

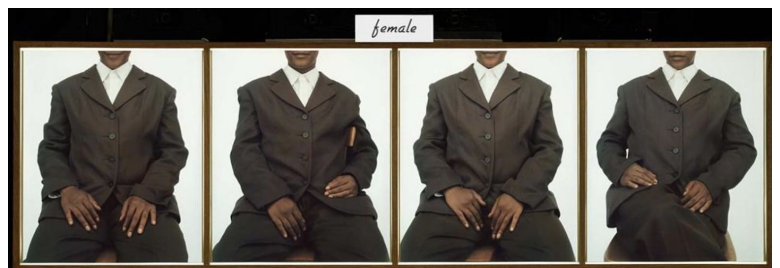
Contested Boundaries: An Analysis of “Women Take the Floor” Exhibit as a Form of Feminist Activism

While regarded as a conduit of meaningful self-expression, art is riddled with gender inequity that favors the male artist as the ubiquitous messenger for the human experience. Men have long entrusted themselves with the power to convey the narratives of women through art, leading to depictions that praise traditional notions of femininity and define the value of women in terms of their significance to men. While traditional female representations in art fall prey to this pattern of gender polarization, art pieces such as those displayed at the “Women Take the Floor” exhibit at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts (MFA) disrupt these perspectives by featuring the works of women artists. Across cultures and domains, these art pieces feature the inclusion of women in areas they have previously been erased or denied entry as women assert a counter-narrative to their traditional portrayal in art. Such pieces utilize mediums that have for centuries perpetuated a misogynistic view of women, demonstrating how art can enable oppressed individuals to use the barriers placed on them as a tool to convey their experiences and overcome the pressures on their identity. In dissolving these arbitrary gender barriers, the very realms in which women are depicted as weak or incompetent become the pathways through which women craft their own identities and reclaim a voice in society, asserting their recognition as independent, unique shapers of society. By overtly challenging the barriers that women have faced in art and other male-dominated realms, the artworks displayed at the MFA’s “Women Take the Floor Exhibit” serves as a catalyst for dissolving the unequal partitions between men and women in society, allowing women to reclaim ownership over their narratives and identities in a broader range of spaces.

Because institutional structures have precluded women from taking an active role in the creation and display of art, the portrayal of women within the archives of art history has been monopolized by the male viewpoint. In her essay on New York’s Museum of Modern Art, Carol Duncan recounts the masses of “simply female bodies, or parts of bodies, with no identity beyond their female anatomy” that crowd the museum, illustrating the reductive representation of women in art (171). Rich, individual stories of women fall away before the predominant, homogenous image of the female nude that overrun what we consider to be “great art.” To examine the effect of this form of representation on the female identity, let us examine more closely the work of Pablo Picasso, for instance. Widely acclaimed to be an influential piece in pioneering Cubism style, his painting *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)* features five nude prostitutes in a Barcelona brothel. With disjointed body shapes and racially primitive mask-like faces, Picasso crudely contorts their physical bodies in his own self-conception of them in ironically seductive, self-displaying poses, divested of intellectual or emotional awareness. The highly sexualized nature of the women renders them purely conduits of male desire, their identities reduced to the passive actors of others’ desires. While the original draft of the painting included two men,

Picasso later omits these male characters and by doing so, places them in front of the canvas, such that it is the audience who acquires the “privileged status of male viewers” through the visual consumption of the women (Duncan 175). Picasso’s assertion over the women’s bodies as his territory to manipulate and interpret is vicariously adopted by the viewer, effectively imposing a power structure of control that extends from the exterior of the frame -- from the artist or viewer -- onto the subject that lies within. While particularly appalling, this painting is indicative of a larger pattern of misogynistic female representation that pervades art culture. By framing the significance of women through a ubiquitously male perspective, art has invariably served to exacerbate the differences between men and women in order to delimit and control the female identity such that it can be defined by the outsider looking into the canvas, rather than by a woman herself. In its simultaneous glorification and debasement of women, the display of art in museums has contributed to the containment of the female identity by confirming a woman's place to lie in primarily sexual, deferential realms while equating the exterior world with masculinity.

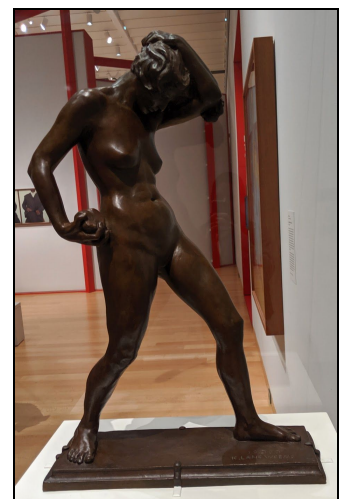
While Picasso’s art serves as a case study for traditional female representation in art, the work by modern feminist artists such as Lorna Simpson illustrates the power in co-opting the medium of art as a way to deconstruct the gender divides that, for centuries, this art has instated. In poetic parallelism to her own journey as a female artist, her artwork fearlessly traverses into male-dominated domains in order to challenge the artificial constructs that dictate which spaces a woman can inhabit. Her work blurs the boundaries between masculine and feminine realms in pursuit of a female identity defined not by passivity and limitation but by control and liberation. One of her pieces displayed at the MFA, *She*, features portraits of a gender-ambiguous individual wearing a tailored suit and sitting with a casual, confident posture (Simpson). The masculine associations conjured by these portraits contrast with the word “female” that sits atop the frame. By merging two domains that appear incompatible -- the female identity and masculine mannerisms -- Simpson actively contradicts our polarized gender expectations, calling attention to and undermining the forces that entrap individuals into binary categories. Simpson borrows stylistic elements of sophisticated art, such as the refined costume and the portrait, yet subverts them in a way that ascribes unprecedented agency to her subject by emphasizing their personhood to be driven by individual choice rather than an obvious product of one’s biological sex. In contrast to the beguiling, hyperfeminine images proliferated in famous artworks, *She* challenges rather than conforms to predominating stereotypes and expectations for women. In a piece such as *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, the viewer’s gaze lands upon the female subject as an object of expected femininity and sexualization, allowing for the negotiation of superiority of the viewer over the subject. However, the subject of *She* evades the categorical stereotypes



fresh in the viewer's mind and refuses to be objectified, rebounding the viewer's gaze upon themselves by forcing the viewer to confront their own biases. *She* questions the gaze of the viewer and disrupts the mental associations built and reinforced by traditional depictions, providing an ultimate example of representational justice. By attacking the preconceptions that proliferate traditional art, this feminist artwork merges the polarized domains of masculinity and femininity, allowing for the corrective representation of women across these domains.

The power of art captured within *She* to emancipate the female identity can therefore be located in its ability to circumvent the polarized gender expectations bred within the viewer's mind, effectively eroding the hold of gender structures in society. By testing the perception of gender in a neutral image of a cat, researchers from the University of Bergamo found that societal gender frameworks, or schemas, influence an individual's cognition when processing new information. In general, the cat was perceived as male around 7 times more often than as female, which is hypothesized to be because the presence of a character suggests its activeness, which links to masculinity, while passivity and invisibility are associated with women. Our androcentric language tendencies reinforce and reveal these biases, as in the use of the "he" series or "man" to refer to humankind or a gender-neutral subject. Furthermore, when stereotypical traits such as a baby carriage or a car were present in the image, the perception of gender was found to be profoundly subjective and strongly adherent to existing gender stereotypes (Zizevskaia). The findings of this study suggest a cultural taboo against the overlap of traits between men and women -- broadly speaking, femininity in men or masculinity in women -- which contributes to gender polarization on the psychological level. This phenomena, which is termed the "lens of polarization," invariably contains women to certain realms while conflating masculinity with universality. Thus, on a psychological level, society pervasively frames our interpretation of the world in a way that reinforces a partitioning of male and female spaces. Because our cognition cannot be disentangled from visual imagery, the art at the MFA strives to subvert this lens of polarization through images that question the androcentric perspective, giving visibility to women in realms seen as proprietary to men. As seen in *She*, this convergence of "male" and "female" domains leads to cognitive dissonance, forcing viewers to confront their internal biases and question the validity of their perceptions. Thus, rather than reject the tools of the patriarchy, such as art, it is crucial that women permeate these male-dominated spaces in order to attack the underlying preconceptions that oppress women.

Katherine Lane Weems's *Striding Amazon*, a bronze sculpture of a muscular female nude, illustrates the capacity of art to achieve representational justice by subverting the perceptual expectations of the viewer. In a style that seems to mirror the statues of ancient Greek Olympic athletes, Weems's sculpture offers rare representation of a female athlete in art. Her sculpture depicts a woman in a powerful, composed stance, grasping a rock with one hand as she looks downward



with an expression of keen determination and anguish. The physical and mental prowess evoked by this statue strays dramatically from the typical mode of representation for women, instead taking on the mode in which men have been portrayed:

“But unlike women, who are seen primarily as sexually accessible bodies, men are portrayed as physically and mentally active beings who creatively shape their world and ponder its meanings. They make music and art, they stride, work, build cities, conquer the air through flight, think, and engage in sport” (Duncan 172).

As Duncan observes, the representation of women in art has been chiefly characterized by emotional blankness and their nude bodies made grounds for objectification, but Weems’s sculpture overturns this paradigm in order to assert a fluidity of gender roles for women. This representation of a woman athlete complicates the one-dimensional, highly polarized depictions of women, helping to broaden the scope of realms in which women can contribute and be recognized.

The potency of art as a threat to polarization, not solely on the level of art but on a grander, structural level, is best illustrated by the integration of calligraphy and henna in rebellious harmony by Lalla Essaydi’s *Converging Territories*. Inspired by the artist’s upbringing in Morocco, the photograph depicts four Arab women standing solemnly before a cloth tapestry and draped in traditional robes, their bodies and surroundings inked with henna tattoos of Islamic calligraphy (Essaydi). While Essaydi is keenly aware of the societal forces that condemn the practice of calligraphy by women, having been barred from learning the art form in school on account of her gender, she subverts this symbol of women’s repression into a conduit for conveying the silenced narratives of women. In a culture that has reserved calligraphy to be a male practice, and therefore appropriated the narratives of women as property of the male genius, these inscriptions daringly reclaim a woman’s right to shape and convey her own story -- and reject the polarizing cultural forces that ordain separate social freedoms for men and women. Some might object that her use of calligraphy serves to appraise male tokens and suggests the inherent superiority of “male” art. However, by interweaving calligraphy with henna, a traditionally feminine craft, Essaydi solidifies her intent: to challenge the very notion of “male” and “female” art that society has arbitrarily construed. Her rejection for polarizing artistic rules allows Essaydi to critique the gender norms within society more broadly.



While the artistic statement in this photograph may not appear to wield real power for change, the efficacy of *Converging Territories* lies in its communication with the lived realities it depicts, the artistic boundaries signified by the calligraphy mapping seamlessly onto the spatial thresholds imposed on women in Morocco. The gender rules that govern the use of calligraphy are merely a reflection of the gender polarization that shapes the

social landscape of society -- for instance, ownership of property. Through the expansive, draping fabrics that envelop and veil the women, Essaydi evokes the sense of physical containment felt by her subjects and confronts readers with the realities of power structures imposed on the Arab female body. Reflecting on the partitioning of space in her hometown, Essaydi states that “[t]raditionally, the presence of men has defined public spaces: the streets, the meeting places, the places of work. Women, on the other hand, have been confined to private spaces, the architecture of the home” (Essaydi, Artist Statement). The cultural customs that confer masculine ownership over public grounds while containing women to the enclosures of the house, demonstrating the use of physical polarization as a mechanism to control and confine women.

Despite this physical containment, the calligraphic inscriptions, which contain biographical meditations about Essaydi’s and her models’ experiences, allow the women to subvert the power structures that seek to lay claim to their bodies, stories, and identities (). Far from empowering the spectator with a sense of dominion over the female subjects, this photograph invites viewers to glimpse the stories and realities of Moroccan life from the female perspective, lending women agency in conveying their own narratives. As articulated by Judith Butler, societal norms compel women to act within a “culturally restricted space and [enact] interpretations within the confines of already existing directives.” However, the women depicted in *Converging Territories* overwrite these “cultural codes” with their own experiences and perceptions (Butler 526). In doing so, rather than passively acting out a part written by society, the women are empowered to live actively according to their own direction. Additionally, these writings allow the women to redefine the space itself by transforming it from a mark of repression and isolation into a canvas for self-expression. In this way, language becomes a force for unity through which the women to communicate and commiserate with each other. By subverting the use of calligraphy as a means for self-expression, *Converging Territories* presents a liberation of the female identity from the strongholds of societal constraint, allowing women to define their terms of living in the face of physical confinement. Additionally, while insisting on greater freedoms for Arab women, Essaydi’s art renders a genuine portrayal and appreciation for her culture that combats its widespread misrepresentation in Western art. Looking back at her Moroccan roots from her adult vantage point in the US, her work sheds light on the genuine narratives of women in her culture that have been erased by damaging Western representations, such as the highly fetishized, voyeuristic Orientalist art of the 19th century (Essaydi, Artist Statement). *Converging Territories* recognizes these external pressures placed on the Arab female identity, empowering women to reject the commodification of their culture through raw, honest narration and ultimately emancipate the female identity from the various internal and external pressures imposed by society.

Some may argue, however, that co-opting traditionally male practices as a means to convey the narratives of women falls prey to the historical inequity of the medium and fails to liberate the female identity from its oppressor. As argued by Audre Lorde in her seminal essay,

“The master’s tools cannot be used to dismantle the master’s house,” the limitations intrinsic to patriarchal tools such as art may perpetuate the divides between women, representing the narratives of predominantly white, middle-class, straight women while marginalizing others (Lorde). By distilling the range of women’s experiences into a single story, the representation of women in art may now perpetuate a narrative from the privileged woman’s perspective as opposed to the male perspective. Furthermore, by dramatizing the barriers that have been imposed on women, whether in the form of calligraphy or athleticism or the medium itself, the MFA art draws attention to the exclusion of women from these domains and continues to frame a woman’s achievements in the context of the limits imposed on her. While the art is critical of the boundaries that have prevented women from accessing these tools, it perpetuates this same pattern of depicting women as creatures of limitation. As a result, while the MFA art strives to disrupt the status quo, its efforts may misrepresent the rich narratives of women and continue to put the female identity in relation to her oppressor.

While these arguments awaken the potential shortcomings of directly applying the methodology of the patriarchy as a means for women to regain power, it overlooks the greater, more fundamental ambitions pursued by these art pieces. For instance, in *Converging Territories*, the use of calligraphy should be seen not as an end but as a means to attain the broader goal of dismantling gender categories. Thus, the ultimate insurgence within this piece lies not in its appropriation of a “male domain” of art by women, but in its rejection of the structures that dictated this art to be male property in the first place. The disregard for the rules that dictate acceptable clothing, activities, and art forms for women achieve lasting activism by undermining the vast structural polarization that these rules are a symptom of. Rather than victimizing women, the use of these tools demonstrates a defiance against the systemic polarization, pushing back on the perception that women are defined solely in relation to their limitations. This rejection of polarization, whether between genders, socioeconomic classes, races, or other identities, allows for the use of art that forges solidarity amongst women. For instance, the depiction of Arab women in *Converging Territories* embraces intersectionality in the feminist movement and strives for greater awareness within and across cultural boundaries. This type of feminism embodied in the MFA art seeks to affirm and attend to, rather than marginalize, the differences and variety of experiences among women.

Ultimately, the disruptive entry of women within domains such as art has forged pathways for them to create meaningful, revolutionary contributions to the field as they challenge the limits of the medium itself. Arguably, the boundaries that have been imposed on women artists has led them to question and reshape the rules associated with art forms. The art pieces displayed at the MFA bear witness to the ways that women artists push the boundaries of art as a means of self-expression. In particular, art such as *She* and *Converging Territories* boast a blend of techniques that daringly dismantle the hold of tradition on the creation of art. Through the interweaving of henna with calligraphy and photography with text to create new combinations, these artists continually question and defy artistic tradition. The central

contradictions present within each of these works -- the clashing of gender with performativity and the converging male and female art forms -- are delivered through artistic contradictions that stretch the boundaries of art tradition. Their impact is not limited by the methods that they borrow because they subvert and integrate these long-standing traditions, challenging the boundaries that stagnate art, rules as arbitrary as those that have excluded women from the domain. The contributions to the art realm made by these and other pieces at the MFA exhibit demonstrate how women assert themselves not merely as counterparts to men but as pioneering shapers of society. The result is not a subpar counterpart to man, as posited by Lorde, but diverse contributions in realms that should not have been considered “the master’s” in the first place (Lorde).

The MFA art makes strides in representational justice and activism by allowing women to subvert the societal expectations that oppress them, granting them renewed control over their identities and narratives. As examples of women asserting themselves in male-dominated spaces, the artworks displayed at the MFA make strides in redefining the representation of women in art, such as through the lens of male fashion, athleticism, and calligraphy. This corrective representation of women in the exhibit upset the prescribed gender notions that frame our perception of women, emancipating women from the constructs that have long dictated their actions and behaviors. By merging these male-dominated spaces into female art, the MFA exhibit enable women to transcend the culturally restrictive spaces they have been confined to and act outside of the limits of patriarchal directives. In enduring pursuit of dissolution of the arbitrary boundaries that have excluded them from art, women artists have achieved a weakening of gender polarization, which has the potential to produce an impact that transcends the walls of the museum or those who see the art alone. These art pieces are a declaration by woman artists that they respond to the barriers placed on them by striving to dismantle their authority in dictating social meaning. And ultimately, it is this freedom that the art affords women that allows for greater societal reform.

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