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INTRODUCTION

Shooting Back presents a selection of works by international artists, most drawn from the collection of Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary, which share a fundamental interest in ethnographic research, folklore, rituals, and spirituality, as well as in exposing alternative histories and acts of commemoration. Following Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary's earlier project KÜBA: Journey against the Current and the art commissions presented during its nomadic travels through seven Eastern and Central European countries, Shooting Back undertakes a broader investigation of the themes of identity and tradition introduced in the earlier exhibition.

The title Shooting Back refers to the act of choosing to narrate one's own history, the deployment of distinctive tools and methods of representation, and the reassertion of ownership over tradition and heritage. The expression is derived from ethnographic film productions of the 1960s and ensuing investigations. As artists, filmmakers, and theoreticians have developed new languages to talk about their traditions, heritage, and identities, they have in turn *shot back* at the crude, stereotypical, and fictitious imagery of their respective cultures presented by mainstream media and scholarship. At the same time the expression *shooting back* marks the shift from passive forms of representation to new modes of self-representation. On an artistic level this has been addressed through the conscious investigation of overlooked, erased, and precarious histories. In order to approach such *elusive* realities, artists deploy strategies of reconstruction, archiving, and (performative) actualization and often access an immaterial heritage that

is committed to forms of knowledge and culture that are already inscribed into history. The exhibition, divided into five loosely structured thematic sections and accompanied by a film program, is dedicated to hinting at these complex discourses.

Experience which is passed on from mouth to mouth is the source from which all storytellers have drawn. And among those who have written down the tales, it is the great ones whose written version differs least from the speech of the many nameless storytellers. Incidentally, among the last named there are two groups which, to be sure, overlap in many ways. And the figure of the storyteller gets its full corporeality only for the one who can picture them both. "When someone goes on a trip, he has something to tell about," goes the German saying, and people imagine the storyteller as someone who has come from afar. But they enjoy no less listening to the man who has stayed at home, making an honest living, and who knows the local tales and traditions. If one wants to picture these two groups through their archaic representatives, one is embodied in the resident tiller of the soil, and the other in the trading seaman. Indeed, each sphere of life has, as it were, produced its own tribe of storytellers. Each of these tribes preserves some of its characteristics centuries later. Walter Benjamin[1]

SONGS / STORYTELLING Amar Kanwar's film A Night of Prophecy was shot in several regions of India and captures songs and poems (of protest and sorrow) that speak of the past, the severity of conflict and the cycles of change. In Seven Hungarian Ballads, filmmaker Želimir Žilnik features rural people in the Vojvodina region singing century-old ballads while doing their chores. Ice Floes of Franz Joseph Land re-creates sections of the novel Two Captains that forms the basis for the Russian musical North East, which was being performed at the Moscow theater that was taken over by Chechen rebels in 2002. Given that the story has been interpreted as a Russian national epic, Catherine Sullivan questions to what extent it was a symbolic target. SONGS / STORYTELLING is devoted

to the slower traditions of narrative, popular songs, and storytelling, which occupy the interstitial spaces of cultural transmission (oral history, interlocution). Speaking again through Walter Benjamin in The Storyteller:

> One must imagine the transformation of epic forms occurring in rhythms comparable to those of the change that has come over the earth's surface in the course of thousands of centuries. Hardly any other forms of human communication have taken shape more slowly, been lost more slowly.[2]

FOLKLORE / HERITAGE Anetta Mona Chisa and Lucia Tkáčová propose with their video Capital: Magical Recipes for love, happiness and health new uses for a work with a precarious heritage and a controversial past, namely Das Kapital by Karl Marx. Ai Weiwei poses uncomfortable questions about authenticity and the relevant actualization of cultural values: Colored Vases consists of Neolithic pots being dipped by the artist into colored industrial paints. In Brad Kahlhamer's work Billy Jack, Jr., the life of the artist seems to accidentally overlap with the story of the hero of the 1971 movie Billy Jack, who was committed to protecting Native Americans against discrimination. Theoretician Faye Ginsburg states that indigenous media-makers are often "people who are particularly engaged in the repositioning of cultural authority and experience by using satire, humor, and performance to provide multi-layered commentaries on their own identities and on the dominant society." Ginsburg's observation seems particularly relevant to Kahlhamer's paintings (but also to Chisa and Tkáčová), in which diversely coded references from popular culture meet. MEMORY / MEMORIALIZATION *Collective memory* is sometimes accessed only through expressions that are considered to be part of a culture's intangible heritage, as in Tanya Hamilton's archival and filmic work about the history of Jamaica's Mobile Cinema Unit. In the photographic work Triangle, Sanja Iveković documents and recalls how an explicitly private act can be interpreted as a threat to the public in an area tightly controlled by a state

regime. The installation The KD Vyas Correspondence: Vol. 1 by Raqs Media Collective consists of 18 video *enigmas*, based on the 18 cantos of the Mahabharata, one of the most important mythological texts of Hinduism. The artists' collective explores issues concerning the production and transmission of narratives as well as vexing questions of demonstrability.

TRADITION / RITUAL / PERFORMANCE As part of a strategy to undermine the single auctorial voice of a producer, one who often comes from outside the culture being examined, artists have literally handed over the camera to the people they are supposed to be filming, bringing in the gaze *from the other side* and questioning the relationship between the investigating subject and the object of investigation. The ongoing process of appropriation and re-appropriation and the remix of attributes of self-definition reinstate a conception of heritage and identity that is either fragmented or infinitely additive and that is actualized in acts and rituals of performance. Kutlug Ataman and Chen Chieh-Jen make use of the performative medium to stage acts and rituals and thereby expose viewers to more nuanced notions of cultural identity. In Turkish Delight, Ataman turns the camera on himself. Dressed as a traditional belly dancer, he performs the character of a belly dancer but also presents himself as a *Turkish artist*. In Lingchi – Echoes of a Historical Photograph, Chen restages a type of public execution performed under the late Qing dynasty in China that became known in the Western world mainly through a famous essay by Georges Bataille. Whereas Bataille analyzed the photograph in the context of religion, eroticism, and aesthetics, the artist describes the actual taking of the picture and the ensuing theoretical oversubscription as acts of colonial appropriation. The traditional teaching system of debating used in Tibetan Buddhism is based upon linguistic processes and rituals, which filmmakers Ritu Sarin and Tenzing Sonam are trying to introduce to a broader public through their work. In a project that combines documentation with social initiative, Kristina Leko points out that one of the

side effects of globalization is the assimilation of distinctive cultural practices and traditions while simultaneously calling upon viewers to take action against the disappearance of the Zagreb milkmaids. HISTORY / RECOLLECTION In 1996 Akram Zaatari, Walid Raad, and other artists founded the Arab Image Foundation in Beirut. It is committed to preserving, indexing, and studying photographic collections that document histories of the Arab world. The artists are concerned not only with research and the retracing of alternative histories but also with the modes in which different dominant narratives are passed on. Authenticity, date, and ownership are always subject to question in the archives of Raad and The Atlas Group. In Let's Be Honest. The Weather Helped, Raad *assembled* the bullet holes left by color-coded cartridges used by the various militias and armies fighting the Lebanese wars. The color-coding system is employed by manufacturers in different countries to mark their ordnances and shells. In Woman to Go, Mathilde ter Heijne has collected hundreds of photographs and biographies of women from cultures throughout the world in order to reveal their remarkable stories and achievements and to question their historical anonymity. In the video Casio, Seiko, Sheraton, Toyota, Mars, Sean Snyder looks at how restricted or arbitrary access to the means of (media) production raises the question of who is included in the process of meaning production. Simultaneously he is questioning the representability of reality in the context of constant global cultural exchange via the media.

The exhibition aims to present a wide variety of cultural histories and engagements and to provoke a reconsideration of ethnographic approaches. The accompanying film and performance program, as well as this publication attempt to retrace an open and fragmented history of filmmakers and artists who have been concerned with issues of documentation.

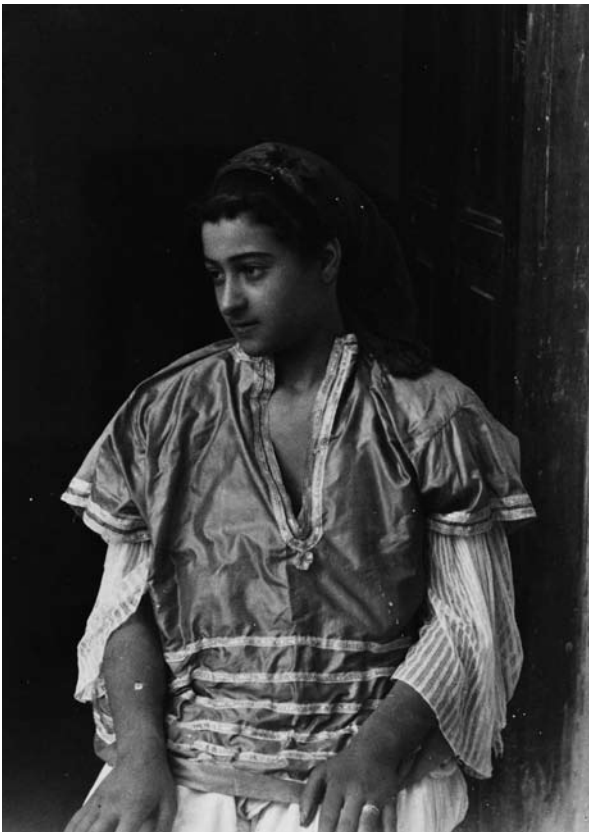
1 Walter Benjamin, The Storyteller, in: Illuminations, Schocken: New York, 1969, p. 83–110

2 Ibid.

Works

Mathilde ter Heijne
*1969 in Strassbourg, Belgium

Figs. pp. 15–19:
Mathilde ter Heijne, Woman to go, 2005, 180 different postcards, 6 postcard racks



Dame Freya Stark (1893–1993) was born in Paris and educated in London. She invested a great deal of time and money learning Arabic and other languages, which would be her tools of discovery. Living to the age of 100, she devoted her life to the art of solo travel, writing two dozen highly personal travel books.

In 1928, at age 35, Stark established herself at the forefront of exploration with an audacious journey into forbidden territory of the Syrian Druze. While there, she was thrown in a military prison, but not before a trek across the infamous Valley of the Assassins, where a heretical sect of Muslims known for committing political and religious murders lived. The resulting book, The Valley of the Assassins (1934), established her recognizable style, combining practical travel advice with a lively commentary on the people, places, customs, and history of Iran. The book also brought her money and fame, in addition to grants from the Royal Geographical Society to pursue additional explorations.

During the 1930s, Stark ventured into the outback of southern Arabia, where only a few Western explorers had previously dared go. She discovered the hidden routes of the great incense trade of antiquity, whose great cities are just now being excavated—right where she had said they would be found. Stark continued to explore well into her 60s, when she followed in the footsteps of Alexander the Great in his epic journeys into Asia. The trips resulted in three of her most well-known books, The Lycian Shore, Ionia: A Quest and Alexander's Path. In them, she not only explores the trails upon which Alexander and his army marched, but also documents the impact that Greek civilization made on the nations of the Middle East.

Library of Congress, LC-DIG-04410, unknown woman, Tunis, 1860–1900, photo: Tancréde R. Dumas

Elfriede Lohse-Wächtler's (1899–1940) parents were, given their narrow middle-class background, totally unprepared to cope with the brilliance and eccentricity of their daughter and tried—unsuccessfully—to block her career as an artist. Elfriede attended the Academy of Art in Dresden and left home at the age of sixteen, earning her living by making batik articles. She associated with the artistic Bohème of Dresden, became a devotee of Dada, and attended events of the Spartacus League, educating herself politically and socially.

Endless poverty became the trademark of her life (after being financially robbed by the wrong husband), and she was living and working in Hamburg under such pitiful emotional and financial conditions that she suffered a nervous breakdown. A stay in a mental health clinic provided the rest and regular meals she needed for recovery. During this stay of several weeks she painted portraits of her fellow patients, the Friedrichsberger Köpfe which earned enthusiastic praise from the art critics.

After these artistically very productive, but personally annihilating years in Hamburg she sought refuge with her parents in Dresden, who now experienced anew the disruption of their peaceful middle-class life. Her father had her committed in 1932 to the state mental institution in Arnsdorf near Dresden where she was labeled *schizophrenic*.

In 1935, the National Socialist Law of Congenital Health led to her compulsory sterilization. This dehumanizing humiliation virtually extinguished Elfriede Wächtler's creative powers. In her 41st year, Elfriede Wächtler became a victim of Aktion T4, Hitler's program of mass annihilation of mentally and physically handicapped persons, or so-called *life unworthy of life*.

New York Public Library, unknown woman, photo: G. Walters Roberts

Alexandrine Tinné (1835–1869) was born in The Hague, the Netherlands, to a wealthy family. An unhappy love affair may have prompted her to leave home and embark on a voyage up the Nile in search of the river's source. In 1862 Tinné hired a small fleet of boats in Cairo, Egypt, and left on her first expedition up the Nile. Accompanying her were her mother, her aunt, several scientists, and a number of assistants and servants. Tinné ascended the Nile as far as Gondokoro, in present-day southern Sudan, above which the river became unnavigable. She planned to meet British explorer John Hanning Speke, who was exploring the upper reaches of the Nile to the south. When Speke's expedition failed to arrive when expected, Tinné set off on her own to determine the source of the Nile.

Traveling overland, she ventured into the watershed region between the Congo and Nile rivers, in the northeastern part of present-day Zaire. Tinné's explorations took her into regions of central Africa that were not yet mapped and seldom visited by Europeans. She returned to Gondokoro in September 1862, and after again failing to meet up with Speke, she headed downriver and back to Cairo. Both her mother and aunt, as well as two of the scientists, died of fever during the trip.

Tinné lived in Cairo until she moved to Algiers, Algeria, in 1867. She resumed her African explorations in 1869, intending to become the first European woman to cross the Sahara Desert. From Tripoli, on the Mediterranean Sea coast of Libya, she headed south to the oasis city of Murzuk. While waiting there for an Arab caravan with which she planned to continue her journey southward, Tinné took a side trip to visit the nomadic Tuareg tribes. On the way to a Tuareg encampment, Tinné was robbed and murdered by her guides.

Heritage Photographs, unknown woman, India

Aleksandra Mikhaylovna Kollontay (1872–1952) was born in St. Petersburg, Russia as the daughter of a general in the Imperial Russian Army. Aleksandra Mikhaylovna married an army officer, Vladimir Mikhaylovich Kollontay. In 1898, however, she abandoned her privileged social position, later became affiliated with the Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party, and spread revolutionary propaganda among women workers. She toured the United States, making speeches against possible U.S. participation in World War I (1916) and advocated radical changes in traditional social customs and institutions in Russia. She became commissar for public welfare in the Bolshevik government that assumed power after the October Revolution and used her position to remodel Russian society, advocating the practice of free love, the simplification of marriage and divorce procedures, the removal of the social and legal stigma attached to illegitimate children, and various improvements in the status of women. Accused of neglecting her official duties because of a love affair, she escaped execution only through Vladimir Lenin's intervention.

Her affiliation with the Workers' Opposition—a group within the Communist Party (Bolsheviks) that demanded greater democracy within the party and a more decisive role for workers in party affairs—won her personal popularity among the general party membership but prompted the Central Committee to attempt her expulsion from the party. She subsequently joined the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs and was assigned to the posts of minister to Norway, to Mexico, to Norway again, and to Sweden. After 1943 she held the rank of ambassador, and in 1944 she conducted the armistice negotiations that concluded Soviet-Finnish hostilities during World War II. Selected Writings of Alexandra Kollontai were published in 1978. She died in Moscow.

Library of Congress, Edward S. Curtis Collection, LC-USZ62-115823,
unknown Cheyenne Woman, c 1927

Pola Salavarrieta (c 1790–1817) was born in a creole family in the province of New Grenada. She moved with her family to the town of Aguadas, on the route from Cartagena to Santa Fé de Bogotá, in 1802. In 1813 the colony declared independence from Spain, but was recaptured in 1816. La Pola became an active member of the resistance. In late 1816, trained as a seamstress, she found work in the houses of Spanish royalist women in Bogotá, passing on information to the rebels and setting up a network of contacts and safe routes. She was discovered, captured and shot in the public square as a republican agent in 1817. Her execution aroused a wave of public sympathy and she became a legendary heroine of patriotic resistance.

Library of Congress, F. Carpenter Collection, LC-USZ62-80004,
unknown woman, Korea, 1920–1920

Akram Zaatari
*1966 in Saida, Lebanon

Excerpts from an Interview with Hashem El Madani
This interview was written by the artist based on conversations he had with the photographer Hashem El Madani in 2003 and 2004 in Saida, Lebanon.

Akram Zaatari: *You are now the oldest studio photographer in Saida, with a studio that has been in operation for over 50 years. Hundreds of thousands posed in front of you. Where did your interest in photography come from, and how did you become a photographer?*
Hashem El Madani: I liked photography since childhood. As children we were surrounded with very few images. Once, my cousins in Aakka, Palestine sent us their portraits as a souvenir, so my father decided to take my brother Hussein and me to Studio Akl, in Bawabet El Fawqa, which had opened in 1933 (it closed down in 1934). He wanted to send a photograph of us to my cousins in return. Going to Studio Akl was a major event for us. When we received the print it was just fabulous. I was five years old and the picture was a postcard size print.
After I left school in 1946, I worked for a short period in a pastry store. I also worked as a house painter. At this time, young men from Saida would travel to Palestine seeking employment. I went to the Workers' Union asking for information. They referred me to a photographer in Toulkarem named Ibrahim Hamoudeh. Later, a friend sent me to see a Jewish photographer called Katz, who was based in Haifa and had another studio in Yaffa. Katz told me, "You will get paid when you learn the job." I worked with him, and tried my best to learn quickly. I used to mix the chemicals, wash film stock, and help him organize his archive. As a result, he paid me two Palestinian pounds at the end of the first month.
When the Israeli State was declared in 1948 and the Israelis arrived in Haifa, I moved to Yaffa and worked for a few days in the studio of the Jewish photographer Ben Ghamzo. After the Israelis arrived in Yaffa, I returned to Toulkarem, then went on to Nablus, where I went to the Lebanese consulate. I received a permit to leave that required me to travel first to Amman, then to Damascus, from where finally I could travel to Saida.
Once in Saida, with no photographic equipment and no capital, how did you start your own practice as a photographer?
In Saida, I bought a 6 x 9 box camera for 10 Lebanese lira in 1948, and started to take