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CLOSE-UP: CHANGE OF SUBJECT

Omar Kholeif on *Nil Yalter's Le Chevalier d'Éon, 1978*

By Omar Kholeif ☞



Nil Yalter, *Le Chevalier d'Éon, 1978*, two stills from the video component (black-and-white, sound, 15 minutes 7 seconds) of a mixed-media installation with Polaroids, gelatin silver prints, and acrylic paintings on canvas.

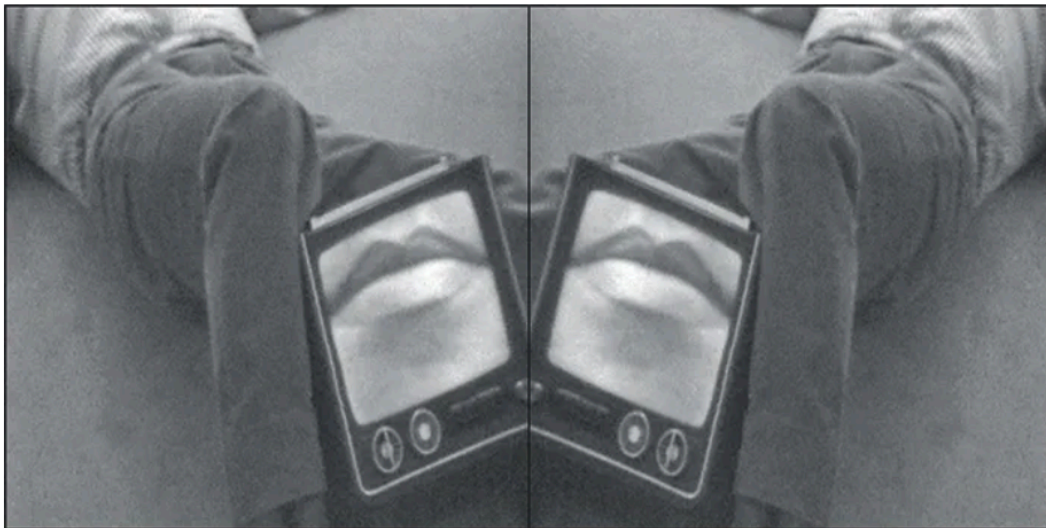
IN 2012, Turkish artist Nil Yalter's poetic *Le Chevalier d'Éon, 1978*, debuted at Galeria Visor in Valencia, Spain, giving audiences an opportunity to see what is arguably the first artwork from a Middle Eastern context to engage transgender identity. Shot with a Porta-Pak, the video at the heart of Yalter's installation had languished for years on a tape that she no longer had the means to play back, because the requisite technology had become obsolete. Then, in the late 2000s, the Bibliothèque Nationale de France offered to restore and digitize her archives. "I had forgotten this work for thirty years," she told me, "and then realized that now everyone was talking about issues of transsexuality."

Born in 1938, Yalter moved to Paris in 1965. She was active in the women's movement that materialized in France after May 1968. *Le Chevalier d'Éon* emerged from the artist's relationship with a man who, while he was involved with her, decided that he would prefer to live his life as a woman. He gave Yalter a biography of Charles d'Éon de Beaumont (1728–1810), commonly known as the Chevalier d'Éon, a French diplomat, soldier, and spy whose gender was considered highly ambiguous by his contemporaries—he was rumored to be a woman in the earlier part of his life, then began to dress and present as female in his late forties while continuing to pursue “masculine” activities such as fencing. Yalter's subject (whose identity she has not revealed) decided to transform himself into the chevalier in front of the camera, in a kind of heightened dramatization of gender transition, and asked her to document the process.

The video begins with a twinned shot of a man looking us straight in the eyes. He is masculine, wears glasses, has a slight double chin. Yalter was unable to create a split-screen effect with the equipment she had, so she used a mirror. This doubling is an iteration of the work's key gesture: the fracturing and multiplication of the image, and, by extension, the self, across genders, across screens. As we contemplate the bespectacled man, a melodramatic orchestral composition by Domenico Scarlatti envelops us. Suddenly, the man before us is topless, and we see that he has breasts. He dons large teardrop earrings. His hair has grown longer—he is transforming before our eyes, one hairstyle melding into another, one gender into another. This is not a conventionally pretty woman, but we can tell from her movements that she aspires to be a Hollywood starlet, a Mia Farrow-type gamine perhaps. Yet there is a certain frankness to her androgyny, a seeming freedom and comfort with those details that don't conform to normative standards of feminine beauty.

The woman puts on fishnet stockings. Now she looks austere, even matriarchal—a “Gertrude Stein kind of lady,” as Yalter put it, smart and sophisticated. She is posing for us—for Yalter. There is an unsettling ambiguity as to whose gaze is being courted here, an uncertainty as to how objectification, desire, and agency are intersecting. Is Yalter, a heterosexual woman, still enamored of this figure?

As soon as we ourselves begin to feel beguiled by the flirting subject, the image dissipates. The video is in fact structured as a series of dissolving vignettes. In the second chapter, our protagonist again appears as male. He is playing with a fur scarf—actually, devouring it. A TV screen sits next to him on a table, the scene we've just witnessed playing on it. Is this an act of self-examination or self-surveillance? In subsequent vignettes, the man begins to undress; he caresses the monitor. Images start to refract and double, proliferating rapidly. Now there are more than a dozen monitors, all spitting out the same image—of a vamping, androgynous siren—as if we were looking at a department-store display as the TVs are commandeered for a liberating, sensuous intervention.



Nil Yalter, *Le Chevalier d'Éon*, 1978, still from the video component (black-and-white, sound, 15 minutes 7 seconds) of a mixed-media installation with Polaroids, gelatin silver prints, and acrylic paintings on canvas.

The film indeed becomes an ever-deepening *mise en abyme*, as the figure we're looking at continues to recede beyond our grasp, as if to suggest that this search for self-representation can never really reach an end point. Near the conclusion of the video, we find the man lying on the ground, smoking, his legs stretched wide-open. Is this the objectified female surrendering to the patriarchal gaze? Perhaps not. In between the man's legs sits a TV, and on its screen, efflorescing lips utter the words of the chevalier.

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After having been an honest man, a diligent citizen, and a valiant soldier all my life, I triumph in being a woman and in being able to be cited forever amongst those many women who have demonstrated that the qualities and virtues, which men are so proud of, have not been denied to my sex.

In the final scene, the music swells over a shot of a TV. Above the television, we see someone's breasts, as if a topless woman were holding the appliance. On the screen, the man is shaving his chest. Fade to black.

The video is presented on an LCD monitor with a standard 16:9 aspect ratio alongside Polaroids that functioned as performative studies for the video and black-and-white photographs. These are displayed with two paintings, red, Rodchenko-like monochromes that, Yalter has said, speak to the abstraction of sexual identity. "Sexual identity is a form that is constantly being renegotiated," she has observed, and indeed, in his later years, the man in the video was to live as a woman, then as a man again. Today, he chooses to remain anonymous and acknowledges no relationship to the work. Yalter informs me that he never wanted to transition completely, and that his pursuit of hormonal treatment was minimal.

The fact that Yalter's work remained hidden for so long chimes with the experiences of a generation of Middle Eastern artists who have only recently begun to be rediscovered: Füsün Onur, Gülsün Karamustafa, Fahrelnissa Zeid, and Simone Fattal, to name but a few. Their work was initially obscured by the master narratives of their time and place, by the gender politics of patriarchy and the geopolitics of neoimperialism, and by expectations with regard to what constituted "authentic" art from the region, as opposed to a stigmatized diasporic cosmopolitanism. *Le Chevalier d'Éon* unbuckles these proscriptive tropes, along with those that govern what it means to be a man or a woman. That Yalter did this almost forty years ago, when the notion of gender identity as a perpetual negotiation was so subversive, so genuinely radical, makes her achievement all the more remarkable.

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