



ORIENTAL RUGS/FRIENDSHIP
an action/happening
MAK Vienna, Oriental collection
May, 11 2012

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by Kristina Leko

in cooperation with/guests:

Rudolf Koppensteiner, carpet dealer, (Orientteppich Koppensteiner - Koppensteiner Oriental Rugs), Vienna/Teheran; Dr. Behrooz Bayat, atomic expert and physicist, Vienna, member of the Executive Committee of the United Republicans of Iran; Ahmad Haschemi, engineer, TU Vienna, active member of the Green Party since 2010; Jaleh Lackner Gohari, retired internist, in Austria since 1955, 1986 co-founder of GIF (Gesellschaft Unabhängiger Iranischer Frauen - Society of independent Iranian women in Vienna/Austria), member of 'Iranian Vienna' and 'Women without Borders'.

"I invite you to take part in an event in a museum's oriental collection, where together we will ponder friendships between people. There will be several Iranians present from a variety of social areas. Among the invited guests is Dr. Behrooz Bayat, an atomic physicist. We will be asking him an important question. Together we will watch a short documentary film in Persian, in order to reflect upon cultural understanding beyond language limitations." (From the invitation text.)

As usual, I was concerned with making the museum space available to persons and content that would otherwise have only limited access there.** My point of departure was a simple question: Who was it that took it upon themselves to bring oriental rugs to Vienna? - Carpet dealers. So I invited carpet dealer Rudolf Koppensteiner to be head speaker for the event, while the aim was to enhance and question the complexity of cultural representation, the power relations and economic background of a representative museum space. How is Western acknowledgment of Persian rugs as valuable cultural museum artifacts to be evaluated? Does it apply only to rugs? Is it at all conceivable, that these centuries-old mediated relations of commercial interest could be redesigned as a democratic, communicative relationship and equal transfer between cultures/nations?

First Mr. Koppensteiner presented his company, its two offices in Vienna and Teheran, its two Iranian partners, and his own rug collection.*** The current political situation, multiculturalism within Persian carpet production, types of folk art that are endangered by industrialization, and the US embargo on Iranian rugs were addressed. "Who weaves the carpets?" was one of the questions voiced during the presentation. In reply to this, Mrs. Lackner Gohari, doctor and activist, founder of several civil organizations, spoke about the role of Iranian woman. The biographies of our guests were an important element of my introduction and

moderation, in order to accentuate the personal aspects of each political issue. Then we looked at a YouTube video in Persian: A short documentary film about a recent assassination of a young nuclear scientist from Teheran University. Afterwards I asked our atomic expert, Mr. Bayat, the following question: "Could oriental rugs indeed prevent a nuclear war?" Mr. Bayat's speech was serious and it merged with a discussion about the video shown before. Comments and arguments alongside elements of regime propaganda visible in the video, but other aspects of understanding among individuals, cultures and communities became an important topic also. Subsequently, Mr. Haschemi, an engineer, from the Austrian Green Party, gave a speech about the duality of western morals, which ended with a poem of his. A lively discussion followed.

Tension between the two groups, guests and audience, Iranians and Austrians, but also tension between all of us and the room itself would come and go during the event. The space had such a scenic quality that while at one moment everything felt surreal, at the very next, the 'simple' reality of intercultural exchange talk would take over. Our emotions would break in the space between us in those moments when the Iranians felt threatened by what 'others' might think, and when that 'other' started being aware of it. At that point, we would quickly get into our 'empowerment mode', and establish ourselves as one group (key word 'friendship') re-appropriating a representative Austrian-monarchic museum scene with Persian rugs. My discrete moderation was all about that - letting us balance between those tensions. Museum visitors would regularly approach us, and listen for a while. In the days to come, I kept receiving extremely emotional feedbacks from both sides.

* Kristina Leko, Oriental Rugs/Friendship, an action/happening, May 11, 2012, duration 2 hours, MAK - Austrian Museum of Applied Arts / Contemporary Art, Vienna; as part of the conference Applied Exhibiting, organized by the ecm - educating/curating/managing studies of the University for Applied Arts, Vienna.

** "Rule 4. Keep your work/activity/events accessible for everybody. Include those who are usually excluded (For a cultural democracy. Unlimited general right of use for public venues.)", from my text "What should I do? An Ethics for Artists in Twelve Simple Rules", 2004, in: Kristina Leko, Secession, Wien, 2006, cover page.

*** We prepared together his power point presentation for which I also photographed his collection.



Above: Rudolf Koppensteiner, carpet dealer, Orientteppich Koppensteiner, Vienna/Teheran, presenting his business with the power point presentation that we created together. On the right: Ahmad Haschemi, engineer, Technical University of Vienna, since 2010 politically activ in the Austrian Green Party, read one of his poems. Below: Jaleh Lackner-Gohari, internist, retired, in Austria since 1955, founding member of The Society of independent Iranian women in Vienna, member of Women without Borders, gave her talk about Iranian women and the revolution, and questioned stereotypes.







Above: A documentary found on youtube, which was shown as part of our gathering.



Above: Dr. Behrooz Bayat, atomic physicist living in Vienna, member of the Executive Committee of the United Republicans of Iran, gave his speech answering my question, if the oriental rugs could possibly prevent wars.
Below: an open discussion was an important part of the event which lasted 2 hours.