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Captivating Strangers  
By Gregory Volk

These are good days for Kutlug Ataman, a 43-year-old Turkish artist who divides his time between Istanbul, London and elsewhere. He has a new video installation in the Carnegie International, for which he won the Carnegie Prize; he was a finalist for Great Britain's prestigious Turner Prize; he recently presented another impressive video piece at Lehmann Maupin in New York; and he is also preparing for a retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney later this year. That's not bad for someone who wasn't even exhibiting visual art per se until 1997, although he has been making experimental and feature films for a while, oftentimes to considerable acclaim.

Ataman and the conceptually minded sculptor Ayse Erkmen are now broadly recognized as the two premier contemporary Turkish artists; like Erkmen, Ataman is one of the few Turkish artists in recent memory to enjoy a robust international reputation. Most of his career, however, has transpired far from his home country, due to the fact that, aside from the acclaimed Istanbul Biennial, Turkey has not developed an arts infrastructure capable of supporting such a professional life. It was the 1997 version of the Istanbul Biennial, curated by Rosa Martinez, that first brought Ataman to the attention of a large international art audience, for his kutlug ataman's semiha b. unplugged (1997), a quirky documentary concerning the (at the time) 87-year-old, decidedly eccentric Turkish opera singer Semiha Berksoy. This was also my first encounter with Ataman's work.

In the mid-1980s, Ataman studied drama and film at UCLA, where there were ample opportunities to make connections to what is called in those parts "the Industry." Therefore, it is interesting to note that all of Ataman's major works to date are actually about as un-Hollywood as you can get. The slow-moving, single-screen projection kutlug ataman's semiha b. unplugged is a perfect example. It is some eight hours long, although the audience can easily jump in at any point, and is devoid of action and ploy. You can forget about digital wizardly or any other razzle-dazzle effect, although subtle shifts in camera angle and a quiet attention to detail make it visually captivating.

Ataman taped Berksoy in her home, with a handheld camera, giving things a lush, grainy, improvisational, ever-shifting, home-movie look. What one sees almost exclusively is Berksoy herself (wearing outlandish clothes, wearing just stockings and undergarments, wearing smeared-on lipstick and caked-on rouge and mascara) as she essentially

disgorges her life. She acts out opera scenes and sings snatches of arias, preens before the mirror as if about to go onstage and discusses her prolific expressionist painting—a medium she turned to late in life. Throughout the subtitled video, she speaks of art as an exalted, rarefied zone far beyond and superior to normal life; but she also tells of her childhood, her cherished mother who died young, her tormented father and her own career as a singer, including professional triumphs. She also discusses the many obstacles she faced in Turkey, where opera was often perceived as a European import, and where her flamboyant persona flagrantly challenged social restrictions.

When Berksoy speaks of her mother, she often addresses her words directly to a partially clothed mannequin whose face is outfitted with a photograph of Berksoy's actual mother. There is something both endearing and creepy about this ersatz "Mummy," as Berksoy calls her, or it. This is one of many times when you think Berksoy might truly be nuts, and it's also one of many times when you feel uncertain and uncomfortable. You're not sure if what you're seeing is staged or for real. You're also something of a voyeur, and Berksoy's crammed rooms along with her equally crammed mind feel claustrophobic and disturbing. Still, there is something charming about how she constantly reinvents herself, remakes her life and continues to act like a prima donna, although the public's attention has long since turned elsewhere; her body has grown old, and her voice has turned raspy. In between ad hoc performances, Berksoy fumbles through boxes of well-thumbed letters, reads from them and muses on the past. Her solipsistic ruminations signal a true diva's self-absorption, yet they also have a sneaky evocative power. They become a portrait of life in 20<sup>th</sup>-century Turkey, of flamboyant, proto-feminist artiste making do in a male-dominated culture and also of a proud woman (with her million memories) beset by encroaching mortality.

Berksoy, who recently died at the age of 94, is a real-life figure, not played by an actor, and Ataman's process was strikingly intimate. He was there by himself, in another person's home, and in another person's psyche and life, not so much recording what he wanted to see, but what she wanted to present and reveal. As with most of Ataman's works, conversational, unscripted language is a potent force here: how Berksoy speaks, how she uses language to construct not only her identity but the epic story of her life, how language is a vehicle for communication and discovery but also for self-delusion and concealment. What slowly accrues is a complex layering of personal memory, ambitions, sadness, sensuality, playfulness, disappointment, love, obsession and canny positioning, all mixed with powerful social and historical forces.

Because of the work's length, it is almost impossible to see it in its entirety. You stay with it for a while, leave and return, and it becomes a work of fragments, repetition, tangents, threads and abrupt transitions. Moreover, with all its fits and starts, repetition

of stories and vignettes, and the occasional confusion and forgetfulness, this innovative video is uncannily convincing as to how the memory of an 87-year-old might actually work. In this sense, Ataman's piece is not so much about Berksoy as it is Berksoy – her mind with all its exquisite oddities and compulsions, her life with all its outsize desires and its faltering grandiloquence. This work also has a curiously meditative, even transportive, power. You don't really enter another world, but the world of another person, via a blur of reportage, and playacting, mundane chitchat and theatrical verve.

In pursuing her music, which involved studies in Berlin and other lengthy stints abroad, the trailblazing Berksoy, who has referred to herself as “Turkey's first opera artist,” sometimes collided with an authoritarian streak in her own country. After she visited the well-known poet and avowed Communist Nazim Hikmet in prison in the late 1930s, for example, she was dogged by false accusations of being a Communist supporter, which she believed hindered her career. This raises a fascinating aspect of Ataman's work. In taping others—oftentimes eccentric others who are in the grip of private obsessions—Ataman winds up delving deep into his own psyche and concerns, including, but hardly limited to, his own conflicted relationship to Turkey. As a 19-year-old in 1980, when the country was convulsed by a military coup, Ataman was arrested for recording a leftist demonstration and imprisoned for 38 days. He has both enjoyed critical acclaim and, as an openly gay man, endured substantial anti-homosexual bias. Then there are the facts that Ataman's kind of media art is “foreign” in Turkey, and that, like Berksoy, he spends frequent time abroad, simultaneously engaged with, but willfully distant from, Turkish culture. Dealing with Berksoy allowed Ataman, however implicitly, to plumb issues of fundamental importance to him. He has often mentioned how important it is to him to have a multifaceted sense of connection to the people whom he tapes.

My next encounter with Ataman's work was at the last Documenta, where he showed his video installation *The 4 Seasons of Veronica Read* (2002), which was one of the must-see pieces at the exhibition. It concerns a British woman who is a world-class expert on the *Hippeastrum* plant (commonly known as amaryllis), about which she knows everything there is to know. *Hippeastrum* dominates both her private and her professional life (she has been dubbed National Plant Collection Holder of the *Hippeastrum* by the National Council for the Conservation of Plants and Gardens, a British charitable organization). The plants fill her cupboards, sink, closets and garden. She is a scholar/aficionado whose interest has long since shaded into total obsession.

Presented as a four-screen installation in which approximately one-hour-long videos (concerning spring, summer, winter and autumn) are shown simultaneously on adjacent screens installed as a square structure in the middle of the room, the work unfolds as a

year in the life of Veronica Read, in relation to a year in the life of her prized plants. She cleans and plants bulbs and is bedazzled by the flowers months later, all the while talking excitedly about them. She dons antiseptic rubber gloves while she slices bulbs, in effect turning her kitchen into an operating room, and she is always lifting, hauling, pruning, watering and otherwise caring for a collection that begins to look like out-of-control mutants from a cheesy horror flick.

The more you spend time with the work, the more you are absorbed into Read's special mind, parceled out in Ataman's kind of collage, which is filled with repetitions and unexpected transitions. She is clear-headed horticulturist who is interested in facts and processes, but these plants also have intense personal meaning for her. When she is with them she is never alone—and there appear to be very few other people in Read's life. They are her surrogate children, and, you also suspect, her surrogate lovers, for there are many points in the work when Read's obsession seems frankly erotic. She touches her flowers lovingly, exults with them and suffers with them when they have problems. And problems they have in droves when they are invaded by mites, which make Read feel furious and helpless, as the excellent order she has tried to muster is suddenly turned to mayhem. All of this is revealed to the audience through her monologues, delivered in her singular crisp cadences (the plants give her "enormous pleasure," you hear over and over, while the mites are "horrible, nasty little creatures," which you also hear over and over.)

Throughout the work, Read's unusual domestic conditions resonate with multiple psychological and social connotations. Her home with its routine (for Read) events becomes the world, and also the mysterious inner depths of her psyche. You can't help but wonder if her comprehensive involvement with these flowers constitutes some sort of refuge or escape from the human world out there, and if so, why this might be the case. Ataman's wraparound installation is highly effective in this regard. Each scene, and season, leads to the others, in an endless cycle of growth and decay. At the same time, the arrangement of the screens confines Read as surely as she is trapped in her obsession. She collects *Hippeastrum* plants, but they also collect her, and have gathered her entirely into their botanical universe.

Ataman found Veronica Read through his own abiding interest in *Hippeastrum*, but it is also not a stretch to imagine that her total devotion to these plants, and her admiration of their beauty, correspond to the ways that many artists (including Ataman himself) pursue their own visions and efforts. The *Hippeastrum* devotee, for whom botany shades into erotics, religiosity and psychology, is also something of a real oddball: the woman with 800-plus plants in her home, the neighborhood eccentric who, on the few occasions when she goes on vacation, takes photographs of her plants with her, to look at longingly and lovingly. It's likely that Ataman, too, knows something about against-the-grain

obsession, and from his time as an expatriate, it's also likely that he knows, or once knew, something about loneliness and alienation. As a *Hippeastrum* fan, it is certain that he knows a great deal about these plants, highly artificial things made from assiduous cross-breeding, and all of this factors into the work. It is not that Read is a stand-in for Ataman. She is her own sharp-bordered, voluble self. But a complicated exchange takes place between subject and artist, for in filming a consummate Other, Ataman once again explores matters that are close to his soul. He rarely appears in this or indeed any of his works (usually through an occasional question asked from off-screen), but you're always aware of his presence, and you deduce some of his questions from the answers given by Read.

A brief tour of Ataman's other works suggests how searching and evocative his kind of monologue-heavy quasi-documentaries can be. *Women Who Wear Wigs* (1999) sounds like some campy movie made by, well, an ironic student at a Southern California film school. In fact, the subtitled video is a poignant and hard-hitting meditation on four Turkish women who wear wigs, and why they do so. The work is shown in four simultaneous DVD projections, an arrangement almost guaranteeing that the viewer's response is partial and piecemeal, the result of darting from story to story. In one, you rarely see the subject's full face as she tries on wig after wig, but mostly just the back of her head or her hands as she runs her fingers through the hair. As she does, the woman talks mainly about being a clandestine messenger for banned left-wing groups in Turkey in the early 1970s, when arrests, torture, imprisonment and murder were commonplace and traumatized much of the nation. Wearing a wig while pretending to be an airline stewardess was what helped this woman survive, yet always being in disguise made selfhood an enormously slippery thing. The video emphasizes how she is still hidden and still in disguise, some 30 years later.

Another story concerns a journalist whose treasured long blonde hair fell out during chemotherapy for breast cancer. As she speaks of her ordeal, which entailed wearing a wig in public, she is an embodiment of embattled femininity, and of beleaguered vitality altogether. A third story involves merely the words (but no images at all—it is just a blank screen, with subtitles) of a young, ardently Islamic woman who is faced with an agonizing choice. Either she continues to cover her head, as she's done since girlhood, which would prevent her from attending university due to strict government restrictions on Islamic garb, or to uncover herself in order to study, which would shame her and betray all her principles. It is heart-wrenching to consider her compromise solution, "covering" her head with a wig. The final story concerns a transsexual prostitute who used to wear a wig for both esthetic reasons (it heightened her adopted femininity) and practical considerations (it increased business, because her male clients preferred blondes). Throughout the piece, something so mundane as a wig becomes a cathartic

force for exploring the vagaries, convolutions, and disguises of selfhood as well as the carious ideological fault lines that rive Turkish society, including leftist political resistance and its suppression, strict constraints based on gender and sexuality, and conflicts between secular and religious cultures.

In *It's a Vicious Circle* (2002), several monitors, arrayed in a circle with their screens pointing inward, show the same man discussing the hilarious and maddening experiences of being a visible expatriate—he's a black Jamaican, for one thing—in Germany. The main character in the six-screen projection *Never My Soul* (2001), a Turkish transvestite, tells harrowing tales of her own life while lounging in a bath or hooked up to a dialysis machine in Lausanne, Switzerland, where she lives. These include being beaten by her father when she was a child and brutalized by an Istanbul police official. At other points she pretends to be the famous Turkish film actress Turkan Soray, and her own life story, which she acts out, could be the plot of a Soray melodrama, centering on a virtuous young woman threatened by unvirtuous men. Ataman's unusually mediated documentaries grab your attention while probing raw issues of race, sexual identity, oppression and what it means to be a marginal figure in a dominant culture.

Ataman is welcome practitioner of a slowed-down art in a speeded-up time, and while it's not a requirement to spend an hour or, as the case many be, many hours with one of his works, it's a good idea to do precisely that. He is also one of the great practitioners of conversational art in an era packed with shrill ideologies, declarations, ad campaigns and sound bites. Language as it is actually spoken by people who are not actors is a multivalent force. For all his ultra-intelligence (and you surmise that Ataman is well-versed in film theory, and knows a great deal about experimental video and film from the 1960s and early 1970s), his works don't wallop you with technique but instead draw you into their complex synthesis of content and form.

When you add it all up, Ataman's oeuvre of the last seven years suggests that he is a convincing innovator when it comes to video and film in gallery and museum settings. As he has transferred his focus to these milieus, he has proven himself adept at devising solutions for the installation of his works that are visually elegant, but that also perfectly fit with his subject matter. With *1+1=1* (2002), you see a Turkish Cypriot woman talking in two facing projections. The installation creates of her a divided self, telling stories about life in Cyprus, cleaved as it is into its Turkish and Greek zones, as well as about the unimaginable brutality (and occasional kindness) that arises when neighborhoods become ethnic battlegrounds. Throughout, the camera always maintains the same steady, seemingly banal, head-on view. Still, one grows completely absorbed by this woman's account of life in a fiercely divided country, an account that is by turns whimsical and disturbing, deeply personal and blazingly moral.

Ataman's relatively rapid rise in the international art world shows no signs of abatement; indeed two of his most recent works are among his best yet. *Stefan's Room* (2004), shown in October at Lehmann Maupin, involves Stefan Naumann, an obsessive German collector of moths, butterflies and other insects. His small Berlin apartment is filled with some 30,000 specimens, mostly arranged in display cases. Ataman's installation consists of five screens suspended in a loose cluster at different heights and angles. Silent videos on four of the screens constantly pan through Naumann's collection, including dried, pinned and labeled moths from all over the world; because of the suspended screens, the effect is of insects fluttering about. One sees superb moths from a distance, and then close-ups of eyeballs, mouths and antennae. Live caterpillars inch across leaves and moths alight on Naumann's arm or flutter about in cages. The slow drift of images has a dreamlike aspect, and you feel as if you are looking into the inner chambers of Naumann's mind.

The fifth screen shows Naumann (like Berksoy and Read) in his home, as he talks about his overriding passion. He is direct, clinical, seemingly unemotional. Interested in facts, he nonetheless allows a note of wonderment and intoxication to creep into his voice now and then, especially when he talks about moth and butterfly markings, or the metamorphosis of larvae into winged creatures. He is also, one senses, uncomfortable; he's a fundamentally private person suddenly exposed to the public via camera and is speaking English as opposed to his native German. Even though he focuses almost totally on the insects, one gleans bits of personal information that elucidate his all-encompassing endeavors, bordering on mania.

Naumann carefully, even tenderly, places a moth in a poison-filled container, and you watch the insect die. Meanwhile he talks about how it was initially very difficult for him to actually kill the insects, mentioning how his first sustained contact with them was through poking holes in another boy's toy to let the insects go free. He also casually notes how an elderly colleague (also an entomologist) managed to acquire a huge trove of poison gas—enough in fact to kill thousands of people. Enough poison to kill thousands of people has particular resonance in Germany, and that whopping insinuation just hangs there, for an instant, before vanishing. At one point, Ataman (presumably from behind his camera) casually asks if there is a “metaphor” in all this insect collecting, some sort of life correspondence, and Naumann's reaction is fascinating. He freezes for a second, and you sense the mental wheels whirring and turning. Yet he simply announces that he doesn't understand the question, and that's that. He would prefer to talk about bugs, and only bugs, without woozy extrapolations.

Still, extrapolations abound, which are never spelled out; they only exist as hints and suggestions. Obsessed with gorgeous, rare creatures from the insect world, Naumann is something of a gorgeous, rare creature himself, belonging to a very small subset of German society—handsome, gay, obviously intelligent guys who happen to be consumed by a passion for bugs. (Speaking of “consumed,” at another point Naumann mentions how he has eaten bugs, and discusses their taste and their protein content.) Since he is in awe of the process that turns a wriggling larva into a stunning moth with gossamer wings, you can’t help but wonder about his own transformations, especially in a country that famously prizes conformity over idiosyncrasy. In a telling moment, Naumann’s partner, an actor, briefly appears in the film, on his way out to some performance. He’s decked out in a shimmering costume and looks exotic himself. You instantly think about the patterns and designs we sport, what our outer markings are, and how we use them for both defense and allure. All of these musings are generated by a rather deadpan video that otherwise resolutely sticks to the matter at hand, namely Stefan Naumann and his bugs. In the end, he becomes a mix of scientific acumen and secretive drives, as close to being an artist as an entomologist. His actual, splendid “artwork” happens to be case after case of vivid moths sporting intricate designs.

Finally, Ataman’s *Küba* (2004), presented at the Carnegie International, returns to the Turkey that has figured prominently in so many of the artist’s works. This one concerns an Istanbul neighborhood called Küba that is home to strident Islamic fundamentalists, left-wing dissidents, criminals, workers, previously homeless people and others, all of whom are far from the mainstream of Turkish life. The whole neighborhood is relatively new, coalescing in the late 1960s as a few shanties built by people who had nowhere else to go. In the early days the police would often bulldoze these dwellings, which were quickly rebuilt, and while there are periodic proposals to eradicate the whole neighborhood once and for all, Küba is still there, and flourishing. It is a cauldron of social, religious, economic and sexual pressures, but it also has a fierce sense of cohesion and community, as well as a prevailing spirit of tolerance. In Küba, disparate outsiders have banded together to make an almost self-governing zone of relative freedom. Disputes are settled within the community (and not by the police), and here people find a level of mutual support that helps them to survive in trying times and conditions.

Ataman’s installation at the Carnegie occupies a large room. It involves 40 cheap, secondhand television sets of different shapes and sizes placed atop rinky-dink tables, in front of which are single, mismatched chairs; this sort of furniture is precisely what one would find in the improvised and scavenged apartments of Küba itself. Each monitor shows a subtitled video of one or another resident of the community talking directly into the camera about his or her life. When you first enter the installation, the effect is of a roomful of people murmuring and talking so that they create a general, low-level din.

From a distance, it is difficult to make out individuals, and you have no clue what their stories are. You are merely a confused outsider approaching representations of people who themselves are outsiders.

Then Ataman's slow magic takes over. All you can do is jump in and sit down and begin to watch one person's story in mid-stream, and then another, and another. Oftentimes the stories are shattering. There's Eda, for instance, whose husband beat her repeatedly and didn't come to see her when she was giving birth in the hospital. You hear from the young boy Avni, who sometimes fights kids from neighboring districts, and who declares that "peace of mind" is more important than money, and from Ramazan, who is trying to be a good father and husband but who was falsely accused of robbery, and from the Kurd Musaffer who declares, "All my life I've struggled against the prohibitions in this country." This cross-section of Küba, ranging from one of its oldest residents to young kids, is subject to violence, drugs, spousal abuse, poverty, police repression, incarceration and hopelessness. But you are also struck by the humanity of these people; their tenacity, their keen intelligence, in spite of the most rudimentary education; and ultimately their depth of soul. Ataman lived in Küba intermittently over two years as he pursued the project, and his work is enormously respectful.

As always, individuals remain at the core of Ataman's vision. He focuses on them in their own routine settings, and details matter: the cadences of a person's speech, his or her choice of words, the behavior of hands, fleeting expressions, body language. Ataman gravitates toward people who, for whatever reasons, are fringe figures in the dominant culture, and he allows them their own complex voices. Most impressive of all is how his savvy video installations, combining fragmented narratives and unorthodox displays, wind up being so intricately human. They are filled with poignant information, but also with mystery, allure and obsession, showing how individuality is maintained in the midst of troubling societal pressures.