

Performance & I

Marya Kazoun

Marya Kazoun is a visual artist who has been exploring the interplay between performance and artwork. Kazoun's artistic endeavor is characterized by her need to communicate through action – specifically by creating works where the public interacts with the artist's physical presence in real time. Her staged presence within her installations or as she roams the streets in costume displays a theatrical dimension. At the same time, the intense focus on performing the body of the artist points to the performative gendered quality of her work. Her inclusion in this issue of al-Raida aims at exposing the reader to an unfamiliar example/genre of female Arab visual artist exploring the field of performance art, a phenomenon rarely seen in the Arab world.

I had organized a photo shoot for an installation I had “finished” in 2003 entitled *Steady Breath*. I had made an outfit but I was not quite sure why I had made it nor what its purpose was. I was wearing it and got into one of the pictures of the installation to show the scale of my work. When I got my slides back from the photographer and looked carefully at them, it suddenly hit me. It all made sense: I felt that the work needed me to support it, to help it sustain itself.

The project started with an urge to embody the works. Having a similar external shell, I wanted to become part of those works, like them, “their equal”. However, I had something they did not have: I was alive and moving. I sometimes would become the protagonist of the situation. Do I do it to compensate for their weaknesses or to highlight the fact that I am alive?

In my work, I create worlds, and I explore them long after. I uncover worlds in which my genuine self can “exist” independently from outside social boundaries and where I can feel “safe”. They might be utopian worlds.



Steady Breath, Installation/ Performance, 2003

For the viewer, these little worlds might appear like renaissance wunderkabinetts (cabinets filled with wonders).

Gradually, the more I got into performance, the more doubts started arising: Was I overestimating



Personal Living Space, Installation/ Performance, 51st Venice biennale, 2005



Personal Living Space, the model - Print on canvas, 51st Venice biennale, 2005

my own appearance and abilities? Did I have a secret need for admiration and a need to shock the audience? Furthermore, I started questioning eroticism, narcissism, self-image, and self-representation. I also had questions about the human body. Some elements, such as the processes and rituals entailed in the making of my outfits, were consistent in my pieces. I also wondered how much of it was inducing stupor. What did I want the audience to see and feel? What about the level of eroticism present in those performances?

During the last few decades, contemporary performance art has been characterized by a strong relationship between the self and the body: "The performer is obsessed with the urgency of displaying his body in order to be able to exist in the first place" (Lea Vergine, cited in Kunst, n.d. ¶ 2).¹

I looked up performance artists, women specifically. I started to research their reasons for performing. The era of the 1970s and 1980s was characterized by a predominance of modernist ideas, like women using their bodies to express feminist statements. Other topics that were widespread during those times were ecology, body, and earth art. A lot of women artists often used the nude to challenge the traditional male ideas of women and nudity at that time.

Who do I dialogue with? I dialogue with society and the audience. The most crucial moment in my performances is the moment of awareness, when a kind of tacit agreement takes place between the viewer and I.

How important is the role of drama and acting? Am I acting? Why do I feel this urge to dress up?²

I find flirting with reality very appealing. I am very interested in the discomfort zone, whereby the viewer finds him/herself looking at me. S/he probably wonders if it is all for real. Am I serious?³

Arthur Danto defines these scenes as "arts of disturbance", the destruction of borders between art and life. This compromises reality itself.

I am very interested in bringing the viewer back to how my objects are created. It feels comfortable, honest, and safe to share my art-making process with the audience. I also sometimes get tired during my performances, and I sleep. While an actor does not really sleep, I do. My performances would last forever if I did not have time constraints.

I try to communicate an honest process. How much more real can it get?



Mamma the Rings are Hairy, Installation/performance, 2005



Pull Christian, Pull, Pull, Installation/Performance, 2005

Not all my work requires that I be part of it. I still want the objects that I create and use during my performances to have a life of their own, to “work” or stand on their own. I only become part of the work when it “needs” me.⁴

My creative process goes through many different stages. Some are sometimes obvious to the audience and to myself. Some make their way slowly, unconsciously, or accidentally into the pieces. The most interesting moments of my work are when I can acknowledge an accident. Sometimes, there is an immediate awareness of these “accidents”. Sometimes no. One has to break one’s rules to reset new ones.

I slowly begin to make up stories in my mind for the objects I create. They suddenly become alive and have attributes and functions. I start talking to them, and we carry out a full-fledged dialogue. My performances generally involve me dialoguing with

my pieces in front of an audience. I perform actions I would normally perform privately in my studio. I would sew my pieces, wrap them up, and perform “operations” to stitch up their “wounds”.

Sometimes, there is no story. Sometimes, the story/script comes after the object has been created. At other times, the script comes first, gets elaborated on, and becomes clearer while working on the piece. I am very aware of the role of fairytales and children’s stories in my work. Beasts and gentle creatures are very present as well. There is a lot of theater in my performances; I have a lot of admiration for Samuel Beckett. I’m also a movie and soundtrack addict. I sometimes feel the influence of Hollywood and its culture seeps in unconsciously. It sometimes feels like I am playwrighting.

Below is a dialogue for a piece entitled, “Fortune Seeker,” shown in the Art Miami Fair of this year:

Black sorcerer: What are you doing little girl?
Little girl: I'm making a Totem! I need to find fortune. I am a fortune-seeker. Look, look! I used windshields, mops so I can see my fortune more clearly; the windows are so dirty sometimes that I can't see anything clearly. Can you help me, black sorcerer, to make it more beautiful?

Black sorcerer: (smiling) What should I do?

Little girl: I am filling it up with details and beauty so it hears and grants all my wishes. We all fill our lives with details while we wait... You can do the same things I'm doing ... Coucou! Coucou! Catch me, beautiful sorcerer!

My interest in the dynamics of space, like performing in the street in a big installation and with other people, is fading. I have come to realize that all those dynamics are tenuous and inseparable. As Cecilia Foote has mentioned on the show she curated in March of 2007, and quoting from her exhibition leaflet, "Intimate Bodies, Public Spaces",



Self-Portrait, Installation/Performance, 2005 Stitching

"Our bodies carry intimate feelings in public spaces, and we bring back home the experiences perceived through our own bodies in the world".

Marya Kazoun is a painter, installation artist, and jewelry designer.
 Email: maryakazoun@yahoo.com

ENDNOTES

1. Lea Virgine is an Italian writer and curator who has been active in the field of contemporary art since the 1970s. She has written many books and curated many shows on body art and performance.
2. Cindy Sherman is a good example of an artist who transforms herself completely in her photo works and films. She would use her own body to portray the object.
3. It slowly became clear that I wasn't acting. I'm interested in that edge where the viewer thinks, "Is it an act or is it real?" Am I a character from real life or am I just putting on an act?
4. Another artist/performer I relate to is Lee Bull with her costume-making and some of her aesthetics. Lee Bull is a leading contemporary Korean artist based in Seoul. She has become known in the 1990s for her high-tech sculptures and performances based on mythical monsters and futuristic cyborgs. Her concern with the human body, gender and technology has led her to the construction of worlds where flesh and metal meet. I also relate to a number of Mathew Barney's works. His art is a celebration art, a critique, and a celebration of commercialism and blockbuster Hollywood filmmaking. I guess I relate to others in other ways.

REFERENCES

- Danto, A.** (1986). *The philosophical disenfranchisement of art*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Foote, C.** (2007). *Intimate bodies public spaces*, exhibition leaflet, Retrieved from <http://www.fecalface.com/calendar/calendar.php?mode=view&id=2191>
- Kunst, B.** (n.d). Strategies of subjectivity in contemporary performance art Retrieved from <http://www2.arnes.si/~ljintima2/kunst/t-strat.html>