

# I Come from All of These Places: Nil Yalter

## Nil Yalter and Lauren Cornell in conversation

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Nil Yalter, *Topak Ev (Yurt)*, 1973. Courtesy: the artist

Now seen as a groundbreaking figure in video, feminist and socially engaged art, Nil Yalter (b. 1938, Cairo) was not fully appreciated throughout her career—the unorthodox nature of her practice placed her at the edges of genres and movements, rendering her work somewhat unclassifiable and out of focus. Originally a painter who moved from Istanbul to Paris in 1965 to further her art education, Yalter was transformed by the trial and execution of Turkish dissident Deniz Gezmiş in 1972, a brutal event that occurred against a backdrop of political turmoil in the country. Following the Gezmiş incident, her projects, variously unfolding across collage, drawing, photography, and video, concentrated on showing the lives and conditions of precarious and marginalized populations such as recent immigrants, refugees, and the incarcerated. For the video *Turkish Immigrants* (1977), made with a Sony Portapak, Yalter taped prolonged conversations with new Turkish arrivals to Paris in their homes, alternately quiet or riotous with children. The result was a multifaceted picture of people figuring out how to navigate a new country—a portrait that was markedly different from the narrow and xenophobic one in the news at the time, which reduced migrants to numbers and statistics. Such an approach characterizes her work from the 1970s onward, in which both she and her subject-collaborators are rendered fluid, in formation, defined by their experiences and interactions with various interlocking systems: nation, family, work. The restoration and digitization of Yalter's media archive in the 2010s by the Bibliothèque nationale de France initiated a broad reappraisal of her work and the chance to understand it more deeply by curators, scholars and audiences alike. In 2019, her retrospective *Exile is a Hard Job*, curated by Rita Kersting, traveled from the Museum Ludwig in Cologne to the Hessel Museum of Art at Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, where I am chief curator. Nil and I spoke over Zoom on the occasion of her showing in this year's Venice Biennale, in which she won the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement.

### LAUREN CORNELL

I'd like to begin by discussing your piece *Circular Rituals* (1992), as it expresses something fundamental about your work—and you, I think. In its latest iteration, the work appears as text on a wall, but it was originally a chant overlaid on a video interweaving footage of Turkish immigrant workers in Paris and women's rights activists in Algeria, and a self-portrait. This collage links seemingly disparate lives and struggles, yours included. *Circular Rituals* was commissioned in 1992 as part of a public art project organized by the American Center in Paris, the Public Art Fund, and the Whitney Museum of American Art called *Trans-Voices: French and American Artists Address a Changing World Order*. Participating artists were asked to send video "messages" to each other on urgent political, economic, and ecological issues at a turning point: the end of the twentieth century. What was the message you sent?

### NIL YALTER

*Circular Rituals* is a manifesto, written by me. I'm a nomad, an immigrant, a Mongol, a Jew from Salonika—I come from all of these places. They are part of me, my family, my history. All these lands—Turkey, Iran, Syria, Iraq—were invaded by many civilizations with many different religions. Most Turks are from a mixed background, just as I am. You can say you're American, or that you're Turkish, but nobody is only one thing. Nothing, and no one, is purely pure.

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I found this out in my youth. My grandmother would say that my grandfather's mother was a Circassian. My father is a Muslim from Bosnia and Herzegovina. My mother's lineage traces to the Ottoman Empire. Her family were Jews from the north who fled the European pogroms of the fourteenth century and converted to Islam. At first, *Circular Rituals* was sent to New York as a video "message." Then in 2016, for the retrospective at Frac Lorraine in Metz, France, I transcribed the soundtrack and wrote it on the wall as "visual language," so that it had its own aesthetics and form.

LAUREN

In 1965, you left Istanbul for Paris with the intention of learning more about art and making your way as an artist. But starting in 1980, because of the military coup d'état in Turkey, you couldn't return there for a long time—thirteen years. Paris has since become your home, and immigration and exile have become preoccupations of yours, perhaps most stridently stated in the long-running project *Exile Is a Hard Job* (1983–ongoing). Where does the title of this work come from?

NIL

It's from a poem by the great poet Nâzım Hikmet, who is beloved in Turkey. He was imprisoned for thirteen years there because of his writing and political views. During his imprisonment, renowned Turkish poets, including Melih Cevdet Anday and Oktay Rifat, went on hunger strikes in protest, as did his mother, and international artists such as Pablo Picasso, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Paul Robeson actively campaigned for his release. Later, he lived in exile all over the world and eventually fled to Russia, where he died. "Exile is a hard job" is a powerful sentence, especially in Turkish. Hikmet was writing about himself while living in Budapest, saying that adapting—learning the language, staying alive, and surviving—takes more than courage. It's a job, a hard job.

LAUREN

In the work, the words "Exile is a hard job" are handwritten in bold red over images from your *Turkish Immigrants* (1977) series and turned into posters that are then plastered (initially without authorization, with the text in German, Turkish, Arabic, Russian, Polish, or whatever is the primary language of each place) around cities, twenty to date. How do you relate to these words, to this poem?

NIL

I relate, of course. It's been harder for me in this country than for artists who were born here, who had art training—I never had art training—and who knew the language and customs. Through my work, I have come face to face with racism and sexism. It's often very subtle, but sometimes not. For instance, in the 1980s, the minister of culture told me that I had been offered a six-month residency in New York at PSI, where they were giving studios to artists from different countries to come, stay, and work. I was so happy. Then two weeks later, he called me back and said, "We're sorry. We've decided not to give the residency to you. We're giving it to a male artist, as PSI is in a very dangerous district, and you're a woman. It would be too dangerous for you, and, also, you don't represent French art." Can you imagine?

LAUREN

I can, but it's so frustrating and unfair. Your work at that time was so distinct, unlike anything else. In the 1970s, you made a major shift from painting to work then described as "sociocritical." This new direction even set you apart from the era's tendencies in video and feminist art, which were perhaps the closest genres or movements. You've said before that a turning point for you was the trial and execution of the Turkish dissident Deniz Gezmiş in 1972. After this, you stopped painting, stopped following the alluring Pop program of gallerist Ileana Sonnabend that was at the center of the art scene of the time, and went in a new direction, the first piece being the three-paneled meditation on the media surrounding the Gezmiş case. Soon after you began *Temporary Dwellings* (1974–2005), which analyzed the conditions of the transitional housing sprouting up around major cities where recent immigrants were living. This was groundbreaking work that represented your new approach. How did you arrive at this method?

NIL

I had a meeting with Bernard Dupaigne, then the director of the Musée de l'Homme's Laboratoire d'Ethnologie, that was very important. He said to me, "You take an image of what you're seeing to see the reality, then gather the objects around it." So, for instance, when I took a photograph of a wall of a transitional house, I would also take little stones that had fallen from the wall. If there was nothing to take, I made a drawing. Then I would sort the objects into envelopes and write down what they were. I worked like an ethnographer, you see. Dupaigne opened a new way for me, a methodology, a means of processing and describing what I was seeing.

LAUREN

How did you gain the trust and agreement of the people you were documenting?

NIL

Of course, you don't knock on people's doors and say, "Can I come in and take pictures?" or "Can I come in and ask you questions?" For *Temporary Dwellings*, I made the work outside, in the streets. But later, for video interviews with Turkish immigrants in Paris, for example, I worked with local associations, social workers, even a sociologist, who prepared the ground and explained what I was doing. We couldn't quite explain it to the art world, but the communities understood.

Also, we had the magic of video. I shot, but I never asked questions and never interfered. The subjects said whatever they wanted to say, and I showed it to them afterward. If anyone said, "Oh—there—I didn't say the right thing," then we would start again. You couldn't do that with 16mm filmmaking, it would be too expensive. The camera and the equipment were so light and not aggressive. And, like I said, it could be done over. The medium was perfect for the project.

LAUREN

Did you stay in touch with any of the people you interviewed?

NIL

Rahime, a Kurdish woman from Turkey, calls me every month. She became the mayor of her district. When I go to Turkey, I see her. But not all of them, because most have died, or some have gone back.

## Press Review

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LAUREN

*The Headless Woman or the Belly Dance* was the first video you ever made, in 1974. It now stands as a major work of French contemporary art and is significant for video and feminist discourses. Can you speak about its reception at the time?

NIL

When I made *Belly Dance*, it caused a stir. Male artists were shocked. They were terrorized! They felt attacked. The French feminist groups of that time—there were several of them, three or four—liked the work, but they had some criticisms, too. They didn't agree with René Nelli's notion of women's sexuality as "convex and concave." They also asked, "Why did you use a male writer's text?" To which I replied, "He's the greatest historian of civilizations, eroticism, and sexuality. Of course, I will use it."

On my projects with immigrant workers, I was asked by feminists why I depicted men, not solely women. But, in my feminism, I saw the men as part of the same situation, the same system. Men could go out, of course, while women had less mobility, they didn't speak the language, and they worked for their husbands. But when you looked at the whole situation, everyone was suffering, with or without jobs or housing, and within their own spheres of existence. At the time, in art, there was discussion of the male gaze, and a great feminist interest in a woman looking at herself, framing her own image on her own terms, which you see in much body and performance art of the time. I explored this in both *Belly Dance* and *Harem* (1980), but decided not to pursue it. My works always have an underlying political and societal issue and a wide lens, encompassing many people. And so, I went on doing my work, my feminism.

LAUREN

*Belly Dance* also marks the beginning of your journey as a pioneer of video art and an early adopter of various new media. What has drawn you to new media—from the Portapak to the CD-ROM—throughout your career?

NIL

Maybe it's because I didn't go to art school that I'm curious about everything. I wasn't conditioned, you see. In most art schools then, you had a teacher, and you did whatever he said—you learned whatever *he* was. But I didn't go to those schools, so I wasn't conditioned. I have no fear of choosing whatever I want as media. It's also likely because I come from a country where there was nothing, not even oil paint or canvas, such that I did some of my first paintings on cardboard or wood. 1 *That* surely makes me curious when confronted with new media.

I'm full of curiosity. That's how I came here, to Paris. I also did twelve years of teaching at the Sorbonne, in visual arts and art history. I taught a class called Video Art and another called Video Installations. I had a huge studio, with assistants, and I had thirty students. The first thing I urged them to do was to go and see a Bill Viola show, but it was very difficult to push students at that time, in the early 1980s. They didn't go. So I said to them, "Don't you realize how lucky you are? You're in a city where there's culture, where there are exhibitions. There are museums, galleries, and great artists who come from all over the world." I told them, "Go and see the Bill Viola show and write a text on it." They didn't. I said, "Why don't you do it? I mean, it's there. All these wonderful shows. And you don't even have to pay since you are university students." Then one guy replied, "Maybe you became an interesting artist *because* you didn't have anything where you grew up." I will never forget that. He was a smart guy.

LAUREN

You're being awarded the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement at the upcoming Venice Biennale—for being an "interesting artist" throughout your life. What does this honor mean to you?

NIL

The Golden Lion—I still can't believe it. Why me? I don't have a huge artist's ego! I mean, I have some, but it's very reasonable. I don't know why they chose me. How do I feel? I'm very stressed. I have one thing in mind, to be able to install *Topak Ev* (1973)—the tent—correctly and on time, and hoping that I don't die from now until the moment is over.

LAUREN

Besides *Topak Ev*, what are you presenting?

NIL

The *Topak Ev* tent will be in a large circular room, surrounded by posters and videos: *Turkish Immigrants* and *Ris-Orangis* (1979), and footage of Portuguese immigrant workers in the suburbs of Paris. In these videos, I wanted to show what these immigrants were going through, where they lived and the terrible conditions they worked under.

You know, when we showed *Turkish Immigrants* at the Biennale de Paris in 1977, we had a whole room. I asked the Biennale liaison, "Could the people in these works come to the opening and to the exhibition any time they want without paying?" She agreed. Then I told the director of the Biennale that everyone was coming. He lost his mind! He said, "No, no, no. This is a contemporary art biennial. There are things hanging everywhere. They will come with their families. The children will touch everything, they will break everything." It was one of the worst experiences of racism I've ever had to deal with. I told him, "If this is your reaction, I will take everything and leave. I won't be in this biennial. I did that once in another show. I am not joking." He saw that I wasn't joking and he shut up. So, the same people that you see in the video were also in the space, talking with their children. They came over for two months, and everything went perfectly well.

LAUREN

Do you think your videos influenced a broader perception and experience of the immigrant population at the time?

NIL

I wouldn't have that pretension. I don't think art changes the world, but the world would probably be even worse if there was no art. How much worse could it be, we don't know, but it could be worse. I don't know if art changes the world. If we, as artists, can make a little contribution to public knowledge and increase access, it's good. But it's not much more than that.

## Press Review

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Nil Yalter (b. 1938, Cairo) is a pioneering feminist artist known for her explorations of cultural identity, ethnicity, immigration, and feminism. Residing between Egypt, Turkey, and France since 1965, Yalter makes work spanning various media—including multimedia installations blending drawing, photography, video, collage, and performance—addressing human-rights vulnerabilities while reflecting on artistic expression and archival documentation. Considered Turkey's first interactive artist, Yalter engages her audience through projects incorporating real testimonies of migrant workers, critiquing systemic injustices and redefining women's roles in society. Her work intertwines autobiographical elements, theoretical influences, and political events, focusing on displacement, gender discrimination, and the struggles of marginalized groups. Her works are in the collections of Tate Modern, London; Centre Pompidou, Paris; Museum Ludwig, Cologne; and the Long Beach Museum of Art, California, among others, as well as such private collections as the Art Collection Telekom; colección olorVISUAL, Barcelona; Reydan Weiss Collection, Heidelberg, Germany; and Fundación Foto Colectania, Barcelona. Yalter has participated in many international art fairs and biennials, including the 60th International Art Exhibition of the Venice Biennale, where she will be awarded with the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement.

Lauren Cornell is chief curator and director of the graduate program at the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College.