

May, 2015

Conchita Wurst Meditation (Excerpt)  
By Fred Schmidt-Arenales

In Vienna's city center there are two prominently advertised female figures. There is the model appearing in an aggressive ad campaign for the Italian swimwear company Calzedonia, and there is Conchita Wurst. You can't walk from one Strasse to another in the Innere Stadt without seeing one of these two faces glowing down from posters and billboards plastered around the city.

The Calzedonia ads appear on bus stops, plastered on construction fences, on billboards in the subway: the places you would expect to find ads in the city. There is also one wrapped around the construction scaffolding one side of a large cathedral. It is the same model in every ad, wearing one of three bikinis. She is haloed in the warm light of *vacation*, or she is floating in water. Her skin glistens with beaded water. She looks out at us seductively: sex is just a purchase away. She is dark skinned with striking features and green eyes, but the context makes it clear she is not Asiatic. Austria is, like many other Central and Southeastern European nations, a very xenophobic society. Although Vienna is probably the least racist place in Austria, there is no small amount of racism directed at anyone who isn't white, and to some extent, anyone who isn't Austrian. As I observed, this racism is more frequently directed towards Turks (a term I've realized is frequently a stand in for "Arab-seeming people" and sometimes black people). Whether or not the woman in the advertisements is Turkish, any question of her non-whiteness is obliterated by the text on the billboards: "*Italian* beachwear." This suggests that, like her bathing suit, she is Italian. It communicates to the Austrian population, "Don't worry, good people of Vienna: she's not Turkish, she's Italian. The good side of the Mediterranean."

The Conchita Wurst pictures appear in different kinds of places. Large vinyl prints featuring twenty-foot tall Conchitas seep across the interior chambers of mall atriums. She adorns the walls of all Bank Austria branches in Vienna. She also appears in the subway and on random billboards, all the same places you find the Calzedonia ads. She is often pictured shopping or singing (the singing will be explained in a moment). Carrying bags, smirking as she holds a bank Austria credit card up next to her face, she is modeling behavior for us. She wears smart, attractive clothing: a pure white blouse, a cream colored jacket, and a black pencil skirt. Her hair is long and sleek and gathered in a loose braid, flowing but not unkempt. And her well cropped, short, chestnut colored stubble. A perfect, silky muzzle.

Conchita Wurst is a drag queen and the winner of last year's (2014) Eurovision song competition. She is the female character created and played by Thomas Neuwirth. I didn't know what Eurovision was before I came to Vienna, so I'll explain briefly: think of American Idol mixed with the Miss America competition but for all of Europe, and I think Australia and Russia get to compete too. Oh, and Israel and Turkey. Each European Nation (+ the honorary members) sends a singer to this contest. There are rounds, I don't know the exact rules, but eventually someone wins, and it's a big deal (especially for the winning nation, who then has the honor of hosting the next year's competition. Winning something at this scale in 2014 was a great moment for Austria, as the last time Austria won Eurovision was in 1996, and has had practically no noteworthy football success in the last thirty years. The whole exercise *seems* like a relatively harmless flexing of nationalist sentiments, a necessary outlet for a geopolitical region with a bad track record. But then again you could say the same thing about European football, and most of the rougher fascist / neo-Nazi / skinhead types seem to be disproportionately into football. But maybe I shouldn't be worried, seeing as the whole reason I brought this

May, 2015

up is because Conchita Wurst, the Austrian drag queen, won Eurovision in 2014. So perhaps Eurovision isn't so riddled with fascists as football. We'll see.

I don't think Conchita Wurst would get very far on a mainstream American drag stage like RuPaul's drag race. As of writing this the winner of the sixth season of RuPaul's Drag Race, Bianca del Rio, is also widely featured on the streets of Vienna. These posters advertise her new comedy special "Rolodex of Hate." She has a gleaming red wig with long bangs and large nineteen-fifties-esque pouffe, huge pearlescent earrings, heavy eye makeup, dramatic eyebrows (painted), a large beauty mark, and a huge wicked smile with blood colored lips. This kind of aesthetic is typical for RuPaul's Drag Race: carefully over the top. Mainstream American drag (Pop drag?) has a look and feel that is unmistakable and often, I think, participating in a critique of contemporary beauty standards more than it acquiesces to them. American drag queens tend to be excessive, bright, and aggressive. They refuse to be ignored, and also refuse to camouflage themselves. Conchita, on the other hand, panders to conservative feminine beauty standards without twisting or questioning them. She has a beard, but the beard is necessary to assert that this is drag at all. Without it Conchita would pass as a woman, no problem. It should be noted that not *all* of the Conchita images are so conservative. In one series she is dressed in a flamboyant gold gown and set against a jigsaw puzzle golden backdrop, photographed to mimic Gustav Klimt's painting *Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer I*. But here, the excessiveness is somehow muted by the fact that the photos frame her as an outgrowth of the work of the most famous Austrian mid century modern painter. Again she becomes fodder for the growth of Nationalist-Capitalist fervor. There is something much hazier going on here than "Austrian drag queen wins Eurovision." Perhaps because it's not totally clear (at least to me) that Conchita *is* a drag queen. When I first saw her I thought she was F-M trans, but sort of playing with the boundary. But mostly I had no idea – my biggest question was "Why is this very gender-ambiguous person so prominently displayed in this otherwise socially conservative place?" Not to mention that her name is Conchita *Wurst*—Wurst being not only a notably phallic food, but one available on many corner stands in Vienna (Wurstlstands). Her name is genius. I'm told that during the fervor of last year's competitions the Wurstl stands in Vienna were selling "Conchita Wursts."

The Conchita ads are somehow both subversive and normalizing. It's subversive to even suggest any kind of trans or non-normative identity in a large scale urban advertising campaign. Conchita isn't trans, but she is a drag queen with a beard, which is a step further than a drag queen without a beard. But her behavior in these ads is acquiescent. She shops, she looks like a competent wife, an attractive woman spending money on quality goods. She's a famous gold leafed painting, the pride of Vienna. She is not angry, disgusting, confusing, dirty, or any of the things which are usually associated with drag and trans people in mainstream media. The ads suggest that this kind of person can play by the rules. They almost directly state that capitalism can subsume and profit from people like Conchita, just like anyone else. Considered alongside the Calzedonia ads, the Conchita images reveal themselves to be equally normalizing. Where the Calzedonia ads subsume the possibility for racial diversity into the monolith of white Austrian capital, Conchita does the same for sexual diversity. But not only that -- Conchita herself is also, as Austrians go, someone of darker complexion. She is from western Austria, close to Italy, and she's a far cry from the blond hair, blue eyed people that peer down from the overwhelming majority of other advertisements in the city. Austria is getting in touch with its Italian side.

Among my friends in Vienna, the Conchita consensus seems to be that this Conchita fanfare is temporary, and hypocritical. In Austria gay marriage is illegal, and at an institutional level the same powers which influence those laws influence the economic

May, 2015

strategies of the nation, including the capitalization of Conchita Wurst. The motives for such prominent celebration of Conchita are twofold. First, Austria comes out looking much friendlier to gay and queer people than it actually is (leaving off the fact that using drag as a stand in for gay and queer politics as a whole is ham-fisted at best). The other clear motivation is economic. Conchita became pure capital the moment she won Eurovision last year. Bank Austria has recently released a “Shop with Conchita” card, some kind of credit card rewards program that rewards you for shopping and buying the kind of things that Conchita would buy (the cream colored jacket, the black pencil skirt). Her authority is also being used by the municipality; her voice can be heard in train stations giving travel information and enforcing the rules: “Your dreams can take you anywhere... as long as you have a ticket.”

On the one hand, it seems wonderful that Conchita is such a public figure; certainly twenty years ago in Vienna this would have been unthinkable. In pop culture drag is “in vogue” and Conchita is a perfect opportunity for Austria to cash in on drag’s mass appeal. For the Austrian state and banking conglomerates, Conchita is an opportunity to cash in: with this Bank Austria credit card, record sales, and tourism from this year’s Eurovision contest. It’s also an opportunity to cash in culturally, to prove Austria’s progressiveness to an international audience. Unfortunately, the underlying conservatism of image culture here stunts that sentiment. Conchita herself gives the game away. She isn’t over the top. She’s proper, feminine, and polished: a politician’s wife with a politician’s beard.