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Digital Art, Political Aesthetic, and Social Media: Case Study of the Iranian Presidential Election of 2009

Editorial Introduction

Digital Ethnography, Resistance Art, and Communication Media in Iran

PEDRAM KHOSRONEJAD

University of St. Andrews
Scotland

On June 14, 2013, Iran will again challenge its nation and nation-state. The country will confront another presidential election—an event that four years ago became a national crisis, a social catastrophe, and a traumatic memory.¹

I have previously discussed the important role played by Iranian independent documentary filmmakers as well as urban journalists in the recording and representation of the traumatic events of the Iranian presidential crisis of 2009 (Khosronejad, 2009). However, much remains unsaid regarding the significance and function of the visual material and digital resistance art that was created and circulated on the Internet as a result of the national crisis. This collection is one of the first attempts to discuss the importance of visual resistance and protest art, its circulation via digital media, and its function in the peaceful movement that was transformed into one of the most traumatic events in the history of contemporary Iran.

Following the official announcement of the Guardian Council of the Iranian government regarding the approval of four presidential candidates (Mahmud Ahmadinejad, Mehdi Karrubi, Mirhoseyn Mousavi and Mohsen Rezayi) for the Iranian election of 2009, major visual propaganda and media campaigns penetrated Iranian society.² Before the election, Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani, in a speech during Friday prayers, emphasized that the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) should collaborate closely with the four candidates to present their views and policies online for all Iranians. Following this request, for the first time in the history of postrevolutionary Iran, IRIB offered a special online program featuring debates among the candidates, who were allowed to describe their own political agendas and discuss their

¹ This article was written a few weeks prior to the 2013 presidential election in Iran. Please note that all images in this article were retrieved from the Internet in 2009, but have since been removed. Thus there are no links provided for the images.

² For more information, watch the documentary *The Real Fake*.

Pedram Khosronejad: pk18@st-andrews.ac.uk

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opinions face-to-face, freely and openly. During previous presidential elections, IRIB had recorded candidate debates and, after censoring and editing them, broadcast them on national television, but it had not made them available online.

IRIB's online presentation of the debates greatly aided the peaceful public gatherings and the candidates' campaign activities that took place in the streets of Iran up until June 11, 2009, one day before the election. All four candidates were allowed to campaign from their own propaganda offices and also in public places. Most such public activities consisted of peaceful demonstrations in which members of each group held posters, banners, flyers, and all sorts of propaganda paraphernalia in support of their own candidate or against the other groups. Here I should emphasize that only Ahmadinejad and Mousavi had serious campaign activities during the final two weeks before election day.

During this time, the streets of Tehran turned to live blogs for peaceful communication between the members of each campaign; a spirit of cooperation and national cohesion could be seen everywhere. Prior to election day, there had been no reports of social aggression or political pressure related to the public activities in the streets, and no one could imagine that such a peaceful scene could suddenly become a national disaster.³

On June 13, 2009, with the immature, irresponsible and unofficial interview of Mousavi regarding his gain in the presidential election,⁴ and the message of congratulations from IRIB (even before the official announcement of the Interior Minister) on the victory of Ahmadinejad,⁵ the peaceful process surrounding the presidential election and its public activities suddenly exploded. The situation became even worse when the new president, Ahmadinejad, invited his followers to gather in Valiasr Square in Tehran on June 14, 2009. It was there, during his speech, that Ahmadinejad publicly insulted Mousavi and his supporters, referring to them as "dust particles which are doing things in the corners."⁶ By saying this, Ahmadinejad was declaring that Mousavi and his followers had no right to reject the result of the election. Moreover, IRIB, by broadcasting all of Ahmadinejad's speeches a few times on the national channels, proved its alignment with the new president and made the situation even worse (for more information, see Khosronejad, 2009).

From this moment on, public clashes during demonstrations and the destruction of public property became part of daily life in most Iranian cities, especially Tehran. Riot police and the secret service personnel secured the streets in the capital, in addition to suppressing those who rejected the results of the election. Representing the opposition, members of the Green Movement soon took to the streets to express their dissatisfaction. Little by little and day by day, what had been peaceful pre-election propaganda turned into antiregime slogans and protests against the Islamic government.

³ However, this does not mean that there was no verbal aggression among members of both groups. Indeed, closer to the date of the election, critical propaganda replaced the previously peaceful tone of slogans and critiques.

⁴ See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MPiy_BEmt7A

⁵ Ahmadinejad, 62.63%; Mousavi, 33.75%; Rezayi, 10.73%; and Karrubi, .85%.

⁶ See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_UwM5ab-QfY

In response to Ahmadinejad's gathering, on June 15, 2009, Mousavi and his followers arranged a massive public demonstration to protest the results of the election; this event turned into one of the most significant antiregime meetings of the postelection—or, more accurately, postrevolution—period in Iran. Azadi Square was selected as the gathering point, and thousands of Mousavi's followers joined the demonstration. The views they expressed rapidly changed from statements of dissatisfaction with the election to antiregime sentiments and serious criticism of the activities and contributions of the Islamic Republic regarding Lebanon and Hezbollah in Gaza.⁷ For the first time, protests turned violent, with people in the street attacking a Bassij center; subsequent firearm exchanges between Bassijis and civilians resulted in many youths being killed on the streets of Tehran in the middle of the day.

Following this tragedy, hidden governmental cameras, personal cellular phones, and CCTVs became increasingly important tools for capturing images of street events. Both sides used these devices, but employed them in two completely different ways.⁸ The regime and its secret service used the images to locate and arrest antiregime demonstrators, while demonstrators broadcast the images via Facebook, Twitter, Skype, and other online networks to inform the rest of the world about the activities going on in Iran (Khosronejad, 2009). In the absence of foreign media in Iran, especially after the presidential election period, urban journalism became one of the primary tools for allowing those in the West to follow internal events in the country.

After the first week following the official announcement of the election results, the rhythm and purpose of public events and demonstrations changed completely. Ahmadinejad's name disappeared from slogans, and the primary targets became the regime and its Supreme Leader (Press TV, 2010a). Clearly, the presidential election crisis had become a national predicament that could result in a regime change. In this regard, the most important demonstrations of the postelection period happened during Qods Day (September 18, 2009), Student Day (November 4, 2009), and the day of Ashura (December 27, 2009).

From June 15 to December 27, 2009, the streets of Tehran became the site of battles between supporters of the regime and its riot police on one side and supporters of Mousavi on the other. Unfortunately, during these urban conflicts, many civilians and innocent people were killed, imprisoned, or disappeared. Many others left the country out of fear of the regime.

Western media groups tried to broadcast news they received from Iran in hopes of changing the regime. After enduring all of the political crises and social injustices, since 2009 the leaders of the Green Movement have been in enforced home exile, the mothers and families of the slain youths are in mourning, many citizens are in jail, and many others have left Iran. No one asks how Iran would be today if a leader of the Green Movement had been elected president in 2009.

⁷ The anti-Hezbollah slogans stemmed from the belief that the regime used Arab Hezbollah soldiers in the streets of Tehran as riot police against demonstrators.

⁸ There also were strong debates among independent documentary filmmakers about what their role was during such a public crisis. For further information, see Khosronejad 2009.

Digital Resistance Art and Its Role in the Iranian Presidential Election Crisis of 2009

The Iranian presidential election of 2009 provided an opportunity for artists inside and outside Iran to express their feelings and ideologies regarding this national crisis. Visual artists of all types—graphic designers, painters, photographers, multimedia performers, and filmmakers—were engaged in the national resistance in different ways.⁹ Talented young artists created their own local workshops, and, alongside them, eminent artists dedicated their time, space, and energy to this movement. Perhaps the last time Iranian visual artists were engaged in national resistance activity at this level was 34 years ago, during the Iranian Revolution of 1978–1979. At that time, the technologies and materials used in the visual and performing arts were quite different than they are today, and therefore most of the visual propaganda and slogans were limited to handmade or silkscreened flyers, posters, and banners, as well as wall graffiti. During the Iranian Revolution, the main aim was to change the regime, and all groups worked to achieve this. However, it seems to me that these artists—especially those who were engaged in visual art—had ways of seeing and saying things that were quite different from the messages communicated by artists associated with the ideological parties. It is rare to find studies of the resistance and protest art that was created during the revolution in Iran. Visual artists at that time worked quite independently and were far removed from political groups or ideological factions.¹⁰

The more recent war between Iran and Iraq (1980–1988) completely changed the sphere of revolutionary and resistance art, turning it into war propaganda with new ideological slogans. Many of the artists involved in the visual art of the Iranian Revolution had returned to their normal artistic lives, and their work remained forever in their workshops.¹¹ Instead, a new wave of revolutionary artists entered the market and created massive visual and propaganda art related to the imposed war with Iraq.¹² However, the resistance art that was created during and after the presidential election crisis of 2009 is totally different from that associated with the Iranian revolution of 1978–1979. I think that the two most important points in this regard are (1) the nature of the resistance, and (2) digital technology and media communication. Digital art, cyberspace, and media communication greatly aided the creation, development, and circulation around the globe of messages about the Iranian resistance and, consequently, its art.¹³

During the presidential election crisis of 2009 and especially in the postelection period, many resistance groups and demonstrators created online platforms, networks, and chat rooms through which they communicated within Iran. They soon understood, however, that one of the primary—and safest—

⁹ More research is needed regarding the roles, activities, and decisions of each group of artists during that time.

¹⁰ Here, I am talking about artists such as Morteza Momayez.

¹¹ Most of the mural paintings have also disappeared. For more information, watch *Statues of Tehran* (Kiarostami, 2008).

¹² Artists such as Naser Palangi, Iraj Eskandari, and Hoseyn Khosrojerdi.

¹³ Of course, not all the visual art of the 2009 crisis was in digital form. For the role of media communication during that period, see Khosronejad (2009).

ways for such online networks and communities to transfer their messages and show their activities to the whole world was through cyberspace.

Today, all around the world, activist networks and resistance communities are rapidly adopting new forms of digital tablets, sophisticated and multifunctional cellular phones, webcams, global positioning equipment, digital cameras, and a growing number of other digital and online technologies. "With a little creativity, these devices and media can provide new avenues of self-reporting, passive observation, and participant observation that yield valuable insights and new opportunities" (Masten & Plowman, 2003, p. 7). for political groups and activists to transfer their messages to the world. Digital technologies, communication media, and, therefore, digital life and activities have become ubiquitous

A growing body of scholarship focuses in a more serious manner on the ways in which digital technologies fit within people's daily practices—how such technologies are integrated within the practices that constitute communities (Wellman & Haythornthwaite, 2002), or how Internet-based technologies augment or remediate our sense of physical place (Walker, 2010). As Forte notes,

The mainstream media's privileged position of broadcast centrality in the control and direction of information has been, some might still argue, significantly eroded by the emergence of new media technologies, many-to-many communication, and narrow-casting. If the printing press enabled or determined the creation and institution of nationalism, of the nation as an imagined community, then it is possible that the Internet, and specifically social media, is helping to bolster, if not create, new social movements and empowering diverse sections of civil society in their struggles against the state, against governments and corporations, and even against each other. (Forte, 2010, para. 2)

We thus witness a range of concerns in the literature about politics and power in/via the Internet, ranging from new utopian conceptualizations of a cyber-democracy to critiques of balkanization and fragmented associations to serious worries that social media are the best state surveillance tool yet, permitting heightened policing of citizens or even crowdsourcing intelligence for the cause of national security.¹⁴ Anyone can use social media to organize causes and project political messages, including states and their military and intelligence agencies—witness the techniques of soft power and genetically modified social movements (Forte, 2010).

Students of cultural media are also interested in observing the ways in which activists and political and resistance groups use such digital and online communication technologies for transferring their messages to the world. On this topic, MacWilliams (2005) states

[F]or marginalized religious and political groups, the Internet is a powerful tool for informational and organizational purposes. As a communications medium available to anyone with a computer and modem, the Internet easily allows groups to explain who

¹⁴ The situation in Iran in 2009 is one the best examples in this regard.

they are, what they believe, and why they live the way they do. Since cyberspace is still relatively unrestricted by governmental regulations and monopolization by giant corporate media conglomerates, marginalized groups can take advantage of the internet's open access for protest and resistance. On their websites, they are free to challenge the negative stereotypes about them that appear in the mainstream media, and to attack the perceived injustices against them by the powers that be. (MacWilliams, 2005, p. 73)

Such resistance websites illustrate the need to apply social theory about community to computer-mediated communicative relationships. As cyber-sociologist Fernback (1999) posits, community is not simply a "materially determined, pre-existing physical reality" (p. 10) but a symbolic construct. Communities share not only actual places but also symbolic worlds in which any "object, act, event, quality, or relation can serve as vehicle of conception" (ibid.). Such sociocultural systems of symbols provide individuals with a sense of identity and meaning by semiotically representing their "common interests, values, economical livelihood, behaviors or roles" (ibid.). Computer-mediated communication is itself such a symbolic construct, one that is electronically reproduced in the non-place of cyberspace but is nonetheless a gathering place for a "community of meaning." While people interacting online may be dislodged from their ordinary social relations in physical space, cyberspace provides them with a new, symbolically real, space in which to communicate and commune with each other (MacWilliams, 2005, p. 75). In this regard, Juris (2005) suggests, such movements belong to a particular class of "computer-supported social movements".

Today, one of the main languages and mediums for such online resistance and digital activism is certainly digital resistance art. In this regard, one of the primary issues in this field of research is the connection(s) and relationship(s) among virtual art, cyberspace, and a subsequent digital aesthetic. Students of visual culture have demonstrated that the visual is inextricably linked to ongoing social, political, psychological, and cultural struggles (Duncum & Bracey, 2001, 2002; Freedman, 2001, 2003; Tavin, 2000, 2002). These struggles occur on numerous cultural fronts and through multiple media, including community celebrations, television programs, advertisements, and digital environments (Freedman & Schuler, 2002; Krug, 2002; Smith-Shank, 2002). According to visual culture theorist Mirzoeff, the human experience is now more visual and visualized than ever before, and visual culture is not only part of our everyday lives, it *is* our everyday lives. He explains that "visual culture directs our attention away from structured, formal viewing settings like the cinema and art gallery to the centrality of visual experience in everyday life" (Mirzoeff, 1999, p. 7). Duncum also has identified the everyday aesthetic experience as an often-overlooked but important location from which many of our attitudes and beliefs, and much of our knowledge, are shaped. He characterizes our everyday aesthetic experiences as significant sites where ideological struggles occur, often without our conscious knowledge, and argues that this imperceptibility makes them difficult to resist (Duncum, 1999, 2002).

Aesthetically speaking, as Popper notes, virtual art is the artistic interpretation of contemporary issues, not only with the aid of technological developments but also through their integration with them. Such an integration or combination allows for an aesthetic-technological logic of creation that forms the essential part of the specificity of the virtual artwork (Popper, 2006, pp. 1-2). As for the aesthetic

advances of virtual art, they are due to the potentialities given to individual artists to develop these techno-aesthetic categories in connection with plastic, narrative, sociopolitical, cultural, and still other issues. If the term "virtual" in this context involves a certain ambiguity because it is meant to play on a philosophical paradox between the virtual, the potential, and the actual (and even between the virtual and the real), this can only be considered an advantage of virtual aesthetics (Popper, 2006, p. 396).

According to Featherstone (2007), the aestheticization of everyday life refers to the rapid flow of signs and images that saturates the fabric of everyday life in contemporary society. A concern for everyday aesthetic arises from the societal turn toward the cultural and the simultaneous turn of the cultural toward the visual. This reflects both the very different sites of everyday culture and the diverse attitudes toward their experience. Condemned by some scholars for being superficial and self-referential, it is applauded by others for offering both immense pleasure and rich resources for the construction of identity (Duncum, 1999, p. 295).

For Khan, "the "political" and the "aesthetic" are antithetical concepts conflated in the expression "political aesthetic" (Khan, 2012, p. 1). The "political" is commonly associated with the immediate socioeconomic, that is, historical, reality: not only what we see and observe from a phenomenological perspective but also the dynamic distribution of space and time within which individuals associate into collectives, engaging in praxis, commitment, and the transformation of existing forces of production and their concomitant relations of production. In this regard, he argues that the "aesthetic" is understood in the Kantian sense as a "system of a priori forms of determining what presents itself in sense experience" (ibid.). In other words, "aesthetic" is the realm of forms, the spiritual realm of ideas, of a priori categories that help us understand the sense perceptions of reality as it is (ibid.).

Resistance art and the political aesthetic that artists used in their work during the Iranian presidential election crisis of 2009 give us a unique opportunity to explore the ways in which cultural, visual, and political symbols—icons and allegories—united to create a new wave of visual activism in 21st-century Iran. For more than 30 years, the Iranian regime was the official curator of all types of revolutionary, propaganda, and political visual art of the country, and the resistance artists of Iran's presidential election crisis had only a few weeks in which to create and circulate their own art. It is very important to understand the ways in which visual artists were involved in political activities from the beginning of the presidential campaigns; to what extent they used icons, symbols, and aesthetics in their works; and how and with which mediums they presented their artwork. Also, it is quite astonishing to see that the peaceful political art of the pre-election period turned into digital resistance art with new political and activist messages that resulted in the use of new visual elements, symbols, and aesthetics in the postelection period. This collection is one of the first attempts to recognize this new wave of digital activist art in Iran and hopes to pave the way for further investigations.

Our Collection

Our collection is a new and creative approach based on digital ethnography and netnography, which is the result of a call for papers I circulated in 2010. Based on the aims of the *International Journal of Communication*, we selected only three of the articles received. The combination of selected works

clearly demonstrates that our approach in this special section is based on interdisciplinary and pluridisciplinary methods. The first article of our collection was written by Elizabeth Rauh, a PhD candidate in the field of Islamic art history. The second article is the result of the research of Andrea Duranti, who holds a PhD in history, and our last article was written by Mazyar Lotfalian, a visual anthropologist.

In the first article, "Thirty Years Later: Iranian Visual Culture from the 1979 Revolution to the 2009 Presidential Protests," the author discusses the influence of Shiite visual symbols and slogans, which revolutionaries used in demonstrations during the Iranian Revolution of 1978–1979, on the visual and aesthetic codes and representations employed by resistance artists during the Iranian presidential election crisis of 2009.

During this period—and mostly after the announcement of the results of the election—demonstrators used flyers, banners, and posters on which different types of symbols, iconographies, and visual elements were represented. To this day, it is not known precisely who the creators of these works of art were; it is also difficult to determine whether these artists were located inside or outside of Iran during that period, but one might imagine that either scenario could be possible, given Iran's situation in those days. However, it is quite clear that the artists developed their ideologies and, consequently, any related arts step-by-step and of course, based on the political era and emotional sphere of the postelection period.

Based on the political events and the situation of crisis during that period in Iran, one can classify the topic, content, and symbols used in the visual arts of the post-presidential election crisis in different ways; however, it seems to me that one of the best ways is perhaps to classify them based on a calendar of events.¹⁵

In this regard, the first category of protest artwork directly touches on the immediate dissatisfaction of the electorate concerning the results of the presidential election. In this category, and at the beginning of events, artists mostly used text and the color green in their works. At that stage, without interplay between text and image, no one could imagine that the demonstrators could transfer their messages of dissatisfaction. However, the interesting point in this period is that artists used both Persian and English typography for their slogans; clearly, they also wished to transfer their voices to the whole world.

Certainly, the most utilized slogan in this category and during that period was, "Where is my vote?" It was only after a few days and based on public confrontations between peaceful demonstrators and the riot police that artists changed their texts gradually. Later they added more icons, such as a victory hand or a stylized bird, to their artwork. Also, in this stage one can feel aesthetically that artists would increasingly replace standard visual propaganda symbols with allegorical icons.

¹⁵ For a more coherent calendar of events related to this topic, see <http://www.greens-art.net/events/?lang=en>

From the beginning of the demonstrations of the pre-election period, the followers of Mousavi chose the color green for their campaign—their leader is among the descendants of the Prophet (a Seyyed), and the color green is a sign of the holiness of the *Ahl-e Beyt* (*the Household of the Prophet*) in Shiite iconology and symbolism.

However, before the period of the election, the use of this color had no further symbolic or political meaning for this group of voters. With the announcement of the election results and the dissatisfaction among Iranians, the symbolic and aesthetic meaning of the color green changed from an indication of a member of the Holy Family (a Seyyed) to the greater and more general message of freedom.

Also, it was after the public aggression and harsh confrontations between demonstrators and riot police, which resulted in public beatings and the death of civilians, that resistance artists added more symbolic elements to their works. Soon, the colors red and black found their place in visual resistance art, signifying aggression and death; these two symbolic colors also automatically direct every viewer to one of the main routes of Iranian Shiism, martyrdom. The nature and content—and therefore visual elements and symbols—of the peaceful propaganda arts of the pre-election period had changed into a political art of resistance.



As mentioned earlier, it was only two days after the official announcement of the election results and the speeches of Ahmadinejad that the manifestations changed from peaceful demonstrations into bloody public aggressions. Consequently, many of the demonstrators were disappeared, killed, or jailed. At this stage, artists added a new and powerful symbol to their art: an open hand (*panjeh*). The victory hand ceded to the *panjeh*. A sociopolitical visual icon, though not necessarily an Iranian one, ceded its place to a powerful and important Shiite symbol that could be considered somehow Iranian. The demonstrations to reclaim the lost votes changed into a fight against tyranny and oppression. It is at this stage that Rauh's article provides us with a detailed explanation of the new wave of symbols and visual aesthetics that, according to her, are related to the Karbala paradigm, the Iranian Revolution of 1978–1979, and the Green Movement.

Based on eyewitness accounts and oral reports, around 72 young demonstrators lost their lives in Tehran alone between June 15 and July 17, 2009.¹⁶ However, for many reasons, one individual has become the icon of those who were killed during this public crisis: Neda Agha Soltan. On June 20, 2009, Neda Agha Soltan, one of the many innocent citizens who was in the streets participating in demonstrations, or simply, like many others, just observing events, was shot dead. In less than half a day, footage of Neda's death, which many consider to be one of the most shocking and powerful images of our century, was circulated on the Internet.

The brutal sight of a young civilian girl dying in front of us, with open eyes—and the recording of these moments and the transmitting of them to the world—brought the Iranian regime a new political and media crisis. The ambiguous circumstances surrounding Neda's death provided another opportunity for many political groups inside, but especially outside, Iran to use and abuse this topic against the regime. World reaction and response to footage of Neda's death encouraged Iranian citizens to share on the Internet additional photos and footage (*tekey-e film*) of the daily crisis in the streets of Tehran. And, increasingly, the Iranian regime tried to ignore or reject the truth in its communications (Khosronejad, 2012).

Andrea Duranti, in his article, provides detailed information about Neda Agha Soltan, her life, how she became one of the icons of the Iranian presidential crisis of 2009, and the ways in which foreign media used and reused her story to condemn the Iranian regime. Although Neda's sudden, impious death left a strong mark on all of the artists who were involved in the resistance art of the presidential election crisis, many mysteries and unanswered questions about her death remain.

Again, based on a calendar of the events, hours and days following Neda's death, visual representations of her changed and developed. The first image of her death was short, simple, but extremely violent footage that was recorded by an anonymous member of the public on the street.¹⁷ During the first hours after the circulation of the footage on the Internet, the regime tried to reject this horrifying news; they immediately circulated a photo portrait of a woman whose name is close to that of Neda Agha Soltan (Schraven, 2009). The regime's justification was that what the demonstrators were saying was false and that the death of Neda was staged in order to accuse the system of being responsible for her death (Press TV, 2010b).

Therefore, the first series of images created by artists of the movement in memory of Neda was based on the photo portrait of the second Neda, not the real Neda Agha Soltan. However, this moment was very important, in part because visual artists' generalized use of photo portraits of the dead young demonstrators began from this moment. Also, it demonstrates that Neda's death shocked the whole world to that point that artists used an image of another woman without knowing that she was not the real Neda, simply in order to defend Neda's rights.

¹⁶ See <http://www.peykeiran.com/Content.aspx?ID=6167>

¹⁷ Additional footage posted on the Internet only a few weeks after Neda's death shows the person filming the primary footage of her death.

At the same time, urban journalism gained another dimension and became more important. Even before the election, demonstrators had begun to use their cellular phones to capture images of public events and circulate them on the Internet, but footage of Neda's death gave more breadth and value to urban journalism and the usage of digital images and arts (for more information on this topic, see Khosronejad 2009). Simultaneously, the engagement of foreign demonstrators outside Iran also changed. Very soon, personal and family photos of the genuine Neda Agha Soltan were circulated on the Internet, informing the world about this mistake and revealing more about her private life.



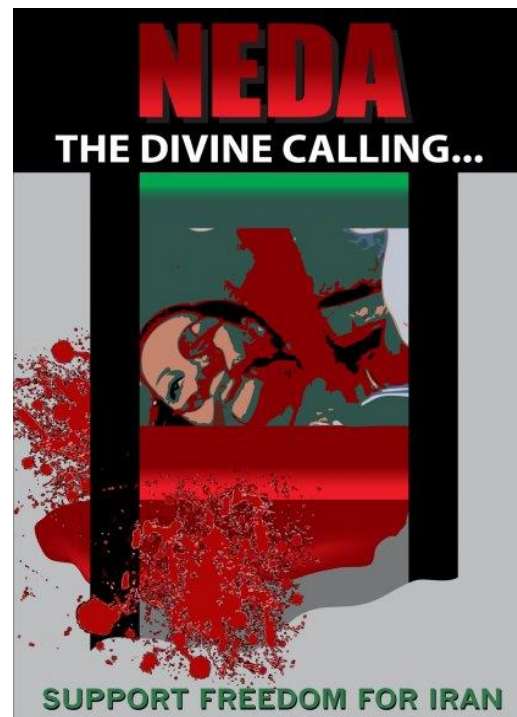
The next group of works comprises digital images focused on the portrait of Neda, stylizing it as graphic image with English anecdotes. In these graphic images, which were primarily circulated among social networks, online groups, and also on the Internet, the color red was dominant; most of the texts say, "We will never forget" or "Neda, stay with us."¹⁸



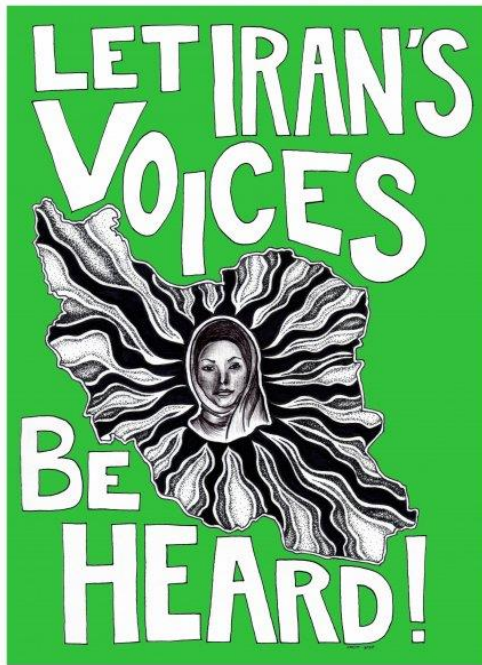
¹⁸ This second slogan comes from the voice that can be heard in the footage of Neda's death.

A few days later, the immediate shock of Neda's death (an unjustified human death) was integrated into the rest of the general resistance activities, including the visual arts of the postelection period (a martyr for the Green Movement). At this stage, the series of digital works of art became more stylized, and the use of color became more important. The color black was quite dominant (the symbol of death), while red was well placed (people were still dying) and, little by little, green again found its place (they belonged to the Green Movement).

In these digital resistance works, the messages of the texts also changed. Using the name of Neda (meaning "whisper of freedom" in Persian) directly was abandoned in favor of invocations with a metaphorical meaning of her name—phrases such as "Neda, the divine calling" or "support for freedom for Iran"—to more closely coincide with the aims of the Green Movement. Clearly, in these series of digital artwork, artists used strong images of Neda's portrait, which is covered by her blood in the last moments of her life, a sign that "the price of freedom is death."

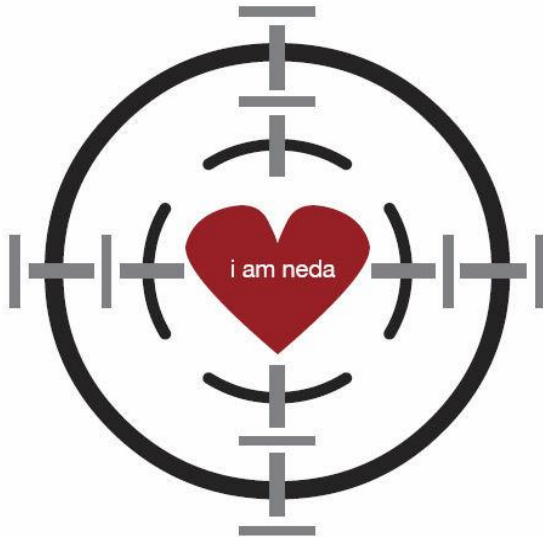


In subsequent images, Neda became the main "voice of freedom" even for those in the diaspora, including non-Iranians. At this stage, artists symbolically used the map and flag of Iran, the country's typography, the color green, and the portrait of Neda together.



Another category of digital artwork about Neda's death is a group of works that use the symbol of the heart (*qalb*) in Persian, which internationally signifies love but also symbolizes the death of Neda, who was killed by a shot to the heart when she became the target of snipers. The message of this group of works is "Neda, you will 'stay forever in our soul."¹⁹ Generally speaking, it is quite difficult to ascertain which category of digital artwork was created first, either inside or outside of Iran.

¹⁹ Last but not least, we should discuss the objects and paraphernalia that were created in Neda's memory, mostly outside Iran and among the Iranians of the diaspora. These gradually surfaced in the year following Neda's death. For more information, see Khosronejad, 2012.



With the death of Neda and other young protesters in the streets of Tehran, as I argued, the role of urban journalism and, consequently, the engagement of international demonstrators and foreign news agencies became much more important to the events in Iran. In those days, it was quite difficult to disbelieve the foreign news that was broadcast about the internal conditions of Iran.²⁰ At the same time, with the development of urban journalism, online social networks and activist communities became crucial in the internal affairs of the presidential election crisis. As a consequence, the involvement of online artists and their digital resistance art again gained other dimensions.

²⁰ Many of them, such as BBC Persian and CNN, broadcast inaccurate information and false audio interviews.



The third article of our section, written by Mazyar Lotfalian, discusses the role of visual culture and digital practices during this period. Lotfalian is in agreement with others that short footage captured by cellular phones in the streets of Tehran became the primary visual sources for many others to create short clips, animations, and other types of multimedia. If we cannot determine with certainty who the visual digital artists of the Iranian presidential crisis were, especially during the first week after the announcement of the election results, from the second week we can definitely say that the creation and circulation of multimedia artwork on the Internet were the result of those resistance artists who were living outside of Iran. It is hard to imagine, given the restrictions and difficulties that the regime placed on the Internet and its use in Iran, especially after the announcement of the presidential election results, that artists living in Iran could circulate such artwork online.

In his article, Lotfalian demonstrates that resistance artists who lived outside Iran were inspired by the visual elements and symbols that were used during the Iranian Revolution of 1978–1979. The author also argues that the notion of circulation that is discussed in debates about new media and theories of representation is not strong enough to account for the impacts and effects of such digital resistance art on the public sphere. Instead, he proposes the use of new forms of social practice that are based on the convergence of modes of production.

As Duncum notes, net art is not really art at all, but rather an emerging complex of network-mediated image manipulations for which we have no better set of constructs to describe than the multiplex of pre-existing social models regarding art that exist generally in contemporary society (as cited in Stalbaum, 1998, p. 18). It is perhaps in this realm that the digital resistance art from the Iranian presidential election crisis can become politically relevant. It can contribute to discussions about the nature of social and political threats and their impact on Iranian activist communities and youth resistance groups; about the memory and trauma of those who lost their children and loved ones in the public crisis after the presidential election period; and future policies about the fundamental definition of security and the ensuing relationship between inside and outside. Such digital protest mediums stress the importance of art in the process of "coming to terms with what has happened" and in the "healing, recovery and rebuilding of self and community" (Bleiker 2006, p. 84). They seek to "function as a dialogue for those who wish to communicate through images" (ibid.) and to open up avenues of discussion and expression through cultural intervention.

If we consider our collection as one of the first attempts to examine the role of digital resistance art in the Middle East and Islamic communities, we still have a long way to go in learning about this type of protest art, which continues to develop every day.

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