

## Beware of the Image

### APEAL's 'Museum in the Making' and Temporary. Art. Platform. present: The 2016 Ras Masqa Artists' Residency

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#### Real Fiction

An image that fascinates me is a low-definition photograph circulated by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria's (ISIS) supporters on the internet in 2014. It shows an ISIS militant in his military uniform, holding in his right hand the head of a Kurdish woman from the top of her hair while raising his left index finger. He has a large victorious smile on his bearded face. There are two bodies on the ground. One is possibly the body of a woman, from which the head has been separated. The second is the body of a man, but only his head and part of his torso are visible.

On the wall, we can see the shadows of two people standing. One is behind the IS militant to his left, which could be his own shadow or someone else's, since the posture of the shadow doesn't match the posture of the militant. The other shadow shows two long monstrous legs that are bigger than the militant himself. This shadow could be for another militant watching the photo-shoot from another angle. There is no blood in this image. It is a clean murder. The face of the dead man on the ground looks a bit bloody, but the face of the beheaded woman that is facing the corner of the image looks like a smiling sleeping beauty; clear, clean, somewhat fictional, with serene face and closed eyes. The mouth shows a thin smile, which suggests that the woman died with no pain. Instead, there is happiness on her face. It seems like a staged scene.

*Beware of this image; it might be disturbing for some viewers.*

*To view this image, please click [here](#).*

*Image specifications:*

*Given: A photograph created by ISIS for propaganda.*

*Quality: Low definition, probably taken by a phone camera.*

*Accordingly, I want to understand the form used and references considered by ISIS, either intentionally or un...*

## The Smile

It has been said that ISIS give their victims tranquilising drugs before executing them, to reduce their fear and pain. However, several sources stated that a former translator who worked for ISIS said that victims are usually told that they are going through another 'mock execution' that aims to put pressure on the victim's governments.[1] This could be one of the reasons why the beheaded woman looks calm; nonetheless, her beheading was not filmed like that of James Foley or Kenji Goto. She was killed behind camera and only presented to the public as a dismantled corpse in a photograph.

What is clear in this picture is the over-excitement on the executioner's face: as though he is celebrating a victory in a football game. There is something surreal in his happiness. In fact, a number of sources claim that ISIS provide their fighters with drugs so that they can kill senselessly.[2] 'The drugs transform them into Mujahideen [the term for one engaged in Jihad] maniacs with enhanced stamina, superhuman strength, no empathy, no fear and who literally feel no pain'.[3]

In order to gain an understanding of the smiling face of the beheaded woman, I examined the representation of the mouth, through Jane Blocker's interpretation of the first-century sculpture Laocoön and his Sons, which shows the mouth of Laocoön crying out in fear. Blocker explains that the mouth 'is a locus of fear and repulsion, the site of betrayal where the body threatens to distort beauty with hateful physicality'.[4] The beheaded woman's mouth in the image does not show a trace of 'fear and repulsion' from death and torture. Her beauty is not distorted.

Foucault discusses how the guillotine made death less painful, whereby torture is supposed to be 'the art of maintaining life in pain, by subdividing it into a "thousand deaths", by achieving before life ceases "the most exquisite agonies"'. [5] ISIS use swords and knives, a slow killing process that revives the art of torture. This supposedly painful violence seems to be absent in this particular photograph, as the woman is presented to us after the actual act of beheading, as an icon for a defeated beautiful Kurdish woman. Moreover, this photograph presented to us in low quality definition makes us question its source, as it does not match ISIS's usual aesthetics of representation. Particularly, the executioner's face in the image is not covered, which brings to mind an observation the artist Rabih Mroué made of an execution by Al-Qaida, broadcasted on TV and performed by Abu Musaab al-Zarqawi:

We do not see the face of the executioner since he is the toll of State/Authorities; he represents the law, which pronounced the verdict. The executioner of the law has a head without features. As if he comes to the public square with no head.[6]

In most of the executions broadcasted, ISIS militants cover their heads and the supposed executioner's face is revealed. This revealed head threatens us, as an audience, and threatens the fate of the Kobani people.[7] By holding her head from the top of her hair, the ISIS militant appears to hold power over all of Kobani's women fighters. This is in line with Regina Janes's analysis on the painting *Matière à Reflection Pour les Jonglers Couronné* (1793), a representation of King Louis XVI's head being held by a hand. This hand represents the people who are holding power over the state and its authority.[8]

## The ID

To find the identity of this woman in the photo, I looked at online news resources, and sent requests to journalists whose main focus is the war in Syria and Iraq. From this research, I could deduce that this woman, wearing a military outfit and smiling to the camera with a victory sign on her left hand, is called Rehana. The picture was circulated on the Internet with information about her victory over ISIS fighters. Rehana, also known as The Angel of Kobani, was reported to have killed over 100 ISIS terrorists.[9] A couple of weeks later another picture, circulated on Twitter by ISIS supporters claiming that the beheaded woman is Rehana.[10] The journalist Carl Drott – who met her earlier that year while she was training with her fellow fighters and who published another picture of her before all these rumours started circulating – falsified the news of her death by tweeting: 'Rehana has probably neither been beheaded nor single-handedly killed 100 IS fighters'.[11]



None of the sources I contacted confirmed the identity of the beheaded woman. Her fellow fighters and the journalist Carl Drott wrote in a Facebook post that the face of the beheaded woman does not look like Rehana, and that Rehana's hair wasn't that long. Drott was not even sure if her name was Rehana. He tweeted, 'Aleppo law student (unknown name, unlikely Rehana)'.[12]

Looking at the two photos and trying to find the similarities, I could not see both women as the same person. But perhaps the face's features change after death? Nevertheless, no matter how much death changes the qualities of one's face the main features would stay the same. Regina Janes discusses that the power of beheading is correlated to the power of the head in identifying itself through the face, while other body parts – the torso, legs, or arms, for instance – do not have the same power since they do not identify their owner.[13]

Janes proposes the following equation, '**head = name = identity; body = nobody = rubbish**'.<sup>[14]</sup> However, I would argue that it brings us to a different equation: **head = no identity = no name = non-existent**.

Some representations of the seventh century revolutionary leader Imam Hussain ibn Ali, such as the Iranian poster, 'Headless Imam Hussain with Dove', show a headless body. When the head is not present, the only element that identifies the body is the words accompanying the image. Such bodies become a symbol for a collectivity of bodies. And so the equation becomes: **body = nobody = representation = many bodies**. Thus, the body of Imam Hussain becomes a representation for all martyrs. Indeed, the most violent element in that photograph is the headless body lying on the ground; whereas the Kurdish woman's head, as an unidentified head, becomes a representation of all Kurdish women fighting against ISIS.

Rabih Mroué discusses the discourse on beheadings used by Salafists expanding on Hassan Hamdan's 1985 book *The Brain is for the Occident and the Heart is for the Orient*:

... the brain is the generator of atheist ideas that doubt God, and which will naturally distance us from matters of religion and worship, Orientals love the heart and are biased for it... Splitting the head from the body so as to separate the brain from the heart and thus separate the Occident from the Orient. It is a Salafist vocation of an incompatible Islam in the face of a modernization project to which Arab 'Oriental' States are trying to adhere. This implies that the beheading is targeting any 'Oriental' who tries to think.<sup>[15]</sup>

By separating the woman's head, ISIS not only shows power over the bodies of their enemies – who they consider atheists, thus killing and torturing them is a lawful act – but also shows power over women's thoughts, by separating their mind from their body. In doing so, women become a desired body, separated from a thinking mind, which connotes their consideration of the female body as an objectified entity.

## The Head

The only element that might indicate that the severed head is Rehana's is the faded smile that resembles the lively and energetic smile in her original picture. Her beauty invites us to keep looking, especially as her eyes are closed, so we don't fear looking again and again; a failure of the 'reciprocal gaze' which, as Peggy Phelan argues, h keeps the 'looker looking'<sup>[16]</sup> just as we might gaze on the clean untainted face of John the Baptist in the painting *Herodias* (1527–31) by Luini, in which John the Baptist's eyes are also closed, as well as his mouth, but it shows no expression. In both faces pain seems absent. But the absence of representation of pain does not exclude the idea that excessive pain was sensed before the two bodies reached their final moments, as presented to us in these photographs. The absent pain is something we, the watchers, choose to create.

The choreographer and dance theoretician Rudolf Laban states, 'any voluntary or involuntary movement involves an effort. The state in which no effort is made is rest. Rest is other than relaxation, as in rest all effort is absent...'<sup>[17]</sup> The woman's face shows some 'reduced' effort (her reduced smile) but not a total rest as with John the Baptist's face. Although, biologically speaking, both the beheaded woman and John the Baptist are in total rest, the woman's slightly smiling mouth invites us to await her resurrection.

*I await her eyes to open and exchange the gaze with me...*

## The Image

This image is not a representation of pain, nor is it even a representation of death, as death is never re-presented. This image is a metaphor for the power over the mind and body of the victim; a fictional female character created by a male's desire. It is a representation for the woman's hoped-for-body, which is, as Blocker explains, is 'a body that is at once crudely physical and yet miraculously clean'.<sup>[18]</sup> It is a fragmented, fictitious body; a face with closed eyes, and a head with a long plait, like a sleeping Rapunzel. This is a pornographic image of a 'potent' and fighting female body separated from the mind, a closed mouth that can smile but is forbidden from speaking out. It is this smile, in the end, that imbibes this image with its power. It stands contrary to Daphne's mouth in Bernini's famed sculpture of *Daphne and Apollo*; open in a fearful gasp, trying to make a sound to express and call for help as she is threatened with rape, only to be transformed into a tree, while being traumatized as she watches her body transform.<sup>[19]</sup> Griselda Pollock argues that Daphne might have cried out for her father when Apollo approached her. Then she might have gasped in horror as her body started transforming/dying; similar to how Medusa opened her mouth terrified, as she faced her own death. Writes Pollock:

A gasp is a sudden, involuntary intake of breath. The mouth opens. Air is dragged down the open throat. Resonating, within the body, the gasp is a sound of subjectivity as it registers a shocking, sudden, unexpectedly affecting encounter with something seen, felt or done to the body.<sup>[20]</sup>

The beheaded woman does not seem to have seen her body transforming into pieces; does not suggest that she ever cried out or gasped.

It is as if she never existed as a subject.

As if...

The image of the 'be-head-dead' woman and the executioner would only be bearable through representation, similar to Medusa, as a 'face of horror', which could be looked at only through 'simulacrum' since her gaze would petrify the looker.<sup>[21]</sup> Using beauty as a theme for their representation, ISIS succeeds in producing a terrifying affect that is real. Whether this is Rehana or another woman, whether it is a real image or a photo-shopped one, this image is an abject representation of the power over the female body.

*As the theorist Griselda Pollock gasped when she saw Daphne...*

*I screamed out when I saw this image...*

*I might have felt the need to release the absent pain.*

*Beware of the image on the next scroll...*

**Photo-Chop. Head off a Self-Portrait:**

*Images of the repulsive can also allure*  
Susan Sontag, 2003

*Heads get cut off, really and virtually, in fact and in representation, because violence,  
like sex, is part of our being that we need to control and cannot do without*  
Regina Janes, 2005



Petra Serhal, *Photo-chop, head off a Self-Portrait*, 2016.  
Courtesy Petra Serhal.

I arrive in Paris.  
Second day. Walking. I arrive at the Place de la Bastille roundabout.  
I think to myself...  
I go back to the head of the page.

The next day I ask my friend to take a picture for me at the Bastille roundabout.<sup>[22]</sup> This is where the famous torture prison Bastille Saint-Antoine stood. Its destruction was a major event in the French revolution, which led later to the beheading of King Louis XVI more than two centuries ago...

I wanted to recreate the painting Matière à Reflection Pour les Jongleurs Couronné.  
I prepared myself and waited for the least busy man passing.

I asked for his hand.

What happened later was a casual movement at the Place de la Bastille, except for the hand holding my hair.

...who holds power over my head...

Who holds power over my head?

I 'photo-chopped.'

...A body without a head, or the head alone?

Am I re-appropriating myself?

The head: brain, mouth, nose, eyes, ears, hair, tongue, skin, breath, sight, voice, bones, listener, looker, looked at, thinker, face, faced...

I am a headless body; a body bomb that could explode in every time and space.

I am both the killer and the killed.

I am both the terrorist and the victim.

I am dual.

I am a thing.

I am a mover.

I am moved.

I am she.

I am a 'pin' on a map. Point A to B to C... or stopped at point A.

I am watched.

I am faceless.

I am a suspect until proven guilty.

I am guilty.

I am a suspect.

I am a devalued human.

I re-appropriate the head as a sign of identification.

...A mover. A fragment. A body.

*This essay is part of the the 2016 Ras Masqa Artists' Residency.*

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[1] See: C. Zeilinski, 'ISIS Defector Reveals Why the Terror Group's Hostages Remain So Calm Before their Executions,' *News*, 24 March 2015, <http://www.news.com.au/world/middle-east/isis-defector-reveals-why-the-terror-groups-hostages-remain-so-calm-before-their-executions/story-fnh81ifq-1227258141208>; and S. Tomlinson, "'I Witnessed Jihadi John Behead Japanese Hostage': ISIS Defector Reveals How British Graduate Subjected Prisoners to Mock Executions Before Killing Them,' *Daily Mail*, 10 March 2015, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2987647/I-witnessed-Jihadi-John-behead-Japanese-hostage-ISIS-defector-reveals-British-graduate-subjected-prisoners-mock-executions-killing-them.html>

[2] J. Medin, 'ISIS Fighters "High on Cocaine": Huge Bags of Drugs Found at Home of Islamic State Leader Accused of Drugging Troops to Boost Morale,' *Daily Mail*, 6 January 2015, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2898876/Isis-fighters-high-cocaine-Huge-bag-drugs-home-Islamic-State-leader-accused-drugging-troops-boost-morale.html>; and I. Watson, "'They Would Torture You": ISIS Prisoners Reveal Life Inside Terror Group,' *CNN*, October 28 2014, <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/10/28/world/meast/syria-isis-prisoners-watson/>

[3] D. Perimutter, 'ISIS Meth Heads: Tweeking in the Name of Islam,' *Front Page Mag*, 9 March 2015, <http://www.frontpagemag.com/fpm/252783/isis-meth-heads-tweeking-name-islam-dawn-perlmutter>

[4] J. Blocker, *What the Body Cost: Desire, History, and Performance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), p. 19.

[5] M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), p. 33-34.

[6] R. Mroué, *Being in the Public Space Without a Head* (Móstoles: CA2M, 2013), p. 413.

[7] Kobani, also known as Ayn al-Arab, is a city in northern Syria, immediately south of the border with Turkey. As a consequence of the Syrian Civil War, the city has been under control of the Kurdish YPG militia since 2012. In 2014, it was unofficially declared to be the administrative centre of the Kobanî Canton of the autonomous Federation of Northern Syria - Rojava. From September 2014 to January 2015, the city was under siege by ISIS. Most of the city was destroyed and most of the population fled to Turkey. In 2015, many returned and reconstruction began. See: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kobanî>

[8] R. Janes, *Beheadings: In Death and Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), p. 247.

[9] C. Silverman, 'The Smile that Launched a Thousand RTs: The "Truth" Behind the Female Soldier Fighting ISIS,' *Digg*, 17 November 2014, <http://digg.com/2014/the-truth-behind-the-kurdish-female-soldier-fighting-isis>

[10] '#BBCtrending: Who is the "Angel of Kobane"?', *BBC News*, 3 November 2014, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/blogs-trending-29853513>

[11] Silverman, op cit.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Janes, op cit., p. 249-250.

[14] Ibid., p. 250.

[15] R. Mroué, *Image(s) Mon Amour: Fabrications*, Exhibition Catalogue (Móstoles: CA2M, 2013), p. 415.

[16] P. Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 21.

[17] R. von Laban and F. C. Lawrence, *Effort: Economy of Human Movement*, (London: Macdonald and Evans, 1974), p. 12.

[18] Blocker, 2004, p.17.

[19] Pollock, 2013, p.51-52.

[20] Ibid., p.47.

[21] J. Kristeva, *The Severed Head: Capital Visions* (New York and Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 2012), pp. 100-103.

[22] Original photo was taken by George Hamiéh.

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## TAGS

Photography

Conflict

Syria

Internet

TAP

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

### Petra Serhal

**Petra Serhal**, born in Kaifoun, Lebanon is an actress and performance artist. Her work focuses on the representation of the violated bodies as well as creating an interactive space with the audience. She holds an MA degree Body in Performance from Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance and a Diploma Higher Studies in Acting from the Lebanese University, Institute of Fine Arts.

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