

Intellect Limited, A journal of Adaptation in Film & Performance, Mis-appropriation and re-appropriation: An interview with Oreet Ashery, by Eirini Kartsaki, volume &, Number 2, pp.225-240, 2014.

Introduction

In September 2011, I spent five days in a twelfth-century church in Suffolk. This was the final of a series of international workshops that lead to the 2013 audiovisual album *Party for Freedom* by Israeli-born and London-based artist Oreet Ashery. The work, which has been presented alongside a live performance nationally and internationally, borrows its name from the Dutch far right anti-Muslim political party, founded by Geert Wilders in 2005. Ashery's large body of work, which spans live performance, installation, site-specific, interactive and video work, looks at identity, race and ethnicity with an emphatic focus on the political and historical, both in terms of research and subject matter. The interview that follows is a discussion about the artist's most recent work in relation to earlier work that has similar concerns. It offers a clear trajectory of the artist's early stages of work till the present. The focus of the interview is certain creative strategies that Ashery has developed through her practice, which make use of notions of appropriation, mis-appropriation, reclamation, adaptation and repetition. These are discussed in relation to specific examples of work, amongst which the latest *Party for Freedom*.

According to the artist, *Party for Freedom* aims to reclaim the term 'Freedom', which the Dutch leader Geert Wilders mis-uses to suit his own agenda; the work creates a counter-culture, as it re-appropriates the mis-appropriated term and reclaims it in a celebration of nudity as a form of protest, trash aesthetics and democracy. The work uses the above

strategies to critique, amongst others, the ‘appropriation and instrumentalization of libertarian sentiments by Western political agendas’ and the ways in which religious values are often ‘masqueraded as synonymous with notions of civilization, modernity, progress and secularization’ (Ashery 2013: 1). It is loosely based on Vladimir Mayakosvki’s 1918–21 play *Mystery Bouffe* and uses subversive mimicry, playful allegories and cutting parody to comment on sexual transgression, xenophobia, immigration policies and aggressive interventions in the Middle East (Demos 2013).



Oreet Ashery: *Party for Freedom* | *An Audiovisual Album*, video still, 2013. Copyright: Oreet Ashery

More specifically, *Party for Freedom* uses material from the lives and work of the Dutchmen Pim Fortuyn, Geert Wilders and Theo Van Gogh to create humorous, disturbing and allegorical parodies, but also to reproduce and expose the political

unconscious of far-right extremism and its problematic ideologies (Demos 2013). For example, in a scene from the 'Geert Wilders Triptych', two performers are taking a bath; they both wear blond wigs, pretending perhaps to be Geert Wilders, and exchanging phrases from Fortuyn's translated speeches: 'This is a black day for Freedom, this is a black day for Freedom, this is a black day of Freedom' (Ashery 2013). The material, which is drawn from Ashery's extensive research, was offered as part of the creative process to the performers, who responded to it in diverse ways. Although the work does not offer any proposition for the future, but rather reiterates the past (Ashery 2013), acknowledging how past revolutions have at least partly failed and regimes of extreme control have taken over, the work can also be seen as a celebration of playfulness, absurdity, and the freedom to speak about current times. It can be seen as a gesture aimed to reclaim the term freedom, a gesture to create a vocabulary that allows one to discuss the problematic ideologies of capitalism and intervene into the political landscape of Europe. *Party for Freedom* constitutes an intervention in a number of ways: it has initiated discussions about freedom in the specific contexts where the work has been performed in the UK and abroad, enabled criticism through creative practice and the development of innovative creative strategies, but most importantly it has permanently altered the meaning of the phrase/title *Party for Freedom*: a simple online search will now reveal bums, monkeys and blonde wigs next to Geert Wilders' xenophobic, extremist political party.

The troubling misuse of terminology has been a topic of interest for Ashery in the past with her earlier project *The Novel of Nonel and Vovel*, a collaboration with artist Larissa

Sansour. What becomes important, according to Ashery, is exposing those misuses and mis-appropriations of language and questioning ‘normalities’, which seem to be constructed through the misuses of language and which constitute political and social agendas. Exposing these mis-appropriations also means asking critical questions about the kind of freedom we are after as well as the price one has to pay for it.

The significance of the overriding principles of Ashery’s work and the predominant preoccupations of the artist are discussed below. What becomes obvious is an emphasis on the principles of appropriation, adaptation and repetition, which constitute not only creative strategies, but also survival techniques in an ever-changing world, where the global and the local have become much more important than the national. One of the things that Ashery’s work exposes is a sentiment of despair about the current political situation. Yet, this is offered through playfulness, trash aesthetics, the ridicule and a commitment to critiquing the present. This is why, in experiencing Ashery’s art, we may feel that ‘it is fine to despair’; because despair is a driving force, which makes possible such caustic, relevant criticism and commitment to making performance work that engages with current times.

Interview¹

Eirini Kartsaki: Your practice covers a wide range of performance types: from intimate encounters with Marcus Fisher to interactive performance work, context-specific performance, installations and most recently the audio-visual album *Party for Freedom*. I initially came to know your work when you were an AHRC Fellow at Queen Mary, University of London, then later on at the *Feminist Research Methods* Conference in

Stockholm and through the workshops that lead to your latest project. Of all my encounters with your work, the image that has stayed with me all this time is that of you dressed up as 'Boy Marcus', which appears in your 2009 publication *Dancing With Men*.

Oreet Ashery: This is a polaroid image taken in 1974. It is interesting thinking about photography at the time, and what was technically available. It seems that Polaroid had fantastic image quality then, it seems richer than instant Polaroid cameras of recent years. I was quite enthralled when I found the image in my parents' cupboard, as I was not aware of it before.

I was born in Jerusalem into a Jewish family, and there is a Jewish holiday called 'Purim', for which one of the main traditions is dressing up. So, it is really the holiday of dressing up. There are various kinds of folk and religious characters associated with this holiday: Esther the Queen, King Ahasuerus, and Haman the Evil. There are also more contemporary costumes such as children TV characters, cowboys and ballerinas. I was born during that holiday. So, in a way, I was born to dress up! In a way, I've always dressed up. I think that particular year I got to be dressed up as an orthodox Jewish boy. The picture was taken of me dressed up, sat on the sofa, I like the 70s cushions! [As I look at it], I find this little shadow of a moustache very interesting; it is rather subtle which makes it very realistic.



Oreet Ashery as Boy Marcus, Polaroid, 1974. Copyright: Oreet Ashery

EK: So is the moustache drawn on the picture in retrospect?

OA: No, it is drawn on me. And I don't know if my mother had done a more pronounced moustache which then faded away, or whether actually she did it so subtly. In the culture of Drag Kings, of women dressing up as men, there has always been this exaggerated visual sense around beards and moustaches and there is a big discourse there. So, I am impressed that this so subtle; it's just like a shadow, like one of Patty Smith's images with a faint upper lip shadow. It is not pastiche. You know, it is just like a hint of hair, fine hair, which is beautiful.

There is another picture of me also dressed up, as a cowboy, from another year, which I think is interesting as well. But in relation to Boy Marcus, what I do remember vividly is

walking with my dad as a young girl to all the orthodox Jewish neighbourhoods and hearing all the voices of the boys studying. In Israel, orthodox Jewish boys go to a special school from the age of three, which is called Cheder in Hebrew – meaning a room, a special room for boys to learn. So, I remember hearing the boys praying and studying and knowing that, as a girl, I did not have access to that; it was ‘boys only’ rooms. So I remember that even from that early point I had an idea of being excluded as a girl, and constantly wanting to cross that barrier. Because to my understanding, being part of it meant to be part of the culture, part of the knowledge, and so the allure of the costume was also really powerful.

EK: In your video work entitled ‘Why Do You Think I Left?’ you interview your parents and sibling about the reasons why you left Israel. Could you say a little bit about that time when you left Israel and the connections to your work?

OA: I left Israel when I was 19 years old. I left as soon as I could probably for a variety of reasons. I think I left because I always felt like an outsider. And I think that being an outsider in England is much more comfortable. Israel is very small, and it is very nationalistic and community-based; at the time it thrived on a sense of loyalty and belonging; loyalty to your country, to your people, which I never quite felt part of. From a young age, I was part of an anti-occupation peace movement; I was going to all the demonstrations. I found the mentality in Israel arrogant, militant and ultra-masculine and I struggled with that. I think part of it was that I wanted to be out-there in the big wide world; this was before the Internet. I wrote diaries since I was seventeen and in those I talked persistently about leaving. But it was not clear to where. All I knew about England was from television programmes such as *Upstairs, Downstairs*, also the

beautiful streets of London with horses and carriages. I had such a skewed view of what England was. It was another era before the Internet.

EK: And how was it when you arrived in the UK?

OA: At the time I was in the army, which is compulsory in Israel, training as a weapons instructor in the infantry. I had to get out of the army; I was literally going crazy and had to get out. So I got married, which was one way of getting out; one could also get pregnant or pretend to be religious. I got married to an English guy, whom I was with at the time. He comes from Leicester, from the Midlands, and he was a 6.3' semi-professional rugby player and a car mechanic; we met in a kibbutz. In Jewish Israel you have to marry within the Jewish religion and he was not Jewish. But we pulled it off, thanks to my army officer who fought for me for six months to get the marriage recognised as legal by the army and the state and get released on that premise. We moved to Leicester, and nothing had prepared me for that, really. Nothing had prepared me for Highfields, where we lived. Highfields was known at the time as the 'Asian Ghetto', which in a way was the most familiar to me. My street in Highfields was made of lines of terraced houses with everybody sitting on the stairs, so you get to know your neighbours. Because of that street-mentality or neighbourhood-mentality that you also encounter in Israel, I felt at home. But, literally, nothing had prepared me for that England and that kind of small Midland city.

EK: Where you making work at the time?

OA: Yes. At the time I became heavily agoraphobic from the shock of the immigration to the extent that I couldn't leave the house. Everyday I just drew one corner of the room

on a sketchbook, I drew literally just one meter a day. I couldn't even get pencils, I remember. I had to ask my partner at the time to go and get me coloured pencils.

Then I applied to the foundation course of the then Leicester School of Art with this work, and I got in. But they were quite dark, those first years in Leicester. Being an immigrant and coming to terms with the fact that I'd left my country at a young age was difficult and it was a different world without Skype and social networks; it is very hard to imagine it now. I was the only foreign student then in my course, whereas now everything is so global.

EK: A lot of your earlier work is about religion and Israel and being back home or not wanting to be back home. You talk a lot about being an outsider and how you can feel at home only when you feel an outsider. So I wonder whether you have moved on from that with your most recent work *Party for Freedom*?

OA: Yes. I think I've moved a lot from the autobiographical. I think that for years, all I felt that I could talk about was myself; all I felt qualified to talk about was my own experience. And I think it was very valid for that period. It is very valid for artists to explore themselves; also from a feminist and minorities point of view. I was constantly drawn to these questions of permanent belonging and Israel and Jewish identity. In recent years this has changed radically. I wanted to stop performing on my body and with my body. I wanted to stop making work about my experiences or myself. And I also wanted to stop making work about what is happening there [in Israel] and embrace the fact that I have been living in the UK for so long and that I've contributed to this culture that I've been in. I mean that I am part of the immigrant culture in London, and I have a place in that. My friends and peers are here, and I work with people all the time and I

wanted to work with these people who are with me in London. So, I have shifted my emphasis on to making work that happens here in Europe, with people from Europe. And also I have stopped performing; I am not in the work [anymore], which is a very big change. But I think now, shortly after *Party for Freedom*, what I wasn't ready for was that actually *Party for Freedom* was in a weird way more exposing. I feel really exposed with this work and I think partly because when you are doing work with your own body and biography, the audience is much more of a witness. It is less of a critical space; there is sympathy and identification. When you make work outside yourself, then the field is much more open. In a way you are reflecting yourself, I realize, in a much more exposing way. So, in the latest work, I found myself in fact less protected.

EK: I can see some interesting links between your most recent and your earlier work. For instance, in your book *Dancing with Men*, Steven Wilson discusses how you adopt alternative biographies (Wilson in Ashery 2009: 52) through the use of characters or alter egos. So, in your work you use these biographies, either your own or other peoples' to communicate something, and I'm wondering how much you are interested in communicating aspects of those peoples' real lives or whether there is something else at stake here.

OA: That is a good question. I think that for many years I have embodied many characters. I have always embodied my characters. I have always projected myself into various male characters: some are real and some are fictional. During my fellowship at Queen Mary's Drama Department I did a project around The False Messiah Shabbtai Zvi, who is a real historical enigmatic figure. He converted from Judaism to Islam and performed a series of what were called by his enemies at the time 'Strange Acts'. He

performed those actions to prove his messianic powers; the acts are much like what we come to identify as performance art actions, like walking with a fish in a pram dressed in baby clothes. As part of this project, I re-enacted quite a few of his performative actions. At the time I went to find Shabbtai Zvi's house in Izmir and spoke to local people in Istanbul and Izmir about the Domneh, who are Zvi's followers to date and a subject of extreme national controversy in Turkey. Also during a residency in Delhi, I worked with another real enigmatic, religious and performative figure, called Sarmad the Saint, who was, some claim, Jewish and then became Sufi. In Delhi I found Sarmad's stunning tomb, literature and followers. I always try to speak to local people about my subject of research. This is all really a factual type of research that takes a long time; but what remains in the end is incredibly fictional and incredibly subjective. Nonetheless, the research element is very important to me and it has always been extensive; and it is quite frustrating, because most of it doesn't make its way into the work, but it is just part of the process. More recently I made *Hairoism*, where my hair is shaved and then audience's hair is re-applied to form the hairstyles that resemble four male public figures. First is Moshe Dayan, an Israeli military figure, and a symbol of Zionism, or militant Zionism; famous for his quote from the 1980s that nothing is more exciting than war, he has an eye patch and the least amount of hair. Then was Abu Marzouk, the head of the political faction of the Hamas; he has a bit more hair and a beard, and then was Avigdor Lieberman, a hated Israeli nationalistic minister. Finally I resemble Yassar Arafat and Ringo Starr whom according to the internet share a similar hair style. At the end I strip off and the audience cover me with glue and hair until I look like an abject hairy monster. The work is not only about the toxicity of some of those figures in the political

sense, but also the apparatuses of celebrity culture with the microphones, the security guards and the ludicrous eccentricity of what these people are saying.

In *Party for Freedom* the male figures central to the research were Geert Wilders, Pim Fortuyn and Theo van Gogh. But, as you know, when we worked on filming, I relayed some of the research to the performers, but what we came up with was incredibly interpretative, incredibly open-ended, incredibly fictional. How shall I put it? They are real public figures acting as fictional models for me, like fictional patriarchal models, some with a very dangerous type of eccentricity.

EK: Yes, and I think there is something very interesting in you saying that all of the research does not come through necessarily, and that, this can be frustrating. But, as you said, the work wouldn't be possible without it. When we were working together, your research was a very big part of the process of making. In discussing *Party for Freedom* you talked about the ways in which Geert Wilders is using this idea of freedom to suit his own agenda. And that one of this project's objectives is to reclaim the term and create a counter-culture. You talk about a mis-appropriation of the idea of freedom. So I am interested in the idea of reclamation, appropriation and mis-appropriation and the ways in which these terms are used or thought through here.



Oreet Ashery: *Party for Freedom | Party for Hire* (2013), photograph by Manuel Vason, An Artangel Commission. Copyright: Oreet Ashery

OA: Yes, I will try to remember the two points I would like to make in response to your question. So, one point is the interventionist point: from being a young child trying to enter these men-only spaces to then as an adult, an artist dressing up and physically going to men-only situations, like a religious festival or a Turkish Men's café. There are always interventionist or de-territorialisation aspects to the work. With *Hairoism*, when you enter the name of Abu Marzouk in Google Images, the image of me looking like him comes up alongside his own images. So for me, this is an intervention into the virtual space of Hamas, into the structure of the Hamas in Google. The same idea was guiding me with *Party for Freedom*, because [in the past] when you put 'Party for Freedom' or 'Freedom Party' in Google or any Internet search tool, all those right wing and far-right

parties came up. Now, the art project *Party for Freedom* also comes up in the search as a sign of counter culture, artistic intervention and reclamation.

I think that the use of biased language in mainstream media is one of the important frontiers in cultural activism. When I worked with Larissa Sansour on the comic book *The Novel of Nonel and Vovel*, we've included a whole section dedicated to misnomers and the mis-use of phrases used by the international media. So, for example the Israeli army is called the Israeli Defence Forces, the IDF, so the name already implies that the Israeli army is about defence and not attack, and yet that it is forceful. There are endless examples of really troubling misuse of terminology, in particular around issues regarding the 'War on Terror' and immigration. Therefore a new language needs to be used. So the question is how to unpack, how to expose those misuses of language; what we perceive as normalities and take for granted, which is actually embedded within a political agenda. And so 'Freedom' is one of those words that are hugely invested in misappropriation; whether by the Left or by the Right, it is a term that is tossed around to serve so many conflicting agendas. And this is why part of the project was called *People vs. Freedom*, because the idea that we all want freedom, we all deserve it, that it is a basic human right, is used in political rhetoric as a given which masks critical questions such as the kind of freedom we actually want and at what price.

I think where contemporary feminist discourse and identity politics starts to really crack and fall apart, is around the term 'Freedom'. Women's situation around the globe is tragic. Women are raped, bitten and looted and undoubtedly in need of defence from such crimes. However when this situation is used as a benchmark to set the West apart from the rest of the world as a superior moral force that encourages new forms of

Orientalism for example, or Western supremacist militant or diplomatic intervention, Freedom is then been clearly instrumentalized for other political and economical gains. It is impossible for Western feminist discourse to agree on how to negotiate the rights of women in a non-Western context. The case is the same for LGBTQI people and their safety across the globe.

I think this is why artists and people, more generally, started moving from identity politics to bio-politics, or intersect the two. Identity politics and certain minority discourses limit the language at use. By looking at how bodies are treated and the management of bodies in everyday life, and under state control the language in use starts opening up.

EK: In your book *Dancing with Men*, Dominic Johnson connects your work with the Ridiculous Theatrical Company; he also discusses Charles Ludlum's work in relation to yours, saying that Charles Ludlum is interested in 'the refusal of technical polish that relates to political as well aesthetic possibilities' (Johnson in Ashery 2009: 95). I know you have discussed in the past how the festival *Trashing Performance*, which is part of the *Performance Matters* research project has enabled you to think about trash in different ways. So I wonder, what are the different aesthetic and political dimensions that are enabled through this approach?

OA: I think this is probably the question of all questions! I am very interested in trash aesthetic, I am interested in DIY aesthetics. I think that this interest originally comes from an autobiographical space; that is the environment where I grew up. I was brought up with posters or fake reproductions of works or paintings, as well as cheap artefacts from all over the world, which were really tacky, really trashy, and endearing as such. As

a child in the 70s, I was exposed to the overriding colour scheme of the browns and the oranges, stripes everywhere and plastic. There was so much plastic all around me! Plastic chairs, tables, bowls everywhere... overloaded market stalls, dirty streets with broken pavements, shabby towels, luminous cockroaches... There was so much plastic in Israel; everything was made of plastic. There wasn't really a sense in my life of anything resembling high culture, or refinement, or a sense of an aesthetical elite; in the hierarchy of things and objects that surrounded me, there was only low and humble sensibility. That had an impact on me in a way that I could never let go of. I became very attached to those aesthetics that were around me as a child. Later on, they became part of the work and they became part of the political meaning of the work, in terms of, for example, the work dealing with issues of marginalities and minority discourses, or simply poverty. And this is not to say that minorities or poor people are not refined, or that they do not go to the opera, or that they do not appreciate good taste. It has nothing to do with that, but it has just to do with the discourse between the aesthetics of what I am doing and what I am talking about and what is natural to me. In the earlier work the men that I performed are always kind of messy, dirty. I worked for years with Marcus Fisher's suit, never washing it and it is still so dirty, and it took years to make it actually that dirty. So, it is the intentional sleaziness and dirtiness in the work that embodies another kind of beauty. And this is a beauty that comes with a certain quality of means and certain limitations; it is a beauty that comes with a decisive notion of cheap aesthetics, if you like, and the politics that this occupies. So this has been really important. In a more complex sense the notion of masculinity itself, portrayed through

these characters, became for me synonymous with sleaziness, but that is for another discussion.



Oreet Ashery: *Party for Freedom* | *An Audiovisual Album*, video still, 2013. Copyright: Oreet Ashery

Party for Freedom started from the project *Trashing Performance*, so I looked at trash a lot. And I looked at left-wing trash, hippie festivals, and tie-dye and forms of protests where people use cardboards as kinds of artefacts like posters and slogans. I was particularly interested in appropriations of ethnic clothing or adornments for Western spiritual purposes. Then I looked at right wing and far-right trashy websites and blogs like Jihad Watch or Gates of Vienna. So, in terms of the aesthetics of *Party for Freedom*, it felt that it could never be beautiful in that sense, or that it should not, as I was dealing with material that was ugly and painful, and I didn't want to beautify it, to aestheticize it in a kind of over-produced way. In the work there are very strong influences from

various counter-culture aesthetics moments of the 60s, 70s, 80s and 90s. Each era has its thing; the 80s and its particular use of effects filters in experimental video works, the 90s and the day glow rave culture. I think one of the main claims of the work is that nothing has changed. We have been through profoundly important civil rights movements' struggles and liberations, which achieved a great deal. However, essentially, in terms of patriarchal structures and racial modalities, to put it simply, nothing has changed. In other words, we have a long way to go. And we still do not really know where we are going, arguably with the failure of the Left, now more than ever. So, I was interested in repeating these instantly recognisable aesthetical modes from each period. The 80s had this crass kind of video feel to it; so, there's a lot of that in the work. The 90s for me were really the age of rave culture and ecstasy; all that was a really big deal; there was some kind of 'finger up yours' rhetoric in those parties. So there's a whole section in the work with day-glow and UV light, as a reminder of the 90s. The 70s and the 60s were a time of work like Jack Smith and Charles Ludlam's. Then there is Punk in terms of sound in the work, with the feminist queer band Woolf. In a way, what started as a kind of natural childhood aesthetics has become a critical decision in the way in which *Party for Freedom* refers to those avant-garde aesthetics both in form and in content, in sound and in image.

EK: A lot of the influences in *Party for Freedom* come from the 60s and 70s nudist movements, such as Naked as a Jaybird in the States and other similar collectives in Russia. Could you talk a little about the idea of nudity in your work in relation to violence?

OA: Yes, I looked at specific collectives, such as Naked as a Jaybird, the Russian Collective Actions, which used great materials such as silver foil, and the English Scratch Orchestra; all of these collectives have really fantastic aesthetics. Looking into the history of liberation, I became interested in nudism and nakedness. I started to look at the naked body as a site of resistance, a site where the implications of ‘control’ in the Foucauldian sense of control and punishment were present; for example, full-body search, orifices, going into peoples’ anuses and other forms of torture (it has been reported by activists that some anuses of gay men in Iraq were glued, then they were forced to drink vast amounts of water until they exploded, also some of the torture in Guantanamo was based on the genitals). Then I looked at naked protest, for example naked cycling or the group Femen. And then simply I looked at the notion of the naked body that reminds us of death and vulnerability. So looking at histories of nakedness and the conflicting regimes under which nakedness has been practised by individuals and groups has been important. That is very closely related to ideas of freedom. For example, German nudism was sponsored by the Third Reich, by the Nazis. And what stood for ideas around freedom and liberation for the body and nature and against industrialization and just being a machine going to the factory to work everyday had a strong Fascist and nationalistic element, and the body started to become associated with nature as a marker of nationalistic entity.

Some factions of German naturalists movements moved to California and influenced the early Hippie Movement, which started around the late 40s in California and then developed into the 60s and 70s. Then I looked at political nakedness as symbolic nakedness in relation to forms of control, especially in recent years where state control

around protesting, for example, as well as information sharing, has become aggressive to the extreme; so, nakedness in the symbolic sense, of the body vs. the state.

EK: Alongside the above influences, which formed part of your research towards the making of *Party for Freedom*, you also looked at Vladimir Mayakovski's play *Mystery Bouffe*, which addresses the 1917 Russian Revolution. In the preface of the 1921 play, Mayakovski writes: 'In the future, all persons performing, presenting, reading or publishing *Mystery-Bouffe* should change the content, making it contemporary, immediate, up-to-the-minute' (Maykovski, 1968: 39). To which extent does this have a resonance with the work of *Party for Freedom*?

OA: In *Mystery Bouffe*, Mayakovski discusses the desire of people towards the commune and the revolution, which is what attracted me to it in the first place; the idea of collective actions and performances of liberation as a group activity. I also really liked the way in which Mayakovski gives you permission to use the play. He states that in the future anyone can use the play providing it is made immediate, contemporary and up to the minute. This means that you do not have to obtain permission, or that the sense of authorship is passed over through a vision for the future and through a political contract of sorts, through a social and political trust. The phrase 'providing it's up to date' seemed ideal to me in terms of the revolution, as it showed that in some way things haven't changed. It also asks us to focus on what is important now, in other words, to choose our battles. What really struck me about the play was first of all that it is divided into the Clean and the Unclean: the Clean are the privileged and the Unclean are the unprivileged. What is interesting for me in *Party for Freedom* is the fact that the Clean and the Unclean keep changing roles. Sometimes the Unclean are literally the

performers, literally dirty, whether it is yourself [i.e. Eirini Kartsaki], with all the kind of stuff that comes out of your mouth or whether it is other performers going in and out of the mud. Or literally just certain types of performances in *Party for Freedom* allude themselves to that sense of being unclean. And the Clean could be the audience or just conservatism. In other ways, the performers or the work is clean because it possesses a kind of 'knowing'. It has its own kind of cultural platform where the Unclean are perhaps real people in real life, where the work is referring to, but they're not in the work. So, all these kind of changing subjectivities around who is clean and who is not clean are really important. And that is where the work is very slippery: we never know who are the Clean and who is the Unclean.

In the beginning of the story of *Mystery Bouffe*, an Eskimo puts his finger in the ground and claims that the world is flooding. An idea of the world flooding is very interesting to me in terms of ecology and climate change realities that we are facing [today], or the idea of always living with that sense of doom, crisis, [the feeling] that things have never been as bad as now. It is always about the now, that the world is flooding: something really bad is happening; or about to happen. And that could be anything. It could be the Second World War, or something that is happening right now, like the financial crisis with growing gaps between rich and poor.

So the world is flooding, and then the Unclean, the proletarian in Mayakovski's play, build a boat to save themselves. And the Clean, the privileged, ask to go on the boat, because they don't want to die, or to make their hands dirty building their own boat, or maybe they don't know how to build things. And so they go on the boat with the Unclean. And sure enough, they throw away the Unclean, the underprivileged ones, into

the water and save themselves. For me, this was just an identical parallel to the financial crisis of 2008, where all the bankers made the world 'flood', basically; they put us in a shitty situation and then they did a piggy riding on the Unclean, on the welfare system. They made us feel like we are responsible for this debt culture, or that we need to pay for something that we've done. So, they were saved by us and yet decided to throw us into the water.

But I was also interested [in *Mystery Bouffé*] in terms of citizenship and democracy. [In the play] there are a lot of democratic debates: [for instance], on how to build a boat; and then another debate about [whether to take] the Clean on the boat or not. So there is a lot of democracy and agency in terms of negotiation around things that come up during the time of crisis. In *Party for Freedom* a small section of the play was performed by three people, each with a blue plastic box over their head, as if they are already in deep water. It felt almost like a sweet children's play.

EK: How do you think you might develop that further?

OA: I am going to do a project with a curator called Nora Razian at the Tate Modern, who has worked for a long time with various groups such as Freedom from Torture. We are going to approach such groups as well as the wider public and create a group of people, which over a period of time will discuss the play in relation to citizenship and will restage it in one form or another. The workshops will take place at Tate Modern between February and April 2014.

EK: I wonder to which extent some of your work may be related to a translation or intercultural practice for audiences that are not necessarily able to access certain

experiences, such as, for example, the experience of you dancing with men in a Jewish, all male, religious festival.

OA: My work deals a lot with 'the region', meaning the Middle East and more specifically Israel and Palestine and Middle Eastern Jewish identity. So, there is always a process of interpretation for a Western and other international audiences and the work relying, in a sense, on being didactic or educational to some degree. There is always that sense of how to remain culturally specific, but also how to bring a global experience over. I have used different strategies in that respect. For example, when I worked with the figure of Shabbtai Zvi at the Whitstable Biennial 2008, in the project called *The Saint/s of Whitstable*, I wrote a very elementary play about Shabbtai Zvi and his two lovers called *First Reading*. So every time a group of audience came, they read it out loud and performed it for the first time. That was in fact the work itself, as, in reality, those audiences met each other then and there for the first time. So, I was working with the idea of acknowledging that this is a first encounter, a first reading; taking into account that when you first read a play, you familiarize yourself with it. So, the strategy of the audience participating in the reading of the play is that in fact they are learning about the historical narrative by performing it. Sometimes the work uses humour to transcend, perhaps, more culturally specific ideas. Other times, there is a text, which is separated from the work and that provides the background to the work. In the case of *Mystery Bouffe* it was perhaps easier, because, in a weird way, the play is completely global. All the characters are actually from all over the world, although the playwright is Russian. The characters are Indian, Australian, Austrian, etc.. This also drew me to that

sense of transnational identity of the play. I would not say transcultural, but definitely transnational.

EK: You talked earlier about an urgency in Mayakovski's play and more generally to respond to disaster and catastrophe on an individual as well as collective level. It seems to me that with that urgency or need also comes a sense of responsibility. How do we respond, and how are we responsible? There are also ethical implications in these kinds of decisions. Some of the work that you have done is about sharing, rather than communicating a message, and about creating a space in which something takes place, and that is a very unique experience that the audience is being offered. And of course the audience can accept it or reject it. So I wonder, to which extent does the space that you create in a generous gesture hold a sort of ethical responsibility? In other words, is there a sense of ethics prevalent in your work? So, there may be a two-fold relationship with ethics; there is a sort of ethical relationship that you have with the work, but also the audience's approach can be thought of as complicating the notions of ethics further.

OA: One issue that comes up a lot for me is the exploitation in art works of the 'other'; the way we might consume images of other cultures or the other parts of the world outside the West. This is something I have really dedicated the work of *Raging Balls* to; during that period I was very angry about certain art works eroticising people from other cultures, from areas of conflict and hardship and about the fact that the art world has a mechanism of consuming and exploiting those images. Since then, I have come to realize that it is an incredibly loaded and problematic area. A friend of mine said 'in *Raging Balls* you're criticizing the notion of the exploitation of the "other" in art, and in *Party for Freedom*, you are criticizing the idea of criticality itself, and whether art and the

avant-garde can be critical at all'. In the past it was easier for me because it was always myself in the work. I think, with *Party for Freedom*, my solution, was that I decided to only work with white people, or near white people, to reflect the world picture of white privilege in relation to freedom. And I think, what comes from that is the question of strategy: do we just reproduce what is already there, thus reproducing a picture of the world, or do we offer alternative images? I think that different artists respond in different ways. What is complex in *Party for Freedom* is that while it is reproducing a picture of the world already there, it also offers imaginary alternatives. In terms of gender roles, we see, for example, a picture of a woman dressed like a pig ready to be roasted; or a man riding a woman. Gender-wise, there are questions. Perhaps the work reproduces the notion that we are not there yet in terms of gender, race and revolution and that there is a long way to go. In some ways, it also offers alternative images, so I think it is a combination of both, both strategies, which draw on ethics. Does that answer your question?

EK: Yes, absolutely. And I think there is something interesting about going against the idea of ethics, or questioning ethics. Levinas discusses the idea of 'the other' in relation to care about the 'other' or thinking about the 'other' as oneself but also putting oneself in the position of the 'other'. I think your work both questions ideas around an understanding of ethics, while at the same time it responds to a need to care for the other. I have one last question. I really enjoyed your talk 'People Vs. Freedom', in which you were in conversation with Tirdad Zolghadr and TJ Demos. I recall very vividly a phrase of yours, which I also wrote down; you said: 'It is fine to despair'. And I kept thinking about this in relation to a conventional desire for hope rather than despair, which I find

frustrating and perhaps non-productive, that is a desire to say ‘we will eventually get there’. On the other hand, in your talk you said: there is no hope or no resolution perhaps, and everything that we are dealing with is a reiteration of the past’. I think this may also be the case in terms of artistic practices and creative strategies.

I am interested in frustration and anger as driving forces and methodologies at work. In terms of this, there is an anecdote in your book *Dancing with Men*, in which Lois Keidan recollects the first time she met you in 1999 and the way in which you were frustrated at the lack of contexts and discourses of practice that seemed to demand new kinds of politically invested interventions and experiences (Keidan in Ashery 2009: 6). I think that you have always been interested in the radical and unstable of the political, which has always been at the centre of your work. So, following from the above, my question is: is it possible to perpetually renew the radical and the unstable in creative practice?

OA: This is another really good question. It is difficult because we are really talking about a couple of things here. In a political sense, we can only look back at historical models, models of revolutions or protest, models of avant-garde actions. We are far too much Western-centred, in that respect. This is changing now as we see the Arab spring, with other kinds of protest in Brazil for example, even if the results are not yet evaluated. But I think we are learning to look at those and seeing them as something outside a Western experience, yet something to learn from, and this is progress. We can see that by looking at the hyper-capitalist reality we live in, that the sort of left/right binary is not working any more; the left has failed in terms of Communism and in terms of Marxist ideologies and Socialism, which gave way to neo-liberalism. And radical left has a sort of ethos, a radical ethos, but in practice it will always be a minority discourse and it will

always be kind of charming in its revolutionary spirit; but not a sustained solution in the wide world. So I think, it is a transitional period where we really don't know what new models are going to be effective. It seems that forms of whistleblowing are effective in what they are trying to achieve, but not everyone can take those risks. And also, where regimes of control have exceeded way beyond anything we have known and, turn to barbaric forms. So civilization feels like it is going backwards in terms of what we have achieved. In that respect, renewal is very important. But I think right now we do not know the answer; right now is a transitional moment, until we find new models of revolutions and protest.

EK: And in terms of the arts?

OA: In art, the discourse is continuously repetitive and continuously renewing itself. Everything is new and nothing is new. We have seen it all, yet it is all still radical. It is very subjective, I think, how we want to call something, whether we want to call it radical or conventional, or whether we can put an agency on something radical. And I think all you are really going to find is various opinions. You find people that will say, 'Well, this work was radical, and something new happened' or, 'It responded to the moment as Mayakovski asked for' or you could say, 'We've done it and we've seen it before in the 60s and 70s, it's been done'. It is a lot to do with language and syntax and how does one chose to describe an art experience and what is at stake for them in doing so. And I think it is something about accepting that, accepting that repetition, accepting that the discourse is an old one, exhausted, yet also always new.

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Abstract:

The present interview is a discussion about Oreet Ashery's diverse body of work with a focus on the most recent work *Party for Freedom*. It offers a clear trajectory of the artist's early stages of work till the present and gives an account of certain creative strategies that Ashery has developed through her practice. What becomes obvious is an emphasis on the principles of appropriation and re-appropriation to counteract mis-appropriations that exist in dominant discourses. Appropriation and re-appropriation constitute not only creative strategies, but also survival techniques in an globalized world.

Biographies

Oreet Ashery is a London-based artist, working across mediums in performance, still and moving image, objects and writing, mainly in the context of post-identity, biopolitics and

minority discourses, and is continuously exploring the appearance of the political and the participatory nature of events, situations and public platforms. Ashery exhibits, performs, intervenes and screens her work extensively in an international context. Ashery has published books, monographs, catalogues and pamphlets, and her work has been discussed in numerous art and cultural reviews, chapters, interviews and essays in many languages. Ashery is a Visiting Professor at the Royal College of Art, Painting Department, an Honorary Research Fellow in the Drama Department at Queen Mary, University London, and a lecturer in the Art Department at Goldsmiths.

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Eirini Kartsaki writes and performs. She has presented her work nationally and internationally (Hayward Gallery, V&A, Arnolfini, Soho Theatre, Cambridge Junction, Whitechapel Gallery, Camden People's Theatre, The Place, Biennale d'Art Contemporain de Lyon, etc.) and has published in journals *Activate*, *PerformArt* and *Choreographic Practices*. Eirini is a Senior Lecturer in Drama in Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge.

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¹ The interview was conducted on 19 July 2013 in London.