

REAL TIME ACTION

PERFORMANCE ART IN THE MIDDLE EAST



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Eckhard Thiemann examines the growing presence of performance in the practice of Arab artists and documents its growth and development alongside seminal moments in its history.

Opening page: Mohammed Kazem. *Photographs with Flags*. 2003. Archival Pigment Print on Hahnemühle photo rag pearl. 100 x 100 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Taymour Grahne Gallery, New York.

Above: Alia Farid. *A Stage for Any Revolution*. 2014. Maquette. Image courtesy the artist.

Facing page: Detail from Zoe Leonard's publication *I want a president...* 1992. Image courtesy Serpentine Galleries, London.

When Kuwaiti-Puerto Rican artist Alia Farid was invited to create a new work for the public realm as a co-commission between the Serpentine Galleries, Shubbak and British Council, she quickly proposed to create an open modular 'stage', now titled *A Stage for Any Revolution*, based on an architectural model from 1929 by Constructivist set designer Victor Shestakov. Straddling architecture, object, sculpture and spatial intervention, her subtle spatial gesture provided both a physical space and an invitation for performances. Being faced with the challenge to work in the public realm, the artist deliberately selected performance – and the curation of performance – as her chosen medium to create a series of interactive moments, which would resonate with the topographical context of the Edgware Road and engage with a live audience – both those who had either specifically come to witness the work, or were simply passing by.

I want a dyke for president. I want a person with aids for president and I want a fag for vice president and I want someone with no health insurance and I want someone who grew up in a place where the earth is so saturated with toxic waste that they didn't have a choice about getting leukemia. I want a president that had an abortion at sixteen and I want a candidate who isn't the lesser of two evils and I want a president who lost their last lover to aids, who still sees that in their eyes every time they lay down to rest, who held their lover in their arms and knew they were dying. I want a president with no airconditioning, a president who has stood on line at the clinic, at the dmV, at the welfare office and has been unemployed and layed off and sexually harrassed and gaybashed and deported. I want someone who has spent the night in the tombs and had a cross burned on their lawn and survived rape. I want someone who has been in love and been hurt, who respects sex, who has made mistakes and learned from them. I want a Black woman for president. I want someone with bad teeth ~~and an attitude~~, someone who has eaten ~~that nasty~~ hospital food, someone who crossdresses and has done drugs and been in therapy. I want someone who has committed civil disobedience. And I want to know why this isn't possible. I want to know why we started learning somewhere down the line that a president is always a clown: always a john and never a hooker. Always a boss and never a worker, always a liar, always a thief and never caught.

Audiences are seeking new and often more multi-layered or immersive experiences rather than following traditional models of art.

A FORM-SPECIFIC LANGUAGE

Performance art is now a term regularly used to describe the work by artists who use live action and time in their work. It is a broad and generous term, which still lacks a clear definition. It can include – and live alongside – other terms such as live art, body art, theatre, dance, sound art and socially engaged art. In the Arab world, the term is even less clearly defined, lacking even a direct translation into Arabic. While there may not be clarity in definition, we are seeing a steady growth of artists using performance as part of their artistic media. This growth is also reflected in the inclusion of performance work in international exhibitions, festivals, biennials and institutional support.

The availability and ease of documentation and dissemination through video, image and sound recordings has become a strong contributing factor in a surging interest in the form. Many institutions, from Tate

Modern's establishment of a curator of performance to Sharjah Arts Foundation's commissioning of performance, are embracing a wider concept of contemporary culture, which erode long-held definitions and categories. Galleries programme live events and theatres do not shy away from programming installations or durational works. Dance is moving from theatres into galleries and the public realm.

These trends reflect not just changes in artistic practice, but also audience interests: audiences are seeking new and often more multi-layered or immersive experiences rather than following traditional models of art. Arab artists have been part of this process. Their contribution to the history of performance art may not be as well told as the work of their European or American colleagues, but we are now reaching a critical point at which the growth of the practice and historic and academic interest coincide.

THE ROLE OF THE STAGE

A Stage for Any Revolution was activated on its first day by a new iteration of the public reading project *I want a president...* The original text was written in 1992 by photographer and activist Zoe Leonard during the time of the AIDS crisis in New York. It is a plea for a more compassionate president whose authority stems from having shared the hardships of unprivileged minorities. The text boldly imagines a president who could embrace and be part of non-conformist identities and lifestyles. Now translated for the first time in Arabic – and using specific *Khaleeji* idioms – *I want a president...* inaugurated eight days of daily actions, performances and talks in one of London's most Arab streets. Farid's concept incorporated a range of consistent strands of performance art: a live interaction with an audience, a blurring between performer and audience, the artist as agent or curator of public actions, and the link to activism



and political agency. However, her idea of creating a stage – a plinth – also has a lineage beyond the original reference point of Russian Constructivist architecture.

The notion of the plinth has been a much-debated topic in the history of sculpture. Bruce MacLean playfully subverted the authority of the plinth as a display mechanism for serious art through live actions. His famous 1971 work *Pose Works for Plinths* consists of a series of staged photographs with the artist negotiating and contorting his body on a loose arrangement of plinths, mocking with gentle humour the pomposity of traditional sculpture and their display. The work was, however, originally conceived as a performance, was done live at Situations Gallery in 1971. The famous series of photographs were taken in a subsequent photo-shoot after the live performance. On a much grander scale, Antony Gormley's *One & Other* in the summer of 2009 gave permission to 2400 people to occupy the empty fourth plinth on Trafalgar

Square for one hour each. It was similar in concept to Farid's *A Stage for Any Revolution*, but, without the curatorial selection of content by the artist, Gormley also created the conditions for personal expression in the public domain.

When RoseLee Goldberg wrote her seminal book *Performance – Live Art from 1909 – The Present* in 1978 – probably the first survey of the role of performance in 20th century art history – she identified important characteristics of performance art, which still influence much of the practice today. Goldberg shows that “performance has been considered (by artists) as a way of bringing to life the many formal and conceptual ideas on which the making of art is based.” She also highlights that “live gestures have constantly been used as a weapon against the conventions of art.” She also accurately identified that artists often used performance in the early and most experimental phases of their career: “It was in performance that

Above: Mona Hatoum. *Variations On Discord and Divisions*. 1984. Image courtesy the artist and White Cube, London.

Facing page: Antony Gormley. *One & Other*. 6 July–14 October 2009. Fourth Plinth, Trafalgar Square, London. Image courtesy White Cube, London. © Antony Gormley. Photo © James O’Jenkins Courtesy Mayor of London’s Fourth Plinth Programme.

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they tested their ideas, only later expressing them as objects.” At the time of her writing, the art world was not as international or global as today and her study did not include the work of a single Arab artist, or indeed any non-European or non-American practitioners. Her analysis of performance art was firmly anchored in the discourse of Western art history.

ARAB PIONEERS

Yet, at the time of the first publication of the book some Arab artists were studying in Europe, and exposed to an emerging scene of performance. Mona Hatoum came to settle in London in 1975 and studied at the Byam School of Art and at Slade School of Art, followed shortly after by Emirati artist Hassan Sharif in the early 1980s, and,

indeed, Sharif has specifically mentioned the significance of Goldberg’s book to his practice. Meanwhile, Hatoum’s work from the early 1980s frequently used performance as strategy to explore power, war, conflict and life in exile. *Negotiating Table* was a direct response to the 1982 invasion by Israel of her Lebanese homeland. In a darkened room, lit by a single light bulb, she lay motionless, covered by a plastic body bag and soiled with bloody animal organs and bandages. On either side of the table was an empty chair. The environment presented an impossible condition for negotiation in the presence of a cruelly victimised body, which is aggressively positioned between the negotiating partners. Her work at the time is characterised by raw and provocative gestures and materials. In the 1984 performance *Variations on Discord and Divisions* she produces raw kidneys from her coat and starts serving them up to the audience.



Above: Wafaa Bilal.
Domestic Tension.
2007. Image
courtesy Lawrie
Shabibi, Dubai.

Facing page:
Installation view
of Emily Jacir's
Crossing Surda (a
record of going to
and from work).
2002. Image
courtesy the artist
and Alexander and
Bonin Gallery,
New York.

Hatoum was not alone in using such organic and shockingly visceral material. Artists like Stuart Brisley, Joseph Beuys and the Vienna Actionists used organic material and provoking actions. The notorious Viennese Actionism artist Hermann Nitsch generated much media coverage and many a scandal through staging wildly exhibitionist happenings, incorporating animal cadavers and large quantities of blood in spectacular and theatrical immersive events. The works of the Viennese Actionism group were driven by strong anti-authoritarian ideology and a quasi-mystical return to a new liberated sensuality free from societal norms. Hatoum's work on the other hand has a much more political urgency. Her work was informed by her experience of life as an exiled artist. She used her own body to create a confrontational entity that was both personal and political: the body of the artist became symbolic of the suffering of a nation and a people.

IDENTITY AND VIOLENCE

In 2007 Iraqi-American artist Wafaa Bilal conducted possibly the best-known and notorious performance action by an exiled Arab artist: *Domestic Tension* (read more on page 72). Reacting to the violent death of his brother in 2005, Bilal submitted himself to 30 days in a prison cell-sized room equipped with a remote controlled paintball gun and connected by 24h CCTV live-streamed to a global Internet audience. People were invited to contact him via chatroom or to remotely guide the gun to target his body and 'shoot an Iraqi'.

Meanwhile, being partially exiled and in a much quieter and meditative mode, young Syrian artist Iman Hasbani used her residency in early 2015 at Art Residency Aley in Lebanon to develop a simple, deeply personal interactive performance *Tell Me A Story*. Sitting blindfolded on a chair opposite a mirror (which she cannot see) and combing her long hair, she invited people to tell her stories about war. The artist once again



Hatoum's work from the early 1980s frequently used performance as strategy to explore power, war, conflict and life in exile.

became the silent and alienated witness to the presence of surrounding violence.

In Palestine, many artists focus on the hardship of daily life under occupation. Less overtly shocking and visceral but using a more documentary approach, the artists depict the struggle to lead a normal life. In 2002 Emily Jacir's experience of having her camera confiscated and thrown away at an Israeli checkpoint, propelled her to

document her daily walk to work through filming her journey with a hidden camera in her bag. The daily walk becomes a self-imposed ritual. The juddering footage functions as documentary evidence of daily repression as well as artwork in the shape of the video installation *Crossing Surda (a record of going to and from work)*.

In Egypt, the emergence of performance art has close links with the thriving

experimental music and theatre scene. The key figure here is Hassan Khan, who is not just a visual artist, but also a seminal figure on Cairo's experimental music scene and co-founder of the progressive music label 100copies. For his 2003 performance *action 17*, Hassan Khan sat four hours for 14 nights in a purpose built soundproof one-way mirrored cell at the American University Cairo, smoking,



drinking and remembering and reliving moments from his student life at the same university. Ignorant of his audience, who can watch and hear him, he disrupts the simple rules of communication. In an interview on *ArtTerritories* he says: "Through this kind of construction the audience experiences a form of communication that is not part of their daily life. So I become the antagonist." His colleague and frequent collaborator Ahmed El-Attar, artistic director of D-Caf Festival, created the solo *On The Importance of Being An Arab* in 2009, with a sound track provided by Khan. Sat alone on a plinth and reading phone calls, texts and diary entries from his life, he also replicates an antagonistic former self through a live action work. The line between theatre and performance art is thin, and often only conditioned by the frame of the venue, in which it is presented, i.e. a theatre or a gallery. Finally, Wael Shawky, whose *Crusades and Other Stories* has

been touring the globe, is more influenced by TV and film than theatre. Yet, for his *Telematch* video series (2007), he worked with children to re-enact historical events, including the assassination of Sadat. Like Khan and El-Attar, fact and fiction, past and present are positioned through performance into an antagonistic relationship through re-enactment.

LIMINALITY AND IDENTITY

Not surprisingly, artists in the Gulf explore themes of rapid and enormous transformation in society. Hassan Sharif's works from the early 1980s used ephemeral material like chalk, stones, water and a rope to create repetitive actions, which in their fragility provided an antidote to the UAE's fast-growing building boom of glass, concrete and steel. The slightly younger Mohamed Kazem places himself next to an unidentified flag on a yet-to-be-developed plot in Sharjah for the work *Photographs With A Flag* (1997).

Through this kind of construction the audience experiences a form of communication that is not part of their daily life.



Facing page: Lantian Xie's talk *Turning the cold weather into sun and fun*. 2015. Part of the Shubbak Festival, London. Image courtesy Alserkal Avenue, Dubai.

Above: Sofiane and Selma Ouissi's *Les Yeux d'Argos*. 2014. Image courtesy Tate, London.

Measuring both time and space as he gradually circles around the lonely flagpole, he claims his presence as a singular human being against the anonymous property development. Of a much younger generation, Dubai based artist Lantian Xie recently offered a talk titled *Turning the cold weather into sun and fun*. The title stems from the ubiquitous poster campaign earlier this year by the Atlantis Hotel Dubai, which promised Londoners a perfect escape from a grey winter existence. Using the faux-Egyptian restaurant Shishawi on the Edgware Road as a location, his lecture explored the liminal spaces of Dubai and London and his own identity. He called his work 'a talk' and shied away from defining it as performance, yet the atmospheric and implicated environment and his deadpan delivery, laced with a gentle ironic style, gave the event an undoubtedly performative quality.

In North Africa, such as in Tunisia and Morocco, performance art can often have a

strong linkage to dance and choreography. Tunisian brother and sister team Sofiane and Selma Ouissi regularly collaborate to choreograph and perform via Skype to overcome physical borders. Being based in different countries, yet enjoying a close and intimate collaborative practice, Skype becomes the medium for them to explore issues of distance and intimacy, of personal and public personas, presence and absence. They were invited by Tate Modern in September 2014 to create the intimate performance encounter *Les Yeux d'Argos*. Performed simultaneously at Tate Modern's Performance Room and an apartment in Paris, the artists responded to their on-screen movements through a live link. Mirroring and echoing each other's movements, they conjured up a subtle dialogue of bodies at close proximity yet geographical distance.

In Marrakech radical movement artists explore performance to intervene public realm locations, often casting



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participants from non-art background into conceptually rigorous and minimal works. Bouchra Ouizguen's most recent work for public space, *Corbeaux* (2013), was performed at Marrakech railway stations in 2014 and several locations in Brussels as part of Kunstenfestival in 2015. Over 30 women, dressed in black with white kerchiefs and of different ages and backgrounds, rock their upper bodies and chant in ever-shifting patterns towards a cathartic climax before disappearing again into the crowd. The artist describes it as “a performance combining a trance with the rhythmical roaring of female wildcats, in which the hypnotic swaying is reminiscent of animals in motion.” The movement intervention *100 pas presque*, by her former collaborator and artistic director of the On Marche festival Taoufiq Izzeddiou, consists of any number of dancers gradually traversing just 100 metres in one hour towards a live music ensemble. The movement subtly increases in intensity and velocity as the performers approach the sound.

Performance has now become one medium among many in the practice of

Contemporary artists and is here to stay. Today it is no longer a ‘new’ art form, but a strategy for artists to explore new ideas. It lends itself to express a diverse range of content, from politically engaged and activist work to private reflection and to the opening up of public spaces for dance and theatrical events to new audiences, who are not habitual gallery or theatre visitors. The history of performance art has also begun to be documented and researched. The Delfina Foundation has launched the research and commission platform *Staging Histories*, which traces seminal moments in performance art. Meanwhile, *Ibraaz's Platform 009* is dedicated to performance and has a new book publication planned for 2016. In Cairo dance artist and academic Adham Hafez and his company HaRaKa is developing ARC.HIVE in collaboration with Lincoln Centre in New York and the German Tanzarchiv. The archive collects documents of performance, including theatre and dance, and aims to digitize historical recordings as exhibition and research tools for future generations. The future for performance art is bright. 🇲🇪

Above: Bouchra Ouizguen's
2013 *Corbeaux*. Image courtesy
Kunstenfestivaldesarts, Brussels.