

## Press Review

LAPIZ. International Art Magazine, 1989

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Frontier between Art and Reality

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" To tell the story of the workers of the sea... to get to know these people. To reveal the wisdom unique to each one of them and the wisdom shared by all. To compose images and sounds out of the many fragments of a reality formulated and anchored in the words and intentions of the workers we have interviewed. To create an aesthetic, plastic language which can serve as our contribution to the culture of the working world."

The above text quite admirably summarises the essence of *Les métiers de la mer*, an installation created in 1982, which included a video display called *The Sea: The World Upside Down*. In this display Nil Yalter and Nicole Croiset successfully capture in visual terms a belief held by workers of the sea in medieval times. They do this by putting one monitor on top of another, both of which contain the same image of the sea, with one of them shown upside down. The result is exceedingly beautiful. Nil Yalter was born in Egypt, raised in Turkey and is now of French nationality. No matter what subject she chooses to depict, whether it be work, the body, confinement, exile, and no matter who the *main actors* are, be it the Turkish immigrants who work in the clothing factories, the woman held prisoner in La Roquette, Egypt, of the Marquis de Sade, Nil Yalter uses her own, unique *socio-poetic* language, a system of signs she has created that enables her to tread that delicate and often ambiguous borderline area between art and reality. Nil Yalter composes, or rather *builds* in the sense that an architect does, in this *area* where the different elements of reality and art are brought together. She builds up themes by freely combining different elements (images, texts, objects) with diverse techniques (drawings, painting on paper or leather, video, photography, or the graphic palette, with which she is able to achieve an exceptionally wide range of colors). Her works could be defined as *dynamic reading spaces* which, depending on the subject, include performances or rituals such as childbirth and hunting, events which discriminate between the role of the sexes in the everyday tasks of survival.

Her art, defined as *ethnocritical* rather than sociological, combines the methodology of a researcher, an ethnologist, with the sensitivity of an artist. This is true of her countless number of individual works as well as the ones that were created in collaboration with other artists, sociologists and ethnologists, especially those in which Bernard Dupaigne of the Museum of Man participated.

Nil Yalter is conscientious and demanding in the scientific aspect of her work while allowing herself total freedom in the artistic aspect. She discloses the critical content of a given situation by means of intricately woven poetic imagery whose beauty, rather than interfering with the message, only serves to make it more comprehensible. The appreciation of the cognitive realm of her work, together with the emotional impact of its aesthetic dimension, combine to enhance the understanding of the artist's intentions.

Ever since Nil Yalter decided to abandon her comfortable life as a well-known abstract painter in Turkey and take up permanent residence in France, she has managed her fascination with technology into a form of art that combines the mystical world with the *logic* of the industrial world, reflecting in part her nostalgia for the richness of her native cultural heritage.

Q.-

Your art is usually classified as *sociological art*, but you prefer to call it *ethnological art*. Why?

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N.Y.-

Well, technically speaking, all art is sociological. But I think that my work is too baroque to be considered sociological. I never impose limits on myself in any way. If I want to combine drawing or even painting with video, I do so without hesitating. This may be the reason why some people consider my work to be a little baroque. In any case, ethnologist in that I collect specimen and classify them, etc. If I would decide to do a sociological project some day, I guess it would have to be more linear, stricter and more consistent within the forms I use and with how I express myself in general.

Q.-

And yet you don't want to do this.

N.Y.-

No, I don't. You know, at the beginning they used to tell me that I mixed too many things in my work, or that I used too many colors, that the effect was too decorative compared to the seriousness of its theme, which was always of a socio-political nature. I've kept on using this type of free style which I call *baroque-oriental* despite these criticism. It's this oriental character that allows me to mix different elements and different techniques. If I often resort to repetition of the mirror motif, etc., it's because they appear frequently in oriental art, which is very ornamental, and because it's very effective and adapts well to the themes I choose to work on.

Q.-

Even though your methodology is like that of an ethnologist, your objectives are quite different.

N.Y.-

Of course they are, because I'm an artist and my work is a search for my own identity through the objects and people that my work portrays. If you look closely at my photographs or videos, for example *Rahime, femme kurde de Turquie*, *La Roquette, prison de femmes* or *La communauté des travailleurs turcs en France*, you'll notice that there is always a spatial relationship between the men and women that appear and the objects around them, such as the table that they sew on, the tools that they use, etc. Rather than concentrate on their behaviour, I work on the relationship between their *body language* and surrounding objects. But of course there is a critical aspect to my work as well, thus the term *ethnocritical art*. When I do a multi-media installation concerning the immigrant workers, their native culture and Kurdish poetry in exile, for example, my work will naturally have a documentary quality about it. The people talk directly to the camera about their problems, their circumstances, etc., but I don't impose the critical aspect. This emerges on its own from the situation that is being portrayed.

Q.-

Yes, but you choose these subjects because they contain a socio-political aspect that invites criticism.

N.Y.-

Of course I do, but I allow the criticism to reveal itself through the relationship between image/object or man/woman. And naturally, since my work is the work of an artist, I organize it and structure it the way I want to, according to my own aesthetic judgement. But no matter what form I choose to give it, the real content, the critical aspect, will always reveal itself. For instance, the newsmen on TV are always making commentaries and offering analyses that manipulate the way we perceive the situation being discussed. I never do this. My voice is never heard. I let my subjects talk. Of course I have to do some editing, but I keep it to minimum.

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Q.-

Have you ever felt tempted to highlight the artistic aspect of a given work as opposed to the ethnological aspect, of vice versa? I imagine that it must be difficult to achieve a true balance between the two.

N.Y.-

One is always of greater or lesser importance than the other. Sometimes I favor the subject matter, giving more importance to its significance; other times I concentrate mainly on the artistic expression – this is true especially of my most recent work.

The form arises almost naturally from the methodology that I apply in exploring the topic and in how I decide to present it. When creating socio-political works, the form arises from the ethnological methodology that is used. But at other times, for example in my current work on the Marquis de Sade, the methodology is more personal, more intimate: I make it up as I go along. I barely think at all about Sade's texts while I am filming, but I'm sure that the form that this work eventually assumes will reflect the basic elements of Sade's ideas.

Knowing where the work will be displayed also determines its form to some extent, if I know it beforehand. This was true of *Les métiers de la mer*, an installation that I created on a 16th century tower two storeys high, located right on the sea. Nicole and I decided to put the installation on two platforms, one above the other. The installation on the top rotated, projecting images on the inside wall of the tower. The work on Sade, for example, will be installed in a magnificent crypt. There will be no interviews in this installation, nor will there be reported material in need of interpretation, etc. My experience as a woman artist and the many years that I have been working will determine the final form that this work concerning confinement and the human body will take.

Q.-

You began as an abstract painter in Turkey. What led you to start working in *ethnocritical art*? In principle they seem to be two very different ways of approaching art.

N.Y.-

I was born in Egypt, but when I was three my family returned to Istanbul, where I lived until I was 28 years old. I had a very religious grandmother who looked after me and encouraged me to take up painting. At that time there were no museums or art galleries in Istanbul. Well, there was a School of Fine Arts with a few professors who had studied in Paris. But you must remember that until Ataturk appeared on the scene, Turkey was not a secular country, so that the human body was hardly ever seen. Turkish painting in the beginning of this century was very beautiful: the pictures were usually of people who blended into lovely landscapes. But all these paintings were hidden away in the cellars of a non-existent museum. I was lucky because my parents bought me all of the Skira books which taught me a lot about painting. Then I met some Turkish artists who had been in Paris. They exposed me to Malevich, which just about changed my life, and introduced me to a very important book called the *Dictionary of Abstract Art*, by Michael Souphor. The pictures were stamp-size. Seeing abstract art was like a revelation to me, and since I was already very familiar with Byzantine and Ottoman art, it didn't take me long to get a feel for it. I was especially fascinated by Poliakof.

Q.-

You came to Paris in 1965. This was the first direct contact that you had with this type of art, which up until then you had only seen in books.



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N.Y.-

It was an incredible shock. I didn't work at all during the first year. I was especially impressed by Warhol's *pop-art*. I thought to myself: I'm a century behind this, maybe my work can't even be considered art anymore. But I immediately assured myself that I was an artist, if for no other reason than the fact that I was so deeply affected by what I was seeing. For several years I worked very little and suffered a lot. Finally, I began to paint. I did very cold and geometrical abstract paintings inspired by architectural forms. The truth is it took me five years to decide what direction I wanted to take. My first important exhibition took place in 1973 at ARC, the Museum of Contemporary Art of Paris. I called it *Topak EV I*. The central theme of the show was the *yourte*. In 1971 I had gone back to Turkey, which was suffering severe repression at the time due to several recent political events. I became interested in the tents of the nomads and nomadic life in general. The nomads could no longer roam freely because the lands that formerly belonged to the community were now privately owned. The *yourte* symbolizes their freedom. Curiously enough, however, the women who build these round tents in the shape of a womb practically spend their whole lives inside of them, sheltered from the real world outside. From the time she's a teenager, the woman spends her time decorating the tent and making it as beautiful as possible, this being considered an important attribute in a wife. A lot of prestige is given to the parents of a girl who gets married. The *yourte* is in fact symbolic of the relation of the father's world to the husband's.

I also became interested in the clothing worn by Chaman women. I visited the Museum of Man often in order to look at their costumes adorned with fringe representing the favors that fall from heaven to earth, like the rain, etc. That's how I met the ethnologist Bernard Dupaigne, current director of the Museum of Man. I had read a lot by him, and also by Mircea Eliade.

Q.-

There's no touch of nostalgia in your work about the nomads.

N.Y.-

No, not at all. Their life is extremely hard, even now, and yet now they are really only seminomadic. During the winter they live in makeshift houses – they are not much to speak of, but still, they are houses. In the Springtime they follow their flocks to the fertile pastures. What really surprised me was the fact that most of the nomads have a father, son, or brother who has left the nomadic lifestyle to go and look for work in Germany, for example, without even trying to make a living in the outskirts of Istanbul. The working class in these outlying areas is made up of Anatolian nomads or farmers of nomadic descent who have had to resort to living in the monster-city. They live in insanitary shacks made out of material found in the trash and in the streets that are somewhat reminiscent of the tents of their former, nomadic lives. Certain socio-political elements of the former nomadic society are evident in the social structure of the nomads living in the big, industrial cities today. This is what made me decide to do something on the nomads living in the big cities. I asked Bernard Dupaigne if he would like to work with me. We went back to Istanbul together and started working on *Temporary Rooms*, which we finished 1977.

Q.-

You hadn't begun to use the video yet.

N.Y.-

No, I first used the video in *La Roquette, prison de femmes*, another project that also deals with confinement in all aspects of the word, both physical and psychological.

Q.-

What made you think of doing something about a prison that doesn't exist anymore?

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N.Y.-

I met an American woman painter that was living in Paris at the time and we decided to do a photographic study of the twenty different neighbourhoods in the city, as seen from the perspective of two foreigners, of two women in exile, although at that time I was still a voluntary one. When we got to the eleventh, we saw the outside wall of the huge prison for women that hadn't been demolished yet. We thought it would be very interesting to find out more about what life was like inside of it. As luck would have it, one day my friend was taking her son to school when she met a woman who had spent one year in the prison. So we decided to do the project. The woman described what the cells were like, what it was like to live inside there, etc., while we took pictures with a camera, taped with the video and drew pictures of the prison from the inside. We recorded her as she talked to us about it. This work forms part of *Paris ville lumiere*, but it is also a work that stands on its own.

Q.-

In this case you made contact by chance, but at other times you have to approach the people that you would like to work with. How do you establish this relationship? What's the first step? Asking them to participate in a sociological study is not the same as asking them to collaborate in an artistic work.

N.Y.-

In the case of the nomads it was easier because I hadn't started using the camera yet, so the work consisted of recoding what the people told me, my own impressions, collecting objects that were given to me, etc. I was primarily interested in their living space, their relationship with surrounding objects; it was a sort of re-structuring, if you like. I had to start using a camera when I began to work on temporary rooms in the big cities. And I've never taken a picture without getting the person's permission beforehand. Nicole and I once decided to do something on the Turkish community living in Gence. We got in touch with the women, took pictures, etc. That night their husbands (some of them were quite influenced by integrationism) came to us and asked for the negatives. We gave them to them, of course, and *then* stopped working on the project. The people have to feel very much a part of the project for it to work. So you explain it to them and logically enough the first things they ask are: who is paying me, and exactly what do I plan to do with the material? I answer them very openly. The video camera opens many doors because of its *immediacy*: people are fascinated by it. I think of it as a kind of psychoanalytic mirror. And in the end they are the first ones to see the results; I give the people that I work with photographs of video-cassettes if they indicate that they are interested. And they usually come to the exhibit as well.

Q.-

You frequently resort to a kaleidoscopic effect in your videos. It seems as though the influence of the oriental world is clearly felt in your approach to advanced technology.

N.Y.-

Yes, the oriental world has influenced my work in the way I repeat patterns that are geometrically-shaped – a characteristic which is typical of oriental tapestries and rugs. I'm a bit removed from that at the moment, however, because I don't think it's appropriate for my current work. But I use repetition, the so-called *mirror* effect, depending on where I do the video taping. For example, the Turkish immigrants that work in the clothing factory on the rue St. Denis in Paris live and work in a very small area, and they're always looking at the wall of the window in front of them. You get the feeling that they're always looking at a mirror which throws their own reflections back at them. They don't communicate with the outside world. They never go out. They work, live and sleep in the same space. It's a circular system that revolves around itself. This brings us back to the *yourte* that we talked about before, the enclosed world of women, an enclosure that's almost womb-like.

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Q.-

Another element that appears frequently in your work is the hand: the hand that takes away the stones to uncover the text underneath, the hand that takes the symbolic apple, etc. Why do you use this particular combination of hand, object and text?

N.Y.-

In the case of *C'est un dur métier que l'exil*, which I presented at ARC in 1983, the idea for the hand that takes the apple came from an anonymous poem written by a woman. A wonderful poem that reads:

"My handsome lad, you are going to another country---don't forget me. Arise, turn me into a red apple and put me in your pocket. When you find yourself among women, tender and beautiful, take it out, contemplate it...don't forget me." All Turkish people are versed in the symbolism of the apple and exile. They are found in the poems written by Nazim Hikmet (a Turkish poet who died in exile after having spent 15 years in Turkish prisons), and in the songs of Karacaoglan, a popular bard of the 17th century. At that time, the brutally repressed Kurdish poets were forced to leave their villages.

As for the hand, it's hard to find a work of mine where it doesn't appear. It's an extension of the body: it establishes the relationship between object and person – the hand stretches out to reach the desired object. Although you use your whole body when working with a video camera, to carry it, etc., the actual taping is done with the hands: you use one hand to press the "record" button on the camera, both of them to move it around. The hand that frequently appears in my work is a reflection of the hand that is used in doing manual labor with the video or photo camera. For example, in order to do the image that you referred to before – of the apple: I first put the video where I want it to be when I tape; then I decide what the action zone will be; I put all the other objects, texts, etc. in their places; I look through the video camera and focus only on those objects that I want to appear on the screen; I connect the video to a closed circuit TV monitor, etc. When everything's ready, I push the "record" button and go quickly around to the other side of the camera. I place my hand in front of the TV and make the movements that appear in the image with the same hand that was operating the camera. The same hand functions in two different ways.

Traditional poetry, folk tales and legends are also an extension of the body, the body whose extremity is the hand. They are passed down from one generation to the next, from one body to the next in historical continuity. They even change geographical location. Traditional poetry travels from Turkey to the rue Faubourg St. Denis in Paris. The hand can function in other ways as well – we use it to caress and to communicate. The deaf and dumb use their hands to talk to one another and the blind become familiar with the objects by touching them.

Q.-

At times you have included rituals and performances in your work. The video is used to tape them, but the action is always live.

N.Y.-

Yes, I've done few, and the image is always built up with the action in progress. For example, there's a subtitle in *Homage to Maria Sybilla Merian 1647/1717* that says: *Video-water color, of how not to break out of the traditional channels for the diffusion of art despite the non-traditional use of modern techniques of communications*. Maria Sybilla was a wonderful water-color artist. When I did this performance, working with water colors was controversial. I decided to do one in the gallery where the show called *Six men/Six women* was being exhibited.



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A video camera was placed on the second floor to tape one of the artworks. The people walking back and forth in front of it were captured on tape as well. I was on the floor below painting my own water color version of the image being taped that appeared on the screen of the monitor next to me. Another version of this same performance included a second video camera that taped me painting the water color that the first camera was taping and that I could see on the monitor. I've never done a performance unless I judged the situation to warrant it, and I've never taped one. They are short-lived actions. All that remains of the performance that I've just described is the water color that I painted.

Q.-

The theme of the woman appears frequently in your work. The one that you did with Nicole Croiset for the Festival de la Rochelle is of special interest.

N.Y.-

I often choose to work with this topic because it's the one that I am most familiar with. When they asked us to do something for the Festival, we came up with an idea for a project consisting of three different parts. There was a *ville nouvelle* in La Rochelle with houses built in what looked like rows of rabbit hutches and a *Youth Center* where a consciousness-raising work called *Working women/Housewives* was made. We decided to take up where this one had left off, doing a type of self-portrait with the ten women who had participated in the former project. The form that we chose to give these self-portraits was similar to the souvenir plates that are sold along the seashore. We encouraged the women to include texts, photographs and anything else that they wanted to.

Nicole and I had noticed that there was a busline connecting *ville nouvelle* with the city center and that the passengers were all women, for if there was a car in the family, the husband was the one who used it to drive to work, etc. So we came up with the idea of hanging up big signs at each bus stop that said *Working Women/Housewives*. We put up smaller signs with the same slogan inside the buses. The third part of this project consisted of a performance which was very exiting to do. There were two huge screens. One of them showed real images of these women working in the factory, at home, etc.; on the other screen these routine activities were interpreted through photographs. In the center of this screen, the bus was shown continually coming and going, while we mimed the women carrying out their routines. It was a big hit. The women asked us to repeat *the perfo*. It was very funny to hear them prefer to it that way. They would say "Oh, the perfo is fantastic!" We did it once again after the summer was over.

Q.-

Your present work seems to be more internalized, more intimate, not as concerned with social themes. Why is that?

N.Y.-

Yes, it's true. There are several reasons for this. First of all, because the art that we call *ethnocritical* is very hard to do; it's very challenging. I would even say that at times it's unrewarding. During the period in which I did this kind of work I was very active in politics. I was president of the organization called Amical France/Turquie for several years, until I began to feel that I needed to get away from it. I didn't want to become an artist who only did works about immigrants, etc. Not only that, but I felt the need at this time to give more attention to my own personal art, which I had been developing all along. For example, *Pyramis*, which I showed in the Saint Simon Museum of Anguleme in 1988, of the work on Egypt that I presented at the Festival of electronic arts in Rennes,

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that is based on a text called *Martyrs*, by Chateaubriand. After so many years, living in France in voluntary or forced exile, of living between two cultures, I told myself that now that I was 50 years old it was time to return to Egypt, the place where I was born, for many reasons; the simplest is that my name is Nil. I went to Egypt and taped a lot of material, almost too much. Chateaubriand's text was all the while repeating itself in my head. I've always been fascinated by the painting and literature from the Romantic period concerning travels to the East, for example the works by Gérard de Nerval, Flaubert, Lamartine, etc. My work dealt with origins, and of course with death. It's impossible to talk about Egypt of Chateaubriand without touching upon these themes, although it also probably had to do with the fact that 50 years is an important turning point for women – it's an age of *sagesse*, of wisdom – and for artist this age also reflects many years of accumulated experience. The video installation in Rennes had three components to it: images of Saint-Malo and all the other material dealing with Chateaubriand were shown on the two side screens; images of Egypt that I had worked on with the graphic palette appeared in the center screen. My voice was heard reading Chateaubriand's text with a foreign accent while the images evolved and transformed themselves into other images.