Art MONTHLY

JUNE 2013 | No 367 | UK£4.80 US$7.40

Thatcher's Legacy

Francis Frascina

The Mother of All Battles

Jennifer Thatcher

Context v Content

Mark Prince

Cinema After the Internet

Adam Pugh

Printed for info@waterside-contemporary.com from Art Monthly (June 2013) at www.exacteditions.com. Copyright ¬© 2014.

PERFORMANCE

Party For Freedom

Oreet Ashery's performance-based work often relies on a deliberately crude clashing of polarities: Jewish and Arabic dress codes, orthodox religious and profane attitudes towards gender, Middle Eastern and European notions of liberty. These dualities reflect her own experiences; she was raised in Jerusalem before relocating to London in the early 1990s and her work evinces a deep interest in questions that trouble the boundaries between fixed identities. I previously knew of Ashery for her male impersonation – or *alter ego* – as an orthodox Jewish man with the believable-sounding name of Marcus Fisher (apparently his first name can be translated into Hebrew as 'Mr Cunt' – a profanity and a transsexual formation in one). Ashery's latest project, *Party for Freedom*, 2013, operates between cultural perception and contradiction: the western fantasy of the Orient as a place of sexual allure; the pornographic, homosexual-tolerant West; the veiled, violent and repressed Orient; the right-wing political parties across Europe that operate in the name of freedom of speech.

Commissioned by Artangel, *Party for Freedom* was launched on May Day at the relatively conventional seated auditorium in Millbank Tower, adjacent to the MI5 secret service HQ and home to Conservative Party HQ (this was the building that was attacked during the 2010 student protests in which Edward Woollard threw a fire extinguisher from the roof). The work can also be invited to your home for free, consisting of an itinerant and mostly nude performance troupe and film-screening event. Venues visited so far include a squat, an Artangel patron, a workers' cooperative and a theatre (a full list of public venues can be found on the Artangel website). This report is a contingent stop-gap in the midst of this evolving process: the project will perhaps be elucidated further in future talks, including one between Ashery and Tirdad Zolghadr in June, which may help unpack the dense jumble of ideas that both trouble and give life to the work. The opening event was essentially a film screening of a moving-image work made by Ashery accompanied by rambunctious live elements enacted by dozens of collaborators, including impressive musical performances which took their cues from elements and titles in the video work, creating a soundtrack and response to the onscreen events.

Once the audience settled into their seats, a number of performers standing on stage and dotted around the audience delivered a disjunctive, camped-up chorus that primed us for the meta-level theatrics to follow. A man with an overblown Spanish accent thanked 'Artaaa-nnncchhell' (Artangel) and the 'Lifarte Deeevelopmente Achenthie' (Live Art Development Agency) for their support; another performer cajoled an unseen lover or friend ('you made such a mess last night'); another proclaimed 'We Want Another Kind of Freedom!' One performer was naked – a youngish man who paraded around with a golden disc inscribed with 'PFF' advertising the event; I was slightly amused to see him disappear backstage before the film started and reappear a few minutes later, clothed, to take a seat among the crowd. Three contrasting musical groups commissioned by Ashery occupied the stage: the all-girl thrash-punk band Woolf, a group of classical musicians headed by composer Timo-Juhani Kyllönen and a post-punk ensemble led by *Art Monthly* contributor Morgan Quaintance. Woolf's brief, blistering songs lasted just a few seconds and were a real highlight – they opened the screening with a blast of noise, taking the repeated refrain from the video's opening section title: 'Is this what they call civilisation?' Kyllönen's ensemble followed on, creating an exaggeratedly modernist soundscape that was slightly easier on the ear, while Quaintance's music added a spiky, uplifting energy at various points throughout the event.

The hour-long film, described as an audio-visual album of ten interconnected tracks, opens with an image of a cross on the roof of a church and proceeds to narrated instructions on 'how to kill a pig' based on UK protocols, accompanied by footage of a naked woman trussed up as a porcine meal – her feet wrapped in foil and an apple in her mouth. References to halal and kosher slaughtering procedures were made in relation to industrial, new age and wild killings. Next we see multi-layered footage of gay anti-immigration Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn stating his knowledge of homosexual Muslims in the Netherlands, while at other moments an Asian woman walks about a house in a maid's apron (and nothing else) while swatting flies. If the symbolism is easy to follow – the immigrant as pest – less clear are the connections between the various vignettes throughout the film: a man plays a grand piano while rimming another man; two men and a woman writhe around a graveyard like serpents; a woman on a swing eats a gloopy red food until she vomits it out in excremental lumps; a man and a woman sit in a bath debating whether Fortuyn and Theo Van Gogh also enjoyed naked baths.

Visually, some of the film's orgiastic excess recalls works by Jack Smith, Stephen Dwoskin or the Viennese Actionists. The event as a whole, however, is more reflexive than carnivalesque. Towards the end of the film, a narrator outlines historical connections between early German naturism and the assassinations of Fortuyn in 2002 and Theo Van Gogh in 2004. Of particular importance here are notions of freedom: the semantic shift between Geert Wilders's far-right Freedom Party and the idea of literally having a party in order to create some sort of freedom. Libertarianism slips easily into intolerance and freedom easily mutates into a nationalist slogan. Significantly, the event closes with Woolf singing the repeated refrain: 'Don't try, to redefine/ your words, not needed this time.' ▮

Oreet Ashery's *Party For Freedom* is at various venues to 22 June, for details visit www.artangel.org.uk.

COLIN PERRY is a critic based in London.

John Hansard Gallery

NANCY HOLT & ROBERT SMITHSON
England and Wales 1969
10 May – 17 August 2013

Supported by The Henry Moore Foundation in association with the Estate of Robert Smithson/ James Cohan Gallery
www.hansardgallery.org.uk

The Henry Moore Foundation
ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND
University of Southampton

Nancy Holt, *Trail Markers (6)*, 1969. Series of 20 inkjet prints on archival rag paper. Courtesy the artist, VAGA, New York/DACS, London 2013

Printed for info@waterside-contemporary.com from Art Monthly (June 2013) at www.exacteditions.com. Copyright ¬© 2014.