

Contemplating Tobacco

Melinda Plastas

There is something I like about taking this object that has been so demonized and playing with it. — Amanda KM

If we observe the taboo, if we submit to it, we are no longer conscious of it. But in the act of violation, if we feel the anguish of mind without which taboo could not exist... That experience leads to the complete transgression which, in maintaining the prohibition, maintains it in order to benefit by it. — Georges Bataille

Egyptian-American artist Amanda KM, who currently lives in Cairo, began smoking at about the age of 18 while residing in the United States. She quit for two years, then started again about nine years ago meaning she has smoked for about seventeen years. Because smoking was so “thoroughly and explicitly” influencing her life she decided to dedicate her art to it (Interview¹). Cigarettes marked her daily routines, shaped the gendered dynamics of her life in Cairo, and exposed the fragility of her body. An accomplished, creative, and engaging artist, Amanda KM creates numerous and varied installations about smoking and cigarettes, guiding us on a journey into the influence of tobacco on society, the self, and gender in Cairo and beyond. Over a number of months Amanda KM and I engaged in conversations about her work. We explored the relevance of gender and sexuality to the intention and design of her projects; the challenges of curating art that potentially celebrates smoking in a moment when cigarettes and smoking are increasingly stigmatized; and more broadly the

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¹ Amanda KM, in discussion with the author, February 5, 2015. Hereafter cited as “Interview.”

relationship of humans, objects and consumption. Explicitly, this paper explores the tenuous and thin lines between taboos and transgressions through the art of Amanda KM. And it asks us to consider Bataille's framework and Amanda KM's art within the context of neoliberal capitalist logics of consumption, the body, and grief.

"She identifies with both the heaviness and weightlessness of smoke." ("Anatomy"², 25)

I apprehensively approached the prospect of interviewing Amanda KM and writing about her work. Although I have been researching tobacco, including tobacco-themed art and the phenomena of tobacco museums for a number of years, I feared the seemingly dissimilar genesis of our interests in the topic. Amanda KM smokes and is fascinated by smoking, tobacco, and cigarettes. While I am in no way a smoking prohibitionist, the fact is that twenty years ago at the age of 57, my mother, a life-long smoker, died from lung cancer. Her death was devastating to me and launched my research into the gendered politics of tobacco production, consumption, regulation, and epidemiology. Although I knew that I shared with Amanda KM both an awareness of the centuries-long complex and dynamic cultural work of tobacco and skepticism for governmental tobacco control policies when they employ moralistic and paternalistic healthism, I wondered if my interest in tobacco capitalism and the ways in which it drives and is implicated in deep transnational structures of inequality and loss and Amanda KM's interests had much to say or learn from each other. But as cultural historian Nan Enstad notes art can provide a space in which we explore how the "lived history of transnational capital," appears in and on the body, whether it be, for instance, as clothing, compunction, disease or decay (331).³

Enstad offers the work of Chinese-born artist and McArthur fellow Xu Bing as an example of the role of art in analyzing neoliberalism and the conditions of our contemporary world. In 2000 Bing premiered his sprawling and multifaceted installation *The Tobacco Project* at Duke University where he was an artist in residence. American Tobacco tycoon James Buchanan Duke founded Duke University and his company would take the lead in opening up Chinese markets to US tobacco products. Bing's installation invites viewers to consider the complex dimensions of commodities, the ways in which they are embedded in the structures of our lives, how they build communities (farms, factories,

² Amanda Kerdahi M., "The Anatomy of a Cigarette," unpublished essay, Transart Institute, May 15, 2013. Hereafter cited as "Anatomy."

³ Nan Enstad, "On Grief and Complicity: Notes Toward a Visionary Cultural History," in *The Cultural Turn in U.S. History: Past, Present and Future*, eds. James W. Cook, Lawrence D. Glickman, and Michael O'Malley (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 319-341.

universities,) and link people across time and space. Out of many elements, two components of Bing's installation include projecting the medical records of his father who had died from lung cancer onto the outside wall of a Duke University building and installing a recording of someone reading his father's medical records inside an abandoned tobacco warehouse. These elements and their location, the heartland of American tobacco farming and tobacco capitalism and the home of Duke University, invite us to ponder tobacco's deep history and, as Enstad encourages, the ways in which it has fashioned and linked personal, national, and transnational bodies through trade exports, consumption, and illness. Bing's display of ephemera of his father's death involves the viewer in Bing's grief and inspires contemplation of the ways in which tobacco links us. Amanda KM's work similarly persuades us to consider tobacco from multiple lenses inviting attention to how transgression and taboo are gendered and the ways in which consumption, including of tobacco, can render bodies vulnerable.

My mother, like Amanda KM, loved to smoke. It brought meaning and structure to her life and often provided her with pleasure. In her younger years it helped her fashion her badass working-class girl self, and throughout her life it also helped her mark a break or space from the drudgery of work. Yet while in many ways smoking was value-added, it in many ways it was not-- for her and for those around her. In addition to her early death, it was, for instance, a cause of perpetual tension and worry between her and her daughters. Even so, my mother, I came to realize, would have liked Amanda KM's art. It is brash, daring, and dirty. It blows smoke in the face of those who disparage smokers while at the same time it asks complicated questions about the compulsive nature of smoking and the smoker. It is about smoking, but also about things like belonging, habit, temporality, and--perhaps most starkly--bodily vulnerability and impermanence. Amanda KM and I, I realized, shared much in common, perhaps most importantly our deep interest in the hauntological nature of tobacco.

As a global commodity, tobacco has influenced the gendered body politic of communities across the world for over a century. The industrialization of tobacco production in the early twentieth century ushered significant shifts in gendered patterns of work and smoking, especially in the Global North. For many women in countries like the United States, Greece, and Slovenia employment in tobacco factories meant access to independent incomes and participation in labor movements.⁴ With the popularization of smoking during

⁴ See Nancy Hewitt, *Southern Discomfort: Women's Activism in Tampa, Florida: 1880s-1920s*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001); Efi Avdela, "Class, Ethnicity and Gender in Post-Ottoman Thessaloniki", in *Borderlines: Gender and Identities in Peace and War (1880-1950)*, Billie Melman, ed. (New York: Routledge, 1998): 421-438; and Can Nacar, "Labor Activism and the State in the Ottoman Tobacco Industry," *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 46 (2014): 533-551, doi:10.1017/S0020743814000580.

World War I, seemingly overnight Red Cross Nurses went from the frontlines of anti-smoking campaigns to the European frontlines distributing cigarettes to servicemen.⁵ Perhaps most spectacularly, Edward L. Bernays, the founder of modern public relations, transformed women's smoking from a marker of taboo into a premier symbol of women's emancipation when in 1929 he entreated elegantly dressed women to smoke *Lucky Strikes* while they participated in New York City's grand Easter Day Parade. Through Bernays' orchestrated media event, cigarettes were transformed into "Torches of Freedom" for women and brought the American Tobacco Corporation a twenty percent increase in female consumers.⁶ By midcentury, then, tobacco increasingly marked women's advancement and smoking by women became less stigmatized, and more glamorized particularly in North America and Europe. Today, the use of cigarettes continues to summon debates about what is appropriate behavior for women and if smoking by women signals equality or regression. Notably, though, these disputes takes place in new regions of the globe, like South Asia, as Big Tobacco pursues new markets using the tale of gender equality reminiscent of the 1930s.

In Egypt, the manufacturing and export of cigarettes along with the consumption of cigars, cigarettes and shisha by Egyptians has played a significant and mutable role in the economic and social order of the country. In the early twentieth century Egyptian cigarette exports capitalized on the appeal of the "exotic orient" to North American and European markets, which along with the cosmopolitan Egyptian elite who could afford these luxuries, were the primary consumers of Egyptian cigarettes. With the rise of print media and the production of new Egyptian cigarette products after World War I, consumption of manufactured cigarettes by Egyptians increased, and ads, like those for Zenith cigarettes, carefully married discourses of modernity with markers of "tradition" in order to appeal to the male professional or effendiya class. In the 1930s, Egyptian women appeared in ads as well, both as consumers and as part of cigarette label iconography. Routinely, ads featuring women smoking also included a male who "tutored" her in the art of consumption. Although infrequent, when a woman appeared alone in an ad, she was either a famous actress or musician, or could be read as "foreign," or the ad was devoid of context hence distancing the female smoker from direct association with Egyptian society or things marked as tradition. While these gendered advertisement trends mirrored those found in the US and Britain during the 1920s and 1930s, a substantial increase in female smoking did not occur in Egypt as it did in the US and Britain in part because woman's suffrage was not

⁵ Cassandra Tate, *Cigarette Wars: The Triumph of the "Little White Slaver"* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁶ Larry Tye, *The Father of Spin: Edward L. Bernays and the Birth of Public Relations* (New York: Crown Publishing, 1998).

yet viable in Egypt.⁷ Although at a higher percentage in the 1930s, than today, the rate of smoking by women in Egypt has always been relatively low. Currently according to the *Tobacco Atlas* about 40 percent of Egyptian men report that they smoke, while fewer than two percent of women report doing so. Other sources suggest that the male smoking rate, when including shisha, might be as high as 60 percent. While Egypt's overall smoking rate is the highest in the Arab world, it simultaneously has the lowest reported rate of female smoking in the Eastern Mediterranean region.⁸ Amanda KM began smoking in the United States and continued to smoke once she relocated to Egypt. While smoking has become stigmatized in the United States, the taboos against female smoking in Egypt are generally stronger and reflect different social, cultural and historical conditions and trajectories. Straddling both worlds, as an Egyptian-American Amanda KM experiences less harsh condemnation for her smoking in Cairo, making her all the more cognizant of how denunciation of women's smoking causes many women to not smoke or to hide it. The existence of taboos against female smoking in Cairo, then, results in gender binaries and the transformation of those who do smoke into gender transgressive. Amanda KM's tobacco and smoking-focused art, then, invites conversations about the gendered terrain of transgression and the body in post-Arab Spring Cairo and beyond.

Pairing: DNA Strand Installation 2013

She has a natural inclination to collect, so she collects cigarette butts—in a sense she collects herself. ("Anatomy," 28)

Every passion borders on the chaotic, but the collector's passion borders on the chaos of memories. (Walter Benjamin⁹)

A collection of cigarette butts discarded by Amanda KM and her former partner figure prominently in Amanda KM's 2013 installation *Pairing: DNA Strand* (2013). Comprised of three components--an oversized DNA helix constructed from the cigarette butts and gold-colored string, a video entitled *Ywbrab*, and gold fabric billowing from the ceiling--the installation contributes significantly to Amanda KM's efforts to "bring back into the discourse the social weight" of

⁷ Relli Shechter, "Reading Advertisement's in a Colonial/Development Context: Cigarette Advertising and Identity Politics in Egypt, c 1919-1939," *Journal of Social History* 39.2 (Winter, 2005): 483-503 and Relli Shechter, *Smoking, Culture and Economy in the Middle East: The Egyptian Tobacco Market 1850-2000* (New York: I.B. Tauris Press, 2006).

⁸ Tobacco Atlas, <http://www.tobaccoatlas.org/country-data/egypt/> and Muhammad Mansour, "Smoking in Egypt," *Egypt Independent*, 6/10/2013.

⁹ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken, 1968), 60.

cigarettes. Distrustful of and frustrated by the Western health-focused narrative that denudes smoking of its historical and cultural contexts and pleasure potential, Amanda KM's art entreats us to set judgment aside and take-up a more robust, messier, and less polarized consideration of cigarettes. Her approach to cigarettes, Amanda KM acknowledges, is significantly shaped by cultural historian Richard Klein's treatise on smoking, provocatively titled, *Cigarettes are Sublime*.¹⁰ As Klein reminds us, "smoking cigarettes is not only a physical act, but a discursive one—a wordless but eloquent form of expression" (Klein, 182). In league with Klein, Amanda KM's work nudges us to consider the complex discursive function of cigarettes. Significantly, though, her art adds more texture, as she summons ambivalence and centers capital, gender and the body, all while exposing the ways in which cigarettes and smoking can simultaneously be declaimed as elegant and disturbing.

Gold-tones and the smell of tobacco suffuse the space in which Amanda KM's *Pairing: DNA Strand* appears. The shimmering gold fabric softens and illuminates the space as the gold-colored strands transform the cigarette-butts from overlooked and meaningless debris into a sparkling floor-to-ceiling DNA double helix suspended from the high ceiling in the center of the room. The somewhat shabby apartment building vestibule becomes a site of inquiry and surprise as the allure of the gold-hue entices the viewer to approach the suspended helix. Once up close, the viewer must contend with the matter-at-hand, cigarettes symbolically transformed into DNA, the substance of human matter. Lacing together DNA, capital, and tobacco, the installation provokes questions about fabricated and assigned indexes of monetary and cultural value that can reach beyond tobacco and smoking. The gold references tobacco's significant role in local and transnational economies. From an anchor commodity of the transatlantic slave trade to an early to mid-twentieth century Egyptian export that captured the interest of the so-called non-Orient world, tobacco capitalism; Amanda KM suggests, imbricates our relationship with the used butts she has assembled beyond the quotidian consideration of the cost of a pack of cigarettes. The dominance of the gold in the exhibit, then, signals to us her interest in questions and notions of value and we see this in her repurposing of the discarded tobacco. Each butt in the DNA strand has gone through a life cycle: rolled, smoked, discarded, rescued, and refurbished. The eerie and enticing transformation of discarded cigarette butts into a facsimile of DNA engages contemporary fixations with health and responsibility and notions of personal and national progress. As an increasingly revered and commodified material, individuals confidently endow DNA with the ability to uncover their

¹⁰ Richard Klein, *Cigarettes are Sublime* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995) and Sander L Gilman and Xun Zhou, editors; *Smoke: A Global History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2004).

lineage and predict their health, reproductive capacity, and longevity while an array of professionals from criminologists, genealogists, agribusiness practitioners, to biomedicalists capitalize on and manipulate DNA to identify and “solve” social and medical problems.¹¹ Amanda KM’s work allows us to interrogate the beguiling systems of value and health embedded in current fascinations with DNA and the associated mastery of the body. In a world where healthy and viable DNA connotes wholesome living, and in which women are held responsible for furtherance of life, Amanda KM’s discarded cigarette-butt double helix troubles assumptions that place the presumption and burden for community health and futurity on women.



Fig. 1: *Pairing: DNA Strand*. Photo by Bashir Wagih.¹²

¹¹ See for instance, Alondra Nelson, *The Social Life of DNA: Race, Reparations, and Reconciliation After the Genome* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2016) and Adele Clark, et al, *Biomedicalization: Technoscience, Health and Illness in the U.S.* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

¹² All images in this essay are from Amanda KM’s website, and used with her permission. See: <http://www.amandakerdahimatt.com>.

The story behind the genesis of the cigarette butt DNA helix is on one level fairly benign and ordinary—two people meet, fall in and out of love, and in the process amass artifacts of their relationship. However, in Amanda KM’s hands the significance of the collected artifacts—in this case cigarette butts—goes beyond her and her former lover as she refashions them to interrogate assumptions about women, relationality and reproduction. Upon approaching thirty, Amanda KM experienced increased scrutiny of her smoking as people advised her to curtail or stop her habit or else her “uterus was going to shrivel up like a cigarette butt” (Interview). Her massive cigarette-butt-loaded DNA refutes these warnings and scoldings and marks women’s smoking as an act of resistance: with each lighting of a cigarette the expectation of procreation is spurned, stubbed out. And her opus implies that for now, at least, her primary relationship of choice is with cigarettes, not with a human partner, or a gestating fetus, or a child.

The visual transformation is easy to see on the cigarette. She has consumed three-fourths of its body and has left her saliva on its tip. She marks it with her DNA—a gift. In return the cigarette raises her blood pressure and makes it possible to sit in her chair for a longer period of time. The long-term transformation takes more time to notice. Her skin eventually changes and her breath becomes heavier. (“Anatomy,” 28)

Through her “gifting” of her DNA to the cigarette she has just consumed, Amanda KM queers her relationship with the cigarette rebuffing, what queer theorist Lee Edelman labels, “reproductive futurism”—the cultural and political primacy of the child and the influence of this sentimentality on the ordering of social and political institutions and gendered value systems. A proper woman transfers her DNA to her children, not to a cigarette. A proper woman tenderly catalogues the influence of gestation on her metabolism, not the influence of inhaling tobacco. A transgressive woman shares her DNA with taboo materials anticipating what new life might emerge. A transgressive woman creates and displays her own DNA double helix, offering her communion with the forbidden for all to see and smell and inspect. Amanda KM implies, then, that the value she derives from smoking-- longing, pleasure, companionship, and transmutation—rivals and perhaps surpasses the value associated with gestational reproduction. And further that she possesses options for projecting herself into the future, her gift of futurity hangs by the hundreds on strings of gold-painted thread. In this and other work Amanda KM summons feminist theorist Donna Haraway’s treatise on the cyborg by referencing and disrupting the gendered and presumed impermeable boundaries and dichotomies between human and nonhuman, and human and nature. Her DNA art claims the cyboric as it contains particles of tar and nicotine, as well as traces of the technological, industrial, and human

elements that comprise the *centuries-long* rise of the global trade in tobacco and our fascination with consumption.¹³

When read against the current idolization of all things DNA, Amanda KM's cigarette butt DNA helix intrigues. If DNA has become the Holy Grail--the flash drive storing our origin stories, the proof of creation and necessity of reproduction--it has also become our ball and chain, ever wedding us to self-discipline and the search for perfection and futurity. In *Pairing* she pushes this fascination with DNA as she blurs the line between the human and nonhuman, the product and the consumer enticing (and repelling) us to consider the genetic transformations that may result from consumption and to question our allusions of mastery and control. Hardily endorsing her work as "dark, self-deprecating and cynical," Amanda KM beckons us to consider what forms of being emerge from the comingling of the cigarette and the human, the banned and the desired, the castawayed (Interview). Amanda KM continues her fascination with consumption, transgression and bodily displacement in *Yisbrab*, the video component of *Pairing: DNA Strand*.

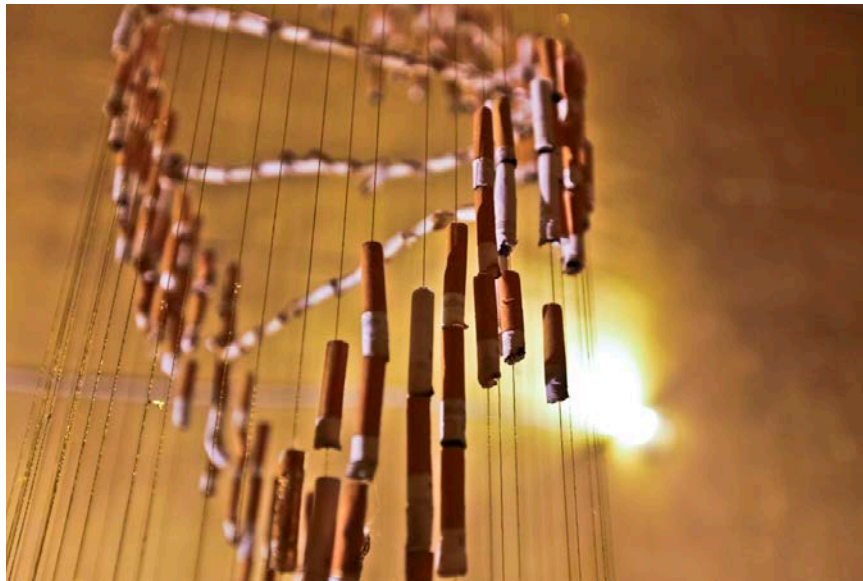


Fig. 2: *Pairing: DNA Strand*. Photo by Bashir Wagih.

¹³ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2004) and Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge Press, 1991), 149-181.

Yishrab

She is consumed by the meaning of her consumption. (“Anatomy,” 31)

When she lights a cigarette, she is a sexual aggressor. Her message resonates in the click of her lighter—that she is responsible for her own sexual pleasure. (“Anatomy,” 21)

The video entitled *Yishrab* (Figure 3) completes the *Pairing* installation and is inspired by the colloquial Arabic term, *yishrab*, which translates to “he drinks/smokes,” hence reserving these forms of consumption for men. In the darkly lit video we experience a diptych profile of the same disembodied woman inhaling and exhaling smoke on the left and consuming a jet of water directed into her mouth on the right. Her lips, eyelids and chin are dimly illuminated. All the action is silent. All the action is oral. Although sharing many of the same aesthetic qualities, the emotional and physical tenor of the two halves differ, inviting a study in contrast. While something approaching the ethereal or serene emanates from the smoking half, the drinking profile verges on gagging reminiscent of many things, including waterboarding. The profile, overcome by the persistent and endless stream of water, provokes the question: is the pleasure and leisure presumed by *yishrab* limited to the male consumer? The ejaculative nature of the displeasure or discomfort experienced by the drinking half, like other elements of the installation and other of Amanda KM’s videos, beckons consideration of the gendered nature of smoking within and without Egypt. While taken for granted by Egyptian men, for Egyptian women, to *yishrab*—to consume in public—is to transgress, to risk assault or drowning in the search for relaxation, sustenance, and pleasure.

Another approach to the linkages among smoking, pleasure, gender, and sexuality erupts in the humorous and wry ten-minute video, *Short of Breath*, which is not a part of the *DNA Pairing* installation. In *Short of Breath* we experience another split screen: on one half a woman smokes a hand-rolled cigarette and on the other half a man smokes a manufactured Marlboro. They face each other, but they do not see each other. Using tight framing focused on the mouth and nose, with infrequent peeks at portions of the eyes, we watch the two highly focused and increasingly sweaty subjects smoke and profess their adoration and longing. Facing each other they light cigarettes, smoke cigarettes, and extinguish them. As they repeat this series of actions we hear them intermittingly and breathlessly declare: “I need you. You make me whole.” “I can’t get enough of you.” “Your smell is intoxicating.” “I love what you do to me.” Although aesthetically dissimilar from Amanda KM’S other videos and the *Pairing* installation, *Short of Breath* is brightly light and humorous, and there is sound; it is akin in that it continues Amanda KM’s contemplation on the meaning and function of consumption. In many ways it echoes leitmotifs found

in works by other scholars and artists who illuminate the hedonistic, social and sexual registers often associated with smoking: smoking as both solitary and social. Smoking as a conduit for sexual exchange. Smoking as sex itself, as masturbation. But significantly, Amanda KM's approach extends these spheres of understanding and interpretation as the repetitive, hollowed and detached nature of the hand gestures and spoken words potentially also signal loneliness, isolation, as well as a fascination with and deconstruction of the cigarette as phallus—the cigarette as power.¹⁴



Fig. 3: Amanda KM, *Yisbrab*. Video Still.

The dystopic probe continues in two other videos that also engage with the concept of yisbrab, *Mechanized Redundancy* and *Mechanized Redundancy 2*. In a split screen we watch the disembodied prone head and throat of a single female figure as she repetitively and in jerking motions consumes cigarettes, exhales smoke, and ingests water. Though darkly lit like *Yisbrab*, the figures in these videos teeter between the human and the robotic pushing the viewer to wonder who or what is directing and in control of the ingestion of the water and smoke. The mechanized click, click, click of the soundtrack transforms the aesthetics from the human to the robotic, as if an invisible hand or machine pulls the figure's head back in preparation for receiving the smoke and water. The click, click, click along with the rhythmic, stunted, and jerking motion of the head and torso references Taylorism, the industrial scientific management practices introduced

¹⁴ For some of this literature see: Penny Tinkler, *Smoke Signals: Women, Smoking and Visual Culture* (New York: Berg Press, 2006) and Klein, *Cigarettes Are Sublime*.

in the early twentieth century that usurped the craftsperson and standardized and synchronized manufacturing and workers.¹⁵ As such, the automated worker and the automated consumer come into relief as the ghostly atmospherics of the video collapse time and connect worker and consumer. Riddled with discomfort and repetition, the cyboric characteristics of the figure featured in *Mechanized Redundancy* and *Mechanized Redundancy 2* also summon us once again to consider “our presumption of control” (Interview). The videos, through humor and discomfort, bring into perception the messiness of the spaces between object and self, will and addiction, capitalism and the body, consumption and control, and pleasure and danger. They ask the viewer to consider how consumption haunts our existence. In the next work to be discussed Amanda KM continues with questions of gender, transgression, and consumption, while shifting from a primarily self-referential framework to a more communal one.

100 Conversations

The filters are visual transcriptions of two actions usually reserved for private exchange: smoking and talking about sexuality. (Amanda KM, website)

She uses smoke to take space within the system that subjugates her, pushing against oppression that undermines her voice. (“Anatomy,” 26)

Wanting to engage in a way that moved beyond her own relationship with smoking and transgression, Amanda KM contrived the project *100 Conversations* to enable her to converse with other women in Cairo. To accomplish this, she asked approximately one hundred women to come to her studio, one-by-one, to smoke and talk about sex and be willing to have the conversations filmed. Amanda KM supplied the space, cigarettes she hand-rolled and tipped with filters made from cloth, and the invitation. The installation that resulted from these conversations is comprised of two components; a soundless video montage of the conversations that are projected onto a wall and a table draped with a cloth made of fabric Amanda KM stitched together from the filters smoked by the women who meet with her. For her and many of the women involved, the conversations that occurred around the proverbial kitchen table were cathartic. New friendships emerged; interviewees’ relationships with their partners improved; and women felt emboldened to speak about the forbidden: sex, sexuality, abortion, sexual harassment, and gender expression, among other things. The relationships and conversations begun in Amanda KM’s studio spilled over into other domains of the women’s lives. And within the larger

¹⁵ See Frederick Winslow Taylor, *The Principles of Scientific Management* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1919).

context of Cairo, where women constantly negotiate the “line between danger and doing what we want to do;” *100 Conversations* poignantly and stealthy disrupts, for the viewer and the participants, dominant discourses on gender and sexuality (Interview).

In the installation, a table sits empty as a soundless video of about twelve minutes runs a circulating montage of the partial faces of the women who joined Amanda KM in her studio to talk. The silence of the video coupled with the empty table haunts the viewer who senses the dynamism and liminality of the women. This juxtaposition of the empty table and the silent video emphasizes the contingency of women’s self-expression, indicating the uniqueness and isolation of each woman while gesturing toward a uniting experience. In the video different women come in and out of each frame, while at no point is a woman’s face completely revealed, instead we are introduced to cropped faces, close-ups of lips or eyes, or hands rolling cigarettes or licking the paper. Yet, for each a personality can be faintly detected: the agitated, the pensive, the shy, the gender-queer, the actress, and the rebel. The viewer yearns to know more about each figure as she attempts to arrange the pieces of the visual puzzle. The focus on the mouth references the orality that links smoking, speech, and sex while the cropped shots gesture to the need to disguise and protect the participants from danger that their actions might beget (Figure 4). The second component, the empty draped table, troubles us as well as it invokes absence and presences.



Figure 4: Amanda KM, *Filtered Conversations*. Video still.

Amanda KM’s fashioning of the filters from the hand-rolled cigarettes the women smoked into a quilted tablecloth and presentation of it in conjunction with the video recuperates domestic spaces as places of transgression and

transformation (Figure 5). As such, this quilt-like fabric harkens to a long complex history of women making quilts from the scraps of their lives in order to record family genealogies and convey what is important to them and their communities. Amanda KM's tablecloth, or "visual transcript," then documents the presence of each woman, comingling her stories and DNA into one unique and peculiarly complex fabric. Like the DNA strand double helix, the recognizability of the tablecloth entices the viewer to come close only to be potentially troubled and repelled upon closer scrutiny for the fabricated tablecloth disgusts as much as it intrigues. Riddled with burn marks, the muddled discoloration of the quilted cloth summons many references to the grotesque from fire to excrement at the very same time that it registers familiarly as a household fabric. The cloaked table provokes us to imagine the women who inhabited the table, while the absence of chairs signals the potential for displacement or erasure when one troubles the boundaries of domesticity. The scarred texture of the cloth and its reference to refuse might be read as a signal of the artist's interest in the impact that taboo consumption (sex and tobacco) might have on the metaphysical and corporal bodies of women.



Fig. 5: Tobacco-filter tablecloth from the *100 Conversations* installation.
Photo by Amanda KM.

“But Now It is My Identity”

Ok, I get it, I am experiencing the health side myself, but also are we going to just completely ignore everything else it has symbolized and is still symbolizing even now?
(Interview)

Since starting to smoke, Amanda KM has had periods in her life when she has taken a break from it. In one such moment, she learned to crochet and set about crocheting a giant cigarette, which she still has, and works on as needed. Recently she felt compelled to stop smoking, because she was feeling physical ill effects from smoking. And although she experienced improved health from these moments of hiatus, this last break also brought worry and concern about the impact of her abstinence on her work.

I've been working with cigarettes and smoking, now, I think for three years, and it has permeated my work and seeped into the identity of my work, but now it is my identity, it has permeated even further, at the same time. When I had decided to take on cigarettes in the work, I had also decided to not carry guilt around smoking. To just relieve myself of these expectations of how you are supposed to be, and not supposed to be. I had this off and on relationship with cigarettes; I had quit for two years, restarted, and then in that restarting feeling like I had to quit. Feeling guilty, I had sort of made this dedication and commitment to myself to jump into this fully and not have any hesitation around my involvement with the cigarette and smoking. But I did find my body changing and shifting, especially during the winter. Last winter I had gotten sick five times in three months and I had chronic cough and all this stuff. I realized that my immune system was really deteriorating because of my increased smoking over the two years and I got really sick about two months ago so much that I didn't have the option to smoke or not smoke.
(Interview)

Amanda KM initially abstained from smoking while working on a recent installation for her contribution to the February 2015 *Futuropolis* group show in Cairo featuring eight artists speculating on the future of the world. In the show, she untangles the original DNA cigarette-butt helix and hangs it in the gallery as a curtain or screen through which all viewers must walk in order to view the rest of the exhibit. On the wall hangs a photographic diptych of the *Yisbrab* woman: exhaling smoke on one side, ingesting water on the other. Yet, unlike the original video, in the diptych photograph the two figures are pointing toward each other, not away. The last element, an overflowing glass cup full of cigarette butts and a substance that resembles gold, sits on a shelf attached to a corner of the room. Like her previous works, this installation imparts the smell of tobacco and refashions cigarettes in such a way that they are rendered repulsive and

enticing signaling Amanda KM's sense of obligation to them and her ambivalence about their place in her life. The exploding cup, the element that for Amanda KM completes the installation, required that she start smoking again in order to assess if the cup worked (Figure 6):

...so I successfully was not smoking all the way up to this moment when I was putting together this cup. But there are moments when you make something and you want to step back and you want to see it and contemplate it from another perspective, so you step back from it. In that moment when I was making the cup and I stepped back to think about it, I couldn't think about it...I wasn't able to look at it and see it and contemplate it because I wasn't smoking a cigarette, at that moment was when I was like, fuck this, I need to roll a cigarette. So I rolled a cigarette, sat there and was thinking about it and it was sort of a moment of realization that I use cigarettes to think. And really there was a block for me, a real tangible block. I could not see this object because I was not smoking...so now I am smoking again, unfortunately, because I am feeling my body like getting sick already, but anyway that is another thing. (Interview)



Fig. 6: *Exploding Cup*. Photo by Amanda KM.

Still Crocheting

My mother, I suspect, would have loved the exploding cup: the humorous way in which it plays with the messiness of life, cigarettes, human desire, habit, and addiction. She would have appreciated how Amada KM's work stares boldly at the contradictions that abound in our world, at the fragility of the self and of the body. Like many a great performance artist, Amanda KM uses her own body as a vessel for our exploration of the gendering of the body, and the dangers and pleasures of our daily existence. She invites us to consider our obsessions, our fears, our secrets, and frailties.

As I worked through my initial nervousness about interviewing Amanda KM, I comforted myself by the fact that I knew we both appreciated the work of cultural critic Richard Klein. She uses Klein frequently in her own writing as a guidepost for thinking about the body, seduction, transgression, consumption, and risk. While Klein is forthrightly critical of the moralism expressed by many who dislike smoking, Klein, nonetheless, used the writing of *Cigarettes are Sublime* as a way to kick his smoking habit and, then, as a forum for his grief. As he explains:

...the act of giving up cigarettes should perhaps be approached not only as an affirmation of life but, because life is not merely existing, as an occasion of mourning. Stopping smoking, one must lament the loss to one's life of something—or someone!—immensely, intensely beautiful, must grieve for the passing of a star. (Klein, 3)

I asked Amanda KM for her reaction to Klein's decision to stop smoking. In particular I wondered if she thought he had "gone to the dark side." She admitted that she "felt betrayed....like how could you write this beautiful book about this thing and then you 'I quit' in this very proud vein, like who are you? I thought I knew you!" (Interview). But she related to his use of the craft of writing as a "mental trick." His book, then, is akin to the crocheted cigarette that Amanda KM keeps adding to. While Amanda KM's art offers distinctive and compelling insight into the ways in which capital shapes taboo, transgression, and human existence; and in fact goes beyond the treatment of the subject Klein's writing provides, I must admit that I hope she joins Klein in giving up the habit; but not her pursuit of the important themes, like the regressive gendered terrains embedded in our societies, her work explores. Her art insightfully pushes crucial conversations and raises difficult questions about our presumption of control, about the complicated circuits of capital, commodities, and governments and the gendered terrains of daily life; about sustenance and about loss. As Amanda KM astutely knows and exposes through her art, tobacco and smoking, unlike any other product of the past one hundred years,

has a capricious capacity to entangle us. While she has pursued cigarettes in her life and in her art, to “give herself space from the patriarchy,” and to entice viewers of her work to contemplate the consequences of gendered restrictions, like the social prohibitions against smoking by women in Egypt, might it also be possible that the harm imparted by the restrictions might be outweighed by the circumvention of the bodily loss the continuation of smoking too often brings? (Interview). In other words, is Amanda KM inviting us not necessarily to take-up, literally, her habit; but to ponder with her ways to subvert patriarchy and create new spaces for being?

Note: Amanda KM is an Egyptian-American artist who lives and works in Cairo, Egypt. In 2005, she earned a BFA in photography and digital media and a BS in psychology from the University of Houston. In 2013, she received her MFA from Transart Institute. In 2014, she received a grant from the Arab Fund for Arts and Culture for her project *Filtered Conversations at Roundtable*. Her installations have been shown in numerous countries including Egypt, Portugal, Germany, and Senegal. Visit her website: <http://www.amandakerdahimatt.com> for artist statements, images, and videos of the works discussed in this essay.



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