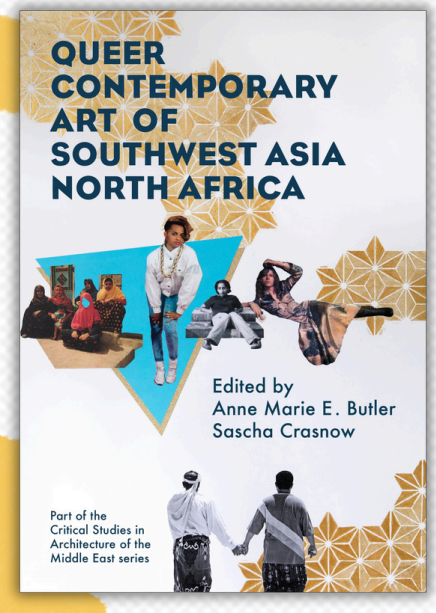
Anne Marie E. Butler & Sascha Crasnow

Q & A



Anne Marie Butler is associate professor of art history and women, gender, and sexuality at Kalamazoo College, Kalamazoo, MI. Her research focuses on contemporary Tunisian art within contexts of global contemporary art, contemporary global surrealism studies, Southwest Asia and North Africa studies, gender and sexuality studies, and queer theory.

Sascha Crasnow received her Ph.D. in art history, theory, and criticism from the University of California San Diego in 2018 with a specialization in contemporary art from Southwest Asia and North Africa (SWANA). She writes on global contemporary art practices, with a particular focus on SWANA, race, socio-politics, gender and sexuality.

Can you tell us a bit about the book and what led you to create it?

The book is a collection of scholarly essays, artist interviews and contributions, and brings together scholars from various locations and points in their careers who are all looking at the intersection of gender and sexuality within the context of SWANA and its diasporas. We created the volume out of a desire to bring greater attention to artists and scholars working at this intersection given its underrepresentation within contemporary art historical scholarship.

Why is it important to focus specifically on queer art from Southwest Asia and North Africa?

As stated above, it is an underrepresented subfield within contemporary art history and additionally, due to misconceptions about the culture, politics and traditions of the region, there is often an idea that queerness and SWANA are inherently incompatible or even in opposition.

What does the term ‘queer’ mean in the context of this book, and how might that differ across the region?

In the context of the book, ‘queer’ is a means through which to acknowledge and take up the impetus in contemporary scholarship to move beyond proscriptive categorizations and identifications that have originated in the study of Euro-American art and that are typically placed on racialized and other marginalized groups. It exposes the ways that normative notions of race, gender, sexuality and other embodied categories have forged presumed assumptions about those who are not part of the normative default – e.g. cisgender, straight and/or White. In the volume, we aim to be attentive to the fact that ‘queer’ as a word is not universal, that different localities understand it in different ways or have developed their own terminology, and that some communities in the SWANA region understand ‘queer’ as embedded in Euro-American, and thereby colonial, frameworks.

How did you go about choosing the artists, writers or artworks featured in the book?

We did an open call for contributors, as well as reaching out to interlocutors and collaborators who we felt would make great additions to the volume. For the foreword, we wanted to make sure the volume led with a voice with ties to the SWANA region so we reached out to Gayatri Gopinath who graciously agreed to open the volume with her contribution. In order to ensure there was a chapter on trans theories, we also wrote an essay ourselves.

Were there any surprises or unexpected discoveries during the process of editing this book?

We were pleasantly surprised at how contributions seemed to speak to one another and create conversations even across the themes that we outlined in the book, echoing the notion that there are multiple ways that this book’s ideas could have been organized. We were also excited by how much we both learned from reading the texts, and how readily we have been able to incorporate it into our teaching.

How do you hope readers will respond to the book – both those from the region and those outside it?

We hope that readers both within and outside the region will find something new in the pages of the book that will inspire them to build upon the foundations that we aimed to set out. People from many regions and at varying places in their own education and scholarly careers have responded positively, remarking that there was something they could identify with or that they were captivated by in the text.