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# BODY, AESTHETICS AND PROTEST ART

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This article examines the aesthetics of the body in protest art in Iran. Since the contested presidential election of 2009, echoed in 2013, Iranian art has emerged as a critical language for protest with a particular attention to the body. Covering a wide range of articulations, from painted bodies wrapped in colorful ribbons, to crude but poignant pen-on-paper sketches and political cartoons that bestow parody as the means for protesting the election debates, creativity emerged as a salient strategy for dissent. This paper focuses in particular on protest art, as artistic expressions that carve out a niche for public debate and social engagement, compelling agency with macro politics through engagement with the most forbidden intimate space - that of the body.

Inspired by recent events in Iran, this paper looks at the triangulation of political protest with the appreciation of aesthetics and the body. Since the protested election of 2009, echoed in the 2013 presidential election, a new breed of artistic creativity is emerging out of Iranian public discourse that agitates political authority, while articulating a critical attention to the body. Although taking to the street and putting oneself before regimes of power and public spectators continues to be the most recognizable form of dissent, the *protest art* that emerged from the Iranian *Green Movement* has ratified the possibility of engagement with politics on local and transnational scales. While visual representations have long been deployed as propaganda in favor of particular politics, the emerging aesthetics of *protest art* in contemporary Iranian political stage illustrates a shift in social engagement on mass scale. What began as the production of “color-coded” campaigns of recent years in Iran (e.g. the green movement, the purple vote) has simultaneously permeated into an outpouring of artistic innovations for political mobilization, inseparable from the visceral experiences and convictions of the public, thus providing empirical evidence on “how visual forms of artistic expressions create new modes of protest.”

More than a mere banner for a political campaign, the incorporation of “taste” and “beauty”, which dominates contemporary public discourse, brings to light the centrality of human agency as creative, imaginative, and affective subjects on the sociopolitical stage in Iran. *Protest art* enables political engagement to permeate beyond an opposition to the State. Crossing over boundaries of streets and cyberspace, the Iranian *Green art of protest* evokes nuances about citizenship and artistic interrogation. The Iranian *Green art*, not only offers a visual outlet for questioning the legitimacy of the ruling power, it also creates a visual context for the intersection of protest, artistic intrigue and the body, thus challenging normative ideals about the protester as trespassing figure across a geography of the desire for hope and change.

Drawing from ethnographic works of the past four years, this paper sketches the imaginative repertoire of political participation across these artistic productions. Here, I argue that creative forms of political engagement have transformed Iranian cultural vernacular through articulation of body art and body as art.

## Introduction

Fourteen months after the protested election of 2009, a long line of art enthusiasts wound up one of Tehran's wounded streets leading up to a door, wherein fifteen visitors at a time were allowed in. The event, Chris Burden<sup>1</sup> Live in Performance, drew in curious art fans escaping the stifling summer air in a city tired of smog and blood. Soon the visitors find out, this was not a show by the conscientious American artist, rather it was an invitation to "*Shoot*" by a young Iranian artist, Amir Mo'bed. *Come and Caress Me*<sup>2</sup>, as the show was entitled, was not only a social commentary on the accessibility of violence in contemporary Iran, but by putting his own figure as the shooting target in the performance piece, Amir Mo'bed draws attention to the tangibility of the body in conflict. As their American counterparts of the anti-Vietnam war era, today's youth has an intimate and visceral connection to the problem of brute violence that has infected the social life of the country. But what distinguishes Mo'bedi's act from Burden is that by putting the gun in the hands of the viewer of the exhibit, the responsibility and the danger of violence is no longer confined to the body of the artist, rather that is shared by public. The body in its most vulnerable state becomes the site of reconfiguration of violence, art, and political protest.

Furthermore, the timing of Mo'bedi's performance, when the memory of street violence remained raw, made for its most tender and trying reception by a public wounded in the brutally silenced protests of the year that preceded *Come and Caress Me*. In other words, both the viewer and the artist were intimately aware of the accessibility and ease of violence against the body, in the aftermath of the Green Movement, targeted sniper-shots from rooftops onto the protesters, mutilated bodies tortured in Kahrizak<sup>3</sup> make-shift prison. Therefore, it is not hard to see how the argument has been made that

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<sup>1</sup> Chris Burden is an American artist, whose acclaimed work using his own body in art brought public attention to the proximity of violence in war stricken America in the early 1970's. In 1971 in his well-known act, *Shoot*, his assistant to illustrate the idea of personal danger in art shot Burden in the arm. This act was among a provocative series of anti-violence performances by Burden in the early 1970's that made his work known to the world.

<sup>2</sup> *Come Caress Me*, was put together by the Iranian young artists Amir Mo'bed in August 2010, in Tehran's Free Designers Gallery. YouTube videos of the event are available for viewing online, but the most careful examination of this protest art is offered by Hamed Yousefi, an Iranian art critic living in the U.K. available on vimeo:

<sup>3</sup> Kahrizak detention center was a secret facility operated by the Iranian Judicial system of Iran since 2001, which became publically known as a site of grave violence, extreme torture and rapes of the 2009 protesters that leaked in the international press by the survivors of the events in July 2009.

<http://revolucioniran.blogspot.com/2010/04/graphic-alleged-raped-prisoners-in.html>

<http://en.irangreenvoice.com/article/2012/mar/27/3582>

protest art of recent years in Iran has brought forth a new awareness about the fragility of the human body as well as the impossibility of distancing the body from the protest (see for example: Dabashi 2010, Yousefi 2010, Neshat 2010). In this work, however, I will examine the contemporary proliferation of art that brings to focus the convergence of the sexuality of the body with political protest in the context of the Iranian Green Movement. The triangulation of these core ideas about sexuality, protest, and art, which makes up the theoretical trajectories of my proposed work, ....

"After the elections, I felt we had to spare an eye for the beauty of the world," said Neda Darzi, an Iranian female artists who started the Face Book group page, the 1<sup>st</sup> Annual Iranian Contemporary Art Contest (Yong 2010).

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