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2016-17 Franchise Proposal

“Bad-ass” Kurdish “Warrior-Divas”

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Franchise location: Berlin, Germany

Helly Luv, a Kurdish music pop-star, shot her 2015 music video "Revolution" in a frontline village in northern Iraq. The video shows laughing children running off to school and men enjoying mint tea until suddenly bombs explode and tanks roll in. A mother cradles her dead child, another child is heard wailing, abandoned in the war-torn street. The stylized Luv, whose glitz and glamour is in stark contrast to the landscape and context, appears with a sign that reads "Stop the Violence." Referred to as a "Warrior-Diva" by western news media outlets (like NPR), Luv has not only directed western attention to the female peshmerga warriors fighting ISIS, she has also, whether they like it or not, become iconic of their movement.

The Kurdish term "peshmerga" colloquially references "freedom fighters," but it also literally means "one who confronts death." Since August 2014, peshmerga have been battling against ISIS in Iraq and Syria, and since about the same time social media (Reddit, for example) and news outlets have been glamorizing and orienting the all-women faction of peshmerga known as the "Women's Protection Units" (YPJ). The romanticized narrative of these women portrays them as nail-polish-wearing, gun-toting "bad-ass" (foreignpolicy.com) harbingers of eastern feminism. One issue with this sensationalized perspective is that it ignores the multiplicity of ideologies, experiences, and subjectivities that make up the YPJ through a singular "you go, Girl!" sentiment.

The "gaze of fascination" also renders invisible a larger culture of resistance within Kurdish traditions, as well as the socio-historical context for the emergent feminism found in the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party). The PKK, classified as a "terrorist organization" in Turkey, seeks a double-emancipation: a Kurdish national state and territory, and the liberation of women. Though the ideology of the PKK is ever-evolving, it has always promoted (to varying degrees) gender equality, and has involved women at all levels of the movement. Some claim the PKK's stance on women's liberation is cliché at best, or an ideological tool used for PR purposes. Whatever the case, women are represented by the PKK and YPJ as the vanguard for social and political change, and our exhibit is both a response to and questioning of this practice.

"Bad-Ass" Kurdish "Warrior-Divas" invites artists to grapple with the stakes of aestheticizing revolution, and asks them to engage critically with women peshmerga by offering views of them in their diversity: as spouses, mothers, daughters, friends, political actors, prisoners, leaders, and protesters. Other themes may include western spectatorship, glamorization of violent struggles, diva-culture (Beyoncé, M.I.A), and ethical storytelling.

Our exhibit will be hosted in Berlin, a stalwart bastion for pro-Kurdistan politics and a longtime home of academic Kurdish culture and language study programs. Artists under consideration:

Mizgin Mujde Arslan, a filmmaker and daughter of an active Kurdish guerrilla, who spent time in jail for her 2012 film "I flew, you stayed."

Walid Siti, an Iraqi-Kurdish artist who focuses on disorientation and the impact of rapid and uneven social change.

Zuhdi Sardar, who works with Kurdish women's "mythologized" beauty and militaristic portrayals.

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