Intersectionality in Identity Politics: Activism in Aesthetic – Reconceptualising the Capacity of Identity in Art.

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Generally speaking, identity politics is defined as a practice that responds to the inability of the state to adequately represent the interests of large segments of their population[[1]](#footnote-1). This organisation of identity centres the importance of recognising collective histories being at play within the context of larger society, and that these organisations are not merely expressions of inherent characteristics but expressions of criticism and resistance against the status quo,[[2]](#footnote-2) but can also provide potential avenues of reformulation of identity in newly constructed spaces.

Identity politics, as a Western art practice produced from the 1970’s foregrounds the intersections of race, gender, class, and sexuality in the context of surrounding institutions and systems of power[[3]](#footnote-3) where in the past these identities were underrepresented in galleries and museums[[4]](#footnote-4). In past decades particular intersections were brought to the fore; the 1970’s locus featured gender and feminism prominently as a response of women’s rights issues, the 1980’s brought sexual orientation in response to the AIDS crisis, and the 1990’s brought critical analysis of race and ethnicity.[[5]](#footnote-5) Investigation of these intersections can function explicitly through the locus of identities of the artists themselves,[[6]](#footnote-6) however it will be argued that this does not necessarily have to be the case. Albeit the implicit influence of the artist’s identity cannot be doubted, the nature of investigation into identity politics provides a dynamic platform in which layers of ‘actual’ identity and their material, or constructed manifestations can become the focus of themselves.

Although contemporary artists and critics have argued that identity politics has become conceptually predictable and aesthetically unimaginative it will be evidenced that this is not the case. In fact, this dynamic platform provides avenues of criticism, resistance, and creation of new concepts and aesthetics, and it does so due it’s nature as a practice; constantly being reconstructed[[7]](#footnote-7). Arguments of conceptual predictability emerge from the assumption that these inherited collective histories are static[[8]](#footnote-8). Consequences of flattening these histories into a static entity of the past enables them to be consumed, and functions to assist the colonial gaze that strips autonomy from the collective body and licenses Western artists to represent cultural aesthetics and concepts in an exoticised, othering and reductive manner[[9]](#footnote-9). However these histories are not static, instead, they are a process constantly interacting within the surrounding context; historical events, media discourse, and socio-political systems that reshape this history into a working identity grounded in the relationship between the individual and society.

Similarly, claims of identity politic driven art being aesthetically unimaginative also result from misunderstandings of the capacity that identity politics has within artwork. It transcends the locus of artist identity being explored, critiqued or reconstructed, but can also formulate meta-analyses, reformulation and criticism of material or constructed identity and their manifestations in public discourse, media, and art production rather than ‘actual’ or inherent artist identity. Alternative forms of resisting oppressive systems such as the state by removing intersecting identities of race, sexuality and gender aim to reconfigure the body in a way that resists coding and instead provides the construction of one’s own mythology.[[10]](#footnote-10) This modern body, the cyborg as coined by Donna Harraway in her manifesto provides a new conceptual framework and aesthetic with which to produce art that dissolves individual differences and creates a collectivist body that subverts normative functions and absolves moral normativity[[11]](#footnote-11) but in doing so erases the intersections of individual identity that lead to differing lived experiences under the lattice of oppressions. Why this is problematic in the contemporary, globalised world is that it ignores and erases the blatantly disproportionate way in which certain groups are subject to such normativity, the scope of complex oppressions a result of the state, and its vehicles of oppression; capitalism, imperialism and colonialism[[12]](#footnote-12). As a result theory driven claims of identity politic being too pragmatic can be seen as a logical fallacy that frustrates the nature of art being embedded within the lived experience of individuals navigating through society and these systems embedded within it.

These reconceptualised parameters of the capacity of identity politics within art will be explored through three female artists of colour, specifically Middle Eastern, one of whom is openly queer-identifying, to demonstrate the fundamental inability to analyse one intersection of identity in isolation. Nonetheless the focus on ethno-cultural identity will be continued. Artworks include Shirin Neshat’s video installation *Turbulent* (1998), Jananne Al-Ani’s Five Channel Video Installation *1001 Nights* (1998), and Fatima Al Qadiri’s album art and music concept in *WaWa* series (2011) and *Asiatisch* (2014).

Shirin Neshat is an Iranian-American artist whose work has been inspired by the cultural shock she received upon completing her education in the United States and revisiting the mother country of her childhood post Islamic revolution, 1979.[[13]](#footnote-13) Although her work deals with culturally specific codes, her nuanced delivery also reveals insight into ‘Western’ modes of perception that she has been familiarised with in her time in New York[[14]](#footnote-14). In doing so she connects these parallels in a way that produces a universal language[[15]](#footnote-15) but also contains several levels of reception[[16]](#footnote-16), once received by an audience that filter these through their own cultural and gendered codes.

This is embodied in Neshat’s *Turbulent* (1998), a film installation work that projects two seemingly separate screens onto opposing walls; one displays a male singer delivering a fervent love song adapted from an ancient Persian poem to an audience entirely composed of men, his back is to the audience as they sit at full attention[[17]](#footnote-17). The work is initiated by the applause of the male audience that opens the man’s song, directed at the fourth wall. Displayed on the opposite screen is a female singer, once beginning to sing appears to capture the attention of the male singer and what was initially assumed to be two separate screens appear to relationally coalesce. The auditorium looks the same, could the events be separated by time? Is one located in the others as a dream? Where both singers are located is brought into question while their position as a man and woman in a conservative Islamic theocracy is already predetermined. The woman’s wordless song is devoid of linguistic meaning yet communicates an orchestral composition of pure emotion; frustration, passion, woe, and earnest. Consisting of what initially sounds like the beginning laments and wails of classical Persian love songs the sounds turn guttural, sonic and transform into a transcendental cry[[18]](#footnote-18) that penetrates the heart of an audience regardless of cultural background. Ancient cultural practices and traditions of story telling and poetry are frustrated as they are expressed through the historical event of Islamic revolution, providing multiple layers of meaning and interpretation dependant upon how the audience positions themselves within the space, unable to view both singers at the same time, relational interpretation is also left entirely to how the audience edits the work[[19]](#footnote-19).

The concept of transcendence has also been introduced in alternative forms of art that reject identity where the assertion that artists are free to transcend the normative narratives attached to their body through the concept of a cyborg[[20]](#footnote-20). However, this assertion ignores the privilege that comes with being able to transcend ones body, and that many people all over the world have their self-identity grounded in lived experience directly resulting from their ethno-cultural and gendered identity[[21]](#footnote-21). Applied to Neshat’s *Turbulence* the work is would be reduced to only this concept, having to relinquish remaining contextually located meaning, this demonstrates that identity politic is not aesthetically unimaginative or conceptual predictable but in fact serves to contribute greater depth and multiplicity of meaning through its reconfiguration of collective ethno-cultural and gender identities that produce an infinite space beyond the pragmatic that centres both the artists identity and the audiences’, resulting in a conceptually dynamic, aesthetically imaginative, and fundamentally relational work of art. Additionally it also serves as an activist statement of resistance towards the implicitly Western centred content of the majority of art spaces[[22]](#footnote-22)

Such privilege has largely gone without scrutiny in Euro-centric art theory and practice that dominates the art world[[23]](#footnote-23) but has been critiqued by a number of contemporary female Arab artists during this millennial period through to the current time with the Venice 2011 Biennale featuring a pan=Arab exhibition *The Future of a Promise*. Jananne Al-Ani’s Five Channel Video Installation *1001 Nights* (1998) critiques this Euro-centricity focussing upon constructing montage-like reconfigurations of her mother and sisters dreams of their experiences in Iraq from the 1960’s to the late 1980’s when they had to leave the country[[24]](#footnote-24). Born to an Arabic father and Irish mother, Al-Ani reworks trans-national historical trauma through the point of view of Arabic women that resist the fetishized colonial Western gaze that turns the complex bodies and identities of mixed race Arabic women into Oriental fantasies of the ‘Other’.[[25]](#footnote-25) Without the pragmatic motivation to subvert this aggressive practice such work, informed by identity politic would lose a great deal of its significance and radical aesthetic of anti-objectification. This prohibits the tendency of critics and artists to commodify these inherited collective histories into static, two-dimensional objects to be consumed and appropriated[[26]](#footnote-26), and instead asserts the lived experiences of Arabic women as central to historical, political and cultural narratives[[27]](#footnote-27).

Born in Senegal in 1981 Fatima Al-Qadiri is a Kuwaiti artist currently living and working in New York. Similar anti-orientalist sentiments are presented in her visual and musical works that explores both her ethnic, gendered and sexual identities and how they inextricably intersect, as well as transcending individual confines towards formulations of critique of imagined material constructs of collective identity, namely what she coins as ‘Imagined China’. Al-Qadiri’s *WaWa* series (2011) consists of a series of constructed portraits that explore the parallels between the overt imagery of Arab female pop icons and covert imagery of Arab lesbianism through early millennia pop aesthetics[[28]](#footnote-28). Marking the shift in the constructed identities of Arab female pop stars from the idealised ‘Golden Age’ to a hyper-infantilised gender stereotype where as imagery of Arab lesbianism is non-existent[[29]](#footnote-29). The series addresses this gap, grafting the queer butch/femme dynamic onto homages of iconic album covers that portray the femme partner in the role of the feminine pop idol while her butch partner fulfils the role of the lustful male consumer in contemporary Arabic society[[30]](#footnote-30).

On the other hand, Al-Qadiri’s music concept and album cover *Asiatisch* explores the Western creation of an ‘Imagined China’ through insistent, vilifying language in Western film, media, economic magazines etc. that parallels the early colonial Orientalist period[[31]](#footnote-31) where supposed realistic depictions of China are co-opted and produced exclusively by the West. Al-Qadiri uses these material constructions of ‘Chinese’ identity found in virtual instrument packages commoditised as an ‘Asian kit’ already present in music software and samples them alongside classical Chinese poetry depicting a ‘real’ or ‘authentic’ Chinese voice that is scrambled in the wake of the reconfiguration.[[32]](#footnote-32) The result is a self-aware album that consists of sonically self-aware orientalist sounds blended through classical Chinese cultural practices of poetry and song like Neshat’s *Turbulent* that provides multiple layers of meaning and interpretation dependant upon the audiences understanding that the album is a self-aware critique leaving the meaning and communicated affect entirely to how the audience receives the work. However, this opens up questions of responsibility of the artist and the audience to understand or interpret the work in its original intention rather than fall into the trappings of cultural appropriation where the work is considered to be a part of the imagined or constructed body of art it aims to criticize[[33]](#footnote-33). Nonetheless, these two examples of Al-Qadiri’s contemporary body of visual and musical work speaks to the capacity and potential for identity politics to construct new conceptual spaces of exploration utilising reconfigurations of aesthetics from the multitude of intersecting identities embodied within artists and external constructions they are exposed to.

In conclusion, organisations of identity that centre the importance of recognising collective histories being at play within the context of larger society, are not only expressions of criticism and resistance against the status quo,[[34]](#footnote-34) but can also provide potential avenues of reformulation of identity in newly constructed spaces in art that provide a dynamic platform in which layers of ‘actual’ identity and material or constructed manifestations of collective identities can be imaginatively explored. The artists used to demonstrate this also provide insight into how these collective histories are not static, but a process constantly interacting within the surrounding contexts; historical events, media discourse, and socio-political systems that reshape this history into a working identity. This identity is grounded in the relationship between the artist, society and audiences in creative and imaginative ways that pragmatically ensure the autonomy of the collective body, avoiding cultural appropriation or trappings in dominant systems of Euro-American centric colonialism and imperial commonly at play in the art world.

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