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Looking at me, are you? Social status and the veil

By Angelika Böck¹

*One succeeded – he lifted the goddess of Sais' veil – but what did he see?
Wonder of wonder – himself. (Novalis)*

Novalis' Dichtichon from Mai 1798 (a preliminary work for the 'Lehrlinge zu Sais') pictures the youngling's discovery when he disclosed Isis' secret (Kurzke, 2001, p.110).

Abstract

In this article I discuss the dialogical method which is used to study the idea of perception among individuals, especially to understand the question of perception toward the veil in Yemen in 2007. Furthermore I elaborate on my exploration of "portrayal" as an art form which lies at the basis of my approach. To be occupied with matters of the veil means to deal with questions of image and gaze. Therefore I also try to give a basic overview on this topic. The article ends with a short description of a corresponding experiment I carried out in Germany one year later. By comparing the Western and Eastern responses to the veiled female body, this experiment reveals typical culturally shaped preconceptions.

Keywords: Identity, Visual Art, Dialogical Portrait, Image, Gaze, Veil, Culture

Introduction

"Among a hundred women I recognised my sister!" exclaimed Mohammed, our driver, suddenly when we passed a group of women wearing the veil, on a holiday trip to Yemen in 2005. I was baffled, since for me all women looked alike under their black cover. Mohammed's ability to distinguish one single woman out of a group of many figures hidden under a full-body cover resonated with a question I have been grappling with for many years – namely, how we perceive ourselves and others. And Mohammed's comment triggered in me a series of "research questions" for a new art project: Who do we see when we look at a veiled person? Can we (especially when raised in a covering culture) attribute specific looks and characteristics to a veiled person? I forwarded these questions to thirty-one Yemeni men and women in Sana'a, the capital of Yemen in 2007. With this survey the basis was set for a new art project I called 'Imagine Me'.

Concepts of identity and the artistic approach to portrayal have been changing during the past centuries from the development of archetypes (not to offend the gods) to identifiable individuals (Idols) and to the psychological exploration of temperament and character. In the same vein the negation of identity has taken on many different forms (Calabrese, 2006). Photography freed portraiture from its indexical, representational range of tasks. Likeness was no more a matter of mere representation but proved to be highly dependent on the consciously or unconsciously assimilated concepts of individuality, which in turn are contingent upon the humanist or scientific ideas prevalent at a particular moment.

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In "Die Wirklichkeit des Bildes" (1999) Reinhard Brandt asks whether physiognomy reveals a person's character and whether an image is able to depict a person's soul (the painter Basil Hallward in Oscar Wilde's novel 'The Picture of Dorian Gray' believes he revealed his own inner self in Dorian's portrait). He reminds us that the act of representation differs from the act of realization as the latter, depending on conclusions, generates what is deduced (Brandt, 1999). The question of internal and external representation in portrayal also brings about the double (inner and outer) nature of the image. According to the art historian Hans Belting this fact is inseparable from of the 'concept of the image' and reveals its anthropological foundation (Belting, 2002:11).

The image of the human, especially the depiction of the individual, fascinates us until today because it bears witness to how humans have perceived and represented themselves over the course of time.

Review of Literature

Visual material, which is at the core of the production of art, can take on a different significance in scientific field studies. Images can be both, the basis or product of the research. Visual anthropology must be concerned with questioning the visual representations and with reflecting the way in which seeing and what is seen is part of people's conceptual worlds (Banks and Morphy, 1997:21). As photography can help the abstract story to be believed in or to convey the "feel" of specific locations or events (Rose, 2007), Douglas Harper pleaded for the application of visual media in sociology and reminded us that sociology and photography were born during the same decades in Europe by recalling that visual sociology gradually emerged from and retains a kinship with the documentary tradition in photography, which, in turn, developed from fine arts and portraiture photography (Harper, 1988:54).

Artists have incorporated the methodologies of anthropologists in idiosyncratic ways, making inventories, carrying out "fieldwork", using interviews, and engaging with anthropology's theorizations of cultural difference (Metken, 1977). Thus the art critic and historian Hal Foster observed an "ethnographic turn" in recent contemporary art (Foster, 1996). This has involved the adoption of a broad definition of ethnography, and the production of an increasing number of works that directly tackle some of the concerns of anthropology. Where anthropologists were usually understood to study other cultures, artists were understood as adding something to their own culture. Despite all differences both, anthropologists and artists, have methodologies and practice in representing others, play with distance and intimacy and overtly place themselves between their audience and the world.

While I am certainly inspired by anthropological research, I deplore its lack of attention to forms which – in an expanded view – could be investigated in regard to "portrait". To give one example: the aboriginal Australians are excellent hunters. With their extraordinary skills in track-reading, community members are reported to be able to distinguish up to 200-300 single human footprints and to identify the individual that left the mark if known to the hunter (Lawler, 1993:186). Douglas Lockwood, an Australian newspaperman who travelled widely through Northern Australia for more than 20 years, was amazed when he realised his Pintupi interpreter was able to identify the person whose track they found in the desert (Lockwood, 1964:36).

Anthropologists who have studied Australian Aboriginal culture are likely to classify - as the Aboriginies themselves do - track-reading, in its use for hunting animals, as a method but do not take its "portrait" aspect into consideration. In the aboriginal Australian tradition - as in many indigenous societies - the representation of the individual never existed in the European sense of 'portrait'. The Western concept of portrayal does not mean anything to the subjects portrayed (track-reading specialists). This necessitates the need to first establish

awareness of the reconceptualised idea of portrait and second, to question their understanding of portraiture through experimental and explorative means sensitive to cultural specificity.

My interest in the Australian Aborigines faculty of track reading and Mohammed's comment on the veiled women challenged my concept of the human portrayal. I therefore decided to set up another 'Dialogical Portrait' in Yemen. This time the art project 'Imagine Me' aimed to investigate the respondent's sensual and imaginational abilities regarding a veiled person.

Method

My interest as an artist is directed at forms of expressions, practices, rituals, or signs able to represent – in short: to portray - an individual in various cultural contexts. In a series of (self-)portraits I have been applying a dialogical strategy by placing myself as the subject to be negotiated, studied and represented through interpretations of my fellow human beings while I, in reverse, portrayed them using common contemporary technologies such as photography or video recording.

My "dialogical" method is based on, and takes its title from Grant Kester's theory of 'Dialogical Aesthetics'. The author posits the possibility of representing identity through mutual social processes, such as conversation, as an alternative to the prioritising of reproducing identity through a system of resemblance (Kester, 1999/2000:6).

I call the artistic method, which challenges and expands the parameters of the conceptions and conventions of "portraiture" by applying a new methodology based on primary socio-cultural fieldwork, 'dialogical portraiture'. The 'Dialogical Portraits', which are at the core of my artistic practice for more than a decade, are intended as a dual relation between both objectivities and subjectivities within the order of representation and represented. This procedure is both a crossover and reversal of the traditional roles of the artist (and the dominant gaze) on the one hand, and a model on the other. It refers to Martin Seel's philosophical model of 'Zwischenmenschliche Begegnung' (1995:86) which claims the 'other' to become co-author of our own 'self' through 'dialogical action'. This understanding corresponds with Amanda Coffey's observation that the construction and production of self and identity of the researcher (artist) and the field occur both during and after the field work (Coffey, 1999:1) and Irit Rogoff's claim that identity is at one and the same time a concept, a sign system and an order of knowledge which is constantly in the process of being formed (Rogoff, 2000).

My strategy also draws on a Video Performance of the German artist Timm Ulrichs, and on a corresponding film editing technique. 'Das getroffene Bild, das betroffene ich' (Ulrichs, 1980:57) is an art work responding to a newspaper report from 1973 about the 'putsch' attempt in Chile. The reportage shows the photographer Leonardo Henriksen's last picture ('Gewehr im Anschlag'): his murderer targeting his gun at him. The film editing technique 'Shot-Reverse-Shot' features one character looking at another character (often off-screen), and then the other character looking back at the first character. Since the characters are shown facing in opposite directions, the viewer assumes that they are looking at each other. 'Imagine Me' is laid out along the lines of a scientific experiment. The process of production and reflection related with the art work features similarities to scientific disciplines employing visual culture, such as anthropology or sociology. According to Gillian Rose interest in what writing and words can hardly ever convey, has recently arisen all across the social sciences. My presentation responds to this 'wider turn towards materiality and practice' (Rose, 2007). It focuses on direct personal perceptions and reactions. Thus, the art installation - unlike a scientific experiment - does not aim to provide answers but tries to offer

a space for association in which the beholder (and the reader) may reflect upon various aspects surrounding the veil.

Sacred Space

The Christian culture is strong in exploiting images. For example, during the counterreformation in southern Germany and Austria images of idols (e.g. the miraculous statue of the Virgin Mary in a pilgrimage church) were printed on small pieces of paper which the salvation seeker swallowed to obtain blessing or healing (von Kittlitz, 2002). Islamic culture, in contrast, restricts pictorial representations and perceptions. The Western and Eastern 'conception of the image' differ. The difference is grounded in the invention of the 'perspective' and connected to the beholder's gaze (Belting, 2009). But the Islamic 'taboo' not only applies to images but to the whole female body. Its 'aurah', is indecent to be revealed. This can, in the extreme, extend to everything that can be grasped, for example the voice (vom Bruck, 1997:192). The women's veiling in public space corresponds to the prohibition of men's gaze. A woman may not be seen by a man and he, in turn, is not supposed to look at her or talk about her, because women are considered 'harim' (von Braun, Matthes, 2007:68). The authors remind the connection to the 'Harem' (and its importance for the Western imaginary). The root consonants *h, r, m* signify, in their original meaning, 'to be forbidden' (1.root), 'to declare as holy', 'inaccessible', 'invulnerable' (2.root). In other words: one keeps away from something that is clearly forbidden out of respect. 'Harim' marks holy, invulnerable places, mostly within the family, and therein, women. The adjective 'haram' means forbidden as well as holy and Islamic law addresses thus everything which is forbidden. Furthermore 'al-harmaan' describes the two sacred places Medina und Mecca. From both of them non-Muslims had to, previously, stay away. Now this only concerns the Kaaba, the most sacred site in Islam (Hitz, 2007, p.68 and further correspondence). The segregation of women in Islam is interpreted by Ludwig Amman as a 'declaration of the female body as sacred space' (Amman, 2004, p.86).

Although first illustrations of the prophet's life (albeit concealing Mohammed's face either by a white pane or veil (Weiss, 2003:102) appeared (ca. 1400) human representation underlies the Islamic prohibition of image. The production of an image could be understood as imitating the 'act of creation'. This as well as the allegedly connected danger of idolisation of the represented has to be avoided. The spectrum of the prohibition can extend to the representation of gods and idols, specific individuals (Prophets, Saints) and even the representation of all creatures. A photographer's possible 'performance of power' with in respect to his objectives has to be considered – as they may influence the beholder and therein future (Ibric, 2008 and further correspondence). The old texts bear witness that dealing with the image was always restricted for the beholders' inner images had to be preserved from being wrong (Belting, 2002:11).

The image is still excluded from Islamic religious practice today but permitted in a profane context. In the religious context the prophet is usually represented by his written name, genealogical tree, footprints or grave (Naef, 2007). The popularity of displaying family or individual photographs or paintings suggests that the image is allowed in private (non-public; non-sacral) space. Also the practice of pictorial representations on bank-notes (in Saudi-Arabia, for example) prove that the image has its place in the worldly realm. In Naef's opinion the (fundamentalist) Islamic prohibition is rather directed against the messages (and Modernity) transported by images than against the images themselves. Instead of the images' prohibition 'we should talk of its assignment with a function different to the one known in Christianity'. The author claims that the idea of the restriction of pictorial representations in Islam has, previously, been shaped by the Christian 'praxis of image'. Consequently Naef

poses the provoking question whether the prohibition of image' in Islam is not, after all, an invention of the West (Naef, 2007).

"Imagine Me" challenges the dealings with image and gaze. Respondents were requested to look at a woman, to imagine her, to express their impressions and fantasies about her and to have their own picture taken. The installation's formal realization refers to the German artist Gregor Schneider's unrealised work 'Cube Venice 2005', an independent 15 meter tall black fabric-clad cubic structure inspired by the most sacred space for Islam. Schneider's 'cubic-shaped building' (the translated meaning of 'Kaaba') has been projected for San Marco square in Venice and was, despite it's official invitation for the 51st Venice Biennale, banned shortly before the exhibition's opening by a decision from Rome and due to the rejection of the city officials who suggested it might offend or provoke Muslims.

The experimental layout of "Imagine Me"

I first provided myself with a neutral abaja, a black coat-like garment all Yemeni women wear in public and searched for a translator who would also conduct the experiment. I found two young women, Samah and Arwa, who had both studied German. Arwa was an employee of the German House Sana'a, and Samah translated for a Yemeni news agency reports about Yemen that were published in German language media. With their help I dressed like a Yemeni woman: I covered my (in Yemen untypical) green eyes under a thick black veil and my light skin with a pair of gloves and stockings. Made up like all the others I mutely confronted myself – together with Arwa or Samah – to thirty Yemeni men and women that belonged to different social and age groups. The participants, especially all women, were contacted through mediators, by Hamied, a business man; Veronika, an intern at the Goethe Institute; Abdulkader, a writer; and Samira, a headmistress. Some of the participating men were approached by Arwa and Veronika on the street or the Souq, the market of the old town.

The local interviewers set the same task to all involved parties: The volunteers were asked to imagine the strange, unrecognisable and non-communicative person. Arwa or Samah challenged the onlookers to observe me very carefully, and asked them later to describe my looks, character and personal circumstances. The interviews took place in private as well as in public, and were carried out in two different ways. In the public space my interviewers searched for men willing to participate before they beckoned me to come closer. In private surroundings, where we arrived together, the conductors of the experiment directed me by handsign. In the latter cases the respondents were already prepared for an interview situation. All statements were tape recorded. After the inquiry in private space I revealed my identity and requested to take a photo portrait of the interviewee. The picture of the men that have been contacted in the street was taken at a second meeting arranged by the interviewer at the end of the session. These portraits were usually made the next day at the interviewed person's home, office or shop.

As a constant throughout all 'Dialogical Portraits' I have used photography or video recording to represent my co-participants. The continuous use of the same technique highlights the respective technique that is investigated. This is important for me especially in regard to a presentation of the body of work as a whole. Like in a scientific research my "Portrait Partners", for the most time, did not know to what extent they were involved in the project before it concluded. My co-participants were usually commissioned and paid for their contribution.

The Installation

'Imagine Me' consists of a 2 x 2 x 2 Meter fabric cube as well as 25 photo portraits. The cube, which is located in the middle of the room, is carrying a selection of 16 interviews

in Arabic and German language stitched in golden letters into the panels that represent the Abaya (according to my observation, besides shoes and handbags, especially golden jewellery (rings or bracelets) were the leads to distinguish women in public). These 16 pieces of cloths are tacked to a cube measuring 2 x 2 x 2 meters (the approximate width and height a human reaches with stretched out arms) in the centre of the exhibition room. The black corpus carrying the projections is surrounded by photographs of the participants who allowed their portrait to be taken (four female university teachers, among others, who didn't wear a facial veil in public, refused to have their photographs shown in an exhibition). The pictures are taken in the typical manner of early photographic portraits. There is no connection between the embroidered statements and the photo-portraits in the installation. The cube itself is inaccessible and its interior is hidden from view as are the Yemeni women.



The perceptions of the Yemeni men and women differ widely. Some respondents developed in a short time detailed inner images while others confined themselves to external features.



Mua'ath, a respondent



Iman, a respondent

An old merchant at the Souq said:

“The woman looks good. Only god knows who she is.”

A young mistress believed:

“This woman could be a man. She is educated and certainly works. She is neither rich nor poor. She’s about 20 years old.”

An elderly businessman thought:

“This woman is definitely no housewife. She has completed her studies and works. She is confident, independent and eager. She is not rich, has a mobile phone but no car. She does what she wants and maintains an opinion. She is a believing Muslim but not a devout one. She loves nature and everything beautiful. She hates violence. Her parents were often disputing. She has beautiful eyes and a nice nose, medium-length black hair and light skin. She loves to sing under the shower. She is reasonably and healthy. She has no children yet. She is between 20 and 30 years old.”

A middle-aged tradesman observed:

“This woman is not handsome. She walks like a mannequin or soldier. She is poor and without interest. She is unreliable, messy and badly organised. She is not a good housewife. She has little chance to get husband and a house. She has a good body without doing anything for it. Her face is neither beautiful nor ugly.”

A middle-aged confectioner remarked:

“This woman walks like a woman from Sana’a, dresses like one from Taiz, but doesn’t look like a Yemeni. She is gorgeous! She is educated and very pretty. She gets scared easily. She has blue eyes and white skin. She is of middle age.”

An elderly housewife declared:

“This woman is like all the others. She has not much money. She leads a simple life.”

An old writer said:

“The woman looks like a ghost under this black hull. She originates from a Yemeni middle-class family, seems to have studied at the university and works. Through her mute participation in this project she possibly wants to demonstrate a thesis. Her way of walking tells of her propensity towards violence. Under the cover of calmness she might hide her emotions. She has black eyes and hair but light skin. She is certainly fashionable. She is totally healthy.”

Conclusion

All information we receive as human beings are enriched by the opinions we accumulate within a certain context - historically, geographically, culturally and socially. Our conceptions and ideas interact with our observations of the world we live in. I observed, for

example, that the most detailed descriptions of the veiled 'me' were expressed by educated men, that educated women were more likely to perceive a woman that has studied and that housewives rather "saw" an uneducated women. How women see other women (from their own perspective as well as being a male agent) seems to be of enormous importance in Yemeni society. Social status comes along with two kinds of female bodies that correspond with the two fundamental sets of relationships in which women are classified as married couples or as brothers and sisters. "Unmarried sisters have not yet fully developed their gender potential; they are seen as incomplete (naqisah) and thus less gendered than wives and mothers". Bodily embellishment is where this difference is negotiated while the female body may only be seen, according to Islamic law, by male persons that are in a degree of consanguinity that precludes marriage (mahram) and other women (vom Bruck, 1997:176).

Women are the match makers and have therefore an important share concerning the achievement of female hierarchical status. Mohammed, our driver, for example, had picked his future wife out of a group of girls his close female relatives had considered marriageable and had described to him. Only after the wedding (an event celebrated separately between men and women), he explained, would he be allowed to meet his chosen one. While he had not even seen a photograph of his bride, Mohammad admired her beauty, adored her intelligence and gentleness and was absolutely sure of having found the right woman. I wondered whether his mother's, grandmother's, sister's, aunt's and cousin's preferences (knowing they will spend more time with her than he) correspond with his own. How could a man develop an ideal different from the female role models of his family, since they are the only women he had ever been allowed to look at and talk to? I was astonished and amazed by the trust and power Yemeni men allowed women over their domestic happiness. This discovery contrasted the image of the "suppressed veiled women" I had brought along from back home.

The cloth designed to cover the female corpus has recently gained attention due to the media polemic surrounding veiling. This is expressed, for example, through exhibitions focussing on the oriental woman and her disguise, such as "Veil: Veiling, Representation and Contemporary art" (a travelling exhibition in the aftermath of September 11 organised by the Institute of International Visual Arts, London, 2003/2004), "The veil: visible and invisible spaces" (a travelling exhibition organised by Jeniffer Heath, ongoing since 2008), "Mahrem – comments on the veil" (Kunsthalle Wien, 2008) or "L'Orient des femmes" (Musée du Quai Branly, 2011) and the work of numerous artist such as Shirin Neshat, for example, who refers in her work to the social, cultural and religious codes of Muslim societies and the oppositions of man and woman or Susanne Weirich, who investigates in her artistic installations the veil in all its spatial and symbolic functions. 'Imagine Me' features similarities to Zineb Sedira's self-portrait and video work 'Self-Portrait or the Virgin Mary? (2000)'. By reflecting on her background and bringing the Algerian white veil face to face with the tradition of veiling in Christianity Sedira overturns Western stereotypes about the veil. The setup of 'Imagine Me', in contrast, challenges the dealings with image and gaze in Islamic culture. Beside this the project is a reflection on different aspects of the 'self' - recollection, reflection, recognition, dialogue, retelling and fiction.

The questions I carry along with these projects and pass unspoken on to those involved, are always the same: How culture-specific are the ways in which humans perceive themselves and others? What is real and what is fictional when we look at ourselves and others? To what extent do we project ourselves when we consider or represent our counterparts? With the realisation of "Imagine Me" a series of new questions emerged, for example: How does the image which a traditional Yemeni man lays out in his mind about a woman (described to him by women) determine the way he later "sees" her? How do the male and female gaze interact and which one is dominant?

Art's mission is not to provide answers. A work of art may only create a new, appropriate room in which the spectator may use the work to question and enlarge own experiences by using all his/her senses. A work of art functions not only for the beholder – but also for the artist who is, like me, looking back onto her work to talk about it from a present perspective – like a reflecting mirror.

Appendix

Some time ago I was asked how, in my opinion, European respondents would react to the task that has been posed to Yemenis for “Imagine Me”. Of course I didn't know but the question made me curious enough to persuade my mother to slip into my Yemeni disguise for another experiment on Munich's most expensive shopping mile “Maximiliansstrasse” – a surrounding where the veiled female body is widely represented by shopping Arab women. I approached various pedestrians of different sex and age (most of them were of German nationality), while my veiled mother kept strictly in such a distance to me that my conversation partner could eye her well without fearing she would hear his/her answer. Unlike the Yemeni interviewees, who had no difficulty in using their own senses and imagination, none of the 15 addressed persons permitted him/herself to the task. The interviewees' gazes seemed neither able to “penetrate” the veil nor to introspect fantasy. Unthinkable in the Yemeni context, all commented – unasked - about the veil and the life veiled women supposedly lead. The rather short answers always contained a more or less politely formulated damnation, incomprehension, pity, or mistrust; from time to time tolerance was expressed. Some statements reminded me, painfully, of my own prejudices regarding the oriental woman before I had visited Yemen. Preconceptions that changed all around the world last spring - mediated by the TV-images of Arab women, who were breaking ground for political and social change in their countries.

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