



## **Timelessness and Precarity in Orientalist Temporality**

Mehdi-Georges Lahlou's Aesthetics of Disorientation

Conor Moynihan

### **Abstract**

*The Hourglasses* (2015), by French-Moroccan artist Mehdi-Georges Lahlou, features five large hourglasses displayed artifact-like upon a table. As one would expect of an hourglass, these glass sculptures can be inverted to measure out time. This, though, is where convention ends, as these are filled with couscous, not sand. Unlike sand, couscous cannot measure time consistently and the inversion of any one of these five hourglasses results in a different measurement of time. In effect, they disorient any linear notion of temporality, raising the specter of Orientalism and its fantasy of a timeless East. Mehdi-Georges works in a diverse range of media including performance, sculpture, installation, and self-portraiture. Dealing with race, gender, sexuality, colonialism, identity, and representations of Islam and Catholicism, his work performs the instability in all these categories by critically complicating fantasies of "East" and "West" without relying on a mere binary reversal of meaning. Contextualizing his work within a larger history of Orientalism, my argument begins first with Percy Bysshe Shelley's poem "Ozymandias," composed in 1817, followed by an analysis of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Orientalist paintings before leading to a concise discussion of contemporary Orientalism in art and art discourse. My analysis then circles back to the artist's work to insist that Orientalism's fantastical invocation of the East remains a disabling presence in the contemporary imaginary. Orientalism's temporality, as glimpsed obliquely from Mehdi-Georges Lahlou's hyphenated identity, is likewise rendered unstable in his work. As seen in *The Hourglasses*, his work produces what I call "an aesthetic of disorientation," predicated on the artist's embodied cultural hyphenation, which renders the Orientalist fantasy of the East absurd through its own tropes of representation. By bringing queer theory and disability studies to bear on his work, I show how his practice engages with Orientalism's temporality to open up new possibilities of perceiving the world.

### **About the Author**

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# Timelessness and Precarity in Orientalist Temporality

Mehdi-Georges Lahlou's Aesthetics of  
Disorientation

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*My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings,  
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!  
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare  
The lone and level sands stretch far away.*

—Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Ozymandias"

In the eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries, Orientalism, as a field of knowledge produced by Western scholars about the so-called Orient, became the dominant mode by which the East was represented (in literature, painting, theater, etc.) in Western spaces. Initially, the "Orient" of Orientalism primarily referred to the Near East regions such as North Africa, the Middle East, and, perhaps especially, Egypt.<sup>1</sup> For example, Ozymandias, the "King of Kings" of Percy Bysshe Shelley's poem, is the Greek name for the Egyptian Pharaoh Ramses II.<sup>2</sup> Though he never went to Egypt, Shelley is commonly assumed to have been inspired by an encounter with the "colossal Wreck" of Ramses II's mortuary statue at the British Museum. However, this viewing would have been impossible because the bust of Ozymandias had only just been excavated from beneath the Egyptian sands and did not arrive at the British Museum, as John Rodenbeck demonstrates, until 1818.<sup>3</sup> As Rodenbeck emphatically states, "Shelley simply could not possibly have seen the head in question before he wrote his great sonnet."<sup>4</sup> It is more likely that Shelley, who was from Britain, learned of what Egypt looked like from European travel literature in circulation at the time, such as the French two-volume *Voyage en Syrie et en Égypte* (1787) by Constantin-François Chassebœuf, comte de Volney.<sup>5</sup> While there is much to be said about the differences between various forms of Orientalism, such as those predicated on national distinctions (French versus British) or based on gender differences (male versus female Orientalists<sup>6</sup>), it is equally important to highlight what remains the same in Orientalism's renderings of the East: that is, an East that has been thrust out of the West's temporal progression and has thus become fixed in a queer state of eternal timelessness—queer because this "timelessness" is predominantly registered through the linear and teleological narratives of Western modernity.

<sup>1</sup> To stress the point, by "Orient," I mean the part of the world as defined by the Western discipline of Orientalism. It is therefore both a real place and a fictive one, depending on the source.

<sup>2</sup> Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers, eds., *Shelley's Poetry and Prose: Authoritative Texts and Criticism* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1977), 103, fn. 5.

<sup>3</sup> John Rodenbeck, "Travelers from an Antique Land: Shelley's Inspiration for 'Ozymandias,'" *Alif: Journal for Comparative Poetics* 24 (2004): 124–25.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>6</sup> For an example on gender differences in Orientalism, see Mary Roberts, "Contested Terrains: Women Orientalists and the Colonial Harem," in *Orientalism's Interlocutors: Painting, Architecture, Photography*, ed. Jill Beaulieu and Mary Roberts (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 179–204.

In this understanding, literary and visual motifs serve to stabilize Orientalism across other differences. In the case of Shelley's poem, it is the sand that hid and revealed Ramses II's face and its wrecked and broken state that emerge as the mechanisms that bind the Orientalist image together. As a substance that materializes temporality through its accumulation and excavation, sand allows for a renewed meeting in the present with the forgotten time of the past. However, it is not just any form of the past that is re-encountered; rather, it is the past rendered precariously in a broken or "disfigured" state that affectively charges this encounter. Disfigurement, as art historian and disability studies scholar Ann Millett-Gallant describes it, "connote[s] a range of striking visible differences from the norm—bodies [or representations of bodies] that capture attention due to their asymmetry, sizes, shapes, 'missing' or extra features and limbs, or other qualities that may cause social spectacles."<sup>7</sup> In this understanding, the encounter with brokenness can also be seen as an encounter with a temporally produced disfigurement that yields, nonetheless, a spectacle. Indeed, as brokenness always already implicates a time prior to being broken, the fractured state further jettisons the bust backward into a time before the present. In addition, "new" discoveries like these, in particular those found in Egypt, staged in dramatic terms the past's renewed presence in the now. In his field-defining text *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said maps this renewed interest in Egypt, Shelley being just one example, back to Napoleon's 1798 failed invasion,<sup>8</sup> after which, Said explains, "the very language of Orientalism changed radically. Its descriptive realism was upgraded and became not merely a style of representation but a language, indeed a means of *creation*."<sup>9</sup> This new language of Orientalism produced the Orient "as something whose existence is not only displayed but has *remained fixed in time and space for the West*."<sup>10</sup> Sand, the matter of the fantasy's metaphorical fixing, together with brokenness, a state in which timelessness takes form, were thereby the means that helped *create* the Orient's shifting temporal distance and proximity to Europe's modern present.

As something that settles *over time*, sand's sedimentation *over objects* doles out temporal and spatial distance. This process of accumulation fixes time in place and denotes spaces that are—often erotically so—lost in time, waiting for excavation and release. This trope is evidenced in Disney's *Aladdin* (1992) when Jasmine, dressed seductively in red, is trapped by Jafar—despotic like Shelley's Ozymandias—in an hourglass. In this scene, sand pours over her, consuming her, as it measures out the time until her mortal doom. As the last grains envelops Jasmine, Aladdin shatters the hourglass—a romance saved from the tyranny of the sands of time. The hourglass, an object steeped in Orientalist reveries, promises to faithfully impose hegemonic time, distancing temporally the West's modernity and the East's timelessness. Mehdi-Georges Lahlou's *The Hourglasses* (2015) (Fig. 1), however, disrupts the hourglass's fidelity to this task.<sup>11</sup> Displayed artifact-like, five of these glass timepieces are turned over to measure out time as one would expect of an hourglass. These, however, are filled with couscous, not sand. Unlike sand, couscous is affected by humidity and therefore measures time incommensurably; with each inversion of any one of these hourglasses, the time it takes

<sup>7</sup> Ann Millett-Gallant, *The Disabled Body in Contemporary Art* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 13.

<sup>8</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 82.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 108. Emphasis mine.

<sup>11</sup> When being discussed or written about, Mehdi-Georges Lahlou prefers to be referred as either Mehdi-Georges Lahlou, Mehdi-Georges, or MGL—never just as Lahlou—to maintain the hyphenation of his name.

for the couscous to fall to the bottom is altered unpredictably. As Marie Papazoglou notes, Mehdi-Georges “nous invite à faire l’expérience d’un temps qui n’existe pas, ou du moins, que ne régit aucune convention.”<sup>12</sup> We may call this unconventional time—quite disorientingly—the conventional time of the Orientalist fantasy, which is, as we will see, a sexualizing and immobilizing temporality.



**Figure 1**

Mehdi-Georges Lahlou, *The Hourglasses*, 2015. Mold-blown glass and couscous. Series of 5, +/- 73 by 30 x 30 centimeters each. Galerie Transit, Mechelen, Belgium, and Galerie Rabouan Moussion, Paris, France. Image courtesy of the artist.

Using the crisscrossing temporal and spatial movements that underpin Orientalism as my starting point, I address how these discursive understandings of the East presuppose and then mandate timelessness in the Orient. Specifically, I am interested in how this conception of timelessness has adhered to certain geographical spaces and the bodies that inhabit them. Rather than seeing the Orientalist project that has produced this temporal stasis as complete, I attend to the ways that its temporality remains active in the contemporary imagination by demonstrating how we can glimpse this presence through Mehdi-Georges’s oeuvre. Born in France in 1983 to a Catholic-Spanish mother and a Muslim-Moroccan father, Mehdi-Georges is a queer-identified, French-Moroccan artist based in Brussels and Paris working in a diverse range of media including performance, sculpture, installation, and self-portraiture. Dealing with race, gender, sexuality, colonialism, identity, and representations of Islam and Catholicism, his work performs the instability in all these categories by critically crossing over and bringing together fantasies of “East” and “West” without relying on a mere binary reversal

<sup>12</sup> Translation: “invites us to the experience of a time that does not exist, or rather, one not governed by any convention.” Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own. Marie Papazoglou, “*The Hourglasses*” from *Behind the Garden* exhibition curated by Simon Njami at La Botanique (collection of the author, Brussels, Belgium, 2017), n.p.

of meaning.<sup>13</sup> Rather, Mehdi-Georges's work, predicated on his own embodied cultural hyphenation, produces what I call an "aesthetic of disorientation" that renders the Orientalist fantasy absurd through its own tropes and re-temporalizes the disabled temporality of the Orient from within the very materials used to bind it. By exploding this fantasy from within, Mehdi-Georges's work opens up new possibilities for perceiving the world.<sup>14</sup>

To achieve this new mode of perception, I begin with a discussion of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Orientalist paintings then move on to examine two more contemporary examples of Orientalism in art discourse. I do so not to map out how Orientalism has remained the same, but to draw attention to the myriad ways that tropes of the East have been deployed to fix this spatio-temporal fantasy in place. This legacy of Orientalism, as art historian Nada Shabout argues, has had a profound impact on people living in the Arab world. As she writes, "While colonial rule actively contributed to restructuring Arab societies, Orientalism aided in transmitting Western ideals and directing modern Arab convictions"; adding that "contemporary Arab cultures are still imprisoned by these assumptions; the stereotypical image of an Arab that they created still persists."<sup>15</sup> In agreement with Shabout's assessment, I first lay the foundation of how this stereotypical image was produced and sustained (what I call "fixed" and Shabout describes as a form of being "imprisoned") as it still continues to have reverberating and disabling consequences in contemporary life. Building broadly from the tropes of sand and brokenness encountered in Shelley's Orientalist poem, I return to my discussion of Mehdi-Georges, using queer theory and disability studies to approach how his performative works, positioned between East and West, to produce an experiential aesthetics of disorientation for viewers. He achieves this affect, I conclude, by making his own bodily precarity a spectacle affectively haunted by the legacy of colonization.

As Mehdi-Georges's practice often thematizes non-normative sexuality, his work readily opens up to a queer analysis. This mode of analysis can be nuanced further by considering queerness as a way that bodies register with a difference in, and through, alternating states of temporality.<sup>16</sup> For example, in her discussion of queer temporalities, Elizabeth Freeman uses the phrase "time binds" to gesture to the ways "that naked flesh is bound into socially meaningful embodiment through temporal regulation" and how "time [is used] to organize individual bodies toward maximum productivity."<sup>17</sup> Through Freeman, queer theory provides a productive way to consider how race, gender, and sexuality register affectively as "Other"—

<sup>13</sup> I place "West" and "East" in scare quotation marks here to hold in tension that I am referring to real cartographical spaces that are simultaneously imaginary spaces. Throughout my argument, I capitalize these two cardinal directions to emphasize their symbolic and associated meanings alongside their literal ones.

<sup>14</sup> By making this claim, I do not mean to assert that Mehdi-Georges's work is only orientated toward a critique of Orientalism—this is false. His works often evade singular meanings and open themselves to many interpretations. For example, *The Hourglasses* also makes a very direct reference to Islamic time, as the five hourglasses gesture to *salat*, the five daily prayers expected in Islam. His work often aims to desacralize, and I am taking that thrust up to show how his work also desacralizes the Orientalist fantasy. Therefore, my argument aims to stress how his works operate against Orientalism without writing off their many other possible meanings.

<sup>15</sup> Nada Shabout, *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2007), 7.

<sup>16</sup> For a great discussion of queer temporality beyond the scope of this paper, see J. Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: NYU Press, 2005).

<sup>17</sup> Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 3.

and thereby queer—through time. If time binds so as to be productive, then we can see Orientalism as a form of queer temporal binding, producing images of a timeless non-productivity in the East that are, nonetheless, quite productive for the project of colonization. Likewise, Mehdi-Georges's work queers these binds by temporalizing the absurdity of such stereotypes so as to re-script the social meaning that has become bound to his flesh.

In addition to queer theory, I bring disability studies to bear in interpreting the Orientalist-inflected temporality in his work. As a field, disability studies has brought overdue attention to the ways that bodies are situated in the world along axes of accessibility and difference. Further, the field has expanded to focus not just on disability as it is formally recognized but also what disability might mean in a global context.<sup>18</sup> In line with this, disability studies scholar Robert McRuer argues that, in global contexts, we must remain cognizant of “the disability to come.”<sup>19</sup> He posits as much to signal the inability to ever encapsulate what disability is because globalization will always produce unpredictable forms of disability and impairment elsewhere in the future.<sup>20</sup> I also consider how, beyond being future-oriented, “disability to come” works in the past tense, allowing us to consider how Orientalism arrives at states of precarity. As the language “to come” suggests, disability scholars, such as Alison Kafer, engage with the temporal turn in theory by positing that disability is often conceived of as an “embodied asynchrony” and as being “out of time”<sup>21</sup>—a productive parallel to the Orientalist's temporal conception of the East. Further, the field of disability studies can be leveraged to draw attention to the ways that Orientalism's rhetorical de-temporalization of the East results in tangible, corporeal, and material effects on people marked as timeless. Thus, a disability studies analysis helps underscore the ways in which these affected states are produced within specific contexts (e.g., in the post-colonial West). In step with this interpretation, Mehdi-Georges's performances often centralize precarity, vulnerability, and the potentiality of bodily harm to himself. In so doing, however, I contend that he re-temporalizes in the present tense forms of precariousness that Orientalism as a discipline has instantiated historically. Taken together, a queer and disability analysis of Mehdi-Georges's oeuvre helps us dwell on the ways that certain bodies are fixed in time and precluded from accessing modernity's temporal present.

<sup>18</sup> For more on disability in global contexts, see Nirmala Everelles, *Disability and Difference in Global Contexts: Enabling a Transformative Body Politic* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

<sup>19</sup> Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 200.

<sup>20</sup> Robert McRuer has also been one of the leading voices in bringing queer theory and disability studies into conversation with one another.

<sup>21</sup> This comes from Alison Kafer's analysis of the case of Ashley X. While she uses these in a different context, there are strong parallels for the way Orientalism uses time to render the non-Western world asynchronous and out of time. Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 48, 53.



**Figure 2**

Eugène Delacroix, *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*, 1834. Oil on canvas. 180 x 229 centimeters. Musée de Louvre, Paris, France. (photo: Franck Raux). © RMN- Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY.

## Directionality and Temporality in Orientalist Painting

In 1832, shortly after Algeria was conquered by France in 1830, painter Eugène Delacroix joined a French diplomatic envoy to Morocco. En route, he sojourned in newly conquered Algeria, where he made sketches based on his visit to a harem to bring back to France;<sup>22</sup> the result was his 1834 *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* (Fig. 2).<sup>23</sup> This oil painting features three Algerian women fixed in the space of their apartment, reclining in a luxurious and confined interior, draped in decorated and colorful fabrics, wearing expensive jewelry and smoking from a water pipe. Their alabaster white skin is set into relief by the Black slave woman, the only figure shown in motion, who attends to them, framing their immobility by

<sup>22</sup> As Sarah Rogers notes, Delacroix was the first European male to gain access to a harem. Sarah Rogers, "Houria Niati's *No to Torture: A Modernist Reconfiguration of Delacroix's Women of Algiers in their Apartment*," *Thresholds* 24 (Spring 2002): 37.

<sup>23</sup> A note on titles: I have left all titles in their original language, which primarily is French. For works that have a regularly used English equivalent, such as *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* (*Women of Algiers in their Apartment*), I do not provide a translation. For all other works, I provide my own translation in the footnotes.

her suggested departure.<sup>24</sup> Articulating eroticism through race, luxury, and excess, this stereotypical Orientalist harem fantasy scene performs the insatiable, penetrating appetite of the colonialist gaze, which perceives these Algerian women as distant but obtainable—a critical tension in the Orientalist fantasy. Note, for example, how the woman on the left of the canvas reclines like an odalisque, leaning into the sumptuous pillow under her elbow, beckoning the viewer to imaginatively enter the harem with a seductive come-hither expression. Discussing this orientation, Sara Ahmed argues that “racial others become associated with ‘the other side of the world.’ They come to *embody distance*.”<sup>25</sup> Delacroix’s canvas, likewise, performs this orientation by mapping Orientalism’s distance from Europe through racial alterity (where the slave attendant formally functions to racialize the otherwise seemingly, though impossibly, “white” harem women<sup>26</sup>) while still marking it as graspable within the West’s desirous reach.<sup>27</sup>

Importantly, *Femmes d’Alger* was a European performance of the East with a European audience in mind. In his discussion of Orientalist painting, art historian Roger Benjamin notes that “costumed Europeans often substituted for Eastern men and women” as models for European painters and that “Delacroix had used such models in making his *Women of Algiers*.”<sup>28</sup> This painting orients the French viewer to an imagined space of indulgent consumption and licentiousness, performing with European models a “pastiche” of the East.<sup>29</sup> Delacroix’s canvas clearly delineates between what constitutes the East within the Orientalist imaginary, which also thereby defines the West as its opposite. As Said writes, “The Oriental is irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, ‘different’; thus the European is rational, virtuous, mature, ‘normal.’”<sup>30</sup> Therefore, from Said, we can necessarily expand our notions of what constitutes Orientalism by including forms of representation that depict the East as inherently different from the West in these binary reversals. More specifically, if we broaden Said’s terms to be more generally about race, gender, class, temporality, and directionality, Orientalism becomes a mode of representation that disciplines and shapes Western modernity based on an *a priori* assumption of the East’s essential difference, a difference that can be made legible in all forms of representation. This essentialized difference and distinction between East and West, a requisite of the Orientalist fantasy, needed to simultaneously produce the East for its own pleasure and disavow any analogy with Europe. Consequently, Orientalism imposed “epistemological boundaries” to limit the porousness between East and West—one such boundary was the pastiche of temporality.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>24</sup> In this way, if we follow Joseph Roach’s theory of substitution and surrogation, the slave attendant becomes a surrogate that highlights the three women’s own bondage in the harem—a bondage as interpreted by Orientalist fantasy. Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 211–24.

<sup>25</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 121.

<sup>26</sup> For more on racial associations through juxtaposition, see Joseph Roach, “One Blood,” in *Cities of the Dead*, 179–238.

<sup>27</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 121.

<sup>28</sup> Roger Benjamin, *Orientalist Aesthetics: Art, Colonialism, and French North Africa 1880-1930* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 34.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 40.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.





**Figure 3**

Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Le Marché d'esclaves*, 1866. Oil on canvas. 84.6 x 63.3 centimeters. Image courtesy of the Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts, USA.

This caricature of Oriental time is furthered in Jean-Léon Gérôme's *Le Marché d'esclaves* (1866) (Fig. 3), which depicts a denuded slave woman with a potential buyer probing her mouth with his fingers. The men in this painting are dressed in an amalgam of Oriental costumes from multiple regions and time periods, signifying for European audiences that this scene is taking place abstractly in the so-called Orient rather than in any real time or place. Discussing this work, Linda Nochlin insightfully comments, "Gérôme's Orientalist painting managed to body forth two ideological assumptions about power: one about men's power over women; the other about white man's superiority to, hence justifiable control over, inferior, darker races, precisely those who might indulge in this sort of regrettably lascivious commerce."<sup>32</sup> The pronounced sexual and heteronormative content of Gérôme's canvas—the fingers of the man penetrating the woman's mouth are almost explicitly pornographic—dovetails with its colonial imperative. Like the slave buyer seen in the painting, this work aims to naturalize Europe's expanding colonization by staging the Orient as a despotic and erotic spectacle irrevocably lost in a time already passed by European modernism.

As scholars have observed, Orientalism moved in the opposite direction, as well, going from East to West.<sup>33</sup> In fact, Orientalism created space for indigenous privileging of the Oriental over the Occidental. In his 1937 "Manifesto of the Neo-Orientalists," Egyptian painter Kamel Telmisany declared, "We believe that our personal, strictly Oriental ideas and perceptions are likely to give rise to a genuine art form only if we experience an authentic Oriental sentiment, freed from Occidental conceptions."<sup>34</sup> Related to Shelley's temperament toward the past, Telmisany sees this "inspiration" as "contained within the Nile Valley," which has "persisted unchanged throughout the centuries, since the feet of the first Pharaonic artist tread upon this brown Earth."<sup>35</sup> While similar to Shelley in tone, Telmisany nevertheless did have an actual encounter with what he invokes, basing his aesthetic inspiration on his lived experience in Egypt—an Orientalism with a critical difference.

Likewise, Algerian-born Azouaou Mammeri provides another example. His canvas *Vue de Fez* (1920) (Fig. 4) is demonstrably influenced by his French tutelage;<sup>36</sup> its modernist composition, sun-soaked color palette, and the various elements of its subject matter—architectural ruins, a sand-filled landscape, and a lone traveler and camel—stylistically accord with the continental Orientalist tradition. His reliance on shared tropes with Western Orientalists notwithstanding, his work can be seen as offering an important corrective as his depiction of the Moroccan city Fez is, according to Benjamin, "exact and technically conservative."<sup>37</sup> His immigration to Morocco in 1916, a recently established French colony, was motivated by his belief that Morocco's cultural authenticity was less spoiled by colonialism than

<sup>32</sup> Linda Nochlin, *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth-Century Art and Society* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1989), 45.

<sup>33</sup> More recent work by art historians such as Roger Benjamin, Zeynep Çelik, and Mary Roberts, among others, has put forth this argument. See Jill Beaulieu and Mary Roberts, eds., *Orientalism's Interlocutors: Painting, Architecture, Photography* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

<sup>34</sup> Kamel Telmisany, "Manifesto of the Neo-Orientalists," trans. Emma Ramadan, in *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents*, ed. Anneka Lenssen, Sarah Rogers, Nada Shabout (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2018), 86.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Roger Benjamin, *Orientalist Aesthetics*, 223–24.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 229.



**Figure 4**

Azouaou Mammeri, *Vue de Fez*, 1920. Oil on canvas. 70 x 92 centimeters. Musée d'Orsay, Paris, France. © Artepics/age fotostock.

Algeria's.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, we see once more an imaginative Eastward orientation motivating this work, imaginative because Mammeri went west to find it just as Delacroix went south. However, as Benjamin comments, "Mammeri follows the strategy of most Orientalist art addressing a European audience: focusing on indigenous traditions, he pretends the invader is absent."<sup>39</sup> In other words, Mammeri opted to render Morocco as timeless as the West imagined it to be, marking a stark equivalence between Mammeri's temporality and that of Orientalism and discounting the effects of colonization that would have been extant at the time.<sup>40</sup>

Thus, Orientalism has always been a multidirectional, cross-cultural, cross-temporal exchange couched within an East and West binary, in which the latter signified progressing modernity and the former timelessness. Within this temporalized, spatialized, and aestheticized binary—at once racial and sexual—a movement from one point to the other

<sup>38</sup> As Benjamin observes, "It was commonly thought (and still is) that Morocco, far more than Algeria managed to preserve a large part of its traditional culture as well as its ancient architectural fabric." *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 226.

<sup>40</sup> My analysis of Mammeri is entirely indebted to Benjamin's. I put forth his argument to point toward how it overlaps with my interest in temporality. This is merely a matter of my emphasis. For more on Benjamin's analysis of Mammeri's work, see his chapter "Mammeri and Racim, Painters of the Maghreb" in *Orientalist Aesthetics*, 221–48.

involves not only a transition of cultures (i.e., West to East) but also a transition of temporalities (i.e., from being in time to being out of time). Even Mammeri, who sought to correct Orientalism's misconceptions, adopted the same signifiers of temporal alterity. Binary reversals of Orientalism's logic always run the risk of entrenching it further by simply turning over the paradigm without negating it, permitting the Orientalist aesthetic to fix—like sand—the Orient in time and space. From either angle, this fixity disables the East's agential capacity to being in time with the West by only allowing for the West to discover the image of wreckage in the East. Working from Sara Ahmed's queer phenomenology, Orientalism's West-East line of demarcation can be queered and denaturalized by looking at this binary "obliquely," from the vantage of mixed-race embodiment if we follow the hyphen line of connection in Mehdi-Georges's work.<sup>41</sup>

As a detour, it is equally important to note that Orientalism, sometimes recognized as such and sometimes not, has continued to be a driving force in modern and contemporary art production and criticism; for example, Pablo Picasso's fifteen-painting series *Les Femmes d'Alger* (1955), which were Cubist revisions of Delacroix's original canvas. The art critic Leo Steinberg explicates this series to map the ways that Picasso remained invested in his Cubist representational project long after his initial *Les Femmes d'Alger* (1907). Steinberg discusses how Picasso perfected his earlier interest in portraying a woman from both the front and the back at the same time as not just monstrous but as erotically desirable. Yet, he does so without ever addressing why Delacroix's Orientalist picture proved to be an ideal model for Picasso to work from in realizing this motif. As Steinberg writes, "The quest embodied above all in the Sleeper [in *Les Femmes d'Alger*] is for the form that satisfies both the impulse of erotic possession and, at the same time, the most systematic investigation of the plane surface as a receptacle of information."<sup>42</sup> While Steinberg does not acknowledge as much, it is pertinent to question why Delacroix's Orientalist fantasy was the "form" that Picasso was best able to leverage to erotically possess—both frontally and posteriorly—his female subject. Further, his analysis equally makes no mention of the colonialist and Orientalist implications of Picasso's appropriation of a harem scene. More recently, Nigel Lendon provides an insightful example of contemporary Orientalism in his critically important debunking of *Arte Povera* artist Alighiero Boetti. In particular, he dispels the myth that Boetti influenced the evolution of carpet production and artistic culture in Afghanistan (via Boetti's *Mappe* series, produced between 1971–1994) by showing that it was, in fact, the other way around.<sup>43</sup> Lendon draws attention to the ways that the "Boetti literature," like other forms of contemporary art discourse, operates on unacknowledged and undiscussed Orientalist terms. Working from Said, Lendon notes that the literature on Boetti "characterize[s] [the artist's] engagement with Afghanistan and Pakistan as if it is with an archaic, romantic, mysterious, culturally 'other' and dangerous world" and that this mythology "begins to construct the framework of a *contemporary* orientalism."<sup>44</sup> Following this explication, Lendon insists that one of the most important aspects of "Boetti's Afghan enterprise" to critique is how the artist has risen to prominence because of "[the Afghan carpet makers'] anonymous, abstracted and mystified representation" in the art discourse, resulting in "but the latest version of a contemporary form of orientalism."<sup>45</sup> As the absences in Steinberg's analysis and Lendon's critical re-evaluation indicate, we have moved away from dealing with Orientalism as it has been typically discussed under, perhaps, the false understanding that it has ceased to be a factor post-Said. Nonetheless, we are still left to

<sup>41</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 92, 152.

<sup>42</sup> Leo Steinberg, *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), 234.

<sup>43</sup> Nigel Lendon, "A Tournament of Shadows: Alighiero Boetti, the Myth of Influence, and a Contemporary Orientalism," *emaj*, no. 6 (2011–2012): 1–32.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

contend with its aftermath, aesthetically and ideologically. In agreement with Lendon, I elucidate Mehdi-Georges's work as an example of how we may interrogate the tropes of Orientalism from within.

## Aesthetics of Disorientation

As *The Hourglasses* reveals, Mehdi-Georges Lahlou shares with the early Orientalists an interest in temporality and timelessness. His *I Used to Be Nefertiti* (2014) (Fig. 5) is a self-portrait bust in the style of the famous statue of Queen Nefertiti. As a plaster cast mold of Mehdi-Georges's own visage, the work is an example of his performative self-portraiture. In addition to the Egyptian Queen's headgear, collar necklace, and dark eyeliner, Mehdi-Georges has rouged his lips. Like a piece of temporal-historical drag, the self-portrait is humorously queer, presenting the artist as the famously beautiful queen of Egypt. This oblique mixing of differently temporalized genders and the feminization of his own Arab masculinity conform with what Joseph Boone has argued to be the latent homoeroticism always already within the discourse of Orientalism.<sup>46</sup> This work also reveals his queer play with gender, appearing in the bust as both he himself and she the Queen, especially as his representation of the bust does not fully dissolve him into the form of Nefertiti. We could interpret this presentation as the artist's claim to identify with an Ancient Egyptian heritage, substantiated by his Arab-Islamic inheritance. Indeed, following this line, Mehdi-Georges has a more authentic claim to Eastern identity as a source of artistic inspiration than Orientalists such as Shelley or Delacroix and thus has more right to position himself as the heir to Egypt's wellspring of ancient symbolic meaning. But this reading does not hold up either. His work, which often defies gender, temporal, and spatial binaries, troubles this interpretation, as he incessantly deconstructs all claims to authenticity.

As a child in France, Mehdi-Georges was unaware of his Arab and Muslim heritage: "Ce n'est qu'à huit ans que j'ai connu mon père. Avant, je ne connaissais rien de la culture arabo/musulmane. Une sorte de choc de cultures, j'étais assez désorienté."<sup>47</sup> The revelatory knowledge of his father in unison with his subsequent move from France to Morocco, where he was exposed to Arab-Muslim culture for the first time, disoriented how he had previously understood himself. Geographically disoriented, sexually queer, and culturally hyphenated, Mehdi-Georges seems to be answering Judith Butler's famous question: "What are the possibilities of politicizing *disidentification*, this experience of *misrecognition*, this uneasy sense of standing under a sign to which one does and does not belong?"<sup>48</sup> Building from Butler, José Esteban Muñoz argues that disidentification is a strategy for surviving within the space between

<sup>46</sup> Joseph Boone, describing the homoerotic Orientalist trope of the beautiful boy: "With the establishment of European photographic studios in Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco specializing in erotic, and sometimes explicitly homoerotic, images of indigenous life, the topos of the beautiful boy entered a new realm of visual representation, mass circulation, and potential exploitation, as attested by the hundreds of nude or seminude photographs of questionable age produced for a European clientele." Joseph A. Boone, *The Homoerotics of Orientalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 65.

<sup>47</sup> Translation: "It was not until I was eight years old that I knew my father. Before then, I knew nothing of Arab/Muslim culture. A sort of culture shock, I was quite disoriented [...]." Mehdi-Georges Lahlou, interview by Juan Dario Gomez, in "Les Talons d'Allah," *PREF mag: Le Magazine Gay, Insolent & Différent* (January/February 2011): 77.

<sup>48</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 219.



**Figure 5**

Mehdi-Georges Lahlou, *I Used to be Nefertiti*, 2014. Plaster, gesomonite, polystyrene, and paint. +/- 60 by 24 x 45 centimeters, unique. Image courtesy of the artist and Galerie Transit, Mechelen, Belgium.

cultural belonging and not belonging.<sup>49</sup> In his work, Muñoz foregrounds the ways that queers of color in particular find ways of surviving and thriving in cultural spaces not initially intended for them. For Muñoz, following Butler, disidentification can be seen when the tropes of dominant culture are picked up and assumed with a critical difference—such as how Mehdi-Georges made time move differently in *The Hourglasses* or when he only partially assumes the visage of a Pharaonic queen in *I Used to Be Nefertiti*. Following this queer lineage, we can see Mehdi-Georges's work, forged from his own disorienting experience of misrecognition and occupation of a complex spatio-temporal middle ground, to be queer through his disidentification with Orientalist tropes by performing them with a difference.

His practice, though, suggests a corporeal queerness that defies simple discursive explanation, requiring us to attend to the mattering of race in his oeuvre. In "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," Hortense Spillers demonstrates how the slave

<sup>49</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 1–35.

trade through the Middle Passage violently reduced Black bodies into commodified and queerly sexualized objects, clarifying “value” in the grammar of (white) history to be the captured, mutilated, and stolen Black body. She names this situation “pornotroping,” whereby Black bodies are reduced from personhood to fungible commodity and, at the same time, to sexualized objects for consumption.<sup>50</sup> Flesh, as Spillers argues, is the material substrate that precedes the body, and pornotroping is the rendering of the body into flesh stripped of personhood for sexual and violent consumption. In *I Used to Be Nefertiti*, Mehdi-Georges conjures his body into a “hieroglyphics of the flesh” that signifies his body as outside of modern time.<sup>51</sup> Like a hieroglyph, a sign that signifies an inaccessible but visible temporal and spatial alterity, he leverages Nefertiti’s timeless beauty to signify his body-as-bust as a desirable object. Mehdi-Georges’s situation is arguably incomparable to that of the Middle Passage as described by Spillers, but if we were to recognize that the bust of Nefertiti (and Mehdi-Georges’s copy) presents a head torn from a body, fixed in place, with the left eye absented, a shared resonance of racialized violence emerges. Significantly, then, Nefertiti, whose likeness resides in Berlin, not in Egypt, as a highly commodified object, is therefore also captured, mutilated, and stolen—pornotroped.

In her analysis of “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” disability studies scholar Nirmala Everelles posits “that Spillers’s essay is as much about the materiality of racialized violence as it is about disability.” From this recognition, Everelles then “situate[s] disability not as the condition of being but of becoming, and this becoming is a historical event, and further, it is its material context that is critical in the theorizing of disabled bodies/subjectivities.”<sup>52</sup> In particular, Everelles was discussing the historical event of the transatlantic slave trade but, as an event, it parallels the colonization of North Africa. From here, we can see Mehdi-Georges as pornotroped, approaching blackness in the white imaginary. As Ahmed describes, “To become black through proximity to others is not to be black; it is to be ‘not black’ by the very extension of the body toward blackness.”<sup>53</sup> As Nefertiti, Mehdi-Georges also performs the fleshy substrate—his distance from whiteness, heterosexuality, masculinity and what these identity traits enable—that precedes, exceeds, and queers his own embodiment. Furthermore, his use of a wreck of a bust with limbs and eye missing suggests that we must attend to the ways that an “extension of the body toward blackness” involves and invokes the disabling aspects of racialized violence, as inscribed on the flesh, even when this violence is seemingly drolly recuperated within an aesthetic project.

<sup>50</sup> While there are departures from how Spillers first theorized “pornotroping” and how I am using it here, I see many parallels to how differently racialized bodies are violently rendered to flesh and therefore am relying on her analysis. She explains the process as follows: “1) the captive body becomes the source of an irresistible, destructive sensuality; 2) at the same time – in stunning contradiction – the captive body reduces to a thing, becoming *being for* the captor; 3) in this absence *from* a subject position, the captured sexualities provide a physical and biological expression of “otherness”; 4) as a category of “otherness,” the captive body translates into a potential for pornotroping and embodies sheer physical powerlessness that slides into a more general “powerlessness,” resonating through various centers of human and social meaning.” Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” in “Culture and Counteremory: The ‘American’ Connection,” special issue, *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 67.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Everelles, *Disability and Difference in Global Contexts*, 26.

<sup>53</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 128.



**Figure 6**

Mehdi-Georges Lahlou, *Stupidité contrôlée ou Autoportrait à la Pastèque* (detail), 2011. Performance. Zattere, Venice. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Transit, Mechelen, Belgium. (photo: Bert de Leenheer).

Moving from his flesh to the flesh of watermelons in *Stupidité contrôlée ou Autoportrait à la Pastèque* (Fig. 6),<sup>54</sup> performed in Venice in 2011, Mehdi-Georges sat upon a black metal stool with a bowl of watermelon slices arranged in a white bowl on a table by his side. Dressed in a black-and-white diamond patterned *taqiyah* and red stilettos, Mehdi-George ate slice after slice of watermelon before rising to stand, arms akimbo, holding a hollowed-out watermelon husk with a hole bored through it in his mouth. This performance centralizes the fleshiness of the watermelon as a consumable commodity and his repeated acts of eating slice after slice down to the husk evokes colonization's endless appetite to consume the colonized. While the watermelon carries many racial signifiers, especially linked to the racist minstrelsy tradition in the United States, it also suggests colonialist consumption, as France in recent years has been a significant importer of Moroccan watermelons, highlighting how France's appetite is still satiated by its former colonies.<sup>55</sup> This dynamic bears strong parallels to the Hegelian master/slave dichotomy in which the slave self-reflexively realizes his individuality through negation by watching the marks of his labor be consumed by the master.<sup>56</sup> As Butler explicates, "The working of the slave is thus to be understood as a marking which regularly unmarks itself, a signatory act which puts itself under erasure at the moment in which it is circulated, for circulation here is always a matter of expropriation by the lord."<sup>57</sup> The watermelon, grown in

<sup>54</sup> Translation: *Controlled Stupidity or Self-Portrait with Watermelon*.

<sup>55</sup> Zineb El Mehcrafti, "Sharp Growth of Moroccan Watermelon Exports in Europe," *Morocco World News*, May 23, 2015, <https://www.morocoworldnews.com/2015/05/159102/sharp-growth-of-moroccan-watermelon-exports-in-europe/>.

<sup>56</sup> Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 34–53.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.



Morocco and consumed in Europe, materializes within the contemporary master/slave Hegelian dialectic supposedly already surpassed in Western historical time.

Being nominally both lord and slave in *Stupidité contrôlée*, Mehdi-Georges places his own hyphenated identity into a Venetian setting, at once cityscape and seascape, known for being a centuries-old trade conduit between East and West. His presence there complicates this trade flow, as his hyphenated identity places him on either side of this circulation.<sup>58</sup> Literal and implied, the hyphen is a central component of his disorienting aesthetics. As the linkage of the Arab-Moroccan name “Mehdi” and the French moniker “Georges” suggests,<sup>59</sup> Mehdi-Georges embodies a disorienting position that always already signifies elsewhere—spatially and temporally—extending into Blackness through his African heritage just as he extends this racial difference into the West via his European lineage.<sup>60</sup> In France, he signifies timeless Morocco; in Morocco, he signifies France and its form of modernity. The Orientalist orientation mandates a spatio-temporal distinction between, building from Ahmed’s phenomenology,<sup>61</sup> here-ness and there-ness, where the here represents the modern colonialist gaze and the there signifies the timeless object of colonization. In contrast, the hyphen in Mehdi-Georges performatively



**Figure 7**

Mehdi-Georges Lahlou, *Walking 30km with red high heel shoes between 2 art spaces* (detail), 2009. From Galerie Transit, Mechelen to Lokaal 01, Antwerp, Belgium. 9-hour performance. Image courtesy of the artist and Galerie Transit, Mechelen, Belgium. (photo: Bert de Leenheer).

<sup>58</sup> I see hyphenation in Mehdi-Georges’s practice working similarly to Homi Bhabha’s theory of hybridity. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>59</sup> My theorization of the performative role of the hyphen in the context of Mehdi-Georges’s work is indebted to Jean-François Lyotard’s work on the hyphen (French: *trait d’union*). Lyotard argues, “The white space or blank, the one that is crossed out by the *trait* or line uniting Jew and Christian in the expression ‘Judeo-Christian.’” Lyotard goes on to argue that the hyphen—or the *trait*—becomes an “abyss” that is “an unpronounceable proper name.” As Lyotard also maintains, a hyphen simultaneously unites that which cannot be pronounced and dis-unites. Jean-François Lyotard and Eberhard Gruber, *The Hyphen: Between Judaism and Christianity*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1999), 13–14.

<sup>60</sup> Mehdi-Georges Lahlou, interview with author, November 11, 2013, Chicago, Illinois, audio recording.

<sup>61</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 25.

brings together the there-ness of the East and here-ness of the West by crossing out the gap between them. Becoming the slash between master/slave, Mehdi-Georges consumes the fleshy watermelon in Venice, a city that literalizes the hyphen between the East and the West, desirously consuming a commodity both meant and not meant for his own consumption. In other words, he performs disidentification. Emblematic of his aesthetics of disorientation, this critical and queer act of expropriation confounds the teleology of Hegelian dialectics.



**Figure 8**

Mehdi-Georges Lahlou, *Walking 30km with red high heel shoes between 2 art spaces* (detail), 2009. From Galerie Transit, Mechelen to Lokaal 01, Antwerp, Belgium. 9-hour performance. Image courtesy of the artist and Galerie Transit, Mechelen, Belgium. (photo: Bert de Leenheer).

Mehdi-Georges's performance *Walking 30km with red high heel shoes between 2 art spaces* (2009) (Fig. 7) also functions like a hyphen. For this performance, he walked in his signature shoes over the course of nine hours between Galerie Transit and Lokaal 01 as part of a group exhibition at the latter. During the video documentation, Mehdi-Georges begins to visibly limp, his toes turning inward as his steps become shorter. As the video continues, Mehdi-Georges is seen leaning against whatever happens to be next to him at that moment—a building, a stone wall, a fence—with increasing need of its support. At one moment, capturing what seems to be a step shortened by discomfort, he stands beneath a blue and white disability-accessible parking sign on a nearby wall (Fig. 8). A coincidence, but a productive one because he appears, as the debilitating performance goes on, not only to be resting but to be entirely maintaining his precarious verticality by leaning heavily into the supporting structures around him.<sup>62</sup> At the end of the performance, Mehdi-Georges arrives at Lokaal 01 to the celebratory cheers of the audience. Having pushed his body to such an extreme, he nevertheless gives the audience a broad smile, lifts his arms in victory, and concludes his performance (Fig. 9), which immediately masks the unwitnessed pain his body endured to produce this highly sexualized work and erases—or, makes timeless—the labor his body endured to produce this performance.

There is a gap between the performance itself and the way that it was situated into the exhibition, as the audience, at the moment of encountering the performance for the first time, could only see the artist upon his celebratory arrival at Lokaal 01. They could not bear witness to all the struggling and limping steps that brought the artist there wearing red stiletto shoes. Mehdi-Georges, consequently, became the consumable art object assimilated into the art gallery, merging sexuality with debilitating movement into a single commodified moment for

<sup>62</sup> This analysis of Mehdi-Georges Lahlou's performance is based on Hershini Bhana Young's analysis of verticality and horizontality in William Pope.L's *The Great White Way, 22 Miles, 9 Years, 1 Street* (2001-2009). Hershini Bhana Young, "William Pope.L: *The Great White Way, 22 Miles, 9 Years, 1 Street*" (presentation, Movement, Publics, and Borders: A Roundtable Discussion, Buffalo, NY, November 14, 2017).



**Figure 9**

Mehdi-Georges Lahlou, *Walking 30km with red high heel shoes between 2 art spaces (detail)*, 2009. From Galerie Transit, Mechelen to Lokaal 01, Antwerp, Belgium. 9-hour performance. Image courtesy of the artist and Galerie Transit, Mechelen, Belgium. (photo: Bert de Leenheer).

the pleasure of the viewers. What is erased at that moment, therefore, is the physical tribulations the artist himself endured to become the object of another's pleasure. His precariously inappropriate shoes—in terms of hegemonic gender conformity and suitability for such an extensive walk—were nonetheless objects designed to generate desire. If we think of the shoes as prosthetics, drawing from disability studies, this performance achieves a new tenor. As Hershini Young argues: "The prosthetic was a way of dealing with the limitations and weaknesses of fleshy bodies that 'failed' in particular ways."<sup>63</sup> Working from Young's definition, we might understand the prosthetic as any device used to make a body meet normative standards of embodiment. In such a case, the red heels modify Mehdi-Georges's gait to a feminine sway, becoming a prosthetic that eroticizes his body to suit the Orientalist homoerotic fantasy of Arab masculinity.<sup>64</sup> However, this is not to imply that the use of prosthetics is meant primarily for the user's benefit and pleasure. In many ways, the prosthetic is meant for the viewer's pleasure, fulfilling normative expectations of embodiment and eliding the discomfort or pain they may cause the user in the process. Nonetheless, the red stiletto shoes disorient our view of him, causing us to see him differently by presenting his labor as happening in time, revealing a temporality Orientalism otherwise seeks to mask in a mirage of timelessness.

<sup>63</sup> Hershini Bhana Young, "Inhabiting Inherited Structures of Representation: Nelisiwe Xaba's *Fremde Tänze*," *Women and Performance: a journal of feminist theory*, forthcoming special issue on Nelisiwe Xaba: n.p., courtesy of Young.

<sup>64</sup> Nick Rees-Roberts, *French Queer Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 10.

## Disorienting Orientalism's Disqualification

Mehdi-Georges's aesthetics of disorientation opens up the legacy of Orientalism to reevaluation. Building from Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Ahmed queries the possibility of remaining in disorientation's nausea and giddiness with "the awareness of our contingency, and the horror with which it fills us";<sup>65</sup> provocatively, she suggests that "if we stay with such moments then we might achieve a different orientation toward them; . . . We might even find joy and excitement in horror."<sup>66</sup> A "politics of disorientation . . . registers that disorientation shatters our involvement in a world,"<sup>67</sup> and Mehdi-Georges's aesthetics of disorientation shatters our being in an Orientalist world. Finding giddiness and joy in the horrors of its aftermath solemnizes the material consequences of Orientalism while orientating oneself to new possibilities. Rather than approaching Orientalism from the vantage of either the West (Delacroix, Gêrôme) or the East (Telmisany, Mammeri), Mehdi-Georges approaches obliquely, from across the hyphen, queerly temporalizing the East's timelessness from the dizzying angle of the West. This slanting perspective is world shattering, calling into question the very affective responses to alterity that Orientalism naturalizes.



**Figure 10**

Mehdi-Georges Lahlou, *Stupidité contrôlée, ou autoportrait en équilibre à la tajine* (detail), 2011. Performance. Croxhapox, Gent, Belgium. Image courtesy of the artist, Galerie Transit, Mechelen, Belgium, and Galerie Rabouan Moussion, Paris, France. (photo: Bert de Leenheer).

<sup>65</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 2002), 296. Quoted in Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 4.

<sup>66</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 4.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 177.

These disorienting and world-shattering aesthetics emerge profoundly in *Autoportrait en équilibre à la Tajine* (2011) (Fig. 10).<sup>68</sup> Performed in Belgium, Mehdi-Georges donned his stilettos with portions of tajine, a Maghrebi food, placed in rows on the ground around him.<sup>69</sup> Positioned as it is, the tajine becomes a hurdle for the artist to jump over. After taking a running start, Mehdi-Georges leaps over each row—impressively, while wearing his heels—to land only momentarily before leaping once more to clear each subsequent row. After completing this queer athletic act, Mehdi-Georges does not pause to rest but runs back around the rows of tajine, heels clicking on the pavement rhythmically, to start the circuit again. Mehdi-Georges repeats this act many times over, growing increasingly exhausted, failing to leap as high or as far as the performance continues just as his landings become progressively unstable. The tenor of the performance transitions from humorous absurdity to intimidating precarity—audience members can be heard laughing in the initial part of the documentation, only to grow tensely quiet as Mehdi-Georges begins each new round. By getting his audience to laugh at and then anxiously anticipate his bodily precarity, he performs disidentification by inhabiting a spectacle of racial alterity. The act deconstructs the Orientalist fantasy by hyphenating queerness to disability, creating a temporal, embodied experience felt by others at an affective level, inducing both giggles and nervous silence. This proximity to potential bodily harm generates what Ato Quayson calls “aesthetic nervousness,”<sup>70</sup> the affective response produced within a viewer or reader through an encounter with disability in aesthetic representation or, in the case of *Tajine*, an audience’s encounter with the possibility of harm to come, in real time, to the performer.<sup>71</sup>

Mehdi-Georges is not an artist with a disability, but his performances pivot on the potentiality of harm, incapacity, and debility. In her critique of the category of disability, Jasbir Puar proposes the terms capacity and debility at the global level in lieu of disability. She sees disability as having obtained a position of unique privilege via legal rights in comparison to other forms of unrecognized yet nonetheless sanctioned incapacitations, to which she aims to draw attention. She argues that “capacity and debility entail theorizing not only specific disciplinary sites but also broader techniques of social control, marking a shift in terms from the regulation of normativity (the internalization of self/other) to what Foucault calls the regulation of bodies.”<sup>72</sup> From this vantage, Mehdi-Georges’s performances implicate forms of reduced capacity and debility that colonization produced (and continues to produce) and that Orientalist art aestheticized. His work then draws a pointed connection between the aesthetics of Orientalism as a regulatory apparatus and the production of bodily harm (if not in the present tense, then certainly as a future potentiality). Working from this disciplining rubric, his aesthetics of disorientation draw attention to what Tobin Siebers describes in *Disability*

<sup>68</sup> Translation: *Self-Portrait in Equilibrium with Tajine*.

<sup>69</sup> While I am writing about a specific performance, Mehdi-Georges has performed very similar performances, sometimes under different titles, to the one I detail here.

<sup>70</sup> Ato Quayson, *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 15.

<sup>71</sup> This shift in focus on the disability to come is from Robert McRuer’s important analysis of disability, futurity, and the global. Likewise, this argument is predicated on the global turn in disability studies as put forth by Nirmala Everelles. See Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 199–208; Nirmala Everelles, *Disability and Difference in Global Contexts: Enabling a Transformative Body Politic* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

<sup>72</sup> Jasbir K. Puar, *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 21.

*Aesthetics* as “the aesthetics of human disqualification,” the “symbolic process [that] removes individuals from the ranks of quality human beings, putting them at risk of unequal treatment, bodily harm, and death.”<sup>73</sup> Orientalism disqualified non-European bodies spatially and temporally, naturalizing colonization that furthers and magnifies bodily risk.<sup>74</sup> Performing his own vulnerability through Orientalist tropes, Mehdi-Georges’s aesthetics of disorientation *disorient* the aesthetics of human disqualification; he highlights the potential for harm to disorient the fantasy that perpetuates it. These aesthetics of disorientation do not reverse the terms of the colonialist gaze—the sightline of disqualification; rather, they stage affectively and make absurd the aestheticized tropes of Orientalism that naturalize colonization. By soliciting an empathetic response from his viewers, he puts himself at risk of becoming harmed, showing how Orientalism was always already an aesthetics of disablement.

Returning to Shelley’s poem, his words already pictured Ozymandias—“that colossal Wreck” fixed in place by “lone and level sands”—as disabled by, and for, the mirage of Orientalist aesthetic pleasure. Mehdi-Georges takes us back to the timelessness beneath Orientalism’s disabling sand to, as Quayson writes, “encourage us to lift our eyes . . . to attend more closely to the implications of the social universe around us.”<sup>75</sup> Shattering Orientalism’s timelessness by positioning its atemporal temporality back in time, the aesthetics of disorientation remake the world in the wake of Orientalism’s disabling effects. With equal measures of horror and giddiness, Mehdi-Georges’s aesthetics of disorientation enables a renewed encounter with the broken pieces beneath the sands of time, dispelling the Orientalist mirage of timelessness so as to address the ongoing disabling effects of colonization.



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<sup>73</sup> Tobin Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 22–23. For more on disability and aesthetics, see also Michael Davidson, *Concerto for the Left Hand: Disability and the Defamiliar Body* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008).

<sup>74</sup> For more on the intersections between colonization, precarity, and risk, see Jasbir K. Puar, *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

<sup>75</sup> Ato Quayson, *Aesthetic Nervousness*, 31.