

# The Language of Performance: A conversation with Hala Ali, Chokra, Nada Dada and Ali Ettehad

*By Jareh Das*

Recent debates on Performance Art have centred around the genre being on ‘the rise’ or at times described with the phrase: the ‘rise and rise’ of Performance Art. Performance Art has long been associated with being more akin to theatre, drama and dance rather than ‘art’, however frequently the genre appeared in movements such as Surrealism, Dada and Fluxus to name a few. The currency of Performance Art is evident in the Gulf region and its popularity amongst a younger generation of artists perhaps heralds its necessity, as it presents often raw and direct engagements with the context of working as a young artist in the Middle East. Through conversations with four artists living and working in the region, one is able to get a sense of their approach, language and use of performance tools as a means to convey their practice.

The resulting conversations with Saudi born but Dubai based artists Hala Ali; Sharjah born, New York based artist CHOKRA; Emirati artist Nada Dada; and Iranian artist Ali Ettehad give a profound sense of the relevance of performance as a medium for this younger generation of art practitioners.

All of these artists incorporate language and text into their performances injecting spoken word, popular culture, humour, politics and other socio-economic factors of the everyday into their works. Text and language become useful tools in this live arena as they produce informative insights into living and working as an artist in the Gulf region. Rather than set up comparisons with Western counterparts or write a comparison of East/West, this feature brings to the foreground the necessity and relevance of performance in the region by looking closely at the language of performance that exists here. The language of Performance, the narratives used (factual or constructed), is often delivered as a construct, protest or parody of today’s society.

## **In conversation with Hala Ali**

Hala Ali was born in Saudi Arabia, studied in the United Kingdom and currently resides in the UAE. Hala’s poetry, often composed within the forms of the spoken word, is direct and argumentative, reflecting on contemporary society and speaking to ideas of female invisibility, human relations, politics and social dogmas.

**Jareh Das:** It strikes me that there is a sort of oppositional stance or rather protest element to your work? It seems (taking into context Untitled, 2012, a spoken word poetry performance by Hala Ali at Art Dubai 2012) that you are anti-art establishments, institutional voices and commercialism?

**Hala Ali:** There is a protest element in my work. In a sense, spoken word serves as social commentary. It’s anchored in that history. I’m not necessarily anti-art establishments, the institution or commercialism but, of course, I’m not pro it either. It’s highly problematic to claim to be anti an institution and then perform for it. The poem performed at Art Dubai was to highlight the absurdity of the UAE art scene. Things that I’d witnessed as a somewhat active member of that scene.

**JD:** What made you adopt a spoken approach to performance, it’s almost a poetic, speaker’s corner type manifestation which emphasises language in a rhythmic manner.

**HA:** I don’t classify it as Performance Art as I don’t feel it factors into what I do. I would rather refer to it as a spoken word performance, so it’s more about poetry and performance than Performance Art, which is why I purposely separate it from my visual art practice. I’ve always been fascinated by writing and then orating that text. It’s informed by my interest in hip-hop music, spoken word poetry, performance and rhetoric. Also, there are elements of demagoguery in what I do which I fear and bath in.



**Hala Ali**, performance in Art Dubai, 22 March 2012.

**JD:** How important is dress or appearance as a part of your performances (I ask as at Art Dubai you were in a black cloak, is this the norm, i.e. is this a form of uniform or perhaps something to do with your roots/heritage or perhaps not?)

**HA:** It's for purely functional reasons that I choose to dress like that. I come from a conservative society and when I perform I tend to be photographed. If I am not wearing the abaya, it may cause some issues in terms of my family which I try to stray from. It bears no more significance than that.

**JD:** Describe how you approach performance, i.e. do you respond to a situation or topic of interest? Is there a text manifestation that accompanies the performance or will you be looking to incorporate a more text-based mode of working in the future?

**HA:** I mainly respond to issues of interest. Those issues mainly center around those of women in the region.

Some pieces are personal or local and others are global. It's completely self-indulgent and I don't claim it to be anything else. They serve as social commentary and, at times, even reference the 'art world'. It's doubtful that I will ever publish my poetry or incorporate a more text-based mode of working. The written word seems indelible and I'm too insecure for that.



**BB CHOKRA** - Al Mtsaalh Haal at Robert Wilson The Watermill Center a laboratory for performance.

## **CHOKRA**

*Fareej or Sikka take a picker  
 Note the code or colour mode  
 Ascertain your unclear disdain  
 That tribal war is on the plane  
 That this is not an Arab name  
 Now where is my khaleeji cane?  
 Alayah at me and ask again  
 Au wein, au wein, min wein?  
 Announce my own Emirati  
 Enhance my own Emirati  
 Pronounce the Falcon Artery  
 Sajil Ana Emirati*

\* An excerpt from Sajil Ana Emirati by CHOKRA, written in 2011. Performed at Haal Al-Mtsaalh, Sikka Art Fair, Dubai, 2012 and MoMA PS1, New York, 2012. The performance in Dubai, UAE occurred after two years, where I find myself still trying to fathom being able to perform in my country.

**Jarah Das:** There is a sort of oppositional stance to your work? It seems (taking into context the Bastakiya piece) that you are anti-art definitions on who you are as a performance artist as well as playing on or rather challenging gender constraints that may be a result of the society you grew up in here in the UAE?

**CHOKRA:** The premise of my work as a performance artist is predominantly based in consciousness where any form of oppositional stance in or about my work appears to challenge ideas of people and places. Thoughts on “current” art practice emerging from touristic accounts in the Gulf to naïve “guest-ideologies” from unexciting curators unfortunately paralyze into a complacent disinterest where I find the nature of my work to be often non-compliant to “current” practice. My work mainly concerns the representation of art from my country as a highly world conscious order that reflects on the incredibly rich cultural interties of the

United Arab Emirates as an impetus of transfiguration. My work does not concern what is stated in an index but rather as an operative that initiates the beginning of a unique nobility that are truly original, independent and constantly evolving. “Anti-art” is not a conscious idea I place as present in my work, but I do find resonance with it in my pursuit of art as an operational performance. My performances appear to me as programmable transfigurations suggestive of a system I coin CHOKRA (Conscious Hoarding Of Kinetic Rage Associated) where I maintain complete automatic independence over the development and execution of my work. At the risk of addressing outdated terms such as “bio-political”, I assure you that my work recognizes the somatic as an operative in performance to accelerate a collective meta-consciousness that urges us to go beyond reinstating self and state to delve further into a heightened command of conscious kinetic momentum. The “oppositional stance”, interestingly, does announce itself in a wide array including urgency, obscurity and the seemingly comprised state, an example of this would be when the opening night performance of Haal Al-Mtsaalh\* at the Sikka Art Fair was shutdown by the cultural authorities in Dubai for unexplained reasons. This occurred despite prior receipt of the detailed written proposal of the work in performance. Gender constraints are indeed very peculiar at home in the UAE, where I am not too curious or investigative about their applied transgressions. There is obvious segregation of gender which follows a coda of modesty and I am aware that a provocative role-play today is diverted from the intent of universal consciousness to a rather horrid symptom of the global. A mutilation of the written word does occur with the mention of trans as an imagined transfer, in the case of Haal Al-Mtsaalh a transfer of the national, hence transnational and its assemblages appear to be quite a drag to me.

\* A sequel to Al-Mtsaalh Haal previously performed at Robert Wilson’s Watermill Center, New York, 2010

**JD:** What made you adopt a more sort of music/spoken gestural approach to performance? The background music is loud, imposing and you infuse this idea of dyes and colour, which is dispersed on your audience. Where did this idea originate from?

**CHOKRA:** I structure performance as a totality of sensory consideration, where every aspect of my work is produced independently and individually. The work incorporates elements of video, attire, written and spoken verses, augmented-software and sound. It is a symbiotic process of understanding performance in its entirety. The gesture is indeed a form of somatic cognition where violence, transgression and love appear in a multi-faceted operation of kinetics.

Sound in particular is an enhancement in my work that induces an artificial vocalized amplification of the raps and rhymes in my verses, the sonic compositions involve my experiments in coding field recordings from particular sites in the Emirates synthesized with vintage sequencers and complemented with a sample overlay of custom-coded computer interfaces.

The verses specifically for Haal Al-Mtsaalh echoed articulations of Mahasweta Devi, Mahmoud Darwish, and Christopher Knowles forming an eternal/internal network of multi-lingual utterances of significant occurrence in the United Arab Emirates including spoken Arabic, Urdu, Hindi, Pashto, Bengali and English. I definitely seek to include an audible presence of what is unheard in public space.

My investigations into the sensorial develops further in my work with an epic propagation of colour, where pigments scented with Arabic oils, cedar scent, jasmine and rose engulf and explode onto the audience as a collective embellishment of identity.

The approach to this collective and physical adorning of my audience comes from actual love for them, including the bright celebrations of such an announcement. The cultural relevancy of liberated pigment in the United Arab Emirates was indeed questioned at Al-Bastakiya by the authorities. Interestingly, the observation of colour stained streets at Souk Al Kabir (Meena Bazaar), in Bur Dubai, suggested quite differently that there was indeed a simultaneous celebration of Holi earlier that week, which proved to be quite an eloquent parallel to Haal Al-Mtsaalh at the Sikka Art Fair.

The application of colour also has its roots in painting which I do hope collapses or reduces to an irreducible in the proposal and funding term “visual art performance.”

**JD:** How important is dress/attire or appearance as a part of your performances (I ask as you are always so elaborately and immaculately dressed in quite traditional attire. I wondered perhaps if this is a nod to your roots/heritage or perhaps not?)

**CHOKRA:** Fashion has considerable relevance to my work as it constructs one's presence, just like performance, with or without attire. It also accelerates our intrinsic individual nobility and expresses our choices of the everyday, especially of the moment. It is true that I am greatly informed by the heritage of my ancestors, especially the customizing of attire to sew in desert practicalities, where I do hope to transfigure these details in my everyday life in forming a celebration of our elegant existence as we often adorn ourselves with our ideas. Haal Al-Mtsaalh in particular consisted of a coral silk kandoura reflecting on the ancestral desert burn on skin which was layered with a sheer-silk black tissue deconstructing the abaya. This was all tied together, high at the waist, with a panel of metallic gold zardosi border suggestive of the bisht worn by dignitaries or the belt preserved for a khanjar. The structure of this attire brought about a body conscious iteration of the visual patterns present at Al Bastakiya, especially the support mechanisms of the barjeels (wind towers) and dhows, where the design of an elongated vertical intersects unequally horizontally to enable air to flow through - in the case of the garment to enable air to flow through like sails. The consideration of fashion in attire is indeed quite disciplined in my work where I do not necessarily view it as uniform. I do consciously execute the much needed transfigurations of the transnational in my attire which is to liberate my work as a performance artist especially from the uninteresting subscriptions of behavioural "otherness" and the desperations of such connotation in attire.

**JD:** Describe how you approach performance, i.e. do you respond to a situation or topic of interest? Is there a text manifestation that accompanies the performance or will you be looking to incorporate a more text-based mode of working in the future?

**CHOKRA:** My approach to performance entirely emerges from a meta-conscious level where I connect elements of situation or topic, sometimes historically

and from what I envision in the future as it is revealed to me. My performances often do involve a consideration of text through coding, poetry, theory and dialogue in the many languages I have come to understand, but it is the manifestation of the communicative into an overwhelming sensory experience that I enhance in my work with texture, light, colour, scent and ultimately the human condition.

I also find that works solely limited by text are best suited to those unable to move forward and beyond the interface as it can often become self-satisfying and trapped in its imagined agency of authorship. I truly believe that such practice does not assert in a factual entirety and truly is a form of deprivation, as nothing belongs to us, everything belongs to HIM.

The experiential memory of performance is incredibly significant where the initiated transfigurations and gestural conveyances are not limited to any form of communicative default such as text. I am mostly interested in an encompassing and collected experience that is accelerated by universal presence and insists on being heard even if it is considered art or not.

### **Nada Dada**

Nada Dada is a performance artist and writer who uses self-portraits as her crucial device to comment on the problems of being an artist in the UAE. She also comments on the personal tragedies of the Muslim Arab woman and the demise of good food, music and religion in the present age. Nada uses self-portraiture as a device to examine the problematic issues of representation, tradition, gender and patriarchy. Her work centers around narratives activated through performance, re-enactment and embodiment.

**Jareh Das:** Your photography and accompanying texts have an element of oppositional stance and feminist aesthetics. They seem to present a critique of the role of the female in Arab society (taken from the context of the kind of statements presented in your *Looking For A Husband*, 2011, piece)?

**Nada Dada:** It is quite sad that the first reaction of the viewers is to get a sense of a fight going on in my work, but people are programmed to think that way when they see political keywords like hijab, a rifle and so on. I

To whom it may concern,

This certificate guarantees that this particular girl from Sharjah, reasonably healthy and attractive, alive, *drinking, poetic, sensual, powerful, minor poetess and a writer, one-time dikhtense artist, performer, brown skinned, aged twenty two is handing you fifty years of marriage, in which she will love your faults, honor your peculiarities, obey your whimsies, nurse your progeny and adore you as her dying mortal god, co-creative and birth babies and new recipes in labor and travail, and shall remain faithful to you until you both rot and the inevitable synthesis of death sets in.*

You are required to give her the freedom of expression, retain the love and the honor that she is willing to grant you, allow her to read, learn and travel the world. You are also required complete honesty, trust, patience and a little amount of money.

This certificate is void if you are homosexual, womanizer or a white man who wants to marry an Arab girl because it is "exotic".

Any nationality will be considered.

Yours sincerely,  
Nada Dada.

The undersigned are bound by the above

Name: Nada Dada

Name:.....



**Nada Dada**, Looking for a husband

am forced to wear the hijab; I am not putting it there to get my work sold. In “Honey on your gun”, the woman rubs the rifle with honey, asking the soldiers of war to think “sweetly”. Maybe it’s sexual, maybe it’s symbolic but artistically it’s a very easy photograph, like T-shirt art, but “Looking For A Husband” (another work that talks about love) is sending the same signal in the form of an ad - I thought to myself, “I must be desperate but mad!” I don’t understand how talking about love made me seem oppositional against the norm in my society. I am not a feminist, I would like to think beyond that but it’s hard not to be talking about your rights in a society like mine. I personally despise the label feminist, it is like grouping people and it is not good. I have interests in feminine energy, yes, but not feminism. My critique

is of artists in my region and the way they make art. Is it because I am young? Is it because I am jealous of their success? Maybe. But these things must exist to balance the art scene, you need someone to point out flaws to make it better really. I may seem harsh but it is essential to continually offer a critique to herald improvement. I liken that to the hunter’s dog in Looney tunes cartoons, pointing out!

**JD:** What made you adopt a text based approach to performance? I find your statements very powerful and we have previously spoken about the Dada influences, but, in your case, it is not nonsensical language rather truths that are conveyed in a humorous way, even though the text isn’t funny.

**ND:** I keep a journal, I write stories about the things I experience and then I reconfigure the text into a performance or a photograph, sometimes paintings. It's very much like story-telling, building a visual installation of an experience, a thought or a study. About Dada! When I came across Dada, I said "You and me, friends." It's funny and childish, I was studying Art History and nothing made me jump out of my chair as much as Dada did. It was like meeting a kid in school who you know will be your best friend forever. I adopted Dada as my last name and never bothered to look at any Dada work because it's pointless; it's not what Dada would want. I am not a "Dadaist", I am Dada, a paradoxical package. On humour, I am very much oppressed but it makes me laugh which is okay. I think to really understand something is to look at it and study it from many perspectives.

You cannot just weep about being imprisoned anymore, it might sell but it's quite dull. I am going through a really hard time but you have to find the time to dance a little, do. There is much to learn when oppressed, and turning tragedy into comedy is the finest of arts.

**JD:** How important is appearance as a part of your performances? Is this a form of uniform or perhaps something to do with your roots/heritage or something more effective as a means of adopting a character?

**ND:** I do enjoy dressing up as characters. My toilet (my studio) turns into a cheap theatre dressing room sometimes but it is never homage to my heritage. Again, I am forced to cover myself; what I do is that I play with what I have.

**JD:** What is your starting point or point of departure for starting a body of work? Is there a text manifestation that accompanies the performance?

**ND:** Music inspires me more than anything. I don't look at art much really, I don't look at things that function like my art... Photographs are formed in my head. I see how they look and I build the picture, performances and work the same way. I would love to work from a script one day and see how it will turn out, but I haven't done that, I just look at my notes or drawings and start from there.

### **Ali Ettehad**

Ali Ettehad has a vested interest in Persian mysticism and his works can be separated into two different parts within his overall practise. The first part "Confidence" series; began in 2007 and is ongoing. This series consists of different works and sub-series and varied mediums, such as video-animation, environmental work, video art, installation, performance, digital images etc. The second part consists of the works which are diary-like entries and at times his reaction to socio-political conditions. He uses the vocabulary of Persian mysticism strictly for his "Confidence" series; but the other works don't use this vocabulary.

**Jareh Das:** Text plays such a dominant part in your politically charged performances, as does the Persian language. Can you explain in detail your text-based approach to Performance Art and the importance of language to your practice?

**Ali Ettehad:** Let me start by saying my art is informative, if one can call it that. It is informative in a way that it investigates the cultural roots to current social and cultural issues, triggered by a response to social situations or mishaps or a topic of interest. To protest, on the other hand, is to find fault with a situation or blame it on outside measures. Of course my art has a message to carry out, but this message is to be drawn by the audience, and not to be shouted out directly at the audience as protest art might do. I give the audience the tools and accessories to follow a path to understanding the language of my art. Imagine a therapist helping the patient understand the current psychological problem she or he might have, by looking into the different stages of the person's life. As a therapist tries to find repeated patterns, unsolved problems, traumas or complexes and bring them to the surface; to therefore pave the way for better understanding the issue at hand, not necessarily to solve it, but maybe to see its pattern throughout the person's life, up to that moment; the same applies to a society, its cultural roots and history. On a larger scale, the society, as a whole, with its cultural, historical and geopolitical roots, past conditions, and "attitudes", can also become the "patient". Its historical and cultural patterns are brought to surface to recognize the current socio-political and cultural issues or problems.



Ali Etehad, Panorama of his performance.

**JD:** Could you elaborate on the Iranian cultural influence that informs your work?

**AE:** My part, as an Iranian artist, is to take the repeated cultural patterns and apply them to current situations and help the audience find elements of understanding the reason for a specific societal issue. I find this pattern common in different historical and cultural eras and I incorporate them into my work, and put the audience in a situation to confront these issues on their own, to feel it, to come to it, and to realize it. So my purpose as an artist is not to protest, or blame, but to recognize the cultural patterns throughout history leading to a problem. In every part of the series, I have tried to bring to the surface the repeated cultural and social patterns and attitudes, and, in each of the episodes, to bring the audience in through the gateway of Texts. In fact, the text is one of the important tools I use in the series since in Persian culture written words and ancient texts are an essential part of the history and culture.

**JD:** And also on language, text and outfits worn for the performances...

**AE:** Texts, and other materials, act as gateways to understanding the notion behind the performance. But they are not, and can't be, used as solidifiers and backbones of my works; they are to let the audience in. In all my performances I use different outfits related to the meaning I want the performance to convey to the audience, and bear a cultural meaning and significance. These outfits are my own designs; and are

deeply related to old Persian clothes. In other words, the performances are not based on the texts, but are given a certain direction through them; a sense of meaning and purpose, more completed by the outfits chosen specifically for that performance. My purpose is to have the audience notice the character, and not me as Ali Etehad, but as the character being portrayed in the performance. So by covering myself as much as I can, I put a wall between "Ali Etehad" and the audience. I take "Ali" out and put the character in front of the audience, so they can communicate with it in their own way, and understand it better.

#### *About the Writer*

Jareh Das is a young curator who currently works on Communications and Artist Liaison in a Dubai gallery. She has worked between London and Middleborough at MIMA (Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art) and holds an MA in Curating Contemporary Art from London's Royal College of Art. Recently curated exhibitions include: *Ubi sunt*, a group exhibition of UK and international emerging and established artists which created an experiential environment in a disused chapel in South London. She has also worked on curatorial projects at 176 Zabłudowicz Collection, ACME Project Space, London and participated in the Manchester International Festival, 2011. She has written numerous articles in various publications in UK & UAE.