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Amateur Aesthetics as State Narrative in Iranian Martyrdom

Talinn Grigor

The rise of the middle-class bourgeoisie in Iran has been, by and large, credited to the secularist and modernist ruling ambitions of the founder of the Pahlavi dynasty, Reza Shah, who reigned between 1925 and 1941. Modern architecture in the capital city, Tehran, and in other major urban centres throughout the country consisted of the most vivid expression of this shift from a Qajar aristocratic to a bourgeois ascendancy in the 1920s and 1930s. The formation of the architectural profession as a separate discipline and vocation – hence the inception of the local architect as the paramount representative of the bourgeois class – was a result of the modernising and secularist policies of the early Pahlavi era, which was instituted by the king’s reformist ministers in his first cabinet. Many of them had long been a part of the revolutionary movement that brought about the first constitutional revolution in the Muslim world and in 1922 formed the Society for the National Heritage of Iran (SNH) that delineated major cultural policies and practices. Young Iranians were sent to Europe on state scholarship – primarily to the *École des Beaux-Arts* – to return in the 1930s and erected the built environment of the New Iran on avant-garde and modernist architecture principles. A dialectical relationship then developed between individual architects at the service of the secular state and the centralist state that founded institutions with the aim of producing the professional middle class, which included these same professional architects.

As the protagonists of the modern middle class, Iranian architects often found themselves in the precarious position between a heavy-handed government – with which they often shared ideological views on progress and methods of implementation – and their own avant-garde spirit to practice without authoritarian interference. While relying on state patronage for public projects, they tried to maintain distance by developing an architectural discourse that divorced their craft from political plots and intrigues.

Khosrow Hassanzadeh,
Pahlavan II, Ready to Order,
(detail), 2008, mixed-media
box, Los Angeles County
Museum of Art, in the
exhibition ‘In the Fields of
Empty Days: The Intersection
of Past and Present in Iranian
Art’, 6 May 2018 – 9
September 2018, photo:
courtesy of the author

As with Congrès internationaux d'architecture moderne (CIAM) and Bauhaus, they designed in the International Style (as did Vartan Hovanesian in his Girls' Art Academy, 1938) and constantly reinforced the notion that they had nothing to do with politics. In the very first editorial of the first Iranian architectural journal, Iraj Moshiri proclaimed in September 1946, 'The *Architecte* is purely a technological and aesthetic publication, which cannot and does not wish to have the slightest involvement with the world of politics.'¹ This ambivalent position of architects was crucial to the survival of the architectural profession as an independent practice; it was pivotal not only to their livelihood, but also to the nation-building project which took place from 1925 to the Iranian Revolution of 1979.

When, in June 1978, Empress Farah Pahlavi (1959–1979) decreed the allocation of \$2 million for the squatters of southern Tehran, it was already too late. Any subsequent attempt to stop a revolution through architecture, as Le Corbusier had prophesied in his modernist call 'Architecture or Revolution', ended in failure. Not only had the people chosen revolution over architecture, but they had co-opted architecture in their revolution. The March 1979 referendum and the 1980 constitution established the Islamic Republic of Iran. Under the auspices of the new theocratic state, revolutionary art – or rather the pictorial replacement of 'royalist avant-garde' (itself a contradiction) art with 'Islamic' icons and signs – was conceived to remove the secular and modernist cultural environment established by the Pahlavi reformists in the 1920s.² It also aimed to solve a theoretical predicament that the new theocratic republic faced. The purpose of this propaganda art catered to the ideological dilemma of the political system that governed it: that the *raison d'être* of the official religion of Iran, Shi'ism, was advocacy for the oppressed in a state of opposition. From the outset, the leadership of the revolution recognised that the Islamic Republic needed to produce an environment wherein the legitimacy of a religious republic would be perpetuated. The creation of a certain anti-elitist, anti-avant-garde visual culture thereby became pivotal to the preservation of the post-revolutionary status quo. Amateur art was to become the official state aesthetic.

The Hegemony of Amateurism

In 1982 the state launched and maintained a firm command on its self-representation, and on the politics of pictorial replacement through the development of a populist visual environment during the Cultural Revolution. The very process of this development was amateurish due to the fact that the Pahlavi dynasty had, by the late 1970s, fully succeeded in merging the image of avant-garde art with the ethos of the reigning dynasty. When the revolutionary momentum began, the Iranian avant-garde, with a few sporadic exceptions in poster design, was unable to muster a dissenting philosophy of its own. Nor did Empress Farah Pahlavi's personal commitment and generous patronage of both Western and Iranian avant-garde art help the revolutionary intentions of artists. Throughout 1978, when the intelligentsia, students, clerics and professional middle class rose against the monarchy, the avant-garde's time had passed. With a handful of exceptions, well-known artists followed the royal family into exile.

1 Iraj Moshiri, *Architecte* 1, August/September 1946, p 1

2 See Talinn Grigor, *Building Iran: Modernism, Architecture, and National Heritage under the Pahlavi Monarchs*, Periscope, New York, 2009

Art students and amateur artists rapidly filled the gap left by accomplished artists. Experimental art, or rather art created by non-trained and non-credentialed non-artists, was adopted by the early revolutionary authorities. The new post-revolutionary state, the first theocratic republic, itself could be described as a by-product of amateurs' bid on a utopian society.

In line with Michel Foucault's short-sighted praise of Iran's spiritual yet modern revolution, these amateur artists began to synthesise classical revolutionary styles from Mexico, Russia, Cuba and China with Islamic iconography.³ Eight years of brutal war with Iraq further reinforced the official status of this populist art. The tension between 'Islamic' and 'republic' is not only reflected in policies towards the arts, but also remains a major structural debate among the leadership and the people of Iran. As cultural historian Shiva Balaghi notes, the 'people's authorship over their cultural destiny' guaranteed by the 1980 constitution on the one hand, and the resolve to 'use culture to promote an Islamic morality' on the other, lingers at the core of the contradiction within an Islamic republic.⁴

During the 1980s, the state produced a pictorial discourse that aimed to (re)acculturate the masses based on Shi'a-Iranian moral principles. The formulaic reproduction of extant styles, the sentimental appeal to emotions, and the didactic purpose assigned to art, formed a separate aesthetic and ethical system that set itself apart from and against the art promoted by the ousted Pahlavi dynasty. The art that the revolutionaries reacted to was characterised by the Western-oriented, Tehran-centred modernist and vernacular movements of the 1960s and 1970s that went hand in hand with the secularist, individualist and nationalist ideological of the *Ancien Régime*. The revolution and the eight-year Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), led by Imam Khomeini, gave rise to a new visual environment that aimed to cleanse (*pak-sazi*) the monarchical and Western traditions. It also attempted to create an Islamic community (Persian *ommat*, Arabic *umma*) through a synthesis of Shi'a signs and narrative with revolutionary iconographic traditions.

The brutality of the war amplified art's presumed truth-telling role within the ideological discourse of the state. The hardship endured by ordinary Iranians during the war brought much disappointment after the promises of the revolution. Street art had to convince many of the merit of continual fate in the republic. Because of its presumed authenticity, the more amateur looking, the more persuasive. Photography and filmmaking were immediately put at the service of the war effort. In the international diplomatic circles wherein most had a finger pointing at Iran, these photographs bore witness to Saddam Hussein's pillage. To a sceptical West, they proved that Iraq was using chemical weapons on civilian targets. Many of these images were captured by amateur photographers. Soldiers who later died on the frontline were given cameras by the state to expose the hypocrisy and double standards of the international community. Many of these photographs were later to become objects displayed in the Martyr's Museum. Documentary photography, although amateur – or one might say, *because* amateur, spontaneous and unstaged – was to save the integrity of the Islamic Republic within the community of nations and to bolster the domestic culture of martyrdom.

3 Michel Foucault, 'Iran: The Spirit of a World Without Spirit', in Lawrence Kritzman, ed, *Politics, Philosophy and Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977–1984*, Routledge, London, 1988, pp 211–226

4 Shiva Balaghi, 'Art and Revolution in the Islamic Republic of Iran', *The Middle East Institute Viewpoints*, Special Edition, *The State of the Arts in the Middle East*, The Middle East Institute, Washington DC, no date, pp 49–52



Photograph of a poster at the cemetery of a dead soldier during the Iran-Iraq War, taken by amateur-soldier photographer and displayed at the Museum of Martyrdom, Shemiran, Tehran, photo: courtesy of the author

The trauma of the war was exacerbated by Khomeini's passing in June 1989. In an impromptu outburst of grief, millions poured onto the streets. None of the Pahlavi kings had enjoyed such popular reverence. The imam had led an austere and disciplined life. To ensure the continual existence of his Islamic republic, his successors betrayed this asceticism with a sumptuous mausoleum. The choice of the site was self-evident. The lay religious thinker and sociologist Ali Shariati popularised the post-revolutionary discourse on Shi'a martyrdom in the late 1960s. This tradition was cemented in a real place when, on arrival at Tehran, Khomeini had asked to be taken to the Behesht-e Zahra cemetery in Ray, in the south of Tehran. 'In his time, only the cemeteries prospered,' he had declared referring to Mohammad Reza Shah's reign, and stated 'the country itself, he destroyed.'⁵ The imam could not have known that under his guardianship Behesht-e Zahra would grow to become Iran's largest burial ground. Divided into sections allocated to martyrs of the revolution, martyrs of the war, relatives of martyrs and non-martyr-related deaths, the cemetery is a manifestation of the state effort to regulate Iranian society and render it functional. At the entrance, the visitor is met by the enlarged amateur photograph of a dead soldier.

Behesht-e Zahra was cast as the epicentre of this populist solidarity. The master plan of the 434-hectare hexagon is designed so that its northern tip connects the historic cemetery to the funerary complex of Khomeini. Carefully numbered and colour-coded, it is conceived as an ideal city. In keeping with its namesake, Behesht-e Zahra refers to the paradise of Imam Husayn's mother and wife of Imam Ali, Fatima Zahra. Designed on a regular grid, the plan is punctuated by squares, memorial monuments, amenities, and fountains, including the Blood Fountain cascading red-coloured water down

⁵ 'Address at Bihisht-i Zahra', 2 February 1979, see Imam Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini (1941-1980)*, translated and annotated by Hamid Algar, Mizan Press, Berkeley, 1981, p 257



One of the wings of Imam Khomeini's mausoleum complex during the long process of construction, Ray, photo: courtesy of the author

several levels, symbolising the blood of the martyrs. The collection of tightly knitted graves acts as an open-air, DIY memorial museum. Loved ones – largely female relatives of martyrs – curate the glass-fronted cupboard on top of each tombstone. The glass-fronted metal cases are uniform and seem to be mass-produced by the Tehran Municipality for this exact purpose. In them, all sorts of personal, official and practical objects are exhibited. Photographs, copies of the Quran, plastic flowers, the national flag, wrapping paper, certificates and other symbolic artefacts are arranged. In one case, the national flag is displayed with great affection, but upside down, which might speak to the less privileged educational level of its maker. Often with scrupulous care, they espouse the populist taste endorsed by the state, which has co-opted the people's desire for memorialisation. There certainly exists an alliance between the state strategy of populist aesthetic and these very personal, intimate amateur curations of female narratives of sons lost.

While Tehran Municipality manages Behesht-e Zahra, Imam Khomeini's main complex was sponsored by the state who commissioned architect Mohammad Tehrani, and ran by the imam's family since erection.⁶ Through its architectural pastiche of medieval and postmodern forms (ie, neo-Timurid domes and minarets juxtaposed with contemporary pyramidal volumes), materials (ie, poured reinforced concrete, longitudinal steel trussing, multi-glazed tiling, gold-gilding) and diverse programming (religious, educational, commercial, etc), the public and the private are blurred. The spiritual is drawn into the domain of politics: mourning intersects with leisure; pilgrimage with window-shopping; and family outing with prayer. Shi'a religious pilgrimage, *ziarat* (or *ziyarat*), much fostered by the state, is enhanced with marketing strategies: shopping malls, free phone lines, drinking fountains, picnics and air-conditioning in a relaxed yet monitored atmosphere. The architecture projects a sense of

6 See Kishwar Rizvi, 'Religious Icon and National Symbol: The Tomb of Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran', *Muqarnas: An Annual on the Visual Culture of the Islamic World* 20, 2003, pp 209–224



Graves of soldiers who fought in the Iran-Iraq War, with metal casing decorated by female relatives of the buried, Behesht-e Zahra Cemetery, Ray, photo: courtesy of the author

futuristic traditionalism. A must-see landmark during diplomatic visits, it projects an image of legitimacy and power for the Islamic Republic. To the outside world, Imam Khomeini's life and death were sensationalised in Western media through the mausoleum's pastiche.⁷ Western journalists wrote about the fusion of the old and the new, of the religious and the contemporary, and of the communal and the individual. The Blood Fountain, with its fake red liquid, was of particular interest.⁸ Architecture was deployed to reinforce differences. While Mohammad Reza Shah ruled the country (1941–1979) from his modernist White Palace in northern Tehran, the Islamic Republic looms large from the paradise of Zahra. While the tomb's plastic bouquets, prefabricated decorations and building materials might convey Imam Khomeini's 'anti-elitist availability', the amateur style witnessed here is a part of the larger representational replacement. The repetition of the same forms, colours and materials in street art, museums, architecture and urbanism, and a persistent official appeal to populist taste is indicative of a wider cultural agenda divorced from the venerated figure of Imam Khomeini.

The Kitsch of the Beautiful

Under the presidencies of Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mohammad Khatami, the Second Republic from 1989 to 2005 saw the rise of the conservative bazaar as the ruling elite of the 'mercantile bourgeois republic'.⁹

7 Fouad Ajami, 'Burying Khomeini', *New York Times Magazine*, 21 February 1999, pp 46–47

8 See, for example, John Kifner, 'Iran: Obsessed with Martyrdom', *New York Times Magazine*, 16 December 1984, p 36

9 See Anoushiravan Ehteshami, *After Khomeini: The Iranian Second Republic*, Routledge, London, 1995, pp 114–115



Enlarged photograph of a dead soldier from the Iran-Iraq War at the entrance of Behesht-e Zahra Cemetery, Ray, photo: courtesy of the author

10 Ali M Ansari, *Iran, Islam and Democracy: The Politics of Managing Change*, Royal Institute of International Affairs, London, 2000, p 53

11 Ervand Abrahamian, *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1993, p 133

12 Abrahamian classifies these classes as the following: the 'modern classes' consisted of the 'intelligentsia' and the 'industrial or urban proletariat'. The 'traditional classes' consisted of the 'bazaar petit bourgeoisie and its clerical allies'. Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1982, p 530.

13 Ansari, *Iran, Islam*, op cit, p 59

The enormous wealth amassed by the Bonyad-e Mostazafan va Janbazen (Foundation of the Oppressed and Disabled) as well as other such 'religious foundation-cum-conglomeration... epitomized the ascendancy of the mercantile bourgeoisie and its dominance over the country's economy'.¹⁰ In 1982, Imam Khomeini had described them as an 'essential pillar of the society'.¹¹ Since then, they had been waiting to reap the benefits of the revolution. Commodity fetishism (re)-entered the Islamic Republic. While the Pahlavi capitalist professionals upheld the foreign economic interests and avant-garde taste dear to its class identity, the mercantile bourgeois who welcomed European business investments differentiated their rise by the hegemony of street art.¹² 'The Pahlavi monarchy had returned,' writes historian Ali Ansari, 'albeit with different actors and an indigenous bourgeoisie'.¹³ This return was predicated not only on change in agency, but, above all, on a sharp difference in taste that legitimised their ascendancy. In his *Portrait of a Lady* (2004), for instance, photographer Kaveh Kazemi captured two well-dressed members of the mercantile bourgeoisie who examine a carpet tableau in the Tehran bazaar. This new type of carpet art – which mingles famous Western and Iranian imageries from Persepolis reliefs to Mona Lisa portraits – was reproduced by women or girls trained outside any fine arts academies and became fashionable among the mercantile class.

To the mercantile bourgeoisie who financed the Second Republic, amateur art had a particular appeal. Acting as its patron, the mercantile



Map of Behesht-e Zahra Cemetery displayed at the cemetery showing the location of the sections as well as Imam Khomeini's mausoleum complex on the upper left, Behesht-e Zahra Cemetery, Ray, photo: courtesy of the author

bourgeoisie deployed populist art to distinguish itself from its equally capitalist and oligarchic Pahlavi predecessor. In contrast to the avant-garde of the 1960s and 1970s, they chose a certain populist kitsch that projected a fitting picture of its populist background and practices of sociability – not necessarily executed by amateur artists exclusively, but certainly having the appearance of the amateur and kitsch. This art, in turn, articulated and normalised a coherent vision of otherwise contradictory new agendas: the mercantile bourgeoisie’s insistence on conformity, despite its newfound wealth and power; the state’s resolve to institutionalise power and stabilise life under the Second Republic while continuing to create ‘the Islamic man’ on orthodox Shi’a ideals; and the constitutional commitment to private property within the increasingly centralised formations of the nation-state. The potential for class conflict caused by this shift was ‘displaced onto relations among things’ through a new ethos of amateurist art and mass consumption. For Walter Benjamin, this ‘cluttered “kitsch”’ was predicated on ‘the overproduction of commodities’ that deferred the dream of the revolution onto consumer fetishism and urban renewal.¹⁴

The state went further in exchanging martyrs with war veterans in the pictorial discourse. Instead of mere replacement, it aimed to historicise the war. Street art moved into the museum. While the Shahadat (martyr) Museum at Behesht-e Zahra cemetery commemorates the culture of self-sacrifice, the Shohada (Martyrs) Museum in Chizar, northern Tehran, is

14 Benjamin, quoted in Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, 1989, pp 283–284



A memorial monument at the intersection of grave sections, Behesht-e Zahra Cemetery, Ray, photo: courtesy of the author



A display case above the martyr of the Iran-Iraq War, decorated by a female relative of the soldier with various objects including an upside-down Iranian flag, Behesht-e Zahra Cemetery, Ray, photo: courtesy of the author

dedicated to the martyrs of the Tehran province.¹⁵ Opened in 1997 under the directorship of Morteza Alizadeh, the display typifies the populist taste of much of the street art that has now been co-opted by the museum system. At its founding, Alizadeh saw the museum as a demonstration of all that has been sacrificed for Islam and Iran. For him the museum was a means to transfer the venerated status of martyrdom in Shi'ism from 'the old' to

15 See documentary, Roxanne Varzi, *Plastic Flowers Never Die*, colour, 34 minutes, 2008



The fountain with the *panjeh*, the remains of a martyr under a display case, and other display cases, Museum of Martyrdom, 1997, Chizar, Shemiran, northern Tehran, photo: courtesy of the author

‘the new generation’.¹⁶ As a renewed expression of the official populist art, the museum serves to tie the state to the people, promoting an interest in the war, in the culture of martyrdom, and to hence appeal to religious-nationalism. Access to the museum is through the courtyard where war veterans are buried. On entering the extensive hall of the museum itself, large and small glass cases display a range of paintings, photographs, banners, personal items such as binoculars, blood-stained cloth, pocket-size Qurans, broken eyeglasses, worn-out guns, photos of loved ones, etc. The four corners of the hall are further enshrined with theatrical displays.

On the far corner, a scene from the Battle of Karbala (10 Muharram 61 AH–October 680 AD) stages the martyrdom of Imam Husayn next to his wounded horse, Zuljanah. It bleeds and weeps for him as recounted in the Hadith. To the right of the entrance, a symbolic sculptural painting depicts the struggle of good and evil through the interaction of a tulip and a serpent. To the left of the entrance, a martyr’s water fountain is flanked by a massive *panjeh*, the Shi’a hand standard. Behind the *panjeh*, life-size paintings of historical and allegorical figures decorate the walls. While enlarged plastic tulips and potted plastic flowers decorate the front of the fountain, here stands a prominent glass display case with a neon-green plastic base. A closer look reveals the actual remains of a soldier. The pictorial replacement goes beyond its own strategies: representation is replaced by reality itself, which in the context of the museum renders the representational impact of that reality far more effective.

Down the hall, a tomb-display with a helmet, a water-cooler and Qurans soaked in blood concludes the visual simulation of martyrdom. It replicates Umberto Eco’s notion of ‘the authentic fake’.¹⁷ The tomb is not a tomb, for it shelters no corpse, but rather a vivid simulation of a tomb. Nor is the red-painted, dripping blood real. Yet, the culmination of the visitor’s experience generates real feelings of sympathy and compassion. The décor collides with one’s proximity to real and fake bones as if to mend the gap created by the transport of martyrdom into the museum. With the exception of school groups and the occasional tourist, it is quiet. For those who have experienced martyrdom by proxy, the relatives of martyrs, they do not need the museum. For those who have not, it is ‘no longer a question of imitation... nor even of parody’, as Jean Baudrillard puts it.¹⁸ It is about ‘substituting the signs of the real for the real itself; that is, an operation to deter every real process by its operational double’. This sense of perplexity is exacerbated by the museum’s gift-shop adjoining the *panjeh* fountain. Under a glass counter, it offers the visitor Imam Khomeini stickers, Imam Ali pin buttons, Imam Husayn dog tags, glossy war posters and other memorabilia honouring Shi’a martyrdom in the form of capitalism. This, in effect, belongs to a global phenomenon of pilgrimage memorabilia: bright green panelling, neon lights, plastic flowers and plants, personal belongings, wallet-size pictures of children and enlarged photographs of bloody, dead soldiers are carefully curated to convey the reality of war. The museum embodies Baudrillard’s hyperreal, ‘a panic-stricken production of the real and the referential, above and parallel to the panic of material production’.¹⁹

Despite the state’s flooding of the public space on the merits of martyrdom by means of these largely amateur homages, trained artists acted as gauges to social consciousness, by preserving the memory of the war’s collective trauma. In the excitement of the reconstruction and the beautification of the 1990s and 2000s, many artworks, such as

16 See Scott Peterson, ‘In Tehran’s Martyrs’ Museum, Iran Courts New Believers’, *The Christian Science Monitor*, 6 June 2007, <http://www.csmonitor.com/2007/0606/p16s01-wome.html>

17 Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*, Harcourt Brace & Co, New York, 1986, p 8

18 Jean Baudrillard, ‘Simulacra and Simulations’, in Nicholas Mirzoeff, ed, *The Visual Culture Reader* [1998], second edition, Routledge, London and New York, 2006, pp 145–146

19 Jean Baudrillard, ‘The Precession of Simulacra’, in Brian Wallis, ed, *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, vol 1, Documentary Sources in Contemporary Art series, New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, 1984, p 257



Women, mothers or sisters of war martyrs, visiting and washing graves at Behesht-e Zahra Cemetery, Ray, photo: courtesy of the author

Khosrow Hassanzadeh's 'War' series (1995–1998), Arash Hanaei's *Benefits of Vegetarianism* (2004), Hossein Khosrojerdi's *Eternal Rest* (2005), and Shadi Ghadirian's 'Nil, Nil' series (2008) reminded their audience of the lingering consequences of the conflict. Newsha Tavakolian's powerful 'Mother of Martyrs' photo series (2006) brought her audience face to face with survivors who continue to bear witness to the war's violence.²⁰ Her photographs of the martyrs' mothers holding the portraits of their sons some three decades after their death loops back to another endless continuum, the Behesht-e Zahra cemetery, wherein these same women act as artists in creating the display cases for the memory of their sons. Nowhere is the absurdity of normalcy more clearly rendered visible, and nowhere are the margins between the high and the low so blurred. Through the painstaking process of curating these mini-museums, women, particularly disenfranchised women acting as amateur artists, enter the narrative of the war. Portraits of martyrs – several of which have been reproduced on official murals and on state-issued portraits of the Supreme Leader – small Qurans, fake flowers, flower pots and other personal object decorate these display cases. Hassanzadeh's *Takhti* from his 'Ready to Order' series (2007–2008) takes its aesthetic cue from the cases. Gholamreza Takhti (1930–1968) was the most popular wrestling champion in Iran, having won both an Olympic gold medal and a world championship. He was politically active for the National Front Party. Although he probably committed suicide, his early death has been blamed on the king's secret police, the SAVAK. *Takhti* is an exemplar of the porousness of the street and the studio, facilitated by President Mohammad Khatami's liberal policies during his tenure from 1997 to 2005, premised on the inclusion of artists and the artworld as agents of socio-political reform.

Holding a bouquet of daffodils in one hand and a vase of plastic flowers in the other, the author of bestseller *Reading Lolita in Tehran*:

²⁰ Correspondence between artist Newsha Tavakolian and Talinn Grigor, May 2010.



Khosrow Hassanzadeh, *Pahlavan II, Ready to Order*, 2008, mixed-media box, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, in the exhibition 'In the Fields of Empty Days: The Intersection of Past and Present in Iranian Art', 6 May 2018–9 September 2018, photo: courtesy of the author

21 See Jacki Lyden, 'The Rise and Fall of Simon Ordoubadi: Our Heart Breaks for Him Because He is Us', *iranian.com*, 23 February 2004

A Memoir in Books (2003), Azar Nafisi, had asked her students at Tehran University, 'What is kitsch?'²¹ I conjecture upon Nafisi's reason for asking that question and wonder about her students' answers. Could it have something to do with the street art to which Nafisi and her students had been exposed during the first decade after the Iranian Revolution? Could it have something to do with Behesht-e Zahra or the murals and



Election campaign banner stating 'Youth, come aboard/Mir Hosayn Musavi', 8 June 2009, Vali Asr Avenue, Tehran, photo: courtesy of the author

billboards that avowed, 'God is beautiful and [he] loves beauty'? Under these inscriptions, one often found illustrations of bouquets of red tulips or pink roses. What has this to do with the history of contemporary Iranian art? There are no plastic flowers in Immanuel Kant's analysis of aesthetic judgment, because the first man-made plastic was displayed at the Great Exhibition, London, as late as 1862. However, Kant does mention 'artificial flowers'.²² To tie Kant to Nafisi via artificial flowers that are termed 'kitsch' would be an anachronism, for the word *kitsch* is a nineteenth-century invention. Moreover, Kant applies the adjective *vanity* to his artificial examples, which might not be a bad approximation of our own fake flowers. Kant's analysis of the intellectual interest in the beautiful reveals a correlation between the reproduction of fake roses on official billboards and the state that has taken upon itself to be the moral guide of that same society.

In his *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*, Kant writes, 'Suppose we had secretly played a trick on this lover of the beautiful, sticking in the ground artificial flowers', adding, 'The direct interest he took in these things [wild flowers] would promptly vanish, though perhaps it would' – and this is where I am interested in elaborating on the point – 'be replaced by a different interest, an interest of vanity, to use these things to decorate his room for the eyes of others'.²³ An ethical system, like the Islamic Republic that upholds a moral responsibility in its governance of the people, gives birth to an aesthetic of populist street art. 'An ethical system cannot do without conventions,' as Hermann Broch argued in 1950, adding, 'the man who sticks to it is inevitably constrained... to aestheticize his tasks and to transform them into works of art which correspond to convention'.²⁴ In order to validate its ethical obligation, kitsch then strives to produce the effect of the beautiful. Within this system, then, the arts of propaganda are collective and appeal to the emotions of the onlooker.

22 Immanuel Kant, '§42. Of the Intellectual Interest in the Beautiful', in Werner S Pluhar, trans, *Critique of Judgment*, Hackett, Indianapolis and Cambridge, 1987, p 300

23 Ibid, p 300

24 In a lecture by Hermann Broch, Yale University, winter 1950–1951. See Hermann Broch, 'Notes on the Problem of Kitsch', in G Dorfler, ed, *Kitsch: An Anthology of Bad Taste*, Studio Vista, London, 1969, pp 49–67, p 63

The official, state appeal to god's love of beauty was also co-opted into narratives of the Green Movement in the summer of 2009, including the popular uprising that followed the rigged presidential election that June. A poster, photographed as it is being held in the hands of a campaigner on the eve of the election, depicts what seems to refer to Michelangelo's fresco, *The Creation of Adam* (c 1508–1512), in the Sistine Chapel. Subverting gender representations, the hands of God and Adam are substituted with female hands that sport green bands on their wrists. The green calligraphy reads, 'Youth, come aboard / Mir Hosayn Musavi'. This cross-border appeal to divine beauty is embedded in and informed by multiple narratives, both theological and art historical – from the Quranic reference to god's love of beauty, to the Christian depiction of divine beauty in the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, to the modern practice of voting.

The combination of the green-stained fingertips of the election banner held by a campaigner with her meticulously French-manicured nails speaks to Nicholas Mirzoeff's claim that 'visual culture does not depend on pictures themselves but the modern tendency to picture or visualize existence'.²⁵ In Iran's case, it is not just about visualising one's own culture and history, but rather of appropriating the other's as a postmodern act of distinction and belonging. The iconographic contradiction, (con)fusion and appropriation are multi-layered and deeply meaningful: the green colour of Prophet Mohammed and Musavi's campaign, the green fingerprints of the most classical signifier of democratic election, the ring on one finger that places the image in a local context, the implication of a divinely ordained election, the implication that youth are joining a movement beyond simple bureaucratic procedures, etc. These are encapsulated in one hybridised image that embraces the West in its own orbit of signs and signifiers and makes it her amateur own.

25 Nicholas Mirzoeff, 'What is Visual Culture', *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, Psychology Press, London and New York, 1999, p 5