

Not Afraid Of Representation?

In the crosshairs of Artaud and Brecht, body art and audience participation

A conversation between Rabih Mroué, Lina Majdalanie, Helena Waldmann, Frank Raddatz and Kathrin Tiedemann (chair)

Lina Majdalanie With his film *Chic Point*¹, Palestinian film-maker Sharif Waked makes an interesting contribution to our theme of representation. *Chic Point* is about men's fashion in an ironic response to the frisking of Palestinians at the Israeli border. The checkpoint becomes a "chic point". In this film, Sharif Waked depicts the relationship between Israel and Palestine in an untraditional manner. Normally, the media or art will flag up the dichotomy between the perpetrator, the guy who detains you, and the victim who is subjected to the search. But *Chic Point* presents a new image, a new kind of representation, in which the Arabs or Palestinians are not merely victims. Rather than martyrs, pity and compassion, we have an ironic twist that turns the situation around, plays with it humorously. Humour undermines power. Perhaps. Modernity becomes a plaything as fashion serves to create something artistic. To propose something gorgeous yet ironic. The film draws attention to something that is usually hidden: the ambivalent relationship between perpetrator and victim, with both fascination and homoeroticism playing their part. The body is not only beaten and humiliated, but desired as well. The film operates with discourse about the power of the victim. Both sides are trying to make victims of themselves. The Israelis present as victims and use that to justify their aggression. The same applies to the Palestinians.

¹Sharif Waked (*1964) *Chic Point*. Fashion for Israeli Checkpoints:

Chic Point is a seven minute video that ponders, imagines, and interrogates "fashion for Israeli checkpoints". Set to the backdrop of a heavy rhythmic beat, men model one design after another in an exploration of form and content. Zippers, weaved nets, hoods, and buttons serve the unifying theme of exposed flesh. Body parts—lower backs, chests, abdomens—peek through holes, gaps, and splits woven into readymade silk and cotton t-shirts, robes, and shirts. Raw materials and standard clothes are transformed into pieces that follow normative fashion standards while calling them into question.

As the sights and sounds of the fast paced catwalk dim to a close, the viewer is transported to the West Bank and Gaza. A series of stills taken from the years 2000 to 2003 display Palestinian men traversing the profoundly violent but highly common Israeli checkpoint. One man after another lifts shirts, robes, and jackets. Some kneel shirtless, others naked, with guns poised at their exposed flesh. Men in Jenin, Ramallah, Bethlehem, Kalandiya, Jerusalem, Hebron, Nablus, and Gaza City wrangle with the Israeli state's security apparatus.

Chic Point brings these two locations together in a reflection on politics, power, aesthetics, the body, humiliation, surveillance, and chosen as opposed to forced nudity. The world of high fashion is an interlocutor for the stark reality of imposed closure. The body of the Palestinian, today commonly understood by the Israeli state as a dangerous weapon, is brought to the viewer's eye in the flesh. *Chic Point* bares the loaded politics of the gaze as it documents the thousands of moments in which Palestinians are daily forced to nude themselves in the face of interrogation and humiliation, as they attempt to move through the intricate and constantly expanding network of Israeli checkpoints.

Samuel Weber (*from the audience*) Isn't this film also an example of that phenomenon in psychoanalysis of identifying with the aggressor? If we take this very specific form of exhibitionism, designer fashion, one wonders whether it doesn't come close to identifying with aspects of the system that produce this perpetrator-victim relationship. There is a commodification taking place. The body becomes a commodity, because designer fashion isn't just any old art form, but a very specific one. The film functions within the system rather than challenging the logic of the system.

Kathrin Tiedemann Except that this kind of fashion and its commodity status are entirely fictional. There is no market for fashion like this. I see it as an intervention or gesture of alienation that sets up a reference to fashion as an ideal while at the same time subverting the system.

LM The film gives visibility to something that is taboo in Arab countries. Both Israeli and Palestinian society are macho societies where male aggression has positive connotations. At the same time, Israelis and Palestinians see themselves as victims of history and legitimate their aggression that way. The film disrupts these discourses. In the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, political art claimed to be outside the system. It pointed the finger at society as wrong, as something that can be completely destroyed, and at the same time it put forward alternative models. Nowadays we know that we can't behave as if we were outside it, but we can play with that. With humour we can carve cracks in reality and the way it is depicted without trivialising it or provoking hysteria.

Rabih Mroué Interestingly enough, it is very difficult for Palestinians, or indeed for the entire Arab world, to identify with the men in the film, because the body is primarily celebrated here as an individual, in that the film accentuates very feminine bodies. Our political discourse usually presents the militant body, which is strong, muscular. In families, too, mothers raise their sons to follow this soldierly ideal. So this is an attack on the collective self-definition of Arab society. What does this "we" mean? "We" Arabs or "we" Palestinians or "we" Muslims or "we" of the Third World have always been excluded. We do not feature in the global picture. Instead, there is a readymade picture of Arabs. Sharif Waked is suggesting that we own up to this defeat so that we can step into the global picture. The film celebrates our defeat, which makes it one of the rare moments in our history to admit the fact.

KT Lina Majdalanie, Rabih Mroué—in your work *Who's Afraid Of Representation?* you quote various very well-known proponents of body art from the 1960s and 1970s. You present their actions and works, which involve real physical injuries or hazards, without the "magic if" of the theater.

LS I see these body artists as the heirs to Antonin Artaud, who was a sharp critic of representation in the theater. He did not believe that life could be represented. Theater only makes sense as an event, as something that defies repetition. Lebanese society and the Lebanese state

have not entirely joined the modern world. In political and social matters, they still stand with one leg in archaic society. Modernity is an unfinished process. This antagonism is the key to whether someone is recognised as an individual or only as a member of a community. This might be a religious community, but also a professional group, the clan or the family. Or does everyone have a right to individuality? In our type of society we have problems with representation because our thinking is still so deeply rooted in religion, as if the words were the things. If you think in secular terms, you are aware of the difference between words and things. But what does it mean for representation if words and things are identical? Representation is only possible if you accept the difference between the things and the words. Their non-identity.

Our interest lies in theater that distinguishes between things and words and forges links with the other. We don't want to be outside the representation but on the edge of it. We represent and we do not represent! I honestly don't know what authenticity is. We are always playing a kind of role, in every situation we adopt an attitude.

Arnd Wesemann (*from the audience*) In the 1950s, especially in the United States, people used to discuss the question: what is abstract art? There is a comic strip where a museum visitor is looking at an abstract painting and asking: "What does it represent?" The painting answers back with another question: "And you? What do you represent?" Frank Raddatz asks in his play *Hysteria Oder Brechts Lab* about illusion or falsehood in the Brechtian sense. But what is the opposite of illusion? Is representation really about the difference between illusion and reality? The actor is an individual and the individual is acting in a play. Does being able to see through the play actually help us? Can truth be represented? Can theater possibly do that?

Frank Raddatz The goal can only be to create your own artistic reality so that the "magic if" idea disappears. Global mass culture is based on concealing the illusion. There are various ways to tackle that. One leads to Artaud. Another to Brecht. Brecht invents processes for criticising the illusion on stage. Instead of showing the real, he disrupts the mechanisms of depiction. It is about dismantling ideology because illusion is the opposite of truth. My experimental set-up demonstrates that even if we know the person being shown is only spreading illusions, we still feel pity when he murders his children. There is something very irrational going on there. Emotion does not process the information. There are various gear changes between thinking and emotion. Brecht's problem is that he doesn't want to recognise these paradoxical structures. He applies linearity to a game of complex interactions. That is Brecht's blind spot. To him, Galileo Galilei—of all people—and with him all the natural sciences constitute the ideal of truth.

Absurdly, that leads him in his theoretical writings about theater to use the fathers of the atom bomb, Albert Einstein and Robert Oppenheimer, as his references and to claim that their theories of physics are aesthetically pleasing because they are founded on an elegant reasoning. It's a bit crazy that a political artist in 1951 or 1952 who is trying to keep up with the times should choose

the atom bomb as his yardstick for the children of the scientific age and defend them on account of their intellectual beauty.

The theme in *Hysteria Oder Brechts Lab* is a different contradiction. Brecht responds to the problem of representation with the alienation effect. Only by alienating something, or creating a detachment from it, can I open it up to cognition and hence resolve it. The surrealists use alienation techniques too, but Brecht rejects surrealism because it doesn't point the way towards clear insights. And so we end up in a cycle of Brechtian thought and unresolved aporia. My interest in the play is to pursue the path of contradictions that opens up. It is because those contradictions have not been explored that Brecht's theory is not dead, but unfolds a dynamic. Today we are even less capable than they were in Brecht's time of deciding what is real reality and what is not so real. What role does virtual reality play? These realities overlap. Who decides which reality matters and which does not?

AW It's not about the problem of illusion on stage but about the problem: what is truth, and who seeks to be the judge of that?

FR That's the point.

SW What I found very powerful in *Who's Afraid Of Representation?* was the use of the page numbers opened at random. That randomness. That might also be seen as a comment on what it means to define reality in a pluralist and alienating sense, i.e. that multiplication of realities that has been mentioned. If those page numbers, the numbering, serve as an example of powers that are not intrinsic but imposed—and imposed in a fairly arbitrary way—that means that every segment of reality is fragmented or reproduced. Every segment depends on contours that are not immanent to them. So every element of reality depends on what is left out and not only due to its self-definition. It has to organise itself within this segmented section at its relative time. That seems to me to be the kind of poststructuralism that was very important for Artaud, too. The cruelty in Artaud's theory of theater, if you think of *THE theater AND THE PLAGUE*, has something to do with the collapse of the traditional framework. Family, home, society are falling apart, and there is no intrinsic principle any longer to effect a reorganisation. But that is what makes reality fall apart in a series of moments on stage or a series of scenes. Each of them is at once unlimited yet always limited and relative to something else. That isn't what we traditionally expect of reality. We expect totality, a foundation, orientation, dependability. But none of that is there any more.

Helena Waldmann In my performance *Feierabend! – Das Gegengift* I dispense with the usual division into actors, performers, dancers, director and audience. Instead there are hosts and guests. We wanted to go back to the roots because theater was originally born of the festival. On the other hand, it is ritual. We wanted to make a festival in a form that we don't have in our

culture. We were looking for a new kind of festival that none of us yet know. My question was: what kind of festival could we create in 2008 with participants from seven different cultures, with seven different opinions and different knowledge about festivals?

KT This production really depended on what kind of performative practice and what kind of experience each member of the audience could share and was willing to share. Everyone was participating while at the same time observing what was going on. You could see how much some guests enjoyed putting their traditional spectator role aside and allowing themselves the liberty to play an active part.

HW We knew that not everyone would find it easy to take part, but we wanted to make it as easy as possible for them to jump across this bridge and clear these obstacles out of the way. In Frank Raddatz's show yesterday, the actors insulted the audience, they said "You might as well be dead!" That was our starting point in our performance. People would like to join in, are happy to take different positions, but at the theater they have learnt to stick to the rules on how we are supposed to experience theater.

KT How do you see that linking to representation in the theater?

HW People like to act roles. That's why we gave them masks. Everyone in the audience had a choice of six different animal masks. You could act like a lion or a wolf or a monkey. In a way that means I am representing something other than what I am. So I can behave differently because I can't be identified. I am no longer what others think of me.

KT In *Who's Afraid Of Representation?* you take the story of a man who shoots his colleagues in Lebanon and combine it with body art from the 1960s and 1970s. What were you trying to provoke?

RM There are many aspects to this performance. I don't want to go through all of them, just to talk about two parallel threads. We live in a country that in a way is very religious—in the family, in society, etc. At the same time, we are a state with a constitution and we are trying to establish a kind of bourgeois scale of values, individual freedom. Me being an artist means that I am an individual. I must be an individual so that I can articulate my individuality, and that in a society that has not quite made it yet into the modern age. On the one hand, I belong to this society; on the other hand, I belong to the world of art. I have tried to bring that problem to the stage, primarily as a provocation to myself. I am not provoking you, although I am in a way by primarily addressing myself. I can be part of this great family, the world of art. In that sense I have the right to work with the history of art, with that of body art, of the theater, just like anyone else in this world.

Whether Chris Burden really did shoot himself in the hand or not is not the question for me. I treat

it as though it did happen, and when I make theater, I reproduce this action again. So it's about convincing myself that it really happened. I am trying to create a world. When it's all ready, we have a chance to think from a distance. I like that line between the stage and the auditorium. I don't want the audience joining in. They should be there and I should be here. Those are the rules. You must know about these rules. But at the same time I always try to step across that boundary between the audience and me. I don't want spectators, or an audience, who come to relax or identify in this space. I want the spectators to be engaged, involved, to think about what they are seeing as reality. About the space and the now. Only then does the question arise about whether it is genuine or not, fiction or not. That applies to the audience and to me because I don't know myself when I am playing a role and when I am not. Of course, there are parts where I am obviously playing a role, even if the audience are thinking: that's Rabih Mroué, we know him. But I know that right now I am acting. And sometimes I don't know any more. In that sense the boundaries are increasingly fluid and this indifference keeps the irritating question alive as to whether what we are seeing is genuine or not. That is why we think about what we see. That's why I leave it open. In many of my performances I try to find a way not to have a curtain call and applause at the end. I want to keep that tension between the work, the stage, and the auditorium alive as long as possible. Without the cut-off at the end.

SW I'd like to come back to *Who's Afraid Of Representation?* The character who goes berserk and kills his colleagues acquires a degree of coherence when it turns out that his act is a response to the judicial system. He gives four different reasons to justify what he did and, even if it is never completely clear-cut, that teases out a very interesting theme: humiliation. If there is any common thread to all those justifications, it's that: I was humiliated in front of my family, my clan, my society. I was degraded socially and economically with everyone looking on, my own contemporaries.

In the case of the body performances, mutilation and murder as an artistic happening, it is never clear what context it springs from. What is the violence responding to? It is certainly a response, in a different way, because the violence is turned towards itself. So there are a few formal similarities, but a lot of differences.

RM Hassan's world does not exist in collective history, so it's good to represent it in the theater. Whereas the history of body art can be obtained in books. It has been allocated a place in the order, it is part of the official history.

LM We only put the play on three times in Beirut. We play most of our performances twice, three times, at the most four. Only *How Nancy Wished That Everything Was An April Fool's Joke* we showed fifteen times. That's how we get round the censors in Lebanon. If someone does a performance, he has to get the text approved by the board of censors beforehand or at least to follow their instructions. They come to the final rehearsal to be sure that everything has been done

the way they ordered.

Ten years ago we decided not to go through the censors any more. The price is that we can only put on our performances a few times underground. That means that we don't do any publicity, don't charge admission, because that's the only way we can say it's a private party. It worked well up until *Who's Afraid Of Representation?* After the first night, someone phoned the censors and said it was totally outrageous and dreadfully pornographic. Thereupon the text was censored and became meaningless.

In Lebanon, this text is not just provocative. It reaches far deeper. We are not accustomed to speaking publicly about sexuality or about genitals. That is a big taboo, in everyday life as well. Not only did we talk about it, we used street slang rather than the clinical jargon.

RM In Lebanon it's easy to be censored. There are so many topics. We aren't allowed to talk about sexual matters. We aren't allowed to mention the president in public. We aren't allowed to talk about religion or the Lebanese army. We aren't allowed to talk about politicians by mentioning their real names. Or about the civil war with real facts and places. To be precise, we aren't allowed to talk about anything. You can write any text you like, however stupid, and still be censored.

You are a victim of the system and at the same time its hero. One of our ideals is that we don't want that. That's why we decided not to go through the censors. We don't want to play that game. Because we think the main struggle is not with the board of censors. We are struggling against the whole system that created the board. And with society itself. And we don't want to be distracted from the really important social issues. If we were to take on the fight with the board of censors, we would only be distracted from actually questioning things and conditions.

The most important thing is to confront the censor in ourselves, the taboos, the norms and traditions that we carry within ourselves. That isn't easy. There is censorship all over the world, but it's relative censorship. In our region it is just more obvious. Compared with the Arab countries, we have a lot of freedom in Beirut, in Lebanon. There is freedom in Palestine, too. Relatively speaking.

Ludger Schnieder (from the audience) I really admired your performance yesterday. Perhaps I didn't understand it all properly, but for me there was that very clear boundary between self-imposed pain in the body art part and the murderer who killed his colleagues. I found that antithesis very poignant. What a luxurious situation we have in the West! We can deal with the visual arts that make our feelings more complete or more complex, that show us things about bodies. And over on the other side, those who have to deal with these real situations: violence, civil war.

KT But apparently the luxury society keeps claiming victims. In *Hysteria Oder Brechts Lab* Jean-Claude becomes a serial killer. Are we in the West living in a peaceful, ideal world? Frank, would you say something about this evening's construct? To me Jean-Claude's story had the makings of a tragedy of late capitalism.

FR Jean-Claude projects the illusion of the perfect consumer. A highly successful doctor, presumably a high earner, who ultimately prefers to kill his family rather than confront his fictional self-image. That is the metaphor for consumer society, and it contrasts formally with the fact that the actors slip in and out of emotion to debate the way this authentic crime is depicted, represented. So the person who is bent on spreading illusion at any price is documented. He is a fact. The actors, meanwhile, apply themselves to various roles: Claudia, the actress, the older woman, the younger woman, the couple in love, then another relationship. So there is no personification. Authenticity has no presence, but in this construct is merely what goes on in the spectator's head. Criticism is levelled at the illusion, but that in turn is anything but fictional. It is a brutal fact. The realities overlap. It is splendid how consumer society manages to plant its image inside us: really everything is fine, even if evidently a lot of things are not going well.

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