

BERLIN

## Katarina Zdjelar

CIRCUS

First comes the music. Even before the first images appear in Katarina Zdjelar's seven-minute-long video *Shoum*, 2009, one of three works in



Katarina Zdjelar, *One or Two Songs, on Someone or Something, in Particular*, 2007, still from a color video, 4 minutes 46 seconds.

her recent exhibition "One or Two Songs," we hear the first measures of the 1984 Tears for Fears megahit "Shout." And only afterward do the images arrive: We see an iPod, a sheet of paper, but above all hands, chapped hands with unkempt, dirty fingernails—the hands of hardworking men—holding pens. Over the course of the next seven minutes, two men—who, as the press release informs us come from Belgrade—attempt to decipher the lyrics of "Shout" as though

they contained a coded message. This is in fact the case, considering that these two men speak no English. "*Shoum Shoum Lajdi o Lau*," they write and sing, in a strange invented language somewhere between phonetic transcription, Serbian, and English, as Tears for Fears sing, "Shout, shout, let it all out."

As quickly becomes clear, meaning here is less a matter of understanding than of processing and assimilation. Cut off from the lingua franca of a globalized world, with perseverance these two men create something of their own that lies between the foreign and the familiar. The two other works in the show provoke a similar sense of empathy. *One or Two Songs, on Someone or Something, in Particular*, 2007, shows a close-up of a young girl, completely absorbed in her attempts to compose a song on an electric guitar. Here, too, the laborious but still pleasurable act of learning to play an instrument, the picking out of harmonies on the fingerboard, the voice groping for possible melodies that don't yet have words to them, show us the process of articulating a meaning of one's own.

Finally, the third work—*Everything Is Gonna Be*, 2008, which was shown at the Serbian pavilion of the 2009 Venice Biennale (a space Zdjelar shared with Zoran Todorović)—observes a choir from the Lofoten Islands in Norway during a rehearsal. Perfectly "average" middle-aged people are sitting or standing in a slightly abstracted living room environment with a table, bookshelves, and vases, learning John Lennon's 1968 "Revolution"—a song that not only embodies the mood of the late 1960s but also marks the precise moment in the Beatles' career when the band's unity began to crumble and the group became just a loose association of separate individuals. Unsure and without emphasis, visibly in an early stage of rehearsal, the choir sings that ambivalent hymn to revolution and change. It is this precarious moment in the song itself and in its performance by this choir—one that mediates between individual voices and the communal voice, between the collective and the individual—that is made manifest here both in musical and sociopolitical terms.

The dialectic of individual and community, of "I" and "we," is at stake here. Zdjelar herself articulates this theme in the rift between a universally valid, abstract language and a concrete, always physical voice. She appears to be thinking quite consciously about this relationship from two different angles. On the one hand, in speaking a given language, her actors are inevitably being spoken by it; on the other, Zdjelar is always also pointing out: that a voice can jolt and alienate, and that it is constantly engaging in a creative appropriation of language as it is being updated. An almost defiant zone of freedom is created. And this openness—which cannot be experienced without the risk of exposure and vulnerability—also gives rise to the fragile, moving, and at times borderline kitschy beauty that sets Zdjelar's work apart.

—Dominikus Müller

Translated from German by Oliver E. Dryfuss.