

1. What exactly happened? Whose initiative the whole project was, how was the pavillion financed? Who exactly banned works (in your impresion)? Was it because Aidan was too critical of Islam - or too explicit sexually - or too explicitly Islamic somehow (as one could understand from some Western comments)? It was not very clear. What was the role of Mr Farzaliev and what was the reaction of other artists?

Since 2001 I have been in contact with the Baku art scene, trying to discover the artists, art production and initiatives. I have realized a series of exhibitions and workshops with artists from South Caucasus in Istanbul and also intermediated between EU institutions and curators. In 2010 summer I was invited to co-curate or act as advisory curator to Azerbaijan Pavilion in 54th Venice Biennale. I am sure the officials and the people who recommended me knew very well what I am doing since 30 years in this region and that I have particularly realized “feminist” and “political” exhibitions – the last one was in Berlin Academy, entitled “ Under my Feet I want the World Not heaven!”(Next Wave events, 2009).

In 53rd Venice Biennale I have curated the four Asian countries, namely Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan; this might be one of the reasons why I am invited.

I have collaborated with Mr. Chingiz Farzaliev to select the artists. I am always willing to work with local experts and curators; I think this kind of collaboration is necessary. All the 6 artists of this exhibition are very well known in Baku; as they have participated in exhibitions there since a decade. Four of the artist (including Aidan) have been living and working outside of Baku since the 80's; that means, Baku was ready to accept these artists to represent the national pavilion; which in fact I found very open and positive approach. Indeed the Pavilion was totally financed by the Ministry of Culture.

All the works of the artists have been discussed at the beginning; in particular Aidan has presented her work with rich visual material, in October (in Baku) and in December (Venice). All the pieces were dealing with the same concept, on which I wrote a paragraph in my catalogue text, sent it to all the team and the artists in January 2011. To my opinion the veil, depicted as drawing and

sculpture in her work is not only related to the veil of Islam – which has been interpreted in many art works since the 90's -, but it is a metaphor of all religious suppressions on women since hundreds of years, of patriarchal ideologies, of orientalist gaze, of consumption culture eroticism. The way Aidan is showing this reality is very poetic and respects the veiled women concept by showing the women as a person of wisdom. In particular, the sculpture which was displayed in the entrance hall reflected empathy rather than disdain and criticism to all the veiled women of this world; together with the exact replica of Black Stone, which is being kissed by millions of pious people it showed respect rather than contempt. In fact, this work might be reviewed by some sharp critics as conformist rather than dissident! Here, I would like to recall a similar work: In 2003 I have exhibited a photo documentation of a performance by Selmin Sherif entitled "Scarlet Scarf", which displayed 64 ways of head cover with a bright red scarf! This was in the Pavilion of Turkey in 51st Venice Biennale! And, at that time the political atmosphere in Turkey was quite hot with the debates on veiled women in public spaces! Even if Aidan's work is supposed to be critical of Islam, this criticism is nothing new in the art world; even the artists from the most Islamic law ruled countries are dealing with this paradoxal tradition. In the exhibition Edge of Arabia, which has been realized in Venice, London, Berlin, Istanbul (2009-2020) we have seen examples of this feminist approach. On the other hand it is generally acknowledged that it is the right of the artists to examine, tackle and scrutinize the local or global social and individual issues and problems; and Venice Biennale is the right place for this!

This work has been misinterpreted by the officials; or they were advised by people they trust who misinterpreted the work. The question is, why at the last moment and not before? Aidan and me, we tried our best to convince them that it will be more harmful to the image of Azerbaijan to remove the sculpture, but we failed. However, the curator of the Italian Pavilion has accepted the sculpture to be displayed in his exhibition; which is the only supporting gesture from the Biennale community!

2. What is now your impression about how contemporary art situation is organized in Azerbaijan? What is the role of the state, of old conservative

structures (Art Academy), of private business, of the authority of the West and of the new "fashion" of "Islamic art"? Did you recognize something you know (or knew earlier) from Turkish context or is it typically post-Soviet situation? What is the role of contemporary art there?

Contemporary art in Baku is being motivated and practiced by vanguard artists and groups since the 90's, with great commitment and stamina. In the 90's a large group of artists have organised Landart in post-industrial areas. A series of international exhibitions have been organised under the title "Aluminium", curated by Leyla Akundzadeh, who unfortunately died two years ago in a car accident. Sabina Shiklinskaya, artist and curator, is organising international exhibitions in and out of Baku. Currently she has organized an exhibition with videos of women artists during Istanbul 2010 ECOC. Babi Badalov, Chingiz Babayev, Faxriyya Mammedova, Orkhan Huseynov, Sanan Alesgerov, Teymur Daimi were the artists, whose work reflected the dissident content of the transition period. Some artists have left Azerbaijan as early as 80's and since a decade they are being invited to exhibitions in Baku. The young generation artists can benefit from this background of international achievements. The art making in Baku is as free as the democracy and religious and nationalist dogmas allow it to be, as it is the case in all the Islamic countries in Middle East and Asia. Like in most of these countries of the Islamic world, in Azerbaijan the state and private sector are favouring and supporting the conformist forms, in particular abstract paintings and the rebellious artists are left to find their financial resources in the international level. We know that without the support of Soros and EU cultural funds since the beginning of 90's there would be less contemporary art making and production in the Post-Soviet countries of Caucasus and Asia.

3. In Russia, artists and curators are often being sued for "offending someone else's religious feelings", and rather than defending the universal right of critical attitude to religion, they defend their right to exhibit whatever they want in secluded art spaces, like commercial galleries and little attended exhibition halls (but it does not work either). In Azerbaidzan, as far as I can understand, it was rather a question of country prestige. In a more general sense, is there something recurrent in these censorship issues, mostly in connection with religion? Is there such thing as a responsibility of artist, and should some topics be avoided in certain contexts, or there is no limit for artistic freedom?

Our world is a world of enormous paradoxes. Religions with its socio-political and economic expansions are generating many models of these paradoxes. Religions are being linked with Terrorism, Child Abuse, Patriarchal Violence, Honor Crime and not to forget, with all kinds of Economic Corruption. When an artist tries to awaken the public perception on the problems generated through religions, he is being attacked! It is because contemporary art is the most liberated field of human creativity and since a century from Marcel Duchamp on the artists has presented the utmost freedom of expression; and therefore it is also the most vulnerable field of human production. Who wants absolute freedom of thinking and awareness? The artworld has acknowledged this fact and has empowered itself with international associations that can defend the right of the artists; however these associations are not working properly. In non-democratic or semi-democratic countries contemporary art is only tolerated when it brings fame and glory to the country's image and apparently when the content and the message is subtle; otherwise it is under open or disguised suppression. In the age of democratic awakening-as we are going through now - contemporary art is being considered as threat to non-democratic governments. The attacks to artists and art experts became frequented and the associations should work in a more efficient way now. In the case of Azerbaijan Pavilion, the work of Aidan is completely misinterpreted by the advisors of officials. The whole world knows that Azerbaijan is not a fundamentalist country, that the women are as free as in EU and the criticism Aidan is conveying through her work is not indicating the socio-religious situation in Azerbaijan, but the centuries old position of women under all religions. The replica of Black Stone is a symbol of "shamanistic" elements in the religions that still exist and that still fascinate people. The problem here is very simple: Reading an art works needs fundamental knowledge which is missing in our countries; people tend to read artworks directly, they cannot evaluate an art work as a metaphor and as the ultimate form of visual thinking.

4. What do you think of neo-orientalism in these contexts - is there such a thing? What does it express? Art critic Maria Kravcova praises Aidan works for her return back to Gerard de Nerval's opulent Orient "where there was no Al Jazeera neither CNN nor Chechenyen", for ner "mysticism" and "feeling of extase". If this work is so uncritical and rather serves as Orient promotion,

why then it is censored? How to contextualize orientalist topics so they would not sound reactionary?

Orientalism is still prevailing. Our cities –cities of Non-EU-are being visited with orientalist attitudes and feelings; this is the most harmless Orientalism, because due to Edward Said we learned to diagnose various kinds of Orientalism. There is also Self-Orientalism, practiced by the people of the orientalist territories; which are quite harmful to the people themselves, as they became the perfect subject of Orientalist desires. Contemporary art utilizes Orientalism as a tool to attack the Orientalist gaze and moves the subject of Orientalism to a sovereign position. In the 5th Istanbul Biennale (1997) Shirin Neshat, dressed in complete black veil, realized a performance, running in the most crowded districts of Istanbul and the documentary video of this work was shown in the biennale. At that time black veil was a prohibited outfit in Turkey! Since two decades we have seen similar works, dealing with the veil and with Orientalism. In 2003 I have curated the Pavilion of Turkey under the title “The Perfumed Garden”, referring to the famous book of Omer İbn-i Muhammed El Nefzavi (1394-1433) and the artists have produced works that dissected the various perspectives of Orientalism, restaging the Orient as a tribute to western perception of visual pleasures.

Aidan’s work in the biennale should be considered as a whole rather than as separate pieces. She utilizes the elements of Orientalism, The Veil, permeating into the historical/art-historical context with all the traditional techniques of art (painting, sculpture). She is exhibiting her veiled women images and tear drops in a room that is not Islamic, but Christian; she has covered all the “naked” images in that room (male angels and naked women). This act is displaying not only the difference of both religions, the difference of “gaze”, but also the difference of imagination. On the other hand the drawings which are inspired by the veiled women images on the icons display the similarity of both religions. With the tear drops she shows the eternal sorrow of women suffering from the dictums of religions. She is neither promoting Orient nor Occident; she is indicating the lack of historical knowledge, the existing paradoxes of judging the religions and misrepresentations and the disguised implications of sexuality and eroticism the veil creates for the male gaze.

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