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To Be Me: The contingency of the body

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts degree in Art and Visual Culture

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Abstract

Exploring my Iranian and immigrant identity, this dossier investigates factors that contribute to the formation of my identity through the experience of living in a complex and repressive society. This dossier is composed of an extended artist statement, a case study of UK-based, Palestinian artist Mona Hatoum's art practices, documentation of a selection of my artworks, and a Curriculum Vitae. In my extended artist statement, I engage with feminist post-structuralist theories to explore my identity as multiple, performative, and contingent. I also discuss how I use these feminist post-structuralist theories in my art practice to question the phallogentric dominant ideology of spaces I have lived in and to construct new desiring subjects. To bring nuance to my artist statement, in the documentation of my art, I present my body art practices as a process involved in the construction of my identity. With my case study, I explore the way Hatoum's body art practices represent a state of being in the geopolitics of exile.

Keywords

Embodied Subjective, Radical Relationality, Nomadic Subjects, Queer Feminist
Durationality, Intersubjective, Mona Hatoum, Geopolitics.

Lay Summary

Not all diasporas are the same. Not all female experiences of oppression are the same. The spaces I have inherited and now occupy have shaped my life in specific and concrete ways. As an Iranian woman who grew to adulthood in Iran and who now resides in Canada and the United States, I have experienced deep feelings of ambiguity with regards to experiencing different cultures and social expectations. Because my practice is body-centric, I seek to claim my body across multiple media of performance, video, and installation. I focus on the traumatized female body, representing it in abject or grotesque states, sometimes evoking an agonized or melancholic state of mind. I consider how my multicultural, individual body has derived its multiplicity from differences between the cultures of the West and Middle-East, as well as differences that exist within a single culture, particularly around gender and sexuality. These enduring feelings of ambiguity have both unsettled and politicized my daily life and helped to raise my consciousness about the oppressions I face as a woman. I have started to question where my particular experiences and practice fit within broader societal discourses and representations that contribute to making me who I am. In response, I seek to understand and investigate the construction of my identity as a woman as it has existed within traditional notions of family and conservative belief structures of both West and Middle-East. I explore my identity in the hope of calling oppressive authorities into question.

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Preface

The spaces I have inherited and now occupy have shaped my life in specific and concrete ways. As an Iranian woman who grew to adulthood in Iran and who now resides in Canada and the United States, my feelings are conflicted around the ambiguities that manifest themselves with regards to experiencing different cultural and social expectations. Because my practice is body-centric, I seek to claim and gain agency for my body across the multiple medias of performance, video, and installation. I focus on the traumatized female body, representing it in abject or grotesque states, sometimes evoking an agonized, or melancholic state of mind. My work plays constantly with extreme exhaustion of my body that results from pushing the boundaries and limits of my physical self. I consider how my multicultural, individual body has derived its multiplicity from differences between the cultures of the West and Middle-East, as well as through the differences that exist within a single culture, particularly around gender and sexuality. These enduring feelings of ambiguity have both unsettled and politicized my daily life and helped to raise my consciousness about the oppressions I face as a woman. As a result, I have started to question where my particular experiences and practice fit within broader societal discourses and representations that contribute to making me who I am. In response, I seek to understand and investigate the construction of my identity as a woman as it exists within traditional notions of family and conservative belief structures of both West and Middle-East. I juxtapose this aspect of my female identity with an exploration of my cross-cultural identity, one that shifts between the contexts of Middle-Eastern and Western cultures.

I remain in a close dialogue with my homeland and strive to address critical issues that have been affecting me as a woman from Iran, even as I reside elsewhere. This includes my reflections concerning the social injustice and tyrannical politics of my homeland. I also find I

am always rediscovering, reinventing, and reinterpreting my Iranian identity as the pivotal point for my work in dialogue with the multiple and heterogeneous contexts of Western feminist theories.¹ I try to generate questions and responses to the legacies of the phallogocentric system which exists in both Iran and North America, which impacts the contemporary socio-cultural realities informing my female subjectivity.

For my work as an artist, in order to create a format for interpreting engagement between my body, as the medium of my art, and audiences, I explore the theory of queer feminist durationality. This theory is proposed by Amelia Jones, an American art theorist and historian, in her text, *Seeing Differently*.² Jones proposes the term Queer Feminist Durationality to explore alternative ways for reading identity-critical visual practice, and to consider art as an individual expression. Queer Feminist Durationality, proposes that artwork can and perhaps ought to be temporal and performative and considered as a potential, an idea; to open the present to the past and the future.³ The term also complicates the meaning and traditional interpretations arising from a body through indicating it as a subject in a constant flux and change, in one determinable place.⁴ The impossibility of considering a

¹ I acknowledge that the Middle Eastern women, living globally and working in a diverse array of languages, histories, and cultures have taken extremely active roles in the gender debate and challenge the patriarchal structure within their societies. Their participation has yielded a variety of interpretations of what “feminism” and the “feminist movements” are in relation to the “West” and “Western feminism”. Although the absence of non- Western feminist thinkers in my recent research and practice raises questions, this dossier took the initial step of understanding my Iranian femininity in the context of dominant Western feminist discourses. Investigating the simultaneity of Western feminist poststructuralism and My Iranian cultural identity, this dossier opens up my art practice and discourse to be both contemporary and global, but also indigenous and specific. It is my hope, that my work in its next step moves toward the visibility of Middle Easterners feminists’ scholars and intellectuals in the process of articulating research in narrating my self-representation.

² Amelia Jones, *Seeing Differently: A History and Theory of Identification and the Visual Arts* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 170-211.

³ Ibid,173.

⁴ Ibid,174.

fixed meaning for a subject offers political and ethical agency that provides the possibility of learning from the history and avoiding future exploitation.⁵ It gives the possibility to bodies, images, and performances to unsettle conventional desirable relationships to specific aspects of the world.⁶ Jones writes, "...durationally complicating the fixing of meaning by exposing the bodies and investments inevitably playing a role in any interpretation, no matter how seemingly neutral or disinterested."⁷ Through this theory, I explore ways to disentangle conventional ideas of body and identity that are maintained within the binary of self and other. In other words, I frame my practice in the embodied and relational mode of interpretive engagement which prompts the audience to consider both gender and sexuality as they intersect with race, nationality, class, age, and other identification related to my female subjectivity.⁸

Thinking about structural displacement in between different languages and cultures, I find feminist poststructuralist thought provides a possibility for conceptualizing the in-between state that I have experienced intimately, as a place to begin. Rosi Braidotti is a contemporary philosopher and feminist theoretician of radical relationality and nomadic subjects as forms of embodied subjectivity. I refer to her theories to produce affirmative representations of myself in my art projects. Braidotti notes, "The nomad is a transgressive identity, whose transitory nature is precisely the reason why s/he can make connections at all. Nomadic politics is a matter of bonding, of coalitions, of interconnections."⁹ This dossier

⁵ Ibid,174.

⁶ Ibid,175.

⁷ Ibid,174.

⁸ Ibid,180.

⁹ Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 35.

reflects my experiences as a racialized person, and is representative of my nomadic existence as a document of critical consciousness that refuses to adjust to or accept the socially coded modes of thought and behaviour of phallogentric frameworks.

Chapter 1

1 Comprehensive Artist Statement

In this chapter, I analyze some of the main visual arts discourses and feminists' theories that run through my art practices. The chapter is divided into five subsections, which are titled in ways that signal their preoccupations.

My work is an expression of difficult and traumatic experiences and as such raises several questions: How can a traumatized body facilitate healing and a sense of empowerment via performance arts? How can in performing art my body be affirmed within a complex and repressive society? How can a body be a site of performance for self-expression rather than self-exoticism? How does performing the grotesque and painful body become a strategy of resistance to dominant forms of oppression? How can performing the body for representational technologies (video and photography) create a space for bodies that are excluded from the privileged category of the individual?

1.1 Nomadic Body: Performing for and Creating an Embodied Subject

Immigration is a compelling subject to contemplate. Emigrants often desire to find within their new homes the conditions of security and contentment. My voluntary displacement from Iran to Canada and then the USA lured me with the utopian assumptions associated with such relocations. Led by the light of hope to live in a better place, perhaps I would overcome the crippling sorrow owing to the loss of the nurturance of my family and the absence of sentimental belongings that I had left behind forever.

At the same time, I have experienced the impossibility of returning to my motherland, Iran, because of ongoing political instability, social insecurity, religious violence, ethnic violence, gender segregation, and repression. This is where my travel has no return ticket.

In spite of the lived costs of my immigration, I gain privileges and benefits that stem from my daily experiences. Moving between cultures, languages, and different configurations of social relations, I have come closer to the possibility of achieving critical insight into my position within the current power relations I experience. Caren Kaplan, a professor of American Studies at University of California, states: "We must leave home, as it were, since our homes are often sites of racism, sexism, and other damaging social practices. Where we come to locate ourselves in terms of our specific histories and differences must be a place with room for what can be salvaged from the past and what can be made new."¹⁰

Not all diasporas are the same. Not all female experiences of oppression are the same. My experience as an Iranian diasporic woman is fragmented along ethnic, religious, political and class lines. These fragments pose challenges to my attempts to bond with others and find solidarity based on multiculturalism and ethnicity. To respond to these challenges, I establish my body as integral material in my art practice. As an artist, I insist on inscribing my personal, political, and social experience on my body through enacted performativity. My approach has focused on the trauma that underscores the connections between personal experience and larger sociopolitical structures. I view my body art practices as performative self-exposure through a feminist poststructuralist lens. I seek to explore the implications of my body/self with its apparent inscriptions of race, sex, gender, class, and ethnicity.

I make my art out of my actions through bodily performance, which allows me to explore my femininity in a contemporary social context. My process allows me to explore my experiences through my senses. I define my subjectivity as relying upon my corporeal materiality. I consider the body, or embodiment, as the locus for the self that is defined through the conditions of social and cultural

¹⁰ Caren, Kaplan, *Deterritorializations: The Rewriting of Home and Exile in Western Feminist Discourse*, Cultural Critique, no. 6 (1987): 194

realms. Considering my diasporic experiences and acknowledging my life experiences with regard to my body in my artworks, I want to inhabit an epistemological project of nomadism. As I think my physical body takes real action and causes real effects, and I consider my body to be an important part of what makes me the subjective of self. Nomadism is the notion that corporeal materiality is refigured as embodied subjectivity. It radically rejects essentialism.¹¹ Braidotti argues that women's intellectual vision is not a disembodied, abstract mental activity; rather, it is embodied and culturally coded as a socialized entity.¹² She also argues that the division of mind-body dualism in human beings is the main feature of a patriarchal attitude that tends to have a disembodied vision.¹³ To incorporate nomadic practices, I borrow from various disciplines and take an interdisciplinary approach in my performance work. As an example, I mix reading feminist philosophy in the context of performing my body, rerouting my concepts from their initial context, and derailing the norms associated with them.¹⁴

Braidotti's nomadic scheme aims to refuse phallogocentric premises through repetitions and mimetic strategies to create transformation and change.¹⁵ Nomadism emphasizes mimetic repetition of the action of dominant codes and the codification of the cultures women live in at the level of female identity, subjectivity, and differences.¹⁶ Accordingly, my performative acts include questioning my identity with regard to the deplorable conditions of history, language and culture that issue from the loss of social ideals, at the root of patriarchal oppression. Each performative act creates conditions for pushing my thought to its limit and allows me to weave different levels of my lived experience

¹¹ Ibid, 4.

¹² Rosi Braidotti, *The Subject in Feminism*, *Hypatia* 6, no. 2 (1991): 160.

¹³ Ibid,160.

¹⁴ In one of my live performances, *Leaking Body* (2018) I turned Rosi Braidotti's text from her book, *Nomadic Subjects*, into my own manifesto and read it while I was performing for the audience. Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

¹⁵ Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, 7.

¹⁶ Braidotti offered the American artist Cindy Sherman as an example of creating nomadic engagement by defining the complexities of one identity and locating agency in shifts, transitions, and mimetic repetitions of actions, Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*,169.

together. I produce new trains of thought by experimenting with my lived experiences, without preplanning, however, which particular outcome might result in an artwork.

As I mentioned previously, I consider the nomadic strategy as an invitation to represent my female identity through my experiences. I also explore the vision of my female subjectivity in my body.

Braidotti proposes the nomadic style as a figuration that emphasizes action at the level of identity, of subjectivity, and of embodied lived experiences.¹⁷ In order to connect nomadic theories to visual culture discourses, I focus on Amelia Jones's argument that the practicing body is an embodied subject.¹⁸ The idea of an embodied subject interprets a body as particularized rather than universal. It thereby engages the performing body across social spaces.¹⁹ For my purposes, it is important to explore my body as a woman of color in a specific cultural context to highlight the particularity of my body, both, in personal, private space, and in social space, as an extension of the body of others.²⁰ Rosi Braidotti and Amelia Jones's theories provide a basis for understanding my body performances, creating an intersection between identity and subjectivity.

In my practice, I am interested in performing my body as fragmented and dispersed across space. I depict this fragmentation by focusing on performing a specific part of my body such as my face, mouth, or stomach for the camera. I also use parts of my body such as my hair or breastmilk in some of my installations. I extensively use hair and the color black, as core materials in my performances. The materiality of my hair and the quality of the color black are the main elements to address the many familiar contemporary issues relating to my body and self, and my experience having lived under the tyranny of the current Iranian political regime. The issues such as compulsory hijab, the restrictions over and intensive control over women's bodies, the limits on freedom of

¹⁷ Ibid,171.

¹⁸ Amelia Jones, *Body Art Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 202.

¹⁹ Amelia Jones, *Body Art Performing the Subject*. 1988.p,199

²⁰ Harcourt in *Body Politics in Development: Critical Debates in Gender and Development* points out that women of color are able to construct counter-power as a context that confronts hegemonic culture and economy. In this context, they have the opportunity to talk about different aspects of repression, including but not limited to domestic violence, repression through religious tradition, and their oppression confronting hegemonic culture and economies. Wendy Harcourt. *Body Politics in Development: Critical Debates in Gender and Development*. 2009.p,32.

speech, and other powers exerted directly upon the body relate to the regime's social, political, and economic oppression in my homeland. Highlighting my background, performing vulnerability, and expressing anxiety, work together in my art to speak to this oppression. This sense of vulnerability and anxiety is rooted in the way my sexuality and gender are intensively controlled by phallogocentric culture. I have lost ownership over my own body and life, and I highlight this theft of myself through my performances.

In the quest for emotional transformation from this sense of vulnerability and anxiety, I explore the physical and mental limits of my being through performing pain, exhaustion, and the abject. I use the corporeal grotesque as a bodily metaphor for the anatomical female body, and I see this grotesque body as a positive and powerful figuration of cultural feminism and womanhood.²¹ In considering the corporeal grotesque, Mary Russo, an American psychologist, argues that the grotesque body points to a state of being between hope and anxiety.²² Engaging my body in self-afflicted melancholy and violence, I strive to express the incoherence of the self and to create a voice for oppressed subjects related to my experience under a totalitarian state and within a male-dominant culture. I use the strategy of deliberately working against 'pretty' images and conventionally pleasing aesthetics to resist the ideological trap of hyper-aestheticization, to which representation of women's bodies are especially subjected.

Emphasizing personal experiences and emotional material in my body-oriented practice, I point to embodied subjectivity and radical relationality as I undertake a close analysis of emotions sparked from my lived experience. Through embodied subjectivity, we experience our bodies both subjectively and objectively in a reflexive process influenced by socio-cultural norms.²³ Referring to the idea of subjects speaking of their lived experiences and how that influences signification, Jeanie Forte, an American assistant professor of Modern Drama at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, mentions that:

²¹ Mary J. Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, and Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 1.

²² *Ibid*, viii.

²³ Oli Williams and Ellen Annandale, *Embodied Subjectivity*, Springer Science Business Media Dordrecht, (2014).1.

...actual women speaking their personal experience create dissonance with their representation, Woman, throwing that fictional category into relief and question. Shock waves are set up from within the signification process itself, resonating to provide an awareness of the phallogentricity of our signifying systems and the culturally-determined otherness of women.²⁴

My body in the performative art context, is a means to provoke self-reflexivity, as it creates a state of hyperawareness as my body becomes a source of healing and potential for self-transformational experiences. By connecting the personal to the political, I extend my practice to address the reciprocity and contingency of the body/self in relation to that of the viewer. To create this extension, I explore how I conceptually engage with what Amelia Jones theorizes as body art²⁵. She points out that body art is an intersubjective process that creates exchangeable meaning between the reception and the production of artwork, thereby bringing the two together.²⁶ Body art at the site of intersubjectivity emphasizes the impossibility of considering art practices in terms of their mere positive or negative cultural value, because the subject derives its meaning from its audiences.²⁷ In other words, the act of interpreting a body becomes a performative process that opens up ideas of subjectivity as performative and contingent, particular to a culture rather than universal.²⁸ In the mode of performing a grotesque and exhausted body within the context of intersubjective exchange, I attempt to establish the normativity of otherness for the viewer, also establishing the viewer normativity as otherness by creating a tune of difference between my body and the body of the viewer.²⁹ Becoming “other” is a process that happens in the viewer’s embodied imaginary.³⁰This

²⁴ Jeanie Forte, *Women's Performance Art: Feminism and Postmodernism*, *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 2 (1988). 225.

²⁵ Body art is used for the exploration of body in different media, and here I consider it in the medium of performance art.

²⁶ Jones, *Body Art*, 14.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 14.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 15.

²⁹ Amelia Jones, *The 'Eternal Return': Self-Portrait Photography as a Technology of Embodiment*, *Signs* 27, no. 4 (July 1, 2002): 963.

³⁰ In the explanation of embodiment of a viewer's imaginary, the “locus of mediation”, which is Jacques Lacan's notion of the screen, is where the subject mapping him/her self in the imaginary capture the fetishized gaze in

process of becoming happens for viewers through the process of remembering, and projecting themselves onto the body of the artist, while the artist's body is cast in the dual role of the producing subject distinct from the performing object.³¹ In relation to the performing of self to its contingent form in otherness, Jones notes, "...feeling the flesh of others as our own, immanently mortal, corporeal skin—is to free ourselves (at least momentarily) in a potentially radically politicizing way from both prejudice and fear."³² By considering the performance of self as a site of exchange for embodied subjects, the image of self is understood not to be about the insufficiency of my femininity, but rather it is the enactment of normativity inside the mechanisms of patriarchy.

In the next section, I will present the principles that allow me to express different levels of my experiences. As an Iranian immigrant woman, my strategy is to avoid appropriating the exotic, while retaining some cultural materials and visual aesthetics that are identified as "Iranian."

1.2 Nomadic Gesture: A Self-expression Not a Self-exoticism

As an immigrant woman, I deal with issues of separation and belonging. I search to find my new identity somewhere between Iranian, Canadian, and American cultures. Constructing a new identity is an important process for me as an immigrant, since establishing myself in a new country and starting a new life necessitates a reconsideration of my position within new social groups. On the other hand, my female Iranian identity that is shaped by my experience of oppression is a crucial element in my quest for self-expression and self-exploration. In his essay, "Introduction: Who Needs 'Identity'?" Stuart Hall, a Jamaican-born British Marxist sociologist, cultural theorist and political activist, points out that, "...identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not 'who we are' or 'where we come from', so much as what we might become, how we might represent ourselves."³³

order to produce intersubjective meaning and bring embodied experiences from the viewer's past. Amelia Jones, "The 'Eternal Return,'" 957-963.

³¹ Ibid, 970.

³² Ibid, 970.

³³ Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay, eds., *Questions of Cultural Identity* (London: SAGE, 1996), 4.

Having an Islamic-Iranian background, it is very challenging to create artwork that satisfies contemporary Western criteria for contemporary Western expectations, or avoids accusations of islamophobia, xenophobia, or discrimination. Sometimes people accuse my artwork of being offensive and disadvantageous to Muslims and Iranian culture. Sometimes, biased opinions of my artwork demand that I change my artistic choices to shape my work for the interest of white European tastes. Writing about facing this type of criticism, in his essay, “The Question of Identity Vis-à-Vis Exoticism in Contemporary Iranian Art,” Hamid Keshmirshekan, a British-Iranian art historian and critic points out that for artistic and economic survival, many non-Euro-American artists have had to employ commodified signs of ethnicity.³⁴ Hence, the theme and form of such artists’ creativity are predetermined and are based on a subjective, exotic view of what is expected to be shown as non-European contemporary art.³⁵ As a real example, a curator, who is a Canadian-born woman, told me that because I do not make myself beautiful in my work, she cannot exhibit my work in her gallery as her gallery is located in an area with a white, conservative population. That was a moment when I became aware of my status; an immigrant woman who has experienced being subordinated not only by patriarchal cultural norms and traditions that exist in my homeland but also by the white conservative culture that puts me in the context of exotic other. Dealing with the issue of expectations of European models of art, my creativity and self-expression has taken on higher levels of challenge. Producing work under the expectation and evaluation of others has limited me from fully engaging my own concerns. I should point to Gerardo Mosquera’s essay, “The Marco Polo Syndrome,” that frames the critique of Western culture in relation to intercultural communication. What he calls, “The Marco Polo Syndrome,” is the Eurocentric exercise of imposing the world-wide hegemony of a specific culture, and of highlighting the supposed otherness of other cultures.³⁶ He writes, “What is monstrous about this syndrome is that it perceives whatever is different as the carrier of life-threatening viruses rather than nutritional elements. And although it does not scare us....it has brought a lot of death to

³⁴ Hamid Keshmirshekan, *The Question of Identity Vis-à-Vis Exoticism in Contemporary Iranian Art*, *Iranian Studies* 43, no. 4 (September 1, 2010): 502.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 498.

³⁶ Gerardo Mosquera, *The Marco Polo Syndrome: Some Problems around Art and Eurocentrism*, *Third Text* 6, no. 21 (December 1, 1992): 35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09528829208576382>.

culture.”³⁷ Binary oppositions in art—the binary structure that claims the cultural superiority of European art, individualism and modernity over other cultures—was invented by European colonizers in their confrontation with non-European cultures.³⁸ The otherness of my female and foreign body is constructed as exotic to support the cultural superiority of European art.

In seeking strategies to counter the objectification of my body, develop a feminist art discourse, and communicate the reality of my experience, I explore my identity formation through consideration of the process of identification. Jones considers identification as a mode for creating a reciprocal process between viewers, bodies, and other modes of visual culture.³⁹ I expand the idea of identification through the presentation of my body with regard to Amelia Jones’ theory of queer feminist durationality. Opening the circuit of identification in the representation of my body helps articulate larger political structures and assumptions about my gendered experiences. The process of identification opens up the possibility of questioning identity through self-reflective modes of representation.⁴⁰ The term, “queer,” in Jones’s theory is not limited to sexuality and gender, but also relates to ethnicity, class, and nationality.⁴¹ I trace my altered experience of subjectivity using Jones’s theory of identity as identification. For example, by performing pain and presenting the impulse to vomit in my Piece *Naan* (2020), I aim to create the potential of affecting the bodies of the audiences in a visceral manner to consider the constitution of the materiality of the body that physically shapes and thus determines my experiences. *Naan* (2020) also strives to offer the possibility of opening up identification through enacting intense bodily formations, and through seeing and being as sensory inputs of my experience, so my body might be seen in temporal and embodied relationality. I argue that my body in *Naan* (2020), evokes aspects of sensual embodiment that engage viewers intersubjectively and contingently. According to Jones, this contingency challenge a binary logic as

³⁷ Ibid, 36.

³⁸ Anne Ring Petersen, *Migration into Art: Transcultural Identities and Art-Making in a Globalised World* (Manchester: Manchester University Press. 2017), 145.

³⁹ Amelia Jones, *Seeing Differently: A History and Theory of Identification and the Visual Arts* (London: Routledge, 2012), 3.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 3.

⁴¹ Ibid, 3.

the viewer creates meaning in general as intersectional, which produces intertwined identification rather than oppositional.⁴² By emphasizing identification rather than identity, I attempt to dismantle the notion of difference as the binary of central/marginal and self/other.

Negotiating a shift from notions of identity as a fixed category towards a more processual understanding of identification, I mark my difference along the lines of gender, race, and ethnicity. I trace these differences through feminist interventions that assert race and gender are always connected. Jones writes that there is no sexuality or gender without their “race-ing.”⁴³ Defining my identity through the notions of race, ethnicity and gender creates a mode of identification by resisting the structure of the binary of self/other to create meaning. For example, opening up visual codes such as the sign of the veil, often reads as cultural otherness, suggesting a universal system of a body in pain, and brings attention to artistic convention of performance art; using the medium of video which coded as Western and individualist aligns my work with feminist art. Putting all these visual codes together, I project identification beyond the potential meaning of the Iranian woman in the context of otherness. Furthermore, I apply Jones considerations of conceptions of selfhood and autobiography through activating culturally coded feminine subjectivity in the form of feminist body art.⁴⁴ In this way, I am able to align my work with common strategies that have been used in Western feminist art historically.

I combine visual signs that have distinct features and particularities of Iran/Iranian nationality or culture with Western feminist and queer strategies to code my work with respect to the conception of the Western lens. This approach uses metaphor and symbolic ideas related to my female body in private and public realms. For example, in my work, *Made up* (2018), I wear a scarf, as a code to my ethnicity and homeland culture, and then disrupt the boundary between public and private through the repeated action of kissing and again reapplying lipstick in front of the camera. In Iran couples are not allowed to kiss each other in public, and also wearing makeup in public is against the morality codes

⁴² Ibid, 187.

⁴³ Ibid, 237.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 225.

that exist in Iran's society. As I highlighted above, another avenue for creating a mode of identification within my work consists of performing my body in multiple senses with an explicit attention to selfhood in the medium of video. Jones, too, emphasizes the medium of video as a representational strategy for enacting a mode of identification.⁴⁵ This representational strategy is the way that I can take on various identifications, such as the act of eating and devouring in my different performances and in every moment: we navigate the world, and we all eat something to survive. However, by eating something unconventional like hair, I highlight the impossible social code of my female sexuality that suggests what cannot be done with actual bodies of humans. I assume through the process of the repetition of devouring hair in *Zolf* (2020) performance, I provide an alternative identification to mark my struggle with the social expectations that relate to my Iranian gender and sexuality.

Using video as a medium and considering the ideas of female subjectivity as a starting point, my work asks viewers to question assumptions of Iranian women traditionally represented as constrained and passive. In *Counterpoint* (2020), I represent a dramatic loss of my identity by performing and staging my body calmly in a neutral space, as paint is poured from a series of objects. These objects include a teapot as a reference to Iranian traditional domestic and household objects, a can of soda pop that is used to represent the modern West, and a military canteen as a reference to war. Another strategy I employ in this work to ascribe identification is to activate some degree of identity crisis through communicating the pain in my body. By communicating self-experiences in the context of pain, I hope to reveal a level of complexity within the cultural structures that are specific to the oppression of women.⁴⁶ Evolving and exploring different ways for creating modes of identification in my practice, I have developed an ongoing series of negotiations between my female subjectivity and the multiple social worlds I inhabit.

Considering identity as multiple, fluid, intersectional, and performative provides a provisional model of thinking about and recognizing identity in the process of identification.⁴⁷ The identity in the mode of

⁴⁵ Ibid, 225.

⁴⁶ Jeanie Forte, *Focus on the Body: Pain, Praxis, and Pleasure in Feminist Performance*, in *Critical Theory and Performance*, Edited by Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph R. Roach, (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1992), 245.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 148.

identification is specific to time and space and occurs in relation to the context of production and display.⁴⁸ This process of identification also creates an interrelational approach to interpretation and understanding.⁴⁹ In my case, by creating modes of identification, by performing my body and with its connection to multiple identities, I aim to recognize the representations of identity beyond the exotic. As I continually raise the nomadic subject as a basis for understanding my practice, I connect the idea of multiple identities to nomadic identity. In my work, *Go with the Flow* (2019), I explore multiple and nomadic identity. The work starts with the close-up of my open mouth and the audience can hear voices of people who joined civil protests in Iran in November 2019.⁵⁰ They shouted “Death to Dictator” and ran away from the army guards who shot the protesters. While the camera zooms out, the viewer can see a heavy bag of blood is dangling from my mouth to keep it open. My open mouth narrates the violent reaction of the government to the protesters. By closing my mouth, which was very painful as the bag of blood was heavy, and starting to drink water, I symbolize the time when I tried to be silent and not acknowledging the violence for the sake of my own safety. In this work, I explore self-expression or self-representation and attempt to invent modes of identification through performing my body in a state of intensive pain and agony. Some examples of how I explore nomadic identity in this work include: presenting the voice of other, representing melancholy and an emotionally distressed self, and representing being both active and passive regarding violence. Braidotti mentions, “The nomad’s identity is a map of where s/he has already been...the nomad stands for movable diversity...an inventory of traces. Were I to write an autobiography, it would be the self-portrait of a collectivity.”⁵¹ I use the idea of nomadic identity in *Go with the Flow* (2019), to create multiple identities related to my ethnicity of being Iranian and immigrant, and propose a shift towards interrelational relationships with my audiences. While this nomadic identity is not marked by my geographical wandering, my life has indeed been divided since 2011 between Iran, Canada, and the

⁴⁸ Ibid, 224.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 224.

⁵⁰ For the sound, I used the combination of different YouTube videos that were uploaded by people in the protest. The national media and news of Iran have never cover Iranian people’s protests and people use YouTube or similar web as a platform to document the events of their protests.

⁵¹ Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, 14.

States. The instability of my individual sense of identity and the construction of the nomadic subject has intersected and changed for me according to the social and political events where I have already been and where I no longer am. In working with this reality, I strive to provide an affirmative and creative act to negotiate with existing discourses and power structures.

1.3 Instigating Tension in the Body: Focusing on the Traumatized Body through Pain, the Grotesque and the Abject

Practicing pain in a body creates a set of narratives related to my own embodied genealogy. This is to say that I am intent on revisiting the events and traumas of the past in order to trace the movements towards the transformation of my life here and now. I utilize pain, abjection, and tension in my body as modes of radical relationality to elicit an empathic investment within my viewers. The radical relationality that Rosi Braidotti introduces promotes erasing binaries and proposes creating new forms of social interaction, with an emphasis on the contemporary expansion of ways for advanced communications and travel technologies to operate, alongside the movement of diverse humans across national borders.⁵² The ethical idea is to increase the ability of one to engage in a mode of relation with multiple others.⁵³ I hope to elicit a visceral reaction in viewers of my work in an attempt to engender feelings of empathy in them—the sense that my body could be their body. Relationality, here, refers to the sense that while my body is distinct, it might be connected to the viewer in this specific context and moment in time.

My Family Men (2018), communicates my experience of oppression by depicting pain and the grotesque within a docile body. I emphasize my bodily presence through the actual pain I carry that was implanted by the patriarchal system of my homeland. I perform pain in order to create intersubjective desire for the possibility of transforming the ways of our lives. In evoking visceral empathetic responses in viewers through performing pain, I point to Amelia Jones's explanation of the

⁵² Jones, *Seeing Differently*, 228.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 199.

creation of radical relationality through self-harm. She argues that self-inflicted harm to the body can have a role in social and political transformation.⁵⁴ Twisting a fabric from both sides, performed by my father and my husband, thus presenting the deformation of my face by their continuous act of twisting the fabric – and revealing the pain in my face to the audiences – are intended to symbolize the experience of being traumatized by intensive social expectations related to my gender and sexuality. This video specifically criticizes the compulsory hijab rules that were enforced at the beginning of the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979. However, it also shows that the compulsory hijab rules have influence in private family relationships.

1.4 Performing for the Camera: Developing a Critical Vision to Feel Seeing

Video and digital processes have become interdependent modes in my artworks, as these technologies exceed the limits of both my physical body and my performance. I explore the ways in which technology might lead to insights into the experience of embodiment. The medium of video is culturally widespread and I intertwine it with my expression of identity. My work does not typically initially take place in front of an audience; rather, I perform in the privacy of my studio. Situating video technology as a core medium for my self-expression, the initial need to perform for the video is secondary to role of the video technology as a tool for creating more visible and permanent results. Women's positions within media power structures, and their representation in the media, are often of secondary concern in many societies. My work invokes Iran's popular media, which is a cultural institution that reinforces traditional stereotypes regarding women as passive. Alongside this is the association of video and totalitarian mechanisms of control and surveillance that must be confronted. Here, I also want to point out that video is a medium that can often be economically accessible and can require minimal technical knowledge or skill to master. As Michael Renov points out, "...video has the capability for registering and recording moving images...more cheaply, quickly, and efficiently than

⁵⁴ Amelia Jones, *Performing the Wounded Body: Pain, Affect and the Radical Relationality of Meaning*, *Parallax* 15, no. 4 (November 1, 2009): 47.

other mediums.”⁵⁵ He goes on to say that, “it offers unique possibilities for responding to the demands of the body transported outside of itself in the virtual space of the society of the spectacle.”⁵⁶ My work focuses on personal issues; however, the individual narratives and self-disclosures of my video art cannot escape their surrounding situation. Renov argues that video has the capability of placing the speaking subject with an ethics of identity in direct relation to the other; hence, the viewer becomes complicit through an identification with the narrator’s project.⁵⁷ The aim of enlisting video technology is to give voice to communities or nationalities, not in a passive sense, but through constant, ongoing representation that provokes discussion.⁵⁸ For me, video is a means of self-understanding and of recognizing the social implications of my expressed identity. Renov considers video technology to be a two-way glass that delivers real events to an absent gaze, and reintroduces us to ourselves through self-revelation.⁵⁹

I regard video technology as a vehicle to enact myself with particularity within a contemporary social and political context. I mobilize my body-oriented practice for the purpose of exploring and multiplying the components of identity. Aspects of my identity are marginalized in the Iranian political realm and oppressed by various political subjects, such as class, lifestyle, sexual preference, and gender. In my video, *Zolf* (2020), I use hair to express my experience of marginalization, violence, and repression as a woman, as well to refer to the policy of compulsory hijab in Iran. I juxtapose my hair with my self-portrait drowning in oil—petroleum—as an emblem of a tool of power. The video shows I am devouring my hair and there are several jump cuts to another scene that my head and face is gradually covered by the black liquid. The work is an installation and there is an embroidered text within my hair. The text is from a traditional poet, Hafez, who is still very famous in Iran.⁶⁰ *Zolf* through

⁵⁵ Michael Renov and Erika Suderburg, *Resolutions: Contemporary Video Practices* (University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 14.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 78.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 78.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 78.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 83

⁶⁰ Hafez (1315-1390) Khwāja Shams-ud-Dīn Muḥammad Ḥāfeẓ-e Shīrāzī, known by his pen name Hafez and as "Hafiz", was a Persian poet who " but also targeted religious hypocrisy". His poems are still important in contemporary Iranian culture.

its medium, text, content and its title, and the video technology which grounds my identity in physical form, provides the possibility of representing different spheres of oppression in the making of my identity.

In the process of representing self/body via video and making a connection with the audience, I cite Amelia Jones's argument about the *technophenomenological* body which describes the way that technology presents the body as the embodied subject.⁶¹ Through her theories of embodiment, Jones considers the technological rendering of the subject in video or photography as similar to a skin that envelops the artist's corporeality. This skin indicates an interiority that leads to intersubjective engagements of body, metaphor, and with the cognitive and emotive aspects of the subject.⁶² In other words, the technology of photography or video embodies the subject on a two-dimensional plane of the image from both inside and outside.⁶³ This proposes that the flesh and the body of the artist ultimately connects to the body of viewers.

One viewer of my video, *Made Up* (2018), acknowledged the embodied nature of my work when she offered a "self-report" of her reaction to my work. She made an aesthetic assessment, mentioning that the vibrant color in the video made it very powerful to look at. She also made an emotional evaluation of the work, mentioning that she felt disgusted while she was watching the kissing action. In the video performance, repeated actions of applying lipstick, kissing my partner and reapplying lipstick are presented. The video is cropped with the extreme close-up of the mouth area of the performers and this framing makes the performers anonymous. The framing creates the abstract form of action as it loses the initial meaning of intimacy, sexuality, and privacy. Instead, it opens up the idea of a constant

The embroidered text in the work:

زلف بر باد مده تا ندهی بر باد ناز بنیاد مکن تا نکنی بنیادم

Zolf bar bad madeh ta nadahi bar badam

Naz bonyad makon ta nakoni bonyadam

The translation of the poet in English:

Don't let your hair with the wind blow

Else to the wind, Caution I'll throw

⁶¹ The term is coined by Amelia Jones to describe the relationship between body and technology.

⁶² Amelia Jones, *The 'Eternal Return': Self-Portrait Photography as a Technology of Embodiment*, *Signs* 27, no. 4 (July 1, 2002): 967.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 970.

confrontation of the viewer with pornography. Given this visitor's behavior—offering a spontaneous report of her reaction—and given her facial expression while talking to me, I put forward that the viewer's perception of the video became embodied and activated. My performance in the video, here, made this viewer aware of her bodily/cognitive responses to the abjection of the performance to the extent that she felt compelled to mention it to me. In the video, *Made Up* (2018), I depict the representation of my cultural image and personal experience, and at the same time, that representation potentially creates meaning through a process of interrelational exchange.

1.5 Conclusion

There have been moments, in my life as a woman, when I have sought validation and recognition within conservative social and cultural terrains, and when I have held on to self-doubt and self-hatred. This also applies to my artistic practice. I have faced many moments of disappointment in my artistic career and felt my work was far from being accepted, or even understood. I have also received many offers of purportedly kind advice to change my style and medium, but I must admit that it has been a long time since I retired attempts at making so-called beautiful arts, and I remain committed to this stance.

Conversely, there have been times in my life when I have felt that my creativity has been a necessary and opportune response to a specific event or experience. These are the moments that I struggle to describe and represent in my work—attempting to represent my identity, my self-esteem and self-confidence by rejecting the abstract, general, and universal, and instead admitting the concrete, the specific, and the particular.

While researching and writing this Dossier, I became excited and emotional when I read some of the readings that my supervisor, Daniela Snepkova, had suggested to me. Her suggestions opened up a world of feminist scholarship to me and encouraged the independence of mind I needed to scrutinize my work, and to develop this series of discussions that I believe help situate my artworks within visual arts theory, as well as within the world where myself and my audiences live and move.

In the process of making art, I explore my identity in the hope of calling oppressive authorities into question. Perhaps there is not much hope for a bright future where differences are recognized without

eliminating the voices of others. But striving to make this future creates a hope to continue and endure.☺

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Chapter 2

2 Case Study

2.1 The Vulnerable Artist's Body in the Geopolitics of Exile

In a dimly illuminated room, a breathing body is wrapped in plastic, covered with blood and viscera, motionless on a table. The head is firmly covered in bloody surgical gauze. The enclosed body covered with blood confronts the viewer with the cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment imposed on it. This anonymous and formless body, in a minimalist setting on a table, is surrounded by two empty chairs. The staged atmosphere is reminiscent of an interrogation scene. These point to the physical absence of negotiators or interrogators, evoking the uncomfortable assumption of ongoing torture. The tumultuous sound reverberating through the space is a combination of news reports and disembodied voices of Western leaders giving speeches about the Lebanese peace process; these are on a loop for the duration of the performance. “*Spending billions of dollars for wars overseas*,” “*A nation with global responsibility*,” “*Protecting our home*,” and “*By negotiation or by other means*,” are examples of the messages that address the state of affairs in Lebanon after the invasion by Israel that took place in 1982. This is Mona Hatoum's body on the table used to depict the trauma of war and exile in her video *The Negotiation Table* (1983).

Hatoum, born to a Palestinian family in Beirut. She settled in London when the civil war in Lebanon made returning home impossible. Hatoum's particular corporeal experience is one of invasion, exploitation, and abandonment. Her body is prevented from returning to her homeland. Hatoum is the image of transnational movement of a body that has experienced loss, displacement and exile, and this work calls attention to the body as a site for examining Arab-Israeli conflict. Using her body, Hatoum strives to embody the subjective experience of torture and trauma. Through embodying her subjective experiences, she expresses the idea that her personal experience extends through space to encounter her audiences in an intersubjective manner, and as such, Hatoum broadens this particular geopolitical experience of her body to a project of universal reach.

Depicting the anonymity of her body in different ways—covering her body with entrails bulged from her abdomen, bandages and blood, staging an interrogation scene, and incorporating sound tapes of Western authorities giving peace speeches—all together work as a metaphor for the political forces that act on her body. Her body gains political meaning and represents the way political authorities develop geopolitical logics for understanding the importance of bodies. Bodies in Hatoum’s work are inseparable from geopolitics that represent the people and place of the Middle East are systematically invade and occupied through the conduct politics by West. In this case study, the geopolitical body of the artist in the context of war and terror remains a critical analytic. Her corporeal contribution poses important questions about the way bodies are scripted within geopolitical logics. Pointing to bodies within concrete political contexts and connecting the bodies to geopolitics, Jessie Hanna Clark, an American Geographer, argues corporeal geopolitics give bodies geopolitical agency of interaction among bodies.⁶⁴ Considering bodies with geopolitical agency helps us to understand that all bodies are affected by shared social, economic, and political system across space and vulnerable differently to the politics.⁶⁵ Hatoum refutes the idea that her personal experience within social and political structures is distinct.

Hatoum’s experience of displacement and violation is not only expressed through her body but also through her manipulation of space and material. The materiality of her body in *The Negotiation Table* (1983) communicates acute sensations of unsettledness. Through the juxtaposition of sound (the peace speeches) and her body (anonymous and tortured), she represents the Western-centrism of determining the values of bodies—of deciding which ones are valuable or disposable in the geopolitical context. Palestinian-American scholar, Edward Said points to human geography as a space of inequality and differences where no one is completely free from struggle over geography.⁶⁶

Said declares:

...this universal practice of designating in one’s mind a familiar space which is “ours”
and an unfamiliar space beyond “ours” which is “theirs” is a way of making

⁶⁴ Jessie Hanna Clark, *Feminist Geopolitics and the Middle East: Refuge, Belief, and Peace*, *Geography Compass* 11, no. 2. (2017): 4.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*,1.

⁶⁶ Edward W Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979): 54.

geographical distinctions that can be entirely arbitrary. I use the word “arbitrary” here because imaginative geography of the “our land—barbarian land” variety does not require that the barbarians acknowledge the distinction. It is enough for “us” to set up these boundaries in our own minds; “they” become “they” accordingly, and both their territory and their mentality are designated as different from “ours.” ... The geographic boundaries accompany the social, ethnic, and cultural ones in expected ways. Yet often the sense in which someone feels himself to be not-foreign is based on a very unrigorous idea of what is “out there,” beyond one’s own territory. All kinds of suppositions, associations, and fictions appear to crowd the un-familiar space outside one’s own.⁶⁷

There is essential sadness while leaving your native land and the host land never becomes your true home. The tragedy of leaving homeland is heightened when the body is in exile and the homeland is under the fire of political and civil war.

In the three hours of the performance, *The Negotiation Table* (1983), Hatoum imposes a set of interpretive parameters around bodies that are deeply affected in times of loss, displacement, militarism, and warfare. Lying motionless for hours and smeared with bloody viscera and entrails bulged from abdomen, Hatoum depicts the brutalized body that physically experience war. In her interview, Hatoum narrates her dream that seems closely connected to this performance. Hatoum describes:

I went to Beirut looking for my parents and in the wreckage of their home I found two plastic boxes – a pink and a blue one. I opened the blue box and it was full of tiny toy soldiers that exploded out into the air... When I turned back to the pink box, the lid was open disgorging human entrails in an endless stream. I heard my mother’s voice saying, “They were disemboweling pregnant women, that’s why we had to leave.”⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Ibid, 54.

⁶⁸ Gannit Ankori, *Palestinian Art* (London: Reaktion Books, 2013). 122.

In *The Negotiation Table* (1983), Hatoum performs the traumatic experience of being unable to return home to Lebanon as it was destroyed by Zionist forces. The agitation atmosphere of the performance places the audience into positions of vulnerability. Her body evokes a lifeless corpse left neglected on a table while the strategies to maintain peace in Western is announced by the political leaders. The fact of injuries and death is absent from the peace strategic and political descriptions. Her body has, therefore, a double function: to represent the reality of political catastrophe and to acknowledge that modern Western culture contributes to exile and to the experience of émigrés and refugees. George Steiner, an American philosopher and literary critic, in his book “Extraterritorial: Papers on Literature and the Language Revolution” writes of Western Culture suggests:

It seems proper that those who create art in a civilization of quasi-barbarism which has made so many homeless, which has torn up tongues and peoples by the root, should themselves be poets unhoused and wanderers across language. Eccentric, aloof, nostalgic, deliberately untimely as he aspires to be and so often is....⁶⁹

Hatoum’s body for this piece reveals she leaves her homeland but her homeland and the trauma of the war and violence never leaves her body.

Her body is the exhausted body of a militarized refugee subject to the political violence of the time. Her depiction of territorial struggle is not limited to the control of space, land, and borders but includes control over bodies inhabiting those spaces. As evidence for this claim, Judith Butler points out that people, despite their differences in location and history, are all the same in being bound to and dependent upon each other.⁷⁰ Butler states that living with corporeal vulnerability is part of the fundamental sociality of our embodied life. Butler writes that:

In a way, we all live with this particular vulnerability, a vulnerability to the other that is part of bodily life, a vulnerability to a sudden address from elsewhere that we cannot preempt. This vulnerability, however, becomes highly exacerbated under certain social

⁶⁹ George Steiner, *Extraterritorial: Papers on Literature and the Language of Revolution* (New York: Atheneum, 1976), 11.

⁷⁰ Emily Cousens. 2018. *Corporeal Vulnerability and the Temporality of Feminist Theory*. *Studies in Social and Political Thought* 27 (January). <https://doi.org/10.20919/sspt.27.2017.71>. n.d. <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/08c2/49ee2fee225fbed49b879ab2eb2d28f044ed.pdf>.

and political conditions, especially those in which violence is a way of life and the means to secure self-defense are limited.⁷¹

Using the fleshly matter of her body to consider geopolitical agency paves the way to understand the idea that all bodies are vulnerable, although in varying ways, to politics.

Changing Parts (1984), a video by Hatoum, begins with a mood of tranquility. Hatoum establishes a slow montage beginning with the intimate and familiar space of the tiled bathroom belonging to her childhood home in Beirut, accompanied by Bach's Cello Suit No.4.⁷² This feeling of tranquility is abruptly shattered by a grainy freeze-frame image of a naked woman covered in clay, and attempting to bite and tear at a transparent wall smeared with marks of hands and body parts. These images are derived from the artist's seven-hour performance called *Under Siege*, performed in 1982 at the London Film Makers Co-op and Aspex Gallery, Portsmouth.⁷³ In *Under Siege* (1982), Hatoum's naked body is trapped in a plastic cell. Her body is covered with clay and she tries to stand in the cell but she keeps falling down in each attempt. The plastic is covered with the traces of her hand, face, and body while she tries to support herself standing up. Regarding this work, Hatoum explains:

A human figure reduced to a form covered in clay, trapped, confined within a small structure, struggling to stand up again and again...slipping and falling again and again...The live action was repeated over a duration of seven hours and was accompanied by three different sound tapes repeatedly blasting the space from different directions creating a collage of sounds: revolutionary songs, news reports and statements in English, French, and Arabic.⁷⁴

Two years after performing *Under Siege* (1982), Hatoum developed the similar idea in her *Changing Parts* (1984). This time, the interference of street noises combines with the collage sounds she incorporated in *Under Siege* (1982). This combination of sounds turns to additional elements to disrupt the serenity created at the beginning of the video.

⁷¹ Judith Butler, *Prekarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), 29.

⁷² Mona Hatoum. *Changing Parts*. 1984. Video. http://www.ubu.com/film/hatoum_changing.html.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Hatoum, Mona, in *Mona Hatoum (Phaidon Contemporary Artist Series)* (London: Phaidon Press, 1997), 122.

Representing fragmented images and performing a brutalized body blur the boundary between time and space. Hatoum strives to recount the experience of past catastrophe and trauma and at the same time, evokes the continuity of the catastrophe. The fragments of the video in *Changing Parts* (1984), point to a discursive indicator of trauma. With Hatoum struggling to tear the plastic cell to free herself, her body smeared with dirt, and her voice inaudible, we become witnesses to her vulnerability. The bathroom images are from Hatoum's point of view, which is a reliable site for witnessing her melancholy of being in exile. This fragmentation of Hatoum's body between war, separation, displacement, violation, and passivity of being the victim of trauma become intersubjective as in the idea that the audience members can put themselves in her shoes. Furthermore, performing her body in the mode of multiple and fragmentation has relinquished the centrality of Hatoum's self and attached her "I" to the construction of a collective Palestinian exilic identity.⁷⁵ Here she disperses the body/self to constitute a relationship with multiple others, Mona Hatoum states:

I want to remind the audience that there are different realities that people have to live through... The video... is about such different realities—the big contrast between a privileged space, like the West, and the Third World where there is death, destruction, hunger.⁷⁶

Changing Parts (1984), is decidedly characterized by the sensation of suffering and the abjection of a violated body. According to Said, willfulness, exaggeration, and overstatement are characteristics of depicting exile and artworks about exile are often decidedly unpleasant.⁷⁷

In Hatoum's video *Measures of Distance* (1988), the naked body of Hatoum's mother gradually appears under a layer of Arabic text scrolling over the screen. Hatoum's fifteen-minute video is comprised of still images of her mother taking a shower superimposed over handwritten letters from Hatoum's mother in Beirut to Hatoum in London. The letters are the written exchange between

⁷⁵ Creating the interconnectedness between an individual identity to the collective project is a feature of poststructuralist feminism based on nomadism. Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: embodiment and sexual difference in contemporary feminist theory* (New York: Columbia University Press), 5.

⁷⁶ Hatoum, *Mona Hatoum*, 127.

⁷⁷ Edward W. Said, *Reflections on Exile*, In *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. Harvard University Press, 2001), 182.

Hatoum and her mother during the Lebanese Civil War (1982). She offers the theme of bodily exposure that here interplays with textuality. The layers of visual elements are paralleled by layers of audio components. A private conversation in Arabic between Hatoum and her mother gradually becomes the background sound. On top of this, we hear Hatoum's voice translating her mother's letter in English. According to the artist, by using this complex, confused, and contradictory materials, she has concluded and culminated all of her early narrative and issue-based work about the state of the world.⁷⁸ In *Measures of Distance*, through performing bodily material and blurring the boundaries between languages, Hatoum depicts the experience of being in exile.

Being in exile and bearing the psychic burden of the loss of her homeland, Hatoum examines the geopolitics of her family in Beirut through the deconstruction of a narrative relating to her family living under military occupation. Hatoum's mother's naked body is veiled in a layered montage of sound and visuals that inscribe the pain of separation. The montage technique here symbolizes that the bodies of both mother and daughter are separated from each other, and also amplifies the sense of distance between the two. In this way, Hatoum embodies another tactic for seeing and understanding the intersection of power and space.

The artist's practice around militarized policing of imaginative and material space has revolved geographically around divisions between homeland and her adopted home. For representing bodies that are out of place, Hatoum has constructed a paradoxical world that is constructed out of two separate worlds: her homeland and her host country. Constructing this paradoxical world points to Jacques Ranci re's argument about the political effectiveness of art that places one world into another to make visible the fact that both worlds in fact belong to a shared world that others do not see.⁷⁹ Narrating different worlds by the strategy of disjunctive montages combine with visual and textual fragmentations directs the viewer with the Hatoum's experience of the struggle of the geopolitical displacement.

⁷⁸ Janine Antoni, and Mona Hatoum, *Mona Hatoum*, *BOMB*, no. 63 (1998),2.

⁷⁹ According to Ranci re, one of the processes of creating critical art is the production of a sensory form of strangeness. Ranci re addresses Martha Rosler's montage technique in the work titled *Bringing the War Home*, 1967-72, as a technique for political messages. By using montage, Rosler constructs a paradoxical world that puts together two separate worlds: the bourgeois US domesticity and destroyed Vietnam. Jacques Ranci re, *Dissensus on Politics and Aesthetics* (London: Continuum International Publishing, 2010), 150.

The theme of the ambiguity of homelessness emerges in the juxtaposition of the intimate mother and daughter conversation in their mother tongue, Arabic, and the reading of the letter in English, the imperial language. Including Arabic language as part of her cultural identity into the colonial cultural text, Hatoum connects the viewer with her origin that she has been exiled from. Hatoum explores bodies as they are caught up in the intimate relationship between the mother and daughter. She reenacts the territorial struggles that are not only about control over defined boundaries, but also about control over the marked bodies that inhabit those spaces.⁸⁰

In *Measure of Distance* (1988), Hatoum reflects human's constitutive relationality and vulnerability.⁸¹

The experience of loss, mourning and grief through the aesthetics of the body of Hatoum's mother force a bodily representation of vulnerability. The nudity of her mother's body is mystified by imposing the handwritten calligraphic Arabic letters on it. This mystified body of the mother is distanced more as the mother's grief and mourning is reflected in the letter. "*My Dear Mona, the apple of my eyes. How I miss you and long to feast my eyes on your beautiful face that brighten up my days. I wish this bloody war would be over soon...*"⁸² Butler argues that experiencing grief and violence provides humans with the self-realization of who we are, and we return to a sense of human vulnerability in the knowledge that we are interdependent.⁸³ Here, reading her mother's letters, works to narrate the anxiety of their separation.

In Hatoum's work, the body is the material foundation of the geopolitics that is burdened with sexual, racial, and political meanings. The wounded and suffering body can become a text to represent the experience of trauma and pain. Grounding a critical intervention into dominant geopolitical discourses of statecraft, war, migration and exile, Hatoum narrates a story of how politics can be understood through the performance of bodies. Creating a relationship between body and system, Hatoum's work

⁸⁰ Deborah P. Dixon and Sallie A. Marston, *Introduction: Feminist engagements with geopolitics, Gender, Place & Culture*, Vol. 18, No. 4, (2011):447.

⁸¹ *Measures of Distance*. VHS. By Mona Hatoum. Western Front Video Production; Video Data Bank, 1988.

⁸² *Measures of Distance*. VHS. By Mona Hatoum. Western Front Video Production; Video Data Bank, 1988.

⁸³ Murphy, Ann V, *Corporeal Vulnerability and the New Humanism*, *Hypatia* 26, no. 3 (2011):580. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23016569>.

opens up the question of borders and renders the social vulnerability of our bodies as a universal subject.

Hatoum's perspective contains a dialogic relationship between global forces and individual experiences. The experience of exile and separation from home allows the performed bodies in Hatoum's work to become the embodiment of the subject. For her, the embodied subject coincides her physical, symbolic, and sociological dimensions of self for the investigation of structures of power. The political performativity of the body found in Hatoum's art, as in *The Negotiation Table* (1983) the anonymous body of the artist, offers the universality of her body as a way of thinking through a postcolonial geopolitical horizon. Meanwhile, exposing the vulnerable body uncovers the power relationships that result in injustice and inequality, uncovering the mechanism and perpetrators of violence. *Changing Parts* (1984), debates the geopolitics of aesthetics and considers the extent to which the harsh reality of the global invades the secure, intimate spaces of everyday life. In *The Measure of Distance* (1988), the body of her mother performs the fractured existence of individuals living in in-between spaces resulting from geopolitics and post-colonial boundaries. Negotiating between the familiar and global, the West and non-West, Hatoum's work opens up a challenging space of uncertainty and uncanniness in order to break down restrictive boundaries of politics exist in her motherland that is mapped as a metaphor for global politics.

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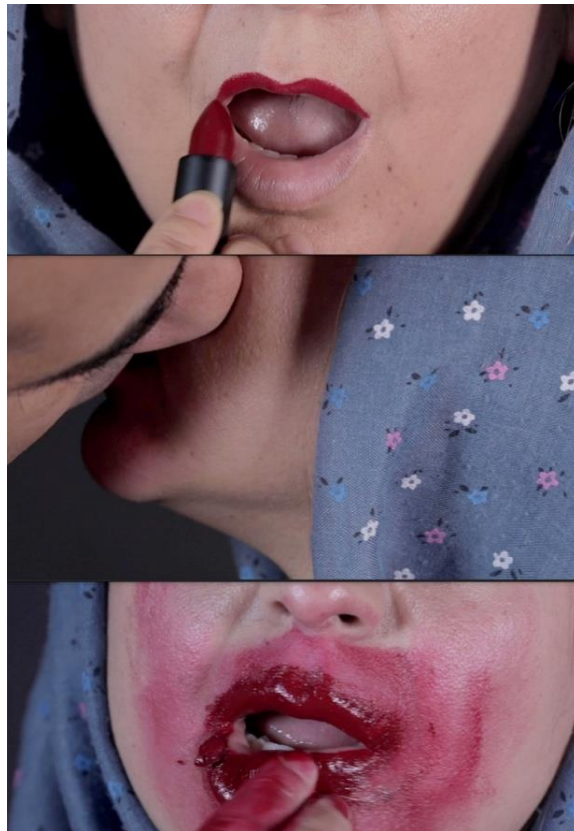
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Chapter 3

3 Creative Research Documentation

Title: *Made Up*
Medium: Video
Duration: 5 minute
Date: 2018

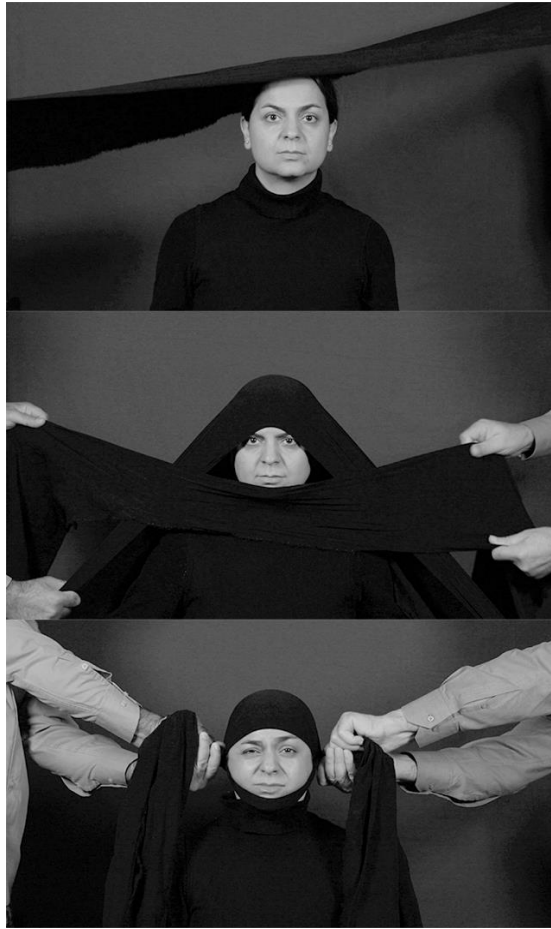


Made Up is a 30-minute performance for the camera that addresses intimacy and the construction and experience of desire in an intimate relationship between a man and a woman wearing hijab. In an attempt to reveal the ideology enforced onto the family structure in order to have control over women's bodies by an Islamic regime, this performance is built on the repeated actions of applying lipstick, kissing and reapplying lipstick. Here the repetition works to show a rebellious gesture of going against the norms of the prohibition of showing women's make up and the couples action of kissing in public spaces. Also, shifting relation between male power and the female body.

Link to access video: <https://vimeo.com/308330512>

Password: Forevergreen61

Title: *My Family Men*
Medium: Video
Duration: 11 minute
Date: 2018

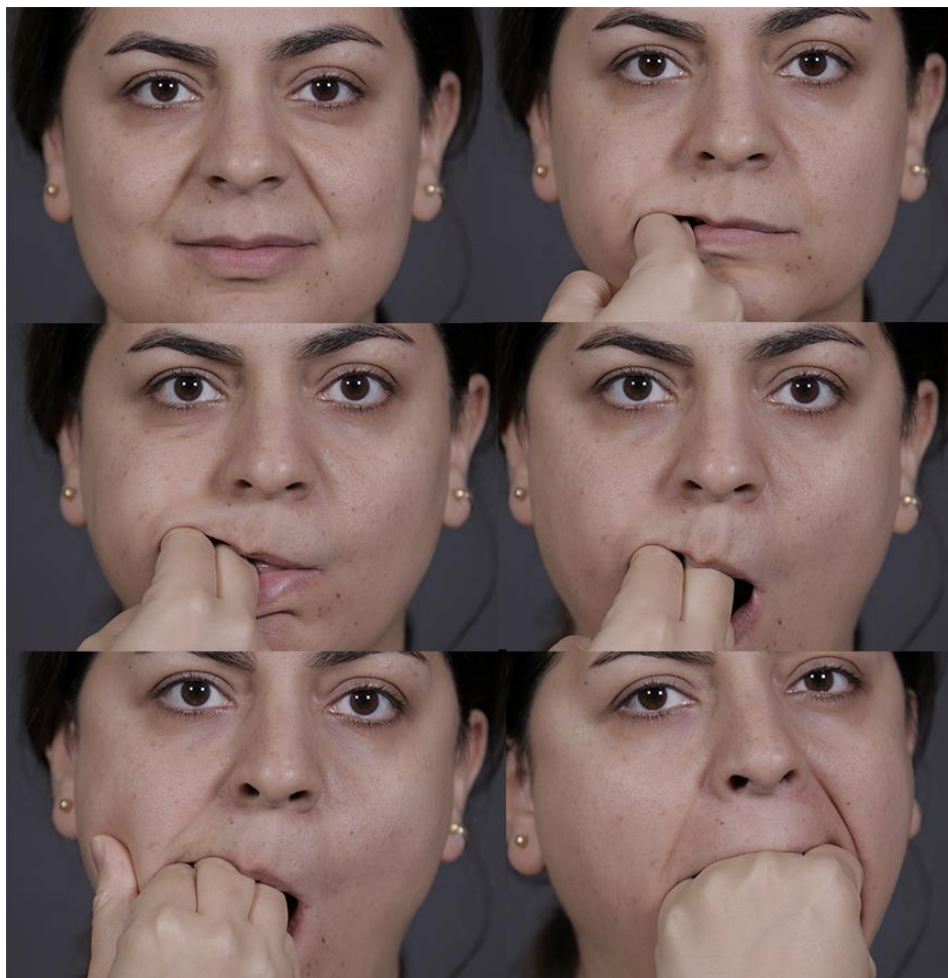


My Family Men is a performance for the camera, addressing control over a female's body by the male members of the family. This piece explored how tradition, religion, and cultural norms can influence intimate relationships, such as father-daughter and wife- husband, and create tensions in the family relations.

Link to access video: <https://vimeo.com/406056576>

Password: Forevergreen61

Title: *Don't ask, I can't sing*
Medium: Video
Duration: 1:47 minute
Date: 2018



The work is inspired by Mona Hatoum's project "*So Much I Want to Say*". Similar to her video I used photography to create the video. The work explores the religious restriction of women's singing in Iran.

Link to access video: <https://vimeo.com/406274082>

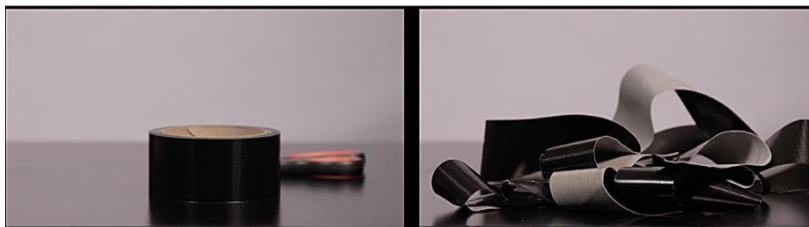
Password: Forevergreen61

Title: *Untitled*
Medium: Installation (Two channels video, photography)
Duration of video: 12minute
Date: 2018

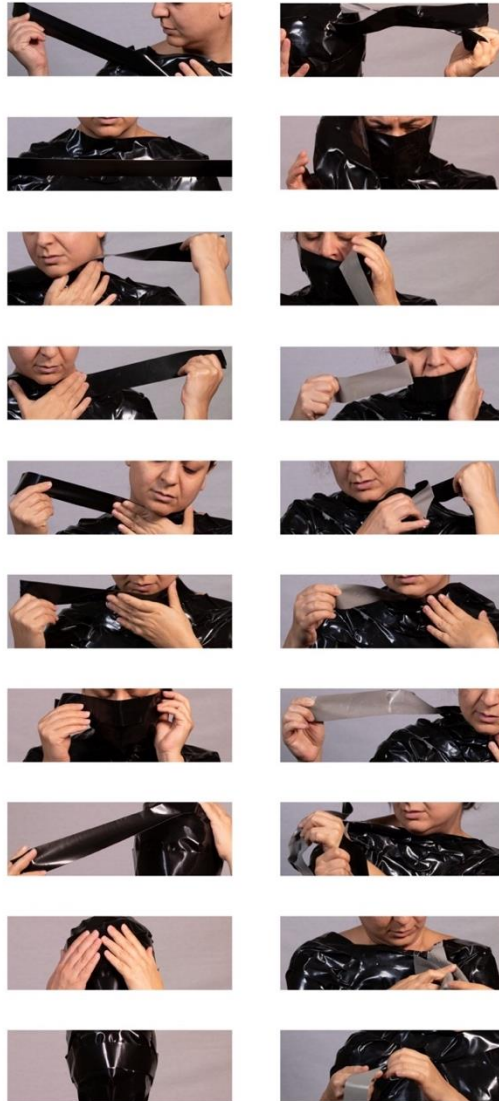


The Installation View

The raw directness of the relationship between others and I is almost too much to handle. It is best not to speak unless they ask me a direct question. I try to think of it from their point of view. I tell myself it doesn't matter, but what I tell myself is wrong. It does matter.



Images of the video



The image of the photograph installed beside the video projection

With this work, I explore the notion of otherness, unsettling and being in-between spaces. Also, I explore the figuration of my identity in the state of feeling of being other as a woman and as an immigrant. The work is an installation and composed of video, photography and sound, the sound is from recording the putting and removing the black tape from my body.

Link to access video: <https://vimeo.com/427137626>

Password: Forevergreen61

Title: They Fancy My Unromantic Part
Medium: A Loop Video Projected on a baby Pillow, Embroidery Text
Date: 2019



The Installation view



Image of the video



Details of the embroidery on the pillow

In this work, I posed my postpartum body as an uncanny question of difference. Feeling grotesque during my postpartum, I created this piece related to the psychological state of being in-between different states of mind, of being anxious and of being hopeful.

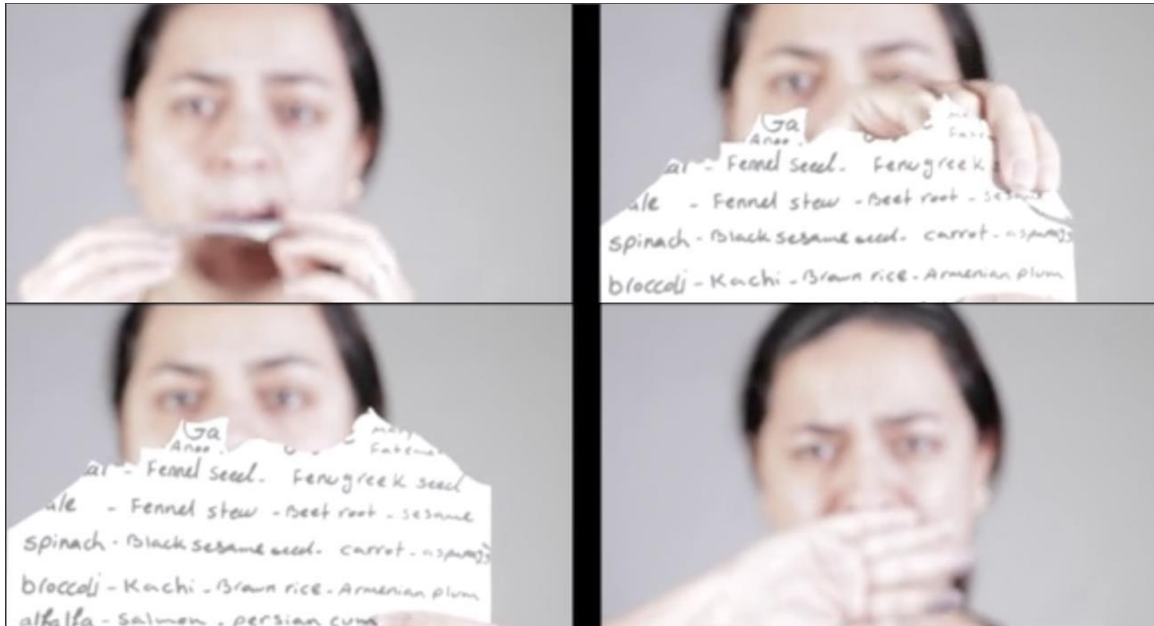
Link to access video: <https://vimeo.com/427167154>

Password: Forevergreen61

Title: Blame

Medium: Two Channels Video, Sugar Paper, Painted Baby Formula Boxes, wood

Date: 2019



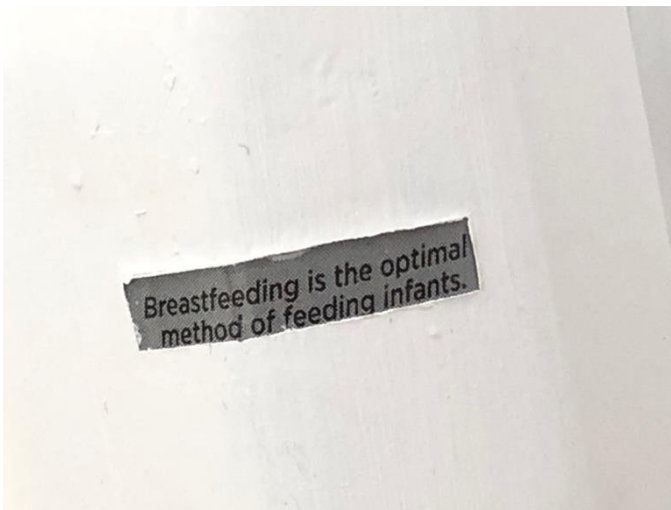
Images of the video



Details of the objects in the installation



Details of the collected formula boxes



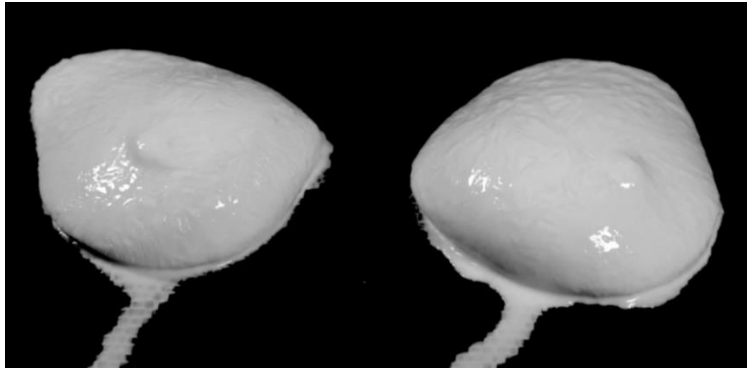
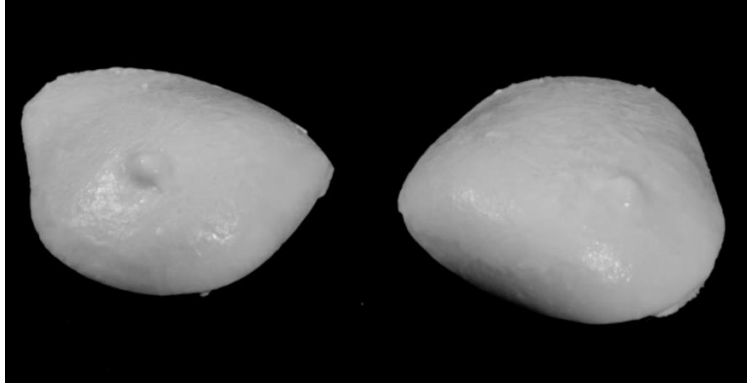
Detail of the formula box

With this piece, I consider my experience of breastfeeding and the use of formula, or prepackaged baby milk. I explore the idea of the social expectations for intensive mothering existing in both Western and Middle East culture. On a sugar paper, I wrote the name of the people who advised and helped me to be able to do breastfeeding. There is also a list of foods that are suggested to help mothers to increase their breastmilk production. In the performance, I ate the sugar paper and it ended when I became nauseous and I couldn't devour anymore. I collected the boxes of formulas that I gave to my son and painted them. I only left one sentence on the box. "Breastfeeding is the optimal method of feeding infants."

Link to access video: <https://vimeo.com/451279248>

Password: Forevergreen11

Title: *Untitled*
Medium: Video
Duration: 6:24 minute
Date: 2019



Images of the video

For this video, I cast my breasts in white milk and froze them. The video is the process of them melting. This video is from the series exploring motherhood and my female psyche through the lens of social expectations. Also, exploring the absence of the body in performance and video art. Instead of using my body I casted my breasts and made two sets of breasts. The breasts at top made from alginate mold and the one at the bottom is frozen milk. The work explores the concept of performance while my actual body is hidden in the presented work.

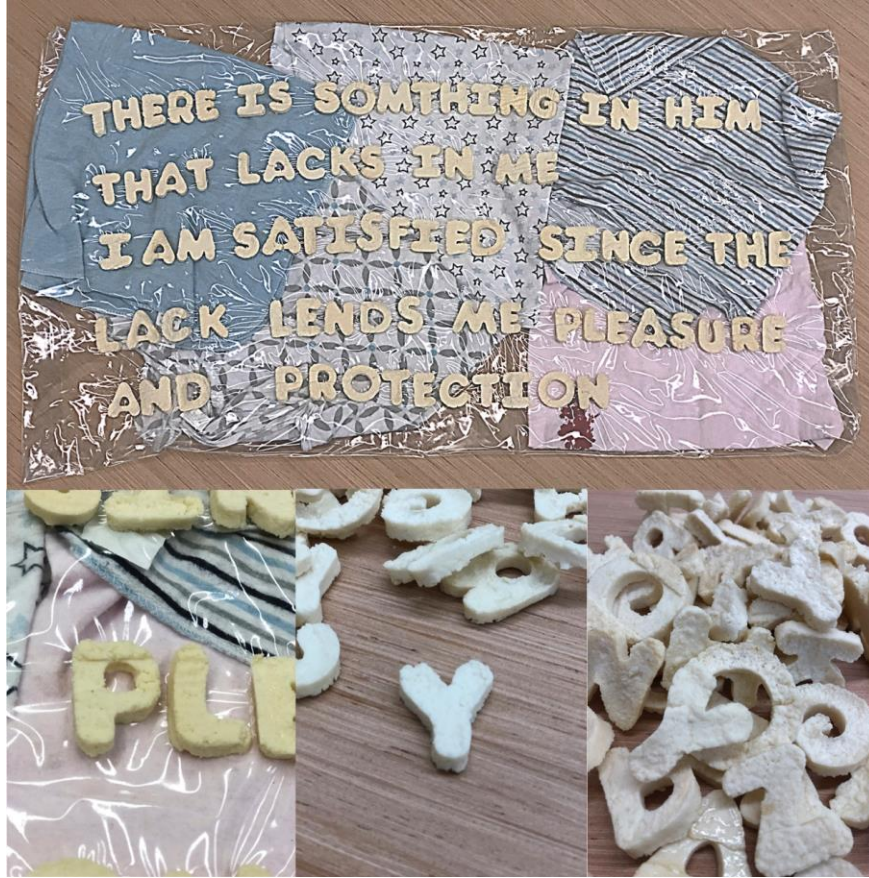
Link to access video: <https://vimeo.com/451281248>

Password: Forevergreen61

Title: *Untitled*

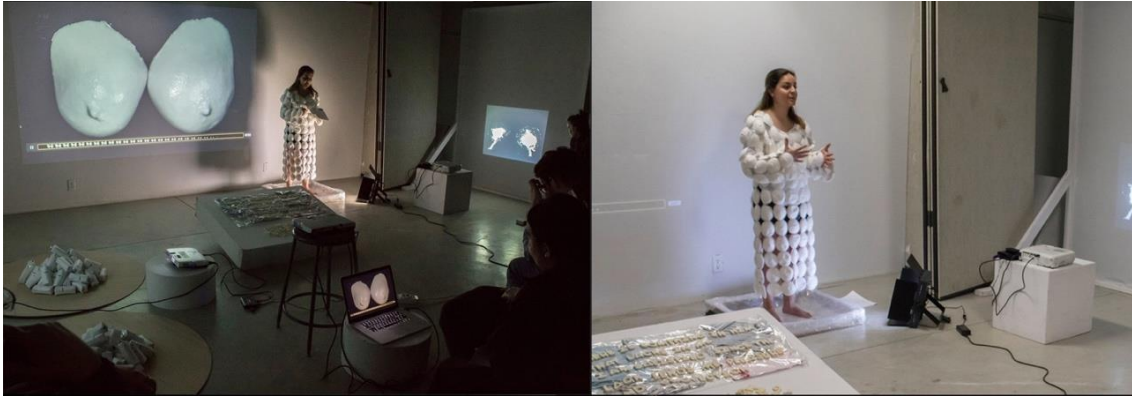
Medium: Breastmilk, Milk, Vinegar, Salt, Plastic, Mode Podge, receiving blankets

Date: 2019

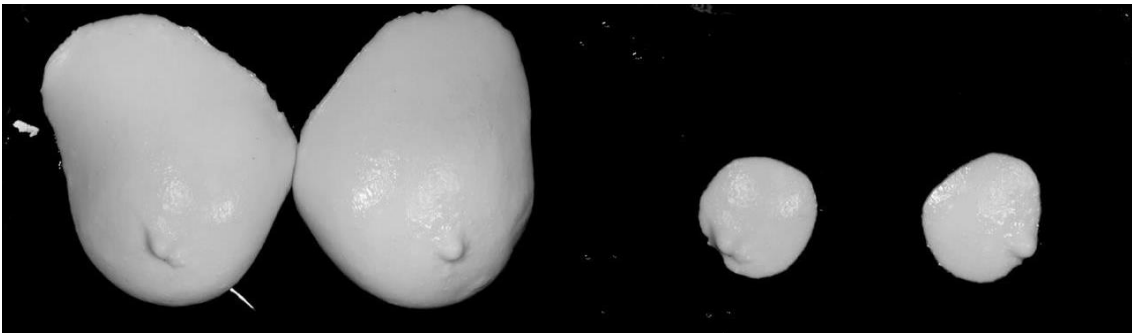


In this work, I explore the association of breastmilk and urine as both are expected to be produced in the privacy of bathroom. Here I explore some of the essentialist views that relate to gender binaries. I created alphabets using my breast milk and placed messages on used baby nappies. The message I produced with these alphabets is “There is something in him that lacks in me. I am satisfied since the lack lends me pleasure and protection.”

Title: *Leaking Body*
Medium: Live Performance, Video
Date: 2019



Details of the performance



Details of the video

In this live performance, I read a motherhood manifesto I wrote, which was inspired by Rosi Bradotti's book *Nomadic Subjects*. I made a dress from breastfeeding pads, and attached a bag of milk which flowed from my underwear, down my leg and to the ground while I was reading the manifesto. A video was projected behind me and showed two breasts slowly being covered with black oil. This piece explored my experiences of motherhood and a connection to my Iranian nationality.

Manifesto Text: *Leaking Body*

As an intellectual woman who has achieved and earned the right to speak publicly in an academic context, I have also inherited a tradition of female silence. My body has changed shape in pregnancy and childbearing. It is therefore capable of defeating the notion of fixed bodily form of visible, recognizable, clear and distinct

shapes as that which marks the contour of the body. The fact that my female body can change shape so drastically is troublesome in the eyes of the egocentric economy within which to see is the primary act of knowledge and the gaze, the basis of all epistemic awareness. The fact that the male sexual organ does, of course, change shape in the limited time span of the erection and this operation- however precious- is not exactly unrelated to the changes of shape undergone by my body during pregnancy.

Gaining the maternal body, it becomes the site of life and consequently also of the insertion into morality and death. My body as the threshold of existence is both sacred and solid, holy and hellish, attractive and repulsive, all-powerful and therefore impossible to live with. The abject arises in my body, in between area of mixed, the ambiguous. I have no power of self-definition. I am an anomaly that confirms the positivity of norm. my body is not only as lack of absence but with more complexity, as a leaking. Uncontrollable, seeping liquid, as a formless flow, as viscosity, entrapping secreting, as lacking not so much or simply phallus but self-containment, not a cracked or porous vessel, like a leaking ship, but a formlessness that engulfs all form a disorder that threatens all order. My breasted body is blurry, mush, indefinite, multiple and without clear identity.

The notion of abjection links the lived experience of my body. My body is dirt as which it is not in its proper place, and it upsets the order. It signals a site of possible danger to social and individual systems, a site of vulnerability insofar as the status of dirt as marginal and un-

incorporable always locates site of potential thread to the system and to the order it both makes possible and problematize.

My body is in postpartum state. It seems postpartum state is never over. It is as pace of continuum for isolation and vulnerability.

Title: Iran- Dokht (This is my grandmother's name and it means the girl of Iran)
Medium: Installation (One Channel Video, Projected photograph, Sewing Machine, Fabric)
Date: 2019



Image of the video



Details of installation (The photograph of my grandmother is projected on the fabric.)

In this work, I explored the way war has effected different generations. My grandmother and my mother experienced the trauma of war between Iran and Iraq. My grandmother had a sewing class and was an independent woman in the time that many women were forced to stay home and be a house wife. During the war, she had to move to another city and leave her home and job to stay safe. However, she started her business again,

she couldn't get back to her previous social and financial status. My grandmother always had a lot of ribbons in her sewing tools. I chose ribbon as a symbol of the connection between four generations. The sewing machine is burned with a torch to resemble the destruction of war that affected my grandmother's house and tools during war. This piece depicts the vulnerability of bodies in relation to the trauma that results from political violence and war, from my grandmother to my mother, to me, and to my daughter.

Link to access video: <https://vimeo.com/486109700>

Password: Forevergreen61

Title: Go with the Flow

Medium: One Channel Video (35 minutes performance for the camera, Water, Red Color)

Duration: 11:51 (11 min and 51 sec)

Date: 2019



The perplexity of my immigrant identity has me wandering between the tragic fate of separation from nationalism, which is belonging to a place, a people, heritage, and my voluntary life in an alien country. Through embracing a self-alienated identity and performing violated corporeality, I am raising two questions. What is the price of being loud against violence? What is the price of becoming silent about things that matter? In this performance, I did two actions. First, I kept my mouth open with the bag of red liquid dangling from my teeth for five minutes. I then began to drink water from another bag while the red liquid dripped from the bottom of its bag. I continued the performance until the bag containing the red liquid was completely empty and I could move my jaw easily. The amount of water I drank made me feel exhausted and nauseous at the end of performance.

Link to access video: <https://vimeo.com/419441951>

Password: Forevergreen61

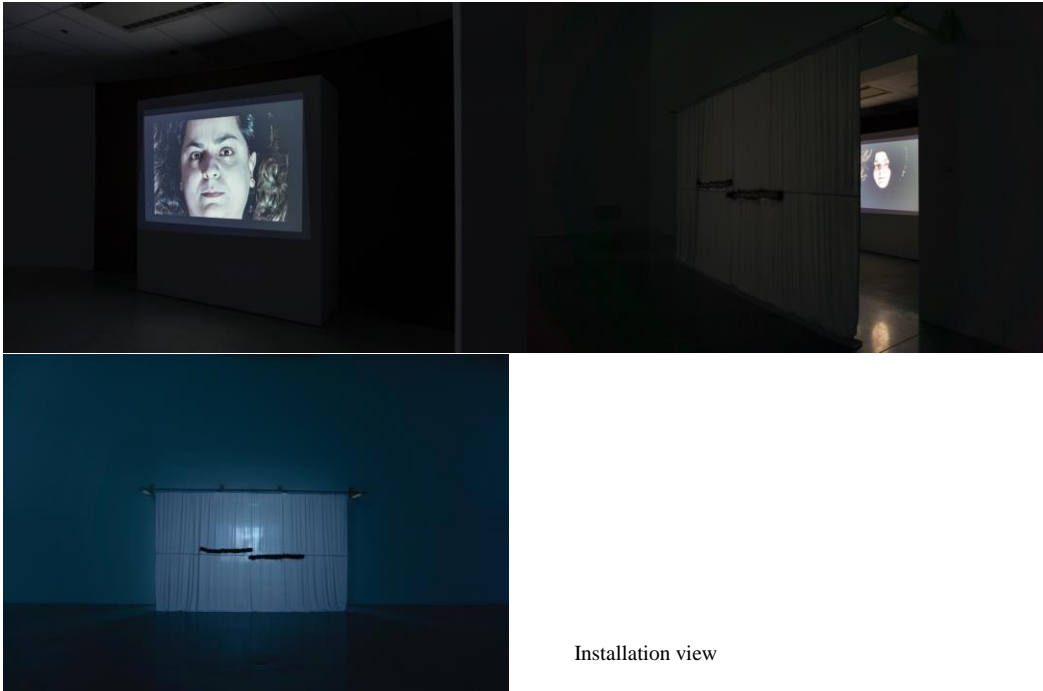
Title: Zolf
Medium: One Channel Video, Embroidery on Hair
Duration: 18:04 min
Date: 2020



Details of the video



Details of the embroidery



Installation view

I am using a metaphoric and reverse language (mimesis) to engage my viewer with an essential dialogue of empowering the marginal, in order to respond to the current overabundance of masculine power and growing phallicism in our world. To uncover/reveal the masculine phallogocentric practice for the elimination of the female subject, I created fragmented lines between oil, hair, and body. Resisting conventional representation, the signifiers in the work avoid fixed meaning and create a multiplicity of interpretation.

Link to access video: <https://vimeo.com/391506089>

Password: Forevergreen61

Title: Counterpoint ⁸⁴
Medium: Three Channel Video
Duration: 10 min
Date: 2020



My body has experienced spatial dislocation and the feeling of deprivation not being in the same communal habitation as others. But the pressure and the agony of going back to my homeland and living with the culture that endorses oppressive religion, norms, and

⁸⁴ I derived the title from Edward Said's theory of counterpoint which is the preservation of difference and the development of multiple narrative by complicating the binary positions of victim and aggressor to provide the possibilities for empathy and solidarity. Lachman, Kathryn. "The Allure of Counterpoint: History and Reconciliation in the Writing of Edward Said and Assia Djebar." *Research in African Literatures* 41, no. 4 (2010): 162-186. <https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/399563>.

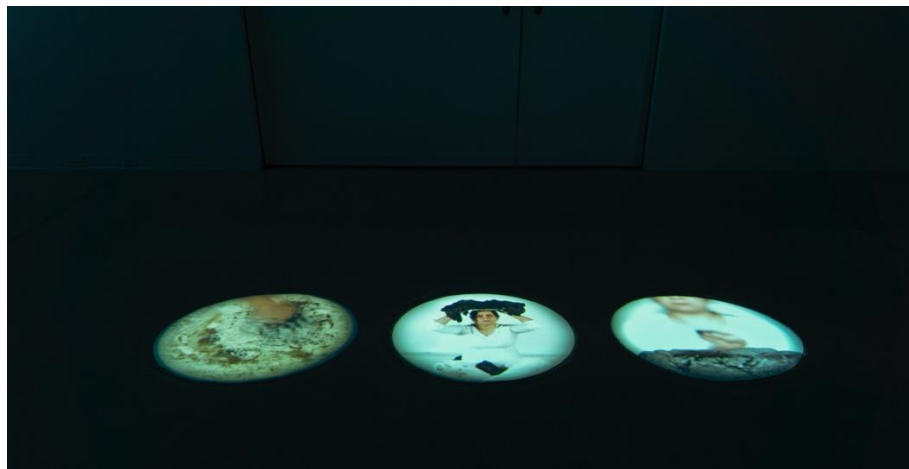
tradition is too great. Canada tempts me with its promise, though the USA is where I am living now. Enduring in the un-comprehending society of the West, I have the fear of being alienated with myself and others.

This work is not a question of which countries' political systems should be privileged, but how to transcend the cycle of violence by questioning the authorities.

Link to access video: <https://vimeo.com/445246209>

Password: Forevergreen61

Title: Naan
Medium: Video Installation
Duration: 15 min
Date: 2020



Installation view

From the beginning of the revolution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the government promised people welfare and desirable living conditions. Instead, today, buying essential

goods for everyday life has become very challenging for many people. Some goods such as flour, bread, and eggs have become very expensive and that puts pressure on many people. Naan is a three-channel video in response to the economic recession due to political sanctions that exist in Iran. Iran is a country which is wealthy from oil and other natural resources, but the current government exploits all these resources for their ideological benefits. The government allocates many thousands of dollars for their Overseas propaganda while nowadays the middle class of families in Iran, include my own family and many of my friends, are struggling to provide their daily needs.

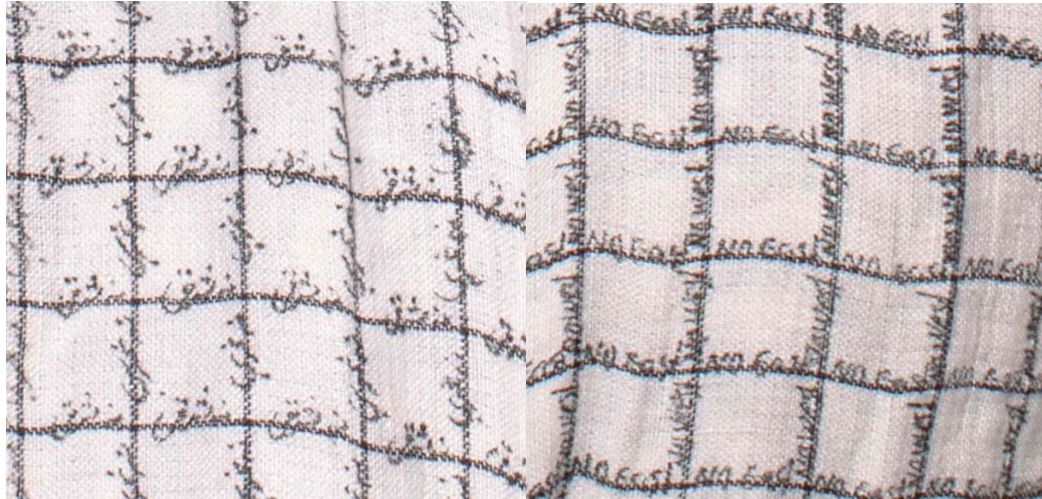
Link to access video: <https://vimeo.com/411630263>

Password: Forevergreen61

Title: No-East, No-West
Medium: Photography (Hair, Handwritten Fabric)
Date: 2020



Detail of the photograph (hair balls)



Details of the photograph

No East, No West is a slogan, that was formulated at the beginning of the governing of the Islamic Republic of Iran (1979). The slogan addresses the state's rejection of the influence of both Soviet and American Powers in Iran, and its intention to establish an independent government. The current Iranian political regime has assigned sets of rules such as compulsory hijab for women corresponding to their ideology of being powerful and independent. This leads to marginalizing and violating many women's rights in Iran. This piece reflects the idea of being affected by the restriction rules from Iran's regime that violated my body and rights while considering the way these restrictions have affected my identity and sexuality.

Curriculum Vitae

Name: Sepideh Tajalizadeh Dashti

Post-secondary Education and Degrees:

2018-2020 Master of Fine Arts, Western University, London, Ontario, Canada

2014-2018 Bachelor of Fine Arts Studio Practice-Intensive Studio Specialization, Honours Digital Arts Communication Minor, University of Waterloo, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada

2001-2004 Bachelor of Applied Science, Agriculture Machinery Engineering, Shahid Bahonar University, Kerman, Iran

Honours and Awards:

2019 Joseph-Armand Bombardier Canada Graduate Scholarships (CGSM) in social sciences and humanities research (SSHRC), Western University, London, Ontario, Canada, \$17,500.00

2019 Ontario Graduate Scholarship (OGS), Western University, London, Ontario, Canada, \$15,000.00

2019 Western Graduate Research Scholarship, Western University, London, Ontario, Canada, \$3,003.5

2018 Western Graduate Research Scholarship, Western University, London, Ontario, Canada, \$1,547.26

2018 Arts & Humanity Dean's Entrance Scholarship, Western University, London, Ontario, Canada, \$2,000.00

2018 Arts & Humanity Chair's Entrance Scholarship, Western University, London, Ontario, Canada, \$1,500.00

2018 Curator's Choice Award, Fine Arts Department, University of Waterloo, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, \$200.00

2018 Liz Edwards Award, Fine Arts Department, University of Waterloo, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, \$200.00

2018 Digital Imaging Award, Fine Arts Department, University of Waterloo, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada

Related Work Experience:

2020 Fall, Graduate Teacher Assistance, SA 2610 (Introduction to Drawing), Department of Visual Arts, Western University, London, Ontario, Canada.

2019 Summer, Internship, McIntosh Gallery Curatorial Study Center, Western University London, Ontario, Canada.

2019 Winter, Graduate Teacher Assistance, VISARTS 1020 (Foundation of Visual Arts), Department of Visual Arts, Western University, London, Ontario, Canada.

2019 Fall, Graduate Teacher Assistance, VISARTS 1020 (Foundation of Visual Arts), Department of Visual Arts, Western University, London, Ontario, Canada.

Certificates:

2020 Teaching Assistant Training Program, Western University, London, Ontario, Canada.

Publications:

2020 (Accepted in upcoming issue) "Moving Across and Through Cultures", Contemporaneity Historical Presence in Visual Culture, University of Pittsburgh, U.S.A

Solo Exhibition:

2020 "*To Be Me*" Artlab Gallery, Western University, London, Ontario, Canada

Group Exhibitions:

2020 The Once Unknown: Online Juried Photography Exhibition. Button Factory Arts, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada.

2020 Photophobia Contemporary Moving Image Festival, Hamilton Artists Inc. AGH Film Festival, Hamilton, On, Canada.

2019 10th show of Modern Panic X, Guerrilla Zoo Exhibition, London, UK

2019 Art as Advocacy: Promoting Equity and Social Justice for Women, Springfield, Illinois, USA

2019 42nd Annual AHVA Graduate Symposium- Violentia: Violence and Representation Exhibition at The University of British Columbia, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

2019 Selsun Blue: MFA Exhibition, Artlab Gallery, Western University, London, Ontario, Canada

2019 2019's Video Fever Program, Trinity Square Video, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Artist Talk:

2020 Photophobia Contemporary Moving Image Festival, Hamilton
Artists Inc. AGH Film Festival, Hamilton, On, Canada.

Artist Residency:

2021 Crosstown Art Residency, Memphis, TN, USA
2020 Virtual Residency on Care /Creativity, OCAD University,
Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

Conferences:

2021 Virtual NeMLA Convention, Speculative Figures and Futures:
Our Uncanny Postapocalypse (Part 2: Critical Self/-ves), University
at Buffalo, Buffalo, USA
2020 UAAC-AAUC, The Universities Art Association of Canada,
"Hidden Within Moments and Places, Memories as Trauma,
Silence, and Trust: #MeToo". Ontario, Canada.