

Additional reading for Belly dancing to the Marseillaise

Here is some additional information on the work of art you heard about in the video and the country it emerged from. This was adapted from S. Shilton, *Transcultural Encounters: Gender and Genre in Franco-Maghrebi Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013).

[Zoulikha Bouabdellah](#)'s video artwork, *Dansons* (2003), portrays an unexpected and (for many) humorous belly dance to the French national anthem, in order to encourage spectators to reflect on attitudes to cultural difference in France.

This five-minute piece exists in several formats and has been exhibited in different ways. The video was originally shown as part of an installation, at the touring exhibition 'Africa Remix: l'art contemporain d'un continent', which began in Dusseldorf in 2004 (this travelled to the Pompidou Centre in Paris and the Hayward in London). At the [Centre Pompidou](#), the screen was embedded in the centre of a white wall, flanked by a red one on the left and a blue one on the right. This video installation earned a place in the African Pavilion at the 52nd Venice Biennale (2007). (Ironically, this work renegotiating 'otherness' has often been categorised as African rather than French). More recently, *Dansons* was shown at an exhibition at the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris on diverse representations of the body in art from the Arab world ('Le Corps découvert', 2012). Here, it appeared on a low white wall with the screen positioned at hip-height. The work is also available on a DVD of experimental film from the Middle East and North Africa called 'Resistance[s]' (made in 2006). In 2009, it appeared online (on YouTube, in the category 'News and Politics'). Exhibited in these different formats, and in various curatorial and cultural contexts, the work elicits alternative modes of interaction and different cross-cultural experiences. In all three versions – which can be exhibited simultaneously in multiple contexts – the video exists with varying amounts of verbal material, which can modify the experience of the work.

If viewed on DVD, alongside textual documentation, it is known that *Dansons* was inspired by the friendly football match between France and Algeria in Paris, in 2001, which (it is well known) ended disastrously: French people of Algerian descent whistled and jeered at the French players during the Marseillaise, and eventually invaded the pitch. Bouabdellah was dismayed by reaction to the event: 'people said afterwards that the Algerians booed the Marseillaise. This really bothered me, because those who hissed during the anthem are actually French!' [1] *Dansons* was created in reaction to what the artist perceives as the 'malaise' of French society.

In a review of this work, as it was shown at the [Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona](#), Fadwa Miadi suggests that the artist 'aims to reveal the "exotic" character that she perceives to be embodied by the Republican values that remain to be conquered' [2]; Miadi discerns in the work '[an] "ethnological" gaze

upon the West' [3]. The work can indeed be seen to exoticise France, through its re-use of the tricolour and the national anthem. However, it does not demonstrate exoticism in the sense of a straightforward reversal of the (neo-)colonial gaze, as this review implies. Rather than replacing Orientalist representations with Occidentalism, this work re-appropriates symbols of both Orient and Occident (specifically France). It re-appropriates the Orientalist trope of the belly dancer, as well as the French flag and anthem, and re-uses these visual and auditory symbols in a way that renegotiates the coherent, static identities frequently associated with them, and instead shows them to be porous, interconnected and in perpetual movement.

Rather than replacing one exoticism with another, *Dansons* reveals the persistence of neo-colonial exoticism, while simultaneously countering stereotypes and signalling the potential for French and 'Arab' identities to co-exist in ways that avoid the extremes of hierarchisation or reductive unification. This work counters attempts to polarise and construct a hierarchy between French and (specifically) Maghrebi identities, by destabilising the power relationship established by Orientalist painting and by recent French stereotypes of Muslim women (which posit them variously – and contradictorily – as exotic, fanatical, oppressed or anti-Republican). Moreover, *Dansons* can also be interpreted as a challenge to certain contemporary French images of integration (particularly those focusing on the 'Black/Blanc/Beur' paradigm), which not only marginalise women of immigrant descent but are also reminiscent of colonial images of assimilation.

Bouabdellah uses the language of television, in which rigid notions of cultural difference have frequently been communicated and passively consumed. However, she employs this language in alternative ways to provoke the spectator, encouraging them to participate actively in the work, and opening up debates surrounding the place of different cultures in France. Artists like Bouabdellah avoid a straightforward political message. Instead, their works create an ambiguous space between politics and poetics, documentary and fiction, as they engage with reality while also imagining alternative ways for cultures to co-exist.

Notes

[1] Z. Bouabdellah, interview available on the 'Parcours Pédagogique: Exposition Africa Remix' webpage (last accessed on January 2015, but not currently available)

[2] F. Miadi, '[Singulière Afrique Plurielle](#)' webpage

[3] F. Miadi, '[Singulière Afrique Plurielle](#)' webpage

References

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