

Adidal Abou-Chamat

Vive la différence!

VIVE la diversité!

Construction, Identity and Alterity in Adidal Abou-Chamat's Work

The photographs and videos of the artist and ethnologist, Adidal Abou-Chamat, deal with being alienated and different as well as the search for one's cultural identity. The urge to explore these particular themes may well lie in her personal history, her border crossings between middle European and Arab cultures. This being-in-between provides a glimpse into hybrid (living) forms and endows a high level of integrity to the themes and discourses in her work.

However, it is not only cultural differences and peculiarities but also the assignation of gender roles, prejudices and clichés that she makes visible on both female and male bodies. In her videos and installations, her protagonists convey questions of difference, identity, cultural and ethnical dominance as well as marginalisation and stigmatisation through their skin colour, clothing and habitat.

The question of discrimination and the simultaneous search for common cultural roots came under discussion mainly in the decolonisation movement of the 1950s and 1960s. The text, «Black Skin, White Mask» (1952), by Franz Fanon (1925-1961), a French colonialist doctor born in Martinique, was seminal for the first criticisms of colonialism. His influence led not only to the freedom movement in Africa, but also the realisation that not only were the colonised affected by colonialism but also the white colonial masters.

Text passages in the anti-hierarchically arranged wall installation, "Transition" (2016), are a direct reference to Franz Fanon and his emancipatory and humanistic visions. The two- and three-dimensional panorama tells of different forms of transition, of cultural and gender-specific hybridity and the combination of different time periods that run counter to a linear understanding of history. An off-centre panel with Arabic text points to elements of the past permeating the present: "*Die Vergangenheit spricht noch mit uns*" (The past still speaks with us).

Her previous artistic production impacts her fetish-like objects, for example, the skin-coloured dress of a suicide bomber with a sewn-in explosives belt. It can be read as a reference to her earlier video work, "Memory Lines", which dealt with the theme of cultural histories and personal memories. Here, the artist remembers the conflict in the Near East in which a political assassination is intertwined with her biography and work history. Other parts of the clusters covering the wall are also arranged according to the principle of interweaving and interrelation. Although some of them appear to have no common ground, for example, the variously arranged "Love Chairs" and the nearby table installation, there is, however, a subliminal connection: both are about gender-specific classifications, the breaking down of traditional role expectations and sexual orientation. The seats of the

'Love Chairs', especially, with their inset light boxes question the common idea of binary sexes: the female XY chromosomes are represented in the first light box with an overlaid line drawing showing the individual steps in the transformation of gender from a biological woman to a man. The surgical interventions show how much the biological body (sex), as well as cultural sex roles (gender) and sexuality (desire) have to be reformulated to present an alternative to the dominant, normalised body image. The existence of the so-called third gender covers the seat in the form of a portrait of an Indian 'Hijra', who fulfil an important social function despite the outsider role and marginalisation they experience in Indian society. Likewise, the burka, niqab and similar head coverings of Arabian culture in the altar-like table installation express ambivalence. This assemblage has its finale in the female figure seen from the back in the photo series, "Enunciation" 2001, mounted on the wall. This figure, although her face is unseen, like Magritte's figures, possesses a magical presence and serves as a projection screen commented on by the message written on the table top:

"... she has a vision of a coming time when she can find a new peace with her body, and once more build a friendship with it..."

The artistic practice of Adidal Abou-Chamat nests in this thicket of postcolonial theory and history as well as the search for cultural and gender-specific identity. From an ethnological and female point of view, she researches cultural differences and ethnic particulars as well as prejudices, projections and clichés which are deconstructed in her work in an ironic and simultaneously subversive way. "Culture" in this context means a bundle of always incomplete processes which are momentarily articulated in artefacts, rituals and values.

While the search for one's cultural location can carry with it painful and oppressive elements, photographic works show the body, and especially the skin as a vulnerable boundary organ of one's body which acquires an identity-building function. An example is a photo from the seven-part series, "In between", from 2005. This photo shows the naked back of a person on which a map of the Arabian peninsula is engraved: geographical origins thus become a visible stigma that is irreversibly burnt into the skin and determines social identity.

Dance is another motif that repeatedly appears in Adidal Abou-Chamat's work. The French sociologist, Marcel Mauss, had already shown in his 1935 text, "Techniques of the Body", that the way in which people sit, walk, swim and eat is culturally influenced.¹ Hardly any other body technique is so closely associated with rituals, culturally formed body images and role allocation as dance. In numerous photos and videos, Adidal Abou-Chamat initially draws on oriental forms of dance such as the line dance, "Dabke", frequently performed at weddings, or the belly dance (Danse du ventre). In the latest video, "Dabke", different cultural forms of representation and rituals are intermixed: a group of male and female dancers together lead the dance, which is practised in Jordan, Syria, Iraq and Palestine, in a large room. The music stops five times, leaving the dances staring or "frozen" - as in breakdancing - before the traditional

¹ *Techniques of the Body*, trans. Ben Brewster, rep. in *Economy and Society* 2:1 (1973), pp 70-88,

dance continues. By way of contrast, the belly dance, in which the hips, navel, arms and feet are unclothed, is often reduced to the erotic and seen as the forerunner to Western striptease. In the video, "Fleshdance" (2005), the artist plays with this exotic, colonial perspective and contradicts it by clothing the dancer not in a transparent, exotic garment of veils but military camouflage trousers remodelled into a skirt. The dance floor is a carpet of raw, bloody flesh (sacrificial dance).

The theme of Abou-Chamat's dance series, "Dreaming of..." (2014) concerns cultural contradictions and their associated prejudices. In the multi-part photographic series and the new video of the same name, a female dancer clothed in black abaya and niqab practises the extreme positions of classical European ballet. Engulfed in abaya and niqab which cover the whole body except the eyes, the dancer demonstrates the splits, practices at the bar and the highly stylised positions of classical ballet. The widespread notion that the abaya and niqab negate and restrict the body is questioned in relationship to the confrontation with the close-fitting, pink ballet shoes into which the feet are squeezed. Which culture disciplines and dominates the body more? The Arabian with its veiling of the body or the Western with its standardisation, which is most clearly demonstrated in classical ballet. Classical ballet organises the body in space according to prescribed schema which is frequently geometric in nature. Examples are the extreme basic positions and body movements such as the "En dehors", the legs outstretched from the hips and the inorganic figure of the "arabesque". Like the Arabic clothing canon of veiling and hiding, the albeit more body highlighting ballet is similarly created "with ideologically loaded signs, which hide within them ideas of beauty, morals and... reason"² (Siegmond 2008:40)

The video, "Sweet Barbie" (2004/5), on the other hand, contains a subversive and humorous handling of role expectations and gender-specific associations. The fashion doll whose clothes could be changed was produced in 1959 by the company, Mattel, and her ideal proportions were the standard for a generation of young girls. Barbie was initially created as white-skinned and blonde, the eternal 'girly' with a fringe and ponytail. Since 1980, most models have been Hispanic and Afro-American versions, ethnic Barbies which offer children their own skin colour. In the video, four women of different ethnic backgrounds eat the 'ideal woman' which has been cast in white and black chocolate - certainly not a way to keep slim. What at first appears to be an uncontrolled eating orgy draws, however, on a widespread anti-colonial strategy from the 1920s which touches on the "Manifesto Antropófago" of the Brazilian writer, Osvaldo de Andrade (1890-1954). This form of cultural cannibalism stemming above all from Brazil is a strategy that turns against the cultural dominance of the West and especially Europe.

The (simplified) recipe is as follows:

take in that which secludes, suppresses or manipulates you
chew it with the relicts of your own culture - and spit it out again.

This 'cultural bulimia' combined with gender-political questions in the video is a symbolic act of subversion and emancipation against all forms of cultural dominance and their mandatory moral concepts.

Transferred to the chocolate consumers in the video, this means that they undermine the culture of denial prevalent in the beauty industry. The hearty consumption of the conforming ideal woman simultaneously becomes a liberating, emancipatory act. A

² Siegmund, Gerald: *Das Gedächtnis des Körpers in Bewegung*, in: Leopold Klepacki/ Eckhart Liebau: *Tanzwelten: Zur Anthropologie des Tanzes*, Waxmann Verlag, Münster 2008, p. 40

continuation and further exploration of the Barbie motif can be seen in the nine-part photographic series, "Heroic Conversation" (2016), which also deals with the difference between wish and reality, and the culture-serving, power-political coding of the body. The basis for this series is initially a sales platform for the dolls in different cultural circles. Apparently, in each culture is a request for prevailing body ideals (Barbie and Ken in various geopolitical versions), honoured heroes (Nelson Mandela, Che Guevara, Fedajin fighter) or ideological representatives (Karl Marx, Che Guevara amongst others) as personified miniatures. Independent of this, the artist offered protagonists invited for a photo shoot the opportunity to select a doll for the photo session. People from different genders and ethnicities were photographed from the front in a half-portrait against a coloured background. Each held in his or her hands - like the figures of benefactors in Christian altar images - a male or female (ideal) figure belonging to or wished for in their own culture, generation or ideology. The dolls become projection figures for personal desires or deficits; they are representations of both the main socio-political and cultural domain and its inscribed body politic.

Adidal Abou-Chamat's artistic practice opens up a third space in which old hierarchies, role expectations and patterns of thinking are questioned and transferred into current discourses.

Against the background of her biography, the artist carries out a kind of cultural re-writing in which she strives to implement a synthesis between her Syrian father's and her German mother's homelands. Individual works show that this striving is based on an intense confrontation with Arabic and European cultures and history writing, as well as an intensive process of production. They also show that a new transcultural base has formed from different cultural and subcultural areas of knowledge.

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