

EYE - VIEW

14.03 – 22.05.2022

**e-billboard, Congress Center
Basel, Switzerland.**

**With video works by Fatema
Al Fardan, Robert Cahen, Jpp,
!Mediengruppe Bitnik, Muda
Mathis & Sus Zwick, Vladimir
Mitrev, Casilda Sánchez, Dorian
Sari, Belle Shafir.**

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Fatema Al Fardan

**“Stereotypes I, II, III and IV”, 2020
1:24 min.**

In *Stereotypes I, II, III and IV*, Khaleeji artist, Fatema Al Fardan, records herself treating her traditional Emirati garb, the *abaya*, as skin. She is depicted lathering lotion on the black cloak, running a razor through it, applying antiperspirant to it, and using a hairdryer directly on her headpiece, the *sheila*. Modestly concealing her body by wearing the *abaya*, as is the norm in the Arabian Gulf, Al Fardan is dually responding to the gaze of foreigners, who view the Khaleej as a cultural monolith, and the gaze of Khaleejis, who subcategorise other Khaleejis based on gender, tribe, religion, ancestry and language. The artist’s performance of an intimate act further characterizes these gazes

“What do you wear at home?” That is the question that this video work responds to. Short yet deafening, the question pointed at the artist during her time at NYUAD reveals the extent of misinformation about the Emirati identity that is prevalent even within the UAE. In a conversation with the artist, Al Fardan notes that “these questions and assumptions are not offensive, just absurd.” It is this absurdity that the artist strove to recreate in her visual exploration of the ways in which othering is an inherent yet ridiculous part of identity formulation. As a young Emirati woman, Al Fardan’s work can be situated within the emerging canon of Khaleeji artists grappling with similar questions of belonging and navigating the same parameters of their identity and cultural agency. For Al Fardan, sharing her lived experience is an integral part of that practice; publicising her experience counts as representation and representation creates awareness.

She does not shy away from the gaze of others; she proudly steps into it to reclaim her individual identity and renegotiate the collective's.

Alya Alawadhi

Robert Cahen

“Françoise”, 2013

6:00 min.

“In this work, the artist filmed his sister. The use of close-ups and the hardly noticeable variations of facial expression give to this face, streaked by time, the serenity of a landscape – mirror of the soul.”

Static shot.

The face of an elderly woman appears, close-up. At the beginning, she looks away and seems to be lost in the distance, in her own contemplation, which the viewer cannot see. She seems to ignore us, indifferent to our presence. Then she looks directly into the lens and invites us to pay attention. Without speaking, she communicates her emotions...but what emotions are these? She doesn't seem to smile,

nor to sulk. Like a Marina Abramović from a different era, mysterious and moving... She radiates an emotional maturity that invites us to reflect on our own feelings. Connected to the audience she stares at, she invites the viewer to concentrate and after a deep breath, looks away again, leaving us alone with our thoughts.

Jpp

“Merri sytë e mi (prends mes yeux)”,

2012

4:00 min.

The video is a fixed sequence, filmed in a domestic space and is a few minutes long. The mother and daughter (the artist) put themselves in a silent situation in their home, trying to share and accept unspoken things, trying to have a conversation they are not ready to have. The communication is made through eye contact only, in complete silence.

Watching and being watched. The fear of giving silence the power of telling things you couldn't say. The fear of seeing your truth in others' eyes.

As the viewer, you find yourself accepting their privacy as the video starts and finishes in the middle of the performative act. Wanting to see

more, the video gives you the power of imagining how it all begins and lets you question the large number of different ways the story may continue.

The one-take scene gives you time to interpret it as one living image filled with emotions while you find yourself in others' stories as they show their honest selves into the public's eyes. Here, Jpp is evoking her experience and difficulties of sharing your true self with your parents, as a woman raised in an Albanian family. Facing her fears as she is facing her mother, looking at her journey by looking at the person she owes the most.

The story is told as they travel in time, looking back through everything by just being present. In a situation created by the artist herself, Jpp evokes fragments of life by constructing a strong presence where she uses her truth as a call for acceptance of taboo subjects like love and sexuality.

Arbesa Musa

!Mediengruppe Bitnik
“Surveillance Chess”, 2012
7:00 min.

London. 2012. On the brink of the Olympic Games. A tube station in one of the most surveilled public spaces in the world. !Mediengruppe Bitnik intercepts the signal of a surveillance camera: business people making their way to the Underground, a man in a suit looking for the right exit. From the left, a woman with a yellow suitcase walks into the frame of the surveillance camera. She opens her suitcase and activates a switch.

This is the moment when Bitnik takes over. The surveillance image drops out, a chess board appears on the surveillance monitor and a voice from the loudspeakers says: “I control your surveillance camera now. I am the one with the yellow suitcase.” The image jumps back to the woman with the yellow suitcase.

“How about a game of chess?”, the voice asks. “You are white. I am black. Call me or text me to make your move. This is my number: 07582460851.”

In *Surveillance Chess*, !Mediengruppe Bitnik re-evaluates surveillance-scapes as part of public space, just before the Olympic Games in 2012. By manipulating unencrypted connections between monitoring cameras and control centres, !Mediengruppe Bitnik replaces the real-time image on the monitor with a personal invitation to play chess. They open up a playful situation between themselves and those who monitor the security cameras in the control centre. Both players are now submitted to the same rules and opportunities. The one-dimensional monitoring system is transformed, it becomes a medium of communication. At this moment, the public space, privatised and

controlled by opaque surveillance systems, is being redesigned. The cards are reshuffled, the game can begin, it is open-ended.

!Mediengruppe Bitnik

Mathis&Zwick

“Der scharfe Blick (The Sharp Look)”, 1999

4:40 min

Two monitors in portrait mode are presented close together. Together they describe an image, a space. They are a pair. Each monitor is inhabited by a figure dressed in red. These are the authors of the installation. They are a couple, they are a pair of twins and each can trigger changes for the other. One stomps and the other one is gone. Isn't that practical? A small movement and the gaze comes into focus for a brief moment. Isn't that generous? It's about the dare, the diffuse, about rhythm, magic and, of course, about the private. The sound propels. Crescendo.

Muda Mathis and Sus Zwick

Vladimir Mitrev

“Once Upon a Time”, 2016

10:40 min

In an intense and prolonged sequence of direct eye contact, Vladimir Mitrev explores the themes of masculinity and heroism. Drawing from what he deems to be one of the greatest scenes in cinematic history, Mitrev borrows a crucial sequence from *Once Upon a Time in the West*, directed by Sergio Leone in 1968, where the ruthless killer, Frank, and the mysterious protagonist, gunman “Harmonica”, look deeply into each other’s eyes before dueling to the death. The artist appropriates the scene to investigate the intensity of the direct gaze. By doing so, he topples toxic masculinity on its head and exhibits the immense strength of vulnerability.

In the video, the artist maintains eye contact with the viewer for over ten,

seemingly excruciating, minutes. Despite being sustained, his gaze is certainly not suspended in time, as the video format emphasizes the duration by allowing the artist's eyes to tire, well up, and eventually tear. Yet, his raw gaze, in direct contrast to the brief look exchanged between Frank and "Harmonica", comes across as an act of striking vulnerability: a stripping of all armors and metaphysical barriers blocking him from the viewer. The only difference between Mitrev's and Leone's versions is the duration of the gaze. In the movie, the eye contact is sustained for a few, poignant seconds, during which the characters' ethical and moral positions are highlighted: "Harmonica's" heroism is emphasized, while Frank's cruelty is underscored. Meanwhile, the sheer length of Mitrev's version allows the inherent violence of the gaze to subvert the pathos of the viewed and convert it into power of the viewer.

Suddenly, it is not just a look exchanged between two people, the recorded stare-off is no longer broadcasting their true colors.

Mitrev's lengthy approach unveils the power the observer holds over the observed and brings our consciousness to the intervening recording device mediating the artist's gaze. Empowering the distant observer, the camera ultimately throttles the traditional power dynamic of the gaze. Yet, by holding his stare, Mitrev exhibits great strength in navigating this shifting dynamic, redefining our understanding of power and masculinity.

The eyes have long been thought to be windows to the soul. From the Italian Renaissance, which witnessed Leonardo da Vinci's *La Gioconda* (1506) and puzzled viewers with *Mona Lisa's* tracking eyes, to Salvador Dalí who adapted the eye as a surrealist symbol for that which is

invisible, unseen, and – in an allusion to Freudian psychoanalysis – unconscious, artists have consistently paid attention to portraying the eye and depicting the gaze. In *Once Upon A Time*, Mitrev engages with this historic discourse and heavily alludes to the eye's post-modernistic colloquial synonymy. Mitrev's confrontational approach is similar to that of pop artist Andy Warhol, particularly to his invasive 3-minute mug-shot-like recordings of visitors at his studio, a series of almost 500 recordings he had titled *Screen Tests* (1964–66). For the duration of the 100-foot Bolex film, Warhol asked his subjects to sit as still as possible, even refrain from blinking, studying the effect of the mediating camera – the effect of documentation – on the power of the gaze. Recorded in a similar fashion, Mitrev's film can be interpreted as a cropped Warholian "Screen Test", one which ultimately ponders what happens when one is asked to emulate stillness, project an image

**of themselves and give into the
camera's recorded gaze.**

Alya Alawadhi

Casilda Sánchez

**“As Inside as the Eye Can See”,
2009, 7:11 min**

Sánchez may very well be described as an “eye artist”, for in this work she interrogates what seeing is, how we see seeing, and she challenges the viewer to look at seeing in terms of closeness and proximity to what is seen [...]

There are at least two kinds of looking that can be investigated in this work. On the one hand, it is the looks exchanged between the two bodies on screen. On the other, it is the way in which viewers look at the work, an overwhelming close-up of the two eyes. Viewed from either position, instead of enabling objective knowing, looking is shown to be paradoxical. The bodies on screen cannot visually recognise each other; they are too close to do so. Similarly, although viewers can

see the image, they may feel limited by their exclusion from the intimate exchange taking place on a monumental scale in front of them. And yet, the viewer cannot deny feeling “in touch” with (perhaps overwhelmed by) what is seen. In fact, far from being excluded, distanced and detached, it is tempting to suggest that the viewer’s eyes wander over the surface of the video projection – the screen – caressing and touching the images on screen as the eyes they see caress and touch each other. We are drawn not only into the image, but also into the intimate, even erotically charged exchange we see before us [...]

In As inside as the eye can see we are compelled to interact with the enlarged close-up image of (hairy) textural skin, wet eyeballs and scratchy eyelashes, as if we ourselves were getting “up close” to the image as we are, at the same time, “eyeing them out” [...]

When recognising that we interact with this work in this way, and that we are in a complex interchange with it, it is no longer possible to assume that the work represents a rational space that is ordered and controlled by the power of the gaze (of the subject) as is presupposed in Cartesian perspectivalism. Instead, Sánchez forces the viewer to acknowledge that knowing and understanding can emerge through the irrational, intimate sense of touch [...]

Jenni Lauwrens (Abstract from *Can you see what I mean?* DEARTE, 2012)

Dorian Sari

“LOOK!”, 2021

3:35 min

The artist points with their hand to an incident outside the screen without the camera following them. The intensity of their gesture increases as the video progresses and their emphasis on the continuously repeated word “Look!” becomes increasingly insistent and desperate. What the important and moving scene off-screen is remains unexplained because the camera remains focused on the protagonist. The disturbing aspect of this invisible happening is mixed with the despair of not being able to change the camera’s point of view.

Dorian Sari

Belle Shafir

“What is the color of your father’s eyes”, 2014

3:27 min

In *What is the color of your father’s eyes* Belle Shafir uses a series of stares to call up a flood of emotionally charged memories of the intergenerational relationships in her family that revolve around a repressed story, never spoken of until then. The eyes erupt onto the screen, one after another, autonomous entities embodying disturbing, intimidating gazes. Their domain is the tension between the closed eye and the open one, the submissive and the rebellious, the oppressed and the fighter, the concealed and the exposed. Between the lowered gaze, seemingly safe under the thick layer of skin concealing it, and the stubborn physical and mental effort needed to open the eyes, to remove

the protective layer and overcome the forces that try to make her pull away. Finally, she manages to raise her eyes and her gaze is revealed, a threatening disturbance in the space. The eye is wide open, exposed and unshielded, but its direct gaze has the power to penetrate into hidden, forbidden places and face the mechanisms that wish only to silence, exclude and terrorize.

Ruty Chinsky Amitay

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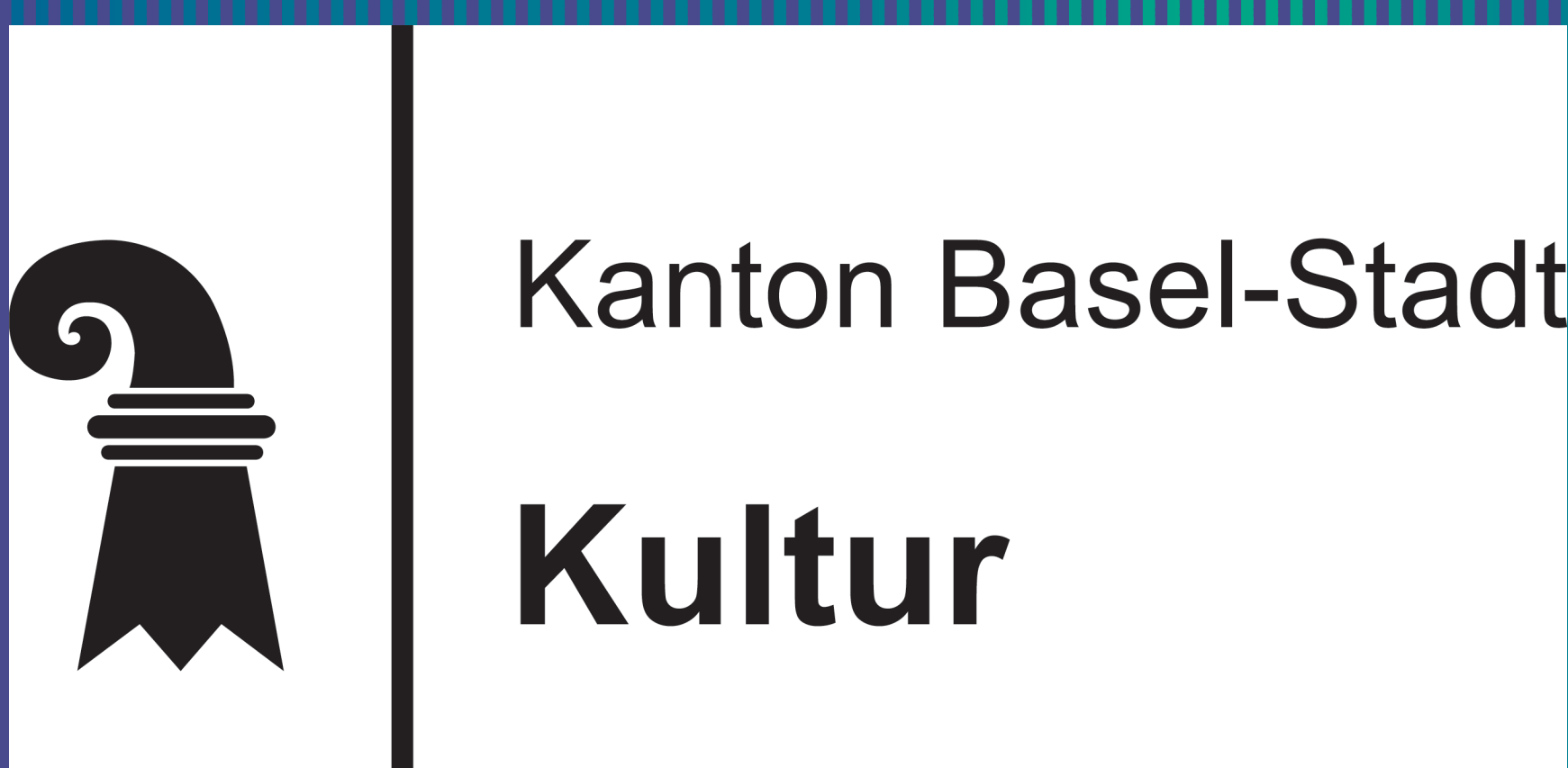
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