

## Passing as Marcus Fisher, Heeb Magazine, November 2004 #7

When Israeli-born, London-based artist Oreet Ashery dresses as her alter ego, Marcus Fisher, nobody suspects that she's not actually a Hasidic man. In Ashery's live art, she discreetly passes as Fisher in real social situations to test the boundaries of cultural customs. For her project "Dancing with Men," Ashery went to the north of Israel in May 2003 to surreptitiously participate in the religious celebrations that memorialize Rabbi Shimon Bar-Yochai, author of the Kabbalistic text *The Zohar*. Tradition calls for intense dancing by Orthodox men the night before the anniversary of Bar-Yochai's death. Ashery describes the event as an intense 48-hour religious rave. In her experience, "the celebration is homoerotic, as a lot of groping takes place among the dancing men."

Followed by a video camera, Ashery, as Fisher participated in the celebration without revealing her female identity. Such an intrusion could have easily provoked violent reactions: One month earlier, terrorists in Jerusalem dressed as Orthodox Jewish men and detonated bombs in two separate incidents. Consequently, Ashery's participation for the sake of art was doubly threatening—to the crowded mass of dancers and also to the male exclusivity of the celebration. In her words, Fisher's intervention was a form of "gender terrorism."

Early on, Ashery felt conflicted about the socio-political mores of Israeli culture. She grew up in a traditional Jewish household, and at the age of 19, Ashery left Jerusalem to settle in England. Eventually she attended art school in Sheffield, where she began experimenting with social situations as artistic material. For one class project, she cooked three tons of hummus for friends in a labor-intensive yet fond evocation of her distanced homeland. For Ashery, the excessive Middle Eastern food represented her loss of nationality. "I looked at the notion of translation through the forces of immigration," explains Ashery. "I wanted to know if food could translate cross-culturally." Ashery's Israeli heritage would continue to inspire performance art projects. In 1994, she began a four-year collaboration with fellow Israeli expatriate Daniel Rubenstein called *Magnum Opus I, II, III*. Often performing in art galleries, Ashery and Rubenstein created live installations about European history and Israeli politics in London, Cologne, Germany, and finally back home in Jerusalem.

In a Cologne gallery, the artists arranged three converging clotheslines—one with hanging German military uniforms, the next with baby clothes and a third line with slinky women's lingerie. Ashery performed daily by washing the German uniforms and stitching Israeli army badges on the baby outfits. Meanwhile, Rubenstein sat in the corner of the gallery reading from a beginner's German-language manual. The performance conveyed how Germany's dark history inspired deep-seated militarism in Israel. The artists positioned themselves as uncomfortable foreigners in Germany, but also as alienated outsiders from their Israeli roots.

After completing *Magnum Opus* in 1998, Ashery attended post-graduate school in London, where for the first time she found peers who were also using performance art to experiment with social rules. So when Ashery's oldest childhood friend from Israel stopped speaking to her because of his increasing Orthodoxy, Ashery funneled her frustration and sadness into a new art project: Since she could no longer communicate with her friend as a secular woman, she transformed into an Orthodox man. Ashery explains that she wanted, "to pay homage to the lost friendship." She found stylists and photographers at London clubs to help her create a dead-on alter ego costume—complete with a full beard and peyos.

Inspired by the powers of her disguise, Ashery went out in the costume to an all-gay male dive bar in London as a casual—albeit awkwardly misplaced visitor. Her ability to pass as a man gave Ashery newfound perspective as an outsider in a variety of secular social settings. "I was testing multiculturalism. And very often this was depressing when Marcus wouldn't get served," explains Ashery. Since Orthodox Jews in London live quite segregated from secular society, Marcus Fisher's presence on beaches, Turkish men's clubs or in London gay bars seriously confused gawking strangers.

For the project "Say Cheese," performed in galleries in London, Berlin, New York, Liverpool, Bristol and Ljubljana, Slovenia, Ashery eroticized the ultra-religious character. Gallery visitors were invited to privately spend five minutes in bed with Fisher. Some bedmates started pillow fights, while others engaged in a primal scream. One particularly daring visitor even made explicit sexual advances toward Fisher. "Say Cheese" strangely unraveled the fantasies and curiosity secular culture harbors toward Hasidic and Orthodox Jews.

After performing as Fisher for a year, Ashery feared that the character had taken over her creative life. So she tried to symbolically kill Marcus Fisher. Ashery hosted a wake for Fisher where she presented a memorial documentary that explained his life story. But Fisher's legend lives on—the character has become somewhat of an urban myth in the London art world and a prized icon himself. Ashery has presented the full body of Marcus Fisher photographs and videos, billed as "Seven Acts of Love," in dozens of cities around the world.

Continuing her fascination with social codes and physical adaptation, Ashery recently started a new project called "Central Location," which she performed in Berlin, Toronto and London. Ashery offers gallery visitors a free head shaving. The participatory performance frankly explores various skinhead references—from Nazism and gay punk subculture to modern prisons and the horrors of concentration camps.

-Matt Wolf