

OPSHERNISH

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*M*y installation began with a two-day tableau vivant. The performance consisted of three phases. Visitors cut suspended locks of my hair, then shaved my head with clippers and finally with a razor, until I was bald. An inverted forest of roughly twenty-five locks hung from the ceiling. Combined with the shorn remains, this constitutes a site of gendered expectation excised.

The epilogue, called Opshernish after the Orthodox Jewish ritual, occurred two months later at the closing of the installation. It revisited the second and third phases of shaving with clippers and razor. The Opshernish is an Orthodox boy's first haircut, which takes place on his third birthday. The community comes to the family home, and everyone participates by cutting a piece of his hair, until what remains is what will become his *payes* [sidelocks]. He then recites a short text in Hebrew to commence his life of learning. The community collectively confirms the role of the male child, collectively acknowledges its expectations of him, by cutting his infant hair—the hair he has grown since birth—and shaping it to mark him as a male member of the society.

The performance lasted five hours at the opening and three hours at the epilogue.

I had not heard of the Opshernish ritual until after the installation opened. I find it encouraging that the image has a complementary context in my own heritage. In Judaism we do not have a personified god or figure on which to project our desires, anxieties, and so forth. We have the text, and we have the body: either our own bodies, as individual Jews, or the nation as a body, that is, Israel. Much of the practice of Judaism has to do with studying and honoring the text, or with acknowledging the body in time and in space, either *vis-à-vis* other people's bodies or in relation to the calendar. The carnality of Judaism has helped me in many ways.

I suppose that my Opshernish has to do with moving out of a certain infancy of self-awareness and self-conception and with moving away from kinship-based models of identity formation altogether. This, for me, is not a linear progression. Somewhere between embodiment and social construct both the viewer and the maker/performer experience a physical change. My work embraces embodiment: the medium of performance here is not representational but experiential.

Tableau vivant captures that moment and stretches it out, savoring it, expanding time. Gender is embodied and not merely performed. This is a live and urgent experience.











