Public Spaces and Ideology: Public Art and a New Urban Movement in Iran

The purpose of this paper is to examine two main issues. It will show how public spaces in Iranian cities have come to function as a counter-ideological force. Second, this paper analyzes the procedure and genus of urban interventions through graffiti and street arts in Iran since the Islamic Revolution in 1979.

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The Islamic Revolution of February 1979 was the most important turning point in Iran's contemporary history that drastically changed its language of politics. After the Islamic Revolution, Shi'i Islamic values gradually spread throughout the public and private spheres of Iran. This paper will call the process of this social and political transformation "Islamization." In this research, Islamization, does not mean that Islam is limited to what the Islamic government of Iran has defined, nor are the totality of Shi'i Islamic values necessarily those portrayed through urban public murals on the walls of Iranian cities. Rather, here, Islamization is the effort of the government to apply and internalize particular Islamic views and values to social and personal aspects of people's lives. Thus, in this paper, the use of the term Islam does not mean the practicing of a religion in a democratic society. Rather, Islam is considered an ideology, which—according to Alvin Gouldner, an American sociologist—is the dogmatic, irrational, and extremist consciousness.[1] In a more precise sense, according to Terry Eagleton, a British theorist, the term ideology makes reference not only to belief systems, but to issues of power.[2] In fact, it will be shown that how Islam has been employed as an ideology to legitimize "the power of a dominant social group or class."[3] This research is a critical analysis about Iranian urban image, influenced by Islamic values, and the reaction to this phenomenon after almost three decades since the establishment of the Islamic Republic.

COLONIZING PUBLIC SPACE

In their book, Staging A Revolution, Hamid Dabashi and Peter Chelkowski recount the characteristics of Shi'i Islam that have historically been constructed. The story of Shi'a carried two prominent messages at the time of the Islamic Revolution and during the Iran-Iraq war (1980–1988), which continues today: Fighting against tyranny and injustice, and Martyrdom. Dabashi historically expounds forming Shi'ism in his book, Shi'ism: A Religion of Protest. He examines the reasons that Shi'ism is considered a religion of protest. The two most significant, defiant, and revolutionary figures in the history of Shi'a are Ali, the first Imam, and his son Hussein, the third Imam of Shi'a. Both are heroic characters in the history of Shi'i Islam who were killed because they rose up against tyranny and strived to achieve justice. In fact, 'martyrdom' and 'rising against tyranny' are two inseparable concepts of Shi'a, which have
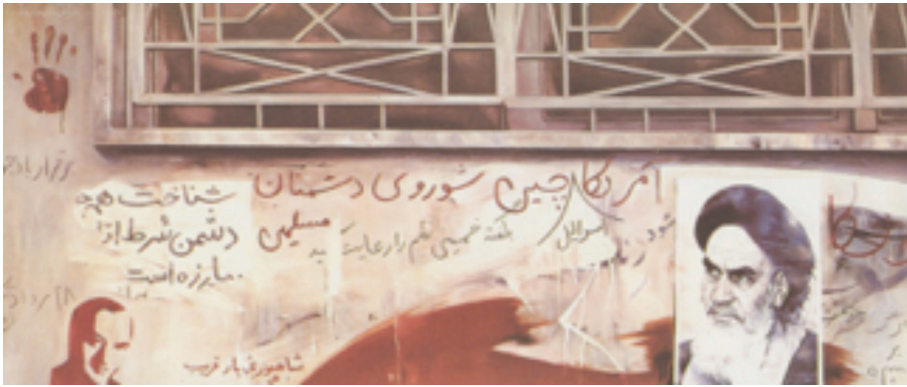
been transformed over history.[4] The values of Shi'a are also seen in the contemporary social and political history of Iran, which led to the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979.

Figure 1 shows a typical image used as a poster by the Ministry of Culture and Higher Education of the Islamic Republic.[5] This poster shows the picture of Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the Islamic Revolution, on the right side, with the slogan "Death to Shah." The picture of Ali Shariati, a well-known Islamic-Marxist character, is on the left side. The slogan written in red says, "The United States, Israel, China and the Soviet Union are the enemies of Muslims."

The content of the murals and their messages were not devoted to merely the Revolution and war period. Talinn Grigor, in her personal visit of Tehran in 2002, analyzes two murals and divides the mural design into four thematic categories: legitimizing jurisprudents, appreciating martyrdom, hostility towards others, and promoting morality.[6] Figure 2 is a mural painted on a wall in Karim Khan-e-Zand Boulevard in Tehran. It shows the flag of The United States with skulls replacing the stars and falling bombs instead of stripes and the inscription "Down with the USA."[7] The Islamic Regime considers countries such as Israel and at the top, the United States, as antagonistic "Others" that are against Muslims and Islamic values and tries to emphasize this hatred towards "Others" by any means, including murals. The concept of defiance and fighting against the enemy indicates another revolutionary side of Shi'ism.

Figure 3 shows the figure of Ayatollah Khomeini on the top and clergyman Ayatollah Beheshti below, on the wall of the Judiciary Center of Shahid Beheshti in Tehran. The image of a judicial balance beside the figure of Ayatollah Beheshti and under the figure of Imam Khomeini, emphasizes the security and assurance of judgment based on Islamic principles. The inscription above says, "We will continue on the path of the Imam and the martyrs of the Revolution."

The mural on the right side in figure 3, shows a tragedy from the Iran-Iraq war. It depicts a soldier who lost one leg in the war, while looking toward the horizon.[8] The inscription above says, "The value of you, the veterans, is more than that of our martyrs." This image indicates another form of persuasion. It urges the viewers to believe what was done as credible, moral, and essential; it is what Dabashi and Chelkowski call the "art of persuasion." Through this term, they mean the ability to motivate the masses to believe and fight for a specific ideological doctrine. In other words, any piece of art, which is produced to persuade the public, does not indicate analytical but symbolic dispositions.

This means that the language of these revolutionary arts and pictures exist to persuade, not to argue or critique.[9] In his essay, "Propaganda and Social Control," Talcott Parsons, an American sociologist, differentiates between the act of "enlightenment" and of "persuasion."[10] According to Parsons, enlightenment is a process of allowing an individual to examine, analyze and express his/her own understanding; however, propaganda is a process
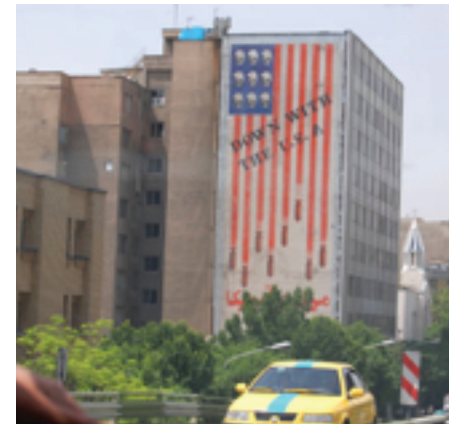
Figure 1: Source: Peter Chelkowski and Hamid Dabashi, *Staging A Revolution: The Art of Persuasion in the Islamic Republic of Iran* (New York: University Press, 1999), 110

Figure 2: Source: TalinnGrigor, "(Re) Claiming Space," *Asian Art and Cultures* 28(2002): 37

of imposing an idea on the scale of both individual and society. Thus, it can be argued that dynamism and inclusivity of a public space can be evaluated by the degree of enlightenment or persuasion of the visual arts appears on the urban screen. While the purpose of this paper is not to examine the impacts of propaganda on the public space, it is necessary to point out the nature and role of ideological public arts in order to comprehend and appreciate counter ideological efforts of artists to change the image of the city.

Jurgen Habermas, a German philosopher, whose work focuses on democracy and the social body, presents the characteristics of public space in a different way. What Parson explains as "enlightenment" and "persuasion", Habermas redefines as a space "before" and "on behalf" of the public. Habermas historically examines the spatiality of the public sphere from the time of feudalism to late capitalism. Habermas poses two approaches on the concept of public realm: first, public realm as a sphere of "interaction and debate" and second, as a sphere of merely "representation."[11] For Habermas, what was defined under feudalism and bourgeois culture as public was not public but "representative publicness." In fact, public space was a stage to represent symbolic drama of aristocracy and the nobility's lives and there was no room for interaction of the public. In other words, public space was "staged performance before the people, not on behalf of the public."[12] Accordingly, the public realm was a space of display not debate. In the eighteenth century the public sphere took a political flavor and the discourse of rights and the enfranchisement of the bourgeoisie class were gradually shaped.[13] With the advent of the philosophies of Marx and Hegel, the concept of public sphere underwent changes, which gradually shifted the role of the bourgeois and increased the role of the public, which continued until the nineteenth century. That era can be considered a time when the idea of democracy was widely spread. The late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries under organized capitalism, according to Habermas, was a process of "re-feudalization."[14]

The use of Habermas's analysis is not intended to compare Iranian public spaces with representation in the sense of a bourgeois public sphere, or a representation of a particular class or mandates. Rather, what is significant here is the way public space works, either before or on behalf of the public. The next half of this article indicates the ways public spaces can be transformed from a space before to a space on behalf of the public. This implies that although the public adapts to the principles of the public sphere in which they live, they have to struggle with discriminative and oppressive policies of the state.[15] The reason the murals and graffiti on the walls of an Iranian city deserve exploration is that they are intended to convey a specific worldview favored by the ruling government upon the Iranian public sphere while marginalizing and sometimes suppressing all other views.

RESISTANT IMAGES: WHO ARE THE OWNERS OF A CITY?
In spite of the uncompromising position of the Islamic government in Iran, there are street artists who attempt to deconstruct the rigid structure established by the government. Mehdi Ghadyanloo and Black-Hand are two (out of several) street artists who, in their own ways, try to cross the red-lines, define a new style and act as a voice for parts of their society.

Mehdi Ghadyanloo is an artist who is currently becoming famous for his colorful surrealistic and three-dimensional murals on the walls of Tehran. Adam Hedengren has arranged an interview with Ghadyanloo in the online journal, "Your Middle East Startup", and asked him to explain more about his works in the interview. Ghadyanloo stated he had a surreal mind and he tried to fight it with the gravity of the earth in his works. He emphasized that citizens of Tehran need more fun and Tehran is a city that needs more color than other cities. Concerning the reaction of the people, Ghadyanloo states that most people appreciate his murals when they pass by in taxis or buses.[16] Figure 4 shows examples of Ghadyanloo's works on the walls of Tehran. The left picture, "Freshness," has been painted on a five-story building located in a crowded urban space[17]. The mural is an extension of the building—it seems that

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Figure 3: Source: TalinnGrigor, "(Re) Claiming Space," *Asian Art and Cultures* 28(2002): 37

the mural completes an unfinished project and reveals the other side of the building. On the new side, Ghadyanloo attempted to link busy urban space with a sense of peace and tranquility. The woman shaking a mat from a window in the top floor, the two men walking with children on their shoulders, the vases by the windows and sunflowers around the building elicit a sense of life and freshness. The clear blue sky, a fine line of a green farm in the background and the two single trees bring nature to the urban space and temporarily separate the viewers from the tumult of urban life. The real scale of the elements, such as the personages, buildings and the trees with their delicate shadows on the background have made a real space inasmuch as the viewers feel they can see a missing part of their life through this mural. Although this mural can be socially critiqued from different lenses, the artist did his best to inspire a sense of freshness within the current limiting social and cultural situation.

The image on the right, "The Old Memories of Tehran," is an attempt to visualize the memories of the old Tehran on the walls. Using elements such as the classic motifs and painted tile mosaics, the horse and cart, an old-model car, balloon and personages in traditional outfits and their illusive visual connections have created a surreal environment within a real urban space. Another fascinating aspect of this mural is exposing the blue sky through old architectural frames in the background, which inspires a sense of emptiness while simultaneously visually lightening the heavy mass of the building.

Ghadyanloo's works are very surrealistic and color-based, which makes a great stride in enhancing the atmosphere of urban spaces. He attempts to bring a sense of dynamism to the city and encourages peoples' minds to challenge the dominant views and be sensitive about their environments. He sees himself as a person intensely attached to color and considers his grandmother's weaving of colorful carpets to be his inspiration.[19] Ghadyanloo also enjoys working with children, and as he says, one of his dreams is painting all the villages around the world with children. He has established a foundation named "Happiness" with the help of his university students and opened a school in a village.[20] By doing so, he has shared the joy of painting with another level of the society and indirectly taught them how to be active in thinking about and shaping their environment.[21]

"Black-Hand", who is known as "Iran's Banksy", is another contemporary artist, whose works include messages that challenge the status quo. In an interview with The Guardian, Black-Hand talks about his controversial works on the walls of Tehran. He intensely believes that the public needs to see and understand art, and the street is one of the best places that an artist can present his/her views. The most significant characteristic of Black-Hand's works, which distinguishes him from his counterparts is the themes of his graffiti. He primarily emphasizes the social and political problems that influence people's lives. Economic problems, women's issues, homophobia and other social themes of this nature are seen in his public works. His acute and sharp views of the social problems that impact daily life of ordinary people and the way that he presents them cause a quick and defensive reaction of civic leaders and governmental forces. Some of his works are washed out hours after he finishes

Figure 4: Source: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/05/28/mehdi-ghadyanloo_n_5399206.html[18]

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them.

Figure 5 shows two examples of his works. The left picture was painted in objection to banning women from joining men at soccer games in public stadiums. The graffiti shows an angry Iranian woman in her country's national jersey, wearing a hijab, gloves, and holding dishwashing soap, as if raising up a trophy.[22] This work was done in Vali-asr Avenue in front of Sayi Park and did not last long. The right picture was graffiti painted on a residential wall in Roudkhaneh Avenue that asked for diplomacy instead of violence in political relations. He painted this graffiti in reference to the gathering of Iranian diplomats and six other countries in Vienna in order to find a way to solve Iran's nuclear program. He depicts hung up red boxing-gloves with a short slogan to indicate that the policy of fighting has expired in the contemporary political world. In other words, it is time to hang up the fighting gloves and work thing out diplomatically. The translation of the inscription is "Enough fighting, continue with diplomacy!"

Black-Hand states that many people may think that art is a means for protest; however, he considers art as a tool for achieving peace. "I work on these issues that are happening in my country. We wake up with them, we live with them and we sleep with them. Art aside, being able to express these issues by itself, can help you find peace" says Black-Hand.[23] He also affirms that Banksy was a significant inspiration for his works. Black-Hand looked for a technique to redefine Banksy's works in the context of Iran with its own social, cultural and political background.[24] By looking at Black-Hand's work we see the soul of life flowing in the city because the themes of his works are rooted in daily lives of people and reveal realities and problems that were always concealed by the state's force. What he creates on the walls of the city indicates people's concerns in a way that can resonate to the authorities as well as a way to remind the citizens of what is going on in the society.

While these artists and their productions serve as visual and public political statements, it is necessary to clarify two issues: first, one must consider how the medium of murals and graffiti function, and second, the procedure of intervention. One of the most significant distinctions between murals and graffiti is the state of their legality. In American cities, such as Charleston, South Carolina and Greensboro, North Carolina, graffiti is considered an unsanctioned material if posted or painted on public or private property. Based on this definition, graffiti, contrary to mural, is a form of vandalism, not art.[25] However, Aida Nikfarjam, in Iranwire journal, writes about how graffiti is a protesting art nowadays in Tehran. She states that graffiti in Tehran has increasingly been expanded especially after the Green Movement in 2009. She continues by stating that no forms of art creation on the walls of the city are considered to be a crime based on the Constitution and even in civic laws. It implies that the use

Figure 5: Source: http://www.the-guardian.com/world/iran-blog/2014/aug/06/iran-banksy-street-graffiti-tehran-black-hand-interview

of graffiti is not necessarily an unsanctioned act in all contexts. Nevertheless, the government does not tolerate these art works and removes them in the false name of the "destruction of public properties."26 Despite the strict reaction of the government, many street artists such as Nafir, Ghalamdar, and Black-Hand still resist the state policies.[27]

Diego Gonzalez, another street artist, argues in a TED Talk that both graffiti and murals are a tool to change the way we see the world. Graffiti is usually known as a form of vandalism and unsanctioned action; however, according to Gonzalez, graffiti is a form of art and a language of mass communication by which the artist can share ideas and political views.[28] Graffiti in the form of what artists, such as Black-Hand, create is different from simply scribbling on walls to make visual unsightliness and destruction of public property. The artists' works are carrying messages and voices of those who wish to critique the dominant power where there is no room for them to share their views.

It is also necessary to unfold the notion of intervention and its implication in this research. According to the Oxford Dictionary, intervention is "the action or process of intervening"; it also means an "action taken to improve a situation."[29] What artists like Ghadyanloo and Black-Hands present is an effort to make a change—changing the image of the city. In a totalitarian society and ideological system, it is not easy to make an effective and quick change and interventions do not necessarily result in a permanent change. Since the themes of the urban murals approved by the state are based on religious values, the efforts of young artists to change the gray color and one-dimensional themes of the urban screens can be considered as an intervention. The attempt of Ghadyanloo to educate children and sensitize them to their environment and the efforts of graffitists like Black-Hand to share his political views are considered to be a form of intervention, even though it has not left a permanent or effective change yet.

RIGHT TO THE IRANIAN CITIES

David Harvey, in his essay, "The Right To The City", critiques capitalism and its impacts on urban spaces. Harvey examines the link between urbanization and capitalism and how accumulation of capital creates unjust urban spaces. He sees a strong relationship between the kind of city we want and our lifestyle, social behavior and aesthetic values.[30] He considers the right to the city far beyond the "individual liberty to access urban resources".[31] The right to the city, for Harvey, means the "right to change ourselves by changing the city."[32] From an anti-capitalist view, Harvey argues urbanization plays a significant role in absorbing surplus products and profit produced by capitalists.[33] Thus, it is necessary to change the procedure of consuming the products and reshape the urban spaces. To Harvey, this transformation depends on the 'exercise of collective power,' or in other words, democratization of power. In fact, the right to the city is the "freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves."[34]

Democratization of power is a procedure, which is probably the most important factor to create effective changes. The velocity and quality of this procedure differ in different societies. This process takes less effort in the contexts where the civil society is active and being elected to governmental office is open to all political parties. However, the process of democratization of power takes much longer and is shaped differently in a society where the power relations follow a hierarchical pattern based on an ideological doctrine. The shift in the themes of the public art is a reflection of the demand of change in an Islamic society. Any change in murals' themes, colors, and contents should be recognized and approved by the Islamic government; it can be said that the muralists have played an important role in changing the tastes of the government. Even graffitists—considered so-called unsanctioned artists—challenged the dominant power by reification of social injustice. This new visual and peaceful movement is an attempt to expose dissatisfaction of the colonization of public space and finding ways to make an effective change. In other words, the entire act of artists—either

ENDNOTES

1. Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (New York: Verso, 1991), 4.

2. Ibid, 5.

3. Ibid.

4. Hamid Dabashi, Shi'ism: a religion of protest (London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 56.

5. Peter Chelkowski and Hamid Dabashi, *Staging A Revolution: The Art of Persuasion in the Islamic Republic of Iran* (New York: University Press, 1999), 110.

6. TalinnGrigor, "(Re)Claiming Space," *Asian Art and Cultures* 28(2002): 37.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid, 32–3.

10. Talcott Parsons, "Propaganda and Social Control," *Journal for the interpersonal Processes* 5(1942): 551-572.

11. Luke Goode, JurgenHabermas: Democracy and the public Sphere (London: Pluto Press, 2005), 4.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid, 7.

14. Ibid, 17.

15. Ibid.

16. http://www.yourmiddleeast.com/culture/this-guy-made-the-most-insane-urban-art-in-tehran-trust-me-itll-blow-your-mind_23395, accessed on September 5, 2014.

17. https://news.artnet.com/art-world/surreal-murals-enliven-the-streets-of-tehran-28804, accessed on September 2014.

18. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/05/28/mehdi-ghadyanloo_n_5399206.html, accessed on September 20, 2015.

19. http://leadingculturedestinations.com/magazine/ambassador-qanda/mehdighadyanloo/, accessed on September 5, 2014.

20. http://guity-novin.blogspot.com/2011_05_01_archive.html accessed on December 10, 2015.

21. https://www.facebook.com/Happiness-Institue-%D8%A8%D9%86%DB%8C%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%AF%DB%8C-646967542042330/timeline

22. http://www.theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/2014/aug/06/iran-banksy-street-graffiti-tehran-black-hand-interview, accessed on September 5, 2014

23. http://www.theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/2014/aug/06/iran-banksy-street-graffiti-tehran-black-hand-interview, accessed on September 5, 2014

muralists or graffitists—is considered a form of intervention in order to approach the democratization of power.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the situation of street art in Tehran and made a comparison between the themes of murals and graffiti in different periods of time since the Islamic Revolution. The walls of Tehran have been transformed into screens of ideological messages based on the Islamic Republic policies and public artists attempt to transgress the limitations of the governmental rules. The concept of Shi'i Islam and its suppressive characteristics has also been analyzed when it comes to the political realm. This paper is an attempt to show how ideology influences urban spaces and how similar and different "the right to the city" can be in a capitalist and Islamic context. Iranian artists continue to struggle for their rights through a silent movement, resisting the hegemony of ideological space and producing their own spaces within the society. The procedure of their struggle and the visual movement functions as a form of intervention and an effort to make change.

24. Ibid.

25. Mural Art Versus Graffiti: Case Study

26. http://iranwire.com/features/6185/ accessed on December 10, 2015.

27. Ibid.

28. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y4GpSEyJZjE accessed on December 10, 2015.

29. http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/intervention

30. David Harvey, "The Right To The City," *NEW LEFT REVIEW* 53 (2008): 24.

31. Ibid.

32. Ibid.

33. Ibid, 25.

34. Ibid, 23.