



**THE SEEN AND
THE HIDDEN:
[DIS]COVERING
THE VEIL**

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Marlene Haring

Because Every Hair Is Different, 2007

Photograph

Courtesy the artist

INTRODUCTION/ CURATOR'S ESSAY

IT'S NOT ABOUT THE VEIL, IT'S ABOUT US
THE SEEN AND THE HIDDEN: VEILING AND CONTEMPORARY ART

IT'S NOT ABOUT THE VEIL, IT'S ABOUT US

ANDREAS STADLER

Director of the Austrian Cultural Forum NY, May 2009

Austrian writer Peter Turrini explored the issue of xenophobia in many essays, interviews, poems, and dramas. An acerbic critic of contemporary society, he invariably concluded that e.g. the Austrians often hate that which is foreign because due to their multiethnic history they have foreignness within themselves. In other words: we humans have more potential for hatred when the object of our hatred is part of our own identity. Similarly, in his last novel, *The Castle in the Forest* (2007), Norman Mailer made one more and final attempt at understanding Hitler's anti-Semitism.

French philosopher Julia Kristeva takes up the same theme in her book *Strangers to Ourselves* (1991). In her feminist analysis of Occidental cultural history, she posits that the first foreigners in antiquity were women: the Danaides, who escaped from the patriarchy in Egypt and came to Argos – out of the proverbial frying pan and into the fire. Drawing on the insights of Sigmund Freud, she also establishes a link between the foreign in the unconscious and the repressed. Not until we recognize that the foreign is always a part of ourselves

can we overcome negative repulsion responses and constructively encounter the foreign as part of the ego.

This exhibition is about more than the veil. It presents various artistic positions on a theme that is part of a long tradition of misunderstandings. And when a "Western" institution, in this case the Austrian Cultural Forum New York, puts on an exhibition on the veil, it is less about the veil and its significance in the Muslim world than about our own perspective of it. It is about our construction of the foreign, then, our response to the foreign – us as the "Occident" and our definition of the "Orient." The two terms are both effective and problematic because they are common, simplistic fictions that already contain the seed of misunderstanding and conflict in their very definition.

From a superficial perspective, the topic of the veil and its various manifestations, be it a headscarf, a veil, or a burka, is already highly complex. This is so even though in the USA and in Austria the veil itself is not the crux of the problem. In Austria, Islam has been firmly anchored as an officially recognized religion since 1912, and veiled

women are part of everyday life, including in the guise of Catholic nuns and rural women who wear headscarves. In the United States, on the other hand, the biggest nation of immigrants in the world, there are so many different ethnicities, languages, and clothing styles that we could hardly seriously discuss a rejection of this piece of clothing. In the course of preparing this exhibition I heard of only one failed legislative initiative in Oklahoma aimed at prohibiting women from wearing a veil on ID cards and driver's licenses.

While in Austria and even here – despite 9/11 – the veil is viewed with a relaxed attitude, in Turkey the discussion of this publicly displayed religious symbol is at the center of a constitutional debate. The secular members of Turkish society, referring to Ataturk, are vehemently opposed to the headscarf as a symbol of Islamification. Still, in recent years the Muslim democratic movement – also by advocating the scarf – has gained ground. A growing number of young women in Turkey and around the world are consciously and actively in favor of covering their neck, head, and face with cloth. In France, meanwhile,

there is a strict rejection of the headscarf in public places, including schools, and the same goes for several German states.

On the whole, then, a piece of clothing that has a shared tradition going back thousands of years has become a visual symbol of a cultural conflict between the imagined perceptions of the Islamic and Judeo-Christian worlds, of the "Orient" and the "Occident."

THE VEIL IN HISTORY

If we use the veil as a collective term for all fabric used to cover either just the head and the hair or the neck and the face as well, its history dates back to antiquity. In ancient Greece and in Rome, women wore veils as part of their dress and a symbol of propriety. Often, the veil was primarily reserved for upper-class women, who were able to set themselves apart from common folk because of the cost of the cloth.

In the Old Testament, which is part of both the Torah and the Bible, we find many references to the veil in connection with women. And both the veil and the headscarf are important topics in Rabbinical literature. In Christianity, the Apostle Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians

prohibited women from entering a church without a veil:

"Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonours his head. And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonours her head – it is just as though her head were shaved. If a woman does not cover her head, she should have her hair cut off; and if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut off or shaved off, she should cover her head. A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. For this reason, and because of the angels, the woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head" (I Corinthians 11:3-10).

So for centuries the veil remained a central element in patriarchal, monotheistic religions, and looking back we can say it almost went

unnoticed. It was not until the social revolution and colonialism that it became a distinguishing feature between Orient and Occident. While upper-class Western European women became increasingly prominent visually, the veil acquired the status of an important, even sexually charged device. Starting in the 19th century, veiled women and fantasies of harems began to define the Western concept of the Orient.

In the 20th century the veil became an important symbol of anti-colonialism, among other things when its leading proponent, the French Algerian Frantz Fanon, denounced the battle against the veil: “Every rejected veil disclosed to the eyes of the colonialists’ horizons until then forbidden... The occupier’s aggressiveness... multiplied tenfold each time a new face was uncovered. Every new Algerian woman unveiled announced to the occupier an Algerian society whose systems of defense were in the process of dislocation, open and breached. Every veil that fell... was a negative expression of the fact that Algeria... was accepting the rape of the colonizer.”

FUNDAMENTALISM AS A CULTURALIZATION OF POLITICAL-ECONOMIC CONFLICTS BETWEEN “ORIENT” AND “OCCIDENT”

But above all in the Arabic world, Frantz Fanon’s manifesto against colonialism was still influenced by nationalist-Marxist ideas of modernization. Starting in the 1950s, the generation of Gamal Abdul Nasser

...THE VEIL CAN NO LONGER BE CONDONED AS A FORCED COVERING IMPOSED BY GOVERNMENTS, SOCIETIES, OR CULTURES...

and Ben Bella was caught between the millstones of Soviet Communism and Anglo-American hegemony in the fight for a form of development that was autonomous and ultimately Western in nature. When subsequent generations increasingly headed in the direction of Islamic fundamentalism, it may well have been in response to the many defeats and disappointments that entire

generations of Arabic social revolutionaries experienced with both the capitalist and socialist models of modernization. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 should definitely be seen as an attempt to find an entirely independent path beyond Western ideas – regardless whether left or right.

At this point, if not earlier with the growing explosiveness of the Palestine/Israel problem beginning in the 1970s, the “Orient” acquired two visual logos: Arafat’s Palestinian scarf became a hip symbol for the fighting spirit of a guerilla movement while the veil became a symbol of backwardness and the patriarchal suppression of women in Islam.

Undoubtedly, the collapse of Communism in 1989 allowed the West to bask in the euphoria of being the winner in a historic battle. But only for a fleeting moment. The volatility of the ceaseless conflict in the Middle East, and the first Iraq War in 1990/91, soon silenced the rhetoric of the “end of history.” And several Islamic totalitarian regimes in Africa and Asia established themselves on the wave of the Third World rhetoric against the unfair world economic order. Islamic fundamentalism gained worldwide prominence as a new

opponent of the Western model of capitalism.

From today’s perspective, the consequences of 9/11 make it painfully clear that “we in the West” have too readily thrown out the baby with the bath water. We have rejected all things Islamic as “fundamentalist” phenomena, including the veil and religious traditions.

The return of identitarian politics in the USA and Europe at the turn of the millennium, less out of a concern for representing interests than as an expression of symbolic, ideological, even religiously embellished life styles, demonstrates that fundamentalism is a human and social issue, not a geographically delimited problem of the “Orient” alone.

RESPECT INSTEAD OF CULTURAL WAR

When we recall today how the democratic revolutions swept aside the Communist dictatorships twenty years ago, we should also acknowledge the complex causality of this development. Of course the arms race and the economic failure of the planned economy were central factors. But we should not underestimate the many cultural processes that began to have an effect in the 1970s.

The simple fact that the West demonstrated a degree of understanding and respect, instead of solely presenting itself as an enemy, diffused many arguments by radical communist hawks in Eastern Europe. And the expectation of coexistence helped to ease the tense East West relations.

How does this relate to our theme? As early as the late seventies, intellectuals like Michel Foucault not only saw the negative in the Islamic Revolution. The veil was also stylized as a shield against capitalist hegemony and its consequences, including the flood of images, overstimulation, advertising, propaganda, and mass culture. And when we encounter nudity everywhere today, especially naked women, as visual bearers of commercial messages, we have to ask ourselves whether this purely profit-oriented instrumentalization of the body still represents the liberation that the generation of 1968 once dreamed of.

WOMEN’S RIGHTS AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Even though women’s rights and human rights may well have become more important than ever in international relations, we still live in a disturbing world. We are witnesses

of forced marriages, honor killings, marital and family violence, female genital mutilation, and sex slavery. The veil can no longer be condoned as a forced covering imposed by governments, societies, or cultures.

But we also have to admit that international sex tourism and sex slavery have grown at an alarming rate in the Occidental countries.

The real condition of women, and even more so the condition of human rights, needs to be improved both in the West and in the Arabic-Islamic world.

But if self-confident and independent women choose a certain form of covering their bodies out of their free will, we should accept it with respect and not reject it as backwards or even generate hostility toward it. The same applies to the many forms of dress that we encounter everywhere in Europe and the USA – including exposure and nudity.

This is why we are giving a voice to various artistic positions in this exhibition. We want to promote a serious dialog and take advantage of the opportunity that a new era in the United States is opening up for relations between the Orient and the Occident.

THE SEEN AND THE HIDDEN: VEILING AND CONTEMPORARY ART

BY DAVID HARPER,
MARTHA KIRSZENBAUM
AND KARIN MEISEL

The veil is one of the most symbolically charged pieces of clothing in contemporary dress. With its clear connections to faith, sexuality, and public life, it evokes elements that are both seen and hidden, and invites discussion and controversy through its simultaneously engaging and defensive nature. The practice of veiling became more closely associated with Muslim women in the 19th century through its exoticization and fetishization in Orientalist paintings of masters like Ingres and Delacroix. It remains one of the most visible icons of contemporary Islam, regardless of its deep roots in the two other Abrahamic religions – Christianity and Judaism – and today provokes numerous tensions between religion, identity, and feminism. It represents an important cultural tradition, yet remains a very personal practice for Muslim women. It is this individual, yet universal nature that renders the veil an iconographic symbol in the public sphere and an increasingly popular concept within contemporary artistic practice.

Throughout the world, heated discussion surrounds the practice of veiling. In the West, the veil has often been interpreted as a symbol

of backwardness and oppression, generating controversy where immigration and assimilation have caused a cultural clash. In France, for example, the headscarves of young Muslim students were deemed incompatible with the *laïcité* (strict secularism) of public schools, and similar conflicts have arisen in countries like Germany and Britain. However, this discordance also exists outside of Europe, even in predominantly Muslim countries such as Turkey where, for example, the rigidly secular constitution bans women who work in the public sector or attend universities from wearing headscarves. As a result, protests have come from the conservative and religious in rural areas, as well as from the growing number of urban Turkish women who choose to cover. There and elsewhere, veiling has simultaneously become a symbol of Islamic autonomy and illustrative of the significance of protection, privacy, morality, and piety.

Given the amount of controversy surrounding the veil, it is no surprise that it has become an increasingly common theme in art making, especially for artists working in the Middle East, North

Africa and South Asia, and of the Muslim Diaspora. The subject retains powerful symbolism outside of the Muslim World as well, often addressing subjects like women's rights, domestic life, and issues surrounding the gaze. In the past twenty years, facing the radicalization of Islam in countries such as Iran, Algeria, or Afghanistan, artists like Shirin Neshat, Zineb Sedira, and Mona Hatoum have emphasized the ambiguous role of the hijab in the public life, and also in the private sphere of Muslim women by recalling feminist discourse and critical thinking. While influenced by these pioneers, younger generations of post-September 11 artists deal with the veil in their own ways, bringing new perspectives to an old debate. In a globalized, yet dislocated world, the stakes are radically changing. The dialogue is no longer about fighting issues, as can be seen in the films and videos of Neshat, but rather about composing with them. The intentions of this exhibition are therefore to shed light on the complex relationship of the veil with contemporary society, to underscore individual questioning by examining diverse current artistic

responses and presenting a trans-cultural exploration of various approaches to the literal and, as importantly, metaphorical meanings of the veil.

Touching on sensuality, spirituality, cultural tradition, politics, and the perception of Muslim women, the artists in this exhibition present diverse interpretations on the

...TOUCHING ON SENSUALITY, SPIRITUALITY, CULTURAL TRADITION, POLITICS, AND THE PERCEPTION OF MUSLIM WOMEN...

theme of veiling. For example, Canadian performance and video artist Fahreen HAQ, who is of South-Asian Muslim descent and considers veiling an important element of her family's strong cultural heritage, often alludes to the practice by saturating her work with "political, sensual, and meditative qualities." Asma Ahmed Shikoh, an artist of

Pakistani heritage who wears a headscarf, uses the collected hijabs from one hundred Muslim women across the United States for her piece *Beehive Project* by incorporating the veils into a honeycomb-shaped sculpture. Through this empowering work, the artist combats negative stereotypes and addresses the misunderstandings surrounding these women in American society. Negar Ahkami, the American-born daughter of Iranian immigrants, appropriates the style of Russian *matryoshka*, or nesting dolls, in her work *Persian Dolls*, combating stereotypes and deconstructing the layered identities of Iranian women.

The artists Marjane Satrapi, Shadi Ghadirian, and Sara Rahbar each engage the experiences of Iranian women, who are required to cover under the law of the Islamic Republic, bringing specific significance to their work. Satrapi's critically acclaimed, graphic novel-turned-feature film *Persepolis* is an autobiographical journey widely read in the West. Satrapi, who left Iran for Vienna after the 1979 Revolution and now lives in France, uses humor when discussing her childhood perception of veiling. However, it becomes

a metaphor for her homeland when, as a confused teenager, she symbolically places the veil on her head to return to a place that, while challenging, remains her home: Tehran. Both Shadi Ghadirian and Sara Rahbar offer a view into the current Iranian experience. Ghadirian, who works primarily in photography, interrogates the preconceived role of women under the Islamic Republic, also using humor, by playing on the private, domestic lives of Iranian women. Whether incorporating modern-day themes into imitation Ghajar-era portraits or anthropomorphizing kitchen objects into domesticated women, Ghadirian's work draws on her personal experience as a contemporary woman in a society that challenges the expression of feminine identity. Rahbar, whose family fled for the United States at the time of the Iran-Iraq War, now lives between New York and Tehran. She creates work primarily as a means of self-discovery, the crux of which, like many artists before her, is about understanding her own diaspora: the memory of and longing for her homeland while existing between two fundamentally incongruent cultures.

Her textile and photographic works often incorporate both traditional fabrics as well as nationalist and feminist symbols, featuring the artist as the sometimes masked or veiled model.

Nilbar Güres and Esin Turan, two artists of Turkish heritage who live and work in Vienna, also address the challenges of existing between cultures, where expressing a critical viewpoint while remaining an outsider produces tension. For instance, in her video *Soyunma/Undressing*, Güres removes a series of headscarves given to her by friends, family, and other women of personal importance, metaphorically revealing central elements of her history and cultural heritage. "The reason for my performance," writes Güres, "is to question and discuss the situation of Muslim women living in Austria who are impacted by a racist climate in public space by experiencing discrimination in every day life." Although still personal, Esin Turan's work takes a significantly more provocative position by combining the imagery of the veil with complex series of symbols, including those of terrorism and

sexual freedom, to examine vast ranges of perception on social and political issues within the Muslim world.

French street and performance artist Princess Hijab takes a highly satirical and political stance on veiling by plastering images of veiled women in the streets of Paris and tagging fashion

...COMBINING THE IMAGERY OF THE VEIL WITH COMPLEX SERIES OF SYMBOLS, INCLUDING THOSE OF TERRORISM AND SEXUAL FREEDOM...

and beauty advertisements by covering models in a hijab of black marker.

Also working in France is Zoulikha Bouabdellah, of Algerian descent, who makes work that explores personal relationships to identity and immigration, often utilizing the veil to explore acts of revealing and concealing.

Born in Baghdad, Ayad Alkadhi left Iraq after the first Gulf War, eventually arriving in the United States where he lives and works today. His works mix traditional Arabic calligraphic techniques with contemporary multimedia painting and collage. Like his personal experiences, Alkadhi's art exists at the intersection

...WHILE NOT PHYSICALLY REVEALING, THE VEIL REMAINS PROVOCATIVE IN ITS CONCEALMENT...

of Middle Eastern and Western cultures. Other non-Muslim artists also pick up on themes of cultural crossroads, though often in a more subtle way, such as Bulgarian-born, Vienna-based artist Adriana Czernin. In her work she obscures elegantly drawn female figures with delicate patterns recalling the latticework of

the traditionally Arabic *mashrabiya*, a common window covering that conceals the highly protected domestic lives of women throughout the Muslim world. Austrian Hannah Menne's new textual work, produced for this exhibition, examines the intersections of religious views on veiling as seen through sacred texts.

The veil also occasionally appears with "Eastern" inspiration outside of contemporary Islamic context in surprising ways, even if frequently speaking to similar ideas. *Cartographies of Sex*, a two-part video installation by German-born, Vienna-based artist Katrina Daschner explores unveiling through the art of burlesque; this specific work was inspired by and features vintage footage from a 1940s Egyptian movie starring the famous belly dancer Naima Akef. In the hair-covered works of Viennese performance artist Marlene Haring, the "hair" acts ironically by subverting the traditional veil that is meant to hide a woman's hair. When the hair covers a household object the work explores the humor in the act of hiding, such as with the

Le Corbusier chaise longue that appears in this exhibition.

While not physically revealing, the veil remains provocative in its concealment. Women's rights, relationships to social space, and religion are examples of the issues continually raised by considerations of veiling. The current global debate that is likely to extend well into the future will continue to create constructive dialog and shape global artistic practice. However ambiguous, empowering, or reactionary these artistic positions may be, their examination and presentation is a significant and necessary contribution to an evolving discussion that seeks to define one small facet of the human experience.

**CURATOR'S
INTERVIEW
THREE ARTISTS:
ESIN TURAN,
ASMA AHMED
SHIKOH,
AND
ZOULIKHA
BOUABDELLAH**

BREAKING THROUGH CULTURAL AND POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

KARIN MEISEL IN CONVERSATION WITH ARTIST ESIN TURAN

How would you describe your sociopolitical role as a Turkish artist in Austria?

In my work as an artist I attempt to offer alternative ways of thinking and seeing – without being overbearing. I present sociopolitical issues using visual means and try to break through cultural and religious boundaries by transcending linguistic barriers. My work revolves around universal themes like the feminine in social reflection, sexuality and current events in their inner references to history, and the effects of time and space. I try to keep my independence and critical insight, even when they go against the expectations of society. For artists of Turkish origin in Austria, there is a real danger of sliding into clichés in order to gain notoriety as a “socially insurgent emigrant artist.” It’s pretty common to be labeled as “exotic.” These kinds of pigeonholes exist in art and culture as well.

The veil or the headscarf is a recurring theme in your work.

To what extent has the veil inspired your artistic production?

Religious symbols, and especially Islamic images or symbols in the mass media, convey many layers of meaning. Most of them are subliminal. They are not only associated with Islam as a religion, but also with Islam as a militant movement, often accompanied by the refusal to adopt the value system of the respective host country. The headscarf and veil are generally viewed as symbols of the repression of women in Islam, while gender equality is considered one of the cornerstones of liberal democracies of the West.

Like migration, cultural identity, freedom, and many other political and social issues of global importance, the headscarf is unavoidable as a topic.

Why did you choose the theme of homosexuality for *Livita*?

In Islamic communities, homosexuality is not only a religious problem, but also a social and above all a male problem. Like encounters with women, homosexuality can bring up male fears and possibly even desire, and this stands in the way of enlightened discourse on the issue.

If the male role is attacked in certain points, most respond with denial. To be homosexual means not to correspond with the male image. In my image the male is veiled like a woman.

How would you describe reactions to your art? Are they significantly different in Austria than in Turkey?

Basically, there are no major differences at all. Of course the interest of the press is high when the political aspect of Islam comes into play.

But from experience, I would not like to rule out the possibility that the reaction to my work is more controversial in the West than in Turkey.

A NEW EXPERIENCE: WEARING THE HEADSCARF AS A CHOICE

DAVID HARPER IN CONVERSATION WITH ARTIST ASMA AHMED SHIKOH

Can you tell us a bit about your personal relationship with the headscarf and why you created this work?

I always respected the headscarf, but I didn't actually start to wear it until a couple of years ago. Around that same time, I was starting to prepare for an upcoming show. As a Muslim woman, I had always worn modest clothing, but wearing the hijab was a big step. The work in my studio was therapeutic as it helped me strengthen my faith and integrate various aspects of my life. As the work progressed, I felt the need to include some of my close friends who inspire me by being women of great strength and spirituality. After I came to the US, these young women had become role models. They had successful careers, were integrated and modern New Yorkers, contributed to American society, and yet practiced their religion with equal zeal and dedication. Many of them wore the headscarf without any inhibitions, as a choice and as one of many acts of faith. This was new to me, although coming from Pakistan, the hijab was very familiar.

But back home the hijab was synonymous with being suppressed, backwards, and narrow-minded, following old traditions that segregated society and hampered progress. Seeing Muslim women in America who embraced Islam with knowledge and practiced their faith with better understanding, I am eternally inspired. Through this work, I am celebrating all these women, unknown to me, who mailed me headscarves from different parts of the country to show their support of my work and break the stereotypes associated with this piece of clothing.

The wearing of headscarves has become a very contentious issue in many countries – for example in France, Germany, and Turkey. Do you feel that women in headscarves are perceived differently in the US? Are there still misconceptions? How about as an artist?

I can relate to this question based on personal experience. It's true, in the USA, women who wear a headscarf are still perceived differently. But I guess it has improved a lot

from a few years back. This is mainly because of increased exposure to the Muslim world in the media. Also, many American Muslims are asserting themselves more and more, trying to be seen and heard in a positive way. American society has tremendous tolerance for diversity, and it's easier to be different here, probably more than any other place. That's why many Muslim women feel liberated to make a choice about whether to wear the headscarf or not.

If there is one message you would like this work to convey – what would that be?

Unfortunately, the headscarf has become such a controversial issue. It's actually a very small part of a much bigger value system that I and many other Muslims try to embrace in our everyday lives. This value system emphasizes high moral and ethical standards in society, as prescribed by God. I guess it's the visual aspect of the headscarf that attracts so much attention. I hope we will soon move beyond it to more important issues.

TIED TO MY IDENTITY: WOMAN, ARAB, FRENCH

MARTHA KIRSZENBAUM IN CONVERSATION WITH ARTIST ZOULIKHA BOUABDELLAH

You are often described as a French-Algerian woman artist coming from an immigrant background and working on subjects related to the Arab world and feminism.

I would not picture myself this way, but I am tied to my own history in this space, "France." If you ask me about my origins, I would of course answer that I am Algerian because that is the reality. But I became French, so I would rather argue that I'm French-Algerian. As far as my work is concerned, I believe that my position blurs the lines that form borders. In that sense, all my projects automatically imply my identity: Woman, Arab, French. I naturally gather all these elements of my personality in my artistic approach. I grew up in Algiers and went to Algerian public schools, but my artistic education started to form while living at the Musée des Beaux-Arts d'Alger, where my mother was the director. My parents, sisters, and I lived in this imposing building that exhibited Western and North African artworks. Divided between the

school's religious instruction and my parents' modern education, I instinctively developed a critical attitude towards a society that was nevertheless fascinating to me in its complexity. During my Algerian years, I saw my mother fighting for women's rights and against the Algerian family code as she felt it contradicted the evolution of the Algerian way of life. Being very concerned with the question of women's rights, to which there is still no clear answer, I cannot separate it from my work. However, my art should not be considered militant or political; I want to be viewed as a visual artist utilizing concepts, forms, and colors.

Many of your videos and installations are related to the theme of the veil (*Vois-le*, *Monochrome Bleu*, *Holly Hybrid*). What role does the veil play in your work as an object, a symbol, or a metaphor?

To me, the veil is foremost a plastic and rhythmic solution. As an object, it enables the illustration of such actions as hiding/showing, blocking/

revealing, masking/unmasking, veiling/unveiling, and distorting/restoring the natural. Even before the Veil of Veronica and the Shroud of Turin, the veil was the expression of the relationship between the visible and the invisible. The revelation of the hidden, its ritualization, and the way it is used in an image or a movement is the principle of the sacred, the magical, the religious, the symbolic, the abstract, and the conceptual. *Vois-le* depicts a side view of the face of a woman. She looks at herself, contemplating her reflection, which is an electronic image. She sees herself through a monitor screen. She is veiled, conscious of it, and plays with it. How so? She is unveiling in order to veil her own reflection. Beyond a simple state of mind, she is not a subject anymore, but an object to stare at. My installation *Monochrome Bleu*, like Yves Klein's monochromes, is a synthesis of nature seen from different angles. It is a modern landscape, an interpretation of the sky, the sea. In this blue space everything seems to be permitted, so

why not incorporate the concepts of nudity and veiling within it? *Monochrome Bleu* is also a piece in which I wanted to claim my relationship with the heritage of Western art history – Duchamp, Delacroix. I am immersed in Arab culture, and this leads me to use the veil as a pretext to approach the space or the notion of looking. When the veil meets Klein's monochrome, it creates a hybrid form corresponding to my own identity.

Current situations in France reveal a very specific position towards the question of the veil in public space, which is often misunderstood abroad. Does this social and political aspect of the veil in France affect the way you create your pieces?

What really bothered me about the constitution of the committee on *laïcité* (strict secularism) in 2003 were the circumstances of its creation. I think that respecting the principles of *laïcité* is a more general debate and should not depend on some individual cases. These cases came from Muslim women

who disagreed with the committee, deeming it stigmatizing and aggressive to all French Muslims. My work expresses the hatred behind stereotypes and prejudiced ideas, closed mentalities, and a uniform view of the world. The 2003 committee on *laïcité*, even if legitimate in some sense, took a form that revealed how part of the French society refuses a world built on pluralism.

Talking about your video *Vois-le*, you declared that a woman hides herself in order to better reveal herself, playing with the visible and the invisible. Would that express the paradox of the hijab: its simultaneous perception as a metaphor for submission versus a particular strength of the veiled woman?

I am not veiled myself, so I can't really talk about the strength of veiled women. However, I can attest to the strength of the Muslim women who surround me – my cousins or aunts. For active and independent women, the veil is just fabric allowing them to exist

socially without having to justify themselves. This piece of fabric became a symbol of submission but remains an ambiguous accessory. It was hidden behind a veil that Algerian women fought for national independence, and it's hidden under burqas that Afghani women filmed the obscurantism in their country in order to testify against executions and stonings of adulterous women. I strongly admire Afghani women artists, writers, and filmmakers, as well as the Iranian filmmaker Samira Makhmalbaf. They showed a huge amount of courage to face the violence of a masculine society in countries that have fallen into disgrace and backwardness.

**THE SEEN AND
THE HIDDEN:
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MAY 22 – AUG 29, 2009**

EXHIBITON CATALOG



Persian Dolls, 2009

Hand-painted sculptures on shelf

COURTESY Leila Taghinia-Milani

Heller Gallery

PHOTO David Plakke



NEGAR AHKAMI

Negar Ahkami, an American artist and the daughter of Iranian immigrants, grew up in the suburbs of New York City and uses the negotiation of her cultural heritage as impetus for her art making. In *Persian Dolls*, Ahkami takes the traditional form of Russian *matryoshka* (nesting) dolls and “Iranifies” them.

The outermost figure is cloaked in the typical black chador of the Islamic Republic, reflecting Western stereotypes of Iranian women. As each smaller doll emerges from inside the larger, the women become both younger and more Western, showing the multiple ways in which Iranian women align

themselves with beauty culture under the rule of law that forces them to cover in public. Through the structure of the multilayered *matryoshka* doll, Ahkami reveals the complex existences of the women of Iran.

AYAD ALKADHI

Iraqi-born Ayad Alkadhi spent his childhood between England, the United Arab Emirates, and Baghdad, and graduated with an MFA from NYU's Tisch School of the Arts.

In his works, the artist mixes layers of Arabic and American newspapers with traditional calligraphic techniques and painting to create cloaked figures, using the veil as an integral part of what he calls the "skeletal elements assembled to create a whole being." Alkadhi's paintings exist at the intersection of Western and Eastern cultures, and emphasize the importance that custom, tradition, social reform, and religion have in constructing meaning that it has become virtually impossible to separate the object from its multilayered significance.

- TOP** *Structure I*, 2009
Mixed media on Arabic newspaper on canvas
121.9 x 152.4 cm
- BOTTOM** *Structure III*, 2009
Mixed media on Arabic newspaper and *The New York Times* on canvas
121.9 x 152.4 cm
- OPPOSITE PAGE** *Structure II*, 2009
Mixed media on Arabic newspaper and *The New York Times* on canvas
121.9 x 152.4 cm
- COURTESY** the artist and ArtSpace Gallery, Dubai



ZOULIKHA BOUABDELLAH

Born in Moscow, raised in Algiers, and based in Paris, Zoulikha Bouabdellah is a French artist of Algerian descent whose work questions the preconceived notions about Arabic and Islamic cultures. Bouabdellah's videos and sculptural works feature symbolic objects

that carry anecdotal messages, questioning traditional cultural systems (veils, wedding gowns, family photography, and historic sites of the crusades in the Middle East, for example). In the video *Vois-le*, the artist uses a veil to reveal and conceal a woman's

face. Her reflection is projected onto a television screen that shows images suggestive of surveillance video, both engaging and subverting the notion of the gaze.



Vois-le, 2004
Video
5 min
COURTESY La B.A.N.K, Paris

ADRIANA CZERNIN

Born in Sofia, Bulgaria, Adriana Czernin lives and works in Vienna, Austria. Intricate nets of organic shapes resembling flower petals or leaves often conceal her delicately rendered self-portraits. Other patterns recall the lattice-work of the traditional Arabic *mashrabiya*, a common window covering that conceals the highly protected domestic lives of women. In these works, the line between private and public space is demarcated by ornament that serves as a sort of veil, and sometimes resembles one, obscuring and metaphorically separating the artist in portrait from her viewer. In her video work *Verwicklung (Entanglement)*, the frame is centered on the artist's head, which is adorned by a brightly patterned, Eastern European-style scarf. Throughout the video, she ties, reties, and then pulls at the fabric, which results, as the artist states, "in a fight between the woman and her scarf."

Ohne Titel (Untitled), 2006

Colored pencil and pencil on paper

73 x 50.8 cm

COURTESY Benedikt Ledebur, Vienna

PHOTO David Plakke



KATRINA DASCHNER

German-born Katrina Daschner is a Vienna-based performance artist/ photographer and currently a professor at the Academy of Fine Arts. In her video installation *Cartographies of Sex*, she investigates unveiling through the art of burlesque. Daschner, who frequently plays the characters in her video work, explores a highly charged, sexual gaze and performs both the role of the burlesque dancer and her female admirer. Facing this work in dialogue is the video loop that originally inspired the artist, projected onto a canvas embroidered with what Daschner describes as “imaginary topography.” This one-minute loop, *Naima and Naima*, uses footage from a 1940s Egyptian movie starring the famous Naima Akef, who, like Daschner, plays both the seductive belly dancer as well as the lustful sailor, subverting the Orientalist, male gaze.

Cartographies of Sex, 2008
Two-part video installation,
embroidered canvas
COURTESY the artist
Installation View at the ACFNY
PHOTO David Plakke



SHADI GHADIRIAN

Iranian photographer Shadi Ghadirian holds a B.A. from Azad University in Tehran, where she lives and works. In this group of photographs, from the series *Like Everyday (Domestic Life)*, she humorously plays with the notion of “woman as object” by presenting completely veiled silhouettes in traditionally patterned fabrics with everyday kitchen utensils – a pan, a glove, a spoon – substituted for the face. Through her work, Ghadirian explores the position of contemporary women in a society dominated by masculine stereotypes, and conflicts between tradition and modernity.

TOP

Domestic Life #04, 2002
C-print
50 x 50 cm

BOTTOM

Domestic Life #02, 2002
C-print
50 x 50 cm

OPPOSITE PAGE

Domestic Life #61, 2002
C-print
50 x 50 cm

COURTESY Aeroplastics
Contemporary, Brussels



NILBAR GÜRES

Turkish-Austrian, Vienna-based artist Nilbar Güres holds a BFA from Marmara University in Istanbul and an MFA from The Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. In her series of collages, *Unknown Sports*, the artist depicts women enclosed by curtains, behind which their private spaces are transformed into unexpected sport arenas: “high jumpers instead of window cleaners, sprinters instead of shop runners, shot-putting instead of holding our siblings in our arms.” In the video *Undressing/Soyunma*, Güres starts with multiple headscarves given to her by family members and other personally significant women. Many of the cloth patterns that completely cover the artist’s head and obscure her face reflect her Kurdish heritage. As she removes the scarves, a slow process due to the many pins securing them to her head, she calls out the name connected to each. Part autobiographical self-discovery, part endurance-based performance, the artist metaphorically reveals important elements of her personal history and cultural heritage.



Eishockey, 2009

Acrylic, pen, paper, crayon, pen,
adhesive film, wax
80 cm x 100 cm

Weightlifter, 2009

Acrylic, fabric, pen, paper, crayon, pen,
adhesive film
80 cm x 100 cm

OPPOSITE

Still from *Undressing/Soyunma*, 2006
Single Channel Video

COURTESY the artist



FAHREEN HAQ

Canadian performance and video artist Fahreen HAQ, of South-Asian Muslim descent, earned an MFA in Visual Arts from York University in Toronto. In her three-channel video *Endless Tether*, she expands an intimate gesture between two people to a majestic scale. For HAQ, the exchange of red cloth between a pair of white, male hands, and its slow wrapping and unwrapping around her body, becomes a performance saturated with political, sexual, and meditative qualities. The artist explains that “the tension in the fabric oscillates between being a protective veil and a restrictive rope,” referencing veiling as part of her family’s strong cultural heritage.



Endless Tether, 2005

Three-channel video installation

COURTESY the artist

PHOTO David Plakke

MARLENE HARING

Through simple means and everyday objects – gestures, poses, advertisements, products, or images – Austrian artist Marlene Haring, a graduate of Chelsea College of Art and Design in London and the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, probes the manners and reinterprets the meanings of her surroundings. The first of the artist's two contributions, the giant billboard poster *Because Every Hair Is Different*, shows a seated woman covered head to toe in long, blond hair. The unexpected "coat" suggests both a naked animal and a veiled woman. The second work, *False Friend (Long Chair)*, was made specifically for this exhibition, and features a piece of furniture that is also cloaked in long, blond hair. The classical contour of the so-called "Le Corbusier" chaise longue, designed by Charlotte Perriand, is "improved," remarks the artist, "in accordance with the pervasive icon of feminine beauty, a familiar icon of the modernist interior turned creature." The hair in Haring's works acts as an ironic veil, subverting the traditional veil that is meant to conceal a woman's hair, and speaking to the humor in hiding.

False Friend (Long Chair), 2009
Hair-covered chaise longue
COURTESY the artist
Installation View at the ACFNY
PHOTO David Plakke



ESSAY I

A FALSE FRIEND
[LONG HAIR]

KATARINA V. POSCH

In *False Friend*, Marlene Haring turns a modern icon (the LC4 chaise longue) into a multilayered work of art. The LC4 was named after Le Corbusier, the Swiss pioneer of modern design. Conceived and built as a prototype in 1927, it is an early example of tubular steel furniture. Its industrial appearance signified the idea of “domestic equipment”¹ for Le Corbusier’s “machine for living”² – the modern house. Still produced today, it has become a lasting symbol of Modernism itself.

¹ Le Corbusier, *Cahiers d'Art*, 1926, no. 3.

² Le Corbusier, *Vers une Architecture*. Champs/Flammarion, 1995, p. VI (original: Paris: G. Cres [1923]).

Modernist credo focused on the rational, the (middle- or working-class) public, the international, the standardized, the functional, and the male.³ By contrast, the initial conception of the chaise longue as a furniture type goes back to a time of a very different spirit. It was developed during the Rococo age to serve the relaxed, social, conversational, and sensual lifestyle of the aristocracy. Inspired by the oriental way of lounging, the chaise longue became popular with ladies; it became associated with the private, the sensual, the exotic, and the female – qualities usually considered reactionary⁴ and hence avoided in radical Modernist products.⁵

³ “Men – intelligent, cold, and calm – are needed to build the house and to lay out the town.” Le Corbusier, *Toward a New Architecture*. Dover Edition, Mineola, NY, 1986, p. 127 (original: Paris: G. Cres [1923]).

⁴ Cheryl Buckley, “Made in Patriarchy: Toward a Feminist Analysis of Women and Design,” in *Design Discourse: History, Theory, Criticism*, ed. Victor Margolin. University of Chicago Press, 1989, pp. 251 – 262.

⁵ Penny Sparke, *As Long as It's Pink: The Sexual Politics of Taste*. Rivers Oram Press/Pandora List, UK, 1995, p. 9.

Perriand resting on the chaise longue, 1929
© 2009 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris



Interestingly enough, the chaise longue was not designed by Le Corbusier but by his employee, the young Charlotte Perriand,⁶ one of the few women who managed to make a mark on modern design. Not surprisingly, their professional relationship of ten years was subject to gender-related tensions.⁷ A picture of Mlle Perriand on the chaise longue expresses her ambiguous role in a modern world: she exposes her legs and her neck in a rather provocative way, but does not let us gaze upon her hair (which was cut daringly short)⁸ or upon her face – almost as if she were hiding behind an oriental veil. The picture conveys tension between proactive seduction and traditional modesty.

⁶ Charlotte Perriand, *Une vie de création*. Editions Odile Jacob, Paris, 1998, p. 33.

⁷ Charlotte Perriand, *Une vie de création*. Editions Odile Jacob, Paris, 1998, p. 53f.

⁸ Adolf Loos, “Kurze Haare” (1928), in *Trotzdem: Gesammelte Schriften 1900-1930*. Georg Prachner Verlag, Vienna, 1997, p. 205f.

In contrast to the “industrial” structure of the chaise, Perriand originally covered it in pony skin or Hermès-style⁹ leather-trimmed canvas, both sensual and luxurious materials. Charlotte Perriand succeeded in creating a perfect balance between aspects of rationality and sensuality; between mass production and luxury; between male and female; between control and indulgence.

⁹ Charlotte Perriand, *Une vie de création*. Editions Odile Jacob, Paris, 1998, p. 33.

Marlene Haring overthrows this equilibrium: Her cover of sensual-luxurious masses of hair offers a voyeuristic gaze upon that what is usually trimmed or hidden. Modernists favored short hair and promoted it as sign of liberation.¹⁰ In fact, cut hair continued both Western pre-modern and Eastern traditions, which considered exposed hair to be a sign of the free,¹¹ but required women who were bound by marriage, by serfdom, or by religious oaths to cover or cut off their hair.¹² Marlene Haring’s *False Friend (Long Hair)* thus unveils the chaise longue’s inherent hidden signs of patriarchic inequality, and becomes a critical statement of Modernism itself.

¹⁰ Le Corbusier, “The Furniture Adventure” (1929), in *Architecture and Design 1890-1939*, ed. Tim and Charlotte Benton with Dennis Sharp. The Whitney Library of Design/Watson-Guption Pub., NY, p. 233.

¹¹ Roman Sandgruber, *Frauensachen – Männerdinge: Eine sächliche Geschichte der zwei Geschlechter*. Verlag Carl Ueberreuter, Vienna, 2006, p. 194ff.

¹² Victoria Sherrow, *Encyclopedia of Hair: A Cultural History*. Greenwood Press, CT, London, 2006, pp. xxii ff.

TRINITY, 2009
Mixed media
COURTESY of the Artist



HANNAH MENNE

In her latest work, *TRINITY*, Hannah Menne, a recent graduate from the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna who also spent one year in Israel at the age of 16, explores the overlapping and incongruous elements of the three major monotheistic religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The focus of this work is the complexity

found in transcribing, translating, and (mis-) understanding sacred texts. As the artist describes, “thousands of years of tradition clash with fast-living virtual communities of (non-) believers. The Holy Word functions as a tool to enshroud and dismantle millions of people’s longing for deeper meaning of human existence.”

After You # 17, 2007
C-print
COURTESY the artist
PHOTO Hossein Ghourchian



SARA RAHBAR

Sara Rahbar’s work often incorporates traditional costumes and textiles in order to express a sense of loss and displacement. The artist, whose family fled Iran during the Iran-Iraq War, graduated from Central Saint Martins College in London and the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York and recently returned to Tehran to live

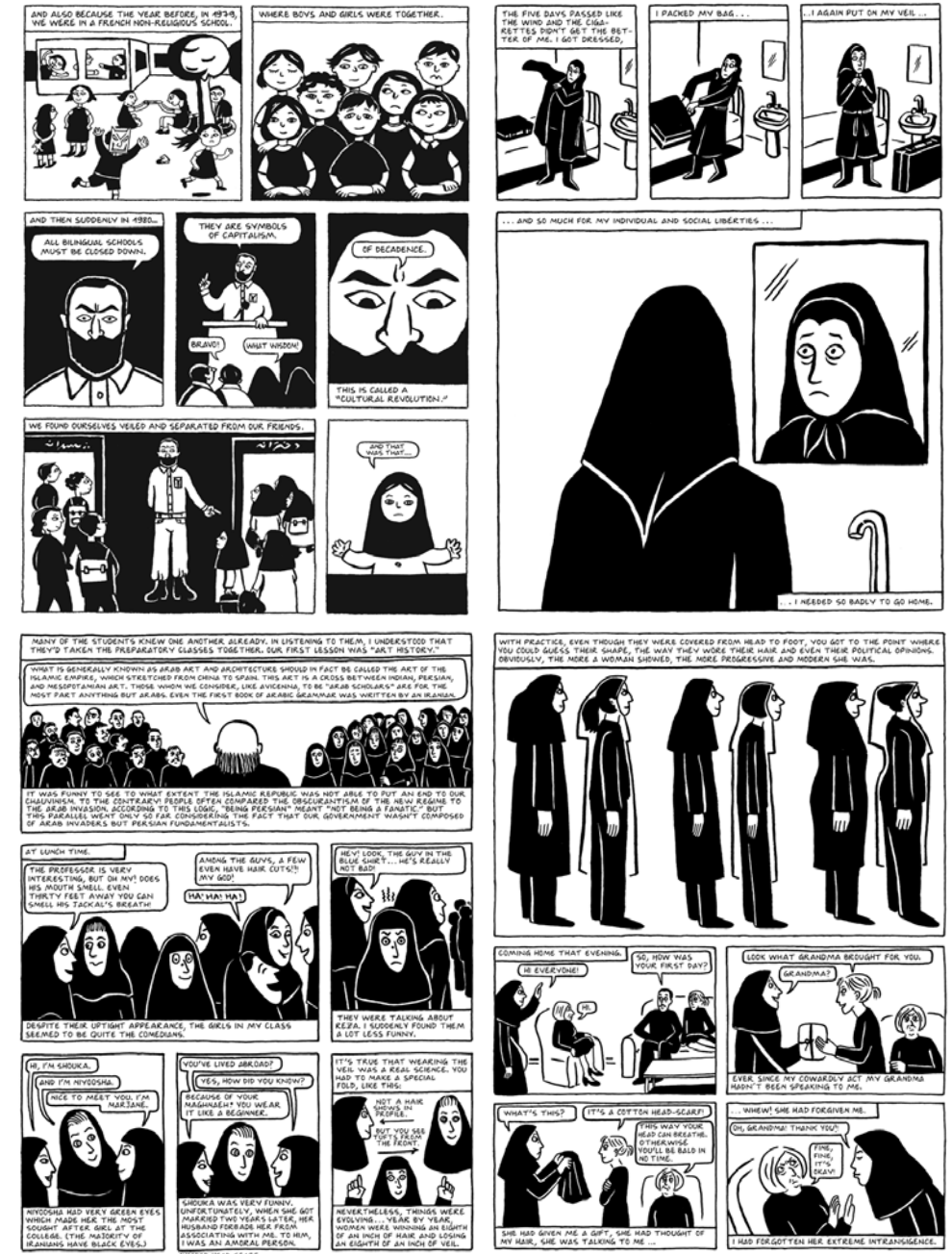
and work. Like other artists who fled devastation and war, Rahbar’s work is about understanding the memory of and longing for her homeland, while existing trapped between two radically different cultures. In her series *After You*, a female figure in Ghajar costume is alone in what resembles a magical, castle-like space, with opulent

sparkling walls that glitter with pink and gold. The figure is portrayed in four positions behind semi-transparent veils or curtains, addressing the viewer through various actions. This series of images is transformative in its juxtaposition of the female figure’s active stance within an architectural space that engages the cultural trope of Orientalism.

MARJANE SATRAPI

Graphic novelist Marjane Satrapi was born in Iran in 1969, left for Vienna as a teenager, and currently lives and works in France. The artist's best-known work, *Persepolis*, tells the story of Satrapi's challenging youth in Iran and her experiences living through the Iranian Revolution and the war with Iraq. These five pages show three stories where the veil plays an important symbolic role in Satrapi's life: as a little girl in Iran for whom the veil is truly strange, a teenager in Vienna where it represents a lost connection to her cultural heritage, and a young woman upon her return to Tehran.

Persepolis, 2003
Print
COURTESY the artist and
Random House Pantheon books



ASMA AHMED SHIKOH

Asma Ahmed Shikoh, who is of Pakistani heritage and lives and works in the New York City area, collected hijabs from one hundred Muslim women across America to create this work. The sculptural form is based on a honeycomb, because, as the artist writes, "honeybees bear special mention in the Qur'an for their healing powers, with a chapter titled 'The Bee' (Chapter 16), in which it says: 'And [consider how] thy Sustainer has inspired the bee: "Prepare for thyself dwellings in mountains and in trees, and in what [men] may build [for thee by way of hives]; and then eat of all manner of fruit, and follow humbly the paths ordained for thee by thy Sustainer. [And lo!] there issues from within these [bees] a fluid of many hues, wherein there is health for man. In all this, behold, there is a message indeed for people who think!'" Each cell represents one of the participating women by holding the individual's scarf, and therefore, a part of her identity, while alongside the border of each cell the occupation and location of the original owner are presented.

The Beehive, 2006
Mixed media installation
COURTESY the artist
PHOTO David Plakke



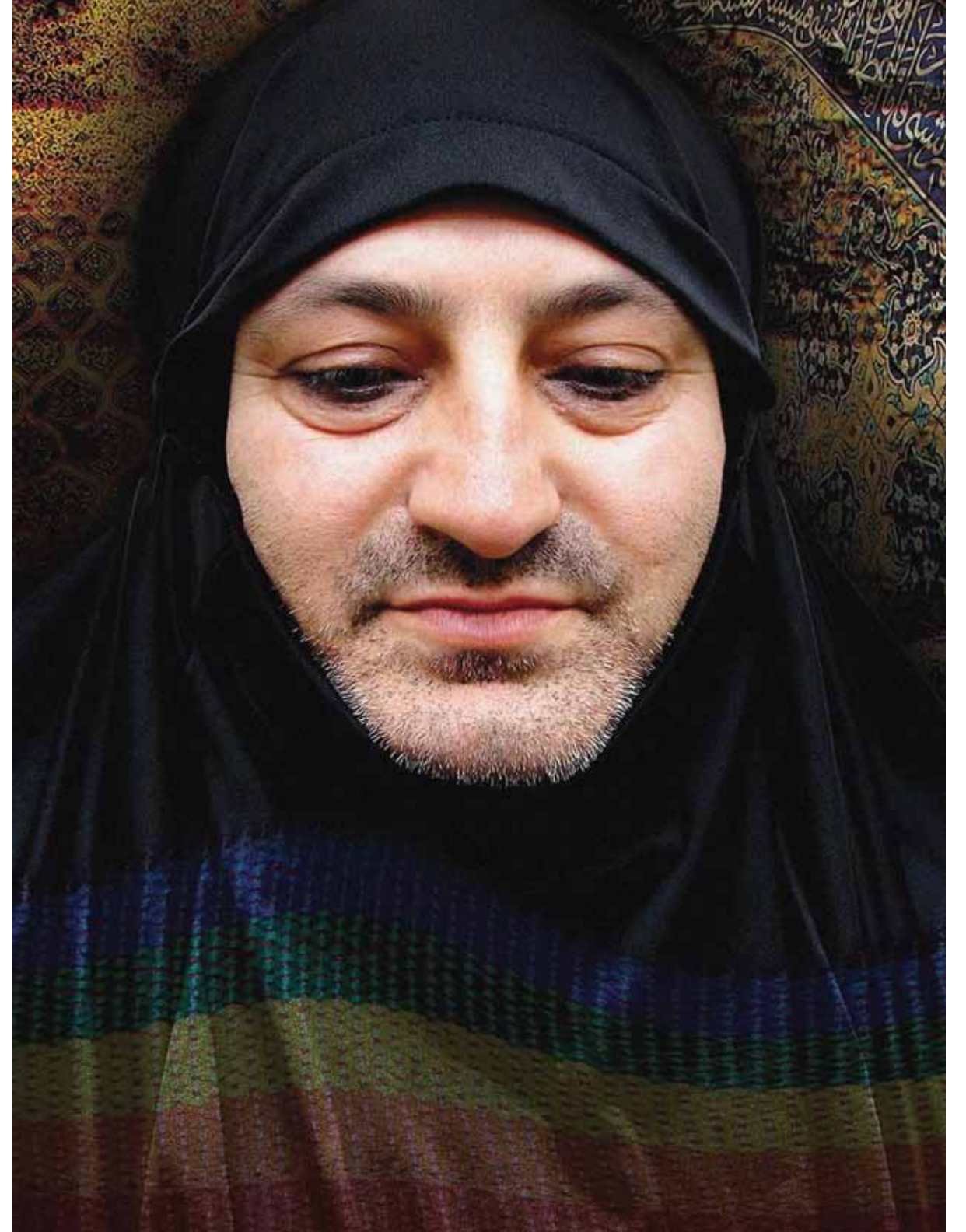
ESIN TURAN

Turkish-born Esin Turan holds degrees from the Academy of Fine Arts in Ankara and the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, where she lives and works. Her art focuses on femininity as a socio-sexual construction, as in the photographic work *Livata*, where the artist deals with homosexuality and the tension surrounding it not only through the eyes of religion, but also as a social issue within the Muslim world. By combining two symbolic textiles – the rainbow flag and the black hijab – into a single piece of clothing worn by a man, Turan engages the complex and often obscured themes of gender and sexual identity in Islam.

Livata, 2009

Photograph mounted on aluminium

COURTESY the artist



ESSAY II, III, IV

**ISLAM IN AUSTRIA –
OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES BETWEEN
MARGINALIZATION AND INTEGRATION
WHEN HISTORY WEARS A VEIL
THE CONTROVERSY OF *MITGIFT***

ISLAM IN AUSTRIA – OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES BETWEEN MARGINALIZATION AND INTEGRATION

FARID HAFEZ, 2009

AN ANOMALY

Austria has the oldest tradition in Europe and the most extensive institutional structures for the integration of Islam. Muslim minorities have been in Austria since the days of the Habsburg Empire. And even though the first contacts were established in connection with hostile encounters (the annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina with Austro-Hungary), in time a loyal fellowship evolved. The 1912 Islam Law dating from this period legally recognized Islam as a religion and in 1979 formed the basis for the institutionalization of Islam as a religious community alongside twelve other church and religious communities. An estimated 400,000 Muslims live in Austria today, about half of them Austrian citizens. The majority have their roots in Turkey, Bosnia, Herzegovina, and Albania. Small minorities come from predominantly Arabic or other countries or are converted Austrians.

Without a doubt, legal recognition was able to fulfill multiple dimensions. Among other things, government authorities can now turn to the Islamic Community in Austria as a liaison for Islamic affairs. Additionally, the status

afforded to Muslims serves as a nice cultural ornament to support the little Alpine country's economic ambitions in its relations with the Middle East. As such, it can be shown off in the context of international meetings like the European Imam Conference, which is organized by the Islamic Community in Austria and the Austrian Foreign Ministry. De facto, the government's recognition also introduced possibilities for Muslims to participate and has protected them from discriminatory legislation. This aspect has become particularly relevant with the increase in public debates surrounding Islam and Muslims in the post-9/11 era. Against the backdrop of the recognition of Islam, a headscarf ban in government institutions is unthinkable in a system of consensual secularism as in Austria. Last but not least, this brief article will take a closer look at one more aspect: the question of identity.

IDENTITY: INTEGRATION INSTEAD OF MARGINALIZATION

The legal recognition of Islam is accompanied by several rights and obligations. One example

is the availability of Islamic religious instruction in public schools. In a textbook case, such a recognition would have a dual effect. It demonstrates to the majority society that minorities need to be recognized and not only need to be given a place, but an equal place on the part of the Republic of Austria. Each of the 13 recognized churches and religious communities in Austria has the possibility to organize religious instruction with the financial support of the government and yet with autonomous decision-making. On the side of the minorities, this demonstrates to young students of Muslim faith that they are home here. Their religion is not perceived as foreign because it is accepted. They do not have to relegate their religion to their private life since it is publicly acknowledged in educational institutions. The Muslim religion is no longer different and foreign, but has become a "normal" religion and an integral part of society.

ISLAMOPHOBIA: THE "AUSTRIAN IDENTITY," THE MEDIA AND PARTY POLITICS
Of course the textbook function is also challenged. For decades,

and for the most part to this day, the Second Republic transported an identity in public perception that relatively speaking was increasingly marginalizing after divesting itself of the identity of the Habsburg Empire. After years of struggling to establish an Austrian identity, one development was particularly damaging: The debate surrounding

...THE MUSLIM RELIGION IS NO LONGER DIFFERENT AND FOREIGN, BUT HAS BECOME A "NORMAL" RELIGION AND AN INTEGRAL PART OF SOCIETY...

the "foreigner problem," primarily at the instigation of Haider's right-wing populist Freedom Party (FPÖ), became a problem of Islamophobia in the wake of 9/11 and the subsequent attacks in Europe. It is relevant to note that in the 1980s and 1990s, the majority of "foreigners" in Austria were of Turkish or ex-Yugoslavian origin and hence

mostly Muslim. Around the world, the media conveyed images of an aggressive, violent, and destructive Islam. The former fear of a flood of foreigners faded, or rather expressed itself more specifically in a fear of the Islamification of Austria and Europe. The attacks in Madrid, London, and Istanbul, and in particular the murder of the artist Van Gogh (a descendant of his more famous namesake), had a very disintegrative effect. Suddenly, the media were on the lookout for their respective homegrown terrorists. These debates made one thing especially clear: political recognition does not necessitate social recognition in the sense of actually normalizing Islam and Muslims as a part of Austrian society.

A RAY OF HOPE FOR THE FUTURE: THE AUSTRIAN ISLAMIC IDENTITY
Muslim Youth Austria was founded in 1996 by young persons of the second and third generation of Muslims and young converted Muslims. The central philosophy was to mirror their understanding that being Austrian and being Muslim is not a contradiction. This message was also addressed to two recipients: the public

perception of the majority society, which viewed all things Muslim as culturally foreign, and the extreme fringes of the Muslim minorities who preferred a life in isolation. The idea was to promote what was tellingly referred to as the “Austrian-Islamic identity.” It was the expression of a self-perception leveled against right-wing, identitarian politics and advocated the recognition of multiple identities.

Addressing this issue will not be insignificant for the question of peaceful and prosperous progress in Austria. When people feel excluded, they withdraw, resign, or, in the worst case, attempt to react destructively. Political recognition is a potential that also needs to find its social counterpart and realization. Many sides have already contributed to the process.

MUSLIM WOMEN AS THE FOCAL POINT OF CONFLICT

This question will be emblematically decided in the context of the role of (Muslim) women in society. As so often in history, the position of women in society is an indicator for the development of that society. In the case of Muslim women, competing images are vying for

recognition in the public sphere. The Muslim woman is not necessarily a woman wearing a headscarf. This is not what gives Islamophobic ideologues a headache. After all, they say, Muslim women are “integrated” in the sense of assimilation. What is at stake here, though, is inclusion \in the sense of the acceptance of differentness. Opponents

...AS SO OFTEN IN HISTORY, THE POSITION OF WOMEN IN SOCIETY IS AN INDICATOR FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF THAT SOCIETY...

of the headscarf codify it as a symbol of “political Islam,” a sign of the “suppression of women,” and hence a symbol of “Islam perceived as a threat.” Muslim women who chose to wear the headscarf, in turn, interpret it as a sign of the “freedom to withdraw from the dictate of the gaze of strange men,” as a symbol of their “autonomy,”

their “freedom to make decisions about their own body,” and their “spiritual devotion to God.” While they are accused of failing to allow objectivity to prevail in public offices by wearing a headscarf, the charge dissolves as soon as the scarf leaves the head.

So far, it has not really been a burning question in Austria whether Muslim women are allowed to take the place they desire in the public sphere. This is above all a result of the fact that the first wave of female immigrants who joined their families in the 1970s included very few educated women. Most of them were mothers and housewives. And to this day, among the Muslim population with a migratory background, the level of education, the proportion of academics, and the number of people in leadership positions are still very low. But there is a new group of young Muslims, and particularly Muslim women, who no longer correspond to these clichés. They are crowding the universities and sooner or later will want to take to a visible position in public. Some of them wear the headscarf as a symbol of their spiritual identification with God and consider their

profane aspirations at university and in the working world to be in harmony with this sacredness.

The question which position these young women are afforded is of decisive importance for the inclusion of Islam in the sense of community in Austrian identity. With respect to their working environment, then, these people are at a crossroad. One path heads in the direction of a social majority with socioeconomic structures in which young Muslims cannot resort to familiar continuities and have to rely entirely on their capabilities. After all, their parents came as guest workers and they are now looking to leave this milieu. The other path leads to specific sub-structures in our society. In the field of ethno-marketing, people with migratory backgrounds promote ethno-jobs to sell ethno-products to the minorities. Not being recognized as part of society would prompt people to build a little universe for themselves, and in the worst case a counter-universe.

To a large extent, this development depends on which interpretation of the Austrian identity will prevail. It has to be an Austrian identity that recognizes

the Muslim identity as part of its own and emphasizes a political identity apart from religious identity. It cannot be an identity that defines cultural aspects so rigidly that there is only room for white, Christian Occidentalism where Europe is constructed as uninfluenced by Islam.

Farid Hafez is a founding member of Muslim Youth Austria. He holds an M.A. in political science and an MSc in civic education. He is a research fellow at the Department of Legal Philosophy, Law of Religion, and Culture, University of Vienna, and lectures at the Institute for Oriental Studies.

WHEN HISTORY WEARS A VEIL

STEFAN BIDNER

PRELUDE

Like no other piece of clothing, the veil is symbolically charged and forms a narrative knot entangled with contemporary conflicts revolving around values, morality, identity, politics, and culture. While in the “secularized” West, the veil is considered an archaic relic exploited by fundamentalist Islamists in their bid to suppress women, in the Islamic tradition it is reclaiming its role in the protection of privacy and stands for cultural independence. Conversely, in the arena of civil liberties and data protection, in Western democracies veiling is at least ethically upheld as a means to protect individual freedoms. In this sense, the veil at once embodies disciplinization and freedom, anonymity and identity.

FLASHBACK: THE VEIL OF MEMORY

In 1968 the secularized world dreamed of the political revolution, but it did not lead to any fundamental changes. The following decade was defined by pacifism (the hippy movement) and terrorism (RAF, Red Brigade). But it was also a time of the grand utopias and social achievements like sexual liberation and emancipation.

The naked body was used as a weapon to seduce, break taboos, and assert its freedom. This new cult of the body found its strongest expression in the arts. On the search for the ideal form of physical love, people indulged in excesses (Muehl commune) with the objective of damasking democracy.

When intellectuals like Michel Foucault showed solidarity with the Mullah regime in Iran in the late 1970s, ideological values were up for discussion that since the revolts of the 1960s had emerged as a battle against the capitalist hegemony.

The veil was understood as a criticism of the flood of images, advertising, propaganda, and cultural industry. Objection, resistance, and iconoclasm were articulated out of various motivations, engendering misunderstandings, false alliances, prejudices, and twisted agendas to this day.

In Western subcultures of the 1970s, veiling and nakedness were not considered contradictory, but instead were viewed as a rejection of consumerism, status symbols, and economic dependencies. Starting in the 1980s, it appeared that ideological cultural struggles were being replaced with questions of identity and cultural attribution.

Does this mean that cultures have mutated into an ideology-free zone where there is nothing left to negotiate except customs and origin?

FADE-IN:

WHAT DOES THE VEIL CONCEAL?

The veil, then, is multiply coded and lends ambivalence and dialectical contrariness to any exhibition exploring the theme.

It stands for tradition, religious affiliation, conformity, and discipline, for crime, terrorism, anarchy, revolt, independence, republican values, and subsidiarity, for objection, silencing, and anticapitalism. The veil is not just a simple piece of clothing or a modern accessory, it is part of speaking, of thinking, and of acting; it is political and economical, and it is increasingly constituting itself as technological. It acts as an object of both distinction and camouflage.

EPILOGUE

All these are often fundamental issues, the stuff art is made of. More than anyone else, artists pose delicate questions to themselves and to us as viewers. Each in their own way, they present our polarized and veiled society against the backdrop of historic circumstances. When history wears a veil, it needs to be assessed in reference to the present in order to arrive at new rules for dealing with the past.

THE CONTROVERSY OF MITGIFT

BY DAVID HARPER,
MARTHA KIRSZENBAUM
AND KARIN MEISEL

When we first encountered Esin Turan's *Mitgift*, it was early in the research process preceding this exhibition. In fact, Turan was one of the first artists we found who both worked in Austria and dealt directly with Muslim issues – immigration, alienation, and in particular women's issues including concepts surrounding the veil. The power of *Mitgift* became a sort of precedent that we applied to many other works considered for the exhibition. It was beautiful, strong. The artist's eyes staring out defiantly from beneath her black hijab and niqab still haunt many who have encountered it. Its power seemed to be derived from its simplicity: it is a portrait of the artist, completely covered except her eyes and a few strands of her crimson hair, facing the viewer defiantly. Behind her stands a stylized yet obvious American flag, around her neck a heavy strand of golden hand grenades.

To us, the work seemed almost too perfect as a metaphor for the stereotypical perceptions of veiled women, of Muslim women. The palpable strength in the figure, even with so much of her face and body obscured, made an impact we felt was essential to see in order

to begin to understand. Of course, it brought to mind stories of female suicide bombers who abused the inherent respect women receive in the Muslim world to get past security checkpoints. This had precedence, of course; on the flight to Vienna to meet with Turan and several other artists under consideration, we had all read Fanon's recounting of the ways Algerian women had used their coverings to conceal weapons in fighting against the French. However, for us, this work was never about terrorism. We felt all along that the work was not a call to arms, but rather posed a question about perception, asking: is this what you must think of me? In a post-9/11 world, the defiance of this veiled and be-grenaded woman was symbolically loaded.

The word *Mitgift* in German is translated in English as "dowry"; in the case of Turan's work, this dowry became less about the bounty a promised woman might come with to her marriage and more about the burden a Muslim women must carry through her entire life, whether it be objectified by tradition, forced into a loveless marriage, or perceived as a threat, especially while navigating the Western world. In *Mitgift*,

Turan utilizes the veil as a metaphor for otherness. This can also be seen in the work that ended up being in our exhibition, *Livata*, which is about the conflicts between homosexuality and Islam.

As part of the Muslim Voices festival, a pan-institutional collaboration between a number of major New York institutions, including Asia Society, Brooklyn Academy of Music, and NYU Center for Dialogues, there was a concern – perhaps even a deep-seated fear – that a work like Turan's would be used negatively by sensationalist media. The image could have easily been misconstrued to discredit the message of the festival – one of peaceful, intellectual dialog and mutual understanding between cultures. If one media outlet twisted Turan's work into nationalist, anti-Muslim drivel, all of our hard work could be for naught. Some of us disagreed wholeheartedly, seeing the importance of such a work made by a woman artist of Muslim descent, and the importance in showing it in this context; others, seeing the power contained in this photograph, felt that there was an enormous risk. The most fearful of us saw the tabloid headline clearly in our minds:



Esin Turan
Mitgift (Dowry), 2009
Photograph mounted on aluminium
COURTESY the artist

ISLAM FESTIVAL CELEBRATES TERRORIST ART.

The dialog about showing this work of art went on until, literally, the day the show's installation was completed. Curatorially, we had hoped that our continuous vocalizations about the power of art and the freedom of speech would force people to see the importance of this work (notably, all had understood both its power and beauty) and past the associations with terrorism and suicide bombing. We were asked to not show this work, and ultimately, the decision was made to do just that. We had to inform Esin that we in fact would not be able to show the work she had sent us (due to the ongoing discussion, the work had been packed up and sent from Vienna to New York). Rightfully, she was beyond hurt and offended. Anyone who knows artists knows how they feel about the art they produce. We explained: it's complicated – we love it, *but*. She heard: you are being censored. And she was not necessarily wrong. Turan's first reaction was to compose a text that, we thought, spoke to her maturity as an artist and person. It was a heartbreaking piece of writing. She asked questions

like “when did art become not free” and wondered if we once again lived in a world where we “burn books” rather than understand them. She had every right. To her, we might as well have burned the work and left its ashes on the floor of the gallery. Her second reaction, brilliantly, was to show the work, but covered in an actual black veil.

...WE WERE ASKED TO NOT SHOW THIS WORK...

It was a little foolish to think we could get away with such a prank, but the bold statement of self-censorship Turan proposed was too powerful for us to resist. Of course, this attempt did not work, seeing that a covered work could be even more inflammatory than the photograph presented as it was meant to be. Any critic, or crazy person, who might have passed by an uncovered *Mitgift* without even noticing it, would have to know exactly what was beneath the black shroud. In the end, *Livata*, rainbow flag and all, was included instead. It was deemed provocative, but not

dangerous, and without direct associations to the never-to-be-spoken “T” word (that's terrorism, in case you were unsure).

We can say, unequivocally, that not displaying *Mitgift* in the context of this show was the hardest curatorial decision any of us has had to make because it was emblematic of the inescapable mishmash of political correctness and the fear of terrorism and Islam in the US. However, this decision was made proudly, not a result of fear but rather from a series of intellectual discussions with scholars and professionals and with one another. Perhaps, though, there existed a sort of meta-fear – a fear of creating fear – or at least of perpetuating misunderstanding. To combat this was first and foremost the attempt of this exhibition.

This book has been published to document the exhibition

THE SEEN AND THE HIDDEN: [DIS]COVERING THE VEIL
MAY 22 – AUGUST 29, 2009

CONCEPT AND PRODUCTION

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