / Do you remember my territories? /... At the end of this letter I'm writing / Don't play with the Albanians / If they break Eagle's wing / Oh the whole Balkan will burn.*

Perhaps not as menacing as the slogan used in Vahit piece, Fejza's lyrics deliver nevertheless a sense of anguish, a reproach to Europe of not being helpful to resolve the pain and more, an accusation of deepening the suffering in risking the future of the region. The addresser has a victimised tone but is still holding firmly on a nationalist rhetoric. Now, if we go back to the problem set at the start, the absence of the critical situatedness of the artist within his or her work in relation to its content, as it was formulised by Vasif Kortun, can we not examine this phenomenon of absence through Erzen's touching work? Is there any medium Erzen employs to distantiate himself from the immediate discourse of the song? Any estrangement effect? Does the white background operate strategically, as in Erkmen's piece, to interrupt the reinstatement of identification? Or does it rather accentuate the contours of a national identity that is already fully present on the costume of the singing figure? Or does it merely mark Fejza's isolation, her inability to make her voice heard, as Erzen argues?

In his previous works Erzen pursued an explicit strategy of ironizing both the national tropes he employed and the external perspective that reduce a traumatic experience to a representational framing. His 'Albanian Flag on the Moon' was an example of this. A cosmonaut thrusting an Albanian flag into the soil of the Moon has an estranging, overtly absurd appearance for sure. But, in the case of *Hey Europe*, isn't the content left a little bit naked? Can a radical pose function without a visible mark of criticality? Perhaps it can, without contenting with the random plays of energetic affects. Perhaps it can slowly unroll on the discursive field of discontinuous, contradicting segments, which could be strategically employed as a mode of resistance, as a kind of stealth? These are old questions I know: agency versus structure, counteridentification versus disidentification, confrontational struggle versus resistance from within and so on. But it's difficult to move beyond. I'm stuck here without concrete answers. The only thing I know is that I would fancy the idea of being in Jamaica right now.