

Interview with Nurgul Rodriguez (24-25 January 2018)

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Nurgul Rodriguez's recent performance as part of IKG LIVE 2¹, *A LOT TO LEARN*, was an artistic attack on borders – borders that immigrants must cross, and the less visible borders that continue to confront us even after we have landed in a country that we are trying to make our new home. Nur's performance made use of ceramic tiles that she had made during her MFA at the University of Calgary. These tiles were laid in a line at the IKG before being crushed under foot first by herself and then by those in attendance.

Nur and I are both from diasporic cultures: she from Turkey and I from the Philippines. Both of us are trying to make a home in Canada because our first homes have become increasingly unwelcoming. Or, to borrow a word she uses, unhomey. Although my work is very different, as an immigrant and as a ceramic artist currently pursuing an MFA at ACAD, I felt an immediate draw to this work. Over two days, we chatted about the performance, borders, walls, colonial language, and the use of art against power.

1st Day

ANTON: In your performance, *A LOT TO LEARN*, you walked along the wall of the gallery carrying tiles from the entrance to the middle of the wall before getting on your knees and carefully laying each of them down in a single line until you reached the other side. I thought that this was such a powerful spatial intervention. Before you began your performance, people were standing around the center of the room more or less spontaneously finding whatever place they liked. But as you lay the tiles down in this line, you effectively displaced people – they had to get out of your way. Not because you were such an unstoppable force, but basically, I think, out of gallery politeness. I was one of those people who was in your way, and if anything, I was a bit embarrassed for taking up space, as though I had been a bit thoughtless. But once you had completed the line, suddenly, you had divided the space, and, more importantly, the people too, who found themselves on one side or the other more or less by chance. And I remember thinking that this was such a concentrated distillation of the way a border operates: the break up of a given territory and the simultaneous creation of a new one. I wonder, as a way to begin, if you could talk about what the border means to you?

NURGUL: *A LOT TO LEARN* is my first performance. In this performance, I wanted to talk about what I have been experiencing in this world since I left my home country, Turkey in January of 2000. I then moved to San Francisco where I decided to learn English (Common Language/colonial language) with the desire (of) expanding the breadth of my knowledge. I was a feminist ceramic artist who didn't fit in Turkey's political system and political approaches. Basically, I was dedicated to living my life the way I believe. However, when I had to face the

¹ IKG LIVE is a 3 day festival dedicated to live art that takes place at the Illingworth Kerr Gallery (IKG), Alberta College of Art + Design (ACAD). Organized by Lorenzo Fusi, IKG LIVE 2 took place from 11-13 January, 2018.

borders between countries and inside the cultures and communities internationally, I felt my learning and understanding of the concept of borders broaden(ed).

In this performance, "the borders" represent the institutional power that requires from individuals who are travelers, immigrants, exiles, refugees, and/or diasporic individuals to provide documentation or paper works to legalize themselves in a host country or culture. It is about the power of the colonial language that shapes, and forms dislocated and/or relocated lives.

ANTON: I think the process of immigration is one of those instances where you really see how language can be used as a barrier, rather than as a means of connection. That seems to me to indicate an element in your performance that I had not thought about before: your silence. What role does silence play in your battle with such institutional power and colonial language?

NURGUL: Actually, English is my third language. Turkish is my native language. I had to learn German during high school. I had to learn Spanish because of a family connection. Learning a new language is a long and arduous process. Learning a new language in other countries is another stage or is an identity process. In my performance, I chose to be silent because I didn't want to contaminate the space with my voice. Identity issues are definitely related to multi-language identities or multicultural communities in Canada too. My silence is about how we make spaces as a place to live, to stay, to belong. It's an act that doesn't talk about my hyphenated identity, it is about how to become an art form that doesn't represent a certain definition.

Let me explain this way, I define myself as: a Calgary-based-becoming-Canadian-feminist-Middle Eastern-immigrant-contemporary artist. When I say something in English, my Turkish accent in English shapes my profile for others. I become the other, and I experience the otherness. I think that's why I chose to bring my silence into a huge gallery space during my performance. I still carry a great fear of how to use my English in a public space. There is a lot to learn!

ANTON: This adds a lot to how I understand the destruction of the tiles. When you walked the border, you also broke each of the tiles that you had laid down underneath your feet. A lot of these tiles had phrases from immigration forms ("client copy" for example), others had words like "hyphenated" or "diasporic". There was something really thrilling about watching and hearing you break those tiles. But other tiles had words on them that were less negatively charged. I mean, probably all immigrants hate immigration forms! But there were also words like "culture" and "collective". I was wondering about how these different concepts related to your attack on the border?

NURGUL: When I started working with language as a text, I was told to write a poem or memories on clay. It took me about a month to decide what to write, how to write. Then I decided to collect some words that have been used by sociologists, art critics, art historians, and the theorists who describe or write about identity issues in the twentieth century. I specifically focused on Postmodernism and the post-colonial era. Finally, I had a list of words in my hand that described my own experience as an immigrant, as an artist, as a feminist woman; OTHERNESS, ACCULTURATE, HYPHENATED, COLLECTIVE, DIASPORIC, IDENTITY,

HOME/LAND, HOST/CULTURE. These words are overused, kind of abused words for me. I wanted to deconstruct them in terms of understanding their meanings. I am also thinking about how these words are perceived by Canadian people who believe that these lands are their own home. As an immigrant, I know that there is not only one side to this experience of sharing a space with being otherness. My English is a broken English, at the same time I broke the language's power with my existence: the otherness. I used the border that's made out of porcelain tiles. Then I broke them to show that my documentation process makes changes. I walk along walls because I wanted to show that even though I am an immigrant I have a territory concept which relocates the homeowner. I use the border that I made out of porcelain tiles. Then I broke them to show that my documentation process makes changes.

ANTON: Could you clarify a little bit what you mean by 'a territory concept that relocates the homeowner'?

NURGUL: I am an immigrant individual, and, in this society, my body represents the other. The other is a diasporic body who wants to belong to a society, community, culture. This is a territorial act that requires interactivity. When I wanted to be part of this culture I practiced interacting with local people or a host culture. The host culture is a homeowner.

2ND DAY

ANTON: we were talking bodies, territorialization, and homeowners when we took our break yesterday. I think you were going to say something a bit more about homeowners, otherwise, I want to ask you about the walk you took along the gallery walls.

NURGUL: I was trying to say that my home is becoming a dreamed place, not real. I am the home. Becoming a homeowner is having cultural and social experiences. If you are not accepted or integrated the way the system demands, you become unhomey.

Today, at 10am, I received an email from CIC (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada) about my Canadian Citizenship Application Process Initiation. I am so excited about it. I am carrying a lot of strange feelings: fear, dreams of my future.

Home is like my paper work and documentation. It knows about me through those papers that I provided through applications. It is my profile, but it is not me. Somebody decides about our lives, and where is "I". "I" is absent. We always need luck with the processes of immigration... When the papers become valid, I feel more at home. They give me a sense of belonging.

ANTON: Unhomey is an interesting word -- it can mean eerie, uncanny, or estranged. I think the process you are describing where your 'profile' with the CIC is supposed to represent you but is also very much not you is in a sense an uncanny experience where your "I" seems somehow estranged from the "client" that CIC represents back to you and deals with. It is interesting, in that respect that you were such an uncanny presence in the IKG. I think this is a good place to start talking about your walk. You traced the architecture of the gallery with your shoulders. On two occasions, there was a bag in your way and you did not progress further until somebody took the obstacle away. I remember being struck by the difference between this walk, and the walk

you took over your tiles. The tile border, in contrast to the wall and the bags was really no obstacle for you at all.

NURGUL: I think globalization brought with it some big issues and one of them is feeling unhomey. I find my memories and experience wasted, and I am needed by or for the system in Canada as an immigrant. There are feelings; we are human, but we are not treated as human beings. Our own social identity makes us who we are. I find myself here in Canada. I have to constantly work and construct my identity the way it is expected. Therefore, I am aware of the borders and whether they allow me or don't with what to do and how to do something.

Walking along the walls and walking the borders, these are the experiences of the replaced and/or displaced individuals and/or bodies. We cannot break the walls in a host culture. Definitely, here in Canada, there is freedom for me as a woman, as an artist, as a person; however, I cannot be sure that the Canadian immigration system is going to protect me whenever I need it to. *The application for Canadian citizenship under subsection 5(1) – Adults 18 years of age and older (CIT 0002)* makes my existence in Canada dependent on a lot of conditions that I have to study and practice. I have to be a likeable person to the system that I want to permanently live in. These conditions are lifelong walls for the immigrants in a host country and culture. They are reminding me that I am not in my homeland even if I try to make this place my homeland. Emotionally I have to become friendly with the walls and space. I have been living in Calgary since 2009, and I feel that I am Calgarian, maybe becoming Canadian. A bag is an obstacle as is becoming part of a new culture, they are part of the procedure of becoming. The tile borders are the conditions, they are the process' characteristics.

ANTON: after trampling those conditions underfoot, after pressing yourself along the limits of the space, you walked out of the gallery. I wonder if you can describe what happened next from your perspective?

NURGUL: Walking out of the gallery suggests that Canada has an open door for us who want(ed) to live abroad, another culture as "estranjeros", and our background and origins always invite us to refresh our memories and traces. With or through *A LOT TO LEARN*, I wanted to encourage the audience to experience empathy, not any sympathy. I am looking for an emotional truth in a space where the audience can become participatory. Thus, their decision-making moment shouldn't require the artist's presence. The broken tiles are traces of the body's act, and it suggests what happened there. Checking the viewer or observing what's going on there is not the artist's job because the performance needed participators to be completed because empathy can be experienced by the person's decision. My intention is to bring into the gallery an art form or artwork material produced by the audience's experience as a participant.

ANTON: I think this was a really triumphant moment in the performance. I remember thinking that this was a very subtle way of winning your audiences solidarity. If so, then it was also a very bodily act -- moved to and by a joyful affection with our bodies. When we crushed those tiles under our feet, we did so gleefully, with an almost childlike feeling of mischief. In part, this was the frisson of exceeding gallery norms, but also there was the sheer visceral joy produced by the feeling and sound of those tiles breaking. What I loved was how easy it was for us to do that, once it became clear that we could crush those tiles, suddenly nothing could stop us from doing

it. But in the wake of the refugee crisis in “Fortress Europe” and Australia, and in the age of Donald Trump and promises to build “beautiful” walls to keep people out of the US, the struggles around borders and walls have become more and more pressing, but also more and more daunting. I am interested in that relation, and possible disjoint, between the ease with which we were able to vandalize and destroy the line that you laid down and the apparent omnipotence of borders and walls out in the ‘real’ world.

NURGUL: Earth’s crust doesn't have any borders. We, the people, create and design the borders. We think we hold our memories. We forget, we want to forget. We want to see the truth. We lie to ourselves, to our children. We don't yet know how to live together. Women’s rights are still being processed even in modern countries. This is our reality. On the other hand, we can change things that are wrong for us. We need each other more than ever in human history. Why I am saying all these things because I don't have the right answer with me. I am an individual who chose to live in another culture and decided to die in other lands because for me it was just a space not a place to live. I chose to live in a global world; however, globalization works for the object based lives. Human life and human feelings weren't the core elements of globalization. We can see similar processes in colonialism. The world is still struggling with colonialism's consequences. I believe that building "beautiful" walls are the results of colonial acts and practices. There are invisible walls in this city, Calgary. Those invisible walls scare me more than the real/ physically built walls.

ANTON: do you think those invisible walls are more difficult to destroy?

NURGUL: Yes, because they are not clearly defined, so you cannot perceive them. I have been participating in parent council meetings at my son’s schools since 2010, and I have received the most private and strange questions from Canadians and immigrant Canadians about my culture and religion in which I grew up. I was introduced as a Spanish, European's wife in public places. This is not a complaint. Actually, I don't call myself an invisible identity. My cultural identity is the wall for others. How we approach cultural identities are the real walls. These walls are so active and dominant in political, cultural, and sociological levels in the context of the everyday life.

ANTON: Walls upon walls upon walls, and borders over borders. We started our conversation talking about both these kinds of walls as well as institutional powers. I suppose we cannot get rid of one kind of wall without getting rid of every other kind?
Perhaps one of the things that art allows us to do is to enact an attack on both in the same action?

NURGUL: Walls represent power and how power functions on people. Art allows us to act, react, construct, deconstruct, observe, think, talk, write... I discovered how to talk about fear, failure and skill/ craft in performing art, and I believe that it can be socially engaged. This is my role because I found it as a right way to go. At the same time, I want to talk about political issues, I want to make political art. There are many subjects that I want to attack, point out, get involved in. I've never felt that brave before in my life. Art is difficult to get involved with. I hope it makes sense for you.

ANTON: Are you kidding me! Yes, the world is burning. But I have always found it so challenging to make political art. In a way, it seems like a really ill-suited way to have any kind of political praxis. At the same time, I just don't have that many other ways! "Art allows us to act, react, construct, deconstruct, observe, think, talk, write..." I think that is so true. And it is so difficult to do those things productively -- if art allows us to do that, then we have to hold on to it very tightly.

But I think we can wind down on a selfish question. Do you have any advice for other artists who want to make and use art against power?

NURGUL: "make and use art against power" is a big decision to take and practice it. I believe that the idea of giving or taking advice about art doesn't work for me. Making art and becoming an artist requires a lot of practice. I can say only one thing to myself everyday "there is a lot to learn" if I want to continue using art against power. "Language" is the crucial material for making art. Knowing and understanding what's going on in your local world is the first step to getting involved in experiencing emotional truth.