

GHADA AMER

Breathe Into Me

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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alarm; fright; fear; trepidation; panic; apprehension. (From *A Dictionary of the English Language*
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PLEASURE/PRINCIPLE

Maria Elena Buszek

*Feminism must increase women's pleasure
and joy, not just decrease our misery.*

CAROLE S. VANCE ¹

Feminism can be empowered by seduction.

GHADA AMER ²

FEW TOPICS HAVE CAUSED more debate within the long history of feminism than those of sexuality and pleasure. Since the late eighteenth century feminist activists, scholars, and artists have tangled with the issue of whether the representation of women's pleasure liberates them from or enforces traditional patriarchal notions of womanhood. While feminist thinkers have offered a wide and influential range of contemporary discourse on the ways in which women are victimized and manipulated through the representation of pleasure, Ghada Amer is part of a long tradition of others who have argued for the necessity of pleasure—in all its complex manifestations—as both an activist strategy and a human right.

Naturally, finding visual languages that perform this task has been difficult—as many artists have learned, efforts to incorporate the highly individualized yet powerful realm of pleasure with the consensus-seeking goals of politics are downright impossible. As bell hooks has put this conundrum for feminism: “It has been a simple task for women to describe and criticize negative aspects of sexuality as it has been socially constructed in sexist society; to expose male objectification and dehumanization of women; to denounce rape, pornography, sexualized violence, incest, etc. It has been a far more difficult task for women to envision new sexual paradigms, to change the norms of sexuality.”³ It is undeniable that representations of women in both the art world and popular culture have frequently portrayed womanhood according to patriarchal myths that feminism has sought to deny. Yet women have always found pleasure and even power in these very representations—representations that feminism





Encyclopedia of Pleasure (detail), 2001

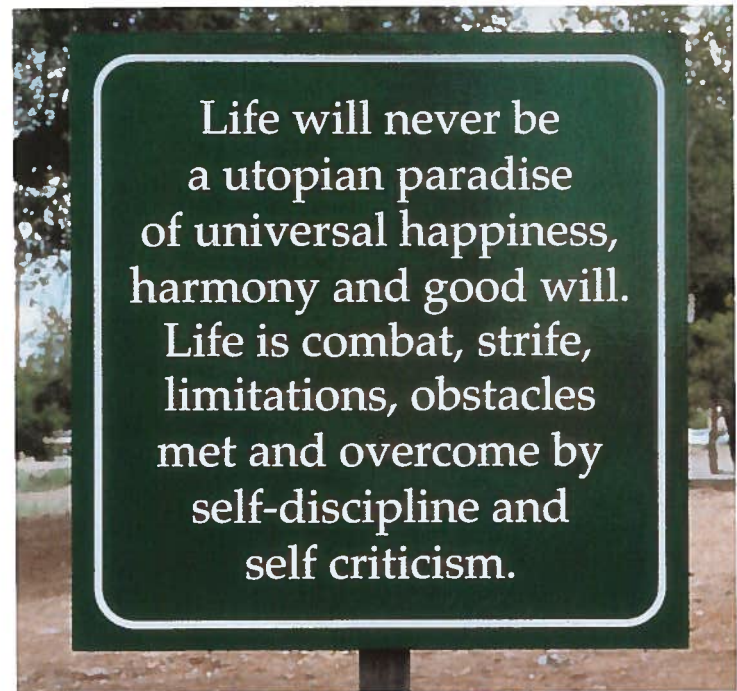
Mixed media with embroidery

has also provided women with strategies for subverting. Thankfully, many women artists find in the truth of both these positions a challenge that has led to attempts to represent the very contradiction of feminist sexuality in their work. Indeed, the paradoxical nature of the issue has forced feminist thinkers to approach feminism *itself* as a political paradox, not as a singular feminism but as multiple feminisms, which are, like pleasure itself, simultaneously individual and (like the “communities” they produce) inevitably somehow common.

In her revolutionary and highly influential “Cyborg Manifesto,” Donna Haraway argues that this paradoxical image of feminism, like that of many activist cultures today, is tempered by the sense of self-awareness with which the movement first encouraged women to approach their lives and choices. Haraway’s call “for pleasure in the confusion of boundaries and for responsibility in their construction”⁴ is a rethinking of the popular feminist rallying cry “the personal is the

political”—one that explicitly takes into account the issues of pleasure, diversity, and agency—that captures the spirit of art and activism in our contemporary, third wave of feminist history. In a recently published forum on this history, Peggy Phelan points out the degree to which the resulting ambivalence—as she puts it, “in the fullest sense of that term”—of contemporary feminist thought reflects the increasingly self-critical, multicultural, and relativist postmodern world in which its third wave emerged. Indeed, as Phelan asserts, not only did the women’s movement make this ambivalence a necessary worldview, “In these days of hideous fundamentalism, the capacity to acknowledge ambivalence is revolutionary.”⁵

Ghada Amer has built a remarkable career around work that revels in the political potential of pleasure, paradox, and ambivalence—work that symbolizes not only the condition of our contemporary existence but the new resources that women are stocking in their



war chest as they confront the “fundamentalism” that still exists there. Indeed, the subject of fundamentalism is a consistent and meaningful one not only in Amer’s work but also in her biography. An Egyptian-born, French-raised-and-educated artist residing in New York, much is frequently made of the role her heavily hyphenated international identity plays in her work as she applies Western erotic imagery of ecstatic, sexualized women to works that defy fundamentalist Islamic taboos against the expression of female sexuality. Similarly, critics often discuss Amer’s position between the essentialist, second-wave French feminist thought in which she was educated—a feminist “fundamentalism” that many argue had a chilling effect on women’s self-expression as the popular images and genres Amer appropriates came to be dismissed by many feminist thinkers as inherently sexist—and the largely American, constructionist ideas of sex and

gender that the third wave has embraced as a challenge to it.

In the erotic paintings for which she is best known, Amer’s use of female porn stars and pinups derived from commercial erotica defies the dogmatic rigidity of both conservative Islam and radical feminism, not to mention calls attention to their occasional and strange common ground on the subject of sexuality. But Amer’s strategic manipulation of the source material at the same time speaks to the nourishment she derives from the very cultures that she critiques: as viewers wade through the tangle of pseudo-drips that constitute the embroidered “lines” of her paintings, they realize that the artist is denying them the frank sexual exhibitionism with which we associate the images she appropriates, as the expressive hands and faces of her figures ultimately do the most speaking for the acts and sensations that we can often only presume to be there. In this way, Amer suggests the

It is not true that
suffering ennobles
the character;
happiness does that
sometimes, but
suffering for the most
part, makes men
petty and vindictive.





Today 70% of the Poor in the World Are Women – Hoy 70% de los pobres en el mundo son mujeres (details), 2001
Installation at La Rambla del Raval, Barcelona

inevitably unrepresentable, unknowable pleasures of her women as stressed in essentialist feminist thought, as well as the mysteries of sexuality sanctified in Islam. Her two monumental new works *The Big Black Kansas City Painting RFGA* (2005, p. 23) and *Knotty But Nice* (2005, p. 33) find Amer approaching both the imagery she appropriates and the cultures she addresses with a simultaneous dose of criticism and affection—a reservation of the right to claim both/and that stands as her protest against those intent on asking women to accept either/or.

While Amer's battle against fundamentalism is consistently noted in criticism of her work, rarely addressed is the degree to which terms such as "East" and "West," "essence" and "construct" are themselves refused a "fundamental" definition by Amer. While her insistence on referring to her embroidered canvases as "paintings" is a pointed rebellion against a male art professor—in France, not Egypt—who

refused to teach women the "masculine" art of painting, she simultaneously, contradictorily insists on referencing the "feminine nature" of needlework and fiber arts as no less an act of defiance. She appropriates the image of the sexualized woman as an icon of feminist sexuality, yet she has frequently dismissed her source material as sexist. She conjures the power of fairy tales to transcend the coarse realities of the real world, but rails against the manner in which women are rewarded within them for their vanity and masochism. She speaks thoughtfully of her liberating discoveries of perspective, the nude, and classical music while studying art in France, even as she recognizes the problematic, compulsory nature of this cultural (re)education.

Her brilliant *Encyclopedia of Pleasure* (2001) demonstrates how deftly she circumvents any efforts to pin down her identification on either side of limiting binaries relating to culture or identity:



named after a medieval Islamic compilation of international texts concerning human sexuality, which has been banned in the Muslim world since the seventeenth century, this Amer work culled passages on women's pleasure and stitched them in English onto zippered boxes scattered like packing crates around the gallery. On the one hand, the piece speaks to her rejection of conservative Islam's contemporary position on women's sexuality; on the other, dedicated as the sacred *Encyclopedia* was to Allah, Amer's work also references and educates Western audiences on the lesser-known fact that in Islam sexual pleasure is to be celebrated as a divine gift. In this piece, Amer rejects neither Islamic culture nor her adopted Western culture, but wants to claim both—as they already exist, in both history and herself—in terms of their forgotten or unspoken realities, and against dogma and stereotypes that would continue to push such complex realities under the rug.

As this piece demonstrates, Amer's ambivalence is neither an apolitical nor a nihilistic one—quite the opposite: in the tradition of art-activism since Dada, her ambivalent position is committed to the necessity of keeping contradictions in plain view. Not so that their messiness will stand in the way of understanding them, but so the realities that give rise to these contradictions might save us from jettisoning them too easily in favor of the quick fix, the pat answer. Granted, the paradoxes with which Amer plays do not make for useful agitprop—indeed, the artist herself is quite resigned to the political futility of art when she states: “I believe in political commitment, but I do not think that art—be it a painting or a book—can change society.”⁶ Yet she clearly believes in the power of art to pose the questions that society itself might feel compelled to step up and try to answer.

Her recent installation *The Reign of Terror* (2005) is among her most clearly politicized to date, even as



Peace Garden, 2002

Installation at the Miami Beach Botanical Garden

it maintains her levelheaded dedication to assuming many positions at once. In this piece at Wellesley College, the artist created a lush, ornamental pattern to wallpaper the lobby of its Davis Museum, as well as adorn the napkins, place mats, and cups of the museum's cafeteria. The luscious, swirling pink-and-green pattern—in much the same way as her paintings—gives way upon close scrutiny to reveal something quite different: complex definitions of the word “terrorism,” as they have appeared in English-language dictionaries since the eighteenth century, presented against historical definitions in Arabic dictionaries. Or, rather, the lack thereof: in Arabic dictionaries, there is no word or definition for terrorism. Does Amer wish for audiences to make note of the anxiety that terrorism has bred in English-speakers since, technically, acts of “terrorism” led to the United States' independence from England? Does she wish for audiences to marvel that a term so closely

associated with Arabic culture would be either so ingrained or denied an aspect of its everyday life that it does not merit a definition? Does she wish to draw attention to the profound disparities possible between different cultures' respective ideas of justice, freedom, and oppression that give way to fear and warfare? And does Amer's ability to pull her audiences in all these different directions, toward seemingly unanswerable questions, negate her political stance?

It's a risky stance, to be sure, but one that speaks honestly to the complexities of politics and political action. As Laura Auricchio has written in her appropriately complex analyses of Amer's work, the artist constantly situates herself “as a figure in exile...always out of place.” Rather than lament or decry this experience, she revels in and shares her outsider status by revealing the “constant state of interaction among all cultures and shatter[ing] the illusions of cultural purity.”⁷ Is it any wonder, then,

that the elusive yet politically charged subject of pleasure—as expressed in both its physical and emotional manifestations—is one to which we find Amer returning again and again, as a rare constant that stands amid all these interactions? Amer’s work reminds us that—man or woman, gay or straight, Eastern or Western, and all permutations possible between these poles of existence—“love and its uncertainties” may be among the few things that actually bind and define humanity.⁸ Drawing attention to the provocative ambiguities and frequent intermingling of *Pain, Absence, Longing, Torment, and Desire* (2005, pp. 41–45) in our lives, Amer constantly asks that we contemplate their persistence, their relevance, and especially their beauty. For whether their beauty is treacherous or generous, its immediate sensation is that of pleasure—and Amer understands the inevitable pull of pleasure, the seductiveness of which she exploits in work that forces us to recognize, as Wendy Steiner does in *The Scandal of Pleasure*, art’s potential to “show us the relation between what we respond to and what we are, between our pleasure and our principles. As a result, it inevitably relates us to other people whose pleasures and principles either do or do not coincide with our own.”⁹

In Amer’s “garden pieces” we see this comparison/conflation of pleasure and principle very much at work. As differently as they appear to function from

her paintings, they in fact build on the same themes and interactions. They present monumental abstractions with narrative subtexts of “love, loneliness, women, sexuality,”¹⁰ but take the form of outdoor installations manipulating or creating park-like settings in which audiences, by physically participating in the works, complete them. From inviting children to play in an enormous sandbox in a fashionable Barcelona park that literally spells out to their families the unsettling fact that *Today 70% of the Poor in the World Are Women* (2001), to a *Peace Garden* (2002) that lives only when audiences sacrificially offer up handy insects to the carnivorous plants arranged in a peace sign, Amer’s garden pieces turn the paradoxes she asks us to contemplate in her gallery work into paradoxes that we ponder through performance.

In her *Love Park* (1999), we find a particularly compelling example of this expanding body of work, one that leads us back to the necessity and potential of a feminist politics of pleasure. The piece cleverly manipulates the accoutrements of modern public parks—benches and instructional signage—into what the artist has compared to the “deaf conversation”¹¹ that persists in our allegedly culturally sensitive, politically correct world. In *Love Park*, the two-seater benches common in park settings are reconfigured so that the couples for which they seem to have been designed must sit facing away from each other—and each facing toward different signs in which “park

rules” have been replaced by uncredited and contradictory quotes culled from literary sources that present various male and female authors’ perspectives on love. Wandering and resting in this idyllic urban promenade, audiences are left to wonder against this seductive, familiar backdrop: which of these quotes were penned by men? by women? does the artist want to inspire each pair to dialogue? to debate? An answer to Amer’s intentions for the piece seems to be presented in one of the signs themselves: “Experience shows us that love does not consist in gazing at each other but looking in the same direction.” And paradoxically, as ever, Amer leads us in this same direction by directing us to face apart, to question our principles beyond the constraints of the particular positions, affiliations, and borders by which we generally define (and limit) those principles—returning us to Haraway’s call for feminists to promote “pleasure in the confusion of boundaries and for responsibility in their construction,” which the best of Amer’s work does with tremendous insight and generosity.

NOTES

1. Carole S. Vance, “Pleasure and Danger: Toward a Politics of Sexuality,” in Vance (ed.), *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, 2nd ed. (New York: Pandora, 1992): 24.
2. “Ghada Amer: Gagosian Gallery,” *The Art Newspaper*, no. 125 (May 2002).
3. bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2000): 150.
4. Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto,” in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1991): 150.
5. Peggy Phelan, “Feminism and Art: Nine Views,” *Artforum* 42, no. 2 (October 2003): 148–49.
6. Estelle Teraud, “Interview with Ghada Amer,” *Studies in Twentieth-Century Literature* 26, no. 1 (Winter 2002): 239.
7. Laura Auricchio, “Works in Translation: Ghada Amer’s Hybrid Pleasures,” *Art Journal* (Winter 2001): 32, 33.
8. Rosa Martínez, “[Interview with] Ghada Amer,” *Make: The Magazine of Women’s Art*, no. 92 (2002): 73.
9. Wendy Steiner, *The Scandal of Pleasure: Art in an Age of Fundamentalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995): 59.
10. Martínez, “[Interview with] Ghada Amer,” 74.
11. Martínez, “[Interview with] Ghada Amer,” 74.