



SABINA HOLZER

*A p p r o a c h i n g
a s a*

*M y s e l f
S t r a n g e r*

*

A n a t t e m p t a t a l i e n k n o w l e d g e

* *

*S u r r o u n d i n g s
o f t h e
a p p r o a c h i n g
a s a*

*a n d t r a c e s
p e r f o r m a n c e
m y s e l f
s t r a n g e r*

* * *

»The simplest truth about man is that he is a very strange being; almost in the sense of being a stranger on the earth. In all sobriety, he has much more of the external appearance of one bringing alien habits from another land than of a mere growth of this one. . . . He is at once a creator moving miraculous hands and fingers and a kind of cripple. He is wrapped in artificial bandages called clothes; he is propped on artificial crutches called furniture.«

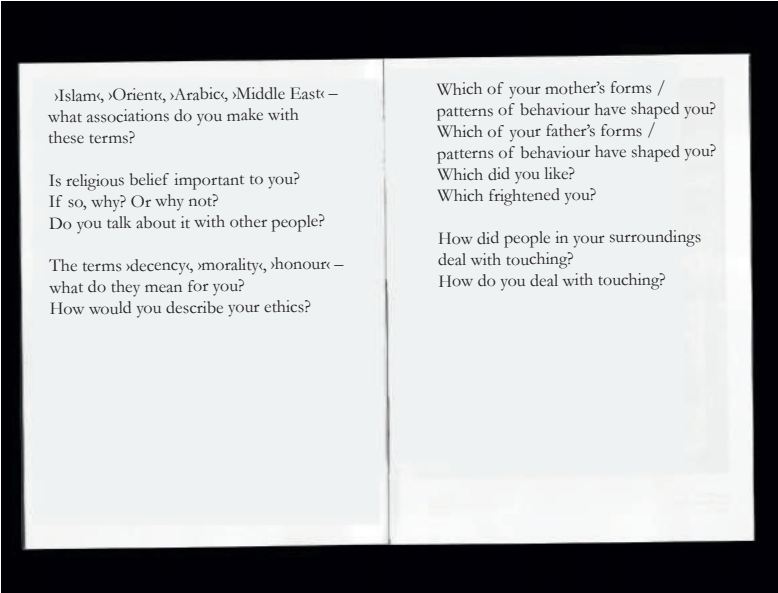
Thus Slavoj Žižek, writing in *The New Statesman* February 2016 and *Die Zeit* April 2016, quotes G. K. Chesterton from *The Everlasting Man*. And he goes on to ask:

»Is a »way of life« not precisely such a way of being a stranger on the earth? A specific »way of life« is not just composed of a set of abstract – Christian, Muslim – »values«; it is something embodied in a thick network of everyday practices: how we eat and drink, sing, make love, how we relate to authorities. [Islam (like every major religion) is a name for a whole way of life, which – in its Middle Eastern version – is based on a big family with pronounced authority of parents and brothers (which is not specifically Muslim but rather Mediterranean) . . .] We »are« our way of life: it is our second nature, which is why direct »education« is not able to change it. Something much more radical is needed, a kind of Brechtian »extraneation«, a deep existential experience by means of which it all of a sudden strikes us how stupidly meaningless and arbitrary our customs and rituals are.«

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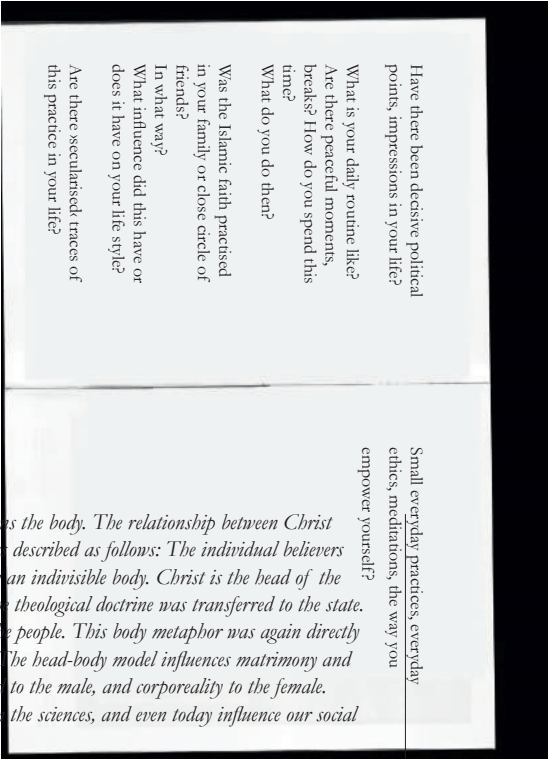
Žižek, Slavoj: *What Our Fear of Refugees Says About Europe*, *New Statesman*, 29 February 2016; *Wir sind alle sonderbare Irre*, *Die Zeit*, No. 16, April 2016

In the performance *approaching myself as a stranger* I wanted to make contact and get in touch with women from the Arab world in order to explore what I can change in my own thinking by attempting to work with a knowledge that is strange to me. I wanted to approach Middle Eastern women's understanding of being subjects and their relation to the body, their relationship to their female bodies and to find out what spaces of action and thought arise from it. What does it have to do with the contradictory roles and fantasies that the Occident ascribes to the female body, the ›Oriental woman‹; the orality, sensuality and eroticism on the one hand, exclusion, subservience, victimhood on the other? Here it was essential for me to keep the encounter as open as possible and to give room for the various nuancings of secularisation, politicisation and religiosity.



Bodies. Nothing full, no filled space. (Space is filled everywhere.) Bodies. Open space, spatial space in a sense, much more than just spacious space. Not only sites. Bodies are sites of existence. There is no existence without a site, without a ›here‹, without a ›here‹, without a ›see-here‹ for the ›this‹. The body sites are neither full nor empty. They have no outside and no inside, no parts and no totality, nor do they have functions and finitude at their command. They are all together. Apathic and acephalic. If you can say so. Skin, folded manifold, folded again, unfolded, replicated, invaginated, equipped with orifices, volatile, permeated, strained, released, excited, amazed, bonded, bandaged, wonderful skin. In this and thousands of other ways the body grants existence. Body existences. Corpus fictum, corpus imaginatum.

I compiled a questionnaire in order to get into conversation with women who live in Vienna and come from the Arab world, or who are from an Islamic background. I wanted to know what the inscriptions, rules and imaginations are with which they encounter the world. What is their way of life and how does it differ from mine? When and where are we different? What are my prejudices and trivialities? What are they composed of? What do women tell with, by and through their female bodies? What subserviences and confirmations do they experience and how do they deal with them?

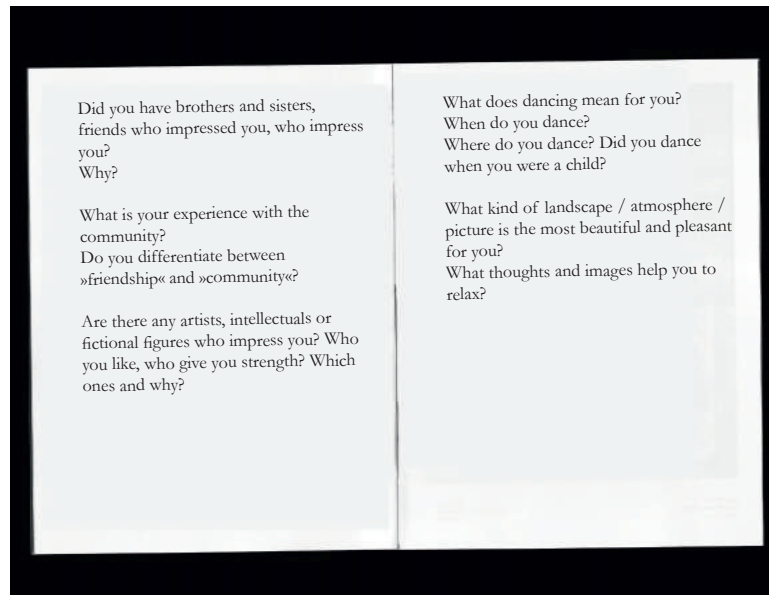


In Christianity, the head governs the body. The relationship between Christ and the religious community was described as follows: The individual believers are limbs, which in Christ form an indivisible body. Christ is the head of the community, which is a body. This theological doctrine was transferred to the state. The king became the head of the people. This body metaphor was again directly transferred to gender relations. The head-body model influences matrimony and the community: mind is ascribed to the male, and corporeality to the female. These ascriptions are reflected in the sciences, and even today influence our social coexistence.

In Judaism, the female body metaphorically takes the part of the earthly house, which at the same time forms an integral part of the community. It does not represent an anomaly or something which is excluded. Naturally, such a community-forming function also implies control of the female body. But in the Diaspora, this control rather implies great presence in the world outside the house. The ›house‹ goes wandering, and the female body becomes the mundane correlate of the ›portative fatherland‹. Contrarily, the house in Islam is a permanent domicile. This can still be seen in the architecture of the cities. Living and business quarters are separated, the ›openness‹ is directed inside, the buildings are closed towards the outside. In Islam, the symbolic house is the veil. Hijab, literally ›curtain‹. Arabic does not differentiate between partition and veiling. The Qur'an represents the ›portative fatherland‹ of the Islamic Diaspora, the veil the ›portative mother country‹.

I concerned myself with feminist Arabic literature, among others with texts by Fatima Mernissi, Mira al Tahawi and Assia Djebar and with texts on Islam and the written religions (as they are analysed, for example, in *Verschleierte Wirklichkeit* [Veiled Reality] by Christina van Braun and Bettina Mathes). The writing of Hélène Cixous was and is essential to my analysis of writing and language. Because, as she says, a political analysis cannot take place without an analysis of the language. I find that the transition from sound / song to language and the relationship of writing to the spoken word is essential. For me it reflects an approach to language in which writing is rather considered as a *score* that is to be interpreted, a trace, an impression of life. Language and writing thus become a poetical instrument to explore the world. In this way, the written word is not the general law and thus the truth, and thus does not have the power to rule and establish identity. To approach the spoken form through movement opens up possibilities to play with words and sounds and to arrive somewhere where one's own language is still ignorant. Words that compose themselves in this way create trans-personal meaning contexts that simultaneously express social reality and individual awareness. By means of such transitions and interstices I have attempted to indicate the difference between Arabic and Greek script; because while in one the letters are only realised by speaking, in the other the script stands on its own. Thus hearing becomes an essential part of speaking (as well as reading as an essential aspect of writing). Listening to the others, listening to oneself. Dialogue and conversation.

While working on the text for *approaching myself as a stranger* I walked from my house to the various mosques in Vienna and while doing so I wrote in coffee houses and on park benches. On these walks, roaming around, my (home) town unfolded itself afresh. It was amazing how many mosques were to be found in quite normal residential buildings, or as places of encounter and community, completely non-prestigious. I sought out these places always unannounced. Sometimes there were conversations, sometimes uncertain, angry looks, sometimes surprised amazement. It always felt like a risk, setting out alone for a strange place, even if it was in my own city. That is said, and thereby how quickly we become strangers. How sensitive and immediate the perception of a belonging manifests itself. And in this, *one of these multiple affiliations* there are innumerable possibilities of distances and closeness. There is not just one allegiance. And non-allegiance does not also mean automatic exclusion. Politics drives us in front of it with these opposites and manoeuvres us into the corrals of neoliberal right-wing populism. These opposites are unfortunately repeatedly redefined through thinking spaces, written down and described. These are precisely the spaces that we must repeatedly differentiate and appropriate with our thoughts, bodies, language and action, to set them in motion.



House.

Habitat.

Home.

Homeless.

No home.

Nomad.

Gypsy.

Wandering. Meandering. Rendering. Space. Place. Spacing. Placing. Positioning. Rendering positions. Entering positions. Centring Positions. Changing Positions. Cherishing positions. Devouring positions. Distorting positions. Positioning. Posing. Losing. Choosing. Wandering. Roaming. Above all stay in motion. House in motion. How's emotion? Even if the motion is merely your breath's oscillation. Just do what I'm doing: for earth, breathe in and out through the nose. For fire, breathe in through the mouth and out through the nose. For water, breathe in through the nose and out through the mouth. For air, breathe in and out through the mouth. For everything that's invisible, breathe in and out through the nose. Very softly this time. Like smelling a flower.

– Because the place where she was born is her home. Although she tried to run away again and again. She wanted to leave the house. Away. Out of the house. Away from the house. Run. Away. Far. Nothing too close to home. Because it is closed. Too closed. Being closed away. Anyway. This house, surrounded by a city of passion, is – she has to admit – what she's most familiar with. Family. Even if other places often excited a sensation of being there which made her feel more inspired, this house is her house. The house in which she grew up and is still growing. Of course she has lived in other places, other cities, other houses, but this is the most familiar one. The most familiar one. The one that holds the largest amount of time. A place that carries childhood within it. That is, time without limits. Fairy tales and patterns. Memories. Dreams.

During the rehearsal period a wave of information about the so-called »Arab Spring« flooded over Western Europe and with it all the hopes of civil courage, civil society, solidarity, as a manifestation of humanity and transcontinental coexistence. All the values that here have increasingly fallen prey to neocapitalism – as is often the case with shortcomings – were projected outwards once again. And at first I thought I have to go to Egypt. But then I thought I don't have to go to Egypt. I have to go to a place that is as far away from it as possible; an island somewhere, perhaps in the Pacific Ocean. And make a gesture of allegiance there, a kind of imaginary country in which forms of relationship might develop that are not permeated by the striving for power. This island as an assemblage of Egypt and other countries. I could call this island 'This Island Is Not for Sale', or leave it nameless, as a place of encounter, of potentiality. As resistance, upheaval, insisting that this is an essential part of reality.



TRAUM

BRAUT

TIER

MÖGLICH

SINN

If you think about it now, what three films were / are important for you?
Why?
If you think about it now, what three books were / are important for you?
Why?

What do you think about the current changes in the Arab world? Are you in touch with anyone directly affected?

Can you remember a dream?
Do you have a dream?

The slave woman recounts: but the greatest pain of all for the slaves was to learn that the greatest slave traders were the slaves themselves. This is why slavery could last all those centuries and millennia. You are betrayed by your own people, they brand you, force you, denounce you whenever their master, the monarch, an anonymous corporation or the market demand it. There always is a demand with regard to the snakes, who then snake and wriggle and wiggle and vanish you and then apparently disappear. Of course nothing disappears. Not even dependency, which after all concerns both sides. And changing sides is not so easy. It is hardly possible. Dependency does not have to equal submission. Dependency in fact is the most beautiful element of friendship. And at the same time dependency is the war zone of responsibility and individual responsibility. She doesn't have any romantic illusions about that. And sometimes she misbehaves. Behave. Haven. Having. Hanging. Falling. Falling for. I for you, you for me. My friend. Friendship. Now shipping. How are we going to do this with the words and the responses, the responsibilities, what can we give when it comes down to forgiveness, if this becomes us, regarding the past, will we take the word into our hands to be able to give it, so that it may become a gift and an action. Into the open. That's still open. We may hope. Once, twice, thrice do something other than the habitual. Here where we live...

Sabina Holzer, May 2016

Some sources that were essential in the production of the article:
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