tina gharavi

veiled societies / hidden sexualities: investigating and documenting gender & public space in tehran, iran and buffalo, ny.

I. EPILOGUE

Thanks

My thanks to Leonida Kovač for inviting me to speak here in Croatia at the AICA conference.

I met Leonida last year in Newcastle-upon-Tyne in the UK where I currently live, and where the post-AICA conference was touring.

I had a chance to speak about my work and interests. A continuing dialogue about my work and our mutual interests has been born into an invitation to speak here with you today.

Provoking

It is a privilege to be invited to the conference as keynote speaker. As keynote speaker, I see my role as provocateur-in light of my conference topic, I doubt this will be very hard. I am neither a theoritian nor critic-this I gladly leave to you who seek the challenge- but I am here to provoke discussions about practice and process; particularly how queer theory and contemporary practices have attempted to challenge and experiment with established methods of representation in visual arts, film and documentary. The presentation of my research and past work offers an example or model of a working process.

Excuse

Due to the recent events in NY, my documentary, *Mother/Country* which I was hoping to present at this conference, has not been completed and I am unable to produce images here as production and post-production has been suspended (due to limited travel and instability in both the US and Iran).

I am, however, discussing process as much as content here so I will rely on my last production, *Closer*, of which I will show an excerpt, to introduce my methodology which was the starting point for the work which I am discussing here.

I have chosen not to show the incomplete work here to avoid misunderstanding about how I am treating my subjects and their images. Also, as part of my process, I rely on consultation and collaboration with the subjects who are included in my work and for their consent to use their image. Because of the delays, I have been unable to do this.

II. INTRO

My presentation today will touch on the complex topic of my practical doctoral project which I recently began at Napier University in Edinburgh, Scotland.

The idea for this proposal sprung from a documentary that I had recently undertaken in Iran, a project called *Mother/Country* that films my return journey to Iran over 20 years after the Islamic Revolution and 20 years since leaving my mothers house. At nearly the same time, I was approached by a group of "Drag Kings" or trans-genders from Buffalo, NY who invited me on an Artist-in-Residency programme as part of their efforts to document their community and histories.

These two projects and groups of women and their personal situations resonated starkly for me. From these two projects, *Mother/Country* and *The Buffalo Project,* was born the synthesis that has become my research topic.

I will broadly be speaking about the background to this research titled: **Veiled Societies / Hidden Sexualities: Investigating and Documenting Gender & Public Space in Tehran, Iran and Buffalo, NY** and also discussing my working methodology and process in relation to this project.

Concept

Gender and its construction is fundamentally a cultural phenomenon, and a theory of women and visibility should be sufficiently unifying to be able to explain manifestations in dissimilar cultures successfully and equally. The research and work that I have proposed, **which I am briefly introducing to you here,** is a cross-cultural comparative study of two very different groups of women, in two opposing societies, who operate under similar conditions. I propose to investigate these two complex social models, seemingly unrelated, which operate in Iran and the United States to better understand the construction of gender and sexuality, visibility and the role of women within contemporary societies.

The research will investigate the experience of women in post-revolution Iran and their relationship to public space and visibility. This experience will be complemented by a comparison with the history and testimonies of lesbian and trans-gendered women in the US (specifically focused around the drag king subculture which has

a long history and continues to flourish in Buffalo, NY).

The eventual work that results will be both an academic investigation and a practical 'creative' exploration of certain issues and difficulties these parallel cultures/societies of women face.

An aside: Afghanie women / London Fashion Week

The position of women's visibility in public/private spheres in the East and the West is a topic that is very relevant to current debates about Islam. Today we can see completely covered burkah-clad women from Afghanistan conveying the oppression and fanaticism of Islam. In the week of the bombing of the World Trade Center, these starving concealed women contrast so sharply for me with following images from the following news report on London Fashion Week where similarly starving women are paraded-however, this time seeing how much can be revealed and how much flesh can be exposed. I ask myself about those images and the position of the women in the frame.

For me Less is Not More it is just Less.

III. RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Drag + FTM's- ***please note the distinction***

Drag Kings are women who not only dress like men, but actively attempt to pass for men. For some women, it's a way to challenge a male-dominant society. Others feel it's a form of self-expression. For many gender-dysphoric women- those who are unhappy with their given sexual or gender identity - what has now been termed 'Kinging' is a way of life. In her book *Female Masculinity* (1998) Judith Halberstam argues that we need to distinguish between "male impersonation," which has been a theatrical genre for at least two hundred years, and the "drag king," a relatively new cultural phenomenon. The male impersonator, according to Halberstam, "attempts to produce a plausible performance of maleness as the whole of her act," whereas the drag king "performs masculinity (often paradoxically) and makes the exposure of the theatricality of masculinity into the mainstay of her performance."

In the book, *Transmen and FTS's*, Jason Cromwell (an anthropologist and insider) writes one of the most in-depth explorations of the experiences of female-bodied trans-sexuals. Cromwell uses extensive participant observation and open-ended interviews, allowing the female-to-male trans-sexuals to speak for themselves

and to reveal aspects of female gender diversity that do not fit into the ready-made categories of male and female.

From the book's abstract, "He considers cross-cultural data on female gender diversity, historical evidence of female-bodied people who have lived as men, and contemporary transmen and FTMs. He also addresses how FTMs and transmen are working to challenge the mental illness model of transness as well as other misconceptions."

By clarifying how FTM's define and validate their lives, as opposed to how society attempts to pigeonhole them, he shows how female-to-male transpeople have been made virtually invisible by male-dominated queer discourses.

Drag Kings and FTM's, though in my project I will be speaking with both, it is important to note the distinction between these two groups.

Iran

To the world's astonishment in 1979, Iran experienced one of the world's largest revolutions in modern history. The self-proclaimed Islamic regime was led by the Ayatollah Khomeini, a conservative religious leader and long-standing opponent of the Shah and his program of westernization. The extensive use of religious symbols and slogans marked the revolution as Islamic fundamentalist, an assumption reinforced by the regime's obsession with controlling female sexuality and shaping gender relations.

Controlling women and their bodies and reclaiming the family as a site of male power and dominance is a common thread found in all brands of fundamentalism. Feminists tend to be keen observers of the history of gender debates in the Islamic Republic of Iran, one of the first countries where fundamentalist movements have successfully monopolized state power in recent times. But Iranian women are anything but passive. Because of this state of affairs, a new form of pragmatic feminism has appeared in Iran's political arena, which challenges this fundamentalism from within.

Ziba Mir-Hosseini argues that an unpredicted outcome of the Islamic revolution has been to raise the nation's gender consciousness. "[W]hatever concerns women - from their most private to their most public activities, from what they should wear and what they should study to whether and where they should work - are issues that have been openly debated and fought over by different factions, always in highly charged and emotional language."

There has been contentious debate amongst feminists and "Islamic feminists". Much of the academic work has attempted to discredit the fundamentalist structure imposed on women in these religious societies. However, recently, some feminists have begun to reevaluate their reading of women's roles in Islamic societies. I feel this is particularly fascinating in Iran where the application of Islam law (a very late import in a very ancient culture) can be evaluated in the adaptations that have happened since its inception in 1979. We can see an evolution of the form of the religion and women's roles within this society and their struggle for visibility.

IV. FORM, PROCESS + WORKING METHODOLOGY

My work aims to bring the discourses on these two groups of women together. In my approach to this topic, I will focus on developing interview and filming techniques that can challenge the perceptual notions of the documentary's construction. I want to actively challenge the conventions of ethnographic documentary while offering new possibilities. How do we tell the stories of others? And of ourselves? Therefore, the research and its component documentary, investigates not only the proposed topic but 'form' and documentary practice(s) it self.

Practice and Theory

Upon entering my work into film and media festivals around the world, the entry forms ask for categorization of the production' the choices *fiction*, *documentary* or *experimental* seem limiting and ironic. I am thrust into analyzing what I have done. So, I have begun labeling my work 'experimental documentary' in so much as the art I produce asks questions and has a process which leads to results which are not predetermined before production begins.

The development of new research methods and the involvement of the women in unfolding their stories with the researcher/filmmaker are implicit in the process of the project. The process will

incorporate the women's own influences into its research methodology.

Like Croatian artist, Sanja Iveković, who works with abused women from Croatia and around the world aiding them in documenting their stories, the women in the two communities I will be working with are active collaborators in capturing and recording their images and stories and therefore are creating a self-portrait.

Part of the construction of the creative work could be a culmination of the research into a fictionalized episode within the documentary. Fiction film techniques could be employed by the women who I work with or actors (for example, role-playing scenes and re-stagings). An example of this we will see in the work I am about to show you.

I am not yet certain how much I will divulge to each of the women's groups about their counterparts. Great sensitivity must be shown to this.

Closer, an example

Closer is a half hour experimental documentary that looks at the experience of a young lesbian growing up in the North of England. For *Closer*, I asked isn't the artist/filmmaker always implicit in the frame? Like the Uncertainty Principle in science, the artist can never measure a situation without somehow changing the very course of what they are documenting.

This works overlaps theory and practice and attempts to examine the paradigm of audience, subject, and artist. In the following excerpt, the film is constantly deconstructing and revealing the apparatus of filmmaking and bringing the audience back to the knowledge that they are participating in spectorship and are an active part of the making of this piece (and by extension meaning).

What is the frame? What is the role of editing and how does the image change with each context? Is what we are seeing real or fiction and how has this been manipulated?

I was also aware of the poverty of images for young lesbians - I was operating with the knowledge that the method of media and style was paramount to the content. This piece has a very youthful feel.

Similarly, new images of the trans-gendered community in Buffalo and of contemporary Iran and women are somehow also "stolen fruit".

V. RESEARCH/BACKGROUND

I have found some interesting examples of the encounter of women from the West and the East that I would like to share with you here. For this we need to travel back in history a few hundred years.

19th Century Eastern women meet their contemporaries from the West

Shireen Mahdavi, in her book *For God, Mammon and Country*, tells the story of women, Persian and European, in the 19th century, becoming aware of each other's existence. As many wives of merchants and various travelers passed through and stayed temporarily in Iran, Persian women became acquainted with Western women and their ways.

In the second half of the 19th century there were 500 foreign families living in Tehran. Persian women, according to the rules of Sh'ia Islam were veiled and secluded in their homes. Persian women could see Western women either shopping in bazaar's or visiting other various public spaces or riding sidesaddle through the countryside wearing a habit and a hat. *What did these women think of each other?*

Lady Sheil, who came to Persia in the middle of the 19th century in the company of her husband, a diplomat, has left one of the earliest accounts of the impressions of a European woman. According to her: "A Persian women of the upper class leads a life of idleness and luxury, though rather monotonous according to our ideas of existence." From her assumed position of supe-

riority she observed: “do not think a Persian woman ever feels the same affection for her husband as some Europeans do”. Which leaves great scope for Post-Colonial discourse.

Mahdavi writes: Persian women were fascinated by foreign women in general and especially by their clothes - with open neck lines, corsets producing unnaturally narrow waists, bell-shaped skirts and endless trimmed lace. The western women must have seemed to them like prisoners in their outfits which contrasted with the Persian costume of a short jacket fitting snugly around the waist worn over a thin, embroidered shirt reaching to the midriff and either a gathered ankle-length skirt or voluminous flaring trousers.

However, their brush with Western women had a lasting effect. Bibi Khanum, an educated women from a traditional non-wealthy background, lamented “Does he not know that in the West they look after women like bouquets of flowers? They sit at the table with unfamiliar men, and when dancing, they hold hands and dance together.” It is true that women were clamoring for their rights in Europe but their position was neither the romantic one depicted by Bibi Khanum. They did not obtain full rights until well into the next century.

The reality of the situation of women in the 19th century is that women in both Persian and the West were oppresses but to varying degrees and in different ways. For example, while Western women could not own property, Muslim women could and had control of it. If Persian women were secluded so were Western women in the Victorian era.

Strangely, it was the romantic vision Persian women had of European women as “bouquets of flowers,” dining with men, dancing at balls and obtaining their legal rights, which fired their imagination and inspired them to strive for similar status, says Mahdavi.

Iran and women: some issues

“We are a very complicated people,” Shahlia Lahiji, a publisher and advocate of women’s rights who lives in Tehran, says in a *National Geographic* article on Iran. “We always live two lives-one outside the home and one inside. Obedience was always for the outside. Disobedience was for the inside. Outside we don’t trust anyone. It is the reason for our survival.”

Iranian women have indeed begun testing the limits of freedom. Women are still required by law to observe the *hejab*, the Islamic dress code, covering their hair and the curves of their bodies. But in Tehran and other cities it is now common to see young women showing hair under their scarves and wearing make-up.

Controversial history of the veil: understanding its context in Iranian culture

Khomeini called the floor-length chador, which covers all but a woman’s face, “the flag of the revolution.”

Even before the advent of Islam, the practice of veiling probably existed among the Zoroastrians. For the Islamic Republic of Iran, the rules about dress are laid out in Koran: “Say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze guard their modesty...They should draw their veils over their bosom and not display their ornaments.” They can go bareheaded only in front of other women, their husbands, fathers, sons, nephews, servants and children small enough to “have no sense of the shame of sex.” A rule requiring all women to appear in public in Islamic dress was written into the country’s penal code, but the Koranic verse that defines it is subject to interpretation.

The Veil and the Shah

Choice - to wear or not to wear the veil - has been an issue for decades. In his plan for modernization of Iran, Reza Shah, issued a law in 1935 that declared the wearing of traditional dress (for both women and men) an offense punishable by a prison term.

The army and police were charged to enforce the law, removing chadors from women and distributing free Western-style suits to men. Men were also banned from wearing turbans.

Reza Shah told the Iranian women to “cast their veils, this symbol of injustice and shame, into the fires of oblivion.” As a demonstration he brought the Queen Mother and royal princesses, unveiled, to a graduation ceremony at the Women’s Teacher Training College in Tehran in 1936.

However, many Iranian women saw it as heresy. For them the veil was a source of protection, respect, and virtue. In the memoir, *Daughter of Persia*, a woman recalls her mother’s reaction: “He is trying to destroy

religion. He doesn't fear God, this evil Shah-may God curse him for it!"

The veil and the Revolution

In the beginning of the revolution in 1979, women could go bareheaded in Iran, but within a month, Khomeini ordered all women to wear Islamic dress. At first, Iran's women resisted. Many walked through the streets of Tehran - bareheaded - in protest to Khomeini's order. Finally the compromise was the hejab - or head covering, usually worn with a loose overcoat.

For some women, the hejab gave a certain anonymity and a way to navigate in public spaces. It may be a means of enabling women to assert their presence in male space by setting unavoidable contacts with non-kin makes within a desexualized context. Since the revolution, there have been degrees of acceptable coverage. It is also a way of reading a woman's political and religious leanings.

VI. BUFFALO

Of course there are many veilings, covering and exposing our sexual and political identities through dress doesn't exclusively happen in Islamic cultures.

What is a Drag King?

A Drag King is a performer who makes masculinity into his or her act. The Drag King makes costume into the whole of her performance. This performance often includes elaborate hair styles, facial hair, and make-up as part of the construction of maleness; Elvis being a popular 'off the self' persona (in addition to those invented by

the performers themselves). Though one could ask if Elvis was drag in the first place anyway.

However, though masculinity is a game for some drag kings, it is deadly serious for some whose performance of gender does not stop at the end of the show. Some describe their gender role as fluctuating but others have personas that contrast strongly from their theatrical life.

"My Drag King persona is not so different from my non-Drag King persona. I think my masculinity may be more emphatic, but it is not essentially different", writes Dred, in the *Drag King Book.* Many of these performers blur the lines between of and on stage in many different ways.

Judith Halberstam says, "Drag Kings confront us with the limits of gender, others confirm the intransigent [or inflexible] nature of categories that we would like to wish away. Above all, they are contradictory, confusing-and perhaps intentionally so."

It is important to see that the wo/men in Buffalo are seeking a separation of gender and sexuality perhaps subverting it. I find these women actively challenging notions of sexuality, the performance of masculinity, and gender definitions in public space.

Like Sanja's collaboration with the Croatian women, I was invited to document this community and their histories before, like earlier generations, they disappeared. I am seeking to enable these women to have an active role in how their stories are recorded and told.

"Documents on working-class community, culture and identity are difficult to find and this problem is compounded by the stigmatization of lesbians which forces them to be hidden at the periphery of society. Upper class and/or artistic lesbians are likely to leave creative work, diaries, letters or memories for posterity, while ordinary lesbians usually do not. Even if they do their works it is unlikely to enter a public realm to be found by historians. To address this situation we and other lesbian and gay history projects have turned to oral history-it allows the narrators to speak in their own voices of their lives, loves and struggles."

Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*

Kennedy and Davis' seminal text, published in 1993, is an exhaustive chronicle of the oral testimonies of lesbian and bisexual women in Buffalo, NY. Not only has it served to raise consciousness about a rich queer history but for me, it breaks entirely new ground in its approach to telling history. Though it rigorously adheres to high standards of historic research, it is a respectful study of the personal stories it contains.Here is an excerpt:

"Things back then were horrible and I think that because I fought like a man to survive I made it somehow easier for the kids coming out today. I did all their fighting for them. I'm not a rich person. I don't have a lot of money; I don't even have a little money. I would have nothing to leave anybody in this world, but I have that-that I can leave to the kids who are coming out now, who will come out in the future. That I left them a better place to come out into. And that's all I have to offer, to leave them. But I wouldn't deny it. Even though I was getting my brains beaten up I would never stand up and say, 'No don't hit me, I am not gay; I am not gay.' I wouldn't do that. I was maybe stupid and proud but they'd come up and say, 'Are you gay?' And I'd say 'Yes, I am.' Pow, they'd hit you. For no reason at all. It was silly and it was ridiculous; and I took my beatings and I survived it." - Matty from *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold.*

VII. MAKING WORK: PROCESS BACKGROUND/INTRODUCTION

Nan Goldin

One of the significant influences on my work was seeing the Nan Goldin retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1996.

Guido Costa, curator and art writer, wrote about Goldin, "Nan Goldin and her photographs form a single whole and those who look at them, in that moment when they really understand them, become irresistibly drawn into their world; they are interrogators, but at the same time are being interrogated. The spectator must to some degree become an active participant in the taking of the picture, reconstructing what went before and the circumstances in which is was made."

For me, Goldin's power lies in her ability to disappear completely behind the lens, while at the same time evocatively communicating her presence as a compassionate

eye and witness, the key to the ultimate meaning of the story.

Costa prefaces his essay by saying, "It is difficult for me to talk about Nan Goldin's work without first talking about her."

My background

My own background is as an Iranian exiled in 1979, sent my mother, then divorced from my father, to Loughborough England (which is quite funny, and you will understand the irony if you have every been there or are English). Living briefly in England and New Zealand, I then spent most of life in America.

I immigrated to New Jersey in 1982 when images of 52 American hostages were still fresh in the minds of Americans. My personal Iranian/American polemic seems very appropriate considering recent world events.

Returning to make a documentary

It is estimated that the Iranian diaspora population is currently around 1 million worldwide.

Just over 20 years later, as an adult, I returned to investigate what was behind this demonized image of women. And for the first time, in as many years, I returned to my mother's house and asked the question, *'Who would I have been if I had stayed?'*

My return journey to Iran was certainly belated. What made it possible for me to return to Iran? I believe, as I am most certainly a coward, and that the reason that I chose to return to Iran was that I could safely do so through the lens of the making of a documentary about the process of returning. I could finally face this epic journey via the detached subjective/objective relationship of being a filmmaker.

An example of conventions: CNN

In a little while I will show you an excerpt of Christiane Amanpour's CNN report about her return to Iran.

Christiane Anampour's CNN documentary and its construction are inherently flawed for me as it attempts two very opposing goals: being personal and also objective while never being responsible to the films subject.

It gives us neither valuable personal testimony nor is not a report that gives balance to stories it reports. The filmmaker tries to combine reportage and personal narrative through the format of CNN news reportage.

This film was controversial in both the exile community and the Iranian community (where people were still talking about it when I visited Iran months afterwards). Typical of the media, the images of those who were filmed were squewed. Those at the party did not know what the images were going to be used for and what the agenda was. This was particularly dangerous for those who were filmed, dancing to music, not wearing veils and wearing what was provocative dress and make-up.

I respond strongly to this lack of responsibility to the filmed subject, a commonplace practice with filmmakers. My project attempts to address this.

VIII. CONCLUSION: VISIBILITY OF WOMEN: FINDING A METHODOLOGY

To breathe my own air out of the darkness of the shell.

To see with my own eyes and talk with my own voice.

Not to be overshadowed by larger wings.

And not to be unheard in the chaos of strange songs.

To carry my nest on my own wing.

To have my own window to break and to hear the sound of it.

To lose my wing and to regain it.

To open my wing in the clouds whose scent I cherish.

And to float and to float and to float until the last song.

The above poem was written by a contemporary Iranian women whom I met but the words speak for most women who are struggling to determine their role in public/private spaces.

There are systems which operate in two different hemispheres and women have been integral to the tug of war in the discussion of the paradigms of US (representing the West) vs. Iran (as representing the Muslim world). This has been brought very much to the forefront of our consciousness.

Forcing and struggling for visibility - my studies of these two groups of women (or men) puts into the foreground women's perspectives on public/private performances, as well as discussing the intersection of space, sexuality and culture. But capturing the stories of other is a easier said than done.

Adrienne Rich in *Of Women Born* writes: "It is hard to write about my mother. Whatever I do write it is my story I am telling, my version of the past. If she were to tell her own story other landscapes would be revealed."

My narrative is not reliable-it is part of many narratives and the work should activate the understanding of the complexities of objectivity and subjectivity without being pedantic. My only assumptions are my own prejudices entering this discussion so I know that the starting point has to be me. The relationship of the camera to the subject, the filmmaker to the subject and the transformation of real stories into art, for artists and art historians/critics this must be vital. It must be a challenge from the artist to the audience to engage themselves.

[N.B.]

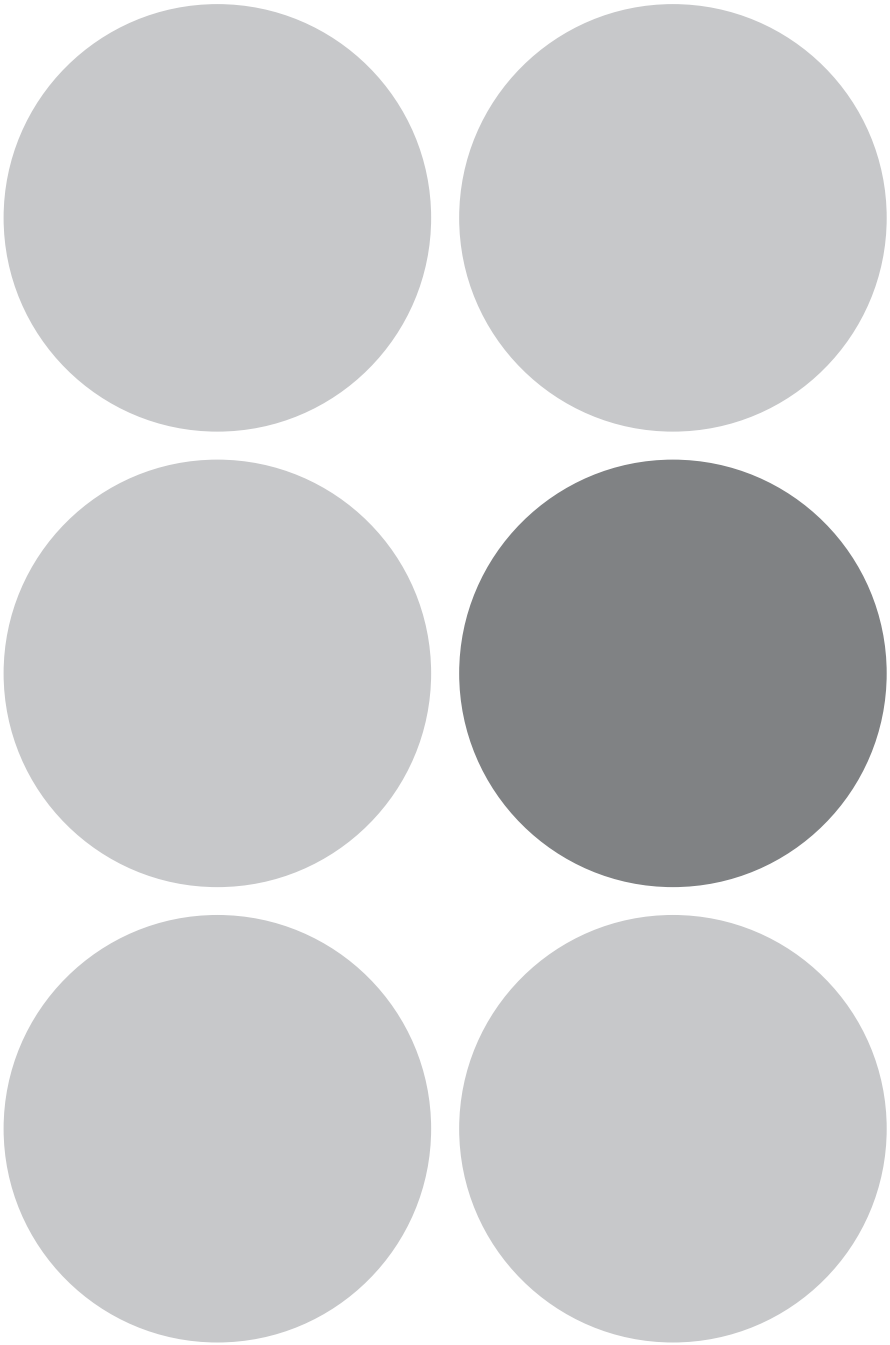
The "veiled" Statue of Liberty that Bojana Pejić mentioned in her keynote speech on Monday shows the transformation of the allegoric figure of liberty leading the people. This computer generated image shows the torch bearing woman's face covered by an Islamic veil, transforming and questioning its meaning. I would like to reference this image here, recalling the paradox of defending freedom and defending one's right to veiling and concealing or revealing and exposing ones gender, identity and sexuality (this freedom of women to decide their representations and manifestations in public/private spaces).

Mohammad Khatami, the regime's so-called moderate president, recently used the opportunity of a seminar, entitled, "Role of women in dialogue between civilizations," to talk about the changing role of

women. He said: “By preparing the environment of the family, as the main and the oldest unit of human society, women can prepare a suitable basis for dialogue. Family as the smallest and at the same time as the most fundamental unit of the society can provide the environment for many of macro behaviors. Therefore, in order to harmonize society with the culture of dialogue.... the only solution is to begin teaching this social behavior from the level of family” (Iranian state television, January 22).

Contemporary Art + Iran

Reportedly in an art monthly magazine the director of The Museum of Contemporary Art in Tehran spoke about bringing the museums collection up to date. His shopping list which included among several leading British artists, Gary Hume, known for his use of household gloss plaints, Damien Hirst and Sarah Lucas. Even in our society, someone like Sarah Lucas is seen as an extremely liberated women and having her work in Tehran would be a very strong signal indeed. ●



➔ **Tina Gharavi** - filmmaker and artist was born in Iran in 1972 and became an exile as a result of the 1979 revolution. She is currently based in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, England where she is the director of Bridge + Tunnel Productions, producing films and documentaries (as well as installations and new media). Her most recent film *Closer* is an experimental documentary which has been screened all over the world at festivals, including Sundance, and has been acquired by Showtime in the US. She is also Ph. D. Researcher at Napier University in Edinburgh.