

Previous
Sally Saul “Hideout” at Almine Reich, Paris

Next
The Texture of Susanne Paesler’s Paintings

CONVERSATIONS

Indistinct Murmur: Özgür Kar

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Özgür Kar interviewed by Chiara Moioli

“Thought I saw you there
Wishing you were near
Can I rest for a while?”

—Deafheaven, “Near,” from *Ordinary Corrupt Human Love* (Los Angeles: Anti, 2018)

In Özgür Kar’s most recent show at Édouard Montassut, Paris, images of two naked men—“caged” in two huge TV screens, their figures outlined in white against a black background—lie in fetal position, barely moving, seemingly humming indistinct lullabies peppered with unintelligible words. Titled *A Decade of Submission*, the exhibition accounts for the artist’s lived experience of the last ten years, which was characterized (he says) by a submissive attitude toward certain types of media and their power to aggravate procrastination. He refers to the larger series of works of which they are part as a kind of theater play. In the following exchange, Kar describes emotions under the spell of new media; language, voice, and narratives; the prominence of sound equipment in his installations; and his works’ subtle, underlying homoeroticism.

CHIARA MOIOLI: *A Decade of Submission*, your first solo show at Édouard Montassut, consists of two nearly static, monologizing, animated video works (*a guy under the influence* [2020] and *it is all in his head* [2020]) displayed on huge TV screens. We don’t know whether these characters are asleep, dreaming, or awake. They are for sure immersed in a state of catalepsy, a trance. Maybe they don’t *want* to wake up, their reality being too painful to sustain, or maybe they’re enjoying mulling chants over and over in a sort of cathartic empowerment ritual. What do you imagine to be the story behind them, and how does it relate to the exhibition’s title?

ÖZGÜR KAR: I was thinking about this show around New Year’s Eve, when we entered 2020. It was the end of a decade, so I was dwelling in particular on my last ten years, which were filled with trash TV, social media, and “ironically” listening to pop music hits. I conceived of this as some sort of power structure of certain types of media, to which I have certainly been submissive. This last decade, which constituted most of my twenties, is thus my “decade of submission” to media—hours and hours of scrolling through feeds, or watching YouTube tutorials that have nothing to do with my daily life. So, the title *A Decade of Submission* seemed fitting. The characters are in a comatose state, mumbling all the trash they’ve accumulated in their brains.

This exhibition is a continuation of a series of works I have been developing over the last few years. The idea is to stage a “scene,” a kind of theater play, in the gallery space. It’s a nonlinear, endlessly looping play, without beginning or end. Here, visitors find themselves in a very private situation where two giant men are sleeping. They are not performing a script for you; they are half asleep. Time slows down, the murmurs creating a lethargic feeling. Slowly, you recognize certain phrases from reality TV, YouTube videos, or catchy pop songs that stuck in your head even though you never actively listened to them.

CM: To my mind, despite being fully grown adults, the characters might as well be in the womb. Squeezed into claustrophobic frames that feel like cages, drenched in darkness, they are deprived of motion. This format is hardly new in your practice, and it’s a direct reference to the “black screens” of our ubiquitous devices.

ÖK: Yes, these works are all about our emotions under the spell of new media. The monologues always refer to a certain type of isolation that one can feel when experiencing the world through the mediation of screens, and at the same time a deep longing for a human touch. So it only made sense to have the characters inside these gigantic black screens, talking to the viewer, trying to connect—which is obviously unattainable. Their movements are very subtle, almost part of the screen. When you think of the experience of being on your phone, reading the news or scrolling Instagram, your body is almost completely inactive other than small movements of your finger and your eyes moving up and down. The characters in my work mimic this inactivity. The gigantic screens they are confined within are almost like contemporary monoliths.

CM: Language, or the lack thereof, and voice play a big role in your narratives. In this case, the voices are laconic murmurs. I imagine them as private confessions, either utterable or unspeakable, perhaps hidden or unrecognizable. In previous iterations, for instance *Let’s agree to agree with me* (2019) or *Love Letters* (2017), the dialogues were more articulated. What led you toward a more intimist (or is it an escapist?) turn?

ÖK: With this series of works, I want to create a completely nonlinear narrative inside the exhibition space. Previously my characters had scripts that they performed to the viewer, and even though they were somewhat fragmented and irregularly repeating, you still had to catch the monologues from the beginning to follow the story. This time, what you experience is a never-ending, seamlessly looping scene containing no elements to catch in order to understand. It leaves more space for interpretation, which I like. This move from a more narrative structure to endless murmurs also emphasizes the idea that these characters are stuck inside the screens 24/7. Nothing changes. You can never tell when the video loops; it is an endless choir of mumbling and singing. On the other hand, the more I showed these works, the more I started to see them as sculptures, and began to think about how to blend video and sound into a sculptural installation. My videos already work this way: there are no cuts in the edit and the characters never leave the screens, so that their images are almost etched on the screens. So, I imagined how to use sound and spoken word in a similar way. I did an improvised recording session of around forty minutes for both of the characters. The viewer never hears the same thing twice, and the sound, just like the video, almost becomes one with the material. It is endlessly continuous. This turn is definitely an experiment with my medium in order to instill a certain type of feeling in the viewer. I’m not sure if it’s an *escapist* move; I see it more as an approach that considers, more than my previous works, the material that the sound and video are coming from.

CM: Your video installations, more often than not, come in pairs. Does this express a wish to create a dialogue between the depicted characters?

ÖK: Yes, it is always a scene, a theater play. Sometimes the characters interact with each other, and sometimes they are isolated but still together. I use multiple characters as a means to move the visitor around the space. You’ll be listening to one of the characters and then the other one says something, so your attention is being pulled from one to the other.

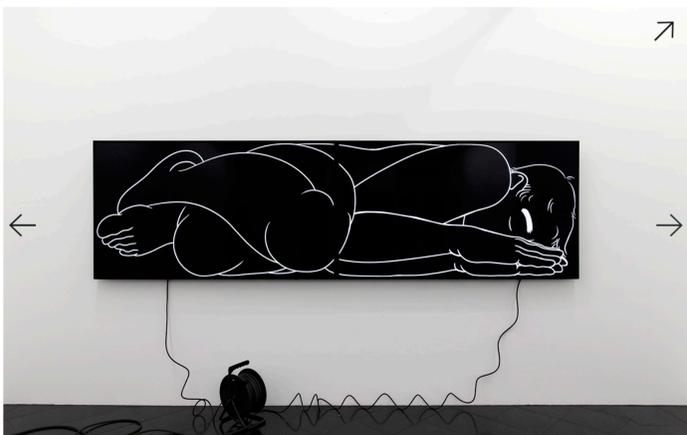
CM: Another element characterizing your installations is the sound equipment, which is highly visible and in some cases almost scenic, as in *At the end of the day* (2019). Could you explain this choice?

ÖK: I treat the audiovisual equipment as a material—not just in the sense of how it looks, but it’s what the work is about, in a way. To me, screens, speakers, cables, cords, and so on are all part of the world I’m working with. In *At the end of the day*, the idea was to have this gigantic speaker representing the quiet thoughts inside the character’s mind. Specifically, he is giving himself a pep talk. He constantly repeats: “At the end of the day, I’m going to be true to myself, and if I’m being true to myself, I should be fine, I should come out on top.” He almost doesn’t have a vocabulary of his own; he’s repeating sentences he’s heard on reality TV shows. To endlessly tell yourself to “be true to yourself” is, to me, a very depressing thing today because it is unattainable. When you’re constantly performing a persona, how can you be “true” or “real”? The speakers were an important part of that installation. They were facing the screen and the character, and their sheer size was intimidating, especially in a closed room like an exhibition space, since they are meant to be used in outdoor festivals or concert halls. Their power was something I didn’t anticipate. You could feel the bass tones of the quiet voice vibrating the floor, in your feet, which made the installation intimate yet overwhelming.

CM: You have a background in film as well as drawing and graphic design. What can you say about the influences that have defined your distinctive practice—for instance the trope of the naked man, male sexuality, and the black-and-white iconography?

ÖK: Most of my influences in terms of drawing come from Persian and Ottoman manuscripts. I love their flatness. In most contemporary video and animation art today, the imagery is computer generated and three dimensional, so I associate the flatness of drawing and 2D animation with something almost “human.” Later on, this background in drawing got mixed with all sorts of influences, for example the amazing films of Lotte Reiniger and Ralph Bakshi, or many early 2000s MTV late-night cartoons, like *Aeon Flux* or even *Beavis and Butthead*. In terms of storytelling, I do like the approach of showing a group of characters that are quite extreme, without positing a set of morals, and letting the viewer draw their own conclusions. For example I watch the movies of Larry Clark and John Waters over and over again. One work that has been very influential over the years is Samuel Beckett’s *Not I* (1973). I’m so fascinated by how overwhelming this play is, even though it’s visually so simple.

There is also always an underlying homoeroticism in my work, but I’m careful not to produce homoerotic images like those of Tom of Finland, for instance, even though I’m definitely influenced by it. My male characters are much more vulnerable, isolated, maybe confused, but most importantly submerged in their emotions. They’re not there to sexually arouse the viewer. They don’t have muscled bodies or huge dicks, and they definitely would never, ever wear police uniforms. It is a more emotional, sensitive male sexuality, which humorously enough makes them almost subversive.



Özgür Kar, *a guy under the influence*, 2020, “A Decade of Submission” at Édouard Montassut, Paris, 2020
Courtesy: the artist and Édouard Montassut, Paris

at Édouard Montassut, Paris
until 11 April 2020