

## Balancing Integration

Natasa Ilic

A young woman is exercising on uneven parallel bars while having her legs waxed by another woman, dressed as a house cleaner. A woman is performing a gymnastic balancing act atop a pommel horse, dressed inappropriately as a housewife, with her head covered, while another woman attempts to go under her skirt with a hygienic pad. A young woman is standing on a balance beam wearing sport clothes, but her large breasts, covered by a bra, are located on her back. These scenes from Nilbar Gures's series of photographs titled *Unknown Sports* (2008–9) are set in a gym, but sports equipment is adorned with tablecloths, traditional carpets cover the floors, and small household objects clutter the space.

The photographs show the processes of beautification and physical exercise in a public sports hall turned into a domestic space. Everyday enforcement of femininity and its demand for well-mannered adherence to a set of structured behavioral rules and beautification procedures are expressed with phantasmagoric vividness. Gures's has staged three performances in a gym, collaborating with women who re-create ideas from her drawings for photographic triptychs that subversively break down women's reality. Aesthetic fetishes and occupations such as body hair waxing or styling, understood as typical female practices, are depicted in an obsessive way. The processes of preparing the body for the absent, working husband evoke threatening and painful associations with sexual abuse and domestic violence.

Against the backdrop of changing gender roles in contemporary Turkey, Gures produces striking visual representations that challenge the traditional patriarchal order that has been operative since the invention of the concepts of normality, (hetero) sexuality, and sexual perversion in the late nineteenth century. Routine institutional practices of classification and spatialization—along with systematic sanctions, repetitive exercises, control over deviations, and the taming of bodies—are what constitutes the "normal," a designation that conceals its disciplinary and technological character. The concept of "normality" is also central to the ideology of "everyday life," which, though not necessarily a system of articulated doctrines, has its patterns, sets of images,

symbols, and concepts about morality, models of gender and sexuality, categories of language, and discourses on ethnic identity. In the ideology of “everyday life”—which cannot be overlooked inasmuch as it is an indispensable medium for the production of human subjects—there are all these unspoken rules and embedded bodies of knowledge, which, from the inner sanctum of the psyche, make their claims about how the social world is and ought to be. Under its rules, the female body is to be manipulated, shaped, and trained to bear signs of its “natural” femininity, turning woman into an ornamented surface and cementing her status as body, confirming her role as primarily decorative. Through beautification procedures women become practiced in and subjected to the discipline of the female gender.

In *Unknown Sports*, there is nothing normal about normality, and although the women seem relaxed and unobserved, content with what they are doing, the weirdness of their gestures and actions and the excess of unmistakably ethnically tainted domesticity, displayed in a public space, seem to invoke something threatening, an act of rebellion or preparation for a fight. The images refer to the submerged threat women pose against phallic power situated within the *domus*. A relationship between the suppression of women and the domesticating force of beautification for the absent man, which trains and prepares them for their social function within the division of labor, is embodied in women whose ethnic and cultural markers are weirdly recombined yet unmistakably Turkish.

Women are shown as domestic servants who spend their time cleaning the house and making themselves beautiful, but their bodies are deeply social and political organisms, marked inherently by history, geography, and a host of other factors, made visible through their dresses, props, actions, and staging. The artist stages their performances by organizing a *mise-en-scène*, that concept that Mieke Bal describes as a summary of what theatricality most essentially is: a form, medium, or practice in which the object of cultural analysis performs a meeting between (aesthetic) art(ifice) and (social) reality. Visibility of that which is to stay invisible is staged through providing the *mise-en-scène* in which procedures of disciplining the female body through the regime of femininity evoke resistance against normalization and domination. That which is to remain invisible has many layers. On the one hand, the

dominant understanding in current Western society is that being viewed as a beautified object is almost always opposed to women's equality and autonomy. On the other hand, the same liberal view requires caution with judgments about other cultures and openness to aesthetic, intersubjective, and embodied elements of feminine beautification that empower rather than disempower women. Ambiguity in Gures's images operates beyond showing bodies as capable of resisting power dynamics, because power is never total, uniform, or smooth but shifting and unstable; if it is exerted on "micro" levels, it can be contested on those levels. By creating a hyperbolic theatricality, providing props, and carefully staging the set for the photographs, Gures's images implicate the viewer as the one entitled to safely enjoy the position of Western indignation over the position of women in Turkey and the trope of the "oppressed Muslim woman" in orientalist discourse.

The question of opposition between the liberal-tolerant West and fundamentalist Islam is often condensed into the issues of women, as it is also visible in the way the status of women in Turkey is instrumentalized in debates on the country's accession to the European Union, also reflecting anxiety within European countries about the integration of their own Muslim communities. Against the enlightening tendency to abolish the "dividing stage," overcoding intentions and horizons of expectations, Gures uses theatricality as a fictional realm of experiment precisely because of its artificiality, in order to draw clear dividing lines, although in contemporary capitalism's overproduction of theaters there is no such thing as a pure spectator and everybody is part of the social drama. Her photographs estrange "technologies of gender," with embodied subjects enmeshed in social and political forces to disable identification along the lines of liberal white feminist critique of Muslim patriarchy, which often becomes the justification for Islamophobia and colonial and neocolonial incursions.

It might be true that Turkey is a country firmly within the patriarchal tradition and that without the pressures of the EU the status of women in Turkey would not undergo "the most radical reforms since the abolition of polygamy in the 1920s," as the 2007 report of the European Stability Initiative claims,<sup>1</sup> but this does not preclude that gender inequality is exclusive to Turkey or that the aseptic dream of European multiculturalism is having difficulty reconciling with Turkey in the EU. By performing domestic and beautification

procedures, the protagonists of Gures's photographs choreograph also the maneuvers of integration of immigrant Muslim women, dictated by European multicultural standards in which economic exploitation is converted into problems of cultural tolerance, and it is the figure of the immigrant that stands for political antagonisms that are not between cultures but within and across cultures. Showing distinction by putting bodies on the line, staging the intersection and not the integration of totalities, oppressive "technologies of gender" and considerations of women's agency are brought together with issues of race and class that cut across the relation between Europe and its "other" in an ideological fantasy of the capitalist liberal-democratic order and politics cheapened to negotiations of difference.

1. Recent amendments (2004) to the Turkish constitution assert that "women and men have equal rights" and "the state is responsible for taking all necessary measures to realize equality between women and men" (article 10). A new civil code (2001), reforms in the employment law (2003), the establishment of family courts (2003), and a complete revamping of the penal code (2004) have brought about comprehensive changes to the legal status of women. These are the most radical reforms since the abolition of polygamy in the 1920s ("Sex and Power in Turkey: Feminism, Islam, and the Maturing of Turkish Democracy," European Stability Initiative, [http://esiweb.org/index.php?lang=en&id=156&document\\_ID=90](http://esiweb.org/index.php?lang=en&id=156&document_ID=90)).