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THE POLITICS OF PERFORMANCE IN IRAN NEGATING THE PUBLIC ORDER AESTHETICALLY: A STUDY OF THREE FORMS OF PUBLIC PERFORMANCE IN IRAN

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This paper aims to analyze three forms of physical performance by artists and activists in Iran. These performances consider the act of performing as an "action" and "process" through which one can highlight the entanglements of the power structure that governs the non-theatrical sphere. From this point of view, these public performances have political and performative values that disturb the public laws and norms in addition to their ability to produce a form of "play" and "confrontation" with the public order, ridiculing the human apparatus that is responsible for maintaining that order in its current form.

The three performances that I chose deal with the body as a cultural subject, which is produced by the sovereign and governed by its bio-politics. This makes the performances a means to question the limits of the subject and an attempt to shake its boundaries.

The examples used - the performances - took place in non-theatrical spheres (train, jungle and city), places where human activity is monitored by the state and maintained by social norms. These places are under direct sovereign control where mobility and public activity are governed textually (laws) and materially (police).

The previous hegemonic methods make these performances a form of "hidden theater" where the "oppressed" use the characteristics of the "space" to produce narratives and real events that do not aim to create *catharsis* but on the contrary aim towards social action.

Last year social media was flooded with images from Iran's protests; one saw women in the streets taking off their veils while crowds were cheering and shouting "Death to the Supreme Leader." These protests represented a direct confrontation with state institutions and the Revolutionary Guards - which practice violence outside the law. In other words, these protests in which a citizen's "body" was endangered were a means to question the state's biopolitics that is comprised of political mechanisms that restrain and govern an individual, rendering him a cultural subject by controlling his mobility as well as his public behavior, at the same time punishing those who do wrong by manufacturing vague legal charges against them.⁽¹⁾

The performances - the actions that will be studied - have characteristics of performance art. Even though it is hard to define, Richard Schechner sets some theoretical principles that can help researchers in the field. He states that performance is, "*Showing doing*": *pointing to, underlining, and displaying doing*. He adds that "*Explaining 'showing doing' is performance studies*."⁽²⁾ Accordingly, this research can be classified under the category of performance studies in which the act of writing is a way of understanding the phenomena of performance not only aesthetically but also culturally and politically, since one performs in a "space" that has its own specific norms and forms of appearance.

This political value of one's performance is related to the fact that the performer's body doesn't undergo the process of *disembodiment* where "any reference to the actor's bodily being-in-the-world must be exorcised from his material body in order to produce the performative generation of materiality."⁽³⁾ In other words, the performer's body maintains its "being in the world" as a sovereign subject and doesn't liberate itself from the political and cultural conditions that nurture him as a citizen. Furthermore, the performer questions the oppressive conditions that utilize and dominate his body. These conditions are the product of biopolitics defined by Michel Foucault as the politicization of "life" and "death" where the subject governed by the sovereign decision maker that decides who can live and who can die.⁽⁴⁾ This biopolitics extends to the level where it sets the public role of the subjects since they follow a specific political "script" that defines how they walk, move, interact, and work.

This "script" and its roles are represented in everyday life and national celebrations which are ritualized. This is because clothes, public behavior and any form of public appearance, symbolically represent Iran's religious code. This makes any ritualized form of "appearing" as "a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which implies continuity with the past."⁽⁵⁾

This paper deals with the problematic issue between the performer's body and political power by highlighting the forms of "mal-citation," whether they are words or acts. These "mal-citations" are considered from a performative point of view as nonserious utterances or empty statements.⁽⁶⁾ Yet, this nonseriousness has a political value, since the misconduct and malperformance reveal the political efforts by the state to regulate the "body."

These entanglements within the performance emerge as a form of negating and facing the

process of abjection, where the abject is “that which has been expelled from a body and therefore it has transgressed the boundary between the interior and exterior.”⁽⁷⁾ From a cultural point of view, the bodies of the performers are abject and must be hidden and disposed. They belong “outside” the national coherent body, the sovereign, therefore, fights against them, exposes them to violence and imprisons them because they threaten the coherent “inside” that follows the “script” and the norms of obedience.

The disappearance or disposing of the abjects is carried out by laws and human devices that practice abjection publicly and secretly, like what happened to the Canadian activists who were exposed to violence because they threatened “national security.”⁽⁸⁾

Inside these dynamic relations of power I located two variables that maintain the performance and gives it its meaning. The first is the body as “flesh” that has political and cultural value and is subject to sovereign power. The second is sovereignty which is a set of symbolic and material efforts that creates and maintains public order by upholding and regulating public roles.

The specificity of performance studies lies in the fact that variables change all the time and affect each other in a post-structuralist sense because both are roles that are being “played” and every time they are played they change the “norm.” This change is related to the concept of “citationality;” where every time a role is played it faces small changes no matter who is playing the role, in addition to the fact that there is no original form for a perfect role whether it is played by “citizens” or “police.” These changes in roles leave us with a small space of improvisation that could either alter the role or create a violent response which aims to re-establish the public order.

Performance as a process reveals the weak aspects of the “norm” and calls upon cultural phenomena that creates misunderstanding and contradictions inside the normative system. This misunderstanding drives the will to resist and leads to the development of new means of protest.⁽⁹⁾ This can be seen in Iran where activists were arrested for dancing to the song “Happy” by Pharrell Williams. The state ordered a punishment of 91 lashes and a six months suspended prison sentence for everyone who danced to the song, saying that “they participated in a video that threatened public morals.”⁽¹⁰⁾

This paper suggests that the biopolitics of domination and the roles of obedience affect peoples’ public performance and is responsible for standardizing it, especially under the threat of being killed or arrested making citizen-performers adapt their public acts, limited by the possibility of facing state violence. In order to protest these limits, they create symbolic acts that confront the state and produce political and aesthetic values that question obedience to authority.

First: Playing Against the State

The Iranian propaganda machine always tries to deflect attention away from the state’s repression of artistic expressions by hosting different festivals for theater and performance arts in an aim to create an image of “art” as an aesthetic product. Additionally, “playing” outside state control is strictly forbidden with the use of fear as a factor to govern public life. This constant surveillance produces forms of behavior which Foucault calls “carceral society” where the population spies on each other and where “the enemy of the sovereign and social enemy is replaced by an evil that carries with it danger, non-order, and madness.”⁽¹¹⁾

These characteristics of enmity can also be applied to performers as enemies of public order, those who question the assigned roles and the surveillance system and the public roles that are legitimized by the state, leading to the creation of a distance between the “citizen” and his “official role.” However since fear compels individuals to continue playing their assigned roles, this leads to what is known as a “cynical performer,” when one doesn’t believe in his act and doesn’t care what other people think of him.⁽¹²⁾ What concerns us is the first part of the definition where one doesn’t believe in what he “performs” as this results in people abandoning their cynical roles and protesting, breaking laws and norms, and putting themselves in danger. This is

what happened in 2009 when protestors were inflicted with violence because they rejected their roles of obedience.

Sovereign power and its effect highlights the importance of “play” which is integrated within the performance. In particular, its dangerous aspects are related to negating established norms and producing new ones since the “players” set their own roles and demand self-sovereignty to distinguish themselves from the “public.” In doing so, they redefine the “place” and break its rules, since “inside the circle of playing, daily life norms are worthless.”⁽¹³⁾ This leads us into the nonserious nature of play which doesn’t establish a new order but has critical value. This factor acted as a guide when I chose the examples for this study; I took nonserious forms of public performances and tried to highlight their political value and the ways in which they question public order and sometimes negate it.

It should be clear that I based my study on photos and recordings of each performance. First, each choice was made for conceptual reasons since the performance cannot be repeated. The second conclusion is related to the construction of these performances; they are designed to be seen not only by the “real audience” but also by those who didn’t witness the performance as a representation of the politics of disappearance applied by the state, making these performances go beyond the traditional meaning of “art.” They can be considered as an “aesthetic event” that disturbs the order, shedding light on forms of domination.

Second: Reshaping the Borders of the Invisible Body

In 2012, the artist Shirin Abedinirad⁽¹⁴⁾ with the help of a group of performers reshaped the sphere of one of the metro wagons in Tehran. When the metro took off, they started the event “Runway in a Subway” where they used the passengers as an involuntary audience. Shirin asked each one of them to give her an item that they wanted to throw away, like a paper or an empty cigarette packet. She then placed each item on her body, performing as a fashion designer who wanted to design a new dress. Every time she walked among the passengers and interacted with them, the elements of her dress kept changing, a dress made of garbage that must be thrown away.

This event which seems innocent at first holds many cultural and political values. The place the artist chose to be the “stage” was the realm of public transportation, a sphere where one makes no effort, he waits to be mobilized, and stands or sits while traveling from one station to another. The artist transformed this sphere into a space of “play” activating the invisible theater, where “people are not spectators. ... The people who witness the scene are those who are there by chance... All the people who are near become involved in the eruption and the effects of it last long after the script is ended.”⁽¹⁵⁾ The individual also becomes a performer without even knowing and his performance - giving Shirin his garbage - is regulated by improvisation, where Shirin leads him towards the end she wants.

The sense that guides the improvisation is based on letting go of personal items that are useless and should be thrown away. Their value is activated by the artistic event that transformed the wagon into a space of changing boundaries between the public “clean” subject and his “objects” that are usually hidden to be disposed of somewhere else. This process makes the audience “clean” and the performer a carrier of the “objects,” changing the function of the wagon itself. It becomes a space to question what is personal and what is not.

There is another aspect that this performance highlights, which is the process of abjection which usually takes place in confined closed spaces. In these spaces, objects are put in specified containers but Shirin placed those objects on her body, reproducing herself as worthy to be kept. This could be interpreted as a reflection of a woman’s status in Iran and the cultural process of abjection practiced on women as they are considered “objects” and “unclean.” Under these conditions, the performative event is a way to question assigned roles where Shirin redefines herself symbolically to highlight the male domination that she is subject to by turning the

process of abjection into a spectacle created by “others” who are silent and agree with it.

She also draws attention to the role of the audience/citizens in the process of abjection, emphasising obedience and fear. This fear is not only a result of a sovereign power but also because of others who surveil each other. They participated in the abjection whether they were cynical about it or actually believed in it. This makes the performance a means to show how artificial “normal” roles are and how playing them enforces the politics of exclusion in the public sphere even in routine daily events such as travelling on the metro.

We witness in this performance the process of producing the cultural subject. In this case, it is the “woman” and the way she appears in the public sphere. The artist’s choice of a “fashion show” as a form of spectacle to criticize the government’s dress code that the sovereign forces upon women reveals the cynical and critical value of this performance, since Shirin used what is meant to be “thrown away” to break the dress code. Furthermore, this dress code is not only a reflection of state power but is also an extension of the body and part of its public construction. It is as if the artist is challenging the politics of banning endured by women by making the excluded “women” an extension to what is “abject.”

This form of expression is dangerous in Iran since it is a form of practicing the “right to appear” in a performative way to challenge the social role that is assigned, making its norms visible. This was done by manipulating the norms that govern the way women “appear” and practicing a form of mal-citation. This technique and its nonseriousness make the previous performance a form of protest since it is not in an “official space” of performing, but in an everyday context where everyone conforms to their social roles.

The previous approach reveals how an invisible theater is a form of protest, where “the oppressed create a ‘model’ made up of images from his or her real life. In other words, an oppressive reality shown in images. These images possess two essential characteristics – being images of the real and being real themselves.”⁽¹⁶⁾ This reality that Augusto Boal talks about is the politics of banning imposed on the female body in Iran which is represented textually and materially.

Third: Practicing Survival Skills

The popular sport parkour was created in the suburbs of Paris. It was inspired by military skills to create a mode of mobility in which one can show physical skill and avoid obstacles. In 2013, the Iranian capital Tehran witnessed⁽¹⁷⁾ a group of young men and women jumping around the streets practicing acrobatic and dangerous moves.

The importance of parkour is its ability to employ the political aspect of physical performance through endangering the “body.” Theoretically, the sovereign is responsible for the safety of its subjects, and it is the one that determines life and death.⁽¹⁸⁾ From this standpoint, the danger that the parkour players face is a threat to biopolitics, since one endangers his body by mobilizing illegally in the city sphere and questioning its safety, taking into consideration that the city is a solid sphere controlled by the state which regulates it according to its needs. In addition, it is regulated in a way to keep people safe, whether they are going to work, walking, or just moving from one place to another.

This aspect defines parkour since it symbolically transforms the city into a dangerous arena filled with traps. This reflects the “playing” values in parkour, where the performers/players are like prey running away from a hunter, represented by the state’s police and Revolutionary Guards. This prey can do nothing but escape and flee inside the city which is governed by the enemy manifested legally and institutionally.

Parkour also threatens the symbolic structure of the “public space” since the techniques of running, jumping and avoiding are improvised. They are chosen in a way that guarantees survival. For example, a wall, a fence or a public square can become obstacles, and avoiding

them opens up new possibilities of movement. This movement is also related to the system of surveillance and the politics of enmity, since parkour transforms the city into a possible space for guerrilla warfare, employing the spaces of the city against “an enemy,” whether its the police or the Revolutionary Guards.

The previous changes in the symbolic sphere of the city redefines the space of spectacle since it is no longer geographical and limited. It is produced by the physical acts of the performer, making his style of running a critical means to challenge the politics of mobility. In addition, his style offers new possibilities and forms of appearing that aren't yet regulated.

Parkour also questions the power of the Revolutionary Guards who can employ violence at any time and place, making the ability to run and avoid obstacles vital for survival under the possibility of being shot or arrested at any moment. Parkour equips us with the skills for avoiding real danger, like children and animals, they “play” and set imaginary rules in order to practice for the moment when the real danger is near,⁽¹⁹⁾ as if the survival instinct is activated in play mode; especially since Iran has an exceptionally oppressive apparatus that practices neutralization and doesn't obey the same laws as the police, making it like a group of hunters that we don't know when and where they are going to hunt.

Instead of the French word “parkour” I use the English term “free running.” This term reflects an ability to question the assigned roles that people perform in public, it bypasses the norms of mobility that are established by the materiality of the city and the human apparatuses that regulate the flow. It also question the laws of property, since the players/performers cross private property, questioning ownership and the norms of invitation.

What is special about parkour is that it could be practiced solo without an audience, making it a bit far from the concept of public performance. But there are still elements of spectacle in the public events that are photographed and recorded. They change the symbolic memory of the city and create another one that is different from the official photos published by the state to promote itself, especially considering that the photos of people practicing parkour documents the possibilities of the danger the performers might face, making these pictures a “double” in which bodies move differently in a way that reveals the regulations that govern the material components of the public sphere.

This makes parkour revolutionary, providing a way to establish individuality and differentiate oneself from the politics of obedience practiced by the state.

Fourth: The Marginal Games of the Victim

Tara Goudarzi ⁽²⁰⁾ is one of the artists who is interested in environmental art. This type of art shares some elements with land art, where the artistic effort/product will not end up in a museum or a gallery but will be in natural space and unofficial spaces of presentation.

This form of aesthetic labor is usually presented in two parts. The first is the moment of performance or the process of creating a work of art. The second is the documents produced after or during the process. These documents are usually pictures or videos, placing the final product in the categories of photography or video art. Yet, what concerns us is the moment of performance in which the body of the artist is the aesthetic medium and the natural space is the stage of performance.

The absence of a live audience in Tara's work questions the concept of performance itself, since Tara performs to the camera. This brings to mind the work of the American artist Paul Kos, one of the pioneers of land art and conceptual art, who performs alone in front of the camera, making his “labor” at the moment of performance a part of the process that will end up as video art, without having an audience at the moment of performance. An example of this was when he tried to climb a wall thousands of times and failed every time, leaving us only with a video that documented this “performance.”

The absence of an audience threatens the feasibility of the performance, but this problem has existed throughout the history of performing arts, where the body of the performer is invisible and not seen by anyone.⁽²¹⁾ This invisibility is related to the space of performing and its politics, like what we see in a work by Tara called "Offering" documented by pictures taken between 2008-2009. In them we find her body in different natural scenes that represent "the stage" making her appearance in this scenery a form of treatment that liberates her from the sovereign. Since these spaces are not under the sovereign's direct surveillance, that means that her body is not in imminent danger.

She voluntarily chose to disappear and to work beyond the spaces of the sovereign, employing symbolic characteristics of natural spaces as being banned. In other words, the relations between the material elements of the natural space are not a result of the sovereign's efforts. Rather, it is like a wasteland, or land that is not yet a subject of political change.

She describes her work in "Offering" by the following:

"In the "Offering", I put on my veil since we have always been together, ever since I was nine. Sometimes out of divine love and sometimes out of hatred. Now I only enjoy its purity, and its plainness, Its whiteness and I offer all of this to the endless greatness, I have used natural materials from the specific sites to perform this piece in different environments. Also, my friends help me to record these performances every time."

Apart from the literary analysis of the text, one can see that the artist maintained the white veil and its political value as a sign of disappearance, not only physically, but also culturally, since it represents the banned face of women in public spaces in Iran.

She maintains the politics of surveillance that govern the public role and explains it by saying that the veil is part of her, whether she liked it or not as if she cannot let go of her political body. This auto-surveillance practiced by the artist reflects her inability to produce herself outside the spaces of the sovereign. She cannot be liberated from the role imposed upon her by the state. This highlights the status of women under the Iranian regime which draws the boundaries for the role of women in two ways, textually by law and its constitution and materially by clothes and its surveillance system.

The previous section highlighted the relations between natural space and the rituals of sacrifice, making the artist go beyond the concept of the scapegoat since the absence of an audience relieves the performer from the catharsis value and the public punishment that she should receive. This transforms the ritual of sacrifice into a form of self-research and personal emancipation, she willingly chose to go back to nature and practice symbolic violence on herself. The "clash" between her body and the veil imposed on her resonates with the concept of "homo sacer," an individual who can be exposed to violence but not sacrificed.⁽²²⁾ She banned herself and symbolically practiced violence negating the sovereign laws of life. What the artist has done is that she has sacrificed herself without an audience, without anyone to see, and relieving herself from the role of collecting public violence on her body. She has mocked the state's politics that control her behavior and the role assigned to her as a possible scapegoat or someone worthy to be punished.

This performance can also be part of the *culture of surveillance* and the cultural industry related to it, since "surveillance is now part of life... it is not something imposed from the outside, but something we practice every day and obey whether we want to or not, we discuss it, fight it, and practice it, and sometimes start it and want it."⁽²³⁾ In other words, surveillance affects what people produce even if it is not visible. This invisible surveillance is represented in the veil the artist wears, even though the political and social authority who "surveil" her do not exist, but its effect extends to her actual artistic effort where she performs in a way that makes her final product - the photos - appear in a manner that respects the norms and conforms with it. She produces herself as a surveilled subject during and after the moment of performance, she wasn't liberated

from her status as a subject of the sovereign, even though she partially went through the process of disembodiment to be transformed from a “body in the world” to an artistic subject. But she was not able to completely do it because of the auto-surveillance and the political boundaries enforced upon her physicality.

The previous hidden fears of surveillance reveals the enforced norms in Iran since the artist, even though in a “wasteland” and unable to fully face the norms, could not totally depoliticize her body. The boundaries enforced by the sovereign are still active inside the sphere of performance and also produced inside of it.

From a performative point of view, she is practicing a form of mal-citation, a non-serious play that shakes the role assigned to her without fully negating it, as if the camera gazing at the performer forces on her a style, a set of words and acts that cannot be broken, as if the frame-Parergon - in which the artist's labor is bound within - and cannot isolate the external political forces. The artist is always a prey, always threatened if she “appeared” in a certain way in any “frame,” that is why we see her “playing’ only on the margins. She cannot totally break the norm. She can only, non-seriously, imitate it.

In another set of photos called “Mask,” the artist documents another performance. One can see her between 2008-2011, moving around wearing a mask, hiding her face or replacing it with natural and artificial elements.

Theoretically, the mask gives the person who wears it a form of freedom. It liberated her from her previous cultural characteristics and allowed her to reproduce herself or be welded to it. It gives her the ability to be a blank page, since the performer's usage of the mask is the first step towards self-negating. It allows the performer according to Jacques Lecoq “to be one with the elements of nature, water, fire, air and dirt...it allows one to be the sea for example.”

This ability the mask has is based on the symbols it possesses, where the artist is not only employing body movements but the natural references the mask has. She dissolves in it when she wears the mask of flowers or grass. She is practicing a form of abjection, where her bodily boundaries disappear to create a form of aesthetic fluidity, to become almost one with the surrounding, threatening the political borders of bio-domination. This fluidity threatens also the “inside” and “outside,” that gives the mask the ability to break the political strategies of subject production by negating the individuality of the subject.

In one of the masks she wears publicly inside the urban sphere, one can see her commodifying herself. She cancels the human for the sake of the artificial. She takes the form of a mannequin, an image copied and reproduced and artificially manufactured over and over again, like a simulacrum that has no origin, a reflection of a reflection that repeats itself unlimitedly. She tries to imitate a perfect spectacle that completely obeys the sovereign's politics. To mock this politics, she responds by total disappearance, employing a likeness and perfect imitation. She is wearing a neutral mask with only a mustache on it, she mocks masculinity to highlight the politics of banning women practiced by the sovereign.

What makes these photos special is that they are taken in Kurdistan and she said that “it is the only place where only men are allowed to go, so I decided to wear a moustache.” By questioning the male symbolic system via the moustache that represents the “man” and his privilege its fragility is made clear by a non-serious play that mocks the norms and performatively reveals its fictional existence.

The mask the artist uses represents from a semiotic point of view a critique of masculine domination adopted by the state through which they practice surveillance over the “right to appear.” This makes the way in which the artist positions herself inside the natural or urban sphere a form of camouflage which is “a tactical measure used in situations such as human warfare. Both modes of visual deception may facilitate either defense or offense in conflict situations.”^[24]

The aesthetic camouflage is a way to avoid violence, and a way to declare that “enemies” and “protesters” are everywhere, they are invisible, and most of them are wearing masks, cynically performing their roles, not believing in the state’s power and its strategies.

Conclusion

The previous forms of performance have a revolutionary value and an ability to change the public order. They are aesthetic events that highlight the performer’s ability to question the authority and its reality by transforming the artistic practice from a transcendent formula into a more critical - political - one. What is important about performance is that it is not only a way to face the artistic institution but also the political one. It is also a way to face the state’s efforts to maintain hegemony.

Performance is a form of sabotage that reveals the fragility of the power discourse and pushes those who “watch” to be involved in it. They are always invited to participate in an event that is not based on “catharsis” but on protest and social change. That is activated when one is part of the event as an “audience” or “performer.”

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