PAMELA KARIMI, *WOMEN, ART, FREEDOM. ARTISTS AND STREET POLITICS IN IRAN*

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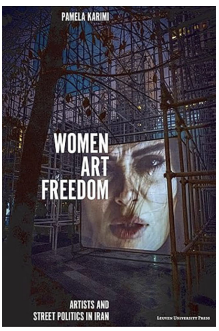

Reviewed by
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Beginning in September 2022, women in Iran and around the world rose up against gendered violence and oppression under the Islamic regime. The protests erupted after the brutal death of Jina Mahsa Amini – a twenty-two-year-old Iranian Kurdish woman who died in police custody after being arrested for allegedly violating hijab regulations. United by the Kurdish slogan *Jin, Jiyan, Azadi – Woman, Life, Freedom* – protesters called for an end to systemic repression and the overthrow of the Iranian regime. As the title of her book *Women, Art, Freedom* already suggests, art historian Pamela Karimi centers the vital role that art played (and still plays) for this political movement. At first glance, replacing "life" with "art" in the book's title may seem bold. However, throughout the chapters, Karimi compellingly argues: What distinguishes the recent revolution from previous protests in Iran is not only "its feminist perspective and the remarkable courage of the youth", but also "the unprecedented volume of visual imagery and art it has produced" (p. 9). That is why, from the outset, Karimi asserts her strong belief that "[m]ore than any texts or reasoned arguments, it was the universal language of art that potently conveyed the essence of this unfolding uprising" (p. 11).

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What images remain when we think of the 2022 *Woman, Life, Freedom* movement? From an outside perspective, the movement is mainly associated with the global spread of visual content on social media. In a recent contribution to *21: Inquiries into Art, History, and the Visual* Kerstin Schankweiler and I analyzed the widely shared memes that significantly fueled and shaped the protests, including selfie-videos of people around the world cutting their hair in solidarity with the Iranian women.[1] However, Karimi offers a different and far less familiar perspective to readers outside Iran by focusing on the site-specific contributions of artists within the country. Her primary concern is not the global distribution of protest images online, but on local artistic interventions. Through in-depth interviews with artists, curators, art students, and academics in Iran, the book gives an invaluable insight into the intersections of art and political resistance on the ground. Karimi investigates how artistic street politics functioned as both a form of defiance and a catalyst for change: before, during, and after the 2022 revolution.

The book is structured around ten thematic "acts, each representing a distinct performative quality" (p. 41). By invoking the language of theatre, Karimi once again emphasizes her focus on "the physical body's central role in art making" (p. 33), highlighting the work of artists who are primarily engaged with physical interventions in public space. The large number of chapters makes the structure of the book appear confusing at times, especially because the referenced strategies seem to blend into each other. For greater clarity and to avoid repetition, a stronger focus would have been helpful here.

The majority of chapters deals with the question of how physical performance is used as a tool for political intervention. *Act One. Parading the Body on Sidewalks* explores how women in Iran have "tactically employed their bodies to draw attention to the injustices of street politics" (p. 59). Now famous is the 2019 performance by activist Vida Movahed who stood on a utility box in Tehran, unveiled, while waving her hijab tied to a stick. Her image became an icon of the protest against mandatory veiling. The *artivist* practices discussed in this chapter show how the public presence of the female body alone can become a powerful, yet highly risky, political instrument in Iran. As a more subtle example of the non-conforming female body in public space, Karimi discusses a performance by Nasrin Shahbeigy. In response to the death of Mahsa Amini, the artist rolled her body along the streets, parks, and other busy places around her home city of Mashhad. What might seem like a trivial performance elsewhere, in the Iranian context, Karimi argues, this unconventional visibility of the female body can be interpreted as an "attempt to reclaim urban spaces that women are barred from accessing freely" (p. 66). Similar art performances are also analyzed

1 Kerstin Schankweiler and Verena Straub, Bildproteste für die Freiheit im Iran. Die Memefication des Widerstands in den Sozialen Medien, in: *21: Inquiries into Art, History, and the Visual* 4/1, 2023, 97–110.

in *Act Five. Reenacting Street Battles*. Here, Karimi discusses the film *Until...* (2023) by Tanin Torabi, which uses reenactment to capture the energy and essence of the uprising, one year after its outbreak. Filmed only with the front and back camera of a mobile phone, the film shows four people, amongst them women with uncovered hair, who seem to be part of a protest on the streets. In short, breathless interactions, the camera is handed from one person to the next, conveying an unsettling atmosphere. Karimi argues that instead of just reenacting a street battle,

> *Until...* could be seen as an act of street protest in its own right. [...] The film exemplifies how real-life activism can be presented as art. The very act of participating in the film was risky: the performers could have faced arrest and interrogation for their unveiled hair and their unconventional behavior both on camera and under the watchful eye of the city around them. (p. 147)

Once again, the fusion of art and activism becomes very tangible here.

In contrast to performances in which artists put their bodies and lives at risk by becoming visible in public space, several chapters discuss how some artists in Iran choose strategies of anonymity and invisibility instead. Particularly compelling are the examples Karimi explores in *Act Two. Hiding in Plain Sight*. Many artists and art students joined the protests by sharing photographs of themselves with their faces obscured by written protest slogans, stained bandages, or their unveiled long hair. The choice to remain anonymous is not solely for reasons of safety. As many tragic cases illustrate, "even under the cloak of anonymity, artists are not safe" in Iran (p. 74). Rather, anonymity reflects a deeper desire among artists to dissolve individual identity and become part of a collective that often operates beyond visibility. Karimi's exploration of prison art is especially striking, emphasizing its deep-rooted tradition in Iran and its renewed significance within the *Woman, Life, Freedom* movement. Behind bars and mostly hidden from the public eye, political prisoners have been engaging in subtle, often abstract, and opaque performances, which have "allowed young detainees to create a space they can call their own" (p. 77). In Iranian prisons, conversations with guards inspire rap songs, at mealtimes "the inmates might use poetic and coded language to reimagine their situation or to mock the lives of their guards" (p. 82). This very unique form of theater has also been described as *Truth Theater* or *Life Theater*. It demonstrates how art has become a survival strategy for many protesters, or, in other words: how "art" and "life" are inextricably linked.

Shifting focus from bodily performances, several chapters also explore the significance of archival practices, the role of poetry and language, or material interventions. *Act Six. Documenting Urban Unrest*, for instance, examines how methods of documentation and

archiving have increasingly emerged as artistic strategies, following the concept of "resistance through recording" (p. 159). *Act Seven. Camouflaging Defiant Words*, on the other hand, explores the significance of the written word, with a particular emphasis on the contested visibility of graffiti in Tehran. In a similar way, *Act Three* examines the *Staging of Protest Props*, highlighting how everyday objects became potent symbols of resistance during the uprising. Here, Karimi explores not only the prominence of headscarves and women's hair as protest icons, but also the striking use of menstrual pads, which anonymous activists attached to security cameras in a Tehran metro train. Beyond obstructing surveillance, these flower-like objects introduced traditionally feminine – and often taboo – items into public spaces, challenging societal norms. Other material interventions explicitly draw on Iran's long history in visual politics. In *Act Four. Reclaiming Old Themes for New Protest Arts*, for instance, Karimi discusses how the symbolism of blood repurposes the regime's own visual propaganda. At the height of the *Woman, Life, Freedom* protests, several fountains in Tehran were stained red to resemble blood. Similarly, art universities used blood-like fluids on classroom floors, doors, and bathroom mirrors to protest the regime's brutality. Following the Iranian Revolution, red-colored fountains were used by the regime to signify national sacrifice and unity. Now, activists have reclaimed this imagery to expose state violence, transforming it into "a powerful assertion of resistance against government oppression" (p. 126). Similar tactics of challenging the regime's visual politics are discussed in *Act Nine. Opposing Art with Art in City Spaces*. In this chapter, Karimi examines how art is used as a means of resistance against state-sanctioned or prescribed artistic expressions, producing works that directly challenge and disrupt them.

A theme that runs throughout the book is how religious matters and freedom of expression are constantly negotiated amongst artist-activists in Iran. *Act Eight. Clashing with Faith in Broad Daylight* sharpens the focus on these issues and explores the complicated and multifaceted "clashes" between issues of faith, individual choice, and gender. Countering accusations of Islamophobia – which have been raised in some Western intellectual circles against the *Woman, Life, Freedom* movement – Karimi presents a very nuanced portrayal of the resistance and its artistic expressions. Particularly noteworthy is her extended focus beyond "secular-minded artists" and her inclusive consideration of "believer artists" who have been part of the movement as well (p. 203): a fact that is sometimes obscured by international media coverage. Even if they choose to wear the hijab themselves, artists like Mehri Rahimzadeh fully support women who struggle for their right against mandatory veiling.

Karimi's focus on offline interventions in Tehran is well justified and offers a much-needed corrective to the over-emphasis of the importance of digital protest for the *Woman, Life, Freedom* movement. Nevertheless, one might question: Is it even possible to

consider art practices inside Iran without their digital mediation, without their dissemination and transformation on social media? Most activists and artists in Iran rely on social media not only to document their public interventions but also to reach a broader international audience, urging them to "be our voice" and amplify their messages. Karimi herself acknowledges the fact that her main source of getting in contact with artists in Tehran was Instagram. Instead of treating the two spheres as separate, a more insightful approach might have been to analyze *artivist* practices offline and online as inherently intertwined. This limitation becomes especially apparent in the final chapter, *Act Ten. Forecasting the Future*, where Karimi presents a series of case studies exploring potential futures for Iran. To fully grasp "the ways art can predict, envision, and even shape the future, especially in contexts where legal and political avenues for change are closed off" (p. 239), a deeper exploration of online spaces – their potential and risks – could have provided additional, and perhaps alternative, insights.

Despite this, *Women, Art, Freedom* offers a valuable perspective on how artists have been at the forefront of this movement for change. Now, more than two years after the uprising and in view of the current situation in Iran – where wearing the hijab is even more surveilled in public, where many activists have been punished, lost their lives or remain in prison – it is impossible to predict what direction dissident art will take. What Karimi's study ultimately demonstrates is that, even in the face of a grim political reality, activist art in Iran has continually reinvented itself for decades, embracing new and creative forms of resistance. In the end, her book stands as a powerful (and hopeful) reminder of the enduring resilience of artistic expression.