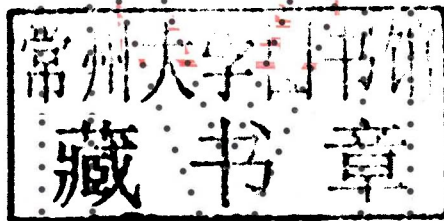


GHADA  
AMIER



GHADA AMER

MAURA REILLY



GREGORY R. MILLER & CO., NEW YORK

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WRITING THE BODY:  
THE ART OF GHADA AMER  
BY MAURA REILLY

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*Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies . . . Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement.*

—Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa"<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," *Signs* 1 no. 4 (summer 1976): 875.

Over the past twenty years, Ghada Amer has gained international acclaim by producing multimedia works that are profoundly linked by her personal quest for an aesthetic language specific to women. Born in Cairo in 1963 and having moved to France at age eleven, Amer's travels between cultures allowed her to witness women's cross-cultural subjugation, whether from increasing religious conservatism in Egypt or in more subtle ways by commodity culture in Europe and then America, where she relocated in 1995. While studying at the École Pilote Internationale d'Art et de Recherche in Nice, she was informed that her art school's painting classes were reserved for male students, at which point she became committed to finding her own feminine artistic language with which to speak about women, as a woman.

Amer's approach to mediums and subjects from an emphatically female perspective manifests itself throughout her career. Her most prominent and signature formal strategy is embroidery, a medium taken up by feminist artists since the 1970s as a political tool. In Amer's hands, embroidery is used to dramatic and subversive effects, allowing her to express herself using a formal language that has been traditionally associated with "women's work" for centuries, while at the same time penetrating the male space of the painted canvas that had been ostensibly forbidden to her. Her subject is most often women—their sexuality, the myths and gender clichés associated with them, and the historical suppression of the female voice. Finding that women are spoken of and for, but very rarely allowed to speak themselves, her strategy is to find those women silenced through master narratives and give them a chance to talk back.

Examining everything from fashion magazines, children's fairy tales, pornography, dictionaries, the Qur'an, and medieval Arabic manuscripts to the art-historical canon, Amer challenges their authority, highlighting their exclusions and countering with a powerfully asserted, activated female subject. That her work reaches its full maturity and power when it combines her analysis of prevailing cultural forms with a deep affirmation of women's capacity for and right to boundless sexual pleasure makes Amer's project an artistic manifestation of the theory of *écriture féminine*.

In 1975, the French theorist Hélène Cixous wrote a feminist manifesto titled "The Laugh of the Medusa" that demanded that women "write them-

selves" in order that their bodies be heard. Along with her contemporaries in France—Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and Monique Wittig, who were responding to the works of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan—Cixous was at the forefront of revealing the systemic masculinist stronghold over language. Taking on the literary canons, Cixous's essay challenged them for their exclusion of women's voices and proposed the practice of feminine writing, or *écriture féminine*, as a strategy of resistance against female repression in cultural production and society in general.

This theory of *écriture féminine* was one among many feminist responses to the growing awareness that a dominant masculinist position structured all disciplines of knowledge, from history, psychoanalysis, political theory, and art history to less conspicuously significant areas, such as mythology and fairy tales. Responding to Freud's structuring of human psychology around the Oedipal complex, feminists argued that Man, possessor of the phallus, is placed at the center of meaning and Woman is always the Other, and therefore has meaning only in relation to, and as given to her by, Man. Man is presented as the privileged Subject, producer of knowledge and creator of History. Woman, on the other hand, is always considered the passive Object or the obliging prop in the enactment of male fantasies. As feminist theory developed, it became clear that in order to disrupt this hierarchy, hidden structures of mastery needed to be addressed as well as overt forms of sexism. Cixous and her contemporaries identified language as one of these primary sites of historical exclusion. To speak and especially to write assumed a dominant position that had historically only been occupied by men.

In seeking to resist this exclusion, the French feminists identified *jouissance*, or sexual pleasure, as the key to ending the linguistic repression of the feminine. Steeped in psychoanalysis, they were acutely aware of Freud's famous assertion that "Woman wants nothing," which by extension made her silence throughout culture seem natural. Rather than acknowledging that she had been denied the power to speak for herself, Freud decided she simply had no personal desires that would drive her to speak in the first place. Cixous in particular argued, then, that if Woman could be reconnected with her own capacity for pleasure and therefore her well of repressed desires, it would counteract her enforced alienation from both her body and from her voice. Experiencing *jouissance* would give her a reason to speak and something to say. But since writing had always been explicitly male, Woman would also have to discover a new mode of expression capable of communicating that uniquely female experience. This was simultaneously the goal and definition of Cixous's *écriture féminine*—first, that Woman must decide to speak; next, that she must speak about women, their desires, their

experiences, their pleasures; and finally, in articulating this new language specifically suited to speaking the female experience, she will move from a passive Object to an active Subject.

In all of her texts on feminine writing, Cixous wrestles with the difficulty of women speaking in a society structured by her exclusion. What would it mean for women to demand a voice if she refused to be silent anymore? What would it sound like? What would she say? What would the literature and art look like that emerged from her—she who has no voice and nothing to say? As if in answer to Cixous's questions, Ghada Amer's artistic practice concerns itself with the suppression of women's voices, the prevalence of men speaking for women, and the resulting dynamic of the absent-present female who is referred to but remains a mystery. Because of this, her oeuvre is particularly illuminated in relation to Cixous's writings about *écriture féminine*. From her first calculated decision to use embroidery within the masculine field of painting to her appropriation of pornography to reclaim female sexuality, Amer has successfully translated Cixous's ideas into an artistic practice. That she was unaware of Cixous's theory makes the parallels between Amer's exploration of female forms and content and Cixous's analytical writings all the more startling.

These affinities begin from Amer's very first decision to place her gender identity at the center of her artistic project. As early as the late 1980s, one sees Amer struggling to find her own artistic language as a woman in the historically male-dominated field of painting, using embroidery and later gardens as her feminine tools. Her next move—to address women as subjects, including a series of works dealing with domestic roles, and also gender clichés of love and romance—matches Cixous's insistence on speaking *about* women. Even Amer's particular penchant for analyzing fairy tales for their gendered and psycho-sexual subtexts is paralleled by Cixous's extensive writings on the very same stories. Amer's strategy of reinscribing master texts in order to destabilize their authority emphasizes the same exclusion from language that Cixous railed against in her writings. And finally, her signature strategy of embroidered pornography realizes Cixous's utopian notion of writing the body, insofar as *jouissance* is the critical starting point for female self-consciousness and, indeed, revolution.



## DECIDING TO SPEAK

*What interests me . . . is the idea of a "model to be followed" and in life, we are confronted with these everywhere; from birth, one is shown how one must live; one is educated this way, one grows up and follows the model imposed on us. All my work revolves around the idea of a "model."*

—Ghada Amer<sup>2</sup>

2 Amer, as quoted in *Ghada Amer*, exh. cat. (Bretigny-sur-Orge, France: L'Espace Jules Verne, 1994).

Despite current Western stereotypes, the Islamic household Amer grew up in was modern and progressive. Practicing Muslims, the Amers were also socially moderate and encouraged their four daughters to pursue higher education or seek careers in addition to traditional domestic roles. When the time came for Amer to apply to university, her parents proposed that she enroll in mathematics, a subject at which she excelled. Nevertheless Amer became immediately depressed and bedridden, later professing that all she could or wanted to do was draw. She instead proposed to her parents that she enter art school. Though they worried that art would not provide Amer with the secure future they wanted for her, her parents finally acquiesced when they recognized the quality of her drawings, her determination, and her devotion to her craft. In 1984, Amer enrolled in a BFA/MFA program in the École Pilote Internationale d'Art et de Recherche in Nice, from which she graduated in 1989.

Despite her fight to pursue her artistic studies, the art school she attended, also known as Villa Arson, while on the one hand inspiring and helpful to her artistic development, was on the other hand a difficult environment for Amer. Upon arrival, she was informed not only that "painting was dead," but that, even if she wanted to study painting, "the teacher would teach only to the male students, as if the activity of painting was an exclusively male activity."<sup>3</sup> Moreover, she found the art program chauvinistic at times and often competitive. Indeed, periodically students were asked to leave if their work was not considered of a high enough caliber. Fortunately for Amer, she made the cut—as did other now-reputable artists who graduated from the same program and became her fast friends, including Tatiana Trouvé and Reza Farkhondeh. The programming at Villa Arson was daunting and experimental and, in Amer's opinion, catered to male students with an almost "all-male parade of artists"<sup>4</sup> brought in for exhibitions and lectures, like Martin Kippenberger, Albert and Markus Oehlen, Lawrence Weiner, Daniel Buren, British Petroleum, and Alighiero e Boetti.

Working in this environment, her early experimentations drew from the valorized artists of the day, including small mixed-media cardboard constructions based on Joseph Beuys's cross iconography, and drawings with collage elements reminiscent of David Salle's divided compositions (figs. 1, 2). She also

3 "[T]he first thing I was told was 'painting is dead.' I have never believed that. I wanted to study painting but the teacher would teach only to the male students, as if the activity of painting was an exclusively male activity." Amer, in Marilu Knode, "Interview with Ghada Amer," *New Art Examiner* 27, no. 4 (December/January 1999): 38.

4 Amer, in conversation with the author.



1. Ghada Amer, *Sans Titre*, 1988



2. Ghada Amer, *Sans Titre*, 1990

quoted images from a range of art-historical sources such as Diane Arbus, Edgar Degas, Kasimir Malevich, Henri Matisse, and other modernist masters and appropriated illustrations from leading French art magazines, such as *Art Press*. In other words, having been denied a chance to participate in the academic tradition of painting as a painter herself, Amer began conceptualizing other ways of creating a formal language, as an artist and as a woman, while continuing to relate to this history. Intent on inserting herself into the “masculine” space of painting from which she was ostensibly prohibited, she sensed that she would have to find alternative methods and tools associated with “women’s work” to form her own artistic language. It would take a few more years and a trip to Egypt before she arrived at a solution.

Amer’s parents moved back to Egypt in 1984, at which point she began making annual visits. During these trips, she was surprised by the huge sociopolitical shift that had occurred in the country in the intervening years. A conservative movement had erupted in the wake of President Anwar Sadat’s assassination in 1981, resulting in a retreat from the relatively liberal attitudes of the 1970s. Each year Amer returned she noticed that an increasing number of women were wearing veils, including her mother, and that there was a visible regression from women’s civil rights and liberties.<sup>5</sup> This was not the Egypt of her childhood, she recalls. In the 1960s and 70s, many women chose not to wear the veil, but with the sociocultural and religious backlash of the 1980s, women’s freedom and the control of their bodies were being vigorously policed.

It was during one of these trips, in the summer of 1988, that Amer experienced a breakthrough moment that would have an irreversible impact on her artistic practice. Walking along a market street in Cairo with her mother one day, she came across a special edition of the women’s fashion magazine *Venus* that featured images of Western models wearing fashionable outfits, but with sleeves and hemlines that had been lengthened and veils that had been photo-montaged (figs. 3, 4). “It was a . . . sort of *Vogue* for the veiled woman,” she explains, one that combined the Western look with the Muslim tradition.<sup>6</sup> “It had this weird feeling of a society looking for an identity. . . . I was quite sensitive to that, since at that time I was looking for an identity, and I did not know if I was French or Egyptian.”<sup>7</sup>

The back of the magazine contained sewing patterns that demonstrated to readers how they could create the illustrated fashions themselves. Amer began immediately working with these patterns in a self-confessedly “obsessive” way. From 1988 to 1989, she made collages, cut out patterns based on the inserts over and over again, and created playful designs in spiral notebooks (fig. 5). These notebooks led to a series of painted wood

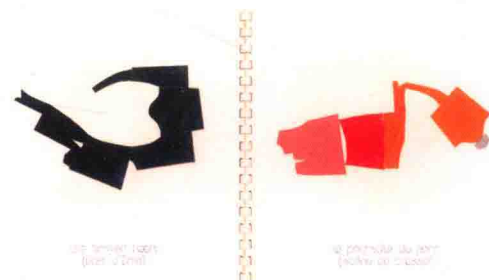
5 Knode, 38.

6 Amer, in Barbara Pollack, “The New Look of Feminism,” *ArtNews* 100, no. 8 (September 2001): 134.

7 Amer, in *Ghada Amer*, exh. cat. (Valencia: Institut Valencia d’Art Modern, 2004), 31.



3 and 4. *Venus Magazine* (summer 1988): cover and inside spread



5. Ghada Amer, *Venus* sketchbook, 1988



8 These works are unfortunately no longer extant. They were destroyed by the artist after receiving a negative graduate student studio critique. Amer, in conversation with the author.

9 Amer, as quoted in Valencia, 32; see also Knode, 38.  
10 Valencia, 32.

11 Amer, as quoted in an interview with Valerie Cassel, "Unscripted Desire," in *Ghada Amer: Reading Between the Threads*, exh. cat. (Oslo: Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, 2001), 36.

pieces, including *Autoportrait avec Cléopâtre*, 1989, a multi-colored, whimsical construction upon which she pasted a plastic portrait bust of the Egyptian queen (fig. 6). That same year, she produced a series of large two-by-two meter works that were re-presentations of the magazine spreads painted in a photo-realist style.<sup>8</sup> Amer also began executing a series of works that year with life-sized dress patterns, including one in which she cut the same pattern in different colors fifty times and stacked it on a pedestal (fig. 7).

It was during this experimentation in the wake of discovering *Venus* magazine that Amer began to realize that sewing could function as an expressive medium in and of itself. Around 1990 she began replacing her pencil with needle and thread. Doing so was an easy transition for Amer since she had grown up in a household in which all the women sewed; therefore she considered embroidery to be the women's tool *par excellence*, "tedious, time-consuming, and fragile."<sup>9</sup> Painting, on the other hand, she felt was "a male tool: it was invented by men and has been used by them for centuries."<sup>10</sup> By putting both aesthetic languages together—embroidery and painting—she realized that she was on the path toward the formal solution she had been seeking. Combining the two mediums allowed her entrée into the masculine territory that she believed was being denied to her as a woman. As Amer explains, "It was during this time [1991] that I refused the traditional 'artistic' medium, replacing it, or even opposing it, with a 'traditional' women's medium to make sure that the representation was coming from a female point of view."<sup>11</sup>

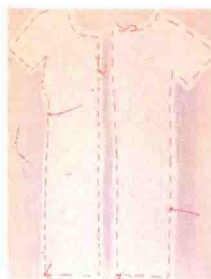
Over the next few years, Amer strove to reconcile the two languages, taking sewing patterns and literally stitching and tacking them onto raw canvases or plywood, sometimes leaving short threads on the front of the canvas in an effort to reference the labor involved and to mimic a painterly effect. In *Sans Titre*, 1990, for instance, she used strands of red thread to stitch a baby dress pattern to the small raw canvas and then applied rabbit glue to the whole surface (fig. 8). One can see, in *Mini Jupe Dorée*, 1990, how Amer also took ideas from her compositions in the spiral notebooks as models for large-scale constructions, equally based on sewing patterns (fig. 9). Choosing a mini-skirt pattern cut out of tracing paper, she embellished it by piercing the paper with long strands of gold thread and then gingerly stitching the whole pattern to the canvas. This delicate assemblage was then adhered to a piece of plywood, combining in a different way the feminine, through sewing and the use of fragile materials, with the masculine, through sculpture and the use of construction materials. This was also the first time that Amer used what might be called "threaded drips," long strands of thread she allows to cascade down the surface of the work. This technique will appear with increased frequency and significance in her later works on canvas.



6. Ghada Amer, *Autoportrait avec Cléopâtre*, 1989



7. Ghada Amer, *Sans Titre*, 1990



8. Ghada Amer, *Sans Titre*, 1990



9. Ghada Amer, *Mini Jupe Dorée*, 1990