

QUEER CONTEMPORARY ART OF SOUTHWEST ASIA NORTH AFRICA



Edited by
Anne Marie E. Butler
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Introduction

Beyond Borders and Binaries

Anne Marie E. Butler and Sascha Crasnow

Queer visibility is global like never before. However, as with the globalization of anything, there is a tendency for Euro-American voices and perspectives to assume the place of the ubiquitous global. Along with worldwide media, art, literature, music, and activism's seeming increase in the visibility of diverse sexualities and cultures comes a responsibility to theorize and contextualize global visibilities of queerness within local, transnational, post/de/anti-colonial, cultural, and religious registers. This volume presents new perspectives on queer visual culture in the Southwest Asia North Africa (SWANA) region from artists and scholars who work on queer themes or issues of gender and sexuality. The focus on artworks produced in the contemporary era is accompanied by the recognition of historical and contextual connections to regional and Islamic art and culture from the pre-modern and modern eras. This scope and framework places this volume in a context that contributes to the growing field of queer studies in the SWANA region.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes the term queer as originating from the Indo-European root word *twerkw* (“across”), which later engenders the German word *quer* (“transverse”), as well as other words that indicate crossing.¹ As the volume *Queer Contemporary Asian American Art* (2017) sets forth, to “*queer* Asian American art signifies the dynamism of the contemporary moment [...] while also acting as a means to broaden our understanding of the ways (*hetero*) *normativity* acts as a generative constraint in society writ large.”² Queering Asian American art is a means through which to acknowledge and take up the impetus in contemporary scholarship to move beyond proscriptive categorizations and identifications that have originated in the study of Euro-American art and that are typically placed on racialized and other marginalized groups. Queering also exposes the ways that normative notions of race, gender, sexuality, and other embodied categories have forged presumed assumptions about those who are not part of the normative default—for example, cisgender, straight, and/or white. In this volume, we seek to take up this approach in an analysis of contemporary art from the SWANA region by asking questions of and about artists and their works, as well as of the methodologies that are employed in their analysis. Kina and Bernabe remark that “the very real material and political stakes of representation and misrepresentation” are in operation whenever scholarship aims to ask difficult questions.³ This inquiry may occur through scholarly content and, as in what we attempt to do here, through what it means to actually compile and produce this volume and the circumstances under which this occurs. Our volume parallels Kina and Bernabe’s in its attention to a diversity of locales and diasporas, and in its inclusion of interviews as integral to highlighting artists’ voices.

The acronym SWANA gives some insight into the regions addressed by the contributors. Arising relatively recently in literature, activism, and political discussions, Southwest Asia North Africa indicates a range of territories, cultures, transnationalisms, and histories described geographically in relationship to their continental position rather than in relation to Europe or North America, as with the term Middle East. To this end, we aim to not describe with any fixed specificity the bounds of the geographic region or the cultural or religious practices of the people and places in this volume. Long histories of Indigenous, tribal, monarchical, and colonial claims on lands complicate easy delineations of inclusion or exclusion. We therefore consider the volume's scope itself as a piece of the larger conversation about what it means to ask these questions about territory and belonging. We include the diaspora, which extends across the globe, constituting a position into and out of which individuals may move or be forced to move. In *Impossible Desires* (2005), Gayatri Gopinath suggests that queer desire is a reorientation of diaspora.⁴ She queers both diaspora and the lens through which she examines diasporic moments and objects in her consideration of how a queer framework reveals diaspora as a phenomenon often bound up in nationalist discourses and heteronormative structures.⁵ Sara Ahmed also theorizes a queer (re)orienting of bodies in times and spaces.⁶ These frameworks help guide our inquiries.

The emphasis of this volume is on the visual fine arts, largely because we are art historians ourselves, and our own scholarship and interests reside in visual art history. Further, while there has been some previous scholarship on the topic of gender, sexuality, and queerness in SWANA film and literature, significantly less has focused on the visual arts specifically. We seek to grow the scholarship in this field with the contributions in this volume. Within the category of visual arts, we include drawing, painting, sculpture, installation, photography, video, digital media, mixed media, and performance, all of which reflect the contemporary scope of practices ranging from long-standing traditional artistic forms to innovative approaches rooted in new media.

In addition to the aims stated above, we intend for this volume to serve as an introduction to the field of queer SWANA art history and visual culture. Queer studies is its primary lens because of our desire to challenge, resist, and transgress oft-used frameworks for art historical analysis of SWANA art. Many such approaches are rooted in the racial, religious, and gendered assumptions inherent in many dominant Euro-American art historical, curatorial, and museological frameworks. By framing this volume as unambiguously located within queer studies, we move beyond existing literature that merely includes some examples of queer studies or queer representation, but does not necessarily use queer studies as a lens through which to engage with visual culture and/or with the SWANA region. The use of queer studies as the primary lens for this volume presents new pathways into queer cultural SWANA studies as a developing academic area. Such pathways establish that queer visual culture from the region is multifaceted and complex. The contributing artists and scholars demonstrate that queerness interacts with ideas about gender and gender expression, religion, the body, family, and the state, among other factors, thereby highlighting how queer studies is of import to any examination of the lived realities of all people, including artists, in the SWANA region.

Queer studies of SWANA is an emerging field, as is queer studies of visual culture in the region. Recent edited volumes on contemporary and feminist art of the SWANA region have included some discussion of queer contemporary art. Other publications explicitly framed as contributing to queer studies have discussed literature or film. Since the 2010s, journals have also contributed to the burgeoning field of queer studies from the SWANA region, with several special issues taking up various threads in queer theory.⁷ Recent monographs have drawn attention to queer considerations as they relate to the SWANA region. Sa'ed Atshan's *Queer Palestine and the Empire of Critique* (2020), Andrew Gayed's *Queer World Making: Contemporary Middle Eastern Diasporic Art* (2024), and Gayatri Gopinath's *Unruly Visions: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora* (2018) demonstrate the increasing interest in the queer lives and artistic practices of those with SWANA heritage living around the globe.⁸ For some time, the fields of anthropology, sociology, and area studies have considered LGBTQ+ practices in the SWANA region, often employing methodologies common in the social sciences. However, no scholarly collection thus far has taken on the territory of queer contemporary art in the region as its sole focus. *Queer Contemporary Art of Southwest Asia North Africa* aims to help begin the conversation at this intersection, and to cast forth a new, defined area of scholarship within these larger fields by looking specifically at what visual culture can tell us about queerness and expansive notions of gender in SWANA.

The very origins of queer theory are indebted to sexual practices and identities that exist outside of paradigmatic (or presumed) norms. Queerness provides alternatives to social constructions like heteronormativity, monogamy, and marriage, exposing their imbrication within power matrices. The origins of queer theory are often positioned as Euro-American, and it is widely thought that queer theory has developed in the Euro-American academy since the 1990s using the English language. During that era, queer politics, activism, and the reappropriation of the word queer took place in many American and European locales, prompting dominant historical narratives to replicate colonialist discourses that positioned the west as progressive and the east as regressive. When the ideas of modernity are relied upon as a single axis that can be expressed linearly and cohesively, they can continue to serve coloniality and other matrices of domination. Maya Mikdashi and Jasbir Puar note that “theory” is often seen to emerge from Global Norths, while “data” is frequently derived from Global Souths.⁹ While this volume uses the English language – as well as translations and transliterations of other languages into English words and Latin script – and also sometimes turns to theory generated in the Euro-American academy, it also frames queer as significant in its unintelligibility. If queerness' potential is its unfixity and its refusal to be conscripted and therefore recuperated for domination, its presence in communities and contexts where it is perhaps untranslatable, inarticulable, and unrecognizable can engender this effort.

Queer visual culture from the SWANA region has not yet been comprehensively presented for a wide audience, perhaps because queerness is often thought to be anathema to the region, and because queer people must at times prioritize their safety over visibility. With contributions from both scholars and artists, this volume demonstrates that queer visual cultures in the SWANA region have entered an era of exciting growth in terms of versatility and

consciousness. Although the contributors are connected in various ways to SWANA, the majority currently reside in the Global North, which typifies larger issues of hierarchy, valuation, language, and access in academia. The othering of individuals from SWANA has a relationship to many other racist and colonialist projects and structures. From an Orientalist fixation on veiling practices among Muslim women to white savior human rights narratives centering around perceptions, practices and beliefs about queer folks in the SWANA region, Euro-American beliefs about cultural structures related to gender and sexuality have at times been rooted in cultural stereotypes and assumptions made about these identities as they intersect with race, ethnicity, and religion. In recent years, scholarship and art exhibitions have increasingly taken on more nuanced discussions of gender and sexuality within the SWANA region and its diaspora, but, as the relatively small group of shared sources cited by the contributing authors demonstrates, it remains a relatively young subfield in art history and visual culture. With the aim of adding to the extant scholarship in the field and expanding its offerings, we have invited the diverse contributions of both artists and scholars at various stages of their careers who offer a breadth of global representation. They examine works of contemporary visual culture across media by SWANA and diasporic artists that articulate experiences of gender, sexuality, and queerness, and expand on existing scholarship in queer SWANA film and literature by focusing on visual culture.

The moment in which this volume is produced is particularly significant. There has been increased media attention on queerness in the Arab world, both in popular and academic circles. The death by suicide of Sarah Hegazi in June 2020, a queer Egyptian activist who sought asylum in Canada after waving a rainbow flag at a Mashrou' Leila concert in Cairo, brought renewed attention to the challenges queer SWANA people face in both their home countries and abroad. There were many responses to Hegazi's death on social media, and a number of broadcasts and articles were published by large news outlets in the United States, indicating growing international awareness.¹⁰ Additionally, narratives about the locality of queer rights and pinkwashing color the rhetoric surrounding the current assault on Palestinians in Gaza and throughout historic Palestine.

During the summer of 2020, the reinvigoration of the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States spurred more public discussions of Arab and Black queer solidarity, such as the conversation that took place between Sa'ed Atshan, Hamed Sinno of Mashrou' Leila, and Black blogger, poet, and activist Hannah L. Drake, sponsored by the University of Pennsylvania and the Arab American National Museum.¹¹ Meanwhile, in journalism, the Queer Voices section of the *Huffington Post* has published several articles about queer lives and culture in the SWANA region, while other social media-based culture and performance platforms have uplifted queer artists, performers, and activists.¹² This increase in attention paid to queer Arabs and individuals from the SWANA region, the growth of scholarship looking at the methodologies of queer and now trans studies, and the development of public platforms for these conversations provide a context for the timely contributions that make up this volume.

As the editors of the volume, it is important for us to acknowledge our own positionality in relation to its subject matter, especially given the long history and contemporary realities

of white, cisgender, heteronormative hegemony both inside and outside of academia, and the potential for harm in visibility mentioned above. Both of us are white cisgender women living in the United States, and only one of us identifies as queer. In acknowledgement of this, there were two elements that were crucial to us when putting together the contributors for this volume. The first was that we wanted to ensure that a SWANA voice was foregrounded from the start to set the tone and lead readers into the volume. We are grateful to Gayatri Gopinath, an eminent scholar in the field of queer SWANA visual culture, for writing the foreword to this text. The second crucial element was to include a strong presence of SWANA and SWANA diaspora artists and scholars at various stages of their careers so that their own words and perspectives could arise out of a diversity of positionalities. Mikdashi and Puar contend that global locations need not be attached to the Global North at all in order to be transnational and to generate theory.¹³ Here, we make what we recognize is an imperfect attempt, or at least a preliminary one, at contributing to the decentering of queer theorizing in the Global North.

Along with the intersections of queer studies and lived realities, this volume is interdisciplinary and intersectional. It includes scholars from different disciplines, such as area studies, art history, English, film studies, and gender studies, many of whom work interdisciplinarily and use a variety of methodologies drawn from social sciences and the humanities. The contributing artists and artist-scholars work in a variety of mediums, such as performance, photography, installation, sculpture, video, and drawing. What constitutes gender cannot be considered without accounting for race, ethnicity, religion, and sexuality, among other factors. As Kimberlé Crenshaw and others following her have discussed at length, intersectional oppressions are not simply the existence of multiple forms of oppression, but rather the compounding of oppressions.¹⁴ Within contexts of colonization and coloniality encountered in many locales of the SWANA region, racialized gender categories can be understood as intersectional oppressions in what María Lugones calls “the colonial/modern gender system,” which does not impose European gender structures, but rather creates new gender structures that are specifically racialized.¹⁵

This volume takes up interdisciplinary and intersectional issues of queer art and visual methods in the SWANA region through three interrelated sections: Unfixed Genders, Intersectional Sexualities, and Sites and Spaces. Unfixed Genders looks specifically at non-binary and trans articulations through artists, artworks, and methodologies. Intersectional Sexualities draws out the specific ways in which other embodied categories such as race, ethnicity, and religion impact the perceptions and lived realities of artists, as well as the means by which these categories are articulated in their works. Sites and Spaces moves beyond the embodied to the spaces and sites that bodies occupy, and to the relationships between them. The impetus behind these three sections was to ensure the inclusion of areas of queer SWANA visual culture that had been under-theorized and less written about, in particular in relation to trans studies. We also sought to avoid the siloing of queer as an isolated embodied category, acknowledging both its intersection with other identity categories and its expansion beyond the embodied. With these aims in mind, this volume approaches some of the previously

underexplored academic areas of queer contemporary art of the SWANA region from multiple new perspectives. The contributions within each of the three sections speak to aspects of gender and sexuality in contemporary SWANA art in significant, underrepresented ways, but these sections are not meant to present the contributions unequivocally within particular perspectives. Our placement of the contributions and the titles of the sections are intended to provide only one possible framing and application of these theories, analyses, and approaches.

Unfixed Genders addresses masculinity, femininity, and non-binary gender expression, and artists/subjects that are playing with gender expressions and confrontations with normativity. This section focuses on the ways that gender categories are challenged, crossed, and uprooted through contributions that engage with queer studies and trans studies. In his scholarly text “The Reawakening of the Belly Dancer and Queer Revolution,” Raed Rafei lays out how Lebanese artist Nasri Sayegh’s video “Strike a Pose” (2017) repositions the figure of the belly dancer, eroticized and exoticized both inside and outside the region through a heteronormative male gaze, using a framework of queer admiration. Yasmine Nasser Diaz’s artist essay describes her negotiation of gender identity at the intersection of race, class, and religion, from childhood to adulthood, and the influence of these formations on her artwork. Proshot Kalami’s interview with artist Rah Eleh delves into the artist’s provocation of colonially rooted boundaries of gender binaries in her video works, in the particular context of Persianate identity. Closing out the section, we submit our own scholarly contribution, an exploration of the ways in which a trans studies methodological framework might be useful in analyzing contemporary SWANA artworks through case studies of works by Aïcha Snoussi and Khaled Jarrar.

Intersectional Sexualities addresses heteronormativity, homosexuality, identity, and intimacy related to sexuality in the SWANA region. These chapters consider works that incorporate queer aesthetics, address queer culture in SWANA communities both regionally and internationally, and probe the intersectionality of the queer experience with regard to the hegemonic queer and non-queer identities within which folks are situated. In “The When, Where, and Why of Intimacy: *Codes of Coupling* in Egyptian Contemporary Art,” Andrew Gayed argues that the works that comprise the exhibition *Codes of Coupling* (2020) challenge both perceptions of queerness in contemporary Egypt and imperial legacies from outside the region, revealing how these artists contest the normative expectations placed on them with regard to their identities. Yasmine Kasem explains in the artist text “The Vicissitudes of Self: Storytelling, Queerness, and Muslim Identity” how storytelling, although the means by which normative narratives of gender, sexuality, and religion were originally told to her, has become a process through which she challenges to these narratives as she creates space for her own queer Muslim identity within religious and cultural tales. Artist Qais Assali’s paired contributions, a photo project titled, *I Only Read About Myself on Bathroom Walls*, and a text titled “On Behalf Of: I Am an Ottoman in Name Only,” invite the viewer/reader into the intimate space of the artist’s personal struggle with the external perceptions of queer Arab identity. From the close proximity of bathroom walls to the intimate narratives of his own medical journey, Assali makes plain the challenges of being caught between the imperialist

hegemonic Euro-American narratives of a seemingly mandatory coming out—a celebration to which he cannot relate—and the personal and public homophobia he faces in Palestine. In “Out on Display: A Queer Negotiation of Identity and Anonymity in Diaspora,” Dylan Volk takes up Mahmoud Khaled’s version of a house museum honoring the so-called Crying Man, a character based on one of 52 men arrested in Cairo in 2001, most at the Queen Boat club. Volk examines how, in the invention of a museum for this internationally recognized yet anonymous figure, the artist plays with notions of the public and private, and being in and out, as they relate to queer identity in Egypt (where Khaled is from) and Turkey (where he now lives and where the exhibition was installed). Conor Moynihan’s conversation with artist Mehdi-Georges Lahlou concludes the section by laying out the ways in which Lahlou’s exploration of sexuality, queerness, and religion has provoked both positive and negative responses from all camps, challenging presumed notions of monolithic perceptions of queerness within Islam, confronting multicultural acceptance in Europe, and bringing to the forefront an exploration of some of the aspects of religion that are most fixated upon from the outside.

Sites and Spaces presents contributions that adopt considerations of space in thinking through embodied experiences of gender and sexuality. Architectural spaces are created in consideration of and activated by the bodies that occupy and move through them. Embodiments of identity such as gender, sexuality, and queerness can be revealed, activated, restricted, regulated, and articulated by the spaces and sites in which these bodies exist. Duygu Oya Ula opens this section with a discussion of Turkish domestic spaces through an analysis of works by Nilbar Güreş. Ula argues that, in combining a number of locally specific cultural and religious elements in her work, Güreş forges a new narrative of the domestic that is distinctly queer and feminist. Baseera Khan’s artist contribution, an image titled *Muslims=America* and the accompanying text “Heart to Heart,” based on a conversation with fellow artist Yasmine Kasem, presents a statement about the positioning of Muslims in America and the two artists’ relationships with Islam in relation to their genders and sexualities. Charlotte Bank, in her chapter “Queer Heavens: Rethinking the Islamic Garden in Contemporary Art,” considers artworks by Chaza Charafeddine and Fereydoun Ave, wherein the trope of the classical Islamic garden is read as a site of erotic encounter and romantic love inclusive of same sex people. In resituating contemporary alternative sexualities within the region, Bank offers a re-historicization of such sexualities that avoids presenting them as external to society, or even—as they are frequently cast in mainstream debates—as imports from the west. In “Viscosities of the Known and the Unknown,” artist Aïcha Snoussi and poet Gaïa Khalil present a collaborative series of drawings and poems that functions as maps of memory and plays with language, recognition, and embodied attachments. Lastly, in “Sa’ dia Rehman’s Queer Cartographies: Convivial Opacities,” Natasha Bissonauth considers how, within histories of bodily, psychic, and imperial violence, visibilities of self and other are disoriented as aesthetic strategies of resilience.

The structure, content, and approach of this volume is only one possibility amongst many. We hope it will be followed, complemented, and built upon: it is a series of explorations and expansions in areas that call for more scholarship, theorization, and discussion to expand the field of SWANA art history and visual culture. We are excited and energized by

the contributions that have come together in this text, and eagerly anticipate the continued growth of the field.

Notes

- 1 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (New York: Routledge, 1994), xii.
- 2 Jan Christian Bernabe and Laura Kina, *Queering Contemporary Asian American Art* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017), 17.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 4.
- 4 Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).
- 5 *Ibid.*, 3.
- 6 Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).
- 7 See Karima Lachir and Saeed Talajooy, eds, *Resistance in Contemporary Middle Eastern Cultures: Language, Cinema and Music* (Oxford: Routledge UK, 2012); Anthony Downey, ed., *Dissonant Archives: Contemporary Visual Culture and Contested Narratives in the Middle East* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2015); Ceren Özpınar and Mary Kelly, eds, *Under the Skin: Feminist Art and Art Histories from the Middle East and North Africa Today* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* (Special issue "Queering Middle Eastern Cyberscapes," ed. Adi Kuntsman and Noor Al-Qasimi) 8.3 (2012); *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (Special issue: "Queer Affects," ed. Hanadi Al-Samman and Tarek El-Ariss) 45.2 (2013).
- 8 Sa'ed Atshan, *Queer Palestine and the Empire of Critique* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020); Gayatri Gopinath, *Unruly Visions: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).
- 9 Maya Mikdashi and Jasbir Puar, "Queer Theory and Permanent War," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 22.2 (2016): 216. See also Chandra T. Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press: 2003).
- 10 These include the American cable news channel CNN, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, and Public Radio International.
- 11 Arab American National Museum, "Creating a Culture of Change: Queer Experiences in Arab and Black Communities," August 26, 2020, <https://arabamericanmuseum.org/event/creating-a-culture-of-change-queer-experiences-in-arab-and-black-communities/>.
- 12 See for example Curtis M. Wong, "Catch A Sneak Peek At The Queer Movie That Could Make Waves In The Middle East," *Huffington Post*, August 23, 2018, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-wedding-lgbtq-film-middle-east_n_5b7dc30be4b07295150f7691; Curtis M. Wong, "LGBTQ Arabs Share Stories Of The Social Stigma Of Growing Up Queer," *Huffington Post*, April 18, 2018, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/lgbtq-arabs-no-longer-alone_n_5ad7ac5ae4b03c426daae9ea. *Frieze* recently published the opinion piece Hamed Sinno, "Hamed Sinno on Pride and Mourning in the Middle East," *Frieze*, June 26, 2020, <https://www.frieze.com/article/hamed-sinno-pride-and-mourning-middle-east>. Move! (@MOVE.series) has twice produced segments with the Tunisian queer trans drag performer Khookha McQueer.

- 13 Mikdashi and Puar, "Queer Theory and Permanent War," 216.
- 14 Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43.6 (1991): 1242–43.
- 15 María Lugones, "Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System," *Hypatia* 22.1 (2007): 186.

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