

UK

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# Claiming Multiple Identities

**Genuine culture can never claim a unique origin. Its validity and its richness are drawn from a long interaction within human society. The centres of cultures, historicized as centres of civilization, have been constantly travelling and traversing at the same pace as human curiosity, and curiosity is as old as being.**

In the 'Dressing – Readdressing' project, we are seeking to position specific symbols drawn from our own communities and marry them to our lives as the new Europeans. The changes witnessed recently by the fashion world speak of a desire to transcend national boundaries. The message conveyed by the clothing and dressing is that of borrowed and exchanged identities. Aminata Dramane Traoré, Mali's minister of culture and tourism, spoke of the meanings filtered through this message: 'Affluent, technological standardised societies tend to forget the meaning of this twofold relationship between ourselves and our clothing and between the clothed body and other people. [...] Clothing is the bearer of our, and society's, images of ourselves, of our desires and impulses. [...] The changes wrought by fashion in recent years have blurred national boundaries. The clothing traditions of the various ethnic groups and cultures are now shifting and interacting to create a new African aesthetic which includes a universal element.'<sup>1</sup>

By dressing some of the facades of conservation buildings with symbols linked in popular memory to 'the other', we hope to bring to the fore the question of the role of art, the inter-relations between the monumental façade and the ambiguities of cultural identity. Here the visual arrangement acts as a fantasy that can be enjoyed by the eye as well as stirring the mind with the unexpected.

Similarly, books bought by the artists from second-hand traders, fragrant with age, are deviated by pasting onto the covers either a *tarbousch*, *fez*, or a traditional veil. This variance, this state of discord, like some translated text that imports the local vernacular, addresses the shifting geographies and the tension between the global and the local. Unlike the dressing of the façade, which is like some ritualized event and has an outwardly symbolic measure, the books are intimate objects and re-a-dressing their cover illustration invites the 'reader' to a more intricate and personalized reading.

In remembering these conditions of lost origins and merged authenticities, of ruined essentialisms and immigrant progression, we have tried to work alongside our 'rememberings' as two disturbed observers participating in what can only be described within a legacy of a century of contested history. As displaced native informants, looking at European culture while being in European culture, we claim an off-centred view, a multi-angular gaze at visual memories.

According to Steyn, '[t]he ways in which identity can be thematised is multifold: it is made and un-made in many sites and crosses many paths. Rethinking identity entails a demand: to split the traditional link between self and identity.'<sup>2</sup>

The two collages of dressing the building and the books in 'Dressing – Readdressing', make and un-make, temporarily, the message of the original architects and publishers.

The intention of the artists was to find out whether this temporary change would have an effect on the understanding of the passer-by that goes beyond a temporary visual experience. The characters created by a simple costume collage became 'self sufficient cameos, nourished within and externalized in self-created visual idioms'.<sup>3</sup> In this self-sufficiency, the enquiry by the artists remains open and questioning: how far can the imagination of an individual or, in this case, a pair of individuals effect the realization of the complexities of a disputed history, of a conflicted claim for the word 'civilized'?

## The first site

The first site is Al-Saqi Bookshop, 26 Westbourne Grove, West London. The façade of the building needed to express its (Middle) Eastern identity to the passer-by – as 26 Westbourne Grove has been the hub of activities around issues raised by the presence of the Near and Middle Eastern communities. The artists intended their work, 'Dressing – Readdressing', to be a proclamation, a shortening of distance between its users and

its locality in the same manner a street loves to put ornaments when it celebrates a happy event or when men put on a tie and women wear a suit to attend an official ceremony.

## Specific symbolism

Since both the artists' grandfathers wore the Turkish *fez*, they wanted the theatre personalities sculpted on 26 Westbourne Grove to try the *fez* on for a few weeks. Near and Middle Eastern women wore the veil traditionally. Most of them covered their faces at the time when the figures sculpted on the façade of the building were active in the theatre. The veil was hastily raised as a negative symbol in the West and by Middle Eastern modernists in a way that was totally oblivious to customs and traditions. By re-dressing 26 Westbourne Grove in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Near and Middle Eastern symbols we hoped – in this case by a simple method of juxtaposition – to make a shift in peoples' visual concepts and readdress the myths.

## Notes

1. Aminata Dramane Traoré, in E. van der Plas and M. Willemsen (eds.), *The Art of African Fashion* (Prince Claus Fund and Africa World Press, 1998).
2. Julia Steyn, *Other than Identity* (Manchester University Press, 1997).
3. Jaya Appasamy, *The Critical Vision* (New Delhi: Lalit Kala Academy, 1985).

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PHOTOS: MAI GHOUSSOUB & SHAHEEN MERALI, 2001