

Istanbul Technical University SNT 114E Contemporary Art
Midterm Paper

Examination of Strange Fruit by Hale Tenger

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Hale Tenger, *Strange Fruit* (2009). Mixed media installation including video and audio. Music: Heitor Villa Lobos arranged by Serdar Ateşer. Two polyethylene globes, each 100 cm in diameter, paper coated by hand and lacquered; automated feather boa curtain and feather boa separation each 70 cm in depth. Viewed at İstanbul Modern. Photograph: GREEN ART GALLERY, Dubai UAE

Abstract

This midterm paper examines the art installation *“Strange Fruit”* (2009) by Hale Tenger. This examination includes personal feelings, comments and view on the artwork. Since this artwork references the famous song ‘Strange Fruit’ by Billie Holiday, composed and written by Abel Meeropol as the poem ‘Bitter Fruit’, some aspects of the song and some aspects of the poem, included in the paper. Also, Hale Tenger’s other artworks and artist’s general ideas reflected in her artworks has been mentioned.

Art installation *“Strange Fruit”* focuses on ‘experience’ and covers a full room, like other artworks of Hale Tenger. Just like *“Strange Fruit”*; *“Kant’ın Portresi”* (1994) , *“İçeri girmedik çünkü hep içerdeydik / Dışarı çıkmadık çünkü hep dışardaydık”* (1995) , *“Sandık Odası”* (1997) , are full room installations and focuses on ‘experience’ of viewers. Each

artwork creates an atmosphere for viewers using different senses together. These senses can be sight, hearing and environmental awareness. Besides senses artist also uses references to real word items, events and other cultural objects. For example, *"Sandık Odası"* has 3 separate rooms with objects that belongs to artist's family and one of the rooms has a radio that broadcasts 1980's military coup news in Turkey. Those objects and that broadcast take away viewer to back in time and creates an 'experience' of the past. Same technique also used in *"Strange Fruit"* which questions nationalism and racism, with both artwork's title and used political map in artwork. The title is reference to song *"Strange Fruit"* by Billie Holiday which became a protest song against American racism and American nationalism in late 1930s. Besides nationalism's effects on societies and humans, *"Strange Fruit"* also examines civilization's effects on earth via political map constructed by humans. Concerning losses and harms to humans, societies and earth; that caused by nationalism, civilization and progress is common theme on Tenger's artworks (Root, 2009). Artwork invites its viewers to question what humanity does to word in the name of ideologies.

Experience

"Strange Fruit" (2009) is formed by two rooms separated with a black curtain. Both of the rooms have a globe that can be described as a 'strange fruit' in space. We can enter to rooms by a dense wall of feathers. This heavy feather wall takes a second to pass through and creates curiosity. Viewer don't know what to expect behind the white curtain of feathers. Halfway through the feather curtain, feathers become black and prepares viewer to the first room. After passing white and black feather curtain, we find our self in a dark room illuminated by stars on the wall. This room reflects space with lighting, music and projected stars to walls. In the middle of the room there is a floating earth, as seen as from the space. Music also supports the experience with a calm melody. It is a remarkable view. And personally, that view filled me with hope and excitement for the future. And then curtain separating two rooms opens and reveals another globe and room, which we didn't realize it until. First thing we see is this globe has a political map on it. However, it feels a little different. There is also a distorted song. Personally, that song created a feeling of a dystopian future. A future where something went terribly wrong. The song played in this room has been sung by Constance Vicdan Begard and arranged by Serdar Ateşer and music plays backwards time to time. Finally, we realize what's wrong with the political globe, it's been reversed but text on the map is not reversed. This reversed map with correct information questions current state of the nationalism and civilization. Personally, it feels like something wrong since it is reversed, but there is nothing wrong with this map. This points out that our image of the word has been founded by popular politic map which North has been placed to top. This reversed map instantly invites us to question our word view.

Material and Technique

"Strange Fruit" uses digital images that projected into walls and illuminated spheres. Different digital projectors used for creating environment around globes that float in rooms. Those projections, dark room and the lighting keeps focus on the globes. Feather curtain that stands between rooms and outside, create a heavy isolation from the outside world for viewer. Which keeps viewer's focus on the artwork and it increases with played music, which edited for environment. Isolation and experience of sudden changes in the environment

creates a shocking state for viewers and pushes them to think. This technique is common between other artworks of the artist. Tenger uses contrasts like man-woman, outside-inside, death-life and personal historic references for creating an emotional state in her artworks with the smell, lighting, movement to create a shock to viewer (Onan, 2017). This artwork reflects contrast with dark-light illumination which contributes to the environment and keeps focus on artwork. Tenger is using all the exhibition area to create a surrounding effect. Especially, going through a wall of feathers cleans the viewers mind as viewer enters to artwork. And entering the artwork really pulls you to another state of mind.

Nationalism, Civilization, Racism and The Artwork

This artwork can be interpreted as a question to nationalism and civilization. One of the globes has a reversed human made political map. This can be described as world becomes 'upside-down' with civilization and nationalism. Which pushes viewers to question what those ideologies changes our life and is it worth it. These themes can be seen in other artworks of Tenger. She criticizes and questions identity, belonging, government, power in charge, violence and official history using a metaphoric language, therefore her artwork develops on political situations, and current events (Gencer, 2017). Artwork questions nationalism with its title too. Artwork's title "Strange Fruit" is a reference to the famous song with the same name which is composed by Abel Meeropol who is a Brooklyn High School English teacher. The song was composed from the poem "Bitter Fruit" by composer himself. Meeropol, writes the poem after one of the famous photographs of that time, lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith in 1930. The song becomes a symbol against American nationalism after it has been sung by Billie Holiday, whom is a black woman, at the opening of club Café Society in the Village of New York City. According to Carvalho, fruit forms another form of life through its death, provides nourishment and seeds for more plants, therefore they are so full of life. This poem's fruit is strange because it is formed by a fearful and violent form of life (2013). Just like the earth in the artwork "*Strange Fruit*". The earth is full of life, ready to form new life forms just like a fruit. However, at the same time it's strange because it is fueled by fearful and violent form of life, humans. Meeropol references hung bodies as strange fruit, and Tenger references the earth as a strange fruit. According to David, "the song 'Strange Fruit' survived because of its expansive metaphorical possibilities" (2000). And keeps surviving in another metaphor created by Hale Tenger.

Conclusion

"*Strange Fruit*" is a remarkable artwork that pushes viewers to question nationalism, civilization and racism by creating a unique experience. This artwork also questions the world as we know it today by using a reversed political map with correct information. Comparing between two versions of earth available inside the artwork, helps to transfer Tenger's ideas to viewers. Reference to the song 'Strange Fruit' which became a powerful symbol against racism and American nationalism strengthens the theme against nationalism and helps viewers to question what nationalism and civilization costs to humanity.

References

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