Obvious Artifice

"Pre-Israeli Orientalism: A Photographic Portrait", written by Dor Guez, focuses on a photographic genre from the early decades of the twentieth century as a local, unique, and complex case of visual Orientalism. Hagai Ulrich reviews the book and suggests broadening the conversation through the values and characteristics of performance art.

Review / Hagai Ulrich April 21, 2018

Dor Guez, *Pre-Israeli Orientalism: A Photographic Portrait*. Tel-Aviv: Resling, 2015. 270 pages

The emerging post-Colonialist discourse in the twentieth century identified photography with the development of several key expressions of Western Orientalism – the enchantment with the East as exotic, alongside its presentation as ineffectual and backward in comparison to the West. In his book, *Pre-Israeli Orientalism: A Photographic Portrait*, Dor Guez – artist, art scholar, and head of the MFA program at the Bezalel Academy – addresses a unique case of Orientalism: the case of the Zionist Jew in the first three decades of the twentieth century, 1901-1929 (before the Great Arab Revolt, in 1936). The early Zionist Jew viewed himself as Western vis-à-vis the native Palestinians and, at the same time, as Semitic and Oriental vis-à-vis the Europeans. Thus he idealized the indigenous Arab by seeing the latter as a biblical figure and a model for emulation - a model which was appropriated and used to enhance the creation of the "New Jew," with ties to the land and the East. At the same time, the Zionist Jew branded the indigenous Arab as backward and child-like, in accordance with traditional Western Colonial thinking.1

JPG.A30 סוסקין 006



[1]

Avraham Soskin. **Mendel Portugali and Israel Shochat**, 1911
A scanned glass plate, 30X24 cm.
The Pinchas Lavon Institute for Labor Movement Research, Museum Section, Tel Aviv (figure 6, p. 130)

Guez focuses on one of the visual expressions of what he terms "pre-Israeli Orientalism" – a genre of photography that he termed “pre-Israeli Orientalist-style photographs”. These photographs had a certain role in the formation of the Zionist Jewish identity as part of the foundation of a national identity by the first waves of immigration to the Holy Land/Land of Israel. These were photographs that documented the development of Jewish settlement (Yishuv [2]) in the first three decades of the twentieth century, as well as outdoors portraits that showed contemporaneous jews executing various tasks related to the establishment of a communal identity through visual representations.2

The book reviews several historiographies (painting and photography in the West, local photography, Zionism, the Orientalist discourse), to provide background and context for the examination of the photographic products of “pre-Israeli Orientalism”: photographs that were influenced by contemporaneous political thought and Western Orientalist literature; inspired by Zionist ideas and literature; responded to Western historical events; incorporated traditions of Western Orientalist representation in painting and photography; and mimicked Western photographers, but were also influenced by the local Armenian and Christian photographers who had preceded the pre-Israeli Jews. Guez mentions many of the latter but centers on Avraham Soskin, who has photographed in his studio leaders of the Zionist movement and prominent Jewish personages of the time, alongside other projects he had undertaken as part of his documentation of the formation of the pre-Israeli settlements. His photographs aimed at ideally and intentionally representing the members of the Second Aliya (the Jewish immigration wave to Palestine between 1904-1914) as “New Jews.” For that purpose, Soskin and other Zionist photographers employed several practices, consciously or somewhat unconsciously, or innocently, the most prominent being studio portraits of Jewish immigrants dressed up in the local attire.3 It is a common Orientalist practice, in which the European Orientalist assumes the garments and appearance of the native for a short while. According to Guez, the local non-Jewish photographers, who preceded the Zionist Jews, had also adopted this practice for commercial purposes.4 However, there was a difference between the costumed Europeans and the business interests of the local photographers, and the intentions of the Zionists, because the dressing-up of the latter was part of a more complex process of assimilation, and also because of their sense of belonging to the East due to their Semitic identity. The Europeans dressed-up as Orientals to enhance their European-ness by emphasizing the differences between them and the locals, Guez says, while the pre-Israeli Zionist Jews did it to appropriate an ancient indigenousness to which they wished to connect.5

JPG.גיטה לבושה כערביה 012 **[3]**



[4]

Avraham Soskin. **Gita Soskin**, 1905-1929
Scanned glass plate, 30X24 cm.
The Pinchas Lavon Institute for Labor Movement Research, Museum Section, Tel Aviv (figure 12, p. 156)

The studio photographs in the “pre-Israeli Orientalist” genre, as Guez termed it, were unique in that the dressing-up was based not on full impersonation but rather on improvisations in the studio using symbolic props, painted backgrounds, and costumes. In the photos, the accessories seem artificial and the real, ordinary objects appear to have been used in ways different from their regular, daily use - intentionally and consciously, or by chance – which emphasized the sense of staging and pretense. For instance, Soskin's son, Raphael, is shown with a handkerchief on his head, held in place by an *akkal*, alluding to a *kafieh*. Jewish women are depicted in embroidered Palestinian dresses or with a *kafieh* around their waists or holding jugs of water over their heads in a way that cannot possibly support the storage of water. The men wear *galabieh*, *kafieh*, *abbayeh*, with gold bands on their arms, guns, and ammunition belts. Next to them in the photographs are three-dimensional props such as a sheep's pelt, water jugs, and cardboard rocks, while behind them European landscapes position the setting as a realm of fiction.6

JPG.64-P רפאל חבוש כפיה 014 **[5]**



[6]

Avraham Soskin. **Raphael Soskin**, 1905-1929
Scanned glass plate, 30X24 cm.

The Pinchas Lavon Institute for Labor Movement Research, Museum Section, Tel Aviv (figure 14, p. 159)

There is quite a difference between the Jews Soskin documented outside the studio - men who in fact used to wear a *kafieh* while working in the fields, as protection from the sun and the dust - and the urbane Jews of Tel Aviv and Jaffa who dressed up in Oriental attire in the studio, and then reverted to their Western clothes. It is especially evident in photographs framed side-by-side, one showing Western-dressed Jews, and the other their portraits in Oriental garments, a 'before and after' effect. The 'before,' signified by European clothes, denotes the time prior to their immigration to "The Land of Israel" and their assimilation in the Orient, and the 'after' points to an aspect of their new identity, or experience, post-immigration: "The proximity of the two images in the same photograph, whether the plate has been split in two," as in the double portrait of Mordechai and Tsipora Shchevitz, "or as two images taken in the studio," which emphasized that the subjects were free to revert to Western culture whenever they wish to do so and that this was not about real impersonation.7

סוסקין, מכון לבון מרדכי וציפורה שכביץ.JPG **[7]**



[8]
Avraham Soskin. **Mordechai and Zipora Shchevitz**, 1920
Scanned glass plate, 24X30 cm.
The Pinchas Lavon Institute for Labor Movement Research, Museum Section, Tel Aviv (figure 12, p. 156)

One of the primary emphases of the book is that the pre-Israeli dress-up genre, unlike the European one, contains a mindful effort to create a new Oriental Jew, a process that aims at producing a consciousness of a new subject and community. The attempt indicates an honest intent of the newly-arrived European Jews to assimilate in the land and among the locals, but it also exposes the falseness of this attempt, as witnessed in the act of mimicry and the existence of ‘faults’ in the depicted simulation. The seemingly failed false pretense highlights the difference between the Jews and their objects of imitation and shows, according to Guez, not only the wish to blur and unsettle the image of the diasporic Jews but also to reject their being perceived as soley Oriental.[8]

Toward the end of the book, Guez writes, "From a post-Colonialist perspective we might say that the Zionist Jews employed what could be interpreted as Colonialist practices of (stereotypical) imitation of the Oriental as a performance."[9] In his view, these expressions reveal the artificiality and superficiality of this imitation – the so-called orientalization – as obvious artifice made for selective viewers (diasporic Jews, Zionists in Palestine, and European politicians and financiers). In the following passages, I would like to analyze the “pre-Israeli Orientalist” photographs in light of 20th century performance art.

Performance is a genre of art that seeks to expand the artistic act toward reality and life itself, at the same time merging artist and viewer, blurring the boundaries between object and subject, while aiming to mix categories of art, as well as different temporalities – past, present, and future. It is made with the purpose of expanding the viewers' awareness and allowing them to wield their responsibility through engaged participation. By analyzing the images in Guez's book through this prism, we detach the ideological and political purposes underlying their making and appropriate them into the domain of visual art – a space where we can halt, reflect, re-examine the action and the various ways it can be perceived, and discuss them. This enables free and pluralistic thought characteristic of visual art.

According to Roselee Goldberg, the rise of performance as an art medium has occurred in parallel to the principal expressions of visual arts in twentieth-century Modernism. However, she claims, the medium of performance defies a simple definition as live action by artists, and, in essence, encompasses other disciplines, like theater, dance, sculpture, music, and video: ”any strict definition would immediately negate the possibility of performance itself.”10 This blending of one medium into another and the disruption of either one have grown out of a broad, postmodern definition of art. Furthermore, performance unsettles the traditional art-viewing experience, in which an artwork and its author face the viewer. It is based not only on the artist; the audience participates in its making or is at the least included. That is, performance includes, and blends, the viewers' consciousness, their points of view, and their cultural, gender, or socio-economic circumstances - they are co-creators of the event, so to speak. The “here and now” of the artwork - the performance - is, in that respect, expanded. Thus, the dimensions of space and time of traditional art viewing are broadened, and awareness is injected into the artistic event.

JPG. גולדמן 036 **[9]**



[10]

Avraham Soskin. **Goldman**, 1905-1929
Scanned glass plate, 30X24 cm.
The Pinchas Lavon Institute for Labor Movement Research, Museum Section, Tel Aviv (figure 38, p. 240)

These are components that can be identified as of performance art, mainly in the U.S.A. in the 1960s: according to Goldberg, Dan Graham, for instance, sought to merge the active performer and the passive viewer in his performances. It was based to some extent on Bertolt Brecht's approach of presenting to the audience an unpleasant and self-conscious situation. Graham used video and mirrors to add a dimension of space and time to a constructed situation in a given place, so that the audience be conscious of their own presence. Thus, in *Two Consciousness Projection(s)*, from 1972, two spectators actively participated in creating the event, while also passively observing their own performance: a woman focused her attention on a television monitor and was then asked to verbalize her thoughts, while a man watched the monitor featuring the woman and was asked to verbalize his thoughts about her. The two events were shown to an audience on an additional screen.11

In the video *Present Continuous Past*, from 1974, Graham showed the viewers their previous actions while a mirror reflected the present. The feedback from the video connected past and present and created a situation in which the work did not exist if it could not be seen again. Thus a reflexive awareness of the self was created, through the feedback.12

In the pre-Israeli Orientalist photographs, the Orientalist dress-up sessions aim at unsettling the existing state of mind (of the diasporic jew) and at designating this unsettled state as a starting point for a different way of seeing "the New Jew." In these photographs, then, the photographer is not just the maker of the images, the subject, but one with the objects as well, which mark him as part of a collective in the process of producing a new Jewish model. Soskin photographed family members, and himself, in the same way he did strangers. Both photographer and photographed were fully aware that they were participating in a project aiming to change the consciousness of individuals, be they Jewish immigrants/settlers or Jews in the diaspora (who were seeing the contents of the photographs - the new way of being Jewish - as an extension of themselves, in a sense). By addressing those spectators, the performance seems to broaden its scope of influence and is expanded beyond its limited time and space of occurrence (the studio).

Guez claims that, contrary to Western Orientalism, which saw the West as subject and the East as object, the pre-Israeli Orientalist position was characterized by an unresolved tension: "the boundaries between subject and object were blurred. The Zionist subject saw himself as both Western and Eastern, and the local Arab was perceived as a role model and an example to emulate for the formation of the identity-in-progress. That was the tension that Soskin and the other Jewish photographers had tried to resolve, while also representing it.13

In this sense, the photographs were not intended for theatrical purposes, since in their making there has been no conscious effort to create an illusion or dramatic mimesis as entertainment, but rather an attempt to present a model of a new Jewish subject by means of fusing of object and subject – a characteristic of twentieth-century performance art, and by its creators' intent to use imagery as a consciousness-altering instrument. The 'before-and-after' images contain a reflexive dimension, as well as temporal aspects where the people who were photographed, upon viewing the finished photograph and seeing themselves in the final product, not only received a certain feedback, but also experienced their taking part in a major event that exceeded their own presence. Although they could not have seen themselves on film, they did get a sense of the 'before-and-after' by being both active participants and passive viewers in a performance.

JPG. גולדמן037 **[11]**



[12]

Avraham Soskin. **Goldman**, 1935
Scanned glass plate, 30X24 cm.
The Pinchas Lavon Institute for Labor Movement Research, Museum Section, Tel Aviv (figure 38, p. 241)

Then there's also Joseph Beuys [13] and his ideas about social sculpture, in relation to 'happenings' and performances (actions, as he called them). Beuys had sought to create a social sphere that resembled an artwork, in which each participant took part in the production of social sculpture, and where every person was an artist. Such reflexivity, which was also endowed with a spiritual dimension, was perceived as capable of setting the subject free within the framework of a social structure.

Beuys made deliberate use of still photography in his performances, contributing to the development of photography as an independent art medium.14 In one of Fluxus's performances, in 1964, his action was interrupted by students who stormed the stage, one of them hitting Beuys in the face. Beuys went on with the performance and was documented in Heinrich Riebesehl's photograph [14] with a bleeding nose, his left hand brandishing a cross. He has used photography many times over, his body and trademark outfit an important part of it. He understood the power of photography, not only as a record of his actions, but also as an iconic expression that had expanded the scope of his performative actions. There were other examples of performances that had used the body as an instrument, to denote the broadening of the action of performance, as well as raising the spectators' awareness of their participation and their sharing of the action's masked violence. One example would be *Cut Piece* by Yoko Ono (1964), in which she set down a pair of scissors, and the audience participated by cutting off her clothes. Also Marina Abramović, who, in *Rhythm 0* (1974), spread 72 objects on a table and asked the audience to use them as they pleased on her body.

Joseph Beuys on Art and Society, from the documentary film "J.B. Public Dialogue."
Directed by Willoughby Sharp, N.Y.C., January 1974).

Marina Abramović during her performance Rhythm 0, 1974.
Directed and edited by Milika Zec.

In her book, Goldberg writes that already in 1933, the artist Josef Albers created a course at Black Mountain College in North Carolina, in which performance was the starting point for artists of various disciplines. He taught that art was about the 'how,' not the 'what.' That is, not the verbal or linguistic content but the performance of content. Performance – how the thing is done – is the content of art.15

Although the pre-Israeli Zionists had certainly not sought to examine the concealed violence in their performances, they still used their bodies in the photographs as means to an end, in an overt intent to alter the notions and ideas regarding the appearance and characteristics of the Jewish man and woman. Pre-Israeli Zionist photography embraced and unified individual subjects in a community of New Jewish subjects (captured in similar conditions, compositions, backgrounds, and costumes). Many of the subjects are young men and women, whose robustness and physical handsomeness are enhanced with props that portray them as pioneers (*halutzim*), farmers, or fighters. At their background is a European landscape, but they are shown as owners of a revitalized Oriental identity that testifies to their wish to assimilate in the East.

The performance underlying the making of these photographs facilitated the creation of an imagined community, a new consciousness, and a new subject. The practice that reveals this intent is the "overt disguise" that Guez mentions in his book, which is not complete impersonation (as opposed to full disguise, which is what Israeli armed forces do when they dress as Arabs to act undercover within the local population). This impersonation does not attempt to fully copy the local Oriental look, but rather brings to the fore the blurring and the tension unique to “pre-Israeli Orientalism”. It appears that the Jewish pre-Israeli photographers were less interested in the "why," in paraphrase of Albers's definition of performance and visual art, and more in the "how" – the performative actions themselves: the careless mimicry, the imprecision, the creative use of artifacts, and the appropriated attire prove that the final product and the creation of an illusion of Eastern-ness were not the issue, but the actual performance, its documentation, and the ability of the photographs to communicate it. The Jewish pre-Israeli photographers cared less if their models wore the turban in the correct manner, or whether the ‘kaffieh’ was just a towel, or about documenting daily acts such as carrying a jug of water on the head (so that it could actually keep the water in it). The new thing that has happened as a result of the act documented in the photograph was more important – an art that creates awareness for individuals, to the point of engendering a new consciousness.

The actions of the “pre-Israeli Orientalist” photographers can then be viewed as similar to ideas about performance art in the twentieth century: the use of obvious, visible costumes rather than full camouflage or disguise, the focus on the 'how' rather than on the finished product, the use of the body (the personal and the common) to erode a prior identity and create a new one, the merging of subject and object, the attempt to create a collective consciousness similar to social sculpture (albeit seemingly addressing a selective audience), the use of 'before-and after' to add a dimension of time and awareness; and the expansion of the the enclosed space of occurrence beyond its physical boundaries.

The photographs turn the studio space into a metonymy of a larger, boundless stage. As Guez emphasizes, "the Land of Israel" is a mythical, subjective definition of a territory broader than the State of Israel, that came to be later. The people in the photographs, with their Palestinian clothes, participate in a much larger performance, and address the audience accordingly.

Viewing these photographs as performance art, despite their being in part propaganda, distances them from Zionism and brings them closer to art. Thus they might be tied to acts of expanding borders and the creation of a more pluralistic arena. The giving-up of the functionality of the action (the ‘how’) evokes reflections about the possibility of stopping, thinking, and conversing– as art wishes, and sometimes demands, that we do.
The book examines the complex case of “pre-Israeli Orientalism” and its photographic products through its association with interpretive and historical aspects, in order to elaborate on why the definition "pre-Israeli" (unlike "Israeli”) attests to an Orientalist approach that is different from the ones that have preceded it, or that would follow in the future. Guez recounts and summarizes his main points in every chapter of the book, to facilitate broader comprehension, regardless of where we might open the book. The text is fluent and enjoyable, combining historical details, anecdotes, and analyses, revealing the complexity and the nuances of the topic. He mentions the performance aspect of the images only briefly toward the end of the book.

It would be interesting to spot similar images of present times, when the Photoshopping of a *kafieh* onto a Jew's head is perceived as seditious in the Israeli public sphere. It seems that the *kafieh* has become an ultimate symbol of evil, accentuating current Orientalism, racism, and paternalism. Furthermore, this might be an expression of a society that cannot cope with the principles of performance art and art in general – the expansion of space and time, consciousness and personal responsibility - a society that separates object from subject, acts to create distinct definitions for them, and does not commit to a mutual dynamic that could create our reality.

- 1. According to Guez, after the 1929 riots and the Great Arab Revolt (1936-1939), in which

hundreds of people - British, Jewish, and Arab - were killed, Jewish society began to rethink the agrarian ideal and transitioned to a more militaristic agenda, disengaging from the Palestinian community around it, and no longer perceiving the Arab as an ancient role model for emulation and assimilation by the new Jewish nation. See: Dor Guez, *Pre-Israeli Orientalism: A Photographic Portrait*. Tel-Aviv: Resling, 2015. Pp. 18-19,89, 91, 221, 229. (The book has been published in Hebrew. Title and terminology used throughout this essay are proposed by the translator.)

- 2. *Ibid*. p. 179.
- 3. For more on another case of Colonialist photography, which employed performative practices, some consciously and some not, among them masquerading, see: Alma Mikulinsky, Playing Spirits *[15]*, Tohu, March 5, 2017.
- 4. Guez writes that impersonation is an act of ambivalent complexity, because the temporary aspect of dressing up as stylized Orientals is evident also in the Orientalist-style work of Armenian and Arab photographers, in which appeared Palestinians in Oriental costumes. These are phenomena related to Western tourism that are also part of the practice of the occupied imitating the occupier, repressing something in their cultural identity – an aspect that exposes symbolic expressions of power. See: Guez, *ibid*. Pp. 232-233
- 5. *Ibid*. p. 19.
- 6. *Ibid*. p. 227.
- 7. *Ibid*. p. 235-236.
- 8. *Ibid*. p. 248.
- 9. *Ibid*. p. 227.
- 10. RoseLee Goldberg, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present*, Thames and Hudson, London, 2001, pp. 8-9.
- 11. *Ibid*. p. 162.
- 12. Many video artists used this motif at the same time performance artists had, and Rosalind Krauss had claimed that in reflection and feedback there is an act of merging and appropriation, an illusion of erasing of the difference between object and subject. See: Rosalind Krauss, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism [16]", October 1, 1976, pp. 50-64.
- 13. Guez, *ibid*. p.74.
- 14. Joseph Beuys, “I Am Searching for Field Character [17]”, translation, Caroline Tisdall, Art Into Society, Society Into Art (exhibition catalogue), Institute of Contemporary Art, London, 1974, p.48.
- 15. Goldberg, *ibid*. pp. 121-122.

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