

Oreet Ashery/Marcus Fisher Rohini Malik Okon for the catalogue *The Promise, The Land*, Ok centre of Contemporary Art, Linz, Austria, also published in *Performing Difference* by Artsadmin

Interested in slippages between life and art Oreet Ashery is drawn to processes of de-territorialisation, intervention and interaction, where her own body and both private and public space become sites for disruption, discourse and exchange. Her interdisciplinary practice engenders a dialogue between live art, video, sound, photography and text, and her work is partly a response to her departure from Israel to live in England and to a constant oscillation between feeling she has two homes and a sense of having no real home at all.

Exploring the complexities of fantasy and desire in the playing out of identity, Ashery has staged and enacted a considerable body of work as her alter ego, Marcus Fisher, an Hassidic cross-gender Jew. These works have taken various forms, from photographic portraits to interventions in the streets of different cities, to staged performances and most recently as dialogic encounters in the intimate space of the bedroom. Photographic portraits of the artist dressed as an orthodox Jewish man were the starting point for this body of work and were made in homage to a close friend of hers who had decided to become an orthodox Jew. Investigating difference as visually and tactilely marked and performed, Ashery has taken Marcus Fisher onto the street and intervened in various sites – gay clubs in London, a Turkish men’s café in Berlin – where one would not normally expect to see an orthodox Jew.

In contrast to these anonymous interventions where Marcus Fisher remains an elusive and incongruous figure, is his most recent incarnation in a work entitled *Say Cheese*, which invites dialogue and exchange in the intimate space of the bedroom. Participants are invited to enter the bedroom one at a time and spend a few minutes with Marcus, engaged in conversation, acting out a pose or exploring a fantasy. A camera is placed opposite the bed and the participant chooses to press the shutter release at any moment, thus creating an instant fictional narrative that may or may not have taken place. After the event, each participant receives a photograph and a personal letter from Marcus. Investigating the relationship between the private performative moment and its memory fixed by a photographic image which becomes public, *Say Cheese* also plays with the touristic phenomenon of posing with “the other” as evidence of having been

elsewhere. Yet in these staged encounters with difference, who is the audience engaging with? A man, a woman, an artist, an orthodox Jew, a trickster or whoever they want “him” to be? Trespassing forbidden territories and transgressing the boundaries that are markers of social control, Ashery as Marcus Fisher proposes an ever-evolving and fluid identity, which comes into being through performance and interaction.

Her recent video work *Why do you think I left?* (2002), also rooted in dialogue, resonates with feelings of hurt, loss and betrayal. Filmed on her last visit to Israel, the artist poses the question “why do you think I left?” to different family members, who each have their own interpretation of her reasons. We only hear Ashery’s voice asking the question, and she does not enter into the dialogue again. In portraying an archetypal family the piece speaks more generally of the struggle between the personal and the political and the complex negotiations surrounding migration, exile and definitions of ‘home’.

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