

SWEET TABOOS A MINI TIRANA BIENNALE IN NEW YORK

Curated by **Edi Muka**
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Adel Abdessemed
Ivan Grubanov
IngridMwangiRobertHutter
Sejla Kamberic
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4:09 min loop

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What happens to inhibitions in today's swell of globalization? Does the old Polynesian term "taboo" still have meaning, or have such notions disappeared in the "everything goes" drive of global Capital? Is this overwhelming drive actually the biggest taboo of our time? To what extent do the power structures of our society differ from those of the past, and is history still relevant?

These and many other questions were at the center of our quest to find collaborators when we conceived the third edition of the Tirana Biennale in Albania. As the five consecutive exhibitions that composed the Biennale unfolded, we witnessed how the poetry of art and contemporary artistic operation dealt with such issues by focusing on practices of re-appropriation rather than their mere critique. The selection made for this "Mini-Tirana Biennale" presented at apexart includes the work of seven artists that participated in the exhibitions of the last Tirana Biennale. However, when dealing with such socio-politically loaded subjects, one has to be aware of the real potential of art and avoid coming up with a tacky display of art works. We tried to identify elements of an ambiguous nature that are found in the juxtaposition of "civilization" and "barbarisms" of obscure and open character, that deal with legality and abuse, and that can be emancipating and conservative. This consisted of a voyage to the edge of theological and ideological narratives, of delirious utopia and icy pragmatism, social hypocrisy and moralism. The artists adopting a wide variety of techniques, viewpoints, and concepts tried to transmit different mentalities, ideas, perceptions and challenges through their works, all motivated by the temptation to experience the triumph and the fear, the freedom and the anxiety of freedom, indifference and veneration and everything else related to the temptation of violating the border of the taboo.

How can the simplest form of aesthetic expression – the drawing – be politically loaded? When looking at Ivan Grubanov's series of drawings from Milosevic's trial in the Hague one becomes lost trying to understand what is it that one is supposed to grasp



Ivan Grubanov, *Visitor*, 2002-03, ink on paper, 6 x 8 in

first – is it the ability of the artist to quickly document reality, or his skillfulness and virtuosity in catching the final moment of Milosevic's reign? By appropriating documentation as a strategy and directing our attention to the fragile structure of "power," the artist gets invested with power—the power to lead the viewer's gaze to the back side of the glamour of authority.

A continuously changing maze of animated drawings reveals, and at the same time conceals from sight, symbols of different religions of the world in Adel Abdessemed's video installation *God is Design*. It is a metaphor for one of today's sharpest global issues – "the clash of civilizations." It is as if the artist personalized the Nietzschean approach of "God is Dead," proposing his own: "God is Design." However this piece about one of the classic taboos, God, is not merely an ironic or sarcastic approach; it is rather a way of tackling fundamentalism. Yet, it is not merely the religious fundamentalism the artist is tackling here. By demystifying the notion of God through a commonplace practice, design, the artist is throwing us back into reflection on the issue – what if religion was not the real cause of the infamous "clash of civilizations?" What if there is a hidden drive that is creating conflicts, some kind of matrix that leads us without our being aware of it, or being able to resist it? What if Design has actually taken God's place???

Many have reacted strongly when stopping for a while to look at Joanna Rytel's film *To think*



Suela Qoshja, *Avenue of the Stars*, 2002, photo postcards, 4 x 6 in

ones on the other side of our political correctness. It's not a journey in our obscure thoughts though, neither in the dark sides of humanity – it's a journey into our collectively suppressed and sublimated selves, with "self" understood as a complex socio-historical construction. The artist says, "To think thoughts you don't want to think" is a project about unwanted racial thoughts." The storyline is told in a diary format and is about the ambiguity of a white woman's racial thoughts and desires for a black man. By voicing out a highly sensitive problem, such as racism, the artist does not try to set us into a liberating experience. She rather exposes our common fears and our constructed barriers that hinder us from reaching towards each other. Gradually and boldly she reveals to us that we all are at the same time abusers and victims of our social preconceptions.

Along similar lines, but with a very different

thoughts you don't want to think. The film is intense, the language is deliberately strong and it deals with the very sensitive subject of racism. It's a journey inside a white Swedish woman's head while she gets to know, falls in love with, has sex with and splits with a black man. It's a wandering on the underworld of thoughts, the

Armando Lulaj, *Living in Memory*, 2004, video, color, sound



approach and viewpoint, comes to us *If*, the work by IngridMwangiRobertHutter. Built upon the re-appropriation of an historical photograph of Hitler surrounded by white-blonde German women, the artists replace the original characters with manipulated images of themselves. As Mwangi says about her work: *If* visualises a fictitious moment, which positions itself in the middle of the "German tragedy," as a photographic image that shatters the historical context. The work removes itself from carefulness, borrowing from past-become-problematic imagery, to provoke reflections that are relevant to present day life. The persons within the scenery have been reproduced to create mimicry on the one hand or have been camouflaged to be less Self on the other. The borders of belonging are confusing or, if we allow, the concept of identi-



IngridMwangiRobertHutter, *If*, 2003, c-print, 48 x 66 in

fication with a nation has become unacceptable." The burning flames of a huge star on the hill-tops of the city of Tirana stand as witness to a once-upon-a-time symbol of the efforts for a better society – turned to be a cruel history of suppression and perse-

cution. By setting fire to a large five-pointed star in *Living in Memory*, it is as if Armando Lulaj is trying to purify the symbol from its own history. The glitter of fire in the night sky and its short, preconditioned lifetime is yet another symbol of another system adopting the notion of the STAR – the "wanna be STAR" as the model of our over infused media based reality. The piece is, however, not some kind of homage to either manifestation. What strikes in the video is when the whole structure falls and the fire continues to consume every bit of it, leaving behind only the ashes – physical ashes of fire, symbolical ashes of history, and living ashes of memory of past and present power structures.

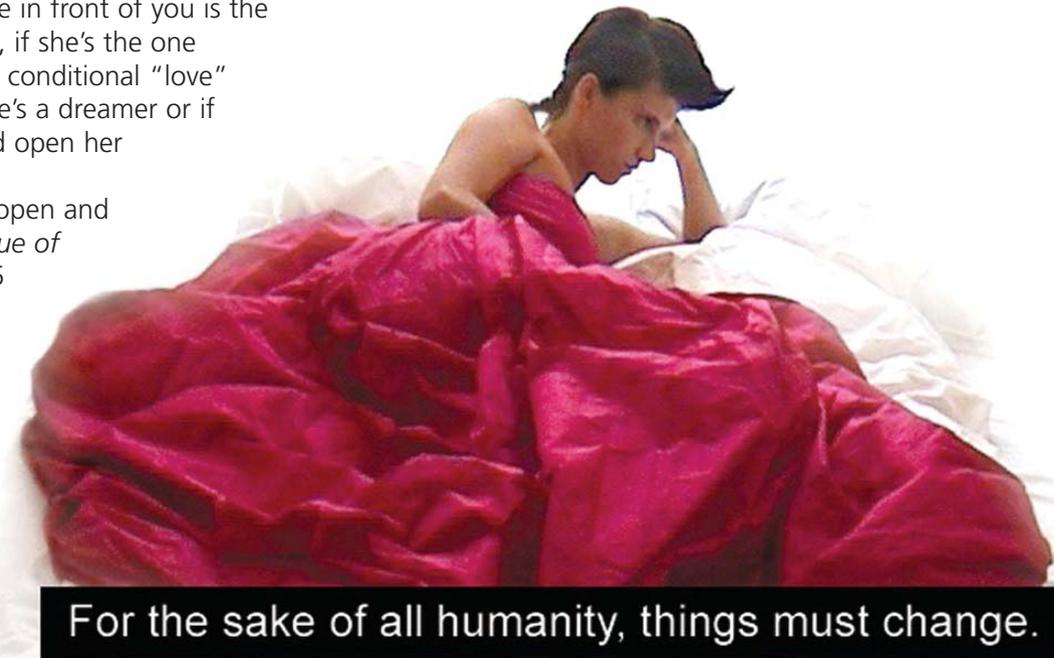
Global authority, power and our understanding of them as the only forms of democracy and free society are the focus of Sejla Kameric's *Daydreaming* video. Setting up a heavenly surrounding for herself, she is featured in the video resembling a goddess while at the same time appearing imprisoned in her radiating cell. Eyes closed, she slowly moves to the relaxing sounds of piano while the content of the speech of the relaxed voice you hear on the background becomes more and more demanding and conditioning. It is hard to distinguish by now if the figure in front of you is the goddess or the imprisoned being, if she's the one uttering orders or reacting to the conditional "love" pouring out from the Voice, if she's a dreamer or if she simply wants to wake up and open her eyes...

Eyes are, however, wide open and looking at you in the series *Avenue of the Stars* by Suela Qoshja. In all 5 photographs / postcards her eyes are open and staring at you. It's this kind of quality of a still image that follows you in every corner of the room or every direction you go. But there's something specific with her look, she's looking at you as if she's trying to predict your next move

and the way it will affect her. Dedicated to one of Albania's worst social plagues of the last 10 years – the trafficking of women – and shot a few days after the artist's neighbor was trafficked in Germany, the series is a re-appropriation and a mixture of classical standards of "beauty" and a continuous condition of discrimination of women as a social class. Between the elegant leaves of flowers she's holding and the heavy make-up of her face, a subtle sense of "innocence" permeates the whole series.

The works in this exhibition offer a testimony to engaged artistic practice that provides us with examples of what could be considered some of our contemporary taboos, and how they relate to both our history and to our present condition. They equip us with a repertory of tactics to artistically deal with taboos, and demonstrate how art can be a tool with which to respond to our rapidly changing global socio-political landscape.

Edi Muka, 2006.



Sejla Kameric, *Untitled/Daydreaming*, 2004, video, endless loop, in collaboration with Dario Philosophy