



EUROPEAN
CULTURAL
FOUNDATION

Princess Margriet Award

Third award

Šejla Kamerić & Kutluğ Ataman



Brussels, 8 February, 2011

The Day Itself

On the 8th of February 2011, the day of the ECF Princess Margriet Award ceremony in Brussels, the world was watching intently as epoch-changing events continued to unfold in North Africa and the Middle East. Between the Arab Spring and the Award there can be no comparison of scale or significance. Yet there is a discernible connecting thread, apparent in the plea made by Charles Esche, Director of Van Abbemuseum, when he asked the audience at the Royal Flemish Theatre: 'How can we use our anger at the blatant injustice of the world and turn it to hope for a better way of living together?'



Robert Palmer, Katherine Watson, Androulla Vassiliou, HRH Princess Margriet, Šejla Kamerić, Kutluğ Ataman, HRH Princess Laurentien, HRH Princess Astrid, Wolfgang Petritsch, Iara Boubnova, Hilary Carty, Jan Goossens and Sudeep Dasgupta.

This was the third Princess Margriet Award ceremony, and the laureates this time around were the visual artists Šejla Kamerić and Kutluğ Ataman. Kamerić survived the siege of Sarajevo, and in her films, photographs, sculptural works and installations, she explores the deeply personal that survives not only major conflict but also time's attrition. Using film and video, Istanbul-born Ataman reveals the vital role of storytelling in defining and redefining our identities.

Kamerić and Ataman spoke for themselves in two short films specially made for the event. In the portrait film of Kamerić, she asserts that: 'The war did shake me up but it didn't make me who I am.' The portrait film of Ataman shows him presenting work in

Istanbul Modern, near the hospital where he was born: an extraordinary vindication – ‘like completing a circle’ – for a once-vilified artist who was imprisoned during Turkey’s military coup.

Both artists reject a fixed identity-concept to concentrate on the journeys that people take in their discovery of meaning and identity – *‘leaving yourself and encountering yourself somewhere else’*, to quote previous Award winner, Stuart Hall. The full name of the Award – *ECF Princess Margriet Award* – also points to its very specific origins, as explained by the President of the European Cultural Foundation, HRH Princess Laurentien of the Netherlands, who praised her predecessor in this role as she told the audience: *‘The Award is a celebration, inspired by the longstanding dedication of Princess Margriet to supporting culture as a driver for European integration, which is why ECF was created in the first place.’*

Behind the Award, Princess Laurentien remarked, lay some fundamental questions, such as: ‘What world do we aspire to live in?’ Asking artists to define precisely what binds us together and what sets us apart would be a tall order – and a prescriptive one, at odds with artistic freedom. This is not what the Award is interested in. Instead, it asks us to remain open to the subtleties of artists and thinkers whose work tackles themes of belonging and separation. Kamerič and Ataman reveal how subjective realities and collective memory connect us within a rich spectrum of difference. ‘Helped by artists such as Šejla and Kutluğ,’ Princess Laurentien went on, *‘we can arrive at a better understanding of our own complexity, and so fear the complexity of other people and cultures less.’*

The ceremony was graced by Ictus ensemble’s performance of Steve Reich’s composition ‘Pendulum’, in which swinging microphones create feedback as they pass the speakers – a surprising music of anticipation and encounter, right for the event. There was also Michael Schmid’s performance of Istvan Matuz’s *Studium 1/974* for flute, described by master of ceremonies, Aldith Hunkar, as both ‘breathtaking and breath-giving’. In the days following the ceremony, further interviews and screenings in Brussels and Rotterdam took the message of the Award beyond the Royal Flemish Theatre. What is that message? A closer look at the Award’s origins – as well as its prize-winners – tells us much.

Princess Margriet Award: The Story So Far

'The Award goes to artists, intellectuals and cultural activists who dare to think, speak, imagine and explore a future vision of society; bringing alive cultural encounters and making creative shifts in how we live and think anew within a society composed of many cultures.'

This is what ECF says in its guidelines for those 50 experts from various regions of Europe, disciplines, and areas of cultural practice who nominated suitable candidates for the Award.

The emphasis of the guidelines is on daring, the future, encounter, change.... The Award draws attention to some of the known and lesser known creative spirits of the age: those whose thoughts and works make better sense of the lives we lead in Europe within ever-changing societies. At one time, the key word here was 'diversity'. This was, after all, the central theme of ECF's activities at the time (2006-2010). Europe's policymakers seemed to be waking up to the challenge identified by ECF decades earlier: that of unifying Europe's people as well as its economies. 2008 was declared the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue, doubtless partly in response to worrying evidence that xenophobic populism was on the rise, looking for its usual scapegoats among minority cultures. This was the right moment to highlight, in the words of Stuart Hall, 'the very different pathways which different cultures, peoples, traditions, languages and religions have taken to the present'.

From the very beginning the Award has been more than a plea to respect cultural diversity. The laureates are artists, activists and thinkers who are far from being 'a safe bet' for any organisation promoting a specific agenda. Instead, they are (in the words Charles Esche used in his speech at the ceremony) 'social seismographs – sensitive to the times they live in, and projecting a vision of a better life. Esche's praise for the most recent laureates is true for all:

'Their expertise lies in how they respond to what is around them in ways that make visible something we would otherwise ignore. They are above all interested in questions of how we can live together as human beings in intimacy, and how we

can organise ourselves collectively, free from fear and hatred, and able to simply be ourselves.'

This, as Esche says, 'seems not so much to ask if you say it,' yet is 'like asking for the world'.

The Award also highlights achievement in areas other than artistic practice, recognising theoretical contributions to the debate on diversity. Whatever its nature, the work should show the connecting power of culture in a society composed of cultural difference – in the words of the Award's Jury member, Hilary Carty, 'taking us beyond our own cultural comfort zones and along new routes into hidden places and exciting possible futures.'

Even more insight into the Award's aims can be gained from the actual identities of the laureates to date. In 2008 there was the Jamaican-born Stuart Hall, a giant in the field of cultural studies, who spoke of his concern for 'policies that might bring equality in a multicultural society where differences occupy the same space,' while cautioning that 'something resists dialogue, and this isn't to be wished away'. Joining him that



Still from the film *Journey to the Moon* (2009), Kutluğ Ataman

year were the dancer choreographers Jérôme Bel and Pichet Klunchun, awarded for a specific performance piece – *Pichet Klunchun and myself* – a variously moving, quirky, hilarious re-enactment of the bafflement and discovery of their initial encounter as French contemporary dancer (Bel) and traditional Thai dancer (Klunchun). The piece changes with every performance. Here is a brief excerpt from one in particular, which captures the spirit of the exchange:

BEL: *If you want to see what you paid for you go to the National Theatre and you see Shakespeare and...*

KLUNCHUN: *The ballet.*

BEL: *The ballet, Swan Lake – it's always the same...*

KLUNCHUN: *You know everything...*

BEL: *You know everything. It ends very badly. So there's no change. But for contemporary arts – it's a bet.*

At the second Award ceremony, two laureates were celebrated. Borka Pavićević, Director of Belgrade's Centre for Cultural Decontamination, was commended for her long opposition to intolerance and her ability to sustain public discourse through the hardest of times; and Swiss theatre-maker Stefan Kaegi was praised for his playful documentary-style creations that reveal the hidden lives of globalisation. Speaking after the ceremony, he said: 'Theatre has often been about groups of actors coming together to stick together over the years and travel – which is more a celebration of the actors themselves. That kind of theatre is not about diversity but more about those "wild and crazy" actors. But I want to put the binoculars onto society and reframe how we see the people who are part of the production chain – like outsourcing, like truck drivers. And this takes a lot of work since you must invent new structures for every new situation.'

Whether the Award has been given for a lifetime of achievement, a single brilliant work, a principled stand against intolerance, or a dramatic exposure of real lives, it has always celebrated those who transform 'how we see people'. And in Šejla Kamerić and Kutluğ Ataman, the Princess Margriet Award has two new laureates whose work presents this transformation in a brilliantly vivid way.



Still from the film *What do I know* (2007), Šejla Kamerić

Šejla Kamberić and Kutluğ Ataman

'The Princess Margriet Award Jury chose two artists of considerably different backgrounds and circumstances whose artistic work casts light on issues of individual and collective memory and the construction of narrative as a space of imagination intertwined with reality. They create the spaces where individuals can experience and imagine for themselves the immense value and richness of diversity. They portray a vision of diversity by asking: who are the different people around you, and how are you different from them? Their work reaches beyond the domain of the arts, right to the basis of human conscience itself.'

from the Award laudation

One came of age in war-torn Sarajevo, and the other so troubled the Turkish military authorities that a spell in prison ensued. Šejla Kamberić and Kutluğ Ataman are two artists who not only face reality in their work but subvert it, and with a purpose. Anyone who views this work with understanding will see resistance to the kind of typecasting that robs people of their real, complex identities, and an assertion of the value of the personal in the midst of the 'construction' of history. The work of each artist resists and asserts in very different ways, however, and it was partly the prospect of an intriguing interplay between these distinct artistic voices which prompted the Jury to make its choice.

Kamberić was born in 1976 and grew up in Sarajevo, where she attended the Academy of Fine Arts, studying in the Graphic Design department. By the late 1990s her public installations and video projections began to be shown in her native city. She put her expertise in graphics to startling use in such works as *Bosnian Girl* (2003), a poster which used real barracks-wall graffiti to powerful effect ('No teeth ...? A mustache ...? Smel like shit ...? BOSNIAN GIRL!'): Kamberić herself is the Bosnian 'poster girl' looking out defiantly at the viewer. Later in the decade her video work grew in complexity. *What Do I Know?* (2007) is a four-channel video installation set in her grandfather's house, with all characters played by children. Kamberić says of it: *'The story was written as a memento to other people's loves that I have not witnessed. The house in the story is real.'* The short film *Glück* (2009) recalls life under siege in Sarajevo, but in a Berlin setting: a literal displacement that mirror's the siege survivor's mindscape.



NO TEETH...?

A MUSTACHE...?

SMEL LIKE SHIT...?

BOSNIAN GIRL

Šejla Kamerić

Graffiti written by an unknown Dutch soldier on the wall of the army barracks in Potocari, Srebrenica 1994/95.

Royal Netherlands Army troops, as a part of the UN Protection Forces (UNPROFOR) in Bosnia and Herzegovina 1992-95, were responsible for protecting of Srebrenica safe area.

Photography by Tarik Samarah



Ataman was born in Istanbul in 1961. He graduated in film studies from the University of California, Los Angeles, and won immediate acclaim with his first feature-length film, *Serpent's Tale* (1994). His often documentary-style work blurs the distinction between reality and fiction, challenging the viewer to consider the proposition that reality *is* fiction. Ataman is no stranger to awards: in 2004 he won the Carnegie Prize and was also nominated for the Turner Prize; his work was included in the 48th Venice Biennale and Documenta 11. A solo exhibition, *The Enemy Inside Me*, was held at Istanbul Modern (November 2010 to March 2011); in 2011, over half-a-million visitors saw the video installation *Küba* (2004) at Bilbao's Guggenheim Museum. Half-a-million viewers, but each will have seen a different *Küba*, that shanty-town dwelling outside Istanbul, with 40 inhabitants telling their stories simultaneously on 40 TV sets. In the ambitious sequence *Mesopotamian Dramaturgies*, which includes the feature-length film *Journey to the Moon* (2009) and the gravity-defying waterfall of *Mayhem* (2011), Ataman turns his attention from personal and community identity as a construct to the similarly constructed phenomena of history, geography and language.

This emphasis on active construction is shared by both artists. With Kamberić, the accent is on the personal, and how memory can be used to overcome, or at least endure, the pain of living. In an interview with ECF, she likened an audience's perception of multi-channel video to the filtering process of memory itself: 'The memory is not one channel, it is many channels that come together in our minds.' This dividedness and striving for unity is accentuated by the experience of trauma. 'I believe everyone who survived the war or some horrible thing such as war is always dividing his or her life in three stages: before, during and after.... I was 16 when the war started and 20 when it ended.... That was such a strong influence that I completely forgot who I was before.' This forgetting turned out not to be complete: Kamberić remembers much, as the work reveals. Her concern with deeply personal realities surviving through memory was hailed by the Award's Jury as part of a larger preoccupation with borders 'both metaphysical and real... national borders, geo-political city borders of inclusion and exclusion, as well as invisible borders in time, between past and future.'

Ataman's exposure of the diversity not just between individuals and cultures but also 'inside ourselves' earned the Jury's praise. This interior diversity can be traced through the use of narrative in our lives. 'We learn [from Ataman's work] how each and every one of us relies on stories to know who we are, to construct our identities, to forge a sense of belonging, and, what's more, to have the capacity to change ourselves.' There was praise, too, for Ataman's ability to link personal stories to 'very broad political questions', which gives universality to his work, and makes it all the more thought provoking. In conversation with ECF, Ataman explained why he called his Istanbul show *The Enemy Inside Me*: 'In Turkey we grew up with this whole notion of *We are*

a great nation but unfortunately we have foreign enemies and we also have local enemies inside us, etc. This is of course state manipulation in order to justify a security state. It got me in trouble in the past. For example, during the military coup I was sent to jail.... I used to get faxes threatening my life. But in the end for some reason you keep doing it. It's not because I'm a very courageous person. It's just that I don't know how to exist any other way.'

This is courage, in anybody's eyes. And if we can be glad that artists such as Ataman remain defiantly themselves, we can also be glad that they point to other ways of existence for the rest of us. In the words of the Jury – said of Kamberić, but true of both artists – this is work that 'compels us to imagine life differently in the face of prejudice'.



Still from the film *Journey to the Moon* (2009), Kutluğ Ataman

A Kind of Happiness: Kamberić

A woman in a checked winter coat walks past boarded-up buildings and along snow-covered, almost traffic-less streets. Slung over her shoulder are two plastic containers; she pulls along a trolley holding a larger container that we see her fill with precious water from a street pump. There is an eerie emptiness, amplified by the steady sound of her footsteps.

Is this life during wartime, or a city whose beating heart is stilled by bad weather? We do not know. The scenes with the young woman are interspersed with those showing a much older woman sitting in a wheelchair – and wearing the same red knitted hand-warmers. Clearly she is the same person, recalling her past life. The steady tick of the clock conveys the unremitting passing of time. Her hands are poised to type but no words come. The act of recalling is not yet the art of re-creation.



Still from the film *Glück* (2009), Šejla Kamberić

One clue to the film's meaning lies in its title: *Glück*, meaning 'happiness'. Before the film's screening, Šejla Kamerić explains to a Brussels audience how, as a young woman, she took strength during the siege of Sarajevo from a statement by Tolstoy: 'Happiness is when you feel that what you once thought of as oppressive has now become the only meaning of life.'

The Russian poet Anna Akhmatova described a woman asking, as they stood in line outside a prison during the Stalinist terror, 'Can you describe this?' When Akhmatova answered positively, 'something like a smile passed fleetingly over what had once been her face'. The woman in *Glück* struggles to describe her earlier privations, but as she moves the keys of the typewriter, music starts up, becoming less tentative as the keys finally strike the paper. Later we see her lips part as if to speak.

With Kamerić, the joyful embrace of necessity is characteristic of work that often tackles grim themes, or life situations that seem beyond the pale. 'I had the best parties of my life during the siege,' she tells Dirk Snauwaert, director of the contemporary art space, WIELS. 'So it is not only a sad story. You can relate to others' suffering if you realise this, that the suffering isn't so bad that it bears no relation to your own life.'

Glück is set in Berlin, not Sarajevo. (Kamerić says that if she finds herself in empty Berlin streets she remembers the tensions of Sarajevo.) It is an evoking rather than a documenting of history. How does she differ from others who work in film? 'I follow only my instinct and my emotions. I do what I do and it seems that it works.' The sophistication of the films, however, shows the influence of such masters as Tarkovsky. There are discrepancies between what we see and what we hear – footsteps and water continuing to sound after they stop, for instance. 'Sound can tell one level of the story, images another,' Kamerić says.

Film is not the only medium in which this sensitive but unflinching artist is active. Recently she has used needlework as a medium for continuing her exploration of the power of memory. Memory's capacity to process the harrowing details of life she regards as key to survival. 'If you are comfortable enough to recall and face bad things – that is also a kind of happiness.'

Fertile Questions: Ataman

'I don't believe there is the centre and then the periphery. Everyone is at the centre of his own existence.' So says the celebrated Turkish filmmaker and artist, Kutluğ Ataman, on the evening after receiving the third Princess Margriet Award. He is deep in conversation with Dirk Snauwaert (Director of Brussels' contemporary artlab, WIELS) at an Award side-event that is also showing his feature-length film, *Journey to the Moon*.

The film follows the travails of fictional Turkish villagers embarking on their own space programme. There is warmth rather than mockery in this portrait of apparent outcasts from modernity. Is the fate of such outcasts, or 'left-outs', his chief subject? The suggestion makes Ataman bristle. 'To a degree it's a fact that I give a voice to the voiceless – but it's never my motivation,' he says.

The film is part of an evolving cycle of works called *Mesopotamian Dramaturgies*, which examines the impact of the modern on the traditional, and the traditional on the modern. 'I'm currently filming in Argentina – about Israel,' Ataman says with characteristic mischief. For him, geography is a manufactured concept, a construct. There are 'narratives of geography' such as 'east meets west' (but, jests Ataman, 'east meets west everywhere'). Conflict is never very far away: 'We write a narrative for a piece of land so that we can defend it.'

Likewise history, which 'is always written in the present', as *Journey to the Moon* demonstrates. Footage of the remote villagers is commented on by a series of actual experts, also shown in the film – their analysis apparently lending credence to the fictitious events. Ataman explains: 'Information in its rawest form is pornographic. We need to write a narrative immediately to explain it, no matter how horrible it is. In this film I interviewed a lot of important people in the Turkish intelligentsia. I asked these scientists and intellectuals the question: "How would you read this event if it had really taken place, from the perspective of your discipline?" The moment you give evidence of something completely unbelievable, people believe the story.'

Ataman also discusses a work singled out for praise by the Award's Jury, the video installation, *Küba*, in which the shunned dwellers of a shanty-town outside Istanbul tell their own stories. He lived for almost two years among the people there before switching on his camera to interview them. The response to the work was overwhelmingly positive, but irritated Ataman, who felt that he was now seen as a campaigning artist for impoverished communities. He made the decision to head for California and portray the lives of more affluent characters. 'The Küba neighbourhood

taught me how people create a common script, like bees make honey; in California I was interested in how people there organise themselves around the idea of “living in paradise”.’ These two groups of people, in Küba and California, may be polar opposites in terms of social conditions, but they are equally involved in the creation of community.

Whatever critical chains are used to ‘capture’ Ataman, he is adept at wriggling free from them. This is a sure sign of his liveliness as an artist. The Princess Margriet Award honours his work that does indeed give a voice to the voiceless, but it also salutes his many-sidedness and independence of spirit.

‘It doesn’t interest me at all to convey a message,’ Ataman explains. ‘I prefer a discussion with the viewer so that there are more questions. I don’t believe there are answers. The really great asked fertile questions.’



Still from the film *Journey to the Moon* (2009), Kutluğ Ataman



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