

Life Is Short, Kebab Is Big

Orient Express is a solo exhibition by Dafna Maimon

In 1972, the first Turkish doner kebab was served in Berlin by Kadir Nurman in his take-away on Kurfürstendamm, close to the Berlin Zoo. Back then, doner kebabs were especially popular with migrant workers who needed ‘food fast in the hand’, says Tarkan Tasyumruk, chair of the Association of Turkish Doner Producers in Europe.¹ There is no doubt that kebab is a hit in Berlin, as in many other northern European cities. Today, in the Wedding district of Berlin, kebab and falafel houses from around the world can be found on every corner.

In Dafna Maimon’s *Orient Express*, the words ‘kebab’ and ‘falafel’ become cues in a parafictional narrative about transnational family relations and the cultural conflicts of gender roles. For this exhibition, the Berlin-based artist – who grew up in Porvoo, Finland, the daughter of an Israeli father and a Finnish mother – has recreated the interior of her father’s eponymous kebab restaurant. *Orient Express* was the first kebab and falafel restaurant in Helsinki in the 1980s. The artist’s father had migrated to Finland after meeting her mother, who was staying in a kibbutz, during a day off at the beach in Netanya. Maimon’s exhibition includes the restaurant setting; two performances, *Falafel Interval* and *After Hours*, staged during the opening and the finissage, respectively; a reworked advertisement film; and, finally, a series of slogans and autobiographical texts. Food will be served during the opening and at irregular intervals. Hungry visitors can buy falafels for 15, 99 or 287 words, paying, as its were, by answering questions about their past which are put to them by the restaurant staff. By calling upon visitors’ memories and biographies, this performance opens up a semi-intimate space of shared mapping and shared pasts. At the same time, a voice over the tannoy repeatedly announces the closing of the restaurant.

For the artist, the closure of the restaurant is related to her biography, more specifically her relationship with her father. In her exhibition, Maimon adopts an adult position from which she can appreciate her father’s entrepreneurship, yet simultaneously question his insatiable “consumption” of, and disrespectful behaviour towards, women throughout his life. Seen under this light, her work aims to deconstruct certain aspects of patriarchal culture – something which, according to the feminist writer bell hooks, can only be achieved through a collaboration between men and women: ‘Dismantling and changing patriarchal culture is work that men and women must do together.’²

As the exhibition in Berlin is part of a series of enactments, it is worth mentioning the performance entitled *Orient Express, Yourself*, which took place in September 2017 at the Lilith Performance Studio in Malmö, Sweden. In that instance, the setting was a fully functional falafel restaurant operating at normal business hours, where visitors could order a falafel and pay with words. They could choose the amount they were willing to spend from the menu: ‘Falafel: 59 words. Falafel: 139 words’, etc. While they placed their order, a member of

¹ German: Verein Türkischer Dönerhersteller in Europa. The owner of Nurmans Imbissbude (take-away) is generally credited with the invention of the doner kebab. In the same article we learn that doner is indeed a Berlin invention. Available via <https://www.berlin.de/tourismus/insidertipps/2036421-2339440-doener-kebab-ist-eine-berliner-erfindung.html> (retrieved 18.10.2017).

² Gloria Jean Watkins (a.k.a. bell hooks), *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love*, Atria Books, New York, 2014, p24.

the staff asked them questions – ‘Who was the kebab in your family?’ or ‘What would you like to change about your childhood?’ – which they had to answer by speaking into a microphone on the counter. Alternatively, spectators could choose the special offer of the day, for instance, ‘Only 89 words on the necessity of challenging patriarchy in order to liberate not just women but – believe it or not – men too. Comes with a free drink!’ Visitors of all ages, men and women, “stilled their hunger” with real stories about their past, their families and family roles. Interestingly, most people immediately knew who was the kebab in their family.

How does a kebab become the kebab?

In 1986 Maimon’s father produced an advertisement film for his restaurant. It was shot in the actual restaurant and involved, among others, the artist’s mother and sister as stand-ins. It shows a dark, handsome man in suit and trench coat looking to eat a kebab in a shopping mall. The man slides down a railing and lands in the arms of a blonde woman who directs him to the Orient Express restaurant where, after crossing the food court with a joyful pirouette, he orders a kebab and takes a huge bite. Other people, including a young girl (the artist’s sister) also order kebabs, and everyone eats, brimming with pleasure.

Thirty-two years later, Maimon ritually re-opens (and closes) the Orient Express restaurant in order to de- and reconstruct the icon of a patriarchal and frivolous father with great wit and emotional force. The 2017 version of the Orient Express appears as an abandoned, apologetic relic of a kebab restaurant.

Louise Bourgeois, who throughout her life and work searched for the antithesis of her father, stated that, ‘every day you have to abandon your past or accept it and then, if you cannot accept it, you become a sculptor’. Reflecting upon the artist’s privilege of being in touch – and hence able to work – with their unconscious feelings, she wrote: ‘The connections that I make in my work are connections that I cannot face. They are really unconscious connections. The artist has the privilege of being in touch with his or her unconscious, and this is really a gift. It is the definition of sanity. It is the definition of self-realization.’³

In *Orient Express*, mock commercial falafel and kebab slogans become metaphors allowing us to grasp the climate in which sexism thrives as something that has been part of most people’s upbringing, whether personally or socially. Adopting the directness of 1980s sexist ad speak, the artist’s slogans are combined with sayings by her father: ‘Life is short, kebab is big’, ‘Get hot . . . with falafel’, ‘Finally a kebab that takes you seriously!’ Mimicking commercially branded restaurant paraphernalia, the slogans appear on signs placed within the installation. The restaurant also holds original food images in light boxes, tables and chairs.

Maimon relates her work to parafiction – scenarios in which real and imagined characters intersect. She uses elements of her own autobiography to generate plausible events, statements and films blurring the line between what really happened and what was made up. As art historian Carrie Lambert-Beatty writes in ‘Make Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility’, parafiction is a method for questioning what and how we trust, how

³ Louise Bourgeois, *Deconstruction of the Father/Reconstruction of the Father: Writings and Interviews, 1923–1997*, ed. Marie-Laure Bernadac and Hans Ulrich Obrist, MIT Press, Massachusetts, 1998, p. 134,

truthfulness (truth measured by conviction rather than accuracy) is generated and how fiction today – also in media and politics – is often preferred to facts: ‘A parafiction is related to but not quite a member of the category of fiction as established in literary and dramatic art. It remains a bit outside. It does not perform its procedures in the hygienic clinics of literature, but has one foot in the field of the real. Unlike historical fiction’s fact-based but imagined worlds, in parafiction real and/or imaginary personages and stories intersect with the world as it is being lived. Post-simulacral, parafictional strategies are oriented less toward the disappearance of the real than toward the pragmatics of trust. Simply put, with various degrees of success, for various durations, and for various purposes, these fictions are experienced as fact.’⁴

Reworking the original Orient Express advertisement, Maimon has constructed several versions and overlapping narratives, with and without image or sound, and with her own grown-up (current?) or childhood comments inserted as subtitles. Trauma, truth, reality and memory are dissected and reassembled as we experience the “desire for kebab” from a child’s, a Finnish customer’s and the grown-up daughter’s perspective.

The artist used similar dramaturgic means of iteration and parafiction in a previous performance at Lilith Performance Studio (*Modern Lives*, 2016), dedicated to her mother. In it, the artist explored a fictional character, an alter ego adopted by her mother in the early 2000s: Mrs. Gyllendaal Af Berntas, a goldsmith’s widow living in the 1860s. *Modern Lives* was designed to engage the numerous facets of Self and perceptual dynamics. The scenography consisted of five interconnected domestic rooms, reconstructed after careful research and with great detail to match Mrs. Gyllendaal Af Berntas’s historic context. It included three identical kitchens, a salon, a maid’s rooms and outdoor chicken coops. The sixteen performers “inhabiting” the set represented three different character types – a maid, a widow and a farm boy – reflecting the historical period, who acted out a series of monotonous choreographies designed to appear familiar at first glance, but ultimately surreal in nature. According to different cues, the actor’s script would slightly shift. Both the *Modern Lives* performance and the Orient Express exhibition capture and map the possible narratives of two highly different life spheres that can only overlap on a surreal level or in one’s memory. In her diary entry of 12 December 1997, Bourgeois muses on her life as a map, as an object of study: ‘The power of integration, connect together, is enormous, overpowering – but evanescent. One responds to a need – are you together? Yes I am. I am a puzzle with all my forty-four pieces. *Tabula Rasa* is needed. A map is an object of study, take your time. I am a map. You are a different map.’⁵

Orient Express, Maimon’s series of performances and exhibitions, is a spatial and interactive process of interpretation of childhood memories and feelings as an adult, an attempt to re-read one’s own past and position oneself from an adult perspective. In a sense, it is a puzzle of clues hinting to the fact that ‘life is short, kebab is big’.

⁴ Carrie Lambert-Beatty, ‘Make Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility’, *October*, no.129 (2009), p. 54.

⁵ *Ibid.* Bourgeois, p. 367.