

Unlived Days

Multi-disciplinary Project - 2017

Hôte Gallery, Brussels, BE

Review by: Bülent Somay

Speaker for the Dead

Sümer Erek's Exhibition/Performance, 'Unlived Days', takes forty years' worth of individual days and moulds them into a narrative, both visual and verbal, of incessant mourning, a mourning for one death among many others like itself, told and re-told by a survivor. It is also a narrative of incessant celebration, a celebration of undying youth (because there is no growing old after death).

The narrative begins (and in one sense ends) in 1977, when Muharrem Özdemir, an Cypriot Architecture student in Istanbul, was abducted and murdered by fascists, an almost common occurrence in the second half of the 1970s in Turkey. The other victim of the abduction survives with three bullet wounds in his head, an almost miraculous escape. Sümer Erek is the 'other' victim, who is in one sense 'stuck' in this traumatic event. In many other senses he 'moves on', becomes a political activist and successful visual artist, leaves his close shave with death behind. He does not tell this story as a life-changing event (although it is), does not advertise it. Most important of all, he does not turn it into 'his' story, a very common disease of our times, turning everything into something about 'us', a Narcissistic outburst. Quite to the contrary, he makes his own victimhood into something arbitrary, insignificant and keeps it as a piece of personal history, trying to live his life in full, in fact, fuller than enough, enough for two people. He is not haunted by survivor's guilt: art has a peculiar way of avoiding this. Survivor's guilt is for those of us who cannot find (or construct) a meaning in the act of survival—art helps you create this meaning.

There is a time, however, for all debts to be repaid. Erek feels it is time to pay his debt to his friend and comrade, for having lived a life for two of them, while all these days were 'unlived' by Muharrem. So he packs up all his reminiscences of the trauma and turns them into art. It centres around a portrait of Muharrem, as he had been decades ago: blurred, pixelated, almost forgotten—but not quite. A photograph, and an unfinished charcoal drawing by himself: using these as a starting point, Erek creates a portrait for every day Muharrem hasn't lived for forty years, almost 14.000 of them.

He then gathers all these portraits in forty 'books' (one book for each year), pursuing a single theme but from different perspectives, different frames of mind. Memory fades, the renderings get blurred and indistinct, but the theme persists: although there is an abundance of such murders in Turkey since the 60s, approaching thousands, Erek insists on the uniqueness of each. The method he chooses to emphasise this uniqueness is to take one event, one death, the one closest to you, and focus and pour the profound sense of loss of all the other murders into it. It is the only way to challenge all this waste of young lives trickling away, leaving only senseless, emotionless and stern-faced statistics behind.

In a way, 'Unlived Days' is Erek's rebellion against the quantification of individual loss. And what better way to start from the very threshold from forty years ago, the blink of an eye when you yourself were almost turned into a mere 'casualty', an insignificant number in the statistics of bloodshed.

Sümer Erek adds a performance to his Brussels exhibition: it is more of a 'happening' since it is mostly improvised and depended on being 'there and then', rather than meticulously prepared and rehearsed. The 41st 'book' of the exhibition added a verbal element to the narrative: people who knew Muharrem Özdemir (even ones who knew of him) wrote their reminiscences of him, of his life and his death. These texts did not only supplement the exhibition but created another dimension, a new space. The performance builds on this new space: The texts are exhibited along with the visual material, and different people, people who knew Muharrem, people who knew of him, and even some people who just learned about him from Erek's work, read these texts pinned on the wall aloud, in a pendulum motion ranging from total cacophony to a ritualistic harmony. They stand before the wall, not much unlike the Western (Wailing) Wall in Jerusalem, and read aloud in three languages, Turkish and Greek (two native languages of Muharrem's and Erek's homeland, Cyprus), and English. A singer leads them (or is led by them, this also varies according to the moment), sometimes reciting, sometimes singing a passage from a well-known song, and sometimes just vocalising, and the total effect is not very far from jazz, as unrepeatable as a Coltrane solo, even when it is recorded.

The performance is multi-faceted, inter-generic. To pick an example, at one point the singer was singing a passage from an old song, *Neden Geldim İstanbul'a* (Why, Oh Why Did I Come to Istanbul?), in Turkish, whose original was in Armenian, reminiscent of other sorrows and tragedies that devastated the same land, while one of the readers reading a text by Muharrem's mother and another a political piece defying fascism.

'Unlived Days' is not just an exhibition, nor is it just a performance, a 'happening' whose main aim is to shock and astonish. It is the accumulation of a lifetime, as a matter of fact two lifetimes, one cut short and 'unlived', and the other spent in collecting material on, interpreting, and trying to create a meaning out of a senseless, cruel act. You cannot just 'watch' it, or walk through it as a bystander: it calls you to participate and create your own meanings out of what happened in Istanbul forty years ago. It also makes you realise that it was not something that 'happened in Istanbul forty years ago'; it is happening here and now, and you are one of the actors in it whether you like it or not. It asks you to decide whether you go through your days half-unlived, or find meaning in others' unlived days and live yours in full.