

*„My name is Oscar Wilde,  
the whole country knows me.  
I choose my friends for their beauty  
and my enemies for their intelligence.  
On my grave in Paris it is written,  
famous for his play Salome and other literary work.  
I don't hide my male lovers. When the situation in town is getting tense, I go to the  
colonies, spend the winter in Marocco, where I can do as I please.  
I am Alla Nazimova.  
I am shooting the film „Salome“.  
I am forty-five, and, as you notice through my accent, I am a Russian immigrant.  
I am the richest actress in Hollywood.  
I love women, I don't hide it. I am directing this film, I produced it, and I act the main  
role.  
I am Salome, I just became 14,  
I am the Jewish princess of Galilee, today north of Israel.  
I will dance for my father in law, Yvonne,  
in exchange I can get all I want. I want blood.“*

Salomania

Film (16 min) and Installation

Pauline Boudry/Renate Lorenz

Performer: Yvonne Rainer, Wu Ingrid Tsang

2009

## **Salomania**

The figure of Salome and the image of her dance obviously had a particular potential, and they circulated: first with Oscar Wilde, then Alla Nazimova, Loie Fuller, or Aida Walker. Several decades later, in the seventies, Yvonne Rainer also took on Salome's dance. At the beginning of the twentieth century in England, women met privately to perform the dance of the seven veils, a movement which, like a kind of viral infection, was called 'Salomania.' Shortly after the appearance of the Strauss opera 'Salome,' an article in the New York Times urged President Roosevelt to act to prevent the fad from spilling over into the USA (NYT, August 16, 1908). All these 'performers' refer to the Biblical story of Salome, as told through Oscar Wilde's reworking: King Herod desires his youthful stepdaughter Salome. She in turn wants to kiss the missionary John (the Baptist), who rejects her. She opts for a trick, seemingly submitting to Herod's wishes and performing a seductive dance for him, only then to demand, abruptly and relentlessly, John's head. Now she can kiss the severed head.

## **circulation**

The figure of Salome circulated: Alla Nazimova emigrated from Russia to New York in 1906. She quickly became one of the most famous actresses on Broadway. She often starred in plays about the emancipation of women (especially those of Ibsen). Later she was under contract to Metro Goldwyn Meyer and became the highest paid actress of early Hollywood cinema. Her numerous affairs with other female Hollywood stars—such as Dorothy Arzner, Mercedes de Acosta, Eva le Gallienne, Glesca Marschall, or Jean Acker—were an open secret. Unhappy with the roles she was being offered (because of her background, she usually got 'exotic' roles in trivial heterosexual comedies), in 1923 she herself produced and directed *Salome*, a silent film that was to become one of the early experimental art films, even if it was not commercially successful and nearly ruined her career.

Performing Salome, the Jewish princess who died for her perverse desire, could be perceived as a layered act of coming out, since her publicly orientalized persona had veiled her Jewishness. Nazimova further discloses but also veils her lesbian authorship by restaging the authorship of Oscar Wilde and the discourse of aestheticism. The

costumes were based on drawings that Aubrey Beardsley had made for Oscar Wilde's play *Salomé*: the Syrian's painted nipples, the Executioner's bold S/M look, Jonaan's uncanny asceticism and the drag queens at Herod's court. Rumor has it that everyone involved in this film project was lesbian or gay.

Oscar Wilde's play *Salomé*, written in French in 1891, had its premiere in Paris on February 11, 1896, starring and directed by Sarah Bernhardt. In his version, Wilde turned Salome into the focal point of the Biblical story, providing her with her own gaze and desire. He wrote the title role specifically for Bernhardt—an actress who often appeared in pants roles. A performance planned for London was cancelled.

Oscar Wilde himself was in jail at the time of the premiere. The father of his long-term lover Alfred Douglas had left a card at Wilde's club calling him a 'sodomite.' When in defense he tried to sue him for slander, the trial quickly shifted and became an indictment of Wilde, during which not only were his writings described as 'sodomitical' and 'perverse,' but in which his relationships with (young) men were also presented in detail. The fact that these men often came from other (subordinate) classes also contributed to the conviction. After two years' hard labor Oscar Wilde was released in 1897, his health highly compromised, and he died three years later in Paris at the age of only 47.

The very photo can be found in the Internet with another caption maintaining that it is a photo of a Cologne performance of the Richard Strauss opera *Salome* with the singer Alice Guszalewicz. Wrongly labeled, it landed in a French photography agency and fell into the hands of Oscar Wilde's biographer Richard Ellmann. He printed it in his book—as a photo of Oscar Wilde posing in a *Salome* costume. In the ensuing years, the photo—reprinted e.g. in Marjorie Garber's book 'Vested Interests. Cross dressing and cultural anxiety'—could quite accidentally instigate research and cultural production following the figure of *Salome* as 'transvestic:' "I want to argue that the dancer is neither male nor female, but rather, transvestic, – transvestism as a space of possibility structuring and confounding culture. That is the taboo against which Occidental eyes are veiled." (Marjorie Garber)

In his notebooks and journals about his voyage to Egypt in 1849-50, Gustave Flaubert referred to his affair with the professional dancer Kuchuk Hanem. Later, in his novel *Herodias*, he produced a famous description of the dance of *Salome*, probably inspired

by the Egyptian dancer. For Edward Said, Flaubert's transformation of Kuchuk's material flesh into an occasion for poetic reverie forms a paradigmatic example of the mechanisms of Orientalism: the masculinized, penetrating West possesses for its own purposes the East's female 'peculiarly Oriental' sensuality. As Joseph Boone argues, Said overlooked the fact that the first exotic dancer to catch Flaubert's eye is not a female dancer but a famous male-to-female transvestite.

Kuchuk Hanem is not a proper name but means "little lady" in Turkish (*küçük hanım*), a term often applied to a child, a lover, or a famous dancer. It remains unclear if this was a name chosen by the dancer to address the colonial tourists, or if this is a careless, shorthand name used by a Western writer.

Aida Walker worked as a director, choreographer and performer, improving Williams and Walker, her husband's vaudevillian comedy duo. She introduced her version of *Salome* in 1908, working it into *Bandanna Land*, a play performed by the company. It was highly unusual for a black Broadway show to include modern dance, but Walker deployed the figure of *Salome* successfully to position herself within the establishment of white female modern dancers, although her important role often goes unmentioned in historic accounts. At the same time she helped bring authentic Black songs and dances to a form of entertainment that had been dominated by demeaning minstrel shows.

Walker and her husband became famous for their performance of the cakewalk, a dance, developed by enslaved Africans, that mixed European dance styles like the waltz with their own dance steps to perform for (and subversively mock) the slave owners. Thus, she always negotiated between her belonging to the Harlem Community and her belonging to the development of (white) modern dance. In 1908 George Walker became ill and could not continue the run of *Bandanna Land*. Wearing her husband's male costumes, Aida Walker performed both his role and her own.

Dancer Loie Fuller emigrated from the USA to Europe, where she was known for her sculptural costumes and her innovative and patented light design. Using special mechanisms to move huge swathes of cloth, each provided with its own color of light, she achieved cinematic effects, bringing together the human (female) body, machine, sculpture, and animal. Fuller lived with her French-Jewish partner Gabrielle Block (who always wore men's clothing) for twenty years without any negative impact on her career. At the 1900 World's Fair in Paris, Loie Fuller was the only participant to get her

own theater. While all around buildings and dwellings from the colonies were being reconstructed and women from North Africa were being paid to exhibit their daily lives at the fair and to perform traditional dances, Loie Fuller was dancing sections from Salome. Her technological innovations fit perfectly into the imagery of the world's fair, which was not only familiarizing the spectators with the 'foreignness' of the colonies, but was also seeking to justify colonial domination by presenting railways, telegraphs, and—especially importantly—electricity. The brutality of murder was addressed in Fuller's dance with blood red light. In 1907 Fuller designed another play with the title Salome that explicitly referred to Oscar Wilde's version. She also toured with Maud Allan for a short time, helping her with her own Salome dance.

Maud Allan's *The Vision of Salome* was first produced in 1906. As a Canadian dancer, she was perceived as a foreigner in Germany and Great Britain, where she mostly performed. The visual juxtaposition of a mobile female body and a very immobile, trunkless male head was a most shocking element of her performance. 'Salome' and 'Maud Allan' became popular nicknames for queens and female impersonators of the Edwardian era and further confirmed the figure of Salome as a historical icon of 'sodomite' subjectivity. In 1918, when Germany appeared to be winning World War I, Maud Allan, who was playing the title role in Oscar Wilde's *Salomé*, became involved—much like Wilde had—in a trial that ruined her career. Noel Pemberton Billing, a conservative member of the British parliament, had claimed that there was a black list in Germany that allegedly contained the names of 47,000 high-ranking 'perverts.' Among them, according to Billing, could also be found many British men who shared Wilde's preferences and who therefore could easily become targets of blackmail by German agents. Men could be convicted as sodomites merely on the evidence of having seen Salome and the 'perverse' dance of the seven veils. Maud Allan's trial, for all of Salome's acknowledged depravities—incest, lust, murder, sadism, necrophilia—also marked the first time she had ever been accused of lesbianism. Paradoxically, it was one of a few sexual practices not present in Wilde's play. In Britain middle-class women held all-female private theatricals—a movement called Salomania—to imitate Maud Allan's version of Salome's dance.

## **becoming salome**

It would be unsatisfactory to explain this so obviously denormalizing and desubjectifying use of the Salome history in the beginning of the twentieth century solely through the Biblical story, its reworking by Oscar Wilde, and the interpretations associated with it in various texts, such as, for instance, economic independence for women or the adoption of the so-called male, sexually active role by a woman. Although there is every indication that Salome's dance was often performed by lesbian or transsexual dancers, and that Oscar Wilde had Sarah Bernhardt, who often played pants roles, in mind for the lead, it would be simultaneously too much and too little to view Salome as an icon of lesbian sexuality or transsexuality. This would assume that the character of Salome is somehow more appropriate for this function than other characters, and it would undermine the complexity of the history of its appropriations. Instead, we would like to view Salome—the character, the narrative, and the dance—provisionally as an 'image.' In doing so, we are borrowing the idea of image as roughly outlined in Elspeth Probyn's book *Outside Belonging*. According to Probyn, images, in contrast to characters, should be understood more as assemblages, in which objects, expressions, and affects come together, but which remain in motion, not assuming any fixed form. An image is a medium by which desire 'travels' and it allows its various elements to produce connections or to dissolve them. The image-desire is a "method": "a method of doing things, of getting places" (Probyn p. 41). The most diverse media come together into an image: The performer Alla Nazimova can link her Salome-image (in the film), for instance, with Oscar Wilde's story, published in a book, with costumes sketched by Aubrey Beardsley, who was already long dead by 1923, with stage and costume elements from her contemporary and friend Natacha Rambova, with elements of modern dance that she had seen on various stages. Furthermore, the image is also created in the mind; as soon as this story comes up, it will be told, even by those who have never seen the film, but who have heard of the unusual visual impressions that it leaves behind. It stays in the memory, it generates interest, it touches us or repels us. The image's productivity, its potential for denormalization (or deterritorialization) depends on social contexts, but also on the way in which it in turn produces new images with the observers *in the image*. So the popularity of modern dance might lead to the Salome film being seen and admired by many people, but it might also give priority to the reception of the film in the context of the history of dance, rather than to its perception as gender-queer strategies. The fact that its release was already being planned at

the time of the Hays Code—a so-called ‘voluntary commitment’ of all Hollywood filmmakers to produce normalizing images of gender roles, sexual pleasure, and whiteness—means that it could function as an intervention into the production of controlled films, into the processes of normalizing and assessing embodiment and lifestyles, and into the ways of making desires taboo. In this context, then, the fact that the Salome story is the preferred material here might be less significant than other factors: that Oscar Wilde was jailed for ‘sodomy’ and class-transgressing sexual activity, or that Maud Allen did her Salome dance nearly nude, that she was also prosecuted in court as a homosexual, and that many drag queens have named themselves after her. The image is infectious. It invites others to escape the norm. In place of a reproduction (however incomplete) of norms of gender through repetition, here imitation serves a simultaneously feared and desired multiplicity of lines of flight. Mass flight rather than performative exercise and subversion.

In order to think through this connection of bodies with Salome, it would seem useful to view them, using Deleuze’s terminology, as a kind of (medial) Salome-machine, as an apparatus that does various things: it turns bodies into dancers, it connects them with a certain dance style, with objects, for instance of Art Deco, or with elements of colonial politics, it produces seduction and aggression, it gazes, it extends the body with costumes (barefoot dancing, a dress with an androgynous effect, a wig), or with elements of the exotic that allow it to detach itself from the here and now of western everyday life and its gender specific roles, that potentially get their performative power from their citation of hegemonic images of colonial domination. The Salome-machine may indeed be productive, but it does not produce identity. Instead, it is above all concerned with dissolving connections which are potentially visualized through a series of very conspicuous elements in the Salome-image: violence, death, the severed head, and the blood. It ‘destroys’ connections to duality in gender, to the gendered division of roles, to heterosexuality, to white being-American, to being-western. Such a connection of image and desire allows for a depersonalized and denaturalized view of sexuality and gender as something that—as Probyn formulates in reference to Grosz—has nothing to do with “what a body is,” but with “what a body can do.”

Deleuze/Guattari also formulate such an idea of precarity or potentiality, of “what a body can do,” which they describe as ‘becoming.’ The Salome-machine therefore allows for an altered idea of ‘drag’ as a method. Dance and performance by drag queens, dancers, and actors *as* Salome would not be so much an imitation, a show, acting as if they were Salome. Instead we

could understand Salome-drag as a 'becoming'-Salome, as an action in which the Salome-image is set in motion, in order to produce links to a set of actions, costumes, and contexts on which desires can travel and that at the same time are released from the pre-existent. The image-Salome, for example—is then not a 'queer image.' Instead, the image is infectious and initiates *practices*, which can be described as queer (or indeed not); in Probyn's words: "they must be read as initiating altered and alternative relations within a matrix of class, race, and ethnicity as well as sexuality" (p. 59). It is not a matter of any utopia, whose romanticizing view falls prey to power relations and social conditions, but of seeing where these conditions might produce something, unexpected or quite deliberate, that precisely does not represent any further building block for normality and identity.

The Salome story functions as a common image element that collects the various images that have arisen without unifying them. This collecting, however, cannot differentiate between success or failure in becoming-Salome. The way in which desire travels on the Salome-images remains singular: Loie Fuller, who is rumored to have lived with her girlfriend, can trace lesbian desire with the Salome-dance without fixing it as an identity. At the same time, the Salome-image, as it is used, fits in perfectly with a colonial setting. This got Fuller her own theater at the Paris World's Fair in 1900. The Salome dance can obviously also be subsumed in a connection to the political directives of the colonial nation of France, using the World's Fairs to familiarize people with the customs and aesthetics of the colonized lands. What on the one hand is a denormalizing practice in reference to gender and sexuality can at the same time contribute to the tacit support of racist presumptions and colonial claims to ownership. Amazingly, for Aida Walker the Oriental Salome-image will become a means of producing her affiliation with the history of modern dance, therefore working at cross-purposes to the narrative of a 'white' history of modern dance.

### **queer chronopolitics**

We understand the method by which we are tracing the circulation of the Salome-image, using artistic work and from today's perspective, as a kind of "queer archeology" (Matthias Haase). The 'excavations' implied by this term search for a potential in elements that have not yet become fixed into a historical account. In an interview with Antonio Negri, Gilles Deleuze speaks of how it became increasingly clear to him how important it is to differentiate between 'becoming' on the one hand and history on the other. Becoming is not part of the historical

situation, not part of the object of history, but instead is that which breaks off from the historical situation, which produces something new, what has become revolutionary, so to speak: “What history grasps in an event is the way it’s actualized in particular circumstances; the event’s becoming is beyond the scope of history. History isn’t experimental, it’s just the set of more or less negative preconditions that make it possible to experiment with something beyond history. Without history the experimentation would remain indeterminate, lacking any initial conditions, but experimentation isn’t historical.” Deleuze criticizes the disparaging way that ‘revolutions,’ for instance that of ’68, are being discussed today. “They’re constantly confusing two different things, the way revolutions turn out historically and people’s revolutionary becoming. These relate to two different sets of people.”

Thus, a queer archaeology could consist in tracking down the destructive or denormalizing strategies of past becomings and re-enlisting these historical strategies into the field of sexual politics and sexual ‘pleasure.’ And this is precisely where the methodological difficulty lies for the research, for as Matthias Haase argues, queer forms of expression turn up in aesthetic discourse as “a disappearing”: “They are legible exactly to the degree that they no longer appear as an articulation of sexual deviance.”

Instead they are transformed, for instance, into a history of modern dance or the history of Orientalism in film. Deleuze refers to Charles Péguy’s philosophical work in order to explain how it might still be possible to be concerned with ‘becoming.’ “Péguy explained that there are two ways of considering events, one being to follow the course of the event, gathering how it comes about historically, how it’s prepared and then decomposes in history, while the other way is to go back into the event, to take one’s place in it as in a becoming, to grow both young and old in it at once, going through all its components or singularities.”

The artistic method of engaging with Salome again from the point of view of today could be viewed as one by which it is possible “to go back into the event, to take one’s place in it as in a becoming.” In this way, connections appear between different generations in place of parent-child relationships, which according to psychoanalysis determine our fantasies and therefore also the production of socially relevant images. And a ‘perverse chronopolitics’ counters the liberal and neoliberal ‘chronopolitics of development,’ which, according to Elizabeth Freeman, distinguishes its own progression from one from non-western culture, characterized as ‘premodern’ or ‘of yesterday,’ causing this to appear as “brown-skinned, feminine, and erotically perverse” (p. 57). *Becoming-Salome*, “as a kind of historicist

jouissance, a friction of dead bodies upon live ones, obsolete constructions upon emergent ones” (p. 66), could be drag as a ‘temporal drag,’ which produces a convergence between the machine of the contemporary body with all its connections, the interest in transgender politics and queer-feminist critique (which the Salomania performers Wu Ingrid Tsang and Yvonne Rainer are involved in), and the machine of the historical body.

Translation: Daniel Hendrickson

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