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Unveiling histories: navigating ideological constructs and cultural memories in the contemporary art of Iran

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ABSTRACT

This special issue explores the multifaceted landscape of the contemporary art of Iran, unveiling diverse approaches to historical narratives and cultural memory while challenging the concept of a 'correct history.' Focused on the post-revolutionary period, the essays scrutinise how Iranian artists navigate and contest an ideologically structured history imposed by the political system. This structured history, often divergent from creative historical understanding, prioritises abstract ideals and diminishes alternative perspectives. Central questions explored include how contemporary Iranian artists position themselves in relation to history and cultural memory, manifesting their way of looking in their works. Examining strategies such as irony, fantasy, intertextuality and deconstruction, these artists engage in critical re-tellings of a past that persists in haunting the present. Their creations reflect on the self by narrating history, contributing to the ongoing debate on historical narratives. The essays investigate how contemporary art practices in Iran grapple with social, cultural and political issues, including censorship, transforming challenges into critical tools that give rise to a multi-faceted aesthetics of resistance. The issue sheds light on these alternative approaches and elaborates on the broader discourse on artistic engagement with historical and socio-political contexts.

KEYWORDS

Contemporary art of Iran; historical narratives; cultural memory; ideological constructs; resistance

The exploration of history and its representation in the art practices of contemporary Iran is a critical theme that needs further investigation. In many instances within the works of artists, references to history do not necessarily imply a particularism that exaggerates the distinction between the past and present, nor do they exhibit an anachronism that embellishes the similarities between the two. In line with the argument of political philosopher Preston King, for these artists past truth is violated not only by falsely equating the past with the present but also by falsely accentuating its differences from the current reality (King 2000, 5). Similarly, their artistic practices reveal a perception of history that maintains a constant connection to present understanding. As emphasised by King's assertion that 'to know about the past is to know about it in the present,'

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(King 2000, 3) this perspective aligns with the concept of ‘participant history’ introduced by historian John Lukacs. In ‘participant history,’ knowledge is not solely personal but is also inherently participatory (Lukacs 2008). One’s comprehension of history and collective memory is intertwined with their active involvement, signifying that the appreciation of the past is continually rooted in a present understanding. Lukacs extends this idea by introducing the term ‘historical consciousness,’ emphasising that historical thought is an inherently human activity with both great power and limitations. History, viewed as a human enterprise, focuses not only on events themselves but also on our capacity to comprehend and explain those events. It is inescapably incomplete, inaccurate and unquantifiable (Gamble). Michel Foucault’s assertion that it is impossible to view history without the influence of one’s own time and values further underscores the subjective nature of historical interpretation. The lens through which we perceive history dictates how we interpret facts, influencing the selection of facts and the narratives we construct. Consequently, engaging with history is an inevitable act of interpreting the present, often with the intention of uncovering truths from both the past and present. This engagement allows each individual, including artists, to craft their own narrative of history based on their personal perspectives and interpretations.

This special issue explores diverse approaches to both distant and recent history and cultural memory with a central focus on challenging the concept of ‘correct history.’ The essays within this collection will scrutinise how Iranian artists, employing various approaches, assert the inviolability of an ideologically structured history imposed by the Iranian political system. This structured history, often antithetical to creative historical understanding, is shaped by an ideology that prioritises an abstract ideal and tends to diminish historical perspectives. In particular, history, with its inherent element of mystery, normally faces erosion at the hands of ideologues. Here the core argument emphasises the complex interplay between a society’s perception of history, the propaganda machinery and its political manoeuvres. This nexus enables political authorities to use history as a potent tool for unifying and mobilising diverse segments of society. The quest for legitimacy lies at the heart of this relationship, as political powers leverage history as a resource to validate the ideological foundations supporting their aspirations. The legitimacy derived from historical narratives facilitates the mobilisation of support necessary for instigating changes within a social structure, a task that would otherwise be challenging, if not impossible (Jenson 2008, 248). The manipulation of history emerges as a central theme in this exploration, particularly as an influential means of control. This special issue critically examines how the manipulation of historical narratives can orchestrate desires and increase the likelihood of specific events unfolding (Jenson 2008, 252).

The essays included in this issue interrogate the theme of challenging the present through a reinterpretation of history in post-revolutionary Iran. Central to the exploration are fundamental questions, namely, ‘How do contemporary artists from Iran position themselves in relation to history and cultural memory, and how do they manifest these perspectives in their works?’ This issue examines the strategies employed by Iranian artists whose creations articulate historical narratives, shedding light on their reflections on the understanding of the past and their challenges to the socio-political conditions of the present. The examination extends to how these artists scrutinise history and navigate the complexities of its representation. Furthermore, the issue explores the ways in which contemporary Iranian artists, seeking to address the world they inhabit, engage in critical re-tellings of a past that no

longer exists but continues to haunt the present. Employing diverse approaches such as irony, fantasy, intertextuality, mimetic perversions, deconstruction and de-familiarisation, these artists challenge and occasionally deconstruct the dichotomy between historical and contemporary discourses. Their works, speaking aesthetically in their own right, reflect on the self by narrating history. A notable aspect of the discussion involves how these artistic expressions contribute to the ongoing debate on historical narratives. The focus is on understanding how contemporary artists challenge established historical perspectives and address current affairs through their artistic lenses. The investigation also explores the ways in which the contemporary art of Iran grapples with social, cultural and political issues, including cultural restrictions and censorship. These challenges become critical tools that give rise to a multi-faceted aesthetics of resistance, suggesting alternative approaches that contribute to the broader discourse on artistic engagement with historical and socio-political contexts.

Before examining the essays in this special issue, it is useful to briefly address some contextual aspects of the topic. The development of historical awareness in modern Iran unfolded alongside the country's political and social evolution. The establishment of modern Iranian nationalism, culminating in the formation of a modern state, drew upon an Iranian consciousness of 'national' identity, emphasising the pre-Islamic history of Iran. This historical narrative, largely veiled in myths, resurfaced in the nineteenth century through the efforts of European archaeologists and philologists. Under the Pahlavi dynasty (1925–79), which centred its modernisation efforts on the adoption of Western civilisation, deliberate efforts were made to integrate it with Iran's historical traditions and ancient ancestral honours. Reza Shah (ruled 1925–40) formulated a carefully crafted vision of nationalism, often termed 'romantic nationalism,' that celebrated Iran's pre-Islamic heritage.¹ The nationalist political elites displayed eclecticism by promoting pre-Islamic Persian splendour with a strong sense of Persian chauvinism. The glorification of historical myths, such as Cyrus the Great, the founder of the first Persian Empire (ca. 600–530 B.C.), and the archaeological site of Persepolis, was a central tenet of this ideology.² This approach fostered Iranians' fascination with ancient Iran, their 'glorious' past and the national pantheon, believing that a return to this pre-Islamic identity would enable Iran to navigate the demands of the modern world and assume a respected role in the global community (See Siavoshi 2014, 256).

The 1978–79 Revolution marked a pivotal moment, leading to the establishment of a theocratic state and the replacement of the modernist secular Pahlavi politico-cultural practices with an Islamic revolutionary ideological discourse. This shift significantly impacted Iranian social and cultural life. During the revolutionary struggles that followed the eight-year bloody war with Iraq (1980–88), the Islamic Republic's singular ideology dominated all various domains of Iranian life, including cultural endeavours. As Ludwig Paul noted, the post-revolutionary state's central slogan became 'Islamic government' (*hokumat-e eslami*), with the revolution aiming for a comprehensive Islamisation of state politics, society and individual lives (Paul 1999, 190). The inevitable outcome was an ideological Islamisation, wherein the state's version of Islam sought to negate individual autonomy.³ The ruling elites of the Islamic Republic, in their efforts to 'direct' or manipulate 'Iranian identity,' assert the authenticity of their construction of that identity (Siavoshi 2014, 255). Similar to the pre-revolutionary state, the Islamic Republic used ideological and financial tools to shape an identity aligned with its objectives. However, in this iteration, Islam in general, and Shi'ism in particular, constituted the essential elements defining

Iranian national identity. This identity was rooted in the concept of a return to the 'authentic' Islamic self or a return to the 'original self' (*bazgasht-e beh khishtan*), seen as a key step in resisting Western domination (see Siavoshi 2014, 257–8). As a result, the cultural policies of the Islamic Republic inherently encompassed both ideological and political elements from their inception. These policies were presented as the 'principles' of Iran's Islamic identity, intended to serve as a defense against cultural aggressions.⁴ The forceful imposition of Islamic values and ways of living in the post-revolutionary period is often considered an ideological effort to amalgamate culture and religion, forging a unified set of values (*arzesh-ha*) and prescribed principles. The state aimed to establish cultural authenticity for its agenda while rejecting any practices that did not match its own. In conjunction with media control, the state instituted the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (*Vezeerat-e farhang va ershad-e eslami*; formerly named the Ministry of Islamic Guidance, *Vezeerat-e ershad-e eslami*) to formulate and coordinate its ideological policies. This ministry also oversees the activities of the media and other cultural enterprises. Notably, it exercised comprehensive control over cultural productions, as evidenced by censorship and repression targeting the press, writers, filmmakers, academics and artists.

Nevertheless, the politicisation of all aspects of Iranian social and cultural life by the Islamic theocracy has given rise to numerous contradictions and conflicts. These tensions encompass cultural practices that have exhibited resilience and refusal to vanish. As I have previously argued, artists have not succumbed to the Iranian state's soft power, which aims to impose its political and ideological values on the nation's life.⁵ This resistance is inherently tied to the dynamics of power and resistance. Artists express their resistance through their works, exploring themes such as political history, cultural memory and power relations. Despite the state's scrutiny of cultural enterprises, with a focus on political screening, it has achieved limited success in institutionalising its reign. Cultural counter-reactions have emerged, characterised by new interpretations of national culture and counter-narratives challenging the state's hegemonic narrative, particularly evident in artistic practices. The result of this resistance is the creation of artworks that represent the iconography of socio-political and moral contravention – artistic expressions that transform into instruments of socio-cultural criticism and political contention. Many artists, particularly those from the new generation born after the revolution, actively challenge the compulsory settings that seek to direct and dominate systems of belief and actions. In their pursuit, these artists strive to reclaim and redefine individuality by employing discursive strategies that allow for a critical approach to their practices and the politically formulated history and cultural past imposed by the state. Their attempt to reclaim their cultural space serves as another indication of the state's ideological crisis.

Returning to Lukacs's concept of participant history, contemporary art practices in Iran serve as presentations and dialogues that respond to the current times. These artists try to explore histories that continue to shape their present, focusing broadly on evolving notions of Iranian belonging. Their work prompts audiences to reconsider their political and national understanding of these histories, allowing complex pasts to be integral to contemporary narratives. These artists use their art as a means to engage with history, politics and society in the present. Consequently, the specified official formula has been replaced by diverse ways in which history can be imagined and narrated. Moreover, the recent painful history of post-revolutionary Iran, marked by war, mass political executions, systematic elite killings (the so-called chain murders; *Qatl-ha-ye zanjireh-i*),⁶ cultural

repressions and recurrent violent suppression of social uprisings by the state has created a traumatic experience embedded in Iranian collective memory, haunting the present lives of the people. Many artists grapple with the challenge of finding an appropriate language to tell a story intertwined with pain. Their work serves as a response to their own experiences in the context of a cultural trauma that pervades the entire society. Amid daily challenges, artists not only have to cope with difficult living conditions but also navigate the complexities of practicing art. The result is a spectrum of artistic practices in which artists seek effective strategies to interpret the traumatic experiences in their country.

Throughout the essays and examinations of artists' works, we see how the artists represent their versions of histories through strategies involving reassessment and reimagination of the past. In referencing the past, artists are not merely recounting an 'objectified past;' instead, they position themselves as subjects of the history they subjectively live in. Moreover, artists actively engage in the historical discourse by challenging and addressing current political affairs in their country, thereby shaping their own truth. Through visual strategies, they seek to reclaim authority over their individuality, opposing the dictated narrative of the ideology of the Iranian state.⁷ In challenging conventional understandings of how politics is conveyed in artworks, artists employ subversive and critical language. The use of metaphorical language, symbolism and allegory in their visual representations allows them to critique established power structures, authorities and control while highlighting marginalised voices. By occasionally distorting and exaggerating elements of reality, Iranian artists draw attention to contradictions, injustices and absurdities within society. To navigate censorship while conveying critical messages, artists employ codes and ambiguity as part of their toolkit. A particularly effective strategy is the use of a surrealist approach, providing artists extensive opportunities to elude censorship and convey critical perspectives on repression (Foroutan 2016, 57–8).⁸ Artists also challenge the status quo through unconventional representation approaches, including collaborative projects within alternative spaces.⁹ Furthermore, in the works of several contemporary artists from the new generations in Iran, fantastical worlds are infused with traumatic experiences. These creations leverage fantastical narratives as a means of political intervention. Trauma in these works is not confined solely to the narrative component or apparent meaning but resides in a particular affective dynamic inherent to the work, often incorporating fictional or fantastical elements. The implications of phantasmagorical imagery significantly contribute to the portrayal of trauma, encompassing both individual and collective experiences, leaving a lasting imprint on individual and collective consciousness and memories (Alexander 2004, 6–7; Werner 2020, 11).¹⁰ Reflecting the art theorist Jill Bennet's insights on the relations between trauma and contemporary art, these works contribute to our understanding of trauma by striving to establish a communicable language of sensation and affect (Bennet 2005, 2). This allows us to register aspects of the traumatic memory experience. In numerous instances, artists plainly explore themes of trauma, loss and violence, as well as the complex interplay of speaking from an 'inside' position to an 'outside' audience. In this sense, trauma is conceptualised as possessing a tangible presence and force, making it a political rather than solely subjective phenomenon (Bennet 2005, 12).

As previously noted, numerous artworks in contemporary Iran subvert the conventional narrative of history, providing a platform for reconsidering the past as a foundation for individual existence in the present. While the essays in this issue explore

various examples of such works, I would like to highlight a few instances before summarising the essays. Among many others are the interrogation of recent Iranian history and collective memory in the paintings of Behrang Samadzadegan (b. 1979, based in Tehran), the staged photographic series by Azadeh Akhlaghi (b. 1978, based in Tehran) and the photographic series by Mohammad Ghazali (b. 1980, based in Tehran).

Over the past decade, Behrang Samadzadegan has examined the recent socio-political history of Iran through his art. Rather than merely reproducing historical visual documents, Samadzadegan engages in a conscious process of reference by carefully selecting and juxtaposing fragments from different photographic sources. In doing so, he constructs his own imaginative narratives that offer an alternative perspective on the contemporary history of Iran. Adopting the language of imagery, Samadzadegan assumes the role of a historian, crafting alternative personal histories that transcend prescribed and clichéd historical accounts. This expansion of visual and thematic references involves the manipulation of images and the incorporation of elements from myths and literature. Through this approach, Samadzadegan explores the possibilities of reimagining historical narratives by recombining forms and subjects. He actively questions the boundary between imagination and reality, intertwining contemporary human perplexity conceptually and formally with history. In his 'Heading Utopia' series (2015-), Samadzadegan uses composition and colour to depict a tumultuous situation. The series constructs a labyrinth of narratives where each part of the work guides the viewer's eyes to the next section, unveiling a new interpretive narration (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Behrang Samadzadegan, *Depart the World, Meet Me in Istanbul*, from the 'Heading Utopia' series, 2015, watercolour on grain stain arches paper. 130 × 182 cm.



Figure 2. Azadeh Akhlaghi, *Marzieh Ahmadi, Oskuie 26 April 1974*, from the ‘By an Eye Witness’ series (2009–12), digital print on photo paper, 110 × 318 cm.

Azadeh Akhlaghi’s staged photography project, ‘By an Eye Witness’ (2009–12), is a series in which she critically examines the history of Iranian intellectuals in the twentieth century. Through meticulous reconstruction, Akhlaghi captures the final moments of seventeen iconic figures, including journalists, activists, filmmakers, poets and politicians, with her own presence as an ‘eyewitness’ (Figure 2). The ‘By an Eye Witness’ series explores the ever-present and often tragic destinies of intellectuals in the modern history of Iran, implicitly testing interrelated parallels under the Islamic Republic. As the artist seeks the ‘truth’ by following narratives from eyewitnesses and drawing from archival information, the series provokes essential questions related to personal histories, visual memory and the nature of ‘documentation.’



Figure 3. Mohammad Ghazali, *Lost no. 017*, from the ‘Persepolis 2560-2580’ series, 2001–21, analogue photography, gelatine silver print, 13.5 × 20.5 cm.

Mohammad Ghazali's 'Persepolis: 2560–2580' series (2021) intricately blurs the boundaries between the visible and the invisible. Ghazali's photographic approach consistently unveils the intensely subversive and enigmatic facets within the ordinary and mundane (Daneshvari 2016, 3–4), all the while challenging the ideologically constructed truth upheld by the local political system. In this series, he interrogates the status of the image's past and present, questioning its reliability as a historical source. By challenging our conventional trust in photographic documents, 'Persepolis: 2560–2580' urges viewers to question why and how we perceive photographs as authenticating media for history and memory (Figure 3).¹¹ Offering objective accounts of a false historical narrative, the photographs in this series expose the impossibility of a purely truthful narration. They illustrate the potential for the artist to create and inscribe his own history within a collective context. Ghazali's work is rooted in the exploration of how elements of history, including architectural elements, can move and circulate in the present day. This unfolds against the background of a history haunted by doubtful events.

The following is a summary of the essays included in this issue, which collectively explore the broader theme of history and memory in contemporary Iran. The essays explore various issues related to the embodiment of cultural memory, the pursuit of truth, the recording of history and the reflection of the present through references to history.

In 'The Color of History in Contemporary Iranian Art: Intertextuality and Its Envisioned Heterotopia' Abbas Daneshvari explores the significant presence of history and the inherent desire within contemporary art practices in Iran to reference, interpret, assign value, reconstruct and envision the past critically. The essay examines the inter-subjective, subliminal and conscious portrayals of history in contemporary art of Iran, whether manifested as signs or symbols. Daneshvari introduces the conceptual question of the infinite ways in which history can be restructured, drawing inspiration from Friedrich Nietzsche's threefold constitution of history: the 'Monumental,' the 'Antiquarian,' and the 'Critical.' Within the 'Critical,' Daneshvari further divides it into the 'Critical-Structural' and 'Critical-Creative.' He argues that the 'Critical-Creative' aspect highlights and foregrounds the subjective and ontological dimensions, offering a significant reflection of the subliminal and intersubjective envisioning of the past. In this context, the contemplation of history suggests arbitrary, quantum, emotional, subjective and even fantastic constructs, framing history as 'his-story.' Daneshvari contends that the 'Critical-Creative' approach plays a dominant role and mirrors the prevailing artistic approach towards history in art practices in Iran. This approach undermines metaphysical absolutes and Truth-centred ideas, whether political, religious or philosophical. The author suggests that this outcome may signal the emergence of new social and political structures in the future of Iran. To support his argument, he closely examines the works of artists such as Abbas Kowsari, Siamak Filizadeh, Farideh Lashai, Azadeh Akhlaghi, Gohar Dashti, Ferydoun Ave, Parastou Foruhar, Mandana Moghaddam, Samira Ali-khanzadeh and Sadegh Tirafkan.

In 'History, Heritage, and the Site-specific in Contemporary Iranian Art,' Pamela Karimi traces the history of site-specific art in Iran from the 1970s to the present day, emphasising the integration of site with the history and heritage it embodies. Karimi begins by recounting the example of the Shiraz Arts Festival in 1971, coinciding with the 2,500th anniversary of the Persian monarchy, where avant-garde multimedia artist

Iannis Xenakis (1947–97) created *Polytope de Persépolis*. This project was centred around the architectural layout and culture of the Achaemenids, showcasing the early connection between site-specific art and historical narratives. Karimi argues that in the post-revolutionary period, site-specificity has become a platform for collective artmaking, grassroots engagement and provocative dialogues not easily achievable in conventional galleries and museums. Unlike the covert settings of the post-revolutionary early phases, contemporary site-specific art projects now take centre stage in accessible spaces and urban hubs. Iranian artists adeptly navigate these complexities, turning themes of tacit control into creative vehicles for conveying subversive messages, particularly impactful when executed in historically rich settings. The essay then examines the site-specific works of artists such as Mahdyar Jamshidi and Pooya Aryanpour. Jamshidi's project, *I Am Here* (2014), emphasises heritage and history, providing an opportunity to get involved in broader historical issues related to territorial and national identity in natural settings. Aryanpour's recent projects have consistently been informed by the history and socio-political characteristics of the sites in which he implements his work. In 'Gone with the Wind' (2022), he draws inspiration from economist and cultural historian Homa Katouzian's thesis, reflecting on short-term cycles of development and blight in Iran's economy and culture with roots in its history. Karimi asserts that if Xenakis's *Polytope de Persépolis* celebrated ancient history, Aryanpour's site-specific art addresses a history directly tied to the lives of contemporary Iranians. She suggests that Aryanpour's art reflects Michel Foucault's method of writing a 'history of the present.' In this approach, Foucault did not intend to disqualify the history of the past but rather emphasised how the study of the past is conceived precisely in relation to the present. The author contends that Aryanpour prompts us to perceive historical space not merely as neutral evidence of the past or a container of events over a specific period but as a manifestation of systems of power that evolve across numerous historical stages.

'Rewriting History: A Conversation between Parham Taghioff and Hamidreza Karami' is an illustrated conversation between Parham Taghioff and Hamidreza Karami, discussing Taghioff's preoccupation with history, particularly the philosophy of history in his photographic projects. Taghioff emphasises that in reality, we often cast ourselves as 'characters in the drama of history' without realising our role in a larger narrative. He reminds us of that new facts, documents and stories are continually emerging, ensuring that our understanding of the past is never complete and some revelations can profoundly alter our perceptions. Responding to Karami's question about defining his position as a contemporary Iranian and artist, Taghioff asserts that understanding our contemporary position necessitates an examination of history. He encourages acknowledging how the past is both obscured and dissipated in the present, influencing and being influenced by historical notions. To reconstruct approaches to history critically, Taghioff contends that certain historical issues need more frequent exploration. Discussing Taghioff's projects, including the 'Hands On / Hands Off' (2014) and the 'Asymmetrical Authority' series (2018), Karami raises the pivotal issue of the artist's reliance on personal 'historical understanding' and 'historical memory.' Taghioff explains his approach involves analysing and using materials, including texts and images, from archives as raw materials for his works, drawing from history and his socially lived experience. The 'Asymmetrical Authority' series, inspired by Taghioff's childhood memories during the ideological turmoil after the

1979 Revolution and the Iran–Iraq War, challenges perceptions of the past and questions the authority and authenticity of reality through the ‘reproduction’ of real events.

‘Archives as Forms of Resistance’ by Fereshte Mousavi is a visual essay exploring artistic and curatorial practices in Iran or related to Iran, where archives serve as a primary tool for reinterpreting histories. The essay highlights the growing interest in contemporary art regarding the use of archival material as a repository of documented and preserved knowledge, bridging artistic productions with curatorial practices. Drawing on Irit Rogoff’s analysis of curatorial practice as an ‘epistemic structure’ and the increasing prevalence of curatorial projects in contemporary art, the essay focuses on how archives have the potential to generate knowledge against historical forgetfulness. It examines a research-based exhibition, *Karnameh; Visual Culture of Iranian Children (1950-1980)*; two curatorial projects, *Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art’s Poster* and the *Archaeology of the Final Decade (AOTFD)*; and an installation titled *Documentation*. As Moosavi maintains, in these curatorial-based practices, public, private, artistic and personal archives play a central role. Viewing curating as a ‘critical post-representational practice’ and drawing on Jacques Derrida’s conceptualisation of the archive, the essay explores how every interpretation of the archive can create knowledge and what might be absent from it. It argues that working with archives in contemporary art is crucial for recovering erased histories and accumulating fragmented memories.

In the essay ‘Visual Articulatory and Periphrasis in the Art of the Unmentionable,’ Aida Foroutan explores the concept of ‘un-manifestos,’ referring to a phenomenon in artistic communities subjected to severe censorship. She argues that, due to political and safety concerns, artists often choose not to comment directly on historical events and related issues. Instead, they employ suggestiveness and allusiveness in their art to convey messages without being overt. This method is prevalent in contemporary art practices in Iran. The essay categorises the works of six contemporary artists into three groups, each using different media and techniques to convey messages subtly. The first category, *Absence*, examines the works of Masoumeh Mozaffari and Shahpour Pouyan, focusing on non-manifestation to avoid explicit imageries. The second category, *Collage and Fragmentation*, discusses the works of Samila Amir-Ebrahimi and Katayoun Karami. The third category, *Ambiguity and Enigma*, explores the works of Alireza Espahbod and Mehrdad Mohebali. In each case, the central idea is the use of allusion to avoid explicitly mentioning a subject that could lead to persecution by authorities. Foroutan suggests that, in post-revolutionary Iran, a shared imaginary of the ‘unmentionable’ has emerged, becoming the characteristic language used by many Iranian artists. This strategic approach aligns with a long tradition of indirect and metaphorical hints in literary forms, including classical Persian poetry. The essay argues that this approach involves conveying meaning in what is barely observable or missing altogether, relying on allusion and suggestion.

In ‘Brothers/Soldiers: Trauma and Wartime Ahwaz in the Art of Sadegh Tirafkan,’ Andrea Fitzpatrick delves into a series of posthumously discovered staged colour photographs featuring twin boys holding rifles, created by Sadegh Tirafkan (1965-2013). The focus extends to Tirafkan’s short screenplay, titled *Tulips Bloom*, produced in Ahwaz, Iran, in 1982 during his youth. The author aims to present a new understanding of the artist’s career (1982-2013) by employing visual analysis of Tirafkan’s photographic art, published interviews, comparative visual analysis involving Iranian visual culture from the era (particularly documentary photography), scholarship in contemporary art

history and theories of trauma from literary theory and sociology. Fitzpatrick suggests that contextualising Tirafkan's work within the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88) and the prevalent culture of martyrdom in the region unveils a subtext of trauma. This exploration sheds light on the recurring visual motifs, symbols, and themes that persisted throughout the artist's thirty-year career.

In summary, this special issue explores how artists navigate the complex relationship between personal and public spheres in representing their versions of histories. The essays explore the intersection of private experiences with historical narratives, emphasising the enduring impact of traumatic events and social transitions on contemporary Iran. The discussions encompass the lasting effects of key periods and events on cultural productions, shedding light on how artists reclaim authority over their individual identities in contrast to the ideological frameworks imposed by Iranian authorities. These artistic endeavours offer a reflexive and critical function, incorporating fragments of historical reality into narrative frames. Autobiographical narratives become a strategy for addressing problematic issues, externalising personal memory and bridging the gap between private and public realms. The artworks featured in this special issue engage with diverse themes such as generational dynamics, gender politics, social corruption, isolation, memory and trauma. Collectively, they contribute to the rich and multifaceted landscape of contemporary Iranian cultural expression, offering a diverse yet distinct vocabulary shaped by artistic, cultural and social commentary.

Notes

1. The initiatives were to be executed through cultural planning and organisation, involving the establishment of various cultural centres aimed at reviving the grandeur of ancient Iran. Among these enterprises were the approval of a law concerning the preservation of historical antiquities in 1930, the founding of the Iran-e Bastan (Ancient Iran) Museum in 1937, the National Library of Iran in 1939, both situated in Tehran, and the Pars Museum in Shiraz in 1936.
2. For further exploration of the role of icons and monuments in shaping a national identity in Iran in modern period, see Merhavy 2019.
3. For full examination of this concept, see Haghayeghi 1993.
4. For examination of the concept of cultural authenticity and its definition by the Iranian state, as well as artistic resistance, see Keshmirshekan 2013.
5. See Keshmirshekan 2023b, 221–240.
6. It refers to the systematic killing of intellectuals, known as the 'chain murders' (*Qatl-ha-ye zanjireh-i*), which occurred in Iran during the 1990s. The chain murders constituted a sequence of targeted killings and disappearances involving Iranian intellectuals who had expressed criticism of the Islamic Republic system. These incidents seemed to be interconnected. The victims comprised over eighty individuals, encompassing writers, poets, translators and political activists.
7. For examination of the strategies employed by artists within the context of localised historical and cultural landscapes, see Keshmirshekan 2011; 2023b, 199–220. Also, for exploration of the ways artists employ strategies such as humour, irony and satire to counter the imposed forces while resisting state prescriptions and striving to reclaim their cultural spaces, see Keshmirshekan 2023b, 268–286.
8. See also Foroutan's essay 'Visual Articulatory and Periphrasis in the Art of the Unmentionable' in this issue.
9. See Pamela Karimi's essay, 'History, Heritage, and the Site-specific in Contemporary Iranian Art' in this issue.

10. For full examination of the concept of phantasmagorical representation in the works of contemporary artists from Iran, see Keshmirshekan 2023c, 15–28.
11. For full examination of Ghazali's 'Persepolis: 2560–2580' project, see Keshmirshekan 2023a.

Disclosure statement

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Notes on contributor

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