Intersectional feminist advocacy is chronically and structurally underfunded. At CFFP, we feel the effects of this in a very real way.

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This piece is the second part engaging with my doctoral research on the geopolitics of Afghan-ized visual knowledge production across the Islamic Republics of Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan. In this part, I examine a case from 2016 starring Afghan-ized photographer born and raised in Iran, Fatimah Hosseini, and the accusations she faced of plagiarizing her Tehran-based performance art teacher and artist Esha Sadr. The purpose of this analysis is to put intra-regional dynamics of gendering and cultural production into a critical conversation in order to approach challenges and predicaments art students and artists have that are rendered invisible when “the spectacle” - comprising of media and social media ‘coverage’ of artistic events in the region - becomes a medium of reproducing identity politics. I conducted interviews with the involved artists, their supporters and critics as well as tried to trace medial and social perceptions of the event by using the Internet as an archive.
Part 2

While research on gendering processes in the context of Afghanistan have widely and critically engaged with the mis/representation of “Afghan women” and provided empirical data complicating one-dimensional ideas of the repressed feminine, two questions become increasingly important to complicate existing scholarly discussions on gender, geopolitics and art in Afghanistan. First, how does the researcher’s social positioning relate to her geographies of interest – particularly, because, as Said highlights, “We are, so to speak, of the connections, not outside and beyond them” this includes imperialist interventions and cultural politics. I have to ask myself, what might my interviewees not like to tell me as a “familiar stranger” – communicating in Persian, but having lived through different experiences of being an alien where we were raised. How can I respect that and still do justice to a critical approach to Afghan-ized artists across the Islamic Republics?

These are not necessarily comfortable questions. Rather, they confront me with difference; unequal opportunities, social mobility, political and economic injustices, varying degrees of access to education, citizenship and vocations. The consequence is neither to produce knowledge for knowledge sake - this would be rather an Orientalist approach - nor to not produce knowledge at all about a space where I was not born and raised since this validates borders that are artificial in the first place.

Comparative Political Thought confronts these challenges, aiming to create conversations between thinkers and their ideas, which have been rendered impossible through the segregation of thinkers from outside Europe to area studies. It does so by linking international relations to specialized regional knowledges (see for instances in the work of Roxanne Euben, Farah Godrej and Andrew March) and discussing the challenges of knowledge production within and “beyond” the west and east binary. Thereby, the dichotomised understanding of geography is questioned, however, it remains present.

Second, it is necessary to ask, how can a feminist methodology examine women artists in the region without reducing them to local and international gender politics? How can we see gender without marginalizing other socio-political and economic dynamics shaping the local conditions of art production for artists in Kabul? Instead of referring here to engagements with intersectionality, I like to approach the event through the Situationists’ idea of “the spectacle”.

The term spectacle is used here in reference to Guy Debord’s Comments on the Society of the Spectacle after the publication of The Society of the Spectacle in 1967. While “people” usually refer to “spectacle” as “media”, as Debord explains, it has a “logic” that adjusts itself:

"Just as the logic of the commodity reigns over capitalists competing ambitions, and the logic of war always dominates the frequent modifications in weaponry, so the harsh logic of the spectacle controls the abundant diversity of media extravagances.“ (Debord, 1998: 7)

The spectacle, and Debord’s sub-categorisations of it, can be used as an indicator, which has the potential to approach geographies and generations of people in a widely neo-liberalised world ruled by colonial legacies and imperialist politics. The consumers of TV and other devices with access to the Internet are linked to other consumers across spaces and times. While the spectacle has the potential to play with its audience through editing: presenting and constructing information by presenting “… contemporary events” in a “… remote and fabulous realm of unverifiable stories, uncheckable statistics, unlikely explanations and untenable reasoning”, Debord underestimates the power of audiences. He could not know that through social media platforms the audience will become a supportive commentator, playing a crucial role in spaces of on-going insecurities such as in Kabul, linking local artists to on-goings elsewhere as well as providing a platform to present art work, thoughts and criticism.

“These local confrontations point to challenges on the grassroots level concerning local art criticism and the difficulties in internal community engagement - despite violence from the top down.”

In August 2016, I travelled to Kabul for the third time to visit the Archive Melli-ye Afghanistan (National Archive of Afghanistan) and conduct a number of interviews. My trip was overshadowed by the aftermath of the “first” performance art in Kabul. This context crystallized the ways in which the virtual as the primary medium of the spectacle takes the complex relation between arts, geopolitics and gendering processes to a whole different level, allowing for numerous clusters of competing knowledges, or more simply put, ideas of “truth” challenging each other in virtual spaces.

In August 2016, Fatimah Hosseini presented a performance called “Harim-e Shakhsi” (personal space) for an invited audience in the Queen’s Palace of Baq-e Babur (Gardens of Babur). Her performance was followed by accusations of plagiarism, which were articulated to me by artists in semi-public and domestic spaces in Kabul as well as through Facebook and from Persian speaking followers in Iran and beyond. In contrast, BBC Farsi praised this same performance as the first of its kind, commending Hosseini for raising awareness of how war and violence break into private space of people in Afghanistan.

BBC Farsi functions like a catalyst, reaching as many Persian speakers and consumers of news from Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Iran as possible. Geopolitically, these medial platforms compete with national and regional instances of “truth” production such as Iran’s official media channels IRIB - also showing international censored cinema - and its English branch Press TV. While these channels quite bluntly make use of religious-political symbolisms, BBC Farsi, although a product of imperialist politics, has the reputation of providing “authorized” and “neutral” news about the used-to-be-Home.

In Kabul, Hosseini, after her performance, was confronted by local artists, many of whom were born and/or raised in Iran and returned during the Karzai era to Afghanistan. Many of these local artists argued furiously in real and virtual spaces that Hosseini had “copied” the performance of her performance art teacher in Tehran, artist Esha Sadr. Sadr’s performance “Davereh” (Circle) that took place at the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art mid January 2016 examining “Harim-e Shakhsi” (Personal Space) was a critique of peoples’ and institutions’ ignorance towards physical and intellectual integrity. Hosseini used the same title for her performance in Kabul in the Queen’s Palace in Bagh-e Babur in August 2016. Her use of a cello player, a long dress covering the floor and interaction with the audience also strongly reminded of Sadr’s performance, but only to those who were aware of it. Hosseini argued in the aftermath of her Kabul performance that she prepared her staging in accordance with Sadr and aimed to perform the breaking of someone’s personal space, in this case, that of her mentor. Sadr, however, has argued that she had allowed Hosseini to display the video of her Tehran performance in Kabul since she could not travel to Afghanistan in person because of on-going insecurity. She defended her position on Honar Online, an Iranian art news platform in Tadbire taze, where she explained her perspective on the issue in a conversation describing video performance art as a process, not an ad-hoc creation. Her partner and artist Ramin Etemadi-Bozorg also responded in the newspaper “Sharq” (East) with a piece entitled “Art is the Result of a Process”.

While one could argue that there is no such thing as copying, only low and high quality reproduction of an idea, the Kabul art scene did not show mercy with Hosseini. Sadr also experienced a backlash, receiving Facebook comments by Iranians living in the region and Euro-America accusing Sadr of not allowing “a poor Afghan girl” to enjoy her moment of success. These posts were countered by painters and filmmakers close to Hosseini pointing at Sadr’s own alleged plagiarism of Marina Abramovich. Both women were either victimised or blamed for their claim of ownership over the performance.

In conversations with male artists in Kabul on their opinion of the performance of Hosseini, she was compared to other female art students who had to leave the country after they received wide international attention and had what is locally described as “a case” for producing burqa wearing skeleton graffiti such as Malina Suliman. Similarly, Kubra Khademi’s performance in central Kabul wearing a metal armour looking like a women’s torso led to her receiving death threats and leaving Afghanistan. While Hosseini’s work was discussed in Persian-speaking virtual realms, Khademi’s performance went viral online. Images showing her walking through masses of young men throwing stones at her and harassing her for wearing a body armour that looks like a naked female body. Most images do not show her male friends accompanying her in this life-threatening situation. Khademi’s performance highlighted the feeling of absolute vulnerability and loss of control for women in public spaces in Kabul. However, not just the artwork itself was rendered invisible in the sensationalism wave surrounding Khademi, but also its production process and how its intellectual contribution relates to similar art projects such as Naiza Khan’s The Skin She
Wears. The competitiveness for international fundings, attention and career chances has understandably created a space of mistrust, resentment and jealousy which has emerged with the neo-liberalization of Kabul. This is similarly discussed by Islad Jad in, “Demobilization of the women’s movement” in Palestine and examined by Hanan Toukan in her analysis of the politics of aid and contemporary arts in the context of Lebanon.

Now, Fatimah Hosseini is a name to artists and art-interested individuals in Afghanistan as well as among those living in Iran. Although she is not an “ustad” (Professor) of photography yet, as described by journalist Bashir Peyman in his coverage of the performance for BBC Farsi, Hosseini is a BA student of photography at the University of Tehran in her early twenties, born and raised in Iran. Hosseini works with visual imagery using a documentary and staged style. Her staged work examines contemporary and urban femininity with the burqa, or chadari, a recurring element in her work, as well as beautiful women with and without a veil. “I am interested in this sense of being a girl or a woman and all the limitations, beauty and freedom linked to that”, Hosseini explained to me during our first meeting for an interview in October 2015 in a coffee shop close to the University of Tehran. Hosseini’s veiled, colourful and sometimes kinky portrayals of women contrast her documentary work, which shows a very folkloristic and romantic image of dress, attire and faces in Afghanistan. Opposing racist attitudes in Iran and abroad, Hosseini tries to show a civilised and beautiful image of Afghanistan in her, as she explained, which speaks to an international audience. She not only reaches audiences through Facebook and various media outlets but also has a growing Instagram entourage of 17,400 people.

Despite local plagiarism accusations, Hosseini received widespread positive media and TV coverage, and particularly, through BBC Farsi, reached an international audience of Persian speakers and was recognised for the “first” art performance in Afghanistan. In Hosseini’s case, the politics of being the “first” in performing in a space of cultural heritage in the capital, thereby restoring national pride for contemporary cultural production, was more memorable than the copying scandal in the local urban art circles in Kabul and Tehran. These local confrontations point to challenges on the grassroots level concerning local art criticism and the difficulties in internal community engagement – despite violence from top-down. The political message voiced by medial platforms and the audience’s reception outside of Afghanistan suited the liberal narrative justifying western presence in Afghanistan, i.e. Afghan women are not safe in their own country and “need us”. Meanwhile, the local discussion was overshadowed by the competitive and individualist nature of Kabul’s arts scene that grew out of the NGO-ization and top-down investments into cultural production in Afghanistan. The confrontations among artists over ownership and intellectual property, and in result, lack of engagement with the hermeneutics of artistic production, are direct results of the precarious living conditions of art students and artists in Kabul and artists with Afghan passports living in Pakistan and Iran and the spectacle’s glossy version of cultural production in a war-zone.

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