

Interview with Keren Cytter

2009 was a very busy year for Keren Cytter, who participated in exhibitions at Manifesta, the Venice Biennale, the New Museum and X-Initiative, and premiered in performances at the Tate Modern and Performa. Cytter won the Vodka Absolute Artist Prize, was featured on the cover of Art Review, and listed second in Flash Art's "2009 Top 100 Emerging Artists". It seems that the artist is everywhere.

Cytter, 32, who was born in Israel and is now based in Berlin, never stops working. She has made over 50 video art works, a full-length feature film, and many drawings. She began an MFA at the Avni Art School in Tel Aviv, but quit after two years to pursue her own projects, such as painting tree trunks green in front of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art ("I think it's funny that 10 years later they are still green...the trees must be suffering." Cytter said.) The artist has also published three novels, a book of crossword puzzles, and six editions of *Alexia*, an art and sex magazine, before moving to Amsterdam with a scholarship from De Ateliers.

Vardit Gross: Funny enough, people in Israel still remember you from your 2001 adventure with *Alexia*.

Keren Cytter: I thought *Alexia* would be really popular because it was about both art and sex, but it wasn't a huge success. It started as a fanzine, and at a certain point I decided to print it in a larger format to make it more marketable. At the time, I thought it was very mainstream, but now that I know how mainstream works, I understand how esoteric it was.

VG: It seems surreal that the magazine was published by someone who had recently moved to Tel Aviv from Ariel, the largest Jewish settlement in the West Bank.

KC: At the end of the day, Ariel is just another big suburb. Ninety-five percent of the population is secular, and even though it is in the territories, kids focus on growing up: hitchhiking to Tel Aviv, going to pubs, listening to music...

VG: You create movies in languages you don't speak, so your own experience of your movies is via subtitles.

KC: I live in Europe and I create in European languages - Dutch, German and French - sometimes because of the actors' languages, and sometimes because of the atmosphere I want to create. French gives an exotic atmosphere. No one judges the acting when the film is in French. I write my scripts in English and someone else translates the script, so when it comes to editing I often don't understand what the actors are saying. When I edit, I'm concentrating on the look and rhythm of the film, and I add the subtitles only when I can't edit any longer. About thirty percent of the time, I break the text or narrative in order to save the film and keep the right rhythm.

VG: Do you think that creating in European languages creates European films?

KC: Language has a lot of impact. People end up determining what the movie is about

based on the language. I did a movie about my childhood in Ariel in Dutch, and people thought of it as a Dutch movie. They ignored the fact that there are soldiers and barricades! I was surprised; it was clear to me that this movie is about a different place and culture, but once people heard Dutch they stuck to it.

VG: Your movies can be hard to digest; for example, your feature-length film, “The Great Tale,” asks a lot of patience from the viewer.

KC: I heard the criticism about my movies being tiring. What can I say? Want easy entertainment - go see strippers! I’m trying to do something new, something different. I’m trying to break movies and create different ways to perceive images and tell a story. Both film and video are relatively new, and it is pretty clear that in a hundred years they will look different. So I’m playing with it, and yes, sometimes it ends up being difficult to follow. I think it is mainly information overload that you adjust to over time.

VG: But you are aware of the problematic length of videos. In the last Venice Biennale you wrote that your video piece was shorter than it really was.

KC: Yes, I lied and wrote on the wall text that the piece is 9 minutes instead of 16. I didn’t want people to feel defeated by the length, and anyway, people leave whenever they want.

VG: Your new piece is your first experience with a dance group – how did this come together?

KC: In 2008 I started working collaboratively with the dance troupe on “If I Can’t Dance, I Don’t Want To Be Part Of Your Revolution,” with the idea of creating a constantly changing performance over a two-year period. The Tate London and Performa Festival in NY were interested in presenting it, and the current show was born. I love working on it, and for the first time I’m even writing the music for it using Garage Band on my computer.

Keren Cytter will be exhibited at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, January 5 through April 4, 2010. The exhibition was organized by Anne Ellegood, Hammer Senior Curator.

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