

# Performing the Body:

## Haifa Wehbi in the becoming

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Haifa Wehbi is a Lebanese singer who started her career as a model. She was the first runner up for Miss Lebanon in 1995. She became known in the Arab world after the release of her first album *Huwa al-Zaman* (i.e. it is time). In 2006 she was on *People* magazine's list of the 50 most beautiful people.

Haifa Wehbi appears and deploys her body; she sings and dances. Her principal achievement is to wander and exhibit her body in public places and various media such as stages, billboards, TV, and magazines - posing, changing poses, and uttering a few words. She is beautiful and desirable, an object of desire. She is a sex symbol and an image. In *Ana Haifa*<sup>1</sup> (i.e. I am Haifa), she is a body and not just has one (Radley, 2003, p. 70). Her (self) staging involves embodiment. She performs being a body: "The body in question here is more expansive than the physical body" (Judovitz, 2001, p. 23).

Bodies have acquired a dimension that is far beyond the body: the body is "a subject, an object, and a representation" (Judovitz, 2001, p. 22). It is a throw back to a Baroque perception of the individual where subject and body form a whole. The separation between body and mind has collapsed as well as the preference of the mind over the body.<sup>2</sup> Identity is therefore performed, and not given, by means of the body. The visible expression of oneself is within the purview of, and inseparable from, his/her body. Performers dependent on the

"Everything is related to the body, as if it was discovered after being long forgotten; body image, body language, body-consciousness, liberation of the body are the passwords" (Starobinski as cited in Morgan & Scott, 1993, p. 1)

body, such as Haifa Wehbi, carry out, through body images and representations deciphered by the viewer, the production of an identity. Haifa Wehbi's performance "being Haifa" involves being traditional and modern, conservative and outgoing, responsive to the public needs and/or reflecting her Arab and Western public.

I believe that Wehbi is aware of herself as a role model. Her success lies in her various representations of womanhood and not in her ability to sing or dance. She distinguishes between "*mutriba*" (i.e. interpreter), which implies both range and depth of talent, and "*mughanniyah*" (i.e. singer), which implies performance, and admits being a "*mughanniyah*". She sings, she said in an interview on *Melody Channel*, what she can, or what "suits her" (i.e. *bi yilba'li*). She sings "her way".<sup>3</sup> So singing and dancing are a means to represent her "self". In her singing performances, she dances, suggesting rather than completing the movements, as if deconstructing iconic images of both traditional and modern women.<sup>4</sup>

She poses when interviewed, and poses for posters. Throughout her performances on stage and in video-clips, she carries out a series of stills, slowly moving from one pose to the other. Her performance becomes a number of stills produced live: stills that are read and interpreted by the viewer. This is similar to the way that Cindy Sherman in

*Untitled Film Still series*<sup>5</sup> (started in 1977), shows photographs of herself, staging various scenarios, demonstrating the ability of the body image to embody a context, a mood, and a character. Equated with speech and gesture, “bodies speak”, and are therefore conceived as “... site[s] for mediated representations ...” (Montaigne in Judovitz, 2001, p. 24). Using the uncertainty lying between being a “body image” and the image of being a body, the viewer, through the faculty of imagination, completes the show (Cruz, 1997). In this mode of representation, the viewers use references such as films, promotions, and advertisements to identify the embodied representations.<sup>6</sup>

In the pictures and stills from clips and shows [fig. 1 to 7], Haifa Wehbi creates several representations of

the modern woman. They vary from the provocative sophisticated woman to the traditional, innocent, countryside girl [fig.1 & 7]. The spectrum includes the contemporary woman in jeans [fig. 4 & 5], the femme fatale in black [fig. 2], the “pure” virginal woman [fig. 3] and the “princess” [fig. 6]. Her body speaks “... as a mediated exercise, a dialogue of multiple voices ...” (Judovitz, 2001, p. 24). Yet, despite the (sometimes) contradictory aspects of the imagined identities in the stills, she remains oriental. It is the representation of the oriental woman that she manages to expand.

According to one Western journalist, Wehbi wears “tight jeans and black *kohl* eyeliner, [and] mixes Eastern belly dancing with Western nightclub moves in an MTV update of the *Dance of the*



Fig 1. <http://www.askmen.com/women/galleries/singer/haifa-wehbe/picture-2.html>



Fig.2. <http://www.webtunisian.com/haifawahbi/page2>



Fig.3. <http://www.askmen.com/women/galleries/singer/haifa-wehbe/picture-1.html>



Fig. 4-5-6 <http://www.webtunisian.com/haifawahbi/page2>

Fig. 7. <http://www.askmen.com/women/galleries/singer/haifa-wehbe/picture-2.html>

*Seven Veils* that promises all and delivers nothing” (Butters, 2006, ¶ 4). The references identified by the journalist are a mixture of Eastern and Western, modern and traditional characteristics. However, according to Butters the imagined identity is oriental. His description of the “oriental dance” is suggestive though not accurate: Wehbi is not veiled. The veil usually acts as a metaphor for the inaccessible embodied desire for the “Orient”. Desire, according to Judovitz, “brings [ing] representation within the purview of the body” (p. 24). Wehbi becomes the inaccessible Orient by means of her bodily performance.

In Butters’ (2006) description, Wehbi poses, suggesting the movement and never finishing it, promising without delivering. These are flirting strategies, and flirt according to Mernissi (1987) is “...a conflict strategy, a way seeming to give of yourself and of procuring great pleasure without actually giving anything” (p. 140). Moreover, Mernissi (1987) holds that flirting is a universal social act with strict rules between participants, not an exclusive oriental act as suggested by Butters (2006). Wehbi performs her body within the framework of flirting, wherein pleasure is satisfied by imagination and fulfillment of the promised seduction will not take place.

Wehbi appears and deploys her body, celebrates it, communicates through it and controls it. Then from time to time, she stares back, returning the gaze, dominating the viewer! [fig. 3 & 6] Her performance involves highlighting the visibility of the female body as a tool to strengthen the body-object, transforming it into a subject.<sup>7</sup> She acknowledges the necessary presence of the viewer without whom representation cannot take place. Wehbi’s performance uses the power of representation, interweaved with the act of singing and dancing, to seize control over the viewers, men and women. She

flirts with the viewer as well as with the different identities she embodies. Her success lies in the uncertainty she maintains; both uncertainty as a flirting strategy and uncertainty in the identity-image she embodies.

Wehbi flirts with an impalpable participant: the public. In the absence of an embodied partner, the game’s rules of flirting are, on the one hand, easy to handle, since fulfillment cannot take place with an immaterial audience/public. On the other hand, performing a flirt is difficult to maintain in the absence of a partner, so she flirts with her own image reflected by the public, adding to it a touch of narcissistic behavior. Her performances become an embodiment of a large range of representations fulfilling social and economic demands that are promoted by cosmetic advertisements and plastic surgery. She is able to seduce men and women, young and old alike, because attention to bodily matters has increased; young skin, slim silhouette, perfect nose, flat belly, ideal breasts, etc ...<sup>8</sup>

Wehbi performs the body, giving form to women and men’s fantasies. She performs “being Haifa”, objectifying her body in order to enact Haifa as a subject. By embodying various forms of representations Wehbi creates an elusive identity and gains control over her own fate.

“Son corps lui apprenait beaucoup, elle l’emmenait partout avec elle. Il la devançait parfois” (Nasr, 1999, p. 99).

“Her body taught her a lot, she took it everywhere with her. Sometimes it preceded her” (Nasr, 1999, p. 99).

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## ENDNOTES

1. *Ana Haifa* (i.e. I Am Haifa) is the title of one of her songs and her line in the Pepsi advertisement in response to "I am Thierry Henri" of the football player. The third character says *Ana 'atchan* (i.e. I am thirsty) at the end.
2. Reference to Descartes' view of the subject with a strong delineation between the body and mind (Judovitz, 2003). Two aspects of modernity are identified parallel to Descartes and Montaigne: one that "... would tend to detach and remove the body as a solid and separate object. Another ... that stresses fragmentation and constant flux, renders the body less stable, more mysterious" (Morgan: 1993:4).
3. Check youtube.com retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OaAA3JzqHF8&mode=related&search=>
4. One can view a number of interviews, video clips, and shows from televisions on youtube.com last retrieved 09-05-07 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OaAA3JzqHF8&mode=related&search=> & <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A-Sjq2lm1rE>
5. For more information see <http://www.cindysherman.com/art.shtml>
6. In Sherman the constructed feminine identities vary. From the tomboy to the seductive celebrity caught wearing her lingerie, to the blond librarian.
7. According to Judith Butler (*Bodies That Matter*, 1993), and based on Foucault's philosophy of the subject, subjectification is not given but depends on power relations within the psyche and society. The individual, here called the subject, 'struggles' to 'be'. Since there is no 'essence', no core of the 'self', the process of formation of 'oneself' is continuous, always in the becoming.  
The female body images are at the same time, objects of (male's) desire and subjects "controlling [the] male gaze" (Cruz, 1997).
8. There can be little doubt that there has been a remarkable growth of interest in these topics [bodily matters] in a matter of years (Morgan, 1993:2\_.

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