

**I Once Fell in Love with an Audience Member**

**Practice, Performance, Politics**

**Tania El Khoury**



Dictaphone Group, *This Sea is Mine*, 2012. Performance.  
Courtesy Tania El Khoury.

Performance art is essentially feminist. Performance art is inherently political. Performance art challenges the status quo, state violence, oppression, and patriarchy. It is radical and ephemeral. It is not object-driven and cannot be bought or collected. At least, this is the legacy that was passed on to us from the 1960s by the first self-proclaimed performance artists. Those who were protesting the war in Vietnam, affirming the rights of women over their own bodies, and freeing performance from theatres and galleries by popularizing it as a form that exists beyond artistic skill and hierarchy; those who stripped performance down to its core – presence. Several decades later, it is no longer 'cool' to protest a faraway war by choosing to lie down in bed for days, or by walking up and down the stage bleeding from self-inflicted cuts on your body. Performance art has suffered decades of being ridiculed by television shows, the media, and even the general public. Its sometimes 'shocking' aesthetics have been depoliticized and judged as 'elitist' and 'alienating.' In the minds of many people this art form became synonymous with self-inflicted pain, self-inflated egos, obvious symbolism, obscure aesthetics, and the indispensable flash of genitalia.

### **Preferred Language**

Perhaps for the reasons stated above, I find it easier to call myself a live artist. At first it may have been a lazy shortcut to avoid watching how people reacted if I told them I was a performance artist. 'Performance art, you mean like this?' they would ask, while pretending to perform some high school interpretive dance. But other than trying to avoid social awkwardness related to the misconceptions about performance art, I feel that the performances I create are not necessarily performer-centric, which I understand to be a key element of performance art. Live art is about creating experiences and unconventional encounters. Like performance art, it can happen using different mediums and in various spaces. It is a practice that is concerned with the public and it is this public experience that makes the artwork live, regardless of the presence of its performative or dramatic setup. As an artist working mainly in the public space, I also struggle with the word 'intervention', which other people occasionally attribute to my work. Interventions remind me of drones and threatening political powers. Artistically, one can argue that there is a similarly aggressive (and arrogant) tone in proclaiming oneself an 'art interventionist'. The need for an 'intervention' suggests an abrupt action, indispensable for 'saving' a certain place or community. Interventionists have no time for discussions.

I am interested in work that starts discussions. In talking about a preferred language, it is important to note that while working as part of the Beirut-based research and performance collective Dictaphone Group, our preferred language of publication and performance is Arabic. We believe that art practice should not intentionally alienate a vast majority of the population

and speak solely to an educated elite (I am also aware that I am writing this in English in a publication on arts about the Middle East.) Dictaphone Group creates site-specific performances based on the multidisciplinary study of space. One of the main aims of these projects, which question our relationship to the city, is to democratize the sharing of local academic research on space. Discussing laws, illegalities and urban planning with the general public could be considered by some people a practice of info-activism. But it is the interactivity employed in Dictaphone Group's projects that applies politics to performance.

### **Performance as Politics**

Politics are performative. Take the protests of the Arab uprisings, the occupations of public squares, the creative production boom by Arab artists and non-artists, and the theatrical oppression of regimes, armies, and thugs, and the spectacular terror acts of ISIS and others. Then there are, of course, the endless political speeches – the dictator's last speech; the dictator's first speech after the uprising broke out; that first international media interview with a mass murderer; the hilariously buffonesque act of a war criminal; and the dreadfully dull statement of the statue-like authoritarian. All of this is performance. But how do performative politics affect our practice of making performance as art? How do we now perceive of video performance after we've seen footage of young Syrians filming their own death on camera? There is an undeniable return to politics in art and, consequently, a return to artistic action: performance. Galleries, museums, art publications and institutions are currently interested in performance after having closed their doors on the medium for far too long. Perhaps we should be thankful for this comeback in 'rebel chic', both in the mainstream and in the art industries.

With the recent interest in political art evidenced by the many international 'revolution art' festivals and exhibitions, we are often left wondering what makes an artwork a political event. Is it when the artwork clearly champions a political cause or discusses current affairs? Or is it when the artist – as has been the case for many since the beginning of the Arab uprisings – is beaten up, locked up, tortured, or demonized? While we tend to believe that the aim of political art is to challenge the concentration of power and that all politicized artworks are inherently progressive, there are various examples throughout the history of counter-revolutionary propagandist artwork that we should be aware of when romanticizing political art. To borrow from Augusto Boal, it is performance as politics that we should be interested in, rather than political performance. The first is a political act in itself, while the second might discuss politics, preach, campaign or advise. Examining my practice as a solo artist and a co-founder of Dictaphone Group, I try to read the politics through the experience of the audience. I find myself stopping at the notion of interactivity and its implications in my work.

## Baring Witness

In the summer of 2012, I took a group of audience members into the sea on a fishing boat for the performance *This Sea is Mine*. My collaborator in Dictaphone Group, the architect and urbanist Abir Saksouk, mapped the Beirut seashore with information about each location such as the laws that govern it as well as the different uses of the space. This performance was described as 'protest' by the media, and 'info-activism' by other activists. Descriptions did not matter to us as long as the project felt accessible, troubling, and essential. Later, in many talks, reviews and workshops, we reflected on what gave this particular project such exposure in the city and when our performance project became politics. Was it because it exposed the many illegalities committed by the political elite? Was it because it took the audience on a boat and invited them to swim for free in areas where they usually have to pay large amounts of money if they came from the land and needed to pass through sea resorts? Was it because I swam every day with a large sign that claimed, 'This Sea is Mine'? Was it because it opened up a much-needed conversation on the right to the sea in Lebanon? The answer, of course, lies in all of these points but also in a key element, which until then we had not conceptualized as a political tool: interactivity.

Placing the audience's and the performer's bodies in a contested space, appearing in the sea in areas supposedly shut off from the non-paying public, seeing the city skyline from the perspective of the sea, and meeting local fishermen, ensured that audiences experienced an embodied knowledge of the space. Armed by ancient laws that explained that the shore, as far as where the water reaches is in fact public domain we crossed the floating borders around private resorts and swam for free, placing our bodies in places where they had been unwelcome. This interactive piece offers the audience the opportunity to rebuild a lost connection with the sea outside of the dominant experience of private resorts and to listen to the stories of the older fisherman who has spent his whole life there. They were able to experience intimate stories about other fishermen who were born by the sea and suffered from various threats of eviction. The audience also shared stories they knew and the performance kept growing as we added these to the script. The performance ended in Dalieh, an open stretch of seashore land which is now facing a serious threat of being shut off from the public in order to be transformed into yet another expensive hotel. As members of the current civil campaign to save the Dalieh, every day we realize anew the importance of building a collective memory in a contested space as it builds a crucial body of resistance against its disappearance.

In my recent solo work, I create an interactive sound installation called *Gardens Speak* (2014) in which I invite the audience to dig in four tonnes of soil in order to get to where they can hear a voice which will whisper into their ears oral histories from people who were buried in gardens across Syria. *Gardens Speak* tells stories of ordinary Syrians, those who have been rendered invisible by the grand narrative forced on us by the regime, the different armed groups and the

propagandist media. It is a work about the political reality around us but in analysing what makes this particular work performance as politics, again I turn to interactivity. A crucial element of the piece is the multisensory experience of the audiences who embody the lives and deaths of the killed, bare witness to their stories, and finish by implicating themselves in the narratives of the deceased through writing letters to their surviving families.



Tania El Khoury, *Gardens Speak*, 2014. Audience members during performance, Melbourne.

Courtesy Tania El Khoury.

*Gardens Speak* is an interactive sound installation. It functions without a performer. It is the audience who activates the piece and transforms it from an installation to a live performance. By digging, dirtying their hands, lying on fresh soil, listening to the stories whispered into their ears and replacing the soil that they dug, then writing letters to real people about their loved ones who were killed, the audience embody the work, its content and its complexities. They of course have a say in it – they chose whether to accept it or not. Perhaps performance as politics happens when everyone involved in a performance (audience and artists) take sides, discuss, disagree and maybe challenge each other. In choosing a space for a performance, I find myself asking for a real space in the city 'which is not neutral'. I used to think this was because real spaces are charming with their apparent history. Lately, I have begun to realize that maybe it is the neutrality of spaces such as theatres, galleries and black boxes that offer a sense of relief for audience and artists, who can at any point in time switch off the politics and fall back into political neutrality.

## **Interactivity as an artform**

What we know as spectatorship in performance art is defined as 'the act of watching something without taking part'. Spectatorship is the opposite of participation in art, in the city and in politics. Since the eruption of the Arab uprisings, interactivity in political performance is reinventing what we perceive as relational aesthetics. It is pushing audiences and artists alike to reveal their position, bare witness and act upon it.

There is a lot to worry about once an artist decides to break with passive spectatorship. Not all performance goers are averagely nice people. It might be hard to believe it but art consumers are as racist, sexist and abusive as anyone else. Choosing to make work that demands an interaction with the audience and challenges them into a horizontal collaboration has its risks. In dealing with this risk, artists have tried to control the outcome of interaction and tame down their 'wild' spectators by introducing tough rules to the game. Some established theatre companies such as Punchdrunk have made it into the mainstream art business by giving spectators a false impression of freedom. Their audience is often allowed to wander in a large performance space unaware that the space is actually locked. Those who have tried to open certain doors or 'improvise' were told off. The consensus is that you as an audience member are not really free to interact with the space and the performers, but are supposed to follow what everyone else is doing while performing a certain air of freedom. Real interactivity cannot control audience interaction. On the contrary, it embraces the unknown and the reality that each show is completely different from the last. It is a risk that is definitely worth taking. Using the audience as collaborators does not only offer excitement and unpredictability but a horizontal relationship between the artist and the audience/participant, which for a moment in time balances the power dynamics around us. During that moment, both the artist and audience/participant reveal their politics. There is no place to hide – you are asked to take a stand, make a decision, react, relate, play, give an opinion, choose, disagree, and so on.

As an artist you might remember your parents telling you not to play with strangers and how that sounded like a sane idea at the time. Strangers are lunatics, they always are. Up until they stop becoming strangers and reveal who they really are – sweet, politicized, problematic, fanatic, smart, sexy, angry, naïve, nationalist, revolutionary, inspiring, generous, and so on. I have met all of these people during my interactive performances in which I've been shouted at, stalked, abused and put in dangerous positions by various audience members. At times I've come out of performances crying, swearing, and promising myself to never make art that gives any power to audience members again. The most difficult ones were the one-on-one performances where the audience and I 'collaborated' on making a performance happen. In one piece I told an audience about my love life, sharing everything about my relationship with my then-partner and asked

them to be our couples therapist. In another piece, I went with the audience on a secret mission, challenging police surveillance. And in another work that was only for one male audience member at a time, I gave this man the power to choreograph me in the city and I performed every single move he asked me to. While these pieces and others have been challenging and effortful both for my audience and myself, they remain in my memory as a moment of truth in which everyone involved revealed their politics and beliefs. Interactivity is an empowering practice of live art. I am a firm believer that passive spectatorship is for the royals and we need performance as politics so that royalty ceases to exist.

The title of this text is a mere confession.

### **About the author**

#### **[Tania El Khoury](#)**

**Tania El Khoury** is an artist working between London and Beirut. She creates interactive and challenging performances in which the audience is an active collaborator. Tania's solo work has toured internationally in venues such as ICA, Artsadmin, Watermill Center, Tanzquartier Wien amongst others, and for which she is the recipient of the Total Theatre Innovation Award and the Arches Brick Award. She is the co-founder of Dictaphone Group, a research and performance collective aiming at questioning our relationship to the city and its public space.