The Whole World is a Very Narrow Bridge:

The Liminal Identity of the Diasporic Jew and the Search for Belonging Through Artistic Practice

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Introduction

"It is Jewish, and not Greek, to vacillate between the need to be everything in oneself and the anxiety of being nothing in oneself."

– Sigmund Freud

What does it mean to be liminal? The idea of being neither here nor there has always haunted me; however, it also characterizes me. Throughout most of my life, I have held fast to two strong identities: the first identity that I put before all the other aspects of myself is that I am Jewish. This identity is one that I have been taught to be proud of while also being unable to escape. I come from a rich history of religious and cultural practices that I embrace and struggle with. I am also an artist; this is the one thing I have always known to be absolutely true about myself. I exist to create. Art shapes how I see and interact with the world. However, I have never felt that I make Jewish art. Additionally, being a woman inherently changes how I fit in with my identity. Each identity comes with its own set of expectations, rules, desires, influences, and complications. I am not 'just' an artist; I am a woman-artist and Jewish-woman. I am permanently attached to a hyphen, and this is the liminal space I inhabit.

Jews, too, occupy liminal space; they float between being observers and participants in the larger society. Jewish texts and stories surround the themes of assimilation and revolution time and time again. The Jewish diaspora is vast and repeating, leaving a trail of hyphenated identities in its wake. Jews have held onto a unique practice and commitment to ritual, even as observance has changed. This research seeks to answer how identity relates to artistic works and how the diaspora shapes the American Jewish identity. By focusing on how the American Jewish identity has been shaped through continuous displacement, I will analyze the cultural issues that create the modern interpretation of Jewish practice and culture.

Jewish Existence

The Jewish Diaspora

Jewish existence and identity are as much characterized by diaspora as by homeland. The Jewish Diaspora is generally accepted to have begun in 585/6 BCE when Nebuchadnezzar took the inhabitants of Jerusalem into captivity.[1] Many Jews remained in Babylonia voluntarily, creating thriving Jewish communities. These exiled Jews continued their practices, leading to one of the most important Jewish texts, the Babylonian Talmud, being written at this time. This version of the Talmud is the repository of many traditions from the land of Israel, but it was a product of diaspora-based academies.[2] Living in diasporic conditions did not deter Jews of ancient times from continuing Jewish practice; it instead fueled it. This is a continual theme throughout the diaspora. Much of Jewish practice has centered around diasporic identity and the desire to return to Israel. Jewish liturgy focuses on the memory and mourning of the Israel that once was while also hoping to see the end of the diaspora and Jerusalem restored. However, the end of the diaspora is much more ambiguous.

With the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, some say that the Jewish Diaspora has come to a close. As much of the Jewish population remains outside of Israel, others feel this ending is inconclusive.[3] The diaspora Jewish identity carries the essence of Jewish practice, with Jewish life existing equally outside of Israel for most of Jewish history. [4] At the end of the Passover Seder, Jews all over the world say, "L'Shana Haba'ah B'Yerushalyim," meaning, "Next Year in Jerusalem." The dream of Jerusalem is embedded in the fabric of Jewish existence. Still,

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[1] Adele Berlin, "Exile and Diaspora in the Bible," in Hasia R. Diner, *The Oxford Handbook of the Jewish Diaspora*, (Oxford Academic, 2021), 23.

[2] Berlin, "Exile and Diaspora in the Bible," 24.

[3] Steven J. Gold, "The Jewish Israeli Diaspora," in Hasia R. Diner, *The Oxford Handbook of the Jewish Diaspora,* (Oxford Academic, 2021), 522.

[4] Gold, "The Jewish Israeli Diaspora," 525.

Jewish life has taken form in the diaspora. What would modern Jewish life look like if Jewish diasporic identity disappeared? Would Judaism, as it is known, survive?

In 1791, France was the first country to emancipate its Jews fully, granting them equal citizenship to their gentile counterparts and maintaining a separate but equal status quo.[5] Jewish life in Western Europe was successful for Jews, with huge Jewish dynasties dominating many cultural and financial industries.[6] In 1894, when Captain Alfred Dreyfus was convicted of treason for the accusation of giving French military secrets to the German Embassy in Paris, Jews in France were pressed to settle where their loyalties lay. Jews having dual loyalties is one of the world's oldest antisemitic tropes, and it is often the tipping point, a sign that there is more to come.[7] It was not until 1906 that Dreyfus was cleared. Despite his innocence, all of the events that would eventually lead to the Holocaust were set into motion.[8] The cycles of marginalization, expulsion, and diaspora are the continuous threads studied in Jewish existence. The Myth of the Wandering Jew has been used for centuries to exemplify the unsteadiness of Jewish existence in the diaspora, a reminder to Jews that their roots only run surface level.[9] This myth ignores how Jews have made deep connections in their diaspora homes. Babylonian Jewry was prevalent in Iraq for 2,500 years, and Jews in Yemen lived in the Arabian Peninsula for two millennia.[10] Despite the very real threat of persecution, Jewish rituals and culture survived.

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[5] Yehudah Bitty, "Praying in French in the Nineteenth Century: Religion and Identity," (*Jewish History*, 2023), 47.

[6] Émile Zola. *The Dreyfus Affair: J'accuse and Other Writings*, ed. Alain Pagès; Trans. Eleanor Levieux. (Yale University Press, 1996), 198-202.

[7] Zola, *The Dreyfus Affair,* 200.

[8] Ronald W. Zweig, "Israel and the Diaspora to 1967," in Hasia R. Diner, *The Oxford Handbook of the Jewish Diaspora,* (Oxford Academic, 2021), 507.

[9] Michael Woolf, "The Wandering Jew*," Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad* 30 (1): 2018), 20-32.

[10] Hosseini S. Behnaz, *The Jewish Diaspora after 1945: A study of Jewish Communities in the Middle East and North Africa,* (Cambridge Scholars Publisher, 2020), 32.

Jews only make up 0.2% of the world population, with most Jews living in Israel or North America; however, until recently, there were prominent Jewish populations spread all across the world, including North Africa, Iraq, Syria, Ethiopia, India, and China. [11]Jewish practice is not a monolith; customs and interpretations of laws can change drastically depending on where Jews were rooted in the diaspora. Ashkenazi Jews of Eastern Europe have different pronunciations of Hebrew than Sephardic Jews of Southern Europe. Mizrahi Jews of Northern Africa have a different Sabbath stew than that of the Jews of India. Ethiopian Jews were so isolated from other Jewish communities for centuries that they celebrate the ancient Jewish holiday of Sigd, which is a day dedicated to accepting the Torah and yearning for Israel. These distinctions in Jewish practice are the fundamental fabric of Judaism and Jewish existence.

In Jewish culture today, it is not uncommon to hear the comical but deeply troubling remark, "They tried to kill us, we won, let's eat!" in relation to the narrative of many Jewish holidays. One may ask, why stay Jewish? Before the Holocaust, the majority of German Jews were secular. The Jewish Reform movement was born in Germany in 1819, aiming to make being Jewish more accessible in modern society.[12] Reform Jews shifted their practices to align with the larger Christian society, even celebrating the Sabbath on Sunday. This intentional form of assimilation was seen as a solution to antisemitism, attempting to show the larger society that Jews are just like them.[13] Conversely, this was also one of the biggest fears of religiously observant Jews, who saw assimilation as a possible total loss of Judaism.[14] The majority of Jews today are secular but remain as Jews. Despite the list of contingencies associated with being

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[11]Shamir Hassan, "JEWISH MIGRATION FROM ARAB LANDS 1946-49: THE CASE OF IRAQ." (Proceedings of the Indian History Congress 78: 2017), 886.

[12] Micha Brumlik, "A Dual, Divided Modernization, Reflections on 200 years of the Jewish Reform Movement in Germany." *A Road to nowhere?* (Vol. 17. The Netherlands: Brill, 2013), 91-202.

[13] Brumlik, "A Dual, Divided Modernization," 125.

[14] Laura Levitt, "Impossible Assimilations, American Liberalism, and Jewish Difference: Revisiting Jewish Secularism." (*American Quarterly*, 59 (3): 2007), 825.

Jewish in a non-Jewish world, there is an underlying optimism in Jewish culture, which makes it impossible to let go.

The Question of Jewish Art

The question of what Jewish art is remains hard to define and yields other questions: Does Jewish art need to be about Judaism? Are all Jews who are artists automatically Jewish artists? Does art for a Jewish audience have to be made by a Jew? In 1984, the Jewish Theological Seminary held a seminar to discuss Jewish art and agreed that 'Jewish art' must reflect the Jewish experience.[15] They did not, however, determine which Jewish experience must be reflected. Due to the variance in Jewish practice and the widespread nature of Jews worldwide, art reflecting the Jewish experience could be anything. What may serve as a better question is what Jewish art is not. As with most things relating to Jews and Judaism, this is also contested.

The Second Commandment prohibition against creating Graven Images has been the focus of much scholarship on Jewish art. This biblical barring has been argued as a catch-all prohibition against Jews creating art.[16] Iconoclastic views are widespread in Abrahamic religions, but Jewish artists have not ruminated on this scholarly blind spot, as there is a difference between religious law and lived experience. Religion's relationship to art is complicated, with extreme interpretations of religious texts drawing red lines often seen as negotiable by less fundamentalist views. Many Jewish artists work with figurative forms despite this narrow view of art criticism. Ben Schachter, a professor of fine art at Vincent College, argues in his book, *Image, Action, and Idea in Contemporary Jewish* Art*,* that the focus on the Second

[15] Nadia Valman and Laurence Roth, *The Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Jewish Cultures,* (Routledge, 2017) 95-104.

[16] Samantha Baskind and Larry Silver, *Jewish Art a Modern History* (33 Great Sutton Street London ECIV ODX: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2011), 15.

Commandment has stalled Jewish art criticism.[17] Schachter points to action in art that should be the present focus in Jewish art criticism. This is due to Judaism's focus on action in observances and the need for a new visual language when it comes to Jewish art criticism.

When most people think about Jewish art, they picture some form of Judaica, which are Jewish ritual objects—items such as candle stick holders, menorahs, hand washing cups, and challah trays. *Hiddur Mitzvah* is the concept that beauty enhances ritual practice and mitzvot (commandments) by visual appeal.[18] The idea is that beautifying ritual objects enhances the experience of completing the ritual, yielding more intentionality from those performing the ritual. Judaica objects can be beautiful art pieces within themselves, but they serve specific practical purposes; the artistry in the piece is deemed irrelevant concerning the ritual itself. Jewish artists have not limited themselves to only producing Judaica and images of rabbis praying. Jewish art takes on many forms.

The Jewish diaspora identity has impacted the development of Jewish art just as much as Jewish text and law have.[19] In the early eighteenth century, German Jews developed works that were very similar to the non-Jewish populations' art; this coincides with the general shift towards secularism. It is not uncommon to see neoclassical mixed with yarmulkes in these works. In his work 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora,' Stuart Hall states, "Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference."[20] Jewish art has been subject to the same cultural and social shifts that diaspora Jews

[17] Ben Schachter, *Image, Action, and Idea in Contemporary Jewish Art* (Penn State Press, 2017), 23-25.
[18] Ruth G. Cole, *Hiddur Mitzvah: Aesthetics in Jewish Ritual Art,* (Hadassah 89, (8): 2008), 83.
[19] Baskind and Silver, *Jewish Art a Modern History*, 18.
[20] Stuart Hall, '*Cultural Identity and Diaspora,' in Identity: Community, Culture, Difference,* ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London, 1990), 235.

have; the presence of the acculturated Jew allowed for more convergence with once-taboo art subjects.

America has been thought of as the "diasporic Promised Land," as a safer Jewish existence has been established. In turn, Jewish artists have been able to separate themselves from their Jewish identity, just as Jews separated themselves from the pogroms of their old worlds by coming to America.[21] Without acculturation, many Jewish artists would not have been recognized by the larger art world, especially regarding contemporary art, as religious themes have been treated with suspicion, especially when it steps out of the normative Christian lens. In 1996, the Jewish Museum in New York City held "Too Jewish?" an exhibition asking, 'Who represents us? And 'How do we represent ourselves?'[22] written in large letters on the outer wall of the exhibition. The following room was described as having tongue-in-cheek cliché portrayals of Jews in popular culture. In other words, they are manifestations of Jewish stereotypes that have become synonymous with the truth due to their popularity. Art reflects and interprets the world around us, and the art one produces reflects some part of oneself. "Too Jewish" explored the desire for recognition of Jewish contribution to popular culture while simultaneously buying into accepted stereotypes of Jews. It is a self-perpetuating cycle that values prominent representation over accuracy. Internalized expectations of oneself learned from culture can be just as limiting as the larger surrounding culture.

Jews have continuously and significantly influenced the art world despite prejudices and stereotypes. Many notable artists, historians, and curators come from strong Jewish backgrounds, bringing Jewish tradition and culture into the art world. The question of Jewish art still remains elusive, but there is, without a doubt, a Jewish appreciation and interest in art, and many Jewish

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[21] Zweig, "Israel and the Diaspora to 1967," 509.
[22] Carol Ockman, "Too Jewish? Challenging Traditional Identities," *Artforum*, September 1, 1996.

artists create art of value with or without Jewish themes or labels associated with them. What significance does a definition hold when there is already a rich history that can be explored from different perspectives? It seems that the desire to fit Jewish art into a neat box is only essential when there is a desire to draw lines or point to the "other." Jewish culture is often one of defiance; it is very Jewish not to accept assigned labels but to continue to shape our definitions that will continue to be argued amongst each other.

To fully understand and see Jewish art and artists clearly, it is essential to acknowledge the role of Clement Greenberg in the dogma of American art criticism. His influence drastically altered the way religion interacted with art in American culture. Artist Rhonda Liberman described Greenberg as the closest thing to a rabbi of "High Art" due to his knowledge of Jewish subjects in art.[23] Greenberg shared the anxiety prevalent for many secular Jews of his Jewishness becoming a barrier to his career. Matthew Baigell, in his analysis of Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg's art criticism, he discusses how Greenberg's monochromatic view of Jewish art has limited how Jewish art has been seen and has led to it being overlooked, as it lacked the same critical thinking components seen in secular art.[24] In the shadow of the Holocaust, Jews, secular and observant alike, have had to wrestle with their Jewishness. Again and again, it is possible to see the themes of time, memory, and identity in art created by Jews. The assimilation of Jews into the American mainstream culture was less than seamless and incomplete. Despite the divorce of observance and Jewishness, Jewish artists still deal with Jewish subject matter and thought. Many Jewish artists have contributed to Holocaust memorials throughout the world, paying respect to lives lost, no matter their affiliation with the Jewish community. Greenberg

[23] Lisa E Bloom. *Jewish Identities in American Feminist Art : Ghosts of Ethnicity* (Routledge), 3.

[24] Matthew Baigell, "Clement Greenberg, Harold Rosenberg, and Their Jewish Issues." (*Prospects*, 2005), 653.

held his Judaism at arms length, but many artists have embraced their Jewish background making Judaism more visible and relatable for Jewish audiences.

From the Yiddish Theater in New York at the turn of the century to Hollywood, many beloved actors and popular figures are Jewish but not known as Jews.[25] Religious identity is often ignored or accepted in entertainment culture and art. The term "token Jew" comes to mind when Hollywood is brought up, as American Jews are different enough to fulfill a diversity requirement but are not so different that the writers must explain their differences. Jews are the uncomplicated other.[26] This role has led to the manifestation of Jewish stereotypes, such as the Jewish American Princess, the notion that Jews in America are all over-privileged. This has contributed to much ignorance when it comes to Jewish exclusion. In popular culture, Chanukah or Passover is celebrated, but rarely Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur. Jewish culture is typically referenced in a *Holiday Episode,* rarely taking center stage. It is a supporting role.

Women's Roles in Judaism and Art

In 1922, the first bat mitzvah was recognized in the United States: Judith Kaplan, the daughter of Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, a progressive Reform movement leader. A bar/bat mitzvah (meaning son/daughter of the commandment) celebrates a transition into adulthood for Jewish children at 13 (or 12 for girls), declaring a separation from the parent's responsibility for their child's adherence to the commandments.[27] Even in 1922, the bat mitzvah was not fully equivalent to the bar mitzvah; girls were still not permitted to read the Torah, but it was a significant step for women's increased involvement in Jewish religious life. [28] In Orthodox

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[25] Jack Gottlieb, *Funny, It Doesn't Sound Jewish: How Yiddish Songs and Synagogue Melodies Influenced Tin Pan Alley, Broadway, and Hollywood.* (Journal of Synagogue Music 37: January 2012), 253.

[26] Lester D. Friedman, *Hollywood's Image of the Jew,* 2024. 1.

[27] Michael Hilton, *Bar Mitzvah: A History.* (Journal of Jewish Education 84 (4): (2014), 444–441.

[28] Blu Greenberg, "Women in the Synagogue," (*Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance Journal,* Issue II, no. 2, 2000), 4.

Judaism, bat mitzvahs are mostly parties outside religious services and often have a materialistic emphasis.

On Friday nights, in many traditional Jewish homes, *Eishet Chayil* is sung to the women by the men of the house. *Eishet Chayil* means "woman of valor" and celebrates the traditional Jewish women's dedication to Judaism and upholding the holiness of a Jewish family; without her, Judaism and Jewish practice would cease to exist.[29] In a certain way, this recognition can be seen as a positive affirmation of women. Still, it is an affirmation of specific kinds of women, such as women who follow the rules and are obedient. Women are exempt from a large portion of the commandments due to the expectation that they are homemakers and are too busy to pray three times a day or to learn the Torah and other Jewish texts.[30] These exemptions in strict Orthodox practice are synonymous with a prohibition, even when the text does not support those claims. The cultural expectations within religious communities still hold arbitrary standards based on a patriarchal status quo that leaves women out of the dialogue.

Historically, women's role (or lack thereof) in the synagogue has been an observer. In the past 100 years, there has been an active push for female inclusion within Jewish practice that has been met with contempt by traditional circles that see the advancement of women's rights as a dangerous step towards losing power. Women who do not fulfill the expectations as homemakers are often viewed as less than those who do; there are no songs for these women. Jewish practice can be viewed strictly as lists and lists of rules; it is possible to find a rabbinic opinion on most matters, but there is much room for discussion. The Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance (JOFA) as established in 1998 with the intention of expanding the intellectual and spiritual opportunities

[29] Penina Adelman, *Praise Her Works: Conversations with Biblical Women* (Dulles, UNITED STATES: Jewish Publication Society, 2004). xii.

[30] Blu Greenberg. "Women in the Synagogue," 4.

for women. Jewish law (Halacha) has been interpreted and changed as the world has progressed to adapt to the modern needs of Jewish life. This is one way that Judaism has stayed relevant for many. While Judaism rewards positive action instead of focusing on punishing negative, in observant communities, going against the structure can have ramifications.[31] In 1972, the first female rabbi was ordained by the Hebrew Union College in the middle of the Women's Liberation Movement.[32] In Jewish environments, rabbis are central to the synagogue experience. Now, within liberal egalitarian environments and even some progressive Orthodox spaces, female rabbis or spiritual leaders are a common occurrence. Jewish women, however, have always pushed boundaries to better the world.

Similarly, women in the art world have also been left out of the dialogue; there is no shortage of female artists, but their representation in museums and collections is too few and far between. Judy Chicago, a well-known feminist artist actively participating in the Women's Liberation Movement, pressed the boundaries of traditional art-making and gendered expectations of who could produce what art. She and Miriam Schapiro co-started *Womenhouse* (1972), one of the landmark feminist pieces of the 20th century. Chicago was born Judy Gerowitz, but changed her name after she started to focus on creating feminist art. In 1966, she participated in the Primary Structures exhibition at the Jewish Museum in New York, where she was one of the only women. To appease the male-dominated art schools and shows, she separated her gender from her work, as she felt that being a woman limited her opportunities since she would not be seen as a "real" artist. Eventually, she rejected the concept that women's subjects and experiences were lesser than their male counterparts and set out to start making

[31]James A. Diamond. "Problems and Parables of Law: Maimonides and Nahmandies on Reasons for the Commandments (Ta'amei Ha-Mitzvot)," (*Shofar* An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies 20 (1): 2001.) 136.

[32] Deena Prichen, "It Was Only 50 Years Ago This Month That the First Female Rabbi Was Ordained." *NPR.org*, June 3, 2023.

intentionally feminine art that tackled the frequent sexism she encountered in the art community. Moving to California, she set out to create the first feminist art education program at California State University at Fresno. The program was radical and somewhat unwelcome at the institution, and she moved her cohort to an off-campus studio comprised of all women artists. She was later offered a position at the new California Institute of the Arts.[33] She took her students to Los Angeles to continue their feminist art exploration and redefine how identity exists in the art sphere.

Many Jewish women, like Chicago, were at the heart of the feminist movement of the 1960s and '70s, changing societal norms within all realms of culture, including religion and art. Secular Jewish women dominated the feminist art movement; however, many of these women left their Jewishness at home and were outwardly assimilated.[34] By backgrounding their Jewishness, artists focused solely on feminist subjects, in which they crossed paths with Jewish topics and figures, but they were often not the subject or focus of work. For secular Jews, the sidelining of religion was not uncommon, but it was expected in many feminist' spaces. It was possible to be too Jewish and, therefore, not feminist enough.

Jewish Art Analysis in Relation to Identity

Spatial Divides

One of the most fundamental human problems is who exists within a space and how space is divided. Partition walls and fences have been used historically to keep Jews as a separate population. Walls have also been used to divide Jews internally. The symbol of a wall has political weight. Walls can create protective spaces, isolation, and division. Perspective and

[33] Gail Levin, *Becoming Judy Chicago: A Biography of the Artist,* (University of California Press. 2018.) 2-10.

[34] Lisa E. Bloom, *Jewish Identities in American Feminist Art,* (Routledge, 2006), 34.

identity change how we view these divides. In Judaism, certain spaces are considered holy, and who can inhabit certain spaces can depend on identity and action.

Mierle Laderman Ukeles is best known for her maintenance work, where she delves into the traditional role of women in the maintenance and well-being of society, going unnoticed and unappreciated. Her Fluxus approach blends performance art and everyday life. Her work, *Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969!*, describes the consumption of everyday life and its hold on her as a woman. She describes the burden of never being responsible for herself; she asks, "After the revolution, who's going to pick up the garbage on Monday morning?"[35] Being a Jewish woman artist comes with a long list of expectations, making it seem impossible to be anything within oneself fully. This creates an isolating environment for many. Through analyzing artwork by Jewish feminist artists, both secular and religious, it is possible to understand the effects of living in an in-between state, which creates a longing for a home that has never existed.

Ukele's *Mikva Dreams* (1977)— is one of her lesser-known Jewish works. *Mikva Dreams* draws attention to the ritual maintenance associated with being a Jewish woman and the presented form of womanhood that is expected within traditional communities. A Mikva refers to a natural pool of water that observant Jewish women submerge themselves in after their menstrual cycle.[36] It is considered a very intimate and holy act between a woman and God. She wrapped herself in a white sheet, separating her from the viewers. The performance monologue piece describes the very intimate event of submersion and the renewal associated with it. The piece ended with a meditation of her repeating the words "immerse again" two hundred and ten

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[35] Mierle. Laderman Ukeles, *Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969! Proposal for Exhibition 'Care"*. Queens Museum of Art, 1969, 1.

[36] Janet L. Jacobs, "Conversa Heritage, Crypto-Jewish Practice and Women's Rituals*," (*S*hofar* 18 (1): 1999.) 106.

times, “the number of times which, according to her calculation, she might immerse in the mikva during her reproductive years.”[37] Repetition and ritual go hand in hand. A common thread in Jewish artworks is the presence of repetition and cycles. *Mikva Dreams* shapes space using division, intimacy, and comfort.

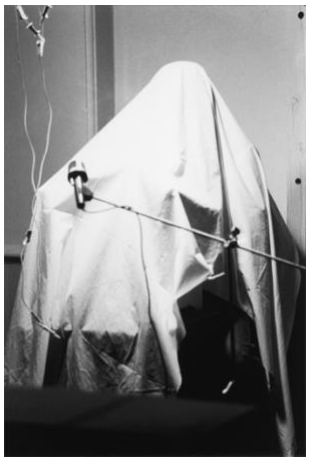

Fig. 1. Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Mikva Dreams, Franklin Furnace, New York City, performance, January 11, 1977.

Contrary to the internalized space that Ukeles draws attention to in her work, artist Richard Serra works with the division of space and how the presence of a divide affects engagement. His large-scale site-specific works show an obsession with gravity and how humans divide themselves. Serra is the son of a Russian Jewish immigrant mother who urged Serra to hide his Jewishness, due to the fear of antisemitism. Serra’s work *Gravity* (1991), located at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. In his work Serra confronts his own identity and the space created around it. *Gravity* weighs 30 tons and stands twelve feet high. The black Cor-ten steel slab cuts the space asymmetrically, creating a forced separation and the implied nature of violence due to its overbearing scale and raw materiality.[38] The piece has been described to

[37] Marisa Newman, “Art as Transformation: An Interview with Multi-Media Artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles,” (*Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance Journal*, Volume VI, Issue 2, July 2006), 14-16.

[38] Mya Dosch, *“Expecting Violence: Richard Serra’s Gravity, the US Holocaust Memorial Museum and Countermonuments”. (Sculpture Journal* 26 (2): 2017), 217.

"arrest the viewer like a wall" and has made many visitors find another way to avoid the work.[39] The title *Gravity* refers to several different implications: "the gravity of the evil perpetuated by the Nazis, the gravitational forms that keep the large piece erect, and the derivation of the word 'grave,' in the evocation of the mass burials of Holocaust victims."[40] These different relations to the word *Gravity* emphasize how the physical weight of the piece creates a monument within the monument, specifically rendered to divide viewers and have them directly confront the evils of humanity and the atrocities of the past. Serra chose to leave the steel in its raw, industrial state, creating a rift in visitors' flow as they descend the stairs. The intentional manipulation of the environment creates a sense of unease and displacement. The industrial nature of Serra's work captures the rawness of these divisions in society and internally within the Jewish community.

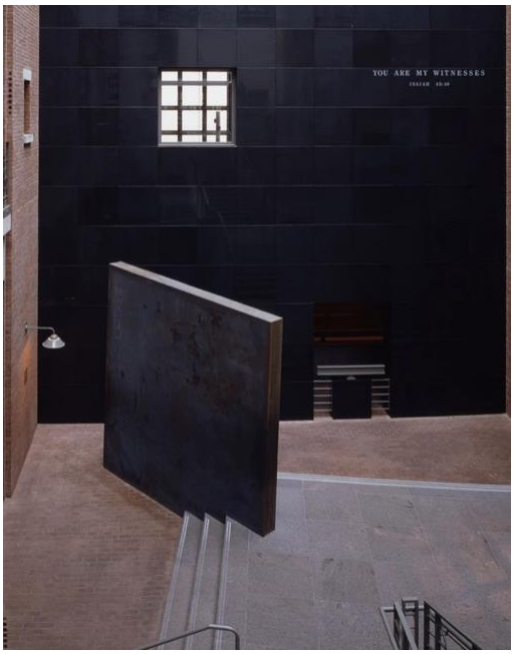

Fig 2. Richard Serra. *Gravity*, 1993. Weatherproof steel. 12 x 12 feet x 10 inches. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC.

[39] Dosch, "Exppecting Violence: Richard Serra's Gravity," 218.
[40] Edward Van Voolen. "50 Jewish Artists You Should Know" *Richard Serra*, Munich ; London: Prestel, 2011. 113.

Gravity is just one of Serra's works that transforms environments through the use of divides. Serra's most controversial work, *Tilted Arc* (1981), purposefully redirected foot traffic in lower Manhattan, leaving the space altered. *Tilted Arc* created controversy and resentment due to its imposing nature, which caused inconvenience in the busy area. This was Serra's intention with the work, as he wanted the work to oppose the federal building in the background, a reminder that complacency has no place in a democracy. After the piece was erected, the disdain for the work led to a shift in the attitudes towards public art. The arc was put on trial due to the public outrage. Serra argued that moving the sculpture would essentially be destroying it due to its site specificity. However, the piece was taken down.[41] It is evident that the power of a divide leads to questioning how and why that divide came to be, as well as who possesses the power to initiate divides as well as bring them down.

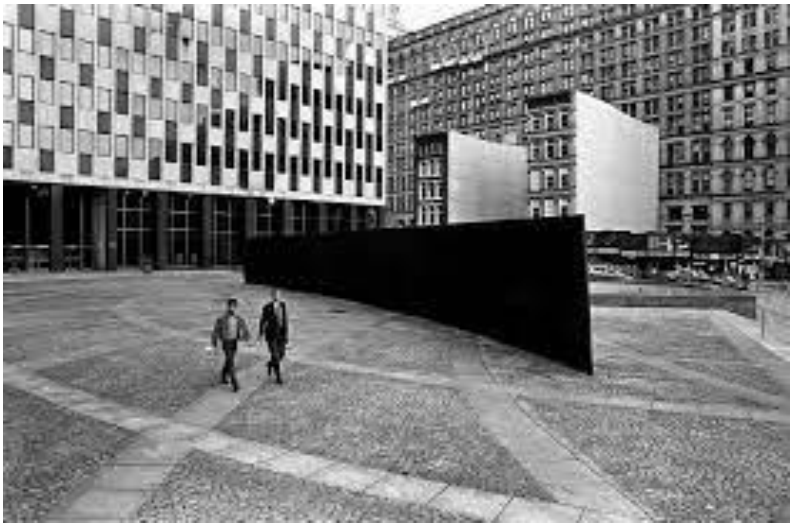

Fig. 3. Richard Serra. *Tilted Arc,* 1981. Weatherproof steel. 12 feet x 120 feet x 2 ½ inches. Federal Plaza, New York. Collection of the US General Services Administration. Photo by Anne Chauvet.

[41] Harriet F. Senie, *Tilted Arc Controversy: Dangerous Precedent?* University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 153.

Repetition

Jewish rituals and practices are based on repetition. Patterns appear through repeating words, movements, thoughts, and actions. Behaviors learned through continual practice yield more sophisticated results each time the behavior is repeated. Routine action and familiarity are comforting; we are drawn to the ease of replication and changing our ways can be uncomfortable and confusing. Religion and art share the commonality that they are both considered a practice. Each practice demands that one shows up and engages with it to exist. This leads to the formation of routines and familiar actions that become part of one's being. Practice makes perfect. The act of repetitive making relates to ritual practice through action. Jewish life is cyclical. The same prayers are repeated multiple times a day, women immerse themselves in the mikva monthly, and holidays surround the natural cycles of the earth.

In *49 Days: Women Who Count (A Performance)* (2015), the practice of counting the Omer (the period between the end of Passover and Shavuot) is captured by the sound of seven different women counting each day of the 49-day period. Sound artist Donna Silver Simons and choreographer Donna Sternberg came together on this performance piece that layered the voices of these women to create a repetitive chant that the dancers move to in off-set unison, mimicking the fluctuations of the voices.[42] The work is used as a way to mark time. The word *Yom*, meaning *'day,' lines* up in the recording, leaving a moment of calm in the chaos, syncing both the audio and visual. The purpose of the performance drew attention to the introspection that the Omer represents. Theodore Steinberg, in his essay, *Counting the Omer: Two Perspectives*, comments on this ritual and what it teaches. He states, "As individuals, we measure our lives day by day,

[42] Doni Silver Simons, "49 Days: Women Who Count (A Performance)," filmed 2015, Artist Video, 11:37. https://donisilversimons.com/videos/

and try to live each one as best we can. As the Psalmist put it, *teach us to number our days, that we may get a heart of wisdom*."[43] The intentional action needed to count each day according to the ritual specifications relates to the dancers' movements. The combination of sound and unison creates a multi-sensory pattern that embodies Jewish practice as both thought and action.

Fig 4. Doni Silver Simons, *49 Days: Women Who Count*, 2015, Performance and Installation with the Donna Sternberg Dance Company.

Eva Hesse's Accession works used industrial fabrication and her human touch to comment on the industrialization of art at the time, and points to the unclear human touch of the works, questioning if humans were creating these works at all.[44] Hesse's *Accession II (*1967) is made of galvanized steel and rubber tubing that was meticulously woven to form a block that is contradictory, as the contrast between the interior bristles that appear sharp and the rugged exterior makes the piece feel defensive, attacking from the inside, and shielded on the outside. These works reflected the detachment she maintained externally and the chaotic feelings inside herself. Each rubber tube was hand-threaded into the holes, a monotonous task that emphasizes

[43]Theodore Steinberg. "Darshanut, Counting the Omer: Two Perspectives." (*Jewish Bible Quarterly* 24 (4): 1996), 263.

[44] Detroit Institute of Arts Museum. n.d. "Eva Hesse, Accession II." https://dia.org/collection/accession-ii-47951

Hesse's obsession with conveying emotion through tactile means and repetition that references textile work.

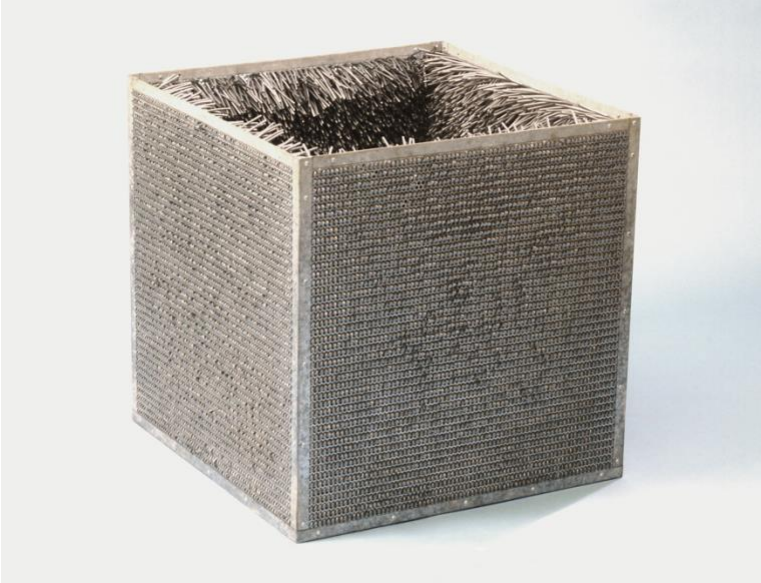

Fig 5. Eva Hesse, *Accession II,* 1969. Galvanized Steel and Rubber Tubing. 30 ¾ x 30 ¾ x 30 3/4 inches.

The hollow space created in the interior of the cube seems both treacherous and inviting, as the material of the bristles is unknown initially. This is a reference to Hesse's struggle with identity in relation to her art-making.[45] Her work contrasted with other minimalist artists whose works focused on solid foundations, building with materials such as steel and stone, whereas she worked with softer materials such as rubber, cord, and latex. Feeling that being a woman fixed her in particular spaces, her work explored the dichotomy of soft and hard materials associated with feminine or masculine practices. Through the act of repetition in this work, she materialized her feelings about existing within the margins of the art world.

[45] Elisabeth Sussman, *Eva Hesse: "*Accession II*," Sculpture, Elisabeth Sussman and Fred Wasserman; with Essays by Yve-Alain Bois, Mark Godfrey*. (Jewish Museum, 2006), 21.

Representation of the Self

How self-image is portrayed externally in art by artists can affect the interpretation of identity. The individual choices about how one presents themselves to the world and how they are perceived may differ. Through artistic practice, the portrayal of identity can be altered, leading to questioning how identity is interpreted and who defines one's place in the world. Representations of the self vary among Jewish artists, as the context of one's lived experience alters one's perspective of one's own identity. Art can be both an internal reflection and a mirror of what others see and understand as identity. Jewish artworks regarding the outward expression of Jewish practice critique both the individual and the communal aspects of identity.

Ken Goldman's works take on the subjectivity of faith, gender, community, and otherness, exploring his relationship to his artistic and Jewish identity.[46] In his work *With Without* (2011), the artist shaved his head around where a yarmulke would sit on one's head, creating the illusion that he is wearing a yarmulke when he is not. The yarmulke is supposed to serve as a reminder that God is always above us, and Goldman questions how the religious issue of lacking a proper head covering can be mitigated. This humorous solution is not a religiously sound one, yet it suggests that the Jewish body has been trained to keep its religious fervor.[47] While a yarmulke can be taken off, essentially removing visible identifiers as a Jew, the phantom yarmulke can only be removed by shaving the rest of the head or waiting for the rest of the hair to grow back. Either solution leaves a physical mark of the action, making one confront the outward identifier of their Jewishness.

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[46] Ken. Goldman, "About Ken Goldman," Kengoldman.com, n.d. Accessed February 8, 2024.

[47] Schachter, *Image, Action, and Idea,* 74-76.

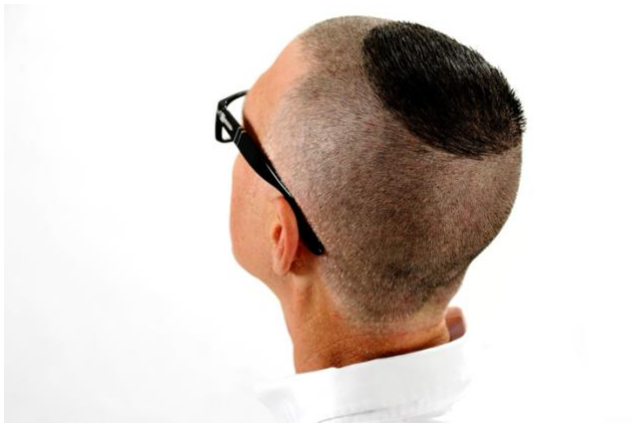

Fig. 6. Ken Goldman, *With Without,* 2012, Photograph, 25 3/4 × 39 × 1 in

The contemporary feminist Jewish work of Hadassa Goldvich relates to language and ritual, specifically the relationship between language and hierarchy.[48] In her work *Writing Lesson #1* (2005), the first introduction to Jewish literacy is explored. For Jewish boys, at the age of three, they are first introduced to school. It is a tradition to draw out the Aleph Bet (Hebrew alphabet) in honey and have the young boys lick it so that their first exposure to learning is sweet. The Aleph Bet is the first introduction to the divine. Goldvich's reinterpretation of the act reflects on her identity as a woman and adult, which she describes as "a built-in failure" unable to reach an unattainable divine.[49] The simple acts that define relationships with Jewish practice are not always accessible to all Jews, making it seem that they are not meant to engage with these practices.

[48] Daniel Belasco, *Reinventing Ritual,* Yale University Press, 2009, 81.

[49] "Hadassa Goldvicht - Bio." n.d. HADASSA GOLDVICHT. Accessed February 2024. http://www.hadassagoldvicht.com/about.html.

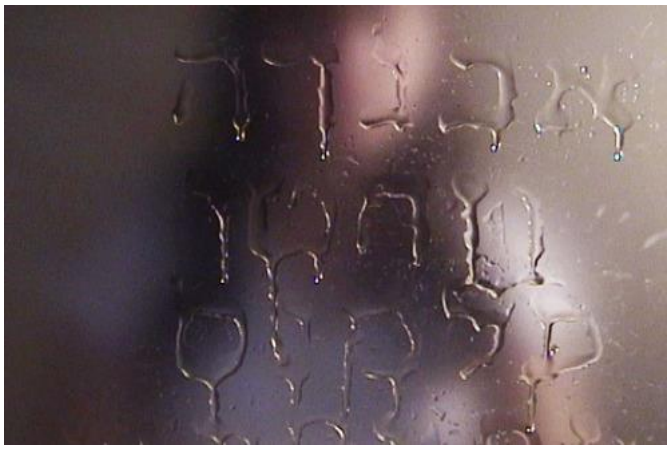

Fig. 7. Hadassa Goldvich, *Writing Lesson #1,* one channel video, 2001, From the Writing Lessons series.

Oreet Ashery similarly calls attention to internalized division within Jewish spaces and critiques how the perception of gender changes the reception of the individual within Jewish society. In her work *Dancing with Men (2003/2008),* Ashery dresses as an Orthodox Jewish man she describes as her alter-ego and dances at Mount Meron the burial site of an important Hasidic rabbi, who is traditionally pilgrimed to during the holiday of Lag b'Omer. The outdoor rave is fueled with religious ecstasy and joy that is reserved for men. By appearing male, Ashery was welcomed and felt the transcendence into a more profound realm of Jewish practice while knowing if her true identity were found out, she would be in danger.[50] By morphing into this alter-ego, Ashery understood a new type of connection to her Jewishness but also acknowledged the unattainable permanence of that connection.

[50] Belasco, *Reinventing Ritual*, 90.

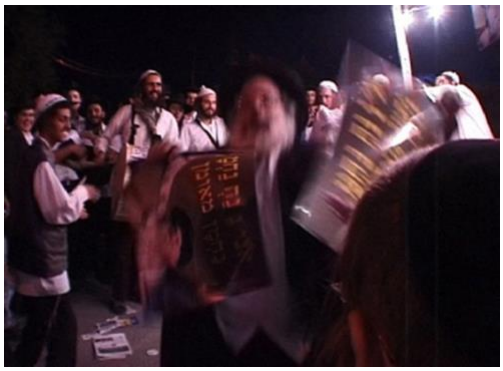

Fig. 8. Oreet Ashery, *Dancing with Men*, 2003/2008, Performance.

The word Israel means to wrestle with God and, therefore, to wrestle with each other and ourselves. Jewish art shows a vast reflection of experiences and thoughts, and many oppose and challenge each other. This is the nature of Jewish thought. It is ever in motion, never settling. The commonality of time, memory, and identity is integral to Jewish artists. The way traditions are passed down from generation to generation allows reflection and reinterpretation with every new generation. How knowledge is shared and expressed impacts the reception and internalization of tradition and culture.

Finding Home within Liminal Space

In Judaism, there is the concept of divine creation. This is defined by the word *Melacha*, translated to mean "work," which differentiates it from *Avodah,* which means "labor." This distinction between labor and work is a direct link between divine creation and mundane action. Melacha is used in the story of Genesis, in how God created the world, and in the book of Exodus, in the building of the Tabernacle. In Judaism, work is synonymous with creativity. The Sabbath, as a day of rest, is set apart from the rest of the week because it is when God finished his creative work.[51] As it is commanded to rest on the Sabbath, it is implied to create outside of

[51] Schachter, *Image, Action, and Idea,* 42-45.

this holy time. The creation of my artistic work consisted of the construction of many tedious elements that work together to create a larger work. Each piece would be ineffective individually, but together it tells a story. This tedium is necessary to my process. The repetitive movements ingrain the work into the body and mind; this work is a part of me, and I am a part of it. The intentionality behind artistic practices and working with one's hands is a holy act. The physical motion of creating work is an act of service and reflection. Through creation, dialogue is started, bridging gaps between peoples and cultures.

The creation of a large-scale installation offers an opportunity to explore and amplify the themes that have emerged from my research. My work is centered around the interrelated concepts of spatial divides, repetition, and the representation of the self. These themes have acted as guiding principles throughout my artistic practice. At the core of my work lies an interest in how we engage with space, both physical and conceptual, and in what ways these spaces shape our identities. By using repetition and the manipulation of space, I am creating an immersive environment that invites the viewer to reflect on their own relationship to space and the self. Ultimately, my installation challenges our preconceptions about how we occupy and experience the world around us.

My creative work is centered around an antique suitcase that serves as a symbol of the liminal nature of Jewish identity. The suitcase is filled with hundreds of individually sculpted and painted leaves made to resemble a Wandering Jew plant; this alludes to the rootlessness that diasporic Jews have encountered throughout time. Each time persecution came, the suitcase would come out, Jews packing in it a way of life that will never be again. The rootlessness has left these leaves bound to a transitory past; however, they are thriving. Deep greens and purples sprawl, the vines tangle, and each leaf is in search of its own destiny but bound together by its

roots. Surrounding the suitcase on either side are two partition panels, also adorned with ceramic leaves. The leaves on the panels share characteristics of the crawling leaves below. However, they are rigid in form, larger, and idealized. Creating a pattern, they appear to be woven, textile-like, and orderly. These leaves have white stripes rather than the purples and greens of the masses. It is unclear if they are protecting the leaves below or confining them. These panels mimic a *mechitza*, the partition wall that separates men and women in Orthodox Jewish prayer spaces. The mechitza was designed to preserve the sanctity and modesty of prayer space but has become a physical barrier to women's involvement in synagogue life. The dialogue between the rigid and organic represents the extremes of Jewish practice and the internalized divides created amongst Jews in modern times.

There is ambiguity between the ideas of protection and fear. My grandfather grew up with a deep-seated fear of being Jewish. The antisemitism he faced when he was young stuck with him for his whole life. While he did marry Jewish, he raised his children secularly. When my mother started asking questions about her identity, he replayed the same stories of antisemitism, perpetuating the fear of his own identity. My mother's fascination with religion and spirituality outweighed the negative associations with her Jewishness and my siblings and I were raised with religion and spirituality as a part of our everyday lives. The animosity towards Judaism my grandparents held created tension when they would visit. I remember my grandfather arguing with the rabbi over wearing a yarmulke at my bat mitzvah. He did not like being visibly labeled as a Jew. Eventually, his stubbornness was met with mine. A could-be-fear could not diminish my excitement about my bat mitzvah. He scowled, but he did eventually put on the yarmulke.

For me, home is found within this very liminal space. My love for and struggles with my Jewish identity and practice is why I was drawn to exploring the attitudes towards Jewish existence in diasporic communities and how these communities have continued and thrived despite their liminal existence. Our world is becoming increasingly divided, and the Jewish community is no exception. Through directly acknowledging this present divide and acknowledging both the painful and joyous past, my work engages with the uncomfortable realities of being neither here nor there. Despite the ambiguity in a Jewish home, Jewish existence has continued.

Conclusion

"The whole world is a very narrow bridge, and the main thing is to have no fear at all."

-Rabbi Nachman of Breslov

I have always been interested in identity. In third grade, I remember making a family tree for a school project, asking my parents for details about my heritage, and internalizing for the first time who I was and what that meant to me. I started drawing lines on our map of the Earth from all the countries my ancestors had been to where I was. The bond formed with these distant relatives I had never met was solidified by drawing these lines. It gave me the power to envision the past. This was my first exposure to Jewish art. While I have never considered my work Jewish art, I have always had an instinctual need to create. Artistic practice is my most regular ritual. My artistic ritual works within the medium of ceramics. The nature of clay is permanent and fragile; it holds these two truths and balances on the line of eternal and ephemeral. I work with clay because I want to capture fleeting forms and the imperfect memory of them. The liminality of this material coincides with the liminality of my identity. My relationship with

history, ritual, and continual challenge associated with my Jewishness shape me, and through working with ceramics, I shape space.

Artistic creation has always been an essential aspect of human society. Art can inspire, move, and transform us. Culture grows and evolves through art, and new ideas and perspectives are shared. When it comes to Jewish art, there might not be an established definition. Still, it is possible to understand why Jews are drawn to artistic practice and how it is used as a tool for understanding, remembering, and expressing Jewish thought and life. Jewish artists have a unique and critical approach to art and society. They use their work to comment on a wide range of issues, from social justice and politics to the Jewish diasporic experience. By doing so, they continue to shape and influence culture while preserving their heritage and traditions. Creative works, including Jewish art, play a vital role in shaping our future, as they offer us a glimpse into the past and open up possibilities for the future.

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