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Subversive Uses of Perception: The Case of Palestinian Artist Anisa Ashkar

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From the very beginning of her career, artist Anisa Ashkar (born in 1979) has fought a conscious battle against categorization, labeling, and compartmentalization. Focusing on the “minor” senses of smell and touch, she has sought to undermine cultural constructions—such as feminine and masculine, Israeli and Palestinian—by insisting on expressing her own multiple and shifting identities:¹

I start my works with a gut feeling, avoiding any rational analysis. I taste and smell, I rub materials onto the skin, feeling them on my body. Only then do I engage in a reflexive process about the piece—a very important aspect. Although the deep political, ethnic, religious, and gendered meanings are all there, I only conceptualize them retrospectively. Our culture perceives intuitiveness—relying on the senses—as primitive, feminine, antirational, inferior, and unreliable in comparison with the transcendental qualities of rationality, perceived as masculine. . . . Also, using the “minor” senses serves me in order to symbolize my being a minority in many additional meanings. . . . I am ever-changing, depending on where I’m at.²

I would like to thank Anisa Ashkar for sharing with me her work and deep knowledge and understanding.

¹ The traditional five senses have usually been arranged in terms of a hierarchy that assumes vision to be primary, hearing second, followed at a considerable remove by touch, taste, and smell. Especially since the Enlightenment, seeing and knowing have been equated, largely because sight can operate at a greater distance than the other human senses and is therefore considered the most objective. With the mind and body regarded as separate, sight was associated with the mind, with reason, rationality, and logic; by contrast, taste, touch, and smell were associated with the body as the source of unreason, the emotions, and irrationality (Dumcum 2012, 184).

² Throughout this article I include quotations from an interview I conducted with Anisa Ashkar at her Tel Aviv studio on June 16, 2013. The interview was conducted in Hebrew and was translated into English by me.