

Review

CHADORS AND GRAFFITI, EU FLAGS AND ICONIC BODIES: FOUR CONTEMPORARY VISUAL ARTISTS

By Maria Petrides

Work grounded in protest - against fascism, moral hypocrisy, the Vietnam War, and so on - is the closest thing we have to an art that zeroes in on a crisis of public conscience and attempts to provoke viewers to think about their own relationship to a social upheaval close at hand.¹

Contemporary art stretches beyond the boundaries of an individual medium and of a single national border. With this encouragement of diversity, fluidity and mobility, art becomes a form of social empowerment by the very surrender of singularity. Reviewing the work of four artists - the Turkish-Cypriot fashion designer and installation/video artist Hussein Chalayan; the British graffiti artist known as Banksy; the New York installation artist Spencer Tunick; and the New York-based multi-media artist Anna Lascari - this piece of commentary aims to show how, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, certain art expresses its *resistance* through various media: whether it be social or political resistance, or resistance to any type of ‘conformity’ which may restrict the potential found in mobility and hybridity.

Hussein Chalayan’s *oeuvre* crosses the boundaries of fashion into sculpture, furniture objects into architecture. If one of the literary concerns of the nineteenth century² was the ‘form’ and ‘content’ divide in literature, complicating the process of ‘content’ as it develops into ‘form’, and locating how ‘form’ becomes an expression of emerging ‘contents’ and ideas, we may find that our century is not necessarily free of this separation.

In 1891, Oscar Wilde writes in ‘The Soul of Man Under Socialism’,

Form and substance cannot be separated in a work of art; they are always one [...]. Style recognizes the beauty of the material it employs, be that material one of words or of bronze, of colour or of ivory, and uses that beauty as a factor in producing the aesthetic effect [...].

¹ Dan Cameron, ‘Inconsolable’ in *Doris Salcedo*, p.9 (Dan Cameron is senior curator of the New Museum of Contemporary Art, and contributor to the magazine *Art Forum*).

² Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde and Gustave Flaubert are examples of several writers of aestheticism who began to emphasize the importance of style and aesthetics in literature, complicating notions about finding ‘meaning’ merely in the subject of a text. For more on this see Pater’s *Appreciations*, Wilde’s *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* and Flaubert’s work ‘On Realism’ in *Oeuvres Complètes, Correspondance*, p.90-95.

The subject is conditioned by the temperament of the artist, and comes directly out of it.³

The materials of the creator, whether it be paint, objects, words or ideas, are, innately, forms that the artist chooses because of the potential s/he attributes to them. In this way, content and form are indissoluble. On the inseparability of form and idea, Gustave Flaubert writes,

It is impossible to extract from a physical body the qualities which really constitute it colour, extension, and the like – without reducing it to a hollow abstraction, in a word, without destroying it; just so it is impossible to detach the form from the idea, for the idea only exists by virtue of the form.⁴

If Flaubert makes a distinction between the two, it is to esteem form over content since, for Flaubert, content, the idea, needs to be exhibited in a given form. Nonetheless, these terms return to remind us that, perhaps, we aren’t always ready to think that they are one and the same in different ways. The fashion editor of *Time*⁵ magazine, Lauren Goldstein, describes Chalayan’s work as being more about ‘substance’ than ‘style’, emphasizing an existing angst to subordinate ‘surface/style/form’ to a ‘predecessor’ ‘depth/substance/content’. But perhaps Chalayan’s aesthetic forms, which are often informed by science, technology, and architectural theories, generate thought and provoke political complacency by the very means within their end: style. What is style, if not the coating, the ‘finish’ of an idea materialized?

Just as Chalayan’s works transcend genre and, the ‘form’ and ‘content’ divide, they also undermine the viewer’s expectations, as does, for example, his terrific runway piece (2002-3) in which naked, and what look like Western, models are wearing the Muslim chador, only not in a traditional manner.⁶ One is entirely naked, wearing only what looks like a leather harness over her face. Her eyes are visible. Another model is wearing half a chador, which covers her as far as her stomach. An artist with a social conscience, this image might be read as, arguably, making some commentary on the different stages of traditional wear, as some have suggested. In response to these interpretations, Chalayan describes the particular show as one that poses questions about defining territory.⁷ Raised in Cyprus, a divided island

³ In *Collected Works*, p. 911.

⁴ Selected from Walter Pater’s ‘Style’, in *Appreciations*, p. 28.

⁵ *Icon* (December 2003),

www.iconmagazine.co.uk/issues/december/hussein.htm.

⁶ This image can be found at <http://www.we-make-money-not-art.com/archives/007197.php>.

⁷ See the article ‘The new sobriety: Covering up the body’, by Suzy Menkes.

between Muslim Turks and Christian Greeks, his work often engages with issues of 'stability' and 'permanency': what often keeps us enslaved to a history of enmity and subordination, material dependency and self-righteousness?

As Chalayan himself remarks:

What [inspires] me [is] the way our lives are in a constant state of mobility, and how, in some ways, that could affect memory, could affect our attachment to domestic things. What would new comfort zones be in those kinds of situations? You know, it's this whole idea of creating a refuge wherever you are. It's quite abstract, in a way it's a bit like meditating on solitude, maybe a bit about nostalgia, how we reminisce, creating a place within a *cavity* [my emphasis], all these kinds of ideas.⁸

Chalayan's use of the word *cavity* as a metaphor is an important one. It suggests that there is no going back to roots or origins once one becomes aware that there is no 'stable' place to which to return; rather, one can hope to find comfort zones, which are mobile, even if they produce some degree of uneasiness. The idea is to create a place within a *cavity* which may be hollow but doesn't necessarily remain so since this crater can be filled in with memories and images, hence a sweet nostalgia of a unified past that relieves us from the weight of a stagnant history of division. The actual refuge, which for Chalayan is transient, can be found in a transformed and transforming gap. His Living Room collection (2000) demonstrates this continuous and rapid change, which prevents one from becoming attached to any particular image. Sculptural dresses convert into tables, which then transform into suitcases, offering us a wealth of images generated in the process of transitioning. His images cannot be arrested long enough to become possessions. They are shifters of shapes and forms, content and concept.

In a parallel way, Banksy's artistic interventions are examples of several kinds of confrontations. When Banksy smuggles, humorously, into the Brooklyn Museum an altered reproduction of a 2 foot by 1.5 foot oil painting of a colonial-era admiral, holding a can of graffiti spray paint on a background of anti-war character,⁹ he is doing more than deprecating the elitist hierarchy of 'high art' still thriving in our contemporary

⁸ *Icon* (December 2003), www.iconmagazine.co.uk/issues/december/hussein.htm.

⁹ <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=3447352403626976278>.

art world. The material activity that goes into the performance of an artist who takes on the authority to shift boundaries that define what can be placed in a museum, is itself a form of socio-political resistance; a dauntless act. Banksy's intervention is a political operation that removes an historical past of colonial imposition only to re-place it into an existing context, equally imposing, in order to comment on our present state of political affairs. In March 2005, Banksy hung in the American Museum of Natural History, a glass-encased beetle with fighter jet-wings and missiles attached to its body: what might be taken for granted to be a harmless insect, appears, here, as military, thus calamitous.

In August 2005, Banksy succumbed to the temptation to paint on the 8 to 10-metre high and 451-mile-long dehumanizing concrete wall of Israel,¹⁰ which cuts through the West Bank, severing the water resources, agriculture, and infrastructure of 6.5 million Palestinian refugees.¹¹ Banksy himself has described the wall as 'essentially turn[ing] Palestine into the world's largest open prison.'¹² On the wall, Banksy paints a hole shaped as though an explosive has gone through it. Through the outlet of this hole we can see a peaceful beach; however, the children, presumably Palestinian, are outside the hole, thus on the side of the wall which allows them to enjoy the pleasures of innocence simply as an imaginary oasis.¹³ Another intervention illustrates a girl holding a bunch of balloons blowing into an imaginary sky of freedom.¹⁴ In spite of the serenity Banksy's graffiti evokes, one Palestinian was offended by this mediation, arguing that it 'makes the wall look beautiful when we don't want it

¹⁰ Mazin B. Qumsiyeh talks about the physical and psychological apartheid implemented by Israel, and its effects on the Palestinian people. He says, 'unlike the physical apartheid constructed unilaterally, psychological apartheid has walls constructed from both sides. These shield people from the reality of the other side and also prevent introspection on their own shortcomings. [...] A sense of hopelessness and desperation leaves many looking for "crumbs" of both material and psychological "food"' (p.210-211). For more on how Israel is continuously violating several of the articles of The Fourth Geneva Convention refer to Mazin B. Qumsiyeh's *Sharing the Land of Canaan*. Mazin B. Qumsiyeh is a human rights activist and co-founder of the Palestine Right to Return Coalition, and Academics for Justice, among other grass-roots groups.

¹¹ Land Research Centre & Applied Research Institute – Jerusalem.

¹² *Guardian Unlimited*, <http://arts.guardian.co.uk/gallery/0,8542,1543331,00.html>.

¹³ This image can be found at <http://www.banksy.co.uk/outdoors/palestine/index.html#> in the top right-hand corner of the gallery.

¹⁴ *Guardian Unlimited*, <http://arts.guardian.co.uk/gallery/0,1543331,00.html>.

to, we hate this wall.¹⁵ Yet the art on the wall offers no illusion of beautifying what is monstrous, or of altering what lies behind it: a bulk of crime and ruthless oppression.¹⁶ By portraying the children outside the haven, we are reminded of the real conditions behind the wall that keep Palestinians confined, therefore we are aware that Banksy's intervention provides an imagined escape from domination without altering our perception of the destruction the wall is causing. On the contrary, Banksy offers art in a prison where persecuted Palestinians¹⁷ do not have the luxury of freedom to enjoy it due to the daily setting under which they have to live. Part of this gesture, however, is to bring art to a place where the drive to create it is inhibited, and in so doing to render it accessible even under the conditions of, arguably, one of history's cruelest crimes. The practice of making art accessible to all, and not confining it to museum and gallery spaces, as such creates a networking of improvisation and facilitates a conceptualization of the artist that depends on the innovative collaboration of the model/viewer/participant for its materialization.

Since 1992, Spencer Tunick has become an icon for his remarkable naked body installations, loosely orchestrated by himself without, however, locking volunteers into a rigorous posing. Tunick's photographs document the real event as it unfolds. He situates thousands of ordinary bodies in public spaces, creating various forms and

¹⁵ *Guardian Unlimited*,

<http://arts.guardian.co.uk/gallery/0,8542,1543331,00.html>.

¹⁶ On 9 July 2004, the International Court of Justice issued its decision on the Israeli wall. The Court's ruling expressed the following. 'The wall is illegal. Israel must dismantle it, and pay compensation to Palestinians who have suffered financial or property losses as a result of its construction. No state should recognize the barrier as legitimate. The UN should act to implement the Court's decision'. We have yet to see the UN execute this decision. For more on this visit the *Global Policy Forum* at

<http://www.globalpolicy.org/wldcourt/icj/2004/0727utmost.htm>.

¹⁷ During an interview on the question of Palestine, the Israeli historian and Palestinian activist Ilan Pappé, says:

The situation has only become worse in the last four years. There are several spheres of brutality that should be mentioned: the collective punishment, the abuse of thousands of detainees and political prisoners, the transfer of people, the economic devastation, the slaying of innocent citizens and the daily harassment at checkpoints.

For more see the journal *Logos* (Winter 2004).

images on bridges and highways, on piers, and outside museum spaces.¹⁸ Not only does he transform landscapes by bringing to them human life in different colours, shapes, sizes and expressions, but he surprises us by subverting our preconceptions of nudity in photography. The naked individual who poses, quite stylishly, in a 'private' space, is replaced by a crowd of naked bodies, crossing the boundaries of race, ethnicity and gender. The ordinary becomes the exceptional. In this traversing of difference, Tunick makes equality visible.

The request to close off a bridge is usually reserved for emergency purposes, e.g. the proceeding of some official figure, or an authorized warning of a 'terrorist' threat. Yet Tunick often has large public spaces evacuated to photograph his installations. Since 1992, Tunick has been arrested five times by the authorities for endorsing ethical matters to do with exhibiting nudity in public spaces. He fought a long battle with former mayor of New York, Rudy Giuliani, for the right to photograph naked people on the streets. The Supreme Court ruled that his work was protected by the first amendment.¹⁹ But Tunick's work is not only confrontational for its nude content. It publicizes what has long been reserved as a 'private' icon: the naked body, and does so by transforming it from the exclusiveness of individuality into a parade of social resistance. In July 2005, Tunick gathered 1,700 naked people, who went on to march, as in a protest, between the Tyne and Millennium bridges on the Newcastle quayside. These marches of the nude send an underlying message, namely, as citizens of the US these volunteers will continue to exercise their right to be photographed nude in authorized public spaces. This is the citizen's right to her/his freedom of expression protected under the first amendment. This protest of the nude has the vigor of any demonstration in its capacity to show how plurality, whether in terms of bodies, genders, ethnicities, or national identities, is an effective means for changing a society's status quo.

Gender, ethnic, political and social inclusiveness are fundamental elements in all these artists' works. Anna Lascari's latest computer-based interactive installation, *Random Identity Forum* (RIF), appears in the form of an entertaining video game, almost: 'design your own flag; create a new European Union'. One enters Lascari's website²⁰ to find a black background with instructions on how to *play*. An interactive forum, RIF is a place where

¹⁸ To see more of Tunick's images visit *I-20* at http://www.i-20.com/artist.php?artist_id=19.

¹⁹ *The Guardian*, National News (18 July 2005).

²⁰ www.annalascari.net/RIF. For the Username enter *rif*; For the Password enter *random*.

one can cast a visual vote based on one's political and inter/national beliefs. The participant has the option to compose a new flag based on the 25 existing EU member countries. By choosing however high a percentage of whichever flag one chooses to preserve, the interactive voter creates a new flag, which can then be distributed to other fellow voters, or printed as a document. On the page 'How to Play', the artist has the following quotation posted from the official EU website *Europa*: 'The idea of a citizens' Europe is very new. Making it a reality will mean, among other things, rallying popular support for symbols that represent a *shared* European identity' [my emphasis]. Indeed, RIF is an invitation to all citizens of the 25 member states to create a vision of another European Union. During an age of increasing disaffection with Western politics and leaders, people are inclined to want to take more power into their own hands.²¹ If the flag of the European Union – a circle of 12 golden stars on a blue background – has symbolic value, Lascari's forum offers a space in which we can replace the existing symbol with multi-colours, creating different patterns according to our vision. But aesthetics and politics are not separate entities,²² and RIF does not

²¹ In 'People and Government, After 5 May, the divorce proceedings continue', Helena Kennedy talks about the British people's disengagement from political life during the last General Elections. She found that

across the established, post-industrial democracies and in Britain, disengagement has four features in common:

- a. a declining outlet at elections.
- b. a declining membership of and allegiance to established political parties: A cross-national study found identification with a political party had dropped across the advanced democracies but this represented a particularly sharp fall for Britain.
- c. increased levels of distrust and contempt towards politicians.
- d. the rise of political activity conducted outside formal democratic mechanisms.

According to Kennedy, 'one of the conditions behind disengagement is that people have been led to a much greater expectation that one should take decisions on one's own behalf rather than delegate them elsewhere.' pp. 32-35. Helena Kennedy is a QC, Labour peer and Chair of the Power Inquiry, an independent inquiry into Britain's democracy.

²² On the relationship between art and politics, Jacques Rancière argues: '[Art] is political as its own practices shape forms of visibility that reframe the way in which practices, manners of being and modes of feeling and saying are interwoven in a commonsense, which means a "sense of the common" embodied in a common sensorium' (p, 1-2). For more see *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*.

seem to be advocating this either. Quite the contrary, it is through a political art that Lascari might be proposing a revisable EU, perhaps an EU whose symbolic consequence is found in a hybrid of identities and not a union comprised of countries with a definite distinctiveness under the auspice of a unilateral coalition.

Lascari's project is powerful for the commentary it makes on the continuous issues which arises with the EU's efforts to arrive at an influential position in world politics. However, it is the way in which the commentary is made that allows RIF to enthrall the viewer. Irony is a clever way by which to invert our expectations, and RIF does this successfully. We are invited into a meeting area to think about and modify the identities to be represented in a new EU flag, and the way to do this is by no means to do it randomly, as the title of the work ironically suggests. If neither the percentages of identities that the participant is invited to form nor the identity of the EU are arbitrarily selected, then the implication might be that what appears to be indecipherable in the final composition of a flag is, in fact, the result of a calculated proposition. If the EU takes itself too seriously during a time when there does not seem to be any current political force powerful enough to oppose US, and to a lesser extent, British imperialism, then RIF opens us up to this incongruous rivalry, by putting us, the masses, in the ranks of the EU. In other words, RIF challenges us to imagine ourselves, the citizens of the world, as the 'Other Superpower',²³ while reminding us that as 'players' in the forum of RIF, we might, like the EU, be amusing ourselves by aspiring to contend with a mismatch – the US and its coalition.

It is in different ways, as I hope I have shown, that each artist expresses his/her subversive aesthetic and political dissidence. In a world of opportunistic leaders who, for the sake of financial advantage and regional supremacy have no reservations about manufacturing a myth to do with Weapons of Mass Destruction, costing hundreds of thousands lives of Iraqis while wreaking havoc in their country, one of the few tools that empowers people is *resistance*, and art is a means to make it visible. Our world of political art, technology, and multi-media, is revolutionary for making art more visible

Further reading includes Katherine Wolfe's article 'From Aesthetics to Politics: Rancière, Kant and Deleuze' found in the journal *Contemporary Aesthetics*, volume 4.

²³ On 15 and 16 February 2003, just days after the US invaded Iraq, the world witnessed the biggest demonstration since the Vietnam War, gathering between 6 and 10 million protestors worldwide. Many, including Jonathan Schell, a contributor of *The Nation* and author of *The Unconquerable World*, called this extraordinary antiwar movement, 'the Other Superpower', as an indication of world public opinion. For more see *The Nation* issue of 14 April 2003.

and accessible to anyone connected with Our-New-World-Without-Borders, and we, the People and Creators, have the power to defy any curtailing of our civil rights and censorship by expressing our resistance and persistently supporting the democratic proliferation of this innovative art.

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