

Bouchra Ouizguen

The Subversive Feminine

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Bouchra Ouizguen, *Ha!*, performed at New York Live Arts, 2013.

Photo by Ian Douglas. Courtesy of New York Live Arts

Originally from Ouarzazate, Morocco, Bouchra Ouizguen studied and performed with choreographers Bernado Montet, Mathilde Monnier, and Boris Charmatz before co-founding (with Taoufiq Izzediou and Said Ait El Moumen) the contemporary dance company Anania in Marrakesh in 2002 (the company also established the Marrakesh-based dance festival On Marche in 2005). An accomplished choreographer, Ouizguen does not use trained dancers in her performances, which are a mix of the contemporary with the traditional. This is because her performances are usually written for and performed by '*aitas*^[1]: traditional female singer-dancers from the Moroccan Atlantic plains, who often perform at weddings, festivals and other ceremonies. It is this tradition that will provide a perspective of Ouizguen's practice as a dancer and choreographer, whose work is located somewhere between performance art and dance.

The traditional '*aita* performance in Moroccan society is often overtly sexual, and consists of rapid movements of the hips and pelvis, made more pronounced by a scarf or belt, accompanied by vocals that are high-pitched. Themes of social impropriety and sexuality are predominant in performances that are often structured through call-and-response song and dance techniques; the women sing about lovers, adultery, and abandoned family or roots. These performances are deliberately designed to infiltrate the public space of ritual and ceremony with the intimacies of private life. As Deborah Kapchan, a scholar who has researched '*aitas* (also known as *shikhat*) extensively, notes that a 'repertoire of movements and emotions' usually reserved for private familial moments among Moroccan women are exhibited publicly by the '*aitas*, who represent the 'festive body' par excellence.^[2]

The subversiveness of the '*aita* is linked to each performer's expression of sexuality, intimacy and personal emotion through music, dance and poetry. When '*aitas* perform at weddings, for instance, their subversion lies not only in the words they sing about love, longing and abandonment, but also in the way they move their bodies and interact with their audiences. While they may look indistinguishable from guests in their caftans and jewellery, they are set apart by their dancing and singing in front of spectators, who they jubilantly invite to join along, as well as solicit for money. Not only do the '*aitas* sing, dance and draw in others to dance in public, but they also often smoke and drink wine. You might say the '*aita* performs shamelessness within very public spaces and events. As Kapchan writes:

...[the '*aita* performer's] social mask requires a refusal of deference to rules and moral norms. By artistically publicizing the intimacies of private life in the public space of ritual and secular celebration, the *shikha* sets cultural definitions of public and private domains into relief. She does this by overstepping social boundaries in a performance mode designed for such activity.^[3]

In descriptions of Ouizguen's work, the perceived low social status and sexual availability of '*aitas* is often a focal point.^[4] '*Aitas* are not just denigrated for 'commoditizing' their voices and bodies in public contexts but also for addressing, through song, private intimacies in public spheres, transgressing the boundaries of what is socially acceptable in Moroccan society.

Expressions of emotion and pleasure, like the ones performed by *'aitas*, are socially censured in Morocco (except when given license during festive periods and particular performances) due to this subversive potential. Thus, while *'aitas* embody the subversive in Moroccan society, their performances are still considered necessary, albeit when controlled and regulated for specific occasions.

It is this very contradictory social role that Ouizguen further destabilizes in her work. She does this by revealing the larger social structures within which *'aita* performers appear to be caught: at once in demand and of society, but also operating at society's margins. These are women who operate in an impossible space in-between, their positions articulated in the somewhat 'in-between' choreography Ouizguen utilizes – created for traditional performers but by no means traditional. And even though these performances are often described as dance, they certainly warrant a consideration as performance art, given the way Ouizguen recuperates 'lower' theatrical forms so as to vindicate them. She does this by allowing the *'aitas* themselves to perform their own roles outside their normal contexts.

In the performance *Madame Plaza*,^[5] Ouizguen holds her arms outstretched above her head and softly paddles with her hands back and forth and gently shakes her body. She is simultaneously steady and unsteady, as she steps gingerly across unadorned mattresses (which in traditional *'aita* performances are usually upholstered and propped on a wooden bench before being used as Moroccan sofas) lined straight on the stage. Three other women sit on another mattress, legs thrown wide apart, staring into the distance. Wearing cotton pyjamas with their hair carelessly pulled back into buns, they walk around the stage barefoot. Ouizguen continues slowly towards them, leaning forward, gently beating her hands back and forth. Over the course of this calculated performance the pace accelerates and the other women join in – swaying, chanting and embracing each other, their voices guttural and almost anguished.

Unadorned and stripped of their usual glamorous environments, these women don't resemble performing *'aitas* who are usually dressed in sumptuous caftans and jewellery, dancing at elaborate festivals and weddings. This plainness can be seen as presenting the 'other side' of the *'aita* – performers outside of work or even out of work, in repose, unkempt, waiting, idle, 'off', so to speak – not publicly and performatively 'on-camera'. Ouizguen has stated that the performance is evocative of the time spent before and after *'aita* performances – private moments of preparation, lounging, stillness, intimacy, and repressed emotions that become unleashed.^[6] The scene is intimate; the performers seem so attuned to one another. After years of dancing and singing together, being in this safe space – or stage – on the 'other side', they exhibit camaraderie and love.

This presentation of the *'aita* demonstrates a differentiation between on and off stage behaviour that is not drawn in Moroccan society, where 'loose' behaviour in performance is immediately extrapolated to the private life of the performer. The scenes in *Madame Plaza* are not seductive, lounging poses reminiscent of Orientalist paintings and photography. With the exception of

Quizgen, the performers are rotund, bulging out from worn cotton pyjamas and shirts and they sit and move indelicately. The boredom and indifference that the performers project is not seductive but guarded and dismissive. This hidden side is intimately portrayed as an act of struggle and perseverance in defiance of social repression.



Bouchra Quizguen, *Ha!*, performed at New York Live Arts, 2013.
Photo by Ian Douglas. Courtesy of New York Live Arts.

As well as showing another side to the 'aita performer, *Madame Plaza* directly addresses such social repression through mockery of traditional gender roles. Later in the performance, the dancers take part in something between an embrace and a tussle, forming a pile of bodies – a boisterousness and rowdy discomfort that tries to mute itself. Lying down beside one another, arms outstretched, they roll, not to any perceptible rhythm but still cautiously, as if trying not to hurt one another. One of the performers, Kabboura Ait Ben Hmad, puts on a man's white suit as if performing the part of a lewd seducer. Fatima El Hanna joins in the mating ritual, coy and simpering. Their courtship grows more intense, collapsing into bumps and grinds, as Quizguen and Naima Sahmoud peep over a barricade of mattresses. In this act, Quizguen references the presumed sexual availability of the 'aita, who dances in public among mixed company and in the process reveals the limits of the body's feminine talents. Since Moroccan women traditionally don't dance in mixed company publicly (although that has changed in modern times in some cities, to some extent), 'aitas present to the public the various ways women use their bodies – a repertoire of possible feminine movement introduced in the public sphere.^[7] Through an exaggerated corporeality and satirical performance Quizguen reflects upon the 'aitas overtly sexualized position in Moroccan society. Yet, shabby attire, open legs, bored

gapes and tussles seem to indicate a potential for the performers to free themselves from their assigned interstitial position in society.

In Quizguen's performances, *'aitas* appear reflective of a collective anxiety in which large, voluptuous, bawdy women – as demeaned as they are – represent a threat to a patriarchal society. This threat is reflected in the seduction routine between Ben Hmad and El-Hanna while Quizguen and Sahmoud spy on them from behind the couches. In this they reveal an understanding that their public and private lives are not separate, that sexualized ceremonial performances are expected to extend to their private lives in the form of sexual labour. As Kapchan explains:

Shikhat have the license to play with gender boundaries and with what is socially permissible during performance time. But *shikhat* are threatening precisely because they extend the license of public performance to their private lives as well. In a real sense, their livelihood lies in transforming their private selves into public display, hypertrophizing themselves. Their sexual liberation and licentiousness become symbolic of their selfhood...[8]

Through their routine, Quizguen not only reveals how *'aitas* show an awareness of the social environment and codes that govern their sexualized roles as they extend into both the public and private sphere, but also how they mock this sexualization. They comment upon expectations heaped upon them not only within the traditional performance sphere of weddings and festivals but outside it, as well. We laugh along with them because the mirror is now turned back upon the social body that hyper-sexualizes them and regulates their performances and bodies.

If *'aitas* appear as the object of both desire and marginalization, then Quizguen reveals the spaces where they are not mere products of social conventions who are allowed scripted subversions. Quizguen shows them as subjects set apart, who reveal an understanding of roles and conventions as they perform, mock and play with them. By performing a seduction, they reveal that they know what is expected of them on and off stage: licentiousness, looseness and sexual availability. This is something Quizguen capitalizes on: mocking the seducer by representing him as a buffoon in a tacky suit, playing with conventions by showing women taking on male and female roles in a performance of sexual play, while having other women play the spectators. Essentially, what Quizguen has created with *Madame Plaza* is a space to perform the social aspect of the *'aita's* role. What is implied is that their performance never ends: off stage these women will still have spectators – the social mask of refusing deference and social norms is always on.

But while *Madame Plaza* is largely about the tensions evoked by the identities of the women and their social position, another dance, *Ha!*,^[9] continues this exploration through a performance of cathartic rituals. It is a release of those socially-manifest tensions. Madness is

the point of inspiration for the piece and the performance wavers between a lack of control brought on by hysteria and the control required for formalized rituals to release the madness. In the darkness of the stage, exhalations are heard until the lights shine on disembodied heads, bobbing in white headscarves. The rhythmic exhalations build up until they chant, back and forth in call and response or until a voice drops out. Ben Hmad initiates and the other women respond; when she twists her face in circles, the others shake their heads. When she produces a cackle, the women break out in gibberish. The intensity accelerates in pitch and volume until the voices dissipate into exhausted grunts, while the women's pelvises thrust repeatedly signalling a kind of release. They twirl their hips provocatively, coil up on the floor and waver silently, intermittently releasing bursts of sharp laughter. At the end, Ben Hmad stops to kneel with her head to the floor, as if to pray. The others join her, whispering, one resting her head on another's thigh. Ben Hmad begins singing and the others join her. The lights go out but the singing of the *'aitas* continues.

Descriptions of *Ha!* often mention the influence of Sufi mysticism and rituals exorcizing madness. Ouizguen visited a few villages around Marrakesh to research 'soul healers and dance-and-song rituals', drawing from traditions that were all led by and included only women. [10] Ouizguen also indicates that *Ha!* is an exploration of the madness associated with female artists, which is telling because in appropriating this healing tradition she exposes it for what it is: a performance in itself. It is also not just a performance rooted in tradition that she appropriates but one that is essentially a feminine practice. She explains the catharsis behind the rituals and their connection to female performers:

It's almost a sociological ritual; some healers also have to deal with mental issues. It was more a conception of, what is madness? How do you deal with it? We took a personal approach to the notion of madness. Madness as the thing that is inserted between what you can control and what is out of reach. ... I was hearing this word often in describing a female artist and I was questioning that. What is the reason that it is the first adjective that comes out every time you speak about a woman artist?[11]

The social and artistic identities and roles of the *'aitas* appear to be an ever-present reference point in this piece and going into a trance appears to be a performative function. *'Aitas* represent a commutability between the feminine and the sacred, drawing on a 'vocabulary of movement similar to that used to commune with the spirit world in Moroccan esoteric performance'. [12] They swing their loosened hair; bob their heads up and down; rhythmically sway from side to side; and stomp on the floor while performing, as though approaching a state of trance.

While traditional Moroccan folk rituals and performances are foundational to Ouizguen's contemporary work, her own pieces have a way of breaking down the traditions so that they may be seen as mundane, repetitive, task-based activities. Her performances appear more

like the preparatory moments for a traditional performance at a ceremony, rather than the performance itself. In this, Ouizguen's work makes visible 'the act of making' by enacting these preparatory processes, which is a common feature of performance art. There is also a kind of malaise in Ouizguen's treatment of the *'aitas* as they lounge around unadorned spaces. Their performances differ from the highly choreographed performances in traditional theatre or dance worldwide. In many ways, what Ouizguen illuminates in these compositions is common to the birth of performance art: a frustration with conventional forms of art and a related desire for a radicalization of consciousness.^[13]

It has been argued that the criticisms against the role of women in Morocco are built into the performances of the *'aitas*: because of their poetic publication of private issues in song lyrics and body movements, *'aitas* bring to attention how certain forms of female expression are considered taboo unless in the context of performance.^[14] They illustrate a reality that they may or may not actually live and make social comment upon it – as traditional *'aitas*. Their performances in Ouizguen's pieces also reflect upon and criticize sociocultural patterns of female expression. But what they ultimately do – with unadorned performers, stripped down furniture and once-intelligible songs reduced to the guttural – is suggest a complete breakdown of the vocabulary, conventions and patterns that govern women's roles in Morocco.

^[1] To be consistent, I use the term *'aitas* throughout the article, although the term *shikha/t* is used by some writers.

^[2] Kapchan, *Gender on the Market*, *op. cit.*, p. 199.

^[3] Deborah Kapchan, 'Moroccan Female Performers Defining the Social Body,' *The Journal of American Folklore* 107.423 (1994), p. 82-83.

^[4] The national narrative of these performers has been more complicated than the low social status of entertainers: their social role has vacillated from the shameful and subversive to the respectable and honorable (when the form became revalorized as a traditional art practice via national cultural projects). In fact, so assimilated have they become in the nation-building narrative, their work is featured at an annual *'aita* festival in Safi and their performances are broadcast on television. It has been noted that their transformation into national folkloric symbols on TV has resulted in a sanitization of their sexuality. However, inclusion in Morocco's ethnic revivalism projects does not necessarily indicate an overthrow of the class system when it comes to recognizing the performers. They are still often looked down upon as prostitutes - sexually available and unprotected from the male gaze and advances. They are still considered outside the norm of feminine propriety as they travel, live with men, smoke and drink. For a

discussion on their sanitized sexuality, see: Laura Chakravorty Box, *Strategies of Resistance in the Dramatic Texts of North African Women: A Body of Words* (London: Routledge, 2005).

[5] An excerpt from *Madame Plaza* can be seen here: <https://vimeo.com/26584560>

[6] Marie Chavanieux, 'Une Femme Marocaine Artiste et Les Maux d'Âme,' *La Terrasse*, 25 February 2015, <http://www.journal-laterrasse.fr/une-femme-artiste-marocaine-et-les-maux-de-lame/>.

[7] Deborah Kapchan, *Gender on the Market: Moroccan Women and the Revoicing of Tradition* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), p. 198.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 90.

[9] An excerpt from *Ha!* can be seen here: <https://vimeo.com/103717872>

[10] Ouizguen states, 'We adopted a nomad approach and went to visit villages all across Morocco – especially three villages where there are soul healers and dance-and-song rituals. ...The rituals we witnessed, which were [told through] dance and song are the inspiration for the voyage. We sat at small cafés and watched the life of the city. The three villages visited were in the surroundings of Marrakech. At first, there was supposed to be only one journey to see the rituals, but then I really pushed the budget and made the time to experience more, because every village has a different ritual. In the village where we principally stayed, they only healed women.' Gia Kourlas, 'Bouchra Ouizguen Talks about Ha! for Crossing the Line,' *Time Out*, 27 June 2013 <http://www.timeout.com/newyork/dance/bouchra-ouizguen-talks-about-ha-for-crossing-the-line>.

[11] *Ibid.*

[12] Kapchan, 'Moroccan Female Performers', *op. cit.*, p. 86.

[13] See: Kristine Stiles and Peter Howard Selz, eds., *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), p. 683 and Carolee Schneemann, 'Art in the Dark: A Letter to *Artforum* (1983)' in *Twentieth Century Theatre: A Sourcebook*, ed. Richard Drain (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 136.

[14] Kapchan, 'Moroccan Female Performers', *op. cit.*, p. 91.

About the author

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Nahrain Al-Mousawi has a PhD in Comparative Literature. She is currently a postdoctoral fellow in Berlin, focusing on the cultural productions surrounding borders and migration. Her writing has appeared in *Al Jazeera*, *Globe & Mail*, and *The National*. Follow her [@NahrainAM](#)