Contingency Holding by a Thread: intersectionality in Selected Works by Ghada Amer

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ABSTRACT

CONTINGENCY HOLDING BY A THREAD: INTERSECTIONALITY IN SELECTED WORKS BY GHADA AMER

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Northern Illinois University, 2018
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Ghada Amer is a diasporic, female, artist of color who creates canvases that wield the domestic as both medium and subject. Her fiber work, including an early formative series combined with her later pornography pieces, feature densely threaded surfaces where images of women working oscillate between representation and non-objectivity. This thesis intervenes with the existing discourse surrounding Amer’s oeuvre by utilizing the artist’s own words along with materialist and intersectional theoretical material to offer two novel interpretive approaches. Specifically, I argue that Amer uses a gendered formula that is reflected visually as a way of referencing the entirety of a situation in order to discuss its dissolution and reconfiguration. The second chapter uses Private Rooms (1998-99), a soft sculpture installation, as support for the intersectional model from which Amer’s reconfiguration draws. In particular, I hold that Amer’s work explores the fluid concept of identity, especially identities that sit at the margins of society and culture, her own included. This act of keeping the borders or edges in sight in order to test their strength is shown to have parallels in the work of artistic predecessors like Eva Hesse as well as contemporaries such as Sheila Pepe.
CONTINGENCY HOLDING BY A THREAD:
INTERSECTIONALITY IN SELECTED WORKS BY GHADA AMER

BY
SARAH EILEEN SABO
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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE MASTER OF ARTS

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Thesis Director:
Sinclair W. Bell
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DEDICATION

For D.A.F and K.A.S for their endless love and support
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INTRODUCTION

In contemporary Western society, the inequitable distribution of power has been the focus of considerable media scrutiny and scholarly interest alike. A rising tide of populist nationalism today has called attention to the vulnerability of populations marginalized due to their gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status. It is within this cultural climate that contemporary living artists who have dedicated their careers to issues of marginalized peoples and whose work not long ago would have been regarded as “niche” are now entering into mainstream discussions. Ghada Amer, a female artist born in Egypt whose work sits at the intersection of the popular Zeitgeist and oppression, is now at last having her moment.

Amer’s canvasses proclaim their feminist affiliation. The large, colorful, densely threaded surfaces depict women appropriated from the pages of pornographic magazines. In her early series of works, *Cinq Femmes au Travail*, Amer offers a group of embroidered images depicting women performing domestic tasks in red thread on unprimed canvases (fig. 1). Here Ghada Amer emphasizes women’s affective labor. This thesis will analyze this early formative series in conjunction with the later pornography paintings (fig. 2) to argue that there is more of a well-articulated materialist component present in Amer’s oeuvre than what has been previously recognized. The pornography paintings also direct our attention to the limitations of feminist interpretations, which have focused on representation. Additionally, within this context

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1 As discussed in Maura Reilly’s monograph as well as in Candice Breitz’s “Ghada Amer the Modeling of Desire.”
the concepts of immaterial labor in their affective and bodily forms require further examination, as this labor is performed by women.

If one considers the pornography works in conjunction with a later installation (fig. 3), Amer’s work lends itself well to interpretation using an intersectional analysis. This takes us beyond the established concept of the hybrid artist by emphasizing multiple sites of concurrent marginalization. Gender, race, class, and sexual orientation thereby converge upon her canvasses to create a unique vision that purposely excludes dominant binaries. In additional support of this argument, Amer will be compared to contemporary, feminist, interdisciplinary artist Shelia Pepe as compelling commonalities can be located between their works.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

The literature that grounds this project is borrowed from three distinct traditions: art historical, materialist, and intersectional. Two significant articles on Amer predate Maura Reilly’s seminal monograph written in 2010. In the first of these, Candice Breitz argues that Amer's work is unified through its exploration of desire. In particular, Breitz cites experiences from as early as the artist’s childhood, in which she described moving from Egypt to France and yearning to fit in. Later, in Amer’s ambivalent formal nods to the Abstract Expressionist movement and through her obscuring of pornographic imagery, Breitz claims Amer is engaged in an examination of not only her own personal desire but the desires of others as well.² The point is also made that through the concealment of pornographic figures with

threads it is impossible to understand the works in their totality, forcing the viewer to confront the fragmented women on the surface. BREITZ asserts that this conflation compels the viewer to reconcile the commodification of the female body with the artist’s creativity. Her frequent use of repeated imagery (e.g., La Jaune, Pink) underscores a capitalist critique. More importantly, Laura Auricchio makes a similar argument to Breitz but places additional emphasis on hybridity, whereby she frames it in the context of desire as a central component of her artwork. Focusing predominantly on Private Rooms, where Amer embroidered passages from the Qur’an that pertain to women on satin garment bags, Auricchio illustrates how many decisions regarding its conception are intended to provoke. Respectfully transformed from their original Arabic to French, the Qur’anic passages resist additional transformation when confronted with their Spanish-speaking audience in Madrid. According to Auricchio, the language barrier imposed upon the Spanish-speaking audience is a reverse marginalization. In this instance, complete satisfaction is unobtainable, leaving desire in its wake due to the many transformations the text has already made from its original Arabic.

This thesis intervenes in Auricchio’s argument, which features prominently in the intersectional discussion. However, where this thesis diverges is through the assertion that Amer’s process and product are a reflection of her intersectional identity; put differently, I argue that there is a purposeful infusion of simultaneity in her work that reflects a postmodern reality. This thesis asserts that Amer creates a more complex vision of identity than the previously

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3 Ibid., 15.
4 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
explored notion of desire that both Breitz and Auricchio use to ground their arguments. Rather, I position desire as subordinate to her expression of the intersectional.

Maura Reilly’s monograph, *Ghada Amer*, is the most extensive collection of her work to date, including a 50-page essay that orients her art as the visual manifestation of Hélène Cixous’s *écriture féminine*. Reilly cites two important Cixous essays in the context of her argument: “Castration or Decapitation?” and “The Laugh of the Medusa.” Cixous outlines the ways in which women are forced into a submissive position. The reinforcement of male authority occurs in what she coins *the lack of lack*. She asserts that the body becomes sexualized at the point of castration and that woman does not inherently suffer from envy. In other words, a woman lacks the yearning to have a phallus. However, within this symbolic system, man is fashioned as deity and master; he gives woman definition and reminds her to be aware of her absence and he establishes that without him she ceases to exist. The construction of her argument is meandering, but there are clear parallels that can be drawn between her work and Amer’s. More specifically, she is co-opting and subverting signs that would once have been symbols of female submission and consequently exposing the system and structures that allowed them to flourish.

Even more influential in Reilly’s argument is Cixous’s “The Laugh of the Medusa,” which serves as a companion piece to “Castration or Decapitation?” Cixous asserts her skepticism of Freud and in a forceful voice encourages women to reclaim their individual narratives by writing their bodies. *Écriture féminine* is the style of writing that rejects the

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7 Hélène Cixous and Annette Kuhn, "Castration or Decapitation?," *Signs* 7, no. 1 (1981): 46.
8 Ibid.
dominant male discourse. This concept is particularly important in Amer’s oeuvre, as Reilly argues that it is from this position that most of her art is conceived.\textsuperscript{11} Reilly argues that unwittingly Amer’s work often closely parallels the discourse presented in these select few essays by Cixous, specifically drawing from them at multiple points. Starting with artworks produced in the early 1990s, Reilly wrestles Amer’s entire oeuvre into this framework. Even a period of significant departure and eclecticism that occurred in the early 2000s are forcibly maneuvered to fit within this reading/stricture. Despite the aforementioned accommodations, Reilly creates a compelling and tightly integrated argument. This is understandable as she is the author of multiple interviews and essays on the topic, in addition to curating Amer’s first U.S. survey, \textit{Ghada Amer: Love Has No End}, while she was serving as the founding curator of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum in 2008. However, like most of the literature on Amer, Reilley reiterates the artist’s feminist inclinations and takes on the challenge of trying to wrangle a lifetime’s worth of work into a relatively narrow theoretical frame. Authors such as Breitz and to a lesser extent Aurricchio seemingly echo Reilly’s approach by adding a bit more to the dialogue, but still maintaining generalized interpretations that arrive out of feminist thinking.

More generally, Griselda Pollock’s essay, “Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity,” is relevant in establishing the structure of gender power relations as a key component in defining modernity. Reilly specifically cites Pollock’s \textit{spaces of femininity} in discussing Amer’s \textit{Cinq Femmes au Travail}, in which images of women performing acts of domestic reproduction are embroidered into the surfaces of the canvasses.\textsuperscript{12} Not only does the imagery fulfill Pollock’s

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 14.
notion, but Amer also iterates it by using the materiality of the needle and thread, leaving little room for any alternative interpretation. Pollock’s essay is also directly referenced in the naming of Amer’s later work, *Les Flâneuses* (2008), where Baudelaire’s flâneur has been appropriated by the female sex.

Comparisons made to Amer in the literature go in many different directions. Reilly places Amer among the pantheon of feminist artists such as Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, and Tracey Emin. Auricchio follows in a similar vein by comparing Amer to Kate Walker, Judy Chicago, and Elaine Reichek. Jean Robertson takes a different approach, for she makes a strong case for both male predecessors (Jackson Pollock and Clyfford Still) as well as female ones (Eva Hesse and Yoko Ono). In an interview with Julie Belcove, Amer herself confirms her affinity for the formalism of Abstract Expressionism, specifically citing the work of Mark Rothko as a significant influence. Thomas Witten-Pincus draws postcolonial comparisons to Shirin Neshat and Kufic calligraphy. It is important to note that while all of these comparisons seek to address Amer’s artistic practice in one way or another, scholars to this point have been too preoccupied with Amer’s feminist inclinations and Middle Eastern identity to give much consideration to additional interpretations. I will argue here that an intersectional reading of Amer’s work not only encompasses past interpretations but also addresses the concept of simultaneity, which is an integral and unexamined aspect her work.

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13 Ibid.
14 Auricchio.
Amer’s medium coupled with the imagery in *Cinq Femmes au Travail* and works like *La Jaune* create a relationship that start to take the viewer in yet a different direction. The connection between these artworks draws attention not only to women, but more specifically the work women perform. The materialist theoretical ground that informs the discussion of Amer’s work involves four subcategories of literature: affective labor, embodied labor, materialist feminism, and immaterial labor. Hardt and Negri’s *Empire* (2000) serves as the basis for a postmodern theory of labor. Emphasis is placed on the deconstruction and fragmentation of systems whose relationships were once directly observable into a complex array of forces that oscillate between agency and interdependence. Of particular concern nestled within their theory is an understanding of the biopolitical framework that reproduces biopower, defined as:

> the power of the creation of life; it is the production of collective subjectivities, sociality, and society itself. More important, biopower is the power of the emerging forces of governmentality to create, manage, and control populations the power to manage life.¹⁸

This definition serves as the basis for understanding the role of affective labor, or “the production and reproduction of life,” as envisioned by Hardt.¹⁹ More commonly, affective labor is often considered to be care work. According to Hardt and Negri, biopower is what is produced in the networks of affective labor.²⁰ In Hardt and Negri’s biopolitical framework, forces and their relationships to one another dematerialize; they become harder to locate and their borders blur. The labor that proliferates under this model is immaterial, of which affective labor can be categorized. However, for materialist feminists, the body is a tangible site of oppression upon which the very concept of feminism relies. Further to this point, as Susanne Schultz asserts,

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¹⁹ Ibid., 100.
²⁰ Ibid., 98.
Hardt and Negri’s adoption of the term “affective labor” is actually a retooling of what feminist analyses have referred to as “women’s work” or also commonly described as “labor in the bodily mode.”

Angela McRobbie builds upon Schultz’s feminist reading of Empire by maintaining that “forms of biopolitics re-stratify society in more complex ways than before, while at the same time ensuring the maintenance of existing social hierarchies.” The concept of a “soft façade,” where things appear superficially to be different but in fact maintain old relationships, is specifically addressed in regard to late capitalism in relational artworks. McRobbie points out that social hierarchies follow in a similar fashion. McRobbie finds additional support in the writing of Joanna Oksala, who echoes many similar sentiments but argues that the category of affective labor in itself is an oppressive structure. Oksala agrees that affective labor is gendered but that the variety of labor that gets lumped under the affective classification actually ends up obscuring forms of exploitation and oppression, with capitalism reaping the benefits of this convolution. Oksala acknowledges that Kathi Weeks makes an effort to reconfigure the affective classification. Weeks proposes a broader paradigm that takes the original Marxist division of reproduction/production and replaces it with a life/work model. In formulating this approach, Weeks proposes a slight shift from that of Hardt and Negri. Oksala argues that in

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Weeks’ effort to deemphasize the gendering of affective labor she perpetuates oppression as the
divisions have become too broad to aid in resistance efforts. In this way Weeks is more closely
theoretically aligned with Hardt and Negri.

While Schultz, McRobbie, Oksala, and Weeks are responding directly to Hardt and
Negri, Julia Bryan-Wilson and Angela Dimitrakaki address women’s labor specifically within
the context of the Artworld. In “Dirty Commerce: Art Work and Sex Work since the 1970’s,”
Bryan-Wilson redefines art, work, and sex to produce new relations and continues to assert
connections between art and prostitution. Bryan-Wilson outlines a series of artists who use sex
work in order to disrupt conventions and create allegorical comparisons between sex work and
affective labor, such as Andrea Fraser’s 2003 Untitled. Some of the artists featured in her text,
like WochenKlausur, a collective whose project on drug addiction culminated in a halfway house
for prostitutes that was open for 6 years, “probe the punitive political economies of feminized
labor and move into advocacy.”

Considering Amer’s imagery, process, and product, her artwork could easily be included
among Bryan-Wilson’s case studies. Dimitrikaki identifies connections between affective labor,
mobility, and the Artworld. She contends that even female artists operating within a social justice
context are unwillingly subjected to the art market’s capitalist forces. While Otherness can
garner “exotic” cache,

______________________________________________________________________________
25 Oksala.
26 Julia Bryan-Wilson, "Dirty Commerce: Art Work and Sex Work since the 1970s," differences
27 Ibid., 105.
not all varieties of cultural Otherness are welcome by the market as the alpha art institution. Instead, market and institutions subordinate to it are in a position to regulate entry, so that different cultural others can exist in a competitive, antagonistic relationship.\(^{28}\)

This notion connects to Bryan-Wilson’s argument by drawing comparisons between women who engage in a variety of careers but share similarities in socioeconomic experience. According to Dimitrikaki, woman always operates from a disadvantaged position and various identities can further complicate that disadvantage. Amer engages in similar comparisons with the work she performs as an artist and the women she depicts on the surface of her canvasses.

Amer’s intersectional identities feature prominently in her work. While this approach is still nascent theoretical terrain, the parameters around who can claim this identity are debated. Black feminists argue that for Black women race is inextricably linked with gender. African-American feminists have developed their own voices instead of working in what was deemed the faulty, second-wave, White feminist framework. Since its inception stemming from Black Feminism, our understanding of intersectionality has broadened to highlight complexity and explore how axes of difference overlap in dynamic ways. The impetus for one side of this debate is best represented in the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw:

Black women sometimes experience discrimination in ways similar to white women’s experiences; sometimes they share very similar experiences with Black men. Yet often they experience double discrimination—the combined effects of practices which discriminate on the basis of race, and on the basis of sex. And sometimes, they experience discrimination as Black women—not the sum of race and sex discrimination, but as Black women.\(^{29}\)

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The focus of this initial model has since expanded to include overlapping sites of marginalization as feminism’s principles of inclusivity in the postmodern era looked to reconcile an exclusive movement in its midst. In Inclusive Feminism: A Third Wave Theory of Women's Commonality, Naomi Zack suggests that intersectional feminism should stress that commonality be more aligned with feminism’s theoretical intentions to promote unification and thwart the dilution and fragmentation that threatens its ability to create real change.30 Zack doesn’t suggest that difference remain unidentified, but rather that woman be the first point of solidarity and commonality upon which all women can claim. For Zack the site of woman is the first point of a marginalized identity that can overlap with physical ability, race, class, and sexuality to multiply an initial marginalization and create what is more commonly considered the definition of “intersectional” today. Such a reading is closer to the one envisioned in this thesis.

Amer’s and Sheila Pepe’s work are analyzed through this intersectional lens, drawing heavily upon the principle of simultaneity. It is this aspect that not only draws upon intersectional theory but also differentiates these two unique artists from their feminist fiber-art predecessors. Amer follows in a rich lineage of female fiber artists attested by Rozika Parker’s seminal text, The Subversive Stitch, and other more recent written contributions such as Julia Bryan-Wilson’s Fray and the anthology of essays Inside the Visible. In a class- and gender based analysis, Parker chronicles the Victorian misinterpretation of medieval social circumstances as support for associating embroidery with the sphere of femininity. This was misguided as during the medieval period both men and women actively embroidered and the hierarchical divisions

between media did not exist.\(^{31}\) Furthermore, as Bryan-Wilson notes, Parker documents how “craft methods have been coded, deployed, and politicized over time.”\(^{32}\) The stitch, as Parker points out, has been used as an instrument of gendered oppression but chronicles how women artists throughout history have successfully co-opted and subverted the medium. At first glance, Amer fits seamlessly among her second wave predecessors, Kate Walker’s *Wife Is a Four Letter Word*, Margaret Harrison’s doilies, Faith Ringgold’s *Family of Woman* series, and specific aspects of Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro’s *Womanhouse* collective just to name a few. While these artworks make inroads by considering the heritage of embroidery and fiber as a more appropriate medium than painting for making their feminist statements, Amer’s and Pepe’s intersectional identities look to address these connections amongst formalist hierarchies, women’s work, class and still other considerations. The intersectional simultaneity infused in their respective artworks is what moves these two artists out of the second wave and into postfeminist territory.

Before arriving at Pepe in order to make the most appropriate comparison possible, other artists showed the potential to make worthwhile associations. More specifically, Eva Hesse’s notion of contingency feels compellingly postmodern. William S. Wilson contends that Hesse “was able to see what happens to a system, where it begins and ends, as when an edge is reached and so might be left as a raw edge, or joined to another edge, or two edges of something are wrapped around and adhered to each other.”\(^{33}\) Hesse’s interest in seeing the edges and then

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breaking through those parameters to test their strength is the formal proof for the dissolution of constructed categories that both Amer and Pepe explore in their artworks. In much of the literature Tracy Emin is regarded as one of the most significant third-wave feminist fiber artists; however, openly embracing the celebrity that her second-wave antecedents eschewed on one hand signals her contemporary affiliation but on the other seems at odds with Amer. Additionally, Emin’s playful use of sexual innuendo seems to connect more to Hesse than Amer.

The following chapters contribute to this combined body of literature by offering two additional lenses from which to consider Amer’s work. The first chapter provides the basis and support for viewing a selection of Amer’s oeuvre as a materialist expression while the second chapter builds upon this analysis by offering an intersectional interpretation. Through this approach this thesis seeks to be a novel contribution to the discourse concerning Ghada Amer.
Ghada Amers wields her medium with unassuming precision. Collectively, her imagery, process, and product speak of woman’s contribution within a capitalist system. While aspects of labor usually make a brief appearance in the academic literature on her work, especially that which seeks to position it within a larger feminist endeavor (Reilly 2010, Auricchio 2001, Berwick 2006, St-Gelais 2012, and Breitz 1996), Amer’s body of work provides compelling evidence for adopting a more in-depth, materialist analysis than scholars have previously attempted. This chapter outlines how Amer’s work exhibits resistance in the themes and motifs she employs and utilizes allusions to traditional binaries as a way to enter into a discourse on both affective labor and embodiment. It seeks to further explain how the individual components (binaries, affective labor, and embodiment) converge and rely upon one another on the surface of her canvases and, in this way, articulate a materialist vision. Additionally, it will be argued that Amer participates in a visual metaphor that closely aligns with materialist feminists (specifically McRobbie, Schultz, Oksala, Owen, and Oliver) and adopts a critical stance in response to the poststructural divisions of labor attributed to Hardt, Negri, and Weeks. To these ends, with the examples that follow I will outline how Amer employs binaries as an illustrative mechanism and through her exploration and dissolution of these configurations she ultimately enters into a discussion concerning affective labor and embodiment.
Binaries

With *Cinq Femmes au Travail* (1991), Amer offers embroidered images in red thread on unprimed canvases (see fig. 1). The embroidery depicts women engaging in a variety of tasks: cleaning, shopping, and taking care of children. Even though this series was formative for Amer, she quickly abandoned this approach. According to an interview with Julie Belcove in 2011, Amer deems these initial works too “submissive.”¹ In an interview with Maura Reilly in 2010, she elaborates further upon this series:

By 1993, I wasn’t happy sewing the subject of women. I needed to develop my ideas more and was worried that an embroidered image of a woman at work—such as ironing—was a symbol of double submission.²

The iterative nature of this early series lacks the demanding subversiveness of the later pornography works but is the “eureka” moment she describes to Reilly. In this series, Amer establishes the most dominant binary in her portfolio, that of the male/female.

*Cinq Femmes au Travail* can be best described as sparse and diminutive compared to compositions that come later. The viewer is presented with tightly controlled stitches of bright red thread on beige backgrounds. Three of the four female figures are centrally placed on their picture planes leaving a significant amount of negative space on each side. Due to the stitches being placed so close together the works require careful inspection to realize the medium is thread, not paint. Occasionally, the fluidity of the contours is interrupted by knots of thread in a reserved nod to her process. Each stitch is painstakingly embroidered by hand, but this is not

¹ Belcove, 7.
abundantly evident given their precise regularity. The images, originally sourced from magazine advertisements, depict women engaged in reproductive tasks. A tall lean woman with a kerchief wielding a vacuum with a smile; a little girl being held; a woman stirring a pot in an apron, dress and heels; and a woman pushing a shopping cart through the supermarket aisles bring Amer’s motivations into greater focus.

In part Amer's own formative life experiences led her to this place. In an interview with Robert Enright and Meeka Walsh she recalls making clothes and patterns with her mother and the mends her grandmother would perform.\(^3\) In a later interview from 2013, Amer mentions that her mother, who worked by day as an engineer, had decided to take sewing classes in order to construct herself a proper suit. She also recalls,

Sewing was an activity where, when I was growing up, women would gather and sew together—my mother and all of her female friends, my grandmother, the grandmothers of all the neighbors of our house. But all of the designers were men, which was very annoying.\(^4\)

While from an early age Amer was aware of the gendered nature of labor, it was not until she applied to art school that the implications of this model became self-evident. She describes submitting a patchwork as part of her application and being rejected. She quickly comes to the realization that she was intended to submit a painting: “I was not yet aware that there were hierarchies between artistic media, with painting being the highest and craft the lowest.”\(^5\) As a result she realized that in order to progress she must pursue painting. However, succumbing to painting's gravitational pull was not a quick fix. Amer recollects old-fashioned professors who

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\(^4\) Artsy Editors, "In the Studio with Ghada Amer: Sewing and Embroidery ".

\(^5\) Reilly, "D as in Drips: A Conversation with Ghada Amer," 1.
disagreed with her choice of study due to her gender.\textsuperscript{6} She completes her education at the famed Villa Arson in Nice, which—just 6 years prior to her arrival in France in 1968—had been a hotbed of revolutionary activity that had given birth to the famous rebellious rallying cry, “Sous les pavés, la plage!”\textsuperscript{7} These experiences form the foundation of her resistance motif.

In \textit{Cinq Femmes au Travail} the personal and political mingle on the surface. A medium and imagery associated with women are juxtaposed with the masculinity of the canvas and its allusions to painting. The negotiation of these roles is far from a 19\textsuperscript{th}-century construction. In Linda Nochlin’s seminal 1971 essay, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?,” she chronicles the institutional variables associated with how art historical value is conferred. Education, Nochlin argues, was one of the most influential institutional hindrances to women’s progression in the visual arts. One facet that proved particularly difficult was access to life drawing. The importance of history painting necessitated an understanding of the male nude. Women were denied this opportunity mainly due to religious mores concerning propriety. Nochlin points out that Le Brun and Kauffman, the two pre-eminent female artists of their time, were subject to public scrutiny but more importantly garnered their unique positions due to their familial connections. Specifically, it was their associations with established male artists that allowed them to bypass the typical roadblocks.

At the end of the 1800s these restrictions started to dwindle and a trope born with literary origins, that of the lady painter, emerged. While this social change encouraged women to paint, it fashioned the serious commitment of painting into a gendered hobby that maintained old relations by keeping women in the domestic sphere so as to diminish any potential threat their

\textsuperscript{6} Amer, 29.
\textsuperscript{7} Witten-Pincus.
talent might present. Similarly, Andreas Huyssen’s “Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism’s Other” (1986) picks up where Nochlin left off: he argues that in the 19th century women became associated with mass culture and men with authentic culture. According to Huyssen, this is in part derived from Madame Bovary's association with pulp and the resulting perceived inferiority of this genre as an art form. The gendering of mass culture as female was the continued devaluing of the feminine. It was a coded form of denigration that labeled mass culture both feminine and inferior. The negative connotation was implied and transferred through simile. Women had their marginalization reinforced by Modernism, and their Otherness persisted in being the measure of the delegitimate. Together both Nochlin and Huyssen partly chronicle how the female/male binary not only presents itself but reinforces the repeated dismissal of female contributions. Through the interrogation of this wider gender binary, Nochlin and Huyssen illustrate how it intersects and activates other binaries, namely, that of high/low art.

In La Jaune (see fig. 2), as in the overwhelming majority of her pornography-related/inspired works, we are presented solely with images of women either engaged sexually with other women or masturbating. Specifically culled from the pages of Western pornography, in this work Amer offers to the viewer female figures who do not rely upon male counterparts for their pleasure. Yet the viewer recognizes the source of these images: the choreographed poses and staged stares unmistakably signal the constructed aspects of pornography. In confronting the manufactured nature of the images, the viewer is reminded of the source material and

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9 Ibid., 46.
10 Ibid., 53.
subsequently of the male gaze that activates the images. The dominance of the male binary comes into sharper focus even while the canvasses exclude representation of the male form.

As Maura Reilly points out, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Amer started to experiment with her well-established formula by subjecting her figures to a broader scope of configurations borrowed from Abstract Expressionist artists. She builds upon her already-existing allusions to Pollock by including the likes of Barnett Newman and Joseph Albers.\textsuperscript{11} In \textit{La Ligne} (\textbf{fig. 4}) we are presented with the verticality of a Newman zip (\textbf{fig. 5}), and in \textit{The New Albers} (\textbf{fig. 6}) her female figures conform to the strict geometry of its namesake (\textbf{fig. 7}). With this process, Amer is drawing parallels between two sets of oppositional binaries, not only that of male/female but also that of art/craft. By borrowing the visual language of high Modernism the dominant male binary has a more pronounced presence than before. Here, however, we are confronted with the collision of male/female with yet another construction: that of the art-historical narrative. Amer executes her paintings in thread on the grand scale of her Abstract Expressionist predecessors, using a needle to perform the work of women to depict the work of women all the while reminding the viewer that labor is gendered and situated within a patriarchal framework.

Turning to a more recent work from 2005, \textit{The Diplomat and His Beloved Wife} (\textbf{fig. 8}), Amer strays even further from her original formula. The white canvas alternates between a series of repeated pornographic images that are arranged in horizontal lines. Over the top of the stitched images Amer reinforces the composition’s horizontality by painting additional colorful lines that read from afar as stripes. Looking carefully one observes a departure; there is a phallus at the

Fig. 7. Josef Albers, *Homage to the Square: Apparition*, 1959. Oil on Masonite, 47 ½ x 47 ½ in. *Source*: Guggenheim.
center of *The Diplomat and His Beloved Wife* in what appears to be scenes depicting group sex. Amer conditions her audience by repeatedly exposing the dominance of the male binary through the absence of its representation. However, through the gesture of including the phallus she destabilizes the hierarchy. In order to prevent the total collapse of the composition, she pivots by returning to the Abstract Expressionists. Yet this time instead of calling forth a Newman or Albers, we see the subtle horizontal stripes of a female counterpart, Agnes Martin (fig. 9). This flip in the work can be interpreted as just one example of what Maria Elena Buszek in her essay, “Pleasure/Principle,” refers to as Amer’s use of many “permutations.” In this gesture Amer’s surprising configuration mirrors the shifting that both Angela McRobbie (2009, p.122) and subsequently Louise Owen (2012, p.81) elaborate upon:

> The conditions of possibility for political action in this irony-saturated discursive environment are alarmingly obscured: the young woman in contemporary political and popular culture is asked to reconcile autonomy and the possibility of achievement with compliancy with a patriarchal order which is dissolved, decentralized, and nowhere to be seen.13

Amer’s moving target parallels a modern reality wherein she sets up the binary, acknowledges a hierarchy, then seeks to destabilize these understandings by drawing attention to their intrinsic slipperiness. Forces strategically appear and disappear, conceal and reveal both physically and metaphorically on her picture planes. Her visual motifs work in tandem with reality to expose the mechanics of power relationships that may have otherwise maintained their allusiveness.

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Fig.9. Agnes Martin, *Untitled #5*, 1998. Acrylic and graphite on canvas, 60 x 60 in. *Source*: Guggenheim.
In *Cinq Femmes au Travail*, however, Amer provides the visual manifestation of these binary relationships by utilizing the symbolic value of medium, process, and image. She draws the viewers’ attention to yet a third intersection that illustrates a relationship between affective labor and embodied labor. The work that her figures perform is affective, embodied, and gendered. Cooking, cleaning, child rearing, and grocery shopping are all activities that are concerned with maintaining the comfort of individuals. Hardt defines this type of labor as immaterial, “even if it is corporeal and affective, in the sense that its products are intangible: a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, passion—even a sense of connected-ness or community [is produced].”\(^{14}\)

Returning to both *Cinq Femmes au Travail* and *La Jaune*, Amer presents the viewer with a spectrum of affective work separated by socioeconomic class. In the quadriptych the women signal their middle-class affiliations. The domestic nature of the tasks the women are performing in most instances suggests that they do not seek employment outside the home. If this is indeed the case it would indicate there is an invisible partner that participates in the workforce. In the pornography works, by contrast, Amer is showing us another affective laborer that is actively employed outside the sphere of domesticity: the adult performer. The women depicted in *Cinq Femmes au Travail* and *La Jaune* are at first glance seemingly miles apart in their tasks, yet they are in fact united in their affective classification. Both the housewife and the adult performer are equally concerned with maintaining the affects of others.

\(^{14}\) Hardt, 96.
In an interview with Maura Reilly from 2010, Amer describes *Cinq Femmes au Travail* as a “manifesto” of sorts. She provides the four images of women working with a title that alludes to a fifth, herself. This admission illustrates that Amer is drawing parallels between the work of the woman artist and that of the woman who performs domestic tasks. In “Dirty Commerce: Art Work and Sex Work since the 1970s,” Julia Bryan-Wilson articulates the connections between domestic work, sex work, and art work in part by noting that in 1971 Lucy Lippard stated that it was far easier for a woman to participate secondarily in the Artworld than to be the artist herself. Lippard believes that the woman critic, curator, and historian are essentially performing the task of domestic maintenance outside the traditional sphere of domesticity. While Lippard drawing comparisons between affective tasks in the 1970s was not a new endeavor, Bryan-Wilson ultimately cautions against their conflation;

> To imply that art work and sex work are mirror economies of each other is to ignore the real struggles, exploitations, and hardships of sex work and to diminish the real privileges, access, cultural value, and capital that accompany artistic work.

For Bryan-Wilson, the boundaries of the affective classification blur as care work is not performed by women solely nor by women of the same economic station, and yet the overwhelming majority of persons who engage in affective labor are women. As Bryan-Wilson alludes, Hardt and Negri’s affective classification serves as both an acknowledgement and problem for many socialist feminists. The debate on affective and immaterial labor has primarily focused on women; however, the lack of feminist perspective in these readings stems from Hardt and Negri’s biopolitical framework. The failure to foreground gender in favor of social class becomes of significant interest

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17 Ibid., 101.
to Marxist feminists. This creates a polemical debate where attempts to locate gender within a post-structural understanding of affective labor becomes problematized.

In “Life Within and Against Work: Affective Labor, Feminist Critique, and Post-Fordist Politics,” Kathi Weeks seeks to de-emphasize the gendered notion of affective labor by restructuring our understanding based on a work/life dichotomy. Weeks suggests that a work/life framework aligns more to the post-Fordist/poststructural era by being more inclusive of people who perform affective labor. Since this type of labor doesn’t create a commodity that can be traded in the marketplace, it was an unacknowledged source of production under the Marxist model. The failure of the model to account for affective labor, which consequently was performed most often in the home by women, was determined by feminists to be an oppressive omission. Weeks seeks to remedy the nature of how Marx’s original model has been interpreted by not only offering a reinterpretation of the types of work that constitute labor but also by de-emphasizing oppressive and exclusionist interpretations of this theory that have prevailed.

Angela McRobbie contends that Weeks is providing a feminist response yet notes she is drawing upon Hardt and Negri’s troublesome framework. Following in the same vein, Weeks presents a social-focused, depoliticized theoretical framework that foregrounds class in favor of gender. This creates an allusion of progressive inclusivity, where the identity of its subjects supposedly has little to no bearing on their division. Class, according to McRobbie, is “a set of antagonistic relations formed in the struggle between capital and labor.” But if we accept this understanding, how would Weeks’ reorganization thwart these existing antagonisms?¹⁸ She asserts that the gender or ethnicity a subject provides is a more telling dimension in the locations of

¹⁸ McRobbie, The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change, 61.
struggle. The essence of McRobbie’s argument is that “such forms of biopolitics re-stratify society in more complex ways than before, while at the same time ensuring the maintenance of existing social hierarchies.” The capitalist façade softens in the biopolitical masquerade, all in the name of inclusivity. Yet, by dismissing the interconnectivity between gender and ethnicity upon class in favor of an all-encompassing social understanding of affective labor, inclusivity becomes weaponized. As a consequence, Hardt and Negri fail accurately to acknowledge the variables that contribute to a certain population’s marginalization and oppression within the capitalist system.

Also, unlike Weeks, Susanne Schultz, in “Dissolved Boundaries and “Affective Labor”: On the Disappearance of Reproductive Labor and Feminist Critique in Empire,” argues that Hardt and Negri’s dissolution of productive and reproductive labor into a biopolitical paradigm only in theory accepts affective labor into the fold but fails to address specifically how marginalized variables (i.e., gender) operate any differently under these conditions. Schultz argues that if biopolitical power hinges on the production and reproduction of bodies and brains (affect and intelligence) and affective labor is considered labor in the bodily mode, Hardt and Negri’s failure to acknowledge gendered differentiations through the expanded use of the immaterial classification allows and perpetuates a traditional understanding of the gendered division of labor.

Joanna Oksala similarly takes issue with Weeks’s reinterpretation of Marx and the resulting implications for feminist theory. Weeks’s suggestion that labor should be constituted based on a

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19 Ibid., 62.
20 Ibid., 63.
21 Schultz, 2.
work/life dichotomy is aligned more with Hardt and Negri’s poststructural model. By contrast, Oksala argues fault in this shift as it encourages de-emphasizing the inherently gendered component of affective labor and ignores its oppressive tendencies. She contends that if a capitalist system is still based on access to resources and those resources are acquired through an individual’s ability to compete actively in the economic game, then a woman bearing the bodily burden of reproduction is inherently disadvantaged. Oksala ultimately argues that by diminishing the role of gender and treating all experiences the same we end up further obscuring forms of oppression and exploitation.

When seen as a collective, McRobbie, Schultz and Oksala offer an understanding of affective labor that I believe is mirrored visually in the relationship that Amer creates between Cinq Femmes au Travail and La Jaune. She presents a spectrum of affective experiences from the domestic (cleaning, cooking, and child rearing) to the sexual (pornography). She reveals the strength of the gendered variable by referencing the traditional binary as an illustrative device and slowly alters our understanding of this essentialist categorization. In Cinq Femmes au Travail the stitch is clean and precise, its stitchwork in effect drawing attention to the well-defined gendered parameters of domestic affective labor. As Amer’s work progresses over time, her women become sexual, they multiply, and they become less visible under loose ends. Her artistic labor mixes with that of the women she depicts. However, even as the women’s figures dissolve and come in and out of focus on the picture plane, much like the mechanisms of power in Hardt and Negri’s and Weeks’s divisions of labor, Amer consistently reminds the viewer of the importance gender plays in the overall equation. Amer—like McRobbie, Oksala and Schultz—ask, how important is gender

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22 Oksala, 299.
to foregrounding affective labor? She responds both visually and conceptually by providing the affective work of women as medium and the affective work of woman as image. Her compositions are unmitigated expressions of the importance of the gendered component of affective labor; one cannot parse the variable as it is ever present and literally embedded in every fiber of her project.

The affective spectrum that Amer presents between *Cinq Femmes au Travail* and *La Jaune* not only foregrounds gender in the debate over the division of labor but also alludes to the significance of the body in terms of a gendered contribution: for both motherhood and sex work rely upon bodily resources in the production of these respective labors. In “‘Work That Body’: Precarity and Femininity in the New Economy,” Louise Owen explains how embodied labor operates seemingly on a parallel plane and in tandem with affective labor to produce similar outcomes to what McRobbie, Oksala, and Schultz describe. Owen, building off McRobbie, takes the contemporary example of pole dancing for fitness as an example of the resurgent patriarchy under neoliberal capitalism. She contends that the focus upon freedom as a defining value in the postfeminist era has further obscured the continued utilization of older constructions of women’s work and precarity. Owen argues that both women’s work and precarity relate to service and this is the foundation upon which pole dancing was initiated. Here Owen is not only acknowledging affective labor but also the embodied aspect of this labor. Even when the activity is refashioned as exercise, bodily maintenance still pervades.

In *Cinq Femmes au Travail*, one of the four canvasses depicts a woman holding a young girl in her arms. According to Iris Marion Young, motherhood is the site of tension for the female

24 Ibid.
body. Mother in the patriarchal system signals a provider while the sexualized body signals the state of wanting or desire. The female embodies both. However, in the patriarchal order, their separation and reification through binary associations ultimately splits the body. The body is either a wanting, desirous vessel of sexual fixation (La Jaune) or a selfless provider of sustenance and support (Cinq Femmes au Travail). Young makes an important point; “It is in our bodies that the sacrifice that creates and sustains patriarchy is reenacted repeatedly. Freedom for women involves dissolving this separation.” Yet, as Anita Harris notes in our current economy, new discourses of desire disassociate sexual activity and reproduction and as result place a premium on the ideal state of a woman’s body: young and child-free. Young and Harris present the same paradox regarding embodiment that Schultz, Oksala, and McRobbie identify in affective labor.

Kelly Oliver echoes her fellow feminists:

Feminists must continue to diagnose the ways in which changing popular images and figurations of motherhood, sexuality, and pregnant embodiment enhance freedoms for women even while at the same time they discipline, constrict, and limit women’s freedom.

Under modern capitalism, as old boundaries shift and break down and new configurations form, the very freedoms that the new configurations seek to address and rectify can instead become mechanisms for continued oppression.

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26 Ibid., 88.
By incorporating images of women in *Cinq Femmes au Travail* and *La Jaune*, Amer addresses not only the established breadth of the affective classification (reproductive work and sex work) but also the corresponding embodied split (desired vessel and nurturing vessel). The two concepts are so completely enmeshed with one another it makes them almost unperceivable, but that is precisely the point. Amer subtly draws your attention to the complexity of the host of converging connotations in an illustrative fashion, almost as if to say, “Look! See how as our understanding shifts the relationships that exist become harder to locate.” Just as borders and boundaries dissolve under capitalism, so do Amer’s figures, but not entirely. No matter how obscured or illegible they become under a tangle of loose threads they remain indelibly fixed in their locations on the canvas. This is a reminder that as divisions of labor shift and the borders of the body become less defined old power structures still maintain their stronghold. The remnants of the figures that are legible in *La Jaune* raise the question: “In light of the dissolution of the borders in both labor and embodiment, regarding the distribution of power, how far from the original model of oppression have we actually progressed?” Amer seems to suggest that capitalism benefits from maintaining aspects of these old understandings while simultaneously obfuscating their stubborn, protean existence.

From Amer’s utilization of binaries to the embroidered figures and the loose ends that strategically conceal and reveal, she composes a highly illustrative and complex visual conceit. If in the division of labor primary focus is placed upon class on one hand, the constructed and essentialist aspects of gender are de-emphasized. However, on the other hand, the rhetorical nature of this stance within the biopolitical framework disavows discussion of biological embodiment. This polemical, zero-sum game has served to “disarticulate feminism as a coherent political movement while simultaneously taking some of its demands into account, thus seemingly
invalidating the need for any further political action.”29 It is the magic of capitalism to provide the allusion of differentiation, equality, and inclusivity while concurrently profiting from the lack of nuance. In the reconfiguration of affective labor under capitalism, embodiment follows in a similarly formulaic fashion. As traditional boundaries seemingly dissolve, the whole becomes more fractured and complex, thereby obscuring the mechanisms of power but ultimately maintaining the old oppressive structures. This leaves women, their bodies, and the affective labor they perform operating from an all-too-familiar position of disadvantage.

Thérèse St-Gelais maintains that Amer presents “an atypical reverse view of the canon. [Her work] offers a vision of cultures and knowledge systems that shifts the Others from their expected position without relocating them.”30 An example to which St-Gelais refers is that marginalized populations maintain their precarity under new divisions of labor. Amer acknowledges Otherness by identifying multiple sites of marginalization in her compositions. The next chapter explores Amer’s depiction of Otherness through her work and the relationship between the instability of the intersectional position in the context of capitalism.

29 Owen, 81.
CHAPTER 2

In “Intersectional and Cross-Movement Politics and Policies: Reflections on Current Practices and Debates,” Mieke Verloo contends that inequality is perpetuated and preserved through the repeated classification of “exclusive and exclusionary” binary pairs.1 Examples of these are “male/female, black/white, citizen/non-citizen.”2 Verloo argues that by upholding these hierarchical dichotomies in which one group is favored and the other is not, we reproduce inequality. As discussed in the previous chapter, Amer references this unhelpful binary understanding as a means of reconfiguration and dissolution. Through her process she engages in a cycle of constant negotiation and renegotiation of systems. This chapter is concerned with the model from which these reconfigurations draw.

Through the analysis of the installation Private Rooms (1998-99) and its comparison to work by artists working in a similar vein, I aim to illustrate that Amer is theoretically drawing upon an intersectional perspective grounded in an art-historical context. I will illustrate these points by interpreting her work through the lens of an intersectional methodology, in which the variables that comprise Amer’s identity (e.g., gender, ethnicity, class, and sexuality) are analyzed. In addition to referencing literature, I will use video material to foreground Amer’s voice in discussing her installation. Using these approaches, I will argue that both physically and

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metaphorically Amer acknowledges the dominant dichotomies and then reconfigures them to reflect an alternative power dynamic. Put simply, by drawing attention to these seemingly immutable structures, she seeks to call into question their stability – indeed, to act as a catalyst to destabilize them herself. She refashions an individualized intersectional identity that privileges traditionally marginalized variables and Otherness while making normativity subordinate. She does this while still referencing the inefficacy of old constructions, representing the specificity of an individual’s marginalization within the larger context of marginalized groups.

_Private Rooms_ (1998-99)

Amer’s satin closet organizer installation that traveled from the ARCO in Madrid to New York’s P.S. 1 to appear in the exhibition “Greater New York” is comprised of hanging storage solutions stitched with passages from the Quran (see _fig. 3_). Five sets of color-coordinated, three-piece closet organization systems hang from a sturdy, metallic closet rod in shades of orange, purple, grey, and blue. Each set is comprised of one zippered garment bag, sweater shelf and shoe organizer with the entirety of their silken surfaces embroidered with Quranic passages in French. The text commands your attention in the large, legible all-caps font. The statements specifically culled from the religious text for inclusion have been respectfully translated from their original Arabic and all reference women. As noted by Laura Auricchio, the number of closet organizers was ultimately dictated by the text as Amer wanted to ensure all the statements
that mention women were included and arranged one after another. Like much of Amer’s work, it is through this subtle act of appropriation from which the viewer can glean additional meaning.

Following the viewer’s initial exposure to this work, it can be difficult to discern what precisely is being resituated as every direction presents another avenue of meaning and tangle of converging relationships. In *Private Rooms* the viewer is required to reconcile both independent variables and their interdependence simultaneously; one cannot be parsed without another’s interference. *Private Rooms* is able to concurrently reference the specificity of an individual’s identity without losing sight of its relationship within the greater whole.

This complexity is mirrored in the identities of the artist herself, for this notion of interdependence or “all at oneness” that Amer’s work signals is tethered to her own identity. Amer’s identity as a nomadic, Muslim woman of color exists on the periphery where each marginalized facet of her identity is interconnected further reinforces her marginalized position. Kimberle Crenshaw’s seminal work in the area of intersectionality paves the way for a discussion of identity in the context of *Private Rooms*. Crenshaw was one of the first to articulate that groups that are located at the intersection of multiple categories of marginalized identities find themselves isolated and facing little opportunity as neither their status as a woman or person of color garners political support. Crenshaw’s ideas are echoed by Egyptian American feminist Mona Eltahawy, who has spoken of the importance of foregrounding her own voice in representing her experience. Eltahawy expressed that all too often people are speaking about and for women of color, which reinforces their silence and which has become a longstanding source

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3 Auricchio, 30.
of oppression. Crenshaw recognizes, just as Eltahway vocalizes, that when routinely spoken for, even in the name of anti-racist and feminist agendas, women of color are erased and compelled to maintain their invisibility from the socio-political sphere, from which they have been historically excluded.

A considerable theoretical dilemma that intersectionality has faced is its practical, methodological application. That is, because intersectionality is not a linear approach with a single area of focus, such as race or gender, its very complexity makes it more difficult to conceptualize and consequently to execute. In an effort to reconcile these challenges, Leslie McCall identified three major applications of intersectional theory, endorsing what she refers to as the “intercategorical approach” that seeks to explore shifting dynamics of inequality between both social groups and dimensions within them. This keeps the oppressor in sight, whereas other configurations ignore the oppressor’s role in order to place the marginalized at the forefront. Another theoretical concern is the balance of fluidity and stability with which the categories of identity should be considered. For Naomi Zack, woman is the site from which one can claim an intersectional identity, for her all women are intersectional subjects. This differs from the often-criticized, color-blind brand of second-wave feminism, as Zack argues that the intersections that occur between gender and sexuality, age, and physical ability should be criteria for determining intersectional status. Zack views intersectionality as an inclusive model of those who have been excluded, and for her womanhood is the first point in determining an

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7 Walby, Armstrong, and Strid, 227.
intersectional identity. While some intersectional scholars insist upon equal consideration of how all variables of inequity contribute in equal measure to one’s oppression and the fluidity upon which these variables are connected with one another, analysis becomes next to impossible without some sort of stable ground from which to begin.

While an attempt is made here to consider multiple intersections and their fluid connections to one another, ultimately it is Amer’s gender that most often collides with the other facets of marginalization in her work. In Private Rooms, for instance, Amer is able to cite simultaneously the broadest variable of her marginalization (gender) and explore additional factors of identity that at times mirrors her actual existence, whereas at other points she references the broader scope of marginalized identities. Her installation becomes part self-portrait, part reversal of the non-dominant binary. In this instance, the individual becomes the collective, thereby subscribing to a model much like McCall’s intercategorical approach where one never loses sight of the oppressive model for which an attempt is being made to thwart.

With Private Rooms Amer enters into an installation where space becomes a metonym for place. Working in the same medium as the pornography paintings (see Chapter 1), she breaks free of the picture plane’s constraints and swaps out some of the signifiers from her original formula. While medium remains a stand-in for gender, the figures have been replaced with letters, the flat canvas replaced with fiber sculpture, and the mobile ubiquity of the painting is replaced with a work that instead uses the specificity of place to speak of class and culture.

Private Rooms relies heavily upon translation. The transformation that the Quranic text makes from its original Arabic to French, then in turn to be installed in a Spanish- or English-

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speaking country, reflects Amer’s own journey as a cultural nomad. Amer left Egypt at 11 for France, where she spent 21 years before moving to New York. Laura Auricchio asserts “that whether in Paris or New York, Venice or Madrid, she appears in translation. Wherever she may be, her identity is inflected with the traces of other cultures, and she continually spills across local boundaries.”

Further to this point, Aurichhio argues that with every subsequent translation some of the original meaning and material is lost, never fully allowing the individual who can only experience the text in its translated form full access to its meaning. In part this act of translation illuminates the Nietzschean suspicion of language’s status as a communicative tool. Amer, like many cultural nomads, are engaged in a perpetual cycle of accumulation and deposition, of assimilation and resistance.

Amer elicits the viewers’ attention to their own level of global and intellectual sophistication by employing this technique. For a viewer in Spain to interpret the work fully, for instance, one would need to possess not only proficiency in French but also be able to recognize the source of the reconfigured text. Amer alludes to the fact that she is speaking to an economically-privileged audience from an economically privileged position, for she assumes that museum-goers must consist of groups of people with access to resources that allow for deeper cultural understanding. However, as Angela Dimitrakaki asserts, the position of the female globetrotting artist is not the same as the images that are derived from the Baudelarian flâneur, such as Bourriaud’s journey form or Griselda Pollock’s flâneuse. Instead, the female artist’s mobility is primarily focused on production and subsequent selling of artwork and bears little resemblance to the liberated, meandering, and adventurous path that Baudelaire envisioned. Rather, she contends:

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9 Auricchio, 32.
10 Ibid., 31.
[the female artist] shares much more with all those who must travel in order to find work or do their work – for example, both me and the au pairs that help me look after my daughter are contemporary mobile workers: my mobility is tied to these other women’s mobility.\textsuperscript{11}

In this instance, the convergence of culture and class through language and place once again lead the viewer to the complexity of an individual identity, one that also exists as a member of broader marginalized groups. While Amer speaks to and comes from an economically privileged position, her gendered experience as an artist positioned within this socioeconomic group bears little trace of the privilege that accompanies her male counterparts. Women artists who seemingly operate within a more economically affluent realm are often motivated into travel through the same impetus as women with less affluence. Amer is synchronously occupying a place of economic privilege and disadvantage due to her intersectional identity.

While Dimitrikaki speaks to the convergence of socioeconomic concerns, gender, and place, Pamela Lee further complicates the discussion by acknowledging the paradox of the Artworld’s enthusiastic adoption of Hardt and Negri’s stance that there no longer exists a position outside of globalization from which to analyze at a reserved distance. But this distance is precisely how the Artworld envisions itself: as a discrete, critical, and distinguishable entity from the rest.\textsuperscript{12} However, Lee points out that the Artworld has fashioned itself a limited view of globalization that often ignores socioeconomic realities. In illustration of her point, she suggests the airport as a metaphor that often underscores the struggles and conflicts associated with placelessness; while often dismissed for its banality, it is the navigation and familiarity of its terminals across the

\textsuperscript{11} Dimitrakaki, 9.  
globe that signal one’s active status within the Artworld. It is the differences in socioeconomic conditions that seemingly characterize the reasons for which members of the globetrotting Artworld and a person seeking employment to send money back home traverse the globe. And yet they are both united in their quest for access to resources. Marginalized economic position alone does not establish the intersectional subject.

In *Private Rooms* Amer uses language and site specificity to address the complexities among intersectional variables. Both Dimitrikaki and Lee provide models where one can seemingly inhabit two contrary positions at once. Economic privilege can exist in unison with economic disadvantage under a gendered umbrella. Dimitrikaki in the context of this discussion is an extrapolation upon the basic premise Lee introduces. Dimitrikaki elaborates upon how variables of marginalization such as socioeconomic class and gender complicate mobility.

The title *Private Rooms* may be an allusion to Chapter 49 of the Quran entitled Al-Hujurat (the Private Dwellings), which takes its name from the verse’s dissemination via Muhammad outside his wives’ apartments. This is not the only time Amer has looked to Muslim texts for inspiration; in an interview from 2001 concerning the newly realized show and installation that informed its namesake, entitled the *Encyclopedia of Pleasure*, she confirmed the relationship between the title and text bearing the same name the Gawami al Lada. As previously mentioned, not only the title but also the text embroidered on all of the closet organizer’s surfaces contain text borrowed from the Quran that reference women. Amer resituates all the instances woman is mentioned in the Quran into immediate succession. In this

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instance, the cross section of experiences of broader marginalized groups such as the Muslim woman comes into focus.

However, Amer talks extensively about how even these categorizations are limiting and unable to reflect fully the complexity of an individual’s identity operating within her. In a video published by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Amer contends that often in America she is first described as Egyptian and Muslim. Amer suggests that by foregrounding these particular facets of her identity, she becomes a token by being “put into a box.” To Amer, this is another form of rejection and Othering. She contends that the discussion that typically ensues surrounding her work is one concerning an East/West dichotomy. However, in an interview from 1999, she suggests that that relationship isn’t quite that direct: “The notion of identity is complex. It grows richer, evolves, and thus cannot be limited to the notion of nationality.” In a talk sponsored by the American Federation of the Arts, Amer discusses how even in France, which is often stereotyped by Westerners as more progressive than Muslim countries, there is a stigma associated with feminism. There her own painting professor in Nice refused to teach her on account of her sex. She found the attitudes there to be equally oppressive towards women, prompting the comparison, “so it didn’t matter Western or non-West.” Thus, while in Private Rooms Amer is drawing upon a text that is culturally significant, she also rejects the charged rhetoric that often accompanies its discussion and reinforces a dichotomy that characterizes the West as enlightened through comparison. Private Rooms is a nuanced expression of Amer’s

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16 Ibid.
identity and experience as a woman who is Egyptian and Muslim, but French and American as well. Being Muslim is only one aspect of this identity, yet too often for Amer it becomes the myopic focus of her work in the West.

In Private Rooms Amer has swapped her erotic female forms for letters and words. In an AFA talk, Amer explains how pornography is “the realm of the man,” and with the incorporation of text she is drawing attention to the ways woman is forced to express herself in the language of man.\(^{19}\) Here, once again, Amer expresses another permutation of the intersectional. The characters and voice are an expression of man, but the text and thread speak of woman, and the language and site specificity of the installation speak of place, culture and socioeconomic status. The translation the Quranic text endures in Private Rooms and the form the sculptures adopt speak of culture, placelessness and the dissolution of geographical boundaries. It is not coincidence that Amer speaks from her own experience. However, her identity resonates with a broader group of marginalized women whose converging marginalizations multiply their invisibility. In order to talk about the part, Amer references the whole. This notion of contingency, where an identity resides in the space between two opposites, orients Amer’s work with predecessors like Eva Hessse and positions her alongside contemporaries like Sheila Pepe.

While the literature on Amer has attempted to draw comparisons, overall these have been somewhat compartmentalized and as a result have fallen short of being able to capture the intersectional simultaneity under which Amer operates. Jean Robertson has made formal comparisons to male antecedents such Jackson Pollock and Clyfford Still but prefers to align Amer conceptually with female predecessors such as Eva Hesse, Pat Steir, and Yoko Ono.\(^{20}\)

\(^{19}\) Ibid.
\(^{20}\) Robertson.
Maura Reilly supports her theory that Amer’s oeuvre is an expression of *écriture feminine* by finding commonalities in the work of feminist artists such as Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, Rosemarie Trockel and in a subsequent generation such as Tracey Emin and Nicole Eisenman. Belcove acknowledges similarities between Amer’s work and Rothko, while Auricchio provides a comparison to Kate Walker’s *Feministo* contribution, Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party*, and Elaine Reichek’s 1999 installation at the Museum of Modern Art, *When You See This...* In the catalogue for the *Rainbow Girls* exhibition in 2014, Anne Creissels outlines similarities between Amer’s sculptures and components of Arabic architecture such as the *mashrabiya*. In the exhibition review of the show by Thomas Pincus-Witten, he mentions Tom Wesselmann, Kufic calligraphy, and Shirin Neshat all in the same breath. While these are worthwhile comparisons to consider, many of these are only able to address a narrow aspect of either Amer’s formal or conceptual practice. As a result, they neglect the aspect of the intersectional, or—as previously described—the “all-at-oneness” of her work. This aspect of simultaneity is one that differentiates Amer from most of her predecessors and contemporaries because she, more like Pepe, is able to reflect a postmodern reality by “illustrating the minor and major relationships that connect in a hyper extended environment of possibilities.”

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21 Reilly, "Writing the Body: The Art of Ghada Amer."
22 Belcove; Auricchio.
24 Pincus-Witten.
Sheila Pepe begins a 2016 talk at the School of the Visual Art in New York with photos of her family. She is quick to explain to the audience that she uses these as a type of source material in which she locates cultural artifacts that not only resonate with her personally but also have the potential to connect with and speak to the identity of a broader group of people. Pepe’s formative experiences, much like Amer’s, contribute to her desire to acknowledge multiple aspects of her identity. Pepe was raised in a Catholic family but also received a thorough indoctrination into the lesbian separatist movement. She cites Audre Lorde, who identified as a mother that was both Black and a lesbian, as being the first person within her circle to speak and give name to a multi-hyphenated identity where all the components were functioning at once. In the same talk Pepe draws a particularly applicable comparison using the optical illusion commonly referred to as Young Girl or Old Woman (fig. 10). She describes arriving at a place where you can flip easily between the two and asserts that this illustrates “having something that means more than one thing, we have these opposites but these opposites have some other type of ground that makes a sound between them.”

Both Amer and Pepe grew up in the sixties, knowing their identities existed in the margins, in the sometimes-nameless spaces between established dichotomies. In interviews, Amer has alluded to the fact that after her move to the West she experienced a strong desire to fit in and “look like the others.” While coming of age in the West, Amer’s family still retained

26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
29 Breitz, 15.
Fig. 10. German, *My Wife and My Mother-in-Law*, 19th c., illustration.
their traditional Islamic values. She wasn’t allowed to date or experiment sexually, which ultimately led to a bout of significant depression that she detailed in an interview with Carly Berwick by stating, “It was about my identity. I didn’t know who I was. I was in such a different place. I didn’t fit.”30 In an essay for *The Brooklyn Rail*, Pepe echoes similar sentiments:

> I was lonely in each of my budding identities. In art I worked at the margins as a lesbian making ceramics. In ceramics there was no room for anything other than clay and clay metaphors. And when I became a Lesbian Separatist, any reference to patriarchal art history became taboo. Everybody had rules. Learning the rules, as my assimilating Italian-American parents taught me, would alleviate the loneliness. Good at compartmentalizing, I lived in different cultures simultaneously.31

These biographical similarities shouldn’t be dismissed in the context of these artists’ work, as it is these personal experiences that inform their expression and connect with the greater whole. However, Pepe’s sexuality does play a more significant role in her marginalization than Amer’s. While this categorization means little in the context of Amer’s work, she identifies as straight.32 Both Amer and Pepe found that their narratives didn’t fit neurly into the established Western dichotomies and instead worked to “reanimate the cultures they inherited with their own personal experiences.”33

In Pepe’s *Under the F&G* ([fig. 11](#)), we are presented with an object that, in order to occupy the space in between, keeps the margins in sight. A filigree of yarn, shoelaces, and industrial rubber bands interrupts and reshapes the cool, clean gallery space. Pepe often cannibalizes old works into the new and works from drawings or creates drawings from the varied and intricate cast shadows created on the walls and floors ([fig. 12](#)) By existing in between,

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32 Berwick, 124.
we as viewers are reminded of the edges. *Under the F&G* is both organic and architectural, handmade and industrial, ephemeral and permanent, non-objective and representational, domestic and institutional, ordered and improvised, regular and varied, old and new, in and out, public and private. In *Private Rooms* Amer operates similarly, for she reminds us of the old dichotomies as a way of challenging their premises. She resists categorizations such as male and female, art and craft, East and West, rich and poor, gay and straight. This approach is primarily due to the fact that Amer, like Pepe, has had experiences outside or in between these constraints. While it is important to acknowledge that Pepe is more structured in her approach, most likely incorporating theoretical material from Greimas’s semiotic square, which attempts to conceptualize the infinite possibilities that can exist between constructions that are perceived as being diametrically opposed, this does not diminish the strong similarities of expression that can be located in both artists’ artwork.

Just as Amer, Pepe draws upon her intersectional identity to inform her practice. *Under the F&G* presents the viewer with an installation that closely corresponds with Amer’s *Private Rooms*. Pepe’s work, like Amer’s, is constantly and rapidly shifting back and forth in a postmodern exercise between the “I” and “We.” This aspect not only unites their endeavors but makes them stand out among their peers. Personal connections fire like synapses continually seeking their match in the broader system, bouncing off the rubble of broken dichotomies that once confined and constricted the very acknowledgment of the multi-hyphenated identity. Amer and Pepe illuminate the entirety of the situation, from the personal to the public to the oppressor. The fluidity of this maneuver and the way with which the work easily transitions between micro and macro make for endless conceptual extrapolation. It is here, in the sheer scope of the work, where Amer and Pepe have performed something special. This interpretation is highly contingent
upon their works being recognized as, in part, an expression of the intersectional. Past comparisons have attempted to address either Amer’s gender or ethnicity. For this to occur her work becomes a dissected shell, losing connections and material in the process. What these former comparisons have failed to acknowledge is the aspect that really makes Amer’s work stand apart from most of her contemporaries and in step with the rare-- her expression of the intersectional.

Through the close analysis of Amer’s *Private Rooms* and the subsequent comparison to Sheila Pepe, we find ample support for interpreting Amer’s work as an expression of the intersectional. The threads with which her compositions are composed cannot stand alone. They literally and metaphorically illustrate the connections upon which Amer’s work relies. When these threads are snipped or when aspects of her identity are parsed, we fail to see the whole and the work loses its potency. Ghada Amer’s compositions are unequivocal expressions of the intersection.
CONCLUSION

Amer’s work calls for two novel interpretive approaches. While the literature surrounding her has explored single aspects of her identity in relation to her production, the approach here seeks to complicate previous attempts by adopting materialist and intersectional lenses. Through the employment of these methods this thesis attempts to illuminate underarticulated conceptual avenues in the works of Ghada Amer.

In her body of work, over time and across media, Amer wields the domestic as both a medium and a subject. She employs the notion of binaries as a way to enter into a materialist discussion concerning their very dissolution and resulting permutations. In La Ligne and The New Albers, Amer establishes clear compositional connections to male predecessors. However, Amer always balances her gendered formula. If the composition and scale connote man, then the medium, labor, and use of representation connote woman. Specifically, in The Diplomat and His Beloved Wife, Amer toys with this formula by calling forth a female Abstract Expressionist and incorporating one of very few phallic representations in her oeuvre. Through visually addressing these dichotomies then manipulating them to her own ends, Amer is calling attention to the slipperiness of their meaning and to the often invisible mechanisms of power that exist between gendered variables.

In comparing Cinq Femmes au Travail and La Jaune, both compositions that feature women working, Amer’s utilization of the female figure is analyzed and interpreted using a materialist lens. Amer’s figures in these compositions are united in their affective classification and divided by their socioeconomic positions. Both the housewife and the adult performer in
these respective works are concerned with maintaining the affects of others, yet the status the positions occupy is a differentiating factor. Visually she is drawing connections between these types of work and using her process (sewing) and medium (fiber) to address the gendered nature of affective labor. The dissolution of her female figures into non-objectivity serves as a visual metaphor that reinforces the conceptual that in turn reflects a postmodern reality. As Amer’s figures become distorted and obscured under tangles of thread, so too do the boundaries and classifications which are thrust upon them.

Materialist feminists such as McRobbie, Schultz, and Oksala argue that Hardt and Negri’s conception of immaterial labor favors a biopolitical understanding where gender becomes subordinate to socioeconomic class. This is considered problematic for feminists as capitalism provokes struggle, of which gender is a site of socio-economic inequality. Ignoring this inequity in favor of Hardt and Negri’s broad framework presents the illusion of boundary dissolution without actually delivering on it. In fact, both McRobbie and Oksala argue that the ways in which boundaries seemingly dissolve is a tool of oppression that capitalism can use deftly to obscure further the mechanisms of power in order to claim equality and inclusivity while covertly continuing to maintain old dynamics. Embodiment functions very much in the same way; as the divisions of labor seemingly dissipate, so do the boundaries of the body. As Harris notes, in the current economy, sexual desire and reproduction have become disassociated. Capitalism benefits most from the woman whose body is young and child-free as she is both desired and able to work unencumbered.\(^1\) Oliver specifically speaks to this by cautioning that as

\(^{1}\) Harris, 40.
figurations of female embodiment change, the freedoms that are gained may leave space for formulas of continued oppression to form.²

Amer’s compositions reflect an understanding of this conceptual material and seem to articulate analogous relations between the gendered division of labor and embodiment. As her figures succumb to the differing permutations and the lines of their bodies stretch into illegibility, our understanding as viewers shifts and we catch a glimpse of an alternative understanding. However, her figures never fully disappear, for their bodies are indelibly stitched into their locations on the canvas, never capable of absolute relocation. The oppression of their categorization is neither completely dissolved nor forgotten and in fact remains still very much intact.

The model from which Amer draws is intersectional. Her work is in constant fluctuation between the part and the whole, the postmodern “I” and “We.” She addresses the variables of oppression that she has experienced and places her understanding in context alongside the broader population of oppressed identities. In the installation *Private Rooms*, for instance, Amer fully incorporates these variables of marginalized identity through medium, process, and product. More specifically, in the installation she uses location, language, image, and medium to address the interconnectivity of the identities associated with the intersectional position. Gender, ethnicity, class, and sexuality become enmeshed. Attempting to rest analysis of her work on a singular facet by trying to follow the path of one thread is futile since all of the facets, like all of the threads, are closely bound together. That is, they exist as a tangle of inseparability that

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² Oliver, 776.
functions as a mirror of Amer’s own complex identity. One marginalized aspect of identity is inextricably linked to others.

In addition to *Private Rooms*, which illustrates the multiplication of marginalization associated with the intersectional subject, Amer is able to ground her work firmly by accomplishing simultaneity. The ability to cite concurrently a piece while referencing the whole happens repeatedly within the installation. In this way Amer’s work operates in a very similar fashion to that of Sheila Pepe. While it has been noted that the literature has supported comparisons to a variety of artists, none have been able to capture this truly differentiating facet of her work. This “all-at-oneness” not only defines Amer’s work as an expression of the intersectional but also supports a more compelling argument for comparing her to Pepe.

Like Amer, Pepe uses her own intersectional identity as a point of departure. In *Under the F&G*, Pepe has created an installation that exists in the space between contingencies. As an installation made from previously cannibalized works, *Under the F&G* is neither permanent nor fully ephemeral, neither old nor new. The work is woven by hand from manufactured shoelaces that make it both handmade and industrial, regular and varied. The expression of identity in Pepe’s work is both public and private. Like Amer, Pepe shows us identities that exist in the often-unacknowledged spaces between established dichotomies. This, in turn, draws attention to the inefficacy of these constructions to represent adequately the breadth and complexity of a contemporary reality. The ability for both artists to keep track simultaneously of the personal, public, and oppressor allows for a proper investigation of how marginalization operates, but more specifically how marginalization is multiplied in the intersectional subject. Through the illustration of converging identities and the employment of simultaneity, Amer’s work convincingly supports an intersectional interpretation.
While an attempt has been made here to establish Amer’s fiber work as both an expression of materialist and intersectional concepts in the last few years, it is worth noting in this context that she has been working on establishing herself as an interdisciplinary artist by widening her media repertoire. While continuing the fiber work for which she is well known, Amer has spent a significant amount of time developing her metal and ceramic sculpture. Conceptual similarities between her fiber work and sculptures are relatively unexplored terrain ripe for further investigation. These additional aspects of Amer’s work, which space does not allow for me to explore in this thesis, speak to the ways in which the approach I have adopted here might be explored further, as well as to the fact of the artist’s continuing ability to challenge, undermine, and expand contemporary art.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


