

i?

by Shahram Entekhabi

**fine
arts
unternehmen
video+film**

**Film data****Year:**

2003-2004

Original format:

video on dvd

Duration:

4:17 min

Artist's statement

I was more interested in the conceptual nature of FILM than in any of its more modernist features. This concept includes the enlisting of a Hollywood star, of course, thus making a pre-post-modernist claim for the abolition of that boundary between popular and high culture. But the primary element of that concept is the unlikely combination of going around in the public space of the city while never revealing the face. For today, it is of crucial importance to reflect on the relationship between the individual subject whose life the constitution demands we respect, and the larger communities whose members the Western World denies that individuality. For, as "i?" in its intertextual relationship to FILM seeks to explore, it is not productive to remain obsessed with the individual face as long as a true Levinasian face-to-face cannot occur.

The mechanics of a conceptual exploration, abolishing the heroizing individualism that subtends Hollywood stardom along with elite notions of artistic genius, offer an opportunity to do research on identity without sentimentalizing that concept, reclaiming it from abuse in identity politics and its backlash. In this sense, "i?" reclaims the complex meanings of, and intricate relationships among, post-structuralism (the concept), postmodernism (the philosophy of the subject) and postcolonialism (the reclaimed, literally re-incorporated search for identity in a culturally hybrid world).

This intertextual relationship to both Beckett and Keaton, two stars of modernist as it tips over into postmodernism, is at the heart of a "new historicism" that is not an attempt to reclaim history as if poststructuralism had never happened, but instead claims a historical position for the acknowledgement of the contemporary in all historical relationships to the past. This pre-posterous historicity anchors the present in a firm bound to the

// Artist's statement

past of the American West woven into Beckett's FILM by means of Keaton's particular acting style and his by 1965 pre-posterous movements, to the past the migrant carries on his back, from the western-exploited middle East and the traces of its own popular culture in small tokens we see here and there, shimmering through their insignificance.

"i?" is not a remake of FILM. The differences between FILM and "i?" are important. Beckett filmed in black and white, I filmed in color. In spite of the passers-by in the frame, the figure in Beckett's film is primarily alone with his identity crisis; his running, climbing and scuttling around appears to merge from an inner need. Mine is examining identity in the midst of the turmoil of the multicultural city. To Beckett's twenty-two minutes, I substitute a 4.17 minute's film on a loop, increasing narrative pace while slowing down diegetic pace. The explanatory ending is gone, and replaced by a circular structure. The beginning, when the figure looks into the mirror while shaving, is buckled up to the ending, which is double. First, he enters his home through the door, then arrives there and cannot open the door. Looking into the mirror is completely different after having been a mirror to others all day long.

Those differences turn the later film into a critical commentary on the earlier one, in true postmodernist fashion. But it is also clear that this is a dialogue, not a rejection, of everything that Beckett's film contains but keeps implicit: most importantly, the rationale of the combination of going out in a public space while hiding of the face. The later film brings out these implicit elements, pre-posterously revising the earlier work instead of treating it like a corpse ready for dissecting. This is an approach to a cultural artifact that supplements, but also

constitutes, academic scholarship – indeed, revealing aspects of Beckett's work that the written word would have a mighty hard time articulating.

My project was also to foreground the crossing, in culture, of two systemic relationships: vertical so to speak, to other artworks from the past, here, Beckett's and Keaton's FILM, and a horizontal one, in the present, between art and the popular culture that populates the urban space and that none of us can esoterically ignore. Both relationships already cross when Keaton, belatedly by forty years, reenacts his past as a comic, a star of the silent film with its particular loaded movements, and his significance as the figure of the migrant going West.

Shahram Entekhabi



Review by Mieke Bal

In his 2004 film, "i?" of 4.17 minutes, Shahram Entekhabi (Iran 1957) revisits for contemporary culture the concept of Samuel Beckett's only film, called FILM, starring Buster Keaton (1965). In the typical and, by 1965 historical fashion of early cinema that had no dialogue, lots of body movement, and visual explorations of the shock encounter with the city that characterized modernity and was fully worked into those Westerns that were set in the contrastive urban environment, Keaton, 40 years beyond his greatest successes jumps and scuttles around in New York City, never showing his face to passers-by or public. In the final shot, and in what might be an ironic concession to the viewer hungry for realistic solutions, it turns out that face is hideously distorted.

The primary element of Beckett's concept is the unlikely combination of going around in the public space of the city while never revealing the face. Entekhabi takes the conceptual nature of FILM up but omits such a reassuring ending - reassuring because it projects the refusal of the face-to-face on the figure who hides. Entekhabi's lone figure is never seen because the environment doesn't care to see him. For today, it is of crucial importance to reflect on the relationship between the individual subject whose life the constitution demands we respect, and the larger communities whose members the Western world denies that individuality. For, as i? in its intertextual relationship to FILM seeks to explore, it is not productive to remain obsessed with the individual face as long as a true face-to-face cannot occur.

The mechanics of a conceptual exploration, abolishing the heroizing individualism that subtends Hollywood stardom along with elite notions of artistic genius, offer an opportunity to research identity without sentimentalizing that concept, reclaiming it from abuse in identity politics and its backlash. In i?, ten very short

// Review by Mieke Bal

sequences position the Migrant in different urban spaces that hint at his everyday life, from a shave in his own home to the market, the coffee house, and returning to the apartment building he lives in. A full day, a full life, and no face-to-face.

i? became the new starting point of a series of short films, in which the inscription of historical continuity crossed with geographical failed encounters is shaped further. In these films, the everyday life of the migrant is further stylized and reduced to single acts: traveling, looking for work, intervening in public space, offering cake on his birthday, and running away from suspicious urbanites who finally see him, and think he's up to no good.

Mieke Bal

Professor of Theory of Literature, University Amsterdam





Interview by A. Rayyan

Of keys and pigeons...

Bidoun meets the artists - interview with Shahram Entekhabi

By Alia Rayyan

A man in a gray suit and white shirt stands somewhat remotely at the edge of a weekly market and allows the crowd to push by him. His attention is drawn to one of the passers-by, who bears a surprising resemblance to him. In a hectic, tense fashion, he begins to pursue the man, which leads him through streets, tunnels, house entranceways – until he arrives at his own doorstep. Has he followed himself?

Shahram Entekhabi quietly watches the video projection “i?”, a work in ten episodes which depicts the everyday life of the protagonist “O”, played by Entekhabi himself. A game of perception and observations of the self. The plot of the video by Shahram Entekhabi is not only reminiscent of the film classic “Film” by Samuel Beckett with Buster Keaton – it can also be understood as a reference to the subject of interpretation from the viewpoint of an immigrant.

Entekhabi is one of ten artists with a commissioned work in the exhibit “Distant Nearness – Positions of Iranian Artists” (Kilid). Concurrently, a solo exhibition of his video work is featured in the Play gallery in Berlin Mitte. Bidoun met the artist in Berlin and spoke with him about his video work “i?”, the accompanying workshop for young people from Berlin and the exhibition in the House of World Cultures.

Entekhabi belongs to a generation of exile artists that haven’t been back to Iran in 25 years. The 52-year old projects an air of relaxation and ease. A prominent pair of black glasses dominates his face. His look is perfectly

// Interview by A. Rayyan

suited to the style of Berlin Mitte. Outwardly political, his artistic work concentrates on themes of the human microcosm. "In the film, I observe myself," Entekhabi explains. "My 'self' is separated into two people. One is fully integrated and involved with daily happenings. The other always arrives a bit too late – stands in front of locked doors, gets lost. Even if Entekhabi is clearly recognizable as the protagonist "O", his face is always partially concealed and remains in obscurity. A blade scrapes across O's face. One can hear the breathing, the water and the scratch of the sharp edge. Despite being shot in close-up, the viewer is held at a distance.

"I am interested in exactly that moment in which you are at one with yourself; when you have no gender, no nationality, no age. I was looking for moments in which one is completely alone. For example, the sound of the shower or the scrapes of the razor. Then you suddenly notice something which brings you back to reality. At this point, you are once again confronted with your physicality, with the location, the environment. My work "i?" revolves around this search, the search for a "self".

At first, the nine young people in the workshop could relate neither to the subject of "identity" nor to a film language à la Beckett. According to Entekhabi, only during the practical realization were they able to display their true strengths. The three productions can be viewed in the gallery. "Without consciously doing so, in the end they chose a similar film language to that of Beckett. In the process, an authenticity was created which some video artists are able to hide behind. However, these films don't have anything to do with the subject of immigration or being on the outside. These young people haven't

yet been confronted with their own "difference". Many are already from a fourth generation of immigrants and approach this subject in a very different way. Perhaps because the clichés are more deeply rooted or obvious. Belonging to a clique and behavioral roles are much more important." Role play and clique membership seem to dominate the exhibition "Distant Nearness". Shahram



Credits

performers shahram entekhabi

and with lars bauer, shaheen moradi,
mustafa kandaz

camera arne hector

sound rachel hunter

production designer volker rehm

costumes baerbel kirchhof

make-up viola fistler

written, directed and edited by
shahram entekhabi

produced by
Fine Arts Unternehmen Film AG

supported by
Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, Neuer Berliner
Kunstverein,
NEXT, Interkulturelle projekte, Zebef e.V. Ludwiglust

Artist's info

Born in Beroujerd (Iran) in 1957

1976 -1979 studied graphic-design at the University of Teheran, Iran; studied architecture, urbanism, and Italian language in Perugia and Reggio Calabria, Italy

Since 1983 lives and works in Berlin

1983 - 2000 works as independent architect: Architecture projects and competitions

Since 2001 active in the fields of video art, photography, drawings, installation, and community art

2004 fellowship at the Baker-Nord Center for the Humanities at Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland/OH

2005 "Walled Souls" on the occasion of the exhibition "Circa Berlin", Nikolaj Contemporary Art Center, Copenhagen, Danmark / "Bologna Flash Art Show", Hotel Sofitel, Bologna, Italy / "GLUB (Hearts)" (with Mieke Bal), Hopkins Hall Gallery, OSU College of the Arts, The Ohio State University, Columbus/OH, USA / "I LOVE ART VIDÉO - 6ème édition", Musée d'art moderne et contemporain de Strasbourg, France

2004 Solo exhibition "GLUB (Hearts)" (with Mieke Bal), Case Art Studio Gallery, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland/OH (GLUB, catalogue) / Participation in the exhibition "Labyrinth X - zu Rassismus und Ausgrenzung", Stadthalle Ludwigslust (i?, newspaper) / Participation in the exhibition "Entfernte Nähe. Neue Positionen Iranischer Kunst", Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin (Kilid, catalogue) / exhibition architecture and exhibition designer of "Entfernte Nähe. Neue Positionen Iranischer Kunst", Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin (Pasheband, catalogue) / Participation in the exhibition "Not in the sky and not on the earth", Museum of Contemporary Art, Skopje/Macedonia (How to perform prayers, catalogue) / Solo exhibition, PLAY_gallery for still and motion pictures, Berlin (i?, Happy Meal, Herr Karl aus Nemsas and me?) / Participation in the exhibition "Schizorama", National Center for Contemporary Art/NCCA, Moscow, (Happy

meal) / Participation in the film program on the occasion of the solo exhibition of Louise Bourgeois, Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin (Eye Contact, directed by Mieke Bal & Shahram Entekhabi) / Participation in the exhibition "La Sage-femme y Spiral Woman", Sala Municipal de Exposiciones del Museo de Pasió (Eye Contact, catalogue) / Participation in the exhibition "just pLAY", Cirrus Gallery, Los Angeles (Happy Meal and GLUB)

2003 Participation in the screening program "Different views in and out of Berlin" on the occasion of the project "In-between countries", Haus der Demokratie und Menschenrechte, Berlin (The Crow) / Participation in the screening program "Einige Bemerkungen über den Nutzen wissenschaftlicher und methodologischer Filme" by Olga Egorova (St. Petersburg), Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, Berlin (Fresh Azan) / Permanent installation of the sculpture seat in the lounge of the Video-Forum at Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, Berlin / Participation in "The 2nd International Kansk Video Festival", Kansk/Russia (Fresh Azan) / Participation in "Fair Play. Video contest", PLAY_gallery for still and motion pictures, Berlin (Klaatu Barada Nikto) / Participation in the exhibition "models + frames 8: Überlebensstrategien für Untrainierte - The Winner Takes It All...", Kunst- und Medienzentrum Adlershof/KMZA, Berlin (RE-CY-CLE)

2002 Participation in "The 1st International Kansk Video Festival", Kansk/Russia (Express Malevich) / Participation in the project "Stardust Deluxe. Kunstaktionen zur Popkultur", Lisa Lounge/Villa Elisabeth, Berlin (Playback) / Participation in the project "Evolutionäre Zellen" of the group "finger", Neue Gesellschaft für Bildene Kunst (Staatrundfahrt) / Participation in the screening program "Pop-Sound-Video", Städtisches Museum Zwickau (Playback) / Participation in the Bush Videonight, open space, Berlin-Kreuzberg (Klaatu Barada Nikto)

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