

“Andrea Lange, Refugee Talks” by Christos Tsiolkas

Catalogue for Remembrance + the moving image, p. 86 - 89, ISBN

192080501-x, 2003.

Australian Centre for the Moving Image, Melbourne, Australia

Digital video displayed as single-channel DVD rear projection; stereo audio.

Collection: Australian Centre for the Moving Image

Courtesy: the artist

In the ancient Hebrew Tehilim, which forms the cycle of psalms in the Bible, the experiences of war and exile were translated into meditations and prayers, songs seeking salvation and peace. In Andrea Lange's **Refugee Talks**, her exiled subjects sing to the camera. Always framed amid a setting of apparent bourgeois domesticity – whether reclining back comfortably, or perched awkwardly on a couch – the refugees sing in a cappella, staring straight to the camera. They sing songs that evoke origin and a sense of place, songs and lamentations in their own languages. Sometimes, however, they sing in accents and expressions that are more familiar to people in the West: a woman sings an old blues standard, her voice drenched in the history of the Mississippi delta; two young girls dance to the Spice Girls and declare that, '**If you wanna be my lover, you gotta get with my friends.**'

Lange took her video camera to a reception centre for refugees in Norway. Awaiting confirmation or denial of their residency applications, the refugees 'speak' this state of 'becoming' through the medium of music. Exhibited at life-size scale, **Refugee Talks** asks the viewer to listen directly to these contemporary psalms and to reflect on the emotions and experiences being communicated. As they face the singing figures, language becomes less important than the nuances of expression. Viewers recognise the pubescent glee of the girls imitating their pop idols. They recognise themselves in the universal intimacy of the family portrait: a woman smiles as her children watch their father singing.

The work's humanist resonance is amplified by the functional suburban lounges in which the refugees sing. Paradoxically, familiarity is further invoked by the vocal inflections and melodies of the Arabic and Balkan songs: the once exotic has been made everyday after a decade of sampling – made universal by the consumer acceptance of 'world music'. **Refugee Talks** is a work that emerges directly from an engaged humanist commitment. In acknowledging the **humanity** of the refugees, the viewer comes to an understanding that spaces once designated as separate and different – political space, geographic space, cultural space – can possibly be transcended through music and song. This is the promise of artistic space.

But, of course, such a promise can be betrayed and this possibility underlies Andrea Lange's work. It is what gives the work its acidic resonance. For the refugees, exile is not merely nostalgia nor simply existential. It is the present and the future. These are people waiting, their very civilian and physical security dependent on bureaucratic will and the see-saw of European popular opinion. What viewers are being presented with in **Refugee Talks** is, then, also a kind of audition, an attempt by the refugees to win them over and to convince them of their humanity. These people-in-waiting, not yet citizens of democracy, possibly never to be admitted to 'citizenship', are communicating in song the very act of accounting for oneself. The viewers' initial identification is undermined by the vertigo of understanding that both their gaze, and more crucially, their judgement, emerge from privilege. By recognising the desperation in the refugees' performances, spectators can no longer be dependent on the safety of universalism, their annihilating desire for sameness. They are in the position of the bureaucrat, of those who make decisions about whether to allow the refugee a home or throw them back into the contemporary abyss of statelessness, homelessness. They are reminded of power and complicity. '**Are you gonna get down with my friends?**' The young refugee teenagers are asking a question that is of no light consequence for possible futures they might have.

It is finally the ability of **Refugee Talks** to remind those watching of power that makes it such a strong work. They are reminded that the ancient psalms spoke not only of salvation and redemption, but they acknowledged the history and memory of oppression, the desire for revenge. Whether through traditional laments, through the blues, through lullabies or pop songs, they are also reminded that music has a history of storytelling and of remembering. That was the purpose of the Tehilim for the ancient Hebrews – so they would not forget their past. **Refugee Talks** asks the viewers to not only listen to the song itself, but to try and comprehend the journey of the song, and through that questioning, to make the connection to the journey of exile forced on the refugee. It's the same question asked in the old slave songs that fed the blues, it's the same question in the psalms, it's the question Bob Marley asked: '**Lord, are we waiting in vain?**'

Christos Tsiolkas