HYBRIDITY, FRAGMENTATION, AND TRANSLATION IN THE EMBROIDERED
SCULPTURAL WORKS OF GHADA AMER

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To my loving family and friends who have always supported me, and to my husband, Derrick, who makes me laugh and inspires me to be creative.
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CHAPTER 1:
INTRODUCTION

Globalization has dramatically shifted the terms of contemporary art. One need only look at the growing importance played by international biennials and art fairs in determining the current artistic climate to see how geopolitics has affected cultural production. That is, many artists are exploring the meaning of borders, nation-states, refugees, nomads and hybridity. And, as contemporary artists address such issues in relation to exile, belonging, citizenship, and transnational migration, the role of translation in communication has emerged as a key theme.¹ This cultural blending across borders lends itself to the discussion of globalization and hybridity, emphasizing the notion of cultural unity, or a ubiquitous ‘international’ identity.²

However, there has recently been an increase in independent nations separating from unions formed long ago – and the ensuing dialogue is concentrating on specific ethnic and cultural identities. Following 9/11, the utopian ideal of globalization lost its appeal leading to a ‘reconstruction’ of borders and cultural differentiation. Although political rhetoric seems to centre around globalization and unity, in actuality there is an

¹ This discourse has led to the production of important contemporary texts such as Giorgio Agamben’s “Beyond Human Rights,” which discusses the state of refugees in the decline of the nation-state.

increasing tendency toward the idea of fragmentation and a return to national identity in a post-colonial state. Nada Shabout writes:

> Across the different regions of the world, an increasing number of minorities are fighting for separate territories. In other words, the rhetoric of nationhood is prevailing. … Countries of the Arab world have reverted to stronger local national identities (e.g., Egyptian, Iraqi, Syrian). Minority groups in a number of Arab states threaten the unity of these countries through actions that encourage division … yet in the midst of this war of national identities they all seem to cling to an Arab identity as well.³

During the colonial period of French and British occupation of the 19th and 20th centuries, there was a renewed effort to reestablish a sense of Arab national identity that did not include the colonizer – either a new identity or a return to the pre-colonized state. Scholar Ibrahim Abu-Rabi’ states that in the years of turmoil that followed colonialism, the door was once again opened to colonization after 1967 when the United States and Great Britain returned to the “Arab world under the pretext of liberating Kuwait from Iraq and defending national American interests in the Gulf.”⁴ After enduring Ottoman rule, the Crusades, French and British invasions, conflict between the Arab nations, and the current involvement of ‘Western’ powers, it is impossible to fully erase the effects of colonialism upon Arab identity. Abu-Rabi’ summarizes the cultural impact on Muslim and Arab society in the following excerpt:

> Modern Muslim history, diverse as it is, faced the challenges of Westernization coming from the different corners of Europe. This does not mean that both the West and Islam are essentially at odds. What I mean to say is that the modern historical evolution of the West in the form of an aggressive capitalist modernity put itself on a collision course with the Muslim world. On the eve of colonialism, Muslim societies took a deep introspective look at the nature of their civil societies and states and were forced to contemplate a new pattern of relationships in a new era of colonial

³ Ibid.

and capitalist domination. Different Muslim voices emerged with a heterogeneous set of responses to the one complex political, social, and intellectual challenge: colonialism and its successor, neo-colonialism.\(^5\)

Throughout a culturally turbulent history, the idea of a unified Arabic identity has weakened significantly as new ‘hybrid’ identities are constantly formed in the liminal space of cultural and societal integration.\(^6\)

In this paper, I discuss how these themes of identity, cultural translation, and fragmentation inform the art of Ghada Amer. Known primarily as a ‘painter’, Amer also creates installations, sculptures, gardens, prints and drawings. Here I will discuss only three of her embroidered textual sculptures or installations, *Borqa*, *Private Room*, and *Encyclopedia of Pleasure*. In these three pieces, Amer embroiders text, but no visual imagery, onto sculptural forms, using various languages and source materials. *Borqa* (1997) is a black cloth burqa created by the artist with a lace and pearl embellishment containing embroidered Arabic text containing the definition of ‘fear.’ The sculpture *Private Room* (1998) consists of fifteen colorful, satin garment bags with an embroidered French translation of all the passages of the Qur’an mentioning women. *Encyclopedia of Pleasure* (2001), an installation of 57 stacked canvas boxes covered with gold embroidered text, incorporates excerpts of an English translation of a late 10\(^{th}\)/early 11\(^{th}\) century Arabic manuscript. This paper focuses on Amer’s textual work as text and literature play such an important role in her Arabic cultural heritage. As Amer herself says, “In the end, the use of language comes from my Arabic heritage, which teaches us

\(^5\) Ibid., 128.

\(^6\) Ibid., 79. Abu-Rabi’ talks about the weakness of Arabic nationalism in the 21\(^{st}\) century in light of the conflict between globalization, or ‘Americanization,’ and Arab and Muslim values.
to use language as an image. I do not make any differences between the text and the image.”

7 From an interview between Ghada Amer and Roxana Marcoci in conjunction with the exhibition “Threads of Vision: Toward a New Feminine Poetics” at the Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art in 2001.
CHAPTER 2:
HYBRIDITY AND IDENTITY

Critical to understanding Amer’s work is the impact that yearly trips to Egypt to visit her family made on her in the 1980s.⁸ On a visit in 1988, she came across ‘Venus,’ an Egyptian fashion magazine with sewing patterns in which hats, gloves, veils, and sleeves were added to the Western fashions, making them suitable for Muslim women.⁹ For Amer, this blending of cultures was both fascinating and shocking. She explains that in the late 1980s nearly everyone around her, including her mother, aunts, and cousins, began adopting veils and traditional clothing.¹⁰ This image of conservatism was vastly different than the more liberal Egypt she remembered leaving in the early 1970s. In fact, during her visits home in the mid-1990s when conservative Islam steadily began to make its presence known, she was afraid she would be forced to wear a headscarf or a veil to hide her face. Nagwa Shoeb, the director of public relations at the American University in Cairo, says, “The shift away from the moderate style of Islam long practiced in Egypt is pronounced.”¹¹ Describing herself as “culturally but not religiously Muslim,” Amer

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⁸ Her parents returned to Egypt in the 1980s after finishing their respective PhD programs in France.


¹⁰ Ibid.

draws heavily on personal experience as an “Egyptian woman raised in France by observant Muslim parents.”12 In a 2001 interview, Amer stated that, “What is going on now politically is like a mirror of what has always gone on in myself, because I am a hybrid of the West and the East.”13 Amer does not adopt the veil, but her work does respond to Egypt’s return to religious fundamentalism and to themes of intersecting cultures. Reflecting hybridity and questioning what is lost in the ensuing amalgamation of identities and histories are prevalent themes in Amer’s body of work.

Laurie Ann Farrell describes Amer’s sculptures as moving from “generalized secular imagery into sociopolitical and religious spheres both nuanced and direct,”14 a shift which brought to the forefront the artist’s struggle with her own cultural identity. Amer’s background is ‘mixed’: she does not, as again Farrell points out, consider herself singularly Egyptian, African, or French, but her formative years in Egypt have had a profound effect on the content of her artwork, as in the case of Borqa.

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A burqa is a long, loose garment worn by women in conservative Muslim societies who wish to cover their whole body. Today, most Muslim women wear hijab, loose clothing and a scarf covering the head, rather than a full-face veil, as a sign of modesty in accordance with God’s commandments. In Amer’s piece, she constructs the niqab, or veil that covers the face, leaving only the eyes exposed. With many forms of hijab present in Egypt, the terms niqab and burqa are considered to be interchangeable. Made of black cloth with a decorative square piece of lace, embroidery and pearls over the nose and mouth, the garment measures 43 x 40 cm, amply covering the head. The decorative lace was created in France where there is a rich history of lace-making, a predominantly feminine activity much like embroidery. She also incorporates jade pearls around the border of the lace and within the design, creating an intricately beautiful mixture of

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textures. Embroidered on the lace in Arabic calligraphy is the dictionary definition for
fear. Reacting to her fear that she will be forced to wear a burqa in Egypt, Amer’s
inclusion of the text acts as a nonverbal protest to the idea of conforming to Egypt’s
conservative culture and the reemergence of the burqa, or hijab, as a widely accepted
dress code for Egyptian women.

Amer often says that she wants the burqa in Borqa to look like a ‘sexy’ piece of
clothing, and indeed the lace, embroidery, and pearl embellishments add an element of
sexiness to an otherwise restrictive piece of clothing. This perception of sexuality is
intriguing in light of media coverage emphasizing the existence of many lingerie stores in
more conservative Muslim neighborhoods, and a fascination with what is ‘beneath the
veil.’ Contrary to Western stereotype, Muslim women desire lingerie; in fact, a requisite
30 items of sexy lingerie are often purchased as part of the bridal trousseau. In order to
show potential customers how the lingerie will look, Eastern European models are
photographed wearing the garments and smiling in a ‘non-titillating’ manner – in this
way the photographs are deemed acceptable. However, the images of nearly naked
women displayed beside the modestly dressed, veiled customers seem quite out of place.

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16 Artist commentary in gallery talk at the Hirshhorn.


18 Ibid., 64.
The fancy adornment – the lace, embroidery, pearls – on Amer’s plain black garment also seem out of place, as though the owner desires attention, which seems to contradict the purpose of wearing a burqa – to remain hidden so as not to attract attention or be enticing. But the embellishment is alluring; working to draw the viewer in closer to ascertain what appears to be a beautiful, delicate pattern. Only upon closer inspection does it become clear that the pattern is words, and that those words define fear. The calligraphic text is embroidered in the same subtle, pale green tones as the lace and pearls, yet the message of fear and regressive conformity is not so subtle. The text’s placement is key here, by layering the text over the nose and mouth, the wearer is breathing in and speaking through ‘fear.’ The text acts as a silent proclamation, it is a substitute for speech, yet it could not more clearly, or loudly, relay its message about the pervasive fear of change happening within Egypt. Amer transfers the Arabic words of the definition onto the garment, but through translation from the page to embroidery, she imbues the text with a new significance. She obscures the meaning through the addition
of embellishments and by placing the burqa within the setting of ‘art,’ but creates a deeper sense of the essence of the words through the context of the garment being forced upon the wearer in a changing culture.

Moreover, another layer of meaning presents itself in Borqa. Not just a covering for women, the term ‘burqa’ is also used to define the veil, or curtain hung before the door of the Ka’bah. Similar to Amer’s sculpture, this burqa, or veil, is created with black brocade, ‘embroidered with inscriptions, in letters of gold, of verses from the Qur’an and lined with green silk.’ 19 The veil and kiswah, the cloth covering the Ka’bah, are created in Egypt and replaced every year. The Ka’bah (cube), or the Temple of Mecca, is a box-like building in the center of the mosque in Mecca that is said to be placed ‘directly below the throne of God.’ 20 It is my argument that Amer’s piece, then, not only references the conservative, modest covering of women, but also alludes to the doorway into the sacred temple. She seems to draw a comparison between the covering of a holy place and the covering of a woman. Amer relays her fears of the conservative change in the Arabic culture, as well as addresses the role of Islam and its stance on the roles of women. There is an existing connection between sexuality and spirituality within Muslim culture, as well as a comparison between the body of a woman and the sacred, yet the contemporary practices of conservative Islam treat sexuality as a topic not to be broadly discussed. By highlighting this connection, Amer forces a discussion of the change in Islam from a sexually liberal culture with more elevated roles for women in the past to the current status of covering sexuality and placing women in a secondary status. The burqa is used to protect the chastity of a woman, to cover her sexuality – but it is also

20 Ibid.
used to protect the sacrality of the Ka’bah. Through Amer’s role as subversive translator, she translates the original representation of the veil of Holy Ka’bah into a veil covering a woman. She then re-translates this covering into something both sexy and fearful – a hybrid representation of a complex cultural identity.

Scholar Homi K. Bhabha discusses precisely this sort of culturally hybrid experience in his 1994 book, *The Location of Culture*. He defines hybridity as an identity that is formed in an ‘intercultural space’ or ‘Third Space of enunciation,’ where a middle ground exists between the culture of the colonized and that of the colonizer. Once the colonizer and colonized meet in this liminal or inbetween space, they both are forever changed, each influenced by the insertion of new ideas or cultural practices. Hybrid identity is not the emergence of an entirely new entity, but a combination of histories. In the late 1980s, Amer was forced to come to terms with her changing relationship to her

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Egyptian heritage and her life as an immigrant in France. As Bhabha describes the hybrid
subject, it is impossible to place Amer in any one culture – her identity is formed in the
boundaries, borders, and liminal spaces between her Egyptian past and French present, or
rather, now as a New Yorker – her American present. But, if Amer’s cultural identity is a
‘hybrid’ of Egyptian, French, and American cultures – it has to be taken into account that
each of these cultures are ‘hybrids’ themselves of many past combinations of cultures
throughout colonialist periods of history. Bhabha’s concepts of “hybridity have made it
clear that cultures must be understood as complex intersections of multiple places,
historical temporalities, and subject positions.”

Through her use of text and cultural context, Amer fuses together mediums and
cultures, mirroring her experiences through life. Laura Auricchio writes, “Amer both
calls attention to and voices her concerns about her identity as a ‘postcolonial subject,’
with claims to several cultures but fully embraced by none.” Cultural theorist Kobena
Mercer refers to artists like Amer as an example of “a transnational generation of
hyphenated hybrids.” In other words, a complex group of individuals not tied down to
one cultural identity, but who exist in a shifting ‘third space’ or ‘hyphen space.’

Ghada Amer creates her work within this ‘hyphen space,’ initiating dialogue, tension, confusion
and contradiction within each piece.

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23 As remarked by WJT Mitchell in conversation with Homi Bhabha in, “Translator Translated,”

24 Laura Auricchio, “Works in Translation: Ghada Amer’s Hybrid Pleasures,” Art Journal (Winter

25 Reference to Mercer’s article in – Joan Livingstone & John Ploof, Object of Labor: Art, Cloth,
and Cultural Production, (Chicago: School of the Art Institute of Chicago Press, 2007), 293.

26 Ibid.
Born the daughter of a diplomat in Cairo, Egypt in 1963, Ghada Amer moved with her family to the south of France in 1974. She spent the larger part of her childhood and adult life in France, where she attended school, university, and eventually L’Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Nice where she received her masters’ degree in painting. While studying in Nice, Amer claims she encountered a painting professor who refused to train women, forbidding them to enter the class, as he believed painting to be very serious and only men could be serious artists. The instructor’s behavior prompted Amer’s progression of injecting femininity into her paintings utilizing sewing, a typically feminine medium, to “paint” her canvases. Combining references to ‘women’s work’ (sewing) and handicraft (embroidery) with the high art of painting, was a direct reaction to the instructor’s biased opinion. She began converting her brushwork into needlework and paint into thread.

Although labeled as paintings and sculptures, Amer’s work exists in the hybrid space between painting, textile, and sculpture, and between ‘high art’ and handicraft – a

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27 Amer talks about how as an Egyptian child in France she always felt as though she did not fit in; she was an outsider in the French culture.

28 Amer now lives in New York.

29 Amer speaks about this instructor in many of her lectures, yet it is thought perhaps the incident is a product of her own self-mythologizing.
state of inbetweenness echoing her own position as an artist and translator. Rozsika Parker discusses this dichotomy between the high art of painting and the handicraft of embroidery as follows:\(^{30}\)

The art/craft hierarchy suggests that art made with thread and art made with paint are intrinsically unequal: that the former is artistically less significant. But the real differences between the two are in terms of *where* they are made and *who* makes them. Embroidery, by the time of the art/craft divide, [which occurred in the Renaissance] was made in the domestic sphere, usually by women, for ‘love’. Painting was produced predominantly, though not only, by men, in the public sphere, for money. … Clearly there are huge differences between painting and embroidery; different conditions of production and different conditions of reception. But rather than acknowledging that needlework and painting are different but equal arts, embroidery and crafts associated with ‘the second sex’ or the working class are accorded lesser artistic value.\(^{31}\)

By choosing embroidery, Amer is clearly referencing the historical role of ‘the second sex’, yet subverting the secondary status by elevating the ‘feminine craft’ of embroidery to ‘high art’. In addition, her use of embroidery in the process of visual, medial, and lingual translation exposes the role of translator, a role also perceived as secondary, as a gendered position entrenched in femininity.

In the sixteenth century, embroidery moved from a craft typically performed by men, to a domestic art that defined the social and economic status of femininity.\(^{32}\) Embroidery became associated with chastity, solitude, aristocracy, submission, femininity, and beauty, and as such provided a pastime for women deemed acceptable by social standards. As Parker observes, “needlework was designated a frontline position in the defence of women’s chastity” because it kept the hands and mind active, not allowing

\(^{30}\) Rozsika Parker’s discussion of the dichotomy seems to center around embroidery and painting production in Britain.


\(^{32}\) Ibid., 60.
for impropriety that could come from idleness.\textsuperscript{33} Remaining ensconced within the home and occupied with needlework, a demure young lady was considered to be a symbol of humble submission – in quiet repose, showing her love by beautifying her home and creating domestic comforts.\textsuperscript{34} However, the resulting work was used as a symbol of status, decorating the home and denoting wealth. A home full of beautiful embroidery was a household that could afford to have a woman stay home and stitch away the hours rather than have a paying job. Combining both the appearance of humility and opulence, the role of embroidery was contradictory – much like the role of women. Amer’s work recalls this loaded history, in the sense that she utilizes the ‘chaste,’ submissive craft of embroidery to emphasize texts and ideas of sexuality and its coexistence with spirituality.

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 74.

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 154.
Amer’s sculpture, *Private Room*, consists of fifteen satin garment bags hanging from a rod suspended from the ceiling. There are three styles of garment bags used: a zippered hanging garment bag, a bag with shelves creating box-like storage for folded garments, and a long piece of fabric with sleeves on both sides for storage of shoes. Within the fifteen bags, five colors are represented – blue, lavender, green, coral, and champagne. The bags are grouped by color, and contain one of each of the three styles, creating five separate traveling ‘units’ combined into one space. Embroidered on each bag in matching threads is a French translation of all the passages in the Qur’an that contain references to women. The words are embroidered on the outside of the bags, but the inside of some of the forms can be seen as well. All of the words are hand-
embroidered and tangled threads hang down from the letters, creating a visual pattern and slightly obscuring the legibility of the text.

Fig. 6, Detail of Private Room, 1998

The title *Private Room* seems to reference the sûrah, or chapter, of the Qur’an titled ‘Al-Hujurât’, or ‘The Private Apartment.’35 Within this sûrah it states: “Those who call you from behind the private apartments, most of them have no sense.”36 It is conjectured that these ‘private apartments’ were the rooms of the wives of the prophet Muhammad.37 In the context of the chapter, the writer is discussing what is necessary to

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37 “Answering Islam.”
be a proper Muslim, claiming the wives of Muhammad call to him, interrupting him in his prayers to come visit their rooms. Through the act of sewing, Amer subverts the text through her translation from the masculine into the feminine – giving voice to these ‘voiceless’ women represented in the Qur’an.

The passages of text used in this sculpture deal with everything from marriage, divorce, and childbearing to the rights of women. Some examples are as follows:38

Men are in charge of women, because Allah has made some of them excel the others, and because they spend some of their wealth. Hence righteous women are obedient, guarding the unseen which Allah has guarded. And those of them that you fear might rebel, admonish them and abandon them in their beds and beat them. Should they obey you, do not seek a way of harming them; for Allah is Sublime and Great!
(Sûrah 4:34)

Your women are a tillage for you. So get to your tillage whenever you like.
(Sûrah 2:223)

Divorced women should be provided with an affordable provision. This is incumbent on the righteous.
(Sûrah 2:241)

Surely those who slander married women, who are heedless and believing, are accursed in this world and the next, and they shall have a terrible punishment …
(Sûrah 24:23)

Amer states that she “was surprised at all the contradictions among the quotes. Sometimes they are really liberal and sometimes not.”39 Setting out to embroider all of these ‘contradictory’ quotes, Amer covered all the surfaces of fifteen bags, the number itself insignificant as it is only the requisite amount needed to contain all of


39 Interview with Marilu Knodle, 38.
Amer renders the Arabic script into French text, providing the opportunity for non-Arabic speaking cultures to gain access to the verses. In Sachiko Murata and William Chittick’s book, *The Vision of Islam*, they explain the importance of the ‘original’ Arabic script of the Qur’an.

For Muslims, the divine Word assumed a specific, Arabic form, and that form is as essential as the meaning that the words convey. Hence only the Arabic Koran is the Koran, and translations are simply interpretations. … The Arabic form of the Koran is in many ways more important than the text’s meaning. … A translation of the Koran is not the Koran, but an interpretation of its meaning.

By translating the text into French, Amer avoids being sacrilegious; the Roman lettering does not hold the spiritual equivalence of the Arabic calligraphic forms. Instead she interprets the scriptures in the context of art, eliminating the structure of the original text. This is a translation not only of text, but also of her experience moving from Egypt into France – the divine aspects do not survive the language translation, much like traditions are lost or transformed in the transfer from one culture to the next. Amer introduces a certain aspect of her original culture into her new culture, but she is morphing the two to create a new position that does not wholly belong in either culture, a transmutation – a hybrid.

In the text of *Private Room*, Amer breaks up the flow of the original passages into excerpts, or fragments, scattered over the varying surfaces of the garment bags. The letters become decorative and act as a visual pattern that wraps around the forms. Although there are larger blocks of text, they are interrupted by seams and change

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40 Amer stated this during her lecture at the Indianapolis Museum of Art.

direction as they move through the sculpture. Tangled threads obscure some of the letters, there is no punctuation, all of the letters are capitalized, and the surface on which the text is placed is often against another surface – making it difficult to access. As in *Borqa*, the text begins to serve a more decorative function as the content becomes difficult to ascertain. By translating the meaningful, scriptural passages of the Qur’an into fragmented, decorative embroidery, Amer embraces the act of rendering the original message as incomprehensible – unable to survive the act of translation. Embellishments and threads obscure the text and any meaning that might be read, the form itself overpowering and veiling the content. However, this lack of legibility has an historical precedent. Amer states that:

> In the mosque, you can’t read all the words on the wall. … It’s not meant to be read. You just get a sense. I think for Islamic people, the text and the image are the same. When I think about using a text, I don’t think about translating it into drawings. To copy it means I have illustrated it.⁴²

In other words, it is not necessary to see all of the words to have an understanding of the content – the inherent meaning is what is essential. In Walter Benjamin’s *Task of the Translator*, he defines the “essential substance of a literary work what it contains in addition to information … the unfathomable, the mysterious, the ‘poetic.’”⁴³ He goes on to discuss how this essential substance, or inherent meaning, cannot be reproduced through translation. However, it is possible for a translator to produce an ‘echo’ of the original author’s intent. This ‘echo’ alludes to the initial intention, allowing for comprehension of meaning. The inability to see a full text but still comprehend meaning connects with the many layers of tradition involved in Islamic society. Veils are not


simply pieces of cloth covering an object or person, they are anything that “separates us from the other, that which prevents our understanding of the other,” from tangles of threads to cultural misconceptions to psychological awareness.44

*Private Room* is very sensual in its use of textures, colors, and even the sound and movement of the fabric as the viewer walks by the work. The garment bags in their reference to packing, moving, or storage, suggest a transitoriness of place; a nomadic condition. They can be used to store garments for transportation, yet these bags are empty of physical garments and contain only text on the surfaces. Both the burqa with no wearer and the garment bags without garments begin to mimic the seemingly hollow, decorative function of women in society. They are colorful and ‘pretty’, but empty of any real meaning, which corresponds to women’s secondary role in this particular society. Emptiness also relates to Amer’s use of incomprehensibility – the translated words are empty, lacking their original meaning and intention. The decorative, extracted text remains surface-bound, covering only the outer layer and not filling the bags. Without the original context, the text and sculpture are in a state of transition without a real sense of belonging – nomadic and incapable or unwilling to settle down in one culture or moment.

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The act of translating is primarily used for the purposes of communication, education and preservation. When a thought or idea is spoken or written it is translated from something intangible into something tangible, a form that can be read, touched, or heard. This translated thought is then communicated to another person, educating the recipient and passing the idea on as a means of keeping the thought alive, or preserved, for someone in the future to hear or see.

Translation can also be used in communication as a form of interpretation. For instance, translation occurs when a verbal or written transmission is transferred from one language to another in order to facilitate a dialogue between two persons speaking or reading different languages. Texts are also often translated into another language as a way to expand the audience, facilitating both communication and education. Yuri Lotman describes translation as “a primary mechanism of consciousness. To express something in another language is a way of understanding it.”\textsuperscript{45} Lotman is referring to the process in which translations can uncover new or different meanings in an original text through a shift in language, cultural context, and syntax. In this process, context, analogies, and language are often added to convey the message of the original and so, in essence, the translation becomes an interpretation of the original. Moreover, through this

dissemination process, the message of the original text is preserved through multiple copies. That is, if the original were to be destroyed, the text would live on, albeit only as an interpretation of the text, through translations and transcriptions.

In *The Rhetoric of Failure*, Ewa Ziarek addresses the task of translating through an analysis of two essays by Walter Benjamin, *The Task of the Translator* and *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. According to Benjamin, all texts contain a certain level of translatability, regardless of the existence of a translator.46 While all texts have the ability to be translated on some level – for words to be transferred from one language to another – some retain an element of translatability as an inherent quality unrelated to the translator’s work. However, Mieke Bal suggests that the original does not promise translatability, but rather, intranslatability – “the identity and mood of the initial thing.”47 This intranslatability, or inherent quality, cannot be truly transferred as it is uniquely connected with the original author, culture and language.

In the process of transference of language, and arguably of culture, this ‘inherent quality’ is often obscured and lost. Through the act of translation and transmission of texts, the original meaning is trans-formed and de-formed into new historical contexts.48 The translation, or interpretation, becomes its own ‘original,’ placed in a new setting. Benjamin describes this transformation as “the sacrifice of truth for the sake of clinging

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48 Ziarek, *Rhetoric*, 127. Bhabha is also interested in this aspect of Benjamin’s writing, the process of translating across contexts and cultures.
to its transmissibility.”49 In order to disseminate a text through translation, it is necessary
to transform the original meaning into an interpretation, thereby sacrificing the true initial
essence. If the intent is only to transmit information, then the essence or truth of the
original is cast aside in order to spread the message. Benjamin writes that a text’s
“essential quality is not statement or the imparting of information. Yet any translation
which intends to perform a transmitting function cannot transmit anything but
information – hence, something inessential.”50 Ziarek uses this statement to posit, “in
fact, what the process of translation reveals is that meaning or message is not essential
even in the original.”51 The message is not as essential as the original author’s purpose
for writing the text. Thus Benjamin claims the truth to be sacrificed through transmission
of a text, he maintains that in certain texts, translatability still exists – the text’s nature, or
meaning, is still intact. Arguably, the term meaning contains more than mere information,
it includes this essence, the translatability, of the original. Benjamin’s subsequent
statement expands on what he regards to be this ‘essential substance’ of a text, “what it
contains in addition to information … the unfathomable, the mysterious, the poetic.”52
This ‘unfathomable’ substance is the essence or aura of the text, its meaning. Yet this
translatability, or intranslatability, remains hidden and inaccessible to the translator. The
text’s nature may still exist, but only in the original. The translation can only echo the
true meaning of the text, not replicate the intention. What is generally lost in translation is
the essence of meaning, leading to the sacrifice of truth. This does not mean the

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51 Ziarek, *Failure*, 129.
52 Benjamin, “Translator,” 70.
translation is false, but rather somewhat flawed and lacking the initial authenticity.

Benjamin alludes to the existence of a ‘pure language’, an authentic language that cannot be translated. Yet he defines one task of the translator as consisting of “finding that intended effect [intention] upon the language into which he is translating which produces in it the echo of the original.”53 If the translation is good, then it will maintain a similar intention, echoing the untranslatable pure language, and in a sense, become its own ‘original’ text. Although Walter Benjamin claims it is possible to recreate the intention of a text through translation, he also concludes that the “whole sphere of authenticity is outside technical – and, of course, not only technical – reproducibility.”54 This assumes that essence and intention are two separate entities, which is important, for while it may be possible to reproduce what the translator believes to be the intention of the text, it is impossible to know or recreate the true authentic intent of the original creator.

53 Ibid., 76.

The *Encyclopedia of Pleasure* is “the oldest extant erotic treatise in Arabic, dating from the late 10th to early 11th century.”\(^{55}\) Ghada Amer’s sculpture copies a 1977 English translation of the manuscript in a dissertation by Salah Addin Khawwam.\(^{56}\) The original manuscript existed for centuries, a translator unnecessary to continuously preserve the text. In fact, Amer does not attempt to perform a translation of language to preserve the essence, or the intrinsic quality of the author’s intent, but merely transfers the text onto a different surface, translating the medium and context. She chooses not to impart the meaning of the text, but rather places the language in front of the viewer to decipher on his or her own terms.

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The manuscript describes all aspects of sexuality that existed in Egyptian society – which is where the book was written – explaining in detail how a man gives pleasure to a woman, how a man can pleasure another man, the virtues of a sexually experienced woman over a virgin, and many other similar topics that deal not only with sexuality, but also with spirituality and the teachings of Muhammad. The connection between spirituality and sexuality is clearly expressed in the original manuscripts author’s note which states, “Allah … gave a high rank to sexual union … urged us to observe it, showed us the need to practise it and, giving priority to pleasure, indicated the grandeur of coition.”57 The manuscript emphasizes the importance of being fully aware and in control of sexuality – how being sexually aware can make one a good human both physically and spiritually.

In *Encyclopedia of Pleasure*, Amer duplicates sections of the incomplete English translation, as the original is lost. She transcribes seven of the manuscripts forty-two chapters and translates them from the written page into embroidery on canvas-covered boxes. Amer chooses to embroider seven chapters, including: 7 (On Lover’s Opinions of Sexual Union), 8 (On Heterosexuality), 12 (On the Praiseworthy Aesthetic Qualities of Women), 13 (On the Manners of Women and on Chosen Women), 14 (On Women’s Desire for Coition), 16 (On Attracting Women) and 39 (On the Advantages of a Nonvirgin over a Virgin).58 According to Amer’s sister, Amer chose sections based on her enjoyment of “certain passages referring to female pleasure and discussing female

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57 Ibid., 43. See the full original author’s note in Appendix I.

58 The complete chapter list of the Encyclopedia of Pleasure is found in Appendix II.
beauty.” An excerpt from chapter 12 (On the Praiseworthy Aesthetic Qualities of Women) is as follows:

She should not be more than fifteen years old; white-skinned and with a rosy face; not too tall and not too short; her lower and upper part should be of equal length, for if the upper part is longer than the lower part, she will walk as if she were rolling.

She should have a wide-chest, well-shaped breasts, a straight back, a broad, fleshy and straight shoulders, well-developed arms, beautiful forearms, thin wrists, soft palms, soft, un wrinkled fingers and long, trimmed nails.

She should have a well-developed belly, a slender waist and well-proportioned limbs, a tough body, plump round hips and fleshy nice-looking thighs, knees that go with the roundness of the thighs, well-developed calves and well-shaped feet.

She should also have a neck which is neither long and thin nor short and thick, a smooth throat, a face that is neither thin nor wide, but rather moderately round, a perfectly round chin and smooth cheeks, a well-proportioned nose and moderately wide nostrils, wide, long, black eyebrows that are not connected with each other, round, unsunken and ungoggled eyes, soft eyelids, black, long, thick eyelashes and black, wide eyes that look beautiful both when they are open and shut. In fact, her eyes should be so charming that they will reflect her emotion, express her thoughts and captivate both the heart and the mind from the first glance.

This is but a small part of a very detailed list of ‘praiseworthy’ physical attributes that then leads to a discussion of preferred attitude and emotion that is exemplified by the following:

She should also be witty, observant, smiling, sagacious, tactful, energetic, complaisant, argumentative and skilful in turning a hot discussion into a scene of love in which she, smiling and joking rather than looking belligerent, tempts her man into kissing and biting her until, getting sexually excited to an uncontrollable degree, he falls a prey to her charm. It is then that both she and her man will unite spiritually and bodily and, thus united,


they will achieve a lasting a perfect bliss in which they will lose their sense of
time.61

These passages, along with many others, are stitched onto the surfaces of 57 boxes
haphazardly stacked in an installation.

Of the 57 boxes included in *Encyclopedia of Pleasure*, there are four different
sizes. Each box is covered with a slipcover of raw canvas and machine-embroidered on
all sides with letters of shimmering gold thread. The Roman letters are all capital, and in
a style known as *sirma*, a type of embroidery that has become popular in contemporary
Egypt but originated in India. This culturally appropriated style of embroidering is, as
Amer’s sister explains, “traditionally often used to display in calligraphy Koranic verses
for decorative purposes.”62 Amer fittingly translates an Indian style of embroidery used
in Egypt for religious texts, into a transcription of an English text denoting the roles of
sexuality and spirituality in an Islamic society – a perfect example of multiple hybridities
existing in a state of inbetweeness. This work uses machine-embroidery rather than
hand-stitching, which creates fewer inconsistencies within the text’s pattern and provides
a visuality that looks more manufactured than handcrafted. This manufactured
appearance looks more mass-produced and puts into question the role of the creator-
suggests that embroidery “even in its simplest form may become the expression of
personal thought and feeling”, as it is “work which mirrors [a woman’s] own thought and


personality. “By using a machine, Amer erases her own ‘thought and personality’ by eliminating her typical tangle of threads, like those seen in Private Room. By removing the creator from the equation, Amer places the emphasis on the form and content, commenting on the absence of a physical, unique, individual woman within this text. Yet, compared with the other texts used in the three sculptures discussed, this text is the most sensitive to the role of women, considering their sexual pleasure, but still placing them as sexual objects that provide both visual and sexual pleasure.

The lettering in Encyclopedia of Pleasure is mechanical in appearance, lacking the delicate web of threads and intricate design in her other works. This particular text is the most direct in its discussion of physical beauty, yet Amer only allows elegance and beauty to appear through her choice of golden thread and the repetition of similar forms within the lettering. There is nothing delicate about the bold lettering on the plain canvas background with white zippers. All letters containing closed forms, such as O, R, A, and D, are filled in as a solid field of gold thread rather than simply outlines. From a distance, these golden shapes create a staccato patterning on the sides of the block, lending a visual flow that disrupts the rhythmic flow of the written text. This rhythm is also disrupted through full justification of the text, breaking up words inconsistently without hyphenation, which forces them to fill the sides of the blocks and flow directly to the edges – like with Private Room; she considers text and image to be interchangeable, breaking up the words to fill the shapes. The words however do not move onto the adjacent side of the block, but are left incomplete. The text is fragmented further as the boxes are randomly stacked with no regard for maintaining the textual flow of the

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original words. The text is no longer bound to its original order within the manuscript as the passages have been transferred to different sides of the blocks and then shuffled within the installation, making it nearly impossible to read the text from beginning to end without physically moving and shifting the blocks in an attempt to find the original connections. The concept of shifting is again a reference to the nomadic qualities of Amer’s sculptures – structures that are not grounded and permanent, but constantly moving across borders and cultures. The text is visible, but incomplete as it flows around the form. There is no clear hierarchy of information and importance, which makes the text appear drifting, existing in fragments. As in Private Room, the text has been stripped from its original location and point of reference.

Fig. 8, Detail of the Encyclopedia of Pleasure, 2001
Amer’s act of translation occurs in the shift in medium from text on a page to embroidery on canvas. By adding a new context through a change in medium and through her manipulation of the flow of the text around the objects, she creates a visual conflict between the physical structure and the embroidered text. She leaves the individual words in the correct order within the sentence structure on the side of the block, but disrupts the order of the overall chapter within the manuscript. Amer represents the text, but in such a way that the focus shifts between the text itself and the object around which it is placed. This tension creates a struggle between form and content. Olu Oguibe writes, “By relocating and repositioning the texts, [Amer] evinces women’s hopes, desires, frustrations, and self-affirmations, thus attesting to the power of text to contain within it the very contradiction of its original intentions, allowing the buried voice to re-emerge and come to the fore.”64 Amer also accomplishes a subversive translation and the emergence of a ‘buried voice’ through her continued use of embroidery, yet by using the machine; she is removing the physical presence of the sewer. She refers to the woman, creates the possibility for a ‘voice’ then removes the opportunity, again emphasizing the surface textures and superficiality, rather than what is hidden within. Amer is once again embracing the incomprehensible nature of translated text – the inability to access the intention of the original. As in the other two sculptures, it is only possible to approach the surface of the sculpture; the words wrap around the structure, but do not penetrate. There is a feeling of emptiness and impermanence, as though the potential stronger role of the sexually aware woman liberated from the act of sewing is only temporary and will again be redefined, packed away and stored.

Amer translates the physical type from black ink to gold thread, paper to canvas, and manuscript to block. The translation has altered the size, shape, form and context of the original. She maintains the original spiritual context through her choice of sirma embroidery, but through placing the text on boxes and stacking them, creates a new context. As in Private Room, the boxes act as a device to reference moving, nomadism, and a feeling of temporariness. This transitory feeling, combined with the loss of the original manuscript, evokes the tenuous nature of text and translation. As a text is passed down orally and in written-form it is subject to constant additions and subtractions through each interpretation. The intent of the original is forever lost. It is bluntly uprooted and shuffled around with no sense of direction or belonging. The boxes are non-specific; they reflect the state of being translated to the point of losing meaning or even information – or become like a tabula rasa. This comments not only on translation, but also hybridity and nomadism. With multiple border crossings and cultural shifts, specificity of origin is lost. No longer referencing a ‘vacuous’ woman, the Encyclopedia of Pleasure evokes the feeling of a figure lost, impossible to translate, but may be unlocked and revealed at some point in the future.

In Amer’s Encyclopedia of Pleasure, the essence of the original is lost through multiple translations and fragmentations, making it incomprehensible.

Benjamin writes:

The technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced.65

65 Ibid., 221.
A reproduction is a direct copy of the object or text, detaching its frame of reference, while translation adds and subtracts from the original in an attempt to ‘copy’ the intent of the text. When the text is translated, it is removed from its ‘domain of tradition’ and is placed in a new context for the beholder, a process which preserves, or ‘reactivates’ the text, but which leaves it stripped of its original aura. However, this reactivation creates a new original text. Amer’s interpretation of the translated sculpture becomes its own original containing her intention and purpose. Ziarek writes that “both kinds of transmissibility – translation or mechanical reproduction – have a similar shattering effect on the consistency of tradition and truth: they perform a fragmentation of meaning by displacing the work of art from its linguistic or historical context.” Language, meaning and context are intertwined in the original, a relationship translation disrupts. The fragmentation, or disruption, results in a translated text in which the meaning “is only loosely attached to its language.”

The true meaning still exists in the language and intent of the original – through placing the ideas into a different language and historical context, the original meaning is only an echo attached to the new language, it is not fully realized. This process of echoing the original complies with Benjamin’s statement that authenticity is not reproducible – it is possible to maintain a loose connection and similar intention to the original intent, but impossible to fully duplicate the true essence of the initial text. However, it is possible to create a new original, the translation, in which the translator takes the active role of imbuing the text with intent.

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66 Ziarek, Failure, 133.

67 Ibid., 130.

Created only a few years apart, Ghada Amer’s *Borqa, Private Room, and Encyclopedia of Pleasure* have many connections. The text used in each piece has been translated or transcribed, yet their meanings remain elusive as she includes only portions of the original text and has incorporated them on her own terms. Moreover, Amer fragments the text and in order to make it fit around the form of her sculptures, she reduces the language to visual display, emphasizing the form. It is impossible to read the texts fully because she has muddled the translation – thereby creating confusion and a need for dialogue to reach some kind of conclusion. Amer contradicts the purpose of translation by making the text only partially accessible - bringing the elements of the text and sculptural form together and creating a tension between the two. Amer creates a situation in which the viewer ultimately spends time contemplating all aspects of the piece in a process of discovery.

The texts and sculptures also share a theme that combines spirituality and sexuality. In *Borqa*, Amer creates a ‘sexy’ garment that reflects both the spiritual desire to cover a woman to protect her chastity, and a veil used to cover the door of the sacred temple of Ka’bah. *Private Room* uses passages from the Qur’an that deal specifically with women and indirectly connects the spiritual nature of the words with the sensuality of the fabric, color, and textures that speak of the private apartments of the Muhammad’s wives. *Encyclopedia of Pleasure* has the most direct language of sexuality, yet it still remains connected with spirituality through the invocation of the Prophet’s words and the use of sirma embroidery. The roles of women in her Arabic culture are inextricably connected with religion – making it necessary for Amer to define her observation of the secondary nature of women as decorative ‘objects’ in the language of religion and
spirituality. Yet, this same religion holds women, or at least chastely modest women, in high regard, as something to be revered and protected. The contradictory role of women within conservative Islam is apparent in Amer’s work as she struggles to come to terms with her own understanding of a culture from which she has been placed as an outsider.
In the process of translating and transmitting texts in her work, Amer incorporates layers of contradiction by fragmenting the texts and rendering them virtually unreadable through her placement of words on the form, disregarding the legibility of the original text. She does not attempt to replicate the authenticity of the original, but rather offers her own interpretation. She translates all aspects of the text from language to medium and context. The way in which she converts language from one dialect to another, her choice of medium, and the purposeful mixing of cultural traditions and identities are some of the strategies Amer utilizes to show how easily translation – the supposed making understandable of the indecipherable – can result in misunderstanding and confusion.

Through contradiction, Amer emphasizes the process of discovery. The dialogue created between the original text and the translation, content and form, object and viewer, and artist and creation stresses the multivocality of translation to be explored. Here it becomes necessary to point out that contradiction does not only exist through Amer’s interdiction of ideas, medium, and arrangement. Translation as a whole is contradictory. Walter Benjamin explains that only through the act of translation is the original brought back to life, and this translated text itself becomes an original.69 However, the very definition of translation defies the existence of an original text, as a written text is a

69 Benjamin, “Task,” 71-72, 80.
translation of spoken word or thought. Each subsequent translation becomes a copy of a copy – distorting the original with grammatical, textual, rhythmical, and cultural inflections so that only mere traces of the ‘original’ exist. Benjamin is correct in stating that the translation becomes an original insofar as the translated text is the translator’s unique interpretation. Each of Amer’s interpretations stand alone as an ‘original’ text, and it is not necessary to see the original forms in order to understand her commentary on fragmentation and hybridity.

In ‘The Task of the Translator’ Benjamin describes translation, “Just as a tangent touches a circle lightly and at but one point … a translation touches the original lightly and only at the infinitely small point of the sense, thereupon pursuing its own course according to the laws of fidelity in the freedom of linguistic flux.”70 Amer’s art uses translation in this same sense. Her sculptures ‘touch lightly’ on the original texts, yet she interprets them in a new context – pursuing her own course and letting the translation traverse down a new path. Through translation, Ghada Amer does not attempt replicate the ‘essence’ of the original, but creates a new ‘aura’ in her sculptures. Benjamin elaborates on this notion of aura in his description of a mountain casting a shadow upon a viewer, and how that aura is eliminated by a picture of the same mountain – by removing the presence of the original, the essence is lost.71 The same is true for a translation of an original text. Like the picture of the mountain, Amer utilizes translation and fragmentation of the original to eliminate the true sense of the original – thereby creating a sense of distance within presence. It is possible to see the text, read the words and letters, and touch the physical form of the surface – but the essence of the absent original

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70 Benjamin, “Task,” 80.

text is unable to be possessed, the distance cannot be bridged. The aura has been intentionally, or unintentionally, eliminated through the process of transmission and translation.

Though Amer eliminates the original context of her source materials, she creates a means of entering the essence of her works through the task of piecing together the varying fragments and sorting through all of the layers. Through her use of translation, contradiction and emphasis on the process of discovery, she forces a consideration of both sides of an issue and seeks to challenge preconceived notions. She challenges the views of the beholder, but perhaps is also using the process to challenge her own views. This is a process of discovery for both the artist and the viewer. She disputes ideas of culture, gender, and religion – exploring multiple issues in a format that does not clearly state her own views, but present the issues in a different context in order to bring them to her audience. Her work provokes an examination of gender and cultural roles in her quest to understand the cultural and societal changes occurring in the ebb and flow between progression and repression. Amer does not clearly state a belief that one idea is superior, but rather seems more interested in coming to an understanding of the resulting change.

Fereshteh Daftari writes that, “One agenda of Amer’s work … is to celebrate Arab culture … by setting parts of its literary history before Western eyes; at the same time, she also confronts the conservative currents in contemporary Islam by restoring to visibility parts of its written tradition that were integral to it in the past.” Amer’s sculptures reflect her personal struggle to reconcile her desire to belong with her

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unwillingness to conform. She forces an interaction between cultures through her use of language – in this case Arabic, French, and English – translation, and medium in an attempt to confront her own identity. Her sculptures act as a puzzle that cannot be solved, through translation and hybridity, pieces have become lost and re-formed, emphasizing cultural and gender divides. Amer’s art contains a “personal significance which ties her present quest and research to her own location and predicament”, both as a woman artist defined by a particular cultural background and living in a contemporary cultural period that seems to contradict the gender roles and historical precedents she has begun to discover and reveal.

73 Here I am referencing her desire to ‘fit in’ when she moved to France as a child, as well as her unwillingness to wear a veil on her later visits to Egypt.

APPENDIX I:

THE AUTHOR’S NOTE FROM ENCYCLOPEDIA OF PLEASURE

In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful. Praise be to Allah, the Lord of the worlds and blessings be on Muhammad, the Prophet and his pure kinsfolk. Allah is sufficient for us! Most excellent is He in whom we trust.

Allah, whose praise be great, whose names be sacred and whose qualities be supernal, gave a high rank to sexual union, legalizing it thereby in the eyes of religions and making it a means by which the survival of animals, the progress of mankind and their reproduction can be secured. Moreover, in His old scriptures and expounded verse, Allah urged us to observe it, showed us the need to practise it and, giving priority to pleasure, indicated the grandeur of coition, placed the desire for it in women and inspired them to practise it so that it might be an impetus for them to be both obedient and submissive to men and so that through their counter-response reproduction and mutual harmony might be achieved. As a result, by matching pleasure against utility God’s wisdom is manifested and His grace is shown to be great. Celebrated be the praises of God. How great He is! And how universal His benevolence is!

Because man shares animals in sexual union and on account of the fact that he is the solo possessor of the faculty of speech he should, by virtue of reason and out of courtesy and superiority, use in the practice of sexual union with his beloved one such ethics and fine speech as distinguish him from animals in their rough and hasty sexual practice. It is in this way that man, beautifying and ennobling his acts, shows that he is a distinct being possessing the virtue of gallantry. Socrates was reported to have said, “Coition without courtesy signifies rough behaviour.”

Now, because the majority of people will be ruled by bestial behaviour and a resemblance to animals in sexual union if they are to remain ignorant of courtesy, it has been necessary to set an example to be followed and offer a presentation to be referred to so that an understanding individual may deviate from the course of the riff-raff and have the advantage of being different from them, for it has been said that perfect manliness lies in being different from the riff-raff.

Finally, I would like to say that the book contains such sexual knowledge as can be useful to courteous people. It is my hope, however, that they will find in it the best ethics of sex.

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75 Encyclopedia of Pleasure, 43.
APPENDIX II:

LIST OF CHAPTERS FOR THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF PLEASURE

Chapter 1. On the Sundry Names Given to Coition
2. On the Advantages of Coition and Its Values
3. On the Causes of Coition
4. On the Sundry Names Given to the Penis and the Vulva
5. On Praising the Qualities of the Penis and the Vulva
6. On the Anatomy of the Penis and the Vulva
7. On Lover’s Opinions of Sexual Union
8. On Heterosexuality
9. On Pederasty
10. On Lesbianism
11. On Physiognomy
12. On the Praiseworthy Aesthetic Qualities of Women
13. On the Manners of Women and on Chosen Women
14. On Women’s Desire for Coition
15. On the Malikite School
16. On Attracting Women
17. On Love Messengers
18. On the Ethics of Coition
19. On the Ethics of Conversation and Kissing
20. On the Ethics of Lying in Bed
21. On Aphrodisiacs
22. On Aphrodisiac Masticatories
23. On Aphrodisiac Foot Ointments
24. On Increasing the Sexual Pleasure of Man and Woman
25. On Favourable Time for Sexual Union
26. On Conditions When Coition is Preferable
27. On Vulgar Ways of Performing Coition
28. On the Kinds and Techniques of Coition
29. On the Safe and Harmful Kinds of Coition
30. On the Advantages of Major Ablution
31. On Precautions Against Pregnancy
32. On Guarding Against Injuries Arising from Frequent Sexual Unions
33. On Curing Impotence and the Illness of the Penis
34. On Contrivances Concerning Coition

Encyclopedia of Pleasure, 44-45.
35. On Questions and Answers Connected with Coition
36. On Questions and Repartees
37. On Jealousy
38. On Procurement
39. On the Advantages of a Nonvirgin Over a Virgin
40. On the Sexual Life of Animals
41. On the Volume of the Penis and the Area of the Surface of the Womb
42. On Miscellaneous Topics
WORKS CITED


