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Lecture: **“Between Protest and Witnessing: The Police-Clown *Az-Oulay* Performances in Jerusalem “**

Colloquium: **“Violence – non-violence”**, Department of European Ethnology, University of Vienna.

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic forced performance artists all over the globe to adapt to a new reality. Unable to perform in their usual settings, performance artists explored new ways and models to perform and meet audiences that could enable the physical co-presence of both actors and spectators, an essential condition for live performances. One alternative was performing in one of the few settings permitted in the lockdowns: public protests.

In Israel, the pandemic came at a fraught political time. Four parliamentary election cycles in two years had failed to produce a stable government and the long-time prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, was under indictment for bribery and fraud. The volatile mix of the public’s right to protest political corruption and bans against public gatherings came to a weekly head on Jerusalem’s Balfour Street, across from the official prime minister residence, where protesters clashed with increasingly violent police officers. Not surprisingly, the protests also a magnet for many sorts of artistic expression.

One artist drawn there was I.K. In her persona of *Hashoteret* (Policewoman) *Az Oulay*, the only representative of the Straight to the Heart Police Force, she – in her rumpled blue uniform, flower-bedecked cap, red clown nose, her “weapons” a spray bottle of “love water” and heart stickers for sticking on people’s foreheads – was the stark opposite of the severe-faced troops preserving the hegemony. I.K. chose her character’s moniker with care: first name – *Az-Oulay* (literally “then, maybe”); surname *Yihyeh Yoter Tov* (“things will be better”). She is seen embodying her belief that reality is created through interpretation, and that we only have to reinterpret the world to make it a better place. After Netanyahu’s defeat, the police-clown *Az-Oulay* began to perform in the more highly charged and dangerous setting of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The lecture is based on observation of I.K.’s performative appearances in protests, an analysis of more than a hundred reports of her self-appointed missions, video and still documentation, interviews and conversations with the artist, press reviews, posts on social media, and a close analysis of her new project, which I co-curate. In it, she creates an Underground School of Police where she shares techniques and tactics in her development of undisciplined knowledge (deep listening to the other, distribution of sticky hearts, dialogue, etc.), visual documentation of her work, and a series of performative acts based on her detention by the police.

In the frame of this paper the Brechtian legacy of protest and resistance is considered in the way it has or not an expression in the performative activist work of police-clown *Az-Oolay*.