

al-raida

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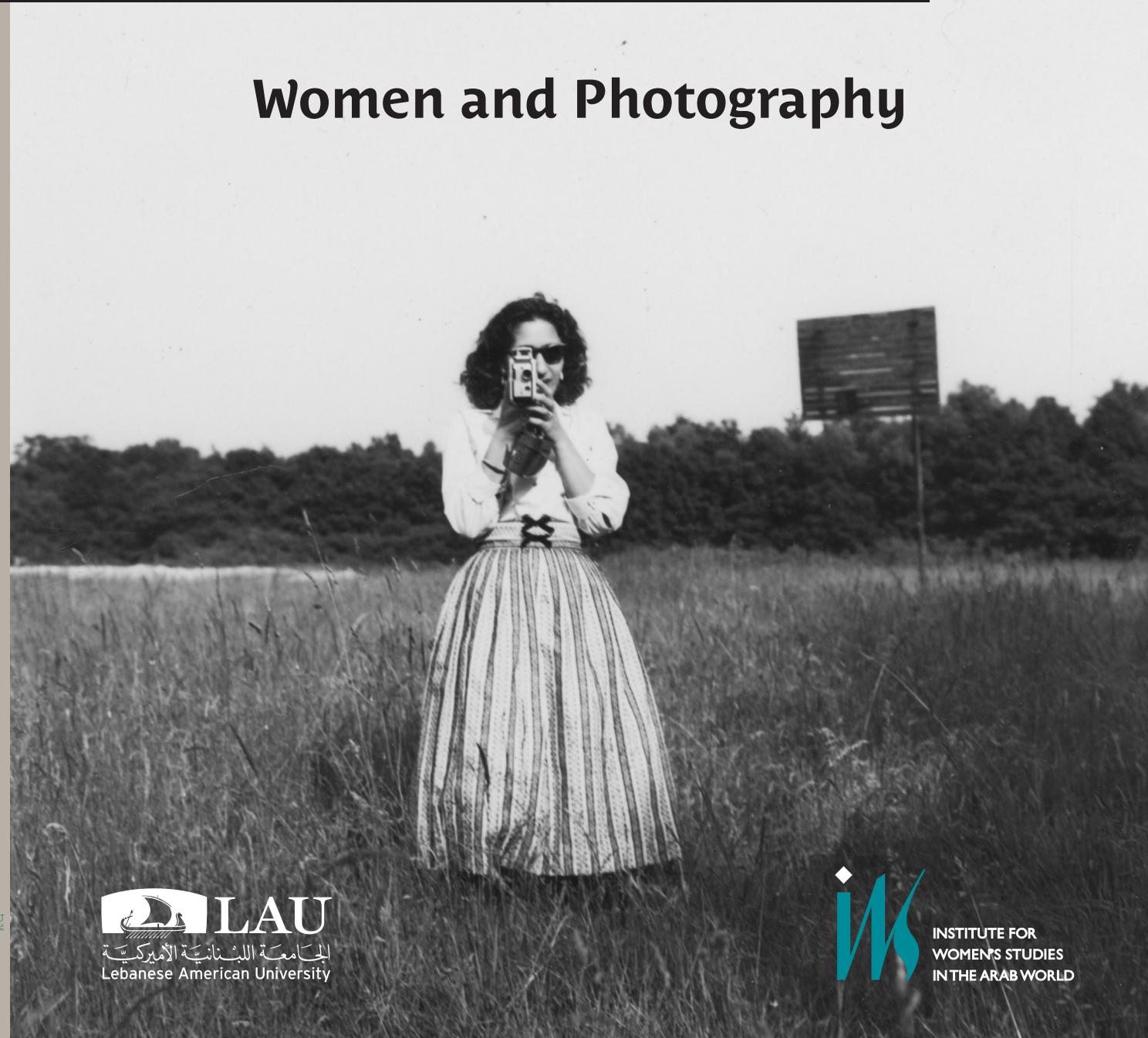
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The Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World
Lebanese American University | issue 141-142 | Spring/Summer 2013

Women and Photography

Women and Photography

Issue 141-142 | Spring/Summer 2013



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The Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World at the Lebanese American University

The Lebanese American University founded the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW) in 1973. The history of the Institute is closely linked to that of the first women's college in the Middle East, the American Junior College for Women, which was established in 1924 by the Presbyterian Mission. The College, which educated Middle Eastern women for half a century, became co-ed in 1973. In order to honor the college's unique heritage as the first educational institution for women in the region, the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World was established that same year.

Mission

- Engage in academic research on women in the Arab world.
- Develop and integrate women's studies in the Lebanese American University curriculum.
- Empower women in the Arab world through development programs and education.
- Serve as a catalyst for policy changes regarding the rights of women in the Arab world.
- Facilitate networking and communication among individuals, groups, and institutions concerned with women in the Arab world.
- Extend ties with international organizations and universities working on gender issues.

Al-Raida Journal

Al-raida first appeared in May 1976, 3 years after the founding of the first institute for women's studies in the Arab world (i.e. IWSAW). It started off as a thin newsletter consisting of a dozen stenciled pages, with the modest and limited purpose of reporting on the activities of IWSAW. With time, however, *al-raida* grew in size and scope, a development that was also gradually reflected in its appearance. Whereas initially it consisted mostly of profiles of women, conference reports, and summaries of studies, by the mid 1980s an important addition was made, i.e. research-based articles, thus making a qualitative and quantitative leap in terms of content and mandate. By 1994, *al-raida* reached a new level of maturity with the introduction of a specialized section or "file" which focuses on cutting edge themes and often controversial issues related to women in the Arab world. In 2002, and in line with the technological advances that swept the publishing world in the last decade, the Institute made *al-raida* available online in both English and Arabic, thus allowing researchers and activists worldwide to have easy and instantaneous access to it. In 2007, *al-raida* was revamped in both appearance and content. It became smaller in size and new sections were introduced, namely the "young scholars" section and an original "book reviews" section.

More than three decades after its first appearance, in 2013, *al-raida* was turned into a bi-annual interdisciplinary peer-reviewed academic journal that contains scholarly articles of international standards as well as non-academic articles. *Al-raida* will thus continue to invite submissions that enrich the debate on women in the Arab world, whether in the form of interviews, opinion pieces, testimonials, short stories, poems, or essays.

Submission Guideliens

All submitted academic articles are reviewed by two blind reviewers. IWSAW reserves the right to accept or reject the articles submitted. Those articles that are accepted will be edited according to journal standards.

For more details about our submission guidelines kindly visit our website at: <http://iwsaw.lau.edu.lb>

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Addressed Various and Suggested Topics for Research that Investigate Women's Role in the Media, in Education, in Art, and Work

ISSUE 2 1977
Promoted Women and Events that Focus on Women's Development

ISSUE 3 1978
Importance of Documentation in the Arab World

ISSUE 4 1978
Post-War Thoughts

ISSUE 5 1978
Women Between Reality and Illusion*

ISSUE 6 1978
Research Projects on Women's Status: A Pressing Need in the Arab World*

ISSUE 7 1979
Will Power

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The Year of the Child, The Year of Hope

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ISSUE 10 1979
Do you have Senile Symptoms

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Freedom cannot be One-Sided

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World Campaign for Peace

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You Cannot Set The Clock Back

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What Is Development

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Women's Participation in Development

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What About Career Woman*

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ISSUE 131/132 2010-2011
Gender-Based Violence in the Arab World

ISSUE 133/134 2011
Arab Women in Latin America

ISSUE 135/136/137 2011-2012
Transforming the World of Work for Gender Equality in the Arab Region

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* Out of print - Xeroxed copies are available

Hard copies of recent and back issues of Al-Raida are available in English at the Institute. Online copies of issues, 2001 onwards, are available online in English and Arabic (free of charge).

al-raida

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Word from the Editor-in-Chief

Dima Dabbous

Once again, I have the great pleasure of introducing a major, new qualitative leap taken by *al-raida*. Exactly seven years ago, issue no. 118-119 (“Arab Women Writing in English”) came out, marking a new phase in the evolution of *al-raida* – an evolution which was then reflected in both content and form. The present issue, though similar in form, is a watershed in the steady, qualitative evolution of this publication, whose beginnings were closely connected with the establishment of the Institute for Women’s Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW) in the early 1970s. From a humble, thin newsletter consisting of a dozen stenciled pages, with the modest and limited purpose of reporting on the activities of the Institute, *al-raida* has steadily developed into a double-blind, peer-reviewed, interdisciplinary journal whose objective is to spearhead quality scholarship on women rights and women issues in the Arab world.

When it was first introduced, *al-raida* consisted of profiles of women, conference reports, and summaries of studies related to women and children, in addition to news reports on the activities of IWSAW. By the mid-1980s it had developed into a magazine that included research-based articles on women. In 1994 it reached a new level of maturity with the addition of the specialized section or “file” which often included controversial issues and contributed to the much needed academic and human rights-based debate on women living in the Arab world. In 2002, benefiting from technological advances in the publishing field, *al-raida* became more widely accessible, when it was made available online, for free, in both English and Arabic. This also meant that *al-raida* has since been able to serve as a valuable resource for researchers and activists who had no access to it prior to that date, due to language and distribution barriers.

The successive cosmetic and substantive changes that *al-raida* underwent since it first appeared in May 1976 are indeed testament to its sustainability, major role, and added value in a regional context still characterized by a dearth of quality scholarship on women’s rights. Academic writing on women in the region is still characterized by paucity, both in terms of volume and range of topics covered. Benefiting from the university setting in which it is housed, and the academic freedom that comes with it, *al-raida* has been at the forefront of the effort to research, document, and enrich the debate on women’s lives and women’s issues in the Arab world. Needless to add, such issues are often taboo and absent from dominant discourses in the Arab world, especially with respect to human rights. Topics that *al-raida* was truly a pioneer in

covering from an academic, human-rights based perspective have included, among others, masculinity and homosexuality, and the role of religion (both Christianity and Islam) in defining the role and life of women in the Arab world.

As probably the only English language journal of its kind in the Arab world, *al-raida* is well placed to play an increasingly significant role with respect to bridging cultures and increasing the flow and exchange of ideas about women in the Arab world. As an interdisciplinary academic journal, it can contribute to the reflection on the relationship (and tension) between theory and practice, while exploring the meaning and role of gender in women's and men's lives – in a region where the very word “gender” is still rejected as an analytical tool for understanding the multiple types of discrimination that affect the lives of women in the region.

In closing, I would like to emphasize that this much-awaited, major qualitative leap taken by *al-raida* will not take place at the expense of another function that *al-raida* has faithfully fulfilled since it first appeared in 1976. While making room for thoroughly researched, written, and argued academic pieces that will fill a gap with respect to quality scholarship on women, it will continue to fiercely protect and project the (often unheard) voices coming from the margins – whether individual or collective: these are the voices that we hear in formats and genres of writing that do not adhere to the rigid, exclusive format of the conventional, academically acceptable “journal article”. *Al-raida* will thus continue to invite submissions that enrich the debate on women in the Arab world, whether in the form of interviews, opinion pieces, testimonials, short stories, poems, or essays. Nearly four decades after having first appeared, *al-raida* remains committed, first and foremost, to the cause of advancing women rights in the region.

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Women and Photography

Yasmine Nachabe Taan

This special issue of *al-raida* on Women and Photography addresses photography as a medium that challenges gender roles, positions, and attributes as seen in the mainstream media. It includes papers by contributors who examine the practice of women photographers in the Middle East as well as the different ways women are represented in photographs from a variety of perspectives that range from critical art disciplines to the social sciences.

It is with pride that I announce that this issue coincides with the establishment of *al-raida* as a refereed journal. With this issue *al-raida* is joining academic journals in its editorial procedure for selecting articles. The task to identify qualified scholars to review the articles was not easy due to the limited scholarship on a highly specialized topic such as gender and photography in the region.

With few exceptions, most of the publications available on photography in the Middle East region are published in the form of photographic albums with limited textual material. In most cases, the text is often descriptive and lacks critical analysis. The articles in this issue focus on interpreting selected photographs using various analytical methods.

This issue also coincides with two major events related to memory and photography in the Middle East. "Not Just Memory, Palestine Before 1948" is the title of a retrospective exhibit showcasing 1920s and 1930s photographs on Khalil Raad's (1854-1957) photographic practice in Palestine. The show took place at the Nimr Foundation in Beirut to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Institute for Palestinian Studies. The second event is a retrospective exhibition of another early Palestinian photographer, this time a woman, Karima Abboud (1891-1955). The photographs were compiled by Dr. Mitri Raheb in Palestine. These events are evidence of a rising interest in photography related to the region not just in order to restore memory and the past but to communicate, analyze, and understand the present.

There are certainly rewards to seeing this issue coming together. Beyond editorial duties, it was intriguing to read about sonic photographs, censored photographs, and photography used as a medium for identity construction. The traditional approach of photography as capturing and preserving the past is not the only purpose in the work

discussed in this issue. Photography, while documenting social change, takes on a political dimension. It becomes a tool for activism.

Brynn Hatton, for example, examines Pietro Masturzo's 2009 World Press Photo of the Year "From the Rooftops of Tehran, June" and Shirin Neshat's multimedia adaptations of the Farsi novella, *Women Without Men*, to reflect on the representation of the rooftops in Iran and the different ways rooftops function as a space from which Iranian women contest political relations. Rooftops are common places from which Tehrani dissident women shout their discontent about the state's unjust practices. Hatton argues that these sonic photographic representations constitute a productive political weapon against the state.

Sara Mamemi explores the photographs of three female Iranian artists and their reflections on queer culture in the presence of morality police restricting contact in public spaces, regulating women's navigation within Tehran, and watching for signs of unorthodox behavior. In examining Anahita Razmi's short video *White Wall Tehran*, Mamemi highlights visuality as an audible medium. Like Hatton, Mamemi attempts to move the attention from the visual to the audible in examining the photographs.

Daniel Berndt in "In/distinction. On Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh's *Photographic Conversation from Burj al-Shamali Camp*" explores Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh's practice of photography in documenting the Palestinian refugee camps. Rather than being appreciated for their aesthetic value, the photographs discussed in this issue are visual hypotheses that serve as catalysts to open discussions and raise questions about the situation of marginalized people. They are emotionally-loaded photographs which are also rich with meanings. Photography can be considered as an instrument that facilitates the imposition of



Nabihah Loutfi behind the camera. Tal el Zaatar, Lebanon, 1976. Unidentified photographer. Collection AIF/ Nabihah Loutfi. Copyright © Arab Image Foundation

power by those behind the camera (the photographers) on those who are in front of the camera (the subjects in the photograph). As Berndt explains, Eid-Sabbagh chose to have the children living in Burj al-Shamali Palestinian refugee camp take their own pictures to document their daily life inside the camps. The photographs were later used by the artist to reflect on the relation between photography and the process of identity formation. In this case, Berndt argues, the photographs empowered the residents of the camps with a self-assurance that nurtures a sense of emancipation from historical generalization.

In Allam's review of Hammam's photographs the author draws on the relation between the sexual implications of the space and the photographs to comment on gender politics in Egypt. For Hammam, similar to Eid-Sabbagh but in a different context, the medium of photography is used as a medium for identity construction. Allam contends that the presence of water, bodies, and the concept of wetness can be metaphorically understood as erotic and sexual. She also discusses the fluidity of gender signifiers in photographs and reflects on the perception of nudity that varies according to gender. The presence of veiled women on the beach contrasts with the nudity of male bodies. The latter is socially accepted whereas women's nudity, according to Allam, is embarrassing.

In the last pages of this issue various aspects of photography are explored such as in the interviews with Christina Rahme on the practice of fashion photography and with Karen Kalou on the practice of photography as art. The two interviews are followed by young scholars' reflections on eclectic photography practices such as Helen Karam's article on Rasha Kahil's provocative nude art-portrait photography, Farah Berro's insight on Twitter profile photographs, and Mehrnoush Shafei's review of Rania Matar's 'gendered photographs' of teenage girls in their rooms featured in Matar's latest book, *A Girl and her Room*.

All of the photographs in this issue transcend the notion of photography as rescuing memory and the past. Most of the authors attempt to articulate the orality of photographs and their ability to communicate sound and layers of meanings. The question here is who is looking rather than what is seen. Photography cannot be understood as having a static identity or singular cultural status. The medium is better regarded as a dynamic field of technologies, practices, and images. Photographs are never neutral, they can never exist outside discourses. Photography is itself an apparatus of ideological control.

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Women and Photography in the Arab World



Brynn Hatton

Silent Shout: Photography, Women, and the Iranian Rooftop (1953, 1979, 2009)

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Farah Berrou

The Passport of the 21st Century

Silent Shout

Photography, Women, and the Iranian Rooftop (1953, 1979, 2009)

Brynn Hatton

Silence is more eloquent than the union of a hundred tongues.

(Farsi proverb, as cited in Tual, 1986, p. 60)

All of old. Nothing else ever. Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.

(Beckett, 1983, p. 47)

Abstract

The historical lineage of photographic representations of the rooftop in Iran, as keyed to three pivotal, modern moments – the 2009 elections, the 1979 revolution, and the 1953 coup – demonstrates how the roof functions as a space from which attempts by Iranian women to reorder, contest, and invert political relations through sound have been recurrently staged.

This paper argues that representations from within this photographic lineage constitute a productive political transition between sonic and visual regimes; one that is actually enabled by the unsettling quality of silence made uniquely perceptible, or rendered singly, in the ambivalent vision of photography. Consequently, the images here considered problematize and expand Jacques Rancière's theorization of the aesthetic formation of politics by questioning what might be accomplished politically in the failure to represent, proposing the idea that imaging silence in the midst of turbulent noise might engender a political representation of a different order.

Of primary interest to this argument are two works completed in 2009 (Pietro Masturzo's 2009 World Press Photo of the Year, "From the Rooftops of Tehran, June", and Shirin Neshat's multimedia adaptations of the surrealist Farsi novella *Women Without Men*), each of which formalize the way in which the specific setting of the rooftop, as something we might call, following Michel Foucault, a "heterotopic" site, activates this relationship of (in)audibility and political representation.

Keywords: Photography, gender, Iran, rooftop, Rancière.

Double-blind peer-reviewed article

The 2009 World Press Photo of the Year, an image now widely acclaimed in the circles of professional photojournalism, went unpublished in the news media during the year of its making [Figure 1]. Captured by freelance Italian photojournalist Pietro Masturzo

in June of 2009, it pictures a small group of female protesters on a rooftop in a middle-class neighborhood of Tehran, shouting their dissent over the results of the disputed Iranian presidential election of that year. In a later interview with the Spanish press, Masturzo said of his award-winning image: “I had the impression that a special history was taking place on every roof. The protesters were all looking to the past, the present and the future at the same time” (as cited in Calvo, 2010). The rooftop protest, a practice rekindled in the wake of the 2009 elections, in fact restaged one of the main tactics of the 1979 Islamic Revolution in which noise was used as a political weapon against the Iranian state. As one foreign eyewitness of the 1979 events observed, “the most impressive development...were rooftop rallies, a way of defying the 9 p.m. curfew. After dark everyone in the city it seemed was out in their garden or on their roof chanting and yelling [sic]. The city was live with noise” (“Get Rid of the Shah”, 1979, p. 16).

Looking at this particular photograph raises a deceptively simple-sounding question: can you hear this picture? Though it works to literalize and capture sonic protest at the moment of its emission, it is nonetheless bewilderingly difficult to look at this image and simultaneously imagine that we hear something. This is all the more strange considering the photograph centers around a woman caught in the visible gesture of shouting. As a picture, it is not noisy, even if the event it documents and the history it recalls are both loaded with allusions to sound. It would seem a matter of course that the most celebrated photojournalist document of this distinctly sonic phenomenon should give aural expression to the exceptional circumstances (indeed, the “special history”) at hand: exactly thirty years after the Islamic revolution, electrifying calls once again emerged from the rooftops at night in defiance of the state. So why, after all this affective positioning, does the photo still feel and look so quiet? How does it happen that, in looking at this image, we can almost hear the slightly acrid hum of



Image 1. Pietro Masturzo. From the Rooftops of Tehran, June, 2009.

the electric lights in the windows, the buzz of the exposed powerlines overhead, but remain utterly deaf to the woman's otherwise very clearly imaged shout?

As one of the jurors of the World Press Photo competition described it, "the photo has a powerful sense of atmosphere, tension, fear – but also of quietness and calm, and in this sense was a challenge as a choice. We were looking for an image that drew you in, took you deeper, made you think more – not just about showing what we already know, but something that asks more of us" ("World Press Photo", 2010). Indeed, the photo itself discloses very little in the way of demonstrative subtext or obvious narrative. This is partially a function of certain atmospheric conditions that result from Masturzo taking the photo in the hazy interval between evening and nighttime, but it is just as indicative of the general tone of uncertainty and precariousness that pervaded the June 2009 events. The scene pictured is a rooftop in a middle-class neighborhood of Tehran, where three women are loosely congregated. It is evening, not yet dark, but the night has already claimed a couple of buildings in the far distance, throwing their facades into flat, black shadow. A barely perceptible glow emanates upward from the street, lightening a small slice of bluish-gray sky visible at top center. The color of the sky – a relatively minor player up against the photo's imposing light effects and blocky architectural forms (stucco and brick residences in varying hues of stone-white) – quietly graduates from light to dark as the eye moves up the horizon, then presses back down, from dark to light again, as we re-enter the scene below. Outside, the faint glow from the street softly pushes on the encroaching darkness, while inside, shrill, white blasts of fluorescent light aggressively and indiscreetly punch it out.

The photographer used a relatively long exposure for this shot, which accounts for the blown-out brightness in the windows and the motion blur around one of the *chadoris* on the roof. The slight shake and distorted light around several of the window frames indicates that Masturzo was likely positioned behind a closed window. While not associated with any time-based technical feature of the camera – like shutter speed or exposure length – but rather with the happenstance position of its operator, this half-focused, shuddering effect of light nonetheless serves as one of the strongest indicators of temporality in the photograph. It visualizes the disparity between a primary hot spot of light and its luminous afterglow, indexing the range of activity that can occur between two static instants. In this, it parallels the relationship between the two adjacent but un-adjointed spaces of the separate buildings from where the photographer and his subjects are respectively positioned.

Aside from the discordant lighting effects and the repetition of groups of three – windows and women both appear in triads – the other major element of the composition is a rather heavy-handed application of photographic vignette that encases either vertical side of the image in deep, thick swaths of near-black shadow. Given the assortment of light effects in the rest of the photograph, this dramatic darkening around the edges suggests that this detail was likely applied in digital post-production. The handling of the light otherwise makes that kind of high-contrast shadow at the sides impossible to achieve raw, since an exposure long enough to account for the blur of the figure on the rooftop would have created a more pervasive, all-over glow across the entire image. By virtue of this aesthetic choice, it turns out that perhaps the unascertainable quality of the shout does not derive from the spatial

environment the photo actually documents. The viewer's distance from the scene, and fact that the photographer (and by extension the viewer) looks to be cordoned behind window glass, cannot completely account for this silencing effect. The effect also arises from the deliberate enclosure of dark, visual material that invades the rooftop and closes it off from either side, enshrouding it in a contained compositional field. Before it is heard, her shout is already an echo, bouncing off the black, opaque wall that closes in on her space with the advancing night, travelling nowhere.

The vignette effect can also be read as a conscious silencing or muting aesthetic move, and perhaps as the very thing that makes this otherwise politically noisy representation seem so quiet. And, as a compositional element rendered after-the-fact (as such the only calculably 'artistic' or aesthetically-motivated component of the finished image), it lends a theatricality and surreality to what has otherwise been produced and received as unequivocally documentarian. The staginess of the vignette, the way it curtains and composes the scene while also containing it, dilutes and suspends the sense of vivid, living, moving noise that we otherwise know to be populating this moment.

That "From the Rooftops of Tehran, June, 2009", shot in the aftermath of the elections but before Ahmadinejad's reinauguration and so in the peak of the drama, won the World Press Photo's grand prize is odd, considering its lack of clear, journalistic storytelling, and its numerous technical slippages and imperfections to which any trained photojournalist will attest. That it won such high accolades in this news context also tells us something about photojournalism's assumed function in communicating the tenor of political events otherwise largely experienced within the sonic realm. In the end, what makes the image remarkable has nothing to do with its sheer affective power, its virtuosic display of technical or artistic adeptness, or even its ability to make pertinent and digestible an important and timely moment in recent history as per the illustrative standards of the news media. Instead, it is the inconclusiveness and uncertainty it shows in all these functions, and its indeterminate treatment of supposedly determinate things – sharpness and blur, motion and stillness, quiet and noise – that makes it so memorable and so haunting. Meanwhile, "what we already know" about this photo, the "real" but imperceptible fact of its utter noisiness, is simultaneously rendered and withdrawn. The sound it makes is sonically out of its own range, exceeding the expected threshold of visual aurality and registering instead as visually silent. It functions, then, in a different kind of productive transitional space between sonic and visual regimes; one that is actually enabled by the unsettling quality of silence that is made uniquely perceptible, or rendered exclusively, in the ambivalent vision of photography.

Sensation and (Non)Representation; or, How to Do Things with Silence

Synesthesia is a neurological condition in which two or more senses are transposed. Seeing sound, hearing color, tasting shape: these are more than evocative metaphorical idioms, though cross-sensory translations have been employed in art and literature for centuries, from Pythagoras' correlation of color to the musical scale, to hip-hop artist B.G.'s definition of 'bling' as "the imaginary sound produced when light reflects off a diamond" (Thompson, 2009, p. 483). In the actual cognitive process of synesthesia, a documented physiological aberration of the normal brain, sensorial overlaps are

experienced as common and automatic, and the linkages they create are taken to be obvious and logical, if not inherent to the very thing perceived. The capacity to understand verbal descriptions of synesthetic compounds is, however, not limited to persons who fit a certain medical profile. Though the choice to describe a person's voice as 'sharp' or a surface's texture as 'purple' may not occur as immediate or instinctive to many, it is nevertheless still possible to imagine what is meant by such an idea. When good synesthetic descriptions raise questions, they are largely rhetorical ones. "Can you hear this picture?" is one such a question.

As musicologist and historian Veit Erlmann (2004) has posited, "Arguments over the hierarchy of the senses are always also arguments over cultural and political agendas", meaning that the mental and representational act of conflating and reordering (or disordering) perception differently in the hierarchical sensorium has inherent political implications (p. 4). But what does it mean to perform this synesthetic reordering and reprivileging through specifically visual media, such as photography and film? Silencing, as a visual strategy, demands that we approach the above question differently, and ask more specifically what employing this strategy accomplishes politically by conjuring the eye's failure to hear. We can say with some conviction that vision has historically enjoyed primacy as the master sense, as the one to which we have ascribed the greatest responsibility for communicating the world to us, helping to order it, and, by extension, forming us as actors and political participants within it.² But, as Jacques Attali (1985) has proposed, "For twenty-five centuries, [we] have failed to understand that the world is not for the beholding. It is not legible, but audible... Nothing essential happens in the absence of noise" (p. 3). While Attali's intervention carefully corrects a legacy of visual supremacy, we should first note that for both ocular- and aural-centric beholders of the world alike, structures of knowledge and political expression are hinged to the structures of sensorial arrangement, where arguments over what is known are based on what one perceives and in what order. The structures of perception form both the prerequisite and the result of any social discussion "in which there is actually something to discuss" (Rancière, 1999, p. 55). Jacques Rancière's (2006) conception of the political in *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* has countered that those discussions are themselves ordered and contested first through and by the structural filter of the visual regime. Nothing may happen in the absence of noise, as per Attali's claim, but what constitutes a political action in the first place is always already reliant on its spatial (and thus visual) occupation of perceptible reality.³

Complicating and challenging both Attali and Rancière's models of politics vis-à-vis regimes of representation is a kind of visual or aesthetic silencing that recurs in a lineage of contemporary photographic imagery of Iranian women. These images document or reference Iran's major, modern revolutionary moments: the 1953 coup, the 1979 Revolution, and the 2009 Green Movement. Consequently, the images here considered problematize and expand Rancière's theorization of the aesthetic formation of politics by questioning what might be accomplished politically in the failure to represent, proposing the idea that imaging silence in the midst of turbulent political noise might engender a political representation of a different order. The fact that these visually silent representations also recur in images of the rooftop, a subversive space of sonic protest borne out of imposed limitations on public visibility, serves to

link multiple modes of perception – physical, spatial, ocular, aural – to a specifically politicized counter-site within the regime of the sensible.

The particular interrelationship between visibility/invisibility and audibility/inaudibility also parallels a much longer history of politicized representations of women in Iran. In addition to the very concrete visibility of the *chador* and *hijab* as it has been alternately banned and enforced in public spaces by the state since the 1930s,⁴ women's voices have been associated with popular protest and public demonstrations in Iran since at least the mid-1800s (Martin, n.d., pp. 50-66). Visually, the varying presence and absence of the *chador* provides a literal enactment of the distribution of the senses, since the colors, textures, shapes, sizes, forms, lines, and patterns that distinguish one individual woman from another can be glossed over in one homogenizing representational system. More than just a visual problem, however, the public enforcement of Islamic dress codes metaphorically blunts and delimits speech acts in the sense that Aphrodite Désirée Navab (2007) invokes when she asks: "How is it possible to hold a gun, march, fight, and give orders with the *chador* held together at the mouth?" (p. 47).

The direct audible and visible presence of women in public spaces of protest has served to establish a demonstrative economy of political representation in certain historical contexts, especially where official representation has been otherwise threatened or refused. The conscious withholding of the visual or the verbal, however, is an act that is potentially equally loaded with other communicative properties. To understand the complexity of women's speech capacities in patriarchal Iranian culture, claims ethnographer Anny Tual (1986), "language and its uses must, for example, be considered in relation to another very important system of knowledge: the non-verbal" (p. 55). Both the refusal to speak and the choice to communicate without words, via movements of the body, eyes, and face, depend on a shared cultural recognition of silence as a loaded and endlessly expressive mode of communication.⁵ So too with the *chador*, a highly visible political symbol of the theocracy that attempts to constrict and condense a plurality of individuals into an anonymous mass, yet simultaneously allows for a level of subversive invisibility on the level of individual choice. Wearing the *chador* can provide practical protection from the unwanted male gaze, or disrupt the surveilling state's capacity to distinguish one woman from another in acts of public dissent. Since the 19th century, "one of the advantages women had was that, when protesting against powerful officials, their veils protected them from individual recognition, so that they could be more intimidating" (Martin, n.d., p. 55). By partially controlling the conditions of their own visual reception in alternately wearing the veil and so asserting their right not to be looked at, or dressing according to secular custom and so asserting their right to be seen, Iranian women have been called "masters of evasion" working with a complex language of exogenous and endogenous expressive tools.⁶ The unintended consequence of the high-visibility *hijab*, which is designed to limit visual access, is that it carves out an alternative space to assert a certain power in invisibility, whereby women paradoxically don the mantle of that which makes them disappear in order to effectively assert the means to representation.⁷ Such acts of limiting one's vision, both expressively and literally, figure as submissive to and as subversive of contemporary patriarchy in acclaimed Iranian-born graphic novelist Marjane Satrapi's 2006 book *Embroideries*. In one scene, for example, a young female narrator is encouraged by her grandmother to "close her eyes a little", which the granddaughter resists because it ceases to make

her “look vibrant and intelligent”. Her grandmother insists that lowering her eyelids languorously will allow her to find lovers more easily – not one lover, however, but three. “Thanks to her half-closed eyes,” the narrator continues, “my grandma got married three times. My grandfather was her last husband”.

The visual and its direct effect on the political was in fact nowhere more evident than in the visible changes that accompanied Khomeini’s Islamist reforms in Iran’s public spaces during the 1980s, in the early years after the Revolution. “Perhaps nothing,” writes sociologist Asef Bayat (2010), “was more jarring than the sudden disappearance of bright colours from public spaces; black and grey, as embodied in women’s *chadors* and men’s facial hair, now dominated the city’s visual landscape” (p. 108). Film theorist Negar Mottahedeh (2008) has described a certain phantasmagoric effect attending the post-revolutionary government’s scopic limitations on vision: “The panoptic enforcement of the rules of clothing through the active engagement of the police force, the school system, the traffic comptrollers, and even undercover agents in bathhouses to monitor compliance, especially with respect to the rule to appear veiled in public places, seems almost surreal”. What we can perceive of the vastly nuanced and complex languages of silence, the non-verbal and non-visible modes of ‘speech’ employed tactically by women over the last forty years of Iranian cultural production, does not seem to completely preclude or negate the fact that:

the visual dimension, despite Islamization, possessed particular power...which matches the power of women’s words and verbal eloquence... As if regulated through a sensitive lens, the women and their actions moved into sharper focus as the research [on the lived experience of women in contemporary Iran, and how they resist the limitations placed upon them] progressed. (Honarbin-Holliday, 2008, p. 5)

Shifting, blurring, and sharpening as contexts and conditions change, the visibility that sanctions and makes audible political speech is itself a perpetual shape-shifter, reconstituting in an endless play of variation and substitution within the rudimentary limitations and regulations imposed by a sensitive lens. From this more entrenched historicist perspective, one can conceive of the distribution of senses as a photographic metaphor; as a lens that responds to and visually abridges multi-sensorial, trans-temporal inputs of information. With this understanding, it now appears as little coincidence that the highly visible daytime street protests of 2009’s revolutionary movement also worked very consciously with the endogenous power of visualized silence, perhaps in response or rejoinder to the highly audible but in-visible corollary of the nighttime rooftop protest [Image 3]. As a BBC correspondent observed of the street protests in Tehran, “the most remarkable thing about this demonstration is the complete silence. The only sound is a certain amount of conversation. There is no shouting, no chanting – just a really dignified silence” (“Reporters’ log: Iran’s upheaval”, 2009).⁸

Rooftop Culture: Limits and Liminals

Prior to Khomeini’s rise to power, in the post-1953 coup, pre-revolutionary era of the 1960s and 1970s, economic growth from oil incomes financed a tremendous upsurge in industrialization projects, public works, and urban development in Iran. Tehran’s population doubled in the ten years between 1965-1975, mostly due to land reform

measures that dissolved traditional feudal powers in the countryside and drew newly displaced rural laborers by the millions in to the city centers, where consumer culture and Western markets were on the exponential rise. With the new influx, Iranian cities became overpopulated, active, and lively spaces where differently classed social groups (comprised mostly of men but diversified somewhat by more secular women) were forced to share a limited urban geography. A kind of street-corner/alleyway sub-culture called *sar-e kouche* formed around the basic activities of socializing, discussing news and politics, and generally passing the time and interacting publicly in the street. After the Islamic Revolution, when Khomeini instated the extremist regime of *velayat-e faqih*, this kind of public circulation and social exchange was lost to “the regimentation of city spaces by *pasdaran* and Khomeinist *hizballahi* vigilantes, who patrolled the streets with clubs and guns to enforce the new moral edicts” of the Islamist state (Bayat, 2010, p. 108).

The public, visible, exterior spaces of the city were virtually transformed into enclosed, ‘interior’ spaces regulated by conservative ideology, and women became the most concretely affected by the imposed behavioral limitations. Consequently, Bayat (2010) remarks, “private spaces and homes became for many the key geographic loci of communication, sociability and recreation” (p. 108). *Sar-e kouche* / “alley culture” gave way to a kind of “rooftop culture”⁹ that still exists in force today. In this early rooftop culture, people – but mostly women – still circulated, but only in spaces relegated to the domestic sphere. Such circulation must be read as a gesture of simultaneous obedience and resistance to the new terms of sociability dictated by the government’s ethos of public surveillance and control.

The female-centric re-occupation of rooftops and domestic interiors has historical precedent in the socialized architecture of the Islamic world, where it has served political as well as informal, convivial functions. In pre-independence Algeria, for example, private domestic interiors became territories of refuge where colonial subjects could convene out of view of the French occupiers patrolling the public streets below. The colonial regime’s inability to fully penetrate the private household frustrated efforts to fully survey and control the colonized, and thus the Algerian house became



Image 2. Shirin Neshat. Feature Film Still *Women Without Men*, 2009. Copyright Shirin Neshat. Courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels.

retooled during the war as a “cell of resistance” (Celik, 2009, p. 155), with the rooftop representing the oppositional “counter-space” (*espace contre*) (Lesbet, 1985, p. 39) to the street below. Moreover, the very fact of the rooftop’s inaccessibility to sight from the vantage point of the street was perhaps the most crucial aspect of its effectiveness as an instrument of colonial resistance in Algiers, given the long-standing dominance of the European socio-political worldview generated by Cartesian ocularcentrism which not only favors vision above the other senses, but directly equates vision with knowledge and knowledge subsequently with power.¹⁰ The Algerian rooftop “also served as a space of knowledge that defined the forms of social exchange and that was transmitted over generations through memory” (Joelle Bahloul as cited in Celik, 2009, p. 135). Such a space of knowledge, carved out in the context of an actual architectural space, is another kind of virtual *espace contre*, based on differently conceived and socially transmitted forms of belonging and representation.

Algeria’s rooftop culture differed crucially from Iran’s in one important architectural feature: the density and proximity of the buildings in Algiers made it possible to actually pass from house to house along the rooftops, de-necessitating any contact, however brief, with the street below. The above-ground, lateral movement from rooftop to rooftop made uniquely possible by Algerian architecture was not replicated in the Pahlavi-era urbanism programs in Tehran in the 1960s and 1970s. This seemingly anecdotal difference may in fact account for a large part of the urban rooftop’s relative success as a revolutionary tool and tactic in colonial Algiers, versus its uncertain and more complicated status in contemporary, post-revolutionary Tehran.¹¹ Because Algeria’s rooftop culture remained both secreted and traversable, it may not have found cause to join the same sonic regime that developed in Tehran’s urban geography.

The rooftop protest, a sonically generated *espace contre* to the visually monitored streets, was first formulated during the 1979 revolution which ended the twenty-six year reign of Mohammad-Reza Shah Pahlavi, a secular-monarchical dictator installed by a British and US-engineered coup d’état in 1953. The 1953 coup, which violently ousted Iran’s democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh, provides



Image 3. “A new form, a new way...” Shirin Neshat. Feature Film Still. *Women Without Men*, 2009. Copyright Shirin Neshat. Courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels.

the historical and political backdrop to Shahrnush Parsipur's 1998 novella *Women Without Men*, a magic-realist drama interweaving the narratives of five Tehrani women, adapted as a feature-length film and multimedia art production in 2009 by Shirin Neshat and Shoja Azari. Neshat, like Parsipur, is an Iranian-born artist exiled from the country due to the contentious political nature of her work. Her extensive oeuvre in film, video, and photography has largely addressed the complex social, cultural, and religious realities of women and the Islamic state, and her specific interpretation of *Women Without Men* stages the 1953 events as a historical allegory of Iran's present-day political situation.¹² In Parsipur's original text, a politically active female character named Munis commits suicide by jumping from a rooftop. Within several hours of her death and subsequent burial, Munis (or her "double", it is unclear in the narration) is rumored by a neighborhood servant girl to be "seen walking along the edge of the roof by night, and opening mosquito nets to gaze impudently upon the people inside" (Parsipur, 1998, p. 39). In this scene, Munis' walking along the rooftop's edge activates the roof as an imagined, liminal space of transgression, in that she is only able to be there in an invented magic-realist scenario as opposed to one determined by historical reality, as in the Algerian context. Here the rooftop represents a metaphorically transitory, but also actual, physical site; an architectural formation between life and death, memory and presence, interior and exterior worlds. Parsipur collapses these realms in a linguistically pared-down, matter-of-fact narrative style in order to demonstrate the incommensurability and absurdity of all these things actually existing alongside one another and at the same time, utilizing a common strategy of magic-realist writing that pairs with the semantic operation of the urban rooftop in Iran as a space of incompatible simultaneities.

Such a co-existence of real and metaphorical spaces of transgression was earlier theorized by Michel Foucault in a mid-career lecture-turned-essay entitled "Of Other Spaces," published posthumously, in which he conceptualized a kind of counter-space he termed the 'heterotopia.' In contrast to utopias and dystopias, which do not exist in actuality but bear a direct cognate relationship to the real space of society, heterotopias are:

real places – places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of



Image 4. "...And in this turbulence and noise, there was almost silence underneath." Shirin Neshat. Feature Film Still. *Women Without Men*, 2009. Copyright Shirin Neshat. Courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels.

society – which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality (Foucault, 1967).

Heterotopias, by Foucault's prescription, are locatable in "probably every culture, in every civilization" in the real world by way of six interconnected principles. The first four principles deal with aspects of the heterotopia's appearance around incidents of social struggle, and their capacity as spaces to index multiple and simultaneous temporalities ("heterochronies"), and their meta-referentiality in relation to both other impossible and actual sites. Heterotopias are "capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible", as when a small parcel of the world becomes symbolic of its entirety. Foucault's illustrative example of this one aspect is, conveniently enough, the traditional Persian garden, and the rest of his text is peppered throughout with case studies of what constitutes heterotopic space in the perceptible world and where they can be found. Thinking through Foucault's criteria simultaneously in terms of the actual space of the rooftop and the representational space of the photograph illuminates the ways in which photography and modern Islamic architecture converge and activate one another, amounting to a specific site of the political within the regime of the sensible. Foucault's heterotopias also operate in a system of conditional opening and closing, becoming alternately penetrable and impenetrable based on culturally determined points of access; as in, for example, women's unique level of access to the Iranian rooftop and the domestic interior, and as in the aperture's conditional opening and closing with regard to changing conditions of atmospheric light.¹³

The film adaptation of Parsipur's novel begins with Munis alone on the rooftop. A female voiceover speaks about a long-awaited silence as Munis jumps (or rather, releases, as per the narration) peacefully to her death [Image 3]. There is no dramatic leap, no conventional act of political martyrdom in the scene, only a tentative embrace of silence through the act of suicide, and a search for what the voiceover calls "a new form, a new way". Versions of this same scene – Munis on the stone-white rooftop cloaked in the black *chador*, her head and hair uncovered and a clear blue sky overhead – are reprised in the middle of the film and once again in the final scene, each time accompanied by a different sub-soundtrack layered behind Munis' voiceover.¹⁴ As the turmoil of the political storyline starts to crescendo throughout the film, culminating in August of 1953 when the Shah's tanks roll through Tehran amid throngs of demonstrating Mosaddegh supporters, the same voiceover remarks: "And in this turbulence and noise, there was almost silence underneath" [Image 4].

The rooftop in *Women Without Men* represents, on the one hand, a limited space, expressed by Munis' suicide as well as what is implied in the act of climbing up to the roof when there is no possibility of going out and away, into the world. This limitation is reinforced in the first repetition of the rooftop suicide scene, which immediately follows a scene in which Munis and her friend Faizeh are forbidden to walk out in public unaccompanied by the man of the house. The roof also functions as a liminal

space in terms of its architectural and social displacement between home and world, private and public, and in its doubled symbolism as both an escape route and a site of death. A heterotopia that repeats, but differently each time, the recurrence of the rooftop becomes sonically malleable to the scene and circumstance in which it occurs.¹⁵ It adheres neither to its own prior or subsequent iterations, nor to the greater world-space of the film as a whole. And it manages to juxtapose in 'real' cinematic time multiple temporal incompatibilities, such as the allusion it makes to the surreal possibility of dying not once, but three times.

By suggesting that "Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time", Rancière (2006, p. 14) imputes that the visual is the a priori order conditioning the possibilities of speech. This is, in one important respect, a radical departure from Habermasian conceptions of the public sphere as a text-based political space that privileges the literate, reading subject, a model itself rife with its own problems and pre-constituted structural hierarchies. But why would Rancière choose to return to the historically predominant visual sphere in order to theorize the constitution of its corollary expressive pair, the "what can be said about it", "the talent to speak"? A paradox: or something that hangs between two registers, one of which defines meaning-making as language (speech proper) and its conditioning prerequisite as visibility. In this seemingly ouroboric re-privileging of visual models within an otherwise radical re-conceptualization of political possibility, is Rancière showing all of his cards? Perhaps not, but neither is Masturzo's camera, Neshat and Parsipur's confabulation of possible and impossible realities, or the complex perceptual situations that both works ultimately aim to show.

It is clear that the issues are potentially manifold when Rancière's formulation of the politics of aesthetics are evaluated against the image of the Iranian rooftop and the (non-)sonic perceptual space it generates. In Rancière's model, the visible precedes and conditions the audible. In making the audible possible, the visual makes the whole of political representation salient. That politics relies on the visual to distribute the audible is substantiated in one way by the photograph as an object, in that it exists as a visual medium first only to ask a series of sonic questions second. At this stage, then, it seems Rancière is right, but only up to a point, since the audible being distributed in this case is apprehended as a muted, closed-off sound. This auditory sphere is closer to silence than speech, and does not fall within the domain of demonstrable language, or "the talent to speak," as Rancière would have it. In Masturzo's photo, the aesthetic muting of the vignette notwithstanding, the shout's very unintelligibility is suspended and held aloft between incongruous registers of representation in several other facets: 1. In the supposed language barrier between the Iranian subjects (shouting in Farsi) and the photographer (an Italian native), in which the codified language of one is literally perceived as noise, not speech, by the other, 2. In the placement of photographer and viewer behind a window, which partially distorts what is visible as well as audible, and 3. In the socialized inbetween-space that is the rooftop in this place and historical context.

The rooftop as a setting featured prominently in the various didactic channels of international news media during the Green Movement protests of 2009, but it remained virtually obstructed as an actionable site in 2009 in its constant, telegraphic

reference to past revolutionary history, as well as its ambiguous visual interface with technologies of contemporary communication.¹⁶ It was in no small part the creative use of late 1970s technology (tape recorders, overseas radio broadcasts, and newspapers) that allowed for the Islamic resistance movement in 1979 to take hold and circumvent Pahlavi authoritarianism in repurposing the tools of the modernist state and turning the “technologies of domination” into “technologies of the self” (Afary, 2005, p. 4, 89). Journalists and cultural critics of the Green Revolution have tended to graft this historical situation on to an incomplete understanding of the influence of Twitter, YouTube, and other social networking platforms on the 2009 Iranian elections, with Twitter receiving the most attention due to an influx of media reports that the site was shut down by Ahmadinejad’s government censors during the height of the protests.¹⁷ Hundreds of videos of rooftop protests were uploaded on YouTube between election night and Ahmadinejad’s re-inauguration date, but this and other social networking activity did not set regime change in motion, as had their technological counterparts in 1979. Moreover, the poor visual legibility of most of these amateur videos, shot at night with cheap consumer-grade cameras and camera phones, reiterated the many disruptions and improvisations of an otherwise “complete” transmission of political organization attending this particular “distribution of the sensible”.¹⁸

One internet video that demonstrates this difference effectively, which has received a substantial but by no means overwhelming number of hits on YouTube,¹⁹ is of a rooftop protest dubbed over with the voice of Hila Sedighi reading a poem about the death of her classmate Neda Agha-Soltan, a young woman who was murdered by a Basij militiaman while observing the protests in Tehran on June 20th [Image 6].²⁰ The video employs two different sources of overlapped sound, and one barely perceptible, jerky, low-resolution and almost completely black image sustained over about two minutes and 26 seconds of unedited nighttime footage. Of the two sound elements, the live rooftop shouts in the distance come across as vitriolic and cathartic but also atmospheric, relegated to the register of background noise, while Sedighi’s voiceover is aurally dominant but cinematically quiet, restrained and mournful. Sedighi eventually begins to weep as she nears the end of the poem, which translates:

Tonight you can hear the sounds of ‘Allahu Akbar’ louder than the nights before. Where is this place? Where is this place which has been closed in from every direction [sic]? Where is this place where people can only cry out to God? [...] Where is this place where nobody remembers us? Where is this place where we only have our own silence from which to raise our voices to the world? [...] Stand on rooftops to pray... Where is this place? Would you like me to tell you? This place is Iran. This place is my birthplace and yours. This place is Iran.

Contrary to Rancière’s formulation, this imperceptible image does not constitute a lack of representation. It does not indicate a failure to distribute, but rather constitutes a charged political utterance of its own accord. How exactly does this realization complicate Rancière’s still-compelling model, especially considering the fact that we are, at the end of the day, dealing with photographic media and with visual objects? In one sense, we have arrived back at the primacy of the visible, but now with an exploded and expanded concept of how visibility may be politically enacted in situations of limited visual transmission. Rancière presupposes that representation is

formulated only in that which is resolutely seen and heard, which is enacted outright, which is clearly demonstrable and undistorted. In *Dis-agreement*, he writes: “But the point is that the demonstration proper to politics is always both argument and opening up the world where argument can be received and have an impact – argument about the very existence of such a world” (Rancière, 1999, p. 56). Here, on the one hand, is a potential space carved out in the act of questioning the very structures that make visible (and hence feasible) the world of political possibility. Hila’s repetition of the line “Where is this place?” and its coda, “Would you like me to tell you?” also serves as an implicit questioning and re-opening of these same structures. But it turns out that it is only by way of the seemingly iconic, large-scale, visible event, the absolutely represented political action – a form that adheres to and resembles if not mimics, the *demonstrable norms of existent political power* – that this redistributive property can be opened up and potentially refashioned. Rancière continues: “Politics exists wherever the count of parts and parties of society is disturbed by the inscription of a part of those who have no part... Politics exists as long as the singular forms of subjectification *repeat the forms of the original inscription* of the identity between the whole of the community and the nothing that separates it from itself” (Rancière, 1999, p. 126, italics mine). In other words, he is here suggesting that while the demonstrable norms of existent political power by those who have no part allows for the reassembly of political formation, it still falls short of ‘politics’ as long as the aspirations of the minor subjects (those who have no part) are not visible in the very terms set by the major regime, or its demonstrable norms. Where they are not, the political as such does not properly exist. In this prescriptive, there is no accounting for the dissidence and ambivalence of photographic vision, the non-aspirational subject as a legitimate agent, the language of silence as an expressive tool, or the willful exit from any dominant sphere of representation as aspirations that, unto themselves, might also comprise forms of political action. Reading affectively silent pictures such as Masturzo’s therefore requires a model of photography that locates its politics not in the aspirational mimicry or demonstrability of the vociferous shout, but rather in the failure of the image to register as audible on the same set of terms as the dominant forms of political representation.

Still, what is the nature and the result of our (and Rancière’s) seemingly tautological return to pictures, and to the visual, as the thing to which political representation ultimately adheres? For better or worse, and for all the photographic situations that push and complicate various synesthetic divisions, might we be wiser to accept the reality of what the widely circulated photographic image as a contemporary social text represents? The reality of the photograph now, as Robert Harriman and John Lucaites (2007) insist, “confirm[s], alters and enhances an old truth: public culture is a visual culture.” (pp. 294-295, italics mine). Like prior Habermasian models, against which resolutely visual arguments are progressively positioned, the valorization of the visual and the representational models it authorizes delimits a certain framework around a conception of the public. A “frame that blinds”, to borrow a syllepsis from Judith Butler, visual primacy constructs a kind of vignette around political possibility. Yet it also attests to the idea that “public life is a way of seeing” (Lucaites, 2007, p. 302) which does not foreclose potential other ways of seeing or apprehending cultural, social, and political information through non-dominant visual means. The interpretational recovery of what is lacking or foreclosed in a visual representation

might in fact reveal its greatest area of significance, especially given the context and framework of the specific historical and political moment from which it arrives. I link this idea of mobilizing lack in the service of representational possibility to a more fundamental interrogation of photography's communicative social value. This will address the question of what a photograph might be equipped to 'say' in the absence of political speech proper. The quietude of the single-frame photograph, its frozen, *tableau vivant* suspension of the moving, multi-sensorial world, bears consequences in terms of what it alternately makes audible or points to as inaudible, with the latter sometimes being the louder. Silence can be deafening; and in the cases of Masturzo's photograph and Neshat's film, what silence helps us to do is visually mediate various sensory publics in order to reintroduce (or refuse) the dominant ordering and perception of disembodied sensorial circulations within a larger conceptualization of political space.

'Louder than the Nights Before' or How to Fail Better

The white garment and black *hijab* of the shouting woman on the rooftop in Masturzo's photograph indicate a likely generational split with the other two figures pictured there.²¹ Most elder women in Iran still wear the full black *chador*, whereas younger and more urbane women dress in variants of the traditional black. Though the *chador's* cultural origin is in the urban middle class, today it is mostly associated with poorer, more conservative women and with the grandmotherly generation of the middle class. The woman in white, our auditory protagonist thus far, may be the daughter or a younger relative of the *chadori* seated behind her, whose composure and posture is more difficult to read. Slumped slightly in her seat but remaining alert, her face is directed up and outward, pointed toward the city. Her arms, pulled in toward her body, are heavy and still on her knees. Is she bored? Tired? Wary? Overwhelmed?

As the nightly rooftop protests begin to take their toll, exhaustion – maybe protest fatigue – slips in to the image by way of the seated *chadori* figure, the assumed representative of multiple generations and iterations of revolutions lived and lost to history. Her voice fades and retreats, whether by continuous and prolonged strain, or by the dilution of urgency that accompanies one too many years of unrequited struggle. The presence of several historical generations here secures the insecure place of photography as an unresolved, intermittently effective tool of political representation. Rather than chiding its insufficiencies or lack of iconic coherence, making of it a latter-generation straw man to beat against for its failure to illustrate or solidify the context of the news, the World Press Photo judges with whom we began seem to have understood wisely that Masturzo's photograph works precisely because it fails. Enconced within a medium so typically understood in terms of its successes to show everything, this is no small claim. An image that indeed makes you "think more", about failure and about the many valences the word takes on in circumstances of dissent from the status quo, it squarely refuses to show us "what we already know". What we already know about the events of 2009 comprises many failures: First, the Green Movement's short-lived presence in the news cycle and its failure to resonate in the long-term public conception as a revolution proper. Second, the failure of the collective protest effort to re-route Ahmedinejad from regaining his seat in the government. Third, the limited understanding of the Green Movement as the failed Arab Spring initiative.

By definition, 'failure' implies a dichotomous pairing with 'success', a simplistic

framework in which far too many complex contemporary political struggles find no essential coherence. The medium of photography and its incomplete reckoning with its own promise of transparency troubles our eyes with the proposition that “perhaps transparency is an illusion that refuses to be called what it is. “Perhaps”, wrote a critic of Shahrnush Parsipur, “speculating on the work of Iranian women authors of fiction in the early 1990s but simultaneously opening up, through such contextual specificity, a world of intervention spanning more than a century of political struggle, “there is always yet another layer of walls and veils to rend” (Ibid., xv.). The silence of photography, the aural and optic closures it portends, should compel us to listen for those layers; to learn how to see and hear beyond pre-constituted obstructions; to fail better.

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ENDNOTES

1. As one of many potential points of comparison, widely circulated press photos of the recent revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt and Bahrain are overwhelmingly ‘loud,’ as per photojournalistic conventions of protest imagery in the contemporary news media. The irate, shouting protester - shot at close range, fist raised, body tensed and angled energetically forward – can practically be heard yelling in opposition. There are innumerable examples, both historical and current, of this kind of ‘noisy’ photojournalistic image of popular dissent.
2. The primacy of the visual and its relationship to power, and hence political arrangements, has been a persistent preoccupation in human political culture and philosophy from Plato to the present. According to Martin Jay, “even in its negative guises [as in destructive capacities of ‘the evil eye,’ the annihilation wrought by vision in the Medusa, Orpheus and Narcissus myths], its [read: vision’s] power was evident. Indeed, it might be argued that the very ambiguities that we’ve noted in Plato’s thought were instrumental in elevating the status of the visual”. The status of the visual is also essentially political in that it determines what is or is not literally visible in a commonly inhabited space. Following this, Jacques Rancière (by way of Kant and Foucault) has argued that aesthetics – not just vision – is at the base of politics, in that aesthetics comprises historic “regimes of visibility” rather than just a set of particular artistic modes. For Rancière, aesthetics predetermines the sensible by establishing the a priori forms that determine what things present themselves to common sense experience. For more extensive discussions and analyses on these propositions, see Jay, M. (1994). *Downcast eyes: The denigration of vision in twentieth-century French thought*. Berkeley: University of California Press, and Rancière, J. (2006).
3. “‘Speaking out’ is not awareness and expression of a self-asserting what belongs to it. It is the occupation of space in which the logos defines a nature other than the phônè” (Rancière, 2006, p. 37). In other words, noise is not recognized as a political expression or political speech unless it occurs from a particularly sanctioned space in the visual field.
4. *Hijab* refers to both the traditional head covering worn by Muslim women as well as the Islamic code of modest, conservative dress in general. The *chador* is the Persian version of the full-body covering, a loose garment or cloak that is usually black and is worn most commonly by conservative, older, rural, and *shi’a* women. The *chador* and all iterations of the *hijab* were banned by the secular government of Reza Shah in 1936 when it was deemed incompatible with the ambitions of the state’s modernization program. After the revolution in 1979, the Islamic government made wearing the *hijab* mandatory in public. Today, Iranian women are not required to wear the *chador*, but many still do. The *hijab* is still technically required, though the rules and their enforcement have loosened.
5. Tual’s analysis of silence and speech unpacks the ambiguity of the Farsi word *javâb*, which alternately means both reply and refusal: “Refusal is always difficult to express for an Iranian; sometimes it is even impossible, and one finds substitutes, equally indicative, like silence.” (Tual, 1986, p. 60)
6. Talinn Grigor (2006) argues that the choice to either wear the veil or to “dress secular” each comprise feminist gestures, in that they both convey insolence toward the representational system(s) governing the norms of female visibility in Iran (p. 55).
7. “By wearing the badge of purity”, writes Nesta Ramazani (1993), an independent writer and frequent lecturer on the topic of women in Islamic culture, “women can move about freely. By wearing the badge of modesty, they may fight for

women's rights. By wearing the badge of moral rectitude, women compel the state to back up its claims to the equality of men and women within Islam" (p. 424).

8. Videos of the silent street protests in Tehran, where participants were frequently masked or muffled and carrying signs verbally indicating their dissent, are also widely available on YouTube.

9. The term "rooftop culture" was first used to my knowledge by Kevan Harris, Ph.D., in a personal communication, February 6, 2011.

10. Martin Jay and Michel Foucault, among other scholars, have both offered extensive analyses on Cartesian ocularcentrism's relationship to political power and social space.

11. Also, according to Harris, "people tend to use their roofs for things like laundry, etc., and so one is always worried that someone else is looking at you up there – ogling." Hence the Iranian rooftop is not an entirely female-centric, inaccessible counter-space mirroring the street, like in Algeria, but, more of an inbetween space straddling the domestic interior (which is largely female-dominated) and the outside (male-dominated). (Harris, personal communication, February 6, 2011.)

12. Neshat dedicated the film "to the memory of those who lost their lives in the struggle for freedom and democracy in Iran – from the Constitutional Revolution of 1906 to the Green Movement of 2009".

13. Foucault's fifth principle of heterotopias: "Heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable. In general, the heterotopic site is not freely accessible like a public place. Either the entry is compulsory, as in the case of entering a barracks or a prison, or else the individual has to submit to rites and purifications. To get in one must have a certain permission and make certain gestures" (p. 26).

14. The background soundtrack to the voiceover during these three different reprisals consists of: 1) the call to prayer over a loudspeaker, which is then cut off suddenly and followed by complete silence, 2) street protests in the distance, and 3) a few steady, elongated musical tones, reminiscent of a digitally slowed, single violin note.

15. Foucault (1967): "society, as its history unfolds, can make an existing heterotopia function in a very different fashion; for each heterotopia has a precise and determined function within a society and the same heterotopia can, according to the synchrony of the culture in which it occurs, have one function or another".

16. A tradition of historical meta-referencing in public demonstrations by Iranian women predates the rooftop protest, as Vanessa Martin (n.d.) shows in her discussion of 19th century protests as allusions to 17th century ta'ziyya passion plays. Like the relationship between the rooftop demonstrations of 1979 and 2009, one iteration was not a direct extension or reprisal of the other, but rather "part of a development that [gave] political expression a new form" (p. 61).

17. See for example, Ramin Admadi (2009), and Elisabeth Mahoney (2010). It remains unclear whether Twitter was interrupted by government intervention or whether it crashed as a result of so many people trying to access the site simultaneously. For more information, see "Iran Elections: A Twitter Revolution?" (2009).

18. Criticizing Slavoj Žižek's hasty comparison of the 2009 protests to 1979 as a Freudian 'return of the repressed' of the old Khomeinist fervor, Hamid Dabashi (2009) counters: "But whence and how the assumption of a retrograde, nostalgic return to the fetal position of the nascent revolution? Shouldn't in fact 'the improvised forms of protest' (a very apt description) alert the philosopher [read: Žižek] that we have had, perhaps, a massive generational shift, an epistemic shift even (occasioned by the narrative exhaustion of ideological legacies, exacerbated by the internet, computer literacy, and cyberspace social networking) after which there is no illegal/illogical U-Turn?...No, sir! If anything, they were (all the indications suggested that they were) sick and tired of that revolutionary zeal and political animus, and were in fact holding their parents responsible for the calamity they had found themselves in, hanging over their heads the banality of the idea of an Islamic republic, or even worse a Velayat-e Faqih".

19. 166,408 hits as of 7 March, 2011.

20. Neda's death was caught on video by a cell phone camera, uploaded onto YouTube and seen around the world within a matter of hours. Her bloodied, lifeless face has become perhaps the most iconic image associated with the election scandals, and her death "probably the most widely witnessed death in human history". The sheer coincidence that Nedā means "the voice" or "the call" in Farsi should not go unmentioned, either (Krista Mahr, n.d.).

21. My thanks to Kevan Harris for his observations on the visible generational discrepancy between the figures, without which I would not have made these interpretations.

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Car Flirting and Morality Cruising: Neurotic Gazes and Paranoid Glances in Contemporary Iranian Art

Sara Mameni

Abstract

Iran's public sphere has been segregated along gender lines since the Islamic Revolution in 1979 and is regularly policed by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. This article considers the ways in which the resulting homosocial spaces appear in the works of contemporary artists working in Tehran. Looking at video and photographic works by three Iranian artists, I argue that contemporary art is hyper aware of being under surveillance and addresses itself to multiple viewers. I bring queer viewing strategies as a method of viewing these artworks in order to point to the continuum between homosocial and homoerotic spaces that permeate contemporary Iranian art.

Keywords: Photography, gender, Iran, the gaze.

Double-blind peer-reviewed article

Neurotic Gazes

On her visit to Iran in January 2007, the German-based Iranian artist Anahita Razmi attempted to film a group of revolutionary guards on the streets of Tehran. Noticing her camera, the guards asked her to follow them to their headquarters where they erased her footage by pointing her camera at a white wall. Razmi has presented this incidence in her short video titled "White Wall Tehran" (Image.1), which shows nothing other than 27 seconds of a blank wall recorded by one of the guards inside their headquarters. The camera held by the guard in Razmi's video does not pan away from the white wall. It remains fixed on faint shadows that move across its surface. Yet the



Image 1. Anahita Razmi, White Wall Tehran, 2007. Image Courtesy of the artist and Carbon 12.

ambient noise accompanying the image allows for an invisible room to emerge around the lens. We hear muffled sounds of a radio bouncing off the white wall and can decipher the abstract sounds of some objects brushing against other objects. Is someone stirring a drink? Is the faint melody coming from the radio? Is someone typing? Can I distinguish the voices I hear from one another? None of this is clear. Yet there is a distinct sense of place, an invisible room, projected across the blank wall that pushes flat against the lens of the camera.

On Tehran's streets the guards' presence is meant to be known as they patrol the roads but they are not themselves the subjects of surveillance. Razmi's camera, which had attempted to turn the observers into the observed, was guilty of disturbing the balance of power tied to visibility, thus landing her at the headquarters. In Razmi's video, Tehran's revolutionary guards cannot be seen but appear, incidentally, around the blocked view of her lens. Even though there are no visible bodies left on this footage they remain engraved within the video through their muffled voices and the odd sounds that result from their movements around the room. More importantly for my discussion here, the guards are present in the video through the gaze of one of them holding the camera. By presenting the footage as an artwork, Razmi attends to these unintended residues left on her footage. Rather than discarding the erased footage, she presents the white wall, the ambient noise within the room, and the very gaze of the guard holding the camera for 27 seconds, as the subject of her work.

In my reading of "White Wall Tehran", the gaze of the guard announces the presence of a viewer within the structure of the video. While at the initial level this gaze belongs only to the guard who filmed the footage, at the level of reception this gaze can continually be dislocated as each new viewer takes a position in front of the artwork. The repeated semantic shift from erasure to art, anytime someone watches the video, undercuts the power of the guard over the work's meaning. The guard may have controlled the form and content of the image, but its meaning is reserved and deferred until it is produced anew at the level of the viewer. Hence, Razmi's video flips the intended meaning of the white wall against itself. As an artwork the white wall is not a blockage as the guard saw it, but a screen across which other viewing practices can become activated. "White Wall Tehran" therefore makes the gaze of the guard available in order to marginalize it. When viewed as an artwork, the guard's gaze is repeatedly displaced and replaced by multiple audiences, whose very act of watching the video disallows the footage from becoming an erasure. In this way, Razmi breaks down the power of the guard over her footage and shifts the viewer's attention to the very existence of that power.

In this paper I employ "White Wall Tehran" as my theoretical base for analyzing two other artworks made by artists in Tehran. These consist of a photographic series titled "Girls in Cars" by Shirin Aliabadi (Image 2), and a short video titled "Line 1" by Niyaz Azadikhah (Image 3). Approaching these two other artworks through Razmi's lens, I argue that each of these artists incorporates the gaze of Tehran's guards within the structure of their artworks. Furthermore, I point to this gaze in the composition of each work in order to dislocate it and allow other simultaneous viewers to appear around its peripheral vision. When studying these works I note that being seen (rather than depicting) seems to be the aesthetic logic according to which these images are composed. Following this visual cue, I place the question of who is looking, rather than what is seen, at the center of my discussion. I argue that if Tehran's guards are the haunting gaze hovering over these images, other viewers must also be accounted for within their composition. My reading therefore argues for the polysemic structure of these artworks which, I believe, incorporate and address multiple and simultaneous spectators.

In order to make my own viewing position more explicit, in this paper I append the theory drawn from Razmi's video with queer viewing practices elaborated upon in

scholarly works by Afsaneh Najmabadi, Roshanak Kheshti, Nima Naghibi and Gayatri Gopinath. The term “queer” here is not equivalent to LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender) identity politics which replicate imperial narratives by making diverse sexualities adhere to Euro-American models.¹ Casting Iranian sexuality in a Western mold has had a long and complex history in modern Iran. As several studies by Iranian feminist scholars have shown, Iranian modernity (tied to the Constitutional Revolution of 1907 and democratic reforms in the first decade of the 20th century) has expressed itself through a transformation of gender relations and sexual practices according to prolonged conflicts and negotiations with the neighboring Ottoman Empire, Russia, and Western Europe (Afary, 2009, p. 9). Altered institutional practices occurring at the turn of the twentieth century, which included the dismantling of harems, the unveiling of women, and the promotion of heterosocial public spaces, meant a radical shift affecting class and gender alignments. Same-sex relations were amongst those forms of sociability that came under scrutiny in modern Iran. According to Afsaneh Najmabadi, Iranians began to “explain to European visitors that at least some of the practices that the latter read as homosexuality, such as men holding hands, embracing, and kissing each other in public were not so” (Najmabadi, 2005, p. 38). Iranians thus began to demarcate, distinguish, and separate homosexuality (in European terms) from homosocial relations, which resulted in the construction of homosexuality as a distinct category of deviant behavior in need of rigorous policing. The disavowal of homosexuality persisting in Iran today, expressed in the form of compulsory heterosexuality, is thus inherited from imperial interests in the region despite the Islamic Revolution’s attempt at dismantling all Western cultural practices. Repression of homosexuality in contemporary Iran can hence be understood as a residual practice linked to the adoption of European models of sexuality at the turn of the 20th century, which were deemed necessary for Iran’s global recognition as a modern nation-state.

My adoption of a queer viewing practice when looking at Iranian art does not attempt to replicate these imperial narratives by once again framing contemporary Iranian sexuality as the deviant Other, this time paradoxically as the homophobe par excellence pitched against American homonationalism. As Jasbir Puar (2007) has effectively shown, “the frenzied fixation on the homophobia of Iran’s state regime”, feeds into the same anxieties that “fuel the war on terror and the political forces pushing for an Iranian invasion” and calls for military strikes justified by Islamophobic rhetorics (p. xi). Rather, I see the potential of queer viewing in its ability to unsettle these very power structures established due to economic and political interests within the region. The question to pose here is how such a queer viewing can be activated. In other words, how can queer viewing avoid restructuring Iranian sexuality according to Euro-American models and be brought to dismantle this very power structure that has left its hegemonic mark on contemporary practices?

In order to answer this question, I want to turn to Rey Chow’s proposed framework for studying what she calls “post-European” artistic and cultural productions. For Chow (2006), post-European countries live in the aftermath of an “encounter” with the West that is not merely a “meeting, contact or conversation but specifically an encounter with that which is deemed culturally superior” (p. 82). Therefore, for Chow (2006), post-European countries experience the West less as a spatial relationship chartable on a map, but “much more as a memory, a cluster of lingering ideological and emotional

effects” that leave their marks in these countries’ cultural productions (p. 89). I find Chow’s concept of “post-European” more suitable than that of “Postcolonial” for designating Iran’s contemporary relationship to the West. This is because, while Iran has never been colonized, it has been brought into the sphere of the world-system as the supplier of raw materials since the turn of the twentieth century and has pitched its own struggle against imperial hegemony, most recently in the form of the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Within the art and literature of post-European countries, according to Chow, we can find the “imprints of fraught and prevalent relation of comparison and judgment” in which Europe haunts it as the referent of supremacy (Chow, 2006, p. 89). When studying post-European artworks therefore the question to be asked is: how has the internalized West left its residual imprint? According to Chow (2006), a post-European culture “needs to be recognized as always operating biculturally or multiculturally even when it appears predominantly preoccupied with itself” (p. 85). The West therefore can be traced within these artworks as the always already present element with which suppressed histories and practices compete. Thus, when looking at post-European artworks we find cultural narratives that hold on to persisting European ideologies while inhibiting and excluding coexisting histories.

The implication of Chow’s theory for queer viewing of Iranian art is that it allows us to look at “lingering” emotional and ideological impacts of European hegemony within Iran and the ways in which these effects are grappled with in artistic production. As mentioned above, one such “lingering” ideology in contemporary Iran is compulsory heterosexuality which stems specifically from the suppression of alternative sexual practices that were deemed inferior to European sexuality and were thus rendered and policed as deviant. The superiority of the West is hence experienced in contemporary Iran as heteronormativity within which other suppressed forms of gender and sexual expressions exist. In the works discussed here, I point to these foreclosed sexualities which appear in the peripheries of seemingly heteronormative structures within each image. My queer viewing therefore looks to moments when strictly heterosexual representations bear imprints of historical and hegemonic exclusions. Such a viewing method is in direct contrast to those methods that search for visible “gay” lifestyles in Iran, a practice which confirms Euro-American identities as the “grid of intelligibility to which may be added more and more others” (Chow, 2006, p. 89).

I began this section with Razmi’s “White Wall Tehran” in order to supplement my queer viewing with the gaze of the guard incorporated within her video. The supplementary addition that I propose here does not simply add “more and more” queer others to discourses of the center. Rather, the addition of the gaze of a guard to my queer viewing is better understood as a “neurotic” supplement, to borrow Chow’s terminology once again (Chow, 2006, p. 89). For Chow, a “neurotic” supplement is an involuntary attachment. It is an unintentional reflex, or an automatic addition that cannot help but to be there. When describing post-European cultures, Chow sees Europe as the “neurotic” supplement that is always already present within the consciousness and memory of that culture manifesting itself within its cultural production. It is for this reason that post-European cultures are inherently multicultural because there is always an internalized Europe with which they have to contend. In psychoanalytic terms, neurosis is “caused by blocking abnormal sexual feelings including queer feelings towards the same sex” (Ahmad, 2006, p. 78). As a result, according to Sara Ahmad,

“the achievement of heterosexuality is often at the cost of neurosis” (Ahmad, 2006, p. 78). Neurosis as compulsive heterosexuality is precisely why the gaze of the guard is a necessary supplement for looking at Iranian art queerly. The gaze of the guard is the heteronormative fixation that blocks and suppresses aberrant practices. In other words, I add the gaze of the guard to my queer viewing because it is the neurotic, unavoidable, and prevalent gaze of heteronormativity that has to be confronted in the structure of the images I discuss here before other viewing practices can occur. The gaze of the guard is the lingering disciplinary and ideological gaze of compulsive heterosexuality, inherited from Euro-American sexual models in Iran that appear repeatedly in contemporary artistic productions. This gaze should be added to any queer viewing of Iranian art since it is the “lingering” and involuntary supplement enunciating these images and which signal historical absences and exclusions. The methodology adopted here therefore does not look for visible bodies that can fit queerness but to those structural residues that keep such bodies invisible.

The following section brings this theoretical perspective to the study of two other artworks set in Tehran’s public sphere. First, I consider the photographic series titled “Girls in Cars” by Shirin Aliabadi. This series presents snapshot photographs of groups



Image 2a. Shirin Aliabadi, *Girls in Cars 1*, 2005. Image courtesy of the artist and Third Line Gallery.



Image 2b. Shirin Aliabadi, *Girls in Cars 2*, 2005. Image courtesy of the artist and Third Line Gallery.



Image 2c. Shirin Aliabadi, *Girls in Cars 3*, 2005. Image courtesy of the artist and Third Line Gallery.



Image 2d. Shirin Aliabadi, *Girls in Cars 4*, 2005. Image courtesy of the artist and Third Line Gallery.

of women driving around the streets of Tehran. I begin my discussion with this series in order to set the stage for the politics of visibility in Iran's urban centers and to set up the terms of my argument around queer viewing. I follow this discussion with Niyaz Azadikhah's video titled "Line 1". Staged in Tehran's metro Line 1, this animated short focuses on the women's cabin in the underground metro. In her video, faceless women appear in their mandatory *hijab* (veils or scarves) inside the metro but their hand movements place the occupants in erotic relationships to one another.

Paranoid Glances

In her photographic series titled "Girls in Cars" from 2005 (Image 2), Shirin Aliabadi presents the viewer with closely cropped images of several cars occupied by groups of women. The street lights reflected onto the shiny surfaces of the vehicles in each image and the walls of the highway visible in some of the photographs place these women on the road and the photographer in another car chasing and maneuvering close to their vehicles. The snapshot quality of these photographs expresses a hurried encounter between the artist and the women in these cars. Composed in a hasty manner, chopping and cropping at the rapid rate of the camera's point-and-click, these images document the photographer's pursuit and provide the viewer with a cursory glance into each vehicle through the side windows. The photographer seems to have caught up with each car to take a picture of these women as she was driving by.

If the snapshot quality of these photographs points to a particular manner of encounter between the women and the photographer, it is the women's glances and expressions that pull us, the viewers, into the structure of each image. As the women look back at us through the frame of each photograph with a mixture of curiosity, suspicion, or disinterest, our presence is confirmed alongside each vehicle. We, as viewers, are called into being each time our gaze is returned by one of these women and a play of glances is activated between us and the cars' occupants. These photographs thus herald the viewer within their composition carving a space for us in a car adjacent to those captured within their frames. As mentioned in the previous section, the artworks I study in this paper are all hyper aware of being seen and point to this condition by building their viewers consciously into their compositions. The question I am concerned with here is: who is watching? Basing my interpretation on the framework described earlier, I read the visible elements of this photographic series against its unseen peripheral vision.

In order to provide a context for Aliabadi's images, it is necessary to briefly outline the codes of visibility regulating Iran's urban centers where the artist took her photographs. Since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Iran's public sphere has been strictly divided along the lines of gender and rigorously policed by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance armed by the revolutionary guards. Controlling gender identities is among the ministry's primary tasks, enacted in public spaces by the Morality Guidance police who patrol the streets looking for behaviors that breach legal gender codes and for women who are not properly veiled (*bad-hejabi*) (Afary, 2009, pp. 265-270). The focus of the morality police is on restricting contact in public spaces between strangers of the opposite sex through the promotion of homosocial spaces that limit and regulate women's presence in and navigation of the city, marked as the domain of male, heterosexual sociability. Patrolling the streets in their own cars, the morality police (known in Farsi as *gasht-e ershad*, which is better translated as morality cruisers) drive

up and down popular spots, particularly those favored and frequented by young people, watching for signs of unorthodox behavior. Depending on the political mood of the day (which can fluctuate on a weekly basis) the guards may either turn a blind eye to the desiring youth roaming the streets, or rip into the streets arresting them in groups for their inappropriate clothes, trendy haircuts or flirtatious glances. No degree of harsh measures, however, seems to keep away the people, who frequent the street and cause dense traffic jams late into the night.

The mandatory veiling of women in Iran's public spaces, legally enforced in 1983, argued for a "return" to female chastity that had been sullied by the Pahlavi state's "westoxification" and its compulsory unveiling of women in 1936 (Afary, 2009, p. 369). The "invisible shield" of morality that had protected women's unveiled bodies prior to the Islamic Revolution was deemed insufficient and had to become reinforced through a visible protective veil. The contemporary practice of veiling in Iran thus imagines public spaces as the domain of male heterosexual activity and works to curb covetous impulses by shielding their assumed object of desire. Veiling after 1983 therefore did not have the same meaning as it did in pre-modern Iran. During the Islamic Revolution, middle class women (who had become unveiled) took on the veil in solidarity with working class women and in opposition to the Western cultural hegemony enforced under the Shah (Mohanty, 1998, pp. 333-358). Thus the veil took on an oppositional and political importance in Iran for a brief period of time. After the revolution, however, the veil was imposed by the newly instituted Islamic Republic and monitored on the streets by the morality police who suppressed women's demonstrations against compulsory veiling. Urban centers in contemporary Iran have since become sites of continuous contestation between female morality police officers who take on the veil in support of the regime and badly-veiled women who oppose its imposition and show their resistance by pushing the limits of the dress code (Naghibi, 2007, pp. 68-73).

The girls captured in Aliabadi's photographs fall into the category of badly-veiled women. Their loosely thrown shawls, framing their styled hair and make-up, make these women susceptible to being stopped by the morality police. In my reading the raised hand of one of the girls in the backseat of the black car indicates the possible presence of a morality police (Image 2c). Resting just above her forehead, her hand has the familiar motion of reaching for the slippery headscarf that has slid across the crown of her head and onto her ponytail. Her raised hand in this image signals Iranian women's chronic panic, their fear of getting caught unveiled while navigating public spaces. Here I am not suggesting that the morality police is necessarily present in these photographs chasing after the girls' cars (although this is always a possibility), but that the very likelihood of their appearance just around the corner functions as an internalized regulatory force that has women compulsively pulling their scarves down onto their faces as they move around the city. The pervasive gaze of the guards therefore creates an internalized, paranoid atmosphere that punctuates the lives of men and women in Iran's urban centers. As mentioned earlier however, the presence of the guard's gaze within the structure of Aliabadi's photographs signals the incorporation of other viewers within these images to which I want to turn here.

It is important to note that the state-imposed, mandatory veiling of women that turns Iran's public sphere into homosocial spaces organized around the roaming gaze of

male heterosexual desire is not static but is continuously manipulated and subverted by people on the street. Those donning the veil, for instance, have a great deal of control over how the field of vision is arranged around them.² Not only does the veil allow a level of anonymity and navigational advantage in public spaces (lending itself with ease to gender crossing), it can also be “fanned open and or closed at strategic moments to lure or to mask, to reveal or to conceal the face, the body or the clothing underneath” (Naficy, 1994, p. 137). The field of vision organized by the veil therefore is not “a panoptic vision in the manner Foucault describes because it is not unidirectional or in the possession of only one side” (Naficy, 1994, p. 138). Rather, it can be pictured as a space activated by a play of glances. “Historically there has been tension,” writes Shahla Haeri (2009), “between the legal discourse that restricts gender relations and regulates the gaze (*ahkam-i nigah*), and the erotic discourse that subverts the very same regulations by encouraging the opposite, the culturally meaningful play of glances (*nazar bazi*)” (p. 114). This sway over how much is disclosed and what remains concealed through the play of glances mobilizes eroticism on the streets of Tehran in ways that exceed the control of the morality police and its heterosexual order.

In this sense, the girls in Aliabadi’s photographs can be read as working around the disciplinary gaze of the morality police. The suspicious blank looks on the faces of some of the girls are turned into enticing glances and luring smiles in others who have caught the eyes of a different viewer. The hand motion pulling up the scarf mentioned earlier can suddenly be read as pushing off the scarf with the same gesture. From this perspective, it may be possible to read these images in relation to Tehran’s car-flirting culture,³ which in some ways is in direct response to patrolling methods used by the police. In a city where open erotic sociability amongst unrelated people of the opposite gender is prohibited in public spaces, cars allow for a degree of privacy and



Image 3. Niyaz Azadikhah, “Line 1”, 2010.

partial invisibility under direct police surveillance. Cars on Tehran's busy streets enable smoother maneuvering and ensure that cruising spots are not easily locatable on a specific street or a marked location. Due to the fact that meeting spots such as bars and nightclubs have been outlawed since the Revolution, public rendezvous take on more creative forms. Meeting spots in public are thus deliberately elusive, temporary and transient, with cars acting as charged markers for erotic possibilities. Could it be therefore, that these women in Aliabadi's photographs are out cruising the city hoping to get a glance, a smile, or a phone number?

One possible viewer whose approach might have activated the playful glances in some of the women in these cars is of course that of the photographer herself. One might suggest that the photographer's pursuit and the flash of her camera is precisely what has occasioned the amusement of the smiling women. From this perspective, the erotic drive of the photographer herself is what has made these photographs possible. As a female photographer, her pursuit of a car occupied by other women remains covert and can go unregistered under the pervasive gaze of the morality police. She can follow these women around the streets and take their photographs because her act is not perceived as erotically motivated and therefore falls outside of the regulatory codes of the police. The guards' heterosexual preoccupation therefore does not manage to regulate homoerotic relations within homosocial settings such as those depicted in these photographs.

Before considering Aliabadi's photographs further, I want to bring into play another artwork by an artist working in Tehran in order to highlight the continuity between homoerotic and homosocial spaces within artistic representations in contemporary Iranian art. In her short video titled "Line 1" (Image 3), the artist Niyaz Azadikhah depicts a scene inside Tehran's metro. Her animation brings the viewer into the all-women's car of the Tehran metro Line 1. Similar to Tehran's buses and some taxis, the metro system has sections that are strictly reserved for women. It is not mandatory that women utilize these segregated sections, but it is the recommended mode of transportation for those choosing to take public transit. As seen in the still shot from Azadikhah's video, these spaces are also lucrative areas of business for peddlers who present their wares to the thousands that pass through Tehran's metro on a daily basis. In Azadikhah's video, the peddler is shown seated on the ground between rows of female passengers. In front of her is a large, open sack filled with women's undergarments, which she pulls out one by one through the course of the animation. The woman removes bras and underwear from her bag to show to the customer standing in front of her. As she holds up each colorful item in front of her shapeless black body, she runs her fingers across each article's lacy contours, signaling the shape of her own body resting underneath her veil.

The most striking aspect of this animation is that the peddler is not the only figure brushing her hands across her body. Rather, her moving fingers are echoed throughout the car by other passengers who also caress various parts of their bodies in repetitive motions. Seemingly warranted by the titillating performance of the peddler in front of them, the passengers' gestures watching the central activity become responses to each other and begin to transform from bored, restless ticks to synchronized movements in tandem with the bodies of their female companions. As the video loops, the only action

that takes place in this silent animation is the back-and-forth play of the passengers' hands caressing their legs and chests. In fact, apart from the sharp colors of the bras that the peddler holds up across her breasts, the only other element that grabs the viewer's attention are the large, wandering hands of the female occupants moving rhythmically to the vibrating pulse of Tehran's metro.

As with Aliabadi's photographs above, I want to suggest that Azadikhah's animation addresses itself to multiple and simultaneous viewers. When discussing Aliabadi's photographs, I argued that the position of the girls' cars within the urban center signals the presence of Tehran's morality police, whose point of view is neurotically present within the structure of each image. The gaze of the guard, I further argued, is simultaneously displaced as the girls are caught in flirtatious (if still paranoid) exchange of glances with each other and the female photographer looking back at them. Azadikhah's animation, similarly placed in a public female homosocial space, is fully aware of being watched. The composition of this video opens the metro up to the viewer presenting a mundane, everyday scene. The neon light of the metro, so aptly expressed in the flat colors of Azadikhah's animation, creates a sterile atmosphere in a transient public space that can open up at any moment to others at the next stop.

While (in)visibility is as crucial to the erotic charge of this video as it is to Aliabadi's photographs, vision is not the sole organizing principle of this artwork. If anything, this video owes its (homo)erotic charge to the visceral sense of touch signaled by the hands animating the image. Eroticism in this video is not voyeuristic. It does not rely on the viewer's ability to see. Instead, it is directly tied to the viewer's experiential sense of touch and memories of bodily contact. The video underplays the sense of sight by depicting the figures in shapeless forms and featureless faces. When we look around the metro cabin, our gaze is never returned by these faceless passengers whose odd bodies are almost indistinguishable from the lumpy bag of undergarments in the middle of the cabin. Azadikhah's animation does not lure the viewer in through vision but hints at covert, temporary, and ephemeral moments experienced in fleeting and transient urban spaces. The erotic geography of Azadikhah's metro is as elusive as the play of glances activated in Aliabadi's drift around the city.

In my reading, the above artworks are not depictions of sexuality in Iran, but images that can activate various plays of glances if their unifocal view is displaced. Despite the seemingly homosocial and heteronormative settings present in these images, I have alluded to queer possibilities active in our peripheral vision. As recent studies of sexuality in Iran have noted, the heterosexual fixation of the morality police, which has legitimized that desire as the only recognized form of sexuality in Iran's public sphere, has also masked homoeroticism within public discourse. While homosexuality was demarcated and deemed deviant within the heterosocial gender structure of pre-revolutionary Iran, the Islamic Republic has paradoxically provided "homosexuality a homosocial home for masquerade" (Najmabadi, 2005, p. 38). This statement is not meant to suggest that homosexuality is safely hidden within homosocial spaces in Iran, since homosociality is itself at the very roots of homophobia rendering homosexuality abnormal and punishable by law. Rather, homoeroticism has the potential of remaining illegible or camouflaged under the heteronormative

assumptions of the morality police. The paradoxical outcome of police regulation, according to Roshanak Kheshti (2009), is such that “heterosexuality gets policed because it is intelligible to the codified regulations imposed by the state, while gender trespass and homoeroticism remain unintelligible and below the censors’ radar” (p. 164). By evading visibility, homoeroticism ruptures the order of power and avoids the disciplinary bounds of being seen, named, and categorized.

Homoeroticism hence remains unnamed within Iranian visual cultural productions but appear covertly around the periphery of the lens. The gestures and movements of the figures in Azadikhah’s video and Aiabadi’s photographs signal the presence of queer viewers but go unregistered otherwise. In her own queer reading of Bollywood cinema, Gayatri Gopinath defines homoeroticism as the excess that remains unnamed within strictly heterosexual and homosocial cinematic scenes, but which can be discerned through queer viewing. For Gopinath (2005), queer viewing practices “make legible non-heteronormative arrangements within rigidly heterosexual structures” (p. 111). As mentioned earlier, it should be noted that this viewing practice does not intend to pull the shroud, as it were, on homoeroticism by making it “legible”. The search, as Gopinath notes, is not “for characters who are explicitly marked as sexual or gender deviants, but rather to those moments emerging at the fissures of rigidly heterosexual structures” (Gopinath, 2005, p. 103). Queer viewing practices therefore, do not seek to fix sexual categories but to unsettle the dominant structures of power that exert themselves through the control of sexuality. This point is reinforced in Kheshti’s (2009) study of transgender performances in Iranian cinema, where “queerness does not ‘come out’ as such but exists as the residue of narrative devices”, which in the films she analyzes, “enable and exhibit movement and survival for various kinds of protagonists” (p. 160). Gender trespass as a navigational strategy in her study underscores queer potentials of interfering with the dominant order of heterosexuality in Iran’s urban centers by subverting its distribution of visibility.

In Aliabadi’s photographs, the glances of the smiling women who return the look of the female photographer, is the erotic possibility that can go undetected on Tehran’s streets. The homosocial settings depicted in the transient spaces of each car, repeated in Azadikhah’s video where same-sex bodies are pressed in their tight confines, are themselves sites of erotic potentialities that remain unchecked (and are paradoxically promoted) by police regulations. In my reading, these artworks address and incorporate multiple viewers within their structures, where the unsuspecting gaze of the guard becomes queered.

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ENDNOTES

1. See for instance Scott Long (2009) "Unbearable Witness: How Western Activists (Mis)recognize Sexuality in Iran", *Contemporary Politics*, 15:1, 119-136. Long discusses cases in which LGBT rights campaigns aggravated a number of sodomy cases in Iran.
 2. For a discussion of women's "agency" under the veil see Saba Mahmood (2005), *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and The Feminist Subject*, Princeton: Princeton University Press. Mahmood argues that "agency" in the Western Feminist discourse has been mainly defined in terms of "acts that challenge social norms". Against this definition, she argues for agency in acts such as "piety" that might uphold social conventions. In the case of Iran also see Azar Tabari (1980), "The Enigma of Veiled Iranian Women" *Feminist Review* 5, 1980, 19-32.
 3. I use "car flirting" as a short-hand term for the many ways in which cruising in cars is referred to in colloquial Farsi. I recognize the inadequacy of this term in relation to Tehran's rich linguistic culture of constantly shifting and transforming urban slang. I use "car flirting" rather than a term such as "fer khordan" (literally meaning curling like a screw to imply screwing around) in order to first, acknowledge my own diasporic distance from Tehran's evolving youth culture and to also avoid the stance of cultural ethnography. I see the task of this paper as a study of representations rather than cultural customs and behaviors.
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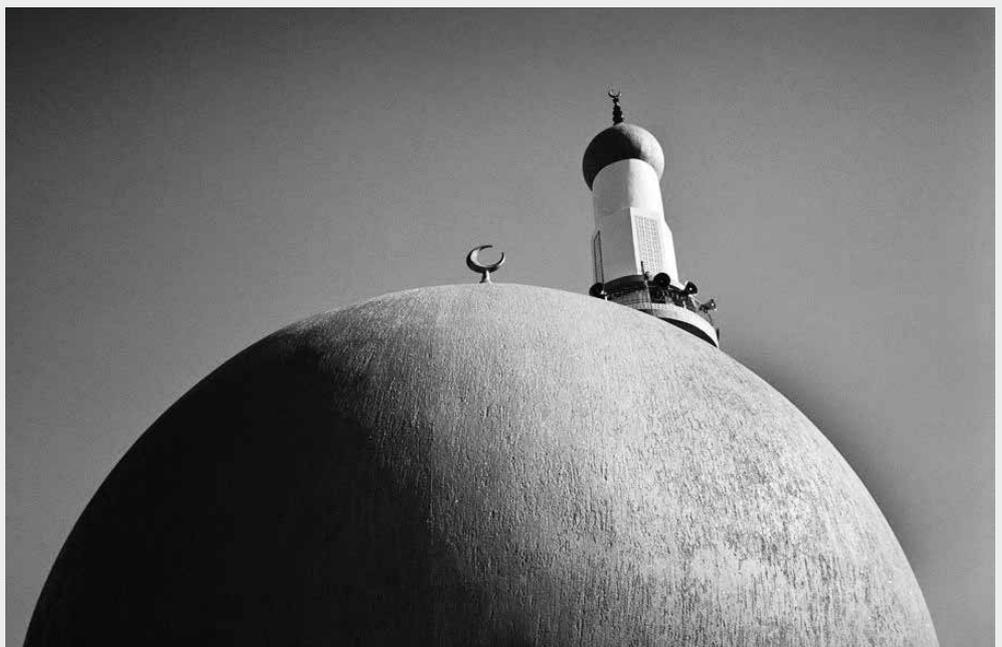
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In/distinction

On Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh's *A Photographic Conversation from Burj al-Shamali Camp*

Daniel Berndt*

As the “abbreviation that telescopes history into a moment” Cadava, 1992, p. 101), photography “is always related to something other than itself” (Cadava, 1992, p. 100). But rather than being material evidences that speak for themselves, photographs are more like “silent witnesses” in relation to this “other”, and to the reality that defines the context of their production and reception.¹ By listening to various voices and stories around and about images, Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh's *A Photographic Conversation from Burj al-Shamali Camp* (2001–present) – a multi-layered project developed over the time span of more than 10 years – is trying to get photographs ‘to speak’ about this reality, in this case that of Burj al-Shamali, a Palestinian refugee camp in the South of Lebanon. Combining archival, historical, and anthropological practices, as well as a variety of artistic forms of expression – from publications and curated exhibitions with a group of adolescents to Eid-Sabbagh's most recent performances and lectures that include a sporadic display of videos and historical photographs² – this project is primarily a tribute to the individual, in that it is the individual's actions and convictions that contribute to the formation of a meaningful community. At the same time, it examines socio-political circumstances and dynamics while cherishing intimacy and personal recollections.



The mosque, March, 2005, August 2006, and April 2008, Ali al-Ali. Courtesy of Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh.

This essay examines some of Eid-Sabbagh's methods and the different visual elements she combines. However, as it is still ongoing, *A Photographic Conversation* does not yet allow for any comprehensive critique or premature conclusion. Nevertheless, the work in progress so far offers at this point many interesting perspectives not only on the history of the Burj al-Shamali camp and the current situation of the people living there, but also on the photography that documents this place of habitation – its rhetoric and different modes of representation.

Located three kilometres east of the city of Tyre (Sour), Burj al-Shamali was established after the Arab-Israeli conflict in 1948 to accommodate thousands of refugees who were forced to leave Palestine following the creation of the State of Israel (the event is referred to as *Nakba*). The camp's purpose was to provide refugees with immediate humanitarian relief. Yet, after more than sixty years, Palestinians were never granted their right of return, and are often regarded by Lebanon as a national security threat.³ Most of them still live in temporary shelters or refugee camps, which, with time, became concrete and institutionalized "zones of in-distinction", in which, according to Giorgio Agamben (2005) "fact and law coincide" (p. 28). These zones are created through the establishment of a constant state of exception: a suspension of the juridical order symbolizing and fixing the border between bare life and political existence.⁴ Simultaneously, the camps became "oppositional spaces appropriated and endowed with alternative meanings" (Peteet, 2005, p. 95) and "a potent political field in which to organize and express national identity and sentiment" (Peteet, 2005, p. 94).

The situation for Burj al-Shamali's residents is highly precarious. Deprived of their basic rights, they are not allowed to perform seventy-two professions, among them medicine, law, and engineering. They are also denied the right to own private property. They do not have access to the Lebanese health care system and are limited in their freedom of movement within and out of Lebanon.⁵ The unemployment rate in the camp is at approximately 65 percent among men and 90 percent among women. Houses are in desolate conditions, having mostly zinc roofs that leak during winter and are excessively hot during summer. The continuous water shortages and electricity cuts, though not unusual in Lebanon, are particularly long and frequent in the camp.⁶

A Photographic Conversation from Burj al-Shamali tackles these issues, beginning with the trauma caused by the *Nakba* itself, moving on to the current living conditions and political views of the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. Eid-Sabbagh looks at how three generations of camp inhabitants have been affected by the consequences of the *Nakba* and a history to which they relate differently based on different sets of memories, experiences and expectations. By investigating the historical narrative that holds these three generations together and the ways it is conveyed through images and stories around them, Eid-Sabbagh shows how this narrative determines collective and individual identity inside the camp.

A Photographic Conversation thus lends its inhabitants a voice that describes the 'zone of indistinction'. Eid-Sabbagh reminds us as viewers, listeners, readers, and participants of our responsibility to regard this camp not only as a symbolic presence that recalls a historical event or the manifestation of a collective trauma, but rather as the real space that it is, namely one that is shifting, unstable and contingent, like the identities

and memories it is supposed to affirm. In doing so, she primarily addresses the role of photography and the capacities it has in the creation of a collective narrative on the camp and its residents, taking into consideration that the refugees' "current identity is built largely on an abstract notion that is solely transmitted orally from a generation to the next".⁷

This process of oral transmission of history leads to an identity affirmation that is mainly based on ideas of imaginative investment, projection, and creation and, according to Marianne Hirsch, is defined by the fact that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma "remember" only by means of the stories, images, and behaviours with which they grew up. "But", as Hirsch (2008) notes: "...these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right" (pp. 106-107). In this context, Hirsch (2008) credits photography with the ability "to solidify the tenuous bonds that are shaped by need, desire, and narrative projection" (p. 117).

Over the years, Eid-Sabbagh gathered a digital collection of more than 2,000 studio and family photographs spanning from 1947 to 1990 and approximately 10,000 photographs produced by adolescents she worked with. She has also amassed over forty hours of video footage, consisting mainly of interviews with camp inhabitants talking about their individual relationships to personal photographs and photography.

The historical family and studio photographs provide indications for the interpretation of contemporary representations of Palestinian society in general, and that of the camp in particular. Most of the families in Burj al-Shamali are originally from rural areas. As they were expelled from their villages in Palestine, many possessed only one or two photographs – if any at all – from before 1948, which they took with them when they fled. This scarcity of photographs in Burj al-Shamali persisted till the 1970s. Although becoming more present in the following years and widely cherished as souvenirs, photographs are until today often regarded as controversial in the camp. Photographs are considered to be close depictions of the real and this realistic representation is traditionally prohibited in Islam, the faith of most camp inhabitants. In Burj al-Shamali, photographs are normally not displayed publicly, but are more likely to be



Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh, *A Photographic Conversation from Burj al-Shamali Camp* - work in progress, part two, Performance at Les Halles des Schaerbeek, Brussels, December 2012. Photographs Rozenn Quéré. Courtesy of Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh.



Setting of lecture performance, (re)collecting images, at Gestures in Time: the 4th Riwaq Biennale and Jerusalem Show VI for the 1st Qalandiya International, Abwein, November 2012. Photograph Andrea Thal. Courtesy of Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh.

kept in bags or boxes, hidden away. The only photographs of people hanging visible in houses are portraits of deceased relatives.

In *A Photographic Conversation* and especially in Eid-Sabbagh's performances, which she herself refers to as "storytelling", there is a reflection on the ambivalent relationship the camp inhabitants have with photography. Her performances, like those on the occasions of the first Qalandiya International festival in Ramallah (2012) and the third Thessaloniki Biennale (2011), take place in relatively small spaces with limited access. She temporarily projects images and videos, telling the spectators about the camp, its history, the people living there, and her own experiences of the place and its inhabitants. Through the situational reality that Eid-Sabbagh creates with these encounters, the constant shift between visibility and absence of images is highlighted: the photograph as a memento becomes – like the instant it was taken – ephemeral again. The narrative elements she presents within her performances are a derivative of the acquaintances she made and the stories she heard in Burj al-Shamali. These stories add up to the collective narrative of the camp and include, for example, the account of a studio photographer talking about his work and clients and how they liked to be perceived in portraits. There is Hasna Abou Kharoub – a key figure in the project since she also took and collected photographs not only as memorabilia with sentimental value, but also as valuable historical documents – and a man who asked Eid-Sabbagh to publish the pictures of his wife before and after the Israeli army attacked Burj al-Shamali with napalm gas in 1982.

Eid-Sabbagh came to Burj al-Shamali for the first time in the summer of 2001. At the time a student with a specific interest in the recent history of the Middle

East, she initiated a series⁸ of interventions in six of the twelve official Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon,⁹ and employed a method widely known as participatory photography,¹⁰ working with groups of children and adolescents for a few days in each camp. The general concept of participatory photography is to provide marginalized members of a society with cameras to ideally empower them to develop a critical consciousness and their often precarious living conditions and to actively participate in a socio-political discourse, of which they as individuals are often excluded. In that sense, participatory photography proposes a valuable alternative to the stereotypical representations of suffering in photojournalism, and delivers seemingly authentic images calling for immediate agency. The democratic aspect of this approach is at stake, though, if the facilitators of participatory photography projects abuse their own power. They are in control of the participant's images and testimonies, as it is eventually up to them to edit, publish, and contextualize the images produced.¹¹

Consequently, for Eid-Sabbagh it was crucial that, after developing the films, she would look at and discuss the photographs together with the children who took them. Doing so, it occurred to her that they had often handled the cameras sincerely as a medium of documentation, clearly understanding its potentials to represent and highlight the particular living conditions in the camps. In this regard, the whole 'photographic conversation' began with the desire to understand how the children and adolescents



Fatmeh Soleiman, Racha Moussa Mohammad (Saadnayel, 1987). A series, 2007-2008. Courtesy of Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh.

in the camps developed their sense for photography. It turned out that the youth Eid-Sabbagh encountered were already familiar with the method of participatory photography. They had already been 'sensitized' through other people working with them, in terms of how to utilize the camera to best suit their needs: namely, to raise awareness on the situation of Palestinian refugees and their cause. Realizing the limitations of this approach and the moral consequences that came with its exploitative aspects, Eid-Sabbagh felt the need to re-evaluate participatory photography and its principles, questioning its ambition of gaining access to a social realm without any actual, evocative exchange taking place.¹² Still interested in the method's capacity to generate a process of collective creativity by simultaneously encouraging individual forms of expression, she decided to return to Lebanon in 2005, and lived in



Yasser Ibrahim, Alia Ali al-Hajj (Naameh, 1922). A series, 2007-2010. Courtesy of Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh.

Burj al-Shamali for most of the following four years.

Convinced that only a sustainable, durable, and direct interaction – one that demanded commitment from all parties involved – could give the practice of participatory photography a purposeful meaning, Eid-Sabbagh began to work more closely with the group of girls and boys she had gotten to know in 2001, who back then were between eleven and fifteen years old. After establishing a workspace in the camp, she involved them in a continuous, long-term dialogue mediated through photography, one that gave sight and voice to their personal preferences, concerns, and eagerness, triggering a collective creative process during which each group member developed his or her own visual language and main area of interest. Consequently, the group arrived at a point where they were ready to expose the results of their work

to a larger audience. The exhibition *How Beautiful is Panama!* was presented in 2008 as the first incarnation of *A Photographic Conversation*¹³ including, for example, the series of portraits Fatmeh Soleiman took of her friends in the pose of the comic icon Handala, turning their back towards the camera facing the walls surrounding the camp; Ali al-Ali's documentation of the construction of a mosque inside the camp; as well as Yasser Ibrahim's portraits of Burj al-Shamali's inhabitants who experienced the *Nakba*.

Created over nine years, this part of Eid-Sabbagh's photographic conversation provides a complex image of adolescence and coming of age, one confronted with a fate inevitably restricted by the socio-political parameters of the camp and the status of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon.

Throughout her stay in the camp, Eid-Sabbagh lived with a family that regarded and treated her as a fully-fledged member. This family also helped her to establish close relationships with other residents. More importantly, she invested the time and patience that was needed to establish these relationships:

I think that time is an essential factor of this project and the whole work process. Everything that happened in the frame of this project, to myself and to other people involved, would not have been possible if we wouldn't have been

so generous with our time. It is very difficult to speak about the component that time is as it is very abstract, but I think that time and the physical presence of us all together in the same space has produced something. Something that is not necessarily material; some sort of creative dynamic (personal communication, 7 March, 2012).

In the context of the camp, itself a hermetic entity whose inhabitants are linked to each other by tight family bonds and a sense of tradition, it is rather difficult as a complete outsider to gain instant access to people's houses and even more so to their photographs and memories. With a critical point of view towards anthropological methods such as fieldwork, Eid-Sabbagh adapted herself to the patriarchal camp environment and its social conventions. Different from the ethnographer as participating observer,¹⁴ her presence wasn't merely about gaining information with the intention to produce an output. She developed instead an alert 'sense of place', which, according to Lucy Lippard (1998), is a "virtual immersion that depends on lived experience and a topographical intimacy" (p. 33).

This process of immersion became a significant element of the entire project, and also facilitated Eid-Sabbagh's in-depth research on, and the collection of, studio and family photographs from the camp community. By that time in 2007, the Arab Image Foundation (AIF) in Beirut had become an important support structure, and Eid-Sabbagh eventually became a member of the organization one year later. Although being presented under the umbrella of the AIF, the AIF never imposed any methods of research and collecting on her that would question the project's autonomy. Opposed to the AIF mission to collect physical photographic objects like prints, negatives or glass plates to preserve cultural heritage, Eid-Sabbagh only collects digital images, which form a collection that is not part of the AIF archive. It is also different from previous projects of fellow AIF artist members in the way photography is presented as a social phenomenon rather than being displayed as a form of cultural artefact. Instead of focusing on the materiality of the photograph, or its aesthetic value and persuasive indexical nature, Eid-Sabbagh is primarily interested in the variety of individual photographic modes and collective customs of representation, strategies of mediation, as well as people's desire to establish a link to the past through photography.

With her applied critique on participatory photography, her restrained display of the historical photographs she collected, and her emphasis on the circumstances of their production and reception rather than on their appearance – as well as her decision to only collect the reproduction of the photographs instead of their originals – Eid-Sabbagh not only negotiates the ambiguous nature of photography as a tool of documentation, but also questions the authority of the archive. Her goal is not to create a static archive that functions merely as a storage device.¹⁵ She is rather composing something that is closer to what Siegfried Kracauer called a "memory-image" of Burj al-Shamali. A memory image is the totality of impressions, feelings, sentiments, thoughts and affections related to a person, and thus a complete and more "genuine" image of him or her that outlasts time. Whereas Kracauer (1993) regards photographs only as insignificant fragments of time and space, or, as he puts it, "a jumble that consists partly of garbage" (p. 425), both entities are organized via essentially different principles:

Photography grasps what is given as a spatial (or temporal) continuum; memory-images retain what is given only insofar as it has significance. Since what is significant is not reducible to either merely spatial or merely temporal terms, memory-images are at odds with photographic representation. (Kracauer, 1993, p. 425)

Eid-Sabbagh manages to balance this disparity between photography and memory-image as she looks at the medium intertwined with the oral history of the camp.¹⁶ If the photographs of the teenagers, by now all young adults, show the current circumstances of the camp from individual angles, the collection of historical photographs creates a counter-image of the past. But both sets of images complement one another and merge into the frame that is shaped by the discussions and debates Eid-Sabbagh led with the camp inhabitants.

Photography in general is problematic as one “either expects too much or not enough” of it (Didi-Huberman, 2008, p. 34). Too much, in the sense that it is often believed to represent an objective truth or reality although it can only show a mere fragment of it; not enough, in the sense that one takes photographs for granted as historical documents, neglecting photography’s phenomenology and “very own substance” (Didi-Huberman, 2008, p. 34). Eid-Sabbagh’s *Photographic Conversation* challenges this dilemma in order to reveal and discuss discrepancies and ideological pitfalls of established historical narratives and their effects on the formation of (cultural) identity. Yet the project still manages to convey a lot of the personal fascination and obsession Eid-Sabbagh and her protagonists have for the medium. Instead of solely applying the notion that “photography is a universal language” that “speaks to all people” (Steichen, 1958, p. 167), she further suggests that people also speak through photography; and they do so in their very own language(s).

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ENDNOTES

* This text was first published online at Ibraaz.org, 6 November 2013 (<http://www.ibraaz.org/essays/75>).

1. The relationship between witnessing and photography and the importance of contextualizing photographs within the circumstances of their production are, for example, a crucial aspect of Georges Didi-Huberman’s (2008) argumentation in *Images In Spite of All*.

2. Eid-Sabbagh presented different aspects of the photographic conversation between 2010 and 2012, for example, at Les Halles de Schaerbeek in Brussels, in the frame of first Qalandiya International festival in Ramallah and the third Thessaloniki Biennale as well as during the Speak and Memory symposium at Townhouse Gallery, Cairo.

3. This is mostly related to the concern that the granting of citizenship to the Palestinian refugees, who are mostly Sunni Muslims, would upset the delicate sectarian balance in Lebanon on which power sharing is based. Related to this, the Palestinian refugees have also been blamed for the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war, creating a ‘state within a state’. See Suleiman, J. (2006, April). *Marginalised community: The case of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon*. Retrieved , from <http://r4d.dfid.gov.uk/pdf/outputs/migrationglobpov/jabereditd.pdf>

4. See Agamben, 2005, p. 4: “[...] the state of exception is not a special kind of law (like the law of war); rather, in so far as it is a suspension of the juridical order itself, it defines law’s threshold or limit concept” and p.26: “the modern state of exception is instead an attempt to include the exception itself within the juridical order by creating a zone of indistinction in which fact and law coincide”.

5. For a thorough and insightful examination of the situation of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon see: Bowker, R. P.G. (2003). *Palestinian refugees: Mythology, identity, and the search for peace*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers ; Morris,

- B. (2003). *The birth of the Palestinian refugee problem revisited*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Sayigh, R. (1979). *Palestinians: From peasants to revolutionaries*. London: Zed Books; and Sayigh, R. (1994). *Too many enemies: The Palestinian experience in Lebanon*. London: Zed Books.
- 6.** For more information on Burj al-Shamali, see for example the website of Beit Aftal Assumoud (BAS), The National Institution of Social Care and Vocational Training (NISCVT) <http://www.socialcare.org/Centers.aspx?id=13>.
- 7.** This quote stems from the introductory text. Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh and Simon Lourié, *How beautiful is Panama!*, exhibition catalogue (Beirut: Arab Image Foundation, 2008), 2. Eid-Sabbagh's assertion corresponds with Mohamed Kamel Dorai, when he lists memory and identity affirmation as one of the four principal functions of the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. See Mohamed Kamel Dorai (2006). *Les réfugiés Palestiniens du Liban: Une géographie de l'exil*. Paris: CNRS Editions.
- 8.** At the early stages of the project Eid-Sabbagh worked together with French photographer Simon Lourié.
- 9.** Besides the official refugee camps that are recognized and supported by UNRWA, about 15 unregistered Palestinian informal gatherings or unofficial settlements exist in Lebanon.
- 10.** Caroline C. Wang and Mary Ann Burris from the University of Michigan first coined the term in the mid-1990s. Eid-Sabbagh reflected critically on this approach in her Masters thesis: Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh, *De la collaboration en photographie. Approche critique de la photographie participative, Mémoire de fin d'études* (Ph.D. Diss., École Nationale Supérieure Louis-Lumière, Paris, 2005) <http://www.ens-louis-lumiere.fr/fileadmin/recherche/Eid-Sabbagh-photo2005-mem.pdf>
- 11.** In her text 'The Art of Engagement', Diana Allan pinpointed this problem as follows: 'While such initiatives are often heralded as a means by which disenfranchised communities can gain access to arenas of cultural production, or raise awareness about issues affecting their communities, the conflation of agency with cultural expression can elide the very real gap that separates theory and practice; the hard fact is that in many such grassroots art projects the work ends up in the hands of organizers rather than participants.' See Diana Allan, 'The Art of Engagement', Arteeast website <http://www.arteeast.org/2012/02/28/the-art-of-engagement/>. Allan is the founder of the *Nakba* Archive, an online archive of recorded filmed interviews with first generation Palestinian refugees living in Lebanon about the events of 1948. Amongst those are also residents of Burj al-Shamali. See <http://www.nakba-archive.org>.
- 12.** In her thesis Eid-Sabbagh critically examines this relationship between facilitator and participants and comes to the conclusion that it is often imbalanced and far from being actually democratic. This led her to reevaluate the whole approach of participation and finally distinguishing between participatory and collaborative projects, as which she also defines A photographic conversation from Burj al-Shamali Camp: 'Dans un processus participatif, le photographe garde son autorité, il est auteur, il impose des choix alors que le rôle du participant reste cantonné à la prise de vue. La collaboration cherche au contraire à partager les différentes étapes de création de l'image, que ce soit la technique (dans un processus de production artisanale) ou la sémantique (dimension artistique et signification des photographies)'. Quoted from Op. cit. Eid-Sabbagh, *De la collaboration en photographie*, 107.
- 13.** The exhibition was on display in four different Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon and Jordan, the Gobi Mela Photography Festival in Dakha, and the Makan House of Expression in Amman.
- 14.** Participant observation as a research method with the aim to gain a close and intimate familiarity with a community through direct social engagement was employed as a main strategy of ethnography by Franz Boas and his followers. James Clifford later defined ethnography as 'ways of thinking and writing about culture from a standpoint of participant observation', see James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 9.
- 15.** Eid-Sabbagh states about the project, that she 'wanted to devise a model that was long-term and premised upon handing over ownership to the protagonists of the camp community rather than NGO officials or grant-makers situated far away from the realities of the camp.' Op. cit. Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh and Simon Lourié, *How beautiful is Panama!*, 1.
- 16.** Eid-Sabbagh here counters Kracauer's argument that without any oral tradition the image alone would not be sufficient to reconstruct an individual's 'identity', as it only shows the appearance or an aspect of his or her personality in a unique spatial or temporal configuration with an emphasize on its context of origin and presentation. *Ibid.*, 423.

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The Beach: The Politics of Gender in Modern Day Egypt

Yasmine Allam

Egyptian photography artist Nermine Hammam (b. 1967) created her controversial series, *Escaton*, between 2009 and 2013, to document changing social norms in an increasingly conservative Egypt. Photographing holidaymakers on a beach in Egypt, she depicts heavily veiled female bathers enjoying the sea alongside male companions. Hammam sets these images against grainy black and white photographs taken of her grandparents basking in European attire, on a similar beach, in a secular and Westernized Egypt of the 1950s. As these disparate slices of time and place come together, what emerges is a strong and unexpected record of sexual politics in modern day Egypt, emphasized always by the sensuality of the water surrounding the figures as a backdrop. Behind the stark differences in the outward aesthetics of dress, one becomes aware of a powerful repetition of poses across both sets of images. The central space occupied by the woman remains unchanged despite society's growing efforts to veil and conceal her. Confident and self-possessed, the woman as wife and mother sits at the heart of each family unit holding the viewer with her powerful gaze, admitting us into her space. Men occupy the periphery of these images, leaning into the woman's space as footnotes to her central narrative. Unexpectedly, the camera reveals a continuum of female strength across time.

Intended as a documentation of the gender stereotypes that characterize Egyptian contemporary society, *Escaton* has inadvertently unveiled their fundamental weakness. The work stands as a powerful testament to the timelessness of human relations, contrasting the changing 'outward aesthetics' of social discourse, particularly as it relates to women, with a core that remains unchanged. Though the series was begun in 2009, its relevance continues at a time when religious conservatism is gaining ground in Egypt, following the January 2011 revolution. Indeed, the confident demarcation by generations of women of a central space, and the psychological and sexual implications of the space they command, makes *Escaton* an inherently fascinating comment on gender politics in Egypt at a time of unprecedented change.

The End of Times

A self trained photographer, Nermine Hammam's early background was in film. She obtained her BFA in filmmaking from New York University's Tisch School of the Arts, going on to work with Simon & Goodman and renowned film director Youssef Chahine. Moving into commercial graphic design, she later ran one of Egypt's most successful design agencies, pursuing her photography concomitantly, until abandoning design in 2011 to focus entirely on fine arts. Today, her work is strongly influenced by, and pays homage to, artists such as Diane Arbus, Swedish filmmaker Ingmar

Bergmann, and the Russian filmmaker Tarkovsky. Indeed, over the past decade, Nermin Hammam has been invited to exhibit in a wide range of international forums such as the Bamako Biennale for Photography in Mali (2011), X Biennale, Cuenca, in Ecuador (2009), and Photo Biennale, Thessaloniki (2009). Her work has featured in more than fifty international exhibitions, both solo and collective.

At its core, Hammam's work probes the constructed nature of reality, subverting the stereotype and tracing the artificial contours of that which we perceive as 'real'. Fascinated by the urban context in which she lives, Hammam is drawn, for her subject matter, to its margins and peripheries. She seeks out individuals in states of abandonment, marginalization, or altered states of consciousness, finding in the peripheral spaces that they occupy the limitations of our society and the clichés with which we articulate our place in the world. Over the past ten years, her subjects have included entranced worshippers at underground Sufi rituals in Egypt, patients in Cairo's derelict Abbasiya mental asylum, and young soldiers in Tahrir Square, making Hammam a controversial figure on the Egyptian arts scene.

"There is no such thing as reality – everything is a construct and nothing is real", says Hammam. "My work is about how we see things in a constructed way. So long as there is manifestation there cannot be reality. It is only the mind that strives to analyze and give shape to the world. Once you realize this, and stop trying to make sense and order out of your context, there is a kind of relief" (personal communication, 10 April, 2012). Her preoccupation with the constructed nature of 'that which we perceive as real' shapes her distinct artistic strategy and techniques. As an artist, she photographs the world and then alters the images she captures. Her works are intricate composites of layered images and symbols created through a painstaking process of digital manipulation and hand painting of the photographs taken to create rich and highly personal narratives. All of Hammam's images exist in series form representing sequential narratives, like the stills of a film, related in time and space.

Through a careful manipulation of vantage points she experiments with the



Image 1: *Escaton*, 2009-2013, 70 x 70 cm; printed on hahnemühle archival paper. Courtesy of Nermin Hammam.

duality of the photograph as a tool for social commentary and as an art form capable of capturing and conveying strong personal sentiment. Speaking of her technique she explains: “Initially, my work borders on photo journalism – the process by which I construct my narrative, layering, painting and so forth, only begins after taking the photograph. There is a strong element of documentation in my art” (personal communication, 10 April, 2012). This is particularly true of *Escaton*, where Hammam conflates photography’s traditional use as means of capturing and preserving the past with its importance as a tool of documenting fast-paced social change. “My work is a documentation of my society” (personal communication, 10 April, 2012), she notes. Yet, her juxtaposition of bold, sumptuous colors alongside monochrome tones, sometimes within the very same image, also reminds us that *Escaton* goes beyond a straightforward portrayal of society to encompass a highly personal inner landscape. The work serves, at once, as social documentary and personal elegy to a time gone by: “I see this work as being very emotional. The political dimension is just a by-product – the intention behind the work is highly personal”, says Hammam (personal communication, 12 April, 2012).

The title, *Escaton*, of course, refers to eschatology, or the beliefs around the end of the present world, or the end of times. The *Escaton* is the final, heaven-like state of history – an end to our current reality that will bring about a new way of living and believing. At its most immediate level, the title references the conservative attire of the bathers and points to an increasingly conservative discourse in Egypt that posits religion as a preferred alternative to more secular ideologies. But, beyond this, the title also draws attention to the hollowness of any single ideological discourse or belief system that sets itself up as an arbiter of reality.

House of Cards

In keeping with her distrust of ‘the real’, Hammam uses *Escaton* to explore the limits of gender constructs in Egypt. Hammam’s work reveals the artificiality of gender stereotypes, pointing instead to deep-seated power relations at the heart of Egyptian society: “To zoom in on gender in Egypt is to reveal it in all its artificiality”, the artist explains “Gender is more than a construct, it is a house of cards. Once you blow on it, it crumbles”. She adds: “I went out with the intention to document my society and to track the shifting paradigms that govern sexual politics in



Image 2: *Escaton*, 2009 -2013, 70 x 70 cm; printed on hahnemühle archival paper. Courtesy of Nermin Hammam.

Egypt. What I found were deep-seated patterns that eroded the rigid stereotypes I had expected to find” (personal communication, 12 April, 2012).

At a time of unprecedented change in Egypt, Hammam posits the body as the front line in the struggle between the public and the private. In *Escaton*, the beach and the body are synonymous: “The beach is about the abandon of the body, it is about water, about the wetness and the sand. It is all very sexual”, says Hammam. “Our memories of the beach are like a collective history where our bodies take shape... once you go to the beach a new language is devised” (personal communication, 12 April, 2012).



Image 3: *Escaton*, 2009 -2013, 70 x 70 cm; printed on hahnemühle archival paper. Courtesy of Nermin Hammam.

In this state of abandonment, gender stereotypes gradually unravel. In her work, a woman and a young boy frolic in the waves: the feminized movements of the boy stand in perfect symmetry to those of his female companion (image 2). Any outward difference in gender disappears in this spontaneous moment of exhilaration and abandon. A man lies on his beach towel (image 3), legs wide open, as the woman sits fully clothed engrossed in conversation on her mobile phone. Ironically, it is the man who adopts the feminine position of childbirth or sex, a towel slung across his forehead. In an explicit act of voyeurism we are invited to enter this image from between his legs. His body hair, in the foreground of the image, stands in contrast to the floral design of the woman’s shirt that obscures her body and echoes the decorative wallpaper imposed across the surface of the image. There is a humorous overtone to this scene where gender signifiers are as fluid as the waves lapping on the shore.

In *Escaton* (image 4), the shape of the modern-day family unit posing for a holiday photograph closely mirrors that of the family fifty years earlier. A cursory glance reveals a fundamental change in outward aesthetics: the woman in 1950s Egypt is dressed in western clothing while, in 2009, the woman is veiled and wears a traditional garb. Yet a closer inspection reveals these differences to be paper-thin: the central position of both women in the photographs remains unchanged across generations. In both images, the woman’s gaze is direct, confident and commanding: indeed we enter each image through her gaze and with her permission. Superficial stereotypes of masculine power are undermined by the body language of the men and boys who lean vulnerably into her space. The woman’s compositional importance in the photograph



Image 4: *Escaton*, 2009 -2013. Courtesy of Nermin Hammam.

echoes the central space she occupies in the family unit. This continuum of female power across time renders irrelevant any superficial changes in outward attire. The background of the image evokes a typical Egyptian seaside town. The sepia like quality invites nostalgia and connection with the past suggesting that this is a family unit that has always existed in Egypt and will always continue to be.

Escaton examines the changing place of the body in public and private narratives in Egypt. It investigates the body's symbolic evolution, both as a physical (and forbidden) site of sensual pleasure and pain and as an object of voyeurism and imagination. It reflects on the vulnerability, even embarrassment of human physicality. Hammam uses the themes of veiling and unveiling to reference the body's literal absence from public narrative where it is referred to only through euphemism. She contrasts this with the basic human instinct for physicality as evidenced in the bathers on the beach. "I don't think we realize, in Egypt, how engrossed we are in the body, both in its presence and its absence", says Hammam (personal communication, 12 April, 2012).

A woman in full *niqab* dominates the foreground of image 5. Only her piercing eyes are visible through narrow slits in her veil, at once challenging the viewer and drawing us into the image. She commands the power and the vantage point in this picture. Her male

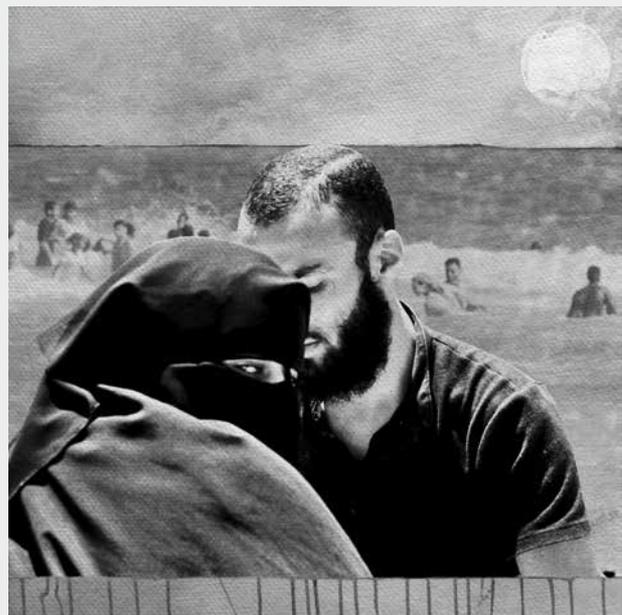


Image 5: *Escaton*, 2009 - 2013, 70 x 70 cm; printed on hahnemühle archival paper. Courtesy of Nermin Hammam.

companion sits next to her, defenseless: his head is bowed and his eyes are averted; his ears and neckline are exposed and almost sensual in contrast to her commanding presence. A couple emerges wet from the sea (image 6). Paradoxically, the woman is at once absent and present in this image; her features are eclipsed by the black folds of fabric while the contours of her body are clearly defined. In comparison to his elusive female companion, the man is incongruously corporeal, his fleshy torso exposed by the wet vest.



Image 6: *Escaton*, 2009 -2013, 70 x 70 cm; printed on hahnemühle archival paper. Courtesy of Nermin Hammam.

Hammam's work defies Orientalist readings of the subjugated female who is oppressed and obliterated by the veil. "In *Escaton*, the veil is a source of power – the power to conceal and to hide from view. It stands in contrast [to] the vulnerability of exposure", she says (personal communication, 10 April, 2012). In her work, our reading of the veil becomes ambiguous, transcending any immediate social or religious connotations to become a universal metaphor for the process by which we hide our true selves from public view. The emphasis on the veil as a source of power in turn relates to Hammam's view of photography as a necessary act of unveiling: "Photography is an unveiling of something that is already there – photography is unveiling in an unguarded moment", explains the artist (personal communication, 10 April, 2012).

The dissolving of rigid gender categories in the sensual and watery environment of the beach is illustrated, again, in

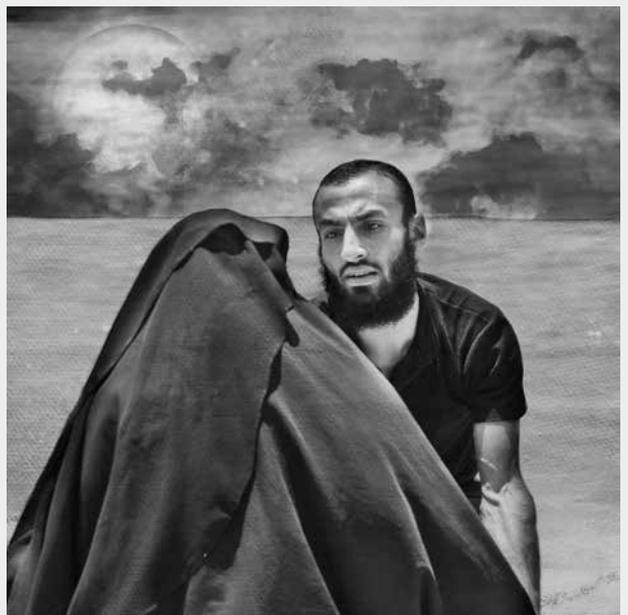


Image 7: *Escaton*, 2009 - 2013, 70 x 70 cm; printed on hahnemühle archival paper. Courtesy of Nermin Hammam.

Hammam's images of young men photographed on their own without women: "When we look at the postures taken by the men, especially on the beach, we see that gender roles mix. Gender reveals itself to be, in effect, a mere construct of the mind". The young men are effeminate in their beauty, striking the sensual poses of a 1940s starlet. They look strangely innocent and seductive in their revealing wet vests, as compared with the fully covered female bathers emerging from the sea behind them. Surprisingly, one young man's coquettish pose, with head cocked and one knee bent, directly mirrors the pose adopted by Hammam's grandmother in the 1950s. That their poses are reminiscent of Hollywood stars is a connection that intrigues Hammam: "These men see themselves through constructs given to us by Hollywood. We have taken the roles given to us by the dominant discourse". She adds: "When you open up the discourse on gender, you see that it is not just constructs of the East that are paper thin, but also those of the West... Through my work I want to say that the divides between East and West, and between genders, are not as great as we make them out to be – we are not as far apart as you might think" (personal communication, 12 April, 2012).

The Woman as Idea

In her representations of women in *Escaton*, Hammam does not dwell on the characteristics of any one particular woman. Instead, she moves between allegory and type, suggesting how all societies engulf women in a web of signifiers and associations through which the female identity and purpose is rigidly defined. Image 8 illustrates Hammam's investigation of the narratives that surround women in Egyptian society. There are no men in this photograph. Instead, the composition centers on the large, wet forms of the women, fully clothed in long traditional *gallabeyas*, emerging from the water like mythical sea creatures, abundant and voluptuous in their physicality. The young girl, whose thin, protruding legs strike a contrast to the larger, covered body of her older companions, is fading out of color and into black and white, hinting that the relative physical freedom she currently enjoys was once the remit of women of all ages in Egypt, as evidenced by the black and white family photographs that accompany this series. In the present moment, however, her command over her body is only temporary. It will be rapidly curtailed with the onset of puberty. This contradiction between the physical freedom of a pre-sexual youth and the restrictions of maturity are accentuated by the repetition of plaited hair on the younger girl and the older



Image 8: *Escaton*, 2009 -2013, 70 x 70 cm; printed on hahnemühle archival paper. Courtesy of Nermin Hammam.

woman positioned at either side of the image.

In the foreground, a woman bends forward. Her abundant wet body, voluptuously contoured by the black clinging fabric of her dress defies society's efforts to obscure and conceal her. Through her sheer physical presence she reasserts her sexuality, becoming at once the subject and object of our gaze. Her protruding buttocks that dominate the foreground and eclipse her head and torso remind us of the role of humor in Hammam's work.

Hammam seems to imply that her countrymen will continue to embrace life's pleasures even as they welcome growing public calls for restraint.



Image 9: *Escaton*, 2009 -2013, 70 x 70 cm; printed on hahnemühle archival paper. Courtesy of Nermine Hammam.

While other images in *Escaton* use humor to deliver their punch, image 9 is more contemplative, resonating with allegorical appeal. It portrays two women, in the foreground, standing in the water looking in at the beach where men embrace and play with children running in and out of the sea. Posing as a snapshot, an image chanced upon unexpectedly, this picture nevertheless has a timeless quality and a richness of color and composition that hints at figurative painting. The physicality of the running, playing figures stands in stark contrast to the motionless isolation of the two women watching and waiting in the sea. Their bright red swim suits reveal only a flash of neck line, a wisp of curl and a small expanse of knee. The women's hair is concealed under swimming caps, depriving them of a gender signifier and reducing them to fairytale creatures rising from the depths and watching humanity frolicking on the shore. The figures resonate with traditions of woman as a two-dimensional goddess, an incarnation of motherhood and of family, denied any sexuality of her own. The round curve of their heads echoes the rounded curves of the inflatable "Tweety bird" floater, a mundane, modern-day Phoenix with its inflatable plastic grin dominating the foreground of the image. The two women stand apart physically divided by the digitally manipulated line running across the center of the image: like modern day sirens or mermaids they are engulfed in a seamless void of water and blue.

The Woman as Beach Photographer

In *Escaton*, Hammam's work is shaped by her choices of particular moments in time and in space – she makes observations framing a moment in an unfolding series of events in which she herself plays a part. Her exploration of gender dynamics in Egypt extends to her own interactions with her subjects. Here she consciously



Image 10: *Escaton*, 2009 - 2013. Courtesy of Nermin Hammam.

inverts the traditionally male-dominated role of the beach photographer in Egypt. Hammam describes the process by which she enters the public domain of the beach in the language of quasi-ritual: “I arrive on the beach, pick a parasol and dump my stuff under it. Then I go and scout for a possible subject to photograph. As I wander along the beach, camera in hand, people come up to me and challenge me. After thirty minutes of back and forth – the right word here, a well-received joke there – I’m invited for tea or lunch on the sand”. With her strange mixture of Western looks and strong vernacular command of Arabic, Hammam elicits a paradoxical, confused response in her subjects who are caught off guard by her mixed cultural signifiers. They regard her with skepticism, even anger, “but through humor and banter, I erode the perceived cultural barrier that separates us; once their confidence is won they pose freely for the camera”, says Hammam (personal communication, 10 April, 2012). It is significant that she does not seek to capture her images in unguarded moments but grants control of self-representation to her subjects, inviting them to choose their preferred pose and infusing her work with their joint collaboration.

Indeed, there is, in Hammam’s artistic strategy, a coupling of a conscious sense of what she wants to capture with a willingness to put aside her plan to photograph what spontaneously unfolds before her: “I know that I am going down one particular route, but on that route there is chance; I relish that interplay of chance circumstances with my original plan” (personal communication, 10 April, 2012). According to the artist, the more traditional beach photographers frequently approach her and argue with her for usurping their territory. But this inversion of conventional roles is an integral element in *Escaton*, where Hammam’s own gender influences the final outcome of the work: “The fact that I am a woman definitely affects the work I do: men would not allow me to take photographs of their female companions if I were a man. Also, they might perhaps feel challenged to give up the central space in the image, to women, if they were being photographed by a man” (personal communication, 10 April, 2012). The resulting photographs document the subjects’ reactions to the artist herself – their resistance, amusement, even ambivalence to this sudden interruption of their leisure time. These incidental elements become part of the ‘facts’ documented in the photographs. As a result, *Escaton* is a testament not only to a specific moment in Egypt’s social history but also to Hammam’s specific artistic encounter

with her subjects: “There is no doubt that these images would have looked very different had they been photographed by someone else”, she acknowledges (personal communication, 10 April, 2012).

The Importance of Setting

In *Escaton*, the interplay between female bathers and their male companions is examined in a space that is resonant with narratives of the human body and sexuality at its most tangible. The importance of water, both in the aesthetic and narrative appeal of this work, is accentuated by the use of water color sensually applied to the finished surface of the photograph – there is a lightness of touch, as the brush strokes embellish and caress the surface of the image, evoking at once the sexual and spiritual dimensions of water. In *Escaton*, the beach becomes the locus for a gradual unraveling of our constructed public identities, bringing down our guard and revealing glimpses of our innermost selves. A public place that is (relatively) free from the more prescribed behavior of city life, the beach is also a primal space marking the outer limits of human society. Ours is an almost involuntary, primal response to the wetness of the sea, to bodies moving in and out of water and to sand and sun.

Hamman expresses the “artificiality of human perception” through an interplay between the two and three-dimensional space in her work. In sharp contrast to the horizons that define the outer limits of her works, Hamman uses flat decorative designs embedded into the layers of the images, disorientating our sense of distance while giving her work a bright, sumptuous quality. Some photographs are even digitally reworked and divided into parts emphasizing the inherently constructed nature of both the image and the stereotype it portrays. Speaking of her use of texture



Image 11: *Escaton*, 2009 -2013, 70 x 70 cm; printed on hahnemühle archival paper. Courtesy of Nermine Hamman.

in the form of fragments of wallpaper, fabric, and carpet, Hammam explains: “These touches of fabric and carpet reflect the types of furnishings my protagonists would use in their own home. It is a nod to Egyptian preferences for bold colors and decorative motifs. It is also a parody of Orientalist representations of women from our part of the world who are often depicted lounging on rich, sensual carpets and spreads” (personal communication, 10 April, 2012).

The Burden of Representation

Nermine Hammam’s exploration of gender relations in Egypt has resulted in a series of socially and culturally pertinent images that embrace the duality of the contemporary photograph as both a tool for documenting reality and a work of art in its own right. Hammam traces the changing social landscape of her home country, intuitively mapping her new world. By juxtaposing color photographs of modern-day bathers with the nostalgic black and white images from her family album, she carefully balances that which is radically altered against that which remains unchanged.

In *Escaton*, Hammam employs “[T]he idea, in documentary photography, of the realities of societies being shown to contradict generally held pre-conceptions...” (Cotton, 2009, p. 186). In both sets of photographs, the mirrored poses of her subjects invites a comparative, linear reading in terms of ‘then and now’. However, *Escaton*’s power derives from the unexpected conclusions that such a comparison yields: We are treated to frank representations of Egyptian society’s increasing efforts to ‘cover up’ the woman. Yet, we are surprised to discover that the woman remains powerful, and central, despite these efforts to obscure her. We are encouraged to reflect on the changes in outward aesthetics. All the while we are reminded that the joy and abandon of the bathers is real and that our response, as human beings, to the primal conditions of the beach (and to each other) are instinctive and unaffected by changing social norms. Hammam explores the medium of the family album as a tool for preserving the past. She balances this against the photograph’s capacity to reveal unexpected power relationships beneath the surface of the cohesive family unit. Hammam parodies the way in which the ubiquitous family holiday snap arbitrarily lends value to particular moments and places. She also imbues the family photograph with nostalgia, paying homage to a time gone by and to her own grandparents who now exist only in these images.

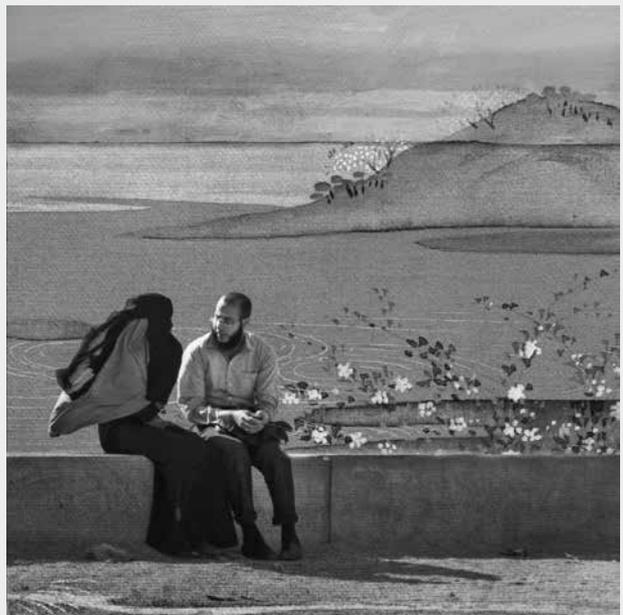


Image 12: *Escaton*, 2009 - 2013, 70 x 70 cm; printed on hahnemühle archival paper. Courtesy of Nermine Hammam.

Meanwhile, *Escaton* plays on the paradoxical capacity of the photograph to portray subjects as they can never see themselves; it also explores the power of photography to alter and obscure reality by excluding as much as it includes, making photographs inherently fictitious and unreliable records of the world: “the camera’s rendering of reality must always hide more than it discloses...” (Sontag, 1977, p. 23).

This circularity or ‘back and forth’ in the representation of her themes is a trademark of Nermin Hammam’s work: “I present you with a stereotype, then I unmask it, only to present you with a second stereotype which I in turn unmask” (personal communication, 10 April, 2012). This is emphasized by the presentation of her work always as a series. In *Escaton*, the details of what she observes are reinforced by the similarities and differences between the images that make up this single series. Hammam believes the existence of her work in series form is integral to our reading of it. Influenced by her background in film, Hammam believes that meaning is derived when several frames come together. After all, you can see one single frame as a film: “My work lends itself more to an intellectual discourse, rather than a single wall painting”. She adds: “I always look for a perfect shot that will fall into a given series rather than a perfect shot that will stand onto itself... Perhaps the meaning of my work emerges from the message being said from many different angles: this work has to do with the absence of reality, and the fakeness, or limits, of individual vantage points. You can’t have a single picture that encapsulates everything. You have to see them together to see it makes sense” (personal communication, 12 April, 2012).

As a result, Hammam masterfully delivers a rich and textured message about gender politics in Egypt, revealing the limits of ideological discourses and demonstrating that all stereotypes – including those of gender – are constructed and clichéd. Indeed, her technique of merging black and white analogue photographs with digital color images serves to objectify the photograph itself. It helps us to abstract, momentarily, from the content of Hammam’s images to view them, not as windows on the world, but as objects: material and disposable. In this way, she draws attention to the role of the photograph in shaping gender discourses over time – a tool that lends both credence and incontrovertible proof to our constructed notions of the other.

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Cross-dressing in Photographs of 1920s and 1930s Egypt, Palestine and Lebanon

Yasmine Nachabe Taan

This issue will not be complete without the eclectic representation of women in the following intriguing photographs that I found while looking for photographs for this issue. All nine photographs are part of the Arab Image Foundation, an inspiring archive of photographs from the Middle East and North Africa.

The photographs defeat the binary association of women as feminine and men as masculine. Femininity becomes the site of cultural mediation, the sign of political and social challenge; it assigns new meanings to female subjectivity through cross-dressing, and in posing and acting as men. The women in the photographs look like they were ‘constructing’ or ‘reconstructing’ the image of womanhood while masquerading as men. By pretending to act like men in the photograph, they attempt to counter the predominant patriarchal system.

In plate A, taken in 1935, Marguerite is leaning against a low wall of the roof of a Jerusalem house smoking a cigarette, dressed up in a man’s suit. In plate B, taken around the same period, Adeline Abiad poses in a man’s suit in her sitting room in Haifa. She is also holding a cigarette and looking straight at the camera lens.

In plate C, Marie el-Khazen, a prominent photographer of 1920s Lebanon, and her sister, are both sporting a *tarboush* and men’s suits, and are sitting under their father’s portrait also sporting a *tarboush*.

Most of these photographs are staged portraits in which the photographer and the subject have carefully thought about what to include and what to exclude within the image in order to generate new meaning and assign new roles for women.



Plate A. Marguerite, dressed up as a man. Jerusalem, Palestine, 1935. Unidentified photographer. Collection AIF/ Alice Agazarian. Copyright © Arab Image Foundation.

It seems that the photographer and the subject had thought about the choice of pose and background beforehand, as well as considered the subjects’ attire all of which had been meticulously arranged. It is as if the subjects in these photographs for reasons yet to be determined were mimicking an appearance while constructing themselves as men.

Notice the short bobbed hair *à la garçon* in plate I (p. 63), the white silk handkerchief tucked in the woman’s upper left pocket, a typical masculine

bourgeois, or dandy practice. In addition, the carefully chosen and confident pose, with one hand in the pocket, and the other leaning on the chair. The white bowling hat is another prop that is representative of the subjects' social class. This woman looks as if she sported a man's suit in order to pose as a man in the photograph.

This particular phenomenon of cross dressing did not necessarily occur in urban contexts; the photographs in plates C, E, and F were taken in the North of Lebanon. The act of masquerade in the photographs with a *tarboush*, commonly worn by men during the ottoman empire to indicate authority and higher education may have been imported from Egypt as seen in both photographs in plates D and G.

All photographs are evidence of a cosmopolitan life style that existed during this period in the region but is not well documented by the mainstream media today. They may represent freedom of expression and equal rights for women at the time.



Plate C. Dressed up as men. Zghorta, Lebanon, 1927. Marie el Khazen. Collection AIF/ Mohsen Yammine Copyright © Arab Image Foundation.



Plate B. Adeline Abiad - Abiad house. Haifa, Palestine, 1920-1930. Anonymous photographer. Collection AIF/ Aimée Sacy. Copyright © Arab Image Foundation



Plate D. Woman dressed up as a man Egypt. Unidentified photographer. Collection AIF/ Amgad Neguib Copyright © Arab Image Foundation.



Plate E. Woman dressed up as a man. Tripoli, Lebanon. Muhamad Arabi. Collection AIF/ Mohsen Yammine. Copyright © Arab Image Foundation.



Plate F. Tripoli, Lebanon. Muhamad Arabi. Collection AIF. Copyright © Arab Image Foundation



Plate G. Fatma Ahmad Al Hussein dressed up as a man. Helwan, Egypt, 1926. Hilmy. Collection AIF/ Shahwar Hegazi. Copyright © Arab Image Foundation

Women appear liberated from attire restriction and social expectations on how to behave, pose and act as women. Most of these photographs are part of private collections and might not have been publicly accessible during the second decade of the twentieth century. Despite the fact that little information is available about these photographs today, I believe that it is worthwhile pursuing further research on this topics. Such photographs generate codes and associations that raise many questions about socially assigned gender roles, and open up new ways of looking into gender as an analytical category in writing history (Najmabadi, 2005).

While I am confident that there are many photographs of this genre yet to be discovered, I believe that a collection of photographs of this genre establishes a particular visual repertoire of Arab women in 1920s and 1930s Middle East and North Africa that can pave the way for critical writing on gender representation in photographs and on photographers in the region.

By pretending to act like men in the photograph, they attempt to counter the predominant patriarchal system.



Plate I. Woman dressed up as a man. Beirut, Lebanon, 1920-1930. Unidentified photographer. Collection AIF/ Azar-Choucair. Copyright © Arab Image Foundation.



Plate H. Woman in a riding costume. 1920-1930. Unidentified photographer. Collection AIF/ Azar-Choucair. Copyright © Arab Image Foundation.

Women appear liberated from attire restriction and social expectations on how to behave, pose and act as women.

Interview with Christina Rahme:

A Fashion Photographer Based in Beirut

Yasmine Nachabe Taan

Christina Rahme holds an M.A. in photography from Université Saint-Esprit de Kaslik (USEK) and is currently teaching photography at LAU. Yasmine Nashabe Taan interviewed her for this issue of *al-raida*.

Yasmine Nashabe Taan: Fashion photography, similar to most creative design and advertising oriented fields, is a highly competitive field. I bet you had to dig your own path in the market.

Christina Rahme: It is indeed a highly competitive, tough field. Although I would like to focus exclusively on fashion photography, I often find myself multi-tasking or working on a diversity of projects such as architecture, interior, or jewelry photography.

In Lebanon, the market is limited. Even though each type of photography requires specific skills, photographers should be ready to take up a range of photography projects and not be restricted to one type. Another crucial element in this field is meeting deadlines.

Most, if not all, fashion photography projects are time-sensitive. There is also the persona of the photographer. When working on a project, the photographer is leading a large team. In addition to the models, there is a group of around 10 employees among them the make up artists, the hairdressers, the assistants, the graphic designers, the agents, the lighting personnel etc... It's all about team work.

Y.N.T.: Christina, who are your major clients?

C.R.: I have local clients as well as international clients. I work with advertising agencies such as *Grey World* and *Impact BBDO*, but I also have clients in the United Arab Emirates, KSA and Qatar. Some of my clients in Lebanon include *Elle Oriental*, *Aishti*, and *Officiel Levant* among other magazines.

Y.N.T.: How is fashion photography different from other kinds of photography?

C.R.: Fashion photography is about recreating worlds. It is a crucial marketing tool to propagate innovative fashion styles. Fashion photography is about creating desire through glamour. It produces the pleasure of looking into photographs. As opposed to photo-reportage or photo-journalism, it is about generating a world of fantasy. It does not necessarily document aspects of 'real' human life.

Y.N.T.: Did you establish your own studio?

C.R.: A few years ago, in Paris, I had the privilege



Sample of Christina Rahme's work.

of working with the internationally renowned photographer Andre Rau. It was a totally different experience than working in Lebanon. Here I have had to purchase all the equipment and establish my own studio and photography equipment. However, in Paris, photographers can rent the studio as well as their equipment for photo shoots. So yes, I have had mine since 2006.

Y.N.T.: How do you work on your photography concepts?

C.R.: First, I brainstorm with the clients and then I present them with a concept that I had previously thought of in relation to the product/service. Then comes the serious work which entails recreating the whole context for such a concept. Concepts can range from a complex jungle setting to a simple bed room. Constructing the stage gradually takes place, of course, with the mutual creative efforts of my team. In most cases, due to budget constraints, we recreate the scene rather than actually travel to the site. This is partly why I am so passionate about my job: it is all about imagination [eye blink]!

Y.N.T.: There is a contradiction in the experience of you being a woman photographer who is also the producer of images that, in a way, are degrading for women – I mean photographs that reproduce stereotypes of women being only sexy and beautiful. How do you deal with this?

C.R.: I think women are very beautiful and I don't think that showing the beauty of a woman's body is necessarily a degrading thing. It all depends on how it is presented.

Y.N.T.: Ok, then I will rephrase my question: I saw the amazing photos that you have taken of the young gorgeous male model for Purrl, was it? Can you say something about your experience in depicting women as sexy and men as sexy... tell us more about photographing nudes or semi-nudes.

C.R.: I think there is beauty in both the male and the female form. I see beauty in many different things and I love to highlight it. Beauty can be found in people, young or old, in forms, shapes, in nature, etc.

Y.N.T.: How do you deal with the issue of depicting



Sample of Christina Rahme's work.

women's bodies as criticized by feminists today?

C.R.: If the photographer is working on the theme of the *femme fatale*, *talon aiguilles*, *rouge/noir* etc., the photographer guides the model into enacting a *femme fatale*. However, not all clients require a *femme fatale*. *Elle* magazine, for example, expects women to be sweet, coquettish, and fashionably modern. I do have clients, and they are many, mostly the locals, who insist on the "pin-up" image. Perhaps this helps them fantasize [smile]. They love it and they strongly believe that it is the only strategy to sell their products. Local clients are focused on making profit.

Y.N.T.: Do you see yourself as an entrepreneur?

C.R.: Good artists are bad entrepreneurs [laugh]. I am an artist ... That is why I am seeking a partner, a business partner.

Y.N.T.: So fashion photography is about imagination?

C.R.: Yes, of course ... When we turn off the light, a new world emerges: a surreal, fantasy world, a recreation of dream, a world of floating cotton candies [smile]. We live the moment till the light is on and when we are back to reality the magic is gone. We leave the exciting, 'surreal' world of photography to return to the 'real' world. I think that photographers capture the magic of the moment. You don't really control the photograph. Photography is magical, it just happens instantaneously.

Interview with Karen Kalou: A Photographer

Hiba Mikdashi

Karen Kalou and I met in 2008, when we had both just returned to Beirut. We instantly knew we had much in common. I could feel her passion for the arts; we were both captivated by the city we live in and shared a funny feeling of wanting to change “things” in our environment.

Karen has her camera on her all the time. Walking down the street with Karen very often turns into a trip of its own. Breathlessly slowing down her pace, looking around, in a moment her scene is photographed.

From Beirut to Turin, London, and Brussels, Karen has exhibited very sensitive, atmospheric, and elemental photos that capture a slice of time in various situations. Even her commercial work brings fresh, organic, and real style to photography in the Middle East.

The following is an interview with Karen Kalou in order to gain insight on how she views her occupation and the path she took to professional photography.

Hiba Mikdashi: I wanted to talk to you about your inspiration as an artist. But for that I would like to know what first led you to photography?

Karen Kalou: For as long as I remember, I have loved photography. As a

child I used to go through all the family albums over and over, wanting to know the stories behind each photo. As a young teenager, I was always the one from my family and friends that was photographing: holidays, gatherings, and unusual moments. Then, at the age of 15, I picked up my father’s old Canon film camera and started to roam around Beirut with it.

After high school I attended the Lebanese American University (LAU) and majored in Communication Arts. Still, growing up in Beirut I never thought that photography is something I could study. At university I took the courses “Women in the Arab World” and “Representations of Women in the Arts and the Media”. It was then that I fell in love with this area of the Social Sciences. So I applied to the Women’s Studies program of the Simone de Beauvoir Institute at Concordia University in Montreal. I was photographing throughout this period of professional



Sample of Karen Kalou’s work.

growth, and experienced a whole new world on my own, from travels to road trips to walks in the rain and snowfall in a place I knew very little about. When I graduated from the program, I should have come back to Beirut, but I always felt that photography was something I just needed to do, so I applied and got accepted into Dawson's Institute of Photography at Dawson College. After graduating from its three-year intensive program, I worked there for a year and then decided that it was time for me to come back to Beirut.

H.M.: You said that when you were younger, you loved finding the story behind every picture. Were you trying to re-narrate?

K.K.: I've always felt that I didn't find photography, photography found me in some strange way. When I was about three years old, my mom would be woken up by me everyday in the early hours of the morning holding a photo album, and I'd ask her who is each person, where they were, what the stories were – questions a child would typically ask at that age. She recalls this, and of course I don't. Today, I have boxes and boxes of photos, negatives, albums, and scattered prints from different periods of my life – my own tangible memories, of loved ones and others that have come and gone in my life. And I do feel that being a photographer is a responsibility. As if I'm somehow the only memory keeper amongst all those I have met in my life. Once, I found a roll of film that had images taken years ago, and which I forgot to develop, when I first started photography at school. The smell of the air, the moment, the actual mood and feeling, I relived them when I developed it. All became alive again. You don't have this in digital photography because it is such an instantaneous camera and its images come in abundance. There's just a different depth with film than in digital photography. Aesthetically speaking as well, film photography has way more tonalities in color; the digital doesn't have that special breathing grain. I mean even when you see an old film shot in the 1970s, 1980s, or in the 1990s there's this richness that digital photography doesn't have today.

H.M.: What inspires you, in general, being in this creative field?

K.K.: Music inspires me. The sea inspires me. Light inspires me. And people who emanate light inspire me.

H.M.: How does this affect you when you shoot, specifically portraits, do you feel any creative difficulties? For example, the inspiration with female portraits, does it differ from a male portrait?

K.K.: No, there's no difference between male and female. I used to always enjoy shooting women more than men, but I've come to learn that men have the same amount of vulnerability and sensitivity as women. I think that doing a portrait of someone in the studio strips them of their environment, the place that they belong to; their comfort zone. In a studio you kind of have the same process of breaking down the barrier with all people. Every person responds to it differently, but the magic is really between myself and the subject, the process of photographing a person is, if not more, as valuable as the final image itself.



Portrait of Karen Kalou

H.M.: But the environment must be different outside of your studio? Have you ever been treated as a female photographer, and not just photographer?

K.K.: I had a client who found our portfolio to be a bit feminine. I've never thought of it like this. What makes it feminine? I guess it's the color palette, it's the way we have our portraits, have our subjects posed in the portraits. It's the aesthetics that has a certain kind of female energy. They just asked if we could do it more neutral, more sober. So it was the first time that it was brought to my attention that our work was a bit feminine. Also, I know that photography is a very competitive field, a very competitive industry. So, men often think they can succeed or dominate through aggressive behavior in some types of jobs. But overall, in the line of work I do, we do not experience gender inequality.

H.M.: Would you say there were any victories or challenges that you've faced, being a female photographer?

K.K.: I think, regardless of whether I'm a man or a woman – I think when you're very honest with yourself and with how you see your world, how you feel, that's when the work speaks the most. That is when there's spirit in the work. The only challenge I can think of is that it's a very hard industry to be in. And you can't be a passive person; you have to be very pro-active and very directive. Photographers running a commercial business need to be a bit firm, strict, honest and cut throat with some jobs. I've been told that's a lot to carry and the "male energy" is quite apparent in how I do business!

H.M.: How would you say your style has matured?

K.K.: Before photography school I was an uninhibited photographer. I didn't know any rules, I just photographed what I felt needed to be documented. I was exploring everything. Then, in photography school there were a lot of rules and guidelines, and you have to follow them. I became somewhat more inhibited, and I hated that. I felt like I lost my eye, my touch, my voice. I lost myself in these strict photographic rules, but, in retrospect, all the things that I learned I took with me and mastered. Once you know the rules, then you can start breaking them because everything becomes more purposeful and intentional.

So, shortly after school I was kind of lost, wondering where to start and what I have to say. You kind of need to re-find your voice. For most of my life I loved photographing people. I think my portraits, even back in school, were somewhat emotional portraits of people, which is really a reflection of myself. I wanted to bring out that side of them. When I graduated from photography school my mood changed, and that period also overlapped with my move to Beirut, which was a huge change for me.

I think landscape photography is a good example of this process of maturity. Ten years ago, landscape photography was not an interesting subject for me. I used to be obsessed with the city – but that within itself I was learning about the city – I was an 'urban girl' and all I wanted to do was stay in the city. Upon my return to Lebanon and having been influenced by the many trips I took in North America, I started to feel the need to leave the city and take drives down south, the Bekaa – areas that were rural and simpler in life and aesthetically. This has translated into me wanting to do more landscape, and understanding it. So I think it's similar to that. The way my work has matured: it's simpler than few years ago, it's a cleaner composition, with softer lines, colors and contrasts. That's my personal aesthetic today. It's more intuitive. It's a way of drawing the divine and sacred from incredible simplicity. You can be emotional without saying so much – it could be a landscape of light and an object graced by light in a home, to actual open landscapes of fields, touched by air and light.

H.M.: Speaking of maturity, what would you say photography has taught you?

K.K.: It has taught me discipline, organization, perfectionism – because I was never the perfectionist type of person. It taught me a way of seeing the world, past its first level of meaning. You start seeing things a little bit differently. Photography is a disciplined art, very precise. It has taught me to shoot, and translate my feelings visually. Being strongly connected with yourself is pivotal to the process of creating imagery.

H.M.: Do you have any favorite photographers? Are you influenced by any female photographers?

K.K.: Yeah, in terms of commercial photography,

I love the work of Annie Leibovitz and Arnold Newman – for their portraiture. There's the French landscape photographer, Marianne Hugonnier, and also Cig Harvey, who is a self-portrait photographer who does a lot of commercial work using herself in all photos. I also absolutely love the intimacy of Elinor Carruci's work – about her life and family. There are so many photographers I respect; hard to name them all.

H.M.: Who's your ideal viewer?

K.K.: I've never asked myself this question actually. I don't think my work is directed towards one community over another. Since my work carries a great sense of emotion, I always hope it can communicate and reflect how others might be feeling too – and perhaps show them another way of seeing their everyday world. I always hope that my parents can read my photos and understand me better through them. In life, like most people, I may put up a lot of fronts and keep a distance sometimes with different aspects of my life – my photography aims to bring the viewer right inside my heart and spirit.

H.M.: You mentioned your preference for analog photography over digital. With technologies such as Instagram becoming popular, how do you feel this is changing photography and how people view it?

K.K.: I don't think it's a bad thing. I love mobile photography. I do it myself. I have an Instagram account. I think it's a great tool because it teaches people to see things in their lives. I think the act of constantly sharing photos of your life does take away from the sacredness of the photo, of special times. That's what digital photography is too. With analog photography people used to carefully tuck away the negatives, the prints, and you might want to show them only when special friends come over. However, in a world like Instagram, it shows that everyone has a unique way of looking at life. I love going through the work of regular people taking images of their everyday life. Some have incredible visions.

H.M.: Is there any challenging photo shoot you can think of that helped change the way you view or conduct your work as a photographer?

K.K.: I'll never forget this. I was in photography school working on studio portraits. I chose to

photograph a friend of mine who was very bubbly, charming, and just a bundle of joy. In the first half an hour she was very giggly, but that's also a defense mechanism somewhat, she's trying to maintain that front. And after 30 minutes or so she started crying in front of me and the camera. She suddenly felt extremely vulnerable and exposed. I learned there and then, that I needed to assure her that she is safe with me. I needed to comfort and soothe her through the process. After that the portraits were so incredibly powerful; she was even more beautiful in this vulnerable real state. It wasn't like 'let's pause' and 'now move your chin this way and that way'. I was photographing her soul.

I find it to be very sacred, connecting with people, reaching them as they reach you too.

H.M.: I'm always eager to ask this to artists: What is beauty for you?

K.K.: Beauty is anything that has a spirit, anything that is multilayered. Beauty is anything that has the elements of fire, air, water. This is beauty for me. I think beauty is a process; everything we go through in life.

H.M.: What are you working on now?

K.K.: I'm working on a series that would be exhibited in a group show that's taking place at the Beirut Exhibition Center. The theme of the show is 'Journeys through our Heritage: Revisiting the Modern Artists'. It's a series of landscapes of light seen in intimate spaces. The curators intended for us to pick an artist born before the 1930s – and base our creations on those artists we've chosen. I drew inspiration from Helen Khal's paintings and private letters. Going through her work, I connected with her vision, and her published private letters really touched me.

Karen's work can be viewed at www.karenandjosssette.com and <http://khalou.blogspot.com>

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A Review of Rasha Kahil's Photographic Practice

Helen Karam

Rasha Kahil¹ is a young Lebanese-born photographer/visual artist who graduated with a B.A. in Graphic Design from the American University of Beirut in 2004, and later pursued an M.A. in Communication Art and Design at the Royal College of Art in London, which she completed in 2009.

She is currently based in London but her work has been exhibited internationally at the Royal Academy of Arts (GSK contemporary), at the British Film Institute, and at the Slick contemporary art fair in Paris, as well as in Beirut where she is represented by the Running Horse Gallery, a contemporary art space.

In the summer of 2011, the Running Horse Gallery displayed 20 photographs from her series of self-portraits titled "In Your Home", one of her most controversial and interesting projects. In the photographs, Kahil appears naked in a domestic

environment: a bedroom, under the sink, a kitchen, a garage, etc. The work was conceived intuitively in 2008 when Kahil was left alone in a friend's apartment in Berlin. She took out her camera and explored the surroundings by shooting still-lives and random shots. Then, using the furniture as a makeshift tripod, she put the self-timer on, stripped bare, and furtively took snapshots of herself naked in the kitchen and the bedroom. The friend later returned home unaware that Kahil had violated his private space with her naked body. This act of trespassing another's privacy with her own body was thrilling and exciting for Kahil and she pursued the project secretly from 2008 through 2011, spanning different cities and different homes. Whenever left alone in someone's home, even if only for a few minutes, she would take out her 35 mm camera and shoot self-portraits of her naked body appropriating the domestic space.¹

Her work is provocative on many levels. First, it is not common to take pictures of people's private homes and publish them without their knowledge. Moreover, it is very unusual to stand naked in such a setting. In her public display of these photos, the private, represented by the intimate spaces and her naked body, are juxtaposed with the public and the line separating art from life is blurred. The artist invites the audience to peer into a stranger's personal space (a reflection of the stranger) but also into her own private body; thus turning the private and mundane (ordinary) into public and sublime. "I am interested in the instances of tension that exist within ordinary moments"²



In Your Home, c-type prints, 90 x 60 cm, 2011

By turning the camera on herself the artist becomes at once the photographer and the object of the lens: “The lens is my mirror, my eye”. She challenges the conventional masculine/feminine representation in mainstream media since the images are not intended for a masculine gaze. Her body is not idealized; it is portrayed as is without artifice. There is no manipulation or calculation on her part – “there’s no time to think of the light, the composition, or the pose”.³ Nothing is set up. It is a spontaneous shot. She is as she is. In most pictures her underwear lacks sophistication – there’s no see-through lingerie or sexy stockings. In other pictures the position of her body conveys rigidity or shame; the photos are not sensual and in some pictures she boldly looks into the lens facing the viewer. The naked body is not put on display for admiration; it is rather banalized and thus made universal.

Her work can be compared to that of Cindy Sherman who dealt with the performative aspects of the body, femininity, and sexuality. However, while Sherman’s images are staged and portray different stereotypes of women using a lot of make-up and props, Kahil’s work is spontaneous and raw and retains an element of honesty. Kahil does not hide behind a disguise, she rather bares it all – she is a genuine reflection of herself. Kahil’s nudity might be seen as a form of exhibitionism and might be considered shocking by some. However, the emphasis is not on the naked body which is “the only constant, a repetitive pattern throughout the series”⁴ but rather on the private homes which hold a personality of their own. Even the title of the photographs is set as the address of the unknown host highlighting the importance of the space in the artist’s journey. It is not the artist’s intent to be provocative in her nudity but rather to document the journey of a body through a spacial and temporal element. The images take the form of a diary and capture a transient moment in a “body’s” life which parallels the transient nature of human relationships. It commemorates the displacement of a body in a social setting, its coming-and-going. Her look in the pictures seems

to simply say: I am here or I was here. It captures a fleeting moment in time.

The artist’s point did come across in her exhibition. The work was warmly received by the Lebanese press and was not dubbed as sensationalist or taboo. The work was also chosen by ArtForum as a critic’s pick for the Beirut exhibition.⁵

The art scene in Beirut is becoming diversified, embracing new art forms and moving away from the portrayal of the war to more contemporary issues such as feminism or individuality that are closer to heart in the modern world. This could reflect the fact that Beirut is becoming more modern itself. As Kahil explains in one of her interviews:

Beirut is quite a liberal city, probably one of the most liberal in the Middle East. It has a thriving art community and a lot of artists have dealt with the issues I have dealt with, so what I’m doing isn’t ground-breaking in that sense at all. I think sometimes it is hard to share my ideas because the last thing I want to be is shocking or sensationalist so I want to be able to show my work in Beirut, in a gallery space and having people respond to it in a positive way. The fact that I could do that there, is a sign that I am able to do what I want without people just dismissing my work for being nude or shocking for the sake of



In Your Home, c-type prints, 90 x 60 cm, 2011

it. In Beirut, there may be people who don't agree with my work but there are people in London who don't either.⁶

The positive reviews that Kahil received for her work are in stark contrast with the death threats hurled at the young Egyptian blogger Aliaa Magda Elmahdy who posted a nude photo of herself on her blog and on Twitter as a protest against the ban on nude models in universities and books. On her blog Aliaa Elmahdy writes:

Put the models who worked at the Faculty of Fine Arts until the early 1970s on trial. Hide art books and smash nude archaeological statues, then take your clothes off and look at yourselves in the mirror. Burn your self-despised bodies in order to get rid of your sexual complexes forever, before directing your sexist insults at me or denying me the freedom of expression.⁷

In the controversial photo, Aliaa poses nude in a full-frontal position wearing only black thigh-high stockings and red ballerinas. She does not stand demurely, but is rather bold in her stature: her right leg rests on a wooden stool as if asserting power and she stares directly into the camera as an act of resistance and rebellion. The photograph sparked outrage in the conservative Muslim community and her blog was bombarded with a wave of insults and death threats, with some labeling her a "prostitute" and others calling her mentally-deranged.⁸

Both Arab artists Kahil and Elmahdy have used their naked bodies in their self-portraits as a form of expression; however the first was praised while the other was shunned. Does this reflect the state of women in the respective societies? This alone does not explain why Kahil's art was accepted while Elmahdy was not. There are other factors to consider when looking at the diverging reactions in the Arab community. The setting of the photographs, the context in which they were represented and which allows for interpretation of the work are important. Kahil's work was exhibited in a contemporary art gallery, targeting a specific audience. Even though Beirut has witnessed a rise in the art scene, art is

still confined to an elitist circle that includes the art collectors, critics, amateurs, and the artists themselves. The interest in the art scene is limited to a specific group of people and as such the exposure of the artist is limited to the people who frequent those settings and who share similar interests. Kahil's work probably went under the radar of the extremist fundamentalist groups that exist in Lebanon. She may have remained unknown to many of the fundamentalists who would have violently objected to her work and censored it (the issue of censorship in Lebanon is still critical).

By contrast, Elmahdy's photograph gained notoriety through the pervasive use of the Internet and the social media, mainly Twitter and her own blog. As such, it was able to reach a larger audience. It is also important to note that Twitter played an important role in the Arab revolutions and is used by many Egyptians. Moreover, the content of the photographs should be closely examined with regard to the extent of the nudity and how much flesh is shown. In all of her pictures Kahil never exposes her sex. She wears underwear covering her pubis; only her breasts are bare. This might be a form of censorship. As the artist explains in one of her interviews, she sometimes practices self-censorship. In comparison, Elmahdy exposes herself stark naked. Her stance is bold, defiant, and shameless. Her legs are parted to further reveal her most intimate part. This revealing representation of the female form in itself is quite shocking and provocative considering that most images in mainstream media depict nude women in a somewhat modest demeanor with their sex hidden and their legs tightly together.

Though it is refreshing to see the work of an artist as Kahil exhibited in Beirut, more women artists should be encouraged to express themselves freely without suffering from any form of censorship, especially self-censorship. Performative art and the feminist nude can play an important role in shaping society and in serving as a tool of enlightenment and modernization.

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ENDNOTES

- * For more information on Rasha Kahil's biography see <http://www.rashakahil.com/info.html>
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The Passport of the 21st Century

Farah Berrou

This is an excerpt from Farah Berrou's visual culture final project research. Berrou graduated with a B.S. in Graphic Design from LAU in 2012. She is currently a junior designer at Leo Burnett.

As part of a senior graphic design research thesis, I investigated fifteen Lebanese graphic designers active on Twitter. Analysis was based on their profiles' general appearance and their Twitter activity over a span of one week. Seven of the fifteen selected designers were young Lebanese women, living in Lebanon or abroad. My analysis aimed at uncovering whether designers attempt to visually represent themselves differently from other professionals and, if so, how they go about doing it. The designers' approach to the digital world through a visual profile can double as a form of identification; however, they have the freedom to customize it to their liking. In contrast with official forms of identification that must follow specific rules, digital platforms allow a designer to create the persona of their choice using only images and

text. The launch of such digital sites has led to another version of the self, existing separate from the tangible entity and giving rise to a virtual version of a person's identity. The identity created, shared, and personified on these platforms is one that should be carefully crafted and controlled by the individual since such sites have become a source for information, interaction, and exchange. This information can, in turn, be used from a professional standpoint, identifying possible candidates for job vacancies; their profiles create a window to the side of them they want to put on display.

Through the choice of avatar, bio, and profile background, the designers can present themselves however they see fit. In order to separate themselves from the millions of other users who have the



ability to be “pseudo-designers” with available templates and applications, designers must put in extra effort into making their digital profile aesthetically pleasing.

Barbara Kruger, a feminist artist who started out in the early 1980s, created works that combine visuals and typography. Her most prominent pieces address the male gaze; a concept that revolves around the objectification of women in art. They were the passive subjects that catered to a male audience. Susan Sontag (1977) maintains that, “it [photography] means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge – and therefore, like power”. The mere act of being able to choose how to represent one’s self is a reclaiming of power. Rather than being the portrayed, the artist’s subject, or the male viewer’s source of visual stimulation, the female designer constructing her own profile chooses how she wants to be seen. The ability to define one’s own self is also an act of self-definition in a patriarchal world that tries to categorize individuals according to criteria through strict instruction. Regardless of social norms and dress codes, when online, a female designer can be a cement block sitting on a sand dune if that is how

she wants to be seen; she is not required to adhere to any regulations. There are no constraints when one is actively creating one’s own avatar in digital space and there is no permanence in its existence. The identity is constantly in flux since all the elements that create the whole can be changed with a few clicks.

If the fundamental exercise of power over individuals is their own confessional interpretations of themselves, then a study of networks of power inevitably leads to an analysis that dismantles technologies of the self.

Jacques Lacan’s “mirror stage” refers to the development of a sense of self, which is of a dual nature. It is a mental recognition of the physical existence of the body that combines the real and the imaginary or abstract. When referring to a Twitter profile, the profile is the mirror allowing for designers to complete the internalized mental image with their corporeal identity. Most of the time, they are the photographers of that image too, effectively making them the photographers and models; this creates an out-of-body experience as they are the subjects and the evaluators of the final image. The

gaze, or awareness that one is being viewed, is self-inflicted but also reciprocated, since those that they interact with online also use pictures to represent themselves. Therefore, the picture selected along with the general portrayal of one’s profile is how an individual decides to present himself/herself to the partially selected audience.

This portrayal is a manipulated version of the self, which simultaneously attempts to keep the



audience interested. As designers, the photograph can be used to show their skills, their creativity, their personality or all of the above. For example, one designer's avatar, photographed from above, captures her in action as she tosses three beanbags into the air. The beanbags have three icons from the Adobe creative suite, a package of programs used by the majority of designers worldwide. Using them as signifiers, she is communicating what she does in a visual language, one she should be fluent with, to those who see it. Only those familiar with the industry would recognize these symbols so it is clear that she is addressing a specific audience. It can be said that she "plays" with these professional programs the same way that she is shown playing with the beanbags. Two other examples are designers that used their own work as avatars; one is a geometric module and another is an illustrated cartoon. Both cases are the designers' own work thus presenting it as their signature but also exhibiting their artistic style. These examples show how some designers use their digital profiles to generate new meanings about them as people; they are visually linked to design and stand out in a sea of "normal" conventional portraits.

Another facet of digital platforms is a shared photograph. These photos are like a visual diary. Allowing others to see one's daily activities or join in the documentation of events that occur in one's life aids in forming this online persona. This visual diary gives others the chance to have a sneak peek into the life of a designer, or the life they would like to appear to have. It can be used as a subtle attempt in displaying work and direct self-promotion. It is not aggressive or forced but still openly accessible to those who are interested. The designer is skilled in photographic manipulation as well as possessing a keen eye for all things visual. He/she knows what makes an image capture an audience's attention, which may or may not be their goal on a social network where they share information.

Digital platforms encourage iconography of the self and how each designer presents their image visually. The persona they represent digitally could have an effect on how others may view them as individuals as well as their creative identity, placing judgment on talent and professional disposition. Representing one's self as an object or illustration versus an actual photograph can give different impressions to the viewers. Disconnecting from physical form could be a way of projecting a side of their personality that can only be conveyed as such. The choice of avatar as their signature reflects how they want to define themselves as visual persons: when given the freedom to express who one is in a small icon, there is so much possibility but also uncountable interpretations. However, this is the job of a designer: to express one idea in a concise visual execution.

The way in which individuals deal with identity is being altered by technology: they are forced to think about themselves in terms of images and visual representation. Studying graphic designers in particular is interesting due to the fact that they are the first generation that utilizes such tools, in the professional realm or otherwise. Because of the availability of tools that allow for anyone to exercise their creativity, it is important to differentiate themselves as designers in the digital world and prove that they have an added value to offer. It is the designers' job to create a visual that corresponds with a specific desired perception, but also to do it better than everyone else. As a result, it is worthy of note to see how they execute such a task when the product they are presenting is the one they know best: themselves.

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Obituary: Farewell Rita

Guita Hourani

Dr. Rita G. Sabat, Assistant Professor of International Affairs at the Faculty of Law and Political Sciences, Notre Dame University (NDU)-Louaizé, Lebanon passed away peacefully on December 29, 2013, after a long battle with breast cancer. Dr. Sabat is survived by her daughter Samira Haymen, her husband Jad Fadel-Hassan, her father George, her mother Yolande Saber, her brothers Toni and Gilbert, and their families. Dr. Sabat was born in March of 1974 in Lebanon to (Amin) George Sabat and Yolande Saber. She studied in Lebanon, Cyprus, and the USA and received a Ph.D. in International Affairs from Florida International University (2010). Since her appointment at NDU, she taught courses in the areas of international institutions, gender, non-governmental organizations, and development. As the only female professor in the faculty to date, she played an important role in developing both gender balance and a gendered approach to teaching in the Department of Government and International Relations at NDU. Dr. Sabat conducted extensive field research on the women's movement in Lebanon in the areas of human rights and peace and security, and on the use of the arts in peace-building for the Peace-Building Academy. She assisted in the design of methodologies of research for several projects and proposals including one on women-owned business, discrimination and corruption, and on conflict resolution through community-level case studies in Tripoli and Baalbek. Dr. Sabat served as a member of the Regional Network on Women, Peace, and Security, which aims at developing policies in the MENA region according to UNSC Resolution 1325, and was a member of the Technical Task-Force of the National Gender-Based Violence Unit, which is headed by the Lebanese Ministry of Social Affairs



Rita Sabat, 1974-2013.

and Lebanese-based NGOs, and an advisory board member for Abaad Resource Center for Gender Equality. She was also a senior consultant to the Lebanese Development Network (LDN) and its Carthage Center for Research and Information (CCRI) where she served as gender and human rights specialist. Between 2012 and 2013, and despite her illness, she presented her research on gender equality, women's non-governmental organizations, violence against women, and gendered human security in Lebanon at international conferences in Switzerland, the USA, India, and the Emirates. With LDN/CCRI she fulfilled her role as a gender expert for a Swiss labor policy project in five MENA

countries (Lebanon, Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar and the UAE) and in the same capacity for an International Labor Organization (ILO) project assessing the employability of the Syrian Refugees in Lebanon. Dr. Sabat has recently published a chapter entitled “Translating International Gender Equality Norms: The Case of Combating Violence against Women in Lebanon” in *Feminist Strategies in International Governance* edited by Elisabeth Prügl, Güelay Caglar, and Suzanne Swindle (Routledge Press 2012). She also guest edited an issue of *al-raida* on “Gender-Based Violence in the Arab World (2010-2011)”. Not long before she passed away, she spoke at a panel organized jointly by the Community Service Office (CSO) and the Human Rights Club (HRC) at NDU on the role of religion in stopping gender discrimination and at another event in New York co-hosted by the International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN), the International Peace Institute (IPI), and the Norwegian Mission to the UN where she focused on the connection between gender based violence in Lebanon and international insecurity.

The news of Dr. Sabat’s passing fell hard on her family, friends, colleagues, and students, who used social media extensively to mourn her and express their sorrow. There isn’t enough space in this obituary to share all that has been written and continues to be written on Rita’s Facebook timeline. It would probably suffice to mention some of the attributes that characterize these posts, including: her being genuine, passionate, giving, caring, committed, selfless, humble, enduring, spiritual, joyful, humorous, a good friend, a good teacher, and an excellent listener.

According to a friend of hers, who spoke to her four weeks before she left this world, Dr. Sabat stated that she knows God’s will and that she is ready to accept it. All of those who knew her through this and other ordeals testified to her brave, gracious and collected manners in dealing with life’s challenges. Another friend also stated that prior to her departure and although breathless from failing lungs, she spoke with deep passion and concern about the career of a friend/colleague of hers.

It is not surprising that the web posts mentioned above bestowed upon her the best attributes for, according to one of her students, Rita’s favorite quote was “work for a cause, not for applause; live life to express, not to impress; don’t strive to make your presence noticed, just make your absence felt”. Her absence will surely be missed.

With Dr. Sabat’s passing, the gender equality and human rights movement in the Middle East in general and Lebanon in particular loses a promising scholar and a staunch activist. A group of friends, students and colleagues, in Lebanon, Switzerland, and the USA, is in the process of establishing an endowment in her name that would help carry on her most endearing cause that “women’s rights should be a foreign policy priority”.

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Book Review

A Girl and Her Room, by Rania Matar, New York: Umbrage Editions, 2012.

REVIEWED BY MEHRNOUSH SHAFIEI

Rania Matar has done the impossible. Her photographic project is a grand undertaking by any measure; as the title suggests, she has managed to capture an elusive space that is at once fiercely protected and highly meaningful. She has succeeded in photographing girls in their real-life bedrooms with an unflinching gaze that feels neither invasive nor exploitative. Part of the book's power derives from the fact that Matar fully gained the trust of her subjects and was privy to their private worlds. This trust allows her to deliver a powerful précis of a life transition that sits uncomfortably astride two distinct life phases – the liminal space between girlhood and womanhood. Matar's lens brings the fuzzy tension that exists in-between into focus and gives readers a visceral photographic narrative of this transitional 'moment.'

The choice of bedroom as setting is telling; this is a space where the girls have a unique ability to exert a certain degree of control and autonomy. The effect is candid and revealing. *A Girl and Her Room* was inspired by Matar's own home, when she was photographing her own teenage daughters. Observing them and their friends she became intrigued with how these young girls construct images of self vis-à-vis their bedrooms. This led to a desire to distill the set of associative expectations and tensions that accompany the very idea of being a 'girl.' In many ways, there is a subtle acknowledgement by the subjects themselves that there is something significant to be captured, a tacit recognition they are worthy of observation. Arielle from Massachusetts: "As teenagers we are surrounded by judgment, responsibility, confusion, pressure, and the desire to break free from all these stresses in society. My room is a place where I go to escape these burdensome feelings and just relax".

The aesthetic tenor of the photographs oscillates between various degrees of subversiveness; some are clearly defiant, some more guarded. Some exude confidence, marked by a physical and sartorial ease as they face the camera directly, while others only display timid, awkwardly turned-in feet. Despite this gradient, there is palpable similarity to all of the photographs – a distinct steeliness, even as some girls appear shy and demure.

The 132 pages of captions and images capture a gendered moment in time – the images tell us far more about the transition that is taking place than pages of description could do. To anchor the pictures in a conversation about gender, youth and selfhood, the book includes two relatively short prefatory essays by Susan Minot and Anne Tucker. Taken together, they are a powerful combination.

Across Borders

Since the order of the photographs vacillates easily between Lebanon and the United States, it is impossible to write about Matar's book without considering geography. An anthropological reading of the images reveals the high degree of overlap between the local and global in terms of self-representation and ideas of femininity. The images work in tandem and the landscapes diffuse into each other, producing what appears to be a seamless narrative. Many times, the reader cannot readily pinpoint the location on a given page until examining the caption, an effect Matar consciously pursued.

Some images capture wonderfully frou-frou bedrooms that are filled, almost to brimming with cotton-candy pinks and purples. Other rooms are bare. Though some rooms appear more cluttered than others, the global hegemonic culture is all present in this book. Amal, who lives in a Palestinian refugee camp, has a relatively naked room save for a closet decorated by cutout stickers of Disney pop star Hanna Montana. "I LOVE Hanna Montana and Selena Gomez...I love that they are pretty and successful and that they dress nice. I wish I looked like them and hope I can be famous someday". Certain objects are repeated across rooms and borders,

and in their repetition become swollen with meaning. Posters, nail polish, makeup, books and photographs all serve as general points of commonality between the girls' rooms. The most commonly repeated object is the mirror; the ultimate symbol of reflection, literally and figuratively. The objects are not the only points of commonality. A close reading of the captions reveals how the girls are similarly grappling with proscribed societal roles – the pressure to get married, to live up to standards of beauty, and to adopt outward displays of religiosity.

Material Girls

One of the most interesting functions of the book is that it examines the highly complex relationship between object and self in the framing of identity and selfhood. Matar's book ultimately drives home the idea that the transition is rooted in an earthly materialism. Indeed, *A Girl and Her Room* reveals a certain Proustian pleasure in objects – the very room itself is given equal status with the subject being photographed. Objects are insignia, and reflect an imagined sense of self.

The book's strength lies in its ability to draw attention to how objects are displayed in order to both mask and ventriloquize the girls' own 'girlness.' For instance, the photo chosen as the cover of the book is striking for its juxtaposition of a soft lilac-colored toy and a flashy fuchsia bra. Here uneasy anxieties are unpacked as traditional emblems of femininity are displayed in contrast with objects of childhood. Matar brilliantly captures the unresolved sense that the girls are torqued by forces that simultaneously restrain them in their girlhood and propel them into womanhood. Becca P. Brookline from Massachusetts sums this up: "I am a 'girly girl'. I like being with friends, watching movies, reading. I LOVE hair, makeup, clothes, and boys. Sometimes I want to be treated like an adult and sometimes like a six-year-old". Matar's phenomenological approach, wittingly or unwittingly, recalls architectural research trends that focus on how the inanimate 'things' that make up our environment are vital clues in understanding human cognition and development. Michael Arbib refers to such a relationship as "extended phenotype".

Through the lens of an "extended phenotype," you can perhaps understand to a certain degree the continuum that exists between the bedrooms even while they are oceans apart. Anna F. of Winchester, Massachusetts articulates a rather sophisticated awareness: "My room was always a place independent of the world, geographically and temporally ambiguous, floating separate from the rest of my life and creating an architectural womb were I was most myself".

Perhaps Matar's training as an architect influenced this understanding in some way. As the photographer concedes in a personal statement at the end of the book, "The room was a metaphor, an extension of the girl, but also the girl seemed to be part of the room, to fit in, just like everything else in the room".

What is remarkable about the book is that Matar manages to problematize the idea of 'girl' as an identity that is unified or homogenous, even as many of the pictures appear strikingly similar. It is precisely in the variety of ways that girlhood can be acted out that Matar drives home the idea that the continuity is linked to a shared set of experiences and a loaded materialism. Taken individually, the girls are all unique and memorable, even as the forces acting on them are revealed to be the same. Womanhood (gender) is embodied and though the bedroom is a private setting, being a girl is not a solely private concern – it is a gendered experience, very much acted out socially.

In the final analysis, Matar shows that these are gendered rooms, gendered selves.