

YARA EL-SHERBINI

‘NOT YOUR AVERAGE QUIZMISTRESS’

by *Kelly Carmichael*

In just five years since graduating from London’s Slade School of Fine Art, Yara El-Sherbini has produced an impressively critically engaged and diverse body of work. British born of Egyptian and Trinidadian heritage with a childhood spent growing up England and Saudi Arabia, El-Sherbini has developed a fresh and sometimes perturbing approach to a practice that touches on relational aesthetics, stand-up comedy, familiar family entertainment and socio-political concerns. Hers is a trans-disciplinary practice with intentional crossing of art and non-art borders, El-Sherbini choosing to stage her works in comedy clubs and neighbourhood pubs as well as traditional gallery spaces. With an obvious affection and skill for language and a love of games, her practice provokes questions on the nature of art, what forms it might take and who can be an audience.

Yara El-Sherbini is an alluring manipulator of the performance format, using humor and parody as methods of engaging her audience. Her practice frequently draws upon well known and recognisable leisure pursuits such as board games, stand-up comedy, quizzes and popular television game shows, these becoming tools “to explore contemporary culture as a site through which to explore art and life” . Under various guises including quizmistress, auctioneer

and game show host, El-Sherbini is an agent provocateur infiltrating a setting under the premise of harmless fun, deploying a strategy in which she puts the audience at ease with familiar formats before playfully shaking them awake and requiring them to confront commonly held ideas and assumptions in contemporary culture. Three live-art works in the artist’s arsenal that assume such undercover tactics are *A Pub Quiz* (2006–present), *Universality Challenge* (2008) and *A Rather Trivial Pursuit* (2008). *A Rather Trivial Pursuit* (aka *ART Pursuit*) is a play on the *Trivial Pursuit* board game, one in which the familiar board, counters and other accompaniments remain, but where the questions have been rewritten; while *Universality Challenge* is a parody of the long running knockout format quiz show on British television played by teams from universities. In the UK, where Yara El-Sherbini is based, pub quizzes are a popular way to spend an evening where small groups of friends combine to form a team and answer a series of general knowledge questions posed by the quizmaster, usually from the worlds of sport, entertainment, geography, nature and current affairs. To accompany an exhibition or as a standalone performance El-Sherbini will present *A Pub Quiz*, inviting gallery audiences to a local pub where she plays with this emblem of popular British culture to skillfully

create a space for debate and dialogue, giving new weight and meaning to a familiar format. Assuming the responsibility of quizmistress and drawing on the friendly but cheeky banter often accompanying the role – “points mean prizes!” or “the quizmistress is always right!” – the artist creates an atmosphere of fun but one in which a thought-provoking element soon creeps in. In a similar vein to *A Rather Trivial Pursuit*, and *Universality Challenge* she poses a series of questions such as:

Jean Charles de Menezes was shot and killed in London when mistaken for a ‘suicide bomber’. In news reports shocked passengers on the tube carriage stated the Brazilian man was “Asian, defiantly Asian”. Does this suggest that:

- a. All brown people look the same?
- b. There are people in the world who believe Brazil is part of Asia ?

In last year’s BP portrait award catalogue essay what was Lynne Truss referring to when she said “we still harbor indefensible prejudices about people with...”

- a. Beards
- b. Wonky Eyes
- c. Caravans

The Keffieh, the Palestinian headscarf, is available to buy in Topshop branches throughout the UK. Is this because:

- a. Resistance is the new black?
- b. Of Guy Debord’s notion of Recuperation, in which radical ideas and images become safe when commodified?
- c. Vogue voted it as a must have black and white classic?

Using humor and parody as critical weapons, El-Sherbini teasingly changes family orientated games and the classic British pub quiz into

highly-authored situations, taking conventions of social interaction and using them as a platform to explore the shared understanding of political, social and cultural references that make up our imperfect world. Her method is to amuse and destabilize the audience, enticing and provoking them into reflecting upon the issues raised and questioning their own viewpoint and sense of truth, even as they recognise the absurdity of these real-life situations. The loaded questions and resulting discussions that continue long after the artist has left force the audience to examine not only their own personal values but also what any of us might assume to be solid and undisputable ‘general knowledge’ and our ownership of that knowledge. There is much more going on here than just a quiz; indeed El-Sherbini says the intention is to use such frameworks as tools to “look at grand narratives such as justice and morality alongside bite sized ‘truth’ from popular culture that inform how we see the world” .

A further offensive on the unspoken but defining knowledge and power structures in life comes in the form of *Auctions Speak Louder Than Words* (2007- present), an intervention exploring social capital in the art world. During the evening the artist – in possession of a little black book and charming smile – works the room, networking to gather contact details from all those present and recording them faithfully before moving on to the next guest. Later that evening an auction takes place where El-Sherbini sells the book and its socially important contents of names and contacts in an absolute auction with no reserve or starting bid, winner takes all. And in this case, ‘all’ is social capital. In one swift move El-Sherbini jimmys the lock on the art scene’s sought after contacts, on what separates the wealthy collectors and influential

museum curators from the artists and recent graduates. Not only blowing open the subtle but rigorous networking and contact building some people spend years trying to perfect, the artist also requests her audience, most of whom are those featured in the little black book itself, to determine the value of the information contained within its pages via the value of their bids, that is to say the current 'value', prestige or usefulness of those art world figures whose details have been collected within the room.

Subtly subverting the commonly understood order of things is something of a passion for El-Sherbini: through her work she takes pleasure in disrupting formats and expectations, playfully destabilizing our relationship to knowledge as a commodity as well as questioning social and political systems of power. What strikes me about El-Sherbini's work is how it intervenes in the political relations of its time, subtly but with openness and clarity, embracing play, risk, pleasure and paradox to give voice to her questions relating to and personal understanding of contemporary life and culture. Much of her practice has an element of socio-political engagement and also serves to question the role of art and the artist in relation to such concerns.

Moving easily between disciplines is a mark of El-Sherbini's practice, and the minimalist *Socially Engaged* (2009) offers an understated and subtle commentary via architectural intervention. For her work in the exhibition *At Your Service* El-Sherbini chose to site her work on a bathroom door leading directly off the gallery space. Altering the toilet lock from 'vacant' and 'engaged' to instead read 'socially vacant' and 'socially engaged', the intervention transforms commonplace signage into political statement. Intervention by its very nature carries

an implication of subversion, a recurring theme for El-Sherbini's work, but unlike the staged and publicized events that are the performative pieces *Universality Challenge* and *A Pub Quiz* here there is a rejection of spectacle, a minimalist and conceptual intervention, inconspicuous but none the less impactful. Questioning the role and function of art and artists in relation to social and political concerns, *Socially Engaged* reflects upon the way in which we frame art practices and positions and seeks to open up debate and discussion around these ideas. That the intervention offers only two options – socially engaged or socially vacant – requires support of one of these possibilities; a declaration, an allegiance. But does it also perhaps playfully question whether any practice that is not 'socially engaged' is therefore 'socially vacant'?

In 2009 *Socially Engaged* was reconfigured for a solo exhibition in Spain. As an artist whose work displays a great affection and talent for puns and language, El-Sherbini was intrigued to find that in translation Spanish locks read 'free' and 'occupied' as opposed to the English 'vacant' and 'engaged'. Again choosing to rework text on the toilet lock, a subtle but compelling intervention changed the text to 'liberado' ('freed') and 'ocupado' ('occupied'). *Occupied Territories* (2009) is a work finely balancing clever word play and political commentary, the literal and the conceptual, while asserting a reminder of the very real illegal occupation of lands. Like *Socially Engaged*, *Occupied Territories* encourages the viewer to consider something beyond what is presented, to reflect upon and become critically engaged with political realities.

El-Sherbini's practice has often referenced her cultural background, playing with Western perceptions of Arabs and the Middle East by



deploying jokes, satire and visual puns to create light-heartedly contentious works that engage audiences in the socio-political ideas at the core of her work. Most stand-up comedy fans don't expect a young, part Arab woman to take to the microphone and unleash a tide of jokes referencing Middle Eastern culture, but in 2005 this is exactly what Yara El-Sherbini did. The six-minute comedy routine *Avoiding Dark Ali's* used humour as an engaging hook to examine racial stereotypes and cultural expectations. Her act was developed from a joke book commissioned by Book Works and written by the artist titled *Sheikh 'n' Vac*, itself a play-on-words referencing the powdered carpet freshener 'Shake 'n' Vac'.

Again delighting in her role as provocateur and catalyst for debate, the solo exhibition at La Caja Blanca where El-Sherbini created the intervention *Occupied Territories*, saw the installation of *Tipping Point* (2008), a formation of ten bowling pins tied with colourful scarves in the manner of hijab. In a similar fashion to the toilet lock interventions, this work evokes not only a socio-political discourse but also makes sophisticated use of a number of strategies from art history. Minimalism and Dada were echoed in the works *Socially Engaged* and *Occupied Territories* while *Tipping Point* sees Duchamp's readymade brought into play. However, it is inevitably the addition of a headscarf, an action that seems to transform the curvaceous bowling pins into covered Muslim women, which defines the work's message for many viewers. Arranged as they are, in characteristic triangle format ready for the game to begin, they invite inevitable comparisons between the objective of the game – to knock over as many pins as possible thereby scoring points – and the commonly perceived position of women in Islamic societies. *Tipping Point* is a loaded and provocative artwork; even

its title seems to suggest so. However it would seem that the work is so overdetermined, that it carries the characteristic trait of Yara El-Sherbini's 'cat among the pigeons' approach, seeming to parody claims made for either an aggressively feminist or art historical meaning. Intriguingly, loosely clustered arrangements of singular pins dressed in hijab have also been exhibited under the title *Critical Mass* (2008). Upon closer inspection of both works we see that each headscarf is unique and tied in a slightly different style, echoing the regional and cultural differences seen in Middle Eastern dress, something often overlooked by Western eyes.

Yara El-Sherbini's practice references both Arab and Western societies and their cultural norms but does not come out in favour of either, her approach being to initiate and open up topics for debate then give over the floor to her audience. Both the live art and gallery based works hinge on interactivity, exploring both the nature of engagement and active participation within contemporary art practice, while seeking to open up ideas concerning art practice, the forms it may take and whom it involves. El-Sherbini's role is that of a spark, a catalyst for conversation and dialogue. She ignites vigorous debate and examination of social and political themes, enticing and provoking, leaving a smouldering ember that lingers afterwards, animating gallery spaces and pubs alike. The artist may have quite literally left the building, but the residue of her role as an inciting agent remains.

