

Preaching to the Choir

Curated by Maayan Sheleff

Participating Artists: Željka Blakšić aka Gita Blak, Irina Botea, Chto Delat, Luigi Coppola, Effi & Amir, Nir Evron, Marco Godoy, Ilir Kaso, Tali Keren, Omer Krieger, Elie Shamir

The exhibition "Preaching to the Choir" delves into projects from the last decade by artists who worked with choirs, presenting them through films, video installations, performances, and workshops. Through a collaborative artistic process involving singers, musicians, writers, and activists, the artists examine and deconstruct ethnic and cultural pre-conceptions as well as perceptions of nationality. This choral-artistic whole fuses local musical and textual traditions with contemporary texts, some extracted directly from the political sphere. Temporal and contextual shifts produce new combinations of tune, text, and place, which are also manifested in the visual aspect of the works. The political function of singing is explored along the axis between the traditional and the contemporary: from religious ceremonies in which a "leader" guides a group with his voice, through traditions of polyphonic choirs in which different voices join together to create a new collective voice, to choirs that sing texts from demonstrations or economic blogs, like performative demonstrations that echo the protest movements of recent years.

A choir is a musical ensemble of individuals singing in unison; different voices that together form a single, yet non-homogeneous voice. Many cultures boast historical choral traditions. One of the earliest forms of choir known

in Western culture is the Greek chorus. It evolved, in fact, as part of a religious ceremony which celebrated man's place in the universe, but most of us are familiar with its later manifestation, as a group of actors-singers playing a key role in Greek tragedy. Already then, the chorus held political power by virtue of its momentous role as mediator between the actors and the audience, between the live human drama taking place on stage (praxis) and the eternal myth underlying the tragedy. It illustrated a multiplicity of voices and viewpoints within a hierarchical civil structure, and reflected the meaning of being a citizen to the audience: the audience watched the actors, but at the same time – was observed by the chorus that addressed it directly, and remembered that it, too, was a part of the same political sphere in which the protagonists operate.

The chorus is the voice of the writer, and simultaneously – the voice of the people; an entity that represents law and order, and at the same time indicates the possibility of their violation. It thus constitutes a communal space. The audience experiences the characters' deeds in a manner which creates a sense of responsibility and renders the other present, not via representation, but through identification and understanding, by way of solidarity. Hence, it is not surprising that choirs have played a major role in demonstrations and protests wherever processes of political change have shown themselves recently. Through the performative occurrence defining them, they call for solidarity, since they operate as a single body, yet make room for the individual voice within the crowd. They discuss specific local occurrences, yet call for collective responsibility that goes beyond geographical, religious, or ethnic boundaries.

Choirs have evolved in different ways throughout Western history, and have, in many instances, tried to generate unification rather than encouraging a democratic multiplicity of voices. Church choirs served as a vehicle for religious elevation which prompts obedience to religious laws, while in Communist countries, singing was an important instrument for identification with the values of the regime. Workers' choirs were used to raise morale and to create a professional "esprit de corps," which would dull the mundane difficulties and social gaps. In Israel,

for instance, singing groups and military choirs fostered identification with the values of Zionism, primarily – the motif of sacrificing oneself for the state. Concurrently, from Brecht's epic theater through cinematic musicals, choirs were also used in a manner reminiscent of the self-reflexive complexity of the Greek chorus. Such choirs produce estrangement and defamiliarization, deviating from the dimension of illusion and fantasy, and calling for critical observation; they suspend the everyday to raise questions about the human condition.

In his book *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, Jacques Attali observes that musical structures typical of a given time and place can anticipate and prophesy historical and political developments. They not only reflect the social formations of their time, as maintained by Theodor Adorno and Max Weber before him; the reciprocal relation between music and political events can foreshadow future occurrences. It can indicate new, liberating modes of production, while introducing a dystopian possibility which is a mirror image of that emancipation.¹

The works in *Preaching to the Choir* juxtapose representations of the individual with perceptions of the collective in various Socialist traditions. Some of them attest to the transformation of these concepts following the collapse of the Communist bloc and the disillusionment with the utopian view of cooperative life. At the same time, the works reflect the current crisis of Western capitalism, which extols individuality, but in view of the uncontrollable expansion of globalism and the growing economic gaps, in fact flattened and trampled the individual. Both these political structures – communism and capitalism, with all their differences and nuances – erase the distinctions between the unique entities comprising society.²

If we adopt Attali's model to examine the return of choirs to contemporary culture and art as a phenomenon that links the artistic-aesthetic with activist-political spheres, we may regard choirs as the harbingers of a new social structure; that structure was to arise from the protests we have witnessed in recent years, and from their artistic manifestations; a structure which does not rely on the nation state, but rather, creates solidarity between different nations; a formation which is neither communist nor

1 See: Fredric Jameson, "Foreword," in Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p. 10.

2 Attali, *ibid.*, p. 17: "No organized society can exist without structuring differences at its core. No market economy can develop without erasing those differences in mass production. The self-destruction of capitalism lies in this contradiction, in the fact that music leads a deafening life: an instrument of differentiation, it has become a locus of repetition."

3 Interestingly, Attali's text was written in 1985, several years before the collapse of the Communist bloc. Since then, the countries of the bloc have absorbed capitalistic influences; today some of them tend toward totalitarianism, and power is concentrated in the hands of small nationalistic interest groups. Israel too, a state with a socialist-idealistic past, shows signs of totalitarianism in a hyper-capitalistic system of privatization.

capitalistic, but rather indicates a new type of collectivism (one which binds togetherness and individuality into a whole greater than the sum of its parts). At the same time, some of the works echo the dystopian possibility, whereby inequality, economic gaps, and distorted power relations encumber civil solidarity, and in which the choir serves as an instrument for brainwashing and deepening the gaps. By virtue of singing it is possible to produce a democratic public sphere of negotiation, but at the same time – it may also give rise to a tyrannical space of despotism.³ The works convey the dual potential at the choir's core: on the one hand, it reflects the luring power innate to a manifestation of uniformity; on the other hand, it enables imagining a new, more democratic political system.

The artists' work with choirs is, essentially, work with communities which may be ascribed to the genre of participatory artworks. The artists furnish an artistic platform that spawns a joint narrative through the combination of different voices. This is not, however, a utopian or harmonious experience, but rather a negotiation of differences that reflects the difficulty in creating a solidary community unanimous with regard to its goals. The artists address their process reflexively, externalizing their role as outside onlookers, as participants, or as disruptive foreigners.

The exhibition consists of video and performance works, but it opens with a lone painting, Elie Shamir's *Lullaby for the Valley*. Five young women singing in a choir are depicted in a plowed field, and next to them, a man playing the accordion. Doron Lurie identified a dual tension in this painting, and in the polemic of Eretz-Israeli painting in general, "one arising between idealistic-utopist description and mimetic-realistic description; and another arising between a moral judgment of the situation's failure and the need and wish for education, propaganda, and expressions of identification."⁴ Similar tension arises from many other works in the exhibition, which carry the dual political potential of choral singing: as a text which elicits identification with uniform national values, and as a signifier of their future deconstruction via protest and revolution. The eternal and the mundane, as well as the conflicts embodied in them, are presented side by side,

4 Doron J. Lurie, Elie Shamir: *On the Road to Kfar Yehoshua*, exh. cat., trans. Tamar Fox (Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 2009), p. 169.

reflecting the reality of life for the viewer, just like the tragic heroes in Shamir's paintings. They are imprisoned by their fate in the landscape of their homeland, which is bruised and scorched along with the utopian ideals of their ancestors.

Lullaby for the Valley was inspired by Renaissance artist Piero della Francesca's *The Nativity* (1470-75). Baby Jesus, however, is absent from Shamir's painting, which features the members of the previous generation in Kfar Yehoshua – his parents' generation – who, he maintains, sacrificed the raising and fostering of their children for the ideal of pioneering labor. The women's choir sings Nathan Alterman's "Song of the Valley" (1934), a song of hope, labor, and sacrifice. Unlike the pathos characterizing the customary rendition of the song by singing groups, however, Shamir's choir is anti-monumental, solitary in the landscape. The women's attire is modern, and one of the singers appears to be a migrant worker. The contrast between myth and reality alludes to the contrast between the imaginary text, with which the viewer is familiar, and the somber realistic landscape. Moreover, the freezing of the moment in the painting blocks the feelings of love for the land, which the song could have invoked had it been heard. The song and the painting thus become an elegy for the Jezreel Valley and for the son, a melancholic allegory of sorts.

Rehearsing the Spectacle of Specters, the title of Omer Krieger and Nir Evron's video installation (2014), are the opening words of a poem by Anadad Eldan (b. 1924), member of Kibbutz Beeri on the Israel-Gaza border. Eldan – the "kibbutz poet," who wrote texts for kibbutz ceremonies and festivals – is also a renowned, widely published lyrical poet. His poems have a unique sound based on rich and musical ancient Hebrew. The video documents a group of kibbutz members reciting the poem in the community center (Beit Ha'am) basement; it is, however, a digital choir of individual figures grafted one on the other, juxtaposed with footage of gathering areas and public stages enabling collective expression. This studio-assembled choir, which is cut off from the real public space depicted in the work, accentuates rather the inability to create a common text. It thus generates a new image of the kibbutz, which started out as a radical social experiment, through

the architecture of communal life and the performativity of togetherness. The work is, on the one hand, a tribute to the poetics of shaping society by the state, and on the other – a lament for a utopian socialist dream gone awry.

Marco Godoy's *Claiming the Echo* (2012) offers a transition from the local to the global, serving as a second exposition to the exhibition. It features the Solfónica choir, founded in Madrid during the 15-M protest, which sings in demonstrations. Godoy shifted the choir from the public sphere to an empty theater hall and situated it in the traditional place of the audience, where it sings protest slogans popular in demonstrations of recent years, relating to the economic crisis in Spain since 2008. The songs, composed especially for the work (by Henry Purcell), were later added to the choir's repertoire, and it continues singing them in street demonstrations. This work also conveys tension: on the one hand, it indicates the danger in aestheticizing protest practices following their appropriation to a sterile artistic space; on the other hand, it hints at the positive potential innate in the diffusion of these practices from the museum back to the public sphere, implying that the link between musical structure and text may generate new options.

The Chto Delat (Russian "what is to be done?") collective was founded in 2003 by a group of artists, critics,

Nir Evron and Omer Krieger, *Rehearsing the Spectacle of Specters*, 2014, 2-channel HD video installation, 10 min, looped
 Courtesy of the artists
 ניר עברון ועומר קריגר,
 בחזרה על מחזה החזיונות,
 2014, מיצב וידיאו HD
 בשני ערוצים, 10 דקות,
 בלופ
 באדיבות האמנים



philosophers, and writers from St. Petersburg, Moscow, and Nizhny Novgorod with the goal of combining political theory and activism in art, and it aims for critical politicization of information. Its members frequently incorporate singing, while referring to Russia's political reality and history. *A Tower: The Songspiel* (2010) is the concluding chapter of a trilogy of critical musicals, the first of which addressed perestroika, and the second – the partisans in Belgrade. The third chapter, based on a real-life event, tells the story of a corporation which suggested building a skyscraper in St. Petersburg. The tower was marketed as a symbol of modern Russia, and raised objections among city residents. In the musical, several choirs of concerned citizens (workers, old people, young girls, human rights activists, etc.) perform protest songs at the foot of a symbolic tower where a group of stakeholders (the corporation's CEO, a politician, a priest, a gallery owner, and an artist) gather, singing their way to capital and power. The battle between the protest choirs and the "elite" choir calls to mind the two channels in which choirs may function: either as a sweeping spectacle of demagoguery (anchored in the Communist past, but manifested in neo-liberal rhetoric), or as a medium for protest and civic rebellion. The satirical aspect of the work is directed not only at the authorities, but also at the protesters themselves, who fail to reach agreement regarding their

Chito Delat, *A Tower: The Songspiel*, 2010, single-channel video, 37 min, looped
 Courtesy of the artists
 קולקטיב שטון דלאט,
 מגדל: מחזמר אופראי,
 2010, וידיאו חד-ערוצי,
 37 דקות, בלופ
 באדיבות האמנים



messages, and get tangled in a web of red cables against the backdrop of a "string quartet of impotence."

In her video *Before a National Anthem* (2010), Irina Botea presents a collaborative process of writing a new anthem for Romania. A choir performs various works written and composed by Romanian poets and composers whom the artist approached, which combine texts proposed by hundreds of Romanian citizens who accepted the challenge. The camera documents the choir performing the new "anthems," lingering on the singers' faces, as the rehearsals transform into negotiations between text and music. When the choir discusses the lyrics and tune, it inevitably discusses the meaning of the process itself, deconstructing it into formal and thematic elements. The work elicits questions about various perceptions of nationality and notions of community and collectivism, exploring the feasibility of a common narrative. The long and complex rendition of multiple anthem variations exhausts and undermines the very possibility of a single anthem that articulates a coherent national narrative, juxtaposing it with a polyphonic alternative. The future anthem heard in the work lacks harmony, since we are faced with a pre-agreement state; but it is precisely the discord and conflicts between the individual and the collective that give rise to the possibility of a more democratic future.

Tali Keren's *New Jerusalem* is a research project which gave rise to a "bureaucratic musical performance" at the monthly meeting of the Jerusalem City Council. A cantor sang parts of the codex of the municipal outline plan, Plan 2000, to the mayor and council members. The plan, which was never authorized but is nevertheless implemented in situ, is the first plan drafted in Jerusalem since the 1967 occupation and the annexation of East Jerusalem; the document refers to a "united" Jerusalem and describes it as the capital of the "Jewish-democratic" state. By combining two types of appeal to the public – a religious ceremony and an administrative ceremony – the performance analyzes the text of the plan, which consists of legal language intertwined with messianic rhetoric. It thus exposes the routine textual expression of a charged ideology.

The video, documenting the performance at the City Hall, is presented alongside another video, which

features text captions sung by the cantor, and next to them comments by Efrat Cohen-Bar (Director of Planning and Community at Bimkom – Planners for Planning Rights, who filed the administrative petition against the plan), Yair Gabai (former member of the Jerusalem City Council and the District Committee for Planning and Construction; among the most prominent right-wing objectors to the plan), and Eli Jaffe (the composer of the eponymous piece, "New Jerusalem," written especially for the project). Their comments reflect the multiplicity of viewpoints at this charged space, and the danger in drifting towards demagoguery and incitement. The ceremony on video seems to evolve without special drama, as the satisfied council members are busy with their cell phones. Fusing a political text with religious music may be interpreted as a critical act; at the same time, the governing body seems to regard it as a flattering reflection of its power, and in fact appropriates the art and "recruits" the artist to its service.

Croatian artist Željka Blakšić aka Gita Blak explores musical manifestations of class and gender divisions in society. *Whisper-Talk-Sing-Scream* (2012–2013)

Tali Keren, *New Jerusalem*, 2015,
2-channel HD video
installation, 20 min,
looped
Courtesy of the artist
טלי קרן, *ירושלים החדשה*,
2015, מיצב וידאו HD
בענני ערוצים, 20 דקות,
בלופ
באדיבות האמנית



depicts a group of adolescent girls with whom the artist worked, a type of spoken words choir performing protest texts in the streets of Zagreb. The texts were written by activists, artists, journalists, and poets with whom the artist collaborated, and they refer primarily to three disempowered groups in Croatian society: female factory workers who lost their jobs, young people who lost their right to education, and people who deviate from the heterosexual norms. Through the collaboration with the teenage girls who sang and danced in the public sphere, the work subverts stereotypes dictating who can be an agent of social change, confronting the invisible ideological apparatuses to which young people in society are exposed.

Luigi Coppola's video *On Social Metamorphosis* (2012) is founded on the principle that new social concepts require a new language to be heard. The artist collaborated with singers, comedians, and other artists, in formulating a utopian manifesto which they sing as a choir. The manifesto is inspired by blogger Paul Jorion, a journalist who created one of the most influential platforms for discussion of the economic, political, and social climate in Europe today. Following the present economic crisis, Jorion and a team of intellectuals created a think-tank, and called upon citizens to suggest ideas by which to formulate principles for a new society. Coppola's choir ties together declarations from the blog with quotations from leading figures such as the ideologue of the French Revolution, Saint-Just; British economist, father of the Keynesian school of economic thought, John Maynard Keynes; and President of the United States who ushered in the New Deal, Franklin Roosevelt. Coppola intentionally combines aesthetics and form that are reminiscent of a Greek chorus, with what he terms a "virtual choir" – the collective voice of the "people," from which he derived the texts. The performing artists wear masks made of financial newspapers to symbolize unity and protest.

Effi & Amir are an artist duo based in Brussels, originally from Israel. Their new video, made in collaboration with the Albanian artist Ilir Kaso, *Skolidlog and Other Inversions* (2015), was shot in deserted private houses in ex-communist Albania, a country which remained untouched by Western influence until the 1990s due to its totalitarian regime. Following mass immigration

to European countries which were perceived as more successful economically, many houses under construction in Albania were deserted. In this two-dimensional dystopian landscape of concrete skeletons, the artists shot a modern allegorical version for the fairytale "Goldilocks and the Three Bears." Like a Greek tragedy, the plot unfolds in the breached liminal space of the empty house where the artists operate possibly as guests, possibly as hosts. An Albanian iso-polyphonic choir, which is heard but not seen, sings texts based on interviews with locals, who respond to the artists' invasion. Like a one-way immigration movement, the iso-polyphonic singing begins with one lead singer, and continues with additional voices joining in. This act of reverse immigration, from the place regarded as representative of Western affluence to the place seen as destitute and deficient, critically inquires into the status of artists as privileged foreigners, short-term migrants who come to work with the local community.

Effi & Amir in
collaboration with
Ilir Kaso, **Skcolidlog
and Other Inversions**,
2015, 4-channel video
installation, 32 min,
looped

Courtesy of the artists

אפי ואמיר בשיתוף עם
איליר קאסו, **סקולידלוג
והיפוכים אחרים**,
2015, מיצב וידיאו בארבעה
ערוצים, 32 דקות, בלופ
באדיבות האמנים

