

Neo-Orientalism in the Contemporary Image

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This paper focuses on the subject of communicational and identification-related dimension of Neo-Orientalism and its semiotics, which has often been used as a subject and a medium in the critique of neo-colonialism and in Edward W. Saïd's concept of orientalization mechanisms (as in the work of Kader Attia), with examples from the history and contemporary art of Croatia (the Balkans, former Yugoslavia, ex-South-Eastern Europe, the European Union). Saïd's first and most important work *Orientalism*, published in 1978, is a groundbreaking critique of the systematic conceptual invention of "East" and "West", as well as a foundational text for the academic field of Post-Colonial Studies, wherein the denotations and connotations of the term "Orientalism" have been expanded to describe what Saïd sees as the false cultural assumptions of the "Western World" as they facilitate the cultural misrepresentation of "the Orient" (*Oriens* in Ancient Rome) in general, and of the Middle East (*Levant*) in particular. For Saïd, the term "Orientalism" describes the "subtle and persistent Eurocentric prejudice against the Arabo-Islamic culture": cultural prejudices that are derived from a long tradition of romanticized images of Asia and the Middle East, which have, in practice, functioned as implicit justifications for the colonial and imperial ambitions of the European powers and the U.S. Moreover, in his criticism of the systematic conceptual invention of "East" and "West", Saïd further describes, criticizes, and denounces the social, economic, and cultural practices of the ruling Arab élites who, as he claims, have internalized, as imperial satraps, the romanticized "Arabic Culture" created by the British and American Orientalists. Saïd argues that the "Orient" is a fixture of the West's imagination because it performs a "mirroring function" against which the West defines itself.



1 Osman Orsal for Reuters, 2013



2 Paul Hansen, *Gaza Burial* – 20 November 2012 (for the Swedish daily newspaper *Dagens Nyheter*)

The photograph by Osman Orsal for Reuters shows a girl in red dress (denoting the anti-traditional milieu of its wearer; the photographer behind the camera wears a shirt that covers his arms and a gas mask), standing all upright and elegant in the Gezi Park, exposed to the water canon in the hands of a policeman from the security forces. The image of female martyrdom, the so-called “female piety”, has become a symbol of the Taksim revolution and the entire Turkish protest movement¹ of 2013. This newspaper photograph may easily be considered as close to Mayakovsky’s definition of art from 1926, which claims it to be not a mirror to reflect the world, but a hammer with which to shape it. A contemporary version of the *pietà* theme can be found in the *Gaza Funeral – November 20, 2012*. Its author, Swedish photographer Paul Hansen, has been deprived of a distinguished award because he corrected the tones, brightness, and contrast in some segments of his wartime photograph by using computer software. However, the enhanced reality of the image has actually made it *more fervent and more truthful*. Today’s life consists of many different vernacular layers, as well as the layer of globalization: visual culture indicates the tensions between the coexisting worlds while creating them at the same time. A kind of self-orientalisation is a work *On Sale from the Owner / Sahibinden satılık* (2014) by Erdal Sezer,² based on traditional Ottoman miniatures that glorified the system. The artist examines the role of media in the history of art, and art’s role in historiography.

The central problem of today’s global interactions is the tension between cultural homogenization, in the form of Americanisation or commodification, and cultural heterogenization. Rebecca Rendall (after Arjun Appadurai) has proposed a framework for exploring such disjunctures, five dimensions of global cultural flows that she has termed ethnoscaples, mediascaples, technoscaples, financescaples, and ideoscaples. The suffix “-scape” allows us to indicate the fluid, irregular shapes of these landscapes.

¹ It started with the government’s plan to erase a public park in Istanbul and build a mall in its place.

² *Mixed media* on canvas, 120,5 cm x 12 cm

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Arjun Appadurai (expanding upon Benedict Anderson) has invented the term *imagined worlds*, which would be multiple worlds constituted by the historically situated imaginations of persons and groups spread around the globe. By living in such imagined worlds (and not just in imagined communities), persons are thus able to contest and sometimes even subvert the imagined worlds of the official mind and of the entrepreneurial mentality that surround them.³ Rebecca Randall uses the term “ideoscapes” to denote concatenations of images, often directly political and related to the ideologies of states and the counter-ideologies of movements, explicitly aimed at capturing state power or a segment of it. These ideoscapes are composed of elements of the Enlightenment worldview, which consists of a chain of ideas, terms, and images, including those of *freedom, welfare, rights, sovereignty, representation*, and the master term *democracy*. Rene Guenon’s premise in 1927 was that one of the most noticeable features of the modern world is the unmistakable gulf between East and West. In the modern world, according to Guenon, there were, on the one hand, all the civilizations that had remained faithful to the traditional standpoint – namely the civilizations of the East – and on the other hand, a veritably anti-traditional civilization, namely that of the modern West.⁴ For Guenon, Western mentality meant the same as modern mentality.⁵ The conflict revealed itself in the form of an opposition between contemplation and action, or, more strictly speaking, a difference of opinion as to their relative importance. But there are people whose minds are no longer content with modern negation, and who, feeling the need of something that their own period cannot offer, see the possibility of escaping from the crisis of the modern man in one way alone: by returning to tradition in one form or another.⁶ In the contemporary world, the perpetuation of this standpoint can be found in the opposition between East and West as a (presumed) opposition between the traditional and anti-traditional outlooks. In the ancient world of the West, Aristotle asserted that there must be an “unmoved mover” of all things: knowledge, which serves as the “unmoved mover” of action. It is clear that action belongs entirely to the world of change and “becoming”.⁷

³ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota press, 1996).

⁴ Rene Guenon, *The Crisis of the Modern World* (2001), p. 226; original title: *La crise du monde moderne* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1927).

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 23.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 24.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 37.



3 Titian, *Suleiman the Magnificent*, ca. 1530



4 Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Young Greeks at the Mosque*, 1865

Titian's (Tiziano Vecellio's) *Portrait of Suleiman the Magnificent* as the representation of power was made around in 1530 after a medallion. The vitality of character was achieved by the detail of the sultan's ear folding under the oversized turban. In 1874, Jean-Léon Gérôme depicted the Greek Souliot leader Markos Botsaris sitting on a throne like Suleiman the Magnificent, in Venice called *// Gran Signore*; an image of Nebuchadnezzar in all his oriental splendor. He is a sublime yet decadent despot and at the same time the heir of a proud warrior race. The painting is Oriental and *Byzantine* on the one hand, and European-*Hellenistic* and Orientalist on the other, as it portrays "the Exotic Other" in the way in which the Western discourse has defined its subject. As the artists of the post-modern age would experiment with, transform, or even cast aside the narratives and stereotypes of the past, thus the Romanticist painter reproduced them in the present time. In 1865, Gérôme depicted some *Young Greeks at the Mosque* (oil on canvas), the Greek Muslim recruits into

the Ottoman Janissary corps at prayer. In 1896, he painted the *Truth Rising from Her Well* in an attempt at describing the transparency of an illusion and welcoming the rise of photography as an alternative to the photographic painting as exemplified by the *Young Greeks at the Mosque*, stating that “owing to photography, the Truth has as last left her well.” The Orientalist exhibition *Orientalism: The Near East in French Painting, 1800-1880*, held at the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester in 1982, was closely associated with the apogee of European colonialist expansion in the nineteenth century. For Edward Saïd, Orientalism in Western literature was a mode of defining the presumed cultural inferiority of the Islamic Orient and a part of the vast control mechanism of colonialism, designed to justify and perpetuate the European dominance. This could be applied to Western painting as well. The organizer of the exhibition, David Rosenthal, rejected this analysis, claiming that the French Orientalist painting should be discussed in terms of its aesthetic quality and historical interest, and that no attempt should be made (at the exhibition) to re-evaluate its political uses. According to Linda Nochlin in her essay *The Politic of Vision*,⁸ the degree of realism (or the lack of it) in individual Orientalist images can hardly be discussed without making an attempt at clarifying whose reality are we talking about.⁹ Nochlin has observed certain absence in this type of painting: the absence of history. It suggests that this Oriental world was a world without change, a world of timeless, extemporal customs and rituals, untouched by the historical processes that obstructed or improved the Western societies at the time. Another defining feature of Orientalist painting is a different kind of absence – that of the Western colonial or touristic presence, for whose controlling gaze, the gaze that brings the Oriental world into being, the painting is ultimately intended.¹⁰ According to Lisa Tickner, the neglected, derelict architecture in these paintings, such as the later intervention in the tiled wall on Gérôme’s pseudo-realistic painting *The Snake Charmer* (oil on canvas, 50 x 40 cm) from the late 1860s, aims at indicating the corruption of the Islamic society in the 19th century. The absence of all scenes of work or industry points to the supposed vice of idleness affecting the Islamic people as a sign of decadence of the Islamic countries.¹¹ It is a kind of Selective Mutism (SM). A similar example can be found in the opening sequence of *The Sheltering Sky*, the second among the three films often grouped together as Bertolucci’s “Eastern Trilogy,” besides *The Last Emperor* (1987) and *Little Buddha* (1993). These films all present the volatile personal consequences ensuing from the East-West encounter. *The Sheltering Sky*, a “long, beautifully modulated cry of despair,” as it was described by a critic, is a 1990 British-Italian drama directed by Bernardo Bertolucci, starring Debra Winger and John Malkovich, based on the 1949 novel by Paul Bowles. Three Americans from New York arrive in Tangier in 1947 and start on a trip that will take them deep into the Saharan Desert. The film opens with a title montage of the post-war New York City – the world the film’s characters have just left – “backed by Nelson Riddle-style orchestration with xylophone accents, of a ticker-tape parade, 5th Avenue, Radio City Music Hall, and other landmarks, the Automat, and jitterbug dancing, Central Park in winter and finally, boarding an ocean liner. This archival footage of New York City is

⁸ Linda Nochlin, *The Politic of Vision: Essays On Nineteenth-century Art And Society* (New York: Harper&Row, 1989), p. 34.

⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 37.

¹¹ Lisa Tickner, *Feminism, Art History, and Sexual Difference* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1988), pp. 38-39.

followed by the scene on the dock in Tangier, where a specific ocean liner arrives [...]. The landscape that we know to be 'our' New York is oddly distant, exotic, like something brought back from far away as part of a documentary film perhaps. But that Tangier dock, with its giant rusty cargo crane, warm rich colors, and the cast in their crisp outfits, seems immediate and real. And the contrast makes it easy to understand the expression that one's old life 'seems like a dream'.¹² Getting to know Islam gave Knut Hamsun new insights that also brought deep furrows: poverty, which is peaceful and modest in its suffering, and pleasure found in other things than just money.¹³ "The closer you get to the East the less the people speak... The old sorts of people have outgrown the level of chatter and laughter, they are silent and they just smile. So different to America!" For Hamsun, the Orient was primarily a place of contemplative tranquility, uncluttered with material trifles. Many Western artists reacted to the perceived shallowness of Western materialism during the last decades of the nineteenth century by turning to Eastern philosophy, religion, and culture, understanding that a major difference between East and West was not in the standard, but in the understanding of life. The quoted sentences clearly show Hamsun's "artistically" simplistic view of life occurrences, with Nietzschean aristocratism peeking out of his conclusion (that Hamsun himself countered by his actions) that there was nothing, absolutely nothing comparable in this world to – staying on the sidelines.



5 Marlene Dumas, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 2011

In his *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917), Sigmund Freud suggested that these two forms of grieving – mourning as something that one gets over, and melancholy as a potentially permanent pathological

¹² <http://www.stylusmagazine.com/articles/asecondtake/the-sheltering-sky.htm/>.

¹³ An afterword by Mirko Rimac to Knut Hamsun's book *On Overgrown Paths* (Koprivnica: Šareni dućan, 2009), p. 159.

condition following the loss of an ideal – that the Orient sometimes embodied. Unlike the Italian futurists, whose work was a eulogy to the Western sciences and their industrial applications, the Dadaists in their work reproduced the endless repetition of the industrial era, which failed to fulfill the promise of human betterment embodied in obsolete technology. Thus, Paul Klee and August Macke made a trip to Tunisia in the spring of 1914. Islamic art is by its dogma oriented towards abstract artistic expression, if we exclude certain compromises in the form of using phytomorphic forms, particularly in Asian Islam. There are parallels between modern and contemporary abstract art and Islamic abstraction (such as the talk about the emptiness of contemporary art). “In Macke’s Tunisian works, prism-like forms create unique impressions of the area. In paintings such as *In the Bazaar*, merchants gather with their goods before a precisely-composed, yet fluid backdrop of intense, beautiful colors. Beyond these stunning Tunisian watercolors, Macke also designed Arab-influenced embroidery patterns for his wife to reproduce onto fabric. Sadly, however, this was all part of a final burst of glory on Macke’s part, as he was soon drafted into the German army and sent to the frontlines of World War I. He died during combat in September of 1914, just a few months after returning from his remarkable Tunisian tour.”¹⁴ T. E. Lawrence, named Lawrence of Arabia, was a British army officer with a great ability to identify with the Arab peoples, played by Peter O’Toole in his filmic version from 1962. In a desert war, Lawrence advised, you should get to know “clans and tribes, friends and enemies, wells, hills and roads”. He convinced the Sheikh of Mecca to fight on the British side against the German/Ottoman alliance. Later, in his book *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1922), he deeply regretted having broken the promise he had given to the Sheikh in the name of British, that of a free Arab state. Marlene Dumas has painted the face of *Lawrence of Arabia*, with his bright blue eyes shining under the white keffiyeh (2011), but his face has been smeared and brutalized by the painter’s brush, bringing to mind the graphic photos of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi that followed his gruesome public death and posthumous trial by the media imagery. Exhibited, it hangs beside his fictional counterpart, the face of Peter O’Toole as Lawrence of Arabia (2010-2011) in the *Forsaken* series of portraits, betraying the states of mind of people with tragic lives and fallen from grace. These (in)famous faces have been selected for an idea of the tragic. Vanessa Beecroft has portrayed herself as a white Madonna with two tiny black twins at her breast, recalling her personal experience in the orphanages of Sudan. *2vbss.010.mp vbss South Sudan* (Vanessa Beecroft, 2006) is a re-creation of the iconic image of the Christian Holy Family with the white Madonna, black St Joseph and the baby Christ, with the technical perfection typical of the artist’s work: strong formal balance and an almost obsessive attention to the composition of figures in the group. Vanessa Beecroft’s work *VB65* from 2009 is based on a performance (at the PAC gallery in Milan) of 20 male African immigrants, some of whom arrived in Italy illegally, as a re-creation of Da Vinci’s *Last Supper*. They are seated aligned at one side of a long table, dining, dressed formally in black dinner jackets or suits by Martin Margiela. Some are bare-chested, others barefoot, eating chicken and brown bread with their bare hands in front of an audience of invited guests.

¹⁴ Meg Nola, *Tunisian Tour*, <https://suite.io/meg-nola/1zqk2fk>.



6 Kader Attia, *The Culture of Fear / The Invention of Evil*, 2013



6a Jodi Bibier, *Bibi Aisha*, 2010

“Fear and anxiety are familiar to all” – that was the introduction sentence of the text accompanying the exhibition *Salon of Fear (Salon der Angst)* at the Kunsthalle Museumsquartier Vienna in 2013, which

focused on the generalized feelings of insecurity and threat, but also on the way in which culture shapes both individual and collective experiences of fear and fearful events. Depictions of fear, terror, and distraught are a recurring theme in art history, but also characterize a younger generation's artistic practice that responds to the contemporary society as rife with new and specific fears and insecurities. "Kader Attia stages the dread of others as a process; more precisely, the fear of others and the possibility of overcoming it" (Jens Hinrichsen, curator of the exhibition). Kader Attia's *The Culture of Fear / The Invention of Evil* from 2013, a structure made of metal shelves stretching from the floor to the ceiling, transmits the oppressive feeling of claustrophobia. Hundreds of magazines and newspapers from various epochs and cultural settings are piled up on the shelves, whereby the uppermost always shows a cover page from the colonial period around 1900. These pictures and texts illustrate the Western notion of different ethnic groups as "Sauvagerie" ("the savages"). A comparison with today's Western depictions shows, this notion exploits modern medial forms, yet the question remains as to whether the West's basic attitude has changed as a result. Based on comprehensive research, the French artist's installation tells of the exchange between European and non-European cultures, and the attendant conflicts and misunderstandings. "Muslims and Arabs are essentially seen either as oil suppliers or as potential terrorists". What we have in both eras is a series of crude, essentialized caricatures of the Islamic world. Namely, the light-motive of the installation is the mutilated face of a Mohammadzai known as Bibi Aisha, an Afghan woman whom her father promised to a Taliban fighter when she was 12 years old, in compensation for a murder committed by a member of her family. When she escaped from her unknown husband, her father-in-law, her husband, and three other family members took revenge by bringing her to the mountains, cutting off her nose and ears, and leaving her there to die. The photo of the girl was taken by the South African photographer Jodi Bieber, and since it appeared on the cover of the *Time* magazine in summer 2010, it is sometimes compared to the "Afghan Girl" photograph of Sharbat Gula by Steve McCurry. Shirin Neshat complicates the image of the Muslim woman as a signifier of the Islamic world. She subverts the power of American media clichés that historically use race and gender to label identities according to their socio-political agendas. Neshat addresses Islamism, martyrdom, and social versus private spaces by using conceptual strategies such as body art, performance, and appropriation.¹⁵ Often she is accused of exoticism, yet these images are meant to suggest the viewer's complicity in stereotyping the body marked by nationality, race, and gender.¹⁶ Neshat's extensive portrait photography series *The Book of Kings* (2012) was a focused reflection on national and cultural identity. With three portrait types – face, bust, full body – Neshat presented three categories of personages, *The Masses*, *The Patriots*, and *The Villains*, referencing the simplistic definitions we use to understand historical and contemporary political events. Each of these images featured a different level, as the figures were then covered with a layer of delicate calligraphy or drawing, connecting the various diachronic layers of Iranian history (the references being drawn from the 10th-century Persian epic *Shahnameh* as well as from contemporary Iranian poetry). Lyricism functions via words, but also via images as words are replaced through battle illustrations, precluding the viewer's complacency. On

¹⁵ Erin Devine, "Exoticization as Strategy: Race and Gender in the Photography of Shirin Neshat," at the 67th Annual Southeast College Art Conference in Savannah, GA (2011).

¹⁶ Abstracts from the Annual Meeting in Savannah, GA, November 9-12, 2011.

one photograph, we see only legs, dangling dully in space as if belonging to a hanged victim. “That bloody splash of red, the negative space that engulfs the figure, and the narrative disconnect of the separated limbs all advance the drama presented more subtly throughout the rest of the series.”¹⁷ In *Rapture*, a two-channel video installation by Shirin Neshat made in 1997, the emphasis is on the impossibility of a work of art existing on its own, as a fixed entity, since it is always intertwined with the gender and social identity of the artist. Muslim women are moving through a desert landscape towards the sea, walking without any particular purpose, raising their hands decorated with calligraphy. Men are shown within the fortified walls, rather active, performing a ritual ablution¹⁸ and fighting. They are wearing white shirts and aggressively establishing the boundaries of their own space, while the women are shrouded in black veils in the limitless desert, demonstrating the complexity of Islamic femininity because of its perceived social suppression. “In the beginning of the film, men explore their new environment, while women are passive. But the situation soon changes: women accept the risk of their initiative outside of the walled space and sail out to the sea in small boats. The scene of pushing the boats into the sea evokes the uncertainty that a woman fleeing into exile for cultural reasons is faced with.”¹⁹



7 Shirin Neshat, *Rapture*, 2007

¹⁷ <http://www.art-thoughts.com/2012/10/26/a-regal-exhibit/>.

¹⁸ Its excessive execution is today's *ALS Ice bucket challenge*.

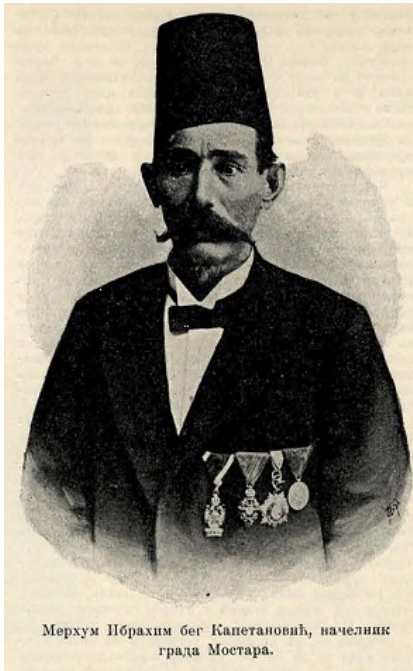
¹⁹ Enesa Mahmić, *Rapture Shirin Neshat*, 2012; <http://www.film.ba/eseji/627-enesa-mahmic-rapture-shirin-neshat>



8 Ahlam Shibli, *untitled (Trackers no. 32)*, Arab al-Shibli, Israel / Palestine, 2005

The work of Palestinian photographer Ahlam Shibli, characterized by a documentary aesthetics, deals with the contradictory implications of the notion of home in various locations, inherent to the repressive politics of identity. In the occupied Palestinian territory, a whole cult has been formed around the photos of Palestinian fighters, often suicide bombers, who died in war against Israel. A special cycle of Shibli's photographs portrays homosexual, bisexual, and transsexual people in Western clubs. These people of "obscure" visual identity, however, originate from the Middle East, especially the Islamic societies, in which being gay is not only socially unacceptable, but is also considered contrary to the doctrine of the Qur'an and therefore punishable by death. The *Trackers* are Palestinians of Bedouin origin, volunteers in the Israeli army in Shibli's photographs (gelatin silver print, 37 x 55.5 cm) wearing camouflage uniforms and mimicry patterns on their bodies. They serve in the Israeli army in order to be accepted by the dominant group or simply to survive, or for practical reasons, namely because after three years of service they may buy land from the Israelis cheaply. It is still a job tied to a strong sense of shame – the artist, however, avoids any preconception, semiotic and in terms of stereotypes of the photographic medium. In his essay *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes has observed that a photograph can be viewed from three angles: that of the *Operator* (photographer) who has created it, the *Spectator* who observes it, and the passive aspect of the target or referent being photographed (*spectrum*). When observing images, he sees the structural rule that his interest in them is based on the co-presence of two elements, which he calls *studium* and *punctum*. The scope of the *studium* includes field activities that are products of knowledge as well as moral and political culture, and it comes from the observer, directing him to investigate the semantic content of images in relation to his or her own personality. The *punctum* denotes a sudden realization of the meaning, the details of a photograph whose presence concerns the observers, reaching from it like sting and causing changes in its reading. And while the *studium* is always culturally coded, the *punctum* is not, and it sweeps

away all knowledge and all culture, operating directly and sharply even if it is often impossible to locate or identify. Testifying about what happened, a photograph is simultaneously telling us what would happen next, which is best seen in historical photographs. The *Death* series displays the memorabilia and family homes in Palestinian refugee camps in the region of Nablus, where people were suffering martyrdom during the Second Intifada (2000-2005). The one who was absent is made present again by being re-presented: the martyrs, *shahids* and *shahidas*, men and women suicide bombers who have blown up their own bodies, as well as soldiers in prisons serving a life sentence, are present on these photographs, graffiti, and posters that are intrusively everywhere, while the martyrs' tombs are decorated with the personal belongings of the deceased. A special section of this artwork by Shibli consists of the letters and diaries of prisoners, written as intimately addressing those whom they were supposed to reach so to trick the strict control of the prison censors. Sometimes there are also intimate confessions in the diaries, occasionally painted, and usually submitted to the family after the prisoner's death. The cycle called *Portrait* was made in 2000. It captures a play of girls and boys in the open field, in the vicinity of the village where the artist was born in 1970. The bare field, with a settlement on the horizon, takes on the quality of an "existential territory", using the words of French philosopher Felix Guattari, of a place of resistance within the official territory of the state. The photographic image is here not a self-sufficient work of art, but achieves its meaning through the photographic narrative syntax, i.e. in the context of other images. Unlike Edward Saïd, an American that was born in Jerusalem, or Mona Hatoum, a Lebanese of Palestinian origins living in London, Ahlam Shibli still lives in Israel. The Palestinians, borrowing an expression from Hannah Arendt, are constantly denied the right to being entitled to a right, so Shibli in her work depicts the lack of rootedness inherent to the inhabitants of the border areas, of places with unstable borders, as well as the expatriates. Photography is a medium that fits the portrayal of a community that exists through memory, or through the mechanisms of memory, while the artist uses following modules: Foster's archival impulse of the contemporary art, i.e. usage of historical documents, and Husserl's phenomenological approach, where "starting from the phenomena of pure intentional acts of pure consciousness, it tends to make visible their immanent essence, as well as the essence of the things themselves." Photography is also technology-mediated as it captures the physical existence of the body, be it a person or a community, and also its real and symbolic disappearance.



Мерхум Ибрахим бег Капетановић, начелник
града Мостара.

9 Ibrahim beg Kapetanović, commander of Mostar (died in 1896)



9a Silvije Strahimir Kranjčević, 1886 (while on duty in Mostar)

Another topic is questioning the function of art in today's societies, where "all men are equal in their fundamental uncertainty" (Mark Terkessidis). While in the Western countries the accessibility of information becomes more important than actually possessing things – because goods can be acquired relatively easily ("Our time makes arrangements for a veritable sale, not only in a world of trade, but also in a world of ideas..." was a conclusion of Kierkegaard under the pseudonym of Johannes de Silentio), in transitional and post-transitional Eastern European countries, during the last two decades, people are fascinated by consumption (which is partly a consequence of the fact that a

person does not own the product of his work, but only the product he or she has bought), so that whole families go for an excursion to the consumerist oases – shopping malls. Ljubo Karaman (one of the most prominent art historians in Croatia) has introduced to the general art history notions that originated in the provincial, marginal, and peripheral milieu (listed by their degree of value), categorical notions under which certain instances of national art can be classified. The collapse of the notion of distance, eliminating the difference between near and far as a consequence of the growing speed of communication, and the parallelism of the dialectically opposed processes of mondialization and regionalization are all unquestionable characteristics of the contemporary world. Thus, identity, with the collapse of one-time integrations and the emergence of new, contemporary ones, becomes merely a performative category. *Artist at Work* (1978) is a series of images of a sleeping artist, Mladen Stilinovic. In his text *The Praise of Laziness* from 1993 Stilinovic states: “There is no art without laziness.” „Artists in the West are not lazy. Artists from the east are lazy; whether they will stay lazy now when they are no longer Eastern artists, remains to be seen... Artists in the West are not lazy and therefore not artists but rather producers of something.“²⁰ During the communist regime, Stilinovic's work had strong symbolic connotations. The color red held a unique position among signs in the communist state, and thus became the starting point for many of his works. For Stilinovic, the opposite of red is pink, and, seen as the color of the bourgeoisie, it also became the subject of the artist's interest. During years of war, when the state of Yugoslavia fell apart, he produced a series of objects in white, a color representing pain and grief. After the collapse of socialism, the artist directed his interest towards more contemporary hegemonies, expressed through the English language. His work *An Artist Who Cannot Speak English Is No Artist* (1994–96) is a well-known example.

The Croatian context²¹ is peripheral, according to Karaman's classification. But the Balkan region is also a sort of Orient for the European West. The young gallerist Erih Šlomović, also known as Erich Chlomovitch, a Jew from Yugoslavia born in 1912, inherited part of the collection of Ambroise Vollard, a French collector to whom he was a prosperous assistant. Šlomović intended to open a Museum of Eastern and Western Art (after a project by Le Corbusier) in Belgrade, the capital of Serbia, because he considered it as a location at the crossroad of cultures, but was killed in the Holocaust. Fashion *a la turca* and *a la Frango* in Bosnia and Herzegovina was especially characteristic of the very end of the 19th and during the 20th century, as can be observed, for example, in the way Bosnian dignitaries were dressed when visiting the world exhibitions of 1896, 1897, 1898, and 1900, in a characteristic combination of suits *a la Frango* with a bowtie or a tie, but wearing the fez on their heads. Such a way of dressing at the turn of the century was common for prominent citizens regardless of their ethnic or religious affiliation, so even the Catholic Croatian poet Silvije Strahimir Kranjčević wore the traditional costume of Herzegovina with a vest and a wide belt, completed with a tie, during his first service in Mostar (as seen in a photo from 1886). The Dadaist Ljubomir Micić would characterize that pastiche culture as “barbarogenous”. The Dadaist magazine *Zenit*, established in Yugoslavia by the same

²⁰ Mladen Stilinovic, *The Praise of Laziness*, 1993.

Read for the first time in the Gallery Opus Operandi, Gent, May 2, 1993. Published for the first time in the journal Kolo, no. 11-12, Zagreb, 1993

²¹ Former Yugoslavia and the ex-South-Eastern Europe, in a country that was at war in 1991-1995 and then a transitional and post-transitional country, now in the European Union.

Ljubomir Micić in 1922, was modeled upon Expressionist journals. *Zenit* had borrowed and imported the avant-garde program, modulating it to propose the “new Balkan man” or *barbarogenius* (Williams recognizes the Balkan activism that needs repression and imposed inhibitions to ignite) – which does not only deny and criticize capitalism and its system of values, logic, and rationalism, but also proposes new creative concepts.



10 Vatroslav Mimica (director), *Banović Strahinja*, 1981

The ex-Yugoslav territory of the Balkans was the border area or the bulwark of Christendom. After the Ottoman conquest in the 15th century, the Catholics of Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as Dalmatia, used to tattoo their girls with the sign of the cross on their hands, forehead, and chest in order to make them repugnant to the Muslims, and in case they were still taken into the harem, to have a memory of their community. This custom survived until 1938, and the last tattooing was done in 1984, on a girl born in 1969. The “Sworn Virgin” is the term denoting a biological woman in the Balkans, in the highlands of Albania and Montenegro, who has willingly chosen or has been chosen by her family to take on the social identity of a man for life. Dating back hundreds of years, this custom was necessary in the societies where there was shortage of men due to the permanent Ottoman threat and where people lived within tribal clans and followed the Kanun, an archaic code of law that stated that women were considered as property. The “Sworn Virgins” used to dress, work, and live as men, and stayed in their parents’ houses. Strahinja Banović or Strahinjić Ban is the name of a nobleman and knight depicted in the Serbian epic poem of the same title. It is unsure whether he existed or not. As stated in the poem, Strahinja ruled over a small territory near Kosovo (*Kraj Kosova*) prior to the Battle of Kosovo in the 14th century. Croatian film director Vatroslav Mimica made a film called *Banović Strahinja* in 1981, and there is a scene of abduction of his wife Andjelija by a Turk, Bashi-bazouk Vlah Alija, who ravaged Strahinja’s castle in absence. First ashamed of her nudity, Andjelija stands naked in front of the Different Other, asking him: “What are you laughing at, you slave?” An officer immediately approaches Alija with a bowed head, begging him: “Alia wait, give her to me for the tent and I shall serve you loyally for life.” But Alija pulls out his sword and cuts off the nobleman’s head, then abducts the beautiful lady of the house, but not taking her by force. They spend long hours in his tent, talking.

Finally, she gives herself over willingly. Later on, her husband is expected to blind her for her sin and leave her in the convent, where she shares fate with other blind women with scarred faces, of similar destinies and life choices.

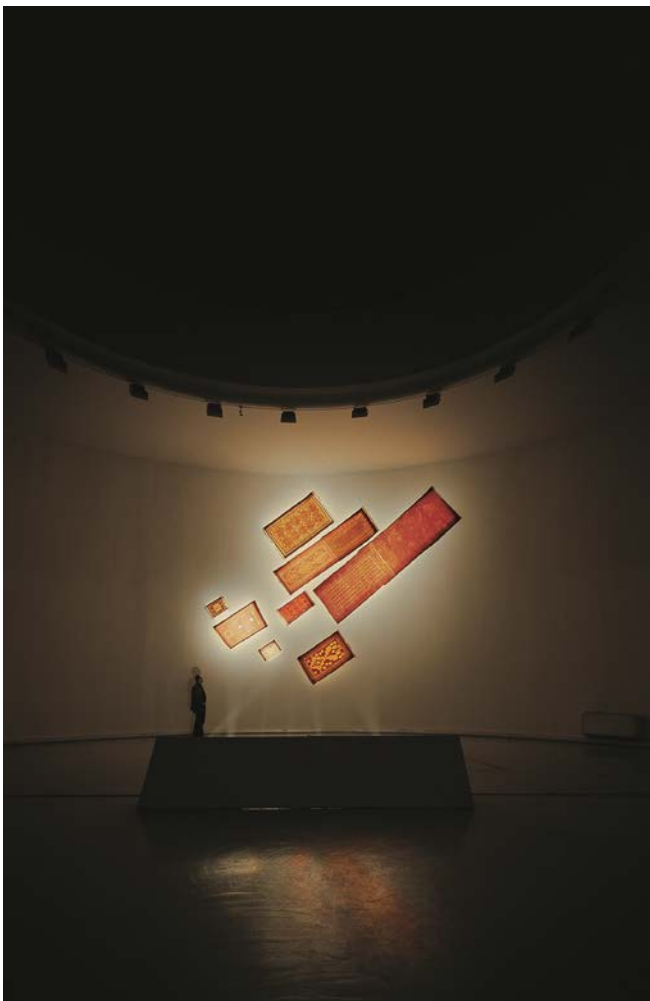
The Turkish syllables BAL (“honey”) and KAN (“blood”) in the title of the exhibition *Blood& Honey: Future's in the Balkans*, held in 2003 at Klosterneuburg near Vienna, Austria (curated by Harald Szeemann for Collection ESSL) evokes “the poles of anger and tenderness, disaster and idyll, of something deeply human and universal.” *Future's in the Balkans* pointed not only to a South-Eastern Europe that has not yet accomplished its multi-ethnic unity, but also to the links between all these multilingual ethnicities and religions, majorities and minorities, in the form of art. It was not a matter of displaying exotica, but of awakening the Western sensitivity to the existence of this specific cultural landscape, the countries of South-Eastern Europe represented as nations. For the 4th Austrian Triennial of Photography in Graz (Austria) in 2003, Slovakian artist Roman Ondák took an oriental rug and slung it over the balcony of the City Hall in Graz, an Austrian and Western-European city historically bordering on the Balkan countries. The polychrome surface of the rug on a gray, neo-baroque façade incorporated a multitude of cultures and peoples in peaceful coexistence within the city. Ondák then exhibited a photo of the City Hall with the oriental carpet as a coloristic accent at a travel agency located on the main square in Graz, so that it could be seen only during the agency's office hours. The act of transposing artworks contributes to an understanding of the places from which they arose. Art is not a mirror, but a way of defining identity, which today is not based on belonging to a nation or a cultural circle. Damir Sokić is a contemporary Croatian artist; his installation entitled *The Suprematist Composition Allah-o-akbar* (Arabic for “God is Great” from 2007 is a wall arrangement consisting of 8 carpets-kilims of various dimensions in a composition that is 8 meters high), an allusion to the history of the building designed by Ivan Meštrović, an echo of the “pure feeling” of Malevich's Suprematism, the inner human need for religious affiliation, and the iconoclasm of Islamic art, all of these coming from different cultural and artistic codes. In a number of his earlier works made before 2007, Sokić used Malevich's composition *Suprematist Painting: Eight Red Rectangles* from 1915 (oil on canvas, 57.5 x 48.5 cm, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam) with eight red rectangles on a white background. It is also recognizable in Sokić's composition *Allah-o-akbar*, with real carpets that are lit and mounted on the walls of the interior of the Croatian Artists' Association in Zagreb, which at some point (during World War II) actually served as a mosque. Sokić reconnects the space with its historical background by means of the material he used to construct the work – “a flying jihad, enlightened and mystical.”²² By using different light sources, the artist stresses the red borders of the multicolored carpets set up on the gallery wall, reminiscent of Malevich's painting, where erubescence rectangles are immersed in thick and soft whiteness, while the intense and deep red evaporates and radiates an invisible aura in “free navigation through infinite space,”²³ in Malevich's words.²⁴ Such a composition

²² Mladen Lučić, *Damir Sokić, Dead Ends*, exhibition catalogue (Zagreb: Klovićevi dvori Gallery, 2013-2014), p. 27.

²³ “Everything which we loved is lost. We are in a desert.... Before us is nothing but a black square on a white background!... I realized that the ‘thing’ and the ‘concept’ were substituted for feeling and understood the falsity of the world of will and idea.”

²⁴ Vera Horvat Pintarić, *Tradicija i moderna* (Zagreb: Gliptoteka HAZU, 2009), p. 547.

has become an ideogram that we do not recognize only as Malevich's, but also as Sokić's. Furthermore, these real carpets have been transposed in the form of prints onto canvas in Damir Sokić's work entitled *Kaaba* (2009). Properly aligned, they hang on the wall or are stacked upon each other, creating a paraphrase of the Kaaba in the architectural typology of a mosque. By changing the materials and the arrangement, a carpet acquires an entirely different connotation – in this case the association with Malevich disappears. It is interesting to observe how different layers of meaning grow into one another and which new meanings consequently appear in relation to the earlier works. The original idea is frozen in time by changing the material or its position, so that the present is always the same, but in a different way. In February 2008, Galerie Nord in Tiergarten (Berlin) was closed during the exhibition of satirical works of a Danish artist who made fun of Islamic radicalism and produced posters with the Kaaba of the Grand Mosque in Mecca with the inscription "stupid stone" added, which prompted a group of young Muslims to violently storm the gallery.



11 Damir Sokić, *The Suprematist Composition Allah-o-akbar*, 2007

Photography by Damir Fabijanić



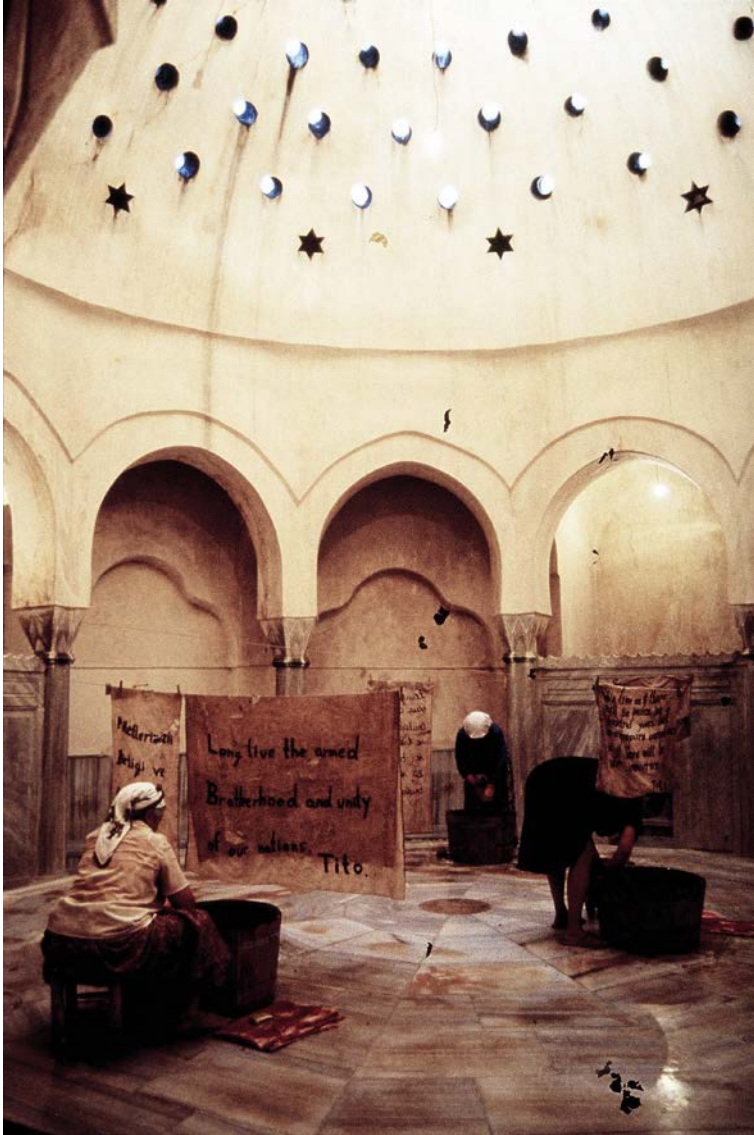
12 Igor Grubić, *Missing Architecture*, 2012

Another contemporary artist from Croatia, Igor Grubić, attached a pair of loudspeakers on the façade of the same pavilion in which Damir Sokić's *Allah-o-akbar* was exhibited (centre of the Croatian Artists' Association), where the Adhan, the Islamic call for prayer that lasts for three minutes, was repeated twice a day. With his ecumenical work *Whenever I Hear...* (36th Zagreb Salon, 2002) Grubić addressed one of the historical strata of the edifice which, as it is known, was redesigned as a mosque during World War II by adding three round minarets (demolished in 1948, but the nickname "Mosque" remained). The morning call for prayer from the minaret and the penetrating ringing of the bell from the Christian tower somewhat contradict the exhortation to internal silence and introspection, to "focusing attention on one's own internal being", but "isn't it strange how people fight so gladly for their faith, and at the same time so reluctantly live in accordance to its laws" (Lichtenberg). Grubić's audio installation, a loud sound of the Adhan resounding over the square, having penetrated the everyday life of people living in the neighborhood, was switched off after five days of the exhibition, owing to a swift intervention, and could be heard again only a few days before the closure, but very quietly and only right in front of the "Mosque". In 2012, Igor Grubić presented his *Missing Architecture*, an installation made of carpets and a series of five photos (46 x 68 cm). The project was realized in cooperation with the Muslim community of Modica (Sicily) and dealt with the subject of Muslim communities on the island. For more than a decade, Lampedusa has been a primary transit point for immigrants coming to Europe from Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. By 2014, over 50 million "clandestine" (Italian for the "illegals") came and infectious diseases in reception camps have become a problem. During his research for the project, Grubić noticed that, despite the fact that there was a large Muslim community present, not a single mosque had been erected. The objective of his *Missing Architecture* was to emphasize this fact and to insert in public space those elements which, in a symbolical sense, represented the missing place of worship for the Muslim people. In this artistic intervention, he made use of three elements which symbolically represented the foundations, the walls, and the minaret of the fictional mosque in a kind of theatricalization of public space (he placed several carpets on the squares, attached posters with Oriental mosaics on the walls of the old city, and organized the first Adhan on Sicily sung by the Muezzin – a call to prayer in public space, resounding in different locations).



13 Damir Nikšić, *If I Was Not Muslim*, 2005

At *The Misfits* exhibition in Berlin (Kreuzberg, 2001), held at the former hospital Kunstraum Bethanien, Croatian artist Dalibor Martinis set up an audio installation in a tree in a public park – passers-by considered it as poetic and even (over)charming, for what they heard sounded like the chanting of a song-bird, but it was yet another “audio-anamorphosis”, a “camouflaged” binary code revealing itself only to those who knew the Morse code – the bird, namely, swore like a trooper in an “auditory anamorphosis” (the installation’s title was *A Garden of the Most Obscure Curses*; if there were a “body” of Balkan identity, it would be an inventive, juicy curse). Martinis’s work revoked the Modernist notion of art, where ethical and ideological issues (even “aesthetic violence”, conflict instead of pleasure) annulled the aesthetic issues of presentation and form. The curse is a symbolic abstraction, and language is a powerful marker of our identity. In the contemporary Bosnian art, Damir Nikšić from Sarajevo produced a video called *If I was not Muslim* (200x), made up as a Broadway-style musical and a recreation of the *Fiddler on the Roof* (music by Jerry Bock, libretto by Sheldon Harinck, named after Chagall’s painting *The Violinist*), which addressed the issue of multicultural Europe. Maja Bajević’s work comments on issues from the recent history, such as collective identity and the construction/deconstruction of history, ideology, and sociology. Questioning the usual conceptions and prejudices that people have regarding the refugees, Bajević staged herself with four women refugees from Srebrenica in the same position and the same clothing as in a painting by the 17th-century Dutch painter Frans Hals. The video is a documentation of a five-day performance at Château Voltaire, Ferney Voltaire, France, in 2000. At a second level of reflection, the role of the Dutch observers was presented through a remake of the painting done in the Dutch-Flemish style. The Dutch forces had been part of the UN observers in Srebrenica, where a massacre and ethnic cleansing of the male Muslim population occurred in 1995. In her collective performances, Maja Bajević relocated women’s handwork – washing, stitching, and sewing – to public space, transforming these arts into the domestic practices of female knowledge and historical memory. At the hamam, women washed pieces of fabric with political slogans until the material was deconstructed, or the power constructs just faded.



14 Maja Bajević, *Women at Work – Washing up (Trilogy)*, 2001



15 The “Polish Plumber”, poster, 2005

In the contemporary city, marketing displays are a landscape of “seduction” – Zlatko Kopljar in *K9 Compassion*, project from the year 2003, performs kneeling in such urban landscapes. The media are no longer understood as instruments for popularizing social culture; they are a new form of culture.

Photographs made in the standard format and technique of billboards (UV-print on plastic foil) show the artist kneeling on a white handkerchief, dressed in a white shirt and black suit, with his head bent and his arms hanging down his body, in a posture of mute and passive adoration in the symbolic spaces of political, cultural, and economic power. Digital media give a new meaning to montage and narration, the semantic construction of an image. Jean Baudrillard has explained the notion of hyper-reality as a way to describe the world in which images no longer represent actual objects, but lead the observer to another image, then to the next one, in an endless sequence. In this globalised world, Western creativity is (supposingly) drying up, while its amalgamation with the East brings forth a new perspective. I would like to mention another example of the European East being Eastern to the European West, yet assuring it to be Western in its attributes. The “Polish plumber” cliché symbolizes the fear of cheap Eastern European labor threatening the jobs of West Europeans. The “Polish plumber” (French: *le plombier polonais*, Polish: *polski hydraulik*) was a phrase first used by Philippe Val in Charlie Hebdo and popularized by Philippe de Villiers as a symbol of cheap labor coming from Eastern Europe as a result of the *Directive on Services in the Internal Market*, promulgated at the EU Constitution referendum in France in 2005. The phrase became well known after Frits Bolkestein, the creator of the *Directive*, noted during a press conference that he would like to hire a Polish plumber because he found it hard to find a good handyman for his second house in northern France. The proclamation caused a considerable controversy and debate in France. The mayor of the village in which Bolkestein resided gave him a list of available plumbers he had found in the phone book. The phrase then sparked a controversy during the EU Constitution referendum concerning the motivations of the opponents to the treaty – were those nationalist considerations, or just the opposite. The “Polish plumber” was also featured on a seductive poster by the Polish tourism board in response to what was perceived as negative rhetoric against Poland. The *Polish Plumber*, portrayed by the 21-year-old male model Piotr Adamski, handsome, blond, buffed and blow-dried, with a come-hither half-smile on his face declaring “Je reste en Pologne, venez nombreux”,²⁵ beckoned French tourists to come to Poland, assuring the French that he intended to stay at home (away from their jobs).²⁶

Presented at the XLVII AICA International Congress South Korea 2014.

²⁵ “I am staying in Poland, do come!”

²⁶ Article by Elaine Sciolino in *New York Times* (June 26, 2005).