

ROUND TABLE

Art of Protest in Five Acts

Pamela Karimi

(Received 8 February 2023; accepted 10 February 2023)

The world's first encounter with the tragic murder of the 22-year-old Mahsa Amini by Iran's "morality police" was through her image. As millions around the world browsed through news and social media, they were shocked by the image of the unconscious Amini hooked up to ventilators—her punishment for showing some hair through a loosely worn scarf (Fig. 1). The photograph was so influential that a week after its release, its brave photographer, journalist Niloofar Hamedi, was imprisoned. Despite government pressure, artists began reproducing this horrific image. In stylized reiterations, the portrait of Amini was at times coupled with mourning songs or counterrevolutionary music, as in the colorful animation by Belgium-based Iranian artist Niknaz Khalouzadeh that went viral overnight.

In the days after Amini's murder, thousands of Iranians protested all over Iran, particularly in the Kurdish region where Amini came from. Remarkably, whether from an art background or not, the actions of these groups bordered on performance: unveiled women confronting the state authorities (Fig. 2), young girls dancing and twirling headscarves, activists igniting governmental billboards, residents participating in nighttime chants from apartment windows, and college students eliminating dividers between gender-segregated dining areas.

If not killed by beatings, bullets, and "noncombat" paintballs that can be fatal when shot at close range, once identified and captured many protesters faced arrest, suspension from official positions, imprisonment, punishment, even execution. Portraits and art inspired by the victims quickly became the hallmark of the quasi-revolution, with the slogan "Woman, Life, Freedom." Apart from its feminist edge and the extraordinary bravery of the youth, one thing that distinguishes this uprising from the previous ones is the copiousness of its art. Although artists do not have the power to shape public policy as political agents do, they have been among the strongest legitimating voices. In what follows, I discuss the role of the visual arts in this revolutionary movement in five "acts," each of which has been a frequently recurring theme.

Act One: Bold Is the New Style

Whether in the visual arts, theater, or film, Iranian postrevolutionary protest and activist art has always been somewhat subdued. Artists have often co-opted an indirect language, used allegorical methods, or played hide-and-seek with state authorities, because since the early 1980s art inside Iran has been monitored by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG) that operates like the infamous "morality police." Instead of succumbing to MCIG's censorship apparatus, artists have employed clever tactics for displaying disobedience. For four decades, without saying too much about oppression, artists have used metaphor or espoused "subversive appropriation," distanciation, parody, and pastiche to interrogate foundational ideologies.¹ Operating in disguise is another strategy, even when MCIG permission is

¹ Fereshteh Daftari, *Persia Reframed: Iranian Visions of Modern and Contemporary Art* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2019), 148.



FIGURE 1. Mahsa Amini photographed by Niloofar Hamedei on her deathbed (original photograph). Courtesy of @DW_Persian. Line drawing reproduction after the original photo by Virginia Martinez Navarro.



FIGURE 2. Student encounters authorities at Al-Zahra University on September 21, 2023 (original photograph). Courtesy of @1500tasvir. Line drawing reproduction after the original by Virginia Martinez Navarro.

granted. These tactics, used by musicians, curators, visual artists, and theater experts, include distancing oneself from “official” centers of art production, utilizing ephemeral installations, deploying spatial camouflage, and manipulating official art venues.² There are even styles and genres, with reputable names such as “apartment theater,” that have emerged from these practices. In cinema, allegory has thrived under political suppression, but allegory is more than “a foil against . . . censorship rules, or an attempt to hide meaning

² Pamela Karimi, *Alternative Iran: Contemporary Art and Critical Spatial Practice* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022).

under a veil of secrecy.”³ Indeed, metaphors have given shape to exceptional cinematography, script writing, directing, and acting.⁴

By comparison, art coming out of Iran (or by diasporic artists) since the start of the recent uprising has a rebellious zeal. First and foremost, artmaking has not been limited to producing images alone. In the early days of the uprising, Meysam Azarad’s political images on Instagram juxtaposed black-and-white silhouettes of unveiled young women with rhyming couplets from the eleventh-century epic *Shahnameh* by the nationalistic poet Ferdowsi, except he gave the typical male heroes female attributions such as “fighting girl” (*dokht-e jangi*).

Similarly, art by graphic designer Pedram Harby, formerly known for his cleverly subdued posters for political art events, appeared unpredictably bold. One of his Instagram posts from late September featured a red background with a female mouth shouting (Fig. 3). Beside #MahsaAmini, the mouth appears between the confidently rendered words “Zan” (Woman) and “Zendegi, Azadi” (Life, Freedom).⁵ It did not take long for the Iranian Cyber



FIGURE 3. Pedram Harby, “Woman, Life, Freedom,” 2022 (original poster). Courtesy of the artist. Line drawing reproduction after the original by Virginia Martinez Navarro.

³ Michelle Langford, *Allegory in Iranian Cinema: The Aesthetics of Poetry and Resistance* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 2.

⁴ Mottahedeh, Negar. *Displaced Allegories: Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

⁵ Pamela Karimi, “The Many Shades of Iran’s Protest Art,” *Hyperallergic*, October 11, 2022, <https://hyperallergic.com/768539/the-many-shades-of-iran-protest-art>.

Police (FATA) to pinpoint many of these artists on social media. They warned, harassed, and even arrested them. In the months that followed, many artist accounts appeared under aliases.

Act Two: The Artist Is Anonymous

Inconspicuousness, anonymity, and obscurity are not new to the recent movement. Such strategies have long been deployed by graffiti artists who inscribe street walls with their political art. Despite finding fame through their stylized signatures, Black Hand, Ada, Blind, Nafir, and many more have managed to keep their identities secret.

Most of what appeared on social media in the early days of the protests was created by graphic designers and illustrators whose works were particularly apt for social media; however, they soon became representatives of just one of the many art forms emerging from the protests. In response to the unrest, many artists abandoned exhibition and performance for “anonymous” expression through graffiti and ephemeral installations. Anonymity quickly became one of the hallmarks of recent art-making. In early October, in response to an attack on demonstrators at Tehran’s Sharif University, two allegedly anonymous women artists adorned trees in Daneshjoo Park with red nooses. Although police quickly removed such installations, their pictures continued to emerge online.⁶ Other acts of bravery occurred in the public spaces of many cities. By November, many artists had canceled performance in public venues that required permission from the MCIG. On his social media platform, a prominent artist and leader of a music band wrote: “At this crucial historical juncture, we denounce the word ‘guidance’ and its incompatible juxtaposition with the word ‘culture’; any work that requires permission from the MCIG will be barred from now on.”⁷

Art students also abandoned their classes, and professors supported them with public statements (a brave decision that ultimately led to the suspension or termination of their contracts).⁸ Instead of performing regular recitals, in footage that blurred their faces or only showed their tapping feet, music majors at Tehran’s University of Art performed protest songs in the corridors. Fine Arts majors participated in the mass choreography of the word “blood” (*khoon*) on the quad. Bathroom mirrors were stained by red stenciled words: “this is the face of someone who can make a change.”⁹ An official statement ensued, in which students condemned acts of violence against students. Other art colleges followed suit. Students at Tehran University gathered with slogan-strewn papers over their faces. They sat behind an unveiled female student whose long hair hid her face and whose wrists were bound to an art tube in a pose like that of the fallen Baluch activist, Khodanoor Legeie, who had been detained like this in scorching heat without water (Fig. 4).

In November, a group of high-profile theatre directors posted a video on Instagram, in which they walked into a public park and stood silently in solidarity with the protests. In this influential performance, women emerged without headscarves. Directors Soheila Golestani and Hamid Pourazari, the first two who appeared in the clip, were arrested and imprisoned shortly thereafter. What followed, however, was another group of performers who walked into the same location, posing in the same way before the camera; this time, however, their faces were covered with stained bandages like those on the acid-strewn faces of women who fall victim to Islamic extremists.

Anonymity, however, is not just for protection, which it does not guarantee anyway. The comedian Zeynab Mousavi, who was behind the popular Instagram account of the disguised

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Statement extracted from the social media platform of a well-known musician whose identity is kept secret for security.

⁸ In early February 2023 several professors from Tehran’s University of Art published letters from high-ranking administrators, which officially terminated or suspended their contracts.

⁹ Official Instagram account of Black Fish Voice (BFV) Group, @blackfishvoice.



FIGURE 4. Protesting students at Tehran University Faculty of Fine Arts (original photograph). Courtesy of @mahanmome-niartwork, Instagram. Line drawing reproduction after the original by Virginia Martinez Navarro.

“Empress Kuzcooo,” for example, was identified by FATA and given two years in prison for satirizing the Islamic Republic. Many creative agents remove themselves from the story to amplify the political message in their work. Accordingly, widespread anonymity has led to an epistemological shift in the art’s import. In the early 1990s, the art world was fascinated by a series of staged self-portraits, showcasing the veiled, gun-toting Shirin Neshat with Persian feminist verses handwritten across her body. The series aimed to capture the resilience of Iranian women despite being forced into Islamic dress codes. Subsequently, the experience of life after the establishment of a theocracy became so interesting, in fact, that the focus of many global art institutions shifted from the artwork itself to the biographies of celebrity Iranian artists in the diaspora. The recent rejection of celebrity culture in favor of anonymous expression has been so strong that when a banner containing one of Neshat’s self-portraits titled “Unveiling” (1993) was hung outside of the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin, many Iranian artists both inside and outside of the country reacted antagonistically. They questioned why the “Woman, Life, Freedom” mantra had been added to a seemingly passive veiled woman, whose “rebellious silence” seemed to contradict the feminist ideals that Iranians are fighting, and even dying for.¹⁰

With no biography or known author to set limits on viewers’ imaginations, the poignant activist art of this quasi-revolution made by anonymous and non-star artists seems to have been more effective than the work that appears of distinguished artists. Most of these works do not operate through the propagandistic visual language of the Islamic Republic, the one that Walter Benjamin famously named the “aestheticization of politics,” pertaining to the “age of the masses.”¹¹ On the contrary, art has entered the realm of the political in informal, tangible, and profound ways. Art has become part of everyday life without powerful agents, big names, auctions, galleries, or museums. Conversely, many instances of political activism

¹⁰ Elaine Velie, “Iranian Artists Criticize Berlin Museum’s Display of Shirin Neshat Banner: Some Have Questioned Whether Neshat’s Famous Images of Women Wearing the Hijab Represent the Struggles of Iranian Women Today,” *Hyperallergic*, November 17, 2022, <https://hyperallergic.com/780221/iranian-artists-criticize-berlin-museums-display-of-shirin-neshat-banner>.

¹¹ Walter Benjamin, “Theories of German Fascism: On the Collection of Essays *War and Warrior*.” *New German Critique* 17 (1979): 120–28.

have adopted art production; indeed, activism has entered the domain of visibility, audibility, and sense-experience—properties traditionally assigned to art and aesthetics.

Act Three: Activism Is Art

Activism in Iran today can be seen as a constellation of aesthetic modalities that transform politics and dissent into art. This aesthetic turn in activism also reflects the fate of other forms of political activism that have been difficult to implement, due to the lack of parties and institutionalized opposition groups.

Indeed, the line between art and activism has blurred so much that they have become impossible to differentiate. Following the performances of art students, anonymous performances of similar calibers soon emerged among non-art majors who, in response to the arrest of one student at Tehran University, stood atop high platforms on the quad



FIGURE 5. Security camera covered with tampons in a train car at Tehran's metro (original photograph). Courtesy of @ShukriyaBradost, Twitter. Line drawing reproduction after the original by Virginia Martinez Navarro.

blindfolded and unveiled. Their images look nothing short of a performance art project. In October, in the Kurdish city of Mahabad, activists used a street charity box from the Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation to create a sidewalk bunker. With most people in small border cities like Mahabad living on poverty lines, these boxes are widely perceived as a hoax. Indeed, the use of charity boxes as a defense against the noncombat shotgun shells of the police sounds like a political art installation, as noted by several prominent artists who interpreted the work as profoundly artistic.

The month after security forces opened fire on commuters at a Tehran metro station, activists responded by plastering surveillance cameras with sanitary pads to stop authorities from forcing dress codes on women. A slew of images emerged on social media showing layered pads stuck to CCTV cameras in metro train cars. Next to some of the blinded cameras were names of Iranian political dissidents who had been imprisoned or killed since September 2022. At first glance, the covered surveillance cameras looked like decorative flowers (Fig. 5). Then it became clear that this was an extreme act of bravery. Although the sticky pads helped expedite installation, those who mounted them could have been arrested and even killed.

In November an anonymous woman in Tehran posed on a pedestrian bridge in an outfit from the 2017 TV series *The Handmaid's Tale*, an adaptation of the 1985 bestseller by Margaret Atwood. In recent months many commentators have compared Iran to the Republic of Gilead—the oppressive society of this dystopian tale that treats women as state property. As in the TV series, in which the bonnets obscure the handmaids' faces to prevent them from forming personal connections, the “handmaid” of Tehran obscures her identity with a bonnet. Five years earlier, a woman stood on a utility box above a busy sidewalk in Enghelab (Revolution) Street, waving her headscarf like a flag tied to a stick. She made sure she was seen, a decision that led to her immediate arrest and a prison sentence. Her assertive pose on that utility box became the hallmark of an anti-hijab movement, its image repeated over and over by illustrators. Her bravery came to full fruition in 2022. Tehran's anonymous “handmaid” may have dodged the fate of the utility box girl (who later gained the moniker “the girl of the Revolution”), but she kept her message alive. Despite all its impact on the ground, activism gains greater credibility once it is featured on social media.

Act Four: Art Is Contagious

The protests seem to have revolved around powerful images circulating on social media, so powerful that they can change your heartbeat and make you cry or even retch. And yet for all their powerful effects, they are not “fully articulated,” to borrow from socialist writer Raymond Williams; they hover, instead, “at the edge of semantic availability.”¹² The images constantly change, they come and go, get forgotten, then reappear—at times they do not seem to cohere at all, as data moves by on constantly evolving social media feeds.¹³ Consequently, images of the protests are experienced across time and space; viewing them simultaneously provokes recurring meditations on the significance of the uprising while also evoking an embodied, felt transmission that registers activism and its ensuing violence at the level of sensation.¹⁴ By means of their engaged consumption, rather than passive perception, the images become “sensible” (or *feelable*) according to philosopher Jacques Rancière.¹⁵

Since September, images of the protests have shaped and formed us as subjects, constituting the limits of how we see and sense. Whether on the streets of Tehran or not, we have become part of a political field constituted by the circulation of images. One Instagram user

¹² Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1977), 121–27, 132.

¹³ Rebecca Coleman, “Social Media and the Materialization of the Affective Present,” in *Affect and Social Media: Emotions, Mediation, Anxiety, and Contagion*, ed. Tony D. Sampson, Stephen Madison, and Darren Ellis, 67–75 (London: Rowman and Littlefield International, 2018).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2010).



FIGURE 6. Woman shown installing a protest banner at a billboard station on Tehran’s Hemmat Highway (original screenshot). Courtesy of @masih-alinejad, Instagram. Line drawing reproduction after the original by Virginia Martinez Navarro.

in California told me that she frequently calls on her less-active social media friends to be the “voice of Iran,” by making “art” through Instagram visualization tools. But it is not just the events on the streets of Iran that feed images to the diasporic platforms.

In January, the French satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* published cartoons of Iran’s supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in a special edition marking the anniversary of the 2015 Islamic extremist attack on its Paris offices that left twelve dead. In response, the paper was hit by an alleged Iranian regime cyberattack. Then the Iranian Foreign Ministry summoned France’s ambassador to Iran to warn France about the “insulting and indecent” cartoons. On January 8, 2023, one *Charlie Hebdo* parody of the supreme leader, showing him with a turban made of nooses, was appropriated for a banner hung from a large commercial billboard over Tehran’s busy Hemmat Expressway. It featured the head of Khamenei next to a raised fist and phrases such as: “Water the tree of the revolution with my blood.” The video distributed on social media showed a young woman in a mask. After the installation, she stood up with poise and bravery atop the wobbly metal post from which the banner hung, posing for a moment with arms outstretched, making the ‘V’ sign for victory (Fig. 6). One commentator wrote: “How daring can you be not to fear walking on that flimsy shaft, falling to your death on that traffic-heavy thoroughfare? How brave can you be to stand there for long enough, next to the most insulting representation of the Supreme Leader, to be a prime target of a bullet shot from one of those frequently roving police cars? How courageous can you be to stand there long enough for a footage to go viral, potentially subjecting you to identification and arrest? Just how brave can you be?”¹⁶ That *Charlie Hebdo*, arguably the most controversial of platforms challenging

¹⁶ Commentary by anonymous user on the footage seen on Masih Alinejad’s personal Instagram platform. The translation, with slight modification, is mine.

Islam, is reproduced and showcased publicly in Iran is another indication of how contagious the art of the quasi-revolution is. Unlike politics, whose barriers seem so hard to break, the art of recent protests spreads with ease. Protest images traverse not only geographic borders, but also temporal boundaries. For example, posters produced by a Tehran-based underground activist group which is known only by its tag, “Aftabkaran,” appropriates iconic images from the May 1968 civil unrest in France as well as leftist publications from Iran’s 1978–79 revolution.

For all its abundance and vitality, the reception of the art and images of the protests on the global stage is not uniform. Although social media continues to be bold, caring little about what commentators say, in some academic contexts it has been difficult to articulate Iran’s protest images. In feminist art-related debates, the discussions can evolve around women’s demand for freedom of choice. But scholars have yet to make sense of images such as those showing women setting their veils on fire or those that pose a potential challenge to a Muslim believer’s way of life. How can academics discuss these images without refuting canonical frameworks, such as postcolonial theory and intersectional feminist scholarship that acknowledge traditions and religious beliefs? What do values mean and for whom? Do some values inevitably take precedence over the others?¹⁷

Act Five: Art Demands Its “Right to Opacity”

In January the award-winning magazine *Bidoun: Art and Culture from the Middle East*, published the diary of an anonymous woman from western Tehran. In characteristic style, this *Bidoun* piece is enlivened by pictures, taken from different corners in the capital, showcasing street walls with defaced political graffiti. No people or protesters appear in these silent images.

As if publishing the article under the anonymous name S* was not enough, the images reveal little about the protesters other than the fact that they appear and then get systematically erased, a cycle with no end. Scrolling down the *Bidoun* page evokes those silent, poetic scenes in Iranian cinema: how in Abbas Kiarostami’s *Taste of Cherry* (1997), for example, most of the film consisted of long shots of a deserted hill in Tehran. The last of the *Bidoun* article images is taken at the golden hour, showing the female narrator as a shadowy boy, dressed in a hoodie and jeans, against graffiti whitewashed by the state (Fig. 7). The protagonist is she who keeps the revolution alive: an unveiled woman, standing against whitewashed words, calling for justice. Despite bearing resemblance to earlier guarded styles of artmaking, the opaqueness of the image and the anonymity of the narrator are not necessarily about using allegorical methods and indirect references; rather, they evoke the “right to opacity,” a foundational aspect of Édouard Glissant’s oeuvre, who questions the possibility of making oneself legible across cultural lines. In his book *Poetics of Relation*, the Caribbean author-theorist calls for “the right to opacity for everyone.”¹⁸ Glissant argues that transparency through description, clarification, and classification disdains those aspects of life that are difficult to comprehend. Opacity, instead, Glissant opines, helps disclose all those complex characteristics that make us who we are. Glissant’s thought “on the one hand . . . is contrasted with the dangerous lure of universal culture. On the other, . . . attempts to distance itself from . . . romanticizing . . . cultural essence.”¹⁹ The shadowy image in the *Bidoun* article may be characterized as impossibly, frustratingly opaque, but it alludes to the possible unrelatability of women’s situation in Iran to the journal’s erudite readers.

¹⁷ For further discussion of these challenges faced by scholars, particularly feminists, see Éléonore Lépinard, *Feminist Trouble: Intersectional Politics in Postsecular Times* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2020).

¹⁸ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 194.

¹⁹ J. Michael Dash, *Édouard Glissant* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 143.



FIGURE 7. Shadowy photograph of the anonymous author of “Anger Piled Atop Anger: Iran Diary,” published in *Bidoun Magazine* on January 12, 2023, available at <https://bidoun.org/articles/anger-piled-atop-anger#8> (original photograph). Line drawing reproduction after the original photograph by Virginia Martinez Navarro.

The difficulty of expressing what women of Iran are suffering is best articulated from Evin Prison by Bahareh Hedayat, a detained journalist. She writes that progressive voices in the West “accuse us . . . of Islamophobia; meaning I, as a Middle Eastern woman, have no right to cry out against . . . [compulsory] hijab, because according to the ‘progressive’ rules that have been issued by . . . the intellectual circles of the West, this act of lamenting under the pressure of historical oppression that hijab has enforced upon me signifies fear of Islam, and no one has a right to fear Islam. . . . they do not deem the Middle Eastern Muslim woman as having the right to lament so that the tensions and contradictions of their own intellectual

apparatus would not be revealed!”²⁰ To further illustrate Hedayat’s point, there have been several instances of academics censoring controversial images of Islam. For example, shortly before the publication of *The Cartoons That Shook the World* (2009), a book about the controversial images of the Prophet Muhammad by Danish cartoonists, the author Jytte Klausen was asked to remove 12 Danish drawings and refrain from including any other illustrations of the Prophet. This request was to prevent offending Muslims and came directly from Yale University Press, which had consulted prominent art historians.²¹

Epilogue

The five acts above reveal some of the most intriguing characteristics of Iranian art (and, by extension, activism as art) since the start of the Woman, Life, Freedom uprising. It is difficult to predict what direction Iranian art might take in months to come. But four decades of determined dissident art in the Islamic Republic has shown that artists will persevere under the hardest of circumstances. A case in point is the Iranian artists’ overt condemnation of the government’s Fajr Festival, its flagship artistic event to observe the anniversary of the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Turning back from where Iranian art stands today is unlikely. A note written from prison by Amir-Hussein Barimani, a theater director who brought Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* to a Tehran stage shortly before his arrest in 2019, captures it all: “Let me say it plainly, there is no dash of regret within me.”²²

²⁰ Bahareh Hedayat, “‘Revolution is Inevitable’: Bahareh Hedayat’s Letter from Evin Prison in Tehran, Iran,” December 2022, *Jadaliyya*, January 4, 2023, <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/44720>.

²¹ Patricia Cohen, “Yale Press Bans Images of Muhammad in New Book” *New York Times*, August 12, 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/13/books/13book.html>.

²² Official Instagram account of Khaneh Cinema (The House of Cinema), @khneccinema. For further information on the demands of politically active artists and the future of the arts in Iran, see the *Radio Zamaneh* conversation with prominent artists Parastoo Forouhar and Jinoos Taghizadeh, January 31, 2023, https://www.radiozamaneh.com/751659/?tg_rhash=0ceb6994783a68.