

**by Nicola Hirner**

The moment I show my face, I turn around

In her theatrical stagings Nilbar Güreş unmasks the essentialist prerequisites of authoritarian structures. She works with various media including drawings, collages, objects, videos, photos, performative stagings and public space performances, in which she methodically links introspection with post-feminist paradigms. Her reflection of hegemonic systems focuses both on paternalistically dominated social structures and an increasingly anxiety-ridden Western perception of Islamic culture, Muslim communities and the concomitant changes. By radicalizing phantasms in this context via feminist practices, Güreş creates scenarios that go beyond the production of desires. Frustration and anger in the face of gender inequalities are aggressively displayed by the artist. The female protagonists counter the paternalistic structures with the multifarious strategies of a body-centered rebellion. Permanent rule-breaking shatters authoritative notions of authenticity. A flashy kind of humor leads the women's revolt. They compete in hybrid costumes to break every taboo, and by doing so pervert the status of traditional female norms of behavior. In temporal and spatial changes of perspective, grotesque settings develop in a synopsis of tradition and futuristic references that directly link symbolism to imagination and alienation bringing about a shift in meaning. This results in the modification, enhancement or redirection of new possible meanings of cultural patterns of representation. In the performances 'Unknown Sports' the confrontation of a religious and feminist discourse takes place in public. The unexpected reactions of the onlookers leave you staring your own prejudices in the face. Such provocative performances require a careful selection of location. Helping to visualize the shift in gender roles, costumes are stripped down like the artist's bridal dress and red ribbon that serves as a symbol of virginity and almost strangles her by the unusual way it is tied around her abdomen and neck. The artist taps into the power of her name Güreş which literally translates as wrestler, in order to free herself from the traditional social role. Wearing a red boxing helmet and a pair of boxing gloves, she paces through a lively street in Istanbul and strips her own bridal dress from her body in front of a shop for bridal wear. Clad in kneepads, boxing gloves and green boxer shorts, she continues to march through the streets.

The depiction of the waxing ritual shows how much the content is influenced by the medium. While the female protagonists in the collages defy traditional wedding preparations—such as the ritual removal of pubic hair—with subversive humor by playing soccer, the torturous act in the video 'Unknown Sports. Indoor Exercises I/ II/ III' can be clearly felt and also heard thanks to its whiplash music score. In 'Indoor Exercise II' an arrangement of carpets and fabrics feigns a private space within an institutionalized space. By transferring the private frame into a gym, the painful waxing ritual loses its taboo character and is revealed to be a prosaic procedure. Alluding to the very rarely practiced sexist tradition of the bride having to hand over a blood-stained bed sheet to her mother-in-law proving her virginity, the fabric divides the gym into two zones. While the men use the gym as a free space for physical exercises the women are forced to strike athletic poses when carrying out the staged waxing ritual without being able to move freely. In doing so they avail themselves of scenic means, such as posing to demonstrate their restricted freedom of movement. The setting theatricalizes social differentiations and the unequal assignments of

gender-specific behavioral norms by outlining the men's physical exercises in the background and the restrictive, paternalistic guidelines for action for the women who parade the space they are allocated in athletic poses. Gymnastics equipment is an integral part of this waxing ritual. A woman dressed in traditional clothes posing as an athlete stands with one leg on a vault and holds on to a still ring while she has her pubic hair waxed. The waxer seems to already have undergone the procedure of this heteronomous ritual as well as the woman bouncing up and down in the background at regular intervals. The latter is dressed in yellow shorts and ballet shoes. At any given time she can move freely in the inner space, however, as a woman, the outer space is not yet entirely open to her. The liberation from domestic duties and a sexualized gaze takes place in 'Indoor Exercise III' by the performance of an athletic exercise in the gym in front of a few female spectators. While the gymnast in a yellow-green checkered swimsuit wearing a bra back-to-front on top of her clothes repeatedly balances on a beam that is covered with a white lace doily, she overcomes the actual obstacle in the form of a cooking pot placed in the middle of the beam. The female audience frenetically applauds her metaphorical triumph. The archaic seeming hand-made textile objects, characterized by the materiality of the fabrics, act as mediators between rites of the past, traditions and their current impact. Fetish-like, these figurative objects take on a mediative function. They parade the sublimation of anger and desires in front of them. Fetishization and not clearly determined intense subject-object relations imply a lack of discursive communication. The interplay of the various textiles leads to a superposition of affirmation and subversion. The women defy the repressive powers in a trashy and gaudy manner. They do not submit, they are virtually on the verge of spitting. Scraps of cloth and threads hang from them—whether out of desire or contempt remains unclear. Sports photos serve as drafts for the collages. The transfer of athletic poses from the public arena to a private space does not allow for cross-references to established constructs as inside/outside, private/public and their gender-specific positioning. The athletic poses in the alienated ambience of the private indoor space seem like rhetorical figures that help to enforce an open access to the body. The ease of the athletic movements that contradict the practice of everyday life, expand the private space to include the potential of public action. The genuinely contextual and culture-specific approach of the figurative collages experiences a shift towards the surrealistic method of associative influence by visual sampling. The hybridization of the rituals, poses, gestures, clothes and interiors creates codes of female identity constructions. The passive role models attributed to women are subverted by paradox interventions and taboo-breaking: The theatricalization of polymorph acting, feeling and sexual action enables the establishment of a psychological distance towards repressions of all sorts. The resulting multiple productions differ from the actual canon of female representations where a delocalization and dissolution of subject-object relations take place. Ambiguous female mutants use this openness to emotionalize the discomfort of gender relations in a loose interplay with reality and by renouncing conventional criticism such as 'female victimhood'.

The conversion and transformation of traditional conditions of socialization lead to a change of perspective. By changing of rigid interpretations in a parody-like manner, the protagonists who interact with traditional forms of action develop a dialectic of resistance that discloses new articulative possibilities in symbolic as well as real-life interventions. The humor inherent in the portrayals drowns out any didactic tone. The narrative image constructions consisting of real and fictional elements, fairytales and myths form the basis of a shift of socio-symbolic conditions.

The dynamics of these narrations that follow no culturally or temporally coherent exchange show the permeability of real and fictional levels, as does the process of actions, reactions and interventions: Then and there is at the same time now and already past.

The privileged gaze characteristic of modernity has lost its validity: The figures' tales have movement and can be spun further. Entangled in abstract private spaces, busy vacuuming, cleaning, wiping and washing, the women rebel against these actions imposed upon them. The obsessions resulting from the reaction to the monotony of the daily routine find a bizarre outlet. The female figures and women react to the repressions and dependencies on patriarchal systems with sexual misappropriations by merging with the household appliances or the furniture that needs cleaning. The subject-object relations are intensified in accordance with the lack of verbal communication. The subjects thereby act in open structures: The women depicted often fly in the face of representative designations by, for example, living out eroticism and sex in lesbian relationships instead of waiting for a heteronomous male impetus.

This way, the bodies are released into a 'non-disciplinary eroticism'<sup>1</sup> where sexual fantasies can be acted out spontaneously, while the transition from submissive domestic impositions to sexual techniques remains ambivalent. Women who crap into cleaning buckets, exchange brooms for books and masturbate while reading, refuse any kind of instrumentalization. By using abjection in the form of excrement they oppose potential forms of exploitation. They claim radical self-determination.

Text written by Nicola Hirner (July 2009)

Translated by Gülçin Körpe

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<sup>1</sup> Sade, Sergeant of Sex, an interview conducted by Gérard Dupont, trans. Robert Hurley, in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology: Essential Works of Foucault*, Vol. 2, Ed. James D. Faubion, Paul Ranibow, p. 222, The New Press, 1999. Foucault argues for a restatement of eroticism that distances itself from Sade's disciplined eroticism proper to a regulated, disciplinary society.