

The Art Journal - Winter 1999
Vasif Kortum

Kutlug Ataman's *Women Who Wear Wigs* (1999), a video installation featuring four women from Turkey who discuss when, where, why and how they wear wigs, operates at the limits of documentary, fiction and contemporary art. The installation consists of four video projections that run simultaneously for total durations of forty-five to sixty minutes. The women are real, not actresses playing fictional characters; and there are no sets, props, special lights, or dramatic editing used to create fictional mise-en-scenes. Although one could claim that *Women Who Wear Wigs* is a documentary, it is not a conventional television-like documentary featuring interviews with talking heads. Instead, it is one that delicately navigates the line between reality and fiction so that the viewer can never ascertain whether the stories that the women tell present a complete truth or whether they are personal mythologies.

The hand-held camera helps to naturalize the viewer's gaze. It wanders, scans, and drifts around the spaces the women occupy, flirting with the image, as if it, and therefore the viewer, is a direct witness to the captivating stories that the women tell. In addition, it adopts a point of view sensitive to each woman's story; for example, it respects the anonymity of woman No. 3, a devout Muslim, by showing only a black screen. Finally, the fact that the projections appear larger than life involves the viewer in a way that extends beyond the visual.

But the larger-than-life dimensions of the projections also manifest the installation's mythologizing dimension. In addition, even though the camera's gaze and the contexts in which the stories are told are not fabricated, they are planned. The fact that Ataman's questions are often edited out of the final cut, and that the women are therefore responding to questions unheard by the audience, also indicates that the relationship between the viewer and the stories that the women tell is not unmediated as the gaze of the hand-held camera might imply. But what other option is there to arrive closer to presenting what is called the truth?

When the projections are viewed side by side, the poignant individual stories articulate an enveloping ideological and historical panorama that encourages the viewer to reflect on his or her own existence. Within this panorama, wearing a wig fulfils many functions. It serves as a disguise for concealing repressed identities in a nation in which the visual construction of identity is a painfully urgent issue. It is a substitute for hair and, as such, signifies a biological lack with social implications. Operating as a trope for the creation, change, or concealment of a given identity, the wig, for each of the four women featured in the installation, unfolds beyond generalized and historically stable forms of identity production and invites a reflection on gender and state repression of a most perilous nature.

The Times - 24 February 2000
Hettie Judah

The very title *Women Who Wear Wigs* sounds like a spoof art piece or perhaps a pastiche girl band; you half expect to enter the gallery and encounter four over-made-up Turkish dollies with monster hairpieces mouthing along to Abba.

After all, the director Kutlug Ataman is not without a sense of camp, and at so self-consciously trendy a space as the Lux Gallery anything seems possible.

In fact, *WWWW* is an immensely serious artwork featuring four

documentary-style interviews which are projected simultaneously as a clamouring wall of testament.

The women's reasons for wearing wigs are various; one is a glamorous journalist recovering from chemotherapy; another is a political activist called 'Hostess Leyla', on the run for 30 years; a third, present in voice alone, is a young Muslim girl banned from wearing her headscarf to university and who resorts to covering herself by other means. The last is Demet Demir, a transsexual prostitute human-rights activist who is losing her hair through stress and needs a wig to keep working.

The interviews are long, nearly an hour, and the portraits of the women are complex: while they are all characters we have encountered as archetypes, the space given to them here allow them to expand into their own contradictions. Demet is a feminist who doesn't think women should always conform to the pressure to be beautiful; Nevval, the journalist, is public about her cancer but not about the resulting baldness. What unites the women is their need to live within pretence, that in fictionalising some part of themselves they can become free in other ways.

In guiding and editing the four interviews, Ataman pulls them together into a complex portrait of modern Turkish society through the constraints placed on religion, gender, sexuality and political belief. As the Muslim student discusses the humiliation of her position, Demet observes; "Most men who frequent whorehouses and prostitutes keep their wives under cover," and Nevval recalls an encounter with a pair of bigwigged transvestites, with whom she felt she shared an unwomanly bond until she bought them cigars and they puffed away like normal men.

Time Out London - 22 March 2000
Sarah Kent

I first saw Kutlug Ataman's four-screen video at the Venice Biennale. Assuming that it was a light-hearted comedy, and thankful for the opportunity to sit down, I planned to stay a few minutes but became so immersed in the stories unfolding on screen and their political and social implications that I didn't want to leave.

The glamorous journalist, Nevval Sevindi, lost her hair when she had chemotherapy after being diagnosed with breast cancer. As she chatters to camera about the importance of having beautiful hair-to herself, her husband and her public-we begin to understand something of how her version of 'femininity' is created and exploited in Turkey. Demet Demir's ideas of the feminine are not dissimilar, except that she is a transsexual who works as a prostitute. She wears a wig for work because she is balding but, occasionally, she gets arrested and the police humiliate her by shaving her head; the disguise then becomes even more necessary.

In case you feel that you are getting to grips with the way that female identity is perceived and constructed in Turkey, a blank screen indicates the refusal of the third participant to be filmed. A devout Muslim student, she was barred from university classes for wearing a headscarf. Listening to her, one's notion of freedom and repression becomes severely jumbled and the compromise that she arrived at - wearing a wig so that she covers her hair while appearing to expose it-raise fascinating issues about the meaning of clothing and accessories. The fourth subject is the most confusing. Melek Ulagay is a left-wing activist who avoids arrest by disguising herself with a blond wig. Demonised by the state as stewardess Leyla, the demented bomber, her response is to create another fictional character.

Complex and riveting review.

The New Yorker - 12 February 2001

To American audiences, "Women Who Wear Wigs" may sound like a Lifetime special hosted by Dolly Parton. But the New York debut of this London-based video artist is deadly serious and profoundly political. Ataman interviewed four Turkish women: an alleged terrorist in hiding, a well-known journalist suffering from cancer, an Islamic student barred from class for wearing a scarf, and a transsexual prostitute and political activist who is going bald. The interviews are projected simultaneously, in a horizontal row at floor level (the frame where the student should be is black, to protect identity). The cacophony of competing soundtracks tries one's patience, but the interplay of narratives occasionally rewards it.

The New York Times - 23 February 2001

Holland Cotter

Art in Review

The New York solo debut of the London-based artist Kutlug Ataman consists of a single, riveting video installation, "Woman Who Wear Wigs." In it, four Turkish women talk at length about wearing wigs, a prosaic enough cosmetic enhancement that for each of them turns out to have wrenching personal implications.

One of the subjects is accused of being a political terrorist and has been living in disguise for 30 years; another is a glamorous journalist who has lost her hair from chemotherapy for breast cancer. A third is an observant Muslim who covers her head with a wig in place of the scarf she is forbidden to wear as a student at a secular university. The last is a transsexual prostitute whose head is periodically shaved by the police.

The four long interviews run simultaneously side-by-side and are very different. The woman accused of terrorism keeps her face turned away from the camera; the student doesn't appear on screen at all. The transsexual, filmed at home, describes police harassment with a mix of anger and humour. The journalist, meticulously coiffed and made up, speaks from her hospital bed as Mr. Ataman's camera wanders down the intravenous tube in her arm.

In each case, truth and self-delusion mingle. All four subjects are dealing head-on with imposed conditions, but each is shaping her response to them in ways that are simultaneously assertive and protective: shaping a view of herself that, like a wig, helps to create a new identity but also hides an old one.

Some artists are doing compelling work with "reality" video these days. Mr. Ataman, whose work has appeared in the Venice and Istanbul biennials, is one of them.

Flash Art - June 2001

Michael Colen

New York

Kutlug Ataman@Lehman Maupin

Kutlug Ataman's four-screen video projection, "Women Who Wear Wigs", presents interviews with four Turkish women who discuss the reasons why

they must wear hairpieces to change their identity. The subjects range from a political terrorist in disguise, to a journalist undergoing chemotherapy, an observant Muslim student using the wig to pass in a secular university, and a transsexual prostitute. In their inventive suturing of the language of attraction to complex political and sexual causes, each "woman" takes a naturalised sign of femininity (the wigs) and plays it open, so that the fixed points of gender become unclear. All four portraits start with a human response to imposed social conditions then branch out into individual self-mythologies, which create a protective web over the marginalized individual. The wigs are the key point in this diverse self-assertion because they announce: "I am who I say I am, even if that is not who I may really be." The reality based TV genre is quite mainstream at this point, but the art world is still figuring out how to utilize instead of ape this phenomena; Ataman's work is a prime, if chaotic, step in the right direction.