



new work

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Since 2004 the British photographer and video artist Phil Collins has been engaged in the production of a three-part video project, *the world won't listen*. In it he invites people in cities around the world to perform karaoke versions of tracks from the album of the same name by the 1980s band the Smiths. In 2004 Collins worked with musicians in Bogotá (the site of the first chapter in the trilogy: *el mundo no escuchará*, or “the world won't listen” in Spanish) to produce a fully functioning karaoke machine, which now forms the basis of the project. On view here is the second and latest installment, *dünya dinlemiyor* (the same title in Turkish), filmed in Istanbul in the summer of 2005. Collins advertised his project on the radio and in dance clubs, and he wheat pasted Istanbul's streets with posters soliciting “the shy, the dissatisfied, narcissists, and anyone who's ever wished they could be someone else for a night.” He found no shortage of willing participants.



Phil Collins, advertisement for *dünya dinlemiyor*, 2005. Fly-poster. Courtesy the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York



With their melancholic lyrics and catchy melodies, the Smiths inspired an intensely devoted international following that persists to this day. It may nonetheless come as a surprise to many Western viewers to encounter young Turkish people passionately singing British pop songs that they know by heart. The video serves as a potent counterrepresentation of Western stereotypes and media myths that imagine Turkey as a fundamentally antimodern nation hindered by tradition and the ghosts of its past, as evidenced by its current contested status vis-à-vis the European Union.

That he has worked primarily in conflicted and war-torn locales (Baghdad, Belfast, Bogotá, and Ramallah, among others) may lend Collins the air of an aberrant photojournalist, traveling far and wide to capture images of human pathos for the edification of art-world audiences. In fact, photojournalists have often turned up in Collins's work: In one video he followed a group of reporters as they interviewed a young Kosovar refugee, directing the boy to remove his shirt to get a better picture of the scars on his torso (*how to make a refugee*, 1999). In another project he recorded an American journalist speaking about his experiences on September 11, 2001, all the while serving the hapless reporter mugs of whiskey, then later edited the whole conversation backward so that it moves from drunken ranting to sober reminiscence (*hero*, 2001). Collins's work confounds our expectations of the standard news-media product in ways that may at first seem frivolous or even unethical. In Baghdad, for example, he restaged Andy Warhol's legendary 1960s *Screen Tests*, setting video portraits of Iraqi people to a soundtrack of love songs (*baghdad screentests*, 2002). More recently he hosted a disco dance marathon in Ramallah, Palestine (*they shoot horses*, 2004).

Phil Collins, *baghdad screentests* (video still), 2002. Single-channel color video projection with sound, 47 min. Courtesy the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York

Whereas Rosler refused photographic access to her subjects, allowing the setting to substitute for their presence, Collins reverses this strategy. He takes portraits but undermines any stable notion of site by denying us access to his subjects' locations. In *dünya dinlemiyor* he places the performers against backdrops featuring picturesque nature scenes and vacation spots: snow-capped mountains, autumnal woods, tropical beaches. Not only do these images not correspond to our own ideas and imaginings of what Turkey's landscape might

look like, but they are also generic fantasy destinations that are precisely nowhere in particular. Collins employed a similar strategy in *baghdad screentests*, leaving the sitters alone with the camera in front of a neutral white wall, and in *they shoot horses*, in which a bubble-gum pink background, embellished with a “usual suspects” identifying strip in bright orange, gives no indication of the dancers' actual West Bank location. Collins's method thus challenges the Western media, for whom these subjects are only ever defined by their status as citizens of a romanticized or contested homeland. Like those who criticized documentary in the 1970s, Collins demonstrates that video and photographic images shape and confirm simplistic notions of, for example, East and West, reinforcing such kinds of binary divisions.

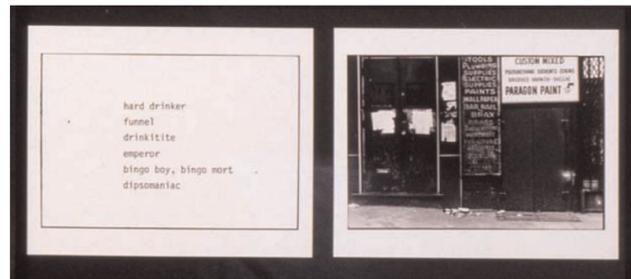
Portraiture is central to Collins's work. Yet instead of speaking for his subjects, he attempts to create situations in which they may speak and act on their own behalf. In *dünya dinlemiyor* performance becomes the means by which these young people differentiate themselves from externally defined stereotypes. The karaoke performances are extremely nuanced and inventive; they are not so much a celebration of the universality of pop culture, nor are

Phil Collins, *dünya dinlemiyor* (video still), 2005. Single-channel color video projection with sound, 58 min., and poster installation. Courtesy the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York

they mere demonstrations of Western cultural hegemony. Instead, they provide evidence of the highly idiosyncratic ways in which pop culture is consumed and appropriated by individuals.

Karaoke is an art of the amateur—an art of the enthusiast, the fan. Collins's trilogy *the world won't listen* conjures a contingent community of “isolated bedroom devotees,” as he has described the Smiths' fan base. Over the years, many of these fans have emulated the dandified style of Steven Patrick Morrissey, the band's iconic lead singer.<sup>3</sup> It is fitting that Morrissey himself started out in the role of idolatrous fan, writing cranky letters to the British music press about his favorite band, the influential but underappreciated New York Dolls (he even penned a biography about them). And it comes as no surprise to learn that Collins himself is a consummate fan. “I always remember smashing my copy of *Hatful of Hollow*; this feeling of Morrissey's that nobody loved him seemed so desperately unfair, because I loved him, so passionately, so absolutely . . . and it was true nobody loved me.”<sup>4</sup>

To quote one of Morrissey's own heroes, Oscar Wilde: “Every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the



Martha Rosler, *The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems* (detail), 1974–75. Forty-five gelatin silver prints mounted on twenty-four mat-board panels. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Accessions Committee Fund: gift of Jean and Jim Douglas, Doris and Donald G. Fisher, Evelyn Haas, and Pam and Dick Kramlich

Phil Collins, *dünya dinlemiyor* (video still), 2005. Single-channel color video projection with sound, 58 min., and poster installation. Courtesy the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York

sitter,” says his protagonist Basil Hallward in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891). Collins is creating portraits not only of others but also of himself. His own queer subject position comes into focus partly through the camp sensibility at play in karaoke and disco, and also through his indebtedness to Warhol and his long-standing personal affection for Morrissey. Furthermore, Collins embraces artificial and melodramatic forms—generally eschewed by “high art” and the intellectual establishment—precisely in order to draw out their latent and potentially subversive political efficacy.<sup>5</sup>

In a moment of Cold War–fueled fear, from within Margaret Thatcher's England, Morrissey once sang, “If it's not Love / Then it's the Bomb / That will bring us together.” Today, the threat of the bomb once again looms large and atrocious wars are raging, propelled—we have been told—by the ideological differences between East and West to which Collins's work alludes. With this in mind, listen and watch one young man in *dünya dinlemiyor*: “Sing me to sleep,” he entreats us, as Collins holds him in a tight close-up. He looks down often and closes his eyes between phrases. He seems to be on the verge of tears, and it is almost unbearable to watch. We may focus on the scars on his forehead. Where did they come from?



What has he been through? What can we know about him? Nothing at all, really. We cannot assimilate him into our knowledge—cannot categorize him or fix him in place. In the end he sings, “There is another world / There is a better world / Well, there must be.” When first released, the words of the song bespoke adolescent self-pity and fantasies of suicide as an easy escape from loneliness and the drudgery of life. But we may hear a more complicated undercurrent in this new voice, both hopeful and questioning. Another world is possible. But the world must listen.

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Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Gilles Deleuze used this phrase to describe the philosophical insights of Michel Foucault. See Craig Owens, “The Indignity of Speaking for Others: An Imaginary Interview,” in *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture*, ed. Norman Bryson, Barbara Kruger, Lynne Tillman, and Jane Weinstock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 259–62.
- <sup>2</sup> Rosler's piece also includes an exhaustive list of terms related to inebriation that runs parallel to the photographs. She thus demonstrates how language and photography can *both* be inadequate to describe the realities of lived experience.
- <sup>3</sup> The question of Morrissey's ambiguous sexual orientation is pertinent to his fans' stylistic imitations. While many of the Smiths' lyrics are so thinly veiled as to leave little question that they allude to the singer's sexuality, Morrissey has never discussed his sexual preferences publicly, and some fans continue to debate the issue. His music has created a milieu in which straight male fans may identify with emotions and forms of self-fashioning that they might otherwise feel the need to repress within mainstream culture, while his gay male fans can openly identify with his coded references to gay culture.
- <sup>4</sup> See “Phil Collins and Alex Farquharson in Conversation,” in *Thinking of the Outside*, ed. Claire Doherty (Bristol, England: University of the West of England, Bristol Legible City, and Arnolfini, 2005), 52.
- <sup>5</sup> As articulated in an illuminating conversation between Collins and the filmmaker Todd Haynes in “24 Frames of Lies,” in *yeah . . . you, baby, you* (Milton Keynes, England: Milton Keynes Gallery; Brighton, England: Shady Lane Publications, 2005), 145–53.

Phil Collins was born in 1970 in Runcorn, England, and is currently based in Glasgow, Scotland. He has received degrees from the University of Ulster, Belfast, Northern Ireland; and the University of Manchester, England.

In 2006 Collins's work has been the focus of solo exhibitions at the Tate Britain, London; Sala Rekalde, Bilbao, Spain; Neue Kunst Halle St. Gallen, Switzerland; Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York; and the Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst, Ghent, Belgium. Previously he has had solo exhibitions at Milton Keynes Gallery, England; Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, Ohio; Espacio la Rebeca, Bogotá; and the Wrong Gallery, New York.

Collins received the Absolut Prize in 2000 and the Paul Hamlyn Award in 2001. As a finalist for the 2006 Turner Prize, he will participate in the accompanying exhibition opening in October 2006 at the Tate Britain, London.

Collins's group exhibitions have included *British Art Show 6*, BALTIC Gateshead, England; the Ninth International Istanbul Biennial; *Populism*, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, Frankfurter Kunstverein, Frankfurt, Germany, and Centre for Contemporary Art, Vilnius, Lithuania; the Seventh Sharjah International Art Biennial, United Arab Emirates; *Universal Experience*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, and Hayward Gallery, London; *Witness*, Barbican Centre, London; and *Manifesta 3*, Ljubljana, Slovenia.

Works in the Exhibition

*dünya dinlemiyor*

2005

Single-channel color video projection with sound, 58 min., and poster installation

Courtesy the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York

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All Collins images courtesy the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York. Rosler photo by Ben Blackwell, courtesy SFMOMA. Reverse: *dünya dinlemiyor* (video stills and installation view at Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York).