FINDING OUR FEET

In the 1970s, Nil Yalter explored the place of identity in a fractured world.

By Pujan Karambeigi

IN 1973, NIL YALTER BORROWED A PORTAPAK camera system and recorded a video of herself belly dancing in her Paris apartment. *The Headless Woman or The Belly Dance* (1974) is a meditation on displacement and the complexities of self—themes that the Turkish artist has grappled with over her five-decade career. The work was included in France's first large-scale exhibition of video art, "Art video / Confrontation 74" at the Musée d'art moderne de la ville de Paris, where it was shown next to pieces by Gina Pane and Vito Acconci: artists who recorded themselves performing transgressive acts centered on their own bodies. The grouping was apt because Yalter, too, focused on her body. In the video, Yalter's undulating belly fills the screen while Turkish music plays. Over the course of the twenty-four-minute tape, shot by her partner, Joel Boutteville, Yalter slowly writes a French text on her abdomen in a spiral that extends from her belly button. Starting with the words "The real woman is both convex and concave," she copies a passage about the repression of female sexuality from René Nelli's *Érotique et civilisations* (1972), a book that analyzes the *longue durée* of misogyny.

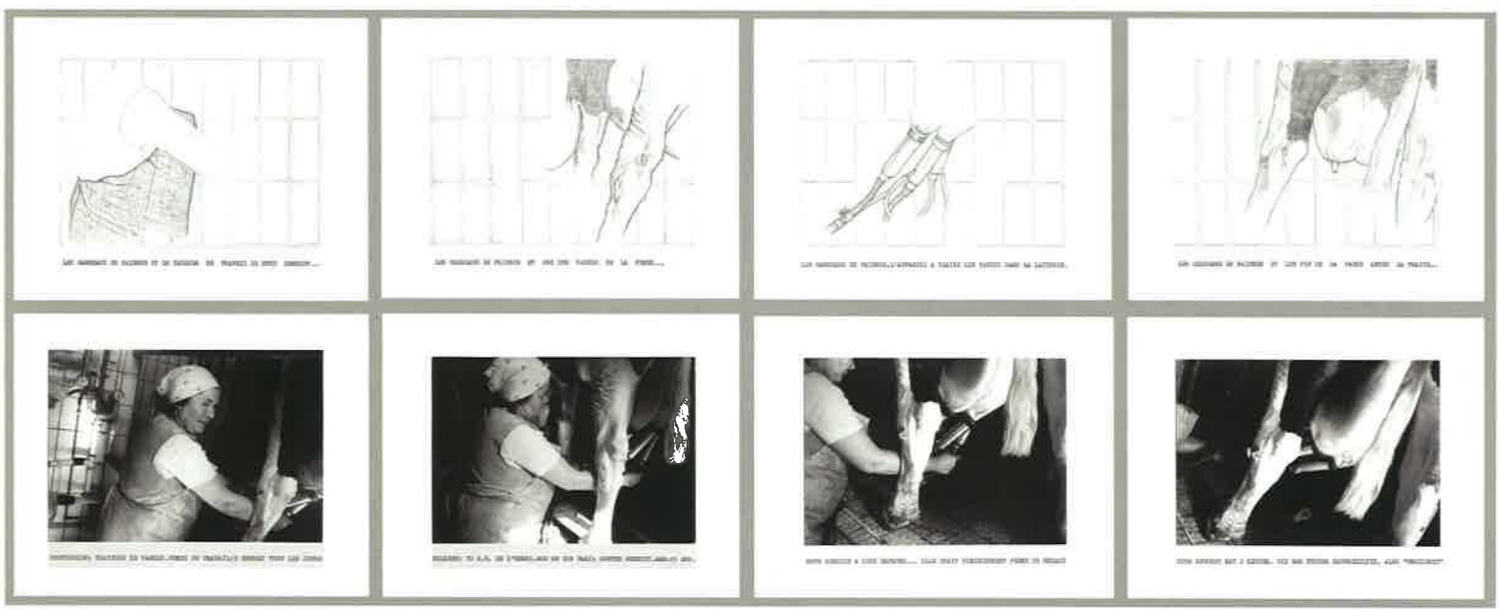
"When women use their own bodies in their art work, they are using their selves," American critic Lucy Lippard argued in a 1976 essay.[1] Though Lippard wasn't considering Yalter directly, this feminist reading of body art applies to *The Headless Woman*. Yalter presents herself as connected to a radical feminist discourse by excerpting a passage from a book that stirred controversy in France at the time. But she also makes reference to the specific challenges that Turkish women face by appropriating an Anatolian practice Yalter had observed, in which imams mark sterile or disobedient women by writing on their bellies. Without revealing her face, Yalter uses her body to grapple with the history of misogyny in general and to transform a specifically Islamic manifestation of oppression into a powerful marker of her identity.

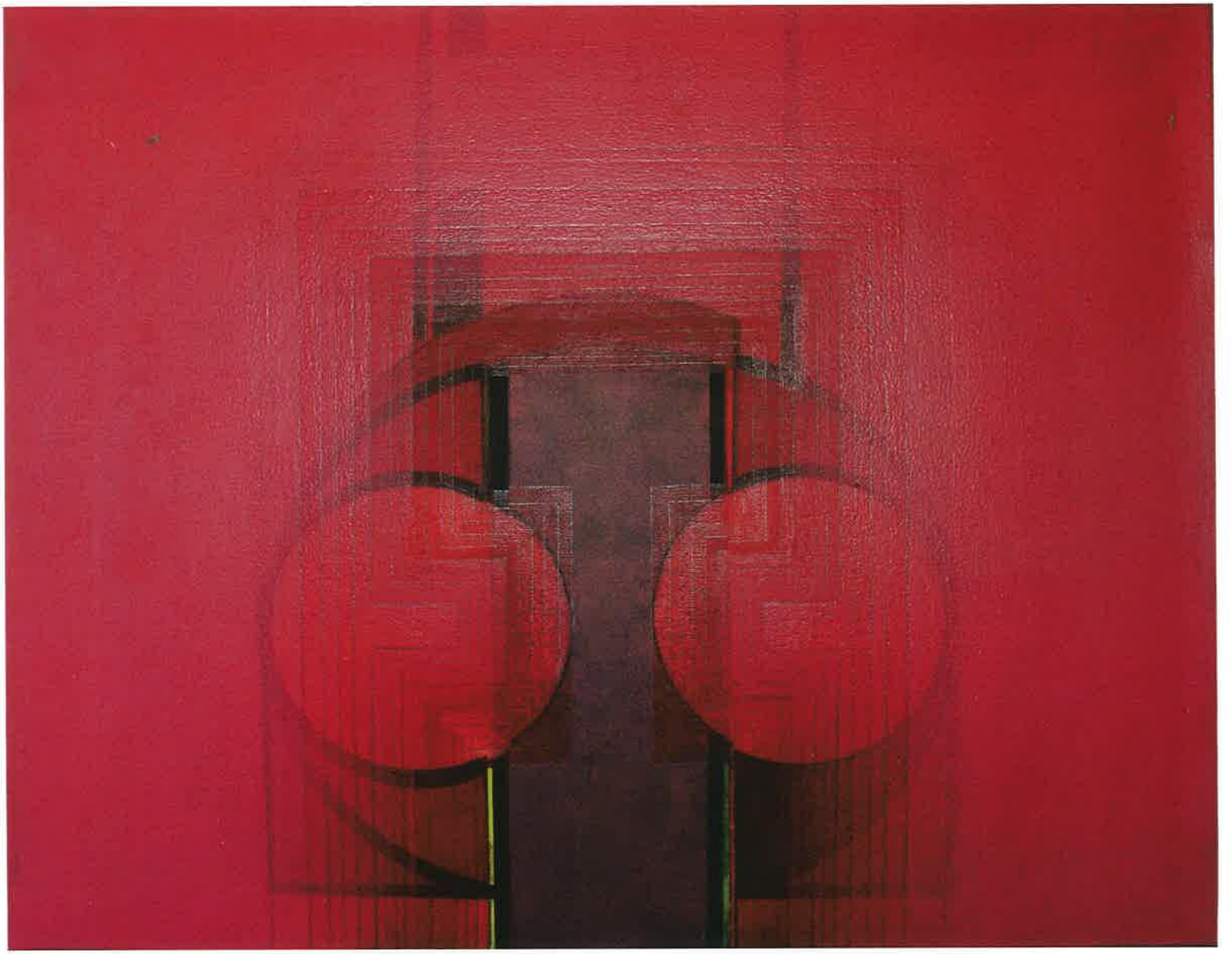
The Headless Woman is a key piece in Yalter's retrospective, "Exile Is a Hard Job." The artist's first institutional survey, the exhibition was organized by Rita Kersting of the Museum Ludwig in Cologne, where it premiered last summer, and Lauren Cornell of Bard College's Hessel Museum of Art in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, where it is currently on view. The video encapsulates some of Yalter's major concerns and forces us to reconsider the canon built around body art and early video art, as Cornell argues in her catalogue essay.[2] But the work is also something of an outlier. As much as *The Headless Woman* affirmed Yalter's use of herself as the medium of her practice, it remains a lonely excursion into a field that Lippard critiqued for its potential to objectify women and art historian Rosalind Krauss identified as part of a landscape of narcissism.[3] Instead of moving deeper into an exploration of her own self via her body, much of the work Yalter produced in the 1970s—a key decade for her art—wrestles with the question of identity by mapping the sociopolitical environments that surrounded her. Indeed, Yalter's practice addresses the still largely unwritten story of immigration and diaspora life in Western Europe, when so-called guest workers arrived in the millions from Eastern Europe, Turkey, and beyond to supply labor for the postwar economic boom. Because the ramifications of this mass migration remain central to the political discourse in Europe today, "Exile Is a Hard Job" couldn't be timelier.

Previous spread (left), Nil Yalter: *Deniz Gezmiş* (detail), 1972, photographs, pencil, and clay on butcher paper, 41¼ by 16½ inches.

Previous spread (right), *Topak Ev*, 1973, felt and sheepskin yurt, marker, aluminum, and mixed mediums, 78¾ inches in diameter.

Below, *Neuenkirchen: Ruth Schmidt, Germany* (detail), 1975, gelatin silver prints and pencil on paper, 8 parts, 14¾ by 21¾ inches each.





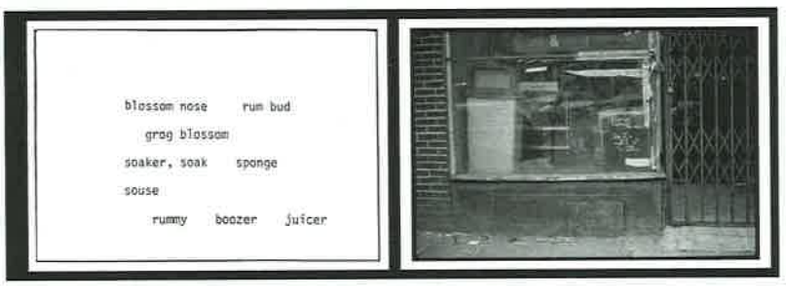
BORN IN CAIRO IN 1938, YALTER GREW UP IN Istanbul and moved to Paris at age twenty-seven. Though she did not undertake formal arts training, she has credited Michel Seuphor's compendium *Dictionary of Abstract Painting* (1957) with introducing her to modernist traditions. Her paintings of the 1960s, which fall somewhere between geometric and lyrical abstraction, owe much to the influence of Kazimir Malevich and Serge Poliakoff.

Yalter's practice underwent a major shift when the Turkish military effectively seized power in 1971 – the country's second coup since 1960. Yalter's work became explicitly politicized, with *Deniz Gezmiş* (1972) encapsulating this new direction. Yalter produced the multipanel installation of collages and paintings in response to the trial and execution, in Istanbul, of three Marxist-Leninist revolutionaries who had run afoul of the regime: the eponymous Gezmiş and two of his compatriots. Some of the panels feature paintings of circular forms on butcher paper – compositions that recall Yalter's geometric abstractions. Here, however, the circles function almost as infographics. The three dark circles on the first panel appear to gradually light-

Above, *Circular Tension III*, 1967, acrylic on canvas, 29½ by 37 inches.

Left, *Deniz Gezmiş* (detail), 1972, newspaper clippings and clay on paper, 9⅞ by 10⅞ inches.

Deniz Gezmiş: Yahia Koç Foundation Contemporary Art Collection, Istanbul; Musée Carnavalet, Paris.



MARTHA ROSLER

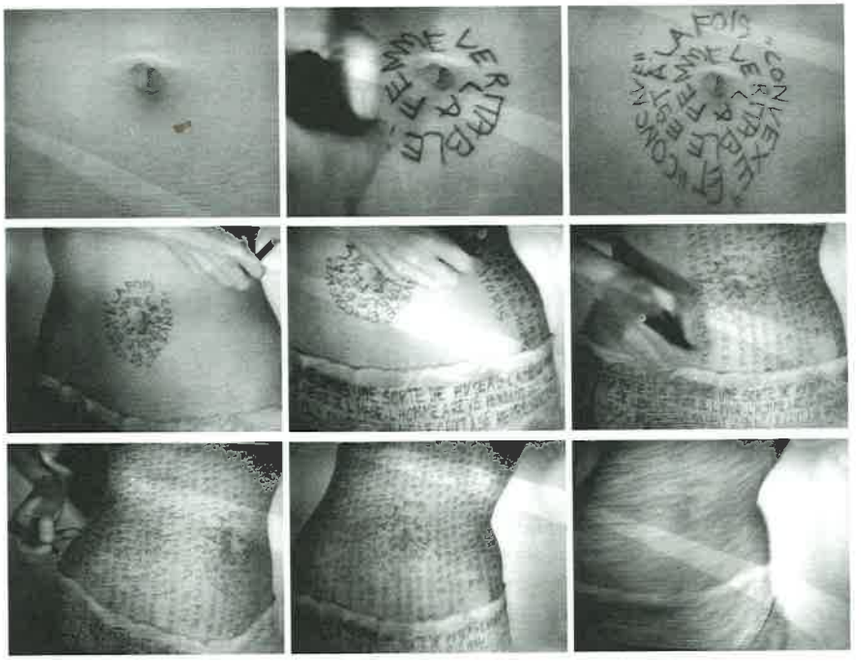
The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems (detail), 1974-75, 45 gelatin silver prints, 10 by 22 inches each.

Martha Rosler's influential work pairs photographs of dilapidated storefronts on the Bowery in New York with various terms for drunkenness. Rosler created the work during roughly the same years that Nil Yalter produced *Temporary Dwellings* (1974–77), which pairs texts and photographs to document working-class dwellings around the world, including in New York. Despite formal similarities, the anthropological underpinnings of Yalter's project sets it apart Rosler's.

en in subsequent panels until only their black outlines are left. This progression functions as kind of timeline of the grisly events. The paintings on butcher paper are interspersed with panels featuring newspaper clippings that narrate the episode, some covered with mounds of clay. *Deniz Gezmiş* stems from Yalter's direct experience – she was in Istanbul during the trial – but it also foregrounds the process by which public consciousness is formed through the mediation of the press.

Yalter's first collaborative work, *Paris City of Light* (1974), which is not included in the retrospective, broadens the scope of such investigations. Together with the American artist Judy Blum, she produced a collection of drawings, handwritten texts, and photographs, and presented them on twenty cloth panels – one for each of the French capital's arrondissements. Informed by earlier mapping projects by the Situationist International, the work juxtaposes depictions of tourist sites with news on social struggles and notes on the city's history of expulsion through real estate development. Blum and Yalter thought of the piece as a "panorama of Paris."[4] In the panel on the Quartier Pigalle, for example, snapshots portray various everyday scenes such as a woman working in a laundromat. These photos are sur-

Temporary Dwellings: Tate Modern, London. Rosler: courtesy Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York.



Above, *The Headless Woman or The Belly Dance*, 1974, video, 24 minutes.

Opposite, *Temporary Dwellings* (detail), 1974–77, Polaroids, pencil, broken record, cement and dirt on cardboard, 7 parts, 30 by 42 inches each.

> *"Yalter plays the role of foreign observer who catalogues the rituals of everyday life."*

rounded by small drawings of lingerie meant to evoke the sex work economy for which Pigalle is known. The text "In France about 25% of industrial labor force are foreigners" appears typewritten toward the bottom of the panel alongside drawings of the national boundaries of France's former colonies. The work reads as a kaleidoscope of colliding identities, deliberately jumping from the perspectives of tourists to those of feminists and Marxists in order to illuminate the specific social histories of each arrondissement.

IF *PARIS CITY OF LIGHT* IS A PANORAMA, IT IS A somewhat hallucinatory one. But the project was only the beginning of Yalter's struggle to relate details of the everyday to larger social forces. *Neuenkirchen* (1975) developed out of a fourteen-day workshop in the eponymous small town in Germany that Yalter participated in, along with artists including Timm Ulrichs, Hervé Fischer, Joan Rabascall, and Helmut Schweitzer. Comprising a video as well as a grid of photographs, drawings, and printed texts on panels, the piece documents scenes from a typical day in the life of two women: Mrs. Meisel, a cleaning lady and wife of a truck driver, and Mrs. Schmidt, a worker on a dairy farm. The images depict the women engaged in routine chores, and the piece overall captures how lived experience is structured by gender and class. In some photographs Mrs. Meisel's husband is depicted shooting at targets; a group of the punctured cardboard sheets are even included among the objects in Yalter's grid.

Neuenkirchen appears to be closely linked to the photoconceptualist work that Allan Sekula and Martha Rosler were making at the same time. With similar compositions of text and images, both American artists aimed to depict a sociopolitical reality while acknowledging the limits of the documentary form. (Yalter even made a piece that includes depictions of the Bowery in New York, *Temporary Dwellings*, 1974–77, around the same time as Rosler produced her now canonical *The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems*, 1974–75, which pairs stark black-and-white images of dilapidated urban scenes with cliché descriptions of drunkenness.) However, there are crucial differences between Yalter's work and that of her US-based peers. In *The Bowery*, Rosler stages a collision of text and image to reveal the inadequacies of both, resulting in what Benjamin Buchloh called a "splintering of signifier and signified." According to Buchloh and other influential critics of 1970s art, the reliance on found language and the production of artless images served to diminish the presence of an expressive artistic subjectivity while drawing attention to the unbridgeable distance between the reality of the social world and its representation.

With *Neuenkirchen* and her subsequent works, Yalter deviates from this orthodoxy. *Neuenkirchen* is neither a meditation on semiotics nor an attempt to erase the artist's presence. In fact, especially through the drawings, which highlight particular details of the photos – closely observed depictions of cows being milked, for example – Yalter seems to assert her own subjective presence. She plays the role of a foreign observer who catalogues, in an almost anthropological way, the rituals of everyday life for typical German workers.

Anthropological methods are even more overt in *Topak Ev* (1973), an installation centered on a yurt of the type that Yalter became familiar with during an extended stay among nomadic communities in Anatolia. She embellished her yurt with drawings, texts, and textiles all related to her study of the relationship between craft and gender roles in Anatolian nomadic societies.

Yalter later collaborated with ethnologist Bernard Dupaigne on *Temporary Dwellings*. The installation that developed out of the endeavor comprises a video and seven archival boards on which are displayed Polaroids, drawings, and small artifacts related to the study. The arrays document the living conditions of immigrant communities in the US, Turkey, and France. Each panel is dedicated to a specific community, meticulously recording the place and date of the assembled found objects and the architecturally focused photos. The result of almost three years of research, *Temporary Dwellings* comprises an ethnographic field diary focused on the material conditions of working-class dwellings.

Yalter's work predates the widespread application of anthropological methods in contemporary art, a development that Hal Foster critiqued in his 1995 essay "The Artist as Ethnographer?"[6] Largely relying on pseudoscientific procedures of mapping and archiving, these quasi-anthropological practices represent, in Foster's eyes, a departure from the Brechtian avant-garde tradition of challenging received systems of knowledge. In Yalter's case, however, documenting the lives

of marginalized people often went hand-in-hand with her attempts to transform the conditions around her. She was heavily involved in political organizing, having co-founded the *Amicale France-Turquie* (The Turkish-French Friendship Association), a Marxist-feminist cultural center in Paris. She also helped organize the Paris-based feminist collective *Femmes en Lutte* (Women in Struggle). Working with these organizations, she helped stage demonstrations, screenings, conferences, and exhibitions in the banlieues of Paris that housed many of the workers who had immigrated to France between 1955 and 1965.

This is not to say her artistic practice and her political organizing were simply interchangeable. But they clearly informed each other. She produced collaborative projects like *Great Strike / 4 Artists / Turkey* (1976–77), for which she invited artists to compose signs for a miners' strike in Turkey, and *Cadence 2x8* (1984), a two-channel video she and her longtime collaborator Nicole Croiset shot and installed in the Renault factory in Sandouville at the invitation of the workers union. As she put it in a recent interview, it was this proximity to women's, workers', and immigrants' struggles that attuned her to the "loss of the self" caused by marginalization within a dominant society.

FOR YALTER, HOLDING ONTO A SENSE OF identity – of self – was a privilege one had to fight for rather than something to be obliterated, as her American peers and their influential critics would have it. Comprising ten photo-drawing diptychs, seven cardboard panels, and a 16mm film, *Orient Express* (1976) is, in this regard, one of her most complex works. Yalter created the piece while traveling on the once-storied (but by the mid-'70s, mostly dilapidated) train from Paris to Istanbul. She not only performed her own journey home but also utilized (if in reverse) one of the main routes that brought migrant workers from Turkey and Yugoslavia to Western Europe, ultimately trying to understand her own position in relation to them.

The migrant is a figure who destabilizes fixed identities and accepts that mutability and mobility can

AMICALE FRANCE-TURQUIE

Nil Yalter (far left) with Turkish intellectuals during a roundtable Yalter organized on social and political issues as part of Amicale France-Turquie, ca. 1978.

render one vulnerable. Drawn away – or driven from – their homes by the forces of capitalism, migrants embody the social conditions that define late modernity. As Vilém Flusser wrote in a semi-autobiographical essay on his own experience of displacement, the migrant "is both a window through which those who have been left behind may see the world and the mirror in which they may see themselves, even if in distortion."[8] In *Orient Express* Yalter depicts, in drawings and photographs, a migrant worker gazing out the window. In addition, as if to duplicate the man's gaze, Yalter took Polaroids out the same window. The juxtaposition underscores the ambiguity in the relationship between the observing artist and her subject. Both face the same direction while moving together on the same train and yet they are part of different worlds.

In a 1982 statement Yalter described her ambition to "create an aesthetic, a plastic language that can serve as our contribution to the culture of workers."[9] This may seem naively utopian, a throwback to the dream of Productivism that took hold within the Soviet avant-garde of the 1920s. Yet the coalitions between workers and artists that Yalter envisioned centered the self and interpersonal relations. Yalter aimed to "get to know these people. . . . To reveal the unique wisdom each of these individuals possess, and to share that wisdom. To form the fragmented images and sounds of an anchored reality they formulate with their words."[10] Accordingly, the second sequence of photos slowly approaches a Turkish worker who holds a cassette player as he looks out the window. The images suggest a Turkish migrant artist's attempt to get closer to a Turkish migrant worker, to minimize the physical and social distance between them without imagining that it could be fully closed.

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz wrote that the ethnographic endeavor is about "finding our feet," that is, learning to find a position in relation to a subject of study that is both stable and sincere.[11] For Geertz, this position was always tenuous and provisional, requiring deft footwork at all times to maintain. Yalter's journey in *Orient Express* is about finding this common ground, however unstable it might seem. The project encapsulates Yalter's overall negotiation between the need to look inward while simultaneously aiming to build coalitions without romanticizing the marginality of others. The arc of Yalter's work presented in "Exile Is a Hard Job" is ultimately about using the self like a vessel or medium to migrate somewhere else, breaking free of all-too-comfortable interiority.

[1] Lucy Lippard, "The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth: European and American Women's Body Art," *Art in America*, May 1976, p. 79.

[2] Lauren Cornell, "Gray in Gray: Tracing the Videos of Nil Yalter (1973–1985)," in Rita Kerstling, ed., *Exile Is a Hard Job*, Cologne, Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2019, p. 192.

[3] Rosalind Krauss, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," *October*, Spring 1976, pp. 50–64.

[4] Interview with the artist, New York June, 2019.

[5] Benjamin Buchloh, "Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art," *Artforum*, September 1982, p. 44.

[6] Hal Foster, "The Artist as Ethnographer?" in *The Traffic in Culture: Refiguring Art and Anthropology*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1995, p. 306.

[7] Yalter quoted in "Qui parle?: A Conversation between Nil Yalter and Rita Kersting," in *Exile Is a Hard Job*, p. 213.

[8] Vilém Flusser, "The Challenge of the Migrant," in *The Freedom of the Migrant*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 2003, p. 14.

[9] Nil Yalter quoted in *Festival de La Rochelle–Rencontres internationales d'art contemporain*, 1982, p. 9.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York, Basic Books, 1973, p. 13.

PUJAN KARAMBEIGI is a writer and curator based in New York who recently edited In the Stomach of the Predators: Writings and Collaborations by Alice Creischer *(saxpublishers, 2019).*

CURRENTLY ON VIEW

"Exile Is a Hard Job," at Hessel Museum of Art, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, N.Y., through Oct. 13.

Above, *Orient Express (Paris–Istanbul)*, detail, 1976, Polaroids, pencil, and ink on cardboard, 7 parts, 10¼ by 28 inches each.

Opposite, Nil Yalter and Judy Blum: *Paris City of Light*, 1974, photographs and colored pencil on cloth, 20 parts, 42½ by 173⅜ inches.