

Sticking Hearts on People's Foreheads

Officer Az-Oolay, a Clown-Policewoman on the Jerusalem Protest Scene

Diego Rotman



Policewoman Az-Oolay in Context

The actions and performances of the clown-policewoman persona Az-Oolay enact the belief that reality can be interpreted and experienced differently, leading to acceptance of the Other, and the use of nonviolent methods such as listening, dialogue, kindness, and humor. Beginning in August 2020 in the streets of Jerusalem, Israel, Az-Oolay first developed her performance persona and participated in the so-called Balfour protests (Balfour Street is the location of the prime minister's residence), protesting against Prime Minister Netanyahu, who was (and actually still is) being tried in court for several charges of embezzlement and bribery. Following this period of unrest and the emergency measures and closures during Covid, Az-Oolay took part in the demonstrations against house confiscations from Palestinians and against Jewish settlements in East Jerusalem. In January 2023, after the short life of the Bennett-Lapid liberal-centrist government, Netanyahu's reelected government initiated a legal reform that led to mass demonstrations all over Israel, where Az-Oolay continued her active participation.

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However, on 7 October 2023, after this article had already been submitted, another round of extreme violence between Israel and Palestinians erupted. Hamas's murderous attack targeted hundreds of civilians and soldiers who were killed or injured, and many were taken hostage, with more than a hundred still captive as of August 2024. The retaliatory and ongoing Israeli military attacks on Gaza killed and injured thousands of civilians and caused massive destruction in the Gaza strip. The Israeli attacks on Gaza are continuing as I write, and so are missile strikes by Hamas, the ongoing military conflict with Hezbollah, and the conflict with the Yemen Houthis in the Red Sea, as well as with Iran.

This harrowing reality has already affected the lives of Israelis and Palestinians in both Gaza and the West Bank. It has left a profound impact on Israeli society and on the opposition movement against Netanyahu's extreme right-wing government, crushing expectations for any short-term conflict resolution between Palestine and Israel.

The 7 October attacks exposed historical failures not just in the Israeli army and intelligence but more critically in Israeli policy towards the Palestinian population, accentuating the complete breakdown of the government's policy. Despite this, paradoxically, 7 October strengthened Netanyahu's government, enabling it not only to conduct a war with very little open criticism in the country for many months, but also to implement highly criticized policies, including restrictions on freedom of expression and protest, to allow the illegal eviction of entire Palestinian communities in the West Bank by extremist settlers, and to arm civilians with the help of the right-wing extremist Itamar Ben Gvir, the Israeli National Security Minister. Fear of prosecution for public statements on social media, especially for Palestinians but also for Israelis, became a tool for the government to silence dissenting voices, often leading to social bans or even imprisonment. This included Palestinian and Israeli critics whose views were many times unjustly interpreted as support for Hamas's attacks.

My research for this article was completed several weeks before the war. Nevertheless, this turning point significantly impacted the social and political landscape described in it, bringing the protests to a halt, altering the perspectives of many protesters, and fostering a new nationalistic sentiment rooted in fear and a desire for revenge. It has also changed the performance of Az-Oolay, but it is still too early to say what will become of her work.

Small protests organized by families of Israeli hostages advocating for their return emerged after the first weeks following the 7 October attacks. Larger demonstrations against the government have emerged and continue to grow. From December 2023 onwards, small protests against the war itself surfaced, often deemed illegal by the authorities.

In this altered political context, I have revised my article, which initially explored performative actions by a single artist in the frame of the prewar protest movements against Netanyahu and against his proposed overhaul of the Israeli legal system. The clown police actions described here represent a quixotic attempt to alter the course of history. In this new societal context, facing an unprecedented crisis, the clown's appearances in protests and self-organized collective walks emphasizing compassion and listening have taken on a more radical and epic tone.¹

1. Officer Az-Oolay organized two communal walks following 7 October: "From Jerusalem to Gaza: Walk from Heart to Heart," 23–29 November 2023; and "From Tel-Aviv to Gaza: Walking on the Line of the Horizon," 24–28 January 2024.

Figure 1. (facing page) Officer Az-Oolay sticks hearts onto Orthodox protesters. Shift #34, 14 February 2021. Balfour protests, Paris Square, Jerusalem. (Photo by Ben Cohen)

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The Plague, the Theatre, and the Clown

An Introduction

During the Covid-19 pandemic, heavy restrictions and lengthy lockdowns forced artists all over the globe to adapt to a new reality and look for alternative means of performance. They explored ways to enable the physical copresence of actors and spectators: using the few public gatherings and settings permitted during lockdowns—mainly public protests (McCutcheon 2022); performing in liminal spaces—from balconies or rooftops (Taylor 2020; Smith 2020); and performing illegally. Artists also performed online, transforming a private space into a public one that featured live physical copresence via digital channels (Chatzichristodoulou et al. 2022; Rotman 2021).

None of those approaches is new. Nor were these performances the result of an artistic or aesthetic choice; they were a consequence of the need to perform during a time of unprecedented restrictions. Some artists thought the restrictions were not only a threat to their art and livelihood but also, and especially, a threat to their freedom of speech. Some saw the situation as an opportunity to reach new audiences and to develop a new language and new forms of critical discourse.

From March 2020 until June 2021, during the most severe months of the pandemic in Israel, public protests became the main venue where people could express their extreme anger with Netanyahu's government, demanding his immediate resignation amid his criminal trial in three corruption cases (Rapoport 2020; Kaplan Sommer 2019). Additionally, they criticized his handling of the Covid-19 crisis, particularly his lockdown policies, which protesters believed were intended to suppress popular opposition and reduce crowd numbers at demonstrations (Hasson et al. 2020; Barak 2021).

Throughout the protests, Netanyahu was accused of prioritizing personal gain over the welfare of the state. The protests, lacking centralized leadership, attracted thousands of Israelis, both as individuals and as representatives of organizations with diverse political leanings. These organizations included the Black Flag protest movement, Investigation Now, Only Without Bibi, Movement for Quality Government, and Guardians of the Fortress, who identified themselves as veteran Likud members (Schlager et al. 2023; Kingsley 2023).² After almost 27 months of uninterrupted weekly demonstrations, the Balfour protests came to an end on 13 June 2021 following the establishment of the Bennett-Lapid government (June 2021–December 2022), marking the end of Netanyahu's 12 consecutive years as Prime Minister (2009–2021). After the coalition of Bennett-Lapid government fell on 30 June 2022³ and Netanyahu came back as prime minister in December 2022 with an extreme right-wing government threatening the structures of democracy, Israel experienced, until 7 October, an even more complicated political situation. Protests began once again, but this time they sought to stop the overhaul of the judicial system (IDI 2023).

In 2020, art interventions and performances took place primarily in the context of the Balfour demonstrations, with Jerusalem's Paris Square and its surroundings as the epicenter, although protests also took place in other cities, on bridges, and in public spaces (Barak 2021; Ginsburg and Sluzker-Amran 2020). These performative protests, characterized by a carnival-like atmosphere, raised political awareness and called for action. Nonetheless, the protests frequently degenerated into violence instigated generally by the police, with the police employing excessive force, including roughing up demonstrators, using water cannons, and arresting protestors, including many artists (Breiner 2020; Times of Israel 2021; Hasson and Breiner 2020). The protesters "attacked" the police, who for them embodied Netanyahu's policies, with slogans and critical songs.

2. The Likud party was established in 1973 as an alternative to the Labour party (HaAvoda), which had dominated the Israeli political landscape since the creation of the State of Israel in 1948. In 1977, the Likud won its first elections and brought Menachem Begin into government. The Likud developed its strength during a period of disillusionment among citizens with the peace process and an identification with right-wing policies. Netanyahu became prime minister for the first time in 1996, also serving as the chairman of the Likud party.

3. When the Bennett-Lapid government fell, Lapid served as Prime Minister from 1 July 2022 until 29 December 2022.

Many artists participated in civil protests and politically charged performances, some using costumes and masks. When the hybrid clown-policewoman first appeared at the Balfour Street demonstrations on 1 August 2020, she wore a rumpled blue police uniform, her shoes on the wrong feet, a police hat adorned with a garland of flowers, and a red clown nose. A heart served as her name tag. As she placed her trademark heart-shaped stickers on people's foreheads Officer Az-Oolay recited the "Three M's": *Mabat* (Look); *Manishma?* (How are you?); *Me'unyan belev?* (Do you want a heart?). Name tags on her uniform identified her in Hebrew (and later in Arabic too) as belonging to *Mishteret Yashar-el-halev*⁴ (Straight-to-the-Heart Police Force)—a force of only one: Az-Oolay Yehiye Yoter Tov, which translates as "Then, Maybe, Things Will Be Better." Interestingly, the Hebrew word for sticking and contagion is the same: *lebadbik*—especially meaningful during the Covid-19 pandemic. Sticking hearts is voluntarily spreading a pandemic of hearts (or hope), in times of deep social crisis. It is a physical practice that in the time of Covid replaced kissing and now radiates into the political.

Officer Az-Oolay was created by Idit Kischinovsky, a performer born in Jerusalem in 1985 who is not part of any global movement. At the start, she acted alone, moved by her sense of civic duty—in her own words, as a "Jew living in Jerusalem" wanting to bring about change.⁵ Amid the Balfour protests, Officer Az-Oolay sought to realize the belief that reality can be interpreted and experienced differently by looking at the Other,⁶ accepting them, and using nonviolent methods such as listening, dialog, kindness, and humor, as well as highlighting "the foulness"⁷ of the system's excessive use of power (Kischinovsky 2021). While Officer Az-Oolay does not openly express her personal political beliefs, she attempts to alleviate the tension between protesters and police. Her goal is to bridge the gap between police and protestors, which she could not do if she disclosed her personal views in favor of one side or the other. Idit Kischinovsky and her persona believe that the damaged space in which they live can become a better, healthier place. They are agents of healing.

Officer Az-Oolay

Influences and Repertoire

Idit Kischinovsky first encountered the protests while training with a running group in Gan Sakker, a Jerusalem park near the government offices. She found herself following the protesters on their way from the Knesset (Israeli parliament) to Balfour St. As she related during an interview, she was impressed by the energy, the fun, the noise, and mainly the use of military march music as part of the protest: "There was something ridiculous about it: who is against whom, who commands whom? It was then that I understood that I wanted to become a clown in the protests." She wanted to become a clown not simply to make people happier but to fulfill her dream of "bringing peace to Jerusalem" (Kischinovsky 2021). By this, she meant adopting a dialogical approach as opposed to resorting to violence (see Ochs 2011; Kischinovsky 2021; and Hasson 2022a).

Constructing the Clown Policewoman: (Non)Uniform, Gender, and Devices

The week of her encounter with the protesters, during a Shabbat meal at the house of friends who were active in the protests, Idit Kischinovsky shared her idea for creating a clown police character

4. In Hebrew the name is also a wordplay: ישראל *Yashar-el halev* shares letters in common with "Israel" ישראל.

5. Since August 2023 she has been working with other clown-police officers who perform iterations of her persona.

6. In her performances, the construction of Az-Oolay's self undergoes dynamic shifts with each interaction, adapting to the diverse settings in which she engages with the different "others." Initially the "other" was the police. However, as Az-Oolay participated in protests involving Jewish Orthodox individuals, far-right activists, and Palestinians, the definition of the "other" expanded. Az-Oolay's interactions illustrate the fluidity of the self and the "other." They are not fixed entities but a dynamic construct influenced by the particular circumstances their meeting.

7. By "foulness of the system," Kischinovsky means the lack of efficiency and clumsiness in the actions of large institutions (such as the police and army).



Figure 2. Officer Az-Oolay marches with the police during a protest against the proposed judicial overhaul. Shift #210, Ayalon highway, Tel Aviv, 23 March 2023. (Photo by Ben Cohen)

on the “Straight-to-the-Heart Police Force.” Her friends showed their support by providing her with an oversized blue shirt, pants, and a belt. She had already found a large pair of old army shoes, EU size 46. She wore a red wig to hide her own long hair, a face mask (during the pandemic), a pair of nonprescription glasses, heavy makeup, and a red clown nose. She clipped words from newspapers “representing various ideologies” (Kischinovsky 2021) across the Israeli political spectrum to form the Force’s name in Hebrew; months later, following her actions in East Jerusalem, she added an Arabic translation of the Force’s name. She took with her sheets of heart stickers that she inherited from a former teacher, a friend’s mother who had passed away, who also gave her much of Officer Az-Oolay’s paraphernalia.

Police Officer Az-Oolay is the inverse of the macho Israeli policeman, threatening-looking militarized people who maintain public order and often repress protesters in the name of authority. Her name, Az-Oolay, refers to Police Officer Azulay from the 1971 movie *The Policeman*, written by satirist Ephraim Kishon and starring the great mime, actor, and comedian Shaike Ophir. Although Azulay is unable to advance because of his repeated failures, he can speak to protesters in their language and solve real distress through dialog. He can also relate on a personal level to thieves, prostitutes, and other offenders. By adding a hyphen to the iconic surname, Idit Kischinovsky went beyond merely referencing a famous police character but became literally “Then, Maybe.” At first, Officer Az-Oolay (like Officer Azulay) had a moustache. However, soon Kischinovsky switched her character’s gender and Officer Az-Oolay became a policewoman.

Az-Oolay’s main actions were applying heart stickers, looking at and listening to others, receiving orders from her heart (with a *kesher-el-halev* [communication-to-the-heart-device] connected via a curly cable to her heart),⁸ telling jokes, sharing witty lines, bringing hope and humor, easing tensions, concocting new acronyms for the Israeli Police Force’s glossary of acronyms,⁹ initiating a critical discourse through parody and laughter, and spraying “love-water” on hot protestors as an alternative to water cannons. In the third week of her activities, when a protester asked her if the stickers were used for writing reports, she realized not only that the heart stickers replaced fines issued by the police but also that as a policewoman she should write reports after each shift. Thus she introduced a new word to her police force: *duach*, an acronym for *din vechesbon* (report), which she uses as the acronym for *diun vechashiva* (dialog and thoughts) and combines with the *al ahava*,

8. During Az-Oolay’s second intervention at the Balfour protests, a policeman asked her why she had no communication device (walkie-talkie). She realized then that she should have one, so she created it.

9. Visit <https://www.police.gov.il/join/glossary> to view the Israeli police dictionary of acronyms.

the acronym for *ayinaleph* (about love). She wrote reports at the end of every shift, publishing them on Facebook. To date, she has published more than 389 reports on the activities of the Straight-to-the-Heart Police Force.¹⁰

Officer Az-Oolay approaches Jews, both secular and religious, Palestinians, settlers, and policemen. She waves a fisted hand asking: “Did you know that the heart is the size of a fist?” Subsequently, she opens her fist, and a heart made of sponge magically pops out. She also often “helped” (or disturbed) the police in their work (moving barriers with them, marching with them, etc.). Part of her actions involve being present at incidents of police violence, attempting to soften such moments with her presence, or helping someone in need.

Officer Az-Oolay displays the physical and psychological incongruities characteristic of a clown: “Fun-loving, childlike, amoral, irresponsible, mercurial, chaotic and anarchic” (Wright 2006:203–04). She is a master fool using *the incongruous object*, and the *incongruous body* to which Barba and Savarese refer:

Clowns have a peculiar natural body or they subject it to special training that makes their actions into an apology for imperfection. They train themselves to fail, or rather, to control their failure. (Barba and Savarese 2019:226)

Az-Oolay intervenes in the semiotics of props that constitute the symbols and tools of power used by the police and army, liberating artifacts from their expected function, mocking or parodying social symbols of power such as water cannons, fines, and communication devices such as walkie-talkies. She transforms and degrades each, “denouncing the delusional sacredness of its values and the artificiality of the symbols” (Bouissac 2015:94). She produces surprises instead of pain, laughter instead of fear, and brings hope instead of despair. She destabilizes the image of the Israeli Police Force’s omnipotence. She converts the police’s power into antipower, accomplishing—at least in jest—what is written in Isaiah 2:3–4, “They will make their swords into plows and their spears into hooks for trimming trees. Nations will no longer fight other nations, nor will they train for war anymore.”

Officer Az-Oolay’s performance engages three clown traditions: Charlie Chaplin, the activism of CIRCA (Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army),¹¹ and the Jewish *badkhn* (jester).¹² Of these three, Idit Kischinovsky/Az-Oolay acknowledged as an influence only Chaplin, in terms of style and humanist philosophy. The Tramp/Chaplin and Az-Oolay/Kischinovsky both provoke laughter by wearing clothes that do not fit, using mechanical and clumsy movements, and combining power and fragility in a childlike gaze. Contradictions, distortions, clumsiness, sensitivity, and fragility characterize them. However, what connects them most is their humanist ethics. Officer Az-Oolay frequently quotes in its entirety the barber’s final speech at the end of Chaplin’s film *The Great Dictator* (1940), including these concluding paragraphs:

In the 17th chapter of St. Luke it is written: “the Kingdom of God is within man”—not one man nor a group of men, but in all men! In you! You, the people have the power—the power to create machines, the power to create happiness! You, the people, have the power to make this life free and beautiful, to make this life a wonderful adventure.

10. See <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100057864934518>.

11. Many of Az-Oolay’s tactics resonate with those used by members of CIRCA, the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army, founded in November 2002 as part of the antiglobalization movements in the UK. CIRCA created a new type of activist practice that combines clowning with nonviolent direct actions, developed methods to respond to repressive police tactics in situations of confrontation, attempting to surprise police and spectators during demonstrations and protests (Fremaux and Ramsden 2007; see also Sørensen 2015).

12. The deconstruction of Hebrew acronyms and performing a type of “folk theatre” relate her practice to the characteristics of the *badkhn* (Jewish jester) as *muser-zoger* (wedding preacher), a clown who, for a moment, can become serious and convey a moral message to those attending a Jewish wedding, the traditional setting of the *badkhn*’s performance. This is characteristic of the *badkhn*, adding a Jewish ethical dimension to her clownesque performance (see Belkin 2003).

Then, in the name of democracy, let us use that power—let us all unite. Let us fight for a new world, a decent world that will give men a chance to work; that will give youth a future and old age a security. By the promise of these things, brutes have risen to power. But they lie! They do not fulfill that promise. They never will!

Dictators free themselves but they enslave the people! Now let us fight to fulfill that promise! Let us fight to free the world—to do away with national barriers—to do away with greed, with hate and intolerance. Let us fight for a world of reason, a world where science and progress will lead to all men's happiness. Soldiers! In the name of democracy, let us all unite! (Chaplin 1940)¹³

In her reenactments, Kischinovsky not only pays homage to her master but also adapts and updates the speech, transplanting it from Nazi Germany to modern-day Jerusalem. The power of the quoted words lies in the urgency of the political moment within which they are performed, quoted, and reconstructed, attempting to awaken and unite the people.

Idit Kischinovsky

Fragments of a Biography

To understand what's behind Officer Az-Oolay, her motivations, and why she risks her personal safety, we must know something about her. In 2003, at the height of the Second Intifada, Kischinovsky was 17 years old when she and her brother were traveling through the Palestinian territories and their car was fired upon. Her brother was seriously injured and hospitalized for a long time, but Kischinovsky was unharmed. As expected by Israeli society, she suppressed the incident and continued her life, trying to prove everything was normal. It took her many years to recognize that the attack had a deep effect on her: "I believed that it could be deleted, after all, no one died" (in Hasson 2022a). But since the attack, she is triggered by any loud explosive noise and panics at the sight of a rifle. Inside her, terror takes hold of her soul.

After school, when her brother was still hospitalized, she entered a year of *shnat sherut* (voluntary pre-army service). During her pre-army service she had to shoot at a firing range. According to her, the experience at the shooting range was worse than the attack. She felt she almost lost her sanity and her self-control at the sound of shooting. She abandoned her year of voluntary service in the city of Be'er Sheva and moved to the north to work on goat farms: "I was afraid that if there were another situation like this that would awaken the memory of the incident, I would not be able to contain this, I will disconnect from reality into insanity" (in Hasson 2022a). Later, she enlisted for her mandatory army service. Attempting to be a soldier like any other but unable to shoot or hear gunfire, she was very uncomfortable. She struggled with the minimum demand to shoot the required five bullets. Those moments in the army, when she was forced to shoot at the cost of her sanity, were decisive in shaping her worldview regarding the use of force, of weapons, and representations of power: "You want to kill me, and I will live. The more violence and more fear you bring to me, the more courage and more love I will bring" (Hasson 2022a). She promised herself never to shoot again. Then came the swearing-in ceremony at the end of basic training.

On the day of the swearing-in ceremony:

I was a clown: I didn't care about the uniform, my pants were here [high], I didn't eat anything. We did all the rehearsals for swearing-in. Fifteen minutes before the ceremony the officer came to me and told me, "You have to swear on the Bible and the weapon." I told her: "I don't touch weapons." She said, "Then you can't participate." I said, "OK, no problem, I'll sit on the side." She tells me, you swear on the weapon. "No," I say. Five minutes before it starts, she calls me and says she agrees that I can participate. They called me by my name,

13. For the full text see: www.charliechaplin.com/en/articles/29-the-final-speech-from-the-great-dictator-.

I went over and there is a table with the weapon and the Bible. She gives me the Bible and then, in surprise, raises the weapon and knocks it hard into my shoulder, and she pushes a weapon at me in front of the whole crowd. I grab the weapon and push it back at her, take the Bible, and go to my line. Suddenly I am in the front row, I do not know how I was put there, behind the commanders. And my family is there, and I'm with the pants here [very high], totally Chaplinesque, my brain was so knocked out, my family torn apart with laughter, and then the names are read to get Bible and weapons, so he says Idit Kischinovsky. And everyone is with the weapon and I'm just with the Bible, and it was such a victory. (Kischinovsky 2022b)

That was also the week in which she participated in parade drills, which would become one of the features of Officer Az-Oolay's performances.

Many years after the attack on her and her brother, while attempting to live a "normal" life (married, divorced, bought a donkey and traveled on it for five weeks, lived for seven years in a tent, and more), Kischinovsky realized that she was suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. The PTSD remained undocumented and unrecognized for over 16 years. Finally, in 2019 after studying physical theatre in the MFA Program at Dell'Arte International School of Physical Theatre in Blue Lake, California, she returned to Israel and fought for the Israeli National Insurance Institute to recognize her as a victim of hostile action. She says that she needed to be recognized; this is why she needs to document her actions: "I felt I needed to document my journey... When there is no recognition, we are all under the radar of suffering, and we all fail to be connected" (Kischinovsky 2021).

Ironically, in this process of healing, the official recognition as a victim of hostility makes a modest contribution to the clown's financial situation:

As a victim of hostility [...] the situation was reversed: the money they [National Insurance] give me is the policewoman's salary. I like to say that National Insurance pays me for my work [as a police clown]. That is the healing. (Kischinovsky 2021)

The trauma of the attack on her and her brother and her army service are part of the formation of Officer Az-Oolay, no less than her studies at Dell'Arte.

Heart Stickers

The Use of Tokens as Magic Pacifiers

The heart is the identifying sign of the Straight-to-the-Heart Police Force. Besides the stickers, it is prominent on the white clown-police flag. Idit Kischinovsky has politicized the heart, using it to perform a core ideology—perhaps naïve, perhaps childish—that is radical in the specific political context of the highly fragmented Israeli/Palestinian society. She proposes the "revolutionary" idea of dialog as an alternative to political agendas that promote a social "crack."¹⁴

When Officer Az-Oolay sticks heart-shaped stickers on foreheads (or wherever the recipient wants), the age, ethnic or national group, color, or gender are irrelevant. Acceptance expresses empathy towards the Straight-to-the-Heart Police Force and its ideas. The sticker unifies people in support of the radical idea of a "heart-communitas." Stickers are concise statements of opinion with "quasi-ritualistic elements of adhesion, removal, and addition" (Salamon 2017:8), a popular medium for expressing emotions, tastes, affiliation, and admiration. They can proclaim a specific political ideology or protest or simply be humorous commentary. When worn by children, stickers are rewards. In Israel, stickers featuring a drawing of a flower signifying the "Blood of the Maccabees"—the Jewish rebel warriors of the 2nd century BCE—are worn on Israel's Memorial Day.

14. I use the term "crack" to refer to an extreme ideological social division as in the conflict in Argentina where it is called "La Grieta" (see Lisińska 2022).

Az-Oolay's stickers are not about blood and fallen soldiers and have no national aim. They are a call to practice peaceful political discourse.

The primary source of these stickers' power is that Officer Az-Oolay personally puts them on people. Az-Oolay is a folk-badkhn clown-policewoman with her own magic power, spreading humor, hope, and love.

The Power of the Image

During her second shift as the clown-policewoman, in August 2020, Idit Kischinovsky decided to align herself with a long line of Border Police:

Suddenly there was a line of cops. I just stood next to them. I had no idea what image it created—today I do. I felt the moment, and realized the environment was suddenly reacting to it. I stood with them [the Border Police], and I did not laugh. It seemed to me an expression of equality. I was just like them, but in my case, I was in an outfit that elicited ridicule. (Kischinovsky 2021)

By lining up next to the cops, a tactic also used by CIRCA (Sørensen 2015; Bogad 2016), Kischinovsky contrasted Az-Oolay's fragility, vulnerability, and comic persona with the rigid performance of power by the police. Az-Oolay destabilized not only those at the demonstration but also, perhaps even more effectively, social and mainstream media. Az-Oolay lining up with the police was photographed by Nadav Bossem, an actor, performer, and activist, who posted it on Facebook.¹⁵ Following hundreds of reactions to this post, Kischinovsky realized the power of the image when multiplied by social media. She started to disseminate Az-Oolay's performance and message. Her performance became rhizomatic, duplicated, commented upon, documented, digitized, shared, liked, and filled with emojis.

Standing in line with the Border Police, Kischinovsky challenged the distinction between the performance of state power and her parody of that performance. She showed that the police's image is no less constructed and fictional (or truthful) than the staging of the Straight-to-the-Heart Force. Masking herself, Kischinovsky unmasked the constructed Other. Increasingly aware of the power her creation had, Idit Kischinovsky decided to extensively document Officer Az-Oolay on video.

Expanding Zones of Jurisdiction or Reterritorializing Protests...and Its Risks

When the actor comes onstage wearing a small red nose, his face is in a state of openness, entirely without defence.

—Jacques Lecoq (2002:155)

What distinguishes Officer Az-Oolay from other performers associated with the Balfour protests is that after Netanyahu's electoral defeat in 2021, Az-Oolay expanded her territory of action from the reasonably safe (for Jews) carnivalesque protests at Balfour to other more violent and dangerous demonstrations. In Jerusalem, Az-Oolay went to ultra-Orthodox Jewish neighborhoods where the police and residents routinely clash, from the Muslim quarter during the annual Flag March on Jerusalem Day (Hasson 2022b), to the Damascus Gate in the Old City, and Sheikh Jarrah, an East Jerusalem Palestinian neighborhood,¹⁶ which she visits every Friday during weekly

15. The image has been republished (with an incorrect date) many times in the "official" and public Facebook page of *Mishteret Yashar-el-halev* [Straight-to-the-Heart Police]. See for example: www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbid0YvcDfzvRefPHWyuGZ67cbvwnWc4z48zJovEFaJNG2aGMxj4Gx53dJA5S6NY9WTo-gl&cid=100057864934518.

16. Sheikh Jarrah is a Palestinian neighborhood of 3,000 that runs north to south through Jerusalem and functions as an urban separation between Israeli and Palestinian neighborhoods.



Figure 3. Officer Az-Oolay at Dung Gate, Jerusalem, during a march from Silwan to Balfour Street by a group of Jews and Arabs. Shift #33, 6 February 2021. (Photo by Mooli Goldberg)

protests that started in 2010 (Reiter and Lehrs 2010; Wright 2018). Sheikh Jarrah is an example of “a micro-scale appropriation of Palestinian territory” by Israel conducted through eviction and displacement of Palestinians:

Palestinian homes are demolished or colonised by settlers [...] while agricultural land is confiscated from its Palestinian owners [...] This is a new phase in which Palestinian space is appropriated not solely through military acts or large-scale urban planning [...] but rather on small-scale urban spaces and the use of planning policies. (Yacobi and Katz 2022)

The change of venues did not mean a change in repertoire but a change in objectives (dialog among different ethnicities), setting (from Jewish West to Palestinian East Jerusalem), actors (Palestinians, other types of protesters and activists, settlers, politicians, police officers), conditions (other rules apply in “occupied territories”), learning and using Arabic, and the use of the translated Arabic name for her character: الشرطة از-اولاي، اسم العائلة راح يكون احسن من شرطة مباشرة إلى القلب (Al-shurtia Az-Oolay, ism al-Ela Rach icun ach-san. Min Shurtat Mubasharat iilaa al-qalb). Idit Kischinovsky created a different uniform in order to avoid being mistaken for an Israeli policewoman. Officer Az-Oolay no longer struggles to change the internal system of Israeli politics; she is now involved in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, where the risk, the tensions, and the violence are much greater. “There was a kind of violence I wanted to stop,” says Kischinovsky, “I wanted to stop it, it’s not good, it’s not healthy [...] I am terribly preoccupied with violence” (Kischinovsky 2022b).

Kischinovsky argues that one of Officer Az-Oolay’s most important functions is witnessing, adding another layer of meaning to her performative actions. If Az-Oolay is not only clowning but also performing witnessing, she is even more vulnerable and exposed than the average clown. Idit Kischinovsky/Az-Oolay realizes in her performance “the potential of the foolish witness” (see Salverson 2006:153).



Figure 4. Officer Az-Oolay in action in Sheikh Jarrah, East Jerusalem. Shift #99, 19 November 2021. (Photo by Shai Kendler)

The Protest and the Imprisonment

At the Nablus Gate a new world opened up for me. I saw how the police produce violence, they throw stun grenades like candies in the synagogue.

—Idit Kischinovsky (in Hasson 2022a)

On 24 December 2021 Police Officer Az-Oolay was arrested during the weekly protests against the eviction of Palestinian families in Sheikh Jarrah. The police violently dispersed the protest with batons and stun grenades. This affected Kischinovsky's PTSD. Az-Oolay asked a policewoman: "What is your purpose?" The officer did not answer, and Az-Oolay kept repeating the question. Eventually, the officer arrested Officer Az-Oolay. During the arrest, Kischinovsky's clown nose, wig, and hat were scattered. She gathered them and recostumed as best she could. At the police station, she was asked to remove the rest of her costume. But Officer Az-Oolay claimed that the clown-policewoman had been arrested, not Idit Kischinovsky. When the police rejected her argument, she agreed to remove her nose. When asked to do so again when photographed, she was certain that this meant "the game is over." She cried, begged. However, she finally had to deconstruct Az-Oolay and be photographed as Idit Kischinovsky. In the words of the journalist Nir Hasson, Kischinovsky had to spend the weekend in jail "without the protection" of her clown identity (2022a).

The judge reviewed the charges: obstructing a police officer under aggravated circumstances, participating in a riot, insulting a public servant, and rioting in a public place. In addition to her brief imprisonment, the police requested a 14-day suspension from attending the Sheikh Jarrah protests, but the judge agreed to only one week. Imprisoning Officer Az-Oolay generated a big public reaction. Her followers, activists, and protesters expressed their anger on social media; they also organized a demonstration near the Neve Tirza Jail where she was imprisoned and another one in front of the Peace Court. Around 20 supporters attended, many of them wearing red noses. When she was released, many greeted her (Hasson 2022a; Kischinovsky 2022b).

Imprisoning a clown is an unexpected event. Idit Kischinovsky/Officer Az-Oolay capitalized on it. The attention in print and on social media increased her popularity. When talking about her imprisonment, she described it as her “first trip!” in a police car (and “without paying!”). She celebrated her unexpected encounter with imprisoned Jewish and Palestinian women she would otherwise have never met. She thanked the police for her “free weekend trip and hotel” at Neve Tirza. She leveraged the arrest, turning it into the “privilege” of incorporating a new experience into her performance (Kischinovsky 2022b).

Witnessing the Witness

A new type of secret agent joined the Straight-to-the-Heart Police Force, one who is neither a clown nor a traditional law enforcement officer but a presence behind the camera. Despite her official role as the Force’s sole officer, Az-Oolay works in view of a cameraperson who bears witness to her actions. Natan Rushansky, a young filmmaker, meticulously documented most of her workday shifts, talks, exhibitions, and performances up to December 2022 for his documentary on Idit Kischinovsky/Officer Az-Oolay, *Want a Heart?*, which premiered at the International Jerusalem Film Festival in July 2024. Officer Az-Oolay was inseparable from her cameraperson till the beginning of 2023. For Kischinovsky, the camera not only documents her actions, constructs a narrative, and promotes the character’s persona; it also provides protection. “I thought that if something happens to me, at least I’ll have it documented” (Kischinovsky 2022a).

The presence of the camera, however, raises the question of whether Az-Oolay’s actions are influenced by the camera or merely recorded by it. Probably both. Kischinovsky is an adept manager of her image and persona. Rushansky’s videos were showcased in Kischinovsky’s 11 March to 12 May 2022 exhibition at the Mamuta Art and Research Center where she also gave workshops, created her “headquarters,” and initiated a “clown-police school,” sharing tools of her work as clown-policewoman. Some of Rushansky’s videos were shared on social media and used in TV segments about Kischinovsky’s work.¹⁷ Rushansky’s documentation highlights the radical dream of a vulnerable artist, Idit Kischinovsky, making informed attempts (in contrast to the naïve Officer Az-Oolay) to bring redemption, love, peace, dialog, care, and justice to Jerusalem.

Az-Oolay’s Clowning as Performing Care and Worship

Idit Kischinovsky crosses ethnic, religious, national, and social boundaries to approach the Other. Using James Thompson’s phrase, Az-Oolay performs an “aesthetics of care” in a situation of carelessness (2015:436). Az-Oolay works to establish, maintain, and expand relationships over a long period of time, meeting her audience/community weekly during protests for more than three years. Officer Az-Oolay listens and responds, bringing empathy to those she met and engaged with. Sticking hearts, provoking humor and smiles, her acts of listening and dissolving tension are both theatrical and therapeutic. This is in contrast to artists who use shock or disruption (Bishop 2012). Officer Az-Oolay is both a clown-policewoman and a clown-doctor who performs not in hospitals but in public places. Clinically, medical clowns induce positive emotions, reduce stress, and decrease anxiety (Dionigi and Canestrari 2016; Christensen 2020).

Officer Az-Oolay’s art and activism is based in Idit Kischinovsky’s personal interpretation of Jewish thought. She is the daughter of an Australian mother and a Danish father who moved to Israel to keep the commandments “in their own way.” She received a religious education, but practiced Judaism in a singular manner. She is a Jewish clown who comes to her shifts—Officer Az-Oolay does not appear on the Sabbath—with the *kavanah* (religious intention) of bringing peace

17. Watch the following interview by Kobi Meidan with Officer Az-Oolay on *Sochen Tarbut*, channel Kan 11 at youtu.be/2KhIEN9tlbY.

instead of violence, dialogue and kindness instead of repression.¹⁸ “I believe that as a Jew, it is my job [...] to be where there is injustice” (Kischinovsky 2022a).

Kischinovsky follows the teachings of the major Hasidic leader, the Besht (Ba'al Shem Tov, 1698–1760), who formulated the idea of “worship through corporeality,” referring to the role of the body in giving validity and value to worship (Etkes [2004] 2012). Officer Az-Oolay's listening, sticking hearts, and spraying love-water are consecrated or at least resignified within *kavanah*, becoming *mitzvahs* (a commandment and/or a good deed). If we compare the Straight-to-the-Heart movement to Hasidism, Officer Az-Oolay is a saintly clown empowered by amulets (stickers), incantations (her words and reports), and healing (through laughter and dialog). These “foolish” powers enable her to create her own court of followers to spread her message. Another Hasidic term relevant to Officer Az-Oolay's actions is *dveikut*, which has the same root as *lehabdik* (sticking, adhering) and can be translated as “communion.” In Kabbalistic and Hasidic literature, *dveikut* refers to a mystical experience, a path available to every Jew irrespective of learning capacity. For Officer Az-Oolay, sticking hearts is *dveikut*, and she expects that also for the person she sticks the heart on.

As she revealed in many interviews, Kischinovsky is inspired by Jewish thought, especially by the Zohar, the main book of Jewish mysticism (Kabbalah), as well as by contemporary Jewish thinkers such as Mikhael Manekin,¹⁹ and feminist Jewish figures such as the Jewish-Dutch writer and Holocaust victim Etty Hillesum (Kischinovsky 2022b). Manekin proposes a philosophical and activist approach based on Jewish ethics: a commitment to Jewish tradition and Jewish ethics to actively oppose occupation, against what he calls a “false notion of freedom,” the blindness toward the suffering of others, and the Israeli glorification of power and dominance (Manekin 2021). Manekin's writings and acts inspired Kischinovsky and reaffirm her commitment to her chosen path.

Etty Hillesum was a woman with a deep connection to God and a mystical approach to life (Bowie 1995), which fortified her evolution as an activist in dark times. Bernard Weinstein mentions two roles characteristic of Hillesum, healer and witness (1993:84), roles that Officer Az-Oolay also takes on in her work, or at least that's the way she sees herself.²⁰

Religious faith, mysticism, and clowning as *tikkun olam* (for the sake of repairing the world) are all part of Az-Oolay's performative practice. I view her activity as *clowning as (Jewish) prayer*. Following Marcel Mauss's perspective on prayer, I see it as a practice that contains the most “immediate impression of life, richness and complexity,” one that “has filled the most varied roles: here it is a brusque demand, there an order, elsewhere a contract, an act of faith, a confession, a supplication, an act of praise, a hosanna” (Mauss 1909:21). Officer Az-Oolay's clowning is a Jewish prayer that is subversive, practicing and spreading Jewish “actimystic” performance for social change (see Sun 2016).

Of course, not everyone is a devotee of Officer Az-Oolay. She has, as an orthodox Hassid, her own *misnagdim* (opponents).²¹ Some do not connect to the clown's behavior; others find it difficult

18. “The Kabbalist conception of *kavanah* rested upon the presumption that each commandment or prayer has a particular ‘destination’ and particular ‘mission’ to perform in the Upper Worlds. The Kabbalist, who is fluent in the secrets of the prayers and commandments, is supposed to accompany the utterance of his prayer and the performance of the commandment with his *kavvanah* [...] Through the power of these *kavvanot* the force and effect of his actions would be multiplied in the Upper Worlds” (Etkes [2004] 2012:130).

19. Manekin is an activist and former executive director of Breaking the Silence and Molad. He currently directs the Alliance Fellowship, which brings together emerging Israeli Jewish and Arab political leaders.

20. “One always has the feeling here,” wrote Hillesum in her diary, “of being the ears and eyes of a piece of Jewish history, but there is also the need sometimes to be a still, small voice” (24 August 1943; 1986:340). In another entry Hillesum noted, “I hope to be a centre of peace in that madhouse” (16 July 1942; 1986:156). Without doubt this witness approach reflects Kischinovsky's approach to her own practice.

21. *Misnagdim* was the common name for opponents of the Hasidic movement, based largely in Lithuania, northern Belorussia, and northeastern Poland.



Figure 5. Officer Az-Oolay in a protest against the establishing of Itamar Ben Gvir's parliamentary office at Sheikh Jarrah, East Jerusalem. Shift #121, 13 February 2022. (Photo by Ben Cohen)

to accept a parodic approach to the police, or the message of love and communality. Some see her aligned to left-wing activists. Many police do not like her entering their area of jurisdiction. Nevertheless, acting in the hostile territories of protests, the police recognize her as a player in the game. So do politicians like Arie King, the extremist right-wing activist Deputy Mayor of Jerusalem and founder of the Israel Land Foundation. On Jerusalem Day 2022, King published on his Twitter account a picture of Officer Az-Oolay with the comment: "I've never seen the police-woman Az-Oolay so sad, and that made me even happier" (King 2022).

Kischinovsky also leverages her privilege as a Jewish Israeli to engage in performances within conflicted areas relatively safely for her compared to Palestinians. It is well-known that Israeli police discriminate against Palestinians (Hasisi and Weitzer 2007). What is particularly challenging in Az-Oolay's approach is that she comprehends the role (and power) of her Jewishness not merely as a position of privilege but as the foundation of her moral obligation: "The character dares to enter those [highly conflictive] spaces because she [Az-Oolay] can say 'I am a Jew,' but not to say it as a savior [...] We [Jews] are supposed to give, not take, not conquer..." (Kischinovsky 2021). Kischinovsky's unique perspective challenges conventional notions of identity and power dynamics. Indeed, she uses her position of privilege in Israeli society to advocate for what she believes is a just cause.

Epilogue

Officer Az-Oolay is a clown, a policewoman, a performer, a spectator, a healer, and a dramaturg. She not only performs at protests to intervene, interrupt the flow, meet others, and provoke a smile, but she is also a witness, documenting her activities, retelling them, reporting, exhibiting, theatricalizing, and performing prayer. Officer Az-Oolay was born and raised in times of political urgency, swimming against the tide, trying to learn and teach others how to live together. She attempts to translate the idea of force into the idea of a communication stream, based on a Jewish ethical background. Week after week, Kischinovsky risks her physical and psychological integrity to make Jerusalem a righteous place, equal for all. She develops in parallel her professional persona, making it more popular, present, and necessary.

Many might view her actions as banal or infantile. However, sticking hearts on people's foreheads, listening to others, loving, healing, or just clowning are radical acts in today's dark times. When a discourse of hate dominates, care and love are subversive actions, a heart sticker on the forehead constitutes an ultimate act of resistance.²²

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22. Following 7 October 2023, Idit Kischinovsky/Az-Oolay's persona and performances were profoundly affected. She continues to intervene in protest scenes and organize walks. However, it is still too early to analyze the impact of these events on both the artist, her persona, and her performances. This will be the subject of further research.

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