

# Genderology: Parody is a necessity

A TALK WITH IBRAHIM QURAISHI

By Sabina Holzer

**corpus:** Could you say in a few words where you are coming from and what your background is?

**Ibrahim Quraishi:** I studied literature and philosophy at Colombia University in New York. At a certain point I decided not to continue, because I really hated the structure. Though, I was lucky to study with a teacher I really liked, Edward Said. But at the end I did not agree with his theories. I found the whole issue of orientalism very problematic. Maybe in his generation it made sense. But when we discuss the East and the West today with oriental theories I find something really wrong with the tendency to see the self and the other.

So I was more into making events, happenings and performances. I started doing this and went to France. I started a company there for 5 years. Then I realized I don't want to live in France, because I did not want to become French. I had problems with the people imagining that the past was always greater than the future. I am not saying people in France do this more than people in Austria, but the relationship to an imagined past which is greater and more valuable in an emotional and historical way than the presence is a problematic issue. I see this also as an continuation of an internal oppression. Then a few years ago I was invited to Holland. I made a course called "the political body." Then I started working there. I fell in love with the city. I have to say I prefer to identify myself with cities not with countries.

**corpus:** In the description of the workshop you write: *"We begin by shaving each others pubic hair (this is an old Bedouin tradition from the Arab desert that is practiced both by men and women). We are going to find the hooker, pimp and prostitute in each of us and our clients within us.... And finally we will proactively play with dressing up in different ritualistic / religious traditions and see if and how there is a performative market out there for us."*

So you start off with an action, which implies a certain intimacy and immediately put it in relation with prostitution. Mostly prostitution is connected with exploitation. You take the body as merchandise and want to connect it with ritualistic / religious traditions. What do you mean by that?

**Ibrahim Quraishi:** I am not a believer. Even if I was I can say, religion is a product. It is commodity. Everything is commodity. You can see it in the manifestation of religion. In the Islam, in Christianity, in Buddhism and Shintoism. There is always the commodification of the individual, always the scarify of the real body and the self to sell the image. You sell an image to cause fear, because you want to control the society.

The problem is that most of us are brought up by oppression. We have been taught that it is good to oppress and it is normal to be oppressed because we have to be afraid. This oppression has specifically been imposed on the performativity of woman. On the one hand you have the mother and on the other hand the woman. On the one hand she has to give birth to perfection and on the other hand she is not perfect. She herself is sin because she has this very active sex. It is interesting how this oppression has been so one-sided.

**corpus:** Do you think that religion still has so much influence?

**Ibrahim Quraishi:** All the religions have denied sensuality, the actual awakening of the self of the body. Most people become very ritualistic and spiritual in approaching the body. Then the oppression starts in another way: it is the attitude.

When I look at it from the point of performativity and mise en scene, it is funny because we keep repeating the same old circles. Why are we doing that?

And the market? What does the market want? It wants cliches. It wants sexual cliches, psychological cliches and so on. For some reasons it is not capable to go with the current moment. It always stays in the past and referring to the images and cliches of the past.

If you look at the visual arts, the ways to work with the image are much further developed and diverse.

And what is it in us as an intellectual public that we are afraid, to really take the risk? And what could it mean taking the risk? We are so obsessed by political correctness, by identity, about how-to-market-an-artist. We are so obsessed with the image related to the product that we are not interested in the product. We are just interested what the product can achieve. This is horrible.

**corpus:** You mentioned mainly the oppression and the cultural rules which are set on women. What about men?

**Ibrahim Quraishi:** Of course these oppressions are ruling also the male body. Take Jesus: the sacrifice of Jesus is so sexualized. But it is sexualized in a way that you are not able to discuss the sexuality. In contemporary art there has been a massive investigation on this topic, especially during the 60's and 70's. If you take the work of Hermann Nitsch, for instance.

**corpus:** You mean the “Orgien Mysterien Theater” from Viennese Actionism?

**Ibrahim Quraishi:** Yes. This movement happened also in this time and till now it is in a capsule. But how many people are really interested in looking at the sexual performativity of Actionists and relate them to what is happening today? All of us could do this. But most of us do not want to look at it, because we don't want to be aware that it is very actual.

**corpus:** I think that Viennese Actionism was a very male-dominated movement incorporating a male ideology.

**Ibrahim Quraishi:** Yes, definitely. In my view is the iconography of the body as re-appropriated by the Viennese Actionism and Herman Nitsch in particular primarily connected to the demystification of the sacred core (body) while at the same time it is the sacrilegious ritualization of that very core (body). It becomes the carnal symbol of our “divine” strengths and weaknesses that are directly related to the hyper-symbolic implications of the flesh as a sacred object while simultaneously perishable.

Of course as I see it, this is exclusively about the continuation of the male relationship to ideology and ritualization of that very male form itself after World War 2. It clearly is coming from the earliest identifications of our (judeo-christian, later muslim) relationships to how we identify or reject the multiple images of Jesus and its symbolic implications of that male image.

I am not against Jesus or the richness of the artistic / political or social possibilities this character offered historically and today, but the weight of oppression and repression his ideology manifests, it is clear that the artistic conflict represented by the likes of Herman Nitsch in the 1970s have to continue further.

Our collective thinking is actually very much infused by the representation of the power of the male flesh as defined by the ultimate moral and physical strength in ultimate suffering that is coming from the moment of the crucifixion.

## **Every liberation starts with the relationship to critical analyses of oneself**

**corpus:** What did you do in the workshop?

**Ibrahim Quraishi:** I was primarily interested to work with a group of people and see what we can bring out as their most inner honest simplicity of their relationship to their sexuality. And how this relates to performativity. That dealt with the notion of space, behavior, objectivization, performativity and with perception. Everyday for eight hours we did nothing but examine this. Subject by subject. And we physicalized it.

In all cases you discover we have a double persona. There is always a person that we imagine, that we want to be. We call that fantasy. But is not really fantasy. It is something that we really want. But we are afraid to reach it. Why are we afraid to reach it? Because something tells us, this is wrong. I think this is because of the construction of morality, which is completely male oriented. It is completely artificial. It is completely based on the oppression of the sensations of the body of men and women.

I am not advocating that we all should denounce religion. It would be great if we did, but how to replace it? We should at least attempt to be more honest with ourselves and with the other sex, to understand her or his realities and neuroses. It has been 3000 years that this morality of oppression is going on and it manifests on stage. A lot of things I see on stage make me sick.

What kind of mentality you see there? Okay, we can call it art, but there is a limit in a way.

I am not advocating censorship, i just wonder, where is it coming from? Some say it is a certain generation; it is still that men are in power and so on. But the question comes to what extent do you live in your own mind, in your own past, or do you deal with the reality of the man and the woman you are dealing with?

**corpus:** Can you give an example of how you were working?

**Ibrahim Quraishi:** We were researching. For instance: When is a touch real? When is a touch sexual? When is a touch performative? When can this performative touch be real and sexual without being sexual at all? It could be something simple like the way you are sitting. Yet it maybe can bring tears or maybe it can bring arousal and excitement. Sexuality is something ancient and very deep-rooted. It is definitely more than a representation of a cliché of a woman or a man. If you turn on the television at night, it is hilarious. Somehow there is the desire to believe in something which is represented as forbidden. The ability to decode breasts for instance should not be touched.

**corpus:** What do you mean?

**Ibrahim Quraishi:** What you see at night in television is a representation of what still is dealt with as a taboo.

**corpus:** You mean the sex hotlines?

**Ibrahim Quraishi:** Yes. Nearly all the female participants had issues about men touching their breasts.

**corpus:** I don't know if it is about the desire for a taboo. I think that the strong sexual visual representation of women all over creates a disrespect of the personal physical space of women. Of course there is a sexualization with men happening, too. But not so much and if, in a different way. But you do not see so many erected – or even flaccid – penises, testicles or male asses. Not even late at night. And if women would get out and grab men in all different situations, because it feels good and it's fun – if you let your hand slide between the legs of men just for a little tickle, then for

sure you would get problems.

**Ibrahim Quraishi:** Nearly all the female participants had an experience of touch which is connected with abuse. For me this is really upsetting. What makes even young men do this and why? So there something in our psyche that is causing that. It is also the ideology we were brought up in.

**corpus:** It would be a great experiment to replace every image of sexually seducing women with images of sexually seducing men.

**Ibrahim Quraishi:** We tried to do this: to sexualize the bodies of the male. The research I am doing is exactly around that. The funny thing is that the only space where male bodies are sexualized is in the homosexual content. There is a slow shift happening, but it is not honest enough. So there is still a total inequality on this level. The true question for me is to what extent is a woman covered in a burkha an ideological sexual revolution and to what extent is it an enforced oppression of a community? Do we wear certain things and feel uncomfortable or are we willing to break our social codes of social comfortability. We say, okay we wear this, or we polish our nails, not because we're gay or straight or lesbian. We do it for ourselves. And this is when you are able to think for yourself, to question yourself, to be present for your self.

**corpus:** These are the slogans with which the women liberation started.

**Ibrahim Quraishi:** I think every liberation starts with the relationship to critical analyses of oneself. Some younger people are much more conservative than people of my mother's generation. That is very surprising.

**corpus:** In the description of the workshop you mentioned Xaviera Hollander, who became famous in the 70ies with the book "The Happy Hooker". Annie Sprinkle was also a post porn artist saying, make your own movies about what is sexual for you, what turns you on.

**Ibrahim Quraishi :** I think that people become so afraid of humor and a flexible relation to the self. In the end they essentially are stuck in their prisons. It happens in their sexual relationships. It happens in their lives. And it happens on stage! You see that people are stuck. I have been researching this for a long time; also in my own life. And I have learned that gender parody is necessary. I have learned as an art maker I get pleasure if I create pieces where there are bodies and objects, and bodies and bodies. That there is the real gender equality. Maybe it is not real real, but as it is now it is real enough. It is not about being sexy, but to find ways to integrate sexuality as an individual powerful source for performances.

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Links:

[Impulsanz CoachingProject 2009 - Ibrahim Quraishi](http://www.impulsanz.com)

<http://www.ibrahimquraishi.org/>

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