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Interstitial Space of the Art of Protest

Hamid Dabashi

In May 2015, I was invited to Freie Universität Berlin for a keynote on the art of protest, in which I had been interested since the Green Movement in Iran (2009) and the rise of the Arab Spring (2011).¹ In my initial communications with my hosts regarding this lecture, I proposed the title “From the Sublime to the Ridiculous: The Art of Protest, Protesting the Arts,” by which I had intended to speak of protest as an act of political defiance against the banality of evil taking place somewhere between two aesthetic exercises—one *defying* and the other *fortifying* the status quo. To do so, I had intended to dwell on two films, Charlie Chaplin’s *The Great Dictator* (1940) and Sacha Cohen’s *The Dictator* (2012), thereby exploring the contradictory function of art as political gesture—one that is enabling by being ennobling, the other by being astonishingly racist and jejune. How did we get from Charlie Chaplin to Sacha Cohen, and when people laugh at Cohen, what does that laughter mean today?

But in the time between that initial communication and my going to Berlin, I was increasingly drawn to the question of the *space* between forms and genres of art, less about the work of art itself and more about where (the place, the space) it is installed, staged, screened, exhibited. I was directed toward this space by the magnitude of counterrevolutionary forces now mobilized by Saudi Arabia and its allies to reverse the course of history and abort the open-ended horizons of Arab revolutions. Where do artists and their audiences dwell and reside, stage and show? The shift was from temporal—the distance between Chaplin and Cohen—to spatial: the differential of power where things mean and can mean even more.

Deferred Defiance

I became interested in space because what happened in the course of Arab revolutions, especially during the fateful year of 2010, was something to behold and remember, theoretically to allow to unfold and historically to find ways to sustain for posterity. The successive events in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, and then Syria

were crafting a new vision of our world in which the collapse of dictatorships was no longer sufficient—Arabs and Muslims were dreaming impossible dreams. The dynamics of revolutionary and counterrevolutionary forces were measuring each other out, maneuvering in and out of each other. Something serious had happened, and that something was finding its way into the realm of creative imagination, into art, literature, and drama, agitating subversive vistas of new horizons. How were we to measure or even grasp such changes? Where were we to archive them?

A major site of contemporary Arab and Muslim art, for example, is the Mathaf, the Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha, Qatar. What happens to contemporary art—art of protest in particular, of which there are exquisite samples in the permanent collection at Mathaf—when the very existence of Qatar is drawn into the Saudi counterrevolutionary mobilization in Yemen or the pernicious sectarianism in Syria? Has not the art, including the art of protest, become actively, aggressively, violently museumized, neutralized, made irrelevant to the site of revolutionary mobilization? What happens when Qatar itself, as a sovereign nation, becomes the target of an all-out embargo by its own Arab neighbors. In what particular ways can we continue to talk about the “Arab World” or an “Arab Museum?” If Mathaf, as one particularly poignant space for contemporary and modern art, is to represent the totality of the Arab world in terms of its artistic production, to what degree is that space implicated or allowed to transcend its location in a transnational politics of hostility and envy, of rancor and resentment? Can the “Arab world,” as a *world*, be allowed a space for an aesthetic intuition of its own transcendence?

My thinking began to be drawn toward the difference between the sublime and the ridiculous, namely between Charlie Chaplin and Sacha Cohen, but eventually shifted to the spatial dimension of that and all other forms of differential modalities precisely because I thought we are in a transitional period in our current history. My concern was no longer about the Hegelian difference between a thesis (the sublimity of Charlie Chaplin’s art) and its antithesis (the ridiculous buffoonery of Sacha Cohen) but about the power differential that enables a *deferred defiance*. It was here that I was drawn to the *interstitial* space on which works of protest art are generated and thereby manage to stage a deferred defiance. We were, and have remained, in a revolutionary mood—but that revolutionary mood was not contingent on a revolutionary success such as the ascendancy of a socialist state or nationalist ideology. Let me explain this in some detail.

I have introduced and cultivated the idea of deferred defiance in two previous books—my book on Shi’ism as a religion of protest and my book on the Arab Spring as the end of postcoloniality—by which I have intended a thematic reversal of the Freudian notion of deferred obedience in cultures that have killed their primordial fathers, relocating the nexus of command and obedience on cultural sites that keep killing their primogenital children.² The current counterrevolutionary mobilization in the Arab and Muslim world, evident in the murderous gang of ISIS domination of the Syrian and Iraqi scene down to the Saudi invasion of first Bahrain and then Yemen, mark a moment when our reflection on the art of protest must necessarily find that effective space where we can think and theorize an art that opposes this counterrevolutionary violence. But the key question is how and on what premise. In the emerging Arab and

Muslim art of protest dwells a delayed defiance, an act of postponed subversiveness, merely suggested here but delivered elsewhere, and in between the here and there is where the art of protests hangs its contemporary significance.

Location of the Art of Protest

Where are the artist and her or his work of art located? Where is the space in which the art of protest takes place, performs itself—art galleries, biennales, film festivals, museums, university campuses, or refugee camps? A sustained politics and aesthetics of dislocation inform our reading of the art of protest; we do not know where we are or even what we are looking at when we look at a picture of the Chinese artist Ai Weiwei posing as the dead Syrian child Aylan Kurdi.³ Dislocation of Palestinian, Afghan, Iraqi, and Syrian refugees, their dispossession and displacement, is the space upon which the art of protest is dreamed or performed. Palestinian *keys* with no doors left to open must remain the paramount insignia of the location of the art of protest, a place occupied by an apartheid settler colony, protected by an amorphous empire.

The space of the art of protest perforce yields to the sphere of public art of protest, and thus we move from Hannah Arendt to Jürgen Habermas, from public space as the location of politics of liberation to the structural transformation of the bourgeois public sphere, from Arendt's notion of public space as the location of public happiness, namely as the space of political protest, where liberty from tyranny and freedom to be political are asserted, to the narrative sphere of politics. Arendt proposed the following:

If the ultimate end of revolution was freedom and the constitution of a public space where freedom could appear, then ... no one could be called happy without his share of public happiness, that no one could be called free without his experience in public freedom, and that no one could be called happy or free without participating, and having a share, in public power.⁴

But this is not entirely applicable to our revolutionary time—revolution as open-ended Bakhtinian novel and not total as in Homeric epic.⁵ On the platform of these revolutions, the occupied public space (from Azadi to Tahrir to Taksim to Syntagma to *Zuccotti* to *Zócalo*) yields to their simulacra of public sphere and thereafter, under severe censorial policies of the threatened state, yields to the parapublic sphere that links underground and cyberspace together. This leads us to reconsider the French Marxist urban sociologist Henri Lefebvre and his idea of the production of space.

This is how Lefebvre proposes the idea of “the third space”: first is the physical space, second is the mental space, and third is the social space.⁶ From Lefebvre we can move to Edward Soja's notion of “third space,” what he calls spatial trialectics. Soja's third space is both real and imagined, what he considers spatial justice.⁷ Here I propose that the idea of third space is open-ended, miasmatic. We must think of it as a cumulative or evolving trialectics. While Soja and Homi Bhabha point to hybridity

and the duality becoming trialectical—and thus the third space opening up—I propose an interstitial space, which is hidden to both first and second spaces. Lefebvre and Soja seem to be too Christian in their preference for trilogy for the world at large, especially if they might be more inclined toward Manichean-Hegelian dialectic. On this trinity we all become more than just Christians. Far more importantly, we become implicated in a post-national trialectics where art loses its power of subversion.

I borrow the concept of interstitial space from art and architecture. Contemporary art historians have already noted the fact that there are many forms of art that defy the accepted boundaries of genres and media. Here, a work of art or fiction becomes its own interspace rather than succumbing to established boundaries. The idea has its resonances in architecture, where an interstitial space is where a building is made more pliable to multiple and varied uses. The way I use interstitial space is to think of it as a location for the urban guerilla artfare, where we perform a revolutionary confiscation of the work of art from the bourgeois public spaces in which it is staged; without depositing it into any bank or museum or biennale, we cash it in for our own revolutionary purposes before auctioneers sell it off in the art marketplace. Our theorization of the work of art is thus entirely predicated on its fragmentary disposition on this interstitial space at the moment of the theoretical confiscation of the commodified work of art, wherein it is fetishized and thus robbed of its politics of emancipation, a fragmented fact that from Walter Benjamin forward we have learned how to transform into allegories.⁸

Existential Reasoning

Let me explain this a bit further. If we were to dwell on the moment that hermeneuticians like Hans-George Gadamer suggest reason is seen incarnate in existence, and therefore, if in order to understand our worldly whereabouts, we would have to categorically abandon the space presumed outside that existential reasoning, then the space of the protest art is where we dwell, where we exist, where we think the world and see the sublime, all at the same time. That space is a space in between, not tertiary but non-numerical, a hidden space, a safe house, where the urban guerilla artfare hits and runs.

Now the question is, How do we read and understand and interpret from this safe house? The question leads us to the consideration of art, subjectivity, and solidarity—where art, subjection, agency, and solidarity all become one, thereby decentering the knowing subject by becoming its own knowable world announces itself, where apathy yields not to sympathy but to empathy, through a revolutionary postcolonial reading of such seminal texts as Max Sheller's 1923 *Zur Phänomenologie und Theorie der Sympathiegefühle und von Liebe und Hass* (*The Nature of Sympathy*).⁹ The move will defiantly overcome Kant's triangulated critic of the knowing subject, which becomes a decidedly European knowing subject, thereby rendering the world at large, from humans to things, as a knowable world. The postcolonial subject has no room in the Kantian critique of reason, for she or he is always already delegated to the fixed status of being integral to a knowable world. As such, the postcolonial person is incapable

of the sublime and the beautiful.¹⁰ She has to dodge Immanuel Kant and the entire bourgeois public sphere he and his subsequent European philosophers enabled if she is to cultivate who she is and what is sublime and beautiful in her horizons.

From Max Scheler, we could move to Emanuel Levinas, where “the face of the Other” becomes the site of consciousness. But I have an even more radical idea. I propose the Persian poet Hatef Isfahani’s (died circa 1783) famous *tarji’-band* poem, in which the poet becomes what we might call a “*verstehende*” subject—he becomes the always othered Other and defends the Other against the self.¹¹ From Hatef’s *tarji’-band*, we learn how to overcome Levinas’s limitation, for in this poem, it is not the absolute face of the Other, thereby transcendentalized, but the constantly changing face of multiple Others that becomes the sublated site of otherness as oneself, where the “I” keeps circulating like a mirror around a face that makes it impossible for the “I” to see itself except in the mirror of multiplying Others. Levinas’s dialogical interface between the self and the Other becomes not just a trialectics but effectively circumambulatory. The proposition of the decentered subject ultimately becomes *fana fi al-khalq*—dissolution in multitude—as the simulacrum of *fana fi al-haq*—dissolution in truth.

In Hatef’s poem, we follow a Muslim who visits a Christian church, a Jewish synagogue, and a Zoroastrian temple and wonders why the worshippers are not Muslims and praying to the same Muslim God, in each case concluding that there was nothing wrong with what they were doing, rather it was his own perceptions of things that kept being corrected by placing himself in the voice of the Other. The refrain after each segment of the poem sings, “That all is He and nothing but He/He is One and there is no similitude to Him.” The key moment in all the varied cycles is when the poet says, “*Man-e sharmandeh az Mosalmani*” (I ashamed of being a Muslim), which is here the epistemic premise of successive and sublimating cognitions. Here the subject is neither dual nor even a triad but circulatory, circumambulatory, always substitutional, substitutionary, not absorbed but in fact intensified in subjection of alterity. It becomes the Other only on its way to something else. The subject in each and every case transcends from factual to the phenomenological, the phenomenology of the sublime, of the poetic art allowing for the self to go through sublimation, having *aufgehoben* through multiple alterities.

In the same vein, I propose that the art of protest works through a mirroring act, as if working in a niche, a *mihrab*, where we see the invisible face of the absolute Other in the face of the moving images of the always self-othering Others, those real people who are alienated from themselves. The interstitial space is the occasion and the simulacrum of that politics which enables this space as it bans it. But in thus othering and altering its means, politics gives birth to its own alterity, its own spatial negation—what I often term the “parapublic sphere,” where the art of protest dwells. Art conquers this space and surrenders to it at one and the same time. To preempt their own overthrowing, the first thing triumphant tyrannies do is to ban the aesthetic pregnancy of the political and to seek to substitute it with their own state-sponsored aesthetics of submission and surrender. The art of protest preempts that possibility.

The art of protest therefore self-transcendentalizes its location, so much so that a university lecture hall or a gallery or a museum or a street corner or a refugee camp becomes the site of its incidence, but it does not stay there. It self-transcendentalizes—

from location to location—always moving in interstitial in-betweens. The space of the art of protest is thus ipso facto interstitial, somewhere in between, somewhere between the event that occasions it, the art that remembers it, and the theory that seeks to capture its enduring significance. That “where” is where that somewhere becomes the camp—from Auschwitz to Zaatari to Yarmouk—camps where all our *bios* has become *zoë*; the camp suspends urbanity until it is made the ground zero of our future liberations. If protest—its arts or its politics—does not lead to liberation, it is an exercise in futility, whether academic or artistic. The art of protest, always in the limbo, preempts that futility.

The Space and the Spectacle¹²

Let me now get more specific. Revolutions generate their own slogans, vocabularies, ideas, inner dynamics, external manifestations, institutional endurance, and perhaps most important of all, their own iconography—the visual registers that will move and mobilize their presence and their posterity. “Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité” became the most famous slogan of the French Revolution. “Workers of the world, unite!” remains the most potent slogan of all socialist revolutions. “Peace! Land! Bread!” was perhaps the most celebrated slogan of the Russian Revolution. “Neither East, Nor West, [but] the Islamic Republic” was the battle cry of the militant Islamists who took over and derailed the Iranian revolution of 1979. The Arab revolutions are no exception. “People demand the overthrow of the regime” and “Bread, freedom, and social justice” will perhaps remain the mightiest and most universal cry of the Arab revolutions. But until the iconic photo of activist and poet Shaimaa al-Sabbagh’s moment of martyrdom on January 24, 2015, captured by twenty-three-year-old Egyptian photographer Islam Osama for Reuters/*Youm El Sabea* newspaper, the Egyptian, and by extension Arab, revolutions lacked a compelling iconic image. They now had it: a young female revolutionary, a leading member of the Socialist Popular Alliance Party, dying, embraced and held upright by a comrade, Sayyed Abu el-Ela, who is kneeling at her feet.¹³ All of these particularities will soon fade and fuse into the emblematic synergy of a revolutionary allegory for generations to come. Where is Shaimaa al-Sabbagh now—where is the moment that this photograph was taken? Is this photograph art, politics, or a mere allegory that transcends all such questions?

Long-shot photos of Tahrir Square with people diminished to minuscule scale were perhaps the most globally recognized visual representation of the Arab revolutions. The self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia was the initial trigger of these revolutions. But the rare picture of his final and heroic demise is shrouded in the burning fire of anonymity. All those photos, from the suicidal self-immolation of Bouazizi in Sidi Bouzid in Tunisia to Tahrir Square in Cairo—ranging from fleeting snapshots of burning anonymity to large scale and long shot, and thus both lacking in revolutionary personification and character, now pale in comparison with this photo of Shaimaa al-Sabbagh. At the moment of her death, Shaimaa al-Sabbagh became iconic, allegorical, emblematic of an entire nation, an entire people, of a momentous revolution, and that

Figure 12.1 Shaimaa al-Sabbagh—shot and killed by Egyptian security forces. Photo: Islam Osman—Youn El Sabea (Al Youm Al Saabi/Reuters).

entire picture is nothing but a digital memory, has no place except in the recollections of those who have seen it. There cannot be any museum holding that instance. The memorial is ephemeral, invulnerable precisely because it is immaterial.

For posterity, all the brutish ruling Arab potentates, from Bashar al-Assad in Syria to Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in Egypt and everyone else in between, will be dwarfed in comparison with this picture of the dying Shaimaa al-Sabbagh. Captured at the moment of entering eternity, she is the very embodiment of all those Arab and Muslim women and men demanding and deserving a better life. Arab revolutions unfold apace up and down a winding road: the rise and immediate collapse of parliamentary democracy in Egypt, the destruction of the state apparatus in Libya, the flickering signs of hope in Tunisia, the forceful crackdown in Bahrain, the murderous machinations of the ruling regime in Syria, the counterrevolutionary sectarianism holding tight the rope between Saudi Arabia and Iran with immediate, genocidal ramifications in Yemen, the noxious rise of the murderous Islamic State group (IS, formerly ISIS), and the heroic resistances of the Kurds in Kobane. The past is forever left behind, the present is uncertain, the future blurry—but the force of history is now crystal clear for the whole world to see in the figure of one Arab woman standing up as a testimony, a *shâhid* (witness) and a *shahîd* (martyr), for posterity. The dying figure of Shaimaa al-Sabbagh stands for the valiant militancy of Kurdish women of Kobane fighting the IS, the summation of all counterrevolutionary conspiracies gathered in one murderous gang. Shaimaa al-Sabbagh has thus joined eternity precisely because of the impossibility of museumizing the moment of her entering eternity.

Revolutionary Icons Worldwide

From our perspective today, the icon of the French revolution, Eugène Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* (1830) is too allegorical, while Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze's *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (1851), as an emblem of the American revolution, is already too Christian fundamentalist, too allegorically triumphalist, too anticipatory, and shrouded in the future of American imperialism to have a global resonance. The long shot black-and-white picture of Lenin mobilizing a crowd in the course of the Russian revolution is too classical a portrait of a full-time revolutionary who has nothing else to do but to lead a massive uprising, as the famous picture of Castro and Che Guevara during the Cuban revolution is too replete with masculinist heroism to register realistically for mortal human beings. The most famous picture of the Iranian revolution raises a portrait of Ayatollah Khomeini to heaven as it dwarfs his followers to the size of little ants.

All these iconic pictures were crucial for their times, and yet they do not travel well across time and space. None of them, now emblematic symbols of bygone ages, comes anywhere near this picture of Shaimaa al-Sabbagh as a potent revolutionary icon specific to our times: the figure of a young woman, a mother, a citizen with ordinary chores and responsibilities, with a child to raise, a partner, a comrade to have and to hold, and then a determined socialist revolutionary—this is the marked difference between this and all other revolutions, led not by the absolutist convictions of what in my book *Arab Spring* (2012) I call “total revolutions” but by the steady determination of the makers of our “open-ended revolutions.” As such, the picture will always remain allegorical, universal in its immaterial particularity.

Ours is a revolutionary *time*, not a revolutionary *moment*: the moment of Shaimaa al-Sabbagh's death, precisely four years after the initial success of the Egyptian Revolution, marks the revolutionary time in which we live and that she gave her life marking. Understanding these revolutions requires the steady patience, the analytical skills, the theoretical trajectory, and the temporal endurance of what in the French Annales school of historiography is rightly called *longue durée*. Just because a military coup in Egypt, the bloody reign of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, and the US imperial adventurism in Iraq have come together to produce the monstrosities of IS and its ilk, and regardless of the persistent, discouraging events in Libya, Yemen, and Bahrain, the Arab Spring has not become a winter. Sometimes a metaphor is just a metaphor. How art corresponds with that metaphor is where this picture of Shaimaa al-Sabbagh marks its interstitial space.

The picture of a dying Shaimaa al-Sabbagh projects a rite of passage for all of us in the Arab and Muslim world, leaving behind and bidding loving farewell to the militant moment captured best in the picture of Leila Khaled, the Palestinian freedom fighter, replete with the cognitive dissonance of a girlish innocence and her averted gaze competing with her gun. The photo of Shaimaa al-Sabbagh is far less romantic, far more palpable, real, and tactile in its emotional power; it lacks both that averted girlish gaze of Leila Khaled and that protruding weapon she carries. What it does have is a steady and steely gaze of a determined woman looking into the future of a

revolutionary cause from the certainty of her moment of death, its present and public stand. This is the moment when an accidental work of art becomes its own allegory.

Another comparative point of reference is, of course, the video of a dying Neda Agha-Soltan in the course of the Green Movement in Iran—yet another iconic picture to which Shaimaa al-Sabbagh's might allude. But contrary to Sabbagh, who was a revolutionary activist having just led a concerted defiance against the military junta ruling her country, Neda Agha-Soltan was a bystander whose murder by the security forces of the Islamic Republic to instill fear in others is made even more tragic by the random helplessness with which her death was broadcast around the globe. Between the two accidental videos and pictures of Neda Agha-Sultan and Shaimaa al-Sabbagh, the interstitial space of the art of protest becomes emblematic of an age that is building subterranean solidarity among movements and entirely unbeknownst to themselves.

Shaimaa al-Sabbagh's death, however, is different from Neda Agha-Sultan's in a pronounced way: Sabbagh's is decidedly the death of an active revolutionary, a leading voice of dissent, who moments before her death was shouting for "bread, freedom, social justice." She is then chased and shot at close range by masked security forces, just before she is picked up to be carried away by a friend. The photo captures her moment of death, when she is held upright, not just by her comrade's embrace but by her own defiant will against the banality of Sisi's murderous charade. The snapshot now becomes a testimonial not just for the Rabaa massacre of August 2013 but also for all defiant revolutionary acts against tyranny in Egypt, against tyranny everywhere. The interstitial is visually mobile, aesthetically transformative. It universalizes the Egyptian Revolution in terms domestic to its historicity and native to its significance.

The significance of this photo is above all in its utter innocence—and in marking that innocence, it is instantly reminiscent of Michelangelo's *Pietà* in St. Peter's Basilica, with the critical twist that here, the martyr is a woman held by a man (her comrade) rather than a man (the Christ) held by a woman (his mother). The iconic Christian allusion here in the death of a Muslim socialist revolutionary marks the self-transcendence of a moment that points far beyond its immediate historical vicinities. Such cross-referentialities bring the world to the Egyptian moment rather than assimilate the Egyptian into the vacuous West.

Looking at the picture closely, every gesture of Shaimaa al-Sabbagh resonates and saturates the transcending moment. Her manicured red fingernails marking her left hand sitting gently on her comrade's shoulder, gesturing to balance the fist of the right hand clenching as if holding something as it sits on his right shoulder. Her gray sweater marks the splashing of her blood on her left shoulder, while her black scarf links her hair to her chest to her comrade's head. And then her face and her look: gazing, marveling, sad, sedentary, stolid—there is a determined sadness about that face, marking a moment that her death is both descending and ascending on her consciousness. Is it there yet—yes, no, maybe?—is she defiant, incredulous, resigned, accepting? The fearful embrace of her comrade is at once protective and yielding, fearful and in reverence. Every moment, every sign, every gesture in the picture assumes iconic significance only after it has entered the revolutionary consciousness of its location and time.

This picture will be the nightmare of the counterrevolutionaries as its replicas, drawings, paintings, statues, and living memories will compete to capture the allegorical potency of this purgatorial moment of a young woman declaring a history. The death of Shaimaa al-Sabbagh is the birth of the new Arab and Muslim revolutionary woman: a citizen, a mother, a comrade, a defiant hope, and a determined soul refusing to take no for an answer. To capture all of that at a moment of death is in and of itself a work of art no museum will ever have the privilege of exhibiting.

*La Vita Nuda: Baring Bodies, Bearing Witness*¹⁴

Let me now give a slightly different twist to the interstitial space of the art of protest and take you to the moment when the body in and of itself gets to stage itself. Here I would like to reflect on the public gestures of two women: the Egyptian blogger Aliaa Magda Elmahdy, who in late 2011 posted naked pictures of herself on her blog by way of a protest “against a society of violence, racism, sexism, sexual harassment and hypocrisy”; and Golshifteh Farahani, a young Iranian actress now living in France who created a sensation in and outside her homeland, especially in the social networking cyber society, by posing half naked for *Madame Le Figaro* and appearing topless in a short black-and-white video clip called *Corps et Âmes* (Bodies and Souls), produced by the prominent French fashion photographer and music video director Jean-Baptiste Mondino. Put together, the two cases of Elmahdy and Farahani stage the body of two young women as the body politic of a revolt where the *corpus anarchicum* aims at and dismantles the self-assuredness of the ruling state.¹⁵

As with the case of Elmahdy and her compatriots, the nude picture and video clip of Farahani sharply divided Iranians around the world—some celebrating her act as courageous and pathbreaking, dismantling ancient and sacrosanct taboos and thus revolutionary, others condemning her as opportunistic, obscene, immoral, and damaging to the cause of liberty in Iran. The Islamic Republic reportedly banned her from returning to her homeland. Whence the outrage? In its widest sense, clothing is the civilizing posture of humanity. No society, no community, no human gathering is devoid of one form of clothing or another as the formal decorum of becoming a full and public human being; it might be as little as a mere bamboo sheath around the groin or it might extend to fully covered veiling, without even the eyes visible to any intruding gaze. But clothing is definitive of all forms of civility. So the question is, What happens when within any society, not just in Egypt or Iran, a body exposes itself from beneath that veneer of civility?

Our manner of dressing ourselves is the most immediate habitat of our humanity—violently disrupted at times by tyrants who seek to give a different look to that humanity. When Reza Shah Pahlavi (who reigned in Iran from 1925 to 1941) banned the mode of veiling in Iran, which he deemed unseemly to his vision of “modernity,” there were women who remained home and never appeared in public until their dying day—because for them to appear in public without their habitual clothing was like

forcing New Yorkers to go to work in their bikinis. When Khomeini reimposed that almost-forgotten manner of veiling decades later, generations of women had grown up entirely alien to that manner of veiling. Reza Shah and Khomeini—two tyrants interrupted by one weakling potentate—had fought their fateful battles over the site of our mothers' and daughters' bodies. "Veiling" or "unveiling" thus branded became a matter of state policies, of ideological convictions.

"Offensive" Content

Posing a body beneath or beyond its habitual habitat is disruptive in varied cultures—not just in Iran, Egypt, or the Muslim world. Even in the heart of Europe, when a website publishes an article about Golshifteh Farahani's photos, it does so with the alert, "WARNING: contains nudity," and that warning is not for its Iranian audiences, who mostly read Persian, not any European language. These warnings are not intended for any cleric in Qom or Najaf either but for people in Western Europe or North America who might find these pictures offensive. To enter St. Peter's Basilica in Vatican City in the heart of Rome, women are required to wear "proper attire," as they would when entering any mosque in Qom or Isfahan or Cairo. When Janet Jackson's breast was accidentally exposed during a duet with Justin Timberlake at the Superbowl in 2004, it caused as much uproar in the United States as it might have in Saudi Arabia. The body is the site of all cultural inhibitions.

In varied cultures around the globe, bodies and faces are painted, covered with cloth or leaves, hair is dyed, noses, lips, and cheeks are surgically altered, and colorful contact lenses are placed over dark irises, all as the mannered rituals of societal acceptance and formality. Dressing is the ceremonial ritual of presenting the body in public. From "Sunday best" to "dressed to the nines" to "dressed to a tee" to "three-piece suits," all the way down to "Friday dressing down," from academic regalia to "heroin chic," from the metrosexual to Calvin Klein androgynies, from Muslim veiling to Gap and Benetton advertisements, people clothe themselves by way of walking into the formal gathering of their public persona. No one is ever completely naked—not even in many naturist nudist colonies. Those who dismiss or ridicule the formal dressing of varied cultures are entirely oblivious to how fanatically committed to their own "casual" look they are. All one has to do is force them to wear a tie to a meeting and they cry out loud for their Gap T-shirt and blue jeans.

Revolutionary undressing, in Egypt and elsewhere, exposes the body as the corporeal exhibition of the most naked site of state violence. Whether it is done by Aliaa Magda Elmahdy in her blog or by Golshifteh Farahani in a fashion magazine in Paris but mostly visible on the internet, the social networking that enables such exhibition/ism is the interstitial space of their art of protest. There is no museum or gallery the authorities in Egypt or Iran can send their security forces to shut down. The cat is out of the bag and no censorial politics can catch it. The fact that it is a female body that transforms itself into the art of protest catches the censorial politics of the ruling state (and perforce its patriarchal prejudices) off-guard and exposes its naked violence without any legitimacy clothing.

“Nor Customary Suits of Solemn Black”

This is all to say that no culture, Muslim or otherwise, is totally naked, that all cultures clothe—sacred or secular, Eastern or Western, traditional or modern. But (and here’s the rub) the deliberate stripping of clothing that a culture has habitually called “decent”—in gestures ranging from running naked in a soccer stadium with joy, or in protest, or in highly stylized photographic or video installations—is an act of staged formal destruction that disrupts the normality of socializing norms for a deliberate pause. It is the staging of the body for a momentary reflection—where and when it is ordinarily taken for granted and ignored. The vast and varied tradition of nude statues, paintings, and photographs, from the Greeks to the postmodern, are aesthetic pauses for such moments of reflection and do not mean that the Greeks and Romans, or contemporary Europeans or Americans, ordinarily walk around their towns looking like those statues or pictures. Nudity by definition is an act of exhibition—anywhere and anytime. It is the moment that the body stages itself in an impromptu or rehearsed act of protest against any normative complacency.

Art as such is a remissive occasion that, in effect, sustains a culture’s inhibitions—not discrediting or dismantling them (if we were to follow Phillip Rieff’s theory of culture to its logical conclusions).¹⁶ Golshifteh Farahani is not the first young Iranian woman in recent memory to have taken a naked photo of herself and publicized it, nor was Aliaa Magda Elmahdy the first Muslim to do so. Long before them both, another young Iranian woman, Minou Arjomand, joined an HIV/AIDS advocacy group (ACT UP) for a top-to-toe naked demonstration outside Madison Square Garden in New York City, where the Republican National Convention was taking place in August 2004, protesting against President Bush’s AIDS policies. She and her friends later posed for a group portrait that was published in the *New Yorker* magazine.¹⁷

Minou Arjomand’s gesture in New York was far more daring, imaginative, and politically purposeful than Golshifteh Farahani’s and Aliaa Magda Elmahdy’s in Paris and Cairo put together. But scarcely anyone in the Iranian or Muslim communities noted that picture in August 2004—or even knows about it now—taken, as it was, before online social networking had turned the world inside out. Minou Arjomand joined that group portrait in protest of President Bush’s HIV/AIDS policies without any pomp or ceremony and without the slightest publicity drawn to that photo beyond the limited HIV/AIDS epidemic activist circles. But it is precisely by opening the frame of reference back at least to that picture (politically purposeful but far from the madding crowd of internet publicity) that the recent actions of Golshifteh Farahani and Aliaa Magda Elmahdy will make more sense (albeit in rather different political contexts). Breaking the taboo of HIV/AIDS by baring bodies and bearing witness in the United States was no less iconoclastic or courageous than baring bodies and bearing witness against tyranny and repression in Egypt or Iran. The body was the same, the protest different, the occasion instantaneous.

There are other, similarly dramatic but far more fatal gestures perpetrated on one’s own body that also need to be included in this frame. Public protest can assume fatal acts of self-immolation, as in the case of Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia that set the Arab

Spring aflame or when young unemployed men set themselves on fire in Morocco. The bodily gesture can also assume less fatal turns while being equally shocking to the reigning taboos, as in the cases of Elmahdy, Farahani, and Arjomand. Put together, these are transgressive moments that expose and shatter the ruling inhibitions—from the stigma of the HIV/AIDS epidemic to the indignity of mandatory veiling to the horrors of unemployment to unbearable political tyranny. But in the age of the “society of spectacle” (Guy Debord’s idea) having gone amok, one must by all means resist fetishizing a single act of nudity going viral on the internet. For exposing one’s body by way of protesting against political tyranny does not mean that if other Egyptians, Iranians, or Muslim women opt to wear their habitual veiling, they are in agreement with the ruling tyranny. What is crucial in all such cases is the spectacle of staging the body as an act of protest.

The Eurocentric neoliberalism now rampant among certain vocal segments of expatriate Egyptians and Iranians equates “liberation” with such acts of anti-veiling defiance, which the Islamophobic Europe and United States then pick up and trumpet *apace*. That equation of extreme unveiling with liberation or even defiance is a patently false equation. There are courageous Muslim women fighting valiantly for their liberties or suffering in the dungeons of Egypt and the Islamic Republic who voluntarily and happily opt to veil. Farahani’s or Elmahdy’s naked bodies are as dignified acts of defiance as are those of their sisters’ veiled bodies in the dungeons of their respective countries. Beyond its Eurocentric, white-identified, and neoliberal appropriation in “the society of spectacle,” *la vita nuda*, public gestures such as those of Elmahdy and Farahani expose the amorphous site of contestation between the violence that states perpetrate (whether forced veiling in the Islamic Republic or forced unveiling in France) and resistances that bodies pose. No defense of Farahani’s courageous gesture in France is thus complete without *ipso facto* defending the right of immigrant Muslim women to veil in public in Europe if they so choose. Both their bodies, exposed or veiled, are sites of resistance to tyranny.

In the age of globalized capital and aterritorial empires, bodies have emerged as the singular site of resistance to power—from suicidal violence around the globe to young women exposing their bodies to shock and awe of a different sort. In a world that commenced with former US secretary of state Donald Rumsfeld’s “campaign of shock and awe” in Iraq and continued with the raping of human dignity on an everyday scale in detention camps from Guantanamo Bay to Bagram Airbase, from Israeli dungeons to Kahrizak and Evin in the Islamic Republic of Iran, these exposed bodies register the always already vulnerable human soul. The systematic reduction of life to biopolitics is done entirely beneath the radar of the instantaneous publicities that accompany such widely publicized acts as those of Elmahdy or Farahani. When the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben theorized the contours of the *homo sacer*—of the reduction of the civil persona to “bare life” in the society of spectacle and in a “state of exception” that has become the rule—he had already seen through the transformation of civic societies into camps as the *nomos* of the modern. The fact that the Green Movement in Iran or the Arab Spring in the Arab

world is recasting the moral map of the region does not mean we have overcome that frightful specter. What these exposed bodies do reveal—whether in self-staging or self-immolation or in the tortured bodies of Iraqi inmates in Abu Ghraib—is the voluntary or involuntary act of subversion inherent in the human body, as the first and final materiality of revolt.

“I Have That Within Which Passed Show”

The photos of Minou Arjomand, Golshifteh Farahani, and Aliaa Magda Elmahdy are the insignia of an age, postmarks from a universal act of defiance. If anything, these pictures are to be compared with the picture of that young Egyptian woman being beaten and dragged by security forces in Tahrir Square, involuntarily exposing her body and underwear¹⁸—or with the picture of the Yemeni women burning their veils in public protest.¹⁹ The protection of the right to revolt is in anticipation of that liberating moment when these protesters, just like “the Vancouver kissing couple,”²⁰ will have the choice of a simple and perfectly human act of love overcoming an obscene act of riot police brutality.

These pictures are not acts of obscenity. Quite to the contrary: these are gestures of innocence incarnate—staging of a delayed defiance. Obscenity is the exposure of human body and soul in the torture chambers of Abu Ghraib, Bagram Air Base, Guantanamo Bay, the dungeons of Israeli prison cells, all the way to Kahrizak and other subterranean cells of the Islamic Republic.²¹ That is obscenity, not these innocent young women baring their soul in protest. Obscenity is the degeneration of civil society and common civility to detention camps in the United States and barefacedly robbing people of their most basic civil liberties in Egypt or Iran—and as all belligerent states posed to fight each other, they rob their respective citizens even more of their civil liberties. These young men and women are protesting by the only means left to them—the site of their bodies, blowing it up in Palestine, Iraq, or Afghanistan, burning it to ashes in Tunisia or Morocco, exposing its fragile innocence in Egypt or Iran, or in Europe or the United States.

To bear witness, territorial boundaries are no longer the solitary sites of resistance to political violence and tyranny. Our naked bodies, whether we expose or hide them, have become the last remaining corporeality that matters and means. Mohamed Bouazizi opted to burn himself alive, Golshifteh Farahani and Aliaa Magda Elmahdy to stage themselves. But common to their acts is not just the fragile bodies of these young protesters, but the fact that their ruling emperors and corrupt kings and clerics, from one end of the Arab and Muslim world to the other, have long been walking around with their proverbial pants down.

The art of protest can never be museumized, staged in any gallery, curated into normalcy. No museum, biennale, or exhibition can contain them. They are site specific to the moment of their staging: here now, gone tomorrow. By thus being transitory, they occupy an interstitial space that can never be defined, for they have turned the whole world, our very existence, interstitial.

Notes

- 1 I am grateful to my hosts Sarah Frahm, Anna Maier, and Regine Strätlin, who invited me to Berlin and facilitated my lecture there.
- 2 Hamid Dabashi, *Shi'ism: A Religion of Protest* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012); and *The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism* (London: Zed, 2012).
- 3 For more on this point, see my essay "A Portrait of the Artist as a Dead Boy," *Aljazeera*, February 4, 2016, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2016/02/portrait-artist-dead-boy-ai-weiwei-aylan-kurdi-refugees-160204095701479.html>.
- 4 Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: The Viking Press, 1963), 255.
- 5 I have detailed this crucial difference in *The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism* (London: Zed, 2012).
- 6 See Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).
- 7 See in particular Edward W. Soja, *Seeking Spatial Justice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).
- 8 As outlined in Walter Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (1925). For an English translation, see Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 2009).
- 9 See Max Sheller, *The Nature of Sympathy*, trans. Peter Heath (New Brunswick, NJ: Transactions Publishers, 1970/2008).
- 10 See in particular the notoriously racist passage in Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, trans. John T. Goldthwait (Oakland: University of California Press, 1961/2003).
- 11 For more on Hātef Isfahani and his legendary poem, see the entry "HĀTEF, SAYYED AḤMAD EŞFAHĀNI" in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/hatef-sayyed-ahmad-esfahani>.
- 12 The first draft of this part of this chapter was published as "Shimaa al-Sabagh: An Icon of the Arab Revolutions," *Al-Araby al-Jadid*, February 3, 2015, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/comment/2015/2/3/shimaa-al-sabagh-an-icon-of-the-arab-revolutions->.
- 13 For more on the story behind this iconic picture, see Jared Malsin and Olivier Laurent, "The Story behind the Photo of Shaimaa al-Sabbagh's Dying Moments," *Time*, January 30, 2015, <http://time.com/3689366/the-story-behind-the-photo-of-shaimaa-al-sabbaghs-dying-moments/>.
- 14 The first draft of this part of the chapter was published as "La Vita Nuda: Baring Bodies, Bearing Witness," *Aljazeera*, January 23, 2012, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2012/01/201212111238688792.html>.
- 15 I have analyzed in theoretical detail the meaning and significance of this idea in my *Corpus Anarchicum: Political Protest, Suicidal Violence, and the Making of the Posthuman Body* (New York: Palgrave, 2012).
- 16 For more on Philip Rieff's theory of culture, see his collection of essays *The Feeling Intellect*, ed. Jonathan B. Imber (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), particularly the essay "The Impossible Culture: Wilde as a Modern Prophet."
- 17 For more on ACT UP and this photo protest, see http://www.actupnyc.org/reports/rnc_nyc.html. Accessed June 19, 2018.
- 18 For more on this incident, see "Woman Beaten by Egyptian Troops in Tahrir Square," *BBC*, December 20, 2011, <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-middle-east-16267376/woman-beaten-by-egyptian-troops-in-tahrir-square>.

- 19 For details, see “Yemeni Women Burn Veils in Crackdown Protest,” *Aljazeera*, October 26, 2011, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2011/10/20111026164441431354.html>.
- 20 For details, see “Vancouver Kiss Couple Were Knocked Down by Riot Police,” *Guardian*, June 17, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jun/17/vancouver-kiss-couple-riot-police>.
- 21 For more on these points, see Hamid Dabashi, “Damnatio Memoriae,” in *Speaking about Torture*, eds. Julie A. Carlson and Elisabeth Weber (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 140–61.