

Nina Kurtela

INNER LANDSCAPES

IMAGINARY HOMES

22 June–23 July 2022

MMC KIBLA / KiBela

»Your name sounds like a Finnish name,« Nina Kurtela has been told countless times. The frequent utterance of this innocent phrase has prompted the artist to start exploring her origins from a new perspective while at the same time researching the various mechanisms that constitute an identity, which in an international environment (such as Berlin) requires constant negotiation and reflection. Even before they asked the uncomfortable question, »Where are you from?«, the artist's interlocutors assumed where she was from. This false assumption became the starting point for the artist's questioning of her own identity.

In search of an imaginary Finnish identity, the artist visited Helsinki, where she explored the possibilities of inscribing herself in a newfound space. Her search made sense when she found a neon sign reading »Dubrovnik« in Aki Kaurismäki's café. The dazzling sign reminded her of the Dubrovnik origin of her surname and created a link between these two distant places. Moreover, it was a film that proved to be the ideal medium for staging the excised categories of time, space, and the body.

As part of her first solo exhibition *Inner Landscapes / Imaginary Homes*, Nina Kurtela presents the essay *Dear Aki*, in which three letters addressed to Aki Kaurismäki are accompanied by scenes filmed in Dubrovnik and Helsinki. In her letters, the artist addresses the renowned Finnish director as an old acquaintance, although in reality, they are letters without a recipient. In this case, the director's name denotes a protagonist who longs for a distant and idealized *Elsewhere* and functions as a counterpoint to the artist's longing for an identity that would »offer her more opportunities.« *Dear Aki* is, therefore, like *Nina Kurtela* for the unknown Finns, only a presumed identity in which one can inscribe one's expectations with and without prejudice.

Nina Kurtela's artistic practice is often performance-based, particularly evident in her previous works such as *365 Routines*, 2017/2018, *Interiors*, 2013, and *Transformance*, 2010. In these works, the artist explicitly exposes her body, placing it in relation to a specific place and space, and the artwork is based on the performance process. *Dear Aki* also contains performance elements, but the body is absent, intangible, and alienated in this case. The artist's physical presence is here reduced exclusively to her voice, which further expresses her vulnerability. As artist and writer Brandon LaBelle points out: »The voice is never entirely given; instead, it demands investment and investigation, work and care. It supports our need for intimacy and sharing, as well as functioning within the greater territories of the political: to enable, empower, challenge, as well as to refuse.« For LaBelle, »the voice is pressed out of us – to support us by literally taking away our breath. In this way, speaking also fundamentally weakens us, which might be one of its

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MMC KIBLA / KiBela, Ulica kneza Koclja 9, Maribor
Opening hours: 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday to Friday, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. on Saturday.

essential lessons.«¹ The act of reading is therefore a subtle act that allows the materiality of the artist to intertwine with the materiality of the recorded scenes.

The film is composed of layered, overlapping scenes that do not say much about a particular location. They could be understood as South or North, although even this division is not precisely appropriate or definitive. The edges of the filmed scenes, softened by the editing, merge into each other, and it is the chosen medium that has allowed the emergence of a third displaced/imaginary space. The scenes of the sea, palms, and pine trees, as well as the industrial motifs in the film, have an almost painterly quality and listening to the content of the letters, we are taken by the striking aesthetics of the newly created *non-place*.

In the gallery space in front of the screen, the artist sets up a platform with a carpet and invites the visitors to watch the film comfortably, inviting them to feel at home in the newly created landscape. As the theorist Svetlana Boym writes: »To feel at home is to be comfortably unaware of things, to know that things are in their places and so are you. It is a state of mind that doesn't depend on an actual place. The object of longing, then, isn't really a place called home but this sense of intimacy with the world; it isn't the past in general, but that imaginary moment when we didn't know the temptation of nostalgia.«²

The neon objects, both in the film and in the gallery, symbolize this »feeling of closeness to the world,« or connection to an unreal place. For example, in the film, the unreal »Dubrovnik« is located in Helsinki and »Helsinki« in Dubrovnik (the neon sign was installed by the artist for the work *Khora*, 2017 at the Flora Gallery). »The signs are visually similar (neon, font) – two opposing places are marked with the same category of sign, with the same niche of marking, which means, despite the differences, the same category of existence,« to quote art historian Josipa Bubaš.³

The abstract neon objects, paired with the larger stones, function as an installation in their own right, and their form, representing the outlines of mountains from a film layered with montage, extend the film space and materializes its fragments in the gallery space.

The stacked posters have a similar role. They feature a selected scene from the film on the front and a letter addressed to Aki on the back. The handwritten letters here function as a visual rendering of the read text, and at the same time, they are the evidence of the artist's imprint in the imaginary landscape. The voice and the moving images we see in the film materialize themselves on the poster into another object of the unreal landscape. The resulting object can be taken home by the visitor, understood as a postcard, which is also an artifact of the *non-place* to which he or she can return again and again.

BIOGRAPHY

Website



Nina Kurtela (born in Zagreb) is a visual artist and a dance maker who works with choreographic and site-specific practices. Through her conceptual, often immaterial, and time-based art practice she works with methodologies of endurance, presence, perseverance, rituals, daily practice and matter of chance while questioning notions of monetary values, immaterial labor, identity, intimacy, belonging, home and its fictions. She creates works across various forms, namely video, installation, performance, choreography, and dance. Her work is presented internationally in a variety of contexts – in museums and galleries, theater, dance, and film festivals, and in public space: KW Berlin, MUMOK Vienna, MSU Zagreb, HKW Berlin, 104 Paris, Tokyo Opera City Gallery, MMOMA Moscow, Royal Albert Hall London, Ars Aevi Sarajevo, Tanz Im August Berlin, Transmediale Berlin, Oberhausen Short Film Festival, Survival Kit Riga, X-border Art Biennial Sweden, etc. She was granted residencies at: Amant Sienna, Q21 MuseumsQuartier Vienna, Cite internationale des arts Paris, THAV Taipei, HIAP Helsinki, GeoAIR Tbilisi, CEC ArtsLink Portland Oregon, Kulturkontakt Austria Vienna. She was nominated for the Berlin Art Prize (2018) and received the following awards: Japanese Media Arts New Face Award Tokyo, X-border Art Biennial Award Sweden, Henkel Art Award (Young Artist's Prize CEE) Vienna, Essl Art Award CEE Vienna. She studied »Dance, Context, Choreography« at the HZT, Universität der Künste Berlin, and holds a diploma (MFA) in visual arts and art education from The Academy of Fine Arts Zagreb.

¹ LaBelle, Brandon. (2014) *Lexicon of Mouth. Poetics and Politics of Voice and the Oral Imaginary*. Bloomsbury.

² Boym, Svetlana. (2017) *The Off-Modern. International texts in critical media aesthetics*. Volume 11. Bloomsbury.

³ Bubaš, Josipa. (2021) *Delaying. Nina Kurtela's solo exhibition*. MKC Split Gallery.