

Extract from Rowe, Dorothy 'Biography and spatial experience in contemporary diasporic art in Britain' in Arnold, D and Sofaer, J (eds.) *Biographies and Space* (London and New York, Routledge, 2007 forthcoming)

.....Whilst Chandra and Bhimji both interrogate concepts of biography and space through objects of material culture, highlighting their significance in recollections, access to and representations of the effects and legacies of colonial histories on a both an intimate personal and a broader socio-cultural level, London-based Israeli born Jewish performance artist Oreet Ashery offers a very different critique of constructs of the self and their location within wider socio-political histories of diasporic communities. A critique of the nexus between biographical construction and spatial location is central to Ashery's performance and photographic practice. Ashery has for a number of years has been performing herself Duchampian-style as Marcus Fisher, a trans-gendered Orthodox Jewish man (**figure 5**)¹. Ashery completed an MA at Central St Martins between 1998 and 2000. It was during this period that she initially created her fictional alter ego as a homage to a former friend in Israel with whom she was losing touch on his conversion to Orthodox Judaism; a faith that limits social contact with those outside its strictly policed parameters. What began as a series of photographic self-portrait stills of Ashery dressed up to approximate a stereotype of an Hasidic Jewish man, gradually evolved into a series of fictional performance pieces in which a whole new identity was researched, constructed and regularly enacted through live interventions and video documentaries. The black and white stills 'were the starting point of visual research into the appropriation of fantasy, desire and play' within the framework of Ashery's own cultural heritage, central to her project as an artist.² Research for the creation of 'Mar-cus' (a name which translates in Hebrew as 'Mr cunt') began as a series of voyeuristic encounters observing the ritualistic practices and symbolic dress-codes of Orthodox Jewish men in the public spaces of Jerusalem and discussing their meanings with her father, a secularised Jewish man.³ The construction of Marcus beyond the stage performances and Cindy Sherman-inspired photographic 'self-portraits' was conceived via a video work executed in documentary style and ironically alluding to the death rather than the birth of its subject, a sixteen minute film entitled *Marcus Fisher's Wake* (2000), celebrating a life in the alluded to context of its death.⁴ The film is a fictional pastiche of various aspects of Ashery's own family circumstances combined with Fisher's performative existence and overlaid with a fictional narrative structure devised by Ashery and narrated in a fake American accent by trans-gendered performer, Del la Grace Volcano. Visual production strategies of disruption, subversion, fragmentation, fiction, pastiche and critique

are all knowingly employed by Ashery at every level of the work's content, format and medium imbuing the work with qualities of an amateur home-video – a production device employed in order to question the authenticity of the medium and thereby also cast doubt on the authenticity of its 'biographical' content.

The video opens with a view across Jerusalem from Marcus's/Ashery's parents' flat followed by the introduction to his/her father who is cooking fish, and overlaid with reference to the gendered division of labour in the house in which Marcus's father is cast in a feminised role of cook and cleaner, whilst his mother, who we are told ran away from Jewish orthodoxy as a young woman and adopted a secular westernised lifestyle, is described as 'butch' by the narrator and the one who is in control of the household accounts. The viewer is shown incidental footage of children playing and some photographs of an emergent orthodox boy, all of which are employed in the film as evidence of the life-story of the young Marcus, yet the status of which remain ambivalent. Are these photographs from Ashery's own family archive of a family member whom we can/ will never know or are they 'found objects' employed as part of the Duchampian strategy, reference to which is provided in the film's closing frame of *Rose C'est Lavie?* Autobiography and fiction are constantly entwined here within a complex construction of subjectivity and trans-gendered ethnic identity. Marcus's fascination with Orthodoxy is charted in the video alongside a narrative that constructs him as 'Outsider', as never quite 'the same'. A particularly telling moment is the lingering homo-erotic camera focus on a young man wrapping the leather straps of *tefillin* around his arm in the public space of the city street in which the collision of private ritual and public space is made all the more forceful by the fetishistic and erotic charge with which we as viewers are also implicated.⁵ The narrative voice over loses its authorial objectivity and slips into a discourse of subjective desire, evident in phrases such as 'real men wrap it real tight'. Such overt fetishization of religious practices as presented in Ashery's filmed presentation of the *tefillin* ritual through the mediated voyeuristic gaze of Del la Grace Volcano's disembodied voice-over, is a highly sensitive manoeuvre, one amongst many taboos which Ashery consistently interrogates in her performance, video and photographic practices and which she is not afraid to confront directly. Not least, this particular episode raises the question as to whether such overt fetishization of Jewish Orthodoxy can avoid accusations of the exoticization of difference? This, I think is a crucial question which accrues to many parodic forms of visual performance, yet I would argue that in many cases, it is precisely the staged theatricality of such practices that allows their 'author/performers' to interrogate religious, social and political constructs in this way.

Certainly for me in *Marcus Fisher's Wake*, Ashery avoids exoticising Orthodoxy precisely through her parody of the structures of gendered and ethnic difference that the religion literally embodies. If exoticisation implies identificatory desire of the 'Other', Marcus Fisher's constant re-iteration of removal and difference from that with which he is supposed to belong doubly parodies the stability of his constructed ethnicity. Underlining this further, Ashery sets Marcus up as a stereotype of Jewish Orthodoxy, relying on generic visual signifiers of beard, Black hat, sidelocks, (*payers*) and fringes, (*tzitzit*) that will be read broadly, by gentiles, non-affiliated Jews and the art audience whom she is addressing. As Rachel Garfield has eloquently argued, detailed attention to the actual schisms and factions within Orthodoxy itself and signalled via particular differences of uniform, certain kinds of silk wrap (*kittel*), fur-lined hats (*streimel*), different coloured stockings and choice of trousers, amongst other issues, are details that Ashery deliberately avoids in her construction of a stereotyped male Jew of historicized western European construction.⁶ For Ashery, the figure of the Jew is a complex image circumscribed by taboos which she wishes to disrupt. As she has explained of Marcus Fisher (quote):

... This performative work attempts to de-territorialize and mobilize geographical, sexual and religious zones. I'm interested in working with the *image* of the orthodox Jew. This image is at once a stereotype and at the same time, an image which is still relatively untouched within visual art. The taboos around 'playing' with Jewish imagery (compared for example with the appropriation of Christian imagery) are closely connected to the Holocaust and to the history of anti-semitism. However, this means that a vast area of this culture remains relatively unchallenged by visual art...⁷

The de-territorialization and mobilization of sexual, geographic and religious zones are all apparent in the video through the sites of intervention that the adult Marcus enacts in non-kosher places and public environments where one would not expect an orthodox Jewish man to be found. Marcus performs in gay clubs, visits the streets of London's Soho, a non-orthodox beach in Tel Aviv and drinks non-kosher coffee in a Turkish men's café in Berlin; in each of these districts, Marcus tests the boundaries and limits: of sexuality, of multiculturalism and street-fashion in Soho, of Jewish ethnicity in Tel-Aviv, and of masculinity and difference in Berlin. The implications of Marcus's performance in terms of the de-stabilisation of gender identifications for both the artist and the viewer can most obviously be mapped against Judith Butler's groundbreaking critique, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, first published in 1990, in which Butler posed a series of questions designed to disrupt accepted categories of gender identity and sexuality and which has had far-reaching implications for subsequent western epistemes of identity, subjectivity and desire. However, there are also other significant analyses of gender

performance through which 'Marcus Fisher' can usefully be read and it is these that I should like to draw on here. Irit Rogoff's essay on diaspora and gender, 'Daughters of Sunshine' and Francette Pacteau's analysis of androgynous representation, 'The Impossible Referent', both offer suggestive frameworks for interpretation. Pacteau's analysis is useful because of its sustained investigation of the pre-Oedipal possibilities of androgyny and the pressures on the visible that androgynous representation provokes, whilst Rogoff's piece grounds my analysis of Ashery's work within the discursive formations of modern and historical Jewish feminine identity construction that is also integral to Ashery's wider cultural project.⁸ For Rogoff, 'femininity in Israel is experiencing a crisis not just of identity but also one of context' which she explores in terms of an analysis of some aspects of Israeli visual culture and its implications for the feminine.⁹ One of the most poignant features of her piece is her quotation from a poem by Esther Fuchs about Fuch's abortive attempt at suicide; she comments:

...Fuch's poem speaks of the despair of attempting to actually possess an identity of one's own in a society in which collective trauma has served to simultaneously infantilize and bind one to duty...the concerns of women born long after the war had ended and the state of Israel had been founded, could not be viewed as anything but self-indulgent desires aimed at a form of bourgeois, individual gratification...¹⁰

Collective struggle, guilt and redemption through the formation of the modern Zionist nation state built on a mythical belief in the ideologies of progressive heroism adapted from the modern west, determined how ideologies of femininity in modern Israel were constructed at the level of dominant visual discourse: as both militant and exotic, pioneers and consumers, different from the west yet in mimicry of the same. Yet as Rogoff also points out, the new culture of belonging central to the successful formation of the modern state of Israel could not be maintained without 'a consciousness of not belonging against which it exists in a permanent state of defiance and self-definition'¹¹. In her article, 'Oreet Ashery: Transgressing the Sacred', Rachel Garfield has powerfully drawn out the implications of the conflict of 'not belonging' when she notes that it is precisely by becoming an Orthodox man that Ashery makes visible the conflict inherent in the Zionist project's attempt to 'normalise' the Jew through the construction of a nation state. She comments that:

...through becoming an orthodox man, Oreet Ashery takes herself into a simpler past when the Jew was outsider untainted by the burden of choices beholden to the insider. But this turning away is never a simple solution and the conflict continues. For while the Israeli may yearn nostalgically for the Diaspora, s/he, as an Israeli [woman] cannot be at home there... 'Oreet' is invisible as an 'other' but as an

orthodox Jewish man, she is not only visible but also unusual. Oreet Ashery [becomes] a public Jew, defiantly not assimilating and defiantly shocking...¹²

By becoming a public Jew though, she also throws into question the gender identification of what it means to be Jewish. If to be Jewish within a dominant historical formation of cultural memory is to be male, then what place is there for Ashery, in either a modern or historical locus as a third generation Israeli woman - a question that poignantly underpins her 2002 video-work, *Why do you think I left?* In which she returns to Israel from England to put this question to each member of her family who answer her in turn whilst at the same time revealing a lot about their own positions, biographies and self-constructions as contemporary Jewish subjects living with daily political and personal conflicts in Israel.

Locating a place for the feminine, then, within a Symbolic order of language and representation that is further complicated through signifiers of ethnicity and difference via recourse to a performance of androgyny in *Marcus Fisher's Wake* becomes a significant, though not unproblematic psychical manoeuvre in Ashery's project. In Francette Pacteau's analysis of androgynous representation, 'the androgynous 'position' represents a denial, or a transgression, of the rigid gender divide, and as such implies a threat to our given identity and to the system of social roles that define us'.¹³ It is the boundaries of this threat that Ashery probes in her performance of Marcus Fisher. However, as Pacteau also comments:

...The androgynous fantasy is a narcissistic 'caress' in which the subject annihilates itself. In this double movement of pleasure and destruction, the fantasy allies itself with the 'death drive', that regressive tendency towards the restoration of a less differentiated, less organised, ultimately inorganic state...¹⁴

In constructing a mobile figure of Marcus Fisher through allusion to his death in *Marcus Fisher's Wake*, it could be argued that Ashery is performing the double act of representation and annihilation central to this psychoanalytic understanding of narcissism in a performance that challenges the taboos of semitic representation in order to materialise her own corporeal subjectivity. The ambivalence of this manoeuvre is apparent in the role that death has to play in the construction of modern Jewish identity. If, after the horrors of the Holocaust diasporic Jewishness became most often 'a cipher for death, loss and victimisation',¹⁵ whose redress was sought in the formation of the modern state of Israel, creating and killing the cipher of the diasporic Jew is a radical, shocking yet enabling move for Ashery - a post-modern Israeli Jewish woman. It is the unspoken annihilation of the narcissistic impulse that haunts the performative explorations of corporeal subjectivity in this work. As Janet Hand has convincingly explained via her reading of Janine Antoni's *Lick and Lather*, the self-

shattering implied by narcissism can also be 'figured as a paradoxical 'structuring' of subjectivity; the desire to disappear implied in the fantasy of disguise for Ashery can perhaps be read through Hand's theorisation as an alternative to 'the omnipotent identity fantasies of self-presence' that have dominated the logic of the Symbolic for too long.¹⁶

¹ In her doctoral thesis Rachel Garfield indicates that although 'there is no evidence that Ashery's character is Hasidic, it would be recognised as Haredi rather than Modern orthodox'. She also notes that 'Orthodoxy is full of schisms, the most well known of which is Hasidic and Mitnaged. Hasidism began in seventeenth century Poland by the Baal Shem Tov and is an ecstatic form of Judaism. The Mitnaged form of Orthodoxy originates in Lithuania and is a scholastic orthodoxy. Both of these forms are collectively known as Haredi, which also includes Sephardi and middle-Eastern orthodoxy' (Rachel Garfield (2004) 'Oreet Ashery' from unpublished doctoral thesis, *Performativity and Identity Politics: Encounters in Recent Jewish Art* (Royal College of Art, London).

² Oreet Ashery 'Marcus Fisher – Background' e-mail correspondence from Ashery in 2003

³ This interaction with her father also touches on other key aspects of Ashery's work in which the artist's ongoing explorations of identity and subjectivity are imbricated within a wider discourse of the tensions between home and belonging, and between Judaism and Zionism, explored in her 2002 video work *Why do you think I left?* available to view in the library of the Live Art Development Agency (LADA), London

⁴ For a more detailed reading of Ashery's debt to Cindy Sherman see Garfield, Rachel (2004) 'Oreet Ashery' *op. cit.*

⁵ *Tefillin* are small black boxes containing passages of scripture with black straps attached to them, worn by men over the age of thirteen at weekday morning prayer. One box is placed on the head to remind Jews to subject their thoughts to God's service and the other is placed on the left arm, near the heart to remind Jews to subject their hearts' desires to God's service so it is particularly telling that it is the *tefillin* associated with desire that is foregrounded in this particular scene. For more information about the practice of wearing *tefillin* see Jacobs, Louis *The Jewish Religion: A Companion*, Oxford University Press 1995, p.537.

⁶ Rachel Garfield (2004) *op. cit.*

⁷ Oreet Ashery 'Marcus Fisher – Background' e-mail correspondence from Ashery in 2003

⁸ See for example Ashery's 2001 twenty minute video work, 'Why do you think I left?' in which Ashery returns to her parental home in Israel and poses the question to each member of her family individually whilst filming their replies. Ashery moved to England from Israel when she was nineteen and has lived in England ever since.

⁹ Rogoff 'Daughters of Sunshine' in Bloom, Lisa (ed.) (1997) *With Other Eyes: Looking at Race and Gender in Visual Culture* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p.173

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p.165

¹¹ *ibid.*, p.159

¹² Garfield (2002) 'Oreet Ashery: Transgressing the Sacred' *Jewish Quarterly*, Summer 2002, p.4-5

¹³ Francette Pacteau 'The Impossible Referent: representations of the androgyne' in Burgin, Donald and Kaplan (eds.) (1986) *Formations of Fantasy* London and New York: Routledge, p.63.

¹⁴ Pacteau, Francette 'The Impossible Referent: Representations of the Androgyne' in Burgin, Donald and Caplan (eds.) (1986) *ibid.*, p.82

¹⁵ Meskimmon (2003) *Women Making Art* London and New York: Routledge, p.22

¹⁶ Janet Hand 'Disappearing Acts: an impossibility of identity' in Steyn, Juliet (ed.) (1997) *Other than Identity: the subject, politics and art*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, p.224.