

## Place, Space and Purpose

### Lina Majdalanie in conversation with Göksu Kunak

---

Göksu Kunak

009\_02 / 30 July 2015

---

In this interview, Lina Majdalanie\* challenges the concepts of 'East' and 'West' as dichotomies around which various elements of performance are situated – as opposing, unrelated histories within performance art as a field; as defined differing modes and styles; and as distinct, audience-specific perspectives. Talking about her solo works and her collaborations with Rabih Mroué, Majdalanie explains her minimalist approach to performance, which reflects her own desires to present issues – whether they be deeply personal, nationalistic or common across cultures – in a way that goes beyond the 'spectacular', mediatized façade and rather unveils the fundamental phenomena at work beneath.

**Göksu Kunak:** The archives generated by an artist and history (of art) researched by artists are crucial features of contemporary art. In your opinion, what kind of an archive, documentation or writings of history of art can be generated, presented, and written considering theatre and performance art in Middle East?

**Lina Majdalanie:** In *Who's Afraid of Representation?* (2005) by Rabih Mroué, in which I collaborated as an actress, the history of performance art of the 1960s and 1970s was being (re)questioned. In this performance he was interrogating body art, especially the violent approaches towards the body. He was researching how and in which ways that period of body art entered into the history of art. He looked into the way that things were written in this specific period, the language, the discourse and the way it was presented, how things were (de)contextualized. The fact that the institutions – libraries, galleries, museums – reintegrated and polished the history of body art, that was particularly out of the classical canon, was questioned. What about the blood and suffering? Why are they so similar to other kinds of writing on art? With the same approach, Mroué focused on what was going on back then in Lebanon and the Middle East. So there was a re-appropriation of the written history of a very specific period of performance art by integrating it or making a connection with the history of a country. The focus was on the relation between what was happening in the Middle East at that time and a specific period of performance art. As an example, in a part of the performance I was reciting Marina Abramović by describing one of her works. Whilst explaining the performance, I was recounting a battle that had happened



Lina Majdalanie in Rabih Mroué, *Who's Afraid of Representation?*, 2005.  
Courtesy the artists. Photo: © Houssam Mcheimech.

in Beirut at the same time as if they were in echo to each other.

Turning attention to Lebanon, Mroué was examining why there were no influences of body art there. Despite knowing a lot about Artaud, Brecht, Picasso or Duchamp, why did this kind of art never arrive in Lebanon? We don't even learn about it at university. Why does it always seem Occidental? Why is it refused? Our point is that any history in the world is ours as well. There is not a radical, essential, cultural approach separating us. So that can be seen as a response to the people who are very concerned about their identity – hysteric, one may say. No, whatever happens in the world belongs to all.

In *Who's Afraid of Representation?*, it's the concept of East and West that was being criticized. The radical differentiation and discrimination as you, the other, and I. Sometimes, there were articles written relating to the body art pieces of that era, such as in Vietnam, but never to other parts of the world like Africa, for instance. Of course there are differences in using our bodies as a result of habits, cultures, traditions and so on, but we have lots in common as well. Thinking of today, people are travelling and TV, cinema and the Internet are everywhere – we share so much with each other. For me, it is so difficult to differentiate between cultures.

**GK:** Questioning the political and cultural issues of Lebanon is a crucial aspect of your work. How do you think geographies affect the perception of a theatre or performance art piece? Do you believe that an audience from



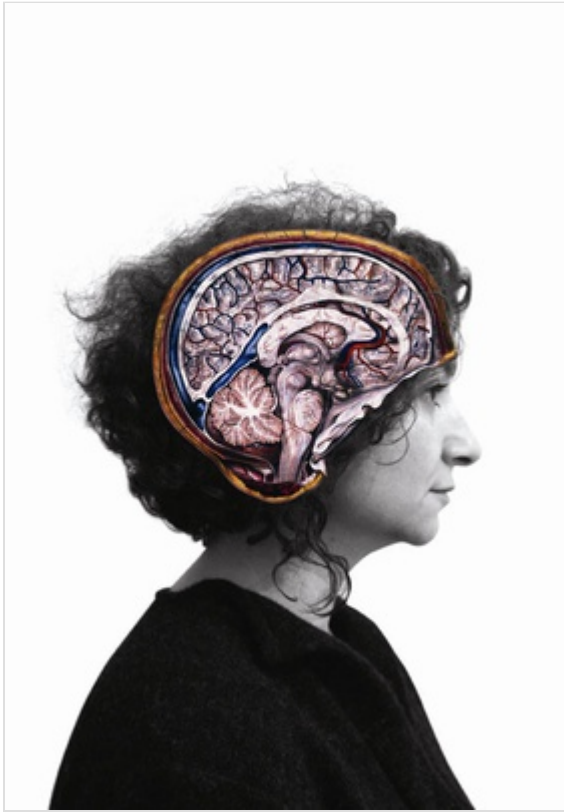
Lina Majdalanie in Rabih Mroué, *Who's Afraid of Representation?*, 2005.  
Courtesy the artists. Photo: © Houssam Mcheimech.

the Middle East reacts differently compared to an audience from Europe?

**LM:** Yes, one may say that the audience from Lebanon perceive it differently, however this doesn't mean their perception is better or worse. In each country, say, Germany, France, USA or Singapore, each venue or festival has its own audience according to its cultural, political, ideological background and interest of each individual. Consequently, it is not only related with geography or nationality. This multiplicity of perception is very interesting. Unfortunately we cannot have a discussion with each person who comes to a performance, therefore, I cannot make any generalizations.

In the history of Lebanon, the constitution and structures of the country have been experiencing problems for a while. Considering the daily bombardment of events from the media it becomes difficult to focus on what is below the surface. It is possible that you will miss what is most important. One should stress that some of those spectacular mediatized events may open a particular door or corridor for us to arrive at the base of the issue. However, looking below the surface, searching for what is deep inside or asking what is creating this phenomenon can be difficult. This is what we work on in our performances. But still, it seems to me that the Lebanese audience is immediately concerned by the obvious political topic. They could even be blurred or blinded because of the urgent questions in their minds. Their judgment or evaluation may be more personal.

**GK:** In *Body P-Arts* (2007–2009) you demand a right – the right to be cremated when you die – and try to find a



Lina Majdalanie, image from the Body pArts website,  
<http://www.linasaneh-body-p-arts.com>.  
Courtesy the artist.

solution to accomplish this. In a way, that is a vigorous but silent reaction towards what is not allowed in the public sphere. In your opinion, does performance art have the capability to be used as an activist act in the public sphere, going beyond the walls of the art world?

**LM:** It is a question in the performance, not an affirmation. After looking for potential solutions to this question, I have always arrived at impossibility – I faced a dead end. As a result of the continuity, I kept it as an open question. Perhaps I would be able to cremate myself through this performance, mainly with solidarity and with the help of the people participating: the audience, curators, artists, friends and so on. I have no idea what will happen. Perhaps the participants, the ones who buy the pieces of my body, will be able to cut my body when I die and distribute it to new owners and to burn them one day. But it could be forbidden as well. Probably, there will be a lot of problems with the authorities – not only in Lebanon but everywhere – because of it being reminiscent of organ trafficking.

Turning back to your question: I definitely don't propose it as an activist act. First of all, I'm not interested in activism in art. I do respect and encourage activism in life but not in art. My work and my collaborations with Rabih Mroué could never ever be perceived as such, although we deal with the problematic public sphere. However, activism is usually something very determined in time and space and seeks an immediate effect. However, *Body P-Arts* is open for, let's say, 100 years. Another aspect of this work is that it is everywhere: in various spaces and in non-space as well – the Internet. Therefore, the boundaries of virtuality and reality, fiction and non-fiction are all blurred. It is discreet, whereas activism is much more spectacular by seeking an effect now, here, immediately.

**GK:** In the performance *Appendice* (2007), the husband speaks on behalf of his wife. The wife sits still, silently. It reminds me of every single person in front of the apparatuses of the state. How do you address the question of gender in your works?

**LM:** In this performance gender was one of my concerns, indeed. If I had read the text by myself, it would have been more like a manifesto. Instead, I gave it to my husband, Rabih Mroué. This act is reminiscent of being a citizen of Lebanon as well – woman or man. Do I have the right to a speech that represents *me*? Do we have the opportunity to speak for ourselves, represent ourselves or not? In Lebanon, we are in a country where communities talk. We are represented in the assembly not as individuals voting for individuals but voting for communities. It is already a concern and a question for any citizen in Lebanon. Does she/he have her/his voice; the opportunity to raise her/his voice; and the possibility to speak out loud without following the ideas of the



community?

In Arabic there are two forms for the word 'you': singular and plural. When one asks somebody 'For whom did you vote?' (using the singular 'you') he/she would normally reply 'we voted' instead of saying 'I voted', which effectively means: 'In the family we voted for...' It is a sign of how we are functioning in the system. The fact that we have certain rights doesn't automatically mean that we realize or activate our individual freedom of thought. Inside this constraining system, women are more suppressed compared to men. Theoretically, the system in Lebanon gives women this right. She could be a successful woman in a position of authority and vote for whomever she wants. However, how much power do most women really have to make their own decisions, to use this freedom and select a candidate to vote for? How many women vote for a politician or party who has not been decided for her by her husband, brother or father?

For example in *Body P-Arts*, I proclaim that the only part of my body that I won't get rid of is my tongue. If I lose it, I won't have the ability to speak, which would lead to me failing to retain my citizenship. At the same time, in *Appendice* I give my voice to my husband, to a man, and trust him to read my own testimony. I play with this difficult situation of women through mine and Rabih's particular position: a couple working in the same field, emancipated from a conservative model. While he is reading, I am present as well and there are lots of small signs of solidarity between us. With my smile I encourage him to continue. Because the text is hard, he sometimes feels weak, of course. Nevertheless, still, I was the silent one on stage and he was the one who was talking. If you consider how I was sitting and the setting of the stage it becomes obvious that I was already an object – an object of art as well. It is also reminiscent of women being beautiful and silent. Or, perhaps, I was already dead – there are several interpretations of this silent presence. This is a very minimalist act on stage: not moving, not talking.

**GK:** You work with video as well such as *I Had a Dream, Mom* (2006) and *Someone Must Have Been Telling Lies About Me* (2008). How does your approach differ when working with video compared to performance art and theatre?

**LM:** In fact, it doesn't differ that much. Even on stage my work is very minimalist in terms of staging and movements; either we sit or stand and talk. It is almost like one image from the beginning to the end. In theatre there are different ways of playing with space and time by having a zoom or a general plan by using lighting. In general, I don't use that in my work so comparing it with these two video works, there is no big difference. In the film *I Had a Dream, Mom* there was one shot of my mother for 45 minutes, in which I tell her a dream I had, and you see her response to my narration. Both in my video works and theatre pieces there are similar interrogations: from personal stories to political or social problems, and common interests. At the same time I'm always precautious because I'm not a video artist or director. Therefore, I cannot pretend that I can interrogate video and image in the same way as I do in theatre and performance.

**GK:** Matthias Lilienthal thinks that German theatre cannot adapt itself to changes in the world. According to his opinion, the performance scene in Beirut is at an excellent level at the moment, dealing with the subject of the Civil War and the critique of images. Do you agree? As an artist from Lebanon living in Berlin, what could you say about theatre in these countries?

**LM:** I don't know about the very typical, classical German theatre scene, to be honest. I still don't speak German enough to be able to understand it. But what I can say is that what I observe here doesn't belong to any specific nationality or culture – it is not *German* theatre. There are international contemporary performances that are being presented in spaces like Hebbel am Ufer or Sophiensaele and so on. If we can still talk about a typically German, French, Italian, Spanish or whatever theatre, they are not in the festivals or venues that I follow, go to and participate in. The groups that I have been seeing on stage are mostly multinational.

**GK:** The stage is a non-place as well in contemporary theatre and performance art?

**LM:** Yes. As I have said, the companies are structured with people from various countries. However considering the stereotypes in theatre, the classical approach is problematic everywhere in the world, for me at least. In Germany as much as in Lebanon, there are a lot of artists still presenting a very 'traditional' modern theatre, if I can put it like this. The line is between conservative theatre and contemporary approaches, but not in terms of nationalities.

**\*Previously known as Lina Saneh.**



Lina Majdalanie, *Appendice*, 2007.  
Courtesy the artist. © Houssam Mcheimech.

**Lina Majdalanie** (née Saneh, born in Beirut 1966) is a Lebanese actress, writer and director. She completed her Ph.D. in 2005 at the Sorbonne Nouvelle in Paris. Her work is concerned with contemplating the particularity of the Lebanese experience; questioning the signs of social and political daily reality; the contradictions and conflicts generated by the suspended project of the political; and modernity in Lebanon and the Middle East. Today her work questions her citizenship and her place within public space, the notion of representation and the relation between fiction and the real. Majdalanie is an Assistant Professor at Saint Joseph University in Beirut and at HEAD in Geneva. Her works include *Ovrira* (1997), *Extrait d'Etat Civil* (2000), *Biokhraphia* (2002), *Appendix* (2007) and *Photo-Romance* (2009); *I Had A Dream, Mom* (video, 2006), *Someone Must Have Been Telling Lies about Me* (video installation, 2008) and *Lina Saneh Body-P-Arts Project* (a website project, 2007 and installation, 2009).

---

## TAGS

Interview

Performance

---

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

### Göksu Kunak

**Göksu Kunak** (1985, Ankara) is a writer based in Berlin. S/he received a BA degree in Interior Architecture and Environmental Design from Bilkent University. Before Berlin, s/he worked as a Research and Teaching Assistant in the Department of Art History at Hacettepe University where s/he has her/his MA as well. Besides working in the editorial team of quarterly interview magazine *mono.kultur*, Göksu has been contributing to several magazines and blogs such as *frieze d/e*, *Ibraaz*, *Paper Journal*, *Freunde von Freunden*, *Berlin Art Link*, *sleek*, *e-skop*, *crap=good*, *Istanbul'74*. Between 2012-2014, s/he has worked as a writer and project developer as a part of Apartment Project Berlin. She will start her PhD soon on queer chronopolitics in relation to performance art and contemporary dance. Göksu's short stories and poems can be read via [goksukunak.tumblr.com](http://goksukunak.tumblr.com).

FACEBOOK

TWITTER

INSTAGRAM

E-NEWSLETTER

RSS

---



Initiated by the  
Kamel Lazaar Foundation

C

---