



Keren Cytter. Photo: Albert Fuchs.
Courtesy the artist

The Interview
by Ross Simonini

Keren Cytter

“It’s a privilege to work on such unimportant things
for such a long time in such a serious manner”

The homepage for Keren Cytter’s website presents, in white text on black, a simple story: ‘Anke just went fishing. / She left her parents at home. / The rest she carried in a plastic bag. / The day was hot and warm.’ Like much of the Tel Aviv-born, New York-based artist’s work, the writing feels both universal and inscrutably specific. Its tone sneaks between dry humour and stone-faced flatness, casually inviting you into its world and then pushing you away with sharp, stubborn opacity.

If clicked upon, though, each word in this folktale serves as a hyperlink into Cytter’s sprawling body of work: moody photographs, meticulous and vibrant drawings, experimental novels (*A-Z Life Coaching*, 2016, etc), picture books that aren’t exactly for children

(*The Brutal Turtle*, 2018, *The Curious Squirrel*, 2015) and many, many videoworks, for which she is best known. Even among her filmic output, the diversity is astonishing, including animations, music videos and short films that sit somewhere between amateur melodrama and documentary. Cytter pointedly provides no context for the work, and the resulting effect is of a vast, bewildering labyrinth of collage, an online abyss that viewers must navigate on their own.

For me, this chaos of media was so varied and so beguiling that I sought a centre, something that might ground me amidst it. I found one when I considered the implicit personality behind the work: wry and playful, withholding in some ways but also generous in

terms of production and energy. Cytter’s interviews, too, are rich with character: a strong-minded artist, unwavering in her opinions and bold in her responses.

At times, the work also seems to encourage this personal reading – photographs of her social life (*Museums of Photography*, she calls them), cinematography that trembles with the handheld touch of its creator, drawings of the artist’s intimate living space (the *Panoramas* series, 2014–). But as I learned in the following two-week email interview, Cytter vehemently rejects this interpretation, and tells me so in multiple ways. I wanted to accept her answers, and yet I pushed back, because even her refusal felt consonant with the contrarian mind behind her work.

It's not about me

ROSS SIMONINI *Is your social life a form of art?*

KEREN CYTTER My private life has nothing to do with art. If I'm making an event with my nonprofit APE [Art Projects Era, cofounded with Antonio Grulli], I try to create, with the participating artists, a certain style, narrative or atmosphere. And I'll never relate my behaviour towards my friends and family to art. I think life with all of its failures is much more precious and important than any form of entertainment. I don't want to live or behave in a calculated way, just to please, or attract the attention of, an invisible viewer.

RS *Is your art a form of entertainment?*

KC I consider all arts, not only my work, as a form of entertainment. What else is it? By entertainment I don't mean funny or grotesque but any combination of form, shape, colour or sound that creates an interest in the mind of the viewer.

RS *Is there a Keren Cytter persona in your work?*

KC No. I hate the idea of it. Less persona makes better artwork, better for the viewer and better for me. I think the less there is of me, the more interesting the work. Less branding, less sellout and the more content that is free of egoistic marketing strategies, the better.

RS *Do you think the presence of an artist in their work is inherently branded and egoistic?*

KC Yes. I think it will always reduce the quality of the work because it just reiterates the myth of the artist. A good work needs to create an interest and make you think. When it's just one piece in a puzzle of a greater narrative that revolves around the creator, there's a certainty already. You know what you are looking at and where it belongs. It's not new. You have fewer questions. We already know that this person is making the artwork, it doesn't need to be pointed at over and over again. It's just another act of marketing.

RS *So would you say the element of mystery is important to you in art?*

KC Hmm. It's not mystery that's important. You can know who the artist is, but the work shouldn't serve the artist's persona. A work of art should stand for itself and accumulate itself, without leaning on other elements or serving ideas, attitudes or personas.

Values

RS *Are artists corrupt?*

KC Yes, a lot of artists are corrupted. In all layers

of humanity there is corruption. It's easy to fall prey to this – you need to create objects that sell, or are at least liked. Without legitimacy from the establishment there won't be any value to your work and you won't be able to support yourself. So it's very easy to become corrupted by this process. It's part of survival.

RS *Is selling inherently corrupt?*

KC No, it's good. That's the way to make a living. The problem is that the market is not regulated. Because the market's not regulated, the works have no cultural value and they function as a currency. Yet the language about and around them describes them as culturally important. It's like saying that the \$20 bill is worth that value because of the quality of the sketch of Andrew Jackson or the position of the numbers on the note. This creates a lack of trust in the evaluation of art and of course in the art market by people looking for culture.

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It also forces museums to purchase art that has no cultural value. Instead they look for work that has financial value because of the popularity and the distribution of the expensive images (expensive work gets more attention than cheap work). Not to mention that galleries looking to represent an artist look for one that produces expensive work, more so than an artist that produces work with cultural value. This degrades the cultural significance of what museums and galleries show.

RS *How do you define cultural value?*

KC It's a very long and complicated answer. It's like asking, how do you define an intelligent sentence? I don't think it's only a matter of taste. It's a question related to aesthetic style and history, not to mention psychological and social effects. There are books about it.

RS *Which books?*

KC There are many books about culture and art history. I see them in other people's libraries.

RS *Do you try to make work with cultural value?*

KC Lol yes.

RS *Why do you make art if you don't like it?*

KC I enjoy doing it. I don't like looking at it.

RS *Does other people's art bother you?*

KC Art doesn't bother me. It's just not so interesting. I like to look at some paintings but not enough to go to a gallery and look at them. Unless my friends are the ones that are presenting them. There are so many stimulations in the world, intellectual and emotional, and art is a bit poor in this area. It's not emotionally complex like a novel or a feature film and definitely falls short of real life and real heartaches. On an intellectual level it's more interesting to read [Israeli-American psychologist] Daniel Kahneman or watch documentaries that explain different perceptions throughout history than to stare at a grey cube with a press release explaining its transcendent quiet harmony.

Not contemporary art

RS *Do you watch movies often?*

KC I don't go to the cinema. I watch movies on Netflix or on YouTube. I usually draw when I watch them. Things I've watched lately: *Wild Wild Country*, *Chef's Table* (all seasons), *The Umbrella Academy* (all episodes), *Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes*, *The Clouds of Sils Maria*, *Personal Shopper*, documentaries by Errol Morris, documentaries about the American Civil War, the American Revolution, the Romanovs, Napoleon, the French Revolution and different ancient civilisations.

RS *Did you enjoy those?*

KC Yes, but they are not contemporary art. I thought you were speaking about art before. I don't read books about art. I read fiction. I like history. I watch documentaries about it. Not art history. I like watching movies that are related to popular culture and not to contemporary or modern art. I like art films. I don't like video art. When I say art, I mean what I consume in galleries and museums, not in cinemas and on TV. All art is entertainment but not all entertainment is art.

RS *What fiction do you read?*

KC I read random books. In the last six months I've read Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* [2010], *Passing* by Nella Larsen [1929], *Family Pictures* by Maya Arad [2008]. And a nonfiction book, a biography of Catherine the Great by Henri Troyat [1977].

RS *Generally, how long does it take you to make one of your films?*



both images
Vengeance (stills), 2012–13, HD video, colour, sound, seven episodes, 15 min (each).
Courtesy the artist and Pilar Corrias, London



MOP (*Museum of Photography*) (detail), 2012–13,
800 Polaroids, dimensions variable.
Courtesy the artist and Pilar Corrias, London

KC Around a couple of months to write the script, two days of shooting, a couple of weeks to edit.

RS *With such a quick shoot, is the process like a performance?*

KC No. A performance takes two months to write and a month and a half to rehearse. I shoot fast because the script is very tight and there are no improvisations. The camera and the actor's movements are all written down in the script.

RS *Do you find being an artist stressful?*

KC Not at all. It's super fun. Like being professionally unemployed. When I work on videos I spend a lot of time at home trying to think about a script that actually only I understand the necessity of. And when I draw I do it at home and it's like therapy. It's a privilege to work on such unimportant things for such a long time in such a serious manner.

RS *How is drawing like therapy?*

KC It doesn't demand much concentration. It's very relaxing. It's a relief from almost any kind of problem or difficulty I have in my daily life. It's repetitive and demands a certain kind of calm. Maybe drawing is not the same as therapy, but it's definitely therapeutic. It can also be boring sometimes, then I watch TV series and documentaries while I draw.

RS *Are you drawing the inside of your home these days?*

KC I used to draw my apartment a lot. Now I draw images I find on the Internet.

Complicated and unpopular

RS *Do you mostly spend your time in New York now?*

KC Yes.

RS *Why did you move here?*

KC I had a boyfriend in Berlin, and after we broke up I didn't feel so good, I needed a new environment. I heard there is an artist visa that I can get and live in the US, and a month later I started the procedure.

RS *Has the move affected your work in any way?*

KC Yes, in Europe I already had a comfort zone – I used to exoticise European culture, change languages (German, French, Dutch, Italian) and rely a lot on the atmosphere. After moving to New York, I had no reason to do that. I could have done the same to an American style that I had done in Europe, but American culture and films are too dominant to be exoticised.

I also counted before on people reading the subtitles and accepting bad scripts as being 'different'. But now I don't have subtitles, and I have to think of a way to make a valuable script in English. The whole structure of the videos changed. I have gone back to the idea of using different languages, not as an exotic element any more but instead as a political tool.

RS *Do you think of your screenplays as a kind of literature?*

KC No. They don't stand alone.

RS *Why did you publish them as a book, then?*

KC In order that whoever reads it will understand how I form my videos, but not as a substitute for them.

RS *What did you mean just now when you said 'political'?*

KC I made a movie (*Object*, 2016) in my apartment in New York, the characters representing different forces in political and historical power structures. They are all abusing a woman who

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represents women and minorities – eternal victims. That was one of the reasons I decided that the video would be in Russian, because I think Russia is the most dominant crushing force in the world right now.

Another example might be the video (*Des Trous (Holes)*, 2018) I shot in Israel last year and narrated in French. I felt distant from my friends and family, and that I had become arrogant like a European colonialist. That was the reason I chose French: I associate it with colonialism.

RS *Since you work with political ideas, are you concerned that your work may take the form of propaganda?*

KC No, it's too complicated and unpopular to turn into propaganda.

RS *Is promoting a political viewpoint in your work a way of inserting yourself into the work?*

KC No. I wouldn't like to insert myself, but I would like people to feel and think like me.

Killing time

RS *Can you point to a specific work where you wanted people to feel and think like you?*

KC Maybe. For example, in *Killing Time Machine* (2018), I tried to create a video that would be physical (on a theoretical level) like a machine. I first chose the number of shots and their placement in the room. I decided it would be 36 framed scenes that would start from the viewpoint of the ceiling, make three points on each filmed wall (there are four walls), then from the middle of the room – three points on each wall (12 points in total) and then on the floor – 12 shots – and back again – repeat the same shots. So 72 shots in total. Then I thought that next to every wall will be a character. Four characters in total. It looked to me like cogs operating a machine. Then I had to create a plot that will create the illusion that it is operating the shots (although the shots were operating the story). The video is in a loop. The viewer can then watch it until the end of time, until s/he's dead.

The plot is about four conmen arriving at a wake (after a funeral), and in the first movement (36 shots) they pretend to be the descendants of the man who died. When the shots repeat themselves (some of them are even rewound to emphasise the repetition), the conmen reveal their true identity. And the actors reveal their real names, just to compare acting to deceit. At one moment some of the actors are saying that it's a 'killing time machine'. Manning a machine that kills time, and explaining the order of the shots. The longer you watch it, the closer you're getting to death. So I wanted people to be aware that time is passing, and that whatever they are watching is all false. Nothing is real, but they keep watching a video that deliberately takes away time from their life. Killing them slowly. A bit like smoking. And there's also smoking in the video. So that was more of a thought, and not much of a feeling.

RS *Is that a political video?*

KC No.

A solo show by Keren Cytter, Sex is not an option, opens at Beverly's, New York, on 12 September; her work is currently on view as part of Momentum 10, Moss, Norway. She will premiere a theatre piece at Kunstverein Düsseldorf this autumn

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