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Oreet Ashery interviewed by Larne Abse Gogarty

IRREPLACEABLE

Party for Freedom 2013
video

Larne Abse Gogarty: *Thinking about the exhibition at Waterside Contemporary in London, how do the live and gallery-based elements of your practice relate?*

Oreet Ashery: To answer this, I have to refer back to my childhood. I was brought up in an area of Jerusalem that was like living in a cinematic, micro-regional cliché. Leaving the small tower block I lived in, you could cross one side of the road and come to the valley leading to the Palestinian Arab neighbourhood Shu'fat. On the other side, you would find yourself climbing up the trenches and bunkers of Ammunition Hill, overlooked by an oversized flapping flag. Further up the road were the gated walls of the strict Orthodox Jewish community. As a young girl I spent time drifting in and out of those territories, in a kind of beginner's *dérive*. I was already acutely aware that my body produced a disturbance. I was stared at because of my gender and my age – I was too young to be walking alone – and I didn't belong in any of those places. These were probably my first public interventions. During those walks I also collected things – ripped posters, rusty nails, degraded signage, mutated colourful plastic utensils – which, together with drawing and other crafts, like macramé, were made into hanging mobiles, assemblages and collages.

Meanwhile, back indoors, I was so inspired by a book I read about a girl who was a witch that I was convinced that I was one too – a good witch, I hoped. As part of my witch-practice I believed that I had hypnotised friends and young relatives in group-rituals that I conducted. Years later, as an adult, I realised with some guilt that those taking part were by no means hypnotised but rather sought to please in these rituals that involved performing various actions. Once, I ground down a chalk stick, taken from the classroom, into a cold chocolate drink for a friend who struggled in school, believing the concoction would work miracles with the right kind of incantation. It ended badly with a stomach pump and so too ended my career as a witch. I did produce at the time a set of props to help my performances as a witch, alongside a body of crayon drawings. I guess this was when my awareness of the difference between props and art objects began to form.

One of my favourite interventions as a non-artist happened later on as a teenager. I became frustrated with people looking at my growing breasts and, at times, even grabbing them in busy public spaces. Riding on the back seat of a moped one time, I spontaneously asked my friend to stop on the curb of this really busy curved high road where I performed a strange strip dance. Cars were swerving, screeching and hooting, risking their safety to my great irresponsible adolescent satisfaction. These

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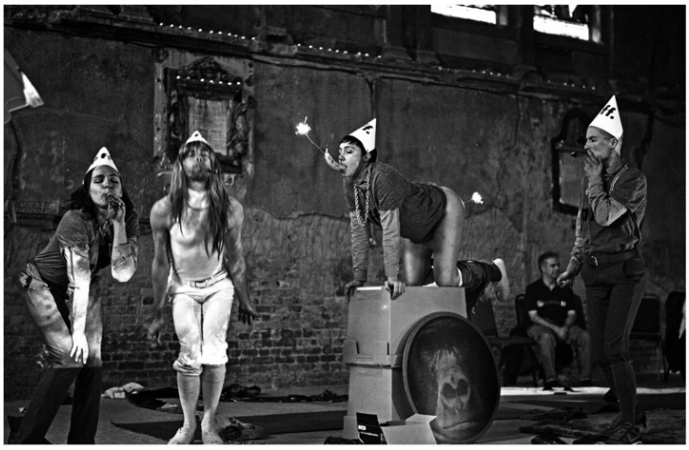

Party for Freedom | Party for Hire 2013
performance

The World is Flooding 2014
performance at Tate Modern

early experiences informed how my future practice incorporated the performative and fictive, the body in deterritorialised public contexts, objects and assemblages and the potential group.

Can you say something about the title of the current exhibition at Waterside – 'Animal with a Language'?
It comes from Theodor Adorno's writings on self-mutilation and self-annihilation of the animalistic or the debased that resides inside ourselves or that we project onto others.

What kind of languages run through the show?
There is an overall lineage between the work and modernist movements such as Dada and Bauhaus which are associated with resistance and socio-cultural change. In the exhibition, humble cleaning materials are elevated through the display system. The figurative assemblages or totems that inhabit the space yield a collective reading – due to their stylistic similarities – yet each of them has its own unique language of objects and text. On one figure the stuck-on text reads: irreplaceable. It is an open-ended word, but for me it connects to the flat-lining effects of some conditions of labour, where everyone and everything is replaceable, for example zero-hour contracts.

In the video *Winking Series 1*, 2014, people from groups that I recently worked with are simply winking. Winking at someone is like sharing a secret knowledge, but it is so quick, you are not sure if it really happened. In relation to participatory work this has particular resonance, as it gives the participants the benefits of 'knowing'.

Also in the exhibition are two deep-red cotton hammocks which are quite womb-like. It was important for me that people will watch a short video as well as the rest of the show sitting and swinging on the hammock. Having two makes it more sociable and intimate. The hammock produces a somatic viewing experience as another form of language. At first, you are not sure that the hammock can take your weight, but once you relax into it more, you are continuously reminded of your body and gravity while absorbing the work.

Recently you have also produced large-scale participatory works, Party for Freedom, *last year (Reviews* AM367*) and* The World is Flooding *this year. Both these involve groups of people, but unusually – in comparison to your earlier work – you are not performing in them or appearing on screen.*
After years of making discreet public interventions, intimate one-to-one performances and more elaborate live works – one involving a memorial party for 300 guests, for example – I decided in 2011 to stop performing myself. This was after performing *Hairoism* a number of times, and I felt overexposed both physically and emotionally. I also felt that audiences were watching me as empathic witnesses because it was my body on the line, so to speak, as well as the imagined biographies attached to this body. There was something essentialist about this that made me feel too fixed. I wanted to explore different modalities of audience experiences, as well as different ways of working with myself. Looking back at the past three years, I actually feel more exposed through these new works where I am not performing as an individual.

I was particularly interested in how with Party for Freedom *you had a history and aesthetics of sexual liberation being played out in conjunction with an address towards the rise of far-right populism in Europe. The film and performance unwound these two poles towards a point where it often seemed like the work would totally fall apart. Yet as soon as the mess and chaos almost completely collapsed, the film and/or performance would snap back into focus. Why did these two ideas become important for you to address, and what was the meaning of that formal approach?*
The sense of antagonism, collapse and slippage was like a guideline for me in the making of the work and in thinking of its possible reception and audience experience. When I started to think about the work in 2011, I became aware of the rise of right-wing and far-right populism in Europe, and a lack of a clear alternative – what has been termed the failure of the left. The effects of neoliberalism and hyper-capitalism, as well as other historical forces, continue to blur the boundaries between the right and the left. So what I wanted to communicate was my own sense, as well as a general feeling, of not knowing and of political disillusionment – a western, post-liberation, apolitical feeling,

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if you like. A certain lack of coherence was therefore absolutely important, and my version of the political unconscious became paramount. There are no goodies and baddies in the work and it does not tell you what to feel or think. In fact, the work scrambles any sense of political certainty.

Really, I was interested in exploring unconscious motivations, eccentricities and somatic experiences that feed political policies and military actions. For example, in researching *Party for Freedom*, I read an article by Ferry Biedermann that mentioned how Geert Wilders, the founder of the Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV), went to visit Egypt and Israel as a schoolchild and contracted a stomach bug in Egypt, which contributed to the formation of his low opinion of Arabs and Muslims. Wilders notoriously posits Islam and non-western immigration as a threat to the pillars of western freedom, such as the rights of women and gays. In *Party for Freedom* the meshing together of leftist performances of liberation and far-right apparatuses was filtered through trash aesthetics. I looked at trash aesthetics in relation to populism, far-right blogs and other mediascapes. In parallel, I looked at trash aesthetics in three 1960s and 1970s cultural and artistic groups who were engaged with the ethos of liberation and freedom – 'Naked as a Jaybird', a nudist Californian group, the Russian avant-garde group Collective Actions and the enigmatic UK-based Scratch Orchestra. I chose these groups to explore a self-made axiom of bodies – nakedness – collective action and democratic sound.

Can you say a bit more about what you call 'trash aesthetics' and how it functions in your work?

The trash aesthetic has always been a big part of my visual language. I was brought up surrounded by unfinished buildings and broken pavements and a huge amount of plastic furnishing and household goods. My parents' flat was filled with posters, really bad paintings made by a distant uncle, and cheesy memorabilia alongside stacks and stacks of books and carefully labelled colourful folders touching the ceiling. Later on, when I came over to England my visual experiences were late 1980s Leicester with its textile factories, home-grown music, bleakness and flocked wallpaper in garish colours, which still makes me panic when I see it. The post-industrial desolation of Sheffield was where I did my first art degree and, later on, coming to London in the early 1990s, I took part in various countercultural moments, such as rave as well as transgender, queer, camp and Dada-like environments. All those various forms of trash aesthetics came to hold their own cultural and political value and have embedded themselves in the visuality and materiality of my work.

You have always traversed between working in collective ways, often with groups of people who may not self-define as artists, and then your own production as an individual artist and performer. In terms of The World is Flooding*, your performance at Tate Modern in July 2014, how did this work?*

The World is Flooding was a project I planned while making *Party for Freedom*. Although they are both based on Vladimir Mayakovsky's revolutionary 1921 play *Mystery-Bouffe*, *Party for Freedom* was incredibly nihilistic and antagonistic by comparison. For *The World is Flooding* the Tate call-out went to non-professional performers from groups such as the UKLGIG (UK Lesbian and Gay Immigration Group), Freedom from Torture, which works with asylum seekers who have suffered torture or threats of torture, and Portugal Prints, an arts and mental health project, as well as Morley College in south London. The participants didn't know each other but, despite my initial concerns, the group developed fruitful dynamics. The schema of the play involves a world inhabited by 'The Clean' and 'The Unclean', which worked very well for both projects as explorations of freedom and regulation, desire and repulsion.

The World is Flooding was conceived from the outset as a project that values the specificities of collective and personal knowledge formations. Catharine Grant speaks beautifully on Bertolt Brecht's concept of learning-play, *Lehrstücke*, and learning through participation. The theatrical performance at the Turbine Hall involved giant low-fi banners, an up-beat catwalk displaying vivid ponchos and headgear made of cleaning materials, and was accompanied by a spoken script that was reprinted in a zine.

In contrast, *Party for Freedom* antagonistically and insistently questioned the notion that we might know anything, or possess any political agency as artists and audiences. *Party for Freedom* involved professional artists and performers, responding to a call by Artangel and Performance Matters. Apart from being incredible artists, dancers and performers with diverse practices, the participants in *Party for Freedom* were all white except for one Asian. They were also all young, 'beautiful', slim and able-bodied. This was antagonistic in itself, apart from for those viewers who took the lack of diversity for granted. I wanted the work to speak of white privilege in the context of freedom, and of the fascist fantasy and nightmare of homogeneity. It is important to note, however, that this reading of a group of white bodies on stage does not represent the invisible realities of the performers, or performers of any race for that matter, and how class, life circumstances, sexual and gender orientations and mental health issues are hidden from view.

The lack of nihilism in The World is Flooding *was striking in comparison to* Party for Freedom. *To me, it was far clearer how you were working with the Mayakovsky play, mostly because the politics we associate with that history are affirmative rather than nihilistic. So, in a way,* The World is Flooding *contradicted that history far less than* Party for Freedom. *Nevertheless, moments of antagonism did spill out during the performance, and those were the parts I found most interesting. How much were those moments also about laughing at the Mayakovsky work and questioning the point of returning to earlier moments of utopian thinking?*

Mayakovsky's play is not without its own ironies and absurdities. It is about class and celebrates The Unclean, the proletarians who survive a worldwide flood, and their victory over The Clean, the privileged. It is emancipatory and utopian, but also perhaps aware of its own grandiose morals and ridiculousness. Yet it is certainly not a postmodern play, and is wholly sincere in its intentions. So the notion of sincerity was something that I grappled with. Devices such as absurdity were projected into the legal and administrative system we live in. There is a part in the performance where the audience is asked to read aloud accounts of struggles with the system only to be laughed at by the performers. This laughter, as well as being directed at the carelessness and crudity of the system, was also directed at the actual performance itself, undoing its own sense of importance and seriousness. The script we wrote has some funny and dystopian sentences that I really like, such as: 'If you cannot control your weight how can you control your life?', 'Middle Class wanted to become a journalist or a filmmaker, but realised that he was just ordinary', and 'Rich children read *The Economist* at the age of 6 or 7.' There are similarities between those elements in *The World is Flooding* and Brecht's notion of the epic theatre and its various alienating and critical devices. For me, there was also something absurd about the large-scale theatrical feel of the performance involving a chorus and a large number of people performing, which was a bit of a nod and a wink towards the original production.

I think those differences are important since perhaps returning to the historical Avant Gardes is only successful if there is a formal antagonism – political antagonism is always there when there is a disjunction between two historical moments.

Often in turning back, or referencing historical Avant Gardes, contemporary artworks are simply elevated by default through the cultural value attached to certain historical moments. In and of itself, it is a challenge to take a politically or culturally utopian moment and make it bounce in the present. In *Party for Freedom* we went to people's

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'Animal with a Language' 2014
installation view

houses and workplaces and performed there – it was very important that we were inside those spaces. With *The World is Flooding* it was about working directly with a group of people who are often the mediated subjects of other people's artworks. There is something about an immediacy of connection in the present in both projects that balanced the historical referencing.

What does the use of cleaning products and the ponchos refer to in The World is Flooding *and the exhibition at Waterside?*

I wanted to use ponchos as they work on different registers. They are seen as ethnic or indigenous and hence have been subjected to cultural appropriations. They are also seen as the simplest form of dress – a blanket with a hole, used as a basic form of protection from rain at festivals, for example. They are also made for cardinals as an official high-status symbol, so they really traverse a rich territory. Crochet and knitted woolly ponchos are generally condemned to remote village craft shops, and seen as shapeless and lacking in style. The fashion designer Walter Van Beirendonck has successfully saved ponchos from their fate and created some brilliant ones that I have looked at for inspiration. Cleaning materials also tend to oscillate between the cheap, mass-produced recognisable ones, such as the classic blue-and-white J-cloths, which I'm sure will become a collectors' item soon, and the more design-oriented products which are a rapidly growing industry. More specifically, the activity of cleaning as a job has associations with cheap and unpaid labour, related to ethnicity, gender and economic bracketing.

Can you discuss the use of music in your work?

Music features regularly in my work. I was a percussionist in a failed band in the 1990s called DogRack. In 2005, I dressed as an orthodox Jewish man to dance in a religious festival in the north of Israel that centred on Mizrahi and Ashkenazi music, documented in the video *Dancing with Men*. Similarly, going to rave clubs in the late 1990s and how they formed part of a counterculture has also been important and informative for my practice. In *Semitic Score* of 2010, the performance explores sites of gender and orientalism through a dance score and drumming, and I always used a live drummer.

With *Party for Freedom* and *The World is Flooding*, I was interested in an idea of democratic sound and producing sound through clapping, speaking or just improvising. I was also interested in the idea of a democracy of sound in terms of using different musical registers. *Party for Freedom* included all newly commissioned music – classical music by Finnish composer Timo-Juhani Kyllönen, punk and noise music by Woolf and Morgan Quaintance playing jazz-fusion with other players. The structure of *Party for Freedom* was conceived as an album with ten tracks and Woolf punctured every title preceding each track. I wanted to contain the indecisiveness, or the falling-apart quality of the album with women's voices and sounds that are direct, angry and very succinct.

How does the episodic shape of these works function – as in the structure of Party for Freedom *being presented like an album?*

It is a way of arranging the world. The research for *Party for Freedom* was based on ten incidents of barely conscious thoughts or images that hover just at the edges of your mind or memory. With *The World is Flooding* it was important to have a structure for editing volumes of material that had been produced collectively into a script. I use scores, or episodic formal devices, in order to establish a kind of anti-narrative or a structure with its own internal logic.

What about the concept of Utopia in your work – how do you relate to, or mobilise this?

The direct experience of having seven naked bodies in *Party for Freedom | Party for Hire* activating the space inside people's living rooms was important to me in terms of mobilising some notion of a politically utopian moment in art. Elements of self-organisation, on behalf of the performers who had to adjust every time to a new space, and on behalf of the audience who had to absorb and interact with the peculiarity of the situation in an otherwise familiar environment, were interesting to me. The somatic experiences of nakedness, as well as the kidnapping and auctioning off of an audience member, for example, resonate with what I perceive as an unconscious political experience of symbolic nakedness and questions of participation or non-participation. As I mentioned before, there was a didactic and dogmatic side to the homogeneity of the bodies, and some of the content of the work, which is also a part of historical Utopias.

That seems politically astute as a negative articulation of the utopian moment. I see this as related to working with Mayakovsky and the necessity of not holding earlier aesthetics and ideals aloft, but not getting rid of them either. In that sense, the attention to the somatic, the unconscious and the questioning of sexuality perhaps stand out as qualities which fell through the cracks previously.

It seems unfashionable to talk about 'the body', or the somatic, when so much of our experiences are virtual, simulated, capitalised upon or otherwise flat-lined. But for me, somatic experience and narratives often make the most interesting political moments in the most surprising ways. And, in terms of minority discourses, there is still no escape from the body. ▮

Oreet Ashery's exhibition 'Animal with a Language' is at Waterside Contemporary, London, until 22 November.

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