

Strange to Herself:

Getting close becomes serious work for Mounira Al Solh.

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One of the immediate questions posed by Mounira Al Solh's video "A double burger and two Metamorphoses" is "who"? Is the artist representing herself in this video, or are these characters someone else? This becomes hilariously confusing as the video progresses, because all characters present are "Mounira" even as they have conversations with and assert their independence from her. Through the humorous enactment of dialogue between multiple "Mouniras", Al Solh demonstrates the negotiation of herself, as someone she knows intimately and cannot get away from, and simultaneously as someone who is other, strange, and unknowable. She does this by positioning herself in the gaze of Animal/Others found within herself during the ventriloquial act of being an artist, as well as the gaze of the camera and, by extension, her viewers. The result is a humorous video that cuts to the heart of intimacy and desire in a theory-heavy art world that still finds ways to essentialize human being as being rational.

Al Solh's video appears to have been made within a predetermined limit of supplies and locations that assists in generating much of the humor found within the work. The whole piece appears very domestic, not the least because everything seen and heard occurs within the confines of a private home. Similarly, all the animal characters who appear are domesticated species who have co-existed closely with humans for thousands of years. Al Solh, who for each of the five conversations has a pair of toothbrushes (or images of toothbrushes) bizarrely tucked behind her ears, sits in close proximity to a camera, cue cards in hand. The cards obscure the lower half of her face and include a dialogue for her to read on one side and the names of the

current conversants on the side facing us. The paper also gets lifted up to become a white screen break between conversations (a hilariously low-tech alternative to digital editing) that allows us to see the typed script through the slight transparency of the paper. Each conversation features Mounira-as-Animal speaking with Mounira-as-Mounira about various topics, from Lyotard to the flavour of coffee to rhyming nonsense, until Mounira tells the animal that the real reason she asked them here was to make a personal request, at which point the animal refuses her request and leaves.

It is important to note that the five requests Mounira makes are all a little odd and invasive, if not outright impossible, for two individuals to engage in. Mounira asks Cat to dance slowly with her, but Cat says that it can't due to its bone structure. Mounira asks Dog to become incognito with her, but Dog says it can't because it already knows her. Donkey refuses Mounira's request to "kiss it on the eyes" because its eyes are closed and they're sensitive. Goat will not even try to swallow Mounira's saliva with her because it is simply impossible to do. Camel will not dance slowly with Mounira either, but does agree to become a carrot for her, at which point the film ends suddenly but, in the words of the narrator, only temporarily.

Three interludes of informal looking snapshot photographs interject the speaking portions of the work. They feature Al Solh using a variety of common household items to represent herself as the titular domesticated animals within the domain of the home. Cat wears ears made of kitchen sponge and earmuffs and licks itself innocently. Donkey carries a burden of reusable shopping bags across its shoulders and has ears made of brushes. Camel, perhaps the funniest of the three, appears against a wall labeled "sort of a desert" and stares at the viewer with huge eyes enlarged via a handheld magnifying glass whilst accumulating root vegetables and a soccer ball in a clear tupperware container on its back, in a clever reference to both camel physiology and suburban household storage conventions.

In the literary context of animals standing in for humans in allegories and fables, it seems tempting to view the animals as real-world people or human traits, external to Al Solh, whom she is satirizing in a classical rhetorical style in her video. Even if this was the case, throughout the video Al Solh owns her characterizations as subjective offshoots of herself. After some reflection upon the most humorous and discomfiting aspects of the work, a very generative way to begin understanding “A double Burger” is to literally accept that each conversant is both Al Solh and Animal. This means that the ongoing joke within the work is that Al Solh is talking to herself as an Other, asking herself for intimacy and then refusing it. The only trick is the readily understood illusion of the ventriloquist, the paper that prevents the viewer from seeing the mouth on Al Solh’s face move as it gives voice to the characters (Goldblatt, 71). This is why the dialogue is understood as speaking in turn, or conversation, rather than as soliloquy.

In his analysis of artists as ventriloquists David Goldblatt writes that “ventriloquism represents a quirky solution to the unfulfilled need for the other, the need for speaking with another and hence becoming lively” (Goldblatt, 155). In other words, artists speak through artworks that become others in the process of their making, speaking back to the artist (Goldblatt, 58). Within this framework, Al Solh’s dialogue with herself becomes an essential part of her work as an artist and by working within a limited means of sets, costumes and editing she brings viewers into close proximity with herself in that process of art making. Even if we were tempted to become absorbed and forget, she verbally reminds us that we are watching a video through the eye of a video camera repeatedly. In the gallery installation of “A double Burger”, Al Solh also pulls viewers back to their bodies and alludes to her ventriloquial madness with the real cuckoo clocks placed on either side of the projection which cry out in between conversations. Seen in this way, reasons for why the requested intimacies are denied by Al Solh’s other selves begin to surface. If they were to consummate their relationship, to know each other inside out

(swallow saliva together, presumably with the same esophagus) or not know one another at all (go incognito), then the work, as a ventriloquial act of self-spacing, would be “suddenly and temporarily over”, as it is when Camel and Mounira reach an agreement that unites them and ends the video. In Goldblatt’s words, “the artwork always has more to say than the artist- the straight man willing to play second banana to the conversational partner that is just his own Other (Goldblatt, 157).”

In parallel to Goldblatt, Slavoj Zizek writes that “a comic character is never fully identified with his role; he always retains the ability to observe himself from outside, “making fun of himself” (Zizek). In ‘A double Burger’ Mounira Al Solh is outside herself as a pair of eyes and a voice that animates a discussion between two characters, one named after herself and another named after an animal who nonetheless recognises that they share a body. For example, Mounira tells Donkey, who doesn’t know where they are, that “you are here with me, and almost half our face is being looked at”. The significance of this emerges every time the human character awkwardly requests intimacy with her animal counterpart and is refused, allowing the comedy to continue. Zizek goes on to write that “two opposed moments are “reconciled” when the gap that separates them is posited as inherent to one of the terms” (Zizek).

Self-estrangement is posited by Al Solh as inherent to herself, and the result seems humorous specifically because the viewer is expecting a different answer; that the animal and the human are two different bodies that will somehow find a way to coalesce. The unexpected twist is that Mounira and Animal are one body which will continue to contain a multiplicity of persons who cannot completely know each other and who will flee from each other when encroached upon too tightly.

Al Solh’s video starts at the personal level of her own practise made transparent and expands outward from there. The idea that art begs the volatile question “who?” becomes

apparent through this work. “Who am I when regarded by my cat?” is the question Jacques Derrida explores in his 2004 lecture “The Animal that therefore I Am” (Bruns, 404). From this work, GL Bruns distills an answer to Derrida’s question along with an explanation for why it is aptly presented in Derrida’s characteristic circumlocutory way. He writes that “the deficiency of the *who* is not a negative—not a deprivation but a kind of privacy that it is always criminal to invade or expose and whose preferred figure of speech would be circumlocution (*circonfession*)” (Bruns, 421). This private “who”, as in “who is speaking?” or “who is represented?”, broods over the span of Al Solh’s video, a question that is continuously dodged, generating a multiplicity of potential answers and contradictions for the viewer. Cat has a body structure that will not allow dancing slow, but also reads through Mounira’s eyes. Donkey wishes to read the insides of things from the outside but Mounira wants to read the outsides of things from the insides. The reason for all these distinctions is that Al Solh, like Derrida, has become as much an other to herself as she is to a cat, dog, donkey, goat or camel (Bruns, 420).

Nietzsche, as cited by Goldblatt, writes that a plant can only see the world as plant-like, and a human will always see it as human-like (Goldblatt, 59). Likewise, In this video, Al Solh does not go out on a limb in order to pretend to see the world as “Animal-like” or even to speak on behalf of the essentialized human, but rather celebrates her entirely subjective position by letting the animals drift in and out of her own body and domestic space, resulting in the hilarity and disjunction of a Donkey who shares her face and the Tupperware Camel. There is no pretense that “A double Burger” contains an accurate representation of Animal life, a move that is unexpected in regards to all the anthropomorphised creatures seen in contemporary narratives, which give animals archetypal human hopes and dreams, making them into the villains and heroes of our stories (McHugh, 7). Al Solh takes Derrida’s approach, which avoids bestowing unasked for humanity upon other animals, or treating them as Cartesian automatons (Bruns,

416). These functions for animals, making them stand-ins for the essence of what humans are or are not, results in their erasure as well as the erasure of other potentials for what they could be (McHugh, 8). In “A double Burger” there is a sense of the unknowable “who” of the other, that refuses to be violated, and which asks us to recognize the existence of unknowable parts of ourselves, as seen through other eyes. This is not the least because, as Al Solh points out constantly, she and Animal are being looked at by us. In this sense, the Animal in the video is a proxy for our gaze. When she asks Donkey if she, a filmmaker, can “kiss [it] in the eyes”, she is also asking us viewers for that uncomfortable intimacy, and perhaps the same furtive response.

By acting as a Derridean foil to individual identity, rather than a hierarchical stepping stone up to Al Solh’s humanity, the animal presence in this video ends up functioning in humorous ways. A clever play on the classical line of thought in “A double Burger” is that, rather than being mute/unthinking, domestic animals casually converse on many topics. An example would be Cat and Mounira’s synonymous view on the flaws of Rousseau’s “social contract”, which doesn’t take into account the helpless dependence of both babies and kittens when stating that “man (or cat) was born free”. The irony of Cat’s dialogue is that in “The social Contract” Rousseau is making an argument with the underlying assumption that man is elevated by virtue of not being an animal. He takes the common classical position that by being able to form societies, man has risen above the “stupid limited animal” and would never want to go back to living off of physical impulses and right of appetite (166). However, In “A double Burger”, physicality seems to be what the presumably human character of Mounira wants. She doesn’t really want to talk about Lyotard or Rousseau. That was just a ruse to get Cat to meet with her. As she says, the real reason she asked Cat to meet with her is because she wants to dance slow with Cat. As she talks to the proceeding animals, she admits to more desires for intimacy, but only after beating around the bushes of culinary preference and philosophy for a while, a

hilarious inversion of the ongoing hierarchy between physical impulse and rational thought. As Steve Baker writes, Modernist criticism has very little interest in dealing with animals as other. It anthropomorphizes them or turns them into symbols (21). He goes on to say that the animal is the least visible in discourses which view themselves as serious. “The modern animal is thus the 19th century animal (symbolic, sentimental) which has been made to disappear (22).”

It is not surprising then, that in “A Double burger”, Al Solh’s animal-selves vanish, disappear or leave furtively when they stop discussing theory and are asked to become intimate. As fellow animals, becoming absorbed by a monumental individual is our vanishing point in “serious” discourse too. In this video Al Solh is revealing the desire that underlies her involvement in the academic art world. We may discuss Lyotard at length, but at a certain point, art also expresses an underlying desire for intimacy. However, to have a productive intimacy, one must respect distance, Derrida’s “who?”, the question that lies between others both outside and inside ourselves. “A double Burger and two Metamorphoses” demonstrates how, as an artist, Al Solh overflows with a multiplicity of strange voices and possible selves which she attempts to reconcile through funny yet invasive means. The irony is that consolidating or rationalizing these selves will inevitably put an end to the conversation that is the work. When Al Solh embraces herself as a multiplicity of voices we laugh at the contradictions that arise, but in her conversation with Cat, we learn that it is “for the viewer”, that Mounira requests the animals interact with her in these awkward ways. We viewers are implicated as a force that tries to essentialize the artist, even as we are slightly put-off by the requests Mounira is making, which suggests that we also need to find ways to spend time in dialogue with our animal-selves, however awkward that may seem.

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