

GREEN'S ART: NEW MEDIA AESTHETICS IN PRE- AND POST-ELECTION EVENTS IN IRAN

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Abstract

Digital media has played a very significant role in anti-government protests in the Middle East (in Iran, Egypt, Syria and so on) over the last four years. It has changed the rules of political struggle and established new expectations and rules of confrontation for both protesters and authoritarian governments in the region. The Greens' Art research project will be a curated exhibition of digital art and other works developed during the pre- and post-election period (2009-11), situated alongside participants' accounts of the role of these works in the grassroots Iranian Green Movement.

Keywords: Iran, Green Movement, Digital Media, Art, Protest, Iran, Artivism, Greens' Art

Introduction

To explain briefly, the Iranian Green Movement refers to the grassroots protests that arose after the presidential election in 2009. These protests engaged different classes and layers of society, spread quickly, and transformed into one of the most significant social and political movements of Iran's contemporary history. According to the evidence of street protest and turbulence, the Green Movement was formed, peaked and declined over a two year period from 2009 to 2011. The period brought considerable turmoil, with militarized reactions of the government to protests, along with the death and imprisonment of a large number of citizens. The Green Movement has been defined and interpreted in a variety of ways. Some commentators say that it has 'died' whilst others insist that despite its temporary absence it is alive, and simply looking for another chance to appear on the streets. Some Iranian citizens see the Green Movement as a thing of the past, while others still carry green elements like wristbands.

Looking back to the pre-election period, one sees that the campaign of the reformist candidate Mirhossein Mousavi, called 'the Green Wave', applied various artistic strategies in promoting him; after the election was rigged, his campaign became the core of the Green Movement, and engaged in further non-violent protests against the results of the election, thereby gaining Mousavi widespread support from a

huge number of famous artists inside and outside the country. In addition, after the election a number of lesser-known and amateur artists joined the protests. Along with street demonstrations and protests, the volume of artworks¹ created by ordinary citizens and unknown artists rose markedly. Created by all available means (such as Photoshop, Windows Movie Maker and Microsoft Paint), these artworks were distributed to audiences via social networks, email and other available digital means.

The *Greens' Art* project is a combination of an online exhibition of artworks about both the Green Movement and anti-movement responses, and a repository of related materials, including interviews, comments, and theoretical debates. This paper addresses the background theories and ideas on the placement of art and digital media in political affairs, and discusses the role and significance of *Greens' Art*, both as a current research project, and as a curated exhibition which aims to undertake a deeper and more comprehensive examination of the relationships between protest, art and digital media during the crisis period in Iran.

New Media and the Green Movement

The world was totally surprised when Iranians broadcast their news, photos and videos in the post-election period on a huge scale. Who could believe that, despite the government's control of cyber activities and its brutal reactions to cyber-protests, people would make such an effort to report and show true stories online? Undoubtedly, digital media has been one of the most vital means for the Green Movement to achieve a voice.

The level of Iranians' contribution to the digital arena during the period 2009-11 seems all the more remarkable when we compare it to the realities of the regulated mass media and the government's ideological control of

¹ Categories: Documentary Videos, Clips, Animations, Short Movies, Long Movies, Paintings, Graffiti, Posters and Illustrations, Website Banners, Cartoons, General Drawings, Lyrics, Poems, Novels, Short Stories, Political Humors, Slogans, Music, Photos, Sculptures, Performing Arts, Costumes and Accessories.

online information channels (through using complicated filtering systems to prevent the Internet from being used effectively by the public). During the post-election period, when protesters were totally isolated by national radio and television, digital media played a particularly significant role in circulating information, feelings and political expression within Iranian society.

Commentators on the role of digital media in Iran in the wake of the 2009 election could be categorized into three major groups. The first group enthusiastically believes that social media tools, such as Twitter and Facebook, played a vital role in the emergence and resistance of the Green Movement [8-11]. The second group is convinced that the effectiveness of various social media tools is just an illusion, and recognize people themselves as being the Green Movement's main engine. They believe that the government's controls on cyberspace and military reaction against any kind of protest have reduced these tools to information services [12-16]. The third reaction to the role of digital media in political struggle is more cautious and inconclusive, remaining ambivalent regarding the value of social networking services such as Twitter [17-18].

Despite positive and negative opinions on the role of technologies and digital media in the pre- and post-election period, there is no doubt that new media tools were very effective in the creation and distribution of artworks. Circulation of artistic materials through social media and satellite channels accelerated the emergence of sympathy and solidarity among protesters at the beginning of the crisis. One of the remarkable aspects of this phenomenon is the evidence of activists' and ordinary people's capabilities in using digital technologies, and the fact that they became audiences and producers of new media products. This phenomenon is in line with Benjamin's essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'. As well as blurring the borders between author and public, Benjamin argues that mechanical reproduction changes the reaction of the masses toward art, and renders it accessible for everyone: "At any moment the reader is ready to turn into a writer" [4]. A version of this has

happened in Iran, with many everyday citizens and users becoming citizen journalists and cultural producers. During the post-election period, protesters used digital media not only as an information channel and a way of organizing themselves, but as an artistic outlet, a means of expression for people lacking freedom of political expression.

Art and the Green Movement

As a socio-political movement, the Green Movement's relationship with art can be considered within the broader field of 'politics and art'. This field includes a range of debates and practices, from propaganda and political art, through community and protest art, to 'artivism' - a combination of art and activism. Historically, there has been much debate about the connection between politics and art. Many theorists, with a variety of points of view, have investigated why art deals with political affairs, and the significance of such political art. For example Marcuse, from his leftist perspective, focusing on "the Beautiful" (associated with art since the mid-nineteenth century), believes that sensuousness is what gives art a political power:

"The sensuous substance of the Beautiful is preserved in aesthetic sublimation. The autonomy of art and its political potential manifest themselves in the cognitive and emancipatory power of this sensuousness. It is therefore not surprising that, historically, the attack on autonomous art is linked with the distinction of sensuousness in the name of morality and religion" [1].

Carol Becker summarizes Marcuse's ideas about the role of art in political affairs as follows: "art with political aspirations should utilize the subversive power of 'beauty' when appropriate" [2].

Historically, ideas similar to those of Marcuse have been adopted by both governments and social movements in different ways. The most wellknown governmental examples are the Soviet Union's socialist realist school, and the Nazi's propaganda system. However, Iran also has a long history of moments in which art has been used as a means of engaging with politics. Four such events in recent history are: the Constitutional Revolution (1907), the 28 Mordad Coup

(1963), the Islamic Revolution (1979) and the Green Movement (2009). The increasing centrality of religion since 1979 provides a particularly clear example. Immediately after the Islamic Revolution, the government established the Islamic Advertisement Organization, investing considerable effort (and the capacities of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance) in the control of social, political and cultural matters through a variety of means, including artistic. This idea can also be seen in what British-based Iranian media lecturer Khiabany calls 'Islamic Exceptionalism', which along with 'De-Westernizing' make up "the pillars of Islamism" [3].

On the non-government side, there is a considerable tradition of artivism, both on a worldwide scale and in Iran's history. One approach is to ask how art is functioning in the hands of protesters. Walter Benjamin suggests that in a social context, art can play a role in undermining social habits, and has the power to shift a politically passive population into the position of critics:

"... Distraction as provided by art presents a covert control of the extent to which new tasks have become soluble by apperception. Since, moreover, individuals are tempted to avoid such tasks, art will tackle the most difficult and most important ones where it is able to mobilize the masses" [4].

During Iran's -election crisis, aesthetics were used in political activism with the clear intention of mobilizing the Iranian people, as in Benjamin's theory. The art of this period was, as Cohen-Cruz puts it, an art which "directly responds to a controversial public action or is intended to challenge public perception about the status quo" [5]. Criticizing the government, reproducing/adopting crucial moments, and showing the plight of victims were the main themes of this period's artworks, with a clear mission of increasing audiences' sensitivity to the ongoing events.

While some figures insist that art has an important role to play in protests, Josh On does not see artivism as a determinant factor during political struggles. He argues that while art can enthuse and challenge the mind, in the end people have to act through their

protests to overthrow the system. His article 'From They Rule to We Rule' attempts to evaluate the role of artivism in current political affairs; this essay is based on his previous creative project 'They Rule', which aimed to provide a glimpse of some of the relationships amongst the US ruling class. He also asserts that artists have the same political responsibilities as other members of society, and does not have extra expectations of them [6].

Similarly, the widely-read yet anonymous Mikhak website commentator views the role of art in the Green Movement's progression more pessimistically. In an article entitled 'Aestheticization of Politics', the author argues that insisting on artivism reduces the whole movement to a fruitless political act, and has transformed serious political matters of death and life into enjoyable entertainment.

In line with this idea, Hamid Dabashi, an 'Iranian Studies' professor in the US, takes a relatively controversial position. In his interview with Radio Farda entitled 'The Transfiguration of Artistic Reconstructuralism', Dabashi discusses the relationship between art and the Green Movement. Whilst he is against the regime, he says that Iranian society should not impose any political expectation on artists, and that a political agenda is not a necessary element for an artwork, even during protest [7]; a position which fundamentally opposed a majority of Iranian protesters' expectations at the time.

Thousands of artworks created and distributed by both the government and the protesters in the pre- and post-election period provide us with both a captured history, and also a current framework for further discussion and examination of the political potential of art.

Greens' Art Website

Greens' Art provides a space in which to collect, categorize, contextualize and exhibit the distributed artworks made by professional and amateur artists, including some pro-government, who created works related to the pre- and post-election period in Iran. The project's aim is to preserve history through an artistic approach, whilst also both bringing the material to life for

people, and avoiding it being lost over a period of time.

The best means to illustrate the cooperation of protest, art and digital media in the Green Movement, and give a comprehensive overview of the activism during the period, seemed to be a curated database (exhibition) of all sorts of related works. The prototype, including 1400 works in 24 categories created, by both Iranians and non-Iranians, was launched on May 15, 2013 (URL: <http://www.greens-art.net/?lang=en>) [19].

The project is not entering the area of criticism at this prototype stage; its main purpose is to restore and categorize the artworks and their related information. The online exhibition will present all the information in both Persian (Farsi) and English, in order to engage international audiences. Currently all the basic data such as titles, events and artists' names are translated; in the next step, artworks' stories and additional information will be added to the dataset, to make the materials more accessible to English-speaking audiences. Besides entries for the works of professional and amateur artists and citizen journalists, related resources will be added over time, including interviews with specialists, artists and ordinary people, and multimedia layers will be added to facilitate access to the collected documents. Eventually, the *Greens' Art* project will become a multimedia history project, providing audiences with an opportunity to (re)approach events through the collected art and other materials.

Visitors to the current version of the website can choose between different options (such as category, artist, origin and event), search the artworks by keywords, or use the calendar section to reach a desired item. For instance, by viewing a documentary photo taken with a very ordinary digital camera on a cell phone, the visitor can view what protesters experienced on a Tehran street on December 27, 2009, (Fig. 1), or see how people kept their hope in the most desperate situations (Fig. 2). These are just small examples of the power of the visual history compared to the written word; it "can inspire and provoke questions" as On says [6].

Fig.1. Military forces using gas tear against people in Bloody Ashoora (December 27, 2009)



Fig.2. An injured protester shows the victory sign after being beaten by military forces

One of the important factors that should be considered in criticism and comment regarding such works is the situations that they were created in. Presumably, we cannot compare these works with artworks or documentaries which are created in politically neutral situations or less controversial conditions, and evaluate the technical and aesthetical aspects from the same perspective. When the government started to react brutally against the protesters, many professional artists rationally ceased their support of the Green Movement. This could be one of the reasons why some amateur artists instinctively entered the scene, and worked hard to respond to the demands of that time. It could even be said that the amateurs' presence was bolder than the professionals', if the quantity of current artworks is considered a significant indicator.

To evaluate the artworks in this context, another interesting factor is their durability. Obviously, durability is guaranteed in most professional artists' works, due to their technique and experience. However, although this characteristic may be an important consideration in art, it should be asked, what is more important during a crisis: durability or a timely response? This issue - what Becker call the 'subversive power' [2] - is especially important when a piece of work is used to organize or advertise a specific act or event. A simple illustration created in Photoshop,

by an amateur with minimal graphic design skills, to invite protesters to a rally (Fig. 3) may provoke a greater response than a professional poster with a general message against the situation (Fig. 4).



Fig.3. A poster designed by an amateur artist calling for a rally on international Worker's Day



Fig.4. An illustration designed by a professional international artist

The first illustration might be less memorable for users of social media, for many reasons, including lack of a mature creativity, and the specific event that it is related to has probably been forgotten (Fig. 4). At the same time, however, we cannot ignore it as an artwork; many factors, such as color, composition and typography, are clearly recognizable in it. In addition, the related event somehow validates this piece of work; its responsiveness to an ongoing situation in society is, according to Cohen-Cruz, activism's duty [5].

Thanks to digital technologies, the new 'mechanical reproduction' tools,

there are thousands of such works available on the internet; from a Benjaminian perspective, most of them are made by 'readers' who turned into 'writers' when it was necessary [4]. Due to their quantity and effectiveness during the pre- and post-election crisis, we cannot now ignore or exclude them, just because they are not technically durable.

During the first few weeks following its launch, the *Greens' Art* website received not only a great deal of supportive feedback from visitors, but also more than 900 more artworks, to be archived in the project. These 'donations' were a combination of personal collections and amateur and professional artworks. The most inspiring and unique collection among them was sent by a former political prisoner, and included a collection of artworks created by political prisoners in Evin Prison during the crisis period. These works will be categorized and archived, to allow the website's future audiences a deeper perception of the scale of the engagement of art and politics in this case study.

Conclusion

Investigating the relationship between art, digital media and the Green Movement is not only important for Iran and the Green Movement's supporters; this is also a rich chapter in worldwide digital media and art history. Technical issues aside, these works clearly have an ability to aesthetically convey to their audiences the facts and stories of those days, facilitating a clearer and more comprehensive image of the happenings; an image which is less affected by political affiliations and biased interpretations. Contextualization and theorization of the artworks by *Greens' Art* project will provide a unique platform for future discussion and relevant research, and allow a deeper insight into the nature of activism in the age of digital media.

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20. I respectfully acknowledge the creators of the images used in this paper. These photographs were taken by artists and protestors who published them on the internet anonymously.